



06 | Community Engagement

Community Engagement

Community input is one of the most critical aspects of the planning process. Planning that does not seek the community's help struggles to gain support and often fails. When community members can voice their opinions, ask questions, and share their wishes for the future, they feel a sense of ownership. It shows them that local government and planners care about their needs and desires. As the planning process moves forward and community members see elements they requested come to fruition, they are more apt to support the expansion through participation, funding, and care for the facilities.

The process was intended to be equitable and inclusive, presenting various input opportunities and methods for all community members and visitors to feel safe expressing their needs and desires. Insight from local leaders and City staff, public meetings, a community survey, and focus group interviews were used to gather ideas, share thoughts, stimulate conversations, and answer questions. The public input-gathering process was robust: public meetings, focus groups, a statistically valid survey, and a community survey that was

open to residents and visitors made up the multi-model process that was employed. The open survey and public meetings were advertised on the City website, social media pages, and via fliers at parks and other popular destinations. The contributions and materials received from community participants were essential for producing a plan that will benefit the community for generations to come.

Parks and Recreation Staff Engagement

On September 23, 2024, we invited parks and recreation staff to engage in a S.W.O.T. analysis process to examine the parks and recreation department. Ten staff members decided to participate in this process. The skill of those staff members ranged from only a few months of departmental experience to those with over 20 years of experience. The group also represented a variety of positions, including leadership, administration, recreation programming, and maintenance. On the following page, we show the major themes that were expressed during the S.W.O.T. analysis.



Example of what a community engagement session looks like

Major Themes of S.W.O.T Analysis

Strengths

The team communicates well and is willing to help each other out. Respect is evident.

There are a well-rounded offering of programs.

The team has a good culture. People are able to create, experiment, and solve problems.

The part-time staff greatly impact the team.

The athletics program is generally viewed in a very positive light.

Opportunities

Increased revenue would help the department and reduce dependence on grants. Funding for equipment would improve the park maintenance levels.

The community could have more pride in the facilities and more trust in the local leaders. This increase in trust will likely elicit more trust from patrons.

The department could offer more programs and nature-based facilities.

Weaknesses

Some people are concerned that not all staff members are equally pulling their weight. Staff members would appreciate more time off, more compensated time, and a better work / life balance.

The maintenance facilities need to be updated.

With the lack of volunteers helping the department, there is some concern about the potential of burnout for staff.

Threats

If the weaknesses are not addressed, there is fear that private and outside organizations might start taking over service offerings.

Trust between the department and the council / public could be at risk.

Employee retention and burnout are a major concern. Another major concern is losing funding or having the funding sources be incredibly limited.

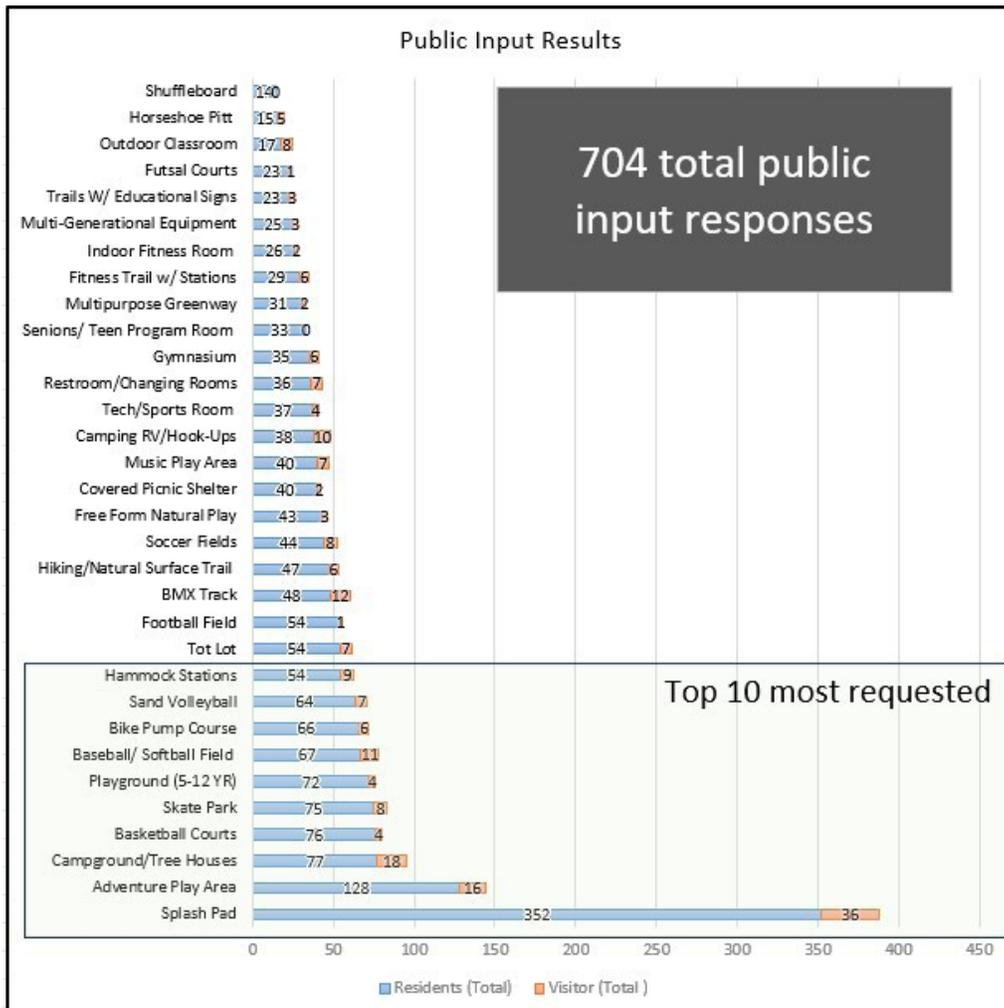
Generally, there is a strong sense of pride within the department and a feeling that it is doing the best that it can to serve the public. The department should work to improve communication, maintenance, and community programs. There is an urgency for the department to improve funding and staffing levels so that there is not burnout.

Public Meetings

To facilitate human interaction and open conversation, we conducted seven public meetings. We held two, 2-hour, drop-in sessions at events that annually have a strong public attendance. The first event was held at City Lake Park on October 4th as part of the concert and food truck rally. It was held from 5:30 PM to 9:00 PM. There was strong participation and 136 participants provided input. The second event was held on October 24th at downtown Albemarle’s Fall Festival Trick or Treat. This event was held from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM. The input effort was set up in front of City Hall on 2nd Street and there was outstanding participation. 568 participants provided input.

Participants were asked to vote on visual preference surveys that presented 32 pictures of different recreation amenities. Open comments were also collected in the event that the participant did not see the type of recreation that they were interested in or if they had general comments about recreational offerings or needs. At both events, we tried to equally solicit and understand the needs of residents and visitors. See the public input effort results on the right.

The results show three general themes. First, there is overwhelming support for a splash pad. Second, there is support for adventure recreation amenities and rustic-styled lodging. Third, there is strong support for athletic-related facilities.





BMX TRACK



MULTIPURPOSE GREENWAY



CAMPGROUND / TREE HOUSES



TRAILS W/ EDUCATIONAL SIGNS



FREE FORM NATURAL PLAY



MUSIC PLAY AREA



INDOOR FITNESS ROOM



RESTROOMS/CHANGING ROOMS



BASEBALL/SOFTBALL FIELD



TOT LOT



SHUFFLE BOARD



FUTSAL COURTS



ADVENTURE PLAY AREA



CAMPING/ RV HOOK-UPS



SOCCER FIELDS



FOOTBALL FIELD



SKATE PARK



HIKING TRAIL/NATURAL SURFACE PATH



BASKETBALL COURTS



SPLASH PAD



FITNESS TRAIL W/ STATIONS



PLAYGROUND (5-12 YR)



OUTDOOR CLASSROOM



HAMMOCK STATIONS



SENIORS/TEEN PROGRAM ROOM



TECH/ESPORTS ROOM



GYMNASIUM



COVERED PICNIC SHELTER



MULTI-GENERATIONAL EQUIPMENT



HORSESHOE PITS



BIKE PUMP COURSE



SAND VOLLEYBALL

Statistically Valid Survey

The active participation of Albemarle residents was essential in creating a plan that truly reflects the City's needs. To achieve this, we collected community input using statistically valid surveying methods. The goal was to collect 300 completed surveys from households within the City of Albemarle, and this target was surpassed, as we received 314 completed surveys. The results from these 314 residents have a precision of at least +/-5.5% at the 95% confidence level. The survey was designed to gather public input on the current and future needs of the City's park system. A full report of the results available in the Appendix.

To better understand the park system, it is important to understand Albemarle's needs and determine which of those needs are not being met. This is called a gap analysis. For example, pickleball is ranked among the top 20 needs in the City, but since there are already so many pickleball courts available, we did not include it on the top 20 list of unmet needs. Even though there is expressed desire for pickleball, the need is largely being met since there are so many courts. On the other hand, a splash pad was ranked number 9 on the list of 20, but since there is not currently a splash pad in the City, that is what tops the list of unmet needs.

Top 20 Facility Needs

1. Picnic shelters
2. Greenways and trails
3. Outdoor athletic fields
4. Open space / unprogrammed fields
5. Multi-functional space
6. Accessible play spaces
7. Indoor, multi-use gym
8. Large amphitheater
9. Outdoor water / splash pad
10. Nature play area
11. Water sports access
12. Aquatics facility
13. Miniature golf
14. Environmental conservatism
15. Outdoor basketball courts
16. Pickleball courts
17. Indoor playground
18. Environmental education center
19. Outdoor tennis
20. Ropes course climbing wall

Top 20 Not-Met Facility Needs

1. Outdoor water feature / splash pad
2. Miniature golf
3. Indoor playground
4. Indoor, multi-use gym
5. Outdoor programmable fitness equipment
6. Environmental conservatism
7. Community garden
8. Water sports access
9. Nature play area
10. Fine arts studio
11. Outdoor basketball
12. Large amphitheater
13. Aquatics facility
14. Ropes course / climbing wall
15. Mountain biking trails
16. Open space / unprogrammed fields
17. Large auditorium
18. Picnic shelters
19. Maker space studio
20. Outdoor athletic fields

We conducted a similar examination of parks and recreation events and programs. It is crucial to consider programs after facilities and amenities because many programs require specific facilities. For example, if a community wanted ice hockey but there were not any ice hockey facilities available, it would be impossible to offer that program and the need would go unmet. While facility and program needs are often related, they do not always align perfectly. Sometimes the facility does exist but other factors, like staffing or budget impact the community's ability for availability.

Top 20 Program Needs

1. Special events and festivals
2. Outdoor movies and concerts
3. Fitness and wellness programs
4. Art programs
5. Adult athletics
6. Aquatic programs
7. Water sports
8. Music lessons
9. Specialized recreation programs
10. Environmental education
11. Life skills programs
12. Pickleball
13. Disc golf
14. Baseball and softball
15. Soccer
16. Senior programs and trips
17. Basketball
18. Tennis
19. After-school programs
20. Teen programs

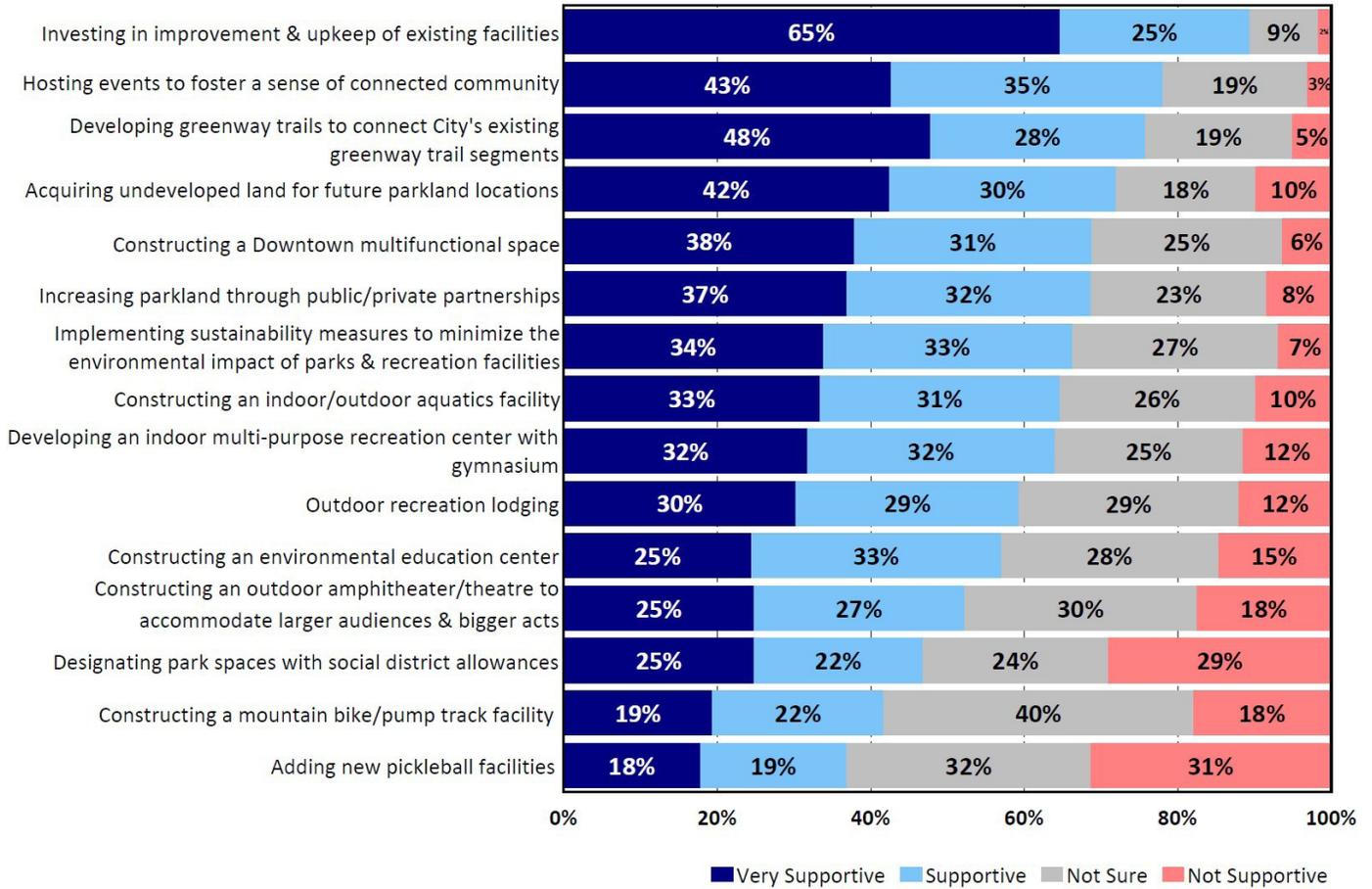
Top 20 Not-Met Program Needs

1. Art programs
2. Fitness and wellness
3. Outdoor movies and concerts
4. Music lessons and classes
5. Environmental education
6. Life skills programs
7. Special events and festivals
8. Adult athletics
9. Water sports
10. Teen programs
11. Specialized recreation programs
12. Action sports
13. Aquatics programs
14. Elevate fitness course
15. Senior programs and trips
16. Full day youth camps
17. After-school programs
18. Volleyball
19. Preschool programs
20. Dodgeball and kickball

Indicate support for the City taking the following actions to improve parks and recreation

Q13. Please indicate how supportive you would be of the City of Albemarle taking the following actions to improve the parks and recreation system in the City.

by percentage of respondents



We also asked survey participants about their support for various improvements to recreation in Albemarle. The results show that the community's top priority is to improve and update existing facilities. After this, residents want to host more events and have accessible walking routes to these events. There is also a general desire to acquire land and construct new facilities in the downtown.

A Vibrant Community

Special events, festivals, movies, and concerts were ranked as the most important program / activity for the community.

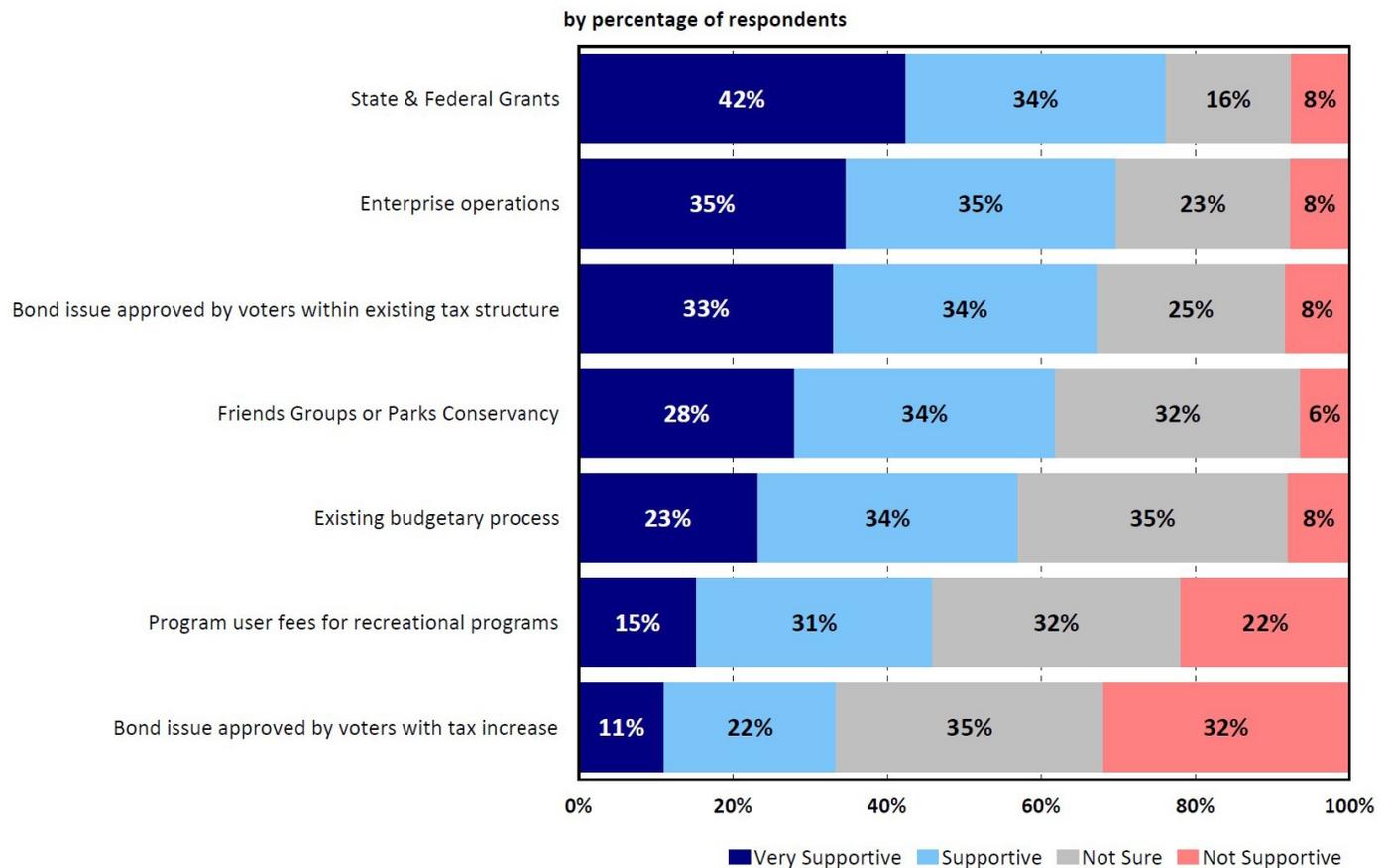
Trails and greenways were ranked as the most important facility / amenity.

Additional Funding Needs

There is support for recreation improvements in the current budget; however, there is also interest in using state and federal grants, as well as enterprise operations, to achieve these improvements. State and federal grants typically require a local match of around 50% of the total project cost. Enterprise funds usually need an initial capital investment to make the facility attractive to a population beyond just residents, which will ensure the facility's success and a return on the investment. Most communities rely on a combination of these strategies to meet public needs. There are additional items that will need funding. The top five, in order, are the following:

- 1 Investing in improvements and upkeep of existing facilities
- 2 Developing trails and greenways
- 3 Acquiring undeveloped land for future parkland
- 4 Constructing a downtown multifunctional space
- 5 Constructing an indoor / outdoor aquatics facility

Indicate level of support for the following items



Major Themes from Statistically Valid Survey

97% of public parks improve the quality of life in a community, and 40% of survey takers noted that they do not know everything that is being offered, which is a major barrier to participation.

Parks Are An Essential Service

Do you believe parks and recreation are an essential service?

93% of survey takers find parks and recreation to be essential

Current Programs Experience

Do you think the events and programs currently offered by the City are good?

92% of survey takers rate the City's current events as excellent or good

Investment in Existing Parks

Do you support investing in existing parks?

89% of survey takers support improving existing parks

Desire for More Events

Do you want more special events?

78% of survey takers want the City to put on more special events

A car-centric system

Do you usually walk or drive to parks and greenways?

76% of survey takers have to drive to parks and greenways

Desire for More Trails

Do you want the City to have more trail and greenway connections?

76% of survey takers want more trail and greenway connections

Focus Group Interview Summaries

Four focus group interviews were held with approximately 25 participants. The meetings were held on December 10th and 11th in 2024. Each meeting lasted approximately one hour. The meetings were facilitated by two McGill staff members. Our staff tried to keep the conversation flexible as long as it stay centered on parks and recreation offerings, opportunities, and needs in Albemarle and the surrounding area. The meetings focused on four categories: business and non-profits, conservation and environment, seniors, and economic development. We noted the core themes from each group below. You can find more detailed summaries of the meetings in the appendix.

Top Five Themes from Focus Groups

1. Parks play a role in economic development
2. The Wiscassett Mill Property is a high priority opportunity that needs to be utilized
3. Albemarle functions as a regional recreation provider
4. The City needs more trails, greenways, and wayfinding
5. Conservation and environmental education are important and partnerships can help with these areas

Economic Development

- Recreation should support economic development
- Wiscassett Mill Property is a high priority park
- Staffing and volunteers are a limiting factor
- Opportunities for partnerships exist
- Outdoor adventure activities are needed
- More trails and greenways are needed
- Should add place to track tourism

Seniors

- High interest in pickleball and more cycling opportunities
- The Wiscassett Property should be used as a park
- Lack of year-round sports due to the limited availability of indoor facilities and schools
- There should be more senior games; currently, Albemarle serves Stanly County and Montgomery County in this area

Conservation and Environment

- There should be more natural areas and passive, green spaces
- Local subject matter experts, like wildlife biologists, should help with programming
- Kiosks with environmental education would be a benefit to the community
- Park system should promote biodiversity
- Group is opposed to hunting within park property

Businesses and Non-profits

- Parks department can partner with Stanly County libraries for "Stanly Staycations"
- Interest in a STEM-focused children's museum
- Wayfinding tools, apps, and QR codes can help visitors find parks, playgrounds, and trails
- Parks and play areas need to be more accessible
- City Lake Park events have been successful
- Rock Creek Park has safety / cleanliness issues

Local Leaders

McGill consistently communicated with Albemarle staff. Before we started the recommendations and action steps process, we gave a project update to approximately 23 of the City's key leadership members, executive staff, and leaders from many of the City's departments. Our team spoke during the City's planning meeting, which took place on March 4th at the EE Waddell Center. The parks and recreation portion of the meeting was held from 6:00 PM to 7:00 PM. Nate Halubka, a project consultant at McGill, presented an overview of the current progress and led attendees through a facilitated strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of parks and recreation offerings. We broke the group into two parts: one group consisted of elected officials and executive City leaders, and the other group consisted of other critical City staff members. Below are the summary findings of the SWOT analysis. A more detailed report can be found in the appendix.



Activity during the leadership SWOT

Summary: Elected and Executive Leaders

Strengths

- Park Usage: High usage across diverse age groups, including seniors and non-City residents
- Number of Parks: Adequate for the City's size with Morrow Mountain as a nearby asset
- Activities: Sufficient variety, strong youth programs, and popular events / concerts
- Economic Impact: Increased visitation and community support
- Facilities: Well-maintained parks, auditorium, meeting space, and indoor gym
- Staff: Highly regarded by the community
- Budget: Average annual funding commitment and council support
- Recreational: High levels of tennis courts, pickleball, lakes, and aquatic activities

Weaknesses

- Aging Infrastructure: Need more greenways and facility updates
- Aquatics: Need a splash pad but there are two pools
- Funding: Challenges with securing funds for new services and non-resident users
- Sports Facilities: Insufficient baseball fields, basketball courts, and soccer fields
- Community Support: Corporate donors and volunteers
- Cultural Programs: Need for more downtown activities and fine arts programs

Opportunities

- Downtown Development: Increased foot traffic, multi-purpose facilities, and housing
- Wiscasset Park: Support for development, including ballfields and a multi-field ballpark
- New Facilities: Splash pad
- Economic Benefits: Parks help with economic growth

Threats

- County Support: Lack of financial support for non-resident users
- Risk of Residents Leaving: Risk of population retraction and youth leaving the City
- Revenue: Loss of revenue if users decline
- Competition: Surrounding communities capitalizing on missed opportunities
- Staffing: Insufficient staff and potential political challenges

Summary: City Staff

Strengths

- Attraction of Non-residents: Parks draw visitors from outside Albemarle, which enhances the community engagement
- Historic Park Areas: Nostalgic value with great trees and picnic areas
- Location: Proximity to lakes (Badin, Tillery, and High Rock)
- Developmental Potential: Opportunities for Wiscasset property and greenways
- Staff: Dedicated internal staff, strong leadership, and abundance of pickleball and tennis facilities
- Expansion: Ample land available for future development
- Budget: Efficient use of relatively low budget with average funding

- Community Engagement: High level of community involvement and economic impact from park usage
- Programs and Events: Diverse and well-received programs, including youth and athletic programs, summer activities, and special events
- Diverse Park Offerings: Parks and facilities are offered around the City

Weaknesses

- Sports Facilities: Need more baseball and softball fields
- Funding: Insufficient funding for maintenance, major projects, and alignment with priorities. There is no Stanly County funding assistance
- Maintenance: High upkeep costs for numerous parks and aging facilities
- Community Utilization: Parks are underutilized by the community
- Development Constraints: Challenges with cooperation for greenways and development of potential sites
- Resource Allocation: Over-allocation of resources to pools, pickleball, and tennis
- Staffing: Insufficient staffing levels and volunteer support

Opportunities

- New Development: Potential for new parks and development, especially at the Wiscassett Property, and for a splash pad
- Funding: Opportunities for grants and partnerships
- Greenways: Expand greenways to connect the parks and schools
- Marketing: Increased marketing efforts
- Special Events: Enhancement of special events

Threats

- Funding: Decreasing government funding and sales tax revenue
- Park Usage: Decline in park usage could lead to revenue loss and decreased interest
- Economic Development: Loss of economic opportunities and competitive disadvantage to other local governments
- Community Dissatisfaction: Potential for increased complaints, lawsuits, and facility closures

Summary of Findings

Below is a summary of the findings from public, staff, and leadership input. The summary is key for the City as the process of developing recommendations and action steps begins.

- Regional Role: Although the system is based in the City, usage data indicates the Albemarle Parks and Recreation Department functions as a regional or de facto department since it serves both residents and visitors
- Budget and Usage: The department's budget is an average size, but the acreage and usage are above average. High levels of use are putting long-term stress on the system.
- Staffing: The staff are stretched thin as they are trying to meet the public demand. These limitations are impacting the numbers of programs and events that are offered, as well as the look and feel of the recreation facilities
- Property Utilization: The City has other properties that could help alleviate overuse issues, according to residents, staff, and leaders.
- Funding Concerns: The City's budget is currently serving residents and non-residents

- **Facility Benchmarks:** Some facilities, like pickleball, tennis, and aquatics, are above benchmark levels, while others, like baseball, accessible play, and basketball, are below benchmark levels. Baseball, accessible play, and basketball are strongly desired by the community
- **Community Engagement:** Residents love the special events, concerts, and festivals that the parks department puts on and they want more.
- **Downtown Support:** There is a shared desire among residents, elected leaders, and staff to use parks and recreation to support downtown recreational offerings.
- **Economic Development:** The parks and recreation department plays a role in attracting visitors to the area, and those visitors contribute to the local economy.
- **Walkability:** Like most communities, Albemarle residents are very interested in having a walkable community that has good wayfinding and safe routes that connect major interest areas.

Long Range Plan Survey

While this comprehensive parks and recreation planning process was underway, the City was also working on long-range planning efforts with the Centralina Council of Government (COG). The findings indicated health, well-being, and walkability are the key factors for this planning process. A community-wide survey was also part of COG's planning process. Below are some of the relevant findings related to Albemarle's parks and recreation.

Top 5 Albemarle Characteristics

1. Natural Environment
2. Sense of Community
3. Regional Location
4. Local Businesses
5. Recreation and Athletics

Four of the five Albemarle characteristics are impacted by the strength of parks and recreation in the community.

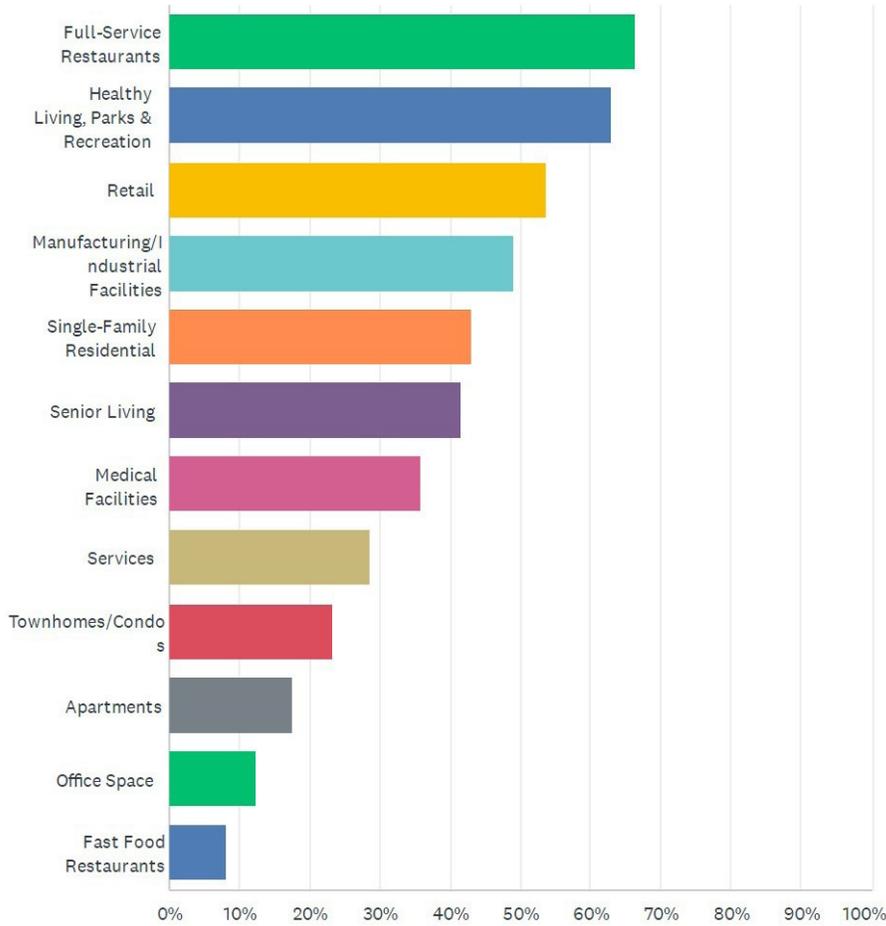
Similarly, parks and recreation were only narrowly edged out, by restaurants, from being the area most encouraged for development. Walkability improvements were also supported, as over 80% of survey respondents felt that residents should be able to walk to a recreation facility within 15 minutes.

When asked if maintaining the current community assets should be a priority, an overwhelming amount of the community showed support. 90% of the community voted in favor of maintaining existing community assets.

Top 10 Parks and Recreation Investment Areas

- Existing parks maintenance and upkeep
- Trails, greenways, and walkability
- Programs for youth
- Events and concerts
- New indoor recreation center
- Programs for young children
- New outdoor parks and recreation
- Nature-based recreation
- Programs for seniors
- Programs for adults

Future Development for Albemarle



Park Investment Levels

Current Levels

I feel Albemarle’s parks investment level currently is (based on a scale where 5 is the best):

2.09

Desired Levels

I feel Albemarle’s parks investment should be (based on a scale where 5 is the best):

3.20