

CHAPTER 8 – PARKS AND RECREATION

In November 2002, Schrickel, Rollins and Associates, Inc. completed a Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan (Parks Master Plan) for the City of Stephenville. The purpose of this section of the Plan is to integrate the adopted parks plan into the future land use plan, transportation plan, community facilities and CIP to ensure that adequate parks, recreational facilities and open spaces are provided for citizens of and visitors to Stephenville.

Parks are quality of life factors that more and more are drawing people and businesses to a community. If Stephenville is to continue to be an attractive community for families, it will need to continue to provide places to play and places to gather. However, with the provision of parks and recreation facilities comes the requirement to operate and maintain these spaces. No new parks are shown on the Future Land Use Plan, as it is advisable only to show very general locations where a future park should be unless there is a tract in City ownership. Parks and open space that were proposed in the adopted *Parks Master Plan* have been reflected in the Future Land Use Plan.

Key Issues

The adopted *Park Master Plan* coupled with recent community input identified a set of key issues for parks and recreation in and around Stephenville.

- ◆ **Continuation of Bosque Trail and other open space areas:** Stephenville has an existing park system that should be improved upon. Existing trail systems such as the Bosque Trail and other associated creeks should create a networked trail system for the City.
- ◆ **Absence of neighborhood parks:** At present, the City is served by two main parks: City Park, Optimist/Jaycee Park. Smaller neighborhood parks are required to serve the community, particularly the areas of the City that are not easily accessible to the main city parks.
- ◆ **Park maintenance and upkeep:** For the City's parks to be operational and attractive to both residents and visitors, the City must provide regular maintenance and upkeep of facilities and equipment.

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- ◆ **Equipment Upgrading:** Much of the City's park equipment is considered old, in poor condition and in disrepair. Health and safety issues are a concern to most residents.

Parks Master Plan Summary

The *Parks Master Plan* is intended to guide the development of Stephenville's parks, recreation and open space system from 2002 through 2017. It was developed with input from citizens, members of the park board, park staff and other city officials. The *Parks Master Plan* indicated that Stephenville's 2002 park acreage would be 141.1 acres. Based on its estimated 2020 population of 21,633, park standards suggest that the City should have an estimated 260.0 acres of parkland, thus creating a future deficit of 118.9 acres. If no more new land is acquired, by 2017, there will be a deficit of 162.9 acres of parkland. To compensate for some of this need for new parkland, the potential for linear open spaces and environmental preservation along the city's stream corridors can be used for parkland.

The park acreage guidelines of the *2002 Parks Master Plan* were set at a goal of 12 acres per 1000 population, an increase of 2.5 acres per 1000 over the 1996 guidelines. The number of recreational facilities doubled as well in comparison to the 1996 plan. According to the standards established in the *Parks Master Plan*, between 2002 and 2007, the City should acquire 133 acres of parkland. By 2017, 305 total acres will be required. Immediate facility needs, according to the Plan, include an aquatic center, a recreation center, linear parks, picnic facilities, RV parking, athletic fields, multipurpose trails, and basketball courts. By 2017, the accumulative needs will include trails (multi-purpose, nature, equestrian), soccer fields, baseball diamonds, volleyball and basketball courts, aquatic facilities, picnic facilities (tables, pavilions), and various other community recreational facilities. Maps of existing and future conditions are available in the *Parks Master Plan*.

Existing Park System

City Park

City Park is made up of 112 acres just off the downtown square on Graham Street along the Bosque River. The park is available for overnight

camping with 10 permanent campsites with water and electricity and up to 50 temporary sites as needed. Other amenities of the park include two group pavilions, picnic areas with grills, two playgrounds, swimming pool, horseshoe courts, four lighted tennis courts, volleyball courts, 1.3 mile walking trail, outdoor stage, two basketball courts, three baseball fields, three softball fields, four youth fields, and one soccer field.

Recreation Hall

The Recreation Hall is located at the north entrance of the City Park. The building houses the City's Parks and Recreation Department offices. The gym is used for scheduled recreational activities, public exhibits and shows, banquets, dances, auctions, and is open to the public during regular working hours for open play when events are not scheduled.

Century Park Gazebo

The Century Park Gazebo is located within the City Park. It is located amongst the trees along the Bosque River. The facilities include picnic tables and grills.

Optimist/Jaycee Park

The Optimist/Jaycee Park is located at the intersection of Harbin Drive and Highway 8. The park is built on 18 acres and features a large pavilion, 0.7 mile lighted walking/jogging trail, covered picnic tables grills, a large playground, and plenty of open space for relaxing and/or recreating. The pavilion is a multipurpose area equipped with two basketball goals and is used for reunions, picnics, skating, roller hockey, and other group activities.

Johnson Park

Johnson Park is a 0.5 acre park located at the corner of Sloan Street and McCart Street. This is a small neighborhood park that provides an open space for citizens to have a place to relax and enjoy both passive and active recreation.

Downtown Plaza

The Downtown Plaza is a multi-purpose area located adjacent to the Erath County Courthouse square at the corner of Washington Street and Belknap Street. The parking and rest area downtown is structured to give

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shoppers and business patrons a place to relax in a park atmosphere. The sidewalk along the plaza hosts the "Cowboy Walk of Fame", plaques dedicated to the men and women of Stephenville's western heritage including three time world champion bull rider, Tuff Hedeman, and six time PRCA All-Around World Champion, Ty Murray. The City hosts a Cowboy Walk of Fame Induction and Dedication Ceremony each May. Some other events include arts and crafts shows, street dances, and a Christmas light show and entertainment stage.

Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives detailed below are taken from the adopted *Parks Master Plan*. The Plan did not include specific action statements.

The goals and objective statements were developed by city staff in response to public demand, available natural resources, and staff perceptions of Stephenville's parks and recreation needs. The following are taken directly from the *Parks Master Plan*.

"Goal 1: Provide the citizens of Stephenville with a quality system of parks, recreation, and open spaces that are compatible with the local environment and desirable to the public.

Objectives

- ◆ Provide adequate park and recreational services to the city's citizens based on standards established for Stephenville.

Goal 2: Develop and preserve the beauty of the natural areas within existing parks and along other natural areas that are desirable for open space preservation and park development.

Objectives

- ◆ Develop the Hampton Property adjacent to City Park to include the Bosque River Trail improvements.
- ◆ Preserve the Bosque River and greenbelt areas throughout the city to complement Bosque River Trail project underway at the time this plan was published.
 - Clear river course from the bridge on South Loop to the bridge on Graham Street near the Foster Home.

- Provide bike trails, picnic facilities, restrooms, some pavilions, and lighting on both sides of the river and under several bridges where security is critical.
- Pave parking areas at various locations.
- Repair erosion problems along the river, particularly in the park proper and at the museum grounds.
- Provide campsite areas for recreational vehicles.

Goal 3: Provide recreational facilities in existing and potential parks that will contribute to improving the quality of life for the residents of Stephenville.

Objectives

- ◆ Develop an aquatics center to replace the existing pool and to provide additional; water recreational opportunities.
- ◆ Build a community activity center or renovate the existing recreation center.
- ◆ Build additional neighborhood parks and playground areas.

Goal 4: Acquire land for parks to bring the City into compliance with acreage standards.

Goal 5: Bring all parks and playgrounds into compliance with current accessibility standards (ADA) and Consumer Products Safety Commission and ASTM guidelines.

Goal 6: Renovate and expand City Park

Objectives

- ◆ Expand City Park west of the river by purchasing out tracts fronting on W. Long St. and presently held in private ownership.
- ◆ Transfer the five acres of land west of City Park, now owned by public works, to the park department.
- ◆ Continue to implement the City Park master plan of development for renovation and development of new facilities in the existing park and on the Hutchinson property.
- ◆ Prepare capital improvements program for the phased development of City Park.
- ◆ Ensure linkages to other facilities that are sensitive to environmental preservation efforts of the City.

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Under the auspices of the Comprehensive Plan, the City may want to consider how to address the need for neighborhood parks either through park dedication fees by which the developer sets aside a park tract proportionate with the number of homes, or money in lieu of land that would actually be enough to purchase park land in the immediate area. This, however, could engender multiple maintenance considerations for the City. Another approach to neighborhood parks is to allow "private parks" funded and maintained by residents or neighborhood associations credited for park dedication.

Funding Mechanisms

Most capital investments involve the outlay of substantial funds; therefore local governments often must pay for new facilities through appropriations in the annual operating budget. There are numerous techniques available to local governments to pay for capital improvements over a longer period of time. The *Parks Master Plan* identifies some funding sources. The following is a compilation of sources stated in the *Parks Master Plan* as well as some other available techniques.

Current Revenue - This technique is known as "pay-as-you-go" financing and is the financing of improvements from current revenues such as general taxation, fees, service charges, special established funds, or special assessments.

Reserve Funds - The use of reserve funds is made possible by accumulating funds in advance for capital acquisition or development. The accumulation may result from surplus or earmarked operational revenues, funds in depreciation reserves, or the sale of capital assets.

Enterprise and Revenue Funds - Many municipalities establish accounts that are earmarked for park and recreation programs. These accounts are used to fund programs and to acquire, operate, and maintain facilities.

General Obligation Bonds - The use of this method involves the taxing power of the jurisdiction as it is pledged to pay the interest and principal

to retire the debt. General obligation bonds can be sold to finance permanent types of improvements such as park and recreational areas and facilities. Voter approval may be required.

Lease-Purchase - Local governments utilizing this innovative financing approach prepare standards and specifications for the development of a park by a private company. The facility is then leased to the jurisdiction for a specified period of time. Title to the park and facilities can be conveyed to the local government at the end of the lease period without future payments. The rental over the years will have paid the total original cost plus interest.

Eminent Domain - The power of eminent domain allows the local government to acquire private property for public use. Although this is not a common practice for the acquisition and development of park and recreational areas, it is a tool that can be used by the City to purchase property within certain areas of the City, particularly within established neighborhoods. The property would be acquired through condemnation with "just compensation" paid to the property owner.

Authorities and Special Districts - Special authorities or districts may be created to provide public facilities such as parks and recreational areas. These authorities are commonly created to avoid the restrictive debt limitations of local governments. They may be financed through revenue bonds retired by user charges or fees, or in some instances, the authority may have the power to tax.

Sales Tax - Through a public referendum, the City may establish a sales tax of any size, typically one-half to one cent, to generate general revenue for the acquisition and development of parks and recreation areas throughout Stephenville. The sales tax may have a limited duration or may be permanent.

User Fees - User fees may be an effective cost recovery technique to recover a reasonable portion of the costs to administer, operate, and maintain public parks and open space. Examples of user fees include

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registration or entry fees for recreational programs and equipment and facility rental charges.

In-Kind Services and Volunteer Participation – In-kind services may be coordinated with other departments and governmental entities to perform the labor on specific construction projects. Individuals, sports associations, private businesses, and civic groups are just a few examples of entities and organizations that may furnish volunteer participation.

State and Federal Assistance - State and federal grants-in-aid are available to finance a large number of programs. The cost of funding parks may be borne completely by grant funds, typically with a local share required. Programs such as federal revenue sharing and Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) have given local governments more freedom on how they spend their grant money. Some of the programs currently available include:

Texas Recreation and Parks Account Program Funds - The Texas Recreation and Parks Account (TRPA) provides 50 percent matching grant assistance to local governments for the acquisition and development of public parks and recreation areas and facilities. All TRPA grant applications are evaluated for program eligibility based on a "Project Priority Scoring System." The applications are scored and presented to the Parks and Wildlife Commission for approval. Minimum master plan standards must be met to qualify for priority points in the competitive scoring system. A project awarded a grant must be complete before another grant application is submitted.

The TPWD offers five grant programs:

- ◆ **Outdoor Recreational Grants** are reimbursable matching grants up to \$500,000 for park acquisition, development or redevelopment.
- ◆ **Indoor Recreational Grants** provide matching funds for qualified recreation centers and other types of indoor facilities.
- ◆ **Texas Trails Grants** provide funds for off street connections between activity centers, such as connecting parks to other parks or to schools and other qualified center.
- ◆ **Regional Park Grants** for larger projects that serve regional needs, and require involvement of multiple entities.

- ◆ **Small Communities Grants** provides matching grant assistance up to \$100,000 total project cost to communities less than 20,000 in population.

The City may apply for and receive a grant in each of the above categories. These grants may run concurrently.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) - CDBG funds may be used on projects which benefit persons with low and moderate incomes. The CDBG program is administered by the state's Office of Rural and Community Affairs (ORCA). Funding is available on an 80/20 cost-share basis.

Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund/Texas Local Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Fund - This fund is co-administered by the National Park Service and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TP&WD). Funds are available to provide planning, land acquisition and development assistance for "outdoor recreation." This is a 50/50 matching grant program administered through the state.

Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program (UPRRP) - This grant program is for the rehabilitation of recreation facilities in areas defined by the U.S. Census as a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Stephenville may qualify under this designation. This program is a 70 percent federal and 30 percent local matching grant.

Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) - This program is available for planning and technical assistance on projects emphasizing environmental protection, open space accessibility and construction. Funds are available to qualified private organizations and local governments. Public involvement is a requirement of this program.

Special Recreation Grants - This program is administered by the U.S. Department of Education under Public Law 101-517, provides \$2.86 million for development of special recreation demonstration projects for persons with disabilities.

Transportation Equity Act for the Twenty-First Century (TEA-21) - This program provides funding for transportation-related bicycle and pedestrian facilities. There is a Surface Transportation Program (STP)

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category, which allows cities and counties the option of using bridge and road funds for providing bicycle and pedestrian facilities. Enhancements can include bicycle and pedestrian facilities, rail corridor preservation, scenic and environmental transportation opportunities and improvements to historical transportation sites. Funds from this program could be used to establish corridor linkages between neighborhoods and park and recreational areas. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) administers this program in coordination with Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) around the state. Congress is currently debating the next six-year omnibus federal transportation bill that would continue similar funding for state and local governments.

Federal Lands Highway Funds - This program provides funds for bicycle and pedestrian transportation facilities in conjunction with trails, roads, highways and parkways. The primary intent of this program is to assist in the construction of transportation facilities. This is a 100 percent federal share program. The use of these funds would primarily be for the acquisition of right-of-way and development of trail linkages connecting residential neighborhoods with the public parks system.

The Landscape Cost Sharing Program - This program is administered by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). Through this program, there is 50 percent cost sharing available for both highway and pedestrian landscape projects on routes within the designated permanent state highway system.

America the Beautiful Tree Planting Program - This program is administered by the Texas Forest Service. It is an outgrowth of former President Bush's proposal to plant one billion trees in the United States by the end of the century to mitigate the "greenhouse effect." Funding is available for public and private projects on a 50 percent cost-share basis.

Cooperative Forestry Assistance Funds - This program is administered by the Texas Forest Service. Matching grants are available on a 50 percent cost-share basis for projects including trails and greenways, beautification efforts, and public education and training. Grants range in size from

\$5,000 to \$10,000 and may be matched with in-kind services or private financing.

American Greenways DuPont Awards Program - This program is administered by The Conservation Fund, which provides grants of \$500 to \$2,500 to local greenways projects. Grants can be used for almost any activity that serves as a catalyst for local greenways planning, design, or development.

Most of the grant programs are reviewed and selected on a competitive basis, therefore, applications for funding will be evaluated based on assessment of local need; existence of an adopted Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan; and, the availability of local matching funds. Although grants provide an alternative means of financing local park and recreational area improvements, they should not serve as the sole basis for funding a local park and recreation system.

Private Financing Alternatives

In addition to capital improvement financing and state and federal assistance, there are a variety of innovative approaches to financing public park and recreation areas. The use of incentives to encourage private financing, public-private partnerships, and land dedication or donation can be effective strategies to develop a City-wide park and recreation system without relying on the municipality to fully fund the program. In addition, the use of impact fees may help to offset the impacts of private development on the demand for and use of public facilities and services. The following private funding approaches may be available to the City of Stephenville.

Park Dedication Fee – Realizing that residents in new developments use existing park facilities, the City, as part of the subdivision process, may require an equitable and reasonable sum of money per lot to be contributed to the City for park and recreational improvements. However, in order to abide by legal validity tests and to avoid a "taking" of private property, the amount of the fee must be roughly proportional to the demand for park and recreational services placed on the City by a

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private development. This method has worked effectively in some municipalities.

Credit for Private Facilities - In lieu of requiring land dedication or money, the City may consider giving credit for providing recreation facilities in new developments.

Land Donation - Property owners may be willing to donate land to the City for use as a public park. The City should encourage donation subject to established guidelines for the development of park and recreational areas. Considerations should include the suitability of the land for park development; conformance with the objectives of the Stephenville *Parks Master Plan*; and proximity to neighborhoods, natural features, and adjacent land uses.

Trust Fund - The City could use a trust fund for citizens to will a portion or all of their estate to public park and recreational use. Legal provisions would need to be established for the conveyance of property. In addition, the City should establish and use guidelines for the acceptance of suitable park land property. The trust fund would be incorporated as a 501(C)3 non-profit corporation or an existing nonprofit corporation could be used. This would allow possible income tax benefits for the donors.

Private Financing - Community organizations or local service clubs could assist in acquiring and developing park and recreational areas by providing the local match for state or federal grants-in-aid. Another option is 100 percent financing by a private entity with dedication to the City.

Fee In Lieu of Dedication or Improvement - The City may use impact fees to collect revenue for the acquisition and development of park and recreational areas. Similar to the dedication approach, the required fees must also be roughly proportional to the City's burden for the provision of additional park and recreational services resulting from private development. An example of a "fee in lieu of improvement" is a park excise tax that would require a developer to pay a fee (on a per square foot or per dwelling unit cost basis) upon issuance of a building permit.

Tax Deferral - The City may use this method to encourage property owners to defer the development of their land while the City uses it for public open space or a semi-developed park. During the deferral period, the property would be assessed as an undeveloped parcel, with the collection of taxes to be deferred until the property is developed. The City would secure an agreement with the property owner with established conditions of use and provisions for liability and ongoing maintenance. In addition, the City would obtain a recreation easement for "temporary" use of the property.

Tax Reductions - Donation of private land for public use may reduce an individual's federal income tax burden. Also, the market value of a recreation easement may reduce the tax burden either federally or locally, if approved by the local government.

With its natural resources and outstanding City Park, Stephenville will continue to provide quality recreational opportunities for its residents and visitors.

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