

## Chapter 1:

# Introduction

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Parks and recreation are vital and integral parts of the City of Rochester. For close to 150 years, parks have played an important part of the quality of life that residents and visitors enjoy. They contribute to neighborhood identity, environmental sustainability, resident health and well-being, and economic development. With more than 4,200 acres, 120 parks, and 85-miles of trail, Rochester’s Parks and Recreation System is accessible, highly-utilized, and an essential part of the City.

Community input gathered in the planning process indicated that residents are generally satisfied with the parks and recreation system, but that there are improvements that could be made to make it great. Participants in the fall 2015 questionnaire gave the system a 72% satisfaction rating. A majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the quality of parks, location of parks, and trail and sidewalk connections. Areas where the system fell short were in the condition of the some trails and cleanliness, which is likely a reflection of the aging system.

Moving from good to great will not be easy. It will take continued, big-picture visioning, change, creativity, commitment, and additional resources. The system planning process demonstrated that the parks and recreation system has a wide, diverse base of partners and supporters.

This System Plan, shaped by Rochester residents, sets the stage for future investment, and is a long-term guide for Park Board, City Council and City Staff in decision-making for the next 20 years. It offers guiding principles, recommendations, priorities, and tools to help the City, its residents, and partner organizations keep Rochester’s parks and recreation system healthy and relevant well into the future.

The Parks and Recreation System Plan complements the directions established in the Comprehensive Plan, and provides detailed guidance in the development, management, and operations of the system. This direction is based on the community’s expressed needs and desires as well as analyses of demographic changes, future trends, and Rochester’s current system. It is important to recognize that the plan addresses park needs at a system-wide level. Specific initiatives, like the development of an individual park, will still require additional, detailed master planning. In addition, the recommendations in the System Plan do not constitute all possible Parks and Recreation actions. Instead, the Plan provides a framework to guide long and short term decision-making and investments in the system.

## Top 7 Important Factors in Deciding Where to Live

- » 89% Sidewalks and Places to Take Walks
- » 83% Easy Access to Entertainment Options (Shopping, Restaurants, and Theater)
- » 78% High Quality Public Schools
- » 72% Being Within a Short Commute to Work
- » 69% Being With an Easy Walk of Places I want to Go in the Community
- » 69% Being Close to Parks and Playgrounds
- » 68% Easy Access to the Highway

2015 Southeast Minnesota Association of Realtors

# Importance of Parks + Recreation

Parks are one of the most important and highly prized components of any community. They are sources of civic identity and pride and are essential to the physical, economic, environmental, and social health of cities and their residents. As in many communities, the 2015 Southeast Minnesota Association of Realtors (SEMAR) survey found that sidewalks and places to take walks was a top factor in deciding where to live.

## Health

Parks and trails encourage healthy, happy, active lifestyles by providing a venue for physical activity. Whether walking or biking on the city's trails, playing a pickup baseball or softball game, participating in an organized soccer league, or snowshoeing through the woods, parks provide essential places for people to exercise.

When people have access to park facilities and programming, they are more likely to be active, therefore improving their physical health. Additionally, exposure to the natural areas that parks and open space provide is a proven link to improved psychological health.

## Property Values

Numerous studies have shown that proximity to parks, trails, and open space has a positive impact on property values. Commercial property values can also be increased with proximity to these amenities, creating potential for these sites to act as catalysts for redevelopment.

## Beauty

Parkways, tree-lined streets, gardens, lush landscaped areas, views of rivers and lakes, stately woods, and public art are all attributes of cities that are beautiful places to live, work, play, and shop. Visitors often remember a place by its access to beautiful natural areas, contributing to a positive community image. All of these attributes contribute to the livability and vitality of a city.

## Cultural + Social Amenity

In a time when social media defines the interactions of many people, parks and recreational centers are places to meet face-to-face, catch up with family members and friends, and feel like part of the larger community. As a focal point of neighborhoods, parks help develop connections between residents by providing a venue for community-building gatherings, like farmers markets, school trips, festivals, and celebrations.

Significant natural features, like Quarry Hill Nature Center, and historical and cultural sites, like Plummer House, are preserved for the enjoyment of both present and future community members.

## Nature Value + Environmental Benefits

Healthy savannas, prairies, forests, and wetlands all inherently improve air and water quality while providing habitat for diverse species of plants and animals. These areas also play a role in stormwater management and protecting the quality and vitality of natural areas. Sound management of natural areas can reduce the prevalence of invasive species and improve environmental outcomes for neighboring properties.

## Community Health

Recreation programs that are offered for all ages and income levels promote lifelong learning opportunities and a supportive community atmosphere. Specific programs can provide enjoyable learning activities for youth, keep seniors active and connected, or educate all community members about the importance of active living and sustainability.



*Health: Soldier's Field Track*



*Beauty: Silver Lake*



# Planning Process

This planning effort was kicked off in August of 2015, and represents input gathered from the community, stakeholders, city staff, and city officials over the following year. Online questionnaires, meetings, focus groups, park and community tours, and group brainstorming efforts guided the development of this system plan by providing valuable input and collective wisdom. The plan also incorporates the expertise of the consultant team, an analysis of benchmarking data, a system-wide evaluation by city staff and the consultants, and best practices collected from other peer communities.

The Rochester City Council and Park Board provided guidance and input for the plan's content throughout every phase of the project. Meetings between the City Council and the consultants were held January 25, 2016, and July 18, 2016. The Park Board collaborated with the consultants on December 17, 2015, January 5, 2016, April 5, 2016, and July 5, 2016.

The goal of the planning process was to educate and raise awareness about the importance of parks and recreation while ensuring that future investment in Rochester's system meets the needs of the community. Throughout this planning process, over 2,500 residents and stakeholders were engaged to ensure the final plan was reflective of community desires. Public outreach efforts included:

- » Eight Advisory Committee meetings spread throughout the year-long planning process.
- » Seven listening sessions on October 22, 2016, attended by representatives of over 25 local organizations. These listening sessions covered the areas of arts, nature/environment, indoor sports, outdoor field/court sports, outdoor adventure sports, schools, and diversity.
- » Two online questionnaires, one in the Fall of 2015 to solicit input on needs and opportunities, and one in Spring of 2016 to review draft recommendations. The two questionnaires generated over 3,200 individual comments.
- » Community Open Houses held on October 15, 2015, and April 28, 2016. The April Open House included break-out sessions on public art, natural areas/sustainability, trails, and facilities.
- » Targeted outreach for underrepresented community groups at Hawthorne Education Center and through the Diversity Council.



*The public reviewed the plan's recommendations and provided input at the April Open House*

# Parks Administration

The City of Rochester Park Board provides oversight of the parks and recreation system. While the City Council of Rochester allocates funding, it is the seven-member Park Board that provides policy direction to the Parks and Recreation Department. This direction includes reviewing and approving the department annual budget and direct expenditures for the maintenance and improvement of parks and parkways.

## Existing Plans

The analysis of existing conditions included the review and synthesis of existing reports and findings from community engagement efforts. Of the more than 50 plans available, the list to the right identifies those most relevant to the parks and recreation system planning effort. A review of these documents provided the following key ideas:

### Community Strengths

- » Vibrant community
- » Overall small town feel
- » Availability of parks, green spaces, and trails
- » Reputation as a wellness city
- » Strong neighborhoods

### Desires for the Future

- » More indoor recreation space
- » Environmental sustainability/protection of natural resources
- » Improved connectivity
- » Expanded winter recreational opportunities
- » Continued growth of local sports and recreation programs
- » Additional community events throughout the year
- » Investment in public art
- » More green space needed Downtown
- » Capitalization of river assets
- » Preservation of areas of unique natural or recreational value

## Plans Referenced

- » Rochester-Olmsted Planning Department
  - » P2S 2040 (2016)
  - » Bicycle Master Plan – 2012
  - » About YoU – Rochester Community Asset Inventory Report (2012)
  - » Downtown Rochester – 2010 Master Plan
- » University of Minnesota, Rochester
  - » Envision UMR Master Plan – 2014
- » Mayo Clinic
  - » Destination Medical Center Development Plan – 2015 DRAFT
  - » DMC Community Conversations Report (July 2014)
  - » Mayo Clinic Five-Year Plan Update (2011)

# Coordinated Planning Efforts

The following planning efforts were underway simultaneously with the development of the Parks and Recreation System Plan.

## **P2S 2040**

The City of Rochester's 2040 Comprehensive Plan (Planning 2 Succeed) was in the process of being updated in correlation with the Parks and Recreation System Plan. P2S 2040 combines land use, transportation, housing, environmental resources, parks, trails, open space, community facilities, community development, and community image into a long-range plan. Community input from the Comprehensive Planning process was valuable as a starting point for the parks and recreation system planning. Collaboration between the two planning processes occurred at many points with strategic directions from the Parks and Recreation System Plan incorporated into P2S 2040.

## **Public Art System Master Plan**

The Greater Rochester Arts and Cultural Trust began the development of a Public Art System Master Plan in late 2015. A representative of the Greater Rochester Arts and Cultural Trust was a member of the Advisory Committee who helped shape the Parks and Recreation System Plan recommendations regarding public art.

# How to Use the Plan

Rochester's Parks and Recreation System Plan is organized into **six** chapters. Chapter One introduces and provides context for the plan. Chapter Two outlines national and local trends that impact current and future development and use of parks and recreation systems. Chapter Three provides an overview of Rochester's existing park system. Chapter Four contains the vision and guiding principles for the future of Rochester's parks and recreation system. Chapter Five identifies the goals, policies, and strategies recommended to achieve the guiding principles. The recommendations are organized into the categories of Parks, Facilities, Trails, Natural Areas, Programming, Sustainability, Public Health, Public Art, and Management and Operations. Chapter Six provides implementation tools, including priorities to assist with future decision-making, general cost estimates, potential funding sources, and a process to review proposed projects not contemplated in the system plan.

It is important to recognize that the recommendations contained within this plan do not constitute all possible future actions. Instead, the recommendations, along with the system plan as a whole, provide a framework to guide future decision-making. Given the 20-year timeframe, it is anticipated that the system plan may need to change as the community responds to trends, needs, and opportunities that arise.

