

Chapter 8 – Robust Recreation:2040

Recreation is indispensable to the quality of life in a growing town near the metro’s suburban growth area. Earlham should have quality recreational spaces with quality options and diverse, quality programs for all ages. Robust implies this quality but also increasing quantity commensurate with the City of Earlham’s ability to offer recreation over time. In some cases, partnerships can expand recreational options, especially when growing the offerings at Gendler Park, which could be a destination park for metro residents with more investment.

This chapter discusses:

- Summary of current conditions from Chapter 3.
- Summary of public input about future robust recreation needs and vision.
- Quality recreation needs and development potential.
- Quality recreational programming potential.
- Future park and recreational trends.
- Robust recreation goals, policies, and action items.

Summary of Current Conditions

The following matrix itemizes the positive and negative characteristics identified in the background research concerning the topic of this chapter.

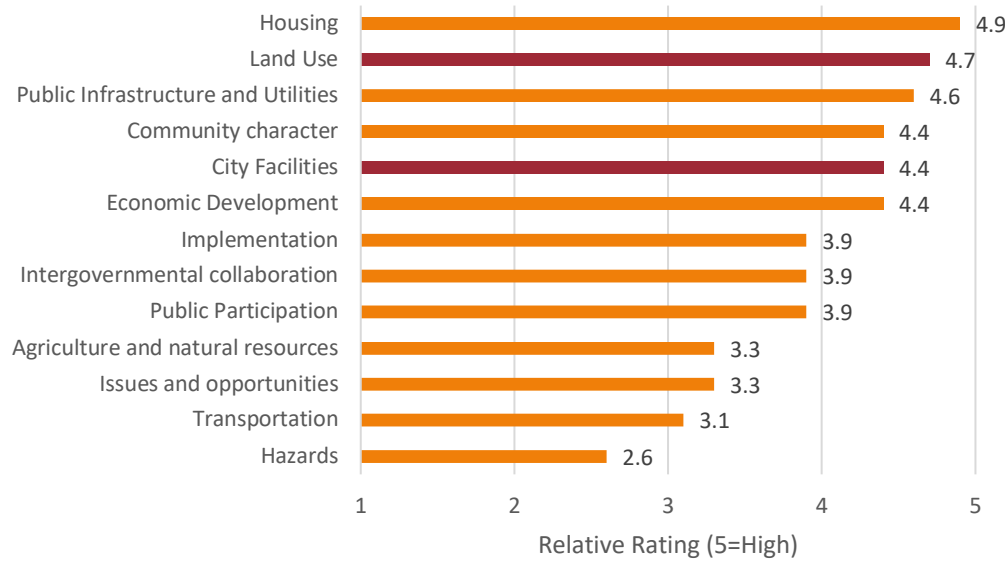
Figure 8.1: Current Conditions Matrix for the Robust Recreation

Thriving Earlham	Struggling Earlham
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The city park just east of downtown is a well-maintained and aesthetically attractive park that attracts many area residents.• The recreation complex with shared City/School amenities is a great partnership that allows for more recreation options.• Having a large open space like Gendler Park is a great community asset.• The recreation program offerings are limited in scale but popular.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is limited identification or directional (wayfinding) signage to direct people to parks.• Gender Park is far from reaching its potential as a recreation destination.

Summary of Public Input About Recreation Needs and Vision

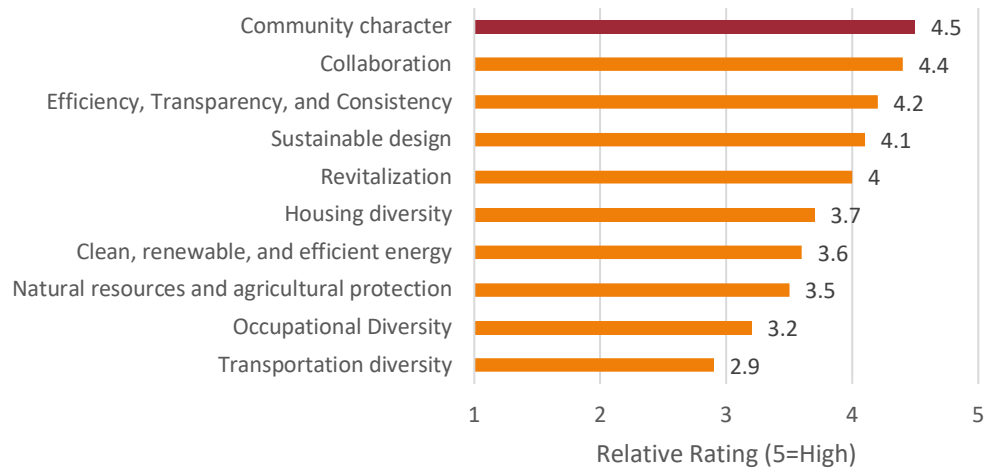
Recreation is moderately important, probably because Earlham has good facilities and programs which satisfy many people. However, Gender Park offers much potential that should be explored, many people say. This section evaluates recreation and open space topics. Trails, while incidental to recreation, is covered more thoroughly in the transportation chapter.

Figure 8.2: Relative Importance of Iowa Smart Planning 13 Planning Elements According to the Steering Committee



Recreation is not one of the ten Smart Planning Elements. However, city facilities and land use relate the most to recreation. Recreation often occupies large areas of land and are sometimes a secondary thought when planning new developments. Land use is the second highest rated element. Recreation is also a form of community facility and involves municipal staffing and maintenance. City facilities is the fifth rated element.

Figure 8.3: Relative Importance of Iowa Smart Planning 10 Planning Principles According to the Steering Committee



Again, no Iowa Planning Principle relates directly to recreation. Community character, the top rated of the ten, probably relates the best. Other planning principles, such as efficiency/transparency/consistency, collaboration, sustainable design, natural resources and agricultural protection, and revitalization, are key to the implementation of goals, actions, and policies related to this topic.

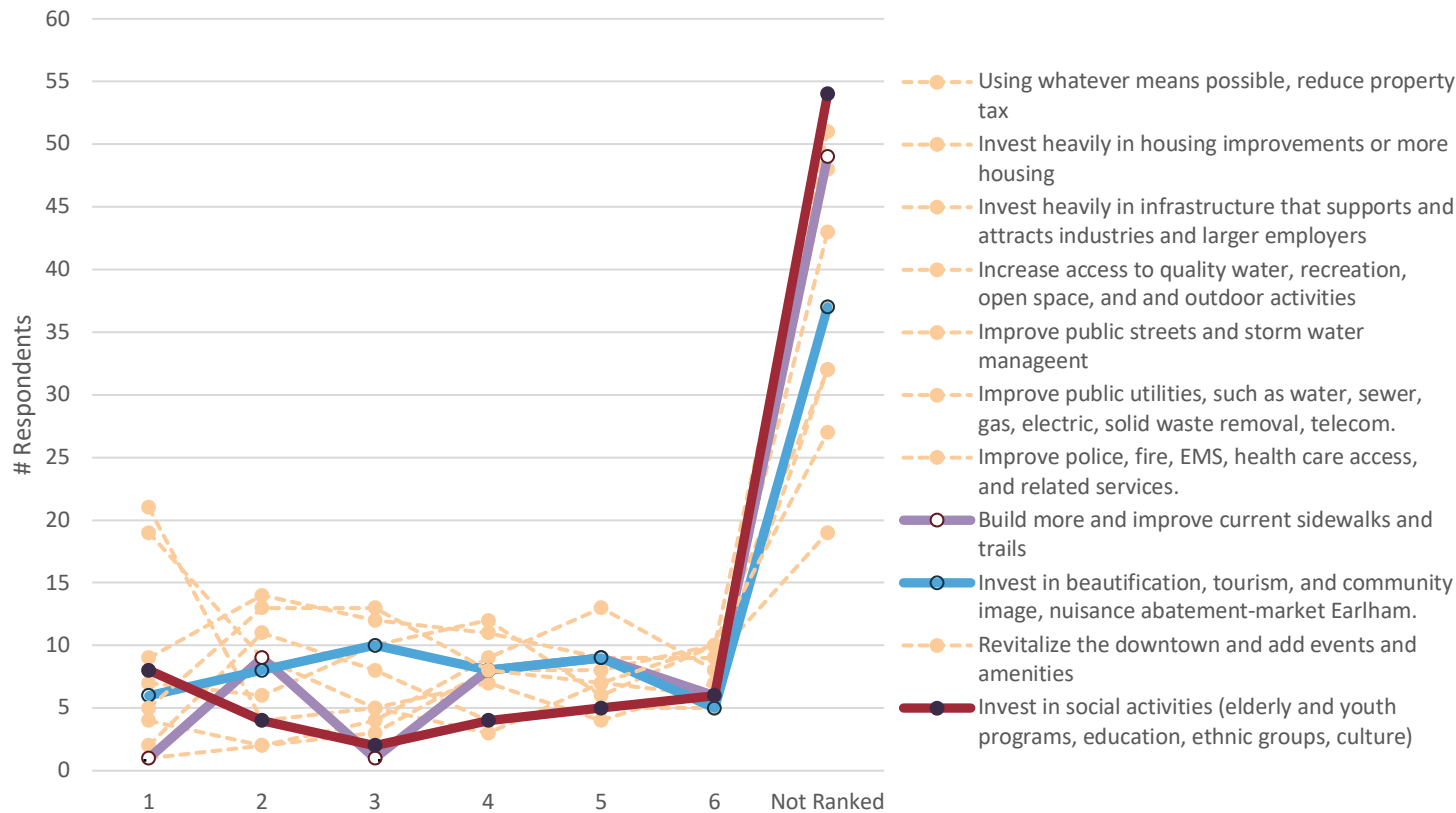
Figure 8.4: Steering Committee Four Questions Exercise Comments Related to Parks and Recreation

Biggest Opportunities	Biggest Challenges	One Big Dream	One Big Fear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bike trails connecting to larger trails. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and address needs for a healthy (socially, physically, spiritually, financially) community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A rec center. • I want Earlham to be a destination town for families to take roots and raise their family. They do so because the schools are strong, the town is safe, the community is supportive and self-sustaining. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None.

Eighty-four people responded to the community survey question asking about current community facility needs in Earlham. The question asked about public satisfaction with several recreational amenities. About 80% of the respondents are very or somewhat satisfied with the city park just northeast of downtown. About 50% of the respondents are very or somewhat satisfied with the city/school sports/recreation complex. Only 20% feel the same way about Gendler Park, with most residents having no opinion. About 50% of the respondents are very to somewhat satisfied with the number and size of recreational amenities. Most residents are somewhat to very unsatisfied with access to an indoor recreational facility.

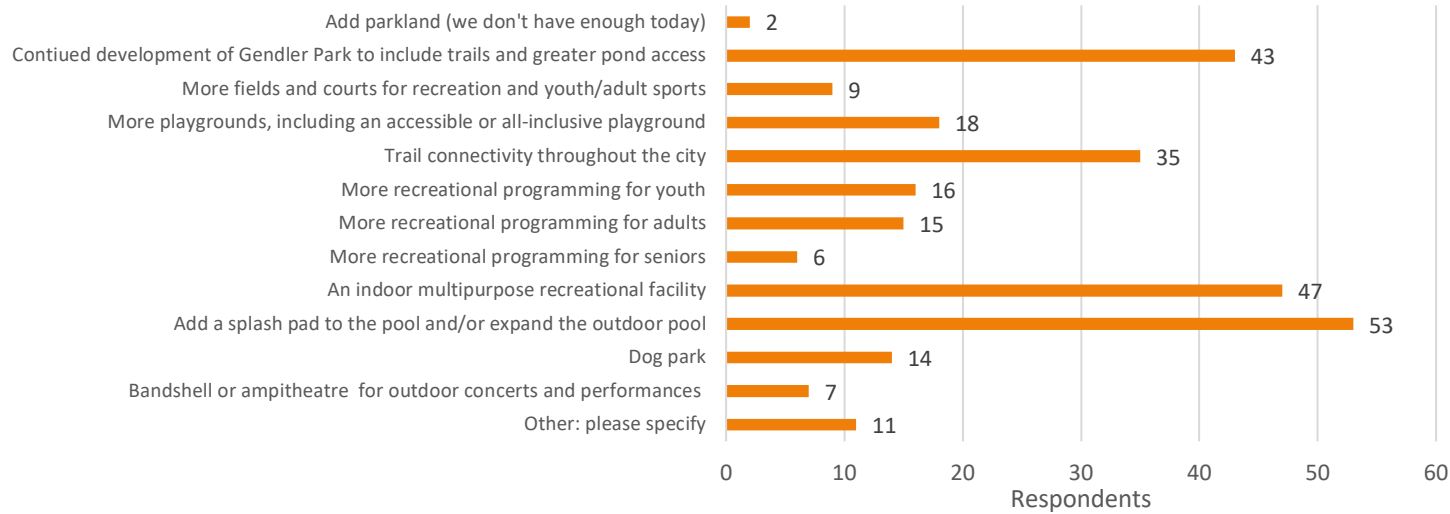
The community survey also asked about future park and recreation, as shown in the following graphics.

Figure 8.5: Community Survey Results: “What Actions Can the City Take to Improve the Quality of Life in Earlham?”



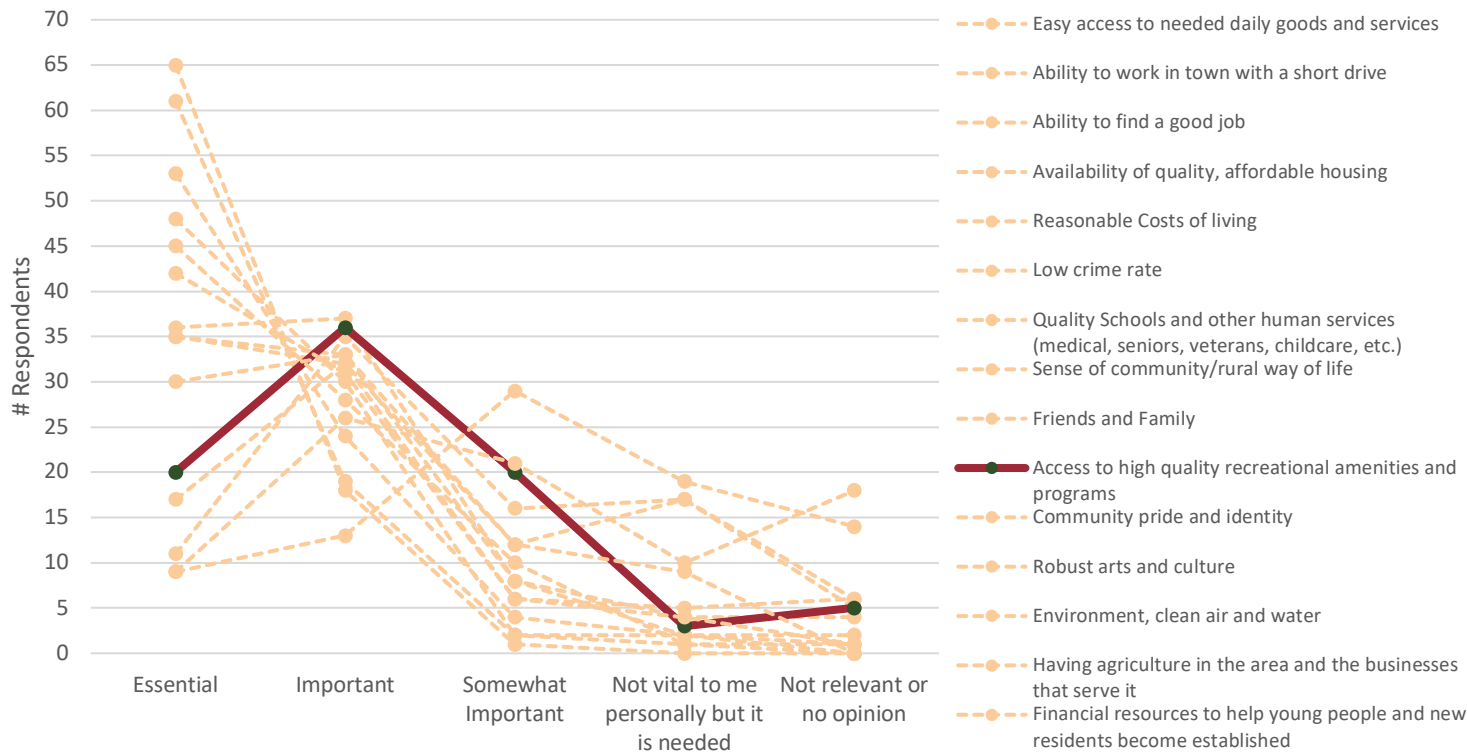
Many residents ranked the investment in social activities (elderly and youth programs, education, ethnic groups, culture) as the top priority among these options but also many didn't rank it at all, so the topic is very important for a segment of the population interested in it. Building more trails and sidewalks and investing in beautification of public spaces are moderately ranked overall.

Figure 8.6: Community Survey Results: “For a Town the Size of Earlham, What Park and Recreational Amenities Should Be Most Prioritized (check up to 3)?”



This data shows that residents are happy with the amount of parkland but that continued development of existing parks with more amenities is strongly desired, namely a splash pad or expansion of the pool, an indoor recreational facility, and continued development of Gendler Park. Trails are strongly supported as well. Recreational programming for all ages is also important. Other amenities and developments receive little support overall.

Figure 8.7: Community Survey Results: “In Your Opinion, How Important Are the Following Factors for WHY You Would Want to Live in or Near Earlham?”



One of the options relevant to this chapter is access to high quality recreational amenities. The public cites that recreation is “important” but only a quarter state that it is “essential.” Many things are higher priorities.

Figure 8.8: Survey Respondent Thoughts About Earlham Related to Parks and Recreation (Number of Responses)

Favorite Thing	Least Favorite Thing	Most Important Places
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community activities (16) • Services/amenities (9) • Clean (2) • Well maintained • Parks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of recreational space that is free or low cost to families (7) • Lack of trail system (7) • Nothing to do indoors during winter months, lack of social events (3) • Need a decent sized pool (2) • Old rec/sports facilities (2) • Lack of affordable things for teens to do (2) • Lack of baby swings at city and school park • Gendler Park could be used better. • No golf course • Larger park closer to town. • Lack of CrossFit gym • Lack of trails • Poor or inadequate quality of city park and baseball/softball complex conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parks/City Parks/playgrounds (32) • Rec Areas/sports complex/ball fields (14) • Pool (6) • Community Center (3) • Gathering spots (2) • Community events • Track • Gym

What Should Stay the Same?	What Should Change?	What Would Make Earlham a Better Place to Live
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep trees/add more. (2) • Park use • 4th of July • Music in park on Sunday with vendors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park improvements/expansion, improve rec complex (11) • More opportunities- activity spaces for youth and families (5) • More trails/new walking/bike paths (4) • Improved pool/access (3) • More events, attractions, street dances, downtown activities (3) • “We are in desperate need of a recreation center. Partner with the school district to create a CTE and recreation facility like Woodbine did for their CREW Center.” (3) • Improved community conditions, beautification (2) • Paid position dedicated to parks and rec • Update bathrooms at all three parks. • Update fencing at ball parks including safety fences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trails/a trail from town to Gendler Park, developments of trails around the ponds (11) • An indoor batting cage/recreation complex/training facility (7) • New/expanded pool or splash pad (6) • Even more community events, more things to do/entertainment (all ages), theatre/community playhouse (6) • More things for children to do/places for kids to have options. Recreation options for kids (5) • Improved parks. “City Park is nice but needs to be bigger.” (3) • Bowling (3) • Improved rec complex/more recreation space (2) • Pool hall • Community fitness center • Traipsing system, activities

As the matrix in Figure 8.8 shows, people value the parks and events held in them, but improvements are desired. Some of them are spelled out specifically and should be included in plans for park investments. People appear to be happy with the number and size of parks but wish for more amenities, newer amenities, and more events and activities. Figure 8.9 (next page) repeats the four-question exercise used with the steering committee (Figure 8.4) but with a bigger audience of about 75 people who attended the community forum in October 2023. Note that many of the dreams, about a quarter of the total, are recreation oriented. No challenges and fears relate.

Figure 8.9: Community Forum Four Questions Exercise Comments Related to Parks and Recreation

Biggest Opportunities	Biggest Challenges	One Big Dream	One Big Fear
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation building/trails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None listed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Park and recreational programming • Indoor recreational space/facility • Recreational center • Trails nearby • Amusement park • Aquatic park, outdoor recreation • Trails, aquatic center, and recreation center • Bike trails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None listed

The “opinion casting” exercise used scale bars as another way to gain understanding on where people are on a range of thought concerning a few issues. The following are some of the key findings for about 20 people who participated that relate to parks and recreation.

- 90% feel very safe walking and biking in Earlham.
- The group is slightly (55%/45%) in favor of focusing public dollars on quality-of-life items versus infrastructure.
- About 75% state that Earlham should focus on maintenance of existing parks and programs instead of developing new ones.

Figure 8.10: Type Preference Exercise Results: Parks and Recreation

Earlham Project Types Preference Exercise

Place ONE dot in each column to indicate your preference among the choices for each category. If you want to suggest a different amenity or feature, please write in and place dot on a “write your own” square.

Recreation

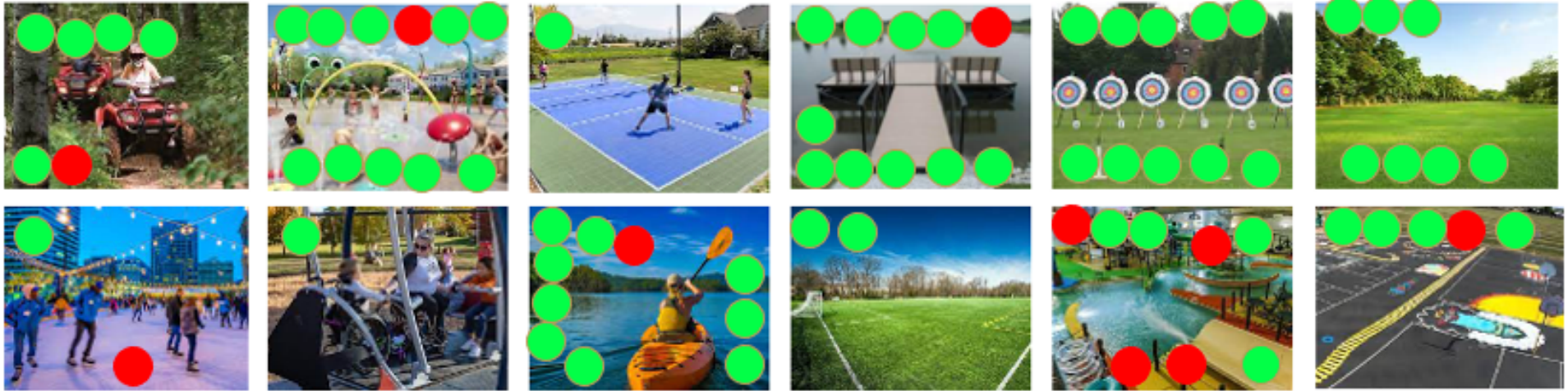


This exercise helps us understand the relative importance of different types of investments in each category. The “recreation” category was judged by 19 people, 9 of which said they most support an indoor multi-use recreational facility. A splash pad received four votes and other options received two or fewer votes.

Since each person was asked to select the top choice in each category (column in graphic), it is possible there is unidentified support for other options.

Figure 8.11: Type Preference Exercise Results: Park and Recreation

Parks and Recreation



About 20 people participated in the exercise to identify the most desired images for Earlham. One theme is park and recreation. The most popular options are a splash pad, dock/lake, archery range, open space, and kayak facilities. None of the options were unpopular outright, but an ice-skating plaza and indoor aquatic park are equally desired and undesired.

Quality Recreation Needs and Development Potential

As the town grows to 1,800 residents, more recreational amenities may be needed, either through continued development of Gendler Park and a better connection to that park from the city or through other park investments in the city. This plan does not recommend the addition of any new parks necessarily, unless there is notable growth south of the railroad or farther east, which would put more areas of town more than a half mile from any recreational area. More amenities within existing parks makes more sense.

If the town grows larger than 1,800 by 2040, it is suggested that a new neighborhood park be added within the city, in addition to continued investments in the existing park system. The neighborhood park has a half-mile service area. It would make sense to accommodate growth with a neighborhood park at the north end of the city, perhaps near the church halfway between town and the interstate or at the east end of town. A trail from town to Gendler Park could go through that park.

Capital Improvements Plan's Projects

The 2012 CIP has identified the following projects that are not yet completed.

For the main city park, the plan calls for new grills, the conversion of the stage to a full bandshell, water fountain upgrades, accessibility improvements, and "community" and "neighborhood" playgrounds.

The 2012 CIP includes several projects for the recreation complex, including a new "neighborhood" scale playground, a new "community" scale playground, ball field improvements, and a park entry sign.

The 2012 CIP includes several projects for Gendler Park as well. The main projects proposed were a disc golf course and an additional dock installation.

Park and Recreation Ideas

Dog parks are growing in popularity and disc golf is a growing sport. Both, if marketed well, would be used heavily by I-80 travelers who wish to stretch their legs or let their dog run while they travel. Both amenities can charge a fee or seek donations from visitors via a kiosk to provide for maintenance. Gendler Park has a dog park, but it is not clearly promoted nor signed and has no direct access road. It also has very few amenities and no shade. Grants exist specifically to improve and enhance dog parks. In 2023, Winterset constructed a \$1 million “all-inclusive” playground, funded by considerable grants. The main city park would be suitable for such a playground.

During the community forum, maps of Gendler Park were placed around the meeting hall. Residents were asked to submit ideas and comments about the park. Three comments were generated. Two people commented about the dog park area. Desired are shade and a vehicle access road. Another comment was made about security and the threat of vandalism due to the park being out of town and not patrolled regularly. Two people also commented on the need for a trail, namely one coming from the east on 6th Street and then north. One of these two stated that they feel unsafe visiting the park day or night alone due to its remoteness from town. That same person stated that some investment would go a long way to make this park a great community asset.

Interestingly, no one during the public engagement efforts brought up the potential of other gravel mining sites near Earlham. Like the site of Gendler Park, other parcels of land may eventually become available after the area is exhausted for mining purposes. What becomes of these sites should be thought about today. Depending on site environmental conditions, they can become future nature areas. If the City of Earlham is not willing or able to maintain them, perhaps they can be privately owned or managed by local county conservation agencies.

Quality Recreation Programming Potential

Several people mentioned that Earlham should increase its recreational programming for all ages, especially youth and young adults. Without a full-time parks and recreation director, implementing recreational programming is challenging. Volunteers and current city staff perform well. As the town grows, expanding in this effort may be possible. Earlham may wish to follow Winterset’s example of surveying the public and evaluating programs to determine what works, what can be better, and where there is enough interest in other programming.

Future Park and Recreation Trends

Some trends that may affect recreation in the future should be considered as part of Earlham’s plan.

Impact of COVID-19

Initially COVID drove more people into the outdoors, as this was a way to socialize safely and get out of the house. Over time, the increase in recreational activity has been sustained to a large degree. This means that more people demand more recreational options and programming. COVID also put a huge dent on budgets public bodies use for recreation. It is often easier for a local government to cut recreation than law enforcement and street maintenance when budgets tighten. Most COVID funds sent to local governments were not available for recreation. Grants for recreational projects have, consequently, become more competitive.

Technology Integration in Recreation

Today, people are more connected than ever. They expect their recreation to also be to a degree high-tech as well. Online scheduling has made facility rentals and youth sport programs more efficient. Other technology integrations in parks that are emerging include the integration of technology into playground

equipment. Companies such as Yalp Interactive specialize in playgrounds that have a strong technology component. As people experience technology in recreation in other places, they may demand it in Earlham as well.

Connection to Nature and Changing Weather Patterns

As Earlham grows, the potential exists to add recreational areas that are nature-based. When a development occurs along a stream, for example, open space should include a pond or maintained waterway. Recreation can be built into those areas. As flooding and droughts both seem to become more common, building with nature makes sense and it can also become a fun place. By integrating functional landscapes, such as green infrastructure, to help manage stormwater and irrigation on-site with natural ecological functions, Winterset can have a more resilient and sustainable park system. Conservation easements (example to right courtesy of Iowa National



Heritage Foundation) offer protection to these areas while allowing some development to occur. The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation specializes in these agreements. During the planning meetings, it was discussed that, if possible, knowledge about these agreements should be presented in the plan. Contacting the INHF and Iowa Land Records, none could be found in the immediate planning area.



Inclusivity

Winterset recently built an all-inclusive playground in its city park (left). This playground offers not just the traditional options but also many amenities for those with sensory needs and physical disabilities. Amenities like this will only increase the number of people Earlham can safely serve to play and explore.

Robust Recreation Goals, Policies, and Action Items

Several goals, actions, and policies have been created to help local leaders and partners create robust parks and recreation.

Goals are statement of overall vision and intent and which aim to be broad. They serve as categories for action items and policy statements.

Action items are specific steps and activities the City of Earlham, its people, and partners should take.

Policies are ongoing principles by which the City of Earlham, its people, and partners should adhere when approving new developments or planning future investments.

These goals, policies, and action items were created to further promote the guiding principles of the Earlham Comprehensive Plan.



Robust Parks and Recreation Vision

Earlham will be a recreational destination with a variety of quality indoor and outdoor recreational options suitable to a growing community, but all investments will be manageable and efficient to maintain for the staff and volunteers available.

Goal 1

Over time, expand program offerings and events in city parks and recreational areas.

Action 1A

Consider hiring a full-time parks director or sharing with another town of similar size. The primary roles of this person are to perform top-level facilities management and programming for youth and families.

Action 1B

Survey the public to determine what programs are most desired and create teams of volunteers to help organize and operate those activities.

Action 1C

Continue and, if and as needed, enhance the music in the park events. Connect events physically with the downtown as they make sense, to draw people into the downtown area.

Action 1D

Hold fun community tournaments in city parks; charge minimally for them as fundraisers for future park investments.

Policy 1A

Continue engagement with Earlham Schools to share staffing and programming where it makes sense as the city's programming increases.

Policy 1B

Ensure that there is a proactive park board that has the power to make park improvements and program investments.

Policy 1C

Use technology to engage the public and increase participation and staff efficiency.

Goal 2

Continue to develop the city park, the city/school recreational/sports complex, and other recreational amenities in town.

Action 2A

Install wayfinding signs directing people to the park system and key recreational amenities.

Action 2B

Complete projects for the city park and rec complex outlined in the CIP and as identified in chapter.

Action 2C

Create a plan for the future of the pool that includes larger upgrades and/or a splash pad addition.

Action 2D

Plan for and build an indoor recreational facility – scaled for Earlham’s size and needs and operated collaboratively (school, etc.) – at a prime location in the city.

Action 2E

Consider an all-inclusive playground in the city park or rec complex. Add walkways in that area of the park.

Policy 2A

Continue engagement with Earlham Schools to share facilities and equipment where it makes sense as the city’s recreational demands increase.

Policy 2B

Remain proactive with maintenance and only add amenities if they are designed to require minimal maintenance and there is a maintenance plan in place.

Policy 2C

Integrate technology into park amenities and programs where it makes sense.

Policy 2D

Consider nature-based amenities and promote the use of natural areas in developments that have wetlands, flood plains, timbered land, and waterways.

Policy 2E

Consider a policy for food trucks and vendors in city parks during the week.

Goal 3

Enhance Gendler Park into a viable regional park with a more direct connection to the city; expand other recreational options near the city.

Action 3A

Engage the public about ideas for Gendler Park and implement a “low hanging fruit” project. Involve volunteers to get people more invested in the park.

Action 3B

Promote the park to the Earlham community and hold a new annual event – such as a huge community sledding party – that interests the bulk of the public.

Action 3C

Start by completing projects outlined in the CIP and then continue to enhance the park to make it a viable regional park. Add water-based recreational amenities and more amenities to the dog park.

Action 3D

Improve park lighting and security; increase law enforcement presence.

Action 3E

Add a bike trail system in or surrounding the perimeter of Gendler Park over time to connect various amenities.

Policy 3A

Remain proactive with maintenance and only add amenities if they are designed to require minimal maintenance and there is a maintenance plan in place.

Policy 3B

Make marketing this park regionally a priority as it is developed. Track use trends.

Policy 3C

Monitor plans for the current mineral extraction areas to see if any of them can be future parks. Collaborate with owners and discuss as a community the potential of these areas. Explore this for land north of Gendler.

Policy 3D

Create a policy for neighborhood park development in rural areas if the town grows beyond 1,800 and land is annexed.

Policy 3E

Carefully plan land uses around the park areas. Ensure land uses that conflict with recreation and impact access to fresh air are excluded.

Chapter 13 is the implementation chapter. It includes a matrix that provides strategies to carry out each goal, action, and policy outlined in this chapter. The matrix also outlines the suggested timeframe for each, the guiding principles impacted, and potential partners that should be involved. It also provides tools and resources to help with the implementation process.