



CITY OF
GRAND
RAPIDS

Parks &
Recreation

STRATEGIC OPERATING PLAN

FY 2025-2027

Updated January 2026

MISSION

To provide our community with inspirational experiences through the responsible management and collaborative stewardship of the City's natural, educational, and cultural resources.

VISION

Creating and supporting a healthy, vibrant community through active neighborhoods, inclusive programs and events, innovation and best practices, exceptional services and embracing diversity.

CORE VALUES

Our values are directly in line with the City's Strategic Plan. They guide our work and allow us to reach our highest level of performance within an inclusive, positive, fun, and safe work environment.

Accountability: Always acting with integrity and transparency and being responsible for what we do and say

Collaboration: Working together in partnership with others; teamwork

Customer Service: Professionally serving those who live in, work in or visit the city. Providing respectful, excellent, high-quality service and assistance before, during and after the person's interactions with the City.

Equity: Leveraging City influence to intentionally remove and prevent barriers created by systemic and institutional injustice

Innovation: Challenging how things have been done before. Fulfilling community needs by offering new ways to serve our customers and enhance operations. Being nimble, self-aware and open to feedback

Sustainability: The ability to be maintained; making decisions with an understanding of how those decisions will impact the environment, people and communities, and finances, both today and in the future

Healthy Community

Expand programs and initiatives that support the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of all Grand Rapidians

Objective 1: Increase the number of youth and families connected to nature through expanded recreational and educational opportunities

Strategies:

1. Increase youth engagement in outdoor activities through GR Outside, summer day camps and other departmental four-season outdoor recreation program offerings
2. Strengthen existing GRPS partnership and collaborate on outdoor environmental education programs like the Grand Canoe Experience, green schoolyard projects, and the GR Outside outdoor excursion trailer
3. Create low-cost and free pop-up style programming that is approachable to youth and families (sledding, snowshoeing, kayaking, hiking, etc.)
4. Incorporate outdoor recreation activities within the free summer day camp program
5. Expand the equipment that is available to borrow through the GR Outside Gear Library
6. Activate the Grand River by providing free and low-cost paddling experiences to the public and to youth serving organizations
7. Expand the network of organizations that collaborate with GR Outside to share Gear Library resources, partner on programming, and create collective impact

Healthy Community

Objective 2: Provide inclusive and accessible programming

Strategies:

1. Enhance the quality of life for residents over 55 through targeted programs
2. Provide free or reduced cost water safety for youth and expand swim lessons
3. Expand free programming for adult outdoor fitness
4. Expand access to adult and youth programming in Neighborhoods of Focus
5. Expand the number of residents participating in the recreation scholarship program
6. Expand cultural reach through recreation program offerings in Spanish and other languages
7. Disaggregate data to sharpen recreation programming in underserved neighborhoods
8. Create new programming to provide additional access to golf for youth and adults



Healthy Community

Objective 3: Provide high quality programming that meets the needs of the diverse population we serve

Strategies:

1. Survey event and program participants to improve program quality and customer experience
2. Provide comprehensive and timely training for program staff and volunteers
3. Enhance both internal and external customer service to enhance user experience
4. Ensure facility quality meets programming needs with participant safety in mind
5. Partner with local organizations who have existing connections within Neighborhoods of Focus
6. Drive new volunteer support for recreation programs
7. Regularly update scripts with 311



Healthy Community

Objective 4: Enhance safety of park spaces through activation, engagement and amenities

Strategies:

1. Expand park ambassador program
2. Collaborate with City and community partners to activate targeted parks with events and programming
3. Incorporate Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles in all park design
4. Ensure all City employees assigned an emergency operations center role or cross functional field work during major emergencies are trained to the appropriate level
5. Install amenities for enhanced park safety where appropriate such as lighting, cameras, controlled access, and improved visibility and monitoring



Business Management & Finance

Expand and improve tools, procedures and systems for staff to work efficiently, demonstrate fiscal responsibility and maximize effectiveness

Objective 1: Sustain a financial plan that supports our strategic direction and drives innovative revenue generating strategies

Strategies:

1. Adherence to budget, projections and forecasting models
2. Implement sponsorship program and policies
3. Continue successful leveraging of grant funding
4. Review and update department's revenue related policies and procedures
5. Review funding structure and revenue sources to ensure the financial sustainability of new investments and expanded programming
6. Leverage Friends of Grand Rapids Parks fund development process to support park activation and capital projects
7. Expand partnerships to increase the number of sponsored outdoor fitness classes



Business Management & Finance

Objective 2: Increase resident and stakeholder awareness of the park system and programming through meaningful communication and strategic marketing

Strategies:

1. Solidify park branding, increase department awareness, and showcase department work across all divisions through social media
2. Create and hire positions to expand capacity across photo/video, sports marketing and graphic design
3. Raise awareness around river and trail development projects and communicate the work of partner organizations
4. Identify special user groups and corresponding media channels focusing on equity and access
5. Create and implement departmental communication plan to inform the general public and key stakeholders of community impact, engagement opportunities and programming
6. Build and nurture relationships with regional news organizations to increase reach through earned media
7. Build and nurture relationships with local community partners and organizations to increase reach of programs and engagement opportunities



Business Management & Finance

Objective 3: Develop and implement a data driven strategy and performance management framework that supports the department’s mission, vision and core values

Strategies:

1. Leverage data to increase efficiency and drive progress on strategic initiatives
2. Conduct data informed analysis in all operations using lean tools and GIS
3. Track and report park capital investment by ward and park, including Neighborhoods of Focus as a tracking mechanism
4. Develop and implement a robust administrative Standard Operating Procedures program and database that incorporates an annual review
5. Collaborate with the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) on national benchmarking initiatives



Environmental Stewardship

Use an ecological framework to inform design, maintenance and programming in the park system in a way that celebrates and preserves the city's natural resources

Objective 1: Increase grade levels of park maintenance per the 2019 Parks and Recreation Strategic Master Plan

Strategies:

1. Leverage Brightly software to improve park operations, expand data analysis opportunities and obtain grade level goals as defined in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan.
2. Complete Brightly facility condition assessment which will inform future capital planning and maintenance strategies
3. Refine Park Operations staffing model to address growing maintenance needs on trails and athletic fields
4. Coordinate with Friends of Grand Rapids Parks to expand volunteerism



Environmental Stewardship

Objective 2: Enhance the resiliency of the park system through conservation, green infrastructure, maintenance standards and other sustainability initiatives

Strategies:

1. Incorporate ecological framework planting strategies into capital project planning and the park maintenance guidelines
2. Build community engagement and communication plans for greater awareness and understanding of new sustainable management practices
3. Reduce pesticide and herbicide use by expanding organic turf maintenance program
4. Develop landscape maintenance standards with a hierarchy of regular, low-mow and no-mow zones
5. Continue to incorporate low energy and sustainable amenities into park design standards including LED lighting, drinking fountains with bottle filler, seating with recycled materials, etc.
6. Partner with ESD and community organizations to implement green infrastructure into more public right-of-ways and park spaces including stormwater daylighting, bioswales, rain gardens, tree plantings, and native plantings
7. Evaluate opportunities with all capital projects to layer in education and sense of place through environmental and interpretive signage and outdoor learning spaces
8. Embed sustainable practices into department processes and operations to support the city's goals including waste diversion, climate action and neutrality goals
9. Collaborate with the Office of Sustainability to operationalize strategies in the Climate Adaption Action Plan

Environmental Stewardship

Objective 3: Create and fund a proactive and sustainable forestry operation that maximizes resources to care for the health of the city's trees

Strategies:

1. Implement strategies from the 2025 Forestry Operations & Management Plan
2. Collaborate with Department of Public Works to incorporate woody material into the Material Handling and Composting Plan
3. Leverage GIS Tech to assess carbon sequestration of public trees (iTree)
4. Complete GIS quantification of all vacant street tree space in the public right-of-way
5. Partner with stakeholders to expand invasive species removal and restoration
6. Preserve City tree canopy from exotic and invasive species through BMP treatments and integrated care to support better natural regeneration
7. Expand collaboration with stakeholders for pruning, watering, planting and a tree canopy study
8. Collaborate on a Citywide debris management plan



Capital Investment & System Planning

Create a connected network of parks, natural areas, and waterways that is accessible to the entire Grand Rapids community.

Objective 1: Expand parks and active open spaces to reduce disparities in park deficient neighborhoods

Strategies:

1. Acquire land in the Third Ward and Neighborhoods of Focus as part of the larger park acquisition strategy
2. Track additional potential park property acquisitions and score with equity prioritization model in all wards of the city
3. Develop recently acquired property into usable greenspace for the community

Objective 2: Close gaps in the City's segments of regional multi-use trail system

Strategies:

1. Leverage GIS Tech to map all City owned and maintained trail property along the Grand River from Riverside Park to Butterworth on the east and west side of the river to develop priorities for future connections
2. Identify existing trail segments in need of access, ADA, signage or site amenity improvements
3. Work with community partners to fundraise and seek grants for trail acquisition, development and maintenance
4. Explore partnerships for acquisitions or easements to build community-based system of trails that connect the river system with neighborhood parks

Capital Investment & System Planning

Objective 3: Increase accessibility and inclusivity to create diverse experiences of park spaces and foster ownership

Strategies:

1. Finalize design standards to increase accessibility including curb cuts, width of spaces, sidewalks, parking lots, restrooms, recreational amenities and universally accessible playground features
2. Install new signage for park entry, wayfinding and rules to be more welcoming, informative and user-friendly
3. Coordinate with Mobile GR for pedestrian safety, bicycle infrastructure, park entrances and other accessibility upgrades
4. Construct new all-gender restroom facilities throughout the park system where possible
5. Continue the Implementation of the Capital Project Prioritization Framework with focus on equity and asset management
6. Incorporate recently completed Cemetery Asset Assessment into the Brightly asset management platform
7. Add amenities that support four-season use of parks
8. Activate Martin Luther King Park Community Center and renovate Roosevelt Park Lodge to provide year-round facility and programming opportunities in Neighborhoods of Focus



Capital Investment & System Planning

Objective 4: Ensure Grand Rapids riverfront parks are a recognizable icon and economic driver for the department and the city

Strategies:

1. Continue collaboration with GR Whitewater and the river restoration team to align park development with in-river projects
2. Continue the partnership with the Grand River Network on initiatives related to public art, interpretive signage, trail improvements, wayfinding signage, and equity-focused efforts
3. Through the development of the Parks and Recreation 2027 Master Plan, leverage the momentum of the Grand River restoration projects, both in-river and along adjacent park and trail spaces, to create a robust, equity-centered river programming framework that enhances community connection to the Grand River, promotes environmental awareness, and ensures all residents can enjoy and benefit from this vital natural resource through inclusive, accessible and culturally relevant programming

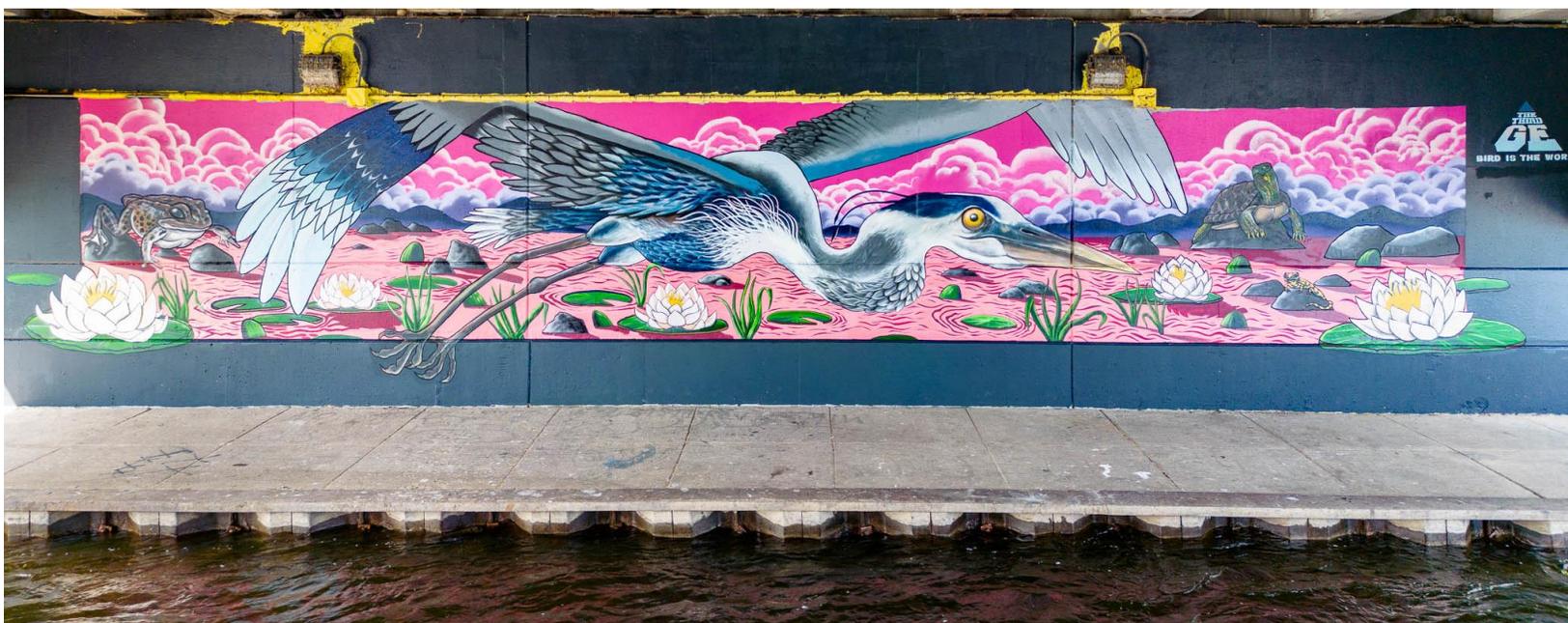


Capital Investment & System Planning

Objective 5: Create equitable community engagement opportunities to increase city-wide collaboration in park improvement projects

Strategies:

1. Amplify partnerships to cocreate meaningful engagement touchpoints for every project
2. Integrate inclusive engagement strategies to ensure equitable outreach opportunities
3. Create opportunities to increase ownership of public spaces through art, community gardens and more
4. Increase community decision-making in park planning and design projects
5. Continue collaboration with community partners to leverage millage funding
6. Collaborate with the Office of Equity & Engagement to further develop equity-centered protocols and standards
7. Improve engagement participant data tracking, including demographics, to communicate the work done across the city in parks and green spaces



Leadership & Employee Development

Attract, hire, train, and retain high performing employees while further identifying and developing our future leaders through the support and development of a workforce that is aligned with our mission, vision and values

Objective 1: Strengthen internal workforce professional development

Strategies:

1. Train all Parks and Recreation staff in equity policies and practices
2. Increase park maintenance certification opportunities
3. Increase internal and external customer service training for all department staff
4. Build internal process to create annual professional development plans for full-time staff
5. Educate employees on professional development opportunities provided by the City including Employee Resource Groups and trainings

Objective 2: Examine organizational structure and staffing strategies to ensure an adequate pipeline of quality employees

Strategies:

1. Develop formal internship programs to increase capacity and build future department leadership
2. Develop a workforce that embodies the values of the City and is reflective of the community we serve
3. Collaborate with Grand Rapids Public Schools, GRCC, Kent ISD, and other workforce development stakeholders to educate youth on career opportunities in Parks and Recreation
4. Identify critical leadership and operational positions and develop a comprehensive succession plan
5. Examine vacancies to determine optimum staffing levels
6. Develop diversity recruitment advisory committee

Leadership & Employee Development

Objective 3: Develop and maintain a workplace culture based on City and department values that improves employee communications, engagement, and satisfaction

Strategies:

1. Improve internal communication to enhance staff awareness and engagement
2. Encourage and expand use of the ACE employee recognition program
3. Collaborate with the Benefits department to provide low-cost or free physical wellness activities for employees
4. Formalize onboarding process for city staff
5. Establish annual cadence for department-wide events and leadership meetings

