



# Monadnock Region Parks and Play

## Municipal Guide to Creating Accessible Outdoor Active Recreation Spaces

Prepared by Southwest Region  
Planning Commission



SWRPC



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Special thanks to Monadnock Outdoors for its collaboration on the Monadnock Region Parks and Play project and for consenting to the Geographic Information System (GIS) data updates provided by Southwest Region Planning Commission (SWRPC) to the [\*Monadnock Outdoors: Connecting Community with Nature Interactive StoryMap\*](#). In 2022, Monadnock Outdoors collaborated with Antioch University's Spatial Analysis Lab (ASAL) to create this resource. In 2023, the map was updated with help from the New Hampshire Children's Health Foundation and SWRPC to provide a more comprehensive inventory of assets identified as "parks" and "playgrounds", increasing the number of sites from 70 to 96.

Other map improvements provided by SWRPC included recalculating latitude and longitude so that navigation links work as expected, enabling search by name of property function, adding labels to properties when zoomed in, and adding a feature to enable more efficient updating in the future.



The Municipal Guide to Creating Accessible Outdoor Active Recreation Spaces is a product of Southwest Region Planning Commission.



## Introduction: Connecting Community Planning to Public Health Outcomes

The Monadnock Region is known for its abundance of places for children and residents of all ages and abilities to get outside and be active in its 33 municipalities. Parks, open spaces and trails are valuable assets that promote community vibrancy and provide a multitude of health, social, economic, and environmental benefits to Monadnock Region communities and those who live, work and play in them. Readily available access to these places support individual health and well-being through increasing physical activity, supporting mental health, and fostering community and social interactions. Many of the region's communities strive to ensure that parks, open spaces and trails are



accessible and welcoming to all, including lower income households, people of color, English learners, the LGBTQ+ community, older adults, and people with disabilities.

The relationship between public health goals and community planning efforts is not always obvious. Integrating public health concepts in planning processes helps to ensure the full realization of health benefits of parks, playgrounds, open spaces and trails for all who use them. The Monadnock Region has a rich history of collaboration between the community planning and public health sectors to ensure appropriate considerations are incorporated in the development and improvement of these

facilities and amenities. With guidance from local and regional planners, the [Healthy Monadnock Alliance](#) has received national recognition for its achievements in creating healthy parks, supporting initiatives to make streets accessible and safe for all users, and supporting trails improvements throughout the region. [Monadnock Outdoors](#), an initiative supported by the Healthy Monadnock Alliance, is a regional partnership of community leaders representing municipalities, schools, businesses, nonprofits, coalitions, faith-based, and civic groups dedicated to fostering connections to nature and holistic community well-being through education and the promotion of active living by means of physical activity, active transportation, and outdoor recreation.

## About the Monadnock Region Parks and Play Project and This Guide

The long-term goal for the Monadnock Region Parks and Play (MRPP) project is to increase physical activity and promote public health for all people, with a particular focus on children up to age five through increased access to parks and play spaces near where they live and learn. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that pre-school children, ages three through five years, be physically active throughout the day for growth and development.<sup>1</sup> CDC further recommends that adult caregivers encourage children to be active when they play. Parents can start early in shaping children's attitudes and behaviors regarding physical activity by taking them to places where they can be active, such as public parks, school playgrounds, community ball fields, and local trails and greenways.

Monadnock Region municipalities and community partners play vital roles in connecting children to active play through implementing park, open space and trail infrastructure improvements. Not all communities in the region offer the same access to these spaces. Municipalities are encouraged to join with partners such as Monadnock Outdoors and the Healthy Monadnock Alliance to increase access to outdoor active recreation spaces and programs for children and people of all ages.



This guide is designed to provide municipalities and community stakeholders with recommendations for improving existing and developing new park and play spaces. Rather than providing an all-inclusive set of planning and design standards, this guide provides an overview of the essential elements necessary to creating fully utilized parks and play spaces that are integrated into a community's vision, culture and built environment, and promote:

- Equitable access for all;
- Safety for users;

- Healthy, active lifestyles; and
- Community and social connections.

## What are Parks and Play Spaces?

Parks and play spaces are areas that promote outdoor active recreation and a connection to nature. They include parks; playgrounds; trails; greenways; undeveloped open spaces; sports fields and courts; and water amenities for swimming, canoeing, and kayaking. The term “parks and play spaces” is used throughout this guide to represent all outdoor active recreation spaces.

## How the Monadnock Region Parks and Play Resource Guide is Structured

The MRPP resource guide was developed to provide Monadnock Region municipalities and community members with best practice recommendations, tools, resources, and relevant community examples for creating parks and play spaces that are accessible and enjoyable for children and all who wish to use them. Numerous guides are available to municipalities interested in improving outdoor active recreation spaces for their



communities. Many are featured in this guide. One of the most comprehensive home-grown resources is [Planning for Play: A Parks and Playgrounds Guidebook for New Hampshire](#) created by the Nashua Regional Planning Commission (NRPC). Rather than re-create the detailed guidance available in the NRPC Guidebook and various

national resources, the MRPP resource guide provides general planning, design and programming guidance related to the following elements:

- Community engagement;
- Inventory and needs assessment;
- System planning;
- Safe routes to parks; and

- Parks and play spaces design and programming including guidance on building public awareness, access enhancements, benchmarks and metrics, and financing and funding.

Extensive legal or policy discussions are not included in the MRPP resource guide, however, there are links to resources where such information can be found. In addition, featured best practice resources are included throughout the guide that municipalities can refer to for further direction on implementing each element. Finally, examples of projects from New Hampshire communities are included to illustrate the practical application of each element.

## Community and Public Health Benefits of Parks and Play Spaces

In 2022, the Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a recommendation to implement park, trail, and greenway infrastructure improvements in combination with one or more additional interventions to increase physical activity and infrastructure use.<sup>ii</sup> The CPSTF recommendation is based on evidence from a systematic review which revealed that combined interventions led to a 18.3% increase in the number of people who use parks, trails, or greenways and a 17% median increase in the number of people who use them to engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.



The CPSTF defines park, trail, and greenway infrastructure interventions as those that improve the built and natural environments by creating or enhancing public locations for physical activity, relaxation, social interaction, and enjoyment. These interventions fall largely under the domain of regional and municipal recreation planning.

Parks are defined by CPSTF as *designated public areas that often combine greenery with paths, facilities for physical activity and recreation, and places for relaxation and social interaction*. Trails or greenways are defined as *routes for walking, hiking, or cycling in*

*urban, suburban, or rural areas (e.g., “rails to trails” conversion projects).* These may involve street conversions that provide opportunities for walking and cycling (most often in urban areas).

The evidence shows that infrastructure improvements alone are not sufficient to promote physical activity and infrastructure use unless they are combined with one or more community awareness and structured programs, such as those recommended in the CDC Active People, Healthy Nation program, [Community Design for Physical Activity](#).<sup>iii</sup> Recommended strategies identified by CPSTF include:

- Community engagement to ensure community participation in intervention planning;
- Public awareness activities (e.g., banners, flyers, promotional campaigns, event days);
- Programs that offer structured opportunities for physical activity and social interaction (e.g., walking groups, exercise classes, organized sports); and
- Access enhancements including transportation connections, street crossings, and expanded hours of operation.

### Children Thrive When They Live Near Places to Play and Be Active

Children who regularly engage in physical activity through active play reap physical, mental, social, behavioral, and emotional benefits.<sup>iv</sup> Children and people of all ages who live within a half a mile of parks and outdoor recreation play spaces are more likely to



engage in physical activity than those who live farther away.<sup>v</sup> Municipal approaches to planning, creating and improving existing active outdoor spaces can have a profound impact on residents’ health and quality of life.

Southwest Region Planning Commission (SWRPC) identified more than 400 active recreation sites in the Monadnock Region. Proximity of residents to these spaces varies significantly throughout the region. Those in rural areas generally live further away from parks and play spaces than those in more densely developed areas. The CDC’s [Environmental Public Health Tracking Data Explorer](#) indicates that over 75% of Keene residents live within a half-mile of a park or playground as compared to less than 10% in many rural communities in the region.<sup>vi</sup>



According to M. Renee Umstattd Meyer, Ph.D., MCHES of the Baylor University Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences, getting enough physical activity can be especially challenging for children living in rural communities. She indicates that, “Rural families are more likely to live in or near poverty, which can mean parents are working multiple jobs. These areas also have fewer transportation options, and kids may have to spend precious daylight hours—prime time for outdoor play—on the bus traveling to and from school.”<sup>vii</sup>

## The Economic Case for Parks and Play Spaces

The CPSTF indicates that the economic benefits exceed the cost for park, trail, and greenway infrastructure interventions to increase physical activity and use. Economic benefits are derived from improved health due to physical activity or from the value of the infrastructure to users for recreation or relaxation. A systematic review of economic evidence from seven studies found a median benefit to cost ratio of 3 to 1, meaning every dollar spent led to \$3.10 worth of benefits. Economic benefits include improved health due to physical activity or the value of the infrastructure to users for recreation or relaxation.

## How can Communities take Action to Improve Access to Parks and Play Spaces?

Community decision-makers can use the CPSTF recommendations to address proximity and other factors to increase physical activity in their communities, improve health, and make progress toward achieving Healthy People 2030 objectives and targets.<sup>viii</sup> Professionals working in public health, transportation, urban design, natural resources, and other disciplines can partner with community organizations to fund, develop, and implement plans that make communities more activity-friendly and benefit people of all ages and abilities.



Use of parks and play spaces combined with additional interventions also provide opportunities for school and family engagement. Parks and recreation departments can partner with schools and community groups to offer before-and after school activities,

highlighted in CDC's [Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program](#) (CSPAP), as a way to increase physical activity among students.<sup>ix</sup> Improvements to trails and walking routes to and from school grounds can also support CPSTF-recommended active travel to school interventions to increase physical activity.

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**Community Example: Pathways to Play, A Roadmap to Active Recreation  
Somersworth, NH**



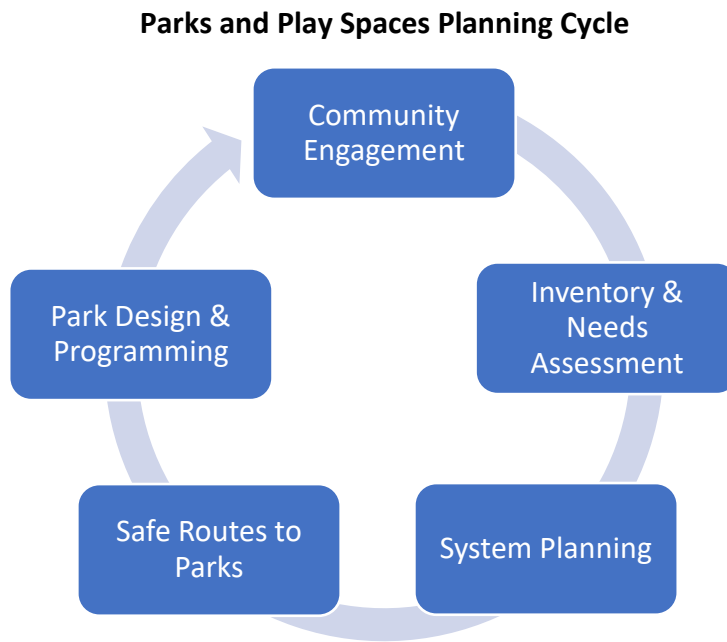
With funding from the NH Children’s Health Foundation, Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) conducted the [Pathways to Play](#) project in 2019 in the City of Somersworth to examine barriers that prevent children from accessing parks. Demographic factors, including a childhood poverty level above the state average, led SRPC to determine that Somersworth could have a population that would benefit from a closer examination of access and barriers to recreation, particularly in its downtown core. Specifically, SRPC examined

barriers such as road infrastructure, safety, signage, and public awareness that prevent residents from using recreation sites to lead more active lifestyles. SRPC met with the City’s Department of Development Services at the beginning of the project to identify potentially under-utilized recreation sites, and the neighborhoods in close proximity that could benefit from increased access. Three sites were identified that potentially serve a large section of the densely populated downtown area.

SRPC conducted a robust outreach campaign to identify how residents use the parks, factors that may play into lack of use, issues with getting to the parks, and needed improvements. To better understand accessibility barriers described by residents, a basic walkability assessment was conducted to determine whether people living in the downtown area can easily and safely walk, bike, drive, or take transit to the parks. Priority recommendations for improving access and usage include establishing signage and wayfinding, creating connections between sites, increasing community awareness of the parks, and improving site safety. Based on the findings and recommendations, SRPC created a detailed table of amenities, challenges, and opportunities, as well as potential resources, for each park, which serve as roadmaps for implementing the recommended improvements.

## Creating Accessible and Welcoming Parks and Play Spaces

Multiple elements are essential to creating parks and play spaces that reflect a community's vision for development and increase the likelihood they are fully utilized by the public. Community engagement and outreach can occur through a cycle as illustrated below.



### Community Engagement

An inclusive and meaningful community engagement process ensures that those who community parks and play spaces are intended to serve have a voice in creating them. This is true whether a community is considering active recreation elements in its master plan; a separate community parks and recreation plan; or as considerations in bicycle and pedestrian, trails, and open space plans. Capturing the public's voice in the planning process contributes to higher-performing public parks as well as health, environmental, social, and cultural benefits for those who use them.

Equitable and inclusive community engagement is an ongoing and proactive process of working collaboratively with the public to build relationships and capacity, identify needs, create solutions, and foster a sense of ownership of public parks through the planning, design, construction, maintenance, and activation of park spaces.

Target audiences include:


- All residents regardless of their race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, creed, marital status, familial status, sexual identity, or sexual orientation,
- All owners of property or business interests, and
- All organizations representing the above mentioned, not to exclude elected representatives and municipal officials.

The ultimate outcomes of equitable and inclusive community engagement are parks and play spaces that are accessible via bicycling, walking, and wheelchair; welcoming; aesthetically pleasing; in good condition; and meet the needs of constituents.

### Community Engagement Strategies

The purpose of community engagement is to provide opportunities for the public to express their needs, experiences, interests, and contribute their ideas when creating new or improving existing parks and play spaces. Effective community engagement

**Featured Resource**  
**NRPA Community Engagement Resource Guide**



This guide provides park and recreation professionals with a roadmap to implement equitable and inclusive community engagement strategies around the planning, design, construction, maintenance and activation of park projects and park plans.

strategies are designed to reduce barriers to participation, giving special consideration to disadvantaged and historically marginalized groups. These may include racial and ethnic minorities, low-income individuals, those with disabilities, diverse age groups, and those with lower-literacy or limited English proficiency. The same populations that may be disproportionately impacted by planning and decision-making processes are also less likely to participate in the public process due to socioeconomic and physical barriers.

A mixed methods approach to engagement is essential to reaching diverse populations and ensuring all voices are heard. The selected methods should be based on the demographic and geographic characteristics of the community to understand, in broad terms, the size and location of different population groups, as well as the content and purpose of the engagement. For

example, inviting community members to a fun public event in the park will necessitate a different approach than inviting them to a small, targeted focus group.

Depending upon the nature of the planning or project activity, a variety of communication and information gathering methods can be employed:

- Focus groups
- Conducting interviews
- Postings on social media
- Posting information and updates on municipal and partner websites
- Using technology like apps and text messaging
- Hosting fun events
- Attending other stakeholder/community events
- Knocking on doors/visiting houses
- Organizing and hosting site visits
- Design charrettes
- Sending personal invitations through the mail or hand delivery

To strengthen engagement efforts, consider establishing an advisory council as a way to increase organizational capacity to build relationships with community members, lead meetings and solicit feedback. The structure of the council can also help sustain and institutionalize engagement efforts far beyond a single project. It is important to consider the following when convening an advisory council:

- Selection method for advisory members (voting, appointment, open volunteer, etc.);
- Criteria for demographic, geographic and other types of representation on the council;
- Ways to incentivize participation;
- Scope of work; and
- Length of service.

Include diverse community leaders and partners on the council that embody the different perspectives and interests of the community. Ideally, some council members will live in the neighborhood where a park and play space is located. Work to build trusting relationships with them and rely on their expertise and networks to help recruit others who are passionate about creating local solutions. Let council members know their opinions are valued and encourage their advocacy for projects by providing them meaningful decision-making opportunities. Ultimately, the council can act as a sounding board for ideas put forward and give credibility to parks and play spaces planning and improvement efforts.



### **Leveraging Community Leaders**

*Community leaders that work closely with traditionally marginalized groups and other target populations are the gateway into a community. These leaders may work in local schools, human services organizations, senior centers, neighborhood businesses and/or lead worship services. They have a stake in the well-being of the community and have built connections and trust. Community members are likely to be less reluctant to engage when encouraged to do so by leaders with whom they already have a bond.*

In 2017, the New Hampshire Active Recreation Workgroup undertook a unique project to engage the voices of middle school youth to answer questions about active recreation opportunities in five New Hampshire towns and cities. Middle schoolers were engaged to go out into their communities in search of answers to the following questions:

- Where are great places for recreation in your community?
- What are the things you like in your community that make it easy to be active?
- What are some of the things in your community or neighborhood parks that make it difficult or challenging to play and be active?

The mission of the students was to help their communities gain an understanding of the opportunities and barriers to accessing active recreation. In the process of carrying out the mission, the middle schoolers became researchers, videographers, mappers, story

tellers, and champions for improving access to parks and play spaces in their communities.

The [Youth Perspectives of Recreation Access in 5 NH Communities](#) project produced answers to these questions and informed local elected officials and decision-makers about specific actions that can be taken to improve access and use of community parks and play spaces.<sup>x</sup>

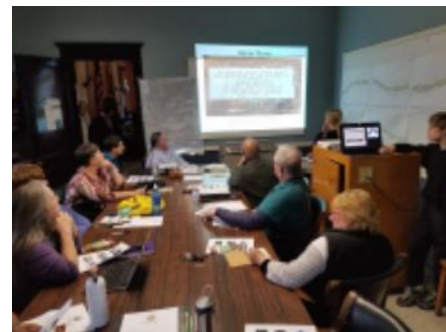


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## Community Example: Youth Perspectives in Recreation Access Berlin, NH

One of the major challenges faced by local governments and organizations aiming to increase outdoor recreation via use of public spaces is identifying the barriers that prevent community members from engaging with those places. Without thorough consideration of the residents of the area and engagement with the targeted populations, there is no way to know if efforts to bolster activity will fall short or miss their mark entirely.

Recognition of this issue led the City of Berlin, as well as several other New Hampshire communities, to take a compelling and direct approach with youth engagement when looking to pinpoint physical and social hurdles preventing them from using public parks. The Family Resource Center's Project Youth Afterschool Program at Berlin Middle School worked with students between 2017 and 2018 to answer questions about recreation access in their community. The young community members expressed their thoughts and conveyed answers through two techniques: Photovoice, a method for sharing perspectives through photography, and UMap, a technique using mapping imagery to identify points of interest. As part of a primary population group using public parks, the middle schoolers provided valuable insight into how they perceive safety and what amenities they want in these spaces. Recommendations spanned from crosswalk improvements for safer access to installing drinking fountains for park users. This method of gathering input from youth in the community gives municipalities a vital understanding of what elements of park and play spaces are most important to children and will motivate them to take part in outdoor recreation.



Berlin Planning Board Presentation

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## Inventory and Needs Assessment

Planning for parks and play spaces begins with conducting an inventory and needs assessment to understand community needs, priorities and opportunities for improvement, as well as residents' level of satisfaction with the current state of community facilities and their willingness to fund needed improvements. The results of the assessment can help communities integrate parks and play spaces priority areas for the master plan implementation section. These priorities can then be used to help formulate the Capital Improvement Program, so that priority projects can be funded.

Each community should determine the level of detail to be addressed in the inventory and needs assessment based on available resources and the purpose for which it is being conducted. For example, a community may conduct a more expansive assessment as part of a master plan update than it would for evaluating the conditions of parks and playgrounds in a specific neighborhood. A community may elect to assess the entire parks, trails and open

space system when conducting a master plan update. When considering improvements to parks and play spaces in a specific neighborhood, the community may choose to conduct site assessments to evaluate such amenities as park usage, the condition of equipment, and level of bicycle and pedestrian accessibility for homes located within a specific distance (e.g., one-quarter mile) of parks.

Components to Consider in An Inventory and Needs Assessment			
Type of Assessment	Purpose	Methods	Outputs
Existing Conditions and Trends	To assess population factors, socio-economic conditions, and other factors that may govern demand for parks and recreation facilities and programs.	Demographic analysis, socio-economic analysis, population projections, user participation surveys, demand surveys, community listening sessions.	Definition of the planning area, description of the planning process, level of service for park and recreational facilities, and strategies for engaging and involving the public.
Site Inventory(s)	To obtain information on current environmental conditions, site visibility and safety, condition of amenities.	GIS mapping, reviewing previous studies and historical information on the parks system, site reconnaissance and visits, park audit tools, community mapping workshop.	Information about soil conditions, vegetation, wetlands, topography, floodplains, cultural and historic sites, ecologically sensitive areas, environmental issues, native flora and fauna, and endangered species, site features and amenities.
Permitted Land Uses	To determine how the land and adjacent property is currently zoned and whether the intended use is permitted within the jurisdiction’s zoning code.	Review master plan land use chapter and existing land use map for location of the different land uses.	Determination of any deed restrictions or easements that impose restrictions on the use of the land.
Inventory and Analysis of Facilities and Programs	To describe facilities and programs in the recreation system, including programs and activities at each site, maintenance issues, preventive maintenance needs, and risk management issues.	Information may be gathered during field visits to parks and recreation sites, focus group sessions, and interviews with municipal staff members, parks and recreation board members, other recreation providers, and stakeholders.	A map indicating such items as location and distribution of existing parks and recreation sites, areas of undeveloped land with future recreation potential, and narrative description of existing sites and programs.
Map Data	To determine both the existing and possible future locations of parks, open space, natural areas, and active recreation sites.	GIS mapping.	Base maps of all potential places for active recreation.
Accessibility	To ensure that parks and recreation facilities and programs provide equivalent opportunities and experiences for persons with disabilities.	Conduct an ADA self-evaluation and prepare a plan to remove barriers to program participation and use of facilities.	Identification of any architectural, transportation, communication, or service barriers that may limit the use of parks and recreation facilities or programs by people of various abilities.



## System Planning: Integrating Active Recreation and Health Considerations into Community Master Plans

The local master plan is a vital instrument for advancing active recreation and public health priorities in a community. In New Hampshire, the master plan provides a vision and framework to guide development regulations, capital improvements and the annual municipal budget. The vision and principles set forth in the master plan chart a course for future priorities. It serves as an essential planning tool to ensure that development decisions are consistent with the community's expectations and vision to maintain the unique character of the community and ensure a high-quality of life for all.

New Hampshire communities typically include details for development of active recreation spaces in the Community Facilities, Natural Resources, and Recreation chapters of their master plans. It is important that master plan recommendations for parks and play spaces improvements directly align with the unique overall vision for the community to increase the likelihood they will be implemented. Some Monadnock Region municipalities reference recreation access in the master plans. As an example, the Town of Swanzey master plan includes opportunities for recreation within its overall vision as a great place for people to live, work and play.

### ***Swanzey Master Plan Vision***

*Swanzey is a vibrant community that celebrates its rich history and natural resources, provides residents and businesses with efficient public services, diverse housing options, recreational opportunities, and safe transportation facilities, and which responsibly plans for future growth and change.*

In addition to articulating a community's vision for development, the master plan provides a policy, regulatory and legal framework for municipal officials to make decisions about the needs of the community. In New Hampshire, it is a legal requirement for establishing a zoning ordinance and capital improvement program.

Though each community needs to tailor parks and active recreation elements of the master plan to the community's specific needs, the ChangeLab Solutions toolkit, [How to Create and Implement Healthy General Plans](#), recommends the following general guidelines for communities to consider.<sup>xi</sup>

- **Create parks in neighborhoods.** Parks located in close proximity to where people live provide accessible space for physical activity and green space for residents. Ideally each

home should be located within a quarter-mile walking distance of a park and should not require crossing a major thoroughfare.

- **Create communitywide parks that spotlight unique facilities, natural features or landscapes, and open space.** While neighborhood parks provide daily access for residents, parks of six to sixty acres can offer a wide variety of recreation facilities and amenities. These parks are designed for residents who live within a three-mile radius.
- **Promote joint use of public facilities for physical activity.** Public agencies can work together to open facilities to the public, for instance, overcoming obstacles to using schools as recreation facilities outside of school hours.
- **Enhance the use of existing parks and recreational facilities.** Fund a wide variety of programs during all hours of the day to serve all populations (including children, low-income families, the elderly, and people with physical disabilities or limited transportation), and improve the quality and character of existing parks through lighting, signage, benches, tables, drinking fountains, and restrooms.
- **Establish a comprehensive network of multi-use trails and streets** that encourages walking, biking, and physical activity, and links residential areas, workplaces, commercial centers, and community facilities.
- **Consider the availability of public transportation and pedestrian/cycling routes** to access existing or proposed facilities.
- **Determine funding mechanisms** to pay for new or improved facilities (See the Financing and Funding Options section for more specific recommendations for funding parks and play spaces).

#### Featured Resource

#### **Planning for Play: A Parks and Playgrounds Guidebook for New Hampshire**



Developed in 2017 by the Nashua Regional Planning Commission, the Guidebook helps municipalities understand the process of park and playground development, from the planning phase to implementation.

### **Policy and Regulatory Approaches**

Centering health equity at the systems-level, rather than focusing on implementing isolated activities, can help foster long-term, community-wide benefits, especially for communities that disproportionately experience health inequities. Working at the systems-level includes

changing policies, procedures, environments, and other structural elements, plus changing relationships, norms, attitudes, and beliefs.

A comprehensive planning approach integrates parks and play spaces into broader municipal, regional, or state land use plans. It involves identifying suitable locations, determining land requirements, and setting goals for connectivity and accessibility. Municipal regulatory and policy guidelines for parks, trails, and greenways can vary depending on the specific municipality and its priorities. However, there are common considerations and guidelines that municipalities can follow when it comes to planning and managing parks, trails, and greenways.



### Safe Routes to Parks

The New Hampshire Parks and Recreation Association recommends the [Safe Routes to Parks: Improving Access to Parks through Walkability](#) report as a reference to help professionals better understand the barriers and essential elements involved in creating safe routes to parks and play spaces to improve accessibility for all users.<sup>xii</sup> A publication of the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) indicates that, "...the key to ensuring accessibility to parks is through creating safe routes to parks within communities. When citizens have the resources to safely walk to parks, every trip taken by foot is an opportunity to engage in physical activity." In many communities, rural communities in particular, citizens are faced with physical and social barriers that make walking or bicycling to parks undesirable. These include:

- Distance to parks;
- Lack of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure;
- Lack of public transit access; and
- Traffic safety concerns.

Through zoning, land use and design strategies, municipalities can break down these barriers. In fact, numerous Monadnock Region municipalities have done just that through the adoption of Complete Streets policies.

With assistance from SWRPC, twelve towns in the Monadnock Region have adopted Complete Streets policies, more than in any other New Hampshire region. Many of these towns have identified and are implementing specific designs for their entire road network. In addition to Complete Streets, zoning, land use and design approaches, municipalities can use Safe Routes to School initiatives to support safe routes to parks.

### Swansey Complete Streets Transformation

*Following the adoption of a Complete Streets policy in 2015, the Town of Swansey secured multiple grants to implement a phased approach to improving pedestrian and bicyclist safety for citizens residing in the densely settled residential neighborhoods around Swansey Center. These changes have made it safer for families and children to walk and bicycle to the Mt. Caesar hiking trails, as well as the Mt. Caesar Elementary School playground and Monadnock Regional Middle-High School sports fields. The Town's long-term goal is to create pedestrian access for those living, working, and attending school in Center Swansey to the Ashuelot Rail Trail.*

Safe routes to parks and play spaces should be planned and designed to eliminate disparities in access. Households in low-income neighborhoods often lack access to parks and are more likely to rely on non-automotive means of transportation such as walking, biking, or public transit. Other populations that face similar barriers to access include older adults, individuals with disabilities, persons of color, and rural inhabitants. Providing a diversity of transportation options will make parks and play spaces more accessible for all.

The NRPA [Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework](#) identifies five essential interrelated elements of safe routes to parks that are described below. The results of the inventory and needs assessment will help to inform the approach to addressing each element.

- **Comfort:** Introducing tree-lined streets, creating a visually appealing and clean environment, ensuring low traffic, and developing off-road trail access will help to make walking to parks inviting to residents.
- **Convenience:** Siting new parks within a half-mile of where residents reside and pedestrian routes within close proximity to homes will heavily influence travel patterns to the parks.



- **Safety:** Perceived safety is a determinant of whether residents will use routes to parks. Separating sidewalks from roads with physical barriers as well as creating physical separation from curbs and parking areas reinforces a safer environment for pedestrians. Well-maintained infrastructure, adequate lighting and winter maintenance (e.g., snow removal and ice management) will further enhance resident’s perceived and actual safety from accidents, crime and violence.
- **Access and Design:** ADA compliance of all walkways and intersections, wayfinding systems and multiple access points to parks are factors critical to assisting with easy pedestrian navigation to parks. Wayfinding systems include signage, use of landmarks, distance to destination markers, and interest points. Parks that are accessible from multiple entrances, free of fencing and barriers, will improve linear distances from homes.
- **The Park:** While easily accessible parks are essential to promoting usage, they may be underutilized without amenities and programs that are tailored to the needs and interests of the surrounding population. For example, if a local park does not offer programs for older adults in a community that has a significant older adult population, they will be less likely to use the park.

**Featured Resource:**

**NRPA Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework**



This framework provides local governments (park and recreation, planning, transportation, and public health) with critical evidence- and practice-based guidance on Safe Routes to Parks best practices that are backed by research and supported by national organizations.

## Park Design and Programming

Great community parks and play spaces are designed to serve all populations, including children, low-income families, the elderly, and individuals with limited physical mobility and/or other disabilities. They attract users both through offering desirable amenities and a variety of programs throughout the week. Programs and amenities that are responsive to community needs and changing demographics will promote strong utilization. As discussed previously in this guide, ongoing community engagement is critical to determine community preferences for programming and amenities as well as needs that remain unmet. Input from users and nonusers alike through community surveys or other means will ensure local policy and programming prioritizes amenities and activities that the residents want to use and participate

in. The goal is to attract a diverse group of people even during times when park usage tends to be low.

In 2018, the City Parks Alliance released the Active Parks, Healthy Cities report.<sup>xiii</sup> The report includes the results and recommendations from a study that was conducted to identify to what degree neighborhood parks in America's cities encourage people to be physically active. Data collectors observed park design and behaviors over a two-year period. Findings and recommendations are addressed in the areas of design, programming, marketing, outreach, and measuring park use. Key findings include the following:

- **Design:** Park and play space design influences how much a park is used and how physically active park users will be. Parks with walking loops were found to have 80% more users, and 90% higher levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. The study found that for every element added to a playground, use and physical activity level increases by 50%. Taking children to the park is the most common reason cited for going to a park. 25% of all children's park use occurs in play areas. Play areas with adjacent Fitness Zones (collections of strength-building equipment along walkways) provide opportunities for both children and their caregivers to be physically active.
- **Programming:** Programming increases park use and physical activity more than any other factor. Providing supervised activities encourages people to make use of the space, with each additional supervised activity leading to a 48% increase in park use and a 37% increase in physical activity. Children particularly benefit from programming that includes activities that build physical coordination and social interaction.
- **Marketing and Outreach:** On-site marketing, including banners, posters, and signs, are effective at increasing park use and physical activity. Many communities are effectively using social media and online tools to connect people with parks. The study found a 62% increase in users and a 63% increase in physical activity when park and recreation departments deployed these kinds of publicity.



- **Measuring Park Use:** The study found that most neighborhood parks are underused. Neighborhood parks that are well-used can generate a groundswell of vocal supporters. Communities that measure park use are equipped to target investments and activities to serve all residents and to make the case to public officials and the public about their value.

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### Community Example: The Restoration of a Community Treasure Franklin, NH



Odell Park sits on 12 acres in the heart of the city of Franklin and is surrounded on three sides by the Winnepesaukee River. In its heyday over a century ago, the park was a gathering place for Franklin residents. After years of disrepair, community residents, led by the Odell Park Centennial Committee, came together to restore the park to its former glory and give residents a vibrant community resource with opportunities for safe physical activity. Renovations included

purchasing security cameras, entry signage, “You Are Here” maps, no alcohol/drugs signage, and connector signs to make the park safer. Four exercise equipment stations were also purchased and installed for public use.

The Franklin Parks and Recreation Department reported that walking trail usage tripled soon after the renovations were completed. In addition, people can be seen using the exercise equipment, artists, and even children celebrating birthdays in the park that was once run down, unsafe, and plagued by vandalism.

In addition to the transformation of Odell Park, engaged community partners facilitated other parks and play spaces improvements, including renovations at two other parks and extensions of two rail trails that serve the region.

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## Design

In 2016, the Healthy Eating Active Living NH Active Recreation Workgroup released an analysis of recreation access in New Hampshire communities.<sup>xiv</sup> The analysis targeted New Hampshire’s 10 highest need census tracts spanning 14 municipalities based on demographic (e.g., poverty, age, ethnicity, language), health status (e.g., heart disease and diabetes rates), and geographic (e.g., rural or urban isolation) characteristics. The analysis included an inventory of publicly accessible park and recreation spaces located in these communities.

The results of the analysis indicate that the most popular natural and built amenities in these high need communities support active recreation opportunities that promote physical activity. A total of 321 properties were assessed for the presence of amenities. Amenities were classified as either natural or built. The most frequently occurring natural amenities include walking trails (33%) and bike paths (25%). The next most popular are public fishing access (11%), ice skating (6%), and boating (6%). The most frequently occurring built amenities include playgrounds (38%), ball fields (including baseball/softball, soccer, and football) (32%), picnic areas (20%), basketball courts (23%), and tennis/racquet sports courts.

It is recommended that municipalities refer to the [Planning for Play: A Parks and Playgrounds Guidebook for New Hampshire](#) for guidance on planning and designing parks and playgrounds that promote active play for children and their families. Along with providing specific guidance for siting a new park or playground, there are detailed specifications for layout, selecting and sourcing materials, listing of age-specific playground features and equipment, and best practices for safety and maintenance. The guidance is illustrated through case studies of projects in New Hampshire cities and towns.



Additional helpful resources for planning and designing parks and play spaces are available in Appendix A.

### **Programming**

As stated previously, evidence shows that infrastructure improvements alone are not sufficient to promote physical activity and infrastructure use unless they are combined with one or more community awareness activities and structured programs. Staff responsible for programming should think creatively about how to meet community needs. For example, a community concerned about rising obesity rates can offer exercise classes for different age groups at their local parks.

Programs that offer a wide variety of structured opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and other health benefits will encourage all community members to use parks and play spaces. Equitable and inclusive programs consider accessibility and engagement across ages, abilities, household incomes, cultures, race/ethnicities, languages, and skill levels.



Examples of programs that will appeal to a broad array of interests include walking groups, exercise classes, organized sports, adaptive activities, and out-of-school time programs. In addition, park usage can be increased through scheduling events designed to engage people in health and wellness opportunities such as 5K walks/runs, health fairs, and celebratory events.

Engaging the community in program design is essential to ensuring the community is represented in program planning and scheduling. The community engagement strategies included in this guide can be leveraged to engage a diverse group of voices and ensure that all community members feel welcome in and benefit from programming. Priority should be given to programs that help meet the needs and interests of populations that disproportionately face additional barriers to access programming including lower income households, people of color, English learners, people who are LGBTQ+, older adults, and people with disabilities.

Objectives to consider when developing and providing programs to the community include:

- Improving physical activity and other health outcomes;
- Achieving high levels of community member satisfaction;
- Ensuring equity within access, fee structures and program schedules;
- Improving the safety of parks and play spaces; and
- Assessing staffing needs, costs, equipment, and other programming resources for long-term sustainability.

### **Public Awareness Activities**

Public awareness activities are an important factor in promoting the use of parks and play spaces and ensuring that community members are fully aware of the available amenities and programming and where to find them. Emphasis on such activities will also alert the public to accessibility improvements.

Collecting information from the community is vital to building awareness and understanding residents' perceptions about the quality of community parks and play spaces. This includes gathering information about residents' experiences of current conditions such as:

- The value and usage of an amenity;
- Community members' knowledge of program offerings;
- Barriers and constraints to utilization;
- Ways in which residents currently learn about offerings; and
- Perceptions of safety.

Once again, community engagement, especially with marginalized groups, will assist with breaking down barriers to access, understanding how community members would like to learn about programming in the future, and/or how community members prefer to communicate with the parks and recreation department or committee about available offerings.

#### **Public Awareness Activities**

Public awareness activities may include marketing offerings via promotional campaigns (e.g., social media, television, radio, print) posting banners and flyers, hosting public events, and ensuring that public awareness materials are inclusive and accessible to all. Print and electronic media should consider language, reading level, terminology, and people who may be visually/hearing-impaired.

#### **Access Enhancements**

Transportation connections, street crossings, entry points from nearby neighborhoods, ADA enhancements, culturally relevant signage, and expanded hours of operation, are examples of improvements that increase access to and use of parks and play spaces. Lower income individuals and marginalized populations have historically experienced barriers to accessing safe and connected parks as a result of unfair and discriminatory policies and funding, including disinvestment. Targeting accessibility improvements in socially vulnerable neighborhoods and communities will help these community members feel welcomed, included, and encouraged to use the spaces for physical activity.

Decisions about where access enhancements are most needed and what types of access enhancements will be the most beneficial should be informed by community input. In addition to soliciting community input, conducting walkability or accessibility audits will help to uncover where gaps in access exist.

The NRPA recommends the following short-, medium- and long- term activities to make access enhancements:<sup>xv</sup>

##### **Short-Term (6 months to 1-year)**

- Assess park features including signage, language, imagery, and historical inaccuracies that may exclude or create non-welcoming spaces for community members.
- Engage with public transit officials to prioritize and bring new and improved public transit to parks, trails, and greenways.

### Medium-Term (1 to 3-years)

- Engage community members of all ages, including youth and older adults, in safety programs related to new or improved park, trail, or greenway infrastructure and/or programming.
- Promote public transit to the park, trail, or greenway.
- Schedule fields for sports and other permitted programs equitably to ensure that affordable and accessible recreational opportunities are available for all.
- Expand hours of operation, add signage and wayfinding, improve crosswalks.
- Install bike storage and/or e-charging equipment that allow users to store and charge e-bikes safely.

### Long-Term (3+ years)

- Add public transit access to parks, trails, and greenways.
- Improve sidewalks and walking access to parks, trails, and greenways.
- Improve bicycle paths to enhance bicycle access to parks, trails, and greenways.

## Community Example: Improving Park Access Laconia, NH

For years Wyatt Park in the South End neighborhood of Laconia was a neglected community asset. In a state of disrepair with few users from the surrounding community, it had become a local hub for delinquent activity. The Parks and Recreation Department of the City of Laconia identified Wyatt Park as an area in need of revitalization and in 2012 began the process of planning renovations in collaboration with local community groups and leaders. Public outreach to the residents and business owners of the neighborhood generated numerous recommendations and strong support, but many responses focused on concerns about safety and access. It quickly became apparent that more would be needed to bring the park to its potential than just the renovation of its amenities alone. Partnering with the Department of Public Works, new safety and accessibility improvements were implemented on the abutting city streets to give users safe ways to enter and exit their newly renovated park. The success of the Wyatt Park Revitalization Project highlights the need for improvements to parks and play spaces to include accessibility as a core component of their design.



## Benchmarks and Metrics

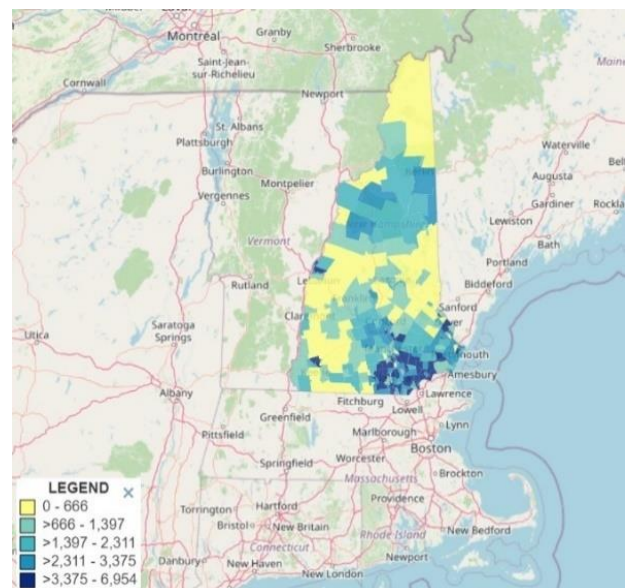
Communities can use benchmark data to evaluate, plan, and promote parks and play spaces at system and neighborhood levels. Benchmarks and metrics can be used to identify gaps within

the system in such areas as parks and play spaces distribution, proximity to neighborhoods, acres and miles of trails, quality and condition of amenities, types of programming, safety, operating expenditures, and more. Community planners, park and recreation professionals and public health professionals can also identify and quantify public health impacts of parks and play spaces, comparing the results across time and geographic levels.

A number of resources are available that provide guidance on standard metrics. NRPA's [Resources & Data Collection](#) site and [Improving Public Health through Public Parks and Trails](#) are two helpful resources for assessing system wide performance and public health impacts. In addition to providing distribution metrics based on population demographics and outcome indicators, the NRPA resource highlights the use of geographic information systems (GIS) to understand quantity, proximity, connections, and amenities of parks and play spaces currently available and where gaps and inequities in distribution may exist. For qualitative data, community input, audits and resource analysis can be used to understand park quality, cultural relevancy, safety, and inclusion.

The Improving Public Health through Public Parks and Trails resource was developed based upon research conducted by North Carolina State University's Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management Department in collaboration with the National Park Service and the CDC. It provides eight common measures that connect park and trail planning to public health goals including:

- Walking access;
- Park proximity;
- Land area,
- Physical activity, visitation;
- Frequency of visits; and
- Duration of time spent at specific facilities.



Proximity to parks and play spaces with routes for walking, hiking, or cycling has already been discussed as a critical determinant in park access. For illustrative purposes, in Southwest NH, 4,108 people in Keene live within one-half mile of a park or public playground as compared to 78 in Antrim. Data are currently available for states, counties and census tracts through the CDC [Environmental Public Health Tracking Data Explorer](#).

## Financing and Funding Options

Sufficient resources are needed to build and sustain a high-quality parks and play spaces system. Revenue and funding can come from a variety of sources including leveraging public funding and earned income, federal grants, private foundations, partnerships with local organizations, local fundraising, revenue from park facilities and programs, and in-kind contributions. Successful fund development approaches involve combining multiple funding strategies and options. Various options and recommended resources for fund development are discussed below.

### Finance Options

Stable local public funding of parks and play spaces is essential since many federal and state funding sources are competitive, require match dollars, and often do not cover maintenance or programming. Local funding helps to ensure a quality parks system that promotes strong usage, is well maintained, and addresses local disparities. Aside from capital investments to



develop new and renovate existing spaces, critical maintenance, operations, and programming are the most challenging areas to fund because they are often ineligible for funding from federal, state, and philanthropic sources.

The Trust for Public Land notes that how public officials view parks and recreation is an important factor in the level of funding parks and recreation departments receive.<sup>xvi</sup> Most park and

recreation departments rely heavily on tax dollars to deliver their services to the public. The Trust for Public Land indicates that, “While a resounding 83% of local government officials agree that park and recreation services are worth the amount of tax dollars expended on them each year, only a third of officials claim their local governments place a high priority on funding these services.”

The City Parks Alliance [Equitable Park Funding Hub](#) provides a good starting point for communities to find information on a variety of funding sources. It includes links to the various agencies in six sectors that oversee the funding programs. The [Local Funding](#) sector provides explanations of different categories of local funding including general fund, property taxes, general obligation bonds, sales and use taxes, and more.

The [Planning for Play: A Parks and Playgrounds Guidebook for New Hampshire](#) provides financing recommendations and resources that are specifically relevant to New Hampshire municipalities with examples of how towns have deployed various public financing options. In addition to the local funding options included in the City Parks Alliance resource, the Guidebook covers such mechanisms as:

- Capital Improvements Program;
- Forming a Business Improvement District;
- Interagency Transfers;
- Acquiring tax-defaulted properties; and
- Generating revenue from parks.

### Fund Development

Another fund development resource is the NRPA Park and Recreation Professionals' Guide to Fundraising. Included in the resource are pointers specifically for the park and recreation sector and referrals to manuals and webinars for more information. The fundraising strategies described are the same building blocks used by fundraisers for both large and small campaigns. Specific topics include:

- Establishing a fundraising team;
- Developing your case for support;
- Identifying and cultivating new donors; and
- Pursuing innovative development strategies.

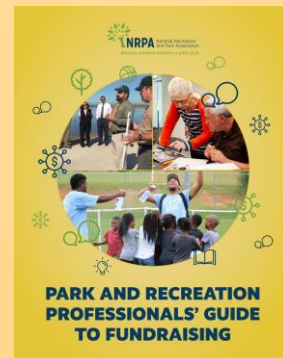
The [Planning for Play: A Parks and Playgrounds Guidebook for New Hampshire](#) also provides recommendations for private fundraising and a listing and descriptions of grant opportunities. Additional resources can be found on the [Grant and Fundraising Resources](#) page of the NRPA website.

### Great American Outdoors Act

On August 4, 2020, the [Great American Outdoors Act](#) was signed into law. The bill provides \$900 million in permanent and dedicated annual funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and invests up to \$9.5 billion to address priority repairs in our national parks and other public lands.

#### **Featured Resource:**

#### **NRPA Park and Recreation Professionals' Guide to Fundraising**



This guide outlines strategies to diversify funding sources and delves into the preparation needed to start a successful fundraising program. It focuses on resource development for programs, spotlighting how park and recreation agencies can work with business entities, conduct special events, and apply for grants to create a holistic, ongoing fundraising enterprise.

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## Community Example: Small Initial Investments Leverages Funding Windfall Nashua, NH

In 2010 the City of Nashua, New Hampshire set out to combat obesity through a series of public/private partnerships and neighborhood revitalization projects that aimed to improve open spaces and promote physical activity in underserved neighborhoods. The Heritage Rail Trail in the Tree Streets neighborhood, which was largely considered unsafe and neglected by community members, was targeted as an area in need of upgrades with high potential. Nashua's Division of Public Health and Community Services collaborated with residents and local organizations to gather support and find funding resources for revitalizing the trail and surrounding green space. The project consisted of improving the Heritage Rail Trail to promote its use and constructing an adjacent community garden to provide people with fresh produce and an outdoor social gathering place. Initial funding was secured through partnering with multi-sector organizations that provide grant money to promote healthier people and places at local levels.



With proper funding, a shared vision and the support of the community behind it, the project was a major success. Outdoor recreation in the area was significantly boosted and the garden became a hub for community programs. Safety concerns were largely reduced as more people frequented the area. As recognition of the project's success spread it fostered further public interest in additional activities. This motivated more groups to get involved and contribute, which led to an additional \$121,000 of funding for fighting obesity and improving public health in Nashua. The Heritage Rail Trail and Community Garden Project highlights how impactful seemingly small projects can be toward generating public interest and leveraging more funding into your community.

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## Monadnock Outdoors: Promoting Parks and Play Spaces and Getting Outdoors

[Monadnock Outdoors](#) is a regional partnership with a shared mission to foster connections to nature and holistic community well-being through education and the promotion of active living by means of physical activity, active transportation, and recreation in the outdoors.

Monadnock Outdoors was launched in 2021 and currently has 12 active members from community organizations. These members represent 10 organizations, and include: The Harris Center for Conservation Education, Horatio Colony Preserve, Cheshire County Conservation District, Cheshire Medical Center, Keene Housing Kids Collaborative, The Monadnock Conservancy, Monadnock Region Rail Trail Collaborative, Southwest Region Planning Commission, Cheshire County, and the Keene Public Library.



Monadnock Outdoors advances active living in the Monadnock Region and is made possible by Cheshire Medical Center's [Healthy Monadnock Alliance](#). The Healthy Monadnock Alliance is a regional partnership of community leaders representing municipalities, schools, businesses, nonprofits, coalitions, faith-based, and civic groups, who have joined together around a common purpose—to create a compassionate community, where health equity and emerging community needs are at the forefront of the work.

### Outdoor Recreation Resource Map

#### Outdoor Resource Map

This resource is a website for community members to locate access points to recreation sites in the Monadnock Region.



In 2022, Monadnock Outdoors collaborated with Antioch University's Spatial Analysis Lab (ASAL) to create the [Outdoor Recreation Resource Map](#). In 2023, the Map was updated with help from the New Hampshire Children's Health Foundation and Southwest Region Planning Commission to more comprehensively show parks and play spaces. The map is an interactive StoryMap that highlights recreation opportunities and resources available for community members to connect with nature. It is a resource for community members to locate public recreation sites in the Monadnock Region and near where they live.



## Appendix A: Other Helpful Resources

### Community Engagement

[Inclusive Healthy Places Companion Guide for Park and Recreation Professionals](#) – Provides a framework for implementing a comprehensive approach to leverage inclusion and health equity using drivers, indicators and metrics that inform the planning, design, development, and evaluation of public spaces.

### System Planning

[Complete Parks Playbook](#) – Provides an overview of all the elements necessary for a fully utilized parks system that is completely integrated into a community's built-environment.

[Parks, Trails, and Health Workbook: A Tool for Planners, Parks & Recreation Professionals, and Health Practitioners](#) – Offers an outline and quick guide on how to include public health factors in the development of a park or trail.

[Creating Equity-Based System Master Plans](#) – Helps park and recreation professionals, planners, and others create a systemwide park master plan that is grounded in equity.

[Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages](#) – Helps local leaders, policy makers, community advocates, and neighborhood residents collect data, evaluate opportunities, and generate ideas about how to increase the quality and quantity of parks and outdoor spaces.

### Safe Routes to Parks

[Connecting People to Parks: A Toolkit to Increase Safe and Equitable Access to Local Parks and Green Spaces](#) – Provides step-by-step guidance through the Safe Routes to Parks framework to increase safe and equitable access to parks and green spaces.

### Park Design and Programming

[Designing the Great Park that Everyone Deserves](#) – Provides guidance to help park and recreation professionals, elected officials, and residents assess the quality of their parks in three primary categories: design principles, cultural influences and emerging trends.

[Innovative Playground Design Trends and Fundraising Resources](#) – Provides examples of recent trends in designing playgrounds, promoting usage, and funding playground improvement.

['Breaking the Bubbles' to Create Play-Centered Parks](#) – Discusses recent trends in play-centered parks, design techniques, and the benefits and added value to park users.

## Financing and Funding Options

[Making the Case: Parks and Health](#) – Includes data-rich fact sheets, presentations, infographics, and other resources to help make the case to elected officials that parks are a critical part of the community's public health infrastructure.

[Park and Recreation Professionals' Guide to Fundraising](#) – Offers strategies to diversify funding sources including establishing a fundraising team, developing the case for support, identifying and cultivating new donors, and pursuing innovative development approaches.

[Grant and Fundraising Resources](#) – Provides links to numerous funding opportunities as well as fundraising and marketing resources.

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