

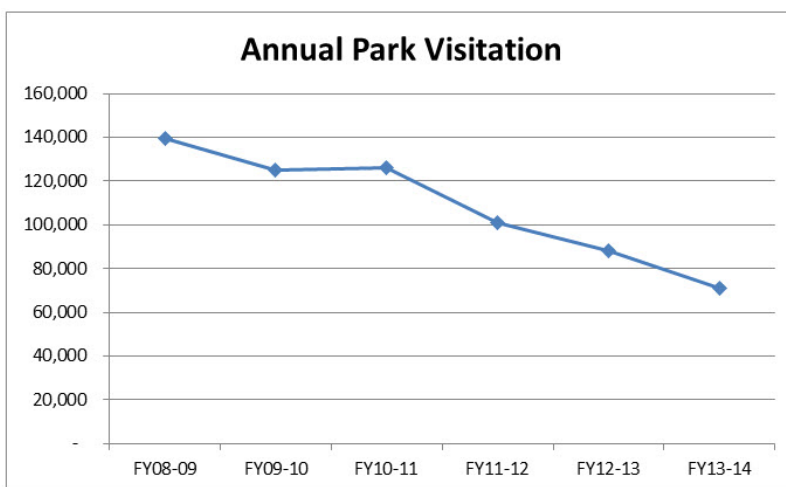
# ESTRELLA MOUNTAIN REGIONAL PARK MASTER PLAN UPDATE

## ABOUT THE PARK

Did you know that Estrella Mountain Regional Park became the **first** regional park in Maricopa County's Regional Park System in 1954? The first parcel of property for the park was purchased in September 1953. Estrella Mountain Regional Park initially contained 828 acres, which was a combination of purchased property and leased land. Additional lands were acquired over the decades and today the park totals 19,840 acres.

Estrella Mountain Regional Park is located in the southwest Valley, adjacent to the cities of Goodyear and Avondale. Located near where the Gila and Agua Fria Rivers converge, the park includes a large wetland or riparian area. The majority of the park is natural desert with the exception of the developed section on the northern boundary.

## PARK VISITATION AND VISITOR USE TRENDS



"Park visitation, and consequently park revenue, has declined significantly over the last five to ten years. In 2008, close to 139,000 people visited the park; last year, the park had just over 71,000 visitors. Our most recent ASU Visitor Use Survey also reflects that park visitor usage is shifting and activities that were once prevalent in the park are no longer as popular," said R.J. Cardin, Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Director.

Funds needed to operate and maintain the County's regional park system come mainly from park user fees (i.e., day-use entry fees, annual passes, facility rentals, and camping), concessionaire fees, grants and donations with less than ten percent of the budget coming from the County's general fund.

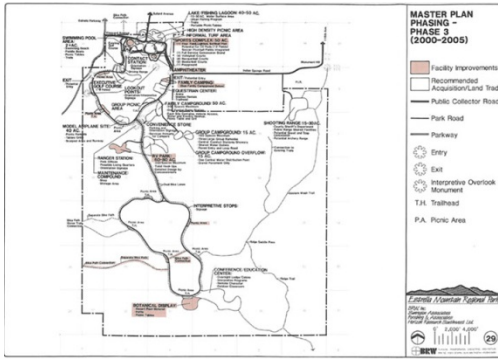
In other words, the Parks Department relies on revenue generated at the park level to support its budget. Declining visitation translates into a declining budget. The Parks Department is then tasked with finding alternative sources of revenue, such as public-private or non-profit partnerships, that support the overall vision and mission of the Department.

## CURRENT PARK MASTER PLAN

The park is currently operating under its 1988 Master Plan, which was approved by the Board of Supervisors. This is a phased development plan so that park enhancements are made in steps and over time. By its third and final phase, the park would have had:

- Camping: primitive and developed (group & family)
- Picnic: group and individual sites
- Education/Conference Center in south-central area with no public roads to get there, must hike or horseback ride in
- Lookouts/vista points
- Ranger station with a residence for full-time, on-site manager
- New maintenance and operational complex
- 2 exit points to provide ease of exit and used as entrances for special occasions
- Convenience store
- Model airplane site
- Shooting range for MCSO and public
- Expanded golf course to 18-hole
- Swimming facility
- "Lake" within the river bed for an urban fishing program
- 50-acre sports complex: softball, football/soccer, volleyball, tennis, basketball, racquetball, playgrounds, concession stand, restrooms (operated by concessionaire or city)
- Restored river shoreline project
- And more.

## ► Estrella Mountain Regional Park Master Plan Update



While certain elements of the 1988 Park Master Plan have been completed; other elements are no longer relevant as recreation trends and park uses

have changed over time. Other adopted plans are helping to inform this Park Master Plan update. In 2009, the Parks Department completed its Strategic System Master Plan and recommended development opportunities should be explored that will support Estrella Mountain Regional Park as a destination point. In 2011, the Parks Department Marketing Plan recommended a riparian theme to highlight the park's proximity to the Gila River.

### THE PURPOSE OF A PARK MASTER PLAN

The Park Master Plan outlines the long-range vision for the park over the next 20 years, as well as development priorities that will provide for both the public's enjoyment and the protection of the park's resources. The Park Master Plan also:

- Serves as a guide and policy document for current and future park staff, partnering agencies, elected officials, and interested members of the public;
- Guides management of natural, cultural, and recreational resources;
- Considers a range of issues such as staffing, funding, encroachment, wildlife corridors, public needs, and more;
- Considers staff, stakeholder, and public recommendations;
- Identifies park enhancement opportunities including possible upgrades to park facilities, recreation infrastructure, restoration opportunities, etc.

The park master plan sets the stage for but does not dictate operational issues or define programs.

### THE PLANNING PROCESS

A typical park master plan may take twelve to eighteen months to develop. It takes this amount of time to perform research, consult with neighboring government entities and stakeholders, consult the public, and develop and write the plan itself.

The park master plan may include a range of draft alternatives for staff, the Parks and Recreation Commission, stakeholders, and the public to consider. The final alternative is not selected by a popularity contest or vote; but rather the Department carefully selects the final alternative(s) that best support existing plans and goals, the public's need, protects its natural and cultural resources, and provides a recreational amenity to

the public while producing revenue for sustainable park management. The final version of the draft plan is then presented to the Parks Commission to gain its recommendation for approval; this is followed by another presentation to the County Board of Supervisors for final approval for and adoption of the plan. At that point, the plan becomes final.

### PLAN CONSIDERATIONS

- The 1988 Master Plan is based on the foundations established in the 1965 Master Plan which reflects the initial effort to protect open space areas as regional parks under the BLM's Recreation and Public Purposes Act (R&PP). Staff continues to remain deeply committed to that vision. The 2015 Master Plan revision aims to blend the founding vision with current recreation needs and trends, providing recreation services to a broad and diverse population.
- Today, residential neighborhoods have 5 to 10 acre parks nearby and visitation at regional parks, such as Estrella, has decreased. Neighborhood pocket parks provide options for informal sports and charter schools make use of them. They serve mostly as tot lots with some other open space areas. As tots age out of that recreation level of service, those older youth need more organized sports opportunities. School yards are typically locked, and no longer available for informal recreation.
- Currently, and with the reduction of sports offered through schools, organized sports and active recreation are in need of land. Estrella Mountain Regional Park is in a position to partner with nonprofit organizations in agreements that will bring more youth and their families into the park. Keep in mind the turf use proposal of the plan represents less than one percent of the entire park.
- The Estrella Youth Sports partnership proposal, represented in 2015 Master Plan revision, is aligned with the 1965 and 1988 Master Plans' goals for health and active life styles and working with nonprofit partners.
- This plan aims to relocate and create new recreation areas with improved amenities responding to what was said by the public during the input meetings of this planning process.
- Currently, the County has to plan for operations and maintenance at Estrella Mountain, or any of the regional parks for which it holds administrative responsibility, based on existing staff levels. While volunteers are extremely valuable to the function of the park, and enhanced park programs, the County has a duty to maintain them.
- All park staff are encouraged to market what services are provided at this, and other regional County parks.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

For park master plan update information, contact the Department's Park Planner by email at:

[leighjohnson@mail.maricopa.gov](mailto:leighjohnson@mail.maricopa.gov).

