



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2022 SOLON PARKS AND RECREATION MASTER PLAN

December 19, 2022





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NEED FOR A PLAN

Situated at the southeastern edge of Cuyahoga County, Solon has experienced steady population growth in the last 20 years. While Solon has a quality existing park system and a myriad of agencies that provide a variety of space/programming, the quantity and quality of parks required to sustain the community has become evident.

This 2022 *Solon Parks and Recreation Master Plan* will be critical to the city's future as it clarifies the department's own responsibilities and needs, as well as what partnerships can be leveraged to best deliver parks, facilities, and recreational choices to the citizens. Meant to instill focus, establish priorities, and inspire action over the next 5 to 10 years, this Master Plan was produced with guidance from an active steering committee appointed by city leadership. It is supported by robust data collection, including hours of in-person engagement, and affirms the special potential that the Solon Recreation Department has to be the community's primary provider of recreation facilities and experiences.

Changing community needs, development goals, and operational feasibility are all reasons enough for producing a future-forward plan. As civic spaces, parks act as operational hubs for addressing chronic issues like physical inactivity and poor health. Having even a simple connection to nature can relieve stress, improve mental health, and provide opportunities for interpersonal interaction.¹ Parks are part of hyper-local civic infrastructure (so-called "third-spaces"²) needed now more than ever, where citizens

practice the "art of association" and do the work of knitting communities together.³

As the Covid 19 pandemic wanes, the increasing demand for outdoor and recreation spaces has remained high, adding stress to existing parks and outdoor infrastructure across the country. Agencies are adapting and finding creative funding solutions,⁴ boldly stepping into the critical work of bridging inequity, safeguarding physical and mental health, and ensuring access. This type of flexibility exemplifies the substance of the recommendations in this Master Plan. While it is impossible to decipher a single "correct" path into the post-pandemic future, this plan underscores the need for responsive action, elevated experiences, and reinforced civic infrastructure. This Master Plan maps the beginning of multi-dimensional recovery where parks and recreation are not only important but essential for building a stronger, more vibrant community in Solon.⁵

EXISTING CONDITIONS OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN SOLON

Due to the nature of the existing park system in Solon, it is necessary to classify the parks according to their functions. A park system should be evaluated as a composite of recreation areas with each meeting a particular public need; the system should provide a combination of smaller Neighborhood Parks, larger Community Parks, Special Use Parks, and Natural Areas. For all residents, whatever their

¹ National Recreation and Park Association, "Health and Wellness," <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/Three-Pillars/health-wellness/>, (March 30, 2022).

² Redefining Infrastructure & Public Space. Reimagining the Civic Commons. 2021. <https://medium.com/reimagining-the-civic-commons/redefining-infrastructure-and-public-space-2e311edfde68>

³ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020)

⁴ McCormick, Kathleen. Room to Roam: The Pandemic Has Underscored the Need for More Urban Parks; So What Comes Next? Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. <https://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/articles/2020-10-room-roam-pandemic-urban-parks-what-comes-next>. (October 7, 2020). Accessed November 2020.

⁵ Marquis, Bridget. Infrastructure That Does More: Investing in Public Spaces for a Resilient America. Strong Towns. https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/11/23/infrastructure-that-does-more-investing-in-public-spaces-for-a-resilient-america?fbclid=IwAR2Aa80XGjUpGNv3iblDHC-W40ic9L9QjnXvix_kgFSoCtEoi5vihqJ0bDg (November 24, 2020). Accessed December 4, 2020

background, parks help provide a variety of passive and active outdoor recreational opportunities. Proximity to these valuable resources invariably improves community health and wellness, not to mention create more adaptable, robust local economies.⁶

The City of Solon oversees over 721 acres of parkland and nine parks, including two Neighborhood Parks (Another is provided by Liberty Hill HOA), three Community Parks, four Special Use Parks, and six natural Open Spaces. Because this plan is concerned with community access overall and demand for parks and recreation in general, it is important to also consider Cleveland Metroparks and Solon City Schools offer land and amenities at several properties. Several private organizations and HOAs also offer open space and recreational facilities.

In recognizing the need for a future-focused plan, the City Council and Recreation Department staff decided a comprehensive planning process should be completed to best align services with community demand. The city appointed a steering committee to support and help guide the planning process. This *2022 Solon Parks and Recreation Master Plan* is the culmination of an engaged and informed planning process. Its 5- to 10-year scope will provide critical guidance for parks, recreation, culture, and community connection as Solon moves forward into the future.

Demographic and Benchmarking Analysis

A strong, proactive approach to department operations requires knowledge and understanding of community demographics. The findings of this Master Plan (Chapter 2) show 1) the population has increased by over 10% over the last 20 years and with continued growth planned; 2) the household size has reduced from 2.89 in 2000 to 2.74 in 2021; 3) the senior population (65+) as a percentage has increased from 10.7% in 2000 to 18.7% in 2021 and is expected to grow to 21.1% by 2026; the percentage of children in the household has decreased considerably; and 4) diversity of the population has greatly increased.

The analysis of existing conditions includes a benchmark comparison to 31 similar agencies using the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Park Metrics database. The benchmarking shows the city has a much higher amount of park land per 1,000 people, but much lower percent of that land is developed due to the large amount of undeveloped open space owned by the city. The benchmarking also shows that residents have much lower service ratios (facilities per 10,000 population) for several amenities including playgrounds, basketball courts, pickleball courts, diamond fields, rectangular fields, and skateparks,

These improvements will be especially critical as post-pandemic shifts in demand for parks and open space adds to stresses on existing resources.

Service Area Analysis (Gaps)

Maps of service areas for various parks and facilities were used to identify "Service Gaps" or underserved areas within Solon. Maps were also created to illustrate levels of access to various park categories and facilities. The analysis indicated that a very small percentage of Solon residents are within walking distance of a park, with the largest concentration of walking access near Community Park. The city also has an existing trail system and plans for the Norfolk Southern Rail Trail to connect Cleveland to Youngstown and beyond. However, gaps in trail linkages can be found throughout the city.

A CITIZEN DRIVEN PLAN

To make informed decisions moving forward, Solon needs meaningful public input in addition to robust statistical and performance analysis. Including resident participation in the planning process gives actual park users a means to share their individual needs, perceptions, concerns, and desires for the park system they themselves use. This Master Plan process used several methods to connect with the community.

As the city begins to implement this plan, sustained efforts will be necessary to continuously solicit public feedback about development projects; allowing direct participation whenever possible will ensure the community feels heard and has pride in their parks. Engagement efforts should be flexible and creative, utilizing tools like on-site feedback (e.g., semi-permanent chalk or bulletin boards) and interactive online platforms.

The summary below indicates the various ways the public was involved throughout this Master Plan process.

Engagement Summary

- Public workshop open house
 - Booth at Home Days
 - Stakeholder discussions
 - Web-based survey
1. A public workshop open house held on July 21, 2022 and a booth at Home Days on July 30 allowed attendees to learn more about the Master Plan and provide input on three general topics – "Parks and Facilities," "Trails and Natural Areas," and "Programs and Events."
 2. Meetings with stakeholder groups (July 2022) representing:
 - Solon Stampede (Boys Baseball)
 - Solon Elite (Girls Softball)
 - Community Group (community members who use Solon facilities)
 - Solon Lightning (Girls Soccer)
 - Solon Soccer Club (Boys Soccer)
 - Solon High School Soccer Parents

⁶ Berg, Nate. Great Parks Don't Just Have Rec. Space: They Create Jobs. 2021. Fast Company. https://www.fastcompany.com/90624316/great-parks-dont-just-have-rec-space-they-create-jobs?mc_cid=105f89bd93&mc_eid=6c9b6b28d4

- Solon City Council
 - Solon Seniors
 - Solon City Staff
3. A Web survey – available in Spring 2022 and powered by Survey Monkey – completed by 1,449 respondents (95% residents of Solon, 5% from another area)

WHAT SOLON RESIDENTS SAID

Information gathered from these public input methods was used to identify the needs of Solon residents. A brief summary of the findings is provided below.

Stakeholder Groups

Discussions spanned a diversity of issues:

- Upgraded fields & courts
 - Turf fields
 - Upgraded dugouts
 - Improved or additional lighting
 - Upgraded game courts
 - Improved restrooms
 - Improve grading at all athletic fields
 - Additional bleachers and seating
- Upgraded support amenities
 - ADA accessible features
 - Improved restrooms
 - Additional/improved picnic shelters (include lighting, electrical hook up)
 - Repaired sidewalks, trails, and parking areas
 - Wifi available at parks (modern technology)
- New facilities
 - Additional restrooms at athletic fields
 - Indoor sports facility
 - Splash pad
 - Disc golf courses
 - Skate parks/pump tracks
 - Soccer fields
 - Tournament level athletic fields
 - Amphitheater
- Improved operations
 - Better reservation system for athletic fields/ programs
 - Partnerships with local organizations
 - Improved advertising
 - Better maintenance

- Additional programming
 - Camps hosted at fields
 - Additional community events (arts festivals, concerts, etc)

Survey Results

Visitation

According to the Web and Handout Survey, 98% of residents who completed the survey visited a park in Solon at some point in the past two years; 57% of these residents visited parks 20 or more times. Solon Community Park (84%) and Solon Community Center (81%) were the top two most visited facilities by households, with Metroparks (74%) coming in third (see Chapter 4).

Physical Condition

According to the Survey, 12% of households rated the facilities condition as excellent, 47% as good, with 29% rating them as fair.

Overall, 59% of households see the condition of Solon's facilities as either excellent or good, indicating a desire for improvement.

Existing Facilities Improvements Desired

Revitalization/Upgrades to Existing (Top 5)

1. Swimming Pools (indoor)
2. Swimming Pools/Aquatic Centers (outdoor)
3. Community/Recreation Centers
4. Fields – Baseball/Softball Diamonds
5. Large Community Parks

New Development of Facilities (Top 5)

1. Spraygrounds/Splash Pads
2. Stage or Amphitheater (outdoor)
3. Skate Parks
4. Disc Golf Courses
5. Trails – Mountain Biking

Both Upgrades to Existing and New Development (Top 5)

1. Trails – Multiuse (paved)
2. Trails – Walking/Hiking
3. Playgrounds
4. Natural Areas/Nature Parks
5. Basketball Courts (outdoor)

These preferences point first to the need for on-site amenities that improve comfort at the parks, as well as a popular desire for trails and walkable connectivity across the community and systemwide.

Most Important Facilities (Sum of Top 4 Choices)

1. Walking & hiking trails – 70%
2. Community Recreation Centers - 65%
3. Natural Areas/nature parks – 62%
4. Outdoor Pools and Aquatic Centers – 57%
5. Paved trails – 53%
6. Large Community Park - 53%

The results of the most important actions the city should take to improve parks and recreation include:

1. **Bike and pedestrian trails and connectivity**
2. **Improve existing facilities**
2. **Protect natural areas and resources**
3. **Maintain city sponsored programs and events**
4. **Develop splash pads**

And finally, respondents shared their level of support for a range of improvements and potential development covered in the survey. **Ninety-six percent (96%) of households indicated support for new trail development, and about 85% supported upgrades to existing facilities and acquisition of open space.**

Motivation to Use Parks and Facilities

Forty-nine percent (49%) of households said the top item that would encourage them to use facilities and programs more was improvement to existing facilities.

Engagement Key Findings

Results indicate that generally the Solon community desires:

- Connectivity and trails, including walking, hiking, and biking
- Upgrades to existing parks and facilities
- New park features (e.g., pickleball, disc golf, dog park, splash pad)
- Preservation of natural areas
- Additional programming (e.g., concerts/live performances, outdoor movies, fitness, adult athletics, nature)
- Upgraded playgrounds
- Support amenities (e.g., restrooms, wayfinding, shade, & seating)
- Strategic & collaborative marketing and promotion

VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES FOR PARKS AND RECREATION IN SOLON

Solon and the steering committee, with support from the planning team, worked to craft a strategic plan. This facet of the document solidifies the daily purpose of the agency, its guiding values, and the long-term view of success.

Vision

Solon's parks, programs, and facilities are an exceptional and interconnected system that engages the entire community and fosters a sense of pride

Mission

Build community and enrich life through parks, programs, and play

Values

Community – Connecting the community through play, nature, and shared experiences

Engagement – Continuous community consultation for the future of parks and recreation

Inclusivity – Creating accessible spaces and programs for all

Innovative – Encouraging exploration through diverse recreational opportunities

Excellence – Offering exceptional parks, facilities, and programs

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The following goals and objectives will guide the operations, improvements, and services in parks and recreation in Solon over the next 5-10 years.

Goal 1: Exceptional Parks

Create destination parks and facilities

Objective 1.1 – **Places**: Provide state of the art facilities that serve both the community and the region

Objective 1.2 – **Amenities**: Pursue innovative development and strategic replacement of structures and support features at all parks

Objective 1.3 – **Stewardship**: Employ sustainable practices to ensure continued community access to nature and high-quality facilities

Goal 2: Community Pride

Build physical and social connections throughout the entire community

Objective 2.1 – **Gathering**: Offer recurring accessible and inviting opportunities for community interaction

Objective 2.2 – **Connecting**: Improve physical connections to parks, schools, and popular destinations

Objective 2.3 – **Engaging**: Continuously gauge community needs and promote opportunities to engage with stakeholders

Goal 3: Diverse Experiences

Provide a wide array of recreational opportunities that inspire well-being for all

Objective 3.1 – **Events:** Collaborate to provide possibilities for interaction, fun, & learning

Objective 3.2 – **Wellness:** Encourage multi-generational exploration & growth through diverse physical activities and educational opportunities based on community input

Objective 3.3 – **Partnerships:** Accommodate local organizations to optimize services and programs

Goal 4: Responsible Operations

Employ strong leadership using efficient management, exceptional customer service, sustainable operations, and productive partnerships

Objective 4.1 – **Structure:** Encourage an engaged workforce of valued staff with a culture of innovation

Objective 4.2 – **Operations:** Implement clear performance standards and training practices for quality and flexibility

Objective 4.3 – **Funding:** Explore creative operational practices and funding strategies to improve effectiveness of investment

SYSTEMWIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

Public input (Chapter 4) and a needs assessment (Chapter 5) together informed the recommendations for improvement outlined in Chapters 7 and 8. The following items are the top priorities determined by the Master Plan process along with regular consultation with the steering committee.

1. Redevelop Solon Community Park to become a community gathering space in which residents will take pride and provide for broader community use (See the Solon Community Park Concept Plan)
2. Add and expand upon existing support features throughout the park system such as restrooms, seating, picnic/shade structures, trees, and landscaping
3. Collaborate with other agencies to expand services and fill gaps within the city
4. Seek opportunities to add parks in underserved areas
5. Continue to add and connect trails throughout the city and connect to regional trails
6. Conduct ADA audit and improve ADA access to all existing and future facilities
7. Expand outdoor field and court capacity in response to community needs
8. Seek partnerships with school systems and health organizations to promote programming and healthy living practices
9. Ensure all decisions for new facilities and programs tie into the department's mission

10. Identify staffing, maintenance, and training requirements for existing and future amenities
11. Re-engage the Solon Community Life Committee to provide guidance and recommendations to the City Council and the Recreation Department
12. Establish partnerships with vendors, contractors, and local organizations
13. Ensure consistency in branding and communication to the public and partnered agencies
14. Consider creating a Solon Parks Foundation (an independent organization or subsidiary of another) to raise funds, recruit and organize volunteers, and promote parks
15. Continue seeking grants and apply to foundations for project funding that enhances the park system
16. 16. Institute an easy-to-understand Cost Recovery and Pricing plan for all services offered

ACTION PLAN

The 2022 Solon Parks and Recreation Master Plan concludes with an Action Plan of **82 strategies** and recommendations. These action items, which can be found in Chapter 8, detail specific actions for Solon to take in implementing this long-range master plan.

