

*City of Mendota Heights*

Parks & Recreation

**STRATEGIC PLAN**

---

## INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT

---

The City of Mendota Heights offers a robust system of recreational and open space options, which includes regional trails, lakeside parks, scenic bluffs, and nature preserves. The City's facilities provide unique features that shape the character of Mendota Heights beyond the ordinary. The City's parks provide a visual identity to the City, in addition to contributing to the quality of life for those who recreate in the community.

Mendota Heights provides both active and passive recreation areas, along with other state and private parks. The City's 33 miles of trails offer an excellent opportunity for exercise and relaxation. Opportunities for walking, bicycling, bird watching, cross country skiing, golfing and nature hiking are sprinkled throughout Mendota Heights. The City has 17 public parks throughout the community, including Oȟéyawahe/Pilot Knob Preservation Site. These parks contain over 295 acres of land area.

The City's parks are supplemented by three golf courses: Mendakota Country Club, Somerset Country Club, and the Mendota Heights Par 3 Community Golf Course. These contribute to open space views and recreational opportunities for residents.

Throughout the last fifteen years the city has made improvements and developed new parks. It has also made efforts to maintain existing open space such as purchasing the 17-acre Mendota Heights Par 3 Golf Course. The City recently joined in partnership with other public entities and purchased the 25.5-acre Oȟéyawahe/Pilot Knob Preservation Site, which will be retained as open space. Protection of the Pilot Knob area as an important Dakota site has been identified as a critical issue for many residents within the City. Oȟéyawahe/Pilot Knob Preservation Site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. A task force has been formed to pursue short and long-term goals for the preservation of and improvements to Historic Pilot Knob.

In the 1990's, the majority of park upgrades were made due to a voter approved parks focused referendum. While the need and interest for recreational opportunities has increased over the years, the improvement of park equipment and infrastructure has not occurred due to inconsistent funding and a lack of proactive planning.

Over the last thirty years the way residents recreate has also changed. Recreational interests have evolved to include new opportunities such as skateboarding, pickleball and cricket. The City Council, Parks and Recreation Commission, and staff must evaluate the current parks infrastructure and recreation programming along with the proposed recreational and park improvements from a 21<sup>st</sup> century lens.

---

## GOVERNANCE

---

The Parks and Recreation Commission is appointed by the Mayor with the consent of the majority of the members of the City Council and has the following responsibilities:

- Advise the City Council on matters pertaining to parks and recreational development programs and shall cooperate with city personnel in implementing the parks and recreation programs
- Advise the City Council on the establishment of written rules and regulations for the use, management, and operation of public parks and recreation facilities, the same to be approved by the action of the City Council before being put into effect
- If requested by the City Council, prepare plans for the acquisition, development and improvement of the City public parks and recreational facilities and shall, if requested by the City Council, develop a comprehensive plan for future park development and open space
- If requested by the City Council, prepare a capital improvements program for the purpose of determining priorities and apportioning costs of scheduled improvements
- In performing the aforementioned duties and responsibilities, exhibit the initiative in formulating policies which will be responsive to the anticipated needs and objectives of the community.

The City Council reviews the recommendations from the Parks and Recreation Commission to approve the annual budget, finalize the scope of park improvement projects, institute policies, establish fees, and address long-term planning in regards to prioritizing initiatives.

## STRATEGIC PLAN PURPOSE/PROCESS

To start the discussion regarding the future of Mendota Heights Parks and Recreation, Parks and Recreation Commissioners and City Councilmembers along with key staff underwent strategic planning sessions to discuss the current conditions and desired future of the park system and programming. This process articulated the needs and wants of residents and how that is different from the facilities and programs that are currently offered within the City. The resulting strategic plan includes information and data from following areas:

- Inventory of Existing Park Amenities
- National Metric Comparison Research to Current Facilities (in progress)
- Community Engagement Results to Determine Needs
- Discussions Surrounding Future Goals of Mendota Heights Parks and Recreation
- Policy Direction and Implementation Planning

The plan serves as a road map to how and where park and recreational improvements should be developed in both the immediate future and in the long-term.

### **Mendota Heights Vision Statement:**

Mendota Heights will be recognized as a high quality, family-oriented residential community, with a spacious natural feel and the amenities of a city.

### **Mendota Height Mission Statement:**

Our mission is to preserve and enhance the quality of life in Mendota Heights by providing quality public safety, infrastructure, and planning for orderly and sustainable growth.

---

# CURRENT STATE OF MENDOTA HEIGHTS PARKS AND RECREATION

---

## STRENGTHS

### 1. Stable Tax Base

The City of Mendota Heights is comprised of a strong tax base consisting of formidable income and economic activity within the City. Mendota Heights features high median property values and incomes, which provide strong financial support for City goals, initiatives and projects. The City also boasts a AAA bond rating, which reflects the City's financial strength and stability.

### 2. City Good Will

The City has established strong relationships with residents which has resulted in trust and respect between elected and appointed officials, staff, and the community. By properly engaging stakeholders, the City has established connections to discuss wants/needs and next steps moving forward. Relationships with residents are imperative to ensure a successful Park and Recreation operation into the future.

### 3. Sustained Commitment to Excellence of Services

The City Council and Parks and Recreation Commission holds staff to a high standard in regards to programming, park planning, community building and engagement. Staff works to implement best practices in their work and deliver process improvement and policy changes to best serve the residents of Mendota Heights.

### 4. Existing Partnerships

The City of Mendota Heights values its positive working relationships with the Cities of West Saint Paul, South Saint Paul, Inver Grove Heights, and ISD 197. These existing partnerships enable large scale programs and events that would be difficult to host singularly. By working together each city's budget is stretched further and human capital is shared. Discussions regarding current and future partnership opportunities are ongoing and staff is working to form partnerships with other local organizations for optimized opportunities for our residents.

### 5. Educated and Motivated Citizens

The residents of Mendota Heights care about their community and are passionate about their park system. Garnering community engagement is important as residents and stakeholders ask educated and intellectual questions surrounding programming and park planning. The Mendota Heights community wants to be involved in providing high quality programming and facilities within the City.

## WEAKNESSES

### 1. Lack of Planning Around Funding

Many of the City's amenities and facilities within the Park System have not been replaced or updated since a Park referendum in the late 1980's. Adequate funding for the upkeep and maintenance of exiting infrastructure has not been budgeted for or properly planned. The Special Parks Fund has restrictions for use and with a lack of land for development, future funding from this revenue source will not be reliable.

### 2. Insufficient Planning

Proactive park improvement project planning has not been a priority. A rolling Capital Improvement Plan has not been regularly reviewed in order to properly schedule projects and ensure funding is available. Moving forward, dedicated staff to supervise this process as well as regular review of the process/strategic plan is necessary to ensure proactive forethought is developed.

### 3. Competing Interests

The Mendota Heights community consists of passionate individuals surrounding recreational opportunities. This results in differing priorities for park improvement projects and programming. Prioritizing park project requests, field and facility usage, and the utilization of funding available has been challenging.

### 4. Lack of Indoor Programming Space

The City lacks indoor gathering space to hold differing and unique programming opportunities. Currently, all indoor programs are conducted in partnership with the City of West Saint Paul. In the future, West Saint Paul's programming may increase and there may not be an opportunity for partnership. This could restrict the type and number of programming Mendota Heights can offer in the future unless ample indoor space is added in the City for programming.

### 5. Lack of Future Park Land

The City of Mendota Heights is 95% built out, resulting in a lack of new recreational park land for development. The redesigning of existing park spaces will be crucial in providing modern and contemporary park amenities. With a lack of land, properly prioritizing projects will be imperative to providing an equitable park system.

### 6. Lack of Staff Resources

The current Mendota Heights organizational structure provides one dedicated administrative employee working on parks planning and recreational program organization. With the current staffing model, being proactive on park projects and increasing recreational offerings is difficult to achieve.

# OPPORTUNITIES

## 1. Generational Turnover

The demographics of Mendota Heights have changed since the 1989 parks referendum. The median age of Mendota Heights residents is 51.2 years, which is considerably higher than surrounding cities.

### Median Age of Surrounding Cities:

- Eagan: 38.2 years
- West Saint Paul: 37.3 years
- South Saint Paul: 35.1 years
- Inver Grove Heights: 39.7 years
- Apple Valley: 38.2 years
- Saint Paul: 33 years
- Lakeville: 36.6 years
- Farmington: 33.7 years
- Burnsville: 36.8 years

### Mendota Heights' 2020 population by age category are as follows:

- Age 0-5 Years: 4.47%
- Age 6-12 Years: 7.44%
- Age 13-15 Years: 3.24%
- Age 16-17 Years: 2.74%
- Age 18-24 Years: 6.78%
- Age 25-34 Years: 8.33%
- Age 35-44 Years: 10.84%
- Age 45-54 Years: 14.42%
- Age 55-64 Years: 18.09%
- Age 65 Years and Up: 23.65%

### Mendota Heights' 2030 population projections by age category are as follows:

- Age 0-5 Years: 4.43% (.04% decrease from 2020)
- Age 6-12 Years: 6.97% (.47% decrease from 2020)
- Age 13-15 Years: 2.84% (.4% decrease from 2020)
- Age 16-17 Years: 2.51% (.23% decrease from 2020)
- Age 18-24 Years: 6.58% (.2% decrease from 2020)
- Age 25-34 Years: 7.78% (.55% decrease from 2020)
- Age 35-44 Years: 11% (.16% increase from 2020)
- Age 45-54 Years: 14.43% (.01% increase from 2020)
- Age 55-64 Years: 14.61% (3.48% decrease from 2020)
- Age 65 Years and Up: 28.84% (5.19% increase from 2020)

### Mendota Heights' 2040 population projections by age category are as follows:

- Age 0-5 Years: 4.44% (.03% decrease from 2020)
- Age 6-12 Years: 6.87% (.57% decrease from 2020)
- Age 13-15 Years: 2.72% (.52% decrease from 2020)

- Age 16-17 Years: 2.33% (.41% decrease from 2020)
- Age 18-24 Years: 6.23% (.55% decrease from 2020)
- Age 25-34 Years: 7.97% (.54% decrease from 2020)
- Age 35-44 Years: 10.31% (.53% increase from 2020)
- Age 45-54 Years: 14.62% (.02% increase from 2020)
- Age 55-64 Years: 15.49% (2.6% decrease from 2020)
- Age 65 Years and Up: 29.01% (5.36% increase from 2020)

Source-Metropolitan Council: <https://gisdata.mn.gov/dataset/us-mn-state-metc-trans-anlys-zones-offical-curent>

With these changing demographics the City must offer programs and provide facilities that enable adults and senior citizens to be active. Equity within a park system is imperative to ensure all residents have equal opportunities to recreate near their home. Engaging the senior population will be important in order to better understand our community's wants and needs.

## 2. Public Interest in Parks

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mendota Heights park system saw record setting usage. Parks became one of the only places people could visit when restaurants, stores, and entertainment venues were forced to close. Our park system was recognized as an essential resource for the physical and mental health of residents. This realization sparked an interest from residents to determine how parks could be improved and better utilized moving forward.

## 3. Potential Funding Sources

The City of Mendota Heights has been approached by residents and groups wanting to financially provide support for ongoing improvements in the parks. Finding proper channels and processes to receive these donations will be important to successfully upgrading the park system. Opportunities regarding grants are also available. Staff time needs to be allocated to this function.

## 4. Underutilized Volunteers

The City has many talented and passionate residents who want to give back to their community. Currently, the City of Mendota Heights lacks a formalized volunteer program. The need for a formal volunteer program to solicit volunteers, ensure proper backgrounding, provide work direction, and track hours in order to provide recognition is necessary.

## 5. Bourn Lane Site

The City has one remaining parcel of land in the Southwest portion of the City that the City Council will need to advise staff in the future of how they want that land utilized. This 14.75 acre parcel is being considered for park usage, in addition to being considered for other uses within the City.

## 6. Additional Resources and Options

With an additional Parks and Recreation staff planned in FY2022, Mendota Heights can expand opportunities in regards to programming and infrastructure improvements. Discussion and decisions regarding funding allocation in future years will also be important to determine the need for better communication, extensive maintenance, and other public services to the community.

## 7. Regional Partnerships

Mendota Heights has many local businesses, non-profits, and neighboring governmental organizations that provide opportunities for joint programming and partnership on facilities. Each neighboring jurisdiction providing unique amenities enable the community many recreational options in close proximity. Duplication of unique amenities is not necessary, if proper planning is developed.

# THREATS

## 1. Neighboring Cities

Neighboring cities to Mendota Heights currently have more facilities and better indoor space for programming and rentals. The reality is larger cities typically have larger budgets, which results in larger and more diverse facilities. As a smaller City this is something that will need to be understood and accepted by the community.

## 2. Increasing Costs

With the reality of the economy, the cost of services, goods, and equipment is going to continue to rise. This is something that will need to be considered when discussing new capital projects, as well as budgeting the cost to maintain existing infrastructure.

---

# FUTURE OF MENDOTA HEIGHTS PARKS AND RECREATION

---

In the next five years the following will be accomplished based on the desires of the City Council, Parks and Recreation Commission, and staff.

**Guiding Principles** explain the vision of the Mendota Heights Parks and Recreation and provide the basis for goals, actions, and outcomes.

**Goals** provide desired results that are planned and committed to.

**Action Items** provide the steps necessary for staff, commissioners, and councilmembers to complete in order to achieve the stated goals and guiding principles.

**Outcomes** state the end result of completing the action items.

## *Guiding Principle:*

### **Sustained Funding for Parks and Recreation**

#### **Goal: Secure Sustainable Funding for Projects**

##### **Action Items:**

- ✓ Staff will provide the City Council with funding options to ensure there is financing for future park improvements and recreational programming for future generations.
- ✓ Policy recommendations regarding field and facility naming rights for donations as well as identifying corporate partners will be provided to the City Council.
- ✓ A relationship with the Mendota Heights Community Foundation will be formed to enable private donation opportunities for residents who want to financially support park and recreation opportunities.
- ✓ Staff will research grant opportunities available for projects included in the City's Capital Improvement Plan and will work with the City Council to submit applications.
- ✓ The City Council will discuss the conversion of the Par 3 bond payments into a park improvement levy starting in 2023.
- ✓ A referendum will be researched and information provided to the City Council in order for an educated decision to be made on next steps moving forward.

##### **Outcome:**

Long term Parks and Recreation dedicated finances will be identified and will be utilized to fund projects under the parks Capital Improvement Plan. The Capital Improvement Plan will be well developed to ensure projects are following the recommended useful life timeframe

outlined in the Asset Management Plan, while ensuring all parks have adequate funding to ensure equity within the City. The City will have developed and maintained strong public/private partnerships within the Community to provide optimal recreational opportunities to our residents at a reasonable taxing rate.

### *Guiding Principle:*

## **A Leading Community Agency**

### **Goal: Mendota Heights is a Model Organization**

#### **Action Items:**

- ✓ Staff will provide the City Council with recommended policy changes in regards to the allocation of fields and facilities reservations, special events, donations, etc.
- ✓ Staff will form a successful volunteer program that helps to provide more human capital within community initiatives.
- ✓ Staff will work with the City Council to follow the organizational recommendations and standards of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Commission of Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) program in order to provide continued high-level services to the residents of Mendota Heights
- ✓ Mendota Heights staff will chair a group consisting of neighboring cities to discuss projects to ensure duplication does not occur, opportunities for partnerships on programming and facilities, and to provide a basis for policy recommendations.
- ✓ City staff will submit initiatives to be considered for the Minnesota Recreation Park Association (MRPA) awards of excellence, which are awarded to Cities that have outstanding achievements in the following categories: administrative or management strategies, marketing and communications, park and facility projects, programming and events, sponsorships and partnerships, and volunteer initiatives.

#### **Outcome:**

City Staff will work closely with the City Council to make strategic decisions that ensure the City is a recognized leader throughout the industry on best practices. This will include being innovative and creative in regards to constructing new amenities, implementing new and emerging trends nationwide, and developing policies to ensure equitable practices.

Mendota Heights will be a recognized leader in the Park and Recreation field in Minnesota

*Guiding Principle:*

## Greater Connection to the Natural Environment

### Goal: Manage Park Natural Resources

**Action Items:**

- ✓ A Natural Resource Commission will be established to provide the City Council with recommendations on sustainability, environmental stewardship, and preserving natural habitats. Recommendations will be made on policies and initiatives that enhance and preserve the environment and natural resources within the community.
- ✓ Staff will determine locations that grass areas can be converted to no-mow areas to provide more native spaces within the park system and community as a whole.
- ✓ Joint meetings between the Parks and Recreation Commission and Natural Resource Commission will provide opportunities for the two advisory commissions to ensure they are working together for the betterment of Mendota Heights parks.
- ✓ Opportunities for nature-based recreation and nature play areas will be researched.

**Outcome:**

Through partnership with the Natural Resource Commission and Natural Resource staff our parks will provide a clean and safe space with natural areas. Passive recreation areas will be reviewed and prioritized for refurbishment to ensure residents have easy access to nature play locations and programming.

*\*A Natural Resource Management plan is being written. Many natural resource initiatives within parks will be included in the Natural Resource Management Plan. Those policies and practices were not included in this plan to reduce duplication and to hone in on priorities. \**

*\* The City Council will continue to work with the O'heyawahe/Historic Pilot Knob Task Force to protect and preserve the natural space and sacred history the space provides.*

*O'heyawahe/Historic Pilot Knob Task Force initiatives were not included in this plan, as their own future planning is developed in a separate document. \**

## *Guiding Principle:*

# **A Safe, Connected, Walkable and Bikeable Community**

## **Goal: Improve Trail Connectivity**

### **Action Items:**

- ✓ A bike and pedestrian plan will be completed to determine gaps within our trail system. Staff will work with the City Council to address these gap locations and provide plans for improvement.
- ✓ Staff will work with the City Council to rehabilitate existing low-quality trails to improve connectivity.
- ✓ Staff will continue to advocate for residents by encouraging partners to add sidewalks on state and county roads.
- ✓ Encourage the prioritization of safety when making decisions regarding trail connectivity.

### **Outcome:**

With renovated trails residents will be encouraged to walk to parks, shopping areas, and other local destinations. Residents within Mendota Heights will have the ability to safely bike and walk within the community. This work will proactively provide better neighborhood connectivity to bring the community together for social interaction and morale building. The overall safety of Mendota Heights residents will be greatly improved by this initiative.

*Guiding Principle:*

## Vibrant and Diverse Community Programming

### Goal: Expanded Programming

**Action Items:**

- ✓ Staff will provide the City Council with a yearly calendar of programming ideas during budget development to determine the necessary costs needed for execution.
- ✓ Staff will increase the amount of community events.

**Outcome:**

The City will organize programming for residents that provide opportunities for all residents regardless of age, race, ethnicity, income and skills to participate. New, innovative program offerings will be provided in addition to the regular offerings currently provided. Staff will work to collaborate as much as possible with neighboring cities in order to minimize costs and staff needs.

*Guiding Principle:*

## Recreational Facilities for All Ages

### Goal: Prioritize Projects and Initiatives

**Action Items:**

- ✓ A rolling Capital Improvement Plan will be reviewed bi-annually and updated by staff, the Parks and Recreation Commission and City Council. This list will be formed utilizing the Asset Management Plan in relation to useful life, community needs based on resident engagement, and national trend research and comparisons.
- ✓ If directed by the City Council, staff will explore the utilization of the Bourn Lane site for recreational use in the form of a Master Plan/Concept Plan to determine if the proposed recreational space is the correct use for the community.
- ✓ The City will look for opportunities to form local partnerships that ensure our community is involved in and has access to regional facilities.
- ✓ Staff will regularly compare our park amenities to the national park delivery standards for cities our size.
- ✓ Engagement with the residents, stakeholders and user groups will be conducted to get feedback on features, amenities, and layouts desired in new facilities.

**Outcome:**

The City will have a roadmap for the next five years on plans to properly provide safe and equitable recreational facilities for residents. With a defined process for reviewing capital improvement project requests, astute financial planning will work hand in hand with our Capital Improvement Plan and Asset Management Plan to ensure an organized process moving forward.

***Guiding Principle:*****Effective Two-Way Communication with  
an Informed Community****Goal: Know the Community****Action Items:**

- ✓ Staff will continue to find creative ways to provide the community with information surrounding Parks and Recreation. A survey will be conducted to determine what are the best forms of communication for our community.
- ✓ In collaboration with other city departments (Police and Fire) our staff will be present in the community and form relationships to better understand the wants and needs of our residents.
- ✓ Listening sessions will be conducted regularly with groups of the community by the Parks and Recreation Commission.
- ✓ A new website will be completed and launched with better Parks and Recreation information easily accessible to residents.

**Outcome:**

By better understanding our community, decisions surrounding park improvement projects and programming will be made to best serve the Mendota Heights community. Information will be more readily available to residents and new information and updates will be better communicated to reach as many residents as possible within reason.

## *Guiding Principle:*

### **Human Capital**

#### **Goal: Attract and Retain Qualified Employees and Volunteers**

##### **Action Items:**

- ✓ Add a Parks and Recreation Manager to the City's organizational structure to manage park improvement projects and planning and lead golf course operations in collaboration with the Recreation Program Coordinator (1 FTE) and an Office Support Assistant (.5 FTE-Park and Recreation Time Allocation).
- ✓ Establish a City volunteer program where volunteers can help on projects and at special events. A formal policy for volunteering will be written and presented to the City Council.
- ✓ Bring recommended updates to the seasonal pay matrix to recruit and retain qualified staff for programming, park maintenance, and Par 3 operations.
- ✓ Provide training and education for park and recreation employees to ensure a qualified and engaged team of employees is developed.
- ✓ Conduct a yearly review of staffing to determine if adequate resources are available to implement the priorities of the strategic plan by the City Council.

##### **Outcome:**

By properly utilizing volunteers and empowering staff to think outside past practices, the Mendota Heights Parks and Recreation Department will consist of high-quality employees dedicated to serving the residents of Mendota Heights and surrounding communities.

---

## KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

---

Our Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) are a set of quantifiable measurements that will be used to determine the Park and Recreation staff's achievement of the City Council approved Strategic Plan. These KPI's will be tracked throughout the year and provided in the annual report. Quarterly updates will be provided to the City Council and Parks and Recreation Commission to ensure organized execution. Each year these will be compared to previous years to determine resources and direction needed from the City Council for the upcoming year.

1. Number of Recreation Program/Event Participants
2. Number of Special Events Planned and Held
3. Amount of No Mow Areas Utilized in Parks
4. Number of Volunteers Processed and Approved to Volunteer
5. Number of Volunteer Hours Utilized
6. Hours of Fields, Facilities and Picnic Shelters Allocated
7. Number of Capital Projects Completed on Time and on Budget
8. Number of Partnership Projects Initiated
9. Number of Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) Standards Completed
10. Number of Listening Sessions Completed
11. Number of Grants Applied to and Received
12. Amount of Grant Funding Received

---

## APPENDIX

---

- A. 2040 Comprehensive Plan
- B. Asset Management Plan
- C. Capital Improvement Plan
- D. Current Planning Calendar