



3. Local Parks and Recreation

THE NEED of Tennessee's cities and counties to provide diverse, close-to-home recreation opportunities for all their residents.

Satisfying the full spectrum of diverse recreation needs is primarily the job of local parks and recreation departments. Only local parks departments can deliver critically important opportunities to work recreation into daily life, where it is most needed. An effective recreation delivery system requires a state-wide network of parks and recreation departments that can give all Tennesseans access to the recreation they need, regardless of where they live.

Access to nearby parks and recreation centers, like fire and police protection, is essential to the well-being of every Tennessee resident. One of the things that distinguishes human beings from all but the most intelligent animals is the need for play. Young children need playgrounds and natural environments for healthy mental and physical development. Older children need places for regular exercise, such as sports and active play. To counter the stresses of daily life, adults need quiet, reassuring places for walking, running, bicycling, playing sports, or just sitting under a tree and reading. Those with physical or mental challenges need acces-

sible places and facilities for regular therapeutic exercise. Older adults need routine exercise to maintain their mobility and alertness. Families need attractive places where they can gather with relatives and friends.

Recreation Delivery System Analysis

If the goal of an effective statewide recreation delivery system is to serve all Tennessee residents, the first step is to identify the gaps that may exist in the system now and those that can be anticipated in the next decade. The following analysis is based on a geospatial

analysis comparing the locations of existing parks and recreation departments in Tennessee with US Census population data and density patterns.

The local recreation infrastructure as it currently exists in Tennessee contains wide disparities in the levels of recreation opportunities available to residents of the 95 counties. Twenty-six of Tennessee’s counties and 118 municipalities have organized parks and recreation departments. Eighteen counties have both municipal and county departments. Forty-three counties have one or more municipal departments but no county department to address the needs of residents living outside municipal jurisdictions. Twenty-two counties have no organized recreation delivery system at all.

For this discussion, the counties are categorized into three groups according to their levels of unmet needs:

- Counties without a recreation delivery system,
- Counties with the largest populations and highest growth rates,
- High-sprawl counties without a county-wide parks department.

Counties with No Recreation Delivery System

The 24 counties in the table at right have neither a municipal nor a county parks and recreation department. These counties may have ballfields and sports leagues organized by committed volunteers, but they are not able to provide a range of opportunities as required by a diverse population. These are low-population rural counties, many of them economically depressed, which contain a total of 303,384 residents. The populations of most of these counties is stable or declining slowly. Four of them - DeKalb, Moore, Smith, and Union - are projected to experience double-digit growth in the next decade.

Assisting these counties in establishing at least minimal recreation delivery systems should be a high priority. Many of them lie in geographic clusters, suggesting the option of organizing regional park entities, possibly with assistance from neighboring counties. These clusters are as follows:

Houston, Humphreys, Perry, and Benton. These counties are already organized regionally under the Tennessee River Trails initiative. This organization could serve as the basis for a regional parks entity. Lewis County, which abuts Perry, might be included.

Crockett, Henderson, and Chester. All of these counties adjoin Madison County, which has a well established parks and recreation department. This linkage suggests a mentoring partnership to share expertise and help the three unserved counties organize their own recreation delivery systems.

24 Counties with No Recreation Delivery System

County	% Growth 2008-2020	Pop. 2008
Benton	-3%	16,193
Bledsoe	7%	13,142
Cannon	4%	13,804
Chester	2%	16,309
Clay	4%	7,794
Crockett	-4%	14,186
DeKalb	15%	18,694
Fentress	4%	17,667
Hancock	-2%	6,693
Henderson	4%	26,916
Houston	-8%	8,137
Humphreys	-2%	18,149
Lake	0%	7,323
Lewis	-1%	11,564
Moore	10%	6,195
Overton	5%	20,975
Perry	-4%	7,753
Pickett	-5%	4,801
Polk	-9%	15,671
Smith	10%	19,107
Trousdale	-4%	7,822
Union	15%	19,008
Van Buren	-15%	5,481

DeKalb, Cannon, Trousdale, and Smith. These neighboring counties could form a regional park entity, with possible assistance from the city or county departments in Rutherford or Putnam. Two of these counties, DeKalb and Smith, are projected to experience 10% population growth by 2020, making them high priority targets for assistance.

Clay, Overton, Pickett and Fentress. These counties adjoin Putnam and Cumberland Counties, both of which have organized departments. All have shown a willingness to cooperate on a regional basis, having worked together for the Cumberland Plateau Heritage Corridor and the Borderlands Project. There is potential for a regional park entity with assistance from professionals in Putnam and Cumberland.

Van Buren and Bledsoe. These neighboring counties could form a regional park entity, with possible assistance from the city or county department in Cumberland County.

Largest Population and Highest Growth Counties

Tennessee’s ten metropolitan counties contain 53% of the state’s population, making the metropolitan parks

and recreation departments in those counties the most significant recreation providers in the state. The total population of these counties is projected to grow by 11% by 2020, with a total of 357,254 new residents.

**10 Highest Population Counties
2008 & 2020**

County	Pop. 2008	Pop. 2020
Shelby	906,825	875,972
Davidson	626,144	736,606
Knox	430,019	471,912
Hamilton	332,848	328,290
Rutherford	249,270	347,974
Williamson	171,452	241,933
Sumner	155,474	190,388
Montgomery	154,756	167,895
Sullivan	147,465	147,465
Blount	151,018	151,018

These urban counties face many challenges. They must serve diverse populations with a wide range of recreation interests. They are home to the largest numbers



of African-American residents in the state and must ensure that their needs for safe, close-to-home recreation are served. They also have the highest percentages of newcomers, who often arrive from other cities with high expectations of diverse recreation opportunities and facilities. Operating in urban environments means they must contend with safety and security issues. These departments are constantly faced with increasing demand and the need for additional sports and fitness programming. Higher volume use of parks and facilities means that their maintenance costs are higher. All of these counties except Davidson have both city and county parks systems, and coordination between these can be a challenge as well.

The Trust for Public Lands annually assesses the parks departments of the nation's 77 most populous cities, which includes Tennessee's two largest cities. The data from this study allows a comparison of the state's largest parks departments with those of other southeastern states. As the tables below indicate, both Memphis and Nashville rank near the bottom in terms of park acres per thousand residents. While Nashville is in the mid-range of cities in terms of operating budgets per capita, Memphis ranks at the bottom, spending significantly less per resident than other southeastern cities.

The 13 counties with the highest rates of projected population growth will account for 31% of Tennessee's

total population growth in the next decade. Most of these counties have become bedroom communities for adjoining metropolitan counties, and new residents have come there seeking larger lot sizes and rural amenities. This kind of demand continues to encourage sprawl, making it difficult for the parks and recreation departments to keep up with the pace of new growth.

The parks and recreation departments in both the large population counties and the high growth counties face significant obstacles in serving their residents. New parks are needed, but land values have risen in response to increasing demand, making it ever more expensive to acquire new parklands. If current sprawl patterns continue, the new residential developments are likely to be located not close to town but farther out in the county, far from existing parks and facilities. These counties typically experience traffic congestion and increased driving times, making it harder for residents to get to distant parks and more important to have recreation opportunities close to where people live. Since a lack of time is cited most often as the reason for not participating in recreation activities, having to drive a long way to reach a park will mean fewer people will engage in any form of recreation or exercise.

High-sprawl Counties with No County Department

Three of the fastest growing counties in the state - Fayette, Wilson, and Sumner - have municipal departments but no county-wide parks and recreation department. In these counties, suburban sprawl has

	Park Acres per 1,000 Residents
Jacksonville	128.8
Virginia Beach	41.1
Raleigh	32.6
Greensboro, N.C.	24.9
Louisville	22.3
Lexington/Fayette	20.7
Charlotte/Mecklenburg	20.2
Nashville/Davidson	17.6
Memphis	13.6
Atlanta	7.4

	Park Operations Spending Per Capita
Virginia Beach	\$104
Raleigh	\$95
Atlanta	\$85
Greensboro, N.C.	\$76
Lexington/Fayette	\$66
Nashville/Davidson	\$55
Jacksonville	\$40
Charlotte/Mecklenburg	\$39
Louisville	\$35
Memphis	\$23

13 Highest Growth Rate Counties, 2008-2020

County	Pop. Change 2008-2020	% Pop. Change 2008-2020	Pop. Density 2020
Fayette	15,878	42%	77
Williamson	70,481	41%	415
Rutherford	98,704	40%	562
Bedford	12,833	29%	121
Sequatchie	3,663	27%	65
Sevier	22,093	26%	181
Wilson	26,989	25%	240
Loudon	11,318	24%	253
Blount	29,507	24%	270
Monroe	10,633	23%	89
Sumner	34,914	22%	360
Cumberland	11,753	22%	96
Robertson	14,040	22%	166



Counties with No County-wide P&R - 15 with Highest Growth Rate, 2008 - 2020

County	Pop. 2020	% Pop. Change 2008-2020	Projected Pop. Density 2020
Fayette	54,051	42%	77
Bedford	57,529	29%	121
Sevier	106,928	26%	181
Wilson	136,792	25%	240
Monroe	56,281	23%	89
Sumner	190,388	22%	360
Robertson	78,938	22%	166
Jefferson	61,411	20%	224
Coffee	60,017	15%	140
Macon	24,848	14%	58
Carter	67,605	14%	198
Dickson	54,281	13%	111
Tipton	66,124	13%	144
Hawkins	64,667	13%	133
Franklin	45,531	11%	82

Counties with No County-wide P&R - 15 with Highest Projected Density by 2020

County	Pop Projection 2020	% Pop Change 2008-2020	Projected Pop Density 2020
Washington	129,326	9%	396
Sumner	190,388	22%	360
Sullivan	147,465	-4%	357
Wilson	136,792	25%	240
Jefferson	61,411	20%	224
Carter	67,605	14%	198
Sevier	106,928	26%	181
Robertson	78,938	22%	166
Tipton	66,124	13%	144
Coffee	60,017	15%	140
Hawkins	64,667	13%	133
Bedford	57,529	29%	121
Greene	71,155	8%	114
Dickson	54,281	13%	111
Rhea	33,862	10%	107

resulted in large populations living outside the range of a parks jurisdiction. Similar situations exist in the other counties shown in the table on page 42. In Fayette, Monroe, Macon, and Franklin counties, low population densities are likely to encourage sprawl far beyond municipal boundaries. As the state's fastest growing county in the next decade, Fayette County should be considered a special priority. This county, with only one small municipal department, is unprepared to provide adequate parks for its new residents. In all these cases, a county-wide parks and recreation department appears to be severely needed.

Analysis of population density patterns yields another perspective on the gaps that exist in counties without county-wide parks departments. Counties with high densities are more likely to have many residents living outside urban boundaries. High density is most evident in the easternmost counties of Tennessee, many

of which do not have county-wide parks departments. While these counties enjoy proximity to outstanding recreational resources in the Cherokee National Forest and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, these resources are no substitute for close-to-home opportunities for regular exercise and relaxation. The most significant gap exists in the cluster of Sullivan, Washington, Carter, and Greene counties, where several cities have expanded outward, creating an area of nearly continuous urban density which lies outside municipal jurisdictions. These counties should be considered high priority candidates for unified county-wide systems.

Sumner County represents a special case among counties without county-wide parks departments. It has the highest population of this category, it is one of the fastest growing counties in the state, and it already has relatively high population density. The county has four municipal departments, located in Gallatin,



Hendersonville, Portland, and White House. This county may already have the state's largest number of unserved residents, and the problem will get much worse in the next decade unless a county-wide system is established.

Ongoing Assessment

While analysis based on population and geospatial data alone cannot provide a complete picture of conditions on the ground in Tennessee's counties, it does suggest where gaps appear to exist in the state's recreation delivery system. Developing a full-coverage, statewide system will require a more detailed assessment of every county's recreation delivery system and the opportunities that exist to expand its scope of services. The Tennessee Recreation One-Stop database, described



elsewhere in this plan, will further this process by building a GIS inventory of all local recreation resources in the state. This data can be overlaid with population data to pinpoint critical gaps that exist in specific locations. In the meantime, this plan's analysis can serve as a guide to allow TDEC, through its Recreation Educational Services Division (RES) and Parks and Recreation Technical Assistance Service (PARTAS), to prioritize locations where grant funding and technical assistance will address the most significantly underserved areas.

Strategies

This plan's survey of local recreation providers reveals the highest priority issue to be a lack of adequate funding for programming, new parks, and maintenance. Underfunding, coupled with population growth and the high cost of new parklands means that all departments, especially those in high growth counties, are challenged keep up with increasing demand for services. The funding issue is addressed in this plan's **Advocacy and Funding** initiative.

Local recreation departments must also implement strategies to do more with the funds available, especially in a time of restricted government budgets. Partnerships and cooperative agreements can leverage existing resources and programs to help providers close gaps in service and expand recreation opportunities economically. The following strategies make use of such mechanisms.

Coordination of Recreation and Planning

Since recreation is a basic human need, a county's existing and potential recreation resources should be considered as vital amenities that deserve consideration in zoning, infrastructure planning, and permitting processes. Too often these resources are overlooked in such processes because the county's planning body works independently of the local parks agency. Parks departments can be in a better position to address growth issues if they are represented on their county

planning commissions and can urge these bodies to consider the public's needs for close-to-home parks as an integral part of planning and permitting. Specifically, recreation resources should be identified as vital community facilities in the county's Comprehensive Plan, as required under Tennessee's Growth Policy Act. These plans can include measures to protect open space for recreation, but that often does not happen unless there are recreation professionals at the table.

When counties issue permits for new subdivisions, they can require a certain percentage of land to be set aside and dedicated for conservation or recreation purposes. The reasonable premise behind such a requirement is that new developments need to mitigate their negative impacts on the community, one of which is the loss of open space for recreation and natural habitat and increased population pressure on existing recreational resources. Unfortunately, the lands that are dedicated in this way may benefit only the immediate subdivision, or may be of little value for public recreation. A better alternative is to allow developers to provide off-site open space by paying fees in lieu of dedication, which are placed in a fund the county uses for parkland acquisition and open space preservation. The county can provide an incentive for this alternative by permitting higher density development, allowing the developer to build more units on the same parcel. This option can enable a county to acquire high-value parklands as needed to serve a growing population. In a county such as Fayette, which is experiencing rapid growth but still has plenty of undeveloped land, this strategy could allow the county to acquire high quality parklands and greenways while open space is still available.

School/Parks Joint Use Agreements

Perhaps the most economical way a city or county can expand public recreation opportunities is to negotiate school/parks joint use agreements between the parks agency and the local public schools. Such agreements can be beneficial for both partners: the parks department is able to offer the public more recreation centers

and sports fields without having to build them, and the schools can reduce costs by shifting a share of the operation and maintenance to the parks. PARTAS has developed a model school/parks joint use agreement and provides technical assistance in negotiating such agreements. There are now 50 such partnerships in the state, and these have been highly successful in several counties. Davidson County has a representative of the school board on its parks commission, and its ten-year parks master plan includes building a playground at every elementary school in the county.

A school/parks agreement can be especially effective when a new school is being planned. A partnership between the City of Paris Parks and Recreation Department and the Paris Special School District in the design of a new county elementary school resulted in an impressive sports complex and public recreation center managed jointly by both agencies. In addition, the Henry County School District donated land for six tennis courts managed by the city.

School grounds and facilities are publicly owned resources paid for with tax dollars, and by rights they ought to be universally available to residents who need to use them. Ultimately, however, the decision rests with individual school principals, who may have concerns about safety and security that can make them reluctant to invite the public onto the school grounds or into the building. These concerns can be addressed through separate school entrances for public users and interior security barriers installed to prevent access to the rest of the building, but first the principal has to be willing to entertain the concept of public use. An important part of the decision process is to provide incentives for the schools to participate. These may include:

- Increased student access to sports grounds and facilities in public parks.
- Parks department maintenance of school grounds and shared maintenance and operating costs for indoor facilities.

- Lease revenue for the school, paid with funds appropriated by the county

School/parks agreements could be a solution to gaps in recreation opportunity all across Tennessee. For metropolitan and high growth counties, they could help address the problem of the high cost of new park land. In small rural counties, especially those with few recreation facilities, they may be the only way to help residents get regular exercise, a critical goal given the state's epidemic of obesity and diabetes. The Tennessee Department of Education could essentially transform the local recreation picture in the state by simply encouraging, or ideally mandating, the schools to enter into joint use agreements.

Alternative Transportation

The online survey conducted for this plan registered the highest level of demand for connecting greenways, trails, bicycle lanes, and sidewalks into an integrated network to facilitate alternative transportation. One benefit of addressing this demand is that it can provide opportunities for the greatest number of residents, since walking for pleasure is the number-one recreation activity among Tennesseans, according to the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment. Walking and bicycling, being human-powered, also serve as excellent recreational fitness activities, contributing to public health while lowering greenhouse gas emissions. As with school facilities, the resources required, such as street rights-of-way, are often in the public domain or can be created through easement agreements, offering a more economical way to expand opportunities without having to acquire land. Alternative transportation is especially appropriate for urban dwellers, who already have two good reasons to walk or ride bicycles: congested traffic and diverse destinations located close together. In many Tennessee cities and towns, a three-mile bicycle ride can take one to work, school, church, and

stores. TDOT has established a priority for alternative transportation, and their cooperation will be necessary to create the required infrastructure.

County-wide Consolidation

For counties that have one or more municipal departments but no county-wide department, consolidating the existing agencies into county-wide departments can eliminate duplication of effort and save money while expanding the coverage of recreation services. Three established examples of joint city/county departments - Maryville-Alcoa-Blount County, Brownsville-Haywood County, and Mountain City-Johnson County - could serve as models. The same consolidation strategy could also bring greater efficiencies to urban counties, most of which have both city and county departments.

Multi-County Partnerships

For cash-strapped rural counties that have no recreation delivery system, a way to begin providing recreation and fitness opportunities for their residents would be to partner with other counties. Opportunities exist to form mentoring partnerships with neighboring counties that are staffed with recreation professionals. Unserved counties that fall into clusters may be able to bootstrap by forming regional parks and recreation entities with assistance from neighboring counties. The state can assist such efforts by establishing a program modeled after the South Carolina Rural Recreation project, which provides small rural counties with recreation directors in the summer months. Clemson University's Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management Department provides management support and field staff. Providing seasonal recreation directors for Tennessee's unserved rural counties can begin to demonstrate the value of having a local recreation provider and help create demand for an organized multi-county recreation agency.

2015 Action Plan

Quality Growth

The regional entities involved in this plan's Quality Growth initiative should:

- Encourage counties to include a representative of the local parks and recreation department on the county planning commission;
- Define recreation resources as community facilities in their comprehensive plans;
- Propose the use of parkland acquisition fees as an alternative to land set-asides for new developments;
- Stress the value of creating interconnected networks of greenways, bicycle lanes, and sidewalks; and
- Encourage counties and communities to conserve open space for future recreation needs.

County-wide Departments

PARTAS should encourage the high growth counties that lack a county-wide department to form one. The highest priority should be given to Fayette County; Sullivan, Washington, Carter, and Greene Counties; and Sumner County. TDEC/RES should consider a grant priority for high-growth counties that establish county-wide recreation delivery systems.

School/Parks Agreements

PARTAS should continue to assist cities and counties in developing school-parks agreements and should develop a model incentive program for local agencies to use in encouraging school principals to enter into such agreements. TDEC/RES should consider a grant priority for joint use projects undertaken through such partnerships.



The regional Quality Growth entities should encourage counties to define school recreation facilities and grounds as community amenities in their comprehensive plans.

The Tennessee Department of Education should establish a mandate for schools to enter into joint use agreements with local parks and recreation departments.

Alternative Transportation

TDEC/RES should continue to encourage creation of local greenways in its technical assistance and grant priorities, with an emphasis on connectivity of greenways, bicycle lanes, and sidewalks into local or regional networks.

TDOT should continue to fund TDEC's Greenways Coordinator position as a means of encouraging the growth of alternative transportation and should cooperate with local governments in providing sidewalks and bicycle lanes.

Multi-County Partnerships

For counties that currently lack recreation delivery systems, PARTAS should develop a multi-county partnership template and encourage recreation professionals in counties with established parks and recreation departments to enter into mentoring relationships with neighboring counties. TDEC/RES should establish a special priority in the grants program for counties that enter into such relationships. The four counties in this class which will experience relatively high growth in the next decade - DeKalb, Moore, Smith, and Union - should receive special attention.

Recreation Summit

TDEC will convene a recurring series of Recreation Summits on Parks, People, and Landscapes in 2010 as a means to encourage ongoing implementation of this Tennessee 2020 plan. The first of these summits should focus on issues relating to local parks and recreation departments as a way to implement and create awareness of this initiative and develop other strate-

gies to expand and improve the state's local recreation delivery system.

2020 Vision

All Tennesseans, regardless of where they live, will have access to consistent recreation services and close-to-home opportunities to enjoy recreation, exercise, and interaction with nature.

Coordination Links

Advocacy and Funding. Research findings on the economic impacts of parks and recreation will give local decision-makers information to help them appreciate why parks and recreation departments should be fully funded.

Tennessee Recreation One-Stop. The statewide recreation resource database to be built for this initiative will provide a detailed geospatial inventory of all municipal and county parks, facilities, greenways, sports fields, and recreation programming. This data will allow TDEC to identify locations where gaps exist in the state's recreation delivery system.

Public Health. Closing the gaps in the state's recreation delivery system will allow more Tennessee residents to have access to exercise and fitness opportunities.

Children in Nature. This initiative will help local parks and recreation departments serve the needs of children and families for opportunities to interact with nature.

Environmental Education. This initiative can encourage school/parks agreements by establishing education-related partnerships between schools and local parks and recreation departments.

Quality Growth. The Quality Growth initiative will give local parks and recreation departments a voice in the process of land-use planning and permitting.

Recreational Waters. Increasing access to publicly owned waterways, both through stream and creek access and through the creation of Blueways, will allow local parks to provide more diverse opportunities without having to acquire new parklands.