

# Parks and Open Space

The City of Iowa City manages more than 1,600 acres of parkland/open space. This includes 42 developed parks with 45 park shelters, 31 playgrounds, 43 athletic fields, and over six miles of nature trails. Park amenities reflect the diversity of Iowa City's population and its varied interests and recreational pursuits, including community garden plots; tennis, basketball, and bocce courts; off-leash dog parks; neighborhood splash pads; an outdoor swimming pool; vintage carnival rides; a Shakespearean theatre; a skateboard park; a boat launch; and an 18-hole disk golf course.

Iowa City's Neighborhood Open Space Plan (adopted in 1993) is intended to ensure that all neighborhoods have access to parkland for active recreation, relaxation, and as a focal point for neighborhood activity and social interaction. Each District Plan considers the appropriate future locations of roadways, development, and open space. As subdivisions are proposed, developers are required to dedicate land or fees to contribute to the development of parks within the open space district. Participants in the Comprehensive and District Planning processes expressed strong support for continuation of the Neighborhood Open Space Plan.

Regional or city-wide parks and the Iowa River Corridor Trail System are also priorities for the community. Many of our community parks are located in flood-prone areas. Peninsula Park, Waterworks Park, Lower City Park, and the Terry Trueblood Recreation Area at Sand Lake are all good examples of floodplains that serve as public parks. Scott Park and a large portion of Hickory Hill Park are areas set aside for flood control along Ralston Creek. Others, such as Ryerson's Woods and Sand Prairie Park, encompass unique environmental features in order to preserve our natural heritage. Again, district planning allows a unique opportunity to identify areas with qualities or features that could be preserved as parkland. The Riverfront Crossings Plan calls for property in the floodplain along the Iowa River to be set aside as a community park that in turn will enhance the potential for private development in the surrounding area.

While the City has achieved many of its goals in setting aside open space and developing parks, areas within the Central Planning District and Downtown do not have adequate open space. The Downtown and Riverfront Crossings Master Plan identifies a number of opportunities to improve access to open space for these densely populated neighborhoods. The Central District Plan looks to pocket parks and alternative green spaces, such as areas within the right-of-way and along Ralston Creek.

*The Comprehensive Plan document adopted in 1997 included goals and objectives regarding recreation programs as well as parks. In 2007, the Parks and Recreation Department completed a Master Plan that drew on extensive community input and addressed in considerable detail subjects including programming, park acquisition and maintenance, funding, and communications. Because the IC2030 update principally focuses on land use and economic development, the goals and objectives listed below address parks only. The Parks and Recreation Master Plan will continue to guide recreational programming and facilities planning as well as general operational aspects of the Parks and Recreation Department.*



Above: concept for a riverfront park from the Riverfront Crossings Plan.

An important goal of the Comprehensive Plan is to ensure that all neighborhoods have adequate open space. Nowhere is this more of a challenge than in Iowa City's most densely built neighborhoods, close to Downtown and the University. The centerpiece of the Riverfront Crossings Plan is to return floodable areas along the Iowa River to open space use. Funding will be needed to design and construct an attractive and functional park that contributes to the overall redevelopment potential of the area. The Riverfront Crossings Master Plan proposes the implementation of a fee structure so that as properties are rezoned for more dense urban uses, they contribute to the park development.

Meanwhile ongoing maintenance and management of parks and other open spaces is a continual challenge. An ever expanding park system with its diversity of uses and management requirements has strained the Parks Department's staff and operating budget. The 2007 Parks and Recreation Master Plan, provides action steps for addressing the need for additional funding and staff.

## Vision:

Attractive and accessible parks and open space are essential features of a healthy and sustainable community and make Iowa City a more desirable place to live. Iowa City supports the continued development of parks and open space that cultivate a sense of place and social connection, enhance surrounding development and property values, expand opportunities to improve the health and fitness of our residents, and preserve unique features and environmentally sensitive lands.

## Parks and Open Space Goals and Strategies:

**Work proactively to ensure adequate and appropriate parks and open space to serve new neighborhoods and for infill development in central and downtown neighborhoods.**

- Identify land appropriate for public parks and trail connections before property is subdivided or development is proposed.
- Allow transfer of development rights and planned developments in order to preserve sensitive features or to guide development around desirable park land or open space.
- Develop a system for collecting open space fees as land is re-zoned for higher density development in the Central Planning and Downtown Districts—areas that are underserved by parks and open space. Such fees would be used for the acquisition and improvement of parkland within the district where the rezoning occurs.
- Include and emphasize green components in all street improvement projects, especially along arterials and at major intersections and entranceways to the city.
- Formulate incentives or other means to encourage construction of functional private open space for high-density multi-family and mixed-use developments.

### **Improve overall access to and awareness of parks.**

- Ensure that future parks have visibility and access from the street.
- Discourage parks that are surrounded by private property; encourage development of parks with single-loaded street access.
- Provide sidewalk access to all parks and ensure that amenities within the park are served by walkways and trails.
- Provide bicycle parking at all parks and recreation facilities.
- Identify and plan for the development of trail connections as part of all new development.
- Provide sufficient parking at all parks in order to serve people with disabilities.
- Make handicap accessibility a priority for playgrounds and other park amenities, including bathrooms, water fountains, trails, etc.

### **Build public awareness of Iowa City's park and trail system.**

- Prioritize the design and implementation of a wayfinding system, providing signage and maps to guide people to parks.
- Implement an on-line map system to help users locate parks and park amenities.
- Work to create a system of bike and pedestrian connections to all parks via trails or other rights-of-way.
- Continue to promote parks with public events such as social events, history or tree walks, outdoor movie nights, etc.

### **Build partnerships with community organizations, including the University of Iowa and community schools, to take advantage of existing facilities, share new facilities, and expand programs and services to the community.**

- Partner with the school district in developing school playgrounds that also serve the surrounding neighborhood as parkland.
- Expand access to and awareness of community garden plots in neighborhoods.
- Work with developers and homeowners associations to raise awareness of shared private open space within new developments to ensure that all neighbors have access and also to encourage the best use and maintenance of this shared property.



Community groups, non-profits, and neighborhood volunteers play an important role in planning, maintaining, and advocating for public parks. Above, Americorps volunteers work with the Friends of Hickory Hill Park to rebuild trails in Hickory Hill Park, and with Community Build in Wetherby Park to create and edible maze designed by Fred Meyer of Backyard Abundance.



Reconnecting the city with its river was perhaps the most widely supported goal articulated during the planning process. Riverfront improvements are a centerpiece of the Riverfront Crossings plan, but were also called for in the IC2030 Planning sessions and in the online Good Ideas campaign.

Progress on the riverfront is already being made. In 2012 the Environmental Protection Agency awarded a \$60,000 Urban Waters Grant to the City of Iowa City for planning and design to modify the Burlington Street dam. These improvements to the dam could create recreation opportunities such as whitewater rafting and boating, as well as improve water quality, fish habitat, and riverbank stability.

- Promote volunteer activities and community support to maintain parks and trails and raise awareness of recreational opportunities and public and private open space.
- Identify alternative funding sources to support ongoing maintenance of our parks system.

#### **Improve awareness of and access to Iowa City's creeks and the Iowa River.**

- Make the Iowa River a focal point for Iowa City.
- Recognize Iowa City's creeks and the Iowa River as valuable green assets and vital natural systems.
- Encourage restoration of Iowa City's creeks and the Iowa River on both public and private land to create a more natural and attractive stream corridor.
- Identify opportunities to acquire land or easements to allow to access to our creeks and riverfront.
- Create access points for visual and physical access to the creeks and river.

#### **Work with residents and other partners to ensure adequate funding for public parks.**

- Identify opportunities to increase community support and revenue for parks, including various fees as recommended in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan.
- Seek alternative funding, including grants, philanthropic donations, sponsorships, general fundraising efforts, etc.
- Collaborate with developers, homeowners associations, neighborhood organizations, and volunteer groups to develop and maintain parks and trails.