



CITY OF MERCED

Parks, Recreation, & Open Space **Master Plan**



2026–2035

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2026–2035 Parks, Recreation & Open Space Master Plan

City of Merced Parks and Community Services Department



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Introduction



A Message from the Director of Parks & Community Services

Dear Residents of Merced,

On behalf of the City of Merced Parks & Community Services Department, I am proud to present the 2026–2035 Parks, Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Master Plan. This Plan represents a shared vision for how our parks, programs, facilities, and partnerships will need to grow and evolve to meet the needs and expectations of our community over the next five to ten years.

The PROS Master Plan was developed through extensive community engagement of local wisdom holders and community groups made up of stakeholders, staff, and City partners. Your voices, ideas, and priorities helped shape this roadmap, ensuring that future investments reflect what matters most.

Our parks, facilities, and programs play a vital role in making Merced a destination where residents and visitors alike are encouraged to live, work, and play. Our parks, recreational programs, community events, and open spaces contribute to a strong sense of place, building community character, promoting

healthy lifestyles and create opportunities for connection and enjoyment. These amenities also support the City's economic vitality by attracting families, businesses, and tourism, increasing community pride, and enhancing Merced's overall quality of life.

This Plan serves as a strategic guide to assess current and future needs, identify opportunities, and outline the policies, programs, investments, and partnerships necessary to create accessible, inclusive, and vibrant recreational spaces for all. From neighborhood parks to citywide programs, the PROS Master Plan positions Merced to thoughtfully manage growth while enhancing long-term community well-being.

We are excited about the future and grateful for the community's continued support and involvement. Together, we are building a parks and recreation system that strengthens our neighborhoods, supports our local economy, and enriches the lives of those who call Merced home.

Thank you for helping shape the PROS Master Plan and for being an essential part of shaping our future.



Christopher Jensen

*Director of Parks &
Community Services*

Acknowledgements

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Project Partner Organizations

<i>Cultiva Central Valley</i>	<i>Merced Sunrise Rotary</i>
<i>Lifeline CDC</i>	<i>Merced Senior, INC</i>
<i>Merced Bicycle Coalition</i>	<i>Merced Youth Soccer League</i>
<i>Merced County Association of Relators</i>	<i>NAACP Merced County</i>
<i>Merced County Public Health</i>	<i>Youth Leadership Institute (YLI)</i>
<i>Merced Garden Club</i>	<i>Valley Onward</i>
<i>Merced Lao Family</i>	

Central Valley Community Foundation

The PROS Master Plan was made possible through a grant from the Central Valley Opportunity Fund.



The Consulting Team



THE CITY OF MERCED PARKS & COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT
Parks, Recreation & Open Space Master Plan

Play *on purpose.*

Introduction *Master Plan Mission*

“Play on Purpose”

At the core...



Purposeful play fosters well-being, strengthens community bonds, and encourages lifelong engagement in recreation.

Who it’s for...



Each park, trail, and facility is designed to meet the unique needs of our community, inspire purposeful play, and foster lasting connections.



Our foundational pillars...



Thoughtful Design

Recreation spaces are intentionally designed to be accessible, sustainable, and built to serve the community for years to come.



Play for Everyone

Parks bring people together, creating inclusive spaces where all ages and abilities can connect and enjoy.



Community & Connection

Recreation fosters social connections, well-being, and active lifestyles, strengthening communities in the process.

Introduction *Master Plan Mission*

Focused on the Future



Community-Driven Vision

The Merced PROS Master Plan was shaped by you, your hopes and ideas, your voice. Through open conversations, surveys, and events, our community shared what matters most. We honor that input and ensure this plan reflects the values, culture, and dreams of the people who call Merced home.



Strategic Allocation of Resources

Every dollar matters. That's why this plan helps us invest wisely—focusing on the most urgent needs and biggest opportunities. With your priorities guiding us, we're building a more equitable, efficient park system that serves all neighborhoods, not just some.



Parks That Support Real Lives

Parks are more than green space—they're where Merced families gather, kids grow up, and neighbors connect. This plan is about creating safe, welcoming places that invite everyone in, support physical and mental well-being, and reflect the richness of our community.



Protecting What Makes Merced Beautiful

Our natural spaces are treasures. This plan commits to caring for our environment—restoring habitats, conserving water, planting native landscapes, and making sustainability a part of every decision. Our parks can be both playgrounds and sanctuaries.



Growing Merced's Future

Parks fuel local pride and prosperity. When we invest in great spaces and experiences, we boost our economy, support small businesses, and attract visitors who fall in love with what Merced has to offer. Our parks aren't just nice-to-have—they're key to a thriving future.



Overall, The Merced PROS Master Plan is more than just a document; it's a commitment to creating a vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive community. By believing and actively implementing the plan's strategies, we can unlock the full potential of parks, enriching the lives of residents and leaving a legacy for future generations to enjoy.

Introduction *Executive Summary*

The City of Merced's Parks & Community Services Department has completed its 2026–2035 Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan (PROS Master Plan), updating the City's 2004 Parks and Open Space Master Plan. The update builds upon key initiatives identified in the previous plan that remain relevant today, including reducing low-return land obligations, improving accessibility, increasing safety, and securing tax-supported funding for maintenance and capital needs. This 10-year update provides a strategic, system-wide framework to guide the sustainable development, maintenance, and operation of Department services in alignment with its mission to enhance quality of life in Merced.

The PROS Master Plan acknowledges both community aspirations and the fiscal and operational realities facing the City. Over time, the park system has expanded without corresponding long-term funding structures, maintenance standards, and administrative policies necessary to sustain it. As a result, the Plan prioritizes strengthening foundational practices before expanding the system further. At the same time, the Department has demonstrated measurable progress. In recent months, staff have strengthened engagement with participants, revamped partnership agreements with community organizations, advanced development of the Merced Regional Sports Complex, secured grant funding, implemented improvements at the Applegate Park Zoo, enhanced communication regarding programs and events, and adapted services despite reduced staffing and financial resources.

Rooted in inclusive outreach and data-driven analysis, the 2026–2035 PROS Master Plan balances current expectations with long-term responsibility. Ultimately it calls for disciplined decision-making, sustainable funding alignment, and a cohesive city-wide philosophy for parks and community services to protect and provide a high-quality of life for future generations.

Plan Pillars

Throughout the planning process, four foundational Plan Pillars emerged. They reflect the most consistent themes identified through community engagement, staff input, and analysis. Together, they establish a clear direction for the Department and will guide implementation of the PROS Master Plan over the next decade. The four Plan Pillars – and each pillar's primary areas of focus are:

- **Infrastructure & Maintenance** represents the existing and future physical environments.
 - *Amenity Enhancement and Maintenance:* proper and planned upkeep and replacement of park and facility amenities will protect the City's physical investments and ensure safe experiences for residents.
 - *Merced Regional Sports Complex:* this South Merced park presents an opportunity for the City to address many current issues from equitable access to amenity gaps, so all potential design, operational, and maintenance considerations, should be carefully explored.

Introduction *Executive Summary*

- **Connected Community** represents the importance of being informed by residents as the Department provides them with services.
 - *Community Support*: build upon strong overall community support through partnerships, relationships, and service provision.
 - *Focused Provision of Recreation Services*: given current limitations, the Department should concentrate on delivering essential high-quality programs and events in the immediate and slowly expand offerings as capacity grows.
- **Safety & Inclusion** represents providing welcoming, inclusive, and safe services for all.
 - *Security*: proactively addressing the community's safety issues that stem from unhoused population, while also humanely serving this vulnerable user group, is one of the top priorities of not only the Department but the region as a whole.
 - *Embrace Community Diversity*: understand Merced's diverse community groups to activate entire population.
- **Resources & Stewardship** represents the importance of the strategic use of human and financial resources.
 - *Applegate Park Zoo*: evaluate operation, management, and funding options to ensure the sustainability of this treasured community service.
 - *Policies and Procedures*: structured direction and expectations will increase staff effectiveness, efficiency, and job satisfaction.

Implementation

To best support staff through the implementation of the PROS Master Plan, the Strategic Action Plan incorporates and prioritizes all of the PROS Master Plan's recommended actions in a dynamic tool used to measure progress.

Additionally, in order to most effectively implement the Plan's recommendations, the Department requires broader City support and collaboration to:

- Develop diversified, long-term funding strategies, including dedicated maintenance and capital improvement (CIP) funding, impact fees, grants, and structured partnerships;
- Adopt stronger administrative and financial policies, including formal CIP planning and lifecycle cost practices;
- Implement a comprehensive safety strategy that increases positive park activity and aligns staffing and maintenance expectations with financial capacity; and
- Establish clear land acceptance policies requiring approved operations and maintenance plans prior to accepting new parkland, including consideration of fees-in-lieu to allow reinvestment in existing assets before further expansion.

Merced

Parks & Community Services Department and Merced Community

Merced *Department Overview*

The Merced Parks & Community Services Department provides the City's 98,000+ residents with parks and recreation programs and services, parks, facilities, trails, and open spaces.

The City of Merced's Parks & Community Service Department's Mission Statement is to plan, facilitate, promote, maintain, and develop activities and facilities that enhance the quality of life in Merced.

Parks, recreation, and open spaces are managed by two separate departments in Merced:

➤ **Parks & Community Services**

Parks, Recreation programs, and open space are planned, developed, and operated through Parks & Community Services. Underneath this Department are two divisions, Community Services and Facility Management. Parks & Community Services offers a variety of services annually to meet residents' diverse needs and interests through the provision of programs, classes, lessons, leagues, and rentals; but at the core of it all are the Department's various community events, which are extremely well attended and supported. The Department has limited use of five City owned recreation facilities that include: the Merced Senior Community Center, the Stephen Leonard Youth Center, McNamara Youth Center, McCombs Youth Center, and Central Youth Center. Additionally, the Division operates the City-owned and widely-popular Applegate Park Zoo, which is home to approximately 75 Native California mammals, birds, and reptiles.

➤ **Public Works**

Parks, recreation facilities, and open spaces are maintained and repaired through the Public Works Department. Underneath this Department are two divisions, Parks and Facilities. These divisions oversees the City's 43 parks and open space, totaling approximately 367 acres. The City provides a variety of amenities including playgrounds, picnic areas, trails, open spaces, sports courts and fields.



Merced City Parks and Recreation Facilities Maps

All 43 parks in Merced create a well-distributed park system, as shown in Figure 1. In addition to Merced’s parks, Figure 2 also displays the City’s five indoor recreation facilities and paths.

Figure 1: Citywide Parks Map

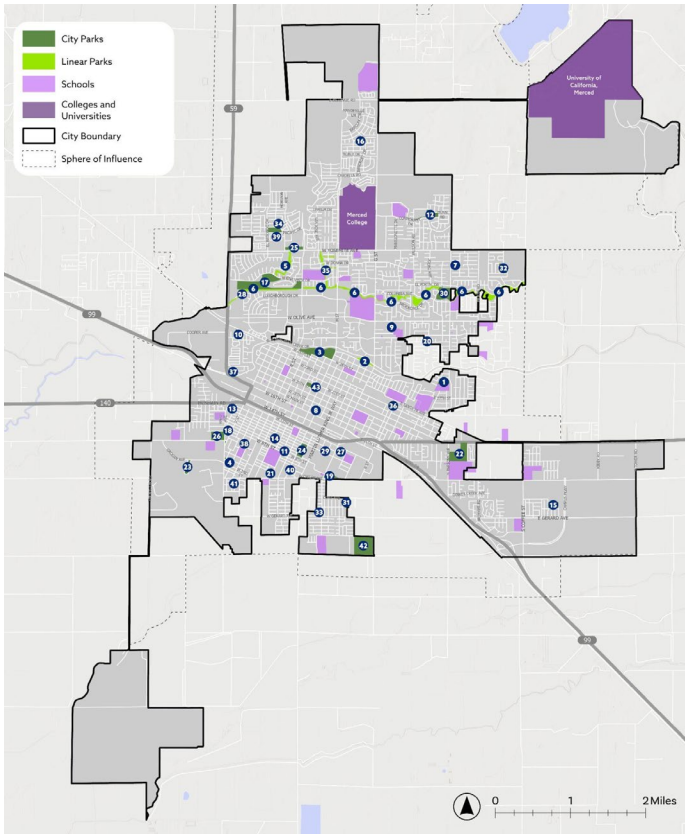
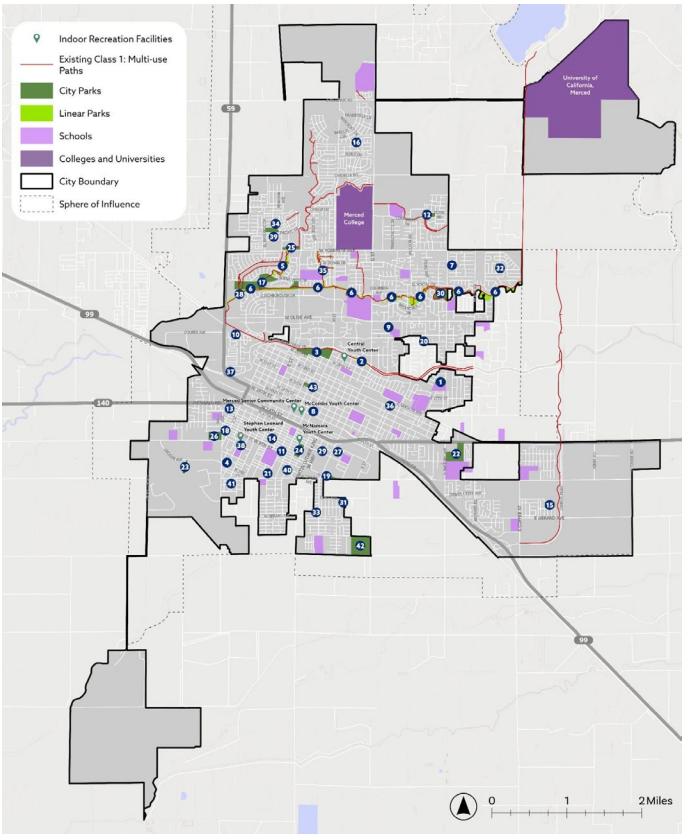


Figure 2: Citywide Parks and Recreation Facilities



NOTE: Full page maps can be found in Supplement C: Park Maps.

Merced Community Overview

The City of Merced is a dynamic community of just over 98,000 residents, offering the character of friendly small-town living within a growing mid-sized city. Located in California's agricultural Central Valley, Merced serves as a regional hub for education, culture, and business. Its revitalizing downtown, connected parks and trails, community events, relative housing affordability, and proximity to Yosemite, the coast, and the Sierra Nevada mountains make it an attractive place to live. With the opening of the University of California, Merced in 2005, the city's profile has continued to evolve and bring new educational opportunity, economic potential, and a youthful, diverse population.

That growth presents both promise and responsibility. Higher educational attainment and a changing workforce position Merced to compete for innovation-driven jobs and long-term economic vitality. But educated residents have choices. Communities that fail to invest in quality-of-life amenities risk becoming places where people are educated but do not stay. Parks, recreation, and open space are not peripheral amenities; they are foundational infrastructure that support public health, social connection, talent retention, and economic competitiveness.

This Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan is the roadmap to align Merced's growth with its long-term aspirations. Its value will be realized only through disciplined implementation, through sustained investment, operational excellence, and clear accountability. If Merced is serious about leveraging the promise of UC Merced and strengthening its economic future, it must treat parks and recreation as essential to that strategy. Taking this plan seriously is not simply about building facilities; it is about shaping a community where people choose to live, work, and build their futures for generations to come.



Merced Demographics



Demographics

Population
90,039

10-Year Growth Rate
21.4%

Median Age
29.8

Median Household Income
\$59,938



Workforce

Labor Force
38,700

Educated Beyond High School
50.4%

Business Establishments
2,581

Top 3 Sectors
Health/Social, Retail, Public Admin



Housing

Typical Home Value
\$403,080

County Housing Affordability
26%

Home Ownership
55.8%

Vacant Units
5.6%



Quality of Life

Cost of Living Index
109.1

Temperature Range
36-97

Commute Time (Average)
26.9 min

Crime Rate (per k)
27.9

NOTE: The following information is provided by the City of Merced Economic Development Department, data from May 2025.

Sources: City of Merced's Economic Development Department [California Department of Finance, United States Census Bureau American Community Survey, California Economic Development Department, 2024 Data Axle, Zillow, California Association of Realtors, Sperling's Best Places, California Office of the Attorney General]

The Process

The Process *Overview*

In today's everchanging society, quality-of-life organizations such as the City of Merced Parks & Community Services Department must continually adapt in order to remain relevant, effective, and trusted. Parks and recreation systems do not operate in isolation, they reflect the strengths, challenges, and aspirations of the communities they serve. The PROS Master Plan process recognized that sustaining public trust requires more than maintaining facilities; it requires responsiveness, transparency, and a willingness to confront both opportunity and constraint with clarity.

Merced is a community rich in culture, deeply connected through family networks, and energized by a vibrant and growing downtown. Young people and families gather in its parks and at community events. The City also benefits from the presence of both Merced Community College and the University of California, Merced, creating unique opportunities for partnership, learning, and engagement. Strong partnerships, civic pride, and residents who want the best for their city provide a powerful foundation for the future. At the same time, the Department must navigate complex realities: perceptions and experiences of safety – especially those presented by the presence of an unhoused population – tight fiscal conditions and revenue constraints, and the need to equip professional staff with modern tools and systems. These realities are not separate from the parks system—they shape how it is experienced and how it must evolve.

The PROS Master Plan process intentionally examined these dynamics. Through community engagement, historical review, operational assessment, and evaluation of national best practices, the Project Team considered not only what residents desire, but what is sustainable and achievable.

Throughout the process, themes consistently emerged from observation, analysis, and community feedback. These themes shaped the Department's Plan Pillars, as detailed on page 24, and informed the 2026–2035 PROS Master Plan design.

Ultimately, this Master Plan is both forward-looking and grounded in reality. It reflects Merced's history, honors its cultural vibrancy, and builds upon the collaborative spirit of its partners and residents. By acknowledging challenges while embracing possibility, the City positions its parks and recreation system to serve current and future generations with resilience, intention, and shared purpose.



The Process Engagement

The Merced Parks & Community Services Department conducted a comprehensive engagement plan as part of the PROS Master Plan process. The Department saw this as an integral opportunity to intentionally connect with, listen to, and learn from the entire Merced community, not simply treat it as a procedural step.

The Project Team strategized with Department leaders to determine optimal opportunities and methods to reach community members where they live, work, and play. From in-person engagements to the online Community Survey, each engagement effort was crafted to be inclusive and transparent in order to fully understand each individual’s perspective and experience. These efforts not only helped inform the PROS Master Plan, but more importantly strengthened community relations and Department buy-in and created enthusiasm for what the staff and the community can achieve together through execution of plan.

The following five key themes emerged from the Plan’s engagement efforts:

Connection	Safety in parks	Maintenance in parks
Parks and recreation should provide community connection through the provision of services and public spaces.	Addressing the safety in public spaces – especially from the unhoused populations – should be a top priority.	A higher level of overall maintenance and cleanliness standards is desired.
Amenities	Additional funding	
Desired new and improved system amenities include splashpads, playgrounds, trail connections, and fitness areas.	There’s a need for additional funding sources to improve the Department’s overall level of service.	

NOTE: Full results can be found in Supplement A: Engagement Report.

Wisdom Holders

To deepen its commitment to inclusive and meaningful engagement, the Department convened a group of community representatives known as the “Wisdom Holders.” Recognizing Merced’s diverse network of community organizations, the Project Team invited 12 partner organizations to designate one representative each to serve as bridges between the planning process and their communities. The Wisdom Holders toured City parks to build a shared understanding of assets and opportunities, completed virtual focus group facilitation training, and led conversations within their networks to ensure diverse voices were heard. They also attended in-person Plan updates and championed the effort throughout the community. Their involvement reflects Merced’s collaborative spirit and underscores the care taken to shape this Master Plan through trusted relationships and shared stewardship of the City’s parks and recreation system.

500+ Total Engagement Touchpoints

1392 Total Comments Received

200+ Community Open House Attendees



**Your parks,
your voices.**



The Process *Engagement*

Staff & Council Planning Sessions

15 staff and City Council members participated

Separate planning sessions were held to learn about the planning process as well as undergo a series of analyses and concentrated discussions on their perspectives about the Department.

Community Focus Group Meetings

100 individuals representing five different groups

Five community focus groups of select stakeholders gathered for concentrated discussions on their perspectives about the Department through a series of structured questions.

Community Survey

124 responses

A seven question survey was made available for residents to share their opinions on usage, thoughts, and perceptions of the Department's parks, facilities, programs and services.

Community Open House

200+ residents attended

This gathering included general information about the PROS Master Plan process and asked attendees to provide input on their preferences on park and facility amenities and concepts.

Pop Up Engagements

500+ engagement touchpoints

To meet residents where they are, five pop up opportunities were held at various locations throughout Merced. The effort asked respondents to share their preferred new park amenities.

Plan Pillars

Plan Pillars *Overview*

Plan Pillars form the foundation from which the City of Merced PROS Master Plan is built. They represent the Department's primary commitments as it serves the community through its mission to plan, facilitate, promote, maintain, and develop activities and facilities that enhance the quality of life in Merced.

Four Plan Pillars emerged as themes during the PROS Master Plan process through observations and takeaways garnered from analyses and assessments, as well as from feedback from the plan's internal and community engagement efforts. Each pillar is grounded in two essential foundations: resident needs and preferences, and the organizational and financial health required to deliver on them. The Plan therefore balances aspiration with practicality by recommendations such as investing in connected trails and community spaces, planning for the long-term care of existing assets, establishing clear quality standards expected and deserved by residents, and identifying sustainable funding pathways.

The four Plan Pillars are:

- **Infrastructure & Maintenance** represents the existing and future physical environments.
- **Connected Community** represents the importance of being informed by residents as the Department provides them with services.
- **Safety & Inclusion** represents providing welcoming, inclusive, and safe services for all.
- **Resources & Stewardship** represents the importance of the strategic use of human and financial resources.

Throughout the rest of this section of the PROS Master Plan, each Plan Pillar will be overviewed and examined before the plan's subsequent recommended actions are identified and reviewed.



Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

Strategic and sustainable management of a park and recreation system’s maintenance and infrastructure, though a challenge, is an absolute necessity for both the organization and the community. By prioritizing its current and future infrastructure and maintenance needs, the Department can deliver exceptional places and spaces for Merced’s residents today and tomorrow.

By identifying it as a PROS Master Plan Pillar, the Department commits to providing safe, functional, and sustainable spaces and places through the appropriate maintenance, repair, and improvements of the physical assets of its parks, trails, open spaces, and facilities.

Recommended actions resulting from the process (included on the following pages as well as in the Department’s Strategic Action Plan) intend to influence the following intended outcomes.

- **Quality places and spaces:** The Department will prioritize providing clean, well maintained, and accessible infrastructure in its parks, trails, and facilities.
- **Staff and community pride:** By prioritizing infrastructure and maintenance, Department staff will provide spaces and places that they will value taking care of while then becoming highly-cherished places and spaces by the community that will increase the Department image.
- **High levels of service:** Deliver responsive, reliable, and customer-focused services that consistently meet established standards and provide a positive experience for all park users.
- **Future needs:** The Department will continue to responsibly evaluate future opportunities that align with current gaps and imbalances to ensure infrastructure meets community needs.



Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

Park Classifications

To better understand the park system in Merced, the PROS Master Plan categorizes the City’s 43 total parks into six categories based on their size, amenities, and geographic area.

Mini Parks are smaller parks that provide passive recreation opportunities and access to nature. They provide outdoor access for high density neighborhoods and typically include open grassy areas, picnic tables, short walking paths, and playgrounds.

Plazas are small public spaces found in urban areas, civic centers, and downtown districts, designed for social gatherings and pedestrians. Common features include seating areas, public art, and landscaping.

Neighborhood Parks are medium-sized green spaces offering both passive and active recreation. They often feature amenities such as playgrounds, picnic areas, walking paths, and occasionally sports courts or practice fields, and should be centered around safe biking and walking access.

Community Parks serve the daily recreation needs of the larger community. They typically contain amenities found in neighborhood parks but also larger ones such as sports fields, multiple sport courts, restrooms, dedicated parking, and recreation centers.

Greenways/Linear Parks serve as a transportation corridor for non-motorized facilities such as play areas, fitness stations, public art, and gathering spaces.

Regional Parks cater to both city-wide recreational needs and the broader local community. They typically feature a variety of amenities that can include large sports facilities and/or nature-focused features (which will typically not contain sports facilities).

Merced also contains many Homeowners Associations (HOAs), many of which contain private park facilities such as pools, play areas, and courts. These facilities are not maintained by Merced. Therefore, they are not a part of the PROS Plan’s analysis.

Figure 3: Existing Park Acreage by Park Type

PARK TYPE	ACRES	#	SIZE
Mini Park	9.53	14	< 2 acres
Plaza	5.53	2	< 1 acre
Neighborhood Park	74.33	15	2-8 acres
Community Park	99.52	4	> 8 acres
Greenway	92.43	4	Varies
Regional Park	85.88	4	> 25 acres
Total	367.56		

Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

All 43 parks in Merced create a well-distributed park system, as detailed in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Existing Parks, Acreage, and Park Type

ID	PARK NAME	ACRES	TYPE	ID	PARK NAME	ACRES	TYPE
1	Ada Givens Park	5.00	Neighborhood Park	14	Diego Rivera Park	0.25	Mini Park
2	Albert Lawson Park	4.21	Greenway	15	Dwight Amey Park	6.92	Neighborhood Park
3	Applegate Park	26.46	Regional Park	16	Elmer Murchie Park	3.56	Neighborhood Park
4	Benjamin Banneker Memorial Park	0.96	Mini Park	17	Fahrens Park	47.62	Community Park
5	Bikeway/Park	9.08	Greenway	18	Fredrick Douglas Park	0.93	Mini Park
6	Black Rascal Creek Strip Park (#1-7)	70.28	Greenway	19	Gilbert Macias Park	4.91	Neighborhood Park
7	Bob Carpenter Park	5.97	Neighborhood Park	20	Hansen Neighborhood Park	0.21	Mini Park
8	Bob Hart Square	0.42	Plaza	21	Harriet Tubman Park	0.45	Mini Park
9	Burbank Park	3.76	Neighborhood Park	22	Joe Herb Park	26.47	Community Park
10	Carol Gabriault Park	5.58	Neighborhood Park	23	Macready Park	3.34	Mini Park
11	Charles Richard Drew Park	0.52	Mini Park	24	McNamara Park	8.70	Community Park
12	Davenport Park	8.36	Neighborhood Park	25	Merced Dog Park	7.11	Regional Park
13	Dennis Chavez Memorial Park	0.66	Mini Park	26	Nannini Youth Sports Complex	13.02	Regional Park

Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

Figure 4 (cont.): Existing Parks, Acreage, and Park Type

ID	PARK NAME	ACRES	TYPE
27	E. 12th Street Neighborhood Park	0.39	Mini Park
28	Old Fahrens Park	2.41	Neighborhood Park
29	Parque De Los Angelitos	0.17	Mini Park
30	Rahilly Park	16.74	Community Park
31	Ray Flanagan Park	3.96	Neighborhood Park
32	Richard Bernasconi Neighborhood Park	7.15	Neighborhood Park
33	Roland D. Brooks, Jr. Park	4.22	Neighborhood Park
34	Rudolph Joseph Merino Neighborhood Park	8.82	Neighborhood Park
35	Santa Fe Park Strip (#1-3)	8.86	Greenway

ID	PARK NAME	ACRES	TYPE
36	Staff Sergeant Frank Joseph Gasper Park	0.26	Mini Park
37	Stephen Gray Park	1.02	Neighborhood Park
38	Stephen Leonard Park	2.70	Neighborhood Park
39	Sunrise Park	0.53	Mini Park
40	The Love Veasley Family Park	0.17	Mini Park
41	William Lloyd Garrison Park	1.02	Mini Park
42	Merced Regional Sports Complex	39.29	Regional Park
43	Bob Heart Square	5.11	Plaza

Merced continues to look towards the future and plan for additional parks, including the General Vang Pao Park, Charles Ogletree Park, Lester K. Yoshida Park, and Alfarata Park.

Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

Level of Service Analysis

A park Level of Service (LOS) is an analysis conducted for park systems to help evaluate how parks, open spaces, and facilities serve a community and identify improvement opportunities.

Population Level of Service

The population-based park acreage assessment demonstrates the extent to which the City is meeting its goal of providing five acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents, as established in Merced’s General Plan.

Figure 5: Existing and Future Park Acreage LOS

	EXISTING 2025	FUTURE 2045
Existing Park Acreage <i>(includes only 50% of linear park acreage)</i>	321.35	321.35
Recommended Adopted Standard <i>(per 1,000 population)</i>	5.00	5.00
Acres <i>(per 1,000 population)</i>	3.28	2.92
Total Surplus/Deficit Acres <i>(per 1000 population)</i>	-1.72	-2.08
Acres in Deficit	168.85	228.58
Population	98,039	109,986
Acres <i>(per 1,000 population)</i>	98.04	109.99
Park acres needed (5 per 1,000 population)	490.20	549.93

Sources: California Department of Finance , Merced County of Association of Governments 2018 Regional Transportation Plan

Parks+ Methodology

The Three Metrics

A park LOS analysis utilizes three metrics that together make up the Parks+ Methodology.

- **Population LOS:** compares population to the total existing park acres.
- **Access LOS:** determines the geographic distribution and accessibility of a parks and recreation system.
- **Amenity LOS:** comparative analysis of park fieldwork data compared to National Recreation & Park Association (NRPA) benchmark data.

Each of these metrics highlight the immediate and future park system needs of the City’s system. Successfully addressing these needs can lead to overall better community health, higher levels of educational attainment, and stronger economic development, to name a few benefits.

Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

Figure 5 shows the existing and future LOS, both of which are behind the City’s established goal. With the population of Merced expected to increase steadily over the next 20 years, if the City does not add additional parkland, the total acres in deficit may increase over the next two decades.

Access Level of Service

The accessibility analysis visualizes which community members have easy walking access to a park, facility, or trail and which do not by showing areas within a 10-minute (or half-mile mile) walking distance.

Maps of the following amenity accessibility were created as part of this process:

- **Park Accessibility:** a majority of schools and residential areas are within a half-mile walk to parks and other recreational facilities; however, gaps are visible in the northernmost part of Merced and near downtown Merced.
- **Recreation Facilities Accessibility:** the City’s five indoor recreation facilities (i.e., Merced Senior Community Center, Stephen Leonard Youth Center, McNamara Youth, McCombs Youth Center, and Central Youth Center), all of which are located in downtown and southeast Merced, and schools are located within a half-mile; however, residents have to use another mode of transportation to access them.
- **Trail Accessibility:** Merced’s Class I Multi-use trails are primarily east-to-west connections that serve the central and northern parks and facilities, while the largest north-to-south connection is Campus Parkway’s Class I Multi-use trail that connects to Bear Creek. Residents of south Merced have a potential need for more trail access routes.

NOTE: Full page maps can be found in Supplement C: Park Maps.

Amenity Level of Service

Utilizing NRPA benchmark data, a population-based amenity comparison of standard park and recreation amenities was conducted relative to long-term state and city national averages. Figure 6 summarizes where existing City amenities stand in terms of meeting the needs of both the current and future population.

Figure 6: Existing and Future Amenity Level of Service

AMENITY BENCHMARKS	CURRENT	FUTURE (2045)
Meet	10	8
On the cusp	2	2
Does not meet	18	20

Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

Recommended Actions

- **1.1: Conduct a comprehensive Park and Facility Asset Inventory Report.**
A comprehensive Park and Facility Asset Inventory of all the City's parks will both identify the immediate needs and priority order for upgrades as well as support the overall findings of the PROS Master Plan.
- **1.2: Enhance the existing aging park amenities with modern amenities.**
Utilizing the findings from Action 1.1, the Department can utilize those recommendations to begin replacing the aging assets with modern upgrades. Addressing these deficiencies prevents further deterioration, protects the City's existing investments, and ensures safe experiences for users. Examples of enhancements may include playground renovations compliant with Americans with Disabilities Act standards, updating existing aquatic features to combat heat, replacing lighting at outdoor sports facilities, and resurface and restripe courts.
- **1.3: Develop a comprehensive maintenance management plan.**
Establishing relevant guidelines and standards, by way of a Department Maintenance Management Plan, will help ensure the upkeep of the Department's facilities, parks, trails, and open spaces. Considerations of the Maintenance Management Plan include responsibilities and expectations, impacts to existing staffing, and determination of additional staff.
- **1.4: Establish a trail maintenance program.**
To encourage usage, the Department should establish a trail maintenance program. Considerations of the trail maintenance program include developing a comprehensive Trail Inventory Assessment Plan to evaluate, define, and track trail maintenance priorities, and developing trail design guidelines to enhance trail amenities (e.g., signage, lighting, maintenance).
- **1.5: Design walkable and bike-friendly streets throughout the City for safe and equitable access to parks and facilities.**
Based on the Access LOS, accessibility could be more equitably distributed throughout the City, especially north-to-south access and for the residential areas in north and central Merced. Examples of efforts may include design and installation of additional bike access to connect to parks located in the south of Merced, enhance existing trails by adding appropriate signage and markings to educate users and encourage use for non-motorized and motorized wheeled devices, and consider Complete Streets policies to support the implementation of appropriate bicycle, pedestrian, transit, and placemaking elements that increase access to parks, facilities, and trails.

Plan Pillars *Infrastructure & Maintenance*

➤ **1.6: Incorporate the most needed park amenities into future parks.**

The Amenity LOS comparative analysis identified several park amenities that the City will not meet the needs the future population unless it addresses them in future park development. The future park inventory report recommends prioritization of the following amenities: playgrounds (special focus on tot lots for ages 2-5), restrooms for community parks and highly-activated neighborhood parks, splashpads, picnic areas, volleyball courts, tennis courts, futsal, and walking paths with fitness equipment.

➤ **1.7: Evaluate the feasibility of an indoor multi-generational recreational facility at Merced Regional Sports Complex.**

With the need to relocate indoor programming space and to address amenity gaps in South Merced, the addition of an indoor multi-generational recreational facility at Merced Regional Sports Complex is worth considering. Exploring feasibility helps the City understand planning, costs, and community benefits so decisions about the potential project are grounded in need, equity, and long-term value.

➤ **1.8: Position Merced Regional Sports Complex as a revenue-generating regional asset.**

To avoid new ongoing operational and maintenance obligations, the complex should be governed by a business plan that treats it as an enterprise operation. By partnering with an experienced sports operator through a long-term lease, the City can benefit from high-quality programming, cost recovery and regional economic activity, while prioritizing benefits and access for Merced residents.

➤ **1.9 Evaluate and create implementation plans for current recreation facilities.**

Establish a structured, phased approach to assess, maintain, and reinvest in existing facilities to ensure safe, functional, and financially responsible use of assets over time.

Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

Community Connection is a foundational pillar of the PROS Master Plan. Throughout the planning process, the warmth and care of Merced’s residents were evident. Hundreds of community members of all ages and abilities participated by listening, sharing ideas, and expressing a desire to support one another. Seniors spoke about opportunities for youth and families, and young people stepped forward to advocate for parks that serve everyone. The spirit of shared responsibility and pride in community was unmistakable.

Merced values being outdoors, gathering in walkable parks and trails, and staying connected across neighborhoods and generations. These shared spaces strengthen relationships and contribute to a healthy, thriving city. This pillar reflects the belief that caring for places and caring for people go hand in hand and that everyone has a role in building a vibrant future for Merced.

Recommended actions resulting from the process (included on the following pages as well as in the Department’s Strategic Action Plan) intend to influence the following intended outcomes.

- **Engaged community:** The Department will continue its commitment to build relationships, strengthening connections, and fostering trust across the entire Merced community, enhancing buy-in and reinforcing Merced as a city people are proud to call home.
- **Enhanced understanding:** The Department will provide comprehensive communication and marketing efforts so that all community members are informed about Department services.
- **Increased participation:** The Department will continue to design and deliver essential, engaging, and in-demand programs, classes, and events that are of high value to the community to lead to increased activation, satisfaction, and overall participation.
- **Strategic and effective partnerships and relationships:** The Department will enhance current partnership opportunities as well as build relationships with other community organizations and groups to increase overall reach and to collectively meet community needs.



Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

Community Engagement

One of the greatest misconceptions about community engagement in public park and recreation planning processes is that its primary purpose is to compile and prioritize a list of the community's wants and demands. And while conversations between an organization and its residents regarding potential services and amenities certainly occurs during these initiatives, community engagement is more importantly about building relationships, common ground and common understanding, and ultimately increased investment and participation.

At its best, an organization's engagement efforts can:

- **Inform:** Communication efforts between an organization and its residents, whether marketing of services or providing general education and information, are enhanced and become more effective through consistent community engagement efforts.
- **Strengthen relationships:** By consistently being transparent, accessible, and engaging with the community, residents will feel valued and appreciated as they help shape the organization's future.
- **Promote stewardship:** When residents truly understand the role they play and how their participation (or non-participation) and engagement in organization-provided services affects how the organization is then able to serve them, they become more active partners in strengthening the system.

Throughout the process, Merced residents showed up and engaged with the Department to support their fellow community members, realize the Department's realities, share their opinions, and understand how decisions will be made and how those decisions will impact the future of parks and recreation services in Merced.

The PROS Master Plan process revealed that Merced residents not only value the Department and the services it provides, but also has many individuals, groups, and organizations who are willing to support it for the betterment of the community. The engagement levels, positive reception, and strong investment between community members and the Department is truly a special dynamic. The consistent themes shared across every meeting, survey and conversation helped shape a plan that is both grounded in community priorities and realistic in its implementation. The Department now has a foundation for a forward moving plan for Merced's future.



Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

Recreation Service Design and Delivery

Today public park and recreation agencies are being faced with dynamic and ever-changing economic, social and environmental shifts that can lead to instability and uncertainty. Contributing to that are increasing internal and external expectations and demands that can cause organizations to veer off course and away from its purpose; for Merced, that’s to enhance quality of life for all Merced residents through the provision of activities and facilities. Staying aligned with the Department’s mission combined with intentional efforts can be the primary difference between mediocre and exceptional performance.

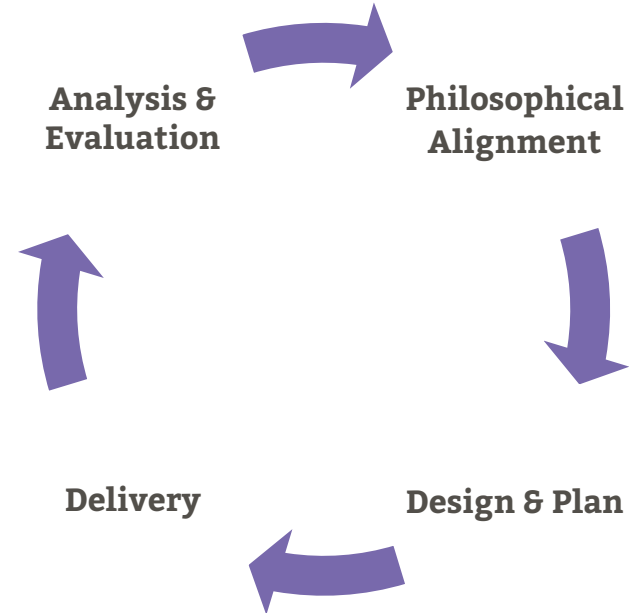
A Service Design and Delivery Model is a way to ensure that the Department’s on-going efforts that contribute to the quality of life in Merced are concentrated, consistent, and rooted in exceeding community and customer expectations.

The Service Design and Delivery Model, visualized in Figure 7, consists of four key actionable stages for the Department to utilize in its service provision to the Merced community:

- 1. **Philosophy:** Ensures that a service aligns with the Department’s mission and values.
- 2. **Design & Plan:** Detailed plan of action that connects a service’s design and delivery with the intended outcomes.
- 3. **Delivery:** The actual provision of a service.
- 4. **Service Analysis & Evaluation:** Structured analysis and evaluation of a service to determine the next operational strategy.

NOTE: The full Recreation Service Design and Delivery can be found in Supplement D: Recreation Report.

Figure 7: Service Design and Delivery Model



Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

Partnerships

“Partnerships” encompass a variety of relationships such as strategic alliances, cooperative ventures, and collaborations. A partnership revolves around achieving mutually beneficial outcomes for all parties. Given today’s competitive landscape, ever-changing markets, and resident requests, a thoughtfully constructed and managed partnership can be a powerful asset. Partnerships represent advantageous collaborations that position organizations to efficiently utilize resources leading to cost effective and efficient service delivery. They facilitate the bridging of markets, reduce duplication of services and fragmentation of resources, and foster cooperative capital development and/or improvements.

The Department maintains several strategic partnerships to expand and enhance programs and services for the community. One of the primary structures are through Joint Use Agreements (JUAs) and Facility Use Agreements (FUAs). These formal agreements establish the terms and conditions for shared use of property or facilities between entities, allowing resources to be leveraged efficiently and collaboratively. Through these partnerships, the Department is able to serve residents in targeted and meaningful ways that strengthen the broader community.

Additionally, the Department also manages operation-based partnerships with organizations that reflect the spirit of collaboration. Each partner plays a vital role in supporting community members recreation and leisure-based needs and effectively becomes an extension of the Department’s offerings. Together, these partnerships enhance connection, expand leisure opportunities, and contribute to a stronger, more vibrant Merced.

The completed Partnership Analysis consisted of a comprehensive review and assessment of the terms, conditions, and provisions outlined in each of the Department’s partnership agreements through the lenses of productivity, reciprocity, and efficiency.

NOTE: The full Partnership Analysis can be found in Supplement D: Recreation Report.

Current Partnerships

Merced Parks & Community Services currently has several partnerships that are aimed to enhance parks and recreation service provision to the greater Merced community.

- Merced City School District**
Shared use of MCSD facilities.
- Merced Community College District**
Shared used of MCCD facilities.
- Merced Union High School District**
Shared use of MUHSD facilities.
- Boys & Girls Club of Merced County**
Operates City-owned McCombs Youth Center.
- Merced Seniors Inc.**
Operates City-owned Senior Community Center.
- Youth Leadership Institute**
Operates City-owned youth recreation centers.

Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

Trends

Trends can be a source of inspiration for park and recreation organizations and the professionals who serve their communities. Whether it be an innovation, idea, or something related to pop culture, trends tend to influence human behavior. While reports on parks and recreation trends often focus on popular programs and services or ways to respond to the next technological innovation, the Project Team chose to instead identify five key issues affecting the Department to explore the industry trends on how to they are being addressed.

NOTE: The full Trends Analysis can be found in Supplement D: Recreation Report.



Technology in Parks

Three considerations for the Department include integrating of Wi-Fi enabled smart parks, addition of digital kiosks for the incorporation of local art, and an Esports room that can also provide virtual reality fitness opportunities.



Unhoused Population & Safety in Parks

While serving both traditional park users and the unhoused population is a difficult task, resources and approaches published by several leading national organizations can help guide the City to better address this issue.



Parks & Recreation's Role in Economic Development

A 2024 Trust for Public Land (TPL) report concluded that many U.S. cities experiencing economic growth, regardless of size and location, are investing more in parks and open spaces for workforce retention, real estate activity, and local spending.



Serving Families

Potential trending services for the Department to consider include additional special events (e.g., multi-cultural, themed and holiday, intergenerational), outdoor programming, and building multipurpose amenities (e.g., vertical playground structures).



Improving Community Health

Three key strategies to improve community health include ensuring inclusive access for all residents to the City's parks, facilities, and trails, promotion of health benefits, and foster partnerships across health sector organizations.

Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

Recommended Actions

➤ **2.1: Enhance internal and external communication about Department services.**

Optimizing communications and marketing efforts to reach all residents is an ongoing area of improvement for any agency. By improving efforts to inform, educate, and market to residents can increase overall awareness, participation in programs and services, and even buy-in of Department initiatives. Examples of efforts the Department could consider include expanding features of the Merced Connect App (e.g., reporting capabilities) and create a consistent strategy for all residents.

➤ **2.2: Coordinate open communication efforts among City departments and pertinent regional, state, and federal agencies to enhance multimodal planning efforts.**

Encouraging collaboration, both internally within City departments and externally among various agencies, will ensure that connectivity and multimodal planning efforts are coordinated across all organizational stakeholders. Doing so can align investments and decision-making so that improvements collectively support mobility and access goals. Specific initiatives may include enhancing freeway and railroad crossings with State agencies, exploring non-motorized transportation opportunities to meet the City's Sustainable Development Goals, collaborate with the University of California-Merced to expand multi-modal transportation, and coordinate with the Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) to connect transit stations to bicycle paths via on-street infrastructure.

➤ **2.3: Evaluate existing partner agreements.**

The Department's current partnerships with local community organizations, such as the MCSD and MUHSD, have enabled the parties to work collaboratively to enhance leisure and recreational opportunities for Merced residents. These agreements should continue to be evaluated annually with reviews of the scope and management of the relationship, roles and responsibilities, milestones, terms, and financial arrangements, including reciprocity.

➤ **2.4: Explore public-private partnerships to advance indoor recreation facility development, strategic relocations, and parkland acquisition.**

As Merced continues to grow, meeting demand for indoor recreation space and strategically located parkland will require creative approaches beyond traditional public funding. The Department should proactively explore partnerships with private businesses, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and community-based entities to identify shared-use facilities, co-located developments, relocation opportunities, and joint acquisition strategies.

Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

- **2.5: Strengthen and clarify the long-term operational model for youth center facilities to ensure consistent, high-quality service delivery.**
The Department should evaluate and define a sustainable operational strategy for youth centers, beginning with the McCombs Youth Center as the primary facility. In the near term, the Department currently operates approximately 600 hours annually at McCombs, with the Boys & Girls Club (BGC) utilizing the facility for the remainder of the year. This shared-use model should be reviewed to clarify roles, responsibilities, scheduling, and long-term expectations. The Department may also consider supporting BGC in securing a permanent location—potentially at Alfaretta Park—while evaluating future indoor recreation opportunities at the Merced Regional Sports Complex. Establishing a clear operational and partnership framework will help ensure youth services remain stable, accessible, and aligned with community needs.
- **2.6: Strengthen relationships, partnerships and coordinated recreation service planning with community-based organizations.**
Merced benefits from a strong network of community groups, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and volunteer-led associations that actively provide leisure and enrichment opportunities throughout the City. The Department should intentionally collaborate with these groups to align programming, share facilities, coordinate schedules, and identify service gaps. By formalizing partnership agreements and engaging in joint recreation planning, the Department can expand activity offerings, reduce duplication of effort, and help manage staffing and financial obligations while still meeting community needs. A coordinated approach will enhance community connection, leverage local capacity, and ensure recreation services are delivered efficiently and responsively.
- **2.7: Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for recreation program operations.**
Designing SOPs will bring consistency, clarity, and accountability to the planning and operations of the Department’s recreation programs. The structure of the SOPs provide best practices that will guide staff to carry out efficient, effective, and repeatable processes that are mission-aligned and responsive to community needs.
- **2.8: Strengthen coordination with Merced County to address impacts related to unhoused individuals and behavioral health transitions within the City.**
As the City of Merced hosts many Merced County services for individuals experiencing homelessness, mental health challenges, and addiction, there are direct impacts on City parks and public spaces. Individuals often exit County facilities and remain within City limits, increasing service and safety demands. The City should pursue a coordinated strategy with the County focused on improved transition planning, shared data, collaborative funding, and clearer roles and responsibilities. A unified approach can better balance public safety, compassionate response, and long-term community stability.

Plan Pillars *Community Connection*

➤ **2.9: Implement an Adopt-a-Park / Friends-of-the-Park program.**

The development of an Adopt-a-Park or Friends-of-the-Parks program will help the Department establish a structured, community-driven model for volunteerism and park stewardship. Designated service days, such as “Clean-Up Day,” create predictable opportunities for residents, businesses, and civic groups to contribute to park beautification and maintenance.

➤ **2.10: Focus service provision efforts on enhancing current program offerings and addressing high-need gaps.**

In order to not overload an already busy small workforce of staff, the Department should primarily focus on delivering the current services they offer and the co-hosted programs they help support. Along with Action 2.7, staff can work towards more the goal of improving the management of these programs and maximizing their impact on the community. However, the Department needs to still stay attuned to the high-need service gaps of the community and should be evaluated and carefully considered. One specific high-need service gap the Department may consider addressing are increasing family programming options.

➤ **2.11: Maintain an understanding of local public health indicators.**

Maintaining an understanding of local public health indicators is essential for the Department to effectively respond to community health needs and enhance residents' overall well-being. Public health indicators provide valuable insights into the state of health in Merced, influencing decisions on recreation service development and facility enhancements. By staying informed, the Department will continue to play a critical role in promoting healthy lifestyles and contributing to community resilience.

Plan Pillars *Safety & Inclusivity*

Providing safe and inclusive programs, parks, and facilities is fundamental to the Department’s mission. Safety is not only about physical conditions, but also about how people feel when they enter a park, participate in a program, or gather in a public space. When residents experience environments that are welcoming, well-managed, and thoughtfully designed, they are more likely to participate, explore, and connect with others.

Inclusion strengthens that foundation. Parks and recreation services should reflect the diversity of the community and ensure that all residents, regardless of age, ability, background, or circumstance and feel valued and represented. Welcoming services and public spaces foster belonging, encourages shared experiences, and supports overall health and well-being. A safe and inclusive system invites participation and reinforces that everyone has a place in Merced’s public spaces.

Recommended actions resulting from the process (included on the following pages as well as in the Department’s Strategic Action Plan) intend to influence the following intended outcomes.

- **Perceived safety:** The Department will prioritize design, maintenance, staffing presence, and communication practices that foster a visible sense of safety and comfort in parks, facilities, and programs.
- **Inclusive access and engagement:** The Department will ensure that services, programs, and facilities are accessible, culturally responsive, and reflective of the community’s diversity, enabling broad participation across all populations.
- **Belonging and cultural celebration:** The Department will create opportunities that celebrate cultural differences and shared experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging meaningful connection across generations and neighborhoods.



Plan Pillars *Safety & Inclusivity*

Safety in Public Spaces

According to the Merced City and County, in 2025 there were over 700 documented unhoused individuals in Merced County, with nearly three quarters of them residing in the City of Merced. Though these totals represented a 14% decrease from the previous year, the presence of the unhoused population in the City's parks and public spaces, and the real and perceived safety issues resulting from their presence, is a top issue facing the Department.

Many municipalities, like Merced, continue to face the challenge of properly supporting unhoused populations, and both their leisure and physiological needs, alongside traditional user groups and the organization's mission to provide safe and accessible community services and gathering spaces. When people feel safe and included, participation in parks and recreation services generally increases; however, when people feel unsafe or uncomfortable, they are less likely to participate in services or visit public parks, trails, facilities, and open spaces.

In some cases, individuals from across Merced County are transported into the City for services without a coordinated transition plan or return transportation. Without clear follow-up support, case management, or mobility options, individuals may remain in the City and seek shelter in public spaces, including parks. This dynamic contributes to a concentration of visible need within City boundaries and increases pressure on Department staff who are not equipped to serve as social service providers.

Recognizing this pattern presents an opportunity for collaboration. Coordinated re-entry planning, transportation partnerships, and stronger connections between County systems, service providers, and City departments can reduce unintended displacement impacts.

Safety is influenced not only by actual incidents, but by visibility, maintenance, communication, and environmental design. Strategic investments in lighting, sightline improvements, consistent maintenance, activation through programming, visible staff presence, and community policing partnerships can increase public confidence in parks and public spaces.

The presence of unhoused individuals in public spaces reflects broader housing affordability, mental health, substance use, and economic challenges that extend beyond the scope of a parks department. No single agency can resolve these conditions alone. Effective solutions require collaboration among City departments, County health and human services, nonprofit organizations, law enforcement, faith-based partners, and the broader community.

Plan Pillars *Safety & Inclusivity*

Parks can be part of the solution by serving as points of outreach, information distribution, and positive activation. At the same time, sustainable progress depends on shared accountability, clearly defined roles, and coordinated funding strategies. When the community understands that this is a collective responsibility and sees agencies working in alignment, confidence grows and polarization decreases.

Source: Merced City and County 2025 Point in Time Report

Culture & Inclusive Access

Merced is a culturally diverse community where language, heritage, age, ability and income shape how residents experience public spaces. For example, the recent designation of the Downtown Merced Cultural District highlights the City's commitment to celebrating diverse cultural identities, supporting creative expression and strengthening the community connections through shared arts and cultural activities. For the Department to truly serve the community, services must be accessible, welcoming and relevant. This includes providing communication in commonly spoken languages such as English, Spanish, and Hmong (the three most utilized languages in Merced); designing spaces that accommodate varying abilities and disabilities; offering services that appeal to different age groups; and ensuring cost is not a barrier to participation. Inclusion is about physical access and cultural relevance and feeling invited.

When parks reflect the people they serve, participation grows. In lower-income neighborhoods especially, safe and welcoming parks and public spaces can support mental health, reduce isolation and provide affordable opportunities to recreate and provide connection. Creating lifelong users means meeting residents where they are. While youth can explore discover activities for the first time. Adults will be balancing work and family. And seniors are seeking social connection. Parks and recreation parks, facilities and services become paramount to these foundational principles of health, safety and inclusivity. When people use parks regularly and feel represented in the, they become more invested in caring for these spaces and in strengthening the community.



Plan Pillars *Safety & Inclusivity*

Recommended Actions

- **3.1: Enhance current and future parks and facilities with sustainable design that encourages safety and creates accessibility for users of all ages and abilities.**

By addressing and improving various barriers to entry of parks, facilities, and open spaces, the Department can create a more welcoming environment for users. Examples of tasks include activating the perimeter of these amenities (e.g., landscaping, increased visibility/sightlines, public art, seating) and overall compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

- **3.2: Increase security measures in parks.**

Efforts to improve both the real and perceived safety throughout the City's park system in regards to the unhoused population will positively impact usage. Enhanced efforts to park security through measures such as increased patrol surveillance and protocols, lighting, security cameras, blue light emergency phone towers, etc. can help deter unwanted activity and support safe use of amenities for all users.

- **3.3: Improve safety and perceptions of safety in parks, trails, and open spaces through increased visible presence and coordinated community-based safety efforts.**

To support safe and welcoming public spaces, the City should explore establishing a dedicated park ranger program and/or partnering with Merced Police Department cadets and trained civilian staff to provide a consistent, visible presence during peak use times. This approach may include uniformed park rangers, cadet patrols, and other designated "safety adults" focused on education, visibility, conflict de-escalation, and connection to services rather than enforcement alone. Implemented as a community-wide initiative, increased presence can deter inappropriate behavior, improve response to issues, and help residents feel more comfortable using parks and trails, while reinforcing shared responsibility for safe, inclusive public spaces.

- **3.4: Strengthen coordinated efforts that help individuals experiencing unhoused transition to stable housing.**

The City should partner with service providers and Merced County agencies to improve outreach, referrals, and connections to housing and supportive services. By focusing on coordinated systems that move individuals toward stability, rather than temporary displacement, the City can reduce impacts in parks while supporting long-term, compassionate solutions.

Plan Pillars *Safety & Inclusivity*

➤ **3.5: Reduce cultural and language barriers to ensure equitable access to parks and recreation services.**

Merced is a culturally diverse community with many languages spoken. To better serve all residents, the Department should consider taking many proactive approaches such as translating key communications into Spanish and Hmong, engaging trusted “Wisdom Holders” as volunteer ambassadors, clearly identifying staff and volunteers who speak multiple languages at events and programs, and providing staff training on culturally responsiveness.

Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

Competent management of an organization’s various resources – from its people to finances – is of utmost importance. And with public park and recreation agencies, being good stewards of each, on behalf of its residents, is even more essential. The Department is committed to using its resources wisely and planning strategically to ensure the long-term sustainability of all facets of its system.

The Resources & Stewardship Plan Pillar of the PROS Master Plan focuses on:

- **People & Organization:** The growth, development, retention, and satisfaction of its people who function as one Department under the highest operational standards.
- **Financial:** Using taxpayer dollars strategically to ensure short and long-term sustainability.

Recommended actions resulting from the process (included on the following pages as well as in the Department’s Strategic Action Plan) intend to influence the following intended outcomes.

- **Sustainable and scalable service delivery:** The Department will prioritize services from parks and facilities to programs that can be responsibly sustained at a high level of quality, while ensuring systems and investments are scalable to meet changing community needs.
- **Strong organizational infrastructure:** The Department will formalize operational systems, staffing structures, training, and professional development practices to improve performance, increase job satisfaction, and strengthen long-term organizational capacity.
- **Equitable and responsible resource allocation:** The Department will continue building on fiscally responsible practices to ensure financial and staff resources are used efficiently, transparently, and equitably to benefit the entire community.
- **Strategic funding and partnerships:** By pursuing diversified funding strategies and collaborative partnerships that align with long-term priorities, leverage outside resources where appropriate, and position the City for sustainable investment and responsible growth.



Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

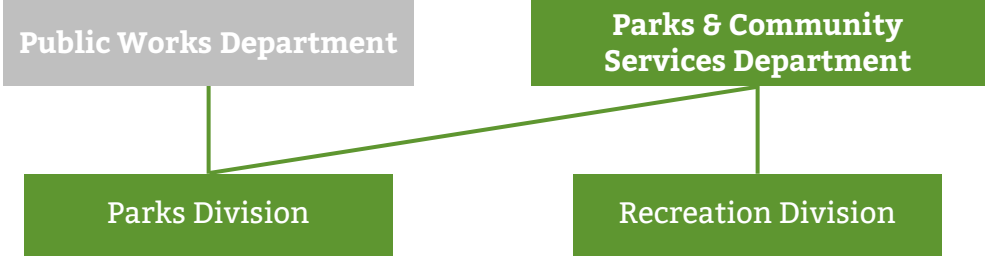
People & Organization

The Parks & Community Services Department consists of two divisions (i.e., Parks Division and Recreation Division) that currently operates out of two separate departments; the Parks Division operates out of the Public Works Department, and the Recreation Division operates out of the Parks & Community Services Department. This means that while the Parks & Community Services Department is considered one entity for both public purposes and for the purposes of the PROS Master Plan efforts, there are technically cross-departmental support to sustain daily operations.

While staff within both divisions are dedicated, capable, and committed to serving the community, they are operating at capacity. As service expectations grow and long-term infrastructure, operational, and community needs become more complex, meeting the level of quality residents desire and expect may require strengthening technical expertise, clarifying roles, and addressing potential gaps. To perform at the highest level and sustain long-term success, staff must operate under a unified vision with shared priorities and coordinated decision-making across divisions. Continued collaboration will be essential to ensuring consistency in service philosophy, operational standards, and quality expectations.

To continue serving the Department’s mission with the highest standards for operations, maintenance, programming, and engagement, additional investment in resources are needed. This includes implementing various administrative policies and plans, technological training, professional certifications/expertise, establishing standards in employee development, and communication standards. Addressing these areas will help ensure the Department establish their foundational practices. And as the community changes and grows, staff will encounter new expectations, new service needs, and expanded responsibilities. Providing staff with the tools, training, and support to succeed not only strengthens day-to-day operations, but it also positions the Department to embrace new opportunities with confidence.

Figure 8: Organizational Chart



Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

Financial

The City is currently operating in a period of fiscal constraint, making it increasingly difficult to provide the level of service the community desires and expects. Budget shortfalls require thoughtful prioritization, and in some cases, even revenue-generating services face scrutiny as broader financial pressures impact the General Fund. In this environment, fiscal stewardship is not optional, it is foundational. Strategic use of taxpayer dollars lays the groundwork for a stable, trusted, and resilient parks and recreation system capable of serving the community not only today, but well into the future.

Strategic financial management balances immediate fiscal realities with long-term obligations. By aligning investments with community priorities and maintaining a disciplined, transparent approach to resource allocation, Merced can build a park and recreation system that remains equitable, resilient, and sustainable for generations to come.

Figure 9 shows the four-year history of the Department’s total operating budget, including total revenues and expenses, for recreation, parks maintenance, and the Applegate Park Zoo.

During the 2025 fiscal year, each of the three areas impact on the Department’s operating budget is as follows:

- **Parks Maintenance** does not generate any revenue and incurred expenses of \$3,191,798, or about 50% of the Department’s total expenses.
- **Recreation** generated \$749,285 in revenue, over 80% of the Department’s total revenues, and incurred expenses of \$2,553,310, or nearly 40% of the Department’s total expenses. This resulted in 29% cost recovery performance.
- **Applegate Park Zoo** generated \$65,611 in revenue, about 18% of the Department’s total revenues, and incurred expenses of \$671,791, or 10% of the Department’s total expenses. This resulted in 24% cost recovery performance.

NOTE: More details on the Department’s operating budget are available in Supplement E: Financial Analysis & Strategy Report.

Figure 9: Total Department Operating Budget

Parks & Community Services, Applegate Park Zoo, and Public Works Parks Maintenance	FY Actual 2022	FY Actual 2023	FY Actual 2024	FY Actual 2025
Total Revenue	\$ 326,423	\$ 465,632	\$ 639,563	\$ 908,817
Total Expense	\$ 3,985,373	\$ 4,502,302	\$ 5,590,506	\$ 6,416,899
Net Revenue	\$ (3,658,950)	\$ (4,036,670)	\$ (4,950,943)	\$ (5,508,082)
Cost Recovery	8%	10%	11%	14%

Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

Financial Sustainability Strategy

Financial stewardship lays the groundwork for a stable, trusted, and resilient park and recreation system. For Merced, embracing this challenge meant extending beyond traditional master planning efforts by engaging in a financial sustainability strategy process.

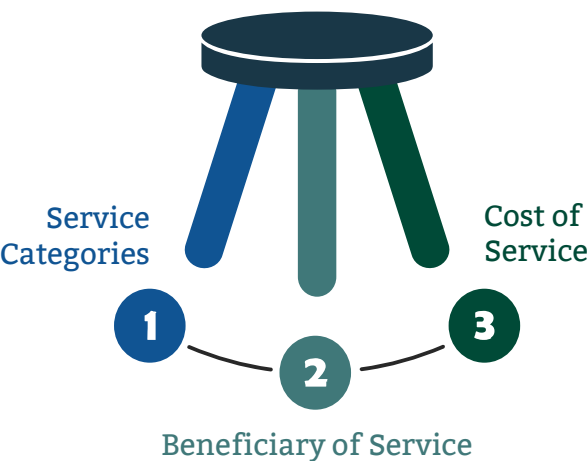
The Department elected to integrate its master planning efforts with evaluating its costs of doing business so that there was a solid understanding of how taxpayer resources are currently being utilized so that future financial decision making continues to be as informed as possible.

Designing Merced’s Cost Recovery Strategy

The Financial Sustainability Three-legged Stool illustration builds on the philosophy of 110%’s Parks and Reconomics© - how parks and recreation organizations manage their finite financial resources.

The Department embraced this philosophy and the exercise of creating their Cost Recovery Strategy for its parks and recreation services by following these principal steps (as illustrated in the graphic to the right).

Figure 10: Tax Use/Revenue Enhancement Philosophy



Overview & Philosophy

Why is it important?

High-performing park and recreation agencies seek out and embrace responsible financial and service management practices. They actively understand the cost of doing business, identify cost savings, divest of services that do not align with mission or waste resources, and generate revenues when appropriate to reinvest in important and often underfunded services, maintain infrastructure, and relieve pressure on taxpayer resources. Ultimately, they possess a financial sustainability philosophy that provides a foundation from which all investment and spending decisions, and funding strategies are built.

Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

1

Service Categories

The development of categories which include services that are alike in "purpose" is important when it comes to justifiable and equitable allocation of subsidy, cost recovery levels, and assignment of budget and general ledger lines to account for a category's fiscal performance.

Service categorization can lead to the diminishing of special interests and social values that can drive arbitrary investment and revenue decision making

2

Beneficiary of Service

Beneficiary of Service evaluates each service category based on who benefits, who should pay (and to what degree).

Common Good services are accessible, of benefit to the community, and provide universal value. Essentially, they contribute to the "common good" and can be characterized as essentially having community-wide interest and far-reaching impacts.

Exclusive Benefit services provide exclusive benefit to the individual(s) and can include constraints or barriers to access. Essentially, these services benefit the individual more than the community as a whole and can be characterized as discretionary with less of a community-wide impact.

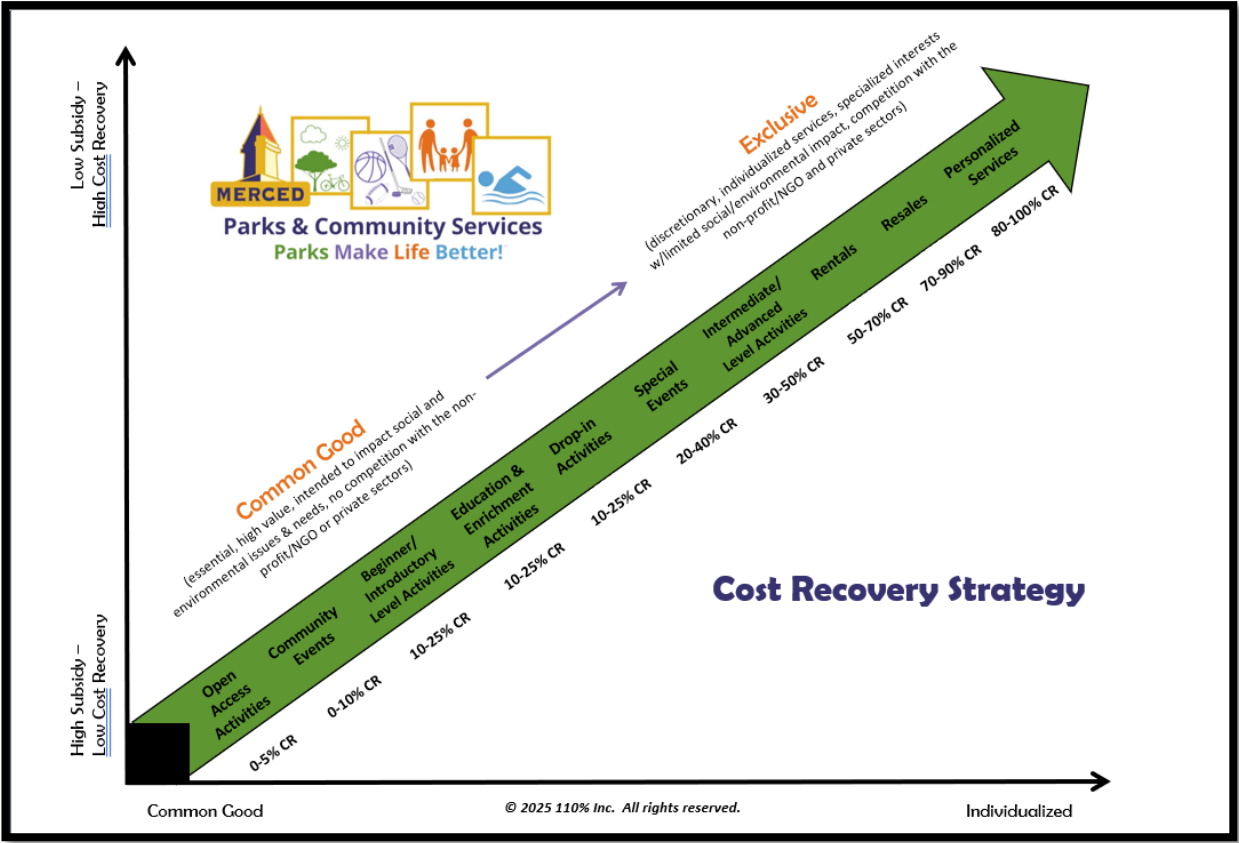
3

Cost of Service Analysis

Completion of an operational cost-of-service analysis allowed the department to understand its cost-of-service of doing business, ultimately revealing each service's cost recovery and subsidy investment level. Operational revenues (fees and charges, sponsorships, grants, donations), direct costs (expenses associated with the delivery of a service; without the service, the cost would not exist) and indirect costs (expenses that would exist with or without the provision of any one service) that the department provided were captured and attributed to all services as part of this work, providing several insights that would inform the design and development of the Department's Cost Recovery Strategy.

Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

Figure 11: Merced Parks & Recreation Cost Recovery Strategy



NOTE: Full details on the Financial Sustainability Strategy process is available in Supplement E: Financial Analysis & Strategy Report.

Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

Recommended Actions

➤ **4.1: Update the Cost Recovery Strategy.**

The Cost Recovery Strategy conducted as part of the PROS Master Plan process should be reviewed annually, and subsidy (tax dollar) investment goals should be analyzed and updated at least every two to three years or more frequently as necessary.

➤ **4.2: Conduct annual cost-of-service analysis updates.**

Conducting regular cost-of-service analysis updates will provide a clear understanding of the costs of delivering services and operating and maintaining parks and facilities. This data and information will position the Department to set informed pricing, align resources with community priorities, and make decisions grounded in transparency and fiscal responsibility.

➤ **4.3: Evaluate long-term partnership and governance options to ensure the future feasibility of Applegate Park Zoo.**

Given the financial and operational demands of Applegate Park Zoo, the City should evaluate long-term partnership and governance models to determine the most sustainable path forward. This review should explore affiliations with nonprofit operators or regional systems, assess standards associated with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and consider potential collaboration with larger institutions such as the Fresno Chaffee Zoo or the Sacramento Zoo. Accreditation benchmarks should serve as a baseline for expected costs and care standards. Ultimately, the City must decide whether to reinvest under its current structure or pursue an alternative model aligned with fiscal realities and community priorities.

➤ **4.4: Establish a long-term Cost Recovery Strategy for Applegate Park Zoo as a pseudo-enterprise operation.**

The Applegate Park Zoo should implement a 5–15 year Cost Recovery Strategy, operating similarly to a pseudo-enterprise fund with defined revenue targets, expense tracking, and reinvestment plans. A focused business plan should prioritize earned revenue through admissions, retail expansion, branded merchandise, food and beverage sales, improved point-of-sale systems, sponsorships, a “Friends of the Zoo” program, and animal adoption initiatives. By strengthening revenue drivers and reinvesting in visitor experience, the Zoo can reduce General Fund reliance while improving operational stability and service quality.

Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

- **4.5: Evaluate and update Developer Impact Fee (DIF) practices and policies to ensure adequate, equitable, and financially responsible funding for future parks and recreation facilities.**
As Merced continues to grow, it is critical that DIFs accurately reflect the true cost of land acquisition, design, construction, and long-term infrastructure needs. This action calls for a comprehensive review of the City’s current DIF structure, assumptions, fee calculations, and nexus documentation to ensure alignment with current construction and design costs, inflationary pressures, and updated park standards. The assessment should also examine policies regarding land dedication in lieu of fees, particularly in light of the City’s current financial conditions and long-term maintenance capacity. Clear criteria and updated fee structures will help ensure that growth pays its proportionate share, reduce unfunded liabilities, and position the City to develop new parks and facilities in a way that is fiscally sustainable and operationally realistic.
- **4.6: Pursue and secure funding to advance the design, construction and maintenance of previously identified by currently unfunded park projects.**
The City of Merced has identified four priority park sites (i.e., General Van Pao Park, Charles Ogletree Park, Lester K. Yoshida Park, and Alfarata Park) that currently lack secured funding for their design and construction phases. Advancing these projects will require a coordinated funding strategy that may include development impact fees, grants, state and federal funding programs, partnerships, philanthropy, and potential voter-approved revenue measures. This action emphasizes proactive grant readiness, updated cost estimates, clear phasing plans, and alignment with broader City priorities to improve competitiveness for external funding. By intentionally pursuing diverse and sustainable funding sources, the City can move these long-planned parks from concept to reality, expand equitable access to recreation and green space, and demonstrate responsible stewardship of community growth.
- **4.7: Establish clear standards for the type, quality, and functional characteristics of parkland to be dedicated and accepted by the City of Merced.**
As Merced continues to grow, it is essential that park land dedication aligns with long-term community needs, operational capacity and fiscal responsibility. This action calls for the development of objective criteria that define what constitutes acceptable park land. Consider factors such as size, configuration, accessibility, visibility, environmental suitability, adjacent to neighborhoods, connectivity to trails and schools and long-term maintenance implications.

Plan Pillars *Resources & Stewardship*

➤ **4.8: Create position-specific and parks and recreation-centric professional development plans.**

Position-specific professional development plans will help ensure that every staff member has the skills, training, and tools needed to perform their duties effectively and grow as parks and recreation professionals. These plans provide clarity around expectations as well as opportunities and relevant organizations providing services. Implementing these plans will support high-quality service delivery and strengthen the Department's overall capacity.

➤ **4.9: Expand training and enhance the use of the Recreation Management Software System (RMSS).**

While the Department currently utilizes RecTrac for the management and registration of its recreation services, further developing the practices of the RMSS will better streamline registration, facility reservations, point-of-sale transactions, and customer communication. Improving practices will improve staff efficiency, enhance data accuracy, expand reporting capabilities, and provide a more seamless, user-friendly experience for residents.

➤ **4.10: Strengthen interdepartmental collaboration to improve operational efficiency and enhance service quality for Merced residents.**

Delivering high-quality parks and recreation services requires coordination across departments, including Public Works, Planning, Finance, Police, and City Administration. This action supports the development of clearer communication channels, shared planning processes, aligned capital improvement priorities, and coordinated maintenance and service delivery standards. By working more intentionally across departments, the City can reduce duplication of effort, improve response times, better align staffing and budget resources, and create more seamless experiences for residents.

Strategic Action Plan

Strategic Action Plan *Overview*

The Strategic Action Plan, included as a supplement to the City of Merced PROS Master Plan, is designed as a management tool for ease of use and as a method of simplifying recommendations. It is essential for the master planning effort to come to life for the following reasons:

- **Clarity Of Pillars and Actions:**
It outlines specific actions that will be taken within a defined timeframe. This clarity helps ensure that everyone involved understands what needs to be done and why.
- **Resource Allocation:**
It helps in allocating resources effectively. By identifying the actions, timelines, and responsibilities, the Strategic Action Plan allows the Department to allocate resources such as budget, human resources, and other resources in a targeted and efficient manner.
- **Accountability and Responsibility:**
It assigns clear responsibilities to individuals or teams for each action item. This accountability ensures that actions are completed on time and to the expected standards.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:**
It provides a basis for monitoring progress and evaluating the success of the plan. Regular reviews against the action plan allow for adjustments to be made if circumstances change or if certain actions are not achieving the desired outcomes.
- **Continuous Improvement:**
It promotes a culture of continuous improvement. Through regular updates and revisions based on feedback and changing circumstances, the Department can adapt and evolve to meet new challenges and opportunities.

Strategic Action Plan *Overview*

The Strategic Action Plan includes 35 recommended actionable steps resulting from the master planning effort that staff are encouraged to execute to impact and improve Department operations and service to community.

The graphic below serves as an example of how the Department's Plan Pillars and Associated Actions are structured and defined in the PROS Master Plan.

Figure 12: Strategic Action Plan Format

Plan Pillar	Recommended Action	Action Details	Prioritization	Resource Requirement	Staff Lead	Timeline
broad based statements of intent; an aim or desired result; also known as a goal	method of performing the acts that will influences the pillars and lead to desired result(s)	the finer details and context explaining each associated action	<u>High</u> necessary for the organization to thrive <u>Medium</u> organization should address but not pressing <u>Low</u> a desire; satisfies an interest	<u>High</u> significant staff, financial, and other resources <u>Medium</u> moderate staff, financial, and other resources <u>Low</u> lessor staff, financial, and other resources	assigns a clear individual(s) or a team responsible	<u>Short-term</u> 0-2 years <u>Mid-term</u> 3-5 years <u>Long-term</u> 6+ years

NOTE: The Strategic Action Plan worksheet tool is available as Appendix F and should be reviewed and updated annually as it is not intended as a static plan.

Strategic Action Plan *Helpful Tips*



Maintain Awareness

Maintaining awareness of the Department's commitment to the Strategic Action Plan amongst all staff is critical to success – and this must go beyond an occasional speech, an annual meeting, or sending the occasional email. After spending months crafting the PROS Master Plan and its priorities and recommended actions, it is important that the same commitment, drive, and passion that carried through plan development is continued into implementation, execution, and monitoring progress.



Generate and Keep Momentum

It is essential to reinforce action when it is taken. Regular, consistent review of effort is needed to provide feedback, take corrective action, hold staff accountable, and keep Merced Parks & Community Services Department on course.



Monitoring and Keeping Score

Monitoring the implementation of the plan is important for several reasons. First, it helps ensure that work is progressing, and the department is assessing whether it is accomplishing desired outcomes. Second, monitoring provides the opportunity to communicate progress, both internally and externally. Third, it identifies where problems and opportunities lie and what has changed allowing for corrective actions including adjustment or setting a new course. Most importantly, monitoring demonstrates a commitment to the plan and translating the planning effort into tangible reality rather than it become an occasional academic exercise.

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