

Chapter 1: Introduction

I. Purpose

In 2008, the Flathead County Parks Board, along with the Parks and Recreation Department initiated an effort to develop a Parks and Recreation Master Plan. The purpose of this plan is to:

1. Provide a framework for decision making regarding park development, land acquisition, recreation programming and partnerships.
2. Engage the citizens of Flathead County in developing a vision for Parks and Recreation and establishing program priorities.
3. Identify and promote the benefits of a county park system.
4. Determine needs through an analysis of existing facilities, development of level of service benchmarks and the examination of trends.
5. Develop an Action Plan that will identify next steps, roles and responsibilities and financial strategies.

II. Relationship to Other Plans

A. Growth Policy

In 2007 the Flathead County Board of County Commissioners adopted a Growth Policy. A growth policy is an official statement of public policy to guide growth and manage change for the betterment of the community. The Growth Policy includes a Park and Recreation element that provides a goals and policies for parks. The Growth Policy recommended that a detailed Parks and Recreation Master Plan be undertaken and adopted as an appendix to the Growth Policy. This Master Plan expands the analysis that is contained within the Growth Policy and contains more detailed recommendations for park and recreation development.

B. Trail Master Plan

In addition to the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, the County is undertaking a Trails Master Plan. This plan considers the recreational and transportation aspects of a comprehensive pathways system. The Trails Plan was developed by an Advisory Committee to the Parks Board and is adopted by reference in this document.

C. Previous Planning Documents

In 2001 the Park Board revised the Flathead County Park Management Plan. Its intent was to assist policy makers with general guidelines for administration in its purchases of its disposal criteria of surplus parks in Flathead County. This Master Plan is an update of the information in that document and expands its purpose to include other aspects of park planning as stated above.

III. Planning Framework

The Plan is organized into four issue areas as illustrated in the diagram below. Each issue area is described in subsequent chapters and contains specific goals and policies to provide direction for decision makers. The organizational issues address staffing, advisory committee roles, and partnerships. Beneficial based management establishes policies based on the economic, environmental, social and recreational benefits of a park and recreation system. The needs assessment section inventories facilities and services and identifies gaps while the financial section examines strategies and funding resources to address those gaps.

Figure 2: Planning Framework



The Master Plan integrates these issue areas and contains the overall vision for a countywide park and recreation system. The Vision Statement reflects public input and underlies the goals and policies as well as identifies priorities and guiding principles for the Master Plan. The plan also contains an implementation section to identify action steps, partners, and resources to accomplish the goals of the plan. Primarily, the Master Plan is a strategic planning tool that provides a framework for public officials in making decisions regarding the Parks and Recreation system in Flathead County.

IV. Planning Process

The project approach was designed to develop a vision for a county wide park system to meet the current and future needs of the citizens of Flathead County. To implement this vision, the plan provides strategic direction to allocate staff and funding resources. The plan sets forth goals and policies to guide public officials in making decisions on land acquisition, budgeting, programming, partnerships, and park development. Basic components of this planning approach include:

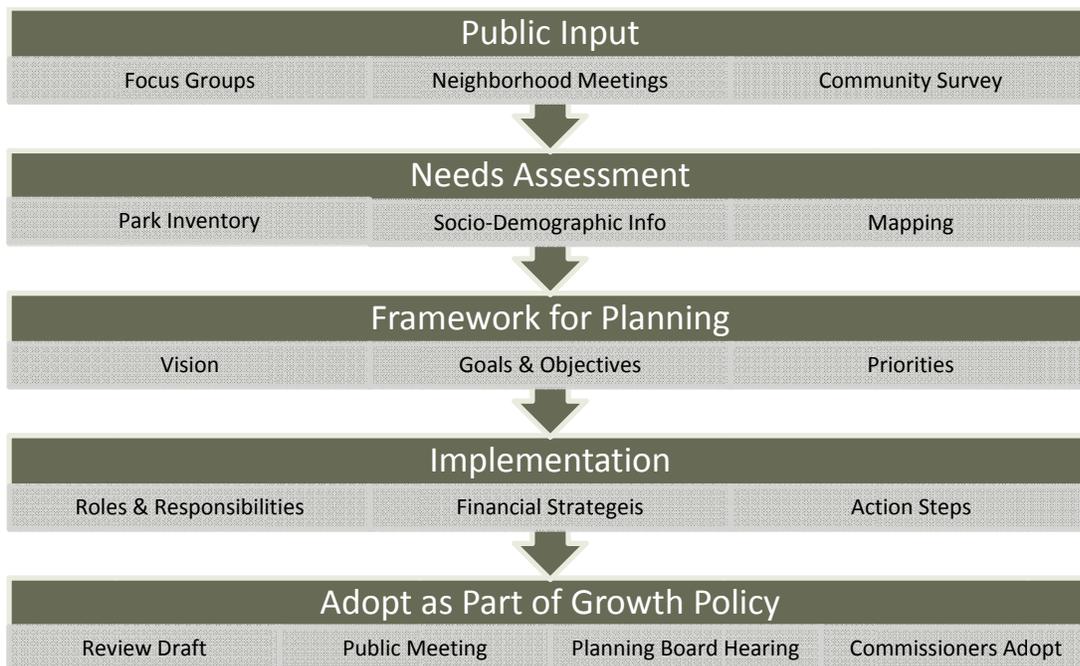
Needs Assessment: The needs assessment is based on community input, an analysis of existing facilities and operations, industry trends and socio-economic analysis. The needs assessment identifies gaps in services and potential partnerships.

Vision, Policies, Guiding Principles: The vision, policies and guiding principles provide the framework for evaluating proposals for new facilities or programs. The Plan is a dynamic document and the vision should provide guidance to meet future challenges.

Implementation: This component outlines action items and establishes priorities for realizing the vision. It reviews funding strategies and partnerships to optimize limited resources.

Public Input: Techniques to engage citizens in the planning process included six neighborhood meetings, focus group sessions with each advisory group and recreation providers, on-line surveys, web-site updates, media coverage and e-newsletters. The Master Plan reflects the citizen input that was gathered throughout the planning process.

Figure 1: Planning Process



Vision Statement

Flathead County Parks and Recreation Department will strive to provide a high level of service to the community through well maintained parks, facilities and recreational programs. Through a system of parks and recreation facilities the county will promote a variety of economic, social, environmental and recreation benefits. To optimize resources and achieve these benefits the top priorities of the Park and Recreation Department will be to provide outdoor recreation in a natural setting with an emphasis on water access, to provide opportunities and facilities for organized team sports and to provide a non-motorized trail system that provides large scale connectivity and safe routes to schools, parks and recreation facilities.

Guiding Principles

- 1. Parks and facilities should be developed and maintained in a manner to meet their intended function and that provides a safe and positive experience for users.*
- 2. Plans for parks and recreation facilities should be made in accordance with sound fiscal policy to develop parks in a cost effective manner with adequate funding for long term operation and maintenance.*
- 3. The County shall promote creative partnerships with other government agencies, citizens, schools, and non-profit groups to achieve the goals of the Master Plan.*
- 4. The Parks District shall be good stewards of park lands by being a good neighbor to private property near parks and recognizing the conservation value of parks.*
- 5. County residents should have convenient access to a system of regional and local area parks and programs that are accessible to all segments of the population.*