Denver Parks & Recreation

STRATEGIC ACQUISITION PLAN

GAME PLAN
for a Healthy City

DENVER
PARKS & RECREATION

DRAFT
April 2021
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Acknowledgements

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This is a draft of the Strategic Acquisition Plan document provided in advance of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB) public hearing on May 12, 2021. Denver Parks and Recreation will continue making edits and adjustments to the document based on continued feedback received from the PRAB and the public. The final document will be before the PRAB on June 9, 2021.

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April 12, 2021

Dear Denver Residents,

Denver Parks and Recreation (DPR) is pleased to share our Strategic Acquisition Plan. This plan builds on and implements important goals of the Game Plan for a Healthy City and the Legacy Fund Five-Year Plan. Through much community and stakeholder engagement during these planning efforts, we heard clearly that Denverites love their parks and recreation system, and want to see it grow as Denver grows, with the aim of making our system more sustainable and resilient for generations to come. In 2018, Denver voters expressed tremendous support for growing our parks and recreation system by passing the Legacy Fund, a 0.25 percent sales tax dedicated to maintaining and expanding parks, trails and open spaces in our urban and mountain parks. The Legacy Fund marks the first time DPR has a significant and dedicated funding source for acquisition. DPR is delivering on this promise through the creation of the Strategic Acquisition Plan and by advancing key acquisitions across six different focus areas.

The Strategic Acquisition Plan confirms the six focus areas identified in the Legacy Fund Five-Year Plan and provides criteria by which DPR can identify and evaluate acquisitions, so we can make informed decisions on prioritizing new acquisitions and ensuring that they provide significant value and benefit to the system and users. We are excited to move forward on advancing our acquisition program to ensure the parks and recreation system expands to meet Denver’s needs.

Since fall 2020, we had the privilege of working with Denver residents from across the city, as well as advocates, partners, elected officials, sister agencies and DPR staff who contributed their enthusiasm, input, and technical knowledge into this plan for growing our urban and mountain parks and recreation system. We are extremely grateful for everyone’s time and dedication. Through participation in meetings and surveys, we saw proof of the importance of laying out a strategic and methodical framework for our acquisition program, and an eagerness grow our parks and recreation system in an equitable and resilient way.

Sincerely,

Allegra “Happy” Haynes
Executive Director, Department of Parks and Recreation
City and County of Denver
How We Got Here

Denver Parks and Recreation (DPR) has developed a Strategic Acquisition Plan to guide the growth of an equitable, sustainable and resilient parks and recreation system for a healthier Denver. The Strategic Acquisition Plan builds off and is an implementation tool to realize the Game Plan for a Healthy City and the Legacy Fund Five-Year Plan. The Strategic Acquisition Plan confirms the six focus areas identified in the Legacy Fund Five-Year Plan, which are:

- 10-Minute Walk or Roll
- Mountain Parks
- Facilities
- Resilience, Habitat Restoration and Waterways
- Downtown, High-Density and Growth Areas
- Equity

Purpose

The Strategic Acquisition Plan provides criteria DPR can use to evaluate acquisitions and make informed decisions on prioritizing and balancing growth opportunities across the six focus areas. The plan also provides the means to evaluate how new land opportunities provide value and benefit to the parks and recreation system and users. The plan identifies specific goals which can be used as measures for success associated with each focus area. The plan also identifies a “toolbox” of various strategies DPR can utilize to expand the parks and recreation system.

Process Overview

The process for developing the Strategic Acquisition Plan kicked off in the Fall of 2020 with engagement and content development. Design Workshop, the consultant, worked hand-in-hand with DPR’s Core Planning Team to engage a robust set of stakeholders over the course of the project. It included technical staff focus groups, meetings with Technical Partners, presentations to the DPR and Division of Real Estate leadership team, and engagement with City Council and the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board. The process was guided by constant input from the public through public meetings and surveys to collect feedback on the vision, recommendations, and criteria. This engagement effort was critical to developing the final document that will guide decision-making on parks acquisitions in the future.
AN ENGAGED PROCESS

criteria for the plan, diving deeper into each focus area. Building off the fall engagement window, DPR continued to hear that aligning with other City goals would be important such as collocating neighborhood needs like parks and libraries, and working with other departments to ensure parks, open spaces, and other facilities are connected via safe mobility options like sidewalks. DPR also heard the need for parks to provide access to nature so that there is a system of green natural spaces to serve as urban oases throughout Denver. This survey closes on April 12th and more quantitative findings will be integrated into the final document.

The criteria in this document have been crafted with this public input taken into close consideration so that DPR’s parks, open spaces, and trails system continues to serve all Denverites.

Technical Stakeholders

DPR engaged various technical stakeholders as well, including staff, topical experts and partner organizations with aligning missions. All methods of input were given equal weight. Topics may have varied for each group, due to their connections to the plan and areas of expertise, but all were assessed along with the information gathered from the general public, in creating this plan.

STAFF FOCUS GROUPS

Two virtual meetings and one survey were held with key staff members in DPR and other partner agencies. Engaging this group of technical staff experts helped integrate cross-departmental efforts into this plan ensuring for more efficient and effective implementation, and to understand potential challenges or potential priorities. DPR heard from these stakeholders that this plan should also continue to advance existing citywide plans and visions such as Blueprint Denver, Denver Moves, Mile High Flood District Master Drainage Plans, etc. and connect to other community services like affordable housing and transit

TECHNICAL PARTNERS

The technical partners group is composed of topical experts and partner organizations whose missions align or overlap with the overarching goals of the Strategic Acquisition Plan and the six focus areas, and/or who have technical expertise within the realm of acquisitions. DPR hosted two virtual meetings and one survey with the technical partners to gather their input on the plan’s focus areas, goals, and criteria. This group also helped to identify coordination opportunities in the plan for the six focus areas as well as share knowledge including best practices related to acquisitions or individual focus areas. Implementation of this plan will depend on partnerships and collaboration at the citywide and regional level. By working with these technical stakeholders to brainstorm goals and dive deeper into recommendations, DPR aims to enhance collaboration with these important partners.

LEADERSHIP TEAM

The Leadership Team was engaged at key milestones throughout the process to guide content and engagement decisions. This team included executive leadership from both DPR and the Department of Finance, Division of Real Estate - ensuring that this plan is truly actionable.

Boards + Councils

PARKS & RECREATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Denver Parks & Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB) comprised of 19 members appointed by each City Council member, the Mayor, and Denver Public Schools. Advisory Board members work closely with their appointing authority, the community and the department to be stewards of the Denver Parks & Recreation system. PRAB’s Sub-Committee on Planning & Design, Funding, Access & Accessibility was particularly involved in this effort.

MAYOR’S RACIAL EQUITY COUNCIL

DPR presented the plan and the engagement strategy to the Mayor’s Racial Equity Council, comprised of City of Denver employees as well as Denver nonprofit and community representatives, to get their feedback and input.

DENVER PARKS & RECREATION

STRATEGIC ACQUISITION PLAN

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

• Public Meeting #1: Held October 22, 2020 in English and Spanish

• Survey #1: Open from October 27, 2020 to January 10, 2021, provided in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese 

nearly 1,700 responses

• Public Meeting #2: Held March 11, 2021 in English and Spanish

• Survey #2: Open from March 8, 2021 to April 12, 2021, provided in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese

nearly 750 responses

• Parks and Recreation Advisory Board public hearing May 12, 2021

KEY ORGANIZATIONS & PARTNERS IN SHARING ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- All Council Offices
- Parks & Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB)
- Registered Neighborhood Organizations (RNOs), Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation Parks & Recreation Committee (INC PARC)
- 11 Denver Commissions and Mayor’s Racial Equity Council
- DPR social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, NextDoor), including paid promotions on Facebook and Instagram
- Emails to over 3200 members of the public
- Direct emails to over 50 partner agencies and organizations including those representing youth, lower income communities, Latino communities, Black and African American communities, environmental groups, people experiencing homelessness, and neighborhood groups
- Citywide and DPR Denver Employee Newsletters
ACQUISITION HISTORY & EXISTING CONDITIONS
INTRODUCING THE FOCUS AREAS

The focus areas for this plan were developed as part of the Legacy Fund Five-Year planning process. They were confirmed during the engagement for this plan in the Fall of 2020. The six focus areas include:

- 10-Minute Walk or Roll
- Mountain Parks
- Facilities
- Resilience, Habitat Restoration and Waterways
- Downtown, High-Density and Growth Areas
- Equity

Why Are These A Focus Now?

10-Minute Walk or Roll (5-Minutes Downtown)

- Mayor Michael B. Hancock and DPR have committed that all residents across the city should be within a 10-minute walk or roll to a park, and within a 5-minute walk or roll to a park in Downtown Denver in order to increase access to quality parks for all.
- Denver received the National Recreation and Parks Association 10-Minute Walk Grant and this plan is partially funded by that grant effort, helping to fulfill Denver’s grant commitment of creating a Strategic Acquisition Plan.

Mountain Parks

- There may be strategic opportunities to purchase lands to add to the Mountain Parks system, particularly if those lands contribute to both wildlife habitat, recreation, and/or education.
- Through Game Plan engagement, DPR knows Denverites want improved access to the mountain parks for all, and increased opportunities for outdoor recreation, environmental education and habitat preservation.

Facilities

- New DPR facilities are needed to serve the system, including land and buildings for maintenance shops, pools and offices.
- Maintenance shops allow DPR staff to efficiently and effectively maintain existing parks, trails, trees and recreation centers.
- DPR is committed to providing a diverse array of outdoor recreation opportunities for all residents.

Resilience, Habitat Restoration and Waterways

- This focus area includes waterway corridors where multiple benefits can be achieved, such as bank stabilization, habitat restoration, trail connections and improvements, flood mitigation, and increased access to parks and open space.
- It also includes resilient natural green spaces, such as open spaces with native vegetation that sequesters carbon and supports native pollinators, and tree canopies which help cleanse the air and keep Denver cool in the summer.

Downtown, High-Density and Growth Areas

- These areas typically have a lower ratio of park acreage per capita and continue to see increasing development density and expanded demand on existing parks and public spaces.
- Park expansion in these areas also helps to maintain Denver’s goal of having 9 acres of park space per thousand people.
- Parks, open spaces, and trails also help meet the increasing demand for a diversity of recreational, cultural, and ecological activities in areas that attract many residents and visitors.

Equity

- The Equity focus area combines various park equity factors with demographic and socio-economic factors to determine which neighborhoods are most in need of equitable investment.
- DPR acknowledges that certain neighborhoods, and especially communities of color, have been historically underserved, and are in need of equitable access to parks and recreation centers and the various amenities and programs they provide.
- Neighborhoods that have been historically underserved face many competing priorities in order to achieve a high quality of life - such as balancing affordable housing with access to open space. This plan lays out a path to better coordinate with other community-serving uses and providers such as affordable housing, libraries, etc.

Acquisitions Outside the Focus Areas

Throughout the course of this plan, DPR will likely encounter acquisition opportunities that may not fall under one of the six focus areas but that are strategic and critical for ensuring a sustainably managed, accessible and resilient system. These opportunities may include boundary adjustments, inholdings, and other small acquisitions within or adjacent to existing parks.
A number of significant historical events have shaped Denver’s parks and parkways over the past 150 years, and have created what is today one of the nation’s finest urban park systems. The timeline in this plan reflects the influences and phenomena that have defined distinct eras of parks and recreation expansion, and their impact over time, and organizes them using the six Focus Areas of the Strategic Acquisition Plan.

10-Minute Walk or Roll

City Ditch (built 1865) made Denver and its park and parkway system possible, it transformed the once dusty mining town into a metropolis, and supports wildlife, diverse habitats, and mature trees throughout the city. Mestizo Curtis Park (acquired 1868) was the first park opened in Denver, followed by City Park (acquired 1881), which at 315 acres makes it one of the city’s largest parks and also its most visited. The park and parkway system was formally established in 1894, laying the groundwork for Denver to become a city of neighborhoods connected to recreational and cultural destinations. Parks like Washington Park (acquired 1898), Elyria Park and Civic Center Park (each acquired in 1911) were designed to provide places for Denver residents to come together in the outdoors. The 1900s-1930s focused on connecting these destination parks with linear parkways such as Speer Boulevard, Federal Boulevard and 8th Avenue. As acquisitions are considered in the future, it will be important to expand upon parks and connections between them to ensure that all residents have access to a park within a 10-minute walk or roll.

Mountain Parks

Initiated in 1912 and completed in 1914 by the Olmsted brothers, the Mountain Parks Plan provided recommendations of mountain properties for purchase outside the city limits that could provide Denver residents with an escape from the growing urban center, and also protect mountain landscapes for future generations. Lookout Mountain Park (acquired 1917) was the first park added to the Mountain Parks catalog. The expansion of the Mountain Parks system was made possible by President Roosevelt’s New Deal (1933) that aimed to put people back to work after the Great Depression. Under the direction of the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built Red Rocks Amphitheater, which is one of Denver’s most iconic parks and cultural destinations, along with numerous other mountain park structures. Access to natural areas continues to be a focus of Denver Parks and Recreation, with an eye toward making visitation to Mountain Parks more equitable to all residents.

Resilience, Habitat Restoration and Waterways

The Great Flood (1965) was modern Denver’s worst natural disaster, inundating over 250,000 acres and damaging the city’s drainage basins. The disaster, however, ushered in a new era of focus on the resilience of waterways and led to the restoration of the South Platte River along with other significant natural areas. Harvard Gulch Park (acquired 1977), Lowry Open Space (acquired 2013), Westerly Creek (acquired 2007), Johnson Habitat Park (acquired 1977, built 2015), and Heron Pond (acquired 1998, master planned 2017) can all be attributed to the change in attitude toward Denver’s open spaces that resulted from the catastrophic flood of 1965. As the Denver population grows, a concentrated effort should be made to preserve, protect and expand habitat and waterways.

Equity

The discriminatory practice of redlining – marking off neighborhoods based on race – had a major impact on the demographics and development of parks across the city. This racist segregation of neighborhoods began in the 1930s, and though the practice was officially halted in 1969 with the Fair Housing Act, the effects were long felt, and are still visible today. Historic communities of color across Denver still do not have equitable access to parks. Thus, the equitable distribution of parks and recreation facilities across Denver is of primary concern for DPR. New parks and recreation centers and park improvements such as Cuatro Vientos Park (acquired 2009, built 2014) in the Westwood neighborhood, Paco Sanchez Park (acquired 1958, major renovations in 2018) in West Denver, and Todos Activos at Swansea Park in Globeville-Elyria Swansea have all opened in recent years to meet the diverse needs and recreational desires of Denverites in historically underrepresented neighborhoods. In 2018, Denver voters approved a 0.25 percent sales tax measure, known as the Parks Legacy Fund, to fund open spaces and trails, including acquisition. The Legacy Fund provides DPR with a dedicated funding stream for parks acquisition, maintenance and operations. This fund, in tandem with the Swanigan Acquisition Plan, will allow the City to focus on closing longtime gaps, and making the park system more equitable and accessible to everyone.
**HISTORY OF THE SYSTEM**

The Park and Parkway System

The Park and Parkway System laid the groundwork for Denver to become a city of neighborhoods connected by recreational and cultural destinations.

**Denver’s Mountain Parks**

The Mountain Parks Plan, prepared by the Olmsted brothers and completed in 1914, recommended the purchase of over 14,000 acres of mountain parcels to offer scenic views, recreational opportunities, and diverse landscapes for future generations.

**The New Deal**

The Civilian Conservation Corps, a key component of the New Deal, built many of the defining structures in Denver’s urban and mountain parks systems.

**The Great Flood**

Denver’s worst-ever natural disaster, the Great Flood, inundated over 250,000 acres leading to the restoration of the rivers and the rebirth of the downtown core.

**The Downtown Resurgence**

The turn of the century saw tremendous growth in Downtown residents - nearly doubling the population in a decade, all with a need for parks and open space access.

**The Parks Legacy Fund**

The Parks and Open Space Sales Tax, Measure 2A, dedicates funding for parks, open space, trails, and waterways, to create a more equitable and accessible parks system.

**Game Plan**

The Game Plan for a Healthy City seeks to make Denver a healthier city overall by promoting environmental sustainability, equity for all people, and the conservation of resources.

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*Dates are approximate in some cases, and represent year of acquisition*
CONTEXT OF DENVER TODAY

Challenges and Opportunities for Growing the Parks and Recreation System

Population Growth

Like many U.S. cities, there has been significant reinvestment and movement back to the urban core of Denver. Large regional investments in the FastTracks transit system, investments in downtown Denver, and general demographic shifts which favor urban living have reenergized the City.

Denver’s population has grown significantly, particularly in the last decade. The City’s population started to show significant increases in the late 2000s. Between 2000 and 2010, population growth averaged less than 1 percent per year. Between 2010 and 2019, the average annual growth rate increased significantly to 2.2 percent. The City’s estimated population in 2019 was 727,000 persons, according to the U.S. Census American Community Survey. In 2000, the population was about 550,000 persons. In twenty years, Denver grew by one-third of its original population.

Planning and Zoning

In 2002 the original Blueprint Denver provided the city’s first comprehensive approach to managing growth and development. Through the plan, Denver directed much of its development to “areas of change.” These areas included the downtown and several downtown-adjacent neighborhoods, large undeveloped areas, transit station areas, and some major corridors.

In 2010, the City completely overhauled its zoning code, with the intent of simplifying the code and modernizing it by making it context-sensitive and form-based. The adoption of the new zoning code in 2010 achieved many key goals from 2002 Blueprint Denver.

In 2019, the City updated a series of citywide plans including the Comprehensive Plan, its Land Use and Transportation Plan, Blueprint Denver, as well as its Parks and Recreation plan, Game Plan for a Healthy City. The updated Blueprint Denver replaced the areas of change approach with a more detailed and nuanced “growth strategy” that emphasizes that all parts of the city will experience some amount of change, while most future growth will be directed to key mixed use centers and corridors.

Denver Parks and Recreation’s Game Plan for a Healthy City closely examines Denver’s growth and outlines areas of the City which are underserved, many of which have been historically underserved, not just because of recent growth. Game Plan calls for closing the 10-minute walk or roll access gap and exploring opportunities to expand the parks and recreation system in areas of most need.

Over the past three decades, many of the City’s largest parks additions (greater than 20 acres) have primarily been concentrated in Denver’s larger redevelopment areas, including Green Valley Ranch, Central Park, Lowry and the Riverfront Park area. During that same time period, DPR has made large acquisitions such as Heron Pond and Carpio Sanguinette Park as part of its effort to grow and expand the City’s parks and recreation system in historically underserved communities.

Land Values

One of the challenges as Denver builds out is the increasing price for land, particularly where the City has seen the most recent higher-density developments. Land values vary significantly throughout the city depending on the underlying zoning, proximity to downtown, rail transit and a variety of market factors. Considering Denver’s highly competitive real estate market, DPR will face stiff competition from the private sector as it works to grow and expand the parks and recreation system.

In 2014, the higher priced land areas were concentrated in the Union Station, the Central Business District and Cherry Creek neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to them. As of 2020, land values have increased more broadly across the city. Much of central Denver is valued at over $75 per square foot. The northwest neighborhoods, in particular, have seen large increases in values during the last five years.

Involuntary Displacement

Decades of research have proven that historically marginalized neighborhoods are negatively impacted by land-use decisions and are often located near polluting facilities such as landfills, highways, and refineries. Not only are residents exposed to environmental harms, but they also lack access to green amenities such as parks, bike lanes, and fresh food.

Research recognizes that there are significant health benefits associated with these types of amenities, and now greater efforts are being taken to ensure that they are equitably distributed.

Denver Parks and Recreation recognizes the past injustices that have resulted in certain neighborhoods having less historic investment that directly serves and benefits the local community. These historic injustices often occurred in communities of color and in lower-income neighborhoods and the impacts are still evident today. DPR is committed to making parks and recreation investments in neighborhoods that have been historically underserved, with the intent of benefiting residents who live there today. Parks, open spaces, trees and opportunities to recreate, play, celebrate culture, and connect with friends and neighbors, are critical to creating healthy communities with a high quality of life. All Denver residents should have easy access to these spaces and amenities. As part of the Strategic Acquisition Plan’s Equity lens and Equity Focus Area, DPR will work to expand the parks and recreation system in high equity-needs neighborhoods.

DPR is sensitive to neighborhood concerns about involuntary displacement, which may occur when property values or rents rise and residents or businesses are forced to relocate to neighborhoods where real estate is less costly. As part of the Equity Focus Area of the Strategic Acquisition Plan, DPR will be seeking out opportunities to create parks and open spaces in coordination with partners, such as affordable housing providers, and other community-serving uses such as schools, libraries, and other uses that provides community benefits. DPR also coordinates with other city departments including the Department of Public Health & Environment (CDPHE), the Department of Transportation & Infrastructure (DOTI), the Department of Housing Stability (HOST), and the Department of Economic Development & Opportunity’s Neighborhood Equity & Stabilization (NEST) team, which offers a variety of anti-displacement tools.

INVOLUNTARY DISPLACEMENT

When property values and/or rents in an area rise, and residents and/or businesses are forced to relocate to neighborhoods where real estate is less costly – Denver’s Comprehensive Plan 2040, p. 72.

Youth participate in gardening in New Freedom Park
Using the Criteria as a Guide

Using the criteria as a guide, DPR and Division of Real Estate staff will evaluate potential acquisitions to ensure they meet focus area and departmental goals and metrics, needs and visions, and consider partnerships, citywide efforts, and other community benefits. As part of, and in addition to, applying the evaluation criteria to potential acquisitions, DPR will also make site visits for on-the-ground analysis and perform a thorough review using geographic information systems (GIS). GIS provides a system for evaluating land and property, understanding current conditions, and forecasting future scenarios and impacts. Recommendations on specific potential acquisition projects will consider the value proposition of all potential acquisitions, in terms of cost versus benefit, and will ultimately be made by DPR’s Executive Leadership.

Equity & Resilience as Lenses

Recent planning efforts in Denver, including Blueprint Denver, Game Plan, and various Neighborhood Plans have been generated through a deliberate attempt to authentically engage communities and reach those who have traditionally been left out of conversations about the future of the city. During this process, two themes stood out as important to stakeholders across Denver – equity and resilience. Building on these previous plans and feedback received during the fall 2020 community engagement, this Strategic Acquisition Plan emphasizes both equity and resilience as lenses through which potential acquisitions should be considered. The Parks and Recreation system plays an important role in the equitable access to services and opportunities that belong to all Denverites. Our open spaces can also ensure a resilient future for our waterways, biodiversity, and health of our residents.

Below is a diagram that shows how existing goals and strategies from plans like Game Plan and Blueprint Denver will be used as lenses for potential acquisitions. Along with the primary criteria discussed earlier in this plan, these goals and strategies will be used to evaluate each potential acquisition on how well they align with the focus areas, and how they are advancing existing citywide plans.

Focus Area Criteria

The next section dives into criteria for each focus area, which are the qualities that potential acquisitions will be measured against. While it is not necessary for a property to meet all or even any of these criteria, properties that meet the focus area criteria will be prioritized, with prioritization increasing in importance as more of those criteria are met.

The various criteria are intended to help DPR evaluate if a potential acquisition will be a meaningful and valuable addition to the parks and recreation system. There is not necessarily a certain number of criteria an acquisition must meet in order to advance, rather the criteria allow DPR to evaluate the benefit the acquisition might bring to the system.

The goals for each focus area were developed through meaningful dialogue with the public and technical stakeholders. These will guide the plan’s effort and are the aim of the plan’s success.

Visualizing the Focus Areas

Maps are powerful representations that reveal spatial patterns and processes of social and environmental phenomena. It is essential to build maps so they tell a story that is inclusive and transparent. Maps within a plan document are also a static picture. The data shown here will change over time, impacting the boundaries, inventory and analysis. DPR will continue to update mapping for the six focus areas over time in accordance with the implementation of this plan.

EQUITY

Equity is when everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, has the opportunity to thrive. Where there is equity, a person’s identity does not determine their outcome. Equitable, inclusive communities are places of value that provide access to resources and opportunities for all people to improve the quality of their life. As a city, we advance equity by serving individuals, families and communities in a manner that reduces or eliminates persistent institutional biases and barriers based on race, ability, gender identity and sexual orientation, age and other factors. – Denver’s Comprehensive Plan 2040, p. 31

RESILIENCE

The ability of communities to rebound, positively adapt to, or thrive amidst changing conditions or challenges—including human-caused and natural disasters—and to maintain quality of life, healthy growth, durable systems, economic vitality, and conservation of resources for present and future generations. – State of Colorado, Colorado Resiliency Office
### EQUITY LENS: EXISTING GOALS AND STRATEGIES

**PRIMARY CRITERIA**

- The property meets one or more of the six (6) focus areas.
- The property is of appropriate topography, location, and visibility; and sufficient size and shape to accommodate parks and recreation purposes.

**RESILIENCE LENS: EXISTING GOALS AND STRATEGIES**

- The property provides the opportunity to expand and/or connect to existing parks, open spaces, or facilities.
- The property enhances the maintenance and/or operations of existing parks and open spaces and their natural or built resources.
- The property supports the goals of one or more other City and County of Denver departments and/or citywide visions or plans.

### USING CRITERIA TO EVALUATE PROPERTIES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLUEPRINT</th>
<th>GAME PLAN</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Foster great urban design and the creation of authentic places that thoughtfully integrate streets, public spaces and private property.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ensure all Denver residents have safe, convenient and affordable access to basic services and a variety of amenities.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Develop safe, high-quality mobility options that prioritize walking, rolling, biking and transit and connect people of all ages and abilities to their daily needs.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Promote a healthy community with equitable access to healthy living for all residents.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Enhance the overall character and sense of place of neighborhoods through all stages of development and reinvestment.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Adapt recreation facilities and programming to promote active lifestyles consistent with the culture of the surrounding community.</strong></td>
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- **10-Minute Walk or Roll Mountain Parks Facilities Resilience, Habitat Restoration, & Waterways Downtown, High Density, & Growth Areas Equity**

Focus Area Criteria are outlined in more detail on the following pages.
**FOCUS AREA: 10-MINUTE WALK OR ROLL**

**Goal:** Provide all residents with a quality park within a 10-minute walk or roll (or within a 5-minute walk or roll in Downtown Denver)

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**FOCUS AREA CRITERIA**

- The property is located in an existing 10-minute walk or roll gap, or 5-minute if Downtown.
- The property is of adequate size/shape/etc. to provide at least three of the following amenities:
  - Play areas
  - Minimum (3) small group gathering areas of 24 people
  - Minimum (6) sport courts
  - Off-leash dog area/run
  - Mobility loop
  - Open lawn area of minimum 2500 sf
  - Tree planting
  - Multi-use plaza minimum 1500 sf
  - Gardens (community, pollinator, etc.)
  - Fitness stations
  - Nature play
  - Access to nature
  - Athletic recreation areas (fields, courts, etc.)
  - Sports courts
  - Picnic areas
- The property directly connects to other parks, open spaces and facilities via the mobility network through city or regional trails, bike paths and/or greenways.

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**VISUALIZING THE FOCUS AREA**

The above map shows existing gaps where residents cannot walk or roll to a quality park within 10 minutes. Most of the gaps are fairly small, but larger gaps can be found in certain neighborhoods. Highways and railroads are also shown on this map to identify where major barriers to walking or rolling may be. No matter where park investment occurs, other investments such as mobility programs like Denver's Safe Route to Schools Program or the Neighborhood Sidewalk Repair Program should also occur in tandem. This walk or roll gap does not take into account access that residents may have to private or other entity managed parks or open space including HOA-provided space, school yards, private plazas, etc.

The map to the right shows existing gaps where residents and visitors cannot walk or roll to a quality park within 5 minutes - the goal for the downtown area. This map was created during the analysis portion of the Outdoor Downtown Plan process.
**FOCUS AREA: MOUNTAIN PARKS**

**Goal:** Provide accessible destination parks that focus on outdoor recreation, environmental education and ecological preservation.

**FOCUS AREA CRITERIA**

- The property is conducive to potential future activities and programming for a variety of demographic groups.
- The property possesses existing connectivity infrastructure like trails and roads, etc.
- The property preserves Denver hydrology and/or protects the watershed.
- The property provides continuity for wildlife corridors and/or protects critical or unique species and habitats.
- The property preserves rocky outcroppings and/or has unique or diverse topography.
- The property possesses historical/cultural assets or advances the protection of them.

**VISUALIZING THE FOCUS AREA**

The above map shows all existing mountain parks and conservation areas owned by DPR, along with how they connect to other public open space in the area. The map also emphasizes connectivity to the DPR mountain park system, an important issue for Denverites, by showing highways that connect to the system and bike routes/lanes that connect to public open space.

*Park County data not available*
FOCUS AREA: FACILITIES

Goal: Provide land and buildings throughout Denver for diverse recreation opportunities as well as accessible and efficient parks maintenance.

FOCUS AREA CRITERIA

• The property is a sufficient size to provide both indoor and outdoor recreation.
• The property helps close a gap in the facilities network – either recreation or maintenance.
• The property is a sufficient size to support both recreation and maintenance/operations needs when possible.
• The property is of adequate shape/size to advance department needs (such as green building infrastructure like solar panels, etc. and/or maintenance vehicle accommodation).
• The property provides reasonable cost/benefit savings for maintenance on travel time to other properties.

VISUALIZING THE FOCUS AREA

The above map shows existing parks and recreation facilities, both for maintenance and recreation. Each of the maintenance districts is also highlighted. There are five maintenance districts within the City and County of Denver.

- Downtown: Manages 128 acres of parkland
- Northeast: Manages 1,513 acres of parkland
- Northwest: Manages 853 acres of parkland
- East: Manages 1,256 acres of parkland
- Southwest: Manages 1,051 acres of parkland

The newly-built Carla Madison Recreation Center on East Colfax

New signage installed by park maintenance staff

DPR’s “Be a Smart Ash” tree taping event

A vibrant mural decorates La Alma Recreation Center
**FOCUS AREA: RESILIENCE, HABITAT RESTORATION, & WATERWAYS**

**Goal:** Cultivate an accessible and resilient network of wildlife habitat corridors, waterways, and recreational and protective areas to prepare for an uncertain future and expand public stewardship.

**FOCUS AREA CRITERIA**

- The property is along a waterway and/or protects a riparian corridor.
- The property is located within a floodplain and/or could be used to protect vulnerable areas and existing properties from flooding.
- The property helps achieve Mile High Flood District or Office of Emergency Management metrics and goals regarding the provision of minimum buffer zones from waterways.
- The property reduces the urban heat island effect.
- The property provides continuity for wildlife corridors and/or protects critical or unique species and habitats.

The above map illustrates how waterways in Denver interact with the existing parks, open spaces, and trails system. Critical wildlife habitats are often located along waterways and near green spaces, so it will be even more crucial in a rapidly changing future to expand the network of green spaces in Denver to continue to protect these critical habitats and species that occupy them. This map also highlights critical drainage areas, data from Mile High Flood District, that can be leveraged to provide stormwater management, while also providing habitat protection and recreation, such as the 39th Greenway. In the near future other data will be available to integrate into visualizations such as MetroDNA’s Regional Vision data and Trust for Public Land’s Climate Smart Cities research.
**FOCUS AREA: DOWNTOWN, HIGH-DENSITY, & GROWTH AREAS**

**Goal:** Meet the increasing recreational, cultural, and ecological demands on parks and public spaces in downtown, high-density and growth areas.

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**FOCUS AREA CRITERIA**

- The property is located within an existing 5-minute walk or roll gap if located downtown.
- The property is located within an existing 10-minute walk or roll gap if in a high-density or growth area as defined by *Blueprint Denver*.
- The property is of adequate size/shape/etc. to provide one of the following amenities if Downtown, or three of the following amenities if in a High-Density or Growth Area:
  - Minimum (3) small group gathering areas of eight (8) people
  - Off-leash dog area/run
  - Open lawn area of minimum 1,000 sf
  - Tree planting
  - Multi-use plaza minimum 800 sf
  - Community garden
  - Playgrounds
  - Community art piece/installation
  - Adjacent or interior restaurant/retail uses
  - Nature play
  - Gardens (community, pollinator, etc.)
  - Sports courts
  - Cultural spaces
  - Seating/picnic areas

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**HIGH-DENSITY AND GROWTH AREAS**

*Blueprint Denver* outlines the City’s Growth Strategy, p. 50-51, for future household and jobs projections.

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**VISUALIZING THE FOCUS AREA**

Based on the mapping that was done as part of *Blueprint Denver*, this map focuses on high and medium-high growth areas. High growth areas are regional centers, while medium-high growth areas are community centers, corridors and higher density areas.

The downtown area referenced in this focus area is defined by the Outdoor Downtown Plan and *Blueprint Denver*. It includes the core downtown business district and adjacent neighborhoods. Examples of places in this area include Union Station, Larimer Square, Golden Triangle, Curtis Park, and Arapahoe Square.

The data shown in the above map is periodically updated as part of the open data catalog made available by the City and County of Denver, and is based on analysis done for *Blueprint Denver* that looked at projections for population, households and employment, while taking into consideration data available from the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) and the State Demographer’s office.

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*Outdoor group fitness classes in Civic Center Park*
FOCUS AREA: EQUITY

Goal: Proactively invest in neighborhoods in a flexible manner in coordination with other complete neighborhood needs and community benefits.

FOCUS AREA CRITERIA

- The property is located within or adjacent to a neighborhood with a high equity need according to DPR’s Neighborhood Equity Index.
- The property is directly adjacent to existing or proposed affordable housing.
- The property is located within a 10-minute walk or roll of existing or proposed affordable housing.
- The property is located adjacent to another community benefit (e.g. school, library, grocery, recreation center, medical facility, etc.) and offers the opportunity to partner with another community serving use in a high equity need neighborhood.

The above map is based on DPR’s Neighborhood Equity Index. The index is made up of the following factors:

- Communities of color
- Percent youth
- Percent low income
- Health disparity indicators
- Population density
- 10-Minute Walk or Roll Park Access
- 10-Year Capital Park Investment
- Park Acres per 1000 Residents

As seen on this map, the darkest red areas are those in greatest need of more equitable parks and recreation services and facilities.
Acquiring land to develop future parks, open spaces, and trails to grow and maintain an equitable, sustainable, and resilient parks and recreation system for a healthier Denver will not be easy, but will be worthwhile. However, diverse funding mechanisms innovatively coupled with proven real estate tools together in coordination with other City agencies and partner organizations will help DPR meet the vision and outcomes of this Strategic Acquisition Plan.

Funding Mechanisms

Successful acquisition projects require funding mechanisms and financial frameworks that not only include purchase costs, but also the cost to integrate the property into the DPR system and manage it for the longterm. DPR acquisitions will be funded primarily through the Parks Legacy Fund derived exclusively from a 0.25 percent sales tax dedicated to the improvement and expansion of DPR’s system. The following are possible funding mechanisms, tools, and strategies in addition to the Parks Legacy Fund that DPR can leverage to acquire land and properties for parks, open spaces, and trails especially in areas where real estate values and competition are high.

Bonds

Debt instruments such as bonding can be a plausible funding strategy in certain situations. Bonding is typically done on a coordinated citywide scale involving multiple city agencies. Local municipalities often have the authority to issue bonds, though if the bond is funded through tax revenue the municipality likely requires a vote of approval from residents.

In the case of future parks and open space acquisitions, DPR could pursue the issuance of General Obligation (GO) Bonds. A GO bond is a type of municipal bond that is guaranteed by the credit and taxing ability of the issuing jurisdiction, rather than from the revenue from a specific project, such as toll road or bridge. Any purchase strategy involving GO bonds should be tied to a larger public engagement campaign that builds community support for leveraging tax revenue for parks and open space development. An example of a DPR acquisition utilizing bond funding is the Westwood Recreation Center project, which is funded through the Elevate Denver Bond Program, approved by voters in 2017 to enhance mobility, safety, and quality of life across Denver.

Grants

As part of its effort to leverage acquisition funding, DPR can explore a variety of grant funding options. Grants for parks and open space development, including acquisitions, are funded through public or private entities, and are often tied to specific development or programming initiatives. Grant opportunities to help fund the development of a new acquisition into a park can be explored during the pre-acquisition planning process as well. By staying apprised of all relevant private and public grant opportunities, DPR can maximize its chance of securing grant funding.

The acquisition of Cuatro Vientos Park in Westwood was made possible thanks to grant funding from Great Outdoors Colorado and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Easements

Easements, which can be purchased or donated, are one of the more widely used tools for land conservation and public access to parks and open spaces. An easement is “the grant of a nonpossessory property interest that grants the easement holder permission to use another person’s land.”

1 Easements can take a variety of forms and be used for a wide range of purposes including acquiring public access for trails and conserving and managing open space. For example, easements could be a potential acquisition tool for linear park and trail development because they would allow the owner of the property to continue to own their land while granting legal authority to the city to access, maintain and improve it.

Land Lease

A land lease, also known as a ground lease, is a type of commercial real estate lease in which a lessee is permitted to occupy, use and/or build on the rented land. Land leases can be used for a variety of situations, including commercial real estate development, property occupation by a homeowner with a mobile home, farming, hunting, and recreation. The terms of the lease vary by situation but generally establish the rights of both the landlord and tenants, the duration of the lease, use provisions, and which party owns any improvements to the property made during the lease period.

Because of their flexibility, land leases can be an effective tool to gain access to private land for park, open space and trail conservation, management, and development. The benefit of a land lease agreement is that it provides an opportunity to acquire access to land without the owner having to give up long-term control or ownership rights. To provide the most flexibility to property owners while also allowing DPR to confidently invest in improvements for park space, it is recommended that land leases for park, open space and trail development be limited to a shorter term, ideally between 25 and 50 years.

An example of a land lease in the DPR system is John F. Kennedy Park which includes a golf course, soccer complex and baseball fields. The 25-year lease is between DPR and the United States Army Corps of Engineers.

Purchase Options & Rights of First Offer

For a number of reasons, acquisition opportunities may not always exist even if DPR is interested in acquiring, and an owner is interested in selling, their property or land for a future park or open space. In these cases, purchase options and rights of first offers are potential tools for keeping the “window of opportunity” open for a future acquisition by DPR. A Purchase Option secures the option holder the right to purchase a defined property at a specific price within a specified time period but does not obligate the option holder to do so. This ensures that the property will not be sold or developed during the option period. Purchase Options can be particularly useful for planning large, multi-parcel acquisitions by allowing DPR to secure the right to purchase land from multiple adjacent property owners without having to commit to the purchase until all the property owners have agreed to make the sale.

A Right of First Purchase guarantees DPR a future opportunity to acquire a property before it is sold to someone else. It can be a Right of First Offer, a Right of First Negotiation, a Right of First Refusal, or a combination of all three.

Acquisition Tools

Fee Acquisition

A fee simple acquisition of property or land—whether a purchase or donation—transfers absolute ownership of the property, including the property’s title from a landowner (seller) to a purchaser (buyer). Once a landowner grants the sale of land, the original landowner (seller) generally retains no ownership rights over the property and gives up all other property rights, such as the rights to control, exclude, or derive income from the property. Fee acquisitions have the advantage of giving DPR full control over the management of the properties’ resources and provide the greatest flexibility for future use and decision making. Most DPR acquisitions for parks and open spaces will be fee simple acquisitions.

ACQUISITION TOOLBOX & FUNDING MECHANISMS

Partnership Opportunities

Corporate, Non-Profit, and other Governmental Partners

Denver’s diverse economy provides significant opportunities for DPR to partner with the private and public sectors such as area businesses, not-for-profit organizations, schools and other governmental entities. Partnerships could include joint use agreements that extend the reach of DPR acquisition funds or contribute lands or public spaces, including existing land that is not currently fully serving a public use, like private plazas or school yards. Partnerships could include the utilization of existing partner lands for public parks, open space, or recreational purposes, which could effectively expand the parks system.

Infill Development

DPR can expand access to parks and open space through the repurposing of underutilized city-owned spaces within high-density areas. The development of infill parks should be targeted in areas of dense development and high land values, where dedicating land for parks and open space can be difficult due to space and financial constraints. Recent examples where DPR partnered with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure to create green space include utilizing the Arkins right-of-way to create a new park and promenade along the South Platte River in a rapidly densifying area of the city; and the 39th Avenue Greenway and Open Channel which converted an old rail line into green space and stormwater conveyance to protect nearby homes from flooding.

Development Policies

Strategic development policies can be implemented for certain types of developments to increase the amount of open space preserved.

Parkland Dedication Requirements

Many communities require developers pursuing large-scale residential projects to donate land or pay in-lieu fees for the acquisition and/or development of parkland. The rationale for these fees or dedications is that the new construction eliminates open space and results in population growth which adds additional stress to existing parks and open space systems. While dedication requirements can be a valuable tool to acquire land or capital for parks and open space, their success is driven by the rate of new development.

In Denver at the site-specific level where most development projects interact with the city, the city oversees site review and entitlements. For most redevelopments (less than 5 acres), provided a potential development meets all zoning requirements, there are no particular parks considerations, nor any in-lieu or impact fees dedicated to parkland development currently in place in the City of Denver with the exception of the Gateway area—a newly developing part of Denver that includes Green Valley Ranch and the area near the 61st and Pena Station area.

Large Development Review

The Large Development Review (LDR) process, instituted in 2019, mandates that 10 percent of lands be provided for open space for sites that are 6 acres or greater. Open space design standards are outlined in Denver Zoning Code, Section 10.8.1.6, and may be satisfied through dedicated park land, or privately owned publicly accessible open spaces. Even with this 10 percent open space requirement, DPR staff typically spends significant time negotiating for high quality open spaces on each development site. Prior to the institution of the LDR process, the City required a General Development Plan (GDP), which also included a minimum 10 percent requirement for open space. Currently, affordable housing on these sites is negotiated on a case-by-case basis, although there is a study underway to provide structure to this negotiated process.

The Gateway area requirements and the LDR process are currently the only scenarios in the City’s development review process where there is an opportunity to require development to provide sizeable parkland. DPR will continue to coordinate with Community Planning and Development (CPD) so that quality parks and open space can be achieved through these processes. In addition to CPD, DPR will also coordinate with the Department of Housing Stability (HOST) and the Neighborhood Equity & Stabilization Initiative (NEST) to coordinate land use requirements, acquisition opportunities, community benefits and affordable housing.

Example Acquisitions

Many potential future acquisitions may achieve criteria in multiple focus areas at the same time allowing many different departmental and citywide goals to be met. It is important to realize that even though properties must be an appropriate size and shape, this does not necessarily mean they will be typical neighborhood park acquisitions in every, or even most, cases. To the left there are five examples of park acquisitions:

1. A property along a waterway with unique topography and shape
   » This property could achieve criteria within Resilience, Habitat Restoration and Waterways. Depending on the geography of the parcel it could also achieve Equity or 10-Minute Walk or Roll criteria.

2. A typical square parcel in a high-density neighborhood
   » This property could achieve criteria within the Downtown, High-Density, and Growth Area focus area, but depending on the demographics of the neighborhood could also achieve Equity or 10-Minute Walk or Roll criteria.

3. A larger square parcel in a more residential neighborhood
   » This property could achieve criteria in the Equity and 10-Minute Walk or Roll focus areas. Depending on the size and use of the parcel, it is also possible that it achieves goals in other focus areas like Facilities.

4. Parcels that connect existing parks and open spaces
   » These parcels could help achieve goals of the Mountain Parks focus area such as creating a contiguous, connected system. Often times these parcels will have unique resources and topography.

5. A joint purchase or joint use agreement with another community organization
   » Many community organizations own or manage spaces that could help achieve goals in focus areas like Equity or 10-Minute Walk or Roll if jointly operated or used by the Parks and Recreation Department.