



COLUMBUS COUNTY

PARKS AND RECREATION SYSTEM MASTER PLAN



June 2022

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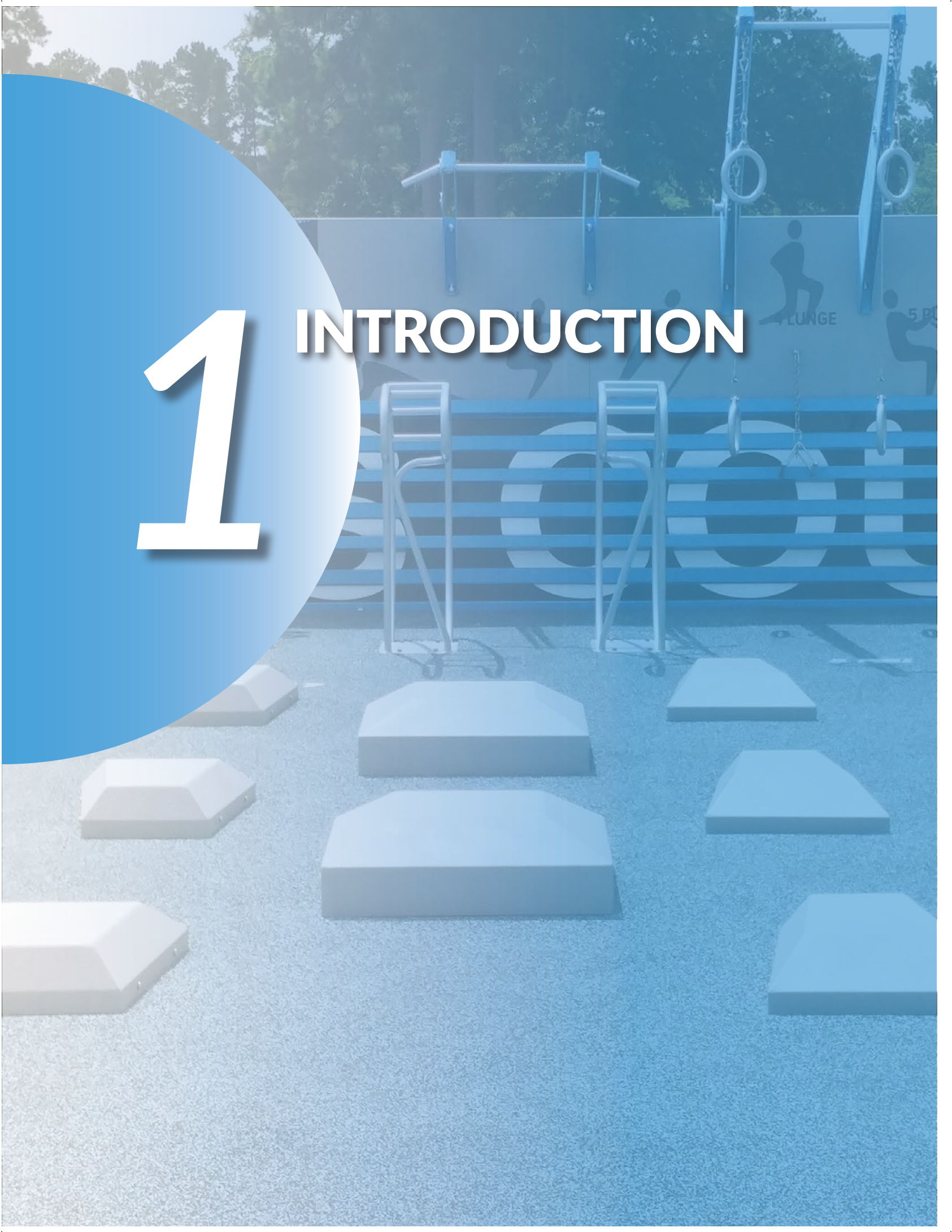
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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Columbus County resides at the southern limits of North Carolina. The County was first populated by the native Waccamaw Siouan tribe. Known to themselves as “The People of the Fallen Star”, the early Waccamaw hunted and tended the lands prior to European settlement in the 17th century.



Under British authority, the lands comprising the County were organized under the Crown in 1696. During the American Revolution skirmishes were fought on these lands, notably The Battle of Seven Creeks and the Battle of Brown Marsh. Upon conclusion of the war, Columbus County was officially formed in 1808.

Today, Columbus County is home to approximately 50,000 residents and is the third largest County in the State, in land mass. The County enjoys various natural amenities including Lake Waccamaw and large portions of natural wooded lands, and heritage areas.



PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

The Columbus County Parks and Recreation System Master Plan is a long-range planning document that is meant to help shape the direction and development of the County's recreation offerings throughout the system over the next ten years. This plan considers previous planning documents, department goals, existing park conditions, and an assessment of community and departmental needs as a basis for developing a strategic vision for recreation opportunities in Columbus County. This vision serves as a framework for proposed recommendations and implementation strategies.

Earlier planning documents include the 2012 Comprehensive Land Use Plan and its subsequent Health and Wellness addendum. These plans illustrate the County's desire to improve the quality of life for its residents, while maintaining the character that makes Columbus County unique. These goals are central to developing excellent parks, recreation facilities, and program opportunities for a diverse population.

As the first system-wide Master Plan undertaken by the Parks and Recreation Department, it provides a point for the beginning for future decision making and serves as a comprehensive guide for planning improvements, acquisition of land, and the operations of parks, trails, park facilities and recreation programs



throughout the County. Master Plan recommendations provide a guideline and identify priorities that will assist County staff in the future formation of programs and the provision of parks and recreation facilities and programs.

Establishing community-defined priorities through engagement with the community, County staff and the Master Planning Steering Committee will help direct the Parks and Recreation Department, maximizing its effectiveness. This Master Plan provides that framework, and ensures that Columbus County continues to be a desirable community for people to live, work and play.



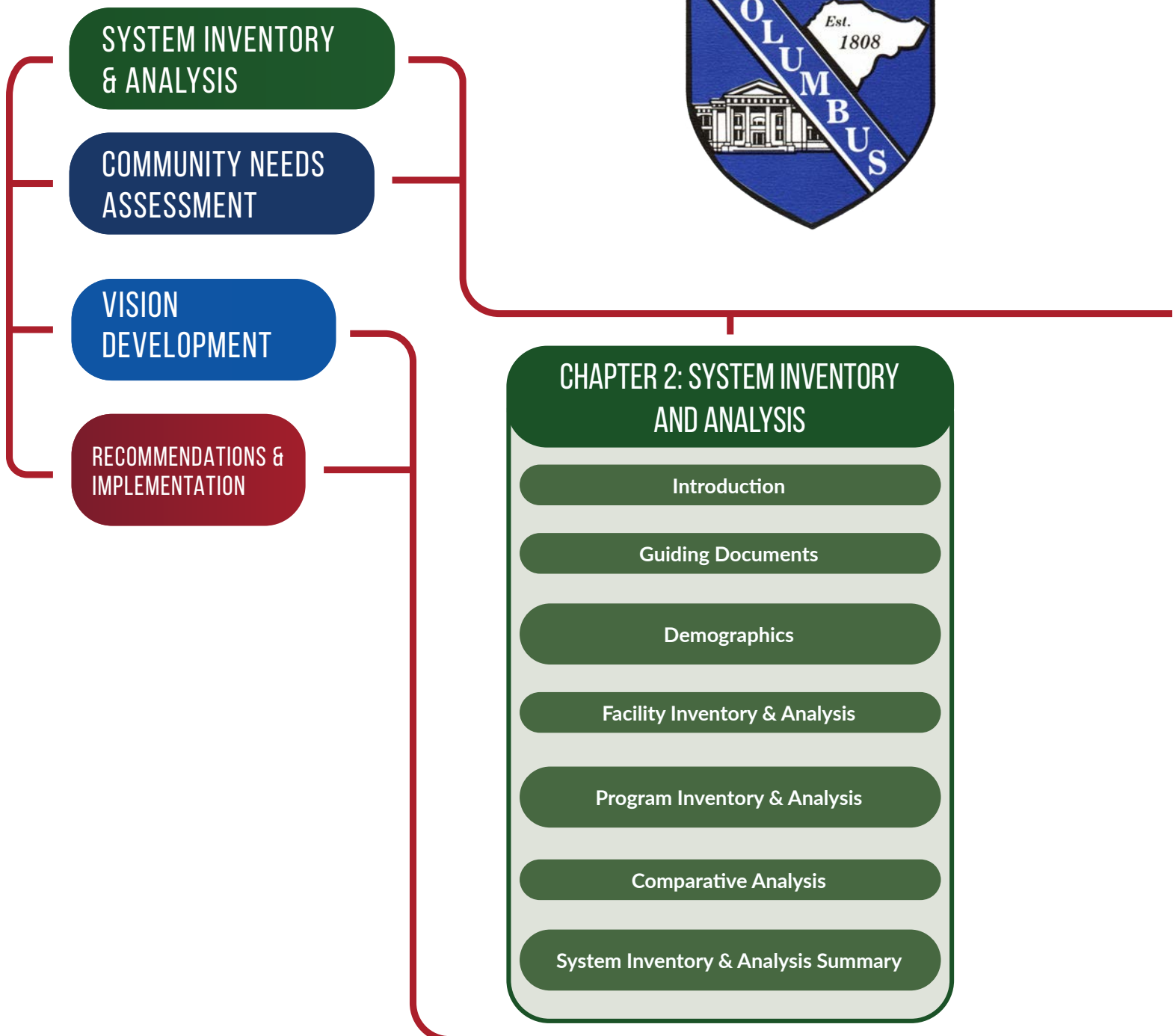
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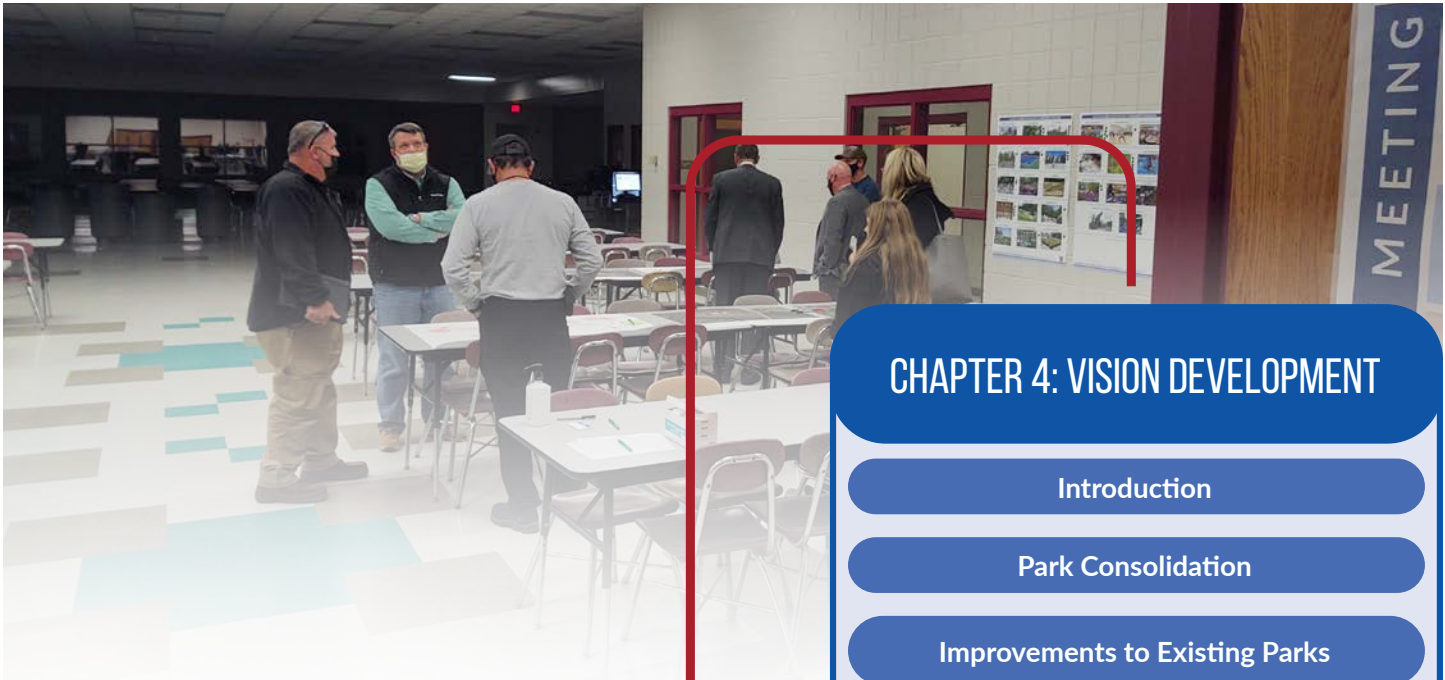
MASTER PLANNING PROCESS

The process for preparing this Master Plan document required engagement with the community and working closely with parks staff, county leadership and a Master Plan Steering Committee. It also included the physical evaluation of current facilities and comparative analysis of current facilities to established national standards.

The process was at once linear and iterative. The process began with visits to existing parks, documentation of current facilities and their condition along with

observations on accessibility and other aspects of each park. Following, the process assessed community needs through surveys and community meetings. With that information in hand, a vision and recommendations for improvements was developed. Supporting that vision is a strategy for implementation.





CHAPTER 4: VISION DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Park Consolidation

Improvements to Existing Parks

Expansion of Park Land

Strengthen Partnerships

Elevate Awareness

Prepare a Greenway/Trail Report

CHAPTER 3: COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Introduction

Community Meetings

Online Community Survey

Steering Committee

Community Needs Assessment Summary

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Recommendations

Opinion of Probable Cost

Capital Improvements

Programming and Operations

Phasing & Financial Plan

DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

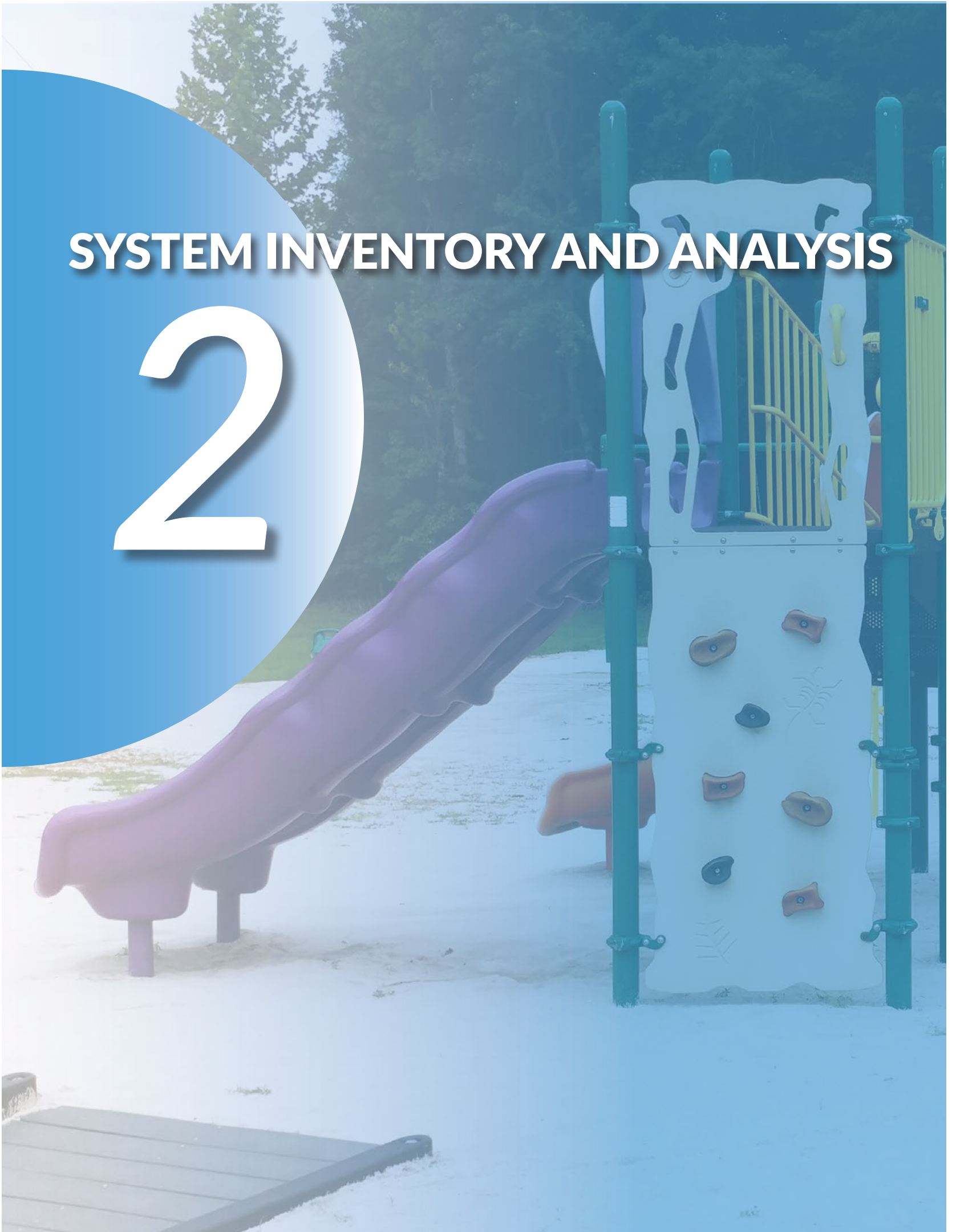
To gain an accurate understanding of the Columbus County Parks and Recreation system, as well as residents' needs, the process was conducted utilizing a mixed-methods, triangulated approach to data analysis. The following diagram identifies the techniques that were used:



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SYSTEM INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

2



SYSTEM INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an understanding of Columbus County's existing parks, facilities, and programs as well as the demographics of the community being served. In addition, the conditions, appearance and functionality of the existing parks will be summarized. Notably, while the County manages 21 parks, it only owns four of them. The other 17 parks are managed/maintained by the County through leases and similar agreements.

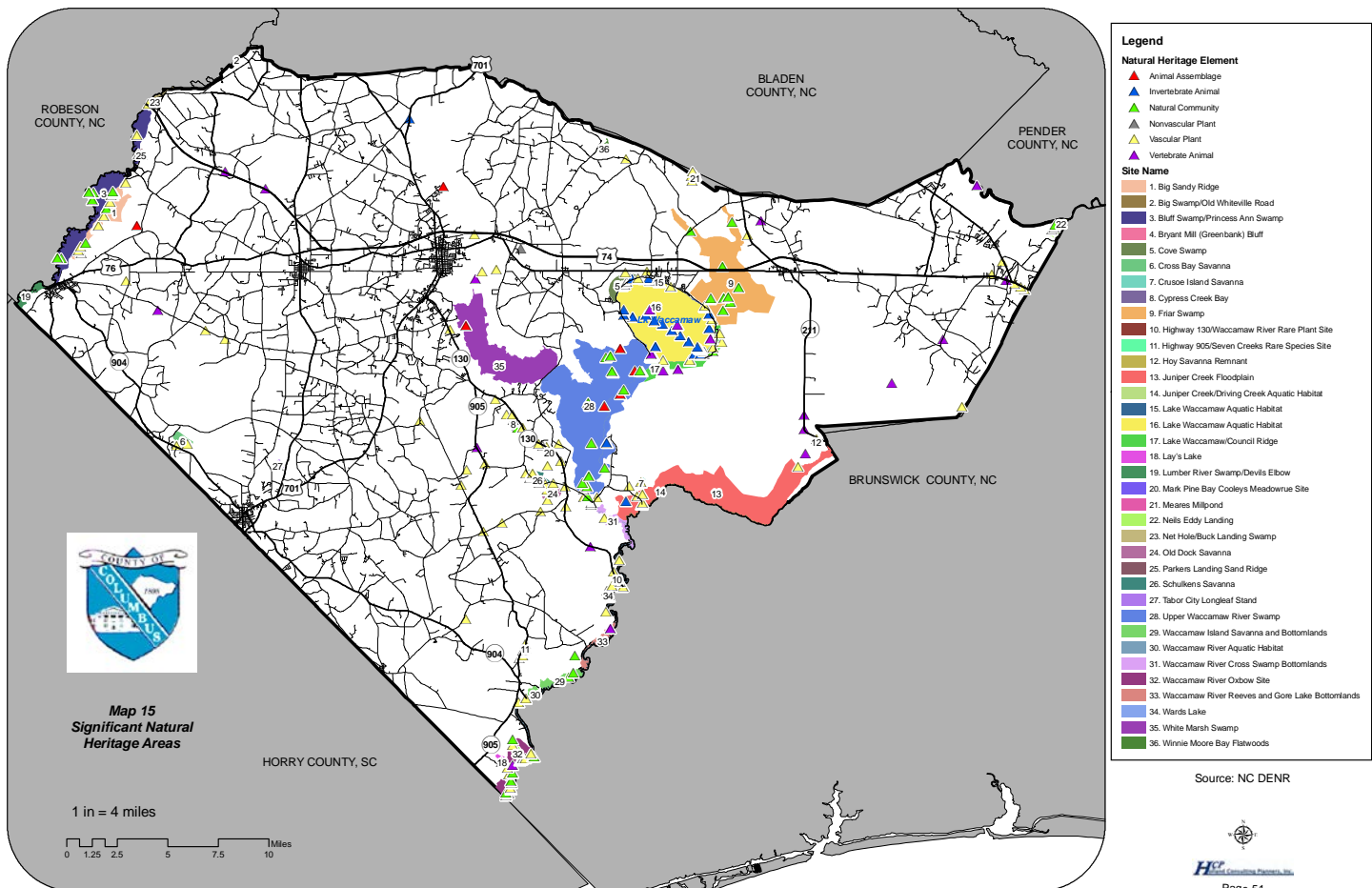
2012 Comprehensive Land Use Plan due to its holistic suite of research and recommendations. In addition to the Land Use Plan, the project team also reviewed the Health and Wellness Initiative conducted soon after the original plan and adopted as an addendum to the document. Lastly, the project team reviewed the draft Comprehensive Transportation Plan conducted as a joint effort by the County and the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT). Together these documents contribute to the foundation for the Master Plan.

GUIDING DOCUMENTS

To identify and perpetuate a continuing narrative of planning within the County, the project team reviewed previously adopted planning documents. These documents help establish a baseline understanding of planning intent and direction within the County, while helping shape the final vision and goals of this Master Plan. The primary document reviewed was the

2012 COMPREHENSIVE LAND USE PLAN

The 2012 Columbus County Comprehensive Land Use Plan is the first of its kind, as the County previously had no form of long-range planning efforts. The document has a planning horizon of twenty years, with 2032 representing the extent of the document's vision.



Through review of existing conditions within the County, the Plan found the following notable factors:

- ▶ Columbus County has an excellent transportation system which provides easy, fast access to the surrounding region.
- ▶ Columbus County has a varied and complex ecological system (see map on previous page).
- ▶ There are over 18,122 acres of conservation properties in Columbus County.
- ▶ There are approximately 218,084 acres of prime farmland soils in the County.
- ▶ Approximately 83% of Columbus County's area has natural limitations for intensive development.
- ▶ There are 53,449.12 acres of natural heritage areas in the County.

Future facility needs based on the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) benchmarking and County population in 2010/2030. show a need for additional facilities including youth baseball/softball, football, soccer, basketball, tennis, playgrounds, community centers, and swimming pools. However, it is important to note two elements of these findings.

First, NRPA benchmarking is intended to be utilized as a guideline for facility evaluation and does not reflect the specific and unique needs of a community. A community may not have as many tennis courts as shown in NRPA benchmarking, but its residents may be more interested in other facilities such as lacrosse. Second, as the next section of this Master Plan will note, the population of Columbus County has decreased since the adoption of the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Thus, benchmarking numbers will no longer be consistent with the demographics of the County.

Looking forward, the Plan established the following goals for the County:

- ▶ To increase and diversify economic development.
- ▶ To improve and expand, when economically feasible, the County's infrastructure.
- ▶ To improve educational opportunities.
- ▶ To improve healthcare.
- ▶ To protect and preserve its residential areas.
- ▶ To preserve its natural assets.
- ▶ To preserve and protect agriculture/silviculture production.



Notably, the following implementation (I) and policy (P) actions were established in relation to recreation enhancement:

I.21 Consider revising the Columbus County Subdivision Ordinance to accomplish the following:

- ▶ Encourage road interconnectivity of subdivisions.
- ▶ Where practical, make subdivisions “walkable” communities.
- ▶ Provide specific stream protection requirements through vegetative buffering.
- ▶ Require tree preservation plans for all major subdivisions. Emphasis shall be placed on preserving trees along roadways.
- ▶ Allow for the dedication of public park property, public access sites, and/or open space. This may include a provision for payment in lieu of dedication if approved by the County.

I.22 Prepare a Columbus County Recreation Plan.

P.61 Columbus County supports a comprehensive recreational program to provide a broad range of recreational facilities for its citizens.

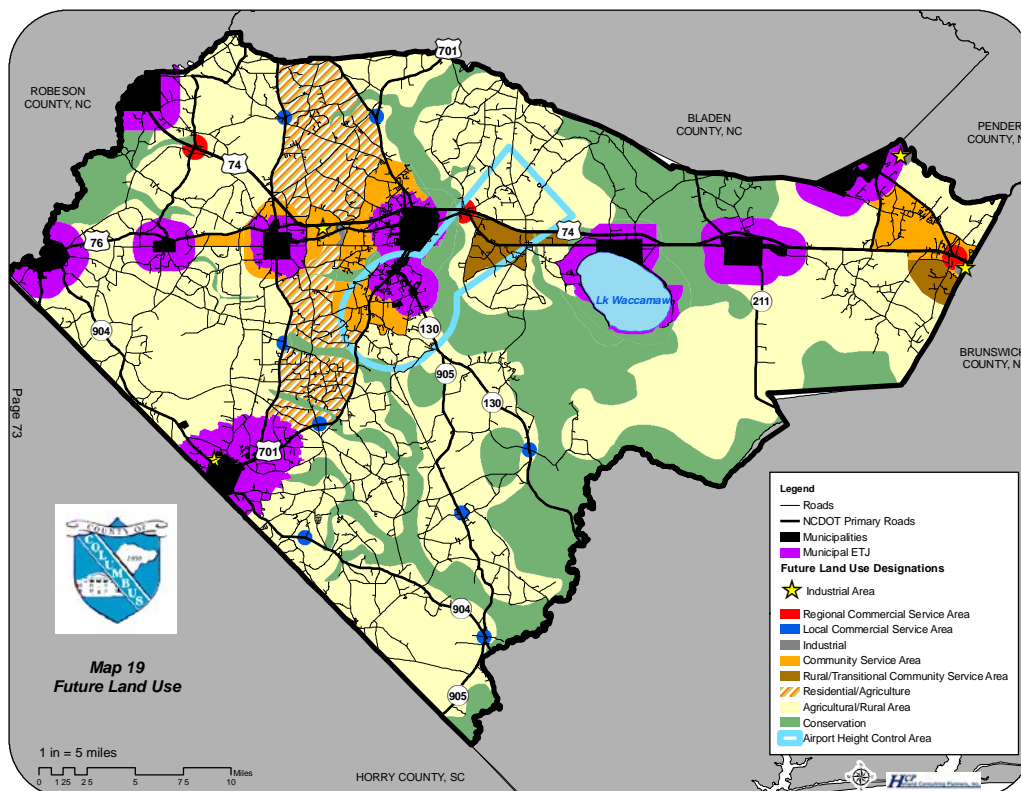
P.62 Columbus County supports future park development and open space preservation which will provide for the distribution of recreation and open space opportunities within the County.

I.45 Consider the multiple objectives of natural area conservation, visual enhancement, promotion of cultural and historic preservation, watershed and flood-prone area protection in determining future sites for park, recreation, and water access facilities.

I.46 Continue to work cooperatively with the county school system to maximize the use of recreation facilities located at existing public school sites, and to foster the joint development of additional public park facilities at new public school sites.

I.48 Seek state and federal technical and financial assistance to provide facilities for physically challenged persons.

In addition to the policy and implementation action items established, the Plan provides a Future Land Use Map which guides future development patterns of the County. These patterns will inform the Master Planning process by identifying key areas of growth and conservation in the future, in turn aiding in the identification of important locations for facility development and access.



A HEALTH AND WELLNESS INITIATIVE FOR COLUMBUS COUNTY

The Health and Wellness Initiative for Columbus County was adopted as an addendum to the Comprehensive Plan and was funded by the Healthy Communities grant and the Community Transformation Grant Project. This addendum was created by the same consulting firm who worked on the Comprehensive Plan and was overseen by a Health and Wellness Advisory Committee created as part of document development.

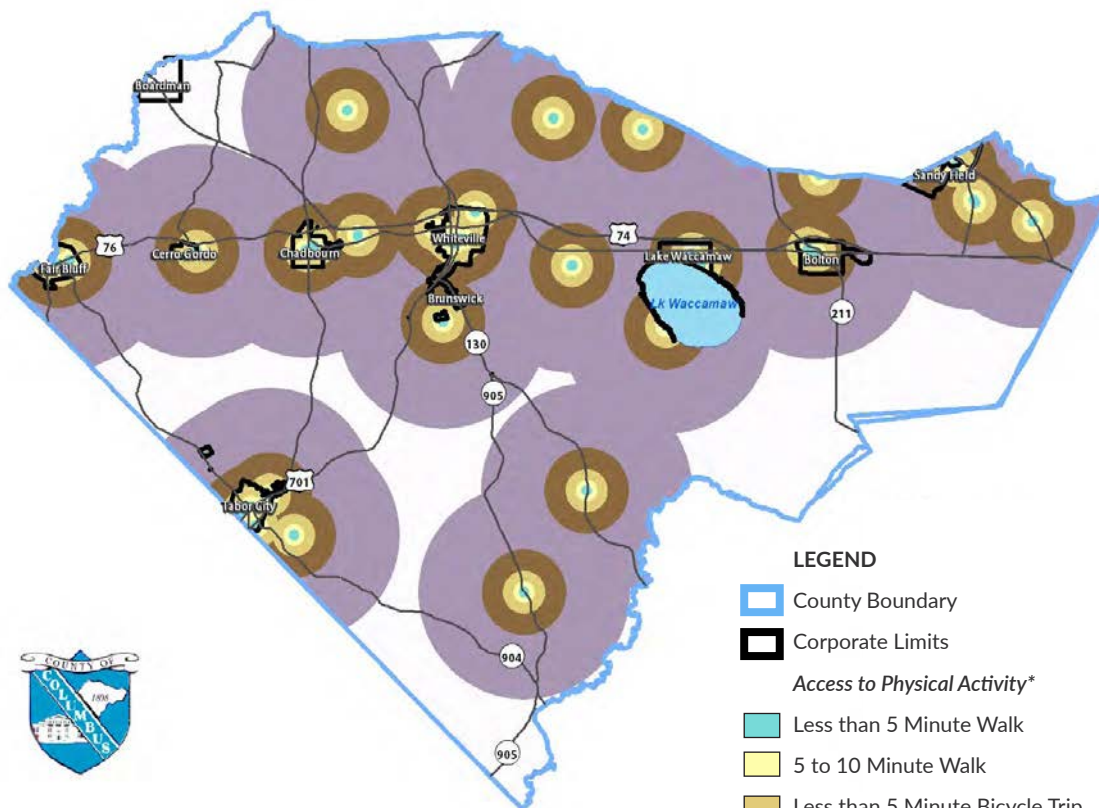
Of the barriers to health and wellness identified in the document, access to recreational opportunities was in the top three most listed. The document details the accessibility to recreational facilities within the

County via walking, biking, and driving. It states that pedestrian/bicycle access to recreational facilities is primarily important as driving leads to increased rates of obesity and health issues.

Additionally, the document outlines priority areas within the County where intervention is necessary for health improvements. Understanding the location of these areas informs the Master Plan with regard to the identification of locations for new facilities or access opportunities.

Notable implementation strategies include educational initiatives such as YMCA fitness classes and presentations at schools, community events such as County field-days, joint agreements for school facilities, and sports clinics.

Map 12: Physical Activity and Recreation Access

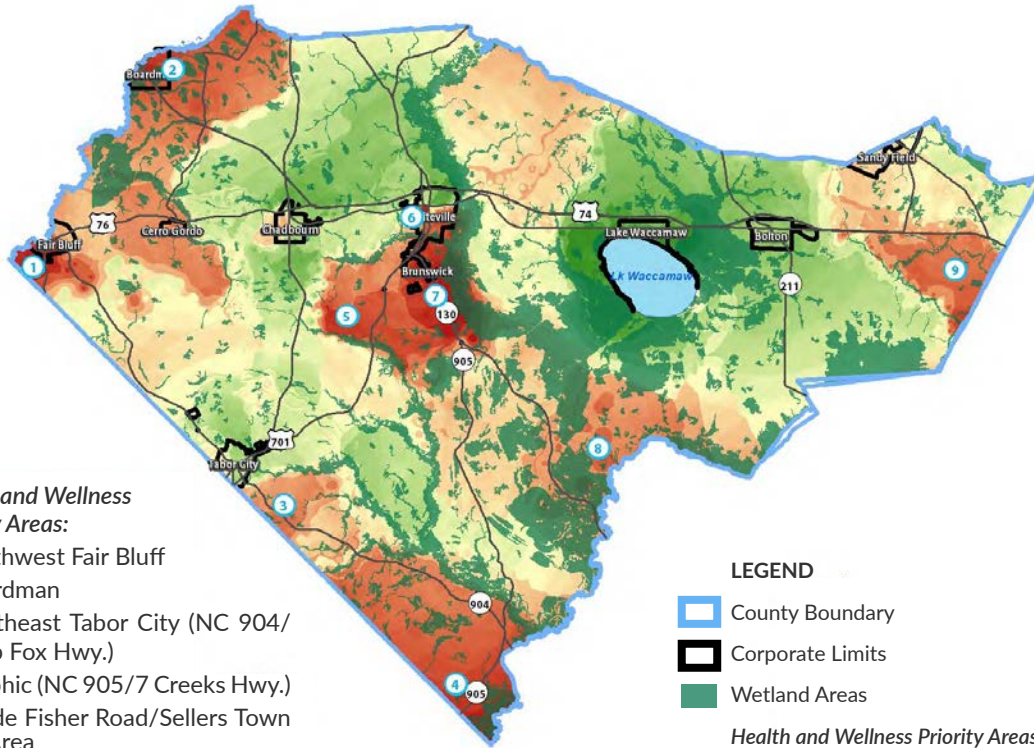


LEGEND

- County Boundary
- Corporate Limits
- Access to Physical Activity**
- Less than 5 Minute Walk
- 5 to 10 Minute Walk
- Less than 5 Minute Bicycle Trip
- 5 to 10 Minute Bicycle Trip
- 4 to 10 Minute Drive
- Greater than 10 Minute Drive

*Drive times are based on an estimation of 2 minutes per mile of travel.

Map 13: Health & Wellness Priority Areas



Health and Wellness Priority Areas:

1. Southwest Fair Bluff
2. Boardman
3. Southeast Tabor City (NC 904/ Swamp Fox Hwy.)
4. Olyphic (NC 905/7 Creeks Hwy.)
5. Shade Fisher Road/Sellers Town Road Area
6. Northwest Whiteville
7. Brunswick (NC 130 Corridor)
8. Dock Road/Crusoe Island Road
9. Southwest Delco

LEGEND

- County Boundary
- Corporate Limits
- Wetland Areas
- Health and Wellness Priority Areas*
- Low Priority
- High Priority

Areas shown as red on the map are considered high priority areas for health and wellness related capital improvements, policy changes, or community supported programming. These areas are, in general, considered to be of a low socioeconomic status and lack access to one or more amenities such as full-service grocery stores, recreational facilities, or healthcare providers.

Wetland areas (shown dark green) tend to be uninhabited. Health and wellness related improvements in these locations are not warranted.



DEMOGRAPHICS

A comprehensive understanding of demographic trends helps articulate the ever-shifting needs of the community. Through review of current and historic data, it is possible to identify patterns and apply future projections. This analysis in turn provides a basis for more informed decision making that is backed by real, applicable data.

POPULATION GROWTH		
Year	Columbus County	Percent Change
1990	49,587	-
2000	54,749	+ 10.4%
2010	58,098	+ 6.1%
2020	50,623	-12.9%
2030 Estimate	44,511	-12.1%

AGE GROUPS IN COLUMBUS COUNTY			
Age Group	2010	2019	9-year Change
Under 18	24.0%	21.3%	-2.7%
Over 65	14.7%	19.5%	+4.8%
Median Age	39.6	41.9	+2.3

HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS IN COLUMBUS COUNTY			
	2010	2019	9-year Change
Family Households	69.2%	66.0%	-3.2%
Non-Family Households	30.8%	34.0%	+3.2%
Households with Children Under 18	34.2%	30.3%	-3.9%
Households with People over 65	11.3%	15.7%	+4.4%
Average Family Size	3.11	3.07	-0.04
Average Household Size	2.53	2.46	-0.07

POPULATION GROWTH

Data obtained from the United States Census and the American Community Survey reveals that the population of Columbus County increased by 2.1% between 1990 and 2020. This reflects an increase of 1,036 residents of Columbus County. However, these numbers do not reflect the drastic shifts in population over the past 30 years.

Between 1990 and 2000, the population of the County grew 10.4% (reflecting an additional 5,162 residents). Furthermore, the population continued to grow into 2010 with a population increase of 6.1% through 3,349 additional residents occupying the County. The data suggests that a drastic change occurred between 2010 and 2020 with the County experiencing a 12.9% decrease in population. This decrease reflects 7,475 residents leaving the County. However, increasing interest in development, particularly on the East side of the County, may lead to a decrease in this projection. Because of the proximity of Wilmington, and South Carolina, development within Columbus County is on the rise.

Residents may be moving to County municipalities or other regional Cities. While any projection is due to multiple factors, changes in population projections are an important consideration for the master plan.

Reassessment of on-going contractual lease agreements for the 17 park facilities not owned may be required to identify facilities that are underutilized. In turn, termination of those agreements will help allocate funding towards existing and new facilities that would be primarily utilized by residents of the County. **Identification of infill development and connectivity are also important factors, as the demands of a changing population must be met with flexibility and adaptability.**

POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS



While reviewing overall population trends help determine level of service goals for park and greenway systems, a more granular review of population characteristics helps to determine the types of amenities that will best serve the community. The following data references the 2020 Decennial Census as well as 2010 and 2019 datasets from the American Community Survey.

AGE



The median age of Columbus County has increased slightly from 2010 to 2019. In 2019, the median age was 41.9 representing an increase of 2.3 years from 2010. Mirroring this trend, the population of the County under the age of 18 decreased 2.7% between 2010 and 2019, with 21.3% of the population being under the age of 18 in 2019. Residents over the age of 65 increased 4.8% to 19.5% of the population in 2019 as well. This trend demonstrates that the County is aging. As such, consideration must be made to accommodate recreational opportunities and programs for adults and elderly. **While representing less of the population, considerations must still be made to ensure that younger populations retain access to opportunities and programs designed for younger generations.**

RACE/ETHNICITY



Columbus County represents a relatively homogeneous racial make-up with a slight trend towards increased diversity. The County's 2020 White population represents 60.0% of the total, a decrease of 1.7% since 2010. African American populations decreased 1.8%, to account for 28.8% of the 2020 population. "Two or More Races" saw an increase of 2.9% in 2020, representing 3.9% of the population total. Similarly, both American Indian and "Other Race" saw slight increases in population, with American Indian populations increasing 0.4% to 3.4% and "Other Race" populations increasing 0.1 to 3.5% in 2020. The Hispanic/Latino ethnic population saw a small increase in size between 2010 and 2020. The population increased 1.0% to a total of 5.2% overall in 2020. **Cultural shifts in population will also influence the provision of recreational needs.**

INCOME



Columbus County residents experienced a small increase in median monthly income between 2010 and 2020, rising from \$35,421 to \$37,268. This difference of \$1,847 represents a 5.2% overall increase. Among income brackets, \$100,000 to \$149,999 saw the highest increase of 4.2%, followed by the \$15,000 to \$24,999 group at 0.8%. The income bracket that saw the greatest decrease was "Less than \$10,000" which fell 3.0% in Columbus County.

Other brackets changed little, with slight increases in the higher brackets. The data indicates positive economic growth within the County.

In relation to the Master Plan process, the increased incomes can have multiple impacts on County recreation. On one hand, residents may be more amenable to parks and recreation spending and can help fund targeted improvements within the County. However, increasing incomes may lead to the use of private recreation facilities or leagues outside of Columbus County. **The park system needs to provide exciting amenities and balance funding in order to ensure that residents are encouraged to use County facilities and participate in County programs.**

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



Educational attainment within the County increased between 2010 and 2019. 83.0% of the County's residents are considered high school graduates or higher, a 5.5% increase from 2010. Furthermore, 13.8% of the County residents have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher in 2019 (1.8% higher than in 2010). In general, higher educational attainment is associated with better paying careers and more disposable income.

Similar considerations must be made in understanding the upward trend in educational attainment as it relates to correlated trends regarding income and impact on seeking recreational opportunities.

MODE OF COMMUTE



Methods of commuting to work for residents of Columbus County largely match that of many North Carolina communities. 85.7% of residents drove alone to work in 2019, representing a 6.7% increase from 2010. Notably, residents who carpooling to work experienced a 5.8% decline between 2010 and 2019, with 10.0% of the population carpooling to work in 2019. Among the alternatives to automobile use, residents walked (1.0%), used other forms of transportation such as bicycles (0.8%), or used public transit (0.2%) in 2019 with little variation from 2010. Residents working from home represented 2.3% of the population in 2019. The average travel time to work increased slightly from 26.8 minutes in 2010 to 27.0 minutes in 2019. **Interest in biking for pleasure or work is on the rise and is considered a significant area of improvement for the County.**



HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS



An overview of a county's housing characteristics provides additional background. High levels of homeownership, for example, often signify stable communities. New residential units often mirror population growth and provide clues to how densely a community is growing.

The housing stock of Columbus County increased by 476 units between 2010 and 2019, a 1.8% increase overall. This additional housing stock appears to mirror the limited population growth occurring within the County over this time period. Owner-occupied buildings accounted for 72.5% of housing stock in 2019, a 0.5% increase from 2010. Conversely, renter-occupied housing accounted for the remaining 27.5% of the stock.

Family households (66.0%) were the most common type of household in Columbus County in 2019. Non-family households (typically single-person, multi-person unmarried, or student housing) accounted for 34.0% of County households. Neither family households nor non-family households varied much between 2010 and 2019.

Households with children under the age of 18 represented 30.3% of households, a 3.9% decline from 2010. Households with a person over the age of 65 represents 15.7% of all households in 2018, a 4.4% increase from 2010 mirroring trends identified in analysis of population age and indicating an aging population overall. Household and family sizes decreased only slightly between 2010 and 2018, with the average household size having 2.46 people and average family size consisting of 3.07 people.

Trends in home ownership are correlated with economic stability within the County and indicate that many are setting roots to raise families and retire within Columbus County. Permanent residents may be more inclined to help undertake Master Plan recommendations and long-range projects as they are more certain to enjoy plan outcomes. Household information is indicating a further aging population, and the Master Plan must account for the shifting recreation needs of an aging County.

PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITY INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, Columbus County manages/maintains 21 park facilities throughout the County. Of these parks, Columbus County owns four: Fitness Park, Edgewood Park, Riegelwood Community Park, and Old Dock Community Park. In total, the County currently manages just over 165.25 acres of parks facilities. In addition, parks staff maintains the Municipal Airport, FEMA properties, Farmers Market, and other select County properties. The Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department currently maintains the following:

- ▶ 24 baseball/softball fields
- ▶ 14 basketball courts
- ▶ 4 volleyball courts
- ▶ 8 soccer/football/multi-purpose fields
- ▶ 15 playground facilities
- ▶ 18 picnic facilities
- ▶ 8 batting cages
- ▶ 4 tennis courts
- ▶ 5 walking trails
- ▶ 1 ball wall

Please see the following table (pg. 26-27) for a detailed overview of the current parks system in Columbus County.

FACILITY INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

Members of the project team visited each of the parks and facilities owned and operated by the County as well as some of the parks under lease agreement to observe their current conditions and evaluate future opportunities. The team used the following criteria, based on guidelines developed by Project for Public Spaces (PPS), a non-profit organization dedicated to creating and sustaining public spaces that build stronger communities. Also considered was the ownership status of each park.

Design and Construction

- ▶ Are the design and construction appropriate for the needs of all users?
- ▶ Does the site include appropriate recreation

amenities?

- ▶ Does the site respond to the surrounding area?
- ▶ Have any changes to the surrounding area made the site ineffective to users?
- ▶ Are there any hazards to users of the facilities?

Effectiveness

- ▶ Does the site have features and amenities that can be used by people of different ages?
- ▶ How many different types of activities are available?
- ▶ Are there choices in intensity of activities to do?
- ▶ Is there a balance of active recreation and passive opportunities?
- ▶ Does the site encourage good health and fitness?

Comfort and Image

- ▶ Does the site make a good first impression?
- ▶ Is the site well-maintained?
- ▶ Are there enough places to sit and are they conveniently located?
- ▶ Is the site clean and free of litter?
- ▶ Does the site feel safe?
- ▶ Do vehicles dominate the site through access roads, parking and/or maintenance?

Access and Linkages

- ▶ Are there clear and open views into open spaces?
- ▶ Is there clear wayfinding signage?
- ▶ Can people easily walk to the site from surrounding areas?
- ▶ Does the site provide opportunities for people with special needs?
- ▶ Are the primary amenities connected to paths and/or roads?

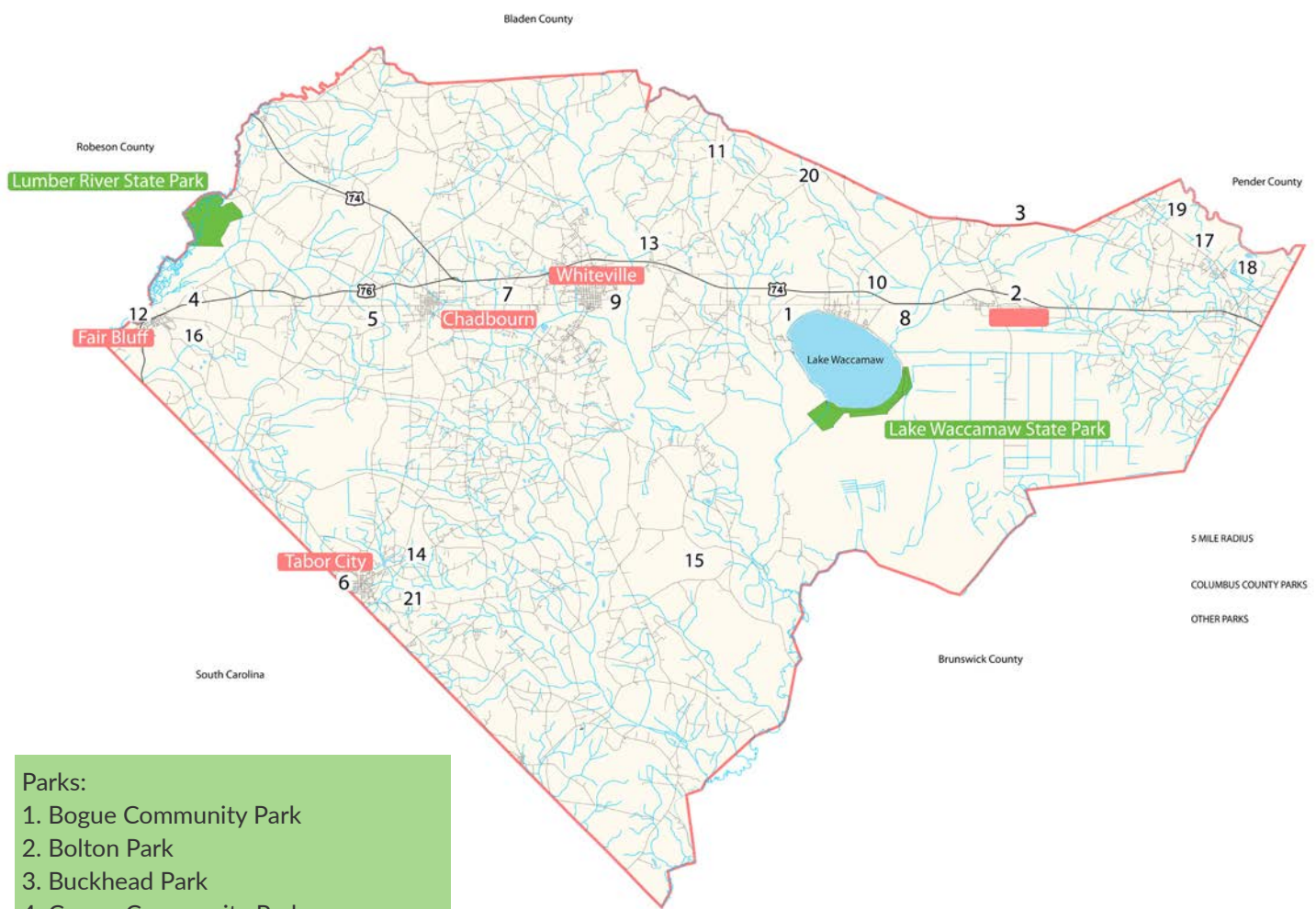
Social

- ▶ Does the site provide places for people to gather?
- ▶ Does the site promote healthy lifestyle and/or reduce daily stress?
- ▶ Is the site well connected with clear and safe access point(s)?

PARKS DATA				
	PARK NAME	LOCATION	ACRES	PARK DESCRIPTION
COUNTY-OWNED PARKS	Edgewood Park	317 E Calhoun St., Whiteville, NC	4	Baseball/softball field, outdoor volleyball; multi purpose open space used for Division I soccer (3 fields), playground area and a picnic shelter.
	Fitness Park - Whiteville	131 Government Complex Rd., Whiteville, NC	10	Open space, with a 1/2 mile ADA Composite walking trail.
	Old Dock Community Park	12844 New Britton Hwy E. Whiteville, NC	5	Lighted baseball/softball field, playground area, basketball court, pressbox with concession stand, 1 batting cage and community center (see below).
	Riegelwood Community Park	142 Waccamaw Rd., Riegelwood, NC	18	4 lighted baseball/softball fields, playground, 2 picnic shelters, outdoor volleyball, basketball court, 2 pressboxes with concession, one press box without concession, 2 batting cages, multipurpose field, bathroom facilities and a community center (see below).
	Bouge Community Park	780 Red Bug Rd., Hallsboro, NC	7	Baseball/softball field, playground area, picnic shelter and 2 basketball courts.
COUNTY-LEASED PARK SPACE	Bolton Park	175 Old 211 Street, Bolton, NC	3	Basketball court, picnic shelter, play ground area and a multipurpose open space.
	Buckhead Community Park	7275 Old Lake Rd., Bolton, NC	7	Lighted baseball/softball field, pressbox with concession, basketball court, picnic shelter and playground area.
	Carver Community Park	213 Carver Cl., Fair Bluff, NC	5	Basketball court and a baseball/softball field.
	Cerro Gordo Athletic Fields	404 Railroad St E, Cerro Gordo	5	2 lighted baseball fields, 2 concession stands and an outdoor batting cage.
	Civitan Park	100 Orange St. Tabor City, NC	1	Playground area and picnic shelter. (no formal lease)

PARKS DATA

PARKS DATA				
	PARK NAME	LOCATION	ACRES	PARK DESCRIPTION
COUNTY-LEASED PARK SPACE	Chadbourn Depot Museum	201 W 1st St. E, Chadbourn, NC	0	Displays a variety of historical artifacts including model railroads, period furnishings, Audubon prints and railroad memorabilia.
	Council Field	154 Pecan Lane, Lake Waccamaw, NC	3	Baseball/softball field. (no formal lease)
	Elizabeth Brinkley Park	100 Columbia Ave. Lake Waccamaw, NC	18	2 lighted ball fields, 2 pressbox concession stands, 2 tennis courts, playground area, batting cages, outdoor volleyball, soccer field, 2 picnic shelters, bathroom facility and a walking trail.
	Elra Gertrude Spaulding Community Park	819 Farmers Union Rd. Clarkton, NC	5	Baseball/softball field, basketball court, playground area and a picnic shelter.
	Fair Bluff Riverwalk Park	146 Riverside Dr. Fair Bluff, NC	~ 1	Playground and "River Walk" which extends over a mile long.
	Lake Tabor Recreational Park	102 Lynwood Norris St. Tabor City, NC	5	Lighted baseball/softball field, pressbox with concession stand, 2 basketball courts, paved walking trail, picnic shelter, restroom facility, batting cages and a playground. (no formal lease)
	Progressive Women's Park	135 Rogers St. Fair Bluff, NC	1	Picnic shelter, youth basketball court and playground.
	Ransom Community Park	2694 General Howe Hwy. Riegelwood, NC	15	2 baseball/softball fields, 2 basketball courts, walking trail, concession area, bathroom facility, picnic shelter and playground.
	Sandyfield Park	1811 Woodyard Rd, Riegelwood, NC	4	Basketball court, playground and picnic shelter.
	St. James Community Park	1000 Carver Moore Rd. Lake Waccamaw, NC	9.25	Baseball/softball field, picnic shelter, outdoor volleyball and playground.
	Tabor City Recreational Complex	229 Complex St. Tabor City, NC	26	5 lighted baseball/softball fields, lighted football field/multipurpose field, 2 tennis courts, 3 press boxes, 2 concession stands, "Wall Ball" wall, 2 batting cages, 3 picnic shelters, bathroom facilities and a playground. (no formal lease)
COMMUNITY CENTERS	Riegelwood Community Center	305 Hwy 87, Riegelwood, NC	0	Building has one large open room, a kitchen facility and 3 bathroom facilities. This facility has enough tables and chairs for up to 80 people.
	Old Dock Community Center	12844 New Britton Hwy E. Whiteville, NC	0	Building has one large open room, a kitchen area and a bathroom facility.



- Parks:
1. Bogue Community Park
 2. Bolton Park
 3. Buckhead Park
 4. Carver Community Park
 5. Cerro Gordo Athletic Fields
 6. Civitan Park
 7. Chadbourn Museum Depot
 8. Council Field
 9. Edgewood Park
 10. Elizabeth Brinkley Park
 11. Elra Gertrude Spaulding Park
 12. Fairbuff Riverwalk
 13. Fitness Park-Whiteville
 14. Lake Tabor Recreational Park
 15. Old Dock Community Park
 16. Progressive Women's Park
 17. Ransom Community Park
 18. Riegelwood Community Park
 19. Sandyfield Park
 20. St. James Community Park
 21. Tabor City Recreational Complex

Environmental

- ▶ Does the site use energy, water and material resources efficiently?
- ▶ Does the site maintain or improve water quality?
- ▶ Does the site enhance, preserve, or promote biological diversity?
- ▶ Is the site a node within a larger ecological corridor or habitat?
- ▶ Does the site enhance environmental awareness or knowledge?

Economic

- ▶ Does the site create public and/or private revenue-generating opportunities?
- ▶ Does the site help sustain or increase property values?
- ▶ Does the site contribute to nearby property development or redevelopment?
- ▶ Does the site provide permanent jobs?

Lease vs. Owned

- ▶ Is the property owned by Columbus County?

Each park owned by the County was observed and evaluated on how it met the criteria for each category. The following listing places each park in one of three categories. It is important to note that each park has its own merits, and that a “one size fits all” approach cannot be used to accurately evaluate every type of park.

Facilities Exceeding Expectations

These facilities exhibit multiple features that enhance the comfort and experience of users, and encourage repeated visitation. The facilities are commonly new or recently enhanced, well-maintained, and readily accessible through multiple modes of transportation. Characteristics that commonly apply to these parks include:

- ▶ Facilities that function as intended and feel safe
- ▶ Facilities that are aesthetically pleasing and exhibit exceptional maintenance, often demonstrating sustainable techniques.

- ▶ Accommodation of a variety of uses, maintaining a consistently high level of activity while remaining flexible.
- ▶ Clear evidence of good design standards and embracing heritage resources where applicable
- ▶ Multiple ways for users to access the park, including walking and biking.
- ▶ Multi-purpose fields or lawn surfaces that are well maintained.
- ▶ Sports fields that may contain premium amenities such as score boards, enclosed dugouts, bleachers and lighting.

Parks meeting these criteria include Fitness Park.

FACILITIES MEETING EXPECTATIONS

These facilities are serviceable for the needs of the community and provide a reasonable experience for users. The facilities provide sufficient recreational opportunities, are fairly well-maintained, and reasonably accessible to the community with some effort. Characteristics that commonly apply to these parks include:

- ▶ Programs that function as intended.
- ▶ A general level of maintenance and may be aesthetically pleasing.
- ▶ Accommodation for several different activities and a moderate level of activity.
- ▶ Reasonable sidewalk connectivity, and perhaps a transit stop nearby.
- ▶ General compatibility with surrounding land uses and a feeling of safety for the users.

Well-maintained and playable field surfaces, but typically without premium features.

Parks meeting these criteria include Riegelwood Park, Edgewood Park, and Old Dock Park.

FACILITIES NOT MEETING EXPECTATIONS

These facilities exhibit conditions that indicate that they have exceeded their functional life span or utility. Repair, enhancement or replacement is necessary to provide functional recreational access to the community. Existing features are not sufficient for the comfort or needs of the users, and maintenance is often perceived to be below standards. Characteristics that commonly apply to these parks include:

- ▶ Facilities are not currently performing as intended.
- ▶ Appearance and / or maintenance is below standards.
- ▶ A consistently low level of activity
- ▶ Limited accommodations or incompatibility with surrounding land uses.
- ▶ A perception that the facility is unsafe or unwelcome.
- ▶ Limited or difficult access by public transit, bicycle, or walking.
- ▶ Field surfaces that are maintained below standards, or unable to be maintained due to over-programming.

Note that these observations reflect a limited time period and the initial reactions of the design team. These evaluations may differ from the comments elicited at the public engagement phase of the project.

PROGRAM INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

The following is an assessment of the Columbus County Parks and Recreation programs, events, and services.

SUMMARY

- ▶ Most programs hosted by the County involve youth and adult sports.
- ▶ The County hosts annual special events primarily in the Spring, but also in the Winter and Fall.
- ▶ The County lacks any form of aquatics facilities, residents must go elsewhere to access such facilities.

- ▶ The County does not have any after school, teen, or educational programs.
- ▶ Social services are not provided by the County.

PROGRAM AREA DEFINITIONS

While the following program areas are not specific to the Columbus County Parks and Recreation system, they represent the types of programs that could be provided for the community. Many of these programs are currently being provided.

- ▶ Sports – Team and individual sports including camps, clinics, and tournaments. This includes adventure and non-traditional sports.
- ▶ Fitness – Group fitness classes, personal training, health education and nutrition.
- ▶ Cultural Arts – Performing arts classes, visual arts classes, music/ video production and arts events.
- ▶ Aquatics – Learn-to-swim classes, aqua exercise classes, competitive swimming, SCUBA, and other programs (synchro, water polo, etc.).
- ▶ Youth Programs – Youth based programming for before and after school programs, summer school break camps, and preschool.
- ▶ Education – Language programs, tutoring, science / technology / math (STEM) classes, computer classes, and financial planning.
- ▶ General Interest – Personal development classes.
- ▶ Special Needs – Programs for those with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities, and inclusion within activities offered.
- ▶ Special Events – Special events that focus on the local market.
- ▶ Outdoor Recreation – Environmental education, hiking, camping, paddle sports and other activities.
- ▶ Seniors Programs – Programs and services that are dedicated to serving the needs of seniors. This can include all of the activity areas noted above plus social service functions.

- ▶ Teen Programs - Programs and services that are focused on serving the needs of teens. This can include all of the activity areas noted above (except seniors).
- ▶ Self-Directed Activities - Opportunities for individuals to recreate on their own, including activities such as open gym, use of weight/ cardio space, lap/recreational swimming, golf, and tennis. Although not an organized program, time and space must be allocated in County facilities.
- ▶ Social Services - Can include nutrition and feeding programs, job training, life skills training, and other activities such as job training.

PROGRAMMING CLASSIFICATIONS

Programs in the following chart are currently provided by the Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department. This overview is based on generally available information for the 2020-2021 year, as well as listings provided by the Department.

PROGRAM LIMITATIONS

Columbus County Parks and Recreation programs are currently limited due to in part by the following:

- ▶ Youth Focus - The Department has a strong focus on youth sports and recreation, which limits resources available for senior programs, cultural arts and educational programs, and after school activities.
- ▶ Limited Staff - The Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department has limited staff in relation to the number of facilities the County operates/maintains.
- ▶ Lease Agreements - Program and facility improvement can be limited by the lack of ownership of facility space on behalf of the County.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparative analysis of Columbus County facilities and programs to National Parks and Recreation Standards is an important method in understanding strengths and weaknesses of Columbus County's system. These comparisons are typically based primarily on population, though the unique needs of each community and facilities offered therein is a product of that community's residents. Columbus County's own needs as defined by staff and community input also need to be considered during comparative analysis.

LEVEL OF SERVICE ANALYSIS

A Level of Service (LOS) Analysis measures a county's parks and recreation resources against its population, and the resulting averages can be benchmarked against data collected from park systems across the country. A Columbus County LOS Analysis follows. A Level of Service (LOS) Analysis helps to quantify how well the existing parks system is meeting the needs of residents. The National Recreation and Park Association defines Level of Service as "an allocation mechanism for the delivery of park land and basic recreation facilities throughout a community. By adoption of such a standard, a community in essence says that all citizens... will have an equal opportunity to share in the basic menu of services implicit in the standard and accompanying spatial distribution and allocation of policies."

While every municipal park system is different to serve their respective needs, there are three metrics that can be used to benchmark a county's parks by comparing them to data collected across the country by the NRPA. These methods are:

- ▶ Acreage (Total Amount of Park Land)
- ▶ Facilities (Number of Facilities)
- ▶ Access (Distance or Travel Time)

Each method offers a different approach to measuring a park system's level of service. Acreage LOS reviews the system's general availability of park land and resources. Facilities LOS quantifies the number of park amenities that are available for each resident. Access LOS illustrates the availability of park facilities to all members of the community.

PROGRAMS		
Area	Age	Program
Sports	Youth	Basketball, Soccer, Baseball/Softball, Tennis, Volleyball
	Adult	Soccer, Baseball/Softball, Tennis, Volleyball
Fitness	Youth	Trail, Fitness Court
	Adult	Trail, Fitness Court
Cultural Arts	All	Art
Aquatics	Youth	N/A
	Adult	N/A
Youth Programs	Youth	N/A
	Adult	N/A
Education	Youth	N/A
	Adult	N/A
General Interest	Youth	N/A
	Adult	N/A
Special Needs	All	Special Olympic Games
Special Events	All	Easter Program, Safe Night for Kids, Candle Light Event, Farmers Market Run, Concerts
Outdoor Recreation	Youth	N/A
	Adult	N/A
Senior Programs	Youth	N/A
	Adult	N/A
Teen Programs	Youth	N/A
	Adult	N/A
Self-Directed Activities	Youth	Buddy Program Scavenger Hunt
	Adult	N/A
Social Services	All	N/A

It is possible to score highly on one or more of these metrics but also low on the third. For example, facilities such as golf courses and conservation areas occupy a large footprint but may be inaccessible to some or not providing the proper recreation opportunities to others. Similarly, facilities may be offered by clubs or groups outside the County's Recreation and Parks Department, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, church after-school programs, community meeting facilities, and non-profit senior programs.

Therefore, it is important to review all three of these metrics together to get a complete picture of a park system's health.

ACREAGE LOS

Acreage Level of Service (Acreage LOS) expresses the number of public park acres per 1,000 residents. This metric shows the total area of park land that is available to the county's residents, and serves as a holistic measurement of the entire park system.

Data provided by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) indicate that municipalities with more than 50,000 but fewer than 99,999 residents, such as Columbus County, provide an average of 7.9 acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents. The lower quartile provides 4.4 acres per 1,000 residents, and the upper quartile provides 15.9 acres per 1,000 residents.

According to the Decennial Census population of Columbus County, the County's population is 50,623 residents. Review of the County's owned and leased park lands reveals that the County is currently providing its residents approximately 152.25 acres of park land. Utilizing the NRPA metrics, Columbus County has an Acreage LOS of 3.01 acres per 1,000 residents. Reviewing Acreage LOS against only the County's owned park spaces, reveals that it provides 0.73 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. Even considering leased parkland, Columbus County is under the lower quartile for compatible jurisdictions.

Utilizing population projections for 2030, the Acreage LOS improves slightly as the population is projected to continue to decrease. If the County were to continue the lease agreements for its parkland, the Acreage LOS would be 3.46 acres per 1,000 residents (or 0.84 acres per 1,000 residents if only the four owned parks were retained). Even with projected population loss, the Acreage LOS of the County is still well below the lower quartile for comparable jurisdictions.

Columbus County's current park system does not appear adequate to meet the needs of the population today nor over the next 10 years.

To reach the median level of service, the County will need to focus on parkland acquisition and expansion. 4.89 additional acres per 1,000 residents would be required to achieve this goal. Strategic consolidation of park services and targeted parkland expansion will work to increase the opportunities for County citizens while helping Parks and Recreation Department staff manage a more streamlined inventory of parks systems. A review of the Facilities LOS and Access LOS metrics will help provide a more strategic plan for consolidating and expanding these lands to maximize the number of residents being served.

ACREAGE				
	Individual Acreage	Total Acreage	2020 LOS (acres / 1000 pop)	2030 LOS (acres/1000 pop)
COUNTY OWNED PARKS				
Edgewood Park	4	37	0.73	0.84
Fitness Park - Whiteville	10			
Old Dock Community Park	5			
Riegelwood Community Park	18			
ALL PARKS (INCLUDING OWNED PARKS)				
Bouge Community Park		152.25	3.01	3.46
Bolton Park	3			
Buckhead Community Park	7			
Carver Community Park	5			
Cerro Gordo Athletic Fields	5			
Civitan Park	1			
Chadbourn Depot Museum	0			
Council Field	3			
Elizabeth Brinkley Park	18			
Elra Gertrude Spaulding Community Park	5			
Fair Bluff Riverwalk Park	1			
Lake Tabor Recreational Park	5			
Progressive Women's Park	1			
Ransom Community Park	15			
Sandyfield Park	4			
St. James Community Park	9.25			
Tabor City Recreational Complex	26			

FACILITY LOS

Facility Level of Service (Facility LOS) is a second method to measure a parks system. Facility LOS reviews the number of park and recreation facilities per resident. While there are no strict standards for the number of facilities that a municipality must provide, or that its community needs, the NRPA provides recommendations to establish a starting point.

The following table depicts the Facility LOS for several park facilities and how they compare against the NRPA recommendations. Figures are shown for the current population and those projected for 2030. Facilities experiencing a deficit are shown in red.

Evaluation of only the facilities provided at parks owned by Columbus County shows that the County has a slight surplus of baseball/softball facilities and community centers. Despite being indicated as a deficit or surplus, volleyball facilities and soccer fields are close to meeting the NRPA median standards. The largest deficit present in County-owned parks are playgrounds, tennis courts, and basketball courts respectively. Projections of 2030 tell a similar story, however projected population decline indicates that the current supply of volleyball courts would be sufficient for the County's population in 2030.

Incorporation of facilities leased by the County illustrates a slightly more positive facility supply. 2020 Facility LOS indicates that basketball, volleyball, and playgrounds are all sufficient for the County's population on top of the facilities meeting the needs from the owned parks alone. Football fields are just

slightly under the NRPA benchmark as well, due to the inclusion of the Tabor City Recreation Complex field. Through 2020 and into 2030 the primary deficits appear to be that of tennis courts and the lack of a swimming pool.

COUNTY OWNED & LEASED PARKS						
Facility	Number of Facilities	NRPA 2021 Median Residents per Facility	2020 NRPA Facility LOS for Columbus County	2020 Facility Surplus/ Deficit	2030 NRPA Facility LOS for Columbus County	2030 Facility Surplus/ Deficit
Baseball/Softball	24	14515	3.5	20.5	3.0	21.0
Basketball	14	8790	5.8	8.2	5.0	9.0
Tennis Court	4	5726	8.8	-4.8	7.7	-3.7
Volleyball	4	24644	2.1	1.9	1.8	2.2
Soccer	7	10545.5	4.8	2.2	4.2	2.8
Football	1	31972	1.6	-0.6	1.4	-0.4
Playground	15	3672	13.8	1.2	12.0	3.0
Community Center	2	41245	1.2	0.8	1.1	0.9
Swimming Pools	0	43100	1.2	-1.2	1.0	-1.0
Picnic	18	-	-	18.0	-	18.0
Batting Cage	8	-	-	8.0	-	8.0
Wall Ball Wall	1	-	-	1.0	-	1.0
COUNTY OWNED PARKS						
Facility	Number of Facilities	NRPA 2021 Median Residents per Facility	2020 NRPA Facility LOS for Columbus County	2020 Facility Surplus/ Deficit	2030 NRPA Facility LOS for Columbus County	2030 Facility Surplus/ Deficit
Baseball/Softball	6	14515	3.5	2.5	3.0	3.0
Basketball	2	8790	5.8	-3.8	5.0	-3.0
Tennis Court	0	5726	8.8	-8.8	7.7	-7.7
Volleyball	2	24644	2.1	-0.1	1.8	0.2
Soccer	5	10545.5	4.8	0.2	4.2	0.8
Football	0	31972	1.6	-1.6	1.4	-1.4
Playground	3	3672	13.8	-10.8	12.0	-9.0
Community Center	2	41245	1.2	0.8	1.1	0.9
Swimming Pools	0	43100	1.2	-1.2	1.0	-1.0
Picnic	3	-	-	3.0	-	3.0
Batting Cage	3	-	-	3.0	-	3.0
Wall Ball Wall	0	-	-	0.0	-	0

ACCESS LOS

Access Level of Service (Access LOS) is a third approach to determining a park system's fit for its community. Access LOS reveals the level of access that residents have to their park facilities. This is typically measured by distance, either in miles or travel time, suggesting the level of effort that a person must spend to get to a park facility.

For the included parameters, a distance of 1/2 mile is considered a comfortable walking distance; 1 mile a long walk or short bike ride; and 2 miles a bike ride or short drive.

Access LOS is provided for parks and for select facilities. The facilities categories in this section mirror those identified above in the Facility LOS section. The elements include:

- ▶ Baseball/Softball
- ▶ Playgrounds
- ▶ Basketball
- ▶ Multi-purpose Fields
- ▶ Tennis
- ▶ Trails
- ▶ Volleyball

PARK LOS:

- ▶ All parks with open space – ½ mile, 1 mile, 2 miles

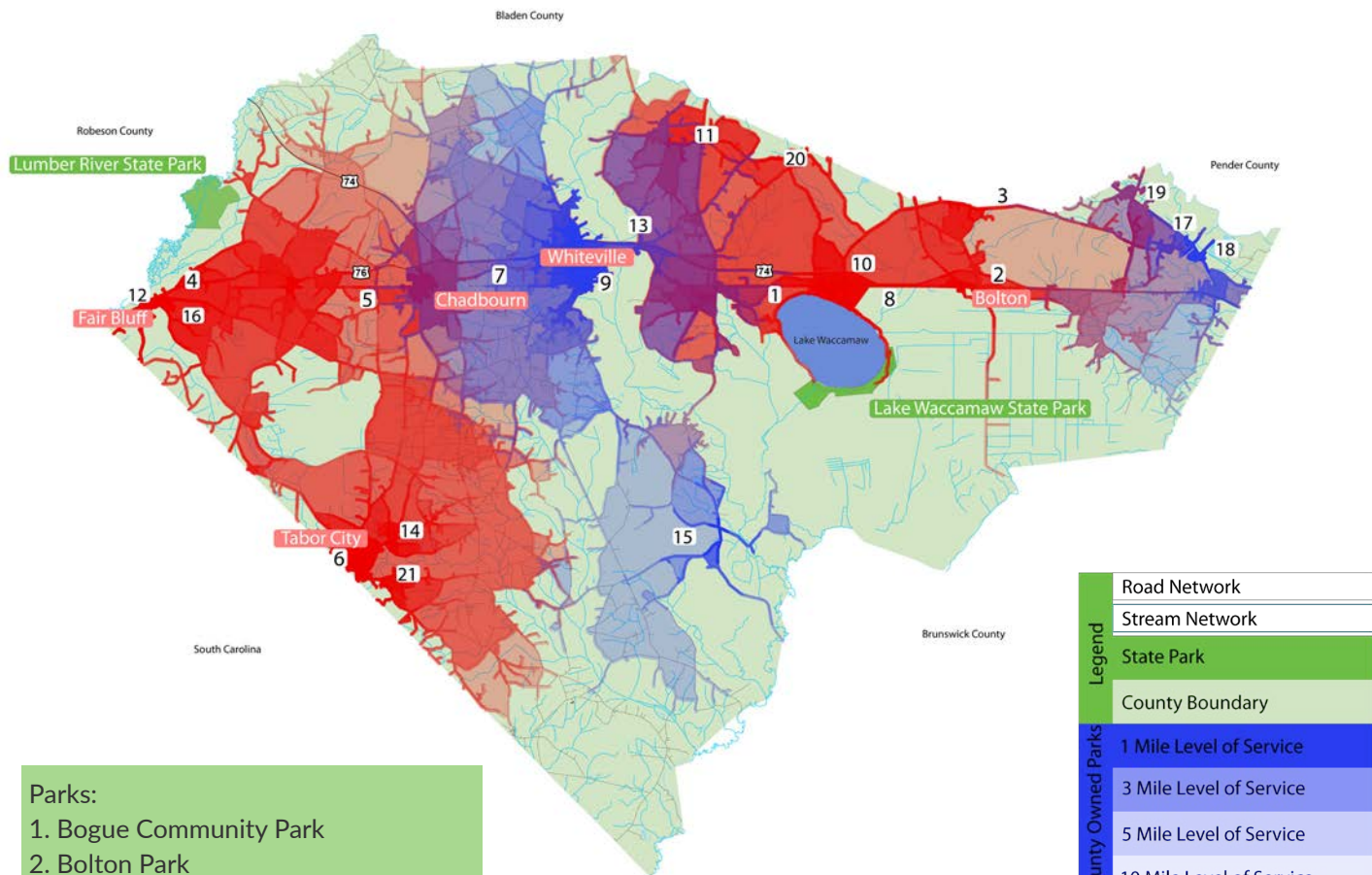
Neighborhood Serving Facilities:

- ▶ Outdoor basketball courts – ½ mile, 1 mile
- ▶ Playgrounds – ½ mile, 1 mile
- ▶ Park shelters – ½ mile, 1 mile

Community-Serving Facilities:

- ▶ Soccer fields – 1 mile, 2 mile
- ▶ Baseball/softball fields – 1 mile, 2 miles

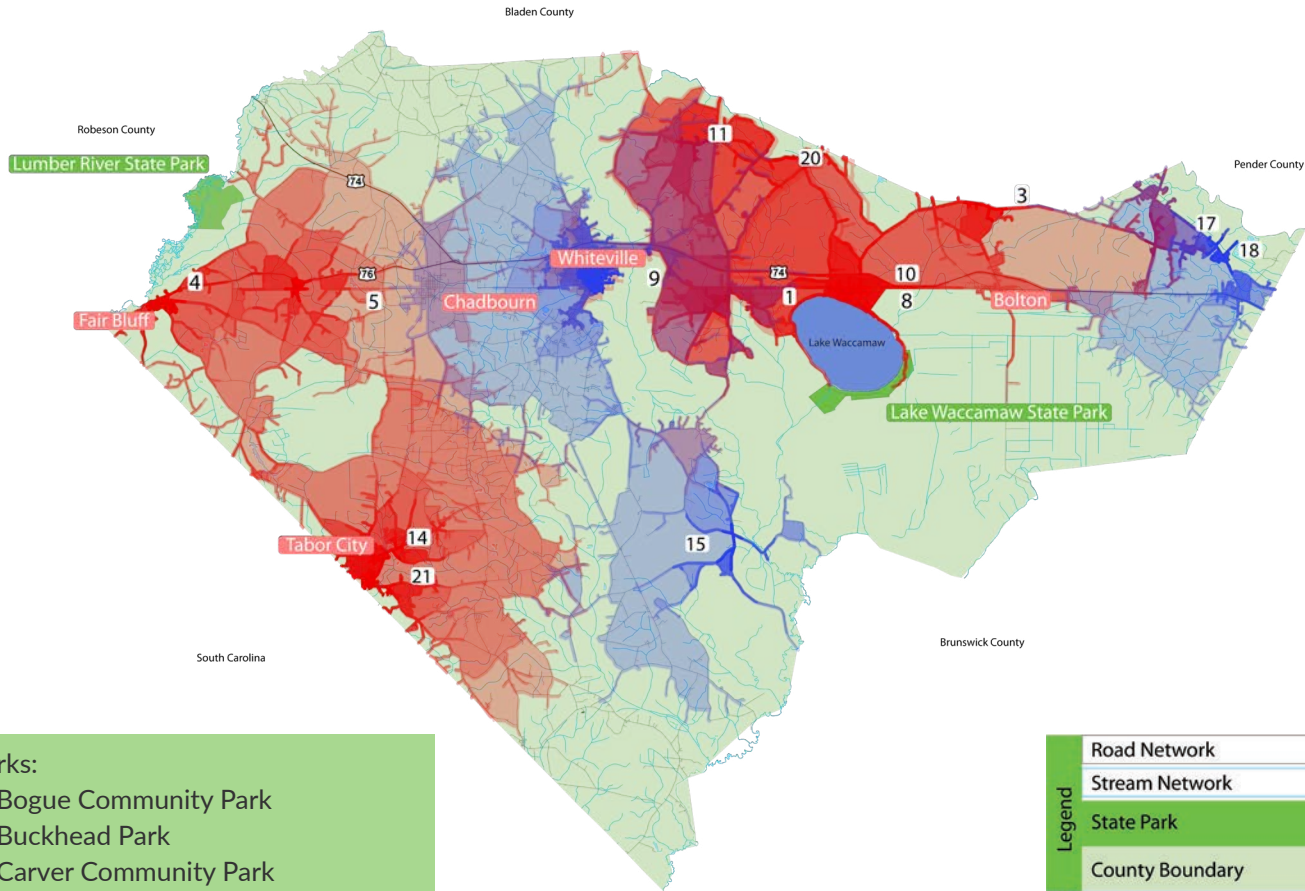
LOS MAP - PARKS



- Parks:**
1. Bogue Community Park
 2. Bolton Park
 3. Buckhead Park
 4. Carver Community Park
 5. Cerro Gordo Athletic Fields
 6. Civitan Park
 7. Chadbourn Museum Depot
 8. Council Field
 9. Edgewood Park
 10. Elizabeth Brinkley Park
 11. Elra Gertrude Spaulding Park
 12. Fairbuff Riverwalk
 13. Fitness Park-Whiteville
 14. Lake Tabor Recreational Park
 15. Old Dock Community Park
 16. Progressive Women's Park
 17. Ransom Community Park
 18. Riegelwood Community Park
 19. Sandyfield Park
 20. St. James Community Park
 21. Tabor City Recreational Complex

	Road Network
	Stream Network
Legend	State Park
	County Boundary
County Owned Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service
County Leased Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service

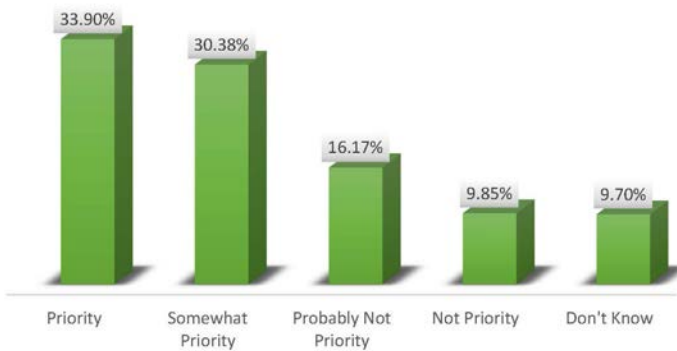
LOS MAP - BASEBALL/SOFTBALL



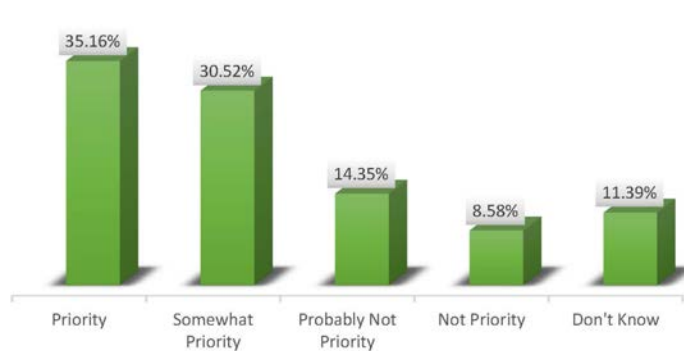
- Parks:**
- 1. Bogue Community Park
 - 3. Buckhead Park
 - 4. Carver Community Park
 - 5. Cerro Gordo Athletic Fields
 - 8. Council Field
 - 9. Edgewood Park
 - 10. Elizabeth Brinkley Park
 - 11. Elra Gertrude Spaulding Park
 - 14. Lake Tabor Recreational Park
 - 15. Old Dock Community Park
 - 17. Ransom Community Park
 - 18. Riegelwood Community Park
 - 20. St. James Community Park
 - 21. Tabor City Recreational Complex

Legend	
	Road Network
	Stream Network
	State Park
	County Boundary
County Owned Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service
County Leased Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service

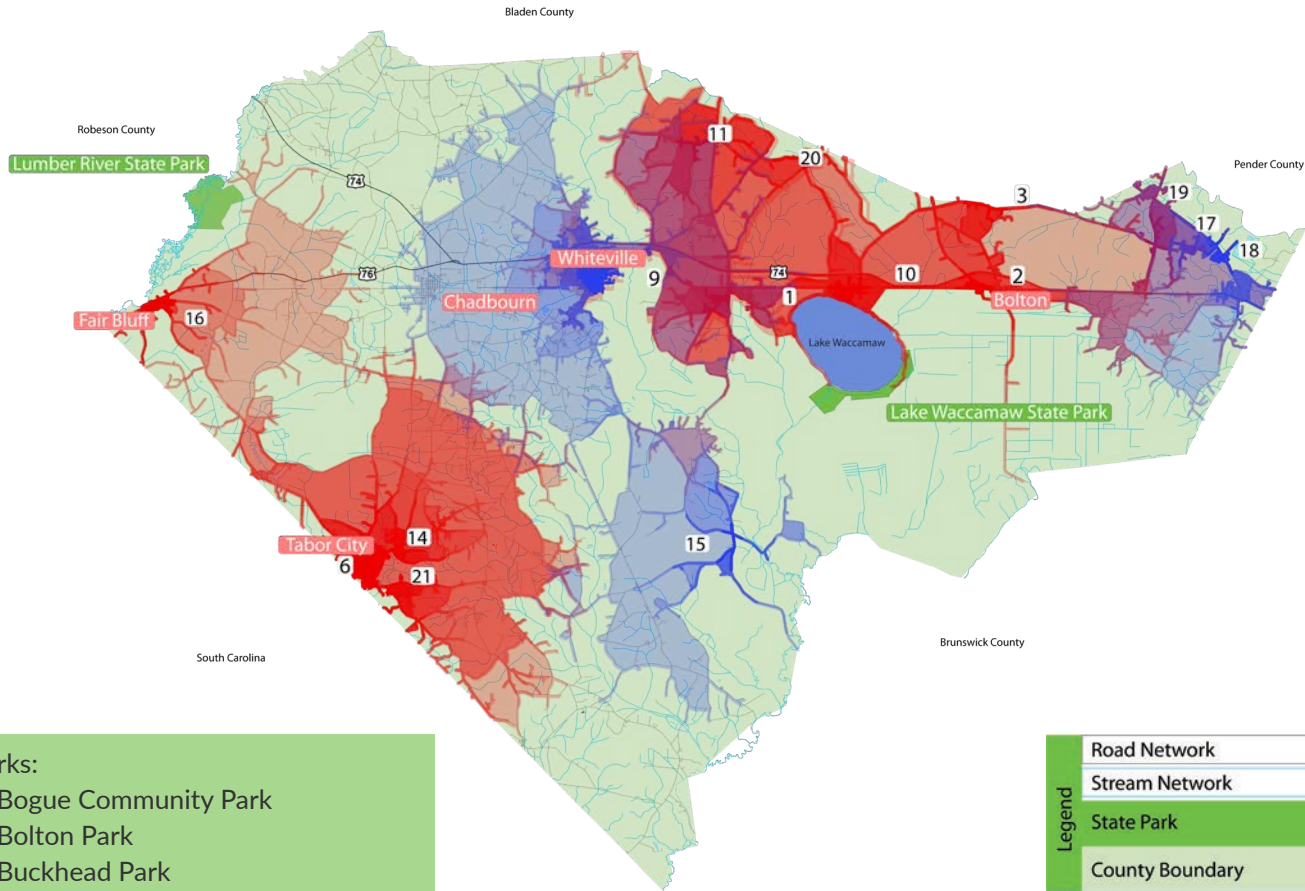
Baseball Fields



Softball Fields



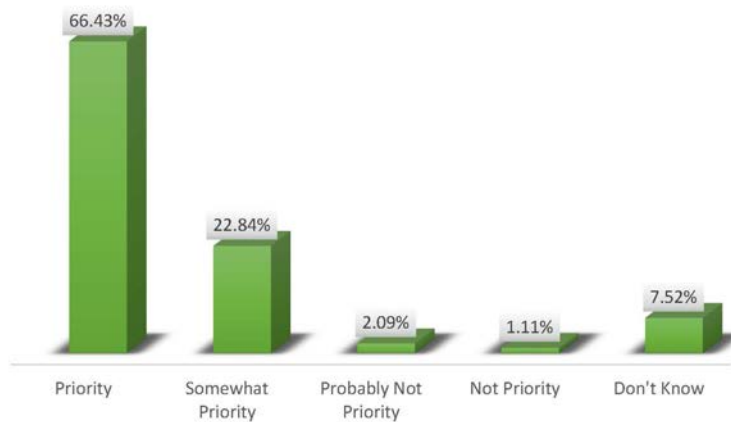
LOS MAP - PLAYGROUNDS



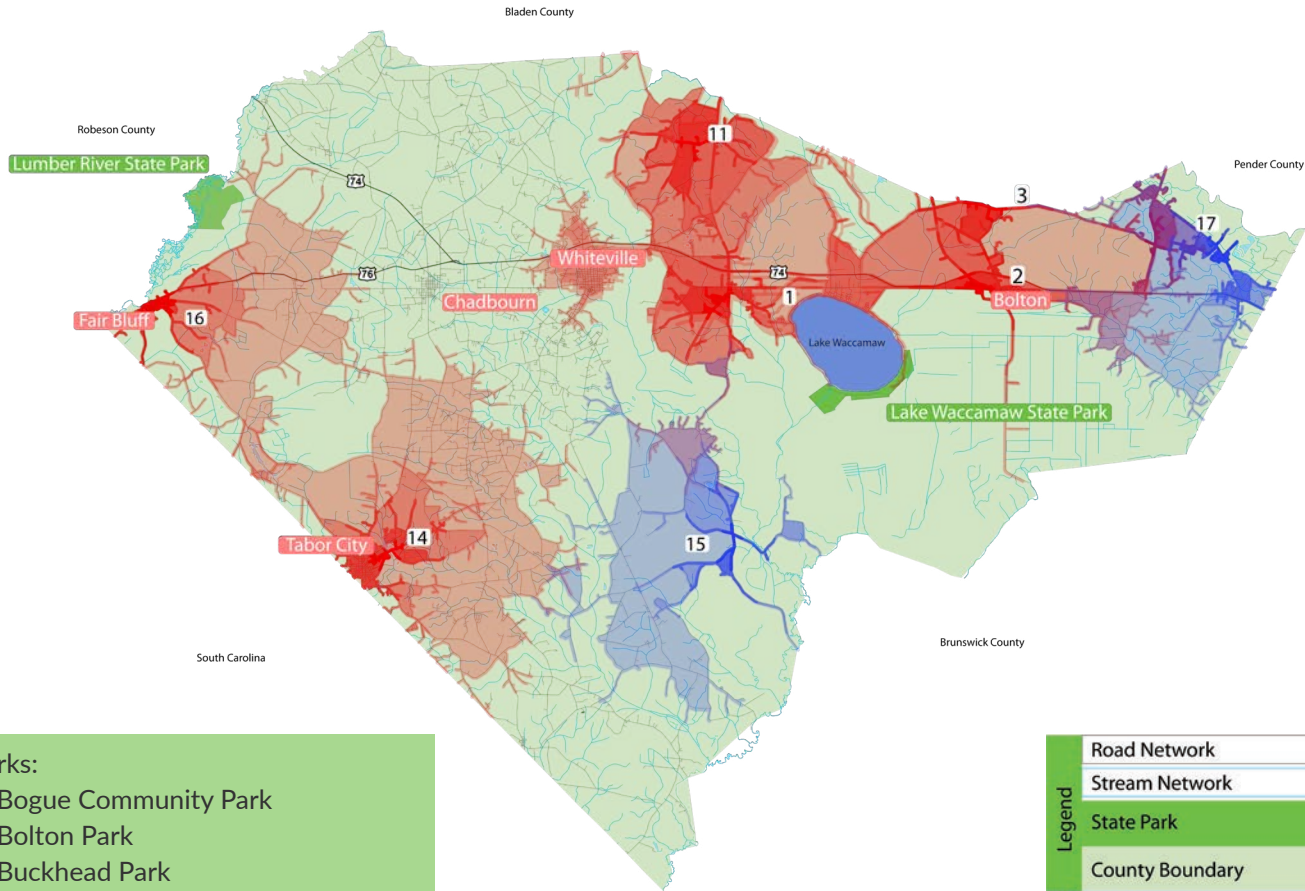
- Parks:**
1. Bogue Community Park
 2. Bolton Park
 3. Buckhead Park
 6. Civitan Park
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 14. Lake Tabor Recreational Park
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	Road Network
	Stream Network
Legend	State Park
	County Boundary
County Owned Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service
County Leased Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service

Playground for all abilities



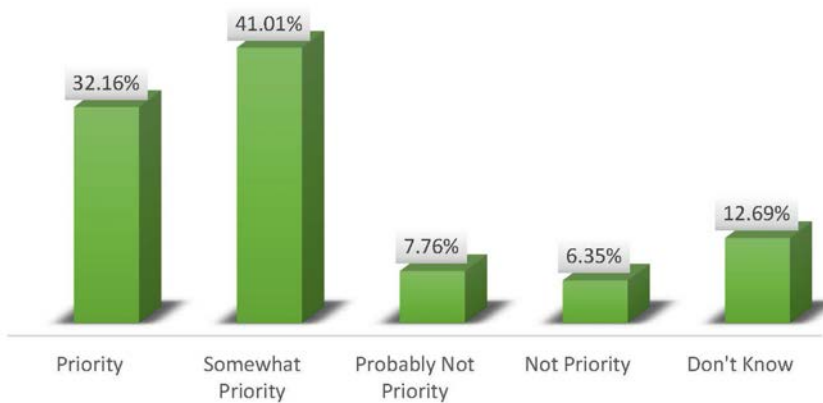
LOS MAP - BASKETBALL



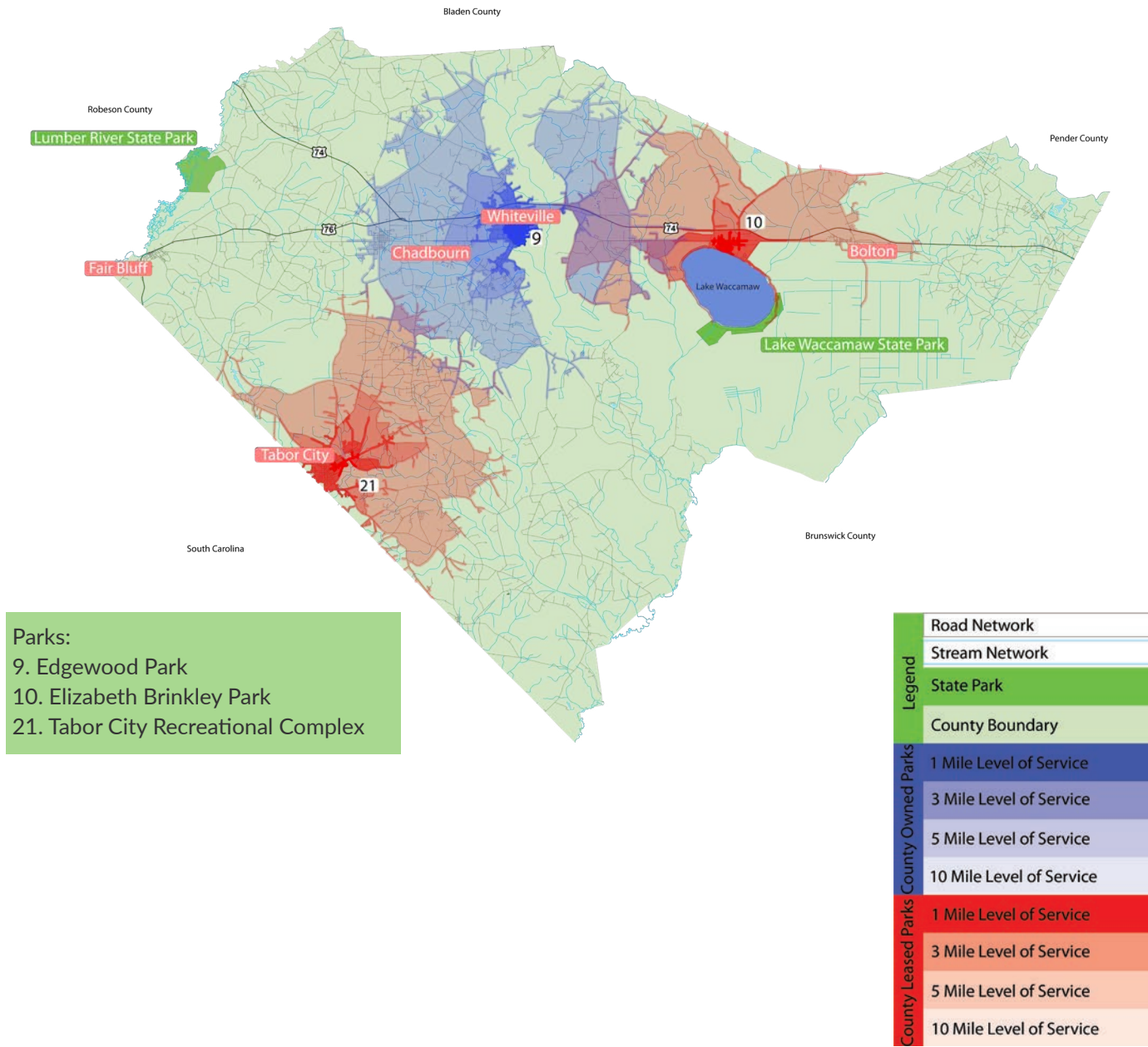
- Parks:**
- 1. Bogue Community Park
 - 2. Bolton Park
 - 3. Buckhead Park
 - 11. Elra Gertrude Spaulding Park
 - 14. Lake Tabor Recreational Park
 - 15. Old Dock Community Park
 - 16. Progressive Women's Park
 - 17. Ransom Community Park

	Road Network
	Stream Network
Legend	State Park
	County Boundary
County Owned Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service
County Leased Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
	3 Mile Level of Service
	5 Mile Level of Service
	10 Mile Level of Service

Basketball Courts

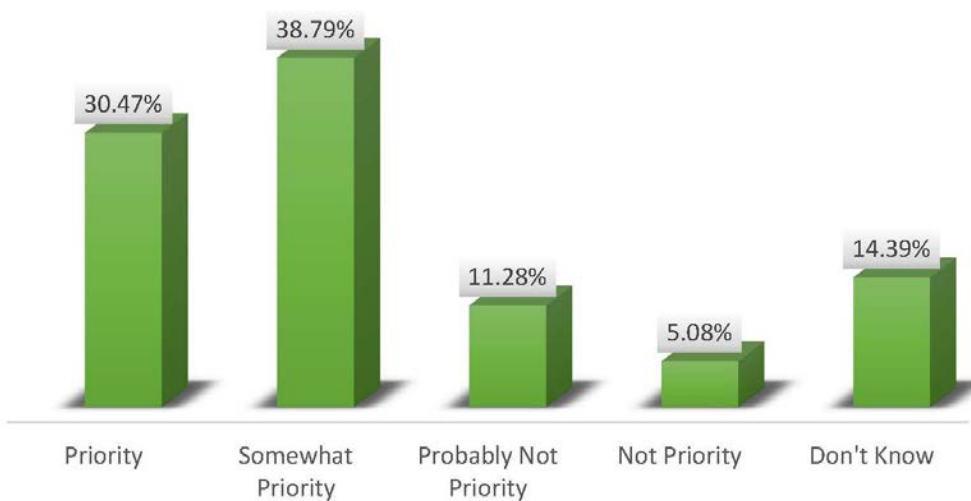


LOS MAP - MULTI-PURPOSE/SOCCER FIELDS

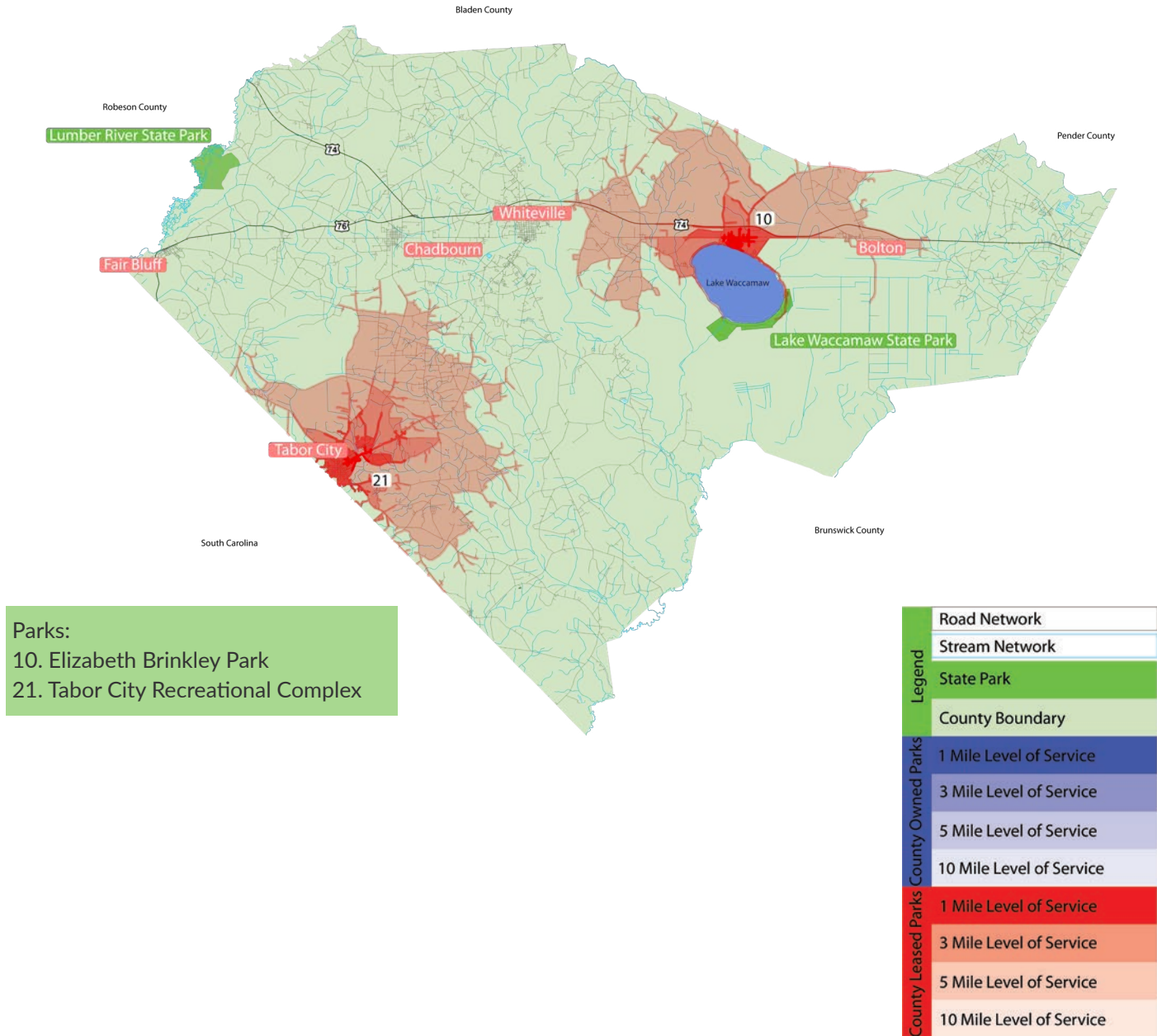


Parks:
 9. Edgewood Park
 10. Elizabeth Brinkley Park
 21. Tabor City Recreational Complex

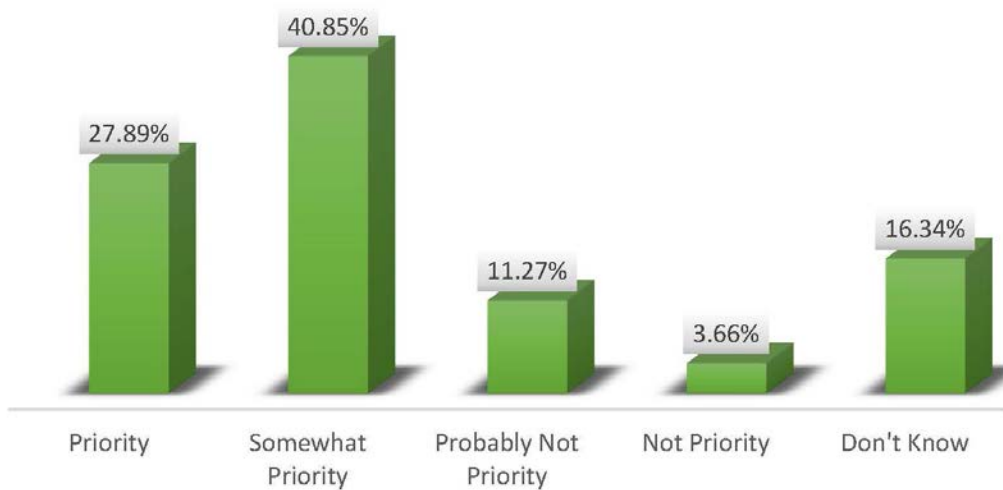
Soccer/Multi-Purpose Fields



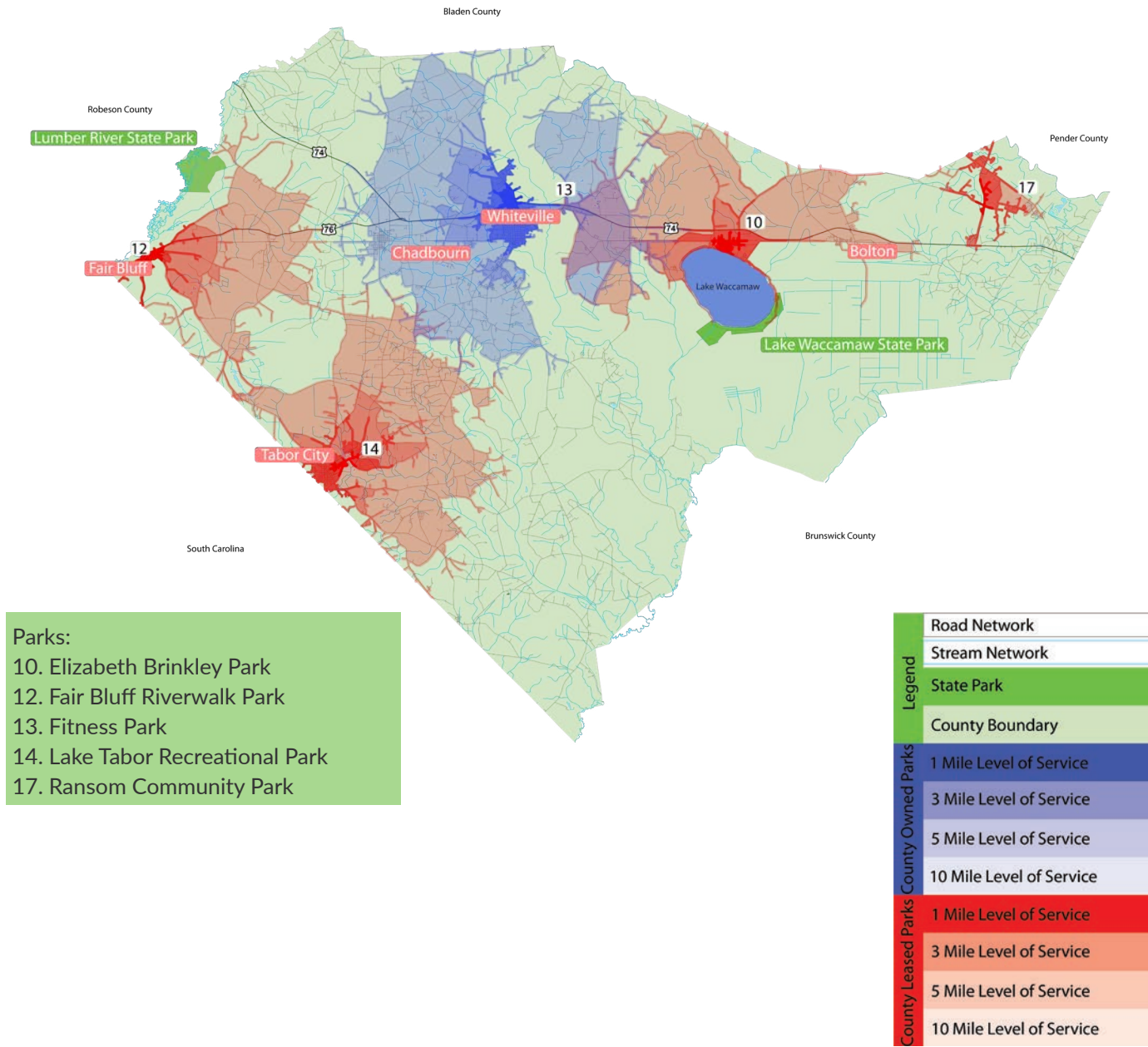
LOS MAP - TENNIS



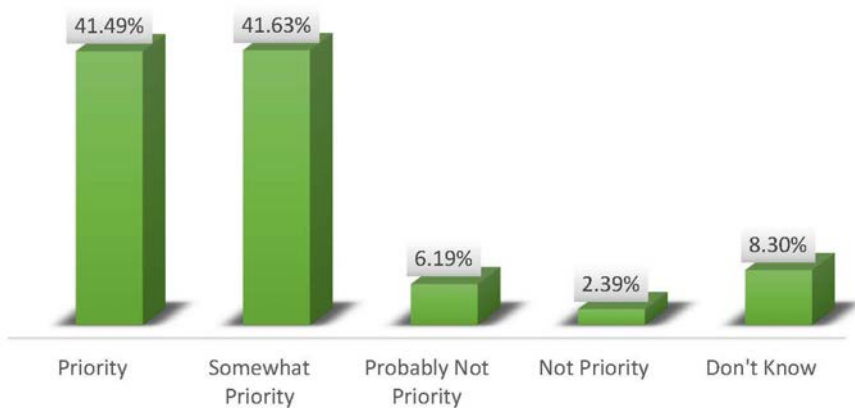
Tennis/Pickleball Courts



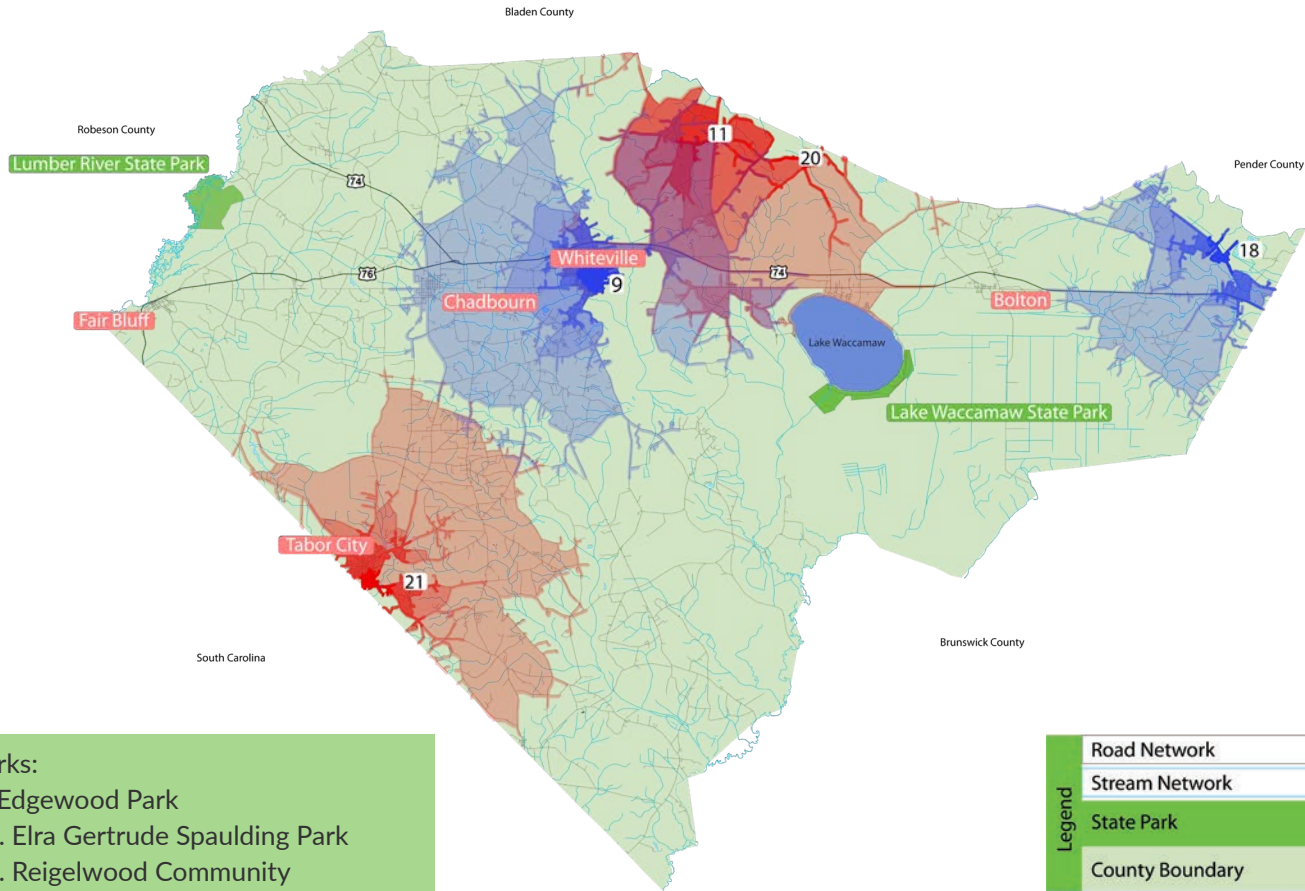
LOS MAP - TRAILS



Trails/Greenways



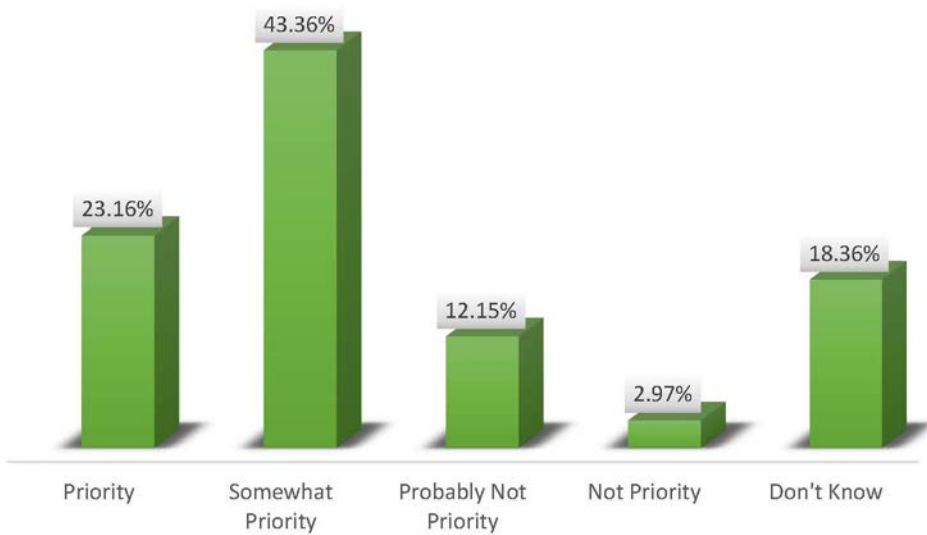
LOS MAP - VOLLEYBALL



- Parks:**
- 9. Edgewood Park
 - 11. Elra Gertrude Spaulding Park
 - 18. Reigelwood Community
 - 20. St. James Community Park
 - 21. Tabor City Recreation Complex

Legend	Road Network	
	Stream Network	
County Owned Parks	1 Mile Level of Service	
	3 Mile Level of Service	
	5 Mile Level of Service	
	10 Mile Level of Service	
	County Leased Parks	1 Mile Level of Service
		3 Mile Level of Service
		5 Mile Level of Service
		10 Mile Level of Service

Volleyball Courts



SYSTEM INVENTORY & ANALYSIS SUMMARY

Analysis of community demographics, previous planning efforts, and national metrics has developed a basis of understanding of the Columbus County parks system. A review of demographics has identified unique trends that are occurring within the County, such as projected continued population decline. Summaries of County plans, such as the Comprehensive Plan, show an established need for both additional park facilities and policy changes. Assessment of NPRA metrics conclude that the County's parkland acreage is low, but many facilities are meeting metric needs.

Columbus County maintains 37 acres of County-owned parkland and a total of 152.25 acres of parks through lease agreements. Within these parks, the County maintains several facilities including 24 baseball/softball fields, 15 playground facilities, 14 basketball courts, 8 batting cages, 4 tennis courts, and 4 volleyball courts. These parks and their facilities currently serve 50,623 residents, with a projected 2030 population of 43,942 residents to be served in the future. While facility metrics only require limited supplementation to meet national metrics, county-wide parkland acreage is below the lower quartile for compatible jurisdictions. A combination of consolidation and park expansion will be required to raise the County's metrics towards meeting NPRA medians. While Columbus County provides many successful programs most are athletically based. After

school and senior center programming appear to be lacking in the current program inventory, Chapter 3 will further illuminate which parks/programs are working and where community needs exist.

Review of park level of service indicates that the County's parks are primarily located within 5 miles of US 74 & US 76. This ensures ease of access to most facilities by automobile, allowing those in the southern portions of the County to utilize US 701 to access the same facilities. While notable accessibility gaps exist outside of utilizing an automobile, the Master Plan must balance consolidation of department resources with expansion of inventory. Future planning may require that the County focus on developing a few regional facilities, continue lease agreements with some municipal-serving parks to provide multi-modal accessibility, and discontinue agreements for small, under-performing parks.

These findings indicate the existing conditions of the Columbus County park network and the planning work done thus far. Chapter 3 will introduce the other half of the vision's foundation, public engagement. To be successful and responsive, the Master Plan must be a document that incorporates the perspective of the community.

This next chapter reviews the outreach work and findings collected during the public input process.



COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

3





COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

Engaging community residents is critical to understanding recreation needs and aspirations. For this master plan, Columbus County residents were provided the opportunity to provide their perspective during community meetings and participate in surveys that provided valuable information and influenced master plan recommendations. Without leveraging community members as local experts and understanding their desires for the County's future park system, the Plan could not be responsive. As such, community meetings, online surveys, and Steering Committee meetings, were conducted to solicit the experiences and insight of the community. This information, coupled with an understanding of existing conditions identified in Chapter 2, created the basis for the master plan vision and influenced the priorities identified for implementation.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, much of this information was gathered through on-line surveys and during virtual meetings. Two in-person community meetings were also held but were lightly attended. However, iterative involvement and digital alternatives resulted in the information found in this Chapter. Additionally, the project team worked closely with a Master Plan Steering Committee, a group of County citizens and project champions, as a representative voice of the community. The project team also worked with County staff and elected officials during the process.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Over the course of the master planning process, two in-person community meetings were held to engage the community. The first of these was held on November 16, 2021 in 4 locations across the county in an effort to make it convenient for residents. Meetings were held at the following locations:

- ▶ Dempsey B. Herring Annex-Commissioner's Chamber
- ▶ East Columbus High School
- ▶ South Columbus High School
- ▶ West Columbus High School

Approximately 50 residents participated in these meetings. The community meetings were designed to allow for drop-in participation and presented visual preference surveys, County-wide park inventories, aerials of County-owned parks, and members of the project team and Steering Committee were present to discuss the Plan and answer questions. Project team feedback indicated that many residents were concerned about the number of unused and underutilized parks, their strain on the Parks and Recreation Department's budget, and maintenance of existing parks. Many residents also indicated the desire for a large regional park, with several referencing Savannah's Park in Myrtle Beach as an example. Myrtle Beach was frequently mentioned as a direct competitor to Columbus County when it came to the recreation needs of the County's residents.

Participants in one of the meetings sketched in a potential regional facility located between Chadbourn and Whiteville on the south side of US 74.

Review of Recreation Preference Boards illuminated shared priorities among the community meeting participants of the. The following facilities scored the most votes among participants:

Top 5 Facilities

- ▶ Athletic Fields
- ▶ Trails/Greenways
- ▶ Water Play / Splash Pad
- ▶ Gymnasium
- ▶ Tennis / Pickleball Courts

Top 5 Programs

- ▶ Athletic Programs
- ▶ Adventure Programs
- ▶ Aquatic Programs
- ▶ Fitness Programs
- ▶ Senior / Active Adult Programs

Input received during the meetings indicated that participants were interested in more opportunities and facilities for organized sports throughout the County. In addition, trails and greenways were often cited as a primary need for passive recreation health and well-being as well as opportunities to connect to nature and connectivity within the County. Adventure and fitness programs were also frequently mentioned in addition to splash pad facilities.

A second in-person community meeting was held on Feb. 22, 2022, at the Board of Commissioners Chambers. The presentation at this meeting included an overview of the process conducted, survey and community meeting results, and the initial vision and recommendations for the system. Input received at this meeting echoed that from the previous community meetings and surveys and there was general consensus that the vision presented was headed in the right direction.

ONLINE COMMUNITY SURVEY

745 Columbus County residents participated in an online survey from Nov. 2, 2021 to Feb.18, 2022. The survey included 30 questions aimed at understanding participants' experience and satisfaction with County parks and recreational facilities and programs, their recreation needs, barriers to participation, and, whether or not they travel outside of the County to recreate. The survey also included 8 demographic questions. The online responses revealed some interesting trends that are summarized below. .

The community survey indicated that the County is maintaining several facilities that are not being adequately utilized by the public. This suggests an opportunity to end several of the lease agreements with these parks and focus more strategically on fewer, but more improved park spaces.

COMMUNITY MEETING

**Columbus County
Parks & Recreation**

NOVEMBER 16TH, 2021
FROM 5:30 TO 8 PM

FOUR LOCATIONS:

East Columbus County HS Cafeteria Lake Waccamaw, NC	West Columbus County HS Cafeteria Cerro Gordo, NC
South Columbus County HS Cafeteria Tabor City, NC	Dempsey B. Herring Courthouse Annex 112 W Smith St. Whiteville, NC





**TAKE THE SURVEY!
SCAN THE QR CODE**







Most respondents believe that in addition to other priorities (such as public safety, utilities, etc.) parks and recreation is important to the community. It is apparent from these results and other conversations that residents of Columbus County understand how important the parks and recreation system is to the health of residents as well as the future of the County's economy. Invested residents help champion future parks projects and programs, indicating a positive level of investment from the community. It was noted that without volunteers the Parks and Recreation Department would not be able to provide various programs.

Additionally, most respondents do not feel like they have good access to greenways and trails. This is a reoccurring sentiment identified in the survey results and indicates that there is a desire for a more connected trail network within the County.

While the majority of respondents were satisfied with the Columbus County Parks and Recreation customer service, ease of registering for program, and overall service fees, over 70% were dissatisfied with the availability of information about recreation programs or parks. Question 14, indicates that the primary avenues used to inform residents are should include social media, the County's website, and through the newspaper.

When asked what currently prevents the respondents from accessing Columbus County park facilities/ programs, the following reasons were identified as the biggest limitations (in descending order):

- ▶ Not aware of facilities or programs available
- ▶ Lack of amenities
- ▶ Safety concerns
- ▶ Condition of parks and facilities

More effective communication between the Columbus County Parks and Recreation department and the residents of the County could greatly increase park and program utilization. Updating the department website to specifically showcase park amenities and sending out social media blasts containing upcoming program information is a cost-effective way to get more residents into County parks.

Most of the respondents (63%) utilize other agencies or private organizations for recreation needs. Respondents primarily travel to North Myrtle Beach, and Brunswick County, and utilize City of Whiteville facilities for recreation needs. In order for the County to remain competitive with these other providers it must improve and maintain a wide variety of facilities/ provider services that keep residents and capital within the County.

In review of funding options to support facility and program improvements, respondents ranked the following options from most preferred to least preferred.

- ▶ Matching Grants
- ▶ Increase Impact Fees on Development
- ▶ Bonds
- ▶ Property Tax Rate Dedicated for Parks
















When asked how much additional funding respondents would support per month/per household, the majority of respondents indicated that they were willing to pay \$15 or more each month to expand recreation facilities, programs, and maintenance. This demonstrates that residents are invested in successful parks and recreation services, and are willing to help supplement the cost for such services. While property taxes dedicated for parks was the least favorable funding option depicted in Question 19, a small increase in taxes, coupled with pursuit of grants and increased development fees may give the department the capital to provide excellent parks and services to the community.


Survey respondents were also provided the opportunity to write in any additional comments regarding the Columbus County Parks and Recreation system. While comments varied, reoccurring topics were noted by the project team. The topics included a development of a regional facility, overall safety concerns, increased communication of department assets/events, opportunity for regional tournaments, need for greenways/trails, and limited access to park facilities in various locations of the County.

STEERING COMMITTEE











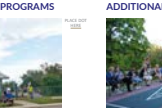
At key points in the planning process, the Master Plan Steering Committee was engaged to provide perspective and guidance. The committee also reviewed master plan recommendations, prior to the materials being presented to the public at large. Steering Committee involvement began at project kickoff when the committee met with the project team and discussed overarching goals and milestones of the plan. Members of the committee attended community meetings, where they spoke with the public about the existing facilities and the plan. Investment in the project was made by the Committee from the beginning to ensure that the community's voice was incorporated into the Master Plan.


PLACE COLORED DOTS ON TOP 5 PREFERRED FACILITIES

NEIGHBORHOOD PARK 	TRAILS/GREENWAYS 	ATHLETIC FIELDS 
BASKETBALL COURTS 	TENNIS/PICKLEBALL COURTS 	VOLLEYBALL COURTS 
SPLASH PAD 	SUMMER CAMPS 	DOG PARKS 
GYMNASIUM 	AMPHITHEATER 	SPECIAL EVENTS 
ADDITIONAL PARKS 	OUTDOOR FITNESS STATIONS 	COMMUNITY GARDENS 

Columbus County Parks & Recreation Master Plan - Preference Boards 

PLACE COLORED DOTS ON TOP 5 PREFERRED PROGRAMS

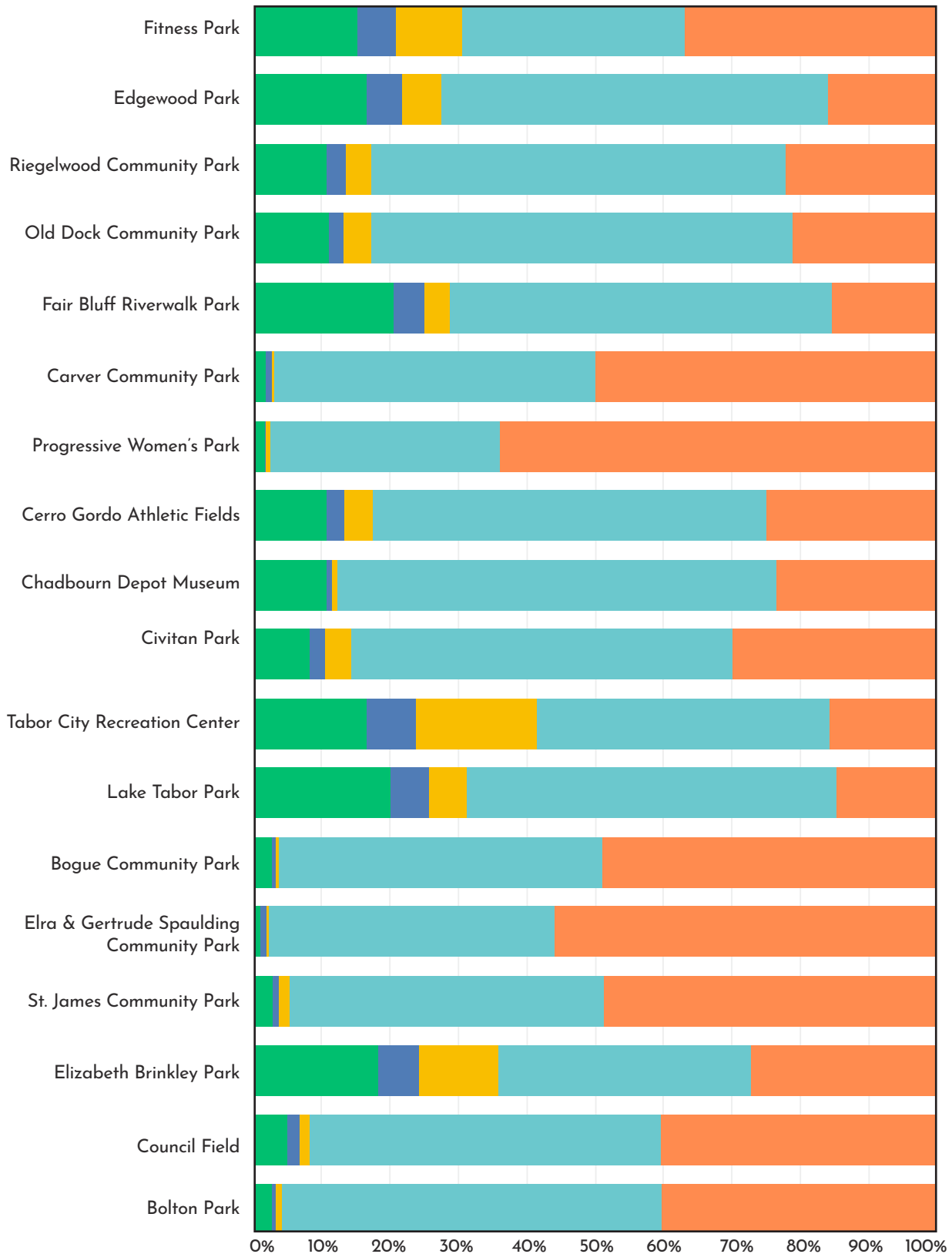
ATHLETIC PROGRAMS 	FITNESS PROGRAMS 	SENIOR/ACTIVE ADULT PROGRAMS 
ART PROGRAMS 	ADVENTURE PROGRAMS 	AQUATIC PROGRAMS 
NATURE PROGRAMS 	SPECIAL NEEDS PROGRAMS 	PRESCHOOL/EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS 
ADDITIONAL TEEN PROGRAMS 	ADDITIONAL SENIOR PROGRAMS 	
DID WE MISS ANYTHING?		

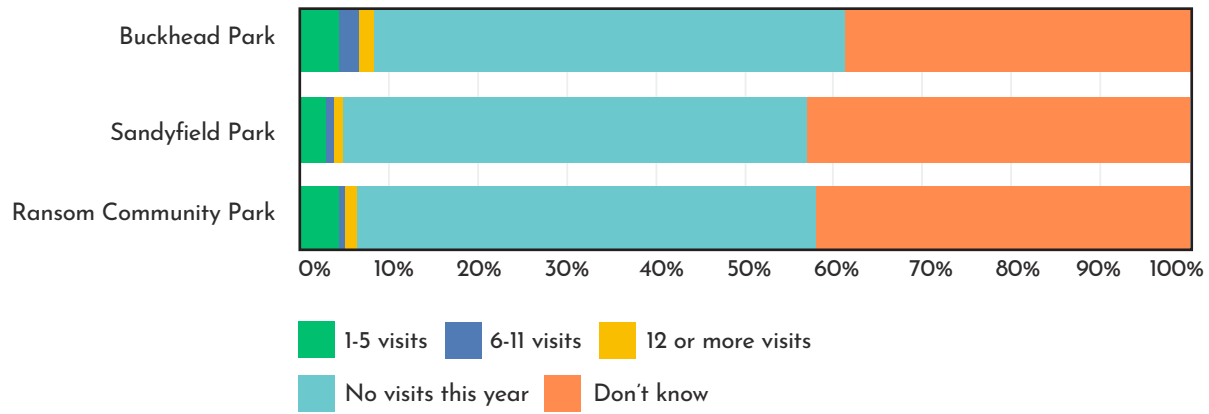
Columbus County Parks & Recreation Master Plan - Preference Boards 

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Q1

“For each of the facilities listed below, please indicate how often you and/or your family have visited in the past year.”





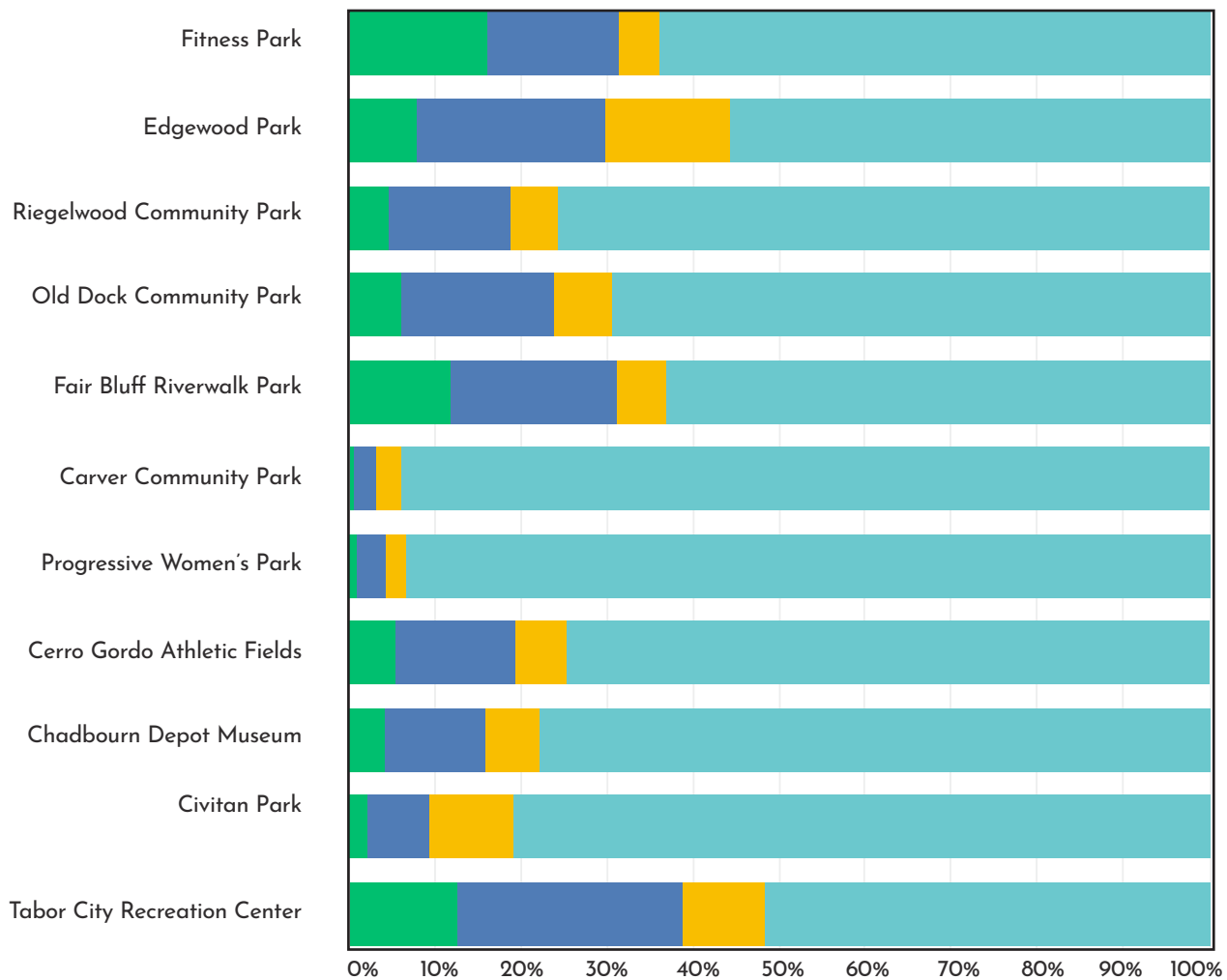
Q2

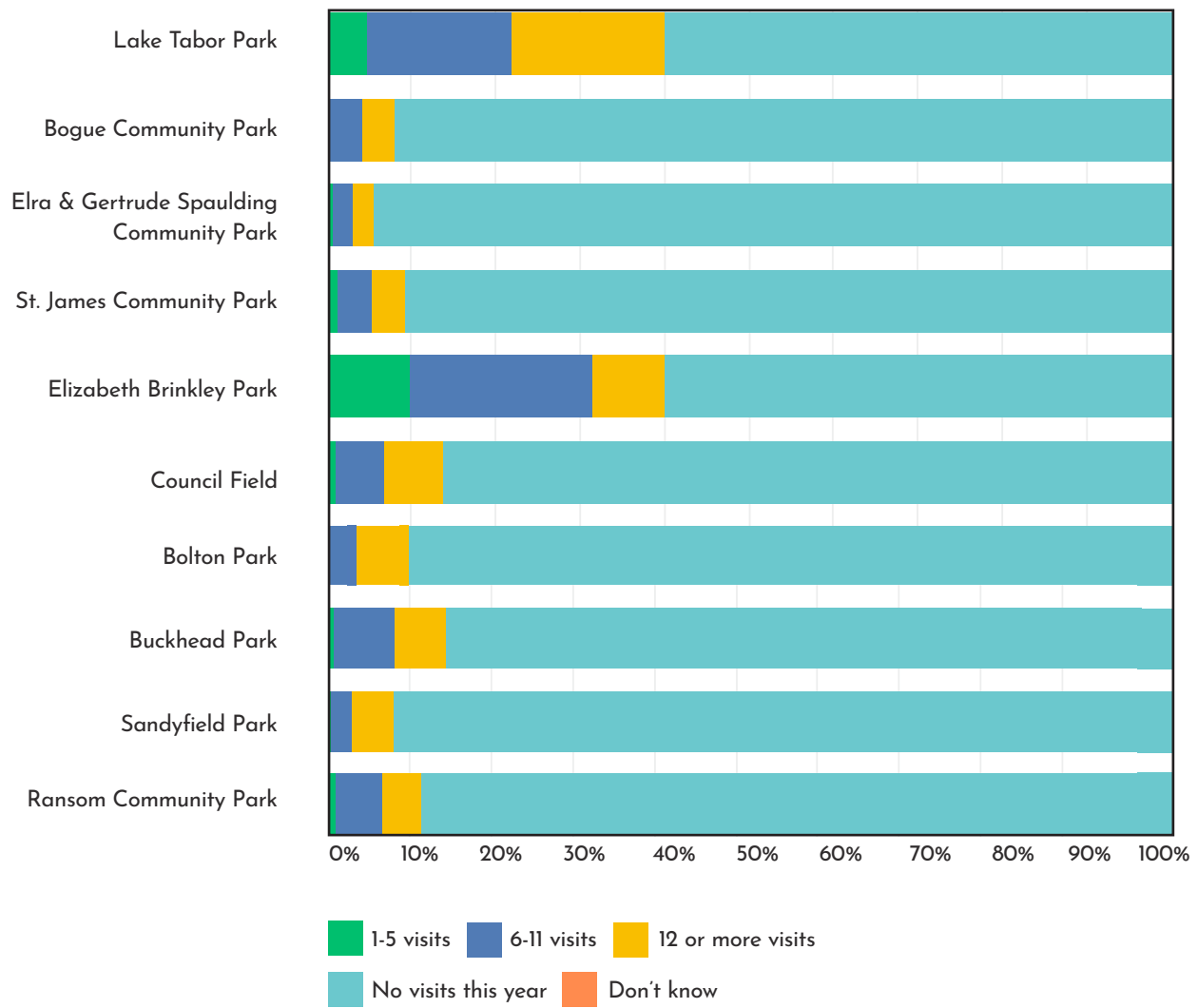
“For each of the parks facilities listed below, please indicate your level of satisfaction with the amenities. Provide additional comments to supplement your feedback.”

Of those who were aware of the park, most respondents were “**very satisfied**” with the facilities of Fitness Park. Conversely, of those who were aware of the parks, most respondents were “**not satisfied**” with the facilities of Sandyfield Park, Buckhead Park, Bolton Park, Elra & Gertrude Spaulding Community Park, Lake Tabor Park, and Civitan Park. Echoing the findings of Q1, underperforming facilities must be reviewed to determine if they are serving a purpose for the community today and in the future. Additionally,

many write-in comments included discussion about park safety, the lack of walking trails, and the need for a community pool. Park consolidation would possibly free up resources and capital to ensure that the better performing parks are safe and supply the amenities Columbus County citizens desire.

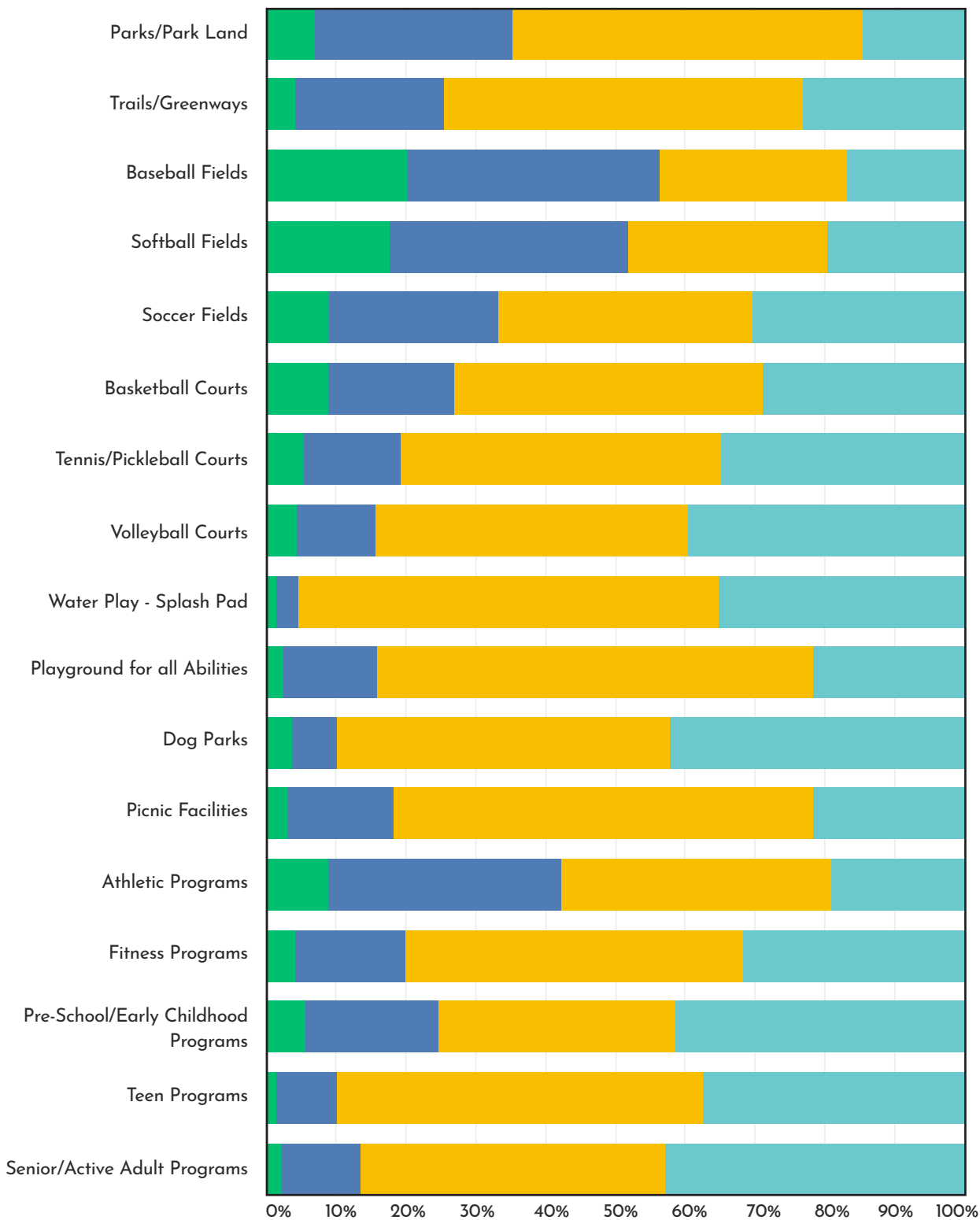
Of those who were aware of the County’s individual facilities, programs, and activities, most respondents were “Not Satisfied” with the following:

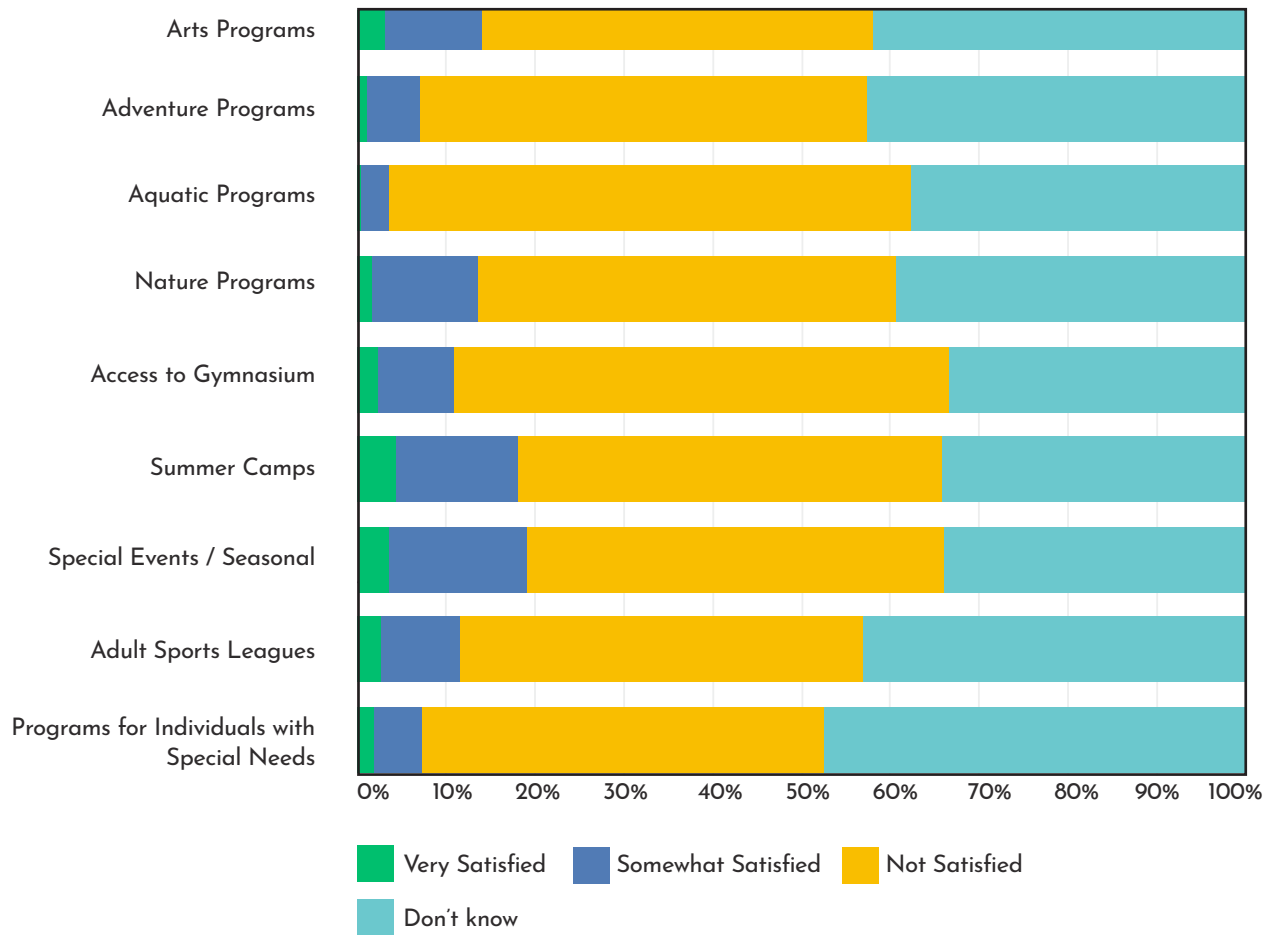




Q3

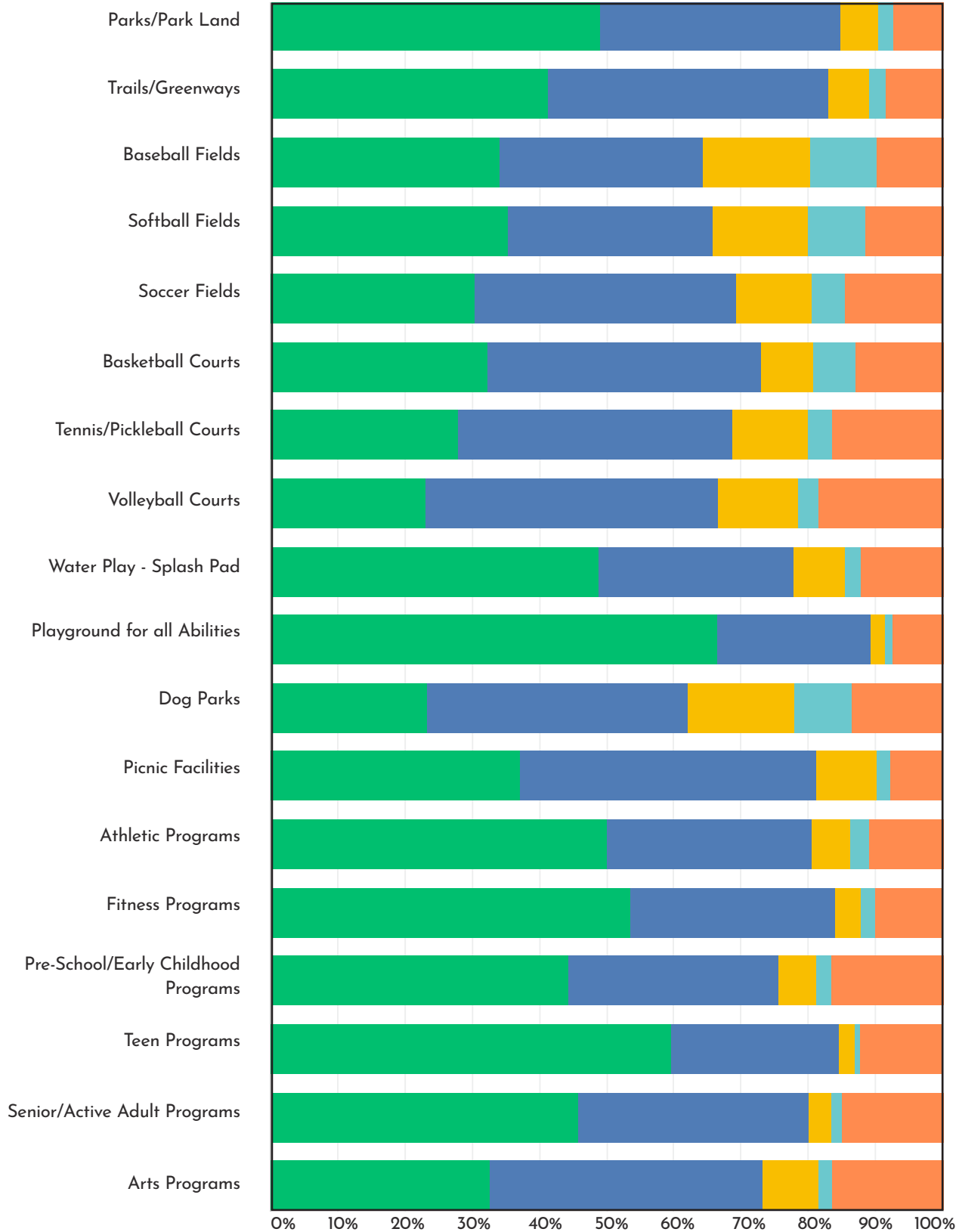
“Do you think the following facilities, programs, and activities provided in Columbus County are currently meeting the needs of the community?”

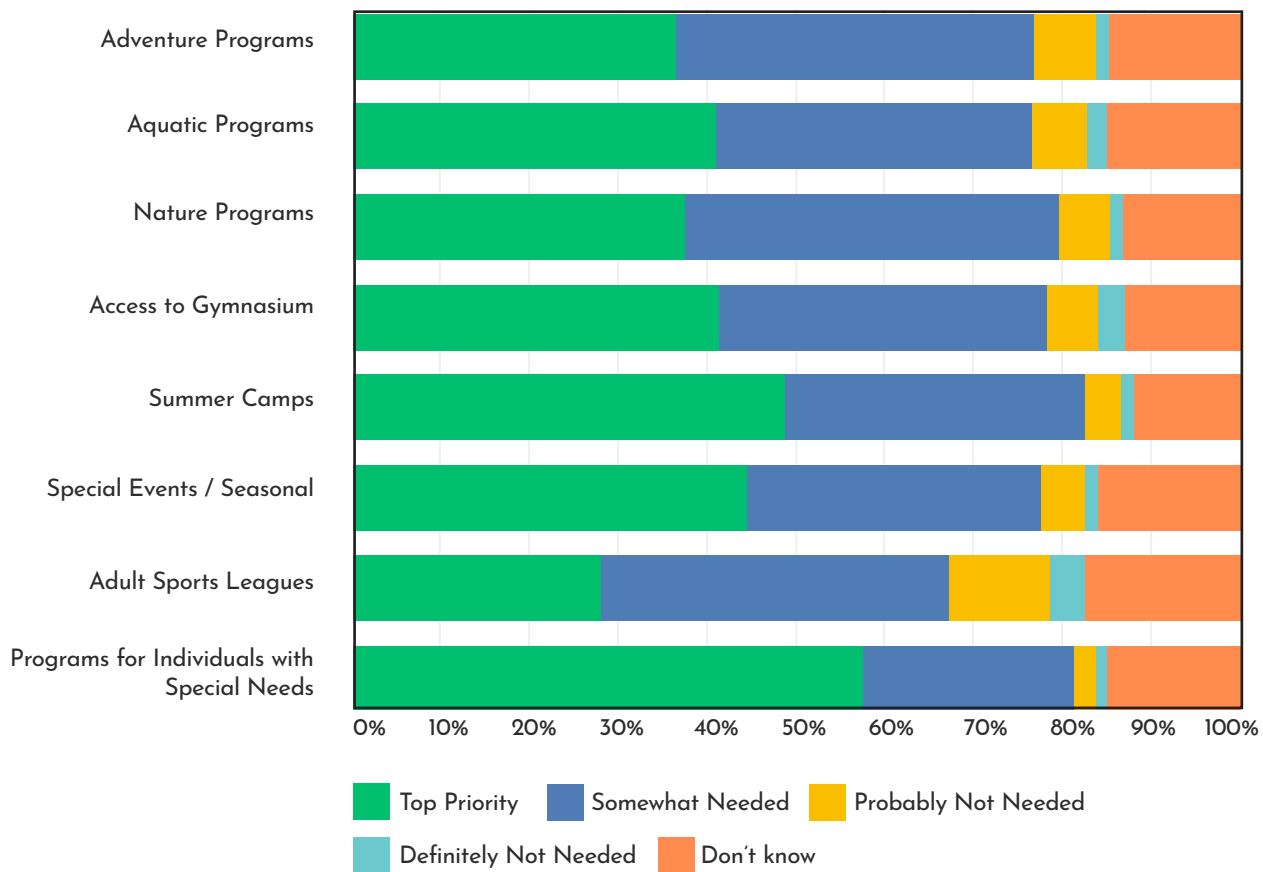




Q4

“Please indicate what you feel is the level of need for each item listed below that Columbus County should consider adding in the future.”





There is significant interest in the following active adult/senior programs/leagues:

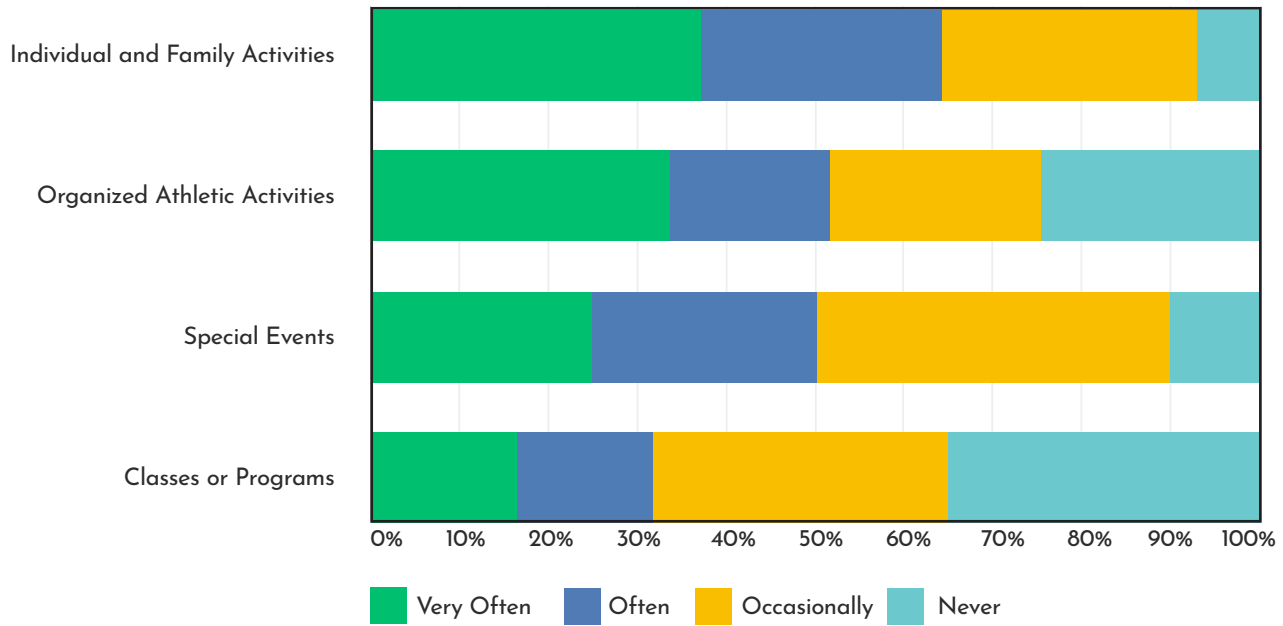
- ▶ Fitness Programs – Yoga, Dancing, Barre
- ▶ Greenway Walks and Low Impact Hiking
- ▶ Travel – Local and Out of Town
- ▶ Aquatic Programs – Water Aerobics
- ▶ Art Studio – Sewing, Painting, Crafts

There is significant interest in the following special events, classes and activities:

- ▶ Camping
- ▶ River Camps (Canoeing, Kayaking, Paddling, Water Safety)
- ▶ Adventure Trips
- ▶ Food Truck Events
- ▶ Farmers Markets
- ▶ Nature Programs
- ▶ STEM Programs for Kids and Teens

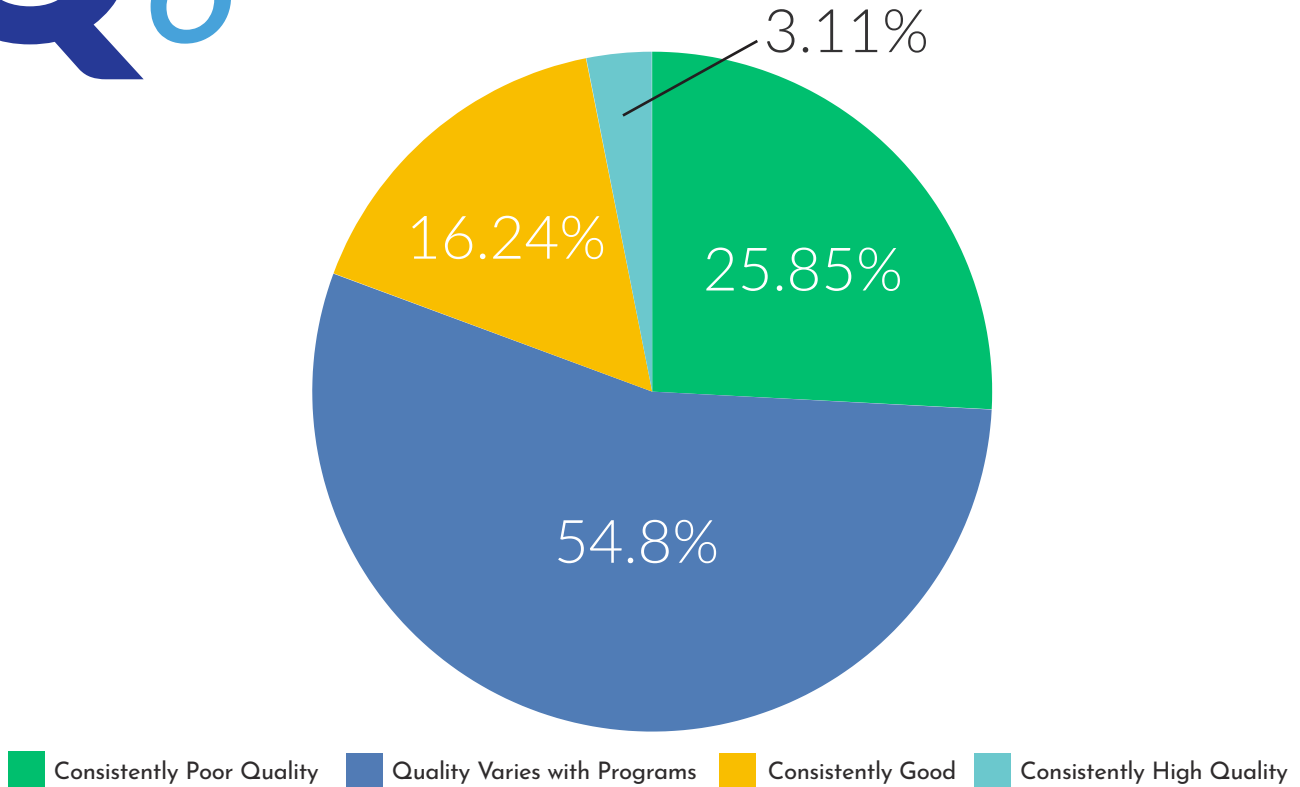
Q5

“Using the list below indicate how often you take part in the following activities, whether through the Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department or not.”



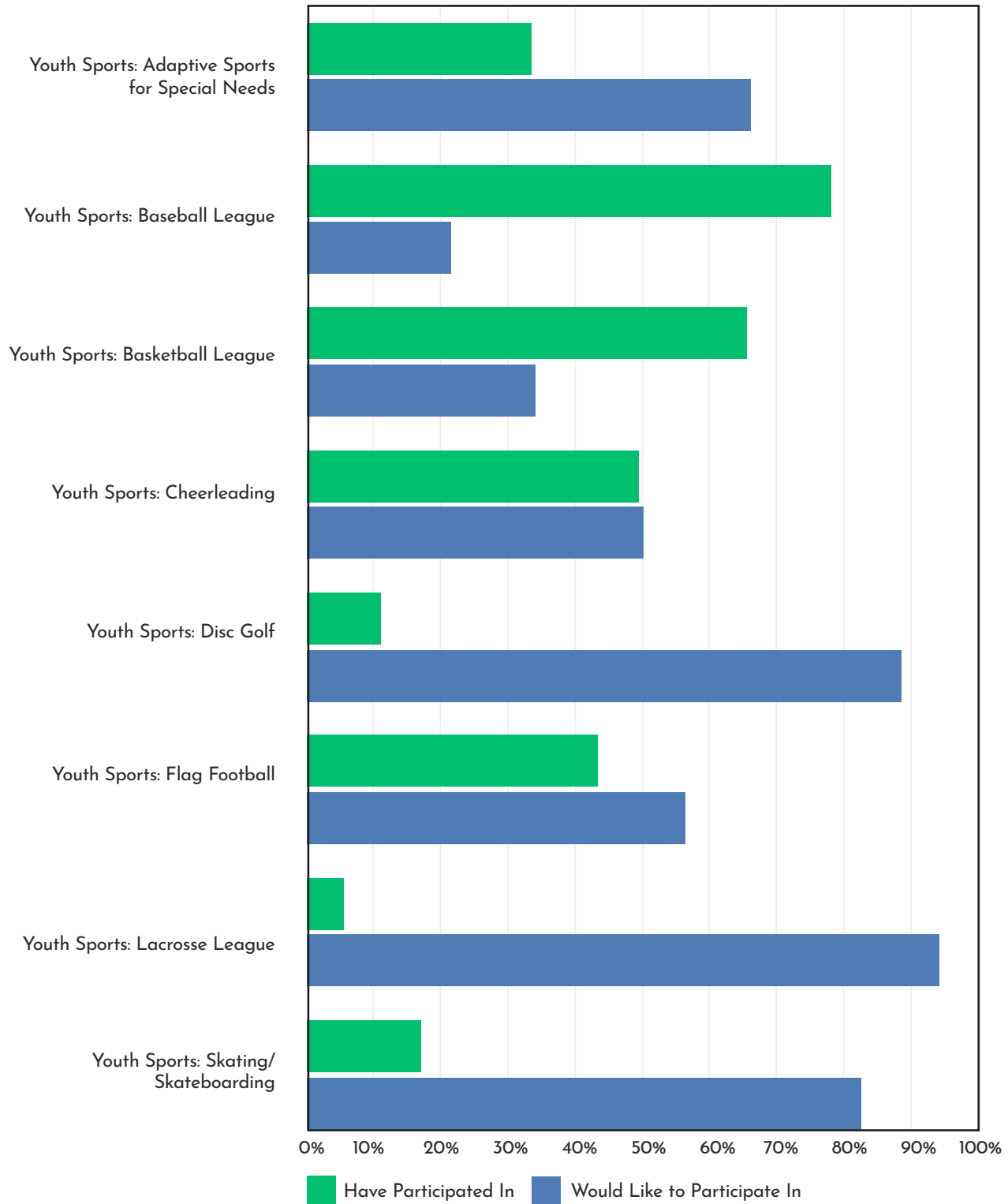
Q6

“How would you rate the Columbus County Parks and Recreation programs and activities?”



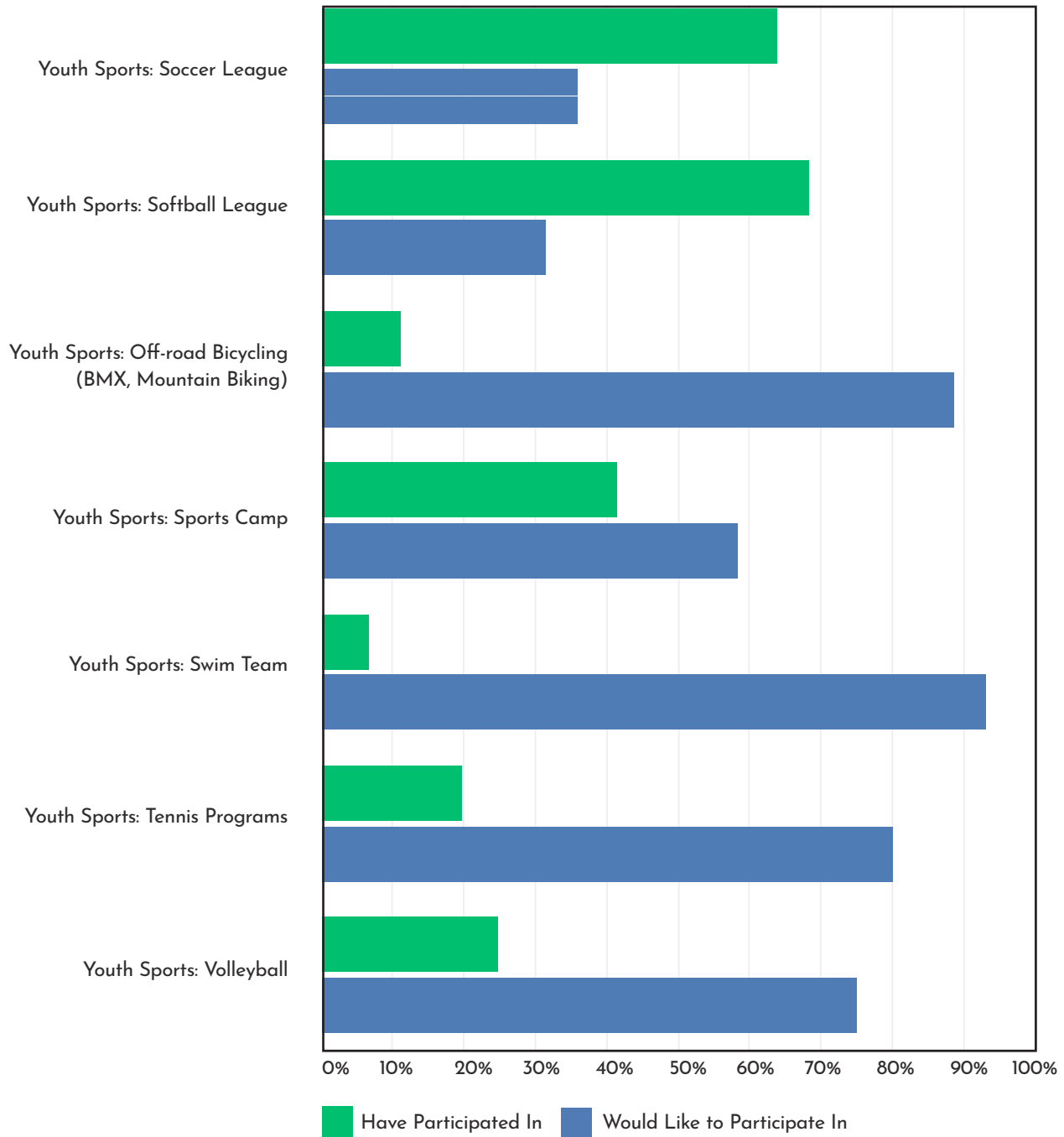
Q7

“Please place a check next to the *Youth Programs/Leagues* that you OR your family have and/or would like to participate in. (Note: blank answers will be counted as no participation and/or no interest).”



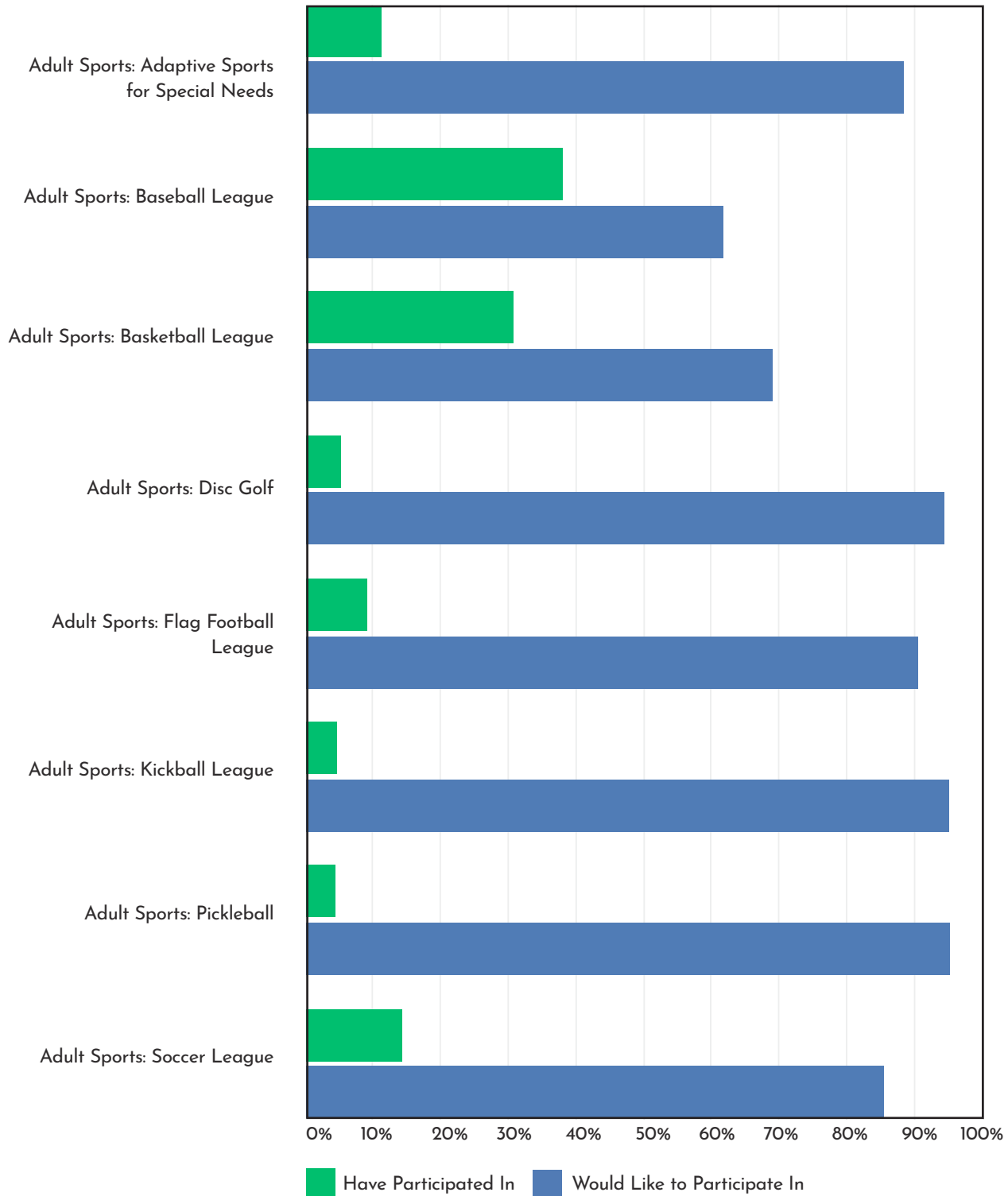
Q7

“Please place a check next to the **Youth Programs/Leagues** that you OR your family have and/or would like to participate in. (Note: blank answers will be counted as no participation and/or no interest).”



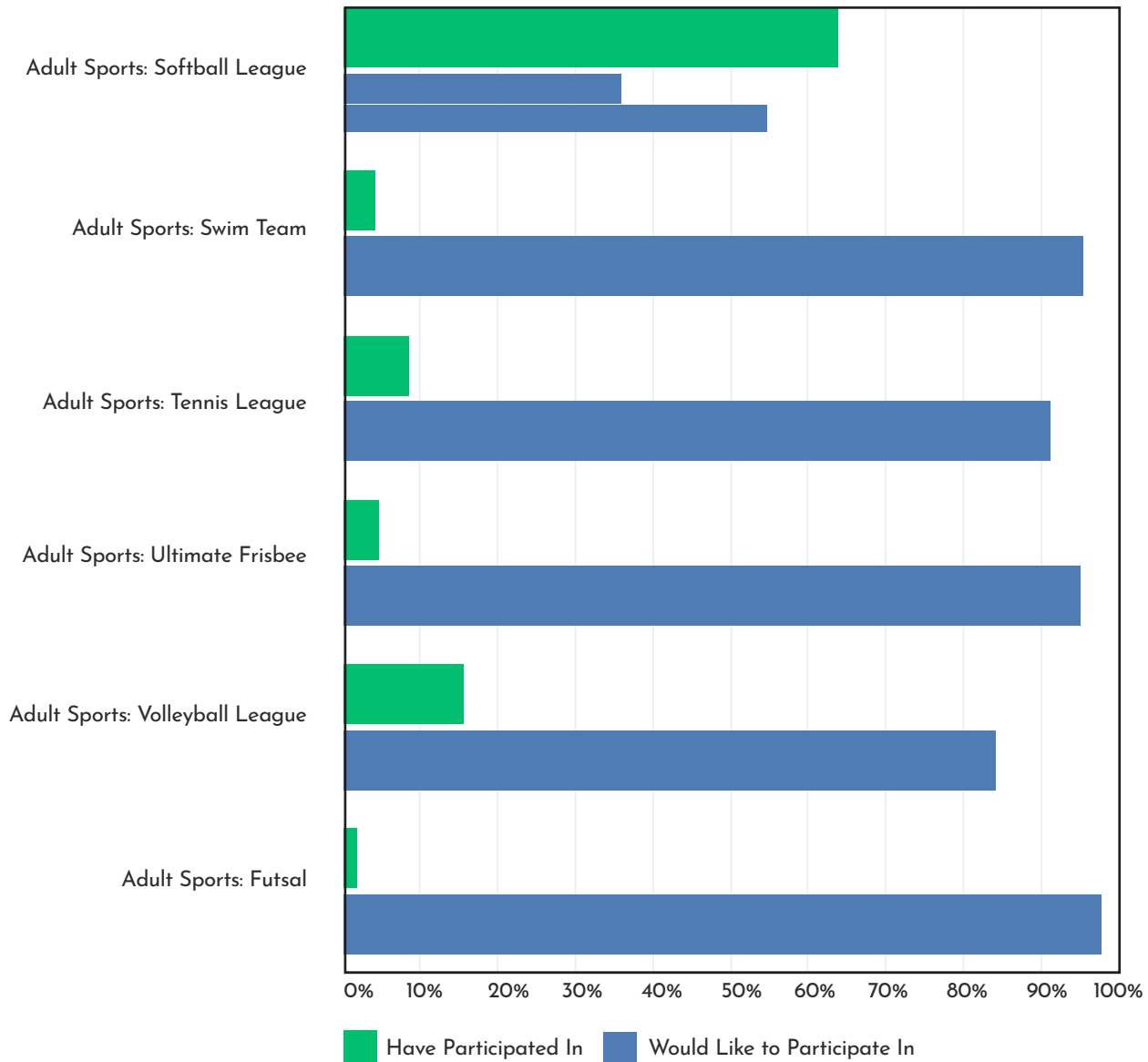
Q8

“Please place a check next to the **Adult Programs/Leagues** that you OR your family have and/or would like to participate in. (Note: blank answers will be counted as no participation and/or no interest).”



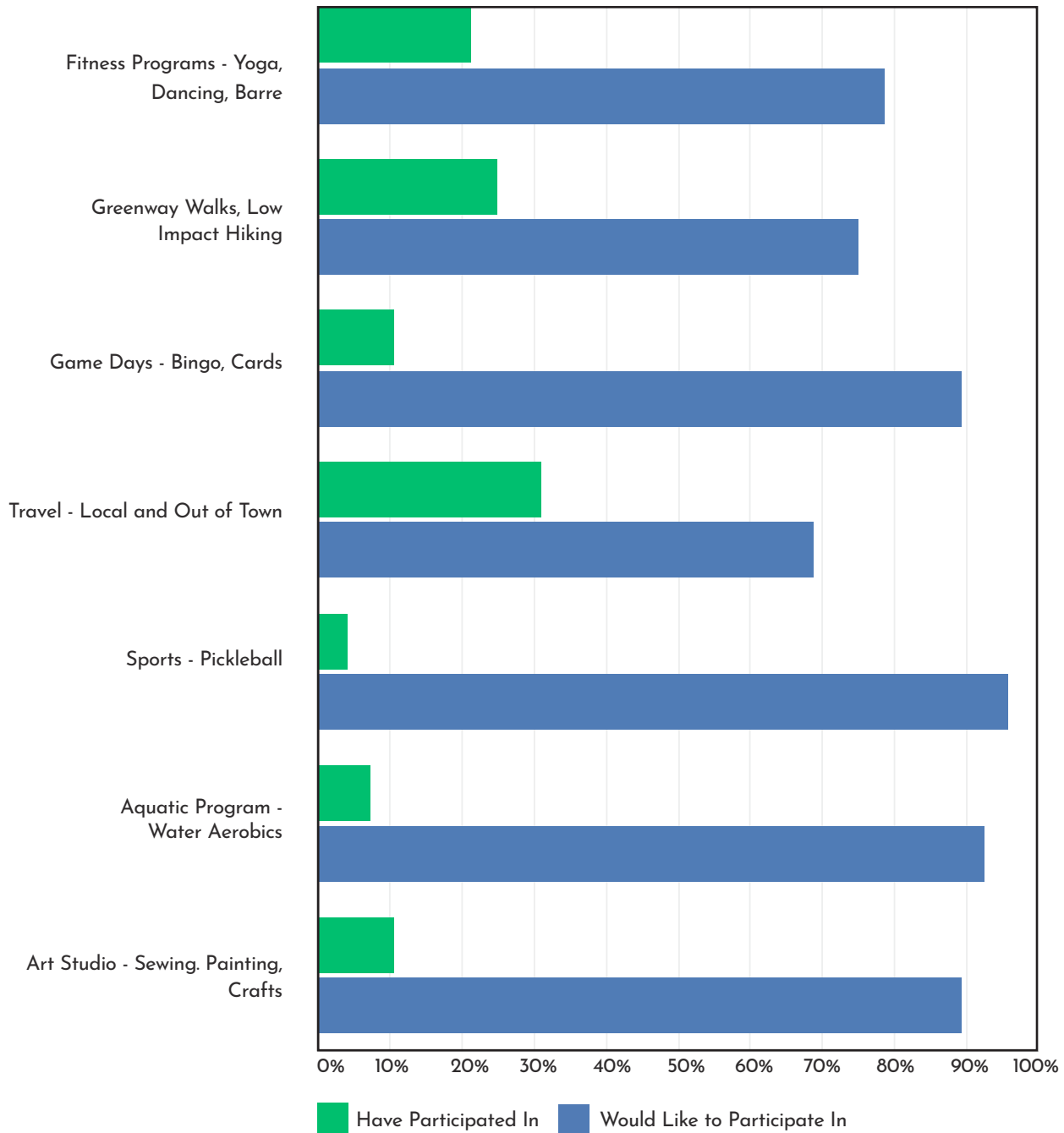
Q8

“Please place a check next to the **Adult Programs/Leagues** that you OR your family have and/or would like to participate in. (Note: blank answers will be counted as no participation and/or no interest).”



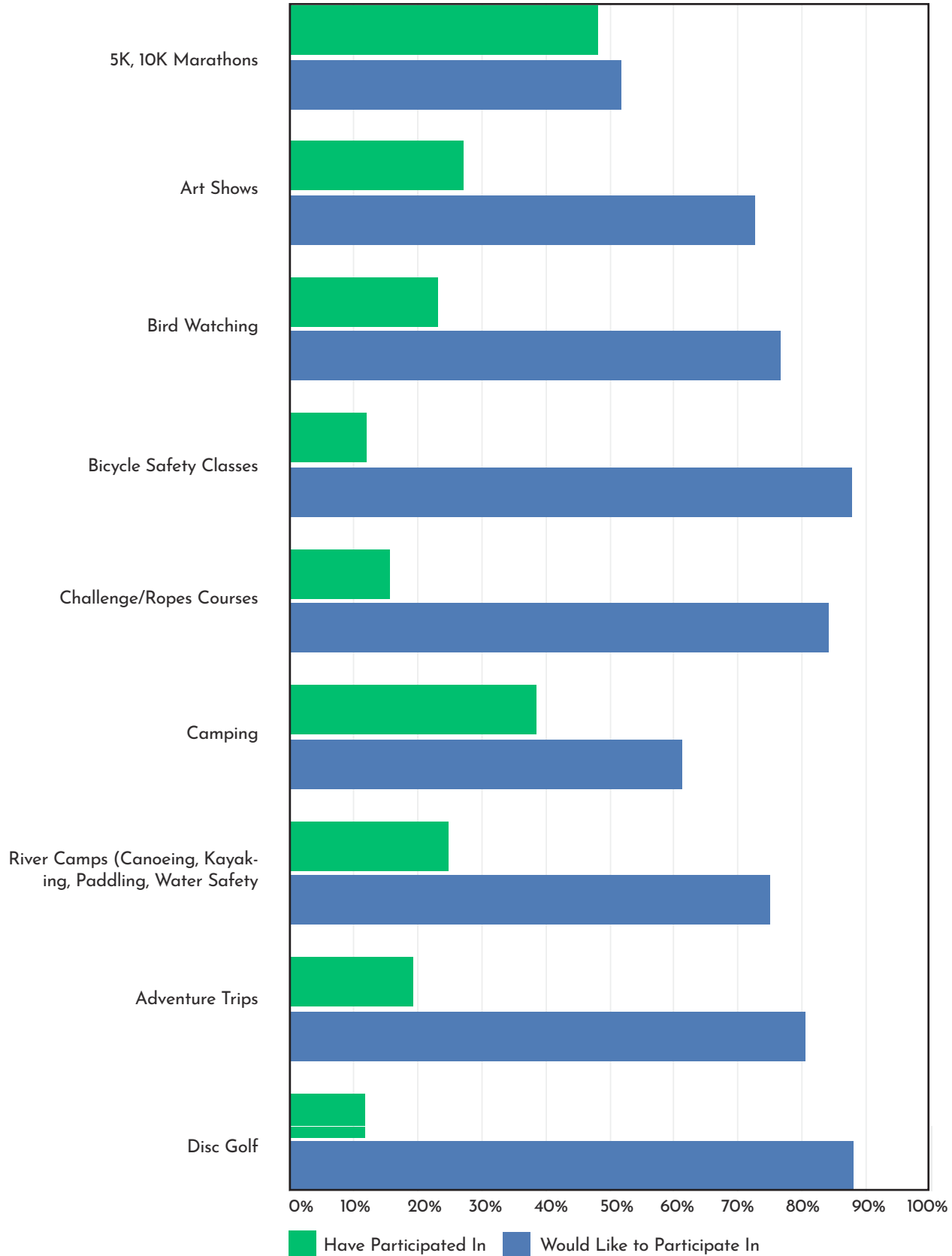
Q9

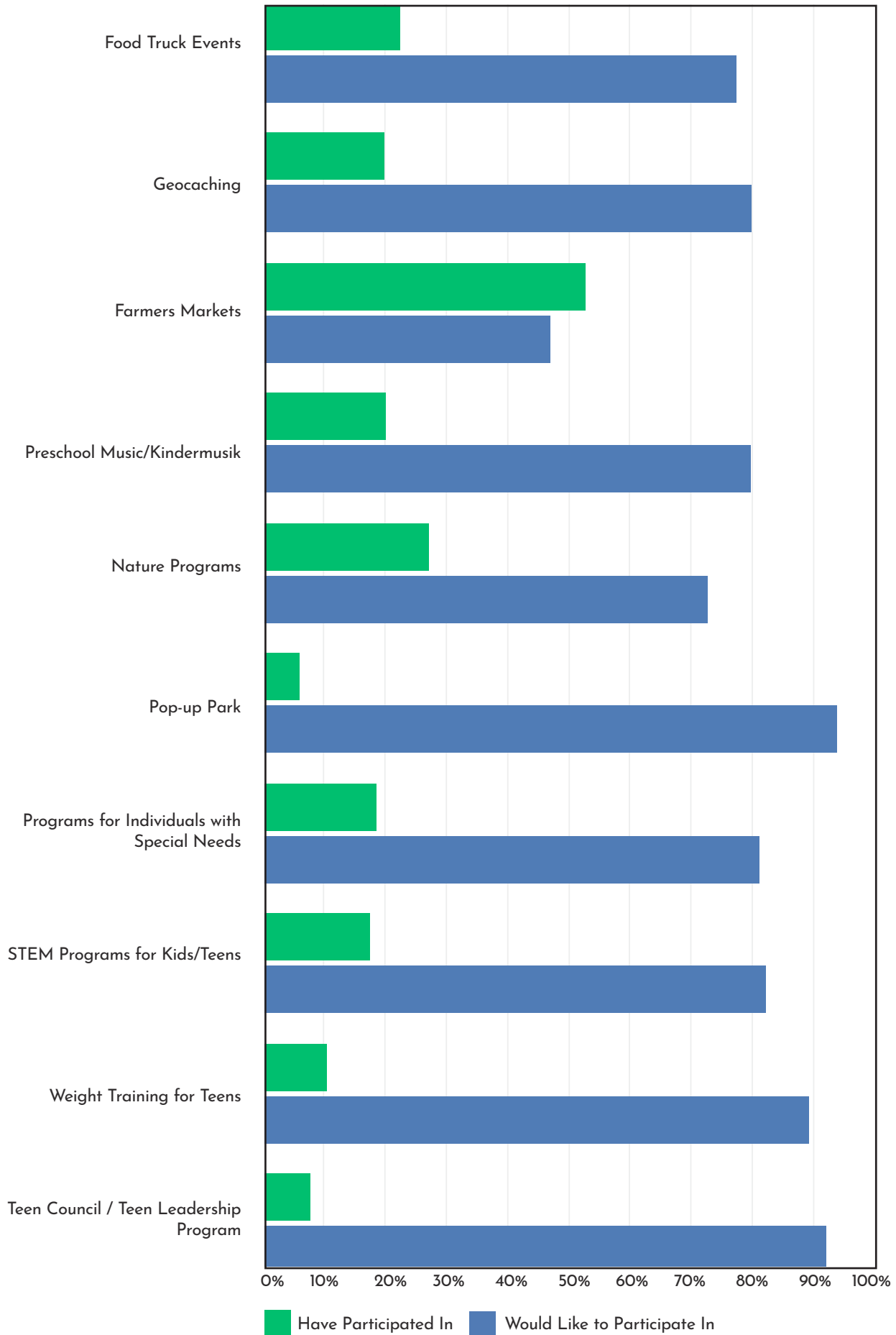
“Please place a check next to the **Adult Adults/Seniors** that you **OR** your family have and/or would like to participate in. (Note: blank answers will be counted as no participation and/or no interest).”



Q10

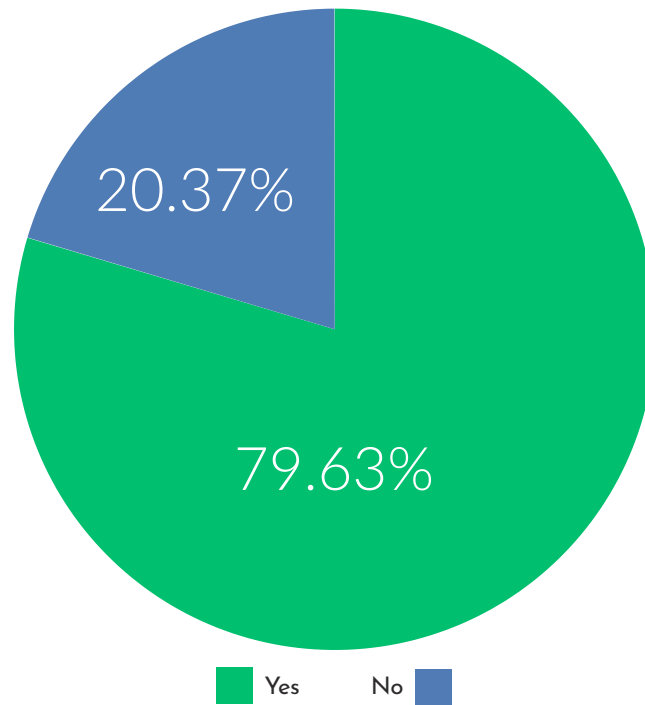
“Please place a check next to the **Special Events, Classes and Activities** that you OR your family have and/or would like to participate in. (Note: blank answers will be counted as no participation and/or no interest).”





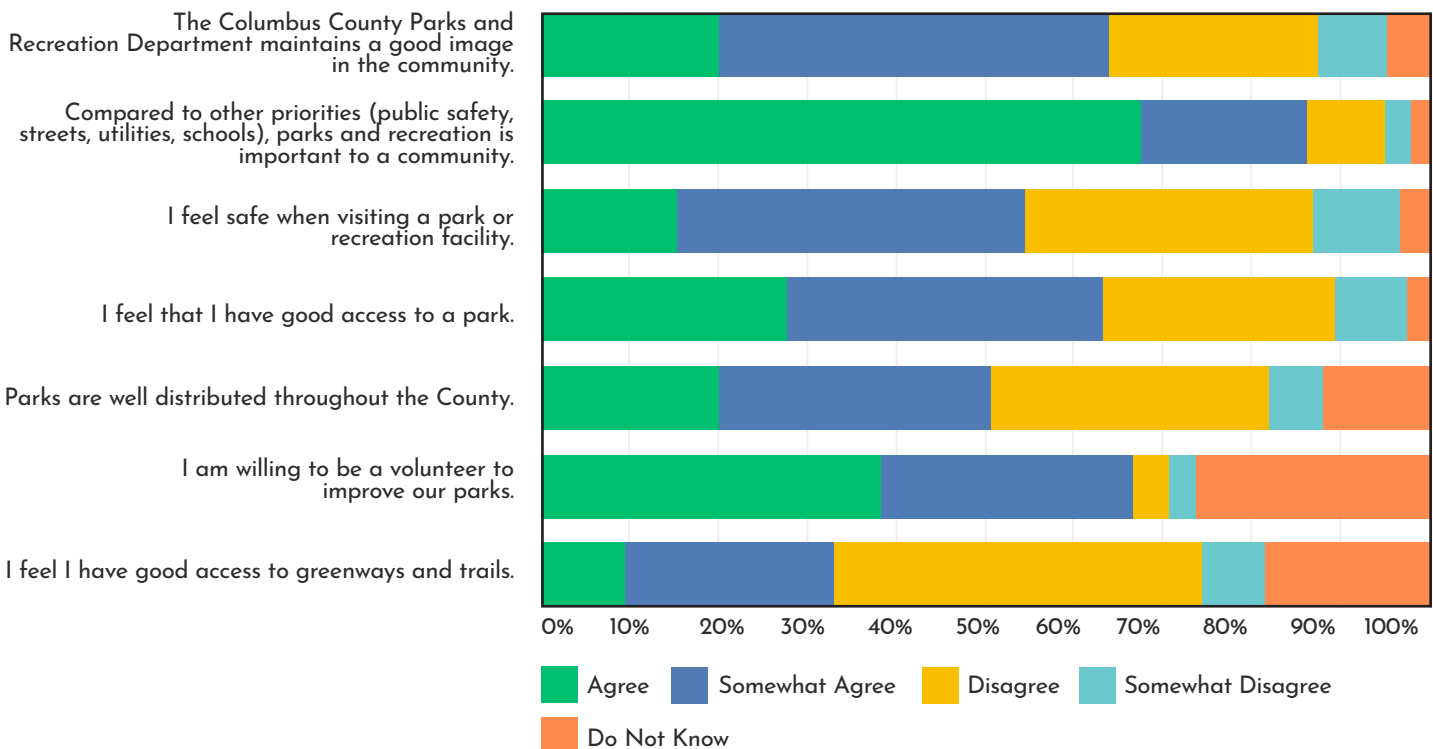
Q11

“Would you like to see more public art in County parks?”



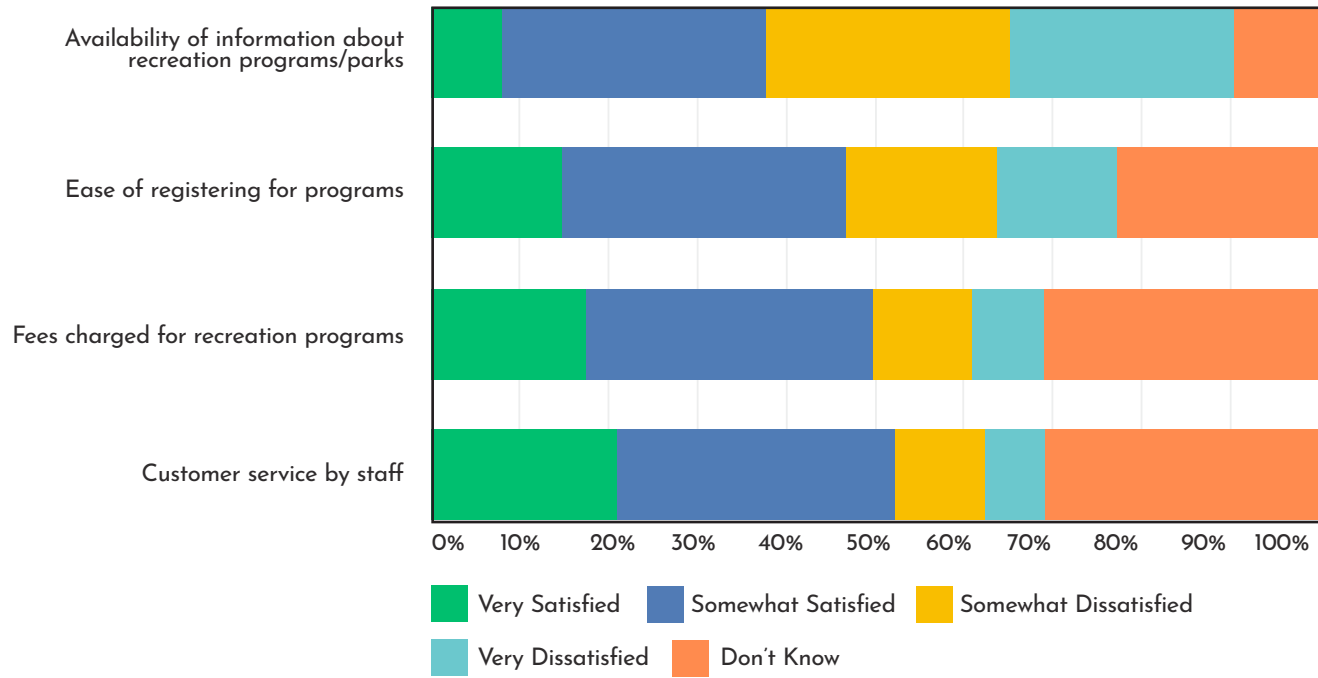
Q12

“Please indicate your level of agreement about the following statements.”



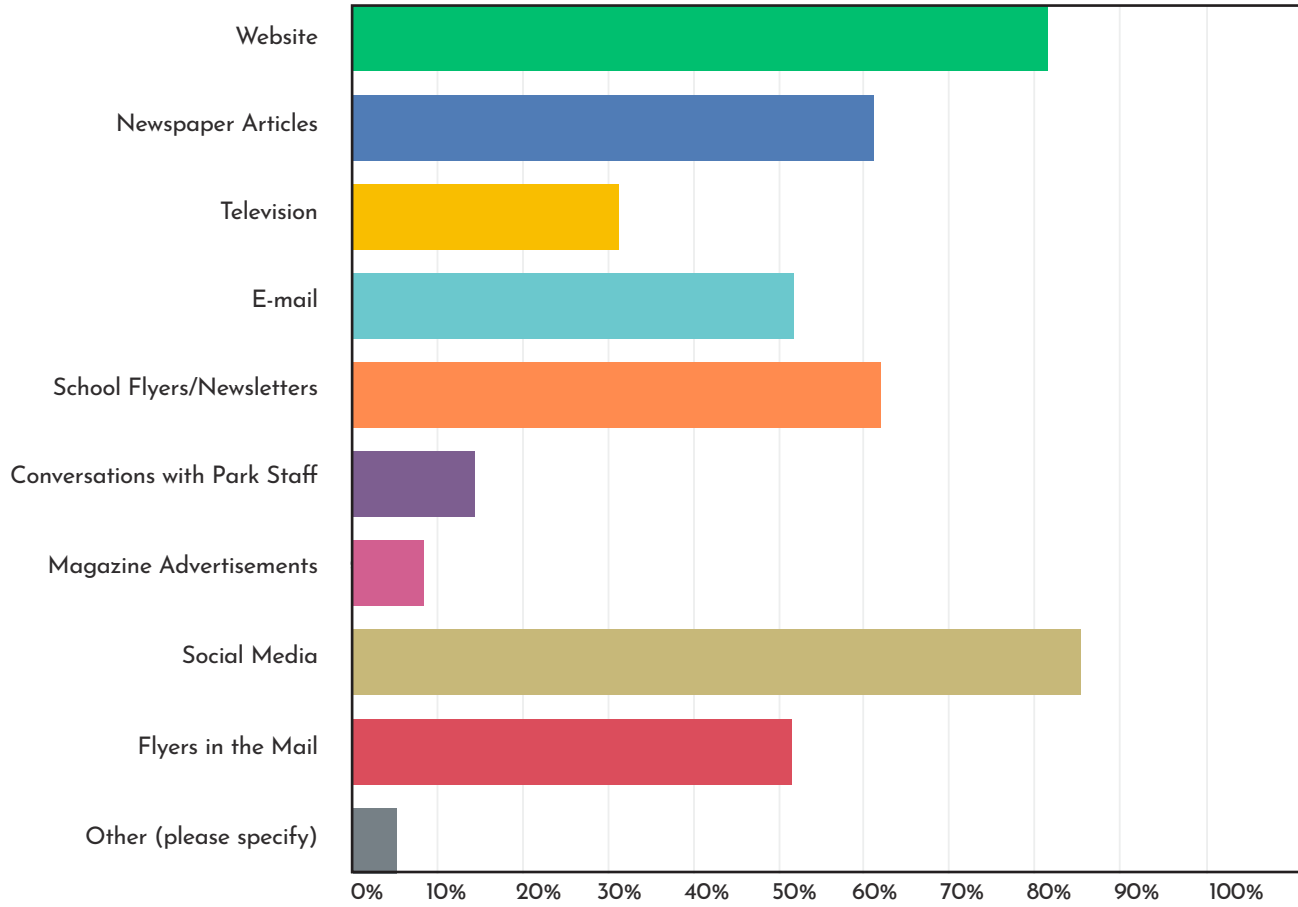
Q13

“Please rate your satisfaction with the following parks and recreation services provided by Columbus County Parks and Recreation.”



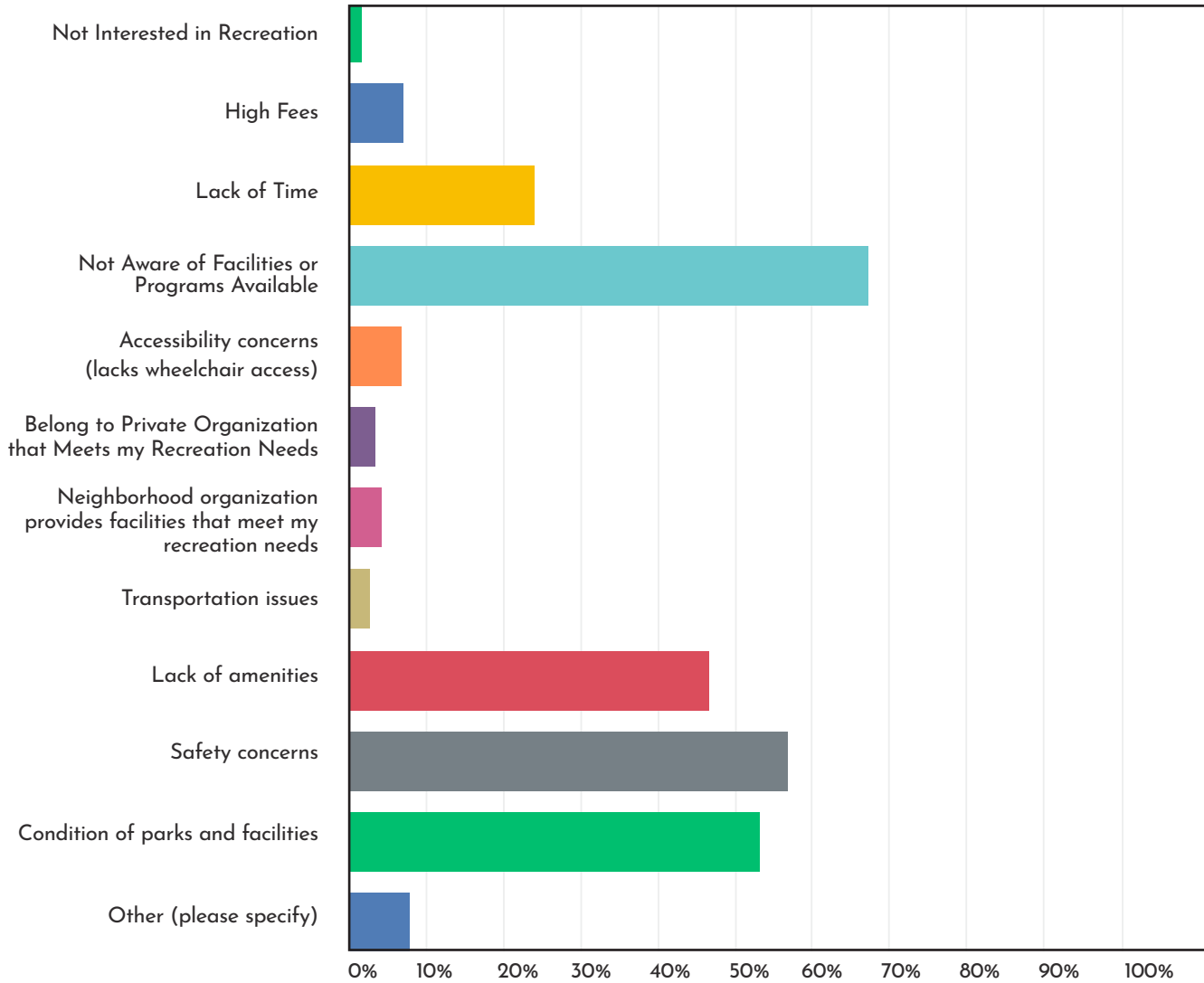
Q14

“Which communication types would you prefer for the Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department to use to inform residents of programs and activities?”



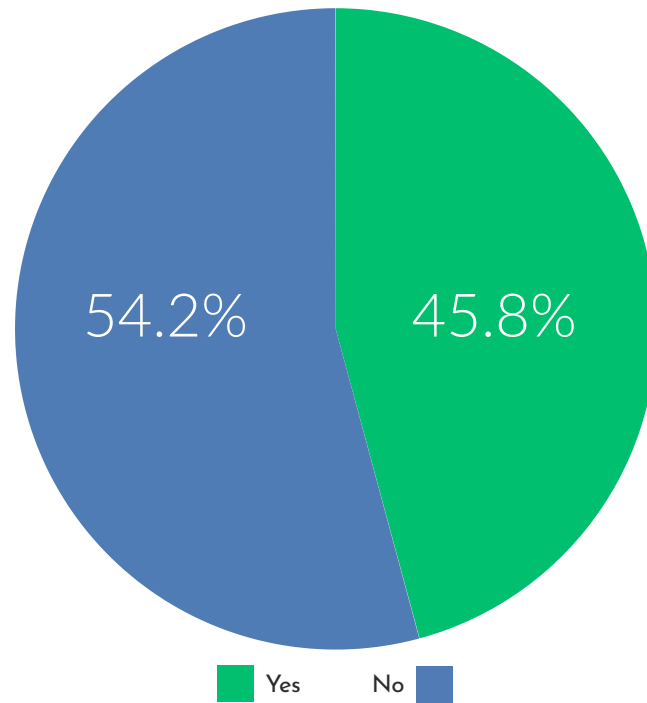
Q15

“Please indicate if any of the following prevents you and/or your family from using Columbus County’s parks and facilities? Please check all that apply.”



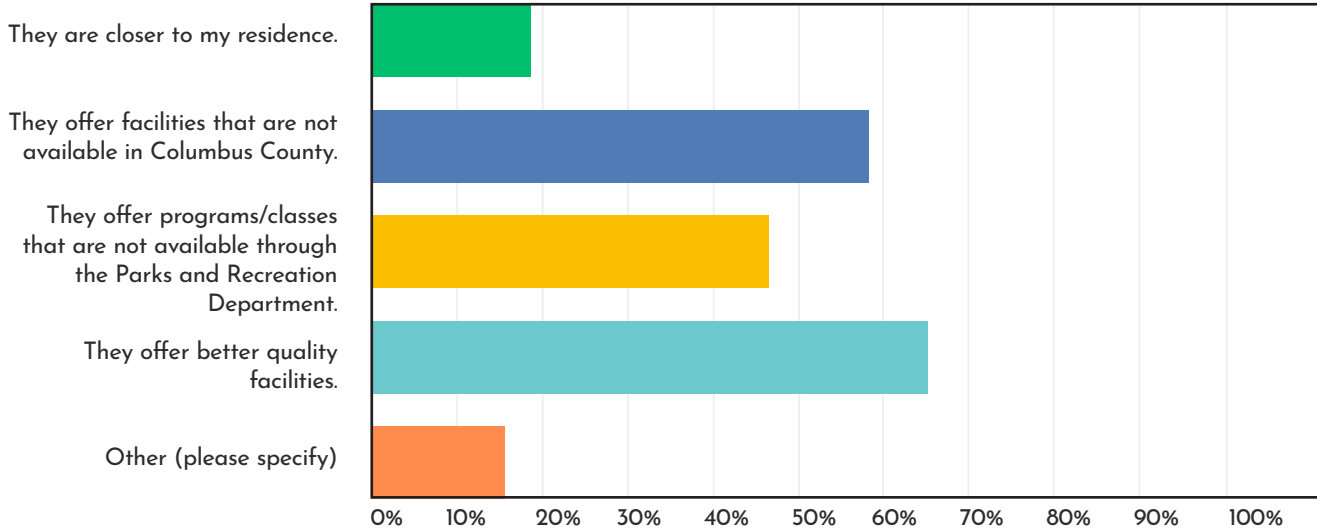
Q16

Do you utilize other agencies or private organizations for parks and recreation services?



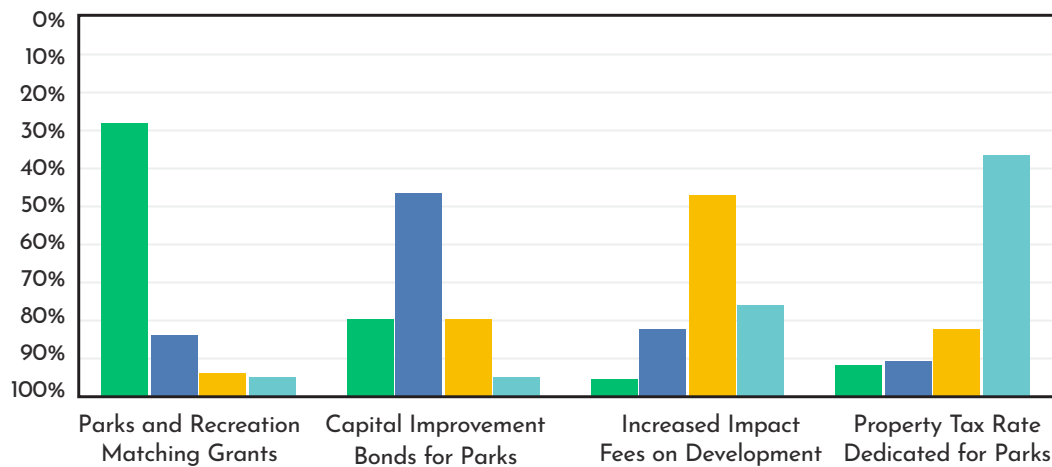
Q18

“If you answered yes above, please check the factors that influence your decision to use these other facilities (Please check all that apply)”



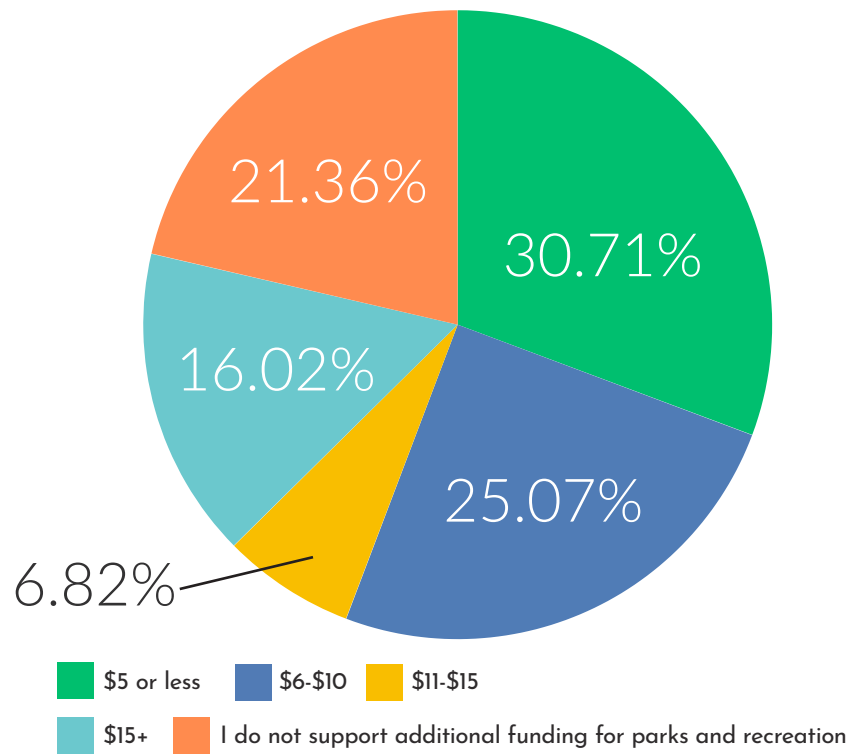
Q19

“(CAPITAL FUNDING) In order to invest in more parks and recreation facilities, Columbus County may require additional funding. Please rank your preferred methods for additional capital funding for recreation and parks 1 through 4 (with 1 being the highest).”



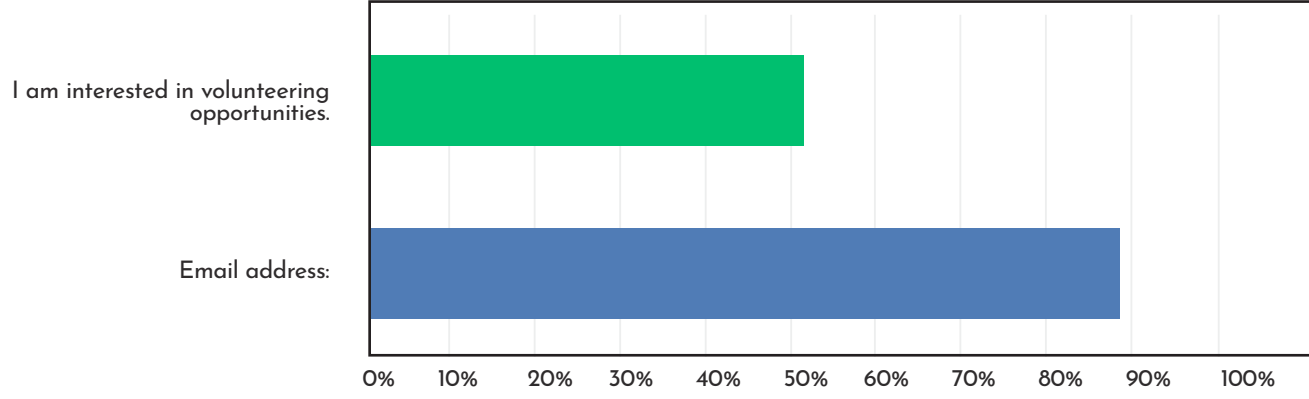
Q20

“(OPERATIONAL FUNDING) Please indicate below the amount of additional funding you would support per month, if any, per household, to improve and expand recreation facilities, programs, and maintenance.(Check ONE)”



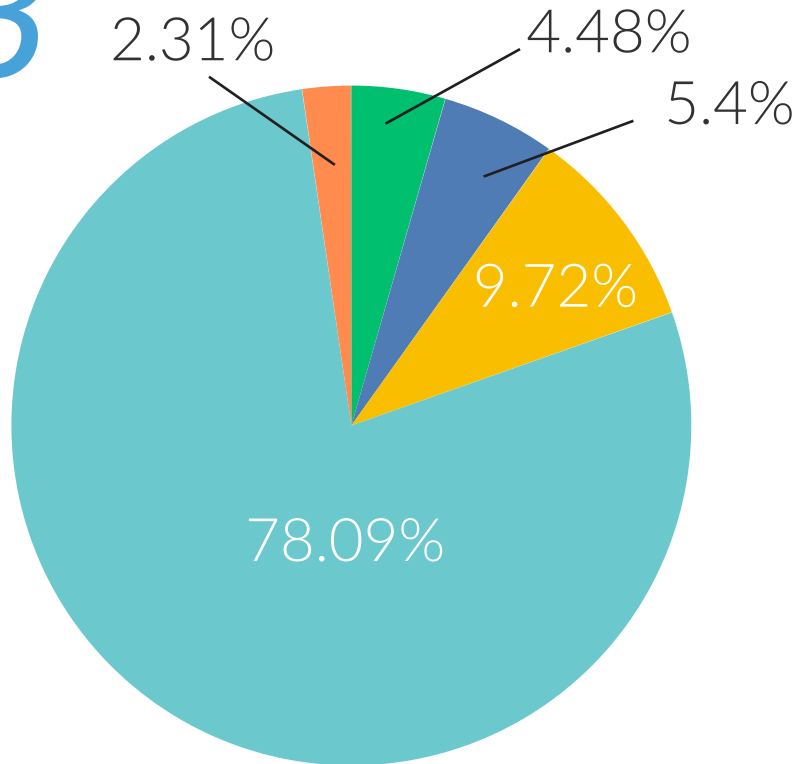
Q22

“If you would like to receive email updates from Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department in the future or if you are interested in volunteering, please provide your email address.”



Q23

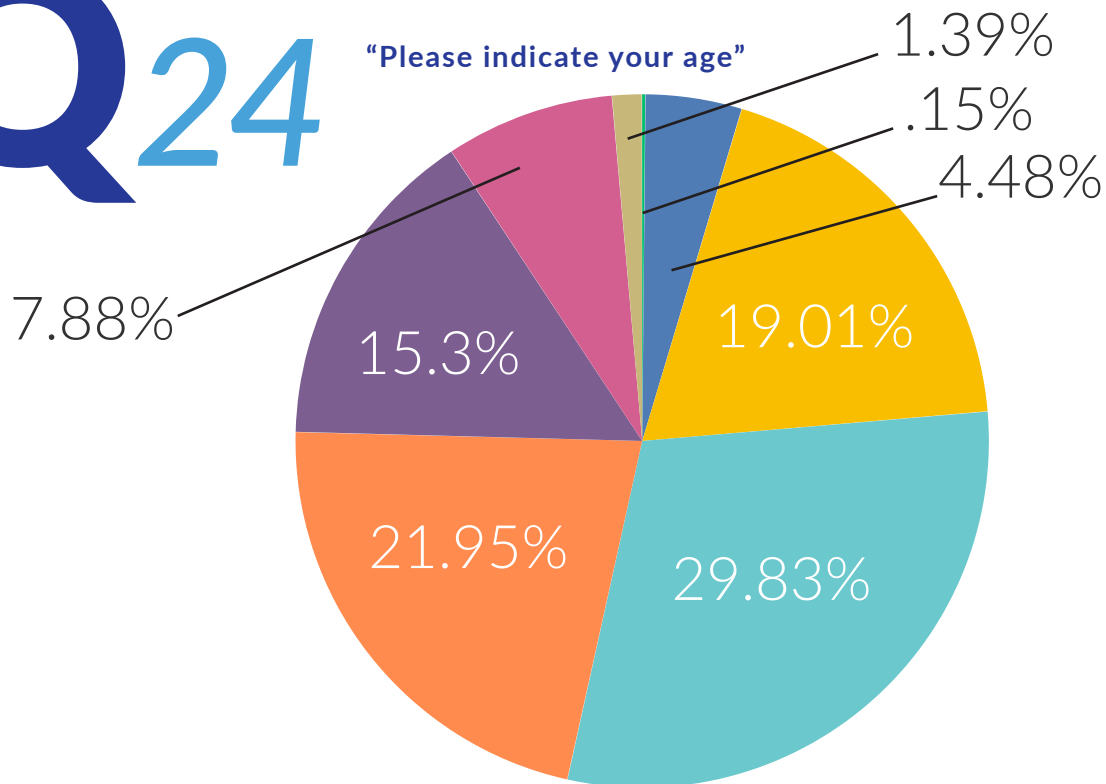
"How long have you lived in Columbus County?"



■ Less than 5 Years
 ■ 6-10 Years
 ■ 11-20 Years
 ■ Over 20 Years
 ■ I do not live in Columbus County

Q24

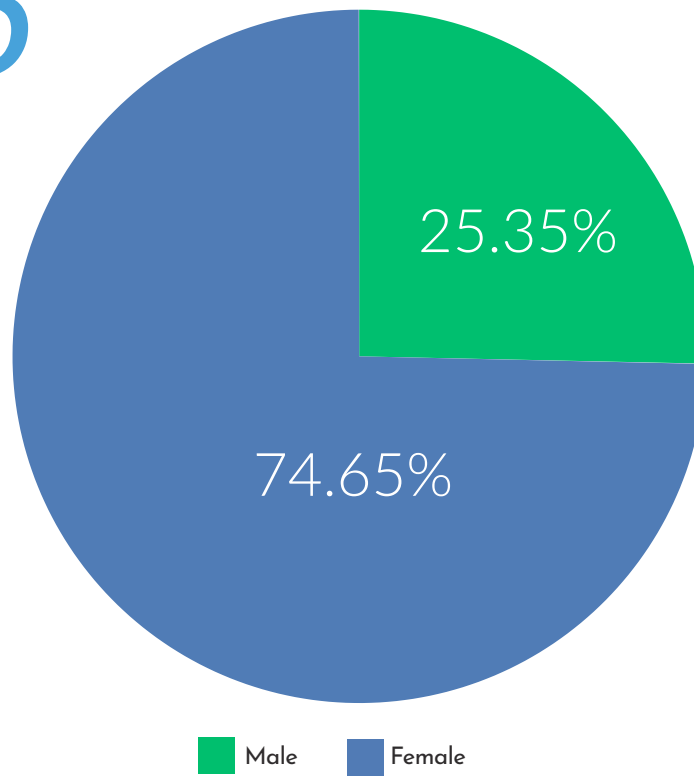
"Please indicate your age"



■ 14 and Under
 ■ 15-24
 ■ 25-34
 ■ 35-44
 ■ 45-54
 ■ 55-64
 ■ 65-74
 ■ 75+

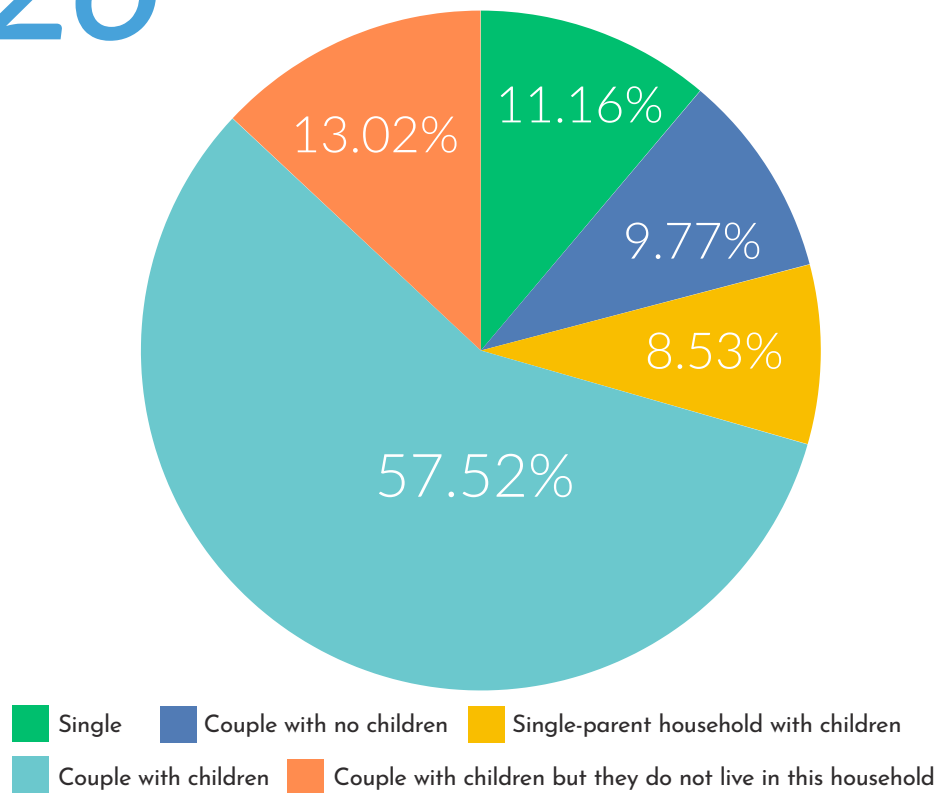
Q25

“Please indicate your gender”



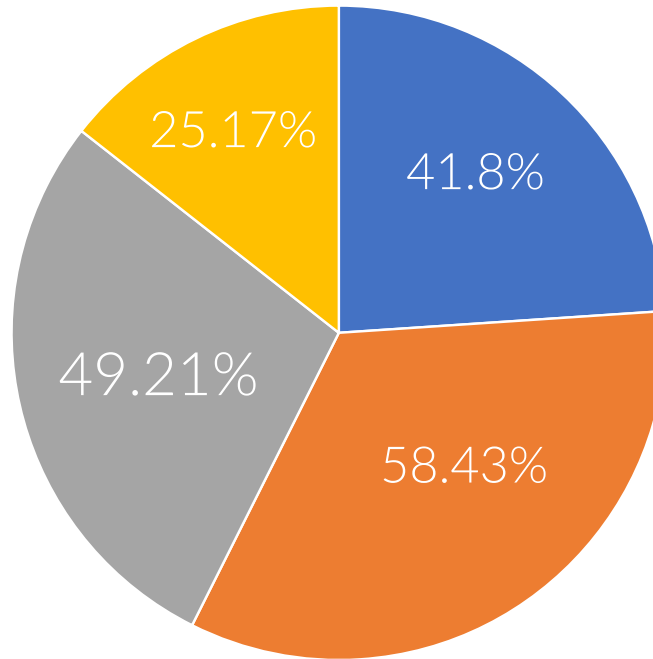
Q26

“Which of the following best describes your household?”



Q27

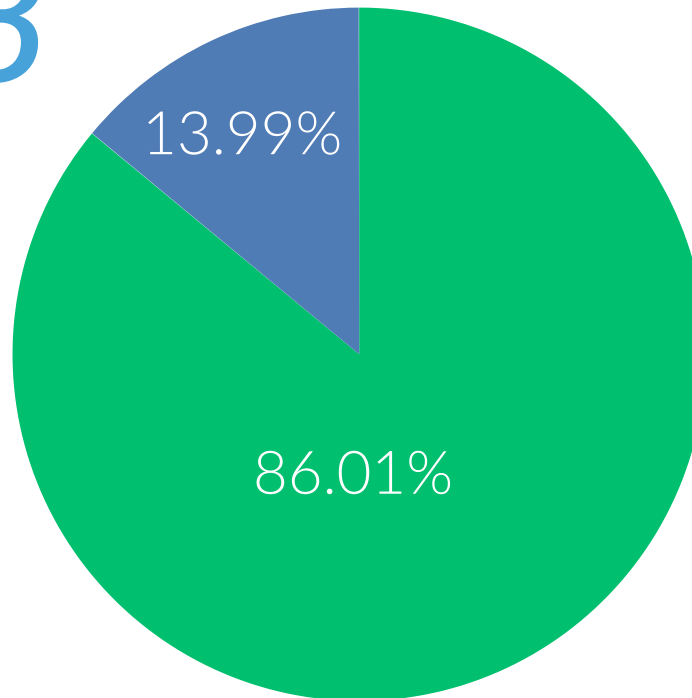
“If you have children at home, how many children do you have in each of the following age groups?”



Under 5 years of age 5-11 years
12-19 years 20+ years

Q28

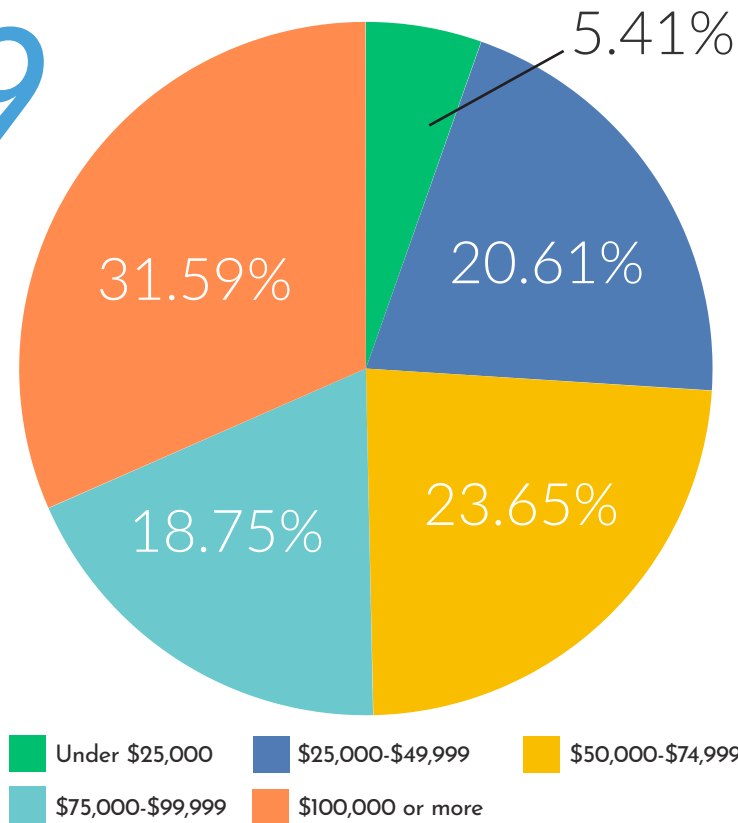
“Please check your housing status.”



Home owner Renter

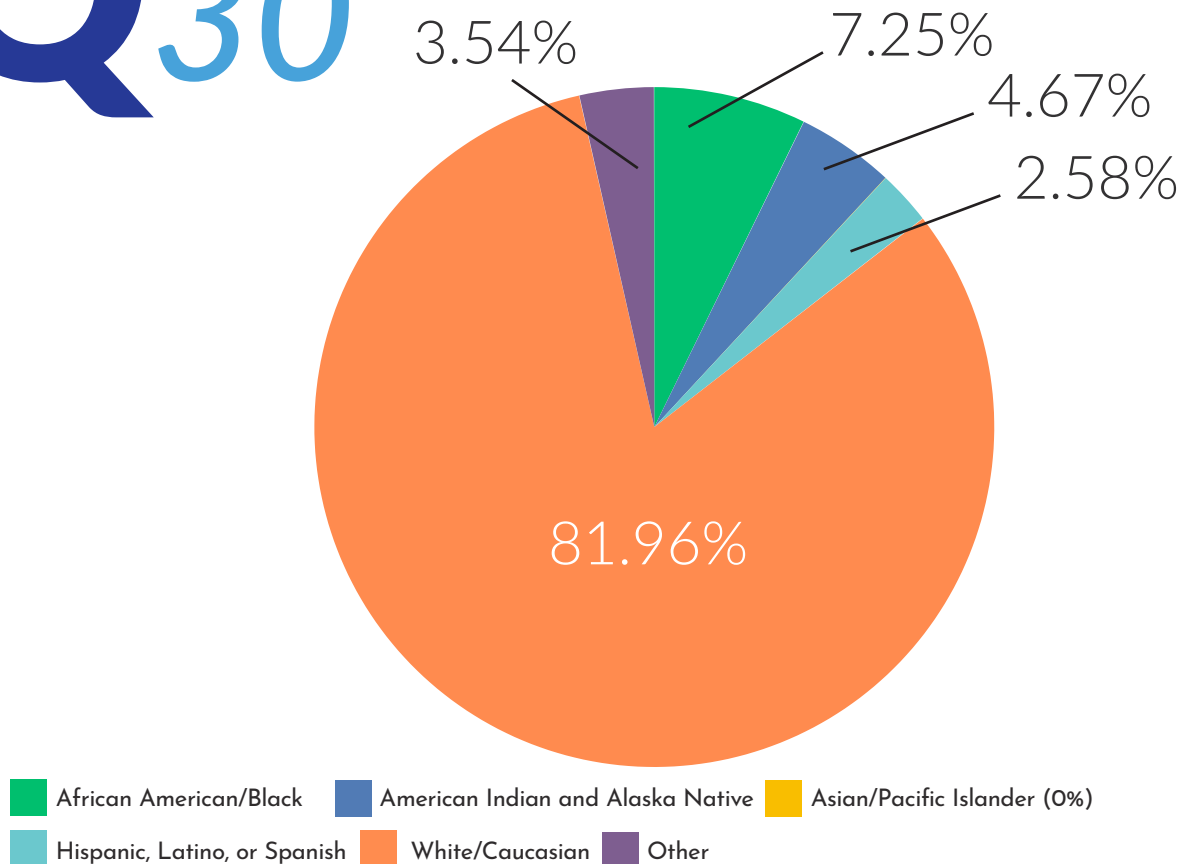
Q29

“What is your household income?”



Q30

“Which best describes your race?”



COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

Consolidating input from community meetings, surveys, as well as the insight from the Steering Committee reveals key information about the recreational needs of the Community.

Athletic facilities and programs were participants' top priority, with many discussing the need for interconnectivity of facilities via a trail/greenway network. Community survey feedback indicates that survey respondents are largely wanting improved facilities and new programs and are willing to pay more for improved services. Awareness, access, safety, and facility quality were cited as some of the major barriers to resident use of facilities, causing most respondents to travel to jurisdictions such as Myrtle Beach and Brunswick County. A key barrier uncovered was the lack of communication of park facilities, programs, and events. Many respondents stated that they were not aware of many parks or programs, which leads to underutilized services and dissatisfied residents.

General takeaways from input received include the following:

- ▶ Parks facilities and programs are valued by the community
- ▶ The quality of programs varies and cited by some as poor
- ▶ Lack of awareness of parks and programs is a major barrier to participation
- ▶ Residents have safety concerns
- ▶ Residents are willing to pay more for participation and improvements to programs and facilities
- ▶ Residents are most satisfied with ballfields and athletic programs
- ▶ Condition and lack of facilities is an issue

- ▶ Residents travel outside the County or go to other organizations to fulfill their recreation needs
- ▶ Residents want improved connectivity and access to trails and greenways
- ▶ There is a desire for overall consolidation into regional-serving facilities that can compete with other municipalities.

Top 3 community concerns:

- ▶ Not aware of facilities or programs available
- ▶ Lack of amenities
- ▶ Safety concerns

Top 5 desired facilities:

- ▶ Playground for All Abilities
- ▶ Water Play – Splash Pad
- ▶ Parks/Park Land
- ▶ Trails/Greenways
- ▶ Gymnasium

Top 5 desired programs:

- ▶ Athletic Programs
- ▶ Fitness Programs
- ▶ Teen Programs
- ▶ Programs for Individuals with Special Needs
- ▶ Aquatic Programs

Top Youth Event Interest

- ▶ Youth Swim Team

Top Adult Program Interest

- ▶ Pickleball

Top Senior Program Interest

- ▶ Aquatic Program – Water Aerobics

Top Special Event Interest

- ▶ STEM Program for Kids and Teens

Of the County's parks, Tabor City Recreation Complex, Fitness Park, and Elizabeth Brinkley Park received the highest amount of repeat visits. Most respondents were not aware of Progressive Women's Park. Additionally, most respondents did not visit the following parks in the last year:

- ▶ Edgewood Park
- ▶ Riegelwood Community Park
- ▶ Old Dock Park
- ▶ Fair Bluff Riverwalk Park

- ▶ Carver Community Park
- ▶ Cerro Gordo Athletic Fields
- ▶ Chadbourn Depot Museum
- ▶ Civitan Park
- ▶ Lake Tabor Park Council Field
- ▶ Bolton Park
- ▶ Buckhead Community Park
- ▶ Sandyfield Park
- ▶ Ransom Community Park

4

VISION DEVELOPMENT



VISION DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

Achieving the vision for improvements to the Columbus County Park System illustrated by this master plan over the next ten years will require commitment to six primary recommendations. Recommendations support the goal of the Parks and Recreation Department to enhance the quality of life of County residents by providing quality and diverse recreational opportunities, programs and activities. Implementation of these six recommendations will enable the County to provide expanded and enhanced recreation opportunities and experiences to a broader community.

Primary Recommendations

- ▶ Park Consolidation
- ▶ Improvements to Existing Parks
- ▶ Expansion of Park Land
- ▶ Strengthened Partnerships
- ▶ Elevated Awareness
- ▶ Preparation of a Greenway / Trails Master Plan

The vision reflects the results of community engagement surveys and meetings, information provided by County staff and leadership as well as the guidance of the Master Plan Steering Committee.

The vision and the recommendations are targeted, capitalize on existing facilities and successful programs and are at once aspirational and achievable. While there are certainly challenges, the vision provides a framework for decision making, setting priorities and implementation.

The vision embraces the continuation and enhancement of programs and activities traditionally provided by the County but also recognizes the need for new facilities, addressing gaps in the level of service across the county and responding to areas of residential growth.

Achieving the vision will enhance the lives and health of county residents. In addition, an improved park system will also contribute to the economic health of Columbus County.

PARK CONSOLIDATION

The recommendation to consolidate parks does not mean closing parks. What it does mean is, removing certain parks from the maintenance responsibilities of the Columbus County Parks Department staff. Currently the staff maintains 21 parks distributed widely across the county. Some of these lie within several municipalities that are also recreation providers and have park systems. Only four of these are parks are owned by the County. The rest are available for county use through lease agreements, and all are maintained by County staff to some degree.

Consolidation will help address some of the current challenges facing the County Parks Department including maintenance cost / time and safety concerns.

Other considerations and challenges that support the recommendation to consolidate include the following:

- ▶ There is no incentive to improve leased park space, as improvements would put money into lands not actually owned by the County.
- ▶ Parks are spread out and those within municipal boundaries provide only a handful of facilities for the proximate county residents.
- ▶ Public knowledge of facilities and amenities is limited due to the saturation of facilities.
- ▶ Event/league hosting is difficult due to the average size of the parks.
- ▶ Service crews are spread thin as they work to managed smaller, spread-out facilities.

To combat these issues, it is recommended that the County consolidate its leased park spaces to reduce the overall number of parks maintained by the County. This will allow for funding to be directed toward more substantial park improvements/developments that directly cater to the desires of the community. Deciding which park leases should not be continued requires analysis of current park facility location, popularity, safety, and capacity for expansion. These quantitative factors provide insight into which parks do not fulfill the needs of the County, and which parks should not continue to be leased.

The following selection criteria and descriptions provide the basis for recommendations regarding lease renewal:

Municipal Proximity

Parks located within, or in close proximity to municipalities with existing Parks and Recreation departments, represent opportunities for the County to reduce their commitment. Values in this criterion range from 0 points to 2 points based on the park proximity to municipal limits. Parks not located within a 1- or 3-mile distance of a municipality score 2 points.

Visitation

Parks with higher utilization are important as they represent repeat use from the community. The survey associated with this Plan asked respondents to rank their utilization of each park owned/leased by Columbus County. Responses were categorized into “used” or “not used” by consolidating all survey options that indicated at least one visit to the park. Values in this criterion range from 0 points to 2 points based on the average utilization of parks and a standard deviation above and below the average. Parks with a standard deviation utilization or higher than the average utilization score 2 points.

Popularity

Park satisfaction is an important element as it identifies which parks are well-received and enjoyed by residents. The survey associated with this Plan asked respondents to rank their satisfaction of the Columbus County parks. Responses were scored based on the percentage of positive satisfaction from survey respondents. Values in this criterion range from 0 points to 2 points based on the average satisfaction of parks and a standard deviation above and below the average. Parks with with a standard deviation satisfaction or higher than the average satisfaction score 2 points.

Safety

Park visitors feeling safe is critical to the evaluation. Parks that are outside of normally patrolled areas and isolated based on their geographical location or parks with inadequate lighting, for example, are considered candidates for removal from County involvement and termination of lease agreements.

Potential for Expansion

Park expansion opportunity allows for future facility development, which in turn can address facility needs of the community. Each park was evaluated to determine its potential for expansion. Parks that contained sufficient space to develop future facilities such as multipurpose fields and playgrounds scored 1 point.

Other Factors

Qualitative elements such as cultural heritage and historical significance are quantified in this criterion to ensure cultural significance is included in this assessment. Points were assigned based on discussion with County representatives and the project team.

Once analysis was complete, each leased park generated a total score reflecting the overall value of the park to the County. Scores of 5 or higher were determined to be candidates for continued leasing. Parks that scored below 5 are recommended for discontinued leasing.

Parks Recommended for Removal from County System

- ▶ Carver Community Park
- ▶ Fair Bluff Riverwalk
- ▶ Progressive Women’s Park
- ▶ Chadbourn Depot
- ▶ Council Field
- ▶ Elra Gertrude Spaulding Community Park
- ▶ Bolton Park
- ▶ Sandyfield Park
- ▶ Lake Tabor Recreational Park
- ▶ Tabor City Recreational Complex
- ▶ Civitan Park

Whereas the County has previously been implementing use of many small parks to serve its residents, it is recommended that future park development focus on larger, more regional facilities. Such facilities should be located along major corridors to ensure ease of access and fill previously identified gaps in level of service. Development of a new, centralized parks and recreation facility would work to serve the entire County. The facility could host future league events, offer new facilities and programs desired by the community, and be an economic asset for the County. Staff maintenance efforts would be focused on fewer but larger facilities, decreasing downtime spent traveling between facilities.

The Southeastern Community College currently owns a 79-acre parcel of land adjacent to I-74 between the municipalities of Chadbourn and Whiteville. This parcel is considered extremely suitable for a future regional facility due to its size and location. Additionally, Southeastern Community College offers several education- and health-based programs which could be further benefited by proximate access to recreational facilities. Students would have access to facilities and programs in an educational environment that otherwise would otherwise be difficult to provide at a regional scale. This presents the County with a potential partnership with the college, and it is recommended that the County and college representatives examine the potential for partnership and future development of this parcel.

As previously stated, the County must acknowledge and work to ensure that future investments also account for the infrastructure lost during consolidation. While a regional facility could address many the lost park land and amenities, the County must also be diligent in exploring future park purchases to help fill the “gaps” remaining after consolidation. The existing park network has notable gaps (see map on page 35) that could be addressed by strategic and informed land acquisition.

In addition to the County-owned parks, consideration must be made for the remaining parks under lease agreements. While facility additions are not recommended for leased facilities, program considerations should be made for the following parks.

- ▶ Cerro Gordo
- ▶ Bogue Community Park
- ▶ Buckhead Community Park
- ▶ St. James Community Park
- ▶ Ransom Community Park
- ▶ Elizabeth Brinkley Park

Programming opportunities are directly linked to facilities. The following facilities support opportunities to develop complimentary programming that were largely requested during Plan development.

Trails

- ▶ Seniors/Active Adult Programs
- ▶ Teen Programs
- ▶ Children’s Programs
- ▶ Special Needs Programming
- ▶ Nature/Adventure Programming
- ▶ Fitness Programs
- ▶ Summer Camps

Nature Play

- ▶ Children’s Programs
- ▶ Special Needs Programming
- ▶ STEM Opportunities
- ▶ Summer Camps

Multi-Purpose Courts

- ▶ Seniors/Active Adult Programs
- ▶ Teen Programs
- ▶ Children's Programs
- ▶ Special Needs Programming
- ▶ League Sports
- ▶ Fitness Camps
- ▶ Summer Camps

Pickleball/Tennis Courts

- ▶ Seniors/Active Adult Programs
- ▶ Teen Programs
- ▶ Children's Programs
- ▶ Special Needs Programming
- ▶ League Sports
- ▶ Fitness Camps
- ▶ Summer Camps

Multi-Purpose Fields

- ▶ Seniors/Active Adult Programs
- ▶ Teen Programs
- ▶ Children's Programs
- ▶ Special Needs Programming
- ▶ Nature/Adventure Programming
- ▶ League Sports
- ▶ Fitness Camps
- ▶ Summer Camps

Splash Pads/Water Play

- ▶ Children's Programs
- ▶ Special Needs Programming
- ▶ Summer Camps

Additionally, farmers market and/or food truck events were also widely requested by the community. These events require a centralized location and staffing. Development of a regional facility would be a prime candidate location for such events.

IMPROVEMENTS TO EXISTING PARKS

Park satisfaction results from the survey indicated that there is a need for facility improvements in County parks. Equipment condition, safety, and access were all cited as major reasons for not using existing facilities.

This master plan identifies specific improvements to the four parks owned by Columbus County. These improvements or additional facilities should be targeted to meet NRPA benchmarking, address the needs expressed by county residents and be complimentary to facilities currently located at these parks. Additional facilities that would help the system address NRPA standards and respond to community perspective include the following:

- ▶ 2 Inclusive Playgrounds
- ▶ Trails
- ▶ 2 Multipurpose Fields
- ▶ 1 Splash Pad
- ▶ 5 Tennis Courts
- ▶ 3 Basketball Courts
- ▶ 1 Volleyball Court
- ▶ Nature-based Adventure Course

The following outlines facility improvements recommended for each of the County's four owned parks. Recommended facilities include many of those on the list above, but also reflect community input.

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RIEGELWOOD PARK

Riegelwood Park is an 18-acre park located in the eastern limits of the County. The park was conveyed to the County in 1999. The park currently consists of:

- ▶ 4 Baseball/Softball Diamonds
- ▶ Community Center
- ▶ 3 Press Boxes
- ▶ 2 Concession Stands
- ▶ Restrooms
- ▶ Basketball Court
- ▶ Volleyball Court
- ▶ Two Multipurpose Fields
- ▶ Playground
- ▶ Two Picnic Shelters

Survey results indicate that approximately 18% of survey respondents were aware of the park and visited at least once in the past year. Of the residents that were aware of the park, most respondents indicated that they were “somewhat satisfied” by the park conditions and facilities.

In order to enhance the user experience of Riegelwood Park, the following improvements are recommended:

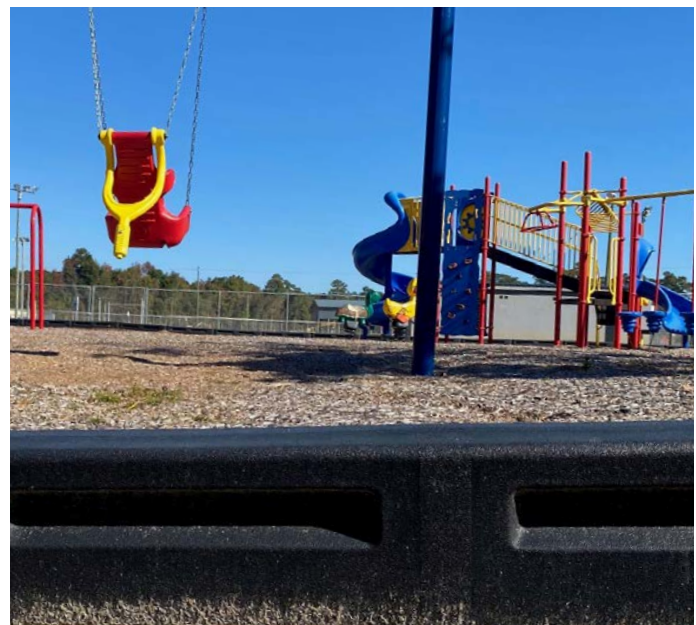
Accessibility Enhancements: While the facilities at Riegelwood Park are in decent condition, accessing facilities themselves is difficult. The park’s facilities are not interconnected to each other via a sidewalk network, nor do they connect directly to the parking lot. American Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility is an important component in park equity. Ensuring that access is provided throughout the park will help the park become a more inviting and utilized County asset.

Playground Update: The existing playground equipment at Riegelwood Park is dated and needs replacement. Updating equipment is an opportunity to create a park experience that is inclusive and equitable.

Ballfield Improvements: The four existing ballfields at the park are in need of updating. Targeted improvements for these fields, including bleachers, fencing, restrooms, maintenance, covered facilities, etc., will greatly improve the largest attractors to the park, and create a substantially improved experience for league-based visitors.

Trail: Riegelwood Park is a prime candidate for trail installation. The park’s size and opportunity for facility interconnection allows for the development of a park trail that provides passive recreation options, connections to nature and access. Trail development can begin at the park’s parking lots and extend in a loop around the edge of the park, with branches inward toward facilities.

Enhancing the Riegelwood Park ballfields and interconnecting facilities with walking paths will make the park more accessible and increase utilization. This, in turn, will make the park more attractive for future league sports and tournaments. Trail development also provides active adults and senior citizens with passive recreation opportunities where otherwise they did not exist. These enhancements will establish Riegelwood Park as a location with recreational opportunities for all ages.





▲ Not to scale.

Legend

- Baseball Field Improvements
- Inclusive Playground
- Integrated Trail

EDGEWOOD PARK

Edgewood Park is located within the Town of Whiteville, and is one of the most utilized parks in the County. This 4-acre park consists of a baseball/softball diamond, a volleyball court, three multipurpose fields, a playground, and a picnic shelter. Survey results indicate that 27% of respondents were aware of the park and visited at least once in the past year. Review of park satisfaction indicated that the majority of respondents were “somewhat satisfied” with the park’s conditions and facilities.

While Edgewood Park does not have a large footprint, its location and proximity to the residential neighborhoods of the Town of Whiteville establish the park as a prime candidate for strategic improvements.

Accessibility Enhancements: Similar to Riegelwood Park, Edgewood Park lacks internal accessibility to site facilities. Development of a sidewalk/pathway network that directs users from the elementary school and existing parking lot north of the site, as well as from existing sidewalk on the eastern terminus of the site into and throughout the site will allow Edgewood Park to be accessible by all persons.

Ballfield Improvements: The existing ballfield can be improved through the installation of more comfortable bleachers, improved dugouts, and general drainage improvements. As the park receives additional facilities, establishment of ballfield limits may also be necessary to help physically separate the uses from one another.

Splash Pad: One of the most desired facilities identified by the public survey was a splash pad. Summer aquatic amenities help keep kids cool in the summer and offer a unique and exciting experience. Edgewood Park has the available footprint and is in a prime location for the development of a splashpad.

Restrooms: As Edgewood Park is enhanced, consideration should be given to the provision of restrooms. Development of restroom facilities will be an important component of the park, supporting added facilities.

Playground: The existing playground at Edgewood park is not accessible and does not offer any inclusive play features. A change in surfacing would also make maintenance easier.



With the recommended enhancements, it is expected that Edgewood Park will become a more highly utilized and appreciated amenity for the County and Town citizens alike.





▲ Not to scale.

Legend

-  Baseball Field Improvements
-  Inclusive Playground
-  Splashpad
-  Restrooms
-  Integrated Trail

OLD DOCK PARK

Old Dock Park is located in the south-central portion of the County. This 5-acre park includes a community center, picnic shelter, baseball/softball diamond, basketball court, and playground. Survey results indicate that only approximately 18% of survey respondents were aware of the park and visited at least once in the past year. Furthermore, of the residents that were aware of the park, the majority of respondents indicated that they were “somewhat satisfied” by the park conditions and facilities.

Old Dock Park’s location in the County provides a unique opportunity to develop new park facilities that work to serve County residents that are not in close proximity to a local municipality.

Accessibility Enhancements: As with the prior parks, internal access to facilities within the park is limited. Development of a sidewalk network is recommended to remove any barriers to accessibility that may be present.

Playground Update: Playground equipment at Old Dock Park is relatively dated and is not accessible. However, there is adequate room for expansion. Utilizing this extra space, Columbus County can enhance the playground facilities at the park and draw a wider range of young families to the park’s facilities.

Ballfield Improvements: : The existing ballfield at the park can be enhanced with shaded seating and updated components.

Multipurpose Field: Benchmarking against NRPA standards identified that Columbus County is in need of additional multipurpose fields. Old Dock Park fortunately has adequate space between the parking lot and the road for the development of a field that can be programed for a variety of athletics including soccer and youth football.

Volleyball Court: In addition to the deficit of multipurpose fields, NRPA benchmarking also identified a lack of volleyball facilities within the

County. However, while the benchmarking identified a notable deficit of courts, direct public engagement and survey responses have indicated that volleyball is not a major priority amongst County residents. Despite not being a facility priority, the project team acknowledged that development of an additional volleyball court at Old Dock Park would help provide a new facility and opportunity for proximate residents.

Basketball Court: The current basketball court is very popular but is in poor shape. It is recommended that the court paving be replaced including new sub base.

Expanding the facilities offered at Old Dock Park will help increase the level of service the park provides proximate residential developments. With most of the County’s existing park facilities located within a municipality or along US-74, the enhancement of facilities at Old Dock Park provides recreation opportunities for County residents that are more rurally located. In turn, facility development increases the opportunities for future programming aimed at this portion of the County and could include teen/youth fitness and athletics as well as additional play options for young families and children.





▲ Not to scale.

Legend

- Baseball Field Improvements
- Inclusive Playground
- Volleyball Court
- Multi-Purpose Field
- Basketball Court

FITNESS PARK

Fitness Park is a 10-acre park located just north of the Town of Whiteville, north of US-74. This park specializes in nature, currently consisting of fitness equipment, picnic shelter, restrooms, and a walking trail. The survey conducted indicates that 31% of respondents were aware of the park and visited at least once in the past year. Fitness Park is unique in that it is the only park of which the majority of survey respondents ranked their satisfaction with it as “very satisfied.”

The park’s location proximate to US-74 ensures that the future facility will be accessible and easily used by County residents.

The parks existing facilities are in excellent condition. Future improvements should focus on utilizing additional park lands and programming the facility to further improve user experience and opportunities. The following recommendations outline the envisioned improvements for Fitness Park:

Inclusive Playground: Fitness Park has adequate space for the construction of an inclusive playground. ADA accessible and inclusive playground facilities are an important addition to Fitness Park, as the park’s location and connectivity to the larger region can truly open up these accessible facilities for a large pool of residents.

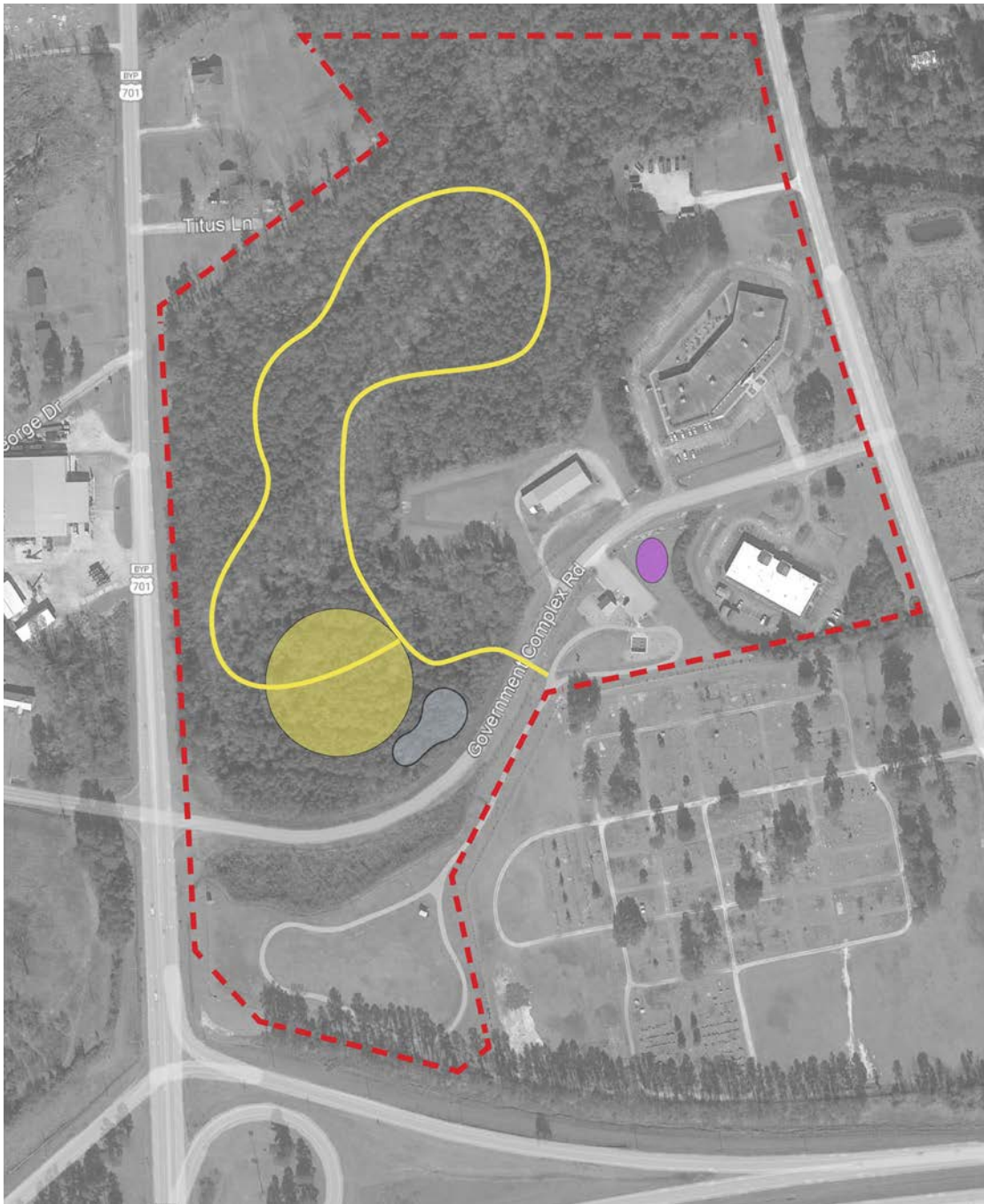
Parking: Additional parking is recommended across Government Complex Rd. to serve trails and adventure course.

Trail Development: With most of the surrounding property also being owned by the County, Fitness Park has the greatest potential to develop an expanded trail system. The existing trail could cross Government Complex Road to navigate into and explore the wooded areas north of the current park.

Nature-Based Adventure Course: Public engagement revealed community interest in outdoor programs for the County’s youth. Nature-based programming was identified as a prime candidate at Fitness Park due to the large amount of open space and wooded areas owned by the County. It is recommended that the County use the land north of Government Complex Road for such programming. This programming can also synergize with the recommended trail development and offer opportunities for guided walks and educational materials to be located along the trail system.

Fitness Park has the greatest potential for facility expansion among the County-owned parks. With surrounding lands also being owned by the County, trail development within Fitness Park can serve park visitors and County employees at the proximate County offices. Development of nature-based adventure programming will also create attractions for a variety of ages.





▲ Not to scale.

Legend

-  Adventure Play
-  Inclusive Playground
-  Proposed Parking
-  Integrated Trail

EXPANSION OF PARK LAND

It is recommended that the County adopt a policy for future parkland acquisition. Future lands should be significant in acreage. Evaluation of candidate parcels should be an ongoing process for County staff as the County's population changes and needs change over time. The following questions should be asked as part of determining a property's potential to contribute significantly to the system's improvements.

1. Is the land 20+ acres?
2. Would the land serve residents not currently located within an existing park LOS area?
3. Is the land located along a major corridor?
4. Is the land suitable for uses, facilities, and/or programs identified by the Parks and Recreation Master Plan?
5. Does the land connect to an existing park?

If staff can answer yes for most or all of the above questions, the land should be considered for purchase by the County.

STRENGTHENED PARTNERSHIPS

Perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of future parks and recreation success is identifying and coordinating with regional partners. Cooperation with these entities will help leverage organizational assets and expertise, and ensure that quality facility/program development is established. Partnerships with other organizations and entities will be necessary to develop and expand recreation programs. All partnerships should be backed up by a memorandum of understanding or contract to formalize the relationship. This should clearly identify specific roles and expectations as well as limits to facility scheduling, fees, and operations. Partnerships with organizations should reflect the needs and culture of the specific markets they will be providing the services for.

To ensure that future partnerships are effective and successful for both parties, the following considerations are important:

- ▶ All potential partnerships must weigh the benefits versus the complications of partnering.
- ▶ Future partnerships must establish a shared vision between organizations.
- ▶ Establish clearly defined development/operational requirements and expectations.
- ▶ Understand that partnerships often require compromise so that both parties achieve positive outcomes.
- ▶ Acknowledge that while compromise is necessary in partnerships, the vision of the Columbus County Parks and Recreation Department must never be a component of the compromise.
- ▶ Understand the potential benefits for future partners and actively pursue and sell the benefits to that entity.

SOUTHEASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

During the planning process a partnership opportunity was identified that would be mutually beneficial to the economy of Columbus County, the curriculum at Southeastern Community College, and the community at large. Adjacent to and owned by SECC is a parcel of land that lies between the campus and the highway that is large enough and suitable for a major athletic complex. The site is central to the county and easily accessed. The complex would be a destination for sports tournaments bringing families to the county for weekends and more while simultaneously keeping Columbus County teams from going somewhere else to play in tournaments. Joint development of such a facility would also support the school's curriculum and programs.

The list below identifies existing potential partners for the Parks and Recreation Department organized by expertise:

Economic Development

- ▶ Columbus Chamber and Tourism
- ▶ Columbus County Economic Development Commission
- ▶ Municipal Partners
- ▶ Local Stakeholders

Trail Development

- ▶ Neighboring Counties
- ▶ Municipal Partners (Whiteville)
- ▶ North Carolina Trails Program
- ▶ Conservation Groups
- ▶ Non-Profit Groups

Program Development

- ▶ Dixie Youth Baseball/Softball
- ▶ YMCA
- ▶ Southeastern Community College
- ▶ Church Organizations
- ▶ Columbus County Arts Council
- ▶ School System

Facility Development

- ▶ YMCA
- ▶ SECC
- ▶ Local Stakeholders
- ▶ School System
- ▶ Civic Groups

ELEVATED AWARENESS

Community survey results revealed that 90% of respondents prefer to get information on recreation opportunities through social media including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. 80% of respondents turn to the Parks and Recreation webpage on the County's website. A small percentage rely on email, mail, fliers or other forms of information distribution.

It is therefore recommended that the County enhance and improve their social media presence in disseminating information on parks and recreation programs, activities and facilities.

PREPARE A GREENWAY / TRAIL MASTER PLAN

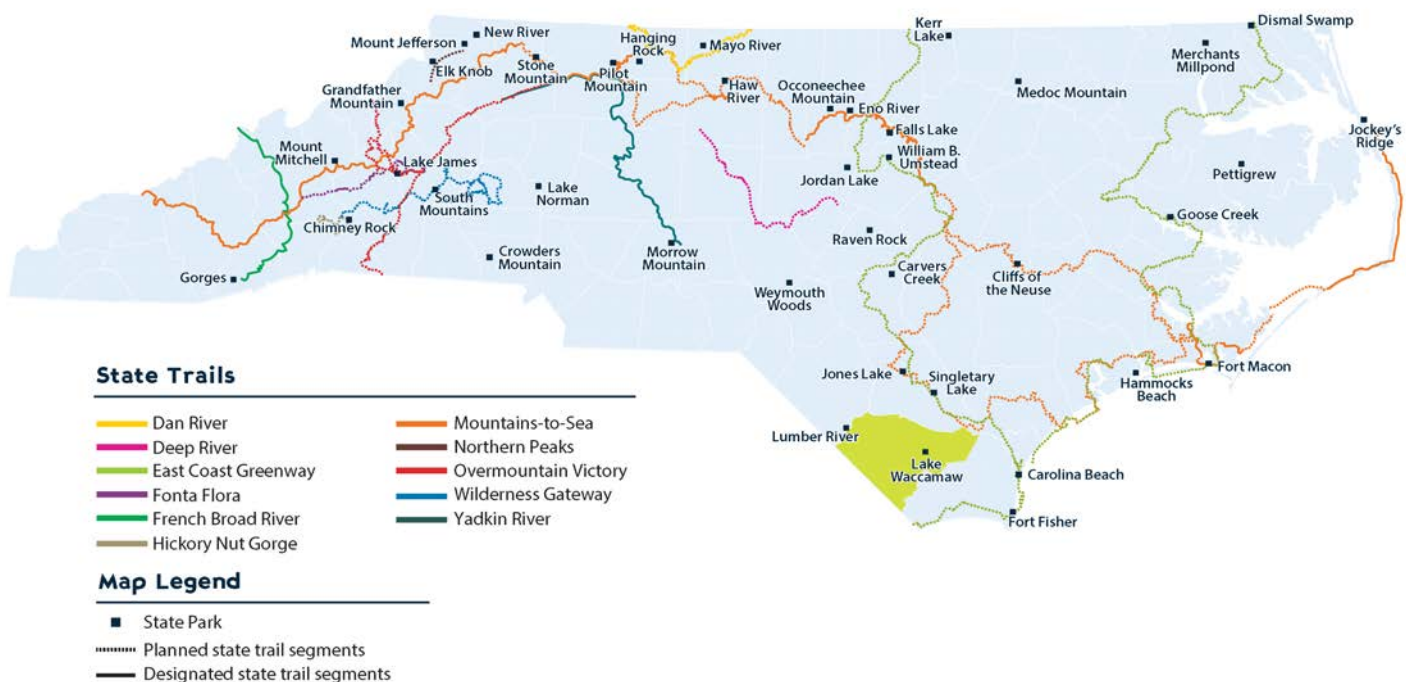
Many of the County residents who participated in the development of this plan desired access to greenways and trails. Columbus County is rich in natural amenities, and the development of a trail network would help showcase and capitalize on these features. Network development also leads to greater connectivity within the County and can strategically connect municipalities to one another and to park facilities. It is recommended that the County work to leverage these natural assets via a trail network. Lumber River State Park and Lake Waccamaw State Park represent attractive natural recreational features already located within the County. Furthermore, the County’s eastern limits are close to the corridors of both the East Coast Greenway Trail, which runs north/south along the state, and the Mountains to Sea Trail, which runs east/west.

At the present, the County does not maintain a greenway/trail network. Tying these natural features and regional assets together will require a plan. Additionally, working with neighboring counties of Bladen, New Hanover, Brunswick, and Pender is required to tie into the statewide trail network. To begin tackling the development of a regional greenway/trail network, it is recommended that the County develop a Greenway & Trails Master Plan. Unlike the Parks & Recreation Master Plan, a greenway/trails master plan will conduct a detailed assessment of trail

corridor suitability, land ownership, and accessibility across the County. The development of such a plan will include coordination from representatives of the neighboring counties and trail organizations. Plan development with these entities will lead to better regional connections, more intentional trail design, and implementation partners with significant buy-in.



At a conceptual level, the trail plan should leverage the natural east/west development pattern of the County following US-74. This pattern helps link many of the County’s municipalities as well as accessing both State parks. Further analysis would be required to identify future connections to the regional trail networks, but framework of a county-wide trail system would also provide opportunities for additional programming and make Columbus County a recreation destination.



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RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION



RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

INTRODUCTION

To advance the parks and recreation vision established by the master planning process, implementation strategies must be defined, and priorities established. As the closing chapter of this Master Plan, Recommendations and Implementation includes an opinion of probable cost of the vision established in Chapter 4; recommendations for capital improvements, programming, operations, and the phasing of a financial plan which includes an evaluation of funding sources.

The Columbus County Parks and Recreation System Master Plan focuses on the implementation of the vision through priority action items and funding and phasing. Priority action items are tied to public input gathered and documented throughout the Community Needs Assessment. Funding and phasing recommendations will allow the Parks and Recreation Department to review and as needed, efficiently revise this strategic plan in the future to reflect changing conditions, demographics, or priorities.

The Master Plan identified six primary recommendations for the system. Two of these six involve physical improvements including the purchase of land. The other four are program related or operational in nature. Defining these recommendations goals allowed the project team to better understand how to respond to the needs and priorities that were identified throughout the planning process, as well as the individual park needs that resulted from the System Inventory and Analysis (Chapter 2). Based on evaluation of existing facilities and input received from the community, County staff and Steering Committee, the recommendations are intended to satisfy system-wide vision objectives. These recommendations inform the opinion of probable construction cost estimate that is included in this section.

The Phasing and Financial Plan identifies funding applicable for priority projects, as well as alternative funding the County may consider. These may include leveraging or 'stacking' potential grants, partnerships with public, private, or non-profit agencies, and bond sales for parks and recreation improvements. Analyzing available existing and potential funding sources creates the foundation for the phasing recommendations for funding, based on the opinion of probable cost estimates.

For the phasing recommendations, three categories of time have been used:

- ▶ Short-term, represents recommendations to be completed in the next 1-3 years,
- ▶ Medium-term, represents recommendations to be completed in the 4- to 7-year time frame.
- ▶ Long-term, represents recommendations to be completed in an 8- to 10-year time frame.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are intended to provide achievable steps for the realization of the vision established through the process. During the process, priority projects and program needs were identified as well as considerations for recommended time frames for implementation.

Projects / Facility Needs	
Projects	Timeframe
Accessibility Enhancements at 3 parks	Short
Playground Updates at 3 parks	Short
Ballfield improvements at 3 parks	Short
Basketball Court at Old Dock Park	Short
Trails at 2 parks	Medium
Multipurpose field at 2 Parks	Medium
Volleyball Court at Old Dock	Medium
Nature Based Adventure Course	Medium
Splash Pad at Edgewood Park	Long
Restrooms at Edgewood Park	Long
Land Acquisition	Medium-Long

Program Needs	
Program	Timeframe
Increase Awareness	On-going
Youth Programs	On-going
Senior Programs	Short
Special Needs Programs	Short
Engaging Young Adults & Families	On-going
Tournament Events	On-going

OPINION OF PROBABLE CONSTRUCTION COSTS

Estimates of probable construction cost are based on recent project experience and are provided in 2022 dollars.

These estimates are order-of-magnitude costs that are intended for planning purposes only. Costs associated with improvements to existing facilities, the construction of new facilities and the acquisition of land will be dependent on numerous factors.

It is recommended that each proposed project should undergo a detailed feasibility and cost analysis prior to physical implementation. Factors that could significantly impact actual costs could vary significantly include but not limited to:

- ▶ Timeframe of implementation
- ▶ Individual project scale
- ▶ Changing land acquisition costs
- ▶ Property market values rise/decline
- ▶ Raw products and materials costs

Riegelwood Park	
Accessibility Enhancements	\$200,000
Playground Update	\$300,000
Ballfield Improvements	\$250,000
Trail	\$250,000
<i>Planning Design & Permitting + Contingency for Improvements</i>	\$100,000
Riegelwood Park Total	\$1,100,000

Edgewood Park	
Accessibility Enhancements	\$150,000
Playground Update	\$300,000
Ballfield Improvements	\$100,000
Splash Pad	\$300,000
Restroom	\$150,000
<i>Planning Design & Permitting + Contingency for Existing Improvements</i>	\$100,000
Edgewood Park Total	\$1,100,000

Old Dock Park	
Accessibility Enhancements	\$100,000
Playground Update	\$300,000
Ballfield Improvements	\$250,000
Multipurpose Field	\$50,000
Volleyball Court	\$15,000
Basketball Court	\$75,000
<i>Planning Design & Permitting + Contingency for Improvements</i>	\$60,000
Old Dock Park Total	\$850,000

Fitness Park	
Inclusive Playground (Grant from Trillium)	\$500,000
Multipurpose Field	\$50,000
Trail Development	\$600,000
Nature Based Adventure Course	\$1,000,000
<i>Planning Design & Permitting + Contingency for Improvements</i>	\$150,000
Fitness Park Total	\$2,300,000

PROGRAMMING & OPERATIONS

Recreational Programs Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for current and future recreation programs. The direction of recreation programming in the County should include strategies, a philosophy and system for delivery. Recommendations are based on the assessment of existing services and public input that was gathered as part of the master planning process.

Key programming goals include:

Overarching Vision Goals (Guiding Principles)

- ▶ Offer comprehensive services through programs, events, facilities,, and partnerships.
- ▶ Utilize effective and innovative practices to operate parks, facilities, and programs.
- ▶ Continue to engage community members in planning and implementation for programs.
- ▶ Provide quality, diverse parks, facilities, programs, and open space for people of all ages and backgrounds.
- ▶ Collaborate with local partners to provide programs, parks, and open spaces.
- ▶ Provide access to natural areas and environmental education opportunities into and programs.
- ▶ Ensure all residents have equitable access to parks, facilities, and recreation services.
- ▶ Serve everyone that interacts with Columbus County parks and programs with exceptional service regardless of background or ability.
- ▶ Continue to provide a high quality of life for residents by promoting a healthy lifestyle through parks and recreation services.
- ▶ Continue to provide and coordinate special events to bring the community together and connect residents to parks and public spaces.

Columbus County should consider the future direction for recreation programming and services as outlined below to meet the needs and expectations of the community.

- ▶ Recreation programs and services need to respond to the demographics of the community reflecting a smaller and older population, a large number of families, and the general ability to pay for services.
- ▶ Build off the strong base of existing recreation programs and leagues offered by the County.
- ▶ Strive to serve all age groups equitably. This means an increase in programs for:
 - ◇ Preschool
 - ◇ Teens
 - ◇ Young Adults
 - ◇ Adults
 - ◇ Seniors
 - ◇ Families
 - ◇ Intergeneration / Multi-generational
- ▶ Increasing community-based events and identifying opportunities to garner support and encourage private organizations and partners to participate in events.
- ▶ Provide activities and events that can generate an economic impact for the County. This could include sports tournaments and special events.

Specific Program Recommendations

- ▶ Continue to grow programs in the following areas:
 - ◇ Youth sports - including newer and non-traditional team sports, individual, and adventure sports
 - ◇ Special events - especially culturally based activities
 - ◇ Fitness/wellness - with a strong emphasis on wellness
 - ◇ Seniors - with a focus on the younger more active seniors
 - ◇ Cultural arts
 - ◇ Self-directed programs - the ability for the community to recreate on their own will always be important and the demand will only continue to grow.

- ▶ Develop new programs in the following areas:
 - ◊ Environmental education - this is one of the top demands for new programming especially nature-based programs
 - ◊ Adult sports - including traditional team sports, individual sports, and adventure sports
 - ◊ Special needs - establishing basic programming to serve this population
 - ◊ Teens - focus on a broader range of teen programs

Programming Strategies

To ensure that recreation programming reaches its full potential the following strategies should be undertaken.

- ▶ Determine the level of financial commitment that the County is willing to make to provide recreation programs and services. Growing programming will require additional staff and an increase in the operating budget.
- ▶ A recognition of the challenges in the delivery of recreation services in a cost-effective and efficient manner with the level of programming that is being asked for by the community.
- ▶ There will need to be a determination of the area of focus for the programming efforts based on demographics and program type. It will be impossible to meet all the programming needs without partnerships with other providers.
- ▶ Identify partners who can assist in expanding recreation opportunities.
- ▶ Enhanced recreation programs and services need to be supported by established marketing efforts.

Establish a Programming Philosophy

The Parks and Recreation Department should develop an overall programming philosophy with the following objectives:

- ▶ Provide recreation program and service opportunities to all ages, incomes, abilities, gender, and ethnic groups in an equitable and inclusive manner.
- ▶ Provide recreation program and service opportunities in areas of interest that are identified as a need in the community.

- ▶ Partner with other providers to bring a full spectrum of recreation programs and services to the community.
- ▶ Recreation programs and service offerings will respond to identified community needs in a cost-effective and efficient manner.

Develop a Program Plan

Developing a program plan for the Department that includes the general direction of recreation programming for the next 5-plus years should be undertaken. This would include the following areas of programming focus:

- ▶ Identify priorities for increasing programming to include:
 - ◊ Environmental Education
 - ◊ Fitness/Wellness
 - ◊ Youth Sports
 - ◊ Youth Programs
 - ◊ Seniors
 - ◊ Special Events
 - ◊ Cultural Arts

Establish an implementation plan

- ◊ Start with an incremental development of new programs for the first couple of years with a limited number of programs being directly offered by County.
- ◊ Start with growing programs that can be offered in existing facilities or parks and do not require extensive capital investment.
- ◊ Enhance key performance measures to gauge program success.
- ▶ Programming should include virtual options in addition to traditional in-person offerings.
- ▶ Determine the role of other organizations and recreation providers in the area. Establish key partnerships with other providers to expand program offerings.
- ▶ Clearly identify areas of programmatic responsibility to ensure that there is not overlap in resource allocation.
- ▶ Establish clear staffing and operational budget requirements to support the program plan.

Develop a Program Classification System

A key aspect of developing a program plan is determining the long-term role of the County in the delivery of recreation programs and services based on three (3) classifications. The placement of programs into these classifications does not indicate the overall importance of these activities in the community but the role of the Department in providing these programs.

- ▶ Core Programs are the program categories that are a primary responsibility of the Recreation and Parks Department to provide as County-based activities.
- ▶ Secondary Programs are the program categories that are a lower priority to be provided directly by the Department but may be offered by other individuals or partner organizations through direct contract with the County.
- ▶ Support Programs are the program categories that are not a priority for the Department but where the County may provide support through facilities and promotion of activities for other organizations.

Role of Other Providers

- ▶ A key aspect of developing a program plan is determining the long-term role of the County in the delivery of recreation programs and services based on three classifications. The placement of programs into these three classifications does not indicate the overall importance of these activities in the community but the role of the Department in providing these programs.

- ▶ The Parks and Recreation Department will need to be a “clearinghouse” for recreation programs and services provided by others. This should involve promotion of their activities, coordinating of some programs, and permitting of facilities that are consistent with department mission, visions, and goals. However, this process needs to be proactively managed to be successful.
- ▶ The Department will always need to be a provider of facilities (especially , parks, and athletic fields) for other organizations to use.
- ▶ Partnerships with other organizations and entities will be necessary to develop and expand recreation programs. All partnerships should be backed up by a memorandum of understanding or contract to formalize the relationship. This should clearly identify specific roles and expectations as well as limits to facility scheduling, fees, and operations. Partnerships with organizations should reflect the needs and culture of the specific markets they will be providing the services for.

For partnerships to be effective and successful, the following must occur:

- ▶ Must actively pursue and sell the benefits of the partnership
- ▶ Weigh the benefits versus the cost of the partnership
- ▶ Do not compromise on the original vision and mission of the Recreation and Parks Department

Possible FUTURE Recreation Programs Classifications	
Core Programs	Youth Sports, Special Events, Senior Programs, Cultural Arts, Teen Programs, Adult Sports
Secondary Programs	Cultural Arts, Special Needs
Support Programs	General Interests

- ▶ Establish a shared partnership vision
- ▶ Expect compromises to meet diverse needs and expectations
- ▶ Clearly define development and operations requirements

Before determining which programs, and services to contract or have provided by others, an assessment of the specific pros and cons of such a move needs to be completed. A major aspect of this analysis should be to determine the financial impacts and quality of the services that will be provided. Key questions to be asked include:

- ▶ How does this fit with the program plan that has been developed?
- ▶ Will this be the most cost-effective method to obtain the program, service, or function?
- ▶ Does the Department have the resources and equipment to provide the program, service, or function?
- ▶ Will the quality of the program, service or function suffer if it is contracted to other organizations?
- ▶ Are there other more qualified organizations that should provide the program, service, or function?
- ▶ Is the service, program, or function only available from a contract provider?
- ▶ Are the safety and liability risks too high to provide the program or service in-house?

Other Supportive Issues

To implement the program plan, the following will need to be considered:

- ▶ Programming efforts must be viewed through a diversity, equity and inclusion lens that ensures recreation program and service access to all ages, incomes, abilities, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic groups in an equitable and inclusive manner.
- ▶ Track program trends on a regional and national basis to ensure that program offerings are current and reflect the opportunities that are available.
- ▶ Continue the tracking of performance measures by analyzing and summarizing all the following on an annual basis.

- ◊ Rates of fill for programs.
- ◊ Participation numbers by major program area and comparisons to past years/seasons.
- ◊ Rate of program cancellations.
- ◊ Financial performance including costs per participant.
- ◊ Evaluations from participants.

- ▶ Develop a comprehensive marketing plan, on a yearly basis, for recreation programs and services to raise awareness that includes:
 - ◊ Outlines areas of focus
 - ◊ Demographic markets and ethnic groups to serve
 - ◊ Specific marketing tools and tasks
 - ◊ Identify responsible staff member of implementation
 - ◊ Financial resources that are required
 - ◊ A thorough evaluation process.
- ▶ Check in with the community on a regular basis to determine satisfaction with the current programs and services and provide directions for the future.
- ▶ Develop a comprehensive fee policy that outlines how fees are established for facility use, programs and services, as well as facility rentals. Tier programs/services by cost recovery categories and benchmark fees with other agencies. This should include the establishment of a fee assistance program for those that do not have the financial means to take programs or use facilities.
- ▶ Establish a formal sponsorship program for programs and special events that will provide a basic level of support and funding for key activities.
- ▶ Critical to growing recreation programs and services is the assurance that a participant's safety and security is being addressed on an on-going basis. This requires not only equipment, such as possibly security cameras, but also specific policies to be in place as well as a comprehensive emergency action plan.

PHASING & FINANCIAL PLAN

Historic Funding

While increases in the Capital Improvements budget for Parks and Recreation facilities and programs are recommended over the next 10 years, grants also provide sources for facility enhancements, programs and land acquisition.

Grants

Several grants have been identified for projects proposed in the Vision, with many providing options to apply annually.

Individual grants may apply to multiple projects, therefore, the projected funding totals for each project may include the use of overlapping grants for

a different project. The tables on the following pages include summarized descriptions of project-based potential funding sources.

The integration of stormwater, emergency management, public health, and educational functions into projects such as a recreation trail can significantly increase the funding opportunities available to the County. Examples of design features that would facilitate additional funding 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.

Land and Water Conservation Fund	
Level of Funding	State
Management Agency	NC Division of Parks and Recreation
Website	https://www.ncparks.gov/more-about-us/grants/lwcf-grants
Description	The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) provides matching grants to local governments to assist with public park and recreation projects
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acquire land for a public park - Renovate/replace outdoor recreational or support facilities at existing park sites
Grant Amount	\$500,000
Match	At least 50% of the total cost of the project
Application Deadline	Early October

Parks and Recreation Trust Fund

Level of Funding	State
Management Agency	NC Division of Parks and Recreation
Website	https://www.ncparks.gov/more-about-us/parks-and-recreation-trust-fund
Description	The Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) provides matching grants to local governments to assist with public park and recreation projects
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Acquire land for a public park- Renovate/replace outdoor recreational or support facilities at existing park sites
Grant Amount	\$500,000
Match	At least 50% of the total cost of the project
Application Deadline	Early May

NC Land and Water Fund

Level of Funding	State
Management Agency	NC Land and Water Fund
Website	https://www.nclwf.nc.gov
Description	The Land and Water Fund improves water quality, sustains ecological diversity, and protects historic sites and military installations by funding projects to acquire land, restore the habitat for fish, wildlife, and other species, and enhance the filtering of stormwater runoff to reduce pollutants from entering water supplies.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Land acquisition - Restoration projects to enhance or restore degraded waters and to protect downstream natural resources such as drinking water supplies, fisheries, and recreation opportunities, - Stream restoration - Innovative stormwater - Planning efforts that develop potential projects with one or more of the following goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enhance or restore degraded waters - Protect unpolluted waters - Contribute towards a network of riparian buffers - Provide buffers around military bases - Acquire land that represents ecological diversity - Acquire land for a balanced program of historic properties - Facilitate innovative efforts in improve stormwater treatment
Grant Amount	No set funding range
Match	No match requirement. However, the percentage of match and the type of match are factored in the application rating system
Application Deadline	Early February

Clean Water State Revolving Fund

Level of Funding	Federal
Management Agency	NCDEQ – Division of Water Infrastructure
Website	https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/water-infrastructure
Description	The Clean Water State Revolving Fund provides funds for wastewater treatment
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wastewater treatment - Wastewater collection - Reclaimed water - Stormwater BMPs - Stream restoration - Energy efficiency at treatment works or collection systems
Grant Amount	\$30,000,000, 0% loan, 20-year term
Match	n/a
Application Deadline	Spring and Fall application funding cycles

Water Resource Development Grant Program

Level of Funding	State
Management Agency	NCDEQ – Division of Water Infrastructure
Website	https://www.deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/water-resources
Description	The purpose of this program is to provide cost-share grants and technical assistance to local governments for seven eligible project types
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General navigation - Recreational navigation - Water management - Stream restoration - Water-based recreation - Natural Resource Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) - Feasibility/Engineering studies
Grant Amount	\$200,000, however larger awards may be granted
Match	50%
Application Deadline	Spring

Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE)

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	US Department of Transportation (USDOT)
Website	https://www.transportation.gov/RAISEgrants/about
Description	These grants fund regional and multimodal transportation projects of regional and local significance. In 2021, the program funded bike and pedestrian projects at the highest level ever and “includes new or improved walking, biking, and rolling access for the disabled, especially access that reverses the disproportional impacts of crashes on people of color.”
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trails and greenways - Bike lanes - Installation
Grant Amount	No set amounts
Match	No match required
Application Deadline	Mid-April

Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	US Department of Agriculture Forest Service
Website	https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/community-forest/program
Description	The purpose is to protect forest land from conversion to non-forest uses and provide community benefits such as environmental benefits including clean air, water and wildlife habitat; benefits from forest-based educational programs; benefits from serving as models of effective forest stewardship; and recreational benefits secured with public access.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community outreach - Land purchases - Installation
Grant Amount	\$20,000-\$50,000
Match	At least 50% of the total cost of the project.
Application Deadline	January

Bike and Pedestrian Planning Grant Initiative

Level of Funding	State
Management Agency	North Caroline Department of Transportation
Website	https://connect.ncdot.gov/municipalities/PlanningGrants/Pages/Planning-Grant-Initiative.aspx
Description	Encourage municipalities to develop comprehensive bicycle plans and pedestrian plans.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive Bicycle Plans - Comprehensive Pedestrian Plan - Comprehensive Plan Updates
Grant Amount	No set amount
Match	Sliding scale based on population (high populations must have higher match)
Application Deadline	June

Recreational Trails Grant Program

Level of Funding	State
Management Agency	North Caroline Trails Committee
Website	https://trails.nc.gov/trail-grants/apply-grant
Description	Grants help fund sustainable, construction ready projects that meet recreational trail needs to provide low infrastructure economic development opportunities through natural resource tourism.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trail construction and renovation - Land acquisition - Planning, legal and permitting
Grant Amount	\$10,000-\$100,000
Match	At least 25% of the total cost of the project.
Application Deadline	September

Community Challenge

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)
Website	https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/community-challenge/info-2021/2021-challenge/?cmp=EMC-DSM-NLC-LC-HOMFAM-20210217_LivableCommunities_1094001_1430301-021721-F1-
Description	This program provides funding for projects that create change and opportunity for walking and movement at the community level.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of public spaces and parks - Increase community engagement - Programs or services
Grant Amount	No set amounts.
No match required.	At least 25% of the total cost of the project.

Carolina Thread Trail Grant

Level of Funding	Anson, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly, Union (North Carolina) and Chester, Cherokee, Lancaster, York (South Carolina)
Management Agency	Carolina Thread Trail
Website	https://www.carolinathreadtrail.org/resources/grant-program-funding-sources/
Description	Communities and partner organizations may receive financial and technical support from the project to create and implement their own community-based trails.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trail construction - Planning, design & permitting - Land acquisition
Grant Amount	\$5,000-\$50,000 depending on type of project.
No match required.	No match required.
Application Deadline	Fall

Doppelt Family Trail Development Fund Grant

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
Website	https://www.railstotrails.org/our-work/grants/doppelt
Description	Support organizations and local governments that are implementing projects to build and improve multi-use trails.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trails and greenways - Bike lanes - Installation
Grant Amount	\$5,000-\$85,000
Match	No match required
Application Deadline	unknown

T-Mobile Hometown Grants

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	T-Mobile
Website	https://www.t-mobile.com/brand/hometown-grants
Description	This program provides funding for projects to build, rebuild, or refresh community spaces that help foster local connections. Communities must have less than 50,000 in population to be eligible.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Park construction - Site furnishings & beautification efforts - Public art installation - Accessibility improvements - Rebuilding/renovating urban spaces
Grant Amount	Up to \$50,000
Match	No match required
Application Deadline	Quarterly

Build it with KaBOOM!

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	KaBOOM!
Website	https://www.kaboom.org/grants/buil-it-with-kaboom
Description	KaBOOM! Works with communities to design and build playgrounds and play spaces
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Playground equipment including shipping - Safety surfacing - Installation
Grant Amount	No set amounts. Grant will provide equipment, safety surfacing, and installation
Match	\$8,500
Application Deadline	Accepted on rolling basis throughout the year

Build it Yourself – Community-Built Playgrounds

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	KaBOOM!
Website	https://www.kaboom.org/grants/buil-it-with-kaboom
Description	KaBOOM! Works with communities to design and build playgrounds and play spaces
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Playground equipment including shipping
Grant Amount	\$15,000
Match	\$9,000-\$15,000 for a maximum project cost of \$50,000
Application Deadline	Accepted on rolling basis throughout the year

Bark for Your Park

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	PetSafe
Website	https://www.barkforyourpark.petsafe.com
Description	The PetSafe Bark for your Park program provides funding to create new dog parks to maintain/improve existing dog parks
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation of a new dog park - Dog Park improvements and maintenance
Grant Amount	\$25,000 for a new park; \$5,000 for improvements and maintenance of existing park
Match	None
Application Deadline	June

Baseball of Tomorrow Fund Youth Development Foundation

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	MLB-MLBPA Youth Development Foundation
Website	https://www.mlbplayers.com/ydf
Description	MLB-MLBPA Youth Development Foundation is a joint initiative between Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association. It was created to increase participation in and expand access to youth baseball and softball. The Foundation makes grants to organizations in the United States and internationally.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capital projects include building and renovating fields and practice facilities and installing lighting. Field and lighting capital projects that have most of the funding secured will be prioritized. - Baseball/Softball programs include in-school/after-school baseball/softball programming, equipment and uniforms, umpire fees, player registration fees and practice facility rental fees. - Education initiatives include programs, exhibits and other learning opportunities that use baseball and softball as its primary focus to promote interest and engagement in the game.
Grant Amount	No set funding range
Match	No match required; however, field and lighting capital projects that have most of the funding secured will be prioritized.
Application Deadline	Accepted on rolling basis throughout the year

Triangle Community Foundation – GSK Impact Awards

Level of Funding	Local
Management Agency	Triangle Community Foundation
Website	https://www.trianglecf.org/nonprofits/grants
Description	Triangle Community Foundation is made up of over 800 philanthropic funds which are used in a variety of ways to provide support for nonprofit organizations. Grants from the Foundation are made in two ways: from the discretionary grant programs and through donor-advised grants.
Project Examples	Programs that support healthy eating, exercise, sports, outdoor activities to the community achieve or maintain healthy weight.
Grant Amount	\$50,000
Match	None
Application Deadline	March

People For Bikes

Level of Funding	National
Management Agency	People For Bikes
Website	https://www.peopleforbikes.org/grants-guidelines
Description	Program supports bicycle infrastructure projects and targeted advocacy initiatives that make it easier and safer for people of all ages and abilities to ride.
Project Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bike paths, lanes, trails, and bridges - Mountain bike facilities - Bike parks and pump tracks - BMX facilities - End-of-trip facilities such as bike racks, bike parking, bike repair stations and bike storage
Grant Amount	\$50,000
Match	None
Application Deadline	March

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Potential Funding

The funding discussion highlights projected funding that may be utilized to advance capital projects in addition to line item capital improvements funds. Through the analysis of existing sources, projections of future funding options and recommendations are as follows:

- ▶ **General Fund Revenues** – As stated previously, the Department is expected utilized dedicated capital improvement funds, which is estimated to provide approximately \$xxx,xxx per year. With the anticipated population growth projected for the county, this figure will need to increase each year, especially in the long-term implementation phase of this vision.
- ▶ **Grants** – Through the identification of grant opportunities annually, the department has the potential to increase funds available for capital improvements over the next ten years.
- ▶ **Borrowing** – As a funding source, general obligation bonds have historically received support from municipalities in the surrounding region. While Columbus County has made it a practice to fund most capital outlay from current operating budgets rather than through long-term financing, debt financing may prove to be the most cost-effective means of future funding for infrastructure improvements. A potential option to consider is utilizing projected funding through CIP, grants, and taxes to fund most improvements to existing parks, while utilizing a bond to fund the proposed improvements that fall within the medium and long-term time frames. A parks and recreation bond would provide substantial funding to complete the proposed improvements.

Though there are additional funding sources available to the County, the funding options listed above are traditionally the most utilized and supported. As a result, the county has the potential to secure funding to implement a sizable portion of the Vision.

Phasing Recommendations

The Phasing Plan for capital improvement projects is comprised of three different phases based on community needs and priorities, The phases, summarized in the following tables, provide a framework for the implementation of \$5,700,000 in capital improvement projects.

In addition to the three capital project phases, ongoing efforts should be conducted concurrently across the ten-year period. These projects help advance longer-term projects including multimodal connectivity projects, such as bike lanes and greenways, and new park development. This 10-year phased approach aligns with the projected funding discussed in the previous section.

To determine recommendations for phasing of projects, the project team assigned each identified project to a phase in the cost estimate. These phases are:

- ▶ Phase 1 Short Term 1-3 Years
- ▶ Phase 2 Medium Term 4-7 Years
- ▶ Phase 3 Long Term 8-10 Tears

Phase 1: Short-term Capital Projects (1-3 Years)

- ▶ \$2,300,000 including design permitting and contingency.
- ▶ Phase 1 focuses on immediate needs including accessibility improvements, playgrounds and improvements to ballfields.

Phase 2: Medium-term Capital Projects (4-7 Years)

- ▶ \$2,600,000 including design permitting and contingency.

- ▶ Phase 2 focuses on trails, sport courts and the nature based adventure course along with annual funding for land acquisition.

Phase 3: Long-term capital Projects (8-10 Years)

- ▶ \$800,000 including design permitting and contingency.
- ▶ Phase 3 is focused on the splash pad and restrooms at Edgewood Park along with annually dedicated funds for land acquisition.

Phase 1 / Capital Improvement Projects: Years 1-3	
Accessibility Enhancements	\$450,000
Playgrounds	\$900,000
Ballfield Improvements	\$600,000
Basketball Court / Old Dock Park	\$75,000

Costs do not include planning, design, permitting or contingency

Phase 2 / Capital Improvement Projects: Years 4-7	
Trails	\$850,000
Multipurpose Fields	\$100,000
Volleyball Court	\$15,000
Nature Based Adventure Court	\$1,000,000
Land Acquisition \$100,000 Annually	\$400,000

Costs do not include planning, design, permitting or contingency

Phase 3 / Capital Improvement Projects: Years 8-10	
Splash Pad	\$300,000
Restrooms	\$150,000
Land Acquisition \$100,000 Annually	\$300,000

Costs do not include planning, design, permitting or contingency



THANK YOU!



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