

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND MATERIAL

In late 2002 the City Council formed a committee to undertake the task of preparing a Long Range Plan for Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces, with the assistance of city staff. The committee consisted of the Recreation Advisory Commission (RAC), plus additional members appointed by the City Council. Councilman and RAC Chair, Dave Kirlin chaired the planning group. The City's Parks and Recreation and Planning Departments worked together to support the Committee.

Recreation has been a part of Gastonia's community life since the city's beginning. Beginning in the late 1920's the city's textile mills sponsored athletic and recreational programs, especially in baseball. Gastonia's churches and service clubs such as the American Legion also sponsored recreational programs. Like in other North Carolina Cities seasonal recreation programs were established early on to keep idle youth active and out of trouble during the summer months.

Publicly provided parks and recreation have long been accepted as necessary to maintain a good quality of life in an urban environment. Although recreation and entertainment are increasingly available through private sources, it is the public parks and recreation areas that enhance Gastonia's civic and community life.

Gastonia's first City park was and is Lineberger Park, built on twenty acres of land at Garrison Blvd. (then, Seventh Ave,) and Chestnut Street. The City purchased ten acres of the land in 1927-28 and that land was matched with another ten acres donated by the Lineberger family. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) improved Lineberger Park during the 1930's. Rankin Lake Park was begun in the 1930's on the site of the City's raw water reservoir. It also was improved by the WPA. Sims Legion Park is another venerable Gastonia park, built on land donated by Brown Wilson in memory of Lt. Albert H. Sims, a World War II veteran. Sims Park was given originally to the American Legion Post 123, and it has been the home of American Legion, scholastic, little league and minor league professional baseball, as well as other sports and activities.

In the early 1960's, Gastonia began to take its recreation programs to the neighborhoods with the construction of Erwin Park and Recreation Center, followed closely by Phillips Recreation Center. Eventually four community recreation centers would be built, most recently the T. Jeffers Center in 1979. T. Jeffers Center and Roland Bradley Center (1977) were financed by federal Community Development Block Grant Dollars. Still to be built is a permanent southeast recreation center, which is now located at the National Guard Armory on Robinwood Road. In addition, the City converted the old NC Army National Guard Armory on West Franklin Boulevard to an Adult Recreation Center in the early 1980's.

The City of Gastonia's recreational facilities include parks, community centers, athletic fields, swimming pools, a baseball stadium, a golf course, and finally a greenway. Much of the focus on City investment in recreation has been in active recreation and athletics.

A well planned and well maintained park and open space system will not only meet the recreational needs of the residents of Gastonia, but will also help project a strong community image. Gastonia’s parks and open spaces are a source of civic pride for a community that cares for its valuable natural areas.

Gastonia’s parks and community centers serve overlapping functions, with generally one large park and/or community center for each sector of the City. Lineberger Park is Gastonia’s flagship park, with a central location and a variety of active and passive recreation opportunities. Rankin Lake is another large park that also provides both active and passive recreation.

The following table is a summary inventory of Gastonia’s park and recreation facilities:

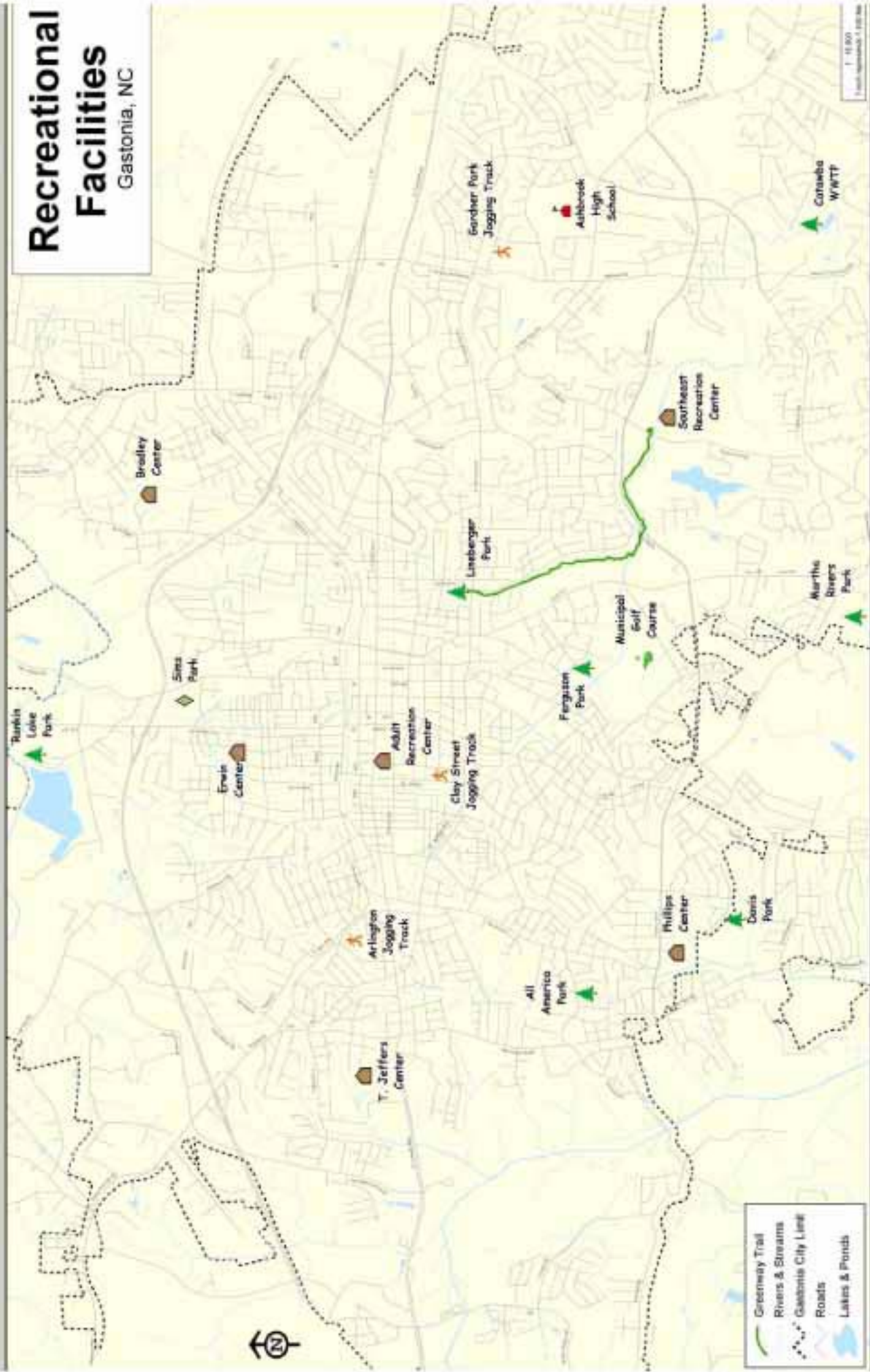
**Figure 1
Recreational Facilities**

FACILITIES	AMENITIES														
	Instructional Programs	Ceramics Room	Game Room	Activity Room	Gymnasium	Weight Room	Athletic Fields	Jogging Track	Picnic Area	Playground	Swimming Pool	Tennis Courts	Outdoor Basketball	Skating	Sand Volleyball
1. Ferguson Park							•			•		•			
2. Lineberger Park							•		•	•	•		•	•	
3. Linwood Park							•		•	•					
4. Hunter Huss Tennis Courts												•			
5. Rankin Lake Park				•					•	•					
6. Adult Recreation Center	•	•	•	•											
7. Erwin Center	•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
8. Phillips Center	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•
9. Bradley Center	•		•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•		
10. Southeast Center	•				•										
11. T. Jeffers Center	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	•		
12. Arlington Jogging Track															
13. Clay Street Jogging Track															
14. Gardner Park Jogging Track															
15. Martha Rivers Park							•	•	•	•					•
16. Memorial Hall															
17. Ashbrook Tennis Courts												•			
18. Skeet & Trap Range															
19. Municipal Golf Course															
20. Sims Legion Park							•								
21. Greenway															

Parks, Recreation, and Open Spaces can be a source of civic pride. Crowders Mountain State Park is an enormous source of pride for Gastonia. So is the new Martha Rivers Park, which provides one of the premier youth sports complexes in the region; and probably the region’s best playground. The playground effort organized thousands of local citizens giving tens of thousands of volunteer hours and donated dollars to build it.

Recreational Facilities

Gastonia, NC



The health benefits of physical activity are well documented and accepted as medical fact. In America's modern industrialized and technological society we have, to a great degree, engineered effort from life. Once, physical activity was a matter of human survival. For many people today, physical effort is less a part of work and even less a part of other day-to-day activities. And unfortunately, our sedentary lifestyles begin in childhood. While lifespan has increased with sanitation and advances in medical science, our sedentary lives are having a profound effect on morbidity—including cardiovascular disease, cancers, obesity, diabetes, and many others. For instance, Type II Diabetes, often associated with later adulthood obesity, is now becoming commonplace in childhood due to the epidemic increase in childhood obesity.

Recreational facilities and programs promote community health. While many persons can afford physical activity through private pay venues, many citizens need free-use public facilities for exercise. Our facilities do and should exist to *entice* their use by all of us, thus stimulating our physical activity. How easy it is to skip exercise after a busy day! Parks, recreation, and open spaces promote mental health. It's no accident that the term "recreation" means to re-create—to allow us to re-create ourselves so that we maintain a healthy mental state and productive lives, day-to-day.



THIS BREATHTAKING VIEW FROM ATOP CROWDERS MOUNTAIN (LOOKING EAST TOWARD GASTONIA) CAN BE A "RE-CREATING" EXPERIENCE FOR SOME—AND AN EXCELLENT WORKOUT FOR ANYONE JUST TO GET TO THE VIEWPOINT!

Economic Benefits of Parks, Recreation and Open Space

Often overlooked are the economic benefits of parks and recreation programs and facilities as well as open spaces. Most people can easily cite the benefits parks, recreation and open space provide their community. These benefits include enhanced quality of life, improved ecological systems, a sense of community, and saved scenic vistas, to name a few. These all improve the physical health of the community. Providing these facilities and spaces also improves the fiscal health of the city. There is a growing body of evidence that asserts that parks and open space bring considerable economic benefits to the community. The way to measure their economic benefits can be categorized into two main areas: the increased real estate value based on the proximity to a park and the additional revenue businesses, tourists and retirees bring to a community because of good parks, recreation facilities and open spaces.

Enhancing Real Estate Values

John L. Crompton's report, *The Impact of Parks and Open Space on Property Values and the Property Tax Base*, lays out the argument: "The real estate market consistently demonstrates that many people are willing to pay a larger amount for a property located close to parks and open space areas than for a home that does not offer this amenity." Crompton, a professor of recreation, park and tourism sciences at Texas A&M University, points out that higher property values mean higher property-tax income for the city. Thus, the parkland is "capitalized" into increased property values of proximate landowners.

The process of capitalization is called the "proximate principle." It means that the increased value of properties located near a park will pay the cost of maintaining the facility. The amount of revenue realized diminishes the further away the property is located to the park. Frederick Law Olmstead was one of the earliest proponents of this method. He used the proximate principle to garner support for New York City's Central Park. Think about the far-reaching impacts of Olmstead's vision today: Manhattan's Central Park sits on some of the most valuable real estate in the world. But if New York City, in an act of desperation were to sell off the land for development, the value of all of Manhattan's real estate would soon be severely diminished. The City would be unlivable without the park!

Open Space Pays

- **Salem, OR:** Land adjacent to a greenbelt was found to be worth about \$1,200 an acre more than land only 1,000 feet away.
- **Oakland, CA:** A three-mile greenbelt around Lake Merritt near the city center was found to add \$41 million to surrounding property values.
- **Front Royal, VA:** A developer who donated a 50-foot-wide, seven-mile long easement along a popular trail sold all 50 parcels bordering the trail in only four months.
- **Dayton, OH:** Five percent of the selling price of homes near the Cox Arboretum and park was attributable to the proximity of that open space.
- **Seattle, WA:** Homes bordering the 12-mile Burke Gilman trail sold for 6 percent more than other homes of comparable size.

The principle of proximate value of capitalizing parks became an important element in the entire New York City park system and many other park systems throughout the country in the late 19th century. This theory is helpful in justifying the installation of new facilities because they are obtained at no long-term cost to the jurisdiction.

“I have all my life been considering distant effects and always sacrificing immediate success and applause to that of the future”

Frederick Law Olmsted

Attracting New Money

Business Recruitment Previously, the formula for business recruitment played heavily on a city’s water, sewer and road systems. While all of these remain important, today’s knowledge-based economy has added another element to the mix – the quality of life. Many location recruiters give high scores to amenities such as entertainment, recreation, and cultural events. A recent study of “footloose” companies (knowledge based) and “traditional” companies (manufacturing and distribution) examined the role quality of life plays in the relocation decision. The footloose companies considered it the most important element of the equation, while traditional companies rated it ninth out of eleven components.



Tourism A tourist can be classified into four categories: the business traveler, the family or friend visitor, the convention attendee or the pleasure traveler. Of these four types, municipalities can most influence the destination decision of the pleasure traveler. Their major

factor in choosing a destination is the quantity and quality of local attractions. Many of these are municipal park and recreation facilities, such as: passive parks, festivals, athletic tournaments and museums.

San Antonio citizens envisioning a riverfront park in the early 1900s prevented engineers from burying the San Antonio River. Today the famous Riverwalk consists of 2-1/2 miles of a beautifully landscaped waterfront that feature many of San Antonio’s most spectacular hotels, shopping areas and businesses. Constructed for \$425,000, the Riverwalk has overtaken the Alamo as the single most popular attraction for the city’s \$3.5-billion tourist industry. And, it is the most visited tourist attraction in all of Texas.

In July, the United States Specialty Sports Association chose Martha Rivers Park to host their 2004 world baseball tournament. The event brought 32 teams to Gastonia for eight days. They stayed at local hotels, ate at local restaurants and shopped at local stores. According to Vickie Riddle of Gaston County Travel and Tourism, the economic impact of this event was \$531,533.

Retirees According to the 2000 census, in terms of per-capita disposable income in the United States, the 55-59, 60-64 and 65-69 age cohorts are wealthier than any other 5-year age-range cohorts. While many retirees chose to age in place, many others search for a new location that will provide the types of services they will need in their later years.

“Accumulating evidence indicates that open space conservation is not an expense, but an investment that produces important economic benefits.”

-Will Rogers, President the Trust for Public Land

Some of the most important concerns are medical facilities, crime, climate and recreational activities. Life expectancy rates are increasing and in 2006, the first of the baby boomers will turn 60 years old. Attracting and retaining what will probably be the most affluent and activity-oriented group of retirees, will require an exciting mix of recreational and cultural activities. Failing to provide an appropriate activity mix will likely result in an eroded tax base by the loss of retirees’ spending power.

KEY ISSUES

- Gastonia’s athletic facilities are showing the wear and tear as a result of the exponential growth in organized youth sports.
- Gastonia’s facilities have not kept up with changes in recreational and leisure preferences.
- The City of Gastonia has not built any new community centers since the T. Jeffers Center in 1979.
- Despite the opening of Martha Rivers Youth Sports Complex in 1999, the demand for youth (boys & girls) practice and game fields continues to exceed the amount of space available.
- There is a serious lack of appropriately sized outdoor athletic fields for adult competition.
- The fastest-growing and most populous area of the city, southeast Gastonia, lacks an anchor public recreational facility, i.e., a community center with a large park.
- Gastonia does not have an adequate year-round facility for competition aquatic sports.
- Many recreational facilities have a regional focus, and the planning and operation of regional facilities should be coordinated with Gaston County, the schools, and the towns surrounding Gastonia.

- Schools are an important recreational asset. Joint projects and sharing of facilities are two policies that should continue to be encouraged by the City and the Gaston County Schools.
- Gastonia was slow to embrace the concept of a park system interconnected by greenways with bicycle and pedestrian trails, and thus lags behind competing cities in offering this amenity, which is important for economic development and the attraction of new families to the community. The City has many corridors of open land suitable for greenways, but insufficient tools for protecting or acquiring this land.
- Parks, trails and other recreation facilities are sometimes regarded as NIMBY's (Not In My BackYard). Citizen involvement at the earliest stage possible in planning new recreational facilities can help build trust, forestall misinformation and create momentum for accomplishing goals.
- Gastonia is growing and there is no formalized policy or mechanism to ensure the addition of public parks and open spaces commensurate with such growth and urbanization. Recreational land, as with any other public land, is easier and less expensive to acquire before an area is in the midst of growth. A land-banking program would save the City money over the long term.

TRENDS IN RECREATION

Several trends are expected to influence the development and administration of parks, open space and recreation in Gastonia. Future demographic forces will shape the demand for recreation in Gastonia.

- As the baby boom generation ages, the proportion of people in middle age and older will increase. This age group (50-65 years old in 2010) will have increasing amounts of leisure time and will probably be more active than the previous generation.
- Increases in single-parent families may signal a need to provide more recreational opportunities through after-school programs, day care and other means.
- Gastonia's high population growth to the east and southeast will create a greater demand for parks and recreational facilities in those sectors of the City.
- The amount of State and Federal aid for park projects will shrink if not disappear. Local funds must be considered the only reliable source for meeting Gastonia's future needs.

- These trends point toward increased use of parks and recreation facilities for less organized pursuits, such as walking and cycling, and children’s playground activities. In addition, while the demand for more flexible open space grows, the resources for acquiring that space will probably shrink. The City must search for innovative ways of providing for the changing needs of the residents of Gastonia.

Recommendation for Level of Service

The table below shows Level of Service (LOS) standards for park and recreation facilities as recommended by the NRPA (or by the State of North Carolina when there is no national recommendation). These numbers are not “minimally acceptable standards” of park and recreation facilities; rather they are targets to strive toward for an optimum level of service for the community. (Totals were rounded off.)

Facility type	Recommended standard Per population	Facility Needs 2000 census (pop. 66,277)	Facility Inventory 2004	2020 Facility Goals (on pop. Projection of 110,000)
Adult baseball fields (lighted)	1/20,000	3	5	6
Youth baseball/adult softball	1/5000	13	11	22
Ball field (soccer, football)	1/5000	13	7	22
Basketball courts	1/5000	13	5	22
Tennis courts	1/2000	33	48	55
Picnic tables	1/125	530	170	880
Picnic shelters	1/2000	33	18	55
Playgrounds	1/1000	66	10	110
Trails	0.4 mile/1000	27	6	44
Recreation Center w/gym	1/25,000	3	6	5
Swimming pool	1/20,000	3	2	5
Golf course (9-hole)	1/25,000	3	0	4
Golf course (18-hole)	1/50,000	1	1	2
Open Space/Park Land	16 acres/1000	1060	442**	1,760
Dog Park*	1/50,000	1	0	2
Skateboard Park*	1/50,000	1	1	2

*No national standard established; recommendation based on community input.

**City lands only. Does not include lake at Rankin Lake Park or Golf course playing area. CSMP=5,094 ac