

RECREATION & OPEN SPACE

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.*

BACKGROUND AND TRENDS

Recreation has been a part of Gastonia's community life since its beginning. Athletic and recreational programs, especially in baseball, were sponsored by the City's textile mills beginning in the late 1920's. Recreation was also sponsored by Gastonia's churches and service clubs such as the American Legion.

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. and Chestnut Street. Ten acres of the land were purchased by the City in 1927-28 and that land was matched with another ten acres donated by the Lineberger family. Lineberger Park was improved during the 1930's by the Works Progress Administration. 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 five Recreation Centers would be built, most recently the T. Jeffers Center in 1979. Still to be built is a permanent southeast recreation center, which is now located at the National Guard Armory on Robinwood Road.

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

RECREATIONAL FACILITIES

A well planned and well maintained park and open space system is 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 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 is a list of Gastonia's recreational facilities, with the name and location of each kind. Figure 1 shows the location of the Community Centers, Parks and other recreational opportunities provided by the City of Gastonia.

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

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

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

Park	Location
Bradley Park	N. Modena Street
East Park	End of Hemlock
Erwin park	North Pryor Street
Ferguson Park	Golf Course Drive
Lineberger Park	Garrison Blvd.
Linwood Park	Garland Ave
North Park	Rankin Ave
Phillips Park	Echo Lane
T. Jeffers Park	Whitener Street
Vance Street Park	Vance Street
Rankin Lake Park	Rankin Lake Road

Other Recreational Facilities:

Sims Legion Park
 Gastonia Municipal Golf Course
 A listing of some common recreational activities and where they are available is shown in Figure 2.

In addition to the City-owned parks and community centers, the City of Gastonia has a joint-use agreement with Gaston County Schools. This increases the number of walking and jogging tracks and tennis courts that are available to the public.

Further recreational opportunities are available through Gaston County, which has its own parks and recreation programs.

Additional recreation facilities are available in and around Gastonia, including church-sponsored activities such as family life centers, the YMCA, the two boy's clubs, the Optimist Club and school activities. Crowders Mountain State Park is just southwest of Gastonia, and it is an outstanding scenic and recreational asset, attracting people from the entire region.

ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORTS

Gastonia has seen an exponential increase in participation in youth sports activities over the past 15 years, with an total increase of 654% in the City's baseball, softball and soccer leagues. No new fields or parks have been built in that time, and the City's existing facilities are somewhat strained by the increase. Constant use has taken its toll not only in increased wear and tear, but also through delayed maintenance and improvement.



Lineberger Park is Gastonia's flagship park.

Figure 2
Selected Recreational Activities

Park, Center or School	Activity Room	Athletic Fields	Ceramics	Basketball	Gymnasium	Instructional Programs	Jogging Track	Picnic Area	Playground	Swimming Pool	Tennis Courts	Weight Room
Ferguson Park		•							•		•	
Lineberger Park		•		•					•	•	•	
Linwood Park		•							•	•		
Hunter Huss High School												•
Rankin Lake Park						•			•			
Adult Recreation Center	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Erwin Center	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Phillips Center		•		•	•	•		•	•		•	
Bradley Center	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•	
Southeast Center					•	•		•				
T. Jeffers Center	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Arlington School							•					
York Chester School								•	•			
Gardner Park School							•	•				
Hancock School							•	•				
Ashbrook High School												•

A committee of concerned citizens has petitioned the City to construct a comprehensive sports park, which would provide a central location and sufficient space for all of the City’s sports leagues, as well as spectator space, restrooms, adequate parking and concessions. This approach has been successful in a number of other cities, and a comprehensive sports park would provide amenities that would not be cost-effective for multiple neighborhood sites

TRENDS IN RECREATION

Several trends are expected to influence the development and administration of parks, open space and recreation in Gastonia.

- As the baby boom generation ages, the proportion of people in middle age and older will increase. This age group (50 to 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 recreational needs.

These trends point toward increased use of parks and recreation 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.

Gastonia needs a comprehensive, scientific survey to determine the recreational needs of City residents and whether those needs are being met. Use of existing parks, recreation centers and fields can be used as an indicator of the growth in established activities, but it is not as good an indicator for emerging recreational activities such as walking and cycling. Conducting a full survey would help the City determine more precisely the recreational needs of Gastonia’s residents.



Playgrounds are some of the most consistently used recreational facilities in Gastonia.

OPEN SPACE AND GREENWAYS

As Gastonia expands and spreads over the landscape, we have an opportunity to preserve and make use of some of our best natural assets even as the areas around them are developed for houses, roads, schools, industries and business. By creating greenways, Gastonia can provide many miles of paths for walking, jogging, bicycling and other forms of recreation. Where greenways are located along creeks, they can also help simplify stream maintenance. In the book *Greenways for America*, Charles Little gives his definition of “greenway:”

Greenways are a linear form of open space along either 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. It is any natural or landscaped source for pedestrian or bicycle passage.

The development of greenways for walking, cycling, connecting parks and other areas has been a trend in cities across the country since the 1970’s. The trend emerged both 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 almost always on land that often goes unused for any other purpose. Some of the North Carolina cities that have active greenway programs include: Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro, Morganton, Boone and Cary.

Gastonia has several natural trails and scenic paths already. The popular Crowders Mountain trails are an example of the value of greenways along ridge

lines. Another local greenway is the loop-shaped, mile-long nature trail behind the Schiele Museum

Potential greenway land is not always obvious to the casual observer because it is often obscured by vegetation, buildings or the rise and fall of the land. A careful study of Gastonia’s land use, however, reveals corridors of open land throughout the City, many of them along creeks and streams, but also along other corridors such as the abandoned Piedmont and Northern Railroad. This corridor, now owned by the State of North Carolina, runs from downtown Gastonia east to Mount Holly and Charlotte. Its future is undetermined, but it could be used for a greenway if it is not used for some other transportation purpose.

One of the public benefits of greenways is the transportation and connectivity function 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.

The first step toward the realization of greenways in Gastonia is to develop a greenway plan. Successful efforts in greenway development have relied on extensive citizen participation and initiative. A greenway plan would identify potential greenway corridors, outline strategies for protecting and managing them, and make recommendations on the policies and methods for acquiring the land and developing it for recreational use.

ISSUES

1. The demand for recreation in Gastonia will be shaped by future demographic forces. Influences include older people living longer, more working mothers and single-parent families, and a population shift in Gastonia toward the southeast.
2. Gastonia's athletic facilities are showing the wear and tear that is a result of the exponential growth in organized youth sports.
3. The City of Gastonia has not built any new parks or community centers since the T. Jeffers Center in 1979.
4. The southeast sector of Gastonia does not have a year-round, full-service recreation center.
5. 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.
6. Schools are an important recreational asset. Joint projects and sharing of facilities are two things that should continue to be encouraged by the City and the Gaston County Schools.
7. Parks, trails and other recreation facilities are sometimes regarded as NIMBY's (Not In My BackYard). Citizen participation at the earliest stage possible in planning new recreational facilities can help build trust and forestall misinformation.
8. Gastonia has many corridors of open land suitable for greenways, but few tools for protecting or acquiring this land.
9. 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.

OBJECTIVES AND TOOLS

Objective 1: *Determine the recreational needs of Gastonia residents and the physical facilities needed to meet those needs.*

Policy References

1-a) Conduct a comprehensive scientific survey of recreational needs for Gastonia's residents.

1-b) Update the recreational facilities inventory to determine which needs are being met and which need to be addressed.

1-c) Develop guidelines for acceptable levels of service for the various recreational facilities and activities.

1-d) Develop a separate recreational facilities plan.

Objective 2: *Provide active and passive recreational opportunities corresponding with the growth and demographic changes in Gastonia through 2010.*

2-a) Upgrade, develop and improve the existing parks which are currently idle or under used.

2-b) Continue the good stewardship of Gastonia's parks and recreation centers with adequate operating funds, management and maintenance.

2-c) Guarantee citizen participation prior to any undertaking of major capital improvements of parks and recreational facilities.

2-d) Use the City's land use regulations to ensure that land surrounding recreational areas has compatible development.

Natural Environment: 3-a

2-e) Continue the joint use of public facilities with Gaston County and Gaston County Schools, and look for new opportunities to use facilities to their maximum.

Recreation: 3-b

2-f) Build a permanent year-round community/recreation center in the east or southeast sector of the City, possibly coupled with an adjacent park.

2-g) Use zoning incentives to encourage the provision of open space areas within future developed areas.

Natural Environment: 3-f

2-h) Study the feasibility of redeveloping the land associated with obsolete public facilities for recreational purposes

2-i) Establish a land banking program to acquire needed land in the most cost-effective manner possible.

2-j) Retain the City Golf Course as a public facility, and upgrade the Course so that the fee structure can be adjusted to make it fully self-sustaining.

Objective 3: *Provide safe, adequate and accessible space for the City's growing sports leagues.*

3-a) Build a central, integrated softball-baseball-soccer park.

3-b) Investigate the possibility of joint acquisition of land for a central sports facility with Gaston County Schools, Gaston County or both.

Recreation: 2-e

Objective 4: *Protect, reserve or acquire open land corridors for possible greenway development.*

4-a) Develop a plan for trails and greenways.

Transportation: 6-e;
Natural Environment: 3-b

4-b) Use incentives within the City's land development regulations to encourage the donation of land for greenway corridors.

Natural Environment: 3-c,
3-d; **Recreation:** 4-c

4-c) Use easements or other agreements with willing private property owners to secure greenway corridors on land that has not been purchased.

Natural Environment: 3-d;
Recreation: 3-d

4-d) Leverage public efforts for greenway development with the help of volunteers, service clubs and other interested persons.

Built Environment: 1-c

4-e) Use land that is already owned by the public where possible in developing greenway corridors.

Natural Environment: 3-c

4-f) Study the use of the P & N corridor for a regional trail if that corridor will not be used for other transportation purposes.

Transportation: 3-c