

Chapter 5

Open Space, Parks and Recreation



"An accessible city connected by green spaces."

"Well appointed parks with activities for all ages."

GOALS	POLICIES FOR DECISION MAKERS
Every resident is within a ten-minute walk of a park, greenway or other publicly accessible, usable open space.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assure, to the extent possible, that all communities are conveniently served by city parks and recreational facilities. Continue support for non-city parks that provide recreational amenities and access to nature.
City parks and recreation facilities are safe, well-maintained and widely used.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide recreational facilities and programs suited to the city's changing population. Foster partnerships to improve and maintain park facilities. Provide adequate, regular funding to maintain a high quality city parks and recreation system.
The city's major natural amenities are enjoyed by residents and visitors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote access and enjoyment of the city's major water features and open spaces.

findings

Most residents are within a five to ten minute walk or bicycle ride to a public park.

City parks are maintained by the Public Works Department rather than the Parks and Recreation Department.

Private organizations have partnered with the City to provide and maintain high-quality parks facilities.

Three major parks—Railroad Park downtown (opened in 2010 and developed in partnership with the Railroad Park Foundation), Red Mountain Park, and Ruffner Mountain Nature Center—provide Birmingham with a wealth of park opportunities.

Recreation centers are unevenly distributed throughout the city relative to neighborhoods and population densities. However, some unserved areas have access to privately operated recreation facilities.

City investments in the park and recreation system include major improvements to three city parks and the development of a minor-league baseball stadium downtown.

Quality of life, which includes access to parks, nature and recreational amenities, is an increasingly important consideration in private sector economic investment decisions.

challenges

City-owned parks are unevenly maintained.

City-owned parks are not consistently programmed or equipped to maximize their use by neighborhood residents.

Declining neighborhood populations affect use and programming in some city parks and recreation areas.

Access to Red Mountain Park, Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve and some city parks is limited due to their locations at the edges of the city, inadequate pedestrian access, industrial and transportation barriers, surrounding development and other factors.

The Parks and Recreation Department has limited funding for park improvements, maintenance and new park development. Park-system management is divided between the Parks Board and the city administration. The board sets policy and directs staff activities, but the city controls funding for operations and capital expenditures.

A. What the Community Said

VISIONING FORUM

The city's parks, landscape and topography—its green infrastructure—was ranked by far as Birmingham's greatest asset. The condition of parks and the need for more of them was also mentioned as a citywide challenge. Table discussions at the forum identified bike/walking paths and parks as a priority for the community.

GREEN SYSTEMS AND SUSTAINABILITY WORKSHOP

During the Communities of Interest workshop on Green Systems and Sustainability, attendees identified issues that brought them to the meeting and table discussions provided a set of priorities. Several of those dealt with city parks and open space:

Issues

- Variety of parks and recreation facilities
- Recreational access to the Cahaba River
- Using the city's green amenities to attract investment

Table Priorities

- Improve and link parks
- Improve connectivity
- Increase public awareness on green systems and sustainability
- Build greenways with destinations

B. Parks and Open Space System

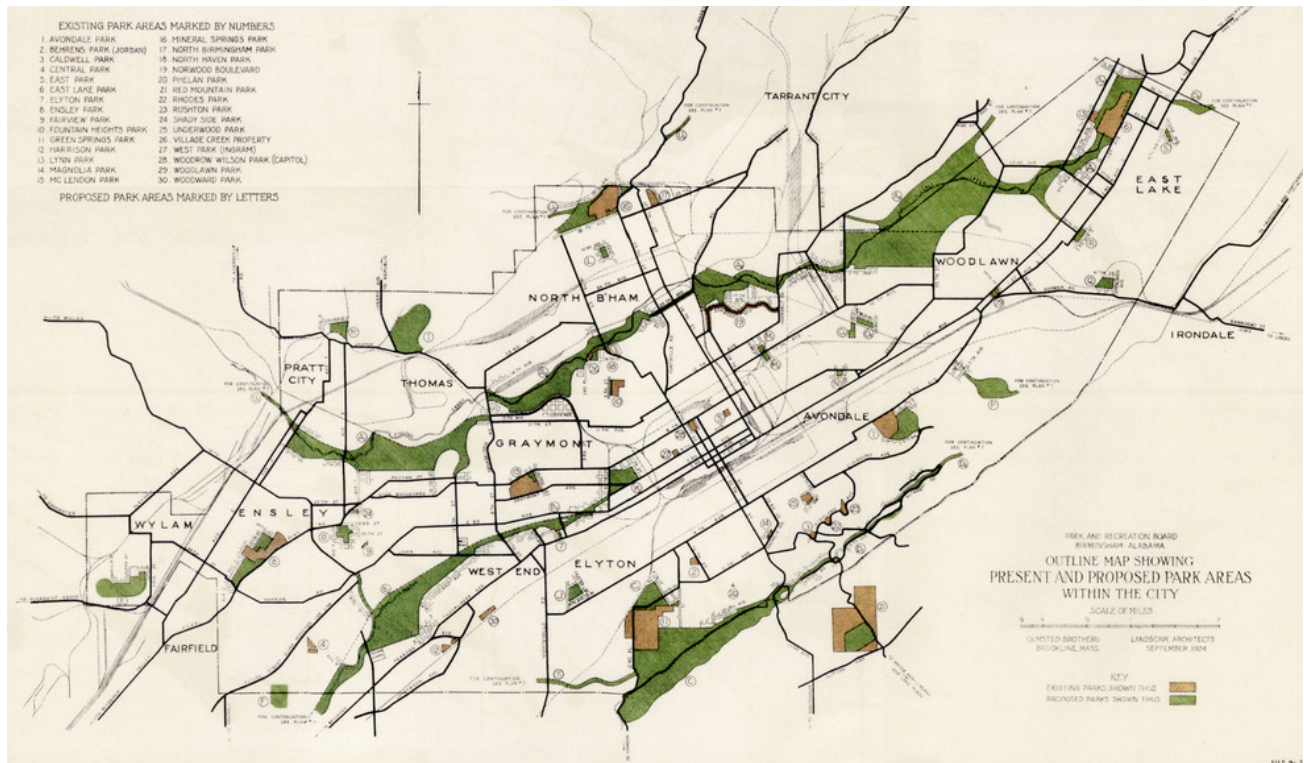
Birmingham has a significant inventory of parks and open spaces, all of which are an important component of the city's green infrastructure network. In addition to traditionally developed civic and neighborhood parks, the parks and open space system has expanded over time to include a wide variety of open space amenities. These include former mining land allowed to return to nature as preserves and hiking areas, historically flooded properties reclaimed for greenways, and special parks such as the Botanical Gardens, Vulcan Park and Railroad Park.

A comprehensive park system for the city was formulated in the 1925 Olmsted Parks Plan. Unfortunately, much of the plan would go unrealized for decades. But, with the more recent conversion of formerly developed floodplains to parks and greenways, elements of the Olmsted Plan are finally coming to fruition.

THE OLMSTED PLAN

In 1925 the Birmingham Parks and Recreation Authority published the Olmsted Brothers' *A Park System for Birmingham*. The countywide plan recommended numerous park expansion and park construction projects, acquisition of strategic lands to protect the domestic water supply, and preservation of floodplains, natural drainage systems and ridge tops. Following the development of the plan, several individual parks were created, though the more ambitious goals of the plan went largely unachieved. But after damaging flood events in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the sustainability of development within the floodplains of Village Creek and other streams ultimately came into question, proving the advice of the Olmsted Plan sound.

Birmingham and nearby cities began to acquire flood-damaged lands to create new parks, open spaces and recreational trails. In recent years there has been increased recognition of the visionary plan by multiple government and non-government entities. Today, organizations such as the Freshwater Land Trust are working on new initiatives inspired by the principles of the Olmsted Brothers' plan.



The Olmsted Brothers' "A Parks System for Birmingham," 1925

COAL MINES TO ZIP LINES

Other innovative parks have resulted from the reclamation and reuse of former mining lands for open space. Vulcan Park opened on Red Mountain atop former mines. The park is home to the Vulcan statue and a mining history museum. Adjacent to the park is the mile-long Vulcan Trail developed along a former rail line that served the mining operations.

In 1977 Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve began on a site originally less than 30 acres along the ridgeline of Red Mountain east of Downtown Birmingham. Today the preserve extends over 1,000 acres and includes an environmental education center and hiking trails that traverse mining areas that have been allowed to return to a natural condition.

More recently, Red Mountain Park was created when USS Realty sold the park property to the Red Mountain Greenway and Recreational Area Commission. The subsidiary of US Steel sold the site "at a greatly reduced



Red Mountain Park began zip line tours in April 2012 (Photo: Red Mountain Park)

price, and also made a \$1 million contribution" to assist in the creation of the park.¹ Like Vulcan Park and Ruffner Mountain, Red Mountain Park spreads across a 1,100-acre former mining site. The park opened to the public in 2012 and features mining interpretive elements and recreational activities like hiking and zip line tours.

¹ Red Mountain Park, "Quick Facts," <http://www.redmountainpark.org/park-overview/quick-facts>.

CITY OF BIRMINGHAM PARKS SYSTEM

The city parks system is made up of district, neighborhood, and vest pocket parks; recreational facilities and sports complexes; and unique parks and open spaces that serve the region. The City of Birmingham Parks Board, whose members are appointed by the Birmingham City Council, is responsible for operating the city parks system. The Parks Board provides direction to the Parks and Recreation Department and establishes park policies. The City Council has a Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Committee that makes recommendations to the full Council on park-related matters.

The Parks Board holds 124 individual properties, which comprise more than 2,000 acres throughout the city. The department oversees some 100 parks and recreation facilities throughout the city. Maintenance is provided by the Public Works Department.

Supplementing these parks, and also representing elements within the city's green infrastructure system, are parks and recreational facilities maintained by the Board of Education and Housing Authority.

District, Neighborhood and Pocket Parks and Greenways

For management purposes, the city classifies its municipal parks based on their size and types of facilities offered. Recently, the city has made special allocations for major improvements to three neighborhood and district parks—Avondale, Cooper Green and Crestwood parks.



Renovated Avondale Park re-opened in October 2011.

Greenwood Park will soon be the newest addition to the city's slate of district, neighborhood and pocket parks. Located on 34 acres of floodplain acquired with federal FEMA grants in east Birmingham, the park will include engineered wetlands, an educational walking trail, a playground and other facilities. The park is part of the larger Village Creek Greenway initiative and is being supported largely through the assistance of McWane Inc. as part of a court settlement with the US EPA regarding pollution of Village Creek by way of nearby Avondale Creek.

DISTRICT PARKS

District or community parks are relatively large, ranging in size from 15 to over 100 acres, and serve multiple neighborhoods. They typically include sports facilities and may also include community centers, pools and passive recreation areas. District parks are often located along major streets and near junior or senior high schools. These include:

- Avondale Park
- Bradford Park
- Cooper Green Park
- East Lake Park
- Ensley Park
- Fountain Heights Park
- George Ward Park
- M.E. Wiggins Park
- North Birmingham Park
- Roosevelt City Park



WC Patton Park is a 30-acre park serving the East Birmingham and Kingston neighborhoods, but the immediate neighborhood is industrial. (Photo: Andre Natta)

Responding to emerging national trends and local interest, the City opened its first dog park in 2009, Green Springs Dog Park. The 2.7-acre, fenced, off-leash area for dogs is located at George Ward Park in south-central Birmingham. Dog parks have typically developed in denser cities, where many dog owners live in condominiums, apartments or other residential areas without private yards, but the trend has grown, and less-dense communities have also shown interest in these facilities. Soon after Green Springs Dog Park opened in Birmingham, a similar park opened in Hoover.

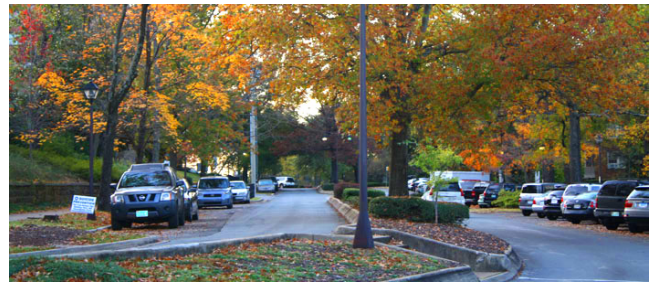
NEIGHBORHOOD AND POCKET PARKS

Neighborhood parks make up the bulk of the municipal parks system. They vary in size from five to fifteen acres. They generally serve the recreational needs of individual neighborhoods and include parks that serve business districts. Neighborhood parks typically include playgrounds, passive recreation areas, multi-use fields and tennis or basketball courts and are often located near elementary schools. Some neighborhood parks include community centers and swimming pools.

Pocket parks are the smallest parks in the system, usually less than two acres in size. These parks supplement rather than substitute for neighborhood parks. They generally consist of small passive recreational spaces, such as picnic and seating areas, and playgrounds. Many pocket parks resulted from the conversion of vacant lots in opportune locations, several of which are located on land leased to the city by private property owners.

GREENWAYS

Birmingham's greenways are linear open spaces that sometimes offer pedestrian and bicycle facilities and connect parks, schools, nature preserves, historic sites and other destinations. Greenways are connective tissue within the green infrastructure system and range from naturalistic trails (Vulcan Trail Park) to landscaped urban boulevards such as 20th Street (Birmingham Green), Norwood Boulevard, Highland Avenue, and Bush Boulevard. Others, such as Shades Creek Park and Altamont Park are not improved for specific recreational uses but nonetheless play roles as part of the city's green infrastructure system, supporting stormwater management and providing natural open space in otherwise urban environments.



Highland Avenue's landscaped boulevard links three neighborhood parks and the Highland Golf Course.

Special and Regional Parks

In addition to the city's more traditional parks and recreation facilities, the parks system includes several "special parks" and regional parks, many of which were created through partnerships with community organizations, private foundations and other groups.

SPECIAL PARKS

Special parks typically serve a singular, unique function, including athletic facilities, golf course, and historic or cultural sites. In several cases, these sites are owned by the City but are managed by an independent organization.

These include:

- Arlington House
- Birmingham CrossPlex
- Don Hawkins Park
- Highland Golf Course
- Huffman Park
- Inglenook Park
- Kelly Ingram Park
- Lawson Field
- Linn Park
- Lowery Park



The popularity of the new Railroad Park has stirred the community's hopes for the future of the city. (Photo: Mark, Almond, Birmingham News)

- Lynn Park
- McLendon Park/Legion Field
- Railroad Park
- Rickwood Field
- Vulcan Park
- Wahoma Park

The Birmingham Crossplex at Fair Park and Railroad Park are new additions to the city's roster of special parks. Vulcan and Railroad Parks are examples of how desired amenities have been achieved through partnerships between the city and private organizations. Both are operated by nonprofit organizations with financial support from the City and the community.

Following the success of Railroad Park in Midtown, the city, with assistance of business leaders, has now opened a minor-league baseball stadium nearby. The Birmingham Barons, who once played at historic Rickwood Field, left the city in 1987 to play in Hoover. The Barons have returned to Birmingham to play in the new stadium. The popularity of Railroad Park and the redevelopment interest it has spurred in the area, now being called the Parkside district, emphasizes the positive effects that parks and recreational facilities can have on community reinvestment. Currently, low-density light industrial, warehousing, automotive and similar businesses are the predominant activities in the Parkside district. But, the opening of the park spurred development interest in the area, which is now being viewed as a reinvestment area for denser, urban development, including residential and mixed-use projects capitalizing on proximity to the park and UAB, which also is interested in extending the campus closer to the park. The opening of the baseball stadium, Regions Field, will only strengthen the popularity of the park and the development market in the surrounding area.



Rendering of Regions Field, Birmingham's downtown baseball stadium, under construction in 2012. (Image: HKS Inc.)



Birmingham Botanical Gardens

REGIONAL PARKS

Birmingham is also home to several significant parks that serve as special destinations to the broader region. These include the Birmingham Zoo (Lane Park), the Botanical Gardens, Ruffner Mountain Nature Center, and Red Mountain Park. With the exception of the Botanical Gardens, each is operated independently from the City Parks and Recreation Board. Whereas Zoo management was privatized in 1999—though still receiving City support and located in City-owned Lane Park—the Botanical Gardens, also in Lane Park, remain a public/private partnership between the Birmingham Botanical Society and the City.

Over half of the 1,000 acres of Ruffner Mountain Nature Center are owned by the City of Birmingham. The newest addition, Red Mountain Park, at over 1,100 acres, is owned and operated by the state-created Red Mountain Greenway and Recreational Area Commission.

Recreation Centers

The Parks and Recreation Department currently operates eighteen recreation centers and two senior centers. New recreation centers are being established on the campus of Jefferson State Community College in northeast Birmingham and in the Oxmoor Valley in southwest Birmingham. The centers are open year round and offer programs for all ages.

In addition to the recreation centers provided by the City of Birmingham, there are privately operated recreation facilities in various areas of the city including those operated by the YMCA and AG Gaston Boys and Girls

How Do Birmingham Parks Compare Nationally?

In 2011, the Trust for Public Land published “City Park Facts,” a survey of the state of parks and open space among America’s 85 most populous cities. According to the report 3.7% of Birmingham’s land area is parkland; the median amount of parkland for cities in the study’s “low density” category was 5.6%.

Birmingham offers 15.2 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, well above more densely populated cities but well below the median amount (20.3 acres) of parkland per 1,000 residents of similarly low-density cities. The survey included parkland owned by the City Parks and Recreation Board, Red Mountain Park Commission and Ruffner Mountain Nature Coalition—about 3,500 acres. The survey indicated that Birmingham



The Olympic competition pool at the Birmingham Crossplex
(Photo: Bernard Troncale, Birmingham News)

fares well compared to other cities in terms of the number of playgrounds per 10,000 residents. According to the report, Birmingham provides 3.5 playgrounds per 10,000 residents while the median of all cities surveyed was 2.1.

While Birmingham can tout the size of Red Mountain Park and Ruffner Mountain Nature Center, each over 1,000 acres, the nation’s largest park located within a municipality is Anchorage’s Chugach State Park at 490,000 acres. However, Birmingham was ranked third for the number of public swimming pools per 100,000 residents.

The report also indicated that, in 2009, the highest funded city parks and recreation programs invested over \$200 per resident in capital and operational costs for parks—excluding zoos, stadiums, and similar special facilities—while the least-funded invested under \$40 per resident. The median funding among the cities surveyed was \$84 annually per capita. For Birmingham, the median operational spending in 2008 was \$56 per capita. (Note: Park total funding information for Birmingham was not available at the time of the report.)

More information: The Trust for Public Land, Center for City Park Excellence, “City Park Facts 2011.” See www.tpl.org/research/parks/ccpe.html; and <http://parkscore.tpl.org>.

Club. The YMCA maintains eleven recreational facilities in the metropolitan area, three of which are located in Birmingham: Shades Valley facility in Redmont Park, Northeast facility in Roebuck, and the Downtown facility. The YMCA also operates a youth center downtown. There are two AG Gaston Boy and Girls Club locations, one in the West End area and another in the North Avondale area.

Level of Service

While the city parks system meets National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) standards of service in most respects for parks and recreational facilities, research has repeatedly shown that the most important variable in how much and how often people use a green space is distance—especially walking time—from home.² They are willing to travel to use large, unique open space of regional

importance, but for frequent use, parks need to be close by. NRPA standards, focused on number of acres or facilities per 1,000 residents, were developed during the period of rapid suburbanization following World War II to assure that new subdivisions would have adequate amounts of parks and recreation facilities. In recent years, urban parks advocates have recognized that the standards are not as appropriate in urban communities, particularly ones such as Birmingham that have demonstrated a strong desire for more walkable, bikeable environments. In essence, acreage is less important than accessibility. Instead, urban park systems increasingly emphasize a goal of a 10-minute walk to a park.

² Design Center for American Landscape, “People and Urban Green Areas: Perception and Use,” Issue 4, 2003, *Forsyth*.

PARKS ORGANIZATIONS AND PROGRAMS

City, regional and state agencies and private organizations are involved in the expansion and improvement of Birmingham's parks and open space system. In addition to those already mentioned, several city parks are supported by volunteer "Friends" groups. Also, the Birmingham Environmental Center's Ecoscapes program and various community garden initiatives add to the number and variety of open spaces throughout the city, putting vacant plots back to productive uses that benefit the surrounding neighborhoods in some way.

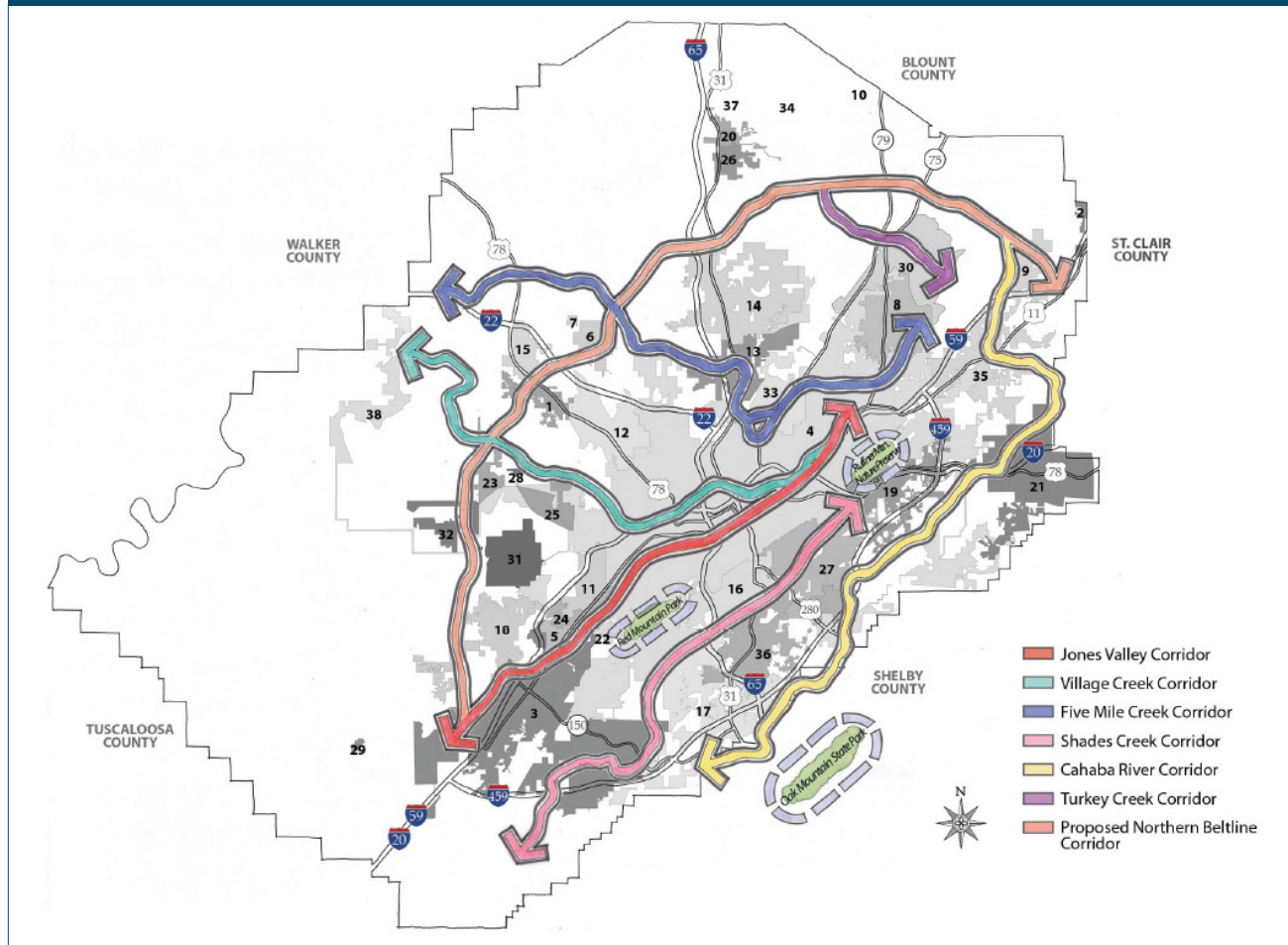
Parks and Open Space Organizations

Birmingham has had great success in achieving parks and open space objectives through partnerships with state and regional agencies and local foundations and community groups. From organizations such as the Village Creek

Society to the state-created Red Mountain Greenway and Recreational Area Commission, many non-municipal organizations are involved in various parks and open space initiatives in the Birmingham area. They include:

- Southern Environmental Center
- Birmingham Zoo
- Birmingham Botanical Society
- Railroad Park Foundation
- Vulcan Park Foundation
- Jefferson County Health Department
- Freshwater Land Trust (FWLT)
- Friends of Linn Park
- Friends of Avondale Park
- Village Creek Society
- Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership
- Champions for Village Creek Greenway
- Red Mountain Greenway and Recreational Area Commission

FIGURE 5.1: RED ROCK RIDGE AND VALLEY TRAIL SYSTEM CONCEPT



Source: www.redrocktrail.org

Greenway and Parks Programs

There are a number of greenway and parks initiatives currently underway in Birmingham. These programs promise to advance quality of life and interconnect parks and other components of the city's green infrastructure network, as well as connecting neighborhoods, schools, business areas and other destinations.

RED ROCK RIDGE AND VALLEY TRAIL SYSTEM

This proposed countywide network of on- and off-road pedestrian and bicycle facilities and greenways provides additional support to previously proposed greenway campaigns, such as the Village Creek Greenway and the High Ore Line Rail-to-Trail. The proposed trails system is a product of the Our One Mile greenway planning process led by the Freshwater Land Trust and supported by other Health Action Partnership members. The City of Birmingham, FWLT and other supporters in 2012 received a TIGER grant to fund an initial phase of the trails system.

VILLAGE CREEK GREENWAY

Since the acquisition of repetitive flood loss properties along the creek, the plan to develop a greenway along this corridor has been a major focus for the Village Creek Society. Pieces of the greenway have incrementally come together over the years, including the construction of Greenwood Park in east Birmingham. The greenway, which ultimately will stretch 26 miles from Roebuck to Ensley, has garnered additional support from the FWLT, Southern

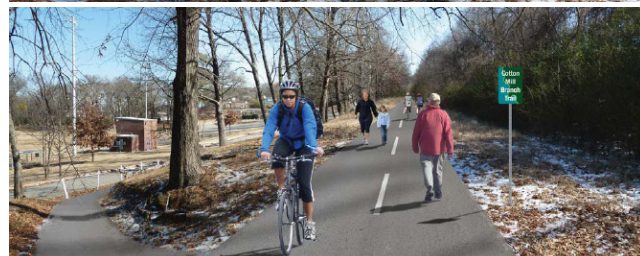
Environmental Center, the City of Birmingham, several neighborhood associations and business representatives and is included in the Red Rock Trail plan.

SHADES CREEK GREENWAY

Another corridor within the countywide trails plan, the Shades Creek Greenway includes a previously built and highly popular segment in Homewood. An additional segment has been proposed in Birmingham's Eastwood area along property acquired by the City. The countywide plan sets an ambitious goal for the greenway, similar in scope to that of the Village Creek Greenway—the corridor would include on- and off-road segments that ultimately connect Red Mountain Park to Ruffner Mountain Nature Center.

THREE PARKS INITIATIVE

This initiative began as a joint funding campaign to develop Railroad Park and Red Mountain Park and provide additional funding to Ruffner Mountain Nature Center. With the support of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, Region 2020 and donors, the initiative was ultimately successful. Since then the parks' leadership have continued this collaborative theme, engaging in mutual long-range planning, organizational training, and sharing a vision to physically connect the parks through greenways and on-road facilities similar to those described in the countywide trail plan.



Dorothy Spears Greenway along Village Creek from the Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System Plan. (Source: Goodwin Mills Cawood, Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System Plan)



Visualization of the proposed Shades Creek Trail in the Eastwood neighborhood from the Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System Plan. (Source: Goodwin Mills Cawood, Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System Plan)

FIGURE 5.2: DISTANCE TO PARKS

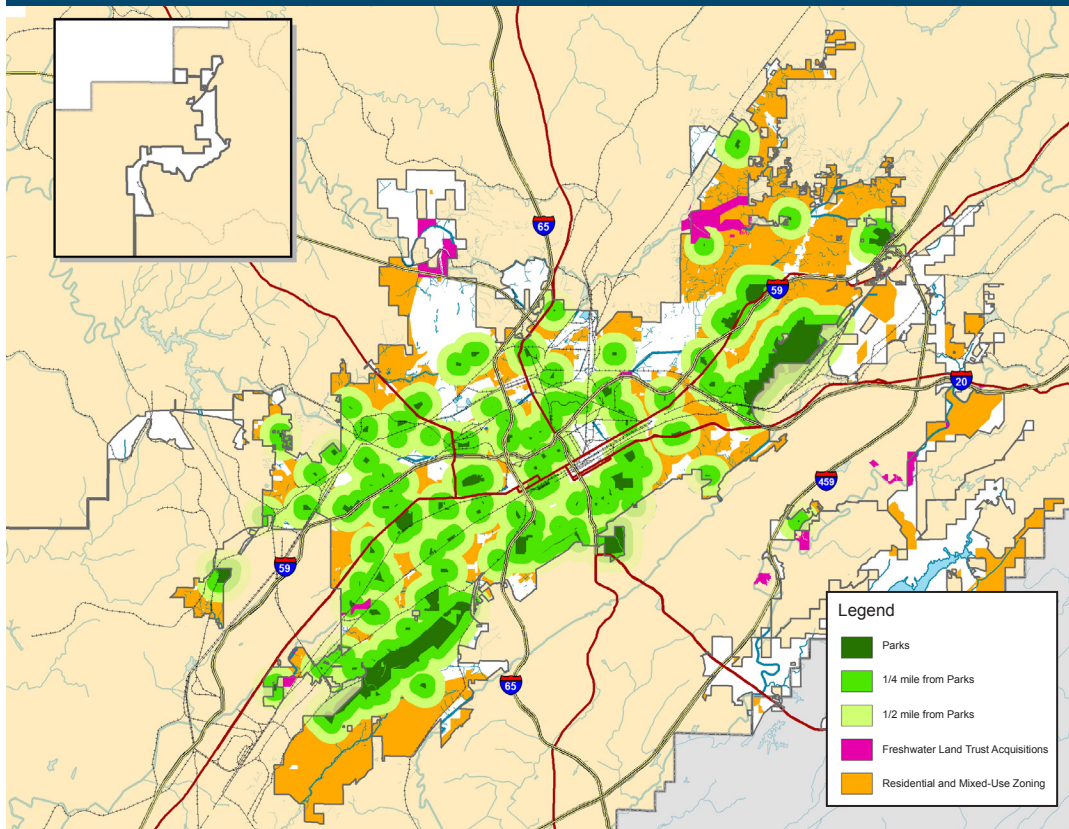
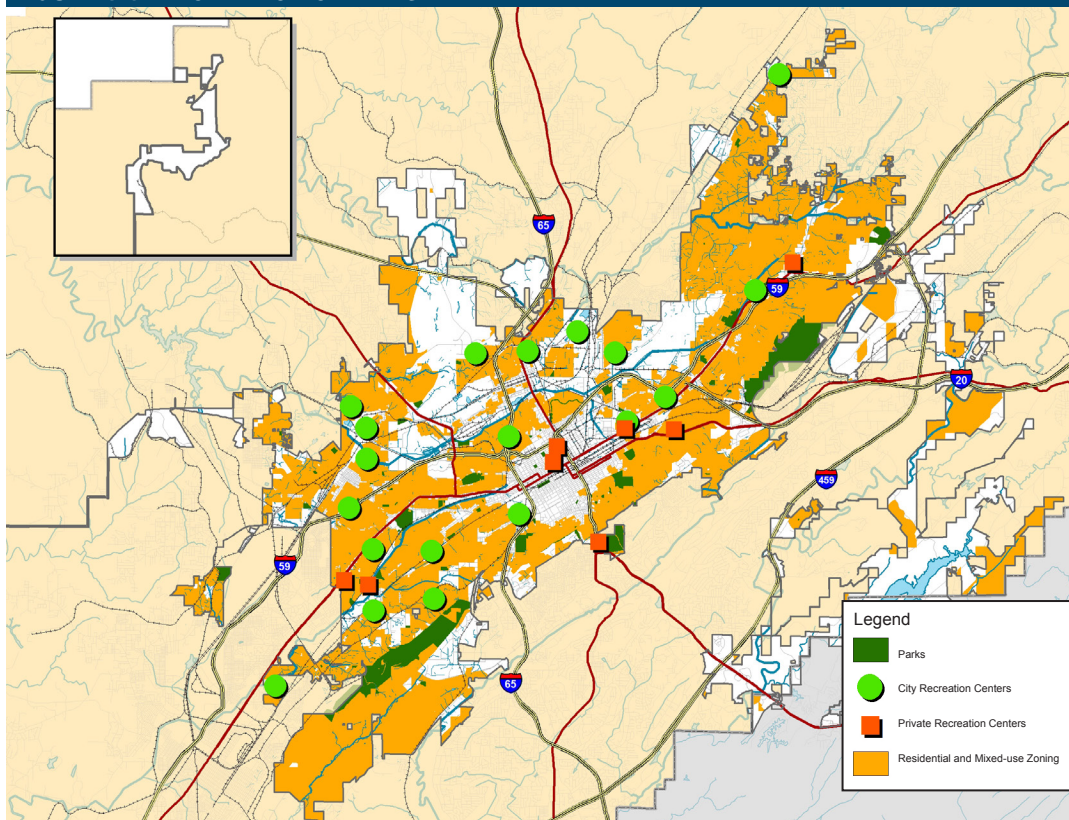


FIGURE 5.3: RECREATION CENTERS



C. Recommendations

goal 1

Every resident is within a ten-minute walk of a park, greenway or other publicly accessible, usable open space

POLICIES

- Assure, to the extent possible, that all communities are conveniently served by city parks and recreational facilities.
- Continue support for non-city parks that provide recreational amenities and access to nature.

STRATEGIES

A. Identify and prioritize residential areas within the city that lack usable open space within a ten-minute walk.

Most Birmingham neighborhoods have convenient access to city and other public parks, recreation and open space amenities. However, some neighborhoods and areas zoned for residential development are much further from existing and planned parks, greenways and recreational facilities. Figure 5.2 shows existing and potential residential areas located further than ½ mile from existing open space amenities. Assuming reasonable walking conditions from neighborhoods to nearby parks (such as relatively flat terrain and safe walking infrastructure), the ½-mile radius represents approximately a ten-minute walk. In reality, walking conditions vary significantly throughout the community, so in some areas a ½ mile can represent a longer, more difficult walk.

Based on the above analysis several areas in Birmingham's northeastern neighborhoods appear to be quite far from nearby parks—Apple Valley, Brownsville Heights, Spring Lake and portions of Roebuck and Huffman. Parts of Oak Ridge Park and Crestwood South in East Birmingham

similarly have less convenient access to parks. In north and west Birmingham, parts of the Smithfield Estates, North Birmingham, and Belview Heights neighborhoods are underserved in terms of nearby parks. Walking access to parks can be further refined by using GIS mapping utilities that show barriers to pedestrian access such as highways, streams, high-speed roads that are difficult to cross, and so on. Figure 5.2 also indicates land acquired by the Freshwater Land Trust that may be used as a part of the Red Rock Trail System and would provide additional access to open space for Birmingham neighborhoods.

Similarly, city recreation centers are unevenly distributed throughout the city relative to population densities. The Parks and Recreation Department operates 18 recreation centers amongst the city's 23 communities. Several densely populated areas do not have recreation centers while other areas with smaller populations have multiple facilities nearby. As Figure 5.3 shows, the Five Points West, Smithfield, Southside, Red Mountain, Eastlake, Huffman, Roebuck-South Eastlake, Crestline, and East Pinson Valley areas have much more limited access to city recreation centers.

Some neighborhoods that are far from city recreation centers have access to recreational facilities operated by private businesses and nonprofit organizations such as the YMCA and AG Gaston Boys & Girls Clubs. However, use of these facilities requires membership and associated fees. In addition, decisions to close, build or relocate these facilities are made privately and independently. They supplement but do not substitute for city-provided recreation services.

Actions

1. Identify opportunity sites in priority areas with limited access to existing parks, recreation and open space amenities.

Priorities should be determined with consideration given to the types of parks and recreational facilities most needed in underserved areas. This will be affected by the demographic composition and trends within the neighborhoods. For example, neighborhoods with a large number of families with young children will desire different amenities than an area with fewer families with children or that have a significant older population. Parks improvements priorities should also be aligned with the community's priorities for community renewal, as discussed in Chapter 8 (pp. 8.18–8.19).

Detailed GIS mapping of city parks and recreation sites can be layered together with mapped demographic data, i.e., age groups, population density, and population growth/loss, to further understand where and what types of facilities are needed. Free web-based and smartphone survey systems are available that can also gather information so the geographic range of responses can be tracked.

Although the presence of vacant, underutilized and tax delinquent and floodway properties throughout the city is an issue for neighborhoods, these lots also offer the opportunity to establish parks within and close to neighborhoods that are far from existing parks and open spaces. Opportunity sites should be considered that have good walking access to underserved areas. Creation of the recreational greenways envisioned in the Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System will also help better serve neighborhoods without easy access to city parks. This will require continued acquisitions by the city and Freshwater Land Trust as discussed in Chapter 4 (pp. 4.18–4.19).

To better serve neighborhoods far from existing recreation centers, there may be opportunities to offer new or enhance existing after-hours programs at city schools, including activities for adults. Also, closed school facilities or other vacant structures may be adaptively reused to develop recreational programs for youth, seniors and other groups as appropriate to the needs of the areas to be served.

2. Update the citywide parks and recreation master plan.

An update to the 1993 citywide parks and recreation master plan is needed to address the future needs of the city parks system considering population loss in various areas over the last twenty years, the desires of neighborhoods given their changing demographics, needs for parks and recreation in potential residential development areas, and management, administration, and funding of the parks and recreation system. This process will provide the city with valuable information to determine parks system priorities consistent with the city's overall developmental goals outlined in this comprehensive plan. The plan should identify financial needs of the system and departmental improvements that may be beneficial to the maintenance of a quality parks and recreation system.

The process should identify the degree to which recreational programs are serving the interests and needs of the community. In addition to athletics, what other types of programs are offered or are missing? Are adult and senior-oriented programs available in neighborhoods where most needed?

Birmingham offers more pool facilities per capita than almost any other city in the US but only some of the city pools are widely used.³ Because the Parks and Recreation Department charges a nominal fee at city pools, usage is tracked and can help determine where continued investment in city pools is warranted or whether ongoing pool maintenance funds would be better used developing or improving other facilities or programs in a given area.

3. Support alternative open space and recreation providers.

Churches, community gardening advocates, philanthropic organizations and others have been successful establishing publicly accessible, usable open spaces as alternatives to traditional, dedicated city parks. These spaces are often located on vacant lots, and similar to many of the city's pocket parks, are quite often on leased land. The Southern Environmental Center's Ecoscape program is a good example of these small, non-traditional open-space amenities. They may contain art, community garden plots, seating and contemplation areas, or environmental education elements. These open spaces are not necessarily permanent but can be used

³ The Trust for Public Land, "City Park Facts," 2010.



The Healing Garden is a Southern Environmental Center Ecoscape Project on the campus of Princeton Baptist Medical Center.

strategically to fill an intermediate need. When such programs are proposed, the organizations involved should commit to plans for maintenance and upkeep for the intended duration.

The city can also support private recreation providers like the YMCA by helping in the assembly of land for new facilities or leasing vacant, city-owned buildings to these providers.

4. *Acquire and develop desired park and greenway sites.*

A number of tools are at the disposal of the City to acquire land for park sites, particularly tax delinquent properties and lots in blighted areas. The city can lease or purchase vacant lots for neighborhood-serving parks and open spaces. Both the City and the Freshwater Land Trust have purchased clusters of land along Village Creek and other floodplain areas. Acquisition should continue to be coordinated to facilitate implementation of the greenway system plan and expand the city's parks and recreation system. Places to walk and bike for leisure and recreation are in great demand and have been for many years. In addition to the land trust, other nonprofit organizations and private foundations may be of assistance in land acquisitions and park construction.

Land assembly will likely be required to create an adequate site. Residents of the concerned areas should be consulted to determine what their priorities are to gauge the necessary park size and ultimately what amenities will be provided within the park.

Development of additional parks necessarily entails a commitment to allocate adequate funding over the long term to maintain those facilities in perpetuity.

5. *Prepare and implement plans to revive underutilized, historic facilities.*

While the announcement of the development of Regions Field in Downtown Birmingham brought great excitement, it also raised questions regarding the future of Rickwood Field. Given the site's national historic importance, the facility should be preserved for future generations to enjoy. But this should also include efforts to make Rickwood fully used, in addition to its enjoyment as an historic landmark.

Similarly, the use of the city's historic football stadium Legion Field has declined over the years. It was previously the site of the Iron Bowl, the annual football competition between the state's largest rivals, Auburn University and the University of Alabama. While it is still enjoyed for sporting events, it may yet lose another collegiate user. UAB has considered construction of an on-campus stadium for many years but only in its most recent Campus Master Plan has the university evidenced clear intentions to do so. Though the University System's Trustees have not supported this move, it may only be a matter of time before Legion Field loses its anchor tenant. Legion Field is in a strategic location within the city and its presence has a significant impact on surrounding neighborhoods. Though controversial, redevelopment of the site offers a variety of opportunities to revitalize the area. Whether the facility retains its current use or is completely re-imagined, for the well-being of the surrounding community, plans for the use of Legion Field must be economically sustainable.

Because of the local, historic importance of both these landmarks, it will be critical to involve the community in exploring ideas and finalizing plans for their future use. The City should host individual charrettes, separate from the process to develop the citywide Parks and Recreation Master Plan, for each of these sites to develop alternative concepts for how they may continue to be used or reused.

B. Incentivize park development and open space preservation as a part of private development.

The City's subdivision regulations require that developments of 15 acres or greater must provide parkland, unless the requirement is waived by the Director of Parks and Recreation. Conservation development provisions, which cluster housing while providing common open space, are one method to create usable open spaces in the course of private development without reducing the developer's unit count. Incentives for providing park spaces in other types of development projects should be explored.

goal 2

City parks and recreation facilities are safe, well-maintained and widely used

POLICIES

- Provide recreational facilities and programs suited to the city's changing population.
- Foster partnerships to improve and maintain park facilities.
- Provide adequate, regular funding to maintain a high quality city parks and recreation system.

STRATEGIES

A. Assure adequate park maintenance and associated funding.

ACTIONS

1. Increase coordination between city departments on parks and recreation maintenance.

Because maintenance of city parks is performed by the Public Works Department, closer coordination at various organizational levels within the Parks and Recreation Department and Public Works Department is essential to providing attractive, safe parks and recreation facilities to the community. Collaboration between departments should begin with departmental planning, budgets and priorities. To the extent practicable, the annual work plans of these departments should be prepared in an integrated process, assuring that maintenance needs of the Parks and Recreation Department are appropriately represented within the budget and priorities of the Public Works Department. Public Works staff assigned to parks maintenance should also be familiar with operational policies and protocols of the Parks and Recreation Department, which can be achieved through interdepartmental training and by updating departmental procedures to assure consistency of goals and methods.

Updating of the citywide parks and recreation master plan is likely to identify specific operational and/or organizational improvements to better facilitate parks maintenance and overall implementation of that plan.

A maintenance standards manual can be developed between applicable departments and with community input to assure parks and recreational facilities are properly cared for. Acceptable practices can be illustrated through photos.

2. Dedicate adequate funding for parks maintenance and for capital improvements.

With an updated citywide parks and recreation master plan, the City will have a detailed understanding of the financial needs of the parks system to maintain and improve existing facilities and build new ones. Parks and recreation facilities are important components in maintaining and enhancing quality of life. Sufficiently funding the parks system, ensuring continued maintenance, and providing for future facilities in accordance with an overall parks system plan will help improve the image of the community and attract private investment in neighborhoods and business areas.



Park maintenance is an essential component of parks and recreation planning and funding.

With the exception of swimming pools, the Parks and Recreation Board does not currently charge fees for use of recreation center facilities. Many communities throughout the nation do so today. Among those, fees for residents are much lower than for non-residents and reduced prices are available for children, as are fee waivers and “scholarships” so that no one is barred from participation. Some communities also offer special rates for families. These fees provide a continuous, dependable funding stream used to support the long-term maintenance of parks and recreation programs. In updating the City Parks and Recreation Master Plan, a policy on user fees should be evaluated as a way to provide dedicated funding for these facilities.

3. *Seek additional funding sources for sports, cultural and other specialty programs and facilities.*

Funding outside of city budgets can be acquired for both the development and maintenance of a variety of sports, cultural and other specialty programs and facilities. Potential sources include nonprofit foundations at both the national (i.e., Tiger Woods Foundation) and local (i.e., Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham) levels. Individuals and for-profit companies may also choose to sponsor these facilities. Some fundraising efforts may entail creation of specific nonprofit 501(c)3 organizations, as has been done with a number of “Friends of” groups in Birmingham.

B. Continue partnering with public and private organizations to enhance the parks system.

ACTIONS

1. *Establish best practices policies for public/private partnerships.*

For many years the City has collaborated with a wide variety of partners, each with varying resources and capabilities, to improve existing parks and develop new ones. Through these experiences, valuable lessons have been learned. These lessons should be documented and policies adopted, regarding funding, ownership, maintenance and other expectations, to assure more successful partnering in the future.

2. *Encourage creation of “Friends of Parks” groups.*

For parks both big and small, neighborhood advocates, business and community leaders and other parks supporters have established formal and informal organizations to lobby and/or support the City in improving existing facilities and in building new ones (e.g., Friends of Triangle (Clairmont) Park, Friends of Avondale Park, and Friends of the Railroad Reservation District). Using the best practices policies described above, such groups can more readily establish themselves as effective organizations capable of bringing resources as well as wish lists to a partnership.

3. *Join the City Parks Alliance.*

The City Parks Alliance (CPA) is an independent national organization of urban park leaders that serves as a network for civic and community leaders, government agencies, parks and recreation authorities, funders and other urban parks stakeholders. Managers of both public and private parks in Birmingham should be encouraged to join the network. Red Mountain Park is already a member of CPA.

The organization’s mission is to promote the creation of vibrant, healthy parks and green spaces that contribute to community well-being. Among CPA objectives that would benefit local members are urban parks advocacy (including at the national level), gathering and sharing best practices, and building partnerships with health, economic, education, environmental and other community development organizations.

C. Adjust recreational programming to best serve neighborhood demographics.

Through the preparation of a new parks and recreation master plan, a more accurate picture of the kinds of facilities and programs that are desired by the city’s changing population will emerge. Some neighborhoods have lost population since the previous parks master plan, which in some areas may represent fewer families with children or an increase in senior populations. Understanding these demographic trends will help make better use of available funds and investing in the right type and size of facilities in the right locations.

Birmingham recreational athletics once served as a feeder system for collegiate athletics. Programs for youth, including girls, that provide team experience and the potential for college scholarships should be encouraged in a variety of sports. Funding can be pursued from foundations like the Tiger Woods Foundation.

ACTIONS

1. Survey residents on park and recreation needs.

Public opinion surveys of residents should be undertaken at the time of updating the parks and recreation plan and, in any case, at least once every ten years. A survey will give information on those who do not currently use parks, and why, as well as park users. Surveys may be constructed to determine in which parts of the city residents may have a specific priorities for parks maintenance, additional park space, special programs or facilities, etc.

Sports and cultural programs for youth can be an important component of city parks and recreation systems. These types of programs, when offered as after-school and summer activities, are vital resources to working families in Birmingham. Athletics programs, particularly for boys, have traditionally been the primary focus of these types of programs. Providing equitable athletic and cultural programs for girls has lagged behind as a result.

Survey information should be collected to more accurately reflect community needs and desires for such investments, including what programs are not adequate to meet youth needs, what types of new programs are highly desired and what existing programs may have less interest from the community. Surveys should allow respondents to identify programming needs that will assure a proper balance in offering activities for boys



and girls, including the different types of athletic, fitness and cultural programs that are most appropriate to the community's interests.

In recent years there has been growing interest in special parks and recreation facilities such as dog parks and skate parks. Community surveys would be helpful in determining the level of interest in various parts of the community for such facilities.



Parks and recreation facilities should be programmed to meet the needs of residents of different ages and interests. (Photos (clockwise from left): www2.timesdispatch.com, www2.tbo.com; www.letsmove.org)

2. Encourage professional development of staff.

The National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) offers a variety of educational resources for all staff who are responsible for the development and maintenance of city parks. In addition to conferences and seminars, the NRPA also offers webinars and other online learning resources to assure access to professional development opportunities and best practices.

Another way to promote professional development of parks and recreation managers and staff is through associate degree programs. Currently there are only two associate degree programs in parks and recreation management in the state. Faulkner Community College and the Community College of the Air Force in Montgomery offer these programs. Lawson State Community College in Birmingham would be an ideal school to provide such a program.

D. Increase safety in parks, greenways and recreation facilities.

ACTIONS

1. Adopt CPTED principles for parks, greenway and recreational facility design.

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) is a set of multidisciplinary strategies and design concepts intended to deter undesirable and criminal activities through the design of the built environment. Design strategies can be used in conjunction with mechanical and organizational strategies, such as use of security cameras and the presence of legitimate users, security guards or police. The primary strategies of CPTED are:

Natural Surveillance, which involves placing buildings, spaces and activity areas in relation to one another to maximize visibility while also promoting social interaction of legitimate users of buildings and spaces. Because of the increased possibility of being observed, potential offenders are less likely to engage in inappropriate activities.

Access Control, which distinguishes between public and private space and emphasizes the use of a limited number of entry points. This technique, in conjunction with natural surveillance, increases visibility at access points and limits escape routes.

Territorial Enforcement, which establishes a sense of ownership and control over public and private spaces and helps distinguish intruders or strangers from legitimate users. Well-maintained premises signal an active presence, whereas signs of deterioration or the use of razor-wire or cyclone fencing lend the impression that owners or other legitimate users are generally absent.



Downtown's Linn Park benefits from several Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) features, including natural surveillance. City Hall, the County Courthouse and other buildings overlook the park and ensure regular activity throughout the week.

Maintenance and Activity Support focus more on activity rather than physical design but are integral to the design strategies above. Regular maintenance, for example, supports territorial enforcement. Activity support, which assures that most spaces are programmed for some legitimate activity or that activities are frequently programmed adjacent to infrequently used areas to increase natural surveillance.

The Parks and Recreation Department should prepare design standards that incorporate these principles. These standards can be used by design consultants as well as the various City departments and boards that review plans for renovation and new construction of parks and recreation facilities.

2. Maximize surveillance of parks and recreation facilities.

In addition to regular patrolling of city parks and recreation facilities, inappropriate and criminal behavior can be deterred by increasing legitimate activity in parks. This can be accomplished through design and facilities programming (see CPTED principles above), but also by neighborhood associations and park support groups through programming regular events. Citizen patrol groups can also be helpful by providing a physical presence in parks during periods of low activity that can attract potential offenders.

goal 3

The city's major natural amenities are enjoyed by residents and visitors.

POLICIES

- Promote access and enjoyment of the city's major water features and open spaces

A. Improve access to Red Mountain Park and Ruffner Mountain Nature Center.

Both Red Mountain Park and Ruffner Mountain Nature Center are somewhat difficult to access by car and almost impossible to access by transit.

ACTIONS

1. Improve wayfinding and access to Red Mountain Park.

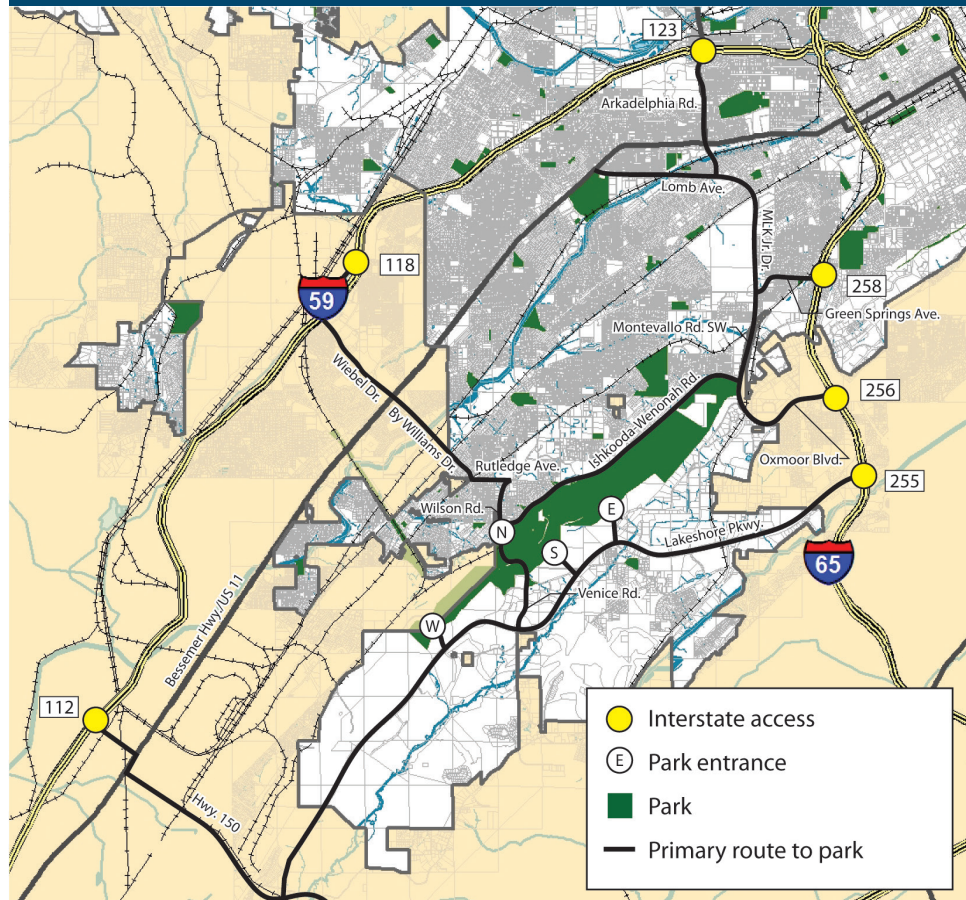
Vehicular access to Red Mountain Park, the city's largest open space amenity, is primarily by way of Lyon Lane, a minor street off western Lakeshore Drive designed to serve office park and light industrial uses in the area. For Birmingham residents and visitors alike, this approach can feel "out of the way." The park plans to have four access points, including one further west along Lakeshore Drive, which will serve as the primary gateway. Wenonah-Ishkooda Road will serve as the northern gateway and the most convenient access point for residents of west Birmingham but for few others.

Wayfinding along Lakeshore Parkway and Wenonah-Ishkooda Road (including the higher classified streets that connect to Wenonah-Ishkooda) will help substantially. Unfortunately, few major roads deliver motorists to Wenonah-Ishkooda Road. Heavy commercial, industrial and other development at key access points to the road, for example at Spaulding Ishkooda Road and Montevallo Road SW, are visually unattractive as routes to the park.

2. Improve wayfinding and access to Ruffner Mountain Nature Center.

Access to Ruffner Mountain Nature Center is not ideal, requiring visitors to navigate a maze of residential streets, some of which do little to provide a strong arrival experience. A new primary entrance is included in the Nature Center's master plan. The new entrance would be from Ruffner Road on the preserve's southern edge. While this route avoids residential streets, from within Birmingham it can also seem "out of the way." Physical improvements are needed along Oporto

FIGURE 5.4: ACCESS TO RED MOUNTAIN PARK



Madrid Boulevard, Georgia Road, and Ruffner Road, as well as attractive, functional wayfinding signage.

Improving access and wayfinding for Ruffner Mountain Nature Center and Red Mountain Park will require coordination with adjacent cities—Homewood, in the case of Red Mountain Park and Irondale, in the case of Ruffner Mountain. Wayfinding signage at nearby interstate interchanges would also be helpful, requiring approval from ALDOT.

3. Explore opportunities to provide transit access to these parks.

Many households in Birmingham do not have access to a car. Transit access to the major parks should be considered, first for major events or on weekends, and then on a more regular basis.

B. Support development of recreational access to the Cahaba River and other area waterways.

Birmingham prides itself as having been laid out along a “river of steel” while simultaneously lamenting the lack of a major waterway through the city. But the city does have a number of area streams and water amenities that can be better utilized for recreational purposes. Already plans are underway

for development of a greenway corridor and associated park amenities along Village Creek. Development of the Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System will further those efforts and create additional amenities along area streams.

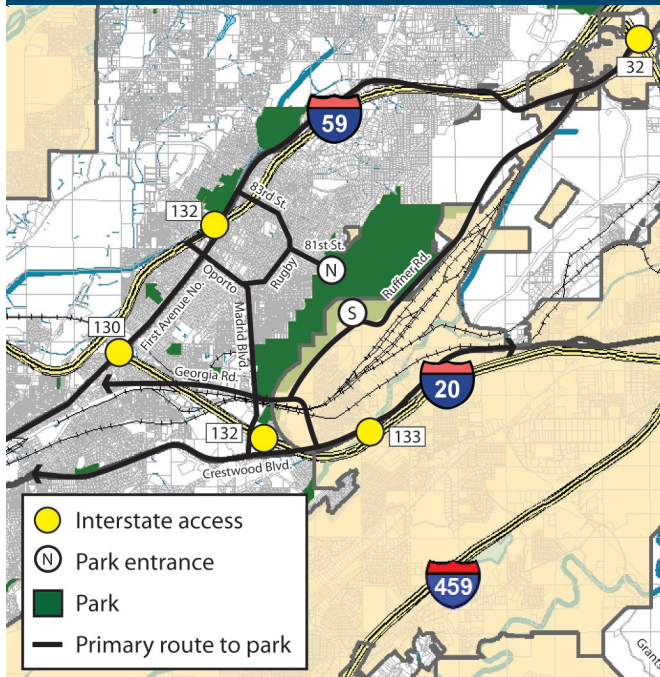
ACTIONS

1. Expand and improve recreational access to the Cahaba River.

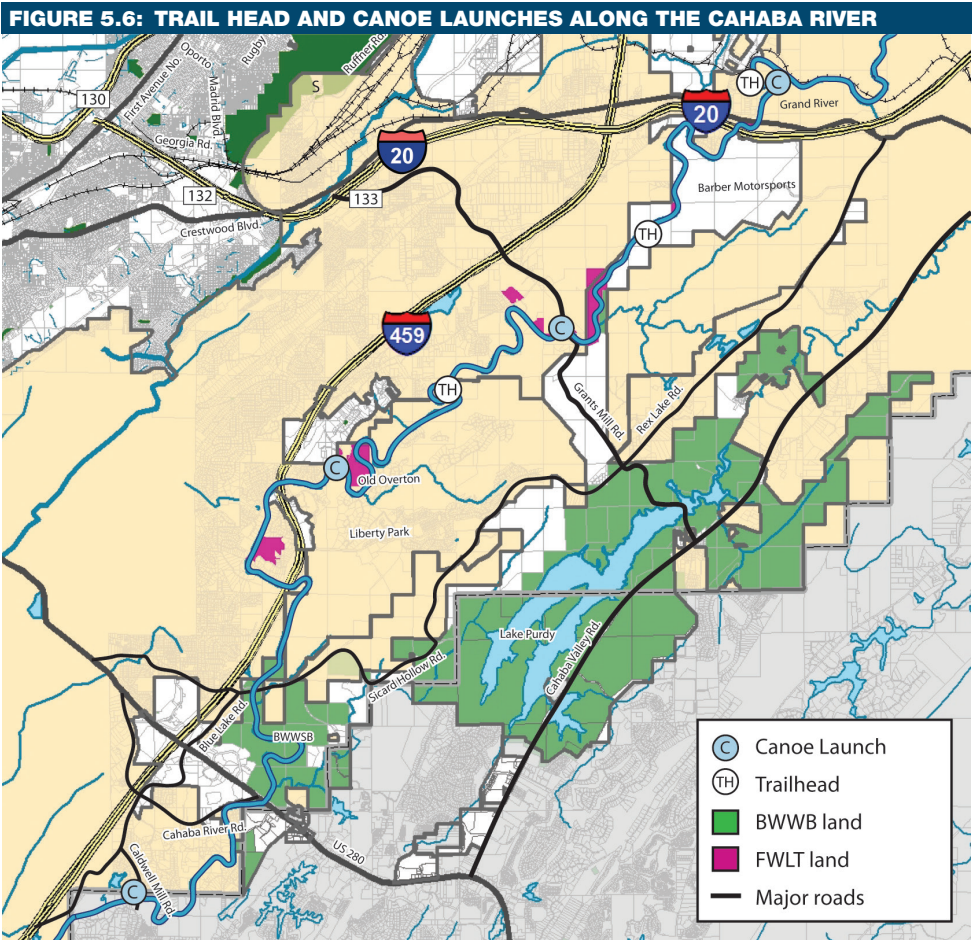
The Cahaba River is a unique, scenic water feature for the community that is largely underappreciated by residents, in part due to its limited physical presence within the city—most of its length within the metro area falls either within other municipalities or in unincorporated Jefferson County. This also reflects that it is relatively far from most Birmingham residents. The portions of the river flowing through the city limits are on lands owned primarily by the Birmingham Water Works Board (BWVB).

Public access points along the Cahaba River are few, and most are not well developed or well known. Compared to the number of people in the region who might enjoy recreational access to the river, only a handful of devotees are familiar with the available access points and canoe launches, some of which are on private land. Recreational opportunities represented by the river and the beautiful open spaces along it have gone largely untapped in the area. Birmingham, the BWVB and surrounding local governments should collaborate with already devoted private groups to create a legible system of appropriately outfitted public access points, passive recreational areas, canoe launches, environmental education features, and trails. This effort would also help further the development of the Cahaba River Corridor proposed in the Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System. The level of access and types of recreational

FIGURE 5.5: ACCESS TO RUFFNER MOUNTAIN



The Cahaba River is a popular destination for canoeing in Alabama. Photo: Ben Thomson



activity permitted should be managed consistently with the role of the river and lake as drinking water sources.

2. Develop greenway trails to provide recreational opportunities along area streams.

Community input throughout the planning process echoed public sentiment documented in the 1993 Parks

and Recreation Master Plan. Birmingham residents have a strong desire for places to walk and bike, for recreation as well as for mobility. Implementing the Red Rock Ridge and Trail Plan along Village Creek and other area streams will accomplish this while also increasing access to nature.

D. Getting Started

ACTIONS	RESPONSIBLE PARTY
Improve coordination between Parks & Recreation and Public Works departments through shared priorities and changes to departmental policies and procedures.	Parks & Recreation Department; Public Works Department; Mayor.
Develop a Parks & Recreation maintenance manual.	Parks & Recreation Department; Public Works Department.
Convene meetings with stakeholder groups to develop a Cahaba River access system.	Mayor, BWWB, Cahaba River Society, Freshwater Land Trust.