

SECTION 2: History of Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation

2.1 THE 1970s

The Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation Department was formed in 1971 when the Pinckneyville Militia District enacted a referendum to authorize a recreation tax levy. Other militia districts eventually joined the recreation district, although only 25% of the County's land area would be under the Department's control until 1986 when this was expanded to include the entire County.

Since its inception, the Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation Department has undertaken numerous planning efforts to develop the County's parks system to the point it is today. The County's first Parks and Recreation Master Plan was developed in 1973, but was never adopted. Nevertheless, the Plan's findings and recommendations provide insight into the issues and concerns confronting the County at that time. For example, the Plan recommended that park development be focused in the denser population zones, which then were located along the DeKalb/Fulton County Lines and Interstate-85. Under an agreement between the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners and the Gwinnett County Board of Education, school lands were used for the provision of ballfields, tennis courts and neighborhood playgrounds. Although recreation amenities were to be provided for all age groups, an emphasis was placed on young adults and adults in order to encourage their civic participation and leadership. The Plan also anticipated action to acquire some properties along the Chattahoochee River. One significant quote highlights a key strategy that would be implemented by the County over the coming decades:

"The larger the county grows, the more its citizens will need and seek open space. Today's open space will be tomorrow's subdivision or shopping center if Gwinnett fails to acquire land now. The projected growth in the county indicates the need for planning, acquiring, and preserving open space today."

Some County parks that were acquired and/or developed during the 1970s included: Best Friend Park, Dacula Park, Pinckneyville Arts Center, Harmony Grove Park, Jones Bridge Park, Mountain Park Park, Shorty Howell Park, and the Singleton Road Activity Building.

In 1970, the County's population was 72,349, however this would more than double in ten years to 166,808 in 1980 (an increase of 131%). Gwinnett County was the second fastest growing county in Georgia during the 1970s and the eighth fastest growing county in the United States.

2.2 THE 1980s

The Parks and Recreation Department began to resemble its current structure in 1986 when, in November of that year, voters in Gwinnett County approved the concept of a countywide recreation department as

well as its 1 mill Recreation Tax. Around this time, the structure of the Recreation Authority was altered to 9 appointed members. As it does today, the Recreation Authority served as an advisory body and oversees the dispersed revenue of bonds and funds for park and recreation facility development.

1986 also brought the first County-wide Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan. This document provided the direction for development of the county park system from 1986 through 1996. The plan inventoried existing recreational facilities, incorporated the results of a previously accomplished assessment of the recreational needs and desires of the County residents, and recommended the future development of parks in Gwinnett County. A series of revenue bonds were issued by the Recreation Authority to address the land acquisition and facility construction needs identified in this master planning effort. The highlights of the Plan included:

- definition of a classification for parks (regional, community, special use, and neighborhood parks with school sites used for neighborhood parks);
- establishment of 11 service zones based on a 15-minute drive time to a community park (which contained both active and passive opportunities);
- recommended improvements for each park;
- emphasis on land acquisition in strategic growth areas - focus was on equity in park distribution; and
- development of a formal cooperative agreement with the Board of Education to develop neighborhood parks at elementary school sites.

In 1988, the Parks and Recreation Department (as it was then known) became a division of the Department of Human Services (now Community Services). Other significant events in the 1980s included the purchase of Springbrook County Club and the adoption of master plans for Lucky Shoals Park, Bethesda Park, Collins Hill Park, George Pierce Park, Lenora Park, and Tribble Mill Park. Spurred on by \$30 million in revenue bonds approved by the Recreation Authority, phase 1 of Lucky Shoals, Bethesda and Collins Hill Parks were all opened on the same day in 1991. These new parks contributed greatly to the success of the County's park system in the 1990s.

Once again, Gwinnett's population more than doubled over the course of ten years, from 166,608 in 1980 to 352,910 in 1990 (an increase of 112%).

2.3 THE 1990s

In August of 1990, the Recreation Authority issued \$10 million in revenue bonds. These bonds were used to purchase, enlarge and development a number of community parks, as well as to begin development of Tribble Mill Park. That same year, the Vines Botanical Gardens site, valued at \$3.9 million, was donated to the County. In 1992, Gwinnett County assumed

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operation of Lawrenceville city parks with the stipulation that Rhodes Jordan Park be expanded and new facilities constructed. Other significant events in the early 1990s included the opening of the Gwinnett Senior Center at Bethesda Park, Tribble Mill Park, and the reopening of the Gwinnett Historic Courthouse.

Despite witnessing dramatic population growth in the 1970s and 80s, it was not until the 1990s (specifically the latter half of the decade) that the County would aggressively pursue the acquisition of parkland. Not coincidentally, it was the development of a new Comprehensive Master Plan in 1996 that would help direct the County in achieving new goals for the provision of parks and recreation facilities.

The 1996 Master Plan, which was borne out of a needs assessment survey conducted by the A.L. Burruss Institute at Kennesaw State University in 1995, contained specific capital investment recommendations through the year 2003.

The purpose of the 1996 Master Plan is not very different from that of this Plan:

- to provide a conceptual framework and description of the existing parks and recreation system in Gwinnett County;
- to develop a baseline of leisure services delivery; and
- to provide information on the recreational priorities and needs of Gwinnett County citizens.

The recommendations and findings of the 1996 Comprehensive Master Plan provided a detailed assessment of recreation facility and parks needs, as well as management and operational strategies. Some key recommendations included:

- the development of community centers at Lenora Park, Rhodes Jordan Park, Bogan Park, and Pinckneyville Park;
- continued reliance on community parks as the foundation of the parks system;
- the acquisition and development of four new community parks and the redevelopment and expansion of numerous existing parks;
- park system redistricting (from 11 service areas to 3 park districts - West, North and South);
- the development of a Greenway Plan to formalize linkages between parks, neighborhoods and schools; and
- projects totaling approximately \$140 million were called for between 1997 and 2003.

To help pay for many of the recommended improvements, County voters approved a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) in the fall of 1996 that included \$60 million for land acquisition and park project development through the year 2001. Additionally, during the four-year period of the 1997 SPLOST, the County's Board of Commissioners expended over \$40 million from general funds for the acquisition of

recreation open space and for the enhancement of the park facilities development program.

Another significant accomplishment was the opening of Bogan Park Community Center and Family Aquatics Center in December 1997 -- this was the first community recreation center and indoor leisure pool facility in the County's park system. Furthermore, the Parks and Recreation Division was recognized as a National Gold Medal Award Finalist by the National Recreation and Parks Association in 1999. The Georgia Recreation and Park Association (7th District) would select the Division as Agency of the Year in 2000.

Gwinnett's population increased by 67% between 1990 and 2000 (from 352,910 to 588,448). Gwinnett was the 31st fastest growing county in the nation over this period.

2.4 THE 21st CENTURY

Rapid population growth and the anticipated renewal of the SPLOST for the period of 2001 through 2004 necessitated the development of the Gwinnett County Parks and Recreation 2000 Capital Improvements Plan. The purpose of the 2000 Plan was to review and update the capital program contained in the 1996 Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

The 2000 Capital Improvements Plan updated the park and facility inventory, evaluated changes in demographics and development trends, reassessed service gaps, and updated and prioritized the recreational desires of the citizenry. This study continued to recommend a very ambitious greenspace acquisition and park construction program. Other key recommendations included:

- continued emphasis on providing parks and facilities within under-served areas; replacement of "neighborhood/school parks" with "passive community parks" as a method to address the needs of under-served & densely populated areas;
- expansion of passive recreation opportunities and open space acquisition;
- expansion of programs for teens, young adults and seniors;
- development of aquatic centers at Mountain Park Park, Bethesda Park, and the West District; and
- development of community centers at Lenora Park, George Pierce Park, Bogan Park, Bethesda Park, and Bay Creek Park.

The Board of Commissioners adopted the 2000 Capital Improvement Plan and its capital improvements recommendations became the primary source of the list of projects included for Parks and Recreation on the ballot for the extension of the SPLOST in November of 2000. The County's voters approved the sales tax extension and the Department embarked on the 2001 SPLOST Program that included a minimum of \$192 million for parks and recreation over a four-year period (with some \$10 million going to

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support parks and recreation capital projects within Gwinnett County's cities).

In implementing the 1996 Master Plan, Gwinnett County completed a Open Space and Greenway Master Plan in May 2002. This Plan is a comprehensive document intended to inform and guide the County's ongoing greenspace preservation program. The primary goals of the Plan are to increase recreational opportunities, protect and improve water quality, improve connectivity via a system of greenway trails, and reduce the environmental impacts of development. The Georgia Planning Association recognized the excellence of this plan with a "Best Planning Document" award in September 2002, and in November 2002 Gwinnett County was granted an "Outstanding Community" award by the Georgia Urban Forestry Council.

In the fall of 2002, the County's Parks and Recreation Division embarked on a process to update the 1996 Master Plan and 2000 Capital Improvements Plan. Like it did in 1995, the County contracted the A.L. Burruss Institute at Kennesaw State University to prepare and implement a Needs Assessment Survey. The results of this project were delivered in April 2003. The Burruss report includes a section of the changing demographics of Gwinnett County, which is now considered to be the most ethnically diverse county in Georgia with one out of six adult residents having been born outside the United States.

Significant capital projects completed during this timeframe include the development of the County's first free skate plaza and outdoor hockey rink at Pinckneyville Park, the opening of aquatic centers at Collins Hill, Rhodes Jordan and Mountain Park parks, as well as numerous land acquisitions (the most noteworthy being Harbins/Alcovy River Park Site at nearly 1800 acres). The County was also successful in applying for funds through the Georgia Greenspace Program to assist in open space acquisition and preservation initiatives.

Population growth in the County shows no signs of slowing. In only three years (2000 to 2003), Gwinnett's population has grown by an estimated 13% (or 26,500 persons per year) to 676,284. Forecasts indicate that, for the period of 2000 to 2010, the County will match or slightly exceed the total growth of nearly a quarter-of-a-million people that it experienced in the 1990s. Although this represents a slowing of the growth rate, the County is projected to top the one million population mark by the year 2018.

The past few years have seen the most aggressive park development strategy in Gwinnett County's history and, with population growth constantly exceeding projections, capital improvements to the parks system must continue to be a high priority for the County and its citizenry. In late 2004, the County's voters will be given an opportunity to express their views when they go to the polls to vote on the renewal of the SPLOST.