



Lawrence Parks, Recreation
and Culture Department
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 30th, 2025

Dear Lawrence Residents and Members of the Governing Body,

As the Director of the Parks, Recreation and Culture Department, I am pleased to serve as a steward of how our department meets the needs of our community. Lawrence's *Unmistakable Identity* outcome is deeply rooted in our community's unique cultural, recreational, and natural assets, and it is my privilege to work toward strengthening these foundations for the benefit of all residents. In order to identify and prioritize the needs of the city and any gaps in our delivery of parks, recreation or cultural services, the City engaged Confluence.

I am excited to share the Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan with you. This plan reflects extensive collaboration among City leaders, the Master Plan Steering Committee, the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, the Cultural Arts Commission and, most importantly, our residents. My team and I fully accept the responsibility of carrying its vision forward, ensuring thoughtful and impactful decisions that deliver the results you expect and deserve.

The Master Plan provides a detailed roadmap to ensure that Lawrence continues to embody its *Unmistakable Identity* by offering the high-quality parks, recreation, and cultural opportunities that our residents need and deserve. At its core, the plan prioritizes the improvement and maintenance of existing facilities—including parks, trails, playgrounds, and recreation centers—while expanding access to arts and culture to foster a thriving, inclusive community. It also emphasizes financial sustainability, outlining innovative funding mechanisms and sound financial practices to ensure that the City's resources are managed responsibly and effectively.

Meeting these needs requires more than vision it requires sustainable funding and a practical approach to implementation. While the plan identifies several funding strategies, such as sponsorships, partnerships, impact fees, and other mechanisms, our department will take a closer look at our offerings to ensure they align with community priorities and reflect our commitment to sound fiscal stewardship. Striking a balance between vision and practicality will be essential to making thoughtful, effective use of every dollar to create meaningful, long-term benefits.

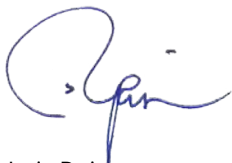
We must recognize that these recommendations will be shaped by economic conditions. Implementing this plan successfully will depend on a shared commitment to addressing funding challenges and remaining flexible in the face of changing circumstances. While economic uncertainties are unavoidable, collaboration and open communication within the community will be key to finding practical solutions and ensuring accountability and transparency throughout the process.

To keep this plan actionable and responsive, we will create annual work plans that prioritize specific projects and milestones each year. These updates will ensure that progress is shared with the community and the governing body, fostering collaboration and trust. This approach guarantees that the work we do today creates sustainable benefits for generations to come.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to this plan. Your voices have shaped its priorities, and this work is truly ours. My role is to ensure that your ideas are translated into action—strengthening Lawrence's parks, recreation, and cultural offerings in ways that align with the *Unmistakable Identity* outcome and our shared commitment to inclusivity, sustainability, and vibrancy.

I look forward to the opportunities ahead and am honored to lead the effort to bring this community-driven vision to life. Together, we can ensure that Lawrence's parks, trails, recreation, and cultural programs remain a source of pride and inspiration for years to come.

Sincerely,



Luis Ruiz

Director, Parks, Recreation and Culture

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The City of Lawrence is a community with an Unmistakable Identity, known for its parks, recreation offerings, and vibrant arts and culture scene. These elements contribute to a high quality of life that attracts residents and visitors alike. The City's Parks, Recreation and Culture Department (PRC) plays a vital role in maintaining this identity and has been recognized nationally as a four-time finalist for the National Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Parks and Recreation Management. This acknowledgement highlights the department's efforts to provide valuable services and programs to the community.

The City manages a 4,000-acre park system with 71 parks, open spaces, and over 85 miles of trails, providing diverse opportunities for leisure, exercise, and connection with nature. The Prairie Park Nature Center further enhances these efforts by delivering environmental education programs designed to inspire all generations to engage in the preservation and protection of natural resources, fostering a deeper appreciation for Lawrence's unique ecosystems.

In recent years, the department has developed key facilities such as Sports Pavilion Lawrence, the Eagle Bend Golf Course, the Indoor Aquatics Center, the Youth Sports Complex, and the Adult Softball Complex. These facilities have established Lawrence as a hub for regional tournaments, community events, and daily recreational activities, drawing thousands of visitors each year and contributing to the local economy resulting in measurable economic impact.

By providing accessible recreational opportunities, programs, and open spaces, the department is a key contributor to public health, promoting active lifestyles, enhancing mental and physical well-being, and strengthening the overall health of the community.

Recently, Lawrence has embraced the integration of Arts and Culture within the Parks and Recreation department. This progressive step reflects the City's understanding that arts and culture are essential to building a thriving, inclusive community. From public art installations to special events and cultural programming, the department is expanding its role as a leader in the region's cultural ecosystem, enhancing Lawrence's appeal as a creative and welcoming city.



The Master Plan Process

This Master Plan reflects a robust series of meetings, charrettes, and a statistically valid survey that were conducted with City leaders, the Lawrence Parks, Recreation and Culture Department Master Plan Steering Committee and Lawrence residents. As a result of these meetings, residents and City leaders have established priorities for park improvements, additional park facilities and improving existing trails networks to strengthen the connections between park facilities. The report also covers the City's continued goals of establishing the Parks, Recreation and Culture Department, operation improvement, and quality service delivery system wide. Additionally, the Master Plan should be used to assist in developing a plan for investing in park system upgrades based on the wants/needs of the community.

The Master Plan is a roadmap for enhancing facilities and services designed to guide the department in meeting the evolving needs of residents and visitors. It identifies critical priorities, such as:

- Improving and maintaining existing park and recreation facilities
- Expanding the network of trails and green spaces
- Integrating arts and culture as a core element of community life
- Establishing financial sustainability through innovative funding mechanisms
- Promoting inclusivity, equity, and access across all programs and facilities

The plan's recommendations are grounded in a comprehensive assessment of the department's current assets and opportunities for growth. This approach ensures that the plan is and sets a clear path for the future of parks, recreation, and culture in Lawrence.

Key Recommendations

Facility Improvements and Community Needs

The plan outlines a comprehensive approach to enhancing the parks and recreation system in Lawrence, balancing revenue-generating improvements with features that increase community appeal and accessibility. Key recommendations include updates to shelters, sports facilities, and reconfigured parks and enhancements such as walking and biking trails, and improved wayfinding. Public input and survey results emphasize the importance of prioritizing upgrades to existing facilities, addressing the features most valued by residents. These priorities include:

Public input and survey results emphasize the importance of prioritizing upgrades to existing facilities, addressing the features most valued by residents. These priorities include:

- Updates and expansions of walking trails
- Modernization of indoor recreation and aquatic facilities
- Upgraded playgrounds to improve safety and accessibility
- Preservation and expansion of passive natural areas



Although many areas of Lawrence are well-served, the master plan identifies portions of the community where neighborhood and community parks and trails could better meet resident needs. These gaps, clearly outlined in the system needs section of the plan, are essential to address for equitable access across the city.

Financial Sustainability

One of the greatest challenges for implementing the plan is securing funding for these improvements. Securing funding for plan implementation is a primary challenge for municipal park agencies nationwide. Public input indicates that residents are open to exploring new funding mechanisms to support these goals and meet community needs. A variety of approaches, including innovative funding strategies and strategic budgeting, will be critical to prioritize department objectives over the next 10 years.

This Plan provides a comprehensive list of recommendations for new funding mechanisms to help achieve these goals. The Master Plan provides financial recommendations to guide strategic investments over the next decade. A list of Financial Recommendations is included in the Master Plan to help guide this process. Key strategies include:

- Developing a Pricing Policy to balance costs with community expectations, classifying services as essential, important, or value-added
- Creating a Business Development Position to secure sponsorships, partnerships, and grants, reducing reliance on tax dollars
- Leveraging the Transient Guest Tax to support facility operations and maintenance
- Establishing a Business Improvement District (BID) for downtown park maintenance and events
- Create a Parks Foundation to generate private funding for capital projects and facility improvements
- Implementing Self-Sustaining Budgets for revenue-generating facilities
- Adopting an Impact Development Fee to fund park and trail expansions in growing neighborhoods
- Considering a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District to fund park and trail improvements in redevelopment areas
- Enacting a Land Dedication Ordinance requiring developers to contribute cash or land for future park expansion

The Department needs to determine the long-term costs of new programming and infrastructure and how much of the operational costs can be covered through revenue generation. This approach allows the Department to recover some operational expenses without being penalized for doing so, enabling it to maximize revenue when possible. By doing this, the Department can continue offering the experiences that the community expects and is willing to support financially.

Arts and Culture Integration

Arts and culture are essential to Lawrence's identity and economy, and the Master Plan positions them as a cornerstone of the Parks, Recreation and Culture Department's mission. By weaving arts and culture into the fabric of parks and recreation, Lawrence can enhance its reputation as a creative and inclusive community.

Key Strategic Actions:

- Formalize the Public Art Program by advancing the long-standing Resolution into an Ordinance
- Develop flagship cultural celebrations to reflect Lawrence's character and attract visitors
- Collaborate with Indigenous communities to highlight their cultural contributions
- Expand partnerships with organizations like the Lawrence Arts Center, Theatre Lawrence, and Watkins Museum to co-create programs
- Conduct a market study for an outdoor event space/amphitheater to assess community demand and potential programming

By embedding arts and culture into parks and recreation, Lawrence will enhance its reputation as a creative and inclusive community.

Conclusion

The Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan identifies key opportunities and challenges for the Department as it advances Lawrence's *Unmistakable Identity* in alignment with the City's Strategic Plan.

Lawrence stands out among peer cities for its exceptional parkland, recreation facilities, and trails. Compared to similar-sized cities, Lawrence excels in:

- Paved Trails: 8.6 miles per 1,000 residents (20x the national average of 0.4 miles)
- Park Land: 30.89 acres per 1,000 residents (more than double the Midwest average of 12 acres)
- Indoor Recreation Space: 3.21 sq. ft. per 1,000 residents (exceeding the 2 sq. ft. standard)
- Sports Fields: Meeting all best-practice standards

However, maintaining this standard requires updating and expanding the number of recreational and aquatic facilities, improving trail connectivity, and ensuring equitable park access while securing sustainable funding. Some key recommendations to accomplish this are:

- Invest at least 5% of the total asset value of the park system, excluding land, to maintain and preserve existing City-owned assets.
- Balance revenue-earned capability with existing tax dollars to manage facilities and program adequately
- Update the Outdoor Aquatic Center and build a new one in West Lawrence to achieve one aquatic center per 50,000 people
- Incorporate more dedicated funding sources to not deplete the system
- Operate revenue producing facilities with approved business plans where all revenues earned help to support the facilities involved and establish a true cost recovery goal for each facility
- Update pricing and partnership policies

The Master Plan provides a comprehensive strategy for addressing these challenges, outlining a 10-year roadmap. At the same time, the City must balance tax revenues with earned income and implement financial best practices to support these initiatives.

To ensure the success of the plan, a robust communication strategy will be essential. Regular updates to the public about progress and the reasoning behind investments will reinforce awareness that their input is being acted upon and that resources are being allocated wisely. The Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and the Cultural Arts Commission will need to play a pivotal role in relaying information and championing the plan's recommendations. By working together, the City can foster transparency, build trust, and solidify support for these efforts.

By adopting the plan's recommendations, the City can:

- Preserve and enhance its parks and recreation system
- Expand access to arts and culture
- Foster economic growth and community well-being
- Ensure financial sustainability and equity

This comprehensive approach solidifies Lawrence's position as a regional leader in parks, recreation and culture, reinforcing its *Unmistakable Identity* and securing a bright future for residents and visitors alike!
