



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Cherokee County is committed to providing a superior quality of life for our residents and to preserving the beauty, unique character, and desirability of the community where we live, work, and play. Recreation, parks, green space and trails play a vital role in maintaining a vibrant, livable community.

This plan updates and expands upon previous planning efforts. Considerable progress has been made since the last plan in 2004. The purpose is to develop a community-supported plan that directly relates to the mission of the County and provides guidance to prioritize, fund, develop and manage parks, recreation facilities, green spaces, trails and recreation programs.

The study area for the plan includes the entire County. Consideration is given to parks within individual cities as well as amenities and services provided by others such as the US Army Corps of Engineers, the YMCA and other local, not-for-profit recreation providers. While the plan is intended to guide the delivery of recreation and parks services in Cherokee County for a period of ten (10) years, it is expected that the plan will be reviewed and updated during that lifespan.

Specifically, this plan reviews the current service levels of parks and recreation services within Cherokee County, and the operations of the Cherokee Recreation and Parks Agency (CRPA). Based on this analysis; public input; a comparison to similar communities; and national, regional and local trends in recreation, it provides a set of recommendations for the county to address the recreation and parks needs of its citizens over the next ten years.

## Demographics & Growth Trends

Understanding the current demographics of Cherokee County as well as predicting the changes over the next ten years is a crucial part of the planning process. Cherokee County is experiencing significant growth, a trend that we expect to continue for some time. Using data from the US Census Bureau and the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), we estimate that Cherokee County will add nearly 70,000 residents over the next ten years, bringing the 2028 population to more than 315,000.

Incorporated cities currently make up about 29% the county's population. That number is expected to increase slightly over the next ten years with Woodstock, Canton and Holly Springs being the largest and densest cities.

While understanding where the growth will occur is important, it is also important to understand how the population will grow in planning for parks and recreation facilities and programming needs.

The county's population is aging overall, and the percentage of baby-boomers has increased. The groups with the largest population increases include 60-64 and 65-74 age groups.

Cherokee County, as a whole, is a predominately White/Caucasian community. However, minorities, including Black/African American and Hispanic populations are continuing to grow. Cherokee's population is slowly growing more ethnically diverse. This trend is expected to continue especially as it relates to the Hispanic/Latino and Black/African American communities.

Compared to national and state obesity rates, Cherokee County is very similar with 26% of the population overall reported as obese. Parks facilities and programming that are accessible to residents and allow for active participation can reduce this number.

Finally, Cherokee County is a community with a higher median household income than most surrounding counties and that of the state population. Income levels are of particular importance because they affect the community's ability to afford recreation programs and services. In communities with higher income levels, the parks agency may not need to subsidize recreation programs as much as it would if income levels were lower. This may affect how the County considers program fees and other revenues to offset programming costs. However, financial aid policies should also be included to assist low-income families with the cost of recreation services.

## Community Input

Public input is a critical component in developing a comprehensive plan for a recreation and parks agency. The citizens are the participants and users of the parks system and recreation programs. An effective plan must accurately reflect the facilities and services most desired by the citizens of the community. The recommendations provided in this master plan were driven by public input gathered through a variety of forums: input recorded in interviews with public officials and staff, public meetings, focus groups, steering committee meetings, emails submitted to the county, and an online survey provided to the residents of Cherokee County.



The public participated through the following initiatives:

- Two (2) Public Workshops (nearly 200 attendees)
- Twenty (20) One-on-one interview with stakeholders
- Four (4) Focus Group Sessions
- County-Wide Online Survey (Over 1,880 responses)

**Chapter 2 – Community Input** details findings from these outreach efforts. While some users had stronger desires for specific facilities and programs over others, the overall direction for future improvements was relatively parallel among all the groups. The public input process brought forward some consistent themes.

- Over 90% felt parks and recreation is as important to the community as other priorities such as public safety, streets, utilities and schools.
- 99% agree that parks and recreation improve physical health and fitness.
- 97% agree that parks and recreation improves the quality of life in Cherokee County.
- Over 76% of survey respondents support additional funding of \$6.00 or more for parks and recreation through property taxes.
- When asked about raising capital funds for future projects, SPLOST and increased Impact Fees were the preferred methods.
- When asked why they participate in CRPA programs, the top two reasons given by survey respondents were location of the program/facility and affordable fees for programs.
- When asked what prevents them from participating in CRPA programs, the top two reasons given were location of the program/facility and times the programs are offered.
- While the majority of Cherokee County residents currently drive to parks, up to 80% of survey respondents said they would be willing to walk up to two miles to a park while 70% said they would ride a bike some distance to a park if safe routes were available.
- More than half of survey respondents use neighborhood/HOA recreation facilities. Other providers of recreation facilities frequented by Cherokee County residents include Georgia DNR, US Army Corps of Engineers and private facilities.
- The top reason why survey respondents use other recreation facilities is proximity to their homes.
- When asked what facilities are most needed if funding is available, the top five answers were more trails; more parks; recreation centers; nature center; and canoe/kayaking facilities.



## Parks, Recreation Facilities & Greenway Needs

A detailed description of the needs assessment for the community is found in **Chapter 3 – Facilities Assessment & Recommendations**. In order to provide a recommended capital improvement plan, the planning team evaluated the current Level of Service (LOS). Based on national standards, similar communities, public input and recreation trends, the plan establishes a set of recommended Community Standards.

Based upon the current LOS, the community standards and the projected growth in the county over the next ten years, the findings from this assessment include the following recommendations.

- Develop a Countywide plan for a system of Linear Parks & Greenways that connects high priority locations throughout the county and coordinates with plans for Greenways within the cities.
- Develop a multi-generational Recreation Center at Cherokee Veterans Park.
- Develop a Community Park in the southwest portion of Cherokee County on property already available for this purpose.
- Develop additional synthetic multipurpose athletic fields by converting natural grass fields in existing parks.
- As part of any new active park, the county should consider adding the following facilities that show a deficit over the next ten years; Rectangular Athletic Fields (football, soccer, lacrosse) including synthetic and natural turf; Running Track; Tennis & Pickleball Courts and a Skate Park.
- Develop canoe/kayak launches at strategic points along the Etowah and Little Rivers.
- Develop more parks that are passive and/or expand existing passive parks. The county should continue to develop the following amenities that show a deficit over the next ten years; Dog Parks; Trails; Canoe/Kayak launches and Disc Golf Courses.
- Develop pickleball courts to meet the growing demand.
- Renovate those parks that were not improved under the most recent capital improvement program.
- Develop a multi-generational recreation center in the southwest portion of the county to serve this growing and underserved population with indoor recreation space.
- Develop a Community or Regional Park at the Thacker Property.
- Develop a Community or Regional Park at the Yellow Creek Road Property along with a canoe/kayak launch and other passive amenities.
- Monitor demand for baseball/softball diamonds over the next ten years.
- Seek to acquire land for Neighborhood and Community Parks in areas where service gaps exist and growth is expected to continue.

### Park classifications

The provision of the four basic park categories: mini parks, neighborhood parks, community parks and regional parks is critical to the service delivery system of any agency. Beyond these four basic park types are special-use parks, natural areas/preserves, greenways, school parks and private parks/recreation facilities. Each is classified differently based upon the types of amenities, size, service area and how access is gained to the facility. See the chart in chapter 3 for details.

### Mini Parks

These parks are the smallest park type. While they are desirable amenities and often developed in more urban settings, they are not typically developed by suburban and rural agencies such as Cherokee County. The county should continue to encourage the creation of these neighborhood amenities through the development process.

### Neighborhood and Community Parks

The majority of Cherokee County's existing parks fall into these two categories. As the county continues to grow, the county should consider adding additional community and neighborhood size parks in the appropriate geographic areas of the county as the demand arises. The amenities in each park can be tailored to meet the needs of the service area.

### Greenways

The most popular outdoor recreation activity in the nation is walking. Both the public workshops and the survey identified trails as the most desired recreational facility. The County's Comprehensive Transportation Plan also reinforces the importance of trails (see Appendix C).

The County should develop a Countywide Greenway Plan to guide future trail construction and establish high priority locations throughout the county for connection. This plan should coordinate with plans for Greenways within the cities.

### Blueways

Cherokee County has unique opportunities with the Etowah and Little Rivers flowing through the county. In addition to greenways and other forms of passive recreation, the County should develop paddling opportunities along both rivers. New access ramps are recommended at intervals of five to seven miles. See **Table 3.6: Existing and Possible Etowah River Launch Sites** for potential canoe/kayak launches along the Etowah River. There are also opportunities, working with USACE and the City of Woodstock to develop a shorter blueway along the Little River.

### Acquisition of Park Land

Another important need identified through the public input process and reinforced in the County's Comprehensive Plan is the need for the preservation of green space and land for passive recreation.

With over 2,796 acres of public parks, which exceeds the recommended Level of Service (LOS) of 10.1 acres per 1,000 persons, the county has sufficient parkland available. However, as the population continues to grow, the county will need to continue to review these needs. With the population increase, the planning team expects a deficit by the year 2028 of about 394 acres.

The county should continue to develop the parcels recently purchased under the parks bond into both active and passive parks. There are some areas of the county where the county does not currently own land suitable for park development. The county should seek to acquire land for Neighborhood and Community Parks in areas where service gaps exist and growth is expected to continue.

### Recreation Facility Needs

Evaluating the Level of Service (LOS) determines whether a recreation delivery system is meeting the needs of the population it serves. In evaluating the desired level of service, the planning team considered National Recreation & Parks Association (NRPA) guidelines, comparisons to similar communities, as well as public input. To establish the current LOS, the planning team considered county facilities as well as facilities provided by the cities and other recreation providers.

Based on the desired LOS, the current LOS and the projected population growth over the next ten years, the following additional needs for active recreation are expected in major recreation amenity categories. See Chapter 3 for the full list.

Recreation Facility	Additional Needed by 2028
Pickleball	9
Tennis Courts	7
Athletic Fields	6
Baseball/Softball Diamonds	5
Volleyball Courts, Outdoor	5
Football Fields	3
Recreation Center/Gym	2
Running Track	2

In addition to greenways and passive parks, as the county looks at needs over the next ten years, there will be a need to balance development of active parks with multiuse sports fields with indoor programming space. As new parks are developed, other deficiencies such as dog parks, splash pads and skating opportunities should be addressed to offer more balanced access to facilities.

### Special Use Facilities

#### Recreation Centers

Through the public input process, recreation centers were identified as the second most desired type of facility. Also, the current LOS is already well behind the desired LOS. Finally, indoor recreation spaces have the greatest potential for cost recovery, meaning that some operational costs can be offset through revenues. Therefore, the county should prioritize the development of two recreation centers over the next ten years.

#### Older Adults

Over the next ten years, the county’s senior population is expected to grow at a rate faster than other segments of the population. As the County develops new recreation centers and improves existing centers, it should incorporate elements that will meet the needs of this growing population.

#### Swimming Facilities

The opening of the Cherokee County Aquatic Center in 2013 greatly improved the county’s ability to provide aquatic recreation opportunities to its citizens with competitive, instructional, fitness and recreation swimming programs. The County also has the splash pad at Cline Park in Waleska.

While this plan does not call for an additional stand-alone aquatic center within the planning period, the county may consider aquatic components as part of future recreation centers as well as splash pads in other parks as the population grows and needs continue to rise.

#### Improving/Expanding Existing Parks

An important part of this plan was an inventory and assessment of the existing parks and recreation facilities. The improvements needed in existing facilities are described in Chapter 3. In addition to improvements in existing parks, the county has opportunities to expand some existing parks in order to fill some existing service gaps and meet the growing demand.

## Operations Review and Recommendations

**Chapter 4 – Operations Review & Recommendations** reviews the county’s staffing, operations, and budget for recreation and parks; and provides recommendations with a tiered implementation plan. Input from stakeholders and best practices from sources including the National Recreation & Parks Association (NRPA), the Commission for Accreditation of Parks and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) and the Georgia Recreation and Parks Association (GRPA) were used to provide recommendations for the improvement to operations of the agency.

### Organization Structure and Staffing

The Cherokee Recreation and Parks Agency currently includes thirty-five (35) full-time staff. Contract instructors and more than 200 year-round and part-time staff supplement the full-time staff. Five divisions make up the agency including Administrative, Athletics, Aquatics, Parks Maintenance and Recreation Programs. The agency has the second lowest ratio of full time employees to 10,000 persons among the state’s ten largest counties.

Staffing levels are adequate overall. However, the county’s current ratio of acres per full time equivalents (FTE) for park maintenance is below the national average. If the county desires to raise the level of maintenance in its current parks, it will need to add additional personnel. Additional personnel in both maintenance and programming will be needed as new parks and facilities are developed.



### Funding for Operations

Recreation and Park Operations and Maintenance are funded primarily through three sources; Earned Revenue, Beverage Excise Taxes in Unincorporated areas of the county and the county’s General Fund.

Revenues generated for parks and recreation services are expressed as a percentage of the operating costs and reported as the Cost Recovery Rate. The national average of for cost recovery among public recreation and parks agencies is 25%; compared to over 52% in Cherokee County. The sources of earned revenue for CRPA are consistent with other recreation and park agencies. Programs drive revenue, making up more than 64% of revenue. Increased programming space will allow the county to further expand programming.

The assignment of beverage excise taxes to recreation and parks operations offsets some of the cost of operations, reducing the demand on the general fund. This source currently accounts for about 21% of the agency budget. The current level of general fund support is 26% of the total budget compared to a national average of 59%. When comparing the recreation budget to Cherokee County's overall budget, we see that parks and recreation accounts for only 1.7% of the County's total operating expenditures. Compared to neighboring benchmark communities, Cherokee County has the lowest recreation spending as a percentage of the overall budget.

The average household income level in Cherokee County is above the state average and indicates that residents should have disposable income to participate in recreation programs. In order to establish a proper fee structure and maximize program revenue, the county should develop a tiered revenue policy that will guide staff in pricing programs. Financial aid policies should be a component of the policy in order to maintain equity and access to recreation programming across all segments of the population.

## Recreation Programming

Through the Athletics, Aquatics and Recreation Programs divisions, and in partnership with other recreation providers in the county, CRPA offers most of the core recreation programs that are commonly offered in other recreation and parks departments.

Public input revealed several areas where the county can offer additional desired programming including outdoor programming, special populations and older adults. Through the recent addition of programming staff, the county is expanding those offerings.

The agency's ability to offer revenue-generating programs is impacted by programming space and available staff. As the county continues to grow, the need for additional programming space and staff will be critical to maintaining current revenue levels. Cherokee County should balance the development of indoor facilities to offset the cost of operating facilities such as greenways and playgrounds that have very little revenue potential.



CRPA markets the parks and recreation programs through print and electronic media, as well as word of mouth. Research showed areas where marketing can be improved to reach more residents. With so much of the operational budget dependent on earned revenue, it is crucial that the agency continue to expand marketing efforts in order to maximize awareness of the types of parks and recreation services available to Cherokee County residents.

## Partnerships

The increased importance of partnerships is a growing trend in parks and recreation. The agency has many partners and partnership agreements in place that allow the agency to provide recreation programs and services throughout the county. These include the Cherokee County School District, municipalities, volunteer organizations and local businesses. The county should continue to develop these and other partnerships as they deem necessary.

## National Accreditation

CAPRA was established in 1992 to create standards of organization and operation for all public park and recreation agencies. Standards include important operation issues such as planning, organization, human resources, financial management, programming, facility & land management and risk management. Accreditation is based on an agency's compliance with the 151 standards for national accreditation. CAPRA accreditation is a five-year cycle.

The accreditation process sets high expectations on those agencies that are committed to the process; ultimately making them better departments. There are currently 166 accredited agencies in the United States, including eleven in Georgia. The county should set a goal of becoming accredited within the next 2 years.



## Summary of Recommendations to Operations

The addition of new park facilities coupled with the improvement of existing facilities will greatly expand park and recreation opportunities within the county. In addition to capital costs, each addition has the potential to impact operational and maintenance costs. The County should consider the operational cost of each capital improvement. Chapter 4 – Operations Review and Recommendations provide guidelines for staff needs as well as program and maintenance considerations. Below is a summary of the recommendations. See chapter four for a detailed list.

- Develop a Cost Recovery, Resource Allocation Plan and Revenue Policy for CRPA.
- Update Maintenance Standards for Parks.
- Expand programming in areas identified through the community survey.
- Pursue CAPRA Accreditation.
- Hire additional staff and increase operations budget as new facilities come online.

## Opinions of Cost and Funding Options



Cherokee County's elected officials and citizens have expressed goals of increasing recreation opportunities throughout the county. Benchmarking comparisons indicate that Cherokee County is not funding park operations at the same level as comparison communities. So transforming Cherokee County's parks and recreation opportunities will be a significant undertaking requiring additional funding.

To meet the expressed goals, a combination of funding is necessary, which could include increasing general fund support of parks; utilizing available special taxes and fees; creating a dedicated millage for park operations and capital projects; and securing grants and private funding. In addition, it would allow for an increased operating budget, which is needed in order to improve facility maintenance and increase the number of programs offered throughout the year.

## Opinions of Cost

Figure 5.1 in **Chapter 5 – Opinion of Probable Cost & Funding Options** provides opinions of probable costs for projects including both proposed and existing parks and greenway facilities. These are based on current construction costs and cost escalation is included for projects slated for the end of plan.

In summary, the recommended projects total approximately \$105,000,000 over a ten-year period. The major categories include improvements to existing recreation & parks facilities, major renovations or expansions to existing parks, and the development of new parks and facilities. Also included are estimates for architectural/engineering services, administrative costs, and a program wide contingency.

<b>Cherokee County Recreation, Parks, Greenspace &amp; Trails Master Plan Capital Improvements Opinions of Cost</b>	
<b>Capital Improvement</b>	<b>Ten Year Total</b>
Existing Recreation & Parks Facilities Improvements	\$2,865,000
Major Park Renovations/Expansions	\$26,750,000
New Park Development	\$30,300,000
Indoor Facilities	\$26,500,000
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$86,415,000</b>
A/E Fees (7%)	\$ 6,049,050
Administrative Costs (4%)	\$ 3,456,600
Contingency (10%)	\$ 9,592,065
<b>Total Capital Improvement Estimate</b>	<b>\$ 105,512,715</b>

### Funding Options

In November 2008, Cherokee County voters overwhelmingly supported the issuance of general obligation bonds up to \$90 million for the purpose of improving and expanding recreation and parks opportunities within the County. That capital program greatly improved the recreation and parks offerings within the county. Details of that program are included in Appendix D. The debt service on these bonds is repaid through property tax revenue generated by a dedicated millage rate levied countywide. The current schedule shows those bonds being paid off in 2029. The impact on the average home in Cherokee County has averaged \$52.42 each year, less than the \$62.00 originally estimated prior to the passage of the referendum. If the county desires to accelerate park and recreation projects, but prefers not to incur additional debt, it will need to consider other ways to fund these projects.

In Georgia, the largest and most commonly used funding source for capital is the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) program. The most recent SPLOST passed overwhelmingly in Cherokee County in November 2017. Minor recreation and parks projects were included in this referendum. As part of the next SPLOST referendum, the county should consider including several of the larger, high priority projects in this plan.

Since 2000, Cherokee County has collected impact fees for libraries, fire protection, sheriff's patrol, public safety, parks & recreation and road improvements. The fees are designed to help our growing jurisdiction maintain the same level of service in these important community resources. Impact fees for parks and recreation are collected only on residential development including single-family detached housing, apartments and condominiums/townhouses. Recent capital improvements have greatly increased the recreation and parks level of service (LOS) provided by the county. During the next review and update to the county's Impact Fee program, it is strongly recommended that the county consider increasing these fees due to recent increased level of services.

Many grants are available through private organizations, the state and federal government. Grants have been and will continue to be a credible funding source for special projects and plans. Grants should not be sought as a primary revenue source but as a supplement to agency and capital funding.

Partnerships, fundraising, naming rights/advertising are all alternative funding sources that the county should continue to pursue as supplemental sources of funding. Additionally, many communities have successful Friends of the Parks group that can increase awareness and assist in fundraising efforts.

As described in Chapter 4, the county already makes great use of user fees to offset operational expenses. By developing a cost recovery and resource allocation policy that contemplates non-resident fees, financial aid policies and effective pricing strategies for recreation programs and services, the county can maximize this source of funds. However, it is unlikely these funds could rise the level necessary to aid in capital projects.

### Funding Recommendations Summary

- Determine the highest priority projects and identify potential funding sources.
- Using existing SPLOST & Impact Fees, complete small capital improvement projects.
- Reevaluate Impact Fees for Parks and Recreation based on the increased Level of Service.
- Include larger, high priority projects in the next SPLOST program.
- Organize a friends group.
- Implement new regulatory processes to allow for parkland and ROW donations.
- Apply for grants to supplement capital and operational costs.
- Increase operations revenue through more advertising and sponsorship partnerships.

### Summary

The needs identified in this plan as well as some of the recommendations are significant. It is understood that some of the recommendations may not be acted upon within the planning period. The intent of this plan is to identify a vision for the Cherokee County's Recreation, Parks, Greenspace and Trails and provide recommendations for reaching that vision. Recreation and parks staff, working with elected officials and community leaders, will establish priorities and identify funding sources throughout the plan period.

### Mission, Vision & Values

#### Mission

Making life better in Cherokee County by preserving our parks and facilities while creating more active and healthier communities through recreation.

#### Vision

Cherokee Recreation & Parks Agency, a distinguished leader in the parks and recreation field, provides a diverse system of high-quality public parks, recreation facilities and programs enabling Cherokee County to remain the place to visit, live, work and play.

#### Values

- Service with Integrity
- Accessibility & Inclusion
- Stewardship & Sustainability
- Quality & Continuous Improvement
- Health & Safety
- A Sense of Community
- Fun & Play