

Longmont's Open Space Keeps Residents Healthy

By Robby Layton, PhD, FASLA



Spending time outside is an important part of staying healthy. Social reformers of the 1800s believed that providing places for people to get a break from the urban environment would be good for their health and spirit. Recent research has proven this to be true. Benefits from spending time in nature--whether in parks, greenways, or open space--include quicker recovery from stress and anxiety, improved memory, better focus and attention span, a stronger immune system, reduction in cardiovascular problems, healthier body weight, sharper vision, and increased longevity (Sprouse, 2017). Longmont, Colorado's open space provides a place where residents can have access to the health benefits of spending time outdoors.

Researchers have also found that being outside in nature can also make you happier (Frash, et al., 2016) A key finding of this research is that having a diverse choice of activities to participate in outside is more important than the duration of time spent there when it comes to being happy. Thus, providing a variety of things to do in open space, such as hiking, biking, fishing, being with friends, or simply relaxing is critical to maximizing the benefits that open space provides.


The 2008 "Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans Summary," published by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, recommends that adults get 2.5 hours per week of moderate physical activity. Moderate physical activity is defined as that which causes a person to burn off three to six times

as much energy as they would simply sitting still (Harvard School of Public Health, 2018). The Centers for Disease Control identifies biking or walking in the manner engaged in on open space trails as moderate physical activity (CDC, 2018). Thus, when Longmont residents visit open space to walk or hike, the time they spend counts toward their recommended weekly amount of moderate physical activity. When they involve more challenging terrain or more intense effort, hiking and biking are considered to be vigorous activities, which allows a person to meet their weekly activity levels even more quickly, bringing the recommended amount for adults down to 1.5 hours per week.

The results of the statistically-valid survey conducted for this study indicate that Longmont residents visit

Statistically-Valid Survey Shows Longmont's Open Space Helps Keep Residents Healthy

GreenPlay, LLC was engaged by the City of Longmont, Colorado, to update their Open Space and Trails Comprehensive Master Plan. As part of that effort, a statistically-valid survey was conducted in February, 2018, to provide public feedback on open spaces, nature areas, and trails owned, managed, and maintained by the City. The results of the survey also gave some insight into the usage, and types of physical activities respondents participated in while utilizing the open space system. Robby Layton, PhD, one of the consultants on the project, was able to extrapolate some important physical activity statistics that show the City's open space program provides a place where residents can have access to the health benefits of spending time outdoors.



50%
of respondents
walk or bike to open space.
This means that they are getting nearly **20%** of their weekly recommended minimum Moderate Physical Activity just traveling to and from city open space.

Half of all respondents typically travel to open space by walking or biking – both considered Moderate Physical Activity by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which recommends that adults get at least 2.5 hours of Moderate PA per week. Average travel time to open space is 11.9 minutes (0.20 hours one way, 0.40 hours both directions, times 1.2 trips per week on average = 0.48 hours).

7 OUT OF 8
RESPONDENTS ARE MEETING 88% OF THEIR RECOMMENDED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Longmont's open space system appears to be meeting the entire physical activity needs (100%) for almost half of all respondents.



87% of respondents report that walking is their primary open space activity.



On average, respondents spend **2.2 hours per week** in Longmont's open space. If that time is spent walking, they are getting **88%** of their recommended weekly physical activity from being in open space.

open space an average of 62 times per year, or 1.2 times a week. The average duration of each visit is 1.8 hours. This means that the average person is spending 2.2 hours per week in the open space. This is 88% of the recommended 2.5 hours per week of moderate physical activity mentioned above. However, while simply being outside is a benefit to health, whether physically active or not, the goal is 2.5 hours of moderate physical activity. But we can see from the survey that 87% of respondents said that they participate in hiking when they visit open space. If we take that activity alone and assume all of it

to be moderate activity (as opposed to vigorous activity), we can infer that, on average, 87% of Longmont residents are meeting almost their entire weekly recommended physical activity allowance by visiting open space.

This shows that by simply providing a place to walk, Longmont's open space is meeting a critical health parameter for its citizens. If other open space activities, such as running and biking, are included, it becomes apparent that the open space system plays a significant role in keeping people happy and healthy. This does not even include

getting to and from the open space, which 50% of respondents said they do by walking or biking, both of which are moderate activity generators. The average reported travel time in the survey was 11.9 minutes, or 29 minutes total getting there and back 1.2 times per week. This is an additional 0.48 hours per week of moderate activity. Thus, half of Longmont's residents are getting 19% of their weekly physical activity needs just from traveling to and from open space. Perhaps this is why Longmont consistently rates at the top of the nation in happiness and health rankings.

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Robby Layton, PhD, FASLA, PLA, CPRP is a founder and partner at **Design Concepts**, a national leader in landscape architecture and parks planning. In collaboration with GreenPlay, LLC, Robby helped develop GRASP® (Geo-Referenced Amenities Standards Process) methodology, a unique tool that bases master plans on a level of service measurement that reflects the quantity and quality of component parts of each system. Robby's PhD focused on measuring parks for physical activity potential and the effects of greenspace on the health of urban populations.



See our companion article: Longmont's Open Space Master Plan – Objectives Achieved