



Northwest Arkansas

PLANNING FOR PARKS, TRAILS, & OPEN SPACE

Prairie Grove, Arkansas

Technical Assistance Panel | January 22–23, 2026

About

Urban Land Institute

Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 48,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute's mission of shaping the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. ULI's interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions, with members in 84 countries.

ULI Northwest Arkansas

ULI Northwest Arkansas is a district council of the Urban Land Institute, a global organization which for more than 80 years has been dedicated to improving the quality of urban areas. ULI is the sum of its members, who themselves deliver the ULI mission through programs and events and positively shape the future of real estate and land use disciplines throughout Northwest Arkansas. Members include real estate developers, builders, finance and equity professionals, architects, engineers, urban planners, elected officials, engaged citizens, and more. ULI shares best practices through practical professional development education programs and ULI's research and publications. The organization sets the standard for high quality information on urban planning, real estate development, growth and land use. Simply put, ULI Northwest Arkansas's goal is a built environment that better serves more people.

Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) Program

Urban Land Institute harnesses its members' technical expertise to help communities solve complex land use, development, and redevelopment challenges. Technical assistance panels (TAPs) provide expert, multidisciplinary, unbiased advice to local governments, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations facing complex land use and real estate issues in the region. Drawing from its professional membership base, ULI Northwest Arkansas offers objective and responsible guidance on various land use and real estate issues ranging from site-specific projects to public policy questions. The sponsoring organization is responsible for gathering the background information necessary to understand the project and present it to the panel. TAP panelists spend two days interviewing stakeholders, evaluating the challenges, and ultimately arriving at a set of recommendations that the sponsoring organization can use to guide development going forward.

Learn more at arkansas.uli.org.

Cover: Muddy Fork Park in Prairie Grove, Arkansas.

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About

Technical Assistance Panel

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Acknowledgments

ULI Northwest Arkansas would like to thank the City of Prairie Grove, Arkansas, for inviting ULI to help frame a request for qualifications for a new parks, trails, and open space master plan to serve the community well into the future. In particular, ULI thanks Mayor David Falk and Larry Oelrich, Assistant Planning and Business Administrator (semi-retired), for their insights during the panel's briefing and community-wide tour. Finally, ULI would like to thank the Prairie Grove steering committee members who generously shared their time and experience with the panel throughout the course of its study.

Executive Summary

As Northwest Arkansas's population continues to grow at a rapid pace, cities like Prairie Grove, Arkansas, are seeing similar population growth and regularly welcoming new residents. Planning for and meeting the needs of a population that has doubled each decade for the past 30 years, as it has in Prairie Grove, takes creativity and foresight. It also requires patience and persistence, qualities needed to nurture efforts like those relating to long-range planning for the city's parks, trails, and open spaces.

Recognizing that the community is rich in natural resources and that the city's parks and open spaces provide ready access to nature and these resources, the City of Prairie Grove (the City) turned to the Urban Land Institute Northwest Arkansas District Council (ULI) for guidance with long-range planning for the city's current and future recreational spaces and natural environments.

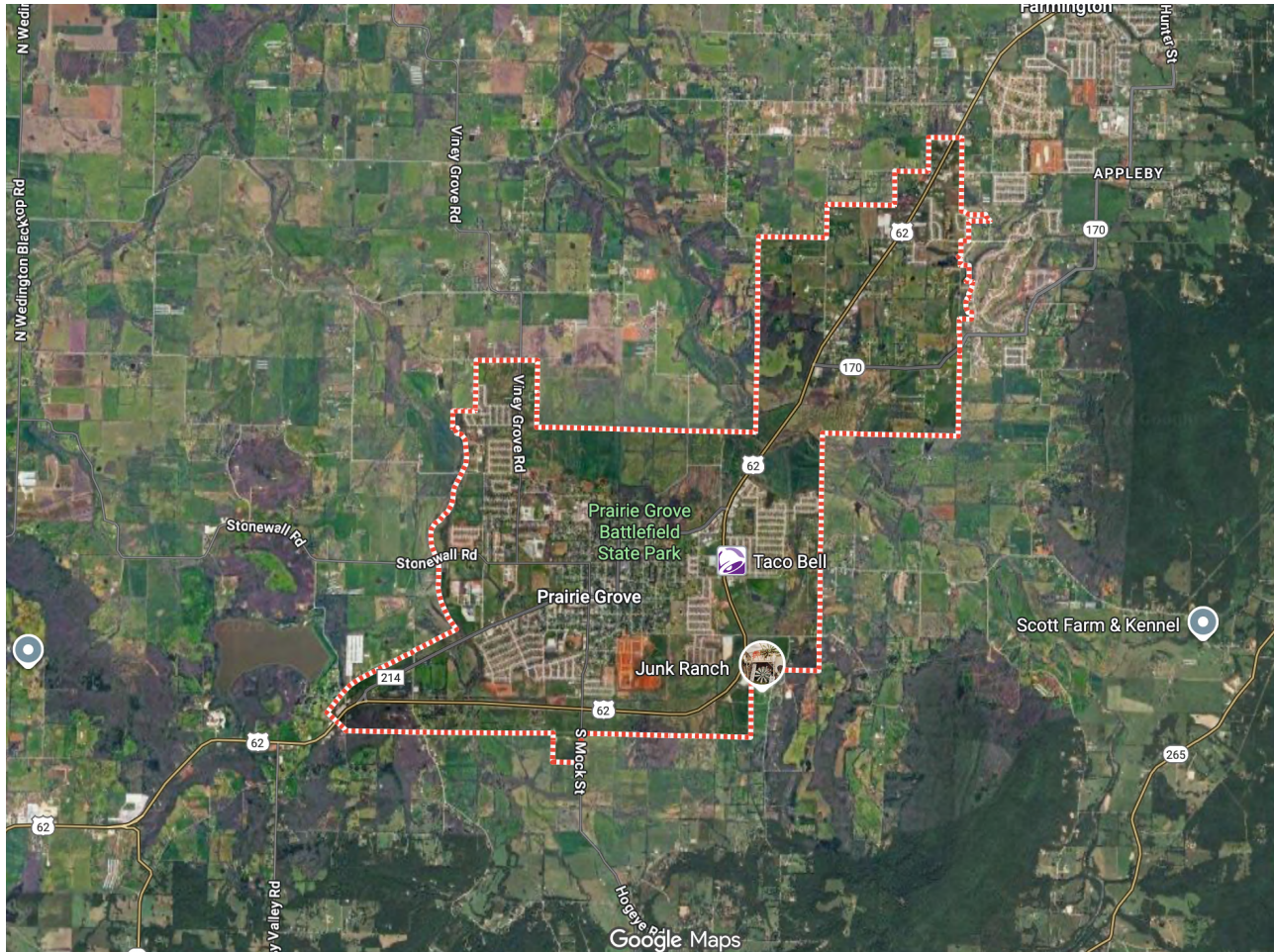
ULI, leveraging its Plan Local, Planning Partnership, and Technical Assistance Panel programs, assembled a team of planning and development professionals to help guide the City in its framing of a request for qualifications for a new forward-looking parks plan. The ULI panel sought to create an outline of key elements the City should include and expertise it should seek in its request for qualifications for an outside planning team. The following summary outlines those key elements, calling attention to current needs as well as projected needs of future residents.

A Vision for Parks

Park planning should start with a vision. For Prairie Grove, the panel believes this should begin with a more expansive view of what constitutes a "park." The City's parks planning should encompass existing park areas, natural areas to be preserved, spaces that can serve multiple uses, and spaces and

facilities that appeal to and are accessible by a range of ages and abilities. Parks can and should connect people and help foster community pride and well-being. Parks can also bring economic benefits to a community.

As the City of Prairie Grove articulates a vision for its open space, the panel encourages City leaders to think



Prairie Grove, Arkansas, is home to a number of city parks as well as the Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park. The Illinois River runs through the eastern end of town, and the Muddy Fork River runs along the western edge of the community.

broadly, creatively, and long-term. Improvements should deliver a range of spaces, scales, and uses. It is also helpful to consider how improving access to nature can provide the community with healing, wellbeing, connectivity, and community-building benefits.

Park storytelling. Parks can create a sense of identity, place, and strengthen the rich story of Prairie Grove. Parks can also strengthen the city's role as a destination. Wayfinding can help residents and visitors find and explore the community's open space and trail options and help connect the parks to the city, its residents, and visitors. People should be able to see themselves in the city's parks, feel welcomed to explore, and be encouraged to enjoy all that these spaces have to offer.

Additional benefits of parks. In addition to recreation and nature, parks can bring important economic benefits to Prairie Grove in the form of tourism and related commercial activity during a park visit. Parks provide valuable quality-of-life benefits and more broadly support a healthier community environment. Parks provide space for family gatherings, community festivals, and parties, all of which strengthen community ties, points of connectivity, and foster joy in residents and visitors alike. Parks, trails, and open spaces are threads that weave together the fabric of the Prairie Grove community.

Resources and Connectivity

At present, Prairie Grove has a number of wonderful parks and open space assets.

Connecting these resources and planning for their future use and expansion should form the foundation for a request for qualifications (RFQ) for community-wide parks, trails, and open space planning. The following elements should receive particular attention.

Focus on connectivity and active

transportation.

Connectivity across Prairie Grove must be elevated, and active transportation planning principles can assist. Regional connections to the Razorback Greenway and other similar catalyst projects should be factored into this planning work. The proximity of the Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park, Prairie Grove Lake, Bob Kidd Lake, Lincoln Lake, and Historic Cane Hill should also be considered as park assets and factored into the story of Prairie Grove as a regional destination. Within the city limits, active transportation improvements should focus on connections between open space assets and downtown, surrounding neighborhoods, schools, the library, senior center, and more.

Include key project elements. The following elements should be included in the RFQ, noted as work to be performed by the selected firm.

- An existing conditions analysis, including existing park, trail, and open space resources as well as other destinations, amenities, and existing facilities. Partner-owned spaces, like the state park, should also be included, and regional plans should be considered.
- A needs assessment will help the City identify gaps in current park assets and recreational opportunities.

- A master trails and active transportation plan should include, at a minimum, alignments with complete streets design principles and new trail alignments. It should also incorporate the Master Heritage Trail Plan, the Prairie Grove Master Street Plan, the City's development ordinances, and a requirement that developers construct park or trail connections or pay a municipal fee in lieu of such improvements.

Include funding recommendations. Funding sources and implementation assistance should be addressed in the RFQ, asking that firms demonstrate experience with infrastructure development, parks programming, operations, and management. Guidance relating to funding sources, transportation programs, and funding opportunities will also be critical.

Include conceptual design plans. The RFQ should also make clear that the selected firm will be expected to deliver conceptual park, trail, and open space design plans that incorporate use and activation recommendations for the city's existing assets, as well as new spaces under consideration. This latter category remains exploratory at this stage but may include other such public-facing land, like school facilities and other publicly-owned property. Joint use agreements between the City and these other property owners could broaden park access across the city's neighborhoods and improve connectivity for residents and children moving between home and school.

Regulations and Administration

City regulations will influence the delivery of future parks, trails, and open spaces. Current and future municipal staffing capacity will need evaluation to ensure delivery of quality park experiences and well-maintained facilities. Early preparation in both of these areas can help better position the City for the exciting work ahead.

Articulate the City's goals. The City's vision for its open space assets should be demonstrated through sustainable park programming and activation. Local partnerships can help support these efforts, and positioning parks as welcoming to all can encourage residents and visitors to linger and enjoy nature and recreation.

Use regulations for maximum benefit. Municipal regulations can be used to inspire the actions the City wants to see, including improvements that serve multiple functions and design standards that promote native plants, guide lighting decisions, and incorporate functionality and accessibility. Utility easements and other land dedications can help cities acquire land for trails. National programs, like [Tree City USA](#), can provide supportive funding and educational support, and state programs like the Natural State Initiative (NSI) Economic Opportunity Zones can provide tax credits to encourage certain development near state parks.

Plan for future staffing needs. A new and expanded parks, trails, and open space master plan will require additional

administrative support. Existing City staff may benefit from new learning opportunities, and a separate parks department may be needed to support operational capacity. Advisory boards, committees, and City liaisons with civic groups can expand the capacity of City staff and encourage broader community buy-in through direct participation in the efforts.

Consider other key factors. Additional experience to consider adding to the RFQ might include experience working with small towns, programming sustainability, land regulations, innovation, placemaking, and near- and long-term implementation plans.

Key Takeaways

As the City drafts its RFQ for parks, trails, and open space planning, the panel emphasized the following elements.

- A multi-disciplinary approach will be needed and should include expertise in the areas of landscape architecture, natural resource management, planning, and civil engineering.
- Specific expertise important for Prairie Grove's environment could also include recreation planning, ecological planning, streambank restoration, trails, an active transportation plan, and more.

The following overarching themes can help guide the City in the work ahead, helping to keep staff, elected leadership, and partners aligned on the goals for these important public spaces.

- Prioritize projects using a clear and agreed-upon strategy and capitalize on opportunities as they arise and as the City has capacity.
- Link the City's active and passive recreational spaces to other public spaces and broader regional assets.
- Lean into partnerships across the community to expand the City's capacity and help bring important community participation into these civic projects.
- Expand the concept of a "trail" to create bike facilities on existing city streets and use these and other trails to connect to other public resources beyond just the parks.

The residents and elected leaders in Prairie Grove take great pride in their community, and the city's small-town atmosphere and natural resources are important community assets. City leaders are committed to shaping the city's parks and open spaces to provide residents and visitors with welcoming spaces to play, gather, and foster strong community connections. With a clear vision for its parks, steps taken deliberately and intentionally today can help ensure that the City identifies the right consulting team that can help bring those goals to life in a plan that serves Prairie Grove well into the future. With the continued support of ULI and its planning partnership, the City can deliver parks, trails, and open spaces that are a delight to residents, a draw for visitors, and a cherished resource for the next generation of Prairie Grove residents.



Introduction and Background

Prairie Grove, Arkansas, is surrounded by the natural beauty for which the state is well known. Hills, streams, and prairies are within easy reach and can also be found within the city limits. City leaders recognize the value of these resources and celebrate them in the dedicated open spaces and parks that serve city residents and visitors today.

The city of Prairie Grove is growing at an impressive rate, nearly doubling its population in each of the previous three decades. With this track record of growth, the City of Prairie Grove (the City) is acting thoughtfully, striving to meet the expectations of current residents while also making plans to meet the needs of tomorrow's residents. Looking out 25 years, City leaders are considering how to position Prairie Grove assets to best meet the needs of the next generation of residents—the children and grandchildren of the nearly 8,000 people who call the city “home” today.

Parks, trails, and open spaces are important elements of Prairie Grove. City parks provide the community with structured playgrounds, open green spaces, and play-specific amenities like sports courts, skating areas, and aquatic facilities. Trails wind through these parks today, facilitating walking, running, biking, and other explorations. The Muddy Fork River, flowing along the city's western edge, adds rugged natural amenities to Muddy Fork Park and will be an important feature of Snyder Grove Community Park, a new park planned for 11 acres a mile south of Muddy Fork Park.

Adding to the city's open space appeal is Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park. Situated on the city's north side, this 1,000-acre state park significantly expands the outdoor recreational opportunities for Prairie Grove residents and visitors. In addition to the state park's trails and open spaces, park pavilions invite family and community gatherings, and the park serves as the location for a number of cherished annual festivals and regional celebrations.

It is also important to note that Prairie Grove Lake and Bob Kidd Lake are within easy reach of Prairie Grove residents. Prairie Grove Lake is managed by the City and offers residents and visitors excellent fishing opportunities throughout the summer. Bob Kidd Lake, just outside the city's western limits, is managed by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and provides the region with additional recreational fishing opportunities.

Broader regional resources also play an important role in Prairie Grove's appeal. The Razorback Greenway is just ten miles to the northeast, which connects bicyclists to the region's renowned trails and communities beyond. The Kesler Mountain Park Playground and trails are also ten miles to the east. Beaver Lake, Crystal Lake, and Lincoln Lake are within an hour's drive, as is the Coler Mountain Bike Preserve. Urban amenities in Fayetteville, Springdale, Rogers, and Bentonville are within easy reach of Prairie Grove residents who like their small-town life sprinkled with outings at new

TAP Questions

The City's TAP steering committee posed the following questions to the ULI panel.

1. With a small budget, how does the City maximize growth to serve the entire community?
2. Prairie Grove has two waterway systems with the Illinois River and Muddy Fork. How can the City use these resources for the citizens of northwest Arkansas?
3. How should the City plan while still maintaining and upgrading its existing parks?
4. Can the City connect subdivisions to downtown and connect the city through the State Park to neighboring cities through the regional greenway?
5. As Prairie Grove plans for 25 years in the future, how can it develop “destinations” instead of green spaces? How should the City pursue placemaking in Prairie Grove?

Through its consideration of the City's questions, the panel added the following objectives to its process.

- Refine and/or expand Prairie Grove's questions and translate them into a clear, consultant-ready RFQ scope
- Tailor the City's goals to a reasonable budget for the consultant contract (between \$150,000 and 200,000).
- Articulate what kind of consultant is needed for the work, including areas of expertise, strengths, applicable experience, etc.

restaurants, performances, museums, and larger sporting events.

To help Prairie Grove with its parks, trails, and open space planning, City leaders turned to the Urban Land Institute Northwest Arkansas District Council (ULI) for assistance through its Plan Local and Planning Partnership programs of work. These programs are designed to assist smaller communities in the region with key planning efforts, helping identify elements needed for a request for qualifications (RFQ) and then issuing the call for deeper planning assistance. To assist with the RFQ framework, ULI, using its trusted and objective technical assistance panel (TAP) program, assembled a panel of real estate professionals with the expertise needed to help guide the City in identifying the areas of focus and the elements required

to elevate and expand Prairie Grove's unique natural and recreational environment.

Over the course of two days, the ULI panel toured the Prairie Grove and its parks, met with City leaders, and interviewed stakeholders who shared their perspectives on the opportunities and challenges before the city in its parks and recreation delivery.

What the Panel Heard and Observed

In addition to the parks-specific discussions, stakeholders shared with the panel the following insights relating to the city.

- Residents love the small-town nature of Prairie Grove.
- Residents would like to have more activity, dining, and entertainment opportunities in the city.
- The city is experiencing consistently high population growth.
- The community hosts a number of beloved community-wide events that bring residents together and welcome visitors.
- The residents living in the development on the east side of State Road 62 feel disconnected from the rest of the city and its amenities.
- The Prairie Grove School District owns a significant amount of land that could provide additional recreational opportunities.
- The city's Main Street program is now in place and gaining traction.
- Walkability is important to residents.
- The community would benefit from additional placemaking and wayfinding.



The two days of the TAP launched with a briefing by City officials and a tour of existing park facilities and potential new open space amenities.

The following insights from stakeholders related to the city's parks and open spaces specifically.

- The city's parks are well used but are physically disconnected from one another.
- There is a need for more sports fields beyond the current options that feature smaller fields catering to pee-wee leagues. Making these spaces multi-functional across seasons would be a welcome improvement.
- Residents and bicyclists would like to connect the city's trails to the Razorback Greenway.
- A waterway or new trail connection between Muddy Fork Park and the new Snyder Grove Community Park would be welcomed.
- Big events at the state park draw visitors to Prairie Grove and represent an opportunity to draw these visitors further into the city and downtown.
- While not high-design, the city's park amenities are very functional.
- The Aquatic Park draws patrons from beyond the city limits, and the entrance fee is kept low to promote affordability across the community.
- Management of city parks falls under the Public Works Department, rather than a separate Parks and Recreation department.



The panel toured Muddy Fork Park, walking the trails and observing how visitors access the river and the park's other amenities.



A Vision for Parks

The City and the community are in the early stages of long-range planning for Prairie Grove's parks, trails, and open spaces. To assist, the panel detailed a series of functions that these spaces should serve in a community and outlined a vision for Prairie Grove's open space amenities that might serve it well into the future.

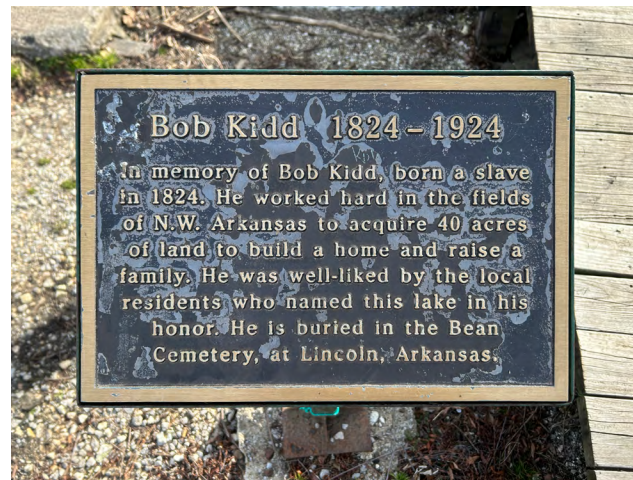
Park and Open Space Functionality

Through the course of his briefing to the panel, Mayor Faulk shared his thoughts on the importance of parks, quoting the theme that "We all need parks for healthy, thriving, and engaged communities." Building on this theme, the panel began with a planning framework and articulation of key elements that parks and open spaces should deliver to a community.

- **Vision.** Prairie Grove should have a vision for its parks and open space that is

informed and guided by the community.

- **Trails.** Trails are important elements of a city's parks and open space character and functionality.
- **Current park uses.** The community's parks provide active and passive recreation opportunities, spaces for special events, and the preservation of important historical and cultural features of Prairie Grove.
- **Access to nature.** In addition to providing recreational opportunities, parks should elevate the natural environment, protect environmentally sensitive areas, and promote resource conservation.
- **Multi-use spaces.** New park facilities should be designed to serve multiple purposes, creating layers of use that serve a broader population and activate the space throughout the year.
- **Expansive appeal.** Beyond families with young children and little league teams, city parks should appeal to a wide variety of users, with opportunities for all generations and abilities to enjoy the outdoors and park facilities.
- **Community building.** Parks serve as community builders, bringing residents together for sports, recreation, festivals, and fun. They can also be spaces where friends can just sit on a bench and talk. Parks should be welcoming to all.
- **Connectivity.** Community connections can be strengthened by parks. Physically connecting public spaces through trails, uses, and experiences can strengthen a community's social connections.
- **Economic benefits.** In addition to providing opportunities for recreation and access to nature, parks can also be



Prairie Grove features a wide variety of park types and open space amenities, with some assets, like Mock Park, located in the heart of the community, while others are outside the city limits, but remain associated with Prairie Grove.

important economic drivers, encouraging tourism, recreation, and use by the surrounding region. Visitors may come to the city for the park and choose to stay for dinner, shopping, and more.

- **Community identity.** Parks, trails, and open spaces can contribute to a community's identity. Each park should support the city's narrative and remind residents why they love their community.

A Vision for Parks

The parks across Prairie Grove currently serve a variety of important uses, including hosting sporting events, providing recreational opportunities, and creating accessible community space for special events and historical storytelling. These spaces are generally community-focused, hold community significance, and make good use of available resources (both staffing and funding). Beyond the basic functionality of the parks, City leaders are carefully considering a new vision for parks and open spaces that could expand the city's resources while broadening recreational benefits for residents and visitors.

As the City contemplates its open space future, the panel provided the following advice to help advance the initiative and create sustainable results.

Think broadly, creatively, and long-term. Contemporary parks stretch far beyond manufactured play structures sitting on turf lawns. Nature has been invited back into

these spaces, providing wilder environments that spark human imagination while encouraging the return of native flora and fauna. Thoughtful long-term planning can support nature and community thriving together while helping ensure that today's investments serve the community well into the future.

Provide a range of spaces and scales.

Park spaces fall into the following broad categories: natural, protection, passive, active, and cultural. Providing spaces within parks that encourage each of these uses will foster environments in which all residents can find the relaxation, recreation, or connection they seek, regardless of age or ability. The city's parks and facilities should

also offer a range of scales, from wide-open areas for team sports and festivals to small groves and benches for quieter moments and conversations. These ranges of use and scale will also support the variety of ages and abilities found across the community, so that all residents can find what they are seeking in the city's public spaces.

Provide for a range of uses.

Single-use facilities, such as soccer fields dedicated to team play during the season, leave opportunity on the table. Creating spaces that can serve multiple uses throughout the year can maximize use time and city investment while serving a broader population. Similarly, spaces for activities beyond team sports, such as biking, hiking, and running, and



While some of the parks welcome quiet observation, other areas could transform into active recreation zones.



Fishing in area lakes is a popular recreational activity.

more passive activities like bird watching and nature walks, should be factored into the vision for the city's parks. Additionally, the lakes and streams in and around Prairie Grove should be factored into the city's open space vision. Dedicated water access points can provide safer access opportunities while channeling access away from other, more delicate areas.

Build connectivity across all things. The city's parks, trails, and open spaces should become an integral part of the city, physically connected and accessible to neighborhoods and schools. Similarly, physical connections to other destinations and activities—such as restaurants, exercise spaces, gathering places, and shopping—should be facilitated by physical connectivity (sidewalks and trails) as well as promotional connectivity (wayfinding and cross-marketing by area organizations). This interconnected approach can support the broader appeal of Prairie Grove as a destination and the parks as key elements of a visit to the city.

Use a nature prescription perspective. Being in nature has been shown to positively impact human health and mental well-being. Trees and a robust tree canopy can support human health by providing shade and trapping and processing harmful carbon dioxide. Nature also has the ability to heal itself when it is allowed to flourish. River cane, for example, was once seen as a nuisance plant, best managed by cutting and conquering, making way for open space and turf. Today, the cane is recognized for its ability to filter water

along streams and rivers and support the integrity of the river banks nearby.

Park Storytelling

Parks can help create a sense of place, and are often overlooked characters in a city's story. Open space and access to nature are regularly taken for granted—until it is in peril or in critical short supply. Using the city's parks, trails, and open spaces to strengthen the story of Prairie Grove and reinforce the city as a destination and community of choice will serve Prairie Grove and its residents well.

Create an identity that includes the parks.

Going forward, City leaders are encouraged to create an identity for the city's parks that can help define the character of Prairie Grove.

Shaping that story and community identity can often become a separate branding exercise, but taking the time to consider an approach that includes the natural and open space resources of the city will help differentiate Prairie Grove from other communities in the region.

Tie the parks to the city, its residents, and visitors. The story of Prairie Grove's parks should be a story about the city, the residents, and the community that the parks help build. The connection to the people and the community should also be a connection to new visitors, whether they are residents visiting a park for the first time, new residents of Prairie Grove, or visitors who may only be spending an afternoon in the community.



The history and rich storytelling found at Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park is an appealing complement to the park's prairies, trails, and other open spaces.



Prairie Grove's downtown, marked by antique stores and other retail destinations, is close to the State Park.

People should be able to envision themselves in city parks, feeling welcome and encouraged to enjoy all that the parks, trails, and spaces have to offer. The park experience should be integral to the Prairie Grove experience.

Focus on wayfinding to the parks. Finding the city's park resources should be easy. While residents are likely familiar with the location of the parks, some parks are tucked behind or between neighborhoods, where navigating to the park feels like intruding on someone's personal space. Signage and wayfinding resources, branded in a manner that complements other city signage, can help new visitors find these public gems and reinforce the idea that these open spaces and natural resources are for everyone's enjoyment.

Strengthen the story of Prairie Grove as a destination. Prairie Grove has much to offer its residents, from enviable small-town life to compelling natural resources. Making that information and messaging clear to new visitors is key to the success of Prairie Grove as a destination. When people think of Prairie Grove, they should think of the city's cultural gems, the ties to history, the ready access to nature, and the unique retail experiences that shape a visit to downtown Prairie Grove.

Additional Benefits of Parks

In addition to providing space for play, community connectivity, and access to nature, parks provide cities and their residents with additional benefits that should be considered when evaluating park investments.

- **Economic.** Parks draw people to a community and invite them to linger. This activity can lead to related spending in proximate commercial districts.
- **Tourism.** Local, state, and national parks are significant tourism draws. Whether visiting the state park on the north edge of town or driving in for water play at the aquatic center, Prairie Grove's parks are already drawing people to the city. Linking the city's parks to other regional recreational draws, such as the Greenway and other biking facilities or the area's lakes, can extend tourism across the region and boost the prominence of Prairie Grove's parks, trails, and other open space resources.
- **Quality of life and health.** A community without a park will struggle to be a community of choice. Parks provide desirable quality-of-life benefits and support healthier environments—in the form of cooling benefits provided by trees and plants, CO2 reduction, access to nature, and greater opportunities for biodiversity in surrounding plant and wildlife. Property values of adjacent privately-owned property are also typically higher than in other areas of a community.
- **Community building.** As noted earlier, parks provide valuable open space for community gathering. These spaces, often much larger than available at any one home, can provide a public space where everyone is invited in, everyone has equal access, and everyone benefits.

Park spaces become communal spaces, relevant to all community members and welcoming to visitors.

- **Placemaking.** Parks can help define a community. Done well, parks become as important a draw as the community or city itself. Central Park in New York City has its own unique identity. Forest Park in St. Louis is home to a number of important cultural institutions and creates a unique experience in St. Louis. The Railyard in Rogers has created a unique space that draws on the area's railroad history and layers on top a contemporary experience that draws visitors far and wide.
- **Connectivity.** The ability of parks to provide connectivity cannot be stressed enough. Physical connections to trails, sidewalks, schools, and neighborhoods are critical. Parks can also provide ideological connections to what makes Prairie Grove special and connect to its history and culture. Connections to nature are made public in parks, elevated with thoughtful access points and educational information that brings additional understanding to the environmental resources at hand. Personal connections—to nature and to one another—are readily available in park spaces. And finally, parks can connect to surrounding commerce, generating revenue and supporting the livelihood of community members.

Parks, trails, and open spaces are threads that weave together the fabric of a community.

Resources and Connectivity

When considering a potential framework for a future parks, trails, and open space master plan, the panel provided the following set of deliverables that this request for qualifications should include.

Connectivity and Active Transportation Recommendations

Going forward, connectivity across Prairie Grove should remain in focus, as should the perspective that parks are key elements in an active transportation plan for the city.

Facilitate regional connections. The proximity and popularity of the Razorback Greenway create a compelling opportunity in Prairie Grove for connections. Other regional catalyst projects and regional open space destinations should also be factored into the broader planning work.

Leverage connections to adjacent destinations. The proximity of the Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park, Prairie Grove Lake, Bob Kidd Lake, Lincoln Lake, and Historic Cane Hill can build on the identity of Prairie Grove as a regional destination. With connectivity to these additional destinations, the City can further expand the impact and depth of the Prairie Grove experience.

Strengthen internal connections. Within the city limits, parks can and should do a better job of connecting to downtown and its “Main Street” corridor experience. Similarly, children, families, and other residents should have easy connections from their neighborhoods to city parks, the library, the senior center,

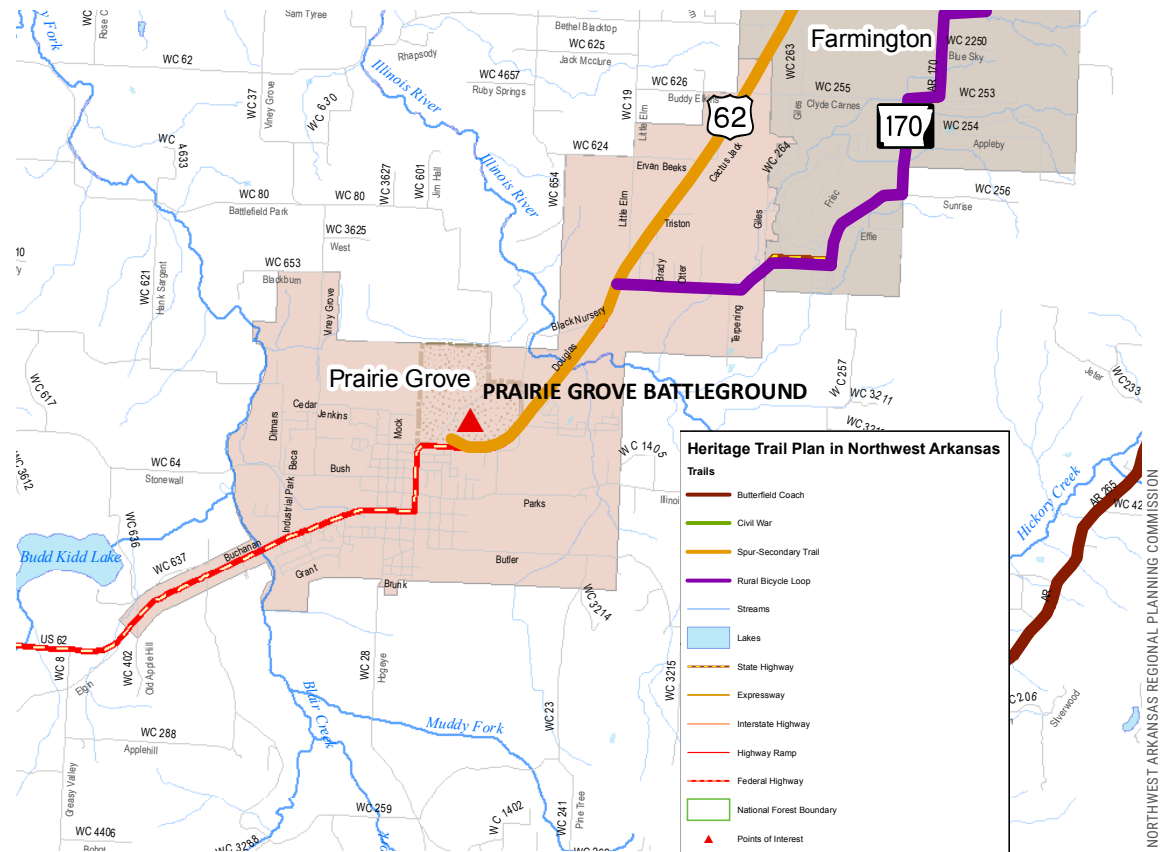
and more. Programs like [Safe Routes to Schools](#), [Complete Streets](#), and [Safe Streets for All](#) can provide the City with additional resources to help with planning, education, and implementation.

Project/RFQ Recommendations

The planning work at hand will require an analysis of existing conditions and a needs assessment. These two key pieces of analysis will help inform the ultimate project

deliverables, which should include a master transportation plan, conceptual designs, and funding recommendations. To drive focus in these areas and gauge expertise, the RFQ should ask that responding teams provide information relating to the following project elements.

Existing conditions analysis. A complete review of the existing city park, trail, and open space resources is warranted. This analysis should include the following elements:



The Northwest Arkansas Heritage Trail Plan connects to Prairie Grove and the State Park.

- **Physical resources.** These resources include destinations, amenities, and existing facilities within the city limits, those under City management, and those within close proximity of Prairie Grove, such as Bob Kidd Lake, that are generally recognized as Prairie Grove community resources.
- **Partner-owned spaces.** These resources could include facilities with which the City has a formal partnership agreement. An example could be the Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park, which sits outside of City oversight and ownership, yet with which the City has a close working relationship.
- **Regional plans.** Planning efforts in the surrounding environment are important and influential resources that will also need to be considered, ensuring that a Prairie Grove plan complements and leverages these broader efforts. These plans would include the [Northwest Arkansas Open Space Plan](#), the [2015 Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan](#), the [NWA Regional Complete Streets Design Guide](#), and [Safe Streets and Roads for All \(SS4A\) Comprehensive Safety Action Plan](#) (NWA Vision Zero Plan), to name a few.

and other recreational facilities. The Safe Routes to School program has a [toolbox](#) that can help communities better understand and identify the existing and needed resources for moving around the city and moving between key destinations.

- **Physical alignments.** Conceptual plans should incorporate alignments with complete streets design principles and anticipated new trail alignments connecting into and around Prairie Grove.
- **Conceptual alignments.** The trails and transportation plans, represented by the Master Heritage Trail Plan, the Prairie Grove Master Street Plan, and the City's development ordinances, should be incorporated. This is particularly important as the City may wish to include some of its existing streets as on-road bicycling facilities or trails as it works to better connect its parks and open space assets.
- **New transportation connections.** The City is encouraged to require that new developments construct and dedicate park space and trails/trail connections to existing Prairie Grove trails. Instead of building these connections, developers could opt to pay a fee in lieu of such improvements.

Funding opportunities and recommendations. Funding sources and implementation assistance will be needed to fully realize a citywide parks, trails, and open space master plan. The RFQ should request information and experience relating to the delivery of the following items.

Prairie Grove Community Plan





River cane is returning to the banks of the Muddy Fork River, helping to filter out pollutants and stabilize the riverbanks.

- **Infrastructure development.** Firms should demonstrate experience with infrastructure development and guidance, as well as park programming, operations, and management recommendations.
- **Funding familiarity.** Information and guidance relating to viable funding sources at the regional, state, and federal levels will be needed to see this work through to completion, and firms should be ready to assist. Familiarity with transportation-specific programs and funding opportunities would also be beneficial. Programs like [Safe Streets and Roads for All \(SS4A\)](#), [ARDOT Intersection Improvement Program \(IIP\)](#), and more can help communities with these types of plans and improvements.

Conceptual design plans. The RFQ should also make clear that the selected firm will be expected to deliver conceptual park, trail, and open space design plans that incorporate space use and activation recommendations.

- **Civic Plaza and Mock Park.** In the physical center of the community, the plan could call for a new Heart of Community concept, a core-corridor idea that features an “all trails lead to Mock Park” or “Mock Block” concept. This idea, which could include the publicly-owned parcel directly north of the park along East Buchanan Street, could draw in the Prairie Grove Heritage Museum, the Chamber of Commerce, the Fire Station, City Employee Gym, Mock Spring, and the food truck court in the block west between Neal and

Mock streets. Mock Block could become the new home for community events, establishing a “pickin’ park” that leverages the Saturday gatherings at Magnolia house and other musical performances and gatherings to create something that is unique to the city. Other events and dances, akin to the square dancing at the Clothesline Festival or other similar events, could also fill Mock Block.

- **Snyder Grove Park.** The City is considering dedicating land along the Muddy Fork River for new sports fields. While new fields were noted as a community need, the panel encourages the City to instead consider re-prioritizing this land as a nature park and amenity for the adjacent neighborhoods. This use repositioning would prioritize the connection to Muddy Fork and Lake Prairie Grove, would allow for the natural ebb and flow of water across the neighboring land during extreme rain events, and lessen the potential traffic impacts on the adjacent residential neighborhood. (This latter point is important as Snyder Grove Park would only be accessible by vehicle through the adjacent neighborhood, which could become a pinch point for teams, players, vendors, and fans using the new sports fields and a headache for residents.)
- **Muddy Fork.** The parkland that surrounds the Muddy Fork River along the western edge of the city would benefit from a restoration plan that would conserve the existing native river cane and encourage

further growth along the riverbank, helping to further stabilize the edges of the river. The City should also explore the potential for established access points down into the riverbank and stream bed. This could help reduce riverbank erosion caused by visitors creating their own access points. The City noted that it is exploring a potential river crossing, via a footbridge, within the park, which could also assist with accessing the river more directly.

- **Lake Prairie Grove.** Looking at similar lake amenities in the area, such as Lake Atalanta and Lincoln Lake, the City should establish a plan for trail connectivity to Lake Prairie Grove and the forested areas surrounding it. In addition to connectivity to the lake, park programs, trails around the lake and woods, and a dock or pier at the lake would be welcome additions to the Prairie Grove Lake experience. Consideration will need to be taken for the existing shooting range near the lake, ensuring that the use can continue safely in the presence of park users or shifting the range to a separate location.
- **Reiff Park.** The city's aquatic center is an important amenity for city residents and actively draws non-resident visitors as well. While there is a generally held belief that the pool, water features, and neighboring sports fields should be expanded, the firm selected for the planning efforts should conduct a gap analysis that includes the surrounding communities. This analysis will reveal

data that can either support the residents' "gut feeling" or may instead point to a need to better leverage broader resources, including, for example, potential joint sports facility development efforts with neighboring communities, before shifting City funds to these expansion efforts. (As an aside, the panel learned of the City's desire to keep pool entrance fees low, supporting affordable access for all city residents. By increasing the fees for non-resident visitors, however, the City might generate additional revenue that could help fund certain improvements to the facilities.)

- **School facilities.** The panel noted that the Prairie Grove School District owns a considerable amount of land within the city limits. Through a partnership with the School District, residents could begin enjoying the school facilities—playgrounds and sports fields—as part of the city's broader park system during hours when school is not in session. A partnership of this nature could expand park access considerably and help ensure that residents have easy and proximate access to green and open spaces. The City and the School District are encouraged to open conversations around potential future shared use opportunities, and a potential public-public partnership could formalize such a relationship and make clear how the facilities would be maintained and improved over time, and which entity would be responsible.

Community Schoolyards™

In 2021, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) published a report on its Community Schoolyards™ work, which sought to transform America's schoolyards into shared public parks by 2030, thereby providing a "common-sense, cost-effective solution to America's park equity problem." Specifically, "opening all public schoolyards during non-school hours would put a park within a 10-minute walk of nearly 20 million people—solving the problem of outdoor access for one-fifth of the nation's 100 million people who don't currently have a park close to home."

More than 220 U.S. mayors—from across the political spectrum and from cities large and small—have committed to working toward universal park access.

In Atlanta, ULI, in partnership with TPL, Park Pride and Atlanta Public Schools, used schoolyards to help increase park access, bringing together walkability, mobility, and greenspace, with the key priority of advancing inclusive and walkable communities. Through the Atlanta Community Schoolyards project, ULI identified and evaluated mobility options surrounding ten school sites with a keen focus on walkability, sidewalk infrastructure, and street crossings. The result was a set of recommendations the City of Atlanta and the School District could use to increase safe access to the schoolyards and expand access to parks and greenspace citywide.

For more information, see the [Community Schoolyards Project](#) and [ULI Atlanta's website](#).

Regulations and Administration

As the City considers requirements outlined for the RFQ process, the planning work on the horizon, and the anticipated efforts that will flow from the planning work, it is also encouraged to consider how its regulations may need to be adjusted. Current and future staffing support will need to be considered, as will other related factors that may influence the selection of the planning firm and how the recommendations are ultimately implemented.

Considering these factors early in the process can help the City better prepare for the exciting work ahead.

Articulate the City's Goals

The City's park planning goals should include a clear vision for how it views its open space assets and how it would like the community to perceive these spaces. While the panel did not presume to articulate such a vision for the City, the following questions can help City leaders explore pertinent issues that may help shape the ultimate vision for its parks, trails, and open space planning.

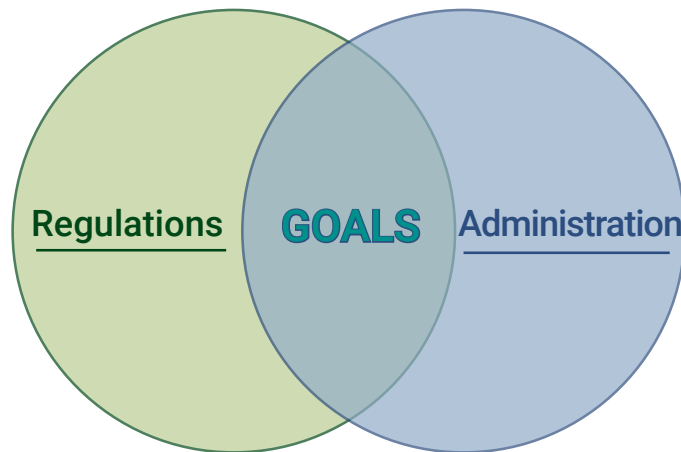
- **Programming, activation, and program sustainability.** How will the parks and open spaces be programmed, if at all? Will the City provide the staffing? Should a new department be formed?
- **Local partnerships.** Which community organizations could provide regular park activations to bring the community into the parks and related open spaces? How would the community benefit from these partnerships?

- **Third places.** Third places are important community spaces that provide gathering spaces for residents beyond individual homes or places of business. Third places often include coffee shops, book stores, libraries, and parks, and are typically spaces where people are invited to visit, linger, and enjoy, often without making a purchase. How will the city's parks, trails, and open spaces function as third places for Prairie Grove residents and visitors?

Use Regulations for Maximum Benefit

Beyond curbing undesirable actions, City regulations should also be used to proactively inspire the actions the City wants to see more of across its jurisdiction.

- **Pursue multifunctional development and design standards.** Multifunctional development regulations can promote improvements that can serve the



The Importance of Third Places

From The Brookings Institute: "Third places' is a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg and refers to places where people spend time between home ('first' place) and work ('second' place).

They are locations where we exchange ideas, have a good time, and build relationships... the most effective ones for building real community seem to be physical places where people can easily and routinely connect with each other: churches, parks, recreation centers, hairdressers, and gyms. Third places have a number of important community building attributes. Depending on their location, social classes and backgrounds can be 'leveled-out' in ways that are unfortunately rare these days, with people feeling they are treated as social equals.

Informal conversation is the main activity and most important linking function. One commentator refers to third places as the 'living room' of society."



community in a number of ways and might end up being more cost-effective for the property owner or developer. An example of this could be requiring that a street light installed in public areas have a built-in mechanism for hanging a banner or sign. Other regulations might include landscaping requirements for properties adjoining the parks and trails that promote native plants, which can help define edges with material other than fencing and assist in stormwater management through natural absorption. Design standards should also be carefully considered in the parks and public spaces. Lighting considerations, in particular, should take into account the needs of those using the park and sports fields, wildlife that may need dark skies for migrating, and neighbors who might not appreciate 1000 megawatt outfield lights shining close to their backyard.

- **Pursue broader programmatic goals to unlock additional support.** National programs like [Tree City USA](#) can provide communities with opportunities for funding and other support while improving specific aspects of the community. In the case of Tree City USA, communities can pursue efforts that support a more robust tree canopy, gain access to sample ordinances, and find educational resources to support their community's understanding of tree planting and maintenance.

- **Evaluate open space and fee regulations.** The City can use its regulatory power to push developers to incorporate trails and open space into their plans. Overlay districts can be added to existing zoning regulations to encourage or require new development or redevelopment to connect sidewalks and trails to the surrounding communities and trail networks. For those developers who do not provide the required percentage of open space, they would instead be required to pay a fee to the City for use in supplying additional or improving open space elsewhere within the community.
- **Explore opportunity zones.** The State of Arkansas established the Natural State Initiative (NSI) Economic Opportunity Zones in 2023 to “encourage private investment and enhance the visitor experience at four Arkansas State Parks.” The zones provide incentives in the form of tax credits to properties within one mile of park boundaries. Although Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park is not yet one of the eligible parks, the panel believes that additional parks will soon be added to the list.
- **Use land dedication for trail acquisition.** There are exciting opportunities to plan ahead for future trail connectivity. Beyond sidewalk connections, trail easements can be built into a subdivision plan at the start, ensuring that the trails connect to and through, greatly assisting future

residents in their ability to walk or bike safely around the community and beyond. Utility easements can also provide good opportunities for trail corridors through land that is vacant, not suitable for buildings, and otherwise unactivated.

Plan for Future Staffing Needs

The ideas posed by the panel and likely to be a part of a parks, trails, and open space master plan will require administrative support. The City is encouraged to plan now for future staffing needs.

- **Staff development.** Existing City staff may need assistance in deepening their knowledge to ensure that parklands, flora, and fauna are able to thrive in the midst of increased human activity. Classes, programs, and other learning opportunities can help expand existing staff capacity.
- **Operational capacity.** There may be a need to expand the City's departments at some point in the future to include a separate Parks and Recreation Department. Staffing a more robust department and ensuring adequate operational capacity will take thoughtful planning, from both budgetary and hiring perspectives.
- **Succession planning.** Public sector employees are often faced with new elected leadership who may have

differing goals or visions for the city. With staff support and guidance, these new leaders can understand the work that has been done to date, the positive impacts it has had and continues to have on the community, and value gained through continued efforts. Some of these same public sector leaders hold a great deal of community knowledge and history, and, when they retire, take that knowledge with them. Establishing a concerted effort to document their insights prior to departure can help capture this valuable community information.

- **Advisory boards and committee development.** Small communities often inspire community members to serve on multiple committees and be deeply engaged in civic life. By allowing staff to make certain decisions without consulting committees, the City can free committee and community leaders' time to focus on the broader visioning and leadership activities the community needs. Similarly, broadening the City's committee structures can provide more residents with opportunities to meaningfully participate in City operations, which can foster more buy-in for City-led activities and improvements.
- **City liaison with civic groups.** The adage to "meet people where they are" applies to civic groups and the public sector. By encouraging a City staff member to serve

as a liaison with a civic or community group, an important line of communication is opened, and trust can be built. This work takes time and extra effort for City staff, but the longer-term benefits to the community make it worth the effort.

Other Key Considerations

There are a number of other items that the City may wish to fold into its RFQ to support the success of a parks and open space plan for Prairie Grove.

- **Small town experience.** Smaller towns have unique challenges and often use their limited resources differently or creatively. It will be important that the selected team has demonstrated experience and success working with similarly situated and sized communities.
- **Program sustainability.** It is not enough to come up with great ideas. Implementing park programming and ensuring that there is a plan for long-term sustainability will be important to the success of the City's park plan.
- **Land regulation.** The City's existing park resources are well situated near neighborhoods, emerging developments, natural resources, waterways, and other amazing assets. Land use regulations can provide important measures to protect parks, trails, and open space today and for future generations.
- **Potential for innovation.** Smaller communities often come with smaller budgets and more limited resources. Park programming may require creativity and innovation, with spaces designed to serve multiple uses and deliver different compelling experiences. This could be important for Prairie Grove's plan, and the selected team should have relatable experience.
- **Small-scale placemaking.** Placemaking is important for a city's public spaces—these are the elements that define a space and help people see themselves there. With smaller parks and trails, placemaking on a smaller scale, yet tied to the broader community, will be important to Prairie Grove.
- **Near-term and long-term implementation.** Near-term improvements to the city's open space resources can help build excitement for the improvements yet to come. The types of improvements the panel envisioned will take years to realize. Consultant teams should be able to balance the phasing of planned improvements, pacing them in a manner that is achievable for a city of Prairie Grove's size.

Key Takeaways

To help the City launch its RFQ efforts, the panel highlighted several key elements that should be factored into the City's RFQ documentation and selection process.

Expect a multi-disciplinary approach.

Across all efforts, the City should use a competency-based approach, looking for specific demonstrated expertise in a variety of areas. It is also important to note that no one responding firm is likely to possess all of this expertise in-house; instead, firms will partner with trusted and capable firms that will help round out their qualifications, responding as one firm but representing several entities.

At a minimum, responding firms should be expected to have expertise in the areas of landscape architecture, natural resource management, planning, and civil engineering.

Look for specific expertise important for Prairie Grove's environment. The following, more nuanced expertise, will prove beneficial in the planning work ahead for the city:

- Recreation planning
- Community engagement
- Ecological planning
- Streambank restoration
- Trails and active transportation planning
- Wayfinding and placemaking
- Branding and storytelling
- Economic analysis
- Educational and recreational programming

- Ecotourism and visitor experience
- Policy and regulations
- GIS mapping and resource inventory
- Urban planning

Additional Topics to Explore

The panel did not fully explore the following concepts in detail during the short window of the TAP, but encourages the City to consider these additional ideas leading up to the selection of its parks planning team. In some instances, certain topics may best be explored with the consultant team, once they are in place.

- **Strengthen the Main Street program.** The city's participation in the Arkansas Main Street program is an excellent idea. Further strengthening this work and building on its early initiatives will help improve the city's core, its commercial sector, and its appeal as a destination.
- **Include master plan context.** Communications and future presentations to residents, particularly those communications relating to new development, should also include information about how new developments will tie into and further expand the city's budding trail system. In addition to highlighting the expanding physical connections, the connections between planning efforts are also important to highlight so residents can gain a more holistic understanding of how this work can improve their quality of

Resources and Guidelines

The following resources and organizations might prove helpful to the City and its professional staff as the planning work begins to take shape:

- [AASHTO Guide of the Development of Bicycle Facilities](#)
- [PROWAG \(Public Right Of Way Access Guidelines\)](#)
- [ADA \(Americans with Disabilities Act\)](#)
- [WALROS \(Water and Land Recreation Opportunity Spectrum\)](#)
- [Low Impact Development Principles](#)
- [NRICRSW \(National Research Institute for College Recreational Sports & Wellness\) Space Planning Guidelines for Campus Recreational Sports Facilities](#)
- [NRPA \(National Recreation and Parks Association\) Programming and Guidelines for Recreational Facilities](#)
- Sports Field Management Association
- Little League Field Specifications
- [Northwest Arkansas Regional Open Space Plan](#)
- [Northwest Arkansas Regional Food Assessment](#)
- [Universal Design Principles](#)
- [FEMA Floodplain Study, Benton County Flood Mapping](#)
- [NACTO \(National Association of City Transportation Officials\)](#)

life, make their community safer and more appealing, and possibly enhance their personal investment in and commitment to Prairie Grove.

- **Update City codes.** The foundation that the park planning team will lay for the City should be supported by municipal codes that include connectivity requirements, particularly pedestrian and bicycle connections.
- **Adopt a riparian ordinance.** The two rivers flowing through Prairie Grove need protecting, particularly in light of a booming population and anticipated new development. A riparian ordinance or overlay can help residents, developers, and the broader community understand what is safe to build and where along both waterways.
- **Conduct a flood study on the Muddy River.** Better understanding the Muddy River's movement, floodplain, and related flooding potential would serve the city well. If one has not been conducted recently, the panel recommends that the City conduct a flood study along the waterway. The results of such a study could help inform the City's concept for new sports fields at its proposed new park (Snyder Grove) or a shift to the panel's recommendation for a more nature-focused park there.

Key Themes

The following overarching themes can help guide the City in the work ahead, helping to

keep staff, elected leadership, and partners aligned on the goals for these important public spaces.

Prioritize projects. Use a clear and agreed-upon strategy and available tools to help prioritize projects and capitalize on opportunities as they arise and as the team has capacity. An example might include identifying the priority connection route(s) to the Razorback Greenway and limiting City land acquisitions outside of the City's defined target areas.

Link public spaces. All public spaces. Regardless of any formal partnering decisions, the city's School District properties should, at a minimum, be linked to the city's active recreation areas, including parks and sports fields, as well as the more passive park spaces. Connections should provide residents and visitors with opportunities to explore a variety of trail facilities and surfaces, including hard surfaces on city streets and soft surfaces running through woods and along riverbanks. These trails will better connect the community, residents, and visitors to all that Prairie Grove has to offer while, at the same time, creating a compelling linear park and recreational experience.

Lean into partnerships. Prairie Grove is a community full of passionate residents and organizations that love the city, the people, and the land. While partnering is already well under way in many instances, more formal relationship with the School District, the Prairie Grove Battlefield State Park, Arkansas

Game and Fish, the Main Street organization, the Chamber of Commerce, and other communities organizations like the Lions Club, Boy or Girl scouts, Life Ministries, and area churches can greatly expand the City's capacity and help bring important community participation into broader civic projects, increasing community buy in.

Expand the concept of "trail." In addition to building new recreational trails within and between the City's parks and open spaces, the panel strongly recommends that the City also consider available opportunities to connect to the regional trail network to expand its own trail network and provide better connectivity for residents and visitors. Within the city limits, there are also numerous opportunities to create bike facilities on existing municipal streets. These dedicated bike lanes can greatly expand the ability of bikers in particular to connect more safely between area resources while widening access to current and future residents and their neighborhoods.

The planning work before the City of Prairie Grove is exciting and has the potential to meaningfully impact residents today and well into the future. The next step, drafting and issuing a request for qualifications for a planning team, will set the City firmly on its path toward a future where the community is better connected, natural resources are highlighted and protected, and the city is a draw to visitors far and wide.



About the Panel

Mary Madden
Panel Chair
Madden Planning LLC

Mary Madden has more than 25 years of experience in the fields of urban planning and design, community development, and historic preservation at the federal, state, and local levels. Her practice includes planning and urban design for public and private sector clients, with an emphasis on revising zoning codes to promote smart growth, sustainability and New Urbanism. She has worked in communities ranging from aging mill towns to mid-sized cities; from vibrant college towns to booming suburbs. In addition to working directly with communities, Mary frequently speaks and writes on the topics of urban design and form-based codes. She is currently an active participant in CNU's Project for Code Reform. Before beginning solo-practice, Mary was a firm principal of Washington DC-based Ferrell Madden for almost 20 years. She also served for almost a decade in several positions at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Earlier in her career, she worked for the Mayors' Institute on City Design and at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Mary holds a Master of Urban and Environmental Planning degree from the University of Virginia and a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from Princeton University. She was a founding board member of the Form-Based Codes Institute (now a program of Smart Growth America).



Danny Collins
Director, Ecological
Design Group
Founder, 37 North
Expeditions

Danny Collins brings a wealth of expertise to EDG, with dual master's degrees in architecture and business administration. After graduation he moved to New York City for 4 years and later moved to Ecuador where he worked as the Expedition Manager for a National Geographic Unique Lodge of the World. His career spans adventure tourism, outdoor recreation, architecture and development, where he has been committed to harmonizing the built and natural environments.

Family led him back home to the Ozarks and his passion for the outdoors led him to start 37 North Expeditions, an Ozarks-based adventure guiding service dedicated to making outdoor exploration simple, accessible, and socially engaging through fully-curated experiences. It's this same deeply rooted passion for conserving landscapes and fostering meaningful connections between people and nature that makes Danny a natural fit for EDG's mission and vision.

His expertise and experience align seamlessly with EDG and our non-profit, studioDRIFT, which is dedicated to strengthening communities in the Arkansas Delta through outdoor recreation project development and activation.



Nicole Gibbs
Transportation
Programs Manager
NWA Regional Planning
Commission

Nicole Gibbs, AICP, is Assistant Director and Transportation Programs Manager for the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission (NWARPC), where she leads regional initiatives focused on mobility, resilience, and coordinated growth. She works closely with local governments, transportation agencies, and community partners to advance projects that strengthen connectivity and support context-sensitive, community-focused development. Prior to joining NWARPC, Nicole served as Senior Planner for the City of Centerton. She holds a Master of Science in Planning and a Graduate Certificate in Heritage Conservation from the University of Arizona, Tucson. Nicole is passionate about collaborative, implementation-oriented planning that maintains Northwest Arkansas' distinctive communities while supporting a resilient, connected, and thriving region.



Jessica Grady
Planner
City of Bella Vista

"I am a city planner with nine years of experience supporting NWA communities through thoughtful, people-centered planning. I hold a CNU-A certification and a bachelor's degree in Workforce Development, which informs my approach to aligning technical planning strategies with local economic and community needs. I am especially passionate about working with small cities, where intentional planning, collaboration, and practical implementation can create meaningful and lasting impact. My work focuses on helping communities navigate growth and change while preserving their character, strengthening resilience, and building capacity for the future."



Alison Jumper
Director of Parks,
Natural Resources and
Cultural Affairs
City of Fayetteville

Alison is the Director of Parks, Natural Resources and Cultural Affairs for the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas where she leads a team focused on creating opportunities for people to connect to nature, art, and each other. She is responsible for oversight of parks planning and development, recreational services, natural resource and open space stewardship, cultural arts planning and implementation, special events and attractions within the City's Parks system.

Alison is a licensed landscape architect and holds a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from the University of Arkansas Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design. She has worked in both the public and private sectors including philanthropic giving.



Annie Sales
Director of Restoration
Services
Illinois River Watershed
Partnership

Annie Sales is the Director of Restoration Services at the Illinois River Watershed Partnership, where she leads ecological restoration and native plant-based green infrastructure projects that strengthen biodiversity, improve water quality, and deepen community connection to place. She brings expertise in vegetation management, ecological assessment, and sustainable landscape design, with experience spanning large-scale restoration, ecological landscape management, and native plant production. Her work centers on blending ecological performance with community values to create resilient, well-loved public spaces.



John Paul Shaffer

**Bentonville Office
Director
Toole Design Group**



John Paul (JP) is a Senior Planner and the Bentonville Office Director with Toole Design and has extensive public and private sector experience in multimodal transportation planning, public policy analysis and development, and community engagement. He has served clients across the southeastern U.S. by leading complete streets and micromobility projects, multi-disciplinary public engagement, and program development and evaluation. JP's technical work is focused on planning for active mobility, design and policy guidance, and performance measurement.

In 2020, JP moved to Bentonville to lead active commuting and transportation demand management programs with some of Northwest Arkansas' largest employers in his role at PeopleForBikes. Previously, he spent over a decade in planning and community development in his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, including the creation of the city's first comprehensive plan in nearly 40 years.

Grady Spann

**Executive Director and
CEO
NWA Land Trust**



Grady Spann serves as the CEO/Executive Director of the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust (NWALT) with a focus and mission to preserve and enhance the quality of life for all people in Northwest Arkansas through the permanent protection of land.

Prior to leading the NWALT, he spent 28 years with Arkansas State Parks beginning in 1993 as the superintendent of Parkin Archeological State Park. Between 2002-2012, he served as superintendent at Historic Washington State Park and then Ozark Folk Center State Park. He was then promoted to Region 5 Supervisor and then to Director of Arkansas State Parks. Grady retired from Arkansas State Parks at the end of 2021.

Prior to working for Arkansas State Parks, he served in the U.S. Army for nine years as a military tactical intelligence and counterintelligence officer. He graduated from Henderson State University in 1984 with a Bachelor of Science in parks administration and a minor in military science.

Grady is the past president of the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD), past president of the Association of Southeast State Park Directors, former Chairman of the Board of Regents for the NASPD State Park Leadership School and currently serves as a regent. Grady grew up in Recife, Brazil, and is fluent in Portuguese.