



## **New Hanover County Parks and Gardens 10-Year Master Plan**

### **Executive Summary**

#### Introduction

New Hanover County recognizes the key role its system of parks, recreation amenities, and open spaces serves in providing a high quality of life for residents. The Parks and Gardens Master Plan serves as a guiding document for the provision of public parks and recreation services to residents of the County. This Plan builds off previous efforts and provides updated information about the County's population, current trends in recreation, and a detailed evaluation of the existing system of the County parks and recreation amenities. This information, along with significant feedback from stakeholders, public input, local and national trends, and a level of service and inventory analysis served as the basis for the development of goals and recommendations for guiding investment in parks facilities and recreational services into the future.

#### New Hanover County Overview

New Hanover County covers approximately 192 square miles or 122,880 acres. The development in New Hanover County reflects a hub and spur pattern with residential development increasing around Wilmington, the central municipality in the area. The residential growth is predominately concentrated in the northern part of the County due to the availability of land both in area and in cost. The southern portions of New Hanover County are growing at a comparatively slower rate. As this growth continues, the demand for recreational resources in the northern part of the County will increase. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the distribution of the parks within the geographic limits of the County and provide an evaluation on the equality of these facilities in terms of access by the populations they aim to serve.

#### Community Survey and Feedback

During the planning process, significant feedback from stakeholders and the public were solicited. In addition, several community survey methods were conducted to include a statistically valid survey in conjunction with the City of Wilmington and an open-link online survey for anyone not in the random mailing. A total of 3,500 surveys were randomly

distributed to residents with 511 respondents for a 14% return rate. A total of 1,703 residents completed the open-link on line survey. The following are top priorities from the focus groups and stakeholders:

- Maintain existing facilities to include increasing facilities
- Trail connectivity between neighborhoods and businesses
- Increase awareness and outreach
- Solicit sponsorships
- Additional rectangular fields with lights, trails, parks, lighting on existing fields
- Major sports complex for hosting tournaments
- Wi-Fi access in the parks

### Inventory Assessment Summary

In general, the overall impression of New Hanover County Parks is as follows:

- County has (15) Parks and Garden sites; (4) large, well-used regional parks
- Smaller parks are lost in the neighborhoods
- Athletic facilities are aging and showing signs of over usage
- Basic park maintenance is performed at a high level
- Connectivity from parks to residential areas is primarily by vehicle; pedestrian access is limited based on locations and existing infrastructure
- Playground equipment and distribution is clustered

### Key Issues Identified and Recurring Themes

- Maintain and improve existing facilities
- Increase public access to waterfronts
- Focus on trails and connectivity
- Address deferred maintenance and level of service gaps
- Balance between active and passive recreation
- Solicit sponsorships and funding sources

### Recommendations and Next Steps

After analyzing the findings from the planning process the following key elements are the consultants recommended goals and objectives. These recommendations will provide guidance and consideration of how to improve park facilities, parks programs and services while enhancing the level of service and quality of life in New Hanover County.

1. Continue to Improve Organizational Efficiencies
  - Establish and maintain a level of service quality to citizens
  - Develop a marketing plan and review annually
  - Enhance internal and external communication regarding dept. services

- Increase partnerships within the community
  - Staff appropriately to meet current demands and maintain quality of service
2. Increase Financial Opportunities
    - Explore additional funding opportunities to include sponsorships, grants, and philanthropic opportunities
    - Explore a Best Practice Pricing Philosophy
  3. Program and Service Delivery
    - Explore opportunities to increase recreational opportunities and community events based on demand and trends
    - Work with other service providers to develop programs and services to meet demand and trends
  4. Facilities and Amenities
    - Continue to maintain and improve existing facilities
    - Expand greenways, bike paths and trails connectivity
    - Develop additional recreational facilities and amenities
    - Develop individual Park Master Plans
    - Create a plan that addresses development, acquisition and use of vacant land