



## CHAPTER 1



# THE GAME PLAN PROCESS:

creating a vision

**Denver's history of parks and recreation** is rich

with political far-sightedness, civic pride, gifted design, and community generosity. The

*Game Plan*, a strategic master plan for Denver's parks and recreation future, builds on this legacy. It provides a framework of values

to guide planning and development decisions over the next 50 years.





## ▲ A FIRST-RATE PARK LEGACY

Denver’s parks and recreation facilities are unrivaled in the Rocky Mountain West. They embrace nearly 3,000 acres of “traditional” parks and parkways and 2,500 urban natural acres in the city alone, with an additional 14,000 acres of spectacular mountain parks. On the drawing boards are an additional 334 acres of neighborhood and community parks and 1100 acres of natural areas at Stapleton and Lowry. Its 29 recreation centers, seven municipal golf courses, and nationally recognized cultural attractions, such as the Denver Zoo, the Denver Botanic Gardens, Historic Four Mile House, Red Rocks and the Buffalo Bill Museum, serve millions of visitors annually.

The system’s 135-year history spans from the first park, a single block that two savvy developers donated to the city in 1868 to create Curtis Park, to nearly 20,000 acres of urban parks and mountain parkland in 2003.

Our parks capture all that is the essence of Colorado, from sand-hill prairie along First Creek in far northeast Denver to fragile tundra at the peak of Mt. Evans. They span nearly 100 miles, 8,700 feet in elevation change, and five ecosystems.

But Denver also is a highly urban park system. In fact, the city owes much of its urban form and character to the tree-lined streets, parkways, boulevards, and parks that were designed in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Parks give each Denver neighborhood a social heart, an identity and, often, a name.

Parks are about recreation — people “re-creating” themselves away from work and home. Denver is a city of people who like to play and enjoy the outdoors. In survey after survey, Denver residents credit parks, open space, and recreational opportunities for our high quality of life, a close second only to our sunny skies and great weather.

Change is the constant in park and recreation trends and the pace has quickened. People now skate, run, and jog past people strolling. The few street-corner jungle gyms of our early history have evolved into our 29 recreation centers and incredible citywide recreation programs.

“When you’re in big congested cities and there’s not a lot of front or backyard, the neighborhood park is your front yard. The most important park is not ... the Grand Canyon, it’s the local park.”

Mayor Wellington E. Webb

City Park by moonlight ▲



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## ▶ THE MANDATE FOR THE GAME PLAN

Denver planners, leaders, and residents shaped this incredible legacy deliberately, and always with an eye toward building on the past. Denver now faces considerable change — new leisure and work trends, demographic shifts, and increasing population density — with no adopted strategic plan for its parks, recreation, and open space.

The last city-wide parks plan was completed in 1986 and never adopted. Denver Parks and Recreation (DPR) and Denver residents wanted to fill this critical void with a plan for the future to protect and extend the existing legacy.

That community mandate was reflected in the Denver Comprehensive Plan 2000, the planning and development guide for all city departments and agencies, which called for DPR to create a master plan as the department's top priority. As a supplement to the Denver Comprehensive Plan 2000, the *Game Plan* will guide DPR's budget, capital development, and policy decisions, as well as provide a planning framework for collaborations with other city agencies, organizations, and businesses.

### The Public Process: A Continuing Dialogue

Thousands of Denver citizens participated in the *Game Plan* process. Working with a citizen advisory committee (CAC) and the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, DPR engaged the public in a 16-month process to develop this plan. The public process entailed extensive opportunities for community input from 14 public forums, formal and informal surveys, six focus groups, and website.

Thousands of individual comments were considered in making recommendations. Bilingual and alternate materials were available for the public forums:

- ▶ February/March 2001 quadrant meetings
- ▶ Nine June 2001 open houses held in parks across the city
- ▶ Two April 2002 open houses and a public hearing
- ▶ Six focus groups engaging youth and non-English speaking communities
- ▶ Two meetings in Jefferson County for communities surrounding mountain parks
- ▶ The *2001 Game Plan Survey*, yielding 1,500 responses



▶ Game Plan open house, June 2001

### DPR at a Glance

- ▶ Denver 2000 Population~ 554,636
- ▶ Size~64,176 acres (without Denver International Airport)
- ▶ Urban parks~3,000 (irrigated) acres, plus 343 planned acres
- ▶ Urban natural areas~2,500 acres, plus 900 at Stapleton and Lowry
- ▶ Municipal golf courses~7 (942 acres)
- ▶ Largest city parks (in acres)~City Park – 314, Sloan's Lake – 290, Washington Park – 195
- ▶ Mountain parks ~14,000 acres
- ▶ Parkways ~100 miles
- ▶ Greenways and trails ~135 miles
- ▶ Recreation centers ~29
- ▶ After school sites ~27
- ▶ Pools ~19
- ▶ Skate parks ~1
- ▶ Employees ~1,400-1,600 seasonal and full-time
- ▶ Annual budget ~ about \$56 million (total capital and operating)



- ▲ Informal recreation-center user surveys
- ▲ A focus group with current and potential nonprofit partners
- ▲ More than 200 individual presentations to organizations across the city
- ▲ City Council briefings
- ▲ Staff retreats, workshops, and presentations
- ▲ Interactive *Game Plan* web site at [www.denvergov.org/gameplan](http://www.denvergov.org/gameplan)

“Denver can be made one of the ordinary cities of the country, or she can be made the Paris of America.”

Mayor Robert Speer: 1907

▲ Crofton Elementary students design a park



Those community patterns — of use, of values expressed, of ideas — are woven throughout the *Game Plan*. The *2001 Game Plan Survey*, a statistically valid seven-page instrument, yielded 1,500 responses and provided extensive information on park and recreation use, values, and priorities. The survey reveals that residents greatly value all parts of Denver’s parks and recreation system and consistently support mountain parks and urban natural areas.

Compared to other cities, Denver’s parks are well-used. More than 90 percent of Denver residents surveyed had visited a park or recreation facility in the previous year, significantly higher than a national average nearer 65 percent. And, overall, residents are very pleased with Denver’s parks and recreation programs.

Yet residents surveyed are also less satisfied with resources committed to park

maintenance, and are inclined to feel that distribution of resources within the city is not entirely fair. Denver residents want the city to balance adequate care of existing facilities with thoughtful expansion for the future.

A majority of residents were willing to pay at least \$4/month for either additional amenities that they especially value or for increased maintenance.

Finally, some recommendations for DPR policies were consistent from source to source.

Priorities for DPR programs should be to serve youth and seniors. Adults programs consistently rated last. DPR should strengthen its relationship with the community through better communications, accountability, and community involvement. And DPR should increase its environmental stewardship through all aspects of the department, especially in water conservation.

As the *Game Plan* moves forward into implementation, this public dialogue will continue with community oversight to measure the plan’s progress and development of a community voice in all aspects of the parks and recreation system.



## ▲ THE VALUES FRAMING THE PLAN

The *Game Plan* is a value-driven strategic framework, divided into two broad parts. First, it offers a 50-year physical vision of Denver as a City in a Park: ideas for the future, as well as ideas for today. Second, it recommends short and long-term policy, management, and community actions to implement the vision. It presents a mandate for new, more responsive city policies and funding strategies.

As a framework plan, the *Game Plan* offers the big picture but fewer specific recommendations for individual parks, recreation facilities and programs, or DPR divisions. It provides information and criteria that will help the city make decisions and respond to future requests and trends.

It also clarifies values that the people of Denver expressed as important for their parks and recreation system. These four values, which are inherent in our park legacy and are articulated in the Denver Comprehensive Plan 2000, direct DPR to work towards:

- ▲ a sustainable environment,
- ▲ equity in facilities and services,
- ▲ engagement of the community, and
- ▲ sound economics.

All *Game Plan* recommendations, in fact, are made with these values in mind. They are the determining criteria for allocating resources, for DPR management and accountability, for continuing our partnership with the public, and for protecting Denver’s open spaces for the future. These values determine the priorities for physical ideas for A City in a Park, and are summarized as follows:

### **Sustainable Environments**

The *Game Plan*’s first priority is to protect the park system’s physical resources. Discussions about vision, new trends, and expansions are meaningless if policies and funding are inadequate to keep even the current physical resources — natural ones such as open space and adequate clean water, or built ones such as irrigation systems and historic structures — in good condition.

The issue is one of sustainability — of designing, building, and maintaining our resources responsibly so we will be able to appreciate them well into the future. That means building, adapting, and managing the park and



▲ Red Rocks, circa 1890



Congress Park scooter ▲

“Priorities for DPR programs should be youth and seniors. Adults consistently rated last.”



recreation system to survive in and contribute to a drought-prone, water conscious City.

Denver’s parks and recreation system has the potential to be a national model in protecting natural and built resources. The *Game Plan* provides direction that will strengthen DPR’s leadership in protecting our resources through new strategies and policies for environmental responsibility, preservation of historic places and structures, and high standards of design, construction, maintenance, and programming.

### Equity

How the city expands our parks and programs and allocates resources will be based on equity, meaning comparable distribution, access, and quality across the city. It does not imply equally dividing the annual budget pie or providing identical amenities for everyone. Parks, parkways, natural areas, and recreation centers should vary across the city, reflecting geography as well as the needs, character, and history of neighborhoods.

However, access to open space and facilities — including parks, trails, natural areas, tree-canopy cover, recreation facilities, playgrounds, ballfields, waterways, amenities like flowerbeds, and recreation centers — should be distributed equitably across the city.

Equity also means applying equally high standards of quality construction, programs, and maintenance across the city. And, from sidewalks to cultural events, equity means that public places and programs are physically accessible to all populations.

Based upon an analysis of park and recreation services across the city, the *Game Plan* provides data for equitable and informed discussions and funding decisions. It offers strategies to balance the needs of underserved established neighborhoods with the needs of new or emerging neighborhoods.

### Engagement

Highly successful parks and recreation departments anticipate, respond to, involve, and respect their users. Engagement means that Denver residents are encouraged to participate in every aspect of the park and recreation system, including programming, park design, and maintenance.

It means that DPR policy and vigorous community outreach invite all voices in the process, especially youth. In turn, Denverites are encouraged to take an active stewardship role as volunteers and advocates. DPR resources are also strengthened and leveraged through innovative partnerships with other

City Park tennis lessons ▲



▲ Park festival, circa 1960





agencies and organizations dedicated to open spaces and recreation. A policy of engagement also results in a park and recreation system that richly reflects Denver, our cultural diversity and evolving recreation trends.

And, finally, engagement means that Denver's parks and recreation facilities and programs should serve the community in a much broader sense, as public places alive with programs and opportunities for Denver residents to learn, to create and to thrive. Parks and recreation centers are places for job training, environmental education, or community festivals — economic and social catalysts for neighborhoods.

### Sound Economics

Ensuring a sustainable parks and recreation system requires adequate funding. The *Game Plan* emphasizes the need for creative sources for both operating and capital dollars. Our ability to develop new parks and programs depends upon our ability to maintain our current system while securing funds for improvements and acquisitions.

This requires realistic and sustainable economic practices and dependable revenues. It also takes a skilled staff to develop and manage high-quality programs and facilities.

The *Game Plan's* financial proposals are based on analysis of existing infrastructure, identification of neighborhoods “in need,” and financial patterns over time. The recommendations vary from increasing public funding to compensate for chronic capital underfunding to improving our business relationships with service providers.



Edging Commons Park ▶



▶ “Hands on Denver” volunteer



Contemporary playground at Lowry

## ▲ A CITY IN A PARK: FROM VALUES TO PHYSICAL VISION

What new ideas or emphases could enhance our extensive and beloved park and recreation system? What needs to be protected? Changed? What does a 21st-century City in a Park look like? It signifies a change in how we define our parks and recreation programs as well as how we design, build, and manage them.

As a City in a Park, Denver itself becomes a large park, with streets, buildings, and people as integral elements of a rich and varied landscape. It begins at our front doors and extends to the mountain and prairie parks. And it embraces the public realm in its entirety.

The City in a Park vision is built upon five broad themes. The first three reinforce current planning directions in Denver:

- ▲ building new parks in new places;
- ▲ celebrating the Colorado landscape in the city; and
- ▲ responding to 21st century needs and trends.

The final two themes chart new territory for DPR and Denver. Then weave together land and the work of various city departments with new ideas about places: transforming open

space into green infrastructure and connecting the public realm. A brief overview of each theme follows, with details in later chapters.

### **Building New Parks in New Places**

Except in developing areas, such as Stapleton, Lowry, and future “areas of change” (outlined in *Blueprint Denver*), where population growth will be channeled, Denver is a city of established neighborhoods and parks. How do we accommodate new types of uses and add park land to bring underserved neighborhoods up to par in these established areas?

*Blueprint Denver* projects 132,000 new residents by 2020. The majority of these new residents will live in areas of change, which will be converted from outdated land uses to new mixed uses and open spaces. This will mean looking at old places in new ways. For example, over the past 20 years, Denver has transformed “brownfields” (abandoned, industrial, or contaminated lands) into new development.

One example is the former railyards along the South Platte River in the Central Platte Valley,



now the setting for dramatic new places such as Commons Park.

In the future, existing and new facilities such as public schools could do double-duty, providing school and community recreation spaces and facilities. Fully built neighborhoods may need to identify and adapt places such as utility corridors or privately owned campuses to develop new parks.

### **Celebrating the Colorado Landscape in the City**

Denver’s mountain parks have offered residents a scenic retreat for 90 years. Today Denver residents also want that taste of wilderness within urban parks and open spaces. A sustainable park system in the arid west must incorporate the plants and landscapes able to survive in and offer relief from drought.

Denver parks can have more natural areas that reveal and restore the Colorado landscape, while continuing to provide spaces for recreation purposes or parks laid out and planted in a formal style.

New parks are beginning to extend beyond Denver’s 19th-century formal parks and parkways planted with bluegrass lawns and non-native street trees. This original “green

grid” of parks and parkways provides a welcome respite within an arid climate. Yet it does little to let people experience the native landscape that gives the Denver region its character and Colorado wildlife their home. Newer Denver parks celebrate the Colorado landscape with its native grasses and the natural ebb and flow of rivers and conserving water.

### **Responding to 21st Century Needs and Trends**

Shade structures over playgrounds? Public “food court” playgrounds? Twenty-four-hour recreation centers? Like any large complex organization with a limited capital budget, DPR can be slow to catch up, let alone anticipate, new directions. And parks and facilities require an intensive investment in fixed capital.

For example, Denver recently opened a \$1 million skate park, the country’s largest, but continues to try to find ways to meet the needs of other residents who desire places to in-line skate, ride horses, and exercise dogs. The *Game Plan* provides a process to help the city stay in tune with the people it serves and to be ready in the 21st century.

Food court as playground ▶



▶ Pelican on the Platte





Stormwater carefully channelled and cleaned



17th Avenue Parkway today

### Transforming Open Space into “Green Infrastructure”

This is a new way for Denver to integrate public open space with other basic city infrastructure, such as stormwater drainage, air and water-quality controls, to transform our park system into an environmental system, into “green infrastructure”.

The idea is to develop and manage Denver as a city in an ecological park. Park lands and facilities will conserve natural resources such as water and energy and protect the quality of our air, water, soils, landscapes, and wildlife habitats.

Although all plants and turf consume water, trees contribute a great deal in return. For example, trees dramatically improve air quality by removing pollutants, and can increase infiltration of ground water. Open spaces can also store and help clean vast amounts of stormwater. As the city retrofits older parks and builds new ones, each piece in the system can contribute to protecting and enhancing the city’s natural resources.

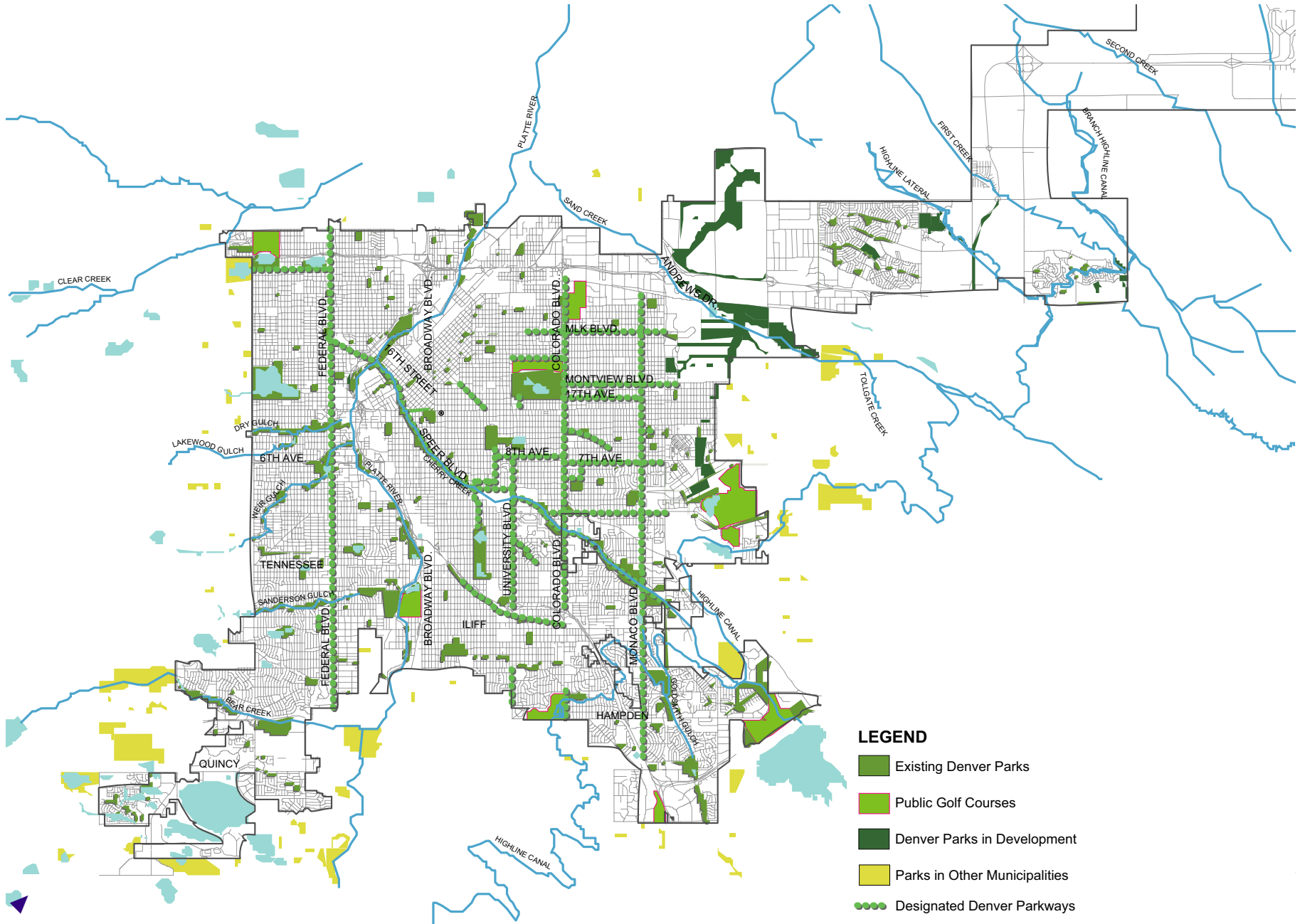
### Connecting the Public Realm

The City in a Park vision weaves Denver’s open spaces together into a whole. It begins at each

resident’s front door, with thousands of new street trees and sidewalks connecting neighborhoods and creating safe “front yard” green spaces available to everyone.

It extends beyond the edge of the city to a regional web of trails, waterways, and wildlife habitats. In between, the city is connected by public spaces, including downtown civic space, parks and plazas, community gardens, Learning Landscapes in every Denver public school, and public recreation centers.

This comprehensive regional perspective reflects the spirit of Denver’s bold early plans, such as the 1914 Olmsted Plan for the mountain parks and the Sopris-Lee plan in 1868 that proposed Sloan’s Lake and City Park, then located outside of city limits. The *Game Plan* emphasizes new connections between existing sites in the system and proposes solutions for how we get people from their homes, across rivers, roads, and tracks, to parks, schools and downtown.



**LEGEND**

- Existing Denver Parks
- Public Golf Courses
- Denver Parks in Development
- Parks in Other Municipalities
- Designated Denver Parkways

Existing Park and Open Space System



▼ Congress Park art benches



Chess players at Davis Center ▼

## ▲ SUMMARY

### Expanding Our Vision

The physical vision of Denver as a City in a Park stretches our definition of parks and recreation in three broad ways. First, it expands the range of public spaces that function as parks, providing residents with maximum choice and opportunities for access, as well as a rich menu of experiences that respond to neighborhood needs and emerging leisure trends.

Second, it broadens the definition of parks and public spaces across a range of scales, from the front yard to neighborhood to community to region — and connects this system physically to a degree not yet experienced. And, finally, it weaves environmental goals into the design and management of all public spaces.

The City in a Park vision also honors the values expressed by the people of Denver: sustainability, equity, engagement, and sound economics. Those values could translate into the following ten broad goals for the *Game Plan*. Chapter 2 discusses the context — the existing conditions, history, and data analysis for achieving the following ten goals:

**1. More parks and recreation for all citywide.** The *Game Plan* proposes adding more than 700 acres of parkland and distributing them equitably among growing areas and existing neighborhoods. These additions may be made by recycling industrial land, sharing open spaces and ballfields with schools, businesses, and institutions, and even sharing utility corridors.

Within a half-mile of every home are new community gardens, natural areas, walking trails, playgrounds, informal play areas, or interpretive historical and cultural areas. Older parks are refurbished, expanded, and enhanced with new natural areas, public art, and trails. Recreation centers are built and refurbished with higher standards for programs and square feet per user.

**2. Greener neighborhoods with lots of new shade trees . . .** The *Game Plan* vastly increases the city’s tree canopy from the current 6 percent citywide to 10 percent in commercial areas and 18 percent in residential neighborhoods.



Shading and beautifying city streets enhances neighborhood identity and pride, creates pleasant passageways between neighborhoods and city parks, and improves air quality. Trees remain a top priority even in a drought.

### 3. . . . while using less water . . .

The 2002 drought dramatically illustrated the vulnerability of our water supplies. Without sacrificing the historic beauty of our parks or our recreational opportunities, we can reduce water needs (currently 2 billion gallons annually) through more efficient management, better irrigation systems, and by preserving or restoring natural areas that thrive without irrigation.

**4. . . . and conserving other natural resources.** The *Game Plan* also proposes “green,” or environmentally friendly, practices for design, renovation, construction, and maintenance of all buildings and landscapes. These measures will conserve water, energy, and other natural resources, reduce pollution, and protect wildlife habitat.

**5. Improved access: You can get there from here.** Getting to a park or recreation center can be difficult. The *Game Plan* seeks to improve pedestrian, bicycle, public transit, and other routes for people of all ages and

abilities. To achieve this, Denver needs more sidewalks and trails, as well as safer crossings at arterial roads, interstates, and railroad tracks that separate neighborhoods from parks and trails. Existing trail systems need to be vastly improved to weave together the entire region.

**6. Predict the recreation future (What next? Disc golf on in-line skates?)** Thirty years ago, we could not have forecasted today’s passions for cycling, skateboarding, in-line skating, disc golf, and dog-exercise parks. Recognizing that recreation needs evolve, and require both space and special facilities, the *Game Plan* outlines a process for DPR to keep up with trends, resolve conflicts, and provide new recreation opportunities.

**7. Bring a “taste of nature” close to home.** The *Game Plan* proposes more natural lands, including conservation areas and healthy waterways that offer access for every resident of every neighborhood. These natural areas will be woven into a regional system that extends from mountain parks to sandhill prairies. Natural areas save water, provide wildlife habitat, and create more diverse parks and recreation experiences. New parklands may include the sage and golden hues of the natural prairie as well as the deeper green of irrigated lawns and ballfields.



▶ Falcon



▶ City Park picnics, late 1800s



"In connection with the Civic Center and its system of radiating boulevards, the mountain parks will form a climax of beauty and an opportunity for pleasure unequalled."

1913 Municipal Facts

Demand for group picnic areas keeps growing ▲



▲ Northside Park sculpture... and visitor



### 8. A sumptuous past: Protect Denver's historic parks, parkways, and structures.

Denver's oldest parks and parkways are treasures recognized through local and federal historic designation. The *Game Plan* proposes to preserve this legacy through comprehensive training, strict design review, restoration and repair efforts that use durable and historically accurate materials, and preventative maintenance.

### 9. Save another historic treasure:

**Revitalize the Mountain Parks.** Denver's mountain park system includes 46 historic parks with classic structures and scenic drives. They encompass 14,000 acres of natural and historic treasures in three counties. The *Game Plan* recommendations protect and enhance these resources by: making connections that weave mountain parks into a regional system; reducing fire risk; balancing conflicting forms of recreation; and devising new funding sources and management techniques.

### 10. The Game Plan means business: Change the way DPR works, focusing on sound economics and creative partnerships.

The *Game Plan* recommends both incremental and sweeping changes to improve management and to secure funding. It proposes new funding sources, partnerships, and strategies to increase DPR's capital budget and efficiency.

For example, improvements may result from partnerships being initiated with more than 50 schools and from joint ventures with private landowners. Some programs and activities help pay their own way through fees for residents who can afford to pay. Building upon a long and effective history of involvement, residents become even greater stewards and volunteers, participating in park and recreation programming, fundraising, and maintenance.