



I. Introduction – The Importance of Parks

El Paso is entering an exciting period of time in its history. It is coming into its own as a major city within the southwest, and is competing economically now on a global stage. Indeed the future is bright for El Paso.

Quality of life is increasingly becoming an important factor for the nearly 700,000 residents who call the El Paso area home. Quality of life encompasses many areas, including the ability to get good jobs, the ability to get around the city easily, the feeling that the city is a safe place to live in, and the availability of quality homes and neighborhoods in which to live. In all of these areas El Paso is making great strides.

One of the most important aspects of quality of life is the availability of high quality parks and recreation opportunities in the city. Parks and recreation influence every aspect of our

lives. They allow us to experience new activities and encourage us to lead healthy lifestyles. Attractive parks and natural areas are often the first place that visitors view in our communities. Parks provide a very visible reminder of the beauty of the land that we choose to live in. Parks are also one of the most visible elements of a city government at work, and can instill a strong sense of pride in the residents of a community. A good park system lets both citizens and visitors know that the leadership of the city is interested in the well being of its citizens.

The Park system especially should impact young El Pasoans, as the experiences of youth will have a direct impact on the intensity with which children become active citizens and contributors to the city in the future.

II. The Need for Planning for a Better Park System in El Paso

A good park system does not occur randomly, but rather requires a series of orderly steps. It responds to the interests of all the citizens it serves, and not just the needs of a select few. El Paso's most recent park planning efforts date back to 1996 and 2004, but not to the degree of self evaluation and long range planning that is truly needed to address the critical needs of the area. Recognizing this, the City Council of El Paso decided to commission a citywide Parks and Recreation Master Plan in early 2005. This report is the result of a year long review of the Parks and Recreation system in the city. This plan addresses both the needs of today and the great opportunities that lie ahead, and **proposes a path to create "a bright future" for the parks system in El Paso.**

"Nature and a tremendously energetic citizenship combine to afford El Paso opportunities for unique development, with possibilities unsurpassed by any other community in America.

"There is no reason why El Paso should not be, and cannot be, a city of striking distinction among cities, a city so attractive for permanent residence and for transient visits as to make a name for itself nationally famous."

George Kessler – The Kessler Plan for El Paso - 1925

III. A History of the Parks System in El Paso.

El Paso's rich history - El Paso is one the most culturally unique areas in the United States, and this is a direct result of the city's long and rich history. Since North America was first inhabited, the pass between the mountains of northern Mexico and the far southern mountainous reaches of the southwest was known to the Native American inhabitants of the area. Spanish explorers began entering the area more than 400 years ago, and in 1598 Don Juan de Onate is credited with naming the area "El Paso del Norte." In that same year, Onate took formal possession of the territory drained by the "Rio del Norte" (the Rio Grande) and established the beginning of over 200 years of Spanish rule over the Southwest.

Early colonization focused on the south side of the river, and settlements in the area flourished. The historic missions in Ysleta, Socorro and San Elizario were founded, and many of those historic structures can still be seen today. By 1682 five settlements had been formed along the river, - El Paso del Norte, San Lorenzo, Senecu, Ysleta and Socorro. El Paso was an important stop on the Camino Real serving the Santa Fe Trail and much of present day Mexico.

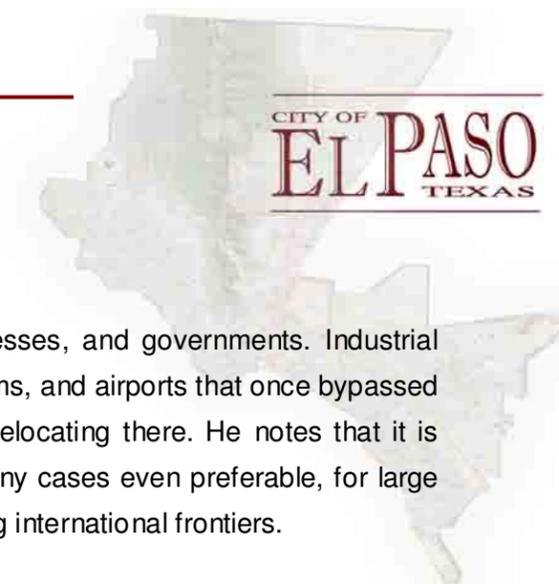
The early Spanish influence and the strong agricultural economy of the area is a direct contributor to the layout and style of the older areas of El Paso. This rich culture and tradition has been lost in the newer areas of the city. In

particular, the idea of the "plaza" as the center of social life should continue as a strong feature of new neighborhoods as they are built. The traditional neighborhood park should be developed, and it should become the "plaza" of the homes around it.

Much of the original downtown of El Paso was once part of the Ponce de Leon land grant. El Paso became part of the United States as part of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which set the Rio Grande River as the boundary between the two countries in the area. El Paso County was established in 1850.

Newer settlements in the area resulted from the California gold rush of 1849. These included Frontera, El Molino, Benjamin Franklin Coon's mercantile mill, Magoffinsville, built by James W. Magoffin, and Concordia, built by Hugh Stephenson. The border also moved Ysleta, Socorro and San Elizario to the U.S. side, further reinforcing unique bi-cultural and bi-national character of the area.

One of the most significant events in the city's history was the arrival of the railroads in the early 1880's. By 1890 the population of the city had grown to more than 10,000. Much of the early history of the city is characterized by its reputation as a rough and tumble place where gambling, prostitution, and drinking were predominant. This continued into the early years of the 20th century, and even today that reputation is part of the folklore of the city.



Historic San Jacinto Plaza, the first park in El Paso
Photo from the El Paso Historical Society

The relationship between northern Mexico and El Paso was further cemented with the migration of many Mexican residents to the Juarez - El Paso area during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1920.

The current city of El Paso was once known as Franklin, and later was named El Paso. For over six decades it was often confused with El Paso del Norte on the Mexican side of the border, until that city was renamed as Ciudad Juarez.

El Paso as a “transfrontier” city - El Paso remains one of the largest “transfrontier” urban regions along the US border. In 1983 it was the largest along the Mexico – US border, and even today is second only to the Tijuana/San Diego area. Lawrence A. Herzog, in a paper on “The Transfrontier Metropolis,” notes that transfrontier metropolitan regions typically consist of two or more settlement centers located around an international boundary. Over time these settlements become fused to form a single ecological and functional city/region. Because the building of cities over the last two centuries has been controlled and managed by nation-states, nations guarded their borders and developed the largest urban concentrations away from the physical edges of a nation. Before 1950, in fact, boundary regions were viewed as buffer zones that helped to protect the nation from invasion by land. Under these conditions, there were few significant cities near national boundaries.

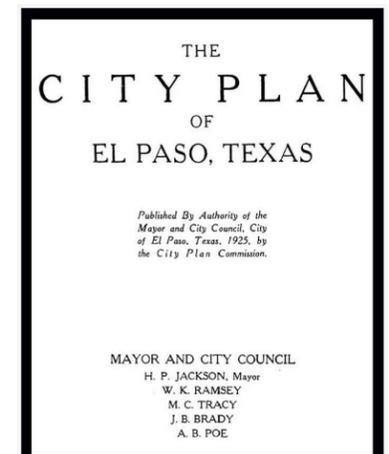
Herzog notes that today, global markets and free trade are the new economic drivers, and property at the edges of nations is

attracting investors, businesses, and governments. Industrial parks, highways, rail systems, and airports that once bypassed international frontiers are relocating there. He notes that it is now possible, and is in many cases even preferable, for large cities to be developed along international frontiers.

The Beginning of Parks in El Paso – The original park in El Paso was San Jacinto Plaza, which is included in the 1859 plat of El Paso by Anson Mills. Other downtown plazas followed, and Memorial Park was dedicated in June 1920 on the site of the old Federal Copper smelter as the original large park in the city. Scenic Drive formerly opened later that year.

Early recreation in El Paso included the El Paso Browns, a baseball team formed in 1881 and who played on Sportsman’s Field, which was laid out in the Campbell Addition in 1888. The El Paso Sporting and Athletic Club was organized in 1890, and a cycle track association was established by 1879. Other clubs for fencing, tennis, and golf were created in the late 19th century, and the city’s first natatorium opened in 1900.

The Kessler Plan of 1925 included Memorial Park and Washington Park as key components of the future growth of the city. In fact the plan noted as one of its goals the following statement **“More**





adequate recreation facilities for adults and children should be provided throughout the city. There is a need for more park spaces, large and small."

The Kessler Plan noted that El Paso had 22 developed parks totaling 97.5 acres in 1925, including Memorial, Washington, Madelyn, and Mundy. The city also had four partially developed parks totaling 313 acres (300 acres for a public golf course) and seven undeveloped parks totaling 175 acres, including the 100-acre site of Charles Davis Park, currently land that is owned by the University of Texas at El Paso. For

Park Related Excerpts from The Plan for El Paso by George Kessler - 1925

"The progressiveness of a city may be measured largely by its parks and recreational facilities, for these are the expression of the aspirations of the community beyond the purely material and obviously necessary things."

"But these have more than esthetic value and have been found to pay real, if indirect, dividends which may be translated into cash. The dividends come in attracting new citizens, in keeping the old citizens and reducing the labor turnover, and in the transient and tourist trade."

The Plan advocates parkways, saying that "They may entirely transform the outward aspect of a city, from comparative bleakness to happy evidences of comfort and civic care."

"El Paso city is bound to take care of all the large alien population just as if it 'belonged,' and school system, governmental agencies, utilities, and all the appurtenances of urban life must be scaled to accommodate all."

the plan estimate of 100,000 residents in 1925, the potential ratio of parks to population in 1925 was around 2.9 acres for

every 1,000 residents. However, over 66% of that acreage was not yet developed at that time.

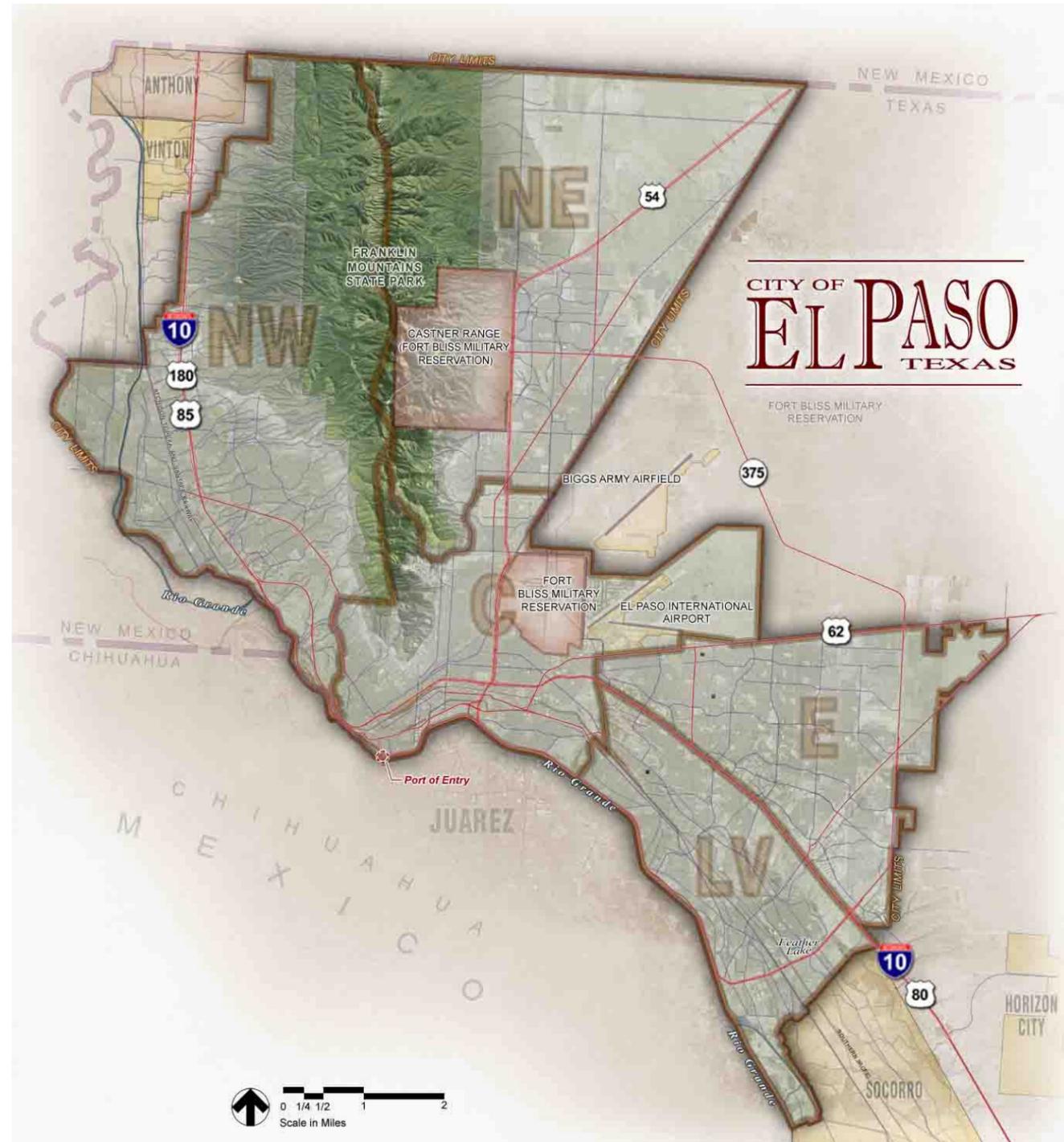
Other large parks in El Paso include the Chamizal Memorial Park, which was created in 1967 by the Chamizal Agreement that verified the boundary and the exact course of the Rio Grande through the city. The park celebrates the strong bicultural connection between the United States and Mexico.

The Franklin Mountain State Park was created in 1979. It is the largest urban park in the United States and features exceptional geologic history and the highest structural point in Texas. El Paso's Public Service Board had a significant role in creating the State Park through the conveyance of more than half of the acreage for the park at a very low cost.

A Golden Age for Parks in El Paso - The 1960's and 1970's might be considered as the golden age of parks in El Paso. During the 1970's in particular, the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Act, the Community Development Block Grant and other federal programs helped fund the development of five recreation centers, two indoor and two outdoor pools, and four of the city's nine senior centers. This explosion of construction more than doubled the major recreation facilities in El Paso, a feat that was not repeated until the recent flurry of development created by the 2000 and 2004 Quality of Life bonds.

But that golden age was short-lived. The rapid expansion of buildings, coupled with the retraction of federal funds and the





recessions of the early 1980's resulted in under-funding of the system through the 1980's and the early 1990's. Development during that time period was largely funded through the CDBG program, and did match the rapid population growth of the city. A change in fiscal policy, from a general fund supported system to one that required the department to raise funds to pay for the operations of its facilities, greatly hurt its ability to provide quality services. Over time, a mindset has been established that is geared largely towards revenue generating operations and not towards programming that is most beneficial to the citizens of El Paso.

IV. The Status of the System Today

A remarkable transition began with the passage of the 2000 Quality of Life Bond program that allocated more than \$50 million dollars towards park improvements. The vote in favor of the package was overwhelming, and resulted in the approval of an additional \$5 million in 2004. Together, this funding has resulted in improvements to over 50% of the parks in the system, along with the construction of major new sports complexes, pools and three indoor recreation centers. In 1995, the system contained approximately 1,097 acres of parklands, including 370 acres of neighborhood parks and 726 acres of community parks. Today, the acreage of the system has almost doubled to over 2,000 acres of developed parks.

However, the system is still significantly under funded, and the per-capita spending on parks is well below almost every other one of the 50 largest cities in the United States. Recreation centers still cannot open for extended periods of time, and they often cannot provide programs that meet the needs of the communities they serve. Sports facilities are heavily used, practice facilities are hard to find, and some areas of the city are enormously underserved.

V. Guiding Principles and Goals of the Parks System

The Excellent Park System, written by Peter Harnik and published by the Trust for Public Lands in 2003, lists seven major measures of an excellent parks system. Those measures are discussed on this page. They are used to develop the fundamental guiding principles of the future parks system of El Paso; those principles will be the foundation for future decisions as this plan is implemented.

1. The Parks System will be Accessible

- **The Parks system will provide adequate parks** - The City will work towards providing parks, trails, and open spaces in an adequate amount in all parts of the city.
- **Facilities will be well distributed to provide equitable access** - Parks will be located so that every citizen of El Paso has close access to a park. In the near future, no one in El Paso will live further than one-half mile from a park, and ideally most residents will be within one-quarter mile from a park, green space or trail access point.
- In newly developing parts of the city, adequate park lands will be allocated from the beginning of development, so that the target levels of service of this plan are met.
- **A balanced parks system will be provided** - A variety of park sizes and facility types are readily available. The Parks system will work towards

providing a mix of small and large parks, trails, open spaces, and indoor recreation facilities. The system will work towards meeting parks, trails and open space goals – in other parts of the city, appropriate steps will be initiated to come closer to the facility and service goals of this plan.

2. The System will be Well Funded, and will Actively Pursue Partnership Opportunities

- **The Parks System will be adequately funded** - The Parks system will be funded to a level that corresponds to its importance to the citizens of El Paso. It will be encouraged to flourish.
- **The Parks system will use all available land resources** - Every land resource in the city will be considered for its potential as a park or open space resource since there are too few available open space and suitable park sites. Schools and drainage land should be considered in the overall parks equation of the city.
- **School Parks must be a vital part of the parks system** - Parks adjacent to elementary or secondary school sites must be a vital resource for the citizens of El Paso in the future. The school districts and the City of El Paso must put aside any past differences and actively work together to serve the citizens of El Paso.

Seven Measures of an Excellent Parks System (from “The Excellent City Parks System” by Peter Harnik)

A Clear Expression of Purpose – a clear purpose for the system must be in place, expressed through a mission statement and goals that define precisely what the system is expected to provide. **El Paso’s Park system must clearly identify who its target market is, and must continue to push for a return to providing “core services.”**

Ongoing Planning and Community Involvement – the excellent parks system has a plan that it follows and updates periodically. It also involves its residents in the development of the plan and major decisions undertaken by the system. **El Paso, through this plan, is clearly committed to both short term and long term planning.**

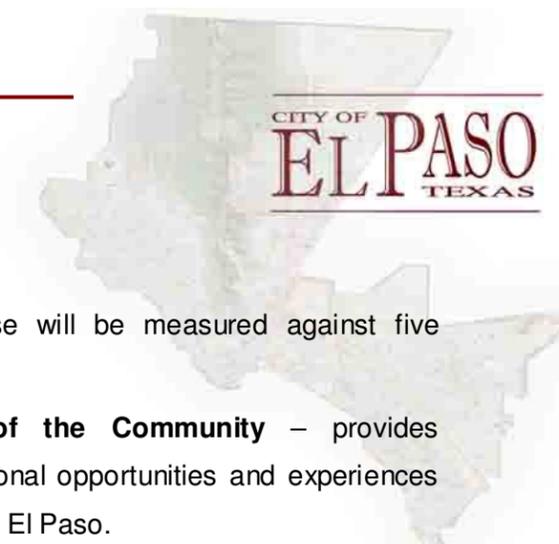
Sufficient Assets in Land, staffing, and equipment to meet the system’s goals – the Parks System must have adequate land, know how much parks it has and where, and have adequate operating funds and “a regular infusion of capital funds for major construction and repairs and land acquisition.” **El Paso lacks the physical assets of land and facilities as well as adequate fiscal backing. The system is surviving, but cannot thrive without additional resources.**

Equitable access – parks should be readily accessible, no matter where residents live. Ten minutes on foot in dense areas and 10 minutes apart by bicycle in suburban areas is recommended by the author. Access for persons with different disabilities or for residents that cannot afford the full cost should also be provided. **Access in many parts of the city is very good. However, in the older central part of the city, as well as the high growth fringe areas, new facilities are not keeping pace with the growth of the city.**

User satisfaction – citizens should fully use the park facilities and be satisfied with what they are provided with. Cities should record usership, and should periodically query their residents to determine the level of resident satisfaction. **The citizens of El Paso, though ongoing input, appreciate the system they have, but would like to see if continue to expand.**

Safety from physical hazards and crime – park users should feel safe when they use the facilities anywhere in the city. **El Paso is considered a very safe city, and in general citizens feel that their parks are for the most part safe.**

Benefits for the City beyond the boundaries of the parks system – the excellent parks system clearly provides environmental, economic, health and learning benefits for its residents. **El Pasoans have long recognized the great benefits of an excellent park system, and are now calling for the resources to allow the system to flourish.**



3. The System will Identify and Focus First on “Core” Services

- The Department will focus on providing basic services that serve a significant portion of the

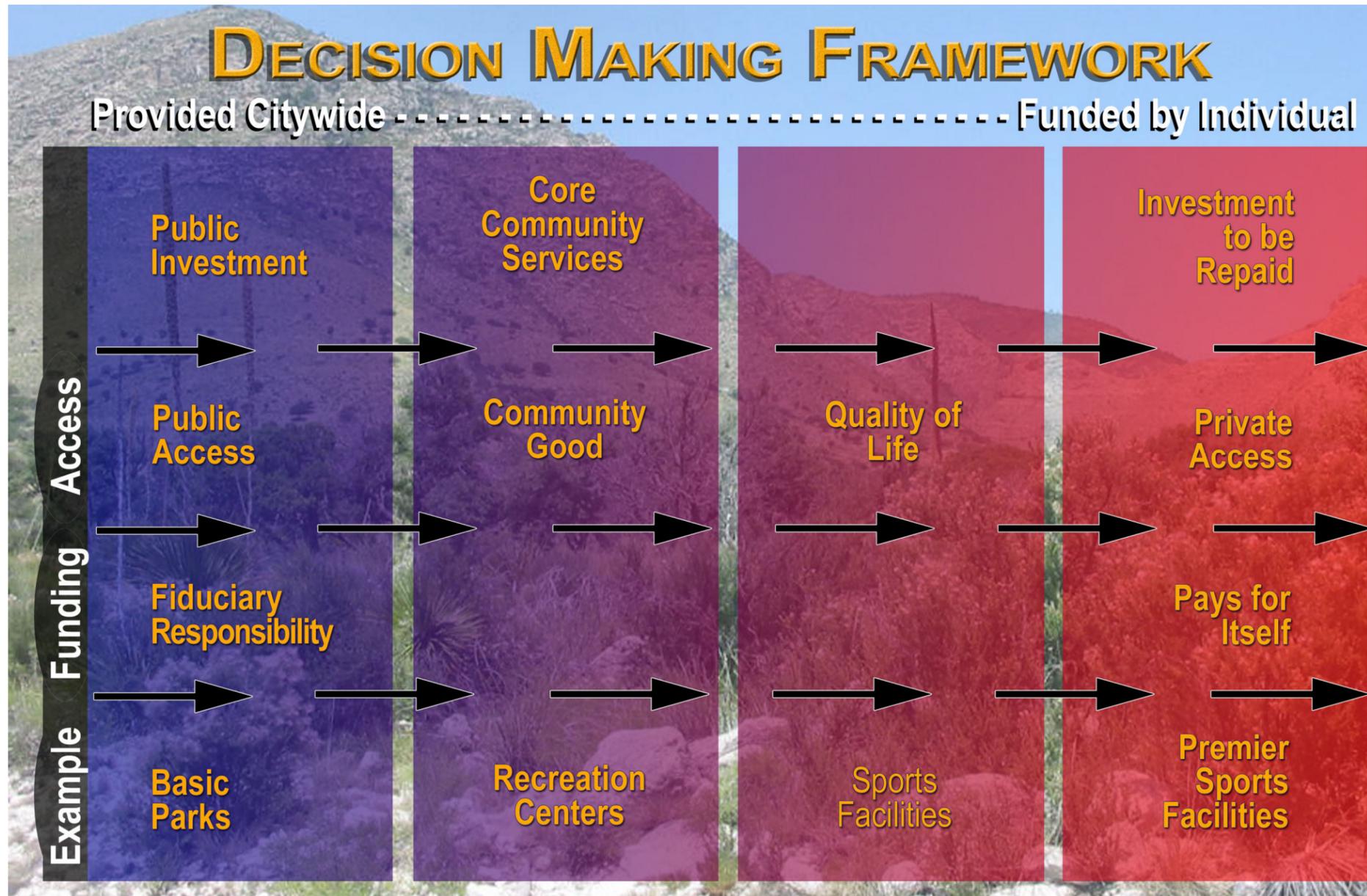
population. These will be measured against five desired outcomes;

- **Livability of the Community** – provides diverse recreational opportunities and experiences for all citizens of El Paso.
- **Health** - provides opportunities to improve the health of the youth of El Paso.
- **Youth** – provides learning and recreational experiences for the youth of El Paso.
- **Revenue** – provides opportunities for revenue, but only if not at the expense of the other desired outcomes.
- **Outdoors** – provides opportunities to experience the outdoors in many different ways.

The table on this page illustrates the continuum of services, from basic services that meet the needs of the entire community to services that primarily serve the needs of individuals.

4. Parks in El Paso will be Extraordinary and Timeless

- The parks of El Paso will express the natural beauty and cultural diversity of El Paso. The parks should look like they belong in El Paso.
- **Create extraordinary parks** - Resolve to create parks that are unusual and that stand out.



- **Express the Character of El Paso** - The entire park system, with its lands and buildings, should be one of the most visible character creating features of the city.
- **Use materials that fit in** - Develop parks that represent the natural beauty of the Chihuahuan Desert, and that fit in with the scenery of the area.
- **Native materials** - Use materials that are native to the area, and that are already commonly used, such as boulders, native rock, shrubs, and trees.
- **Strong, distinctive appearance for park buildings** - Use architectural features as the focal points of parks. Use strong architectural statements that draw attention to the parks.

5. Parks will be Community Focal Points

- **Parks as focal points of the Community** - Place parks so that they become readily visible focal points of the community around them. Madelyne Park is an excellent example – it is central to the neighborhood around it, and is readily accessible via foot. Encourage the development community to think of parks in this manner, and where necessary, develop ordinances that force that consideration.
- **Think of parks as mini-oasis** - Treat parks as lush areas within the desert environment, but note that only a portion of each park has to have that feeling. The strong juxtaposition of lush and verdant alongside desert-like can create an enormously powerful image.

6. The City will Focus on Connectivity and Linkage

- **Trails and linear parks will equally focus on connectivity and leisure uses** - the trail system will actually link a variety of uses, especially neighborhoods to area schools and parks, to local retail and centers of government, and to indoor recreation.
- **Trails and linear parks will be a vital part of the parks system** - A spine system of linear parks and trails should be extended, so that the goal of one day linking all parts of the city via scenic parkways and linear parks can be achieved.

7. The City will Value and Preserve Open Space

- **Open Spaces** - Make the preservation of open space within the city a high priority in the future. Set a goal of having five times more undeveloped in-city open space within the next 10 to 20 years.
- **Preserve Arroyos** - Preserve arroyos and natural areas as reminders of the original character of the area, and as beautiful scenic areas that will add significant long term value to El Paso.
- **Use drainage as opportunities to “create” open space** - If arroyos do not exist in an area, then use drainage channels as the “greenbelts” of an area. Run roads alongside them and add trees to create linear parkways.

8. Detention and Drainage will be used as a Green Opportunity

- **Treat drainage ponds and detention basins as mini parks or green areas** - Plant vegetation around detention basins to convert them in attractive open space.
- **Avoid deep detention unless critical** - In the future, avoid deep detention basins except on a regional scale. Use natural basins as potential large parks.

9. The System will Focus on Sustainability

- **Convert portions of existing parks to more drought-tolerant designs** – focus on lowering water consumption.
- **Incorporate energy and sustainable features into all buildings and parks in the future** – include sustainability features that emphasize sustainability if efficiency savings can be demonstrated over time.

10. The System will Focus on Reducing Maintenance

- **Use cost effective maintenance techniques** – Water usage, equipment, and staff allocations will all be designed to promote the most efficient maintenance of park facilities, while maintaining parks in the best manner possible.
- **Design facilities to reduce maintenance** – All park facilities will be designed to reduce the amount of maintenance that they require.

VI. The Parks and Recreation Master Planning Process

This master plan is the result of a planning process that looks at what facilities and programs currently exist in the city, identifies future needs and expectations, as expressed by the citizens of El Paso, and lays out a plan to address those needs. This plan:

The Parks Master Plan is intended to guide City staff and City leaders in determining where and how parks funding should be allocated over the next five to 10 years.

- Analyzes progress made since the previous master plan in 1996, during which many significant new facilities were added;
- Points out deficiencies in the system and recommends alternatives to address and correct those deficiencies;
- Looks at the potential growth of the city over the next 10 years, and assesses where additional facilities will be needed as the city grows and what types of facilities are most needed;
- Guides City staff in acquiring land to meet future park and open space needs;
- Prioritizes key recommendations of the Parks Master Plan to address most significant deficiencies as quickly as possible;
- Is intended to guide City staff and City leaders in determining where and how parks funding should be allocated over the next five to ten years.



The planning process can be expressed by a flow chart shown on the following page. The single most important characteristic of the process is the input of the citizens, elected officials and managers of the City of El Paso. This plan represents the needs, concerns, and dreams of El Pasoans.

The plan looks at the park needs of the city on a sector by sector basis, following the major planning areas that were previously designated by the City of El Paso. The sectors are shown on this page.

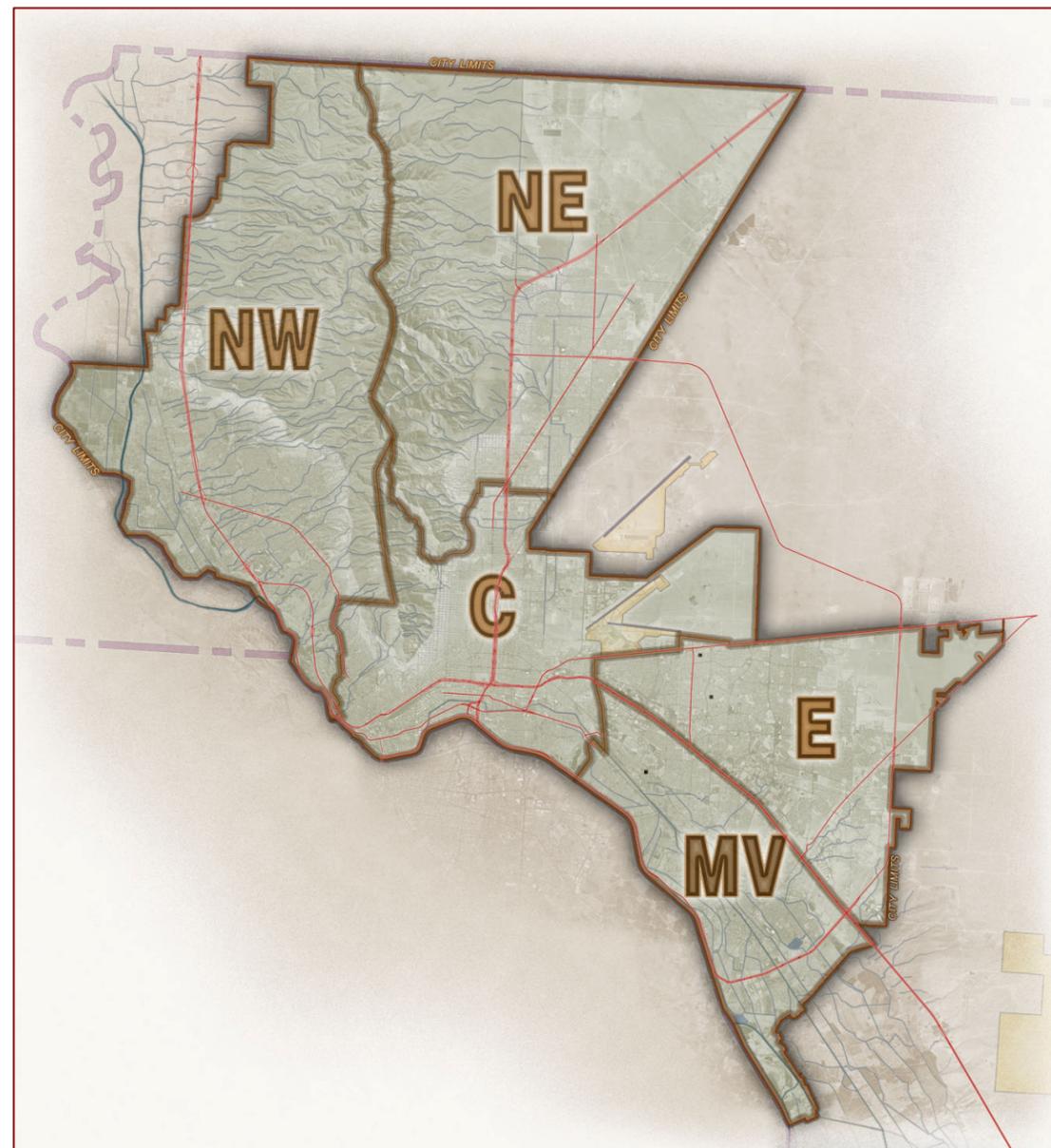
Towards A Bright Future

The plan is divided into sections that address existing facilities, and then lays out recommendations for each type of park facility and major programs in the city. For each recommendation, the plan divides recommendations into two categories;

A Plan for Today – The Plan for Today addresses those actions that are immediate and that must be undertaken to renovate or better utilize existing facilities. It also addresses actions that meet the needs of today’s population. The Plan for Today continues the process of rejuvenation that started with the 2000 and 2004 Quality of Life Bonds, and turns the clock back on the erosion of the system that has occurred since the 1970’s. Plan for Today actions will be noted in blue in this planning document.

Towards A Bright Future – The second part of each set of recommendations addresses longer range, visionary actions that can transform El Paso’s parks into a premier system. An

example of such an action would be to create a central park for El Paso. Throughout this document, those actions are generally noted in yellow to designate a bright future.



Major Planning Areas used to analyze different parts of the city
 NE – Northeast Planning Area
 NW – Northwest Planning Area
 C – Central Planning Area
 MV – Mission Valley Planning Area
 E – East Planning Area



VII. Process Methodology



The Comprehensive Parks Planning Process

Who Will Implement this Plan?

The implementation of The Vision for A Bright Tomorrow will be lead by the City of El Paso and the Parks and Recreation Department. However, everyone in El Paso has a vested interest in improving the parks system in the city – this includes:

- Primary responsibility – the City of El Paso;
- All governmental entities, including the City of El Paso, El Paso County, all area school districts, and other entities such as the Public Service Board;
- In their own way, all departments within the City of El Paso, from Development Services to Planning and even the Police and Fire Departments;
- The business community of El Paso, including property owners, developers, commercial entities and others;
- All citizens of El Paso, no matter which part of the City they live in;
- Residents of El Paso County, since the park system of El Paso is in effect their park system.

The Park Master Plan follows the general guidelines for local park master plans established by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). This document also is intended to meet the requirements of the Department of Interior for the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Program, and will serve as a Recovery Action Plan document (RAP). This document will be filed with both the Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Department of the Interior, and allows the city to better qualify for grant opportunities as they become available.

Timeframe for the Plan

The plan is formulated to address the time frame from the year 2006 until the year 2016. Per requirements issued by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the Parks and Recreation Master Plan should be completely updated after a ten year period or before if any major developments occur which significantly alter the recreation needs of the city.