chapter three: guiding principles

### general principles

The basic principles that form the foundation for the Little Rock Parks and Recreation Master Plan are as follows:

- Creating and maintaining a "city in a park" atmosphere
- Providing a diversity of recreational leisure and living experiences that highlight Little Rock's unique natural and cultural resources and meets the needs of citizens and visitors
- Providing accessibility to the parks system for all citizens and visitors
- Maximizing the use of existing and new resources

Little Rock, due to its unique location at the confluence of the five major physiographic regions of the state, has many features that set it apart from other communities within the state and within the region. The lush tree cover and undeveloped open spaces are what create the image of Little Rock as a "city in a park." Preservation of this perception of a green city is key to the maintenance of the area's quality of life.

The confluence of physiographic regions, as well as the presence of the Arkansas River, provides a diverse landscape of hills, wetlands, forest, streams and river experiences for the citizens of Little Rock. Opportunities to experience and un-

derstand these different environments are currently limited and should be expanded. Where possible, the diverse landscapes of Little Rock should be linked together into a network of recreational resources and experiences.

The mainstay of support for a parks system is achieved by creating a community of active users. Increasing accessibility to the parks system allows more people to benefit from and appreciate the available resources. Access, for example, can be improved by providing sidewalks and street trees along roads that go to parks, or by improving stream corridors with multi-use paths that connect to other park facilities and the community.

Finally, the city should utilize as many of the area's existing and new resources as possible to diversify recreational leisure and living opportunities and extend the effectiveness of public funds. A dialogue that explores these opportunities should be established with other public entities as well as private organizations to ensure that residents and visitors alike experience the "city in a park".

These four basic concepts direct strategies for the entire system:

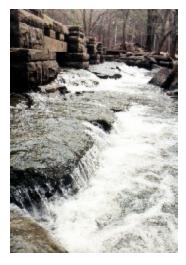
- Creating a linked multi-use open space system
- Constructing flagship new parks and facilities
- Providing enhanced neighborhood service
- Providing programs that meet the needs of all users in the community



Jogging paths at Murray Park are among the most popular amenities within the park system.



Two Rivers Park



Boyle Park

### Preservation Issues

Little Rock's diverse natural setting gives the city a unique environmental framework in which to grow. Like many other cities, Little Rock is facing the dilemma of balancing growth with the preservation of the elements that make the city a desirable place to live. Unlike many other cities, however, Little Rock still has the opportunity to protect the natural features that help define the unique liveability of the city. Aggressive, wellplanned action by the city now will ensure that the area's unique natural features and habitats are preserved for use and enjoyment by current and future residents. It will also ensure that the city remains economically competitive with other cities through the preservation of its natural resources, and hence its quality of life.

The Atlanta, Georgia region, for example, is facing serious air quality problems that are challenging the region's ability to accommodate new growth. Had the region more effectively addressed park, open space and development issues, and provided greenways, bike trails and other linkages, the area may have been able to mitigate its air quality and congestion problems and avoid a crisis. Now local, regional, and state governments must determine if any viable growth alternatives remain available.

The preservation of the natural environment in a city enhances the quality of life experience in several ways. First, it maintains the regional identity of the city by preserving habitats, ecosystems and natural features that cannot be found elsewhere. Second, it provides natural methods to maintain the general air and water quality for an area. Third, it provides relief to residents and visitors who seek escape from the hard edges of typical urban development, providing sensory diversity to the daily experience. In an age where urban development around the country reflects a corporate culture rather than the local culture, the preservation of the natural environment is the most effective way to maintain a sense of place and cultural identity.

Without preservation efforts, however, many of the quality of life elements provided by the natural environment can be lost. In many urban areas, including Little Rock, streams have been converted into concrete-lined channels. Wetlands that used to support a variety of plants and animals while maintaining water quality and mitigating the effects of floods have been drained and turned into shopping malls and parking lots, increasing the need for flood mitigation downstream and adding significant amounts of pollution to waterways, and ultimately increasing the cost to taxpayers.

Historically, urbanization has resulted in the loss of functioning natural ecosystems and has increased the occurrence of flooding, water pollution, air pollution, and the tendency to sprawl—as homeowners attempt to get "away from it all"—bringing the environmental degradation with them as development moves to serve the population. Urbanization also results in a loss of biodiversity, as the habitat provided by a building or parking lot is not able to support the same range of plants and animals that previously existing natural habitats may have supported.

Preservation of existing riparian areas and greenways, as well as the restoration of urbanized stream corridors, are the most effective ways for Little Rock to maintain and improve the community's accessibility to parks and open space. The preservation and restoration activities also help to maintain the region's biodiversity through the linkage of a variety of habitats and address other spoils of urbanization. By combining the provision of recreational amenities and environmental preservation, Little Rock can efficiently address issues that are directly related to the city's quality of life.

The Little Rock Parks and Recreation Master Plan development process has identified the following general areas of preservation interest:

 The Arkansas River, which led to the founding of the city and remains its most signifi-

- cant identifying natural feature
- Riparian areas and wetlands provide a green infrastructure and maintain a natural drainage, water quality and flood mitigation system; to form a greenway network of trails and an alternate means of transportation
- Steep slopes to protect wooded areas, reduce erosion, provide a natural backdrop for the city, to preserve open space, and to provide recreational opportunities such as hiking, biking, rappelling, and other activities which have a low-impact on the environment
- Wooded areas to protect habitats
- Viewsheds to maintain and highlight the city's natural character
- Ecological habitats to protect biodiversity and to provide educational opportunities



Two Rivers Park



Rebsamen Park Golf Course



Murray Park

### Natural Resources Issues

Little Rock is home to a variety of natural resources, in part due to its geographic location between many physiographic regions. Several geological, biological, and hydrological resources are present, and many of those resources are located within the existing parks system. The Nature Conservancy is currently developing the Pulaski County Ecological Assessment, which evaluates public and private natural resources. The following parks were found to have significant natural value.

# Natural Resource Value Within Existing Parks

#### Two Rivers Park

Two Rivers Park is located on a peninsula at the confluence of the Little Maumelle and Arkansas Rivers and is part of the Ouachita geographic region. Composed of alluvium soils deposited by the Arkansas River, this low-lying and frequently flooded park boasts a variety of plant communities within marshes, riparian woodlands, old fields, and loblolly pine plantations. Most noteable is the cattail marsh community, which is worth protecting since it is locally rare. Thirty-five percent of the land within this park is considered wetlands. Its large size and diverse plant associations allow the park to house a diverse range of habitat, including 160 bird species. Roosting bald

eagles are frequently found on the site. Disturbances to the site include fire suppression, soil erosion, and the influx of non-native species.

#### Gillam Park

Gillam Park contains a rare igneous geology (nepheline syenite granite) which supports a unique system of interspersed glades, woodlands, and forests, as well as wildlife. As a result, the park has been designated as "ecologically significant" by the Nature Conservancy. The park, part of the West Gulf Plain geographic region, also includes xeric uplands and some mesic forests. These nepheline syenite granite outcrops and their associated plant and animal communities are considered globally critically imperiled, according to the Pulaski County Ecological Assessment.

### Rebsamen Park Golf Course

Rebsaman Park was recently upgraded to "Audubon Certified Wildlife Sanctuary" status. All 27 holes of this riverfront golf course boast impressive river vistas beneath huge cottonwood trees dotting the fairway edges.

### Murray Park

Rebsamen and Murray parks comprise a total of 550 acres along the river; parts of which contain marshes and forested areas with diverse migrant and shorebird species. Roosting bald eagles can be viewed from the park in winter months. "The large size and linear extent of these parks, and

their proximity to the River, combine to make this area a significant habitat, with excellent outdoor recreational opportunities." (Pulaski County Ecological Assessment)

### Boyle Park

This 240-acre park boasts a unique natural setting, ideal for hiking and mountain biking on the numerous wooded trails that loop throughout. This rolling wooded landscape is a favorite for bird-watchers. The park "is noted as the best place to find spring migratory birds in Little Rock." (Pulaski County Ecological Assessment). 113 species of birds have been documented at Boyle Park, primarily in the wooded areas and in thickets along Rock Creek. Numerous exotic plant species have invaded the park, crowding out native species. The park has not only ecological value, but also historic value as a CCC-constructed park which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

### Allsopp Park

The 150-acre park located in a wooded ravine offers an oasis within the city, offering both undeveloped land for passive recreation and unorganized play, as well as a range of park amenities within the developed areas of the park. Although many native plant species have been replaced by exotic species, the Nature Conservancy is preparing a list of what native species can still be found here. Allsopp also has preservation value as a historic park which was originally designed

by the noted landscape architect John Nolen and recently received the Arkansas Chapter or the American Society of Landscape Architects national status of Medallion Park.

### Fourche Creek

Fourche Creek is one of the largest urban wetlands in America within a city limit and encompasses 1700 acres of swamps, low lands, and open space in south Little Rock. Fourche Creek flows from the west, within a 170 square-mile watershed, eventually joining the Arkansas River near the Little Rock Airport. The wetland areas, bordered on the north side by the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the Central High neighborhood, currently have limited access and are undeveloped. Fourche Creek holds future potential as a natural area with educational and recreational-oriented uses and offers recreational opportunities for large urban open space, interpretive trails, and passive recreation.

### The Arkansas River

The Arkansas River forms the northern and eastern boundaries of Little Rock. Several parks are located to take advantage of the views and recreational opportunities along the River, and are among the highest-used parks in the city. The river provides the framework for continuous park types in a linear pattern for several miles, and offers great opportunities for linkages, trails, and bike paths throughout in order to connect downtown Little Rock to residential areas and westerly destinations.



Boyle Park



Allsopp Park



Fourche Creek



Museum of Discovery



Arkansas Repertory Theater

### Cultural and Historical Resources Issues

Cultural resources are important to preserve because they are reflective of the influence of man and nature on his activities and his environment. They document the high and low points of an area's history, and they preserve elements and events that the community has determined to be valuable.

Like parks, historic districts can be destinations that reflect the distinct characteristics of the city. Several National Register of Historic Places historic districts are found in Little Rock, including the Central High School Neighborhood Historic District, the Governor's Mansion Historic District, Hillcrest Historic District, MacArthur Park Historic District, Marshall Square Historic District, Philander Smith College Historic District, the Railroad Call Historic District, the South Main Street Apartments Historic District, the South Scott Street Historic District, and Boyle Park.

Architectural resources such as Little Rock's historic districts document stylistic, technical, cultural and aesthetic changes over time. For example, certain buildings may be a result of social beliefs of the time, religious movements, or the cultural influence of new settlers to the area.

In addition to historic sites and landmarks, other cultural sites have preservation value as well. Civic sites and structures, early settlements and homesteads, and fine art facilities (fine arts and performing arts) should all be included in the recreational and open space network of the city.

Cultural resources of place, embodied in architecture or a landscape, may be important due to the social or political events that occurred during the history of the site. These physical resources remind the community of proud and painful moments in the past — reminders of the greatness and fallibility of mankind.

Cultural resources of art, artifacts, information and performance provide additional documentation of cultural impacts ranging from the influence of prehistoric native peoples to recent immigrants. Arrow points, operatic performances, literature and digital images are all examples of the intellectual heritage for an area.

Preservation of all of these resources is important because they help define the sense of place. The resources act as a summary of the history of an area and the people who have created the past and are creating the future. These resources are a partial documentation of a community's collective consciousness and can be used to educate and inspire new generations.

Cultural and civic resources, while important in themselves, are also important in how they relate to a parks and recreation system. The resources add another level to the framework for a park system by adding to the open space system in the more urbanized parts of the city. They also help define the overall context of the community. The resources may be used to provide points and destinations for a trail system. They may also, through interpretive signage, exhibits, and performances, provide extensive educational opportunities regarding the heritage and intellectual resources of a community. By combining the resources of a parks system with those of a cultural system, the overall experience of a user is expanded and enhanced. This interconnectedness of resources also significantly enriches the livability and viability of a community.







### open space principles

Open space is intended to provide areas that protect natural resources and that are designed for lower intensity uses than what might be found in a normal park facility. Open space provides the resting points for Little Rock, and is what defines the "city in a park" experience at another level. Guiding principles for such spaces include:

- Protecting natural environments, systems, habitats or features such as floodplains, wetlands and steep slopes
- Developing a system of "green infrastructure" that links the city's parks and other open spaces
- Employing conservation development principles that minimize the impacts of mankind's use of the land
- Providing publicly accessible areas or visually accessible areas
- Providing space for the implementation of an urban forestry program
- Providing landscape treatment along interstates and roadways
- Providing public art as a component and/or partner

Little Rock's open space system, to most efficiently serve the future needs of the city, must provide multiple benefits to active and passive users. As the city continues to grow, there are natural areas that have limitations to development that should be protected from future development and degradation. These areas include floodplains and steep slopes. The environmental heritage of the city should also be incorporated into the open space system by identifying and protecting sensitive environments and habitats that contribute to the city's quality of life because of the plants, animals or ecosystems supported by a site. The city can fulfill its mandate of protecting the health, safety and welfare of its citizens by incorporating these landscape features into its "green infrastructure" system of parks and open space.

Floodplains, steep slopes and other environmentally sensitive areas and habitats can be preserved and used for recreational purposes if proper design, implementation and programming are undertaken by the City of Little Rock. In some cases, open space resources may be best protected by limiting access to visual access. Other areas, such as the Fourche Bottoms, are appropriate for interpretive nature centers that could be jointly developed with the public school system and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. A site containing steep slopes might be appropriate for a mulch covered hiking trail, while a stream corridor might support a concrete trail and wooden boardwalk system that allows walking, running and bicycling activities. These examples illustrate how important the function of site design and programming can be for existing and future open space resources.

The city's parks system should not, however, be limited to existing parks, open spaces, floodplains and steep slopes. New and existing residential, commercial, public and industrial developments throughout Little Rock should be founded on the premise of conservation and linkage. This means that sidewalks, bike paths, riparian corridors, treelined streets and other types of linkage and site design elements should be incorporated wherever possible to help develop the fabric and accessibility of the city's "green infrastructure" and the concept of a "city in a park". Such public and private sector improvements will help maintain the city's quality of life and "city in a park" atmosphere.

## Open Space Opportunities and Issues

Any open space system is made up of several elements:

- City parks
- Private parks and Property-Owner Association parks
- Private recreation facilities
- Historic, cultural, and civic sites
- Floodplains
- Schools
- Thoroughfares
- Privately-owned undeveloped land

Although many components of an open space system are not publicly accessible, each element plays an important role in achieving the "City in a Park" vision. Maintaining the natural setting of the city can be accomplished by the proper management of both public and private lands.

The Little Rock parks system consists of roughly 3200 acres of developed park parcels, and 2600 acres of currently undeveloped parcels and open space (see Chapter One for a complete inventory). These developed parks are the public's primary access to the overall open space system. In general, the western portions of Little Rock have significantly fewer public parks than the remainder of the city.



Open space and natural features at public parks



Privately-owned open space amenities



Steep slopes and floodplains





### **Opportunities**

Little Rock's undeveloped public park land is largely comprised of the Fourche Creek Bottoms, 1700 acres of swamps and wetlands surrounded by the city. Additional undeveloped park land can be found in west Little Rock, primarily located on steep, unbuildable slopes and floodplain corridors. Park parcels such as Fourche Creek Bottoms, Gillam Park, and others with significant natural or ecological features should be developed with minimal impacts to the site as part of the overall open space system for passive recreation.

Private parks and recreational facilities, such as property-owner parks and private golf courses, also provide recreational opportunities and make up the overall open space system of Little Rock. Many times, these parks and facilities occur in areas of the city where there are fewer public parks.

Historic, cultural, and civic sites are also important elements in the open space system. Often these facilities are public or allow public access, and provide alternative recreational and educational opportunities which most parks do not provide. These facilities may be connected to the overall open space system by cultural trails and provide an important link in the public realm.

Floodplains and riparian areas are great opportunities for providing open space. Many city park properties are located adjacent to floodplain land, and are therefore easily connected by following the major riparian corridors through the city. For example, Otter Creek, Ottenheimer, Hindman, Brodie Creek, Jack Stephens Youth Golf Academy, Curran Conway, Oak Forest, War Memorial, Fourche Bottoms, Southside, Interstate, Swaggerty, Gillam, Remmel, and Richland parks are all located along Fourche Creek or one of its tributaries. Chenal Country Club, Birchwood, Kanis, University, and Boyle parks are all located along Rock Creek. Providing trails along these floodplains allows for a connective framework of parks and recreational facilities. Such connections are materializing along the Arkansas River in an effort to link Pinnacle Mountain State Park, Two Rivers, Murray, and Rebsamen to downtown.

Schools provide another layer of public open space. Most schools provide basic recreational facilities, including playgrounds and ball fields. Connecting these amenities to the overall framework creates an extensive system of opportunities and maximizes the use by and value of these amenities to the community.

Thoroughfares are probably the most accessed and experienced form of open space. Streets and sidewalks provide a basic form of connection between amenities. Enhancing these corridors with landscape improvements and other

amenities can enhance the look and experience of the city. Urban forestry programs are an effective way to beautify the public open space system which people utilize the most.

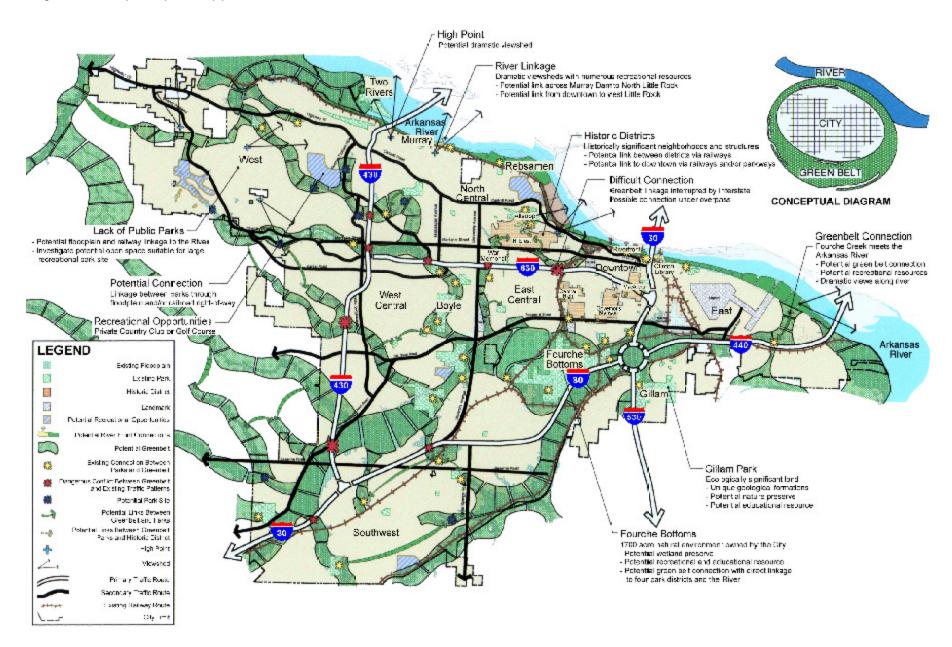
Privately-owned undeveloped land comprises a large portion of the open space system in Little Rock. Though not publicly-accessible, careful development of such parcels can help retain the natural character of the region. The City should advocate and implement programs that promote the stewardship of natural resources by the private sector. Implementation through revised development and landscape codes, as well as through leadership by example on the part of the City, are just a few methods that can be employed to protect the area's natural character.

#### Issues

While many types of lands comprise the open space system of Little Rock, not all open spaces are publicly accessible. Some parcels within the park system, such as those with extreme environmental sensitivies or dangerous conditions, may not accommodate public access. In addition, some private parks and facilities may require user fees or are not publicly accessible.

The primary issue in creating a framework for Little Rock's open space system is securing access or land for physical connections and trail systems. The many stream corridors and floodplains comprise an extensive natural network of connectivity. Once access along these riparian areas is secured, the second issue is safety. Difficult connections of these corridors occur at underpasses along Interstates 30, 430, 630, 530, and 440. As with all land under the purview of Little Rock Parks and Recreation, there must be adequate financial and personnel resources for ongoing maintenance. See Figure 3.13 for a graphic representation of the aforementioned.

Figure 3.1: Open Space Opportunities and Issues



### park land principles

### Description of Park Types

### Regional Parks

Regional parks generally serve an area considerably larger than the municipality that they occupy and usually occur in conjunction with a unique natural or cultural feature. A regional park is generally one which encompasses a substantial land area and serves several municipalities. Many times, only a small portion of the park is developed with active recreation uses, and much of the property remains as natural open space. Currently, parks such as Boyle, Allsopp, Murry/Rebsamen, and Riverfront serve regional park needs. City land holdings such as Fourche Creek, Gillam, and Two Rivers may serve as regional park facilities in the future.

Many times, regional parks showcase a unique feature, either natural or manmade. Such features may include

- Nature center
- Interpretive or educational center
- Interpretive/educational trails
- Unique or rare ecosystems
- Habitat viewing
- Unique or rare natural features
- Features which are regional or specific to a particular physiographic region
- Historical or cultural features

- Outdoor activities which demand special topographies (i.e. rock climbing)
- "Extreme" sports center
- Aquatic center/water park
- Theme park
- Sports complex

Such facilities may be considered regional parks, even if sited on smaller parcels, due to the expanded user group which the facility serves.

Regional parks should be accessible via automobile, foot, bicycle, and other means of transportation. Ideally, regional parks should be integrated as part of the larger open space system. In addition, regional parks should be located in areas with compatible adjacent land uses.



Regional parks such as Two Rivers showcase natural or specialized amenities



Community parks may contain both active and passive recreation areas

### Community Parks

Community parks are those which are generally greater than 20 acres in size and serve many types of recreational needs within a 2-mile service radius according to both the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and the Urban Land Institute (ULI). Several Little Rock community parks contain specialized facilities or features, which serve the entire city, extending beyond a two-mile service radius. Many times community parks contain groups of lighted ball fields and practice fields, as well as other active and passive recreational facilities. Such parks include Kanis, East Little Rock, Southwest, University, and Hindman Community parks.

Community parks may include

- Sports fields
- Basketball, tennis, or volleyball courts
- Community centers
- Recreation centers
- Swimming pools
- Running tracks
- Fishing areas
- Open play areas/play fields
- Practice fields
- Exercise trails with fitness stations
- Skate facilities/skate park
- Playgrounds
- Public art

Community parks should provide adequate parking as a drive-to park. However, they should also be accessible by foot or bicycle, and integrated into the city's trail system. Their locations should not conflict with surrounding land uses; since many community parks create noise and light pollution unwelcome by residential neighbors.

### Neighborhood and Mini Parks

Neighborhood parks are typically five to twenty acres in size, providing a range of recreational facilities. Smaller parks contain only playground equipment and seating, while larger parks might contain practice or game fields. These parks generally serve a ½ mile radius (or the neighborhoods contiguous to them) and are accessible by adjacent neighborhoods. Both the NRPA and the ULI recommend a maximum service radius of ½ mile. Ottenheimer, Dunbar, Meriwether, and Wakefield parks are all examples of neighborhood parks.

Neighborhood parks may include

- Playgrounds
- Picnic areas
- Basketball or tennis courts
- Practice fields
- Small game fields
- Open play fields
- Fitness/walking trails
- Community gardens
- Public art

Neighborhood parks should be accessible by walking or bicycling, and ideally located on a smaller road. These parks should respect the neighborhood scale around them, and meet only minimum parking requirements.

Mini parks are less than one acre in size (according to the NRPA). Commonly referred to as

pocket parks, they serve a very small service radius and generally facilitate few recreational needs. They generally include limited facilities, such as playgrounds, picnic shelters, and benches.

These parks are usually found in urban areas or on small urban lots in older neighborhoods. Because of mini-parks' limited service to the community, Little Rock should consider accepting no future parks under five acres in size, unless they are needed in heavily developed areas which have inadequate recreational provisions and no larger parcels can be obtained, or are located within the urban context of downtown. Pettaway, Fletcher, Cheatem, and Ninth Street parks are all considered mini-parks.



Neighborhood parks serve a smaller, more specific area



Trail along the Arkansas River

### Guiding Principles for Park Land

Specific guiding principles have been identified for providing the land required for improving the parks system in Little Rock:

- Strategic additions to the existing parks system
- Locations for new parks needed in west Little Rock, east central and southwest Little Rock
- Maintenance and enhancement/upgrading of existing parks over a 20 year period

The City of Little Rock, like many cities, has a limited capacity to acquire and maintain new park lands while maintaining the existing system. This limitation underscores the need for any additions to the park system to be strategic in terms of facilities provided as well as future maintenance and programming. Additions to the system should significantly enhance the quality of and access to recreational experiences and reinforce the "city in a park" experience.

The location of future park lands is also extremely important. Additions to the parks and open space system should be located to 1.) serve areas that are currently under-served, and 2.) expand the overall network of open space, including access to trails and other parks. Analysis indicates that west, east central, and southwest Little Rock are in need of park land. Location of new parks in these areas will help address existing and

future community needs. As Little Rock continues to grow outward, it is imperative that appropriate acreage is acquired to support the objectives of the Master Plan.

All of the parks in the recreational system will benefit from increased maintenance operations. Older parks are also in need of upgraded facilities and equipment to replace equipment that is no longer safe or that does not meet American with Disabilities Act accessibility requirements. Furthermore, normal wear and tear due to use as well as changing recreational interests make the establishment of a continuous improvement system very important in the preservation of quality recreational facilities.

Park lands, as opposed to open space lands, provide space for more active uses that have facility specific needs (such as tennis courts) or provide a more manicured environment for passive recreational uses. Open space areas provide land in a more natural, less maintained state, and generally are for activities that do not require extensive man-made facilities.

# recreational facilities principles

Recreational facilities vary in their siting requirements and land use compatibility. Distribution of facilities, like general park land, is related to the user groups and their recreational needs. Guiding principles for recreational facilities include:

- Siting recreational facilities in appropriate park types
- Siting facilities in parks with appropriate surrounding land uses
- Determining suitability of new facilities added to existing parks – i.e. neighborhood park that would be suitable for additional sports fields which are scattered around town vs. all consolidated into sport complexes in community parks
- Distributing facilities to accommodate all user groups and age groups
- Expanding the program base to include all ages and user groups
- Encouraging educational programs
- Providing family programs
- Monitoring program and facility participation levels

Siting a recreational facility is both an art and a science. The science identifies the appropriate location for a new facility in an existing park, or identify the best location for a new park with a

new facility. The art is required to work with the lay and political communities to gain support for the facility's location and funding. The art is also required to address any concerns expressed by the community and user groups.

Providing new facilities while expanding the program base, encouraging educational programs, and providing family programs will add value to the Little Rock recreational system. Monitoring the program and facility expansions will be necessary, however, to determine the success and actual value of any improvements, and will help Little Rock Parks and Recreation determine future actions.



War Memorial Fitness Center