# Meck **Playbook**

**Park & Recreation
Master Plan**
Mecklenburg County, NC

**2021**

**Master Planning Team**

**Agency Landscape + Planning:** Prime Consultant
**Kimley-Horn:** Connectivity
**Neighboring Concepts:** Inventory & Local Engagement
**BerryDunn:** Strategic Planning
**RallyRally:** Branding
**Ryan Hegreness:** Marketing Advisor
**ETC Institute:** Survey Administrator

# Contents

# Letter from Mecklenburg County Park & Recreation Director

Dear Mecklenburg County,

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 gatherings 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 surveys, 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 & Recreation Department

# Definitions

**Amenity**
An object or offering that contributes to the enjoyment of a space and benefits its location. Within parks and open space, there are generally 4 categories of amenities: active recreation, passive recreation, natural areas, and site amenities.

Playgrounds, greenway trails, fields, and sports courts are examples of active recreation. Gathering spaces, gardens, docks, and shade structures are examples of passive recreation. Bird watching and butterfly watching stations, meadows, and stream corridors are examples of natural areas. Benches, bike racks, charging stations, and wi-fi are examples of site amenities.

**Accessibility**
Usable by people with the widest possible range of abilities, operating within the widest possible range of spaces. See also, Universal Design.

**Access**
The proximity of a park, greenway trail, nature preserve, or recreation facility to the public with safe means of getting there (walking, biking, transit, or driving). Equitable access is defined as a ten-minute walk or 5-minute drive to a park or facility.

**Blueways**
Marked routes on navigable waterways such as rivers, lakes, canals, and coastlines. These multi-activity routes are meant for recreation by canoe, kayak, stand-up paddle board, or other aquatic human-powered watercraft.

**Brand**
An identifiable system that associates the public to a company, good, or service. A brand includes a visual identity - logo, color palette, and approach to application in digital and printed collateral, signage; a framework for messaging; and standards for brand use.

**Capital Reinvestment**
(Formally known as "Deferred Maintenance") Troubleshoots more significant or deferred maintenance needs, including the conversion of underutilized amenities to requested amenities. This term applies to County assets of various sizes and those listed as B-C in the inventory.

**Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)**
A spending plan for physical improvements to various County assets. The Capital Improvement Plan is a multi-year approach that is approved by the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC). CIP funds should be applied to assets ranked as D-F in the inventory.

**Capital Projects**
Projects that are funded through the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget. The CIP funds significant investment projects like the creation of new recreation centers, updating facilities, and expanding the park, open space, and greenway system.

**Equity**
A proactive and strategic approach that aims to alleviate the differences in opportunities, burdens, and needs to improve outcomes for all. In this document, equity is achieved once everyone in a community has contextual or responsive investment and choice in their parks, open spaces, facilities, programs, and services regardless of skin color, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity, income, or social class.

**Facility**
Refers to physical structures owned, operated, and managed by Mecklenburg County. These fall into four general categories: (1.) administration and maintenance facilities, (2.) aquatic and athletic facilities (3.) event spaces and pavilions (4.) nature, recreation, golf courses, and senior centers.

**Greenway**
Park classification for a linear piece of property that lies along a creek or is in a floodplain, local/regional park, nature preserve, recreation center, or other natural area.

**Greenway Trail**
A critical part of the pedestrian/bicycle network. Located along Greenways, land set aside for recreation, transportation, and/or environmental protection. (Also see definition for "Greenway" and "Urban Trail")

**Priority Communities**
Defined as a community with a higher rate (often the Top 10% of Census Data) of renters, income below the poverty line, more youth under the age of 18, more seniors over the age of 65, limited access to a car, and greater proportions of communities of color.

Communities that lie in the Top 10% of multiple categories are more likely to be negatively effected by public health emergencies, natural disasters, or economic downturns. Meck Playbook uses these indicators, but also adds open space specific indicators like access to a car and distance from a park. All these data points are layered to identify priority communities for investment and intervention.

**Inventory/Assessment**
The inventory referenced in Meck Playbook was conducted between October 2019 - February 2020 and provides both a high-level understanding of the current conditions of each park, facility, and greenway trail and a detailed documentation of current assets.

The Meck Playbook team reviewed and scored the quality and condition of each park, facility, and segment of greenway trail. The inventory was captured using a mobile app, called ArcCollector, that houses all of the data and allows it to be updated in the future as new investments are made. It is recommended that updates be made regularly. Additional details about the rating system, methodology, and findings are in Appendix 3.

**Land Acquisition**
The process of gaining ownership of land. The Meck Playbook often uses this term to mean the purchase of land. However, strategies like partnerships, gifting, and land leasing are other mechanisms for land acquisition.

**Local Parks**
Park classification for small to medium sized parks dispersed around the county that provide access to open space for residents near their home.

**Mecklenburg Park & Rec**
The new short form, branding, and marketing name for Mecklenburg Park & Rec. This "name rebrand" provides a clearer and more direct name around which to build a brand identity. This new name will be used through Meck Playbook.

**Nature Preserve**
Park classification for natural resources that can be managed for natural resource 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.

# Definitions, Continued

**Open Space**
Green space open to the public for recreation and leisure.

**Park Classifications**
Each type of park classification category serves a specific purpose. The amenities and facilities in each park type are designed for the number of residents the park serves, drive time, active and passive amenities, and the uses it has been assigned (See "Local parks," "Regional parks," "Greenway," and "Nature Preserve").

**Parkland Reserve**
(Formerly known as "Undeveloped")
Land held in perpetuity (or on long term lease) as open space, park, or recreation space. Often, this land is left undeveloped until Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) 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.

**Partnership**
In the context of Meck Playbook, this term describes joint projects, responsibilities, ownership, and implementation duties between Mecklenburg Park & Rec and other groups and organizations. Before becoming formal agreements, successful partnerships would articulate clear expectations and outcomes.

**Programming**
Leisure and recreation events or activities, that may or may not require particular amenities. For example, programming can vary from a self-guided walking tour to a fitness class held at a recreation center.

**Regional Parks**
Park classification for a larger park that includes all of the amenities of a local park and additional assets that draw visitors from across the county.

**Routine Maintenance**
Refers to regular maintenance and upkeep of spaces. Includes regular care of Mecklenburg County's assets and is currently structured to replace like for like needs.

**Special Use**
Special 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.

**Statistically Valid Survey**
A survey large enough to accurately represent the population being surveyed in terms of race, age, gender, and location.

**Trails**
A marked or established path or route. Meck Playbook specifies between five different types of trails.

- **Greenway Trails**
  See "Greenway Trails."

- **Nature Trails**
  Natural surface trail, typically found in a natural setting. May have accompanying signage that tells a story or aims to educate. Typically, these are pedestrian only.

- **Mountain Bike Trails**
  Off-road trail for all terrain/mountain bikes. Often located in larger parks and natural resource areas.

- **Park Trails**
  Multipurpose trails that can be used by pedestrians and bicycles in parks. Focus of these trails are on recreational value and harmony with the environment. They can be hard or soft surfaced.

- **Urban Trail**
  A multi-use public transportation path along a road, rail corridor, or through a developed urban area. Urban Trails are a critical part of the overall pedestrian/bicycle network and intended to complement and connect Greenway Trails.

**Universal Design**
The design of facilities, playgrounds, and open spaces to make them accessible to all people, regardless of age, ability, or background.

**Under-Resourced**
Neighborhoods, facilities, communities, or populations that have not historically received significant investment, lack amenities, and/or services provided to others.

**Walkability**
A measure of how friendly an area is to walking. Leading park and recreation, planning, and design organizations define "equitable" access as one where a person can walk to the amenities they need within 10 minutes.

# How to use Meck Playbook

Meck Playbook is a ten-year comprehensive framework for the future of Mecklenburg County's places, spaces, and programs. The plan is guided by a vision and four principles. Goals and strategies identify the desired outcomes and projects or initiatives to achieve them. Meck Playbook's recommendations are meant to be flexible, with the potential to adapt to changes in the County, the community, and to respond to new opportunities or challenges.

## Meck Playbook Vision

Together we will protect irreplaceable environmental resources, foster health and wellness, and create transformative experiences for future generations.

**Commit to Equity**

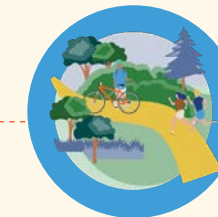across the system to make improvements and close the gaps.

**Evolve and Grow**

County assets to keep pace with the needs of all communities.

**Tell More Stories**

to increase awareness and expand impact of Mecklenburg Park & Rec's efforts.

**Move Beyond Boundaries**

to better connect our communities to natural systems.

## Guiding Principles

Aspirations for Mecklenburg County and the parks system.

Goal #1 Engagement - Speak to and include diverse audiences and communities.
Goal #2 Reinvestment - Focus reinvestment in spaces that need it most.
Goal #3 New Investment - Create the highest quality places and programs.
Goal #4 Inclusion - Provide access to resources and opportunities for all residents.

Goal #5 Stewardship - Protect and adapt the resilience of natural areas.
Goal #6 Programming - Adapt and expand programs to respond to needs.
Goal #7 Land Acquisition - Increase open space in areas of need, growth, and value.
Goal # 8 Staffing - Build teams to support programs and acreage.
Goal # 9 Funding - Invest in places and programs as essential County services.

Goal #10 Celebration - Protect and share historic, arts, and cultural resources.
Goal #11 Communication - Increase awareness of programs and facilities.
Goal #12 Hospitality - Improve every user's experience of parks, greenways, facilities, and programs.
Goal #13 Reflection - Instill values of communities in projects and programs.

Goal #14 Partnerships - Optimize relationships with mission - aligned organizations.
Goal #15 Leadership - Position Department as a leader in community well-being.
Goal #16 Collaboration - Enhance coordination with public partners.
Goal #17 Connections - Connect assets to other facilities and services.

## Key Recommendations

Organized by plan goal, these recommendations are pulled from individual strategies.

## Implementation Chapter

The Implementation Chapter prioritizes recommendations, identifying specific capital projects, operational changes and other initiatives to help achieve the plan.

## Goals

The goals articulate what Meck Playbook is working to achieve. Within each goal are several strategies to help accomplish the goal.

## Go the Distance

Recommendations and phasing to guide plan implementation.

# Meck Playbook

Let's Play Ball!

# The Starting Line
## Why do we need a Playbook?

Meck Playbook comes at a critical time for Mecklenburg County. As of the 2020 census, Mecklenburg County saw a population increase of over 20% over the last 10 years. Charlotte is now the 15th most populous city in the nation. At the same time, demographics are shifting, recreational trends are changing, natural systems are feeling pressure, and funding strategies are requiring greater creativity and commitment. Behind the scenes, parks, greenways, and nature preserves serve as areas of watershed protection, water quality enhancement, and open space protection for future generations. 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 new Comprehensive Park and Recreation Master Plan. The plan will be referred to as

Meck Playbook throughout this document. The most recent master plan update was completed in 2015, to guide 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.

Meck Playbook was created through a collaborative process 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.

Today, the system includes over 230 park and recreation facilities, including parks, nature preserves, stadiums, camping areas, golf

courses, greenways, multi-use greenway trails, and nature preserve land. Investing in park and recreational facilities has multi-faceted benefits. It creates destinations, by drawing in local and non local visitors to generate new spending. It fuels the economy. In 2018, Mecklenburg County led the state in domestic travelers expenditures, with visitors spending nearly $5.7 billion. This accounts for 77% of the total $7.4 billion spent in the Charlotte MSA[1]. This was a 5.6% increase from the previous year. As of 2018, one in nine jobs in the Charlotte region was in the hospitality sector.[2] Parks, open spaces, and greenway trails are undoubtedly a part of these attractions.

Investment in the system also ties back directly to the four main principles of the Livable Meck Plan: healthy, affordable, secure, and accessible.[3] The system protects and expands green space and recreational amenities. It supports actions like 2019's "Breathing Room" initiative. This initiative was taken on by Mecklenburg County's Air Quality Division-Land Use & Environmental Services Agency (LUESA) to reduce ozone pollution and improve air

quality. The system protects natural systems by reducing runoff and cleaning the air. Greenway trails, parks, and open space are active attributes in stormwater management and natural disaster mitigation. LUSEA's Storm Water Program, in particular, has greatly assisted the expansion of the greenway system. It has linked the needs for stormwater mitigation with greenway development initiatives. LUSEA's 2017 proposal to rezone sections of the Mallard Creek Greenway is an example. It requested a 50-foot stormwater easement on the parcel on the FEMA stream, making the greenway multi-task to solve multiple ecological needs. Finally, the system strives to connect neighborhoods through pedestrian friendly pathways, support adoption of non-vehicular transportation methods, and champion integrating public transportation and open space systems. These actions are all strategies of the Livable Meck Plan.

These benefits to tourism, public health, natural systems, and affordability attract businesses. The 2019 Livable Meck Progress Report

highlights this interplay of quality of life and economics through the example of Trane Manufacturing. This Charlotte based plant has hosted many week long summer camps focused on energy and engineering education, specifically for young girls.
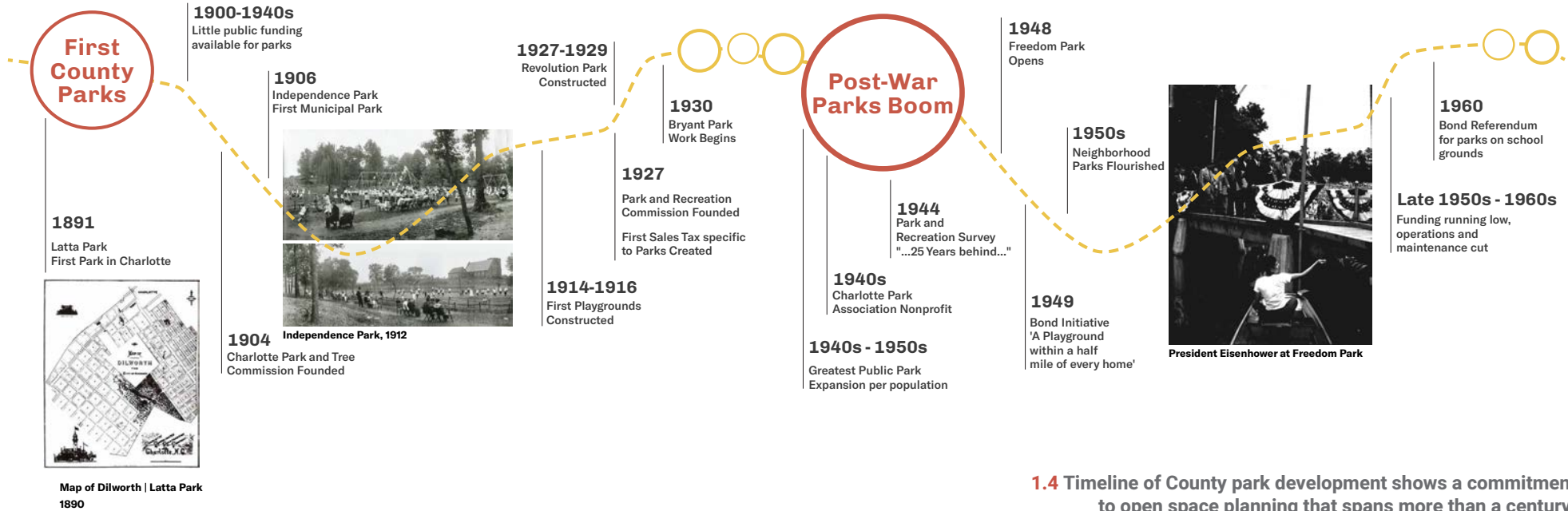


**1.1** Expanded community gardens promote healthy eating habits county-wide.



**1.2** Youth cooling off at Double Oaks Pool.



**1.3** Protected open spaces like McDowell Nature Preserve connect residents to nature and provide ecological benefits.

## Timeline

**First County Parks**

**1891**
Latta Park
First Park in Charlotte


Map of Dilworth | Latta Park
1890

**1900-1940s**
Little public funding available for parks

**1904**
Charlotte Park and Tree Commission Founded

**1906**
Independence Park
First Municipal Park


Independence Park, 1912

**1927-1929**
Revolution Park Constructed

**1927**
Park and Recreation Commission Founded

First Sales Tax specific to Parks Created

**1914-1916**
First Playgrounds Constructed

**1930**
Bryant Park Work Begins

**Post-War Parks Boom**

**1944**
Park and Recreation Survey
"...25 Years behind..."

**1940s**
Charlotte Park Association Nonprofit

**1940s - 1950s**
Greatest Public Park Expansion per population

**1948**
Freedom Park Opens

**1949**
Bond Initiative
'A Playground within a half mile of every home'

**1950s**
Neighborhood Parks Flourished

**1960**
Bond Referendum for parks on school grounds

**Late 1950s - 1960s**
Funding running low, operations and maintenance cut


President Eisenhower at Freedom Park

**1.4** Timeline of County park development shows a commitment to open space planning that spans more than a century.

# Strong Past Seasons

Mecklenburg County, like many places across the country, is facing a challenge to increase access while providing consistent quality across its park and recreation system. This challenge is rooted in the larger history of national park and recreation development. The national city park movement, which created some of the first public parks, was at its height from 1890 to 1940. During this era, cities and counties recognized the beneficial relationship between parks and their surrounding communities. While this was an important national awakening, the prolific creation of parks cemented particular types of design philosophies throughout American cities. As contemporary park and recreation systems work to solve 21st century problems, they often collide with these past design ideologies.
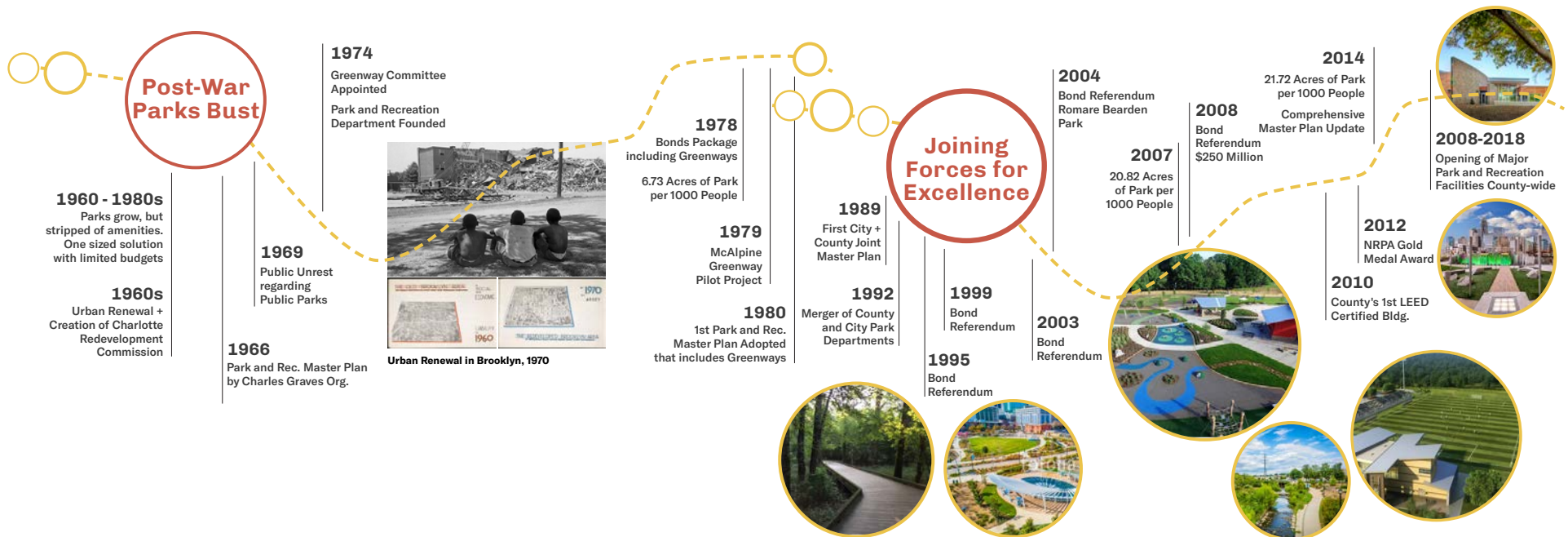
The city park movement influenced the people and places of Mecklenburg County. As Edward Dilworth Latta noted in 1890, 'Please read all the history of cities, particularly locations there of which have been made adjacent to parks. Enhanced values tenfold have followed.' To that aim, the area introduced places like Latta Park (Dilworth) in 1891; Independence Park, the first City park, in 1906; and culminated in the additions of the land that would become Revolution Park and Bryant Park in the late 1920s. The community's faith in parks was further demonstrated by the founding of the City's Park and Recreation Commission, and the passage of the first sales tax to support parks, both in 1927. While small, the funding allowed for government maintenance of publicly owned parks.

A big shift occurred in national patterns following World War II. The nation turned its focus on expansion of suburban development, and the national urban park system fell behind. A parks boom flourished in Charlotte in the 1940s, seeing the creation of Revolution Park, Bryant Park, Eastover Park, and Freedom Park. As public funding for parks remained minimal, these parks were each spearheaded by land donations made by private developers or by organized community groups.

## Timeline

**Post-War Parks Bust**

**1960 - 1980s**
Parks grow, but stripped of amenities. One sized solution with limited budgets

**1960s**
Urban Renewal + Creation of Charlotte Redevelopment Commission

**1966**
Park and Rec. Master Plan by Charles Graves Org.

**1969**
Public Unrest regarding Public Parks

**1974**
Greenway Committee Appointed

Park and Recreation Department Founded


Urban Renewal in Brooklyn, 1970

**1978**
Bonds Package including Greenways

6.73 Acres of Park per 1000 People

**1979**
McAlpine Greenway Pilot Project

**1980**
1st Park and Rec. Master Plan Adopted that includes Greenways

**1989**
First City + County Joint Master Plan

**1992**
Merger of County and City Park Departments

**1995**
Bond Referendum

**1999**
Bond Referendum

**2003**
Bond Referendum

**Joining Forces for Excellence**

**2004**
Bond Referendum Romare Bearden Park

**2007**
20.82 Acres of Park per 1000 People

**2008**
Bond Referendum $250 Million

**2014**
21.72 Acres of Park per 1000 People

Comprehensive Master Plan Update

**2008-2018**
Opening of Major Park and Recreation Facilities County-wide

**2012**
NRPA Gold Medal Award

**2010**
County's 1st LEED Certified Bldg.

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These local groups helped to usher in large scale change, as the 1940s–1950s saw the area's greatest public park expansion per population. The first park and recreation survey, completed in 1944, noted that Charlotte was already "…25 years behind" other like cities across the country. The survey provided justification for a 1949 City bond initiative that promised "a playground within a half mile of every home," which funded at least 25 of the system's current 94 neighborhood parks.

This bond initiative also spearheaded 1960's construction of joint school and park projects. This construction was followed by the creation of neighborhood parks and recreation centers into the early 1970s. By the late 1950s–1960s,

Charlotte and Mecklenburg County could not escape the retraction other areas experienced and funding started to run low, resulting in cuts in operations and maintenance budgets.

The Park and Recreation Commission provided oversight of parks within the City of Charlotte limits. However, public recreation land outside of the city limits began to become a priority for the area. Both the City and the County began studying the creation and benefits of greenways, first in the City's 1966 recreation master plan, and later in the County's appointment of a greenway committee. To further address this need, and because Mecklenburg County does not benefit from state or federal recreation lands as do many municipalities, the Mecklenburg

County Park and Recreation Department was founded in 1974. The priority of the County Department was environmental protection and acquiring large nature preserve parklands and greenways. The first greenway, McAlpine Creek Greenway located at McAlpine Creek Park, was completed in July 1979.

If the early postwar period was characterized by a boom, the later postwar era was a challenge for park and recreation within the county. Between the 1970s and 1980s, park space continued to grow, but diminished budgets created parks with limited amenities and represented a one-size-fits-all solution rather than a response to neighborhood needs.

Urban renewal processes across the country created lasting damage to neighborhood fabric in favor of large-scale infrastructure and development projects. The demolition of the Brooklyn neighborhood in Charlotte during the 1960s exemplified the profound negative impacts of urban renewal on Black communities.

Despite this challenging period, there were many reasons to be optimistic for the future of the system in and around Charlotte. This era saw the creation of the first park system master plan by Charles Graves Org in 1966. Despite this plan, planners continued to fight for park investment, noting in 1969, "it is the quality of urban open space that counts more than quantity. Parks that provide variety and choice are the ones that matter. In addition to being easily accessible, parks should be important in themselves, not merely an incidental adjunct to some housing project, or treated as waste space." This perception of parks as integral community hubs was further strengthened in 1980.

That year, the Mecklenburg Park & Recreation Plan became the first master plan providing a vision for greenways and greenway trails. It created a linear park system, known as the Emerald Greenway, along twenty creeks and streams within the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

Regional population growth continued into the early 1990s. In 1992, the County and City Parks Departments merged, resulting in Mecklenburg County taking on responsibility for the city's many older neighborhood parks built during the 1890s–1940s heyday. At this time, the City of Charlotte stopped managing park and recreation and transferred all its parklands and park facilities to Mecklenburg County. The County assumed the operation of City parks. The merger was followed by a series of successful park and land bond measures in 1995, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2007, and 2008. The merger and these land bond measures allowed the system to expand acreage from 6.8 acres per 1,000 people in 1978 to 21.72 acres per 1,000 people in 2014, even as the population itself was growing. This investment resulted in the largest expansion of amenities in the history of either organization.

There have been a series of successes for more than a decade. Mecklenburg Park & Rec earned Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies accreditation in 2009, and in 2010, opened the first Silver Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design building, Revolution Park Sports Academy. This 30,000 square foot building is part of the larger Revolution Park complex, and includes

a concession stand, fitness center, boxing ring, and offers life skill programs for youth and teens. It exemplifies how recreational facilities can be energy efficient while remaining appealing destinations. In 2012, Mecklenburg Park & Rec was recognized for such visionary work by receiving the National Recreation and Park Association Gold Medal award.

Overall, since the 2008 comprehensive plan, Mecklenburg Park & Rec has met growing community needs by investing extensively in creating regional recreational facilities and expanding trails and greenways, opening many facilities county-wide. Progress towards the 2008 comprehensive plan can be measured in two stages: between 2008 and 2014 and between 2015 and 2019.
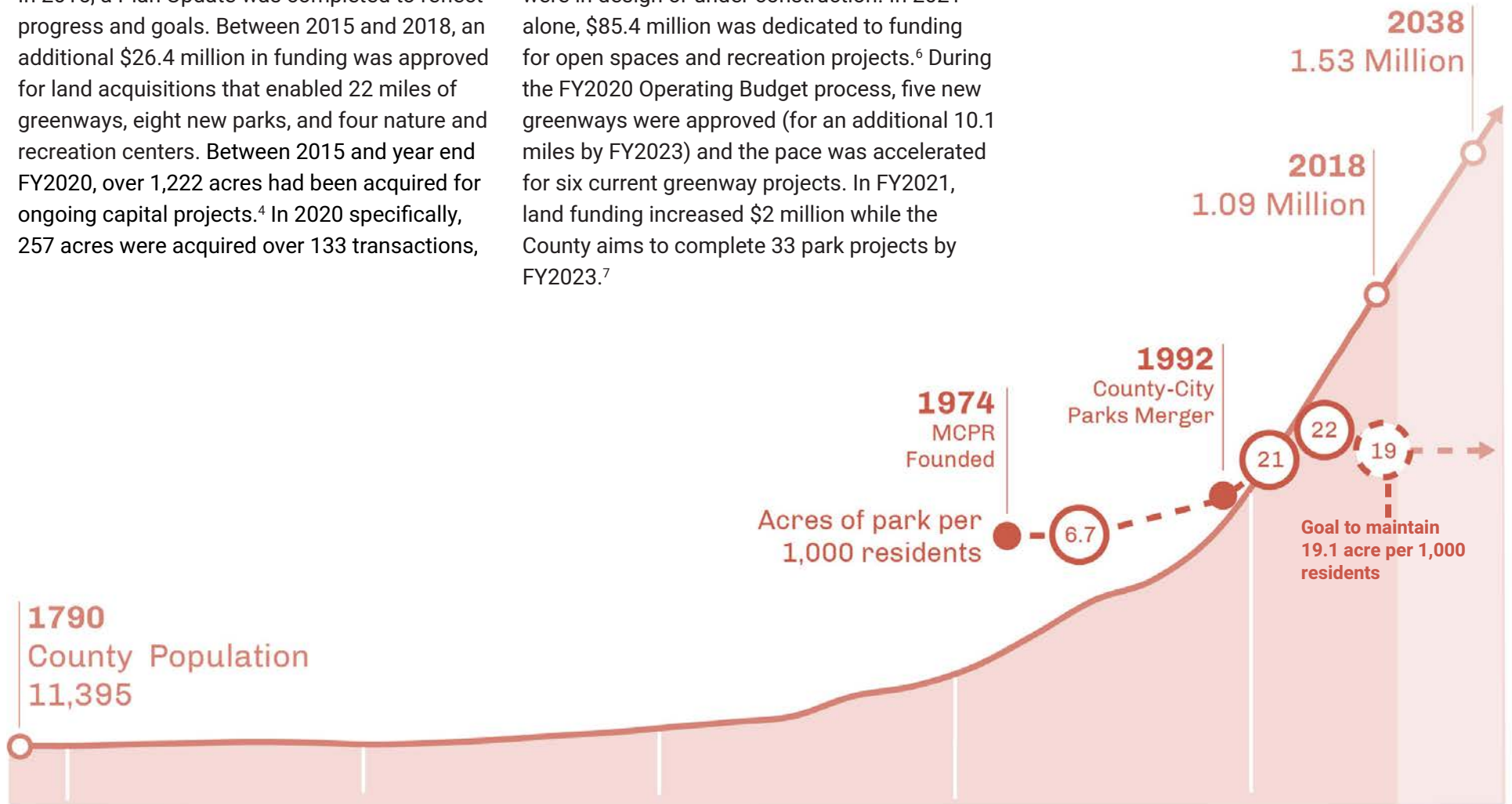
From 2008 to 2014, the County increased its park acreage by 17%, its trail mileage by 130%, and added eight percent more square feet of recreation facility space. Significant progress was made in creating new resources with the opening of eight neighborhood parks, ten community and regional parks, thirteen miles of greenways, and two nature preserves. Additionally, well-loved landmark facilities like Romare Bearden Park, Revolution Sports Academy, and the Mecklenburg County Sportsplex were added to the system. These

successes are particularly noteworthy because they occurred in spite of budget reductions brought on by the 2008 recession.

In 2015, a Plan Update was completed to reflect progress and goals. Between 2015 and 2018, an additional $26.4 million in funding was approved for land acquisitions that enabled 22 miles of greenways, eight new parks, and four nature and recreation centers. Between 2015 and year end FY2020, over 1,222 acres had been acquired for ongoing capital projects.[4] In 2020 specifically, 257 acres were acquired over 133 transactions,

providing over 35 acres for greenways and over 220 acres for parks and nature preserves.[5]

As of February 2021, 51 active capital projects were in design or under construction. In 2021 alone, $85.4 million was dedicated to funding for open spaces and recreation projects.[6] During the FY2020 Operating Budget process, five new greenways were approved (for an additional 10.1 miles by FY2023) and the pace was accelerated for six current greenway projects. In FY2021, land funding increased $2 million while the County aims to complete 33 park projects by FY2023.[7]

**2038**
1.53 Million

**2018**
1.09 Million

**1992**
County-City
Parks Merger

**1974**
MCPR
Founded

Acres of park per
1,000 residents

6.7

21

22

19

**Goal to maintain
19.1 acre per 1,000
residents**

**1790**
County Population
11,395

1.5 As the population rises, the acres of parks per 1,000 residents (noted within the red circles) will decrease without strategic land acquisition.

## Department Organization

Mecklenburg Park & Rec is organized into five parts. One is the administrative unit, which manages Mecklenburg Park & Rec. The other is a collection of four divisions, which maximize staff around public interest and need. There are four formal divisions:

**Capital Planning Division:** responsible for managing capital planning projects and long-term planning.

**Community and Recreation Center Services Division** (CRCS): provides physical fitness and wellness programs. Four sections lie under CRCS:

- **Aquatics:** oversees all of Aquatic facilities including neighborhood pools, Ray's Splash Planet, Ramsey Creek Beach, and the Aquatic Centers.

- **NC Cooperative Extension:** the bridge between University specialists and Mecklenburg County residents.

- **Recreation Centers:** hosts, maintains, and organizes wellness and physical fitness programs, after school care, senior services, therapeutic programs and performing arts that occur on site.

- **Therapeutic and Inclusive Recreation Services:** develops programs for disabled, elderly, and under-resourced individuals.

**Nature Preserves and Natural Resources Division:** manages the nature centers, nature preserves, and natural heritage sites.

**Park Operations Division:** operations and maintenance of parks and facilities.

# Homefield Advantage

### Municipal Boundaries

Mecklenburg County is in the Southwestern region of North Carolina. The South Carolina state line lies directly to the County's south, while the Catawba River forms the County's western border. Mecklenburg is home to one city, Charlotte, and six towns, Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville, Matthews, Mint Hill, and Pineville, as well as the unincorporated areas.

### Rapidly Growing Community

Meck Playbook serves as the implementation framework for the Mecklenburg County Comprehensive Park and Recreation Master Plan. Specifically, it serves to guide the direction of capital planning for parks, greenway trails, and recreation facilities. This means planning for growth and managing a large, diverse system that includes about 21,000 acres of parks and open space, 55 miles of greenway trails, and 60 facilities.

Proactive planning is particularly important given the region's recent and future rapid growth. Since 2010, North Carolina's population has grown by 7.7%. Charlotte's growth alone represents 15% of the state's total growth.
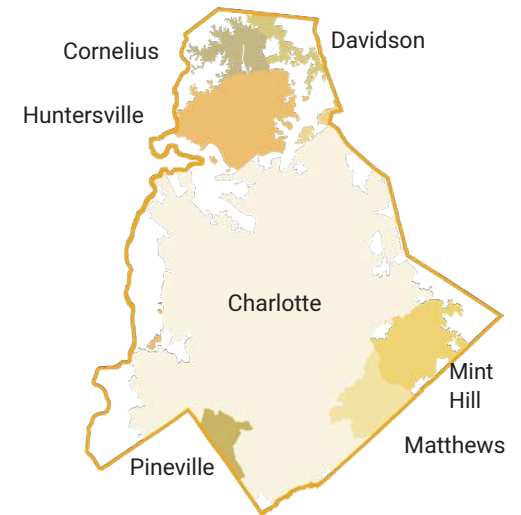


**1.6** Mecklenburg County's municipal boundary includes the city of Charlotte and six neighboring towns.
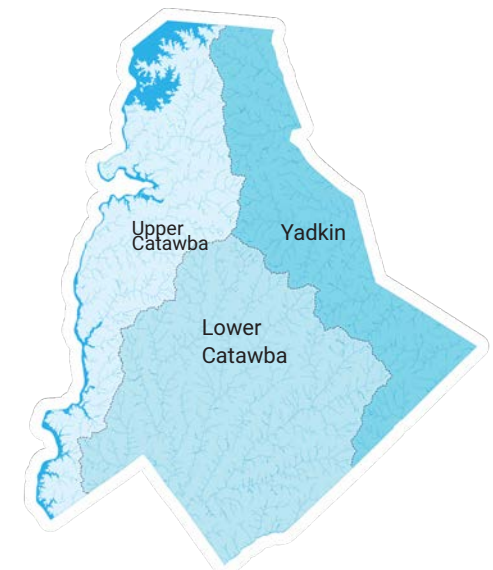


**1.7** The County's three watersheds provide lifelines for flora, fauna, non-human, and human life.

Mecklenburg's population in particular grew by 20% (+184,849 people) between 2010 and 2019[8] and is expected to rise another 17% between 2020 and 2039.[9] With such a sustained demand on resources, Mecklenburg Park & Rec has recognized a need to anticipate growth. This requires implementing strategies that allow for preservation of natural resources and habitat, expanding access to public open space, increasing investment in public health, and elevating quality of life for future generations. Meck Playbook aims to craft strategies which allow Mecklenburg Park & Rec to guide growth, instead of reacting to it. Doing so will create better outcomes and provides services for all.

## Embedded in Nature

Mecklenburg County is located in an ecologically diverse and vibrant natural context that gives identity, beauty, and value to Mecklenburg Park & Rec's offerings. It lies within the hilly Appalachian Plateau region along the Charlotte Milton Belt geological zone. It is nestled within the Southern Piedmont Ecoregion, characterized by rolling topography, plains, and small tributaries. The Piedmont region is facing mounting development pressure, as local cities are some of the fastest growing in the country. Amid this pressure, Mecklenburg Park & Rec's broad role in resource conservation and the promotion of a healthy urban ecology is even more critical for the future of cities.

Once the center of a thriving gold mining economy, Mecklenburg's 'gold' is now embedded in the blue and green veins of its natural systems. The County encompasses three watersheds, the Upper Catawba, Lower Catawba, and Yadkin (See Figure 1.7). The Catawba watersheds in particular, are regional lifelines; supplying 2 million people with drinking water and containing a rich biodiversity of fish, birds, insects, and amphibians and other wildlife. Despite this importance, the Catawba River is also one of the region's most endangered waterways. Responsible stewardship of this land means not only restoring streams, protecting habitats as development increases, and managing invasive species – it also means building a culture of environmental value and future stewardship in the community.



1.8 A kayaker enjoys time on Lake Norman.
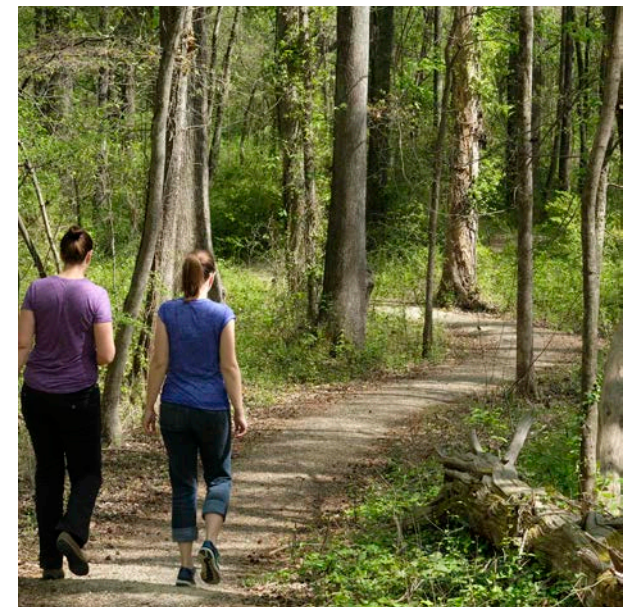


1.9 Evergreen Nature Preserve highlights the ecology of the Southern Piedmont Ecoregion.

## Changing Character

Mecklenburg County's development patterns have driven growth and contributed to its strong, wide-ranging sense of place. The diversity of the County plays out in the scale and characteristics of its streets, the density of its housing, and the variation in its parks. Every element of the Mecklenburg Park & Rec system does not stand alone; it is closely tied to its context and community. By understanding the unique places that make up the County, future parks, trails, natural spaces, and programs can better respond to the unique conditions of different areas of the County.

The Charlotte Future 2040 Plan outline place types that align with existing land uses and envision centers for healthy and active communities. Meck Playbook's character types, show in Figure 1.10 simplify this approach and illustrate physical patterns that exist as a result of the interaction between development and open space. These character types identify values and challenges for future open space investments and identify a few existing parks and open spaces that exemplify each type. Together, these two categorizations can drive future development decisions.

**1.10** County character types illustrate how the interplay between development and open space create physical patterns.
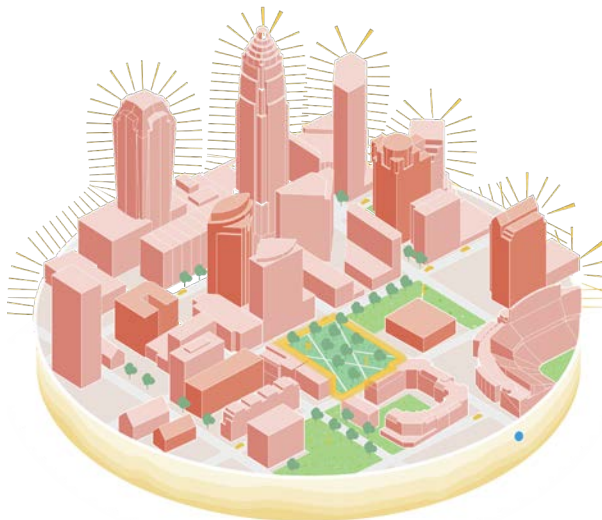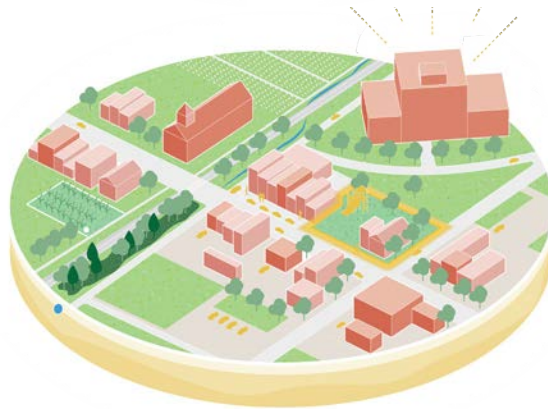
**Local Hubs**: Village and neighborhood centers celebrate local identity and provide safe, walkable connections to shared resources and open space. Development in these areas should maintain connectivity and bolster existing open spaces. Examples include Seversville Park, Kilbourne Park, Midwood Park, and Latta Park.

**Productive Places:** Often on the periphery, large tracts of land are often used for industrial and commercial activity. Lands adjacent to these land uses are ripe for large scale recreation needs like sports fields balanced with wildlife habitat corridors. Examples include Robert C. Bradford Park, Col Francis Beatty Park, and T.M. Winget Park.

**Regional Destinations:** Iconic areas of the region are dense and walkable and serve many. Open space is well-maintained and visited by diverse populations. High land cost restricts new park size and growth, while existing park spaces continue to be maintained and protected as gems within the system. Examples include Romare Bearden Park, Freedom Park, and Independence Park.

**Natural Periphery**: Low density residential areas exist at the edges of the County. These zones are defined by natural systems and are the furthest from population centers. Park development in these zones takes advantage of more affordable land and opportunities to preserve the ecological biodiversity that is present along the County's waterways. Examples include Latta Nature Preserve, McDowell Nature Preserve, and Iswa Nature Preserve.



**Connected Corridors:** The County is bisected and ringed with multiple scales of roadways that provide access throughout the County. Currently, these are connectors of people. However, they could take advantage of residual open space to increase the regional tree canopy coverage and provide micro habitat zones. This land could also support infrastructure for safe links across roadways to connect critical segments of greenways. Examples include McAlpine Creek Park, Martin Luther King, Jr. Park, and Renaissance Park.



**New Communities:** Mecklenburg County has experienced booming growth in the past twenty years. Within new housing developments, public open space is supplemented by household access to private backyards, homeowners' associations, and private clubs. It is within these new communities that opportunities for shared use of publicly accessible open spaces within neighborhoods could connect to school and park lands. Historically, park space in these communities has been developed along the perimeter of developments, reducing access for all residents. Examples include Clarks Creek Park, Eagles Landing Park, and Robbins Park.

# Preseason
## Inventory and Assessment

It is essential to clearly understand the condition of the open space and facility network. Such knowledge prioritizes both short-term and long-term investment and reinvestment in targeted ways. To this aim, an on-the-ground inventory and assessment of parks, greenway trails, nature preserves, open spaces, historic sites, and sports and recreation facilities was conducted. The inventory included furnishings (benches, trash receptacles, drinking fountains, etc.), accessibility, wayfinding, and signage. Both quantitative and qualitative data was used to compare Mecklenburg's assets. Quantitative data included the count of amenities, like playgrounds, recreation centers, restrooms, and seating, while the qualitative assessments graded the condition, function, and design of each space using an A-F rating system.
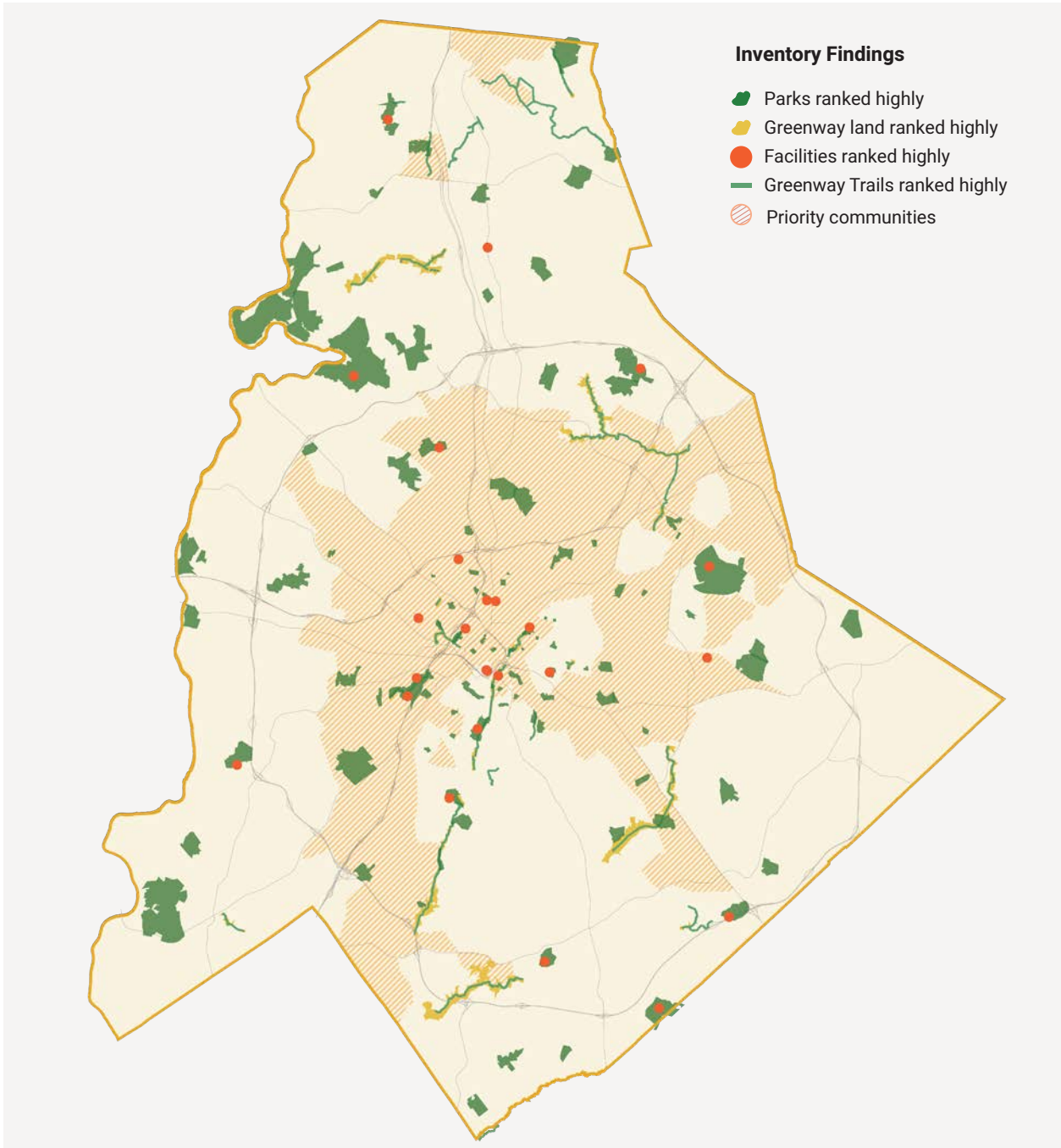
To conduct the inventory and assessment, a dozen members of the Meck Playbook team, including Department staff and the consultant team, visited spaces from October 2019 through February 2020.

Recognizing the subjective nature of the qualitative assessments, the team ran internal trainings and cross-checked scores at various milestones with the County staff to ensure consistency. The team used an online geospatial tool, ArcCollector, to catalogue the inventory. This platform was selected because it allowed the team to add data to County's existing GIS framework from the field in real-time.

The inventory provides a snapshot of the conditions today, which – in conjunction with staff and community input – inform the strategies set forth in this master plan. The inventory is not intended to be a static document frozen in 2020. Instead, it is a malleable online tool that must be updated regularly by Department staff to remain relevant and effective. It will be critical to update the inventory, in order to benchmark progress, identify emergent gaps/issues, and prioritize future investment (See Strategy 2.1 for more detail).

## Key Findings

Levels of investment, programming, and maintenance vary greatly across parks, facilities, and greenway trails. In general, large parks, preserves, and greenways, which were the original focus of the County's park department, are in excellent or good condition, are safe, and have a lot to offer (See Figure 1.11). Most often, these types of places are newer, like Harrisburg Road Sportsplex. Contrastingly, many park properties built by the City prior to 1992, including neighborhood parks and recreation facilities (See Figures 1.12 and 1.13), need updates. Devonshire Park is a good example. These spaces are often older, very well-loved, and in neighborhoods with dense activity and high use. Many of these parks have not seen recent substantial Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) or community led investment beyond the replacement of amenities. In addition, limited-access parkland on the edges of the County, as

**Inventory Findings**

- 🟢 Parks ranked highly
- 🟨 Greenway land ranked highly
- 🔴 Facilities ranked highly
- ━━ Greenway Trails ranked highly
- ▨ Priority communities

**1.11** A detailed inventory process found that large parks, preserves, and greenways are doing well.

well as greenway corridors without trails, offer considerable ecological benefits but are being threatened as development takes precedence in the County.

## A Closer Look

All observed open spaces, trails, and facilities were reviewed against a number of tangible and qualitative criteria. This criteria ranged from the number and condition of trails, play equipment, and wayfinding signage, to the accessibility and safety considerations in parks. It also looked at the condition of structural systems, building envelopes, building systems, and interior finishes. Finally, it documented the level of activity within the building, the building's visibility from the street, the maintenance condition, and implied visitor safety in facilities. The goal of the effort was to establish a template criteria and rating system for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to modify and use for future documentation of open spaces, trails and facilities, to assist in identifying common themes across facilities, and to assist in understanding where resources should be invested next. For all assets and their rankings, please see Appendix 3.

### Parks & Open Space

Mecklenburg County is home to about 21,000 acres of County-owned open space and parklands. These lands were reviewed based on their 2008 and 2015 park classifications: Regional Parks, Community Parks, Neighborhood Parks, Nature Preserves, and Golf Courses.
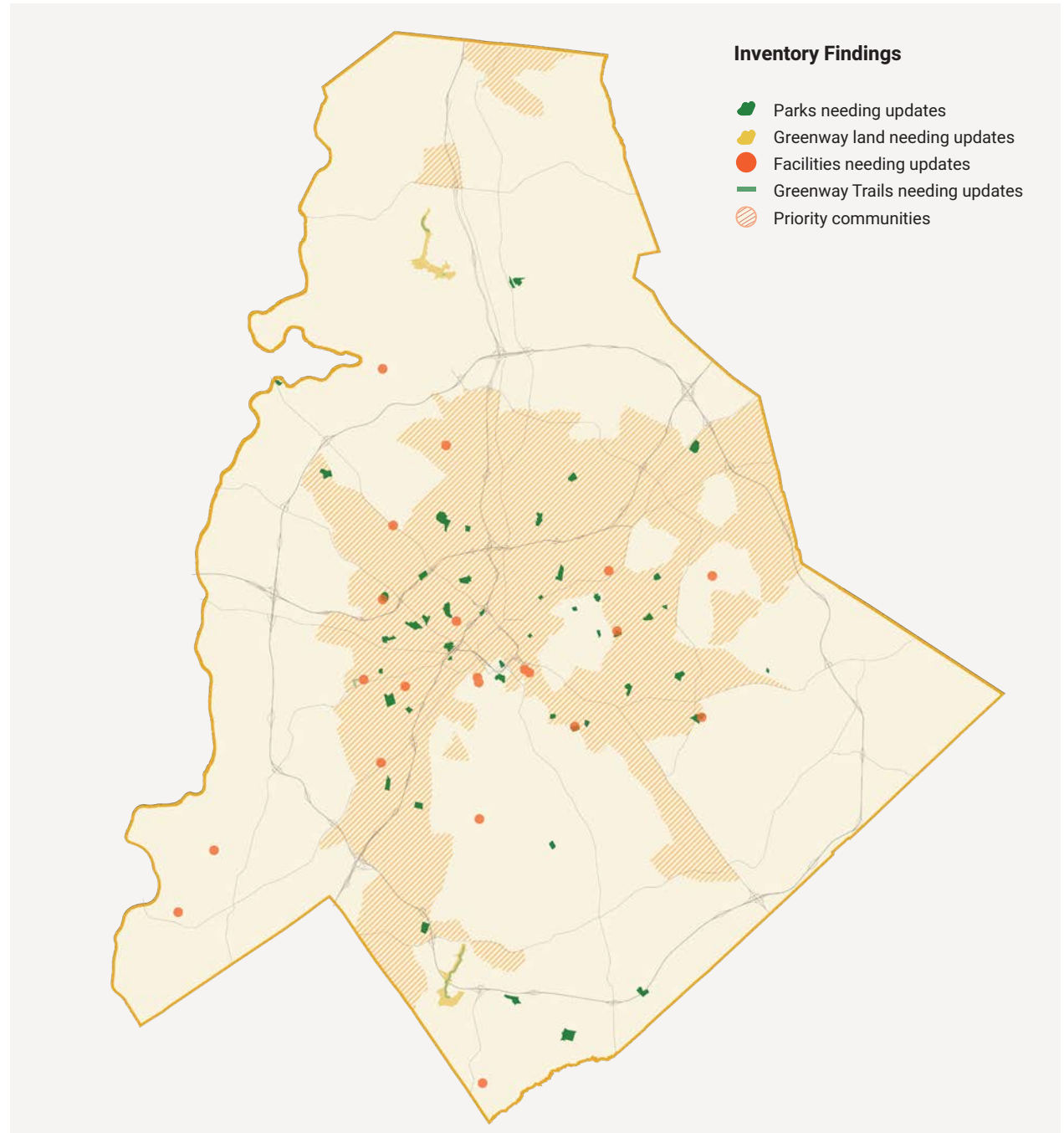
The inventory revealed that over two thirds of the Regional Parks and half of the Nature Preserves are in good condition (A or B grade). Similarly, half of the County's six Golf Courses are in excellent condition. The conditions in Community Parks are more varied. The new Clarks Creek Park, for example, is in great shape, while others, like Albemarle Road Park, need investment to address issues of activation and maintenance. Lastly, more than half of the Neighborhood Parks, which provide a critical, walkable recreational service for residents, require investment to update aging equipment and infrastructure.

## Facilities

County-owned facilities meet a broad range of needs for public users and staff alike. The current condition of these facilities is equally varied. The assessment discovered that aquatic facilities were observed to be in the best condition of all facilities throughout the system, and pavilions and senior centers followed. Recreation Centers and Nature Centers varied greatly, with each type having both new buildings and a number in need of reinvestment. Non-public facilities, such as administration or maintenance facilities, are generally in need of reinvestment.

The condition of the buildings were generally distributed evenly across Mecklenburg County, and no clusters of underinvested areas were present. Newer and recently renovated buildings are distributed in a similar manner as



**Inventory Findings**

- Parks needing updates
- Greenway land needing updates
- Facilities needing updates
- Greenway Trails needing updates
- Priority communities

**1.12** Many neighborhood parks and facilities need updates, especially in priority communities.
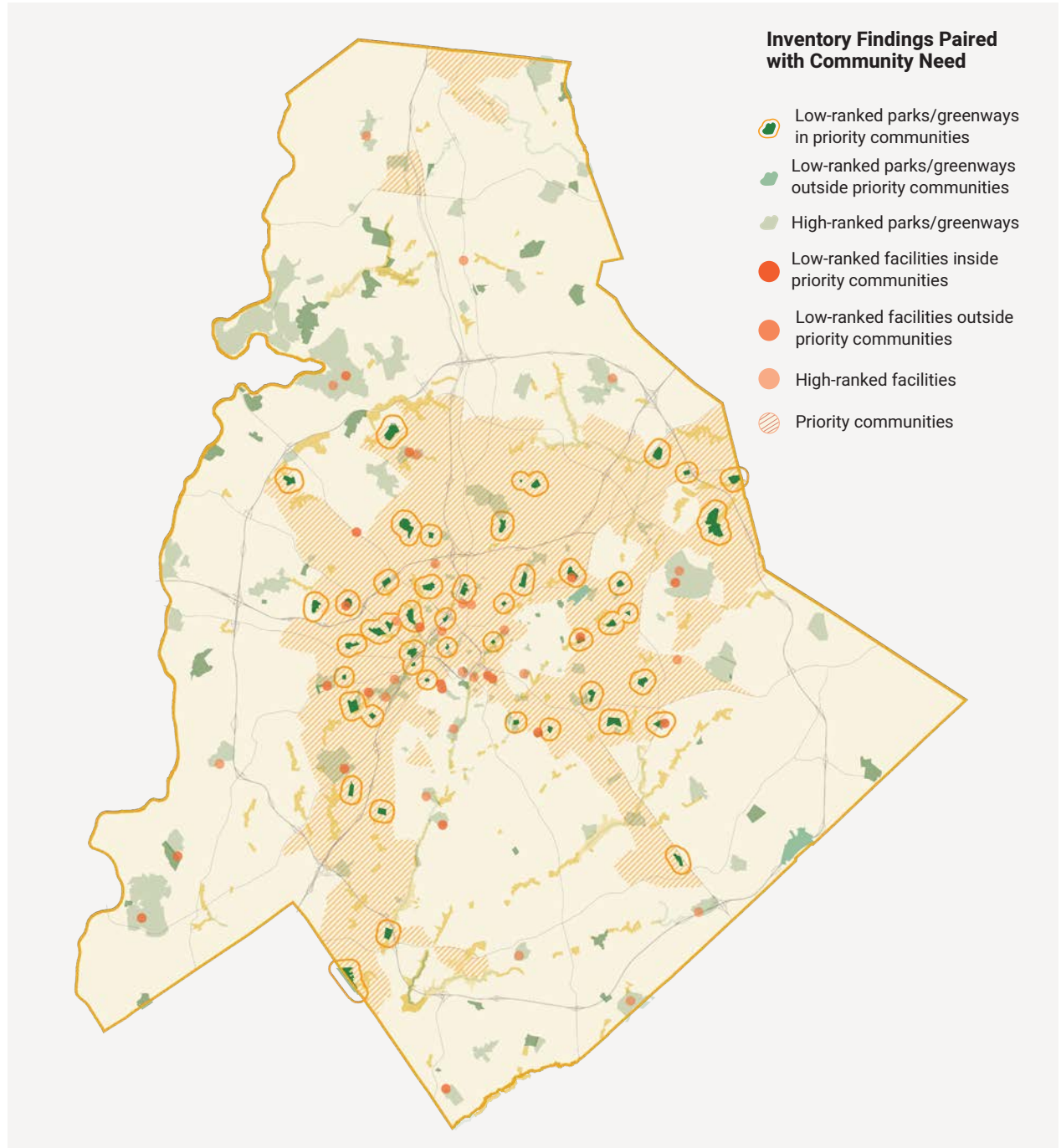
those that are in need of reinvestment. While many of the older facilities are well-loved by the community, building envelopes, building systems, and interior finishes have aged, as deferred maintenance is a recurring theme. Incorporation of technology varies greatly from building to building, with newer and recently renovated buildings providing greater technology offerings than older facilities. Irregularities in sign branding (like between Flat Branch Nature Preserve and Mallard Creek Community Park) and wayfinding are present in many places across the system. Additionally, some buildings are not identified at the street, or the front door to the facility is obstructed or hard to find. Site lighting, maintenance, and visitor visibility varied greatly across the system as well.

## Greenway Trails

Compared to other parks and open space amenities, greenway trails are a relatively new endeavor for the County. As a result, the greenway trail system is in great shape overall, with nearly three quarters of them scoring an A or B in the assessment. Trails receiving low marks were frequently due to pavement that created inaccessible conditions through eroded gravel or aging and cracking asphalt.

**1.13** Most of the lowest rated parks fall within priority communities. When mapping conditions such as percent of renters, higher rates of poverty, rates of youth and adults over 65, and a higher population of non-white residents, we can map where reinvestment should take priority.



**Inventory Findings Paired with Community Need**

- Low-ranked parks/greenways in priority communities
- Low-ranked parks/greenways outside priority communities
- High-ranked parks/greenways
- Low-ranked facilities inside priority communities
- Low-ranked facilities outside priority communities
- High-ranked facilities
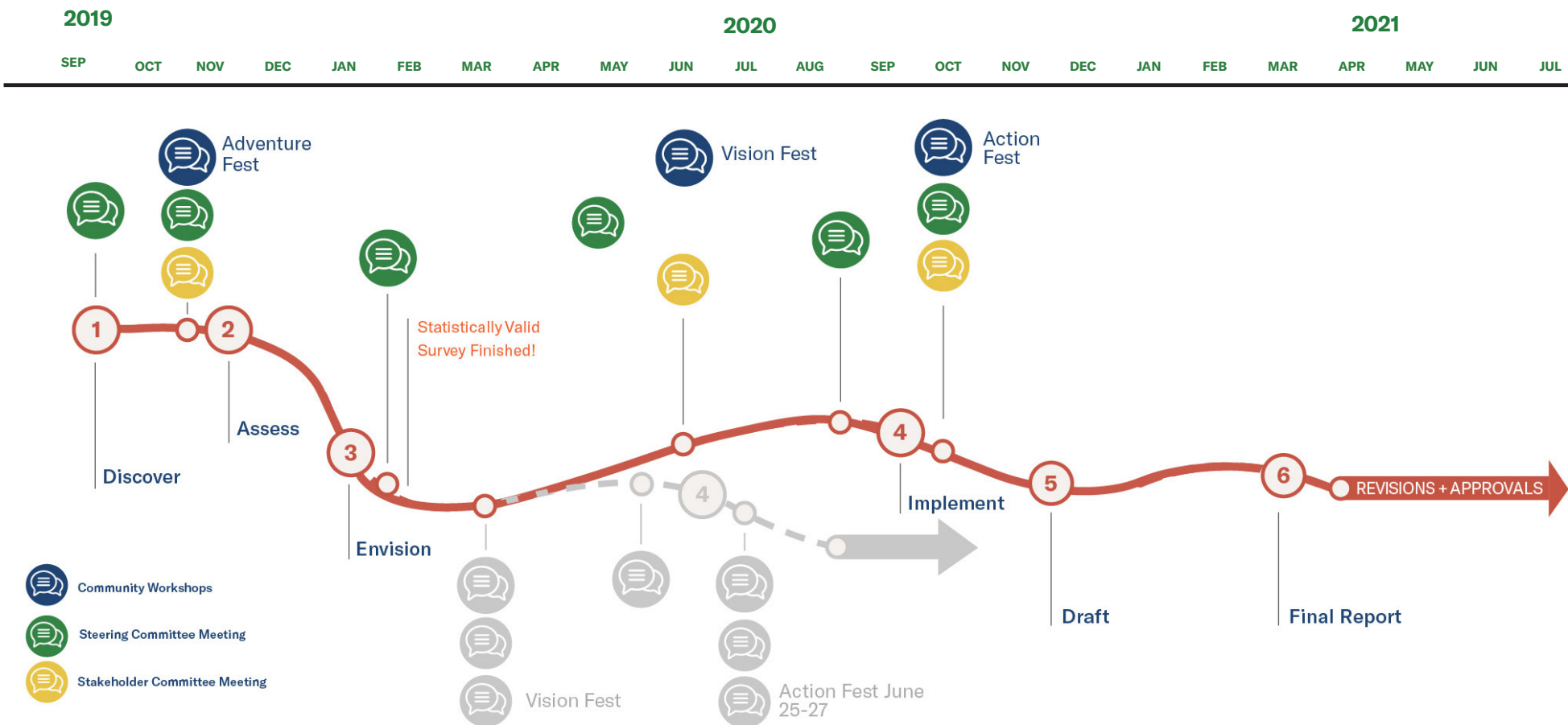- Priority communities

# New Game Plan

Meck Playbook builds off of the successes of the last comprehensive planning effort and greenway plan to create a document that continues to guide decisions about parks, trails, and programs towards a renewed vision grounded in recent investments.

The County is taking positive and meaningful steps towards increasing park and recreational space. Yet in 2015 and in 2019, over half of residents surveyed still felt there were not sufficient parks or green space close enough to their homes. Those who responded expressed they would rather have repairs done to well-loved parks and open spaces over the creation of new ones. It will be a challenge to balance these wishes while also juggling the myriad of initiatives recommended by the comprehensive plan. Meck Playbook stands to serve as a guide for this effort by articulating a framework, process, and path towards implementation. It is a vision plan rooted in principles created from the community.

## The Plan Process

Meck Playbook was developed with extensive community involvement and input over fourteen months. Department staff and key stakeholders helped guide the plan's development and contributed to the engagement process. The plan kicked off in September 2019 and included four phases:

- **Discover:** a review of past decisions and existing conditions

- **Assess:** a detailed inventory of the County's open spaces and facilities

- **Vision:** development of plan principles and goals to guide implementation

- **Implement:** identify actionable strategies and recommendations to deploy the plan's vision

**2019**

SEP   OCT   NOV   DEC   JAN   FEB   MAR   APR   MAY   JUN   JUL   AUG   SEP   OCT   NOV   DEC   JAN   FEB   MAR   APR   MAY   JUN   JUL

**2020**

**2021**

Adventure Fest

Vision Fest

Action Fest

**1**

**2**

Assess

Discover

Statistically Valid Survey Finished!

**3**

Envision

**4**

**4**

Implement

**5**

Draft

**6**

Final Report

REVISIONS + APPROVALS

Community Workshops

Steering Committee Meeting

Stakeholder Committee Meeting

Vision Fest

Action Fest June 25-27

**1.14** Meck Playbook was developed over a fourteen-month-long process, which included multiple community convenings, surveys, workshops, and feedback from a multitude of committees and stakeholders.

# The Team Roster

## Core Team

Meck Playbook was guided by a Core Team of Department staff who met regularly to provide data, guide the trajectory of the plan, organize community engagement and outreach, and organize implementation steps.

## Steering Committee

A Steering Committee met six times during the planning process to steer the project at significant milestones. The Committee was composed of members from Mecklenburg County Asset and Facilities Management, Mecklenburg Park & Rec employees, managers, and specialists, and some members of the Park and Recreation Commission. The group reviewed deliverables throughout the process, such as plan documents and early branding efforts.

## Stakeholder Committee

The Stakeholder Committee included various community participants from across Mecklenburg County. This group participated in public workshops, while also meeting three additional times. They served as guides and provided invaluable insight from various community perspectives. It included representatives from schools, libraries, public transportation, public safety, local municipalities, and other partners.

## Park and Recreation Commission and All Advisory Councils

The Mecklenburg Park & Rececreation Commission (PRC) and its Advisory Councils provided strategic guidance throughout the Meck Playbook process. The consultant team kicked off the process with the PRC, and the core team shared regular updates with the PRC to ensure the goals of the plan aligned with those of the commission. Several PRC members also engaged in focus group conversations, served as ambassadors to the plan effort through the Steering Committee, and participated in a vision brainstorm with all advisory committees midway through the process.

## Focus Groups

Focus groups met twice during the process. These interest-based affinity groups were composed of topical experts at all levels who served as resources during the initial inventory and discovery phase and provided information to guide strategy and recommendation development. They provided commentary on specific issues and opportunities and were organized by topic: (see page 192-194)

- Nature Preserves and Natural Resources
- Parks and Park Operations
- Greenways and Trails
- Municipalities (Towns and City)
- Community Organizations - Seniors, Therapeutic Recreation, Programs, Cooperative Extension
- Recreation - Aquatics, Athletics, Fitness, Golf
- Public Interface / Image

**1.15** Core Team touring parks in Mecklenburg County.


**1.16** Steering Committee Meeting.


**1.17** Focus Group Meeting.

# Broadening Plan Conversations

As of early October 2019, public workshops, small group meetings, focus groups, community surveys, staff interviews, newsletters, interactive activities, 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:
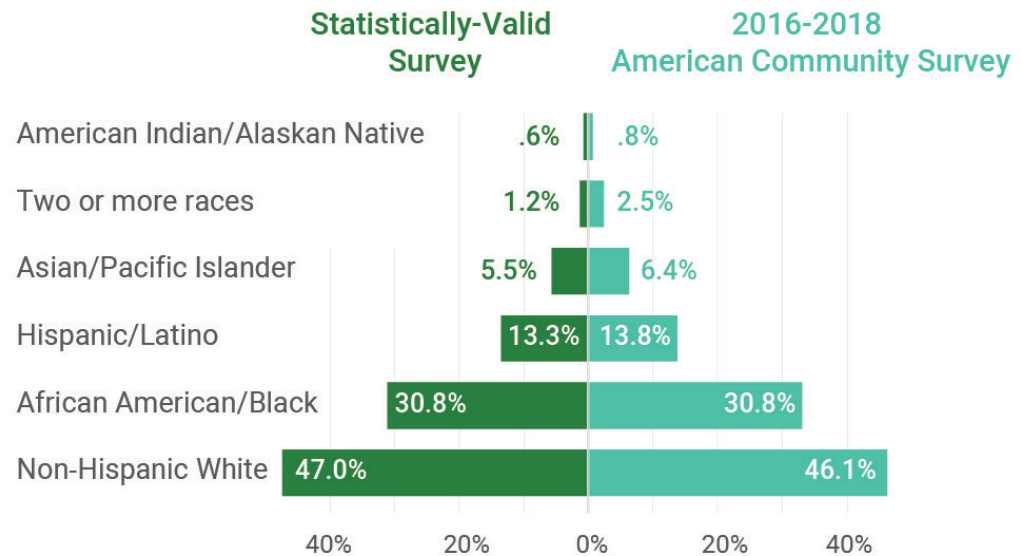
## Workshops + Small Group Meetings

- 2,400 memories and ideas shared in workshops (including 1,100+ PublicInput.com responses).

- 312 workshop participants (twelve workshops total).

- 88 public focus group participants (four public focus groups total).

## Surveys

- 800 households surveyed through the statistically valid survey.

- 412 participants in online survey (four surveys total).

- 98 particpants in online draft plan document review

## Communication + Outreach

- 5,300 email newsletter recipients.

- 9 pop-up events to raise awareness.

- 3,300 unique website visits.

- 3 press releases and social media campaigns aligned with each public workshop milestone.

- Over 1,100 responses were left on the online platform Public Input as of October 9th, 2020.

| | Statistically-Valid Survey | 2016-2018 American Community Survey |
|---|---|---|
| American Indian/Alaskan Native | .6% | .8% |
| Two or more races | 1.2% | 2.5% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 5.5% | 6.4% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 13.3% | 13.8% |
| African American/Black | 30.8% | 30.8% |
| Non-Hispanic White | 47.0% | 46.1% |

*reporting household income was optional. 19% of respondents did not provide income

**1.18** The Statistically Valid Survey was representative of Mecklenburg County American Community Survey data.

**1.20** Brainstorming session with Department staff.



**1.19** The team participated in existing meetings early on in the process to gather insights from community members.



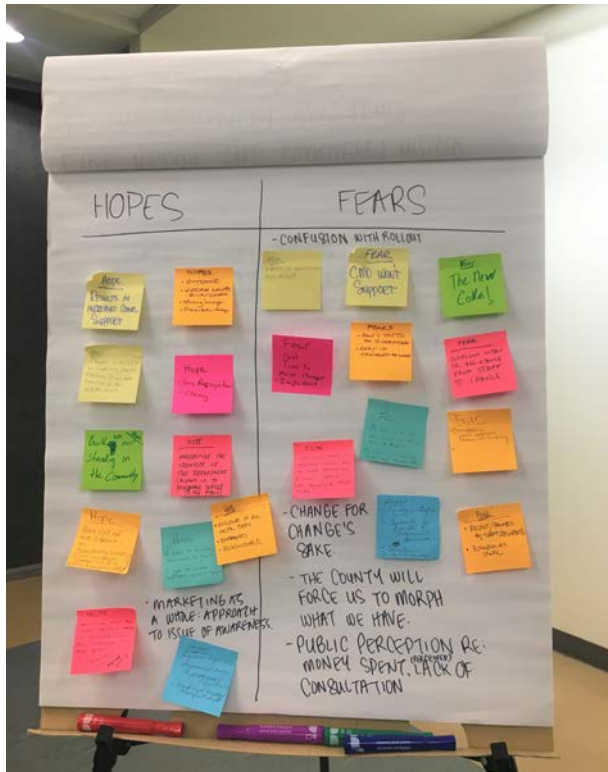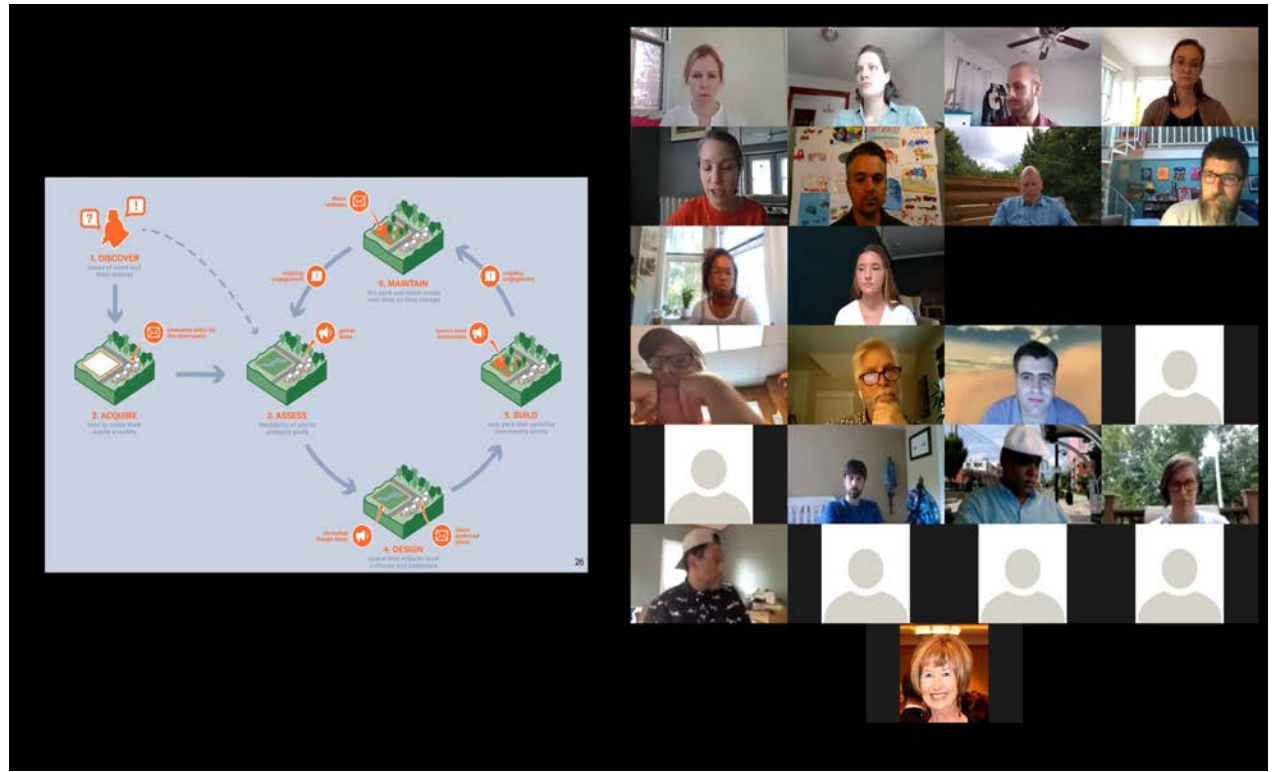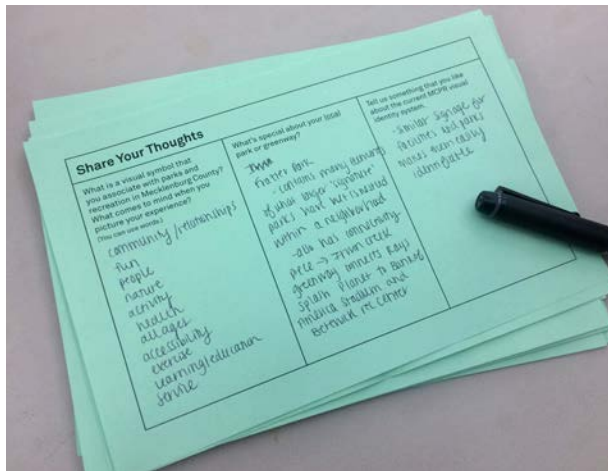**1.21** Community members provided insight into the county's changing character.

**1.22** Pre-pandemic meetings allowed the community to share their fears and hopes for the future.



**1.23** Public workshops went virtual after the start of the pandemic.



**1.24** The new branding approach sought to incorporate already existing symbols and visual identifiers.



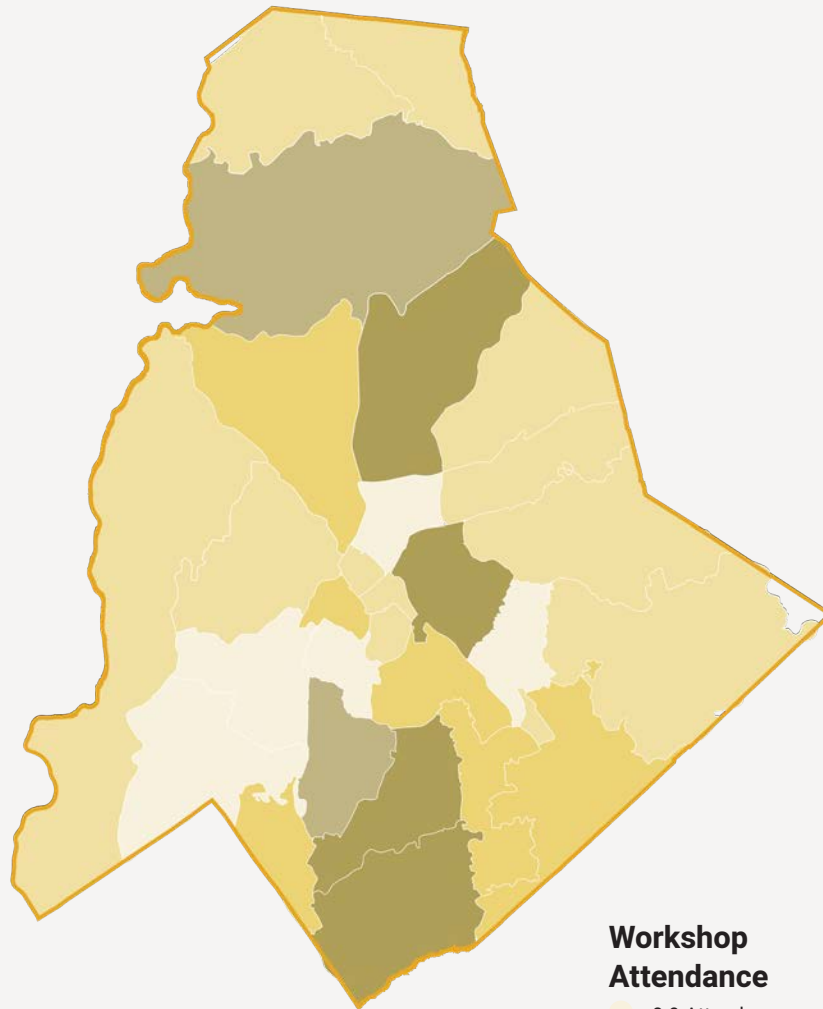**1.25** Signs in local parks encouraged community feedback.



**1.26** Public meetings revealed where the community would like to see additional open space and recreation facilities.

**Workshop Attendance**

- 0-9 Attendees
- 10-19 Attendees
- 20-29 Attendees
- 30-39 Attendees
- 40-49 Attendees

\* reporting home zip code was optional.
Numbers on map do not reflect the total number of participants

**1.27** Central zip codes were the most represented at workshops.

# Planning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, the Meck Playbook public engagement diverted to online or socially distanced measures. Recreation facilities, poised to be the centers of engagement, were closed to the public. At the same time, parks, trails, and open spaces became some of the safest places to gather and saw a record number of visitors. The pandemic has centered the importance of these spaces for mental, physical, spiritual, and social wellbeing.

Since March, the team has adapted engagement efforts to keep everyone healthy and safe.

Virtual and socially distant engagement included:

- 5 email newsletters with plan updates, mini-polls, and meeting invitations were sent to 700 recipients.

- 4 themed virtual chats for each of the 4 plan principles.

- 3 Vision Fest public workshops were held to share principles and goals.

- 3 Action Fest public workshops were held to share the team's big ideas.

- 2 fun mini-polls were conducted.

- In total, over 250 people participated in these efforts since March, providing over 650 comments and representing 84% of zip codes.

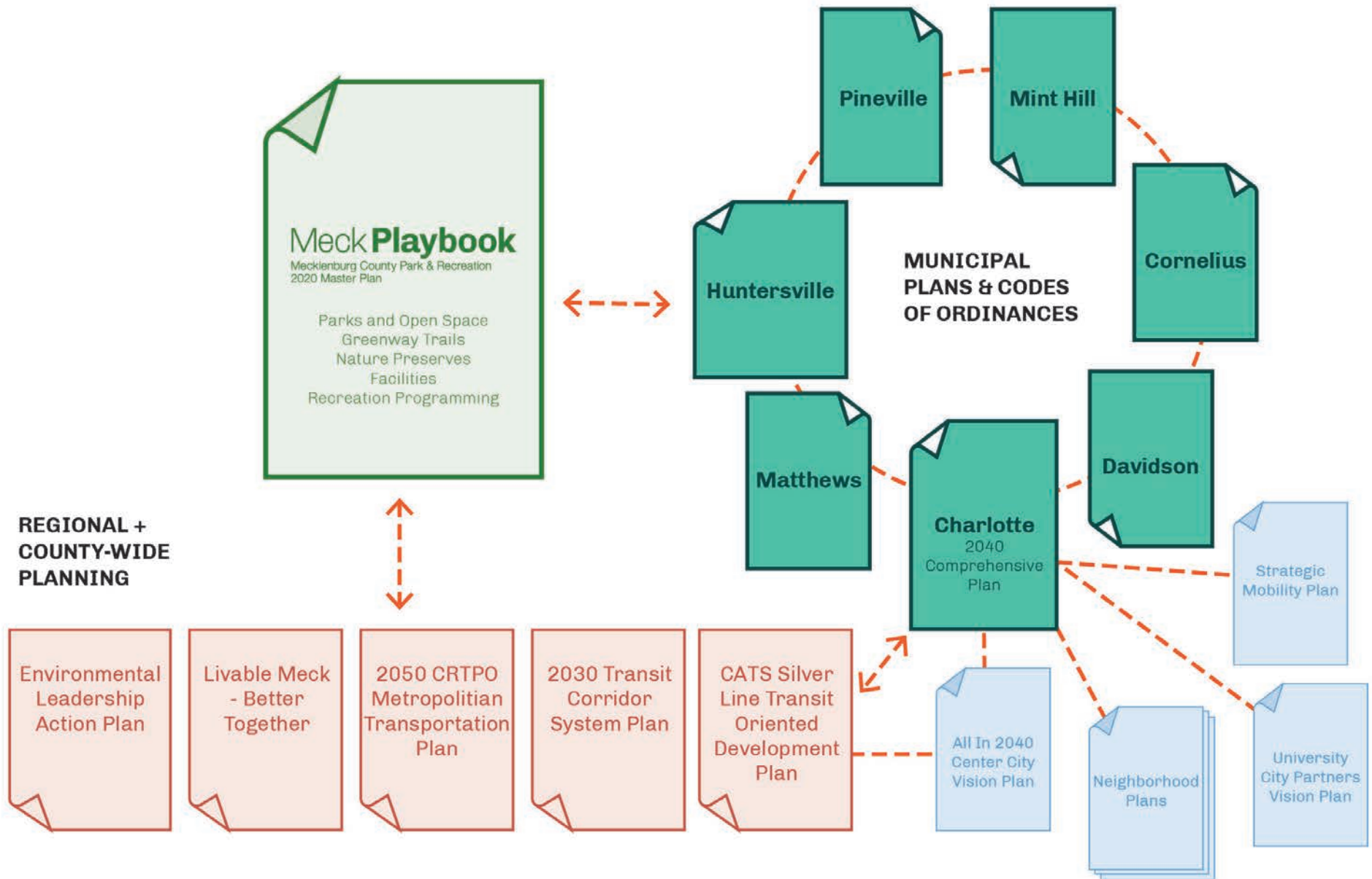# Coordination with Related Plans and Studies

Meck Playbook aligns with several regional, county, and municipal plans and projects, many of which are currently underway (See Figure 1.29). To coordinate ongoing regional and municipal efforts, the County convened representatives of those planning efforts for monthly meetings to ensure that each process was aware of project timelines, approaches to outreach, and outcomes or recommendations of those plans.

It was through this coordination effort that Meck Playbook is able to closely support and advance regional and county-wide transportation plans including 2050 CRTPO Metropolitan Transportation Plan, 2030 Transit Corridor System Plan, and the ongoing CATS Silver Line Transit Oriented Development Plan. Meck Playbook also informs and is guided by recent and ongoing planning efforts within individual municipalities including municipal plans and codes of ordinances (land use and zoning codes) including Livable Meck-Better Together, the Charlotte 2040 Comprehensive Plan, the All in 2040 Center City Vision Plan, and others.



**1.28** Stakeholder focus group at the Park and Recreation Commission All Advisory Council meeting

**Meck Playbook**
Mecklenburg County Park & Recreation
2020 Master Plan

Parks and Open Space
Greenway Trails
Nature Preserves
Facilities
Recreation Programming

**REGIONAL +
COUNTY-WIDE
PLANNING**

**MUNICIPAL
PLANS & CODES
OF ORDINANCES**

Pineville

Mint Hill

Cornelius

Huntersville

Davidson

Matthews

Charlotte
2040
Comprehensive
Plan

Environmental
Leadership
Action Plan

Livable Meck
- Better
Together

2050 CRTPO
Metropolitian
Transportation
Plan

2030 Transit
Corridor
System Plan

CATS Silver
Line Transit
Oriented
Development
Plan

Strategic
Mobility Plan

All In 2040
Center City
Vision Plan

Neighborhood
Plans

University
City Partners
Vision Plan

**1.29** Plan coordination efforts encompass local, county-wide and regional projects.

# Meck Playbook Vision

# Meck Playbook Vision
## Build a Bold Future

Across Mecklenburg County, nationally, and even globally, the role of public open spaces and recreation programs are expanding as issues of equity, public health, economic development, environmental change, financial sustainability, and cultural identity become paramount. The work that Mecklenburg Park & Rec does for the community and environment is central to these issues and a fundamental part of a healthy, resilient community. Recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic, more frequent and extreme weather patterns, and systemic racism have placed the status quo of our relationship to parks, facilities, and programs at a critical impasse.
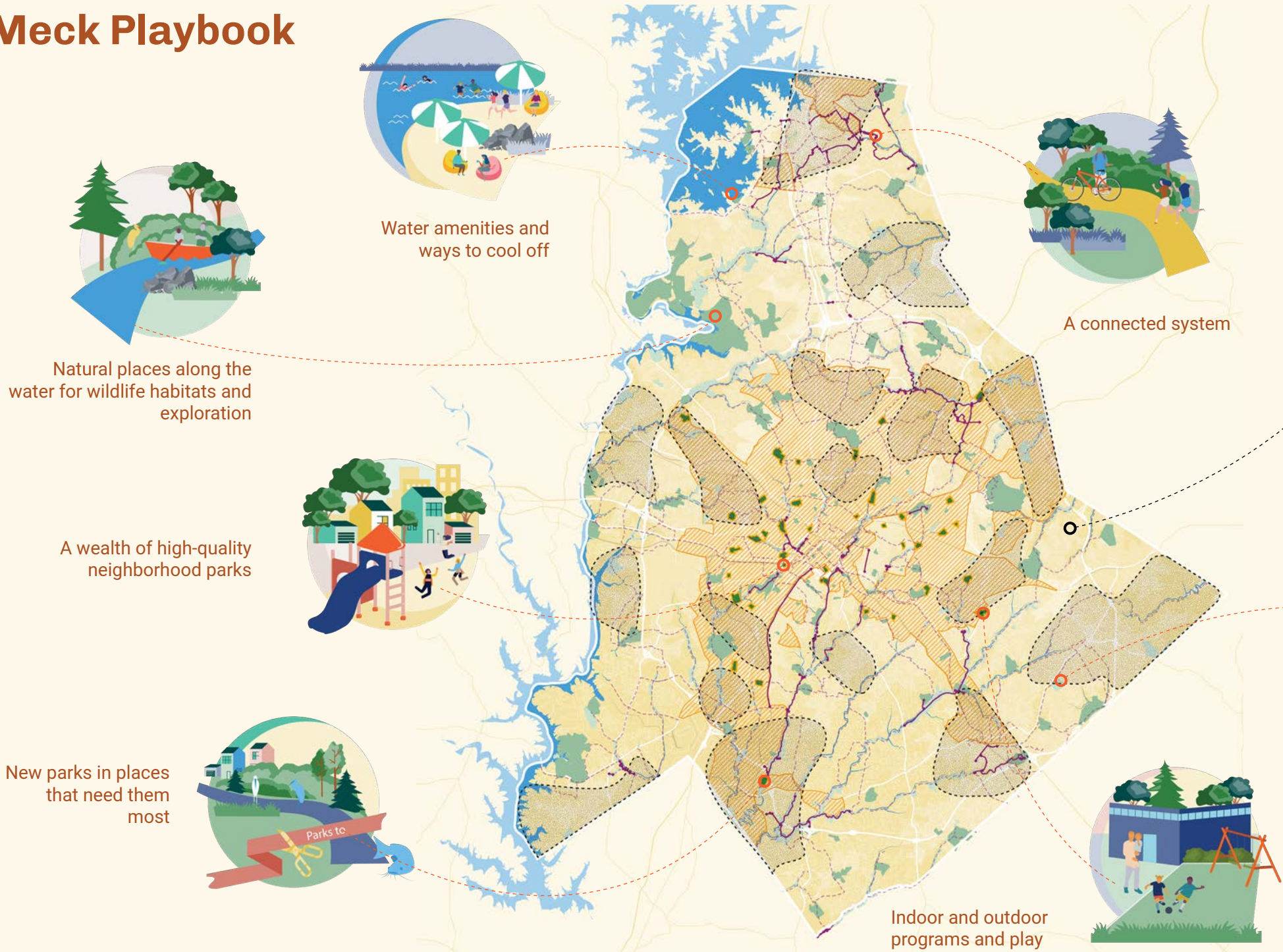
**In keeping with the core message of Mecklenburg County, Mecklenburg Park & Rec is positioned to protect irreplaceable environmental resources, to foster health and wellness, and to create transformative experiences. Boldness will be an important ingredient to move these aspirations forward and shepherd a more connected, resilient, and equitable future.**

# Meck Playbook

Water amenities and
ways to cool off

A connected system

Natural places along the
water for wildlife habitats and
exploration

A wealth of high-quality
neighborhood parks

New parks in places
that need them
most

Parks to

Indoor and outdoor
programs and play

Parks in High Need Areas

Parks and Greenways

Existing Trails

Future Trails

Priority Communities

Gap Areas

Amenities close to home and safe to access

# Rules of the Game

To position the County for this multifaceted role, this document organizes Mecklenburg County's vision into four key principles: Commit to Equity, Evolve and Grow, Tell More Stories, and Move Beyond Boundaries.

These principles derive 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. Through these conversations, it is apparent that leaders, staff, and community members believe Mecklenburg Park & Rec must:

## Commit to Equity

across the system to make improvements and close gaps.

## Evolve and Grow

County assets to keep pace with the needs of all communities.

## Tell More Stories

to increase awareness and expand impact of Mecklenburg Park & Rec's efforts.

## Move Beyond Boundaries

to better connect our communities to natural systems.

# 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.

# Evolve and Grow

As Mecklenburg County's population steadily increases, so does the demand for open space and recreation opportunities. In order for the County to achieve its goals Mecklenburg Park & Rec's capacity and funding need to simultaneously grow. This following goals provide strategies that encourage strategic growth while meeting 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 -** Invest in parks and recreation as a valuable and necessary County service.

# 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 communications 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 Celebration -** Highlight, protect, and share the County's historic, arts, and cultural resources.

- **Goal #11 Communication -** 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 Reflection -** Build programs and places in which residents see and express their community's values and perspectives.

# Move Beyond Boundaries

Mecklenburg County's greenways and 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.

Moving Beyond Boundaries also means expanding partnerships, creative collaborations, and coordination with other jurisdictions and mission-aligned organizations. These measures will position Mecklenburg Park & Rec as a community leader and facilitator of seamless experiences. 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.

# Commit to Equity

Summary of key actions required to realize the Game Plan goals include:

## Goal #1 Engagement

*Key Actions*

### Create an Engagement Framework

Develop a manual with guidelines, success stories, policies, and tracking methods to unify processes.

### Expand Engagement Capacity

Hire new full time staff, specifically a Community Engagement Liaison, focused on connecting with the community.

# Goal #2
# Reinvestment
*Key Actions*

### Maintain the Inventory

Assign responsibilities to continuously update the existing inventory as new projects or improvements are made.

### Establish Standards of Care

Over the course of a park or facility's life, Meck Playbook recommends implementing a maintenance strategy that considers five types of maintenance needs: operations and equipment, routine maintenance. preventative maintenance, capital reserve, and capital reinvestment.

### Prioritize Reinvestment in Under-Resourced Communities

Combine priority and condition indexes into a clear road map for improvements and maintenance.

# Goal #3
# New Investments
*Key Actions*

### Make Data-Driven Investment Decisions

Model a tool that uses community characteristics and park characteristics to examine equity in investment through a data lens.

### Expand Participatory Budgeting

Expand participatory budgeting opportunities within both capital projects and larger County-wide flexible spending funds.

# Goal #4
# Inclusion
*Key Actions*

### Enhance the Equity Action Plan for Equitable and Unbiased Access to Services

Mecklenburg Park & Rec should incorporate the goals, guidelines, and procedures within the current Equity Action Plan to ensure all residents have equitable access to facilities, programs, and services.

### Conduct Anti-Bias Trainings

Trainings should be specific to the ways bias infiltrates and manifests in park and recreation settings.
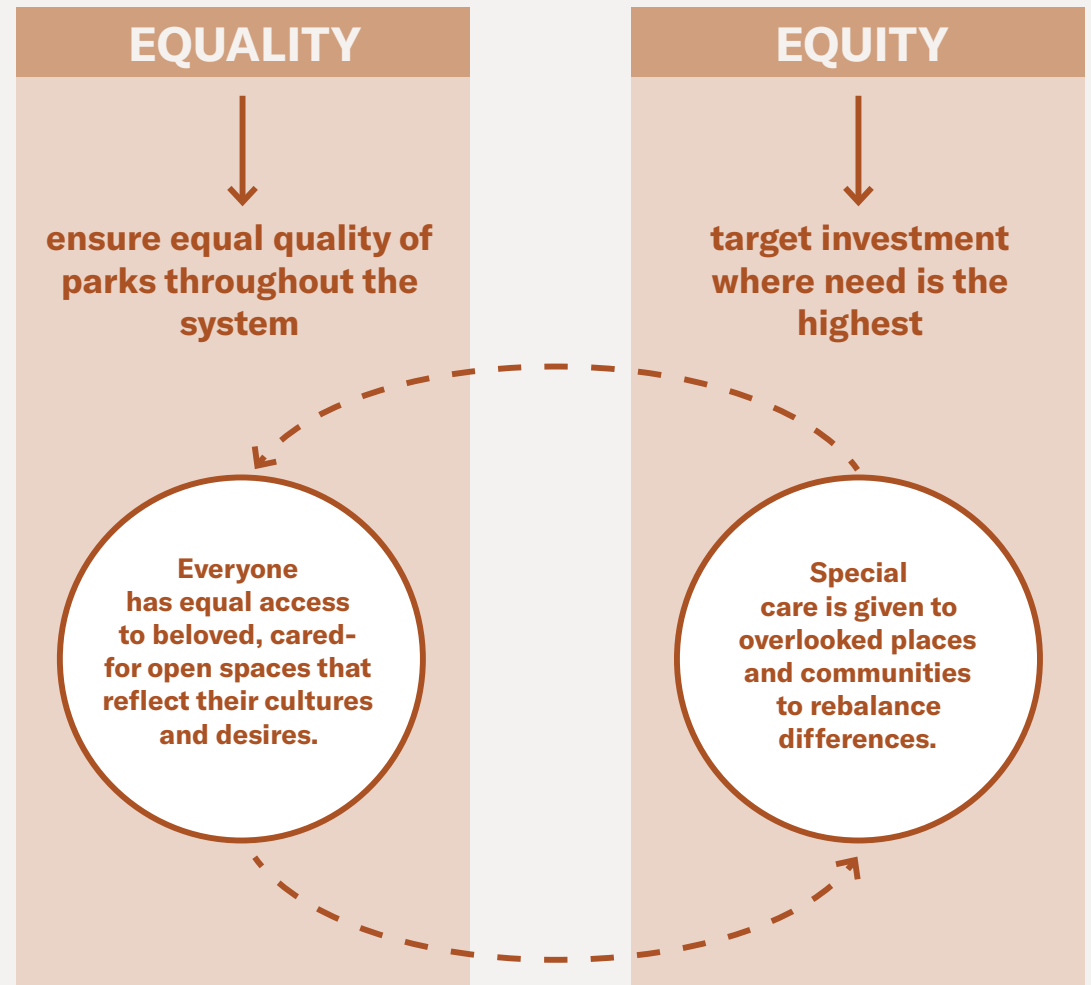
# Commit to Equity

# Commit to Equity
## Level the Playing Field

For Mecklenburg Park & Rec, commitment to equity means targeting investment where the need is the highest – whether that is refurbishing parks in under-resourced communities or creating new public amenities in growing areas where facilities are not present. The vision is to provide everyone with meaningful access to beloved and cared for places. This is achieved by engaging the community, directing funding for reinvestment to existing parks in priority communities, and making additional, strategic investments to close gaps. It is cause for celebration when a new park, facility, or trail opens. But, to remain an exceptional community asset, open spaces, parks, trails, and recreation facilities need adequate maintenance budgets, ongoing updates, and a strong connection with residents.

# What is "equity?"

Equity and equality have become well used terms in recent years. While both are meaningful and important to discuss in terms of parks, open space, and access to recreation, there are noteworthy distinctions.

In the context of Meck Playbook, the two words are similar, but with very important nuances.

## EQUALITY

ensure equal quality of parks throughout the system

Everyone has equal access to beloved, cared-for open spaces that reflect their cultures and desires.

## EQUITY

target investment where need is the highest

Special care is given to overlooked places and communities to rebalance differences.

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

### 1.1 Create guidelines for engaging and reporting back to neighborhood residents regularly to ensure local needs are understood and met.

**Engagement Framework**

Community engagement is much more than public meetings and pop-up events. It is a process of building community relationships, sharing information, and – ultimately – feeding community input into decision-making processes. The core vision of Mecklenburg Park & Rec is around ensuring that residents have great park, trail, recreation, and nature-based experiences. However, this cannot be achieved without conversations that inform decision making and ensures that Mecklenburg Park & Rec's services meet community needs. Community members and the Park and Recreation Advisory Councils have expressed a desire for engagement to go beyond meetings that are only about specific sites.

Instead, the aim of this strategy is to transform decision making to be more transparent and communicate decisions on a regular basis. The goal is to provide the public with greater context for Mecklenburg Park & Rec's rationale and process of decisions. As planning for open space and recreation resources becomes more sophisticated and communities increase in diversity, engagement also needs to respond in kind. This means borrowing from technology for transparent communication and ensuring staff have the tools to effectively communicate, listen, and build rapport.

Rather than creating a unique engagement strategy for each capital project that arises, cities like Raleigh, North Carolina, and Portland, Oregon, have created comprehensive public engagement policies that clearly state the organization's engagement mission and approach to fairly and equitably maximize resident input and support. In July 2020, the City
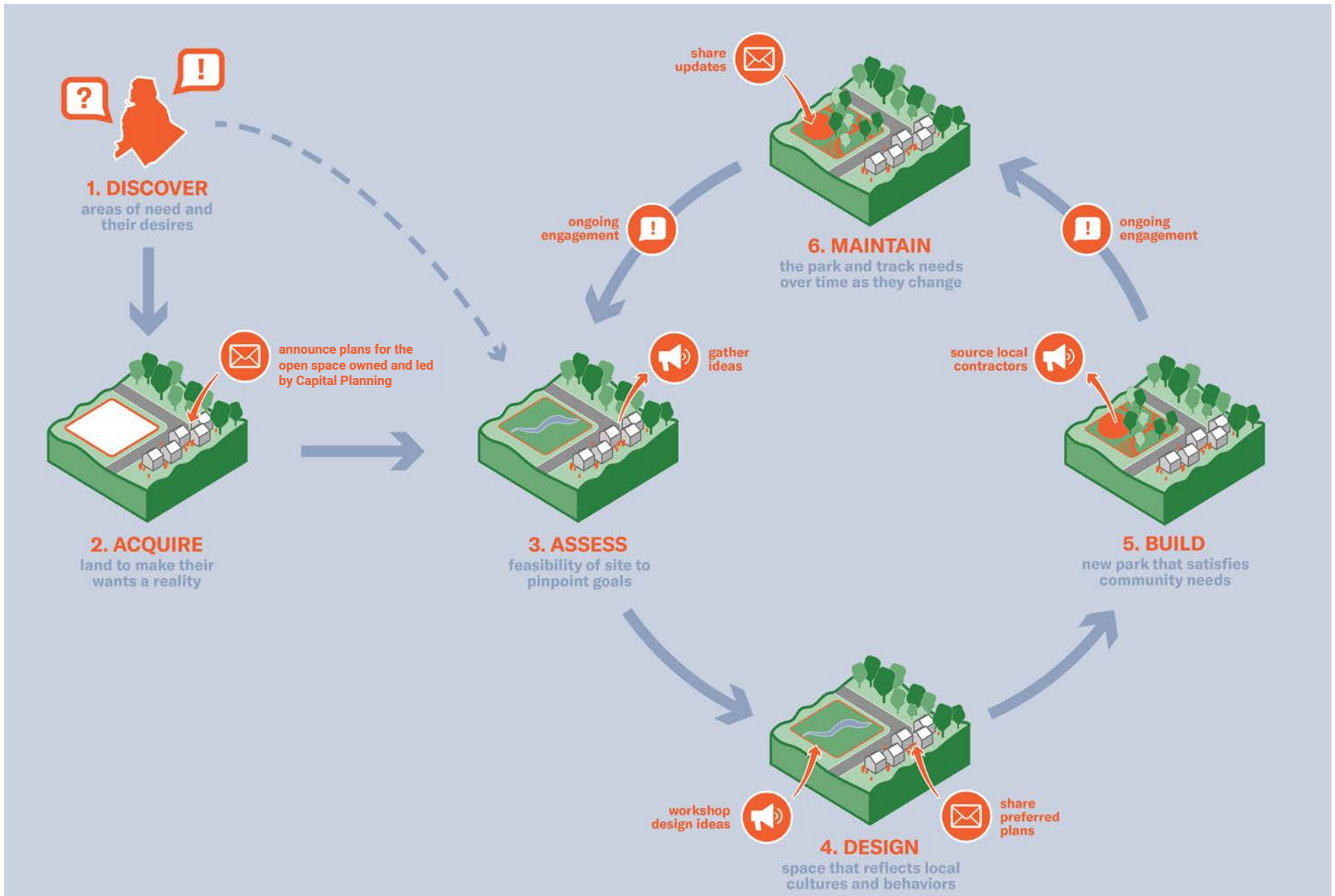
of Raleigh published a Community Engagement Process Development Public Participation Playbook[10] to study best practices for outreach and create a standard process for City of Raleigh projects.

**Measuring and Tracking Progress**

Mecklenburg Park & Rec also needs mechanisms to track community conversations to make sure a diverse pool of residents are being heard and to communicate the outcomes. Expanding the ways for the community and Department to interact is the first step for building trust and strong relationships. The next step is to coordinate this with increased research, evaluations / surveys, and other data gathering to better understand, track, and reflect on diverse community needs.

For example, Oregon Metro, Portland's regional planning organization, publishes a public engagement survey and annual report each year, acknowledging that the ongoing success of

**1. DISCOVER**
areas of need and
their desires

announce plans for the
open space owned and led
by Capital Planning

**2. ACQUIRE**
land to make their
wants a reality

gather ideas

**3. ASSESS**
feasibility of site to
pinpoint goals

share updates

ongoing engagement

**6. MAINTAIN**
the park and track needs
over time as they change

ongoing engagement

source local contractors

**5. BUILD**
new park that satisfies
community needs

workshop design ideas

share preferred plans

**4. DESIGN**
space that reflects local
cultures and behaviors

**2.1** When the community provides feedback at each step of the process, the open space
and recreation system becomes a co-designed and co-implementation process.

their public engagement depends on consistent and effective communication with the public. The annual survey helps them understand how community members prefer to be reached and checks in on awareness of projects and programs. The annual report is an important summary for the public of project evaluations, objectives, levels of involvement, methods, and outcomes. Similarly, The Capital Project Tracker for the New York City park system is an example[11] of a simple online database that provides access to all project information in one place.

## 1.1 Key Actions

**Develop an engagement framework or plan that contains:**

- Guidelines for best practices, formats, methods, and techniques that have been most effective with the Mecklenburg community.

- Policies or principles of public participation to clarify purpose and roles of responsible parties.

- Manual describing information on processes and procedures.

**Measure and track engagement progress through four steps:**

- Proactively build and maintain a database of active community members, their neighborhoods, and how they are engaged. Using that database, document which communities are receiving information, and those who are engaging with Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

- Use demographic information to align resident representation on the Park and Recreation Commission and Advisory Councils with the communities that they are serving.

- Regularly attend and engage with community organizations, taking advantage of those that represent multiple neighborhoods with shared interests. For example, the North End Community Coalition, Plaza Eastway Partners, Steele Creek Residents Association, and Historic West End.

- Develop a web-based CIP and Deferred/ Reinvestment Projects Tracker documenting current, future, funded, and non-funded projects across Mecklenburg County to transparently share information with the community and make it clear what improvements they can expect and how they can participate.

## 1.2 Hire staff to strengthen the Mecklenburg Park & Rec's internal capabilities for outreach and engagement to develop sustaining community relationships.

Outreach and engagement are always critical to a successful department - not just during a master plan process. By better understanding how communities organize and share information, Mecklenburg Park & Rec can do more effective and efficient outreach and meet community needs. Fulfilling this goal will require both dedicated staff time and specialized knowledge.

At present, staff play many roles. Yet, there are no staff solely dedicated to forming relationships with community members and organizations, maintaining them, and helping to shape outreach and engagement. It will be challenging to try to create a strong community relationship while lacking the staff resources to truly do the work. In comparison, many park and recreation organizations of similar scope and size have an Community Engagement Liaison that is focused on connecting with the community and providing informational updates on a regular basis. With many staff members already serving multiple roles, new staff should be added to serve this purpose.

It is recommended the Liaison begin as a single position. Over time, the role may mold into a Liaison team, transitioning to a department wide resource.

Portland Parks and Recreation relies on a Public Involvement and Community Engagement Manager to set over-arching engagement policies and collaborate with teams on strategies and implementation of community engagement processes on all planning and design efforts. This staff member has enabled Mecklenburg Park & Rec to develop a public involvement policy, toolkit, and manual to better support the broader team's engagement, increase its effectiveness, and to coordinate efforts and messages. This staff member can also help broaden engagement training to the other staff who have community-facing roles.

In implementing this strategy, there are opportunities to create solutions to potential technological and language barriers that could inadvertently limit input from some participating. For example, distributing bilingual paper copies of surveys or plans could provide more input options for limited English speakers with limited access to online resources.

### 1.2 Key Actions

**Hire a Community Engagement Liaison:**

- Create a single position located within Mecklenburg Park & Rec to directly support engagement on capital projects, programming, and other Department services. Initial focus of this role should be on capital projects and reinvestment projects.

- Ensure the position works closely with the future Marketing team.

- Grow the Engagement Team over time, with support members and additional responsibilities.

# Goal #2 Reinvestment

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

### 2.1 Maintain and regularly update an inventory of parks, facilities, and greenways to monitor progress toward equitable quality and maintenance.

The Meck Playbook inventory revealed significant qualitative and quantitative variation across the system. Recent investments have resulted in high marks for regional facilities and greenways; however, many older neighborhood parks lag behind. With this up-to-date understanding of community character and needs across the entire County, Mecklenburg Park & Rec can implement strategies to achieve a more targeted and consistent level of service in the future. In order for the inventory to remain a useful tool, Mecklenburg Park & Rec needs to put processes in place to maintain it. To do so, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should assign clear roles and responsibilities for ongoing updates and oversight, maintaining the database in ArcMap or comparable system. In order to

track investments and deferred maintenance, ground truthing of the inventory needs to occur regularly.

The current inventory, including a system of parks, facilities, greenway trails, and historic sites, can be found in Appendix 3.

### 2.1 Key Actions

**Build inventory updates into regular processes:**

- Assign an individual responsible for maintaining the inventory.

- Create a process for integrating new information to the inventory and add to public facing information sources whenever capital improvements are made.

- Allocate resources (internal staff or external support) for more thorough updates regularly.

## GREENWAY TRAILS

**55** miles on 4,203 acres of greenway land

## HISTORIC SITES

**41**

**2.2** Mecklenburg County has a vast and diverse network of parks, open spaces, facilities, greenway trails, and historic sites. It is important to reinvest in these community favorites.

## FACILITIES

**RECREATION CENTERS**
WEST CHARLOTTE
**26**

**SPECIAL FACILITIES**
GRADY COLE CTR
**5**

**INDOOR PAVILIONS**
COL FRANCIS BEATTY
**10**

**EVENT VENUES**
ST. MARYS CHAPEL
**3**

**NATURE CENTERS**
REEDY CREEK
**5**

**AQUATIC & ATHLETIC FACILITIES**
DOUBLE OAKS
**6**

**SENIOR CENTERS**
WAYMER GYM
**3**

9 of these facilities are under construction and coming soon!

**ADMINISTRATION**
MAIN ADMIN OFFICE
**3**

## PARKS

**NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS**
LINCOLN HEIGHTS
**94**
745 acres

**COMMUNITY PARKS**
PARK ROAD
**48**
2,332 acres

**REGIONAL PARKS**
HORNETS NEST
**29**
4,706 acres

**NATURE PRESERVES**
McDOWELL
**27**
7,578 acres

**GOLF COURSES**
CHARLES T. MYERS
**6**
1,252 acres

40 of the County's landholdings (2,805 acres) are park reserves! These places serve ecological purposes and are earmarked for future County needs.

## 2.2 Implement standards for level of care and capital maintenance across all parks, facilities, and greenways to ensure equitable quality across the network.

In 2020, Mecklenburg County included roughly 21,000 acres of parks and open space, 55 miles of greenway trails, and 60 facilities. This is a massive and diverse system. Not only is such a system full of diversity, but it is spread across an equally expansive and wide-ranging County. In order to remain accountable and consistent across such a system, it is important to establish standards for maintenance and care across parks and facilities.

The inventory will guide Mecklenburg Park & Rec towards understanding the condition of existing open spaces, trails, and facilities. It is imperative to implement a documentation and reporting process to plan, prioritize, and fund ongoing facilities maintenance across the system. Facilities and assets with the lowest rating can be CIP funded, while those with moderate rankings can utilize a mix of CIP and reinvestment funds. Over the course of a facility's life cycle, this information should inform the decision to invest in and renovate or demolish and replace a facility.

**Investment Analysis**

To analyze ongoing open space, trails, and facilities maintenance needs, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should identify and confirm how their publicly accessible spaces fit into the following four categories. These categories will determine which spaces receive investment first and equitably rebalance the quality of Mecklenburg Park & Rec holdings. Priorities would rank in the following order:

**Category 1**

Category 1 assets should be highest priority. They are top candidates for investment and maintenance funds. Category 1 assets: (1) have a high level of usage, but located in areas where replacement is infeasible (2) are ranked lowest in the inventory. Overall, these assets are in the worst condition, not viable for replacement, but used very often by the community.

**Category 2**

Category 2 assets should be medium priority for investment. Category 2 assets: (1) have a high level of usage, but located in areas where replacement is infeasible (2) are ranked moderately in the inventory. Category 2 assets are similar to Category 1 assets, but are in generally better condition. This makes them a secondary priority for investment.

**Category 3**

Category 3 assets: (1) have a low level of usage and are in areas where replacement is feasible (2) place high in inventory rankings and are in better condition. While these facilities are in better condition, they are also used less. This makes them an equal priority to Category 2 assets. Both should be medium priority for investment.
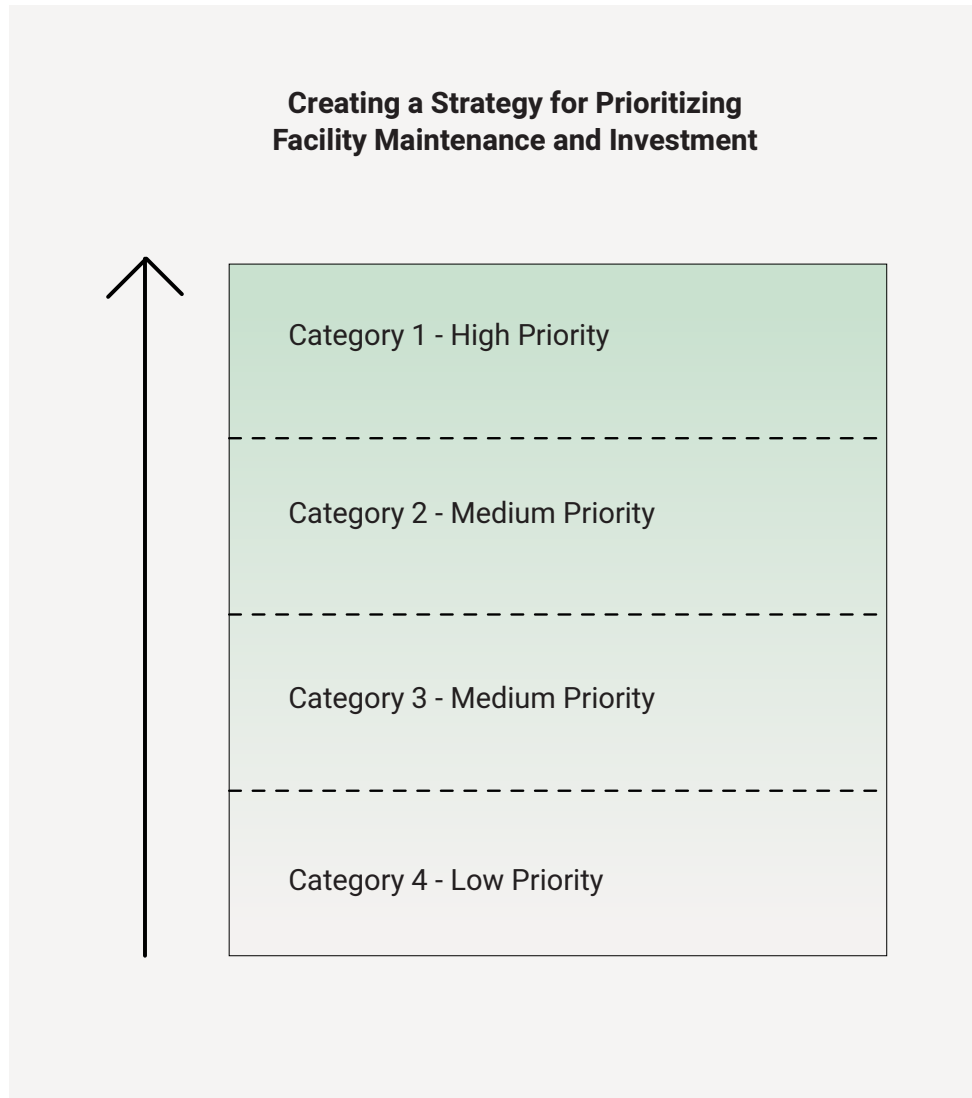
**Category 4**

Category 4 assets: (1) have a low level of usage and are in areas where replacement is feasible (2) place low in rankings and are in worse condition. As Category 4 assets are used less, in worse condition, and located in areas where replacement is an option, they are the lowest priority for investment. They may become candidates for demolition.

While it may seem counter intuitive to prioritize less used assets in better condition (Category 3), over less used assets in worse condition (Category 4), there is a logic this calculation. A Category 4 rating may indicate that an  open space, trail, and facility is not serving the needs of the community. In this instance, replacing a Category 4 asset with a new asset, or rechanneling funding into successful assets is a more preferred solution.

The analysis to rank assets as either Category 1, 2, 3, or 4 has not been conducted as part of the Meck Playbook effort. It is recommended this initiative be one of Mecklenburg Park & Rec's first tasks as part of plan implementation.

**Creating a Strategy for Prioritizing Facility Maintenance and Investment**

Category 1 - High Priority

Category 2 - Medium Priority

Category 3 - Medium Priority

Category 4 - Low Priority

**2.3** Understanding the condition of Mecklenburg Park & Rec's facilities is essential for creating a strategy for prioritizing maintenance and investment.

## Comprehensive Approach to Ongoing Maintenance

Mecklenburg Park & Rec currently engages in a two part strategy for facilities, open spaces, and trail maintenance. Routine maintenance and level of care work supports regular care of the County's assets and is currently structured to replace like for like needs. Capital reinvestment however, troubleshoots more significant or deferred maintenance needs, including the conversion of underutilized amenities to requested amenities. This approach enables Mecklenburg Park & Rec to take care of maintenance needs large and small, but also translates to investments that are uneven and reactive.

Over the course of a park or facility's life, Meck Playbook recommends implementing a maintenance strategy that considers five types of maintenance needs. The five types are:

- Operations and Equipment. These functions are critical to day-to-day operations and programming, and typically include regular site maintenance (mowing), interior cleaning and utilities, and on-site customer service.

- Routine Maintenance. Functions that are performed on a day to day basis, supporting operational and programming needs. Mecklenburg Park & Rec refers to this type of maintenance as Routine Maintenance. This could include planting, painting, patching and other touch-up activities.

- Preventative Maintenance. Functions that are regularly scheduled and periodic activities (quarterly, seasonally, or annually). This work is typically on equipment and includes inspection, lubrication, minor adjustment, tuning, and controls integration.

- Capital Reserve. The replacement of 50% or more of a building subsystem component (lighting, paving, roof, HVAC, flooring) as it reaches the end of its useful life (currently referred to as "Capital Reserve"). These systems are typically divided into 'critical systems': roofing, HVAC, and the exterior envelope, and 'non-critical' systems: interior finishes, interior walls, casework, etc. The Facility Maintenance and Operations division within Asset and Facility Management oversees these projects.

- Capital Reinvestment. Referred to by Mecklenburg Park & Rec as "Deferred Maintenance," this includes all required work to correct unaccomplished maintenance tasks from any of the previous four categories. It is limited to replacing like for like needs, adding a new amenity or replacing one with another.

Capital reinvestment in particular presents a unique opportunity for community engagement and collective decision making. Communities members could assist operations staff in prioritizing maintenance projects or suggesting new ones. A participatory budgeting strategy, elaborated on in Strategy 3.2, would be a helpful mechanism for such a process.

**Develop a Facilities Maintenance Strategy**

Once the existing condition of facilities and their components have been identified and assigned to the appropriate categories, a plan should be developed. Category 1 assets typically have deferred maintenance and may need component renewal, requiring a higher first cost investment. Category 2 assets are prime candidates for recurring and preventative maintenance programs, while identifying and budgeting for future component renewals. Category 3 assets are placed on the recurring and preventative maintenance programs as well, but are candidates where trial programs, new programs, or new systems should be tested, prior to deploying across the system.

## 2.2 Key Actions

**Based off the regularly updated inventory, prioritize and catalogue parks, facilities, and greenways.**

- Rank assets as Category 1, 2, 3 or 4.

- Assets with the lowest rankings can be funded by CIP funds, while moderately ranked assets can be a mix of CIP and reinvestment funds.

**Implement a maintenance strategy based on five types of maintenance needs.**

- Use community engagement and public feedback to specifically direct capital reinvestment needs.

**Use an asset's Category ranking and maintenance needs to create maintenance strategy.**

- Decide if a park, facility, or greenway needs routine maintenance, deferred maintenance, or preventative maintenance.

## 2.3 Reinvest in priority communities to improve quality, maintenance, and access in park, greenway, and facility distribution to better connect users to parks and facilities.

Early community surveys noted that reinvestment in existing facilities was the community's top priority. While creating new facilities in areas with gaps or growth is still a priority, residents truly value the spaces they already have. In order to commit to equity, routine maintenance/capital reinvestment, and upgrades should begin in areas that have historically received less resources.

The inventory revealed that there was great variation in quality across the system. In particular, over half of all local parks need updates. Notably, the majority of lower rated parks or facilities were also located in priority communities. For the purposes of Meck Playbook, a priority community is defined as having two or more of the following characteristics: more renters, higher rates of poverty, more youth, more seniors, and greater proportions of communities of color. (See Figures 1.11 - 1.13 to see where these communities are located).

The inventory also clarified gaps in the park and greenway infrastructure. Today, only 38%
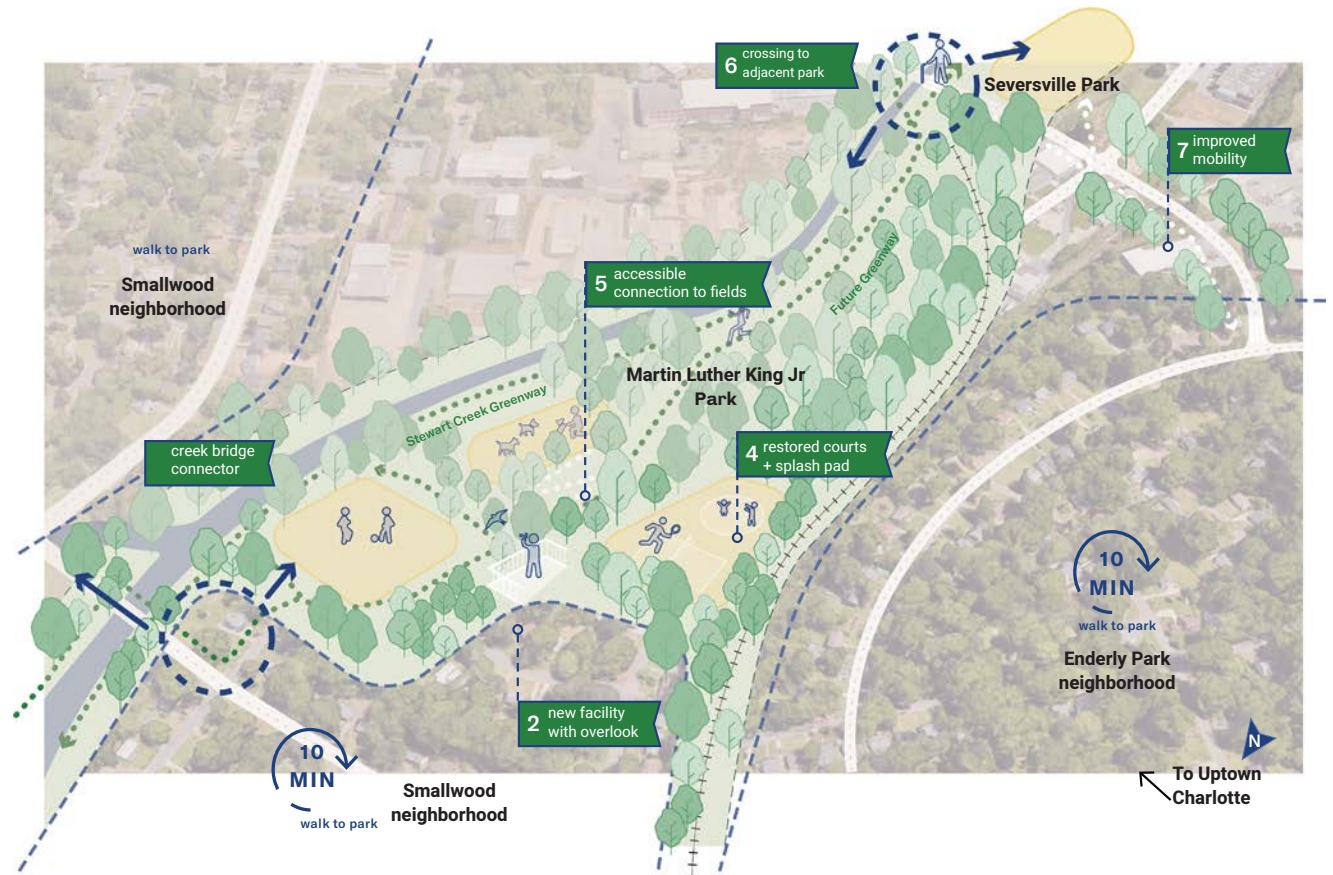


**2.4** Martin Luther King, Jr. Park could become a more integrated and open park that unites and connects nearby neighborhoods.

of Mecklenburg residents can walk to a park within 10 minutes. This is compounded by the fact that historically, the City's planning efforts and development approval process created County development patterns that have not always favored safe pedestrian walkability. During outreach efforts, community members affirmed this takeaway. Many stated that they drive to parks, greenways, and facilities and that this travel takes anywhere from five to twenty minutes.
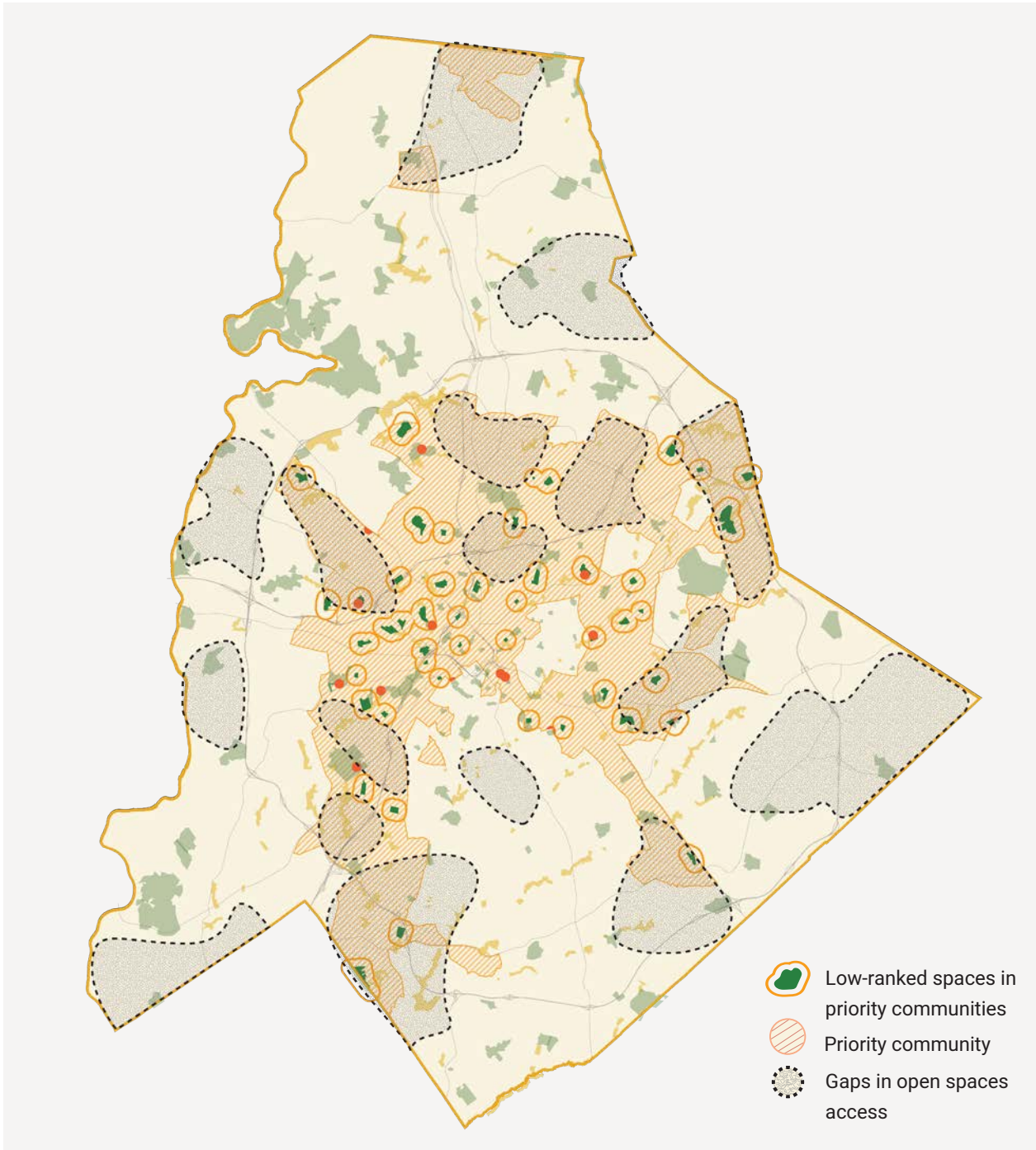
2.5 A commitment to equity can help the county rebalance investment.

Legend:
- Low-ranked spaces in priority communities
- Priority community
- Gaps in open spaces access

## 2.3 Key Actions

**Commit to starting with reinvestment in locations where lower ratings and priority demographics overlap:**

- Use the next Capital Improvement Plan projects to address needed maintenance in parks, facilities and greenways that received a low rating in the system inventory and assessment.

- Use the priority communities mapping and analysis to further inform which projects should come first to address historic needs and create greater equity in resource allocation. This means starting reinvestment in priority areas.

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

### 3.1 Design and deploy data systems and indexes to collect, calculate, and communicate metrics for evaluating the equity performance of Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

Data-driven decisions are needed to better make the case for the essential contributions of park, open space and recreation services as well as to ensure that investments are shared equitably across the system and, particularly, to neighborhoods and places that have not received recent funding.

Mecklenburg County has already been building up its database of basic community and infrastructure data and successfully maintains metrics on a variety of topics including the Charlotte/Mecklenburg Quality of Life Explorer data and air quality information. This data can

be leveraged, along with other sources, to drive future recommendations.

There are many national examples of harnessing  community data toward more equitable decisions. Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, and Portland are all leading the way, through different methods, and offer lessons for Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

In particular, the Minneapolis Parks Board created a strategy for capital investments that centers around race and equity. This can serve as a model for development of a similar system in Mecklenburg. Minneapolis' solution is a data-driven, criteria-based system for capital and rehabilitation projects. The system is a matrix that combines various characteristics about an area surrounding a park or facility with characteristics of the facility to create a composite score that objectively indicates if

this site is a priority for investment. According to team members at the Parks Board, the data-driven planning still required critical oversight, and it generated surprises. "To ensure the metrics would generate an accurate result, [we] ran the numbers several times and evaluated whether the data reflected the reality parks staff knew on the ground. The power of empirical equity data [is that] it will reinforce what you already know, but it will expose the things you might have had blinders to," said Adam Arvidson, Director of Strategic Planning.

## 3.1 Key Actions

**Implement a data-driven process for equitable decision-making that:**

- Consider community characteristics that include data points like population density, youth population, crime statistics, and concentrated area of poverty/racially concentrated area of poverty. In order to factor in Mecklenburg's high rates of growth, compared to many other areas of the country, a factor can be added as well for population growth projections. This needs to be balanced against park characteristics that include data points like park amenity conditions, age of park assets, and reinvestment status (can be calculated by recording amount reinvested in recent years in relation to total replacement value). Much of this data can be translated from the Meck Playbook inventory.



**Current Walkability and Driveability Indicate Where New Investments are Needed**

Zone beyond a ten-minute walk or 5-minute drive to a park

Airport

Priority community

10-min walk

5-min drive
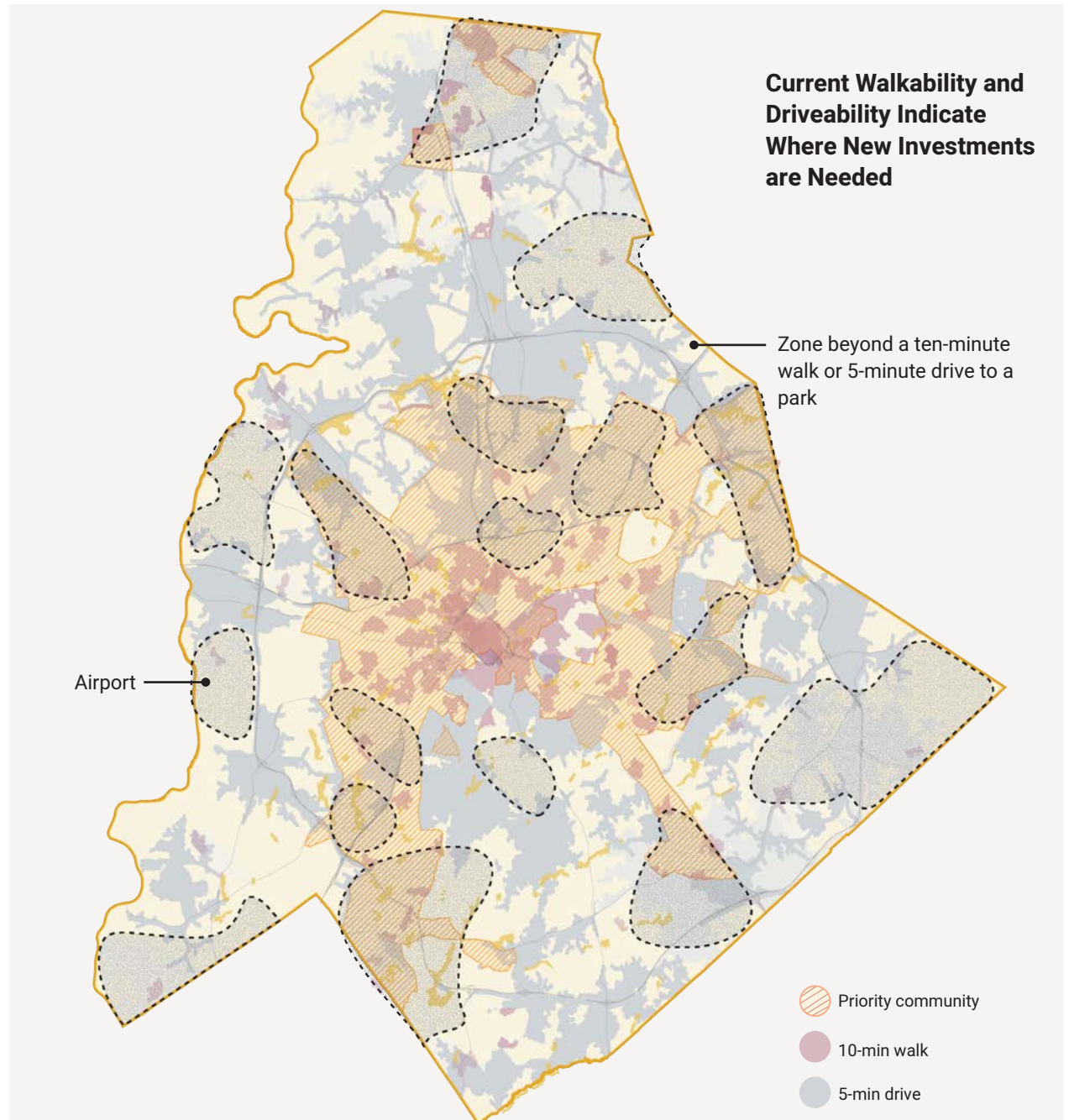
**2.6** When considering both walkability and driveability, gaps still exist, indicating where new parkland investments are most needed.

## 3.2 Expand participatory budgeting to promote open and informed resource allocation decision making.

Throughout community engagement efforts, calls for equity in decision making were echoed by calls for equity in financial allocation. While the County already implements a successful County budget public engagement process, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should explore similar engagement through Capital Improvement Planning and the implementation of capital projects. This approach would assist in ensuring a degree of financial transparency and citizen agency throughout the planning and design phases of project development.

This process has many benefits. It provides influential paths to individuals who wish to champion specific issues. It is an educational tool for understanding how budgets and design decisions are made. Community members are often guided by municipal staff, fostering connections and relationship building.  Perhaps the greatest benefit, however, is that it invites civic participation and a sense of trust about where resources are allocated.

The process would provide a tangible and direct way for community members, especially those without a history of participation, to become involved. It would support other goals in the master plan such as the creation of an engagement team and tying innovation to implementation. Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff have already begun experimenting with this approach through the engagement process for current park renovation projects. A participatory budgeting exercise was used to prioritize and select final park improvements.

The City of Seattle engages in a participatory budgeting initiative that spans many departments. It is a guide for how a cross divisional process can be implemented. Seattle's Your Voice, Your Choice: Parks & Streets program is a partnership between Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, Seattle Department of Transportation, and Seattle Parks and Recreation. Seattle Department of Neighborhoods leads the project by collecting ideas, evaluating the proposals, and organizing voting. Seattle Parks and Recreation funds and implements park specific projects, while Seattle Department of Transportation funds and implements the street improvement projects. A sample of 2019 projects that received funding included improvements to basketball courts, maintenance to kiosks and pavilions, new benches, ADA improvements to parks, and restoring park entryways.

A Mecklenburg Park & Rec specific community budgeting process would reveal which interventions community members value most, even before projects are identified within the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). Imagining this pool of funds like a "flexible fund," would mitigate concerns about the ability to use pre-planned funds to meet emerging needs. This may mean the flexible pool is used for unforeseen infrastructure improvements one year and habitat restoration the next. Identifying community priorities first, before setting any budget restrictions, would also allow community engagement to guide the process. Nearby, the city of Durham, North Carolina has adopted a similarly flexible model. It has implemented a process for residents to support one-time projects that improve physical infrastructure, technology, or general community enhancements.

## 3.2 Key Actions

**Incorporate community input into financial decisions by testing a new process:**

- Expand participatory budgeting process by allocating a portion of the capital budget for each project to a discretionary pool whose use is determined specifically through the design engagement process for the site.

- Alternatively, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should allocate a set of funds for a participatory budget process County-wide where the community can determine on which projects those additional funds should be used.







**2.7** Participatory Budgeting funds could support improvements, updates, and new programs in places like American Legion Memorial Stadium, Veterans Park, or Matthews Sportsplex.

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

### 4.1 Align with the County's Equity and Inclusion Action Plan.

Although gains have been made in the areas of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) through the County's Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI), more can be done. Specifically, in articulating and implementing policies through Mecklenburg Park & Rec. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should incorporate the goals, guidelines, and procedures within its current Equity Action Plan to help ensure all County residents have equitable and unbiased access to facilities, programs, and services. While it is complicated to measure intangible metrics like bias, the mere act of creating the standard is meaningful. Doing so will solidify a stance of inclusion that will remain central to Mecklenburg Park & Rec's messaging.

In order to define direction, create alignment, and continue to generate commitment to DEI, Mecklenburg Park & Rec leadership can take some important steps to allow staff to evaluate individual and collective perspective, identity, values, and culture. As an organization, they can consider how those experiences may affect their approach and effectiveness. Then, Mecklenburg Park & Rec can evaluate how dynamics of DEI affect residents and department strategic planning.

True inclusion requires active, intentional, and ongoing efforts to promote full participation and a sense of belonging of every employee, customer, and strategic partner. It involves procedures and practices, but also the ability to envision and enact new ways of leading.

Across the Mecklenburg Park & Rec divisions, leaders will need to define new requirements and reimagine what inclusive leadership looks like at their division. Divisional leadership will need tools and support, both financially and functionally, as they improve their ability to identify and mitigate bias, respect differences, manage conflict, and create a system of inclusion for individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities, members of a multicultural/racial/ethnic community, members of the refugee/immigrant community, and members of the w community.

Creating and implementing a formal inclusion plan will guide Mecklenburg Park & Rec to establish consistent guidelines and encourage adherence to these guidelines.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's Therapeutic and Inclusive Recreation program identifies its mission and purpose as the following: "To provide therapeutic recreation services for individuals who have disabilities that focus on abilities, rather than disabilities and encourage people to attain their highest level of independent leisure functioning by increasing leisure skills, improving social and communication skills, increasing independent living skills, and increasing their awareness of and involvement in community recreational activities; to advocate for and ensure inclusive opportunities in all program services; to act as

advocates for individuals with disabilities by promoting accessibility at all Department parks, facilities, programs, special events and classes."

This eloquent message mirrors the National Recreation Park Association's (NRPA) understanding of inclusion. For the NRPA, inclusion comes from supporting built-environment enhancements, modeling policy development, and highlighting best practices for program implementation to increase access to health opportunities. Capitalizing on that message, Mecklenburg Park & Rec's Therapeutic and Inclusive Recreation team can help to develop a formal inclusion plan for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to ensure multi-divisional acceptance of inclusion practices.

## 4.1 Key Actions

**Enhance the Equity Action Plan for Equitable and Unbiased Access to Services:**

- Seek support from the County's Office of Equity and Inclusion and the Therapeutic and Inclusive Recreation program to update the plan specifically to park and recreation service needs.

- Include an outline of the accommodations that can improve accessibility to programs, parks, recreation centers, and other facilities for all community members, regardless of background or ability.

- Support staff members with the appropriate training to implement the plan through their own roles and responsibilities.

"Thousands of lesser-known neighborhood parks are the backbone of America's park system. Often, they are the nearest—and sometimes the only—natural environment available for urban communities. Yet, despite their importance, public agencies struggle to meet the basic budgetary maintenance and programming needs of these parks. All too often, this equity imbalance falls along racial and economic lines."

**– Catherine Nagel, Executive Director of City Parks Alliance**

## 4.2 Complete regular equity and anti-bias trainings for department staff to continue and reinforce a departmental culture of equity advancement across all Mecklenburg Park & Rec operations, internal, and external.

Recently, Mecklenburg County has begun a county-wide initiative requiring full-time staff to complete a day long training in anti-bias, equity, and inclusion. These workshops work to decrease external bias by establishing a baseline of understanding and awareness for individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities, members of a multicultural/racial/ethnic community, members of the refugee/immigrant community, members of the unhoused community, and members of the LBGTQIA community. Mecklenburg Park & Rec approves of and participates in this effort. However, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should conduct regular department specific bias training for all staff. This training can be done in collaboration with OEI.

Park and Recreation specific anti-bias training could focus on all ways in which Mecklenburg Park & Rec interacts with County residents.

It can provide an opportunity to teach staff creative game-centered approaches to discussing bias with both children and adults, providing a toolkit for camp counselors, schools, or recreation staff. Trainings such as these are effective outside of Mecklenburg Park & Rec as well. They equip employees to empathetically, effectively, and honestly interact with their diverse community stakeholders. Mecklenburg Park & Rec is highly representative of the county's resident population, placing it a step ahead of other departments and poised for more critical, creative, and division specific conversations around equity and anti-bias. Adding department specific training will add a level of nuance that can set the model for other departments.

It is imperative to acknowledge the existence of bias and proactively craft a culture that works to dismantle it at both an internal and external level. Internally, this is especially important for workplace advancement. One of Mecklenburg Park & Rec's goals is to "increase employee awareness and development opportunities across all salary plans." This goal cannot be achieved unless all employees have equal access to development opportunities.

### 4.2 Key Actions

**Conduct anti-bias trainings specific to park and recreation services:**

- Work with OEI and support regular staff training to address bias in outdoor recreation programming and experiences.

- Seek training that will leave the staff with tools and approaches to use within their own roles.
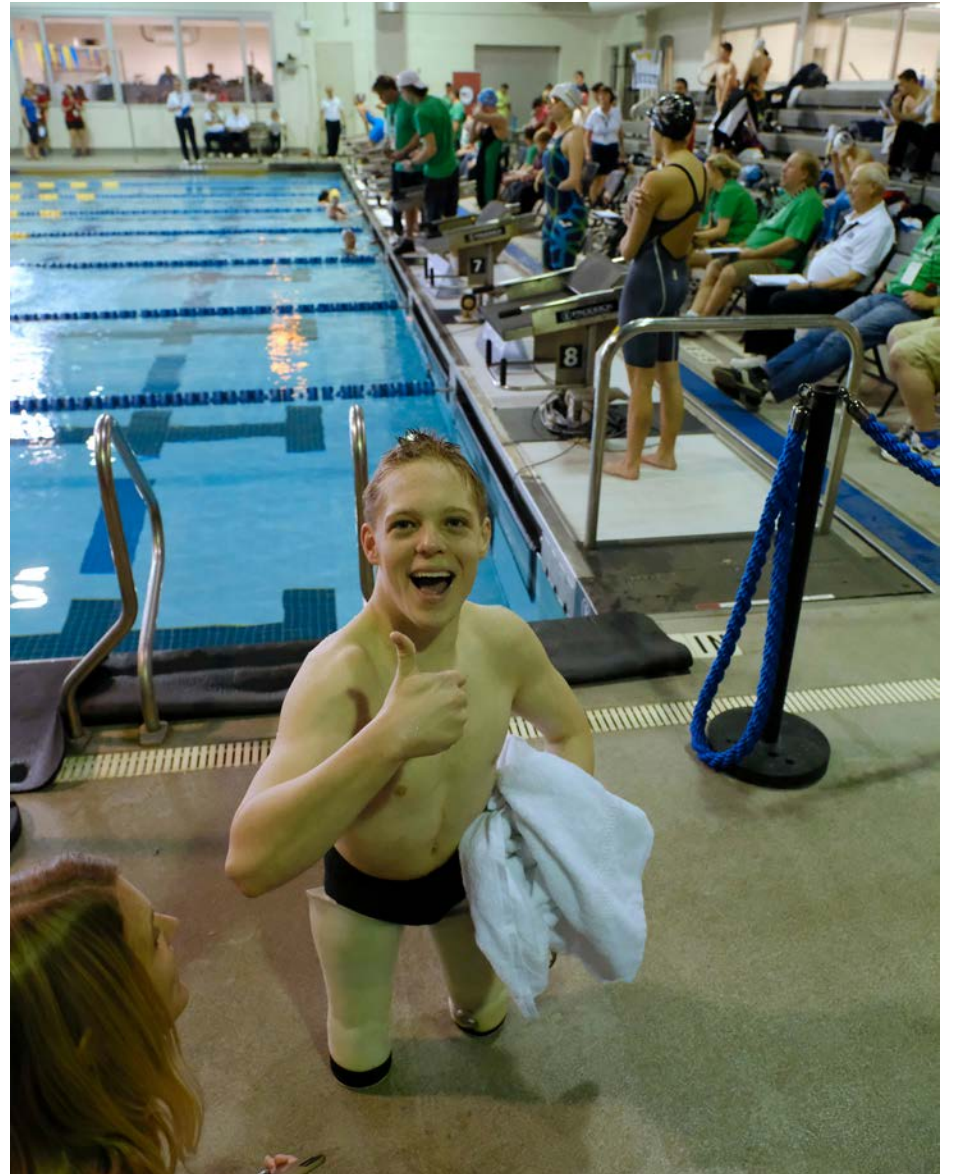
**2.8** Swimmers participating in the local Paralympics.

# Evolve and Grow

Summary of key actions required to realize the Game Plan goals include:

## Goal #5
## Stewardship

*Key Actions*

### Actively Manage Natural Spaces

Conduct property surveying and boundary marking of existing properties and evaluate new sites for ecological value to inform care and opportunities. Protect plant communities through vegetation research and preservation and invasive species monitoring, removal, and controlled burns. Monitor animal populations for disease or population changes.

### Expand and Protect Conservation Areas

Prioritize stream buffers and native habitat development through active management to protect waterways and other natural resources. Continue to create buffers along waterways. Identify land acquisition opportunities that prioritize preservation of natural resources.

## Goal #6
## Programming
*Key Actions*

### Balance Recreation Use

Design and develop sites to harmonize human activity with sensitive existing ecological systems.

### Create Productive Landscapes

Design all spaces to be multi-functional, with a focus on stormwater management.

### Close Gaps in Shade Trees

Continue existing tree planting strategies, while enhancing efforts like the City of Charlotte's Tree Canopy Action Plan and partnerships like Trees Charlotte. Champion for acquisitions or partnerships to protect existing trees.

### Adjust Offerings for Equity

Expand services in the central park region, given its density and access to transit. Assess programs per square foot in facilities to track regional performance.

### Streamline Registration and Reservation Processes

Introduce a new streamlined reservation process that simplifies the steps needed to host an event.

### Reimagine Community Targets, Pricing, and Evaluation Methods

Target adults (ages 18-54) and active adults (ages 55+), equalize summer programming with other seasons, review opportunities to increase some program fees, and work towards 30% program participation rate by county residents.

### Tie Programming Gaps to Growth Strategies

Identify gaps in programming and use those gaps to guide land acquisition, relationship buildings, and capital projects.

### Reflect Community in Programs

Expand programs to meet the needs of the active adult population. Use community input to inform acquisition and facilities planning.

### Build in Flexibility

Create design standards that ensure new facilities are flexible spaces that are able to adapt to future trends over time.

# Evolve and Grow

Continued summary of key actions.

## Goal #7
## Land Acquisition

*Key Actions*

### Partner with Development

Collaborate with other agencies to create a standard impact fee that provides a steady and reliable tie to open space acquisition, management, and wellness.

### 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.

### Implement New Classifications

Classify all places as Local, Regional, Greenway, Nature Preserve, or Special Use Facility.

# Goal #8
# Staffing
*Key Actions*

### Continue Workforce Growth

Hire additional full-time staff to keep pace with growth and create new positions to meet community and departmental needs.

### Support Staff Satisfaction

Adjust operations with a focus on strengthening communication, building successful teams, and modernizing technology.

### Streamline On-boarding

Simplify hiring, on-boarding, and training.

### Share Training Across Divisions

Expand the "grow-in-place" system that allows mentoring across divisions and create succession plans for key roles.

### Tie Innovation to Implementation

Create a system to translate innovation in operations to daily work processes and funding.

# Goal #9
# Funding
*Key Actions*

### Communicate Value

Develop an online dashboard to easily and transparently report Departmental progress externally, demonstrating success and value.

### Capitalize on External Partners

Foster partnerships that increase access to resources, such as grants, corporate sponsorships, and existing health programs.

### Remodel Pricing and Fee Structure

Implement more fee-based programming while continuing to balance subsidies for those with financial need.

# Evolve and Grow
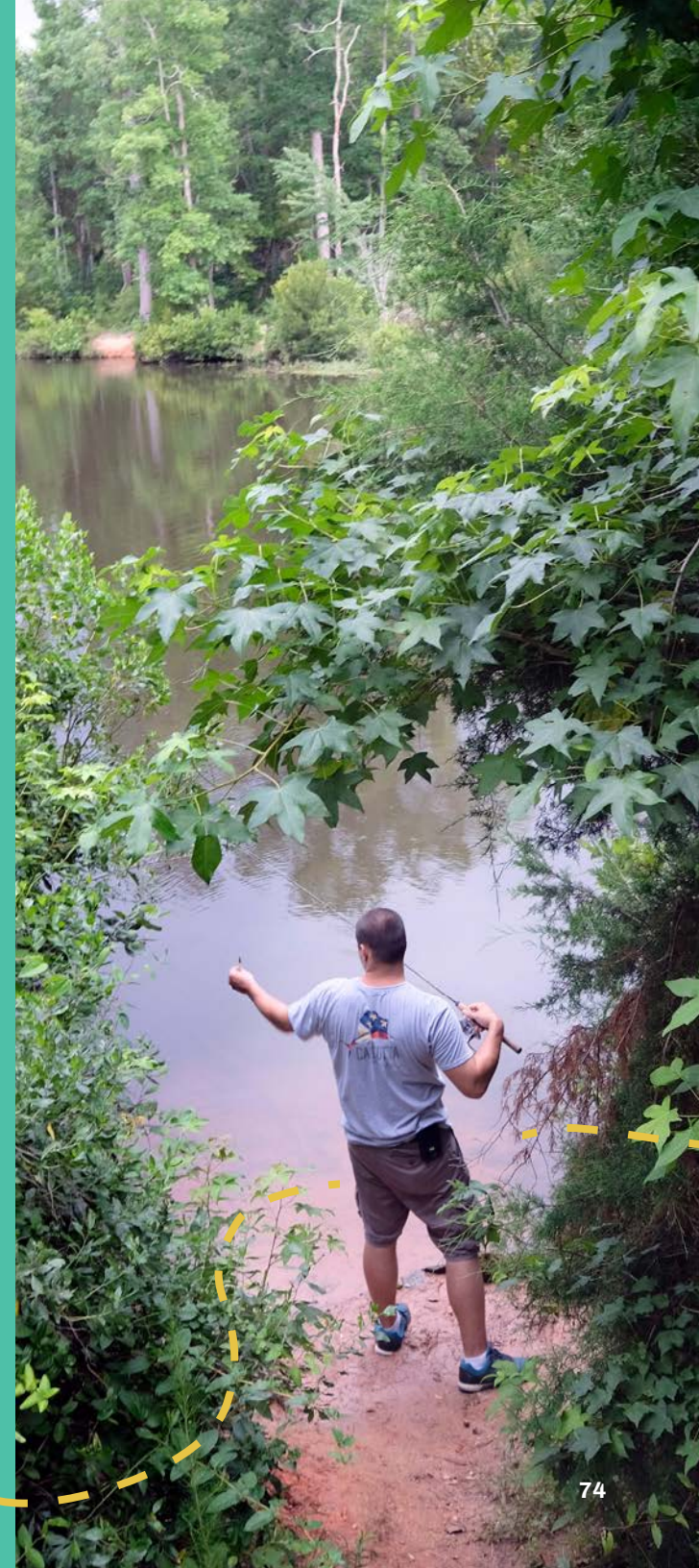
# Evolve and Grow
## Cover all the Bases

The residents of Mecklenburg County are growing in number, aging in place, and evolving their interests and ideas about what Mecklenburg Park & Rec should provide. National recreational trends and a community survey point to future trends the County should take into consideration. Variety will still be important; different programs and activities appeal to various age groups. Youths appreciate "risk" play, such as outdoor adventures and fitness; young adults are drawn to concerts and festivals; adults make use of trails and dog parks; and older adults report that they want a balance of age-specific and intergenerational activities and aquatics. At the same time, growth signals an importance of proactively planning for land needs for environmental conservation, recreation, and multi-modal connectivity that meets not only today's needs, but balances future pressures. To keep pace with change, Meck Playbook outlines goals around stewardship, programming, land acquisition, staffing, and funding.



**3.1** Organized sports for adults are on the rise.



**3.2** Riparian corridors like McDowell Creek help provide habitats, prevent erosion, and reduce flooding.



**3.3** Staff perform prescribed burns to reduce brush, and control invasive species that push out native plants.

# Goal #5 Stewardship

## Protect and adapt the resilience of natural areas for future generations in Mecklenburg County.

### 5.1 Expand efforts to actively manage natural spaces to preserve ecosystems and provide habitat for native flora and fauna.

Mecklenburg County contains a myriad of natural resources, including temperate forests, wetlands, an extensive stream network, and a biodiverse animal population. Some of the most valuable natural resources in the County exist in riparian buffers, or areas along streams and waterways. These buffers are critical in supporting wildlife habitat and a healthy stream network.

The rolling topography of the Appalachian Plateau region divides the County's 3,000 miles of streams and creeks into three major watersheds: the Yadkin, Upper Catawba and Lower Catawba.

The Catawba-Wateree Watershed provides drinking water to 2 million, and yet is one of the country's most endangered waterways. Plants and other vegetation within the riparian buffers help filter out pollutants and sediment and prevent them from entering the region's water supply. Proper active management is essential to support this watershed. Active habitat and forest management can protect air quality, drinking water, and habitats for humans and animals alike.

### 5.1 Key Actions

**Actively manage natural species:**

- Survey and mark boundaries of existing County-owned properties to gather information and properly care for them.

- Evaluate new properties for natural and ecological value and incorporate into the County inventory.

- Expand vegetation research and preservation efforts like those ongoing at Reedy Creek and Stevens Creek Nature Preserves. Mitigate invasive species through monitoring, removal, and controlled burns to encourage native tree growth.

- Monitor animal populations for disease or population changes.
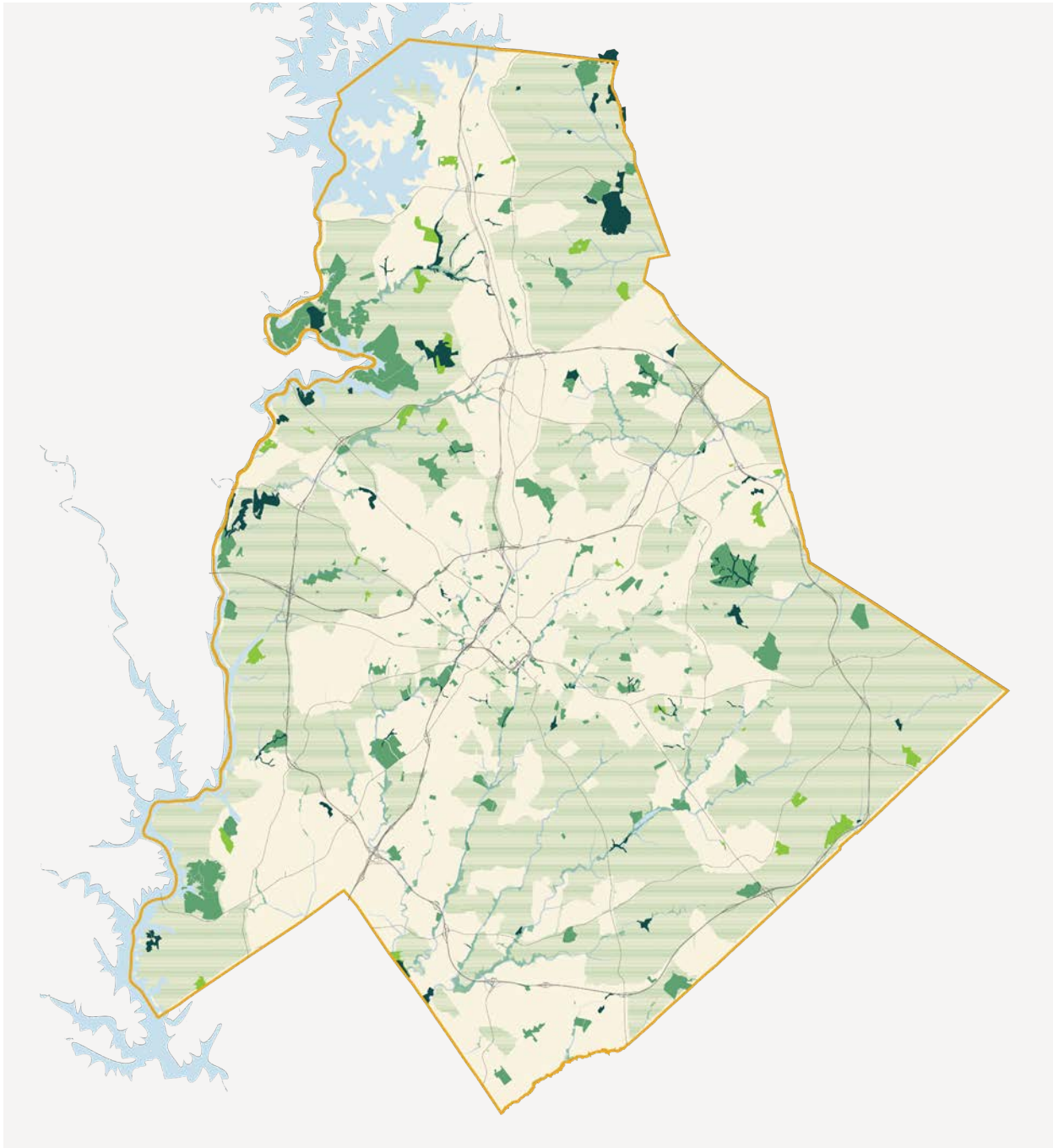
## Conservation Land

- Tree Canopy (Greater than 50%)
- Park Property (Developed)
- Park Property (Greenway)
- Parkland Reserve
- Conservation Land (CLC+ Catawba)
- Waterway

**3.4** Current land undergoing conservation efforts.

## 5.2 Expand, restore, and permanently protect County-owned conservation areas, including greenways and waterway buffers.

The County protects over 7,700 acres of nature preserves. These preserves include important ecosystems like native plant communities and stream corridors. Latta Nature Preserve, Reedy Creek Nature Preserve, and McDowell Nature Preserve are the three largest preserves in the county, and each provides nature education to the community as well as conservation. In 2019 alone, almost 1.2 million people visited the county's nature preserves to learn about the natural systems right outside their backyards.

Protecting the County's streams and creeks is also critical to the long-term health of the community. The greenway system currently spans more than 4,200 acres. Almost all (99%) of greenway land intersects with a creek or stream in at least one location. Similarly, 74% of County parks are located along a stream or lake. Thus, protecting these amenities also means protecting natural waterways. In the mid-2000s, the County had already executed a plan to buy and protect over 3,000 acres of land along the shoreline of Mountain Island Lake, the primary drinking water supply to almost all residents of Mecklenburg County.

Although the overall acreage of preserved lands is important, the ecological impact of these lands is diminished if they are scattered throughout the County. As development surges in the County, it is increasingly important to create buffers and to realize the full ecological and community benefits.
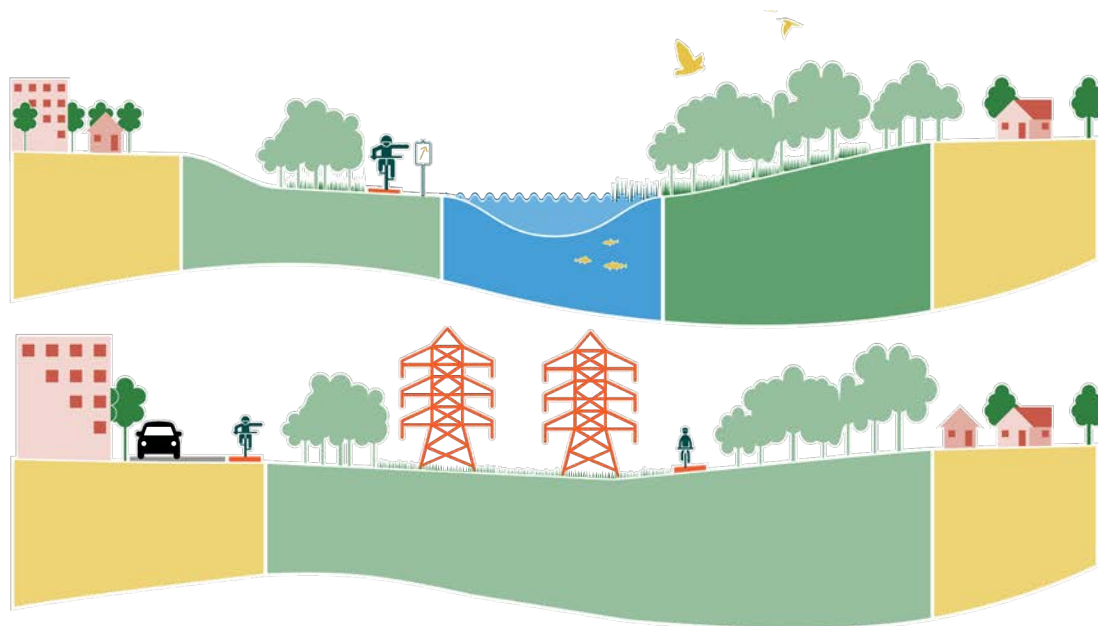


**3.5** Sections of current conserved lands show how human, ecological, and transportation needs can exist symbiotically.

### 5.2 Key Actions

**Expand and Protect Conservation Areas:**

- Build land acquisition targets for preservation into the Capital Improvement Plan.

- Acquire and actively manage riparian buffers and native habitat areas.

- Prioritize acquisition adjacent to existing conservation lands that connect and expand habitat corridors and riparian buffers.

## 5.3 Design and manage facilities to balance recreational use with environmental protection.

Mecklenburg County's land resources serve a dual purpose; they are often critical both for natural resource benefits and for human use. This is particularly true for greenway trails, which have a special relationship with stream corridors. Streams are beautiful and valuable natural resources. Due to their flood potential, they are often deemed only suitable for passive recreation uses and not desirable for development. They also form linear corridors perfect for long stretches of trails. This is the ideal relationship: if greenway trails are carefully planned, they can have minimal impact on the stream corridor while allowing users to interact closely with the stream and the aquatic ecosystem. Greenways provide land for recreation while simultaneously adding significant flood plain protection.

Parks can also vary greatly in their environmental impact, depending on siting, design, and use decisions. Some parks may be almost completely preserved with low impact amenities like natural trails, providing recreation opportunities that coexist with nature. Other parks with larger amenities may have more of an impact. Sports fields in particular, often

disturb the natural environment because of their large size and grading, which requires disruptive earthwork and creates stormwater management issues. These manicured areas may also be very resource intensive over time, requiring consistent watering, mowing, and fertilization. The latter, which the County currently participates in and plans to continue, can contribute to offsite water quality impacts. However, with careful planning, the environmental impacts of new and existing parks, bicycle routes, and trails can be reduced, if not entirely mitigated.
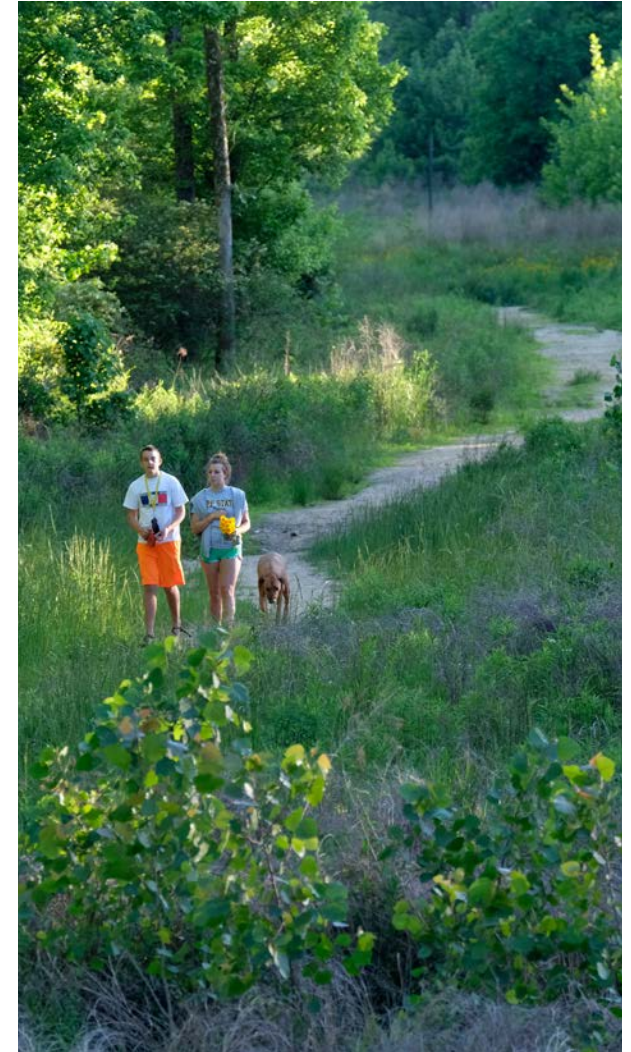
### 5.3 Key Actions

**Balance land allocated for recreation and protection:**

• Implement flexible recreation solutions that encourage multiple uses.

**Create standards for facility design and management that align with the County's Environmental Leadership Action Plan.**

**Incorporate environmental education into facility design and greenway trails.**



**3.6** Managing invasive and native plant populations in places like McAlpine Greenway have a positive environmental impact and provide natural places to explore.

**3.7** Little Sugar Creek near Uptown used to be a "capped" waterway, flowing through a pipe.



**3.8** Unearthing the stream provided space for the greenway trail and reconnected the creek to its watershed.

## 5.4 Increase productive landscapes in parks to enhance stormwater infrastructure, support pollinator species, and beautify surrounding neighborhoods.

Natural systems and ecosystem function exist everywhere in Mecklenburg County, from designated nature preserves to urban patches. Crafting landscapes to reduce runoff provides many benefits to parks and the people that use them. This "green infrastructure" can include rain gardens, vegetated swales, stream restoration, rainwater harvesting, green roofs, protected floodplains, and more. These systems provide great ecological benefits - and when they are properly designed they can offer considerable recreational and financial benefits as well.

For example, parks that have suitable soils and topography can decrease municipal spending on stormwater management by utilizing natural stormwater management techniques such as rain gardens or vegetated swales. In Philadelphia, the Trust for Public Land estimates that the City saves about $6 million a year in stormwater costs due to parks. These methods can improve drainage and water quality in the parks, and in some cases can even filter and absorb runoff from surrounding areas.

However, these benefits are easily negated if the system is not properly designed or appropriate maintenance is not performed.

While the exact costs of the impact of stormwater runoff in Mecklenburg County are unknown, the siting of over three-quarters of the County's open space system along waterways makes it a valuable stormwater resource.

Additionally, green infrastructure is often highly compatible with recreation value. Other stormwater management techniques like vegetated wetlands can provide beautiful walking environments with space to fish or birdwatch. Native vegetation can be used to support animal habitats, absorb stormwater, improve air quality, and enhance park aesthetics.

### 5.4 Key Actions

Collaborate with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Stormwater Services on open space improvements and green infrastructure projects.

Identify the stormwater benefits of the County's open space system to support for future open space expansion.

## 5.5 Leverage County-owned land and partnership opportunities to expand tree canopy and close gaps.

In general, Charlotte is known as a verdant city with beautiful tree-lined streets. This lush canopy has come to be a defining feature of the area. However, from 1985 to 2008, Mecklenburg County lost 33% of its tree canopy. Charlotte fared even worse, losing 49% of its tree canopy and 5% of its open space during the same period. Urban trees are not only beautiful; they are an important natural resource that we are in danger of losing.

In the 2017 Urban Forest Master Plan, Charlotte set goals to expand tree canopy coverage and continue tree planting strategies. Charlotte 2040 makes increasing the tree canopy an imperative action of its plan through the Tree Canopy Action Plan, which will add detail to the 50 by 50 goal by setting specific tree coverage goals for different place types. Continuing to plant trees on county-owned land while enhancing efforts like the City of Charlotte's Tree Canopy Action Plan and partners will be important to reach these goals. It is also recommended that Mecklenburg Park & Rec continue to advocate for ordinances encourage canopy retention.

Meck Playbook strives to support these canopy rehabilitation plans throughout the County.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec can specifically contribute through land acquisitions or by supporting municipalities to impose development impact fees. These fees would prioritize existing tree preservation, tree succession planning on County-owned land, and planting strategies that value shade. Mecklenburg Park & Rec can also collaborate with other departments to support tree planting strategies on streets, urban trails, and potential partner sites that directly connect to their facilities or programs.
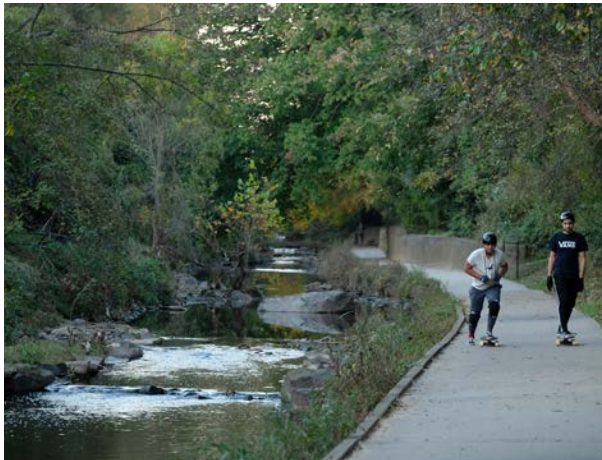


**3.9** Recent investments in Greenway trails include reforestation efforts to bring back the County's beloved tree canopy.



**3.10** Trees at Romare Bearden Park provide shade during the summer months and a holiday spectacle during the winter months.

### 5.5 Key Actions

**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.**

**Develop a plan for tree succession and shade planting on County-owned land.**

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

### 6.1 Evaluate locations of service offerings to ensure programming and space needs are equitable.

A program evaluation system focused on equity and inclusion needs to use both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Quantitative metrics, like mapping the location of facilities and recreation access, will indicate if gaps exist in certain areas. Mecklenburg County's recreation centers service three geographic regions, the North, South, and Central regions. The regions pie chart in Figure 3.11 visualizes the quantity of enrollment-based programs as a percentage of all programs offered at recreation centers. The south region offered 40% of all recreation center programming. The north region offered about 32%, while the central region offered 28%.

Yet, all of these regions contain unique facilities and assets that make this analysis more nuanced. When accounting for large programming hubs like nature preserves, aquatics, and the Revolution Sports Park

Academy, the percentage of programs offered in each region changes. This is displayed in the second pie chart in Figure 3.11. It is up to the discretion of Mecklenburg Park & Rec to determine if this distribution is equitable (*program data was acquired before the COVID-19 pandemic and should be reevaluated before further action).

To conduct such an analysis a measurement and evaluation system should be developed and implemented. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should craft a system that works for them, guiding management decisions in a streamlined and consistent manner.

Qualitative metrics are more elusive. While it is important to understand if the community finds programming welcoming and well-run, it is equally important to analyze whether programs respond to unanticipated needs. Events this year have reinforced the need for programs, facilities, and parks to respond to unknown conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protest movements of the summer

of 2020 have shown that parks and open spaces are critical infrastructure that supports togetherness in a time of social distancing and encourages poignant community conversations. This precedent of "stepping up" to meet the moment should be a theme that carries Mecklenburg Park & Rec forward through future opportunities and challenges. However, it can be difficult to track the success of responding to intangible needs. Evaluation metrics will need to shift to fit the nuances of each moment. For example, Mecklenburg Park & Rec can measure its "success" during the COVID-19 pandemic by measuring how many and how quickly it was able to move programs online. It could measure its ability to respond to social justice movements by evaluating how many open spaces were used for protests and events. Surveys could also directly ask constituents if they are satisfied with how Mecklenburg Park & Rec responded to particular social, cultural, and political changes.

## Enrollment Based Programs by Recreation Center Region



- 40% South Region
- 32% North Region
- 28% Central Region
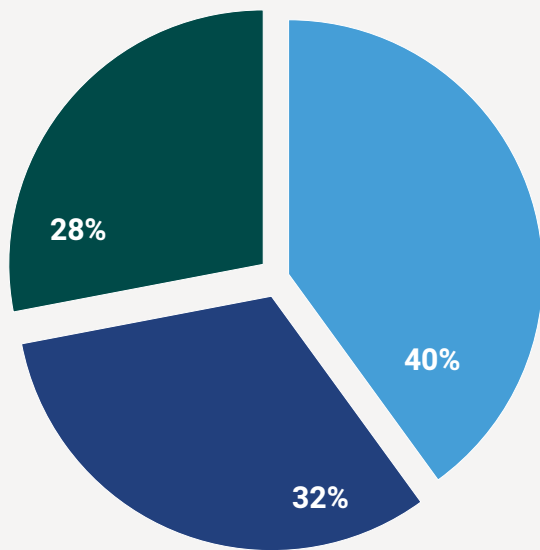
## Enrollment Based Programs with Facilities



- 27%
- 22%
- 21%
- 19%
- 7%
- 4%
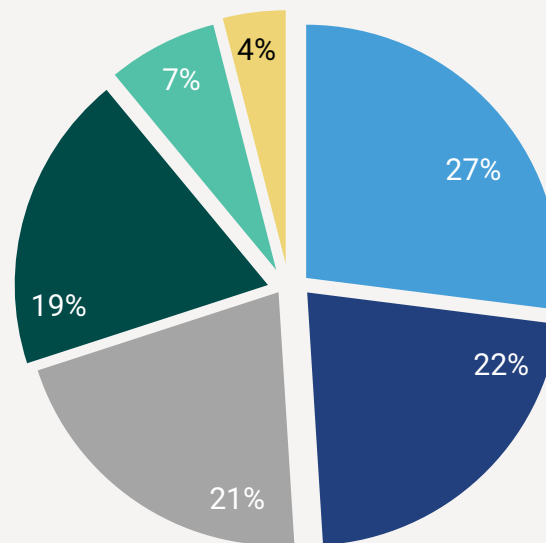
**Legend:**
- South Region
- North Region
- Nature Preserves
- Central Region
- Aquatics
- Revolution Sports Park Academy

## 6.1 Key Actions

Expand service in the central region, given its density and accessibility to transit systems.

Create a life cycle tool to understand if programs are successful or need to be phased out. Re-evaluate and shift metrics for program evaluation.

Gather regular community input to determine if programs are meeting community needs.

**3.11** Enrollment based programs by corridor.

## 6.2 Streamline administrative processes for hosting events and programs in neighborhood parks to facilitate ease of use and attract diverse users.

Mecklenburg County's parks host dozens of neighborhood, community, and County-wide special events with thousands of attendees. The current process works well for those who are well versed in the administrative system but is opaque and complicated for many first time users. This is complicated by limited informational guidance online.

While the process is difficult for external community organizers, it is also unclear for internal staff-to-staff collaboration and staff communication with residents. There is an opportunity to enhance communication between residents, parks operations, and special events staff about ongoing and upcoming events. The current process causes each sector to function independently, leaving many without the knowledge that an event is occurring.

It is recommended that Mecklenburg Park & Rec introduce a reservation system that all stakeholders can access simultaneously. The system would simplify the steps needed to host an event, while creating a more streamlined event management system. Such a management system, coupled with increased communication efforts between Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff and residents, will encourage diversity of users at parks and open spaces.

### 6.2 Key Actions

**Improve the existing reservation and event management system that is accessible to all stakeholders simultaneously:**

- Train staff to use the reservation and event management system.

- Provide system navigation support to external stakeholders.

**Expand special events services to support events in in parks throughout the county.**



**3.12** Fourth Ward Park special events are popular in the summer.



**3.13** Spectators watch a tournament at Matthews Sportsplex.

## 6.3 Recalibrate program offerings to ensure they reflect the community's diversity and fill a market need.

### Recreation Assessment

Mecklenburg Park & Rec has a high service standard. This is reflected in the wide variety of programs and far reaching services offered by Mecklenburg Park & Rec. When compared to the listing of programs that park and recreation agencies throughout the country provide, Mecklenburg Park & Rec offers 88.6% of possible categories. This is much higher than similar departments across the nation, which provide offerings of 65.7% of possible service categories. While Mecklenburg Park & Rec's service delivery is thriving, analysis showed that the distribution of programs and services can be revised to align better with demographics of the rapidly growing County.

A detailed analysis of the recreation program offerings was used to identify the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for future program direction. The resulting information identified program categories, programming gaps, and future program considerations.

The recreation assessment process was informed by data and reports from the

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's Recreation Programming Plan and Comprehensive Program Matrix, as well as enrollment and participation data, program revenue and expenses, and program metric worksheets, which were completed by Department staff. Internal meetings and interviews with staff also provided insight. Data from the Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc. (ESRI) informed the trends review. Community engagement from focus groups, stakeholder meetings, and a community needs survey provided insight into additional perspectives.

From a planning perspective, Mecklenburg Park & Rec has demonstrated ongoing achievement in the documentation of its programming processes and methodology. Mecklenburg Park & Rec completed a Program Plan in 2008 as a part of a comprehensive master planning process. In 2015, a Program Development Manual was established. The Recreation Programming Plan was updated in 2019 (Appendix 4). All these tasks align with the requirements as outlined in the Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) standards.

### Programming Offerings

The program age segment analysis reviews the distribution of the program offerings according

to age segments serviced. For the purposes of this assessment, age categories followed Mecklenburg Park & Rec's age structure:

- Preschool, ages 0 – 5 years
- Elementary, ages 6 – 11 years
- Pre-Teen and Teen, ages 12 –17 years
- Adult, ages 18 – 54 years
- Active Adults, ages 55+ years
- Family
- Therapeutic Recreation

The group that had the highest total quantity of planned programs was the elementary age group (ages six to eleven), at 865 or 25.6% of all programs offered. Programs for active adults (ages 55 and over) was the second-highest total offering, with 764 or 22.6% of all programs offered. Preschool children (ages zero to five years) were the least likely to have programs, as only 7.6% of all programs served this age group.

A typical goal of a public recreation provider is to offer programs for all ages in a manner that balances resident demand with an equitable supply. The segmentation review can be used to assess the extent to which each age group is being served. The segmentation does not necessarily need to mirror the community's age demographic category in an exact manner;

| Age Segment | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 0 – 5 Years | 257 | 7.6% |
| 6 – 11 Years | 865 | 25.6% |
| 12 – 17 Years | 404 | 12.1% |
| 18 – 54 Years | 448 | 13.3% |
| 55+ Years | 764 | 22.6% |
| Family | 528 | 15.6% |
| Americans with Disabilities | 109 | 3.2% |
| Total | 3,379 | 100.0% |

**3.14** 2019 County population by age, courtesy of United States Census Data.

| Population | Age Category | Programs Offered |
|---|---|---|
| 23.8% | Youth | 45.3% |
| 53.7% | Adult | 13.3% |
| 22.4% | Active Adult | 22.6% |

**3.15** A breakdown of 's programming by age. It shows a surplus in programming for youth but lack of programming for adults based on population.

however, an ongoing goal may be to balance the menu of programs toward a reflection of the community makeup. The side-by-side comparison of the County's actual population and program offerings in Figures 3.14 and 3.15 demonstrate how the County's demographics are being served.

As Mecklenburg Park & Rec considers opportunities for program expansion, an understanding of population and program can help identify target age categories for enhancements, additions, and/or innovations. Extending the reach to age categories that have the highest spread between offerings and population is more likely to result in a higher potential of market participation (e.g. adult offerings should increase to better match the number of adults in the population).

While maintaining programs like youth sports and after school programs, Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff should give attention to programming for the growing population of adults over the age of 55, whose population grew by 3.6 percentage points (about 72,000 residents) between 2010 and 2018. The County's existing senior centers are serving the needs of the older segments of this age group; however, the aging Baby Boomer generation prefers active recreational endeavors and lifestyle choices. Thus, services for these adults and active adults, rather than senior

adults, should be the next programming target market.

There needs to be flexibility in the idea of how programming offerings are created. Usually, programming catalogs are created based on existing, available spaces types. However, Mecklenburg Park & Rec has an opportunity to reverse this approach as it plans for known, anticipated future growth. Starting with the needs and desires of the community or possible partners, Mecklenburg Park & Rec can articulate what programs and spatial needs are needed. These needs would then dictate what facilities are recommended. For example, sports fields are always considered in park development and redevelopment. However, Mecklenburg Park & Rec currently lacks spaces for aquatic and track programming.

Future program assessments should also include an assessment of Therapeutic Recreation. These offerings should stay consistent with a growing need for these services brought on by a growing population. Both a Therapeutic Recreation assessment and program assessment should include a detailed analysis of the market, including similar providers.

It will also be important to balance revenue-generating programs with access to scholarships. Currently, free programs represent

49.5% of all programs. This high percentage of free programming is commendable, but can be difficult to sustain financially and assumes an inability to pay. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should implement more fee-based programming to encourage buy-in, enhance perceived value, and generate non-tax revenue.

With an increase in fee based programming, it will be imperative to simultaneously increase scholarships and aid. Among staff, there is interest in structuring both a formal corporate sponsorship and donation solicitation program as a way to increase access to scholarships.

## 6.3 Key Actions

**Balance programming with a changing community profile:**

- Target the adult (ages 18-54) and active adult (ages 55+) market with new programs and services.

- Develop preschool and youth Therapeutic Recreation services. Increase all TR services in line with community need.

- Increase summer programming to match the quantity of programs offered during other seasons; expand summer program opportunities globally, across all core program areas. Specifically, expand summer fitness and wellness offerings.

- Evaluate adult league and association offerings to identify popular programs and gaps in adult programming.

- Continue to offer robust youth sports programming.

**Recalibrate Mecklenburg Park & Rec's role in the market:**

- Complete a pricing review of the local fitness and wellness programs offered throughout the County, paying particular attention to the balance between the regional fitness market's willingness to pay and providing a community service for the common good.

- Consider a more collaborative approach to programming and service delivery. Expand partnerships with private, non-profit, and other public organizations.

- Balance an increase in fee-based programming with scholarships. Look to corporate sponsorships.

- Develop new programs with the highest Priority Investment Rating (PIR), based on ESRI data, and strongest market potential.

- Continue Mecklenburg Park & Rec's quest to have a 30% program participation rate.

- Reduce the number of participants on program waitlists.

**Use anticipated growth and recreation trends to determine capital investments:**

- Review the Recreation Program Assessment report which identifies where those programmatic gaps are strongest and where demand is articulated. See Appendix 4.

- Using the land acquisition strategy and Capital Improvement Plan as a guide, discuss recreation trends and community demographics with community partners to guide reinvestment in capital projects.
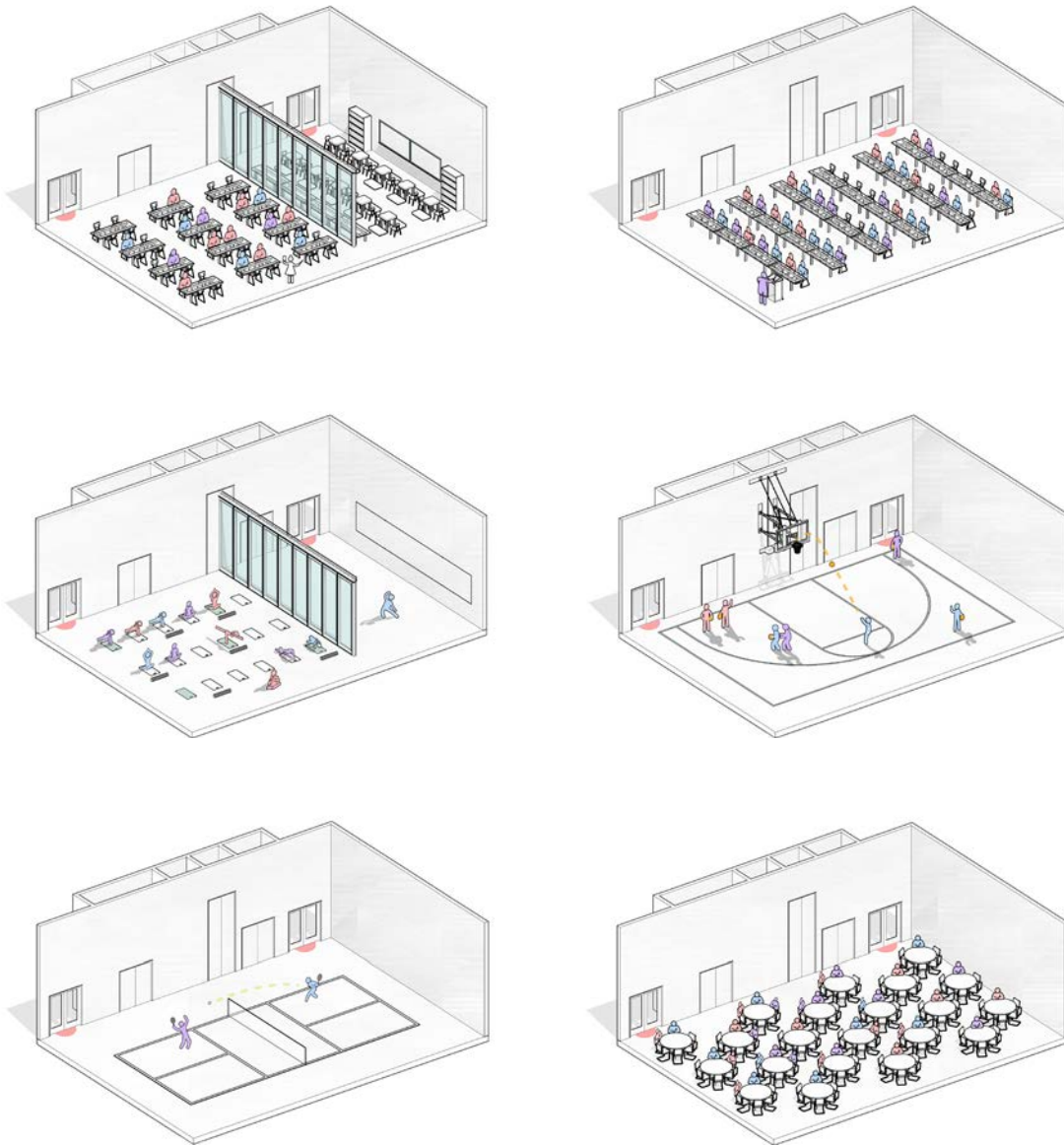
**3.16** Adding just a few improvements (technology, operable windows, movable desks,etc) to centers can transform them into spaces for a greater mix of programs.

## 6.4 Design and renovate facilities to ensure flexibility to meet evolving community needs.

The greatest facility need is for large, flexible, adaptable spaces. This flexibility would allow the use of the same space for a variety of programs, empowering them to meet the varied needs of the community (See Figure 3.16). When designed and equipped appropriately, a single space can provide programs for user groups multiple times a day, with little down time between different uses.

If appropriate proportions for the space are used, technology and equipment infrastructure is in place, and the right finishes are selected, a single space may serve, at a minimum, the following uses in a single day:

- Before school activities
- Adult Education
- Older Adult Programming
- Adult Fitness
- Corporate Use and Rental
- After School programming
- Youth Fitness
- Community Meeting

The inclusion of larger, flexible, and adaptable spaces will also allow the facility to meet future community needs. By including many smaller, program-specific rooms and specialty finishes, or by excluding appropriate infrastructure, spaces are more likely to become less relevant, less efficient, and obsolete over time. Smaller spaces limit group sizes, and provide less flexibility with furniture and equipment, limiting programming options. Spaces without proper technology, lighting, or equipment can quickly become outdated, and necessitate more expensive renovations, with greater impacts in the future. Rooms with specialty finishes or targeted to specific demographics and user groups can become obsolete as demographics and trends change over time. This can be observed in 'Teen Rooms' that were a staple of Recreation Centers designed in the early 2000s. These rooms were more intimate and intended to create a welcoming environment for high school aged youth. They included lounge furniture, specialty lighting, game tables such as ping pong and a pool table and a space for video games. While initially popular, these spaces soon fell out of favor, and were challenging to program for other uses due to specialty room sizes, finishes, and equipment. Existing recreation centers that contain these specialized rooms should renovate such spaces. Local grassroots and community organizations should be welcomed into conversations about reimagining these rooms to ensure changes serve communal needs.



3.17 Howard County's Roger Carter Center includes two large flexible multi-purpose rooms that support a range of needs.

## 6.4 Key Actions

**Establish design standards for new and existing facilities to ensure flexibility to meet evolving community needs:**

- Design new facilities and additions with large multipurpose rooms that can be divided into smaller spaces with temporary dividers.

- Limit finishes in spaces and design spaces to be easily adapted for technology enhancements (exposed ceiling infrastructure or unfinished storage space can allow upgrades to facilities that are time and cost efficient).

- Renovate spaces in older recreation centers, like 'Teen Rooms' for more flexible use for all ages.

- Work with local grassroots and community organizations to reimagine existing recreation facilities to ensure changes serve communal needs.

# Goal #7 Land Acquisition

## Increase the County's public open space in areas of need, growth, and environmental value.

It is necessary to balance the need to restore streams, provide vital habitats, and manage invasive species, while meeting the needs of a growing population. Despite efforts to acquire land over the past decade for conservation and to create more equitable public access, growth pressures are driving up land value and making land acquisition for open space increasingly difficult.

Mecklenburg County currently owns 21,000 acres of parkland. The 2015 Master Plan recommended acquiring an additional 1,300 acres for current population growth projections. Between 2014 and 2020, 1,802 acres have been purchased for open space,[12] but land will need to be purchased to continue to meet the needs of a growing population and get ahead of development throughout the county.

### 7.1 Advocate for incentives for public open space in new developments by coordinating with ongoing planning efforts and local development regulations.

Mecklenburg County's population continues to grow, and Mecklenburg Park & Rec has faced challenges to acquire land in the places that are growing fastest. Looking ahead, Mecklenburg County's population is projected to increase by another 400,000 residents in the next eighteen years. 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. The service ratio will decrease to 13.6 acres by 2039 if new land is not acquired. This aim is echoed by the Environmental Leadership Action Plan, which lists the goal of acquiring 8,000 acres by 2025.[13]

Achieving goals like the "ten-minute neighborhood" standard recommended by the Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan will need land acquisition coupled with a targeted, location based strategy. This goal strives for all Charlotte households to have access to essential amenities and services within a safe ten-minute walk. Parks, plazas, and nature preserves are listed as some of these essential amenities. The County should stand by its desire to provide an exceptional level of service to ensure that it continues to meet environmental and recreational goals, while exploring policies that seek to capture value from new development and channel it into enhanced or new resources for the community.

One way to capture this value is through partnerships with developers. In this process, private developers are active participants in the creation of public space. Local regulations could ensure that redevelopments, like the former Eastland Mall redevelopment, include publicly accessible open space that helps to close a

gap in park access and provides amenities that align with community desires. This legislation could be enacted through the redevelopment rezoning process and enhance community relationships with future development projects. In the Eastland Mall case, such legislation could provide an opportunity for the current skate park to remain.

Another way Mecklenburg Park & Rec can get ahead of growth is by working with the City of Charlotte and the six towns to create developer incentives for tree canopy and open space contributions. While many tree preservation incentives occur on privately owned land, programs like the Charlotte Tree Canopy Preservation Program can integrate these efforts into City or County owned land.

Mecklenburg County currently collaborates with municipalities to ensure land development plans align with County and local goals and regulations for sustainable development. However, regulations and policies vary from municipality to municipality, requiring the

County to cater its approach to open space preservation with the unique goals, character, and development patterns of each place. These varied regulations are not always tied to concrete and regenerative financial mechanisms. Currently, Mecklenburg County only charges fees related to land development and stormwater impacts at the municipality level. Since the County has limited land development authority, the County should consider advocating for municipal-led impact fees in support of expanded and enhanced open space investments at the local level. While it is true that developers have helped to fund open space interventions, implementing a standard impact fee would provide a steady and reliable tie to open space acquisition, management, and wellness. The County should work with municipalities to collect these fees, as it does not have legal mechanisms to do so on its own.

The City of Raleigh, North Carolina provides a strong example. A portion of Raleigh's impact fees go directly to their Parks, Recreation, and

Cultural Resources Department. Fees pertaining to urban forestry, facilities fees, and fees in lieu are "indexed on an annual basis using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the Engineering News-Record (ENR). The CPI annual change is 1.6%. The ENR annual change is 3.03%."[14] Mecklenburg Park & Rec also has fees for programming, which are based on Mecklenburg Park & Rec's cost recovery matrix. Raleigh's open space fees vary based on type of dwelling (single-family or multi-family) and zone. These fees range from $952 per unit to $1,557 per unit.

**Looking ahead, Mecklenburg County's population is projected to increase by another 400,000 residents in the next twenty years.**

The city is segmented into four zones, each with their own rate for impact fees. By creating these impact fees, Raleigh is able to incent residential density, while providing funding specifically for open space, schools, and roads. Additionally, it instills a culture of environmental responsibility by charging developers for losses in tree canopy. Raleigh also has an interactive online dashboard, where developers can receive an estimate of their impact fees based on type of construction and location. However, fees such as these often need community buy-in. Raleigh needed special legislation from their General Assembly to impose these impact fees.

Impact fees incurred at the local level could also be tailored to reflect different development types. Fees could be on a sliding scale, relative to number of building units. Buildings with more units could incur a higher fee. Also, impact fees are not the only option. In lieu of impact fees, municipalities could accept gifts of land, or land dedications.

Municipalities could also direct prospective impact fees into a land acquisition fund. Bolstering this fund would allow the County to work with municipalities to act with greater immediacy should land come to market. Another option is to use this revenue in a flexible account by earmarking revenue collected from a fee

system that could complement the CIP timeline and allow for a mix of reactive and proactive project implementation.

Feedback from residents articulated a desire for development that contributes to expanding the open space network and responds to environmental needs. Many people asked for

developers to acknowledge their responsibility to be environmental stewards. Mecklenburg Park & Rec has already committed to restoring its tree canopy and public and municipal support exists. From there, they could incrementally add impact fees to offset the effects of development.

## 7.1 Key Actions

**Collaborate with other agencies to create a standard impact fee that provides a steady and reliable tie to open space acquisition, management, and wellness:**

- Coordinate with City of Charlotte Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to address land acquisition and easements through the development process.

- Work with municipalities to create impact fees in support of increased park land acquisitions.

**Facilitate relationships with developers to help achieve County goals:**

- Support municipality-led developer incentives for tree canopy and open space contributions.

- Clearly articulate roles and responsibilities for design, construction, and maintenance of any new open spaces in new developments.

## 7.2 Create a prioritization framework for land acquisition to balance development with equity goals for addressing service gaps in under-resourced communities.

Land acquisition is a priority goal, but it may be one of the most challenging steps to implement. The plan sets a goal of 19.1 acres for every thousand residents so that Mecklenburg Park & Rec can protect natural resources and critical habitats, while providing all residents with nearby high quality open space. To accomplish this, the county needs a prioritization framework for land acquisition and funding that fosters new public space, while creating a clear understanding of service standard levels. The land acquisition framework is recommended to achieve three aims: fill system-wide gaps, strategically anticipate growth, and protect the environment all while maintaining a high level of service. It is important that one priority does not supersede others. Given the opportunistic nature of land opportunities, Mecklenburg Park & Rec continue to appropriately fund, proactively search for, and react to opportunities in all categories. When the County creates this framework quantitative programs like the greenprint software program should

be combined with qualitative metrics like community feedback.

To expand access across the County and achieve the goals of a land acquisition framework, the County should look beyond traditional methods of land acquisition to more creative approaches, many of which are currently used by the County but could be expanded. The  following seven approaches provide a foundation for a robust land acquisition strategies built upon relationships, diverse funding streams, and regulations.

### Acquire land in under-resourced communities and rapidly growing areas

Only 38% of Mecklenburg County residents live within a ten-minute walk to a county-owned or municipal park. However, walking is not the only mode of travel in the county. Residents also bike, ride transit, and drive. Using Meck Playbook as a guide, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should focus land acquisition for recreational use or public access to areas of the County with demonstrated need. In this case, need can be based on the social vulnerability index, or identified in places where land is being developed rapidly. The assessment identified places within the County where physical gaps in access continue to exist. It takes into account

prevailing commuting patterns outside of the City of Charlotte limits, even as neighborhoods become more dense. The zones identified do not have access to a park within a ten-minute walk and often are also cut off from a park within a five minute drive. This indicates where new parkland investments are most needed (See Figure 1.12 or Strategies 2.1 and 2.2 for more detail on how these areas were identified).

New growth, or places where new development projects have started in the last year, are focused in largely suburban and rural areas along existing light rail like the LYNX Blue Line and proposed light rail like the LYNX Silver Line. Multi-family developments are clustered closest to sustainable transportation options, while single family development is focused just outside of Uptown's boundaries and at the edges of the County.

### Link with existing parkland or other publicly accessible land

Parkland expansion enables the County to grow amenities within parks, create new connections to neighborhoods, and link these neighborhoods to civic institutions and community destinations like libraries, schools, and bodies of water. The majority of the County's local neighborhood-serving parks are too small to support a diverse

mix of programs. They also contain fixed park infrastructure that cannot nimbly reflect the changing demographics and community needs that surround them. Expanding park space, where possible, will create safe connections and grow healthy recreation habits among surrounding neighborhoods. Land can be acquired to create new parks (specifically benefiting communities with limited park access) or expand program offerings.

### Enhance the greenways network

Partnerships that expand access to greenway trails to better connect the region provide a layered approach to connecting the County's regional trail and habitat network. Greenway trails are multi-modal and connect to parks and employment centers, which make them valuable for recreation and commuting.

### Procure open space easements

Not all land acquisition needs to be fee-simple, especially as land values in many parts of the County become too expensive for large land acquisitions. Easements with regional infrastructure organizations, land trusts, and private developments or homeowners' associations can quickly help to expand public access.
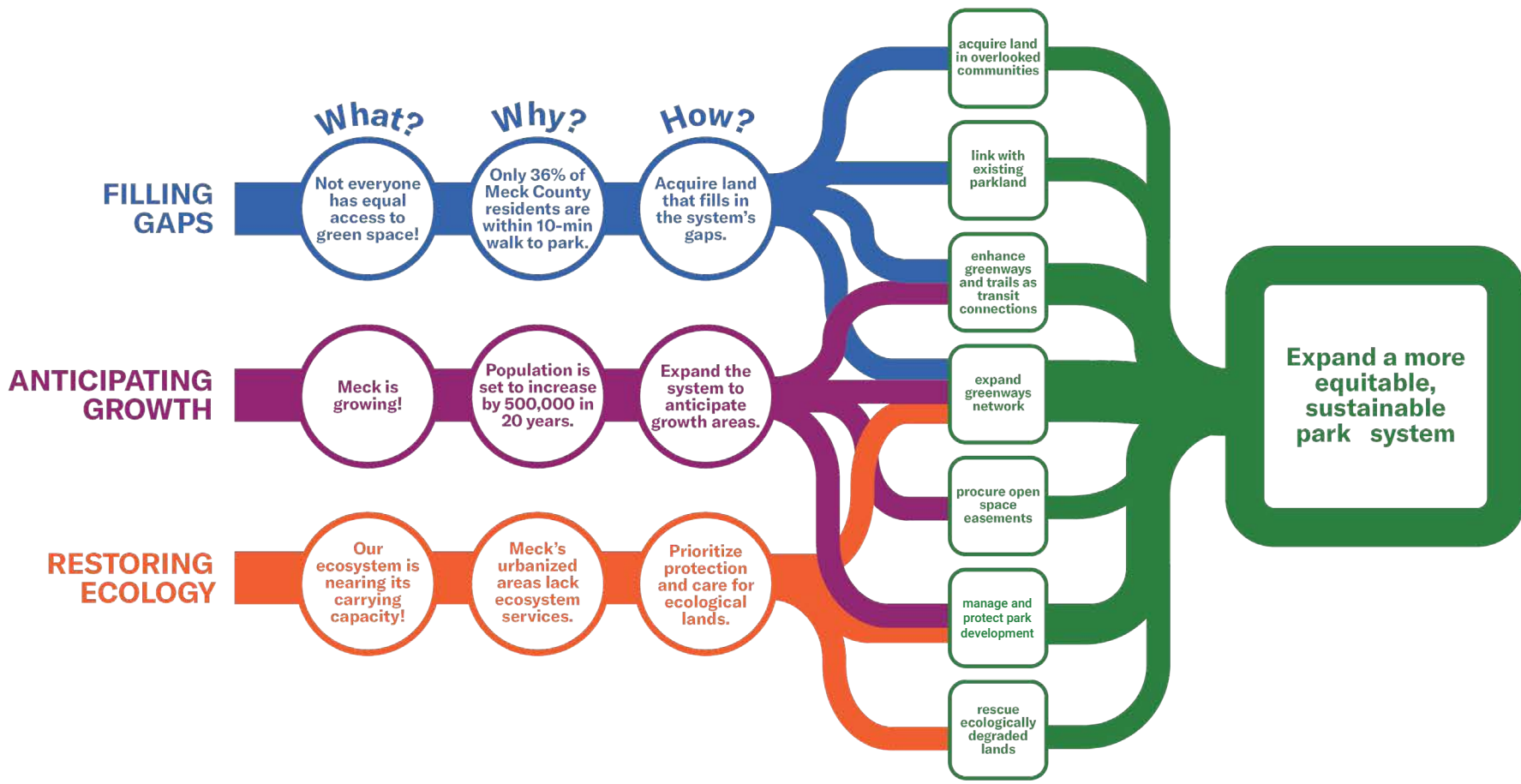
### Manage and protect park development

Parks and open space are critical for many reasons including enhancing public health infrastructure, resilience to climate change, and protecting irreplaceable habitats. Once this lens is accepted, these County-owned lands are seen as some of the most important lands in the region.

Working with local governments to create a Parkland Reserve overlay within municipal ordinances will ensure that parkland is protected long term until it is developed into a park. It is possible for some park types to co-exist with other land uses including roadway infrastructure. However, more environmentally fragile areas sensitive to damage will need to be considered for protection during the park planning process. This understanding would limit activities with negative effects on the park's operations and subsequently, its role in the community. Currently, there are mechanisms in place to support natural landscape protection. One is a goal to cap development on parkland at 50% of a parcel's area. This would maintain half of a park's land for natural ecosystems. It is understood that the ability to achieve this goal is site dependent, as it may be unrealistic to maintain these proportions on urban and northern spaces. This goal would be well supported by the standards instilled by a Parkland Reserve Overlay.

Similar to the Charlotte Future 2040 plan's "neighborhood conservation overlay district" idea, a Parkland Reserve overlay would help to mitigate impacts to existing parks and open spaces, including utility or infrastructure projects, prior to development. To protect any critical habitats and sensitive environmental areas from potentially harmful development, any projects should require feedback from Natural Resources, and possibly an external environmental study to ensure impacts to these areas are limited.

**FILLING GAPS**

**What?** Not everyone has equal access to green space!

**Why?** Only 36% of Meck County residents are within 10-min walk to park.

**How?** Acquire land that fills in the system's gaps.

- acquire land in overlooked communities
- link with existing parkland
- enhance greenways and trails as transit connections

**ANTICIPATING GROWTH**

Meck is growing!

Population is set to increase by 500,000 in 20 years.

Expand the system to anticipate growth areas.

- expand greenways network
- procure open space easements

**RESTORING ECOLOGY**

Our ecosystem is nearing its carrying capacity!

Meck's urbanized areas lack ecosystem services.

Prioritize protection and care for ecological lands.

- manage and protect park development
- rescue ecologically degraded lands

**Expand a more equitable, sustainable park system**

**3.18** A proposed Land Acquisition Strategy should be multi-dimensional, aiming to fill gaps and anticipate growth while restoring native ecology.

**Protect ecologically valuable lands and areas with unique value**

As the region continues to draw more people to live and work, development pressures continue to place undue burden on critical ecosystems and historically meaningful places. Mecklenburg Park & Rec, other environmentally minded organizations, and volunteer networks can be advocates and stewards of the places with cultural, historical, and environmental value.

**Partner to invest in once in a generation opportunities**

To prepare for future park investments that are just outside of the County's capacity to acquire on its own, partnerships will be invaluable. As an example, Queens Park, the conceptual "central park" at the northeast edge of Uptown, would help to fill in gaps in highly dense areas and create a regional attraction for residents and visitors alike.

## 7.2 Key Actions

**Acquire land in under resourced communities and rapidly growing areas:**

- Acquire land in areas of the County that have limited access to parks (within ten minute walk in dense areas and five minute drive in less dense areas) or demonstrated need.

**Link with existing parkland or other publicly accessible land:**

- Purchase land that will expand a park's footprint, create safe connections, and grow healthy recreation habits among surrounding neighborhoods.

**Enhance the greenways network:**

- Partner to close greenway gaps.

**Procure open space easements:**

- Work with regional infrastructure organizations, land trusts, and private developments or homeowners' associations to expand public access.

**Manage and protect park development:**

- Work with local governments to create an overlay for future parklands to ensure protection prior to parkland development.

- Require an environmental review to ensure impacts to these areas are limited..

**Protect ecologically valuable lands and areas with unique value.**

**Partner to invest in once in a generation opportunities.**

## 7.3 Consistently apply a new classification system to clarify internal operations and reinforce level of service standards.

Most people choose to visit a park not because of its ownership, but because they want to participate in a specific experience. The classification system should reflect community expectations for a trail, facility or open space. Park spaces are classified by types to aid in design and acquisition decisions for land, facilities, and distribution of amenities that respond to needs, diversify experiences, and ensure consistent maintenance. Mecklenburg Park & Rec historically used the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) park classification system, which emphasized size and uses, but did not account for unique needs or attributes. Today, alignment with the NRPA system is less necessary given changes to metrics that build in more customization. In order to provide a better framework for designing, maintaining, and programming the County's open spaces and facilities, Meck Playbook recommends a more experience-based system that also works with Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies accreditation requirements.

The proposed new classification system will recategorize the previous categories into six general types to account for the diverse system offerings and allow Mecklenburg Park & Rec to better meet specialized needs. These park types will help clarify management and maintenance needs and provide park development and reinvestment guidance.

### 7.3 Key Actions

**Implement New Classifications**

- Classify all places as Local, Regional, Greenway, Nature Preserve, Parkland Reserve, and Special Use Facilities.

- Using the proposed parks classifications as a guide, confirm the balance of park acreage for recreational use and environmental protection in existing parks.

- Design new parks and facilities to align with park classifications conservation guidelines.

## Proposed New Classification System

| | Local Park | Regional Park | Greenway |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Description** | Smaller parks dispersed around the county that provide reliable access to open space for every resident near their home. This type could include limited facilities like stand-alone restrooms or picnic shelters. | Larger park that includes all of the amenities of a local park and additional assets that draw visitors from across the county. This type includes at least one type of facility, including a special facility, indoor pavilion, recreation center or aquatic facility. | Linear piece of property that lies along a creek or is in a floodplain, local/regional park, nature preserve, recreation center, or other natural area. This type has limited facilities, but should include restrooms, water fountains and other "comfort" facilities at least every five to six miles. |
| **Role/ Resources** | Informal/lightly programmed open space resource. This park type might host youth recreation leagues depending on the amenities (courts, fields, etc); and non reservable spaces. | Heavily programmed/reservable open space resource. | Recreational or commuter connector. |
| **Access/ Users** | Ten-minute walk, five-minute drive. Parking should be on-street and adjacent to the park. If sports fields are in the park, there should be no more than 12 parking spaces per field. | 20-minute drive; If sports fields are in the park, there should be generally no more than 20 parking spaces per field. Baseball and football fields are exceptions, with a minimum of 20 and 24 parking spaces, respectively. Access also via greenway or urban trail. | Ideally, safely accessible via non-vehicle. Off street parking should be limited to major trailheads every three miles, unless on-street parking is accessible. |
| **Size** | Up to and including 70 acres. | Typically over 70 acres. | No size restrictions. |
| **Location** | Typically more urban, suburban. | Urban, suburban, rural. | Ideally, equitable dispersed across the county. |
| **Facilities** | Limited facilities - could include a restroom and picnic shelters. | It should provide at least one Special Facility, such as an indoor pavilion, recreation center or aquatic facility, as well as restrooms. | Limited facilities - restroom every five to six miles. |
| **Amenities** | Often include playgrounds, picnic shelters, and multipurpose fields. | Amenities that provide for an all-day experience. | Paved and unpaved trails; drinking fountains, benches, boardwalks, picnic table. |
| **Passive** | Smaller areas of open space and connective trails. | 100-foot undeveloped buffer around the entire perimeter of park property. | Riparian Buffer. |
| **Active** | Fields and courts are prioritized as informal spaces for surrounding neighborhood use. There are generally few courts and often only one field at each location. | Support competitive athletic leagues and tournaments, numerous athletic park amenities such as tennis and basketball courts, softball/baseball, multipurpose fields, shelters, playgrounds, walking trails. | Paved and unpaved trails that provide spaces for recreation and connectivity. |
| **Future Development Capacity** | Limited capacity for additional assets, but strong potential for deferred maintenance investment. | Capacity for diversity and size of amenities listed above. Phased Master Plan development. | Capacity for closing gaps, trail development, or addition of park assets. |

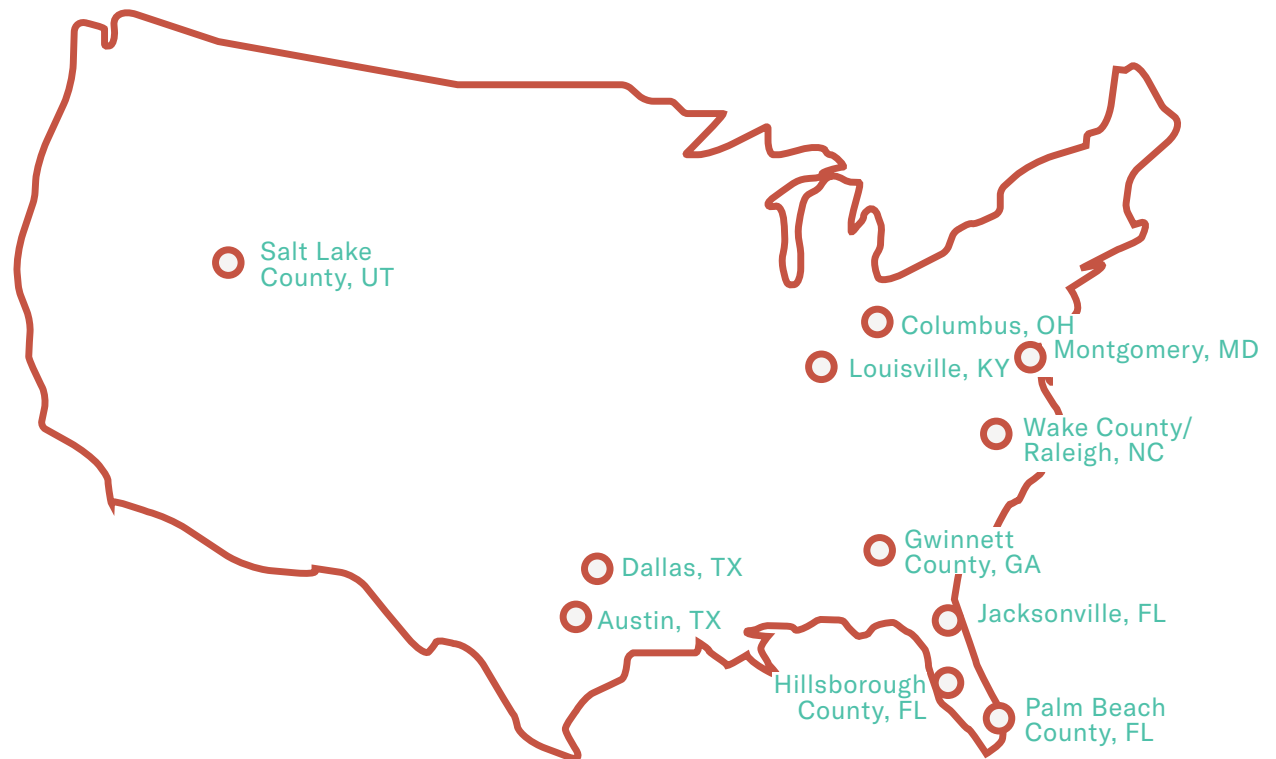| | Nature Preserve | Parkland Reserve | Special Use Facilities |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Description** | Natural resource managed for conservation and recreation. Preserves protect wildlife habitat, water quality, and endangered species. They can provide opportunities for nature based, unstructured, low-impact recreational opportunities such as walking and nature viewing. Nature Centers exist only within this type. | Land held in perpetuity (or on long term lease) as open space, park, or recreation space. Often, this land is left undeveloped for future CIP program plans. Park reserves are often, but not always, earmarked to become park space in the future. The land is maintained by environmental agencies. | 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. |
| **Role/ Resources** | Critical habitat for endangered species/location of a natural resource. Open space preservation and wildlife refuges. | Unprogrammed land earmarked for conservation or for future, undefined needs. | Specific recreation and sports activities. |
| **Access/ Users** | Generally 20-minute drive (although significant natural features may change drive times); typically no more than one parking space for every five acres of property | N/A | 20-30 minute drive. |
| **Size** | No size restrictions; 90% or more natural space. | No size restrictions. | No size restrictions. |
| **Location** | Areas experiencing development pressure and areas with large contiguous parcels of undeveloped land. | Areas experiencing development pressure, areas that are unbuildable (floodplains, significant topography). | Typically more suburban, rural. |
| **Facilities** | Nature Center, other wildlife/conservation related buildings, ranger station, bathrooms. | No facilities. | Indoor and outdoor facilities dependent on the needs of the special use. Restrooms and water fountains. |
| **Amenities** | Camping, Trails, Interpretive and Educational Wayfinding, Wildlife habitat. | Limited to no amenities. | Amenities that provide for an all-day experience. |
| **Passive** | Less than 10% developed Wildlife management area. | Not programmed or developed. | 100-foot undeveloped buffer around the entire perimeter of park property. |
| **Active** | Natural surface trail. Greenway trails are permissible if paving is limited and approved by NPNR staff. | N/A | Dependent on the specific needs of the sport or recreation amenity. |
| **Future Development Capacity** | Land conservation and environmental education. | Land conservation, future park or connectivity needs. | Capacity for size of the special use. |

# Goal #8 Staffing

## Build the Mecklenburg Park & Rec team to support the system's expansive programs and land holdings.

The National Recreation and Park Association organizes a database that agencies can use to understand metrics with comparisons to similar populations, size, and region. A selection of peer counties were also selected to more closely compare and benchmark staff capacity, budget, funding, and program offerings. This deeper research provides national context to where Mecklenburg Park & Rec currently stands while guiding future decision making.

While there are many cities and counties with systems comparable to Mecklenburg, the samples here were chosen. These agencies span the nation, and provided comparison for Mecklenburg Park & Rec's parks inventory, operations, and funding.

Overall, Mecklenburg County has the largest population and is near the upper quartile of national park and recreation systems in the number of park sites within its boundaries. Mecklenburg Park & Rec manages the highest number of developed park acres and the most miles of trails.

Salt Lake County, UT

Columbus, OH

Montgomery, MD

Louisville, KY

Wake County/ Raleigh, NC

Gwinnett County, GA

Dallas, TX

Austin, TX

Jacksonville, FL

Hillsborough County, FL

Palm Beach County, FL

*The Operations Assessment (Appendix 10) includes a sampling of the peers listed above. The Operations Assessment includes an in-depth analysis that required extensive data collection. Comprehensive data could not be collected from all peers.

These peer agencies were selected based on criteria similar to Mecklenburg County: size of service area, percent of growth since 2010, and development density per square mile.


Austin, TX


Columbus, OH


Dallas, TX

| Peer Department | Pop. Density per sq mile | Pop.Growth 2010-2018 |
|---|---|---|
| Austin, TX | 2,965 | +20% |
| Columbus, OH | 2,389 | +13% |
| Dallas, TX | 3,766 | +12% |
| Gwinnett County, GA | 2,105 | +15% |
| Hillsborough County, FL | 1,313 | +17% |
| Jacksonville, FL | 1,210 | +10% |
| Louisville Metro, KY | 1,922 | +4% |
| Palm Beach County, Fl | 725 | +13% |
| Salt Lake County, UT | 1,552 | +12% |
| Wake County, NC | 1,307 | +21% |
| Montgomery County, MD | 2,142 | +8% |
| **Mecklenburg County, NC** | **2,088** | +19% |


Gwinnett County, GA


Hillsborough County, FL


Jacksonville, FL


Louisville Metro, KY


Montgomery County, MD
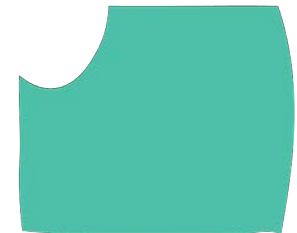

Palm Beach County, FL


Salt Lake County, UT
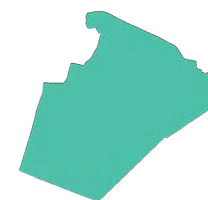

Wake County, NC


Mecklenburg County, NC

* Counties, metropolitan areas, and cities to scale.

## 8.1 Gradually hire additional full-time staff and continue to increase workforce to keep pace with growth.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec received over $56 million in its FY2021 budget cycle for operational costs. This was in addition to the current five-year capital improvement plan funds (FY2019 - FY2023) totaling $269 million for new and renovated facilities. A study was conducted comparing Mecklenburg Park & Rec's parks inventory, operations, and funding with 11 similar peer agencies across the nation. The peer agencies, identified in this section, were selected based on criteria similar to Mecklenburg County: size of service area, percent of growth since 2010, and development density per square mile. Mecklenburg County oversees a larger system than these peers. When compared to these peer agencies, Mecklenburg Park & Rec:

- serves a larger population than any peer agency,
- is in the top 25% of these peer agency systems in total number and overall size of parks,
- manages the highest number of developed park acres and the most miles of trail.

Despite these statistics, the County's operating expenditures are at the bottom compared to the same peer agencies. The lowest 25 percent of peer agencies spend $977 per acre of parkland. Mecklenburg Park & Rec spends far less, at only $898 per acre of parkland.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec also does not compare favorably with other agencies in relation to staff. It falls just below the median for total number of full-time employees (FTE) and non-full-time employees when compared to the peer agencies identified in Meck Playbook. Mecklenburg Park & Rec's FTE count is 577[15] which is below the median of 782 in the peer agencies studied (contracted services were not accounted considered within these comparisons). Despite progress which added approximately 100 FTE since 2011, additional full-time staff are still recommended based on comparisons to these peer agencies.

It is imperative that Mecklenburg Park & Rec build staff gradually to meet current needs and increase staff to keep pace with population growth and the growth of the park

| | Lower Quartile | Median | Upper Quartile | Mecklenburg County |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Operating expenditures** | | | | |
| Operating expenditures per FTE | $55,155 | $61,709 | $104,836 | $69,777 |
| Operating expenditures per capita | $34 | $39 | $74 | $37 |
| FTEs per 10,000 population | 2.5 | 5.7 | 10.6 | 5.3 |
| **Percentage total FTEs involved in the following:** | | | | |
| a. Administration | 13.80% | 18.00% | 19.30% | 22.00% |
| b. Operations/Maintenance | 27.50% | 44.00% | 61.30% | 47.00% |
| c. Programmers | 29.50% | 39.00% | 60.00% | 30.00% |
| d. Capital Development | 2.90% | 3.00% | 4.00% | 1.00% |
| Total park acres | 1,605.90 | 5,925.80 | 11,942.40 | 20,933 |

**3.19** Expenditures and FTE comparisons against peer agencies. Refer to page 106 for list of peer agencies.

and recreation system. In addition to peer analysis, staff interviews were conducted over several months in all Mecklenburg Park & Rec divisions to better understand current shortfalls and potential future needs for staff in each division. See a full summary of Staffing and Hiring recommendations in the Go the Distance chapter.

**The Park Operations Division** is tasked with maintaining and servicing both the greenway trails network and over 13,000 acres of parkland. In the economic recession of 2008, the division transitioned from nine regional managers overseeing nine regions to five managers overseeing five regions, and finally to three managers for three regions. Since this consolidation, the park system has grown, leading to a greater number of facilities to manage and maintain. Mecklenburg Park & Rec continues to purchase new land and develop purchased land into new parks, increasing the burden on an already stretched division. To more fully support maintenance needs in existing and future facilities and open spaces, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should consider expanding the number of park regions, with staff to manage and oversee maintenance within each region.

Land acquisition and capital reinvestment are focal issues which require the need to oversee

daily project management. Additional staff is needed to manage and oversee projects to support capital efforts and for the division to simultaneously address continuous demands of the system. It is recommended that the division dedicates at least one full-time position in each of the regions to oversee special or capital projects.

In the past several fiscal years, division overtime expenditures has exceeded $400,000 per year, highlighting the need for additional staff. Currently, Park Operations utilizes metrics to add staff in response to new facilities such as greenway trails. The Division adds one FTE staff position for every five miles of newly constructed greenway trail. Park Operations base staffing needs for parks on time: the average number hours required annually to properly maintain a park. The type and use of a park dictates the number hours necessary for proper maintenance. Several local parks can be maintained by one FTE, while larger regional parks may require two to three FTE positions. Park Operations should continue to utilize this metric for staffing, employing part-time staff and expanding contractual services each budget season to account for gaps in capacity and system growth as the CIP is implemented.

**The Nature Preserves and Natural Resources Division (NPNR)** is responsible for the protection and conservation of all Mecklenburg County nature preserves. Nature preserves protect the county's biological resources and natural areas, while providing opportunities for environmental education, nature-based programs, and outdoor recreation. Division staff offer more than 5,000 programs annually, perform natural resource management on over 7,700 acres, maintain over 65 miles of nature trails, operate four nature centers, and a public campground. The division also contributes to regional environmental leadership and research by partnering with other public agencies and non-profit organizations both in neighboring counties and throughout the state.

The division's organizational structure is sound and functions well. However, adequate staff will be required to manage and care for natural assets as Mecklenburg Park & Rec acquires more land to manage, develops or expands new facilities on existing preserves and adds more nature-based and outdoor adventure programming offerings for the County, especially in priority communities. Each division uses a unique methodology for determining staff needs as the system grows. Nature Preserves and Nature Resources tracks

growth by acres of land acquired that will need to be managed. New supervisor and specialist positions should be added for every 700 acres of nature preserve or natural resource land added to the system. This ratio of 700 acres for one staff member was formed during a 2018 internal analysis by the NPNR division.

The operations staff in Nature Preserves functions in much the same way as the staff in Park Operations, however, with county-wide responsibility, travel time for this group is significant. To manage and maintain the existing built environment within nature preserves, an additional complete maintenance crew is needed. Additional full-time positions may be needed in high-use areas of the division, like the McDowell Campground.

In addition to growing staff within the division, there is an opportunity to use volunteers for some tasks. Nature Preserves and Natural Resources staff should coordinate with Volunteer Services to increase a robust volunteer program focused on projects within nature preserves.  This program could engage volunteers to lessen division workload  with invasive species treatments, trail work, etc. Other established groups, like Master Naturalists, Trail Masters, Park Ambassadors, and other volunteers with similar training should also be utilized.

As part of the County's commitment to the environment, the BOCC-approved Environmental Leadership Policy and Action Plan indicates that Mecklenburg County will continue to acquire land for parks, nature preserves and greenways and will be committed to the specialized management of some of these properties through invasive species removal and prescribed fire. Additional full-time positions should be added to successfully meet the commitments for managing future properties that are designated as nature preserves.

Outdoor adventure programming continues to be one of the high demand programs as indicated by the Mecklenburg County Citizen Survey.  A new full-time outdoor recreation manager would oversee the development and implementation of outdoor recreation programming and staffing across all the nature centers and nature spaces to meet the needs of county residents.

Nature centers offer unique nature-based programming and special events for the citizens of the County. However, the current distribution of nature centers limits the ability of residents in priority communities and highly urban neighborhoods to benefit from these important offerings. To help address this need, Mecklenburg Park & Rec is moving forward with the development of a mobile nature center to bring nature to these areas.  New full-time

nature educator positions will be needed to ensure that the investment in the mobile nature center can be fully realized. The goal will be to offer nature-based programming at schools, libraries, neighborhood associations, and other special events. If successful, the program could be expanded to supplement traditional brick and mortar nature centers moving forward.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec is responsible for numerous culturally and historically significant sites including Historic Latta, the Holly Bend House, Historic Rural Hill, the Robinson Rock House ruins and other historic structures and properties. Appropriate management and programming of these sites requires a specific educational background that currently does not exist within Mecklenburg Park & Rec. A full-time position within Mecklenburg Park & Rec could manage the maintenance, education, and interpretation of these sites so these resources would remain intact and relevant.

**Administration** is responsible for a wide variety of operations within Mecklenburg Park & Rec and at the County level. This includes executive oversight of Mecklenburg Park & Rec in addition to overseeing functions of budget, financial management, strategic planning and evaluation, marketing, volunteer services, data management, ADA coordination, commemorative events, and information

technology. The grouping of these disciplines seems to be a sort of "catch all" for ancillary and supporting areas of the organization.

The Senior Management Analyst performs a vast array of work focused on performance management, to include but not limited to, data tracking, reporting and analysis; research and evaluation; and strategic planning, with two interns as direct reports. Mecklenburg Park & Rec's size as well as the considerable amount of strategic initiatives outlined in the Meck Playbook will require a consistent and efficient method of reporting data on progress through the implementation process and after. It is recommended that this position focus on strategic direction and that funds are directed toward full time support. This position supports all divisions and is crucial to the success of programming.

Fiscal Administration is responsible for a wide variety of operations within Mecklenburg Park & Rec and at the County level. This includes overseeing the functions of budget, financial management, accounts payable, revenue accounting, accounts receivable, contracting, purchasing, payroll, accounting, and information technology. The organization functions efficiently and effectively, providing excellent services to all other divisions. Fiscal administration is recommended to continue its



**3.20** Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff pose for a photo at the opening of Clarks Creek Park

current system, but should consider two fiscal analyst positions to support the increase in business transactions.

While the overall structure of this division is sound, there are opportunities for better alignment of functions within the existing management structure and more effective leveraging of existing skills, competencies, and expertise in order to support implementation of initiatives. Commemorative events could be

shifted to the special events team under Park Operations Division, taking advantage of staff expertise and service alignment. Currently, there is no identified "champion for innovation" within Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

Staff recommendations for marketing are addressed in Strategy 11.1. Staff recommendations for volunteer services are included in Strategy 14.3.

**The Capital Planning Division** is responsible for the planning and design of Mecklenburg Park & Rec facilities within the County, prioritizing funding for capital projects, and engaging residents on various projects. Capital Planning also partners with Asset and Facility Management on the construction of capital projects. The division manages and coordinates dozens of projects annually. The Mecklenburg Park & Rec system requires planning and implementation from a knowledgeable and agile staff. The capacity to manage projects is currently stretched and the capital goals outlined in Meck Playbook will further burden the division without changes.

The division should grow with the County's population and number of park facilities grow. At the center of the expansion is the need to consistently engage residents and honor a commitment to equity. Improved resident engagement on a consistent, regular basis will not only inform improvements as part of on-going or future projects. This improved process will also provide residents an opportunity to share issues in existing facilities and a point of contact when questions arise. Enhanced engagement will provide staff an opportunity to share upcoming programs at nearby and county-wide facilities. Staff recommendations for engagement are included in Strategy 1.2.

Continued growth of the Mecklenburg Park & Rec system will require continued coordination with the City of Charlotte, six towns within the county, and other similar recreation providers and non-profit organizations. Staff recommendations for collaboration are included in Strategy 16.1.

**The Community and Recreation Center Services Division (CRCS)** oversees athletics, aquatics, fitness, recreation and senior centers, and therapeutic recreation for Mecklenburg Park & Rec. CRCS also oversees the North Carolina Cooperative Extension and shared use facilities with different jurisdictions. Offering over 10,000 programs and activities annually, this division includes a menu of services. Ages served range from preschool through senior citizens, with a wide variety of programs offered in each grouping.

A goal of the division is to be the "go to" recreation provider for Mecklenburg County. Despite the desire to be an unparalleled community resource, barriers have made this difficult. The CRCS Division has felt the unprecedented growth and demographic shift that has occurred in the County over the last decade. The previous and continued County growth will require CRCS to find ways to continue to expand programming on a county-

wide level. Expanding programming will most likely require securing additional funds. Due to this need, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should create a grant coordinator position. This position would seek and administer grant funded projects for the entire division. It would ensure consistency in offering CC2N (Connecting Communities to Nature) and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) programming.

A well-crafted plan is needed to balance growth with service delivery. A compounding reality is that competition for entry level staff is fierce. This makes it difficult for the division to enact its goal to "recruit, train, and develop first class Recreation Professionals" as listed in the CRCS annual report. There are a multitude of businesses, public organizations and nonprofits all vying for a similar pool of candidates. At any given time, the division has numerous full-time and part-time vacancies. Some centers need to share full-time staff with other facilities as a result of these vacancies.

With the competition for staff so tough in the County, it is important that Mecklenburg Park & Rec distinguish themselves from the competition to find and hire reliable staff. A more efficient and simpler system for new job applicants to be interviewed, hired, and on-boarded is needed. Such a system will

ensure that staff can be integrated quickly. This will help ensure excellent are not lost to competitors.

By using performance metrics that are currently part of the annual review of programs and services, a data driven case can be made to support additional staffing or contractual support in program areas experiencing waitlists and program areas with additional identified needs. Gathering enrollment information and consistently evaluating the needs of the community, as well as paying close attention to local and regional trends are all important elements to proper budgeting for staffing in the future. See Goal 6: Programming for strategies related to assessing community desires and needs for programs in facilities that are proximate to residents. The outcome of these local engagements will inform any needs for additional staff or contracted services.



**3.21** Camp counselors serve as mentors and advocates for active recreation

**3.22** Summer programming at Double Oaks Pool.



**3.23** Fee-based environmental education program at Reedy Creek Nature Preserve.

## Aquatics

Aquatics programs include activities conducted in water, such as group and private swim lessons, stroke clinics, water fitness, school days off camps, and lifeguard courses. In 2019, Mecklenburg Park & Rec offered 785 aquatics programs, which comprised 4.8% of the 15,187 total programs and activities available. Ages served include a full range, from babies to adult beginners.

Based on registration data gathered in 2019, Aquatics activities were well attended, with

12,280 participants enrolled in classes and programs. This amounted to 4.2% of the total 292,841 registrants participating in Mecklenburg Park & Rec programs that year. The existing staffing model for aquatics currently meets the demand for service.

## Recreation Centers

The Recreation Centers section of CRCS oversees 29 recreation and senior centers, including the recently completed Eastway Regional Recreation Center which opened in 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic changed

the programming and service needs of the community, revealing a void in childcare options for the County. New programming considerations for the division include filling this void by expanding Out of School Time (OOST) opportunities. The addition of one Out of School Time Coordinator would allow Mecklenburg Park & Rec to meet state guidelines to become a licensed childcare provider. This would allow residents to utilize state subsidies to pay for after school and summer camp programs. Summer camp is currently the division's

largest program with over 4,000 participants each summer. These numbers will grow with the addition of regional facilities. To support the expansion to a licensed childcare facility, Mecklenburg Park & Rec will need to recruit mature, experienced talent, provide a higher level of staff training and oversight, and will need to increase the operational budget accordingly.

## Athletics

Athletics is one of the largest departmental program areas, with 13.2% of all program offerings and 28,532 enrollees in 2019. Mecklenburg Park & Rec offers youth and adult team sports and instructional classes in a variety of athletic endeavors at several recreation sites throughout the system. It appears that staff support for this division is multi-dimensional, as parent volunteers and partnerships with private and nonprofit entities assist in program delivery. There is currently little market competition in this area, and so continued budgetary support is a good investment in the system. Adult athletics is one of the division's most requested programs. The addition of a new staff position would allow for the expansion of adult athletics to new areas of the county.

## Fitness

Fitness and wellness is by far the most robust and largest departmental program area. Typical wellness programs include classes in yoga, balance, relaxation, tai chi, healthy choices, and cooking. Fitness programs include group exercise classes such as Circuit, Zumba®, and Body Blast, as well as homeschool physical education, and athletic conditioning opportunities. Mecklenburg Park & Rec offered more than 4,000 fitness and wellness classes in 2019 — more than double that of the next-highest program area.

Many of the classes and programs are offered by contracted companies, so Mecklenburg Park & Rec has the ability to expand with minimal impact to the budget. As the program area continues to grow with the demands of the community, the biggest limiting factor is the access to facility space, which is at capacity with current programmatic demands.

## Therapeutic Recreation

The Therapeutic Recreation (TR) section within the CRCS Division plans and delivers a variety of programs for Mecklenburg Park & Rec, including sports specific activities, life skills activities, and a spectrum of out of school time and camp opportunities.

This section includes seven full-time Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) positions. Several other staff within Mecklenburg Park & Rec hold and maintain CTRS certification. The section also includes several part-time/seasonal recreation assistant positions.

The TR section provides an example of how best practice standards can be completed and implemented to improve programming and services. The CTRS designation is a specialized educational component that is achieved through specific education requirements as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree.

The growth of the County has impacted service delivery in therapeutic recreation. Within Chapter 6: Programming, Meck Playbook recommends CRCS develop a comprehensive recreation assessment that focuses on key user groups including Therapeutic Recreation. The assessment should outline appropriate staffing levels and resources needed for excellent service delivery. TR programs and services sometimes requires unique design elements or modifications to structures. It is recommended the assessment also includes a facilities assessment to determine current and future facility ability to support therapeutic recreation programming needs.

## 8.1 Key Actions

### Park Operations:

- Expand from three park regions to five regions. Hire two full time Regional Managers for a total of five Regional Managers; one in each region.

- Create one full-time capital and special projects oversight position in each park region, for a total of five positions

- Create one full-time Capital Reinvestment oversight position.

- Employ part-time staff and expand contractual services each budget season.

- Increase staff levels as new parks are developed and additional park land is acquired using staff evaluation methodology.

### Nature Preserves and Natural Resources (NPNR):

- Create a FT Natural Resources Supervisor position and a FT Natural Resources Specialist position for every 700 acres added to the nature preserve system.

- Add two FT nature center educators to program the approved Mobile Nature Center.

- Create an Outdoor Programs Manager to guide expansion of outdoor programs in response to growing popularity and renewed interest in outdoor-related activities.

- Create a Cultural Resource Manager to expand educational opportunities and explore and enhance historically significant people and places.

- Create an additional position to manage and operate the campground. One FT was approved for FY22 but one more FT position is needed.

- Create an additional maintenance team to align with current maintenance demand (one Maintenance Supervisor and two Maintenance and Operations Technicians).

**Capital Planning:**

- Hire a Community Engagement Liaison (See Strategy 1.2 for more detail).

- Hire one planner, specifically tasked with overseeing partnerships between the County and municipalities (See Strategy 16.1 for more detail).

**Administration:**

- Create two Fiscal Analyst positions.

- One position within the Volunteer Services Team to lead youth and adult volunteers in Natural Resource - focused projects and assist with other volunteer coordination activities.

- Fund and gradually increase staff for a dedicated marketing team. (See Strategy 11.1 for more detail).

- Consider moving Commemorative Events area to Parks Operations to streamline service delivery.

- One Senior Management Analyst position to focus on performance management to include, but not limited to, data tracking, reporting and analysis, research and evaluation, and strategic planning.

- Convert part-time positions to one full-time position to support Senior Management Analyst.

**Community and Recreation Center Services (CRCS):**

- Create one Out of School Time Coordinator position to insure recreation centers meet state guidelines to become a licensed childcare provider.

- Create a Special Projects Coordinator who seeks and administers grant funded projects through CRCS. This would ensure consistency in offering CC2N (Connecting Communities to Nature) and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) programming.

- Create another Recreation Coordinator Supervisor to expand adult sports offerings in under-served areas of the county.

- Anticipate and finance additional staffing needs as programs and initiatives grow in the future. This is especially important when considering post-COVID-19 pandemic budgets.

## 8.2 Improve systems that support staff to carry out mission and work of Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec relies on several Mecklenburg County partner agencies for services that support department staff, as well as other departments within the organization. This organizational structure creates a uniform level of services and equipment that is applied county-wide. However, each agency has its own unique needs and challenges.

Information Technology Services provides department staff with technology and communication devices, along with input on software systems to help staff work securely and efficiently. While some staff are well equipped, others are not. According to staff and county residents, the current reservation system used to sign up for programs and rent facilities is difficult to use. See Strategy 6.2 for more details.

The system used to establish work assignments, scheduling, and progress tracking for work orders presents challenges to operations staff. The current work order software system is not being used to its full potential. This system, even when optimized, is limited in its capabilities to manage such a large park system. An updated mobile-ready maintenance and management system should be implemented to handle tasks like creating and distributing daily work orders, managing inventory, and tracking Mecklenburg Park & Rec assets to understand costs and productivity, and be complemented by in-person staff meetings.

Human Resources supports management staff to advertise, recruit, and fill new and vacant positions. While Mecklenburg County Human Resources' current recruitment and on-boarding systems are more streamlined than in the past, there are still staffing challenges. Management staff have expressed frustration at the recruiting process, believing it is opaque, difficult to navigate, and time consuming.

For example, the process of posting an open position, vetting candidates, providing an offer, and scheduling on-boarding can take eight to twelve weeks. Many viable full-time, part-time, or seasonal candidates receive offers from other entities while this process unfolds.

Hiring managers should be more involved in the beginning stages of the process, particularly in the evaluation and selection of candidates for interviews, along with creating a streamlined system for recruiting, hiring, and on-boarding employees. Recent expansions to the County's Human Resources staff will help to expedite the recruitment and on-boarding of new employees.

**3.24** Department staff, Park and Recreation Commission members, and community members integral to the Cordelia Park reinvestment project celebrate the facility's opening.

## 8.2 Key Actions

**Modernize technology to support growing demand:**

- Develop a plan with Mecklenburg County Information Technology Services to address current technology needs. Needs include improving Mecklenburg Park & Rec's digital presence, simplifying program sign-up and facility rental, modernizing asset and amenity management systems, and implementing a mobile-ready maintenance and management system to increase staff efficiency.

- Develop improved methods to catalog and track user data for programming, volunteers, and engagement.

**Build successful teams:**

- Collaborate with Mecklenburg County Human Resources to identify opportunities to improve recruiting and retaining methods, evaluate candidates for interviews, and further streamline hiring and on-boarding practices.

## 8.3 Enhance interdepartmental communication, training, and mentorship to improve the performance of Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff.

Staff are the heart of Mecklenburg Park & Rec. The recession in 2009 necessitated staff and budget reductions which significantly impacted department functionality and operations. Remaining staff had to assume additional responsibilities. This created a reactive vs proactive work environment which made it challenging to implement new ideas.

Staff have expressed concerns about a lack of communication of department-wide information. While the vertical communication within divisions is very good, there is a lack of clarity and flow with intradepartmental communications and department-wide communications. There are multiple ways that messages are being communicated, causing confusion and misinformation at times. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should create and execute a communications plan for its staff in the near future.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's Strategic Business Plan (SBP) is a helpful mechanism to facilitate innovation. The SBP is a regularly updated

document that identifies departmental priorities and provides performance metrics to quantify success. While the SBP is seen as a mechanism for organizational improvement, funding must be specifically allocated to make follow through possible.

Staff retention is paramount, as Mecklenburg Park & Rec has a substantial amount of senior and key staff. Mecklenburg Park & Rec's FY2020-2022 Strategic Business Plan states in Goal PRK.4 - "Cultivate Culture of Recruiting and Retaining High Performing Employees and Volunteers" that it aims to make professional development and employee retention a priority. In order to do so, Mecklenburg Park & Rec must invest in detailed succession plans to navigate future staffing. The current staff includes many people who have dedicated their careers to carry out the mission of Mecklenburg Park & Rec. Expanding mentorship and cross-training programs will allow experienced staff to pass along important lessons learned, while assisting new staff to be better prepared for future leadership roles within Mecklenburg Park & Rec and the community.

Annual Leadership Retreats continue to be a valuable resource for staff to learn new and innovative management approaches. These retreats provide the team with ways to connect

via brainstorming. Leadership Academy brings together staff from all of the Mecklenburg Park & Rec's divisions to offer management and leadership training. The program invites participants to collaborate with colleagues from other divisions to develop innovative ideas. Some projects may receive funding for implementation. Continuing professional development funding for front line staff contributes to more innovative program development. Increased staff involvement with organizations such as NRPA, NCRPA, and local municipal park and recreation departments fosters an environment of experimentation and creative thinking within Mecklenburg Park & Rec, yielding successful initiatives like the Leadership Academy.

Similar successful programs like the Innovative Program Initiative (IPI) from the Prince George's County Office of the Maryland National Capital Park & Planning Commission have yielded positive results in this realm. Staff provides ideas that are believed to potentially have significant beneficial impacts on coworkers, the work environment or the community served. The suggestions are reviewed by a Special Innovation Task Force and where appropriate, are implemented. This program is supported by funding and mentorship. Submitters are paired

with department mentors in a collaborative workspace to foster positive interaction and the execution of their ideas.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec has a cross-training program which allows staff members to experience positions within other divisions for several weeks. Many staff work in remote locations (recreation centers, nature centers, in parks and along greenways) and are not aware of the roles that staff in other sections or divisions play. This program is popular among staff as it fosters a sense of collaboration and camaraderie. It encourages staff to try new areas of interest while infusing new ideas and perspectives into established areas of Mecklenburg Park & Rec. The system also increases communication among staff, as they gain a comprehensive understanding of how different roles function. This 'grow in place' system is working well and should be expanded. It adds a unique benefit to being a Mecklenburg Park & Rec employee and can aid in employee retention.

## 8.3 Key Actions

**Strengthen communication within Mecklenburg Park & Rec:**

- Develop a communications plan so that staff are aware of critical departmental information.

- Establish consistent messaging and communication practices into staff on-boarding and ongoing training.

**Make the Strategic Business Plan an implementable driver of team initiatives by supporting innovative strategies with funding and metrics.**

**Continue to support staff professional development by encouraging participation in professional development opportunities and organizations.**

**Expand the impact of the Mecklenburg Park & Rec Leadership Academy:**

- Dedicate funding for implementation of staff-initiated projects, modeled on innovation programs like those in Prince George's County.

**Expand the 'grow in place' cross training program.**

- Develop performance and improvement standards with detailed succession plans to support employee retention and professional development needs.

- Revisit division organization regularly to ensure all staff have access to appropriate mentorship and oversight.

# Goal #9 Funding

## Invest in parks and recreation as a valuable and necessary County service.

### 9.1 Develop and regularly update metrics to communicate the value of Mecklenburg Park & Rec service and amenities— across County departments and to the public.

As a CAPRA accredited organization, Mecklenburg Park & Rec has developed a healthy system of performance measures and metrics. Mecklenburg Park & Rec is able to track progress with the Strategic Business Plan in concrete and measurable ways. The stories of these successes and challenges are vital to communicate to the public. It is recommended that Mecklenburg Park & Rec develop an online dashboard to easily and transparently report such progress externally. Dashboards in similar communities have been used to track customer experience, infrastructure development and preservation, organizational excellence, and staff performance. Transparent reporting of

performance results, both successes and current challenges, allows the community to actively participate in government.

While it is important to measure Mecklenburg Park & Rec against its own goals, it is also helpful to situate metrics in a larger context. As a reminder, the following list includes the peer agencies analyzed and reviewed for a comparison of both funding and staffing needs. While this list is not exhaustive, it is recommended that Mecklenburg Park & Rec continue to compare itself to these same agencies for consistency:

- Austin, TX
- Columbus, OH
- Dallas, TX
- Gwinnett County, GA
- Hillsborough County, FL
- Jacksonville, FL

- Louisville Metro, KY
- Palm Beach County, FL
- Salt Lake County, UT
- Wake County, NC
- Montgomery County, MD

### 9.1 Key Actions

**Develop an online dashboard to easily and transparently report CAPRA performance progress with the public.**

## 9.2 Capitalize on funding related partnerships with County, private, or non-profit institutions that reinforce Mecklenburg Park & Rec's role in a broader County-wide network of open spaces.

Mecklenburg County boasts a high number of mission-aligned institutions, ranging from schools to libraries, nonprofit organizations, education and recreation providers, and local businesses. Developing partnerships with these groups has multi-faceted benefits—in particular, increasing access to resources.

Partnerships with a broad base of organizations could leverage funding sources to expand programming or improve facilities without impacting Mecklenburg Park & Rec budget. For example,  Mecklenburg County Community Service Grants (MCCSG) are available to 501c3

non-profits. As of 2020, Camino Community Development received funding for a health center serving low income, uninsured Hispanic and Latinx populations, as well as Special Olympics North Carolina. Organizations such as these seem natural partners.

Corporate and small business partners can also provide strategic investment. In the past, Coca-Cola Bottling Co. donated $105,000 to Mecklenburg Park & Rec through the Partners for Parks non-profit. Money was used to repave the top of six basketball courts and add colorful paint. Targeting these charitable contributions in under-resourced communities will aid in providing equitable access. Mecklenburg County's Minority, Women and Small Business Enterprises Program, Charlotte Business INClusion, Small Business Administration, and North Carolina Office of Historically Underused Businesses are also valuable partners. Offering

park and recreation space to host small business pop-ups, hold outdoor convenings, or partner with financial sponsors will be mutually beneficial.

### 9.2 Key Actions

**Explore corporate sponsorships for new investment and reinvestment projects.**

**Work with business conveners, like Center City Partners, to advertise rentable park and recreation space to host small business pop-ups or hold outdoor convenings.**

**Build relationships with partners who have diverse access to resources (grants, corporate sponsorships, health programs).**

# Case Study: Successful Partnerships







## San Diego, CA

San Diego County's new waterfront park was funded using certificates of participation (a tax-exempt lease-financing agreement that is sold to investors as securities resembling bonds) and Balboa Park, one of the region's most iconic parks, is run by both the city and a combination of many privately run organizations.

## U.S. Forest Service

Since 2002, the U.S. Forest Service has successfully partnered with a for-profit vendor (Recreation Resource Management) to manage just over half of their campgrounds (150 locations in eleven states). Although controversial to some, it has provided revenue to the Forest Service and has kept campgrounds open and maintained for the public.

## Maricopa County, AZ

Maricopa County's department of parks and recreation created several private partnerships that enabled them to provide concession offerings, recreation facilities, and services that they could not have provided otherwise. They look to the private providers to manage services like golf courses, water parks, and paintball facilities, while investing in parks through capital development. The Central Arizona Conservation Alliance (CAZCA) contribute approximately 20% to Maricopa's overall park system operation budget. CAZCA is made of a consortium of partners ranging from museums to garden clubs, conservancies to the Urban Land Institute. These partners handle approximately 24% of the agency's annual visitation of 2.1 million visitors.

## 9.3 Develop a cost recovery model that enables Mecklenburg Park & Rec to respond to both temporary and permanent needs.

The County has steadily increased investments in Mecklenburg Park & Rec between 2011 and 2018, by increasing its staff by about 30% and its budget by $16 million. Even with continued investment by County leadership, Mecklenburg Park & Rec is still working to catch up with the needs of a growing and diversifying population, environmental challenges caused by increased development pressures, and competing to attract and retain talent. The long term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may only make funding for Mecklenburg Park & Rec more difficult to achieve through traditional methods. In order to respond to changing demands and increase its ability to fund creative projects, Mecklenburg Park & Rec must act more proactively to better align its own financial goals with the County's high level aspirations and chart an achievable path forward.

In 2019, the Portland Parks and Recreation department met with the City Council to align community expectations with funding realities and set expectations for a sustainable long-term investment plan. Portland Parks and Recreation

modeled three scenarios for the future of the system over the next fifteen years and described the funding needed to deliver each vision, as well as the trade-offs associated with each:

- **Scenario 1: Decline -** Funding would remain static and service levels would decline.

- **Scenario 2: Maintain -** New funding would be acquired to maintain the current level of service.

- **Scenario 3**: **Fulfill -** New funding is acquired to meet aspirational service standards.

Scenario 1 was not supported, so Portland Parks and Recreation organized an Alternative Funding Task Force, which worked with national and local experts to identify funding options that could achieve either the Maintain or Fulfill scenario. While Scenario 3 was the goal, there was no consensus about how to finance such an ambitious game plan. They explored a range of solutions, identifying those that were politically feasible from bonds to a special district to a food and beverage tax, as well as noting those that were not recommended.

While deliberations are still ongoing, the process of decision making and creative brainstorming was notable. This kind of conversation with County leadership would not only help Mecklenburg Park & Rec identify additional

sources of revenue, but enable creative problem-solving with County leadership.

### Cost Recovery Methods

Currently Mecklenburg Park & Rec does not balance program and operational costs with generated revenue from fees, programs, camps, and services. In order to develop and maintain a financially sustainable system, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should evaluate the current budget against the existing fee model and policies to track expenses and revenue generation and to more sustainably recover costs from programs.

**Recommendation Assessment:** Fee-based programs accounted for 50.5% of the total, while free programs were 49.5%. This equalization of fee-based versus non-fee based programming is to be commended. This equalization of fee- versus non-fee based programming can, in theory, reduce the incidence of price as a barrier to participation. From a fiscal perspective, however, such a large percentage of free programs can be financially difficult to sustain and assume inability to pay. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should implement more fee-based programming to encourage buy-in, enhance perceived value, and generate non-tax revenue.

**Cost Recovery Report:** Mecklenburg Park & Rec's fees are currently identified by direct cost and a 12% overhead calculation. Proposed fees are developed by staff using an Excel based program pricing tool. And while the tool provided a solid foundation for setting the price for programs and services, additional factors should be considered when developing pricing.

The following factors are currently considered by Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff in developing proposed fees:

- Cost to offer the program (limited direct costs only)

- History of fees charged

- Perceived ability and willingness to pay

- Number of participants per class/activity

- Affordability for target audience

- Ability to attract participants

It is recommended that a more business minded approach to pricing be taken by Mecklenburg Park & Rec. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should establish a model for setting fees that encourages realistic cost of service based fees for those who have the ability to pay, while allowing for expanded subsidy (discounting) for those who have demonstrated financial need. Creating and implementing discount policies



**3.25** Activities for youth, teens, and seniors have traditionally seen greater subsidies than other programs.

(senior, multiple family, financial aid assistance) are important components of effective operationalizing of a cost recovery process.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec currently groups programs and services by division and by recreation facility. However, to better define cost recovery it is recommended that Mecklenburg Park & Rec also create categories of programs and services that are alike, regardless of the affiliation with a specific recreation facility,

program type, or demographic. This method groups services according to level or likeness of activity (introductory, intermediate, etc., community events, merchandise for resale) and also allows for differentiation of value to the community.

In many agencies, activities are subsidized to greater and lesser levels based on priorities directly or indirectly identified by decision makers. For example, activities for youth, teens,

and seniors have been traditionally subsidized to a greater level than adult and active adult activities. Services sympathetic to low-income populations have traditionally been subsidized to a greater level than those targeted to middle/higher income people. After creating new categories based on activity similarity and establishing a cost of service for each one of the programs offered, a cost recovery model should be developed. Cost recovery plan to increase revenue but make cost assistance readily available to those who need it to participate.

Establishing and implementing a cost recovery policy into routine fiscal exercises provides Mecklenburg Park & Rec with a multitude of opportunities to improve service delivery. More importantly, it aligns fees with the mission and priorities of the community.

## 9.3 Key Actions

Create a cost recovery model. First, revise the program fee tool to set realistic cost of service based fees for those who have the ability to pay, while allowing for expanded subsidy (discounting) for those who have demonstrated financial need.

Establish a model for setting fees that encourages realistic cost of service based fees for those who have the ability to pay, while allowing for expanded subsidy (discounting) for those who have demonstrated financial need.

Work with County leadership, residents, and the Board of County Commissioners to better align Mecklenburg Park & Rec's budget with Meck Playbook's goals.

Implement more fee-based programming to encourage buy-in, enhance perceived value, and generate non-tax revenue.

# Tell More Stories

Summary of key actions required to realize the Game Plan goals include:



■ ## Goal #10 Celebration

*Key Actions*

### Catalogue and Maintain Public Art and Historic Resources

Complete a public art and historic resources and structures inventory to note the structural integrity of artwork, buildings, sites, and cultural landscapes. Evaluate prospective programming, revenue, and interpretation potential.

### Craft Authentic Experiences

Seek programming partners, including national institutions and subject matter experts, to grow Mecklenburg Park & Rec's capacity in cultural programming and operations through collaboration.

## Goal #11
## Communication

*Key Actions*

### Invest in a Marketing Team

Increase the marketing budget to be closer to national benchmarks of 2% of the operating budget, and grow the marketing and communication team to three FTE.

### Develop a Marketing Plan

Begin with creation of a high-level marketing and communications plan, followed by more detailed goals and objectives for different service areas or divisions, then more specific strategies and tactics for each facility tied to community needs.

### Implement Consistent Brand

Complete a phased roll out of a consistent brand to update visual communications of Mecklenburg Park & Rec, including logo, messaging, shortened Department name, and wayfinding.

### Build Awareness of Offerings

Execute a outreach campaign with digital and printed content.

## Goal #12
## Hospitality

### Expand Signage and Wayfinding

Standardize consistent wayfinding for accessibility and orientation; use signage for story-telling and place-making; and incorporate digital components.

### Emphasize Customer Service

Update technology systems and software to better track work orders and understand service needs and opportunities.

### Apply Updated Messaging

Update public messaging to be simple and user-friendly, framing Mecklenburg Park & Rec offerings as "places, programs, and events."

## Goal #13
## Reflection

*Key Actions*

### Measure and Report Visitation

Develop and implement a standard usage assessment including visitor counts, frequency of use, and regular samples of demographic questionnaires.

### Build a Diverse Team

Audit and enhance hiring practices to ensure the composition of Mecklenburg Park & Rec team relates to and reflects Mecklenburg's changing community.

# Tell More Stories

# Tell More Stories
## Celebrate the Hall of Fame

Mecklenburg County has a unique history, created by generations of overlapping traditions, cultures, and heritages. The physical land has not only been the setting of these stories, but has been an active participant in creating them. The story of the land and its people should be told through the open space system and its programs. However, without a comprehensive marketing strategy and communications team, it has been difficult for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to fully celebrate and amplify its voice. Over and over, feedback from this process has revealed that there are barriers, like awareness and communication, to people's knowledge of Mecklenburg Park & Rec's offerings.

Meck Playbook provides an opportunity for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to rethink and reimagine how to market itself and present Mecklenburg Park & Rec's brand in order to reach a broader audience to promote its many offerings. Parks are, in many ways, hospitality centers, and hospitality is core to the experience and identity of Mecklenburg County. Using a notion of hospitality, Mecklenburg Park & Rec can build its role and identity as welcoming, creative storytellers. It can simultaneously increase awareness and expand community impact through celebrating, providing hospitality and wayfinding, reflecting, and communicating effectively throughout the County.

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

## 10.1 Inventory public art, historic resources and structures to prioritize for reinvestment and preserve local history.

With a rich historical and cultural legacy, Mecklenburg County has many well-preserved heritage sites and public art pieces. Mecklenburg Park & Rec owns and maintains a total of 21 historic sites and 48 historic or cultural resources, all of which are either stand-alone sites or structures located within county-owned parks.

In 2016, Mecklenburg Park & Rec partnered with the Historic Landmarks Commission to inventory and assess all of the county's historic sites and landmarks. The resulting report included a range of recommendations related to storytelling. Some included building interpretive signage to point visitors toward adjacent landmarks or developing educational programs and staff to teach about the cultural and historical significance of different sites.

The stories of these historical landmarks could be integrated into an interactive online or app based platform providing information for tourists and Mecklenburg Park & Rec personnel alike. There is also a Cultural and Historical Resources Management Plan, which is a productive step towards cataloging and preserving cultural assets.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's public art collection is integral to the culture of the county. In 2002, Mecklenburg County adopted a 1% for public art ordinance, which guarantees that the public art collection will continue to grow. It is paramount that an inventory exist to track the expansion of the program. However, there currently are no dedicated funds for public art maintenance. These objects need routine care if they are to be preserved for future generations.

In order to fully understand the value of these important historic spaces and pieces of art, both a public art inventory and detailed historic resources and structures inventory should be conducted. These efforts would

note the condition of artwork, structural integrity of buildings, sites, and the health of the overall cultural landscapes. This will aid in understanding the full historical significance of the County's assets. Part of this inventory should also include an evaluation of current and prospective programming and interpretation potential. Revenue generated through public art, heritage programs, and event rentals could assist in maintaining the integrity of artworks, historic sites, and corresponding programs.
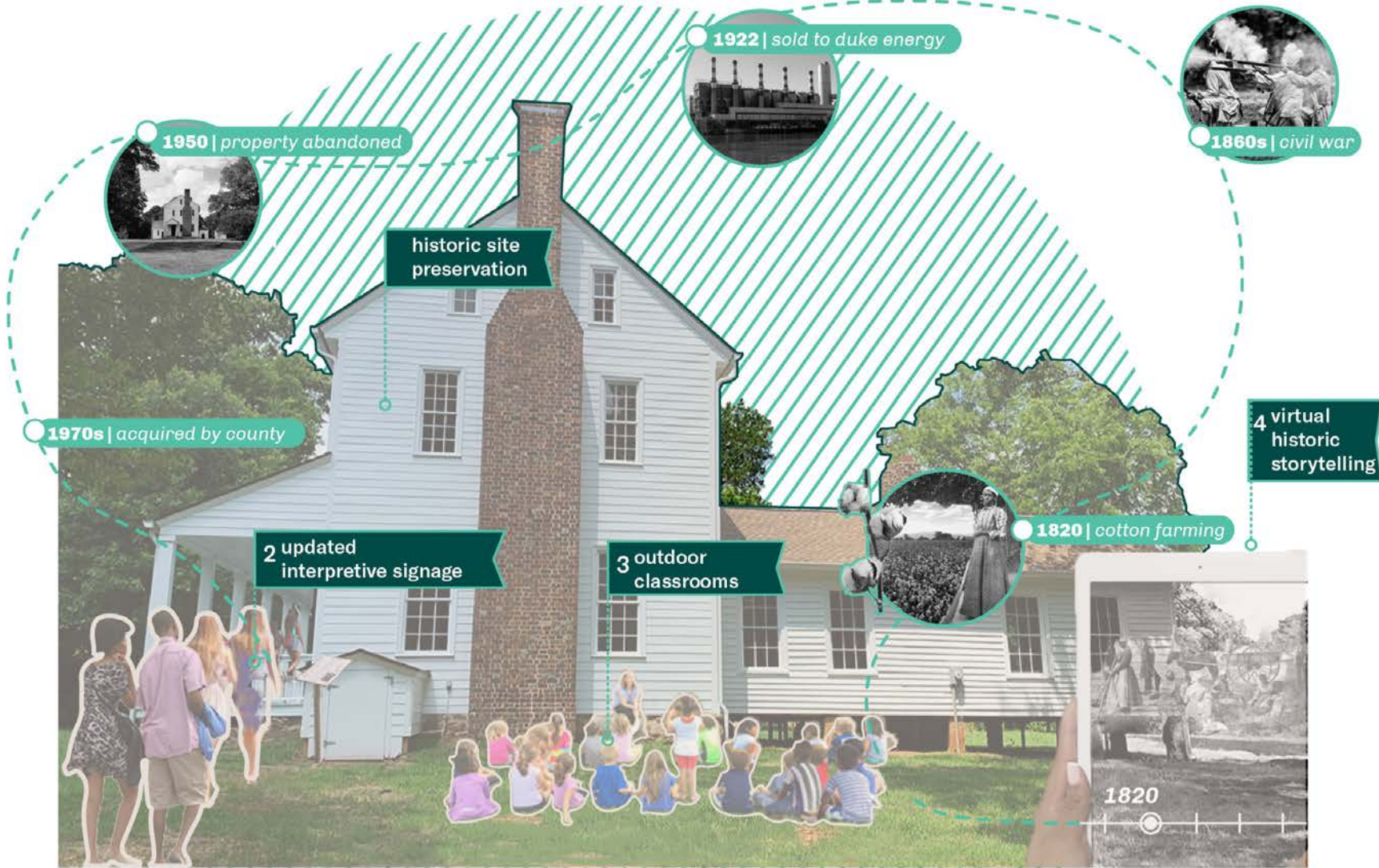
### 10.1 Key Actions

**Create a public art inventory to identify and assess the condition of public art on County land.**

**Partner with public art organizations and museums to develop a public art maintenance plan.**

**Update the CAPRA Cultural and Historical Resources Management Plan with a comprehensive assessment of buildings and sites.**

HOLLY BEND HOUSE

1922 | sold to duke energy

1950 | property abandoned

1860s | civil war

historic site preservation

1970s | acquired by county

4 virtual historic storytelling

2 updated interpretive signage

3 outdoor classrooms

1820 | cotton farming

1820

**4.1** Investments in historic landmarks can support cultural, educational, and recreational use.

## 10.2 Offer experiences that authentically communicate the diverse historical, cultural, and artistic contexts in which parks and facilities are situated in order to reflect local identities and convene communities.

Arts and heritage programming greatly benefit from partnerships with other organizations. This is particularly relevant for Mecklenburg Park & Rec, as it can help to augment financial and staffing resources while enabling creative ways to grow and program unused public art and historic sites within Mecklenburg Park & Rec's inventory. If Mecklenburg Park & Rec can maintain historic land and physical assets, it can seek programming partners to take on an educational and interpretive role.

Increasing awareness of the public art program is integral to reflecting community identities. The program is run in partnership with the Arts & Science Council, who manages each project. The Arts & Science Council undergoes a community engagement process during artwork selection. However, a more targeted, intentional, and strategic approach to this engagement would be a wonderful tool for advancing Mecklenburg Park & Rec's inclusion and equity goals.

While the 1% for public art fund is a wonderful mechanism, it lacks flexibility. Public art funding tied to larger Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) projects can be difficult to access for smaller projects or grassroots art ideas. It is recommended that local partners, like the Art & Science Council, work with community members and artists to draft hyper-local public art plans ahead of funding opportunities. These plans should be flexible, serving guides and not mandates. Acting like "mini master plans," these "wish lists" could help direct funds towards projects already approved by neighborhoods, should funds arise. If CIP funds are unavailable, other funding sources/strategies should be explored. Such a public art system would reinforce the distinctive and dynamic characteristics of neighborhoods.

Re-imagining heritage sites and programming also allow the County to revisit its storied past by telling complete stories about the region's original inhabitants, and the history of slavery and race relations in North Carolina.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec has the opportunity to work with national institutions locally to better understand its historical sites and educate visitors of the indelible imprint that slavery had on the development of Mecklenburg County.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec should reach out to the Catawba Indian Nation and current tribes representing the Sugaree native people to understand the perspectives and priorities of indigenous peoples and to recognize that the history of Mecklenburg County and its open spaces does not start with the founding of the City of Charlotte.

A mixed group of volunteers, college interns, staff, and an enchanced partnership with the Historic Landmarks Commission should run daily operations at these sites. Full-time staff supervise and expand the program model. Programming could occur at under-visited artistic or unused historic sites, increasing reservation opportunities and knowledge of Mecklenburg County's history. These sites have potential to be the location for unique Mecklenburg artistic and historic celebrations, concerts, holiday traditions, or athletic events like Fun Runs.

Implementing this strategy also allows Mecklenburg Park & Rec to partner with local subject matter experts, whether in ecology, public art, history, science, or health and wellness. These local experts hold diverse and important knowledge. Coordinating and co-working with them allows Mecklenburg Park & Rec to tell deeper stories without the need to develop such specialized expertise in-house.

## 10.2 Key Actions

**Maintain historic land and physical assets in keeping with their historic significance.**

**Identify programming partners and national institutions to contribute to education and interpretation services for key historic sites:**

- Reach out to the Catawba Indian Nation and current tribes representing the Sugaree native people to understand the County's history and appropriately represent this history and culture in County facilities.

**Expand the partnership with the Historic Landmarks Commission.**

**Formalize operations of historic sites.**

**Build volunteer engagement at historic sites and buildings.**

**Expand the historic resources program model for sites with historical significance.**

# Goal #11 Communication

Increase awareness of programs and facilities through more effective marketing and branding.

## 11.1 Increase the marketing budget and grow the marketing team to improve communication and programming engagement goals.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec has taken some steps in the direction of marketing and communication success in recent years. The decision to hire a marketing coordinator in 2018 was a positive step. Staff noted improvements during the short time the marketing coordinator was with the organization. However, the addition of only one position was below the 2015 recommendations for marketing staffing. Even with some part-time support, one person is not nearly sufficient for a department that serves more than 1 million people and with an operating budget of more than $50 million. Substantial organization and process changes must occur to successfully accomplish the goal to increase engagement and awareness.

Another noteworthy step was staff embracing digital video content during the COVID-19 pandemic. This demonstrated the staff's passion, originality, and flexibility to new communication methods. The "do it yourself" nature of some social media platforms also empowers the staff to share their stories in their own personal way while maintaining agency over produced content. The uptick in engagement with this content proved there is an opportunity to build upon this approach.

### Budget

A commonly suggested standard in the private sector is to invest approximately 10-15% of revenues in marketing. The Learning Resources Network (LERN), a continuing education and lifelong learning association, makes a similar recommendation for universities, colleges, schools, recreation departments, and associations.

Research by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), published in their 2019 Marketing and Communication Report, found the following (See Figure 4.2):

- 15% of park and recreation agencies designate 10-15% of their operating budget to marketing and communication activities.

- 26% of park and recreation agencies designate 5-9% of their operating budget to marketing and communication activities.

- 30% designate 2-5% of their operating budget to marketing and communication activities.

- 28% of park and recreation agencies designate 0-1% of their operating budget to marketing and communication activities.

The same report by NRPA found that agencies with an operating budget of $10 million and greater spend an average of 2% of their operating budget on marketing and have an average of three FTE for marketing and communication. Staff salaries and benefits should comprise one-half to two-thirds of the allocated marketing budget. The remainder should be allocated to the following areas: printing, postage, advertising, promotional

materials, contracts, software, and event related expenses. Despite being one of the larger departments in this category, Mecklenburg Park & Rec is well below average when it comes to investing in marketing and communication, including having the dedicated staff to support it.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's FY2021 operating budget is just over $51 million. Currently, Mecklenburg Park & Rec only has one full-time marketing position budgeted (currently vacant), with part-time support from two employees who fill other roles in the organization. Staff report $25,000 for basic marketing expenses, with $60,000 budgeted for program advertising and another $60,000–75,000 for the special events team. Even assuming other minimal financial contributions from other divisions for printing or advertising, the total current investment in marketing and communication by Mecklenburg Park & Rec is markedly less than 1%.

**Key Observations**

- There is a need for dedicated creative staff to support the marketing needs of the park and recreation department. The lack of dedicated marketing and communication efforts is a lost opportunity for Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

- Recent efforts were a step in the right direction, but insufficient for the size of Mecklenburg Park & Rec and amount of opportunity.

- COVID-19 pandemic constraints forced digital engagement creativity which has been effective.

- Marketing staff must proactively pursue Department and County goals through improved strategic marketing, storytelling, branding, and community engagement.

Return on Investment (ROI): Marketing and communication investment have repeatedly paid off for diverse organizations throughout

**Amount of Budget Spent by Park and Recreation Agencies on Marketing and Communications Activities**
(percent distribution)

Mecklenburg Park & Rec



- 0-1% of budget
- 2-4% of budget
- 5-9% of budget
- 10-14% of budget
- 15+% of budget
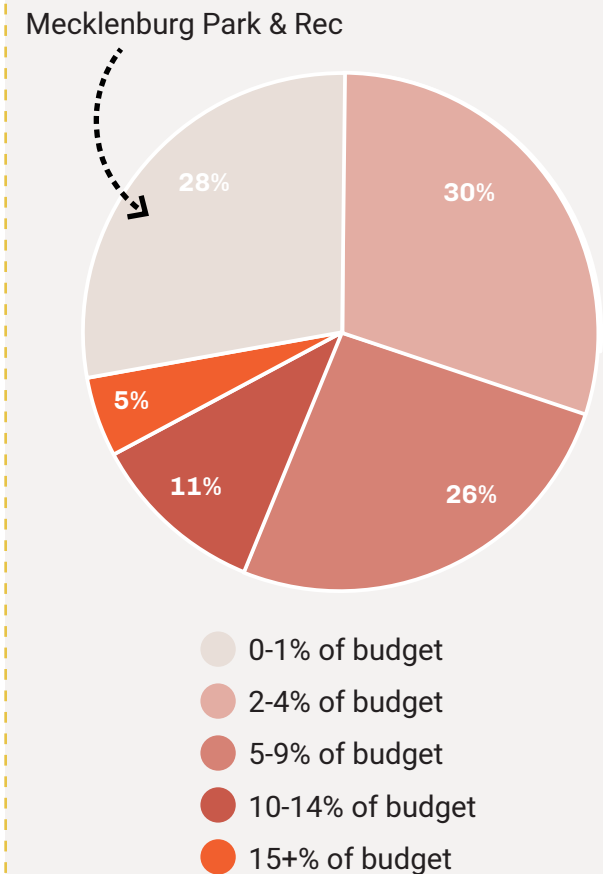
**4.2** Nearly 3 in 5 Park and Recreation Agencies designate less than 5% of their annual operating budgets to marketing and communications activities.

the country. In 2012, the City of Arlington, Texas, increased their marketing staffing and budget by $190,449 (from $351,960 to $542,409) and saw their 2013 revenue increase by $761,125 compared to the four-year average of 2009-2012. More importantly, they saw engagement skyrocket and participation numbers increase significantly in five key areas: summer camp programs, after school programs, fitness memberships, swim lesson registrations, and rentals.

Hiring qualified marketing staff to analyze current practices and make recommendations can make a significant difference. In Westminster, Colorado, marketing staff made minor changes to an annual fitness drive to change how it was advertised. In prior years, the initiative brought in $13,000 to $16,000 in membership revenue during the first week of January. With the new approach, the program brought in $185,898 in one week and continued to bring in over $100,000 in new membership revenue in subsequent years.

Genesee County Park and Recreation in Michigan conducted a marketing return on investment analysis on event advertising and found an ROI ranging from $2 to $13 in direct revenue for every dollar spent on marketing.

**Typical Median Percentage of Park and Recreation Operating Budgets Dedicated to Marketing and Communications Activities**

| | Population Served | | | | Annual Operating Budget | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All | Less than 20,000 residents | 20,000-49,999 residents | 50,000-99,999 residents | 100,000 residents and greater | Under $1 million | $1.0- 4.9 million | $5.0- 9.9 million | $10 million and greater |
| 3% | 5% | 3% | 3% | 2% | 5% | 3% | 4% | 2% |

**4.3** According to NRPA, Park and Recreation departments of Mecklenburg County's size should spend 2% of their operating budget on marketing and communication.

While a financial return on investment should be anticipated, it is vital to realize that increased participation and revenue is not the only return on investment, nor is it the most important.

An investment in marketing, branding, and engagement can also:

- Create a sense of place through improved branding and design standards.
- Create a sense of community through engagement and storytelling.
- Improve physical and mental health through increased participation.
- Foster better relationships through greater engagement and participation.
- Promote diversity, equity, and inclusion to services.
- Improve trust and satisfaction in government.

In building a new marketing team, goals and objectives must be clearly identified by leadership. Marketing staff must be trusted and empowered to aggressively pursue these goals. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should be identified and agreed upon by Department and County leadership at the outset so there is consensus about the direction, expectation, and progress of the marketing efforts.

Staff salaries and benefits should comprise one-half to two-thirds of this amount. The remainder should be allocated to the following areas: printing, postage, advertising, promotional materials, contracts, software, and event related expenses.

## 11.1 Key Actions

**Increase budget for Mecklenburg Park & Rec's marketing**

**Expand marketing staff capacity:**

The following positions are suggested as a starting point and demonstrate the range of recommended skill sets. These should be adapted based on department and community needs:

- **Marketing and Communication Manager:** Leadership of marketing and communication team, responsible for alignment with County and Mecklenburg Park & Rec goals and objectives, and member of the leadership team and County communication team. Empowered to make strategic decisions with marketing and communication coordinators.

- **Marketing and Communication Coordinators:** Liaisons to specific Mecklenburg Park & Rec divisions who provide communication strategy and ensure marketing needs are fulfilled. These positions could also take responsibility for developing related social media, website, and newsletter content.

- **Graphic Designers:** One or more professional graphic designers to develop marketing and communication collateral that adheres to brand standards and professionally represents Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

- **Digital Media Specialist:** Responsible for website management and overall social media administration.

- **Videography Specialist:** Produce regular (weekly and monthly) video series for Mecklenburg Park & Rec as well as one-off promotional videos for major events and milestones.

- **Language Access and Inclusion:** If a similar role does not already exist within Mecklenburg Park & Rec or the County, there should be someone within the team who is responsible for ensuring that marketing and communication efforts meet the needs of a diverse community. This would include a focus on translation services and accessibility of information.

## 11.2 Execute a holistic marketing and communications plan to increase participation, awareness, and tell better stories.

Mecklenburg has an opportunity to increase participation in parks, facilities, and programs through improved marketing, branding, and community engagement efforts. In a 2019 survey, consultants for Meck Playbook found that while 87% of those surveyed have visited a park or facility in the last year (above national average), only one in three people visit a park or facility with monthly or more frequency. Participation in programming also remains below the national average. While program participation has increased slightly since 2015, it remains at a 23% participation rate, which is below the national average of 34%.This may seem counterintuitive, as parks, open spaces, and programs often seem full or have waitlists. This displays a disconnect between how Mecklenburg Park & Rec is operating and what it provides. It also illuminates that more study is needed to discover who is participating and how.

Lack of awareness is the greatest barrier to program participation (38% of respondents) and the second greatest barrier to park and facility use (12% of respondents). This can be remedied by improving and streamlining marketing and communication across platforms like email, news, and social media (See Figure 4.4). Part of a larger revamped communications strategy would include developing a strong brand identity and implementing this consistent branding across platforms, parks, and facilities. The 2019 consultant survey indicated that Mecklenburg's marketing and communication efforts need improvement. For every communication channel, the negative responses outweighed the positive. For all but one platform, less than one in four rated the communication as good or excellent. Mecklenburg Park & Rec's website was the only exception, at 27%.

It is critical to note that increasing awareness and participation is a simple means to a far greater end. Increasing awareness and participation ties directly to departmental goals of reaching new community members and establishing itself as a community leader. The first step in improving awareness and participation is to hire a Marketing and Communications Manager within Mecklenburg Park & Rec or at an enterprise level. The Marketing and Communications Manager should then develop a holistic marketing and communications plan. There are many approaches that can be taken to accomplish this goal. Due to the size, complexity, multitude of operations, and diversity of the community served, it is recommended to begin with a high-level plan. This would guide the overall marketing and communication of Mecklenburg Park & Rec. Once this is established, more detailed goals and objectives should be developed for different service areas or divisions, such as parks, facilities, or programming. Then, specific strategies and tactics could be crafted for each facility, which would be tied to the composition and needs of each community.

Components of a useful marketing and communication plan should include, but not be limited to the following:

- Situation Analysis - an evaluation of the internal and external conditions that affect Mecklenburg Park & Rec to identify the current opportunities and challenges for Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

- Target Market Profiles - specific group of users most likely to respond positively to Mecklenburg Park & Rec events, programs, and places. The analysis will be based on specific factors like location, age, income, and access to places and services.
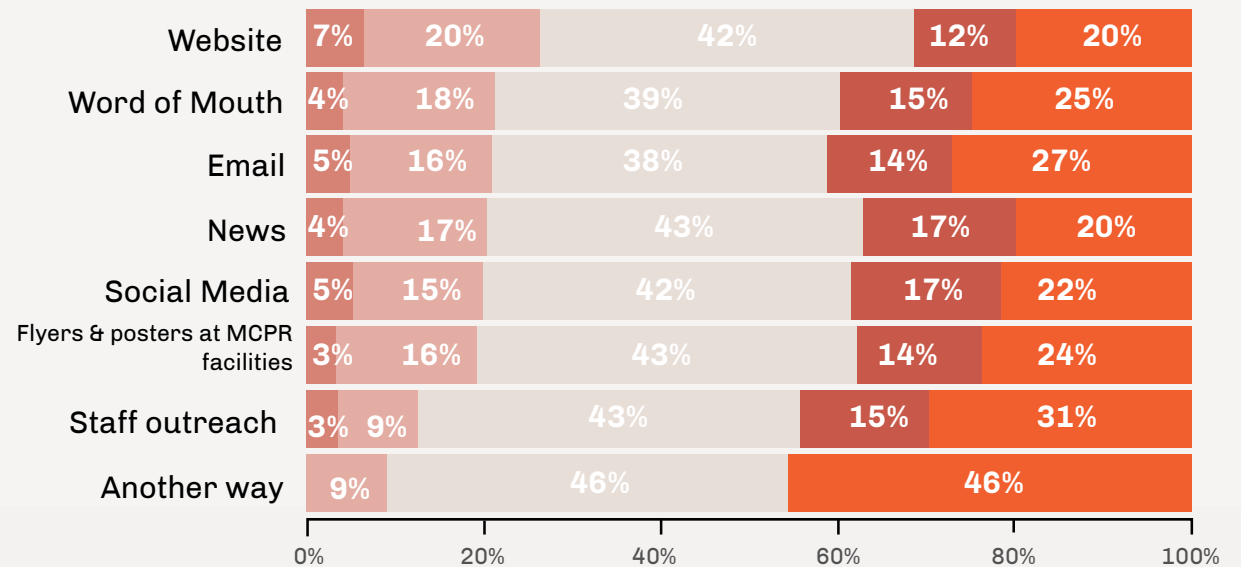
- Competitive Analysis - a similar provider survey/analysis to understand other providers, their services, and marketing strategies.

- Goals/Objectives - identify purpose of the plan, e.g. to grow program participation or to increase awareness of programs, places, and events.

- Strategies/Tactics - methods to realistically deploy the goals or objectives.

- Marketing Budget - this budget should include costs for staffing, contracts, brand deployment, etc.

- Key Performance Indicators- measurements to gauge long term performance of the plan.

## 11.2 Key Actions

**Develop a holistic marketing and communications plan:**

- Analyze Mecklenburg Park & Rec's current marking approach to guide future marketing and communication of Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

### Rate of Quality of Communication



| | Excellent | Good | Neutral | Below Average | Poor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Website | 7% | 20% | 42% | 12% | 20% |
| Word of Mouth | 4% | 18% | 39% | 15% | 25% |
| Email | 5% | 16% | 38% | 14% | 27% |
| News | 4% | 17% | 43% | 17% | 20% |
| Social Media | 5% | 15% | 42% | 17% | 22% |
| Flyers & posters at MCPR facilities | 3% | 16% | 43% | 14% | 24% |
| Staff outreach | 3% | 9% | 43% | 15% | 31% |
| Another way | | 9% | 46% | | 46% |

**4.4** Statistically Valid Survey respondents rated the quality of communication they received from Mecklenburg Park & Rec regarding programs and activities.
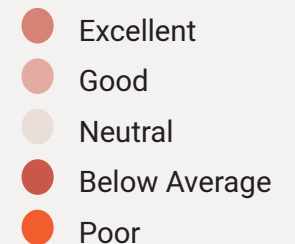
## 11.3 Implement a consistent brand for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to more effectively communicate the diversity of the system and its audiences.

Any update of the Mecklenburg Park & Rec visual brand should be studied through a broad engagement process. The effort should be informed by research and community engagement and refined through several design concepts. Ideas ranging from evolutions of the current visual identity to bold new directions should be considered.

An update to the current brand or proposed rebrand should be outlined in a brand standards guide. The comprehensive visual identity system should include a Department logo along with many other elements. These elements should include divisional logos, color palette, fonts and typography, photography, iconography, graphic devices, and more. A brand standards guide explains in detail the building blocks of the visual identity system, usage guidelines, and a messaging framework.

The logo is only one part of a larger brand system. Additional attributes, division specific elements, and color scheme should all work together. A community survey conducted as part of Meck Playbook indicates that far too many residents are unaware of what Mecklenburg Park & Rec provides and how to take part. When asked, some residents indicated that the current brand feels outdated and misaligned with the experiences people have in parks, facilities, and on trails. A refreshed brand, including a logo, is only one tool to better communicate to residents, increase participation, and stay current. An updated or new look should be rooted in the rich history of Mecklenburg Park & Rec while reflecting a world-class, 21st century park and recreation department. In tandem with a refocused effort on marketing and storytelling, an updated or new brand would have the potential to elevate the visibility of Mecklenburg Park & Rec, foster awareness, and become a point of pride for Mecklenburg County to rally around.

Implementing a consistent, updated brand, or a full rebrand demands decisive action and a commitment to see it through a period of transition. It may feel like a risky move, but there is a greater risk in maintaining the status quo, falling behind the times, and potentially failing to attract new audiences. Through the transition, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should take care to engage staff and longstanding park and recreation users so that it does not alienate some of its biggest champions. This is an opportunity to get them excited about the future of Mecklenburg Park & Rec and encourage them to help build an even larger community of supporters.

Rolling out a consistent updated or new brand across a vast park and recreation system is a significant undertaking, so early planning for funding and implementation is key. Rebranding also requires significant buy in from departmental leaders. There must be a sustained commitment to implement changes across the system (from logo to letterhead, apparel to color scheme) in order to resonate as a new direction with community members.

# HUGH SMITH
## RECREATION CENTER

📞 817-275-1351

✉ EAST ARLINGTON
1815 New York Ave.
Arlington, TX 76010

f Hugh Smith Recreation Center

## NEIGHBORHOOD COMPOSITION

**TOP ESRI TAPESTRY SEGMENTS (6 minute drive time)**

**Industrious Urban Fringe (38) - 29.1%**
Family is central to these residents. Fifty-four percent are married-couple families; 17 percent are single parents. Multigenerational households are relatively common. Hispanics comprise 61.7 percent of the residents in these neighborhoods. More than one fourth are foreign born.

**Inner City Tenants (52) - 22.7%**
Household types are mixed; 34 percent are singles, 28 percent are married-couple families, 21 percent are single parents, and 10 percent share housing. These neighborhoods are also a stepping-stone for recent immigrants.

**NeWest Residents (58) - 16.5%**
Three-quarters of the population is Hispanic. The average household has 4.1 people. Children live in 54 percent of the households. Approximately half of this population is foreign born, more than half of whom have arrived in the United States in the last 10 years.
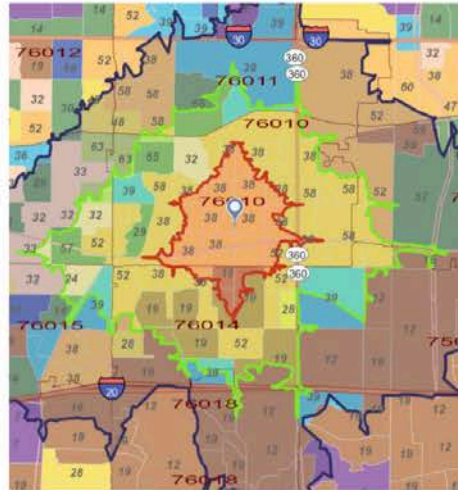
## PROGRAM REGISTRANTS
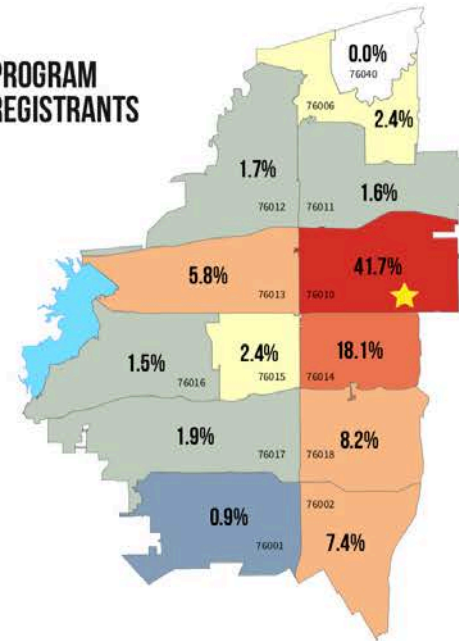


## CUSTOMER PROFILE

The majority of the program participants at the Hugh Smith Recreation Center live within the 76010 zip code. This ethnically diverse area of town is characterized by larger households and lower incomes than the rest of the city. Many residents are immigrants.

**Likely Customers**
Based on neighborhood demographics, the most likely customers are lower-income minorities with two or more children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Programming at Hugh Smith should be tailored to tighter budgets and responsive to the ethnic diversity of the community. Drop-in activities may be more successful than those requiring payment for multiple sessions. Reformatting some of the mini-camps to allow greater participation at a lower price may be advisable.

Marketing for Hugh Smith should be targeted to the 76010 and 76014 zip codes. Producing materials in both English and Spanish is advisable in order to better serve the large Hispanic population in this region. Scholarship opportunities should be heavily targeted to this area of the city.

| Drive Time: | 3 Min | 6 Min | 9 Min |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total Population | 25,323 | 97,408 | 195,535 |
| Households | 7,677 | 32,227 | 68,287 |
| Average HH Size | 3.30 | 3.02 | 2.86 |
| Owner Occupied | 41% | 38% | 44% |
| Median Age | 27.5 | 27.6 | 29.2 |
| % Hispanic | 51% | 52% | 44% |
| % Minority | 82% | 79% | 73% |
| Average Income | $44,571 | $45,037 | $52,806 |
| Median Income | $36,177 | $34,906 | $39,875 |
| Avg. Rec. Spend | $243 | $240 | $287 |

See Appendix D8

**4.5** An excerpt from the 2015 Arlington Parks and Recreation Department Marketing Plan featuring recommendations based on a customer profile composed of demographic and psychographic information for the surrounding community (drive time analysis) and the mapping of program registrants.

Updates to Mecklenburg Park & Rec's brand could help to grow awareness, signal a strategic evolution, adopt a more contemporary look and feel across the system, position as a leader in the park and recreation field, and equip the marketing team with a powerful set of tools to communicate Mecklenburg Park & Rec's offerings.

### Proposed Department Name

Along with the implementation of a consistent brand, a "name rebrand" should be considered for Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation, adapting a short form version of the name for everyday branding and marketing purposes. The full version of the name – "Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department" – would remain for official purposes. "Mecklenburg Park & Rec" is the recommended short brand name, which could appear in a logo and be used for everyday marketing purposes.

The short brand name is more efficient with words in order to support clear marketing messages, build recognition, feel more colloquial and inclusive, and discourage the use of acronyms such as "MCPR" which do not resonate with external audiences. "Mecklenburg Park & Rec" pairs well with Mecklenburg Park & Rec's vanity URL (parkandrec.com) and social media handle (@MeckParkRec).

There are recent precedents for this change from peer cities. Metroparks of the Toledo Area changed their brand name to Metroparks Toledo as part of a comprehensive rebrand, and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation adopted the moniker NYC Parks.



**4.6** Logo from the 1980s. The tagline "The Natural Place to Be" was added in 1986.



**4.7** Current 2018 logo.

## Pillars of Rebranding Mecklenburg Park & Rec

The Brand Assessment laid out five pillars as strategic guidelines for a potential visual rebrand:

**Legacy:** Honor the proud past while looking forward. Consider how to build on the recognizability and nostalgia of the existing identity as consistent branding is introduced. Strategize for a thoughtful transition to a new visual identity system.

**Nature and More:** Mecklenburg Park & Rec offers a wide variety of natural spaces, as well as a diverse set of experiences that take many forms and happen in a range of places. The logo alone cannot represent everything all at once but should offer a starting point for consistent branding that reflects the many different aspects of Mecklenburg Park & Rec.

**Inclusive Diversity:** The brand should reflect the rich variety of places, programs, events, and people. It should invite many unique voices and celebrate many different experiences. It should be relatable to all, while still reflecting the history of the community. Growing populations, changing demographics, and shifting park uses are key considerations for the new brand and its longevity.

**Storytelling:** Branding is not just the visual identity. Messaging and marketing are key to telling more stories, better. The visual identity system should support the marketing strategies that are part of Meck Playbook.

**Implementation:** A potential rebrand must take into consideration the practical challenges of rolling out a new look across a wide variety of applications. Some items might be replaced simultaneously while others are updated gradually. Refer to the Brand Assessment (Appendix 7) for more on implementation.
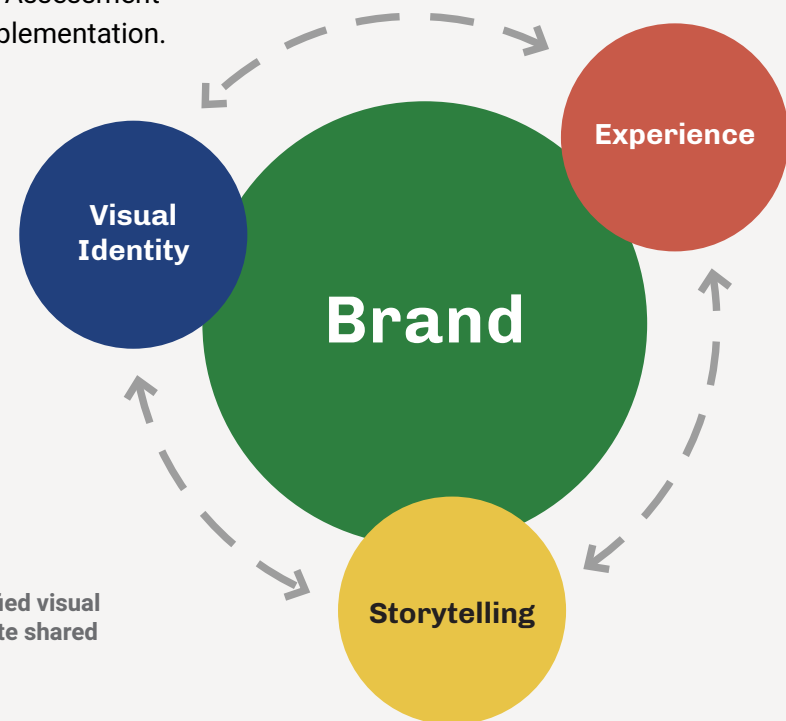
**4.8** Successful brands use a unified visual identity to tell stories and promote shared experiences.

**Messaging**

While limited access to resources is a large impediment to participation, the community survey found that the biggest barrier to participating in Mecklenburg Park & Rec programming is a lack of awareness. Along with renewed marketing efforts, a messaging framework with clear guidelines would increase consistency in communications and help residents understand the scope of programming.

In the past, Mecklenburg Park & Rec has used the tagline "The natural place to be." Moving beyond a tagline, a flexible messaging framework could enable Mecklenburg Park & Rec to more effectively communicate its full range of offerings. It creates language that can evolve over time and is rooted in Mecklenburg Park & Rec's legacy tagline.

The word "natural" could be swapped out and replaced with other adjectives to complete the phrase. These would not act as formal taglines but rather ways to constantly expand the narrative and tell stories that reflect Mecklenburg Park & Rec's diversity of places and offerings. For example, "The active place to be" could be used to call out sports programming while "The healthy place to be" could position Mecklenburg Park & Rec as a champion of community wellbeing, and so on.

## 11.3 Key Actions

**Implement a consistent visual brand to more effectively communicate the diversity of the system and its audiences:**

- Create internal and external focus groups to evaluate the current brand and review the brand examples from Meck Playbook.

- Release the brand in 2024 to celebrate Mecklenburg Park & Rec's 50th anniversary.

**Rebrand Mecklenburg Park & Rec name to "Mecklenburg Park & Rec" for everyday branding and marketing purposes:**

- The full version of the name– "Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department"–would remain for official purposes.

**4.9** Recreation and Waterfront signage in Burlington, Vermont after the Burlington Parks rebrand.





**4.10** Metroparks Toledo logos before and after a rebrand.

**4.11** An application of options of the Metropark Toledo rebrand.

## 11.4 Tell individual stories (of visitors, staff, etc) to personalize the image of Mecklenburg Park & Rec, build interest in offerings, trust in the organization, and energy.

The story of Mecklenburg Park & Rec is the amalgamation of many diverse and interesting stories. Reflecting the diverse community in images is a story, as is information about the historical background of a place. Highlights of an event on social media is an example of storytelling. Storytelling can be from partners, residents, visitors, or Mecklenburg Park & Rec itself.

Highlighting individual narratives of staff, visitors and community members will be a friendly and personalized way to engage with the County. Mecklenburg Park & Rec has already taken steps to do so recently.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's staff adapted program delivery as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. They posted much more video

content, and the community responded well to this shift. There was a significant increase in engagements per post. The team should make sure that this strategy continues even after other traditional means of engagement are more possible again.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec should build upon this trend by continuing to humanize the brand through regular video content that features staff, visitors, volunteers, and community partners. Regular, short video segments can be very impactful in raising awareness, generating interest, increasing trust, and driving participation. The platform of digital video provides a level of authenticity, personality and transparency that is only exceeded by in-person communication. It allows the viewer to see that the staff, leadership, or participants are people like them. The benefit of digital video is that it is scalable, as it can reach thousands with minimal investment.
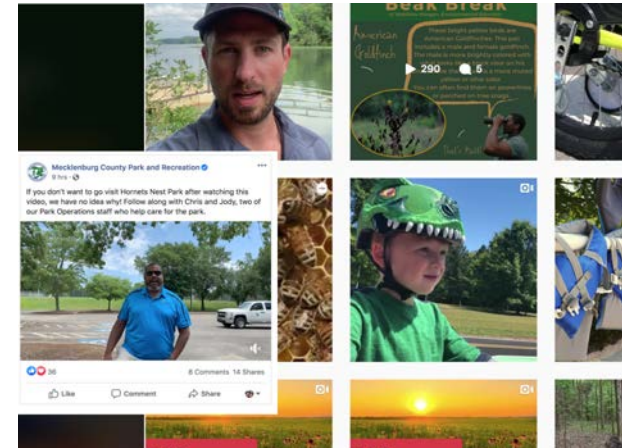


**4.12** Sample of social media content during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 11.4 Key Actions
**Build awareness of park offerings with an outreach campaign that includes digital and printed content.**

# Goal #12 Hospitality

## Improve every user's experience of Mecklenburg Park & Rec parks, greenways, facilities, and programs.

### 12.1 Invest in further signage throughout facilities—including buildings, greenways, nature preserves, and parks—to ease wayfinding and expand opportunities for local storytelling.

As Mecklenburg Park & Rec creates new facilities and updates existing ones, it is important to mind the details and look for opportunities to improve signage, wayfinding and storytelling. On a practical level, this contributes to positive user experience and navigation, but this is also a placemaking opportunity—a way to help people connect to the places they visit across the county.

### Wayfinding

Whether inside a recreation center or exploring a nature preserve, wayfinding elements are foundational to a positive user experience. While signage is present at most places, there are currently inconsistencies in visual communication, aging and faded signs, gaps in information, and one-sided signs that are only visible when approaching from one direction. Curb appeal is a factor in someone's decision to enter a space – it should look safe and inviting from all points of access. Signage should be improved for increased visibility, safety, ease of navigation, clear communication, and updated information, while considering Meck Playbook's strategies for equitable reinvestment.

For accessibility, signage at trailheads should provide helpful information such as any changes in trail surface material and the distance to destinations including publicly-accessible restrooms. In places where there is no accessible route to a park or greenway, signs should be provided so users know where to go.

In addition to improving existing locations, there is great opportunity to "leap ahead" where new facilities are being built, where new greenways or blueways are being created, and where trails are stitched together. For example, in an area where a greenway trail crosses a road or joins with an on-street bike lane and then diverges again, an abundance of signage and pavement markings is critical to help users smoothly find their way. Any decision point should be supported by clear navigational cues. The wayfinding standards for both greenway trails and nature preserves are important frameworks. Both systems should continue to relay navigational and general information through cohesive signage systems.

Physical wayfinding must be complemented by other print and digital tools. It is recommended to develop an updated and easy-to-use map of the system and to make it accessible both in print and on Mecklenburg Park & Rec's website. Digital map apps such as Google Maps and Apple Maps should be updated with the correct addresses of all parks, nature preserves, greenway trails, recreation and senior centers, and facilities. Photos and relevant information can be included on the location listings for ease of access to information, like the photos added to Google Maps as part of the greenway trails inventory. In the past, Mecklenburg Park & Rec has explored creating the parks locator app; this should be revisited and completed.

**4.13** Some signs do not match current County sign standards.

## Storytelling

Mecklenburg County is rich in stories—past and present—and the physical environment offers endless potential to exchange these stories. Signage and interpretive panels can communicate effectively, while murals and other forms of public art are more creative platforms for storytelling. Through community and stakeholder engagement, several specific ideas emerged, including:

· Interpretive panels at historic sites, such as the many gristmills located along greenways.

· Weave sports history into parks.

· Amplify hyper-local stories at neighborhood parks. A community driven art program (independent from the Capital Improvement Plan CIP public art process) would achieve this aim.

· Continue to champion public art, particularly to tell local/neighborhood stories.

· Carefully consider the common practice of naming parks and other places after people, as the meaning and relevance of these names fade over time.

· Celebrate Mecklenburg's role in important historical and social movements.

· Draw attention to interesting natural history such as watersheds and magma chambers.

· Establish a network of local craftspeople who can construct amenities such as benches along trails and integrate their stories into the pieces. The existing Functional Artist Directory, begun by the Arts & Science Council has begun to identify such artisans.

· Reflect local communities in the architectural elements of parks and facilities.

· Beyond permanent installations, activate spaces and tell stories through festivals and special events.

· Integrate storytelling with bicycle networks, creating educational and interactive bicycle routes.

Approaches to storytelling must reflect the diversity of the County and celebrate a range of lived experiences as the region becomes increasingly diverse. Additionally, Mecklenburg Park & Rec itself has a storied past. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should capture some of its own history and the history of its open spaces and reflect that back to the public. Local groups, such as the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, are potential collaborators for this research.

**Cohesive Signage**

With the implementation of an updated brand system, Meck Playbook recommends that all wayfinding and signage be produced in alignment with current and future guidelines. While this may take additional coordination in towns like Huntersville, Matthews, and Cornelius (who have their own park and recreation departments), this will build consistency across the many different touchpoints of the brand. The proposed rebrand includes a design solution for subtly integrating the new logo into existing signs so that new signage does not need to be reproduced from scratch and can instead be updated.

## 12.1 Key Actions

**Install signage in buildings, greenway trails, nature preserves, and parks:**

• Capture the County's history and culture in interpretive signage.

## 12.2 Enact service guidelines for programs and staff at all levels to ensure positive experiences for visitors.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff are proud that customer service is core to their jobs and Mecklenburg Park & Rec's offerings. Yet, many agencies make the mistake of assuming that good customer service can be achieved merely by providing customer service training. Excellent service requires a culture of agency and organization. A culture that incubates empowered employees often provides both the training and the trust for front-service staff to make authoritative decisions when customer service issues arise.

Organization and the right systems are also central to this trust and empowerment. The technology systems that Mecklenburg Park & Rec uses today need to be updated, and the current work order system should be re-examined. (For more detail on recommendations for reservation systems, see Strategy 6.2)

Both systems are not the right fit for Mecklenburg Park & Rec and thus, inefficient. The work order system lacks accountability, allowing issues and tasks to slip through the cracks. At other times, an entire day can be sidetracked by meeting issues as they arise in the moment. This sets Mecklenburg Park & Rec up to be reactive rather than proactive, focusing on quick fixes over foundational change. ITS is an integral partner for finding the appropriate technology systems and should be consulted.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec is effective in collecting and reviewing complaints, feedback, and suggestions. To ensure the highest quality visitor experience, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should develop guidelines to identify and track recurring issues and use data management tools to apply appropriate and actionable solutions. Mecklenburg Park & Rec can take advantage of software programs it already has access to, like ActiveNet, to develop a system for understanding service needs and opportunities.

Once Mecklenburg Park & Rec is able to track and report out visitor and customer service patterns, it can evaluate its current service system and develop guidelines to enhance the quality and structure of its customer facing operations. No matter what framework Mecklenburg Park & Rec uses, it will need to take a holistic approach to understanding organizational performance in order to better

understand who and how current customers are being reached, who is not being reached and why, and what the internal and external expectations of Mecklenburg Park & Rec are. This information will help to uncover how Mecklenburg Park & Rec can implement high employee service standards and create a transparent system of responding to customer satisfaction.

While Mecklenburg Park & Rec should pay attention toward external customers, working toward strengthening internal customer service is a priority as well. This would mean streamlining response times between administration at various departments, both at Mecklenburg Park & Rec level and within individual divisions. Such efforts toward improving internal service, such as response times, should occur simultaneously with efforts toward enhancing external customer service delivery.

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## 12.2 Key Actions

**Use data management tools to identify and track issues in program and facility use.**

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## 12.3 Update messaging across print, digital, and physical experiences to create consistent, informative communications and wayfinding throughout the system and its platforms.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec must extend the notion of warm hospitality beyond in-person interactions, to permeate all print, digital, and physical experiences. This means consistently applying the updated brand in all contexts and pairing that with clear communication. Just as physical wayfinding helps users navigate a trail through a facility, wayfinding in a communication context helps users to understand and navigate information.

It is recommended that all relevant staff become familiar with the new Brand Standards Guide and that it be shared with staff, partners, and vendors to promote consistent implementation in both visual branding and messaging.

### Communicating and Navigating Mecklenburg Park & Rec's Offerings

When people think about Mecklenburg Park & Rec, they mostly think of parks and greenway trails. They may not be sure what programs

Mecklenburg Park & Rec offers, where they can find more information, or how they can participate. Community members find it difficult to learn about facilities and programs, even when they are nearby. This lack of awareness is one of the most common barriers to Mecklenburg customers/patrons in accessing the program offerings of Mecklenburg Park & Rec. Even with improved marketing and communications, there is the risk of confusion due to the vast amount of information. It needs to be easier for people to understand what is available and how to find what they are looking for at any particular moment.

Meck Playbook recommends the use of three main content categories to organize offerings, help users navigate information, and discover Mecklenburg Park & Rec programs and events. Establishing a set of categories will help Mecklenburg Park & Rec to better communicate to external audiences its full range of offerings. Categories can support navigation and information architecture on the website, for grouping marketing materials, for tagging items on a system map, and for speaking high-level. Overarching categories create access points for a deeper dive into the specific items within each category.

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 that Mecklenburg Park & Rec has to offer. The following table shows examples of these groupings. Use of these content categories, in conjunction with consistent messaging, will help to create informative communications and wayfinding throughout the system and its platforms.

## 12.3 Key Actions

**Organize offerings and outreach materials into three categories—places, programs, events:**

- Use categories to support navigation and information architecture on the website, for grouping marketing materials, or for speaking with the public about high-level ideas.



| Places | Programs | Events |
|---|---|---|
| Greenway trails | Youth sports | Festivals |
| Parks | Swimming lessons | Concerts |
| Recreation and senior centers | Adventure clubs | Sports games |
| Athletic facilities | Seniors programming | Community events |
| Nature preserves | Camps | etc. |
| Aquatics | Nature programs | |
| etc. | Outdoor recreation | |
| | Therapeutic recreation | |
| | Fitness programs | |
| | etc. | |

**4.14** Places, Programs, Events table highlights how activities fit within this organization.

# Goal #13 Reflection

## Build programs and places in which residents see and express their community's values and perspectives.

### 13.1 Measure and report on park and facility visitation to understand use patterns across geographies and demographics and prioritize investments aimed at increasing visitor diversity.

Visitation counts are extremely important, as they help organizations understand facility capacity and need against program allocation and weekly or seasonal use patterns. Counts help to identify where and how Mecklenburg Park & Rec resources, like staff, routine maintenance and capital reinvestment funding, programs should be allocated. Accurate visitation counts also reveal if Mecklenburg Park & Rec is fulfilling its goal to increase the diversity of visitors.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec does measure visitation through the Strategic Business Plan, which attempts to compile data on recreational center visitation through registration software.

However, there is not a standard approach county-wide to collect this data and information about visitation often leaves out crucial park spaces and facilities. In order to understand current use and make decisions about increasing the number and diversity of visitors to recreation centers, nature centers and other facilities, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should develop and implement a standard usage assessment. The assessment should include visitor counts and include regular samples of demographic questionnaires that include questions about home address, household size and needs, and visitation frequency. This not

only allows data points to be compared across facilities but reveals which amenities are over- or under-visited and by whom.

### 13.1 Key Actions

**Develop and implement a standard usage assessment:**

- The assessment should include visitor counts and regular samples of demographic questionnaires about visitation and household details.

## 13.2 Recruit and support a diverse workforce at all levels of Mecklenburg Park & Rec to better reflect the communities Mecklenburg Park & Recreation serves.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's workforce greatly reflects the demographics of Mecklenburg County. Yet, there is less diversity at higher levels of Mecklenburg Park & Rec. Mecklenburg Park & Rec can work in concert with the Mecklenburg County Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI) to expand opportunities for neighbors identifying as black, indigenous, people of color, LGBTQIA, or youth and adults with disabilities. A department with backgrounds that mirror the community fabric will create a more robust and multifaceted perspective.

OEI has established guidelines and approaches to attracting, recruiting and retaining diverse talent throughout the County. Mecklenburg Park & Rec can capitalize on this work by establishing realistic goals for staffing Mecklenburg Park & Rec. Tracking how closely Mecklenburg Park & Rec's makeup reflects census demographics could become a performance metric in the Strategic Business Plan.

Diverse hiring needs to be considered at all steps of the hiring process: job posting, active recruiting, and the selection process. Job descriptions should emphasize a commitment to diversity and encourage application by diverse candidates, recognizing the importance of experience working with diverse populations. Specialized skills (for example, bilingual capability) should be acknowledged to further encourage diverse candidates to apply. Targeted recruitment activities can also build a broader applicant pool. This might include attending job fairs at local universities, community colleges, or other settings where underrepresented populations already participate. Active mentorship through these educational programs can also connect Mecklenburg Park & Rec to potential candidates in advance and build strong partnerships. Finally, best practices for selection and hiring include ensuring that the hiring committee itself is diverse, has criteria that value diversity meaningfully in the evaluation process, and touches on the topic of diversity and serving a diverse population during the interview.

### 13.2 Key Actions

**Recruit staff through job fairs at local universities and community colleges.**

**Ensure the hiring committee is diverse, has criteria that value diversity, and focuses on serving a diverse audience.**

# Move Beyond Boundaries

Summary of key actions required to realize the Game Plan goals include:

## Goal #14
## Partnerships
*Key Actions*

### Formalize Partnership Protocols

Develop a policy governing partnership and identify staff responsibilities to make sure that they are successful in practice.

### Partner for Programming

Pursue formal partnerships with municipalities, private organizations, similar providers, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

### Grow Volunteer Services

Build on current momentum by building volunteer partnership with larger organizations and within the community.

### Review Mission and Vision

Complete the process to update Mecklenburg Park & Rec's mission, vision, and values statements.

# Goal #15
## Leadership
*Key Actions*

### Grow Programs Centered on Health, Culture, and Stewardship

Pursue new partnerships toward meeting Meck Playbook goals around equity, health, and cultural diversity.

### Connect the Link Between Environment and Public Health Benefits

Collect, track, and communicate the health benefits of open space through programming and tangible metrics.

# Goal #16
## Collaboration
*Key Actions*

### Make Collaboration Routine

Set and hold regular quarterly meetings with regional partners and municipalities. Likewise, meet with community-facing civic groups twice annually.

### Team up with CMS

Identify and implement ways to collaborate on shared needs around growth/site development and programming.

### Standardize and Develop Agreements for Greenways and Parks

Build on recent project development successes and create a simple matrix that identifies the ideal responsibilities split between Mecklenburg Park & Rec and other jurisdictions.

# Goal #17
## Connections
*Key Actions*

### Link Trails to Transit

Focus on closing east-west connection gaps, increase land banking in utility or stream corridors, and connect trails to existing and future regional trail and transit facilities.

### Link to Bike and Ped Routes

Seek a seat at the table for roadway planning to ensure greenway connections and signage are factored in early to avoid future barriers.

### Improve Trail Safety

Create standards for safety in context of traffic planning and for human comfort at key intervals.

### Envision the Catawba River

Take steps by engaging public and private partners in a blueprint for future development along the Catawba River, as part of a broader regional tourism, economic, access, recreation, and environmental strategy.

# Move Beyond Boundaries
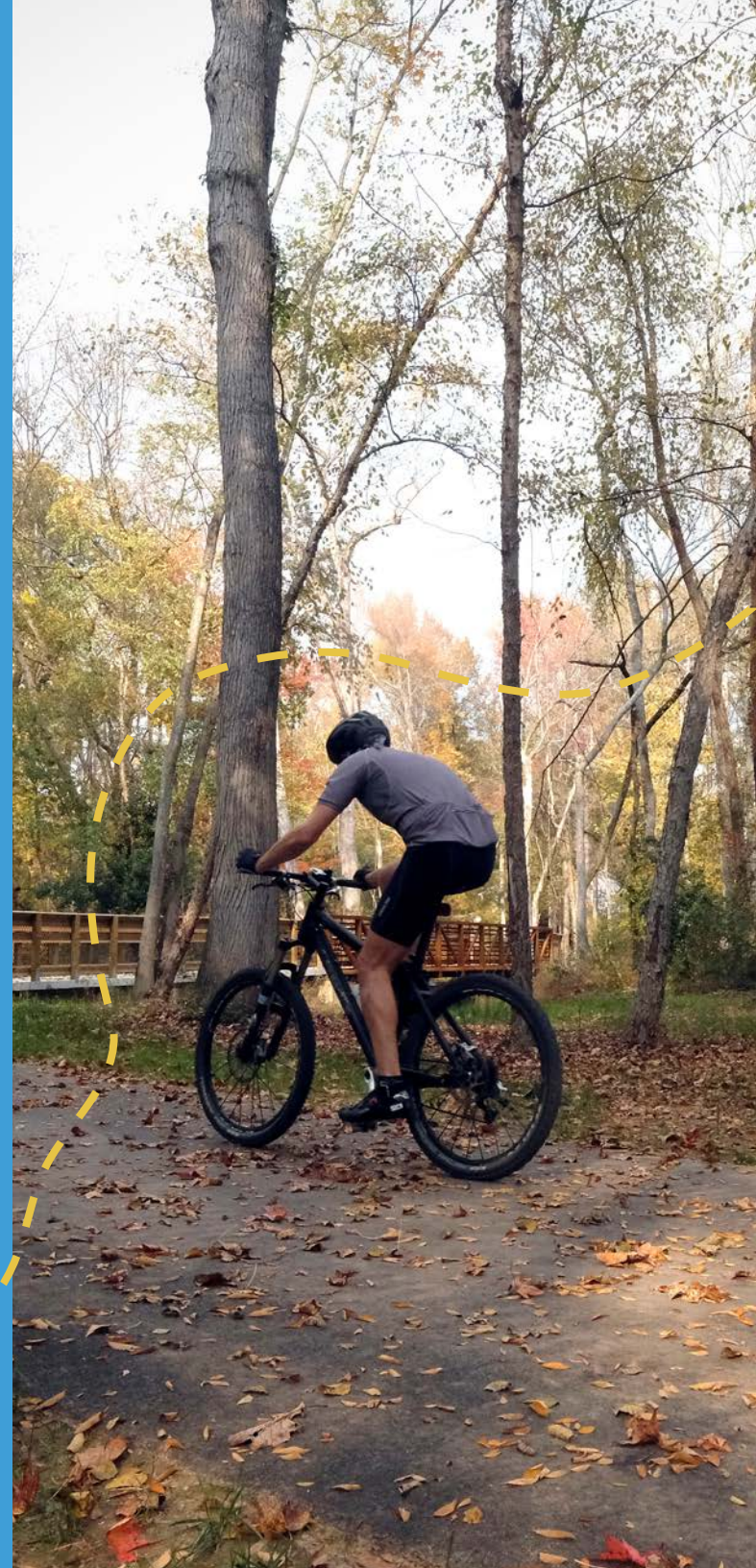
# Move Beyond Boundaries

## Out of Bounds

"Move Beyond Boundaries" challenges Mecklenburg Park & Rec to take the next steps on partnerships, link gaps in its greenway and urban trails system, and create connected areas of environmental value. In each case, there is a great foundation to build on with work that Mecklenburg Park & Rec has already done, but some hard steps forward remain.

"Moving Beyond Boundaries" champions connecting natural elements like greenways and waterways and recommends methods to expand meaningful partnerships. Relationships with organizations like schools, libraries, religious institutions, cultural groups, and even utility companies will be critical for realizing these goals and continuing to grow the system amidst increasing development pressures. Moving Beyond Boundaries will require partnerships, leadership, collaboration, and connections.
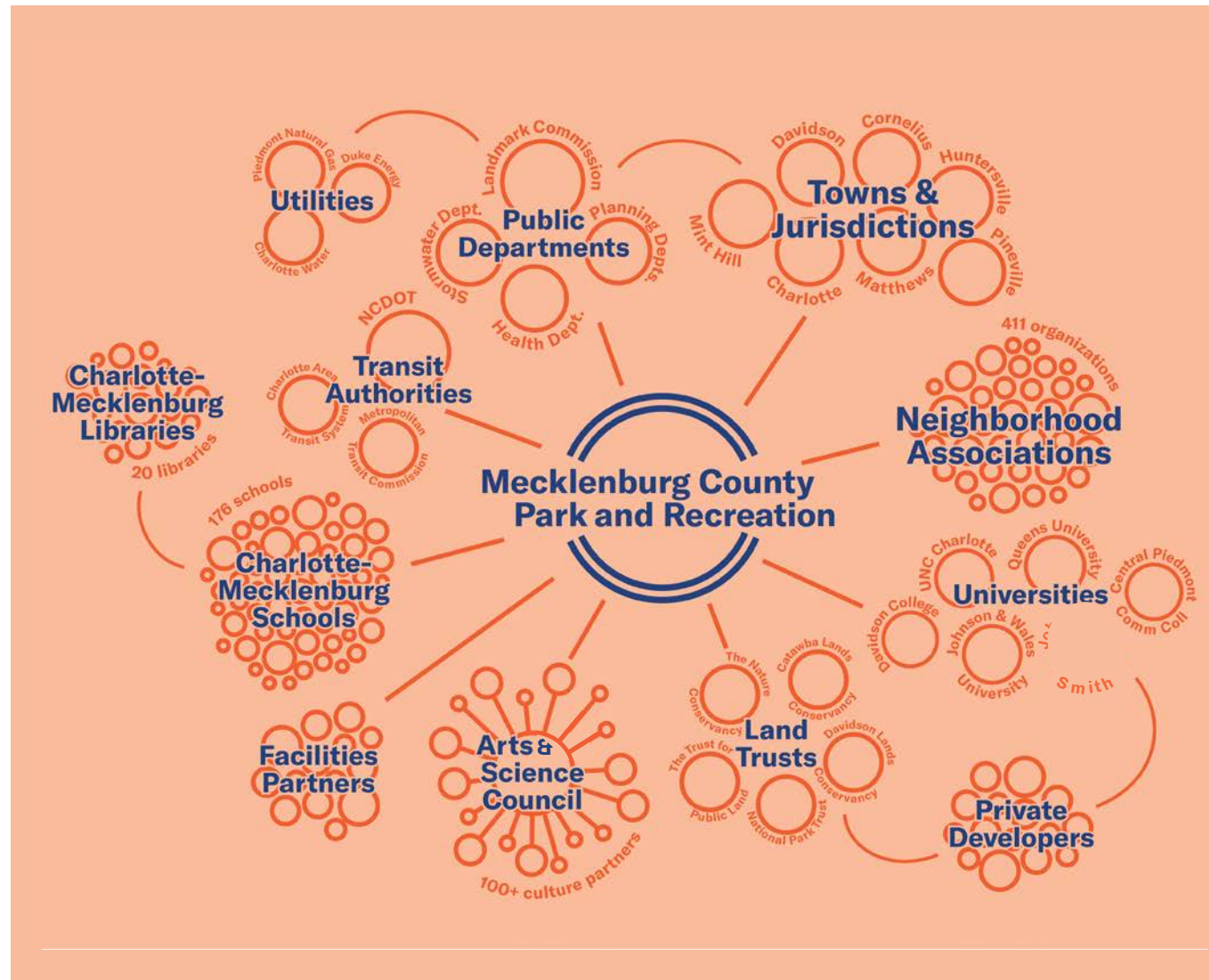


**5.1** Partnership opportunities exist across various stakeholder groups.

# Goal #14 Partnerships

## Optimize relationships with mission-aligned organizations across the County.

### 14.1 Enhance partnership protocols to ensure all parties are operating from a clear understanding of delivery requirements.

The term partnership refers to an agreement between two parties with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal. Relationships exist with the YMCA and CMS, and work well (See Strategy 16.2 for more detail on CMS specific partnerships). However, formal agreements that better define a common mission, outline expectations, timelines, and specify leadership roles can make these relationships stronger. The Meck Playbook process has surfaced many areas for expanded collaboration, particularly with members of the Stakeholder Committee.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec's operations and programs are made stronger by successful partnerships with municipalities and like-minded organizations. The Tarheel Trailblazers and its county-wide mountain bike trails program is an example of a mutually beneficial partnership

that the County wants to continue to enhance and expand. Despite good intentions and valiant efforts, not all partnership agreements have been as successful. One of the challenges with the current partnership system is that Mecklenburg Park & Rec is often left with additional maintenance and operational responsibilities. A partnership where these responsibilities are shared, such as with the Tarheel Trailblazers, will lead to greater long term success.

While long term deals may seem secure and stable, experience has shown this is not always reality. Ten-year partnerships for example, often lack the nimbleness to respond to changing community needs or recreation trends. Long term contracts are also not appropriate for all types of partnerships. One-year to three-year joint-use agreements—often with the potential to renew—and memorandums of understanding can foster productive external partnerships. This allows Mecklenburg Park & Rec to clearly identify costs, respond to trends or unseen issues, and reevaluate with more immediacy.

Shorter term partnerships also foster cooperation and collaboration among a broader set of stakeholders.

Partnerships can be one-sided, as organizations look to use County-owned property for singular and particular uses. This can be precarious if the use is not open to the larger community and limited to a particular school, sport, or activity. Single land partnerships should serve the neighborhoods closest to them and be open to all. Even partnerships with schools can be complex, as superintendents and principals are committed to their own missions and visions. Instead, school and park and recreation partnerships should occur at the strategic county level, rather than on a case-by-case basis.

The county should continue to include a termination clause, or a revocable license agreement system to retain control over their assets if partnerships begin to fail. Such a clause ensures the county's control if the partner does not fulfill their responsibilities. There is also the potential for a private vendor to price

services too high for constituents. It would also not be a successful partnership if the County had to supervise or manage the vendor. All of these items should be addressed and anticipated through negotiations and codified in a signed agreement. After the agreement is signed, the partnership needs to be actively monitored, managed, and evaluated to ensure planned benefits are achieved and make any adjustments needed. Mecklenburg Park & Rec is eager to engage in partnerships with diversified groups and build community. However, it must do so in a way that provides the most benefits for all.

At one time, Mecklenburg Park & Rec included staff focused on building and maintaining partnerships, as well as identifying grant opportunities and overseeing the volunteer program. Revisiting and reimagining this program could be a potential first step to identifying opportunities for additional partnerships that don't currently exist.

## 14.1 Key Actions

Implement one-year to three-year joint-use agreements, often with the potential to renew, and memorandums of understanding can foster productive external partnerships.

Refine termination clauses, like revocable license agreement system for all licenses with public and private vendors and organizations.

Dedicate a resource to coordinate partnerships with jurisdictions and external organizations.

Include maintenance standards in agreements with the City of Charlotte and towns for Department-owned, jurisdiction maintained, and programmed spaces.

# Case Study: Successful Partnerships

## Massachusetts: Revocable License Agreements

Both partners agree to the terms of the partnership, including the length of partnership and expectations to be held by both sides. If expectations, such as care of fields or the provision of inclusive programming, is not met, the state or county can end the partnership.

## City and County of Denver: Partnership Categories

Denver has a dedicated Partnerships and Volunteer Manager who manages their 200 partnerships, helps to set related policies, draft and negotiate contracts, manage relationships and sponsors, and support development activities (fundraising, planned giving and in-kind gifts). Denver organizes its partnerships in various categories (individual, business/corporation, non-profit, volunteer/neighborhood group, quasi-governmental, government, and public schools) to reflect the different offerings and shapes these relationships can take.

## 14.2 Formalize partnerships to increase accessibility of Mecklenburg Park & Rec offerings and expand its capacity to deliver authentic, relevant programming to local communities.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec programs and activities are a priority choice for numerous families in the County. Fortunately, there are many opportunities to take advantage of the array of services. However, population growth is causing an increase in demand coupled with a dwindling of resources. With some agile and creative thinking, Mecklenburg Park & Rec can continue to provide quality programming. One way is through partnerships. Collaborating between both internal departments and external stakeholders, similar providers, and community-based organizations will foster a greater sense of community, provide enhanced community services, and create fiscal efficiencies. One of the barriers to effective expansion is program space. Establishing partnerships with existing private, public, and non-profit organizations is the most cost-effective way to expand programs (See Figure 2.2, Strategies 14.1 and 16.2).

As part of the Meck Playbook process, a similar provider analysis was conducted. This effort revealed a vast array of private, non-profit, and other public/municipal recreation service providers in the area. Areas of programming that were analyzed included youth basketball, youth swim lessons, both science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), and science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) programming, adult fitness, and golf. There are dozens of private businesses and non-profit organizations offering activities that are similar to Mecklenburg Park & Rec, providing numerous opportunities for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to forge meaningful relationships. In particular, there are many fruitful opportunities for collaborative STEM and STEAM programming. Within the county alone there are eleven private organizations who provide this type of programming.

The County is also home to a thriving YMCA community, with fifteen regional locations. The YMCA has particular infrastructure that could be utilized for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to fill current gaps in their program analysis. This includes activities for youth like sports, swimming, and after school programs and fitness activities for adults.

It is also important to continue to collaborate with other local municipal partners. The City of Charlotte, Town of Cornelius, Town of Davidson, Town of Huntersville, Town of Matthews, Town of Mint Hill, and Town of Pineville all lie within the County. Five towns have existing park and recreation departments that offer programs and activities to the public. Establishing a collaborative relationship with these communities can, in some cases, eliminate duplication of services and competition for users. This would allow Mecklenburg Park & Rec to focus instead on strengthening distinctive offerings that could be the backbone of potential branding efforts. A shared system could also include the shared use of facilities and staffing.

The additional spaces and facilities provided for by municipalities, schools, and libraries help to close physical gaps to parks county-wide. These facilities and open spaces, also visible in the map to the right, add an additional:

- 60 Parks & Plazas
- 26 Facilities
- 20 Greenways & Trails
- 5 Other Facilities

Legend:
- ● County parks + facilities
- ⬤ Town parks + facilities
- ▲ CMS Schools
- ■ Libraries
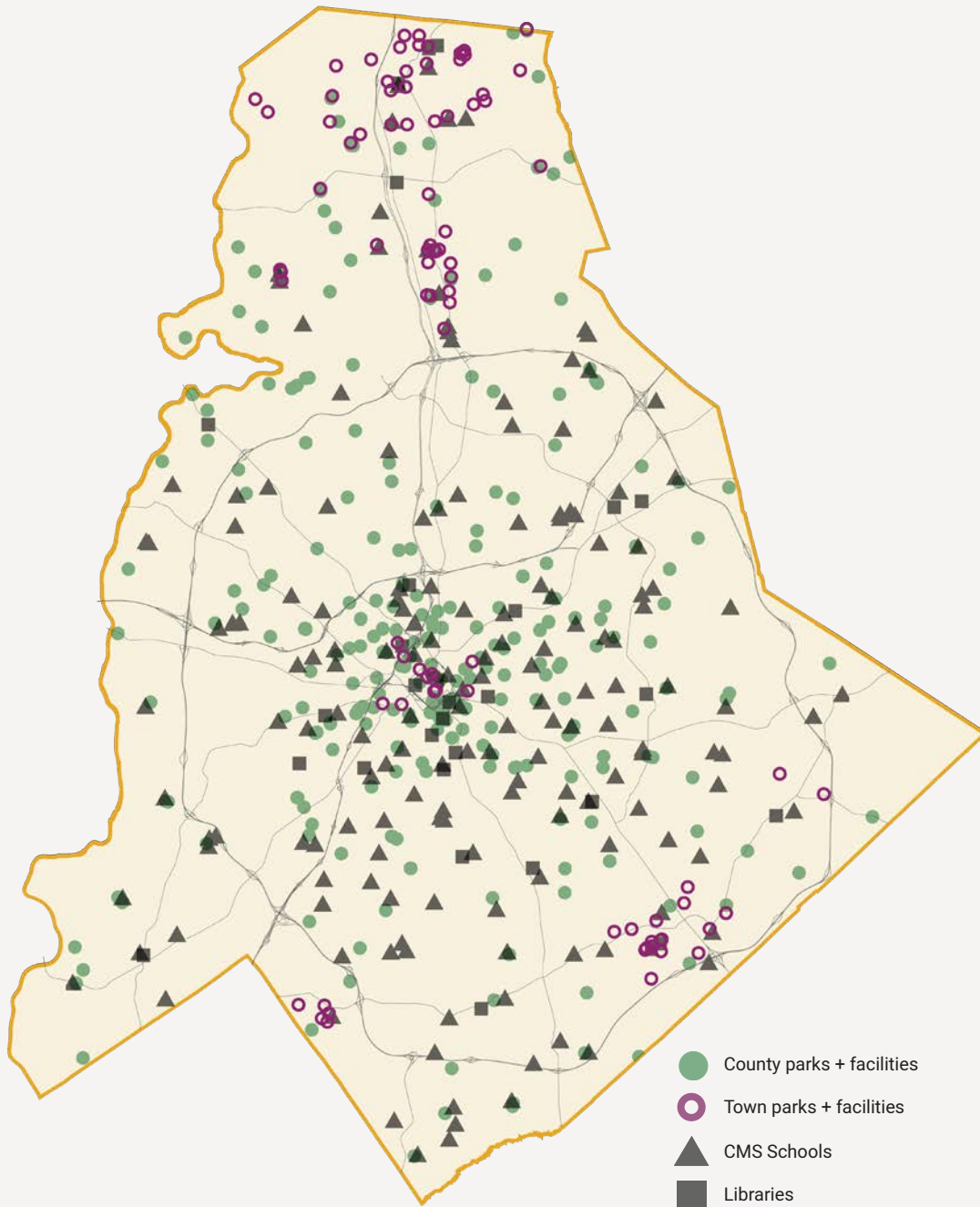
## 14.2 Key Actions

**Formalize a usage agreement with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS):**

- Focus on shared use of common spaces and facilities for recreation programming during non-school hours, similar to what was successfully done in the mid-1960s.

- Strengthen greenway access throughou CMS properties.

**Develop STEM/STEAM-based formal joint use agreements:**

- Connect with the eleven identified private organizations who provide STEM/ STEAM programs to test collaborations.

**Develop partnerships with recreation service providers:**

- Establish formal use agreements with other recreation service providers, such as the YMCA, to expand opportunities for youth and adults.

**Grow coordination with municipal partners:**

- Develop systems of collaboration to avoid duplication of services and strengthen individual offerings.

**5.2** Mapping of all publicly accessible open spaces and facilities by owner.

## Existing partnerships and their contributions to the County are identified below:



Queens University of Charlotte

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Partners for Parks

Land

Funding and Maintenance

The U.S. National Whitewater Center

vendors services programs co-branding fund development

Programs

The YMCA of Greater Charlotte
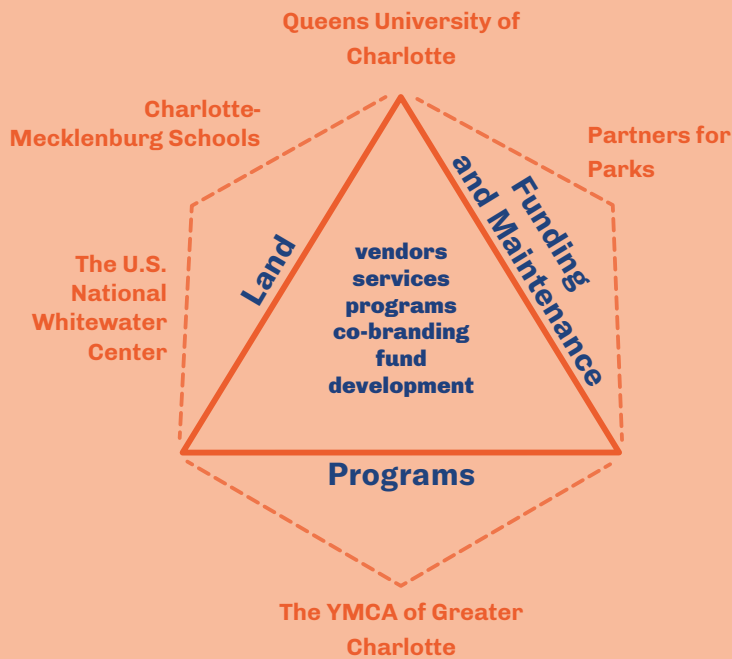
## During the plan process, the following organizations were identified as important partnerships to enhance:

**Public Agencies**
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Storm Water Services
- Land Use and Environmental Services Agency
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission
- Utility Groups (e.g. Duke Energy)

**Neighborhood and Civic Organizations**
- Homeowners/Community Associations
- Neighborhood and Civic Groups
- Parks Friends Groups

**Private and Non-profit Organizations**
- Local and National Interest Groups
- Land Trusts (e.g. Catawba Land Conservancy)
- TreesCharlotte
- Religious Institutions
- Higher Education

**5.3** Existing formal agreements contribute to closing gaps in County services including funding and maintenance needs, land acquisition and conservation, and programs. Additional partnerships that Mecklenburg Park & Rec would like to formalize are identified to the right of the existing partnerships diagram.

## 14.3 Develop a hearty volunteer program with consistent roles, responsibilities, and time commitments.

A robust volunteer network fosters greater community "buy in," awareness, and participation. However, the flexible nature of volunteer work can sometimes lead to a lack of follow-through or prolonged commitment. This dichotomy can make it difficult to build a stable long term volunteer force composed mostly of individuals. Mecklenburg Park & Rec has been fortunate to have a centralized volunteer coordinator and consistent engagement. They generally do not need to solicit for volunteers, specifically at the nature centers, youth sports, and event operations. Volunteer coordination can also wax and wane as children age out of programs and parents move along with them.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec can build on current momentum by building volunteer partnerships with larger local organizations, like schools, universities, businesses, cultural institutions, or other non-profits (See Figure 5.2).

A formal "Friends of…" program, like Partners for Parks, between local programs, organizations, and institutions could support stronger environmental awareness through clean-ups and invasive species removal; could build park stewardship through park beautification; and could increase awareness of the system. However, additional staff are needed to grow and efficiently maintain strong and consistent volunteer partnerships.

## 14.3 Key Actions

**Grow volunteer services staff to expand volunteer programs**

**Build on current momentum by building volunteer partnerships with larger organizations.**

## 14.4 Review the Mecklenburg Park & Rec mission and vision statement(s) to clarify Mecklenburg Park & Rec's role in the community.

Mission, vision, and values statements are the foundational tools for building an organization's purpose and role, while creating a positive culture. Mission statements articulate the aims of an organization, its objectives, and its approach to meet those objectives. Vision statements look to the future, describing what it looks like for an organization to reach its goals. Value statements define the foundational principles on which an organization wishes to operate.

Having these statements provides touchpoints for staff within Mecklenburg Park & Rec to connect their daily activities to larger missions and foster a sense of momentum. It also offers clarity for external partners to understand where their activities can connect to the County's. It is best practices to review and update mission and vision statements every three to five years, so they can evolve alongside the organization.

During Meck Playbook, Mecklenburg Park & Rec was also in the process of completing revisions to its mission and vision statements. Mecklenburg Park & Rec's current mission statement of "enhancing community wellness through recreation, open space, and natural resources" is comprehensive in some way. Future updates may consider fully articulating the connection that Mecklenburg Park & Rec has with the community today. Collaborative staff workshops should be conducted to review current statements and craft a singular mission and vision.

## 14.4 Key Actions

**Conduct staff workshops to review current statements and craft new mission and vision statements. This will provide opportunities to refocus and realign Mecklenburg Park & Rec with its values and current community needs:**

- Hold workshops before final revisions to the mission and vision are completed, to maintain momentum.

# Goal #15 Leadership

Position Mecklenburg Park & Rec as a facilitator and leader in community wellbeing.

## 15.1 Develop programs that promote healthy habits, environmental stewardship, and cross-cultural exchange.

Strategic partnerships in under-resourced neighborhoods are all the more paramount as open space may be limited or of poorer quality. Partnerships with institutions that provide essential services or are already nestled into the community fabric also builds trust deeper and faster.

One example could be to use Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and libraries along with land trusts to create more parks and open spaces through land shares and donations. Additionally, jointly offering programs with places like the YMCA and the Arts and Science Council could share facilities and budgets. This would develop cultural activities and build relationships and energy across the County.

Innovative partnerships in particular, can lead to exciting and imaginative programs and offerings. For example, the nearby US National Whitewater Center is a local example of such creative thinking. Here, utility easements were used to create a winding trail through electrical towers. This created surprising public trails while opening new land for greenways. Mecklenburg Park & Rec could also explore partnership or sponsorship potentials to better leverage corporate and health care funding partners, such as Novant Health and Atrium Health, to support specific recreation centers and programing improvements.

Partnerships however, take leg work and consistency. Mecklenburg Park & Rec already attends many project related meetings and additional partnership-based meetings may not be feasible. The planner position focused on partnerships, recommended in Strategy 8.2, could assume some of this responsibility.
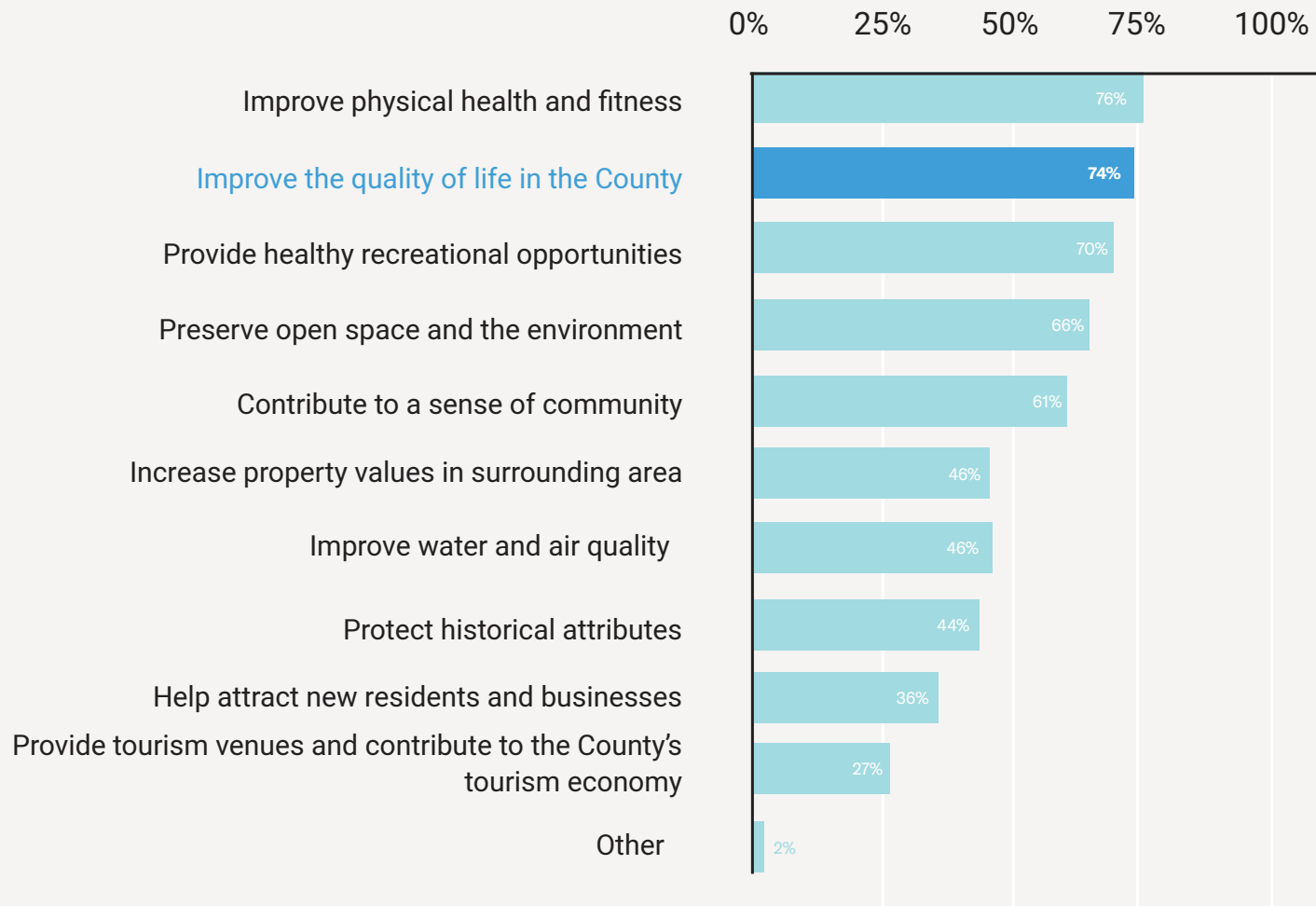
Additionally, Mecklenburg Park & Rec could share leadership roles in partnerships, providing some external community-based stakeholders limited liaison or decision making responsibilities.

### 15.1 Key Actions

Develop additional partnerships with external community-based organizations or stakeholders that allow for limited liaison or delegated decision making responsibilities, especially on the topics of equity, health, and cultural diversity.

## What Are Important Benefits of Open Spaces & Recreation Facilities?

| Benefit | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Improve physical health and fitness | 76% |
| Improve the quality of life in the County | 74% |
| Provide healthy recreational opportunities | 70% |
| Preserve open space and the environment | 66% |
| Contribute to a sense of community | 61% |
| Increase property values in surrounding area | 46% |
| Improve water and air quality | 46% |
| Protect historical attributes | 44% |
| Help attract new residents and businesses | 36% |
| Provide tourism venues and contribute to the County's tourism economy | 27% |
| Other | 2% |

**5.4** Community survey show respondents believe open space and recreation facilities improve quality of life

## 15.2 Articulate and connect natural environmental benefits with public health and environmental justice.

Mecklenburg County's natural environment, notably its trees, are appreciated by County residents and core to Charlotte and the region's identity. Yet, many people may not fully appreciate that the beautiful setting is also essential for healthy drinking water, air quality, promoting active lifestyles, and mental health benefits. Ecosystem protection also relies on clear communication, education, and suitable public access, so residents and visitors understand and appreciate the need for conservation.

Environmental maintenance and restoration is also deeply tied to issues of environmental justice. It is common for brownfield sites, previous (or current) landfills, or commercial and industrial land uses and infrastructure, which bring with them higher levels of air pollution, to be adjacent to or fall within lower income communities or communities of color. These environmental injustices led to higher negative health issues for these communities and inextricably links the health of residents to the health of the environment. To improve public health while promoting the value of natural resources, both at the scale of large nature preserves and smaller, urban areas, Mecklenburg Park & Rec should communicate the health benefits of open space through programming and tangible metrics. Partners in this endeavor include the County Health Department. This department could help develop active programming within parks as well as a dual-part system for benchmarking public health, both physical and mental. Benchmarks could be used to compare the health of the natural environment with the health of residents through indicators like diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and depression.

An essential idea from Meck Playbook is that facilities should be linked to nature and ecological health, whether it is within a 1,000 acre nature preserve or a recreation center in an urban environment. Any space, large or small, could serve multi-funcitionally toward environmental benefits, health, and education.

### 15.2 Key Actions

**Communicate the health benefits of open space through programming and tangible metrics:**

- Develop active programming alongside public health tracking benchmarks.

- Strive to tie all facilities to multi-functional public health solutions.

**5.5** Community Gardens foster neighborly connections while promoting environmental and public health.



**5.6** Environmental Education Camps provide children a chance to connect with nature.



**5.7** Dirtway trails and native plant meadows provide open air exercise.



**5.8** Event programming helps get people outdoors in large groups.



**5.9** Outdoor fitness supports improved health and wellness outcomes.

# Goal #16 Collaboration

## Coordinate with the City of Charlotte, towns within the County, schools, and mobility partners.

### 16.1 Establish a regular cadence for meeting and collaborating with the City of Charlotte, towns and community groups to facilitate knowledge and resource sharing, generate operational efficiencies, and realize projects.

The Stakeholder Committee engagement helped to demonstrate the value of scheduling and holding regular meetings with the City and the six towns (municipalities) to foster collaboration across the County. These meetings can take multiple forms: "share-outs," workshops, on site meetings, or brainstorming sessions. An episodic process like Meck Playbook is not frequent enough; staying aware of one another's goals, resources, limitations, and project pipelines as they emerge will present greater opportunities for integration. Regular interaction can also aid in coalition building across departments and sectors.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec has a strong desire to partner with proactive community-facing civic groups like Charlotte East, Steele Creek Residents Associates, and others. Meeting with these groups at a minimum of twice per year will allow Mecklenburg Park & Rec valuable time to discuss ongoing projects and programming. However, these milestone meetings are not a substitute for staff time dedicated to building community relationships. To help expand Mecklenburg Park & Rec's capacity, small decision making power could be given to partners or a new planner position that focuses on municipal coordination.

### 16.1 Key Actions

**Set and hold regular meetings with regional partners and municipalities:**

- Meet with civic groups at least twice a year and with municipal and County stakeholders at least quarterly.

**Create a planner position to focus on municipal coordination.**

**5.10** The County regularly coordinates with various ongoing planning efforts. This is essential for connecting goals across projects and fostering collaboration across County stakeholders.

**Overwhelmingly, when the topic of partnerships came up during Meck Playbook, staff, leadership, stakeholders, and members of the community mentioned the importance of collaboration with CMS.**

## 16.2 Develop joint use projects and collaborate around youth programming with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

Meck Playbook has identified many stakeholders as important future partners. However, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) is uniquely suited for a distinctive type of partnership with tangible benefits for both organizations.

### Shared Sites

With growth occurring, the school system, like open space, and recreation, will also be in greater demand. CMS will likewise face a need for land to house educational infrastructure, like school buildings and sports fields. While it may seem like the two organizations will have competing real estate goals, this shared land acquisition need should prioritize strategic identification of places where existing or future facilities can serve both needs. A clear

opportunity, particularly in the southern areas of the County, is to serve both daily school, athletic, and community recreation needs with shared facility agreements that facilitate smart land use. Local schools offer similar recreation resources to neighborhood park and recreation centers, but they may be locked outside of school hours or on weekends. Clear partnerships can provide public access to these facilities outside of school hours, helping to expand recreation opportunities in many neighborhoods and improving equitable access.

Currently, the use of CMS facilities is inconsistent, changing with school administrators. However, aa mutual, system-wide agreement between the entities would solidify use of these spaces and promote consistent usage. Such a formal partnership, backed by policy, will ensure Mecklenburg Park & Rec's programs thrive despite any staff turnover, leadership changes, shifts in agency priorities, or funding shortages.

There is also particular national attention on the condition and quality of school yards. Large organizations like the Trust for Public Land have partnered with Green Schoolyards America to transform hardtop playgrounds to "living" schoolyards full of greenery and trees. Opportunities like these simultaneously improve the school and open space systems.

Despite the benefits, school/park partnerships are often prevented by concerns about safety, liability, insurance, and maintenance. A 2006 study, Playing Smart: A National Joint Use Toolkit by Change Lab Solutions, found only 29% of schools opened their recreational facilities after school hours. Formalized shared use agreements are critical to address these challenges and specify terms and responsibilities. This study provides a useful spectrum to consider the range of possible sharing scenarios and determine what is comfortable for both CMS and Mecklenburg Park & Rec. These scenarios range from

# Case Study:
# Green Schoolyards America
# "Living" Classrooms

This program works to change asphalt-covered playgrounds into green spaces that support sustainable and resilient natural systems, embed the "living school ground movement" into regulation, and change traditional design approaches to school play yards. They see "greening" school yards as a means to improving a child's academic achievement, a community's health and nutrition, and restoring ecosystems.



**5.11** Tule Elk Park School before the renovation.



**5.12** Tule Elk Park School four years after Green Schoolyards Renovation.

**Quote, photos, and general information from Greenschoolyards.org, 2021**

"unlocking the gates" for after hours use to reciprocal access between both groups' facilities, allowing indoor and outdoor access.

## Programming Synergies

Beyond land and facilities, schools provide an opportunity for joint programming. Partnership discussions can explore a formal usage and fee policy that is developed between Mecklenburg Park & Rec and CMS. Mecklenburg Park & Rec should work with CMS to be provided usage priority to school spaces.

Community engagement discussions also suggested ways to integrate Mecklenburg Park & Rec into the public-school system. It was suggested that Mecklenburg Park & Rec hold programs at schools so transportation is easier for parents to navigate, and that school hand-outs include details about Mecklenburg Park & Rec's offerings, to streamline communication to families.

A partnership with the school system could provide additional opportunities for youth leadership and education, such as a Youth Advisory Council. The Youth Advisory Council could propose new ideas, carry out school based community engagement activities, participate in a participatory budgeting initiative, work in peer conflict mediation and team building, or serve

as park and recreation advisors and stewards. The program would bridge schools to the larger community, while teaching children advocacy, leadership, and life skills. The input of youth is integral to county-wide decisions, but is often overlooked. An active Youth Advisory Council would add new perspectives, while teaching youth how to be stewards of their environment.

## 16.2 Key Actions

**Negotiate with CMS for priority use of school sites over other partners:**

- Use formalized shared use agreements to centralize and set expectations for joint use of school properties.

- Consider a formal use and fee policy to guide facility reservations.

**Consider establishing a Youth Advisory Council or adding youth representation on existing Advisory Councils within the Park and Recreation Commission.**

## 16.3 Standardize joint development agreements for parks and greenways with the municipalities within Mecklenburg County.

Collaboration between the County, municipalities, and regional connectivity-related organizations (like NCDOT and neighboring counties) continues to be of utmost importance to the development of parks and greenway trails. Such teamwork will become even more critical in the future, given important remaining connectivity gaps and goals for equitable access to the greenway trail network. In order for these relationships and projects to be successful, the County, municipalities, and these regional organizations need to work together to confirm responsibilities for capital development and maintenance of greenways and facilities.

Going forward, a framework should be developed to make the process more consistent across projects to these assets. Mecklenburg Park & Rec can begin by mapping out the projects that are completed, identifying roles and responsibilities, and noting what has worked well and what has been more challenging. A simple matrix can identify and clarify the ideal share of responsibilities in the future. This strategy is meant to provide predictability rather than rigidity for both the County and municipalities.



**5.13** The Mecklenburg County Sportsplex at Matthews is a facility where joint agreements could be instituted.



**5.14** Four Mile Creek Greenway is enjoyed by residents both inside and outside the County.

## 16.3 Key Actions

**For each project, confirm roles and responsibilities through a joint development agreement:**

- Articulate maintenance roles.

**Map the projects that are completed, identify roles and responsibilities, and note what has worked well and what has been more challenging.**

# Goal #17 Connections

## Connect parklands, greenway corridors, and trails to other community facilities and services.

**17.1 Coordinate development of facilities, greenways, and urban trails with public transportation nodes to allow for greater public access.**

**Greenway framework system wide recommendations**

The County's greenways are a well-earned point of pride. They facilitate exercise while bringing people closer to nature. Yet, these trails can be an even greater asset. Meck Playbook envisions an additional use for the trail system: an evolution into a transportation network that allows people to move between destinations like restaurants, shopping, office parks, and grocery stores. To do this, more trail connections must be completed strategically to form links between existing segments, new segments, and destinations.

**Challenges:** The greenway system is well-used, but many of the segments are disconnected or need repair or replacement. Currently, there are five major issues:

- **Urban Trail Connections:** most trails follow the stream corridors of Mecklenburg County, leaving the urban and residential areas between the streams disconnected.

- **Transportation Corridor Crossings:** roadways are a major barrier to trails. Strategizing where to cross highways safely and economically is key to filling these gaps.

- **Disconnected Neighborhoods:** many neighborhoods through the County do not have trails. While there are some

trails planned in these areas in the short term, they are the first step to creating a more connected system.

- **Maintenance:** some built trails today are difficult to navigate for older adults or youth and adults with physical and other disabilities because of natural surfacing or cracked or warped pavement. Adequate funding for trail maintenance is critical to ensure a connected system, especially as the trail system ages.

- **Roles and Responsibilities:** coordinating with partner entities to design and fund improvements that fall within their respective areas.

## 17.1 Key Actions

**Evaluate and invest in land acquisition, preserve land, plan, and construct more greenways and urban trails, and monitor and improve existing greenways:**

- **Connect:** create east-west and north-south connections, increase land banking in stream corridors, and pursue funding for complex, expensive connections such as major roadway crossings. Connect trails to existing and future regional trail and transit facilities to increase transportation potential, including bus routes, the Blue Line Rail Trail, Silver Line Rail Trail, Cross Charlotte Trail, Mooresville to Charlotte Trail, and the Carolina Thread Trail. Early planning coordination is needed to make these transit-trails connections possible.

- **Improve:** create design guidelines for greenways and over-street connectors that address quantities and spacing of amenities, ease of access, boardwalk and bridge maintenance, erosion control/repair, and flooding mitigation.

- **Communicate:** expand wayfinding to create a safer and easier to navigate system, develop an updated and easy-to-use digital system map (with brochures, sign, and mobile versions) teach user etiquette, and educate trail users about the trail system and ecology.
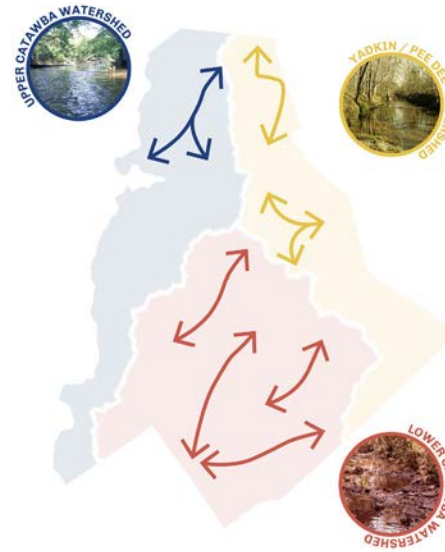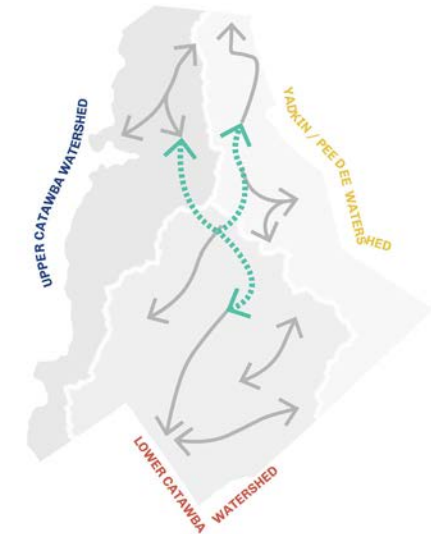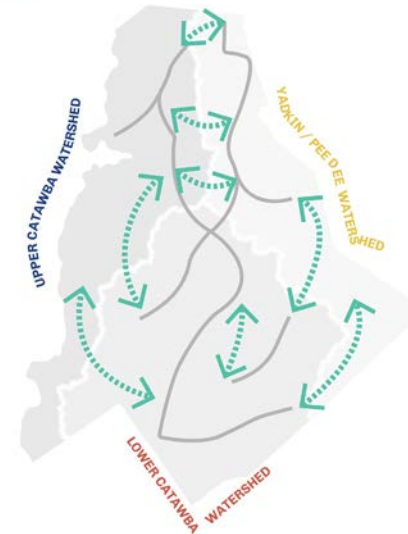

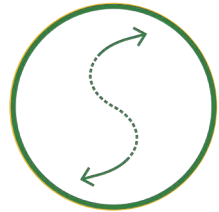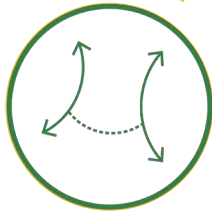
**5.15** To achieve goals for a connected greenway trail system, Mecklenburg Park & Rec needs to strategically bridge county watersheds to build out the system.
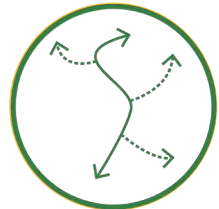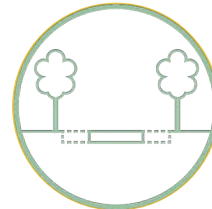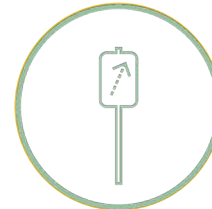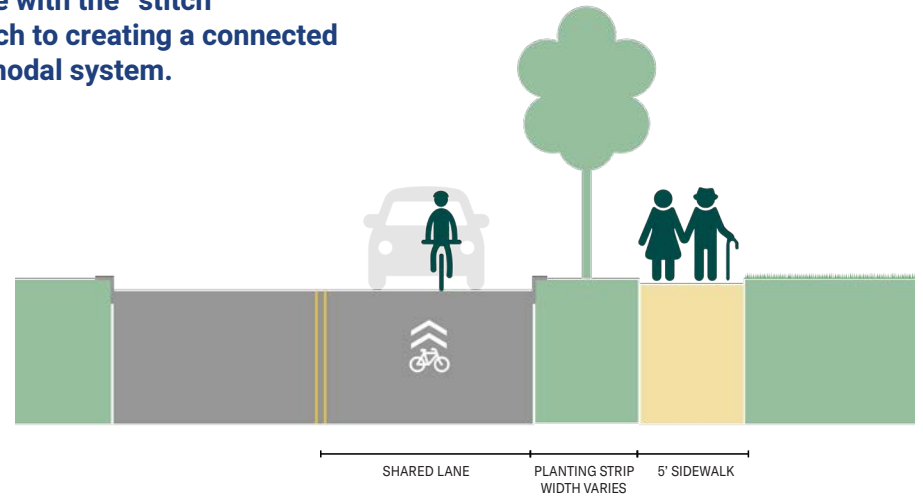
**CONNECT**

| LINK | STITCH | ACCESS |
|------|--------|--------|

| EXPAND | IMPROVE | COMMUNICATE |
|--------|---------|-------------|

**Here are a few ways to get creative with the "stitch" approach to creating a connected multi-modal system.**



SHARED LANE  PLANTING STRIP WIDTH VARIES  5' SIDEWALK

**5.16** On-street sharrows are the least protected types of bike infrastructure, as cars and bike share the same travel lane.

## 17.1 Key Actions, continued

**Creating Connections:**

To create a truly cohesive trail system, there should be multiple types of connections:

- **Link:** connect two sections of an existing main corridor such as a greenway trail.

- **Stitch:** connect two separate main corridors through a secondary connection, such as an on-street bike lane or urban trail. These connectors should aim to connect to parks, schools, transit, and other amenities.

- **Access:** create a tertiary connection off the main trail to a neighborhood or destination.



5' BIKE LANE + 2-3' BUFFER   5' BIKE LANE   PLANTING STRIP WIDTH VARIES   5' SIDEWALK
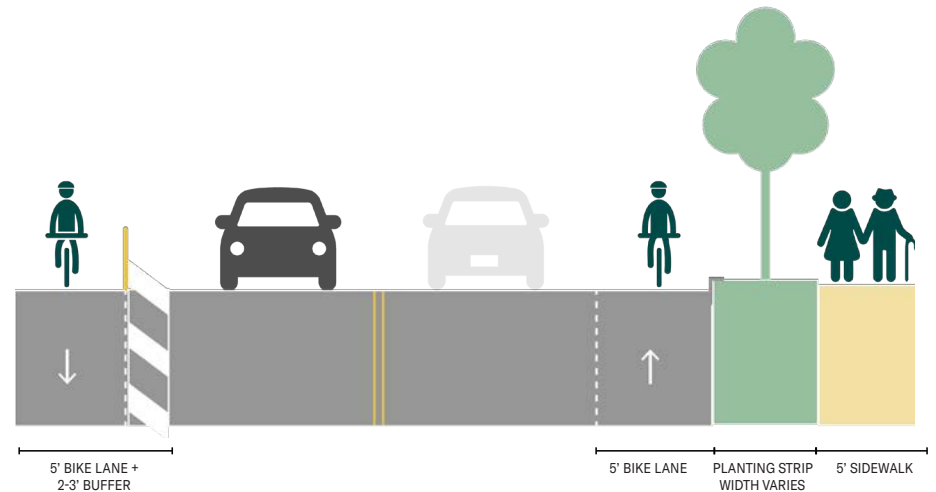
**5.17** On-street bike lanes separate bike and car traffic. While they are preferred over sharrows, they can still feel unsafe to less experienced riders.

## Least Protected

### Urban Trail On-Street Sharrow

Sharrows indicate that bicycles and vehicles are sharing the same lane. The level of separation provided should be based on the context of the roadway with regard to traffic volumes and vehicle speeds to ensure acceptable comfort levels of the target users.

An example in the County is the Jameson Street sharrow which ties together the Freedom Park portion of Little Sugar Creek Greenway.

### Urban Trail On-Street Bike Lanes

Bike lanes may be used on existing roads to provide connectivity. Bike lanes provide separation between bikes and vehicles either through a striped line, a buffer, or bollards. Protected bike lanes are preferred over sharrows.

An example in the County is Hillside Avenue at the Westfield Rd multi-use path to Little Sugar Creek Greenway Trail.

## Most Protected

### Greenway Trail

Greenway trails are paths located on Greenway land that are set aside for recreation, transportation, and environmental protection. They are essential parts of the bicycle and pedestrian network, created to be comfortable and accessible to a variety of ages and abilities.

An example in the County is Little Sugar Creek Greenway Trail.

### Urban Trail Shared Use Path/Cycle Track

Use of urban trails or multi-use paths (MUPs) are appropriate where there are higher traffic volumes and vehicle speeds, such as suburban or rural areas with significant development or urban corridors. They generally parallel roadways, may contain cycle tracks, and provide connections to destinations like shopping centers or residential areas.

An urban trail connects SP Rocky River Greenway to Antiquity Greenway.

2-5' SHOULDER      12-20' GREENWAY TRAIL      2-5' SHOULDER

**5.18** Greenway trails provide ample space for pedestrians and bicycles in nature away from vehicular traffic.

EXISTING ROAD    PLANTING STRIP WIDTH VARIES    8-12' URBAN TRAIL    2-5' SHOULDER    5' SIDEWALK
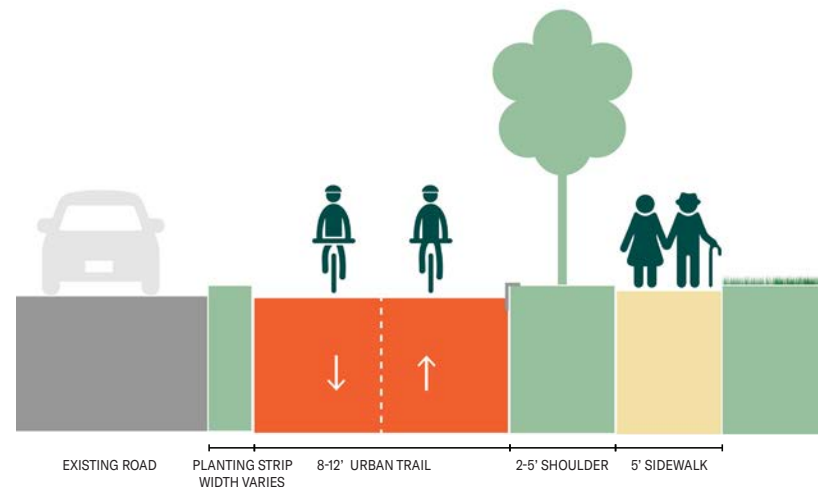
**5.19** Urban trails can separate cyclists from both vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

## 17.2 Collaborate with state and local Departments of Transportation and other partners to improve bike and pedestrian facilities connecting users to parks.

Greenways and urban trails are only useful if users can easily access them. Bicycle and pedestrian facilities such as sidewalks and bike lanes can help connect riparian-based greenway trails and urban trails, as well as provide valuable connections between neighborhoods and trail networks. Sidewalks should be strategically built—and then maintained—in neighborhoods that are walking distance from trails to facilitate safe access. The Charlotte Department of Transportation is a valuable partner for investing in bike infrastructure and prioritizing connections as they implement their Bicycle Priority Network Plan.

Providing multi-modal access to existing and proposed parks aligns with the plan's other equity goals and will allow residents with no other means of transportation the ability to reach more facilities. The goal should be to create greenway and urban trails that will reach their fullest potential by linking to parks and recreation destinations, connecting directly to neighborhoods, and promoting healthy

choices. To achieve this, the County and its municipalities, along with neighboring counties, municipalities, and the State, will all need to collaborate on trails planning that prioritizes providing underserved areas with access and connections.

Signs are a low cost way to reduce barriers to parks, protect pedestrians at road crossings, and provide important information to help direct users to their destinations. At a minimum, directional signs should be provided in areas that have limited or unclear access to or between parks and greenways. Signs that improve safety at road crossings should be clearly visible to both trail users and vehicles.

### 17.2 Key Actions

**Work with municipalities to incorporate greenway trail projects into ongoing and future roadway design.**

**Incorporate directional signs in areas that have limited or unclear access to or between parks and greenways:**

- Signs that improve safety at road crossings should be clearly visible to both trail users and vehicles.

## 17.3 Improve trail safety by mitigating dangers at busy thoroughfares, intersections, and trail access points.

Busy streets and intersections create points of conflict between vehicles and greenway users. This danger can be mitigated along busy streets through physical separation of cyclists from cars, such as bollards. At intersections, crosswalk safety devices such as flashing walk signs or brightly painted crosswalk paint, can be used to draw the attention of drivers and promote alert driving. These simple design elements are important for both reducing conflicts and creating a sense of safety that will encourage more users. These interventions will take collaboration and communication across various departments, as road related changes are the responsibility of CDOT.

Cities who lead in bicycle infrastructure development make safety a priority. It is a best practice to make bicycle routes feel as protected as possible so these routes can connect to large recreation systems. The bicycle facility type should be selected using a context-sensitive approach based on traffic speed and volume to achieve higher levels of user comfort and increased safety. For example, sharrows may provide a comfortable user experience on lower

speed and lower volume residential roads. On busier streets, cycle tracks or bike lanes that are separated by bollards or medians may be necessary to achieve the same levels of user comfort and safety. Such improvements will emphasize cycling as an integral part of Mecklenburg County's recreational experience.

Safety standards should trickle through the system, expanding to facilities and open spaces. New facilities should incorporate the City of Charlotte's "All Ages and Abilities" standards to provide accessible areas that everyone can enjoy. A user should be able to feel safe at all parts of their journey. Initial investments in safety infrastructure can begin at places that support safe ridership, like bike parks, pump tracks, and bike safety programming locations. Additional infrastructure can then branch into greenway trails and urban trails. This safety implementation strategy will celebrate the growing relationship between bicycles, greenway trails, and urban trails.

Future safety infrastructure can grow from these locations. However, this will take collaboration and coordination, as the street right of way is the responsibility of the CDOT.

### Safe trailheads, fun trails

Greenway trails are great places to relax and exercise for users of all ages and abilities. As a primary entry point to greenways, trailheads must be easy to access and navigate to encourage use by all. Trailheads should provide clear vehicular circulation patterns and adequate parking—including accessible van parking spots—so anyone can travel to the greenway. Access points from the parking lot to the trail should be compliant with ADA and PROWAG guidelines. Signage at the trailhead should provide helpful information, such as any trail surface material changes and the distance to destinations. Trailheads can also become valued local parks with the addition of amenities such as playgrounds, picnic shelters, or even sports courts, where space allows. Additional amenities such as restroom facilities, benches, or bike pump stations may not always be feasible but should be incorporated where practicable to help more people enjoy the trails.

## 17.3 Key Actions

**Improve greenway trail crossing and access points:**

- Create standards that align with "all ages and abilities" guidance for pedestrian and bike safety in traffic planning at key locations.

- Require all access to be ADA compliant.



**5.20 Colored crosswalks can improve safety at road crossings. This particular example displays the City's urban trail standard.**



**5.21 Four Mile Creek Greenway trailhead uses the County's updated signage standards. Image courtesy of Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority.**

## 17.4 Invest in regional greenway corridors that link to the Catawba River greenway and blueway system.

The Little Sugar Creek Greenway Trail (part of the Cross Charlotte Trail) is a source of pride throughout the community and within Mecklenburg Park & Rec. It is a model for long-term improvement and stewardship of Mecklenburg County's inspired greenway trail system. This planning process surfaced a desire to find the next great project that can build on the successes and lessons of Little Sugar Creek and provide a new long-term goalpost for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to begin to rally around.



5.22 The Catawba River creates a cohesive blueway, seen here at the Latta Nature Preserve.

Regional greenway trail corridors are not only environmentally beneficial, but drive tourism, improve quality of life, and connect the County to regions outside its boundary. The future network created by trails like the Cross Charlotte Trail, Mooresville to Charlotte Trail, North Charlotte Arc Trail, Silver Line Rail Trail, and McAlpine Creek Greenway Trail will become pedestrian and bicycle "superhighways" of national distinction and recognition. Investment in these particular greenway trails should be seen as an investment in larger regional transportation efforts.
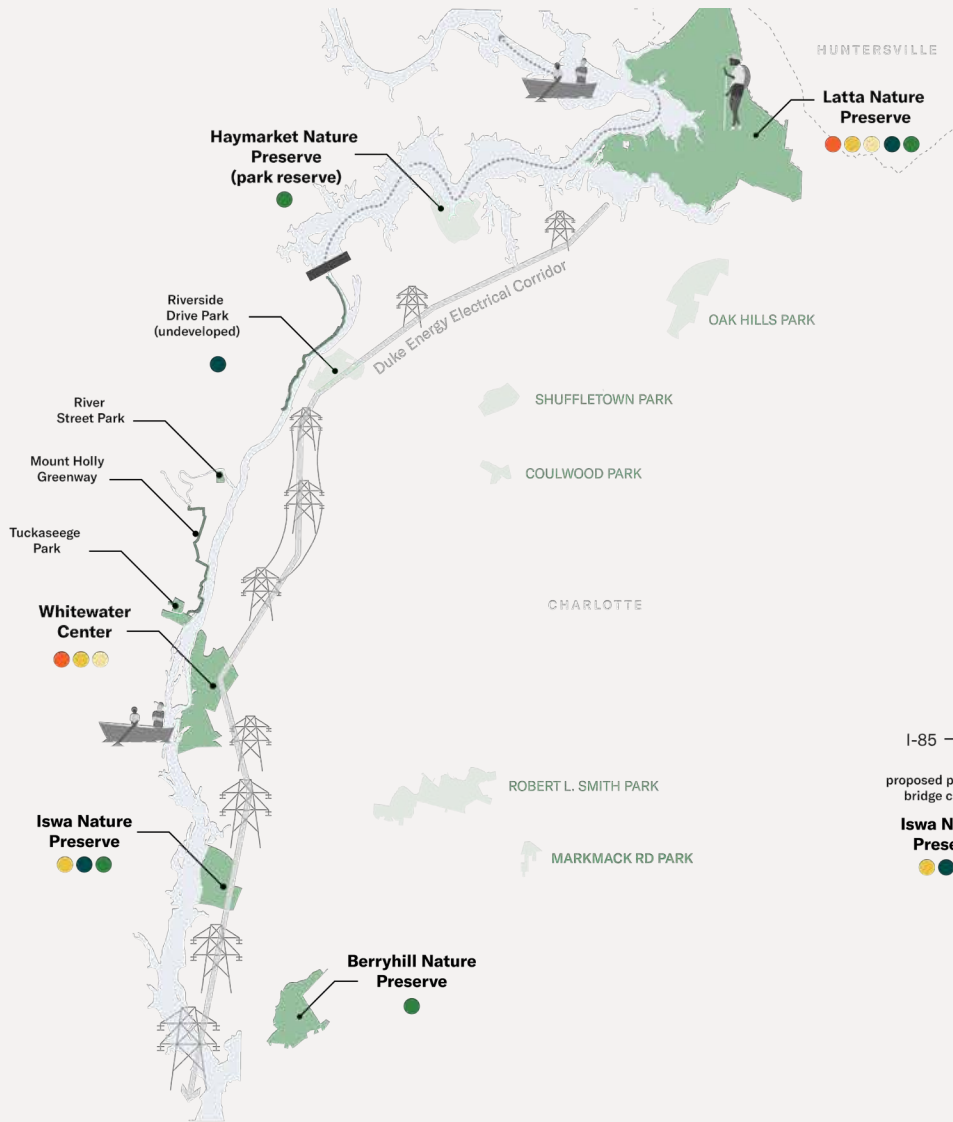
The Strategic Mobility Plan capital investment effort has such a vision. It is a regional multi-modal transportation initiative where community engagement displayed a desire for the project to follow a "multiple centers connected by regional transit" model.[16] This makes regional greenway trails part of successful implementation. Strategic Mobility Plan, is advocating for the addition of about 115 miles of new greenway trail investment, much of which will be seen along the Carolina Thread Trail.[17]

Linking the expanding regional greenway trail system to existing waterways will further enhance transportation, tourism, and ecological protection efforts. Gracing the western edge of the County, the Catawba River presents a great opportunity for strategic transformation.
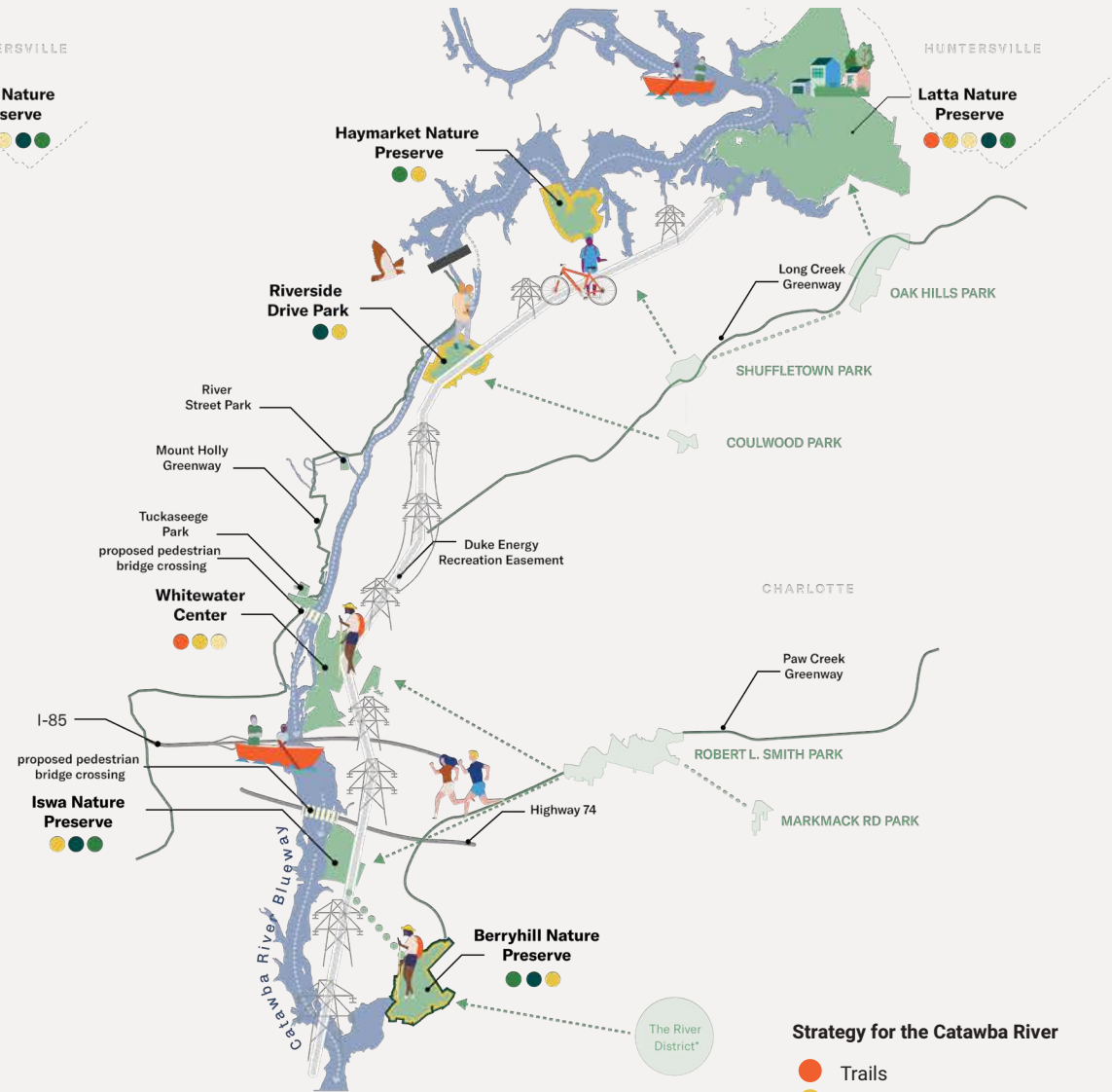
Investing in the Catawba River could provide many mutually-reinforcing benefits—from improving ecological health and function to enhancing quality of life, tourist, and recreation opportunities. The transformation of this unique and valuable resource is exciting for two reasons. It aligns perfectly with Mecklenburg Park & Rec's identity and environmental philosophy while more broadly offering the potential to define the next generation of Mecklenburg Park & Rec development. The Catawba vision put forward through the Meck Playbook is three-fold: improve the river's health, provide more opportunities for human engagement and programming, and leverage its inherent connective potential.

The river is an essential component of the County's ecological and public health. Improvements such as vegetated buffers—a role well-designed parks and trails can play—can create filters, help prevent sediment from entering the waterways, and improve water quality. Targeted interventions on County-owned riverfront properties can greatly improve the system as a whole while protecting the natural asset from market-driven development.

# Today
## Catawba River



Haymarket Nature Preserve (park reserve)

Latta Nature Preserve

Riverside Drive Park (undeveloped)

Duke Energy Electrical Corridor

HUNTERSVILLE

OAK HILLS PARK

SHUFFLETOWN PARK

River Street Park

COULWOOD PARK

Mount Holly Greenway

Tuckaseege Park

CHARLOTTE

**Whitewater Center**

ROBERT L. SMITH PARK

**Iswa Nature Preserve**

MARKMACK RD PARK

**Berryhill Nature Preserve**

# Potential Future
## Catawba River



HUNTERSVILLE

Haymarket Nature Preserve

Latta Nature Preserve

Long Creek Greenway

OAK HILLS PARK

**Riverside Drive Park**

River Street Park

SHUFFLETOWN PARK

COULWOOD PARK

Mount Holly Greenway

Duke Energy Recreation Easement

Tuckaseege Park

proposed pedestrian bridge crossing

CHARLOTTE

**Whitewater Center**

Paw Creek Greenway

I-85

proposed pedestrian bridge crossing

ROBERT L. SMITH PARK

**Iswa Nature Preserve**

Highway 74

MARKMACK RD PARK

Catawba River Blueway

**Berryhill Nature Preserve**

The River District*

### Strategy for the Catawba River

- 🔴 Trails
- 🟡 River Gateway
- 🟤 Programming & Recreation
- 🟢 Nature Activities
- 🟩 Conservation

**5.23** In the future, the Catawba River could stitch destinations along the riverfront through a greenway network. This would provide greater interaction between the greenway and blueway system.

The Catawba River connects multiple park properties, recreation facilities, and private sites that are unique to the County, namely Riverside Drive Park Reserve, newly acquired Moores Chapel Loop Riverfront Property, the US National Whitewater Center, and nature preserves like Latta, Haymarket, Iswa, Berryhill, and McDowell. While each of these places already engages with the river, there are many opportunities to embrace the riverfront identity more fully: providing greater physical and visual access to the river, celebrating these parks as Catawba gateways, and building out more activated programming. When incorporated into the broader trail system, these assets can become part of a larger tourism and economic development strategy that includes collaboration with neighboring jurisdictions, such as Mount Holly and Belmont.

Lastly, the connective potential of the Catawba is key! There already exists a natural connection between the greenway and blueway systems, as 74% of Mecklenburg parks are along a stream or lake. However, this connection often feels unseen or underused. Prioritizing land acquisitions, and creating new opportunities for greenway trails, recreation, and habitat restoration can expand the experiences available to County residents. On-land connections that link upland community centers, parks, and trails systems could broaden the reach of the Catawba into its nearby neighborhoods. This linking of the river to local assets and facilities is extremely important in balancing regional trail development with local park and greenway connections. While a regional strategy has large scale appeal and benefits, it should also benefit and integrate local attributes.

In order to capture the full potential of the Catawba, partnerships will be essential. Groups already working on and along the River including South Carolina and neighboring counties and municipalities, Catawba RiverKeeper Foundation, Carolina Thread Trail, or the Audubon Society—can play a critical role in advocacy, implementation, and programming. A partnership here could be a win-win!

## 17.4 Key Actions

**Construct greenway trails where regional gaps exist along County-owned greenways:**

- Work with Strategic Mobility Plan and other regional trail advocates to prioritize trail investments.

**Conduct a Catawba riverfront activation study:**

- Identify feasible river access locations, riverfront open space and trail opportunities, and on-river recreation.

- Include a blueprint for future development on the river with public and private partners.

**CATAWBA RIVER AT BUZZARD ROCK**

2 audubon society

3 proposed greenway

4 accessible water access

1 catawba blueway

5 habitat restoration

**5.24** Imagined uses along the Catawba River blend aquatic and land based activities.

# Go the Distance

# Go the Distance

## Introduction

The MeckPlaybook Plan sets out an ambitious vision for the future of Mecklenburg County's parks and recreation system. Realizing this vision will require a carefully considered implementation plan with clear, actionable steps. This chapter organizes the implementation plan into two separate categories:

- "Capital Projects" includes all current or future capital improvement projects (capital reinvestment and investment) in parks, greenway trails, nature preserves, and facilities. It also discusses projects and initiatives that will help achieve the vision laid out in the four Master Plan Principles: Commit to Equity, Evolve and Grow, Tell More Stories, and Move Beyond Boundaries.

- "Where Do We Begin" details immediate staffing needs to help realize the plan and actions Mecklenburg Park & Rec can take to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of its recreation programs, outreach efforts, operations, and maintenance. See Appendix 11 for a more detailed Implementation Plan.

**Facility Needs**
Inventory
Previous CIP

**Principles, Goals, Strategies**

**Community Needs**
Public Feedback

**Implementation Actions**

**CAPITAL PROJECTS**

Reinvestment

Investment

Land Acquisition

**WHERE DO WE BEGIN?**

Staffing and Hiring

Programming

Implementation

**6.1** The implementation actions were guided by the inventory, plan goals, and public feedback.

# Capital Projects

The current Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) will end in fiscal year 2023, or June 2023. The projects on the following pages outline investments that the County should undertake in future CIPs aligned with the goals and strategies of the Master Plan.

Project selection should be guided by consistent criteria that weighs:

1. the asset's ranking in the assessment (for existing spaces). See Strategy 2.1 for more details.

2. its location in priority communities that have been historically under-invested. See Strategy 2.3 for more details.

3. the ability to close gaps in service or connectivity.  See Strategy 3.1 for more details.

Projects that appeared on previous CIP lists, but were not funded, should also be considered for renewal in the next cycle. However, they should be weighted against the same selection criteria in order to ensure that poor condition assets and priority communities are addressed first. It is likely that the majority of the next round of CIP funding will be dedicated to addressing park and facilities with poor condition rankings as well as a portion of the following cycle.

It worth noting that the new inventory/ assessment does not include historic sites or greenway land. The Cultural and Historic Resources Management Plan developed for CAPRA re-accreditation in 2016 can be used to prioritize improvements and incorporated into future CIPs until an updated inventory/ assessment can be completed.

The criteria used to prioritize future CIP projects varies from one facility type to another and between existing and new parks and facilities. The following pages focus on four facilities types: parks and nature preserves, park amenities, facilities, and greenway trails. Each facility type is further divided into reinvestments needed to existing facilities and investments into new facilities. Place specific reinvestments and investments are prioritized into Tiers based on the criteria used for each facility type.

# Parks and Nature Preserves

## Reinvestment

A system-wide inventory and assessment of each park and nature preserve was conducted to determine the condition of each facility. Poorly rated parks and nature preserves will be the first facilities to receive reinvestment through the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) or other funding sources. The criteria used to determine reinvestment priorities include the assessment grade given for each facility based on the current state of the facility and its amenities and its location relative to Priority Communities. Parks and nature preserves in poor condition need immediate attention. These facilities showed signs of neglect, older/damaged play equipment, limited park assets, and limited access to the park. Many of these facilities have lacked significant investments over the last 10 to 20 years. Many of these parks are ready for a significant refresh or renovation. Reinvestment priorities are provided below.

### Tier One
### Parks and Nature Preserves in Poor Condition

The facilities listed here are poorly rated existing parks and nature preserves. These facilities are located in Priority Communities and are in need of immediate improvement. Tier One facilities are those with the highest priority for reinvestment.

| Local Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Allen Hills | Yes |
| Amay James | Yes |
| Archdale | Yes |
| Biddleville | Yes |
| Camp Greene | Yes |
| Campbell Creek | Yes |
| Coulwood | Yes |
| Derita | Yes |
| Devonshire | Yes |
| Enderly | Yes |
| Eva B. Barber | Yes |
| Firestone | Yes |
| Fred Alexander | Yes |
| Grayson | Yes |
| Grier Heights | Yes |
| Julian Underwood | Yes |
| Kirk Farm Fields | Yes |
| L.C. Coleman | Yes |
| Martin Luther King, Jr. | Yes |

| Local Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Methodist Home | Yes |
| Oakhurst | Yes |
| Pressley Road | Yes |
| Sixteenth Street | Yes |
| Springfield | Yes |
| Thereasea C. Elders | Yes |
| Tryon Hills | Yes |
| Tuckaseegee | Yes |
| Westerly Hills | Yes |
| Wilmore | Yes |
| Wingate | Yes |
| Winterfield | Yes |
| Viewmont | Yes |
| Yorkmont | Yes |

| Special Use Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Cadillac Golf Range | Yes |

## Tier Two
### Parks and Nature Preserves in Poor Condition

The facilities listed here are poorly rated existing parks and nature preserves. These facilities are not located in Priority Communities, but still require immediate improvement. Tier Two facilities are those who should be funded secondarily.

## Tier Three
### Parks and Nature Preserves in Acceptable Condition

The parks and nature preserves listed here received an acceptable rating. These facilities are beginning to show signs of decline and will require reinvestment soon. Some of the parks and nature preserves listed here are located in Priority Communities as indicated. These facilities should be prioritized for improvement through the Capital Reinvestment program (formerly referred to as Deferred Maintenance) to avoid further deterioration and unsafe amenities.

| Local Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Baxter Street | |
| Carmel Road | |
| Flat Branch | |
| Harrisburg Road | |
| Marshall | |
| Mckee | |
| North Charlotte | |
| Pearl Street | |
| Shamrock Park | |

| Special Use Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| David B. Waymer | |

| Nature Preserve Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Big Rock | |

| Local Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Alexander | Yes |
| Cedarwood | Yes |
| Chantilly | Yes |
| Collins | |
| Colonial | Yes |
| Druid Hills | Yes |
| Eastover | |
| EB Moore | Yes |
| Five Points | Yes |
| James Dennis Rash | Yes |
| Lincoln Heights | Yes |
| Mason Wallace | Yes |
| Merry Oaks | |
| Midwood | |
| Newell | Yes |
| Ninth Street | Yes |
| Progress | Yes |
| Richard Barry Memorial | |
| Seversville | Yes |
| Sheffield | Yes |
| Shuffletown | |
| Solomans | Yes |
| Southside | Yes |
| Tom Hunter | Yes |

| Local Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Unity | Yes |
| Waddell Street | Yes |
| West Charlotte | Yes |

| Regional Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Blythe Landing | |
| Clanton | Yes |
| Cordelia | Yes |
| Elon Homes | |
| James Boyce | |
| Mallard Creek | |
| Mcalpine Creek | Yes |
| Nevin | Yes |
| Park Road | |
| Park Road Tennis Ctr | |
| Ramblewood Complex | Yes |
| Renaissance | Yes |
| Sugaw Creek | Yes |

| Special Use Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Charles T. Myers | Yes |
| Harry L. Jones, Sr. | |

# Parks and Nature Preserves

## Investment

Mecklenburg County owns a number of properties that are meant to be developed into future Mecklenburg Park & Rec facilities. Some existing parks and nature preserves have the ability to be expanded to offer additional amenities. Investment locations provided here represent those properties and existing facilities that should receive funding for construction and expansion. Criteria used to prioritize investment include a properties location relative to Priority Communities, the property's ability to close gaps in access to parks and public spaces, whether or not the project was recommended as part of a previous CIP, and the potential for expansion to provide additional amenities or protect natural resources.

### Tier One

The parks and nature preserves listed here represent those facilities that should receive investments first. They are properties or facilities eligible for expansion that are located in Priority Communities. In addition, many of these properties are located in identified gap areas that, when developed, will provide access to parks and open space for residents who do not currently live within close proximity to a park.

### New

| New Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Back Creek | Yes |
| Brooktree | Yes |
| Cullman Avenue | Yes |
| Hidden Valley | Yes |
| IBM Drive | Yes |
| Lakeview Park/Pineville | Yes |
| Marmac Road | Yes |
| Monroe Road | Yes |
| Potential New Acquisitions | Yes |
| Reddman | Yes |
| University Meadows | Yes |

| New Nature Preserve Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Possum Walk | Yes |
| Ribbonwalk | Yes |

### Expansions

| Park Expansion Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Bryant* | Yes |
| Clanton | Yes |
| Nevin | Yes |
| Ramblewood | Yes |
| Southview | Yes |

\* Previously recommended, but unfunded CIP project

## Tier Two

The parks and nature preserves listed here should be the next facilities to receive investments. These facilities are not located within Priority Communities but will provide access to parks and opens space in areas of the county with limited or no nearby options. Some of these facilities were included, but not funded, as projects in a previous CIP.

## Tier Three

The parks and nature preserves included in this tier include future facilities where the land has not yet been acquired for development. Future land acquired for parks and/or nature preserves should be added to this list for consideration of future investments.

### New

| New Park Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Buckthorn | |
| Capps | |
| Cook | |
| Fairview | |
| Mcilwaine | |
| McDowell Creek | |
| Northlake | |
| Oak Hills | |
| White Tract | |

| New Nature Preserve Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Berryhill* | |
| Charles and Ida Graham | |
| Haymarket | |
| Oehler | |
| Rocky River Bluff | |
| Rozzelles Ferry* | |
| Shuffletown Prairie | |
| Winget | |

### Expansions

| Park Expansion Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Ballantyne | |
| Berewick | |
| Elon | |
| Harrisburg Sportscomplex | |
| James Boyce | |
| Mallard Creek | Yes |
| Robert C. Bradford | |
| Robert L. Smith | |
| Shuffletown Prairie | |

### Previously Unfunded CIP Projects

| Nature Preserve Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Potential New Acquisitions | |
| Sherman Branch | |

* Previously recommended, but unfunded CIP project

# Park Amenities

## Investment

Mecklenburg Park & Rec regularly receives requests for popular park amenities. The current approach to fulfilling these requests, through new CIP projects, takes years to fulfill and limits where the amenities are provided. A new approach is needed to fulfill highly ranked amenities to underserved areas of the county where these amenity types are not available. These desired park amenities should be provided in existing parks that have the space and infrastructure to support the added amenities and distributed evenly across the county. Determination of which amenities to create first should come from an analysis of both national peer comparisons and community feedback. Decision making for new amenities will need to take into account the following priorities and considerations:

### Close Physical Gaps

Focus new amenities where the level of service (geographic access) to resident populations is lowest and in high priority communities. New amenities should primarily occur in areas of the County that have amenity gaps to ensure assets are distributed equitably. Figure 6.9, on page 201, shows gap areas and park reserve sites.

### Stay on top of trends

Prepare for future recreation trends by engaging neighborhoods to understand their evolving needs, including for multi-cultural amenities and trends in technology.

- When compared against peers, the County is well-served by tennis courts. However, pickleball, which is also a court sport, continues to grow in popularity. Underutilized tennis courts can be adapted into pickleball courts and new pickleball courts should be considered in communities where the demand is high.

- According to data from peer communities the County is well-served by dog parks, but trends in recreation, adoption rates during COVID-19, and community feedback during this process all suggest continued need for leash-free spaces for dogs.

- Disc golf and mountain biking are also growing sports in the Southeast. While the County is considered to have an abundance of facilities that support these sports, new investments should be considered on a case by case basis.

## Compare against peers

Use similar peer benchmarking to right-size the number of typical amenities and contextualize how well served the County is by each amenity. Figure 6.2 displays the current surplus and deficit of amenities based on NRPA Peer Benchmarks.

- The County has an abundance of playgrounds compared to peers. While playgrounds should be incorporated into many new projects, care should be taken to incorporate trends and priorities like nature play, outdoor adventure, and arts play.

- The County is lacking in Recreation/Senior Centers, and swimming pools and splash pads.

This data should be compared against community desires. Amenities that are both deficient in quantity and highly sought after by the community should be prioritized.
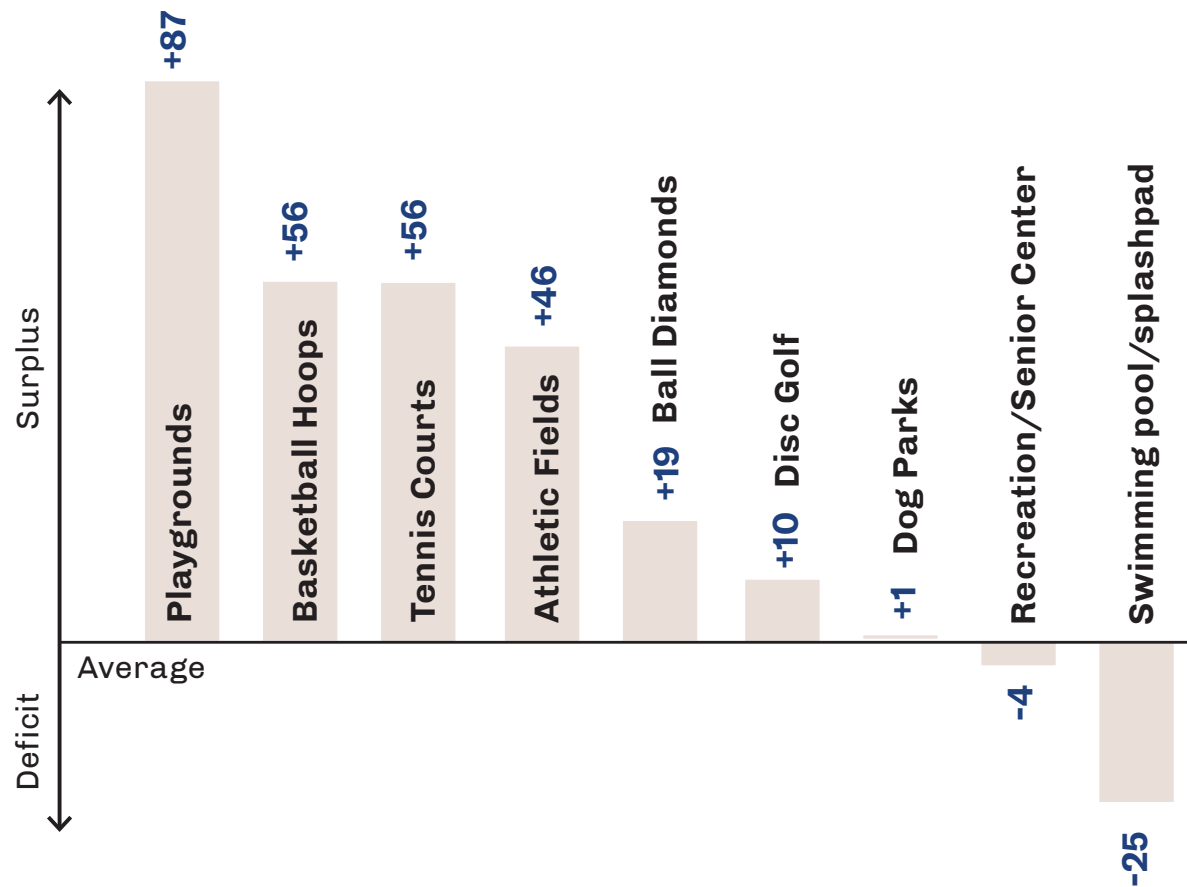


6.2 Amenity surplus and deficit. Based on a comparison with NRPA peer agencies, Mecklenburg County is well-served by the majority of its amenities.

## Look to the private market

Track private providers that are publicly accessible like fitness clubs (YMCA, etc), and private, membership organizations like golf and swim clubs, and homeowners associations (HOAs), to understand how demand is captured by the private market.

- Access to water recreation is a high priority for the County. Comparisons against national data suggest a deficit of swimming pools across the County. However, Homeowners' Associations and private swim facilities accommodate much of this need. The County should continue to rely on partnerships to support swimming pool access and focus County investment on the construction of splash pads, especially in priority communities.

## Track Use and Demand

There is an abundance of athletic and baseball fields across the system, however most of the athletic fields are clustered in the City of Charlotte. Based on conversations with stakeholders, demands for athletic fields are highest in periphery municipalities, which align with gaps in service in Mint Hill, areas of Pineville, and Northwest Charlotte.

- A review of field reservation fields should be taken to understand priorities for future fields.

- Track demand to understand which amenities are in high and low demand. Meet high demand by adding amenities to existing parks. This strategy provides an opportunity to use future CIP cycles to focus on specific amenities within multiple parks and sites.

- Conversely, ball diamonds are a low priority for investment. Trends are shifting away from baseball/softball and towards multi-purpose field sports. Baseball fields can also be used for other sports like cricket.

## Tier One

The park amenities shared here represent those most requested through input received from County residents. The location of these park amenities should be studied individually, then added to existing parks and included in future park projects where nearby access is not currently provided.

| Park Amenity |
| --- |
| Community gardens |
| Dog parks |
| Pickleball courts |
| Picnic areas |
| Spraygrounds/Splashpads (w/ parking + restrooms) |
| Trails, paved |
| Trails, unpaved |

## Tier Two

Park amenities included here were not the most highly desired by County residents, but should considered where nearby access is not currently provided.

| Park Amenity |
| --- |
| Basketball courts |
| Playgrounds/play areas |
| Tennis courts |

## Tier Three

Park amenities listed here were the least desired amenities according to resident input. However, access to these facilities are limited in certain areas of the county and should be considered in existing and future parks.

| Park Amenity |
| --- |
| Fields, baseball/softball |
| Fields, football |
| Fields, soccer |
| Inclusive play area |
| Skatepark |
| Volleyball courts, outdoor sand |







**6.3** Dog parks, athletic fields, and playgrounds are strongly represented throughout the Mecklenburg County.

# Facilities

## Reinvestment

Mecklenburg Park & Rec operates many types of facilities: recreation centers, aquatics facilities, athletic facilities, senior centers, indoor pavilions, and administrative buildings. The system-wide inventory and assessment completed during the Meck Playbook process included an evaluation of each existing facility. Facilities found to be in the poorest condition should be the first to receive improvements through reinvestment. These facilities tend to be older and have not received significant investments in many years.

### Tier One
#### Facilities in Poor Condition
The facilities below represent those in the poorest condition within the system. These facilities are located in Priority Communities, elevating the need for significant reinvestments. The facilities are in poor condition, feel unsafe, need renovation, and the buildings and signage are difficult to see from the road.

| Facility Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Albemarle Road Rec Center | Yes |
| Jeff Adams Tennis Center | Yes |
| Tuckaseegee Rec Center | Yes |
| Wallace Pruitt | Yes |

### Tier Two
#### Facilities in Poor Condition
Facilities included here are in poor condition and require improvements through reinvestment soon. While not located in Priority Communities, it is still important to renovate these facilities to maximize their use and appeal.

| Facility Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Armory Training Center | |
| Elon Homes | |
| Hawthorne | |
| Latta Nature Center | |
| Winget School | |

### Tier Three
#### Facilities in Acceptable Condition
The facilities listed here received an acceptable rating, but will need reinvestment soon to continue to provide the greatest benefit to County residents. Facilities listed below are located both within and outside Priority Communities. Those in priority communities should be considered first for reinvestment.

| Facility Name | Priority Community |
|---|---|
| Arbor Glen Outreach Center | |
| Cordelia Park Pool | Yes |
| Harry L. Jones Golf Course | |
| Hornet's Nest Picnic Barn | |
| Latta Recreation Center | |
| Main Administrative Office | Yes |
| Martin Luther King Jr. | |
| McDowell Nature Center | |
| Methodist Home/Shamrock Senior Center | |
| Park Road Tennis Center | |
| Reedy Creek Nature Center | |
| Southview | |
| Tom Sykes | |
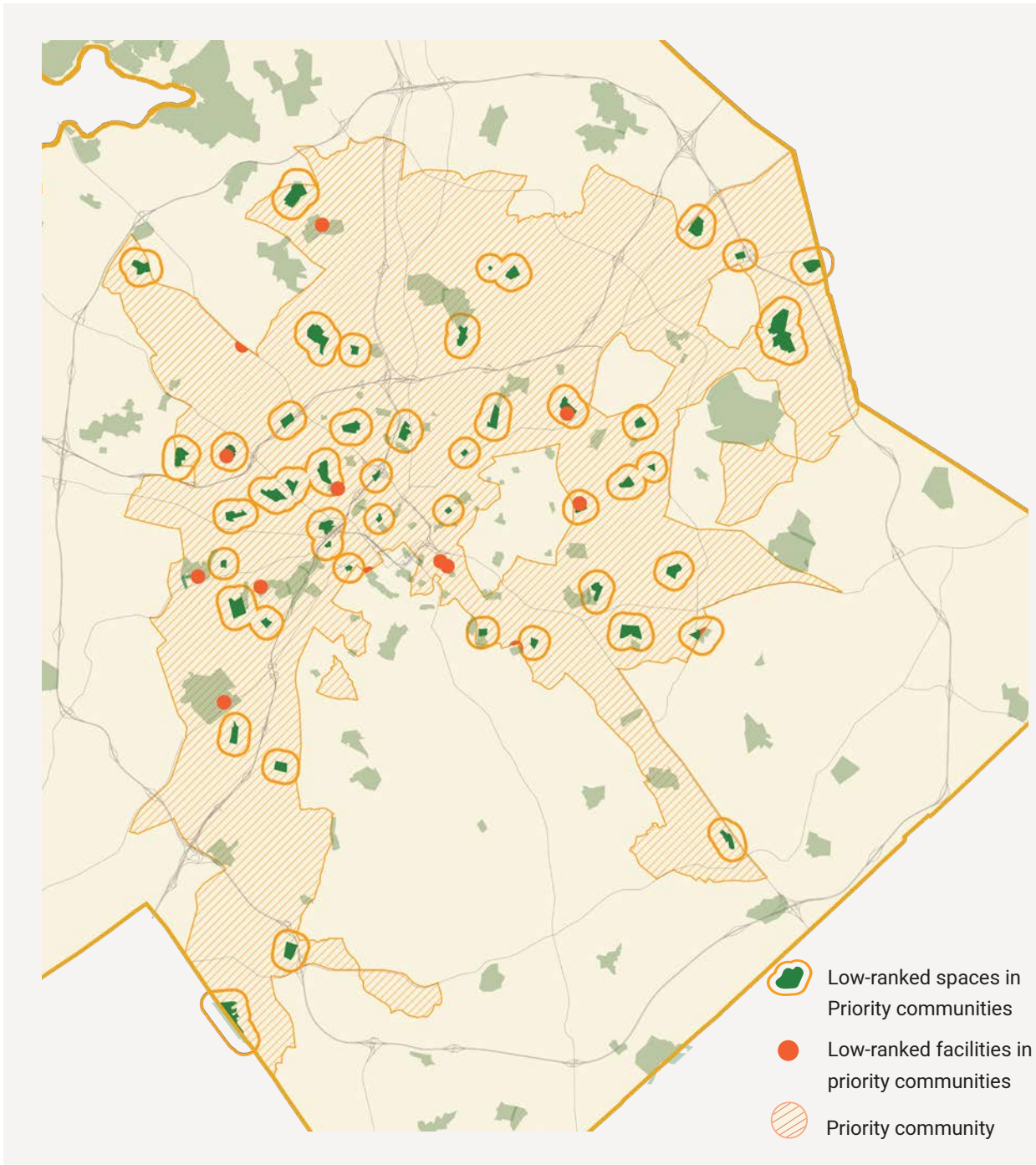
**6.4** Parks and facilities within priority communities.

Legend:
- Low-ranked spaces in Priority communities
- Low-ranked facilities in priority communities
- Priority community

# Facilities

## Investment

Reinvestment in Mecklenburg Park & Rec's existing inventory of facilities is this highest priority for Meck Playbook. However, the Meck Playbook level of service analysis, peer benchmarking, and program assessment highlighted opportunities for expanding services available for residents with future recreation facilities.

### Tier One

Facilities identified here are the most requested facilities per community input. While each type of facilities included here are currently found within the Mecklenburg Park & Rec system, most are scattered across the County and are not easily accessible for most residents. These facilities should be considered for investments first.

| Facility Name |
| --- |
| Indoor pavilions (new) |
| Nature center (new) |
| Pools (indoor) |
| Pools (outdoor) |
| Recreation/fitness centers |

### Tier Two

The facilities listed below were requested by residents through community input, but were not the most requested facilities. These facilities should be considered for investment later, but located in areas to expand service to areas of the County that do not currently have nearby access to these types of facilities.

| Facility Name |
| --- |
| Public golf course |
| South Regional Recreation Center |
| West Regional Recreation Center |

## Tier Three

Facilities in this category listed were the least desired amenities according to resident input. However, access to these facilities are limited in certain areas of the County and should be considered in existing and future parks.

| Facility Name |
|---|
| Park shelters |
| Mobile classrooms |
| Senior centers |
| Skate parks |

**Legend:**

- ■ Nature Center
- ▲ School
- ● Regional park
- ● Recreation centers
- ● Regional recreation centers
- 15-minute drive to regional parks
- 10-minute walk recreation and senior centers
- 20-minute walk recreation and senior centers
- 5-minute drive recreation and senior centers

**6.5** Level of service analysis for County-owned recreation, senior, and regional parks. The map also includes schools and nature centers.
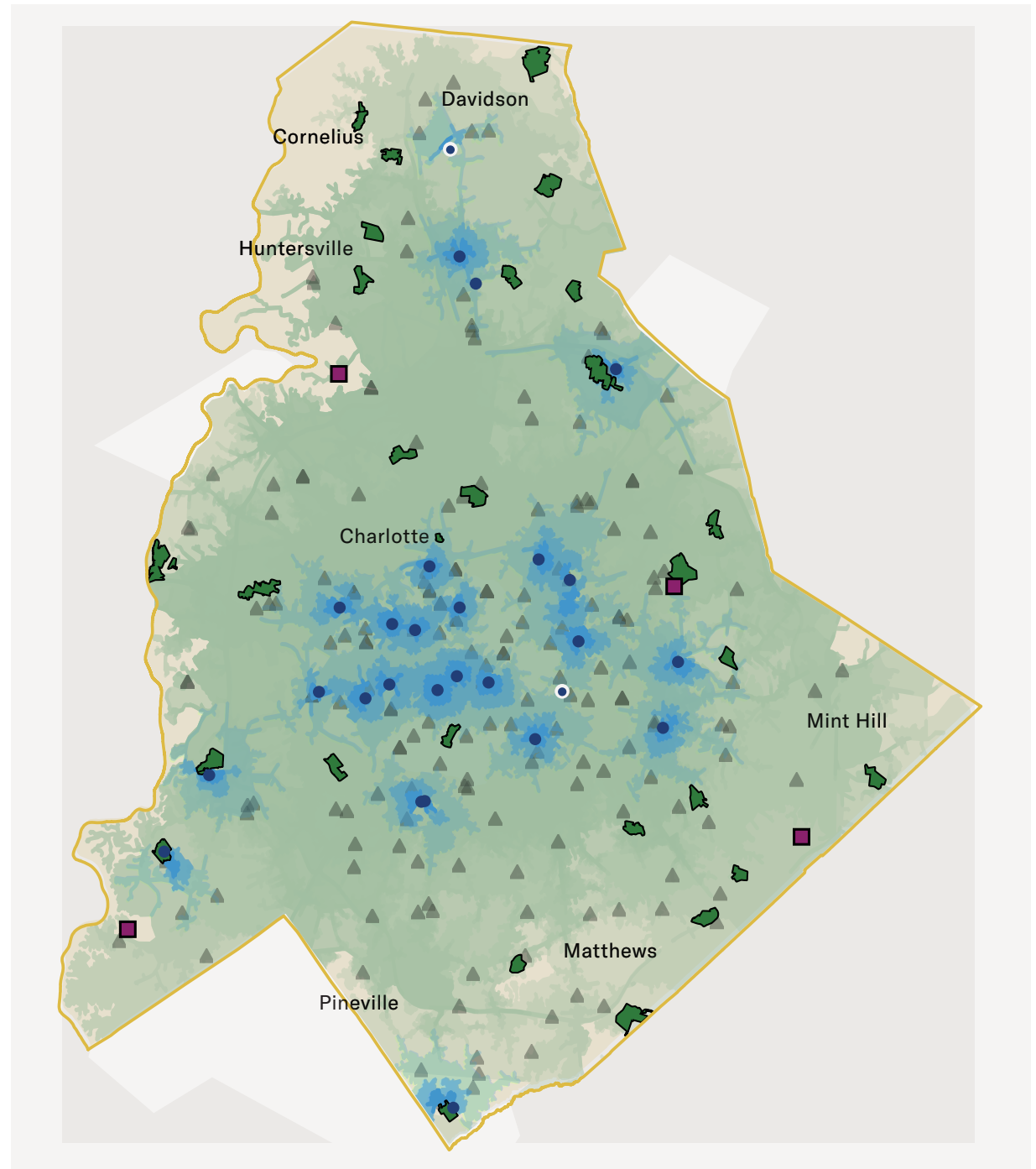
# Greenway Trails
## Reinvestment

Greenway trails are the most requested facility in Mecklenburg County. However, many existing greenway trails are relatively new when compared to many parks and recreation centers. Previous CIPs have focused on expanding the greenway trial system and funding new greenway trail projects. Reinvestment in existing greenways is now necessary to avoid older trails from posing safety risks to users and improving access to trails. While most greenways are in good condition, a few have maintenance needs. These needs will only increase as the greenway system ages and expands.

### Tier One
#### Greenway Trails in Poor Condition

The greenway trails included here represent the facilities in poor condition with issues that need to be addressed immediately. These trails do not meet their intended use and will soon pose a safety risk to users. There are major needs for maintenance along many stretches of these trails. Structures along these trails are beginning to fail, signage is sparse, and accessibility is poor with limited adjacent parking.

| Greenway Trail Name | Priority Community |
| --- | --- |
| **Four Mile Creek**<br>McAlpine Gwy to Bevington Place | |
| **McMullen Creek**<br>Pineville Matthews Rd to McAlpine Gwy | |
| **Taggart Creek**<br>Morris Field Dr to Irwin Creek | Yes |
| **Mallard Creek**<br>Mallard Creek Drive to David Taylor Dr | |

### Tier Two
#### Greenway Trails in Acceptable Condition

Portions of the greenway trials included here do not meet intended use and repairs are needed at multiple points along these trails. Elements may be damaged or signage may be missing or in disrepair. Trailheads are still accessible but have limited parking and amenity options.

| Greenway Trail Name | Priority Community |
| --- | --- |
| **Briar Creek**<br>Colony Rd to Runnymede | |
| **Campbell Creek**<br>Shiloh Ridge Ln to Independence Blv | |
| **Clarks Creek**<br>Fairlea to Amaranthus Ct | |
| **Lower McAlpine Creek**<br>Johnson Rd to Carmel Rd | |
| **Torrence Creek**<br>Cedar River Road to Lower McDowell | |

### Tier Three
#### Greenway Trails in Acceptable Condition

Currently, there is only a small budget for greenway reinvestment like there is for parks, nature centers, recreation centers, and other facilities. There is a need for reoccurring greenway funding to allow for general repairs to greenway trails, structures, trailheads, and signage as needed. This funding should be used to repair certain items within a trail segment (like bridges, swale bridges, and boardwalks), but not fund full trail renovation. Due the large number of greenway trails that fall within this category, no list is provided.
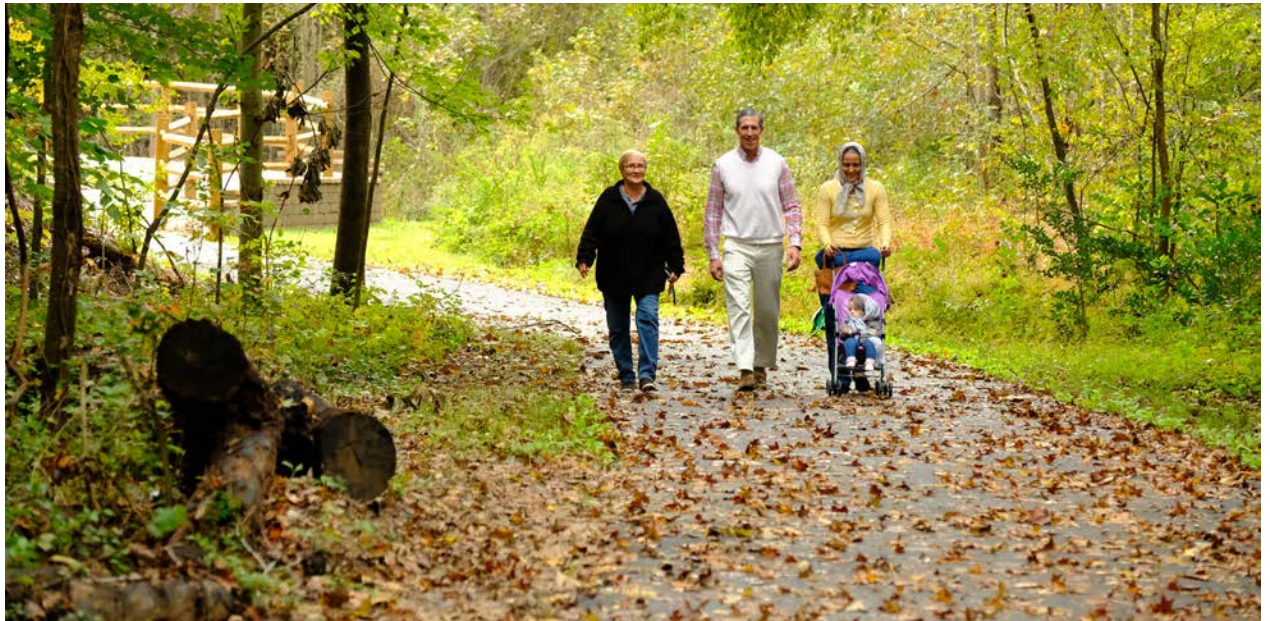
# Greenway Trails

## Investment

The Greenway Trail plan aspires for an equitable, accessible trail system that connects County residents and visitors to jobs, cultural and recreation destinations, fitness, and to one another. In order to incrementally achieve the goals for a system of this size and magnitude the County developed a data-driven approach for investments in 129 trail segments.

The Capital Investment Greenway Trail Project tables include a summary of the top 30 high priority trail segments. The scoring system for greenways trails is different than that used for parks, nature preserves, and facilities. It is based on the following conditions:

- **Connections:** whether the trail connects to an existing trail or multiple existing trails

- **Land:** required land acquisition, or the number of parcels needed to construct the trail

- **Equity:** whether the future trail is in a priority community or a physical park gap area

- **Partnerships:** whether there are partner projects in the areas that expand the reach of the trail segment if funded for construction

* Note that each high ranking project will also be evaluated based on potential barriers to construction prior to funding requests.







6.6 Greenway trails throughout the County.

# Tier One
## Investment Greenway Trail Projects

The following table includes greater detail about the top 30 greenway investment priority projects identified in Figure 6.7. The order was based on a scoring system that evaluated connections, land, equity, and partnerships.

| Priority Order | Greenway | Description | Length (Miles) | Priority Community | Within Park Gap |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Sugar Creek | Existing Sugar Creek Gwy to Arrowood | 1.7 | Yes | Yes |
| 2 | Irwin Creek* | Existing trail at Clanton Rd to Crestridge Dr | 0.9 | Yes | Yes |
| 3 | Irwin Creek | Crestridge Dr to Existing Sugar Creek Gwy | 0.99 | Yes | Yes |
| 4 | Mallard Creek | Kirk Farm Fields to Pavilion Blvd | 1.68 | Yes | Yes |
| 5 | Irvins Creek | Existing Irvins Creek Gwy to Existing McAlpine Creek Gwy | 1.94 | Yes | Yes |
| 6 | Ballantyne Connector | Ballantyne Commons Py to Existing McAlpine Creek | 0.6 | Yes | Yes |
| 7 | Campbell Creek* | Campbell Creek Park to Existing Campbell Creek Gwy | 1.98 | Yes | Yes |
| 8 | Briar Creek/Edwards Branch | Monroe Rd to Randolph Rd /Independence Blvd to Existing Briar Creek Gwy | 0.94 | Yes | Yes |
| 9 | Irwin Creek/ Stewart Creek / Stewart Creek Trib | Alleghany to Freedom Dr to West Blvd | 2.62 | Yes | Yes |
| 10 | McDowell Creek | Existing McDowell Creek Gwy (Gilead Rd.) to Beatties Ford Rd | 2.34 | | Yes |
| 11 | South Prong Rocky River | Existing SPRR Gwy  (Davidson Concord Rd) to Existing West Branch Rocky River Gwy (River Ford Dr) to Existing WBRR Gwy (Fisher Farm) | 1.23 | Yes | |
| 12 | McAlpine Creek | Existing McAlpine Creek Gwy (at Providence Rd) to Colony Rd | 2.06 | | Yes |
| 13 | Six Mile Creek | Flat Branch to Existing Six Mile Creek Gwy | 2.46 | | Yes |

| Priority Order | Greenway | Description | Length (Miles) | Priority Community | Within Park Gap |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | South Prong West Branch Rocky River Tributary | Old Statesvillle to Existin Plum Creek Gwy (Bailey Rd) | 1.54 | | Yes |
| 15 | Briar Creek | Shamrock Dr to Existing Briar Creek Grwy | 1.6 | Yes | |
| 16 | Steele Creek* | Williams Glenn Road to Westinghouse Blvd | 2.3 | | |
| 17 | Sugar Creek | Main St to SC State Line (Little Sugar Creek Gwy at Lakeview Park) | 2.2 | Yes | Yes |
| 18 | Irwin Creek | Hamilton to Existing Irwin Creek Gwy | 0.5 | Yes | Yes |
| 19 | Toby Creek Trib | Old Concord to Existing Toby Creek Gwy | 0.94 | Yes | Yes |
| 20 | Mallard Creek | Pavilion Blvd to County Line | 2.02 | Yes | Yes |
| 21 | Doby Creek Tributary | IBM Dr to Doby Creek | 1.22 | Yes | Yes |
| 22 | McIntyre Creek | Existing McIntyre Creek Gwy (Hornets Nest Park) to Long Creek | 2.98 | Yes | Yes |
| 23 | Back Creek Tributary | Caldwell Rd to Caldwell Ridge Py | 1.3 | Yes | Yes |
| 24 | Toby Creek | Orr Rd to Existing Toby Creek Gwy (Autumnwood Lane) | 3 | | Yes |
| 25 | The Seam Trail | Gibbon to Existing Irwin Creek Gwy (Nevin Park) | 0.8 | Yes | Yes |
| 26 | Four Mile Creek | Providence Rd to Existing Four Mile Creek Gwy (Rea Rd) | 3.14 | | Yes |
| 27 | Dixon Branch/Dixon Branch Trib 1 | I-77 to Ex Dixon Branch Gwy | 1.5 | | Yes |
| 28 | Long Creek | Oakdale Rd to Shuffletown Park/Bellhaven | 2.3 | | Yes |
| 29 | West Branch Rocky River | Existing WBRR Gwy to Future Rocky River Gwy (County Line) | 0.32 | | |
| 30 | Back Creek | Existing Reedy Creek Greenway at Grier Rd to Katherine Kiker Rd | 1.87 | Yes | Yes |

* Previously recommended, but unfunded CIP project. Campbell Creek Greenway, from Campbell Creek Park to Executive Center Drive, is also an unfunded, but recommended, project from a previous CIP.

# Tier One Greenway Projects

| # | Project | | # | Project |
|---|---------|---|---|---------|
| 1 | Sugar Creek | | 16 | Steele Creek |
| 2 | Irwin Creek | | 17 | Sugar Creek |
| 3 | Irwin Creek | | 18 | Irwin Creek |
| 4 | Mallard Creek | | 19 | Toby Creek Trib |
| 5 | Irvins Creek | | 20 | Mallard Creek |
| 6 | Ballantyne Connector | | 21 | Doby Creek Tributary |
| 7 | Campbell Creek | | 22 | McIntyre Creek |
| 8 | Briar Creek/ Edwards Branch | | 23 | Back Creek Tributary |
| 9 | Irwin Creek/ Stewart Creek / Stewart Creek Trib | | 24 | Toby Creek |
| 10 | McDowell Creek | | 25 | The Seam Trail |
| 11 | South Prong Rocky River | | 26 | Four Mile Creek |
| 12 | McAlpine Creek | | 27 | Dixon Branch/Dixon Branch Trib 1 |
| 13 | Six Mile Creek | | 28 | Long Creek |
| 14 | South Prong West Branch Rocky River Tributary | | 29 | West Branch Rocky River |
| 15 | Briar Creek | | 30 | Back Creek |

Legend:
- County Boundary
- Greenway Trails - Existing
- Greenway Trails - Short Term (funded project)
- Greenway Trails - Future
- Urban Trails - Existing
- Urban Trails - Short Term (funded project)
- Urban Trails - Future
- Urban Trails - Need Further Study
- Regional Trail Systems (Carolina Thread Trail, XCLT, etc)
- Parks
- Mountain Bike Trails
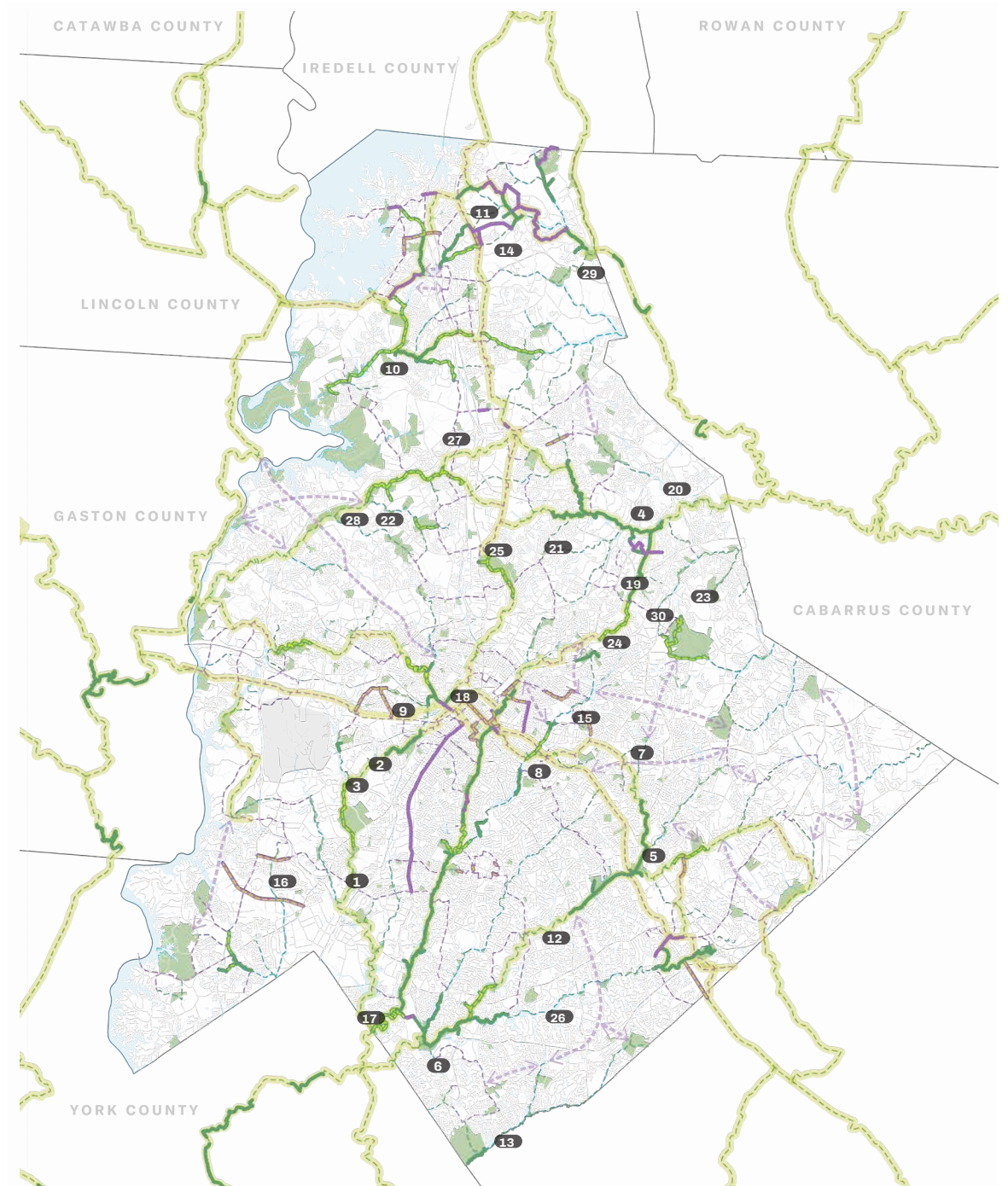
**6.7** The top 30 greenway investment priorities are identified above.

**6.8** Captured moments from McDowell Creek Greenway display the wide variety of uses greenways provide.

# Land Acquisition

## Investment

This section includes capital investment strategies for 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 Goal #7.

### Tier One

Tier One land acquisition opportunities or new investments/projects are those which:

- Close a physical gap in access and are within a priority community.

- Connect priority communities to the greenway trail system.

- Protect critical habitat areas and natural resources.

### Tier Two

Tier Two land acquisitions are those which:

- Close a physical gap in access.

- Connect residents to the greenway trail system.

- Enable park/nature preserve expansions or projects that expand park programming (next phases of work).

### Tier Three

Land acquisition in areas without access gaps or Priority Communities today; yet are experiencing population growth.

### Filling Gaps

Future land acquisition should be prioritized in County areas with identified physical access gaps within the boundaries of the priority community overlay. These gaps are highlighted in Figure 6.9. Only two areas with physical gaps overlap with parkland reserve land, though all of these areas include greenway lands.

Physical gaps in access to parks and open space still exist at the edges of the City of Charlotte and at the edges of the County.

The land acquisition strategy provides a multi-faceted approach to closing gaps without needing to invest limited funds away from other Department needs.

### Accounting for Growth

Land acquisition that focuses on high and medium priority geographies in the County (priority communities and places with physical gaps) will also help maintain Mecklenburg Park & Rec's goal to grow recreation amenities with resident growth and preserve the current baseline of 19.1 open space acres per thousand residents.

### Restoring and Protecting Ecology

The County needs to continue protecting critical habitats and endangered, vulnerable, or threatened species. Land acquisition and capital projects that expand existing natural areas or create new protected habitats should also be prioritized.

## Filling Gaps Method

- **Fee Simple Purchase where physical gaps exist**
- **Public Easements**
- **Partnerships with private organizations through MOUs**

## Accounting for Growth Method

- **Fee Simple Purchase to expand existing park footprints**
- **Option to Purchase/Right of First Refusal**
- **Public Easements**
- **Partnerships with Public Agencies like CMS for shared use agreements**

## Restoring Ecology Method

- **Fee Simple Purchase of natural resource**
- **Public Easements to connect important wildlife and greenway corridors**
- **Partnerships with land trusts, utilities, and other large landholders**
- **Land Trade for park reserve land that does not have value as a future park or natural resource**
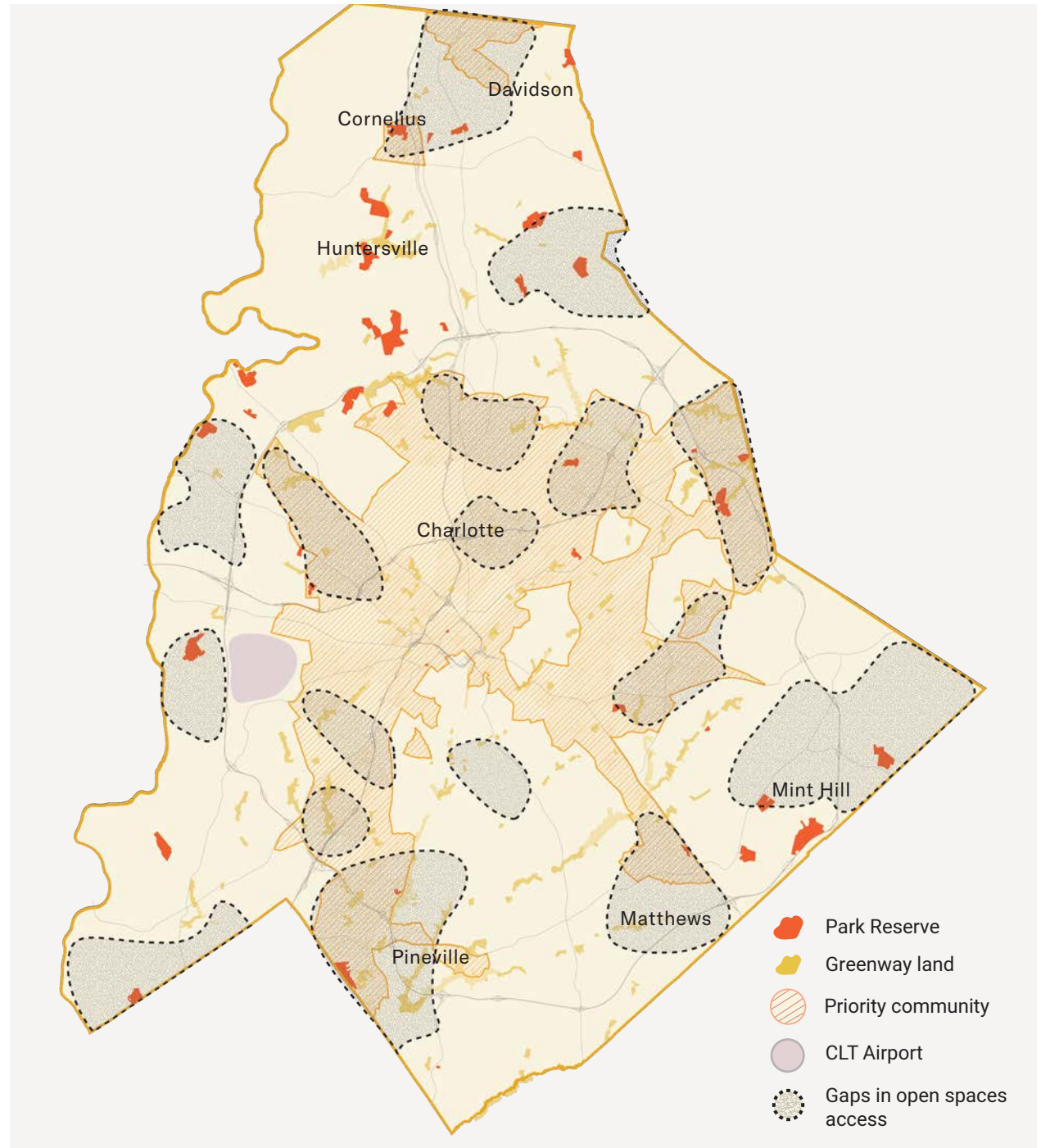


**6.9** Parkland Reserve space and greenway land can help contribute to a more connected and accessible system. Map current as of Spring 2021.

# Where Do We Begin?

## Staffing and Hiring

Based on the Operations Assessment, Meck Playbook recommends growing the team gradually to meet the following needs. This list includes initial recommendations for the first phase of Meck Playbook. It is a summary, highlighting additional strategic positions or entirely new positions for reclassification. All positions are full time. Look to Appendix 11 for more detailed information.

### Park Operations Division

(See Strategy 8.1 for more details)

- 2 Regional Managers for a total of 5 Regional Managers; 1 in each region. Consider maintenance supervisor needs to support this reorganization.

- 1 capital and special projects oversight position in each region, for a total of 5 positions.

- 1 Capital Reinvestment oversight position.

- Additional part-time/seasonal staff and expansion of contractual services should be assessed each budget season.

- Increase staff levels as new parks are developed and additional park land is acquired.

### Nature Preserves and Natural Resources Division

- 1 FT Natural Resources Supervisor position and 1 FT Natural Resources Specialist position for every 700 acres added to the nature preserve system.

- 2 FT nature center educators to program the approved Mobile Nature Center.

- 1 Outdoor Programs Manager to guide expansion of outdoor programs in response to growing popularity and renewed interest in outdoor-related activities.

- 1 Cultural Resource Manager to expand educational opportunities and explore and enhance historically significant people and places.

- 1 additional position to manage and operate the campground. 1 FT was approved for FY22 but 1 more FT position is needed.

- Create an additional maintenance team to align with current maintenance demand (1 Maintenance Supervisor and 2 Maintenance and Operations Technicians).

### Community Recreation and Center Services Division (CRCS)

- 1 Out of School Time Coordinator position that insures recreation centers meet state guidelines to become a licensed childcare provider.

- 1 Special Projects Coordinator who seeks and administers grant funded projects through CRCS. This would ensure consistency in offering CC2N (Connecting Communities to Nature) and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) programming.

- 1 Recreation Coordinator Supervisor to expand adult sports offerings in under-served areas of the county.

- Anticipate and finance additional staffing needs as programs and initiatives grow in the future. This is especially important when considering post-COVID-19 pandemic budgets.

### Capital Planning Division

- 1 Community Engagement Liaison (See Strategy 1.2 for more detail).

- 1 Planner, specifically tasked with overseeing partnerships between the County and municipalities.

**6.10** Growing the capacity of Mecklenburg Park & Rec will be a vital first step to implementing the plan.

## Administration

- 2 Fiscal Analyst positions.

- 1 position within the Volunteer Services Team in Admin to lead youth and adult volunteers in Natural Resource-focused projects on a regular basis.

- Fund and gradually increase staff for a dedicated marketing team.

- Consider moving Commemorative Events area to Parks Operations to streamline service delivery.

- Convert part-time positions to 1 full-time position to support Senior Management Analyst.

## Marketing and Communications

(See Strategy 11.1 for more details)

- 1 Marketing and Communication Manager

- 3 Marketing and Communication Coordinators

- 1 Graphic Designer

- 1 Digital Media Specialist

- 1 Videography Specialist

- 1 Language Access and Inclusion Specialist

### Notes:

- All traditional positions would grow based on the growing needs of Mecklenburg Park & Rec staff and staff would grow based on growing amenities/land acquisition.

- Consider growing Volunteer Services staff.

- Consider the following future positions: partnerships/sponsorships manager, community projects memorials manager.

# Where Do We Begin?
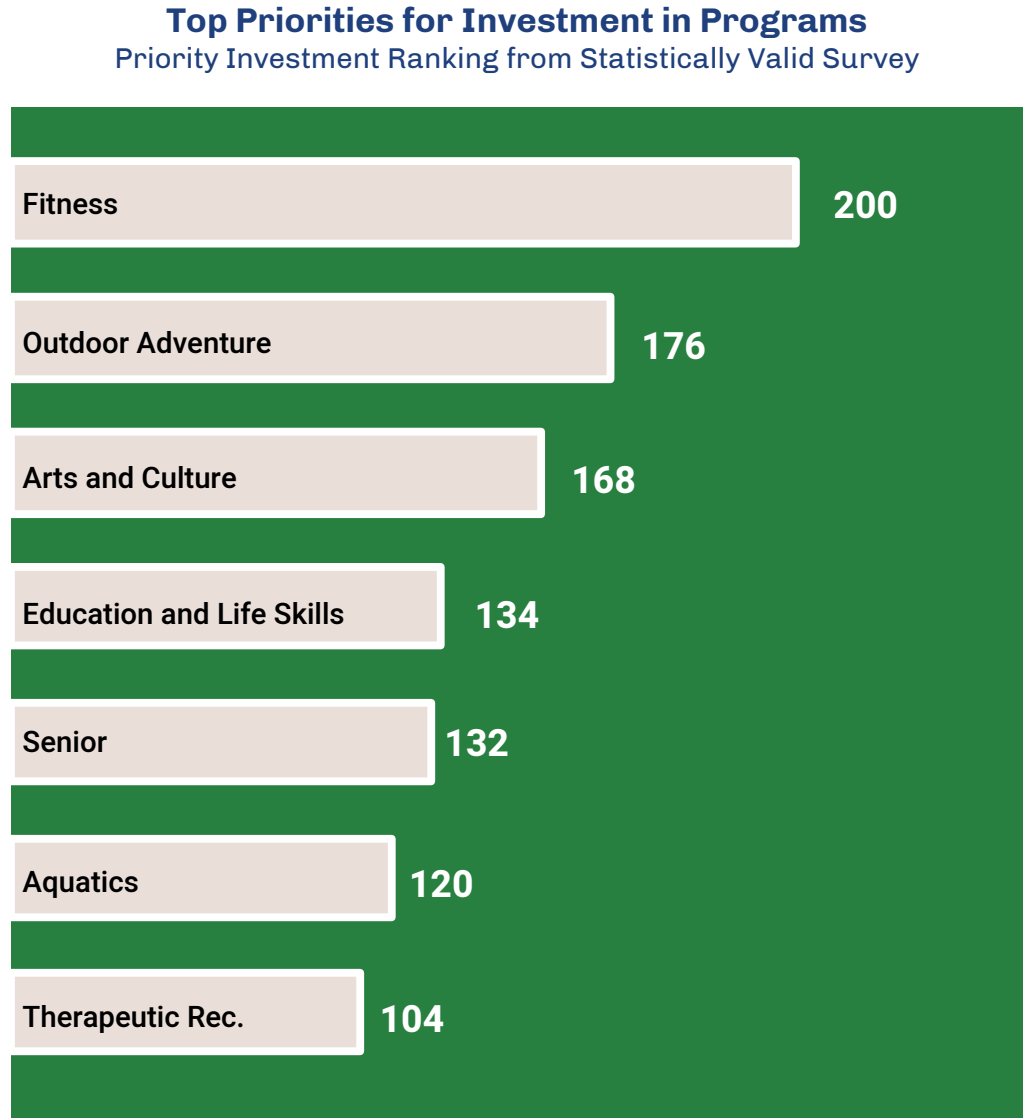
## Programming

### Program Priorities

Physical space limitations can inhibit the quantity of programs a recreation center can feasibly provide. At present, the metric of "programs per square foot" is not tracked, but this could be another indicator of regional performance to gather in the future and understand space needs at each facility and across the county. The program waitlist points to needs that are difficult to be met, either due to space limitations to grow course sizes or staff limits. In 2019, there were 2,331 people remaining on program waitlists. An immediate tactic to increase enrollment and participation rates is to find ways to enroll participants off the waitlist. Depending on the course and facility, possible changes might include increasing class size, adding course sections, and/or adding instructors - all of these require ample and appropriate facility space to accommodate more courses and participants.

The following recreation recommendations will create needs for greater program and facility space:

- Target the adult and active adult market with new programs and services.

- Develop therapeutic recreation services for preschool and youth markets.

- Examine the addition of new program categories, such as pet programming, that are currently not offered but could meet unmet community needs.

- Double the quantity of summer fitness and wellness offerings and grow summer offerings across all core program areas to equalize summer programming with other seasons.

- Consider an enhanced focus on Mecklenburg Park & Rec's role in the realm of the community outcome. Increase partnerships and collaborative efforts with outside agencies.

- Continue Mecklenburg Park & Rec's quest to reach a 30% program participation rate.

- Reduce the number of participants on program waitlists.

- Bolster the number of programs offered within and including nature centers. Ensure any newly created nature center has ample programming capacity.

- Activate plans to develop new programs with the highest Priority Investment Rating (PIR) and strongest market potential.

- Add active programs: jogging/running, theme park visits, yoga, hiking, weightlifting, zoo visits, basketball, bowling, aerobics, mountain bicycling, and dancing

- Add passive programs: museum visits, attending sporting events, board games, cooking, attending rock music performances, live theatre attendance, adult education courses, art gallery visits, video/electronic gaming (console), and painting/drawing.

- Add more mobile programming, specifically within nature centers and areas with gaps in access.

- Programs with the highest PIR and strong market potential are shown in Figure 6.11.

Once there is a need for greater program and facility space, it will be important to utilize the methodology described in Goal #6: Programming to prioritize program creation. Examining physical gaps, a metric like "programs per square foot," and community desires for particular facilities and programs will provide guidance on how to prioritize new offerings.

**Top Priorities for Investment in Programs**
Priority Investment Ranking from Statistically Valid Survey

| Program | Ranking |
|---|---|
| Fitness | 200 |
| Outdoor Adventure | 176 |
| Arts and Culture | 168 |
| Education and Life Skills | 134 |
| Senior | 132 |
| Aquatics | 120 |
| Therapeutic Rec. | 104 |

**6.11** Priority investments for programs.

# Where Do We Begin?

## Implementation

To achieve the vision for Meck Playbook, priorities for projects will help guide investments and ensure that Mecklenburg Park & Rec is able to implement projects aligned with changing economic, political, developmental conditions. The intent of the Implementation plan is to guide the progress of Meck Playbook in that every incremental step, no matter how small, advances the County's overall vision for the future.

It is recommended that the Strategic Business Plan be used to articulate implementation timelines and actions in concert with Capital Improvement Plan implementation. The SBP is a document updated quarterly that identifies departmental priorities and provides performance metrics to quantify success. Recommendations within the SBP are developed through guidance from the vision and goals of Mecklenburg Park &

Rec's Comprehensive Master Plan. Since SBP development occurs every three years, staff will use one Comprehensive Master Plan to guide the development of up to three SBPs. As the SBP is created by staff, it includes logistical knowledge of the County and Department practices and procedures. This ensures an implementation strategy is realistic and properly scaled.

Appendix 11 of Meck Playbook contains an initial Implementation Program. The program lists key actions from each Goal and Strategy. Each item is expanded to include a timeline to address the action, the party/parties responsible for the action, and any partners that should be involved. Staff have already begun to draft Mecklenburg Park & Recs next SBP using the key actions included within the Implementation Program. The new SBP begins is July 2022 (FY 2023).

|  | TIER ONE | | TIER TWO | | TIER THREE | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Reinvestments | Investments | Reinvestments | Investments | Reinvestments | Investments |
| **Parks & Nature Preserves** | 32 Local Parks<br>1 Special Use Park | 10 Parks (New)<br>5 Parks (Expansions)<br>1 Nature Preserve (New) | 9 Local Parks<br>1 Special Use Park<br>2 Nature Preserves | 9 Parks (New)<br>8 Parks (Expansions)<br>1 Previously Unfunded CIP Park Project<br>8 Nature Preserves (New)<br>1 Previously Unfunded CIP Nature Preserve Projects | 27 Local Parks<br>13 Regional Parks<br>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: | 1. Close access gaps, beginning in priority areas<br>2. Implement the Priority Capital Investment Greenway Trails<br>3. Balance growth with natural resource areas | Set land acquisition targets for CIP cycle<br><br>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 | | | | | |

# Acknowledgments

**Thank you to the thousands of voices who contributed to this plan through public workshops, in-person and online, through surveys, and on social media.**

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# Endnotes

## The Starting Line

**1** The Charlotte MSA represents seven counties in North Carolina and three in South Carolina. Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, "2018 Visitor Spending Hits A Record $7.4 Billion in Charlotte Region..." September 5, 2019
**2** Ibid
**3** Unless otherwise noted, the data, figures, and references for the "The Starting Line" were provided by the County.
**4** Asset and Facilities Management Department: Real Estate records, Mecklenburg County
**5** An additional 149.31 acres was in negotiation at the end of the fiscal year.
**6** Mecklenburg County, North Carolina Capital Improvement Plan FY2019-FY2023. Interactive Website. <meckgov.maps.arcgis.com>, Oct, 2020
**7** Ibid
**8** "Annual County Population Totals, 2010-2019."Office of Budget and Management, North Carolina.
**9** "Projected Annual Population Totals, 2020-2039." Office of Budget and Management, North Carolina

## Commit to Equity

**10** https://cityofraleigh0drupal.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/drupal-prod/COR22/CEPDPlaybook.pdf
**11** https://www.nycgovparks.org/planning-and-building/capital-project-tracker

## Evolve and Grow

**12** This number does not include easements. However, easements are often how land for greenway trails is acquired.
**13** Environmental Leadership Report, 2018 https://www.mecknc.gov/LUESA/sustainability/Documents/2018%20Sustainability%20Infographic.pdf
**14** "Guide for Raleigh Development Fees: Fee Development Schedule." July 1, 2019 - June 39, 2020 raleighnc.gov
**15** As of early 2021, there were 395 full time staff and 577 FTE's. FTE's represent the total number of staff positions converted into 40 hour/week units. This is an industry standard comparative unit. It does not include contracted staff or services.

## Move Beyond Boundaries

**16** " Strategic Mobility Plan Task Force Focuses on Equity-Based Transportation Planning," SustainCharlotte. Sept 1, 2020.
**17** "Strategic Mobility Plan: Task Force Report." Dec 2020.