

# CHAPTER 10

## PARKS AND RECREATION



Williams Park Playground

# CHAPTER 10 PARKS AND RECREATION

**GOAL: ENCOURAGE THE IMPROVED UTILIZATION, MAINTENANCE AND REHABILITATION OF THE DIVERSE PARKS, RECREATION AND OPEN SPACE FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS ADEQUATE IN EXTENT, STRATEGIC IN LOCATION AND EQUITABLE IN DISTRIBUTION TO SERVE THE UNIQUE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE RECREATION NEEDS OF THE CITY'S POPULATION PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO ARE MOST DEPENDENT UPON THE SYSTEM FOR RECREATION**

## 10.1 INTRODUCTION

The variety of public and private recreational opportunities available to New London residents and visitors can be considered as one of the City's great strengths and have a significant effect on the quality of life in the City.

It is the intent of this chapter of the Plan to provide an inventory of the parks and recreation resources within the City, identify the existing administrative structure that manages these resources, identify the issues and needs of the park system and recommends a series of policies and strategies that can be used to address these needs.

The goal of this chapter of the plan recommends that the City must increase its effort to more fully utilize, rehabilitate and maintain the various parks and recreation facilities throughout the City to better serve all citizens. The plan recognizes the fact that the City's financial limitations will make this goal increasingly more difficult to achieve in light of the various pressures placed upon the City park system. The plan identifies ways to enhance and improve the City recreation system and suggests new

approaches that can be implemented to help make this happen.

### 10.11 EXISTING PUBLIC PARK SYSTEM

The City owns and operates one regional park, three city wide parks, three beaches, one senior center/auditorium, two historic sites, eleven neighborhood playgrounds, seven neighborhood parks, one pier, one marina and two open space parks.

The New London park system at present contains a total of 292 acres at 28 sites. Figure 1 identifies the facilities owned and maintained by the City and Map 2 Community Facilities identifies their locations within the City.

Site sizes range from .35 acres to 95 acres. These facilities contain twenty-seven playgrounds, twenty-seven basketball courts,

sixteen tennis courts, ten baseball fields, nine softball fields, four soccer fields, two football fields and a variety of other special purpose facilities such as an outdoor olympic size swimming pool, an indoor swimming pool, a track, a senior center, a skating pond, miniature golf, and trails.

**Figure 10-1  
PUBLIC RECREATIONAL FACILITIES  
City of New London, 1995**

<u>Site</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Conn. Ave./McDonald Street	.25
Bartlett School	1.50
Little Red Schoolhouse	1.00
Jennings School	3.02
Mercer Field	5.00
Martin Center	3.50
Caulkins Park	12.87
Winthrop Cove	4.20
Nathan Hale School	8.70
Mahan	1.00
Harbor School	3.19
Toby May	7.00
Ocean Beach Park	40.40
Williams	2.20
Old Town Mill	3.00
Memorial Park	4.00
Winthrop School	4.00
Greens Harbor	3.50
Ye Antientist Bur.	2.50
New London High School	23.00
Blackhall/Garfield	.35
Bates Woods	95.00
Riverside	18.64
Edgerton School	4.17
City Pier	.40
Veterans Field	3.82
Parade	.45
<b>TOTAL ACRES</b>	<b>256.66</b>

**10.12 PRIVATE RECREATION FACILITIES**

Additionally, there are several private and quasi-public facilities located within the City which are often available to community residents. The Garde Arts Center, Mitchell Woods Park, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, Connecticut College, the

Connecticut College Arboretum, Mitchell College, the B.P. Learned House, six marinas, a yacht club, a state boat launch, a community center and a number of privately owned beaches and beach clubs. These facilities add over 220 acres of recreational land to the facilities available in New London. Although many of these facilities are not available to all residents they do reduce the recreational demand placed upon City facilities and must be considered an important component of the City's parks and recreation plan.

**Figure 10-2  
PRIVATE/QUASI-PUBLIC  
RECREATIONAL FACILITIES  
New London, 1995**

<u>Site</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Coast Guard Academy	70
Conn College Arboretum	68
Connecticut College	57
Mitchell Woods	36
Pequot Avenue Beach	16
Mitchell College	9
Mitchell College Beach	7
B.P. Learned Mission	2
State of Connecticut	
<u>Boat Launch</u>	<u>7</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>262.5</b>

**10.13 ZONING FOR RECREATION**

The City has zoned the majority of its recreation facilities as Open Space. At the present time two hundred and six acres or 5.6% of the City's land area is zoned as Open Space. Most of the City's school sites are zoned for residential purposes and most of the quasi public recreation facilities are zoned Institutional. The combination of private and publicly used land presently used for open space/parks/recreation purposes accounts for nearly 495 acres or about 14% of the City's land area.

The City's compact development pattern and the availability of the regional transit system makes accessibility to these recreation facilities relatively easy. Since the City embarked on a major parks

improvements program, almost all of the City's parks have been upgraded to some degree.

### 10.14 PARKS AND RECREATION NEEDS

National standards for the provision of parks, recreation and open space have been historically established by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). The NRPA recommends that every city should offer a minimum of 6.25 acres of developed open space for every 1,000 people. A City's parks system should include a series of small mini-parks within a quarter mile of every resident, neighborhood parks within a half mile of every resident, community parks within a two mile radius of every resident and regional parks. Based upon these standards the City has more overall park area within its boundary than the standards recommends. This information is charted in Figure 3. Recently however these standards have come under increasing criticism which argues that the standards of maintenance, equipment, location and design of a parks system are more important than size/area/acreage. The City should initiate a survey of parks users to determine whether the City's parks system is really satisfying the public need.

### 10.15 PARKS PLANNING

In 1999, a *Park and Recreation Master Plan* was completed by FMA PARTNERSHIP, PC of New Hartford, Conn.

This Master Plan was undertaken to examine the present park system and determine its needs to fulfill its obligation to city residents. The Master Plan concluded that the most common sentiment expressed by people is that the parks have suffered from a lack of attention, especially good maintenance. When resources are scarce, the Master Plan says, most people understand why major capital improvements are not constructed. But people expect and should expect that sufficient resources must be found "to take care of what we have". This has not been the case for the past several years.

The Master Plan found parks and recreation facilities have deteriorated to the extent that what might have been maintenance (operational) problems have become replacement (capital) problems. This condition can be found in any park or school yard. The full Master Plan contains documentation of visits to each site including photographs of existing conditions.

**Figure 10-3  
OUTDOOR OPEN SPACE/  
RECREATION NEEDS,  
NEW LONDON, CT, 1995**

<u>Park Classification</u>	<u>Acres/1000 People</u>	<u>1995 Acreage</u>	<u>1995 Need</u>	<u>1995 Acres Deficit/Overage</u>
Neighborhood	2.5	87.2	70	+17
Community/ Citywide	2.5	115.2	70	+45
OVERALL	6.25	260.0	175	+85

The Master Plan presented a number of overall Goals that can be divided into short-term and long-term objectives. Short-term goals are those that can be implemented with ease, should be implemented for safety reasons or for compliance with current codes or regulations. Improved maintenance is both a short-term and long-term goal. Long-term goals require more time, more money, consensus, and commitment. In its analysis of existing conditions, the Master Plan found that many improvements can be achieved in the short-term, but because facilities have been neglected for so long, some improvements will take more time and resources. The short term and long term goals presented in the Master Plan are as follows:

## Short term goals

1. Improve park and school playground safety.
  - a. Remove existing equipment, which is hazardous and does not meet current safety standards, such as slides, climbers and swing sets, which do not meet U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission Guidelines.
  - b. Remove sites or facilities from use by the Park and Recreation Department, which are difficult to maintain and are unsafe for public use. Examples are the pedestrian bridge and waterfront at Riverside Park and Winthrop Cove Park.
2. Improve the access to all park and recreation facilities and conform to recommendations of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA).
  - a. Installation of accessible walks to all the facilities will increase participation by all New London's citizens.
  - b. Installation of accessible play equipment.
  - c. Installation of accessible picnic tables, drinking fountains, trash receptacles, etc.
3. Improve park identity, as part of the park system, by installing standard signs.
  - a. Install standard park entrance sign and landscaping.
  - b. Install standard park rules sign at each park.
  - c. Install standard traffic signs at each park.
4. Develop the maintenance department under the jurisdiction of Parks and Recreation to improve the appearance and upkeep at the parks.
  - a. Hire a maintenance supervisor
  - b. Develop standards and procedures for the maintenance department, along with job descriptions.
  - c. Develop design plans for the maintenance center.
  - d. Construct the Maintenance Center.

- e. Begin to hire and train full time maintenance staff.
- f. Maintain parks at a Mode II level as defined by the NRPA Maintenance Standards.

5. Continue the investigation of developing a park Conservancy Program and other programs in which volunteers can assist the park and Recreation Department in maintenance of its facilities.

## Long Term Goals

6. Install a capital improvement program to renovate the existing park and recreation facilities. Initial emphasis should be placed on school sites. See 'Recommended Priority Listing.'
7. Incorporate Park design standards into the improvement projects to provide uniformity to the New London Park System.
8. Incorporate current ADA, National Recreation and Park Association, U.S.C.P.S. standards to the design plan.
9. Investigate the purchase of additional land to meet recreational needs.
10. Investigate Federal and State grant programs to provide funding for implementation of the park improvement program.

To implement Short Term Goal #5a of the 1999 FMA Plan, the *New London Parks Conservancy* was formed shortly after the report was finalized. In the past eight years the *Conservancy* has held seasonal cleanups of the parks and coordinated volunteers to prune shrubs, plant flowers and perform other maintenance tasks. An environmental education effort aimed at elementary, middle and high school students called *Bates Woods Environmental Education Program (BEEP)* was initiated in 2002 with over 400 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders expected to participate in educational programs during the fall of 2007. *BEEP* has grown as the *Conservancy* has adroitly developed its

curriculum and volunteer support base by creating an extensive network of collaborators to support the program from various community and volunteer organizations.

The Department of Recreation is responsible for the planning, scheduling and the provision of all of the City sponsored recreation services to the residents of New London. The Department is administered by a Director, who is a city department head who reports directly to the City Manager. The Parks and Recreation Commission serves as an advisory board and makes recommendations to the City Council regarding the policies, rules and regulations of the City of New London concerning the leisure time of its citizens.

## **10.16 PARKS MAINTENANCE**

Since 1986 the Public Works Department has assumed responsibility for the maintenance, repair and improvements to the City's parks system. At the present time staffing levels for the departments parks maintenance division is at an all time low of 9 positions. The National Parks and Recreation Association standard indicates that for a community containing the amount and type of parkland like New London 18 workers should be available for routine maintenance work. Lack of timely maintenance is presently evident at many of the more intensely used recreation facilities in the City. Additionally, capital outlay from the City's general fund budget for parks improvements has been virtually nonexistent for many years.

## **10.17 RECENT CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS**

The City has relied very heavily upon Federal and State funds for parks and recreation improvements over the past seven years. The City has utilized Federal Community Development Block Grant funds and Federal and State Open Space and Recreation Grant funds to complete the following park improvement programs:

- Major improvements at Bates Woods Park were funded with \$239,000 in Block Grant funds which were matched with \$72,000 in Open Space and Recreation Grant Funds.
- Improvements Caulkins, Mahan, Bates Woods and Riverside Park were funded with \$106,000 in Block Grant funds and \$56,400 in Open Space funds.
- Two neighborhood playgrounds received a total of \$56,000 in Block Grant funds.
- The \$3,600,000 improvements to the Ocean Beach Park pool and bath house were funded in part by a City bond, an Urban Act Grant and an Open Space Grant.
- The Greens Harbor Beach Bath house was rehabilitated with a \$130,000 grant from the State's Outdoor Recreation program.
- The athletic fields and the playscape at Caulkins Park were improved through the assistance of \$53,000 from the State's Outdoor Recreation Grant program.

## **10.18 PARKS AND RECREATION ISSUES**

The variety of issues facing the provision of parks and recreation services in the City of New London can be generally summarized as follows:

- The lack of sufficient funding necessary to adequately upgrade, maintain and program for the recreational needs of the City.
- The need for the City to expand and/or improve its existing facilities to gain the maximum utility.
- The lack of easily accessible indoor recreational activity space for all age groups.

Given the range of parks and recreation facilities and the limited opportunities for the City to acquire additional acreage the principal objective of the City's parks plan is maintenance,

rehabilitation and replacement of the existing systems.

This Plan supports the retention of all existing parks and recreational facilities. Additional funding for maintenance should also be sought.

A committee was created in 2007 to examine and make recommendations for action on all New London's sports facilities and fields as well as its other parks and recreation facilities. Called the *Mayor's Sports Complex and Recreation Committee*, the Committee has been examining the need for upgrades to the New London High School fields, the need for identification and directional signage at all public parks, recreation and athletic facilities and priorities for installing these signs, as well as the need for the development and implementation of an overall Maintenance and Enhancement Plan for all of the City's public parks and recreation facilities, including the New London High School fields.

The Committee's final recommendations, as they may be adopted by the City Council, should be considered to be included in this Plan for informational purposes in the same manner as the short and long-term goals of the 1999 FMA Study.

## 10.2 PARKS

**POLICY: Rehabilitate and maintain the existing public and private parks and recreation facilities in order to maximize their use and potential rather than acquiring and developing major new parks and facilities.**

### 10.21 URBAN PARKS PLAN

In 1999, a *Park and Recreation Master Plan* was completed by FMA PARTNERSHIP, PC of New Hartford, Conn.

This Master Plan was undertaken to examine the present park system and determine its needs to fulfill its obligation to city residents. The Master Plan concluded that the most common sentiment expressed by people is that the parks have suffered from a lack of attention, especially good maintenance. When resources are scarce, the Master Plan says, most people understand why major capital improvements are not constructed. But people expect and should expect that sufficient resources must be found “to take care of what we have”. This has not been the case for the past several years.

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The Master Plan presented a number of overall Goals that can be divided into short-term and long-term objectives. Short-term goals are those that can be implemented with ease, should be implemented for safety reasons or for

compliance with current codes or regulations. Improved maintenance is both a short-term and long-term goal. Long-term goals require more time, more money, consensus, and commitment. In its analysis of existing conditions, the Master Plan found that many improvements can be achieved in the short-term, but because facilities have been neglected for so long, some improvements will take more time and resources. The short term and long term goals presented in the Master Plan are as follows:

#### Short term goals

11. Improve park and school playground safety.
  - a. Remove existing equipment, which is hazardous and does not meet current safety standards, such as slides, climbers and swing sets, which do not meet U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission Guidelines.
  - b. Remove sites or facilities from use by the Park and Recreation Department, which are difficult to maintain and are unsafe for public use. Examples are the pedestrian bridge and waterfront at Riverside Park and Winthrop Cove Park.
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  - a. Installation of accessible walks to all the facilities will increase participation by all New London’s citizens.
  - b. Installation of accessible play equipment.
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2. Improve park identity, as part of the park system, by installing standard signs.
  - a. Install standard park entrance sign and landscaping.
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3. Develop the maintenance department under the jurisdiction of Parks and Recreation to improve the appearance and upkeep at the parks.
  - a. Hire a maintenance supervisor
  - b. Develop standards and procedures for the maintenance department, along with job descriptions.
  - c. Develop design plans for the maintenance center.
  - d. Construct the Maintenance Center.
  - e. Begin to hire and train full time maintenance staff.
  - f. Maintain parks at a Mode II level as defined by the NRPA Maintenance Standards.
4. Continue the investigation of developing a park Conservancy Program and other programs in which volunteers can assist the park and Recreation Department in maintenance of its facilities.

#### Long Term Goals

1. Install a capital improvement program to renovate the existing park and recreation facilities. Initial emphasis should be placed on school sites. See 'Recommended Priority Listing.'
2. Incorporate Park design standards into the improvement projects to provide uniformity to the New London Park System.
3. Incorporate current ADA, National Recreation and Park Association, U.S.C.P.S. standards to the design plan.
4. Investigate the purchase of additional land to meet recreational needs.
5. Investigate Federal and State grant programs to provide funding for implementation of the park improvement program.

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#### 10.22 SIGNAGE

**Improve park visibility and image by defining entries with consistent signs, fencing and plantings and by linking the parks through a pedestrian\bicycle network.**

Many of the City's parks are not identified as public facilities through the use of entrance signs, directional signs, landscaping or through the use of some other similar consistent identification program. An effort should be initiated to develop some type of network that would easily identify the fact that all City parks are part of an overall Citywide park system. The City park system is distributed widely throughout all areas of the City and could be further enhanced through the development of a series of sidewalks, trails, walkways, bike paths and open space that could link the parks in all areas of the City together.



Bates Woods Park

### **10.23 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

**In conjunction with an overall citywide capital improvement program the City should establish a parks and recreation capital improvement plan which emphasizes the rehabilitation and replacement of parks and recreation equipment and facilities in order to gain maximum utilization from each facility for multiple purposes.**

As the UPARR plan is updated this document should be used to develop a detailed series of physical capital improvement recommendations with associated costs that can be used as a capital improvement program for the City's park system. These recommendations should then be incorporated into a citywide capital improvement program. Presently, the Public Works budget does not provide for capital outlays for the parks system and improvements are made to facilities as Federal and State programs make monies

available. Facilities have not been improved or replaced on any systematic basis.

### **10.24 DOWNTOWN**

**Provide, encourage and require, where appropriate, and particularly in the Downtown, additional facilities such as vest pocket parks, mini-parks, plazas, fountains, sculpture and public art.**

Some of the City's most visible, successful and notable public sites are the various, small parks and plaza spaces that have been created over the years; the Parade at the corner of Bank and State Street, Union Plaza on State Street and Colby Park on Eugene O'Neill Drive. These sites provide valuable outdoor space for relaxation, lunches, festivals, street vendors and farmers markets. One way to encourage the creation of additional similar space is to revise the City's zoning regulations to provide incentive bonuses to developers to provide such spaces as part of the development process. Additionally, the City should explore ways to improve these existing spaces with additional seating, landscaping etc...

### **10.25 COMMUNITY GARDENS**

**Encourage the use of vacant lots for neighborhood community gardens.**

In many of the City's more densely developed residential neighborhoods the housing units have virtually no backyards that can be used for gardening or a small vegetable plot. Additionally, there are vacant lots which have become neighborhood dumping grounds and a nuisance to the local community. The City should actively encourage the development of these sites into community gardens. Recently, the Olde New London Neighborhood Association has converted a derelict site at the corner of Coit and Reed Streets into a small open space park. This effort could be duplicated elsewhere in the City.

## 10.26 SCHOOL SITES

**Continue to expand the policy of using school recreational sites and buildings for community-wide recreation.**

Twenty-five percent of the City's parks and recreation facilities are provided on the sites of the City's school facilities. The functional integration of these school sites into the park system has satisfied a considerable neighborhood and citywide level of demand that could otherwise not be satisfied. However, there are additional opportunities to more fully utilize these facilities to satisfy the communities recreational needs.

## 10.27 MAINTENANCE

**Develop a comprehensive program to improve the function and appearance of all City recreational facilities.**

Given the fact that most of the City's recreational fields are intensely used the need for improved maintenance of these facilities is a major concern of this plan. The City's parks must be maintained in a clean and attractive manner. This strategy will continue to be difficult to achieve unless the issues of limited personnel, intensity of field use and the lack of public funds is resolved. A comprehensive maintenance plan would be helpful with the implementation of this strategy.

## 10.28 FUNDING

**The City must continue to aggressively seek state and federal monies to fund park improvements.**

In light of the City's fiscal constraints and the need for significant improvements to the City's parks system the need for alternative sources of funding from State and Federal sources has become even more important. As we have previously stated, virtually all recent capital investments in the City park system have resulted from funds supplied

from State and Federal sources and this situation will not likely change in the foreseeable future. Each year the City should develop a series of projects and improvements that are likely to be funded from these sources in order to anticipate the annual funding cycles.

## **10.3 RECREATION**

**POLICY: Offer programs and services that are responsive to individual, group and neighborhood needs, make more efficient use of facilities and expand recreational opportunities for all citizens.**

### **10.31 FUNDING**

**Explore the possibilities of establishing new policies and programs that could generate additional funds to be used to defray the costs of recreation programming.**

The provision of most recreation programs by the City has historically been viewed as a service provided to all City residents. However, as new programs are created and additional demands are placed upon the parks system the City's ability to adequately provide these services in a financially sound manner is becoming more and more difficult. Ideas such as adopting a user-fee policy for facilities and programs, selling local parks and recreation memorabilia such as T-shirts, mugs etc...and encouraging local businesses to financially sponsor specific programs should be explored in order to generate additional revenue to be used by the Recreation Department to run programs and improve facilities.

### **10.32 VOLUNTEERS**

**Implement a program in which users or volunteer groups assist**

**with parks maintenance, security, litter control and programming such as an Adopt-A-Park program.**

During 1994 the City made some initial progress towards the development of this concept through a series of volunteer efforts at Riverside Park. Throughout the summer and fall community groups, city officials and volunteers from the Naval Submarine Base worked together to clean up the beach, parking lots, landscaping, overgrown vegetation, picnic areas and play areas. The park had become an eyesore to the local neighborhood. Through these volunteer efforts which were supplemented by the assistance of the City's Public Works Department the park was rejuvenated and is being targeted for possible future programs. This effort can be used as a model for possible maintenance and program needs in other parks in the City. Additionally, the City could consider allowing organized park users to share specific maintenance tasks in exchange for park privileges and operational funding or encouraging local neighborhood groups to adopt the maintenance responsibility for some of the smaller neighborhood parks and playgrounds.

Volunteers are presently being used to supplement the City's paid recreation staff through the Volunteer Action Center and Connecticut College's Office of Volunteer Services. These contributions of volunteer time and talent can greatly assist the provision of programs while freeing up valuable financial resources that can be used for supplies and equipment. However, additional resources are necessary to support the employment of staff to supervise the present volunteer efforts.

### **10.33 USE OF PRIVATE FACILITIES**

**Increase recreational opportunities by exploring with the Board of Education and all three local colleges the opening of facilities for expanded resident use.**

There exists the need for additional indoor recreational space to supplement the facilities provided by the City to the public for recreation programs. The City has recently made substantial strides through a cooperative effort with the Board of Education and Connecticut College to gain access to these facility for resident use. Public and private programs are now being held at these facilities which has alleviated the pressures being placed on City facilities. The City should continue these cooperative ventures and look to ways to expand public access wherever appropriate.

### **10.34 NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

**Conduct periodic assessments of the recreational needs of the community.**

The recreation needs of a community will change as the population demographics of its residents change. These changes will obviously impact the facilities and programs provided by the City and other private recreation providers. In order to anticipate these needs and provide a level of service to its residents the City must establish a mechanism to systematically survey the users of the park system in light of the programs being provided. The City presently uses students from Connecticut College for a variety of internship programs. This assistance could be used to conduct such an assessment.

### **10.35 SERVICE COORDINATION**

**Develop a recreation services coordinating council of local service providers to act as a centralized information clearinghouse for recreation related programs.**

The City is not the only recreation service provider in the community. Agencies such as B.P. Lerner Mission, New London Community Center, the YMCA, Centro de la Comunidad church groups, clubs all provide programs that serve the needs of the community. The Council could coordinate recreational services amongst all providers to insure that programs are not duplicated and needed programs are provided. The Council could also cooperatively advertise the availability of the programs throughout the City and the region. Many community residents are not aware of the programs and facilities offered by private and public providers. The marketing of the programs could be improved.