

i n t r o d u c t i o n

Little Rock's origins lie in the navigation of French explorers who used the first rock found along the Arkansas River from the Gulf of Mexico as a landmark, distinguishing the area from larger rock bluffs located a few miles upriver. Little Rock, or la petit roche, as it was referred by the French, was settled in the early 1800s and was incorporated as a town in 1831. The city was chartered in 1836, and was taken by Federal forces in 1863 during the Civil War. Early expansion outward from the central core of the city was to the south and to the west. Over 150 years later, the majority of new growth in the city continues to push westward.

The first park was deeded to the city in 1893 and was known then as City Park. Today it is known as MacArthur Park, and houses such features as the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History and the Arkansas Art Center. It remained the only city park until the 1920s. John Nolen, a prominent landscape architect and planner, created the first park system master plan for the city in 1913. His visionary plan helped shape today's park system in Little Rock. The city's next park system master plan was completed seventy years later, in 1983. Now, the 2001 master plan strives to make Little Rock a more livable city by creating the vision for a world-class park system. It embraces the past and sets the direc-

tion for the future in the midst of a new digital era and a new millennium.

Project Origin and the Planning Process

Setting a bold new course of action, the city began the planning process in 2000, creating Vision Little Rock, a citizen group formed to develop a comprehensive vision for the city through 2010. Little Rock Parks and Recreation simultaneously began the process of creating a new master plan for the park system. Together with the Parks and Recreation Work Group of Vision Little Rock, the 2001 master plan took shape.

From that process, a public consensus emerged to develop a master plan that would enhance the quality of life in Little Rock. Broad issues affecting the region were addressed.

It is with a balanced, comprehensive approach that Little Rock Parks and Recreation embraces the Master Plan. Little Rock Parks and Recreation firmly believes that there needs to be an emphasis on land and people which will, in turn, improve Little Rock's attractiveness as a place to live.

This comprehensive approach to developing the park system master plan required a multi-step process that includes the following tasks:

Did you know ?

John Nolen, a prominent landscape architect and planner, created the first park system master plan for Little Rock in **1913**. Little Rock had only one park, now known as MacArthur Park, until the **1920s**.

Did you know ?

Between 1853 and 1856, New York City commissioners paid more than \$5 million for 843 acres of swampy, muddy terrain which later became **Central Park**? This calculates to \$179 million in 2001 dollars!

Their foresight led to the development of one of the country's most famous open spaces.

- The collection and evaluation of information related to the City's existing resources and demographic trends.
- A visioning process and public input solicitation to determine the desired direction of the city's park system. From this process, broad-brush concepts for creating a citywide system of parks and recreation opportunities were formulated in an effort to address a wide array of issues.
- Completion of a needs analysis that addressed where additional parks and recreation facilities are desired and/or necessary. Particular findings from this needs analysis were then incorporated into the overall concepts for the citywide parks system.
- The development of a policy framework comprised of a series of specific actions with detailed steps to achieve each. These recommendations provide the direction for the ongoing development of Little Rock's parks and recreation system.
- The development of capital and operations/maintenance cost estimates and phasing. With thorough cost estimates and strategic phasing, the framework of the master plan can be taken through implementation.

Purposes of a Parks Master Plan

In conformance with the state enabling legislation and the ordinance establishing a park and recreation zoning district, the purposes of the Parks System Master Plan and what constitutes a municipal park purpose for Little Rock, Arkansas, include, but are not limited to, the following:

Create a Vision and Set Standards

1. To set a clear direction for the future;
2. To assess the existing parks, facilities, programs and management;
3. To establish the necessity of park land and open space as a means to enhance Little Rock's appearance, viability, and image for visitors, businesses and the community as a whole;
4. To provide greater design flexibility and efficiency while maintaining the integrity of the natural and cultural setting in the siting of services and infrastructure, including the opportunity to reduce length of roads, utility runs, amount of man-made drainage improvements and the amount of paving required for development, conversion of rails to trails; and
5. To provide standards reflecting the varying circumstances and interests of individual landowners and the individual characteristics of their properties.

Enhance the Quality of Life

6. To establish high standards of livability and quality of life for all segments of the market place;
7. To give the city a distinct positive presence in this region of the United States as it applies to beautification, natural resources and land use;
8. To provide a range of recreational, leisure and living choices attracting the most residents and visitors; and
9. To create neighborhoods through direct visual and/or physical access to open space and park land, with amenities typical of these, and with a strong neighborhood identity.

Facilitate Public Concensus

10. To provide a means for public participation meetings in order to plan with affected residents and agencies for park land and open space in central Arkansas;
11. To identify values and translate them into dimensions of time, space, and activity for different populations; and
12. To establish measures of effectiveness and performance standards that reflect values of populations.

Stimulate Economic Development

13. To stimulate urban revitalization;
14. To support important industries, such as tourism, recreation, retail projects, real estate, cultural offerings, and agriculture;
15. To encourage the diversity in the economic mix to strengthen the regional economy against market fluctuations by attracting small businesses and residents to central Arkansas; and
16. To provide other facilities so as to provide for the recreational and cultural needs of its residents, and to stimulate and encourage the economic growth of the municipality and its inhabitants.

Conserve Natural Areas and Protect the Environment

17. To conserve open space and promote biodiversity, including those areas containing unique and sensitive natural features such as woodlands, steep slopes, streams and their watersheds, floodplains, floodways, and wetlands, by setting them aside from development or to establish, with regulatory approval, low-impact developments, such as ballfields, trails, vehicular and pedestrian access, concessions, restrooms, and other support facilities;

The Master Plan

This study assesses the community's needs and values, and identifies solutions to ensure that the proper quantity and types of park facilities, open space, and programs are being provided to ensure a high quality of life for the residents of Little Rock.

18. To reduce erosion and sedimentation by the retention of existing vegetation and the minimization of development on steep slopes;
 19. To help reduce expensive flood control measures and flood damages;
 20. To safeguard public drinking water by protecting watersheds;
 21. To provide multiple options for landowners in order to minimize impacts on environmental resources (sensitive lands such as streams, wetlands, floodplains, floodways, critical wildlife habitat, and steep slopes) and disturbance of natural or cultural features (such as mature woodlands, tree stands, fieldstone walls, cemeteries, historic buildings, neighborhoods and lands, art, library, and history institutions, and subdivisions);
 22. To encourage conservation subdivisions with a diversity of lot sizes, building densities, and housing choices to accommodate a variety of age and income groups, and residential preferences, so that the community's population diversity may be maintained and the park land and open space needs are appropriately provided;
 23. To protect areas of Little Rock with productive agricultural soils for continued or future agricultural use by conserving blocks of land large enough to allow for efficient farm operations; and
 24. To conserve scenic views and elements of Little Rock's rural and natural character, and to minimize perceived density by minimizing visibility of new development from existing and proposed roads.
- Protect and Enhance Historic and Cultural Resources***
25. To assure that all appropriate historical, educational and cultural park uses can be identified and maintained as is done by the state parks systems, including but not limited to such uses as archeological sites, historic cemeteries or burial places, local, regional, and national libraries, museums, archives, amphitheaters, theaters, lodging and residential uses and other similar uses incidental to park purposes;
 26. To strengthen the fabric of city life through a healthy and viable cultural life as demonstrated by the important role played by the cultural community in enhancing livability, access, opportunities for life-long learning, and economic vitality;
 27. To serve as the primary steward of a comprehensive, inclusive, and proactive cultural agenda for Little Rock;
 28. To facilitate access to Little Rock's cultural life for residents and visitors; and
 29. To cultivate, leverage, and broker investment in the city's vital and vibrant cultural resources to strengthen Little Rock.

Take Action and Implement a “Class A” Parks System

30. To assure that any area within the city’s parks jurisdiction, which by reason of location, natural features, scenic beauty, or historical interest, can be deemed a public park in order to preserve, protect, or enhance its distinctive physical, aesthetic, intellectual, creative, or social values;
31. To utilize a combination of public and private financial support and regulatory approaches to implement Parks System Master Plan;
32. To implement adopted Little Rock policies and ordinances to conserve a variety of irreplaceable and environmentally sensitive resource lands, including provisions for reasonable incentives to create a park system for the benefit of present and future residents and visitors;
33. To implement adopted land use, transportation, and community policies, as identified in Little Rock’s Comprehensive Plan;
34. To provide for the maintenance of open space and park land through sufficient resources; and
35. To develop partnerships for implementing the Master Plan that minimize financial, social and environmental cost to central Arkansas.

Public Input Process

Vision Little Rock was established in 2000 to develop a comprehensive vision and related action plan through 2010. Its charge is to develop goals, action steps, and implementation strategies for a broad range of city issues. The Board of Directors appointed 60 members to a Vision Team to oversee and coordinate the work. Five members of the Vision Team were then appointed to one of the following Work Groups, which were formed to guide the direction of each planning element within the city:

1. Cultural and Tourism
2. Economic Development
3. Education, Youth, and Senior Strategies and Programs
4. Environment and Land Use (Smart Growth)
5. Government and Legislative Issues
6. Housing
7. Infrastructure
8. Parks and Recreation
9. Public Safety, Crime Prevention and Emergency Response
10. Racial and Cultural Diversity
11. Regionalism
12. Transportation Services

Over 400 citizens were appointed by the Board of Directors to serve as members of these Work Groups.



Public meetings to gather input

The Parks and Recreation Work Group has played a critical role in the development of the Little Rock Parks and Recreation Master Plan. During the course of twenty work group sessions, they have guided the development of goals and objectives, identified priorities, and gauged action items for effectiveness and political reality.

In addition to input received from the Vision Little Rock Parks and Recreation Work Group, key leaders in the community were interviewed at the beginning of the planning process. These included political and business leaders, as well as community activists. Project participation and input were also gathered from residents, community leaders, government agencies, Little Rock Parks and Recreation staff, and other city departments.

Public meetings were held throughout the planning process to solicit input and reaction. These meetings were held at three critical junctures in the process to solicit the most meaningful opinions. The first was held early in the process, when defining where the Little Rock park system is now. Demographics, development patterns, and park distributions were explored by park planning districts, and the desired input addressed visioning for the future. The second meeting was held to respond to the “where do you want to go” question posed at the first meeting. Preliminary concepts for creating a park system that fulfilled the desires of Little

Rock’s residents were explored, and input was received regarding strengths, weaknesses, and additional ideas for concept plans. The third public meeting focused on the “how do you get there” aspect of the parks plan: implementation. The four-point strategy was introduced and reviewed, with its supporting actions, phasing, and funding.