

Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Strategic System Master Plan Addendum 2014



Maricopa County
Parks and Recreation

Strategic System Master Plan Addendum





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Background

In 2007 the Department began an extensive effort to clearly define the qualities and characteristics of a “high quality park system” most appropriate for Maricopa County.

The Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department desired a Strategic System Master Plan (Strategic Plan) to guide decision-making for the future development and management of its parks, trails, recreation and open space opportunities. The purpose of the Strategic Plan is to:

- Provide a conceptual framework or blueprint to strategically position the Department as the recognized leader in delivering regional parks and recreation services, opportunities, experiences and benefits, and successfully guide the Department toward the desired future destination.
- Create a Plan that will set forth the appropriate park system structure and policies to guide County leadership in meeting the needs of the expanding population of the County for the next 50 years.
- Affirm that the County Park System will continue to remain one of the finest park systems in the United States.

The Strategic Plan was adopted by the Board of Supervisors in June 2009.

Maricopa County Parks and Recreation is comprised of 10 regional parks that encompass more than 120,000 acres. Last year the total visitation to the parks and concession operated facilities in the system totaled more than 2 million visitors. Following the direction of the 2009 System Plan many improvements have been achieved.





Accomplishments

The results of Strategic Plan process included the recommendation of over one hundred goals or action items for the Department to pursue in order to maintain a high quality parks and recreation system. Most of the goals require multiple layers of activity and action steps to realize their full achievement. These goals were then placed into four categories: land and facilities, programs, operations and maintenance, and financing and administration, and assigned to the appropriate staff. Despite the recent and prolonged economic recession, the Department has made significant strides to improve its performance while enhancing the park visitors' experience. These efforts have increased park revenue and minimized the reliance on the County general fund. The Department has completed or made significant progress with 34 of these goals or action items. Several major accomplishments include:

- An online campground reservation system was implemented by the spring of 2011 and has received a positive reaction from the public. This system provides an increased level of customer service by allowing visitors to view and book campsites and other services online and allows staff to function more efficiently and provide quicker camper check-ins. (Goal 33)
- A Volunteer Coordinator position was created in November 2011 and has shown great success in all areas. Policy PK102 has been approved to guide volunteerism. The number of volunteer opportunities and hours logged each year has increased. During the period of July 2013 to June 2014, volunteers recorded over 99,485 hours of service; a 13 per cent increase over the previous year and a dollar value of over \$2,202,624.¹ The Coordinator produced a Volunteer Manual and Training program that is now available electronically and has advanced the Adopt-a-Trail program by matching sponsors to trail segments. (Goals 27, 59-61)
- A cost of service report was completed in 2013 and a price increase was approved by Board of Supervisors in May 2014, the first comprehensive price increase since 2009. This will assist the Department to keep up with the rising cost of service. (Goals 86-87, 101)

Similarly, many goals require ongoing attention or coordination with other agencies and often times do not include a formal end date. Substantial attention has been given to many of the goals, including:

- The Department has made concerted efforts to resolve policy interpretation issues with the BLM and has met repeatedly over the last three years with their District, State, and Federal offices to resolve their limitations on allowing concessionaires to operate and provide recreation activities or services on County park properties that were deeded or leased to the County through the Recreation and Public Purposes Act. The limitations prevent the Department from offering activities and services that the public desires and from increasing revenue generating opportunities. Department staff continues to pursue this issue with the assistance of Government Relations and, further, the National Association of Counties has included this in a resolution in their national policy platform. (Goals 23-24)

¹ Using Independent Sector volunteer per hour value of \$22.52

https://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time.



- Building meaningful partnerships is a goal area that requires an ongoing commitment in order to cultivate and maintain relationships with other agencies or organizations. The Department has fostered many successful partnerships; these include: (Goals 20, 51, 102)
 - County Library District – constructed a combined library and nature center at White Tank Mountain Regional Park;
 - Estrella Youth Sports - proposed development and expansion of sports fields and new facilities at Estrella Mountain Regional Park;
 - El Rio – a multi-jurisdictional project (led by Maricopa County Flood Control District) that will incorporate recreation and education into flood control activities along a 17-mile stretch of the Gila River, to include a segment that passes through Estrella Mountain Regional Park;
 - U.S. Forest Service – trail connections at Utery Mountain Regional Park, Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area, Maricopa Trail; and currently exploring additional opportunities;
 - Conservation Alliance – valley-wide efforts for biological research, education, and stewardship of parks and open space.

New Trends and Issues

Over the course of the past five years many issues, challenges, and opportunities noted in the plan have been addressed through a series of tactical efforts to improve the Park System. The Strategic Plan is scheduled to be fully updated every 10 years. Over the past five years, however, several new trends and issues have emerged that should be addressed in addition to the on-going efforts to fully implement the tactics set-forth in the Strategic Plan. Many of these “new” issues were addressed at some level in the Strategic Plan but new information and changes in socio-economic patterns call for a fresh look at certain topics.

Arizonans Value Parks, Trails, and Open Space

Late in 2009, the Center for the Future of Arizona published *The Arizona We Want* (<http://www.thearizonawewant.org/>). The effort provided a realistic and contemporary picture of what citizens think about life in Arizona communities, what they want for the future, and how they think we can work together to achieve a common set of goals. The foundation of the study was an extensive Gallup Poll. The poll produced six overarching results that help explain many of the collective beliefs and values shared by the people who live here. The most notable finding for the Department was the remarkable attachment people have for aesthetics and the natural environment. **“The state’s natural beauty and open space are seen by citizens as our greatest asset. Arizona’s landscapes matter - on both an economic and emotional level. It’s important that growth and development in the future respect the passion that citizens feel for the environment.”** Balancing population growth with preserving open space and recreation opportunities ranked higher than mass transit, new highways and roads, improving airports and rail systems, and providing a statewide network of high speed internet. The only issue ranking higher was the protection of our water supplies.



Arizonans want to make sure that the open space and parks we have are well managed and that the elements that make our state unique and special are conserved for future generations. Accordingly, new tactics should be developed and existing tactics should be revised to assure our residents we:

- **have a well-managed regional system of protected and connected open spaces;**
- **have a comprehensive plan for acquisition and limited, appropriate development of future open space areas and eco-systems as growth dictates; and**
- **have regional policies in place that seek to not only balance but also enhance growth through proper conservation measures.**

Increasing Need for Stewardship, Conservation, and Restoration

Following publication of *The Arizona We Want*, the Center for the Future of Arizona began a competition that challenged organizations and coalitions to form strategies and actions to address the most pressing issues identified in the publication. One of the competition finalists was the development of a coalition called The Conservation Alliance (Alliance). Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department was one of the initial founders and architects for the Alliance.

The Conservation Alliance is a Desert Botanical Garden-led coalition of scientists, land managers, educators, community liaisons, and conservation-based non-profit organizations committed to the ecological and recreational sustainability of the mountain park preserves in and around the Phoenix metropolitan area. The ultimate goals are to establish strong working relationships between and among all members of the Conservation Alliance and to put into place programs and mechanisms that will position the Alliance to continue to move its priority actions forward. Community engagement in the study, restoration, and promotion of the preserve system are the key to success.

Current Conservation Alliance Partners include:

- Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department
- City of Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department
- Desert Botanical Garden
- Audubon AZ
- McDowell Sonoran Conservancy
- Phoenix Mountains Preservation Council
- And ASU's:
 - CAP LTER (Central Arizona-Phoenix Long-term Ecological Research project)
 - School of Community Resources and Development
 - School of Life Sciences, Ecology Community of Practice

The Alliance received a \$300,000 Pulliam Grant to fund the development of the organization and provide seed money to further study the existing condition of these park preserves. In conjunction with



the conditional assessments, the Alliance will begin developing restoration and stewardship plans to sustain these treasured areas for future generations. In addition, marketing efforts will be developed to showcase the quality of life values and economic benefits offered by these gems. Accordingly, new tactics should be developed and existing tactics should be revised to align with efforts of the Conservation Alliance.

Growing Supply and Competitive Advantage

The 2015-2020 Managing for Results draft plan acknowledged that increased competition for recreational users will negatively impact the Department's ability to generate revenue through user fees to meet its operating expenses. Sometimes this competition leads to unauthorized public access and misuse of park lands and facilities. Further, when combined with decreasing and sporadic funding for capital improvements, these pressures limit the Department's ability to keep up with aging or damaged infrastructure.

Most local municipalities offer "free" parks, trails, and open space to the public. Similarly, some localities have recently made significant infrastructure improvements or acquired additional lands. The Department, on the other hand, charges user fees for entrance into its parks in order to meet operating expenses. Nonetheless, what the Department can provide visitors that free parks cannot is high-quality educational programs and other visitor services, uncongested trailheads and parking, camping, and it links communities to County parks via the Maricopa Trail. County parks also provide a sense of security for visitors by having controlled entry and a dedicated park staff.

Economic Development Opportunities

Vulture Mountains Recreation Area will provide a boon to tourism and recreation in the northern part of the County, including the Town of Wickenburg. OHV recreation provides \$1.8 billion and supports over 13,000 related jobs in Maricopa County as a whole (Arizona State Parks, Economic Impact of Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation to Arizona, 2003).

The proposed sports field complex at Estrella Mountain Regional Park will fill a gap in the shortage of ball and multi-purpose sports fields in the southwest valley. The complex will not only attract local teams and leagues but also tournament players for multi-day events. The influx of players and visitors is expected to increase camping and the use of other park amenities and services. The players will also likely venture out into the local community to patronize restaurants, gas stations, and utilize other commercial services.

The El Rio Watercourse project (led by Maricopa County Flood Control District) will address flood and erosion issues along the Gila River and will provide economic development opportunities from Avondale to Buckeye. El Rio will provide increased recreation opportunities and improvements to environmental resources by linking fragmented trails and offering habitat viewing stations.



Developing and Managing an Expanding Park System

As the population grows, so does the need to provide parks, trails, open space, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Likewise, maintaining a connection with the County's open space heritage is not only an expectation of County residents, but also vital to its economic vitality.

The inclusion of 71,000 acres at Vulture Mountains Recreation Area allows the Department to expand its vision and mission to connect more people with nature while providing high quality outdoor experiences. Future opportunities to partner with the Tonto National Forest are being explored; this will further enhance and expand recreation and tourism, but some level of investment will be required. By partnering with other County departments and project partners, the Department will be able to add amenities and services in a sustainable manner. However, with these opportunities also comes the need for reliable funding sources and will require additional staffing.

Expanding Recreation Opportunities

The Department frequently examines or implements opportunities that would be a good fit for its vision and mission. Recent expansion efforts include the following:

- Maricopa Trail: additional trail segments link County's parks with communities, bringing the trail system to 65% completion;
- Vulture Mountains Recreation Area: the BLM's most current travel management plan will once again allow racing on the designated OHV race track – an activity that has been missing from the area;
- Estrella Mountain Regional Park: the negotiations currently underway to bring ball fields and multi-purpose fields to the park will allow the Department to offer team and tournament play to the park and expand its visitor base;
- Lake Pleasant Regional Park: new trails were constructed with the assistance of AZCC;
- Agua Fria Conservation Area: recent planning and development will allow increased fishing, wildlife viewing, and trail opportunities;
- North Lake Pleasant Management Plan: cooperative planning with BLM will allow consistent recreational uses throughout the northern lake area; and
- White Tank Mountain Regional Park: improved camping allows campers to enjoy a longer stay.

Additionally, new "playscapes" have been installed at multiple parks that will enhance child's play experience by providing unique pieces to climb, slide, or swing on, inviting the child to use his/her imagination in new ways. The Department has also explored bike parks, fly-boarding, and other activities for suitability. A newly developed "determining use" matrix may be used to objectively evaluate a new activity's suitability and aid decision-making.

The Next Five Years

The Department has made significant organizational and staff changes over the last several years, both of which have contributed to it making great strides in accomplishing its strategic goals – with each



goal representing a significant undertaking. After five years of implementing the Strategic Plan, over 60 goals or action items remain. These remaining goals were evaluated by staff and the list was further narrowed down to those still relevant and feasible over the next five years; the condensed list is presented as Exhibit A. (Exhibit A details all goals and tactics, updates responsible staff, and provides recommendations.) The Department would be best served to evaluate the remaining goal areas and refocus its attention towards specific tactics that can produce meaningful results over the next five years. Briefly, those include:

- Establish dependable and dedicated funding for park capital improvement, major maintenance, and upgrades to aging infrastructure to systematically develop, maintain, repair, and upgrade existing facilities, to meet visitor expectations for quality parks and facilities;
- Develop the Vulture Mountains Recreation Area in accordance with its approved master plan (New goal added);
- Expand natural/cultural resource planning and management, align tactics with our partners the Central Arizona Conservation Alliance (Goal 6);
- Increase marketing strategies, including a website update and expanded social media opportunities (Goal 44); and
- Develop standards for new concession agreements and other revenue generating contracts to include market rate revenue benchmarks (Goal 96).

Accomplishing these goals will not only support the Department's mission for stewardship, but will also expose new visitors to the Park System and provide additional insight to visitor preferences to increase customer service. These goals also provide a strategy to retain career-driven staff, aid in addressing new trends and issues identified previously, as well as address issues identified by the 2015-2020 Managing for Results draft plan. When combined with the goals already completed, accomplishing these additional goals will position the Department to successfully take on the challenges and opportunities of the *next* ten years.