

Town of Mills River

Park & Recreation Master Plan

May 2021



*Town of Mills River
North Carolina*

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Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION **PAGE 6**

Purpose
Mission
Vicinity Map
Getting to Know Mills River
The Community
Past Plans

2 INVENTORY **PAGE 14**

Overall Map- Existing Park Features & Facilities
Mills River Park Inventory
Banner Farm Road Inventory

3 PUBLIC INPUT **PAGE 22**

Process
Public Input
Stakeholder Meetings/Interviews
Survey

4 ANALYSIS **PAGE 28**

Level of Service

5 RECOMMENDATIONS/ACTION **PAGE 38**

Overview
Master Plan Maps
Recommendations

6 APPENDIX

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Section One:

Introduction



Introduction

The town of Mills River was incorporated in June, 2003 and is within minutes of Pisgah National Forest, Interstate 26, and Asheville Regional Airport. Highways 280 and 191 serve as the major arteries and provide access to the nearby cities of Asheville, Hendersonville, and Brevard. Mills River is 22 square miles in size, is home to approximately **7,500** residents, and has a rich history in agriculture and natural resources.

Since incorporation, the Town's Council has sought to determine what parks and recreation services and facilities the citizens would like to support within the community. Park facilities continue to stand out as a priority and are highly desired by a majority of Mills River residents. The Town has invested greatly in the continued development of its first park, Mills River Park, which currently encompasses 50 acres. The town of Mills River began its planning efforts for parks with the Mills River Master Park Plan, originally adopted in 2008. In November 2016, Town Council adopted an updated version of the Park Master Plan in keeping with the results of the latest Needs Survey. The Town is undertaking its first Parks and Recreation Master Plan in response to this continued support and in order to plan for future needs and growth.

Purpose

The purpose of this Master Plan is to understand the recreational needs of the Town of Mills River, identify the opportunities and constraints of the park property within it, and to make recommendations for the future of the Parks and Recreation department based upon the findings during this process. This shall be done by following a thorough planning process and through the guidance of the Departmental Mission:

Parks and Recreation Department Mission:

Mission: To provide quality recreational facilities, parks and programs, which are safe, diverse, and enriching to the Mills River community.

Vision: Our vision is to make Mills River a happier, healthier, and greener community through programs and places.

Core Values:

- Health and Wellness – We strive to provide the people of Mills River with opportunities to work on both their mental and physical health.
- Conservation and Stewardship – We are committed to preserving, protecting, and enhancing our Natural Resources through education, conservation, and sustainable practices.
- Safety – We work to provide safe and well-maintained spaces.
- Accessibility and Inclusion – We ensure that everyone has access to high quality parks and recreational opportunities.
- Responsibility – We value efficient and effective management of our assets and good stewardship of our tax dollars.

Process:

Inventory

Community

Analyze

Prioritize

Recommend/
Implement



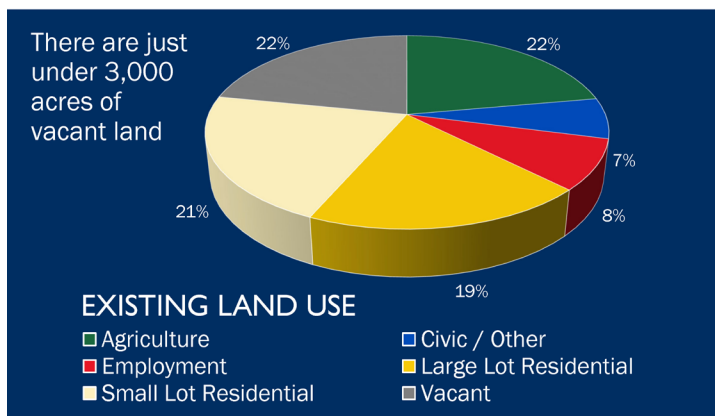
Getting to know Mills River

The town of Mills River is located in the northwestern part of Henderson County and borders the northern and southern borders of the county. The location of Mills River within the County gives residents and visitors incredible access to outdoor exploration and natural recreation opportunities.

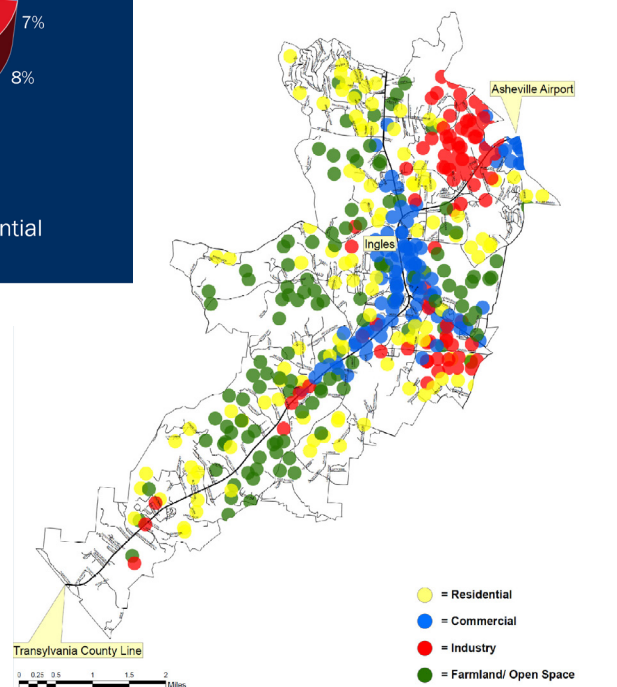
The Town itself encompasses a total area of 22.5 square miles according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The majority is land and a small percentage (0.2 square miles) is water. While water is a small percentage of the Town, its sources offer recreational opportunities. Approximately 4.25 miles of the French Broad River, a primary tributary of the Tennessee River, border the northeastern part of town. The Mills River, a tributary of the French Broad River, flows for approximately 7 miles from west to east through the Town, with the South Fork Mills River running for about 2.5 miles in the town as well. In addition, Boylston Creek, a small tributary, winds across the Town meeting up with the French Broad River to the east.

Nearby are Pisgah National Forest, Dupont State Recreational Forest, Agriculture and agri-tourism sites, local breweries, Asheville Regional Airport, and Interstate 26 are all within minutes of the Town. The major arteries running through the Town are NC 280 and NC 191 provide easy access to nearby towns and cities within the region that also provide recreational and tourism resources within the County.

Mills River falls within the Mills River Watershed which has a large amount of undeveloped and agricultural land cover along with the developed property as indicated in the "Making Mills River" Comprehensive Planning Process. According to public input and existing land use data, there are just under 3000 Acres of vacant land in Mills River. This agricultural identity is part of what makes Mills River unique.



Land Use Data from "Making Mills River" Comprehensive Planning Process



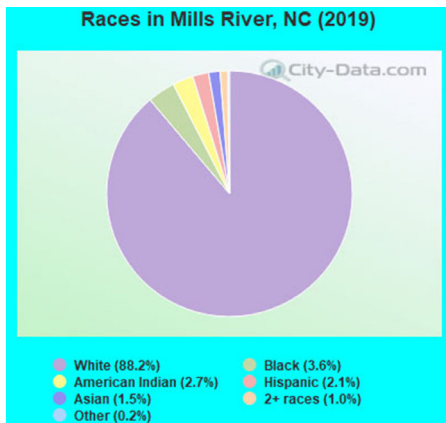
The Community

The 2019 US Census Bureau calculates the population of Mills River is 7406 people. Of those residents, 52.1% are male and 47.9% are female. The median age of residents is 44.8 years of age. The largest percent of the population is under the age of 18 (21.1%) with the second largest age range being those over the age of 65 (20.2%).

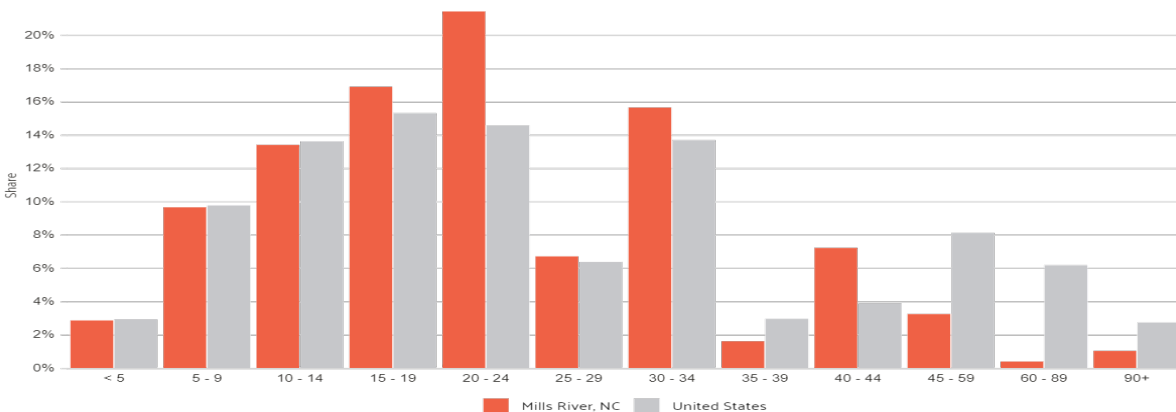
According to the preliminary findings in the "Making Mills River" Comprehensive Planning Process, it is anticipated Mills River will see a 33% increase in people and jobs between now and 2045.

Community	Population (2019 data)
Mills River	7406
Fletcher	8369
Laurel Park	2738
Hendersonville	13,908
Flat Rock	1257
Biltmore Forest	1536
Asheville	92,870
Brevard	7926

The ethnic breakdown of the community according to Citydata.com is predominantly white citizens, or 88.2%, of the Mills River population. The chart below shows the diversity within the community.

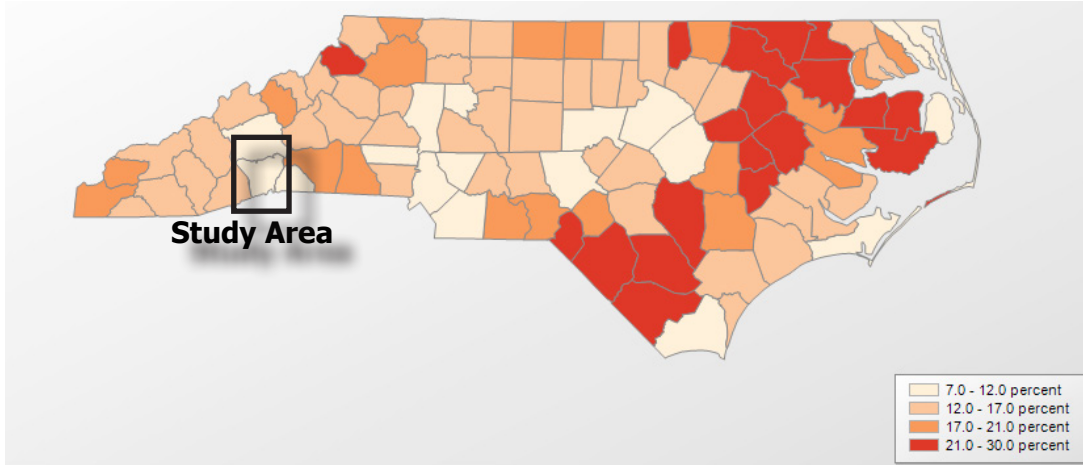


The 2019 Census states the median property value is \$245,100 and the majority of the population in Mills River, 78.7%, own their homes. The average commute time to work for residents is 22.3 minutes, which is above the U.S. average.



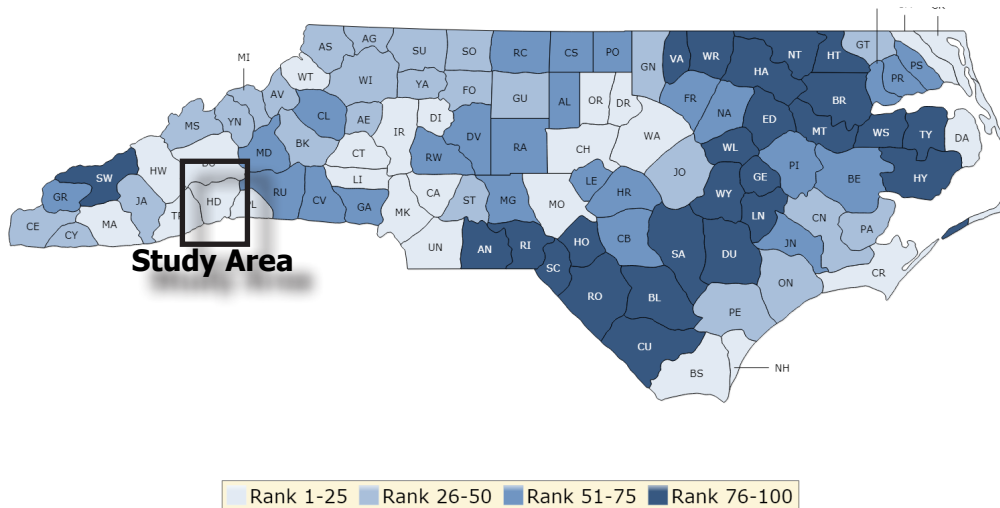
Poverty

In a USDA document from 2018 "Percent of total population in Poverty in North Carolina," Henderson County ranked as having 9.7 percent of persons living below poverty level. This data is extracted from US Census Bureau data and Small area income poverty estimates that are updated annual. The median household income is \$63,953 according to the US Census Bureau.



Health

According to The County Healthy Ranking report, the study factors represent the focus areas that drive how long and how well we live, including health behaviors (tobacco use, diet & exercise, alcohol & drug use, sexual activity), clinical care (access to care, quality of care), social and economic factors (education, employment, income, family & social support, community safety), and the physical environment (air & water quality, housing & transit). The 2020 report found that Henderson County is 8th among the 100 ranking counties for health in NC, meaning it's health factors rank higher than 92 other counties within the state.



Past and related plans

Past and related planning efforts were reviewed as a part of the inventory for the Town of Mills River Parks and Recreation Master plan. Below is the listing of plans reviewed. Each plan was reviewed to get an understanding of goals and recommendations, and how those may influence or be related to the Parks and Recreation Master Plan study. It was also important to understand which plans had executed recommendations presented and which plans still had outstanding items. A summary of findings was created to identify common themes and needs in the region.



Plan Name	Year
Comprehensive Land Use Plan Town of Mills River	2005
Comprehensive Transportation Plan for French Broad River MPO and Rural Areas of Buncombe and Haywood Counties	2008
Mills River Park Phase I PARTF	2010
Ecusta Rail Trail Planning Study & Economic Impact Analysis	2012
Blue Ridge Bike Plan	2013
GROWNC Regional Plan	2013
WalkBikeNC	2013
Mills River Park PARTF Site Plan	2013
NC 280 Corridor Bikeway Study: Town of Mills River and Transylvania County	2014
Evaluating the Economic Impact of Shared Use Paths in North Carolina	2017
Mills River Park Master Plan	2017
Mills River Town Park Master Plan	2018
Henderson County Greenway Master Plan 30 Year Vision	2019
Mills River Park - Conceptual Design Stream Repair & Improvement Project	2019
The Hellbender Trail	2020
SCORP, NC- Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan	2020-2025
Fletcher Connects: A Comprehensive Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan	2020

Highlights from the related plans

From the Comprehensive Plan:

Mills River is a desirable place to live, work, play, and relocate to. The preservation of the rural character, natural features, and aesthetic value are top priorities. Overall plan goals include: preservation of rural character, better road network, promote commercial development at appropriate scale, provide park(s) and protect open spaces, define an identity for Mills River, create a town center, promote industrial employment in appropriate locations, and expand agri-business.

Local Plan Highlights:

Several identified cycling needs including: Need for activity hubs and regional connectivity, tourism, public health and the ability to improve it, the growing senior population, economic impacts in the area, commuting via bicycle, and reducing energy use and/or environmental stewardship, Improved Connectivity for pedestrians and cyclists to parks and community (town, river, and parks)

Access to the River. Benefit residents and visitors alike by providing **transportation, recreation, health access**, livability for residents, commuters, and visitors. **Economic Development.** Access to recreation for improved health, **Use of parks for resilience planning and flood management**

Environmental Education and Special Events , Nature Trails and Recreation Tourism, Environmental Stewardship

Better Wayfinding

Systemwide Plan for North Carolina State Parks:

Support Local Economic Development, Provide Health and Wellness Opportunities, Improve Natural & Cultural Resources Stewardship

Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP):

Public Health , Outdoor Recreation Economy, Conservation

Top Facility Needs in SCORP:

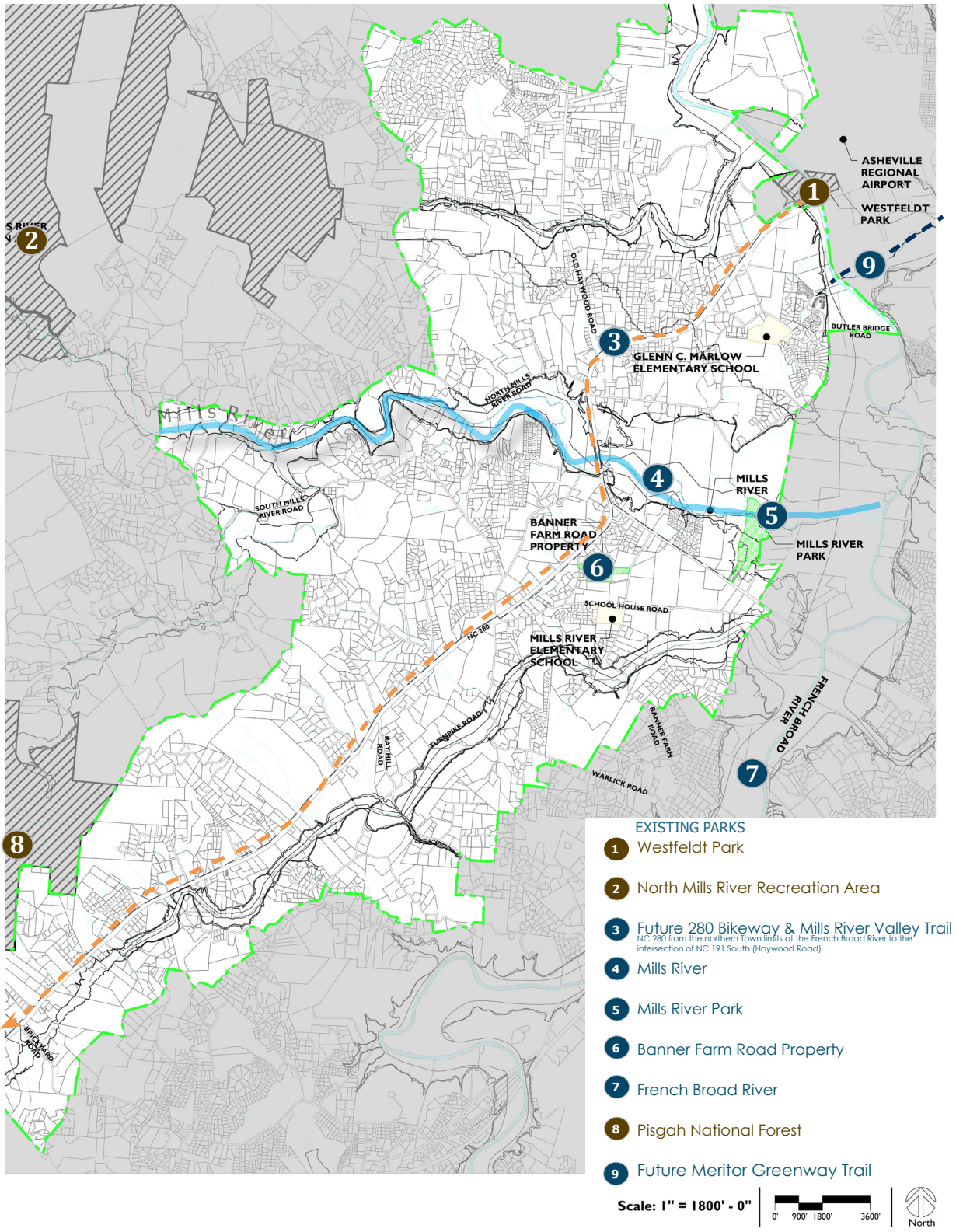
Unpaved Trails; Picnic Shelters; Wildlife Observation Sites; Paved Trails; Canoe, Kayak Launches

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Section Two: Inventory



Existing Park Features & Facilities



Mills River Park- 48 Acres
124 Town Center Dr, Mills River, NC 28759

Hours: Dawn to Dusk.
Park Restrooms- Open Mon. - Sun.
6:30 am - 7:30 pm

Park Asset / Amenity	Quantity	Condition	Notes Condition = (N= Needs Improvement; S= Satisfactory, C= Commendable)
Parking (Qty. & Condition)	268; 14 HC	C	Parking quantity and condition excellent. Parking is paved and distributed throughout complex with HC parking and access.
Baseball	1	C	Completed and open in Spring of 2021
Basketball	1	C	Excellent condition and accessible
Bicycle Access/ Parking	1	S	Should add bike racks in other use areas (shelter) and as external connectivity is added.
Dog Park	1	S/N	Large and small dog areas with seating, dog play features, and excellent access; additional shade, surface improvements, and seating would help increase access.
Library Building	1	S	Part of Town Hall complex within the Park; open for pick up only during pandemic.
Lighting	no	N	Park facility access could improve with lighting: Tennis, baseball, and parking area
Maintenance Building	1	S	Nice building, centrally located to park needs; difficult for expansion as system needs increase.
Meadow		S	Large Meadow in floodplain; excellent flora fauna educational opportunity in floodplain and floodway.
Pedestrian Access	1.2 miles	C	Internal sidewalk and walking trail heavily used, paved, well signed, and in good condition. Paved Park Trail 1.2 miles
Picnic table/ Benches/Picnic Shelter	1 shelter 16 tables	C	Can accommodate 96 individuals at 16 picnic tables; the park could use additional shade, shelters, and picnic space. Access to Wifi during pandemic is excellent for community outreach and service.
Playground	1	C	Centrally located, accessible, and has a 2-5 and 5-12 unit. There are activity stations that could be expanded along the trail.
Restrooms	1	C	Good condition and centrally located; good use of structure for solar; opportunity for renewable/solar education.
River Access		C	ADA accessible fishing pier built in cooperation with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission; kayak canoe launch (non-motorized only); 18 parking spaces; (under construction); 1 Fishing Pier; 1 canoe/kayak launch
Signage	Title; limited internal	N	There is an entry sign to the Mills River Town Hall complex but it is not large enough to see and does not indicate park.
Trash Receptacles	Yes	S	Fixed and distributed well throughout complex
Tennis/Pickleball	4 Courts	C	Good condition; fence, 2 courts striped for pickleball & tennis



Primary Trail/Walking Trail



River Access



Educational Signage and Pamphlets



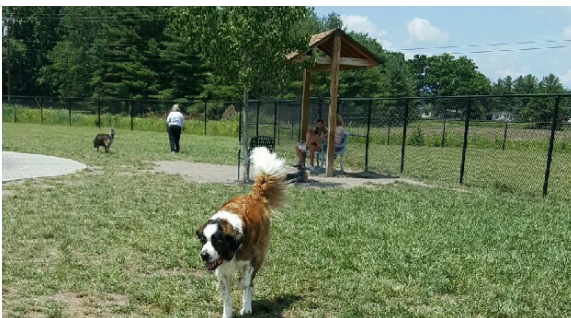
Playground



Basketball



Tennis and Pickleball

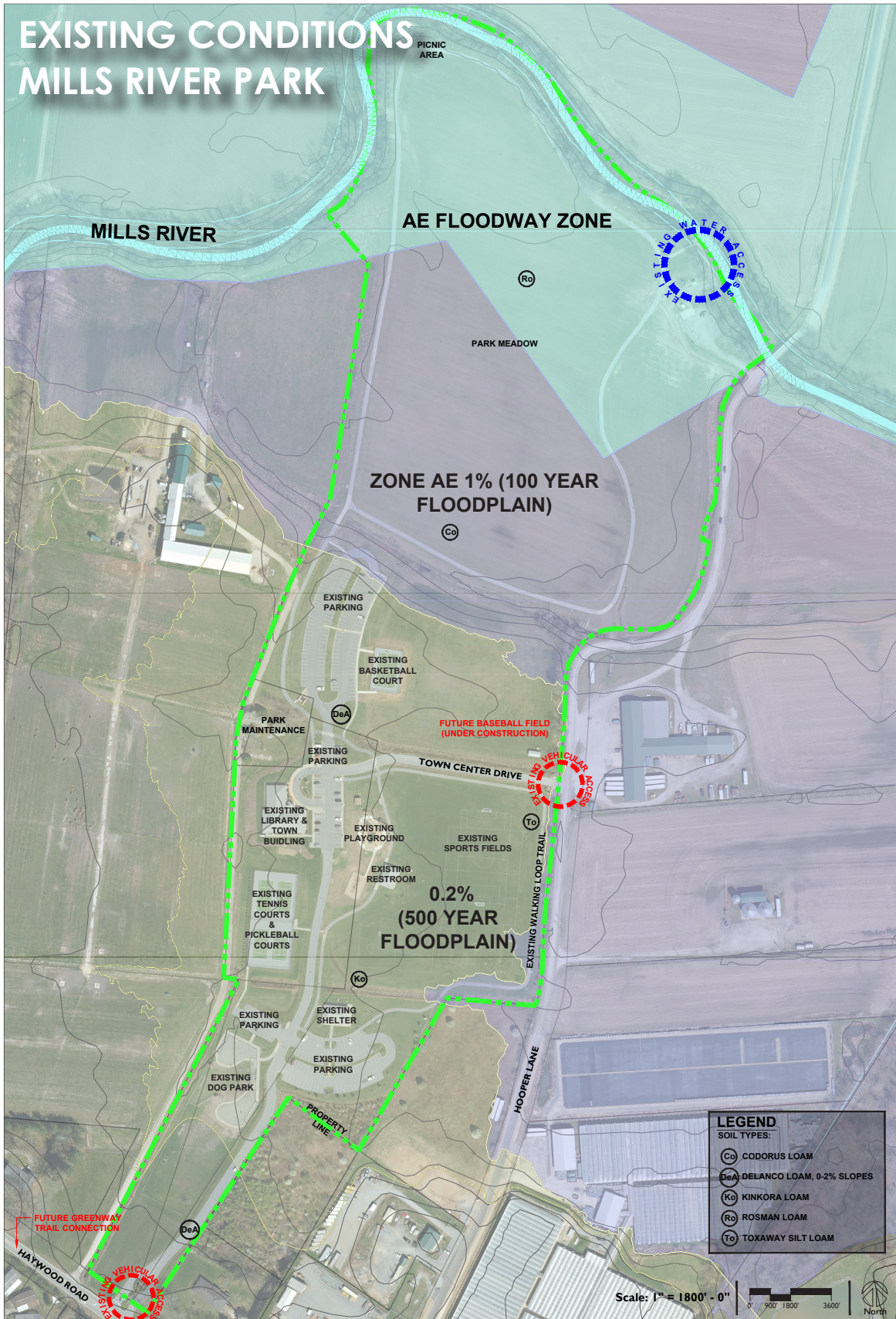


Dog Park- from: <https://theokdogblog.wordpress.com/2016/07/12/mills-river-dog-park/>



Mills River Park Shelter

EXISTING CONDITIONS MILLS RIVER PARK



Banner Farm Road Property (Undeveloped) 21.5 AC

Banner Farm Road Property is a 21.5 acre undeveloped tract located off of Banner Farm Road. The site is predominantly wooded with steep topography, site wetlands, and an approximate 3 acre portion of cleared more gently sloping topography adjacent to Banner Farm Road.



View From Banner Farm Road

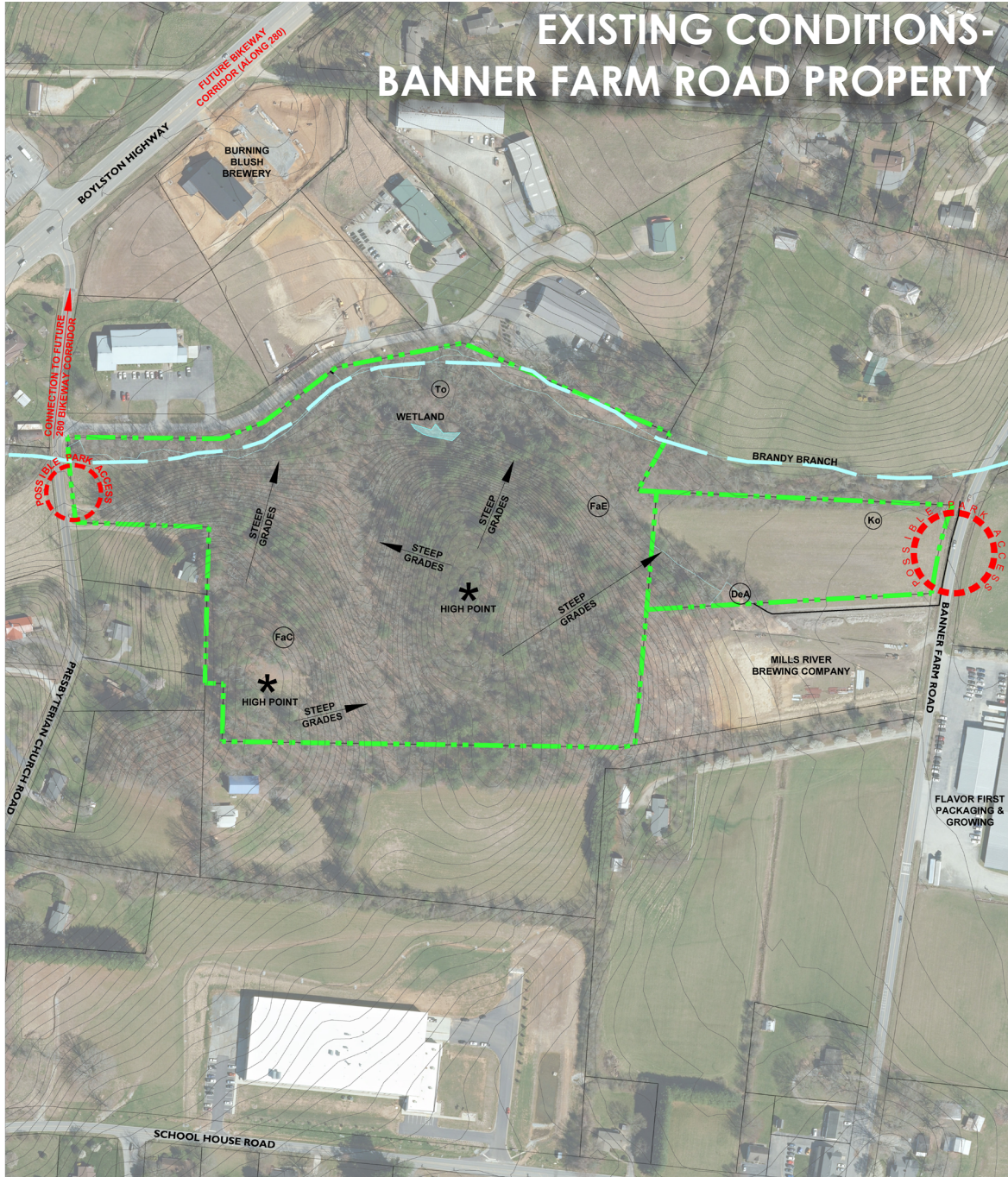


View of Woods Edge at Banner Farm Road Property



View From Brady Branch Road

EXISTING CONDITIONS- BANNER FARM ROAD PROPERTY



LEGEND
SOIL TYPES:

DeA	DELANCO LOAM, 0-2% SLOPES
FaC	FANNIN SILT LOAM, 7-15% SLOPES
FaE	FANNIN SILT LOAM, 15-25% SLOPES
Ko	KINKORA LOAM
To	TOXAWAY SILT LOAM

Scale: 1" = 100' - 0"



OPPORTUNITIES & CONSTRAINTS MAP BANNER FARM ROAD PROPERTY

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Section Three:

Public Input



Process

Public involvement is an important component to the success of the parks and recreation master planning process. Conducting input during the Covid-19 pandemic required a varied approach in order to ensure input was received, and parks and recreation information was distributed to the entire community. The Town was able to host virtual public meetings through Facebook live, the use of the software platform Mentimeter, via zoom, survey monkey, and by hosting in person input opportunities at Town Hall, and Mills River Park. In addition to that, once restrictions were lifted, intercept surveys were obtained at community breweries and restaurants, as well as along the trail at Mills River Park. These not only served as an opportunity for community outreach, engagement, and education to highlight the Towns' park features and programs, but it also provided an opportunity for the Master Plan team to hear about needs and ideas for the Town. The master plan efforts solicited input through hard copy and online surveys, stakeholder interviews, in person input, and participation in virtual and in person community events to help identify need. Stakeholder groups were also identified to give insight to specific group needs. Past and related planning efforts were reviewed and referenced including recent statewide surveys, the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2015-2020, the 2018 NC Parks Systemwide Update Public input, and guidance from the 2021 NRPA Park Metrics and 2020 NRPA Agency Performance Review.

Summary of Input

The following chart outlines the input received throughout this process and the means in which input was obtained:

Mills River Parks and Recreation Master Plan Outreach/Input and Meeting Log			
Surveys Completed (open, direct, intercept): 544			
Round 1 Mentimeter Surveys Completed: 55; Round 2 Mentimeter Surveys Completed: 40			
Posted	followers	likes	audience reached
Mills River Facebook Page	1128	994	3827 reached; 824 engagements; 31 shares
Mills River Website: https://www.millsriver.org		Oct. 13 to Nov. 11	1825 visits
Making Mills River Website: www.makingmillsriver.org		Oct. 13 to Nov. 11	959 visits
Source	Surveys Completed	Date	Time
Survey responses (open and direct link)	477	10/1/20 to 11/07/20	ongoing
Intercept Survey Collection:			
Public Input Hard Copy Survey #1: Mills River Brewery	11	10/15/2020	5:30 to 7:30pm
Public Input Hard Copy Survey #2: Mills River Park	23	10/20/2020	2:30 to 4:30pm
Public Input Hard Copy Survey #3: Burning Blush Brewery	14	10/22/2020	5:00 to 7:00pm
Public Input Hard Copy Survey #4: Mills River Park	19	10/27/2020	2:30 to 4:00pm
Public Input Sessions			
Mentimeter Online Public Involvement Meeting	28	10/27/2020	6:00 to 7:00pm
Mentimeter Online Public Input	27	10/27/20 to 11/07/20	completed
Public Meeting (Zoom, Mentimeter, and Facebook) interactive survey taken	25	2/23/2021	7:00- 7:45pm
Stakeholder Meeting * interactive survey taken	15	2/24/2021	10:00am-11am
Public Open House at Town Hall *	16	3/5/2021	10:00am-2:00pm
Park and Recreation Advisory and Town Council Meetings (Open to the public)	Attendance (in person)	Date	Time
<i>Community Members participated via facebook live and zoom--those attendance numbers are not included in the total</i>			
Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee Project Kick Off	7	8/25/2020	7pm
Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee Update	7	9/22/2020	7pm
Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee Update - Needs assessment	8	11/17/2020	7pm
Town Council Update	9	12/10/2020	7pm
Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee	8	12/17/2020	7pm
Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee	7	1/7/2021	7pm
Town Council Visioning Session	9	1/28/2021	2:30pm
Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee	8	3/23/2021	7pm
Town Council meeting - final presentation and recommendations review	9	4/22/2021	6:30pm
Town Council Meeting and Approval of Master Plans	9	5/27/2021	6:30pm



Surveys Completed



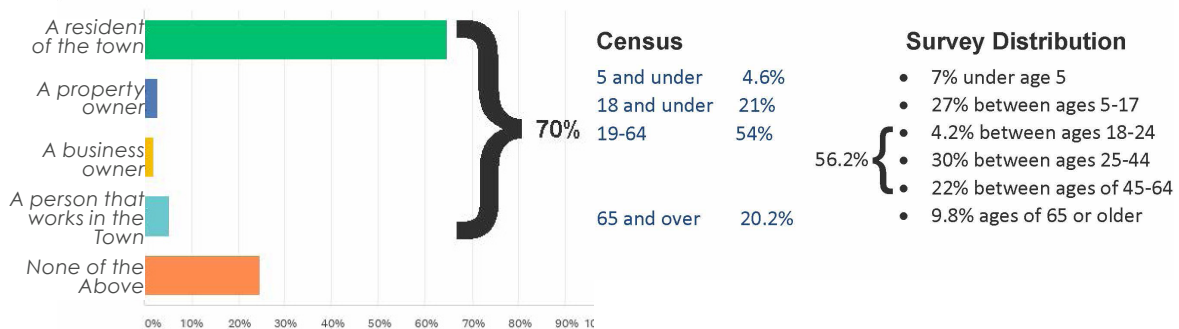
Mentimeter Participants & Surveys

Survey and Input Summary

Public Input Survey - The public survey was conducted from October 13 - November 19th, 2020 and remained open for a period of approximately 38 days.

A participation survey was created with the assistance of Park Planning Staff and placed on facebook, the town website, and distributed via email. Intercept surveys were also conducted in Mills River Park, Burning Blush Brewery, and Mills River Brewery on select dates and times. Stakeholder and staff input was conducted via zoom and mentimeter. Public input sessions were held predominantly online via zoom and Mentimeter, with in-person intercept surveys in various locations, and an open houses at Town Hall once Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. All Park advisory and town council meetings were open to the public via zoom and facebook live to maintain access through Covid-19. All input was tabulated and compared to town demographics to ensure representative sampling. The focus of the survey was threefold, the town of Mills River Parks and Recreation Master Plan, the Mills River Park Master site plan update, and the future park to be located along Banner Farm Road. Questions included user preference, open ended comments, and interests and concerns for the future park use within the town.

When asked whether or not participants were residents, the majority, 64.89% were residents, with the remaining respondents either working in Mills River (5.51%) , property owners in the town of Mills River (2.94%), business owners in the town of Mills River (2.02%) or none of the above (24.63%). The majority of residents have lived in the town of Mills River for over 15 years (30.10%). The response rate was higher for females (59%) versus males (39%), 2% preferred not to answer. The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 25-44 (30%) and age distribution of input is consistent with demographic breakdown of the town of Mills River Residents. The majority of respondents had at least two people in their household (34%), with the second largest responding being 4 person households (28%). The remainder were fairly evenly distributed between 1, 3, and 5 person households (approx. 10%).



Satisfaction with Parks & Recreation in Mills River:

When asked how satisfied they were with the overall quality of the Parks and Recreation Department in Mills River, 42.04% felt the quality of the existing facilities was very good followed by 29.44% deeming the existing facilities as excellent, overall the combined response of 70.48% shows strong support for parks and recreation in the town.



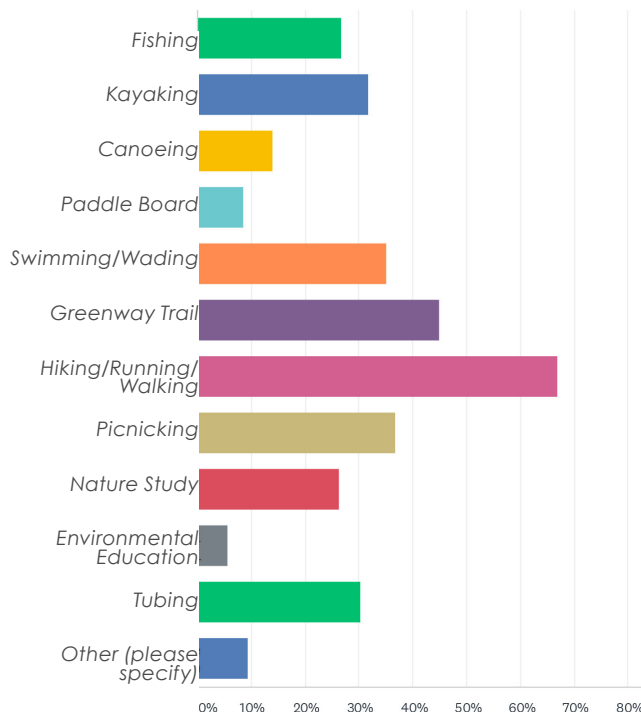
Types of Facilities important to participants:

When asked to rank the importance of Parks and Recreation facilities provided, the top ten answers deemed to be *Very Important* (in order) were:

1. Pathways/Trails
2. Community Parks
3. River Access
4. Playgrounds
5. Picnic Shelters
6. Open Lawn Areas
7. Fitness
8. Performance/Festival Space
9. Aquatics
10. Athletic Fields.

Participant River Usage:

The majority of the participants currently utilize the Mills River or French Broad River for recreational activities. While it may be anticipated that the uses are related to the river itself, the largest recreational use via the responses was for hiking, running or walking, indicating that the banks of the rivers themselves are utilized by respondents more than the water. When accessing either of the rivers, 61.25% said they primarily use the access point in Mills River Park followed by 11.58% accessing the water from Bent Creek River Park, which is located in Asheville.



Priorities for Expansion and Development :

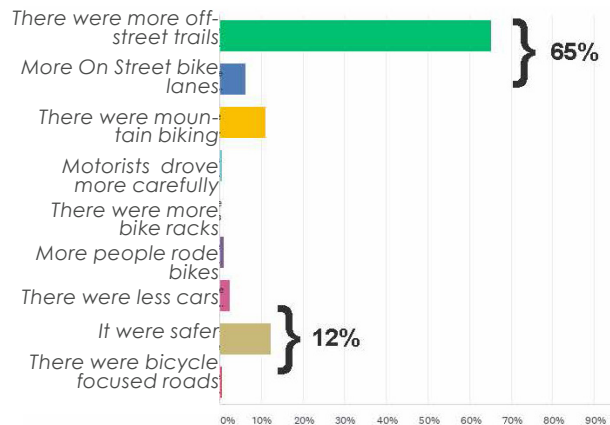
Respondents were also asked to rank their priorities for expansion or development in the town of Mills River.

1. Pathways/trails
2. Aquatics
3. Community Parks
4. Playgrounds
5. Mountain Biking
6. Athletic Fields
7. River Access
8. Fitness
9. Pickleball/Tennis Courts
10. Items listed in 'Other' category:
 - Inline hockey rink with roof
 - Hockey rink
 - Dog park
 - Bike Trails
 - Pump track
 - Splash pad

Bicycles and the Community:

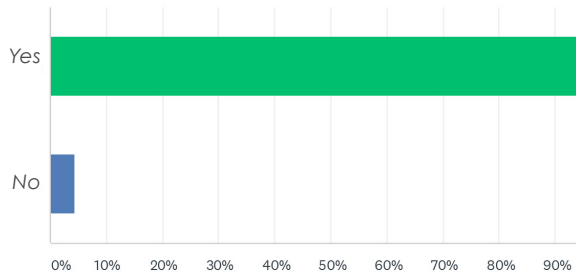
In addition to programming questions, survey participants were asked if they rode a bicycle, 69.25% said yes. 65.38% said they would ride a bicycle more if there were more off-street multi-use paths or greenways in which to ride upon and 12.26% responded that they would be willing to ride a bicycle more if it were safer to ride. Trails, greenways, blueways, and greater community connectivity remained the highest overall priority for the Town and within each of the park site master plans, Mills River Park and the future Park at Banner Farm Road.

I would ride a bicycle more if:



Programming Priorities:

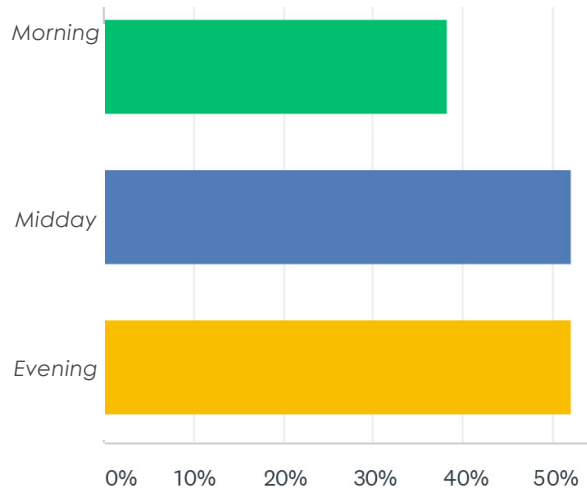
Survey participants were asked to prioritize programming offered by the Mills River Park and Recreation Department. The response rate was high and the top three priorities were youth sports, community events, and fitness and wellness programming. 95.61% supported the addition of recreational programs such as special events, youth summer camps and senior programs.



What types of Programs would respondents like to see:

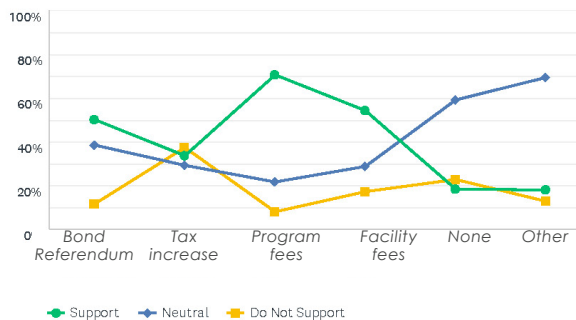
1. Youth Sports
2. Community Events
3. Fitness and Wellness Programs
4. Senior (65+) Programs
5. Adult Sports

When asked specific questions regarding the use of Mills River Park, 25.80% of participants said they visited the park more than once a week, and 23.92% stated they visit the park one time per week. This data shows the park is highly utilized by the participants on a weekly basis. The park is used throughout the day during operating hours with heavier use in the midday and evening. The majority of park users drive to get to Mills River Park rather than biking or walking.



Support for Funding of Park Improvements:

The survey also asked participants their opinion regarding support for funding in order to make park and program improvements. The majority of the responses supported program fees as a method of funding. Facility fees and a bond referendum were the second and third preferences for funding sources. Tax increases were split across the board among the ranking categories of support, neutral and do not support.



Mills River Park currently offers a variety of activities and recreation choices. Multi-use trails and the playground are the most utilized activities or facilities based upon the survey results. When asked about additional activities to be provided at Mills River Park, the following responses were most strongly supported:

1. Shade
2. More River Access
3. Park Lighting
4. Benches, swings, seating
5. Dog Park Improvements
6. Trail Connections
7. Nature Interpretation & Education
8. Events
9. More bathrooms/shelter

When polled about activities they would like to see at Banner Farm Road Property, the following responses were presented and received the most support:

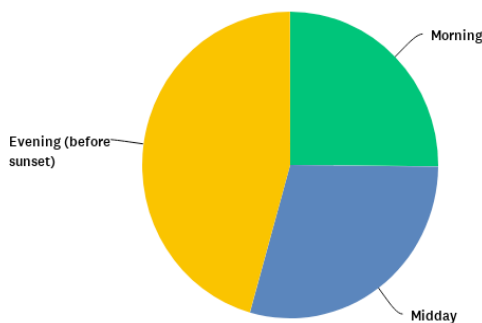
1. Walking trails/paths
2. Hiking Trails
3. Biking Trails/Greenways
4. Mountain Biking
5. Picnic Areas
6. Disc Golf
7. Playground/Nature Play Area
8. Nature Center/ Community Garden
9. Dog Park

There is strong support for improved trail and greenway connectivity within the park, and community wide connectivity to and from the park. Additionally, open ended comments identified improvements to existing resources such as the dog parks, trails, and athletic fields which could improve and expand user access.

Follow up public and stakeholder involvement emphasized the need for sidewalk and trail connectivity, dog park improvements, shade, desire for lighting, and a greater emphasis on environmental education and the environmental features present.

Thoughts on the future of Banner Farm Road Park:

Participants were asked their thoughts about the future Banner Farm Road Property. The majority of the respondents stated they would use this new park in the evening before sunset, with the second highest use being the midday. Similar to Mills River Park, most users would drive to the new park with only a small percentage biking or walking.



In addition to the already identified features, follow up public and stakeholder involvement for the future park along Banner Farm Road highlighted the desire to include the following features: a community farmers market, passive recreation, accessible nature based play area, and improved connectivity within, and to and from the future Park.

Section Four: Analysis



Analysis Summary

All of the study findings and information presented in this report have contributed to the analysis and recommendations. Existing conditions, environmental conditions, history, past plans, community involvement, and staff involvement have helped formulate the recommendations. In order to help identify common findings, all information was placed on the existing conditions map to help highlight site opportunities and constraints. A data summary was compiled highlighting past plans and findings, and input results were charted to identify common needs throughout the planning process. All of the factors contributed to the draft program features.

Past Plans

During the inventory process, the consultant team worked with the client to identify related reports and past plans. Each study was read and reviewed to understand common action items and priorities. The summary in the inventory contributed to identified need during the analysis. Past reports have identified many of the features identified by the public during this planning process, many are still an identified need.

Opportunities and Constraints

Site existing conditions information utilizing available base data and GIS information was used for planning, review, and input. The map data contained environmental features, public input comments, and site conditions that may be an opportunity or constraint for future park use and management. The following are some of the features included on the Existing Conditions Map during the opportunities and constraints site review:

- Wetlands
- Floodplain information
- Soils
- Vegetation
- Topography
- River Access Locations and time from each location
- Pedestrian and bicycle plan information
- Regional roadways
- Areas already impacted or previous developed
- Existing park development and infrastructure
- Park program needs
- Overall park acreage, land use, and park user access and circulation
- Site history
- Existing park boundary/ buffers
- Camping locations and type (paddle to or primitive)
- Land not prone to flooding
- Areas with identified needs



Mills River Park Solar Panels

To better understand the needs within a community, it is important to examine park and recreation trends regionally, within the state, and at a national level in comparison to the Town of Mills River.

Regional Trends

Locally, the town is undergoing "MAKING MILLS RIVER - 2040 Comprehensive Plan" to help guide overall community goals. It is important moving forward these plans are compatible to help move both visions forward. The goals presented in the draft 2040 plan are consistent with findings in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan and are as follows:

GOALS

1. Protect and enhance the rural and small town character of Mills River
2. Promote preservation of agricultural and natural lands while respecting property rights
3. Manage growth and invest in Mills River to promote land stewardship, community development and fiscal responsibility
4. Provide and maintain exceptional public facilities and services
5. Build infrastructure to support local needs and diverse economic development
6. Encourage housing choices for persons of all ages and different income levels

Regionally, the Town of Fletcher, the City of Asheville, and Henderson County all reflect similar goals and ideals. Like the Town of Mills River, each of these areas are growing and safe, alternative methods of connectivity such as greenways within and between these areas remains a priority. Walking, bicycling, agriculture, and river related activities on the French Broad and Mills River are an important part of the culture in this region. Linking greenways to jobs, schools, destinations, and adjacent communities not only serves as forms of recreation but also as modes of transportation and economic support increasing tourism, promoting higher property values, attracting new businesses and providing jobs.

In addition to connectivity, improved access to recreation to benefit overall community health by encouraging physical fitness, healthy lifestyles, and creating access to recreational opportunities for all ages and abilities is desired. In order to promote access to quality parks and open space for all, annual funding for maintenance, proximity to park locations and increased participation in programs all need to be considered regularly. While it was evident prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic, it is now crucial to distribute community health and fitness options in an equitable manner among the community. The region is actively seeking more park and open space to fill the needs within the community.

When filling recreational needs, planning and designing with nature in mind is key, including implementing green infrastructure practices, enhancing urban tree canopies and protecting valuable land and water assets. This not only helps promote the natural beauty and environmental diversity of the region, but it helps to preserve and protect the natural, historical, and cultural environments, mitigate flood damage, and prevents soil erosion which has become more prevalent.

For these regional trends among others please look at the Fletcher Connects: A Comprehensive Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan (November 2020), <https://www.fletchernc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Fletcher-Connects-FINAL-Plan-November-2020.pdf>, the Living Asheville: A Comprehensive Plan for our Future (Adopted June 2018), <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/106269/392/>, and the Henderson County Greenway Master Plan 30 Year Vision (Adopted April 2019), <https://www.hendersoncountync.gov/greenway-network>.

State Trends

The North Carolina Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2020-2025 is an important document for Mills River to reference to understand the trends and goals of outdoor recreation within our state. Understanding the SCORP needs allows individual municipalities and counties to determine nearby state resources and how they may benefit or contribute to the state recreation system as a whole. As previously indicated regionally, the population of the State of North Carolina is also growing. This growth drives a greater demand for recreational opportunities within the state, specifically targeting areas where population growth is taking place and recreational gaps exist.

In part, due to the growth North Carolina is experiencing, the State has recognized the importance of protecting and conserving high quality natural resources and landscapes due to diminishing opportunities. If these resources are not protected now, their future use will be in question. Parklands not only promote health and well-being, but they also serve to provide mitigation and resilience efforts in areas that are prone to natural occurrences that would otherwise prove to be detrimental to residents and inhabitants alike.

While expansion is critical to keep up with demand, aging recreation facilities and infrastructure is of concern as well. The ability to renovate, replace and revitalize park amenities is crucial to meet demands and provide quality recreation experiences. Public priorities are high for improved park management. Operating existing parks more efficiently, acquiring new parks, developing trails, facilities and networks and providing education programs are necessary within the system as whole. As has been the case in the past, funding is the greatest challenge to achieving success within existing systems. Bond referendums have been trending in popularity as a means of achieving financial support for improvements and additions to park systems state wide.

The State is not only growing, it's also aging. By the year 2030, 1 in 5 North Carolinians will be at least 65 years old, and by 2035 there will be more older adults (ages 65+) than children (age less than 18). This aging of the population means that access to safe, quality recreation opportunities will be critical in providing physical activity opportunities for this segment of the population in years to come.

Statewide input from the SCORP highlights linear parks connecting regions, nature parks, trail linkages to other jurisdictions, cultural/historic parks, and community parks are in highest demand. Statewide, unpaved trails, picnic shelters, wildlife/nature observation sites, paved trails and multi-use fields are among the top priorities. Athletic facilities are noticing a shift from specialized recreation to more versatile multi-sport areas, while playgrounds and aquatics are still in strong demand. Within the region of Mills River, demand for multi-purpose fields has been hard to achieve due to topography and lack of land. Niche recreation such as disc golf, dog parks, court games and golf still remain popular across the state.

Walking for pleasure is in highly desired and currently the western portion of the state is lacking in strong trail linkages. Greenways as a means of active transportation and connections to local, state and National Parks are desired as a form of recreation as well as a form of tourism, which is one of NC's largest industries and has a presence in the Town of Mills River.

Limited recreation opportunities in economically depressed areas have proven to be a major barrier to participation in outdoor recreation and equity to access remains a priority. North Carolina recognizes the importance of recreation to support public health and fitness in all communities. Providing recreation opportunities in service gaps and creating public awareness of the state's natural resources not only serves those who use them, but also promotes economic benefits that come from providing the opportunity itself. Additional barriers to outdoor recreation present within the State include lack of time, facility availability, cost, physical and health limitations, condition of facilities and safety concerns.

For further information on the NC SCORP, please visit <https://files.nc.gov/ncparks/north-carolina-state-parks-statewide-comprehensive-outdoor-recreation-plan-2020-to-2025-for-public-comment.pdf>

National Trends

Nationally, parks and recreation departments have pivoted within this last year due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The impacts have been significant and subsequently, parks and recreation has become a fundamental part of daily life for many Americans not just providing recreational opportunities but aiding in critical services as well. While this trend is seen as a positive outcome, other trends stemming from this impact aren't viewed as favorably. According to the NRPA 2020 National Report, 1 in 5 park and recreation agencies are reducing operations spending by at least 33% with 66% of agencies facing a median reduction of 10-19 %. Due to these reductions, departments will need to be strive for efficiency and fight to attain required budgets. Funding opportunities through strategic partnerships to achieve shared goals and leveraging funding will be necessary as will additional revenue streams.

As seen at the regional and state levels, parks, trails, and open space play an important role and ensuring access for all to parks in an effort to create equitable, resilient, active and healthy communities will remain a top priority. This not only includes park access itself, but also narrowing gaps in access to youth sports and programming. The inequities of access have been more apparent during the pandemic and require increased attention as departments move forward, specifically aiming to reduce historic gaps for low-income and communities of color.

Climate impacts and weather events have been more prevalent, requiring communities to become more resilient and sustainable, providing greener parks to advance overall community health, well-being and resiliency. Green infrastructure in parks is, and will continue to remain, a key piece to conservation as park system move forward and Mills River has already started utilizing this approach on Town Campus.

This information, along with other highlights of the road ahead can be found in the NRPA 2020 National Report: <https://www.nrpa.org/about-national-recreation-and-park-association/leadership/annual-report/>.

Level of Service

The purpose of a level of service (LOS) analysis is to determine how well The Town of Mills River Parks and Recreation Department is meeting the needs of town residents. According to the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), the basic definition of LOS is expressed as an allocation mechanism for the delivery of park and recreation facilities. By understanding the current level of service, a community can better understand how and if residents have equal opportunity to basic parks and recreation services. The LOS was examined by understanding what facilities exist as presented in the inventory, and then by evaluation of the quality and location of facilities in Mills River.

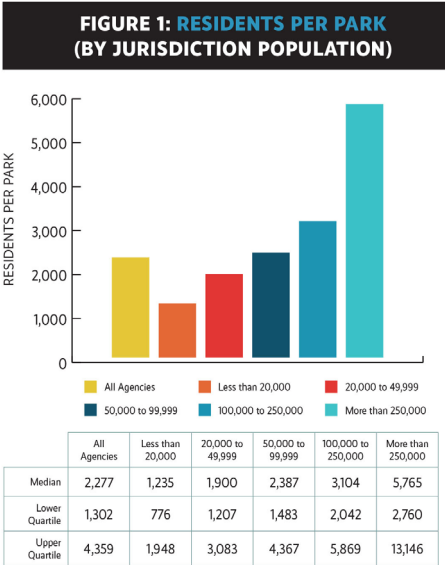
It is important to note that Mills River has a population under 10,000. Typical services provided and comparison of agency services are typically broken down by population as follows: All agencies (all sizes); Under 20,000; 20,000-49,999, etc., up to populations over 250,000. The 2020 report and NRPA Park Metric data base is a good way to fine tune comparisons, and one of the first action items presented to the Town is to enter town parks and recreation data annually in order to update comparative information as the Town grows and adds services.

It is important to note as a part of these park metric comparisons, the Town of Mills River is less than half of the smallest size comparative bracket (under 20,000). The Town and population are unique and these metrics serve as a guide for future planning to understand how local demand compares to the national database.

While Mills River Benefits greatly from nearby local, state, and national recreational and natural resources, this LOS is to understand services within the Town, the services it is providing, and how the Town compares within national metrics.

To understand overall park demand, NRPA evaluates access to Parks using Parks per resident by jurisdiction population. Currently, the Town of Mills River is providing 1 park per total population and falls under the lower quartile of 908 residents per park. With the addition of the Banner Farm Road property, it will be in the lower quartile and should continue to seek access to future park land to serve residents. The median resident per park population in the 2020 annual report was 1,300 residents per park for agencies with a population under 20,000.

Figures No. 1 from the 2020 NRPA agency performance review.



Level of Service Comparison

The typical agency serving jurisdictions under 20,000 manages approximately 12.0 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. Using the current population in Mills River of 7,406, and the total current park acreage of 69.5, the Town is currently in the lower quartile of acres per 1000 residents and is currently providing 9.4 acres of parkland per 1000 residents. As the Town grows, additional acreage to meet growth and recreational demand should be acquired.

The 2020 report outlines the median number of residents served per population:

FIGURE 3: OUTDOOR PARK AND RECREATION FACILITIES – POPULATION PER FACILITY (BY PREVALENCE AND POPULATION PER FACILITY)

Type of Facilities		Median Number of Residents per Facility					
		Population of Jurisdiction					
	Percent of Agencies	All Agencies	Less than 20,000	20,000 to 49,999	50,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 250,000	More than 250,000
Playgrounds	94.4%	3,607	2,132	2,961	3,672	4,804	8,271
Basketball courts	87.4	7,187	4,051	7,000	8,790	8,477	11,632
Tennis courts (outdoor only)	81.4	5,089	2,748	4,819	5,726	5,818	9,997
Diamond fields: baseball – youth	78.0	6,763	3,000	5,099	7,560	12,914	23,619
Rectangular fields: multipurpose	66.4	8,750	3,895	7,400	11,212	10,792	22,538
Diamond fields: softball – adult	65.5	13,510	5,663	11,184	16,250	28,081	35,875
Dog parks	64.9	46,000	11,148	27,528	58,926	76,610	129,506
Diamond fields: softball – youth	59.3	11,287	5,447	9,891	11,884	26,073	43,670
Swimming pools (outdoor only)	51.5	37,569	8,591	25,402	43,100	67,004	93,534
Diamond fields: baseball – adult	51.3	20,159	7,989	20,522	22,366	38,899	48,657
Rectangular fields: soccer – youth	48.9	7,192	3,433	5,833	8,291	12,646	32,649
Community gardens	48.3	31,175	9,001	25,480	51,197	72,238	96,322
Tot lots	45.1	11,000	6,194	8,974	13,701	19,122	22,163
Multiuse courts: basketball, volleyball	44.6	20,000	6,200	18,850	24,644	36,979	70,287
Rectangular fields: soccer – adult	43.6	12,943	7,541	11,161	12,800	20,000	30,092
Skate parks	39.3	49,750	11,000	31,248	66,672	109,798	247,664
Rectangular fields: football	36.5	25,977	7,917	16,584	31,972	51,719	78,656
Multipurpose synthetic fields	21.0	38,328	13,200	22,041	40,305	53,550	112,707
Ice rinks (outdoor only)	17.9	16,664	10,000	13,049	29,386	112,000	472,688
Rectangular fields: cricket	12.1	128,393	ISD*	29,404	62,958	110,936	370,119
Rectangular fields: lacrosse	11.2	29,000	7,051	13,333	33,437	63,250	174,861
Overlay fields	8.7	15,385	4,385	8,935	10,724	42,139	87,438
Rectangular fields: field hockey	3.5	23,270	ISD*	15,007	ISD*	110,558	ISD*

*ISD = Insufficient Data

It is important to note in Figure 3, the Town of Mills River is less than half of the smallest comparative population size of 20,000. These metrics serve as a guide to growth. We evaluate quantity, quality, and location for comparison to “All Agency” and “Less than 20,000” to help evaluate the town recreation offerings in response to the demand presented by Mills River Residents.

Figure from the 2020 NRPA agency performance review.

The following highlights show demand comparison for Mills River to national 2020 metrics:

Facilities

Playgrounds ranked high for demand with Town of Mills River residents. The Town is currently at the median for population per playgrounds for “all agencies.” As the Town adds parks and continues to expand park resources, additional playgrounds need to be factored into planning efforts.

The Town is currently at or below population per rectangular and diamond fields. As the Town seeks acquisition of future parkland, consideration should be given to the inclusion of multi-use fields and versatility of field use.

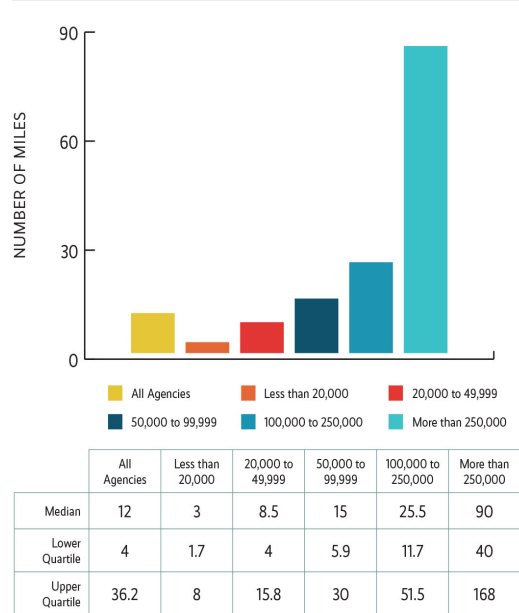
The Town is currently above, or in the upper quartile for specialty items such as dog parks, tennis courts, and basketball courts. The expansion or inclusion of additional facilities is typically based upon condition and distribution. As parks expand out of the 10 minute user area the Town should consider inclusion of additional specialty facilities and/or varied types to expand access to different user groups.

Aquatics ranked high in demand for the Town but it is important to note that specialty facilities such as swimming pools are not a typical recreational service for populations of this size. This service offering is typically provided for jurisdictions with over 35,000 residents. Access to water and natural features, the inclusion of “misterters”, and future splash pads are all ways to expand and introduce aquatics into the recreational service offerings in the town. The same population jurisdiction service comparison can be said for specialty features such as ice rinks, skate parks, and larger community gardens. Local demand for these features needs to be considered when prioritizing for future park features, land acquisition, staffing, and seeking partnerships.

Greenways and Trails

Demand for greenways, trails, blueways, and connectivity remains high for Mills River residents. According to the 2020 NRPA agency report, the median miles of trail by jurisdiction population of less than 20,000 provides 3.0 miles of trail on average. With the inclusion of future trails at the Banner Farm Road property, the Town will just meet this median. It is very important the Town immediately plan for additional trails, connectivity, and greenways to meet existing demand and plan for future demand. Trails and greenways are a high local, regional, statewide, and national trend. Due to demand presented in the planning process, the Town should be planning to provide service that fits into the upper quartile of service by jurisdiction population. As presented in the 2020 Agency report this is approximately 6.8 miles of trail, or greater. It is also important to factor in miles of blueway trail, which does not currently have a metric in the database.

FIGURE 4: MILES OF TRAIL (BY JURISDICTION POPULATION)



Indoor community space was identified by residents as a future need, and while items like trails and playgrounds currently rank higher, as the population grows, indoor community space will be an important element to provide program expansion and future services provided. This is a feature that is typically provided for jurisdiction populations of 10,000 or greater, so as the Town plans for future recreation programs, indoor space needs to be a consideration.

FIGURE 5: INDOOR PARK AND RECREATION FACILITIES – POPULATION PER FACILITY (BY PREVALENCE AND POPULATION PER FACILITY)

Figures No. 4 & 5 from the 2020 NRPA agency performance review.

Type of Facilities	Median Number of Residents per Facility						
		Population of Jurisdiction					
	Percent of Agencies	All Agencies	Less than 20,000	20,000 to 49,999	50,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 250,000	More than 250,000
Recreation centers	63.9%	30,709	9,800	24,545	41,452	53,550	71,514
Community centers	58.6	29,000	9,045	26,099	41,245	56,025	109,089
Senior centers	39.0	61,975	12,304	34,674	68,540	122,000	275,401
Performance amphitheaters	35.1	62,927	11,000	31,115	59,294	113,221	341,294
Nature centers	31.6	109,212	11,704	33,164	69,250	125,000	361,613
Aquatics centers	25.0	49,024	11,000	29,790	62,313	85,500	235,760
Stadiums	18.0	64,800	9,126	27,192	62,682	135,323	330,868
Ice rinks	13.2	55,174	7,911	27,000	55,174	102,543	385,525
Teen centers	12.8	57,729	12,044	32,000	57,027	152,714	343,661
Arenas	6.5	53,236	7,102	24,413	66,215	118,271	499,500

Programs

Programs overwhelming received support from residents with a 95% response rate for support of some type of parks programming. The Town hosted one of its first special events over the holidays and had incredible support and response to the “2020 Mills River Santa Tour.” By measure of comparison, parks and recreation agencies measure program services through contacts provided. If the access provided during the initial special event is an indication of “contacts provided” the Town will need to fill this gap in service to meet program demand. By measure of NRPA’s evaluation, the average agency registers approximately 225,000 contacts every year and those with populations less than 20,000 typically hold 40 fee-based programs per year. It is very important to note, the national comparison for this service is very difficult for a population of 7046 and the Town should rely on the desired program areas identified by residents: Youth Sports, Community Events, Fitness and Wellness Programs, Senior (65+) Programs, Adult Sports in combination with the NRPA Park Pillars which are: Conservation, Health and Wellness, and Social Equity as they moved forward with program service offerings.

Staffing

An important component to facility and program expansion is the inclusion of staff to provide park services identified as a need, or are currently in demand. The town of Mills River parks services offerings are strongly supported by its residents. There is a high level of satisfaction with facilities and strong desire to grow park offerings and include programs. As such, staffing will need to increase. This can be done through FTE’s (full time equivalents), part time staff, partnership programs, and volunteers. FTE’s are typically measured by the population they serve, for example the typical parks and recreation agency has 8.1 FTE’s for every 10,000 residents served by that agency, that number continues to increase as the population increases. Currently, the Town of Mills River has 3 FTE’s and 3 part time staff serving the Parks and Recreation Department. The Town will need to address the addition of FTE’s for the inclusion of programming in addition to staffing positions for additional maintenance.

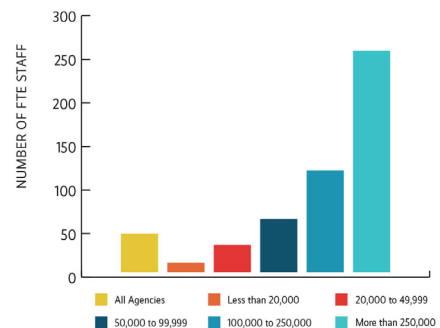
Quality and Distribution

As part of the inventory and evaluation facilities were rated as: “N”= Needs Improvement, “S”= Satisfactory, and “C” = Commendable. All of the facilities were either “S” or “C” and there is a high level of satisfaction with the quality of facilities provided by the town. There is support for expansion, improvements, and increased access to park features. The evaluation revealed high quality park services are currently being provided and there is strong support for the Town to continue and expand upon these offerings.

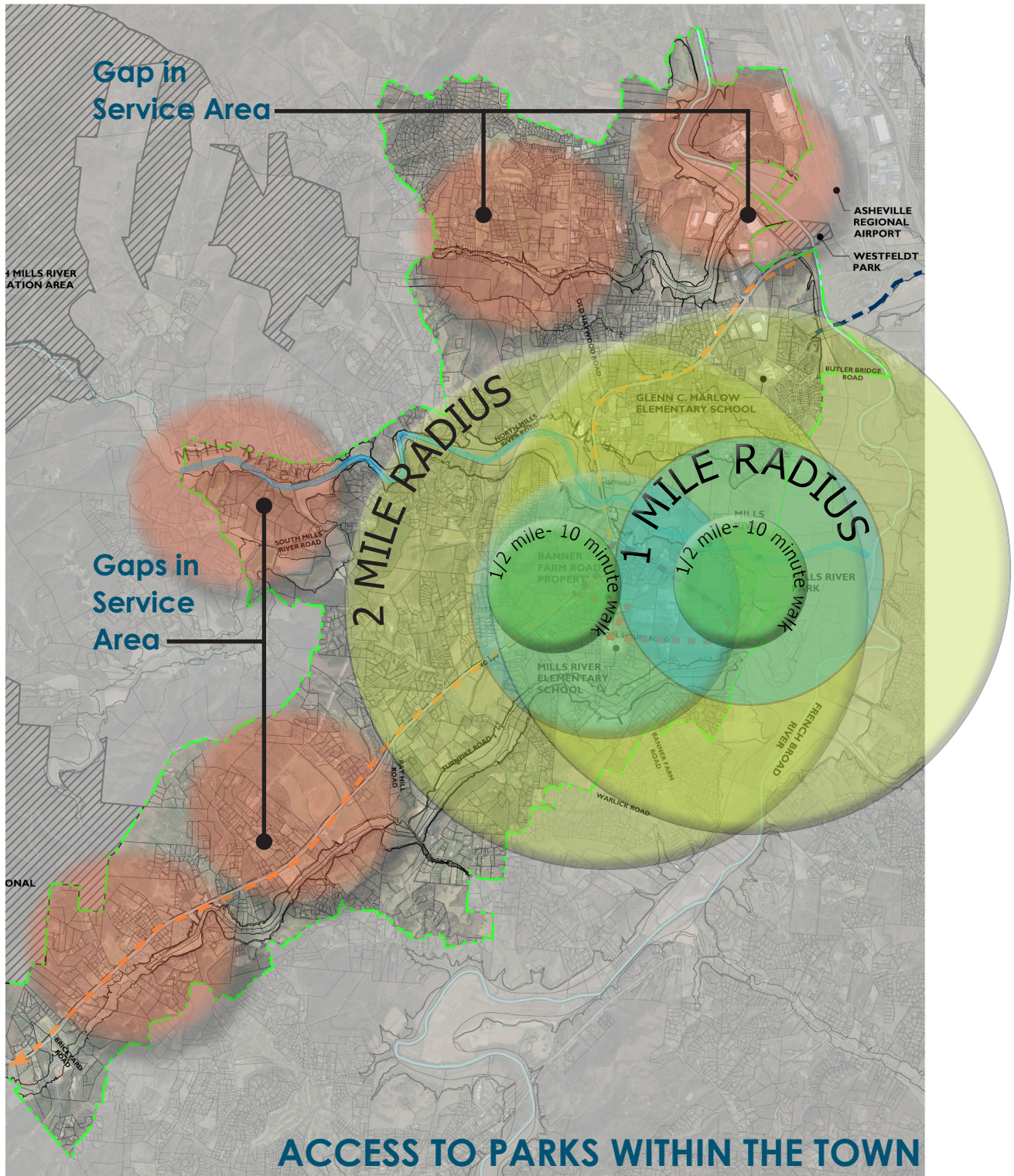
There is currently only 1 town park in Mills River, so distribution analysis is discussed in regards to future park features and distribution, as shown on the town park access map. Mills River Park is conveniently located on Town campus in the central part of town. As land is evaluated for future park access, it is recommended the town evaluate opportunities in the service gap areas shown on the map. These are areas where residents are greater than 2 miles from a park. NRPA is part of the 10- minute walk initiative in which they are supporting efforts so that all people have safe access to a quality park or green space within a 10-minute walk of home by 2050. A ten minute walk is typically completed in 1/2 mile, a mile can be completed in 20 minutes. As the Town moves forward with improved connectivity, pedestrian access via trails, sidewalks, and links should consider the 10-minute walk as a guide for access. Due to the fact that the majority of residents drive in Mills River to work, parks, and for pleasure it is important to address vehicular access in distribution. According to the Trust for Public Land, “How far is too far,” Those who must travel a greater distance to get to the park are less likely to use the park. Continued efforts for equitable distribution should be addressed in order to meet the Mission and Vision statements, “ We strive to provide the people of Mills River with opportunities to work on both their mental and physical health; and, We ensure that everyone has access to high quality parks and recreational opportunities.”

Figures No. 10 from the 2020 NRPA agency performance review.

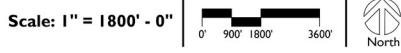
FIGURE 10: PARK AND RECREATION AGENCY STAFFING: FTEs (BY JURISDICTION POPULATION)



	All Agencies	Less than 20,000	20,000 to 49,999	50,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 250,000	More than 250,000
Median	44.3	10.9	31.4	61.2	117	254.1
Lower Quartile	15.9	5.4	16.3	34.4	46	106
Upper Quartile	126.9	21.5	59.8	114.6	202.2	550



ACCESS TO PARKS WITHIN THE TOWN



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Section Five:

Recommendations/Actions



Recommendations

The town of Mills River has built a solid foundation for high quality parks and recreation services. The following recommendations are a culmination of findings during the planning process and not the result of one step, but rather input and discovery from all steps:

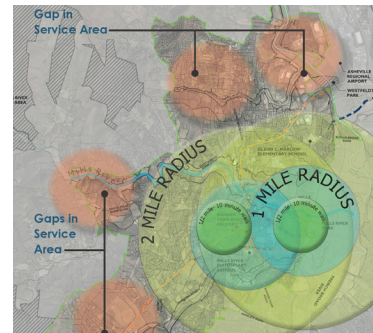
Process:



Recommendation descriptions are presented as a result of analysis findings and should serve as a guide to continue the high level of services established within the department. Following the recommendation descriptions are outlined action items prioritizing recommendations in Near Term (0-5 years) and Long Term (5-10 Year) priorities. In some cases there is a recommendation of Immediate (0-2 years), in which best efforts should be made to begin planning or action toward meeting an immediate need.

Land Acquisition

Planning for an interconnected and integrated network of parks and trails across the town of Mills River requires a thorough and thoughtful objective approach of future town development, available funding, support and advocacy. Staying focused on the mission of the department and broadening support from local and regional groups will better define priorities and determine the appropriate acquisition opportunities. The Town has done a fantastic job providing park resources in a central location. As it plans for future growth beyond the property at Banner Farm Road, equitable access to facilities, including walking and driving time, needs to be established as a measurement tool.



Future Park Land

Trails and Trail Support Facilities

The existing trails within Mills River Park are one of the highlighted features from users and providing a diversity of trail types and lengths throughout the Town and its future parks will provide greater access to a variety of user groups. Trail improvements such as connections to proposed and existing bike routes, paved access to park features, providing hiking opportunities to explore natural resources, creating blueway routes from park access locations, and improving trail communication (routes, difficulty, and length/time) are all items that can be done to improve user experience. The Town will just be meeting the median service of 3 miles for its jurisdictional size. Additional trail length, connectivity, and access to primary trails should be provided to meet demand.



Trails and Greenways

Multi-Use (Paved and Unpaved)

Paved: Users expressed interested in having a primary route multi-use paved trail to link key features and parks, making them more accessible to a diverse skill level and user groups. Multi-use paved trails should follow standards and guidelines for trail development as outlined in the NCDOT Bicycle and Pedestrian Design Guidelines manual. Recommended Primary Trail Width is a 10' minimum paved trail with 2' shoulders on each side of the trail.

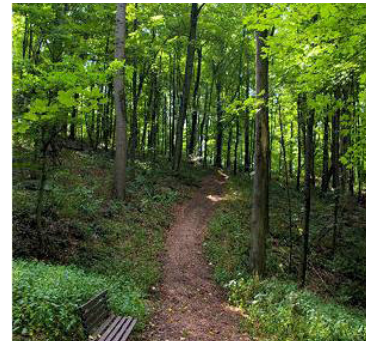


Multi-Use Primary Trail

Unpaved Trail: Primary natural surface trails shall connect important features within parks. Primary natural trails shall have a wide enough clear zone to accommodate park maintenance vehicles. Having a wider clear zone also provides a hiking experience for those not experienced in hiking or being outdoors.

Natural Surface

Natural Surface Trails should be provided to allow access to hiking in the natural environment. These trails shall be clearly marked with safety information at trail head, routes, distance/time, and key features to help park users navigate the trail system.



Natural Surface Hiking Trail

Sidewalks

In key park areas where a primary multi-use trail is not provided, it is recommended that additional paved sidewalks links be provided to connect features making them accessible.

Paddle Trail/Blueway

Water trails, also known as blueways, are marked routes on navigable waterways such as rivers for recreational use. They allow access to waterways for non-motorized boats and sometimes motorized vessels, inner tubes, and other craft. Water trails not only require suitable access points and take-outs for exit but also provide places ashore to camp and picnic, and other facilities for boaters. It is recommended Mills River work with local vendors to encourage site visits, day trips, and participation in park educational programs. A critical component to improving the blueway and paddling experience along the Mills River is to update access to route data including: safety information, paddle access sites and route information (including times), signs and markers identifying the primary route in the river for users, and property markers showing park access sites from the river.



Paddle Trail/Blueway

Active Recreation

Active recreation is that which has defined space and can require intensive development. It often involves cooperative or team activity, including playgrounds, ball fields, swimming pools, gymnasiums, and skateparks. Active recreation, such as team sports, often require substantial space to congregate, typically involve intensive management, maintenance, and high costs. The analysis of Mills River shows that future land acquisition needs to incorporate space for active recreation fields and the town may be best served by including space for multi-purpose fields to allow for flexibility in user groups.



Active Recreation

Passive Recreation

Passive recreation, also called “low intensity recreation” is that which emphasizes the open-space aspect of a park and allows for the preservation of natural habitat. It usually involves a low level of development, such as rustic picnic areas, benches and trails. Passive recreation typically requires little management and can be provided at very low costs. Some open space managers provide nothing other than trails for physical activity in the form of walking, running, horse riding, mountain biking, snow shoeing, or cross-country skiing; or sedentary activity such as observing nature, bird watching, painting, photography, or picnicking.



Add places to gather

Signage and Wayfinding

Improving identification of key features and how to find them will improve access to Mills River parks. Messaging and wayfinding to, within, and from parks not only informs users of everything the parks have to offer but can also make the experience more interesting, easy to use, and safer to navigate. It is important for a park user to clearly identify and recognize park features and safety information via signage. Mills River needs to develop a master signage and communication plan for their parks both on land and on the river. Updated sign types shall include: vehicular signage along major routes, entry identification signage (all locations-vehicular), identification signage at a pedestrian level (trails, paddle trails, and other amenities), kiosks (pull up car and pedestrian), directionals (vehicle and bike/ped), loop/trail maps, buildings/special features, educational signage, pavement markings, mile markers, trail blazes, navigational tags, river identification and educational/interpretative messaging and signage.



Trail Markers



Example of a signage wayfinding plan that should be completed for the park



Provide Trail and River Trail Markers



Expand educational signage and experiences for users

River Access

There are several areas along the Mills River that allow access to and from the river. However, very few of these sites are improved sites that include parking, signage, or a ramp to and from the river. It is recommended to focus on the areas at Mills River Park to improve user experience and amenities in these corridors including: river ID signage, picnicking, and parking.

Improvements should be provided for ease of use and access to park visitors, but also minimize the impact of shoreline erosion. Consideration should not only be given to the park visitor experience arriving from land and partaking in water events, but also for those visiting the park from the river.

An outreach and educational program should be provided at Mills River Park through educational signage, programming, and or vending rental company to teach users about natural features such as: river conditions and paddle safety and conservation efforts and potential wildlife a user may encounter. It also can serve as an educational setting to learn more about resilience planning and the impact flood waters have on the surrounding areas.

River Safety

Rivers rapidly change and conditions are not always ideal. It is important to display and discuss river safety within the park. In addition to information that is available in the park, users should also be able to access river safety information online in preparation for a visit.

Programs

Programming was overwhelmingly supported by the residents. The town should introduce a program component as staff is available or added to provide this service. Youth Sports, Community Events, Fitness and Wellness Programs, Senior (65+) Programs, and Adult Sports were highlighted as the most desired program areas to start.

Partnerships

It is important to develop partnerships and educational outreach programs with the local school systems and organizations. These partnerships may allow for additional events to be held at the park, in turn, hopefully creating more exposure and awareness of Mills River from tourists and other users. As such, support facilities in the parks such as restrooms, shade, and shelters, power, and wifi will enhance the ability for programs and visitors enjoy the park setting.



User safety education



Flood mitigation education



Special events



Environmental education

Restroom

Restroom facilities should be accessible and be able to accommodate visitors. Any amenities added such as this should be in an area that is easily accessible to staff so that maintenance can occur regularly.

Shelter/outdoor classroom

Throughout the public input process, education and the need for gathering locations or shelters were identified. Each park area should include at least one large rentable accessible shelter to accommodate bigger groups and events, and should be reservable online. Each site should also contain multiple non-reservable shelter spaces. These may be smaller and would be available on a first come first serve basis.

Nature Based Play and Play

Visitors are seeking a non-traditional play space that promotes play and exercise with children. To help young visitors have an introduction to nature, an accessible nature based play space should be added. Providing a nature based play area not only can educate users on natural resources present, but also provide another means of engagement. It can help transition young park users from a more developed area and encourage interest and engagement in things like camping, hiking, wildlife observation, and plant and animal identification. As the park system expands, additional playgrounds should be included within future park sites to meet demand and growth.

Agricultural Recreation

Community participants have expressed a desire to retain the agricultural character of Mills River as it continues to grow. This was expressed not only in this planning process but also in the "Making Mills River" planning process. There are many ways this can happen and as the town seeks future park land consideration should be given to how to best celebrate this character, whether it is through protecting agricultural land for open space, agri-tourism, preservation of a farm for education and interpretation, or through public private partnerships. All of these tools can help continue the celebration of agricultural land and uses currently in place.

Park Infrastructure

Mills River has done an incredible job serving as a community resource during the pandemic. The inclusion of wifi, nearby community services, and places to recreate all served as valuable community tools. As the Town moves forward with park development it should include these community services and infrastructure that allow the parks to continue to be the multi-service features that they are. Within the State and Nationally, parks serve as points of contact and relief sites during natural and community disasters. Having the services in place such as adequate parking, lighting, access to power, water, wifi, and community connectivity services not only make the parks themselves more usable but also makes the community better serve its residents.



Provide restrooms and gathering space

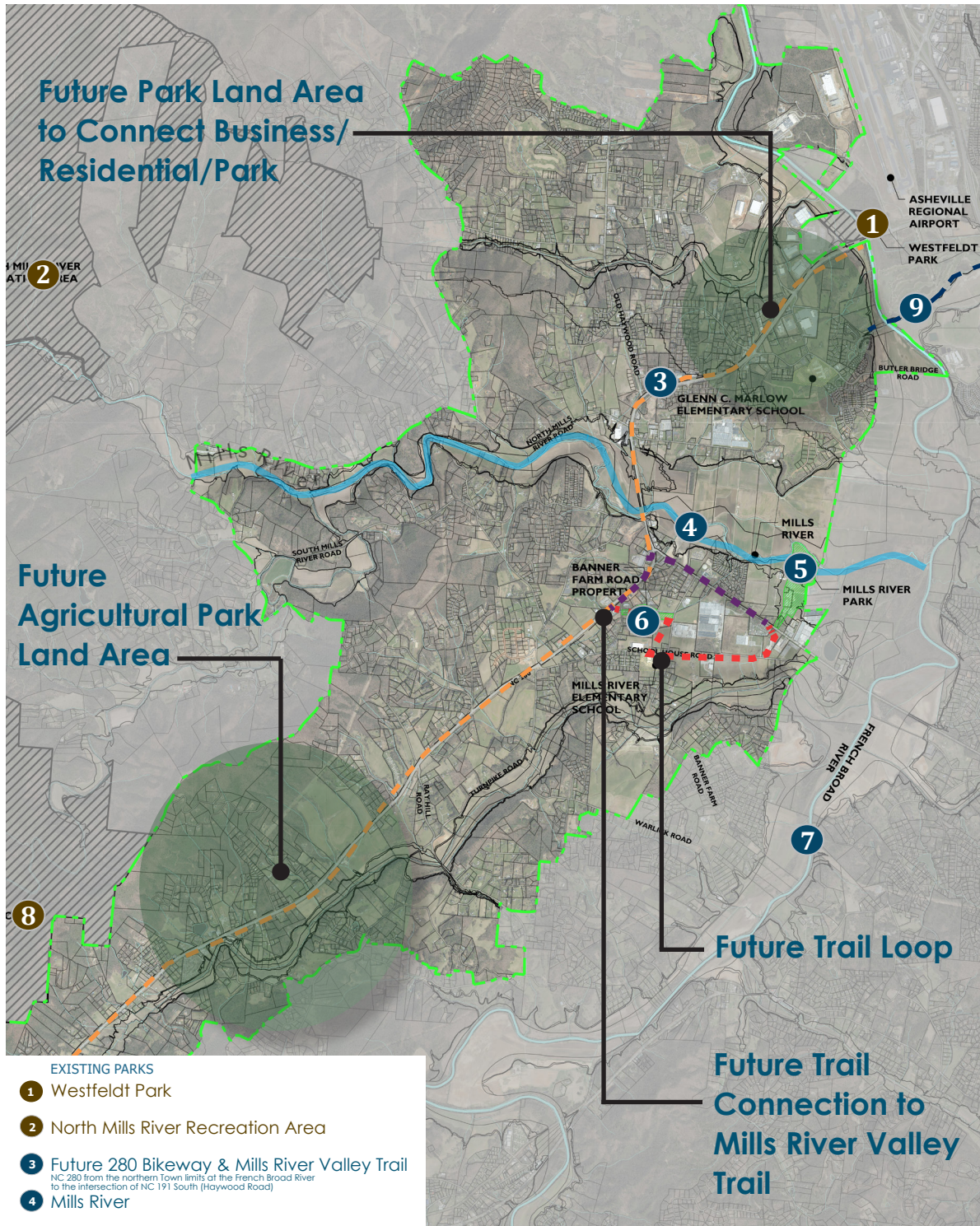


Provide a nature based play space at each end of park



Provide a nature based play space at each end of park

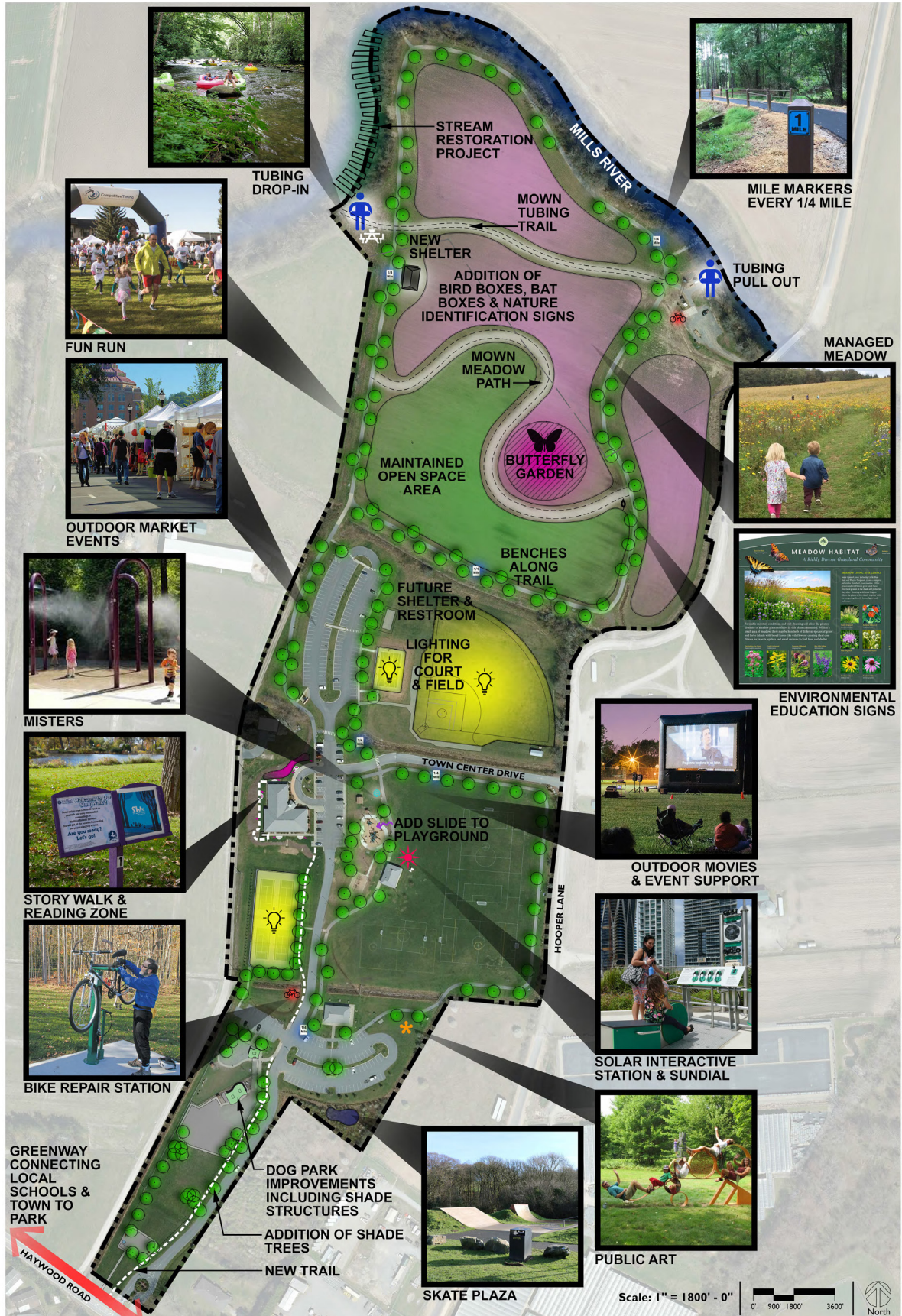
Overall Park Master Plan



- EXISTING PARKS**
- 1 Westfeldt Park
 - 2 North Mills River Recreation Area
 - 3 Future 280 Bikeway & Mills River Valley Trail
NC 280 from the northern town limits at the French Broad River to the intersection of NC 191 South (Haywood Road)
 - 4 Mills River
 - 5 Mills River Park
 - 6 Banner Farm Road Property
 - 7 French Broad River
 - 8 Pisgah National Forest
 - 9 Future Meritor Greenway Trail

Scale: 1" = 1800' - 0"

Mills River Park Master Plan



Mills River Park

Recommendations outlined below are not listed in order of priority. However, there are some items that have shown greater demand such as: the need for shade, dog park improvements, signage, and seating along the trail. These items were presented as a need in all methods of input (the survey, digital and hard copy, mentimeter, and at the open house).

Mills River Park Recommendations	
Item	
Park Lighting: Tennis, baseball/softball field, basketball court	
Park Signage	
Stream Restoration	
Additional River "Put-In"	
Trail Connections to future Greenway	
Environmental Education Signage and activities	
Additional Picnic Shelter/Outdoor Classroom	
Additional Picnic Shelter/Restroom	
Additional Benches, bench swings, and picnic tables	
Managed Meadow and mown meadow trail	
Butterfly Garden and managed and mown meadow	
Story Walk for Library	
Shade (along trail and dog park)	
Sundial/Solar Education	
Bike Pump Station(s)	
Skate Plaza	
Dog Park Improvements: Shade, Seating, surface maintenance, fence adjustments, and trail connections.	
Cooling/Mister Stations	
Include traffic control and calming devices such as stop sign, pedestrian crosswalks/crossing tables to slow vehicular traffic.	

Park Master Plan for the property at Banner Farm Road



Banner Farm Road Property

Recommendations outlined below are not listed in order of priority. The items are a result of the site analysis and input received from the community. As park development occur the items listed below should be included in park development as funds become available.

Banner Farm Road Property
Item
Name the Park
Natural Surface Multi-Use Trails
Paved Multi-Use Trail and Connections
Bicycle Playground
Hiking Trail
Accessible Nature Based Play
Open Space/Events Lawn
Picnic Shelter(s)/Outdoor Classroom
Restroom
Environmental Education Signage
Children's Garden
Bike Pump Station(s)
Site Furnishings: Benches, trail markers, bottle filling stations, bike racks, etc.
Fitness Stations
Farmers Market support features (power/storage/parking)

Recommendations	Immediate Term	Near Term	Long Term
Action Item			
Overall			
Complete a Bikeway, Greenway, Pedestrian Master Plan for the Town	X		
Greenways and Trails: Continue efforts on completion of the Mills River Valley Trail from the French Broad to the Intersection of 191		X	
Insert data into NRPA Park Metrics	X		
As Banner Farm Road Property is developed, include the connection of the Mills River Valley Trail from the intersection of 191 to Presbyterian Church Road.			X
Conduct an evaluation/feasibility study of a multi-use trail loop from Mills River Park to future Park at Banner Farm Road through a combination of off road and side path alternatives (School House Road, 191, and Banner Farm Road)	X		
Incorporate lighting into future park improvements as a means to increase access through additional park hours		X	
Signage: Establish Park Branding, signage, and identification not only for improved user access but also for safety. Coordinate River Identification points along Mills River and the French Broad for safety.	X	X	
As parks and the department grow, look for opportunities to involve collaboration between similar agencies and organizations to expand access to recreation programs and facilities. Working with community partners can strengthen access to various grant funding sources.		X	X
Land Acquisition			
Obtain ROW encroachment approval, easements, and property that support trail and greenway development.	X	X	X
Future park land should be acquired to plan for future growth and to promote access from housing, residential areas, places of work, and schools. The Making Mills River Process highlights the places people live, work, and where commercial centers are present, work to improve access to parks and public spaces. Consideration should be given to land acquisition type so that active recreation development can occur in the future.			X
In the Comprehensive Plan and Making Mills River Process reserving the agricultural and rural character remains a priority. Consideration should be given to park land acquisition that highlights this importance either through agritourism or future park space on or near agricultural lands. (See Overall Map)			X
Direct River Access Points: Look for additional river access points to put in/take out of Mills River and in connection to the French Broad River.	X	X	X

Recommendations	Immediate Term	Near Term	Long Term
Action Item			
Programs			
There is strong support for Community Programs. Phase in Programming. First Phase Programming should include Community Special Events and Youth Programming	X		
As programming expands, add Fitness and Wellness Programs, followed by adult and senior programs		X	X
Environmental Education: build on the work you are already doing as a town to educate with purpose. You have solar at the park restroom, teach and expand on solar education. You are preserving and protecting flood space along Mills River, create opportunity to show residents they are helping their community with these tools.	X	X	
Staffing			
There is strong support for Community Programs. Future Staffing needs to include a person to assist with and/or coordinate program needs.	X	X	
As parks and park spaces (including greenways/blueways) are brought online, park maintenance staff should be added to help maintain high quality parks.		X	
Facilities			
Trail and Greenways: There is strong support for additional trails. Look for improved connectivity within and to Mills River Park.	X		
Playgrounds: Add Nature Play space		X	X
Picnic Shelter(s)		X	X
Shade and Shade Trees: There are grants available for Shade Structures https://www.aad.org/public/public-health/shade-structure-grants . In addition to that there is an opportunity to have a "trees forever program" that allows for tree donation on honor, memory or celebration.	X		
Dog Parks: Add support facilities, and spaces as available	X		X
Fitness Stations		X	
Open Lawn/play space		X	X
Mountain Biking: Add beginner mountain biking track and pump track for learning the sport		X	
Indoor Community Space			X

Recommendations	Immediate Term	Near Term	Long Term
Facility Action Items Continued...			
Signage: As park features are added include signage hierarchy to identify, educate, and make user friendly (ie. trail mile markers)	X	X	
Athletic Fields: As the population grows look for opportunities to collaborate between similar agencies and organizations to expand access to athletic fields. Seek land in future acquisitions that can be utilized for a variety of purposes, including active recreation.	X	X	X
Public Art that reflects community character, the park setting, and/or the environmental topic teaching points within the park(s).	X	X	X
Seating/Benches: Add to Mills River Park and future Park developments.	X	X	X
Restrooms: Future Parks should contain access to restrooms		X	X
Storywalk: Bring the library outdoors and connect to the park space to promote interaction between the two		X	X
Misters/Cooling: Add misting stations/opportunities for cooling		X	
Interactive Environmental Education Spaces (Solar, Butterfly, Meadow, Floodplain, etc.)	X	X	X
Aquatics: There is strong support for access to aquatics. Providing a pool in a community this size is not a typical recreation service offering. However, as the community grows the Town should seek opportunities to plan for, partner with, and or provide a range of access to water related recreation.			X

Funding Strategy Alternatives

The Town has an established process for providing parks and recreation services to the community. However, as the town grows and demand for services increases it is important to explore alternative funding opportunities. The following funding strategies can be assessed as part of a larger funding evaluation for new and on-going services.

Bonds are a fixed income instrument that represents a loan made by an investor to a borrower (typically corporate or governmental). A bond can be thought of as an I.O.U. between the lender and borrower that includes the details of the loan and its payments.

Crowdfunding & “adopt a park/greenway” is a way to provide web-based funding which is showing greater use in the parks and recreation sector. Funds are acquired from a group of people who are willing to support a specific project, program, or facility. This tool has been a great resource for greenway development.

Development fees are frequently assessed for the development of residential properties with the proceeds to be used for parks, recreation, and open space acquisitions, community park site development, neighborhood park development, regional park acquisition and development, etc. This is a typical planning tool used in communities throughout NC and has generated park services through growth in communities like Cary, Apex, and Asheville.

Friends of the Park groups are organized fundraising groups who raise money for specific park projects, areas, or regions. The town can partner with a local nonprofit to accept private donations in the form of funds, land, facilities, recreation equipment, art or in-kind services.

Fundraising events can provide a means for support in programming and park facility projects.

Grants are a common funding tool for parks and recreation projects and programs. There are numerous grant opportunities for parks and recreation in NC but the most common sources are:

- The North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF)
- The Federal Recreational Trails Program (RTP)
- The Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)
- The Connect North Carolina Bond grant program (CNCF)

Parks and recreation services have become much more of a community wide service and as a result trends in grant funding have branched out

well beyond traditional sources and now include funding from health and wellness partners, transportation, conservation, economic and tourism, and much more. The NCSU RRS page maintains an updated link to resources and grants: <https://rrs.cnr.ncsu.edu/grant-writing-resources/>

Sponsorships/Naming can fund events, facilities, or equipment. Sponsorship agreements should clearly articulate expectations between the Town of Mills River and the sponsor. Many cities and counties are now selling naming rights for new buildings or key facilities in parks for the development cost associated with improvement. This was a primary funding mechanism used for the Miracle league of Wilmington field and playground: <https://www.accessilm.org/miracle-league-of-wilmington>

User fees are used with specialty programs and/or facilities with examples such as pools, sports requiring referees, and indoor facility usage.

Utility agreements coordination for more varied infrastructure uses such as greenways, water/sewer, fiber optic, gas, etc. By including greenways in the infrastructure conversation opportunity can increase for connectivity and receipt of fees for easement use.

Pubic Private Partnerships-(PPP) are becoming more of a common tool in parks and recreation. When built correctly, they are wonderful tools for creating successful relationships to get work done effectively. PPP occur when a service provided by the government is funded and operated through a cooperative venture between the government and a private sector company(ies). This relationship is usually long-term, and built on the premise of shared risks and reward between the organizations.

From parks and education, to infrastructure and technology, many agencies are relying on PPP as a way to reduce operating budgets – turning these responsibilities over to, or sharing them with, private companies.

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Photo from Friends of Mills River Dog Park

TOWN OF MILLS RIVER

RESOLUTION ADOPTING THE PARK AND RECREATION COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PLAN AND THE SITE SPECIFIC MASTER PLAN FOR MILLS RIVER PARK AND FUTURE BANNER FARM ROAD PARK

WHEREAS, the Mills River Town Council and Town of Mills River Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee have worked together to collect public input from the citizens of Mills River to create a Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan designed to reflect the needs and desires of the Town and of its citizens as related to future parks and recreation planning within the town limits; and

WHEREAS, the results of that public input is the "Town of Mills River Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan" and the "Site Specific Master Plan for Mills River Park" and "The Site Specific Master Plan for Future Banner Farm Road Park", which are presented to the Council this date for review, a copy of which shall be on permanent file in Mills River Town Hall; and

WHEREAS, the Town of Mills River recognized the need to formulate a detailed redevelopment plan for the Mills River Park property and a detailed development plan for the new park property at Banner Farm Road and collected input from Mills River citizens to conduct a thorough site analysis to provide for, and continually improve park and recreational facilities, provide trail opportunities, preserve open spaces, and fulfill the existing Town park plan; and

WHEREAS, the resulting Site Specific Master Plan for Mills River Park and the Site Specific Plan for the Banner Farm Road Park are included as part of the Town of Mills River Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan;

BE IT RESOLVED by the Mills River Town Council that the "Town of Mills River Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan" and the "Site Specific Master Plan for Mills River Park" and the "Site Specific Plan for the Banner Farm Road Park" are to serve as a guide for future planning and are hereby adopted and that the Town Council hereby expresses its intent that such document be used henceforth as a reference in the creation of all ordinances, rules, regulations, and investment to the extent they each may impact the parks and recreation facilities for the Town of Mills River.

ADOPTED this the 27th day of May, 2021



Chae Trantham Davis
Mayor

ATTEST By:



Susan L. Powell, MMC, NCCMC
Town Clerk

