



ONE CHARLESTON

Parks & Recreation Master Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Charleston, South Carolina

September, 2021





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One Charleston Parks and Recreation Master Plan Charleston, South Carolina

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NEED FOR A PLAN

Charleston, South Carolina is a memorable destination city with some of the nation's oldest history long preserved through community devotion and forethought. Often referred to as the "Holy City" — a moniker some contend paints a misleading depiction of the city's complex past¹ — Charleston is home to many specimens of South Carolina palmettos (the state tree), pastel antebellum architecture, verdant civic spaces, and idyllic wetland landscapes. In a city where tourists and residents alike crave access to the unique flora (e.g., Angel Oak Park), dynamic history (e.g., Waterfront Park), and enjoyable experiences (e.g., Brittlebank Park, Bee's Landing Recreation Center, Governors Park, and Demetre Park), the Parks and Recreation departments have a vital role to play.

These city departments safeguard the quality of physical public space and generate social encounters necessary for making a strong, healthy community. The Charleston Parks and Recreation departments already strive to uplift all members of the community, bringing incredible resources to citizens. Known for signature sites like The Battery, White Point Garden, Hampton Park, and Marion Square, the city's park system offers residents a wide range of possibilities. This *One Charleston: Parks and Recreation Master Plan* will be critical to the city's future as it clarifies the responsibilities and needs of each department, as well as what improvements and policy changes are required to best deliver parks, facilities, and recreational choices to the citizens of Charleston.

Meant to instill focus, establish priorities, and inspire action over the next 10 years, this Master Plan was produced with guidance from a project steering committee (appointed by the city), the Recreation Committee, and staff members from Parks, Recreation, Planning, and other city departments. It is supported by robust data collection, including hours

of in-person engagement and previous plan analysis, and affirms the special roles the Charleston Parks and Recreation departments play as premier providers of local quality facilities and memorable experiences.

Deferred maintenance, changing community needs, development goals, and operational feasibility are all reasons enough for embarking on this process and producing a future-forward plan. But even as the departments looked head-on towards addressing these, the year 2020 ushered in an added and unprecedented layer of change and challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in the U.S. in early March of 2020 has impacted communications, procedures, and everyday routines across all sectors of the economy. Besides dramatically altering daily life, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic are shaping the future of communities in ways as yet impossible to fully understand.

Even before the pandemic began in the U.S., clear reporting existed on the value of parks and recreation. As civic spaces, parks act as operational hubs for addressing chronic issues like physical inactivity and poor health. Having even a simple connection to nature can relieve stress, improve mental health, and provide opportunities for interpersonal interaction.² Parks are part of hyper-local civic infrastructure (so-called "third-spaces"³) needed now more than ever, where citizens practice the "art of association" and do the work of knitting communities together.⁴

During the coronavirus lockdown, Charleston's parks were the spaces residents turned to for finding solace and connection. The city's tourism certainly slowed, but the community continued using these close-to-home resources. As the Charleston community enters pandemic recovery and post-lockdown life, the city will have to choose how to protect and amplify its precious park resources.

And Charleston's not alone. What has emerged out of the COVID-19 pandemic is the undeniably vital

¹ Butler, Nic. *Myth of the Holy City*. Charleston County Public Library, Time Machine. 2020. <https://www.ccpl.org/charleston-time-machine/myth-holy-city>

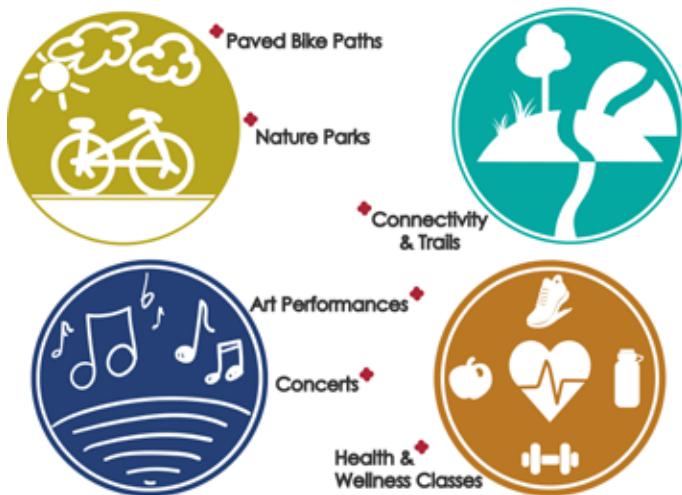
² National Recreation and Park Association, "Health and Wellness," <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/Three-Pillars/health-wellness/>, (December, 10 2019).

³ Redefining Infrastructure & Public Space. *Reimagining the Civic Commons*. 2021. <https://medium.com/reimagining-the-civic-commons/redefining-infrastructure-and-public-space-2e31edfde68>

⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020)

role parks and recreation played – and will continue to play – in the nation's wellbeing and recovery. Six months into the pandemic, the National Recreation and Park Association published an extensive discussion of the myriad ways parks and recreation is both affected by and affecting the outcome of the pandemic.⁵ Agencies are adapting and finding creative funding solutions,⁶ boldly stepping into the critical work of bridging inequity, safeguarding physical and mental health, and ensuring access. This type of flexibility exemplifies the substance of the recommendations in this Master Plan. And the city of Charleston is fortunate; when asked whether they would support a tax referendum to fund the city's parks – early in the pandemic – Charleston households voiced overwhelming and incomparable support (Chapter 4).

Most Important to Charleston Households*



*Based on statistically valid mail survey results

While it is impossible to decipher a single “correct” path into the post-pandemic future, this plan underscores the need for responsive action, elevated experiences, and reinforced civic infrastructure. This Master Plan maps the beginning of a multi-dimensional recovery where the Parks and Recreation departments are not only important but essential for sustaining a strong, vibrant community in Charleston.⁷

EXISTING CONDITIONS OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN CHARLESTON

For many residents, parks are primary entry points for interacting with the natural environment, and yet cities do not always invest equitably. Equity fissures of social and economic magnitude persist but can be remedied in part through fair, inclusive access to public parks, nature, recreation opportunities, and quality facilities. For all residents, whatever their background, parks help provide a variety of passive and active outdoor recreational opportunities. Proximity to these valuable resources invariably improves community health and wellness, not to mention create more adaptable, robust local economies.⁸ As mentioned previously, Charleston Parks and Recreation services are already a critical thread in the city's civic fabric and will continue to be crucial to Charleston's pandemic recovery.

In Charleston, the city maintains about 1,700 acres of parkland and was over 140 parks, including Neighborhood Parks, Community Parks, both active and passive Special Use Parks, and Linear Parks. In addition to these city properties, residents have access to numerous other parks, open spaces, and facilities managed by other entities, including Charleston County Parks and Recreation, school districts, residential organizations (e.g., HOAs), and others either within or near Charleston.

Demographic and Benchmarking Analysis

A strong, proactive approach to operations and structure requires knowledge and understanding of community demographics. The findings included in this Master Plan (Chapter 2) show 1) the population has steadily increased in size and is projected to grow by 15% by year 2030 and another 13% by 2040; 2) the city has diversified since 2000 with other race populations besides white alone expanding by up to 200%; and 3) the city's older population (age 65+) is growing much like state and national trends, but the median age is younger than the comparisons. Understanding these past trends and projected changes is one of the best ways for the city to address present demand for parks and recreation and to proactively identify future needs.

⁵ Dolesh, Richard J. How Parks and Recreation Will Change Forever. NRPA. (July 2020). <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2020/august/how-parks-and-recreation-will-change-forever/>

⁶ McCormick, Kathleen. Room to Roam: The Pandemic Has Underscored the Need for More Urban Parks; So What Comes Next? Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. <https://www.lincolninst.edu/publications/articles/2020-10-room-roam-pandemic-urban-parks-what-comes-next>. (October 7, 2020). Accessed November 2020.

⁷ Marquis, Bridget. Infrastructure That Does More: Investing in Public Spaces for a Resilient America. Strong Towns. https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/11/23/infrastructure-that-does-more-investing-in-public-spaces-for-a-resilient-america?fbclid=IwAR2Aa8OXGjUpGNv3ibIDHC-W40ic9L9QjnXvL_kgFSoCtEoi5vhqJ0bDg (November 24, 2020). Accessed December 4, 2020

⁸ Berg, Nate. Great Parks Don't Just Have Rec. Space: They Create Jobs. 2021. Fast Company. https://www.fastcompany.com/90624316/great-parks-dont-just-have-rec-space-they-create-jobs?mc_cid=105f89bd93&mc_eid=6c9b6b28d4

The analysis of existing conditions includes a benchmark comparison to 32 similar agencies using the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Park Metrics database. Benchmarking shows that while the city has an abundance of park sites, only 37% of that acreage is developed (compared to the 77% benchmark median). And while a greater percentage of Charleston's expenditures, by benchmark comparison, goes towards operations, a smaller percentage goes to personnel services. These organizational dynamics will be evaluated and potentially restructured to ensure the department's longevity into the future.

Social Needs & Conditions

The Social Needs and Conditions Analysis (Chapter 2) used 10 demographic and socioeconomic indicators (e.g., education, poverty, household income, age, etc.) to measure the level of social needs in 44 census tracts across Charleston. Much of the data included in this analysis is from the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates from [2014-2018], but the Charleston Police Department (through the city website) provided crime data (that specific information was converted to the census tract level to better align with the other indicators).

The following are critical takeaways about the population living within the city's highest (very high or high) social needs census tracts:

- 28% of Charleston's 2020 population live in these tracts
- 50% are white, 46% are black (compared to these racial groups representing 68% and 26%, respectively, of Charleston)
- Median age of residents living in these tracts is 29.6 (36.2 in Charleston)
- \$41,808 median household income in these tracts (\$69,347 in Charleston)
- 23% of these households are single parent led (17% in Charleston)

This information is part of the evaluation of overall need in the city. Understanding key attributes of the individuals living in these areas is crucial for ensuring Charleston's programs, pricing, and opportunities align with the community.

Service Area Analysis (Opportunities)

Maps of service areas for various parks and facilities were used to identify gaps in service, or underserved areas, to determine potential improvement opportunities within Charleston. Maps illustrate levels of access to various park categories and facilities.

The analysis indicates that just over half of Charleston residents (51%) are within walking distance of a park. Walkable access varies substantially throughout the city, however, ranging from 96% in the Peninsula to only 12% in Johns Island.

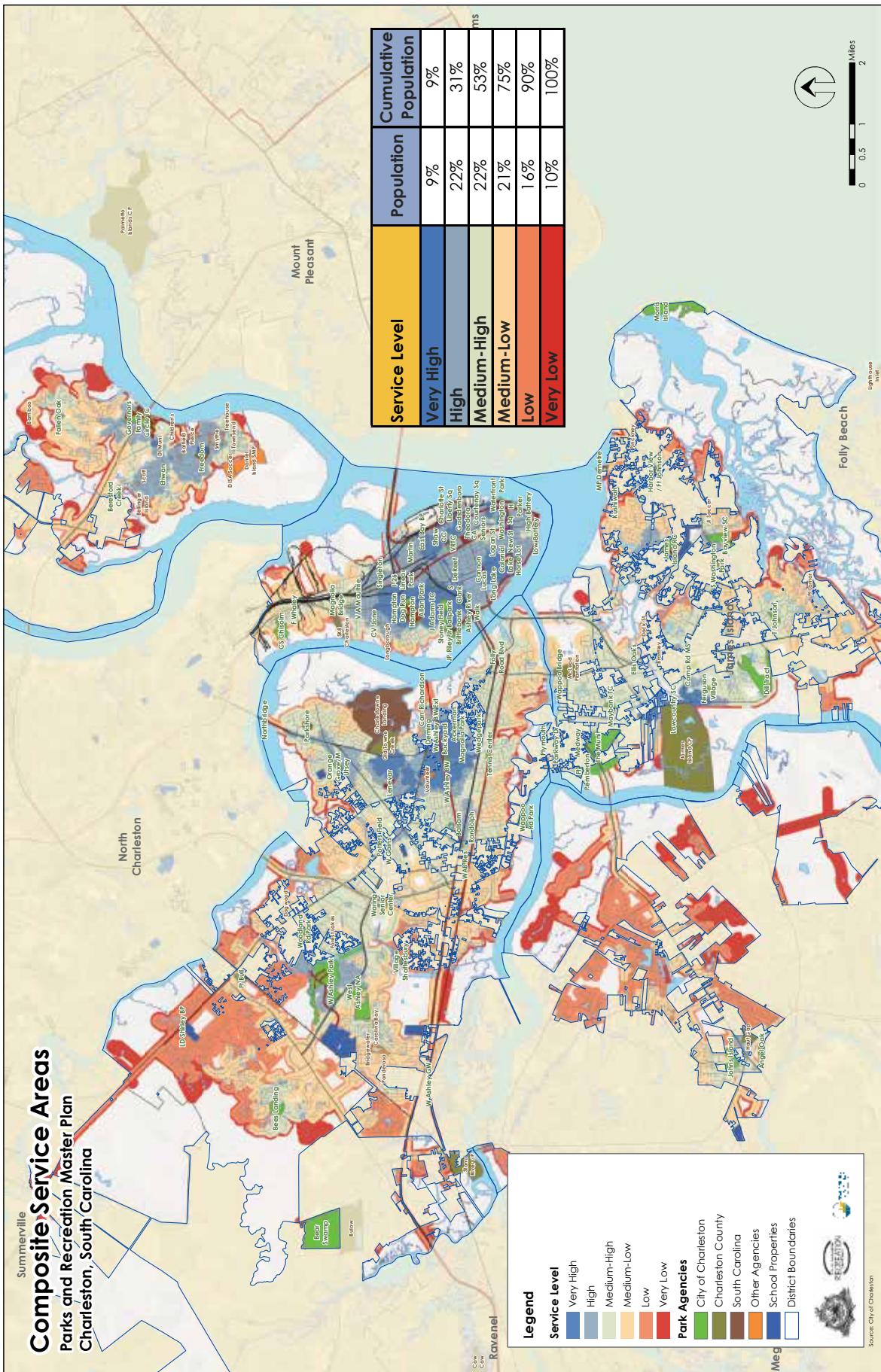
Lastly, a composite service areas map (see next page) shows the overall level of service for parks (5 types) and facilities (21 types), in turn revealing spaces of need and opportunity. Dark shades of blue indicate high service levels while red areas show the areas with the lowest level of service to parks and facilities. Thirty-one percent (31%) of Charleston residents live in the highest two categories, with a little under half (43%) live within the two medium service area. Twenty-six (26%) – just over a quarter of the population – live with low to very low service.

The highest service levels coincide with some of Charleston's older and more densely populated neighborhoods. Much of the lowest service areas occur near the western boundary of the city in West Ashley and Johns Island; these areas include new annexations and not yet developed areas. Johns Island is the district with the most concentrated low service; only small portions have medium-low service due in part to the presence of Johns Island County Park. With much of James Island at medium service levels, the city has incentive to add strategic improvements to enhance service.

Service Level	Population	Cumulative Population
Very High	9%	9%
High	22%	31%
Medium-High	22%	53%
Medium-Low	21%	75%
Low	16%	90%
Very Low	10%	100%

A CITIZEN DRIVEN PLAN

To make informed decisions moving forward, the Charleston Parks and Recreation departments will need meaningful public input in addition to robust statistical and performance analysis. Including resident participation in this master planning process establishes a foundation for input gathering. It gave actual park users a means to share their individual needs, perceptions, concerns, and desires for the park system they themselves use. This Master Plan incorporated several methods for connecting with the community.



As the department begins to implement this plan, sustained efforts will be necessary to continuously solicit public feedback about development projects; allowing direct participation whenever possible will ensure the community feels heard and has pride in their parks. Engagement efforts should be flexible and creative, utilizing tools like on-site feedback (e.g., semi-permanent chalk or bulletin boards) and interactive online platforms (e.g., Mentimeter).

The summary below indicates the various ways the public was involved throughout this Master Plan process. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, normally in-person meetings with groups were conducted via virtual conferencing.

Engagement Summary

- In-Park Intercept Interviews
- Stakeholder Discussions
- Statistically Valid Parks and Recreation Survey (by ETC Institute)
- Online Engagement (powered by MindMixer)

1. Intercept interviews in 19 key locations across all areas of the city
2. Meetings with stakeholder groups over late summer and early fall 2020, representing:
 - Charleston Parks Department
 - Charleston Recreation Department
 - Charleston Parks Conservancy
 - Lowcountry Lowline
 - Sports groups (e.g., Palmetto Masters Swimming, Picklesstrong, Charleston Riverdogs, and more)
 - City partners (e.g., SMRTSwimming, Charleston Tennis, Lowcountry Tennis Association, Palmetto Masters Swimming)
 - Other recreation providers in the area (e.g., First Tee Golf, Daniel Island POA, Ravenel Stadium)
 - Lowcountry and Waring senior centers
 - Developers in Cainhoy
 - Berkeley and Charleston County school districts
 - Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission
3. A statistically valid needs assessment survey conducted by the ETC Institute – 601 households
4. A handout and web survey – available on the Parks and Recreation webpage and shared

on social media platforms – **2,482 total surveys received, 81% residents of Charleston**

5. Online engagement platform, MindMixer, where **346 interactions made by a total 150 participants generated 164 ideas**

WHAT CHARLESTON RESIDENTS SAID

Information gathered from these public input methods was used to identify the needs of Charleston residents. A brief summary of the findings is provided below.

In-Park Interviews & Stakeholder Groups

Discussions spanned a diversity of issues:

1. Connectivity & Wayfinding
2. Upgraded Facilities
3. On-site Amenities
4. Walkable/Bikeable Trails
5. Improved Marketing & Promotion
6. Parks as Local Treasures
7. Partnerships & Collaboration
8. Funding & Revenue Sources
9. Effective Operations
10. New Development
11. Social & Cultural Events

Statistically Valid Mail Survey

Ninety percent (90%) of residents visited a park in Charleston at some point in the previous year; 59% of these residents visited parks more than 10 times. Marion Square, neighborhood/mini/pocket parks, Battery/White Point Garden, and bikeways/greenways were the top four for visitation with over 50% of households indicating use (Chapter 4).

The **top reasons** (above 30% of either/both survey responses) **for not using parks more often:**

- **Do not know what is offered (51%)**
- Availability of parking (31%)
- Do not have time (22%)

These responses suggest that stronger communication efforts, intentional outreach, reworked program schedules, and meaningful improvements systemwide would help improve service and achieve resident satisfaction.

Some improvements households would most like to see to existing parks include:

- Restrooms (59%)
- Shade structures (43%)
- Walking/hiking trails (42%)
- Bike trails (36%)
- Security cameras & lighting (36%)

These preferences point first to the need for on-site amenities and improved comfort at the parks, as well as a popular desire for walkable connectivity across the community and improved safety systemwide.

The **most important parks and recreation facilities** for households were (sum of top 3 choices):

- Walking & hiking trails (35%)
- Natural areas/nature parks (28%)
- Paved bike trails (21%)

The results of the most important facilities were combined with the reported unmet needs to determine high (top 6) **facility priorities for investment**:

1. **Walking & Hiking Trails**
2. **Natural Areas/Nature Parks**
3. **Paved Bike Trails**
4. **Canoe/Kayak Boat Launch**
5. **Small Neighborhood Parks**
6. **Swimming Pools**

The most important parks and recreation programs for households were (sum of top 3 choices):

- Concerts/Art Performances (28%)
- Fitness & Wellness Programs for Adults (17%)
- Nature Programs (15%)
- Outdoor Movies (15%)
- Special Events (15%)

The results of the most important programs were combined with the reported unmet needs to determine the high (top 6) **program priorities for investment**:

1. **Concerts/art performances**
2. **Fitness & Wellness Programs (adult)**
3. **Movies (outdoor)**
4. **Nature Programs**
5. **Programs for 55+**
6. **Special Events**

And finally, respondents shared their level of support for the range of improvements and potential development covered in the survey. **Ninety-two**

percent (92%) of households were supportive of upgrading existing parks and facilities.

Engagement Key Findings

Results indicate that generally the Charleston community desires:

- Upgrades to and improved maintenance at existing parks
- More and better-connected trails
- Preservation of open space and natural areas
- More special events
- Affordability of opportunities and equitable facilities (distribution and quantity)
- Variety of facilities and programs for all ages, abilities, income levels, etc.
- Better marketing and communication
- Services in underserved areas and rapidly developing areas
- Easily accessible neighborhood parks within walking distance
- Variety of game courts
- Improved accessibility and more programs serving disabled and special needs community
- Expanded opportunities for dog owners (programs and facilities)

VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES FOR PARKS AND RECREATION IN CHARLESTON

The Master Plan Steering Committee, with support from the planning team, worked to craft a strategic plan. This facet of the document solidifies the daily purpose of the agency, its guiding values, and the long view of success.

Vision

We strive to be a national leader in citizen and visitor focused parks and recreation offerings

Mission

Building community and enriching lives through quality parks and recreation experiences

Values

Welcoming Experiences

Our parks and programs belong to everyone

Inclusivity

We create diverse opportunities for growth, fun, and discovery

Environmental Stewardship

We protect & highlight our green and blue resources

Healthy Living

We provide meaningful ways to achieve physical and mental wellbeing

Operational Excellence

We deliver the highest quality of service to our community

Cultural Stewardship

Our city's historical heritage is integral to everything we do

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The following goals and objectives will guide the operations, improvements, and services in parks and recreation in Charleston over the next 10 years.

Goal 1: Health & Wellness for All Our Residents

Provide resources that encourage active living and foster wellness for the mind and body

Objective 1.1 – **Athletics:** Innovate to provide comprehensive access and increased opportunity

Objective 1.2 – **Facilities:** Provide state-of-the-art accessible amenities and features to enrich user experiences

Objective 1.3 – **Wellness:** Build on existing and create new offerings through creative, locally-sourced resources

Objective 1.4 – **Social Services:** Provide responsive services that improve well-being and empower individuals and families

Goal 2: Natural & Cultural Resources as Community Treasures

Highlight our unique park spaces, celebrate our remarkable history, and ensure access for everyone

Objective 2.1 – **Stewardship:** Set the standard for responsible management and development of our unique natural and cultural resources

Objective 2.2 – **Outdoor Beauty:** Elevate park spaces so that everyone can enjoy the outdoors

Objective 2.3 – **Access:** Expand opportunities for all residents to engage with nature on land and water

Objective 2.4 – **History, Arts, & Culture:** Cultivate community vibrancy and celebrate our diversity

Objective 2.5 – **Resilience:** Foster adaptation to sea level rise and climate change

Goal 3: Durable Services for Our Community

Apply internal best practices and explore external opportunities to cultivate a legacy of quality

Objective 3.1 – **Operations & Maintenance:** Improve efficiency & fiscal sustainability through clear standards of performance & consistent evaluations

Objective 3.2 – **Funding:** Secure sufficient resources to providing enduring services

Objective 3.3 – **Staff & Volunteers:** Nurture a well-supported team committed to our mission

Objective 3.4 – **Local Support:** Solidify parks and recreation as vital to the highest quality of life for everyone

Goal 4: Accessible Connectivity Throughout Our Community

Build cohesion through spaces and experiences that knit our city together

Objective 4.1 – **Equity:** Provide for an equitable distribution of park, facilities, and recreation programs

Objective 4.2 – **Trails & Wayfinding:** Ensure navigable access within and between our parks

Objective 4.3 – **Shared Encounters:** Offer activities and events that help bridge divides

Objective 4.4 – **Partnership & Collaboration:** Prioritize relationship-building and information-sharing to tackle collective goals

SYSTEMWIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

Public input (Chapter 4) and a needs assessment (Chapter 5) together informed the recommendations for improvement outlined in Chapters 7 and 8. The following items are the top priorities determined by the Master Plan process along with regular consultation with the Steering Committee.

1. Establish five service districts for Parks and Recreation core services to better organize and maintain citywide efficiency
2. Provide core facilities and services in each service district to safeguard quality and complete service to the city
3. Seek a bond referendum to fund the park improvements identified in this plan due to the high level of public support
4. Prioritize enhancements and upgrades at existing parks and facilities
5. Create an Enterprise Manager position to establish creative fundraising campaigns and to expand program offerings, partnering with the Parks Conservancy when possible
6. Determine policy for subsidizing program participation to ensure equitable, meaningful access for anyone who wants it
7. Fill approved but currently vacant positions in Parks and Recreation to improve service and increase staff effectiveness
8. Create a Parks Ambassador employee program (e.g., Memphis, TN) to provide community liaisons, monitor cleanliness, and improve security
9. Establish consistent, communicative collaboration with other service providers (e.g., CCPRC), school districts, and developers (especially in Cainhoy Peninsula)
10. Utilize Charleston Parks Conservancy as a uniquely positioned fundraiser; clarify role of Conservancy compared to Parks and Recreation departments to avoid duplicate services and broaden impact
11. Seek CAPRA accreditation to certify Charleston as a premier provider of parks and recreation services
12. Collaborate to develop park-based solutions to flooding and sea level rise

This Master Plan provides capital improvement recommendations for each park in Charleston. These recommendations – together with cost estimates – can be found in Chapter 8.

ACTION PLAN

The One Charleston: Parks and Recreation Master Plan concludes with an Action Plan of 185 strategies and recommendations. These action items, which can be found in Chapter 9, detail specific actions for the Charleston Parks and Recreation departments and the city itself to take in implementing this 10-year Master Plan.