Denver’s parks and recreation facilities have always responded to their times. This chapter reviews the significant forces that have influenced our modern-day parks system. It discusses changes in population, leisure trends, infrastructure condition, and expectations for accountability that shaped the Game Plan. The chapter concludes with an analysis that underlies Game Plan responses to these trends, and that supports future resource allocation and investment decisions.
DENVER’S PARK LEGACY: AN EVOLVING SYSTEM

Nature Tamed: Parks from the City Beautiful Era

The 19th-century idea of a pastoral retreat is evident in Denver’s first and oldest parks. Early landscape architects, including Reinhard Schuetze and his successor, S. R. DeBoer, labored during the late 19th century to carefully design the informal-looking meadows, lakes, winding paths, and small “forests” of our older parks to provide a refuge from the dusty, arid, emerging city.

At the turn of the 20th century, Denver Mayor Robert Speer, who had been exposed to the City Beautiful idea at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, introduced the City Beautiful movement to Denver, then a city of dirt streets.

In 1906, Speer hired the prominent landscape architect George Kessler and planner Charles Mulford Robinson, who recommended a citywide system of boulevards and parks. Their plan produced some of Denver’s grandest civic spaces, such as the Civic Center, the formal parkways, and Cheesman Pavilion. Our park legacy was honored in 1986 when 32 urban parks and parkways were listed on the National Register of Historic Landmarks.

These historic park designs shared a vision of nature tamed as a refuge for residents living in an industrial and polluted city. In arid Colorado, this meant replacing the original landscape — the natural grasses and trees of the high plains — with images of parks borrowed from lusher climates.

What resulted was a welcome but artificial green layer laid over the city’s formal grid. This “green grid” gives Denver neighborhoods their character and the city its overall urban form. Lush dark green lawns and formal flower beds, however, also use large amounts of water and require expensive and sometimes environmentally unsound maintenance procedures.

In the first two decades of the 20th-century, Denver’s leaders extended this park system into the foothills and mountains by ultimately acquiring nearly 14,000 acres primarily, in Jefferson County. (Denver also has park land in Douglas County, Clear Creek County, and Grand County [Winter Park Ski Area].)
Denver built its mountain parks system of scenic roads weaving together parcels of mountain land based on a plan by the nationally renowned Olmsted Brothers landscape architecture firm of Brookline, Mass. In the 1930s, the mountain parks added wonderful stone structures, meticulously designed by the National Park Service and local architects and built by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

**Celebrating the Regional Landscape: Parks from the 1930s to the present**

The growing importance of recreation, the automobile, and changing attitudes about the environment influenced the next six decades. In the early 19th century, a visit to the large parks on Denver’s edges still required time and transportation, excluding many poorer workers in central Denver. As part of a national “city playground” movement, Denver built corner-lot playgrounds throughout the central city.

And during the decades immediately before and after World War II, Denver’s park system expanded into all city neighborhoods through a series of smaller neighborhood and community parks.

S. R. DeBoer’s 1929 comprehensive plan ushered in an era that acknowledged both the automobile and the regional role and character of Denver’s parks. His landscape design ethic celebrated Rocky Mountain landforms and plants, even when artificially placed in a traditional park, like the DeBoer Box Canyon in City Park. In the 1930s, DeBoer also had the foresight to conceive of the rebirth of the South Platte River, then Denver’s industrial wasteland.

It took another 30 years for civic leaders to begin to develop a system of river parks and trails along the South Platte, whose renewal became the centerpiece of the 1990s park system expansions. The South Platte’s rebirth captures the environmental ethic and public appreciation for natural areas that has grown since the 1960s. In 2002, DPR created its First Natural Resource Unit.

Ideas about park design have evolved still further. Numerous new, innovative parks now line the South Platte and its tributaries. These include Northside Park, which transformed an old wastewater treatment plant, Commons Park, which celebrates Denver’s urban skyline and the South Platte River’s native habitat, and Bluff Lake, Denver’s first conservation area. Over the past 30 years, Denver has added significant modern-style parks, such as Lawrence Halprin’s downtown Skyline Park and the highly symbolic and contemplative Babi-Yar Park designed by Halprin and Saturu Nishita.
Evolution of public recreation

Parks a century ago teemed with people bicycling, boating, playing tennis, riding horses, and socializing. A band concert on July 4, 1910 at City Park, called the “People’s Park,” attracted more than 100,000. People caught drinking or speeding (driving over 8 m.p.h.) were “jailed” in the basement of the Pavilion. Activities in the parks have changed continually over time; people no longer camp, swim, or race horses and cars in the parks. Bicycling continues to be a passion, joined today by people running and in-line skating.

Not until the 1960s did the city build and staff its public recreation centers. Built originally to provide a safe refuge for youth during a tumultuous social period for cities, Denver’s recreation centers offer programs for all ages and special needs. Recreation programs now extend beyond these walls to care for children after school and to offer special trips and opportunities such as mountain challenge courses.

Denver’s parks and recreation system will continue to evolve. The Game Plan challenge is to ensure that changes that could significantly alter the system are addressed in a positive and thoughtful way.

Population Trends

During the past two decades the city’s population has increased by nearly one-fifth, though in real terms, population is just now approaching the previous peak achieved during the “boom years” of the 1970s. Some neighborhoods have become more densely populated and ethnically diverse, and many are among the least-well-endowed with parks and open space. Who uses the city’s parks and how they use them also has changed.

Since 1970, the areas that have experienced the largest population increases (over 25
According to the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) and Blueprint Denver, the largest areas of future growth, based on new homes planned, will be in central Denver, portions of Southeast Denver, the new Lowry and Stapleton communities, and the far Northeast neighborhoods.

Population Growth by Neighborhood from 1990–2000

Legend:

- **1.3% Loss**
- **Stable**
- **3.8-10% Growth**
- **10-25% Growth**
- **> 25% Growth**

percent in real terms) include Montbello, East Colfax, Fort Logan, Harvey Park South, College View/South Platte, Washington Park/Virginia Vale, Hampden, and Hampden South (Map: Population Increases). Areas with more modest growth (11 to 25 percent) include the West Side neighborhoods of Westwood, Villa Park, and Barnum.
In the past decade, Denver also became a more urban city. This is especially evident with high-rise, loft, and townhome redevelopment Downtown and in Cherry Creek. But density does not always result from an increase in housing stock. Many older West Side and Northeast neighborhoods have experienced increasing population density because households are larger, not because new homes have been built.

The Change in Population Density Map shows that the densest areas, with more than 15 people per acre, are parts of the West Side, Lincoln Park, Capitol and North Capitol Hill, Congress and Cheesman Parks, and East Colfax. The highest density is North Capitol.
Hill with 46.7 people per acre, compared to a citywide average of just under six people per acre. Because more land is occupied by development in higher-density areas, parks, playing fields, and natural areas become much more valuable to residents. Residents of higher-density areas also need conveniently located neighborhood parks.

Even if population does not increase much in real terms, a shift in population distribution or density can have significant impacts if occurring in areas of the city that have limited park resources. Increased population or density in these neighborhoods can translate into new demands on existing resources, more competition for parks and trails, and more wear

**Change in Population Density by Neighborhood 1990–2000**

Density is calculated based on number of people per acre, rather than number of housing units per acre. This acknowledges that an area’s population density can increase if more people are occupying the same housing stock, as well as from construction of new homes.
and tear. Data suggest that between 1970 and 2000, park acreage in the neighborhoods that gained the most people average only 5.6 acres per 1,000 people, compared to an average of 10.1 acres for the city as a whole.

Denver’s demographics have also shifted. In the past 10 years, two age groups — people under age 25 and between the ages of 45 and 54 — have comprised close to half of the city’s population. Residents age 24 and younger now constitute nearly a third of the city’s population, while Baby Boomers account for about 13 percent of the total. These shifts are important, as recreation and leisure trends tend to vary by age.

The city is also more ethnically diverse. Non-Hispanic whites (Caucasians or “Anglos”)

Change in Youth Population Growth 1990–2000
The Denver Public Schools’ population is now only 21 percent Caucasian. To the extent that different groups have different recreational preferences — and the 2001 Game Plan Survey suggests that they do — this growing diversity means that our system must become more flexible to accommodate the needs of all residents.

In response to population trends, the city’s parks and recreation system is seeing both increased levels of use and more varied types of uses compared to 10 years ago. By 2020, the city’s population is projected to increase further by 132,000 people — nearly a 25 percent gain. This will place still more demands on the city’s parks and recreation resources, especially in areas of change, identified in Blueprint Denver, where the city hopes to channel growth and develop more transit. New, different, or upgraded amenities may be needed in these areas.

**Changing leisure and recreation trends**

In Denver, as nationwide, recreation and leisure trends are becoming more complex, influenced by social and demographic forces. Activities such as tennis and football have declined while new activities have emerged. For example:

- The fastest growing leisure activity is walking and fitness walking, enjoyed primarily by Baby Boomers. This generation is much more active than their parents at the same age, but prefers low-impact activities or activities that can include young children.
- Among youth, the most popular activities include anything on wheels, such as in-line skating and skateboarding, all-terrain in-line skating, and mountain boarding.
- Organized league activities for youth soccer and baseball are still very popular, having largely replaced the spontaneous “pickup” games that were the norm 30 years ago.
- New “hybrid” sports such as disc golf have emerged that combine elements of several activities in new ways.
- More cities are investing in year-round facilities such as indoor soccer arenas, ice rinks, indoor playgrounds, indoor pools with summer use, and covered playgrounds offering protection against the sun.
- Even pets are getting into the act. Some 35 percent of Colorado households own a dog. Cities across the U.S. have created off-leash areas where people can play with their pets.
An Aging Physical System, Real Financial Constraints, and Environmental Realities

Denver’s parks infrastructure is aging. The majority of parks and recreation centers were constructed prior to 1980. Major mechanical and related systems are failing. Irrigation system alone constitutes a significant capital repair expense. Estimates for replacement with a new, more efficient system, approach $58 million. The financial commitment required to maintain this aging system and growing backlog of capital repairs dramatically reduces the city’s ability to provide innovative programs and facilities.

DPR’s capital repair and maintenance estimates show that the city faces a yearly $6 million deficit to catch up with deferred repairs and then keep the system in good shape. It faces another $10 million yearly shortfall to cover the currently identified capital upgrades, improvements, and expansions. The result over time is a physical infrastructure that continues to slip deeper into disrepair, moving moderate projects into a more critical state. The Game Plan projects themselves will require additional funding beyond these identified needs.

And, the environmental realities for DPR and Denver vary in their intensity but never lose their presence: drought, flooding, air pollution and “nonpoint” water pollution. DPR contributes to these problems and can help solve them.

Greater Public Expectations for Accountability

Both the 2001 Game Plan Survey and a survey conducted during the same time period by the city’s Budget Management office show that residents value well-maintained and safe amenities and think the city needs to improve delivery of those amenities. This parallels a nationwide trend in which the public is more sensitive to public spending, and expects greater accountability from parks and recreation, public works, and other city departments.

Achieving the City in a Park vision requires DPR to be accountable to Denver residents. The plan translates the guiding values and goals measurement and monitoring of progress toward this vision.

How? The Game Plan identifies indicators that capture the essence of A City in a Park, and sets qualitative or quantitative performance goals as long-range objectives to track progress. Benchmarks, reflecting the condition or level of service existing in the year 2000, gauge short-term progress.
For example, “street-tree canopy cover” is one indicator, with 18 percent coverage citywide established as a long-range performance goal. In 2000, Denver had an average tree canopy cover of 6 percent, which will be used as a benchmark against which to gauge year-to-year progress.

Indicators and performance goals are based on four sources:

- Information from residents about what they value most in our park system;
- Comparisons of Denver’s performance to similar cities;
- Comparisons to national standards advocated by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), a professional organization of parks administrators; and
- Professional expertise within DPR.

While values ultimately define what residents want to see in their parks and recreation system, we also compare progress through comparisons with similar cities nationwide.

In 2000, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) surveyed 25 cities including Denver to gather information on per-capita park acreage, amenities, and expenditures. This provides an important context for Game Plan recommendations (see Chapter 3: Generous Park Acreage for more information).

The Game Plan’s approach of focusing more on customer needs and measuring performance in reaching goals is a major departure for DPR. This is congruent with the performance measurement framework established by the Denver Comprehensive Plan 2000 and Blueprint Denver. Private industry in the 1980s and 1990s as well as parks systems in Indianapolis, New York City, Raleigh, and Ft. Lauderdale use these measures.
The City in a Park vision described in following chapters offers a range of physical recommendations at three scales: neighborhood scale and just beyond; citywide scale, which addresses connections, civic space, and Denver’s urban waterways; and from mountains to plains, which addresses the city’s regional open space and trails and the mountain parks system. Policy recommendations are directed at the sustainability of the natural and built environment; equity in amenities; more resident and partner engagement in planning and implementation; and a sound economic foundation for the system. As a framework plan, the recommendations deliberately were not listed by priority, with the assumption that city staff, working with the DPR Advisory Board, will create yearly work plans and priorities based upon budget and other city projects.

These recommendations respond to the underlying goals and values of the plan, and to the trends outlined above. They are also shaped by the proposed performance measurement framework and by a great deal of analysis to identify where there are gaps between the City in a Park vision and current achievements.

Priorities

To determine priorities at the neighborhood level, the Game Plan identifies areas of the city well below desired performance goals. By comparing resources to current and projected demands for services, the Game Plan targets the investments to ensure an equitable distribution of resources. At the citywide and regional scale, progress against more qualitative benchmarks is assessed. At the policy level, this “gap analysis” employs both qualitative and quantitative measures and goals. And, to be realistic, early actions are proposed that cost less but have a high payoff.

This “gap analysis” provides a context for making decisions about investment or reinvestment in parks and recreation amenities, or in new policy initiatives. The Game Plan does not recommend investment only in needy or growing neighborhoods, or in initiatives that will be “quick successes,” but rather provides tools and resources to help create priorities and monitor progress.