

SECTION 1 COMMUNITY INPUT AND VALUES STATEMENT

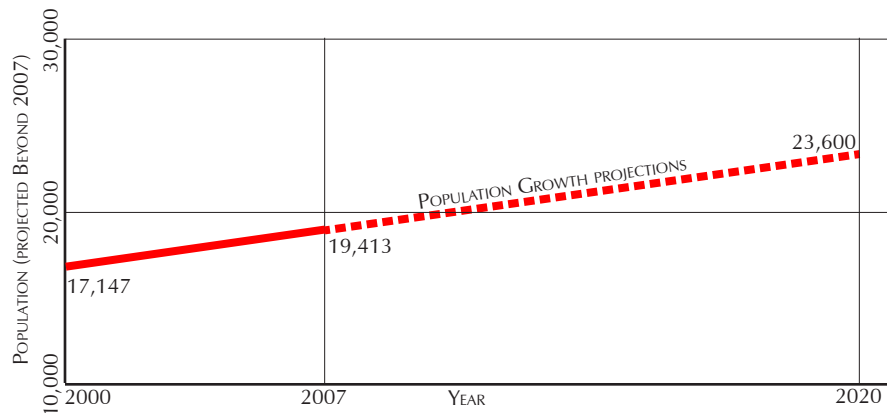
OVERVIEW

GROWTH OF THE COMMUNITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

Understanding the needs and desires of the community was one of the first steps in preparing the system plan. Through the public process, citizens and their local representatives on the Park & Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB) and City Council had a variety of opportunities to provide input and perspectives on planning issues. These findings provided the foundation for developing the parks, open space, and trail system plan. Through these interactions, a strong and consistent public statement has been made: *Preserve the sense of place and livability of the community while accommodating growth and evolving recreational and social trends.* These values have been extensively reflected in the system plan.

In 2000, the total population of Northfield was 17,147. Since then, the overall population has grown to over 19,413. By 2020, the population is projected to grow to 23,600. Figure 1.1 illustrates the projected population growth rate in Northfield.

FIGURE 1.1 – PROJECTED POPULATION AND HOUSEHOLD GROWTH RATES THROUGH 2020



To accommodate this projected growth, privately-held land in Northfield will continue to be subdivided for residential housing, commercial, and industrial uses – including spreading out into the surrounding township on a managed basis. Inherently, this growth will impact the demand for parks, open spaces, and trails.

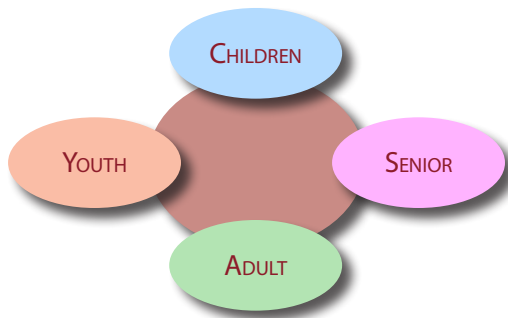
The system plan as presented here is planned to accommodate this level of growth. However, should growth rates and overall population significantly exceed these projections, reevaluation of the system plan is recommended.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES

As a modestly growing community, many of the new households that have come to the community since 2000 are families with school age children, a trend that will likely continue. As a college town, 28% of the local population comes from St. Olaf and Carleton Colleges, which effectively lowers the median age in Northfield. Excluding this population, Northfield looks much like other communities.

Complementary Study: “Chapter Two, Demographic Composition, Northfield Comprehensive Plan” provides a more comprehensive overview of the demographic trends that influenced the development of the park, open space, and trail system plan.

FIGURE 1.2 – KEY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS WITH EVOLVING RECREATIONAL NEEDS



A well-balanced and flexible system that can respond to evolving, broad-based community needs of different demographic groups will be required to be successful.

PUBLIC PROCESS FINDINGS

At the same time, with the general aging of the population, there will also be a higher propensity of “empty nesters” or households without school age children. The senior population will also likely continue to grow, albeit at a slower pace than more gentrified communities.

Recreational trends – which are greatly influenced by demographics and other societal factors – will continue to evolve. For example, today’s younger age groups have much more diverse interests than in past generations, at times making it more difficult to engage them in “traditional” recreational activities. There is also a marked shift in adult recreation trends away from organized sports (i.e., softball) to passive/informal activities (i.e., hiking in natural areas, biking a paved trail) as the overall population ages.

The changing demographic character of the city coupled with the changing recreational trends underscore the need for a well-balanced and flexible system that can respond to evolving, broad-based community needs. The system plan places considerable emphasis on addressing this issue by ensuring that the active and passive recreational interests of residents are reasonably accommodated.

Public input into the planning process occurred at several levels. Interviews with stakeholder groups, public open houses, and work sessions with the PRAB were used to gain extensive public input and receive direction on key planning issues. Formal presentations to the City Council were undertaken to ensure consistency with overall community goals and priorities. All meetings throughout the process were open to the public.

Appendix B – Summary of Findings from the Public Process summarizes the input gained from the PRAB and local stakeholders and should be referred to for specific perspectives on needs and demands. These findings were instrumental in shaping planning decisions related to parks, open spaces, and trails throughout the city.

Some of the overarching themes gleaned from the public process include:

- The relationship between the City and School District has generally worked out well in meeting local needs for recreational programming and facilities; continued reliance on this partnership will be important to effectively and efficiently meet local needs
- In the shorter-term (1-5 years), supply of athletic facilities should be adequate to reasonably keep pace with demand, especially if the proposed improvements as defined in Section 3 are phased in; in the longer-term, additional athletic facilities will be needed to balance supply and demand and meet other objectives of the system plan
- Overall, the park system functions well in servicing community needs; however, a disciplined approach to future park enhancements is necessary to maintaining a well-balanced system that meets the needs of an evolving demographic over time
- The greenway corridor is one of the most important aspects of the system plan; maximizing the value of, and access to, natural and scenic areas along the Cannon River corridor and other natural greenway corridors defined by the system plan is especially important
- Greater focus on developing a comprehensive trail system is needed, especially the greenway-based trails as defined in Section 4; the trail system should focus on high value interlinked trails that entice high levels of use for recreation, fitness/health, and alternative transportation
- Maintaining a sound working relationship with St. Olaf and Carleton Colleges will continue to be important, especially as it relates to implementing the greenway and trail system plans

TRENDS INFLUENCING PLANNING OUTCOMES

In addition to findings from the local public process, a variety of state and regional trends affecting parks, open space, and trail system planning influenced planning outcomes, as the following considers.

PARK USE TRENDS

Recent findings by the Metropolitan Council, MN DNR, and other agencies suggests that future growth in participation in many areas of outdoor recreation is not as assured as was the case a decade or two ago. In numerous activities, research indicates that participation rates are expected to actually decline as Minnesotans shift their activity patterns based on evolving interests, age, and access to newer forms of recreation. Other key findings include:

- Decreasing participation in nature-based activities: fishing, hunting, wildlife-watching, state park attendance, etc.
- Growing disconnection with nature, which impacts personal development, societal well-being, stewardship of natural areas; also contributes to nature-deficit disorder in youth
- Barriers to getting outdoors include time, family obligations, work responsibilities, lack of money, weather, bugs (uncontrollable environment), lack of outdoor skills and equipment, lack of information and knowledge, and concerns about personal safety
- Aging population is affecting recreational trends
- More ethnically diverse population with widely varying expectations
- Obesity/health issues on the rise, with lifestyle choices being a key factor
- Greater diversity in recreation opportunities available to all age groups
- Funding issues – less local government aid (LGA), dollars for acquisition and capital improvements; suggests greater need for non-traditional approaches
- Increasing urbanization – urban sprawl is eating away at the rural environment with often limited regard for natural open space
- Technology is competing for people’s discretionary time and creating more sedentary time
- Energy costs are rising and limiting people’s willingness to travel very far for recreation
- Climate change is impacting our natural resources and weather

The shift away from active/organized to more passive/informal uses is especially noticeable, particularly with older age groups. At the adult level, this can be attributed to an aging population in combination with changing personal interests. For example, activities such as adult softball have given way to walking and nature viewing.

Within the younger age groups, the electronic era is absorbing an increasing percentage of the free time of youth and young adults, often taking away from their participation in programmed recreational activities and time spent freely in a park setting. Although many Northfield athletic associations anticipate stable or modest growth in their programs, changing trends underscore the importance of closely tracking participation rates and adjusting priorities based on documented demands.

Demographic shifts toward an older population and a general broadening of recreation interests for youth and adults have changed the public park system planning paradigm of the past. Although traditional park and recreation opportunities remain very important as quality of life indicators, emerging trends must also be accommodated for the parks, trails, and recreational facilities to be successful. With increasingly limited public funding available, using resources where they are most valued by the community and leveraging economic opportunities with private development to maximize public values is extremely important.

ECONOMIC VALUE OF OPEN SPACE

The quality of life value residents place on preserving open space has important economic value as well, as reflected in a 2005 public opinion survey summarized in Figure 1.3.

FIGURE 1.3 – ECONOMIC VALUE OF OPEN SPACE

2005 Twin Cities Metro Area Public Opinion Survey

The public opinion survey is part of a comprehensive evaluation of the economic value of open space from the public education campaign, Embrace Open Space. It provides insight into how much Twin Citians value open space.

Key Survey Findings:

- Nearly two-thirds of Twin Cities residents would pay between 10 percent and 25 percent more for a home that was within walking distance to an open space.
- Among all metro residents, 71 percent said they would pay at least 10 percent more for a home within walking distance of an open space. Among residents who have recently moved, 70 percent said they would pay at least 10 percent more; among those who intend to move soon, 69 percent said they would pay at least 10 percent more.
- By a 70 percent – 24 percent margin, residents would support a \$30 per year property tax increase to raise funds for purchasing, restoring, and maintaining natural areas in their county.
- Residents reporting they are “very satisfied” with nearby open space are more active in their communities. Residents who are “very satisfied” with the amount of nearby amount space also are more likely to have stronger ties to their entire community than others; 50 percent of those very satisfied with the nearby open space say they feel a real tie to their city or township compared to 40 percent of all respondents who felt close ties.
- There is a similarity in the data between older, more affluent residents and younger, middle-income Twin Citians. Fifty-eight percent of residents between 35 and 54 were willing to pay between 10 percent and 25 percent more for a home within walking distance of open space, compared to 53 percent of those 55 and older.
- In 2002, Dakota County passed a referendum to raise property taxes for open space acquisition and preservation. Most Dakota County residents still see great value in preserving open space; for example, 73 percent agree with the statement, “even if the land acquired for preservation is not in my immediate area, Dakota County should preserve open space as a legacy for the future.”
- Most Dakota County residents think the referendum funds allowed preservation to occur in key parts of Dakota County. By a 47 percent-7 percent margin, residents agree that the referendum allowed Dakota County to acquire and preserve open spaces in spite of significant development throughout the county.

Methodology:

This study was conducted by Decision Resources Ltd., a Minneapolis research firm. It contains the results of a telephone survey of 500 randomly selected residents of the eleven-county Metropolitan Area. In addition, a “balloon” sample of Dakota County residents was undertaken to bring their number to 400 respondents. Survey responses were gathered between August 15th and September 6th, 2005. In general, random samples such as this yield results projectable to the entire universe of adult Greater Metropolitan Area residents within ±4.5 % in 95 out of 100 cases; in the case of Dakota County residents, the results are projectable within ± 5.0 % in 95 out of 100 cases.

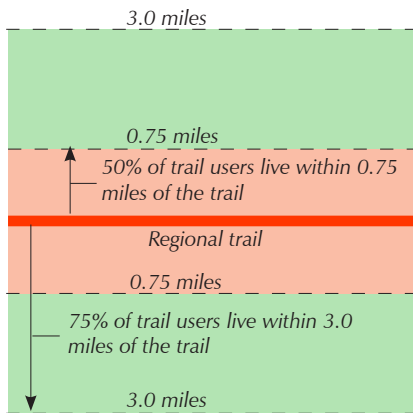
This citizen attitude is further reflected in a 2005 *Metro Residents Survey* funded by the Metropolitan Council, in which 79% of those surveyed felt it was moderately (26%) to very (53%) important to continue purchasing land for new parks and parks and open space expansion. This perspective is an important consideration as the city grows outward where the opportunities to integrate highly valued open space with development still remains.

COMPLEMENTARY REGIONAL STUDIES

Over the past decade a number of regional studies have been conducted to determine recreational trends associated with the regional park system. These studies looked at residents' desires for a variety of recreational opportunities and their perspectives on current facilities and future needs. The main generalizations from these studies that have application to Northfield include:

- Walking around the neighborhood or in large natural parks remains the top activity, with over 85% of respondents being interested in this activity
- Individual sports are becoming more and more preferred over organized ones, at least at the adult level
- People value parks even if they do not regularly use them
- There is an especially strong desire to set aside land for nature areas/open space, bike paths, and general use trails

FIGURE 1.4 – TRAVEL DISTANCES FOR TRAILS



In terms of actual users of trails, recent research by the Metropolitan Council suggests that the majority of trail users live within three miles of the trail they are using, as figure 1.4 illustrates. This suggests that the majority of trail use within the city will be from residents, not people driving to the area from outside the region.

The regional studies are consistent with some of the perspectives from Northfield residents, suggesting that there is a very strong link between local interests and those typically ascribed to the regional population. This reinforces the vision and basic precepts of the system plan as described in *Section 2 – Vision Statement and Policy Plan*. It also provides an additional rationale for developing a balanced system that offers recreational opportunities and values to the widest audience.

ACTIVE LIVING/DESIGN FOR HEALTH MOVEMENT

Increasingly, public health officials (public and private health care industry) across the country are stressing the importance of planning and designing communities that foster active living and healthy environments for individuals, families, and broader community. With obesity rates and other health risks associated with inactive lifestyles on the rise, well-designed and located parks, open spaces, and trails are proving increasingly important and beneficial to society in terms of promoting physical health and economic prosperity (i.e., healthy individuals are more productive and health care costs are reduced, both of which add to the economic bottom line).

Further, well-planned and designed parks, open spaces, and trails enhance perceptions of quality of life in a community, social well-being, and general mental health. Well-designed trail systems also promote alternative forms of transportation that provide personal health benefits along with reducing congestion on local roads and improving air quality.

The input received from residents during the public process, along with noted trend information, greatly influencing planning outcomes and points of emphasis in the system plan. In spite of varying opinions on needs and uncertainties about trends, it is important to underscore that all residents that participated in the planning process consider parks, natural open spaces, trails, and recreational facilities very important quality of life indicators.

INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC INPUT AND TRENDS ON PLANNING OUTCOMES IN NORTHFIELD

To remain relevant to the community, the system plan has particularly emphasized the following key points:

- The system must be balanced, diverse, and flexible enough to adjust to ever-changing needs of the community
- Providing *quality* parks, open spaces, and trails is very important to encouraging higher levels of use; conversely, spreading investments too thinly across the community is discouraged since doing so often leaves unmet expectations – resulting in lower overall use levels
- Providing trails and natural open spaces are at least or more important than traditional parks, such as a neighborhood park or athletic facility
- Other values of parks, open spaces, and trails also need to be maximized, ranging from increasing the economic value of properties adjacent to or near parks and open spaces to improving the overall aesthetic of the community through park beautification efforts