

Parks, Open Space and Recreation

In many communities, parks, open space and recreation are often viewed as among those features that are *nice* to have, but are clearly of secondary importance when compared to other *essential* city services such as law enforcement, fire protection, public works, etc. This is unfortunate. In today's mobile society and high tech driven economy, businesses and people can relocate to anywhere they choose, and they are increasingly choosing communities that offer a high quality of life.

Fortunately, Salisbury has demonstrated its commitment to maintaining a high quality of life, including the provision of an excellent parks system. The most tangible evidence of this commitment may be seen in the City's efforts to develop the new Salisbury Community Park on a 303-acre site west of town. Moreover, the commitment of the City to this facility would not be possible without the support of the voters who, in 1996, approved a \$3 million bond referendum to fund land acquisition and the early stages of park development. This major park facility, combined with the City's on-going efforts to expand and improve upon a whole system of park sites, promises to put Salisbury "on the map" as among a select few communities with outstanding parks, open space and recreation amenities. In fact, it is no coincidence that the City is accredited as one of the few communities in the nation meeting national standards for park and recreation facilities and services.



Lastly, it should be noted that the City recently undertook the development of a new Master Parks and Recreation Plan which sets the course for park improvements in Salisbury over the next ten years. Many of the policies contained in this section are intended to dovetail with the recommendations of that plan.

Policies for Parks, Open Space and Recreation

Policy P-1: The City shall provide for a hierarchy of parks, located according to population density and designed according to the needs of the people residing within the most likely park service area.

If every part of Salisbury were exactly the same, each neighborhood planning area would have roughly the same number of residents, spaced at the same relative density, and comprised of the same population subgroups. In reality, we know, however, that certain areas of the city have a heavier concentration of elderly, while others have more young families, etc. Therefore, the City's park system must take into account first and foremost the anticipated users of each park site.

The current parks master plan for the City includes an evaluation of park needs in different parts of the city. Existing park facilities are compared with the population in the area. Recommendations are then set forth describing improvements to existing parks and suggestions for future park and facility development. In addition, the plan suggests that other parks might be developed as opportunity sites may become available—either through new development, defaulted tax parcels or other



circumstances. When such parcels become available, it will be important for the City to work closely with nearby residents to determine those features that would be most valued in the new park. Fortunately, Salisbury has a good track record for conducting such consultations.*

*One example of tailoring park facilities to the immediate population is the need for a park downtown with features designed to serve the children of downtown area families. It is expected that this need will become more pronounced as the City continues to facilitate the creation of more residential units downtown.



Policy P-2: The City shall continue to develop a system of open space greenways and hiking trails to connect residential areas with, especially, schools, colleges and park facilities. The use of (1) natural corridors such as streams and floodplains, and (2) man-made corridors such as utility and transportation rights-of-way and easements, shall be emphasized.

The City of Salisbury is blessed with an urban pattern of development, stream configuration, and utility corridors that offer good opportunities for greenway development. The greenway concept, which continues to receive significant attention across the country, encourages the use of natural corridors such as river and creek floodplains for linear park systems. These natural corridors are supplemented as necessary by man-made corridors, such as utility and transportation rights of way, to assemble a complete, interconnected system of linear park spaces within a community.

Greenways offer enjoyable walking opportunities to the elderly-- a population group that will soon swell with the ranks of the baby boom generation. Greenways also afford safe, off-road paths for children between home and school, home and the park, etc. Further, in Salisbury's reasonably modest terrain, greenways offer opportunities for joint development of bikeway trails from residences to shopping or even to places of employment. In many instances, this requires the construction of "neighborhood connectors" or "spurs" leading from a neighborhood area to a greenway trunk line.

Finally, it should be noted that greenways can serve the multiple objectives of open space preservation, transportation, recreation, floodplain management, wildlife conservation, cultural awareness, and a host of other purposes. Salisbury's recently prepared downtown master plan, for example, calls for a "cultural loop" connecting points of interest in the central part of the city. This plan therefore urges continued development of a greenway system as a defining feature of Salisbury's parks, recreation, and open space system.

Policy P-3: Mini-parks shall be encouraged in existing and proposed neighborhoods to meet the needs of small children and to encourage social interaction and mutual support among area families.

Considering the expense of park maintenance, it is understandable that some park programs today are moving away from the small neighborhood park. Yet, national studies have confirmed that a majority of the American public would prefer that future parks and open spaces be *close to home*, i.e. within walking distance. This plan therefore recommends that Salisbury continue to support small pocket parks within

each neighborhood, especially in the older, walkable areas of the city and in the new, compact neighborhoods yet to be. Maintenance of such facilities may require innovative approaches involving some combination of city crews, private contractors and/or volunteers. (See Policy P-8 below.)

Policy P-4: Neighborhood and mini parks should be located with exposure to residential and/or non-residential activities, where informal observation and oversight can take place.

Smaller parks should be located where people naturally congregate. Not only does this increase the use of the park, but *it also puts many eyes on the park*. By placing new parks where houses or businesses face them, the mere presence of many informal supervisors (i.e. people in general) helps prevent various forms of mischief and vandalism. This principle most easily applies to so-called “vest pocket” or mini-parks; equally important, however, are opportunities to apply the concept to other, larger open spaces, such as neighborhood parks. Rather than putting new parks on sites removed and/or screened from the view of homes and businesses, the location and design of future small to medium-sized parks should be carefully coordinated with neighborhood designs and mixed-use developments that face on the park.

In the context of the neighborhood planning area, neighborhood parks offer a natural meeting place for residents from the various residential enclaves that surround it. Neighborhoods of varied home values (and therefore diverse economic levels) could come together around the park in much the same way that the petals of a flower join together at the blossom's center. The policy immediately below concerning a parkland dedication ordinance would create a public mechanism whereby each new neighborhood development might set aside either land or money for the joint development of such a common park. Meanwhile, the preparation of individual neighborhood plans should identify suggested locations for common, neighborhood park sites.



Policy P-5: New residential development should provide for adequate open space and recreation areas in proportion to the demand created by the development. This may be determined according to the number of dwelling units in the development and/or by a percentage of the total acreage in the development.

North Carolina law allows local governments to require new subdivisions to set aside or “dedicate” a certain proportion of the total development for open space and recreation. For example, a “10% dedication standard” would require that five acres of a fifty acre development be reserved for open space. Alternatively, a “1 acre per 20 housing unit” standard would require that a development with 100 housing units also set aside five acres for open space. Either approach is acceptable under State enabling legislation.

Regardless of the approach taken, such ordinances typically include criteria concerning the quality of the land to be set aside. Without such criteria, a developer could conceivably set aside many small “remnants” of land, which collectively add up to 10% requirement. Alternatively, a developer might elect to set aside only undevelopable wetlands or other unsuitable land-- areas also unsuitable for recreational use.

Instead of setting aside land, another way to ensure that parkland keeps up with new growth, is to require a “*fee in lieu of land dedication*”. Under this option, fees paid by the developer/builder are deposited into a special trust fund set up by the City specifically for parks, open space and recreation. The *fee in lieu of land dedication* option is intended to correct for situations where a development involving just a few housing units would not yield sufficient open space to be useful. For example, ten percent of the land area in a small, five-unit subdivision would be unlikely to yield enough open space to be useful. Further, the *fee in lieu of dedication* option ensures that small subdivisions, not just the larger ones, also provide for a proportionate, fair share of the open space needs of area residents.

Significantly, the City of Salisbury currently has no provision in its subdivision regulations regarding land dedication or fees in lieu of land dedication. Nor is there any requirement in the City’s zoning ordinance regarding the provision of open space in planned unit developments. While there was such a provision in the City’s development regulations as recently as 1990, it was not enforced and was subsequently taken off the books. As the city continues to grow in population, however, one or more such provisions concerning land dedication or fees in lieu thereof warrant serious consideration. It is, perhaps, the most equitable way of assuring that new growth is adequately served by open space and recreation facilities.

Policy P-6: The City of Salisbury supports the co-location and joint development of public park facilities in cooperation with institutions such as colleges, public schools, federal, state and local government agencies, as well as other entities.

Within the corporate limits of the City of Salisbury are located over a dozen public school sites, three college campuses, and the substantial grounds of a major Veterans Administration hospital. Each of these institutions affords opportunities for joint development and use of parks, recreation and open space facilities. This policy therefore encourages the City to work proactively with these various institutions and agencies to jointly develop and maintain park facilities, preserve open space, mitigate wetlands, restore stream banks and protect wildlife habitat, as such opportunities arise.



Policy P-7: The City shall continue to explore new methods of park maintenance and programming including, but not limited to, increased privatization and volunteerism.

A major concern in parks and recreation administration today is in the area of maintenance and programming. With each new addition to the park or open space system of the city, comes a permanent commitment for "perpetual care" and program management. Not only must cities today look after the grounds and buildings at public parks and facilities, but also they are called upon increasingly to maintain median strips, street plazas, street trees, public flowerbeds, and cemeteries. Meanwhile, the costs of vandalism and mischief on City owned properties continue to go up.

Generally, the City of Salisbury assigns responsibility for road right of way maintenance to the Public Services Department and gives parks maintenance responsibilities to the Parks and Recreation Department. Regardless of how the work is divided, however, the total number of work hours facing the City remains large.

Because of the continuing increases in the costs of park maintenance, as well as street right of way maintenance, the City of Salisbury periodically examines other options for such tasks, including opportunities for privatization and volunteerism. Currently, for example, the City contracts out responsibility for mowing the right of way along the City's sewer easements. Private contractors also maintain the areas around the City's entrances, including entryway signs. With the Salisbury Community Park bringing more property into active use, pressures for privatization of mowing and other services may become even greater.

Regarding volunteerism, the City will continue to explore opportunities for transferring additional recreational programming to community sports organizations and civic clubs. Community and civic club involvement in the framing of a long-term strategy will be a key to the success of such an endeavor. Finally, the public will need to be made to understand that with the benefits of new parks and attractive open spaces comes a commitment for a greater level of individual and neighborhood responsibility. The public must be weaned from the notion that it is the total responsibility of the City to supervise parks, mow median strips, etc.

At the same time, privatization may offer the best promise for those aspects of parks or open space maintenance that do not easily lend themselves to volunteerism. Large-scale grounds maintenance, tree trimming, rest rooms, etc are but a few of the possibilities that are better suited to private sector contracting than volunteerism.



Summary of Policies for Parks, Open Space and Recreation

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Policy P-2: *The City shall continue to develop a system of open space greenways and hiking trails to connect residential areas with, especially, schools, colleges and park facilities. The use of (1) natural corridors such as streams and floodplains, and (2) man-made corridors such as utility and transportation rights-of-way and easements, shall be emphasized.*

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Policy P-7: *The City shall continue to explore new methods of park maintenance and programming including, but not limited to, increased privatization and volunteerism.*

Policy P-8: *The City of Salisbury shall continue the expansion and development of the new Community Park, while maintaining its commitment to the maintenance and upkeep of existing City park facilities elsewhere in the urban area.*

Policy P-9: *The City of Salisbury welcomes cooperative public-private arrangements for the development, programming, and maintenance of park and recreation facilities.*