



PARKS & RECREATION

MASTER PLAN



City of Gulf Shores

Mayor

Robert Craft

City Council

Joe Garris, Place 1

Gary Sinak, Place 2

Philip Harris, Place 3, Mayor Pro Tempore

Jason Dyken, Place 4

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Jennifer Guthrie

Philip Harris

Frank Malone

Pete Vakakes

Recreation & Cultural Affairs Department

Grant Brown, Director

Matt Young, Assistant Director

Prepared by

City of Gulf Shores
Recreation & Cultural Affairs Department
Planning and Zoning Department
Finance Department, IT Division

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Section 1: Introduction



Individual effort to group effort- that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.

-Vince Lombardi

Purpose of the Plan

Municipal parks and recreation facilities are a service of the City of Gulf Shores to its residents, businesses and visitors. They assure families safe, quality places to play and—in addition to Gulf Shores’ schools—for children to develop physically and socially through free play and competitive sports. They provide adult residents places to exercise, unwind and interact. For older residents, they are irreplaceable sites to gather, enjoy themselves and maintain a connection with the community around them. The parks system is also a physical manifestation of Gulf Shores values, self-image and quality of life. A robust, well planned and designed parks and recreation system projects a message that the City cares deeply for its people and provides the best for them. This is valuable in efforts to attract and retain businesses and a talented employment base. High quality parks and recreation facilities can also add to the local economy through sports and outdoor recreation tourism, increasing activity in area hotels, restaurants and shopping destinations. Finally, parks are also part of the city’s infrastructure—not just a quality of life amenity—but a part of the city’s essential systems. Parks are one of only a few uses of land that can be located in sensitive environmental areas without damaging natural functions like drainage, and yet still provide a whole other meaningful service to residents.

The desire for a Parks and Recreation Master Plan emerged following the adoption of the *Gulf Shores Vision 2025 for Sustainability*. In answer to that call, this Parks and Recreation Master Plan was developed to be the primary guiding document for improving, expanding and managing the City of Gulf Shores parks system over the next decade, and to complement the City of Gulf Shores Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. Most importantly, the Master Plan is a commitment to a course of action that will lead to the development of a park and recreation system that reflects the vision and core values of the people of Gulf Shores¹. Maintaining and growing parks and recreational facilities are essential investments by the City of Gulf Shores to provide an exceptional quality of life to its residents, businesses and visitors. The Master Plan is put into action by the Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department with the support of City officials, committees and community stakeholders and serves as an extension of the City’s Strategic Plan.

The goals for the Master Plan were to:

1. Inventory and evaluate the current conditions of Gulf Shores’ parks and recreation facilities
2. Assess future parks and recreation needs based on projected population growth and community values
3. Establish an overall vision for the Gulf Shores parks system to serve the community’s recreational needs and help accomplish other goals for the community’s physical, cultural and economic development

¹ *Vision 2025 for Sustainability – June 2014, p. 3.*

4. Establish an overall open space and greenway system that links the City's cultural, recreational, and civic amenities
5. Foster development of a parks system that builds on Gulf Shores unique character and quality-of-life
6. Set priorities for how and where parks and recreation funding is allocated in the future to best meet the needs and desires of the community

Process

This Master Plan was developed over the summer and fall of 2017. The process began with an analysis of existing city parks and recreation facilities, private recreational offerings, environmental conditions and develop elemental characteristics and plans of the city. A planning team comprised of City Council appointed recreation committee members and staff reviewed the inventory in the context of National Parks & Recreation Association (NRPA's) traditional standards and annual PRORAGIS reports, data from the Trust for Public Land's *City Park Facts* publications and stakeholder assessments. A community survey was administered to further refine the needs assessment and document the community's overall parks and recreation priorities. This survey was vital to determining the needs of the community as The National Park and Recreation Association (NRPA) no longer publishes National Standards for recreational facilities, but states that standards must be set according to the individual needs and desires of each community². City staff, prepared initial recommendations that would become the backbone of the plan. The planning team also evaluated operational funding against peer cities both regionally and nationally and projected costs of recommended parks improvements. A draft Master Plan was presented to the Recreation Committee in February 2018. The Gulf Shores Planning Commission reviewed and approved a final draft on June 26, 2018. The Parks & Recreation Master Plan was unanimously adopted by the Gulf Shores City Council on February 11, 2019 per Resolution No. 6100-19.

Community Profile

Located on the Gulf of Mexico, 54 miles south of Mobile, AL and 35 miles west of Pensacola, FL, Gulf Shores is a rapidly growing coastal community known for its sugar white sand beaches, year round recreational opportunities and family friendly, high quality of life. According to the US Census between 2000 and 2010 the population of Gulf Shores nearly doubled from 5,044 to 9,741, making it one of the fastest growing areas in Baldwin County. Gulf Shores is home to a constantly changing population ranging from hundreds of thousands of summer tourists to winter-spring "snowbird" residents. The City also hosts renowned events including the annual National Shrimp Festival, Hangout Music Festival, NCAA Collegiate National Beach Volley Ball Championship and NAIA Outdoor Track & Field National Championship. In 2014, Gulf Shores was listed among National Geographic's top 7 Great American Beach Towns.

² Park, Recreation, Open Space and Greenway Guidelines, 1996, p. 23.

Planning Area

For the purposes of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, the Future Land Use Plan is used as the planning area³. The Land Use Boundary was formally adopted by the City in part to identify and advise regarding priorities for infrastructure investments including roads, parks, and schools and other public facilities, Resolution No. 4429-08.

Demographics

Demographics such as overall population and age distribution are indicators of potential demand on recreation facilities and programs. The 2010 Census showed that majority of the population consisted of working adults between the ages of 18 and 64 (59.1%), with children between the ages of 0 and 17 (23.7%) representing the second highest group, followed by those aged 65 and older (17.2%). In 2017, the year this document was prepared, the City of Gulf Shores had an estimated population of 11,689⁴ with a median age of 47.4 and a median household income of \$47,662. The City's population is divided into 11,921 household units.

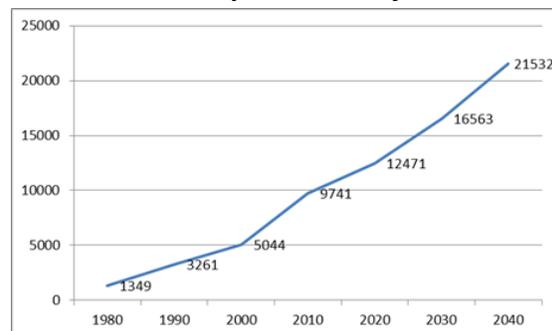
The city is well-educated, safe and economically strong:

- Over 93% of Gulf Shores residents are high school graduates and over 30% have earned a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Gulf Shores has also become increasingly attractive to seniors, with the 65 and older population more than doubling between 2000 and 2010.
- Gulf Shores unemployment as of 2013 was only 5 percent, two points lower than the state average and three lower than the national average.
- The crime rate has trended downward over the years (50% since 2002).
- Gulf Shores' median household income (\$47,662) is twice or more than that of Foley or Robertsdale according to 2011-2015 American Community Survey estimates.
- Average value of owner-occupied homes in Gulf Shores (\$232,400 according to 2011-2015 ACS estimates) greatly exceeds that of neighboring cities.

Table 1.1: 1960 – 2016 Population

| U.S Census | Pop. | %± |
|------------|--------|--------|
| 1960 | 356 | - |
| 1970 | 909 | 155.3% |
| 1980 | 1,349 | 48.4% |
| 1990 | 3,261 | 141.7% |
| 2000 | 5,044 | 54.7% |
| 2010 | 9,741 | 93.1% |
| Est. 2016 | 11,689 | 16.7% |

Table 1.2: Population Projections



³ City of Gulf Shores Land Use Plan – January 2015, p. 63.

⁴ United States Census Bureau, Vintage 2016.

Vision 2025 for Sustainability

The city's steady growth is expected to continue over the next twenty years. According to the University of Alabama Center for Business and Economic Research estimates, if growth continues as experienced since 1990, the population of Gulf Shores could approach 22,000 by 2040. Population increases, particularly of this magnitude, present a challenge to provide a quantity and diversity of parks and recreation amenities commensurate with the increased size of the community.

The Core Values of Vision 2025 in concert with the City of Gulf Shores Mission Statement address public and social activities and functions performed by the City, which includes parks, recreation and cultural affairs. "The City of Gulf Shores is committed to meeting and exceeding the needs and expectations of our residents, visitors and businesses. We are committed to preserving our city's family-friendly, small-town, safe atmosphere and beautiful natural settings, while providing the infrastructure and amenities necessary to support a sustainable, vibrant economy."⁵

The Park and Recreation Master Plan bases its recommendations, strategies and action plans with the City's Vision 2025 for Sustainability's Core Values:

- We protect and enhance the quality of life for our residents, visitors and retirees
- We protect and preserve our unique natural resources
- We honor the family centric and safety-orientation tradition
- We maintain a relaxed, no-hassle environment
- We support a clear culture of Southern Hospitality
- We enhance the sense of place
- We embed sustainability into the fabric of the community
- We promote economic prosperity in a business-friendly atmosphere
- We boost competition in the market place unaccepting of the status quo
- We commit to excellence and the highest quality standards

Gulf Shores Land Use Plan

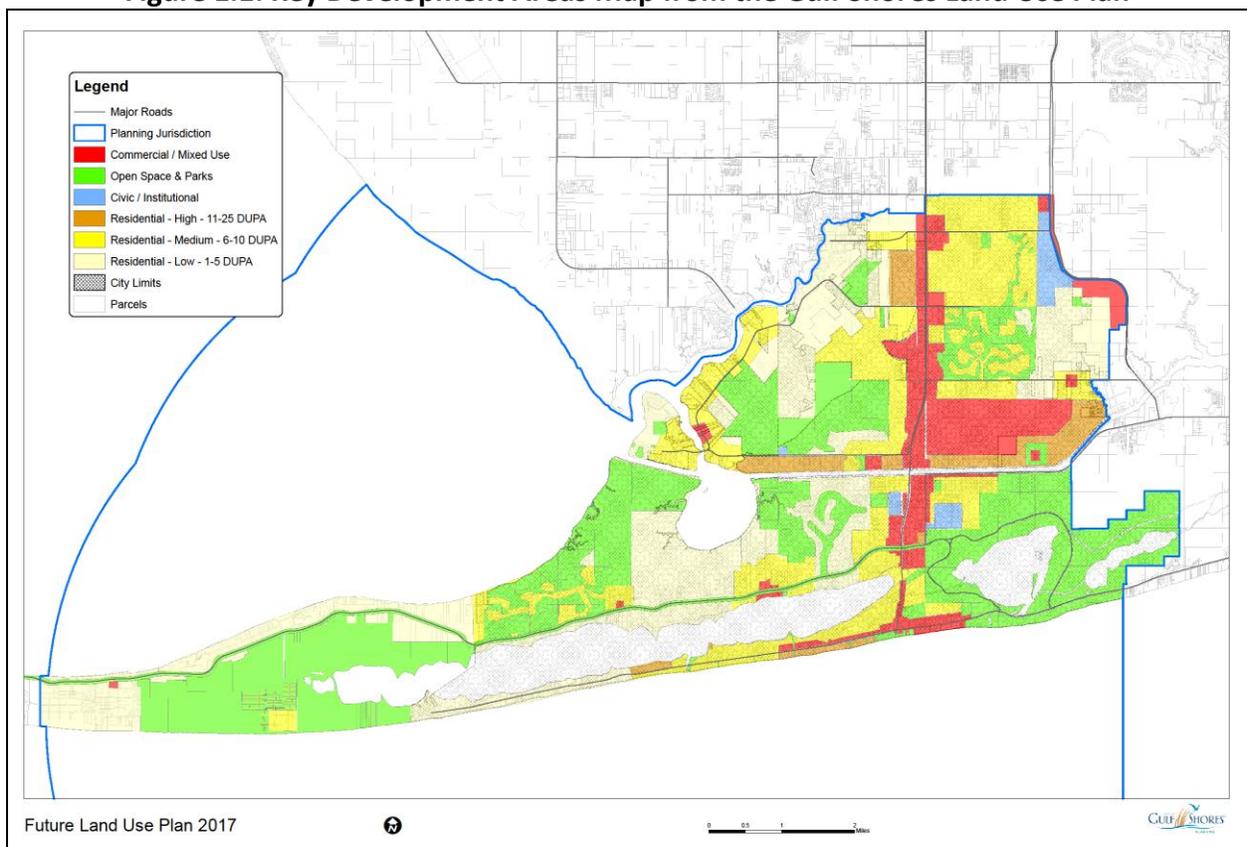
In 2008, anticipating growth, the City Planning Commission adopted a land use plan followed by a 2009 zoning ordinance amendment⁶ to manage new development. The plan established an overall framework for continued development and provided focused recommendations for growth in several "key development areas." These recommendations included strategies for reinvestment in existing areas as well as new investment in relatively undeveloped areas. Financial assistance received from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources permitted this ordinance to be amended in August 2016 thus furthering the Land Use Plan's policies to guide development to meet existing needs and to protect, promote and improve the public health, safety,

⁵ City of Gulf Shores Vision 2025 for Sustainability – June 2014, p. 2.

⁶ Ordinance No. 1584, Zoning Ordinance of the City of Gulf Shores, Alabama

convenience, order, prosperity, and general welfare of residents⁷. Of particular importance to parks and recreation planning, the Land Use Plan states that various areas of the city are in need of park space and that future park additions should support greater walkability within the community and that the City should develop a strategic plan for parks and recreation to capitalize on targets of opportunity. Analysis performed for this planning process supports that finding, recognizing that while there is sufficient total park space, there are neighborhoods and communities with an abundance of park space and those where parks and open space are distinctly lacking. The Use of Land section of the Land Use Plan establishes criteria for maintaining and enhancing community character as well as defines community adopted open space, parks, recreation and protected area characteristics. This section addresses the City’s initiative to “protect, preserve and enhance important and fragile ecosystems” and “use its natural and open lands for parks and for passive and active recreation.”

Figure 1.1: Key Development Areas Map from the Gulf Shores Land Use Plan



The updated 2015 Land Use Plan identifies the following objectives as part of the Gulf Shores Strategic Development Concept that are relevant to parks and recreation:

⁷ Ordinance No. 1827, Zoning Ordinance of the City of Gulf Shores, Alabama

- Neighborhoods will be planned, designed and built to provide a focus and a sense of place to their residents and the community at large
- The city’s park and recreation system, including passive and active parks and outdoor recreation facilities, will be enlarged, expanded and focused on the needs of neighborhoods to meet the needs of the community
- The city’s “green infrastructure,” consisting of its park and recreation system, in combination with its surface water resources, flood plains and wetlands, augmented by major portions of its tree cover, will be conserved and respected by the city’s development management plan.
- All activity centers, neighborhoods, schools, recreational amenities, and cultural facilities will be interconnected through a combination of safe, attractive sidewalks, greenways, trails and other bicycle and pedestrian facilities.⁸

While the Land Use Plan establishes major policy themes for future community development, it does not state goals and objectives specific to Parks and Recreation; therefore, goals and objectives established by this plan will be presented in Master Plan section of this plan.

Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan

In 2014 the City adopted a comprehensive Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan to guide the construction and maintenance of bicycle and pedestrian facilities city-wide⁹. The plan built upon the City’s previously adopted 2000 Sidewalk Bikeway Master Plan and Subdivision Regulations and sets specific goals and objectives which support an interconnected bicycle and pedestrian network, provide alternate modes of transportation, create recreational opportunities and that enhance livability of Gulf Shores.

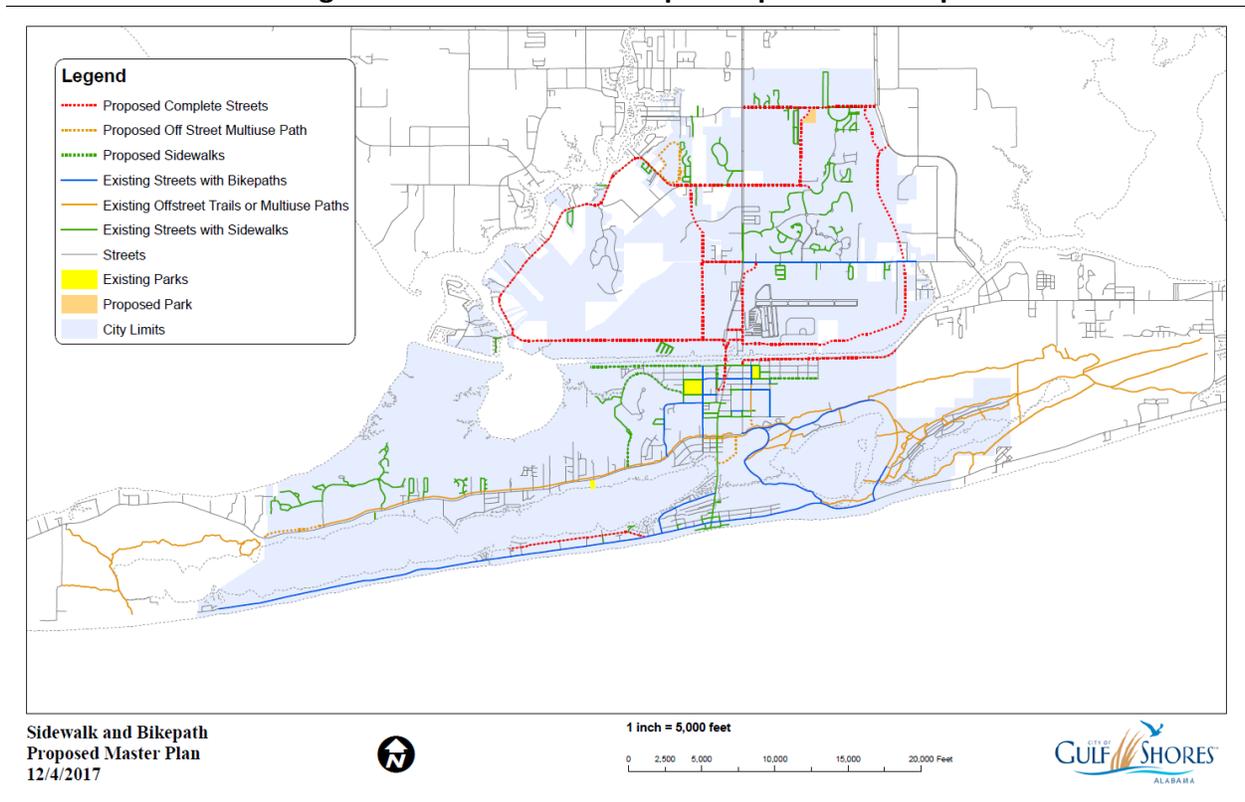
The following Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan goals and objectives are relevant to parks and recreation:

- Provide a safe, convenient and connected network of bicycle and pedestrian facilities and continuously pursue funding options for new and improved facilities
- Require bicycle and pedestrian improvements with new development and insure that new development does not compromise or eliminate existing bicycle and pedestrian facilities
- Provide education and encouragement to citizens to promote safe walking and bicycling as a regular form of exercise and transportation
- Ensure current and proposed pedestrian and bikeways are furnished, where needed and appropriate, with signage, lighting, seating, landscaping, trash receptacles, bike racks, handicap access, comfort stations, etc.

⁸ City of Gulf Shores Land Use Plan – January 2015, p. 37-39.

⁹ City of Gulf Shores Bicycle & Pedestrian Master Plan 2014, p. 1.

Figure 1.3 Gulf Shores Multiple Purpose Path Map



Recreation & Cultural Affairs Department

The specific functions of the City of Gulf Shores Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department combine the importance of quality of life with the need for sustainable economic development in the community. The Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department also has the responsibility of implementing the Master Plan.

“Gulf Shores Recreation & Cultural Affairs enriches lives and fosters harmony within the community through area-wide leisure services targeted to improve healthy life styles, educational and recreational opportunities, public participation, and environmental and economical stewardship” –RCA Department Mission Statement

The Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department is responsible for a number of City services related parks and recreation, beach operations, special events, City merchandise economic development, redevelopment, agency marketing and public relations. In these capacities, the Department not only provides staff support to the City Council, it also provides staff to the Gulf Shores Park and Recreation Committee, Planning Commission, Library Advisory Board, Bicycle & Pedestrian Committee, Gulf Shores Police Department Marine Division Search and Recovery Dive Team, and the Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Sports Commission. In addition, the Department manages the David L. Bodenhamer Recreation Center, Erie H. Meyer Civic Center, Gulf Shores Cultural Center, George C. Meyer Tennis Center, Activity Center, City Store, Gulf

Shores Sportsplex, 8 public parks including a skate park, a dog park, two public boat launches. The Department maintains a staff comprised of 95 City Council approved employees, including full time, part time and seasonal positions. In addition, contract laborers and volunteers contribute a great deal to the functions of the Department; approximately 125 contract laborers and volunteers provided assistance to the Recreation, Special Events, and Parks & Facilities Divisions during OY 2017.

Section 2: Needs Assessment



Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and a focused effort.

-Paul J. Meyer

Inventory and Analysis

The Gulf Shores Recreation & Cultural Affairs Department manages approximately **213 acres** of active parkland including seven parks, two boat launch facilities, library, museum, civic center, auditorium, two activity centers and two recreation centers. In addition, the city has over 900 acres of green space of which approximately 800 acres are designated for the development of two future passive wetland parks and the remainder is maintained as natural preserves and/or special use areas. Altogether the active 213-acre parks system affords the community 17.75 acres of parks and open space per 1,000 residents. While this is well above the 10.5 acre/1000 residents recommended traditionally by the NRPA, neighborhood and community parks make up less than 18% (37.1) of the city's 213 active parkland acreage. Most of the of Gulf Shores' park space is found in passive regional parks and the Gulf Shores Sportsplex (93.6 acres). As such the city is currently deficient **26.5 acres** of neighborhood and community parkland. Additionally regional park needs are satisfied by Gulf State Park (6,500 acres) to the east of the City and Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge (7,157 acres) west of the City.

This ratio of park space to population also puts Gulf Shores ahead of the pack when compared with the larger cities evaluated in the Trust for Public Land's City Parks Fact 2017 report—the median park acres per 1000 residents for America's 100 most populous cities was 13.1 according to the publication. The 2017 report indicated that lower density cities on average provide more park space by population than denser cities, however these comparisons are useful for assessing overall allocation of parkland in a very general sense but do little to convey how well parks serve the unique needs of the people of Gulf Shores. These considerations are addressed in the following analyses.

Park Classifications

To get a finer grained snapshot of the parks system, the City of Gulf Shores' parks and recreation facilities have been classified into standard categories established originally by the NRPA. These categories reflect the size of parks, their service area and relationship to surrounding neighborhoods and districts, and the types of recreational activities provided within them. This classification system allows Gulf Shores' parks offerings to be compared to traditional benchmarks and to create a better understanding of how each park serves the community. Traditional park classifications established by the NRPA include:

- Mini Parks are small (generally under 1 acre), specialized facilities that serve a concentrated or limited population within a quarter-mile radius/5 minute walk.
- Neighborhood Parks are moderately sized (1 to 15 acres) parks with multiple activities that serve one or more surrounding neighborhoods within a half-mile radius/12 minute walk.

- Community Parks are large (15 to 30 acres) parks with a wider variety of recreational activities that serve several neighborhoods within a service radius two miles/5 minute drive.
- Regional Parks are large parks with varying recreational opportunities—often associated with unique natural or cultural features—that serve multiple communities or cities within a 1 hour drive.
- Special use parks are facilities dedicated to specialized or single purpose recreational activities that vary from historic parks, zoos, and golf courses to marinas, nature preserves and arboreta. Special use parks tend to have a community-wide or larger service area depending on the type of activities involved.

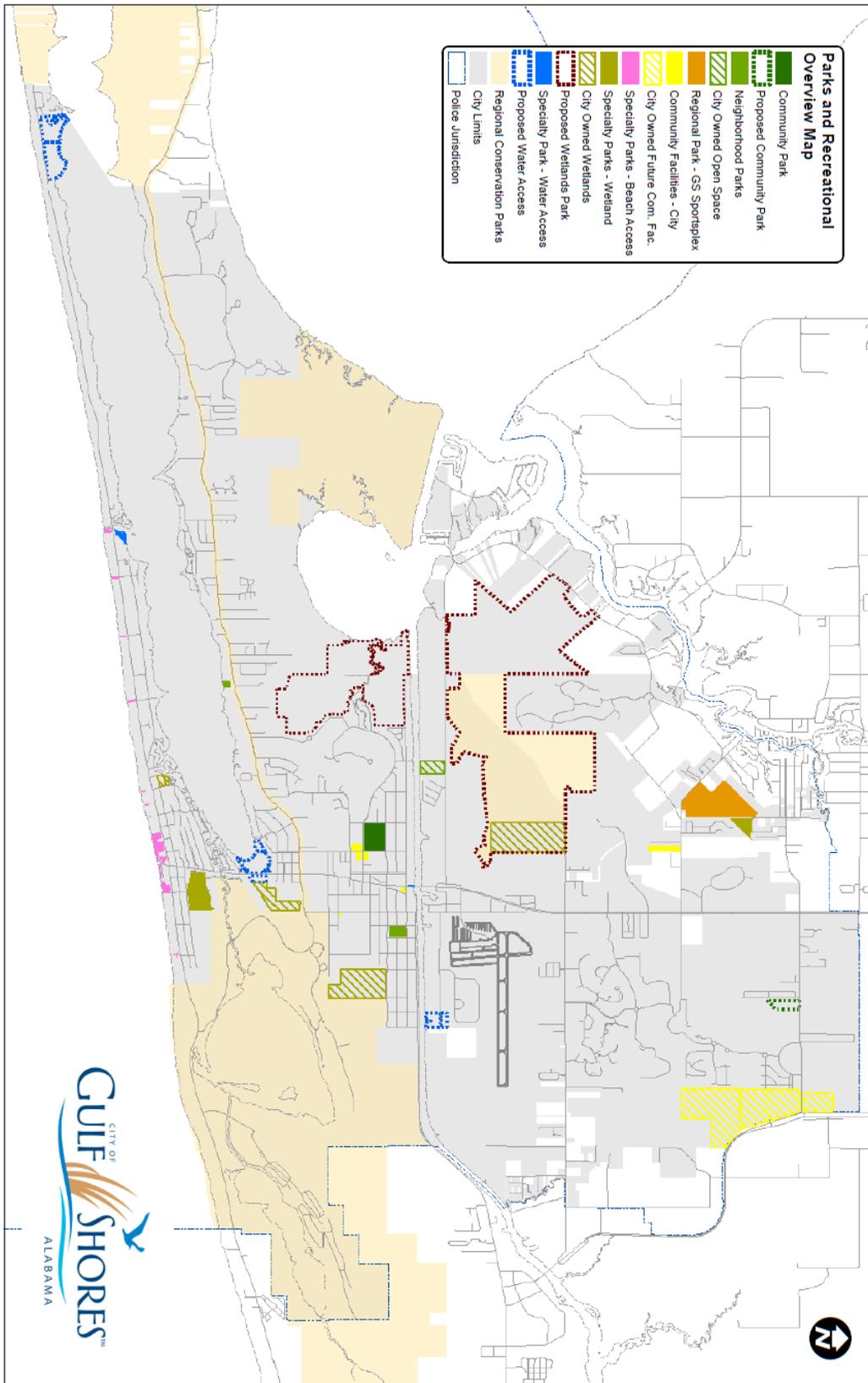
With these classifications applied to local conditions, Gulf Shores’ parks were categorized as shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Existing Parks

| Park | Park Classification | Ownership | Size (acres) |
|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Gulf Place Beach | Regional | City of Gulf Shores | 15.9 |
| Gulf Shores Sportsplex | Regional/Special Use | City of Gulf Shores | 93.6 |
| Wade Ward Nature Park | Regional | City of Gulf Shores | 37.3 |
| Johnnie Sims Park | Community | City of Gulf Shores | 27.7 |
| Meyer Park | Neighborhood | City of Gulf Shores | 9.4 |
| Wetland Park | Special Use | City of Gulf Shores | 11.8 |
| Lagoon Pass Park | Special Use | City of Gulf Shores | 6.4 |
| Mo’s Landing Park | Neighborhood | City of Gulf Shores | 2.4 |
| Canal Park | Special Use | ALDOT* | 0.8 |
| Gulf Shores Dog Park | Special Use | City of Gulf Shores | 0.5 |
| Gulf State Park | Regional | Alabama DCNR | 6500 |
| Bon Secour N.W. Refuge | Regional | U.S Fish & Wildlife | 7157 |

*Maintained by the City of Gulf Shores

Figure 2.1: Parks & Recreational Facilities Overview Map



Mini Parks

Mini parks are generally very compact and are typically located amid higher density development, however due to Gulf Shores historically low to moderate neighborhood densities and no former parkland dedication requirements the City has no mini-parks in its inventory. NRPA standards have historically recommended cities provide 0.25-0.5 acres of mini parks per 1,000 residents. Mini parks tend to be accessed most frequently on foot or by bike and thus have a smaller service radius, than larger parks that attract more people, some of whom will travel by car. Generally, mini parks serve an area roughly ¼ mile in radius, or about a five minute walking distance. It should be noted that, due to the costs of properly outfitting, maintaining and managing a large number of such small parks, nationally, cities have taken a shrewder stance with respect to mini parks, limiting municipal investments in maintaining existing or building new mini parks. As such, mini parks (less than 1 acre) should only be pursued opportunistically and only in locations that would provide open space to serve densely developed areas.

Neighborhood Parks

Gulf Shores' currently maintains two neighborhood parks, of which only Meyer Park is in-line with NRPA standards, which recommends a size of at least five acres. Despite its size (9.4 ac), Meyer Park currently, offers a ratio of **1.2 acres/1000 residents**. Mo's Landing Park, consisting of 2.4 acres, primarily serves boaters and kayakers wishing to access Little Lagoon, however the recent addition of a picnic shelter and bench swings have diversified the park. Because of the increased amenities and activities normally available at neighborhood parks compared to mini parks, users will choose to walk or bike from a slightly greater distance, up to ½ mile or a ten minute walk. Some users from further away may even choose to drive. As can be seen in Figure 2.2, there are significant deficiencies in the distribution of neighborhood parks in throughout Gulf Shores and a significant lack of coverage in the growing northern area of the city. As such, the City's primary northeast parkland acquisition should be focused on neighborhood park acquisitions of 2.5 acres or larger.

Mo's Landing Park (2.4 acres)

Mo's Landing Park was built on a pair of privately owned sites purchased by the City of Gulf Shores, where a convenience store and private boat launch known as Mo's Landing and RV Park used to be. The park is 1.8 miles west of Highway 59 on Fort Morgan Road (Highway 180). Two concrete boat ramps, parking for both vehicles and boat trailers, restrooms and an observation deck overlooking the Lagoon are available for public use. In addition to access for fishing, sports, and recreational boating access the park affords kayak and canoe access to the north shores of Little Lagoon.

Mo's Landing Park Evaluation

| Quantity | Facility | Good | Fair | Poor |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1 | Pavilion | X | | |
| 1 | Restroom | X | | |
| 2 | Boat Launches | X | | |
| 2 | Docks | X | | |

Meyer Park (9.4 acres)

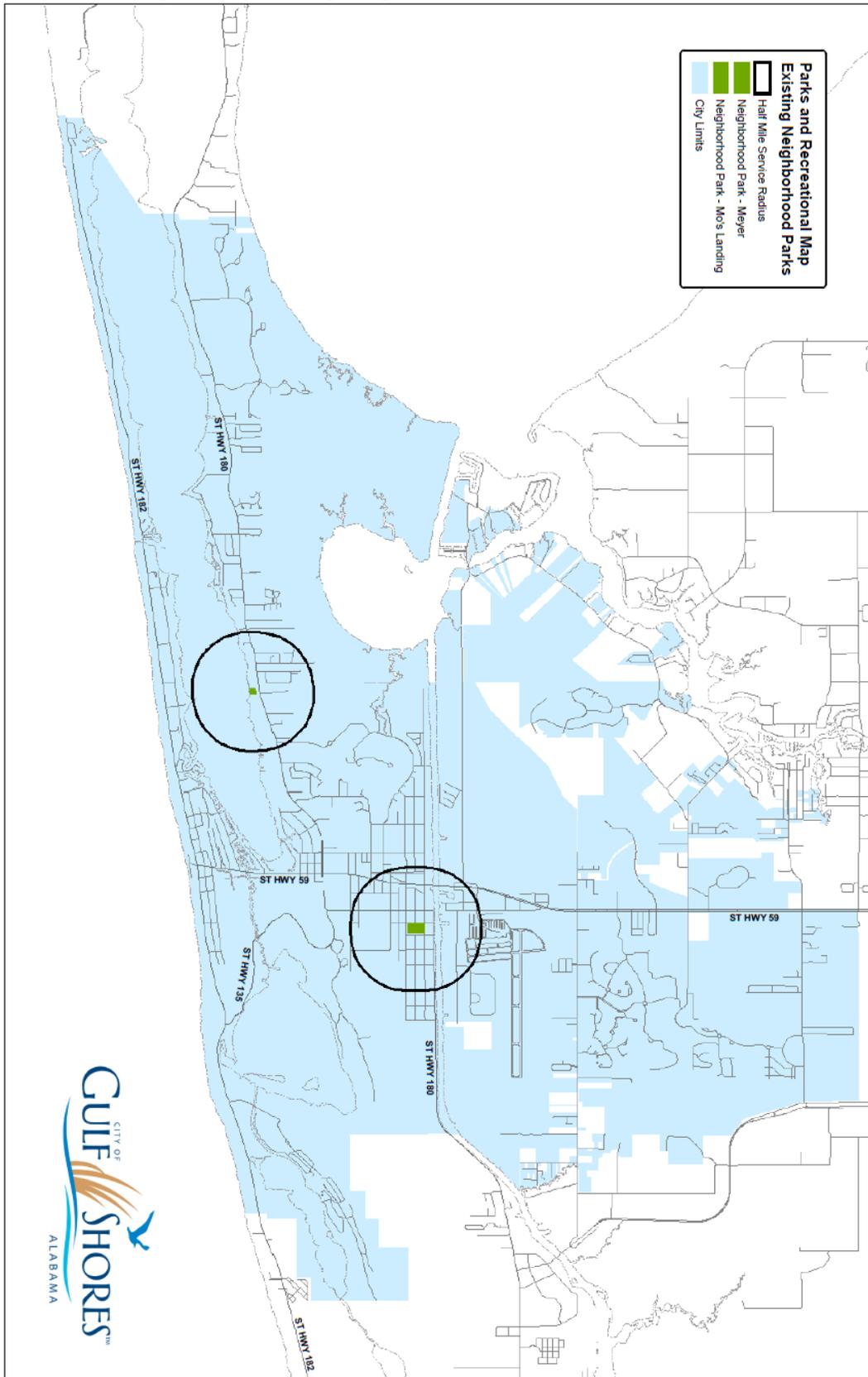
Meyer Park in southeast Gulf Shores is representative of a traditional neighborhood park, offering a mix of active and passive recreational spaces and facilities. Due to its proximity to Gulf Shores schools and the Waterway Village District, Meyer Park often hosts community-based events.



Meyer Park Evaluation

| Quantity | Facility | | Good | Fair | Poor |
|----------|-------------------|--|------|------|------|
| 1 | Playground | | X | | |
| 2 | T-Ball Fields | | | X | |
| 1 | Basketball Court | | X | | |
| 1 | Restroom | | X | | |
| 1 | Sound Stage | | X | | |
| 1 | Pavilion | | X | | |
| 10 | Horseshoe Pits | | | X | |
| 2 | Bocce Ball Courts | | | X | |

Figure 2.2 Existing Neighborhood Parks Service Radius



Community Parks

Community parks are generally 15 acres or larger, because they often contain a mix of natural open spaces, active recreational fields and courts, and structures appurtenant to such uses, including anything from concession stands to community centers. Gulf Shores' single community park easily meets NRPA size standards individually however there is a lack of community park space citywide. NRPA standards recommend 5-8 acres per 1000 residents whereas currently there are only **2.3 acres of community park space per 1000** residents in Gulf Shores.

Johnnie Sims Park (27.7 acres)

Johnnie Sims Park in southwest Gulf Shores is representative of a traditional community park, offering a wide mix of active and passive recreational spaces and facilities. The David L. Bodenhamer Recreation Center includes administrative offices of the Recreation Division and also houses an indoor pool, locker rooms, running track, gymnasium, game area, racquetball courts, tennis courts, skateboard park and playground. Sims athletic facilities continuously host youth recreation games, high school games, and provide overflow facilities for larger sporting events held at the Gulf Shores Sportsplex throughout the year. In recent years visiting youth sports tournament use of the fields tend to significantly limit local programming and facility parking access during the spring and summer months.



Johnnie Sims Park Evaluation

| Quantity | Facility | Good | Fair | Poor |
|-----------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1 | Recreation Center | | X | |
| 3 | Baseball Fields | X | | |
| 1 | Softball Filed | X | | |
| 18 | Tennis Courts | X | | |
| 1 | Multipurpose Fields | X | | |
| 1 | Tennis Center | | | |
| 1 | Pavilion | X | | |
| 1 | Playground | | | X |
| 1 | Skateboard Park | | X | |
| 2 | Basketball Courts | | X | |
| 1 | Concession Area | X | | |
| 2 | Restrooms | X | | |

An additional well placed community park in north Gulf Shores, perhaps with an outdoor swimming pool and multipurpose athletic fields, would help Gulf Shores achieve a better proportion of community parkland to popularize, and alleviate the current demands at Sims Park. Despite recent improvements, there is room to make physical improvements and broaden the ways in which people utilize Sims Park to be more commensurate with the historical use of the park.

Figure 2.4 Existing Community Park Service Radius

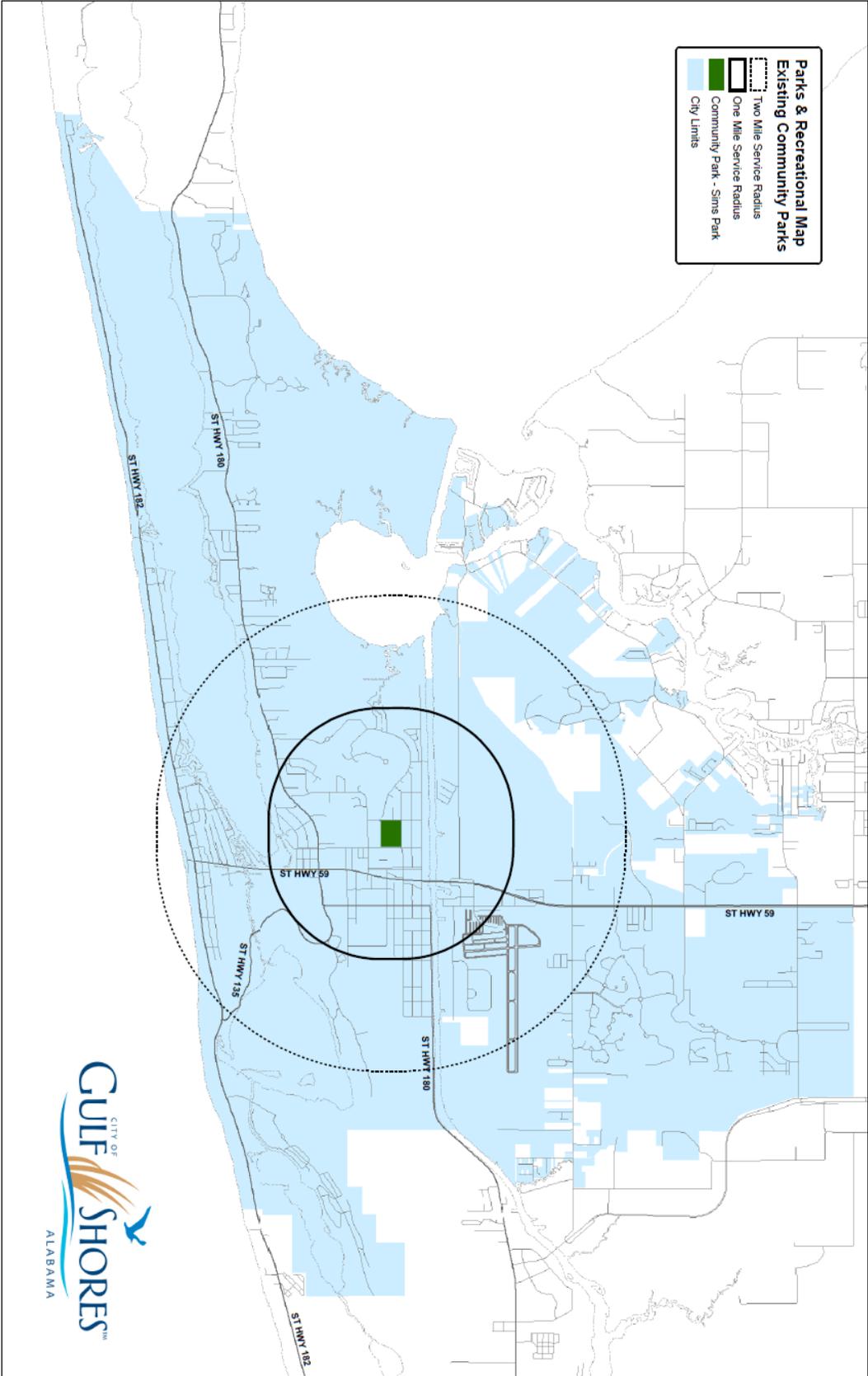
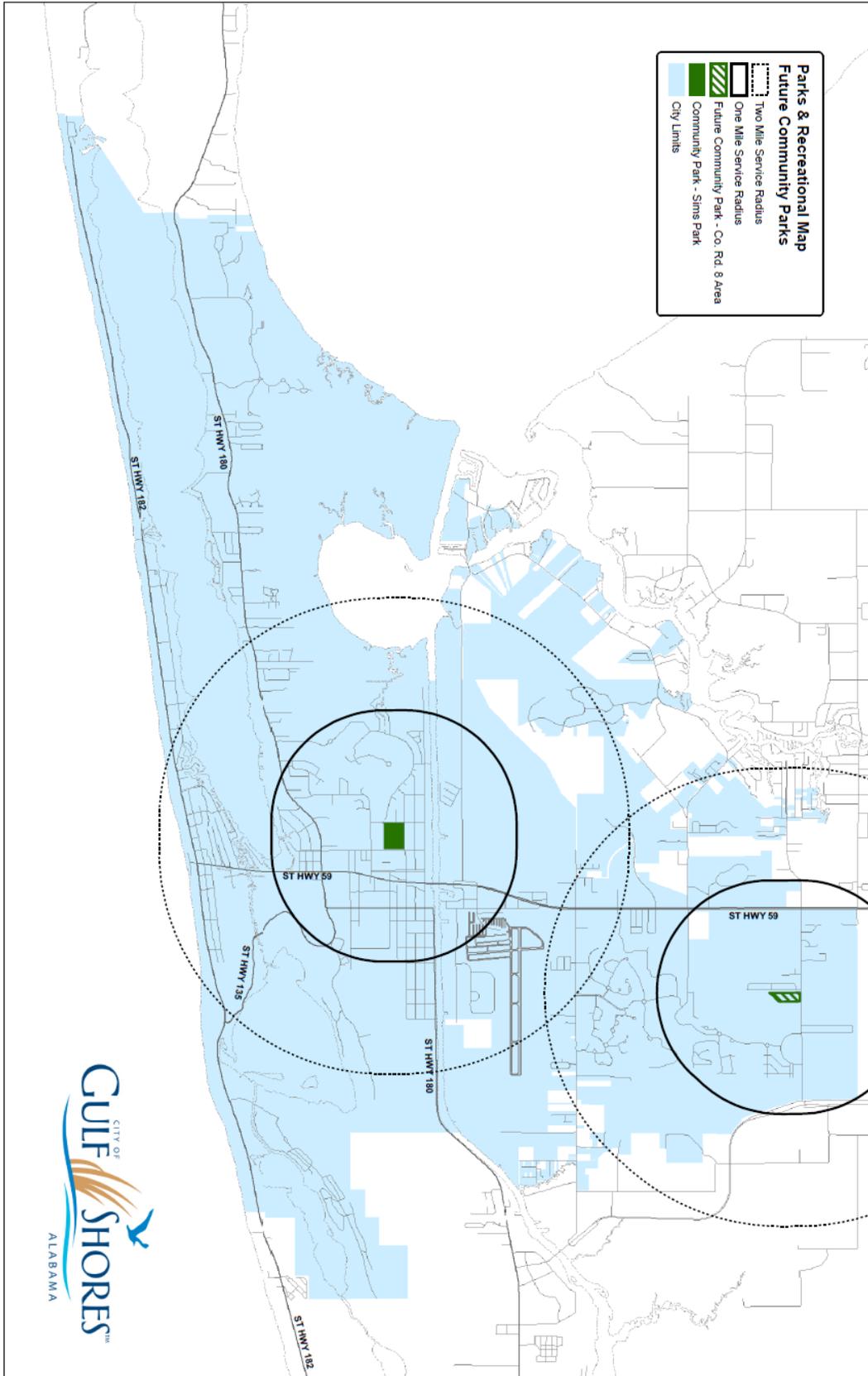


Figure 2.5: Existing with Future Community Parks Service Radius



Regional and Special Use Parks

Historically, there are no standards for how many acres of regional or special use parks should be provided to communities based on population size. The provision of these amenities is determined by the demand for protecting and interpreting local natural or historic resources or the demand for other types of activities to which these parks may be devoted.

Gulf Shores Sportsplex (93.6 acres)

The Gulf Shores Sportsplex in northwest Gulf Shores is devoted to organized sports use and plays host to many sporting events including USSSA World Series baseball tournaments, the NAIA Outdoor Track & Field National Championships, the AHSAA State Track & Field Championships as well as hosts Gulf Shores High School Varsity and Junior Varsity athletics. Mickey Miller Blackwell Stadium hosts a 4,000 seat stadium containing a regulation size football field surrounded by a state of the art track. The 5-Plex contains a group of five 300' baseball/softball fields that encircle an elevated, indoor press box and officials area. Because of this intense focus on sports activities, it should be considered a special use park. However, with room for additions and changes and with its adjacency to subdivision developments it can be adjusted to be a better-rounded park facility by installing community and neighborhood park amenities, such as playground equipment and disc golf, and expanding pedestrian and trail corridors.



Gulf Shores Sportsplex Evaluation

| Quantity | Facility | Good | Fair | Poor |
|----------|--------------------|------|------|------|
| 1 | Football Stadium | X | | |
| 6 | Baseball Fields | X | | |
| 1 | 5 Plex Press Box | X | | |
| 1 | Softball Field | X | | |
| 1 | Soccer Field | X | | |
| 1 | Championship Track | X | | |
| 1 | Triple/Long Jump | X | | |
| 1 | Pole Vault | X | | |
| 1 | Hammer Throw | X | | |
| 1 | Discus | X | | |
| 1 | Field House | X | | |
| 2 | Pavilions | X | | |
| 4 | Concession Areas | X | | |
| 8 | Restrooms | X | | |

Wade Ward Nature Park (37.3 acres)

An Alabama Coastal Birding Trail site, Wade Ward Nature Park is located two blocks north of the main public beach. An elevated boardwalk allows access to wetlands connecting Little Lagoon and Lake Shelby where wildlife including migratory birds and alligators can be observed. The park is connected to the Highway 59 bike and pedestrian path through a series of sidewalks. A picnic pavilion, sitting benches and bikes racks are also present.

Wetlands Parks (11.8 acres)

The Wetlands Park adjoins the Gulf Shores Sportsplex to the northeast. A loop gravel footpath leads around a fishing pond, complete with benches, gazebos, and a fishing pier.

Gulf Shores Dog Park (.5 acre)

Located at 308 Clubhouse Drive, the half-acre fenced park offers both large and small dog areas with seating and pet drinking fountains.

Lagoon Pass Park (6.4 acres)

Lagoon Pass Park is located at West Beach Boulevard, 3 miles west of Highway 59. Public parking, restrooms and outdoor showers are available on the north side with public beach access to the south. A Little Lagoon fishing pier and boardwalk is planned and will afford elevated access to the park's protected estuary.

Canal Park (0.8 acre)

Canal Park is located under the ICW Bridge in Waterway Village, Canal Park features a boat launch, public parking, restroom facilities and a courtesy dock.

Gulf State Park (6500 acres)

Managed by Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Gulf State Park is a public recreation area located within the corporate limits of Gulf Shores, the state park's 6,500 acres mostly encompass the land behind the Gulf Shores beach community, between Highway 59 and SH 161, with the west end extending further south to a wide beach area. In addition to beaches, the park offers access to 9 unique ecosystems as well as three spring-fed, fresh-water lakes: Lake Shelby, Middle Lake, and Little Lake. The park includes 2.5 miles of white sand beaches, a 1,540-foot Gulf of Mexico fishing pier, an interactive nature center, a beach pavilion, 28 miles of nature trails, a modern campground, fresh and saltwater fishing, swimming, kayaking and paddle boarding. Twenty cabins, 11 cottages, and 496 campsites for both RVs and tents are available within the park's 11.5 square miles. An 18-hole golf course includes a pro shop and snack bar. A state-of-the-art interactive beach-front learning campus and lodge to be completed in 2018 and will include guest lodging, meeting rooms, a public restaurant, ballroom and an educational lobby, in addition to restored wetlands, dune growth areas and an expanded trail network.

Bon Secour Wildlife Refuge (7157 acres)

Managed by the National Fish & Wildlife Service, Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge was established by Congress in 1980 for the protection of neotropical migratory songbird habitat and threatened and endangered species. The refuge also provides crucial habitat for the endangered Alabama beach mouse as well as Loggerhead, green, and Kemp's Ridley sea turtles nesting on Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge beaches. Conservation strategies to protect these turtles under the Endangered Species Act include on-site nest monitoring and protection, as well as fostering a public ethic through educational programs. The refuge also serves as a living laboratory for students and scientists, and provides wildlife oriented public recreation. A Visitor Center offers information about the local flora and fauna, and housed NFWS staff. Several miles of improved trails, including the recently reconditioned Jeff Friend Trail offer wildlife and plant viewing and showcase multiple ecosystems. A kayak/canoe launch at the Jack Friend Trail parking lot provides access to Little Lagoon.

Gulf Shores Recreation Programs and Events

Benchmarking current Gulf Shores Recreation & Cultural Affairs programs and events (Table 2.2) with comparable municipal departments indicates current public access to trending recreational resources in Gulf Shores meets or exceeds those of NRPA Gold Medal Award winners and highly regarded recreation agencies.

Recreational Facilities

To more fully quantify the level of service provided by the City of Gulf Shores' current recreational offerings, the number, distribution and functionality of its recreation facilities, i.e., baseball fields, tennis courts, pool, were analyzed and compared to available benchmarks. Input from the community, advisory committee and other stakeholders was included to better reflect local recreational needs and values. Several sports leagues depend on the availability of school facilities. The City should continue to support coordination between city schools and sports leagues and programs to assure recreational programs are accommodated properly as the community grows. Continued partnerships between the Gulf Shores Recreation & Cultural Department, Gulf Shores Schools, the Cities of Orange Beach and Foley, and area sports leagues will allow public funding for recreational facilities to achieve synergy and avoid redundancy. As parks facilities were evaluated, each organization was surveyed to better understand their needs with regard to the recreational facilities at city parks.

Baseball

Gulf Shores offers 11 fully outfitted baseball/softball fields of various sizes suited to varying age groups supporting sports tourism in addition to community use. Seven of the eleven baseball fields are located within the Gulf Shores Sportsplex with the remaining four fields located at Sims Park. These fields are primarily intended for league and tournament use and are therefore in "tournament" condition. City recreation leagues also use city school fields for practice. Additionally, two lighted multipurpose fields with backstops are available for T-Ball practice and games at Meyer Park. Even after excluding the Sportsplex baseball fields, Gulf Shores exceeds the NRPA recommendation of 1 field per 5,000, however, growing tournament and sports tourism demand is causing scheduling problems and maintenance challenges.

Basketball

Gulf Shores offers 2 full length, indoor basketball courts, one at the Bodenhamer Recreation Center and one at the Cultural Center. Additionally, the city offers 3 outdoor hard surface courts, one at Meyer Park and two at Sims Park. Gulf Shores currently exceeds the NRPA benchmark of 1 basketball court per 5,000.

Football

Gulf Shores offers 1 fully outfitted football field for high school varsity and community league use at the Sportsplex. Multiuse fields at Sims Park and Gulf Shores High School are available for football (and soccer) practice, and youth league and pick-up games. Gulf Shores currently meets a benchmark of 1 football field per 20,000 residents; however future expected growth demand of High School Varsity and Junior Varsity and youth league may require additional multipurpose fields.

Soccer

Soccer is undoubtedly one of the most popular sports in Baldwin County, representative of the sport's rapid rise in popularity in the US. The Sportsplex offers one lighted soccer field in addition to a multipurpose field at Sims Park. The Gulf Shores Middle School field also serves as a youth soccer league practice and game facility. Additionally, the Orange Beach Sportsplex's 2 tournament soccer fields and newly constructed Foley Soccer Complex's 12 lighted fields currently provide sufficient regional demands. The Gulf Shores Sportsplex soccer field is considered to be in good condition, however the field currently doubles as a discus hammer throw facility during track and field events, limiting soccer access and requiring additional maintenance. Because of Gulf Shores youth league agreements with Gulf Shores Schools and contiguous communities, the longstanding NRPA measure of one field per 10,000 residents is applicable.

Softball

Gulf Shores offers 2 dedicated softball fields rated as being in good to excellent condition with both currently serving youth, high school and adult league play as well as state and national tournaments. Gulf Shores is slightly below the recommended standard of 1 softball field per 5,000 residents, however the City is able to efficiently convert baseball fields to meet larger league play and tournaments.

Swimming

The Bodenhamer Recreation Center at Sims Park contains a small outdoor children's pool and larger indoor swimming pool with recreational climbing wall. While these facilities roughly meet the recommended standard of 1 pool per 20,000 residents, because the pool is shared with the school system there is considerable demand in the community for an outdoor pool.

Tennis

There are currently 18 tennis courts available for public use at Sims Park. These courts are located at the George C. Meyer Tennis Center and are rated in excellent condition. Based strictly on NRPA benchmark of 1 court per 2,000 residents, Gulf Shores exceeds in tennis space.

Volleyball

There are two indoor volleyball courts available for public use at the Bodenhamer Recreation Center and Cultural Center are in good condition. There is a considerable lack of dedicated indoor volleyball courts in Gulf Shores compared to the traditional NRPA standard of one court per 5,000 residents. However, if the city youth volleyball league is able to use school gymnasiums for indoor games the majority of demand would be met. Additionally, 4 outdoor sand volleyball courts are located at Gulf Place Beach.

Track & Field

Gulf Shores offers a championship track & field complex located at the Gulf Shores Sportsplex. Facilities include pole vault, high jump, triple jump, shot put, javelin, discus, hammer throw, and

a polyurethane track that can accommodate both high school and collegiate level events, hosting the AHSAA State Track & Field and NAIA Track & Field National Championships.

Event & Special Use Facilities

In addition to sport activity specific facilities, the City operates general program and event, and membership based facilities.

Gulf Shores Activity Center

Located at 260 Clubhouse Drive, the Activity Center is a 2,400 square foot facility available for public and private use. The facility was renovated in the spring of 2012 and features LED lighting, updated kitchen, banquet tables and chairs, and professional audio/visual equipment. The Activity Center has a max seating capacity of 200 persons.

Gulf Shores Cultural Center

Located at 19470 Oak Road West (Co. Road 6), The 9,478 square foot Cultural Center was acquired by the City in 2014. The facility provides meeting space to businesses, civic organizations and residents. The facility offers a 500 person theater, professional performance stage, breakout rooms, meeting rooms, class rooms, gymnasium, and fitness studios. Many meeting rooms as well as the theater and gymnasium are available for public and private reservations. Additionally, the auditorium serves as a City polling site for election cycles.

Erie H. Meyer Civic Center

Located at 1930 West 2nd Street, the 5,400 square foot Erie H. Meyer Civic Center hosts many of City's largest civic events including the Gulf Shores Entertainment Series, Breakfast with Santa, Easter events, music and performing art venues, and serves as a City polling site for election cycles. The mainstage, theatrical lighting, and banquet area were renovated in 2017. The facility offers a commercial grade kitchen, box office, and lobby and can host public and private groups up to 600 persons depending on the event type.

Thomas B. Norton Public Library

Located at 221 West 19th Avenue, the Thomas B. Norton Public Library offers a full range of library services and programs to Gulf Shores' residents and visitors. A computer lab, photocopying, printing, faxing, notary services, and free WiFi are available. Additionally a 35 person meeting room is available to civic groups to rent.

Gulf Shores Museum

The Gulf Shores Museum hosts new and permanent historical exhibits as well as seasonal programs and events. Located at 244 West 19th Avenue, the museum's historic building was donated to the City in 1982. The museum grounds include a public garden. Admission is free to the public.

Needs Assessment

On evaluating Gulf Shores’ parks and recreation facilities against national standards and then comparing that to local demand, parks and recreation standards were calibrated specifically to the **Gulf Shores Vision 2025 core values and priorities**. This established a set of localized standards through which the Recreation & Cultural Affairs Department can forecast recreational needs as the city’s population grows. The following table represents the projected need for different types of park space, fields, courts and other recreational facilities over the next several years.

The recommended standards should not be seen as rigid measures but guidelines to help the City prioritize its investments over the next decade. Finally, they are not fixed and should be re-evaluated when the City updates its parks and recreation plans.

Park Standards

The City park standards shall be a minimum of ten and five tenths (10.5) acres per one thousand anticipated population within the proposed development. This standard of ten and five tenths (10.5) acres per one thousand population is composed of the following elements:

- A. Five acres per one thousand for regional parks;
- B. Three acres per one thousand for community parks;
- C. Two and five tenths per one thousand population for neighborhood parks.

Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment

The following table projects the amount of park space that will need to be added to the current park system to meet future demand. For 2017, the existing level of service is indicated. The rightmost columns indicate the number of acres needed to provide an adequate level of service in each category as the community grows. With additional population growth, the City will need to add another **54.0 acres** by 2040 for a total addition of neighborhood/community park space of 93.5 acres.

Table 2.3: Existing and Projected City Parkland Needs

| Activity | LOS Standard | Existing Acreage | 2017 | 2020 | 2040 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|---------|----------|----------|
| Estimated Population | | | 11,689 | 12,471 | 21,532 |
| Demand 2017 -2040** | | | | | |
| Parkland Needs | Mini Parks | 0.25 ac per 1,000 | - | - | - |
| | Neighborhood Parks | 2.5 ac per 1,000 | 11.8 ac | 30.0 ac* | 43. ac* |
| | Community Parks | 3.0 ac per 1,000 | 27.7 ac | 36.0 ac* | 51.0 ac* |

*Demand acreage has been rounded to the whole number

**Population rounded to the nearest 1000

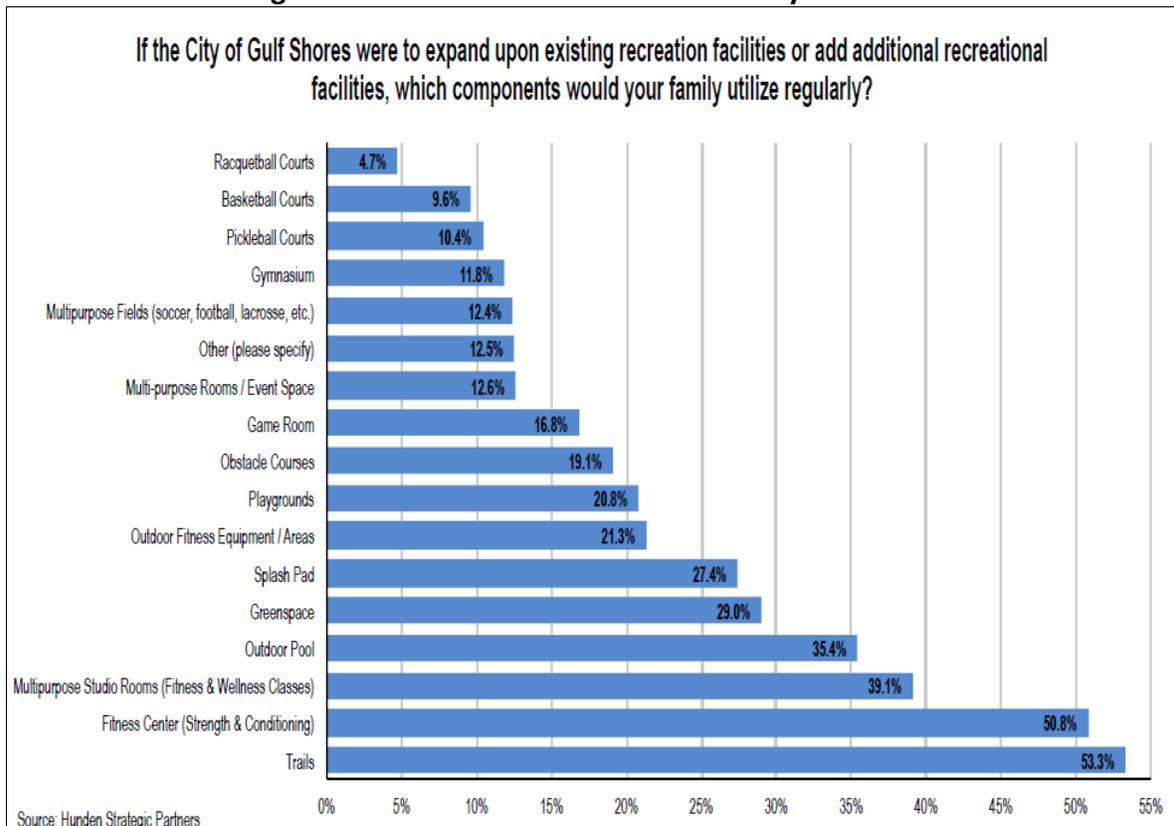
Regional Parks Provided

This Master Plan, at the of time of adoption, determines that the regional park needs of the residents of Gulf Shores are satisfied by the Gulf Shores Sportsplex, Wade Ward Nature Park, Bon Secour Wetlands, Oyster Bay Wetlands, Gulf Shores public beaches, Gulf State Park to the east of the City, and Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge west of the City.

In addition to the active parkland needs shown in the preceding table, a number of additional parks and recreation amenities are desired by the community¹⁰ and should be considered as the City invests in new parks and recreation facilities:

- More trails and greenways
- More passive greenspace
- Outdoor recreation equipment
- Outdoor pool & splash pad
- Multipurpose athletic fields
- Fitness Center & Multipurpose studio rooms expansions
- Playgrounds
- Outdoor pickleball and basketball courts

Figure 2.4: Additional Facilities Desired by Residents



¹⁰ GSOBSC Recreation Facility Market, Feasibility & Impact Study. 2017, p. 52

Trends

Those values a community holds regarding parks and recreation can change over time. Indeed, the rise in popularity of soccer over the last 30 years has had a fundamental impact on local parks and recreation departments across the United States. But cultural, economic, and technological shifts can also greatly affect the way communities think about and value parks and recreation. Interests can also change at regional, state and local levels. These trends must be taken into account in planning for the future of the local parks system to assure that investments are proactive and will meet future demands while also adjusting to economic changes.

National Trends

Local governments across the United States have seen losses in revenue as a result of the recent recession leading to more austere city budgets and cuts in city services, including parks and recreation. But this is not necessarily a temporary phenomenon. Instead, it has led to a much broader debate over the ways in which taxpayer dollars are used by the government. However, a national survey conducted by the NRPA in 2015 found that the public still places considerable importance on parks and recreation. About one-third of respondents indicated that too little is spent on parks and recreation while only 6 percent believe too much is being spent. Parks and recreation facilities are increasingly being recognized as a public service that can help reduce obesity—and the health problems associated with it—by encouraging physical activity. Walking paths and trails, in particular, have quickly grown in interest as the nation's concerns over physical inactivity and obesity have risen. Trails are also being recognized as a key element in making communities more walkable. And though some federal funding sources are tightening, in the future it is likely that existing or new health and safety-related funding sources may come available that can be used in the context of parks and trails.

The *Outdoor Recreation Participation Report 2012* produced by the Outdoor Foundation indicated that participation in outdoor recreation is increasing and that 2011 saw an increase in three million participants. The report also states that running, jogging and trail running were the most popular outdoor activities by participation in 2011. By frequency of participation, running, jogging and trail running also came in first followed by biking/mountain biking, birdwatching, fishing and hiking.

As might be expected, age is a determining factor in participation in outdoor recreational activities as evidenced by the national survey. Participation rates drops steadily from 63% for those aged 6-12 to 38% for the 45 years and older category.

According to the 2012 Sports, Fitness, & Recreational Activities Participation Topline Report from the Sporting Goods Manufacturers' Association (SGMA), fitness activities -class-based fitness, stationary cycling, working out with machines, cross training, etc. have become the most popular way to get exercise and are particularly popular among Generation Y/Millennials (those born 1980-1999). The SGMA report also indicated that the three most popular team sports are basketball, outdoor soccer, and baseball. But, Ultimate Frisbee, lacrosse and

gymnastics are seeing steady gains in participation while traditionally popular sports are remaining the same or losing popularity.

Regional and State Trends

As has happened nationwide, walking for pleasure has grown considerably in the last twenty or so years in Alabama. According to the Alabama Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (2003-2018 SCORP), over 73% of residents enjoy walking for pleasure. Other top recreational activities indicated in the survey were swimming (55.6%), football (45.3%), salt water beach (37.4), outdoor basketball (29.5%), camping (27.4%) and soccer (17.5%).

Table 2.4: Alabama’s Most Popular Outdoor Recreation Activities

| Rank | Activity | Participation |
|------|----------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | Walking for Pleasure | 73.2% |
| 2 | Outdoor Fairs, Festivals | 70.0% |
| 3 | Visiting Historical Sites, Parks | 66.4% |
| 4 | Spectator Activities | 65.9% |
| 5 | Hiking, Trails | 63.2% |
| 6 | Open Space Park, Relaxing | 61.7% |
| 7 | Viewing Scenery | 59.1% |
| 8 | Picnicking | 56.8% |
| 9 | Driving for Pleasure | 56.4% |
| 10 | Swimming, Pool | 55.6% |

Source: Alabama Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. 2013-2018

The SCORP survey also identified outdoor participation levels and perceived needs within Gulf Shores region in which polled residents indicate a great need for playgrounds, walking, hiking and bicycling trails, parks, and swimming pools.

Sports-based tourism is increasingly being pursued to generate revenue in Alabama cities through their parks and recreation systems. Cities are developing expansive sports complexes and indoor sports facilities to attract youth and professional tournaments in efforts to attract visitors who will patronize their shops and eateries and stay in local hotels. This is particularly true in Gulf Shores, Orange Beach and Foley where facilities draw crowds throughout the athletic season. There has already been considerable success in the state in outdoor recreation tourism exemplified by the Gulf State Park visitation, the Hang Out Music Festival, and the hosting of national youth and collegiate tournaments such as the USSSA Baseball and Softball World Series and NCAA Women’s Beach Volley Ball National Championship.

Section 3: Master Plan



In life, as in football, you won't go far unless you know where the goalposts are.

—Arnold H. Glasgow

Vision

This Master Plan is built upon five primary aspirations that underlie the goals, recommendations and strategies for the expansion and enrichment of the Gulf Shores parks and recreation system.

The City of Gulf Shores envisions a parks and recreation system that will be:

- A center of community life
- Abundant in active and passive recreation opportunities, natural areas and designed spaces
- For all ages—children, young adults, adults and seniors
- A system of walkways, greenways, trails and parks that weaves the community together
- Composed of premiere facilities that support economic development through visitation

Goals

1. Our parks system is balanced and inclusive

To create a more balanced and inclusive parks system, the City of Gulf Shores intends to:

- 1.1. Focus investment on larger, mixed activity neighborhood and community parks
- 1.2. Integrate passive and active recreational uses
- 1.3. Strengthen and/or expand larger neighborhood parks
- 1.4. Provide recreational offerings for the young and old
- 1.5. Assure parks and recreation facilities are accessible
- 1.6. Provide civic open space within the parks system

2. Our parks are well maintained

To assure sustained, effective maintenance of city parks, the City of Gulf Shores intends to:

- 2.1. Make existing parks more maintenance-efficient
- 2.2. Use durable, low-maintenance designs and materials
- 2.3. Update maintenance policies and procedures
- 2.4. Provide adequate operational funding
- 2.5. Implement sustainable, environmentally prudent best practices

3. Parks and greenways connect us all

- 3.1. Continue to development of bicycle and pedestrian links
- 3.2. Provide recreation offerings for the young and old
- 3.3. Provide civic open space within the parks system

3.4. Integrate parks with their neighborhoods and communities

4. Our recreational facilities are high-quality

4.1. Integrate passive and active recreational areas

4.2. Develop tournament-quality sports facilities

4.3. Use durable, low maintenance designs and materials

4.4. Conserve and protect the natural environment

Key Recommendations

The following recommendations describe the primary objectives for expanding and enhancing the city parks system over the next several years. The recommendations are not listed in order of priority. For priorities, refer to the Implementation section of this plan.

1. Existing Parks and Facilities

The evaluation of existing parks revealed that there is an overabundance of regional parkland and notable deficiency of neighborhood and community parks compared to traditional NRPA standards. This concern was also underscored by the community's strong support for development of community greenspaces, playgrounds, picnic pavilions, outdoor fitness equipment and walking paths. Additionally, the development of a recreation plan based on anticipated growth, including the number and types of parks and facilities will be necessary to meet these community demands, as such, the City's adopted park classifications are further defined in the Appendix of this Master Plan.

Expanding, improving and building new neighborhood and community parks will help address the priorities of the community and create a more desirable balance within the parks system. But to further deal with the current park imbalance the City will need to act judiciously in investing in any new small parks, consider the adoption of a park and open space dedication requirement for subdivisions and implement strategies to reduce maintenance needs among newly acquired parkland. In addition, planned expansions at the Gulf Shores Sportsplex & Bodenhamer Recreation Center will alleviate existing and projected use demands by increasing both available use space and programs.

2. Acquire property/build Neighborhood & Community Parks

During the resident needs assessment survey participants were asked to vote for their priorities for enhancing the city parks system over the coming years¹¹. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the highest priority is development of accessible neighborhood and community park amenities. This further supported findings of the parks inventory and analysis. Currently

¹¹ GSOBSC Recreation Facility Market, Feasibility & Impact Study, 2017. p. 52

there is sufficient space among regional parks to fulfill demand through 2030. However, there is current demand for **26.5 acres** of neighborhood and community park space. And by 2030 an additional **54.0 acres** will be needed for neighborhood and community parks. Additionally, survey participants felt there should be a balance between active and passive recreation areas—an integrated mixture of sports fields and natural areas with walking trails and picnic facilities. The community also emphasized high quality in the design and maintenance of such facilities, indicating they should meet or exceed the level of similar facilities in nearby Orange Beach and Foley.

Given the City’s high growth rate, it is critical to reserve parkland today to meet future needs. The most strategic location for new parks is north of the Intracoastal Waterway, an area that is currently underserved with parks. Ideal neighborhood and community parks would be sufficient in acreage to serve individual neighbors or constitute a larger community park with planned bicycle and pedestrian amenities, and would include areas of mature vegetation, multipurpose open greenspace, abundant natural beauty, and sufficient public outdoor design standard amenities. An appropriate park site should be readily accessible by pedestrians and vehicles alike, and offer opportunities to connect to the City's greenway and sidewalk system.

A master plan for each park should be developed for the long term use of the site; while the actual development may occur in phases. The park should include areas for both active and passive recreation, and should feature natural areas with mature vegetation. The park should be carefully designed to take advantage of its landscape. Activities should be arranged to use available space effectively and with the convenience and enjoyment of many different types of park users in mind.

Gulf Place Master Plan



equipment should be removed. A thorough inventory of all park and maintenance equipment will allow the department to create an amortization schedule and budget for equipment replacement more effectively. Maintenance equipment must also be kept up-to-date to assure effective and efficient care of city parks.

3. Continue development of a citywide greenspace network that interconnects neighborhoods, parks, schools and other destinations

The Gulf Shores Land Use Plan recommended planning and developing the parks and recreation system in ways that fulfill the community’s recreation needs while fostering unique development opportunities. Neighborhood and community parks should be developed in a manner that links downtown.

Greenways, Complete Streets and Nature Trails

Natural spaces and on- and off-road bicycle and pedestrian facilities are integral components of a citywide recreation system. When surveyed 63.8% of Gulf Shores residents listed trails and pedestrian walkways as the most utilized and requested City recreational facilities¹². Moreover, resident response closely aligned with regional recreational trail and walkways usage demands (63.2%)¹³. Complete streets, streets that accommodate pedestrians and/or bicycles through multiuse paths, bicycle lanes or sidewalks, add to the ways public streets serve the community. They are useful for exercise as well as getting from place to place. Greenways that contain off-road paths serve much the same function but provide trail users with more natural rather than urban surroundings. The City of Gulf Shores should continue the implementation of its 2014 Bicycle & Pedestrian & Master Plan. Attention should be paid to any routes newly proposed in this plan, to those previously proposed routes on which this plan places additional emphasis, and to facilities to serve Gulf Shores’ communities north of the Intracoastal Waterway. Natural areas such as Little Lagoon, Bon Secour and Oyster Bay wetland properties offer the opportunity for low impact recreation, such as nature trails and conservation. Where appropriate, natural or soft surface trails should be included in sites that are preserved for environmental reasons. These trails should be connected to the city’s growing network of greenways and on-street facilities.



Figure 3.2: Segment of the Fort Morgan Trail

¹² GSOBSC Recreation Facility Market, Feasibility & Impact Study. 2017, p. 49

¹³ Alabama Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. 2013-2018, p. 53

Joint Use Agreements with Schools

Promote the development of joint facility use agreements between Gulf Shores schools and the City to allow school facilities (gym, track, baseball fields, soccer fields, etc.) to be used for recreation by neighborhood organizations and/or residents. A common example of a joint facility use agreement is between a City and school system that share facilities such as a school's gymnasium, playground, and track and a city's athletic fields, concession areas, and aquatic complex. The agreements will encourage schools and other organizations to open up their facilities to the public, allowing greater access of recreation space.

Joint facility use agreements should consider:

- Facilitate cost-sharing for maintenance of recreational facilities
- Provide increased resources for physical activities and education for children
- Increase access to nearby places to allow community members to be more physical active
- Promote partnerships across community agencies
- Create a sense of community ownership and engagement

4. Create additional recreational opportunities around waterfront properties (Laguna Cove, Lagoon Pass, Canal properties) – boat launch

The addition of waterfront recreational properties would greatly expand outdoor recreation opportunities and can serve as a catalyst for additional economic development, such as lodging, shopping and dining activity in adjacent business areas. Fresh and saltwater based recreation ranked high among survey respondents at both local and state levels with access to shorelines, fishing, boating, kayaking and paddle boarding preferred waterborne activities throughout coastal Alabama¹⁴ and the City of Gulf Shores¹⁵.

Acquiring New Parkland

The City should seek to maintain a minimum of 2.5 acres/1000 residents in neighborhood park space. Currently, the ratio is closer to **1.2 acres/1000** residents. Additional parkland should be focused toward neighborhood parks of 1 acre or larger. Mini parks (less than 1 acre) should only be pursued opportunistically and only in locations that would provide open space to serve densely developed areas. Community parks are generally 15 acres or larger, and as described previously. Well placed new community parks would help Gulf Shores achieve a better proportion of community parkland to population size, and alleviate the current demands at Sims Park.

In the past, the City has accrued most of its small greenspace through the subdivision review and approval process. Land is commonly reserved by the subdivision developer in the form of

¹⁴ Alabama Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. 2013-2018, p. 53

¹⁵ GSOBSC Recreation Facility Market, Feasibility & Impact Study. 2017, p. 49

detention or retention ponds and then acquired and maintained by a subdivision home or property owners association. In most cases these lands are of little recreational benefit to the surrounding or adjoining neighborhood, and do not meet City adopted park classifications. This method can be greatly improved to produce a better overall park network, including requiring developers to dedicate and develop eligible open space as turn-key parks in lieu of cash and within certain housing densities where sufficient neighborhood park space or service radiuses may be deficient.

Not all subdivisions warrant a neighborhood park. In some cases, such as large lot developments, a small common open space outfitted with a playground, seating and perhaps a small pavilion is all that is needed or adjacent City conservation lands in which the development contributes to passive access may suffice. In many cases, modest facilities are within the ability of a typical private homeowners' association to maintain. But where a public park is desired, in accordance with this Master Plan, the City should attempt to assemble land for larger facilities. Sites for larger parks can be acquired through direct acquisition in advance of development, through reservation of contiguous tracts within adjoining developments during the subdivision process, or a combination of these methods.

In the process of evaluating property for parks acquisition, the following siting criteria should be considered:

- Is the park needed? The site is located where surrounding residences are underserved by public parks. For example, there is not another park within a ½ mile radius.
- Is the site accessible? At a minimum, it should be easy to get to on foot. The larger the park the more likely it will generate car traffic; and therefore should be along a street where that traffic can be accommodated and will not be a nuisance.
- Is the site central or prominent? Unless they are privately-maintained, parks should not be buried deep within a subdivision. Instead, locations should be sought that make the park a central feature for surrounding subdivisions.
- Is the site large enough to accommodate a mix of recreational uses? Neighborhood parks should generally be in the range of five acres. Smaller sites may be acceptable if acquisition of additional contiguous land is both feasible and likely.
- Are there resources available to develop and maintain the park long-term? Neighborhood parks must be adequately outfitted to be a sustained benefit to residents. The City should be in a position to improve the site and financially absorb the long-term maintenance costs.

Conservation in Parks

Conservation of natural features should be incorporated into the site selection and design of neighborhood and community parks. Generally, 50-60% of park sites may be allocated toward active recreation, for which it is necessary to manipulate and clear land for sports fields, courts and structures. 25-30% of a park site should be improved for passive use, such as playgrounds, picnic areas and multiuse open spaces, and 15-20% left mostly natural and dedicated for steep slope conservation and stormwater management. Some passive recreational elements, such as trails, that require little or no grading and clearing can also be incorporated into portions of a site that are to be conserved. Retaining a portion of a park site in a natural or near natural state can be advantageous in addressing stormwater management and contributes to the scenic beauty of local parks. It will not be possible to meet these targets in every case and, for some park sites, conservation needs may have a lower priority.

The use of Low Impact Design (LID) techniques can be integrated into the development of active recreational parks to help manage stormwater impacts that result from grading and introducing structures, parking lots and other impervious surfaces. Parking areas may be constructed with a combination of pervious and impervious materials. Rain gardens and swales can be used to collect and allow on-site infiltration of stormwater. Though it will vary on case-by-case basis, these techniques are similar in cost, if not less expensive, compared to traditional, structural stormwater management facilities. LID features can also save on long-term maintenance costs.

| Table 3.1: Park Site Selection and Design | | | | | |
|--|--------------|----------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------------|
| | Rec. Size | Service Radius | Active Area | Passive Area | Conservation Area |
| Mini Park | <1 ac | <.25 mi./ 5 min walk | 20% | 50% | 25% |
| Neighborhood Park | >1 <15 ac | .05 mi./ 12 min walk | 50% | 30% | 20% |
| Community Park | >15 <30 | 1-2 mi./ 5 min drive | 60% | 25% | 15% |

Undeveloped Parks

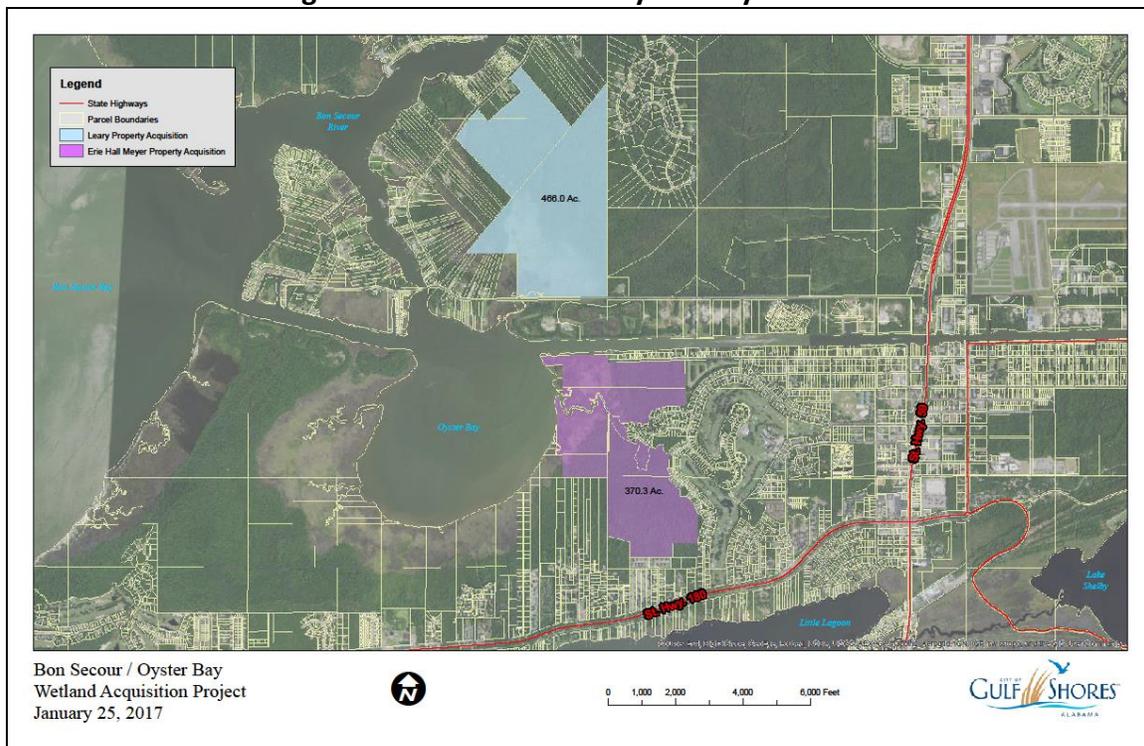
There are approximately 1300 acres (new wetlands acquisitions, waterfronts, etc.) of land previously acquired by the City slated to be improved for future parks. They range from 0.5 acres to over 700 acres, with the majority of this acreage being conservation areas or small special use parks (watercraft launches). These sites should be individually evaluated before plans are finalized and improvements made. Regardless of park class and use, the City should consider programmatic and design elements that will reduce long-term maintenance. This

might include retaining more natural ground cover rather than installing sod across large portions of a site. Where play areas for children are desired, the City should consider types of play equipment that are long lasting, age well and require less maintenance.

Table 3.3: Undeveloped City Parkland

| Parkland | Proposed Classification | Size (acres) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Bon Secour Wetlands | Regional/Special Use | 466 |
| Oyster Bay Wetlands | Regional/Special Use | 370 |
| Laguna Cove | Special Use | 53.7 |
| Bear Creek | Special Use | 0.6 |
| Waterway East Boat Launch | Special Use | 8.7 |
| Brigadoon Trail | Special Use | 0.9 |

Figure 3.3: Bon Secour & Oyster Bay Wetlands



Section 4: Implementation



*Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.*

-Henry Ford

Action Plan

The City of Gulf Shores maintains a strong parks and recreation system but as revealed through this planning effort, steps must be taken over the coming years to assure that programs and facilities keep in tune to the needs and interests of the changing community; to offer more diverse, well-integrated activities in community parks, develop new, accessible neighborhood parks, and to put renewed focus into the quality and long-term maintenance of parks facilities. To achieve these objectives the City of Gulf Shores and its Recreation & Cultural Affairs department must consider parks funding very carefully. Is annual funding for parks consistent with the community's interest and demand for a quality parks system? Are there savings that can be found in the way that current funding is used? Are there additional sources that can be leveraged to assist in enhancing Gulf Shores' parks?

The following development recommendations are based upon the needs assessment, community input, and analysis of local trends. Projects have been categorized into Tier 1 Priorities (within 5 years) and Tier 2 Priorities (within 10 years). The priority levels indicate that the recommended project or task be underway or complete within the timeframe indicated.

Tier One Priorities (1-5 years)

Capital Improvements

1. Develop a new Community Park. Design a Master Plan for the park to be developed in phases. Construct Phase One of the Master Plan, which should include the following:
 - Community Center
 - Outdoor Swimming Pool
 - Concession area
 - Lighted Multi-purpose fields (2 minimum)
 - Pickleball courts (2 court complex)
 - Disc Golf Course (18 basket course)
 - Play areas
 - Restrooms
 - Trails
 - Parking
2. Acquire Public Beach access where and when available.
 - East Beach Boulevard public access points
 - Dune walkovers
3. Plan and develop neighborhood park(s) in concert with subdivision development. Neighborhood parks must be adequately outfitted to be a sustained benefit to residents. Neighborhood parks, including mini parks, should meet both City Park Site Selection and

Design standards and include the following City approved components for public outdoor spaces:

- Benches
 - Trash/Recycling Receptacles
 - Bike Racks
 - LED Pedestrian & Bollard Lighting
 - Shared Use Paths
 - Parking
 - Landscape
 - Multi-purpose open space
4. Develop a Master Plan for Kids Park Playground replacement at Sims Park. The Playground Master Plan should include:
 - New playground equipment
 - Sidewalks linking facilities
 - Skate Park restroom accessibility and improvements
 - Improved pedestrian and overhead lighting
 5. Plan and develop additional water access facilities
 - Boat launch at Canal
 - Kayak and paddleboard launches at Laguna Key and Mo's Landing
 6. Renovate Bodenhamer Recreation Center parking lots. Parking lot improvements should consider the following:
 - Improved lighting and landscaping
 - Planned Phase II Recreation Center Expansion footprint

Planning and Operations

1. Adopt and implement park and open space level of service standards.
2. Remove subdivision detention areas from public greenspace inventory.
3. Continue to add programs and facilities for teen and adult populations.
4. Coordinate with Gulf Shores Schools regarding shared facilities. Establish a regular meeting schedule to coordinate capital improvement plans, scheduling and maintenance.
5. Prepare and implement a Parks Maintenance Plan.
6. Coordinate with City Planning & Zoning and Public Works Departments. Establish regular meeting schedule to coordinate capital improvement plans, scheduling, and maintenance.

Tier Two Priorities (1-10 years)

Capital Improvements

1. Continue to develop opportunity- based neighborhood park amenities and trail connectivity as part of new development proposals, either as parkland donations, or fee in lieu.
2. Develop Master Plan and develop passive recreation facilities at Bon Secour and Oyster Bay wetland areas. Coordinate with the Environmental Grants Coordinator and Public Works Department to establish and implement wildlife and conservation management plans.
3. Continue to develop fitness and wellness membership opportunities at the Cultural Center (Rec Center North).
 - Enclose lobby space
 - Multi-purpose rooms
 - Expanded fitness class amenities
 - Recreational & Outdoor Adventure Recreational amenities
4. Complete Gulf Shores Sportsplex expansion and improvements.
 - Expand home bleachers and press box at football stadium
 - Expand seating at high school baseball and softball fields
 - Design and install playground
 - Design and install disc golf course
 - Connect Sportsplex open space areas to adjacent neighborhood through easement corridors
5. Complete Phase II of the Bodenhamer Recreation Center.
 - Upper and Lower Floor Expansions
 - Increase gym space, fitness and aerobic classrooms
 - Update existing recreation interiors
 - Splash Pad

Planning and Operations

1. Update the Parks and Recreation Action Plan (annual).
2. Assist with updating the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan (annual) and conduct regular coordination meetings with City Planning & Zoning and Public Works Departments regarding the planning and connections of park and open space connection to trails, greenways and sidewalks.

3. Coordinate with Gulf Shores Schools regarding shared athletic and recreational facility needs.
4. Coordinate with the GSOB Sports Commission regarding ongoing and proposed sports tourism needs.
5. Draft a Joint Facility Use Agreement with Gulf Shores Schools.

Funding Strategy

Existing Parks & Recreation Financing and Acquisitions

The Recreation & Cultural Affairs Department currently utilizes various funding sources for the development and acquisition of parks and recreation facilities. The majority of funding is generated through excise taxes, developer impact fees, land dedications, land conservation grants and user fees. The following information presents the most common funding and acquisition methods utilized by the City.

Park & Recreation Operations

The information and community opinions collected in this process offers the opportunity for Gulf Shores to evaluate and adjust annual parks and recreation funding to assure that Gulf Shores' recreation programs and facilities operate at a level that meets residents' expectations. To put into perspective current parks and recreation funding, annual parks and recreation budgets of peer communities were evaluated. The communities selected for this analysis included cities—in Alabama and Florida—similar in size to Gulf Shores as well those offering youth and collegiate sports tourism facilities.

Gulf Shores' parks and recreation funding per population was **\$502.82** in FY 2017, ranking well above that of most of its in-state peer cities and was most comparable to that of Orange Beach at \$574.42 per resident. The average spending per person among the Alabama cities surveyed was **\$404.92**. Because of its substantial difference in size and lack of sports tourism facilities from Gulf Shores and peer communities, Fairhope is able to achieve an efficiency of scale in parks and recreation and other community services—accounting in part for a low per person parks spending, \$200.84. Removing Fairhope from the average to compare Gulf Shores only contiguous Alabama communities results in an average per person spending of **\$472.95**, comparable to Gulf Shores' annual parks spending by population.

This analysis indicates that current parks and recreation funding is more in line with peer cities with established youth and collegiate sports tourism markets. As such operational spending should be commensurate with current and projected sports and tourism events to ensure the City maintains its facilities to the level desired by residents and take on long-term maintenance of facilities added to the system over time. An increase in budget should be balanced with

efforts to optimize efficiency within the department, particularly with respect to maintaining Gulf Shores’ sports tourism parks and facilities.

Table 3.1: Annual Parks and Recreation Funding in Gulf Shores and Peer Cities

| City | Population (est. 2016) | P&R Annual Budget | P&R Funding per Capita |
|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Gulf Shores, AL* | 11,689 | \$5,877,924** | \$502.86 |
| Orange Beach, AL* | 5,981 | \$3,435,619** | \$574.42 |
| Foley, AL* | 17,607 | \$6,013,840** | \$341.57 |
| Fairhope, AL | 19,421 | \$3,900,514** | \$200.84 |
| Gulf Breeze, FL | 6,466 | \$2,256,246 | \$348.94 |
| Destin, FL* | 13,654 | \$2,885,773** | \$211.35 |
| Panama City Beach, FL* | 12,776 | \$4,045,009** | \$316.61 |

*Includes sports tourism facilities

** Includes library services

General Fund

These revenues are available to the City without restriction for general support of City-wide programs. Fund sources include sales and use taxes, property taxes, and other taxes. These fees provide the bulk of support for all City services. Annually, a percentage of these funds are made available for recreational services, capital projects and facilities.

User & Membership Fees

Another consideration in raising parks and recreation funding is charging and/or increasing fees for the use of certain parks and recreation facilities. Not only do user fees raise needed revenue, they can also help track community interests in different facilities and activities. However, overdependence on user fees can place residents of modest means at a disadvantage in accessing parks and recreation facilities. It can also skew the parks and recreation system’s focus toward activities and facilities that generate the greatest revenues, whether or not those are the types of facilities most desired by residents. As of 2017, the City’s membership and user fee schedule averages an 8% cost recovery.

Capital Improvements

In order to implement the various action items previously listed a funding strategy for the Recreation & Cultural Affairs (RCA) Department needs to be established. As part of this process it is necessary to identify the existing and potential funding sources and a final funding strategy. Through this plan the City will be able to strategically set aside capital improvements funding necessary to improve existing facilities and build new ones in the coming years commensurate with community’s priorities. This master plan presents this information under the following subsections:

- Existing Park and Recreation Financing & Acquisitions
- Funding Alternatives

- Capital Improvement Costs
- Financing Strategy

No matter what improvements are ultimately constructed as part of the Master Plan, there are three basic principles which should guide future decisions regarding financing mechanisms. These principles are as follows:

- Costs for new infrastructure and public amenities should be borne by developers, property owners, and, where appropriate, by the public. Costs should be equitably distributed based on benefit received.
- Sources of both capital and on-going maintenance revenue should be considered as part of any financing strategy to ensure that all improvements can be maintained without placing an undue burden on either adjacent property owners or the City of Gulf Shores.
- Development fees and assessments should be structured so that they distribute costs equitably among various land uses, and do not serve as a disincentive to uses desired by the City.

These principles provide some element of certainty to the developers and property owners in terms of what types of facilities and/or fees they will be expected to provide in conjunction with the future development.

The City of Gulf Shores has available to it a variety of potential funding sources. These include park development impact fees, tax increment revenues, special assessment districts (entertainment, lighting & landscaping), county, state and federal funding, developer contributions and potential grant funding. The following is summary of funding options available to the City¹⁶.

Existing and Potential Sources

- General Revenue Funds
- Park Impact Fees
- Park Land Dedication
- Turn-Key Park Dedication
- Cooperative Funding Agreements
- County, State and Federal Funding
- Philanthropic Organizations/Property Donation

Debt Financing

- Excise Tax
- Transit Occupancy Tax
- General Obligation Bonds
- Revenue Bonds

¹⁶ City of Gulf Shores Annual Budget Operational Year 2017

Section 5: Appendix



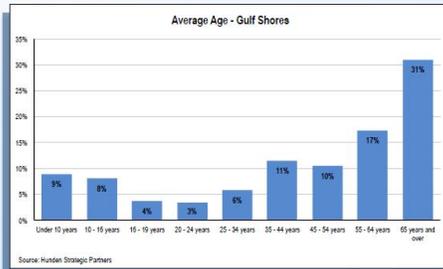
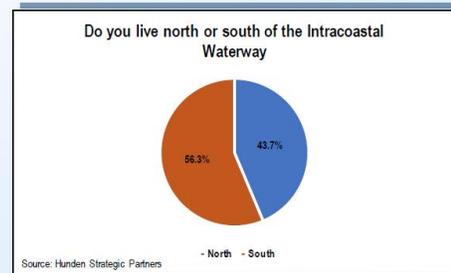
Key Facts

- Until now, there has not been a long-term vision to guide the development of the parks and recreation system.
- The parks system is imbalanced. The City has few too many neighborhood and community park assets and many existing and proposed neighborhoods fall out of existing Meyer Park and Sims Park service radiuses.
- There are policies in place that require “fee in-lieu” of parkland donation as part of the subdivision process in Gulf Shores; however, the City has yet to adopt turn-key park dedication requirements.
- There is a good working relationship between the City and the school system regarding the shared use of facilities. However no official joint facility use agreement exists, and the school system maintenance standards are not consistent with current City standards and some agency programs conflict.
- The existing community park is heavily burdened with athletic fields and regional activities and are lacking open space for trails, play areas, picnics, and other passive uses.
- The seasonal resident fluctuations restrict accessibility at the Bodenhamer Recreation Center facilities and its programs
- There is a desire for additional trails, outdoor fitness equipment, and outdoor pool, water access, and wellness classes.

GULF SHORES SURVEY RESPONSE SUMMARY

LOCATION OF RESIDENCY

- Majority of respondents live south of the Intracoastal water, and are in close proximity of current recreational facilities.

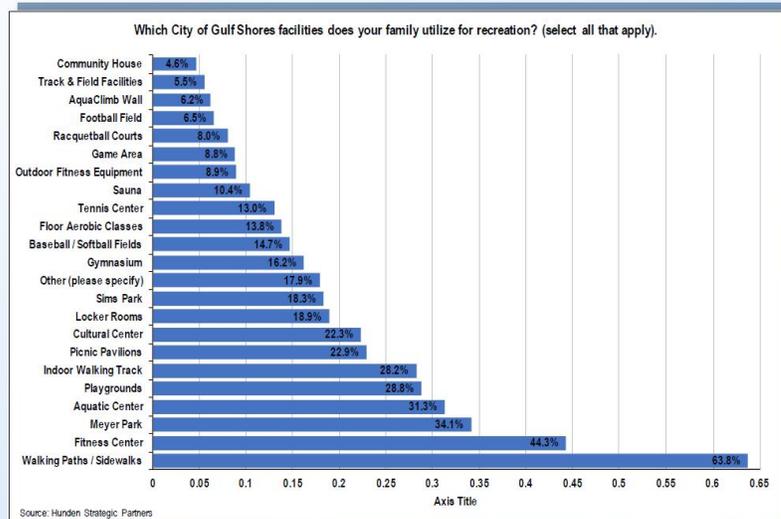


RESPONDENT'S FAMILY AGE

- Predominately senior aged respondents
- Nearly half the respondents are 55 years old or older

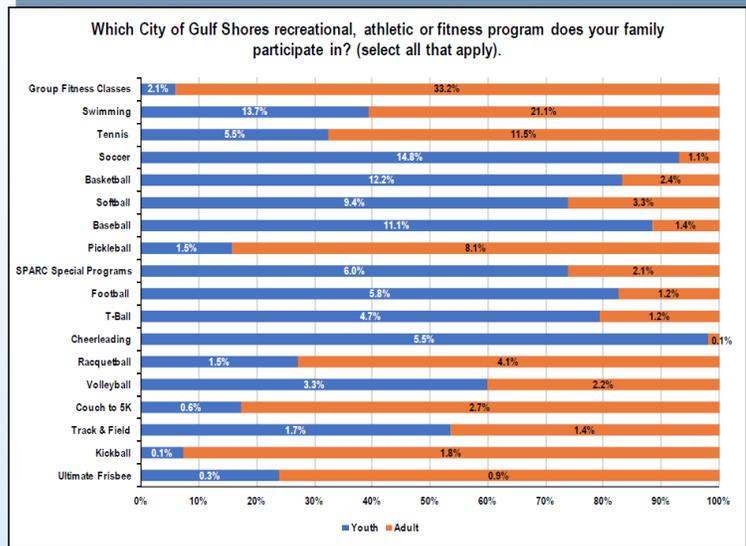
LOCATION OF RESIDENCY

- Walking Paths / Sidewalks are the most utilized
- Seven facilities/ amenities are utilized by less than 10 percent of the respondents



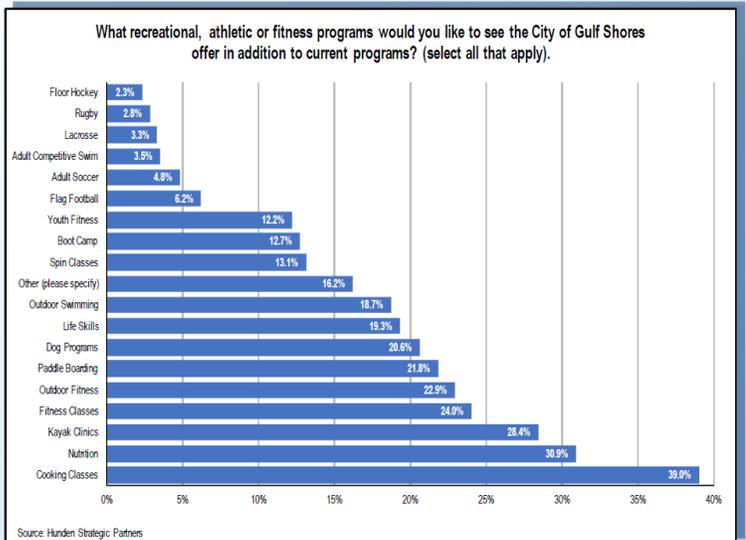
PARKS & RECREATION PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

- Group fitness and swimming are most popular programs.
- The majority of the group fitness participation is by adults.
- Youth users focus on team sports, while adults focus on exercise.



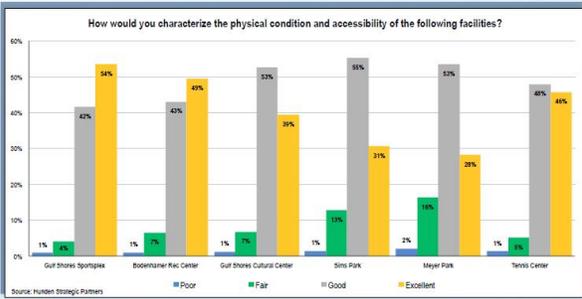
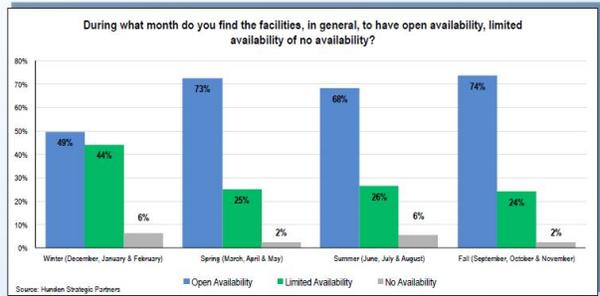
PARKS & RECREATION DESIRED PROGRAM

- Dietary classes, including those on cooking and nutrition, are most desired.
- Fitness and water activities are also highly desired by respondents.



FACILITY AVAILABILITY

- Winter months are busiest, as population increases
- Spring, Summer and Fall have more high availability
- Very low perception of no availability from respondents

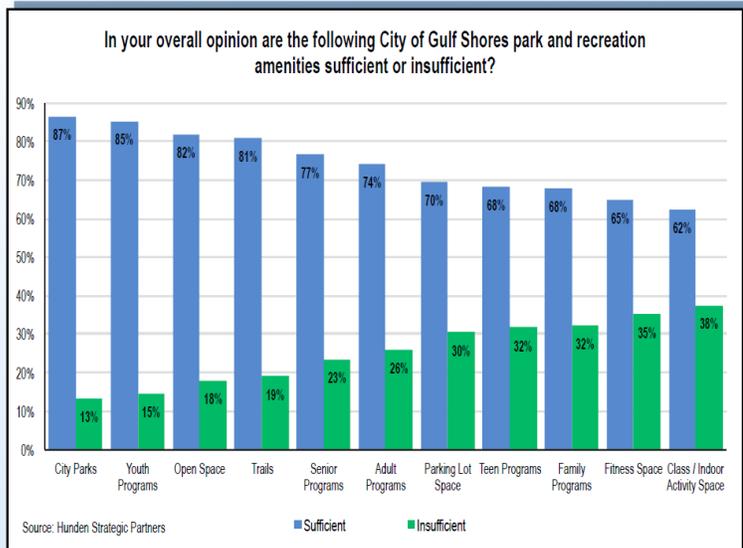


FACILITY CONDITION PERCEPTION

- Community overall is pleased or content with current facility conditions
- Gulf Shores Sportsplex and Bodenhamer Center have best perception among respondents
- Meyer Park is the least favorable but acceptable perception.

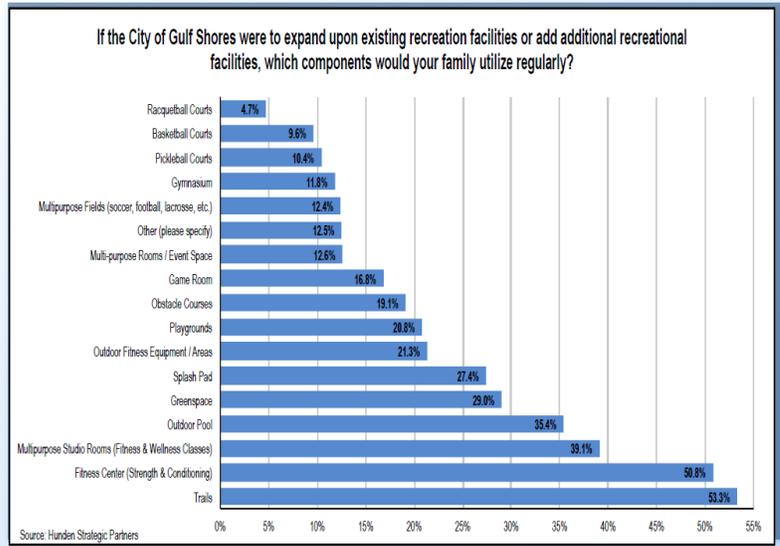
PROGRAM & AMENITY SUFFICIENCY

- All program & amenity types are greater than 60 percent sufficient.
- Teen and family programs, fitness space and indoor activity space are the biggest concerns among respondents.



NEW & EXPANDED FACILITY UTILIZATION

- Desire for and claimed usage of fitness space
- Walking trails have a high utilization and would be used regularly by respondents
- Outdoor pools desired for high swimming usage



Many respondents had additional thoughts on the current recreational facilities in Gulf Shores. A summary of these is provided below:

- Tourists should come second - "Gulf Shores needs to focus on its citizens more than tourists."
- Meyer Park needs to be updated with "a stage for all kinds of events" or "some type of water activity."
- Beaches and pools need to be handicap accessible.
- A high number of respondents requested facilities for Pickleball.
- The current facilities are over crowded in the winter months, specifically exercise classes.
- Majority of respondents would like fitness classes or access to the fitness center outside of normal business hours, before or after work.
- A few respondents raised concerns about dog park maintenance.
- A high number of requests for an outdoor pool.
- Many respondents raised concerns about bike trail maintenance.

Definitions

Active Recreation Recreational activities, usually of a formal nature, and often performed with others, requiring equipment and taking place at prescribed places, sites or fields, including swimming, tennis and other court games, baseball and track and other field sports and activities.

Community Park A recreational facility of 15 or more acres that serves multiple neighborhoods, or a population within a 2-mile/5 minute drive radius. Community parks include a mix of active and passive recreational activities and may include intensively developed facilities and relatively undisturbed, open spaces.

Greenway A pedestrian, bicycle or multi-modal trail, linear park or combination thereof. Greenways range from landscaped, on-street corridors with a paved walking/biking surface to mostly natural, linear open spaces oriented along a paved or soft-surface trail.

Mini Park A recreational facility one acre or less in size that serves a concentrated or limited population, such as those within less than a quarter-mile/5 minute walk radius.

National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) An advocacy organization formed in 1965 dedicated to the advancement of public parks, recreation and conservation. NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for its membership in support of the development and management of parks and recreational facilities.

Neighborhood Park A recreational facility one to fifteen acres in size that serves a neighborhood, or a population within a half-mile radius/12 minute walk. Neighborhood Parks are generally focused on passive recreational uses but can also accommodate active recreational facilities.

Passive Recreation Recreational activities that are generally unorganized and noncompetitive, including picnicking, bicycling, walking and free play.

Service Radius The area surrounding a park, from which its most frequent users travel from. A service radius increases in size with the size of the park and the diversity of facilities it provides. A service radius of one-quarter mile represents a walking or bicycling distance of five minutes or less. A service radius over one-half mile is typically associated with a community or other major park serving a larger population within a twelve minute walk.

Pick-Up Game Ad hoc baseball, soccer or other sports activity played amongst friends as opposed to a baseball, soccer or similar game scheduled and officially overseen by a sports league.

Regional Park A recreational facility of significant size (often more than 30 acres) that serves multiple communities or cities within a drive time of up to one-hour. Regional parks range from major outdoor recreation complexes oriented toward sports tourism to nature preserves oriented toward a wide variety of nature-based recreation.