

Chapter 6

Needs Assessment

REVISED

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APPROVED



Ch 6 Needs Assessment

6.0 Introduction

A vital component of the Long Range Plan for Land, Facilities and Programs is the needs assessment. A needs assessment is an analytical method to help staff assess what facilities are most needed and desired by the citizens of Austin and to determine which of these needs are the most critical. Two approaches were used for this assessment: a demand-based survey and a resource-based analysis. The demand-based approach gathered information from surveys and public input meetings. The resource-based approach analyzed natural resources, facilities, and parks to determine how these assets can best be used to develop a park system for the future. In addition to demand and resources, staff examined local trends that might influence the Parks and Recreation Department.

6.1 Demand-Based Needs

The Needs Assessment is composed of several techniques used to evaluate recreational demand for different perspectives. Each of the following approaches were utilized in the Needs Assessment:

- Public Opinion Surveys' Results
- Public Input Meetings' Findings
- Gap Analysis
- Adopted Neighborhood Plans' Recommendations
- Bond Committee Findings

A. Public Opinion Surveys' Results:

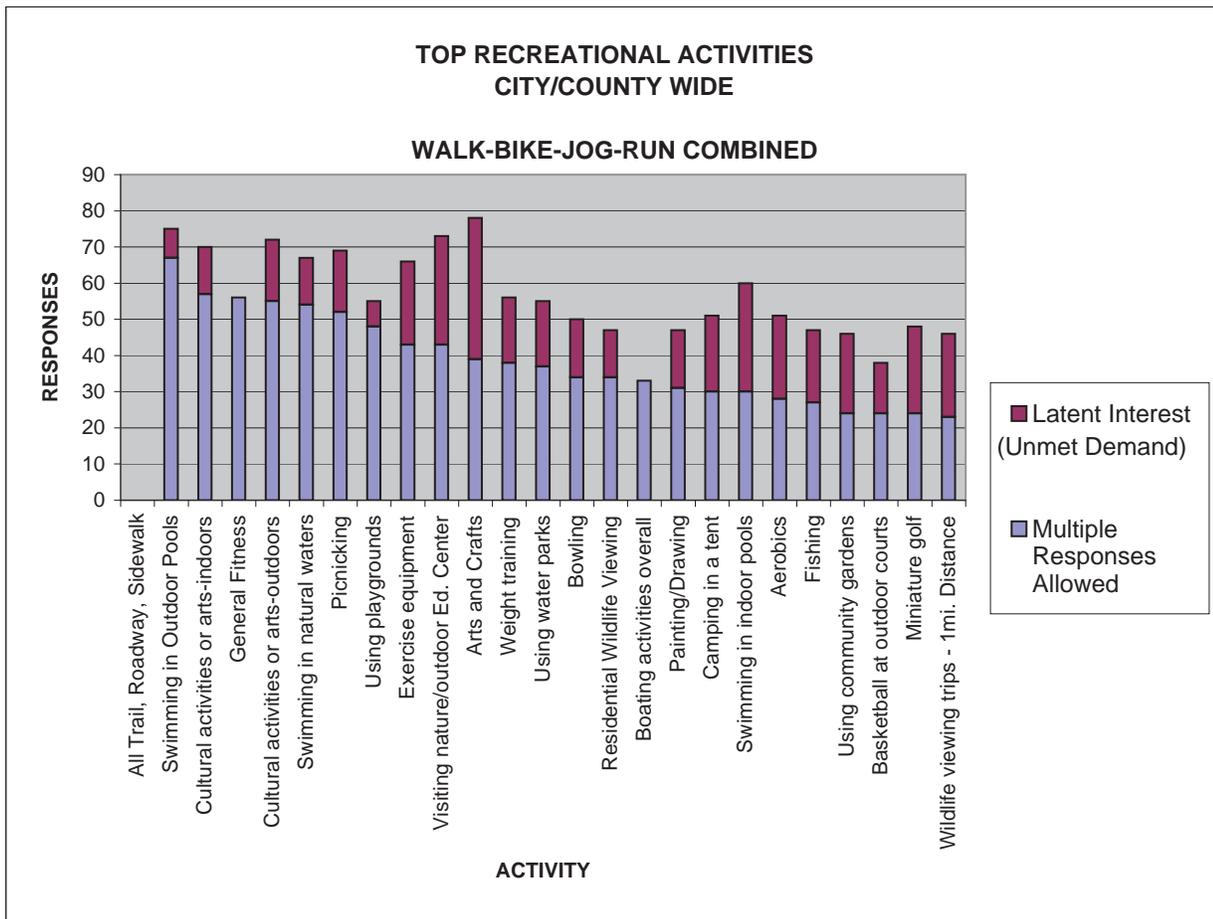
Telephone Survey

A random telephone survey of citizens of Austin and Travis County was conducted in 2004. The purpose of the survey was to assess the needs and desires of citizens concerning parks and recreation. The survey was designed to collect information from a sample of population that accurately represents Austin's diversity in age, sex, income, ethnicity, and geographic distribution. Subsequent public opinion sampling indicates that the results of this survey are still valid to date.

TOP 20 RECREATION ACTIVITIES CITY AND COUNTY WIDE TRAIL AND ROADWAY WALK-BIKE-JOG-RUN COMBINED			
Activity	Rating	Multiple Responses Allowed	Late Interest (unmet demand)
All Trail, Roadway, Sidewalk Related*	1	81+	
Swimming in Outdoor Pools	2	67	8
Cultural activities or arts-indoors	3	57	13
General Fitness	4	56	
Cultural activities or arts-outdoors	5	55	17
Swimming in natural waters	6	54	13
Picnicking	7	52	17
Using playgrounds	8	48	7
Exercise equipment	9	43	23
Visiting nature/outdoor Ed. Center	9	43	30
Arts and Crafts	10	39	39
Weight training	11	38	18
Using water parks	12	37	18
Bowling	13	34	16
Residential Wildlife Viewing	13	34	13
Boating activities overall	14	33	
Painting/Drawing	15	31	16
Camping in a tent	16	30	21
Swimming in indoor pools	16	30	30
Aerobics	17	28	23
Fishing	18	27	20
Using community gardens	19	24	22
Basketball at outdoor courts	19	24	14
Miniature golf	19	24	24

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It should be noted there are two components to this survey: participation rates and latent interest. Participation rate indicates how many people currently participate in a recreational activity. Latent interest represents unmet need because of a lack of easily available facilities. By combining these two components, "total need" is determined. This is represented by the following graph.



Source: Responsive Management, "A Recreation Study for the City of Austin and Travis County, TX", 2004

B. Recreation On-Line Survey Analysis *(see appendix Ch 9 for full findings)*

A recreation survey was conducted in March 2007 to determine recreation priorities for the Austin community. The survey was distributed through recreation centers and senior centers or could be completed online. Over 700 citizens responded to the survey addressing a broad range of recreation issues. The survey asked a question regarding needs, and a list of selected recreational activities were provided. The participants were able to answer in a hierarchy format. The following represents the priority of needs that received the highest percentage of votes for a given household:

1. Walking and biking trails
2. Nature and science center / Preserves – tie
3. Museums
4. Outdoor swimming pools / Running / Walking track - tie
5. Community gardens
6. Indoor exercise & fitness facilities / Cultural centers / Art galleries – tie
7. Recreation Centers
8. Indoor swimming pools
9. Tennis Courts
10. Performing arts / studios
11. Playgrounds for children
12. Dog play areas
13. Indoor gymnasiums
14. Outdoor court sports (basketball etc.)
15. Senior activity centers
16. Golf courses
17. Youth baseball & softball fields
18. Skateboarding parks
19. Adult baseball & softball fields
20. BMX parks

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C. Public Input Meetings

From December 2007 through April 2008, the Parks and Recreation Department held a series of public input meetings to gather input for land, facilities and program planning. In order to conduct a manageable amount of public input meetings, the city was divided into five broad areas that were the focus of their respective meeting. The public input meetings educated the attendees on the purpose, goals and objectives of the Long Range Plan for Land, Facilities and Programs. The meetings provide the opportunity for group discussion on identifying strengths, challenges and opportunities that exist within the Parks System and to prioritize future opportunities for the next 5 years.

The 5 areas are:

N/NE 12.10.07 Reagan High School

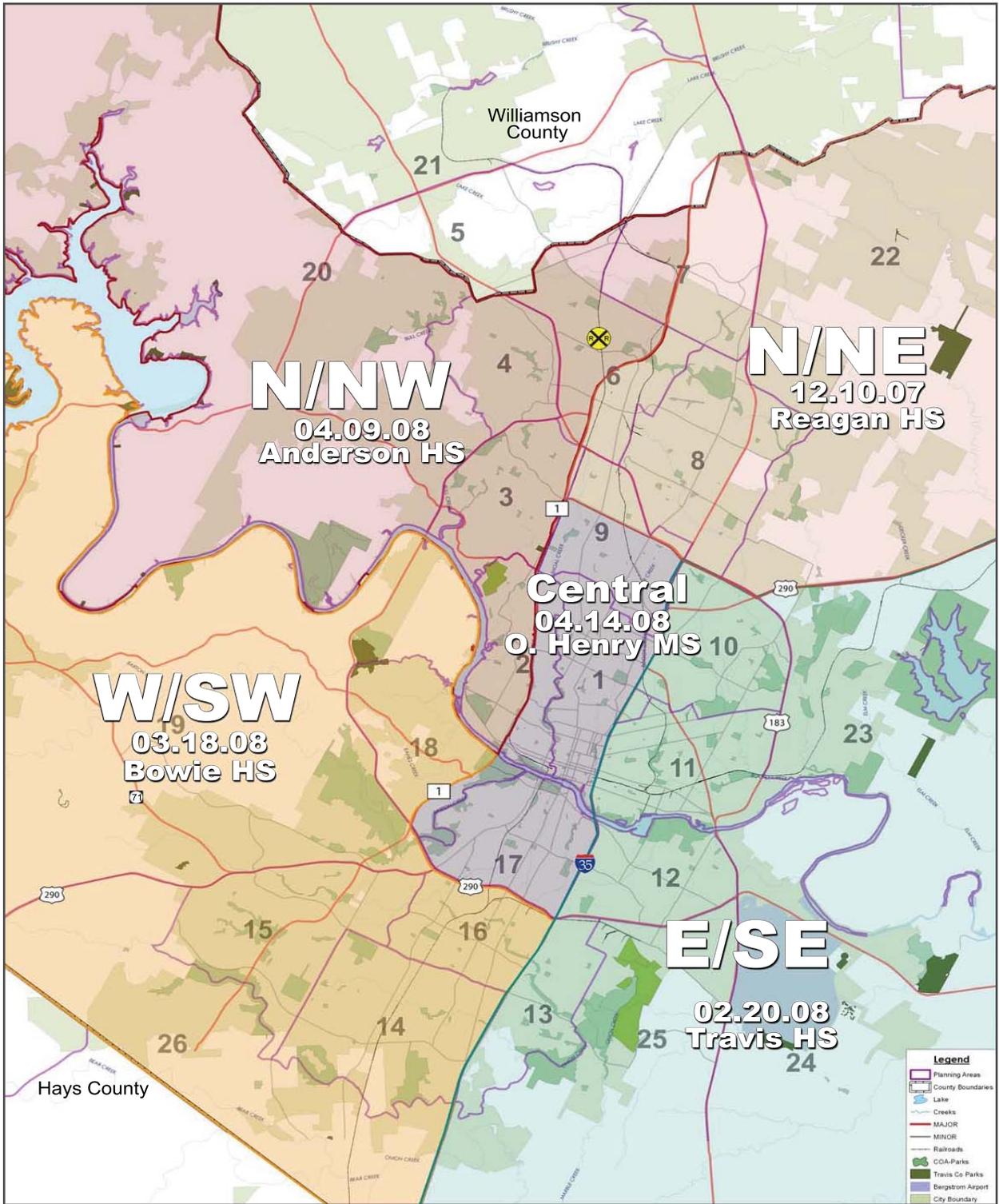
S/SE 02.20.08 Travis High School

W/SW 03.18.08 Bowie High School

N/NW 04.09.08 Anderson High School

Central 04.14.08 O. Henry Middle School

The boundary map delineating each meeting area's boundary follows.



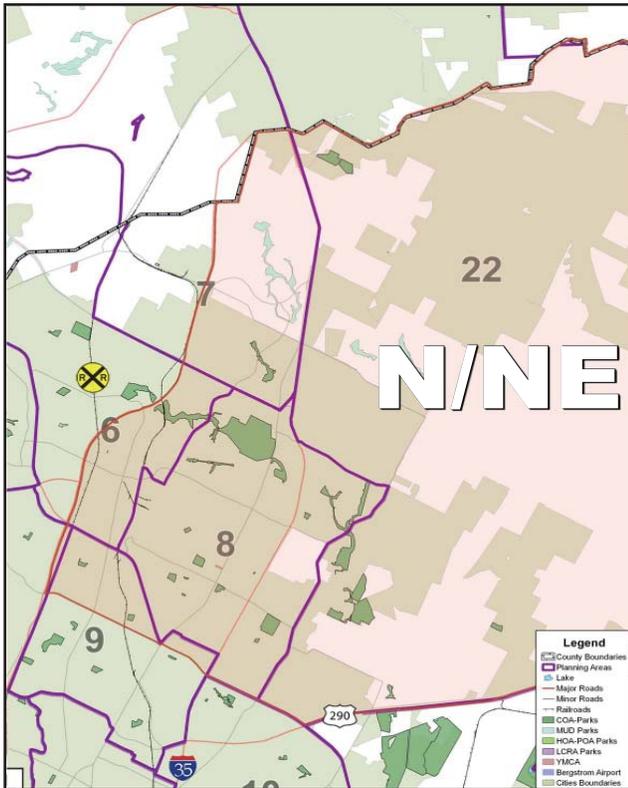
PARD's Public Input Meetings Boundary Map



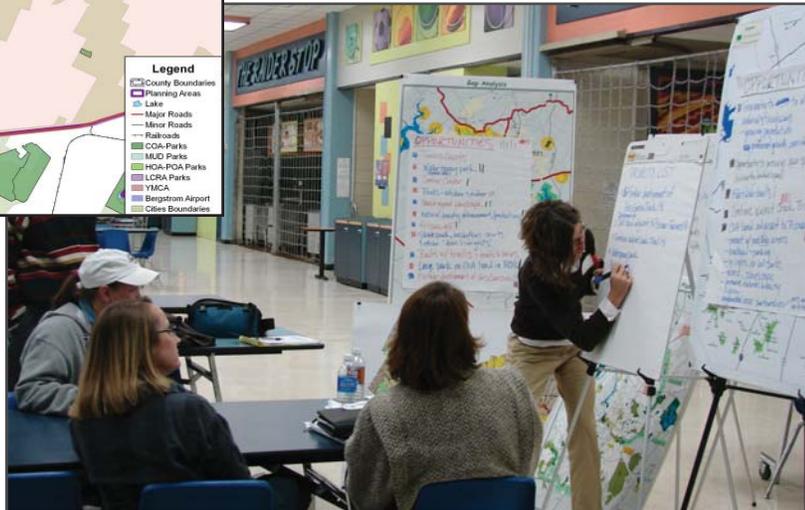
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Public Input Meetings' Findings

As previously stated in Chapter 5, there were five public meetings conducted between December 2007 and April 2008. Below are the top findings defined by the participants' votes. (Raw data collected at these meetings may be found in the corresponding chapter of the Addendum)

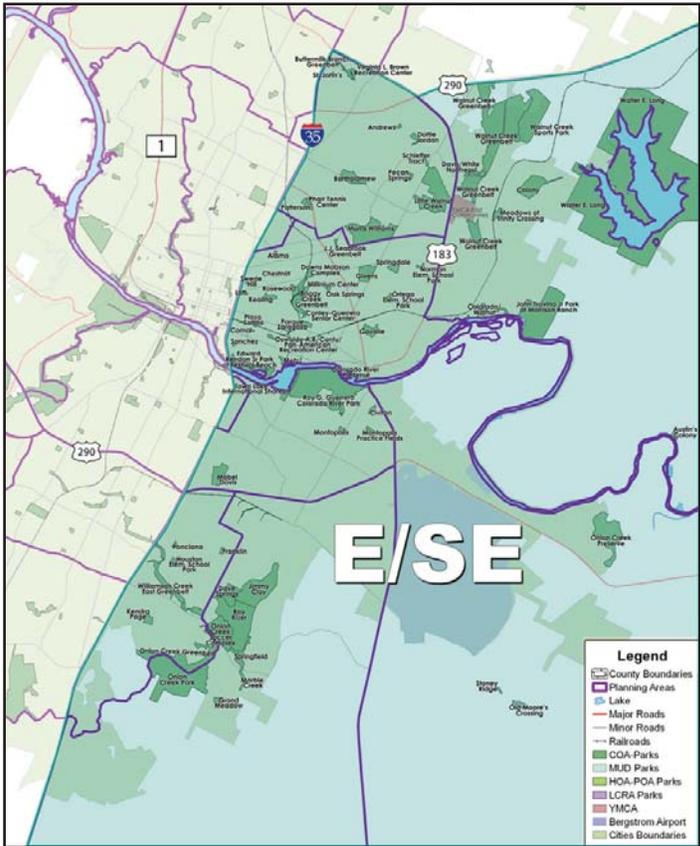


N/NE: 12.10.07



N/NE Public Input Meeting – Top 5 Votes

- Develop remaining areas of Gustavo “Gus” L. Garcia Park
- Develop COA land adjacent to Pioneer Farms
- Continue development of Walnut Creek Trail
- Add water playscapes to the area
- Additional pools – indoor and outdoor



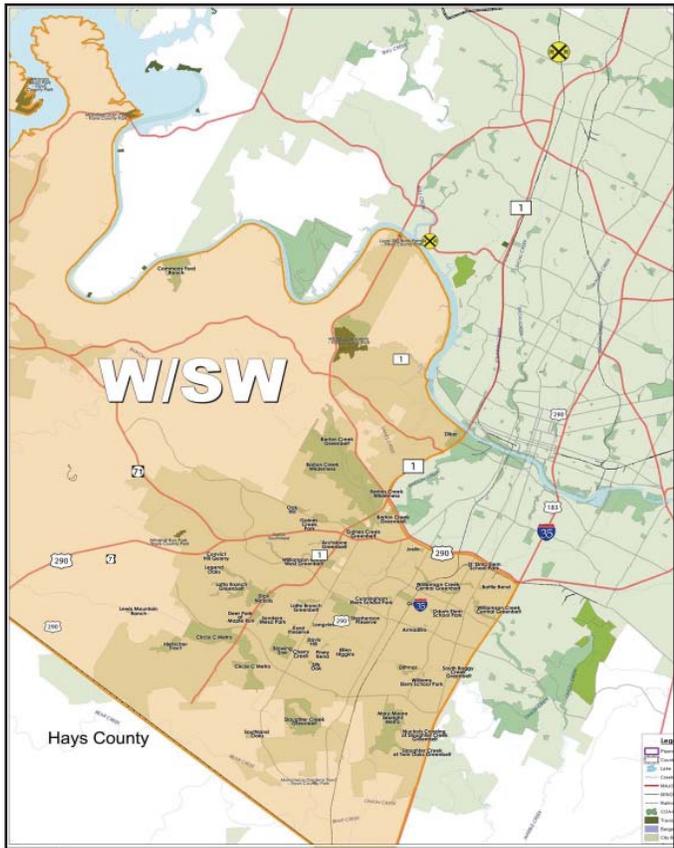
E/SE: 02.20.08



E/SE Public Input Meeting – Top 5 Votes

- Off-leash dog area in Rosewood Park
- 5908 Manor Rd needs a free park with an activity center
- Country Club Creek Trail
- Skate parks throughout City
- More parks in SE area of Austin

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W/SW: 03.18.08



W/SW Public Input Meeting – Top 5 Votes

- Lighted tennis courts, shaded bleachers for spectators and restroom facilities through partnership with Austin Independent School District(AISD)
- Partnership with AISD for use of lighted tennis facilities
- Additional trails
- Regional skateboard park (same size as Mabel Davis)
- Full recreation center at Dick Nichols with lighted tennis courts



N/NW: 04.09.08

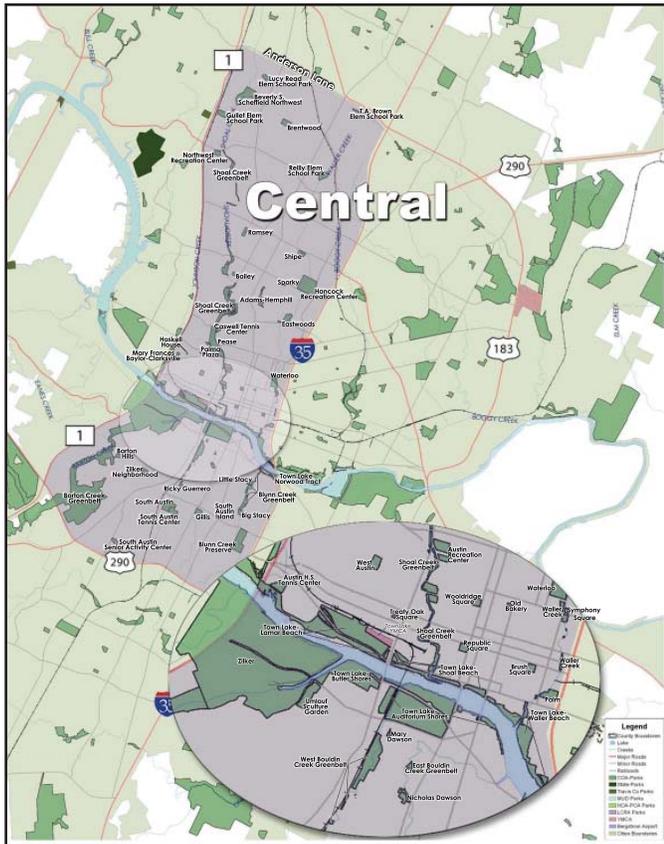


N/NW Public Input Meeting – Top 5 Votes

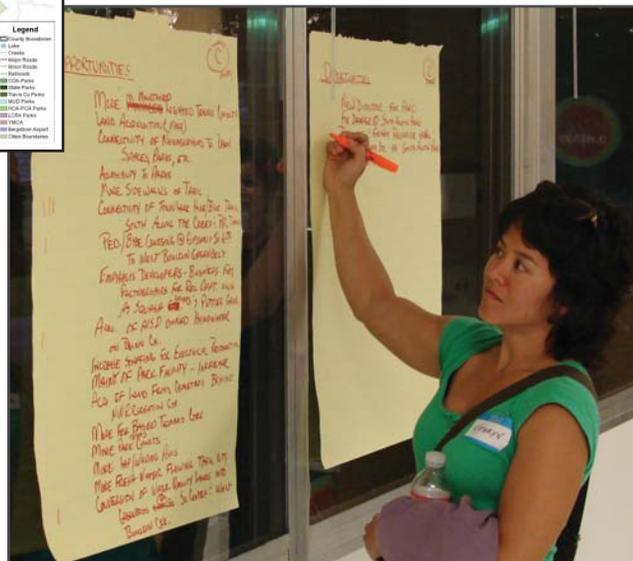
- Neighborhood tennis courts – lighted – 4 court cluster min
- Affordable tennis courts, minimum of 8-lighted courts (tournament and recreational play)
- More off-leash trails
- Balcones Country Club and Golf Course acquisition
- Collaborate with Anderson High School (area high schools) for more tennis courts (particularly put in lights) (also Westwood High School)



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CENTRAL: 04.14.08



Central Public Input Meeting – Top 5 Votes

- More maintained lighted tennis courts
- Fix gaps in trails – lower Shoal Creek between W 5th and West Ave
- Acquisition of AISD owned headwater on Blunn Creek
- 401 St Johns (COA Prop) (it is leased to Univ Hills Optimist) move them (*Univ Hills Optimist*) to create more Park opportunity
- More skate facilities in parks – open to skate board, roller skating, bmx, roller derby

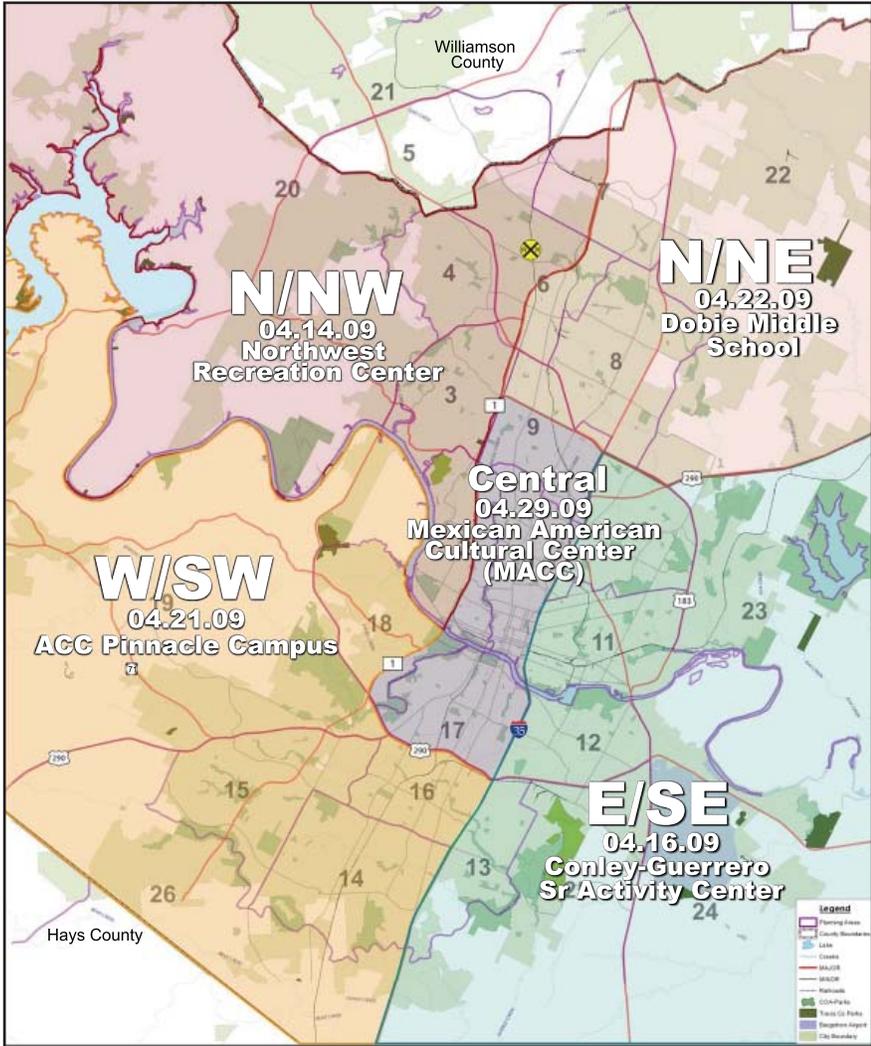
C. Public Meetings

In April of 2009 the Parks and Recreation Department held an additional series of public meetings to review the information gathered at the initial five public meetings and how this information was incorporated into the draft document. The same five broad areas were used for a manageable amount of public meetings and consistent with the previous process.

The 5 additional meetings were:

- N/NW 04.14.09 Northwest Recreation Center
- E/SE 04.16.09 Conley-Guerrero Sr Activity Center
- W/SW 04.21.09 ACC Pinnacle Campus
- N/NE 04.22.09 Dobie Middle School
- Central 04.29.09 Emma S Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC)

The boundary map delineating each meeting area's boundary follows.

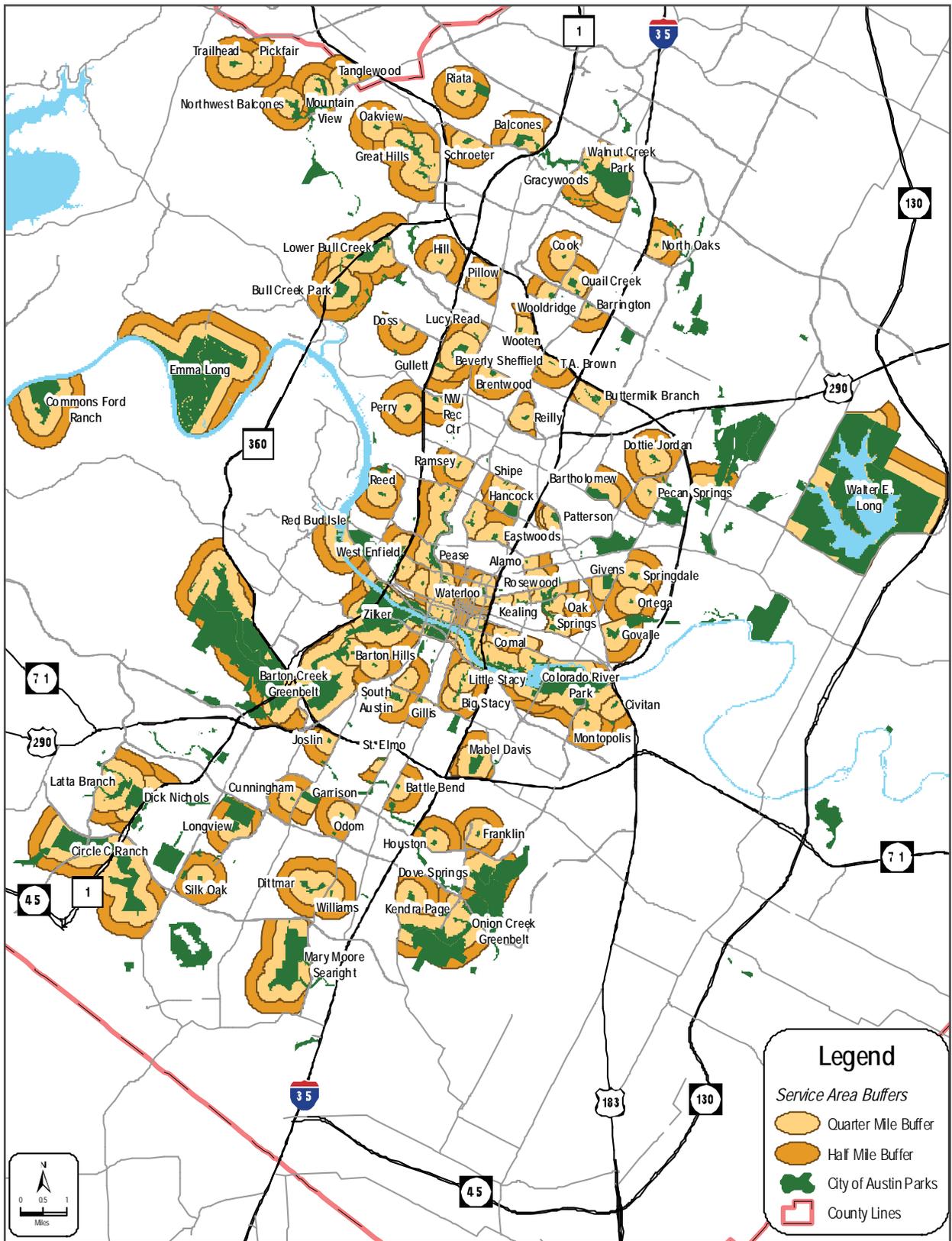


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6.2 Gap Analysis of the City of Austin's Parks Service Areas

As part of the methodology used to assess recreational service delivery, PARD performed a "gap analysis" using its Geographic Information System (GIS). The objective was to determine which areas of the City are underserved with park facilities which create gaps in the park system. The Gap Analysis process also considers county and state parks, and private/public facilities however, the process does not include private facilities. The components of the gap analysis are listed below and the map follows:

- A. Neighborhood Park Service Level** - The basic assumption is that the desired level of service is achieved at the Neighborhood Park level. In order to function at the minimum level, a park must have three or more different types of recreational facilities that are normally found in a neighborhood park. Raw parkland does not function as a Neighborhood Park and thus would not provide recreational opportunity. In some instances, larger parks can also function as a Neighborhood Park. For example, if a family lived next to a District Park, it may serve as their Neighborhood Park. So for this exercise, any size of park would serve as a Neighborhood Park as long as it has at least three different facilities.
- B. Service Area** - The standard service area for a neighborhood park in Austin is one mile, but a more desirable service area would be a half mile. Both a half-mile service radius and a quarter-mile service radius were used in the analysis.
- C. Service Area Barriers** - It is assumed Neighborhood Parks should be most accessible by pedestrian or bicycle travel. Thus if a major barrier exists that would prevent travel to a park by these modes, then the service area is blocked by that barrier and is not available for use as desired. Major barriers would include arterial roads, rivers, or other physical barriers. Therefore, if a barrier exists, the service radius for a neighborhood park would not be a complete circle, and only that part of the service radius that is barrier free is available for use.
- D. Demographics** - When considering segments of the population that have priority needs, we use the following indicators: low income, youth and elderly. Also given consideration is population density.
- E. Analysis** - When all the factors above are plotted on a map of the Austin area, certain "gaps" appear. A gap would be an area that does not have recreational service and has strong demographic need indicators. This indicates an area that needs a park and a diversity of facilities. If parkland exists in that area, but is undeveloped, then the goal would be to develop the existing parkland. If no parkland exists, land acquisition is the first priority, and then the development of the park would follow.



City of Austin's Parks Service Areas (Gap Analysis) Map



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6.3 Adopted Neighborhood Plans Recommendations

As part of the Neighborhood Planning and Zoning planning process for each neighborhood, residents are able to provide input that is used as a guide for existing and future development within their respective neighborhood. A summary of the input related to the Parks and Recreation Department follows:

- Protect and enhance all natural and environmentally-sensitive features
- Preserve and enhance neighborhood trees, green spaces, trails, gardens, existing parks and recreational facilities
- Preserve creek banks with low-impact, natural stabilization
(no concrete or gravel gabions)
- Increase connectivity from neighborhoods to parks, greenways and trails
- Develop neighborhood pocket parks and greenways
- Install more park benches, picnic tables and checkerboard tables
- Increase amounts of mutt mitt/trash receptacles within parks, greenways and trails
- Promote existing and provide more recreational activities and programs for youth and seniors
- Provide opportunities for cultural arts, recreation and leisure activities/ services for all ages

(Additional information on the Adopted Neighborhood Plans may be found in Ch 7 and http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/planning/neighborhood/planning_areas.htm)

6.4 Bonds Results

The 2006 General Obligation (GO) bonds are one of the sources of funding used by PARD to develop new facilities, renovate existing facilities and infrastructure to meet current and future needs of the department for parkland, trails and recreational facilities. The bonds were established by public input and a study of existing facilities by departmental staff.

In 2004 and 2005, PARD determined a Needs Assessment for existing facilities using current outstanding work orders. The assessment included a comparison of the departmental operating budget for Park Maintenance and Facilities Maintenance to determine if work orders had been deferred based on an inability to meet the repairs due to budget shortfalls. A second part of the review was to rate the age of the infrastructure such as HVAC, roofs systems and health and safety needs to determine if these components had reached an expected life expectancy. These were reviewed and a bond proposition was recommended by the department to council in 2005.

The voters of Austin approved a city bond in November of 2006 which included \$64 million dollars for PARD to complete renovations to existing facilities and construct new facilities to meet expect growth and \$20 million for land acquisition.

6.5 Resource-Based Needs

The resource based approach examines the physical assets and natural resources of the area that are available to meet the various recreational needs of the community. The analysis takes into account the environmental nature of the study area and how facilities can be fit into these natural settings; the need for new parkland; and how existing parkland can be utilized.

A. Analysis of Significant Natural Resources

In order to preserve the essence of the area's natural heritage, and in order to maintain a "green infrastructure" for the region, significant natural resources are identified for potential acquisition or conservation. In order to assess these natural resource priorities, the Parks and Recreation Department participated in a community-wide process know as "Greenprinting". This is a methodology that utilizes a Geographic Information System, as well as citizen input to determine the region's needs and priorities for land conservation. The Greenprinting process is further described and delineated in chapter 7 Relevant Adopted Plans.

B. Land Value and Opportunity Assessment

Many factors are involved in the decision making process for parkland acquisition. In addition to the assessments described above, the following factors are considered:

- Need – there is a demonstrated need for a park in a particular area
- Suitability – the land meets the criteria for the desired use
- Connectivity – the land provides access to existing parks or continues a greenway or trail
- Proximity – close to a school, neighborhood, water body or some other desired area
- Projected Growth – a rapidly growing area necessitates advance acquisition in order to secure available land for parks and open space
- Unique Values – an area has unique environmental, cultural, historic, geologic, scenic or other scarce or endangered resources
- Availability – land is available for acquisition
- Leverage Opportunity – Potential to work with other public and private land owners to secure parkland
- Affordability – land must be within the range of the appraised market value
- Funding – adequate funding must be available for the acquisition

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6.6 Trends

The Austin Parks and Recreation system is large and diverse. To a degree, it reflects the Austin community which is widely varied, vibrant and progressive. The park system has over 200 parks totaling more than 18,000 acres. There are the traditional recreational opportunities involving swimming pools, ball fields, sport courts, picnicking, recreation centers, trails, golf courses, and nature preserves. The Austin system also includes more diversity such as museums, an art center, a botanical garden, senior centers, historical and cultural centers, a youth complex, a skate park, and endangered species habitat. Looking toward the future, the following are observed trends that will affect the parks and recreational needs in the coming years.

1. **Population Growth and Changing Demographics:** Austin and the central Texas area continue to grow at a rapid rate. More people require more parks and facilities. Meeting both the demand for new recreational opportunities and funding the operation of new facilities will be a challenge. Creative and innovative approaches will have to be employed to keep up with a rapidly growing population.

Austin has become a very ethnically diverse community. In addition to new arrivals from Spanish speaking countries, Austin has attracted new comers from India, China and Southeast Asia. Like many other large cities, this profound demographic change will result in a community with no single ethnic majority. Understanding the implications of this ethnic diversity is important for park planning. For example, growth of the Latino community means larger household sizes with significantly larger under 18 age populations. Thus in certain areas there will be a greater need for recreational amenities and programs for families and youth.

2. **Commercialization of Parkland:** Over the last year the number of fitness camps and instructors in public parks has soared. Coinciding with Austin's initiatives to become the fittest city in the Nation, and with the continued nation-wide accolades of Austin's outgoing and active citizens, it is no surprise to experience the surge in fitness activities in Austin's parks. Workout groups and boot camps are being conducted in Austin parks almost every day. These activities range from small yoga gatherings, 30+ person strong running coaching classes, boot camps, and registration tables/booths being set up throughout the park system. In some scenarios, staff members have witnessed the dragging of large commercial tires across parks, the flinging 4" thick boat mooring ropes about, non-permitted amplified stereos systems, and the coning and establishment of challenge courses at times blocking public sidewalks.

Commercialization of Parkland *cont.* It is no doubt that citizens enjoy physical activity, especially in Austin's picturesque parks. These activities, along with environmental conditions, contribute to the system being a victim of its own popularity. The three key impacts to the park system should be noted:

- a) Unregulated for-profit instructors operating without required permits
- b) Varying degrees of grounds protections to protect public land sustainability, and lack of common standards/expectations
- c) Negative impact to the general public

3. **Saving Open Space:** As the population and the city grows, open space disappears at a corresponding rate. Time and again, the citizens of Austin have demonstrated their commitment to parks and open space conservation. There has been strong support for land acquisition for parks, preserves and water quality protection lands. This trend continues with renewed emphasis on riparian corridors along the Colorado River and creeks in the desired development zone in east Austin. Also to the east, there is concern about vanishing prairie lands, and the expanding growth corridor surrounding the new State Highway 130. Preserving land in southwest Austin for the sake of water quality and quantity remains a strong desire for citizens.
4. **Nature and Resource-Related Activities:** Many people enjoy getting out in nature in a variety of different ways. Visiting nature centers and outdoor education centers is popular. Others enjoy more active pursuits such as swimming in natural waters, canoeing/kayaking, hiking on nature trails, camping, and mountain biking. The fact that Central Texas is a major flyway for migrating birds presents many opportunities for the popular activity of bird watching. The survey indicated that there is a latent demand for nature and natural resource-related activities that would increase participation if more opportunities were available.
5. **Partners and Other Providers:** Although the City of Austin is the largest provider of recreational services in this area, there is a growing list of other providers that also service central Texas. These include other governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, school districts, and service organizations and local businesses.

Government Agencies: Travis County has assumed a major role in providing parks and recreation; Williamson and Hays Counties have newly formed parks departments; the Lower Colorado River Authority plays a role by providing lake front parks and by supporting other agencies with technical expertise and grants; the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department manages a large park within the metro area; the City of Austin's Watershed Protection Department lands for recreational and trails, Austin Water Utility's Wildland Conservation Division allows limited recreation on some of its resource lands; the National Parks Service's Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program has a field office in central Texas that provides valuable assistance to local governments.

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Partners and Other Providers cont:

Non-profit organizations: Play a larger role in providing park facilities and by supporting governmental agencies. These include the YMCA, Austin Parks Foundation, The Trail Foundation, Bull Creek Foundation, Save Barton Creek Association, American Youthworks; Boys and Girls Club, Treefolks, Austin Ridge Riders, Central Texas Trail Tamers, The Trust for Public Land, and many others.

School districts: Also play a large role by providing joint use of playgrounds, sports fields, and sports courts. Recreation Centers also are used by adjacent schools for their gymnasiums. Currently there are 23 school sites that are jointly used by PARD; which total 129.84 acres.

Service organizations and local businesses: Provide volunteers and funding for special events. Developers have come to recognize the marketing value of parks, and as a consequence, most large new residential developments have a variety of park facilities. These parks are managed and maintained by Homeowner Associations. Municipal Utility Districts build and operate park systems for their residents. These parks will ultimately become City of Austin parks upon the City's annexation of the utility districts.

6. **Favorite Activities:** A random telephone survey of Travis County residents was conducted in order to determine the most popular and most needed recreational facilities. This survey was followed by a series of public input meetings to determine recreational desires of the community. Trails and trail-related activities such as walking, biking, and running remain the most popular recreational activity. A variety of factors may contribute to this popularity, including the maturing of the "Baby Boom" generation who find these activities well-suited to their time-limited, but vigorous lifestyles. A rising concern for health also contributes to community-wide participation in trail activities. Swimming remains a very popular activity. The traditional park activities of picnicking and use of children's playgrounds are also favorite activities for many people.
7. **Rise of Culture:** The aforementioned survey also revealed a strong desire for culture and art related experiences. These desired activities include both outdoor and indoor functions. The survey indicated that people are most willing to pay for the opportunity to experience cultural and art functions. This rising interest in intellectual and aesthetic activities may also reflect a maturing population.
8. **Non-Traditional Recreational Activities:** Traditional recreational opportunities include amenities that have stood the test of time, therefore are considered traditional activities, such as: ball fields, playgrounds, pools, etc. In response to the rise of individuals seeking variety and adventure, more consideration has been given to non-traditional recreational activities and opportunities, such as:

Non-Traditional Recreational Activities *cont.*

- a. **Off-Leash Dog Areas (OLAs):** High density areas where residents have no yards have become popular throughout Austin, neighboring cities and nationwide. OLAs provide opportunities for socialization and exercise for dogs and even their human counterparts. Due to the increased popularity and demand for additional OLAs, two OLA Task Forces were created to assist staff with the development of future sustainable OLAs. The OLA Task Force: Existing Site Assessment focused on the assessment of each existing site and creating a survey to gain input from additional users. The OLA Task Force: Dog Advisory Group focused on the creation of a mission statement, by-laws, goals and application process for the future OLA Advisory Committee (OLAAC) that would continue the efforts of each Task Force. The initial OLAAC began meeting in the fall of 2009. Additional information on the OLAAC maybe be found at:
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/offleashareascommittee.htm>
- b. **Community Gardens:** Another growing trend is the community gardens, which bring community and neighbors together for social interaction. Additionally, these gardens beautify neighborhoods, provide additional opportunities for wildlife habitats (butterflies, hummingbirds, etc) reduce food budgets, conserve resources and create therapeutic and educational recreation for all citizens. Community gardens may be on any City of Austin land as long as the respective department's Director has approved the use of the land for a Community Garden. However, due to the increased interest in community gardens, criteria have been established to further assist citizens with creating a successful sustainable community garden on parkland.
- c. **"Extreme-Sports":** Non-traditional recreational activities are sometimes represented as the "X Games." These include skateboarding, BMX bike jumping, rock climbing, and other activities that involve some element of risk. Although the number of participants is still relatively small, the younger generation is defining their own new styles of recreational activities that will most likely grow in the future.
- d. **Community Wildlife Habitats:** Wildlife Austin is a new City program that promotes the creation and conservation of wildlife habitats through community-wide collaboration and public education, with the objective of preserving Austin's biodiversity and natural heritage. The program's foremost priority is the certification of the City of Austin as a National Wildlife Federation Community Wildlife Habitat. This will make Austin the largest municipality in the nation and the first community in Texas to receive this prestigious certification. <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/wildlifehabitat.htm>

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- 9. Energy and Natural Resource Conservation Measures:** In response to various city resolutions, departmental policy, best management practices and environmental conservation concerns, the following measurable efforts have become design standards within the City of Austin.

Water Quality and Conservation:

- Non-potable lake water irrigation – water pumped directly out of the lake or other natural water resources and is not treated (*Zilker Metropolitan Park*)
- Reclaimed water irrigation – waste water that has been fully treated for health purposes however not treated for potable use. The treatment is safe for runoff back into the natural waterway systems. (*All municipal golf courses*)
- Innovative Water Quality Controls – more organic, holistic, naturalistic approach to storm water management that is being implemented on all new park development/redevelopment/enhancement sites
 - Rainwater harvesting – rainwater off various hard surfaces for collection and use as irrigation in small landscape areas (*Austin Nature and Science Center*)
 - Rain gardens - small basin landscaped with native plants that receives runoff from a catchments area that is one acre or less. The water is filtered by the vegetation and soils prior to percolating into the ground (*Big Stacy Neighborhood Park*)
 - Vegetative filter strips – using undeveloped natural areas to treat storm water runoff (*collaboration with Watershed Protection Department at Bull Creek District Park – underway*)
- Water reuse - Utilize back wash water from pools and splash pads for irrigation around pools and splash pads
- Pool conversions – convert fill/draw pools to splash pads
- New irrigation code requirements – mandate ET-Based controllers, drip irrigation, etc
- Pervious pavement – allows rain to percolate into the ground and controls runoff (*Shoal Creek Trail*)

Solar:

- Use of solar power panels for supplementing energy consumption at some recreation centers, parking lot lighting, and recharging golf carts (*pilot program at Morris Williams Golf Course*)

Renewable Resources:

- Mulch – mulch trees damaged by natural causes for park use and for citizens; year round availability (*Circle C disc golf course*)
- Christmas tree recycling – Christmas trees are turned into mulch and available for citizens while supplies last
- Dillo Dirt – fully treated solid waste mixed mulch and soils that serves as a soil and planting medium for grasses and non-consumption plantings (*Zilker Metropolitan Park*)
- Aggregate – reuse aggregates for bank stabilization, erosion controls, etc, within the park system

Energy and Natural Resource Conservation Measures *cont.*

Technologies:

- Computer controlled scheduling of irrigation - provides precise scheduling of irrigation to reduce over application of water (*Zilker Metropolitan Park - 42 acres*)
- Web-based weather data – from Camp Mabry, downloaded and based upon heat, sunshine, humidity - provides daily weather data used by computer controlled irrigation controls to calculate and adjust the proper amount of water for irrigation (*Zilker Metropolitan Park - 42 acres*)
- Programmable Lighting on all ball fields (future installation) – computer based - Computerized control of ballfield lights with internet communication provides precise of control minimizing excess use (*Krieg Fields, system installed summer 2010*)
- Web-based controls for HVAC systems at various locations with the goal to continue conversions throughout the facilities within the park-system - HVAC controls with web-based communication provide remote adjustment and control of PARD buildings heating and cooling (*Austin Recreation Center*)

10. New Downtown Austin and Urban Infill: New residential development is rapidly occurring in downtown Austin. New residents and visitors to downtown put more pressure on inner city parks. Infill housing within the urban core continues to be a popular trend. The inner city area will require more recreational resources and pocket parks to meet this growing demand.

11. Challenges of Operations and Maintenance: Austin’s park system has doubled in size over the past two decades, but funding for the maintenance and operation of new parks and facilities has not kept pace with this growth. Today’s fiscal climate for municipalities is putting more and more of its budget toward the security departments of police, fire, and emergency medical services. That trend leaves less and less funding for other city departments such as Parks and Recreation. In order to meet this challenge, the Department will have to rely more on partners and volunteers. Planning for new parks and facilities will have to be closely coordinated with other public and private providers in order to more efficiently provide recreational services. More priority may have to go towards providing recreational facilities that require less overhead costs. More emphasis will have to be placed on maintaining existing facilities so they don’t become a maintenance liability over the long term.

12. Rising Cost of Fuel: As fuel prices continue to fluxuate, there is a resulting inflation that affects both the operations of parks and the activities of park users. It will be more costly to build new parks and operate existing parks. On the other hand, citizens will be less inclined to travel to far away vacation spots. There will be more interest in recreating closer to home. Thus the need for local recreational resources will be more important than ever.

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13. Economic Impacts of Parks and Open Space: In spite of recent slowing of regional and national economies, the Austin Metropolitan Area currently remains in a strong economic position for future growth. The Austin economy is strong for a variety of reasons and one of which is its “high quality of life.” A prominent factor in this mix is access to open space in and around the city, plus access to a variety of recreational opportunities and a vibrant cultural scene. An additional factor is creating family friendly spaces. Providing these opportunities is necessary to maintain Austin’s economic health.

6.7 Analysis - Evaluation and Project Selection

The Needs Assessment provided a wealth of information concerning preferences, participation and environmental issues. Rather than preparing a “wish list” of projects, an affordable and realistic plan is needed for the next five to ten years. In defining a plan, which has practical application, several factors must be considered. These factors include:

- The Parks and Recreation Department’s goals and objectives as identified in Chapter 4
- The affordability of a project, and the total cost of all proposed projects. The City is limited in the amount of bonds that can be sold to finance new capital projects in a given period of time
- The workforce capacity of the Parks and Recreation Department is limited by its annual operating budget. Only so many projects can be completed within the plan’s timeframe
- A project’s viability is determined by the “opportunity” factor. For example, in order to purchase a new park, suitable land must be available in the project area at a reasonable cost. If this opportunity is not available, the project would not be viable.

In addition to projects identified in the needs analysis, city-wide and departmental policies also have a direct bearing on the development of recreational land, facilities and programs. These projects are important for the continued operation of a vital park system and must share available funding for capital improvements. Some of the pertinent policies are briefly described below:

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – The Parks and Recreation Department is committed to providing equal access and barrier-free parks and facilities to the greatest extent possible. To this end, the Department has an aggressive capital improvements program to bring its facilities up to ADA standards.
- Infrastructure Restoration – The Parks and Recreation Department has a deferred maintenance plan which prioritizes its most critical needs for repair and replacement of its aging infrastructure. A percentage of any future funding should be used to address these needs.

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- Playground Safety – The guidelines of the Consumer Product Safety Commission for playground safety have been adopted as a standard for Austin’s playgrounds. In order to meet these guidelines, many playgrounds have been restored and improved. A percentage of any future funding should be used to continue this upgrading and replacement of playground facilities.
- Sustainable Communities Initiative – Austin has a goal to become a “sustainable community.” One of the recommendations of this initiative is for Austin to strive for a linked regional open space system consisting of parks and greenways, historic sites, working rural landscapes, natural habitats, stream corridors, woodlands and wetlands.

Projects are selected by need, how well they meet departmental goals, the opportunity for accomplishment, and with consideration of the constraints of time, money and workforce capacity.