

Chapter 8

Implementation Strategy



Chapter 8:: Implementation Strategy



Funding Strategies

Funding strategies will differ for each type of facility. However, the majority of the funding required to address the City's park needs must come from local sources, primarily bond funding and sales tax revenue. While improvements to existing parks can be built with local funds, other park, open space and trail projects may be able to contend for federal and state funds. This section provides brief descriptions of these funding implementation assistance opportunities.

Key City-Generated Funding Sources

General Fund Expenditures - These are primarily used for minor improvements to existing parks and operations. Some funding should be set aside annually to cover upgrades to at least one park. An amount of at least \$250,000 should be budgeted annually for general improvements and replacement costs.

Sales Tax Revenue - Abilene should explore establishing a 4B fund which can be used for community facilities such as parks, trails and recreation buildings, subject to approval by voting by the citizens of Abilene. While each project or group of projects would have to be approved by citizen vote, this option could be considered for projects with significant community-wide benefit. Recreational features with significant impact on quality of life will make Abilene a much more attractive and economically viable location to live, work and play.

Voter Approved Bond Funds - Recent bond issues in other Texas cities for park, recreation, and open space preservation needs have been successful, and point to a continued desire for increased spending on quality of life items. Although bond sales referendums for park related expenses in the past have not been well received by the citizens of Abilene, a bond referendum to fund many of the larger development items recommended by this plan. Specifically, the development of a state-of-the-art citywide recreation center, which is one of the highest ranked items noted by the citizens of the City, will need to be primarily funded by bond sales.

Tax Increment Finance (TIF) and Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ) Districts - A TIF District is a zone where certain property tax revenues generated in the district are reinvested back into the district through development of infrastructure. TIFs operate on the idea that public investment helps stimulate and grow property values, justifying the reinvestment of property taxes back into the district generating the revenue. If feasible, explore the use of TIF/TIRZ funds to address needs identified in this plan.

Public Improvement District (PID) - Somewhat similar to a TIF district, a PID allows a city or county to levy and collect special assessments on property that is within the city or its ETJ to fund improvements that are within that district. Essentially, property owners within the district agree to pay an additional tax so that improvements can be made within the district (similar to HOA fees for homeowners). Examples of improvements can include street and sidewalk improvements, park or cultural improvements, landscaping and other aesthetic improvements, and art installations.

Park Facility Funding through a Parkland Dedication Ordinance - This type ordinance would provide a vehicle for development of parks, open space and trails through private developers as land is developed in Abilene. Specific considerations for the ordinance are discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Hotel/Motel Occupancy Tax - A portion of the City's hotel occupancy tax revenue could be a source to help fund sporting events and special events.

Key Grant Funding Sources

Grants can provide a significant source of additional funding for parks, but should not be considered as the primary source for park construction.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department - Texas Recreation and Parks Account (TRPA) is the primary source for parks grants in Texas, and in addition, provides funding for recreational trails. Up to a 50 percent match can be obtained, up to \$500,000 for new parks and trail facilities. Grant applications that stress joint funding and support from two or more local entities may have a greater chance of contending for the TRPA grants. These grants are highly competitive, and in recent years there have been far fewer grants available or awarded due to State budget restrictions. When the grants are available, the typical deadline to submit an application is March 1st and August 1st every year.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) - This fund is divided into two funding categories: state grants and federal acquisition. The state grants are distributed to all 50 states, DC, and other territories based on factors such as population. State grant funds can be used for park development and for acquisition of parkland or easements.

Transportation Alternatives Program - Under the new Federal policy, MAP-21, the previous Transportation Enhancements, Safe Routes to School and Recreational Trails programs are combined into one. Under this new program, 2% of federal highway funds are reserved for projects defined as transportation alternatives such as trails.

Indoor Recreation Grants - These grants are available to local governments for the construction or renovation of indoor recreation facilities. This assistance is in the form of 50% matching grant funds up to \$750,000. Local governments must apply, permanently dedicate the building for public recreational use and assume responsibility for operation and maintenance. This grant program is currently suspended, and funding amounts may be limited over the next few years.

Environmental Protection Agency - The EPA can provide funding for projects with money collected in pollution settlements, or with funding targeted at wetland and habitat preservation or reclamation.

Foundation and Company Grants - These can assist in direct funding for projects, while others exist to help citizen efforts get established with small seed funds or technical and publicity assistance.



Grants for Greenways - This is a national listing that provides descriptions of a broad spectrum of both general and specific groups who provide technical and financial support for greenway interests.

Partnering with Volunteer Groups - Partnering with volunteer groups can be helpful when constructing trails or playground equipment. Their effort can be used as part of the required match for many grants such as the Transportation Alternatives Program. There are a variety of sources for volunteers including: user groups, local residents, corporate community service initiatives, and business and civic support groups.

Parks Foundation - Parks foundations are non-profit organizations and another source for volunteers. People can make tax deductible donations to a foundation, which in turn provides financial support and volunteer time to a city's parks system. Parks foundations often assist with physical improvements to a park or support recreational programming. They essentially help fill the gap between what needs to be done and what a parks department can afford to do.

Policies and Ordinances

Parkland Dedication Ordinance - This type of ordinance is used by many cities, and is now generally not considered onerous by the development community, but rather is welcomed as a method to help fund smaller parks in a timely manner. A city's parkland dedication ordinance provides an important mechanism to ensure that adequate parkland is available when new development occurs. The City of Abilene currently does not have a parkland dedication ordinance. Therefore, it is a high priority recommendation that the City pursues adopting such an ordinance.

Landscaping Ordinance - Establishing a landscaping ordinance in Abilene can contribute to the beautification efforts throughout the City with requirements such as set-backs and impervious cover allowance. This plan recommends the City adopt a landscaping ordinance.

Trail Development Ordinance - A trail development ordinance is usually a component of a Parkland Dedication Ordinance. Similar ordinances have been enacted in other cities in Texas, and have proven successful in helping to get trails constructed. Often the city will fund regional trails and trailhead development, and then require complete developer construction of key trail segments that fall within their property limits. Credits for landscaping, pavement, or other infrastructure elements could be given in return for trail construction outside of the City's Trails Master Plan (Chapter 5). A central point to consider is that most developments will add trails automatically; therefore, such a mandatory trail development ordinance only serves to create a level playing field between the many developments that include trails and those that will build them only if required to do so.

Partnership with Taylor County and Jones County - Active joint planning with Taylor County and Jones County is recommended to help share the cost developing facilities in the ETJ and surrounding areas.

Joint Planning with Abilene ISD and Wylie ISD - Establish joint planning review sessions with both the Abilene and Wylie Independent School Districts to allow for coordination of facilities and possible pooling of resources for a partnership in acquiring land for schools and parks.

Other Policy Recommendations

Establish a City Ordinance that requires single loaded streets along future neighborhood parks. Single loaded roads allows for accessible parks that are safe and inviting. Safety is generally achieved by the informal surveillance provided by the residents overlooking the park.

Establish a City Ordinance that mandates the donation of floodplain lands along creek corridors. Such land is not developable yet provides habitat and corridors of movement for fauna and the opportunity for use as open space, greenways and trails.

Establish a formal process and agreements for working directly and continuously with the Abilene and Wylie Independent School Districts, so as to acquire lands for neighborhood and family parks in conjunction with school district property acquisitions.

Establish a formal process and agreements for working directly and continuously with the various utility districts and other city departments that can assist in acquiring parkland or in jointly developing facilities.

Pro-actively search for parkland to target for acquisition over the next five years. Include Abilene's ETJ in this search.

Endorse the park to population ratios established by this plan to guide the acquisition and development of parks in all sectors of the City. These are 1.25 acres per 1,000 population for neighborhood parks and 8 acres per 1,000 population for community parks.

Endorse the creation of linear park corridors that bisect and link parts of the City. Use the corridors identified in this plan as the major corridors throughout the City such as Cedar Creek and Cat Claw Creek. Establish standards for developing land adjacent to linear park corridors. These can include helping to fund linear parks, providing pedestrian connections to the parks, minimum amounts of landscaping along those corridors, and signage regulations adjacent to or within the linear park corridors.

Ensure that adequate maintenance personnel are provided to take care of parkland in the City. Expect and provide an exceptional level of care for high visibility park corridors.

Endorse the need for the acquisition and preservation of open space preserves throughout the City. Consider acquiring these lands in conjunction with needed park areas.

Direct City staff to pursue alternative methods of funding park system and programming improvement such as partnerships with nongovernmental entities, grant funding sources, establishing "Friends of..." organizations, and contracting out programs or operations. Consider these and other methods only where feasible and financially sound.

Budget Levels

Current Budget Level – The current FY 2013-2014 budget for the Parks, Recreation and Senior Citizens divisions of the Community Services Department is \$5,285,750. For a current projected population of 119,151 residents, per capita expenditures are approximately \$44.36 per resident of the City. This is slightly below average for per capita expenditures when compared to other area cities. Spending by other comparable cities is as follows:

- San Angelo - Approximately \$37.68 per capita
- Midland - Approximately \$57.64 per capita
- Odessa - Approximately \$43.82 per capita
- El Paso - Approximately \$18.02 per capita

- Lubbock - Approximately \$39.16 per capita
- Wichita Falls - Approximately \$62.10 per capita
- Amarillo - Approximately \$60.88 per capita

As the City constructs additional large scale community parks and recreation/aquatic facilities, the budget levels will need to increase over the next five to ten years to allow for additional operations and maintenance staff.

Operations and Maintenance

With the recommendations of additional developed parks, recreation facilities, aquatic facilities, and trails, it should be recognized that additional manpower is needed for the required maintenance of these various projects. The number of additional staff needed to attend to these proposed facilities will vary depending on the use of these facilities. The provision of adequate staffing must be included as each facility is developed or the facility should not be built. As the park system grows, additional maintenance resources should be provided to the Parks and Recreation Division. This includes new mowing and transporting equipment, as well as park maintenance staff and facility operational staff. Over the next ten years, as new facilities are added, park and recreation staff should grow at the same rate.

A Sustainability Approach to Maintenance

Often parks and recreation agencies are the single largest landowner in a city or community. As such, stewardship of the community's natural resources and recreation amenities is a key parks department responsibility, all the while managing the conscientious expenditure of tax dollars. According to the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), "Good stewardship requires management practices that protect and enhance the recreational, environmental, social and cultural values of public lands and natural and cultural resources in a manner that is cost-effective and sustainable for future generations."

The role of the Abilene Parks and Recreation Division in the conservation of natural and recreation resources, while implementing "sustainability" in its approach to resource management, not only contributes to the health and welfare of its residents, it also reduces operations and maintenance costs, particularly for mowing and irrigation. The "sustainability" approach to natural resource management is not only an environmentally sensitive management strategy; it is "good business" for the City and its residents.

What is Sustainability? - Sustainability is defined as the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Basically, sustainability embraces a stewardship approach that conserves our natural resources for use by future generations. These natural resources include:

- Clean water
- Clean air
- Nutrient rich topsoil
- Wildlife habitat
- Trees and vegetation

- Harnessing of wind and solar energy to reduce the use of fossil fuels
- Develop parks with water conservation in mind, e.g. smart irrigation

The Abilene Parks and Recreation Division is responsible for the care and maintenance of approximately 1,275 total parkland acres, throughout the City in 32 locations. To provide the highest level of park and recreation facilities and amenities, while maintaining these facilities in the most cost-effective manner, the Parks and Recreation Division should implement a “sustainability” based approach to park development and maintenance. This approach includes:

- Planting native tree and grass species that are water conserving and hardy to the west Texas climate. This approach will encourage the “greening” of parks, while limiting the amount of long-term maintenance required to achieve attractive facilities.
- Developing active areas in parks and greenways that will be maintained to levels dictated by the intended use. For example, high intensity use areas such as athletic facilities or playgrounds will have a higher degree of maintenance and cultivation. On the other hand, areas that are less used or do not require a high level of care, such as disc golf courses or open play areas, can receive less frequent or less intensive maintenance.
- Planting more trees in parks in mass plantings rather than lines or rows creates more shade, bird habitat, rainfall absorption and summer cooling effect.
- Planting native grasses and wild flowers in peripheral areas of parks and in park sites that are planned as natural or habitat areas. These areas will only need to be mowed once or twice per year, and rarely fertilized, reducing maintenance costs.
- Provide beds of native and drought tolerant ornamental shrubs and perennial plants for color in “high-impact” areas, such as park entrances. These beds can be mulched with recycled green waste such as Christmas trees, chipped branches and dead trees, and lawn clippings to help the soil retain moisture and reduce irrigation demand.
- Changing irrigation practices to water only those areas that are designated as “high intensity use” areas, such as playground and adjacent picnic areas, designated sports practice fields, and athletic facilities that host league play. This approach will conserve water and reduce costs by discouraging turf growth except in priority locations.

Drought Considerations in West Texas

Record drought conditions throughout Texas in recent years, including Abilene, have driven home the point that city parks can no longer be kept green through a limitless supply of water. Severe drought conditions over the past several years have resulted in damage to turf in some parks and the loss of weaker trees in multiple parks in the City. Key points regarding water and conservation related issues considered in this plan are as follows:

- Abilene’s parks represent a huge capital investment. They also represent some of the more attractive environments throughout the City. Even more importantly, the trees that exist in Abilene are not as plentiful as in cities in wetter climates, and therefore are significantly more valuable. Mature trees that have lived for decades are extraordinarily hard to replace, and even then will take additional decades to reach a similar level of maturity.
- Parks and attractive streetscapes are critical to Abilene’s future. It cannot be overstated as to how much they positively contribute to the appearance of the City today.
- The lack of water should not be used as an excuse not to provide parks and additional

streetscape throughout the City. Rather, technology, alternative sources and drought tolerant materials should be used to increase the amount of green in Abilene.

- Beautiful parks exist in some of the most arid and water-poor areas of the Southwest. Abilene's parks, as they are improved or renovated over time, should include best practices that are used in other southwest cities. These include:
 - Increasing the use of artificial turf playing surfaces for premier game fields throughout the City.
 - Actively choose extremely drought tolerant trees such as thornless mesquites, honey locust, and cedar elms. Large trees are not common on the prairie around Abilene, and yet they are desperately needed to help beautify the City.
 - Incorporate desert-scapes that use dry climate plants and gravel or mulch beds in larger portions of existing and new parks.
 - Incorporate larger hardscape areas where appropriate in heavy use areas of parks.
 - Plan for significant use of shade structures to increase the versatility and year round usefulness of the City's parkland.
 - Modernize irrigation systems in all parks to include drip systems and other high efficiency distribution techniques.

Plan Updates

The 2014 Abilene Parks, Recreation and Senior Facilities Master Plan is a guide to be used to develop the existing system for future needs over the next ten years. However, during that timeframe changes will occur that impact the recommendations. For example, the community may indicate a special need for a facility not listed in the recommendations, or development of some of the recommendations listed in this plan will occur. A review and update of this plan by staff should be conducted every year or when a significant change occurs. These updates can be published in short report format and attached to this plan for easy use. Four key areas for focus of these periodic reviews are as follows:

Facility Inventory - New facilities should be added to the parks inventory, as well as any significant improvements to Abilene ISD, Wylie ISD, Taylor County and Jones County parks or facilities. Improvements by other major private entities such as the YMCA that could influence recreation in Abilene should also be noted.

Public Involvement - As mentioned previously, this plan reflects the current population and attitudes as expressed by the citizens of Abilene. However, over time those attitudes and interests may change as the City changes. Periodic opinion surveys are recommended to provide a current account of the attitudes of the citizens and to provide additional direction from the public on issues that may arise.

In order to make an accurate comparison of the changes in attitudes and interests, it is recommended that future surveys follow the general format of the citizen survey conducted in this plan, which mirrors the survey conducted for the 2008 Master Plan. An interval of every four to five years is recommended, and may be combined with other citywide citizen satisfaction surveys.

Facility Use - Facility use is a key factor in determining the need for renovation of additional facilities. Updates on league participation of sports facilities should be gathered each season with data from each association. Key efforts should be made to compile data on usage at all facilities, both existing and new. Changes in participation by citizens of Abilene as well as residents outside the city limits should also be recorded.

Action Plan - As items from the action plan discussed earlier in this document are implemented, updates should be made to this prioritized list to provide a current schedule and priority list for staff.

This page was intentionally left blank.