Chapter 8: Parks and Recreation

A comprehensive and interrelated system of parks and recreation opportunities that responds to the needs and values of the local residents contributes to a community’s quality of life and livability. A well planned, funded, and managed system of parks, trails, and recreational facilities attracts and sustains quality development, contributes to improved community health, and helps to preserve and enhance the quality of the natural environment.

In 2003, the City adopted the *City of Conroe Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan*. The Parks Master Plan inventoried the current parks, recreation, and open space assets; identified and prioritized needs; and provided implementation strategies for continued park and recreational opportunity development.

This chapter of the Comprehensive Plan reflects key information presented in the current *Parks Master Plan*, along with updated information and refinements regarding:

- The parks and recreational facility inventory
- The assessment of the level of adequacy of facilities relative to typical planning standards
- The community’s expressed needs and desires for parks and recreational opportunities
- Identification of “areas of need” for parks and recreation facilities development based on the City’s latest growth projections and accessibility considerations
- Goals, actions and policies related to Parks and Recreation facilities based on the current *Parks Master Plan* and other potential funding and implementation considerations.

Key Issues

**Uneven Distribution of Parks**

Neighborhood, community, regional or “metro” parks should be planned for and evenly distributed throughout the community to ensure that all residents have equal access to recreation opportunities. Studies show that those with direct access to built or natural facilities are 43 percent more likely to exercise for 30 minutes most days of the week. This makes access to parks an important community health issue, especially when considering growing obesity rates throughout the U.S.

The City of Conroe’s parks are not geographically distributed to provide residents with equal recreational access.

Almost three quarters of the City’s park acreage lies in the southeast park planning area of the City (the Parks Master Plan divides the City into four park planning areas using the roadways of IH 45 and SH 105 as the dividing lines). As a result, the north and southwest areas of the City are deficient in park space.

**Rising Demand for Sports Fields**

The rise of organized youth sports such as soccer, softball and baseball has increased the demand for local playing fields. This is magnified in the City of Conroe because it has a large youth population and a high percentage of young adults of child-bearing age. The availability of facilities for league sports is an important community amenity for residents of this demographic. Athletic fields also provide an economic development opportunity by drawing visitors to the City for weekend tournaments and other events.

**Enhancing Community Connectivity**

An interconnected system of bicycle and pedestrian facilities serves not only as an alternative mode of safe and efficient transportation, but also as a means of recreation and exercise. Walking is the most predominant form of adult activity in the nation, with bicycling and trail running gaining popularity. Conroe residents surveyed for the Parks Master Plan identified the addition of hiking, biking and walking trails as a very high priority. The Parks Master Plan identifies potential bike and trail corridors; however, they have not yet been implemented.

**Sharing Resources for Recreation Uses**

Rapid development in the Conroe area has had the effect of both increasing the demand for parks and increasing the price of raw land for park development. As parkland becomes more costly to acquire, it will be important for the City to use its resources wisely and efficiently. This may involve coordinating and sharing resources with Montgomery County, Conroe ISD, and other government entities. Another strategy is to use city-owned land for recreational uses as suggested in the Parks Master Plan.

**Existing Park and Recreation Facilities**

The City of Conroe is currently served by a system of park facilities that provide a range of active and passive recreational opportunities for residents. Table 8-1 lists the parks and recreation amenities located within the City of Conroe. Additional recreational
## Table 8-1
City of Conroe Park Facilities and Amenities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Pavilion/Gazebo</th>
<th>Picnic Area</th>
<th>Playground</th>
<th>Athletic Field</th>
<th>Softball/Baseball</th>
<th>Basketball</th>
<th>Trails</th>
<th>Concessions</th>
<th>Restrooms</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armstrong Elementary Park</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>B.B. Rice Elementary Park</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candy Cane Park</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>Swimming, Tennis Courts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Barton, Jr. Park</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Fishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Park</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sports Complex</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flournoy Park</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gibbon Park</td>
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<td>Giesinger Elementary Park</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heritage Place</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Amphitheatre</td>
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<tr>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>Skate Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis Park</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Fishing, Disc Golf</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>O.A. Reeves Elementary Park</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar Johnson Jr. Park</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
</tr>
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<td>Roberson Park</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Runyan Elementary Park</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sam Houston Elementary Park</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Stewarts Creek Park</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Table 8-2
City of Conroe Park Need According to NRPA Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park Category</th>
<th>Existing Park Acres</th>
<th>Recommended Acres—2005*</th>
<th>Existing Need</th>
<th>Recommended Acres—2025**</th>
<th>Future Need</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>Min. 27.7 Max. 47</td>
<td>Min. 19.3 Max. 66.3</td>
<td>Min. 90</td>
<td>Max. 180</td>
<td>Min. 62.3 Max. 152.3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desirable Size: 15 acres</td>
<td>Characteristics: Centrally located within neighborhood with safe walking and bike access, suited for intense development, may be a school playground</td>
<td>Service Area: quarter-mile to half-mile radius</td>
<td>Frequency: 1-2 acres/1000 persons</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Min. 84 Max. 235</td>
<td>Min. 151 Max. 292</td>
<td>Min. 450</td>
<td>Max. 720</td>
<td>Min. 366 Max. 636</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desirable Size: 25 acres</td>
<td>Characteristics: intense or combined recreational areas such as athletic complexes and swimming pools; may include natural features in areas for walking, viewing, picnicking</td>
<td>Service Area: 1-2 miles</td>
<td>Frequency: 5-8 acres/1000 persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Use</td>
<td>Min. 4 Max. N/A</td>
<td>Min. N/A Max. N/A</td>
<td>Min. N/A</td>
<td>Max. N/A</td>
<td>Min. N/A Max. N/A</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desirable Size: No standard</td>
<td>Characteristics: Activity-specific, such as golf courses, zoos, nature sanctuaries, theme parks, or equestrian activities.</td>
<td>Service Area: No standard</td>
<td>Frequency: No standard</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Min. 225 Max. 235</td>
<td>Min. 10 Max. 245</td>
<td>Min. 450</td>
<td>Max. 900</td>
<td>Min. 225 Max. 675</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desirable Size: 100+ acres</td>
<td>Characteristics: Large parks, natural or developed with ball fields, playgrounds, boating, fishing, camping, picnicking, trails, etc.</td>
<td>Service Area: Several cities</td>
<td>Frequency: 5-10 acres/1000 persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Acres</td>
<td>Min. 340.7 Max. 517</td>
<td>Min. 940 Max. 180.3</td>
<td>Min. 603.3</td>
<td>Max. 990 Max. 1800</td>
<td>Min. 653.3 Max. 1463.3</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on estimated 2005 population of 47,042 (2005 U.S. Census)

**Based on projected 2025 population of 90,888 (Wilbur Smith Associates)
opportunities are provided by local County, state and federal parklands including:

- Sam Houston National Forest (163,037 acres)
- Jones State Forest (1,733 acres)
- Lake Conroe Park (128 acres)
- Gene Campbell Sports Complex (60 acres)
- War Memorial Park
- Courthouse Square
- Gwen Hruska Memorial Park (12 acres)

The City of Conroe’s existing park facilities are shown in Figure 8-1.

**Park and Recreation Standards**

Parks and Recreation Standards, such as those published by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), provide a measure for determining the amount of parks, recreation and open space needed to meet current and projected demands of a community. In addition to providing benchmarks for the amount of parkland, NRPA has developed a classification system that distinguishes different types of parks based on their size and function within the community. These standards serve as a basis from which the community can develop standards that fit local needs.

*Table 8-2* compares the City’s existing park acreage to NRPA standards for 2005 and 2025 population estimates.

As shown in Table 8-2, Conroe has approximately 340 total acres of parkland which includes:

- 27.7 acres of neighborhood parks
- 84 acres of community parks
- 4 acres of special use parks
- 225 acres of metropolitan parks

Based on a current population of approximately 47,000 residents, *The City of Conroe is parkland deficient in each of the NRPA categories*. To meet the *minimum* NRPA guidelines, The City would have to add an additional:

- 19.3 acres of neighborhood parks
- 151 acres of community parks
- 10 acres of metropolitan parks

In addition to catching up to current demand, the City would have to begin planning for and acquiring additional parkland to accommodate future growth. With an estimated 2025 population of approximately 90,000 residents—nearly double the existing population—it is recommended that the City acquire an additional:

- 62.3 acres of neighborhood parks
- 366 acres of community parks
- 225 acres of metropolitan parks.
Service Area Analysis

Equally important to the park acreage in a community is the geographic distribution of parks and recreational facilities. Figure 8-1 shows the service areas for existing city parks as defined by NRPA guidelines.

The service area analysis shows that the older, central area of the City is adequately served with a mix of neighborhood and community parks. As growth has occurred in the outskirts of the community, it has been more difficult for the City to keep pace with demand. This is illustrated by the gaps in service to newly developing areas to the northwest and south.

The Parks Master Plan has proposed to develop additional parks in key areas to eliminate existing gaps in service and accommodate future growth. Figure 8-2 shows the approximate location of three additional City parks with their likely service areas. The addition of these parks will take care of most existing gaps in service within current municipal limits. Areas to the northwest toward Lake Conroe will still face deficiencies that will need to be addressed, particularly as additional growth occurs in the area.

The service area maps also show that the City has chosen to build larger community parks in growing areas rather than a series of smaller neighborhood parks. This is a choice that many communities make for more cost effective maintenance. However, it also means that people are less likely to be within a short, safe walk to their local park. Under these circumstances, a trail system that connects neighborhoods to parks is extremely important. Without these connections many residents will be forced to drive to a community park, creating additional parking demand and possibly creating barriers to those who cannot drive (i.e. children and some elderly residents). Figure 8-2 shows trail alignments that have been proposed by the Parks Master Plan and additional trails suggested through the comprehensive planning process. Those proposed in the Parks Master Plan include:

- Alligator Creek: San Jacinto River to FM 2854
- Alligator Creek: Crossroads
- Stewarts Creek: San Jacinto River to N. Loop 336
- Little Caney Creek: BNSF Railroad to Barton Park
- Wiggins Village to Roberson Park

User Preference

Acreage guidelines and service area analysis provide useful ways to assess a community’s park system. However, these methods do not account for unique local considerations or the preference of users. Participation trends, user characteristics, demographics, climate, and natural features are other factors that need to be considered in a comprehensive evaluation of the City’s parks and recreation system. During the 2002 Parks Master Plan process, user preference was assessed through public meetings, steering committee meetings, and a mail-in survey. While the public was generally satisfied with the City’s parks system, the following needs were identified and summarized in the Parks Master Plan:
Athletic fields—designated fields for girls/women’s softball, additional soccer fields and additional lighted fields

Trails—linkages and greenways connecting parks (currently trails only exist within individual parks)

Natural areas—protecting passive natural areas along streams, drainage easements and existing City-owned land

Programming/activities—education, nature center, historical/cultural center, community garden and additional space at existing indoor recreation center

In addition to new facilities, residents noted the need to maintain and enhance existing facilities. All facilities will require routine maintenance and repairs. As the population grows and increasing demand is placed on the existing parks and recreation system, facilities and equipment will need to be refurbished or replaced. This is essential to ensure that parks and recreation facilities continue to be assets to the community. Proper maintenance also lets residents know that the City values and takes care of its assets.

Financing Park Needs

Financing parkland acquisition and construction is difficult with the increasing cost of raw land. As a result, the City will have to be innovative in finding ways to finance local parks. The Parks Master Plan suggests maximizing resources by developing recreational space at existing City-owned property such as the public works center site. It also suggests building trails along undevelopable property such as floodplains and drainage easements. School fields and playgrounds provide another option that is particularly successful when the schools are accessible from surrounding neighborhoods.
As suggested in the Urban Development Chapter, the City of Conroe also has the option of seeking parkland dedications from residential developers. Parkland dedication requirements are commonly written into subdivision regulations to ensure that the community has adequate resources to serve newly developing areas. Developers either provide land for parks or a fee-in-lieu that is proportional to the size of the development. Asking developers of larger subdivisions to provide private park space for their residents is another option to relieve the need for small, neighborhood parks. Some developers in Conroe have done this voluntarily due to the increased marketability of subdivisions with access to park amenities. However, limiting park access to the wider community can be logistically difficult.

Parks and Recreation Goals

The City hopes to achieve the following long-term goals through the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan.

- An even distribution of well-maintained and expanded parks and recreation facilities.
- Connectivity among recreational areas, neighborhoods and activity centers.
- Preservation of natural features.

Parks and Recreation Actions

The following actions have been identified to aid the City in achieving its Parks and Recreation goals.

- Develop the individual trail segments identified in the Parks Master Plan and additional trail segments identified in Figure 8-2.
- Establish a phased program for making improvements to existing parks.
- Revise the City’s subdivision regulations to include a mandatory parkland dedication.
- Conduct a natural resources inventory to identify sites that warrant protection, conservation, or enhancement.
- Coordinate with local sports league organizations to identify existing and future demand for various types of sports fields and facilities.
Parks and Recreation Policies

Policies are intended to provide additional guidance for daily decisions made by staff and City Council. Decision-Making policies are intended to guide decisions regarding development projects and other proposals. Administrative Policies provide guidance on the day-to-day business of the City regarding budgets, staff resources and City-initiated programs or projects.

Decision-Making Policies

- Encourage developers to include recreational amenities within subdivisions (i.e. tot lots, pocket parks, trails and sidewalks).
- Encourage developers to provide recreational easements on undevelopable areas of the site.

Administrative Policies

- Acquire and develop neighborhood and community parks in areas currently “under serviced” (as shown in Figure 8-1).
- Monitor population growth and development intensity to determine whether population-based service standards are being met.
- Evaluate existing park and recreation facilities regularly to determine needs for maintenance and improvement.
- Update the Parks and Recreation Master Plan on a regular basis to ensure priorities are current and relevant.
- Land acquired for City purposes (i.e. city offices, maintenance facilities, drainage facilities) should be designed to include some parks and recreational space where feasible.
- Acquire future recreational easements and/or rights-of-way early to ensure availability and affordability.
- Acquire park sites that are within walking distance to residential neighborhoods or are connected to neighborhoods via hike-and-bike trails.
- Utilize rights-of-way, easements, natural drainage courses, and creeks for trails to provide a safe and secure connection between parks, schools, neighborhoods, and open spaces.
- Preserve floodway and floodplain areas for conservation, public open space and greenways.
- Reserve adequate funds in the capital improvements program (CIP) to meet existing parks maintenance needs and achieve phased priorities set forth in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan.
- Maintain and enhance partnerships with Conroe Independent School District for joint acquisition of land, and shared use/maintenance of playgrounds, parks and athletic fields.
- Coordinate with Montgomery County regarding future County park development in Conroe’s ETJ, including the possibility of joint acquisition of land and shared use/maintenance as a means of acquiring land before it is already developed or too expensive.
Figure 8-2
Existing and Planned Parks, Planned and Proposed Trails

Legend
- Existing County Park
- Existing City Park
- Metropolitan
- Community
- Neighborhood
- Planned or Future City Park from Parks Master Plan
- Proposed Trail from Parks Master Plan
- Proposed Trail from WSA
- Recreation Area
- City Limits
- Conroe Planning Area
