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I. Purpose and Authority

a. Purpose

The purpose of the Denver Parks and Recreation (DPR) Design Standards for Open Space in Large Developments, Urban Parks and Natural Open Space is to:

i. Ensure high quality, publicly accessible urban parks and natural open spaces,

ii. Advance goals in alignment with Game Plan for a Healthy City,

iii. Identify the character and type of new urban parks and natural open spaces to be delivered,

iv. Clarify expectations for the variety, amenities, and features of urban parks and natural open spaces needed in Denver,

v. Describe the variety of ways that urban parks and natural open spaces are developed in Denver, and

vi. Describe the variety of ways development comes to DPR for review and how these standards may apply.

The design standards included in this document are meant to be the basis for developing high quality urban parks and natural open spaces to include Open Space in Large Developments (see Denver Zoning Code Section 10.8.1.3). These standards are non-exhaustive and, where indicated, additional standards and specifications may apply. DPR may modify or waive these standards, except as required by law or formal regulation.

b. Authority

The authority for implementation and enforcement of these Design Standards for Open Space in Large Developments: Urban Parks and Natural Open Space comes from the following sources:

i. City Charter Section 2.4.4 grants DPR authority to manage, operate, and control all park facilities.

ii. Chapter 39, Article 1, Section 39-1 of the Denver Revised Municipal Code also states that “the manager of the department of parks and recreation (‘manager’) has the power and authority to adopt rules and regulations for the management, operation and control of parks, parkways, mountain parks and other recreational facilities...”

iii. Article 10.8.1 of the Denver Zoning Code specifies that certain Development must provide open space, and Section 10.8.1.3 parts A and B require that said open space complies with “applicable design standards adopted by the Department of Parks and Recreation.”
c. Extraordinary Situations

DPR recognizes that standards cannot be devised which will apply to all situations. In those few instances where the standards cannot be applied, DPR, at the discretion of the DPR manager, will determine appropriate standards to meet the purpose, intent, and spirit of those outlined here. DPR encourages applicants of Large Developments to reach out to DPR early in their development review process to discuss their project.

II. Definitions and Context

a. Development Context

The Denver parks and recreation system is primarily comprised of urban parks, natural open spaces, recreation centers, trails, and other spaces that are owned by the city for parks and recreational purposes, and designed, constructed, managed, operated, controlled, and maintained by DPR. Additionally, the system is enhanced by other partners such as Denver Public Schools or through donations.

The private development community expands and enhances the system through:

i. Dedication of new city-owned urban park or natural open space land¹,

ii. Development of new Open Space in Large Developments within a private development area² that is held in a public access easement.

Both dedicated urban parks and natural open spaces, owned by the City and County of Denver, and privately-owned urban parks and natural open spaces can be used to satisfy development project open space requirements. As each proposed development is unique, DPR planning staff is available to work with developers to determine the appropriate park type, ownership and management, and ideal locations within the proposed development. When new urban parks or natural open spaces that will be designed and built by a developer and will be dedicated to DPR, DPR will assign a project manager to work with the developer through the design and construction process.

¹ Urban parks and natural open space developed in the Gateway area of Denver are subject to the Gateway Subdivision Rules and Regulations in addition to the design standards in the Denver Zoning Code section 10.8.1.6 and the standards included in this document.

² Development that is greater than 5 acres or 3 blocks ("large development") requires a minimum 10 percent park or open space, which is subject to the design standards in the Denver Zoning Code section 10.8.1.6 as well as these design standards.
b. **Game Plan for a Healthy City Goals**

*Game Plan for a Healthy City*, Denver’s long-term parks and recreation strategic plan, outlines several goals and strategies related to ensuring that Denver residents and visitors are served by a high quality, publicly accessible urban parks and natural open space system. Chief among the goals is ensuring that every neighborhood is within a 10-minute walk or roll to a park.

In addition to ensuring that Denver residents have close proximity to parks, DPR is working to provide enough park space for a growing population. In 2019, Denver estimated that the city would increase by 150,000 new residents in the following 10 years. To maintain existing citywide service levels of 9 acres per 1,000 residents, the city would need 1,350 new acres of park space. Through acquisitions, redevelopment, and new development, DPR plans to continue to provide a high-quality parks and natural open space system.

This document supports several goals and strategies defined in *Game Plan*, including the 10-minute walk or roll standard; increasing the supply of parks, facilities, and resources relative to Denver’s population growth; achieving equitable access to parks and recreation amenities for historically underserved communities; and working with the private sector to provide public amenities within private developments.

c. **Open Space in Large Developments**

Open Space in Large Developments can be privately-owned, publicly-accessible functional open space and are a key means to providing new urban parks and natural open spaces in Denver. These spaces can greatly enhance access to urban parks, natural open spaces, and trails in highly urban, developing, or redeveloping areas of the city that attract large numbers of new residents. Open Space in Large Developments are urban parks, natural open space, and/or trail connections that are located on private land, but are not dedicated to, owned by, or maintained by the city. These spaces, however, are subject to a public access easement with a commitment that they be open to the public in perpetuity. In addition to physically being accessible to the public, these spaces should be designed in such a way that makes clear to residents and visitors that the space is open for public use.

Large Developments may be of such a size that they warrant dedication of Open Space to the City and County of Denver to own and manage. DPR reserves the right to require that new urban parks or natural open spaces be publicly
dedicated as part of Large Development Review Scopes.\(^3\) Developers or partners proposing new urban parks or natural open spaces within the priority areas in DPR’s [Strategic Acquisition Plan](#), particularly ones that close a gap in the 10-minute walk or roll standard (5 minutes for the downtown area), should anticipate likely dedication(s) of these urban parks and natural open spaces.

**d. Urban Parks**

Urban parks are parks that typically come to mind when thinking about a vibrant, active city park. They can be any size, from a small pocket park of one-half (1/2) acre to a large regional park of more than eighty (80) acres. In dense urban areas, well-designed parks smaller than one-half (1/2) acre can provide meaningful spaces for passive and active recreation. While the scale and variety of activities change with the size of an urban park, an urban park is one that is open to the public, can be visited and enjoyed with or without being part of an organized program, and provides multiple park amenities to facilitate park use, such as turf playing fields, gathering areas like plazas and picnic areas, shade, play areas, sport courts, or an off-leash dog area. Urban parks additionally have furnishings, walkways, or other infrastructure components such as lighting or drinking fountains. A balance of hardscapes and softscapes is ideal for urban parks.

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\(^3\) City and County of Denver, Large Development Review and Infrastructure Master Plan Rules and Regulations, Adopted October 1, 2019, Section 1.6.E.3.
Even smaller, Swampoodle Park in Washington, DC, is only 0.2 acre in size but provides an off-leash dog park, play area for children, seating areas, and native landscaping and a rain garden amid the city’s densest neighborhood.

The design of urban parks should be created intentionally with community input to serve the recreation and leisure needs of the neighborhood. In very dense neighborhoods in Denver, urban parks may also have additional demands, such as providing space for social and cultural gatherings, balancing passive and active recreation demands, and providing environmental benefits such as shade and pervious surfaces.

Urban parks take many forms, with some including playgrounds and others creating different types of spaces for their neighborhoods and the city as a whole. Arkins Park was developed through a partnership between Denver Parks and Recreation and the RiNo Art District, who creates a creative hub with community programming and flexible cultural space. The flexibility of Arkins Park serves significant social needs as well as environmental needs.
Rights-of-way, pedestrian infrastructure, vehicular and emergency access, and other required urban design elements are not the same as space that is needed for urban parks. While important and necessary, these areas generally do not meet the intent of providing for high-quality urban parks and natural open spaces in Denver that are intentional and serve a recreational function.

e. Natural Open Space

Natural open space, either publicly or privately owned, is park-like space that is visible and accessible to the public. Natural open space has an emphasis on aesthetic and natural resource value and a focus on providing opportunities for connecting to nature. DPR plays a formal role in reviewing and guiding the design of this type of open space on privately-owned sites, and the design, construction, and management of this type of open space on parcels that will be dedicated to DPR as open space.

The goal of natural open space is to cultivate and maintain an accessible and resilient network of wildlife habitat corridors, waterways, and recreational and protective areas to prepare for a changing climate and expand public stewardship.

This goal is achieved through:

- Providing opportunities for people to experience and connect to nature.
- Protecting acreage containing natural resource values of community-wide significance including wetlands, wildlife habitats, urban forests, and scenic areas.
- Protecting and restoring healthy wildlife habitats and functional ecosystems maximizing their ability to provide ecosystem services to Denver residents.
- Mitigating the effects of climate change on Denver residents.
- Protecting water quality.

Natural open spaces are a DPR park classification of their own, but could also be a major component of a Regional Park, Community Park, Neighborhood Park, or Linear Park, as defined in the DPR Planning, Design, and Construction Manual. Natural open spaces often include regional, local or collector trails.

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4 The term “Open Space” is used by multiple Denver agencies and disciplines, and in inconsistent ways. For purposes of compliance with open space required under the Denver Zoning Code section 10.8.1, dependent on the context, open space provided in association with new development shall be either urban park or natural open space as outlined in this document.
Natural open spaces are typically defined by natural landscape features such as waterways, water bodies, soils, vegetation and/or significant natural landforms. They often connect wildlife habitat corridors or existing native landscape ecosystem patches. Natural open spaces shall be defined as upland systems, riparian systems, or hydrologic systems as defined in the DPR Landscape Typology Manual.

Importantly, natural open spaces are not remnant or leftover spaces, or private detention basins, that simply could not be developed. These spaces have ecological, wildlife corridor, and/or other environmental value and benefits.

f. DPR Approval

For most new urban parks and natural open spaces that come into the overall parks system through the methods described in Section II.a., approval for the suggested urban park and natural open space size, specifications, and design come through various steps in the Large Development Review (LDR) process administered by Community Planning and Development. The general size and character are typically determined as part of an Infrastructure Master Plan or Development Agreement, and technical reviews are provided during the submittal of Site Development Plans.

For new urban park and natural open space considerations outside of the LDR process, such as Open Space in Large Developments that are reviewed as part of a General Development Plan or Site Development Plan, DPR reserves the right to propose an approval process that is mutually agreeable to all parties named in a proposed dedication or donation.

DPR planning staff is available to provide guidance as to the park classification(s) needed based on the development size, development plan, location, natural features, existing amenities, and other factors.

DPR will not approve nor accept, without written consent of the manager of parks and recreation, dedications or donations that are not free of the exclusions listed in Section IV, such as parcels containing utilities, easements, etc. Urban parks or natural open spaces that are anticipated to be publicly dedicated will be carefully reviewed during the design process, culminating with an approval of the 100% construction documents and specifications.
III. Design Standards

DPR has 13 different classifications for park and open space properties. While certain classifications serve very specific and unique functions, such as the Mountain Park Conservation Area or Special Use Park, other classifications share some common characteristics and design standards to ensure they are developed and maintained at a high standard to serve the community for many years to come. More information about each park classification can be found in the DPR Planning, Design, and Construction Manual.

DPR seeks to preserve and advance Denver’s great legacy of parks and parkways. Many neighborhoods in Denver are named after their largest park, and DPR encourages planners and developers to similarly consider urban parks and natural open spaces as organizing principles for new and redeveloping communities throughout Denver. Future residents and users of new or redeveloping areas should be considered when developing a parks and open space plan. For example, multi-family developments should provide for the recreational needs of their residents as well as dogs, who need an appropriate area for relief that needs to be considered in areas outside of the streetscape. Residential areas anticipating families should incorporate tot lots and other family-friendly amenities. Commercial areas should have open space that provides places for breaks for employees, such as movable tables and chairs, benches, and walking paths. Treating new spaces as part of the larger parks and parkways system is also a prudent way to develop urban parks and natural open spaces plans.

As DPR seeks to meet the recreational needs of Denverites, the agency is also focused on climate resiliency, reducing heat island effects, and developing a system of urban parks and natural open space that includes broad ecological benefits. To that end, both urban parks and natural open space should be designed with a balance of hardscape and softscape, that is, a balance of walks, plazas, and other impervious materials with landscaping and plant materials. In general, landscaping and plant materials should be prioritized over impervious materials, and native, low-water plants should be prioritized over non-native plants.

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5 Urban parks and natural open space that are subject to the Denver Zoning Code section 10.8.1 are also subject to the design standards in section 10.8.1.6. From 10.8.1.6, provision 6 should be considered a minimum list of elements that can be included.
This rendering of the design for a portion of Skyline Park in downtown Denver illustrates an ideal balance of active and passive recreation, responding to the needs of downtown workers, residents, and visitors. Linear parks adjacent to high-density development can be designed to activate an area as well as provide green relief.

a. Urban Parks

Urban parks are parks that typically come to mind when thinking about a vibrant, active city park. Among the DPR park classifications, urban parks typically fall into the categories of Community Park, Neighborhood Park, or Pocket Park (see descriptions in the DPR Planning, Design, and Construction Manual). Parks may have connections to trails or be located along a trail or waterway. Trees should be provided in urban parks and along trails, where appropriate, to enhance Denver’s tree canopy.

Guidance on the size, character, and types and number of amenities that DPR seeks for new parks can be found in DPR’s Strategic Acquisition Plan.

Dog areas (e.g., dog runs, off-leash dog parks) should be considered for all new residential development to help protect nearby recreational areas, natural open spaces, and trees.
Dog parks are important for both dogs and their owners, providing places for social gathering for people and appropriate areas for dog relief and play. As areas of Denver continue to experience higher density growth, dog areas are even more important to serve the needs of residents. Off-leash dogs in areas where they should be on-leash can present conflicts among users, and dogs need appropriate places to relieve themselves so that vegetation, including vital street trees, are protected.

Additional standards for urban parks include the following requirements:

1. Urban parks shall be adjacent to and physically open to a public street or public right-of-way for a length of the block that is appropriate to the scale and context of the site. This interface shall also provide for clear visibility and pedestrian access. Please see the Denver Zoning Code Section 10.8.1.6.A for the minimum guidance for locating urban parks adjacent to public streets or rights-of-way.

2. Urban parks that are dedicated to DPR shall be delivered as contiguous space. Privately-owned, publicly-accessible space should also be delivered as contiguous spaces, to the extent possible, to provide optimal park benefits. Multiple, smaller parcels may be approved, particularly if they are well-activated, help close a 10-minute walk or roll gap in the park system, provide connections to other parks, open spaces, and facilities, and/or offer the opportunity to partner with an adjacent
community benefit (e.g., school, library, grocery, recreation center, medical facility, etc.).

3. Urban parks shall demonstrate consistency with *Game Plan*, the City’s comprehensive plan, comprehensive plan supplements such as *Blueprint Denver*, any small area plans relevant to the development area, the DPR *Planning, Design, and Construction Manual*, and established policies, rules, and regulations of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

4. Land intended to be used for urban parks, as defined above in Section II.d., shall be located outside of the 100-year floodplain unless no other feasible location is available. Land proposed for urban parks located within the 100-year floodplain shall be counted at fifty percent (50%).

5. Urban parks shall be free from easements, encroachments, or other restrictions that would impede the development of the site as a park. Examples of easements, encroachments, or other restrictions include but are not limited to the presence of existing or future utilities such as overhead power lines, underground storm or sewer pipes, gas lines, cell towers, emergency vehicle access for private development, steep slopes and other natural constraints, etc. DPR may, at its discretion, consider exceptions depending on context and ownership, and whether the site can be demonstrated to be suitably developed with amenities to support recreation functionality or meet other DPR goals.

6. Some minimal and unintrusive installation of utilities that do not benefit the park may be allowed in an urban park subject to DPR rule, regulation, and policy. Otherwise, utilities that do not exclusively or primarily benefit the park are generally a non-park use and prohibited.

7. Urban parks shall comply with all Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access requirements as well as any applicable building, fire, and life safety code compliance.

8. In addition to ADA requirements, urban parks shall be designed in accordance with the accessibility standards for outdoor recreational facilities contained in *Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards* (ABAAS), Chapter 10.

9. Any urban park that will be dedicated to DPR shall adhere to the Design Standards and Specifications as delineated in the DPR *Planning, Design, and Construction Manual* and in the current DPR *Technical Specifications*. DPR also offers this resource to assist in the design of parks that will be privately-owned but publicly accessible and useable.

10. A parkway setback required by Parkway Rules and Regulations cannot be counted toward required urban parks and natural open space.

11. For development without a required setback adjacent to an urban park, an appropriate buffer such as a sidewalk, trail, or other public right-of-way, shall be included between the building and urban park to ensure
that there is no encroachment on the park during design, construction, and maintenance of the development.

12. Irrigation and a plan for the care and maintenance of landscaping and trees should be included in urban park design and operations planning.

13. Turfgrass shall not be used as the primary landscaping cover in areas identified as providing limited to no functional recreational value.⁶

b. Natural Open Space

Natural open spaces are often characterized by natural features, a lack of active use amenities, passive recreation, limited access, and may include (but shall not be defined by) storm drainage systems, water quality features, and green infrastructure. Sites with storm drainage systems or water quality features may be counted toward required open space at 50% if they meet the design standards below and are approved by DPR. See section III.b.i. below.

Natural open spaces shall be open and accessible to the public; be available to enjoy without an organized program or event; and have passive recreational amenities appropriate for the space (e.g., trails, paths, bridges, boardwalks, overlooks, educational signage and benches). Natural open spaces could have lighting or other site amenities as appropriate. Natural open spaces should be appropriately landscaped, enhancing the ecosystem and with an emphasis on native plants and trees.

Guidance on the size, character, and types of natural open spaces that DPR seeks can be found in DPR’s Strategic Acquisition Plan.

Additional standards for natural open spaces include the following requirements:

1. Shall be less than forty percent (40%) surface water as determined by normal water level.
2. If dedicated to DPR shall be delivered as large contiguous parcels and rated as “good” or “excellent” condition by an ecologist as determined using the Landscape Typology Field Data Sheet (Landscape Typology Manual, Chapter 4).
3. Shall demonstrate consistency with Game Plan, the City’s comprehensive plan, comprehensive plan supplements such as Blueprint Denver, any small area plans relevant to the development area, the DPR Planning, Design, and Construction Manual, and established policies, rules, and regulations of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

⁶ More information can be found in the forthcoming DPR Policy titled “Turfgrass Restrictions in Park Spaces.”
4. May be located within the 100-year floodplain. Land proposed for natural open space located within the 100-year floodplain may be counted at fifty percent (50%), on a case-by-case basis.

5. Shall be free from easements, encroachments, or other restrictions that would impede the development of the site as a park, to include the presence of existing or future utilities such as overhead power lines, underground storm or sewer pipes, gas lines, cell towers, emergency vehicle access for private development, etc. DPR may, at its discretion, consider exceptions depending on context and ownership, and whether the site can be demonstrated to suitably meet DPR goals.

6. Some minimal and unintrusive installation of utilities that do not benefit the park may be allowed in a natural open space subject to DPR rule, regulation and policy. Otherwise, utilities that do not exclusively or primarily benefit the park are generally a non-park use and prohibited.

7. Shall comply with all Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access requirements as well as any applicable fire and life safety code compliance.

8. In addition to ADA requirements, natural open space should be designed in accordance with the accessibility standards for outdoor recreational facilities contained in Architectural Barriers Act Accessibility Standards (ABAAS), Chapter 10.

9. Any natural open space that will be dedicated to DPR shall adhere to the Design Standards and Specifications as delineated in the DPR Planning, Design, and Construction Manual and in the current DPR Technical Specifications. DPR also offers this resource to assist in the design of parks that will be privately-owned but publicly accessible and useable.

10. A parkway setback required by Parkway Rules and Regulations cannot be counted toward required urban parks and natural open space.

11. For development without a required setback adjacent to a natural open space, an appropriate buffer such as a sidewalk, trail, or other public right-of-way, shall be included between the building and natural open space to ensure that there is no encroachment on the open space during design, construction, and maintenance of the development.

12. Turfgrass shall be eliminated or minimized in natural open spaces.

c. Stormwater Detention, Water Quality, and Green Infrastructure Areas

Stormwater Detention, water quality, and green infrastructure should not be the primary use of Open Space in Large Developments. DPR prefers that stormwater

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7 DPR reserves the right to consider land subject to an easement or which includes utilities depending on the type of easement and utility, restrictions thereto, and conservation or resiliency goals.
detention, water quality, and green infrastructure areas are located outside of urban parks and natural open space. Some exceptions may apply, and DPR encourages planners and developers to share their ideas and concepts regarding incorporation of these facilities into natural open space early in the planning and design process.

Design teams are encouraged to consider naturalizing their required stormwater detention, water quality, and green infrastructure areas for expanded habitat and including passive recreational features such as walking paths and benches, where appropriate. These areas should be thoughtfully designed and complement the urban park or natural open space. If approved, these areas may be counted toward the required urban parks and natural open space at fifty percent (50%) of their acreage.

Utah Park in Aurora is an example of an urban park carefully designed for both active recreation amenities, including ballfields and a playground, and regional flood control and detention. For most of the year, when the park is not flooded, it is an active, popular park serving a variety of recreational needs.

d. Trails and Linear Parks

DPR encourages development partners to consider how to make connections to new and planned trails throughout Denver. Approved trails, trail connections, and associated corridors, built as part of urban park and/or natural open space requirements, may be a component of overall acreage requirements, but they should not be the primary feature of the required urban park and natural open space. Generally, the associated corridor for a regional trail should be fifty feet (50’) on either side of the edge of the trail cross section, particularly if the trail is
within a floodplain and/or along a stream or gulch. These corridors are generally comprised of native landscapes and help promote wildlife movement and habitat. DPR planners are available to consult with development partners who have a project in more urban areas and may have constraints that prohibit a fifty-foot (50’) corridor on either side. Should associated corridors be difficult to dedicate, DPR may coordinate with the development partner to create an easement for regional trail maintenance access.

Cycling along Bear Creek is made more comfortable by the associated landscape buffers on either side of the trail. Native landscapes along trails, waterways, and gulches provide comfort for people as well as vital habitat for wildlife.

Trails and trail connections should be designed in accordance with current DPR Trail Standards as delineated in the DPR Planning, Design, and Construction Manual (available upon request).

For trails identified in the Denver Moves – Peds and Trails Plan, DPR will require dedication of the trail and adjacent corridors.

IV. Exclusions

Generally, parks, open spaces, natural open spaces, and trail connections can be developed on a variety of parcels given their varied nature. There are a number of
constraints upon the development of these spaces, however, that exclude them entirely or in portion from being considered for development as an open space. Constraints on both DPR-owned urban parks and natural open spaces as well as those that will remain privately-owned and publicly-accessible include, but are not limited to:

a. Regulatory setbacks such as building setback areas and parkway setbacks, streetscapes, walkways, steep topography areas, areas with environmental constraints, water quality or stormwater detention areas (these may be included within open space as approved by DPR, see Section III.b.i), or lands that preclude park and recreational activities for other reasons, at the discretion of the manager of DPR.

b. Land constrained by an exclusive utility easement, other types of easement, or other property or use restriction, public street right-of-way, pedestrian walkways required under other regulations, or topographical or hazardous obstructions that preclude development of park and recreational activities.

c. Land with other uses that would inhibit public access and intended park use. Examples include, but are not limited to, solar farms, utility uses such as heat recovery systems, farmland, and others, regardless of whether the land has an easement.

Urban parks and natural open spaces that are intended to be dedicated to the City and owned and operated by DPR also have the following constraint:

d. Land constrained for use as a park by bridges, underground parking decks, road lids or caps, or other infrastructure that could preclude the full use of the land for typical park amenities or landscaping.

Privately-owned, publicly-accessible urban parks may be counted toward open space requirements if they have the constraints identified in d. above, but with the caveats that the primary function of the space must be a park function and that the site is thoughtfully designed and fully accessible to the public.

Additionally, amenities with limited functionality as green space, open play, or urban park facilities (e.g. a courtyard, public ROW, pedestrian transit connection, or areas with private access only) may not be used to satisfy the entirety of any open space requirements. Amenities suggested for required open space must demonstrate quality and functionality for people in an urban park or natural open space context.

All park dedications must adhere to the City and County of Denver’s land acceptance standards.