

Prairie Establishment FAQs

A number of residents have asked questions about the City's strategy to convert several areas of park land to prairie plantings. Here are some answers to most commonly asked questions:

How were prairie establishment areas chosen?

- Sites were selected based on our staff's study and observations of our public lands.
 - Areas of low active recreation use or where active use was largely provided in other areas of the park;
 - Areas that have been difficult to maintain due to standing water or steep slopes;
 - Areas where prairie could provide a safety buffer between active use and traffic;
 - Areas where prairie would help with streambank stabilization.
- Neighborhood park preferences need to mesh with best practices for park design and maintenance. The choices for each park were also guided by community-wide goals, particularly with actions in response to Climate Crisis.

Where can I find the updated Prairie Establishment Area Maps?

- Please note that a number of these sites have changed since the May 5, 2020 City Council Meeting based on feedback received from area residents.
- Please visit: www.icgov.org/project/iowa-city-park-projects

How does staff determine "low active recreation" use of areas?

- Humans and pets leave clues in active use areas just like wildlife. Active use areas show use patterns in the grass: litter/trash, dog poop, lost/found items, among other indicators that staff encounter during their regular park maintenance throughout the year. Although not perfect data, the experience of our staff while mowing and maintaining the parks is a good way to measure how much an area is being used by people.
- Based on the amount of active use in a park, some of the larger parks were slated to have their active use targeted to fewer areas within the park. This would allow for a higher level of maintenance, while still providing adequate open space for current and future projected use of these parks.
- There are park maintenance and recreation staff at work between the hours of 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, during warm weather months. Although they are not stationed at one park this entire time, they have ample time to observe uses throughout the park system.

Why are you taking our park open space away?

- The conversion to prairie does not take park area away. The new prairie establishments create opportunities for our community to learn about natural and native open spaces. The community will learn what these natural areas look like, how they benefit our environment, how they create a diverse ecosystem, and all while helping out City reach its climate action goals.
- Sometimes the amount of low-level use in a park can be equally served by a smaller, more focused active use area. This is the case in several of the larger neighborhood parks, even allowing space for social distancing due to coronavirus concerns.

Why were there no neighborhood meetings for public input at each of these sites?

- This project stemmed from the city-wide [Natural Areas Plan](#) and [Climate Action Plan](#), both of which had public input components.
- Additionally, the [Parks Master Plan](#) had a significant public input process. The Parks Master Plan has an overarching goal of expanding natural areas and re-engaging the public with nature in more park sites through enhanced access to natural areas and waterways.
- There was not direct outreach to each individual site because this activity has been considered a park maintenance/landscaping activity when previously completed in other parks.
- Other changes to parks that have been routinely done without specific neighborhood meetings include adding community gardens, re-aligning/maintaining paths, adding or replacing pieces of playground equipment, changing landscaping beds, performing creek maintenance, and tree maintenance. The Natural Areas Plan, Climate Action Plan and City Budget process guide this work.
- Although specific meetings were not held for each site, input received from neighborhood meetings held within the last two years was considered when identifying new prairie areas, as well as public input for the Climate Action Plan, Natural Areas Plan, and Park Master Plan.
 - Willow Creek neighbors provided input that the flat areas near the playground and along Teg Drive be maintained for neighborhood use. We listened to their comments and left those areas open.
 - Happy Hollow neighbors asked for more green space and prairie, and asked us not to interfere with neighborhood sledding area. Based on this input, we are choosing a prairie planting that will allow for sledding.
 - Scott park neighbors asked for natural screening between the new playground and Scott Boulevard. Based on their feedback, we designed a suitable prairie planting.

How does this project fit with the Parks Master Plan?

- The “Go Wild” concept, in addition to access to natural areas are a key strategy in the Parks Master Plan. The plan recognizes that not all recreation happens on athletic fields and open spaces. Kids need access to natural areas, too.
- Willow Creek and Kiwanis were classified by the plan as primarily active, but with “Go Wild” as a secondary characteristic. This concept provides natural areas for the western side of the city. The park is large enough to accommodate both ways of meaningful recreation to surrounding residents.

How were the addresses chosen for the letter that was sent out in April?

- Outreach specific to these 18 sites was sent by letter to adjacent property owners. [View the prairie establishment property adjacent letter](#). See link below.
- A typical process for a full renovation of a park or playground has meeting notices sent to all the property owners within .25 miles of the park, plus press releases and social media posts.

What about equity and geographic coverage?

- Prairies spread throughout all neighborhoods providing ecological habitat restoration and access for all residents to natural habitats.
- The sites work together to create a stronger network of connected prairies throughout our city, enhancing the ecological benefits to the community.

Who decides what makes a prairie acceptable and that it is meeting intended purposes?

- Staff with advanced degrees and certifications in natural resource management, years of experience maintaining our parks, and guidance from the City's public planning processes – Climate Action Plan, Natural Areas Plan, and the Park Master Plan – all provide the information and experience needed to create successful prairie lands.

What are the qualifications of the current staff who manage the parks?

- Natural Resources degrees at Associates, Undergraduate and Graduate levels
- Planning and Design degrees at Undergraduate and Graduate levels
- 10 Staff with Natural Areas fire training and certification
- 11+ Staff certified in pesticide application
- 5 Certified Municipal Arborists
- 3 Staff who are Certified Parks & Recreation Professionals through the National Recreation and Park Association
- Staff with a number of years and range of Natural Resources management experiences at Federal, State, County, Municipal, Non-profit levels
- Staff collaborates with industry professionals from: community colleges, state universities, county conservation, county roadside vegetation management, non-profits, other municipalities, state DNR and more.
- Permanent Staff have approximately 310 combined years of experience for an average of 14.75 years per Parks employee.

Is the reason for this change because parks staff wants to do less weekly mowing?

- Yes – this is part of the reason! Less mowing leads to fewer carbon emissions and ultimately more efficient care of our park system. Less time mowing turf grass means that staff has more time to devote to other park maintenance needs, like natural prairie maintenance areas.

What should I expect to see in my neighborhood prairie?

- Prairie establishment occurs during a 3 to 5-year period with occasional maintenance of mowing, prescribed burning, over-seeding, and invasive species removal. These management techniques may be implemented to help the prairie establish, flourish, and outcompete undesirable species.
- Prairies go through many changes from the initial establishment, during the seasons and throughout decades. The process will begin this spring and fall in preparation for seeding in late fall.
- What to Expect:
 - Year 1 – Brown grass, and bare looking soil.
 - Year 2 – The first sprouting of prairie grasses and forbs (prairie flowers).
 - Year 3 to 4 – Transition from early dominant species to varieties with longer-term establishment.
 - Year 5 – A lush mix of grasses, sedges, and forbs benefitting many pollinators.



How can I learn about current park projects?

- All the Iowa City Parks and Recreation projects can be found on our website at, www.icgov.org/parkprojects.
- Sign up to receive news directly to your email inbox at www.icgov.org/subscribe. Select the subscription topic “Parks & Recreation,” and choose from several more options.

How can I get involved?

- If you are interested in helping with the new prairie establishments please email us at, parksandrecreation@iowa-city.org.

Are you interested in learning more about prairies and the city’s new establishments?

- Contact the Parks and Recreation Department for educational resources at, parksandrecreation@iowa-city.org.

Resources and Links – Please note some of these are large files and may take time to load.

- [Natural Areas Plan](https://bit.ly/3czFlaw) - https://bit.ly/3czFlaw
- [Climate Action Plan](https://bit.ly/2zrs1Mj) - https://bit.ly/2zrs1Mj
- [Parks Master Plan](https://bit.ly/2WkAdag) - https://bit.ly/2WkAdag
- [Iowa City Park Projects](http://www.icgov.org/project/iowa-city-park-projects) - www.icgov.org/project/iowa-city-park-projects
- [Prairie Adjacent Properties Letter](https://bit.ly/3bpAJrG) - https://bit.ly/3bpAJrG
- [Revised 2020 Prairie Maps](https://bit.ly/2LlqnP1) - https://bit.ly/2LlqnP1
- [Revised 2020 Prairie Maps Comparisons](https://bit.ly/3fJg3hS) - https://bit.ly/3fJg3hS

