

CITY OF LOWELL
NORTH CAROLINA

PARKS AND RECREATION

2021-2022

Master Plan: Program Review & Needs Assessment Study



Acknowledgements

Community Members

Thank you to all the community members who participated in surveys, focus groups, events and provided feedback to this process.

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Community Partners

The Boys & Girls Club of Gaston County, First Baptist Church of Lowell, Presbyterian Church of Lowell, Woodlawn Baptist Church, Hebron Church of Jesus Christ, Choice USA, NorthPoint Development, Gaston Business Association, Montcross Area Chamber of Commerce, Lowell Women's Club, Salvation Army Boys & Girls Club, River Falls HOA, The City of Lowell Staff

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1. Executive Summary

The City of Lowell's Parks and Recreation Department is a small department serving a population of a little more than 3,500 residents. The City of Lowell's population is projected to grow significantly over the next few years as businesses, attracted to the proximity of major highways and the Charlotte metro area, are investing in Lowell. The department, consisting of the Park and Recreation part-time Director and one part-time employee, manages two parks, two athletic fields, and a community center. Despite the lack of staff, the department provides a variety of programs, including senior programs, youth sports programs primarily for younger children, and several community festivals and events throughout the year. The department utilizes volunteers to provide programs and has partnered with local schools, churches, the Boys and Girls Club and other community organizations to provide recreation services to residents. Based on the activities associated with this project, including background research, the department's mission, benchmarking, trend analysis, stakeholder focus groups, and a resident household survey, the following main recommendations are offered for consideration by the City of Lowell's Parks and Recreation Department:

1. Examine opportunities for future land acquisition to connect Lowell destinations and provide more opportunities for physical activity at a time when investment in a communities' health is strongly associated with quality of life and economic development opportunities. This will capitalize on Lowell's stated goal of creating a healthy community through providing recreational spaces and their notion of connectivity as a community value while meeting the recreational needs of all residents. The recent acquisition of the old dye plant on North Main Street is both adjacent to Gaston County's George Poston Park and the South Fork Catawba River and represents a significant opportunity for the City of Lowell to expand park and recreation opportunities. Similarly, the annexation of property north of Lowell that includes a 575 home future development, dedicated open space areas, and extension of the Carolina Thread Trail to include a greenway connection from McAdenville through Lowell to George Poston Park and Spencer Mountain would bring Lowell in line with the standards for park and recreation opportunities to residents. Finally, the vacant lot located at the main intersection of Lowell (W. 1st Street & N. Main Street), currently leased by the City, could be developed into a new pocket park.
2. Revitalize Harold Rankin Park. As the most used recreation facility within the City of Lowell, the park is in need of renovations to provide current and future residents with quality sport, athletic, and recreation experiences including older youth and adults. The most pressing renovations include additional and upgraded bathroom facilities, lighting,

turf and field upgrades, shelter upgrades, and signage and aesthetic upgrades. These renovations would also allow the City of Lowell to better capitalize on sponsorship and concession-based opportunities and also provide better-organized sports programming.

3. Bob Bolick Park Revitalization. As the park is adjacent to the current community center, Bob Bolick Park renovations could better serve its residents. We recommend renovating the existing playground including a fence that separates the playground from the rail tracks, lighting, repurposing the basketball court, including new basketball nets and an upgrade to the picnic shelter that includes more seating and additional benches. Access to restroom facilities, through the community center is recommended.
4. Explore the feasibility for adding a community (multigenerational) indoor recreation center with space for indoor sports, indoor events, child and youth after school care and camp programming, and indoor fitness opportunities. Currently, there are limited opportunities for indoor recreational activities.
5. Finance the park and recreation improvements, the Harold Rankin Park and Bob Bolick Park renovations, and the community center land renovations, from a diverse mix of funding sources including private funds, grant opportunities, donations, and sponsorships and potentially through a general obligation bond. It is further recommended that the city establish a land development ordinance that would require developers of multi-family units to provide recreational area funds to the City, or a combination of funds and land dedication, whereby the City may acquire recreational land or areas to serve the multi-family residential development or other multi-family developments or residential subdivisions in the immediate area.
6. Add additional full-time staff equivalents (FTEs) to the park and recreation department to better maintain and improve park and recreation facilities and amenities, improve and manage the increased demand for marketing and communications, and to accommodate current and future participant needs for recreation programming, festivals and events.
7. Enhance sport and recreation programs for older youth, along with teen and adult programming. Prioritize the addition of outdoor and nature based programs in conjunction with passive recreation opportunities (trails, biking opportunities and river access). Increased amenities and awareness of available facilities or programs add wellness focused and innovative revenue driven programs.



2. Project Introduction

Department and community overview

The City of Lowell is located in Gaston County, North Carolina approximately 18 miles west of Charlotte. According to the 2020 decennial census¹, Lowell has a total population of 3,654 and a land area of 2.7 square miles. The median household income in Lowell is \$53,810 and an employment rate of 58.3%³. Lowell's proximity to the city of Charlotte, Gastonia and one of the largest airports in the southeastern United States makes it an ideal location for an urban commuting workforce seeking more affordable housing. For example, in September 2021, the median list price of homes in Lowell was \$248,500 compared to a median list price of \$360,000 in Charlotte². Furthermore, with the recent acquisition of a 365 acre parcel of land to house 3.6 million square feet of industrial space, Lowell is poised to become one of the largest industrial parks in the Charlotte region⁴.

The Lowell Parks and Recreation Department's role is to create a healthy community through diverse and innovative recreation programming. The Department's mission is "to provide space to learn and play, space to be safe and secure, and space to create and imagine. Our goal is to meet the recreational needs of all of our residents as well as visitors in our wonderful city. We will continue to develop and bring new and exciting programs and events to all residents".⁵

Purpose of the project

Successful park and recreation agencies must keep up with the demands of their community and make every effort to tailor their services to meet community needs⁶. Engaging the public through a formal needs assessment process provides valuable information that agencies can use to drive future planning efforts. Obtaining input from the public on their wants, needs, and priorities helps to ensure that citizen voices are incorporated into facility and program development and keeps the public well-informed of agency decision-making.

This parks and recreation program review and needs assessment study was undertaken by a project team with the Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management at NC State University, conducted by Michael Kanters, Jason Bocarro, Kyle Bunds, and Matt Carusona. The purpose of the study was to determine the current and future recreation facility and program needs in Lowell by engaging citizens in public input sessions, conducting a benchmarking study of peer/comparison communities and implementing a city-wide needs assessment survey. The data elicited through this study was used to develop future facility and program planning efforts. The NC State project team has expertise in community planning and parks and recreation administration.

Scope of this report

The scope of this report focuses on the work of the planning and evaluation team from NC State University. The team completed a parks and recreation needs assessment for the Lowell Parks and Recreation Department during the Fall of 2021. The study collected public input data addressing a broad range of indoor and outdoor recreation needs. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to:

1. Examine the park, recreation, and community activity needs identified by the residents and key stakeholders of the Lowell Parks and Recreation Department;

2. Determine which park, recreation, and community activity needs were deemed to be priorities for the Lowell Parks and Recreation Department;
3. Develop a set of recommendations that would allow the Lowell Parks and Recreation Department to meet the priorities that were identified throughout the study.

Project activities

All project activities were designed to generate information to inform the recommendations contained in this report. In addition to background research and meetings with staff, this process included opportunities for public engagement. Public input activities were especially important to include broad citizen participation and input into the process. A description of the project and public input activities precedes each section of the report. Project activities included:

1. Background research, benchmarking, and trend analysis
2. Meetings with the City of Lowell Manager and Parks and Recreation Director
3. Focus group meetings with several key stakeholder groups
4. Development, distribution, and analysis of a city-wide survey of Lowell residents

Project resources and data sources

The project team reviewed key city and department planning documents including the city's website and Facebook page, and other relevant department materials. In addition, the team toured and observed Lowell's park and recreation facilities, programs, and services as a component of project activities. The team also conducted trend analyses of city demographics and recreation activity participation using a variety of resources to obtain this information, including:

- NRPA Park Metrics
- US Census Data
- A review of comparable city & town parks and recreation master plan reports
- RecManagement 2021 – Trends in Parks & Recreation report.
- Riverfront Master Plan & Public Works Conceptual Design

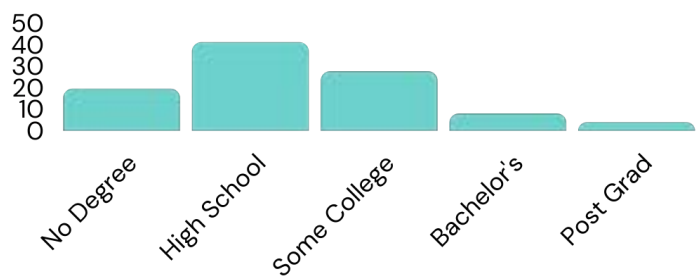
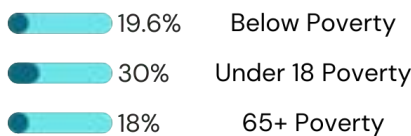
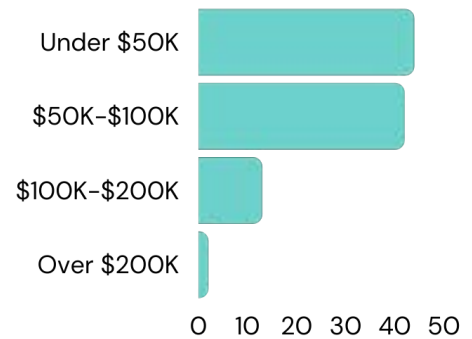
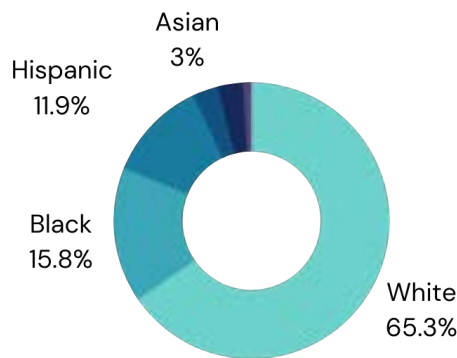
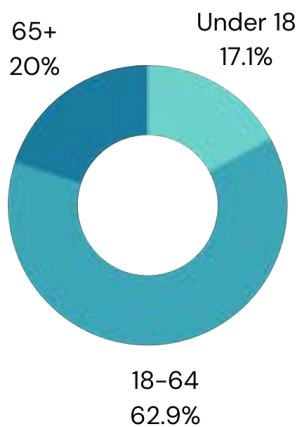
In addition, the project team conducted a variety of public engagement activities, including holding several focus groups with key stakeholders and gathering needs assessment data through an online resident household survey.

3. Background Research and Trends

Lowell 2019 Census Profile Demographics

According to the American Community Survey, 2019⁷, Lowell has a total population estimate of 3,640. Beginning with age, Lowell’s population skews about 10 percent higher than both the Charlotte metropolitan area and North Carolina. The majority of the population is between 18 to 64 and aligns with the state and metropolitan area statistics. However, there is a higher percentage of individuals over the age of 65 in Lowell.

48.5% male and 51.5% female



American Community Survey, 2019⁷

The male and female population of Lowell are skewed slightly more to the male demographic than both the metropolitan area (48.5% male and 51.5% female) and state population (48.7% male and 51.3% female). In terms of race and ethnicity, Lowell is similarly positioned to the rest of the metropolitan area and state, but has fewer Black residents and slightly more Hispanic residents.⁷

Overall, Lowell residents have a lower per capita and median household income than the population of the Charlotte metropolitan area. However, in regards to comparing Lowell residents to the rest of North Carolina, Lowell has about the same median household income and lower per capita income.⁷

Overall poverty rates are higher in Lowell than the rest of the Charlotte region and the state of North Carolina. In particular, children's poverty level is significantly higher than the metropolitan area and the state average.⁷

Overall, educational attainment rates are lower in Lowell compared to the Charlotte metropolitan area and the state of North Carolina. There is a significant gap between Lowell residents with a bachelor's degree or higher in comparison to the metropolitan area and the state.⁷

Level of Service & Gap Analysis

A level of service analysis was used to assess current offerings and a systematic inventory of facility offerings. A thorough evaluation of existing facilities, programs, park features and conditions, and access to those features was completed. The City of Lowell Parks and Recreation facilities along with nearby resources provided by partner agencies and municipalities were factored into this analysis.

This inventory matrix was tallied and compared to State and National Agency Performance review through the National Recreation and Park Association Park Metrics system⁸. Comparison to NRPA data helped identify facility types already provided, to better understand the gaps in the facility offerings, and provided benchmark data to best identify the best practices to optimally serve the Lowell community.

NRPA Park Metrics is the most comprehensive source of data standards and insights for park and recreation agencies. Launched in 2009, these agency performance resources assist park and recreation professionals in the effective management and planning of their operating resources and capital facilities. This suite of tools allows park and recreation agencies to build customized reports that allow for comparisons with peer agencies. Park and recreation professionals can use this benchmark data to gain more funding support, improve operations and better serve their communities.

4. Inventory of Facilities and Land

Overall, Lowell has two parks and one facility it currently operates. Harold Rankin Park built in 1973 on 5.86 acres with 2.21 acres acquired property next to the park. Located at 519 Park Circle, the park is .25 mile from downtown. Bob Bolick Park, acquired in 1969 with the initial park, built in the 1980s, is located at 503 West First Street on .47 acre and located .25 mile from downtown. The Lowell Community Center is located at 505 West First Street adjacent to Bob Bolick Park on .61 acre of land consisting of a 9258 square foot building downtown.



Harold Rankin Park

Harold Rankin Park, built-in 1973, includes 5.86 acres of developed land with an additional 4.09 acres of property adjacent to the park.



Located at 519 Park Circle and only a quarter-mile from the city center, the park features are centered around two baseball fields (one larger and one small). The park also has a playground, outdoor fitness equipment, an outdoor basketball court, a recycling center, a picnic shelter, a 1200 sq foot building that houses a concession stand, restrooms, and storage.



Bob Bolick Park

Bob Bolick Park was established as a park in the early 1980s after the property was acquired by the city in 1969. Located at 503 West First Street and on the same parcel of land as the community center.



Park amenities include a 2-5 year old playground, swings, a toddler swing, an ADA accessible swing, a climber for ages 5-12, an outdoor basketball court, picnic tables, park benches, a Little Free Library, and on-site parking.



Community Center

The City of Lowell Community Center (formerly Lowell Teacherage) is a historic structure that was built in 1920. It was previously used by the female teachers of nearby Holbrook High School as a dormitory. The City of Lowell currently houses Parks and Recreation administrative offices within the building. The building also doubles as the City of Lowell Community Center.



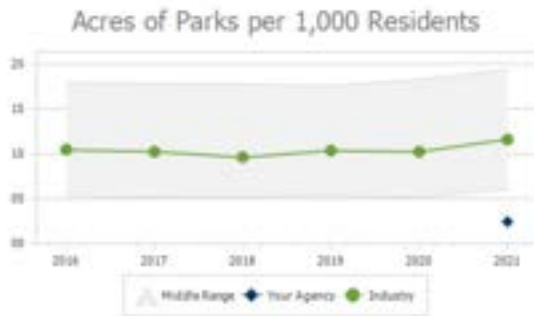
This rental facility consists of two meeting rooms, a full kitchen, bathrooms, tables, chairs, and on-site parking. The space is commonly rented to both residents and non-residents of Lowell. It is popular for birthday parties, baby showers, bridal showers, family gatherings, and other small community events.



The community center is currently under construction to perform necessary maintenance tasks of the building's exterior and interior and improve the functionality of the interior space for the users of the property. Exterior aspects of the renovation will include painting, mortar repair, porch roof/ceiling maintenance, updating light fixtures, exterior door replacements, ensuring proper seal from the weather on any utility or HVAC line, and window replacements. Future needs include, completion of the interior aspect of the project will involve painting, updating light fixtures, and improving electrical, ceiling, and drywall/plaster repair and replacement, flooring, updating the kitchen with a functional kitchen, and two (2) bathroom remodels. Funding for the renovation is provided by the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG).

NRPA Park Metrics Findings

For the year 2021, the City of Lowell had an operating and capital budget for all departments in the jurisdiction government of \$2,773,007. The square mileage of the incorporated jurisdiction was 3.7 acres and a population of 3,654 residents. The total operating expenditures for the Parks and Recreation was \$183,225. 97% of operating expenditures were derived from the general fund with only 3% coming from sponsorships. The estimated parks and recreation revenues for 2021 were \$15,175. For FY 2021, the City employed 1.13 full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) for Parks and Recreation. Approximately 129 volunteers were used throughout the year. Using this data, along with details on all parks and recreation services offered during 2021, Lowell’s level of parks and recreation services was compared with 293 communities across the nation that provided similar data. The following graphs and tables were generated from this analysis.



Year	My Agency	#	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
2021		2	5	12	19
2020		527	5	10	18
2019		445	5	10	18
2018		449	5	10	18
2017		406	5	10	18
2016		413	5	10	18



Year	My Agency	#	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
2021	\$20,358	270	\$4,127	\$7,791	\$18,873
2020		506	\$4,132	\$8,352	\$21,483
2019		427	\$4,113	\$8,404	\$21,035
2018		438	\$3,567	\$8,136	\$20,334
2017		385	\$3,319	\$7,196	\$16,566
2016		397	\$3,189	\$8,142	\$19,188

Operating Expenditures per Capita



Year	My Agency	#	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
2021	\$50.14	295	\$58.19	\$101.89	\$182.94
2020		580	\$53.17	\$91.10	\$164.63
2019		500	\$48.53	\$87.33	\$164.40
2018		525	\$45.97	\$82.04	\$150.03
2017		455	\$42.90	\$77.39	\$141.43
2016		459	\$45.29	\$79.44	\$163.33

Revenue per Capita



Year	My Agency	#	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
2021	\$4.15	278	\$5.93	\$23.43	\$56.81
2020		538	\$5.98	\$18.90	\$52.55
2019		460	\$7.08	\$23.89	\$57.00
2018		494	\$6.86	\$21.67	\$51.21
2017		418	\$5.67	\$17.18	\$44.93
2016		418	\$7.29	\$22.10	\$56.86

Total revenue to total operating expenditur...



Year	My Agency	#	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
2021	8.28%	273	9.71%	23.51%	44.69%
2020		536	10.07%	22.01%	39.62%
2019		458	13.73%	27.44%	48.90%
2018		489	12.50%	27.65%	47.14%
2017		416	12.26%	25.98%	42.20%
2016		415	14.95%	30.74%	50.41%

Gap Analysis

A review of the findings from the level of service analysis using NRPA's Park Metrics tool revealed several deficiencies in parks and recreation facilities and services available to the residents of Lowell.

1. With only 2 acres of parkland available to every 1000 residents, this places the City of Lowell on the lower end of the bottom 25% of communities across the nation.

However, it should be noted that a majority of comparable parks and recreation agencies included in the Park Metrics database were from communities much larger than the City of Lowell. While 2 acres of parkland for every 1000 residents is certainly low, the disparity between Lowell and other similar sized communities across the nation may not be as large.

2. Conversely, the City of Lowell allocates significantly more expenditures per acre of parkland (\$20,358/acre) when compared to communities across the nation placing them well into the top 25% of communities included in NRPA's Park Metrics assessments (\$19,728).
3. An analysis of revenue generated from parks and recreation services also shows that the City of Lowell is in the bottom quartile of agencies included in the Park Metrics database.

Parks And Recreation National and Future Trends

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) identified the following as trends to watch in 2021 and 2022.

- Macroeconomics of Parks and Recreation
- Use of Technology, Data and Data Privacy
- Drones, Robots and Remote Access
- Decline in Youth Sports Participation
- Pickleball becoming more mainstream
- Parks everywhere
- Reclamation of parks and open space
- Stronger Orientation Toward Health Equity and Social Services
- Accelerating Impacts of Climate Change
- Virtual Programs and Esports

2020 and 2021 highlighted the importance of parks and recreation programming and infrastructure while expediting upcoming trends and considerations for municipalities, with parks and open spaces as infrastructures as the top trend. The NRPA predicts the expansion of pedestrian spaces in dense urban areas, expansion of outdoor dining on urban streets, conversion of streets to bike lanes and trails, and installation of "parklets" in parking spaces and former travel lanes as key components to this trend.⁹

Lowell, North Carolina as a small but active community can refer to these trends in conjunction with The 2021 NRPA Agency Performance Review Data to identify trends and opportunities for the Lowell community. Special events, social recreation events, team sports, fitness enhancement classes, health, and wellness education are offered by over 80% of parks and recreation departments. Individual sports, safety training, aquatics, and racquet sports are offered by over 70% of parks and recreation departments. Lowell currently offers special events, special events, social recreation events, and team sports.

Youth Sports: Moving into 2022, families have fewer options to participate in sport programs. A recent study from the Aspen Institute showed that more than four of 10 families said their community-based sports provider has either closed, merged or returned with limited capacity. Travel sports parents report similar issues: 46% said their travel-based provider closed during COVID-19, merged with another league or club, or returned with limited capacity. While participants are returning to youth sports, half of all youth sports parents surveyed by the Aspen Institute, view their child getting sick as a barrier to resume play.¹⁰

Growth of Individual Sports: Individual, outdoor, socially distanced sports benefitted in 2020. Sports such as golf, tennis, surfing and skateboarding exploded in participation. Other than the three most popular sports (basketball, baseball and soccer), the top sports/physical activities kids tried for the first time during the pandemic were bicycling, swimming, walking, dance, badminton, flag football, and bowling. However, individual activities such as bicycling, tennis and skateboarding have seen declines from April 2021 to September 2021 as more organized team sports returned.¹⁰

Loss of Interest in Youth Sports: Many kids are losing interest in organized sports: When Project Play and Utah State conducted their first COVID-19 survey in June 2020, 19% of youth sports parents said their child was not interested in playing sports. By September 2021, that figure was 28%. Data shows that the more money a family has, the less interest a child has in sports.¹⁰

Esports: A growing trend in recreation, esports, allow cities to break down barriers that may discourage some residents from participating in traditional municipal recreation programs. The key components and entry into esports are straightforward compared to the training and the equipment needed to play some traditional sports. Once participants are engaged through esports, parks and recreation departments have more opportunities to connect with those players about other activities. According to Recreational Esports provider Mission Control, 40% of people who joined an organization's recreational esports league had not engaged with that organization before. Furthermore, 93% of those players were likely to

play again.¹¹ Besides being the fastest-growing genre, esports has a primary target audience that is critical to park and recreation agencies: teens and young adults. Virtually every agency struggles with programming for teens, who are notoriously hard to attract for structured programming or offerings besides traditional sports. In addition, per the National Alliance for Youth Sports Poll, 70 percent of kids stop playing sports by the age of 13, while, in contrast, 90 percent of kids ages 12–17 play video games.¹²

General Programming: According to the 2021 Trends in Parks & Recreation report, 2020 and 2021 led to a shift in programming priorities, 41.7% of park respondents said they had introduced new online fitness and wellness programming, while 38% had introduced other types of online programs. Another 38.7% said they had converted some of their indoor programming to take place outdoors. More than one-third (34.3%) said they had provided educational support to children who were out of school. Nearly three in 10 (29.6%) had introduced programs to address food insecurity, and 26.5% said they had provided childcare for essential workers.¹³

The 2021 Trends in Parks & Recreation report shows the most commonly planned program additions in 2021 as follows:

- Group exercise programs
- Teen programming
- Fitness programs
- Mind–body balance programs such as yoga
- Programs for active older adults
- Educational programs
- Environmental education programs
- Holidays and other special events
- Adult sports teams
- Special needs programs

Exercise and wellness focused programs tend to lead newly added programming planned by parks and recreation departments.

Liability and Training: Organizations that manage parks, schools or other facilities rented by outside operators, can utilize the parameters in the permitting process to set conditions under which the space will be provided. Setting requirements for insurance, training for coaches in key competencies and best practices in safety, from COVID-19 risk mitigation to CPR to concussion management can be outlined.^{9,10}

Creatively Finding Funds: Nationally park and recreation agencies are becoming more creative and entrepreneurial when delivering services and providing facilities for an increasingly diverse and demanding constituency.¹⁴ Trends nationally for parks and recreation administrators include, positioning departments as drivers for economic development, strategic planning and assessment, entrepreneurial approach to program and facilities, leveraging special taxes, and finding opportunities for revenue share.

Partnerships: The 2021 Trends in Parks & Recreation report identifies that a majority of park administrators (94.7%) said that they form partnerships with outside organizations. More than seven in 10 park respondents said they partner with local schools (72.6%) and local government (71.3%). Other more common partners for parks include: nonprofit organizations (59.5%); state government (40%); and corporate or local businesses (39.5%).¹⁵

Access: Access to parks and green space is one social determinant that can have a huge impact on communities and nationwide, 100 million people, including 28 million children, do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of home.¹⁶

Infrastructure Growth: With the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act in 2020 that permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Act at \$900 million annually, and the recent passage of long-sought infrastructure funding in the INVEST in America Act, the National Recreation and Parks Association highlights that billions of dollars will be available for land acquisition, park and recreation planning, and infrastructure maintenance, repair, and development. Agencies that are prepared will be able to tap into funding for roads and bridges, climate change resiliency, renewable energy utilization, waste reduction and recycling, and even “tree equity.”¹⁷

The 2021 Trends in Parks & Recreation report identified the most commonly planned park construction additions as the following:¹⁵

- Outdoor fitness areas and fitness trails (26%)
- Splash play areas (24.9%)
- Walking and hiking trails (21.7%)
- Dog parks (20.6%)
- Playgrounds (19.9%)
- Park shelters (18.4%)
- Disc golf courses (18.4%)
- Bike trails (18.4%)
- Park restroom structures (16.6%)
- Open spaces and natural areas (13.7%)

The City of Lowell is compared to departments who participated in the National Recreation and Park Associations Agency Performance Review. The report is the most comprehensive resource of data and insights for park and recreation agencies in the United States. The 2021 NRPA Agency Performance Review highlights 25 of the most critical park and recreation metrics collected from the NRPA Park Metrics database.¹⁸

Programming Offered by Park and Recreation Agencies	All Agencies	Under 20,000	Lowell Offers
Themed special events	89%	84%	Yes
Social recreation events	88%	81%	Yes
Team sports	87%	82%	Yes
Fitness enhancement classes	83%	69%	No
Health and wellness education	82%	71%	No
Individual sports	76%	64%	Yes
Safety training	72%	63%	No
Aquatics	71%	59%	No
Racquet sports	70%	59%	No
Performing arts	65%	48%	No
Cultural crafts	62%	41%	No
Martial arts	62%	44%	No
Visual arts	62%	43%	No
Natural and cultural history activities	62%	39%	No
Trips and tours	61%	47%	No
Golf	48%	28%	No
Running/cycling races	48%	39%	No



Indoor Park and Recreation Facilities Prevalence and Population per Facility	All Agencies	Less than 10 FTEs	Lowell Facility
Arena	53,263	0	No
Arena %	6.50%	0.80%	
Community centers	29,000	10,750	Yes
Community centers %	58.60%	42.20%	
Indoor ice rink	55,174	6,996	No
Indoor ice rink %	13.20%	5.00%	
Nature centers	109,212	20,622	No
Nature centers %	31.60%	9.10%	
Performance amphitheater	62,927	10,000	No
Performance amphitheater %	35.10%	18.20%	
Recreation centers & gyms	30,709	9,701	No
Recreation centers & gyms %	63.90%	29.80%	
Senior centers	61,975	16,031	No
Senior centers %	39.00%	15.70%	
Stadiums	64,800	8,501	No
Stadiums %	18.00%	9.90%	
Teen centers	57,729	13,088	No
Teen centers %	12.80%	4.10%	



Outdoor Park and Recreation Facilities Prevalence and Population per Facility	All Agencies	Less Than 20,000	Lowell Facility
Baseball field – adult	20,159	7,898	Yes
Baseball field – adult %	51.30%	42.00%	
Baseball field – youth	6,763	3,000	Yes
Baseball field – youth %	78.00%	75.00%	
Basketball courts	7,187	4,051	Yes
Basketball courts %	87.40%	88.30%	
Community gardens	31,175	9,001	No
Community gardens %	48.30%	36.20%	
Cricket field	128,393	0	No
Cricket field %	12.10%	0.50%	
Dog park	46,000	11,148	No
Dog park %	64.90%	43.60%	
Field hockey field	23,270	0	No
Field hockey field %	3.50%	1.10%	
Football field	25,977	7,917	No
Football field %	36.50%	26.60%	
Lacrosse field	29,000	7,051	No
Lacrosse field %	11.20%	4.30%	
Multi-purpose field	8,750	3,895	Yes
Multi-purpose field %	66.40%	64.40%	
Multipurpose synthetic field	38,328	13,200	No
Multipurpose synthetic field %	21.00%	4.80%	
Multi Use courts	20,000	6,200	No



5. Community Engagement/Input

Focus Group themes/observations

The project team held 8 focus groups with different residents and stakeholders between October 27th and November 18th, 2021. Stakeholder groups represented a range of interests including seniors, members of the business community, non-profit organizations, parents, leaders of various faith communities, parks and recreation and city staff, and youth sports organizations and volunteers. Meetings were facilitated by the NC State project team and due to Covid concerns, the focus groups were conducted via zoom with no more than 4 participants per group. Meetings consisted of an open, guided conversation related to the recreation needs and priorities in Lowell. Detailed notes of focus groups were taken by the project team for each meeting. Guiding questions for focus groups consisted of the following:

- What do you like most about parks and recreation programs, facilities, and services in Lowell?
- What are the main drawbacks of parks and recreation programs, facilities, and services in Lowell?
- What new spaces do you wish you had for recreation activities in Lowell, or what new program ideas do you have?
- When you think about the future of park and recreation facilities programs and services in the city of Lowell, where would you like to see the city invest/prioritize that investment?
- What current parks and recreation programs and facilities are you aware of that are provided by Lowell Parks and Recreation?



For the focus groups with leaders of the business community, additional questions related to the type of community that would attract business to Lowell were added. Guided questions included the following:

- What attracted you/or why did you decide to start a business in Lowell?
- When you think about the type of community you want Lowell to be (from your perspective), what amenities and services would you like to see Lowell invest in to meet the needs of your employees and families?
- When you think about Parks and Recreation services and programs, do you think there is an opportunity to promote staff/employee wellness or as a partner in employee wellness? And if so, what would that look like?
- Do you see any potential partnership opportunities with Lowell, parks, and recreation as an opportunity to better connect with the community?
- What do you see as your role within the community and potentially community events in Lowell?
- What role/involvement do you see in helping to facilitate the type of community you want Lowell to be?
- Do you feel that current Lowell parks and recreation facilities and programs are meeting the needs of their employees?

After the focus groups were concluded, the project team met to review focus group notes and discuss relevant observations and trends that emerged across the interviews. Specific information related to various stakeholder groups is presented in the tables that follow.



Focus Group Themes / Observations

What Stakeholders Liked Best about Lowell Parks and Recreation	What Stakeholders Would Change/ Think Could Improved
The convenient location of Harold Rankin Park in the middle of the City, that is well used.	Facilities described as outdated and needing updates and improvements (Harold Rankin Park and community center). Often lacking bathrooms and other basic amenities.
Traditional sport programs (baseball, basketball, soccer) that are well organized and have strong enrollment for younger children, given the size of the department.	Sport and other recreation opportunities for older children and for adults without kids is lacking.
Recreation opportunities help to create a very family oriented environment.	Residents often leave Lowell for other leisure opportunities.
Parks and Recreation Department's festivals and events are well-recognized for bringing the community together.	Lack of quality indoor spaces to host indoor sports and other events.
	Lack of passive recreation opportunities (trails, biking opportunities and possibly a river put in amenity - to capitalize on a unique feature). This would also provide more recreation opportunities for adults.
	More facilities that encourage less organized leisure (splash pads, playgrounds, trails, aquatic facilities).
	Improvements with the major youth sport park - bathrooms, concessions, field that is used by multiple sports can get chaotic.
	Recreation branding for the City could be improved. Better way at communicating parks and recreation programs and events.
	Feeling that residents want long term smart investment not band aids.

Future Opportunities and Challenges

The river running through Lowell provides opportunities to develop recreation opportunities.

Recognition that the City of Lowell (and surrounding areas) are growing and will need parks and recreation investment to keep up with the growth.

Opportunities to partner with other organizations who are enthusiastic and positive about the parks and recreation department (faith community, business community).

Parks and recreation's role in helping to involve new residents into the community.

George Poston County Park is mentioned as an example of an outstanding facility that people think is part of the City of Lowell.

Business community recognizes the value of parks and recreation in helping to draw residents to the area during a more competitive labor market.

Challenge of meeting the recreation needs of an increasingly diverse and growing community.



Household survey

Overview of Findings: A link to an online recreation needs assessment survey was made available to residents of Lowell using a variety of methods that included a posting on the city’s website, social media pages, community bulletin boards throughout the City of Lowell, Harold Rankin park announcement board, city-wide newsletter, direct emails, promotions at various community events, announcements at local faith-based organization events, and word-of-mouth. The survey was open and available for approximately two months during the Fall of 2021. A total of 126 surveys were completed yielding a sufficient response rate for analysis. Overall, survey respondents were more likely to have lived in Lowell for more than six years (86%), had an average age of 48 years, were female (84%), were white (65%), and earned more than \$50,000/year (72%). A summary of key themes from the survey data are presented below. Data for all responses received are indicated in the tables that follow.

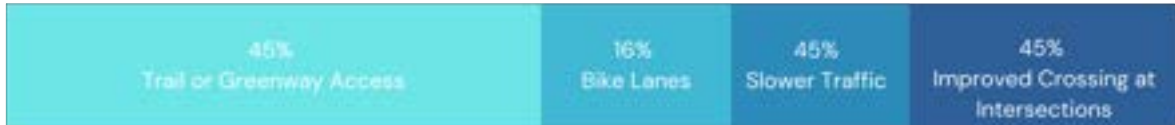
- 88% indicated that they walked or biked from their house and 48% indicated that they walked or biked to Harold Rankin Park.



- The most frequently selected locations where respondents would like to walk or ride their bike was downtown Lowell, parks, and restaurants.



→ When asked what factors would encourage participants to walk or bike the most frequently selected response category was trail or greenway access, followed by improved crossings at intersections, and bike lanes.



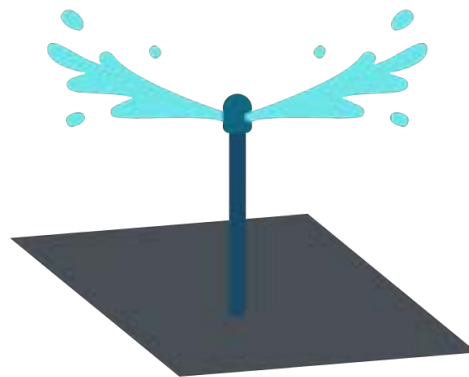
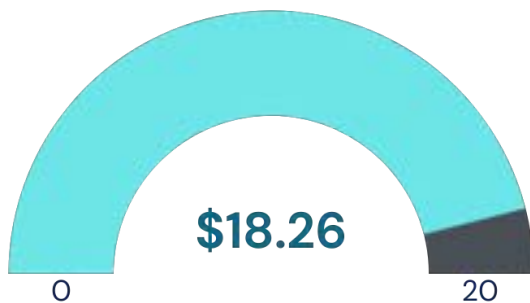
→ When survey participants were asked how they would spend \$100 on a list of features most commonly associated with parks and recreation, results indicated that a splashpad (\$18.67) and greenway/walking trails (\$14.53) received the highest dollar values.



Greenway/Walking Trail



Splashpad



→ When asked to rate a list of activities based on their family's level of preference, swimming was most frequently selected as the highest-ranked activity, followed closely by walking/running, and hiking/trail running.

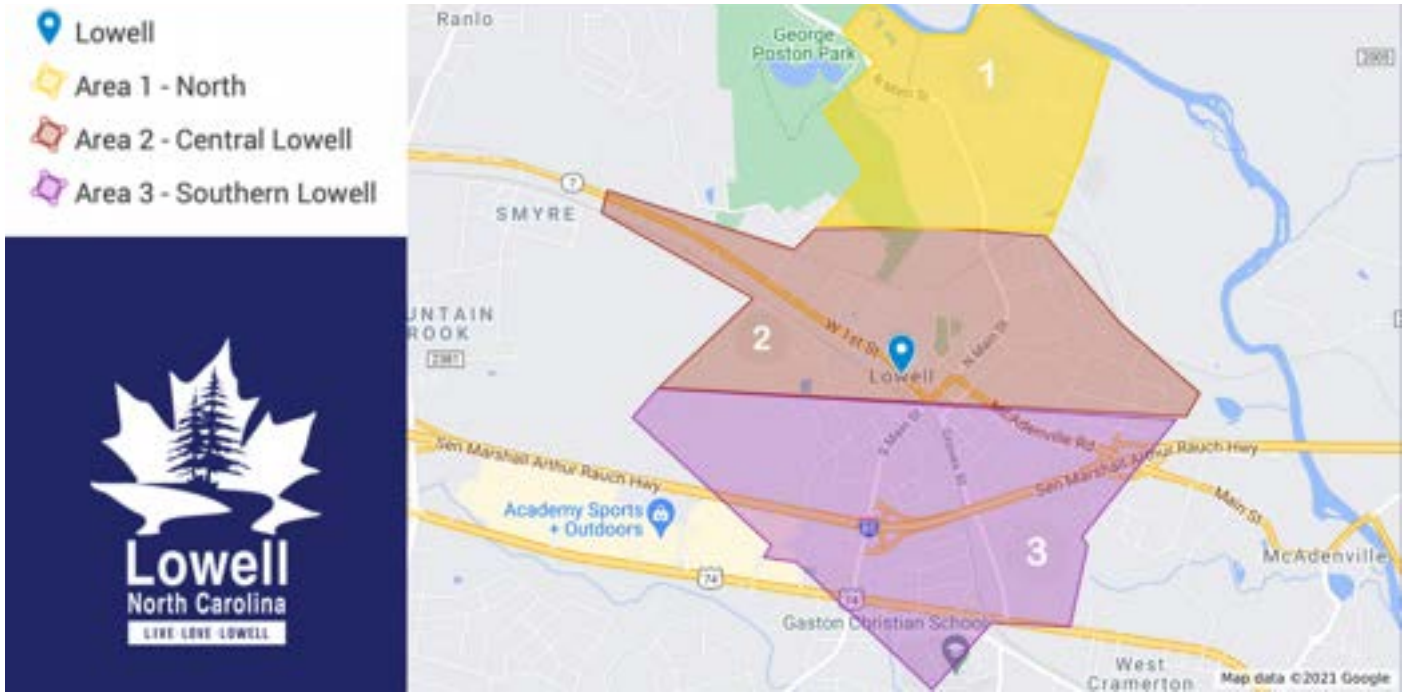
	1	2	3	4	5
Swimming	39%	16%	16%	13%	15%
Hiking/Trail Running	34%	15%	20%	11%	20%
Walking/Running	34%	23%	21%	9%	13%
Baseball	31%	5%	22%	15%	27%
Visiting playgrounds	29%	17%	20%	6%	29%
Camping	28%	9%	30%	6%	27%
Biking	26%	19%	28%	11%	16%
Concerts	25%	27%	19%	10%	19%
Fishing	24%	12%	24%	14%	26%
Pickleball	23%	10%	9%	10%	49%
Performing arts	22%	11%	27%	9%	31%
Canoeing/kayaking	21%	18%	20%	18%	23%
Football	21%	5%	23%	10%	41%
Bocce	19%	5%	9%	9%	57%
Basketball	19%	13%	22%	10%	36%
Disc golf	18%	10%	18%	12%	42%
Fitness programs	18%	19%	32%	14%	17%
Arts and crafts	17%	16%	34%	13%	20%
Tennis	15%	4%	14%	10%	58%
Soccer	14%	9%	26%	15%	36%
Volleyball	12%	17%	20%	11%	40%

→ The top three community events were festivals, kid's events, and concerts.

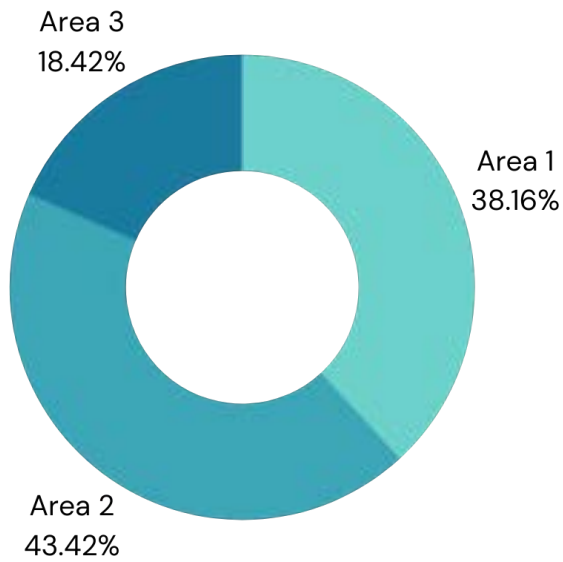
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Concert	21%	28%	14%	11%	16%	10%
Community run	9%	8%	12%	14%	16%	41%
Outdoor movie	4%	11%	28%	21%	26%	10%
Parade	6%	17%	19%	26%	22%	11%
Community festival	32%	21%	16%	18%	10%	3%
Kid's events	28%	16%	11%	10%	11%	24%



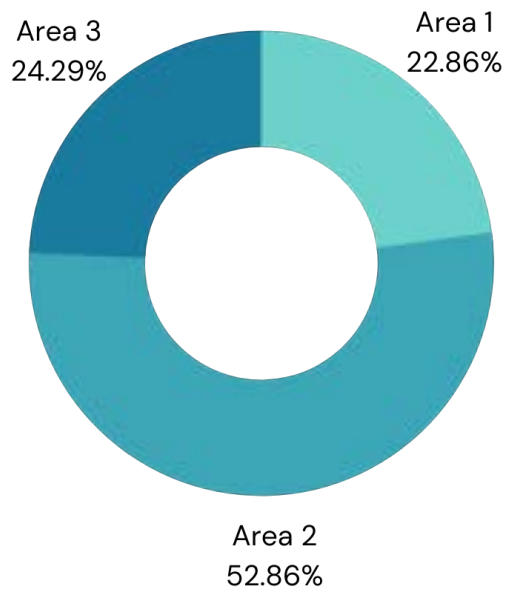
→ Areas within the City of Lowell that participants would like to see more open space, parks, and greenways was the downtown area (Area 2).



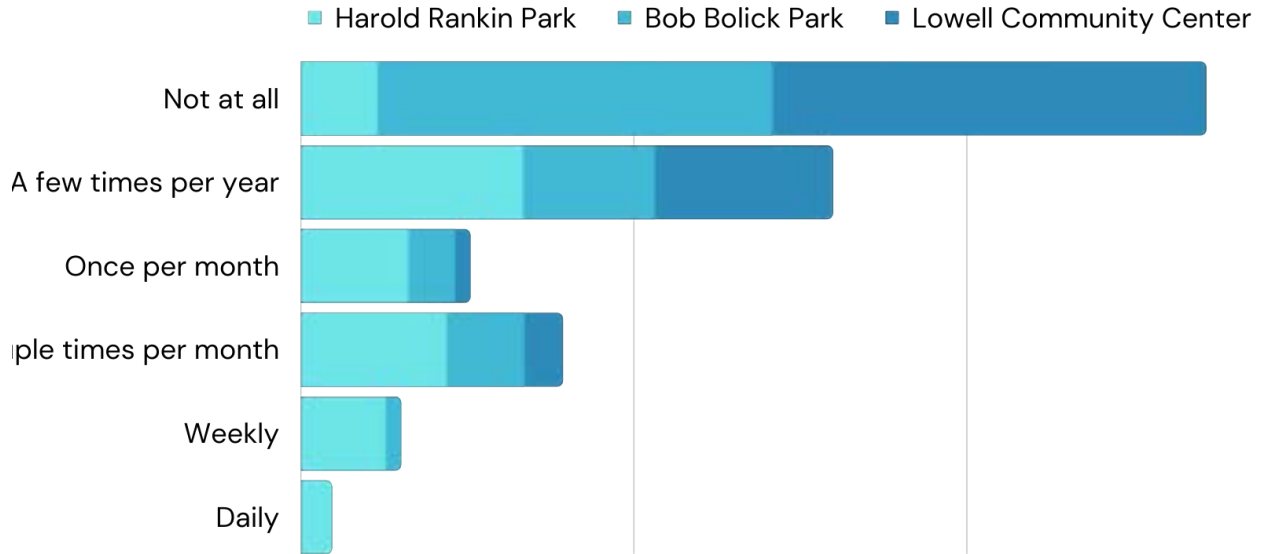
Where would you like to see more greenways



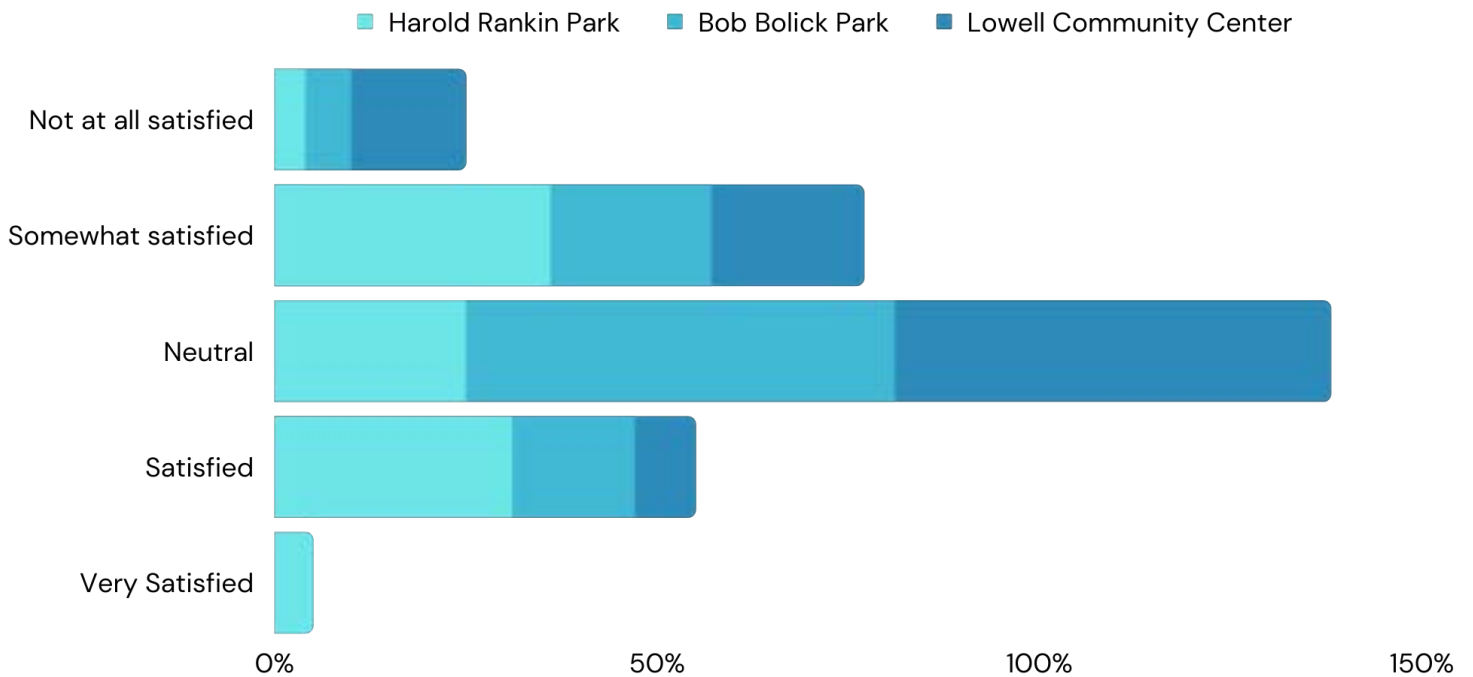
Where would you like to see more open space/parks



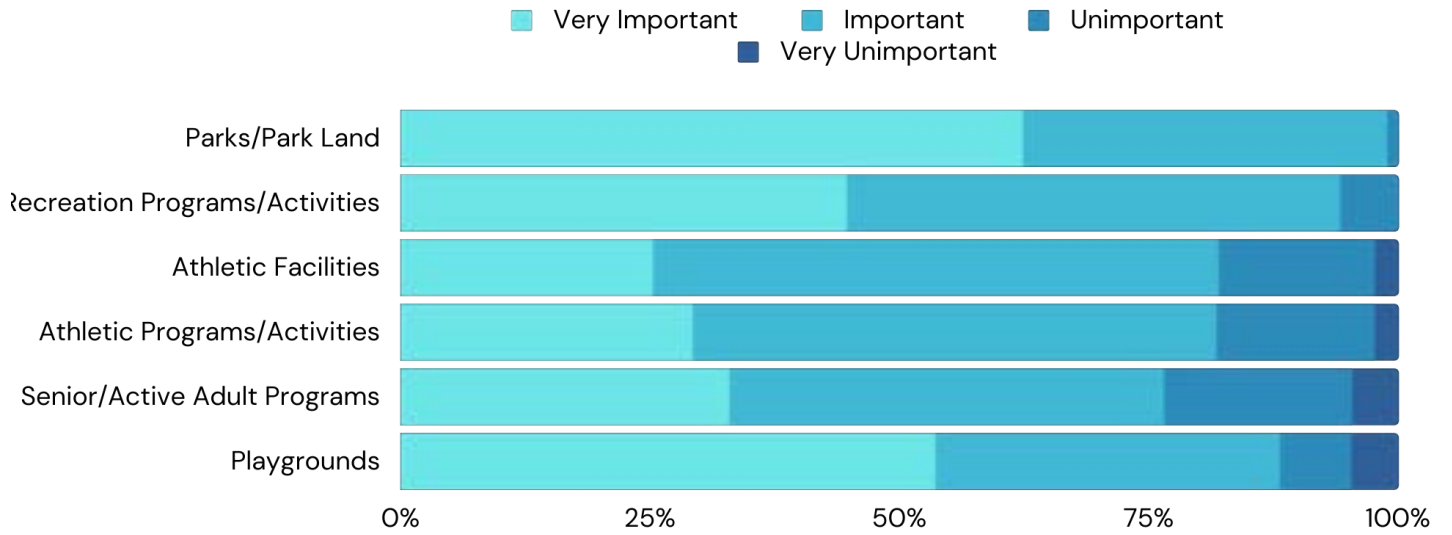
→ Participants were most likely to have visited Harold Rankin Park in the past year. A majority of residents had never visited the Lowell Community Center or Bob Bolick Park.



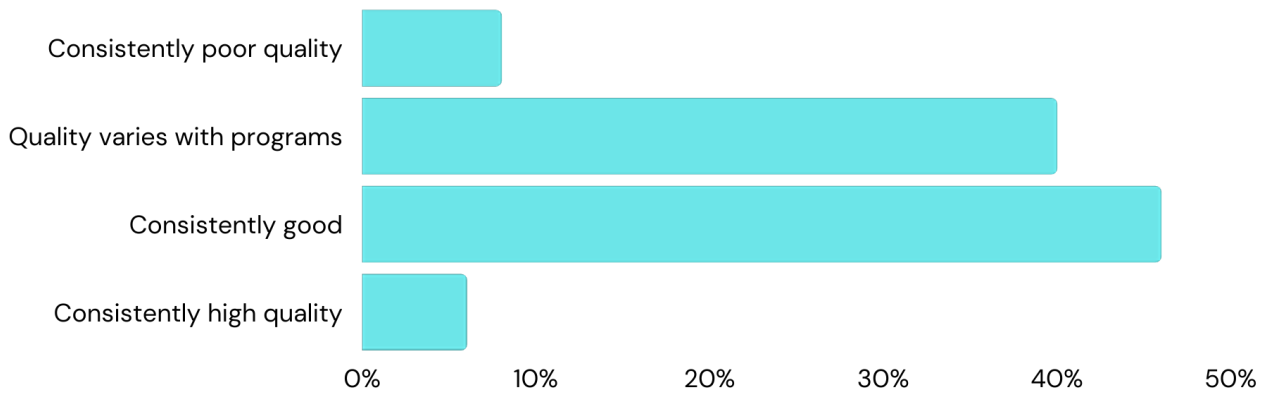
→ Participants were moderately satisfied with the amenities at Harold Rankin Park with only 5% indicating they were “very satisfied” with the amenities.



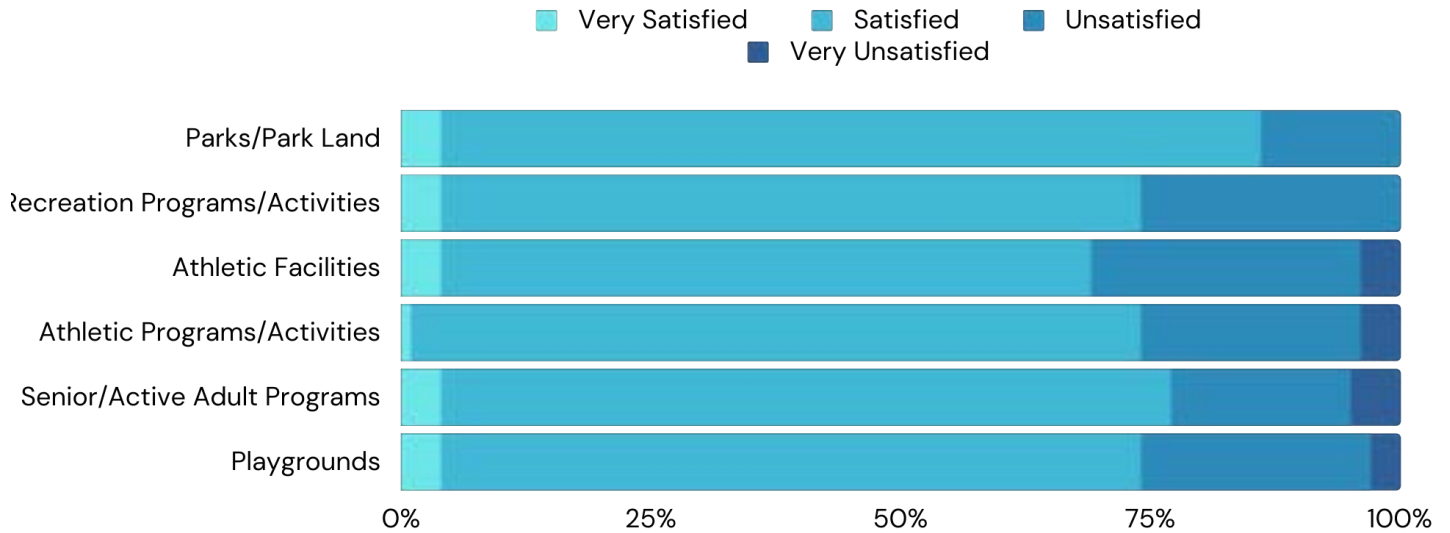
→ Parks/Park land and playgrounds were most likely to be rated as “very important” by participants.



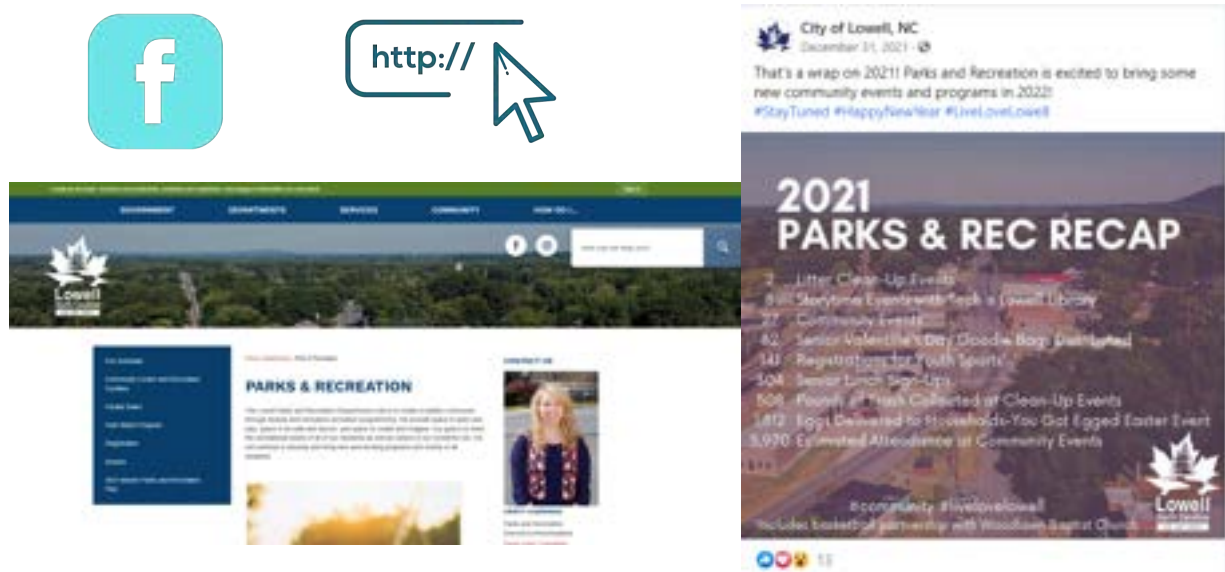
→ 52% of participants rated the City of Lowell’s parks and recreation programs as either “consistently good” or “consistently high quality”.



→ Participants were generally “satisfied” with the recreation amenities, facilities, or services offered by City of Lowell Parks and Recreation.

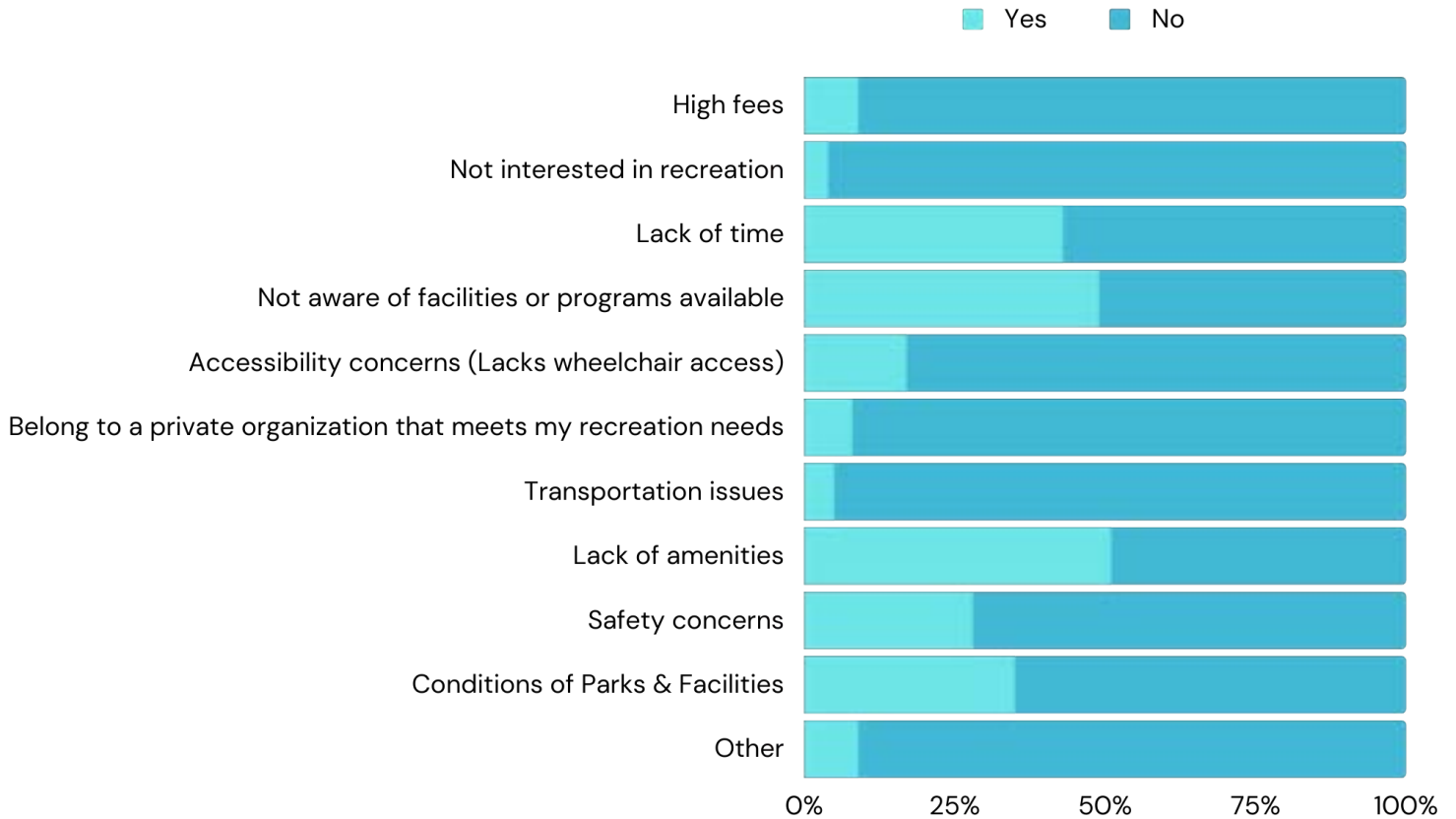


→ Facebook and postings on the City of Lowell’s website were the most commonly selected communication type used by participants.



→ A lack of amenities, awareness of available facilities or programs, and lack of time were the most frequently selected reasons preventing participants from using Lowell’s parks and facilities.

Do any of the following prevent you and/or your family from using Lowell's parks and facilities?



→ 88% of participants travel outside of Lowell to use parks and recreation facilities. The most frequently selected reasons for this were that other communities near Lowell offer facilities that are not available in Lowell or they offer better quality facilities.



6. Summary Findings and Recommendations

Organizational

The City of Lowell's Parks and Recreation Department should prepare now for future growth by developing plans and policies that enable the department and services provided to reflect the needs of current and new community members, in conjunction with projected population growth. Results of our Gap Analysis of Lowell's parks and recreation facilities and services indicated that not only do the residents of Lowell have much lower access to parkland when compared to other communities across the nation, the city spends more on operating parks and recreation services than most communities across the nation (when adjusted for population size). Consequently, developing a land dedication process, fee in lieu policy, investment in and acquisition of park space should be considered priorities for leaders. The city also lacks many of the parks, open spaces, and facilities to offer adequate programs. Prioritizing facilities that support multi generational programs, youth athletics, and active adult/aging populations would be advantageous to the city.

The recent acquisition of the old dye plant on North Main Street is both adjacent to Gaston County's George Poston Park and the South Fork Catawba River and represents a significant opportunity for the City of Lowell to expand parks and recreation opportunities. The site, in conjunction with Riverfront Master Plan & Public Works Conceptual Design, provides opportunities to expand on the current offerings and develop new programs and amenities.. Similarly, the annexation of property north of Lowell that includes a 575 home future development, dedicated open space areas, and extension of the Carolina Thread Trail to include a greenway connection from McAdenville through Lowell to George Poston and Spencer Mountain would bring Lowell in line with the standards for park and recreation opportunities to residents.

"I think large green spaces, where people can hang out and congregate and I really think for us it's an important piece of that happiness factor that is driving the family unit. We think that will encourage people to put down roots and feel rooted to the community so that turnover is lower because people are happy with the community outside of their actual job." Lowell Business Leader

With a large percentage of citizens traveling outside of Lowell for recreation services and a lack of overall awareness of offerings, increased efforts in providing more diverse and accessible programs in conjunction with enhanced marketing and promotions. Developing a

formal marketing and communications plan and schedule, along with consistent branding is strongly suggested.

Increase capacity for program development and service delivery

It was clear from our review of Lowell's parks and recreation department that a key operational deficiency is the number of full-time staff administering programs and services. We recommend the addition of full-time staff equivalents (FTEs) to the park and recreation department to better maintain and improve park and recreation facilities and amenities, manage and train volunteers, develop and manage other organizational partnerships, improve and manage the increased demand for marketing and communications, and to accommodate current and future participant needs for recreation programming, festivals, and events. Furthermore, staff should be given opportunities to gain relevant certifications and credentials.

Lowell is behind national and regional benchmark comparisons for park and recreation staff. There appears to be a need for additional park laborers, and at least one (1) new FTE for recreation programming to meet the current needs of the city.

"I think a lot of the concentration needs to be on building out high quality capacity and infrastructure so I think Cristy and Scott are doing a really good job. If Lowell wants to take it to the next level they kind of have to have a reckoning, with the fact that we gotta grow this more." Lowell Business Leader

Public perception of the quality of Lowell's parks and outdoor recreation facilities is moderate at best. Given the scope of Public Works' responsibilities for the maintenance and upkeep of all of the city's facilities, there is a need for additional laborers to help take care of parks and recreation needs for ongoing maintenance. This would include mowing, trimming, irrigating, fencing, netting, mulching, painting, filling holes, removing trash, seasonal cleanups, field restoration, contracting, turf management, accommodating special requests and permitted uses, and lining fields. When maintenance gets deferred, facility quality declines, and the high standards the City has for facility upkeep cannot be met.

To sustain and grow programming, particularly at Harold Rankin Park, the parks and recreation department should consider adding one (1) additional FTE as well as additional part time and contract laborers over the next two years. Focus group participants noted the current staffing challenges of having staff in multiple locations, and not having enough staff to accommodate programming needs. Adding an additional recreation programmer would alleviate these challenges.

Engage Citizens Through Meaningful Volunteer Opportunities

In 2020, the Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee merged with the Lowell Citizen's Committee (LCC) due to the inability to achieve quorum in 2 different, but similar committees. While this is beneficial in the short term, we recommend that the City of Lowell should make a plan to restructure the committee by creating a stand alone Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee. This should comprise of community stakeholders who meet regularly to advise on citizen concerns, provide feedback to staff, and support long term planning and community engagement. A focus on land acquisition, park development and high level advisory tasks should drive the committee during the current phase of growth, with public art, greenways, community events and others as possible sub committees. The LCC can remain as is or transition to a subcommittee depending on the needs of the community and staff recommendations. Staff, council and the advisory board should utilize this document in conjunction with the existing [Land Use Plans](#), [Bike Ped Plan](#), [Gateway Master Plan](#), to inform acquisition and development of new parks and community resources offered by the City's parks and recreation department.

Infrastructure and Facilities

Enhance and Upfit Current Parks and Recreation Facilities.

The city currently has two community parks, and a community center. Updates of current facilities, along with further development of the city's current assets and identifying opportunities for future land acquisition to connect Lowell destinations should be priorities. In addition, the city should explore the feasibility of adding a community (multigenerational) indoor recreation center with space for indoor sports, indoor events, child and youth after school care and camp programming, and indoor fitness opportunities. Currently, there are limited opportunities for indoor recreational activities.

"I think that a new recreation Center is needed because it could give the seniors some place to go where they can all play Bingo and a bigger place.....so I would say that if we could have the money, a nice new recreation center would be good for everybody, for people of all ages" – Lowell Senior.

The most pressing need, particularly with Harold Rankin Park, is facility improvements to all aspects of the park. The bathroom/concession stand building is in need of an update. The smaller of the two baseball fields requires new fencing and field repair work. The walking path around the perimeter of the larger baseball field requires resurfacing.

The City of Lowell's second community park, Bob Bolick Park, which is adjacent to the current community center, is also in need of renovations that could better serve residents. Recommendations include renovating the existing playground including a fence that separates the park and playground from the rail tracks, benches and natural or manufactured shade structures. Additional updates in the park include lighting and resurfacing of the basketball court, and new basketball backboards. Furthermore, an upgrade to the picnic shelter that includes more seating, additional benches and trash and recycling will be beneficial. Access to restroom facilities, through the community center is recommended. Further study may be warranted to determine the feasibility of adding multi use or racquet courts to accommodate pickleball, tennis and other programs.

Deploy updated wayfinding signage throughout the city and in each park.

Wayfinding signage was discussed in the focus groups and could be a fairly inexpensive addition that could serve two purposes: Guiding people to places they are looking for while bringing awareness to places they may have missed or not been aware of. Branded wayfinding can also guide people to and through places and could help the City of Lowell's park and recreation facilities and spaces be more visible.

"I think wayfinding signage is important. Once it's in the ground, it blends into the fabric of your daily life and you don't really notice it until it's time for you to want to notice it. I mean we don't rely on signs as much as we rely on our handheld devices, but I think from an accessibility standpoint it's important"

- Lowell Community Member

Finance park and recreation improvements, including a multigenerational community center, from a diverse mix of funding sources.

It is unlikely that a new multigenerational indoor community center will be able to be 100% self-supporting in the sense that it will generate enough revenue to service the capital debt burden and cover annual operations and maintenance costs. The predominant funding model for public recreation facilities throughout the country is some combination of funding sources, including tax dollars, fees and charges, and sponsorship/philanthropy. It is likely that support for such a project in Lowell (as in most communities) will be predicated on the facility being built with as little impact on taxes as possible. If the City has bonding capacity freed up within the next three to six years, it is possible that such a facility could be financed with minimal additional tax burden.

“An indoor facility. I think that's important because you can't be outside all year round. you could do a lot with an indoor facility” Lowell Parent

“We honestly don't have a dedicated basketball gym. We've used a gym at a local church, which has been nice and then we've got a gym that we use at the Boys and Girls Club so honestly, because of that my son's somewhat kind of aged out of basketball ” - Lowell Parent

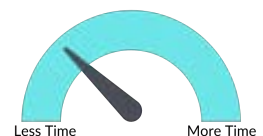
Indoor facilities such as the one mentioned above can be economic drivers for communities and can provide opportunities for business sponsorship, rental/contracts, and referral services. Partnerships with non-profit groups, local youth sports organizations, and the school district are natural fits for a project such as this. Parks and recreation staff should seek out private entrepreneurs who might be interested in renting space in such a new facility in order to build and grow their existing programs. This could provide a source of income for the new facility and add to the economic vitality of the city by providing opportunities for new "pop-up" businesses to grow and serve the community. For example, multipurpose space could be rented to a local dance studio to run dance programs for all age groups, while adding to the range of program offerings available in the city.

“For us, partnering is huge. It means everything for the Community, because with numbers we have more strength” - Non profit leader

Investigate alternative sources of funding for the project. Alternative sources of funding are difficult to obtain, but can be used to supplement tax dollars needed to service debt for capital construction. Sources of funding could include fundraising, planned giving, sponsorships, and/or grants (e.g. USDA Rural Development Community Facility Grants, Community Development Block Grants). Information on these and other programs can be found at <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/Grant-Fundraising-Resources/>.

We recommend that the timing for any new project should be scheduled with the City's current and future bonding capacity in mind. We believe that a new facility project such as this should take place within a 6-year timeframe.

The charts below provide highlight recommendations including a general estimate of the time and resources needed to complete each project.



Facility	Action Item	Details	Time Frame	Resources Needed
Community Center	Renovations	Completion of planned renovations.		
Community Center	Awareness	Updated roadside signage.		
Bob Bolick Park	Perimeter Barrier	Add a fence and natural barrier adjacent to train tracks.		
Bob Bolick Park	Lighting	Add additional lighting to parking lot and basketball courts.		
Bob Bolick Park	Basketball Court Upgrade	Resurface, upgraded goals, safety		
Bob Bolick Park	Shade Shelters	Upgrade to picnic shelter, additional shade at play areas.		
Bob Bolick Park	Restrooms	Access to restroom to community center restroom facilities.		
Bob Bolick Park	Seating & Picnic Tables	Additional benches and picnic tables.		
Future: Downtown Park	Popup Features	Temporary park features		
Future: Downtown Park	Public Art	Coordinate murals on the side of adjacent buildings or temporary public art installations.		
Future: Downtown Park	Program Space	Pad or space benches, cafe' tables, chairs, plantings and general placemaking activities.		
Future: Downtown Park	Event Infrastructure	Unintrusive numbers grid and 110v power boxes to support food truck rodeos, markets, pop-up community events and various placemaking activities		

Facility	Action Item	Details	Time Frame	Resources Needed
Harold Rankin Park	Updated Restrooms	Additional or upgraded bathrooms and facilities		
Harold Rankin Park	Updated Field Maintenance	Turf and field upgrades, fences, lines and infields.		
Harold Rankin Park	Field Upgrades	Grading and conversion to multi-use fields. Lighting upgrades.		
Harold Rankin Park	Comprehensive Park Plan	Develop a comprehensive plan to the park		
Harold Rankin Park	Concessions	Upgrade (service partner)		
Harold Rankin Park	Shelter & Fitness	Upgrade shelter and replace or upgrade outdoor fitness equipment		
Harold Rankin Park	Signage and Aesthetic upgrades	New branded signage throughout park, updated scoreboard, turf and drag and line fields.		
Harold Rankin Park	General Cosmetic Renovations	New paint on buildings, new park amenities, benches, tables, trash can, etc. General cosmetic updates and opportunity for community art.		
General	Wayfinding Signage	Branded wayfinding signage throughout the city and in parks.		
Future: Riverfront Park	Nature Trail/Greenway	Prioritize development of a nature trail including interactive elements.		
Future: Riverfront Park	Outdoor Classroom	Include outdoor classroom/programing space.		
Future: Riverfront Park	Adventure Playground	Adventure playground with nature themed amenities		

Utilize Community Input and Data to Inform Amenities of Future Parks.

The City of Lowell also has plans for a Riverfront Park and Downtown Pocket Park. The current plans align with trends and data gathered by the community survey, with additional opportunities for gathering and program space.

“I think Lowell needs infrastructure that's not just car centered. The way people live their lives, you already see them kind of trending towards I'll say spaces that they don't need to have a car. You need workforce housing that can support the gold standard for alternate modes of transportation. That would help create a safe way for people to get to their jobs. If you create a safe way for people to get to work. You're bringing a lot of quality life stuff with it, so the connectivity piece and ensuring that there's alternate modes of transportation for folks to get to their jobs is important” –Business Leader











The Riverfront Park, which if funded could start construction as early as 2024, is slated to include connectivity to the Carolina Thread Trail, a kayak/canoe launch, shelters, bathrooms, amphitheater, low ropes/adventure course, and space for future Parks and Recreation offices. Additional consideration should include public art, a story or track trail, playground and outdoor classroom or learning space. With connectivity and close proximity to George Poston Park, planning and development of programs and amenities should focus on **not** replicating the amenities at George Poston, but instead having the parks complement each other providing the optimal experience for community members and visitors.

The Downtown Pocket Park, currently leased by the City, is projected to have a small performance stage and open lawn. Additional consideration should include public art and passive programming space to be utilized for free community programs. Installing 110v power boxes in the space also allows for events such as food truck rodeos, farmers or craft markets, pop-up community events and various placemaking activities, to take place without relying on generators.

Future considerations for parks in Lowell should include considerations such as greenways and expanded trail connectivity, passive parkland, playground amenities, trails, and river access. Additionally an updated multi-sport complex at Harold Rankin or a future park should be considered. While citizens rated a water feature such as a splash pad high in the survey as an opportunity, because of the complexity of running such an amenity, adding staff and organizational capacity should be prioritized before moving forward. Additionally, opportunities to add an outdoor performance or event venue such as an amphitheater or event lawn should be considered, in new park development. As Lowell grows, the adoption of a park classification system can also help determine needs and priorities.

Long Range Planning

The City of Lowell should pursue site specific feasibility studies for the Dye Plant space and Harold Rankin Park. Harold Rankin Park plans should include a complete reconfiguration of the park to better accommodate multipurpose programs and services, including a full multi-sport complex. Former Dye Plant site plans should include amenities such as an Indoor Recreation Center, River Access, Event Venue, connector trails and play areas.

	Action Item	Details	Time Frame	Resources Needed
Dye Plant / Riverfront Park	Bond and Site Specific Park Master Plan	Referenda of residents to approve of the City's use of general obligation bond financing. Park Master Plan to address the park space needs of Lowell.		
Indoor Community Center Facility	Funding	Referenda of residents to approve of the City's use of general obligation bond financing.	Program 	
Harold Rankin Park	Site Specific Plan	Referenda of residents to approve of the City's use of general obligation bond financing. Complete reconfiguration of the park to better accommodate multipurpose programs and services.		
Future	Splashpad or Water Feature	Consideration of water feature such as a splash, staff to maintain		
Future	Outdoor Performance Venue	Amphitheater or event lawn should be considered in any future park development, financial partners and additional funding sources should be explored.		

Programs and Services

The community needs survey and focus groups highlights a variety of ways the City of Lowell provides ample programming opportunities, yet also highlights multiple gaps that should be addressed. While the city offers a variety of community events and activities for younger youth, sport and recreation programs for older youth, along with teen and adult programming is lacking. It was also identified that there is a lack of passive recreation opportunities (trails, biking opportunities and river access). Residents identified swimming, walking/running, and hiking/trail running as priority activities. The top three community events were festivals, kid's events, and concerts. A lack of amenities, awareness of available facilities or programs, and lack of time were the most frequently selected reasons preventing participants from using Lowell's parks and facilities. This lack of opportunity and awareness has led to community members leaving Lowell to partake in recreation activities.

Develop and Evaluate New and Existing Programs.

The City of Lowell staff should follow a program planning process to identify, establish, evaluate, adapt and replicate new programs. Programs should be developed based on community needs, industry best practices, recreation trends and revenue goals. The process should also include baselines that determine the future viability of said programs based on community need, participation, feedback and revenue. All new and existing programs should be evaluated on a consistent basis, with programming adjustments or cancellations occurring in conjunction with planning and programming schedules.

A program process should include some or all of the following

- Identify community needs. Who benefits?
- Market and segment research. Who else is offering, where and how often?
- Identify public issues, conflicts or potential concerns. Will the community approve?
- Identify risk management issues and best practices. Is it safe and appropriate for the user group, and do you have rights to offer?
- Identify resources available and established costs. What do you need, what do you have and how much more do you need?
- Develop a budget. How much will you charge, how much will it cost, what are your revenue expectations?
- Establish criteria for a successful program. How do you measure success?
- Determine program long term program lifecycle. Is the program sustainable?
- Implement the program and monitor. Determine how you monitor the program.
- Measure and evaluate the program. How did the program measure goals (revenue, attendance, engagement) and expectations (community perception)?

- Determine what needs to be adjusted and if it can be replicated. What adaptation or revisions need to be made for long term viability and expansion?

Connect community members through multi-generational programs.

With a smaller staff, developing events and programs that connect across generations can help serve the diverse needs of the population while staying within the capacity of the current staff structure. Both a revenue generator and often popular in communities, child-parent/guardian dances, movie nights and similar special events can generate revenue through ticket sales and sponsorships. Offering cooking and art classes, allowing for the city's staff to utilize volunteers, either seniors or active adults teaching children and young families or teens and young adults working with seniors. Additionally these programs can be run as multigenerational encouraging whole families to attend together. Reading groups or story time hours can also be set up with the same multigenerational principles. Outdoor and environmental programs such as guided or group hikes, outdoor wildlife observation, nature expires and similar programs can also be offered as multi generational. Parks and Recreation staff can evaluate and expand on programs as needed in conjunction with growth in participation and enrollment. Identifying partners and volunteers to support these programs will be vital to their success.

Support Community Wellness and Physical Fitness

Results of the community survey and recreation program trends, suggest staff should prioritize more opportunities for exercise and physical fitness. Low overhead programs such as facilitated walking and running clubs are an easy starting point and can be used to leverage sponsorship and partnerships with local businesses. In addition, bringing in partners to offer group fitness and programs such as Yoga in the park can create an opportunity to utilize new and existing parks to further enhance the community. These programs may also create opportunities to partner with health and wellness providers who are invested in the communities overall health and wellbeing.

"I would like the focus to be a healthy community offering whatever it is for all ages to increase and improve and provide opportunities for a healthy community." - Lowell Community Member

Continue to support growing active adult and aging populations.

Continue to provide programs and events for seniors, including senior lunches, bingo and adult recess. As in person events are able to happen, look for opportunities to enhance senior programs by expanding offerings. Parks and recreation staff should prioritize developing new senior programs focused on fitness and wellbeing to align with the community survey and recreation program trends. Programs such as general wellness

classes, low impact fitness programs like zumba, walking clubs, basic and chair yoga, should be considered. Instructors and volunteers can lead these types of programs for multiple audiences.

Additionally identifying community partners to lead educational seminars for seniors such as computer literacy, can help enhance services. For example, Seniors' Health Insurance Information Program (SHIIP) is a division of the NC Department of Insurance that offers free seminars with, objective information about, Medicare, Medicare supplements, Medicare Advantage plans, Medicare Part D prescription drug plans, Medicare fraud and abuse, and has partnered with Parks and Recreation departments across the state.

Expand recreation program opportunities through innovation and partnerships .

With limited staff and space, and at a fraction of the cost of a traditional recreation center, purchasing a mobile recreation unit or trailer will allow the department to bring parks and recreation programs to community members and partners. A mobile recreation unit in its most basic form is a branded trailer or vehicle that carries recreational supplies amenities, such as sports balls, cones, jump ropes, hula hoops portable basketball hoops, soccer goals, as well as materials for wellness classes, arts and crafts, and board games, to be deployed throughout a community. Investing in a unit will allow the department to provide programs to the community with its current capacity and expand programs in the future when a community center is in place.

Additionally identifying local, regional and state agencies to partner with can help increase capacity to deliver programs. For current facilities, the department should identify unused space and opportunities to offer programs, when internal department capacity cannot support these programs, staff can work with partners to maximize program offerings. Facility vacancies and program gaps can be filled by rentals, outsourced programs that support revenue share or community building. The Boys and Girls Club, Cooperative Extension, Local Faith Community, Gaston County Arts Council and local clubs and community organizations can serve as potential partners.

"Our church has a full gym and so we'd be more than happy to be a backup or spare. You know those kinds of things said to the parks and recreation department. Or if they have festivals and events and need volunteers, we could certainly promote that within our congregation and bring volunteers to the table." – Church Leader

Develop user driven programs that require little to no staff time

Both the focus groups and community survey identified a gap in passive programs and recreation opportunities. The acquisition of and development of future parkland will be the nuggets determinant in increasing passive recreation opportunities. Within the current capacity and assets of the department, passive programs that require little to no staff time can be created. A trail story or storywalk which places elements of a children's story along a popular walking route or path is simple and cost effective and can be changed out to fit various themes or seasons. Similar to a story walk, a nature discovery trail can also be utilized, and can be updated seasonally with various points of interest created along a trail or walking route to engage and educate participants.

“Things that are public like trails. A put-in for the river, where people can put kayaks into the river. More bike lanes, maybe even special trails for adults and kids.” – Community Leader

[Kids In Parks Track Trails](#) is another program and partner that can help to enhance program offerings at minimal. TRACK Trail features a series of self-guided, brochure-led adventures. This allows kids to visit the same trail numerous times to complete a different activity, or for a family to visit a trail and use different brochures based on their age ranges or areas of interests. After their adventures, kids can register their outings through the program's website, www.kidsinparks.com, to earn prizes designed to make their next outdoor adventure more fun and meaningful. The program also uses various types of trails (hiking, biking, geocaching, paddling, disc golf, and citizen science) to engage kids and families with varying age ranges and recreational interests. With various grant and sponsorship opportunities to support adding a track trail to Lowell, this is a partnership worth exploring.

“We have the River running through Lowell that has amazing views. That could really become something for Lowell.” – Community Volunteer

Community scavenger hunts, photo contests, or themed contests can all enhance engagement. These can build upon or enhance current programs offered by the City of Lowell. Programs can be offered that are similar to Lincoln City, Oregon's [Finders Keepers Program](#) or Westminster, Colorado's [Standley Monster initiative](#), which both used hidden elements and prizes to encourage park use, exploration and promote the department. Creating a signature program that encourages park use and exploration can help engage citizens and encourage physical activity, all while promoting the department.

Develop new and innovative programs that drive engagement and revenue.

Understanding what new and trendy programs can benefit your community can help drive engagement and support revenue. While traditional sports require equipment, esports leagues can be run without citizens ever stepping into a facility. A variety of partners (Mission Control, GG Leagues) currently work in the parks and recreation space to support esports leagues with minimal costs. Because of the low overhead, esports programs if properly managed and promoted can be a revenue generator for the department. Esports may also allow the city to reach residents who have not traditionally participated in recreation programs, creating opportunities to connect with those players about other activities.

Similar to Esports, Pickleball is one of the most popular new sports in the park and recreation field, because pickleball has a smaller footprint and is easy to learn, it's an excellent multi generational sport and a wonderful alternative to Tennis. Portable pickleball nets and removable or temporary nets can be utilized to grow and teach the program until a multi use court can be added to the city's inventory.

Expand Athletic Programs

Survey respondents indicated a lack of athletic programs for adults and older youth. While the current youth sport league offerings are well received and attended, the ability to offer leagues for older youth and adults will be a challenge due to already identified facility and capacity issues. Instead parks and recreation staff should identify opportunities to offer athletic programs for adults, teens and older youth that fit within the current capacity of the department. With limited staff, offering play to learn programs and clinics can help staff gauge interest from the community without committing resources to an entire league. Staff should also identify programs such as [Grow Golf Now](#) which teaches golf basics to youth and families or [NFL Flag](#), which often partners with the Carolina Panthers to offer grants of up to \$10,000 to help support program startup cost and equipment.

“ One of the areas where I really want to see improvement is going to be around improving youth sports. They tend to phase out when kids get a certain age. So when they get older, there isn't anything. ” – Community Volunteer

When developing adult athletic programs similar principles should be applied, while also incorporating social aspects. Staff should identify possible partners or sponsors to support offering semi-competitive social leagues, currently softball, kickball, volleyball, pickleball, dodgeball and soccer are often popular choices in communities across North Carolina. Social leagues also create opportunities to identify sponsors, often businesses in the

community, who are interested in connection with participants. For example a Winston-Salem adult kickball league has grown from 11 teams up to 49 teams since its inception in 2009.¹⁹

Effectively Market and Promote

A lack of awareness of amenities, programs and services was identified in both the community survey and focus groups. To successfully meet the goals of new and existing programs, it is recommended that the city develop a marketing strategy and communications plan. This plan should include marketing goals and objectives, audiences, process for content creation, marketing tactics, brand guidelines, content calendar, and measurable. The marketing plan can also drive community engagement and needs assessment review along with sponsors and partnership activation. Each program should fit within this process and plan to ensure proper promotion.

A separate and identifiable parks and recreation brand identity and logo should also be developed. This brand will help the department select what tactics and channels it utilizes, how it engages with the community, and allow for targeted communications.

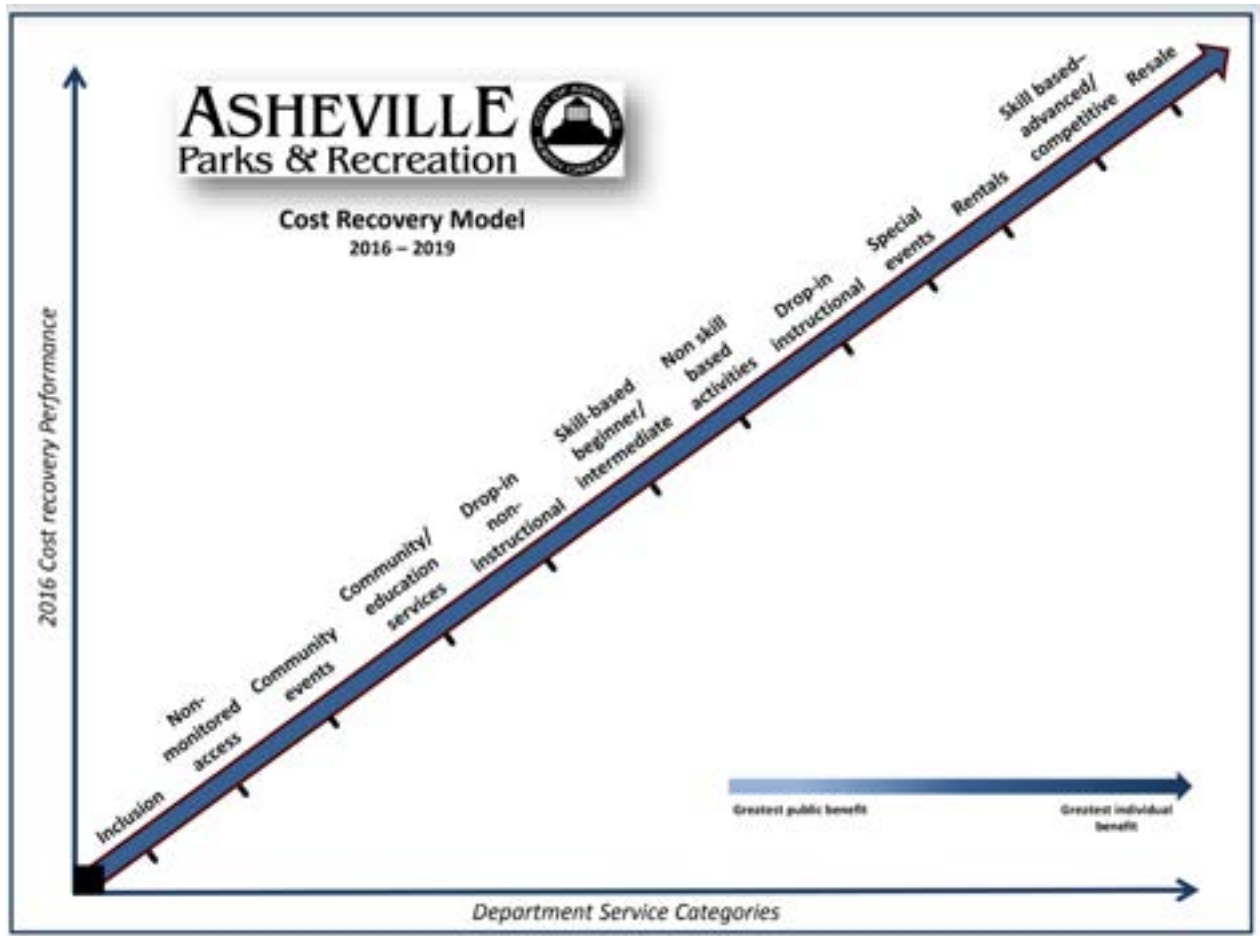
Financial Strategy

In conjunction with the growth of the city and department, opportunities to generate additional funds for the department will be critical to the success of the parks and recreation department. Finance the park and recreation improvements, the Harold Rankin Park and Bob Bolick Park renovations and the community center, land renovations, from a diverse mix of funding sources including private funds, grant opportunities, donations and sponsorships and potentially through a bond.

The City of Lowell has a comprehensive land development ordinance. However, given the fact that the city is expanding, we recommend explicitly requiring developers developers of multi-family units to provide recreational area funds to the City, or a combination of funds and land dedication, whereby the City may acquire recreational land or areas to serve the multi-family residential development or other multi-family developments or residential subdivisions in the immediate area.

Utilize a Cost Recovery Model that Benefits the Community and Supports Revenue.

Balances between effective cost recovery vs. ensuring cost don't prohibit participation, will be a challenge as the City of Lowell continues to grow. Nationally best practices in developing a cost recovery model indicate that "recommendations are developed from an analysis of programs to determine which programs benefit the community and should receive tax dollars, and which are to be supported by other revenue sources.. From a long-term perspective, this provides the agency and community an action plan for financial sustainability, as well as a logical and rational approach toward price setting"²⁰ Developing a cost recovery model that balances essential services and community benefit vs. individual benefit and premium services and facilities should be a guiding principle for Lowell. In addition, facility fee waivers, scholarships and sliding fee waivers may be tools to offer programs and services while also providing equitable access to citizens. Using examples from peer organizations in conjunction with organizational goals can help the City of Lowell develop an effective model.



[\(Example: Asheville Parks and Rec\)](#)²¹

Funding/Grant Opportunities

Every parks and recreation department is challenged to meet the facility and programmatic needs of their community with a finite source of revenues. Community bonds dependent on tax increases have been and will continue to be a source of funds for land acquisition and capital projects. However, individual grants may apply to multiple projects and may include the use of overlapping grants for a different project. The integration of stormwater and other emergency management features into projects such as a recreation center or recreation trail can significantly increase the grant funding opportunities available to the city .

Examples of design features that would introduce additional grant opportunities would include:

- the construction of parking areas to act as drainage and/or treatment basins for severe weather events;
- stormwater retention ponds that alleviate localized flooding as part of park or trail project;
- and the hardening of an indoor facility such as a recreation center to act as a shelter and/or public outreach center before and after a disaster.

Utilizing multiple funding sources has become the most effective way of maximizing the amount of funding a community can obtain. “Grant Stacking” allows a project to draw funding from several sources. The idea of “Grant Stacking” refers to grouping grants of varying levels (federal, state and local) to support one project. Careful selection of grants can result in one grant providing the matching funds requirement for another grant. This process can address acquisition and development in phases to best meet a project’s intent and time schedule.



Funding Program	Grant Type	Details	Due
NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund	Recreation	The statewide program helps local governments reach their park and public access goals to improve the quality of life in their communities.	Spring
NC Recreational Trails Program	Recreation	Designed to help states provide and maintain recreational trails for both motorized and non-motorized recreational trail use.	Summer
Land Water Conservation Fund	Recreation Conservation	State Grants program provides matching grants to States and local governments for locally supported projects that provide close-to-home recreation areas and facilities	Summer
Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Grant	Recreation Mobility	To encourage municipalities to develop comprehensive bicycle plans and pedestrian plans.	Summer
Safe Routes To School: Non-Infrastructure Transportation Alternatives Program	Community Development, Mobility	Provides an opportunity for communities to improve conditions for bicycling and walking to school	Open
Clean Water Management Trust Fund	Stream Restoration, Stormwater, Water Quality Conservation	Various funds to finance projects for acquisition, restoration, planning and innovation	Winter

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