



Parks and Recreation Committee

Transition Chair: Kourtny Garrett

Co Chairs: Connie Rule, Jolon Clark

Committee Members: Adeeb Khan, Arslan Guney, Chris Herndon, Conor Hall, Hollynd Hoskins, Frank Rowe, Yoli Casas, Jeanne Lee, Milo Marquez, Jon Gambrell, Taishya Adams, Sebastian Andrews, Kim Yuan-Farrell, Ramona Martinez, Rana (Amy) Razzaque, Jim Petterson, Laurie Mathews, and Florence Navarro

Proposed 100-Day Action Plan

Due to the short timeline, engaging broad and diverse communities was a challenge. The committee conducted three meetings and one public forum. Additionally, several committee members met with special interest groups and brought that feedback to the conversation.

With just a few weeks to complete the process of discussion and synthesis, the committee does not feel this was a thorough and inclusive approach to bringing community voice to this report. However, the committee agreed that what follows is a thoughtful approach for the Johnston Administration and the new Parks and Recreation Executive Director for the first 100 days.

Recommended Priorities/Outcomes

	Key Outcomes	Comments
1	Restore the two historic mayoral appointees who, together with the Executive Director, form the department leadership team while reorganizing to create a highly motivated and enthusiastic workforce dedicated to the highest ethical standards and strong strategic goals.	Priority to instill community and staff trust and model cultural shift. This will be critical to attracting and retaining bright new staff and building real career paths for new and existing staff.
2	Review existing DPR plans to develop strategies with milestones and neighborhood focused to aggressively and urgently acquire new land through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Land Acquisition focused on closing the gap for communities not currently within a 10-minute walk of a high-quality park AND also focused on large land opportunities like the Park Hill Golf Course 	Priority should be to fulfill commitments to historically under resourced communities.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negotiate an agreement with all Denver Schools to activate school yards and DPS property as parks during non-school hours which will leverage existing land assets without financial outlay 	
3	Create a specific plan to meet with and engage the community proactively and consistently in decision-making processes, ensuring that community engagement is transparent, shares power in the process, and is structured with a strong equity lens to meet communities and individuals where they are.	This will require employing a culture of change mindset, policy, and practice to adapt to emerging issues in the community today (such as Pickleball), using community subject matter experts who are dedicated liaisons for that user group to interface with department leadership and the PRAB.
4	Conduct a deep review of the current strategic plan to ensure all planning and operations are aligned with the resilience, One Drop, and other climate-specific directives in the Game Plan considering the climate crisis that exists today.	This must include aggressive environmental /climate policy, design, and implementation as a core function of everything the department does. This will also require deeper cross departmental collaboration and integration and a focus on sustainable practices and an ecosystem biodiversity approach.

	Other Outcomes	Comments
5	Aggressively prioritize Denver's tree canopy and leverage partnership with CASR and the Climate Protection Fund and community partners with a focus on low income and historically marginalized communities.	A comprehensive plan and strong partnerships are needed to ensure adequate water and maintenance of our trees. This will be critical to ensuring that this is a program focused on growing a tree canopy for the long term and not simply planting trees.
6	Reinvest and prioritize youth through strong programming, access to parks and mountain parks, youth workforce opportunities and career paths in our outdoors.	This must be done by partnering with community and nonprofits, a "back to basics" approach to restoring access, programming, and engagement with youth in our parks and at our recreation centers.

7	Develop clear and consistent reporting policies to report out to the community on achievement of goals, and accounting for funds spent, especially from the Park Legacy Fund.	Rebuilding trust will come through transparency and that must be modeled by leadership.
8	Modify policies and systems that are blocking community from partnering with the department in the areas of contracting, planning, programming.	Improving the department's culture of collaboration, responsiveness to community input, and removing barriers to partnering with the private sector and nonprofits in robust and capacity-building ways will help the department deliver on its mission.

Key Themes

Community Engagement and Transparency

1. Launch community input campaign and listening tour to carry forward the public input process that the transition process initiated to create a culture of trust and transparent communication internally and externally. This includes sharing public data to demonstrate decision making process with key constituents.
2. Continue to leverage community leaders who participated as the DPR Transition Team post Inauguration.
3. Develop change management approaches and coalition-building strategies. Create intentional and public access points for all residents in the decision-making processes around their communities.
4. Proactively engage with the community and other Denver departments, including special efforts to reach unhoused individuals and youth populations.

Equity, Equality, and Accessibility in Parks and Recreation

1. Focus on climate resiliency, green infrastructure, and combating climate change.
2. Deeply explore the tension between under-resourced and under-utilized facilities using an equity investment and programming lens. Prioritize resources in areas with the best equity and equality return to these communities.
3. Ensure sports facilities and equipment for all ages are available and maintained.
4. Transform school lands into public park spaces.
5. Offer youth sports camps during summers and athletic leagues that bring adult volunteers together with youth.
6. Add more pickleball courts citywide. Add indoor pickleball courts with permanent lines to all Recreation Centers. Investigate sound reduction fence for the existing pickleball courts where there is a noise concerns. Investigate closure of the Congress Park and Sloan Lake pickleball projects, process.
7. Expand park locations through strategic purchases and innovative partnerships.

Public-Private Partnerships and Asset Management

1. Map current and potential partnerships and identify barriers to partnering and leveraging resources.
2. Learn from other communities on successful strategies that bring networks, resources, creativity to improve programs and services to community.
3. Investigate the potential for private operation of DPR assets with clearly detailed memorandums of understanding.
4. Explore the use of tax credits in partnering on land acquisition.

Agency Design Projects

1. Engage communities in the design and investment process that will bring fresh ideas and innovation.
2. Leverage opportunities for recruitment, career exposure and mentorship programs.
3. Exploring regenerative park design and preserving open space

Development of Park Hill Golf Course

1. Identify the stakeholder group and process to explore the future of the PHGC. See recommendations in the questions below.

Key topics listed below are not directly tied to specific themes but are noteworthy or bridge more than one theme.

1. Establishing measurable goals and accountability for existing leadership
2. Improving internal culture, staff relationships, and trust building cannot be overstated as it is a theme in every discussion and every topic, increasing budgets for programming and staff retention
3. Strengthening partnerships with nonprofits to reach underserved communities
4. Establishing a clear and transparent annual report on Parks Legacy Fund usage
5. Reviewing and updating area plans and Blueprint Denver Attachment A for park expansion
6. Assessing operational and maintenance capacity of Parks & Recreation
7. Planning for downtown parks and public spaces to support economic recovery
8. Strengthening partnerships with nonprofits and reducing bureaucratic barriers
9. Addressing issues of green gentrification and transportation inequities
10. Managing the goose population to prevent overpopulation and culling

Summary and Assessment

A. What key things is this agency doing well right now, according to feedback from stakeholders? // What key things is the City doing right in this area, according to feedback from stakeholders?

Denver residents are very passionate about their parks and recreation centers and have a great sense of pride in these places. They are heavily used, and this was identified as a challenge, but also evidence of what is going well. Many of Denver's neighborhoods are named after the park in that neighborhood, and Denver citizens are connected to their park, identify with our parks system and utilize our parks and recreation facilities often.

The Department's focus on equity and making investments in historically under-resourced communities was also highlighted as something that is newer in the Department's approach, but that is going well and needs continuous improvement. This was evidenced by investments in new pools, new land acquisitions, and investments in aging playgrounds and park infrastructure in these communities. While this effort was flagged as a strength, it was noted that this is just the beginning of righting historical wrongs, and the department must continue to stay focused and committed to these investments. In this same vein, many members of the public commended the department for the care and maintenance of the parks and the general uptick in the quality and level of maintenance in their parks. It was noted, however, that this feedback seemed to come from regional park users and more affluent residents. BIPOC communities expressed the opposite, and highlighted the very real disparity between the level and quality of maintenance happening in parks across the city. The department should continue to build on the great work that has been done, but should ensure that the quality and level of maintenance is at the highest level in all parks with specific attention being made to closing the gaps in BIPOC and low income communities.

Additionally, the Mountain Park System was identified as a strength, but in need of increased investment to make the parks accessible to all Denver residents. Our community gardens and food forests were similarly identified as a strength area in need of more investment and stronger support from the department for outside partners. The department's emerging focus on climate change, climate resiliency, sustainability, and the environment was also noted as a strength to be built upon.

The Park Legacy Fund, a permanent funding source for parks, was also flagged as a strength. The committee and community wanted more transparency on how the dollars were being used, but this influx of new and permanent money has been felt across the system.

B. What are the key challenges for the City in this area, according to stakeholders and current employees? // What are the key challenges facing this agency, according to stakeholders and current employees?

Denver has experienced population growth at levels that few other cities have over the past decades. This has put a strain on the Parks and Recreation systems, and the department has not kept up.

- An urgent need to secure more land to deliver on the promise that every Denver resident should have a high-quality park within a 10 minute walk or roll as detailed in the Blueprint Denver and Attachment A.
- A misalignment of policies, programs, and practices that are not addressing or meeting the needs of BIPOC communities. A disheartening shift from structures that support youth of color and families with limited resources to a focus on accommodating well-heeled residents with abundant financial resources, flexibility with time and location, private clubs and activities.
- A lack of accessibility for individuals with disabilities to truly access our parks.
- A lack of public restrooms and drinking fountains needed to ensure that our parks provide access to the facilities needed for basic human comfort.
- A need to better understand the ideal overall operating costs of parks to ensure proper maintenance and how we balance this need with the needs for expansion of park space.

- A lack of diversity in park ranger and law enforcement staff in the parks has led to a system of enforcers who do not represent the communities they are serving and may lack cultural competencies.
- A lack of consistent, authentic, and well-timed public engagement paired with a failure to deliver on promises made during the public process.
- The department's policies and procedures around partnership with outside nonprofit and small for-profit entities are overly onerous, to the point of being inaccessible for most small organizations and nearly untenable for even larger and more sophisticated organizations. This creates an environment where the Department is missing out on funding, programming, and collaboration that would benefit all Denver residents, and specifically benefit low income and BIPOC communities because the barriers and red tape in place are too great a barrier to overcome.

Additionally, much of the committee's discussion as well as the public comments received revolved around staffing issues and leadership concerns.

- Low engagement, satisfaction, and empowerment of employees up and down the org chart.
- A clear perception that favoritism and cronyism played a significant role in employee's opportunity for advancement in the Department which has discouraged people exploring a DPR career. Lack of management support and advocacy to align compensation with role changes.
- A contracting and bid process that makes it nearly impossible for community organizations to work with and partner with the Department.
- Pickleball is a flashpoint in the community with extremely intense feelings that will be more completely detailed in a separate section.

Both the committee and the public input received highlighted a high level of dissatisfaction with how the previous administration has converted two leadership positions from mayoral appointees to career service employees. The committee strongly recommends that the Mayor-Elect re-allocate those two appointments to Parks to build out a leadership team that embodies a culture of transparency, community engagement, change, and accountability. Additionally, the committee recommends that the new leadership strengthen, support and empower Denver Parks and Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB) to provide independence, transparency and to ensure citizen engagement and input are received and acted upon by DPR with support from the Mayor.

Question and Answers

1. How can we aggressively bring more green space and open space to neighborhoods across Denver, including those that have been historically neglected?

These suggestions highlight the need for proactive measures, collaboration with various stakeholders, creative approaches, and a focus on community engagement to increase green and open spaces in underserved neighborhoods.

- Incentivizing the planning and delivery of programming in private open spaces that can be utilized for public purposes. This could be achieved through tax reductions based on the provided services.
- Creativity and not solely relying on existing green/open spaces. Over-developed areas should be considered for transformation into accessible green spaces.

- Conducting a build-out analysis of city-owned land and properties for sale or in the design phase. This analyzes areas for land acquisition and tree canopy planning, taking into account adopted plans and neighborhood types.
- Prioritizing the urgent need for acquisition of land for future parks and adopting a "land banking" mindset. This may involve acquiring properties that require remediation or remaining undeveloped until park planning and funding are finalized. Collaboration with non-profit organizations can expedite acquisitions.
- Expanding urban forestry goals, particularly in low-income communities. This involves significant tree planting efforts, including partnerships with Denver Public Schools to plant trees on school grounds and enhance community access to nature.
- Private/public partnerships to partner with building greater park space, including tax credits to reduce the cost of any land bought back from the developer.

2. What role does design have in park spaces? How might design standards play a role in creating inviting, inclusive, and special places that are neighborhood-serving and memorable?

These insights stress the significance of considering safety, historical context, accessibility, community input, and inclusivity when designing park spaces.

- Design in supporting safety standards, such as lighting and visibility. Design can also incorporate historical context specific to each neighborhood, adding authenticity and creating memorable park spaces. Partnerships with retail uses within parks, where feasible, can enhance their appeal, and leveraging sustainability measures like water quality and solar can further enhance the design.
- Designing spaces with marginalized groups at the center leads to accessibility, inclusivity, and memorability for everyone. Design should prioritize high accessibility for people with disabilities, pay homage to neighborhood history and culture, and include requested amenities like restrooms and water fountains. Designing areas that foster intergenerational access promotes community bonding.
- Designing and planning are crucial for addressing conflicts, parking, resident complaints, and creating inclusive and inviting park spaces that serve neighborhoods and the entire community.
- Design should be climate and resilience focused. Our parks and public spaces should provide areas for residents to find relief from an intensifying climate while also providing natural habitat, attracting pollinators, and providing critical support for natural systems. Tree canopy should also be a fundamental part of all designs and support the recommendations and vision of the Forestry master Plan with an eye to contributing to citywide efforts to reduce the heat island effect, protect water resources, and provide respite in a rapidly changing climate.
- Community engagement in the design process to ensure that public spaces reflect the priorities, heritage, and culture of the surrounding neighborhood. Adopting standards for inclusive and universal play can provide equitable access to quality outdoor spaces for all ages and abilities. The design process itself is essential, as involving the community leads to a park that is more loved, used, and safer, with reduced maintenance costs. Incorporating the community's vision into the park enhances civic engagement, neighborhood pride, and community vitality.

3. What is the right stakeholder group and correct first steps in negotiating the future of the Park Hill Golf Course?

The administration must act boldly and quickly in acquiring the Park Hill Golf Course property based on the will of the Denver voters. Recommendations include obtaining an independent land appraisal, recording the conservation easement as a city-owned asset, considering a mediator for negotiations, and invoking the settlement agreement if necessary.

- The mayor should meet with the property owner to discuss the possibility of a sale and the steps required for acquisition. A clear vision for the property should be announced, and a stakeholder group should be assembled accordingly to work towards acquiring the property.
- A Stakeholder Group should include neighborhood members, City Staff (including DPR staff), private development representatives who are not associated with future development, and design representatives (landscape/architects). The group could be structured similarly to the board overseeing the Hyatt Convention Center Hotel.
- The first steps in the negotiation process could include reconfirming what can be accommodated or completed for the property, identifying funding issues and potential solutions, and involving the city, community, and stakeholders in the decision-making process.
- Understanding Fair Market Value: It is crucial for the city or parks department to determine the fair market value of the golf course, considering the easement. The city should purchase the property at no more than the fair market value based on the easement's conditions.
- Authentic Community Engagement: The process should prioritize authentic community engagement, ensuring that previously excluded voices are included. The vision for the space should reflect the community's input, and meetings should not be designed to influence a specific outcome.
- Funding and Youth Programs: A group should be established to explore funding sources, creative ideas, and public/private partnerships for park space. Additionally, there is a recognition that youth programs need to be reinstated after school.

4. How can we provide access to pickleball while protecting other uses of public space and addressing neighbor concerns?

Over the last several years, pickleball has been and continues to be the fastest growing sport in the nation. With more than 10,000 active players in the Denver metro area, capacity has not kept up with demand. Additionally, tensions between pickleball players and residents have escalated to concerning levels. While this is a national issue, resentment and distrust with DPR leadership decisions regarding expanding access and resisting well-known solutions have heightened tensions. These suggestions aim to address the need for pickleball access while considering neighbor concerns, exploring partnerships, and identifying suitable locations for facilities.

- In February 2023, the Pickleball Advisory Board was established with a six-month charter. The new administration should extend that group as a standing community advisory entity and create transparency around their structure and role.
- Hire pickleball staff to coordinate internally with DPR staff on integration of indoor and outdoor pickleball throughout the system, and externally with community to understand resident and player needs, understand industry trends and solutions to noise mitigation and abatement, location selection and equipment needs (e.g., nets, fencing, lights)
- Immediately offer indoor pickleball programs with proper equipment and permanent lines at all Rec Centers while ensuring that no youth and local programming is displaced.

- Review 2021/2022 project plans and budgeted expansions including Congress Park and Sloans Lake communities.
- Explore a long-term growth strategy that includes acquisition of property - potentially in non-residential areas, such as warehouse districts or industrial zones, for the development of a pickleball (or other) sports complex that can meet the growing recreational demand. And one that explores public/private funding partnerships.

5. What are innovative models in park financing, operations, maintenance and programming? Should the private sector be a partner, and if so, how?

These suggestions focus on creative approaches to financing land acquisition, involving the private sector as a partner, and leveraging community involvement to support park initiatives.

- Exploring tax credits to incentivize businesses to relocate from designated development areas, similar to the example of Pepsi moving from Brighton Blvd. to a site near DIA. Seller-financing could also be considered, allowing individual property owners interested in selling land to the city to finance the transaction.
- The city should move quickly to acquire land, considering options such as using city funds, public/private partnerships, or partnering with private corporations that support the creation of park spaces.
- Partner with nonprofit, and small for profit organizations who are better positioned to provide programming for target populations including youth, low income, and BIPOC individuals. Currently the barriers to partnership for these organizations due to the overburdensome policies and bureaucracy are hindered if not discouraged, and fixing this should be a top priority for the new administration.
- Engaging volunteers, community activists, and leveraging the expertise and resources of Regional Neighborhood Organizations and community groups to support DPR programs and activities.

6. How can the City play a role in increasing access to mountain parks for Denver residents?

- The city should publicly recognize that Denverites are significant users of recreational properties in the foothills, in particular Jefferson County Open Space (JCOS) AND Denver Mountain Parks, and should be willing to actively partner with JCOS to grow the network of public open space and trails in the foothills. This should include investing in strategic land acquisitions that result in new publicly accessible open space parks, enhanced or future access to existing Denver Mountain Parks and new trail connections across Denver Mountain Park properties where appropriate.
- The city should explore providing a free chartered bus to access our mountain parks – prioritizing the communities and groups that do not have equal access.
- Providing programming, transportation, and engagement opportunities for our youth in our mountain parks should be a top priority, and partnering with nonprofit and small for profit organizations who already have relationships with youth across our city should be explored and encouraged.