

SECTION 1: Introduction / Executive Summary

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

Gwinnett County, with a current estimated population of 676,284 people, is a dynamic, progressive and increasingly diverse community that continues to attract new residents and investment at a record pace. The County's excellent parks system provides a significant contribution to the community's high quality of life. As residents continue to demand more and better recreational opportunities efforts must be made to expand and improve the wide range of leisure services within the County.

The 2004 Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan is an update to the County's 1996 Master Plan and 2000 Capital Improvement Plan. Considerable progress has been made since these plans were developed – the County has doubled its parkland inventory and countless facilities have been built, expanded and renovated in order to keep pace with the demands of a growing population. In fact, the need for an updated Master Plan has been partly precipitated by recent park system improvements that have created heightened expectations among residents and investors. Proactively addressing the changing needs of its residents has been a characteristic of the Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation Division since its inception. This Master Plan proposes to continue the excellent work that the County has done over the years.

The time is right to re-examine and evaluate the recreational needs of Gwinnettians. At the end of 2004, County residents will be asked if they want to extend the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) for another four years. The SPLOST is a self-imposed County-wide sales tax, part of which may be allocated to fund improvements to the parks system. In order to ensure that these funds are spent wisely and in those areas with the greatest needs, this Master Plan has proposed a prioritized list of capital projects that are consistent with the current and emerging needs of residents.

Specifically, this updated Master Plan accomplishes three major tasks. It:

- 1) evaluates the current status of the County's ability to provide service based upon its enhanced array of capital facilities;
- 2) analyzes service gaps and needs within the County due to changes in population and distribution of existing facilities, and
- 3) proposes a refined Capital Program for the period following the current (2001) SPLOST program.

The Master Plan is comprehensive and strategic in nature. It provides Gwinnett County with a roadmap for addressing its parks and recreation issues and needs by providing solutions for improving the provision, quality and quantity of parks, facilities, and services. Although the process of developing this Master Plan is more complex than it was for the previous

master planning efforts due to considerable expansion of the County's park system in recent years, the process for creating this Plan remains quite similar. The master planning process remains a product of extensive research, technical expertise, and – first and foremost – consultation with the public.

The Plan was prepared by the Gwinnett County Department of Community Services, under the direction of the Citizen Steering Committee, and with the assistance of Monteith Brown Planning Consultants and The Jaeger Company.

1.2 SCOPE OF THE PLAN

The Master Plan will guide the delivery of parks and recreation services in Gwinnett County for a period of four to five years. This Plan also examines needs for specific recreational facilities and parkland to the year 2010 to provide an understanding of longer-term need in relation to projected populations. The Study Area for the Master Plan is the entire County.

The 2004 Master Plan addresses the full range of facilities and spaces that fall under the broad definition of "leisure" or "recreation" (e.g., community centers, gymnasiums, soccer fields, aquatics, cultural space, playgrounds, nature trails, etc.), as well as all associated services.

1.3 IMPETUS FOR THE PLAN

Recreation plays a vital role in Gwinnett County and there is a need to continue to enhance the quality of life through improvements to the parks and recreation system. A number of factors have necessitated the need for an updated Master Plan:

- The County's population is growing at a very rapid pace and is also aging and becoming more culturally diverse.
- The County's high growth rate requires that sufficient parkland be acquired before it is lost to development.
- Leisure trends are shifting and new approaches in recreation planning are emerging.
- The "bar has been raised" through previous efforts and residents have greater expectations for parks and recreation services.
- There is a need to coordinate the Master Plan with other recent initiatives, such as the Open Space and Greenway Master Plan.
- The County has a history of proactively addressing its parks and recreation needs and planning for the future in a forward-thinking, fiscally responsible manner and this must continue to be a high priority.

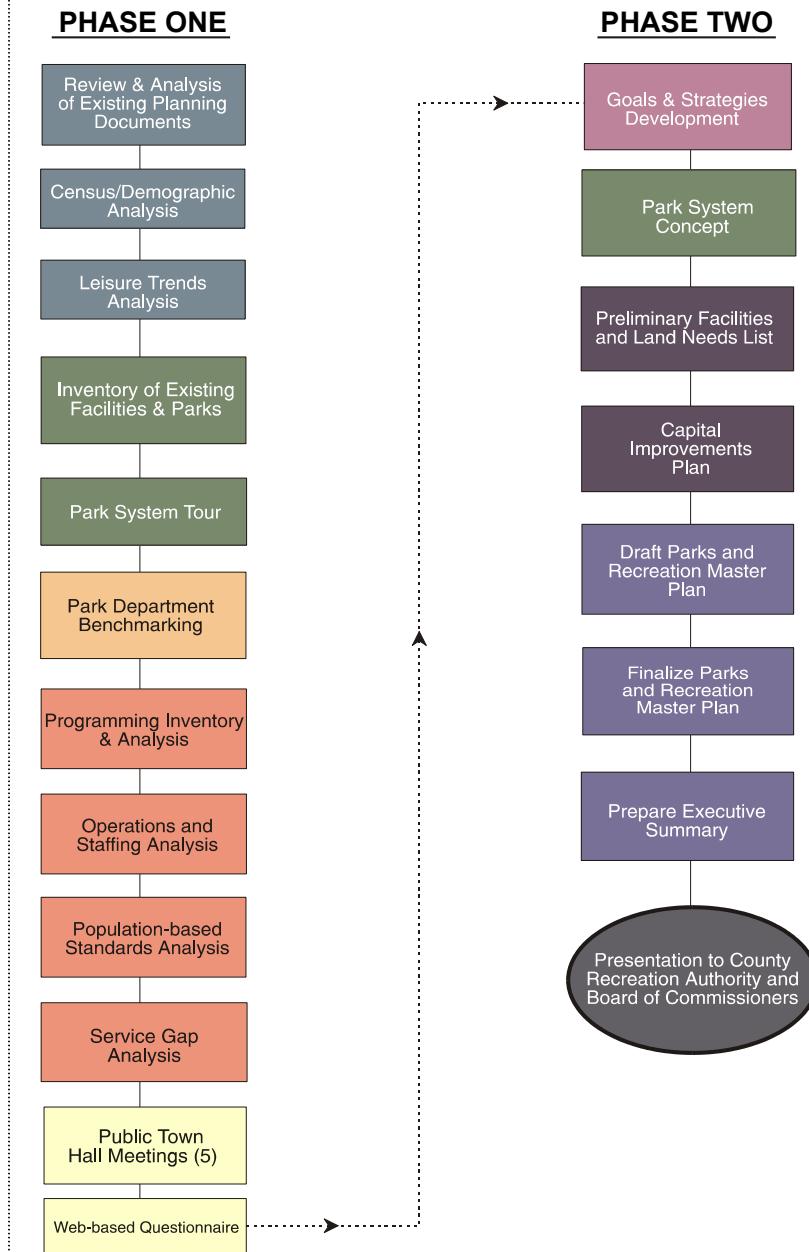
The County has succeeded in responding to many of these challenges. The 2004 Master Plan builds upon this momentum and refocuses the County's future efforts through a comprehensive review and assessment of needs and priorities.

1.4 SUMMARY OF THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Master Plan process commenced in May 2003 with the first meeting of the Citizen Steering Committee and Consultants. This planning process was constructed to capitalize on past efforts and initiatives, to be comprehensive in nature, and to provide clear and justifiable direction for the future provision of recreation facilities and services.

A schematic of the planning process and its various components is shown below (Figure 1-1). Numerous meetings with County staff and the Citizen Steering Committee were held throughout the duration of the project in order to gather information, review the Plan's progress, and to provide direction for the Plan's goals and recommendations.

Figure 1-1: The Planning Process



1.5 CITIZEN STEERING COMMITTEE/ PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS

The Master Plan is most certainly a product of community input and participation. County staff and officials, partners (affiliated external agencies), stakeholders, and the community at large have been consulted and asked to participate throughout the process through meetings, surveys, workshops/focus groups, interviews, and a variety of other methods.

Public consultation efforts have been concentrated near the beginning of the planning process in order to focus on information gathering and issue identification. In particular, five public meetings were held at various locations in the County and those attending were invited to participate by expressing their opinions and completing a questionnaire. The questionnaire was also posted on the County's web-site to allow for additional input from residents regarding the County's parks and recreation needs. Furthermore, the Master Plan Update incorporates and builds upon the community needs, values and preferences identified in the 2002 Needs Assessment Survey prepared by the A.L. Burruss Institute of Public Service (Kennesaw State University).

Regular meetings with the Citizen Steering Committee assisted in developing the overall goals and objectives for the Master Plan, providing feedback on completed work and deliverables, and prioritizing the park and facility recommendations.

1.6 PLAN GOALS AND PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

With the assistance of the Citizen Steering Committee, a set of goals was developed to guide the Master Plan's recommendations and capital improvement plan. Specific strategies to realize each of the goals were also formulated. The goals and strategies address the most appropriate range of means to ensure service expansion to:

- meet the needs of a growing population;
- manage and maximize the capacity of existing facilities; and
- provide for new or expanded facilities and efficient operations.

The goals and strategies are based upon public input, the analysis of facility and parks needs, and the experiences of similar agencies and are described below in priority order. Goals sharing the same number (e.g., 4a, 4b, and 4c) share the same level of priority.

1. Work toward achieving pedestrian and bicycle linkage or connectivity between parks and other points of interest such as schools, libraries, institutional land uses and commercial nodes.

Not every one of the many connecting links identified in the 2002 Open Space and Greenway Master Plan will be achieved. However, the highest priority efforts should be made to link parks, libraries, schools and communities to increase biking, walking and jogging opportunities (not only for recreation but also as an alternative mode of transportation).

To achieve this goal, the County should refer to the specific projects identified in the 2002 Open Space and Greenway Master Plan and proceed to develop the highest priority greenways while being cognizant of the fact that priorities may shift slightly as opportunities present themselves.

2. Maintain a balanced approach to the continued acquisition and development of both passive and active parkland to the greatest extent possible.

The main theme emerging from the Citizen Steering Committee prioritization meeting was to seek a balance between both passive and active parkland acquisitions as well as a balance between the acquisition of land and the development of the land for recreational activities.

To achieve this goal the County must address parkland acquisition in a multi dimensional manner. Land that is suitable for playing fields will need to be acquired, as well as land that is suitable for open space or passive uses (i.e. woodlands, wetlands, valleylands, etc.). In addition land in areas that are currently under-served and/or experiencing rapid growth will need to be acquired.

3. Provide for the needs of all age groups including adults. This should include both structured and unstructured recreational opportunities.

Previous studies have indicated that the needs of adults, seniors and youth/teens (ages 10 to 18) are not being met as well as those of children. Although it was agreed that these age groups needed attention, the Committee recognized that the child population in Gwinnett will continue to increase as a result of overall growth and, as a result, additional recreational demands will be placed on the community. There will also be a need for more active adult recreational opportunities (e.g., slow pitch and soccer).

The Committee also discussed the issue of unstructured play requirements and, in particular, adult pick-up soccer. This unstructured or unscheduled non-league play results in over-utilization of the fields and often conflicts with scheduled field usage. The need for unstructured soccer opportunities is expected to increase with the popularity of the sport.

Goals 4a, 4b, and 4c share the same level of priority:

4a. Complete the construction of planned phases of development within existing parks.

There was concern among some Committee members that new parks would be developed before existing planned parks were fully developed. It was generally felt that just acquiring land did not

automatically make it parkland if the community could not utilize the space.

4b. Proceed with the acquisition of parkland in under-serviced areas.

There continues to be a concern about the areas of the County that do not have favorable parkland to population ratios. Although the Committee acknowledged that equity amongst the Recreation Planning Areas will never be fully achieved, attempts need to continue to be made to address parkland needs in under-served areas.

4c. Continue with the acquisition of parkland in developing areas.

While there is a need to address under-serviced areas, the newly developing areas will also require parks and there is no better time to acquire parkland then before residential development occurs. This is particularly true if the County wishes to acquire and develop a site suitable for bolstering sports tourism (e.g., softball or soccer tournaments).

Goals 5a and 5b share the same level of priority:

5a. Utilize the development of parks to help revitalize existing under-served communities.

The Committee suggested that under-utilized and vacant commercial or industrial/brownfield sites be explored as options to providing parkland and recreation facilities in areas deficient in parkland and experiencing high population densities and growth. County investment in the redevelopment of these sites could help rejuvenate older areas in need of revitalization.

5b. Investigate the incremental costs associated with a competitive or sports tourism standard of service versus a community standard of service.

The Committee perceived there to be many economic benefits to bolstering sports tourism in the County (e.g., swim meet, softball tournament, soccer tournament, bike rally, etc.). In order to accommodate these events, however, larger and more specialized facilities are often required, such as a 50-meter swimming pool or multiple adult softball diamonds at one location. Alternative sources of capital funding might be required to bridge the difference in construction cost between a facility that meets community standards of service and one that aspires to a sports tourism standard of service.

Goals 6a, 6b and 6c share the same level of priority:

6a. Continue to integrate and coordinate with other departments and agencies to leverage the public's disposable dollars for recreation.

There was a desire to see the County continue to work with not only the School Boards and State and Federal agencies, but also with utility companies and other County departments to increase resources and optimize the impact of every dollar spent.

6b. Continue to maintain and renovate existing parks and recreation facilities.

6c. Maintain adequate parks and recreation staffing in keeping with growing demands and facilities.

7. Maintain security at parks and recreation facilities through the use of park police. Use planning and design methods to increase user security, to the extent possible.

1.7 RECREATION PLANNING AREAS / PLAN AREAS

Gwinnett County has employed a service area/district approach for a number of years. The purpose of these districts, which divide the County into distinct geographic areas, is two-fold: (1) to create efficiencies in management and operations; and (2) to improve the effectiveness of parks and facility planning.

Prior to 1996 there were a total of 11 service areas in Gwinnett County operating out of two operational districts. The 1996 Master Plan recommended that the County reevaluate these boundaries, after which three programming and maintenance districts (North, South and West) were formed. The three-district model proposed in the 1996 Master Plan called for the creation of a satellite field office for parks and recreation staff in each district.

For the purposes of analyzing park and facility needs only, this Master Plan has departed from the three-district model and created in its place five recreation planning areas. This change need not be reflected at the operational level.

The following are just some of the reasons why the Master Plan has adopted a system of five recreation planning areas:

- The interstate and highway system that traverses the County, while a barrier to pedestrian flows, is an aid to the County's operational division in that it increases their ability to move through the County and creates economies relating to costly maintenance equipment. That being said, the highway system also creates physical barriers that severely limit the ability to connect trails and to travel by foot or bicycle across these roads. With a greater emphasis now being

placed on limiting automobile travel and encouraging pedestrian travel and the development of greenway corridors, it would make sense to reduce the geographic scope of the recreational districts.

- Gwinnett County's population is increasing at a rapid pace and the County has "outgrown" its existing model. At the time that the three-district model was developed, each area had an average population of approximately 145,000 people. Given existing population estimates, a five-district model lowers this average to 130,000 people, which represents a much more reasonable "community" around which facility and park requirements can be established.
- The geographic size of the County creates challenges relates to transportation and access to parks and recreation facilities. By increasing the number of recreation planning areas, the result is a more accurate representation of reasonable "travel times" to parks and recreation facilities.
- There are "pockets" or areas of the County that contain high proportions of children, teenagers, seniors, or ethnic communities. By developing geographically smaller units of analysis, it is possible to develop recommendations that target the specific needs of each area.

Through an examination of the socio-demographic characteristics of the County's population at a census tract level, combined with the knowledge of land area, park locations, major thoroughfares, and transportation barriers, the boundaries of the five recreation planning areas (RPAs) were established and vetted through the Citizen Steering Committee. RPAs were assigned letters from A through E and are illustrated on Map 1-1. Based on 2000 Census data, the populations of the RPAs range from 90,124 to 150,202.

Although population projections have not been assigned to geographic areas, discussions with the County's Planning Department indicate that growth is anticipated along the I-85 and Highway 316 (University Parkway) corridors. The result will be continued population growth in RPAs A, B and C. RPAs D and E in the eastern portions of the County are expected to experience growth as well due to the availability of developable land at lower densities.

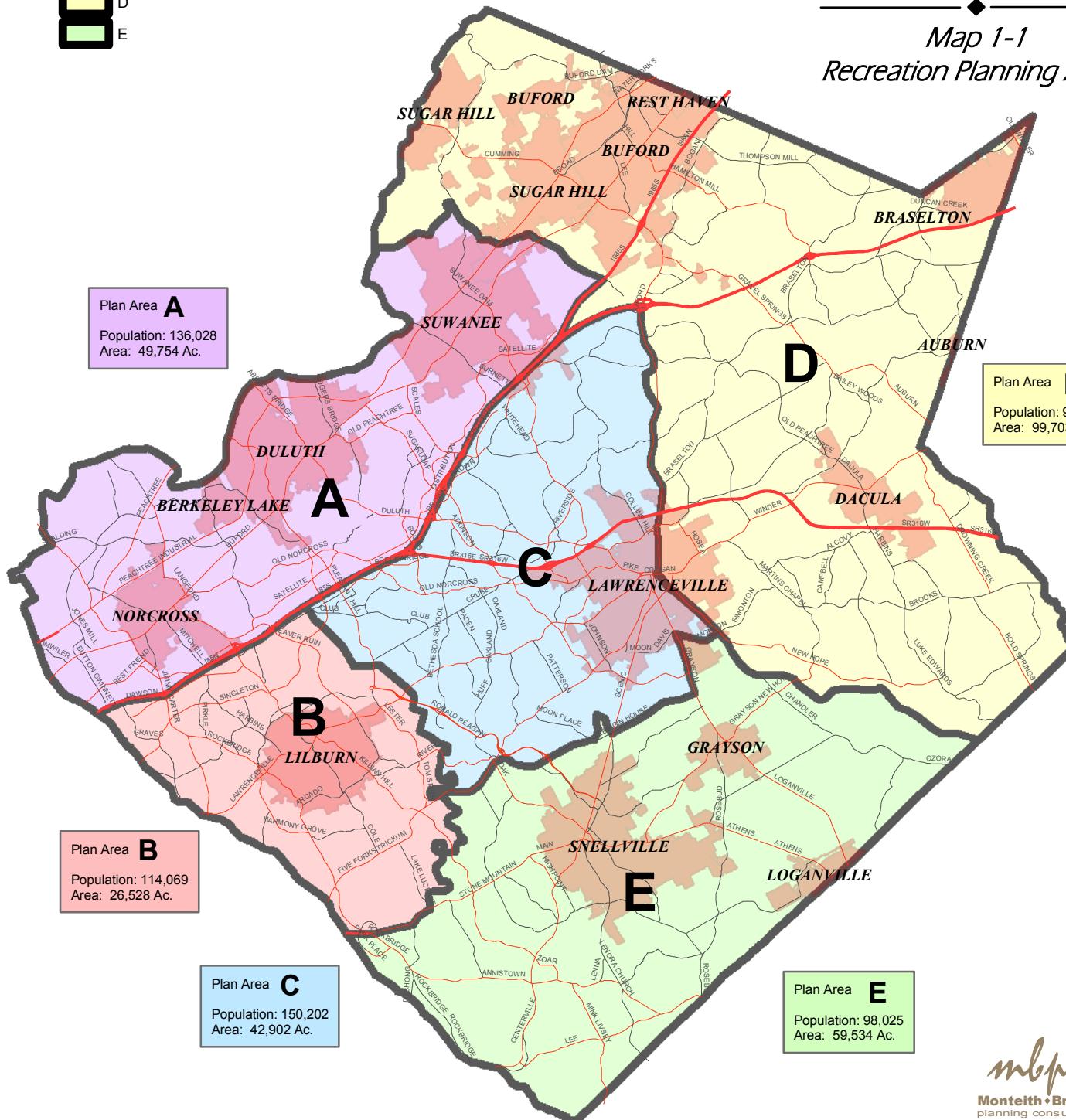
The Recreation Planning Areas, otherwise referred to as Plan Areas, are referenced throughout this Plan, most notably in relation to the projection of park and facility requirements and recommended locations for new recreational infrastructure.



GWINNETT COUNTY, GEORGIA

2004
Comprehensive
Parks and Recreation Master Plan

Map 1-1 Recreation Planning Areas



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