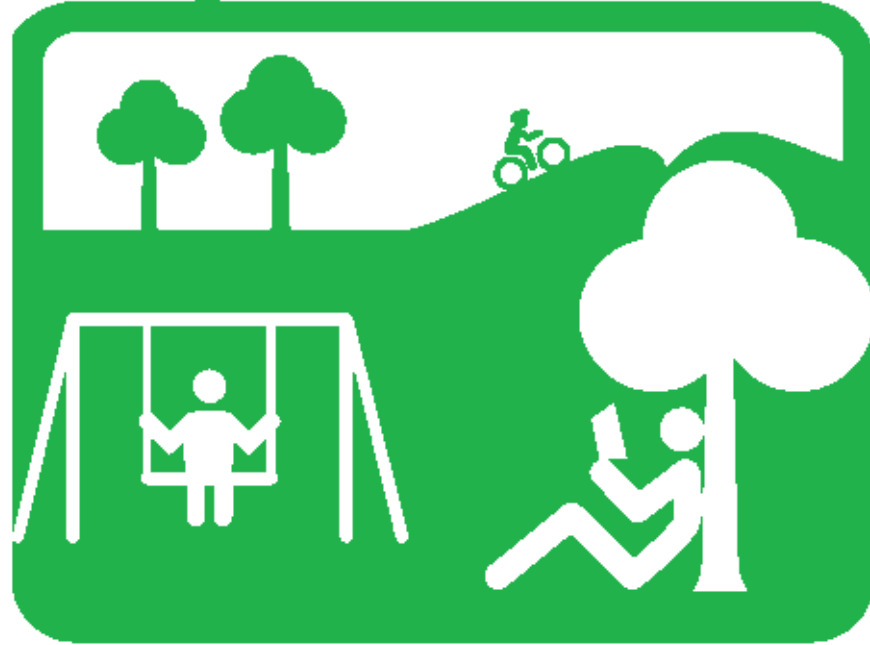


City of Lowell



Open Space and Recreation Plan

Focus Group Meetings

September 2018

INTRODUCTION

Department of Planning and Development (DPD) staff identified early in this open space and recreation planning process that large public meetings were not the only way to hear from members of the community. After the Kick-off Meeting, we visited neighborhood groups and attended community events to discuss the plan goals, solicit initial feedback, and distribute surveys. To increase access, surveys were available in English, Spanish, and Khmer and translators attended the larger public meetings. DPD staff published [reports](#) summarizing each of the public meetings and results from the neighborhood group tour.

Despite these efforts, two major users of our parks and recreation programs were not well-represented. Consequently, we scheduled three focus-group style conversations with members of the City's Disability Commission and two local youth organizations. We believed that hearing from these two constituencies would enrich this process and lead to a better plan.

MEETING STRUCTURE

Each focus group had a similar structure. First, we introduced ourselves and then provided background information about the process to date, including information gleaned from previous meetings. We continued the conversation with an ice breaker: discussing the neighborhoods people call home. Next, we asked each group how they use parks and open spaces today, the kinds of improvements they would like to see in the future, and whether they know about and participate in the programs offered by the City's Recreation Department.

KEY FINDINGS

We heard many comments that aligned with the input gathered at the previous public meetings. Hearing these common themes reaffirmed our belief that even though our community is diverse, we largely share a consistent vision for our parks and open spaces.

Still, each of these meetings also raised topics that we had not yet heard. If we had not met with the young women who use the City's pools, we would not have known that locker rooms at South Common do not have curtains in the changing areas. Without curtains, the pools are difficult and uncomfortable to use. Many of the discussions about splash pads in public meetings were positive, but no one had thought to ask the City to invest in wheelchairs designed for use in water. These types of wheelchairs feature quick dry technology, saving personal wheelchairs from exposure to water and rusting.

As we hoped, the insight gathered from these focus groups has enhanced the plan-making process. The following pages summarize our notes from each of the focus groups.

June 8, 2018 – Youth Organization #1

What parks and open spaces do you use?

- Callery Park
- Gage Park
- Hadley Park
- Memorial Park (Dracut)
- Mulligan splash pad
- North Common
- Shedd Park

What do you do/use at those parks?

- Baseball
- Run around (with siblings)
- Sled (at Shedd)
- Slides
- Soccer
- Tag with friends
- Swings with friends
- Volleyball

Do you play an organized sport, and, if so, which sport(s)?

- Baseball—Callery and Gage parks
- Basketball—North Common
- Soccer—Regatta Field
- Softball (LHS)—Shedd Park

How do you get to those parks?

- Walk
- Driven
- Bike—usually with adult supervision

What do you like about the parks you visit?

- Walking to the stores near Hadley park
- We can play
- Watch and play sports in the fields

What do you wish was better about those parks/what do you want to see at them?

- More space to just run around
- More swings
- Repair or replace the equipment that is old, squeaky, or broken
- Higher slides
- Fun climbing structures
- Board games to check out while at the park
- More trees

- Bouncy houses
- Softer surfaces at playgrounds to land on
- Better bike racks
 - Racks at Shedd Park are in a bad location
 - All the schools need more racks
- More playgrounds like the new one at Father Maguire Park
- Climbing nets and climbing rock walls
- More obstacle courses (like American Ninja Warrior)
- Ziplines
- Higher monkey bars
- Tunnels—things to crawl in/through
- More pools and splash pads across the city
- Pools with fountains
- Shedd Park parking lot is small, so people leave or park on busy streets
- Parks should have bigger open spaces and more courts
- Ice cream truck at Shedd Park is great, should be one at all parks
- Either have someone selling water or have working bubblers for water at all parks
- Have concessions stands for water and snacks
- More (and CLEANER) bathrooms
- Have some open spaces dedicated for smaller kids so they don't get pushed out during games
- Parks need more bright colors—no beige and green
 - **Q:** why not pink and purple or a full rainbow of colors?
- Parks should have individual colors/themes
- More maintenance staff—for clean up
- Areas dedicated for smaller children to be able to run around separate from bigger kids so they don't get knocked over
- Some schools have recess in parking lots—why doesn't every school have a good park that kids can use for recess
- Some schools have painted the asphalt for hopscotch, four square, etc.
- Some parks have a weird set up
 - E.g., Hadley Park swings are too close to the entrance. If you are swinging high, you feel like you are going to hit people as they are walking in
- Bathrooms at South Common pool are gross—no curtains in any of the changing areas
- More places to sit
- More access to water bubblers
- No smoking allowed
- More signs and fines for littering
- Family nights at parks with movies and events

July 26, 2018 – Youth Organization #2

Parks most often visited:

- Cawley site
- Father Maguire Park
- Hadley Park
- McPherson Park—track
- North Common
- Shedd Park
- South Common—youth group has a recreation component to their program, which uses this park weekly

How do most people get to parks?

- Walk
- City bus

What do you do/use at those parks?

- Attend events
- Play basketball
- Plan on meeting people at park to hang out
- Swings
- Walk to stores around/through parks
- Watch basketball/pickup games

Things teens would like to see prevented:

- Used needles
- Active drug uses
- Homeless/mentally ill people scaring visitors
- Gang related activity
- Fighting
- Serious violence—like shootings

General suggestions for park improvements:

- More security, but lenient. Let kids be kids, just don't let dangerous people hang around
- Parents fear for their kids safety so they don't let them go to parks—maybe have specific “hang out zones” where there is more security
- Consider installing call buttons like blue security lights on college campuses—it gives people a visual safety net to know a call is just one button push away
- MORE NEEDLE CLEAN UPS. It's an issue every time the group goes to South Common
- Food trucks & Ice cream trucks regularly at parks
- More fun equipment: spinners, climbing walls, bigger and longer slides/slides built into park slopes. Instead of taking stairs people could slide down—stuff older kids would find fun too

Recreation programs:

- Very limited knowledge about City recreation programs and no one in the room had participated in one
- No one was aware the City offered free swim lessons and only four (of 21) teens in the room could swim
- Some participants mentioned that their parents thought the programs would be “too expensive”

July 12, 2018 – City’s Disability Commission

What parks and open spaces do you use?

- Canal walkways
- Riverwalk in Pawtucketville –it’s quieter and nicely maintained
- North Common
 - Group values all the parks and open spaces mentioned above because these spaces are nicely accessible

Suggestions:

- Some playground spaces are accessible for kids with disabilities, but not enough
- Splash pads are nice—and could be accessible. However, people cannot get their wheelchairs wet, which makes them inaccessible
 - **Q:** Has the City considered buying water wheelchairs? Many communities have them to provide access
- The long inter-connected trails are nice. However, someone using an electric wheelchair would need to watch their power levels because they could get stuck with a dead battery
 - **Q:** Has City ever considered installing wheelchair quick charging stations at any trails (e.g., Concord River Greenway)?
- Involve the Disability Commission in more planning projects to incorporate their feedback
- **Q:** Could the City install an accessible fishing dock?
- Real and perceived safety issues can decrease access to parks
 - E.g., the new South Common walkway is nice, but the park still doesn’t feel safe. People with disabilities aren’t always able to getaway and/or call for help
- The City should sponsor programs for children with disabilities
- The City needs an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plan
- Lowell should aspire to be universally accessible community
- Ensure programming to creates a welcoming/accessible environment and more people will participate/attend
- People with disabilities want accessible activities and the ability to independently use the City’s parks and programs

NEXT STEPS

DPD hosted the 3rd Public Meeting in August and will publish a report about that meeting next month. The Open Space Survey is closed and staff is analyzing the data. Over the next couple months, staff will begin drafting the Open Space and Recreation Plan, with the goal of releasing a draft for public comment in late October.

Lowell Department of Planning and Development
50 Arcand Drive, 2nd Floor
Lowell, MA 01852

OpenSpace@LowellMA.gov