



Update of the Indianapolis-Marion County Park, Recreation & Open Space Plan

As part of the process for the Update of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, PROS Consulting conducted a combination of 18 focus groups, which included approximately 75 participants, and over 35 stakeholder interviews. This process of community involvement helps establish priorities for the future improvement and direction of management and planning for Indy Parks. The focus groups and stakeholder interviews enable Indy Parks to learn what users of the system value, are concerned about, and feel are unmet needs that the department could be providing.

Focus Group and Key Stakeholder Summary

1.1.1 WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS OF INDY PARKS THAT WE NEED TO BUILD ON FOR THIS MASTER PLAN?

Participants agree that there are many strengths for the Indy Parks to build upon in the Master Plan. The City's park real-estate is a tangible asset that could be leverage as needed. Among this inventory are the many strengths of the Department; these include the "Signature" or "Destination" parks, the amount and accessibility of green inventory, the trails, the specialty programming, and certain sports facilities.

Eagle Creek Park, Garfield Park, Ellenberger and Holliday Park represent examples for future developments to the Indy Parks and Recreation Department. Their iconic presence, user support (e.g., "Friends of..."), and ability to attract visitors from across the county and beyond place them high on the development hierarchy.

Overall, residents are proud of their parks; and most are users of parks and green spaces within Marion County. Locals express that the variety and quality of the parks and park facilities encourage more active lifestyles, provide opportunity to recreate, and foster a sense of community. Respondents generally equated good parks to healthier families and healthier community.

In a general way, parks and general green spaces are recognized for their impact on home values. Parks have an influence on choices made by families (at every income strata) when home-buying. Parks are a benefit to the City's Community Development and Quality of Life agendas.

Respondents expressed high regard for current trails, including the (recent) addition of the Monon Trail and the Cultural Trail. The City's Trails collectively represent potential for great connectivity between neighborhoods and people and the opportunity for both recreational and economic development.

The diversity of inventory within the Indianapolis Parks System is voiced as a strength. The inventory ranges from the simple "pocket park" to the 18-hole golf courses. The Parks System's golf courses remain a strength so long as they are not permitted to burden the Indianapolis Parks Department budget.

Families and professional users have benefited from youth programming, state-of-the-art recreational and sports facilities (e.g. The "Velodrome"), and nature experiences. Today, there is concern that this foundation has not been maintained and has eroded with time. This concern is balanced with the hopeful expression that the Parks System possesses the ingredients to become much better. Park professionals; health and recreational service providers; developers; conservationists; and others are willing to contribute expertise and resources to achieve this objective; i.e., a much better Park System. Parks that are located in proximity to private greenspaces (e.g., college campus) are in strong position for partnership.



Local Foundations and several Corporations promise their continued support for Parks and Recreation based on sound, visionary proposals.

Participants agree that parks department employees are courteous and helpful. Stakeholders agree the current free lunch program provided by the Parks Department in underserved areas is a vital component of programming and meets the needs of the community.

1.1.2 WHAT ARE YOUR GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARK AND RECREATION SYSTEM THAT NEED IMPROVEMENT?

Based on stakeholder and focus group responses, there is a need to improve advocacy and financial support on behalf Indy Parks.

There is a need for more and better communication in a general way between Indy Parks, other City departments, and stakeholder agencies in the Community. In addition to the general ability to share information, there is a need for demonstrated engagement of Indy Parks in critical planning and development efforts going forward in the community. Indy Parks has not been and should be an integrated participant in the several community plans developed in the past two years, or in planning efforts currently underway. There is a concern that this represents disinterest and disconnection from the City. Several of the community plans address quality of life concerns, and concerns regarding health, public safety, and conservation. Most plans refer to and address utilization of Park spaces and facilities. However, there may not be adequate input and/or buy-in by Indy Parks.

Long-time residents and park advocates recall when there was more active and productive partnership between City officials and local agencies to sustain “clean and safe” parks and to bring about meaningful programming. It was expressed that such partnership, in quality and quantity, no longer exists, and that on-going partnerships are a strength and will need to be a part of the solution that will restore and/or improve the Indy Parks system.

Indianapolis Parks and Recreation seems to own more property than it can properly maintain. Stakeholders and focus group participants were able to discuss specific concerns for the general condition of their park’s grounds, buildings within their park, and the associated amenities. Lack of lighting was specifically and frequently mentioned, among other items. There has been a gradual deterioration of park assets over the past 10 years due to lack of resources. Informants want “clean and safe” parks and amenities first and foremost. They also see importance in a more balanced distribution of support resources (maintenance/upkeep and capital investment in Parks) but perceive that the “signature parks” have influential supporters and these pull more funding to the detriment of the smaller ones. Participants expressed their concern that if, in fact, there are too many Parks (or parks facilities) by what (fair) means will the need be prioritized and choices made.

Respondents suggest that national-level Best Practices be adopted to evaluate and to improve Indianapolis parks and facilities. There is the sense that a basic level of acceptability and usability of Parks facilities and amenities is feasible and should be expected (at minimum). Many expressed that disparity (and disenfranchisement) exists and that this is a source of dissent and apathy among residents. Therefore, Indy Parks and the City will need to be transparent in their considerations and welcoming of a broader-base of input. This should establish an expectation of fairness in the face of limited resources. General comments suggested that a “par” be identified for each park (or type of park) and that each park be “brought up to par.” If par cannot be achieved, the Park leadership must take steps to become leaner; i.e., reduce quantity of assets and these be made excellent, rather than sustain too many parks that are



mediocre (or worse). Indy Parks may need to eliminate parks and/or the facilities that the system cannot support.

Many residents would like to see more specialized (and modern) amenities in the Parks. One example is the trend to replace swimming pools (i.e., aquatic centers) with spray facilities. Spray Parks are less costly to install and to maintain. Other respondents were outspoken about the importance of “City Pools” in the center-city. Swimming pools are the single-most important resource to prevent drowning deaths among children in poor neighborhoods.

A city park used to be an extension of the neighborhood center and an adjunct to local human services programming, e.g., summer day camp; but not so much in recent years. Access fees have become burdensome to many youth-serving programs due to their budget challenges. Rather than competing for the same budget dollar, Indy Parks could be more creative and collaborative. Operating in silos is counter-productive: Kids learn from summer jobs; kids with summer jobs are not up to mischief; kids are “cheap labor” and can clean parks and help with park programs.

Focus group and stakeholder participants see a need for more competition-quality sports fields and facilities in the Parks. These fields bring groups to the Parks from across the County, and have capability to draw from outside the County and the State. Competition-quality sports fields will put additional burden on City resources (public safety, maintenance, utility costs); however, this type of activity engenders civic pride, broader support, and sense of ownership for Park spaces, in addition to increasing tourism. The Public Process has brought forward several private groups/event organizers who express willingness and capacity to underwrite development and operating costs of facilities, amenities, and events pertaining to their particular hobby or sport.

Residents in general see growing dangers in many of the City’s parks due to deteriorated facilities, reduced programming, and general lack of interest. There is a need to improve and foster conditions in the Parks such that they (signature park, neighborhood park, or pocket park) can be destinations for recreational activity year-round.

There is also need to improve the marketing of the parks and recreation system. The department is missing a huge opportunity to increase participation and generate revenues by failing to effectively communicate inter-departmentally and externally. Much can be achieved by marketing and promoting the Indy Parks system and its offerings. In recent years, basic promotion and advertising of Park programs and events have been reduced. Many informants/respondents are not aware of all the services available and events organized by and through Indy Parks. Residents are prospective users and supporters of Indy Parks. However, concern is expressed that news and information is not readily accessible, even on the Indy Parks website. In general, participants believe a marketing strategy and an energetic information dissemination capability will create value for residents, which will, in a short time, lead to increased use of Indy Parks and Recreation assets.

1.1.3 WHAT ARE THE KEY OUTCOMES YOU DESIRE THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE COME FROM THIS MASTER PLAN?

Stakeholders and Focus Group Participants concur that a comprehensive and well thought out Master Plan is important as a guide for leading City officials, stakeholders, and the general community in a productive direction as they contemplate a Park System for the future.



Participants view the Master Plan as a potential tool for decision-making. The Master Plan should help define our Community's Values. Choices should be made according to Community Values. The Master Plan should describe the intrinsic value we see in parks and green spaces.

Residents expect a clear plan that 1) establishes an identity for the Parks Department; 2) recognizes opportunities for growth and development; 3) has attainable goals and appropriate metrics to provide for an objective evaluation of the Parks System as progress is made. The plan should inventory the assets of Indianapolis Parks Department. These assets should be evaluated for current operating condition and remaining life. Department personnel are the primary assets; and personnel should be identified by their core competencies, cumulative experience, and function.

A desired outcome of the Master Plan is an objective cost-benefit analysis of inventory by Township (or by neighborhood) based on criteria established in advance. Need and value are not uniform from township to township, so care should be taken to compare one Township or neighborhood Park System to another in a fair manner. Respondents seemed willing to accept that some Park resources may need to go away, but fairness and equal access were repeated as a theme.

In deference to limited resources, the Master Plan should provide a mechanism to prevent approval of "questionable ventures" that overextend the Department.

The Master Plan should help improve equity across the County; that is, park inventory is better distributed by Township and/or population size. And funding should be more fairly distributed.

The Master Plan might be a compilation of "Indy Parks Township Plans".

There was mention that the Master Plan might examine and grade the arrangements existing currently between Indy Parks and partners (e.g., for golf courses management firms) to ensure that the agreements in concept promote efficiency and produce promised revenue. Healthy(ier) partnership arrangements should benefit all parties and promote additional partnering.

Respondents advocated for development and implementation of a strategic marketing plan to create better awareness of Indy Parks' offerings and to increase use of the available facilities and programs.

1.1.4 WHAT ARE THE KEY PROGRAM SERVICES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE MASTER PLAN?

Those interviewed agree that Indy Parks and Recreation Department needs to offer a wider range of programming (as it has done in the past). Parks programming should (better) represent "Best Practices" in the national Park industry.

Park Program Services are key for 1) all age groups (youth, adult, seniors); 2) all health/physical needs (fitness, rehab, disabilities); 3) for educational and social development (sports, conservation, "family time").

No matter how good the programming, if Parks are not safe places, the Community will not use them (for intended purpose). Parks can be/should be safe havens. Parks should be used to contribute to Public Safety, to reduce youth delinquency, and to provide for summer jobs.

Parks should re-connect to schools and help connect schools to one another. In particular when kids are out of school, Indy Parks could step up and fill the gap. Because school calendars are no longer uniform, this presents an added challenge. However, the original "safety net" for youth included, in-park engagement of children and families.



Peace Learning Center is a great concept. Why can't it be in other parks [not just Eagle Creek Park]?

Park programming must be exciting/interesting enough to get kids off the video games and electronics, and back to physical "play" and the type of play that encourages interaction with other kids (i.e., social development). The absence of constructive play produces high(er) probability of anti-social behavior. There seems a sense of nostalgia by the community in the expressions about kids and play...that new generation is missing out on good times.

AmeriCorps, JobCorps, National Guard, ROTC represent opportunities for indirect tax dollars to be applied to enhance Park programming. All bring human capital to bear on budget problems and make more programming possible.

Schools can adopt a park and vice versa. Schools and parks can trade and achieve greater impact, e.g., schools perform parks maintenance in exchange for access to park amenities, e.g., swimming pool. Utilization by human service agencies diminish as entry fees increase.

Indy Parks leadership should assure that its Master Plan relates to and considers the findings and recommendations of the several other plans in development by other agencies/organizations.

Participants would like to see Signature Parks become even better at attracting visitors from beyond Indianapolis area.

Inner City parks may not have affluent users and/or "Friend of" organizations to help raise funds and to help assure that "fair-share" dollars are allocated. Residents of our poorer neighborhoods are poor usually reticent (if not apathetic). For these reasons, inner city parks are always under-funded, which should be addressed in the master plan.

1.1.5 WHAT RECREATION FACILITIES AND/OR AMENITIES IN THE COMMUNITY ARE MOST NEEDED?

There is a pervasive theme expressed that too many areas are under-served; that too many park properties have "lost their luster;" and that too many parks are not safe. There is also a message that "hobbyists" are organized and vocal, and that the interests of the few are allowed to prevail over the needs of the many.

There is a change in the recreational marketplace that should be better understood. For example, golf is not as popular as it once was. Young families and urban families are not choosing to play the traditional 18-hole golf game; and golf remains a relatively expensive recreation. However, golfing activities could become of interest to this audience if modified. New golf games like foot golf and speed golf are examples of shorter games and games that may fit better within urban parks. With a shift in interest, are 13 golf courses needed in Marion County?

It is imperative that Indianapolis improve its ranking on the national scale, beginning with its facilities and amenities. Other cities have begun to replace golf and golf courses with soccer and soccer fields. Non-traditional games and recreation are becoming in-demand. New sports quickly gain popularity today as result of our electronic and social media; a prime example is the recently completed cricket field. Park planners and managers will be challenged more than ever to provide fields and facilities that are convertible and lend themselves to multi-sport use.

There are new themes in "eco-recreation" that young(er) families are looking for. It will be important to incorporate facilities and attractions that are more rugged, physically-challenging, and nature-inspired.



A significant amenity in our Parks is trees and these are protected from removal (felling). However, the trees in our parks are not getting the professional care that they require. If our trees are lost to disease, insects, or human encroachment, it may be impossible to restore these.

Stakeholder and focus group participants offered anecdotal reports of needs within the parks and indicated that when such “needs are reported to downtown,” there is no response and no remedy (e.g., a water fountain broken and repeatedly reported over a 3-year period).

Each Park needs to show its families there is a reason to visit (i.e., presentation, accommodation, activities programmed to their needs and interests). Parks must be a “safe haven” for young people and for the older people. The Park is the “3rd Place” after Home, Work/School.

If encouraging field sports activity, there must be restrooms and refreshment facilities so visitors can be comfortable for 2 – 3 hours. Field sports are generally team sports, so in addition to comfort facilities, teams need places for equipment storage and for meeting/teaching. Lighting is another amenity that is useful where field sports are played.

Indy Parks should follow national trends, particularly for programs; i.e., visitors have expectation if they have traveled to other parks/had other park experiences (e.g. “GoApe Treetop Challenge,” full-service waterparks, and others). If Indy Parks does not offer similar experiences, the City will lose tourism revenue.

1.1.6 ARE THERE OPERATIONAL OR MAINTENANCE ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED?

Stakeholders and Focus Group Participants expressed a common concern that Indy Parks facilities, equipment, and grounds need improvement. The Park System get a “C” grade for the services offered, mainly because so much is in need of maintenance. Many could state a personal observation of something that needed fixing, cleaning, or painting. Some Participants spoke about duplication that might be eliminated to produce cost-savings.

Respondents are concerned for safety: without Park Rangers, park staff, general lighting and robust activity, the Parks do not feel like safe places to be.

Respondents are concerned for basic amenities as clean and accessible toilets. An anecdote shared: Restroom facilities at a sports fields remained locked through the day even though the sports field reserved in advance and use approved.

The Indy Parks System includes a variety of Park facilities; and some require special knowledge for proper operation and for proper maintenance, especially in some of the specialty areas. Result is improper, inadequate attention to SOP and to preventative maintenance protocol. Specialized knowledge and experience is required in many areas of current Parks programming. If these skills are not available via staff/employees, they need to be acquired, via staff training or contractual purchase. Deer Culling was offered as recent example of need for specialized knowledge and “special handling.”

As regards operational issues, respondents are concerned that policy is not being consistently applied when 1) reviewing “Public-Private Partnership Agreements;” 2) reviewing Agency-Agency Partnership Agreements; 3) reviewing applications (from the community) to reserve facilities. And related to this point: the general public cannot navigate the Indy Parks-DPW organizational structure well. The general public should not feel intimidated, or become frustrated, when seeking information or following a prescribed procedure.



As regards operational issues, respondents are concerned that there is no communication from Indy Parks to the general public about its programs and events. Subsequently, there is disappointment that programs and events are not well-attended. It is suspected that poor-attendance leads to reduced budgeting/programming. Then there is even less funding to promote Indy Parks programs and events.

1.1.7 WHAT AREAS OF THE SYSTEM NEED MORE FOCUS (SUCH AS TRAIL DEVELOPMENT, LAND ACQUISITION, PARK MAINTENANCE, PROGRAM SERVICES, FACILITY DEVELOPMENT, ETC.)

Stakeholders and Focus Group Participants agree that our Parks System needs to focus on getting our kids/our families back into the Parks.

The stakeholders and focus group participants agree that Indy Parks should focus on maintaining current inventory, and not adding new; and that reduction in inventory may be appropriate at this time.

The current system has the basic infrastructure to support greater connectivity of one Township to another; one Park to another; and one Agency/Organization to another. More focus on effectiveness and efficiency of operation was desired.

There is merit in considering bumping Riverside Park up to “Signature Park” status. Its location, constituency, and current configuration lends it to multi-level, strategic development. Another candidate suggested for signature park status was Washington Park.

More focus on Park waterways other than Eagle Creek; e.g., Broad Ripple’s waterway is seldom noticed by passers-by, has very few access points, and is maintained by Broad Ripple Village merchants (or it would get no attention at all).

Promoting the Parks and communicating with all publics about Park programs and events. The lower-income populations and those lacking language skill, electronic equipment, or transportation are frequently unaware of park programs and events.

1.1.8 DO YOU FEEL THE DEPARTMENT IS ADEQUATELY FUNDED? WHAT FUNDING SOURCES DO YOU FEEL THE COMMUNITY WOULD MOST SUPPORT (E.G. BOND ISSUE, MILL LEVY, IMPACT FEES, PROPERTY TAX INCREASE, USER FEES)?

Consensus among Respondents is that the Indianapolis Parks and Recreation department is not adequately funded, and that there is not a fair distribution of the limited funds to the individual Parks.

Respondents feel that City Officials have unrealistic expectation that the parks are able and should generate revenue and be self-sustaining. The Community seems to have a more realistic understanding that 1) many of the Parks have no means to generate revenue and 2) the Value of Parks is not in their ability to generate revenue. Parks are a “City Service.”

The Community would most support a strategic mix of funding sources, to include generated revenue. However, revenue from user fees and at point of sale should be fair to residents/visitors at lower income levels.

Respondents suggest that creative means to generate Park revenue should be explored. Many could cite examples from parks they have visited in other communities. Revenue streams already exist, but are not capitalized upon. One example is the rental of park facilities to private individuals, organizations, businesses to host events. These are typically corporate meetings, weddings, and family reunions. These



spaces are not promoted, rented, or managed in the best business-like manner, and so they offer potential for increased revenue.

Respondents feel that City Officials should survey what is allocated to Parks as an industry Best Practice (e.g., as percent of municipal budget) and consider if the current allocation to Indy Parks from the City's budget is comparable to what is being spent in other cities. While comparing Indianapolis against Benchmarks and Best Practice may be an unpopular or tedious undertaking, City Officials should want to emulate Park Systems that represent 21st Century facilities and programming.

Respondents feel that the Indy Parks Master Plan must coincide with other local plans that are completed or in development because funding mechanisms will overlap and integrate one to the other.

1.1.9 AS YOU SEE THE CITY OF INDIANAPOLIS AND MARION COUNTY CHANGING IN THE FUTURE, WHAT SERVICES AND PROGRAMS DO YOU FEEL WILL NEED THE MOST ATTENTION AND NEED TO BE MADE A PRIORITY?

Stakeholders and Focus Group Participants readily agree that Metro-Indianapolis will continue to grow in size and develop. Populations will increase in the Center-City of Indianapolis. At the same time, population will grow in the northern suburban areas. The City's population will be older and more diverse in general.

The infrastructure of Metro-Indianapolis is changing and will continue to change at a rapid pace. Housing construction activity in the Center-City will be on-going; much of housing construction requires inclusion of green space in the design. The Metro infrastructure development will also address transit needs; public service needs; and the needs of business and tourism.

The City of Indianapolis/Marion County has an over-arching Vision for its future. City-County officials must assign a true and meaningful value to its Parks System in light of this Vision and re-dedicate to an improved Park System. The Stakeholders and Focus Group Respondents agree that the needs are many and diverse, and the process to prioritize and implement in the face of limited resources requires leadership, transparency, and inclusion.

1.1.10 STAKEHOLDER PRIORITIES

- Recruit and retain nationally renowned leadership
- Robust partnerships for program development
- Upgrade in parks maintenance and deferred maintenance budgets
- Enhanced safety through "Environmental Design"
- Increase connectivity of all parks by the upgraded trail system
- Develop iconic features at signature parks to improve tourism
- Improve system-wide access based on changing population demographics and geographic trends
- Significantly upgrade communications and information dissemination

1.1.11 WHAT HAVEN'T WE ASKED YOU THAT YOU WOULD LIKE OR HAVE DOCUMENTED IN THE MASTER PLAN?

Some Respondents wished to add their thoughts:



1. Each Park has a special significance to its neighborhood. There are opportunities to “commemorate” and to document certain events and certain persons. For example, Ellenberger Park should be a centerpiece to celebrate Kesler (local artist). Kudos offered for the new Bertha Ross Park along these lines.
2. Revenue should not be the (only) measure of a Park’s value to its community.
3. Indianapolis Parks Foundation should be the “official fund-raiser” for Indy Parks. It is confusing for foundations and corporate funds to receive piecemeal asks from all the different parks and the programs of Indy Parks throughout the year. One Big Ask is better.
4. With only a small green space, children can play soccer. Around the globe kids can make a ball out of whatever is available and start a game of soccer. As a matter of fact, there is a project called “Make A Ball.” Soccer is a universal sport as result. Soccer is easy to play; easy to equip. Everybody can play soccer.
5. Who chased away all the national/regional organizations (First Tee, Junior Golf Foundation, PAL Clubs) and all the Corporate Support (corporate Olympics, golf outings, company picnics)?
6. Parks are for healthy living. Therefore, put healthy concession items in the vending machines, etc. And don’t charge MORE for water than for the sugary stuff. Follow the schools’ lead....
7. Parks can be modeled as a business and be required to function as a business, or close itself down. Each Park should have its own business proposition and business manager (either an individual or a board).
8. Dog Parks can generate revenue.
9. We should have “Signature EVENTS” in parks; not “Signature Parks.”
10. We still live in times of “winners and losers” because there are not enough resources to go around. But the successful neighborhood re-development is the one that enticed the broadest partnership. This leverages the most resources to bear on a small, focused area. This produces sustained results far better than distributing a few dollars, shot-gun-style, over a wide area. Sell Parks for their economic value. Parks are for recreation and quality of life, true; but they are also significant contributors to economic development.....at a very basic level. No matter what your income level, if you are choosing a house to buy, you will choose the one that affords proximity to green space over the one that does not.
11. What’s up with the park across from 300 N. Meridian Street? The State controls it like it is part of the War Memorial, but it is not state property. We can do something significant with that space if the City would take it back.