

6

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

GASTONIA'S RECREATIONAL
INFRASTRUCTURE

GREENWAYS

LAND ASSEMBLY & FUNDING
SOURCES

ISSUES

OBJECTIVES & TOOLS



Open Space, Parks & Recreation



OPEN SPACE, PARKS & RECREATION

Goal

To provide a variety of active and passive recreation opportunities, and to preserve valuable open space for the enjoyment of the residents of Gastonia.

Why is it Important?

Gastonia's increased growth rate has made the preservation and construction of parks, recreational facilities, and open space more critical than in the past. Because of the tremendous amount of residential and commercial growth occurring in previously undeveloped areas, particularly in the southeast, the City must take steps to ensure that large tracts of land are set aside for open space preservation and future recreational needs. These large tracts, combined with Crowders Mountain State Park, existing local parks, potential greenways along creek corridors, the nearby Daniel Stowe Botanical Gardens, and recent conservancy acquisitions all provide the elements for Gastonia to be known as the region's "Green Community." Creating linkages and connections to these places will draw attention to them, make their use easy and help ensure their success. If marketed properly, these assets could make Gastonia stand out within the region, by attracting people and businesses to the area, and making Gastonia a great place to visit. The Gastonia of the future will have an abundance of parks and open spaces with connecting greenways that accommodate the variety of recreational needs of a growing and diverse population.

Recreation has been a part of Gastonia's community life since the City's inception. Gastonia's textile mills sponsored athletic and recreational programs and area churches and service clubs also sponsored recreational programs. In addition, the City's public parks and recreational facilities have greatly contributed to the social fabric and quality of life in Gastonia. A quality municipal parks and recreation system is vital to the growth and development of the City. It also provides the community with substantial health and economic benefits to the community.

HEALTH BENEFITS

Studies show that fewer adults and children are engaging in daily, moderate physical activity. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention:

- 61% of North Carolina adults are overweight or obese;
- 22% of non-Hispanic white adults, 36% of non-Hispanic black adults, and 21% of Hispanic adults in North Carolina are obese; and
- 27% of North Carolina high school students are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

Beyond cosmetic concern and quality of life issues, obesity has been identified as a contributing factor to many chronic diseases and conditions in both adults and children, including hypertension, type-2 diabetes, colon cancer, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, and coronary heart disease. In addition, health care costs associated with our sedentary lifestyles, and obesity-related illnesses are on the



rise, with costs for treatment estimated at over \$78 billion annually.

Recreational facilities and programs and open space promote community health by allowing us to “re-create” ourselves so that we maintain a healthy mental and physical state and lead productive lives. While many people can afford physical activity through private membership clubs, there are still a large number of citizens in need of free public facilities for exercise. Free, public recreation within a community is a matter of civic responsibility and promotes the common good for all citizens.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

There is evidence of the economic benefits of green space and recreational facilities through increased real estate values based on the property's proximity to these features. In addition, these amenities create desirable communities, helping to improve business recruitment, tourism, and retaining retirees.

Enhancing Real Estate Values: There is a myth that properties diminish in value due to their proximity to green space, such as parks and greenways, but the opposite is true. Studies show that many people are willing to pay more for property located close to parks and open space areas than for a property that does not offer this amenity. Higher property values mean higher property-tax income for the city. Professor John L. Crompton, professor of recreation, park and tourism services at Texas A&M University argues that park land is “capitalized” into increased property values of proximate (nearby) landowners through a process called the “proximate principle”. This 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 from the park.

Business Recruitment: In today's knowledge-based economy, businesses are adding quality of life to their list of factors affecting business location. Many location recruiters give high scores to amenities such as entertainment, recreation, parks, open spaces, and cultural events. In order for Gastonia to diversify its economy and attract and retain knowledge-based companies, the City must strategically invest in these quality of life factors.



Tourism: Parks, greenways, and open spaces can attract visitors from other communities. Within the region, Gastonia could be known as the place to go for hiking, biking, and recreating, especially as other parts of the region become more urbanized without dedicating areas for parks and green spaces. In July 2002, the United States Specialty Sports Association chose Martha Rivers Park to host the 2004 world baseball tournament. The event, which brought 32 teams to Gastonia for eight days, is an example of such recreation/open space related tourism. Participants and fans stayed at local hotels, ate at local restaurants, and shopped at local stores. According to the Gaston County Travel and Tourism, the economic impact of this event was \$531,533.

Retaining 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 (individually) are wealthier than any other five-year age range (individually).

“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

Figure 6-1: List of Parks & Locations

Park	Location
Bradley Park	N. Modena St
Crowder's Mountain State Park	Linwood Rd
East Park	Hemlock St
Erwin Park	North Pryor St
Ferguson Park	Golf Course Dr
Lineberger Park	Garrison Blvd
All American Park (formerly Linwood Park)	Garland Ave
Martha Rivers Park	Neil Hawkins Rd
North Park	Rankin Ave
Phillips Park	Echo Lane
T. Jeffers Park	Whitener St
Rankin Lake Park	Rankin Lake Rd
Sims Legion Park	N. Marietta St
Gastonia Municipal Golf Course	Niblick Dr

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. Attracting and retaining what may be the most affluent and activity-oriented group of retirees, will require an exciting mix of recreational and cultural activities.

Public recreation within a community is a matter of civic responsibility and promotes the common good for all citizens. It also provides residents with an aesthetically pleasing environment in which to live and work. The City should implement the recommendations set forth in the *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020* by actively maintaining existing facilities, making upgrades to older facilities, and planning for and constructing new facilities in areas with an inadequate level of service.

Gastonia's Recreational Infrastructure

A well planned and well maintained park and open space system is one that not only meets the recreational needs of the residents of Gastonia, but also helps project a strong community image. Gastonia's parks and open spaces are a source of civic pride for a community that cares about 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 recreational opportunities. Rankin Lake is another large park that also

provides both active and passive recreation.

Crowders Mountain State Park is an enormous source of pride for Gastonia. Located just southwest of Gastonia, Crowders Mountain is an outstanding scenic and recreational asset, attracting people from the entire region. The newest addition to the Gastonia park system, the Youth Sports Complex at Martha Rivers Park on Neil Hawkins Road in southeast Gastonia, is also a Gastonia gem. The Youth Sports Complex, which opened in 1999, provides one of the region's premier youth sports complexes and playgrounds. The playground effort organized thousands of local citizens that gave tens of thousands of volunteer hours and funding to build it.

In addition to the City-owned parks and community centers, the City of Gastonia has a joint-use agreement

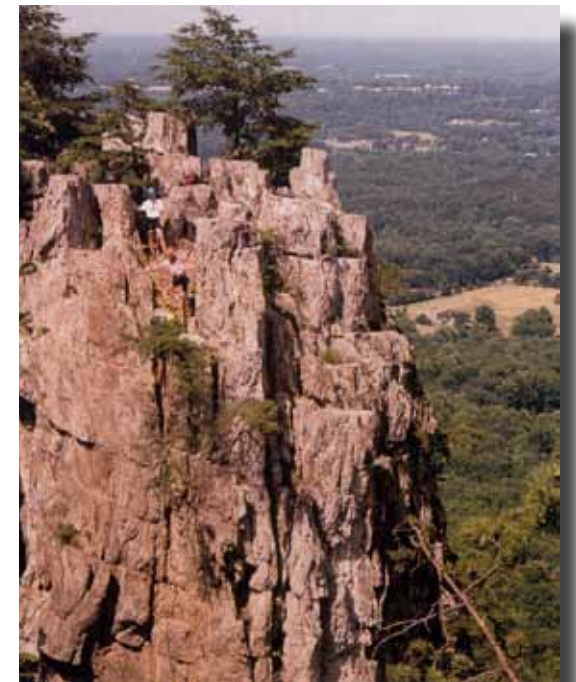


Figure 6-2: List of Community Centers & Locations

Sector	Rec Center	Location
Northeast	Bradley Center	N. Modena St
Central	Erwin Center	N. Morris St
Southwest	Phillips Center	Echo Lane
Southeast	Armory	Robinwood Rd
Northwest	T. Jeffers Center	Whitener St
Citywide	Adult Rec Center	W. Franklin Blvd



CROWDERS MOUNTAIN STATE PARK

Crowders Mountain became a state park in 1973 as the result of a citizens' movement in Gaston County. A group of local citizens formed the Gaston County Conservation Society in response to a threat to mine the Mountain. This group was able to convince state officials of the importance of preserving this unique natural resource. A portion of Crowders Mountain State Park was annexed into the City of Gastonia in August 1996, adding a superb natural and recreational resource to the City.

The park currently encompasses 5,100 acres. This total includes the recent addition of 2000 acres, primarily in Cleveland County, which will protect the entire Kings Mountain ridgeline and join Crowders Mountain State Park to Kings Mountain State Park and Kings Mountain National Military Battleground in South Carolina. Crowders Mountain State Park offers a contrast to the rapidly developing counties in Piedmont North and South Carolina. One of the major issues for the park is the encroachment of development around the park boundary, making the acquisition of additional properties more difficult. The NC Division of Parks and Recreation seeks to add properties to the park for resource protection, access control, the construction of new recreational facilities, and to protect the scenic and biological integrity of the park. Another issue is the character of development surrounding the park and its impact on the park experience, from a visual, environmental, and ecological standpoint.

In 2006, the park had roughly 350,000 visitors. Park visitation is expected to increase over the next 20 years, due to approximately 20% of North Carolina's population, and 20% of South Carolina's population, being within a 50-mile radius of the park. The park offers a variety of hiking trails ranging from the more rugged trails leading to the summit, to the flat, easy trails circling the nine-acre park lake. Canoes for use on the lake can be rented during summer months and bank fishing is allowed. The park also includes an office with display area, multiple picnic tables, grilling areas, and several large shelters.

New initiatives and activities to be considered for the future include:

- facilities for backpack camping,
- horse and mountain bike trails,
- pedestrian trail improvements and extensions, and
- the purchase of an additional Ranger residence.

Other goals include limiting automobile use in the area by road closures, maintaining the rural nature of the park experience and safety of hikers through narrow streets and rural street drainage systems and constructing a new access area in Cleveland County with a new contact station, maintenance building, Ranger residence, and public parking. These new facilities will provide public parking and access to the seven-mile Ridgeline Trail that will connect the current Pinnacle Trail to trails to be built in Kings Mountain State Park and Kings Mountain National Military Park.



Figure 6-3: Crowders Mountain State Park

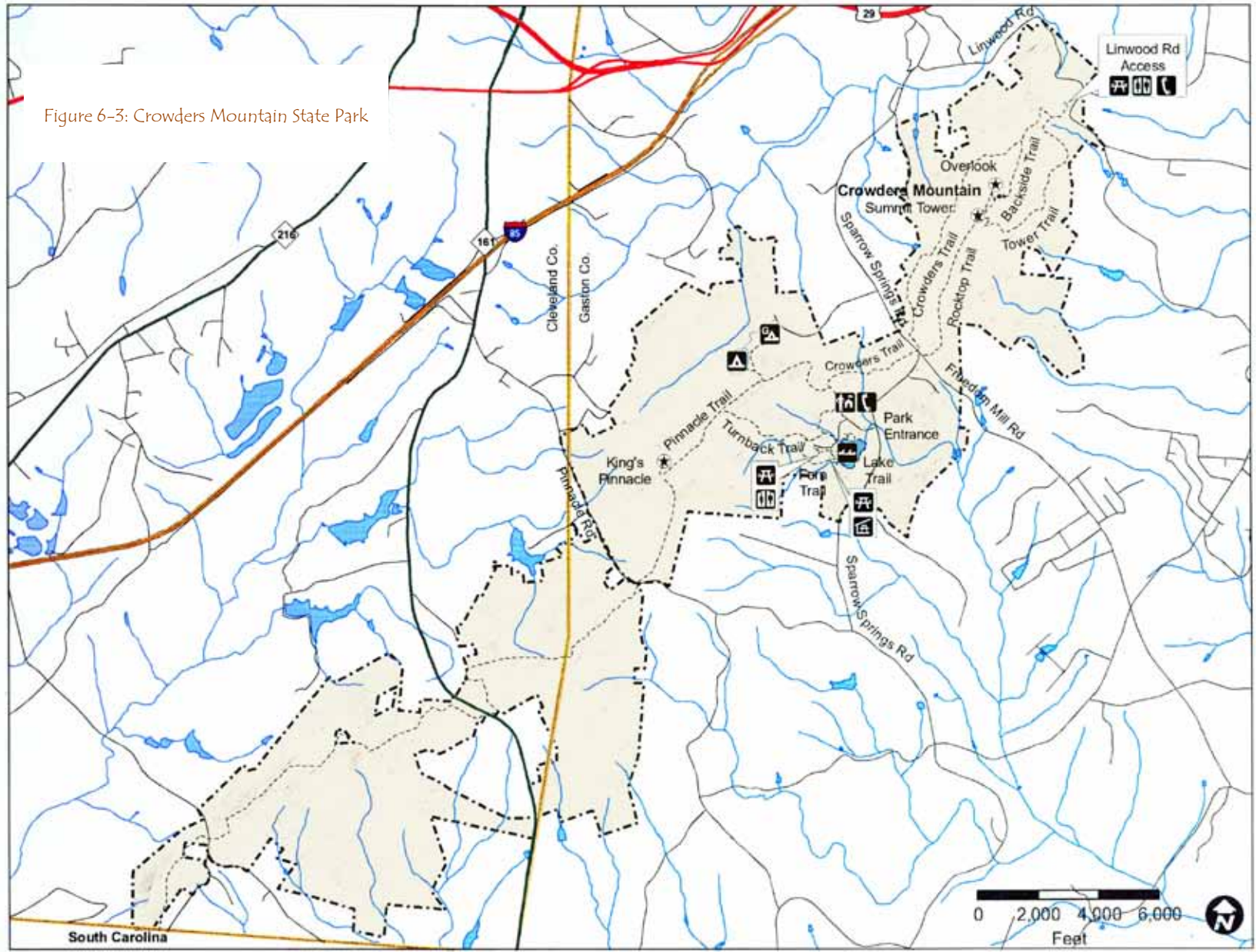


Figure 6-4: Recreational Facilities

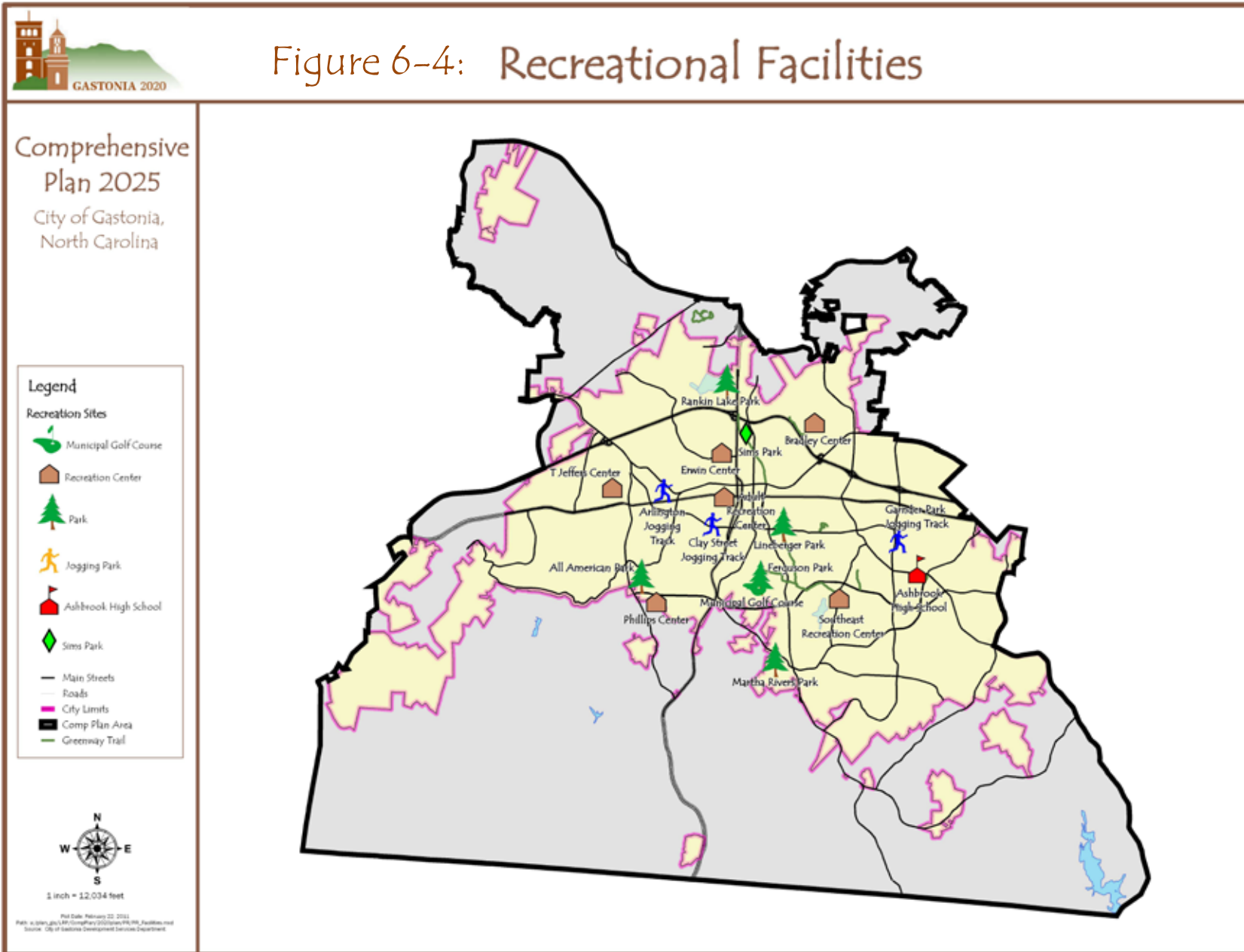


Figure 6-5: Inventory of Gastonia’s Park and Recreational Facilities and Amenities Offered At Each

FACILITIES	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. All American Park									•	•					
4. Hunter Huss High School												•			
5. Rankin Lake Park				•					•	•					
6. Adult Recreation Center	•	•	•	•											
7. Erwin Center	•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
8. Phillips Center	•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•
9. Bradley Center	•		•	•	•		•		•	•		•	•		
10. Southeast Center	•				•										
11. T. Jeffers Center	•		•	•	•		•		•	•		•	•		
13. Clay Street Jogging Track								•							
14. Gardner Park Jogging Track								•							
15. Martha Rivers Park							•	•	•	•					•
16. Memorial Hall															
17. Ashbrook High School												•			
18. Skeet & Trap Range															
19. Municipal Golf Course															
20. Sims Legion Park							•								
21. Greenway															
22. Smyre Millennium Park								•	•						
23. Gardner Park Elementary School								•			•				
24. East Park									•	•					
25. I.C. Falls Park								•	•	•			•		
26. Rhyne Elementary School								•							
27. Woodhill Elementary School								•							
28. Sherwood Elementary School								•							

Community Centers provide gymnasiums, clubrooms and game rooms, and are available for use by the public. Supervised recreational activities are available at the community centers.

Parks provide open space enjoyment and a variety of active and passive recreation activities.



Figure 6-6: Level of Service (LOS) Standards for Park & Recreation Facilities

with Gaston County Schools. This increases the number of walking and jogging tracks and tennis courts that are available to the public.

Additional recreational opportunities are available through Gaston County, which maintains its own parks and recreational programs. Other recreational facilities available in and around Gastonia include church-sponsored activities, such as family life centers, the YMCA, the two boy's clubs, the Optimist Club and school activities.

RECOMMENDATION FOR LEVEL OF SERVICE

Figure 6-6 shows Level of Service (LOS) standards for park and recreational facilities as recommended by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) or by the State of North Carolina when there is no national recommendation. The table gives the recommended number of various recreational facilities that a city should have based upon its population. The recommended number of facilities is compared to the number of those facilities within the City, as well as the City's goals for those facilities in the future.

These numbers are not "minimally acceptable standards" of park and recreational facilities; rather they are targets to strive toward for an optimum level of service for the community. (Totals were rounded off to the nearest...)

The planning area for the City of Gastonia includes areas outside of the City's corporate boundaries that could be annexed into the City in the future. Gaston County currently provides parks and recreational amenities and maintains services and facilities in these areas. Currently, there are two park facilities within Gastonia's planning area, that are outside the

Facility type	Recommended standard per population	Facility needs (based on population as of July 1, 2009 (pop. 75,280) ¹	Facility inventory 2011	2020 Facility goals (based on population projection of 110,000)
Adult baseball fields (lighted)	1/20,000	3	5	6
Youth baseball/adult softball	1/5000	15	11	22
Ball field (soccer, football)	1/5000	15	7	22
Basketball courts	1/5000	15	5	22
Tennis courts	1/2000	38	46	55
Picnic tables	1/125	600	195	880
Picnic shelters	1/2000	38	23	55
Playgrounds	1/1000	75	11	110
Trails	0.4 mile/1000	30	9	44
Recreation Center w/ gym	1/25,000	3	6	5
Swimming pool	1/20,000	4	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	1200	587	1,760
Dog Park	1/50,000	1	0	2
Skateboard Park	1/50,000	1	1	2

¹ Population as of July 1, 2009 based on the Official Municipal Estimate with July 1, 2009 boundaries as determined by the NC State Demographer, Office of State Budget and Management.





ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORTS

Gastonia has seen an exponential increase in participation in youth sports activities over the past 15 years, with a total increase of 654% in the City's baseball, softball and soccer leagues. This growth spurred the plan for a Youth Sports Complex at the existing Martha Rivers Park. In 1995, the Gastonia City Council, Gaston County Commissioners, and the Gaston County School Board collectively worked to deed an existing 20-acre passive park at Martha Rivers Park, and 34 adjoining acres, originally purchased as a future school site, to the City for the proposed Complex. The City then purchased an additional three acres for approximately \$300,000, bringing the total park size to 57.95 acres. On October 23, 1997, ground was broken on the new complex and it opened exactly two years later on October 23, 1999.

The Youth Sports Complex at Martha Rivers Park is one of Gaston County's premier youth recreational facilities. The complex includes: four ball fields, four lighted soccer/athletic fields, a stunning one acre playground, two large picnic shelters, a sand volleyball court, horseshoe pits, approximately two miles of asphalt walkway, 110 additional parking spaces and other amenities.

The playground at Martha Rivers Park covers approximately one acre and was built with the assistance of hundreds of community volunteers over a six-month period. Over \$350,000 in private donations was raised by volunteers for the project. Upon completion, the appraised value was over \$600,000. In 2009, volunteers raised \$160,000 to complete minor restoration projects, which include repainting, replacing outdated equipment, and replacement of rubber surfaced walkways and play areas throughout the park that are used by all but suitable for the physically challenged.

Future phases include a corporate picnic shelter and a full-scale community center. The *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks and Recreation, 2005-2020* recommends that a recreation center be built to serve southeast Gastonia due to the tremendous amount of growth occurring there.

The updates at Martha Rivers Park have been very successful, making the park a popular destination and a great source of community pride. However, despite the popularity of the complex, the City lacks a centrally located youth sports and recreation facility. Also, more space is needed as the demand for youth practice and game fields continues to exceed the amount of space available.



Figure 6-7: List of Recommendations for City Park & Recreation Facilities

current City limits. As the planning area develops, and is potentially annexed into the City, the City will plan for new, City-owned recreational facilities and services to meet the corresponding increase in population and level of service as recommended by the National Recreation and Park Association. In addition, school recreational facilities in the planning area will remain part of the recreational network if annexed into the City.

FACILITY NEEDS

The *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020* includes an inventory of the state of amenities offered at each City park and recreational facility and makes the recommendations listed in the Figure 6-7.

TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

Recreational facilities, services, and open space amenities are dependant on area demographic trends. As the city experiences growth and development, newer areas such as the Southeast Sector may be delayed in getting new city parks and recreational services. Conversely, if older areas suffer from population loss and private disinvestment, they may also suffer from municipal disinvestments in new recreational amenities, as well as inadequate maintenance of existing facilities.

As people go through various life stages, their abilities and preferences for physical and leisure activities change. Young adults, particularly single professionals, may look for solo or group exercise opportunities such as greenways and trails bicycle paths and jogging tracks. While senior citizens may also enjoy greenway trails, they may be more interested in activities offered at recreation centers. Families with children are likely to seek out playgrounds, athletic fields, aquatic facilities, and picnic areas.

Facility	Recommendations
Lineberger Park	Rebuild park including recommendations from the Lineberger Park Master Plan, expansion of parking adjacent to the park, reconstruction of the pool bathhouse.
Erwin Center/ Park	Update playground, update ball field, install water fountains, replace gym floor and update gym, replace bathhouse roof, various outdoor enhancements.
Phillips Center/ Park and adjacent Davis Park Tract	Replace gym floor, replace weight room equipment, update playground, resurface and landscape parking area, resurface tennis courts, replace/update interior lighting, replace lobby doors and furniture, add activity room/storage, install water fountains, construct outdoor basketball court, construct press box/concession/restroom facilities for ball area, add picnic shelter, connect to Davis Park, add amenities.
Roland E. Bradley Center/ Park	Build storage/activity room to gym, replace gym floor, minor building improvements, outdoor improvements, rebuild tennis courts, add picnic shelters, water fountains, landscaping, volleyball court, install lighted ball field with fencing, construct park trail system, provide for beautification and pedestrian access, construct press box and concession and restrooms for main ball field, add bleachers to main ball field, upgrade playground.
T. Jeffers Center	Build new storage/activity room, replace gym floor, misc. bldg. Improvements, landscaping, water fountains, resurface tennis courts, update picnic shelters, resurface parking lots and build entrance walks, construct paved trail system, improve walking track, misc. outdoor improvements, enlarge press box, screen ball field from Wal-Mart, update playground.
Rankin Lake Park	Replace clubhouse roof, refinish exterior with stone or brick, upgrade playground and add second playground, landscaping and drainage, update/repair shelters and move shelter Number 4 from floodplain, return lake to clean public access, build attendant station, remove City storage from north end, piers, docks, and decks, Lake Pavilion, trail around lake, corporate picnic pavilion, interconnecting trail with County park and Gaston College, build three new picnic shelters, repair constructed wetland.
Skeet and Trap Range	Remodel manager's building and add restrooms, add storage facilities, staff with full-time range manager and two part-time seasonal employees.
Ferguson Park	Update softball fields, construct warm-up area inside fence, resurface tennis courts, pave parking areas, extend greenway trail through park, landscaping and walks, update playground.
Gastonia Municipal Golf Course	Irrigation upgrades, rebuild tee complexes, build driving range facility, relocate front half of Hole #10, rebuild sand traps, install two distant restrooms.
Sims Legion Park	Renovate press box and restrooms, add a backup scoreboard, replace lighting and poles, replace backstop netting, repair outfield wall, repave, landscape parking lot of main ball park, build a lighted softball field at southwest corner of park, relocate BMX track, build two lighted fields at present location of fields, explore the feasibility of creating a joint-use softball complex in the North Chester/Highland area.



DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

The Growth Patterns and Directions Chapter of this plan includes age trend maps that show the percentage of people within different age cohorts and where they reside. A large percentage of young people under the age of 18 are clustered in the moderate to low income areas of Highland and west Gastonia. Another pronounced concentration of people under 18 is shown in south Gastonia. Thus, recreational facilities that serve the under 18 population are needed in these areas. Gastonia has seen an exponential increase in participation in youth sports activities over the past 15 years. While the Youth Sports Complex at Martha's River Park is a great asset to the City, it is not centrally located to allow adequate accessibility, nor does it meet the demand of the City's youth.

The 18 to 34 age group is relatively absent in the most affluent areas of southeast Gastonia, and seems to occupy the more modest residential areas of west Gastonia and near northeast Gastonia. This could be because this age group is generally less affluent because they are just entering into their careers and make less money starting out than those in the 35 to 59-age cohort. In addition, those in the 18 to 34 age cohort have less disposable income than those in the older cohorts because they are taking on extra costs such as buying their first home and having children. These areas should have a balance of recreational facilities for active adults and families with children.

It is not surprising that a large percentage of people in their prime earning years, those in the 35 to 59-age cohort, are most concentrated in the more affluent sections of southeast Gastonia. In comparison, this age group is notably absent in the older parts of Gastonia, including west Gastonia, the Center City, and other inner city areas. Gastonia's high population growth to the east and southeast will create greater demand for parks and recreational facilities in those sectors of the City. As this area continues to grow, it will require additional recreational facilities and amenities targeting active adults and seniors as well as families with children.

This growth trend indicates that the current need for facilities in the southeast area will only become more critical over the next 15 years. In order to meet the City's parks and recreational services system goal of "regional community centers," the City will need to add a minimum of one, preferably two, new community centers to the southeast area of Gastonia. The recommended facilities should consist of a park and athletic facility on a new site west of New Hope Road. A new community center could be located on the grounds of Martha Rivers Park.

Other parts of the Gastonia area that will receive moderate rates of growth and could benefit from additional facilities include: areas near Crowders Mountain, areas between Gastonia and Bessemer City and west of NC 275, and areas northeast of the city along Long Creek.

Population maps show that a cluster of senior residents near the hospital area and in older traditional residential areas that could be considered the first ring of Gastonia's "inner suburbs." Many of the areas showing high percentages of older people contain larger numbers of nursing homes, active senior communities, and apartment complexes occupied by seniors. The City must meet the recreational needs of the growing number of active seniors in these areas by providing amenities that meet their activity levels, such as greenway and walking trails, jogging tracks, passive parks, fishing ponds, and recreational centers that offer various classes and activities that target the senior population.

Despite these trends, it is crucial to understand that the highest densities of population, where there are a larger number of people per square mile, still tend to be in the downtown and surrounding areas of Gastonia's urban core. The recreational facilities in the Central City are generally older than those found elsewhere the City and require updating. It is crucial that a variety of recreational facilities and amenities be located in the Center City in order to take advantage of its central location and easy accessibility to a large number of residents, as well as to revitalize downtown and make it a destination for both people and businesses.



Greenways

As Gastonia expands and grows outward, there is an opportunity to preserve and make use of some of the City's best natural assets. The development of greenways can provide the community with miles of paths for walking, jogging, bicycling and other forms of non-automotive recreation.

The development of greenways has been a trend in cities across the country since the 1970s. The trend emerged because of a dramatic shift toward the activities that greenways are best suited for, and because of the relative cost-effectiveness of greenway development. Greenways are usually on land that often goes unused for any other purpose. While greenways typically include some type of trail for public or private use, they can also remain completely natural.

BENEFITS OF GREENWAYS

Greenways benefit the public through the transportation, environmental, and connectivity functions that they serve. Greenways can potentially connect parks, neighborhoods, schools and other destinations. If a greenway is strategically located, it can function as an alternate transportation system, giving pedestrians and cyclists a safer and more enjoyable route than thoroughfares. Greenways also serve to preserve natural habitats, remove critical areas from development, and as a buffer between development and adjacent streams, providing filtering for stormwater runoff.

Other greenway benefits include:

- Helping to reduce air pollution by lessening the demand for vehicular travel.
- Enhancing urban livability through the protection of

stream corridors and offering the opportunity to interact with the natural environment.

- Preserving natural features, and, therefore, adding aesthetic value to the overall image and quality of life of our community.
- Protecting wildlife by providing habitat, shelter, and migration corridors.
- Providing opportunities for people, particularly children, to have a close-up, live classroom setting of how nature relates to the environment.

CONNECTIONS

Potential greenway land is not always obvious to the casual observer because vegetation, buildings, and/or the rise and fall of the land often obscures it. Frequent greenway locations include adjacent to streams and floodplains, abandoned streets, abandoned railroad beds, and utility rights-of-way. Greenways help to protect important community, scenic, and historic sites and not only connect these places to each other but to parks, neighborhoods, and schools as well. When determining locations for future greenway funding, policy makers should look at making connections between existing and future community facilities such as:

- parks
- schools and school playgrounds
- neighborhoods
- retail centers
- existing greenways and trails
- special features, such as lakes and mountains
- community recreational centers
- historic sites and tourism sites
- libraries, offices, employment centers, civic spaces
- miscellaneous points of interest and visitation
- major tracts of open space

What are Greenways?

Greenways are a linear natural or landscaped feature designed for pedestrians, bicycles, and other non-motorized users.

They can exist along a natural corridor, such as a riverfront, stream valley or ridge line, or overland along a railroad right-of-way converted to recreational use; a canal, scenic road, or other route.



GASTONIA'S GREENWAY SYSTEM

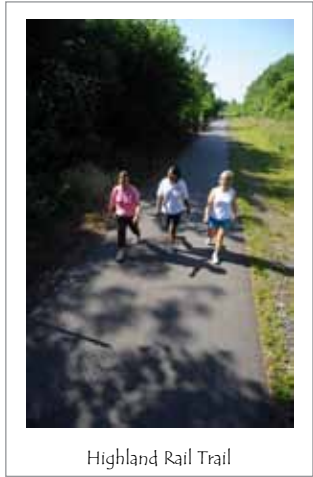
Gastonia opened its first greenway, the 2.5 miles Avon and Catawba Creeks Greenway, on December 1, 2001. The City has continually improved this greenway. Such improvements include the addition of another access bridge and an extension across Union Road to Stevens Street, an additional three quarters of a mile. The greenway was spearheaded jointly by a private nonprofit group, Connect Gaston (a metamorphosis of the Mayors Committee on Greenways, Sidewalks and Bikeways) and the City Planning Department. In addition to City of Gastonia funding, this greenway was financed by grants from the Clean Water Management Trust fund, NCDOT T-21 Enhancements Program, the NC Recreational Trails Program, The Community Foundation of Gaston County and the local Glenn Foundation, as well as a host of other private contributions. The project has been a success since its opening, with weekly visits totaling around 2000 in good weather. The trail is currently used as more of an exercise and recreational facility as opposed to alternative transportation although it does connect to destination points. It has served as an example of how to make greenways more acceptable and supported by the public. This greenway should be viewed as an ever-expanding "work in progress." Other natural trails and scenic paths in Gastonia include the popular Crowders Mountain trails and the loop-shaped, mile-long nature trail behind the Schiele Museum.

Greenways are not purely recreational features. They also protect watersheds and serve a transportation purpose as well by providing a natural linkage accessible by foot or bicycle. Fortunately, the City of Gastonia recognized these functions and has consequently taken the initiative by organizing the Gastonia Committee for Greenways, Sidewalks, and Bikeways. In July 1996, Mayor Jick Garland appointed seven citizens to a panel that would focus

solely on identifying places in and around the city for people "to walk, jog and ride bikes." The City of Gastonia adopted the Connect Gaston plan in 1998 and a more detailed greenway plan in 2002 as part of the *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020*.



Avon & Catawba Creeks Greenway



Highland Rail Trail



Trail at Crowders Mountain State Park

A new development for the Gaston Urban Area MPO and the local municipalities is participating in the development of the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT). The Carolina Thread Trail is a regional trail network that will eventually reach 15 counties and over 2 million people. While not every local trail will be part of the Carolina Thread Trail system, it will link the regionally significant trails and many regional attractions. Think of it as a "green interstate system" of major trails and conservation lands created by connecting smaller trail systems throughout the region. The City of Gastonia received funding from the AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT OF 2009 (ARRA) for the Marietta Street Bridge Improvement project which



includes a Downtown Gastonia Carolina Thread Trail Bicycle/Pedestrian connector.

The Greenway Plan Map should be viewed as a multiple opportunities and alternatives map. The goal of the plan is to interconnect the entire city and make joining connections to County and regional trails. The plan should be implemented strategically. Not all alternatives listed in the plan will be implemented. Different alternatives will present themselves to the City as corridors are made available. The City will take advantage of corridors that become available, typically through the private development process, and subsequently make connections through acquisition of "missing pieces." Corridors no longer needed will be removed from the plan.

The City should seek to leverage its own public resources with funding from public grant agencies, private foundations, and private donations. Greenways are today, a popular funding target for several public and some private funding programs. In other words, greenways are hot items when it comes to grants!

There are several regional greenway plans that have included proposed greenway systems for Gaston County, including Gastonia. Generally, these plans follow the proposed system as established by the City of Gastonia in its Greenway Plan.

Land Assembly and Funding Sources for Parks, Open Spaces, and Greenways

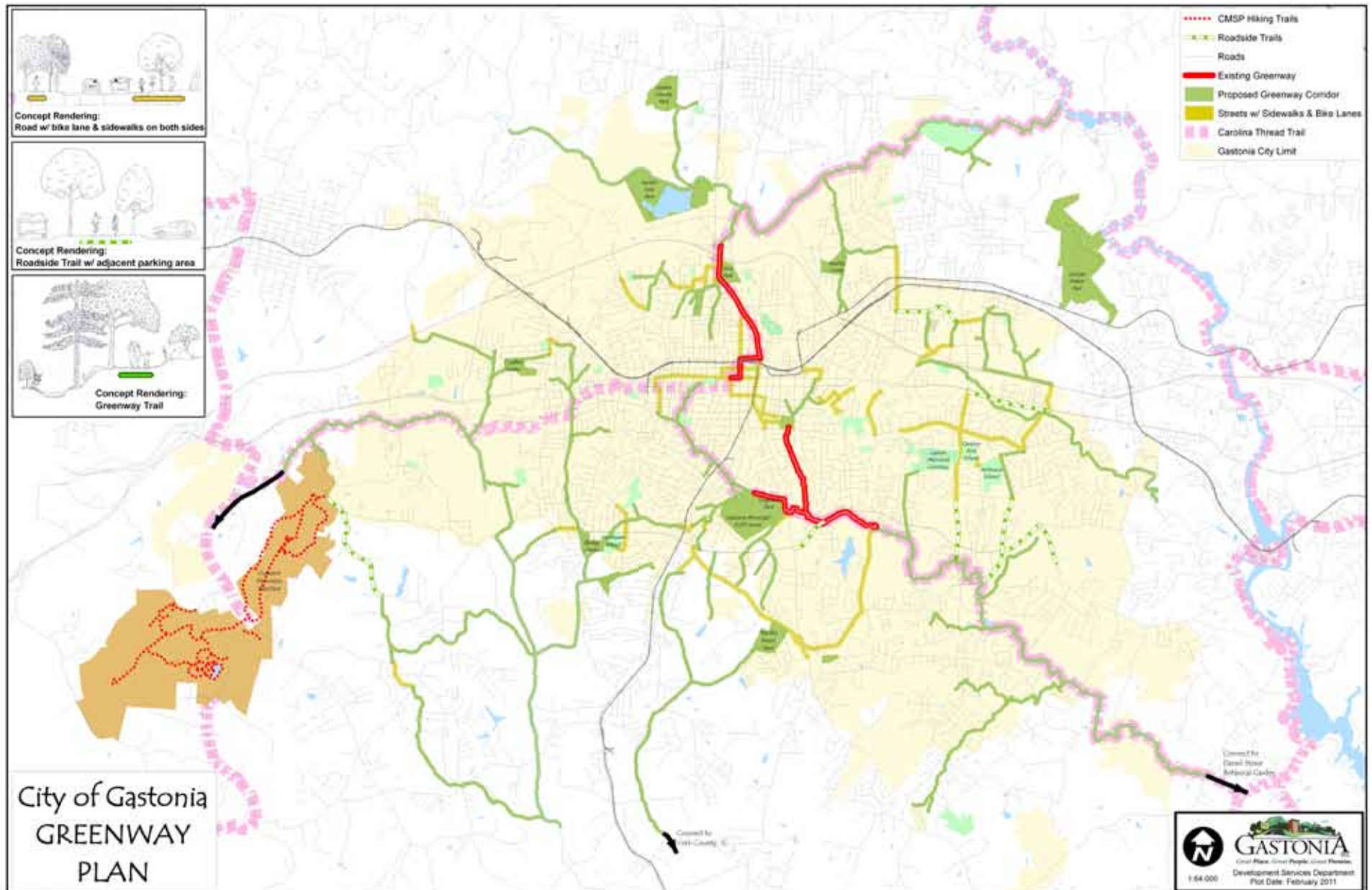
Land for parks, recreational and open space purposes are capital investments that help to secure a sustainable and economically viable future for our community. Not counting Crowders Mountain State Park, which is a state facility, Gastonia lags far behind national standards in parks and open space land. These lands are vital for a well-rounded community that is attractive to both new residents and businesses. The establishment of parks and open spaces should be considered an ongoing process as the city expands.

From 1970 to 2005, Gastonia has grown by over 50% in both population and land area, during which time little public resources have been spent acquiring parklands. The three major new parks (Bradley, Jeffers, and Martha Rivers totaling 143 acres) established during this period were provided land primarily through outside sources. Bradley and Jeffers lands were acquired with Federal Community Development Block Grant Funds, while Martha Rivers was largely funded through private donations. The only significant exception was land acquisition for the Mountain Island Watershed, but, this tract is over 15 miles from Gastonia and will exist in a virtually natural state for the primary purpose of protecting our water supply.

Davis Park, located only 1,600 feet south of Phillips Park is a park that was once a very active park operated by a local civic organization. However, after a drowning occurred in its lake, the park closed, the lake was drained, and the land dedicated to the City. It is currently a 25-acre undeveloped tract of land. The *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open*



Figure 6-8: City of Gastonia Greenway Plan



Spaces, 2005-2020 recommends that Davis Park should be developed into an active park again, offering such amenities as a public fishing lake, a pedestrian trail around the lake, picnic facilities, bicycle trails, parking, and a greenway connection to Phillips Park and All American Park. This interconnection would provide a greenway connection running through and between the three major tracts along the Blackwood Creek floodplain and would be a great asset to the city.

Some jurisdictions in the region pursued visionary policies and programs during this period to provide parklands and open space. The three most important points to make about a comprehensive open space program are: (1) parks and open spaces exist to make our community more livable and more competitive; (2) they are time sensitive opportunities and, for greatest enjoyment, should be distributed throughout the community; and, (3) once an area is "built-out," opportunities for open space and parkland preservation are forever lost.

The following are methods used by municipalities for the assembly of land to be used for Parks, Open Space and Greenways.

LAND DONATIONS

Private citizens may contribute any land that a municipality is willing to accept. The land donor can claim the value of the land donated to a charitable organization as an income tax deduction equal to the land's current fair market value. Land donation also removes its value from an estate, reducing future estate taxes. Land donations result in an actual transfer of ownership, unlike a conservation easement as discussed below. This relieves the owner of the management and care of the land. Furthermore, North Carolina provides a 25% of value *state income tax credit* called the North Carolina Conservation Tax Credit

(distributable over five years), for land and easements donated for public recreational and conservation purposes. This is possibly the easiest form of land assembly.

LAND DONATIONS THROUGH DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In many instances, the development process has led to the donation of land for greenways or other open spaces. During the rezoning process, developers of both residential and non-residential projects have agreed to dedicate land and construct portions of the public greenway system. The developer obtains credit for open space improvements (residential developments), generate city and public support for the project, and create an amenity for future buyers or users that will reach beyond their own project. Projects outside of the greenway plan area have provided sidewalks and connector trails to provide access to the proposed and existing public trail system.

GASTONIA CODE - SEC. 18-37.

AREAS FOR SCHOOLS, PARKS, PLAYGROUNDS

Planning Commission may consider the allocation of suitable areas for schools, parks, and playgrounds. In the interest of the public welfare, a minimum amount of land in the ration of three acres per 100 families, exclusive of streets, should be set aside for recreational or park purposes. Where a tract contains less than 40 acres, such reservation for open space should be combined, whenever possible, with similar reservations in adjoining tracts. Such parks or playgrounds may be dedicated for public use or reserved for the common use of all property owners within the proposed subdivision by covenant in instruments conveying lands in such subdivision. In some cases policies may be in place, but are not being applied.

"Land...they aren't making any more of it."

Will Rogers





A trust fund grant helped purchase, and a conservation easement will preserve, this land along the shore of Mountain Island Lake in perpetuity.

In 2009, the City Council amended the Subdivision Ordinance to require that most subdivisions dedicate land for parks and recreation or provide a fee in lieu of that property dedication. The policy provides the land or funds that would assist in constructing new parks, open space, and recreation facilities identified in the Vision for a Healthy Community Plan, which was adopted in 2005. The property dedication or payment in lieu of is tied to the subdivision approval process; therefore, the program only applies to newly constructed dwelling units, the units that actually add population to the City.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

A Conservation Easement consists of a legally binding agreement between a property owner and a governmental body, or land trust, that restricts the type and amount of development that may take place on the property. A conservation easement ensures a landowner that his land will be protected for future generations. The ownership of the land does not change hands and does not imply free access by the public. For the City, conservation easements are a better financial alternative than land donations because the land remains in private ownership and on the tax roles, unlike publicly owned land. The City is not responsible for the maintenance of easements.

Property owners donating land through a conservation easement are also privy to the North Carolina Conservation Tax Credit Program, which renders a 25% tax credit for donating property or land conservation easements to a state or local government entity or to a qualified non-profit organization.

EXCESS PURCHASE BY MUNICIPALITY

Using the idea that the value of land surrounding a park increases otherwise called the "proximate principle", the

municipality can purchase an excess amount of land for a park project. After developing the park, which increases the value of the surrounding land, the municipality can sell the remaining land at a higher market value. The increased property tax revenue pays for the original investment.

GRANTS

Grants are available at both the state and local level to purchase land for protection purposes. The City received significant financial resources from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund to purchase land for the Avon and Catawba Creek Greenway. Together with the Trust for Public Land, the City used Clean Water Management Trust Fund dollars to purchase land for conservation along the shore of Mountain Island Lake where the City draws raw water for potable treatment.

GENERAL REVENUE

Local general tax revenues, and voter approved tax levies, support the purchase of property for open space protection. In the fall of 2004 there was a countywide referendum for a half cent sales tax for economic development related projects. The City of Gastonia allocated a portion of its projected share of the proceeds for recreational project development. Although this referendum failed, there may be future opportunities for similar initiatives.

BONDS

Another way to fund capital parks, recreational and open space improvements is through a general obligation G.O. bond referendum. Because the full faith and credit of the City as a taxing authority is pledged, authority for a G.O. bond issuance must be granted by the electorate. The table below illustrates the amount of funds that can be generated through various size bond referendums. Each



Figure 6-9: Annual Amortization Costs of General Obligation Bonds, 20 Years @ 4.5% Rate in \$1,000's

Year	\$6 Million	\$8 Million	\$10 Million	\$12 Million	\$14 Million
1	563	751	939	1,126	1,313
5	509	679	849	1,018	1,187
10	442	589	736	884	1,032
15	375	499	624	749	874
20	307	409	511	613	715

\$400,000 dollars of debt requires the equivalent of one cent per \$100 valuation on the property tax rate.

In addition to new bonds, existing bonds can be refinanced to create funds for parks, recreation, and greenways.

DEVELOPMENT CODE MANDATES

Some jurisdictions require a certain amount of land in residential developments to be set aside as open space. The Town of Davidson adopted an aggressive policy of a 50% set-aside. Gastonia requires a 20% set-aside in "planned residential developments" (PRD). For this, the developer may build a greater density/intensity on the remaining 80%, and is freed of most lot dimensional and setback requirements. But, this provision only applies to those who elect to take their application through the PRD process. Furthermore, installing sidewalks to a superior standard can satisfy part of the 20%.

One important principal in land conservation through the development process is that the land to be preserved must be developable. Sometimes, designated land is inaccessible and may have little use for recreational purposes.



ISSUES

ISSUES

- Gastonia's recreational facilities are showing wear and tear due to age.
- Gastonia's facilities have not kept up with changes in recreational and leisure preferences.
- As the baby boom generation ages, the proportion of people middle aged and older will increase. This age group (50-65) will have increasing amounts of leisure time and will probably be more active than the previous generation. Increased facilities targeting this age group are needed in order to keep them in the City.
- The growing societal awareness of the unhealthy habits of Americans, and the correlating increase in the emphasis on exercise and fitness, especially for children, may lead to an increased usage of Gastonia's recreational infrastructure.
- Young adult professionals, in the growing creative and information economy, show a preference for pedestrian and cycling trails, as well as other non-traditional recreational activities like skateboarding, inline skating, BMX, whitewater sports, and mountain cycling. If Gastonia wants to attract this emerging "Creative Class" (as coined by bestselling author, Professor Richard Florida), the City must offer the recreational facilities they seek.
- 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 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, such as 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.
- Trends point toward the increased use of parks and recreation facilities for less organized pursuits, such as walking and cycling, and children's playground activities.
- While the demand for more flexible open space grows, the resources for acquiring that space will probably shrink. Thus, the City must search for innovative ways of providing for the changing needs of the residents of Gastonia.
- The provision of adequate parks, open spaces, and recreational facilities is an important indicator of quality of life, and therefore, will be instrumental in attracting a diversified economy.



Objectives and Tools

Objective 1

Provide park and recreation facilities to meet the needs of a diverse population at accessible locations throughout the City.

Tools

- a. Implement the recommendations of the recently completed *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020* according to the following priority schedule.
 - i. Renovation of Lineberger Park
 - ii. Renovation of Rankin Lake Park (including trails and lake pavilion)
 - iii. Phase I Greenway Development (8-10 miles)
 - iv. Land Banking
 - v. SE Community Center Building
 - vi. Second Youth Sports Complex
 - vii. Development of Davis Park (as a passive facility) and Phillips Park interconnecting trails
 - viii. Construction of two modular skate parks
 - ix. Improvements to the Adult Recreation Center
- b. Continually update facility needs to reflect demographic changes.
- c. Actively maintain existing facilities, make upgrades to older facilities, and plan for and construct new facilities to exceed the recommended Level of Service standards set by the National Recreation and Park Association.
- d. Promote recreation facilities as a center of civic activity where people gather to play, interact

and learn about each other.

- e. Design new, and improve existing recreation facilities that are safe, secure and aesthetically pleasing.
- f. Provide adequate funding to ensure updating of older facilities and proper facility maintenance.
- g. Increase staffing levels as new programs are offered and facilities are built.
- h. Implement the recommendations for improvements and new facilities of the *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020* to ensure a fair geographic dispersal of recreation opportunities.
- i. Continue to work with Gaston County Schools to extend the joint-use agreement.
- j. Provide recreation services to fill current gaps, including adding a southeast recreation center to serve southeast Gastonia due to the tremendous amount of growth, and adding a centrally located youth sports/recreation facility with youth practice and game fields.

Objective 2

Increase participation with other public and private agencies to maximize the efficiency of the City's facilities and programs.

Tools

- a. Where feasible, partner with other public and private agencies to provide joint park, recreation and open space facilities.
- b. Communicate the need for park and recreation programs through community watch groups and local churches.
- c. Work with Gaston County to plan for recreational facilities in areas for potential annexation into the City.

OBJECTIVES & TOOLS



OBJECTIVES & TOOLS

Objective 3

Maximize all available and develop new funding sources for the maintenance, updating, and construction of parks and recreation facilities and open space opportunities.

Tools

- a. Continue to use the public and private land development process as a means of acquiring additional recreation space and greenways.
- b. Encourage the dedication of properties for recreation through appropriate incentives and tax relief programs.
- c. Proceed with a bond referendum, or other financing mechanisms, to finance the needs demonstrated in the *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020*.
- d. Use volunteers and encourage non-profit groups, local companies, and other organizations to build and maintain park, recreation and greenway facilities, whenever possible.
- e. Consider hiring a development administrator for parks, recreation, open space and greenways to plan and manage the construction of new facilities, grant writing and administration, and master plan implementation.
- f. Add parks, recreation, open space, and greenway projects to the City of Gastonia's annual capital improvement plan.

Objective 4

Provide an open space system that protects natural habitat areas, enhances quality of life and links people, neighborhoods and resources together.

Tools

- a. Continue to develop the greenway system as the "emerald necklace" that ties together natural areas throughout the City.
- b. Encourage landowners to donate land for open space and greenways using conservation easements and other financial incentives.
- c. Modify open space requirements for new residential and non-residential development to enhance the quantity, quality and contiguity of open space.
- d. Encourage new development to use natural features and open space (both active and passive) as an integral part of the development.
- e. Minimize significant loss of natural features during the site preparation phase of new development.
- f. Identify and preserve land for urban pocket parks and urban greenspace, particularly in the Center City and in west Gastonia.
- g. Work with Gaston County to add protective zoning around Crowders Mountain State Park in an effort to limit negative visual, environmental and ecological impacts on the park.
- h. Consider future land acquisition plans for Crowders Mountain State Park when reviewing rezoning requests.
- i. Update regional greenway plans and preserve corridors that would link Crowders Mountain State Park with other regional parks and cultural facilities.
- j. Maintain the rural nature of the Crowders Mountain State Park experience, and the safety of hikers, by retaining narrow streets and rural street drainage systems.



Objective 5

Construct and encourage additional greenway trails to capitalize on available open space, to provide an alternative mode of transportation, and connect new and existing neighborhoods.

Tools

- a. Continue to implement the *Connect Gaston* plan and Master Greenway Map in the *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020*.
- b. Implement short-term priorities for greenways as outlined in the *Vision for a Healthy Community: A Plan for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, 2005-2020*.
 - i. Expand the Avon and Catawba Creeks Greenway system with connections to, and through, Ferguson Park to Marietta Street. Study the feasibility of extended connection to the Historic Loray Mill Neighborhood. Expand the Greenway southward to connect to, and through, the City property at the former Catawba Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant site.
 - ii. Interconnect Phillips Park with All American Park to the north and Davis Park to the south.
 - iii. Continue to implement the Highland Greenway proposal to connect the existing greenway with the Gaston Technology Park.
 - iv. Determine other strategic opportunities for greenway development as they present themselves to the city in the near term.
- c. Require greenway dedication for new residential and non-residential development located as shown on the approved Greenway Master Plan Map.
- d. If new development is located adjacent to a constructed or planned greenway, require connection points during subdivision and rezoning processes, where a legal nexus exists.
- e. When easements, and rights-of-way are being acquired adjacent to planned or existing greenways, ensure that a greenway easement is also acquired.
- f. Implement existing policies regarding the reservation of park and open space lands during the property subdivision process. Consider amendments to the Unified Development Ordinance and other innovative techniques to acquire greenway and park property.
- g. Develop standards for greenway trails to include specifications for trail width, slope, materials, bridge construction, etc. for multiple trail types to be constructed within the City.
- h. Ensure that new road and transportation improvements interfacing with planned greenway corridors accommodate greenway accessibility and promote connectivity.

OBJECTIVES & TOOLS

