

Executive Summary

Report of the Joint Master Recreation and Parks Work Group

June 15, 1999

Introduction

On November 19, 1997, the Board of Commissioners created a Joint Master Recreation and Parks Work Group. The Work Group was developed to follow up on two reports: a 1996 Assembly of Governments report "Recreation and Parks Issues in Orange County, NC", and a May 1997 report entitled "Coordination of Parks and Recreation Services for Carrboro, Chapel Hill and Orange County", developed by the area Managers.

The charge to the Work Group was to:

"update and modify the Master Recreation and Parks Plan to be a joint long-range capital facilities plan for Orange County, Carrboro and Chapel Hill..."

Although not listed in the charge, Town of Hillsborough and OWASA representatives participated in the work group effort. In accomplishing this task the Work Group was asked to address the following topics:

- An update of recreational facilities countywide
- An update of local recreation and parks needs
- Develop standards for park facilities and design
- Joint siting, design and management of school and park sites
- Tangible and realistic parkland acquisition goals
- Reassess payment-in-lieu of dedication programs (and service area boundaries for programs)
- Dedication provisions for greenways in the Joint Planning Area

The Work Group began on December 17, 1997. The group met monthly over the next 17 months (including six months of additional subcommittee work) to produce a report. While the Work Group reviewing a great deal of research and discussed a wide variety of topics, a summary of the report may best be considered in the following six topical categories:

1. Where Are We Now?

In evaluating the status of recreation and parks in the County, the Work Group created two

committees. The Resource Inventory Committee worked during the spring and summer of 1998 to develop a template for tracking all existing recreational facilities, and discuss a map or brochure to convey these facilities to the public. The inventory of facilities (including quasi-public and private "fee-based" locations) is included as Appendix C to the report. The inventory would be maintained for future use, and contains information on the type of activities available at each location.

The Needs Assessment Committee met during the spring and summer of 1998 to update recreation and parks needs from each jurisdiction. These needs are found on pages 4-7 of the report, and run the gamut from active recreation facilities to community parks, greenways and "low-impact" recreation. In summary, the primary needs identified for each jurisdiction were:

Jurisdiction	Primary Needs
Carrboro	Acquire/develop Northern Community Park, community gymnasium
Chapel Hill	Complete Northern Community Park, Southern Community Park
Hillsborough	River Walk, Fairview Park, Occoneechee Park
Orange County	Complete Efland-Cheeks Park, Northern Human Services Center Park, acquire parkland in Bingham/Little River Twps

An evaluation of previous bonds and projects constructed with those monies is also provided on pages 7-10 of the document. A summary of needs appears on page 19.

The Work Group discussed the concept of a Countywide set of standards for facilities and park design. The development of a common set of standards was recognized as important, but because of time considerations was deferred by the Work Group. Recommendation B on page 35 addresses this topic.

2. Where Do We Go From Here

With knowledge of needs and facilities, the Work Group then turned its attention to future concerns. One such area was a set of goals and criteria for future land acquisition and facility sitings. In general, the goals and criteria (pages 12-14) encourage joint siting of schools and parks, preservation of resources in conjunction with parks development, awareness of environmentally-sensitive lands, the existence of matching funds, considering the intensity of use, and locations for linear parks.

The work of the Schools and Land Use Councils was recognized as an important piece of the recreation picture, and the idea of joint management of school and park sites (as well as possible joint acquisition) is a theme throughout the report.

One topic that the report notes regards impediments to locating new active recreation facilities. These impediments exist primarily in the context of lighting, intensity, traffic and noise. In defining both active and low-impact recreation, it is important to be consistent with surrounding land uses. Ideas on ways to mitigate the impacts of larger active facilities include co-location of schools and parks, combining active and low-impact recreation in larger park settings to buffer residential areas, and the need for a proactive land acquisition program to purchase lands for long-term use as parks (and/or schools).

The potential for coordinating parks planning exists beyond the scope of the local governments involved in this effort. In particular, the report notes the significant potential for coordination with UNC, OWASA and Duke University in meeting long-term needs of mutual interest. While UNC provides many facilities used by students (and local residents), there is also an undefined impact on local recreation facilities from faculty and staff of the University. Programs such as the Carolina Outdoor Recreation Center offer a means for sharing resources, and the potential exists for collaboration on future recreational facilities with UNC.

Likewise, OWASA currently provides recreation facilities at both University Lake and Cane Creek Reservoir. OWASA holds over 3,000 acres of land in the County, some of which appears to offer the opportunity for coordinated recreational use. A memo from the OWASA Board (Appendix F) indicates a willingness to discuss certain parcels for future public use. And finally, Duke Forest also provides a recreational resource to County citizens. While concerns about protecting the integrity of the forest resources will be paramount, opportunities exist to work with Duke in the future, particularly in terms of carefully-located trails that fit with the University's plans.

3. Adequate Provision of Parkland and Natural Corridors

One of the most prominent needs identified is to preserve green corridors, whether in an urban or rural setting. This section of the report addresses the potential for linking some existing and proposed greenway networks in Chapel Hill, Carrboro and Hillsborough to future parks and regional open space such as Eno River State Park and Duke Forest.

The importance of existing and future greenways in the Towns is noted, as well as the existence of a schematic plan for greenways extending from the Chapel Hill/Carrboro area into the Rural Buffer, developed in 1986 as part of the Joint Planning Area Land Use Plan. Wildlife corridors in the rural areas were introduced into County planning efforts through the 1988 Inventory of Natural Areas and Wildlife Habitat, and are important to the overall County and regional ecosystem as part of the "green infrastructure." These corridors are undeveloped riparian stream corridors or overland connectors that exist in a natural state. Any trails would exist only as they have evolved over time by use of wildlife or humans.

However, as the County and Towns continue to grow, it will become important to link Town parks to regional corridors such as Eno River State Park, nodes of open space such as Duke Forest, and future County parks and open space. Linking future rural parks and open space to Town parks via a few unpaved trails could greatly expand low-impact recreational opportunities. The identification of strategic corridors that might tie together these recreation

facilities is suggested as a practical long-term goal. Using criteria and a classification scheme, the potential for a select few woodland trails as part of a Countywide (and eventually) regional corridor scheme is noted. Three examples of such trail links are offered (two within the Towns or Rural Buffer, one in the rural areas linking Cane Creek and Eno River State Park) are offered.

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4. Coordinated Land Acquisition for Parks

The 1996 and 1997 reports point to the need for coordinated capital funding, and this is one of the goals of this project. In discussing parks needs and goals, the Work Group placed a strong emphasis on the need to begin land acquisition for long-term park needs now.

Orange County has taken steps in 1999 to create a mechanism that could be used in this fashion. The new Department of Environment and Resource Conservation began operation on January 4, with a primary focus on acquisition/easements of critical land resources. A Land Acquisition Program for Orange County is currently being developed for discussion in the fall of 1999. This program will develop and/or use inventories, criteria and a management structure for the acquisition and stewardship of land resources deemed critical to the public interest, working with other existing land trusts and entities. The program will involve the preservation of natural areas and wildlife habitat, farmland, riparian buffers, and the acquisition of lands for long-term parks use. The County is hiring a Land Resources Conservation Manager, with expertise in site evaluation and land acquisition this summer. This position will coordinate land acquisition efforts, and would use the criteria developed in the Master Recreation and Parks effort to evaluate land purchases for parks (please see the Recommendations section for additional details). The outline of the Land Resource Acquisition Program may be found in the report on page 26.

Funding for long-term parkland acquisition would likely involve local bonds and allocations, and grants from programs such as the state Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. Information on this program is provided on pages 27-28.

5. Payment-in-Lieu Programs

All of the jurisdictions in the County have provisions in their development ordinances addressing dedication or provision of recreation facilities. Carrboro and Orange County also have payment-in-lieu of dedication programs, which allows for the payment of a fee based on the number of lots in lieu of providing recreation facilities. Orange County has special legislation that would allow for the use of an impact fee for public uses including recreation, but this proviso has not been utilized to date.

As of 1999, Carrboro has collected \$453,000 through its payment-in-lieu program. Orange County currently has \$488,000 available, allocated by four districts in which the money must be spent. The County has also received land dedications totaling 44 acres since 1986, although this land is in small pieces exclusively in Bingham and Chapel Hill Townships.

The Work Group found that difficulties exist with the existing payment-in-lieu programs. The funds must be geographically earmarked and spent within the area collected. They must also be supplemented with matching funds for use. Considerable research was performed to explore programs in other jurisdictions, and a special meeting with Richard Ducker from the Institute of Government was held to review payment-in-lieu possibilities.

6. Recommendations

Using the research and deliberations of 17 months, and with the charge and goals of the project in mind, the Work Group developed nine recommendations, summarized as follows (these recommendations also appear on pages 34-40).

A. Create a Parks and Resource Lands Council

As we move to coordinate long-term recreation and parks planning, the need for a permanent joint council (to meet quarterly) was identified, building on the useful nature of the Work Group itself. Possible duties might include:

- Develop and review standards
- Develop future parks bond proposals
- Provide a coordinating mechanism for parks plan updates
- Make recommendations on allocations of future bond moneys
- Coordinate acquisitions through the County Land Resource Acquisition Program

A resolution asking the local boards to create the Parks and Resource Lands Council is attached as Appendix L.

Inter-jurisdictional Standards

As previously noted, impediments exist to the creation of common standards that could be used Countywide for recreation and parks facilities. If coordinated funding were pursued, the need for some coordinated standard would be important. The Parks and Resource Lands Council is recommended as a mechanism to accomplish this goal.

Joint Siting, Design and Management of School and Park Sites

Coordinating efforts and responsibilities with the Schools and Land Use Councils will be important, given the emphasis from both groups on the benefits of joint school/park development. As discussed in the section on land acquisition, it is recommended that Orange County, with dedicated staff resources, a program for land acquisition, and a role in school siting, should take the lead role.

Public/Private Partnerships

One of the most exciting prospects is the potential for partnerships. Coordination between the local governments on future parks, such as a large district park between Hillsborough and Chapel Hill/Carrboro, will be paramount. Opportunities also exist with OWASA, and it is recommended that the Parks and Resource Lands Council work to identify properties for partnership and meet to explore these possibilities. Coordination with UNC on future parks also

appears practical and should be pursued. While Duke Forest is a different type of recreational entity, it plays an important role in the County's open space network and future discussion of less-sensitive portions of the Forest as links in the open space network should be pursued. Finally, opportunities for coordination with the state, other land trusts and private firms offer many possibilities for future needs.

Joint Capital Facilities Planning / Coordinated Land Acquisition

A meeting of the Managers of each jurisdiction is recommended to develop a plan for coordinating long-term land acquisition. With land prices continuing to escalate and little land available for parks within the Town jurisdictions, action is needed now to identify and acquire future park sites. Use of the individual Capital Improvement Plans could be a fundamental part of this funding mechanism. By timing and matching fund availability, the Towns and County will be able to work together more effectively, with the County serving in a lead role in site identification and acquisition, working with the Parks and Resource Lands Council and the individual elected boards.

Open Facilities Policy

In the spirit of inter-governmental coordination, the Work Group feels that all County citizens should have the opportunity to use facilities within the County, regardless of their jurisdiction of residence. Attempts to restrict use will be cumbersome administratively and not constructive in the collaborative future of parks planning. A resolution to this end for consideration by the elected boards is found as Appendix F. Pursuit of a similar policy with UNC and OWASA is recommended, as is a review of hours of operation at Cane Creek/University Lake.

G. Payment-in-Lieu Changes

After considerable discussion and review, the Work Group finds that the existing payment-in-lieu programs are not likely to produce sufficient funds to meet long-term needs. It is recommended that Orange County and Carrboro develop plans to match other funding with the current payment-in-lieu funds to use these resources. Even with its limitations, the existing payment-in-lieu program should be kept and modified where possible. The potential for an impact fee or impact tax should be explored, using existing legislation.

H. Address Existing Needs

While more thorough standards are needed, a population-based standard from the 1996 Assembly of Governments report was used to determine needs for parklands. Using this standard, the County as a whole has **a current deficit of 645 acres** of parkland. With expected population growth, this is County and Towns combined with have a deficit of **1,265 acres by the year 2025**.

Based on average land sales (weighted for urban and rural lands) and existing bond funds, the cost of purchasing lands to erase the long-term deficit is \$10.12 million in 1999 dollars. Since this will unquestionably rise in the future, the Work Group again recommends immediate action in terms of land acquisitions.

Use of Current Funds and Future Funding Needs

While it may be more practical to develop recreation facilities over time as the population increases, a more-proactive approach to land acquisition is needed to identify and purchase

sites that offer both active and low-impact recreation potential. Matching funds from the different jurisdictions (coordinated through the aforementioned joint capital funding mechanism) should be an important component, and an acreage threshold and additional standards for joint school/park sites are also warranted.

To address long-term needs, the Work Group recommends that the following actions occur:

- The remaining \$2.89 million for land acquisition from the County parks bond should be used for acquisition of lands identified as sites for long-term acquisition as soon as possible.
- The remainder of the \$10 million in long-term land acquisition should be addressed through an **\$8 million parks bond** placed before the voters in November 2000. The Parks and Resource Lands Council should develop the specifics of the bond proposal.