



The background of the page is a repeating pattern of wavy, parallel orange lines that create a sense of movement and depth. The lines vary in length and curvature, creating a textured, organic feel.

# 1

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# PROJECT INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

For the first time, the City of Rapid City Parks and Recreation Department is leading a city-wide Parks and Recreation Master Planning effort. The City has hired the consultant team of RDG Planning & Design to facilitate this process. The master plan will look at individual parks as well as the overall parks system to identify opportunities for upgrades and updates. The team will look at facilities, operation and maintenance schedule, recreation programs and funding strategies. Ultimately, the final plan will serve as a roadmap to guide the Department for the next decade or more.

The first 'chapter' of this planning effort is the Discovery Phase. At the start of a project, the consultant team works with City staff to fully understand the scope of the Department's work and the Park System as a whole. Initial inventory and evaluation processes will be explained later in the document, but it is important to establish a baseline. What do you have today? What services are currently provided? Who is being served? To determine this baseline, the consultant team met with staff, toured parks, researched relevant case studies and compared numbers to national parks and recreation standards. This data collection helps to establish an early understanding of the assets within the Rapid City Parks System that can be tested, expanded upon or changed based on another kind of data collection in the form of public input.

Public engagement is an important part of any community planning effort. This is especially true for a parks and recreation master plan because parks are for everyone to enjoy. An Advisory Committee was recruited to help support this effort and represent various factions of the community. This group was involved for the duration of the project to help advocate, educate and provide regular feedback to City Staff and the consultant team. Public engagement expanded far beyond this group to park users, stakeholder groups, and the public with both in-person and online opportunities to engage.

Based on the initial inventory and analysis, early themes came to light during the initial discovery phase. These evolved throughout the process as more data was collected and more feedback was garnered:

- Access to nature is crucial
- World-class destinations bring great opportunity
- Funding is always a challenge
- The plan should be strategic
- Maximize resources through partnerships
- Operational and maintenance planning is desired
- Quality of life is a focus
- Activate open spaces
- Facilities should be inclusive and accessible
- Parks are a tool for economic impact
- Expand the trail system

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rapid City Parks & Recreation Master Plan represents the City's first comprehensive, system-wide planning effort to guide parks, facilities, programs, and operations over the next decade and beyond. Developed in collaboration with RDG Planning & Design, Ballard King, Waters Edge and ETC Institute, the plan establishes a strategic roadmap to align investments, improve service delivery, and respond to evolving community needs. It evaluates the full spectrum of the system—from individual park sites to citywide opportunities for growth, programming, and funding strategies—ensuring that decisions are data-driven and future-oriented.

The planning process begins with a strong foundation in system understanding, including inventory analysis, benchmarking against national standards, and identification of existing strengths and constraints. Key early themes emphasize access to nature, quality of life, inclusivity, and economic impact, reinforcing parks as critical community infrastructure. The plan ultimately positions parks and recreation not only as amenities but as essential drivers of health, connectivity, and regional identity. This role reflects a long history of parks as sites for rest, relaxation, and appreciation of natural beauty. In this way, parks continue to offer the restorative presence of nature while strengthening the social and cultural fabric of the region.

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNITY INPUT

Public engagement formed the foundation of the master planning process, ensuring the plan reflects community priorities and lived experiences. A multi-layered engagement strategy included an advisory committee, stakeholder interviews, listening sessions, open houses, and a statistically valid survey with more than 500 responses at a 95% confidence level. Engagement extended to residents, user groups, leaseholders, and City staff, creating a comprehensive understanding of needs across all user types that represent a cross section of the City's demographics (making it statistically valid).

Community feedback revealed strong support for parks as vital quality-of-life assets, with 96% of residents reporting park visitation and satisfaction levels exceeding national averages. Key priorities include expanded trails, improved access to neighborhood parks, better communication about programs, and enhanced safety.

Residents also expressed a desire for more naturalized landscapes, year-round programming, and improved connectivity, emphasizing the importance of parks as both recreational and social infrastructure.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS & SYSTEM ANALYSIS

Rapid City maintains a substantial parks system, including 32 parks, over 1,400 acres of parkland (with approximately 50% of the parkland in the floodplain – and therefore amenities are restricted) and 42 miles of trails. While the system is strong in acreage and trail mileage—exceeding national benchmarks—analysis reveals uneven distribution of park access and gaps in walkability, particularly in expanding areas of the city. Floodplain constraints also impact how significant portions of parkland can be developed and maintained. Benchmarking shows the City performs well in parkland quantity but faces challenges in staffing levels, maintenance capacity, and system balance. Certain amenities—such as ballfields and outdoor sports facilities—are overbuilt relative to national norms, while other assets such as indoor recreation space and community centers are underrepresented. These disparities highlight the need to shift focus from expansion alone to optimization, reinvestment, and improved distribution of new facilities.

## OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

The Operations and Maintenance assessment identifies both strengths and systemic challenges in managing a large and diverse park system. Staff currently maintain extensive assets including parks, trails, forestry, irrigation systems, and public facilities. While operations are efficient given available resources, staffing levels fall below national benchmarks, limiting the City's ability to maintain and expand services at the desired level.

Aging infrastructure and deferred maintenance represent significant pressures, with many facilities approaching or exceeding their lifecycle simultaneously. The plan emphasizes the need for increased staffing (Rapid City staff take care of twice the median amount of land per staff member, when compared to national benchmarks for staffing) improved maintenance technologies, and refined service-level standards—particularly

differentiating between high-use spaces and natural or floodplain areas. Strategic use of contract services, improved asset management systems, and development of satellite maintenance facilities are recommended to enhance efficiency and long-term sustainability.

## RECREATION & PROGRAMMING

Rapid City offers a robust range of recreation programs across aquatics, ice, sports, golf, and special events, with more than 250,000 annual program participants. Programming aligns well with national trends, particularly in outdoor recreation and special events, but faces constraints due to limited facility availability and staffing challenges. Demand continues to grow for diverse offerings, including fitness, enrichment, and year-round programming.

Financial analysis shows most program areas operate below full cost recovery, with aquatics, ice, and general recreation recovering approximately 50% of their costs, while golf approaches or achieves full cost recovery. The plan recommends establishing formal cost recovery policies, expanding partnerships, and diversifying program offerings—particularly for adults, seniors, and underserved populations. Emphasis is also placed on aligning programming with national trends such as wellness, outdoor activities, and flexible, short-duration programs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The Master Plan outlines a series of systemwide recommendations focused on improving connectivity and long-term growth. Key strategies include shifting from higher quantities of recreation facilities (e.g. diamond sports) to improved quality facilities, expanding trail connectivity, and developing new neighborhood parks in underserved areas. Enhanced accessibility, ADA compliance, and accessible design are emphasized across all future improvements.

Operational recommendations focus on increasing staffing, implementing updated management systems, refining maintenance standards, and establishing clear

cost recovery and fee policies. The plan also calls for expanded partnerships, updated lease agreements, and strategic use of contract services. These actions aim to create a more adaptable, efficient, and responsive parks system.

## IMPLEMENTATION & FUNDING STRATEGY

Implementation is structured as a phased and flexible process, prioritizing high-impact projects while aligning with available funding and operational capacity. The plan identifies approximately \$43 million in deferred maintenance needs and \$120 million in new capital improvements over a 20-year horizon, underscoring the scale of investment required.

To support these investments, the plan recommends a diversified funding approach, including enhanced use of earned revenue, potential tax mechanisms, partnerships, grants, and the establishment of a parks foundation for sponsorships and philanthropy. Policy tools such as a parkland dedication ordinance will help ensure future growth contributes to system expansion. A strong emphasis is placed on accountability, performance tracking, and ongoing community engagement to guide implementation.

## CONCLUSION

The Rapid City Parks & Recreation Master Plan establishes a clear and actionable vision for the future of the park system. By aligning community priorities, operational realities, and long-term investment strategies, the plan creates a roadmap for sustainable growth and improved quality of life.

Moving forward, success will depend on the City's ability to balance reinvestment with expansion, strengthen partnerships, and adapt to changing community needs. With strategic implementation and continued public support, Rapid City is well-positioned to enhance its parks system as a cornerstone of community health, economic vitality, and regional identity.