



Future City

RECREATION AND AMENITIES

Parks, open space, and recreation facilities are an essential part of a healthy and sustainable community, offering relaxation and exercise outside of the home and work, and beyond school activities. Much like streets, utilities, and police and fire protection, parks are integral parts of any municipality – and often among the public services most valued by residents.

An ongoing quality of life focus for Victoria dates back to and reflects the influential legacy of the City's Comprehensive Plan of 2000. The years since have brought many successes and enhancements in recreational, cultural, and other leisure opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy. Nonetheless, some fundamentals still need continued attention, including maintaining and upgrading existing parks while also increasing the quantity and quality of developed, accessible recreational acreage across the community, especially in underserved areas.

Also prominent in the process of preparing this updated Comprehensive Plan was the often expressed desire to share Victoria's abundant history and local assets with more Texans and other visitors. Key to success in this arena, as recognized by those charged with luring more tourists to "Explore Victoria," is overcoming the lack of an instantly identifiable landmark or image to associate with the area. While Victoria has much to offer once visitors arrive, an essential challenge is how to raise Victoria's profile amid a state saturated with established destinations known for their culinary, natural, and historical points of interest.

KEY ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Five key issues and considerations related to Recreation and Amenities were identified through the comprehensive planning process and should be addressed as the City's associated vision, goals, and strategic action priorities for the coming years are pursued.

1. The need to invest in upgrades to existing parks while also providing for future park needs in newly-developing areas.

- Proceed cautiously with any potential park system expansion in the immediate future given the extent of needs within the current system – and look to the recent and ongoing rehabilitation of Riverside Park as a prime example of the consequences of letting existing assets fall victim to deferred maintenance.
- In planning for park upgrades, Parks and Recreation Department leadership noted the need to look beyond just City-owned park sites to their context in terms of the surrounding neighborhoods and routes that lead to and from public parks (e.g., adequacy and quality of access, landscaping/streetscapes, wayfinding signage, etc.).



2. Ensuring adequate parkland in appropriate locations to meet the needs of areas projected to gain additional housing and population in the future.

- It is essential that the City of Victoria implement a formal procedure for acquiring public parkland with new development and/or collecting fee-in-lieu payments to fund park acquisition or development.
- Action is needed as inadequate parkland acquisition and development in past decades is evident in northwest Victoria and other underserved areas, especially at the larger "Community Park" scale.
- A parkland dedication/fee system is market driven in that it recognizes that new development is what generates new demand for additional City parkland and recreation services, so existing residents and taxpayers should not have to bear the entire burden to expand the park "supply."
- The City's Planning Commission, during the subdivision approval process, should have some involvement in park location considerations given Commissioners' knowledge of the community and awareness of local development trends – especially to address parkland deficiencies on the north and northwest sides.

3. Enhancing recreational access to the Guadalupe River corridor, especially within Riverside Park.

- River bank clearing within Riverside Park and the initiation of a kayak rental service at the park have been well received enhancements implemented recently and should be continued as well as additional possibilities explored.
- The City should explore public park possibilities in the area north of Riverside Park along the east bank of the Guadalupe River, which is constrained for development by floodplain and where additional water features are also located near the river.

4. Responding to growing emphasis on healthy living habits, opportunities, and resources in Victoria as in many other Texas and U.S. communities.

- Recognize that in some areas – especially where public parkland is partly or entirely within floodplain – sizable, quality, well-maintained open space for various recreational pursuits is all that is needed versus any significant facilities, amenities or programming.
- In areas where potential off-street trail alignments are not available or viable, a “complete streets” approach to roadway design (especially for major reconstruction of older streets in already developed areas) would ensure that residents can walk or bike: (a) along thoroughfares with good separation from vehicular traffic, (b) along roadways that offer continuity and connectivity to nearby destinations, and (c) in a pleasing setting when good streetscape design is also incorporated.

5. Building consensus on how best to position Victoria as a destination for visitors and “overnighters” amid a broader array of Coastal Bend tourism offerings.

- Part of the context for this key issue is adjusted mechanisms for tourism promotion in recent years.
- The spike in local hotel construction in recent years has already increased the pool of “overnighters” providing more opportunities to motivate return leisure visits by those in Victoria on business or just passing through.
- Recognize differences of opinion within the community regarding Victoria’s true tourism potential and the level of resources to put toward its promotion (and toward certain enhancements such as further significant downtown improvements).

FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The Recreation and Amenities framework for action is organized in three tiers: Vision statements, Goals, and Strategic Action

Priorities. These topics are intended to mesh with and support the other aspects of this Comprehensive Plan. The Strategic Action Priorities convey tangible actions that will, in the long run, lead to achievement of the Goals in line with the Vision.



VISION STATEMENTS

- V1:** Victoria has improved park facilities and expanded recreational opportunities.
- V2:** Victoria is a vibrant, attractive, well preserved historic, cultural, and entertainment center.
- V3:** Victoria’s historic buildings and resources are preserved and enhanced.

GOALS

1. Revitalized existing parks.
2. Recreational opportunities that attract tourism.
3. An adequate quantity and equal distribution of parks, open space, and recreation facilities.
4. Natural greenbelts developed with trail systems to provide pedestrian and biking linkages for neighborhoods, schools, parks, and other destinations.
5. Additional recreational opportunities.
6. Adequate convention center/arena capacity to meet demand for additional public meeting space and activities.

- 7. Downtown Victoria revitalized as a balanced work, housing, cultural, and entertainment center – a place where there is a variety of day-to-day activity.

STRATEGIC ACTION PRIORITIES

In the background of the action priorities below is recognition that an update of the City’s Parks Master Plan is expected to follow at some point after this updated Comprehensive Plan. Periodic city-wide park plan updates provide an opportunity to factor in shifting trends in the utilization of parks and recreation facilities and evolving community priorities (e.g., splash pads, dog parks, etc.). Additionally, as in many other communities facing resource limitations, a fundamental policy decision is needed as to whether the future envisioned park system should focus on a set of larger Community and/ or Regional parks or aim for more Neighborhood and/or Pocket level parks in most areas.

>> “Parks to Standard” investments in existing parks.

- Just as with the City’s other physical assets and “infrastructure,” recognize the need for – and commit to – sustained operations and maintenance funding for Victoria’s established parks and trails to ensure that they can be maintained at a quality level that meets resident and visitor expectations.
- Acknowledge and work to address residents’ desire for lighted paths while highlighting the costs of lighting installation.
- Public desire for restrooms in parks, as indicated in surveys, is another cost factor amid competing priorities for limited funding.
- Plan and design all potential park improvements with appreciation for expected utilization (e.g., a trend toward much shorter-duration park visitation by some users for specific recreational purposes, particular interests of college students, etc.).
- Install splash pads at more parks given the popularity of this water amenity, plus the cost and maintenance advantages for the City relative to public pools.

- Implement beautification efforts in all existing parks.
- Document and highlight demonstrated, tangible improvements to Victoria’s current park assets as an essential factor in securing additional external funding through grant programs administered by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.
- Noteworthy for the City is that all of its park playgrounds are already compliant with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards.
- Remain mindful of the range of responsibilities imposed on the City’s Parks and Recreation Department beyond just basic park and recreation facility operations and maintenance to ensure the Department can achieve its core missions.



>> Continued focus on Riverside Park rejuvenation as Victoria’s signature park for residents and visitors.

- Include in the next Parks Master Plan update (or as a supplemental effort) a special focus on the near- and long-term possibilities for maintaining and enhancing Riverside Park as a community treasure with a wide array of offerings for both residents and visitors to Victoria.
- Recognize Riverside Park’s function as a regional park to which most users drive and park, while some residents closer by can bike or walk.

>> Parkland dedication/fee-in-lieu mechanism to secure acreage for new public parks in conjunction with new development.

- Some typical reasons why required parkland dedication works for so many communities include:
 - Public acquisition of new parkland occurs in conjunction with the very residential development that will generate the demand for new recreational space.
 - It is highly efficient to plan for public park sites when designing new residential neighborhoods to ensure that the park will be of adequate size, in a convenient and accessible location, and with characteristics that will make it suitable for cost-effective park development and ongoing maintenance.
 - If the City cannot rely on mandatory dedication to ensure that new residential areas will have park space, then several scenarios can result when land is not dedicated:
 - » the City must scramble to find available sites in the area that are appropriately situated and will be suitable for park development and use;
 - » the City will be looking to purchase property on its own at a time when development pressure already exists in the subject area, resulting in higher land costs to the City and its taxpayers; and/or
 - » residents in the newly developed area may have to go without a neighborhood park for some time if the City cannot secure an appropriate site or does not have the resources for both acquiring and developing a new park site in the near term.

A well-established dedication procedure, with associated standards for park size and location, provides predictability for development applicants, the City, and residents and taxpayers. It also ensures a “level playing field” for all applicants versus an approach that relies on case-by-case negotiation, especially where the City has little leverage to require that community expectations and standards

for public parkland be met consistently by every new development.

Key considerations when implementing requirements for parkland dedication include:

- Any ordinance provisions drafted and ultimately adopted in Victoria can draw from lessons learned in numerous other Texas cities that have many years of experience with parkland dedication. But all such requirements must be tailored to the local situation to ensure they are realistic and not onerous.
- Land suitability standards should be included to ensure that the City is not presented with “leftover” pieces for dedication that are inappropriate for practical and cost-effective park development, public use, and/or maintenance based on their relative inaccessibility, topography/slope, drainage conditions, etc.
- ETJ areas should be included in the parkland dedication system. This ensures that any relatively dense residential subdivisions outside the City limits, especially in areas likely to be annexed into the City within some reasonable timeframe, will provide for public parkland from the start rather than this service having to be addressed after the fact. Part of the rationale is to ensure that developments outside the City limits do not have particular advantages over in-City developments.
- A fee-in-lieu option should be included, as is widely used by other cities, to enable payment of a fee by the development applicant instead of actual land dedication, subject to certain criteria. The fee option also gives the City flexibility in planning for future land acquisition and park improvements.
- A series of park planning and improvement zones will need to be delineated, and these can be determined through and incorporated into the next Parks Master Plan

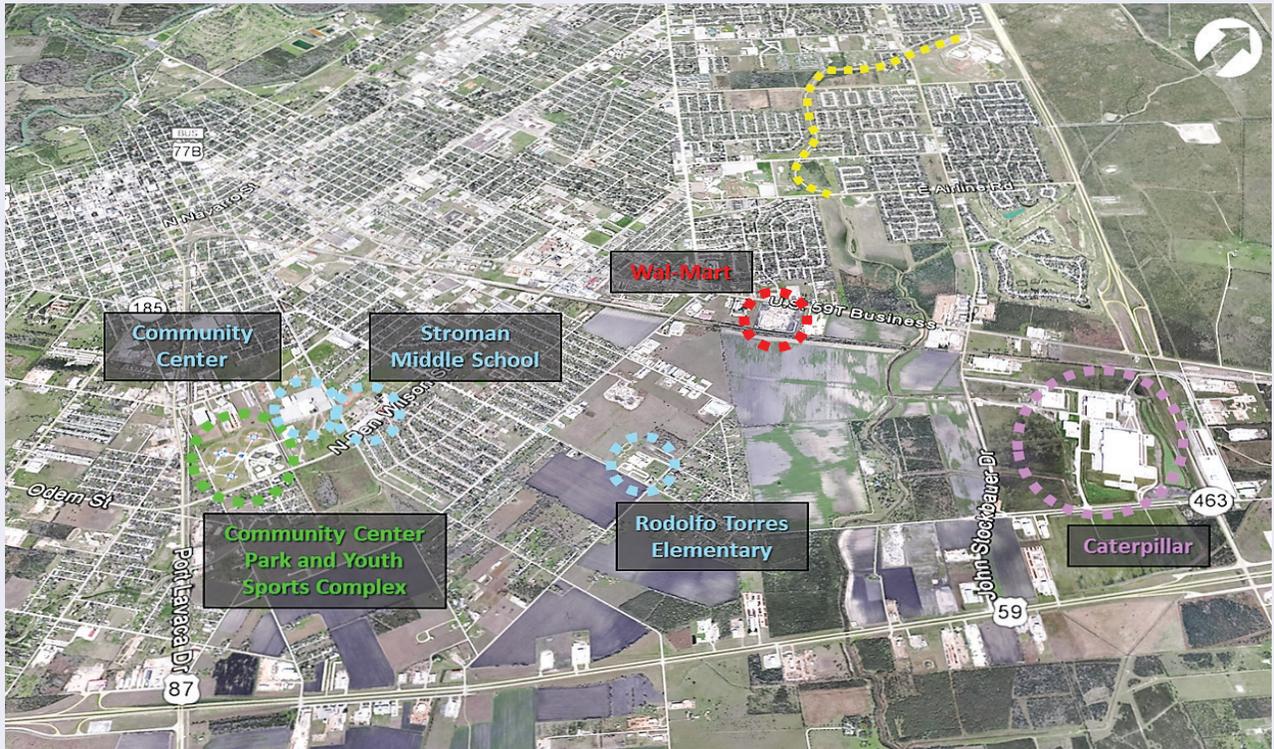
update. This is because one principle of the fee-in-lieu approach is that fee revenue generated in a particular area should be escrowed and dedicated to finance improvements that benefit new development in that same area (versus fee revenue being spent for improvements elsewhere in the community).

- Elected officials in too many cities with parkland dedication requirements defer increases in local park fees due to economic or political considerations. As a result, the fees do not keep up with increasing land costs over time, as well as the rising costs of parkland development and improvements. This leaves their cities with inadequate revenue to

accomplish planned improvements and keep pace with the added demands of new development. Some Texas ordinances include an automatic escalator clause for this reason, tied to the local rate of inflation or other measurable indicators.

- Provisions for linear/corridor land dedications can be included to support trail network expansion in conjunction with new development, as well as a mechanism for fees to help finance trail improvements.
 - Through the next Parks Master Plan update, prioritize the establishment of specific local acreage benchmarks for parkland relative to population, as well as for specific park classifications.

DESTINATIONS FOR POTENTIAL LONE TREE CREEK TRAIL EXTENSION



This illustration highlights destinations that could be made more accessible to pedestrians and cyclists through a potential southward extension of the existing Lone Tree Creek Trail (yellow dash), including public parks (green) and facilities (blue), retail (red), and employment locations.

SOURCE: Kendig Keast Collaborative

>> Phased trail network expansion.

- Design and construct a southward extension of Lone Tree Creek Trail, utilizing the creek/drainage corridor and associated easements where possible. More detailed planning should assess the feasibility of an eventual route to Community Center Park and the Youth Sports Complex. A key focus will be a workable and safe crossing point (and design) at Houston Highway/Business US 59 to maintain trail continuity. If viable, this extension could pass near industrial park areas (offering an amenity to workers), Rodolfo Torres Elementary School, and Stroman Middle School, as well as various residential neighborhoods along the way.
- As with the Lone Tree Creek Trail extension, emphasize continuity of key trails and avoid development of scattered, shorter segments across the community (i.e., develop “trunk” trails within an overall trail network similar to major water/sewer lines). Essential to the continuity of longer-distance routes is to recognize that some connections along the way will not be fully improved trail sections. Instead, continuity is achieved via sidewalks, marked bike lanes along streets, and other means for pedestrians and/or cyclists to continue their trek in a safe manner.
- Explore other potential alignments for primary-level trails, as well as “feeder” and loop trail opportunities along the “trunk” routes.
- Possible connections to a future community-wide trail network should be emphasized in the design of new residential development, especially those that incorporate internal paths for residents, as well as the design of school campuses and other public facilities. Targeted projects could help to make, and pay for, these connections.
- Ensure that all new “trails” in Victoria are designed with at least an eight-foot minimum surface width – and preferably 10 feet or more where feasible and where shared use by strollers, runners, skaters,

and cyclists is intended. Attractive landscaping and pedestrian-level lighting are other key design priorities. A direct link should also be made to the end of any nearby residential cul-de-sac or stub-out street for ease of resident access (which makes the trail accessible “close to home” and with less need for trailhead locations and parking).

- Ensure careful design attention to any trail crossings of streets to ensure high visibility of trail users and clear demarcation of crosswalks.
- As a potential alternative to “one-size-fits-all” sidewalk requirements for new residential subdivisions, consider a more flexible approach – without the need for a waiver/exception procedure – that would allow provision of off-street trails in lieu of sidewalks where appropriate, such as in areas with a more suburban character and less pedestrian activity. Off-street trails can actually be safer, more convenient, and provide more direct routes compared to road-side sidewalks, as well as being situated in a more appealing setting than adjacent to roadways. Additionally, the total extent of internal trails can be less, in linear feet, than if sidewalks are required along all local neighborhood streets. This can lead to cost savings that could help keep house prices lower or go toward other site amenities.

>> Better internal marketing to Victoria residents of local entertainment/leisure, culture, and recreation opportunities.

- Continue the focus on more and better community events, plus internal and external promotion through the Victoria Convention and Visitors Bureau (“Explore Victoria”) and other communication outlets.
- Continue to expand on local wayfinding signage and walking/biking/driving tours to promote awareness of points of interest among existing and new residents, as well as visitors (including to point out more local destinations for those interested in heritage tourism).

- Ensure effective marketing of outdoor recreation opportunities in and around Victoria given numerous mentions of its appeal to young adults.
- When attendees at a public workshop for this Comprehensive Plan were asked to identify locations on a city map “where you like to go for fun or leisure activities,” Riverside Park was most popular by far, followed by downtown, and then Victoria Mall in a distant third place. Therefore, continue to support and promote these local draws, including as part of welcoming efforts for new Victoria residents.

OTHER ACTIONS

Along with the short list of Strategic Action Priorities outlined above, this section captures other potential action items discussed through the long-range planning process. These items are compiled in five categories that are the main ways Comprehensive Plans are implemented:

- (1) Capital Investments
- (2) Programs and Initiatives
- (3) Regulations and Standards
- (4) Partnerships and Coordination
- (5) Targeted Planning/Studies



Capital Investments

- A. Pursue the development of a sports complex that can be used to host tournaments, draw overnight stays, and elevate sports tourism.
- B. Locate new parks in underserved areas of the city, specifically the northwest sector.



Programs and Initiatives

- A. Remain vigilant for opportunities to acquire vacant or under-utilized sites in older neighborhoods that are appropriate (in terms of location, size, access, etc.) for beneficial public uses, especially in conjunction with other community partners. However, also remain mindful of the potential management and maintenance implications for the City’s Parks and Recreation Department.



- B. Consistent with Explore Victoria’s mission to “sell, market, and promote Victoria as a premiere meetings, sports, and leisure destination,” continue to target meeting planners to bring their events to the area; expand sports tournament activity locally; and market “specific, genuine travel experiences in Victoria” to residents in the nearby large cities of Houston, Austin, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi.
- C. Continue to market Victoria to key demographics such as culinary, nature, and history enthusiasts within a two-hour drive market.
- D. Continue to raise Victoria’s profile as a meeting and sports host at state and regional travel shows.
- E. Market the downtown area as a tourism destination.
- F. Develop and implement educational programs on littering that target school children.

Regulations and Standards

- A. Develop and implement more stringent site development standards along major transportation corridors and “gateway” entrances to the city.
- B. Adopt a tree preservation ordinance.

Partnerships and Coordination

- A. Continue to pursue joint use, programming, and/or cost-sharing arrangements between the City and Victoria ISD, the University of Houston-Victoria, and/or Victoria College, either through formal inter-agency agreements or less formal means, where and when appropriate.

- B. Continue to implement the five-year strategic plan for tourism development and promotion developed by Explore Victoria through its Victoria Tourism Partnership, building on a recent wave of venue and hotel development and upgrades in the community.
- C. Build partnerships and develop cooperative efforts among public and private sector stakeholders to further the goals of historic preservation.
- D. Prepare an application to become a Certified Local Government through the Texas Historical Commission.

Targeted Planning/Studies

- A. Future updates to the City's Parks Master Plan should prioritize park types to be acquired and developed in underserved areas within the community.
- B. Identify opportunities to cluster multiple public functions with parks and recreation facilities.
- C. Facilitate a cooperative effort involving the City, County, interested citizens, Parks Commission, and other agencies/organizations to develop a Heritage Park plan.
- D. Update the hike and bike master plan to be consistent with the goals and direction of the Comprehensive Plan.

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