



PLANNING FOR A POPULATION BOOM

How the Town of Leland, North Carolina, is using the Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan to understand and plan for growth

By Alaina Brandenburger

Situated just east of Wilmington in the southeastern part of North Carolina, the Town of Leland is experiencing tremendous growth. Incorporated in 1989, the Town's population has increased from 2,000 residents in the year 2000 to almost 20,000 in 2017.

GreenPlay is currently working with the Town on a Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan to assess the current parks, recreation, and open space system and to plan for growth. Niel Brooks, Assistant Town Manager, discussed the process of developing this plan and how it is being used in part to help the Town grow in a more responsible way.

SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS

Brooks mentioned that the Town's population boom has resulted in a wider variety of demographics. He said, "We've seen a tremendous amount of people moving and retiring from the northeast: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. Our Town includes a lot of active retirees who are still social and live in large neighborhoods."

This is due in part to the Town's climate, in which the winters are much less harsh than the typical northeastern season, and summers are not as hot and stifling as in Florida, Arizona and other popular retirement destinations. There has also been an effort by developers in the area to attract retirees to the area.

Along with an influx of active older adults, the Town has seen a rise in the number of young families. States Brooks, "Wilmington is essentially built out. Leland is seeing a number of people who work in the Wilmington area. We have affordable starter homes and large, amenity rich neighborhoods."

PLANNING FOR IMPLEMENTATION

"We have built this Department from the ground up. We are celebrating our 10th anniversary in August," said Brooks. When the Department began in 2008, the first Parks and Recreation Master Plan was developed based on a smaller population, but the Town realized that a different course of action would be appropriate for this update.



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Email: info@greenplayllc.com

“We know that with our current growth rate, we will likely need to update the plan every 2-3 years. We wanted to have a plan that everyone could feel comfortable with. We hired GreenPlay for their experience all over the country. We felt that an outside perspective could help us to see growth and where it’s going with unclouded vision,” said Brooks.

Of the goals laid out for this Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan, Brooks says that the most important is prioritization. When dealing with a population boom, communities will likely become overwhelmed with goals. Brooks stated that many of the people who have moved to Leland have come from larger communities with established parks and recreation systems intact and that they have become used to having those amenities around.

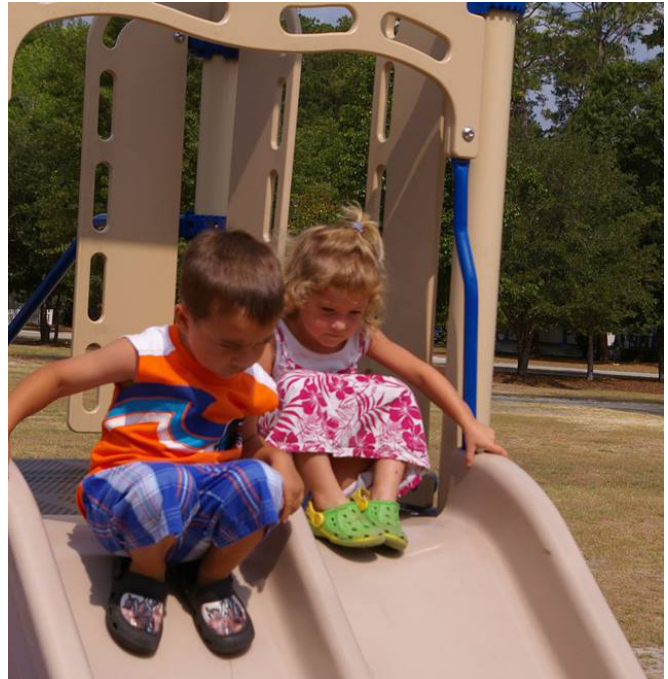
However, it is not realistic or economically feasible to build all desired amenities at once. Brooks says, “There was so much that we wanted to do, but where do we start? Where are we going to get the most bang for our buck? What is it that we need most? Athletics, Trails, a Recreation Center?” To determine this, the Master Plan project team engaged members from all over the community.

DETERMINING COMMUNITY NEEDS

One of the most surprising findings from this process, according to Brooks, is that most of the community was in agreement when it came to what they wanted the most. In Leland, there three general regions, with a corridor in which people have lived in the Town for most of their lives. According to Brooks, the influx of transplants and growth has been difficult for some people in this part of town, because they feel like their voices are being heard less often.

For this reason, the project team made a point to engage everyone in the community. Priority was not given to one group over another, and a mixed-methods engagement approach was employed in an effort to hear from people in every part of the Town, and in every demographic group. One of the most consistent desires throughout the community is walking trails and connectivity.

All over the country, some formerly small communities are experiencing high rates of growth due to many factors which could include a nicer climate, a booming economy, build out in other parts of the states, and a myriad of other reasons. When this happens, it can be hard for an agency to handle. Many smaller agencies have fewer staff members, which can make planning and operations difficult.



It is also important to consider the needs of long-time residents in the agency alongside those of the new population. Perhaps the most important tool when dealing with rapid growth is community engagement. By listening to residents in the area, a growing agency can get a handle on potential gaps in the system, and residents may feel less frustrated with these gaps if they know that their voices are being heard.

If your agency is experiencing rapid growth, a Parks and Recreation Master Planning effort can help you determine what may be missing to help enhance the quality of life in the community for everyone.