

VIII. Parks & Recreation

INTRODUCTION

City parks and recreational areas contribute to the health and wellness of our community. These spaces give residents of all ages and abilities opportunities to be active, interact with nature, and gather with neighbors. Being outdoors improves not only our physical health, but also our mental health. Spending time in parks reduces depression, stress, and anxiety. In urban areas like Woonsocket, where residents may have limited private yards around their homes, city parks become even more important. Safe and inclusive parks and recreational areas are a positive way to impact the health and quality of life of Woonsocket residents.

In addition to local city parks, Woonsocket also has federal and state resources that contribute to recreational opportunities for residents and have the potential to bring visitors to the City.

Vision for Parks & Recreation

Over the next 20 years, Woonsocket will ensure diverse, high-quality parks and recreational areas that are safe and welcoming to all and contribute to the physical and mental wellbeing of residents.

For greater detail on data and statistics related to parks and recreation resources, see the Parks & Recreation chapter of the Baseline Report of the Comprehensive Plan.

WHAT WE HEARD

Based on community surveys and other methods of public engagement, residents want the City to focus on:

- Increasing the number of parks in Woonsocket.
- Better maintaining City parks, including cleanliness.
- Ensuring safe parks and recreational spaces.
- Increasing recreational facilities and programming for all age groups.



Woonsocket Little League (City of Woonsocket)

MAINTAIN EXISTING PARKS & RECREATIONAL AREAS

One of Woonsocket’s key challenges, as with many communities, is the maintenance and upkeep of existing municipal parks and recreation facilities. The Baseline Report outlines recent improvements to the City’s parks and recreational areas. Additional improvements and upgrades are needed at other City facilities, particularly ensuring that public restrooms are accessible for people with disabilities. Priorities are Menard Field, Cold Spring Park, Bernon Park, and Renaud Field.

The City’s Parks & Recreation Division of the Department of Public Works could benefit from a proactive preventative maintenance program to ensure that current and future investments are properly monitored, and facilities are meeting community needs. A basic preventative maintenance program¹ focuses on four areas that give the City a leg up in extending the useful life of equipment and resources as well as promoting sustainable practices in operations and maintenance organization.

- 1. An annual facility audit/inventory/condition assessment process
- 2. Regular maintenance schedule
- 3. Identifying and sustaining operating efficiencies
- 4. Data collection through maintenance management software

Through this process, facilities that require larger more complex upgrades and maintenance can be planned for over the long-term.



Cass Park (City of Woonsocket)

¹ National Recreation and Park Association. *Simple Preventive Maintenance Leads to Sustainable Practices*. (2014) Parks and Recreation Magazine. Available at <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2014/february/simple-preventive-maintenance-leads-to-sustainable-practices/>

CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Creating new recreational opportunities in the City is a need.

Some residents are looking for indoor activities. The City lacks a recreation center to offer indoor programming year-round. Constructing a facility is a large financial expense and requires maintenance and upkeep; investments in staffing and other needs would have to be factored in as well. Grants and other financing are available through government and non-profit sources. Long-range revenue, costs, and other factors would have to be evaluated.

For new outdoors spaces, the City should evaluate the feasibility and availability of City properties to be redeveloped as recreational uses. New opportunities can also be accommodated by expanding and improving existing parks and recreation areas with new equipment and new amenities.

Residents want to see expanded recreational programming for all age groups, but particularly for children, teens, and seniors. While the City considers options for expanding programs, it is important to note that the Parks & Recreation Division has limited staff and relies heavily on volunteers for the 25+ programs it currently offers. Should the City want to increase programming for these different age groups, partnerships with local and regional organizations will be critical.



River Island Park (Visit Rhode Island)



WWII Memorial Park (City of Woonsocket)



Dunn Park (Valley Breeze)



Rivers Edge Recreation Complex dog park (WJAR)

PROVIDE ACCESS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

PARKS & PROGRAMMING FOR EVERYONE

A popular, well-used park is one where everyone feels welcome. They are safe, accessible, and offer amenities and programming that meet the needs and interests of the community. Because parks contribute greatly to quality of life in Woonsocket, it is important to ensure that all residents have access to quality parks and recreational opportunities and feel comfortable in these spaces.

Safety in parks is an important concern of residents. If a park becomes unsafe or has a perception of being unsafe, fewer people will use it, and the community loses the value and benefit of this critical resource.

Addressing park safety is multifaceted and involves park design and programming as well as long-term maintenance and resident involvement.² Safety audits engage residents to understand specific safety concerns of a space and develop solutions. Results can help prioritize the City’s most at-risk parks.

Accessible parks and playgrounds for people with disabilities is another concern of residents. As the City upgrades its older parks, playgrounds, and recreational areas, it identifies and removes barriers to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

In addition to this, the City should start thinking about the concept of “universal design” to create spaces for all physical and cognitive abilities as it redesigns and upgrades parks and playgrounds. There are eight principles for inclusive playground design,³ which can also be applied to city parks more globally. They can also meet other design objectives such as safety and increasing recreational opportunities for residents. Four of these principles are particularly relevant in Woonsocket:

The **safety audit process** is based on participation and feedback from users of a given space. It allows for an evaluation of the physical environment in terms of fear of crime and perceptions of safety. When users become involved in identifying their safety concerns, they become an integral part of the solution. The findings from community-based safety audits are an important starting point for creating and implementing strategies for enhancing personal safety. Audits also provide an inventory of design, operational, and programming solutions to make parks safer.
- NRPA

² National Recreation and Park Association. *Creating Safe Park Environments to Enhance Community Wellness*. (n.d.) Issue Brief. Available at:

<https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/f768428a39aa4035ae55b2aaff372617/park-safety.pdf>.

³ Cheri Ruane, FASLA. (September 2022). *Principles of Inclusive Playground Design*. Parks and Recreation Magazine. Available at <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2022/september/principles-of-inclusive-playground-design/>.

- **Equitable Use:** The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.
- **Flexibility in Use:** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
- **Simple and Intuitive Use:** Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills or current concentration level.
- **Perceptible Information:** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

Finally, the City strives to ensure that all residents have access to the diverse programming it offers at its parks and recreational areas. Understanding the financial, physical, social, or cultural barriers and gaps that may prevent participation can help increase access to these opportunities. Partnerships with local and regional organizations and businesses can help overcome barriers through scholarships, more accessible meeting space (physically or socially), or language interpretation, among other approaches.

DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

Evaluating accessibility also looks at the geographic distribution of resources to ensure that all neighborhoods have access to parks and recreational areas within walking distance (see more on this below). Some residents indicated that city parks are too far from their homes, which limits their use of them.

Most areas of the City have access to a neighborhood park, except for Oak Grove. Finding an opportunity to add park and/or recreational amenities for these residents should be a priority for the City. Additionally, some residents might not have access to spaces they can use, such as people with disabilities. A neighborhood may have a park, but if it has not been brought up to ADA standards, it is not necessarily accessible to people with disabilities.



Bernon Park (City of Woonsocket)



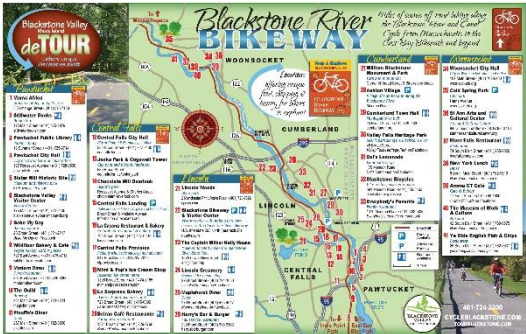
Globe Park (City of Woonsocket)

BUILD WALKING & BIKING CONNECTIONS

Creating safer walking and biking connections between residential neighborhoods and city parks/recreational areas will make these spaces more accessible and better used by residents. Not only do these amenities provide recreational opportunities, they also promote active lifestyles and get people out of their cars.

Approaches to creating safer biking can depend on the location and conditions of a roadway. An off-road bike and walking path requires land, which might be a former rail line (typical of existing resources like the Blackstone River Bikeway) or an easement. A dedicated bike lane in a street requires adequate right-of-way to accommodate car traffic and possibly on-street parking. Signage alerting drivers to share travel lanes with bikers is another option. Education on bike safety and rules of the road for both drivers and bikers is essential.

Additionally, the City needs to continue to lobby the State of Rhode island to complete the Blackstone River Bikeway through Woonsocket. This includes connections to the City's neighborhoods as well as cultural and recreational resources along the bikeway.



Blackstone River Bikeway Brochure (Blackstone Valley Tourism Council)

The Circulation Element of this Plan touches on the need to inventory and assess the condition of city sidewalks by neighborhood and develop priorities for replacement, repair, and creation. Evaluating the connections from these areas to city parks and recreation areas should support the prioritization of investments. For more discussion on walking and biking, see the Walking & Biking section of the Circulation Element of this Plan.

PROMOTE PARKS & RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Through the Parks & Recreation Division page on its website, the City publishes information about its parks and recreation areas as well as ongoing seasonal programming and events. The City continues to look for new opportunities to promote these spaces and events to residents. Some ideas include publishing a parks and recreation guide and map that highlights city parks. Guides can include information on parking, public restrooms, and nearby places of interest such as historic and cultural sites or restaurants. Signage along walking routes can also help increase visibility.

The City should also find opportunities to work with the National Heritage Corridor to promote the city park system to regional visitors. The National Heritage Corridor along with the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council are able to reach a wider audience and showcase Woonsocket's local destinations.

GETTING IT DONE

GOAL VIII-1: Promote the City Park System and available opportunities to residents and visitors to the area.

POLICY VIII-1.1: Integrate new and existing city park facilities and programming into the promotion of historic and cultural resources with regional and state partners.

ACTION VIII-1.1.a: Develop a combined master plan for recreation, interpretation, and tourism development along the Blackstone River. Coordinate with the Blackstone River Valley Tourism Council, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, Inc., Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), and the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT).

ACTION VIII-1.1.b: Develop a marketing program to increase public awareness of the City's natural resources and recreational opportunities. This can include marketing materials, website page, and/or media coordination.

ACTION VIII-1.1.c: Continue to monitor progress in the development of the Blackstone River Bikeway, and work closely with State agencies to plan a specific route that maximizes public access to the riverfront and economic development opportunities in the City.

ACTION VIII-1.1.d: Increase the number of cultural events programmed in local parks, both City-sponsored and hosted by local and regional organizations.

POLICY VIII-1.2: Increase local knowledge and awareness of the city's park facilities and programming.

ACTION VIII-1.2.a: Produce a park and recreation guide/map for public use. Make them accessible on the web and printed.

ACTION VIII-1.2.b: Continue to maintain the City's website which highlights the parks and recreation amenities and programming in the community.

GOAL VIII-2: Ensure that City parks and recreational areas are well maintained, safe, and accessible for all users.

POLICY VIII-2.1: Improve the City's capacity to support and invest in park maintenance and develop public support for continued investments.

ACTION VIII-2.1.a: Conduct an assessment of maintenance and operational needs of the City's parks and recreational areas. Include the evaluation of staffing levels, training, work plans, existing policies and procedures, and

overall management. Identify priorities to increase capacity (e.g. additional staffing, equipment) and improve efficiencies (e.g. training, best management practices) to meet current and future demands on City resources.

ACTION VIII-2.1.b: Identify which City parks and recreation areas have management plans and prioritize the development of plans for those that do not. For those with management plans, review to determine if updates are needed. Management plans should address regular maintenance needs, schedule for equipment and amenity replacement (including ADA requirements), and opportunities for new facilities.

ACTION VIII-2.1.c: Develop a long-term approach to appropriate funds in the City's Capital Improvement Program for maintenance, upkeep, and updating of parks and recreational areas.

ACTION VIII-2.1.d: Continue to aggressively pursue state, federal, and private funding for park development and upkeep to supplement existing municipal funding sources.

POLICY VIII-2.2: Invest in City park and recreation areas to ensure they are safe, accessible, and welcoming places.

Action VIII-2.2.a: Continue improvements to Cass Park as a way to centralize the City's sports facilities near the high school and increase passive recreation opportunities in the park.

Action VIII-2.2.b: Identify a new location to replace Ayotte Field.

Action VIII-2.2.c: Conduct a safety audit of city parks and recreation areas with extensive community engagement. Develop a long-range plan to address perceived and real barriers. Strategies can be integrated into management plans identified in ACTION VIII-2.1.b.

Goal VIII-3: Increase visitation and the appropriate use of the City's parks and recreation areas.

Policy VIII-3.1: Improve public knowledge and awareness of the City's parks and recreation areas.

Action VIII-3.1.a: Frequently revisit the Parks & Recreation Division's page on the City's website to make sure that all material is current and accessible, including park amenities, maps, events, and programming.

Action XIII-3.1.b: Develop and install signage to encourage appropriate use of the City's conservation areas.

Goal VIII-4: Ensure that City and State parks and recreational facilities meet the diverse needs of Woonsocket residents.

Policy VIII-4.1: Provide a variety of recreational areas and facilities for all demographic groups and residential areas in the community.

Action VIII-4.1.a: Conduct a feasibility study with public engagement to understand a recreation or community center that could meet the needs of multiple generations, including youth and teenagers, and provide indoor recreational opportunities.

Action VIII-4.1.b: Continue redevelopment of existing neighborhood parks with an emphasis on family and passive recreation features.

Action VIII-4.1.c: As investments in new equipment and amenities are planned, identify neighborhood parks that have opportunities for “universal design” elements.

Policy VIII-4.2: Promote equity in park, recreation, and open space expenditures by targeting the City's densely developed, low-income neighborhoods.

Action VIII-4.2.a. Develop a strategic plan to increase riverfront access in the River Street/Fairmount Street area. Develop a vision plan with policies that incentivize redevelopment projects to dedicate land or allow public access along the river.

Action VIII-4.2.b: Prioritize new park spaces in areas of the City that lack recreation or dedicated open spaces with public access.

Action VIII-4.2.c: Understand if existing neighborhood parks are meeting the needs of residents through public engagement and incorporate changes into existing management plans or in the development of new plans (see ACTION VIII-2.1.b).

