



PARKS, RECREATION & OPEN SPACE

BUSINESS PLAN

FISCAL YEAR 2008 - 2010

I. Mission Statement

Wake County Parks, Recreation and Open Space (PROS) shall acquire and maintain parks and natural areas that promote environmental and cultural resource stewardship and provide safe recreational and educational opportunities for all county citizens.

II. Demand Analysis

- a. **Policy Drivers – Several policies and initiatives across Wake County Government direct the services provided by the PROS staff.**

Parks and Recreation Master Plan – Accepted by the Board of Commissioners on October 17, 2003, the plan is the guiding document for park and recreation development for PROS. This plan is currently being updated, and is slated for completion in August 2007.

Consolidated Open Space Master Plan (COSP) – The COSP was accepted on March 17, 2003. This program and plan has been clearly endorsed by the citizens of Wake County through two separate bond issues totaling \$41 million. The COSP guides staff through the acquisition and development of the open space program. PROS staff works collaboratively with all local municipalities and numerous non-profit organizations to implement the recommendations of the plan. The COSP was updated in 2005 and staff is currently evaluating the consultant's recommendations.

Environmental Stewardship Agenda (ESA) – Most recently accepted by the Board of Commissioners on February 21, 2005. This overarching environmental policy is the primary driver for PROS' services. Four of the ESA's six focus areas: Water Quality; Parks, Recreation and Open Space; Air Quality; and Environmental Education and Information are directly impacted by PROS' services. PROS indirectly provides additional programming and services for the ESA's remaining two focus areas of Environmental Health and Solid Waste.

- b. **Demographic Changes – As Wake County continues its rapid urbanization, the demand for leisure services, environmental and cultural stewardship will increase.**

County Population Increases – The Triangle region is one of the fastest growing areas within the United States. Recent statistics placed Wake County's growth rate at over 61 people per day or 22,265 per year. The 1990 census estimated Wake County's population at 423,380. Ten years later, the County's population had risen to 627,846, an increase of 47.3%. The North Carolina Demographer's Office estimated Wake County's July 2003 population at 699,503. The most

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current projections by the Wake County Planning Department estimate the 2006 population at 774,326 and 2007 population at 798,892.

Increases in School Age Children – The Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) is currently the second largest school district in North Carolina and the 21st largest in the United States. Due to Wake County's rapid urbanization, the school system is currently experiencing the largest annual increase in the number of students joining a North Carolina public school system. This increase in new students is felt at all county park facilities. Last year, approximately 32,000 school-age children participated in PROS' environmental and cultural programs. The demand for programming, facilities, partnerships for special events and technical advice for teachers is at an all time high and will continue to grow as the school population increases.

The Wake County Public School System's conversion of many schools from traditional calendar to year-round calendar may also impact services at Wake County's park facilities.

Ethnic and Cultural Changes – Beyond the overall increase in population, there are also major shifts in Wake County's ethnic and cultural makeup. PROS' capability to address the diversity is a challenge.

- c. **Environmental Changes** – As the County's population continues to grow, the conversion of Wake County's natural landscape continues at an unprecedented rate. The natural landscape is being converted at the rate of 27 acres a day, or 9,855 acres per year – an area larger than William B. Umstead State Park. The rapid urbanization of the Triangle region means more people will continue to exert pressure on the existing natural resources and the area's public land managers.

Fragmented Landscape – Wake County's landscape is becoming increasingly fragmented, with small pockets of woodland surrounded by increasingly large areas of residential and commercial development. This landscape pattern reduces core wildlife habitat and cuts migration and movement corridors. One consequence of this fragmentation is an increase in the involuntary interaction between wildlife and citizens, sometimes negatively as with whitetail deer/auto collisions and the threat of rabies. One benefit of the County's Open Space Program is the protection of stream corridors, which are also used as wildlife corridors.

Lack of Stewardship – As a result of our Open Space bonds and collaborative efforts, Wake County has protected approximately 2,800 acres of undeveloped land. Unfortunately, Wake County lacks a formal stewardship program for its open space lands while issues arise from illegal dumping and hunting, as well as the increasing presence of exotic and invasive plant species. A stewardship program could accomplish three goals: provide access to these public lands,

provide maintenance and resource protection for these properties and reduce the county's liability exposure brought about by lack of oversight.

III. Goals

a. Maintain current facilities and resources to the highest standard.

- Hire and retain a competent professional work force.
- Work with General Services Administration.
- Participate in the annual Maintenance Assessments.

b. Acquire and maintain a unique system of open space and parks while providing quality leisure opportunities for all citizens of Wake County.

Objectives

- Update the Wake County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan.
- Evaluate the recent update to the Consolidated Open Space Plan and recommend changes in program policy and direction.
- Develop an Open Space Stewardship Program.
- Update and complete the site master plans at existing park facilities – American Tobacco Trail, Blue Jay Point County Park, Crowder District Park, Harris Lake County Park, Lake Crabtree County Park, Historic Oak View County Park and Historic Yates Mill County Park.
- Begin master plan development for three new park facilities at Little River County Park, Southeast Wake County Park and Lake Myra.
- Continue to acquire land for a Southeast Wake County Park.
- Support Partners for Open Space and the Environment, the Open Space and Parks Advisory Committee and the Upper Neuse River Clean Water Initiative.
- Generate interest in a future Parks and Open Space Bond.

c. Engage the citizens of Wake County in environmental and cultural stewardship through effective educational programming, public involvement and special events.

Objectives

- Provide programs and special events that promote the message of the Environmental Stewardship Agenda.
- Maintain a high level of interaction and collaboration with the Open Space and Parks Advisory Committee to ensure citizen input on division related initiatives.

- Publicly market and promote Wake County Park’s activities and programs in conjunction with the Wake County Public Affairs Office.
- Provide technical assistance to other agencies, public schools, non-profits, other organizations and individuals involved in environmental and cultural education, and recreation services.
- Create and nurture partnerships to provide quality community programming and facilities.
- Program special events that represent the mission of PROS and the interests of Wake County and its citizens.
- Promote and reward volunteerism within our system.

IV. Service Areas

From its inception in 1976, PROS has offered unique services that differ from those offered by other park and recreation providers in the area. Based on our adopted mission statement, three “Service Areas” were created to satisfy the previously stated demands for leisure opportunities in Wake County.

- a. Open Space**
- b. Recreation and Leisure**
- c. Environmental and Cultural Education**

V. Priority Areas for FY 2007-2008

- a. Stewardship** – As a result of two successful public bond referendums in 2000 and 2004, Wake County has grown its open space land inventory exponentially. Of the 2,800 acres of land purchased, approximately 1,700 acres of open space is currently under the direct responsibility of Wake County government. Unlike other properties owned by Wake County, open space lands currently have no dedicated resources for their stewardship, leaving an approximately \$20 million investment unattended. A funded and staffed stewardship program could accomplish three goals: provide access to these public lands, provide maintenance and resource protection for these properties and reduce the county’s liability exposure brought about by lack of oversight. A draft Land Stewardship Business Plan was developed in conjunction with several county departments and outside partners to begin laying the framework for this program. Open space land stewardship will continue to be a priority for PROS, on both current and future lands.

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Stewarding our lands demonstrates accountability towards our investments, reduces liability, and promotes the original intention of the acquisitions, which is environmental and cultural protection for the future of Wake County.

- b. Planning** – Programs and facility planning, implementation, oversight and evaluation is a progression aimed at meeting citizen’s needs. Timely research on programs and services similar to those offered by PROS allows us to provide the most effective and efficient programs and services possible. A re-organization within the County in 2005, in which two PROS administrative staff were transferred to other county departments, reduced our ability to provide some aspects of planning, research and oversight. An example of this is the Recreation Land Dedication Ordinance (RLDO), which requires a substantial time commitment working with developers and the Wake County Planning Department. In addition, is the annual Park Maintenance Assessment process, with the aim of upfront maintenance as opposed to backend repair or replacement. The County has begun an update of the Parks & Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan, with a tentative completion date of August 2007.
- c. Safety** – PROS operates seven regional and district parks throughout Wake County. Ranging in size from 33-acre Crowder District Park to 680-acre Harris Lake County Park, our parks contain varied landscapes and terrains including lakes. Many of our facilities are “in the County”, outside municipal jurisdiction, for emergency response. Facilities are open 361 days per year, with a summer peak operation of a 13-hour day. These parameters and others create many unique operational challenges for staff. Staffing our parks relies heavily on part-time employees filling a number of responsibilities including opening and closing facilities, providing educational programs, emergency response, and maintenance of facilities and grounds. Part-time employees are in many cases college/high school students who are interested in seasonal work or individuals not able to commit to long periods of employment. This provides a great challenge to PROS full-time staff with training, consistency and turnover. PROS makes every effort to use well-trained and experienced staff in as many roles as possible but it is challenging to do with our reliance on part-time workers.

Part-time and full-time employees often work alone. Our employees almost universally close the parks nightly by themselves due to the lack staffing. Providing a safe working environment for employees as well as a feeling of safety for visitors is crucial to the success of our services.

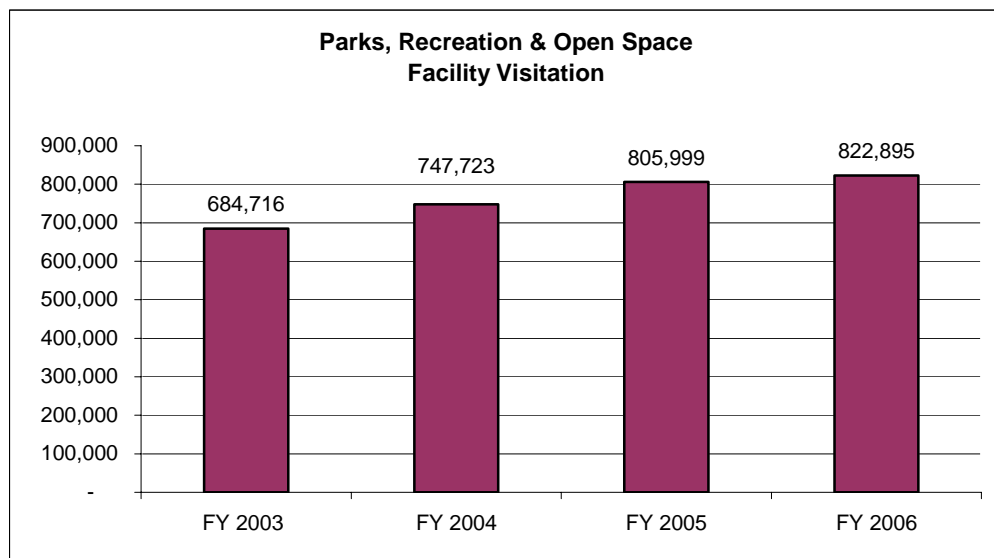
PROS has undertaken an internal staffing study to look at staffing levels at the individual parks. The study is slated to be completed by March 2007.

VI. Status Report on Service Delivery

- a. **Level of Service Delivery** – Trends in attendance clearly demonstrate the demand for county park services. PROS has experienced a 70% increase in visitation during the five-year period starting in FY 98-99.

From 1990-2000, Wake County’s population increased 48.3%, while during that same ten-year period, PROS experienced a 375% increase in visitation to its parks. Visitation to our facilities is increasing on average at a pace eight times faster than the corresponding rate of population increase in the county.

TOTAL PARK VISITATION

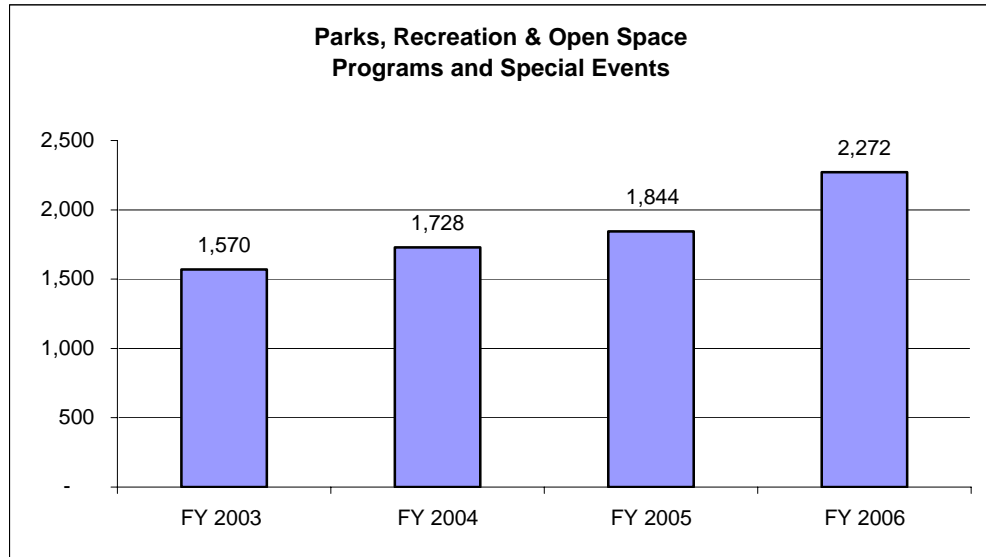


Comments:

- This chart includes two months of visitation data from Yates Mill County Park, which opened in May 2006.
- PROS visitation increased approximately 20% in this four-year period.

(NOTE: This visitation data only includes our 7 staffed park facilities – American Tobacco Trail, Blue Jay Point County Park, Crowder District Park, Harris Lake County Park, Lake Crabtree County Park, Historic Oak View County Park and Historic Yates Mill County Park.)

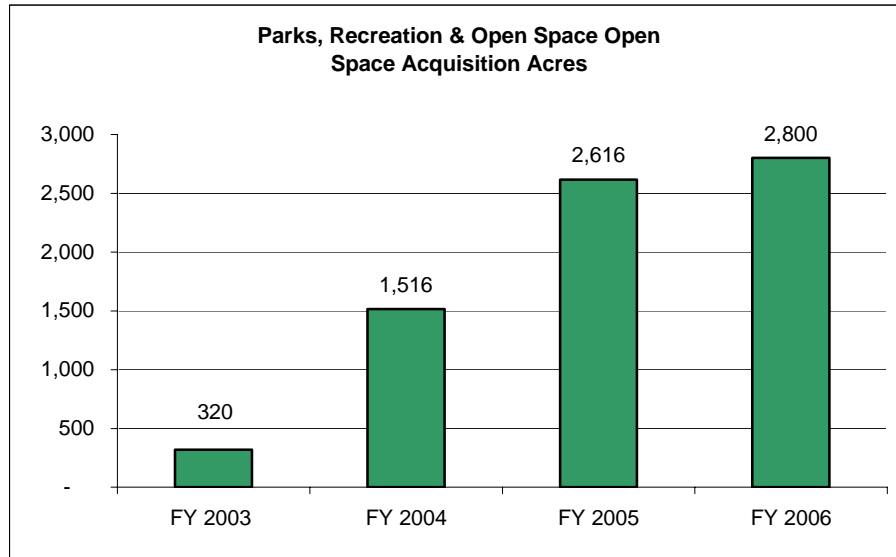
NUMBER OF PROGRAMS AND SPECIAL EVENTS



Comments:

- The number of programs presented by PROS increased by approximately 45% between 2003 and 2006.
- This chart shows that on average over 6 programs/special events a day are offered within the Wake County Parks system.

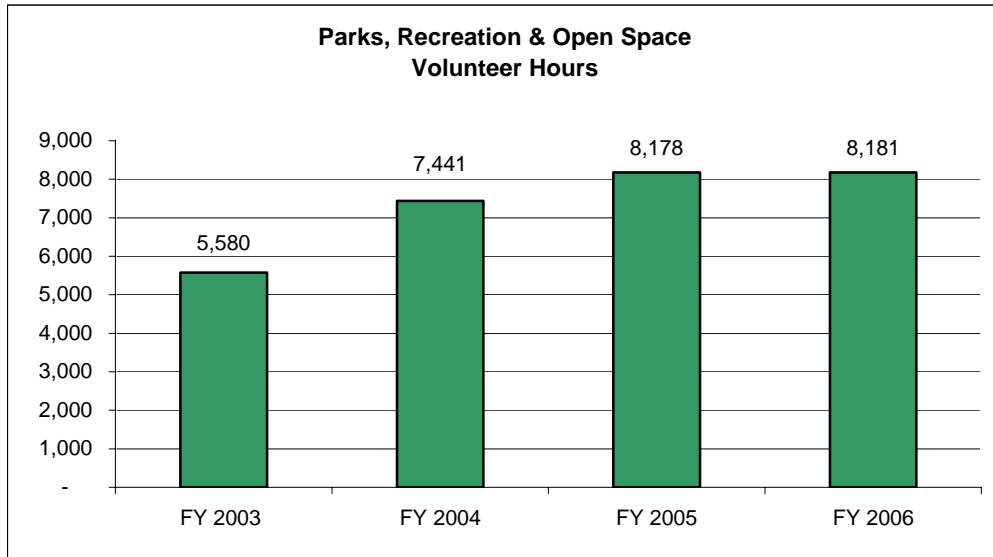
TOTAL ACRES PROTECTED



Comments:

- The total acreage protected through the open space program has increased approximately 775% in the last four years.
- As land prices escalate in the Triangle region, current bond fund proceeds will be exhausted before the County reaches its goal of protecting 30% of its land area.

TOTAL NUMBER OF VOLUNTEER HOURS



Comments:

- The number of volunteer hours in the last four years increased approximately 47%.
- Over the last four years Wake County has received an estimated cost savings of \$293,800 through PROS volunteers (This estimate is based on \$10/hour, the average rate for PROS' part-time employees).

(NOTE: The Wake County Board of Commissioners values volunteer help at \$17.50 / hour. This rate would make PROS volunteers worth \$514,150)

b. Conditions and Impacts on Service Delivery

- **Consolidated Open Space Plan Appraisal** – Greenways, Incorporated has completed its evaluation of how the COSP is being implemented across Wake County. Staff is currently reviewing the consultant’s recommendations and anticipates that the results of this appraisal will assist them in developing the needed changes for the program.
- **Update of Wake County’s Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan** – The firm of Bucher, Willis & Ratliff has been retained to update the County’s Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan. It is hoped that this update will lead PROS’ future park development at its existing and new facilities. This plan is slated for completion in August 2007.
- **Completion of the PROS Staffing Study** – PROS has undertaken an internal staffing study to look at staffing levels at the individual parks that will also aid in developing a staffing model for future facilities. This committee lead effort includes representation from Wake County’s Human Resources and Budget Departments. The study is slated to be completed by March 2007.
- **Loss of 2 full-time employees** – Last year, PROS lost two full-time employees to County re-organization. The only PROS Project Manager/Planner was moved to Facilities, Design and Construction. Currently there are no employees within parks dedicated to planning, research or project management beside the Director and Open Space Planner. In order to move forward with a County Park system, there is a need for additional staff focused on park planning and related programs. The other full-time employee transfer was PROS’ graphic designer. We continue to have the services of the graphic designer but on a limited basis.

VII. Performance Measures

Current Measures of Performance

- **Consolidated Open Space Plan Appraisal Process** – PROS hired Greenways, Inc. to conduct a third party appraisal on how the open space program is being implemented. Staff is currently reviewing Greenways, Inc’s recommendations.
- **Park Facility Maintenance Assessments** – Annually, PROS staff works in conjunction with GSA to conduct a thorough assessment of the facility conditions and needs for each school, district and regional park. Based on these assessments a prioritized list of park improvement projects is created.

Future Measures of Performance

- **PROS Master Plan Appraisal and Update** – The firm of Bucher, Willis & Ratliff has been retained to update the County’s Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan. It is hoped that this update will lead PROS’ future park development at its existing and new facilities. This plan is slated for completion in August 2007.
- **Park Facility Maintenance Assessments** – PROS has now completed its third year of annual park assessments, a GSA and PROS process to evaluate and prioritize needed maintenance and repairs across all the park facilities.

VIII. Horizon Topics

- **Community Level of Service Demands** – PROS must provide the overarching leadership for Wake County with regard to parks and recreation services. Not only do we need to provide for the unincorporated areas of the county, we should be the “tie that binds” the twelve municipalities within the county’s borders together. Both inside and out of Wake County, PROS has set an example of cooperation and collaboration with regard to regional issues on parks and recreation.
- **Open Space Stewardship** – Wake County must no longer neglect the stewardship responsibilities associated with an open space program.
- **Community Use of Schools Capital Fund** – The Community Use of Schools program represents a partnership between the County, Wake County Public School System, municipalities and other non-profit agencies to develop community parks in conjunction with the development of new school sites. Funds are used for land acquisition and/or infrastructure beyond what the school program requires. Park facilities may include ball fields, lighting, irrigation, parking, playgrounds, and picnic shelters.

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Since 1997 the Wake County Board of Commissioners has allocated \$8,750,000 or an average of \$875,000 per year towards the Community Use of Schools. Schools are an integral part of any community and partnerships with the municipalities can provide improvements for the school and for community parks, recreation and leisure programs.

This program is designed to:

- Provide incentive to the municipalities to work collaboratively with the WCPSS for new school planning, land acquisition and development, maximizing the joint use limited public resources
- Promote efficiency in the provision of parks and recreational facilities by the developing of park facilities in areas of targeted growth
- Leverage partnership opportunities between multiple funding sources to maximize the benefits of public infrastructure for schools and parks
- Provide the framework between the County, WCPSS and the municipalities for coordination and communication for long range planning for schools, parks, open space, roads, utilities, libraries, emergency management and other public facilities
- Reduce the demand for the County to provide additional active recreation amenities at its current and future facilities

In the last ten years this program has resulted in over twenty-two (22) school and park partnerships with eleven of the twelve municipalities in Wake County. Opportunities exist for the 12th municipality, Rolesville, in the current 2006 program.

Facilities realized over this time frame that benefit both the specific school and community include athletic fields, gymnasiums, community centers, restrooms, open play areas, interpretive trails, shelters (outdoor teaching spaces), additional parking and utility infrastructure to support the project development.

- **Future Open Parks and Space Bond Referendum** – As land prices escalate in the Triangle region, current bond fund proceeds will be exhausted before the County reaches its goal of protecting 30% of its land area. The County's Blue Ribbon Committee actually called for an increase in this goal to 35%. A future bond referenda or multiple referendum is needed to meet these demands.

Another future demand is park development. The County's has already committed monies for land acquisition and master planning of three future park facilities – Little River County Park, Southeastern County Park and Lake Myra. A portion of future bond proceeds could go towards park development.

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- **Technology** – Technology can aid PROS in many of its endeavors. The use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in planning is fast becoming the industry standard.

Reservation and program registration software can provide needed data for building business cases and formulating budget requests.

Appropriate computer equipment and high-speed Internet access can make employees more efficient and improve the functionality of our parks.

- **Park Planning** – Master planning efforts should be conducted on the proposed Little River County Park, Southeastern Wake County Park and Lake Myra County Park.

As for construction of these facilities, the County should consider the inclusion of park development monies in any future bond campaign.

- **Completing Park Master Plans** – Of the seven regional and district parks currently within Wake County's system, only one has reached the potential reflected in their original master plans. This potential should be re-evaluated through re-visiting each park's master plan.

IX. Conclusions

Wake County Parks, Recreation and Open Space will continue to work towards providing quality leisure services and opportunities for the entire community. As the Triangle experiences its rapid urbanization, demand for PROS services will grow. The focus for PROS through the next fiscal year and beyond will be to: improve its services through improved stewardship of the county's environmental and cultural resources; continued planning to ensure equitable park and recreation facilities across the county; and finally to focus on the safety of our staff and our visitors.

Staff recognizes the importance of these three areas in order to carry out the initiatives set forth by the Board of Commissioners and to meet the demands of the Wake County community.