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**DULUTH**

**Parks and recreation**

**master Plan**



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

- I. Introduction - *The Vision***
  - » Plan Context
  - » Plan Purpose
  - » Plan Process
  - » Background
- II. Trends - *How We See Things Changing***
- III. The State of the Park and Recreation System - *Where We Are Today***
  - » Impressive and in Sad Shape
- IV. Principles and Objectives: *The Path to 2030***
- V. Strategies & Actions: *Making the Vision a Reality***
- VI. Implementation & Priorities: *Following Through***
  - » Priority Actions and Projects
  - » Standards and Guidelines
- VII. Supporting Documents**
  - » Needs Assessment





# DULUTH

## Parks and Recreation master Plan



## CHAPTER 1

## introduction



Duluth attracts outdoor-oriented people to live, work, play and visit.

(2)



Duluth is blessed with an incredible system of park lands and people who value nature and recreation. Those natural, park and recreational lands and motivated volunteers, staff, officials, partners and organizations will allow Duluth to create a world class park, trail and recreation system.

This Master Plan focuses on pragmatic actions to improve the parks and recreation system in the near term while recommending principles to guide long-term direction. This approach is based on the reality that investment in Duluth's parks, recreation, nature and trails will pay dividends in the form of increased tourism, jobs, and quality of life.

The plan recommends new sources of funding be dedicated to Duluth Parks and Recreation and that those funds be invested in:

**Park maintenance and stewardship** - Duluth is fortunate to have a large and diverse network of park lands. Acquiring park land is often the most difficult and costly part of creating a park and recreation system. With the park land system largely in place, the City and its partners can focus on park improvements, upkeep and stewardship of parks and natural resources.

**Trail and bikeway connections** – Duluth has several of the most important trails and parkways in Minnesota, but needs connections and enhancements to realize the potential of these gems. The Lakewalk, Munger Trail, Superior Hiking Trail and Skyline Parkway are wonderful assets that can form the backbones of a future trail and bikeway network. Trails are the most popular recreation feature and attract tourist and locals alike.

**Recreation facilities and programs** – Convenient and equitable access to recreation facilities and programs is a hallmark of a healthy and vital community. Fully utilizing schools as community places and targeting city investment in people and sustainable recreation facilities will foster community, family and individual health.

Realization of this vision will take time, dedication and funding, but it will result in a park, trail and recreation system that will help drive economic growth and enhance quality of life for decades to come.

*Duluth was voted by OUTSIDE MAGAZINE as "One of the Top Ten Dream Towns."*



## PLAN CONTEXT

The confluence of Lake Superior and the St. Louis River is the reason for the founding of the city and the stunning lake side setting and proximity to nature have been enduring elements throughout Duluth's history. Tourism, health care and education have replaced transport and resource extraction as Duluth's economic engine. Parks, trails, recreation and nature are vital to resident's quality of life and to Duluth's new economy. Duluth's scenic qualities, parks, recreation opportunities, access to nature and the Lakewalk attract people to move to Duluth as well as to visit Duluth.

Duluth has an exceptional system of parks, open spaces, trails and recreation attractions. The Duluth park and open space system includes over 11,000 acres of land providing a diverse mix of neighborhood, community, nature and athletic parks. The system includes specialized facilities such as golf courses, and unique attractions such as the Lake Superior Zoo and Spirit Mountain Recreation/Ski Area. Amenities such as the Lakewalk, Bayfront Festival Park, Park Point, the Rose Garden, Skyline Parkway, Hawk Ridge and Chester Bowl attract visitors and locals alike and help define the identity of the City. The Superior Hiking Trail links the City and the entire North Shore.

Duluth's parks host national, community, and neighborhood scale events. Events such as Grandma's Marathon, the Tall Ship's Festival, Bentleyville 'Tour of Lights', and the Homegrown Music Festival attract visitors and are key factors in the economic, social, and cultural health of the community.

Like most cities in Minnesota, Duluth's municipal budget has been shrinking and the City has had to take actions to respond to reduced funding. Duluth's Parks and Recreation Division has faced challenges and reduced staff resources; cut backs in the frequency of park and facility maintenance; and less funds for replacement of park and recreation facilities and new park improvements. Many recreation buildings are closed due to deteriorated conditions and the changing needs of the users. City recreation programs have been eliminated. Volunteers and

partner groups have stepped up to help deliver recreation services and to assist with upkeep.

The importance of parks, nature and recreation to Duluth means that a strategic approach to achieving efficiency is needed now to help weather the current budget crisis and to prioritize use of limited resources. Equally important is a plan for the future to maximize the benefits of the parks and recreation system and to create a system that is flexible and resilient. The plan for the future needs to include an approach and action plan to achieve the vision of a high performing and efficient park, recreation and trail system. It will take funding, staff resources, public partnerships, political support, volunteers, and new ways of thinking and acting to fully achieve the benefits of this legacy of parks, trails and recreation.

## PLAN PURPOSE

### Blueprint for a High Performing, Resilient, and Efficient System

This plan establishes a blueprint to achieve an economically sustainable park and recreation system. The Guiding Principles and the action plans of this Master Plan set a course to: reduce operating and capital costs, enhance efficiency, improve parks, strengthen partnerships, connect the city with trails, increase access to nature, increase and stabilize funding, create equitable access to healthy recreation, and enhance stewardship.

Countless studies show that great cities have a vital, well-cared-for park and trail system. Indeed, most new development and redevelopment in the last 10 years occurred next to park and recreation amenities (parks, plazas, trails, greenways, waterfronts, etc.). In economically challenging times, development and redevelopment becomes less frequent and people desire to recreate closer to home, making quality park and recreation experiences and facilities even more important.

The last Duluth park and recreation plan was prepared in 1997. Over the years Duluth Parks and Recreation has been challenged



*Lift and Bridge from Skyline Parkway, ca. 1930; Minnesota Historical Society Photograph Collection*

to maintain services at its parks and community centers due to reduced resources, manpower, and population. Another challenge is that many people value close to home parks and recreation centers while the city's ability to maintain and operate these local facilities is significantly reduced. The City has taken many actions to reduce costs (reduced maintenance frequency of some parks, staff reductions, eliminating city-operated recreation programs, utilizing partners and volunteers, etc.) and wants a guide to actions that would make the park and recreation system more sustainable and resilient while meeting community needs. This Plan recommends short term and long term actions to make the park system more sustainable, more relevant in people's lives, more cost efficient and balanced with adequate funding in the long term. This Master Plan contains recommendations and plans for existing parks, park maintenance, recreation centers, recreation programs, trails and connectivity, funding, operations, resource stewardship, partnerships, and volunteerism. The Plan establishes a framework for the city-wide park and recreation system. It is envisioned that more detailed plans and community outreach will occur to implement the recommended action and principles. This Plan also includes recommendations for priority actions and standards to help guide future facility development and improvement.

### A System-Wide Approach

This Master Plan urges thinking about recreation activity needs first, then analyzing the best method to deliver that service. Building a new facility is not always the only solution to meeting a recreation need. Appropriate facilities may be available already through a potential partner or in another location and the solution is connecting users to that facility.

Systems thinking looks at parks and recreation in Duluth as one system operated by the City, the School District, other schools, service and recreation groups, private businesses, volunteers and others. As a City and as a society we cannot afford to have school facilities idle during non-school hours, city parks not serve school uses, maximize cooperation between the public and private sector and maximize the role of talented and committed volunteers.

## PLAN PROCESS

This Master Plan is based on input from the community, stakeholders, staff and city officials gathered in 2009-2010. The Plan represents their collective wisdom expressed through surveys, meetings, focus groups, hands-on exercises, park and community tours, and brainstorming. It also used the expertise of the consultant team, benchmark data, a system-wide evaluation by staff and the consultants, standards from the National Recreation and Parks Association and best practices from other communities across the nation.

## BACKGROUND

### Relationship with the Comprehensive Land Use Plan

The Duluth Comprehensive Land Use Plan was adopted in 2006. The Comprehensive Plan is the policy guide and foundation upon which Duluth's regulatory tools (zoning, subdivision, shoreland, floodplain and other ordinances) and Duluth's capital improvement programs rest. The Comprehensive Plan contains guidance for governing principles, future land use, policies and implementation and defines how development, redevelopment, and preservation decisions are made. In addition, the Comprehensive Plan describes ten other areas of interest that need to be addressed in the decision-making process, which include demographics, historic development patterns, natural systems & the natural resource assessment, land use, transportation, public utilities/services, parks & recreation, economics, housing, and schools. The Plan's parks and recreation chapter recommends that the City classify and standardize existing parks, set access standards for different park classifications; as well as tax forfeited lands, in order to reflect their value as park or natural areas additions to Duluth's park system. The Plan recognizes that setting access standards will allow clear evaluation of the need for park dedications in new developments or redevelopment areas, and allow for trail and natural area linkages to be created within the development process. The City's neighborhoods are defined by



stream corridors, bluff lines, and other natural and man-made features. The Comprehensive Plan recommends, as part of new development and redevelopment activities, creating integrated connections defined by natural features to make a trail and pedestrian network that not only links neighborhoods, parks, and open spaces, but connects to the City's numerous cultural resources and destination businesses. The Plan also supports redevelopment efforts and recognizes that restrictions on infill development can push development into areas that lead to water quality problems, habitat loss, and nonpoint source pollution.

This Parks and Recreation Master Plan builds on the Comprehensive Plan recommendations with an intent to provide equitable access to parks and recreation facilities - that are appropriate, integrated, and sustainable - for all residents. This Plan must address the challenge of providing and maintaining a park system that, for cities the size of Duluth, is one of the most extensive in the nation while providing residents with a diverse range of recreational programs and special events all balanced within available capital, staff, volunteer and partner resources.

### Duluth School District Changes

Faced with declining enrollment and an excess of schools, the Duluth School District 709 foresaw significant changes. After twenty-five years with virtually no improvements, all of Duluth's schools were in need of significant investments if the City was to provide students the 21st century education they need. In 2006, the Duluth community came together to discuss the future of their school district. In the Spring of 2006 a series of nine workshops were held with key stakeholder groups including the school board, principals, school administrators, teachers, parents, students, representatives of maintenance, food service, and educational assistant unions as well as the special education, desegregation/integration and citizen's advisory groups.

The Long Range Facilities Plan underpins two fundamental goals for the Duluth Public Schools: providing today's students with an education that competes with the best Minnesota has to offer, and attracting tomorrow's families with the best possible schools

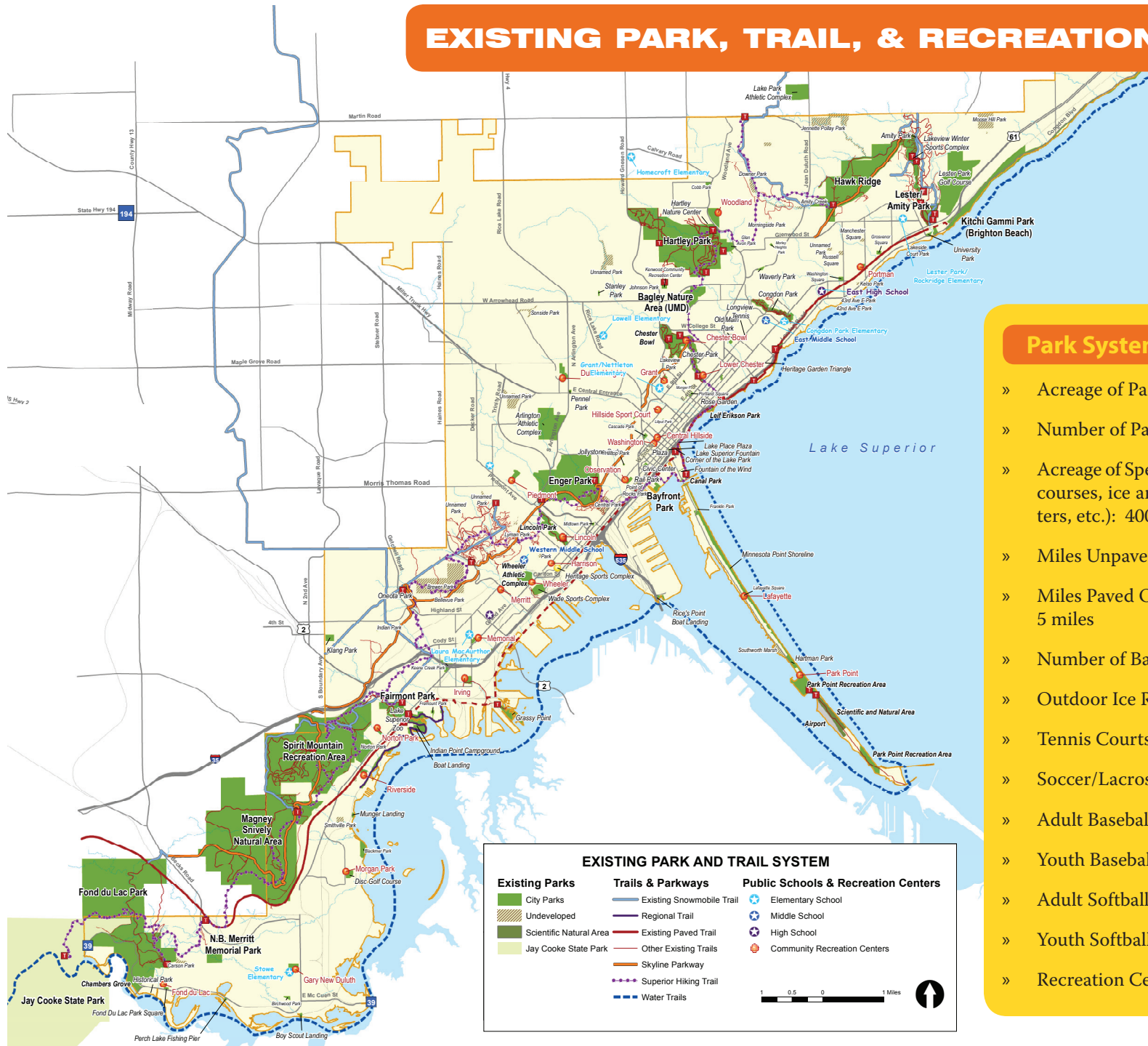
so Duluth can remain a growing, vibrant community. Intended to improve and replace the district's aging facilities, the Long Range Facilities Plan takes Duluth from 19 to 13 schools. The entire plan is expected to be complete by 2013. The Facilities Plan includes several key changes that will allow Duluth Public Schools to better serve its students and the community, including:

- Close some schools: Consolidating from three high schools to two, four middle schools to two, and eleven elementary schools to nine. Closing these schools will save the district over \$4.5 million per year. This money will then be reinvested in newer, better facilities that offer 21st century resources and safety features.
- Build and upgrade other schools: The Facilities Plan will rebuild or refurbish the remaining schools to bring them to modern safety and learning standards. Not only will these schools provide the best possible learning environments for current students, they will attract new families to Duluth.
- Go green: Many unique elements of the Facilities Plan, from energy efficiency features to a streamlined bus system, will make Duluth's schools the most efficient and environmentally friendly in the state. For example, reductions in utility costs, as well as eliminating 500,000 square feet of no longer needed space, will save over \$800,000 each year.

*(From the Long Range Facilities Plan)*

An important part of approval of the Long Range Facility Plan was the creation of schools that are truly community-wide resources. This means that the schools will function as places of community gathering and recreation in addition to education. For Duluth Park and Recreation that means counting on effective partnerships with the School District to assure appropriate public access to facilities such as gyms, auditoriums, meeting rooms and outdoor recreation facilities and partnering with schools for efficient provision of recreation facilities, community centers, parks, athletic fields and programs.

# EXISTING PARK, TRAIL, & RECREATION SYSTEM



## Park System at a Glance:

- » Acreage of Parkland: 11,600 acres
- » Number of Parks: 105
- » Acreage of Special-Use Facilities (golf courses, ice arenas, community centers, etc.): 400 acres
- » Miles Unpaved Trails: 100 miles
- » Miles Paved Off-Road Trails: 5 miles
- » Number of Basketball Courts: 20
- » Outdoor Ice Rinks: 15
- » Tennis Courts: 16
- » Soccer/Lacrosse/Football Fields: 11
- » Adult Baseball Fields: 1
- » Youth Baseball Fields: 15
- » Adult Softball Fields: 4
- » Youth Softball Fields: 10
- » Recreation Center Buildings: 22



