

FULL REPORT

Carol Stream Park District

WHERE EVERYONE IS WELCOME

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND GOAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

2026-2029

PREPARED JULY 2025



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Center for
Governmental Studies**

Outreach Engagement and Regional Development

Center for Governmental Studies
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL 60115

Strategic Plan Process Acknowledgements

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Renee Bachewicz, *Director of Recreation*

Shane Hamilton, *Director of Parks and Facilities*

Lisa Scumaci, *Director of Finance and IT*

Christine Quinn, *Director of Human Resources and Administrative Services*

CAROL STREAM PARK DISTRICT COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDERS

The Park District would also like to thank all the community members who participated in the stakeholder feedback phase of the process. An effective strategic plan includes feedback from stakeholders to ensure that needs and expectations are shared and understood by leaders of the organization.



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**Center for
Governmental Studies**

Outreach Engagement and Regional Development

Process facilitated by Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies

Mel Henriksen, MPP
Assistant Director

Strategic Management, Policy, and
Community Development

Northern Illinois University's Center
for Governmental Studies

Alli Aiston, MPA
Research Specialist

Strategic Management, Policy, and
Community Development

Northern Illinois University's Center
for Governmental Studies

Jeanna Ballard, MPA
Senior Research Specialist

Strategic Management, Policy, and
Community Development

Northern Illinois University's Center
for Governmental Studies

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Carol Stream Park District Background

The Carol Stream Park District, established in 1964, serves the residents of Carol Stream, Illinois, by offering a range of recreational programs and maintaining its parks and recreation facilities. Spanning more than 40 parks and 360 acres of land, the District provides access to athletic fields, playgrounds, trails, natural areas, and community gathering spaces. Main facilities include the Fountain View Recreation Center and the Simkus Recreation Center, which host a variety of fitness, aquatic, and community programming for all age groups.

Governed by a publicly elected Board of Commissioners, the Park District operates with a focus on fiscal responsibility, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. Its mission is to enrich the community by delivering exceptional experiences in recreation, fitness, and fun, while promoting a healthy and active lifestyle¹. Through thoughtful planning and responsive service, the District continues to adapt to the evolving needs of its residents and strives to enhance the overall quality of life in the community.

To read more about the Carol Stream Park District, visit <https://www.csparks.org/>

Introduction

Strategic planning is an effective way to identify and confirm the Park District's vision for the future and set organizational purpose and direction by incorporating clear priorities and measurable goals. To this end, the Carol Stream Park District (the "District") engaged the Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies ("NIU-CGS") in June 2024 to facilitate its strategic planning process (Figure 1). The value of such processes continues to be recognized by policy-making boards, councils, and executive staffs in both private and public organizations.

In October and November 2024, the NIU-CGS team gathered internal and external stakeholder input that was shared at the strategic planning leadership workshop held in February 2025. The workshop offered elected officials and administrative leadership an opportunity to explore the Park District's vision for the future, to engage and listen to its internal and external stakeholders, and, ultimately, create short- and long-term goals and establish priority areas. It also provided a positive atmosphere where workshop participants could discuss the best ways to serve the District and the broader community in the coming years.

It is important to keep in mind that the judicious use of the District's limited resources, including financial resources and professional staff time, is key to achieving good results. Only a limited number of goals and objectives can be managed and implemented effectively at any given time. In a very realistic sense, clear and stable priorities must be maintained if the District desires to stretch its resources as far as they can go.

Figure 1. Strategic Planning Model



¹<https://www.csparks.org/about-us/mission-vision-values/>

Pre-Workshop – Environmental Scanning and Stakeholder Input

The District's leadership recognizes the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding of their organization and the broader community they serve by gathering input from various stakeholders. During the environmental scanning phase of the strategic planning process, NIU-CGS aimed to examine factors that shape the District's future direction. To accomplish this, the NIU-CGS team conducted focus groups and interviews involving external and internal stakeholders. The results from the stakeholder input phase were shared in thematic form at the strategic planning leadership workshop, providing valuable insights to guide discussions.

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

Incorporating external perspectives into the District's strategic plan helps capture the diverse needs and aspirations of the community, ensuring the plan is responsive to stakeholders' concerns. This approach fosters public trust and engagement, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes. To gather these external perspectives, the NIU-CGS team conducted focus groups. Detailed summaries are provided in [Appendix A](#).

- **Focus groups** are designed to be a highly interactive approach, allowing for a robust and informative conversation with and between participants. In October 2024, two focus groups were conducted at the Fountain View Recreation Center with the District's external stakeholders, as outlined below. The number of participants in each group ranged from 14-21.
 - » *Civic Organizations and Intergovernmental Institutions*
 - » *Invitational Residents and Park District Patrons, Volunteers, and Users*

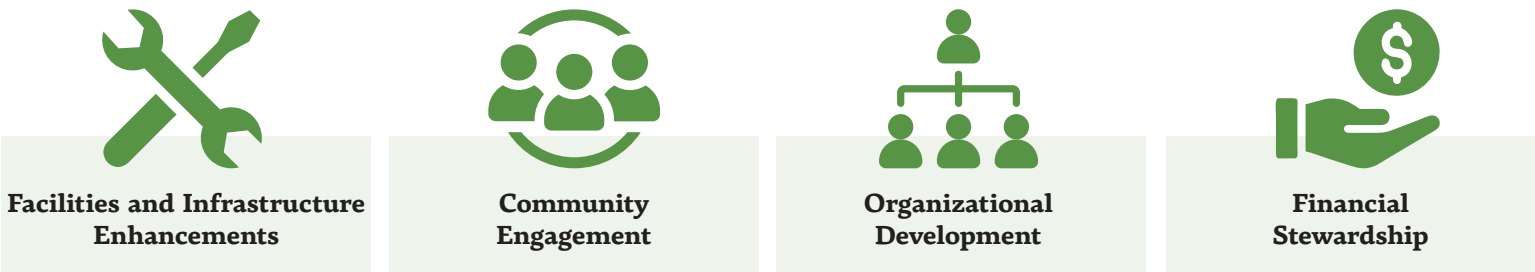
INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

Gathering internal perspectives when developing the District's strategic plan is crucial, as it ensures the plan is informed by the insights and experiences of those who best understand the Park District's unique operations and challenges. This comprehensive input can create more effective and inclusive strategies, aligning with the community's needs and goals. The NIU-CGS team conducted interviews with the District's leadership team and elected officials as well as facilitated a focus group with staff. Detailed summaries are provided in [Appendix A](#).

- In October 2024, a **focus group** was conducted with District front- and mid-line staff at the Fountain View Recreation Center. Participants included 19 staff members across different Park District departments.
- **Interviews** result in highly personalized participation and the in-depth sharing of ideas. The focus of the interview sessions is to gain an initial perspective by building a balanced and informed view of the District from each stakeholder's unique vantage point. In November 2024, virtual interviews were conducted with the District's Board of Commissioners and a working session was conducted with administrative leadership at Fountain View Recreation Center in January 2025.

Figure 2. 2024-2025 All Stakeholder Priorities

STAKEHOLDER PRIORITIES – ALIGNMENT OF ALL STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK (internal and external focus groups and interviews)



Leadership Workshop –

Outline of Exercises and Discussion Sessions

All discussion sessions at the strategic planning leadership workshop with elected officials and administrative leadership, held in February 2025, employed highly participative and interactive approaches. The workshop facilitators utilized a group discussion approach that assures each participant an equal opportunity to speak and share opinions with the larger group. Participants were also able to weigh alternatives and refine their thinking through dialogue in small-group activities at the workshop. As ideas were shared and debated, the group worked steadily toward a consensus regarding the District’s mission, future direction, goals, and priorities.

INTRODUCTIONS AND ICEBREAKER EXERCISE

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and share in what capacity (employee or elected official) and how long they have been involved with the District. Next, they engaged in an icebreaker exercise titled, “Garage Sale.” In this exercise, workshop participants selected an item from the “garage sale” table that represented an important issue, initiative, or big idea they felt should be a part of the District’s future and be discussed as part of the strategic planning process. This was a brainstorming exercise, and no evaluative or judgmental debate was permitted during this session. Next is a list of those answers (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Icebreaker: important issue, initiative, or big idea that should be part of the District’s future

Garage Sale Item	Workshop Participant Responses
Baseball	Need for more baseball fields and synthetic turf.
Pez Dispenser	“What’s old is new” – Remember past successes and maintain focus on what works well.
Hard Hat	Making positive improvements through new playgrounds and construction projects.
Fire Truck	Increase revenue for information technology. - Example: Corporate Replacement Tax used as funding source
Flashlight	Always seeking to maximize use of existing space and explore opportunities to add more.
Rope	Park District should be the connector: bringing together all people regardless of race, age, or demographics.
Clorox Wipes	Wipe away Park District debt—Board should prioritize financial responsibility, especially after new facility investments.
Elephant	Continued focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)—ensure everyone can access and enjoy programs and facilities which is part of our mission.
Candle	Spark an inclusive environment that welcomes all abilities—make Carol Stream a model community.
Police Car	Enhance safety, security, and training, especially at public-facing areas like the front desk.
Hard Hat	Explore options for land acquisition or leasing. Park District is currently landlocked but needs more space.
Tape Measure	Celebrate growth and measure ongoing success—acknowledge how far the Park District has come.
Brick	Continue making infrastructure improvements (e.g., indoor turf), and create more space for programming and services.
Sharks	Making good progress in safety protocols; consider a phased approach to enhance access control and emergency training for staff.
Thumbs Up	Prioritize staff retention, training, strategic thinking, and create opportunities for growth in a team-oriented culture.
Pig	Add recreational flag football (e.g., “pig skin”) to the Park District’s programming.
Green Tape	Continue community engagement projects and partnerships to raise the profile of Carol Stream and the Park District.
Softball	Improve parks and facilities for softball by adding batting cages and enhancing related programming.
Capitol Building	Monitor and engage in legislative initiatives—track policies that impact funding and would put potential constraints on programming or services.

VISIONING FOR THE FUTURE

The workshop participants next engaged in a visioning exercise to describe the desired future direction of the District by answering the following question: "If you left the community and didn't return for 10-15 years, what do you think you will see or what do you hope you will see when you return in terms of development, services, programs, improvements or changes?" Participants were asked to think about their ideas ahead of time and then be ready to share them with the group during this session of the workshop. Responses are listed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Visions for the Future—Hope or think you will see in 10-15 years

Note: an asterisk (*) indicates that others expressed agreement with the statement.

Hope or Think You Will See in 10-15 Years...

Addition of more connecting paths to connect community, including along Morton Rd.

Park District gets an indoor ice rink.

Supervisory and administrative staff has a more collaborative and connected office space.

Lazy River added to the Park District's pool – improvements and added amenities to pool.*

New gymnastics facility.

More gym space.

Sustainability plan for natural areas – consider adding a butterfly garden.

Staff is proud and satisfied.

Upgrades are made to the Simkus Recreation Center.

Collaborative Communications Plan for events and programming, etc.

Staff is representative of demographically diverse community.

Park District gets an indoor ice rink.

Continued engagement with partners such as neighboring municipalities, schools, libraries, etc. *

- *Focus on strengthening the Park District's partnership and relationship with library*

Additional transportation for Park District, including a larger school bus, new vehicles, and more bus drivers.

Park District gets a food truck.

Full-time Safety Coordinator position is created.

Partner to provide programs for veterans.

- *Tap into the market of younger veterans, fitness, services, etc.*

Park District creates an undefined, open community space or room for gathering and meetings.

- *E.g., work meetings, space for teenagers to hang out, PTA meetings, crafts, refreshments*

Strengthen the Parks Foundation by raising awareness to increase funding.

Hire additional maintenance staff to help with demand and expectations from community (cleanliness of parks is a high priority yet park maintenance has the fewest employees).

Ensure the Park District is financially stable to keep up facilities and equipment.

- *New, up-to-date equipment, keep up with trends in programming (pickleball, flag football, rise in popularity)*

Park District has explored their role and potential partnerships in strengthening mental health services and programs for the community.

Advance the Park District's technology, bring up to date.

- *Audio and video, televisions, phone system, registration, website, artificial intelligence*

Access barriers are eliminated.

- *Spatial constraints, registration desk and staff seating location are reconfigured for better flow, consider moving the fitness center to the first floor, etc.*

Match Armstrong Park to McCaslin Park so the Park District has two big complexes (consider adding a band shell and concessions to Armstrong Park).

Overall improved athletic fields.

McCaslin Park gets a "McCaslin Pub" – upstairs establishment, entertainment.

Improvements are made to the mini golf course.

- *Pump, drainage, updated and added technology, cleaned up*

More planning together with regional partners, make the most efficient use of space and resources and strengthen each other. *

Large indoor sports complex, maybe repurpose an existing Park District property or building.

Hope that everything becomes more affordable (materials, etc.) so Park District can afford to make updates, etc.

Internal advancement opportunities are provided for staff, including succession planning, growth pathways.

Patrons and users know how to access Park District information and where to look for it about programs, etc. (website, newsletter, social media, etc.)



ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING PART I— SURRENDER OR LEAD

Next, participants were introduced to a leadership exercise titled, “Surrender or Lead.” During this exercise, participants organized into small groups to respond to a series of structured questions. These questions aimed to reveal hopes, perspectives, challenges, opportunities, and possible barriers based on the collective view of each group. The responses were recorded and the combined themes from the three groups are reported next. For a full list of Surrender or Lead responses from each individual group, see [Appendix B](#).

Themes from Surrender or Lead:

- Balancing big dreams and ideas with realistic planning and resource limitations.
- Prioritizing financial sustainability through diversified funding, sustainable growth, and responsible investment in programs, facilities, and technology.
- Empowering staff as a core driver of quality, impact, and community connection.
- Strengthening community relationships through collaboration, communication, and responsiveness to resident needs.
- Fostering strategic leadership and decision-making to maintain assets, elevate identity, and position the Park District as a leader.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING PART II— LARGE GROUP SWOC ANALYSIS

The next exercise at the strategic planning workshop allowed participants to further review and account for the internal and external factors present that could potentially influence the Park District, both negatively and positively. Workshop participants were asked to identify the Park District’s **strengths (S)** and **weaknesses (W)**. In what areas does the Park District regularly excel, and in what areas are there difficulties or shortcomings in terms of expertise, resources, or training? What **opportunities (O)** are on the horizon that can be used to the Park District’s advantage? Conversely, what trends or **challenges (C)** lie ahead that would be obstacles or hindrances? These elements could include both internal and external factors, conditions, trends, regulations, agencies, and resources. The full list of responses to the exercise are provided in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Large Group Rapid Fire SWOC Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Agency vendors (Corporate Counsel, Risk Management, Bond Council)
- Western DuPage Special Recreation Association (WDSRA) – Special Recreation District
- Cohesive Board
- Transfer to capital fund
- Educational opportunities available
- Rentals revenue and available customer service
- Capital improvement budget and plan
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) plan for parks and facilities
- Supportive of flexible staffing
- Cohesive brand – professional, recognized (signage)
- Park District has a good reputation*
- Talented staff
- Board trusts staff
- Community support from patrons
- Community partners
- Facilities are constantly being updated, kept looking nice
- Variety of programming
- Multiple generations in the workforce
- Park District's large volunteer base
- Ability to adapt and do more with less
- Affordable benefits packages and pension for staff
- Carol Stream Parks Foundation (CSPF) is a partner in fundraising
- Pathways and trails are one of the most popular Park District features for residents
- Good bond rating

WEAKNESSES

- Shoreline maintenance
- Competition from corporate fitness
- Lack of space – facility limitations
- Balancing new ideas from staff with planning efforts and growth
- Not enough funding
- Park District is currently landlocked
- Need to maintain focus on safety and security
- Technology is outdated
- Debt structure
- Need more sponsorships
- Shortage of staff, need an evaluation of staffing levels
- Need stronger Foundation
- Improved communications to reach users who need additional modes of communication

OPPORTUNITIES

- Building relationships with legislators
- Carol Stream Parks Foundation (CSPF) – raising awareness and funds
- More rentals utilizing the rental space available for indoor and outdoor assets
- Adding more turf, indoor facilities, and fields
- Increased veteran engagement
- Pathways and trails are more connected, activities utilizing trails, etc.
- Develop a plan to make all facilities and parks Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible
- Adding food truck concessions at Armstrong Park
- Capitalize on new trends in programming such as pickleball and flag football
- Shoreline maintenance
- Community support
- Artificial intelligence
- Homeschool programming
- St. Luke's Church location (idea for expanding space for programming)
- Succession planning
- Focus on the active adults population
- Creative funding strategies
- Untapped groups of residents
- Sponsorships
- Unified message – use partnerships with intergovernmental organizations
- Cooperative programming with other park districts

CHALLENGES

- Finding and keeping seasonal maintenance staff
 - » *Challenging because of the work schedule, long hours, work/life balance, and burnout*
- High demand of residents
- Maintaining aging facilities
- Carol Stream Parks Foundation (CSPF) – raising awareness and fundraising are challenging
- Supporting newer employees' ideas – ensuring that their voices are heard and included and input is considered
- Communication – so many formats or avenues
- Need more transportation available for events and activities
- Remote work environment, expectations for coming into the office, competing with other places who can offer remote work
- Shoreline maintenance
- Balancing needs of programs with limited space
 - » *Managing expectations*
- Keeping up with customer service
- Community partners – competition and overlap with some programming, learning how to work together to support each other and not step on any toes
- Artificial intelligence
- Legislation
- Park District is currently landlocked
- Staff that is retiring – need for succession planning
- Training the next generation of staff – combating and working with generational differences
- Maintaining safety and security
- Lack of internal office and programming space
- Market competition – private entities offering the same programs and services (gyms, etc.)
- Increasing expenses

NOMINAL GROUP GOAL IDENTIFICATION

With the preceding discussion sessions and exercises acting as a sound foundation for goal setting, the next exercise provided time for a healthy group discussion and development of goals and objectives to achieve the future visions as expressed by workshop participants.

Participants reconvened in the same small groups from the previous exercise for goal development. Each group was allotted time to develop, and then report out, at least three to four important policy and program goals that they thought the Park District should accomplish. Groups were asked to create goals using two different time frames: **short-term goals**, which could be started or accomplished in the next one to three years, and **long-term goals**, which could be accomplished in a four- to eight-year time frame. Each small group then shared their goals with the larger group. Goals could be highly specific or general, but all goals pointed to important outcomes that leadership hopes to see in the years ahead.

Short-term goals are those goals or objectives that could or should be completed or substantially underway in the next one to three years.

Long-term goals are those goals or objectives that could or should be completed or substantially underway within a four- to eight-year time frame.

Open Group Discussion and Consolidation of Goals and Objectives

This final phase of the goals discussion served as a forum for workshop participants to refine and compare the ideas and goals offered by each participant. Participants gave their opinions and further explained the fit, ideas, and policy outcomes expressed in the goals and discussed if additional goals or details were needed.

Following the workshop, NIU-CGS worked with the Park District's leadership to refine the strategic goals, ensuring they aligned with the direction set by the Board and senior staff, clarified intent, and eliminated redundancies.



Strategic Priority Areas

Based on an evaluation of the entirety of the process, including interviews, focus groups, discussions at the workshop, and the goals developed, the NIU-CGS team worked with Park District staff to identify six high-level strategic priority areas. These priority areas represent larger themes or priorities that encompass all the strategic goals and highlight the activities and initiatives that the Park District will focus on in both the short and long term. The strategic priority areas identified as a result of the strategic planning process are illustrated and fully defined (in no particular order) next. For focus group data alignment related to each priority area, see [Appendix C](#).



PRIORITY AREA: **COMMUNITY CONNECTION AND ENGAGEMENT**

This priority area focuses on strengthening communication, outreach, and partnerships with residents and community organizations. Key initiatives include enhancing marketing and digital communication strategies, addressing language access barriers, and engaging non-users of Park District facilities. Efforts also involve creating opportunities for inclusive community input and supporting connection across all ages, abilities, and cultures.



PRIORITY AREA: **FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Maintaining a strong financial foundation is essential to the long-term success of any organization. This strategic priority emphasizes diversifying revenue streams through expanded concessions, increased sponsorships, targeted fundraising efforts, and the pursuit of grant opportunities. It also includes the ongoing, strategic management of financial obligations and the thoughtful exploration of growth opportunities—such as property acquisitions or improvements—that align with the organization's mission and long-term sustainability. Effective budgeting and financial planning are essential to ensure that resources are allocated in support of both immediate needs and future goals.



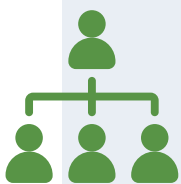
PRIORITY AREA: **INNOVATIVE AND SECURE INFRASTRUCTURE**

This area addresses improvements to both physical infrastructure and digital technology systems. Initiatives include updating emergency preparedness plans, enhancing facility security, and implementing technology upgrades to improve operational efficiency. Additional efforts include exploring emerging AI and provide staff training to support infrastructure enhancements.



PRIORITY AREA: **COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMMING AND SERVICES**

Delivering diverse and responsive programming is critical to the mission of the Park District. Priorities include expanding access in underserved areas, increasing active adult and senior offerings, and incorporating emerging recreation trends. These efforts are intended to meet the evolving needs and interests of the community.



PRIORITY AREA: **STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION**

This priority area focuses on investing in staff capacity and support. Key initiatives involve evaluating staffing levels, offering professional development, and implementing strategies to improve retention and succession planning. Enhancing workplace culture and providing growth opportunities contribute to a stable, skilled, and fulfilled workforce.



PRIORITY AREA: **FACILITY ASSESSMENT AND IMPROVEMENT**

This priority area focuses on ongoing evaluation and upgrades to facilities. Activities include renovations to the Simkus Recreation Center, improvements to athletic fields, and identification of opportunities for new indoor spaces. Capital improvement planning and ADA compliance guide efforts to ensure facilities remain safe, functional, and accessible for all.

Post-Workshop –

Goal Prioritization and Ranking Exercise

The Park District’s senior-level staff and Board of Commissioners were asked to delineate, via a post-workshop online ranking exercise, which goals should be given the highest priority. Each participant was provided with an online ranking tool, where they ranked each goal within its respective Priority Area in order of importance, using a “forced ranking” method. For example, participants were asked to rank all goals that fell under the Community Connection and Engagement Priority Area against each other, all Financial Sustainability goals against each other, and so on.

The overall ranking of each goal is calculated using the average of the rankings given by all participants. For example, if a goal was given scores of **2, 5, 6, 6, 1, 2**, and **3**, the average total would be **3.66**. The lower the score, the higher the priority. Again, the average scores were based on the rankings provided by all workshop participants (senior-level staff and Board of Commissioners).

The results of the Park District’s goal-ranking exercise, including each goal’s average score and assigned priority levels of High, Medium, and Lower for each goal within its respective category are shown in Figure 7. For additional comparison, the goals are also displayed by priority level only in Figure 8. Together, these visuals provide a dashboard outlining the strategic goals, objectives, and tasks for the Park District’s leadership to address in the months and years ahead.

Figure 7. 2025 Prioritized Goals Dashboard by Priority Areas

PRIORITY AREA: COMMUNITY CONNECTION AND ENGAGEMENT			
GOALS		AVERAGE SCORE	PRIORITY LEVEL
Develop a structured Communication Plan to effectively engage external partners, customers, and stakeholders.			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Expand marketing and outreach to connect with non-users and bring users to facilities</i>		1.47	High
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Assess and determine social media platforms, electronic communications</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Address language barriers in communications from the Park District</i>			
Distinguish the Carol Stream Park District as a community leader.			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Strengthen partnerships with local governments</i>		1.53	Medium
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Provide opportunities for connection amongst all ages, abilities, and cultures</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Continue to gather community input evaluating needs for programming, services, and potential partnerships</i>			

PRIORITY AREA: **FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

GOALS	AVERAGE SCORE	PRIORITY LEVEL
Remain financially sustainable and maintain adequate funding for future repairs and replacements. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek grant funding where available 	1.41	High
Continue to focus on diversifying revenue streams. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand concession operations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Concessions/food truck at Armstrong » Expand food options at Coyote Crossing Mini Golf once village water is connected 	1.71	Medium
Monitor markets for refinancing and investment opportunities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate available sponsorship opportunities to private entities and businesses to support Park District programming and services 	2.88	Lower

PRIORITY AREA: **INNOVATIVE AND SECURE INFRASTRUCTURE**

GOALS	AVERAGE SCORE	PRIORITY LEVEL
Explore safety needs at all Park District facilities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access control • Update camera systems • Complete public address system enhancement 	1.71	High
Create a Technology Plan to maximize efficiency. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update the existing IT repair and replacement plan • Evaluate various software and amenities (AV System, HRIS, Scheduling, Maintenance tracking) to improve work functionality, efficiency 	2.12	Medium
Assess and update a comprehensive, district wide emergency operation and Crisis Management Plan. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create staff training and drills; scripted plan 	2.71	Medium
Explore use and application of AI Technology.	3.47	Lower

PRIORITY AREA: **COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMMING AND SERVICES**

GOALS	AVERAGE SCORE	PRIORITY LEVEL
Integrate programming related to emerging trends. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More Pickleball programs</i> 	2.00	High
Expand access to programming and facilities in the underserved areas of the community.	2.41	High
Implement running and walking programs.	3.35	Medium
Expand Active Adult fitness programming.	3.41	Medium
Increase adult educational and hobby classes.	3.82	Lower

PRIORITY AREA: **STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION**

GOALS	AVERAGE SCORE	PRIORITY LEVEL
Review Park District staffing levels.	2.00	High
Create a Staff Retention Program/Plan. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Enhance employee satisfaction for a healthy and positive work environment</i> • <i>Staff recognition programs and activities</i> • <i>Provide professional development opportunities</i> 	2.06	High
Create or formalize a long-term succession plan that considers career advancement, creates growth pathways, and helps identify potential leaders.	2.41	Medium
Provide opportunities for engaging staff in long-term planning.	3.53	Lower

PRIORITY AREA: **FACILITY ASSESSMENT AND IMPROVEMENT**

GOALS	AVERAGE SCORE	PRIORITY LEVEL
Increase the quality of the Park District's athletic fields. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider lighted fields and artificial turf • Increase funding for turf/grass field maintenance program 	2.12	High
Evaluate renovation and improvement needs for Simkus Recreation Center. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address ADA standards • Prioritize building improvements • Review things like gymnastics, program rooms, equipment, amenities 	2.88	Medium
Update and implement the Park District's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) to make necessary upgrades and additions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renovate the Coral Cove Water Park locker room • Expand paths and connect trails 	3.12	Medium
Incorporate existing repair and replacement plans related to facilities, infrastructure, parks and playgrounds, trails, and shorelines.	3.29	Lower
Investigate funding options, locations, and partnerships for future indoor multipurpose facility. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibly include athletic fields, storage space, and communal areas • Research available vacant spaces in consideration for expansion 	3.59	Lower

Figure 8. 2025 Prioritized Goals Dashboard All Goals

STRATEGIC GOALS	PRIORITY LEVEL
Develop a structured Communication Plan to effectively engage external partners, customers, and stakeholders. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand marketing and outreach to connect with non-users and bring users to facilities • Assess and determine social media platforms, electronic communications • Address language barriers in communications from the Park District 	High
Explore safety needs at all Park District facilities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access control • Update camera systems • Complete public address system enhancement 	High
Integrate programming related to emerging trends. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Pickleball Courts and programs 	High
Review Park District staffing levels.	High
Create a Staff Retention Program/Plan. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance employee satisfaction for a healthy and positive work environment • Staff recognition programs and activities • Provide professional development opportunities 	High
Expand access to programming and facilities in the underserved areas of the community.	High
Remain financially sustainable and maintain adequate funding for future repairs and replacements. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek grant funding where available 	High
Increase the quality of the Park District's athletic fields. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider lighted fields and artificial turf • Increase funding for turf/grass field maintenance program 	High
Distinguish the Carol Stream Park District as a community leader. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen partnerships with local governments • Provide opportunities for connection amongst all ages, abilities, and cultures • Continue to gather community input evaluating needs for programming, services, and potential partnerships 	Medium
Create or formalize a long-term succession plan that considers career advancement, creates growth pathways, and helps identify potential leaders.	Medium
Implement running and walking programs.	Medium

Figure 8. 2025 Prioritized Goals Dashboard All Goals (cont.)

STRATEGIC GOALS	PRIORITY LEVEL
Evaluate renovation and improvement needs for Simkus Recreation Center. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address ADA standards • Prioritize building improvements • Review things like gymnastics, program rooms, equipment, amenities 	Medium
Continue to focus on diversifying revenue streams. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand concession operations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Concessions/food truck at Armstrong Expand food options at Coyote Crossing Mini Golf once Village water is connected	Medium
Update and implement the Park District's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) to make necessary upgrades and additions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renovate the Coral Cove Water Park locker room • Expand paths and connect trails 	Medium
Create a Technology Plan to maximize efficiency. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update the existing IT repair and replacement plan • Evaluate various software and amenities to improve work functionality, efficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » AV System, HRIS, Scheduling, Maintenance tracking 	Medium
Expand Active Adult fitness programming.	Medium
Assess and update a comprehensive, district wide emergency operation and Crisis Management Plan. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create staff training and drills; scripted plan 	Medium
Monitor markets for refinancing and investment opportunities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate available sponsorship opportunities to private entities and businesses to support Park District programming and services 	Lower
Provide opportunities for engaging staff in long-term planning.	Lower
Increase adult educational and hobby classes.	Lower
Incorporate existing repair and replacement plans related to facilities, infrastructure, parks and playgrounds, trails, and shorelines.	Lower
Explore use and application of AI Technology.	Lower
Investigate funding options, locations, and partnerships for future indoor multipurpose facility. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibly include athletic fields, storage space, and communal areas • Research available vacant spaces in consideration for expansion 	Lower



Conclusion

The strategic planning process will only be effective if this report serves as a practical guide for Carol Stream Park District's leaders and community. It captures key discussions throughout the strategic planning process and supports the Park District's leadership in creating action plans to achieve strategic goals and advance priority initiatives.

As the Park District evolves, it must adapt to changes in demographics, community trends, technology, and best practices. The strategic plan provides a flexible roadmap to navigate these shifts. To stay aligned with community needs, regular reviews of the strategic planning goals—monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually—are recommended, along with a full update of the plan every three to five years.

The discussions and idea-sharing during the strategic planning process highlighted Carol Stream Park District's forward-thinking leadership, who are committed to embracing strategic thinking and ensuring thoughtful planning for the Park District's future.

We wish you well with the ambitious years that lie ahead.

Melissa Henriksen *Alli Aiston* *Jeanna Ballard*

Mel Henriksen, Alli Aiston, and Jeanna Ballard
NIU-CGS Project Coordinators and Facilitators

Appendix A:

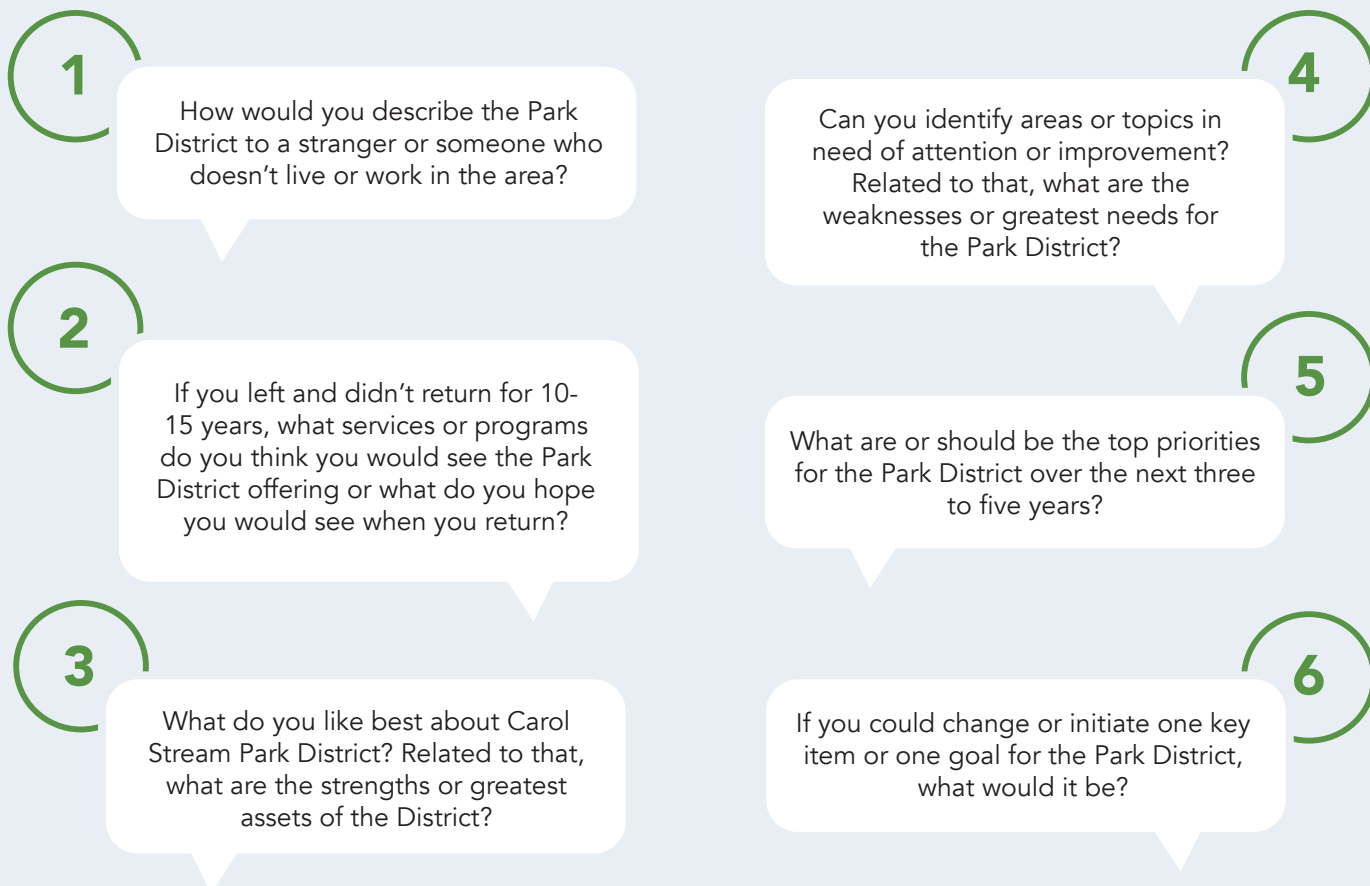
Focus Group and Leadership Interview Feedback

SUMMARY

One of the key analytical techniques used for the focus groups and interview notes is an analyst's search for key phrases, words, or terms that emerged during the stakeholder input sessions, a process known as coding. Coding is an analyst's individual readings of the data, followed by key term searches. The words and phrases listed below are the results of the NIU-CGS team's analysis of the collected focus group and interview notes. At a glance, the analyst can discover which terms were used or referred to most frequently in the feedback notes. Using individual analysts' coding, the researcher identifies terms that recur across participant groups and across questions. The results reveal key topics or issues that should be weighed and considered when proceeding with strategic planning discussions.

The information that follows is a summary of key themes and topics that emerged during the exploratory focus group sessions and leadership interviews. The stakeholder feedback collection served as a primer for the strategic planning process. The information that is presented in this summation was designed to add exploratory and thematic information for the Park District's leadership team to consider during the strategic planning workshop.

The same exploratory discussion questions were asked to each focus group and interviewee and are listed below:



Overall Themes Based on All External Focus Group Feedback

FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE ENHANCEMENTS

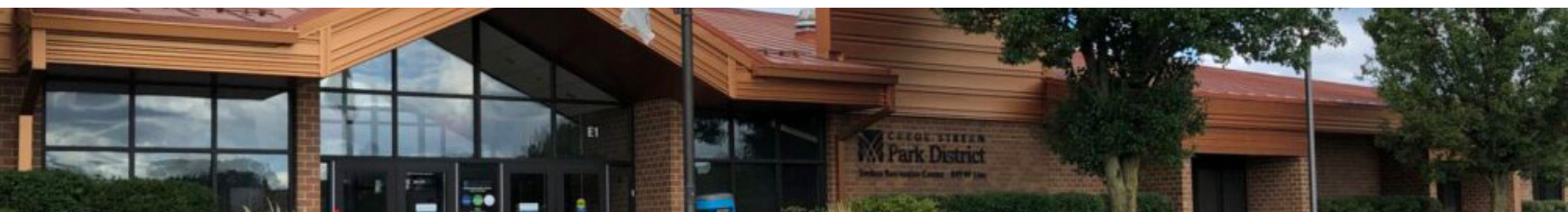
- Add more space for swim meet spectators to sit, potentially build upwards to save space
- Continue making Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements to Park District facilities and playgrounds
- Acquire more land for a second indoor activity center
 - » *Possibly including space for a new Performing Arts Center, indoor basketball, volleyball, swimming, fitness, etc.*
- Upgrade Red Hawk Park with added lighting and parking
- Hope to get rid of woodchips at the parks in exchange for rubber pieces
- Gymnastics center needs an upgrade, updated equipment and layout of room including mirror placement
- Bring back childcare hours for the fitness center

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

- Emphasize the Park District's "why," their mission, values to gain buy in from users and residents
- Expand access to programming and facilities in the southeast corner of town –more presence, larger footprint, and fully-staffed facilities
- Enhance marketing efforts to increase the visibility of the Park District
 - » *Make a paper copy of the programming guide available onsite*
 - » *Mail a paper copy of the senior guide to senior households*
- Increase collaboration with community partners – mutually beneficial
 - » *Share space for sports fields, parking, include churches not just the schools*
 - » *Offer space rental for private organizations potentially increasing revenue – aim to keep rentals local, within affiliated organizations*
- Continue to gather input from community to learn what they want in terms of programming. Where are the gaps? How can programming be more diverse to meet the growing needs of the population?

PROGRAMMING

- Continue to provide the community with opportunities to gather and connect
- Ensure the Park District can maintain current programming while remaining innovative and stay relevant regarding additional programming
 - » *Create a driver's education program for those youth whose family don't own a vehicle*
 - » *Addition of senior swim aerobics classes or adult swim time*
- Explore partnering to provide the community with a Performing Arts Center
- Focus on maintaining and enhancing before and after school activities for youth, possibly partnering with the Library and School Districts
- Strengthen the Park District Foundation to support fundraising events for scholarships, help achieve budget goals, and increase opportunities for lower income youth to participate
- Remain financially sustainable and solvent
 - » *More budget transparency regarding program costs, fundraising funds allocation (adult vs. youth programs)*



Overall Themes Based on the Staff Focus Group Feedback

STAFF SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

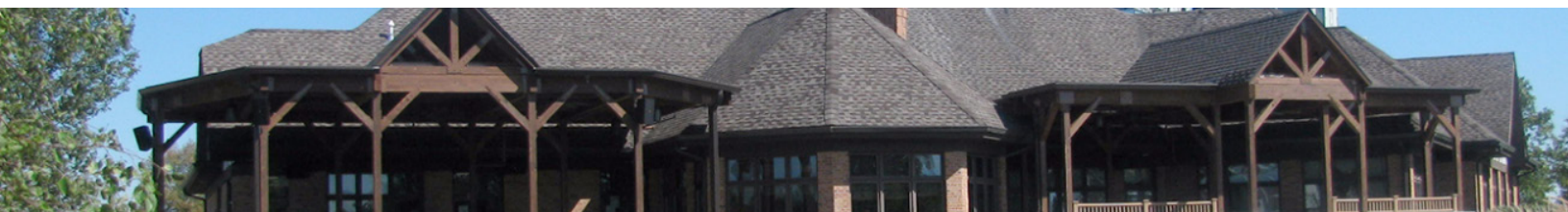
- Better quality, more in-depth training opportunities
 - » *Possibly online training platform with standard operating procedures across all departments and programs*
- Create opportunities for growth internally, career advancement and pathways
 - » *Trust front- and mid-line staff with supervision as needed*
 - » *More transparency regarding succession planning and career advancement*
 - » *Reduce burnout by adding more staff to cover some activities and programs*
- Develop a plan for adding more summer staffing. Ensure camps are operating at the recommended ratios for child to supervisor
- Build staff morale by increasing staff appreciation opportunities including part-time, seasonal staff
 - » *Increased levels of staffing and more competitive compensation and benefits*
 - » *Stronger presence of senior leadership in the trenches, jumping in to help when staff is spread thin*

FACILITIES AND PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS

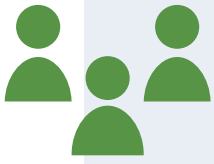
- Expansion of facilities, such as a new theater and Performing Arts Center
 - » *Indoor space expanded to include athletic fields, storage space, communal lunch area, etc.*
- Upgrade the gymnastics equipment
- Focus on updating Simkus Recreation Center
 - » *Replace gym floors*
- Need a new or updated bus for senior trips, camera for pictures of trips
- Incorporation of art or sculptures in outdoor park areas
- Expansion of the water park with a lazy river
- Upgraded technology/software throughout the Park District
 - » *A/V equipment, computers, website for user-friendliness, etc.*
- Place less focus on numbers of registrants and more focus on improving quality of programming; focus on what the Park District does well
- Expand class offerings to include daytime programming for adults with special needs
- Update and improve parks, particularly on the southeast side of town

COMMUNICATION

- Improve communication internally and externally with the community and partners
 - » *Reach people from varying ages and demographics*
- Address language barriers in communications from the Park District (including forms, website, newsletter, brochures)
- Provide opportunities for engaging staff and residents in decision-making
- Need for more print marketing materials and user-friendly digital communication
- Partner with private entities and businesses to support and sponsor marketing
- More marketing and outreach to connect with non-users, bring users into facilities



Overall Themes Based on the Leadership Interviews



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND REPRESENTATION

Maintaining strong connections with the community and key partners, such as the school district, is essential to ensure that programming and services align with the diverse needs of all residents. As the community becomes increasingly diverse, explore initiatives and outreach efforts, along with culturally engaging programs, that can help bridge gaps in representation and participation.



INFRASTRUCTURE MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENT

Sustainable management of facilities and resources is crucial as the Park District seeks to maintain and enhance aging infrastructure and other enhancements such as playgrounds and shoreline restoration. Long-term capital improvement planning with a focus on proactive maintenance and transparent communication about asset upkeep will help preserve the Park District's current assets and maximize service availability for residents. Strategic land acquisition and exploring shared facilities with community partners are additional priorities as available land decreases.



FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Maintaining strong financial practices is essential to the Park District's success, particularly in managing high-interest debt and securing resources for future initiatives. Increasing revenue through program-driven activities, events, and large-scale sponsorships will support key programs and infrastructure. Additionally, fostering partnerships with other agencies can provide further funding opportunities to meet both operational and long-term goals, strengthening the Park District's overall fiscal health.



BOARD AND STAFF COLLABORATION AND STABILITY

Transitions and changes in the Board of Commissioners and senior staff, whether planned with retirements or unforeseen when employees possibly pursue other opportunities, highlight the importance of continued prioritization of succession planning to maintain organizational stability. Building on the existing strong communication and collaboration between staff and the Board will help ensure balanced oversight, clarify roles and responsibilities, and support effective decision-making.



Appendix B:

Surrender or Lead Exercise

The **bolded and underlined** sections are key phrases that each group provided in response to the Surrender or Lead exercise's open-ended questions and prompts during the leadership workshop.

Group #1

1. We want to **offer unlimited opportunities to our community**, but **we have to be more realistic**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are **smiles** and **memories** because **that will touch everyone**.
3. If it weren't for **monetary limitations**, we would **build more indoor/outdoor space and expand programs**.
4. We need to finally **distinguish ourselves as the Leader in the Community**.
5. **Staff** will have the biggest impact on the Park District in the coming two to three years.

Group #2

1. We want to **include everyone & everything** but **there are always going to be constraints**.
2. Two most important things to focus on are **Residents** and **Staff** because **without them we have nothing**.
3. If it weren't for **money**, we would **have endless opportunities**.
4. We need to finally **update technology**.
5. **Legislation** will have the biggest impact on the Park District in the coming 2-3 years.

Group #3

1. We want to **expand**, but **we are limited**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are **Resident needs** and **quality/clean facilities and programs** because **they are the heart of the District**.
3. If it weren't for **limitations**, we could **serve more patrons**.
4. We need to finally **find a sustainable funding source**.
5. **Taking care of what we have** will have the biggest impact on the Park District in the coming 2-3 years.

Group #4

1. We want to **set the bar**, but **why can't we?**
2. The two most important things to focus on are **staff** and **well-maintained facilities** because **they are integral in meeting community needs**.
3. If it weren't for **financial limitations**, we would **satisfy everyone**.
4. We need to finally **get on the same page with our community partners**.
5. **Strategic decisions** will have the biggest impact on the Park District in the coming two to three years.

Appendix C:

Strategic Priority Area Goal and Stakeholder Feedback Alignment

COMMUNITY CONNECTION AND ENGAGEMENT

This priority area focuses on strengthening communication, outreach, and partnerships with residents and community organizations. Key initiatives include enhancing marketing and digital communication strategies, addressing language access barriers, and engaging non-users of Park District facilities. Efforts also involve creating opportunities for inclusive community input and supporting connection across all ages, abilities, and cultures.

Community Connection and Engagement—aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Emphasize the Park District’s “why,” their mission, values to gain buy in from users and residents.
- Expand access to programming and facilities in the southeast corner of town – more presence, larger footprint, and fully-staffed facilities.
- Enhance marketing efforts to increase the visibility of the Park District.
 - » *Make a paper copy of the programming guide available onsite*
 - » *Mail a paper copy of the senior guide to senior households*
- Increase collaboration with community partners – mutually beneficial.
- Share space for sports fields, parking, include churches not just the schools.
- Continue to gather input from community to learn what they want in terms of programming. Where are the gaps? How can programming be more diverse to meet the growing needs of the population?
- Improve communication internally and externally with the community and partners.
 - » *Reach people from varying ages and demographics*
- Address language barriers in communications from the Park District (including forms, website, newsletter, brochures).
- Need for more print marketing materials and user-friendly digital communication.
- Partner with private entities and businesses to support and sponsor marketing.
- More marketing and outreach to connect with non-users, bring users into facilities.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Maintaining a strong financial foundation is essential to the success of any organization. This priority area focuses on expanding revenue sources through concessions and sponsorships, seeking external funding, and monitoring investment opportunities. Budgeting practices and financial planning are key components to ensure resources are aligned with both short- and long-term needs and goals.

Financial Sustainability—aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Remain financially sustainable and solvent.
 - » *More budget transparency regarding program costs, fundraising funds allocation (adult vs. youth programs)*
- Strengthen the Park District Foundation to support fundraising events for scholarships, help achieve budget goals, and increase opportunities for lower income youth to participate.
- Offer space rental for private organizations potentially increasing revenue – aim to keep rentals local, within affiliated organizations

INNOVATIVE AND SECURE INFRASTRUCTURE

This area addresses improvements to both physical infrastructure and digital systems. Initiatives include updating emergency preparedness plans, enhancing facility security, and implementing technology upgrades to improve operational efficiency. Additional efforts explore emerging tools, such as AI, and provide staff training to support infrastructure enhancements.

Innovative and Secure Infrastructure—aligning stakeholder feedback:

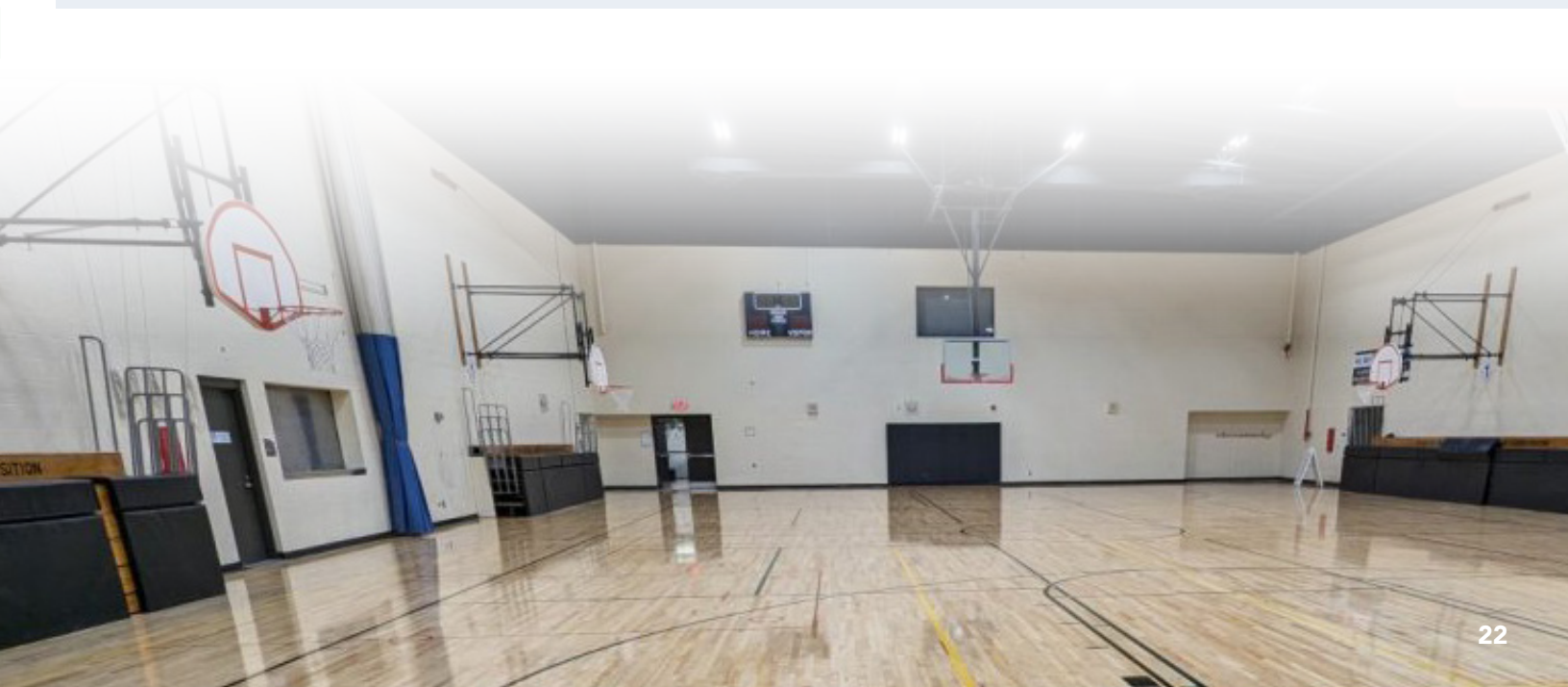
- Upgraded technology and software throughout the Park District.
 - » *AV equipment, computers, website for user-friendliness, etc.*
- Need a new or updated bus for senior trips, camera for pictures of trips.
- Incorporation of art or sculptures in outdoor park areas.

FACILITY ASSESSMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

This priority area focuses on ongoing evaluation and upgrades to facilities. Activities include renovations to the Simkus Recreation Center, improvements to athletic fields, and identification of opportunities for new indoor spaces. Capital improvement planning and ADA compliance guide efforts to ensure facilities remain safe, functional, and accessible.

Facility Assessment and Improvement—aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Add more space for swim meet spectators to sit, potentially build upwards to save space.
- Continue making Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements to Park District facilities and playgrounds.
- Acquire more land for a second indoor activity center.
 - » *Possibly including space for a new Performing Arts Center, indoor basketball, volleyball, swimming, fitness, etc.*
- Upgrade Red Hawk Park with added lighting and parking.
- Hope to get rid of woodchips at the parks in exchange for rubber pieces.
- Gymnastics center needs an upgrade, updated equipment and layout of room including mirror placement.
- Expansion of facilities, such as a new theater and Performing Arts Center.
 - » *Indoor space expanded to include athletic fields, storage space, communal lunch area, etc.*
- Upgrade the gymnastics equipment.
- Focus on updating Simkus Recreation Center.
 - » *Replace gym floors*
- Expansion of the water park with a lazy river.
- Update and improve parks, particularly on the southeast side of town.



COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMMING AND SERVICES

Delivering diverse and responsive programming is critical to the mission of the Park District. Priorities include expanding access in underserved areas, increasing adult and senior offerings, and incorporating emerging recreation trends. These efforts are intended to meet the evolving needs and interests of the community.

Comprehensive Programming and Services-aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Continue to provide the community with opportunities to gather and connect.
- Ensure the Park District can maintain current programming while remaining innovative and stay relevant regarding additional programming.
 - » *Create a driver's education program for those youth whose family don't own a vehicle*
 - » *Addition of senior swim aerobics classes or adult swim time*
- Explore partnering to provide the community with a Performing Arts Center.
- Focus on maintaining and enhancing before and after school activities for youth, possibly partnering with the Library and School Districts.
- Place less focus on numbers of registrants and more focus on improving quality of programming; focus on what the Park District does well.
- Expand class offerings to include daytime programming for adults with special needs.
- Bring back childcare hours for the fitness center.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION

This priority area focuses on investing in staff capacity and support. Key initiatives involve evaluating staffing levels, offering professional development, and implementing strategies to improve retention and succession planning. Enhancing workplace culture and providing growth opportunities contribute to a stable, skilled workforce.

Staff Development and Retention-aligning stakeholder feedback:

- Better quality, more in-depth training opportunities.
 - » *Possibly online training platform with standard operating procedures across all departments and programs*
- Create opportunities for growth internally, career advancement and pathways.
 - » *Trust front- and mid-line staff with supervision as needed*
 - » *More transparency regarding succession planning and career advancement*
 - » *Reduce burnout by adding more staff to cover some activities and programs*
- Develop a plan for adding more summer staffing. Ensure camps are operating at the recommended ratios for child to supervisor.
- Build staff morale by increasing staff appreciation opportunities including part-time, seasonal staff.
 - » *Increased levels of staffing and more competitive compensation and benefits*
 - » *Stronger presence of senior leadership in the trenches, jumping in to help when staff is spread thin*
- Provide opportunities for engaging staff and residents in decision-making.

