

DeKalb Park District

Strategic Plan 2008-2013

Approved by the DeKalb Park District Board of Commissioners

March 13, 2008

Vision

Excellence in parks and recreation services

Mission

To provide diverse, high quality, active and passive recreational facilities and services to all residents of DeKalb

Board of Commissioners

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Introduction

In spring of 1999, the DeKalb Park District contracted with the Center of Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University to assist the park district in preparing a Master Plan update to serve as a guide for planning activities over the next five years. As part of that effort, planning sessions were held with the Board, staff and community focus groups. Strategic issues were identified and a set of goals and objectives for the coming years were developed.

Challenged with meeting the current and future needs of the community, the Board and staff realized the goals and objectives established in 1999 were no longer in alignment with the needs of the community. In addition, the recreation industry standards and trends had changed significantly.

In early fall of 2006, the Board of Park Commissioners approved an engagement with the Northern Illinois Center of Governmental Studies to assist the District in updating the strategic plan. In addition to the focus group process to identify strategic issues, a new component was added. The Board felt it was critical to access the overall pulse of the community through a community wide phone survey which addressed Park District services and facilities.

The results of the community survey along with the results of focus groups held with the public, staff and Board were utilized to develop a series of goals and objectives for the District for the next five years. This plan allows the organization to channel resources in a direction that yields the greatest benefit for the community. The key to the success will be the ability to balance funding of future needs with those of existing needs.

As you read through the goals and objectives of this plan, you will find that they cannot be achieved by us alone. It will take the support of the entire community-residents, businesses, community leaders, staff and commissioners.

We invite you to join us in our effort to realize our vision.

David Male

President

DeKalb Park District Board of Commissioners

History

The City of DeKalb was the first provider of park and recreation services to the community beginning in 1935. Spearheaded by the League of Women's Voters, the citizens of DeKalb formalized their need for recreation and parks by establishing the DeKalb Park District as a separate governmental entity with its own tax base in 1935. The first significant improvement project was the opening of the community swimming pool in Hopkins Park. As the community grew, so did the Park District.

The Park Board of Commissioners consists of five elected individuals who serve uncompensated six year terms. The Park Board of Commissioners is responsible for administering the policies of the District while the day to day operations are the responsibility of the Executive Director. The DeKalb Park District employs 25 full-time and over 250 part-time, seasonal, and temporary staff members.

The DeKalb Park District boundaries are nearly coterminous with the City of DeKalb and encompass 14.6 square miles serving a population of over 43,000 residents along with the students of Northern Illinois University.

DeKalb Park District Offers:

Over 200 recreation programs each season

40 parks with over 600 acres

16 Baseball Fields

3 Basketball Courts

Community Center with Banquet Facility

Cultural Center

Disc Golf Course

Driving Range

2 Fishing Lakes

18 hole Golf Course

9 hole Executive Golf Course

9 hole Jr. Golf Course

4 Gymnasiums

Historical Museum

8 Picnic Shelters

20 Playgrounds

2 Recreation Centers

Skate Park

15 Soccer Fields

8 Softball Fields

Swimming Pool and Waterslide

4 Tennis Courts

Indoor Volleyball Court

Walking, Biking and Jogging Trails

Community Survey

The DeKalb Park District strategic planning efforts began with a community telephone survey. A total of 4,439 calls were made to 1,351 telephone numbers and 405* interviews were completed during the winter of 2007. The objectives were to determine the frequency of using park district facilities, program participation, reasons for not using facilities or programs, opinions about potential improvements and funding and overall satisfaction with park district services. A response rate of 37.1 percent was attained, and among households where a person was contacted, the cooperation rate was 77.4%. Highlights of the survey were as follows:

- Hopkins Park was found to be the most heavily used facility with over 40% of respondents reporting frequent or occasional use in the past year, followed by the use of a neighborhood park.
- Lack of time was the primary reason for not using park District programs or parks.
- One in four families participated in at least one park district program over the last year.
- Many respondents reported being unaware of the park district programs and facilities.
- Expanded program offerings would influence program participation by one-third of the respondents.
- When asked to prioritize improvements over the next five to ten years residents gave the highest priority to the expansion of paved trails, development of winter recreation activities, improving neighborhood parks and playgrounds, expanding recreational programming, acquisition of open space and construction of a community recreation center.
- Most residents are satisfied with the park district facilities, programs, maintenance of parks and customer service.
- Lastly, a solid majority of 66 percent believed the voters should support a referendum to increase park revenues.

The 2007 Survey of DeKalb Park District Residents as prepared by the Public Opinion Laboratory of Northern Illinois, March 2007 can be viewed at www.dekalbparkdistrict.com

*The special census taken in 2004 estimated the number of households in the City of DeKalb to be 14,324. In order to provide at least 95% confidence that actual District population status would be estimated within five percent of the survey results, a sample of 400 respondents was targeted.

Focus Groups

As the community survey was being developed in the winter of 2006, four separate focus groups were conducted with the line staff of the District, community representatives and program participants. By gathering input in advance of the survey, results of these meetings could be used to help refine those issues to be identified and addressed in the community survey. Participants were led through a structured but informal discussion focusing on a review, assessment and expression of their understanding of the Park District. A summary of the key themes derived from these focus groups is presented in the following.

Question 1. If I say DeKalb Park District, the first words that come to mind are?

Recurring themes from this question across all groups included comments that were almost, without exception, positive. Phrases and themes focused on:

- The variety of programs
- Hopkins Park was seen as the “flagship” of the District and viewed as a critical “high profile” facility and location that helped “brand” the District
- Parks equated to places to have fun, to relax, to have recreation time, a place for families and an important part of the quality of life in DeKalb
- Comprehensive programs and diversified offerings and facilities and parks was frequently mentioned
- Dedicated staff and approachability of staff was also mentioned in every group
- Having a good reputation or other positive assessments were also mentioned in each group

Question 2. If a newcomer to DeKalb approached you about the Parks, what would you say? How would you rate them?

Recurring themes from this question across all groups included comments that were again, almost without exception, positive. Phrases and themes to this question included telling a newcomer that:

- the parks are excellent
- the district is flexible and comprehensive for all ages, look over the program of courses
- the parks are safe
- there is a lot to use and take advantage of

-great golf

-great kids programs

-there are some hidden gems to find

Ratings from the groups, on a scale of 1-10 (10 = best) were:

8,8,8,8,9,8,7,8,8,8,7,8,8,7,7,8,10,8,7. Non-scientific and may have been subject to some group influence, but interesting nonetheless.

Question 3. What are some of the assets of the Park District?

Recurring themes from this question across all groups included:

-Golf courses (frequently mentioned)

-The Rec Center

-Staff

-Walking Paths

-Programs for a variety of ages

-Hopkins Park

-The Band shell and 4th of July Celebration

-Variety of parks

-Fishing ponds

-The pool

Beyond these, other comments shared were more singular

Question 4. What are some of the “hidden” assets of the Park District?

Recurring themes from this question across all groups included:

-The riverfront

-Prairie Park

-The walking trails

-Frisbee course

-Haish Gym

- Short course at Buena Vista
- Willingness to work with groups in the community

Beyond these, other comments shared were more singular

Question 5. What Are Some Of The Present Shortcomings of the Park District?

Recurring themes from this question across all groups included:

- More bike paths and linked paths
- Need for maintenance, repairs and upgrades to several facilities
- Better marketing and communications/higher profile
- Need for development of some underutilized or “unusable” parks
- Lack of a “friends of the parks” advisory or advocacy group
- Lack of a “dog park” for unleashed pets
- Short-staffing of facilities or maintenance crews...it is evident to regular users
- Lack of winter facilities, especially a sled hill or skating rink
- Need for more collaboration and cooperation with other units of local government and organizations
- Cancelled programs
- Competition for tee times at prime time slots due to leagues or outings
- Lack of a long-term plan for new land obtained through development fees etc. and for existing facilities and land
- Need for more staff training/uneven skills and demeanor at times

Beyond those above, other comments shared were more singular, but numerous.

Question 6. If you had a magic wand and could change one thing, today, relative to the Park District, what would it be?

Recurring themes from this question across all groups included comments that were almost, without exception, tied to the shortcomings. Phrases and themes included:

- Modernize and maintain existing facilities, take care of what's already here
- Need for more community outreach and improved communications
- Plan for future of soccer fields in the event the high school expands
- Develop a staffing plan, more training and assessment of staff (are there enough, in the right specialties? enough maintenance staff?)
- Fix the Hopkins Park shelter and band shell
- Investigate a "punch card" system for golf and maybe even all programs that has a built-in discount for pre-paying
- Development of a community center and/or sports-core all at one site
- Build a off leash dog park
- Improve connectedness, flow and signage of trails
- Improve the pool
- Develop plans to use/improve new areas and current open areas that are seen as "just green grass" or "water detention space"

Beyond these, other comments shared were more singular, but numerous.

Having completed the community focus groups and survey, the next step in the process was to take advantage of the professional experience, perspective and hands on knowledge of the District's management staff on specific issues already known or predicted to impact the District in the future. The first part of the all day retreat held in July 2007, consisted of an evaluation of the mission statement along with a classic SWOT analysis of the organization (identification of the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats). Following this process, staff was then asked to identify four to five key issues in their areas of expertise that the Board should be aware of and incorporate into their discussion of the strategic goals for the District. Once the process of identification was completed, staff was given an opportunity to discuss and debate the ideas and goals offered by each participant. At the end of the open discussion, staff was then asked to classify each goal as either short term or long term and routine or complex. Lastly, all goals were then rank ordered.

This same process was used for sessions with the DeKalb Park District Board of Commissioners in late August, 2007. As was the case in the staff meetings, the summary of the community survey and public focus group sessions were shared in an effort to provide an overview of the public's sentiments for the District. The Board met on two separate evenings, the first for the review of the mission and SWOT analysis followed by a goal setting meeting.

After the completion of the management and Board meetings, the results of each were distributed so that the staff and Board could rank each other's goals. The combined ranking was then presented at a joint meeting held in December of 2007 and priority goals were identified for consideration in the formulating the strategic plan of the DeKalb Park District. The following is the result of a year long process to "strategically" determine plans and actions for the future of the DeKalb Park District.

DeKalb Park District Strategic Issues

Strengthen the Administrative Operations of the District

To Care for the Facilities and Parks and Trails

Provide a Comprehensive Park System to Meet the Current and Future Leisure Needs

Offer Quality Recreation Programs and Facilities

Increase Park District Visibility in the Community

Strategic Issue: Strengthen the Administrative Operations of the District

Action Plan:

1. Undertake an organization assessment regarding staffing levels, duties and responsibilities, pay and compensation and benchmarking our performance with other agencies.
2. Evaluate the current and future staffing needs of the District and the overall organizational chart with regard to efficiency of operations.
3. Increase staff training at all levels. Identify areas of deficiencies and appropriate training opportunities.
4. Seek out professionally trained and experienced staff when hiring opportunities occur.
5. Initiate standardized human resources procedures and training programs.
6. Annually update the District personnel policies and procedures manual.
7. Develop a centralized employee orientation program.
8. Improve District wide communication, coordination and information sharing through quarterly all staff, department and program specific meetings.
9. Annually, complete a formal evaluation of all part-time, seasonal and full-time staff.
10. Develop uniform policies and procedures to standardize operations in the District.
11. Improve departmental planning and organization across the entire agency.
12. Develop a District wide plan for the maintenance and upgrade of its' technology.
13. Continue to enhance the website to be more user friendly.
14. Initiate an on-line program registration.
15. Implement the new technology plan to include RecTrac and MSI software.
Provide staff training so that managers can utilize the data in the administration of their specific areas of responsibility.
16. Streamline the purchasing, payables and budget procedures by maximizing the new financial software package.
17. Develop a financial plan for the funding of new and existing services and capital improvements throughout the District.
18. Develop a Gift Program for the District.
19. Incorporate risk management practices and procedures throughout the District.
20. Annually evaluate the progress of the Strategic Plan.

Strategic Issue: To Care for our Facilities, Parks and Trails

Action Plan:

1. Complete the goals and objectives of the District's Maintenance Plan.
2. Develop a playground assessment/replacement program.
3. Evaluate the five year capital replacement schedule each year.
4. Establish standards for the parks and facilities with regard to maintenance practices.
5. Assess the integrity of the Hopkins Park Aquatic Facility.
6. Conduct an ADA audit of the District's facilities and parks.
7. Consider feasibility/master planning when addressing underdeveloped or new park sites in the District.
8. Update the District's Park Master Plan.
9. Complete the renovation of the Hopkins Park Shelter.
10. Develop a parks and facility security plan.
11. Increase site amenities at park sites to enhance their appearance and appeal.
12. Develop a District wide equipment replacement program.
13. Implement improvements to the River Heights irrigation system.
14. Operate within the most environmental efficient manner.
15. Improve the neighborhood playgrounds.

Strategic Issue: Provide a Comprehensive Park System to Meet the Current and Future Leisure Needs

Action Plan:

1. Investigate and expand on winter recreation opportunities.
2. Expand and improve the trail system to include better linkages throughout the community.
3. Explore the viability of an off leash dog park.
4. Expand the land holdings of the District with new growth in the community.
5. Work with developers with regard to impact fees to provide for the dedication of open space that meets the needs of the community.

Strategic Issue: Offer Quality Recreation Programs and Facilities

Action Plan:

1. Implement plans to renovate or replace the Hopkins Aquatic Facility.
2. Assess the need for a new community center to expand recreation program offerings.
3. Expand recreation program opportunities for preschool, youth and teens.
4. Annually evaluate program offerings with regard to content, participation, time, feasibility and meeting the needs of the community.
5. Expand training programs for volunteer coaches.
6. Identify resources/partnerships in the community to expand program operations.

Strategic Issue: Increase Park District Visibility in the Community

Action Plan:

1. Investigate the formation of Friends of the Parks Advisory Group.
2. To increase collaboration and coordination with other units of local government and the community.
3. Develop a district wide Marketing Plan.
4. Continue to improve our customer service efforts throughout the District.