

CITY OF BLUE EARTH

PARK SYSTEM MASTER PLAN



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IN COLLABORATION WITH:

The City of Blue Earth Public Works Department

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

City council members, the park and recreation commission, and the community participants who provided feedback to help define the final recommendations for this document

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01

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Earth so rich the city grows!”

The City of Blue Earth provides a great system of parks, open space and trails for its community members and visitors. Parks are clean, well-maintained and community members feel safe when visiting Blue Earth parks and trails. By comparison, the acreage of public open space within the community *exceeds* that of the national median for comparative communities, as well as many other cities within the immediate region. Community members frequent the park system, with many weekly visits to the neighborhood playground and recreational trails.

While residents value their park and recreation amenities, the city recognizes a need to keep the park system current, continue to meet the needs of the community, and continue to offer quality amenities to its residents.



Jolly Green Giant Statue (at Giant Park)

THE PLAN AND THE PURPOSE

This plan was developed to be a tool for the city to evaluate park improvements, develop realistic budgets, and identify and align resources effectively to make improvements to the park, open space and trail system that caters to the needs of the community.

Historically, Blue Earth has not had a park master plan in place to guide decision making and provide direction for making park improvements. Additionally, the city does not have a dedicated “parks department” to manage their facilities, track expenses and allocate resources specifically for the upkeep of the park system. These resources have been managed by public works staff with the budgeting and tracking of park-related expenses, combined with those of other public works projects and maintenance.

The development of this plan is rooted in community input and considers both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the Blue Earth park system. At the onset of the planning process, Committee members were asked to identify what their “Critical Success Factors” were for the project. They include:

- **The plan must be actionable with at least a five-year outlook**
- **Recommendations shall be practical for Blue Earth and achievable**
- **Identify and utilize potential funding sources to leverage taxpayer investment**
- **Provide accessible and inclusive amenities that cater to the community**
- **Treat parks as critical infrastructure**
- **Provide amenities that will last and consider maintenance/lifecycle costs**

With the implementation of this plan, it is important to consider the ongoing maintenance of new park amenities and to ensure that whatever improvements are made will align with the core principles of this plan. The ultimate goal is to maintain a quality park system that is right-sized for the population it serves but also considers the ever-evolving trends of park and recreation amenities. Plans are never perfect and they also require being revisited from time to time. By adopting this plan, the city accepts the responsibility of progressing with initiatives that align with the recommendations herein, whenever practical. Similarly, evaluating and tracking the progress

toward implementation will allow the city to evaluate when it is time for an update and/or to revisit certain goals.

Critical Success Factors

Derived from conversations with the park and recreation committee

- 1 Plan must be **actionable** with at least a **five-year outlook**



- 2 Recommendations shall be **practical** and **achievable**

- 3 Potential **funding sources** must be identified and utilized



- 4 **Accessible and inclusive amenities** (that cater to the community) should be provided

- 5 Treats parks as **critical infrastructure**



- 6 Consider **maintenance/lifecycle costs** and provide amenities that last

THE PROCESS

The City of Blue Earth administered a six-month planning process that began with an in-depth inventory and analysis of each city-owned park and open space amenity. This visual analysis documented park amenities, site furnishings, and notable site features, in addition to the general condition of these items at each location. Accessibility was evaluated by means of noting missing sidewalks, pedestrian ramps, general condition of the pavement and noting any obstacles or physical barriers present.

Discussions with city staff and the Blue Earth Park and Recreation Committee were facilitated by the consultant team, to better understand the history of park improvements and evaluate the existing conditions of each park throughout the community. The steering committee provided valuable insight into how community members and visitors use the park system, as well as relevant information about changes affecting the city's resources over the years.

Early in the planning process, community members were initially engaged through a community-wide input survey distributed online. Committee members circulated the survey over an eight week period resulting in participation from over 300 community members. Input received through this

process was evaluated by the project team to establish a list of recommendation priorities for each park location.

A summary of the key steps in the planning process is as follows:

1. **Information Gathering**

- Inventory of existing park and trail amenities and assessment of current conditions and site features.

2. **Public Outreach**

- Online community survey and various in-person engagement events.

3. **Analysis**

- Thorough review of existing conditions, concurrent planning studies, NRPA metrics, and public input to identify preliminary improvement strategies.

4. **Improvement Recommendations**

- Develop improvement recommendations for system-wide and location-specific improvements, accompanied by budgetary cost estimates for capital improvement planning and implementation.

5. **Review, Refinement and Adoption**

- Information developed over the duration of the planning process was compiled into this plan report, reviewed by the city and steering committee. Upon refinement, the plan was presented to city council for consideration and adoption.

01

**INFORMATION
GATHERING**

02

**PUBLIC
OUTREACH**

03

ANALYSIS

04

**IMPROVEMENT
RECOMMENDATIONS**

05

**REVIEW,
REFINEMENT,
AND ADOPTION**

HOW TO USE THE PLAN

NAVIGATING THE PLAN

This park system master plan is organized into six sections, which include:

- **01: Executive Summary,**
- **02: Community Background**
- **03: Inventory and Analysis,**
- **04: Relevant Trends,**
- **05: Community Alignment and Needs Assessment,**
- **06: Recommendations,**
- **07: Action Plan and Implementation**

The contents of this park system master plan report includes park inventory data, community input results, analysis of all collected data, recommendations and implementation strategies for Blue Earth's parks, trails, and open spaces. Also included are descriptions of why the recommendations found herein are relevant to the growth of Blue Earth's parks and recreation amenities. The report's appendices (included in a separate document) include park inventories, complete community input survey results, and meeting notes from meetings with city council and the park and recreation committee. The sections that follow are meant to serve as a guide and will provide a starting point for implementing projects.

01: Executive Summary

- » Provides an introduction and summary of the Park System Master Plan

02: Community Background

- » Dives into important background information about Blue Earth

03: Inventory and Analysis

- » Provides an overview of existing parks, trails and open spaces and their current condition
- » Highlights issues with the park and trail system and discusses opportunities for improvement

04: Relevant Trends

- » Addresses trends relevant to the current and future development of parks, trails and open spaces

05: Community Alignment and Needs Assessment

- » Highlights important information from in-person meetings, pop-up events, and the community survey

06: Recommendations

- » Establishes improvement recommendations, goals, and initiatives to achieve the mission and vision of the master plan

07: Action Plan and Implementation

- » Discusses implementation priorities, phasing strategies, and potential funding resources

THE MISSION, VISION, AND GOALS

The Blue Earth Park System Master Plan **does not seek to reinvent each park** or stray too far from their original design, character, or intent. Instead, the **MISSION** of this plan is to advocate for thoughtful, community-driven improvements to the existing parks that are grounded in a deep understanding of each park's history, ecology and intended purpose. The goal is that with these improvements, implemented through continued dedicated investment, the parks can do what they do now - only better.

The Blue Earth Park System Master Plan recognizes that the city's parks and trails are part of a living system and should be treated with great care. The plan's recommendations respond to the changes that have taken place in Blue Earth's parks over time and provide suggestions for improvements to the changes that have most negatively impacted the community. The improvement suggestions, detailed in Section 6, are forward-looking and visionary, and provide a baseline understanding of what interventions need to be made in coming years.

The **VISION** for this plan, is an actionable document that utilizes input gathered from the community throughout the process

to establish immediate (0-2 year), mid-term (3-5 year) and long-term (5+ year) improvements. With limited resources, both in terms of staffing and budget, improvements to Blue Earth's parks, trails and open spaces need to be considered collectively with other capital projects throughout the city. The contents of this plan represent the Blue Earth community and have been carefully considered in comparison with national trends in participation and the park and recreation resources of other communities of less than 20,000 people.

Based on an analysis of each park's existing condition, this report establishes five **GUIDING GOALS** the city should prioritize to better plan for the future of the park system. They include:

Guiding Goals

Developed through engagement and outreach with the community

1. CLARIFY AND CORRECT CIRCULATION



2. AMPLIFY EXISTING DESTINATIONS



3. EXPAND THE PARK AND TRAIL SYSTEM



4. ESTABLISH STRONGER CONNECTIONS TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



5. IMPROVE THE DIVERSITY OF RECREATION PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES



AN OVERVIEW OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goals and objectives of this master plan were developed and collected through various public outreach and engagement events, including engagement with residents, city staff, and a park and recreation committee. The recommendations outlined in the following sections of this plan were influenced by responses collected during the engagement process and are representative of what participants value in park and trail amenities.

Three overarching themes regarding the state/condition of the city's parks, trails, and open spaces arose during the development of this plan. Concerns with accessibility, issues with connectivity, and a need for stronger community ties came up many times during engagement events and conversations with city staff. These issues are preventing Blue Earth's park and trail system from being the best it can be. In coming years, it will be important for the city to consider these themes and how they might be able to address them as they make improvements to their parks, trails, and open spaces.

Overarching Themes	Project Goals	Objectives/Improvements
ACCESSIBILITY <i>Designing parks, trails and open spaces in a way that allows people of all abilities and ages to participate fully in the amenities and activities offered</i>	Clarify and correct circulation to, in, and through parks	• Add accessible sidewalk connections... • Add crosswalk across street to parking area... • Establish wayfinding throughout... • Create better connection to Giant Park... Update disc golf equipment and signage...
CONNECTIVITY <i>The integration of both physical and conceptual connections to/in parks, trails and open spaces that enhance their functionality and ecological health</i>	Improve the diversity of recreational programming opportunities	• Update/Improve existing playground areas... • Improve kiosk, maps and visitor information... • Create additional programming and amenities for senior citizens throughout...
COMMUNITY <i>Emphasizing the interconnectedness of people, wildlife and the natural environment through shared experiences in parks, trails and open spaces</i>	Expand the park and trail system	• Establish and promote biking/hiking trails... • Expand the size of the Dog Park... Designate specific areas for small and large dogs... • Connect amenities with accessible walking loop... Add a trail connection...
	Establish stronger connections to the natural environment	• Strengthen connections to the river... • Add a nature playscape...
	Amplify existing destinations	• Incorporate an open air shelter/shade structure... • Establish water access to the Dog Park... • Expand the existing playground area/offerings... • Promote the community gardens... • Add additional landscaping enhancements to increase park appeal... • Add seating options throughout... • Create a more welcoming central plaza space... • Update/Improve existing playground features... • Add a community event space/bandshell... • Add a basketball court and skate park... • Establish a bike share station...

CRITICAL TAKE-AWAYS

Improvement recommendations are identified in Section 6 and planning level cost estimates are identified in Section 7 of this plan. In total, this plan identifies **\$4.1 to \$5.9 million** in investment into the Blue Earth park and trail system. Successful implementation of these improvements will require creativity, patience and outside funding assistance beyond the city's resources. The suggested timeline aligns with the priorities developed during the planning process and should be considered as a guideline, not a mandate. Opportunities for grants, public/private partnerships and other influences may impact the timeline for implementation of these recommendations and that should be embraced.

While it is exciting to look toward the future of the park system and consider all the great changes/additions that might be possible, it is critically important to continue to budget for routine maintenance and consider the additional maintenance that will come with new amenities. As the city and its partners evaluate implementation of these and other improvements, three questions should be

asked. They include:

- 1. Does this align with community input and direction of the Park System Master Plan?**
- 2. What funding mechanisms align with community needs and can they be pursued?**
- 3. How will this impact our maintenance capabilities?**

One of the more challenging projects to implement will be certain trail segments on properties that are already developed, on private property or in difficult Right-of-Way (ROW) conditions. These projects may align with specific grant funding opportunities that seek to establish safe connections to schools or reduce/eliminate barriers within communities. Trail projects should start with engaging all affected parties in discussion and looking at what financial resources could be utilized to make it happen.

As mentioned in this document, the City of Blue Earth does not have a dedicated parks department, which means there are not dedicated staff to maintain the park system. At the same time, the number

of park acres within the community exceeds comparable communities. "New" amenities should be carefully evaluated and budgeted on a timeline that also identifies opportunities for maintenance-related improvements, such as pavements repairs, play surfacing replacement, equipment rehabilitation, and more.



**\$4.1
to \$5.9m**

**Approximate Investment into the
Blue Earth park and trail system**

02

COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

With such a welcoming community, Blue Earth stands as a testament to the allure of small-town America. The city itself is located in the southern part of Minnesota in Faribault County, where it serves as the county seat and the largest city within its boundaries. Nestled in the heart of the Upper Midwest, the land surrounding Blue Earth is known for its agricultural heritage and picturesque landscapes. The community resides immediately off Interstate 90, approximately 37 miles west of Albert Lea and Interstate 35. It's about a two-hour trip to the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area and nearly three hours to Des Moines, Iowa. Because of its many iconic parks and trail routes, Blue Earth draws in visitors from all over the United States.



Blue Earth Water Tower

AN INTRODUCTION TO BLUE EARTH

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW

Blue Earth's history can be traced back to the mid-19th century when the area was primarily inhabited by Native American tribes, including the Dakota Sioux. European settlers arrived in the region during the mid-1800s, drawn by the fertile soil and abundant natural resources. The city's name comes from the Blue Earth River, and refers to the bluish clay found in the river's banks.

Blue Earth has a current population of over 3,200 people. Over the years, the population has experienced fluctuations, with periods of growth and decline reflective of economic conditions and changes in the agricultural industry. Blue Earth has a higher proportion of older residents, as is common in many smaller, rural communities across the Midwest. The median age is around 45 to 47 years old.

The city's economy has deep roots in agriculture and other related industries, which have provided a primary source of income and employment for many residents. When it comes to education, the city is served by the Blue Earth Area School District, which includes the Blue

Earth Area Elementary, Middle and High Schools. Education is valued in the community, and the district aims to provide students with a well-rounded curriculum and opportunities for personal growth. The Community Education group puts together many activities and events during all times of the year that residents of any age can enjoy, as well.

LANDMARKS AND ATTRACTIONS

Blue Earth boasts several landmarks and attractions that highlight its history and cultural heritage. The most recognizable and iconic landmark in the city is the Jolly Green Giant statue, located in the heart of the community. The 55-foot tall statue depicts the famous Jolly Green Giant character and serves as a tribute to the region's agricultural legacy. Visitors (around 15,000 annually) and residents alike often stop by to take photos with the Giant and visit the museum nearby, which also serves as the Blue Earth Area Chamber of Commerce offices.

The Faribault County Historical Society Museum is another significant attraction, preserving and showcasing the area's



Faribault County Courthouse



Steinberg Park Prairie Landscape

AN INTRODUCTION TO BLUE EARTH



Downtown Blue Earth

history through exhibits and artifacts. It offers insights into the lives of early settlers, the impact of agriculture, and the growth of Blue Earth as a community.

There are also many iconic examples of architecture in Blue Earth, including the Faribault County Courthouse (Richardsonian Romanesque), First Presbyterian Church (Romanesque Revival/Gothic Revival), and Salem Evangelical Church (Gothic). These buildings reflect the history and traditions of Blue Earth and provide residents with an important link to the past.

Additionally, outdoor enthusiasts can explore the numerous parks and recreational areas surrounding the city, providing opportunities for hiking, picnicking, and enjoying the natural beauty of southern Minnesota. Blue Earth has 9 main parks, over 120 acres of parks and open spaces and over 10 miles of trails/ bikable roads, so there's an opportunity for everyone to get outdoors for recreational opportunities.

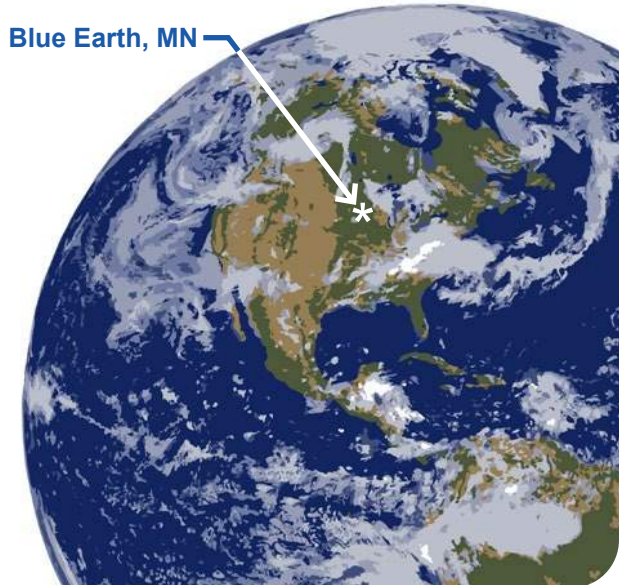


Blue Earth Municipal Swimming Pool

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

One of the defining characteristics of Blue Earth is the spirit of community support and togetherness. Residents take an active interest in local affairs and are quick to lend a helping hand to their neighbors. Community organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and various service clubs, work diligently to foster economic growth, provide assistance to those in need, and promote a welcoming environment for residents and businesses alike.

Blue Earth, MN

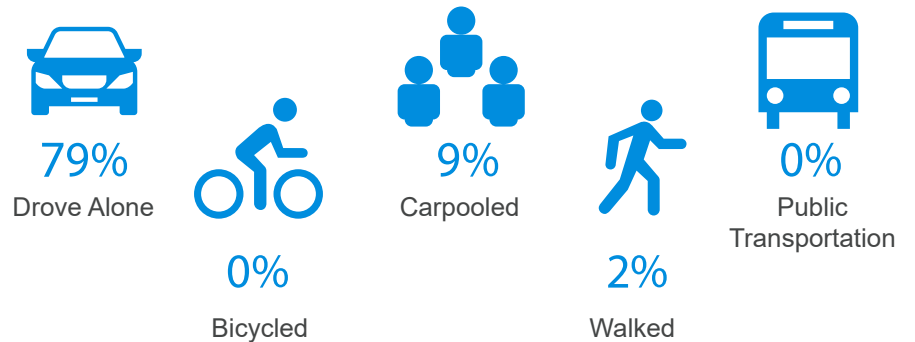


COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

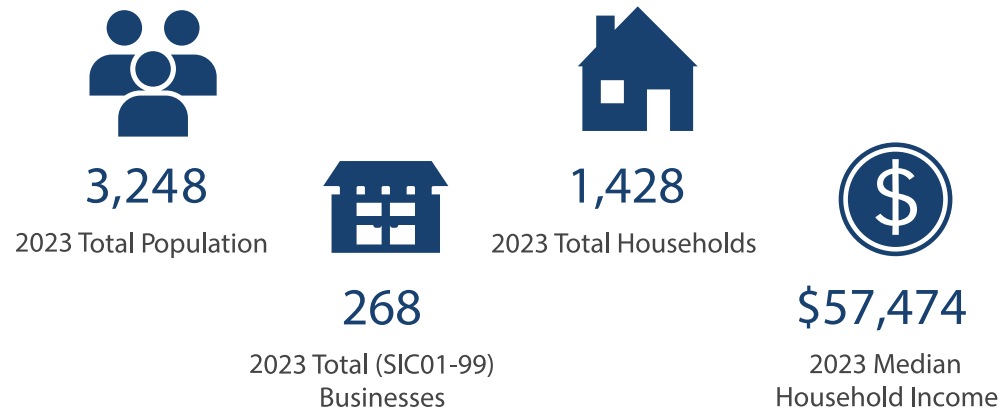
To understand the needs of a community, one must better understand the people who make up that community. The following information provides a snapshot of the demographic makeup of Blue Earth. It highlights several key facts about the community, including what modes of transport are most commonly used, the community's population by race, and statistics on housing, employment, education, persons with disabilities, and poverty levels.

This information was derived from U.S. Census Data.

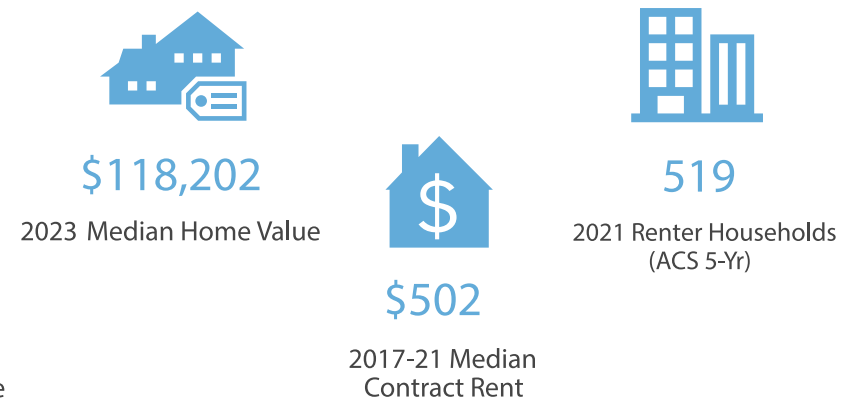
2017-2021 TRANSPORTATION TO WORK (AGE 16+)



KEY FACTS

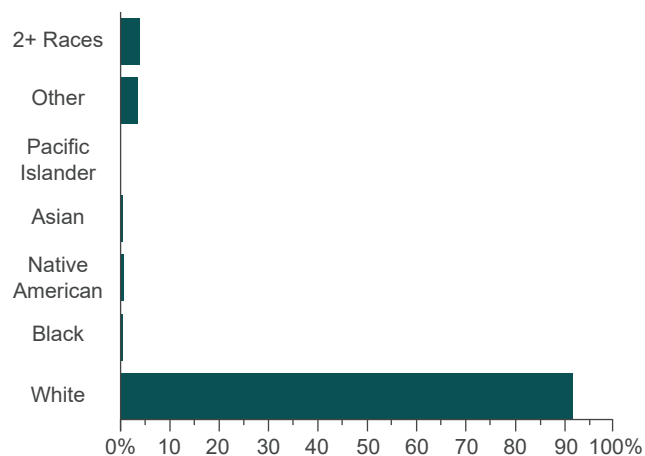


HOUSING

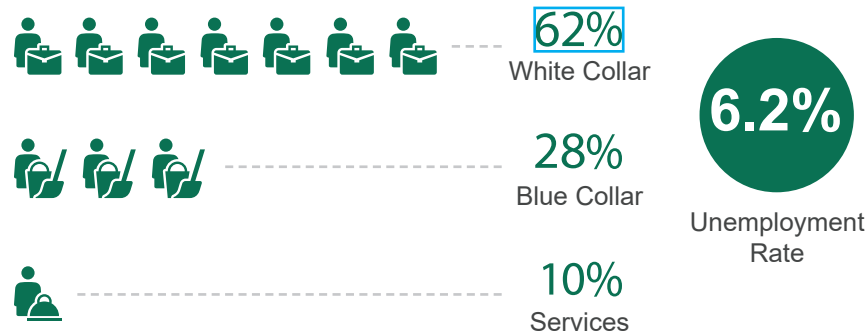


COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

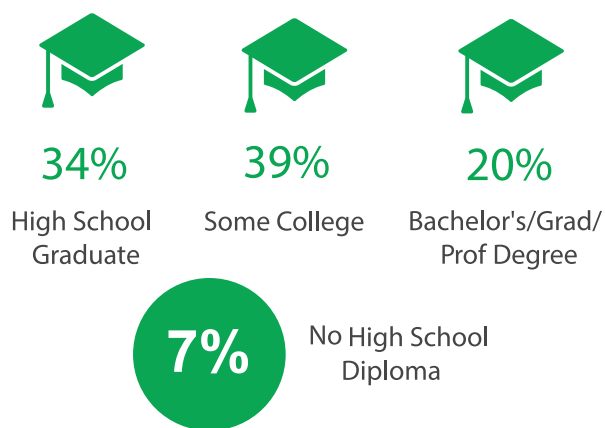
2021 POPULATION BY RACE (AGE 18+)



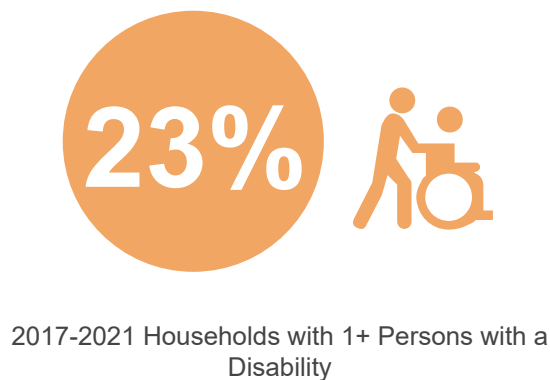
EMPLOYMENT (2023)



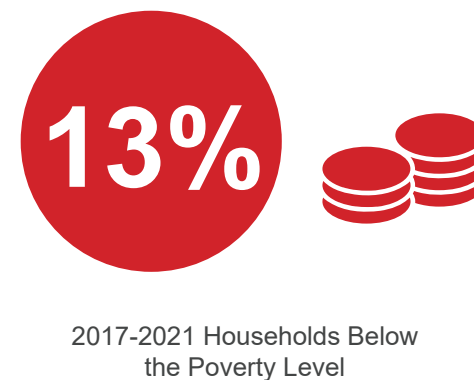
EDUCATION



PERSONS W/ DISABILITIES



POVERTY STATUS



PAST PLANNING EFFORTS

PAST PLANNING EFFORTS

There are two past planning efforts that were considered during the creation of this report: the [Vision of the City 2030 - Blue Earth Comprehensive Plan](#) and the [Faribault County Comprehensive Plan 2015-2035](#).

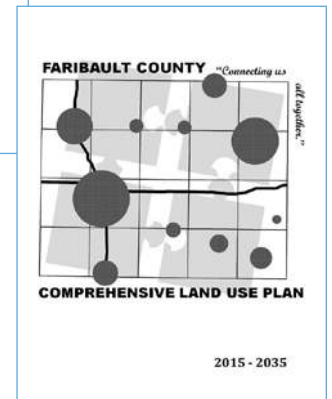
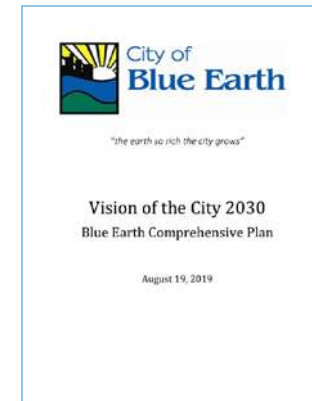
The [Vision of the City 2030 Blue Earth Comprehensive Plan](#), created in August of 2019, “provides the blueprint for the future growth and development of Blue Earth” and “describes how the plan should be used to achieve the community development vision and goals of Blue Earth.” The [Faribault County Comprehensive Land Use Plan 2015-2035](#) describes and analyzes “the important elements of the county in current terms, to determine the issues surrounding each element, and to set goals and strategies for those elements that will help local policy-makers as they guide the public through current issues into the foreseeable future.” The 2015-2035 Plan is actually an update of the previous plan, which was put together in 1967. Both documents discuss strategies to direct the future growth and development of Blue Earth and should be referenced extensively as the City makes decisions regarding its park and trail system.

CURRENT PLANNING EFFORTS

The City recently added a walking pedestrian bridge across a gulch just east of the parking lot and near the picnic area that connects back to the main trail loop. The implementation of this pedestrian bridge provides a safe passage over the gulch for residents and visitors to utilize while in Steinberg Nature Park.

Additionally, the City is in the process of replacing the tennis courts at Putnam Park. The six existing courts have been in use for many years and have therefore fallen into states of disrepair. The replacement project will bring about six new tennis courts with striping for pickleball courts to Blue Earth. Accessible sidewalk connections will be added in several areas around the courts, too. The expansion of recreational offerings in Putnam Park will have a positive impact on the park’s usage and visitors’ physical and mental well-being.

Faribault County is also planning a road improvement project along CSAH 16 (programmed for 2026) that will provide a much needed trail connection from S East St to Steinberg Nature Park, which aligns with the recommendations of this plan.



Existing tennis courts



03

INVENTORY & ANALYSIS

Inventory and analysis is an essential part of any park system master planning process. Performing an in-depth inventory of existing features helps establish a better understanding of a park's existing conditions, amenities and resources, and provides a city with important baseline information to make informed decisions regarding their park and trail system.

In the fall of 2022, an inventory and analysis of each of Blue Earth's community parks and multi-use trails was conducted. This process provided vital information about existing conditions and amenities in each park, guided decisions about potential improvements to each park, and ensured that each park's unique characteristics and the community's needs were taken into consideration throughout the master planning process.



Community Gardens (in Faribault County Fairgrounds)

INVENTORY

To evaluate how well Blue Earth is meeting the recreational needs of the community, one must understand what amenities and features exist in the park system and the condition/state they're currently in. During the inventory of the Blue Earth park and trail system, each park's assets (e.g., natural resources, recreational facilities and amenities) and issues (e.g., environmental limitations, infrastructure problems, and other factors) were identified. The analysis of these assets and issues helped the planning team understand how to best capitalize on each park's strengths and find solutions for any potential limitations.

Although Blue Earth has a variety of park facilities and amenities in good, working condition, there are some park features that are currently not meeting the needs of the community, not functioning properly, or not safe for continued use by the public. This slow degradation of park features and equipment is normal, due to heavy usage by community members and exposure to the elements; however, it must be addressed to preserve the longevity of the city's parks, trails and open spaces.

By conducting an in-depth inventory of Blue Earth's many park and trail features, it is our hope that the community can better track the condition of their park equipment and implement a plan and timeline for continued maintenance and replacement.

The images to the right showcase just a few of the amenities that Blue Earth's park system has to offer, including well-built picnic shelters, enjoyable playground structures, and even musical play equipment.



Main Shelter at Putnam Park



Musical Play Equipment at Giant Park

ANALYSIS

Upon completion of the inventory, the qualitative and quantitative data collected was consolidated into a comprehensive inventory chart (see page 23) to provide a more thorough system-wide review of existing facilities. Amenities available for public use as part of the school district facilities are shown as isolated rows in the table.

The purpose of this park system master plan, and specifically this section, is to identify what park and trail assets the community already has, what assets are missing, and what issues may need to be addressed in each park. Potential problem areas and possible points of improvement are detailed throughout this section.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO OUTDOOR AMENITIES

Parks, trails and open space amenities play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life and overall well-being of rural communities. The great outdoors offer multiple benefits that contribute to the physical, mental and social health of residents, and allow for a sense of community and environmental stewardship.

- **Applying this to Blue Earth:** *It is important to evaluate physical connections throughout the community to encourage walking and cycling to parks and trails. Similarly, providing accessible connections from parking areas, adjacent sidewalks and access points to park amenities such as shelters, restrooms, bleachers and playgrounds should be improved.*

PROVIDING CLOSE PROXIMITY TO PARKS + OPEN SPACE

Parks provide opportunities for recreational activities, promote physical fitness and help combat sedentary lifestyles. Close proximity of trails, multi-use fields, and playgrounds encourages residents to engage in regular exercise while also being in a welcoming natural environment.

- **Applying this to Blue Earth:** *As shown in the Proximity Mapping portion of this section, there is a good distribution of park space across the majority of Blue Earth. An important consideration regarding park proximity*

is the playground and amenities at the Blue Earth Elementary/Middle School. While these are not city-owned facilities, residents in the neighborhoods surrounding the school site rely on these amenities and use them frequently. Without the playground at this location, there would be a significant gap in the playground proximity in the heart of the community.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION

Parks serve as gathering places for social interactions and community events. They foster a sense of belonging and unity among neighbors by facilitating community bonding. Community events held in these spaces promote cultural exchange, celebrate local traditions, and strengthen community ties. These events also contribute to the economic vitality of the community, particularly important in rural communities like Blue Earth.

- **Applying this to Blue Earth:** *There is currently not a specific location within one of the parks for community events such as small-medium sized performances such as concerts,*

movies in the park, weddings and other similar events. As evident in the community input during the planning process, community members desire an outdoor amphitheater or bandshell-type structure to host events, creating more opportunities for social and community engagement.

KEEP PLAYGROUNDS FUN + FOLLOW CURRENT TRENDS

The playground industry responds well to current social and behavioral trends and the manufacturers do a good job of changing play equipment to keep the interest of children and keep them active. As playgrounds are updated, it is important to follow these trends and find opportunities to keep our playgrounds as a place that encourages continued use, social interaction and a fun and inviting space for recreation.

- **Applying this to Blue Earth:** *It is important to continue to evaluate the condition of playground equipment within Blue Earth parks, most notably in Piano Park (formerly Third Ward Park) and when the time comes, consider incorporating play equipment that provides a unique play experience from other playgrounds in town. Currently, the play equipment at Putnam*

Park, Piano Park and the ballfield playgrounds are all fairly similar. By creating unique play experiences at each park, children may be more inclined to visit different parks for a different experience or challenge. This may result in broader use of the park system and potentially introduce children to new peers that are not in their immediate neighborhood.

CONNECT PEOPLE TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Even in smaller, rural communities, people are often limited in opportunities to engage and experience the “natural” environment. Parks play a vital role in environmental awareness by enhancing biodiversity, improving air quality, and mitigating the impacts of climate change. These spaces offer a natural escape from the stresses of daily life and allow park visitors to connect directly with nature, even if it is in the middle of their community.

- **Applying this to Blue Earth:** *Blue Earth has an extensive amount of what would be considered open space acres. Leland Parkway, Steinberg Nature Park and Unity Trail are three incredible amenities within the community that create opportunities for people to experience natural*

landforms, the Blue Earth River, native vegetation and wildlife. Protecting these resources is important and presents certain challenges with impacts from flooding, security and upkeep. At the same time, additional consideration should be put into finding opportunities to enhance these areas with right-sized and carefully planned amenities. Types of appropriate amenities might include:

- * *Single track bicycle/hiking trails*
- * *Interpretive/educational signage*
- * *Natural playscapes*
- * *Geocaching*
- * *Outdoor classrooms*

Many times, these amenities can be low-cost input ideas but are made possible simply by the unique setting they are in and rely more on the environment around them, than the actual built features themselves.



Nature Playscape Example

ANALYSIS

Park Inventory of Existing Amenities																								
		Acres	Trail Length (mi)	Ballfields (Baseball and Softball)	Basketball Hoops/Court	Bike Racks	Bike/Walk Trail	Community Gardens	Go-Kart Track	Ice Skating/Hockey Rink	Kiosk (Interpretive/Educational)	Multipurpose Court	Open Air Shelter	Open Field/Football/Soccer	Park Entry Signage	Parking/Parking Areas	Pickleball Courts (Striped for)	Play/Interactive Equipment	Pool/Aquatic Facility	Restroom Facilities/Warming Houses	Skate Park	Splash pad	Tennis Courts	Volleyball Courts
Parks and Trails	Location																							
Beyer Field and Leland Parkway	South/North of Leland Pkwy, East of N Main St	31.3	-	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Blue Earth Ballfields	E 14th St and S Rice St	6.4	-	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0
Dog Park	E 2nd St and N Walnut St	0.6	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Faribault County Fairgrounds	Along Fairgrounds Rd, Between N Main St and White Oak Rd	34.7	-	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	2
Gazebo Park	W 6th St and S Main St	0.19	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Giant Park	Green Giant Lane	2.6	-	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Piano Park	E 5th St and N Grove St	0.4	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Putnam Park	E 14th St and S Main St	12.0	-	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	4	2	1	1	0	0	6	0
Steinberg Nature Park	Along County Rd 16, East of the Blue Earth River	34.9	0.9	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		123.1	0.9	5	0	8	4	1	1	1	2	0	8	1	6	10	4	12	1	5	0	0	6	2
Trails	Location																							
Unity Trail (Not City-Owned)	Between Faribault County Fairgrounds and I-90 WB Rest Area	-	2.9	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nearby School Parks / Playgrounds	Location																							
Blue Earth Area Middle/Elementary School	315 E 6th St	2.1	-	1	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	-	1	0	2	0	-	0	0	0	0
Blue Earth Area High School	1125 Hwy 169	19.3	-	1	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	-	3	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	0
Wilson Field Football and Track	Between S Rice Street and Hwy 169	11.4	-	0	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	-	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total (Including Trails and Schools)		155.9	3.8	7	1	13	5	1	1	1	2	4	8	5	7	16	4	14	1	6	0	0	6	2

Figure 1: Park Inventory of Existing Amenities

PARK CLASSIFICATION OVERVIEW

Park types are often differentiated based on their size and intended purpose. This allows for a better understanding or definition of how they are used but also what amenities may be appropriate for them. Derived from the NRPA, there are eight commonly used park classifications (listed to the right). Because of Blue Earth's lower population, there are no metropolitan parks, regional parks, linear parks, or conservancies within city limits. There are, however, mini parks, neighborhoods parks, community parks, and special use areas for residents and visitors to enjoy.

Beyer Field/Leland Parkway, the Blue Earth Ballfields, Giant Park, Piano Park, and Putnam Park are considered "neighborhood parks" because they serve many age groups within limited areas in Blue Earth. With such a small size (<1 acre), Gazebo Park would be referred to as a "mini park." The Dog Park, on the other hand, is a special use area. Because they serve several neighborhoods within Blue Earth, Fairbault County Fairgrounds and Steinberg Nature Park would be classified as "community parks." Classifying parks ensures the appropriate management and conservation practices are applied to parks based on their specific purpose and characteristics.

Source: <https://www.dallasparks.org/151/Park-Classifications>

Classification	Size	Brief Description
Mini Park	2,500 sq. ft - 1 acre	A park that is used to address limited, isolated, or unique recreation needs of concentrated populations
Neighborhood Park	1 - 15 acres	A park that serves a variety of age groups within a limited area or neighborhoods
Community Park	16 - 99 acres	A park that serves several neighborhoods and is larger than a neighborhood park
Metropolitan Park	100 - 499 acres	Large park facilities that serve multiple communities
Regional Park	500+ acres	A very large multi-use park that serves several communities within a particular region
Special Use Area	N/A	An area or park used for specialized or single-purpose recreation activities (e.g., historical areas, nature centers, plazas, etc.)
Linear Park	N/A	A built connection or natural corridor that links parks together
Conservancy	N/A	An area used for the protection and management of the natural/cultural environment with recreation use as a secondary objective



Putnam Park (7.8 acres) - an example of a neighborhood park



Steinberg Nature Park (33.0 acres) - an example of a community park

PARK SYSTEM OVERVIEW

Parks, trails and open spaces are not just recreational spaces; they are the heart of rural and urban communities. Prioritizing the development and maintenance of these greenspaces will help positively impact the city of Blue Earth for many years to come.

With just over 120 acres of public parks and open spaces, Blue Earth has quite an expansive park and trail system. As shown in Figure 2, Blue Earth's neighborhood parks and trails include:

① **Beyer Field/Leland Parkway** 31.3 acres | Neighborhood Park

Located along either side of Leland Parkway, Beyer Field and Leland Parkway offer both passive and active recreation opportunities, including walking/running, biking, sledding, ice skating, hockey, and more.

② **Blue Earth Ballfields** 6.4 acres | Neighborhood Park

Home to three of the community's multi-use ballfields, a concessions building, restroom building, and playgrounds, the Blue Earth Ballfields can be found at the corner of S Rice Street and E 14th Street.

③ **Dog Park** 0.6 acres | Special Use Area

Blue Earth's fenced-in Dog Park, which was recently established in the 700 block of E 2nd Street, provides an off-leash area for dogs of all sizes to run around and socialize with other dogs.

④ **Faribault County Fairgrounds** 34.7 acres | Community Park

The Faribault County Fairgrounds, situated just south of Fairgrounds Road and west of Giant Park, offers a variety of amenities, including ballfields, volleyball courts, a go-kart track, 14 electrical campsites with full hook-ups, playgrounds, restroom facilities, 10 community garden plots, multi-use trails, and the city's indoor Fitness Center.

⑤ **Gazebo Park** 0.19 acres | Mini Park

Located just east of City Hall at the intersection of W 6th St and S Main St, Gazebo Park offers a peaceful and well-designed place to rest. Picnic tables, benches, shade trees, and a beautiful gazebo structure can all be found here.

⑥ **Giant Park** 2.6 acres | Neighborhood Park

Located just south of Green Giant Lane, Giant Park is quite popular with visitors and residents due to the 55.5' tall Jolly Green Giant statue that resides there. The Jolly Green Giant, and the memorabilia museum across the street, attracts thousands of visitors a year.

⑦ **Piano Park** 0.4 acres | Mini Park

Formerly known as "Third Ward Park," Piano Park is located near the corner of E 5th Street and N Grove Street. This park has several play structures for children to utilize.

⑧ **Putnam Park** 12 acres | Neighborhood Park

Putnam Park, in many ways, is the "hub" of the community. Tennis courts, playgrounds, open-air picnic shelters, the city pool, and a disc golf course are all located here. 2023/2024 improvements include new tennis courts with pickleball striping and accessibility improvements.

PARK SYSTEM OVERVIEW

9 Steinberg Nature Park 34.9 acres | Community Park

Steinberg Nature Park may be Blue Earth's most beautiful park. Located east of Blue Earth River along County Road 16, the park provides visitors with a scenic environment to view, experience, and appreciate nature. Many other park amenities are available at Steinberg Nature Park, including educational signage, an open-air shelter with restroom facilities, and plenty of parking space.

10 Unity Trail (Not City-Owned) 3.0 miles | Multi-Use Trail

Unity Trail offers visitors a unique opportunity to enjoy the great outdoors without leaving Blue Earth. This 3-mile paved trail starts at Faribault County Fairgrounds, works its way through grassland and woodland areas, and ends at the rest area north of I-90. If you're looking for a peaceful and scenic trail experience, Unity Trail is the place to be!

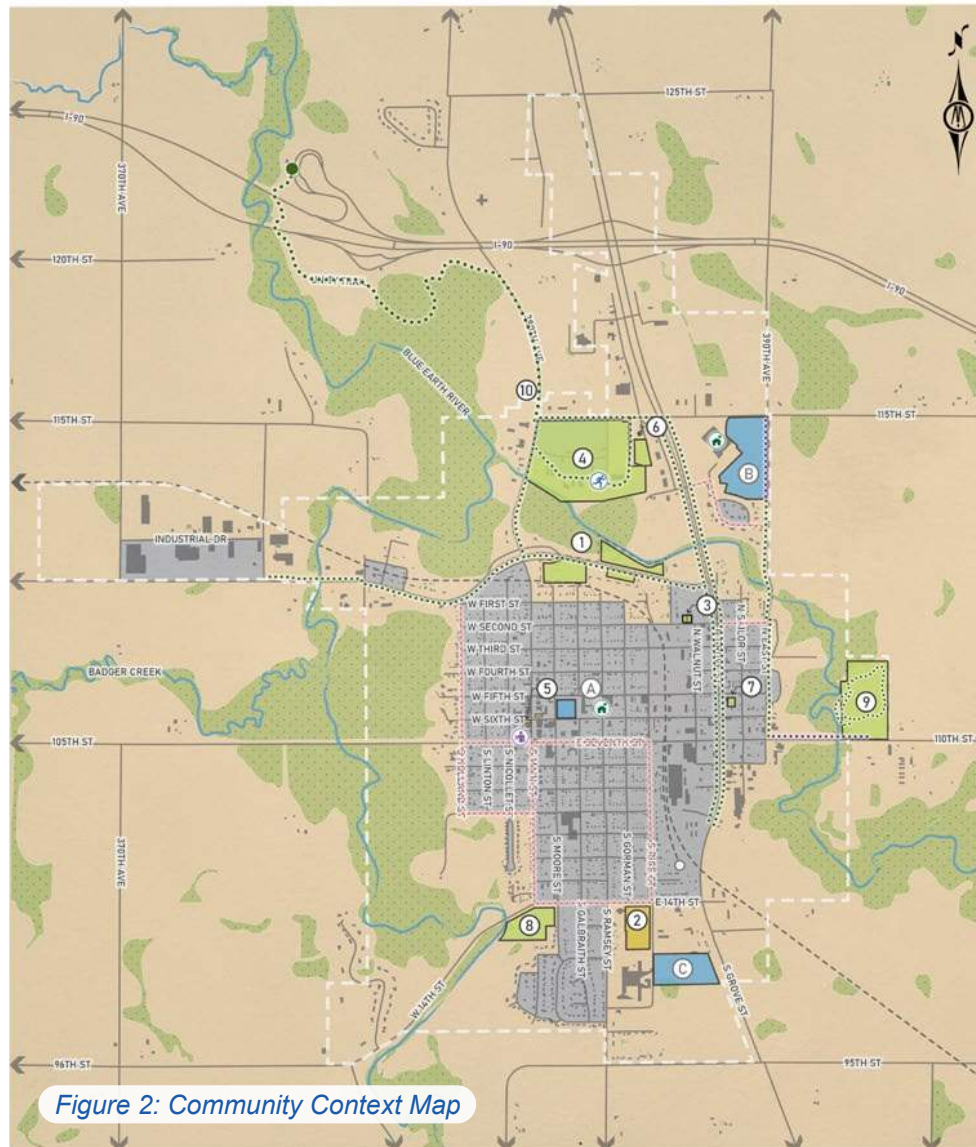


Figure 2: Community Context Map

- ① Beyer Field/
Leland Parkway
- ② Blue Earth
Ballfields
- ③ Dog Park
- ④ Faribault County
Fairgrounds
- ⑤ Gazebo Park
- ⑥ Giant Park
- ⑦ Piano Park
- ⑧ Putnam Park
- ⑨ Steinberg Nature
Park
- ⑩ Unity Trail
- A Blue Earth Area Middle/
Elementary School
- B Blue Earth Area
High School
- C Wilson Field Football
and Track

LEGEND:

- City Parks
- Other Parks
- Greenspaces
- Wetland/Wooded
Areas
- City Limits
- Building Footprints
- Railroads
- Streets
- Rivers
- Schools
- Fitness Center
- Senior Center
- Multi-Use Trails
- On-Street Bike
Route
- Future Trail
Connection

0 1000 2000
HORIZ SCALE FEET

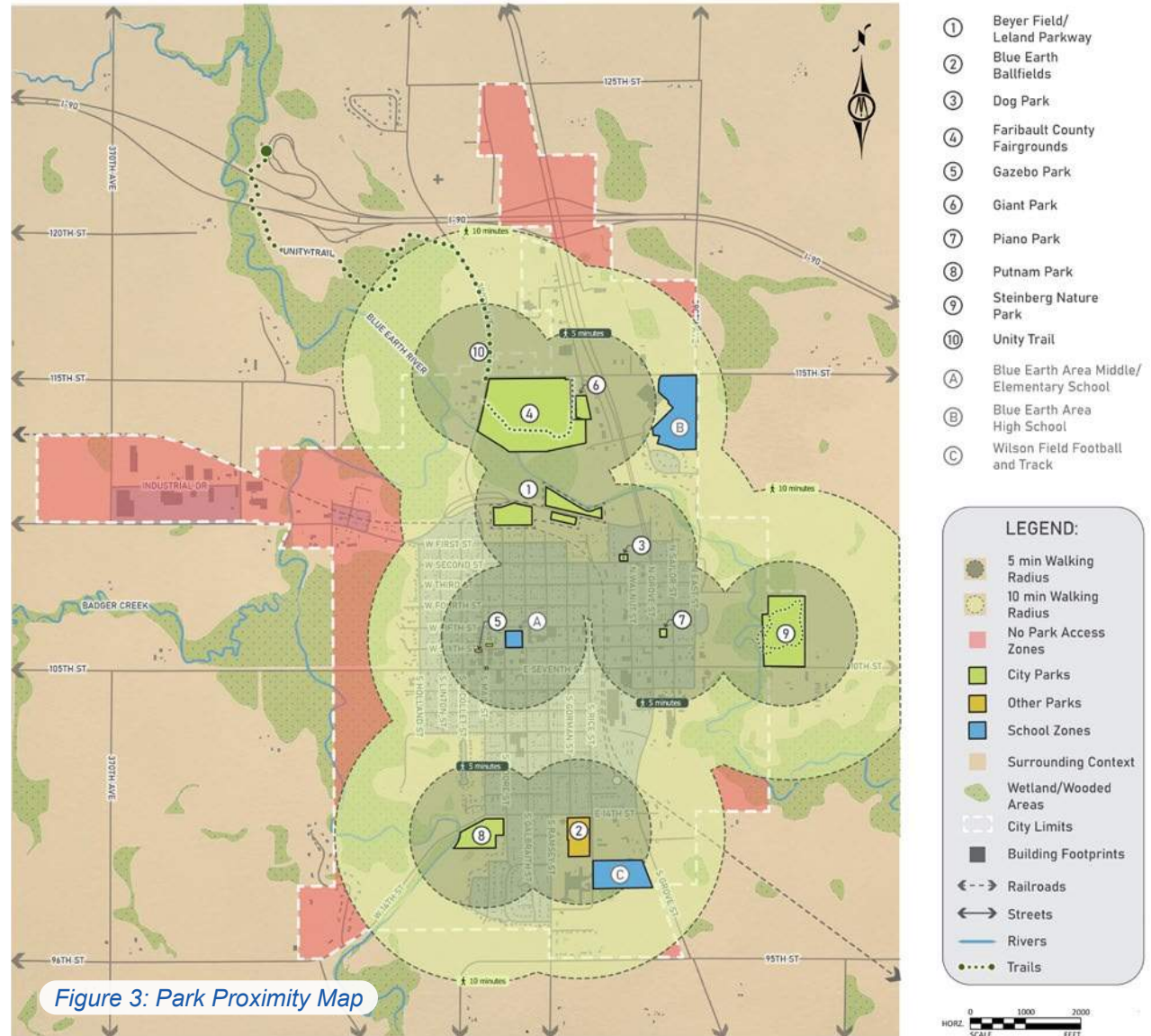
PROXIMITY MAPPING

PARK PROXIMITY MAPPING

Blue Earth has nine city parks. These parks serve a variety of needs for residents who live within walking distance to them, but it is also important to consider the needs of residents who do not live within close proximity to parks. During the analysis of the park system, maps were generated to study the distribution of parks and certain park features within the community, and to look for gaps in their associated service area.

The park proximity map to the right was created to evaluate the adequacy of Blue Earth's existing parks in meeting the recreational needs of the community. For neighborhood and community park facilities, the associated service area is generally defined with quarter-mile to half-mile walking radii, which equates to approximately 5 and 10-minute walking times for the average user.

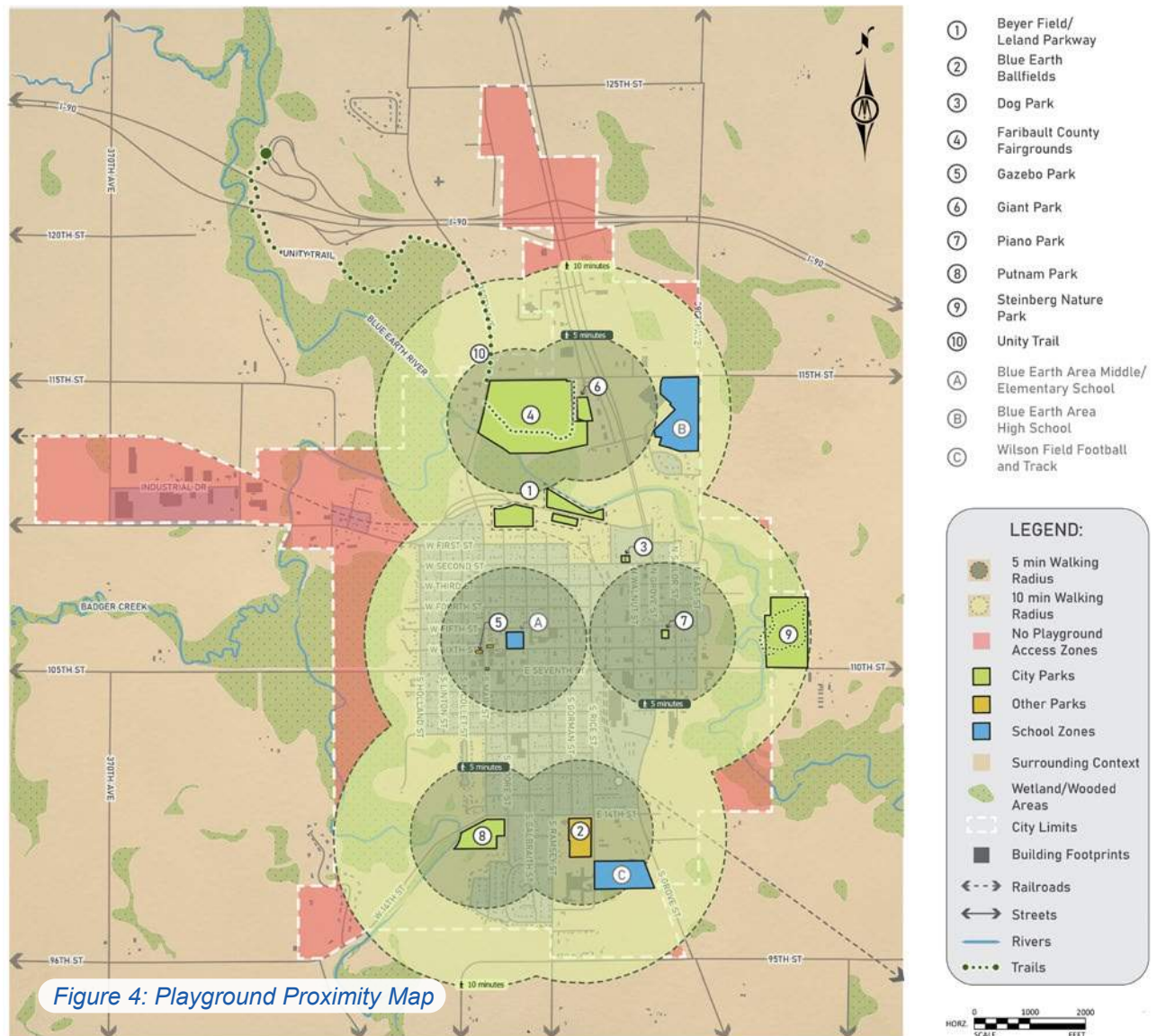
For the most part, parks are within reasonable proximity to most residents, but those who live along the edges of the community may have to travel greater distances to access a community park and its amenities.



PLAYGROUND PROXIMITY MAPPING

Similarly, the playground proximity map was created to study the distribution of playgrounds within the community, and to identify areas in Blue Earth that may have a gap in access to playgrounds. Developing an understanding of this proximity is important, as playgrounds are often visited multiple times on a weekly basis by families with toddler and school age children, living nearby.

Currently, there are playgrounds or play equipment available for use at the Blue Earth Ballfields, the Faribault County Fairgrounds, Giant Park, Putnam Park, and Piano Park. Although it is not a city-owned facility, the play areas outside of the Blue Earth Area Elementary/Middle School play area are often used by residents who live nearby and, as a result, was also included in the playground proximity map. Playground and play structure accessibility was an important consideration during the inventory process. Although there are many parks with play equipment, not all of the equipment is accessible to people with disabilities. More effort needs to be made to meet ADA accessibility standards and consider different types of disabilities. There may be opportunities to reach underserved populations with improvements to the amenities within the parks.



RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING + COMMUNITY EDUCATION

EXISTING PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES

According to the city's community education website, "Blue Earth Area Community Education provides quality programs and services for all ages, from the very youngest learners to senior citizens." Blue Earth's community education programs and opportunities are quite robust, with activities/options available at all times of the year. Listed below are just some of the programs and opportunities available through the Community Education group:

- Special events (e.g., guest speakers, book clubs, art shows, carnivals, etc.)
- Parent/Child classes
- Monthly interest groups
- Online and in-person adult enrichment courses (e.g., self-defence training, pottery, golf, etc.)
- Teen drivers education classes and senior driver improvement classes
- Activities for students (e.g., sports, clubs, etc.)
- Early Childhood Family Education

(ECFE) opportunities for children ages birth to five

- Swimming lessons
- Children's theater opportunities
- and many more!

For parents with children, Blue Earth Area Community Education offers several child care options, including Little Giants Early Learning Center (ages 6 weeks to 5 years old), Jumpstart (preschool for children that will be entering kindergarten), and Be a Kid (school age care).

Each year, the Community Education team puts together booklets with information on all the activities and events offered in the summer and in the winter/spring. Additionally, the Community Education Calendar, available on the BEA Community Education website, is an incredibly useful resource that lists out each event, including details on when and where each event/activity will be held. For additional information on the programming and opportunities offered through Community Education, check the Blue Earth Area Community Education website or the group's social media pages.

POTENTIAL PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES

Although Blue Earth offers many recreational and social opportunities through their Community Education program, there are still a few programming opportunities that the community does not offer that residents have shown interest in. They include:

- Skateboarding
- Basketball
- Multi-purpose play (e.g., football, soccer)
- Nature play
- Kayaking/Canoeing

In the community survey, there were several respondents who noted that more time and focus should be spent on community events and entertainment opportunities. Additional programming opportunities that the city could focus on include:

- Programming for senior citizens
- Community bandshell/event space
- Bike share program



04

RELEVANT TRENDS

Park and recreation trends are ever-changing. They can vary by region or climate and are often impacted by social influences. The following section of the report showcases information from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and outlines just a few of the most relevant trends related to park planning in general and in Blue Earth.

TRENDS OVERVIEW

1. Adaptive and Inclusive Recreational Programming
2. Environmental Stewardship
3. Access to Local Parks and Trails
4. The COVID-19 Pandemic
5. A Rise in Non-Traditional and Informal Recreation
6. Climate Change Resilience



Ballfield (in Faribault County Fairgrounds)

TOPLINE FINDINGS

Source: 2022 and 2023 NRPA Agency Performance Reviews

■ Staffing ■ Agency Funding
■ Budget



“The typical park and recreation agency has **8.9 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees** on staff for every **10,000 residents** in the jurisdiction served by the agency.”



“Operating and maintenance, programming, and administration are the primary responsibilities of park and recreation workers.”

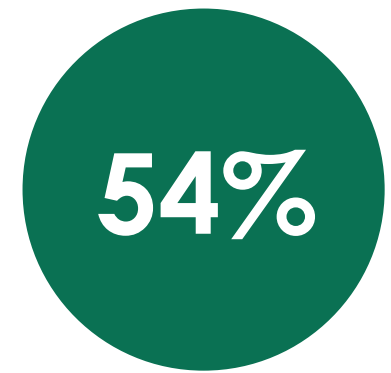


In Blue Earth, this would come to **\$302,096** annually, based on the current population

“The typical park and recreation agency has annual operating expenses of **\$93.01** per capita” and “the median level of operating expenditures is **\$7,823** per acre of park and non-park sites managed by the agency.”



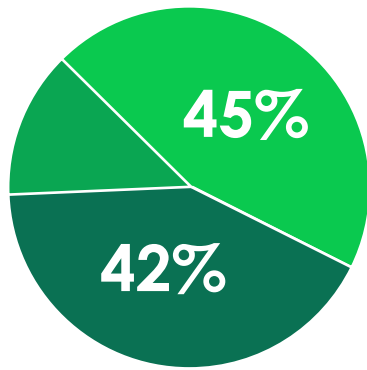
“The typical park and recreation agency spends **\$102,530 in annual operating expenditures for each employee.**”



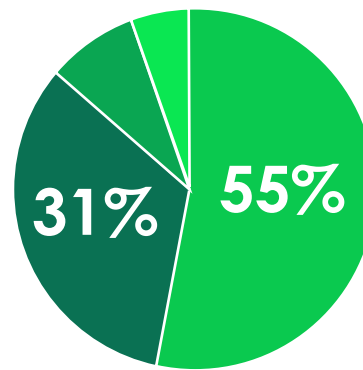
Staffing costs account for **54%** of the operating budget at the typical park and recreation agency.”



“The typical park and recreation agency serving a population of less than 20,000 has a **median five-year capital budget of \$1.5 million.**”



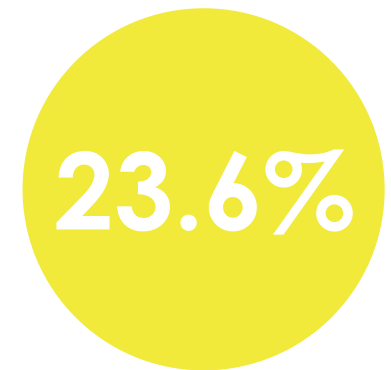
“The typical park agency dedicates **45%** of its operating budget **to park management and maintenance** and **42%** to recreation.”



“On average, agencies designate **55%** of their capital budget **for renovation** and **31%** toward **new development.**”



“The typical park and recreation agency generates **\$22.08 in revenue annually for each resident** in the jurisdiction.”



“The typical agency recovers **23.6%** of its operating expenditures from non-tax revenues.”

NRPA PARK METRICS

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) created the NRPA Park Metrics resource to provide park and rec professionals with benchmark data to help effectively manage and plan their park systems and resources. This data is especially helpful to park and recreation professionals because it assists park and rec agencies with comparing how their community's amenities compare to other communities at a national level. Incorporating these metrics into the park system master planning process can lead to more informed decisions, better resource allocation, improved equity and a higher likelihood of successful implementation and long-term sustainability of the plan.

Park & Recreation Facilities Per Population				
Type of Facility	Median Number of Residents Per Facility		Blue Earth	
	All Agencies	Less Than 20,000	# of Facilities Needed to Meet NRPA Metrics	# of Existing Facilities
Playgrounds	3,750	1,986	1.6	12
Basketball Courts	7,403	3,750	0.9	0
Tennis Courts (outdoor only)	5,608	2,723	1.2	6
Ballfields	13,192	5,831	0.6	5
Multi-Purpose Fields	9,622	4,362	0.7	0
Dog Parks	43,586	11,100	0.3	1
Outdoor Swimming Pool	38,000	8,637	0.4	1
Community Gardens	30,140	8,773	0.4	1
Soccer Field - Youth	7,382	3,504	0.9	0
Outdoor Ice Rink	16,887	7,997	0.4	1
Skatepark	53,708	11,100	0.3	0
Pickleball Courts	14,714	3,446	0.9	0

Blue Earth Population = 3,248

Figure 7: Park and recreation facilities per population

Community Population Comparison				
Community	Population	Size (Square Mile)	Population Density	Number of Parks
Blue Earth	3,248	3.41	956.60	9
Granite Falls	2,737	3.73	733.78	4
Jackson	3,310	5.22	634.10	14
Le Sueur	4,178	5.44	768.01	8
Luverne	4,934	3.68	1,340.76	12
Pine Island	3,841	6.02	638.04	9
Plainview	3,500	2.14	1,635.51	9
Sleepy Eye	3,428	2.14	1,601.87	10
St. Charles	3,989	3.78	1,055.29	7
St. James	4,727	2.35	2,011.49	10

Figure 5: Community population comparison

Park Acreage	
Park	Size (Acres)
Beyer Field/Leland Parkway	31.3
Blue Earth Baseball Fields	6.4
Dog Park	0.6
Faribault County Fairgrounds	34.7
Gazebo Park	0.19
Giant Park	2.6
Piano Park	0.4
Putnam Park	12.0
Steinberg Nature Park	34.9
Total	123.1

Figure 6: Park acreage

Park Acres Per 1,000 Residents			
	All Agencies	Less Than 20,000	Blue Earth
Median	10.4	12.0	37.9
Lower Quartile	5.1	5.2	
Upper Quartile	18.2	21.7	

Figure 8: Park acres per 1,000 residents

TREND 1: ADAPTIVE + INCLUSIVE RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Adaptive and inclusive recreational programming in parks and open spaces is crucial for promoting a diverse and cohesive community. Prioritizing inclusive recreational programming creates opportunities for social interaction and physical activity by catering to individuals of all abilities and backgrounds. Embracing diversity in recreational activities encourages understanding and empathy among people and helps create better-functioning and healthier community dynamics.

- According to an NRPA Park Pulse Survey from November 2022 (“A Place for All to Play”), **“Nearly 90% of U.S. adults agree it is important that local park and recreation agencies create and provide recreation programming that is adaptive and inclusive so persons of all abilities may participate.”**
- Some **“81% of U.S. adults want parks and recreation to ensure inclusivity through policies and practices,”** according to an NRPA Park Pulse Survey from June 2022 (“Inclusive Policies and Practices”)
- Local park and recreation agencies must provide community members with recreation programming that is adaptive and inclusive so people of all abilities can enjoy their experiences in outdoor spaces.
- To ensure people of all abilities can participate, local park and recreation agencies must make changes to current policies and practices to become more inclusive.



TREND 2: ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP



Environmental stewardship is vital for the future of parks, trails, and open spaces. Preserving natural habitats, conserving biodiversity, and mitigating climate change are of utmost importance as climate change continues to alter the natural environment. By responsibly managing these areas, we can ensure that future generations will enjoy fresh air, clean water, and a thriving ecosystem. Protecting Blue Earth's natural resources will ensure that residents, visitors, and wildlife will be able to enjoy the city's parks and open spaces for many years to come.



- With so many factors contributing to climate change and the degradation of the natural environment, it is important to teach children at an early age about environmental stewardship.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines **environmental stewardship** as “**the responsibility for environmental quality shared by all those whose action affect the environment.**”
- “94% of U.S. adults agree that it is important for children and young adults to learn about the environment and ways they can help be a good environmental steward.”

TREND 3: ACCESS TO LOCAL PARKS AND TRAILS

Access to local parks, trails, and open spaces is vital for the well-being of both individuals and communities. Not only do public greenspaces offer opportunities for physical activity, but they also promote a healthy lifestyle, reduce the risk of various health issues, contribute to environmental conservation, and enhance the overall quality of life in both rural and urban areas. Perhaps most importantly, they serve as spaces for relaxation, socialization, and mental rejuvenation. Without these important gathering and recreation spaces, cities would function quite differently.

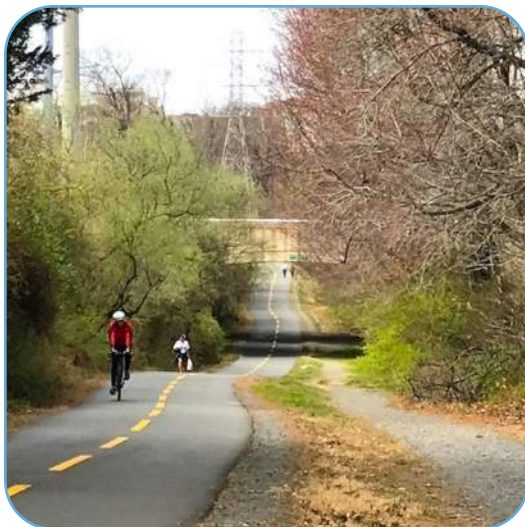


- Trails are important to residents and visitors of a community for a variety of reasons. They provide opportunities for physical activity, improve our overall health and wellbeing, and act as safe corridors for walking, running, and biking throughout the day.
- As stated in an NRPA Park Pulse Survey from November 2021, **three in four U.S. adults believe “it is important that they have access to public walking, hiking, or biking trails near their home.”**
- Additionally, **“84% of Millennials say it is important that they have access to public walking, hiking, or biking trails near their home.”**

TREND 4: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



The COVID-19 pandemic had profound effects on the public's perception of parks, trails, and open spaces. As communities around the world went on lock-down, many people turned to their city's parks and trails as a way to get outdoors and engage in physical activity while still adhering to social distancing guidelines. During such a challenging time, access to nature and outdoor spaces provided a much-needed avenue for stress relief and relaxation, and raised awareness about the importance of equitable access to parks, trails, and open spaces.



- The COVID-19 pandemic caused wide variations in park visitation in 2020 and 2021 as some trails and parks were closed while others limited their services. However, in urban areas, parks and trails “experienced increased numbers of visitors as people sought safe areas for recreation and exercise.”
- The pandemic may have shut down the nation for an extended period of time, but it did not stop people from searching for opportunities for distanced physical activity. **Our love and appreciation for parks, trails, and open spaces became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and will only continue to grow as we continue to reflect on the pandemic's effect on our health and well-being and the importance of community spaces for healing.**

TREND 5: A RISE IN NON-TRADITIONAL AND INFORMAL RECREATION

Recreation trends generally shift based on societal changes and preferences over time. In recent years, there has been a rise in non-traditional and informal recreation in parks, trails, and open spaces across the country. Often times, non-traditional and informal activities are more inclusive and appeal to a wider range of people, which encourages participation from folks of all backgrounds and age groups. As recreation in parks and trails continues to become more informal, cities will need to reconsider their recreation offerings and adjust accordingly.



- According to The Aspen Institute's Project Play State of Play 2021 report, **"before the restriction imposed by the pandemic, participation in youth sports declined from 45% in 2008 to 38% in 2018."**
- Other forms of physical activity and engagement have become popular as a result, including mountain biking, hiking, horseback riding, disc golf, dancing, geocaching, pickleball, skateboarding, and seasonal/holiday-themed sports.



TREND 6: CLIMATE CHANGE RESILIENCY



Fossil fuel use, deforestation, and some agricultural and industrial practices have exacerbated the effects of climate change in recent years. Parks across the country have seen a loss in biodiversity, as well as increased rates of erosion, soil degradation, and drought. In order to counteract the effects of climate change in parks, trails, and open spaces, cities must find new approaches to increase resiliency to climate change. The conservation of our land's natural resources should be of the utmost importance to parks and recreation agencies around the world.



- As communities deal with the effects of climate change (e.g., flooding, drought, extreme heat, and sea level rise), parks and recreation agencies will need to find new approaches to increasing resilience in their parks, trails, and open spaces.
- **Contemporary approaches to increasing resilience to climate change include designing with nature, conserving landscapes and ecosystems, and incorporating native plants.**

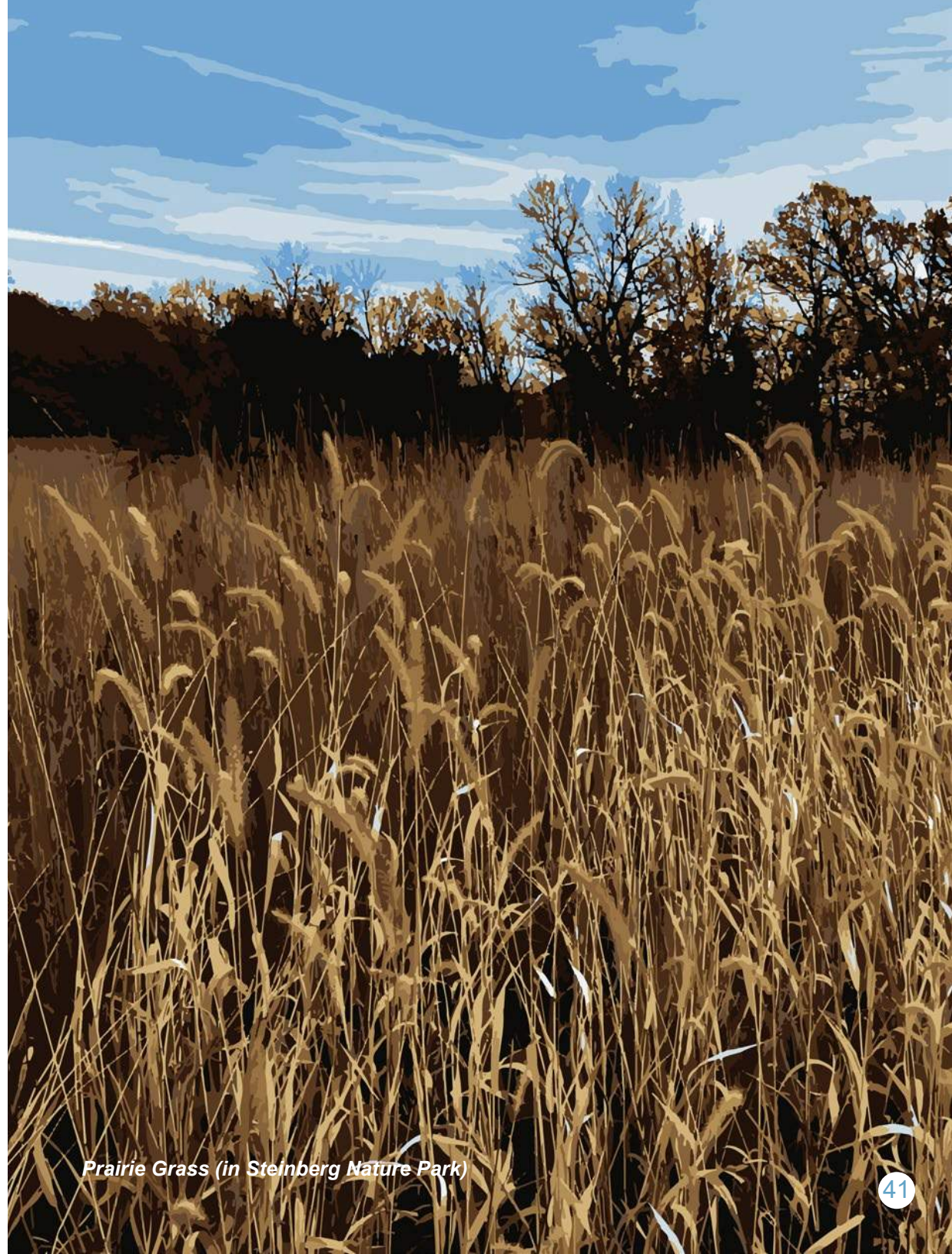


05

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT + INPUT GATHERING

Multiple engagement events were facilitated during the planning process to develop a rapport with community members and stakeholders regarding the current condition and future opportunities of the park system.

These input opportunities sought feedback across the community through different forms and allowed the consulting team to gain valuable insight into what the community values in park and recreation amenities.



Prairie Grass (in Steinberg Nature Park)

OVERVIEW

Engaging the community and understanding what a positive outcome looks like to them is critical to the success of any planning effort. Continuing this input process can be a valuable exercise in evaluating the city's progress toward implementation and keep aligned to the community's needs.

This section of the report provides a summary of these efforts and the information collected throughout the process.

Examples of engagement event
and community survey material



JULY 2023
BLUE EARTH PARK SYSTEM MASTER PLAN - GIANT DAYS



BLUE EARTH PARK SYSTEM MASTER PLAN

We want to hear from you! Share your feedback below.

Name and contact info (if desired):

Comment:



CITY OF BLUE EARTH PARK SYSTEM MASTER PLAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

ENCUESTA COMUNITARIA DEL PLAN MAESTRO DEL
SISTEMA DE PARQUES

Do you want to help shape the future of Blue Earth's park system? Take part in this community survey by scanning one of the QR codes below or by visiting the following links, for English: bit.ly/blueearthparks, or Spanish: bit.ly/blueearth_espanol.

¿Te quieres ayudar a dar forma el futuro del sistema parque del Blue Earth? Participa en esta encuesta comunidad por escaneando uno de los códigos QR abajo o visitando los siguientes enlaces: Español - bit.ly/blueearth_espanol, Inglés - bit.ly/blueearthparks.

Please contact our consultant team at Bolton & Menk with any questions.
Casey Byers: casey.byers@bolton-menk.com or 515-259-9190
Aus Perez: aus.perez@bolton-menk.com or 651-304-7313

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

PARK AND RECREATION COMMITTEE AND CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS

With an invigorated interest in completing a park system master plan document to help guide future parks and recreation-related decisions, the city decided to prioritize the development of this plan in 2022. The parks and recreation committee, which was created long before the development of this plan, helped facilitate the process. This group was made up of residents, business owners, volunteers, community organization representatives, city council members and city staff.

The committee's mission was to aid in the overall development of the plan, to provide local expertise on the existing park system, potential deficiencies, and to guide outcomes of the project (in conjunction with input collected through public engagement).

There were three meetings with the steering committee and/or members of city council during the development of this master plan. These meetings focused on topics ranging from existing conditions in the parks to potential improvement recommendations for each park/major trail.

IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT

During the development of the park system master plan, the planning team held an in-person engagement event in conjunction with Blue Earth's Giant Days celebration. Giant Days is a two-day celebration of the city's agricultural heritage and community traditions where community members/families can enjoy live entertainment, shopping, food, parade festivities, and child-friendly experiences together.

This year the event was held on two days: Friday, July 7th, 2023, and Saturday, July 8th, 2023. The planning team set up a booth with boards showcasing progress on the report in Gazebo Park (just east of City Hall) on the 7th. Several families, community members and city council members stopped by the booth to give their feedback on potential improvements and to discuss their thoughts on Blue Earth's park and trail system. Their feedback helped inform several aspects of the report and was crucial in understanding how residents currently use the parks and trails in their community.

COMMUNITY SURVEY

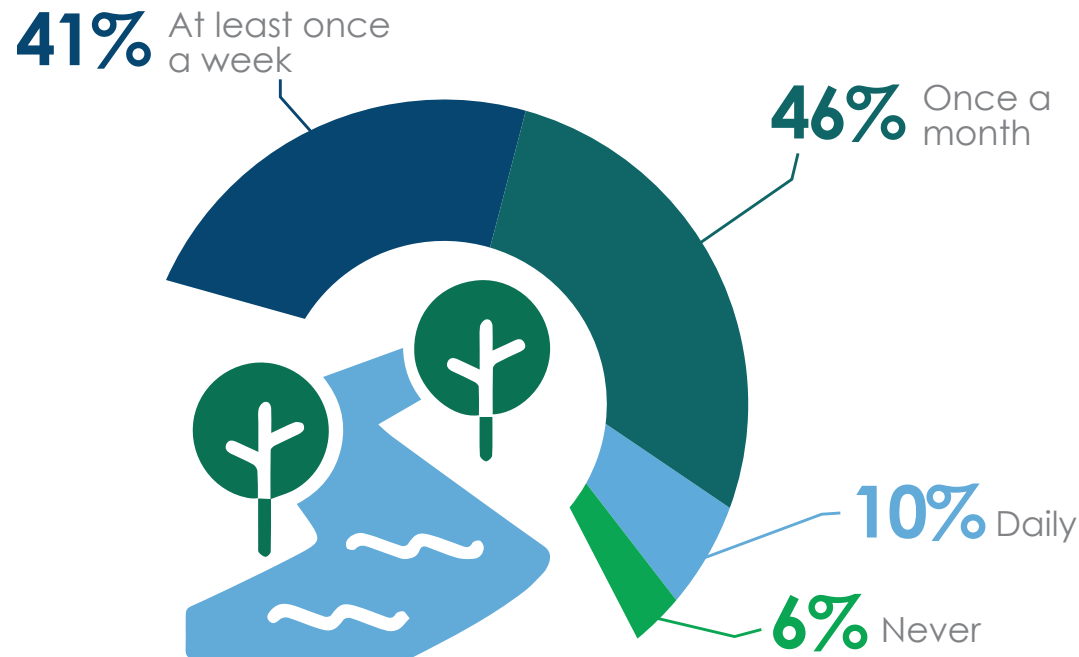
The planning team shared a park system master plan survey with the community of Blue Earth on April 15th, 2023. The survey was live for approximately two months and could be accessed online through a shareable weblink. While the survey was live, city staff and the parks and recreation committee spread the word throughout town. Over 300 participants provided input through the community survey!

In order to better understand the participants, the survey started by asking a series of introductory questions relating to participant demographics. A series of questions pertaining to community members' park, trail, and open space preferences followed.

The following provides a summary of the community input received from the community survey and input from City Council and staff. A full report of results from both surveys can be found in the appendix documents of this plan.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

HOW OFTEN PEOPLE VISIT CITY PARKS OR TRAILS



MOST FREQUENTLY USED PARK AREAS



MOST IMPORTANT AMENITIES



Most frequent interactions with parks, trails, and open spaces



1st

Visiting playgrounds with children



2nd

Exploring trail systems



3rd

Visiting parks and open spaces



4th

Relaxation



5th

Other outdoor recreational activities

Other common activities include:

- Dog walking
- Working
- Bike riding
- Disc Golf

What discourages people from using the parks?

25%

Lack of park and trail connectivity

24%

Lack of amenities/activities

17%

Proximity to home/work

Why are some parks visited more than others?

42%

Proximity to work/home

17%

Size of park

17%

Playground Accessibility

TOP 3 PRIORITIES FOR THE CITY TO FOCUS ON IMPROVING



Expand and
improve trail
connectivity



Update existing
park facilities/
amenities



Expand
community
activities and
events

Most participated in activities and events at parks



1st
Walking



2nd
Playgrounds



3rd
Swimming



4th
Nature Viewing

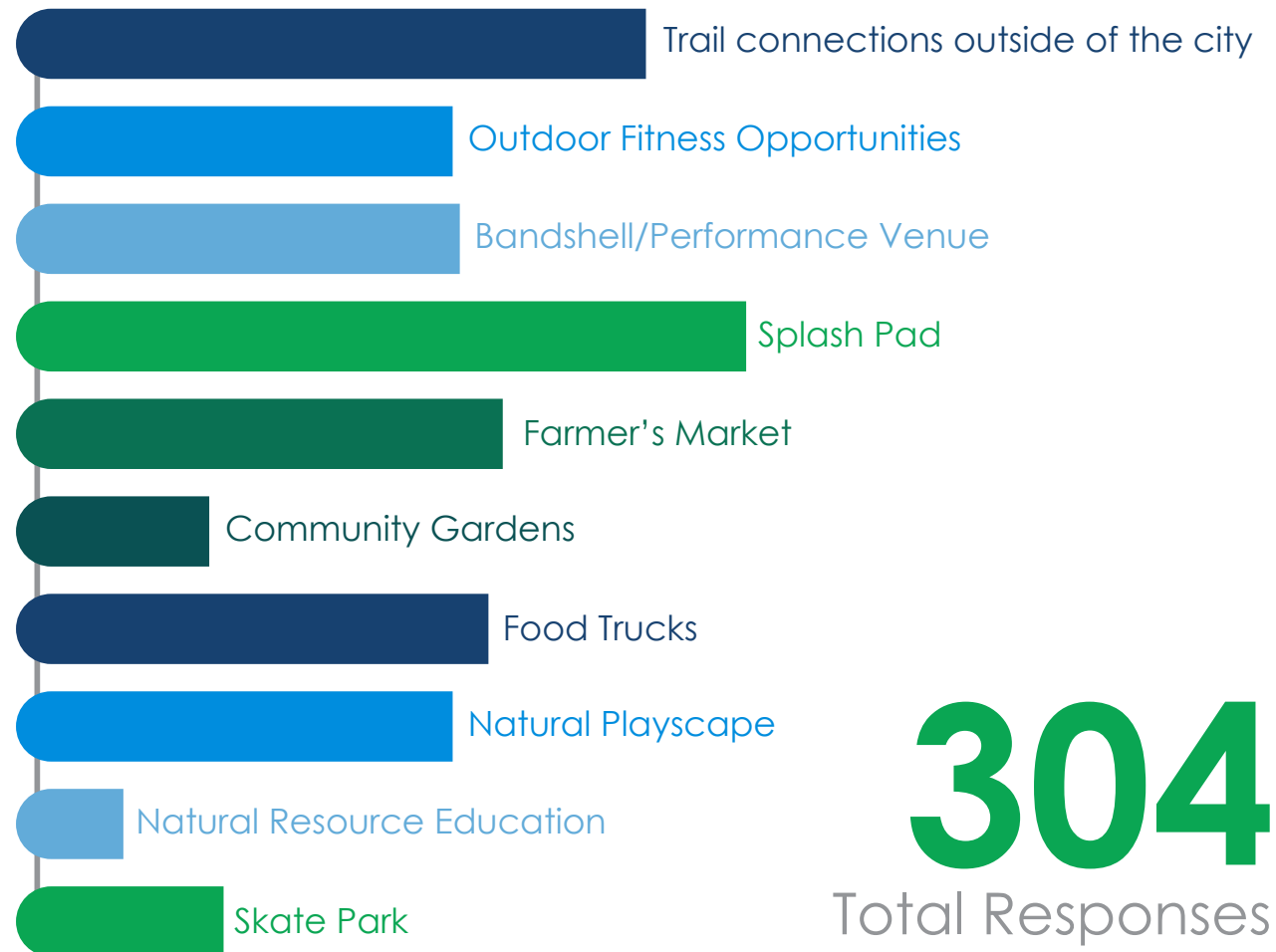


5th
Biking

Other common activities include:

- Community Events
- Team Sports
- Outdoor Picnicking
- Individual Sports

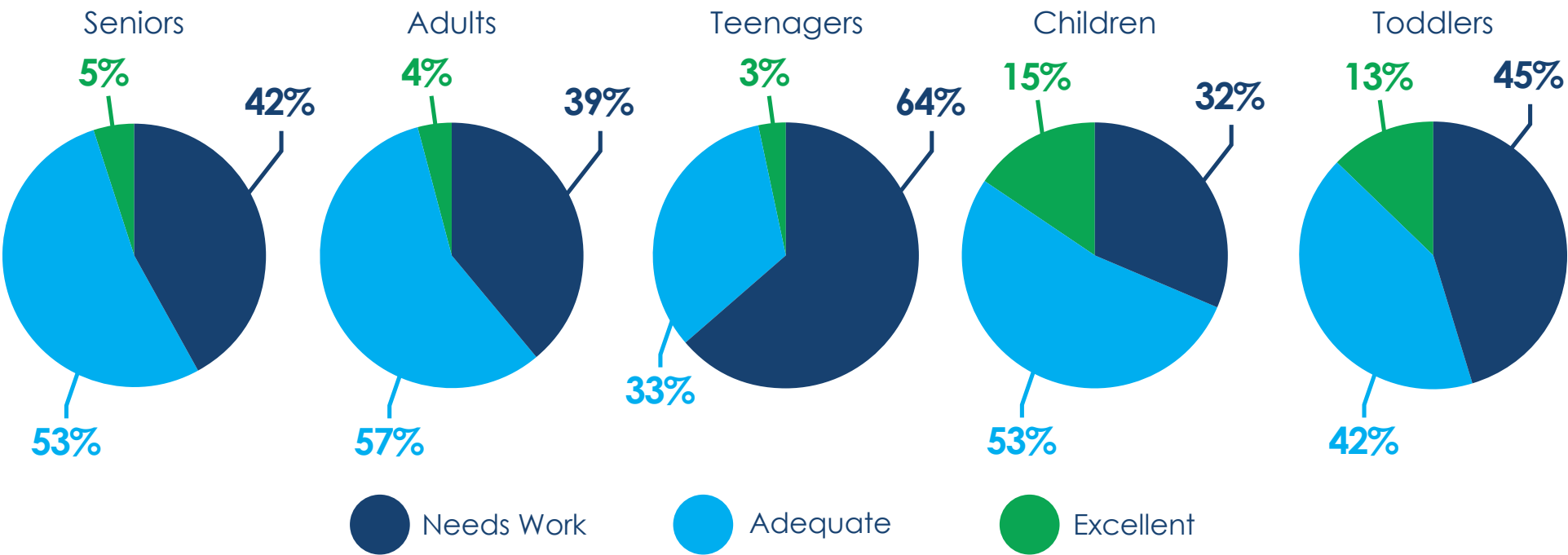
ACTIVITIES & EVENTS MISSING FROM PARKS



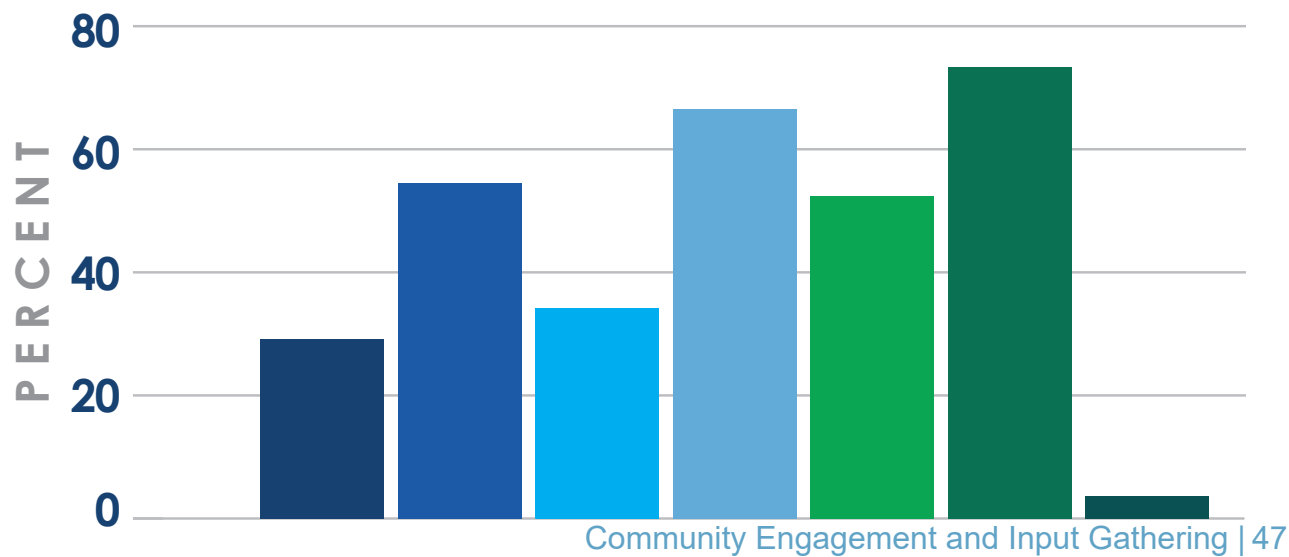
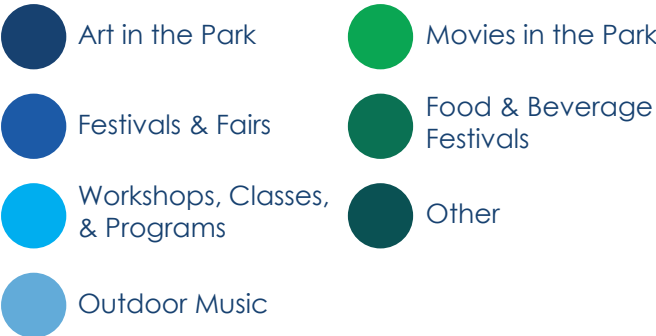
ACTIVITIES/AMENITIES TO FOCUS ON OVER THE NEXT 10 YEARS

- 1 Walking and Running
- 2 New Park Amenities (currently missing)
- 3 Biking/Cycling

ARE THERE ENOUGH PARKS, TRAILS, & OPEN SPACE ACTIVITIES FOR THE FOLLOWING GROUPS



ART & CULTURE OPPORTUNITIES PEOPLE WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN





TRINITY LUTHERAN FAIR STAND

Faribault County Fairgrounds

06

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommended improvement strategies for the Blue Earth park and trail system were derived from community input, feedback from the city's park and recreation committee/city council, and an in-depth inventory and analysis process. The improvements are meant to provide a comprehensive approach to preserving, restoring, and enhancing the parks, trails and open spaces in Blue Earth. It is intended that the following improvements will be phased, depending on available funding and partnership opportunities within the community. It should also be noted that each project will require additional exploration and design to refine project scoping and cost expectations. The information provided as part of this report is intended for planning and budgeting purposes only.

The following section of the report dives into recommended improvements for each park. Budgetary costs are identified in further detail in Section 7 (Action and Implementation Plan).



The Woodland Landscape Along the Blue Earth River

OVERVIEW OF SYSTEM-WIDE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

As is the case for many communities, allocating funding for park and trail improvements can be a difficult task. Often, the price tag for maintenance and park infrastructure improvements exceeds the capacity of the city's budget, which results in not being able to make the improvements that residents rely on. In the future, Blue Earth should identify project partners and align potential projects with available funding sources and grant opportunities to leverage public and private funding for park and trail improvements. As identified earlier in the plan, all park, trail, and open space improvements were created and categorized into five overarching themes/strategies, they include:

1. CLARIFY AND CORRECT CIRCULATION

2. AMPLIFY EXISTING DESTINATIONS

3. EXPAND THE PARK AND TRAIL SYSTEM

4. ESTABLISH STRONGER CONNECTIONS TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

5. IMPROVE THE DIVERSITY OF RECREATION PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES

CLARIFY AND CORRECT CIRCULATION TO, IN, AND THROUGH PARKS

Currently, there are issues with ADA accessibility in several parks. To improve the accessibility of local amenities, the city should focus on providing accessible amenities and maintaining ADA compliance to and around all public facilities, including facilities in parks, trails and open spaces. Public facilities that are not ADA compliant are not only a liability to the city, but limit access for people with mobility impairments.

AMPLIFY EXISTING DESTINATIONS

Blue Earth offers several quality parks to visit. Among those most intriguing to visitors is Giant Park, with its 55.5' tall Green Giant statue. As the city improves its park and trail system, it will be important to amplify this park, as well as other city parks with updated/new park features and amenities to create additional destinations throughout Blue Earth. While this is a popular visitor destination, this park gets less traffic from residents. To promote more visitor traffic into downtown and to other community destinations, the city and chamber should focus on educating visitors on the other great amenities nearby. Improved signage, informational kiosks, and other similar strategies can be implemented to amplify not only Giant Park as a destination but also the nearby trail system, close proximity to the playground and other attractions at the Fairgrounds and the nearby trail system.

OVERVIEW OF SYSTEM-WIDE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

EXPAND THE PARK AND TRAIL SYSTEM

While by comparison, Blue Earth owns and maintains more park acres than other similarly-sized communities, there are opportunities to strategically expand the park and trail system throughout the community. This should be done by filling gaps in park proximity and by providing sidewalk and trail connections throughout the community. Community members have expressed an interest in walking and biking and the completion of specific trail segments and sidewalk gaps will go a long way to catering to an active community. New park space should be carefully evaluated with the establishment of new neighborhoods and subdivisions. If new subdivisions are within walking distance of existing parks, more focus should be put into connecting these neighborhoods to existing resources, rather than creating new parks.

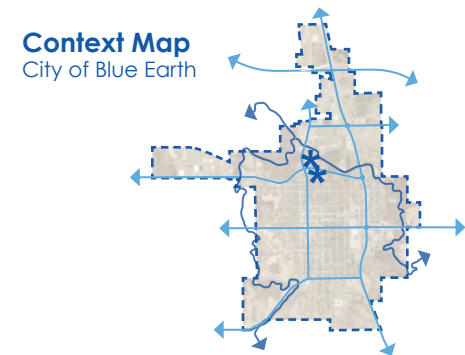
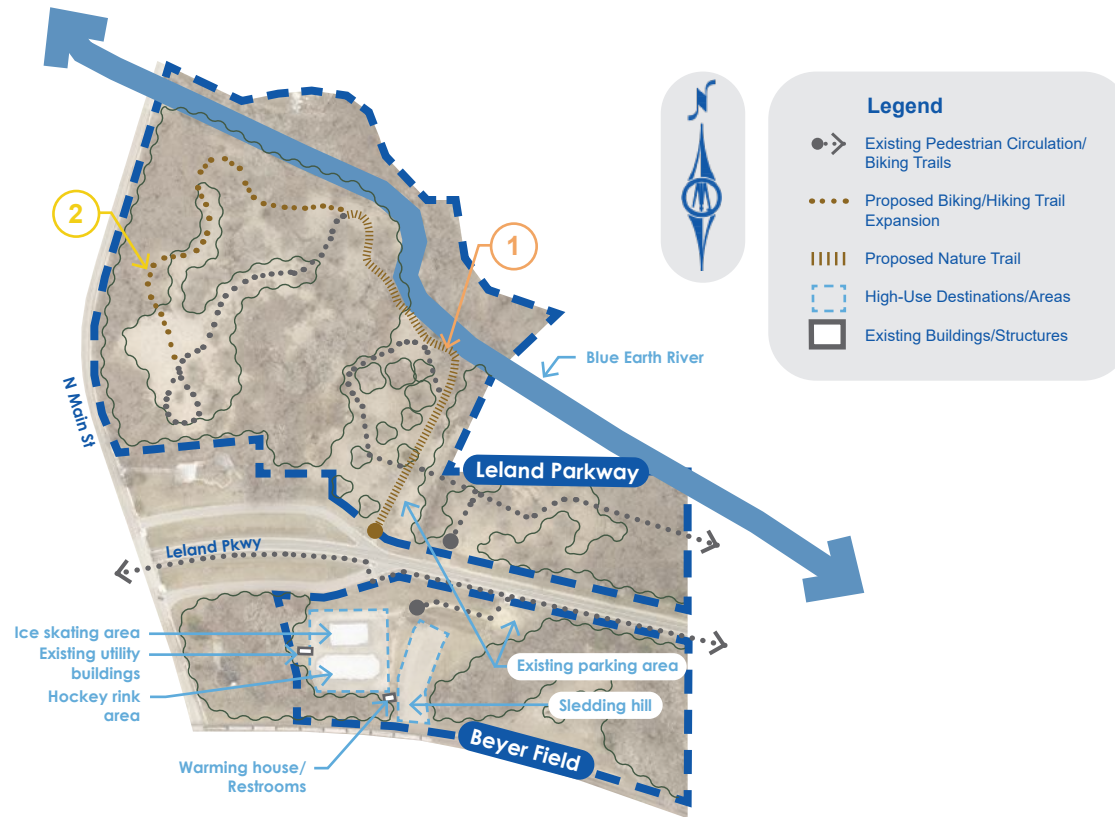
ESTABLISH STRONGER CONNECTIONS TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The Blue Earth River, Leland Parkway and Steinberg Park are tremendous resources for connecting people to the natural environment within the community. Prioritizing the protection of these resources and access to them is important to providing unique recreational opportunities within Blue Earth's park system. Engaging with these natural resources can be achieved through trails, educational opportunities and alternative play and programming within these important areas of the community.

IMPROVE THE DIVERSITY OF RECREATIONAL PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES

Although there are many opportunities for young children in Blue Earth, there are not as many recreational programming opportunities for senior citizens, individuals with special needs, and families. Through partnerships and close coordination, community organizations should seek opportunities to improve the diversity of recreational programming opportunities for currently underserved groups. Cooking classes, exercise programs, arts & crafts classes and other programs can reach broader audiences and expand programming resources for community members.

BEYER FIELD + LELAND PARKWAY IMPROVEMENTS



Because of their close proximity to one another, the parks are often consolidated into "one" park. Both park areas are prone to flooding in recent years because of their proximity to the Blue Earth River, which can impact park usage and should be considered when considering and locating any future amenities. With many winter programming opportunities available at

Beyer Field including ice skating, hockey, and sledding, opportunities exist to provide additional recreational and natural resource-oriented activities that could occur in the warmer months in Leland Parkway.

1 Strengthen connections to the Blue Earth River

Medium Priority / Goal: *Establish Stronger Connections to the Natural Environment*

Currently, the Blue Earth River is an underutilized asset in Leland Parkway. It is sometimes used by community members for fishing but is otherwise mostly left alone. In the future, the City should strengthen connections to the Blue Earth River by incorporating river trails, educational opportunities, water activities, and more. This would encourage visitors to forge a deeper, more meaningful connection with the river that flows through not only the park but many parts of town.



Kayaking and Canoe Launch Along River

2 Establish and promote biking/hiking trails in Leland Parkway

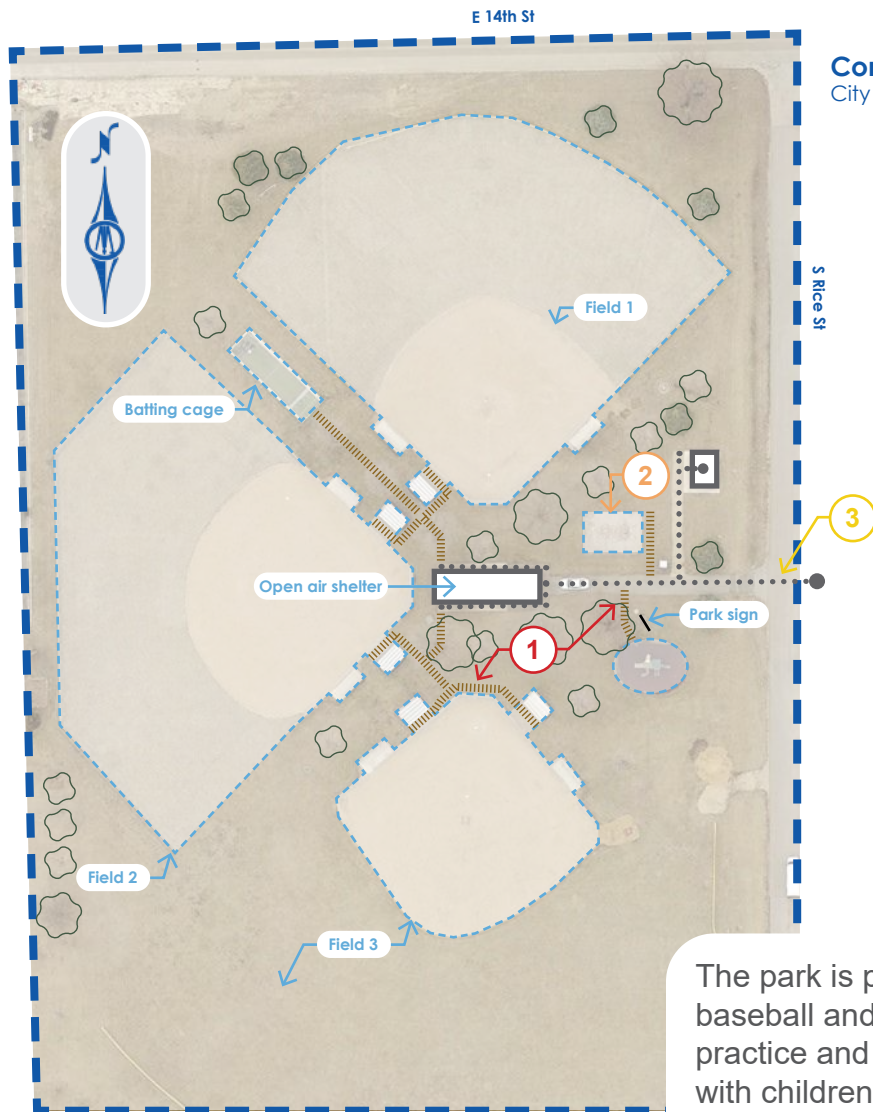
Low Priority / Goal: *Expand the Park and Trail System*

Community members have created a series of makeshift trails throughout the western half of Leland Parkway over the years. Expanding this network with constructed trails, vegetation clearing and some minimal drainage improvements would add an amenity to Blue Earth that doesn't currently exist. Biking and hiking on unpaved trails is becoming increasingly popular and often, these trails are maintained by citizen user groups.

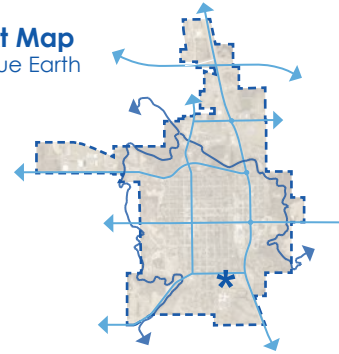


Hiking in the Woodlands

BLUE EARTH BALLFIELDS IMPROVEMENTS



Context Map
City of Blue Earth



Legend

- Existing Pedestrian Circulation
- ||||| Proposed Pedestrian Circulation
- High-Use Destinations/Areas
- Existing Buildings/Structures

The park is primarily used by the baseball and softball associations for practice and games but nearby families with children also frequent the park for its play structures and restroom facilities.

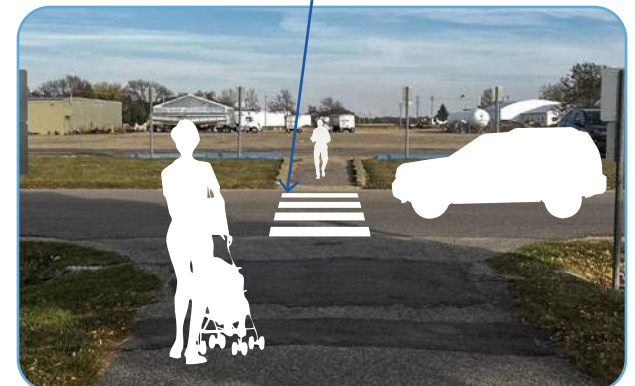
Add accessible sidewalk connections to the park's playground and other important park features



Replace the gravel path outside of the restroom facilities with an accessible concrete sidewalk



Add crosswalk across S Rice Street for pedestrian safety



1 Add accessible sidewalk connections to playgrounds and important park features

High Priority / Goal: Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks

Adding accessible sidewalk connections to play areas, the restroom and concessions buildings and other prominent park amenities will encourage use of a broader audience and bring the park into better ADA compliance. Included in this improvement strategy is replacement of the gravel path to the restroom. People with wheelchairs and other mobility aids are unable to safely navigate the gravel path and it currently does not meet ADA standards

2 Update/Improve existing playground areas

Medium Priority / Goal: Improve the Diversity of Recreational Programming

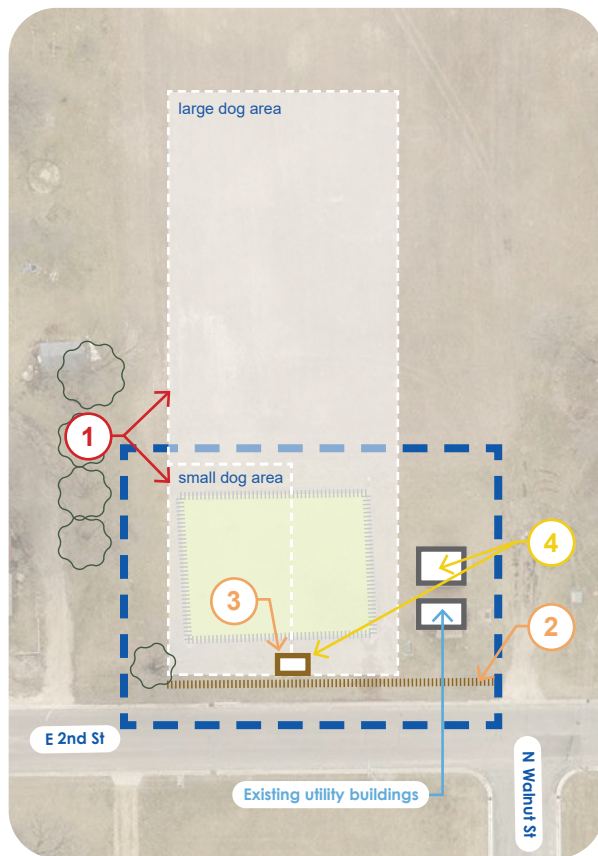
Currently, there are two separate playground features at the ballfields. One is a 2-5 year old play structure and the other is a bank of swings. The city should consider replacing the swings with a new play structure or inclusive swings to broaden the play area use and to keep these play areas current and in safe condition.

3 Add crosswalk across S Rice Street to parking area

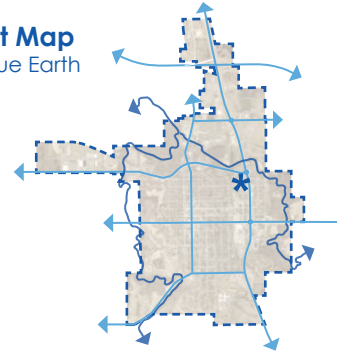
Low Priority / Goal: Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks

Visitors of the Blue Earth Ballfields generally park in the lot east of S Rice Street and cross the street to enter to the park. Although S Rice Street is generally safe to cross at this location, the city should consider adding a crosswalk to the parking area to ensure the safety of park visitors.

DOG PARK IMPROVEMENTS



Context Map
City of Blue Earth



Legend

- Proposed Pedestrian Circulation
- Existing Dog Park
- Potential Dog Park Expansion
- Existing Buildings/Structures
- Proposed Buildings/Structures

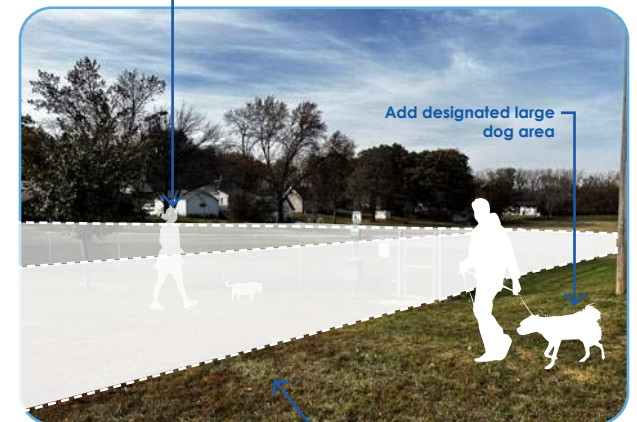
Blue Earth historically had two dog parks; however, the land where the former dog park resided is no longer city property, so the City had to downsize to a singular dog park. The remaining dog park is located along E 2nd Street, between N Hood Street and N Walnut Street. The Dog Park

is fenced-in but is not an adequate size for the community's needs. Additionally, the park lacks accessible accommodations for park visitors.

Rules to follow when using the Dog Park



Add designated small dog area



Add designated large dog area

Add accessible sidewalks alongside and between designated dog areas



Incorporate a shade structure for park visitors

1 Expand the size of the dog park and designate specific areas for small and large dogs

High Priority / Goal: *Expand the Park and Trail System*

Park users desire the ability to separate small and large dogs and use the park simultaneously. This can be accommodated by expanding the park footprint and adding fencing to delineate the two areas members. Providing the two separate areas may reduce the number of accidents with dogs and increase the overall safety of the dog park.

2 Add accessible sidewalks to park amenities

Medium Priority / Goal: *Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks*

Currently, there are no accessible sidewalks in the park for dog owners to use. Adding accessible concrete walks into the dog park areas would allow this park to be a resource for all community members and a place people of all abilities can enjoy with their furry friend(s).

3 Incorporate an open-air shelter/shade structure for park users

Medium Priority / Goal: *Amplify Existing Destinations*

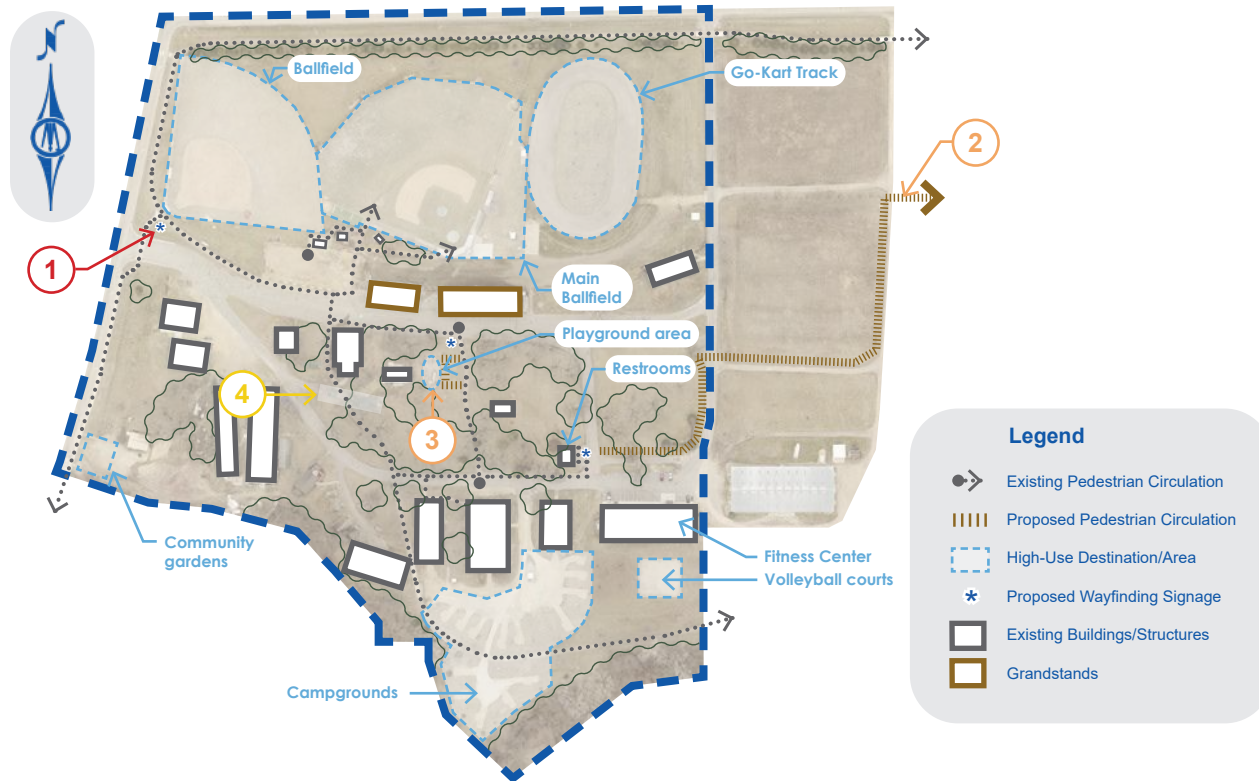
With only a few small trees to provide shade on-site, the City should incorporate an open-air shelter or shade structure to offer park users (and their dogs) a reprieve from the sun while watching their dogs play in the fenced-in and designated dog areas.

4 Establish water access in the park

Low Priority / Goal: *Amplify Existing Destinations*

Park users have expressed a need for water access at the Dog Park. Just like us, dogs need to stay hydrated, especially during physical activities like running and playing. Providing a source of clean and fresh water in the Dog Park would allow dogs (and humans) to drink as needed and prevent dehydration and overheating. In the future, the City should establish water access in the park to maintain the health, safety, and enjoyment of dogs and their owners.

FARIBAULT COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS IMPROVEMENTS



Located just west of TH 169 and south of Fairgrounds Rd, Faribault County Fairgrounds is home to many of the city's outdoor amenities, including playground equipment, a walking/biking trail, a grandstand, an indoor fitness center, a go-kart track, ballfields, volleyball courts, campgrounds with electric hookups, public

bathrooms/showers, and picnic shelters. During the month of July, the Fairgrounds hosts the County Fair and sees many visitors. In the future, the city should consider addressing circulation/wayfinding concerns and update park amenities to continue to serve the numerous visitors and events throughout the year.



1 Establish wayfinding throughout the Fairgrounds

High Priority / Goal: Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks

At nearly 35 acres in size, the Faribault County Fairgrounds can be difficult to navigate for newcomers/visitors. The Fairgrounds needs wayfinding signage throughout to help direct visitors to amenities, parking areas, exits, and more within the grounds. Adding wayfinding signage at specific locations like the park's entry points, the campgrounds, and the public restrooms would aid park visitors in finding their next destination/park to explore. Having a central kiosk for information about other destinations around town could compliment the wayfinding signage within the grounds, too.

2 Create better connections to Giant Park and surrounding circulation

Medium Priority / Goal: Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks

Giant Park welcomes thousands of visitors each year, due in part to the presence of the Green Giant statue. To draw more of those visitors into the Fairgrounds, the City should prioritize creating better connections to Giant Park by establishing additional accessible sidewalk/trail paths in the Fairgrounds. Because there are already accessible trail routes that make their way to Giant Park to the north and south, the city should create an accessible route that snakes from the restroom facilities in the Fairgrounds to the existing trail west of Giant Park.

3 Expand the existing playground area/offerings

Medium Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

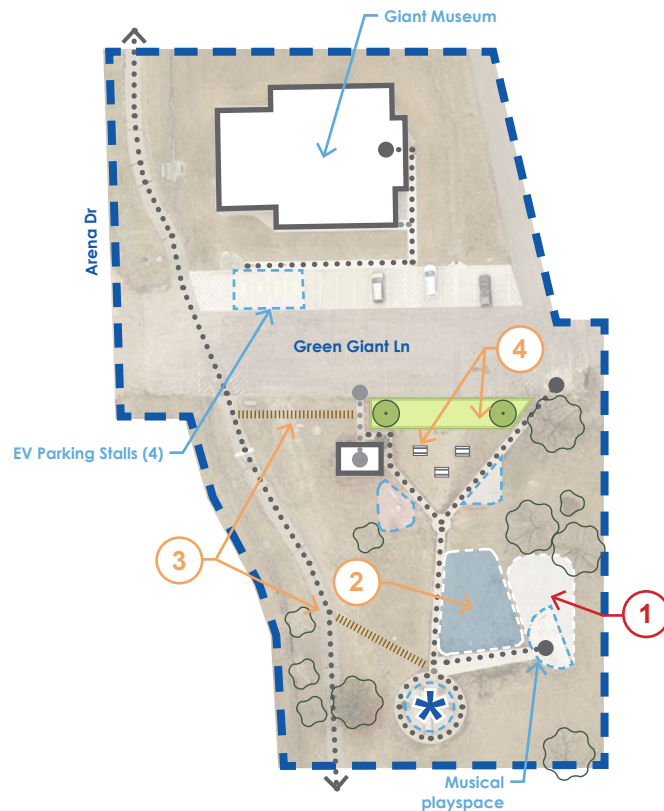
Currently, the play area in the Faribault County Fairgrounds includes two swing sets and a main playground structure for children to utilize. The main playground structure is newer and in better shape than the swing sets. In the future, the city should consider expanding the existing playground area/offerings to increase the park's popularity among residents and visitors. Perhaps incorporating some accessible play structures or adding more accessible playground surfacing would be an important first step.

4 Promote the community gardens

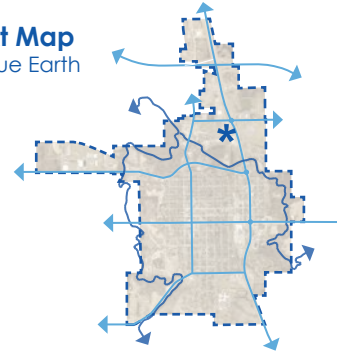
Low Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

For many years, the Faribault County Fairgrounds has been home to Blue Earth's community gardens, where residents are able to rent plots that they can grow their own produce on for a minimal fee. The community gardens are used relatively consistently but still fly under the radar as a park amenity. In the future, the city should work on promoting and educating residents/visitors on the importance of community gardens, perhaps through the city's website, newsletter/newspaper, or social media platforms.

GIANT PARK IMPROVEMENTS



Context Map
City of Blue Earth



Legend

- ➔ Existing Pedestrian Circulation
- ||||| Proposed Pedestrian Circulation
- High-Use Destinations/Areas
- ★ Green Giant Statue
- ▭ Existing Buildings/Structures
- Planting Bed

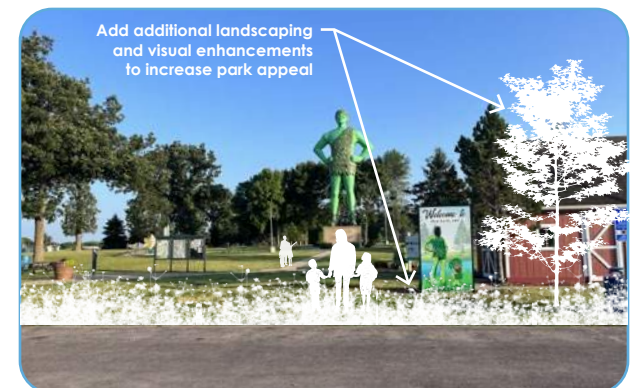
While Giant Park generally caters to visitors to see the Green Giant Statue and learn about Blue Earth, this park space also plays a critical role in the proximity of residents to the city's parks. For many, this is one of the "first stops" coming to Blue Earth. Continued upkeep of the

landscaping, a welcoming playground, along with promotion of the other amenities throughout the community will encourage that Giant Park is not the "last stop" for many visitors.

Existing informational kiosk in Giant Park



Establish accessible sidewalk connections to the existing trail



Add additional landscaping and visual enhancements to increase park appeal

1 Improve kiosk, maps and visitor information

High Priority / Goal: Improve the Diversity of Recreational Programming

Compared to other parks in the community, Giant Park is commonly used by visitors and tourists, who often check out the Green Giant statue and museum nearby. Directing visitors to other location attractions and encouraging traffic to local businesses and the downtown area, is important and with the number of visitors to Giant Park, this space has tremendous influence on the rest of the community. Improving the existing kiosk and visitor information will help promote other attractions and destinations throughout Blue Earth.

2 Add destination / themed playground

High Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

While Giant Park is a destination for many visitors, the park lacks amenities to engage park users and potentially extend the length of visits to the park. Adding a themed playground that celebrates agriculture and the Green Giant Company, would compliment the giant sculpture and museum that reside on site. Playground equipment and park details can creatively connect to the Green Giant brand and create a unique attraction for both visitors and residents.

3 Establish accessible sidewalk connection to existing trail

Medium Priority / Goal: Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks

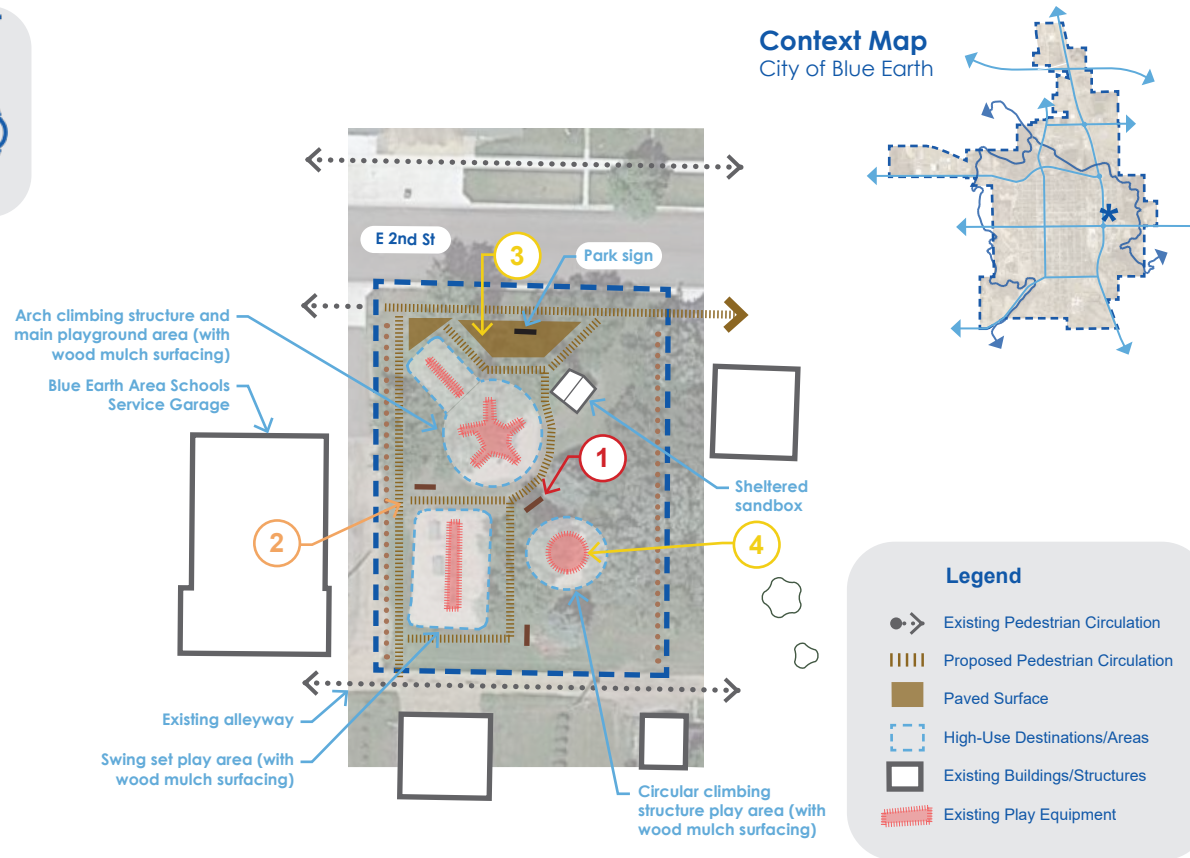
Blue Earth has a great trail system, with multi-use trails both in and outside of city limits. A portion of the trail system runs just to the west of Giant Park. Establishing an accessible sidewalk connection from the base of the Green Giant statue to the existing trail west of the park would no longer require park visitors to circulate through the parking lot to access the trail.

4 Add additional landscaping enhancements to increase park appeal

Medium Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

Although there are already landscaping beds present in Giant Park (both near the parking lot and at the base of the Green Giant statue), adding additional landscaping enhancements to the park would be a major improvement to one of the city's most iconic public spaces. Well-designed landscaping adds beauty, color, and texture to the park environment, and would make Giant Park more visually appealing and welcoming.

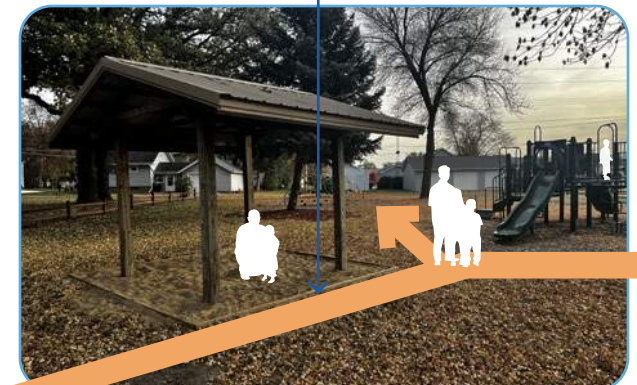
PIANO PARK IMPROVEMENTS



Create a more welcoming plaza space for folks to gather and watch their children in



Add accessible sidewalks to important park features



The park features a selection of updated play equipment, including two climbing structures, a swing set, a sheltered sandbox, and a large playground structure. Piano Park is an important public space because it provides park access to community members on the west side of town. Although the park has several play structures, there are no accessible

sidewalks in the park, which makes it rather difficult for people with mobility impairments to visit. Additionally, the park lacks seating for parents and caretakers while children are using the park features.

1 Add seating options throughout the park

High Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

The lack of seating in the park limits park users and negatively affects the amount of time people spend at this park. Adding a few seating options would go a long way to promoting more use of Piano Park and be a welcomed addition to parents and caretakers visiting the park with children.

2 Improve park accessibility by adding sidewalks to important park features

Medium Priority / Goal: Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks

Although there are accessible sidewalks on the north side of E 5th Street, there are no accessible sidewalks in Piano Park, which makes it difficult for visitors with physical disabilities to traverse the park and its features. Adding a sidewalk connection to important park features will improve accessibility and may reduce wear and erosion within the park.

3 Create a more welcoming central plaza space

Low Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

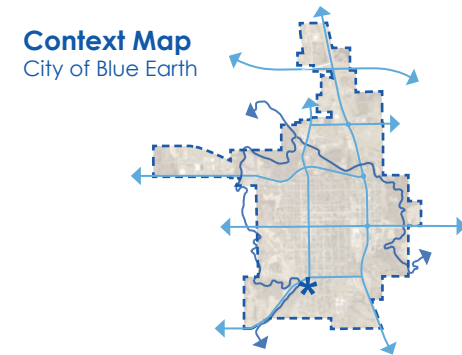
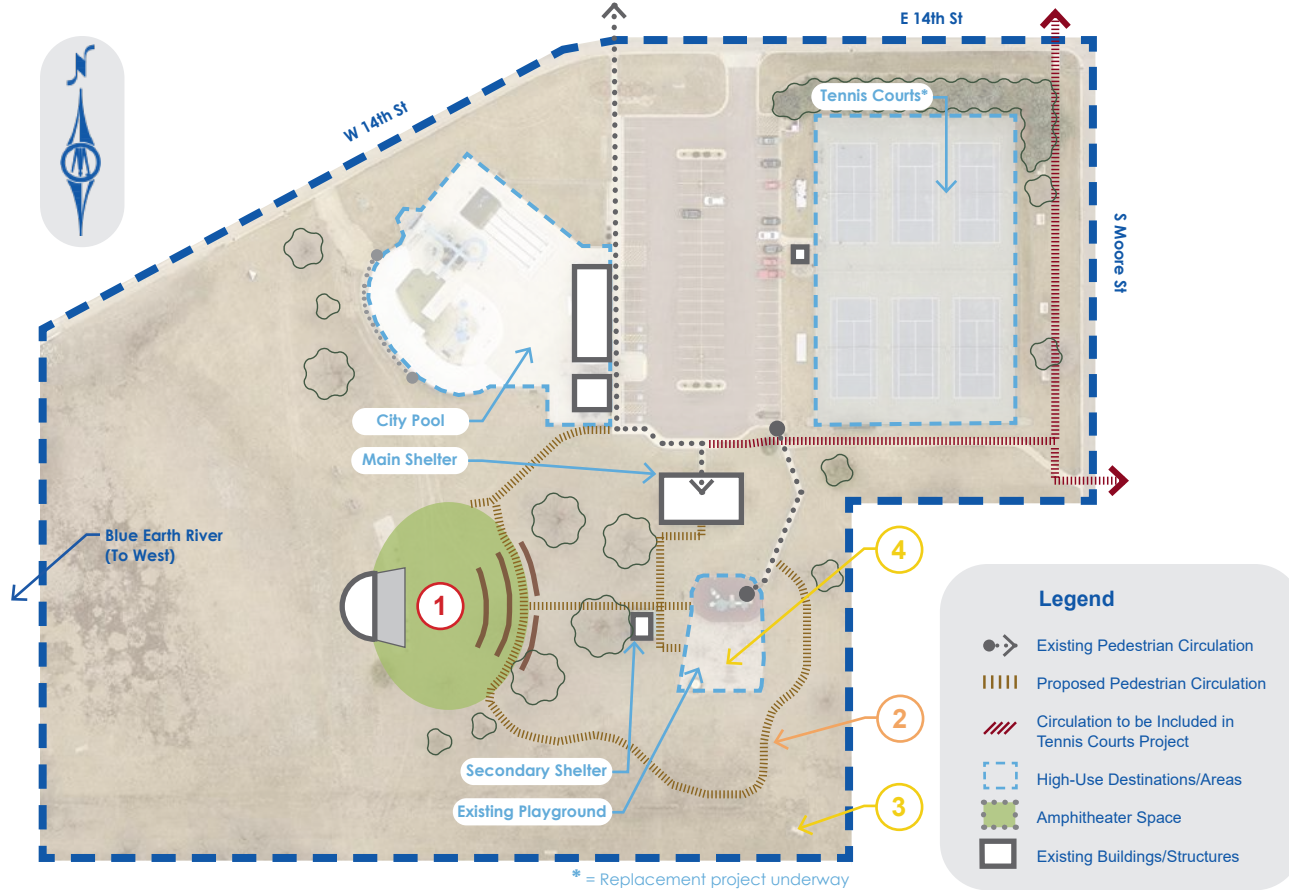
Piano Park features playgrounds, a park sign, and a waste receptacle but lacks a formal space for visitors to meet or gather. If the City were to act on the first two improvements to Piano Park, creating a more welcoming central plaza space (a paved surface, with seating, waste receptacles, and the park sign) would help lock in the park as a neighborhood destination.

4 Update/Improve existing playground features

Low Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

The city recently updated some of the play equipment/ added new playground features to Piano Park. While this play equipment continues to age, consolidating the individual play areas into one complete playground with new play equipment will ensure the park meets current standards and reduce maintenance input.

PUTNAM PARK IMPROVEMENTS



Connect park amenities with an accessible walking loop



Putnam Park is considered the city's main community park. Home to the city's only public swimming pool, six tennis courts (being replaced in 2023-2024), open air shelters, and a variety of play structures. The western portion of the park is susceptible to seasonal flooding, but provides opportunities for flexible open space. As a result of the community input

survey, community members expressed interest in establishing a community event/performance space in Putnam Park, which would establish the park as a destination for both residents and visitors alike.

1 Add a community event space/ bandshell

High Priority / Goal: Amplify Existing Destinations

This was a top priority among community members and stakeholders during the community input process. Adding a community space/bandshell/amphitheater to Putnam Park will not only create a platform for entertainment and cultural events, it will also help foster a sense of community by providing a gathering space for shared experiences. Blue Earth residents could enjoy concerts, plays, and other outdoor performances, while at the same time enhancing their cultural engagement and stimulating the local economy.

2 Connect park amenities with accessible walking loop

Medium Priority / Goal: Expand the Park and Trail System

With the reconstruction of the tennis courts and additional paved walks creating improved access to Putnam Park, a similar strategy should be implemented to connect the other park amenities with a short walking loop. Additional paved connections would allow park users to easily access the playground, shelters and take a stroll through Putnam Park.

3 Update disc golf equipment and signage

Low Priority / Goal: Clarify and Correct Circulation to, in, and through Parks

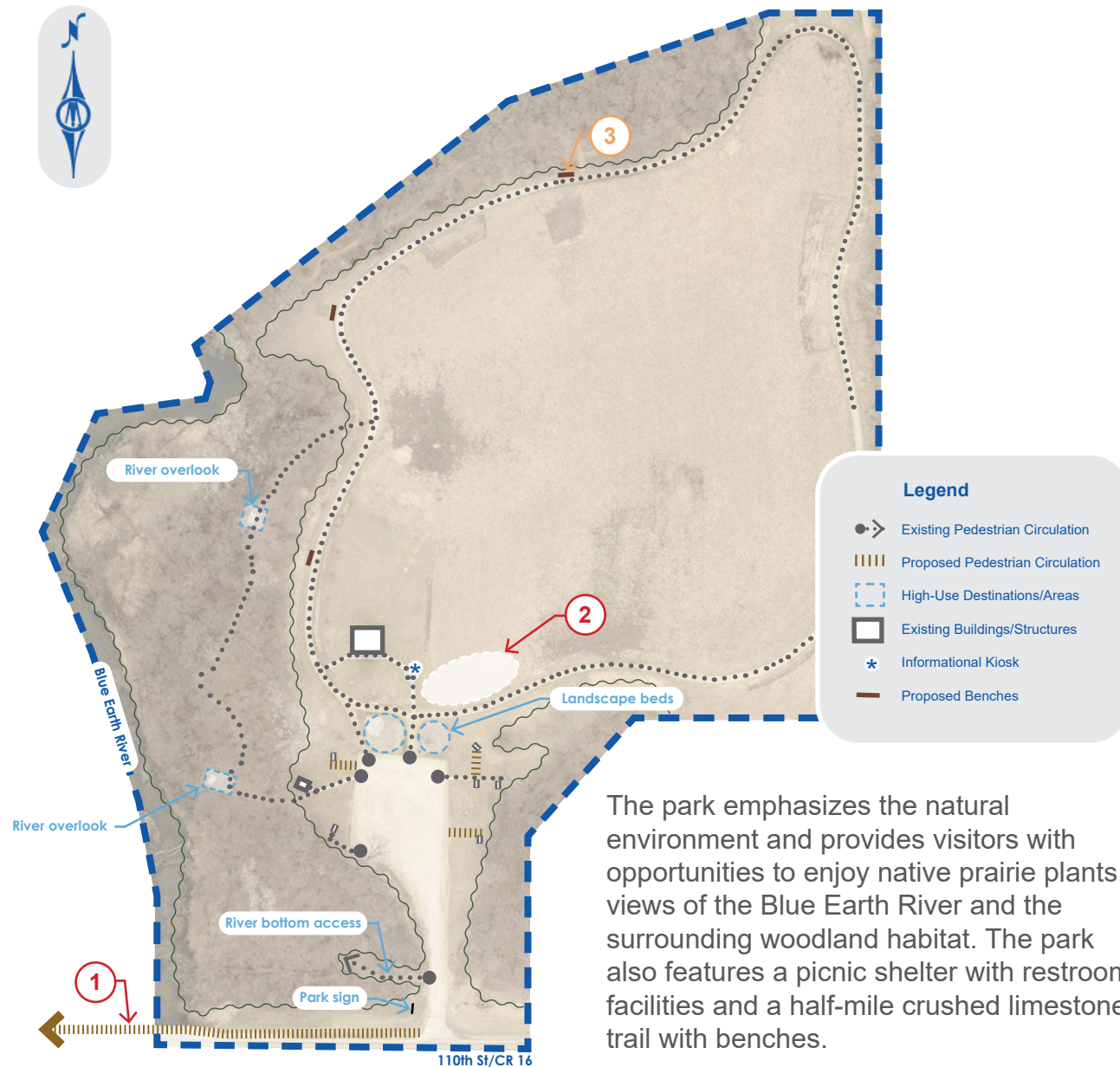
After many years of use, the disc golf equipment and signs in Putnam Park have been damaged and are currently in varying states of disrepair. In the future, the city should make repairs to existing disc golf baskets, potentially reroute the disc golf course to activate other spaces in the park, and make updates as needed to disc golf signage in the park.

4 Update/Improve existing playground features

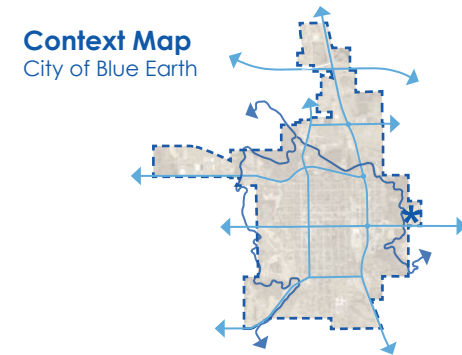
Low Priority / Goal: Improve the Diversity of Recreational Programming

While the current play equipment in Putnam Park is in relatively good condition, planning for future replacement of the play structures should be considered. Future play equipment should consider all-inclusive amenities and consider current trends in playground amenities.

STEINBERG NATURE PARK IMPROVEMENTS



The park emphasizes the natural environment and provides visitors with opportunities to enjoy native prairie plants, views of the Blue Earth River and the surrounding woodland habitat. The park also features a picnic shelter with restroom facilities and a half-mile crushed limestone trail with benches.



1 Add a trail connection along 110th Street/ County Road 16 to S East Street

High Priority / Goal: *Expand the Park and Trail System*

Steinberg Nature Park is located east of the Blue Earth River in the easternmost portion of Blue Earth. The city has been interested in adding a trail connection along 110th Street/CR 16 to S East Street to fill a gap in the trail system for a few years. Doing so would connect Steinberg Nature Park to the rest of the city's park and trail system and create unique trail experience (beyond Unity Trail) for community members to enjoy.

2 Add a nature playscape

High Priority / Goal: *Establish Stronger Connections to the Natural Environment*

Steinberg Nature Park is the perfect candidate for a nature inspired play area. The park is located near the Blue Earth River with its forested banks opening to an established prairie in the park. By using natural elements (potentially found in the wooded areas nearby) a nature playscape could be constructed near the main shelter and kiosk. This amenity would strengthen connections to the natural environment celebrated in this park and provide unstructured play opportunities for children and teens in the park.

3 Provide additional park seating opportunities and related site furnishings (e.g., picnic tables, benches, etc.)

Medium Priority / Goal: *Amplify Existing Destinations*

Steinberg Nature Park has several picnic tables and benches for visitors to use as they traverse the park. There are accessible sidewalk connections to a few of these amenities, but not all. In the future, the City should establish permanent locations for picnic tables, benches, and other seating options and create accessible sidewalk connections to those park amenities (where needed).

OVERVIEW OF NON-SITE SPECIFIC IMPROVEMENTS

In addition to park and trail-specific improvements, there were a number of non-site specific improvements recommended by community members, the park and recreation committee, and city council members.

The following improvements should be considered with the same degree of importance as others identified in specific parks but will take additional conversation in terms of locating and/or applying these improvements within Blue Earth.



1 Create additional programming and park amenities for senior citizens throughout the park system

High Priority / Goal: *Improve the Diversity of Recreational Programming*

Seniors in Blue Earth are in need of parks and outdoor recreation spaces that allow them to leave their home for exercise and socialization. When designing for the elderly, it is important to remember that their needs may differ somewhat from the rest of the population. Focus should be put on creating additional programming and park amenities for senior citizens. Incorporating plenty of benches along expansive walking areas and offering a variety of programming options (e.g., fitness circuits, shade structures, chess tables, etc.) will be important first steps in addressing this improvement. Additional outreach to senior living facilities and other community groups will help identify potential amenities and programs that will provide the most benefit to the community.

2 Add a basketball court to a neighborhood park

Medium Priority / Goal: *Amplify Existing Destinations*

Currently, Blue Earth does not have a full-size or half-size basketball court in any of its neighborhood parks. The only outdoor basketball court available to the public is located adjacent to the Blue Earth Area Elementary/ Middle School. Although the basketball court at the school is in fair condition, the court does not exist within park property. The city should consider adding another half or full-sized basketball court in a neighborhood park to provide community members with additional opportunities and not conflict with school activities.

3 Add a skate park to a neighborhood park

Medium Priority / Goal: *Amplify Existing Destinations*

While not garnering overwhelming public interest, skate parks and similar facilities have seen a resurgence in popularity over the last several years. These facilities often cater to multiple types of wheeled sports and can often reach teen and pre-teen aged children. While considering other mid to long range improvements, the city should explore adding a skate park facility at one of the parks to amplify the recreation resources in existing parks but also diversifying recreation opportunities for the community.

4 Establish a bike share station at a neighborhood park

Low Priority / Goal: *Amplify Existing Destinations*

Bike share stations are becoming common in many Midwest communities and are often owned and operated by third party resources, minimizing the burden on city resources. They provide a resource for both community members and visitors by providing alternative transportation means for people to get to work, get exercise and explore the community resources available. Adding these stations at one or two key locations around town would be a nice addition to community members and visitors looking to explore Blue Earth.

07

ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Perhaps the most important part of this Park System Master Plan is the action and implementation plan. This section will touch on the importance of establishing priorities for improvements, explore potential funding opportunities and suggest a path to implementation moving forward. A goal of this plan is to get public partners and citizen groups to be actively involved in implementation. Residents, local government, the school district, law enforcement, healthcare, local businesses, developers and other agencies will need to work together for Blue Earth's vision for its parks, trails and open space system to be successful.



Steinberg Nature Park

IMPLEMENTATION OVERVIEW

The recommended improvements developed as part of this master planning process are meant to serve as a comprehensive approach enabling the city to preserve, restore and enhance the community's parks and open spaces. Some of these improvements can be achieved without much capital investment. Others will take time to identify funding, prepare plans and oversee construction. This plan anticipates that the cumulative improvements for each park and the overall system will be completed in phases as funding is available and opportunities for partners (public and private) are fostered.

As it is with many communities, funding needs for parks and open space typically exceeds the capabilities of the City's budget and often take a back seat to other infrastructure improvements that residents rely on daily. As a result, it is important that the city explore opportunities for both public and private funding. The completion of this plan, accompanied by construction cost estimates, will allow the city to plan for, and pursue, additional funding to implement specific projects.

It should be understood that each project will require additional exploration and design, which will refine project extents

and cost expectations. The information provided herein is intended for planning and budgeting purposes only.

The following pages include an implementation matrix which identifies each of the projects described in the previous section. It provides vital information about each project's implementation, including information about the project's priority level/phase, location, budget estimate, and any coordination that may need to take place. Following the implementation matrix is a list of funding resources for Blue Earth to look into.



View of Prairie from Unity Trail



Sledding Hill in Beyer Field

IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

The improvement recommendations identified in the previous chapter have helped inform the implementation priorities identified herein. Implementation phasing should be flexible and based on community needs, funding availability, and partnership opportunities. The city may need to consider phasing larger capital improvement projects, if funding is not readily available. This may have effects on the implementation time-frame and potentially add costs to the project, but it will allow the city to implement multiple capital improvements at the same time.

Because Blue Earth does not have many public and private partnerships to help fund their parks and recreation-related projects, it will be important for the city to find funding opportunities at the local, state, and federal levels. The table on pages 74-77 highlights possible grant funding opportunities that the city could pursue to address the recommendations mentioned in the previous section of this master plan report. Although there are many grant/funding opportunities available for parks, trails, and open spaces in Minnesota, the “Funding Resources” table touches on some of the most important and relevant to the city of Blue Earth.

Because eligibility criteria and existence of each grant is not guaranteed each year, the City should confirm grant details prior to establishing funding plans.

IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

PRIORITY / PHASE	PARK / LOCATION	IMPROVEMENT RECOMMENDATION + BRIEF DESCRIPTION	BUDGET ESTIMATE	
			Low (\$)	High (\$)
1 (0-2 Year/Immediate)	Blue Earth Ballfields	Accessible sidewalk connections to playgrounds and park features	\$ 90,000.00	\$ 120,000.00
	Dog Park	Expand size of existing dog park; designate fenced-in areas for dogs	\$ 70,000.00	\$ 90,000.00
	Faribault County Fairgrounds	Establish wayfinding throughout the Fairgrounds	\$ 30,000.00	\$ 40,000.00
	Giant Park	Add a kiosk w/ map to community amenities	\$ 30,000.00	\$ 45,000.00
	Giant Park	Add destination / themed playground	\$ 750,000.00	\$ 1,000,000.00
	Piano Park	Add seating options/furnishings	\$ 10,000.00	\$ 20,000.00
	Putnam Park	Add a community event space/bandshell/amphitheater	\$ 550,000.00	\$ 650,000.00
	Steinberg Nature Park	Add a nature playscape	\$ 100,000.00	\$ 200,000.00
	Non-Site Specific	Create additional programming and park amenities for senior citizens	\$ 50,000.00	\$ 200,000.00
TOTAL PHASE 1 COST			\$ 1,680,000.00	\$ 2,365,000.00
2 (2-5 Year/Mid-term)	Beyer Field and Leland Parkway	Strengthen connections to the Blue Earth River	\$ 30,000.00	\$ 40,000.00
	Blue Earth Ballfields	Update/Improve existing playground areas	\$ 250,000.00	\$ 350,000.00
	Dog Park	Add accessible sidewalk connections to park amenities	\$ 40,000.00	\$ 60,000.00
		Incorporate an open-air shelter/shade structure for users	\$ 80,000.00	\$ 150,000.00
	Faribault County Fairgrounds	Create better, accessible connections to Giant Park and surrounding circulation	\$ 200,000.00	\$ 275,000.00
		Expand the existing playground area/offerings	\$ 300,000.00	\$ 400,000.00
	Giant Park	Establish accessible sidewalk connection to the existing trail	\$ 30,000.00	\$ 45,000.00
	Piano Park	Add accessible sidewalks to important park features	\$ 100,000.00	\$ 150,000.00
	TOTAL PHASE 2 COST			\$ 1,030,000.00
3 (5+ Year/Long-term)	Beyer Field and Leland Parkway	Establish and promote biking/hiking trails in Leland Park	\$ 50,000.00	\$ 100,000.00
	Blue Earth Ballfields	Add crosswalk across S Rice Street to parking area	\$ 5,000.00	\$ 10,000.00
	Dog Park	Establish water access in the park	\$ 15,000.00	\$ 30,000.00
	Faribault County Fairgrounds	Promote the community gardens	\$ 2,000.00	\$ 5,000.00
	Giant Park	Add additional landscaping and visual enhancements	\$ 25,000.00	\$ 50,000.00
	Piano Park	Create a more welcoming central plaza space	\$ 50,000.00	\$ 80,000.00
		Update/Improve existing playground features	\$ 250,000.00	\$ 350,000.00
	Putnam Park	Update disc golf equipment and signage	\$ 15,000.00	\$ 25,000.00
		Update/Improve existing playground features	\$ 350,000.00	\$ 450,000.00
		Connect park amenities with accessible walking loop	\$ 200,000.00	\$ 300,000.00
	Steinberg Nature Park	Provide additional park seating opportunities and related site furnishings	\$ 5,000.00	\$ 10,000.00
	Non-Site Specific	Establish a bike share station at a neighborhood park	\$ 10,000.00	\$ 20,000.00
		Add a basketball court to a neighborhood park	\$ 150,000.00	\$ 200,000.00
		Add a skate park to a neighborhood park	\$ 300,000.00	\$ 400,000.00
TOTAL PHASE 3 COST			\$ 1,427,000.00	\$ 2,030,000.00
TOTAL INVESTMENT INTO PARK AND TRAIL SYSTEM			\$ 4,137,000.00	\$ 5,865,000.00

FUNDING RESOURCES

Potential Funding Sources		
Grant Name	Description of Grant	Agency
AARP Community Challenge Grant	Small grants to fund quick-action projects that can help communities become more livable for people of all ages	AARP
America Walks Community Change Grants	Awards stipends to communities for projects related to creating healthy, active, and engaged places to live, work and play	Foundation
American Trails Trail Fund	Assists the trails community with funding to support maintenance, research, and stewardship training needs	Foundation
Clean Water Funding	Provides hands-on environmental stewardship and service-learning opportunities to youth and young adults while providing low cost labor to eligible applicants	Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources (BWSR)
Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant	Provides affordable funding to develop essential community facilities in rural areas	U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
Conservation Partners Legacy Grant Program	Provides funding to restore, protect or enhance prairies, wetlands, forests, or habitat for fish, game, or wildlife in Minnesota	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR)
Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund	Aims to protect, conserve, preserve, and enhance Minnesota's air, water, land, fish, wildlife, and other natural resources	Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR)
Federal Recreation Trail Program	Provides funding to encourage the maintenance and development of motorized, non-motorized, and diversified trails	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR)
Fields for Kids	Provides financial support to improve baseball and/or softball facilities for youth in the Upper Midwest and Southwest Florida	Minnesota Twins Community Fund
Bridge Investment Program	Provides funding for communities to replace, rehabilitate, and preserve bridge infrastructure	U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)
Local Trail Connections Program	Provides funding to promote short trail connections between where people live and significant public resources	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR)
Minnesota Festival Support Grant Program	Provides arts experiences through festivals celebrating arts, building community, and exposure to diverse art forms	Other - Minnesota

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Eligibility	Focus	Link
City, Nonprofit	Community Development, Livable Communities, Trails, Parks	https://communitychallenge.aarp.org/2023/organizations/aarp/home
City, County, School Districts	Outdoor Recreation, Trails	https://americawalks.org/programs/community-change-grants/
City, Nonprofit	Trails	https://www.americantrails.org/the-trail-fund
City, County	Civil/Municipal, Water Resources	https://bwsr.state.mn.us/clean-water-fund-cwf
City, County, Tribal, School Districts, State Agency	Civil/Municipal, Community Development, Livable Communities	https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program
City, County, State Agency, Federal Agency	Water Resources, Environmental Resources	https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/habitat/cpl/index.html
City, County, Tribal, Private, School Districts, Townships	Water Resources	https://www.legacy.mn.gov/environment-natural-resources-trust-fund
City, State Agency, Federal Agency, Private	Civil/Municipal, Outdoor Recreation, Trails	https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/recreation/trails_federal.html
City, School Districts, Nonprofits	Outdoor Recreation, Community Development	https://www.mlb.com/twins/community/fund/grants/fields-for-kids
City, County, Tribal, State Agency	Transportation	https://www.dot.state.mn.us/stateaid/bip.html
City, County, Townships	Civil/Municipal, Planning & Urban Design, Trails, Livable Communities, Outdoor Recreation	https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/recreation/trails_local.html
City, County, Tribal	Other	http://www.arts.state.mn.us/grants/machf-mfs.htm#:~:text=Minnesota%20Festival%20Support%20is%20a,including%20folk%20and%20traditional%20arts.

FUNDING RESOURCES

Potential Funding Sources		
Grant Name	Description of Grant	Agency
Minnesota Festival Support Grant Program	Provides arts experiences through festivals celebrating arts, building community, and exposure to diverse art forms	Other - Minnesota
Natural and Scenic Area Grants	Provides funding to increase, protect, and enhance natural and scenic areas	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR)
No Child Left Inside	Aims to support and increase efforts to expand programming that connects youth to the outdoors	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR)
Our Town Grant Program	Supports projects that integrate arts, culture, and design activities into efforts that strengthen communities by advancing local economic, physical, and/or social outcomes	National Endowment for the Arts
Outdoor Recreation Grant Program	Provides funding to increase and enhance outdoor recreation facilities in local and community parks throughout the state	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR)
PeopleForBikes Community Grant Program	Provides funding that supports bicycle infrastructure projects and targeted advocacy initiatives that make it easier and safer for people of all ages and abilities to ride	Other - Minnesota
Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program	Supports community-led natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation projects across the nation	National Park Service
Rural Initiative Grant Fund Program	Provides funding to encourage collective and involved endeavors among citizens in rural communities	Foundation
Safe Routes to School Infrastructure Grants/Safe Routes to School Planning Assistance Grants	Provides funding for the development and implementation of infrastructure projects which enable students to walk and bicycle to and from schools	Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT)
State Park Road Account Program	Provides funding to assist local governments in improving access to public recreation facilities	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR)

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Eligibility	Focus	Link
City, County, Tribal	Other	http://www.arts.state.mn.us/grants/machf-mfs.htm#:~:text=Minnesota%20Festival%20Support%20is%20a,including%20folk%20and%20traditional%20arts.
City, County, School Districts, Townships	Civil/Municipal, Planning & Urban Design, Outdoor Recreation, Livable Communities	https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/land/natural-scenic-app-cycle.html
City, County, Tribal, School Districts, Nonprofits	Outdoor Recreation, Livable Communities	https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/no-child-grants/index.html
City, County, Townships	Livable Communities, Community Development	https://www.arts.gov/grants/our-town
City, County, Townships	Civil/Municipal, Outdoor Recreation, Planning & Urban Design, Community Development, Trails, Parks	https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/recreation/outdoor_rec.html
City, County, State Agency, Federal Agency	Civil/Municipal, Outdoor Recreation, Trails	https://www.peopleforbikes.org/grants
City, County, Tribal, State Agency, Federal Agency	Trails, Parks, Outdoor Recreation	https://www.nps.gov/orgs/rtca/index.htm
City, County, Nonprofits	Community Development, Livable Communities	https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/rural-community-development-initiative-grants/mn#:~:text=What%20does%20this%20program%20do,dvelopment%20projects%20in%20rural%20areas.
City, County, Tribal, School Districts	Civil/Municipal, Planning & Urban Design, Transportation, Trails	http://www.dot.state.mn.us/saferoutes/grants-funding.html
City, County, Townships	Civil/Municipal, Transportation	https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/recreation/parkroads/index.html