

Recreation and Open Space

Introduction



Hillsborough County is responsible for a broad system of recreation parks, conservation parks, trails and preserves. These varied and diverse amenities serve as gathering places and connections within the community, provide access to nature, recreation and open space, and offer opportunities for enrichment, physical and mental wellness, and community activities. The importance of recreation and conservation parks, as well as providing equitable access for all, is paramount to the long-term quality of life of the community.

The Recreation and Open Space Section serves to update the Recreation and Open Space Element of the Unincorporated Hillsborough County Comprehensive Plan. The Section provides a framework for long-range planning of recreation parks,

conservation parks, recreational trails and preserves. The overarching goal of the updated Section is to ensure an integrated system of recreation and resource-based parks that are accessible, inclusive, equitable and enhance quality of life for residents and visitors in the community.

With respect to recreation parks, Hillsborough County facilitates community connections with a system of over 3,200 acres of neighborhood and community parks, playgrounds, dog parks, recreation facilities, fitness and community centers, athletic and special use facilities/complexes, and programming. On the conservation parks, preserves and trails side, a system of approximately 80,000 acres offers opportunities for activities such as wildlife viewing, picnicking, canoeing/kayaking, fishing, hiking, biking and horseback riding, all while protecting water quality and wildlife habitat. The County trails system also serves as connecting multimodal features linking residential areas, parks, commercial/retail areas and public uses and provide another

choice for walking/biking mobility in Hillsborough County.

The last time the Recreation and Open Space language was significantly updated was in 2008. The plan has undergone a holistic, comprehensive revision to address today's priorities and strategic objectives. Key concepts in the update include safe and equitable access, diverse programming opportunities, continued inclusive engagement and involvement, strategic partnerships, and integrating parks with the built environment in a manner that enhances the overall community.

The language was developed via a collaborative approach with staff from Hillsborough County's Parks & Recreation and Conservation & Environmental Lands Management Departments. In addition to providing significant public and community outreach, the project team ensured the Hillsborough Greenways Committee and Hillsborough County Parks, Recreation & Conservation Board also had an opportunity to weigh in. The Section is coordinated with master planning efforts and incorporates best practices in both comprehensive planning and parks planning.

GOAL 1

Ensure an integrated system of recreation and resource-based parks that are accessible, inclusive, equitable, and enhance quality of life for residents and visitors in the community.

Objective 1.1

Provide a system of recreational parks, conservation parks, preserves and trails that is adequately and equitably sited, maintained, and where feasible, interconnected, to serve County residents and visitors.

Policies

- 1.1.1 Ensure parks and recreation facilities are inclusive, accessible and reflect current needs of the community; routinely assess the latest available demographic information as part of facility evaluation.
- 1.1.2 Provide recreational parks, conservation parks, preserves and trails in a proportional and equitable manner to meet the needs of the current and projected future population and among all socioeconomic groups, as feasible given budgetary constraints and environmental conditions. Consider historic gaps in park infrastructure and historically underserved communities when planning and prioritizing new facilities.
- 1.1.3 Routinely review County-owned and potential acquisition lands for additional opportunities for parks, trails, preserves and recreation facilities, as well as consideration of co-location and shared use of sites in strategic master planning.
- 1.1.4 Continue to explore opportunities for connection and continuity of parks, recreation and conservation assets and other public lands and facilities via rights of way, trails, and other open space corridors. The Hillsborough Greenways Master Plan, ELAPP Strategic Acquisition Map or other parks/preserve planning efforts shall be used to guide these connections, dedications and any acquisitions where appropriate.
- 1.1.5 Pursue a balance between creation of new parks/facilities and the maintenance, operation, and upgrades to existing parks/facilities. Evaluate long-term operation and maintenance costs and ensure resources for adequate maintenance prior to the development of any new park.

- 1.1.6 Utilize natural materials and green maintenance practices for parks where feasible.
- 1.1.7 Understanding the public health and environmental benefits of trees, consider the development of an arboriculture program for both conservation and recreational parks, which includes a certified arborist and urban forester along with other appropriate resources.
- 1.1.8 Consider the following factors when acquiring or creating new parks or trails facilities:
 - A. Areas that are currently underserved by parks or trails facilities
 - B. Responding to needs analysis feedback from the community
 - C. Locations either adjacent to existing parks or in growth areas where new development limits availability of land
 - D. Addressing demand for specialty facilities (dog parks, skate parks, adaptive playgrounds, etc.)
 - E. Maximizing the benefits of co-location and shared use with other public facilities
 - F. Existing or proposed transportation options that would enable greater accessibility for the community
 - G. Maximizing the number of residents within a half-mile walk
 - H. Providing greater access to economically disadvantaged residents
 - I. Continue to prioritize ELAPP lands acquisition by environmental value and/or threat by development
- 1.1.9 Prioritize additional amenities, facilities and park improvements for the following:
 - A. Regional (Conservation) Parks proposed as “Destination Sites” by the Conservation and Environmental Lands Management (CELM) Master Plan
 - B. Neighborhood parks and athletic complexes as identified in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan
- 1.1.10 Explore the feasibility of land banking for future recreational park creation.
- 1.1.11 Meet or exceed the adopted Levels of Service for Regional (Conservation) and Local Parks as outlined in the Capital Improvements Element.

Objective 1.2

Policies

Integrate recreational parks, conservation parks, preserves and trails with other aspects of the built environment in a manner that enhances the overall community.

- 1.2.1 Utilize parks to inspire a sense of place and as gathering spaces for the community.
- 1.2.2 Integrate and design recreational facilities to be well-connected and walkable to residential areas and community serving uses and facilities. Continue to connect parks to sidewalks and other infrastructure for walking, bicycling, and public transportation; incorporate design features to ensure safety, accessibility and functionality for all users.
- 1.2.3 As parks are developed or redeveloped, consider design features that reflect and promote community identity, reflecting community input or as outlined in the Livable Communities Element and other community-focused documents.
- 1.2.4 Ensure the preservation of cultural, historical, archeological, scenic, and natural resources to promote resource-based recreation; provide public access where such access does not impact the resource.
- 1.2.5 Integrate environmentally sensitive and natural areas into parks, preserves and recreation amenities while retaining natural character and function.
- 1.2.6 Protect and maintain connectivity of natural systems when planning recreation opportunities. To protect sensitive ecosystems and wildlife corridors, locate and design trail/greenway facilities and other recreational amenities in an environmentally sensitive manner, consistent and compatible with natural resource protection and conservation.
- 1.2.7 Enable multi-use recreation opportunities and co-location of recreational facilities with other public or publicly beneficial uses.
- 1.2.8 Explore methods to increase the reservation of corridors to complete the trail network.

- 1.2.9 Retain lands and trails publicly dedicated for existing and future recreation; these shall be held inviolate against conversion to other uses except in instances of overriding public interest as defined by the BOCC or, where appropriate, state and federal agencies, in which case they will be effectively replaced. Pursue modifications to the appropriate ordinances or regulatory documents to strengthen implementation of this policy.
- 1.2.10 Continue to use incentives to encourage developers to provide public recreation facilities that meet County standards; employ incentives to encourage new development projects containing waterfront sites suitable for parkland to provide public access to the water. Incentives may include, but are not limited to, credits for density or impact fee credit.
- 1.2.11 Require new development to contribute to recreational facilities through payment of impact fees (preferred) or the dedication to Hillsborough County of usable open space. Any usable open space shall be accessible to the public. The regulatory framework for open space dedication requirements shall be routinely reviewed and updated to provide defined criteria for usable open space and consider a minimum size requirement of 10 acres (a smaller size may be considered for open space providing public access or navigable access to natural water bodies – lakes, rivers, freshwater springs, the bay, or major tributaries or canals connected to these water bodies). The size and location of dedicated park land shall continue to be analyzed.
- 1.2.12 Land development regulations shall address standards for recreation and open space areas pertaining to landscaping, protection and signage.
- 1.2.13 Ensure new development is compatible with the uses of adjacent public recreational lands; incompatible uses shall be eliminated or mitigated via site design techniques such as buffering and screening.

Objective 1.3

Promote strategic and complementary partnerships to maximize park resources and enhance facility and programming opportunities.

Policies

- 1.3.1 Continue to use cooperative agreements or other coordination methods with government agencies, public and private schools, colleges and universities, non-profits, churches and the private sector to assure facilities and access for recreational opportunities and/or potential connectivity to trails, with a particular focus on enhancing recreational opportunities for residents in economically disadvantaged or historically underserved areas.
- 1.3.2 Coordinate public and private resources to provide residents with a balanced program of athletic, aquatic, community recreational, educational, heritage and resource-oriented park activities.
- 1.3.3 Collaborate with local, regional and state agencies to encourage the strategic acquisition and connection of existing publicly owned parcels of land.
- 1.3.4 Target partnerships with entities responsible for creating linear public facilities, such as electrical utilities or drainage improvements, to combine the objectives and funding of these projects with the Hillsborough Greenways Master Plan or other trail planning efforts.
- 1.3.5 Analyze operation and maintenance cost-sharing opportunities periodically to identify and establish cost recovery partnerships for the operation and maintenance of recreational facilities.
- 1.3.6 Pursue joint financing for activities and programs that can be combined.
- 1.3.7 Maintain an active volunteer program and explore additional opportunities for volunteer assistance in new areas.
- 1.3.8 Public/private beautification efforts on public property shall continue, provided resources are available to maintain the additional inventory.

1.3.9 Explore opportunities for sponsorships of County park, recreation and conservation assets and programming.

1.3.10 Continue to examine partnership opportunities with the agricultural community.

Objective 1.4

Provide diverse recreational programming opportunities that reflect community needs for all ages and abilities, facilitate athletic and outdoor activities, promote the overall health of the community, and support tourism while prioritizing programming and activities for residents.

Policies

1.4.1 Ensure that programming opportunities continue to reflect the input and needs of the community and are updated as growth and development occurs.

1.4.2 Explore opportunities to connect programming with public health, health equity, community inclusion, and community education. This includes support of 1) out of and after-school activities and youth athletic opportunities that benefit the next generation and build a strong sense of community; 2) programs and services that support the ability to age in place and community engagement for seniors; 3) programs affordable to residents of all incomes; and 4) youth and adult recreation opportunities that facilitate connections between residents.

1.4.3 Prioritize community athletic facilities for recreation style leagues that allow for social equity and opportunity for all players from the community.

1.4.4 Continue to provide active and passive recreational opportunities and programming related to the County's water resources.

1.4.5 To ensure adequate programming, inventory, analyze, and recommend specific programming responsibilities among various public and private organizations such as those focused on athletics, community improvement, health, the arts and nature.

- 1.4.6 Support sports tourism’s role in enhancing the local economy via dedicated facilities for tournaments, competitive travel leagues, adaptive sports and other athletic opportunities while ensuring this does not supersede provision of athletic facilities for residents.
- 1.4.7 Expand ecotourism in Hillsborough County. Promote, as a Destination Site, the Tampa Bay Wilderness Area as an interconnected network of conservation parks and preserves with adequate public access.
- 1.4.8 Focus on future programming for wilderness area Destination Sites, including enrichment and educational programs centered on environmental education, ecotourism, adventure sports, fitness activities, historical/ cultural programs, special events, and rentals.
- 1.4.9 Continue to support and promote trail-related and cycling tourism.

Objective 1.5

Ensure safe and equitable access to recreational parks, conservation parks, preserves, trails and waterfront lands for all members of the community.

Policies

- 1.5.1 Continue to implement the ADA Transition Plan and other enhancements to ensure parks and recreation facilities, programs and communications are accessible and inclusive for citizens of all ages and abilities, embed accessibility and universal design within park and recreation operations and facility design, and continue to offer sensory-friendly recreation opportunities.
- 1.5.2 Continue to provide, maintain and improve public access to beaches, lakes and rivers as well as conservation lands. Such access shall be designed to protect natural system integrity and be compatible with site management plans for ELAPP preserves.
- 1.5.3 Ensure equity and access for residents of all income levels and ability to pay. To enhance access to amenities and programming, ensure scholarships, vouchers or reduced/sliding scale fees are made available and these opportunities are effectively communicated to the public.

- 1.5.4 Retain ownership rights to any property providing or having the potential to provide public access to passive open space, public access to waterfronts/coastal areas (e.g., avoid vacating dead-end streets and undeveloped dedicated rights-of-way in these instances). Formally established public access to parks, preserves or other recreation facilities through private lands shall be maintained and in no way diminished or rendered unusable.
- 1.5.5 Seek opportunities to expand recreational access to public lands, facilities and assets during land acquisition for other public facilities.
- 1.5.6 Enhance public access and equity via coordination of present and future parks/recreation sites with multimodal transportation options.
- 1.5.7 Design and plan future parks to maximize the number of residents within a half-mile walk. For existing parks, incorporate both walkability criteria and acreage per capita to measure equity and access.
- 1.5.8 In cooperation with state, regional and local entities, ensure no actions are taken which impair the access to or use of trails.
- 1.5.9 Ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all park users across age, culture, race, ability and gender via implementation of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles, staff training and diligence, continued partnerships with law enforcement, and use of technology to enhance safety.

Objective 1.6

Continue an inclusive engagement strategy to increase awareness and use of parks and recreation opportunities and programming; enable opportunities for ongoing community feedback and input.

Policies

- 1.6.1 Utilize both new (social media, websites, apps, interactive mapping) and traditional (trail, bike path, and other illustrative maps, wayfinding, media, signage, brochures) communication platforms to promote and communicate programs, events, and recreational/conservation amenities to the community. As applicable, continue interdepartmental coordination and other related approaches to achieve these promotional and communication objectives.

- 1.6.2 Routinely survey the community on awareness of and any challenges or barriers in accessing facilities/amenities, programming needs, and satisfaction; provide opportunities for multilingual digital and paper-based comments and input.
- 1.6.3 Ensure marketing, communication and information is disseminated across the community in a manner so that residents of different socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds and abilities are aware of all opportunities in County parks and conservation lands.
- 1.6.4 Explore new information sharing and community input opportunities with neighborhood associations and other community-based organizations.
- 1.6.5 Explore outreach programs to introduce members of the public to recreational parks, preserves, conservation parks and trails.
- 1.6.6 Communicate the need to responsibly maintain, connect and preserve the complexity of natural systems in Hillsborough County.
- 1.6.7 Track demographic and socioeconomic participation and use of County parks facilities and programs; use this information to inform community outreach.
- 1.6.8 Continue consistent branding and messaging for recreational parks, conservation parks, preserves and trails.
- 1.6.9 Provide information to community residents about methods to preserve and maintain recreational amenities.

Objective 1.7

Strategically ensure the long-term fiscal sustainability of recreation parks, conservation parks, preserves and trails facilities via traditional and innovative funding and financing tools.

Policies

- 1.7.1 Continue to prioritize park and recreational needs through the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) process; ensure a separate list of additional project needs is maintained to supplement the CIP and to be available for unexpected or specialized funding opportunities.

- 1.7.2 Continue to seek grants and foundation funding from state, federal, community, and non-profit sources for parks and recreation development.
- 1.7.3 Balance fee structures to provide cost recovery for programs and facilities without excluding users from participation; explore differentiated fee structures between destination sites and traditional conservation parks.
- 1.7.4 Explore opportunities for revenue generating activities/programs, as well as initiatives that enhance the overall economic development of Hillsborough County.
- 1.7.5 Continue to support park and recreational facility development via multiple funding sources, including but not limited to developer contribution.