

DRAFT



Lawrence Parks, Recreation
and Culture Department
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 8th, 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, Art, and Culture

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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 combine to create a high quality of life that attracts residents, businesses, and visitors alike. The City's Parks, Recreation and Culture Department (PRC) has been an important part of this identity, receiving national recognition as a four-time finalist for the National Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Parks and Recreation Management. This acknowledgment highlights the department's efforts to provide valuable services and programs to the community.

The City manages a 4,000-acre park system comprising 71 parks, open spaces, and over 85 miles of trails, providing residents and visitors with 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 led the development of significant facilities, including 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. In addition to their economic impact, these spaces have strengthened community connections, supported physical and mental well-being, and enriched the quality of life for Lawrence residents.

Recently, Lawrence has embraced the integration of Arts and Culture within its Parks and Recreation portfolio. 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 not merely a roadmap for enhancing facilities and services; it is a visionary document 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 both aspirational and achievable, setting 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:

- 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.



One of the greatest challenges for implementing the plan is securing funding for these improvements. Public input indicates that residents are open to exploring new funding mechanisms to support these goals. A variety of approaches, including innovative funding strategies and strategic budgeting, will be critical to prioritize department objectives over the next 10 years. The Master Plan provides a detailed list of financial recommendations to guide this process.

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 that their input is being acted upon and that resources are being allocated wisely. The Advisory Board, with its deep community ties, will continue to play a pivotal role in relaying information and championing the plan's vision. By working together, the City can foster transparency, build trust, and solidify support for these transformative efforts.

Financial Sustainability

After developing a comprehensive Parks, Recreation and Culture Department Master Plan, the challenge many municipal parks and recreation agencies face is funding the recommended improvements. As identified in public input, Lawrence residents are willing to consider additional funding options to meet needs and desires. To fully meet expectations of residents, a variety of funding mechanisms and budgeting is necessary to prioritize department goals for the next 10 years. A list of Financial Recommendations is included in the Master Plan to help guide this process. Key strategies include:

- Create a park, recreation, and arts pricing policy to balance operational costs with community expectations. The policy should classify services as essential, important, or value-added, include resident and non-resident pricing schedules, and evaluate regional comparisons to ensure fairness and sustainability.
- Develop a dedicated Business Development position to seek out new sponsorships and partnerships to help fund park programs, park improvements and operations. This would include designating a single person in the department to develop new funding options that could include sponsorships for programs, special events, and facilities to help offset operational costs. This position is also able to seek out grants from foundations, state, and federal agencies to help secure funds for the department.
- Leveraging the Transient Guest Tax from sporting events and special events hosted by the department to help support the operations and maintenance of these facilities in the city that have a large population draw outside of the city to help pay for the operations of these facilities. This would require the department to work with the convention and visitor bureau to use Placer AI to track users of the system who come into the community for special events and tournaments on where they stay, how much do they spend on food and drinks, how far did they drive, what other places they went to while in Lawrence.
- Consider establishing a BID (Business Improvement District) for downtown Lawrence and include the parks system as a recipient of the funds for the BID District to help keep those parks and events the park system host downtown to have the need resources to keep those events happening with resources from the businesses who pay into the BID.

- Establish a Park Foundation to support the needs of the Parks, Recreation and Culture Department to generate private dollars to support capital improvement projects both new and old, create new operational revenues to support facilities and programs services that help to fill the gap between taxes and user fees to make Lawrence Parks, Recreation and Trails as strong as they can be in their efforts to support the community.
- Establish self-sustaining/revolving budgets for revenue-generating facilities and programs to ensure their long-term viability.
- Consider development of an Impact Development Fee for parks when new development is created in the city to support adding parks and trails to support the development through capital funds generated from each home in the development. Revenue generated from impact fees is allocated towards public infrastructure including parks.
- Consider a Tax Increment Finance (TIF) District which involves the issuance of tax-exempt bonds to pay front end infrastructure costs and eligible development costs in partnership with private developers that consider Quality of Life improvements that capture the increases in property tax revenue within a designated geographic area and allocates it for a specific public purpose. These funds work well in downtown park redevelopment and for trails.
- Consider a land dedication ordinance that developers can provide cash in lieu of park land to support future park acquisitions that would support their development. These dollars can help with building trails and parks in underserved areas of the community.

The key to effective financial management is to not overextend the Department's resources, hoping that operational or capital money will follow. The Department needs to establish what the long-term cost of new infrastructure is to the Department's budget and ensure that the operational cost will be covered through the budget process or wait on the capital improvement until those dollars are available. Second is to allow the department to operate with the goal of recovering some of their operational costs without penalizing them when they do so to capture more operating revenue when they can do so to provide the type of experiences people are expecting and are willing to pay for the future.

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:

- Collaborate with Indigenous communities to highlight their contributions to Lawrence’s cultural heritage
- Formalizing the Public Art Program by advancing the three-time reaffirmed Resolution—initially passed in 1986— to an Ordinance and implementing the accompanying public art program
- Work with cultural organizations like the Lawrence Arts Center, Theatre Lawrence, and the Watkins Museum of History to co-create programs that celebrate the City’s diversity
- Develop flagship cultural celebrations that draw visitors and reflect Lawrence’s unique character
- Execute a market study for the building of an outdoor event space/amphitheater to understand the community demand and programming types that would be successful in Lawrence

Next Steps Communication

The success of the Master Plan depends on sustained engagement and transparent communication with the public. The Parks & Recreation Advisory Board and the Lawrence Cultural Arts Commission will play a vital role in championing the plan and fostering public trust. Regular updates on progress, challenges, and successes will demonstrate the City’s commitment to implementing community-driven solutions.

Advisory Board members, who have deep connections to the community, will serve as key advocates, helping to amplify the plan’s message and build consensus among residents. Their involvement ensures that the plan remains responsive to community needs and values.

Conclusion

The Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan is a bold and forward-thinking blueprint for Lawrence’s future. It addresses critical needs, leverages opportunities for growth, and reflects the aspirations of a diverse and engaged community. 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.

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