

City of Merced

Park and Open Space Master Plan Final Draft



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PARK AND OPEN SPACE MASTER PLAN

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

As the largest city in Merced County, Merced is a regional provider of park and recreation services. However, the current service level is lower than that of most California communities of similar size. One of the main questions addressed in this master planning effort was whether the City should attempt to improve the quality of life in Merced by providing a larger and more comprehensive park and recreation program.

The City has been fortunate in that its inventory of parks is good, and most existing neighborhoods are served by parks. The City also wisely pursued the development of an off-street bicycle trail system that is now widely viewed as a local treasure. However, in the absence of a plan for park acquisition and development, many of the newer parks are poorly designed, poorly located, or underdeveloped. The result is a park system that is underutilized in many cases. In addition, with the increase in new development, more parks are coming on-line, increasing the maintenance needs of the park system. In addition, the level of recreation programming (both public and private) in Merced is very low, and there are limited options available for residents.

This plan addresses community needs and charts a new direction for the City to take in the future. The City has the basis for an excellent park system, and the potential to develop comprehensive recreation programming. However, to provide a higher level of service to residents, the existing system needs improvement, as well as expansion to meet the expected population growth. In addition, an increased level of programming is needed to meet community recreation needs. With the current level of development in Merced, it is now time to expand the basics and go to the next level of park and recreation services.

EXISTING RESOURCES

The Merced park system consists of both active and passive recreational areas, including a variety of park types, as well as an extensive off-street bicycle path system. The City of Merced has approximately 187 acres of active parkland, more than 120 acres of linear parkland encompassing the stream corridors where the bike paths are located, and more than 29 acres of undeveloped parkland.

The bike trail system is contained in 4 creek corridors, and currently total 13.11 miles. Expansions to this system are planned, and funding is in place for some of them.

In Merced, the inventory of recreation facilities such as sports fields used by the public is relatively low, and the City itself provides only a few facilities. There are no gymnasiums owned by the City, except the McCombs Youth Center which is operated by the Boys and Girls Club. The City relies heavily on the local school districts for athletic fields and gymnasiums. The following facilities are available for public use in Merced:

- 23 youth softball/baseball fields (3 lighted);
- 5 adult softball fields (all lighted);
- 13 soccer fields (does not include open turf areas);
- 6 tennis courts; and
- 5,450 s.f. of pool space.

Other recreational sites in the planning area owned by public agencies include the Merced County Fairgrounds (owned by the State of California), Courthouse Park, and Flanagan Park, (both owned by Merced County). Lake Yosemite, also owned by Merced County, is located to the northeast of the planning area and is adjacent to the U.C. Merced campus.

COMMUNITY INPUT

The Park and Open Space Master Planning process incorporated community input in several ways.

These include:

- A public workshop
- A youth workshop
- Stakeholder interviews

A public workshop was held on the evening of June 10, 2003 in the Sam Pipes Room at the Merced Civic Center. Key findings are summarized below.

- The top three priorities identified by participants were:
 - City-wide trail system expansions
 - Outdoor sport field complex
 - More aquatic facilities (Pools and water playgrounds)
- Participants seemed to value the parks in the City and see them as an important component of quality of life. The trail system was cited as a major success by many.
- Generally, there appeared to be interest in the City's providing additional recreation programs and developing more partnerships, especially with the school districts.
- There was support for a mix of park facilities, with neighborhood parks within walking distance of most citizens.

On June 10, 2003, a noontime workshop for youth was held at McCombs Youth Center. Approximately twenty youth ranging from ages 7 to 18 were in attendance, with the majority of the group ages 10 and 11.

Participants identified swimming and waterslides; very active amusements such as skate parks; and concessions in parks their top activities and facilities to include in parks. Other input received through the youth workshop included a need to provide park facilities that accommodate people with disabilities.

In May, 2003, telephone interviews were conducted with stakeholders identified by the City of Merced Park and Open Space Master Plan project team. Key findings were:

- There is a perception of crime in the parks, and on the bike paths. The City needs to address

this, such as through increased policing or volunteer foot patrols.

- There is a lack of indoor recreation space. There is a need for gyms, classrooms, indoor meeting places, community rooms, and similar indoor spaces.
- The bike trail system is wonderful and should be expanded, especially toward U.C. Merced and Lake Yosemite.
- There should be parks within walking distance of most neighborhoods.
- There is a need for more programming, especially for youth.

PARK LAND AND FACILITY NEEDS

- It is recommended the City consider reducing its inventory of mini-parks because of the low use of these parks and the overlapping service areas.
- Based on the recommended service level, 8 additional neighborhood park sites are needed to serve the current city limits, and an additional 13 are needed to serve the planning area at build-out. However, 9 sites are already available or dedicated to park use.
- The majority of the current Merced city limits are served by the existing community and large urban parks. To provide community park service to the entire planning area, 4 additional community or large urban parks will be needed.
- In addition to other park land needs, land is needed for the following special use facilities: 2 youth centers, 2 recreation centers, and additional athletic complexes.
- There are opportunities to develop trails along linear corridors such as the Cottonwood Creek corridor and the northern portion of the Fahrens Creek corridor. In order to build out the City of Merced's off-street bikeway network as planned, approximately 65 acres of linear park land containing approximately 10.8 miles of trail are needed.
- Based on the recommended demand standard, 1 additional adult softball field is needed to serve current demand and a total of 6 additional fields would be required at build-out.
- It is recommended the city maintain about the current level of service for youth baseball and

softball fields. The supply and demand analysis showed that current needs can be served by the existing field inventory. A total of 17 additional fields will be needed to serve the City at build-out.

- Based on the recommended demand standard, there is a shortage of 3 soccer fields at this time. This will be reduced to a shortage of 2 fields once the new field at Joe Herb Park is complete. At build-out, a total of 17 additional soccer fields will be needed.
- Based on the supply and demand analysis, there is a need for additional gymnasium space. The recommended demand standard indicates a current need for 2 courts, with a need for the equivalent of a total of 11 courts at build-out.
- There is a need for additional pool space.

FACILITY PLAN

The Master Plan includes a facility plan that sets forth recommendations for existing parks, proposed new parks, and new facilities. Key points of the facility plan are summarized below:

- Due to their size, maintenance costs, and limited recreational value, additional mini-parks are not recommended. In addition, the City should consider reducing its current inventory of this park type by either selling some sites or acquiring additional land to make them into neighborhood parks.
- Improvements are proposed to most of the City's neighborhood parks, with major improvements proposed for Burbank Park.
- Land is available for eight new neighborhood parks, but the parks need to be designed and developed.
- Thirteen new neighborhood parks will require land acquisition, as well as planning and park development.
- Upgrades are proposed to the City's existing community and large urban parks, including McNamara, Joe Herb, and Applegate. Development of Fahrens Park as per the master plan is proposed.
- Four new community parks are proposed, including a 40 acre site in south Merced and three 20 acre sites in north Merced. These sites are intended to serve new growth in the community.

- Two new indoor recreation centers and two new youth centers are proposed.
- A second adult softball complex is proposed, preferably to be located in north Merced.
- A soccer complex is proposed for inclusion in the new community park in south Merced, site CP-42. This site should be about 20 acres in size, and should include lights on at least a portion of the fields.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

- The City should work with local leagues and any new leagues that may form to establish a Sports Council that will develop policies for field scheduling and other field sports-related topics. This group should include representatives from all field sports, and should meet regularly (at least quarterly).
- The City should consider moving the Zoo from Applegate Park to another site in the long term.
- Improve park security. In addition to park design improvements, this can be accomplished by regular patrol of bike paths and parks by police bike patrols, volunteer, Explorers, or paid park rangers.
- Increase recreation programs and classes. Target areas include more programs for adults, fitness programs, youth at-risk programs, arts and crafts, special one day events, cultural events, day camps, sports instructional programs, indoor instruction and special interest classes. Another potential program area is additional recreational sports, especially for youth.
- Implement a computerized program registration program, preferably one that allows registration via the internet, to increase the level of customer service.
- Establish cost recovery goals for each program area. Track revenues and expenditures for each program area so that cost recovery can be evaluated routinely.
- Improve the level of park design.
- Adopt specific restroom policies about when and where restrooms will be provided, and what type they will be. The policies will help reduce vandalism and improve safety in park restrooms.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT OPTIONS

This plan is intended to be a twenty to twenty-five year document. A short-term six year capital improvement plan is proposed for initial implementation of the plan. It is anticipated that work on the park system would continue beyond the initial 6 year strategy, and that successive CIPs would continue to be prepared and updated.

Two approaches to financing the Plan are presented: a pay-as-you-go approach based on availability of grants and local funding and a more aggressive approach based on a voter-supported tax measure paying for selected improvements. There are numerous other options and combination of options to accomplish the Plan.

Option 1 (Pay As You Go Approach):

Due to the current economic climate and the limited available resources, Option 1 will continue on as in the past and proceed based on a pay-as-you-go approach. Using this approach, the City will only fund smaller capital projects. Large capital projects, such as a recreation center or acquisition of land for the South Merced Community Park, will be deferred until funds are appropriated to develop multimillion dollar projects. This is the recommended approach for the near future. The table below lists the capital projects proposed under Option 1.

Project Name	Opinion of Probable Cost	Comment
Charles Richard Drew Park	\$147,000	Upgrade
Santa Fe Strip N'hood Park	\$601,500	Development
Flanagan Park	\$300,000	Upgrade
Alfarata Ranch	\$316,845	Partial Development
New Neighborhood Park	\$800,000	Partial development
New Neighborhood Park	\$800,000	Partial development
New Neighborhood Park	\$800,000	Partial development
Ada Givens Park	\$270,000	Upgrade
McNamara Park	\$340,000	Upgrade
Fahrens Park	\$940,000	Development
New Community Park	\$5,290,000	Acquisition/Dev.
Bikeway development and improvements	\$543,630	Development
Total Expenditures	\$11,148,975	

Option 2 (More Aggressive Tax-Supported Approach):

The second approach is more ambitious and assumes that certain key projects, such as acquisition of Site CP-42, the South Merced Community Park, would occur in the first six-year period. This approach will require a voter-supported tax measure to implement, and a citywide Landscaping & Lighting District is the proposed financing mechanism. The cost of an L&L district to raise \$6 million in capital project funds is projected to be approximately \$22 per household annually. Due to the current economic climate, it is not recommended that the City pursue tax-supported financing at the present time, but that this be reevaluated in a few years if the economy improves.

Option 2 includes two major projects: acquisition of 40 acres for the South Merced Community Park and development of the North Recreation Center. It is important to secure the property for the South Merced Community Park while the land is still available and reasonably priced. The North Recreation Center is also proposed as part of this CIP to meet the community's pressing indoor recreation needs and to provide park service in an underserved area.

The table below lists the capital projects proposed under Option 2.

Project Name	Opinion of Probable Cost	Comment
Charles Richard Drew Park	\$147,000	Upgrade
Santa Fe Strip N'hood Park	\$281,500	Partial development
Flanagan Park	\$300,000	Upgrade
Alfarata Ranch	\$316,845	Partial Development
New Neighborhood Park	\$800,000	Partial development
New Neighborhood Park	\$800,000	Partial development
New Neighborhood Park	\$800,000	Partial development
Ada Givens Park	\$270,000	Upgrade
McNamara Park	\$340,000	Upgrade
Fahrens Park	\$940,000	Development
S. Merced Community Park	\$2,000,000	Land acquisition
New Community Park	\$5,290,000	Acquisition/dev.
North Recreation Center	\$4,500,000	Acquisition/dev.
Bikeway Development/improvements	\$543,630	Development
Total Expenditures	\$17,328,975	

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Preface

This report is a long-range guide for park and recreation services in Merced. Once adopted, it will give the City direction and policies for acquiring and developing parks, open space, trails, and other recreational facilities.

As the largest city in Merced County, Merced is a regional provider of park and recreation services. However, the current service level is lower than that of most California communities of similar size. One of the main questions addressed in this master planning effort was whether the City should attempt to improve the quality of life in Merced by providing a larger and more comprehensive park and recreation program. The City has been fortunate in that its inventory of parks is good, and most existing neighborhoods are served by parks. The City also wisely pursued the development of an off-street bicycle trail system that is now widely viewed as a local treasure. However, in the absence of a plan for park acquisition and development, many of the newer parks are poorly designed, poorly located, or underdeveloped. The result is a park system that is underutilized in many cases. In addition, with the increase in new development, more parks are coming on-line, increasing the maintenance needs of the park system. In addition, the level of recreation programming in Merced is very low, and there are limited options available for residents.

As with the rest of California and the United States in general, Merced has experienced general budget constraints within recent years. In addition, the average income in Merced is lower than in Merced County and much lower than in the State of California, which means that the population has a need for affordable recreation and less disposable income to pay for it. Compounding the budgetary challenge is several years of instability in the organization of park and recreation services in Merced. The result is a disconnect between parks and recreation, a lack of recreation programming, and a park system that is underdeveloped. With the exception of several that are highly used, many of the parks require renovation and or substantial upgrades to improve their quality and usability.

This plan addresses community needs and charts a new direction for the City to take in the future. The City has the basis for an excellent park system, and the potential to develop comprehensive recreation programming. However, to provide a higher level of service to residents, the existing system needs improvement, as well as expansion to meet the expected population growth. In addition, an increased level of programming is needed to meet community recreation needs. With the current level of development in Merced, it is now time to expand the basics and go to the next level of park and recreation services.

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