

A Vision for El Paso's Park System

The 2006 Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan



**Executive Summary – Preliminary Findings and Update
Legislative Review Committee – Quality of Life Services
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The following is an overview of preliminary findings and recommendations being generated by the ongoing Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Planning process. This plan is the first truly comprehensive system wide plan developed for the El Paso Parks System. It establishes both the vision for the next decade, as well as the technical aspects of how to move forward to make that vision become reality. The plan recognizes that El Paso’s unique location as the geographic center for a large population, climate conditions that favor outdoor recreation, and a culture that values family events and community participation in recreation result in a very high level of use of park facilities, recreation buildings and programs.

Serving both the Population of Today and Tomorrow’s El Paso - The master plan assesses each of the city’s five major planning areas, and develops recommendation for each area. The current and future projected population of the city to be served is as follows:

Population of El Paso and El Paso County	Beginning 2005	Projected 2015	2020
Northeast	97,448	118,796	
East Side	177,294	217,281	
Lower Valley	107,029	111,194	
Central	124,094	79,223	
Northwest	98,291	165,864	
Overall Population	604,156	692,400 (15% increase)	976,200 (62% increase from 2005)
El Paso County	748,258	904,596	986,443

The master planning process consists of several key steps. These include an analysis of the existing parks system, reaching out to the citizens of El Paso to find out what their concerns and wishes for the parks system are, developing an assessment of current and future park system needs, and finally developing an implementation plan that provides a roadmap to begin to address the city’s park needs. These key steps are summarized below.

Where is El Paso’s Park System today? El Paso currently has approximately 2,009 acres of parkland spread over more than 160 different locations or around 3.3 acres for every 1,000 residents of the city. Approximately 996 acres or 49% of the overall total is in irrigated turf areas. El Paso has 18 recreation centers (including the Three Hills Complex now under construction) or one center for every 33,000 residents of the city, 10 Senior Centers, or one Senior Center for every 60,000 residents, and 15 swimming pools, or one pool (both indoor and outdoor) for every 40,000 residents.

How does El Paso compare to other similar communities? The plan compares El Paso’s park system to that of other cities in the Southwest, such as Phoenix, Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Las Cruces, as well as other similarly sized cities in Texas such as San Antonio, Fort Worth and Austin. Only Las Cruces, at 4.7 acres per 1,000 and San Antonio, at 4 acres of developed parks per 1,000 residents, are close to El Paso’s 3.3 acres per 1,000. It should be noted that San Antonio actually has over 16,000 acres of parkland, representing an overall parks to population ratio of more than 14 acres per 1,000 residents. At the other end of the spectrum, all of the other benchmark cities have over 15 acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents.

At approximately \$29.00 per resident of the city, El Paso's ability to allocate funding to parks is significantly below the other benchmark communities. Las Cruces, for example spends approximately \$91 per capita annually, San Antonio expends over \$55 per capita, and both Fort Worth and Austin currently allocate almost \$40 per capita.

Citizen Input: The master planning process includes an extensive amount of citizen input, using a variety of methods. A scientifically valid citywide telephone survey was conducted in November of 2005, and yielded the following key findings:

- 67% were satisfied with the quality of parks and recreation in El Paso, with the northwest area being the least satisfied.
- Walking and hiking was by far the favorite recreation activity, followed by basketball, football, baseball and softball, and finally by swimming, running/jogging and soccer.
- Over 40% had attended events at Chamizal, indicating an interest in community wide events.
- Respondents from the Lower Valley indicated the most active use of facilities, followed by the Northwest area, the Central area, the Northeast and lastly the Eastside.
- Album/Eastwood, Memorial, Veteran's and Marty Robbins were the most frequently visited parks, but a total of 87 separate facilities were mentioned by respondents.
- At a very high 49 to 1 ratio, citizens agreed that parks improved the city's image, and that parks contribute to the economic viability of the city.
- Citizens responded negatively to the amount of trails and parks in the city, with a less than 0.5 to 1 ratio of agreement to disagreement.
- More parks, aquatic facilities, recreation centers, trails and athletic facilities were the facilities most frequently mentioned as missing in each sector of the city.
- Specific facility needs most mentioned included shaded areas, trails, playgrounds, lighting for parks for evening use, and courts for basketball.
- At a 32 to 1 ratio, citizens wanted to maintain affordable recreation opportunities. They also noted the need for the renovation of existing parks, offering accessible parks close to where they live, and developing major trails for recreation and linkage.
- Other ideas, such as the development of a large centrally located park and providing fewer parks with improved facilities had a 1.7 to 1 level of support.
- For funding, citizens supported raising the department's annual budget by a ratio of almost 7 to 1.
- The creation of a county wide funding mechanism received a support to opposition ratio of 1.6 to 1, while the possibility of raising fees for sports participation and to use park facilities also received a similar level of support to opposition. Maintaining the current level of funding received a less than positive level of support to opposition at 0.6 to 1.
- Support was stronger for the idea of providing facilities and programs in each part of the city (at a 3.2 to 1 ratio of support to opposition), even if it required additional funding from residents, rather than providing larger but fewer facilities and programs that were further but more cost effective (at an even 1 to 1 ratio of support to opposition).
- More than 69% of the residents of the city supported the city acquiring and operating county park facilities such as Ascarate, even if additional city funding was required. Surprisingly, support for this idea was not as strong in the East Side and Lower Valley planning areas.
- 62% of the respondents were in the 25 to 55 age group, and 15% were over 65 years of age. These results are in line with the 2000 census results for the city.
- 69% of the respondents indicated that they always or often voted in city related elections, indicating potential strength for future park related bond propositions.

Area Public Meetings - Five planning area meetings were also held in October of 2005. Citizen comments during those meetings were noted as follows:

- The preservation of natural areas was an area of concern and interest in all planning areas.
- Trails ranked as a very high need in all areas, and ranked as the third single highest area of need.
- Citizens were concerned about the availability of athletic facilities.
- Citizens in the central area were concerned about the availability of recreation programs.
- The desire for smaller accessible parks ranked ahead of the need for larger community wide parks.
- Citizens expressed the desire to increase developer requirements for parks in new parts of the city.
- Almost 50% of the respondents noted that they would pay a little more to support better park facilities.
- One in three noted that they would be willing to pay more and higher fees for programs or use of facilities.
- 11% said that they would not be willing to pay more to support improved parks and recreation programming.
- Citizens noted the need to better address public use of recreational facilities, so that all groups could share facilities fairly. There was concern that school districts partnering with the city might pose some challenges to the availability of recreation centers.
- Citizens expressed the desire for competitive aquatic facilities in El Paso.

Key Park System Needs: The needs assessment uses multiple sources of information to develop a list of key needs in the city. These include:

- Numerical expressions of the current and proposed level of service, as in a ratio of facilities to population;
- Demand based needs, such as those expressed by user groups and through citizen input; and
- By resource evaluation, such as preserving natural areas throughout the city.

Key findings of the needs assessment are as follows;

- The amount of neighborhood parks citywide is very low, at just over 1 acre for every 1,000 residents. The ratio is lowest in the Central, East Side and Northeast areas of the city, which all rank at only a little over ½ acre per 1,000 residents. The far east and west sides of the city are particularly underserved.
- Community parks are of even greater concern, with only the Northeast area having an amount higher than 3 acres per 1,000 residents. The Northwest, Central, and East Side areas have less than 1 acre for every 1,000 resident. A ratio of at least two to three acres in each area would be preferred.
- The city has a ratio of trails to population of 1 mile for every 24,000 residents. Other similar communities have strived to attain a level of service closer to 1 mile for every 10,000 residents. To attain this, El Paso would have to triple the miles of trails in the city to almost 70 miles. Note that nature trails in the Franklin Mountains State Park are not included due to their greater degree of difficulty of use and their higher level of remoteness from the city.
- The current construction of athletic complexes is addressing a significant area of concern, but will require significant additional facilities to meet both a growing population and increasing demand. At a minimum, large complexes on the West Side, the Far East Side and the far Lower Valley will be required over the next few years. A replacement for the unusable fields at Modesto Gomez Park will also be required.
- Recreation centers are generally well distributed, although the East side, the Lower Valley and the West Side are in need of at least one additional center each. Future centers must be larger in size and serve a larger core area, and must be planned to be able to expand. The combination of aquatic and recreation facilities in close proximity to each other and sharing staff, marketing and infrastructure should continue to be the pattern for the future.
- Within its core areas, the city has a very low ratio of open space to population. Strategies currently being developed to preserve arroyos as one of the key open space assets of the city are vital to maintaining an adequate amount of open space within the city limits. At a ratio of five acres for 1,000 residents, a total of over 3,000 acres spread throughout the city would be needed. This is over five times what is currently owned by the city.
- Because of the high current level of use of facilities, the Department does not actively promote many of the programs and facilities that it has. Increased promotion would lead to a level of use that current facilities and funding cannot support.

Implementation Strategy:

- The Department’s mission must be clarified to respond to the demands of a fast growing population. Should the Department grow to meet increasing citizen needs and desires for recreation or should it remain in a mode of meeting only as much demand as it is able to? From the citizen input received, Parks and Recreation are clearly viewed as a vital component of city services.
- Focus on park accessibility, since this was one of the key citizen desires. This does not necessarily mean small parks in every single neighborhood in the city, but rather reasonable access to a variety of facilities and programs in each area of the city. It also responds to new urbanism strategies that call for common green spaces to be a key focal point of their neighborhoods.
 - Smaller parks should be within a half mile from every home. This equates to a maximum of a five to seven minute walk to get to the park.
 - The city should develop a system of “super neighborhood” parks that become the core park in each sub area of the city. These may range in distance from a quarter mile to a mile from every home, or a five to ten minute walking distance. These larger neighborhood parks will provide a greater variety of park facilities.
 - A recreation center and aquatic facilities should be within a ten minute driving distance.
 - Athletic facilities should be no more than 15 minutes driving distance away.
 - Major recreation trails should be located within ten minutes walking or bicycling distance.
- Adjustments to the Parkland Dedication Ordinance are being finalized, and can help address the development of parks in newly expanding areas of the city. These potential modifications are discussed in a separate attachment.
- Management of El Paso County Park Assets should be considered, but revenue sharing or assistance, both for operations and for much needed improvements must be jointly agreed to. Ascarate Park, in particular, with its central location and aquatic and athletic field facilities can fulfill key needs in the center of the city.

Funding

- The plan will consider the need for an increase in annual general fund allocations for the department. A gradual increase over the next five years to a level approaching \$40 per capita will be considered. For an estimated population of over 650,000 by the year 2010, the Department’s annual appropriations might increase from approximately \$18 million to between \$23 and 26 million. The increased funding levels are required to adequately maintain existing facilities, to maintain and program new facilities that are part of recent bond funding, and to allow capital reserves for facility improvements and land acquisition.
- Recreation, community and senior centers throughout the city are excessively dependent on raising a significant portion of their own budgets to keep their centers functioning, and as a result centers focus on income generating decisions and not always on facilities and programs that meet the larger needs of the community. Increases in the Department’s operational budget could provide some relief and allow greater use of the centers.
- A follow-up bond program in the next five plus years to fund additional major athletic, aquatic and recreation center development should be considered. Potential amounts for this proposition are being developed as part of the plan.
- Consider allocating a pool of bond or C.I.P. funding to acquire strategic open space assets such as arroyos.
- Parkland dedication ordinance revisions may increase available funding for parks, but will only meet the needs of local populations created by new development. For example, 3,000 new homes per year might yield an additional \$1,500,000 in available funding, but that funding is only sufficient to develop three to four new smaller neighborhood parks.
- Mechanisms to generate funding on a county-wide basis should be aggressively pursued. El Paso’s facilities and programs are the only major facilities in much of the county, and as a result El Paso continues to serve a broader, county-wide population.