

Executive Summary

The Bloomington Park Master Plan was prepared in 1973 and served the City well in building the park system. The park system is now largely complete and there is a need for a plan to guide park and recreation system replacement and revitalization. The City hired Hoisington Koegler Group, inc., park planning consultants, to work with City staff, a citizen planning task force, officials and the public to prepare a new park and recreation master plan. The Master Plan includes a background, needs assessment, strategies and actions to guide park and recreation operation and investment until 2026.

Situation and Needs

Extensive Park System

The Bloomington park and recreation system is a mix of 97 neighborhood, community, natural resource and regional parks and specialty recreation facilities that are highly valued by Bloomington residents. This extensive parks system positively affects quality of life and provides great access to parks, but requires resources to maintain and replace aging facilities.

Changing Community

The population of Bloomington has changed considerably since the park system was built in the 1960s and 70s. The City now has significantly fewer children, more active seniors and baby boomers and is more culturally diverse. There is an emphasis on active living (trails, walking and exercise) and a desire for quality facilities over quantity.

1950-2000	2000-2026
Developing	Redeveloping
Homogeneous	More diverse
Suburban	More urban
Building park system	Maintaining park system
Developer funds	Stable funding needed

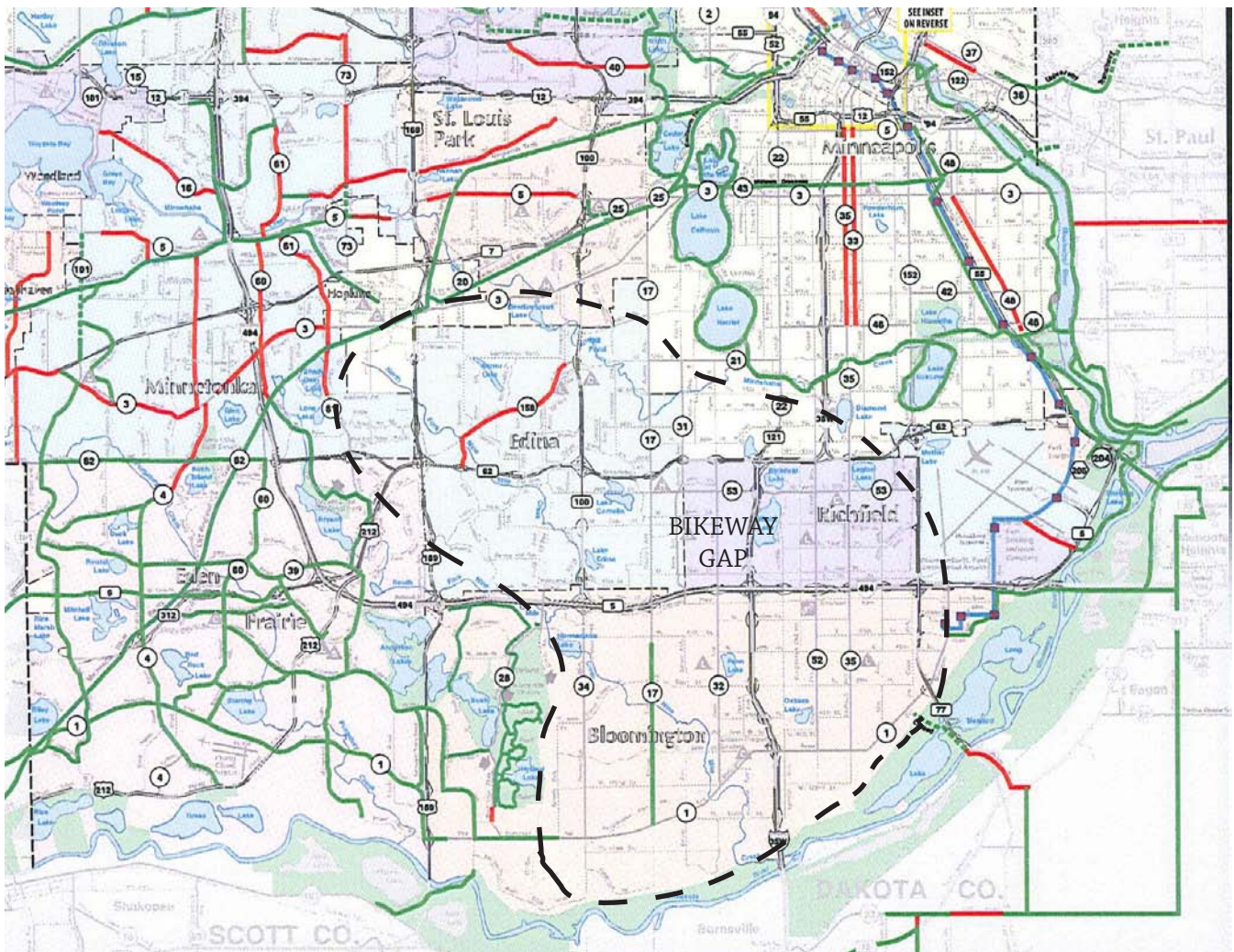
Partnership Approach

The City provides neighborhood and community parks and partners with schools, churches, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Three Rivers Park District, recreation associations and others to provide additional facilities and to operate programs. This is an efficient method of delivering services but has challenges of coordination and access to facilities.

Park Revitalization Needs

Much of the park system was built 25 - 40 years ago, and aging play equipment, buildings, paving, etc., need replacement. In addition, investments are needed to keep parks fresh and vital and to meet changing community and recreation needs. A strategic approach is needed to prioritize and shape that investment.

Figure 1 - Hennepin County Bikeways Map



Trail Needs

Trails are the number one desired recreation amenities in Bloomington. Much of the City lacks trails and bikeways. Connections across highway barriers and to neighboring trail systems are needed. The Bloomington-Edina -Richfield area is a “hole in the doughnut” where community and regional trails are almost non-existent (See Figure 1). The City is at a competitive disadvantage to newer suburbs with highly developed trail networks and to cities like Minneapolis which have an extensive city-wide trail and bikeway system.

Natural Resources

There is a need and desire for more natural resource management and sustainability actions. The City is blessed with many natural areas and conservation lands but has lacked any systematic plan and the resources to wisely manage these lands. As a result the quality of the natural areas is declining.

Funding Shortfall

Funding for upkeep, replacement and revitalization of the system has not kept up with the needs. The funding gap of approximately \$27.6 million over the next five years is due primarily to:

- ▶ The need to reinvest and renovate existing facilities.
- ▶ New trails, community facilities and completing the planned park land acquisitions.
- ▶ Lack of traditional funding from new development. A large portion of the park system was acquired and built using non-tax revenue (park dedication from subdivision developers) which is now a very limited source of funds.

Plan Initiatives

Five major initiatives are recommended to address significant park system revitalization requirements, to position parks and recreation to meet the needs of a changing community, to create an appropriate and sustainable funding method for on-going replacement needs, and to obtain funding for park, trail and recre-

ation improvements to address changing community needs and to keep the system fresh and vital.

A. Revitalize Parks

Renew aging facilities

Invest in a planned and phased program (Park Revitalization Program) of replacement and revitalization of aging park facilities and infrastructure (play equipment, paving, buildings, fencing, etc.).

Create signature parks

A repositioning strategy is recommended to guide investment in aging parks to create attractive community oriented parks at key locations. Depending upon funding availability this may mean shifting funding from smaller parks to focused improvements at signature parks. Signature parks would serve a broader area and would have a greater range of amenities. This is in response to the desire for quality over quantity and the reality of limited funds. Investment in smaller parks should not stop, but it should be tailored to create a more sustainable system overall; such as, removing worn out tennis courts in areas with other tennis courts nearby and replacing the former courts with gardens, lawn, natural plantings or another recreation facility which has less initial and on-going operational costs. Focusing investment at signature parks may result in some people having to travel further to reach a certain park facility. This can be offset somewhat by connecting signature parks with a City-wide bikeway/walkway network.

B. Create Sustainable Funding

Park Revitalization Program - *Sustaining actions*

Fund a life-cycle cost replacement program that dedicates monies annually to the planned and systematic replacement and revitalization of aging park facilities, equipment and infrastructure. This funding program is modeled after the successful Bloomington Pavement Management Program. It is prudent to protect the significant public investment in Bloomington parks by implementing a life-cycle replacement program to keep them in good, safe condition and responsive to community needs through regular sustainable invest-

ment. The Park Revitalization Program should focus on regular life cycle park infrastructure replacements such as play equipment, paving, shelters, buildings, lighting and fencing, etc. This program will require the use of approximately one million in general fund dollars on an annual basis to keep the Bloomington park and recreation system as a valued element of the City.

Bond referendum - New initiatives

Within the next 1-3 years (before 2010), utilize a bond referendum (vote on a temporary property tax increase) to fund a package of new facilities such as trails, bike-ways, community park and recreation improvements and natural resource enhancements. Consider the timing of other agency referendums and build support and advocacy for a park and recreation referendum package of approximately \$15-\$20 million.

Expand outreach and partners - Build advocacy

Expand outreach and communication efforts regarding the services, facilities and benefits of Bloomington Park and Recreation to develop broad support for park, recreation, trail, and improvement funding. Develop partnerships with area businesses and organizations. Consistently portray the benefits of parks and recreation in internal and external communications. Use challenge grants to stimulate private funds. Establish a park foundation and legacy giving and create a staff position to encourage and coordinate volunteerism.

C. Add Trails

Connect the City

Adopt an alternative transportation plan which includes a city-wide trail, bikeway and sidewalk plan. Integrate the trail and bikeway plan with parks, park trails, and surrounding community's trail plans. Eliminate pedestrian and bicycle barriers at highway crossings.

Build trails and bikeways

Building new trails and bikeways in Bloomington should be the top priority for new facilities and should be a major cross-department initiative (Park and Rec., Public Works and Community Development) for the next 20 years. There are many trail grant and cost sharing opportunities. Acquiring right of way for trails can

be difficult in a built community, and variation in existing street width preclude "captured" for trail or bikeway use in most corridors. Major trail opportunities exist within the Xcel Energy power line corridor and within the Minnesota River Valley. Support for trails and active living (walking, biking and exercise) is at an all time high. That level of interest makes trails and bikeways an attractive element for bond referendum funding.

D. Enhance Natural Resources

Improve management, access and sustainability

The completion of the Bloomington Natural Resource Inventory by Hennepin County offers the City a tool to prioritize natural resource preservation, management and enhancement. A city-wide natural resource management plan is a natural extension of the inventory work. Priority vegetation and habitat actions should be identified and resources allocated according to an overall plan. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Three Rivers Park District and others should be partners in this effort. The scope of the natural resource lands in Bloomington warrant a greater focus and devotion of resources and staff to ensure long term sustainability.

E. Improve Community and Recreation Facilities

Build community gathering places

Bloomington has an extensive system of neighborhood parks but lacks places where community events and social interaction can occur. Park amenities such as plazas, gardens, spray grounds, skate parks, loop walking trails, dog parks, and even coffee shops, restaurants, beer gardens, etc., can enhance a sense of community by bring people together in parks and public places. As redevelopment occurs and as parks are revitalized, an emphasis on social spaces and places is appropriate. As the City becomes more diverse, the need to address different cultures' social traditions and recreational needs becomes more important and will require a flexible approach to park space. Gathering places help create a sense of community and can bring people together. The City does not have any gym space and relies on access to school and other facilities to run programs. While there is interest in a community center, there appear to be higher priority needs in the immediate future (1-3 years).

Maximize use of facilities

Efficient use of facilities makes sense from a budget, user and space allocation standpoint. For parks and recreation this means adding irrigation to extend turf life and use, using artificial turf to allow unlimited use, adding lighting to extend playing time and looking at refrigerated ice to allow longer and higher quality outdoor skating. Park users are looking for quality experiences. Use of more durable materials and elements like lighting and irrigation adds cost to park renovations but pays dividends through increased use, better life-cycle cost/benefit and lower annual maintenance costs.

Complete key park land acquisitions

The City park system is 99% complete. However, a few key planned park land acquisitions, such as completion of the park land acquisition around Bush Lake to allow a loop trail, are very important. Most of the Park Reserve inholding property acquisitions are eligible for matching funds through the Metropolitan Council.

Capital Improvement Program Review

The park systems Capital Improvement Program (CIP) identifies and budgets for priority park improvements such as playgrounds, buildings, trails, etc., on a yearly basis. The CIP allows the City to budget and prioritize specific park improvement projects matched to available funding and resources. The list of projects in the CIP does not obligate the City to undertake the improvement. The Parks Master Plan's list of park improvements is part of a twenty-year vision. Due to the limited financial resources, not all listed projects will necessarily be completed. However, the Parks Master Plan is a big picture tool to be used by the City to review and prioritize the CIP, including newly recommended improvements, with respect to the Park and Recreation goals and strategies of this Plan.

Priority Strategies

A set of 36 strategies were developed to implement the Master Plan goals and initiatives. Citizens, City staff, Citizen Task Force members and the Parks, Arts and Recreation Commission were asked to prioritize

the strategies. The top ten priority strategies are listed below:

1. Park Revitalization Program - Adopt and fund a park revitalization program for park infrastructure. The Capital Improvement Program (CIP) will need to be reviewed and prioritized relative to the Park and Recreation goals and strategies and ongoing revitalization of parks.
2. Signature Parks - Reposition parks to reduce costs, improve quality, and better meet evolving and diverse needs.
3. Trails – Adopt an Alternative Transportation Plan including improved internal and external bicycle and pedestrian connections.
4. Natural Resource Management – Enhance planning and resource allocation devoted to natural resources and sustainability.
5. Recreation Programming - Emphasize quality programming to serve a spectrum of ages, abilities, and interests. Encourage active living actions.
6. Community Gathering/Sense of Community – Develop community gathering locations and improve facilities and parks to enhance a sense of community.
7. Arts - Integrate public art into community life and identify and increase opportunities to participate in arts and cultural
8. History - Identify and preserve historical sites and properties with historical significance.
9. Collaboration - Increase communication and partnerships with advocacy groups, partners, and the business community. Support volunteerism and community stewardship of parks and natural areas.
10. Bond Referendum – Define the content and timing of a future park, trail, green space, and community facilities bond referendum, an essential tool needed to fund planned park system improvements.

