



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY PARKS STRATEGIC PLAN

FINAL
AUGUST 6TH, 2018



FORWARD



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DEPARTMENT OF PARKS, OPEN SPACE & CULTURAL SERVICES

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Dear Friends and Partners,

The Santa Cruz County Parks Department is pleased to present to you our first Strategic Plan. This document represents a year-long process of assessment, inquiry, and outreach to our community, partner organizations, public officials, staff, and supporters. We are proud of the comprehensive and collaborative nature of the document as well as the process which created it.

Our goal was twofold: first, provide a ten-year roadmap for the department that will assist us in adapting and growing our support for a healthy, connected, and culturally vibrant Santa Cruz County. Second, to create a resource for understanding of what we do and how we serve the community, as well as guidance for partnering and collaboration.

The premise of this document is that our system of parks, open spaces, beaches, and recreation and cultural services represent one of our county's most valuable investments. The department's primary role is to ensure that this investment is well-managed, relevant and accessible to all, regardless of age, cultural background, physical ability, or income. We also must see that it is preserved and enhanced for generations to come.

Thank you for your contribution and dedication to our amazing park system and the public value we provide. We hope you will find this plan useful; it is the beginning of a relationship and an open conversation about community priorities.

Sincerely,

Jeff Gaffney
Parks Director

The Mission of the Santa Cruz County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services is to provide safe, well designed and maintained parks and a wide variety of recreational and cultural opportunities for our diverse community

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This plan would not have been possible without the assistance and participation of a great number of individuals. We would like to thank all the members of the public who participated in the public process that created this Strategic Plan, and to all the staff and volunteers who contributed.

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Strategic Plan Pyramid

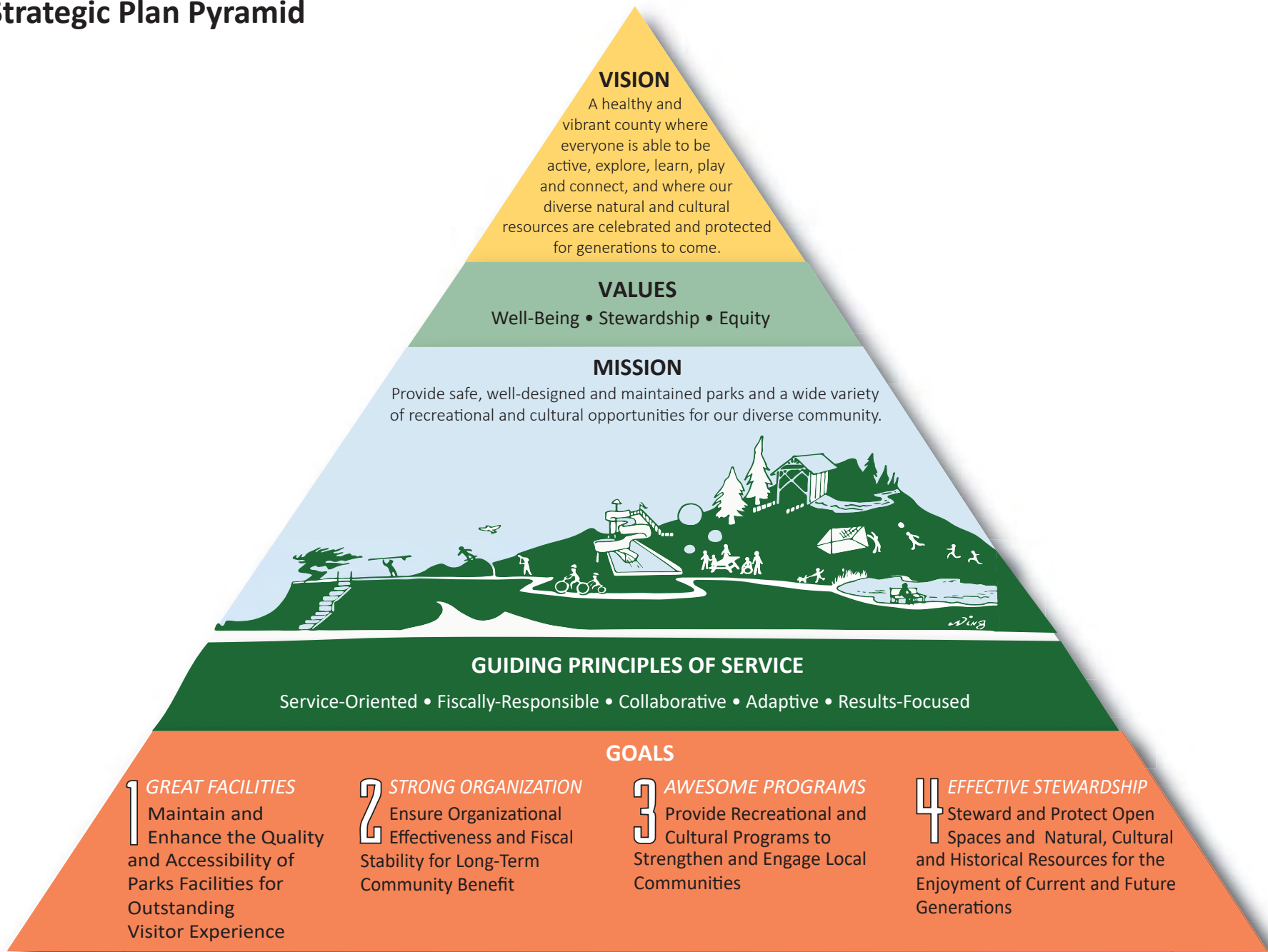


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PART I: THE COUNTY PARKS STRATEGIC PLAN

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This Strategic Plan represents the first comprehensive and collaborative planning effort between the County Parks Department and the local community in Santa Cruz County. The Strategic Plan seeks to articulate the vision and strategic priorities for the future of the County Parks system in a ten-year timeframe. The vision and priorities established through this process reflect the strong value that Santa Cruz County places on parks, coastal access, open space, programs and the events and activities that bring us together as a community.

The Strategic Plan addresses the County's existing park system, including its strengths and challenges, and identifies the necessary areas of improvement to remain responsive to the changing needs of our community. Ultimately, the plan will serve as the basis for future department work plans (operational plans) and as a roadmap for the department.

OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE:

A healthy and vibrant county where everyone is able to be active, explore, learn, play and connect, and where our diverse natural and cultural resources are celebrated and protected for generations to come.

WHY A STRATEGIC PLAN?

The Santa Cruz County Department of Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services (County Parks Department or County Parks) has grown in both the size of its holdings and its importance in the lives of county residents since its inception in 1979. Over the course of the last 38 years, the department has undergone many changes, while the County Parks system has grown into a large network of parks, open spaces, facilities, trails and coastal access points throughout the unincorporated portions of the county.

Some highlights of the department's history:

- **1979 - 2002:** Established in 1979, the County Parks system grew for two decades in the number of parks, programs and employees. By 2002 there were 55 County Parks facilities, parks and coastal access points.
- **2002 - 2011:** The number of full time permanent budgeted department staff positions declined from 68 funded full time or equivalent staff positions in 2002/03 to only 35 in 2011/12, along with a decline in program offerings. At the same time, the number of park facilities steadily increased.
- **2011 - 2014:** In the wake of the economic downturn, the Parks Department was temporarily dissolved into the County Department of Public Works from 2011 to 2014.

- **2014 - 2018:** Some limited additional funding for County Parks was established through the passing of Measure F in 2014. The County Parks Department was re-established as an independent department in 2014 and a new director was hired in 2015.

The Parks Department provides both local and regional parks and programs. Santa Cruz County is unique in having such a large portion of the population living outside of incorporated cities (about 130,000 people, or 49 percent according to the 2010 Census). The County Parks Department provides typical county regional parks and open spaces serving the entire county population. The Department also has a role similar to a city parks department in providing local neighborhood and community parks and event facilities in these unincorporated areas, despite having a smaller relative tax apportionment and ability to leverage funding than other counties and cities (see Chapter 7 for more explanation).

Working within the current framework of the County's General Plan, the County Parks Strategic Plan represents the current vision of the community, and identifies opportunities for leveraging funding and resources to move the department towards this vision. The Strategic Plan does not create or change any County policy, but provides a framework to assist us in working more effectively within existing policies.

HOW THE STRATEGIC PLAN WILL BE USED

This document consolidates background information, community feedback, key findings and other information that was used to develop the vision, values, goals, objectives and strategies contained in this Strategic Plan. County Parks has gained a wealth of information about the community and the environment through this process, and this summary will be used by staff, community stakeholders, the County Administrative Office, and the Board of Supervisors as the County moves forward to carry out the vision outlined in this Strategic Plan. Much of this information will be referenced or serve as

a jumping-off point for strategic decision-making. Additionally, this Strategic Plan will serve as the basis for future operational plans for the department, which will contain performance measures, more time-specific priorities, and detailed actions to implement the Strategic Plan and achieve our goals.



Simpkins Family Swim Center in Live Oak

RELATIONSHIP TO THE COUNTYWIDE STRATEGIC PLAN 2018-2024

The County Administrative Office developed its first-ever countywide strategic plan in 2018. This plan establishes a common vision and set of goals that will be implemented by all the County departments and will contain broad, inter-departmental goals. The goals and objectives in the County Parks Strategic Plan will work together and align with the countywide goals, while being more specific to the provision of parks and recreation in the county.

The Parks Department is not the only County department to undergo its own strategic planning process. Under the direction of our County's new Chief Administrative Officer, all County departments will be asked to develop plans and to align those plans with the overarching County plan.



Strategic Plan Community Meeting in Watsonville

STRATEGIC PLAN VOCABULARY

Throughout the Strategic Plan, the following terms will be used frequently and have a specific meaning within the context of this Strategic Plan.

- Vision:** A brief statement articulating the desired future state, describing ***why*** the department does the work that it does.
- Values:** Core ***motivators*** reflecting community ideals that drive the work of the Parks Department and relate directly to the vision.
- Mission:** A brief statement describing ***what*** the department does.
- Goals:** Broad statements of ***how*** we pursue our vision.
- Objectives:** Specific ***ways*** we plan to achieve our goals and impact our community.
- Strategies:** The ***approach*** we plan to take to achieve our objectives.

CHAPTER 2: VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

VISION

The vision for the future of Santa Cruz County Parks describes the desired end state of the work that we do and articulates the biggest ‘why’ for the County Parks Department’s existence. Our vision statement was created with extensive input from the staff, the community, and partners during the Strategic Plan process.

MISSION

The County Parks mission states what the department does to serve the community. The mission statement was adopted for the department prior to this Strategic Plan process, and represents the department’s most essential purpose.

OUR VISION:

A healthy and vibrant county where everyone is able to be active, explore, learn, play and connect, and where our diverse natural and cultural resources are celebrated and protected for generations to come.

OUR MISSION:

The Mission of the Santa Cruz County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services is to provide safe, well designed and maintained parks and a wide variety of recreational and cultural opportunities for our diverse community.

VALUES

The values listed in this section represent the core motivators that drive the work of the Parks Department to serve the community, as identified through the strategic planning process. The values directly support the new Parks Department vision and have been used to identify and define department priorities and our goals and objectives in the Strategic Plan.

The three core values are *Well-Being, Stewardship and Equity*.

WELL-BEING

Creating a happier and healthier Santa Cruz County and improving quality of life by promoting physical activity, safe and welcoming public spaces, positive community interactions, and relief from everyday stress.

STEWARDSHIP

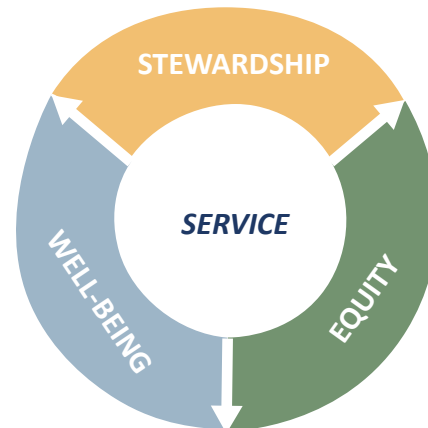
Sustaining natural systems and conserving resources throughout the parks system for future generations, including education and learning opportunities, and chances for people to appreciate and connect with the natural world.

EQUITY

Serving communities throughout the county with a focus on those most in need, to ensure that parks and programming are inclusive, welcoming and accessible to all.



Aptos Village County Park



Parks Department Core Values

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF SERVICE

The following principles describe the strong value the parks department places on **service**. These principles were identified by staff and the community during the strategic planning process, and reflect how the department operates to increase the values of well-being, stewardship, and equity.

Service-Oriented: We work as a team to provide a consistent high level of service to our community.

Fiscally-Responsible: We allocate and use resources responsibly and pursue sustainable funding that meets the needs of the system of parks and parks services.

Collaborative: The department works together with other agencies, organizations, businesses, volunteers, community members and staff to provide the highest possible level of service and to create new opportunities.

Adaptive: The department remains nimble and creative as it responds and adapts its parks and programs to the changing needs of the community.

Results-focused: We establish community driven goals, measure our performance, and communicate with the public our progress in meeting long-range goals in support of community well-being, stewardship and equity.

CHAPTER 3: GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

For the purposes of articulating the vision of the Parks Department, specific means for implementing the plan are described through Strategic Plan goals, objectives and strategies. These means are intended to describe the direction and priorities for the department for the next 10 years. These statements respond to the key issues and themes that emerged during the strategic planning outreach process.

Definitions for goals, objectives and strategies are described in the text box to the right. A summary table of goals and objectives is shown in Table 1. Strategic goals are not ranked and are numbered only for reference. Note that these strategies do not include specific measurable actions. Actions to implement the Strategic Plan will be developed in future operational plans for the department (see Chapter 4).

Objectives and strategies are organized into categories of “core” and “stretch.” These categories illustrate what the department can pursue with existing staffing and resources, and what will require additional resources, according to definitions on the right.

All the goals, objectives, and strategies were developed with extensive input from the community and staff as part of the strategic planning process.

Goals:

Broad statements of how we pursue our vision

Objectives:

Specific ways we plan to achieve our goals and impact our community

Core Objectives:

Objectives that: 1) are essential to the Department’s existence and function, 2) may be pursued with existing staffing and resources, and 3) have been core areas of focus for the department in the past.

Stretch Objectives:

Objectives that: 1) have been identified as important by the community, 2) will require us to leverage new resources and to increase department capacity, and 3) expand the services provided by the Department

Strategies:

The approach we plan to take to achieve our objectives



Photo by Peter Fink.

Miller Property County Park in Boulder Creek

COUNTY PARKS STRATEGIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

<p align="center">Goal 1: Great Facilities</p> <p align="center">MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE THE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF PARKS FACILITIES FOR OUTSTANDING VISITOR EXPERIENCE</p>	<p align="center">Goal 2: Strong Organization</p> <p align="center">ENSURE ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND FISCAL STABILITY FOR LONG-TERM COMMUNITY BENEFIT</p>
<p>CORE OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>1.1 Maintain and update parks facilities, and the accessibility of parks facilities, to a consistent standard</p> <p>1.2 Ensure safety and cleanliness of parks facilities</p> <p>STRETCH OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>1.3 Increase accessibility of parks facilities to people of all abilities, ages, backgrounds and financial resources</p> <p>1.4 Create and implement a plan to address deferred maintenance throughout the parks system</p> <p>1.5 Upgrade parks in alignment with parks master plans and add additional parks facilities in under-served areas</p>	<p>CORE OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>2.1 Ensure department efficiency and effectiveness</p> <p>2.2 Invest in staff development and promote innovation and excellence in service</p> <p>2.3 Develop sources of sustained funding for operations and enhanced services</p> <p>STRETCH OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>2.4 Institute improved systems for departmental management and operations planning</p> <p>2.5 Lead and partner with other departments, agencies and organizations to better serve the community</p>
<p align="center">Goal 3: Awesome Programs</p> <p align="center">PROVIDE RECREATIONAL AND CULTURAL PROGRAMS TO STRENGTHEN AND ENGAGE LOCAL COMMUNITIES</p>	<p align="center">Goal 4: Effective Stewardship</p> <p align="center">STEWARD AND PROTECT OPEN SPACES AND NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES FOR THE ENJOYMENT OF CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS</p>
<p>CORE OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>3.1 Provide recreational programs and events to meet community needs</p> <p>3.2 Cultivate the arts and strengthen the culture of the county through public art programs and events</p> <p>3.3 Conduct community outreach and offer regular opportunities for diverse groups to engage with and learn about their county parks department</p> <p>STRETCH OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>3.4 Provide additional recreational programs and events to address areas of unmet need</p> <p>3.5 Enhance our support of local families and youth by expanding after school and summer offerings</p> <p>3.6: Increase the department’s understanding of parks customers through increased outreach, data collection and research</p>	<p>CORE OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>4.1 Partner with other agencies, organizations, and land owners in an integrated regional approach to resource management</p> <p>4.2 Protect cultural and historical resources throughout the parks system</p> <p>4.3 Provide interpretive programs and opportunities to increase awareness and appreciation of natural, cultural and historical resources</p> <p>4.4 Provide opportunities for volunteers in parks, facilities and programs</p> <p>STRETCH OBJECTIVES:</p> <p>4.5 Establish a natural resources and open space management program in the parks department to maximize environmental benefits throughout the parks system</p> <p>4.6 Increase interpretive programs and opportunities to increase awareness and appreciation of all natural, cultural and historical resources</p> <p>4.7 Increase volunteer opportunities in parks, facilities and programs</p>

Table 1: Summary of Goals and Objectives

GOAL 1: GREAT FACILITIES

MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE THE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF PARKS FACILITIES FOR OUTSTANDING VISITOR EXPERIENCE

CORE OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 1.1: MAINTAIN AND UPDATE PARKS FACILITIES, AND THE ACCESSIBILITY OF PARKS FACILITIES, TO A CONSISTENT STANDARD

STRATEGIES:

- a. Continue to establish consistent park maintenance standards and staff levels throughout the parks system
- b. Determine and communicate staffing needs based on department goals and the number of properties, facilities and programs, and pursue appropriate staff levels
- c. Assess the anticipated operational costs for potential new parks projects and budget for projected staffing levels and maintenance costs
- d. Regularly inventory and prioritize system-wide needs for deferred maintenance projects
- e. Continue to increase accessibility of parks to all people as parks are upgraded

OBJECTIVE 1.2: ENSURE SAFETY AND CLEANLINESS OF PARKS FACILITIES

STRATEGIES:

- a. Pursue resources to increase professional staff presence in parks
- b. Increase volunteer presence in parks under direction of staff

- c. Engage community and volunteers in supporting safe and clean parks
- d. Partner with law enforcement to enhance security in parks and facilities
- e. Improve and expand system for tracking and responding to citizen reports of maintenance and safety issues
- f. Increase staff input in identifying and prioritizing maintenance needs

STRETCH OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 1.3: INCREASE THE ACCESSIBILITY OF PARKS FACILITIES TO PEOPLE OF ALL ABILITIES, AGES, BACKGROUNDS AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

STRATEGIES:

- a. Conduct physical accessibility assessments of existing parks facilities, identifying and prioritizing needed improvements
- b. Increase relevance of parks to youth and aging populations and to families with young children, and ensure that all demographics are served by parks

OBJECTIVE 1.4: CREATE AND IMPLEMENT A PLAN TO ADDRESS DEFERRED MAINTENANCE THROUGHOUT THE PARKS SYSTEM

STRATEGIES:

- a. Identify needs and determine priority projects
- b. Develop budget and timeframes for deferred maintenance projects, and identify potential funding sources
- c. Secure funding for deferred maintenance
- d. Implement the deferred maintenance plan in stages to maintain investments in parks
- e. Anticipate and schedule upgrades as projects are completed

OBJECTIVE 1.5: UPGRADE PARKS IN ALIGNMENT WITH PARKS MASTER PLANS AND ADD ADDITIONAL PARKS FACILITIES IN UNDERSERVED AREAS

STRATEGIES:

- a. Inventory and develop a system to prioritize planned park projects
- a. With input from the community, identify new park uses for existing parklands, including both active and passive recreation opportunities
- b. Pursue park acquisitions in areas that lack access to parks
- c. Pursue resources to develop additional amenities to serve the community

GOAL 2: STRONG ORGANIZATION

ENSURE ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND FISCAL STABILITY FOR LONG-TERM COMMUNITY BENEFIT

CORE OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 2.1: ENSURE DEPARTMENT EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

STRATEGIES:

- a. Provide exceptional customer service to park users and the wider community
- b. Provide resources and systems to ensure effective staff communication throughout the department
- c. Engage and deploy volunteers effectively to augment departmental capacity
- d. Upgrade technology where it makes the most difference to staff effectiveness
- e. Regularly survey staff regarding department priorities and effectiveness, and solicit ideas for improving department functionality

OBJECTIVE 2.2: INVEST IN STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTE INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE

STRATEGIES:

- a. Create and maintain a variety of opportunities for staff training and leadership development
- b. Encourage collaboration across the department and promote ways for staff to learn from each other and share expertise
- c. Increase regular communication between staff and supervisors

- d. Track and recognize staff performance
- e. Pursue opportunities for networking and staff development with other agencies

OBJECTIVE 2.3: DEVELOP SOURCES OF SUSTAINED FUNDING FOR OPERATIONS AND ENHANCED SERVICES

STRATEGIES:

- a. Pursue new opportunities for revenue generation
- b. Collaborate for the creation of a parks funding measure or other sustainable source of park funding
- c. Evaluate park dedication fees and update as needed
- d. Work with the County Administrative Office and Board of Supervisors to assess department operations and capital projects budgets and secure adequate funds

STRETCH OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 2.4: INSTITUTE IMPROVED SYSTEMS FOR DEPARTMENTAL MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS PLANNING

STRATEGIES:

- a. Develop metrics and performance measures for Strategic Plan Objectives and share com-

puting data with stakeholders and potential funders

- b. Develop and annually update an Operational Plan, integrated with the Capital Improvement Program and department budget
- c. Regularly track and report progress on Strategic Plan Objectives and Strategies through implementation of the department's strategic management cycle
- d. Work to align the Parks Department's Strategic Plan with the County's Strategic Plan

OBJECTIVE 2.5: LEAD AND PARTNER WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS, AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS TO BETTER SERVE THE COMMUNITY

STRATEGIES:

- a. Partner with other public land owners to provide increased recreational access to existing public open spaces
- b. Partner with school districts, land trusts, non-profit groups, community organizations, and public agencies to provide additional public access to existing facilities
- c. Collaborate to develop an interagency vision for the countywide network of trails

GOAL 3: AWESOME PROGRAMS

PROVIDE RECREATIONAL AND CULTURAL PROGRAMS TO STRENGTHEN AND ENGAGE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

CORE OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 3.1: PROVIDE RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS AND EVENTS TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS

STRATEGIES:

- a. Continue to offer free and low-cost programs and events to the community
- b. Sponsor and co-sponsor a variety of events for families & diverse audiences
- c. Promote program scholarships offered by non-profit partner organizations based on individuals' financial need

OBJECTIVE 3.2: CULTIVATE THE ARTS AND STRENGTHEN THE CULTURE OF THE COUNTY THROUGH PUBLIC ART PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

STRATEGIES:

- a. Continue to work with the County Arts Commission and partners to: a) fund arts programs, b) include public art components in public projects, c) provide art in public spaces, d) develop new public art programs and e) conserve existing public art
- b. Continue to offer opportunities to engage in rich, hands-on arts curriculum through arts-based summer camps and class offerings

OBJECTIVE 3.3: CONDUCT COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND OFFER REGULAR OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIVERSE GROUPS TO ENGAGE WITH AND LEARN ABOUT THEIR COUNTY PARKS DEPARTMENT

STRATEGIES:

- a. Conduct meaningful outreach to the county's diverse communities to increase access to and knowledge of parks facilities and programming
- b. Regularly engage community members and other agencies and organizations in assessing community needs

STRETCH OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 3.4: PROVIDE NEW AND INNOVATIVE RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS AND EVENTS THAT ADDRESS AREAS OF UNMET NEED

STRATEGIES:

- a. Regularly assess needs and inventory priorities for classes, programs, and events, especially in underserved areas
- b. Pursue partnerships and develop programs where most needed
- c. Add additional programming targeted to and relevant for high-need and underserved groups
- d. Increase relevance of programs to youth, elders, and families with young children, and ensure that all demographics are served by programs

OBJECTIVE 3.5: ENHANCE OUR SUPPORT OF LOCAL FAMILIES AND YOUTH BY EXPANDING AFTER SCHOOL AND SUMMER OFFERINGS

STRATEGIES:

- a. Pursue resources for expanding programs and classes for youth, especially in underserved areas
- b. Regularly survey youth, parents, teachers and school administrators to identify current gaps in services and areas of unmet need
- c. Partner with other agencies and non-profits to expand the cultural, recreational, educational and interpretive program options available to families and youth countywide
- d. Expand the Junior Volunteer Program and Junior Lifeguard programs to support job and life skills development and opportunities for mentoring

OBJECTIVE 3.6: INCREASE THE DEPARTMENT'S UNDERSTANDING OF PARKS CUSTOMERS THROUGH INCREASED OUTREACH, DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

STRATEGIES:

- e. Conduct an equity analysis including a survey to help the department focus on key areas of need
- f. Regularly conduct surveys of park and program users to determine how parks facilities and programs are used and how they can be improved

GOAL 4: EFFECTIVE STEWARDSHIP

STEWARD AND PROTECT OPEN SPACES AND NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES FOR THE ENJOYMENT OF CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

CORE OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 4.1: PARTNER WITH OTHER AGENCIES, ORGANIZATIONS, AND LAND OWNERS IN AN INTEGRATED REGIONAL APPROACH TO RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

STRATEGIES:

- a. Regularly meet with local conservation partners to assess opportunities to lead and/or provide support for stewardship projects
- b. Provide ongoing educational and interpretive opportunities related to natural resources

OBJECTIVE 4.2: PROTECT CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES THROUGHOUT THE PARKS SYSTEM

STRATEGIES:

- a. Inventory and assess priority projects to enhance preservation of cultural and historical resources in the parks system

OBJECTIVE 4.3: PROVIDE INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION OF NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

STRATEGIES:

- a. Continue to provide interpretive programs led by staff and volunteers in the parks system
- b. Continue to provide interpretive signage and information with all appropriate new parks projects

OBJECTIVE 4.4: PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR VOLUNTEERS IN PARKS, FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS

STRATEGIES:

- a. Provide a variety of types of opportunities for volunteering in the parks system
- b. Establish regional and neighborhood-based Adopt-A-Park programs to encourage community engagement in parks

STRETCH OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE 4.5: ESTABLISH A NATURAL RESOURCES AND OPEN SPACE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM IN THE PARKS DEPARTMENT TO MAXIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS THROUGHOUT THE PARKS SYSTEM

STRATEGIES:

- a. Pursue additional resources to increase department's available expertise, staff capacity, and leadership in natural resource management projects on park properties
- b. Create a natural resources program with staff and volunteers dedicated to developing and implementing resource management goals
- c. Create a parks natural resources management plan to improve ecological outcomes and pursue multiple long-term environmental benefits

OBJECTIVE 4.6: INCREASE INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION OF ALL NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

STRATEGIES:

- a. Develop an interpretive plan for the parks system
- b. Pursue resources to increase interpretive staff presence at appropriate parks throughout the county to run programs, manage volunteers, and engage with park users
- c. Develop additional interpretive facilities and amenities throughout the parks system

OBJECTIVE 4.7: INCREASE VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES IN PARKS, FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS

STRATEGIES:

- a. Grow the volunteer and intern programs to provide experiential learning opportunities and promote land stewardship throughout the parks system
- b. Increase involvement, collaboration, communication and coordination with "friends of" groups to pursue the department mission

CHAPTER 4: PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

DEPARTMENT STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM & OPERATIONAL PLANNING

THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Implementing the Strategic Plan will require future cooperation and planning. The strategic management cycle illustrates how the plan will be implemented (Figures 1 and 2) including the phases of planning, implementing and monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting. These phases will help keep the department on track with the Strategic Plan goals, will set regular times to engage the community, and will help continually improve efficiency and effectiveness.

The Strategic Plan lays the groundwork and sets the framework for future operational plans which will serve to implement the Strategic Plan and help manage department staff work plans and budgets. Together, the Strategic Plan and these future operational plans make up this strategic management system. This is the framework for managing the department and steering us towards our vision and the realization of our Strategic Plan goals.

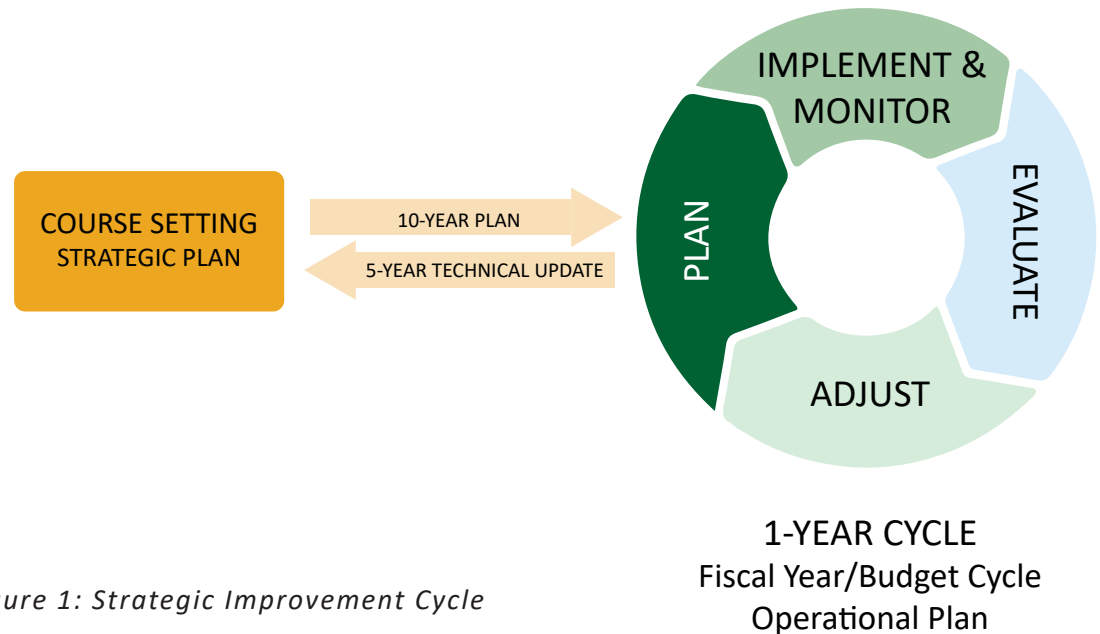


Figure 1: Strategic Improvement Cycle

Figure 2: Strategic Management System





THE OPERATIONAL PLAN

The Operational Plan is a tool we will use to implement this Strategic Plan. The Operational Plan will be updated regularly and will identify short-term (1-2 year) actions that will flow from Strategic Plan goals and objectives and support department priorities. Each operational plan will identify the concrete steps that the County Parks Department will take to assign resources and staff toward achieving the strategic priorities and goals laid out in the Strategic Plan.

The heart of these operational plans will be the formulation and tracking of actions and performance measures. Operational plan actions are specific, measurable, achievable steps to be taken to implement Strategic Plan objectives. In each operational plan, priority will be given to specific actions that further multiple goals and objectives identified in the Strategic Plan. Performance measures will be established and tracked on an annual basis.

CRITERIA FOR PRIORITIZING ACTIONS

With finite staffing levels and budget, the Parks Department must prioritize. In order to determine which actions take priority, the following set of criteria will be used to maximize the potential to achieve the goals, objectives and strategies in this Strategic Plan. Since each goal and objective will require additional resources and needs to build on additional progress, the emphasis is on actions that set the stage and overcome initial barriers, enabling the department to work towards multiple Strategic Plan goals.

Actions should address the following criteria:

1. Lay the groundwork for implementing the long-term goals
2. Work towards fulfilling multiple goals and objectives as identified in the Strategic Plan
3. Create additional resources and enable pursuit of additional goals and objectives identified in the Strategic Plan
4. Be readily achievable in the short-term, with existing funding and staff levels.
5. Capitalize on previous momentum and continue previous progress

THE STRATEGIC PLAN WILL EVOLVE

Over the 10-year horizon for the County Parks Strategic Plan, the priorities and context will evolve in response to changing circumstances. To succeed, we must revisit our Strategic Plan goals regularly and refine our course by adjusting the actions in the Operational Plan. Every five years, the Strategic Plan should undergo a technical update to ensure that the priorities articulated reflect the changing environment, economy, and department and community needs.



Mesa Village County Park

KEYS TO MAKING PROGRESS

FOCUSING

Priority Actions for the first Operational Plan have been selected based on the criteria stated above, as applied to the goals, objectives and strategies included in this Strategic Plan. Based on this approach, the first and highest priorities identified for the Parks Department include the following:

1. Clearly articulate the funding needs of the department through creation of a deferred maintenance plan (Objective 1.4), a system to prioritize capital projects (Objective 1.5), and an assessment of appropriate staff levels needed to operate and maintain the existing parks system (Objective 1.1).
2. Pursue additional funding for the department through potential collaboration on a funding measure, working with the Board of Supervisors and County Administrative Office on department budget allocations, pursuing additional revenue sources, and evaluating park dedication fees (Objective 2.3).
3. Develop metrics and performance measures with the first operational plan (Objective 2.4) for Strategic Plan goals and objectives, and begin to share compelling data with stakeholders and potential funders.

We hope that the focus objectives named here will help the Parks Department achieve the goals, objectives and strategies identified in this Strategic Plan by increasing the capacity and organization of the department.

FUTURE FUNDING

The improvement and growth of the County Parks Department will require investment. This investment is expected to yield a wide range of recreational, environment and socio-economic returns to the community. To realize the goals articulated in this plan, additional department resources and revenue must be pursued.

Before other goals and objectives can be realized, we will need to first develop sources of sustained funding for operational and enhanced services (Objective 2.3). Strategies to meet that objective are detailed below.



Scotts Creek County Beach

PURSUING NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR REVENUE GENERATION

The County Parks Department currently generates revenue through user fees and reservations of facilities. There may be future opportunities to generate new revenue sources through increased services such as providing additional facilities available for reservation.

COLLABORATE FOR THE CREATION OF A PARKS FUNDING MEASURE OR OTHER SUSTAINABLE SOURCE OF PARK FUNDING

The County Parks Department is not the only agency providing parks and recreation services in the county, and is not the only agency that requires additional funding to meet community needs for parks and recreation. Working together, the various parks agencies and the community may pursue a ballot measure to fund parks in the county. This could be in the form of a dedicated parcel tax or a sales tax, which could be used to fund projects identified by the community as important, and could help us implement the goals and objectives of this Strategic Plan. The Parks Department could also individually pursue a ballot measure to secure a sustainable funding source for County Parks.



Willowbrook Park in Soquel

EVALUATE PARK DEDICATION FEES AND UPDATE AS NEEDED

The Park Dedication Fees are required for residential development in the unincorporated county, and are used locally to provide additional park facilities proportionally to serve increased demand resulting from new development. Fees are based on the standard provision of acres of parkland for every 1,000 new residents, and fees are adopted by the Board through resolution. These fees were last evaluated and updated based on market conditions in 1998, and should be assessed for appropriate levels for current economic conditions.

WORK WITH COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE AND BOARD OF SUPERVISORS TO ASSESS DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS AND CAPITAL PROJECTS BUDGETS AND SECURE ADEQUATE FUNDS

The largest source of funding for the County Parks Department is the County General Fund. The General Fund contribution to the department budget has decreased from its pre-recession level, while operational costs and the size and demands on the County Parks system have increased. The Parks Department should work cooperatively with the Board of Supervisors and the County Administrative Office to develop a sustainable source of revenue that is commensurate with the long term needs identified in this plan.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

This Strategic Plan represents a collaborative vision developed with the Parks Department and the community at large. The County Parks Department cannot implement the goals of this plan alone. Realizing this vision will require the leadership of other organizations and agencies as well as increased participation and support from the community. New partnerships will be needed to pursue strategies identified in this plan that will improve the County Parks system, and that the community sees as important, but which are currently outside the scope of the department to implement (such as improving neighborhood bike and pedestrian infrastructure and connections to parks). Community support will be especially important to help us generate new resources and additional funding, as many goals of this plan simply will not be realized without it.

By focusing on collaboration and partnership, this department intends to foster and to amplify the leadership and innovation in this community, to implement this plan, and to support community values. Working together, County Parks will strive to create a healthier and more vibrant Santa Cruz County for all.



Volunteers at Quail Hollow Ranch County Park

PART II: THE COUNTY PARKS DEPARTMENT

CHAPTER 5: THE PARKS NETWORK AND SERVICES

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY'S PARKS & OPEN SPACE NETWORK

The County Parks Department is one of several entities that provide parks, open space, cultural services and recreation facilities and programs in the county, along with several other public agencies, organizations, and private landholders. Together, these various entities provide a network of parks and open space that serves the entire county. Generally, local urban-type neighborhood and community parks are provided by the cities, County Parks, and the four park and recreation districts. Larger regional-serving parks are provided by State Parks, County Parks, and other entities. Local park-provider jurisdictional lines are shown in Figure 3. Parklands and protected lands are shown in Figure 4.

COUNTY PARKS

Generally, the County Parks Department provides two broad categories of services: local neighborhood and community parks and programs in the unincorporated portions of the county (areas outside one of the four city limits), and larger regional-serving parks and facilities that serve the entire county. In Santa Cruz County, there are many urban neighborhoods that are not within a city limit, including the communities of Live Oak, Soquel, and Aptos, and the County provides neighborhood parks in these areas.

CITY PARKS

There are four incorporated cities in the county, including Capitola, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and Watsonville. Each of these four cities has their own city parks department providing local neighborhood-serving parks and recreation services within that city's limits.

INDEPENDENT RECREATION AND PARK DISTRICTS

The four independent park and recreation districts of Alba, Boulder Creek, La Selva Beach and Opal Cliffs are responsible for providing local neighborhood and community parks to urban and rural neighborhoods within their independent jurisdiction boundaries.

OTHER PARKS AND OPEN SPACE AGENCIES & LANDHOLDERS

In addition to the local parks provided by the County Parks Department, the four city parks departments, and the four recreation and park districts, California State Parks also provides several large parks and beaches in the county. State Parks provide important recreational opportunities for local county residents as well.

There are also recreational facilities and open space provided by other agencies in the county including local school districts, the Bureau of Land Management, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the City of Santa Cruz Water Department, the San Lorenzo Valley Water District, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, and the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.

Figure 3: Neighborhood-Park-Providing Jurisdictions

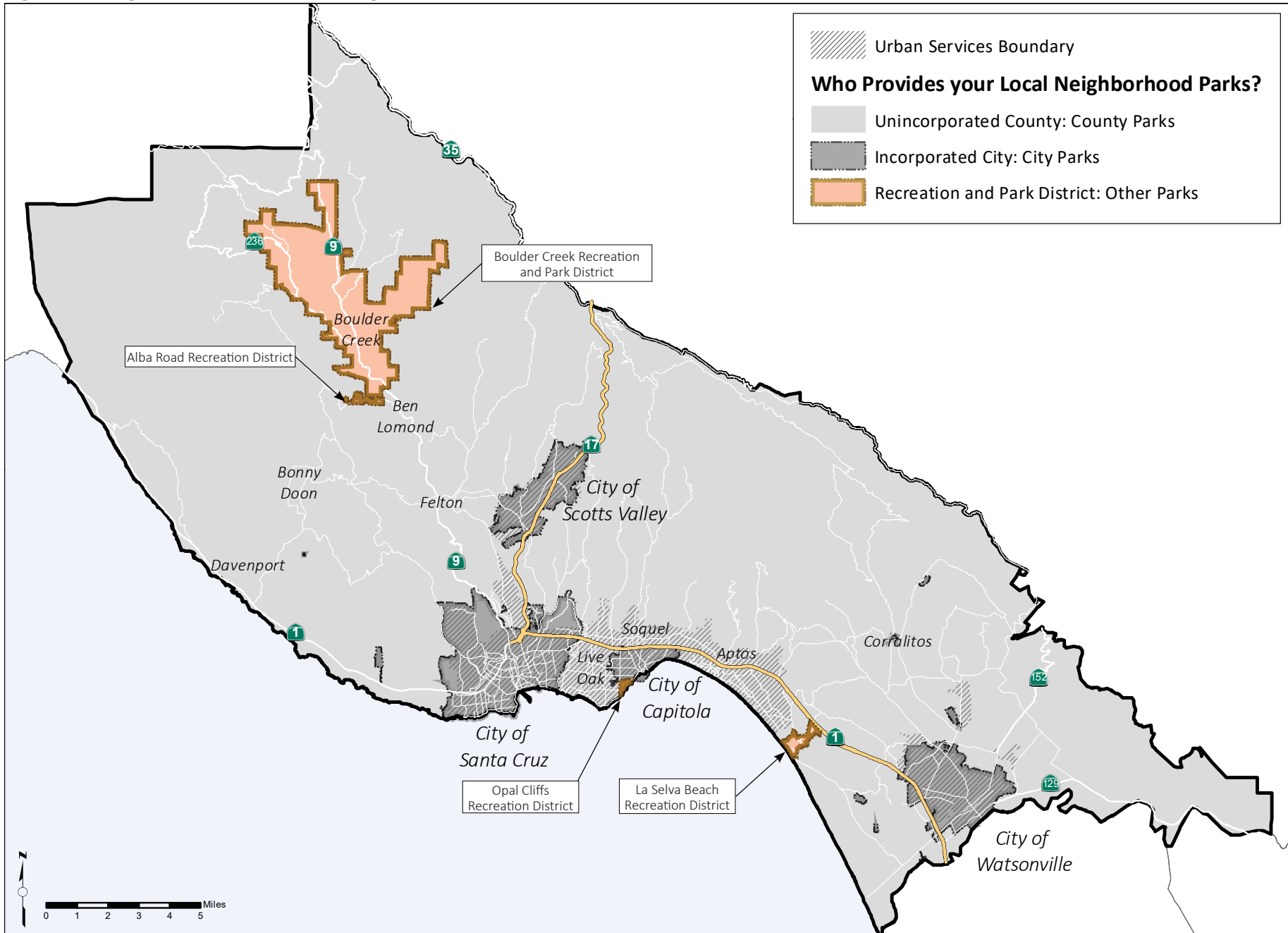
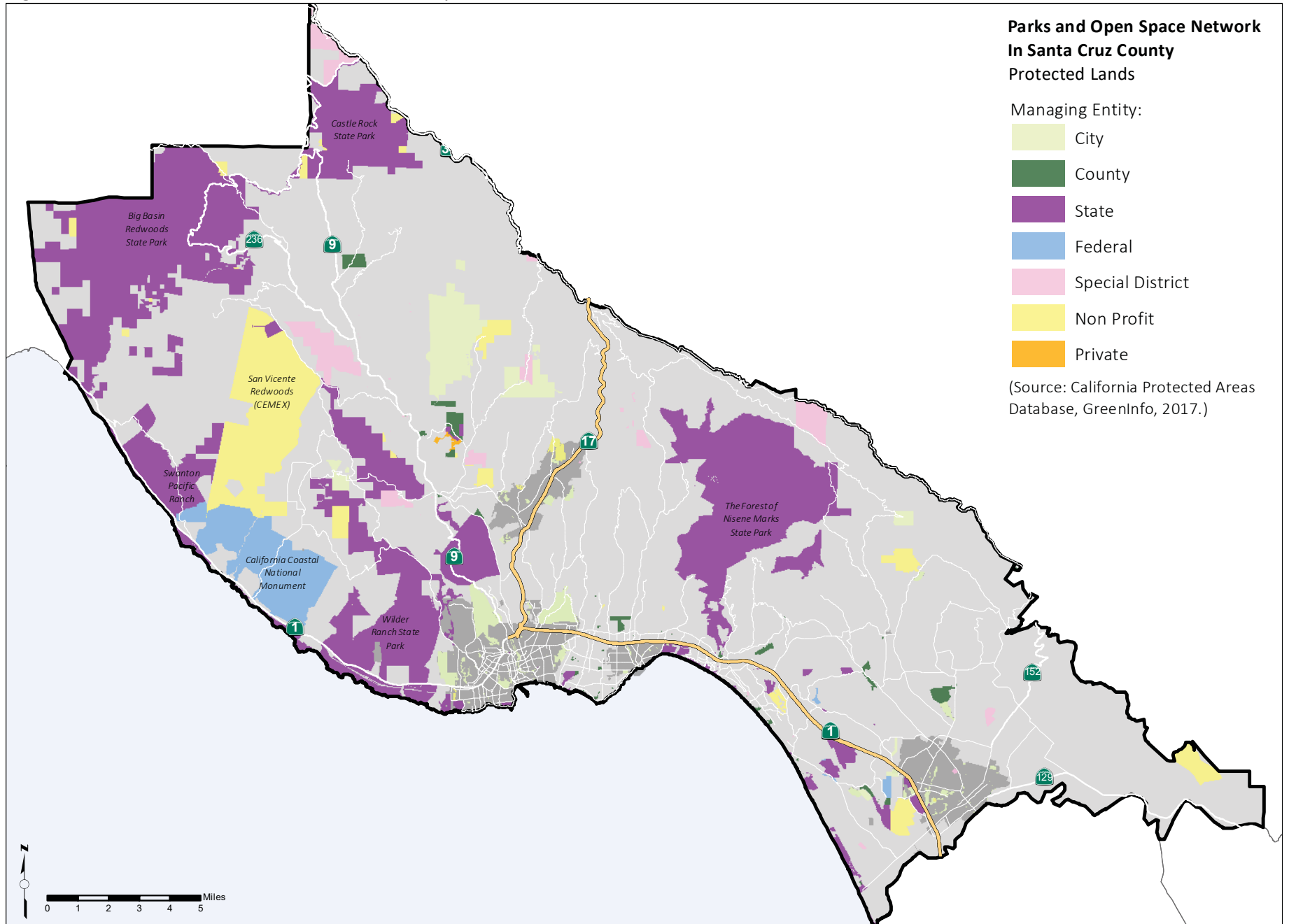


Figure 4: Protected Lands in Santa Cruz County



Today the County Parks Department manages:

- 1,593 acres of parkland including 883 acres of parks and 710 acres of open space
- 38 neighborhood, community, regional or rural parks
- 27 coastal access points
- 23 playgrounds
- 6 parks with sports fields
- 8 parks with basketball courts
- 5 parks with tennis courts
- 5 parks with community rooms
- 1 regional swim center with aquatics and fitness programs and special events throughout the year. Swim Center visits exceed 180,000 per year
- Recreational, cultural and youth programs throughout the unincorporated county
- 4 parks with wedding event facilities

COUNTY PARKS SERVICES

Since 1979, the County Parks Department has managed a diverse parks system including neighborhood, community, regional, and rural parks, coastal access points, trails, and cultural and recreational programs and activities for all ages throughout the unincorporated county. County Parks facilities' locations and amenities are shown in Figure 5.

The County Parks Department also provides

financial support to community arts and recreational programs provided by other organizations such as the Museum of Art and History, the Davenport Teen Center and local school district facilities and programs in various locations around the county.

The Parks Department provides the following services.

Seascape County Park in Aptos



Photo by Mary Chavez

REGIONAL PARKS



Regional parks, located throughout the county, include Quail Hollow Ranch in the San Lorenzo Valley, Polo Grounds in Aptos, and Pinto Lake in Watsonville. These parks and their facilities have unique geographic features, draw people from a wide area, and provide a wide variety of public amenities such as trails, sports fields, dog parks, and rental facilities.

NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY PARKS



Among the County's 29 neighborhood and community parks are Highlands Park in Ben Lomond, Brommer Park in Live Oak, Seascape Park in Aptos, and Aldridge Lane in Corralitos. These parks serve the surrounding communities and provide amenities such as places to picnic and hold gatherings, play structures for children to explore, benches to rest on, community art for visitors to enjoy, community gardens, skate parks and bike pump tracks, and facilities for community events and weddings.

SIMPKINS FAMILY SWIM CENTER



The Swim Center, also a regional park, is located in Live Oak. Among the aquatic programs offered are swim lessons, recreation and lap swim, water exercise, and water polo, as well as the popular Pool Jr. Guards and Little Guards summer camps. It is the primary public pool in the area and provides services for every age group 363 days a year.

COMMUNITY EVENTS



The County Parks Department puts on events such as the Parks & Rex pool party, where dogs can take a dip in the pool, the Holiday Art & Craft Faire and the Floating Pumpkin Patch.

TEEN PROGRAMS



Zombie Camp (pictured), for ages 11-14, is held at Aptos Park. Teens can gain valuable job skills while having fun by volunteering as a Junior Leader at County Parks youth summer camps, as well as assisting with after-school programs.

COASTAL ACCESS POINTS



Coastal access points include Scott Creek Beach near Davenport, Sunny Cove Beach in Live Oak, and Hidden Beach in Aptos. County Parks, together with State Parks and other entities, provides and maintains coastal access points in the unincorporated portions of the county. These coastal access points sometimes include restroom facilities, trash receptacles, natural plantings, and infrastructure such as stairs and fencing to protect sensitive areas and species.

YOUTH PROGRAMS



School-age youth can enjoy a variety of camps and programs, including Nature Adventure and Science Sleuths at Quail Hollow Ranch, Kreative Kids at Wilder Hall, and art and science camps at Aptos Park. Afterschool programs are held at Mar Vista Elementary and La Selva Beach clubhouse.

ADULT AND SENIOR PROGRAMS



Programs for adults and seniors include local day trips (pictured, trip to Harley Farms), water and dry-land exercise classes at the Swim Center, Spanish language and tap classes, interpretive hikes and workshops at Quail Hollow Ranch, and a popular Mall Walk Program.

ARTS



The Percent for the Arts Program, art exhibitions at the Government Center, Artist of the Year, and Outside the Box are just a few of County Parks art-related programs. Arts programming for youth is provided through summer camps and is integrated into parks after school programs. County Parks-sponsored public art can be enjoyed at locations throughout Santa Cruz County. The department also supports the Arts Council and the Museum of Art and History.



Jose Avenue County Park in Live Oak



Recreational Trip to Suisun Marsh Natural History Cruise



Mar Vista Kinder Enrichment Program

DEPARTMENT STRUCTURE & STAFFING

The County Parks Department is made up of five sections with distinct functions.

ADMINISTRATION AND RESERVATIONS

Administration staff provides support and customer service to all Parks staff and customers, and oversees the department budget, finances, human resources, and office operations. Reservations staff administers the use and rental of all park buildings, beaches and park sites; manages concessionaires and the rentals of private houses in county park sites; provides oversight of community gardens and horse-boarding facilities; and works closely with maintenance staff to maximize the use and enjoyment of public facilities.

AQUATICS

Aquatics staff manages the Simpkins Family Swim Center and the extensive aquatics programs offered there. Swim Center visits exceed 180,000 a year. Staff continues to develop new program opportunities to meet the needs of the community and increase participation at the Swim Center.

MAINTENANCE AND OPERATIONS

Maintenance staff provides maintenance to all park locations, beaches and facilities. In addition, staff maintains the landscaping around all County government facilities. A partial list of respon-

sibilities include mowing, minor construction projects, trash pick-up, restoration of natural resources, building maintenance, and pool maintenance at the Simpkins Family Swim Center. Maintenance staff also assists Reservations staff in preparation, set up and clean up for events.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Planning staff oversees the implementation of the Parks Capital Improvement Program (CIP) projects, develops plans and studies for components of the County Parks system, and oversees park construction projects. The Planning and Development section works with specialists from a variety of disciplines and members of the public to develop short, medium and long term plans such as feasibility studies, acquisition studies, park master plans, environmental review documents, design and construction documents, and permits for park projects. Staff leads the submission and administration of grant applications for County Parks projects. The planning section also reviews plans for projects led by other agencies for potential impacts on the County Parks system.

RECREATION & CULTURAL SERVICES

Recreational Program staff administers an extensive list of programs including youth programs, interpretive nature programs centered at Quail Hollow Ranch, adult and senior programs, cultural services and arts programs. Recreation and Cultural Services staff also conducts annual special events, such as the Holiday Art and Craft Fair.

CHAPTER 6: OVERSIGHT AND FUNDING

PUBLIC OVERSIGHT

As with all County departments, the Parks Department is overseen by the Board of Supervisors. In addition, it is supported by two Commissions: the Arts Commission and the Parks and Recreation Commission. These commissions are appointed by the Board of Supervisors, make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors for park-related actions, and assist in coordinating between the public, the department, and the Board.

THE PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION
The mission of the Santa Cruz County Parks and Recreation Commission is to advise and support the Board of Supervisors in its work to provide excellent and accessible parks, open spaces, recreational programs and facilities that promote health and enhance the quality of life for all.

THE ARTS COMMISSION
The mission of the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission is to promote, expand and plan for the cultural life of Santa Cruz County and to bring artists and arts organizations together with government for the benefit of all residents of the county.

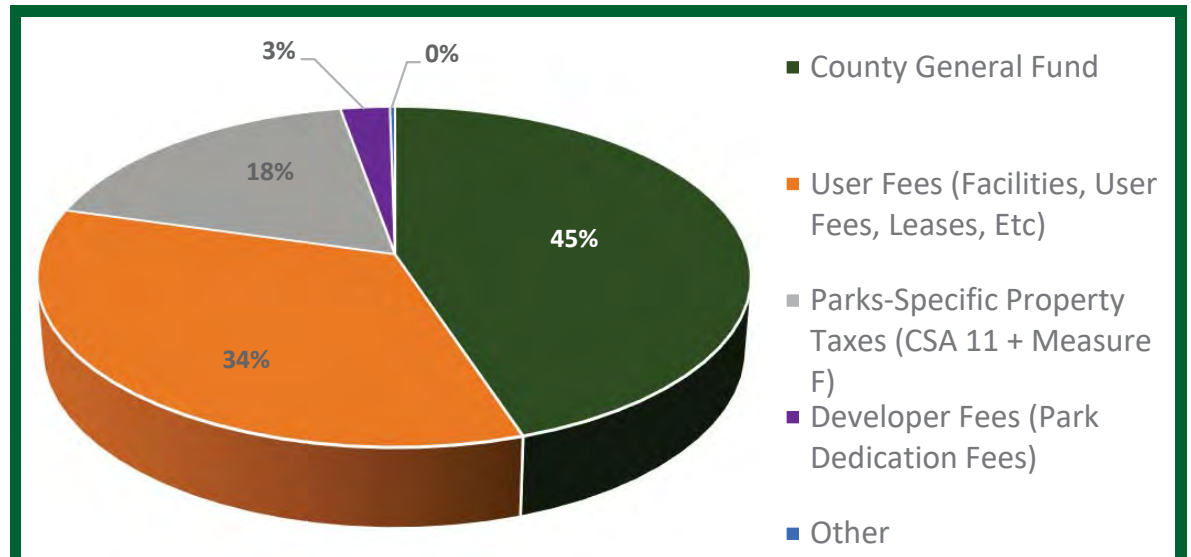


Figure 6: Parks Revenue Sources in Fiscal Year 2016/17

DEPARTMENT FUNDING

County Parks funding comes from a variety of sources including the County General Fund, property taxes, recreation and park facility user fees, grants, and developer fees (for capital projects only) as shown in Figure 6. The amount of each of these sources varies by year depending on specific grants and several other factors. Property tax money includes funds associated with County Service Area (CSA) 11, which exists to provide funding specifically for County Parks.

Generally, the budget can be divided into two categories. First, the operating budget includes the costs associated with operations and maintenance of the existing parks facilities and programs. Second, the capital projects budget includes costs associated with the acquisition of new park properties, development of new or additional park facilities on park properties, and deferred maintenance.

The Parks Department budget, including both the operating budget and the capital projects budget, has not remained proportional to the growing size, demands and costs of operating the parks system (see Figure 7).

OPERATING BUDGET

The sources of funds used for department operations generally include the County General Fund, park user fees, CSA 11, and Measure F.

The overall department operating budget decreased with the recession in 2008, and has only recently (in 2015/16) returned to the pre-2008 level. Additionally, costs associated

with staff, supplies and services have increased over the same time period. To illustrate both of these points, Figure 7 shows that there were 68 funded full time or equivalent staff positions in 2002/03, and only 46 in 2016/17. While staff numbers have decreased, the number of parks and facilities for which the department is responsible has increased from 55 in 2002/03 to 64 in 2016/17.

COUNTY GENERAL FUND CONTRIBUTION

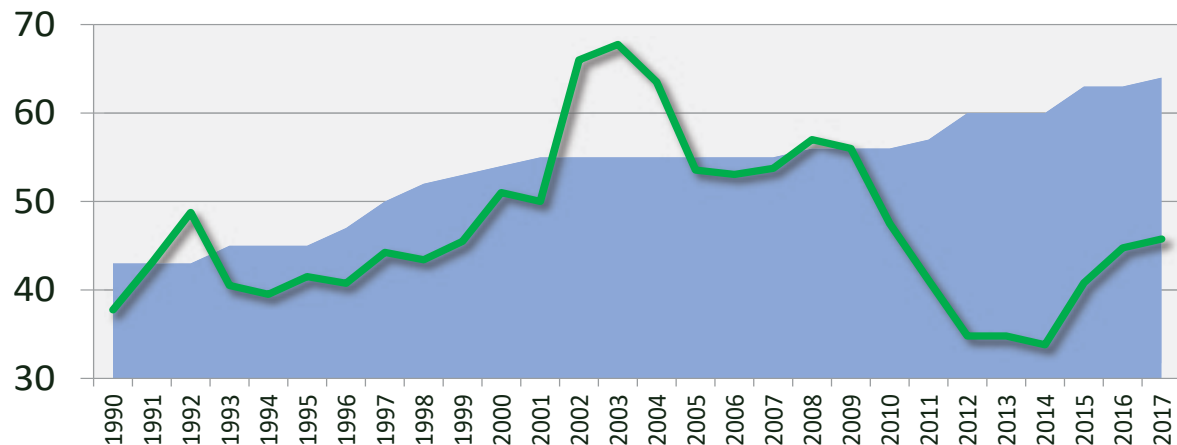
Each fiscal year, the County Board of Supervisors approves the department budget which includes a contribution from the County General Fund. This General Fund contribution generally has increased slightly each year proportionate to rising costs of operating the department. However, in the economic downturn of 2008, with the fiscal crisis and the dissolving of the County Parks Department into the Department of Public Works,

the General Fund contribution to the Parks Department was reduced significantly, from \$4.3 million in 2007/08 to \$2.1 million in 2012/13. Although the total operating budget has partially recovered – due to increasing program participation, user fees and Measure F – in 2016/17 the General Fund contribution was \$3.7 million, and has still not returned to pre-recession levels.

COUNTY SERVICE AREA 11

County Service Area (CSA) 11 is a special district that covers the entire unincorporated county (outside the four cities) except areas that are within one of the four distinct recreation and park districts. This service area was created in 1971 to provide additional property tax funds in an effort to address the gap between needed parks services and available funding. This relatively small fund has been essential to the department in maintaining the most important

Figure 7: Number of Parks and Number of Parks Department Staff





Valencia Hall

department services. Because the Santa Cruz County Parks Department provides an urban level of service in some areas while collecting proportionally fewer taxes than a city, this was a necessary step.

MEASURE F

Measure F was approved by the voters of CSA 11 in 2014, to include a specific per-parcel property tax within CSA 11 that provides a small additional amount of funding to the County Parks Department. Measure F provides less than 4 percent of the annual department budget.

CAPITAL PROJECTS BUDGET

There is no consistent source of funding allocated to capital projects in the County Parks system for upgrades to park infrastructure, deferred maintenance, planning and construction of new

park uses and facilities, and acquisition of new park properties. These types of projects must be funded through unique combinations of funding sources such as grants, park dedication (developer) fees, one-time individual funding sources such as property sales, and public-private funding partnerships.

REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Throughout the past 30 years, the Redevelopment Agency provided the largest amount of capital funding for parks projects. Since the agency was dissolved in 2011, this source of funding is no longer available for development of the County Parks system. Redevelopment Agency funding was only available for parks within the Redevelopment Project Area, which included Live Oak and Soquel. The parks throughout the rest of the County Parks system were not eligible to receive these significant contributions of capital project funds.

PARK DEDICATION FEES

New residential development in the unincorporated portions of the county requires either dedication of new public park land or paying an in-lieu fee to offset additional demand for parks created by the residential development. In-lieu fees go to the County Parks Department and are used to fund capital projects or acquisition of new parkland. The intent of these funds is to allow the parks system to grow proportionally with the increased demand created by new residential development. These fees have not been adjusted to reflect inflation or the increase in property values since 1998.



Photo by Alyssa Johnson

The Hook County Park at Pleasure Point

CHAPTER 7: KEY CHALLENGES

A number of key challenges face this county and this department. Understanding these challenges is critical to creating a way forward that is strategic, holistic, and proactive, rather than reactive. Understanding these challenges will also help the department focus on the big picture rather than responding individually to specific circumstances in a way that is at best piecemeal or partial. The following issues have been identified by staff during the strategic planning process.

LARGE URBANIZED UNINCORPORATED AREAS

The passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 locked in the apportionment rate for each county in California in addition to establishing a maximum property tax rate of one percent statewide. The apportionment rate determines the percentage of property taxes that go to the County as opposed to other local agencies such as cities and special districts. Since that time, Santa Cruz County has been locked into a lower property tax apportionment, on average 13 cents of each tax dollar, than many other counties and cities in California, some of which may receive about twice that for each tax dollar. At the same time, about half (49%) of Santa Cruz County's population lives in the unincorporated area (e.g. outside the cities of Capitola, Scotts Valley, Santa Cruz or Watsonville) compared to the median of 19% living in unincorporated areas in all California counties with populations over 200,000. This means that our parks facilities experience high use and many urban-type challenges, and that the County Parks Department is responsible for

providing more urban-type parks than would typically be provided by a county. At the same time, the County has fewer financial resources to meet those challenges.

DECLINE IN AVAILABLE FUNDING

In the wake of the economic downturn of 2008, available funding for parks and services was reduced dramatically in favor of directing funds toward other essential services such as fire and policing. The General Fund contribution to the department has still not returned to pre-recession levels, while costs have risen. Despite passage of Measure F in 2014, staffing has still not returned to pre-2008 levels despite significant new demands on the department such as new properties and facilities. The number of funded full time or equivalent staff positions has dropped from 68 in 2002/03, to 41 in 2015, and is up only to 46 in 2016/17 (see Figure 7). In addition, in response to our state's budget crisis,



The Shore Trail in Aptos

in 2011 California’s Redevelopment Agencies were shuttered. Redevelopment was previously the primary funding source for almost all parks development and capital projects in the Redevelopment Area of Live Oak and Soquel. The only other source of funding currently available to help us meet community demand for new or improved parks and facilities is Park Dedication Fees, and these haven’t been adjusted for inflation since 1998 and are limited due to the small amount of new development in the county.

DEFERRED MAINTENANCE

The Parks Department estimates that there are approximately \$100 million in deferred maintenance projects needed to address critical or primary maintenance needs within the County Parks system. These deferred maintenance projects include critical upkeep and routine maintenance such as roof replacements, repairs to the Simpkins Family Swim Center, and replacement of facilities such as playground equipment that has reached the end of its usable lifespan. There is a strong potential for ‘cascading’ effects and permanent negative impacts if we don’t address these issues in the near term.

COUNTY LAND AND HOUSING COSTS

Santa Cruz County is now one of the least affordable places to live in the world based on median house price and median household income.¹ Considering the cost of living there’s a great need for low and no-cost programs and facility access. Many residents are housing insecure,

and a growing number are currently experiencing homelessness. Impacts of increased homelessness on parks include use of parks property to meet basic human needs (for sleeping, bathing, storage, etc.), which puts additional environmental and maintenance demands on parks-owned facilities and open spaces. Additionally, the high cost of land means it is much more expensive to purchase and develop new parks facilities.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics and needs of the community in our county continually evolve, causing changes in the demands on the parks system. The parks system must continually adjust its services as needed to meet these changing demographics. Most significantly, over the past two decades, the county’s median age has increased and the percentage of the population identifying as Latino has increased.² These two demographic groups, as well as other groups, may be disproportionately underserved by the parks system. Each community has unique needs, and the department strives to understand and address these needs as they continue to evolve.

PARK ACCESS CHALLENGES

Transportation difficulties exacerbate County Parks’ challenges in providing accessible park facilities and programs throughout the county. The county’s population is spread out, with many residents commuting long distances to jobs. There are few functional alternatives to private

automobile use for residents and visitors to access many of the county parks. The one primary transportation corridor is narrow and heavily impacted. This increases the cost of doing business in a number of important ways such as increased construction and shipping costs, and increased travel time for parks field staff who travel between facilities. Transportation challenges also increase the need to provide local parks within close proximity to all neighborhoods, to make parks more accessible to more people.



Felton Covered Bridge County Park

1. 13th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey, 2017.

2 “Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010,” for Santa Cruz County, US Census, 2017.

PART III: CREATING THE PLAN

CHAPTER 8: PROJECT APPROACH

The Strategic Plan was developed through a collaborative process that sought to be both geographically and culturally inclusive. Input was solicited through meetings with staff, community members and the Strategic Plan Working Group. Generally, the process is illustrated in Figure 8, and includes outreach, visioning and goal-setting.

GUIDANCE & OVERSIGHT

The Strategic Plan was instigated and the process was led by a Strategic Planning Team which consisted of two lead project designers from the department along with parks leadership. In addition, a Strategic Plan Working group was formed in December of 2016 for the distinct purpose

of helping with the County Parks Strategic Plan process. It was composed of ten outside members of varying backgrounds with diverse interests, expertise, experience and partnerships. A list of Working Group members is included in the Acknowledgements section at the beginning of this document.

The Working Group met periodically, for a total of six times over the course of developing the Strategic Plan, to review and give input into all Strategic Plan materials and project phases. This review included project outreach and public engagement, creation of the parks vision and values, and the framing of the goals and objectives for the department. The Working Group also helped implement the public meetings.

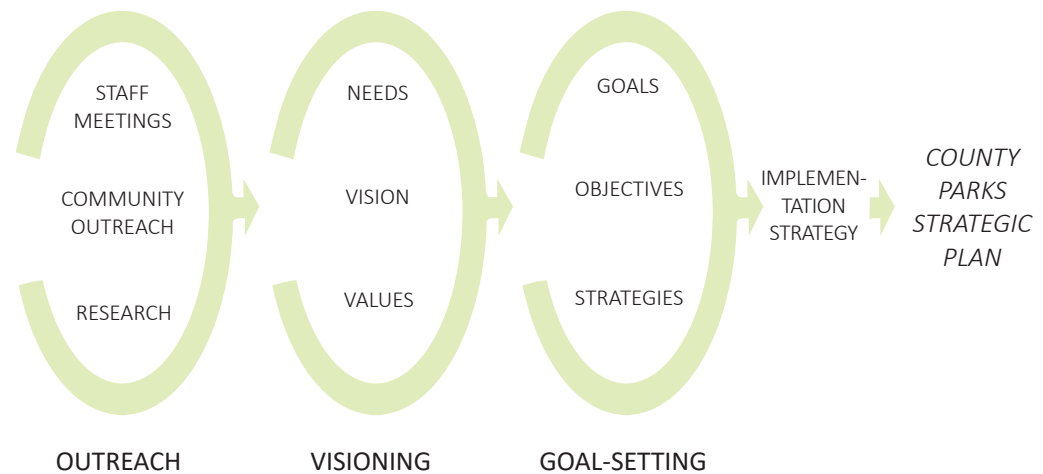


Figure 8: Strategic Plan Flow Chart

STAFF INVOLVEMENT

In Spring 2017 the Parks Department hosted a series of three meetings for staff across the department to solicit their input and engage them in the strategic planning process. Each meeting drew a mix of attendees from various sections, and a total 48 staff members provided input. Ultimately, all sections of the department were represented: maintenance and operations, recreation and cultural services, administration and reservations, aquatics, and planning and development.

These initial meetings included a series of visioning and brainstorming exercises aimed at gathering ideas on how the department can improve and evolve to meet the needs of the community and continue to be a great place to work. Through this process we sought also to identify what changes were needed to both enhance the department's ability to serve the public and to improve job satisfaction for Parks employees.

These meetings generated a wide range of specific ideas and feedback – all of which have been valuable to this process and will be important to the department in future planning. Staff input was synthesized and used to populate a large graphic (see Figure 10 in Chapter 9).

Just as staff input was vital to developing the Parks Vision and Values, it contributed foundationally to establishing the department's priorities. An additional 'All-Hands' meeting took place later in the process to generate specific goals and objectives for the Strategic Plan.

Internal feedback about what is missing, and what can improve the department will continue to be gathered on a regular basis from staff as part of the new Strategic Improvement Cycle.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Community input was an integral part of the Strategic Plan process. The people that live in Santa Cruz County care deeply about their parks system; in total over 1,000 people participated in the Strategic Plan process through completing online surveys, attending one or more of the community meetings about the project, or providing comments or feedback in other ways. Strategic Plan outreach included engagement of

County communications staff, Board of Supervisors' staff, department staff and members of the Strategic Plan Working Group for assistance in personally contacting various groups of stakeholders, key community organizations and interested community members to solicit their input via the survey and to publicize the community meetings.

Our personal outreach included over 5,000 people at over 200 local organizations with a wide geographic and demographic reach with materials in English and Spanish. Feedback from the community members was the most important consideration in developing each component of the Strategic Plan.



Strategic Plan Staff Meeting

The meetings were publicized through individual letters and emails to over 200 stakeholder groups and their membership, publishing in each of the Board of Supervisors' newsletters, posting on both the County's and the Parks Department's website and social media, posting on Nextdoor, posting in the Parks Activity Guide and at parks and community bulletins, distributing flyers to school districts where feasible, and a press release which generated several articles in local media. Outreach materials were provided in English and Spanish.

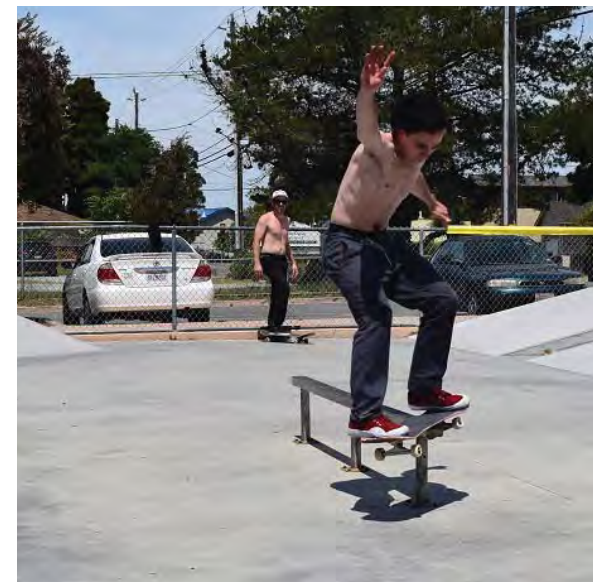
Community meetings included about an hour and fifteen minutes for public comments. Participants were split into four groups for the comment period, and each group rotated through a series of four stations. Each station was facilitated by staff and/or volunteers and focused on one of four topics, including vision and values, parks and facilities, programs and events, and priorities. Facilitators asked a series of prompts and led a series of exercises with each small group, and all comments were recorded. Spanish translation services were available at each meeting.



Strategic Plan Community Meeting in Live Oak



Polo Grounds County Park in Aptos



Felt Street County Park

CHAPTER 9: KEY FINDINGS

KEY DEPARTMENT NEEDS

Community members and parks staff have provided significant contributions during the Strategic Plan process, describing the needs of the parks system and the needs of the department. Funding constraints are a key limiting factor in the ability to meet these needs. For a discussion on needed funding, see Chapters 6 and 7. This chapter summarizes key findings from staff and the community that identifies the needs for the County Parks Department. These needs form the basis for the development of the goals, objectives and strategies in Chapter 3.

All staff members in the County Parks Department were given the opportunity to give input into the strategic planning process through an initial series of three staff meetings, additional written comments and interviews, and as part of a follow-up mid-year ‘All-Hands’ meeting, where they were able to prioritize their ideas on ways to improve the department’s functioning.

In the course of the initial internal strategic planning meetings, staff was asked to consider both the internal needs of the department and what the community most wants and needs—from the perspective of those who are on-the-ground directly serving the public.

DEPARTMENT NEEDS

Parks staff identified the following most important staff needs:

- **More financial resources to maintain the growing number of parks and facilities:** It has been increasingly challenging for the small number of staff—particularly maintenance staff—to do their jobs while being given increasingly more responsibilities with less time.
- **More training and support:** Staff sees great value in participating in training to develop new skills as well as cross-train and share knowledge within the department. These opportunities could increase staff capacity and efficiency, allow for personal growth and career advancement, and allow the department to retain skilled employees with experience and knowledge.
- **Improved internal communication:** Increasing and improving communications between parks management and staff, and between individual parks staff members, has been a consistent key need raised by staff as part of this process. Ideas for improving communication include technological upgrades for staff such as email and network access, as well as improved communications planning and disseminating information throughout the department.

COMMUNITY NEEDS

Parks staff considered the most important community needs as follows:

- Safe, clean and well-maintained parks facilities
- More programs for youth, especially in underserved communities

- Expanded volunteer opportunities and community involvement
- Better awareness of what the Parks Department offers

The input collected in the course of these meetings was used to fill in a large graphic summarizing the key themes and ideas received from staff (see Figure 10).

Many of the specific actions identified as priorities at the internal staff meetings will be incorporated into our first operational plan and will continue to be referenced as the department moves forward.

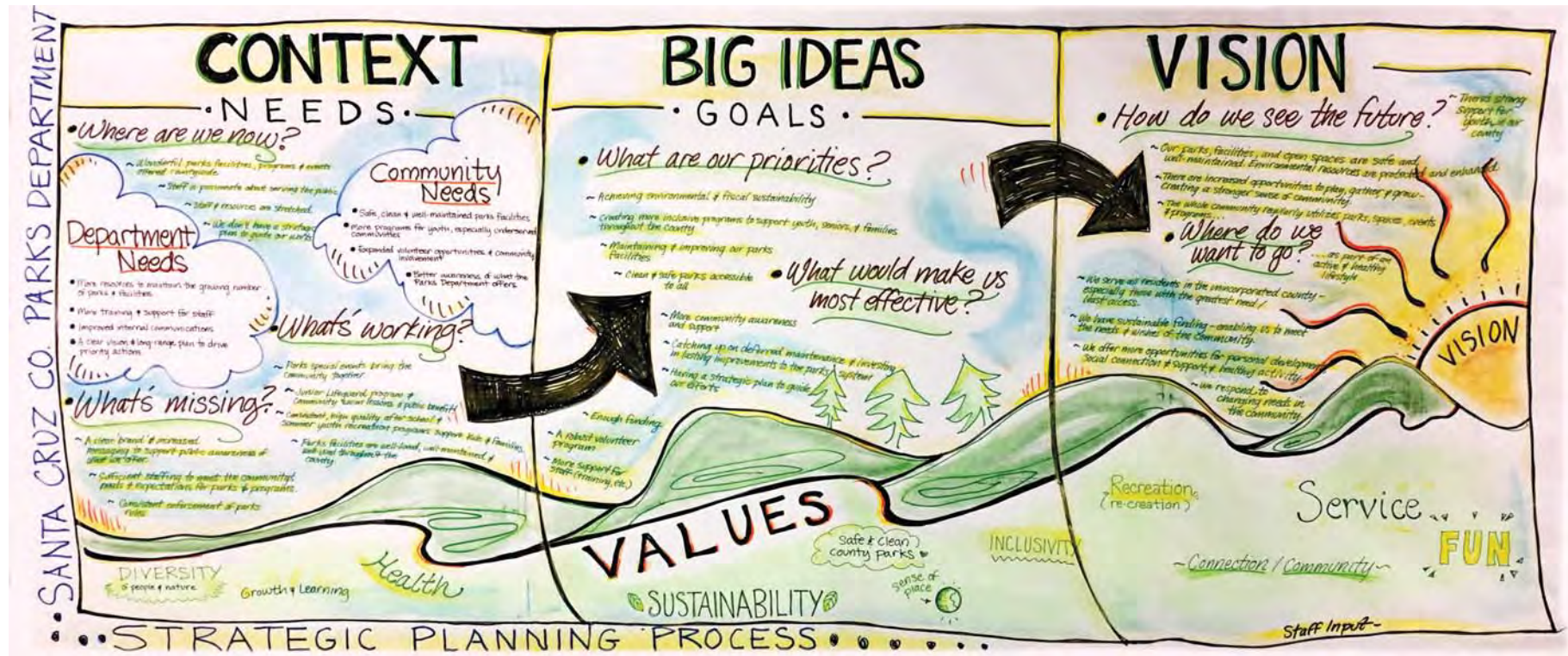


Figure 10: Key Themes and Ideas Received from Staff

Highlights from Graphic Text (Figure 10)

CONTEXT

Needs

Where are we now?

- Wonderful parks facilities, programs & events offered countywide
- Staff is passionate about serving the public
- Staff & resources are stretched

What's working?

- Parks special events bring the community together
- Junior Lifeguard program and community swim lessons a real public benefit
- Consistent, high quality after school & summer youth recreation programs support kids & families
- Parks facilities are well-loved, well-maintained (for the most part) & well-used throughout the county

What's missing?

- Sufficient staffing to meet the community's needs & expectations for parks & programs
- Consistent enforcement of parks rules

BIG IDEAS

Goals

What are our priorities?

- Achieving environmental & fiscal sustainability
- Creating more inclusive programs to support youth, seniors & families throughout the county
- Maintaining & improving our parks facilities
- Clean & safe parks accessible to all

What would make us most effective?

- More community awareness & support
- Catching up on deferred maintenance & investing in lasting improvements to the parks system
- Having a strategic plan to guide our efforts
- Having a robust volunteer program
- More support for staff development

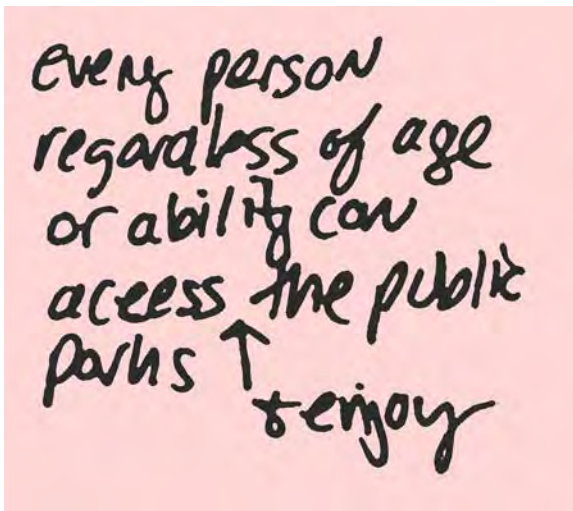
VISION

How do we see the future?

- Our parks, facilities & open spaces are safe & well-maintained. Environmental resources are protected & enhanced
- There are increased opportunities to play, gather & grow – creating a stronger sense of community
- The whole community regularly accesses/utilizes our parks, outdoor spaces, events & programs... as part of an active & healthy lifestyle
- There's strong support for all youth in our County of Santa Cruz

Where do we want to go?

- We serve all residents in the unincorporated county—especially those with the greatest need/least access
- We have sustainable funding—enabling us to meet the needs & wishes of the community... while maintaining what we have
- County residents have more opportunities for personal development, social connection & support & healthy activity
- We respond to changing needs in the community



Vision Statement from Public Meeting

COMMUNITY RESPONSE

The outreach process provided valuable insight into community needs that could be addressed by the County Parks Department. It also clarified priorities and hopes for the future of parks in the county.

In the community conversations, five general themes emerged as being important to community members. These themes include 1) the quality of park experience; 2) opportunities for outdoor recreation; 3) stewardship and protection of open space and natural, cultural and historical resources; 4) accessibility of parks and programs; and 5) engagement of the local community. Generally, these themes are well represented by the number of comments, as shown in Figure 11. However, the most common theme overall was engagement of the local community, which included interest from the community in topics such as programs, outreach, volunteers, events and educational opportunities. Themes are explained below, and the most prominent themes, topics, and comments are summarized in Table 2.

QUALITY OF PARK EXPERIENCE

The community consistently emphasized the need for maintaining and improving the quality of the existing park experience for park visitors. Essential to a positive park experience, things like improving *safety* for park users, improving the *cleanliness* and availability of restrooms, and *maintaining aging parks infrastructure* are of utmost importance. Community members also expressed a need for allocating additional and consistent levels of resources to the parks sys-

tem to allow improvements and consistent levels of service in times of economic downturn.

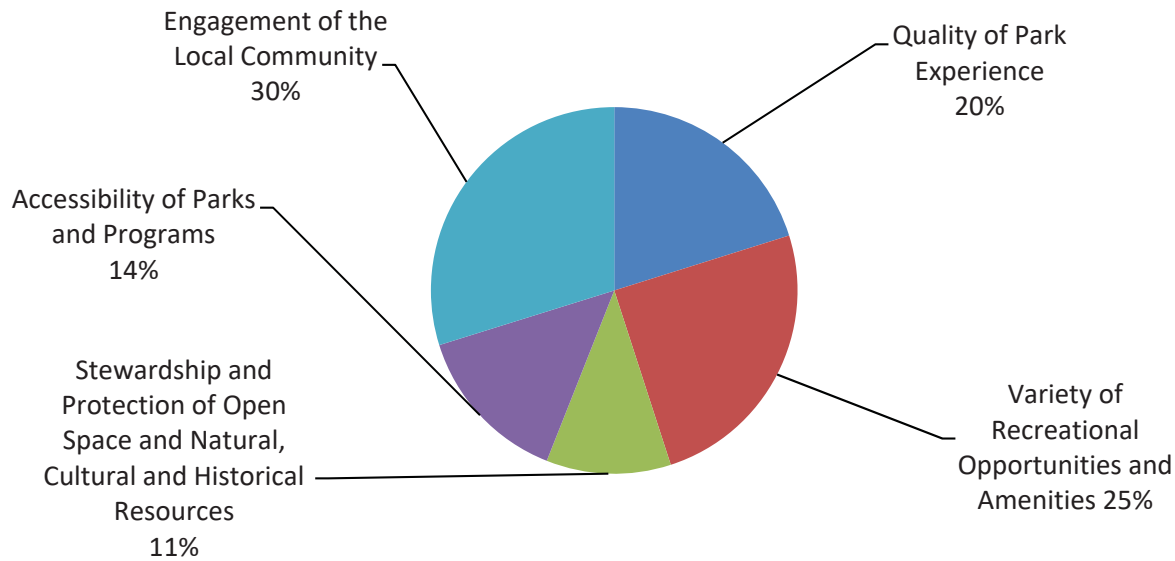
VARIETY OF RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND AMENITIES

The parks system needs to provide adequate and appropriate opportunities for both active and passive recreation, and common outdoor spaces and facilities for group activities. Community members expressed a need for a variety of specific activities and new facilities they wished to see within the parks system. These facilities and uses included *sports facilities, trails, community centers, natural open areas, places to take dogs, additional amenities for youth*, and other types of parks uses. The range of suggestions reflects the community's diverse needs and their vision for what a healthy lifestyle and improved quality of life mean to them.

STEWARDSHIP AND PROTECTION OF OPEN SPACE AND NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Santa Cruz County residents feel strongly about the importance of protecting the natural environment and cultural and historical resources. Particularly, in the parks system, there is a need to *preserve natural open space* and to balance the development of recreational facilities with the protection of the environment. There also is a need to improve the *management* of natural areas and to restore and enhance natural habitats within the parks system. There is a strong desire to preserve our historical and cultural buildings, sites, landscapes and resources.

Figure 11: Percent of topics raised in comments during public meetings



ACCESSIBILITY OF PARKS AND PROGRAMS
 People find accessibility of parks and programs to all people and geographic areas in the county to be a key need. Many comments related to increasing *equity in park and program distribution* and access. Another consistent topic is *universal access* to facilities for people with various types of abilities. Improving *connections* between and to parks to make them more accessible to local neighborhoods is another key need.

ENGAGEMENT OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY
 Locals expressed a desire for more opportunities to engage with and learn about the Parks Department, the parks system and parks programs. The department needs to increase *outreach* about offerings, and especially outreach to *underrepresented communities*. People would like to see more programs, events and volunteer opportunities in the parks and to have better and more accessible information about these opportunities. This would increase individuals' and the community's connection to the parks system. Educational opportunities and particularly *interpretive programs* and facilities are important throughout the parks system.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES
 There are specific needs and unique gaps in the park network in each part of the county, and in each of the five meetings, topics that were most important to participants varied. Prominent themes by region are summarized in more detail in Appendix 2.



Greyhound Rock County Park

Table 2: Key Needs Summary


THEME: QUALITY OF PARK EXPERIENCE

PROMINENT TOPICS:

- Safety of park users
- Cleanliness of park restrooms and facilities
- Local stewardship of parks
- Updating and maintaining aging park infrastructure
- Adequate and sustainable funding for parks system
- Working with other park agencies to provide consistent facilities, hours and regulations

OTHER FREQUENT COMMENTS:

- Keeping park facilities operational
- Upgrading park facilities to accommodate increases in use
- Enforcing park rules
- Appropriate resources for maintenance and operations of existing facilities
- Consistent park funds that are not significantly reduced in times of economic downturn such as the recession of 2008



Restroom and Concession Building at Polo Grounds County Park in Aptos

THEME: VARIETY OF RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND AMENITIES

PROMINENT TOPICS:

- Providing a variety of types of community-serving park amenities
- Adapting to provide opportunities for current and future trends in recreation
- Opportunities for active and healthy lifestyles
- Adding new uses and improvements to existing park properties
- Opportunities for people to access open spaces and natural landscapes in the parks system
- Partnering with other parks agencies to provide new facilities



Shared Pickleball, Tennis and Basketball Courts at Brommer County Park in Live Oak

OTHER FREQUENT COMMENTS:

- Additional sports facilities such as soccer, baseball and softball fields, and basketball, tennis and pickleball courts
- Additional pool facilities and programs in underserved areas
- Additional trail connections for all types of trail users
- Spaces to take dogs
- Community centers for programs and events
- Youth facilities such as bike jumps and pump tracks, skate parks, adventure courses and climbing walls
- Joint use agreements with schools and other agencies to provide public access to park-like facilities during off hours

Table 2: Key Needs Summary (Continued)


THEME:
STEWARDSHIP AND PROTECTION OF OPEN SPACE AND NATURAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

PROMINENT TOPICS:

- Balancing the development of recreational facilities with protection and enhancement of natural, cultural and historical resources
- Functional habitat for native flora and fauna
- Protecting sensitive biological communities
- Protecting natural open spaces in parks
- Working with other park agencies to provide consistent facilities, hours and regulations


OTHER FREQUENT COMMENTS:

- Connectivity between open spaces and natural areas to maximize benefits to wildlife
- Conserving long-term viability of the variety of ecosystems within the county
- Allowing natural biological processes to occur and biological systems to adapt to future conditions



Pinto Lake Regional County Park in Watsonville

THEME:
ACCESSIBILITY OF PARKS AND PROGRAMS



Future Site of LEO's Haven, an Inclusive Playground at Chanticleer County Park

PROMINENT TOPICS:

- Equitable opportunities for access to parks and programs for all county residents and people with varying economic resources
- Universal accessibility to built infrastructure for people of all abilities
- Additional neighborhood parks within walking distance of people's homes, especially in underserved areas
- Increasing youth programs and bringing them to new locations

OTHER FREQUENT COMMENTS:

- Safe pedestrian and bicycle routes to access parks
- Public transportation to parks and programs
- Signs and materials in both English and Spanish
- Shuttle services or other forms of transportation to people who need it to access parks and programs


THEME:
ENGAGEMENT OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

PROMINENT TOPICS:

- Outreach to all demographics, particularly underrepresented communities
- More volunteer opportunities
- Additional programs and events
- Partnering with community organizations and local cities
- Educational opportunities

OTHER FREQUENT COMMENTS:

- Relevant publicity of parks, programs and events
- Coordination with school districts in publicizing parks and programs
- Events for families with activities for multiple age groups
- Interpretive programs
- Working with neighbors and being respectful to local residents



Strategic Plan Community Meeting in Watsonville