

CHAPTER FOUR

COMMUNITY VISION, ISSUES, OPPORTUNITIES, & TRENDS

INTRODUCTION

The major reason why people do not use parks is availability of time.

Public participation was essential to the development of the original Chisago County Comprehensive Parks and Trails Plan and the public's input shaped the plan's conceptual framework. A community task force consisting of citizens who drew their membership from the Parks and Trails Foundation, Bike Path Task Force, the County Parks Department and various community leaders provided community input and guidance throughout the project. In addition, the County held community meetings in 2001 and 2014 to obtain public input about County parks and trails. This section presents the results of the public participation processes, a summary of identified issues and opportunities and a community created vision. This section also presents some demographic information and information from the following sources on recreation trends:

1. Former National recreation standards and guidelines
2. The Metropolitan Council Leisure Survey (1995)
3. The Metropolitan Council Parks and Trails Survey (2008)

A summary of findings and recommendations is presented at the end of this section. This summary outlines the conceptual framework for the County Comprehensive Park and Trail plan, which is based on community input and a review of recent and current recreation trends.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

In order to obtain meaningful community participation throughout the 2001 - 2002 planning process, the County established a community task force. This task force drew their membership from the Chisago County Parks and Trails Foundation, the Chisago County Parks Department and other community leaders. As a group, they provided direction, community feedback and guidance throughout the project. In addition, the County held three community meetings to engage broad public participation. These meetings were conducted

by the planning consultant – Sanders, Wacker, Bergly, Inc. in conjunction with the Chisago County Parks Department.

The objective of these meetings was to provide background information and to facilitate discussion with the greater community about their vision for the plan and their identification of issues and opportunities for the future plan.

These public meetings were held at three different locations in the county. The first meeting was held in North Branch on March 29, 2001 at the Chisago County Senior Center. Another was held on April 3, in Lindstrom at the Chisago Lakes Town Hall and the third meeting was held on April 11, in Wyoming at the Wyoming City Hall. In total, approximately seventy to eighty residents and property owners attended these meetings.

COMMUNITY VISION STATEMENT

The following is a summary of the community vision statements discussed and developed at the three community meetings in 2001. This vision established the direction for the County's Comprehensive Park and Trail Plan.

We envision a park and trail system that recognizes the county's diverse natural resources, and the diverse recreational needs of its growing community. This system provides a variety of passive and active recreational activities accessible to residents, visitors of all ages and abilities. The park system consists of up-to-date facilities equipped with the latest technologies for management and surveillance. Throughout the county, an extensive, well-marked and non-motorized, multi-user trail network connects cities and County Parks, natural areas and water resources and is coordinated with the county's vehicular transportation corridors.

Protection of natural resources and designation of conservation areas are integral components of the entire system. We also envision these natural areas as educational resources for the community and places to learn about community history. Overall, the system is accessible and serves many interests. Built with cost-conscious spending and high concern about safety and maintenance issues, it will serve many families and individuals with recreation and relaxation for many generations to come.

At each of the community meetings, participants were divided into small groups to discuss their vision for the county in twenty years and then asked to identify issues and opportunities for change. Participants shared their ideas and then each small group presented and summarized their findings to the large group. Participants identified issues and opportunities for the County Parks and Trails Plan into three focus areas: 1) conservation (Park Reserve) areas, 2) County/regional parks and 3) trails. A summary of the comments expressed by participants is presented below. These comments were identified as issues or opportunities and are organized by the three focus areas below.

2001 SURVEYS AND COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

SWB, the planning consultants, sent surveys to residents, task force members, school district officials and workshop attendees. Surveys also were available on the Chisago County website. Interviews also were conducted with some community leaders to get their thoughts on issues and opportunities. The results of these surveys and interviews also are summarized in the statements below.

A. TRAILS

➤ *Issues*

- The County Comprehensive plan only recommended shoulder trails and thus it is a fragmented system.
- Trails impact adjacent areas.
- Trails need to be safe.
- The cost of land makes preservation of open spaces and trail areas difficult.
- Sunrise Prairie Trail needs to be connected with future trails.
- Trails should connect communities.

➤ *Opportunities*

- Link trails along the existing County Road system, i.e., Blueberry Trail-east/west trail from Dennis Frandsen Park to Rush City.
- Preserve Sunrise Prairie Trail.
- Continue to develop the Swedish Immigrant Trail.
- Provide a connection with Gateway Trail.

In summary, there appeared to be consensus of those involved in the 2001 park and trail planning process about the development of a well-marked, interconnected County trail system that would provide a recreational and transportation pathway for multiple (non-motorized) users throughout the entire county. This trail network should provide non-vehicular transit corridors throughout the county for residents and visitors. This trail network should link County parks, City parks and communities together. Furthermore, this trail system provides coordinated trails along existing transportation corridors and provides trails through natural areas, and to significant water resources.

B. PARKS

➤ *Issues*

- Parks are needed in the southeastern area.
- The County must be pro-active to acquire land.
- There needs to be cooperation between all the governmental entities.
- There is the high cost of land.
- Need inter-governmental cooperation.
- Link together regional and local parks.
- Population is aging and is more health conscious.
- Coordinate local and regional parks.
- Need more facilities i.e. restrooms.

➤ *Opportunities*

- Permit private vendors in County Parks.
- Develop and promote a unique feature for each park.
- Establish year-round uses and diversify uses in the parks.

Goals that were expressed for the County Park system in 2001 were that the parks should provide benefits to the community in a number of ways. These benefits are harder to tangibly characterize, but include such things as providing facilities that promote community health, providing access for people with varying mobility to natural areas, increasing tourism revenue and promoting the welfare of children within the community.

In summary, community residents and representatives noted that they wanted a County Park system that was up-to-date and would provide a variety of recreational activities for residents of all ages and abilities and educational opportunities regarding natural resources and community history. These regional parks should provide specialty recreational experiences and ideally, each park should emphasize a particular theme/focus. The Park system should be pro-active in terms of new acquisitions and park expansion. Parks also should be in balance with nature.

C. CONSERVATION AREAS➤ *Issues:*

- Lakeshore conservation areas are diminishing.
- Need to preserve the diverse species.
- Need more passive spaces and open areas.
- Need natural resource protection.
- All open space and conservation areas should be explained with guides, markers and /or interpretative centers.
- Need areas set aside for the future.

➤ *Opportunities:*

- Establish Nessel Twp. parcels as conservation area.
- Use Camp Ojiketa land as an area sanctuary.
- Establish a conservation corridor along the Sunrise River from the Carlos Avery Wildlife Management Area to the St. Croix River. Work with County Board to establish a conservation area along Sunrise Dam.

In summary, those polled in Chisago County emphasized the importance of conserving more land (particularly along creeks and lakes) for increased wildlife habitat and resource protection. It also was, and still is, important for the County to be pro-active and conserve land for the future.

2013 – 2014 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Park User Satisfaction

Chisago County conducted an on-line survey of park users in 2013. When asked about the importance of a variety of park activities, most respondents rated natural resource preservation and activity-based recreation as highest. When users were asked to rate the availability of various county services, 70 percent rated the availability of parks and 65 percent rated the availability of trails as good or excellent. When asked to rate the quality of park services, 60 percent of the residents rated the quality of parks and recreation as good or excellent and 60 percent rated the quality of trails and bikeway system as good or excellent.

Public Involvement Process

The County created an on-line questionnaire to gauge the concerns and thoughts of County parks users. The survey was initially available to participants from September 2013 to December 2013. The County promoted the survey on the County website, with signage in the County Courthouse and in the County parks as well as with a direct mailing to all City Administrators and Township Clerks in Chisago County. Staff also included information about the survey in the fall 2013 issue of the “Environmental Connections” newsletter that the County mails to all property owners. The people that responded to the survey answered 20 questions related to the parks and trails in Chisago County and provided the County with comments.

The Park Board also held public open houses in July and August 2014 to take comments about the Parks and Trails Plan. A total of 23 persons attended these meetings and provided the County with helpful comments and insights about the County Parks and trails.

Key take home points from the 2013-2014 public involvement process are:

1. There are a wide variety of recreational interests represented in the County.
2. Trails are extremely popular and continuing to provide and expand trail opportunities is a priority. This could include paving trails in parks or between parks and points of interest and adding more primitive or basic types of trail in parks. There is strong interest in the County completing the Swedish Immigrant Regional Trail.
3. The Sunrise Prairie Regional Trail is extremely popular. The County should carefully review suggestions for trail improvements and maintenance.
4. Focusing on outdoor recreation facilities and amenities should be a priority for the County and in particular, picnic areas, walking/hiking trails, playgrounds and off-leash areas for dogs.

5. Water resources and access continues to be a priority and the county should pursue opportunities for expansion. This could include additional fishing piers, more and improved watercraft access points and canoe, kayak and paddleboard rentals.
6. The County should focus on maintaining and improving existing park facilities rather than developing new sites.
7. Response to questions about park funding drew many comments. Special funding for parks is a sensitive issue that needs careful consideration by the County.
8. There is interest in developing mountain bike trails in the County.
9. The public expressed support for improving or restoring parks to more natural conditions with shoreline improvement, the removal of invasive species and the planting of native grasses and plants.

Through this plan update process it has become clear there are citizens who do not have a clear understanding of who Chisago County Parks is, which parks the County owns and manages and what programs the County provides. The County could do a better job of identifying facilities and branding/marketing the system that the County offers and manages.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL STANDARDS

In the past, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) published standards to help communities in planning, acquisition of implementing the creation of park and open space. The NRPA standards were based on the number of recreation facilities (of acres of park land) per 1,000 people. For example, the NRPA standard for tennis courts was one tennis court for every 2,000 residents. Therefore a town of 10,000 citizens should have, based on this standard, five tennis courts (10,000 residents divided by 2,000=5 tennis courts.) It is important to recognize, however, certain recreation activities are more significant in different regions of the country and that national standards should be adjusted for local conditions. The following is a sampling of the standards:

Facility	NRPA Standard per people
Baseball 90 bases	1 per 5,000
Softball/youth	1 per 5,000
Football	1 per 5,000
Tennis Court	1 per 2,000
Soccer	1 per 10,000
Outdoor Volleyball	1 per 5,000
Multiple Court	1 per 10,000
Swimming Pool	1 per 20,000
Ice Arena	1 per 10,000
Archery Range	1 per 50,000

Since 2001, however, the NPRPA has dropped the standards listed above. Instead, the NRPA recommends that jurisdictions decide what land should be used for park purposes based on a variety of factors ranging from:

1. The land's suitability or unsuitability for other uses (e.g. wetlands, steep slopes, unique plant and animal habitat)
2. Accessibility to the population served by the park unit (e.g. within a mile or 5-mile service area) and
3. Affordability.

Trail standards vary widely from community to community. The NRPA for instance suggests five miles for every 10,000 residents. However, trail standards vary widely among communities. Because local conditions vary considerably, it is difficult to apply single trail standards to all communities. Perhaps, it is more important to recognize that trail use is growing at a fast rate. These standards are perhaps most useful for city parks systems and useful only in a general way for counties park systems, which is about meeting recreation demand gaps and whose recreation role is as much about meeting recreation needs as it is about natural resource protection for regional park use.

In NRPA third edition of Park Planning guidelines published in 1990, they indicate the following key national trends regarding recreation:

- The major reason people do not attend parks is the availability of time. Over 90 percent of all people who say they would like to attend parks more often do not do so because, according to them, they do not have the time.
- Wildlife viewing is a year-round activity, which usually peaks when the objects viewed are present in their greatest numbers (the migratory season for each species.)
- There are ten activities which account for most recreation time for "natural park type users; camping, hiking, picnicking, relaxing, sightseeing/pleasure driving, swimming, sunbathing. In addition, wildlife viewing (birds, animals, plants) is strongly involved both as a primary and secondary activity.
- In the teenage bracket the activities rank in this order from most to least popular: sunbathing, swimming, biking, picnicking, hiking, sightseeing/pleasure driving, camping, relaxing, fishing, nature walk.
- In the 20-29 age bracket the activities rank in this order: sunbathing, nature walk, camping sightseeing pleasure driving, biking, swimming, picnicking, relaxing, hiking, fishing.
- In the 30-44 age bracket the activities rank in this order: camping, fishing, relaxing, hiking, swimming, picnicking, sightseeing/pleasure driving, nature walk, biking, sunbathing.
- In the 45-64-age bracket the activities rank in this order: fishing, biking, relaxing, hiking, picnicking, nature walk, sightseeing/pleasure driving, swimming, sunbathing, camping.
- In the 65+ age bracket the activities rank in this order: nature walk, sightseeing/pleasure driving, fishing, hiking, relaxing, picnicking, camping, biking, sunbathing, swimming
- Park satisfaction increases with age.

1995 METROPOLITAN COUNCIL LEISURE SURVEY

The Metropolitan Council Leisure Survey was conducted in the fall of 1995. The University of Minnesota Center for Survey Research surveyed a sample of 5,400 households in the seven-county metropolitan region about their interest and participation in leisure activities. The purpose of the study was to help local and regional governments in planning and implementing park systems.

One survey question asked households to identify leisure activities that they were interested in and had participated in at least once over the last 12 months. Table 4-A lists the responses in ranks order. Passive activities and activities related to natural areas were ranked highest.

Another survey question asked households to identify leisure activities that they would like to participate in, but were limited in participating in because of cost, item constraints, or lack of many passive and nature oriented activities were ranked highest. Some activities, like horseback riding, were ranked higher than in Table 4-A. This suggests that more people would like to participate in other activities but they feel constrained by time, cost, or lack of facilities. The County can help minimize these constraints by providing adequate facilities in convenient locations.

Table 4-A: Interest and Participation in Activities in Last 12 Months

(Source: Metropolitan Council, 1996)

	<u>Activity</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1.	Walking in Natural Area/Large Park.....	57
2.	Picnicking.....	52
3.	Visiting zoos.....	49
4.	Visiting conservatory, Arboretum, Gardens.....	39
5.	Swimming or Sunbathing at a Beach.....	35
6.	Informal bird watching/Nature Study.....	35
7.	Camping.....	33
8.	Fishing.....	29
9.	Biking Paved Trails in Natural Areas/Parks.....	26
10.	Power boating/Water-skiing/Racing.....	23
11.	Sledding/Tobogganing.....	21
12.	Jogging/Running.....	20
13.	Non-Power boating (Canoeing, Sailing).....	19
14.	In-Line skating, roller skating, Skateboarding.....	14
15.	Cross-country skiing.....	12
16.	Snowmobiling.....	10
17.	Horseback Riding on Trails/Along Roads.....	6
18.	Formal Bird watching/Nature Study Programs.....	5

County Parks Use and User Satisfaction Statistics – Park Visits

According to the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council (the seven county metropolitan area) Parks and Trails System Visitor Survey (2008), survey respondents ranked the popularity of and their participation in the following activities in regional parks and park preserves:

Biking	37 percent
Hiking and walking	18 percent
Swimming	13 percent
Playground use	6 percent
Dog walking	5 percent
Picnic	4 percent
In line skating	4 percent
Boating	4 percent
Camping	4 percent
Fishing	4 percent
Jogging and Running	3 percent
Relaxing	2 percent
Commuting	1 percent
Other	2 percent

When compared to the park user survey that the Chisago County completed in 2013, the County can use these two sets of numbers as a guide to help in planning park and trail improvements for the future.

DEMOGRAPHICS

As indicated in Chapter 2, the population of Chisago County grew by 37% during the 1990s to reach 41,101 by 2000 and to 53,887 in 2010. If Chisago County continues to grow at this same rate, its population will reach approximately 70,600 by 2020. The State, however, is estimating the population of Chisago County will reach 75,630 by 2020. Regardless of what the actual population figure will be in 2020, it is clear the population will continue to grow. As a result, the need for additional recreational opportunities will increase. Furthermore, the population growth is projected to occur in the largest population centers: North Branch, Wyoming and the Chisago Lakes area. The demand for accessible recreation activities close to these centers can be expected to grow.

The distribution of population and its relationship to household size also impact the type of recreation and leisure demand that occurs. The state demographer indicates that although married couple households will continue to be the predominant household type, they will only represent 61% of the total households. In contrast, the non-family households, living alone and the senior living alone households are expected to increase. Furthermore, in Chisago County, like the rest of the state, the population older than 55 years old will significantly increase from 2000 to 2020.

Chisago County Population Overview

Year	Total County Population	65+ County Population	County Percent 65+	State Percent 65+
2000	41,101	4,047	9.85	12.08
2010	53,887	6,247	11.59	12.88
2020	75,630	9,310	12.31	15.94
2030	89,330	15,290	17.12	20.63

Source: US Census and Minnesota State Demographer's Office

The state is not projecting as significant of an increase in the younger population. Between the years 1995 and 2025, according to the State Demographer, the 45-64 year age group will increase by 52% statewide and the 65-74 year olds will increase by 99%. As a result, a dramatic increase in demand for recreational activities popular with children and teenagers is not expected to occur. Instead, an increased demand for recreational activities popular with aging adults, such as, biking, picnicking and bird watching can be expected to occur. Although people of all ages participate in a full range of recreation activities, in general younger people favor more active recreation activities (like soccer, skiing and swimming) and older people favor more passive recreation activities (like nature walks and picnics).

According to the Metropolitan Council's Leisure Time Survey, nature observation is the top-ranked outdoor activity in Minnesota, followed by boating, sightseeing and walking/hiking. This survey also indicated that people appreciate the open space created by parklands and natural resource areas even if they are only enjoyed from a distance. In summary, recreation and leisure pursuits are important to many citizens with the young and the old having the most time for engaging themselves in a variety of activities. **As the population ages, it is likely that recreation patterns and leisure time devoted toward activities for fitness and wellness will change. Television viewing, the use of computers and electronic devices, outdoor recreation, sports, education and family activity currently dominate an expanding amount of leisure time.**

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of review of public participation results and current recreation trends, the Chisago County park and trail plan is expected to emphasize the protection of natural environments, natural resource-based recreation and education and should take into account the following findings and recommendations.

- Population growth and increased free time will create a higher demand for recreation facilities.
- The greatest demand for recreation facilities in Chisago County is generated by the densely populated urban areas. To best serve these population centers and the less mobile, lower income groups, county/regional parks located close to urban centers should be developed to a higher level than the parks located in rural areas. Because the County's primary focus is on recreational activities that take place in or emphasize the natural setting (resource-based recreation), the degree to which the County may develop a park to respond to projected population increases is usually limited by the desire to protect existing natural resources.
- The County's emphasis for the parks will be activities that have broad general appeal and are participant-oriented. Chisago County will continue to stress opportunities for recreation uses that occur on a self-directed basis. **As a consequence, the increase in demand for recreation activities requiring more intense development, such as organized sports, will have to be satisfied by the growing municipalities.**
- The aging population and the increase in non-family households will increase the demand for more passive recreational activities and the demand for recreational activities such as biking, hiking, picnicking, nature walks and bird watching.
- Regional parks located near seniors and elderly population centers should include facilities for gatherings like picnic shelters and multi-use buildings.
- An aging population and increasing environmental awareness offers a strong market for the county's resource-based parks and its open space.
- The growing interest in exercise activities such as hiking, biking, bird watching and walking; the interest in nature and nature-oriented education and recreation activities will provide long term support for the County's role as a recreation provider.
- Although the population is aging, Chisago County has and will continue to have a broad cross-section of age groups. Recreation facilities should focus on providing opportunities for families and multi-generational individuals and groups.
- Partnering between public agencies and private business is becoming more and more common. Purchasing services from private business can often be less expensive than the County providing equipment and manpower to perform some operating and maintenance tasks in-house. In addition, allowing private concessionaires to operate in the parks (subject to County Board approval), could provide services and merchandise to park users that the County cannot or may decide not to provide.

- Chisago County should continue to partner on projects with other agencies. There is much to gain in the efficiency of sharing personnel, equipment and supplies, as well as skills and technologies, among agencies that are providing similar services.
- Cooperative efforts with other agencies in marketing park and recreation services and in developing educational and recreational programming also provide opportunities for sharing resources.
- **Key visions for the park system are to protect natural resources and provide outdoor recreation opportunities for people to use on a self-directed basis. This limits the potential for generating revenues with the park system itself and the cost of operations in maintenance will continue to require a major commitment from property tax revenues.**