

Chapter 3: Public Input

I. Survey

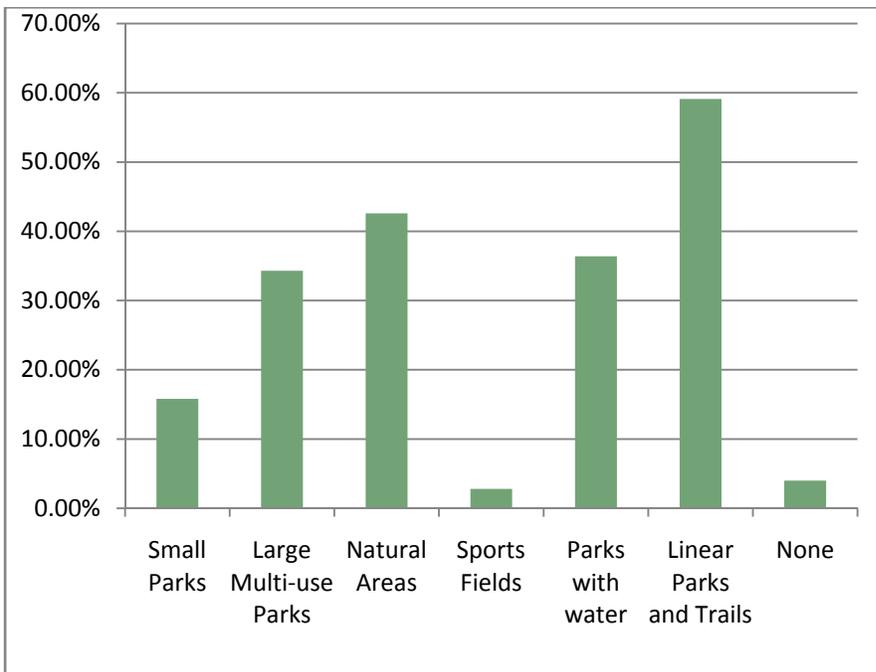
A. Methodology

From September, 2008 until January, 2009, the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Department conducted an on-line survey to provide residents an opportunity to have input in the plan. The survey was publicized through the Parks and Recreation list-serve, Flathead County Growth Policy List-Serve, and a number of civic groups that sent notices to their list-serves. There were also several articles in newspapers serving the county as well as radio and television coverage about the survey. Additionally, hard-copies of the surveys were available at all of the community meetings and were distributed at recreation league games. A total of 435 surveys were completed. (See appendix for complete survey with responses.)

B. Survey Responses

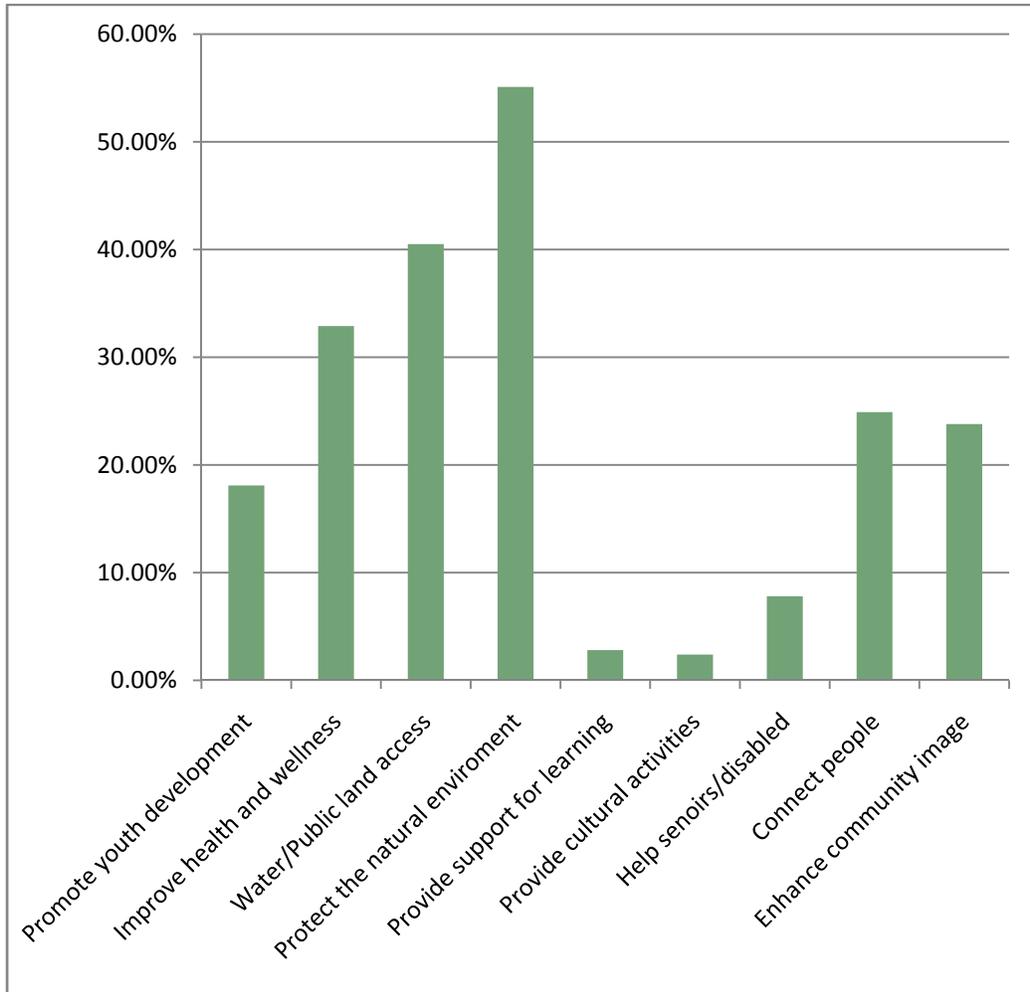
Survey respondents indicated that the types of parks most needed in the county are linear parks with trails, natural area parks and large multi-use parks. This correlates with the responses to the question regarding how people are using parks. The two most common responses to this question were, "Enjoy outdoors/nature" (71%) and "Walk or bike for exercise" (47%).

Figure 1: Types of Parks Needed in Flathead County



The survey also asked respondents to rate the public benefits of parks. The two most important benefits were protecting the natural environment and providing access to water and public lands.

Figure 2: Benefits of Parks



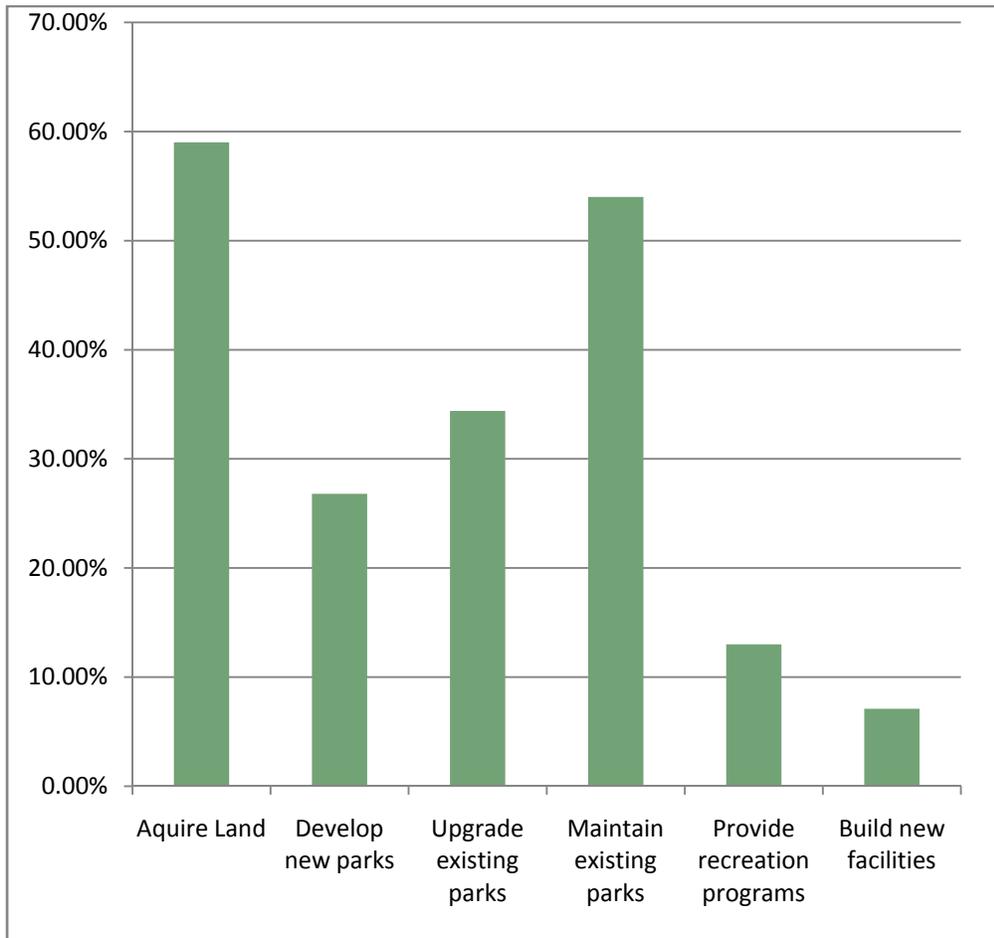
While providing access to water and public land was important for many respondents, access is most important when conveniently located to their home. The most common obstacle to use of county parks was distance from home. The top five reasons preventing park use are listed below.

1. Distance from home (40.8%)
2. Poor maintenance (31.5%)
3. Lack of restrooms (30.7%)
4. Doesn't contain desired features or facilities (29.5%)
5. Rowdy behavior of other park users (28.6%)

Several questions asked respondents about support for financial mechanisms to fund park improvements. Although more respondents (44.7%) indicated that they would support a county-wide tax than creation of a park maintenance district, (37.3%) neither option received more than the 50% approval that would be necessary to pass a ballot measure. More respondents ranked pathways has a high priority compared to other county programs (52%) compared to those who ranked parks and recreation programs as a high priority (40%).

In using the financial resources it does have, acquiring land while the opportunity exist and maintaining existing parks were the top two priorities.

Figure 3: Focus of Parks and Recreation Efforts



The five **most popular** policies for park planning were:

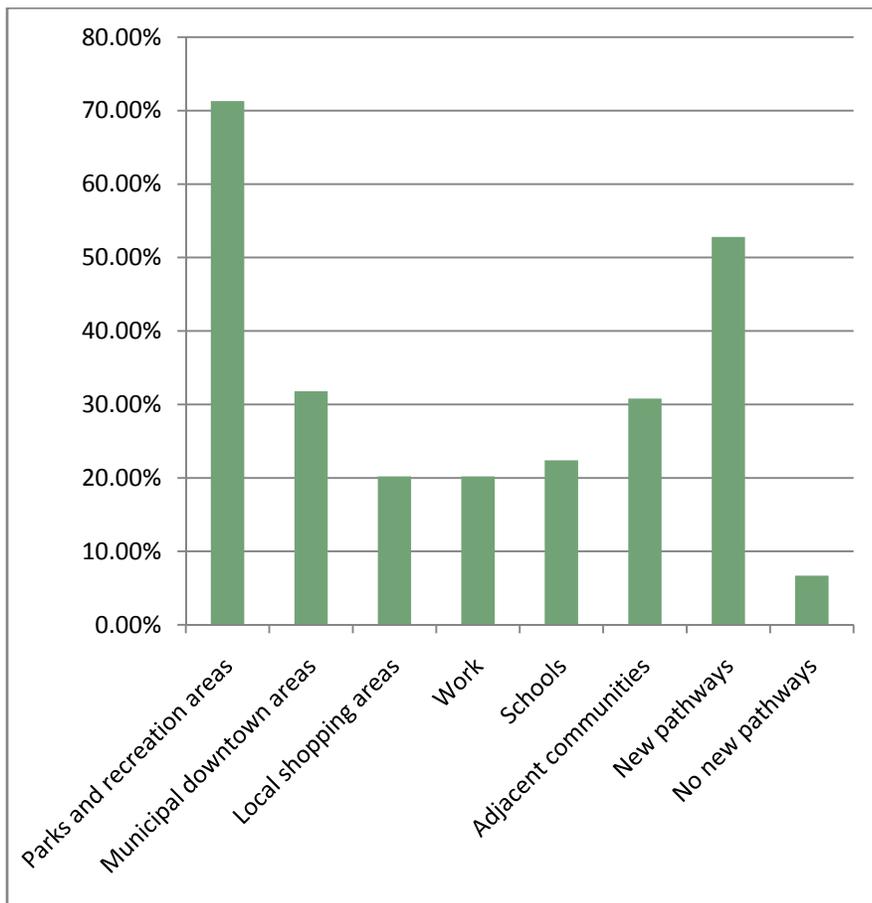
1. Parks should protect natural areas such as wetlands, floodplain and wildlife areas.
2. Connect parks with trails or pathways
3. Protecting access to public lands should be a priority
4. Develop a county-wide interconnected trail and pathway system.
5. Acquire new land for future parks

The five **least popular** policies for park planning were:

1. Provide alternative sports such as skateboarding, Folf, Bike jumps
2. Provide more athletic facilities such as tennis courts and basketball hoops
3. County parks should attract visitors from outside of the area
4. Provide a dog park in the county
5. Generate revenue from user fees

Three out of four survey respondents indicated that they currently use the trails trail system in Flathead County. When asked where additional trails should go, the most common response was to connect parks.

Figure 4: Preference for location of new trails



II. Public Outreach

Public outreach was an important part of the planning process. Public outreach provides an opportunity for citizens to be involved in the planning process and provides information about various planning issues, programs costs, and the difficulty or ease of program implementation. In addition to the survey, the following public outreach methods were used as part of the planning process.

Table 1: Public Outreach Summary

<i>Technique</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Opinion Surveys</i>	<i>An on-line survey was conducted as part of the planning process. There were 435 responses to the survey. Results were consulted to develop goals and policies. .</i>
<i>Open House</i>	<i>The Parks Board conducted an open house to present the draft plan and obtain public input.</i>
<i>Community Meetings</i>	<i>In the fall of 2008, there were six community meetings conducted at various locations in the county.</i> <i>Big Fork</i> <i>Columbia Falls</i> <i>Kalispell</i> <i>Lakeside</i> <i>West Glacier</i> <i>Whitefish</i>
<i>Internet</i>	<i>Draft documents were posted on the County Web Site. Meeting dates were posted on the web site. There was a list-serve of approximately 150 people who received regular e-updates regarding the plan.</i>
<i>Focus Groups</i>	<i>Focus Groups were conducted with each of the Park Advisory Groups and the Paths Committee. Additionally, there was a focus group comprised of representatives from municipal park departments and State and Federal public land managers. .</i>
<i>Press Coverage</i>	<i>Periodic press releases sent to media outlets in the County.</i>

III. Summary of Input

Certain topics were repeatedly mentioned in discussions at the community and focus group meetings. While many of the priorities expressed in these group discussions were similar to the responses in the survey, the group discussions provided more detail and insight into each of the topic. A summary of the most common topics are described below.

- **Partnerships** - Partnering with other agencies and civic groups will be essential to achieve the goals of the plan. Examples of successful partnerships include the Foy's to Blacktail Trail effort, Kidsport Athletic Fields, Sliter Park in Big Fork, and Columbia Falls ballfields. Potential partners include the municipal park departments, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation, and United States Forest Service. Civic groups and athletic groups are also potential partners.
- **Advisory Committees** – Advisory committees have worked well to engage citizens and take the initiative on promoting projects. The roles of the advisory committees should be better defined. There is a desire to form advisory committees in other parts of the county such as Columbia Falls, Kila, West Valley and the Canyon area.
- **Funding** – The Parks and Recreation Department is underfunded. There is not enough money for maintenance. Generally, participants felt that funding parks was a low priority for County Commissioners. There were questions about the use of cash-in-lieu of land fees that are collected as part of the subdivision process. Suggestions for financing improvements to the park system include impact fees, user fees, use of volunteers, forming a non-profit foundation, investigating a park maintenance district and privatizing some functions.
- **Opportunities to Improve Existing Parks** - There were numerous suggestions for improving or expanding the existing county parks. The biggest obstacle to implementing such improvements is funding.
- **Park Use Abuse** - Abuse of the park system by users was mentioned in almost every meeting. Issues included vandalism, illegal activity, partying after hours, litter, and uncontrolled dogs. Some of the problems were attributed to the heavier use of parks due to population growth. Parking congestion was a concern at Foy's Lake and Somers Beach. There was concern about property values near parks where such problems occur.
- **Water Access** – There was general consensus among all groups that parks that provide access to water and rivers should be a priority. The crowds at Foy's Lake and Somers Beach were noted as an indication of the demand for water access. Montana FWP is in the process of obtaining land for state parks on Flathead Lake. There is a proposed park on Flathead Lake in Lakeside that would result from the donation of

property. It was suggested that some County R.O.W. with lakefront access be converted to parks.

- **Trails** – Trails should be part of the park system. Trails should generally provide connectivity between parks and schools. There should be a trail connecting Kalispell to Lone Pine State Park and Foy's Lake Park. Make trail maps widely available. Partner with trail organizations to build and maintain trails. Consider a canoe trail on some of the rivers.
- **Surplus Parks** - Park land that has been previously dedicated but is not functional as a park should be sold as surplus land. There should be a public process to evaluate the surplus parks before they are sold.
- **Park Values** - Natural area, riparian corridors, access to public lands are important park values that should be incorporated into the plan.
- **Recreation** - Participation in softball leagues is growing. There should be a long term solution to securing playing fields either through a long-term lease or owning fields. Rotary basketball competes with Park Department programs for gym space. Recreation programs provide a needed service for at-risk youths. Baby boomers will be more interested in health and wellness activities rather than competitive sports. There is a demand for tennis in Lakeside.
- **Accessibility** – Parks need to be easily accessible from roads. Handicap accessibility features are important.