

GreenPlay Project Receives Statewide Recognition

by Alaina Brandenburger

The El Paso County Parks Master Plan won a 2013 Merit Award for Outstanding Planning from the Colorado Chapter of the American Planning Association. The project also received a Starburst Award from the Colorado Lottery for Excellence in Use of Lottery Funds.

This plan serves as an update to the 2005 plan and functions as part of the County's General Plan. A driving force behind the project was to ensure a sustainable approach to the allocation of resources for the next five to ten years by maintaining a high quality parks, recreation, and open space system in the most fiscally, socially, and ecologically sustainable manner possible.

El Paso County Parks was founded in 1971 as the El Paso County Park and Recreation District. Its initial policies gave high priority to the development of parklands in urbanized but unincorporated areas of the County in an effort to reduce pressure on City of Colorado Springs facilities and programs. Since 1976, the Department has focused solely on parks, open space, and trails, along with cultural and historic programs within the parks and trails system.



Factors that led to the APA award included the Plan's specificity to the County, along with a public process that is relevant and able to be applied in similar communities across the state. Specific issues for El Paso County that were addressed during this Master Plan Update included identifying needs and developing solutions based on the Department's limited resources, identifying areas with a high priority for conservation, identifying potential trail connections to link parts of the County with others, and identifying potential service delivery into the future, considering population changes.

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To accurately determine citizens' needs, our team performed a robust public process, which consisted of stakeholder input meetings, a web-based survey, hosted by "MindMixer," and "Meetings in a Box" – a proprietary public input strategy designed by Colorado Springs-based KezziahWatkins that allows residents in the community to host public meetings on their own in locations that are convenient to them. This input tactic works well to engage the community, as participants facilitate the meetings themselves, serving to draw those who may not feel comfortable speaking up in a typical public meeting setting.

Results of the public input, along with inventory and other tasks, were used to develop recommendations, which were crucial to the development of the capital budget. Some key issues that came out of this input process included residents' desire to see more land for preservation, and potential partnership development for managing County owned and operated assets. The Public indicated that they were generally pleased with how the Department handles its budget, but agreed

that more funding is necessary, which led to the recommendation for the Department to investigate alternative funding mechanisms.

On the whole, the Parks Master Plan Update did an excellent job refining and solidifying future goals and opportunities for the Department. It is a dynamic, forward-focused document that will guide the Department through its next decade.

GreenPlay was proud to be part of this award-winning project.

