



MILLS RIVER
Parks & Recreation

Mills River Park Expansion
Site Specific Master Plan
April 2024

SageDesign

WGLA
Engineering

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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MILLS RIVER
Parks & Recreation

CONSULTANTS



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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Mills River Park is the only park within the Town of Mills River, North Carolina. The park serves as the central hub for the community as it is also home to Town Hall, a community library, and the Park. The existing park is 53-acres located at 124 Town Center Dr. Mills River. The existing Park amenities include 1.25 miles of paved multi-use trail, tennis/pickleball courts, basketball court, picnic shelters, dog park, playground, athletic fields, river access, a meadow, and more. Mills River Park sees an average of 7,500 visitors per week and is a well-loved gathering place in the community.

The Town of Mills River recently purchased an additional 70-acres adjoining and to the west of the current Mills River Park. These adjoining parcels are in agriculture use, previously as a dairy, and still serving as a crop field. It is expected that this acquired land will act as a major recreation hub in the community for generations to come.

Mills River 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.

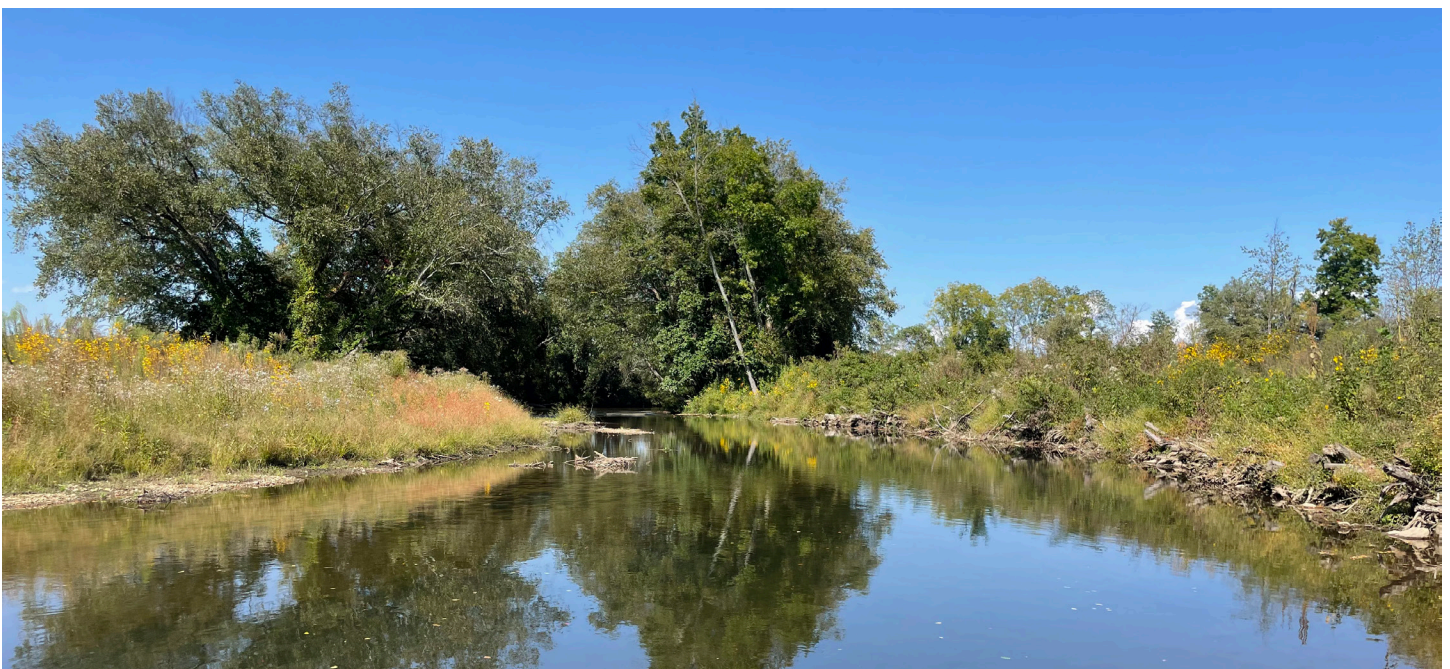
Vision: Our vision is to make Mills River a happier, healthier, and greener community through programs and places.



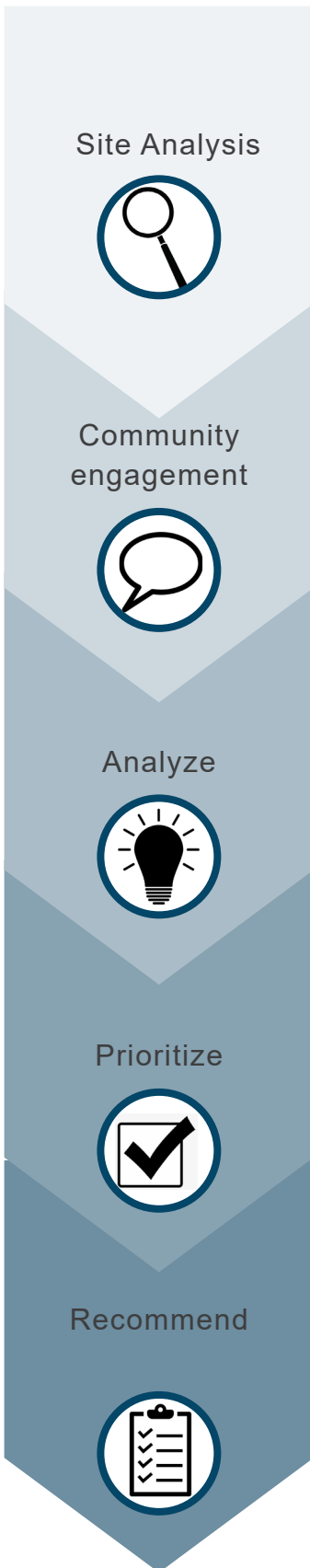
Expansion site when it was operated as a dairy

PURPOSE

The purpose of this plan is to further understand the community recreational needs in order to create a Park Expansion Master Plan that joins the existing town park and recreational services into one cohesive park site.



PROCESS



The Town of Mills River followed a thorough planning process using best practices to ensure site inventory, community involvement, analysis, priorities, and recommendations reflect the recreational needs identified.

- Site analysis
- Community engagement
- Analyze
- Prioritize
- Recommend

Inventory process evaluated the site’s natural, historic, and man-made features including items such as topography, soils, vegetation, hydrology, significant natural communities, wetlands, existing structures, and public access.

Community engagement involved a broad range of the citizens that is representative of the community by conducting a community survey, having input opportunities in the park, facilitating input sessions with the Park Advisory Committee, Staff, and Town Council, and attending civic meetings.

Analyzing these findings involved bringing all of the discovery information together to find common themes from community engagement, understanding how these recreational needs may fit in the context of the site, and what features were in greatest demand.

Priorities were established by identifying program elements that appeared in the Comprehensive Plan, identified in this process, and understanding where gaps in services existed to meet recreational needs.

Recommendations presented are community focused, directed, and supported.

COMMON GOALS AND VISION

The community engagement process helped streamline community values and vision for the site. The following priorities were identified as common goals for the future park.

Promote Health and Wellness

Create Connections & Develop a Sense of Community

Promote Environmental Sustainability

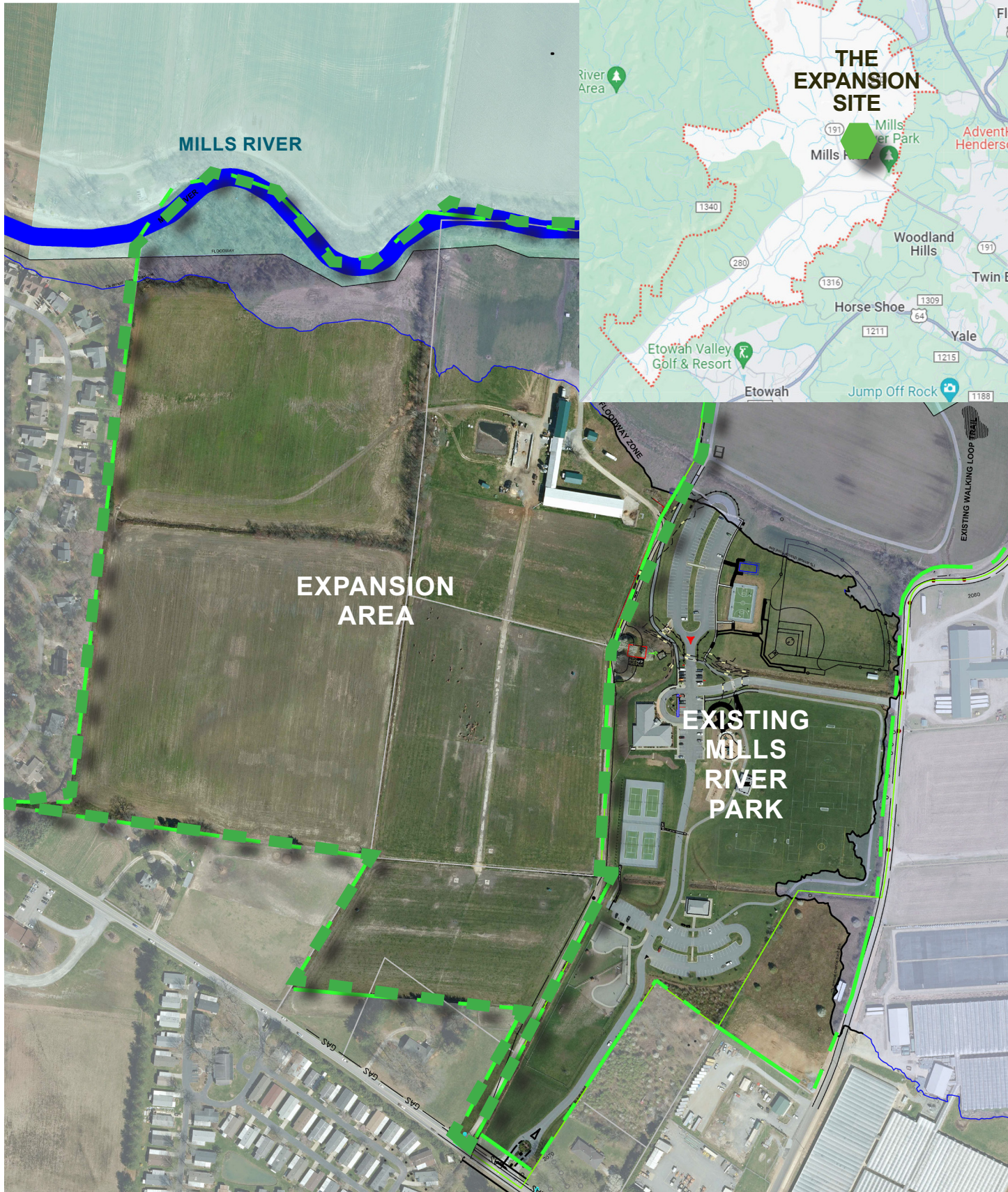


Camping Night - Photo from Town of Mills River Facebook Page

SITE ANALYSIS



THE SITE



THE SITE



Existing expansion area access road



Existing structure under operation as a dairy



Structure used for previous dairy operations



Expansion area



Expansion area under agricultural operations



Mills River

INVENTORY

SITE HISTORY

A Phase 1 Environmental Assessment was completed in July of 2022 and aerial photography dating back to 1964 shows the site has been in agricultural use since that time. At the time of acquisition, the property had served as agricultural land and as a dairy. According to the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office Website and online GIS database there are no known historic structures or sites located on this property. There are old agricultural structures that appear to have been added to the site based upon aerial photography. The town had the structures evaluated and found these structures are not acceptable for public use.



PHOTO INVENTORY

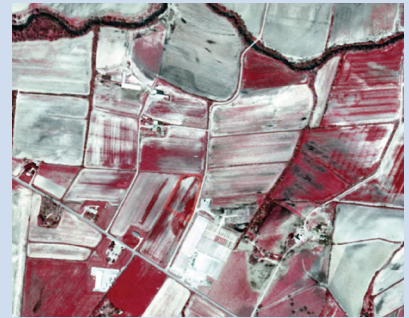
1964



1970



1984



2012



2020



Timeline photos are from 2022 Phase 1 Environmental Assessment Report by Equinox

INVENTORY

THE AREA

The Town of Mills River is located in the north-western 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 borders 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, all within minutes of the town. The major arteries running through the town are NC 280 and NC 191 which provide easy access to nearby towns and cities within the region that also provide recreational and tourism resources within the County.

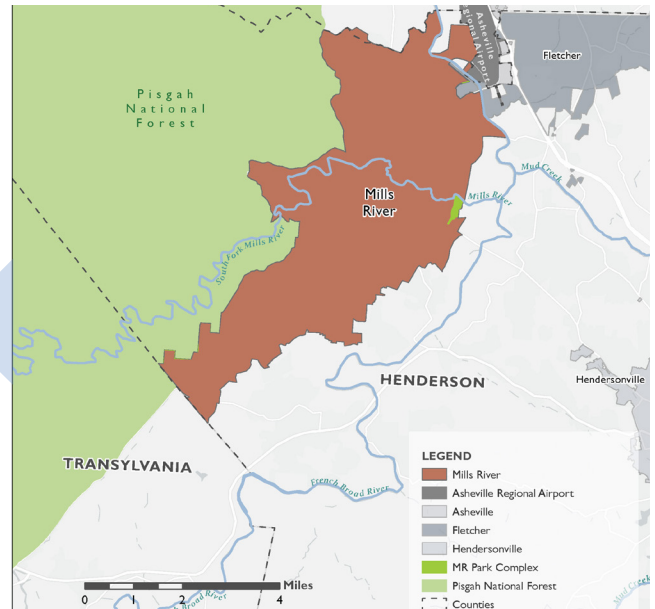


Image from 2023 Go Mills River report

THE COMMUNITY

The 2022 US Census Bureau calculates the population of Mills River is 7206 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 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.

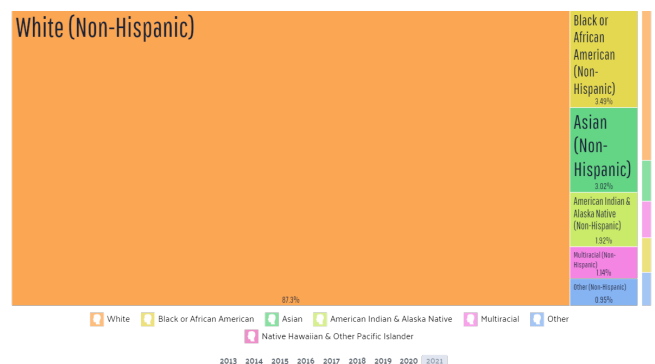
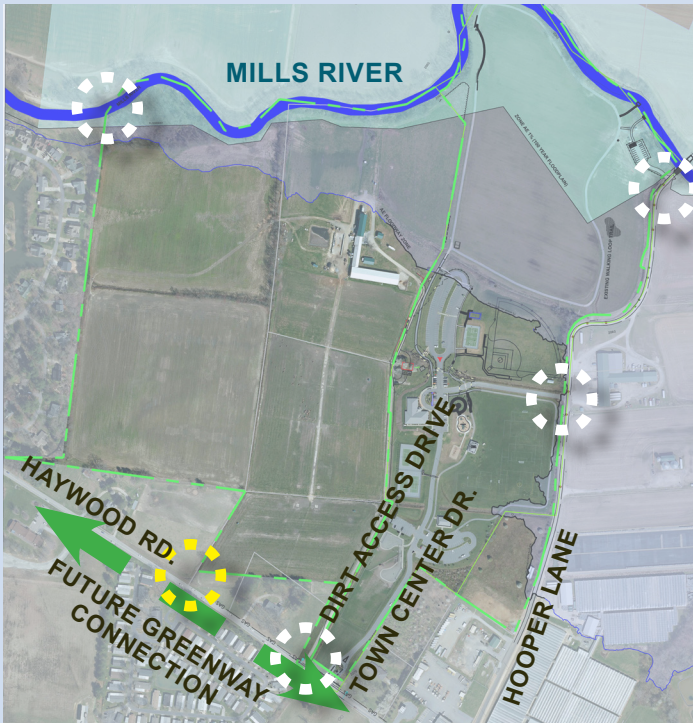


Image from Data USA Race and Ethnicity Data

ACCESS

Currently the existing Park is accessible via Haywood Road and Town Center Drive, and Hooper Lane and Town Center Drive. In addition to the roadway access points, there is access to the park from the river.

The Park Expansion Area can be accessed via a dirt access drive, and there is a connection allocated via the existing park at the parking area near the tennis courts. The widening of Haywood Road will result in an additional vehicular access location opportunity, and the opportunity to connect park trails to the regional greenway to be located along Haywood Road.



SITE INFRASTRUCTURE

The site currently is served by an on-site well and septic. As this site transitions from private agricultural use, to public recreational use, the Town plans to update site infrastructure including internal park access roads, connection to water and sewer located at the existing town hall and park site, and connections to power and solar.



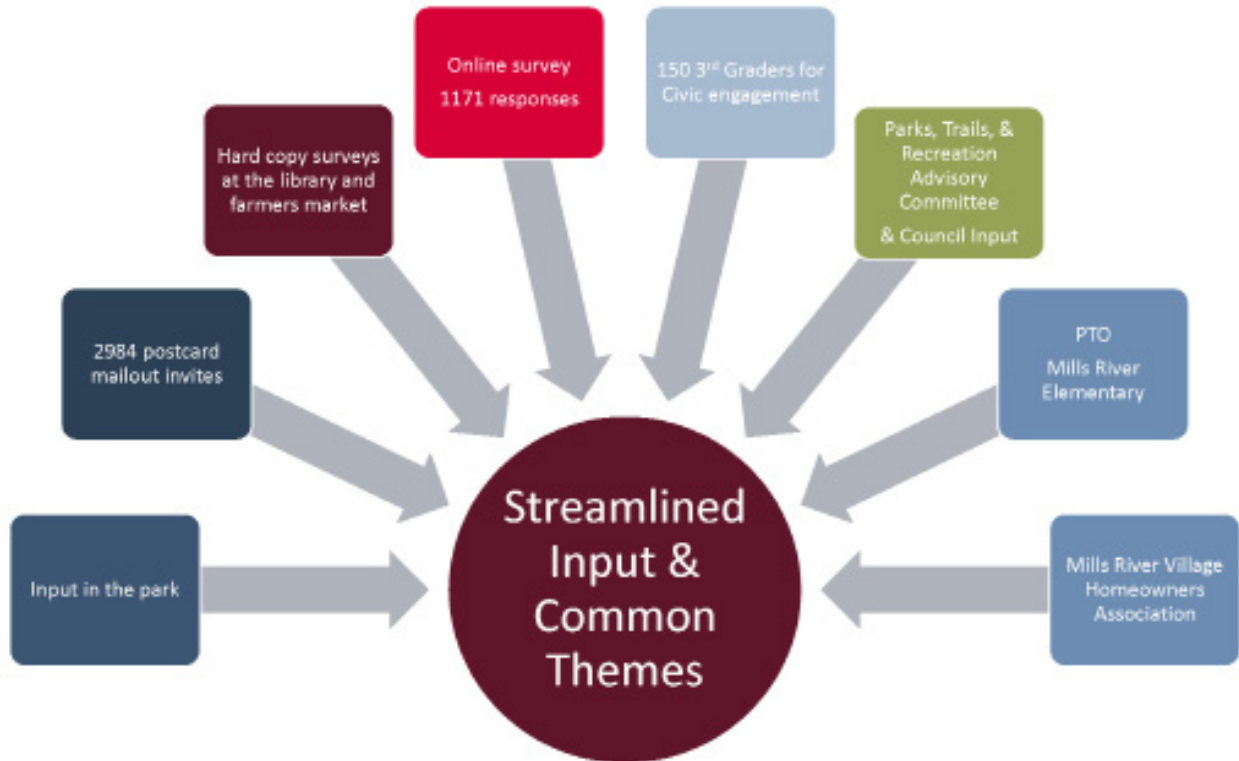
The adjacent existing Town Hall and Park site have access to water, sewer, power, and parking and roadway infrastructure.

RECREATIONAL NEEDS



Photo from Town of Mills River

RECREATIONAL NEEDS



COMMUNITY

The Town of Mills River completed extensive assessment of recreational needs during the 2021 Mills River comprehensive parks and recreation plan process, and the 2021 updated Mills River Park Master Plan. However, with the inclusion of the additional acreage, the Town wanted to reassess the recreational needs. In order to do that they wanted to make sure they were able to reach as many residents as possible by conducting a post card mail out to every resident, presenting an online survey, completing in person input opportunities, and attending community meetings. The result is a representative assessment of recreational needs for the Mills River Park Expansion Master Plan.

ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINTS

- 2984 Post Card Mail Outs
- Input at the Park Events
 - Movie Night
 - Park Intercept Surveys and Input Event
- Surveys at the Farmers Market & Library
- 1171 Online Survey Responses
- 150 3rd Graders giving insight and input on the park during a civic engagement course
- Input and Design Charettes with the Park Advisory Committee and Town Council (2) each
- Attendance at the Mills River Elementary PTO and Mills River Village Neighborhood Homeowners Association
- Community Feedback on Concept Design

“ First and foremost: Keeping that “Mills River character”! Also, I love the idea of additional river access points, keeping green/nature area space (birding area, meadows, addition of bird & bat boxes, and nature identification signs), addition of sand volleyball. Overall, I love that the expansion of the park include many, diverse elements while not losing the “Mills River feel”that makes it so special and unique.” Survey response from Mills River Resident

SURVEY

The Town of Mills River mailed a post card to every household, with a total of 2984 postcards being mailed. Residents were asked to participate in the survey which yielded 1171 representative responses. Residents also had the opportunity to participate in person, at park events, and through community civic organizations. This gave the town a clear pictures of community needs for the expansion site, and a better understanding of how offerings at the existing park are serving the community.

The draft master plan concept was also posted online, presented to council, and displayed at Town Hall and the library for additional survey comment in which the town received over 100 open-ended responses.

survey responses

1171

Mills River Residents

68%

Mills River Park Expansion Input Highlights

What do People Want?

Top 10

1. Trails
2. Pools or Splash pad
3. Indoor Recreation
4. Farmers Market & Foods trucks
5. Nature, Open space, Mills River character
6. Tennis and Pickleball separated
7. Soccer, Multi-use fields, baseball
8. Event Space/lawn
9. Expanded Dog Park
10. Disc Golf

Importance of Park Connectivity
Important/Very Important

60%

Accessible/Universally Designed
Important/Very Important

70%

Most Used Facilities

Top 5

1. Trails (598)
2. Playground (212)
3. Dog Park (107)
4. River Access (81)
5. Tennis/Pickleball (61)

How People are using the River

Top 5

1. Hiking, Running, and Walking
2. Greenway Trails
3. Picnicking
4. Swimming/Wading/snorkeling
5. Nature Study & Observation

Great Ideas!

- Shade
- Adventure Play: Obstacle Course and climbing areas
- Skate Park, Roller Hockey, Ice Skating
- Bike Park, Pump Track
- Sand Volleyball
- Observation Towers/Tree Houses
- Yoga Areas
- Shuffleboard, Bocce, Horse Shoes
- RC Courses
- Backboards for Soccer & Tennis
- Firepits

What would you change?

- More Trails
- Shade
- More Benches & Seating
- More Playgrounds
- Separate Tennis/Pickleball
- Add Splash Pad
- Farmers Market
- Lighting
- Dust from Road

IN PERSON

Mills River Park users, residents, and visitors had the opportunity to participate in the input process at the Park, Park events such as movie night and at the Farmers Market, and in the library located at Town Hall. Information boards in the Park, emails, facebook posts, and website information informed the public of opportunities to participate in person to give ideas!

Additionally, two Town Council planning sessions, and two Parks and Recreation Advisory meetings were open to the public for input and participation.

CIVIC GROUPS

The Town of Mills River had the opportunity to attend and get feedback from two civic groups, the Mills River Elementary PTO and the Mills River Village Homeowners Association. Staff and the consultant team attended events in order to better understand the individual organizational needs, and learn how the future park site could help meet these needs. Civic organizations also had an opportunity to present any concerns that may exist.

Mills River Village had representatives attend a council meeting to express support for the project and identify their neighborhood needs.

PTO IDEAS!

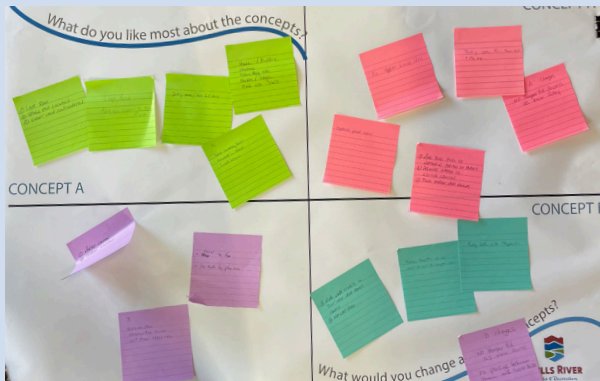
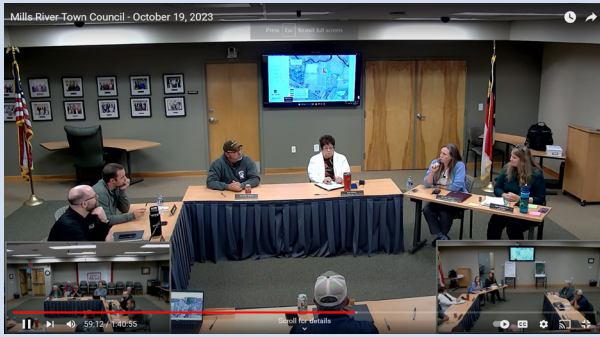
- Splash Pad (8)
- Shade (4)
- After school
- opportunities for kids
- summer camps
- indoor soccer
- Farmers Market
- Tennis Courts (more)
- swimming pool (3)
- trail from park to elementary school
- party structure near playground
- pollinator garden
- larger playground
- disc golf
- safety (2)
- pump track
- trails
- wheelchair accessible features



Civic groups were a part of the planning process, giving input for the plan and feedback on the ideas presented

COUNCIL AND ADVISORY

The Town of Mills River Town Council and Parks and Recreation Advisory Board have been actively engaged in this process. Both have had two opportunities to participate in design charrettes to give ideas and input, and review draft concepts to give feedback. The result has been a very community driven and supported plan for the future expansion of Mills River Park.



COUNCIL & ADVISORY IDEAS!

- Celebrate Mills River, Arts, and area
- More Trails
- Indoor Recreation
- Connectivity
- Open Space
- Farmers Market
- Room for Growth
- Park Roads, Circulation, & Accessibility
- Balance of Active and Passive
- Partnerships
- Exercise and Play
- Community Event Space
- Environmental focus (Stream Restoration, Birding, Nature)
- Picnic areas
- Shade

STUDENTS

Town of Mills River Staff had the opportunity to not only teach 150 third graders about civic engagement, but also provide a platform for student user input. Students learned about reading a map, regulations, civic engagement, and what types of elements are needed in parks to support users.

STUDENT IDEAS!

- Gaga Pit
- Tree houses
- Roller Coasters
- Restaurant
- Pool
- Forest
- Pond
- Hot tub
- Soccer fields
- Splash Pad
- Football
- Petting Zoo
- Swings



The adjacent existing Town Hall and Park site have access to water, sewer, power, and parking and roadway infrastructure.

THE MASTER PLAN



THE MASTER PLAN

DESCRIPTION

The Town of Mills River committed to a community created and supported plan and as such has been able to bring together a variety of ideas and elements that help meet current recreation needs, and map a plan for the future.

The master plan has several exciting components in response to existing site features, community engagement, and identified gaps in recreational services.

TRAILS

Trails were identified as one of the most important features in the existing park, and to include in the park moving forward. The Master Plan presents additional linear footage of paved multi-purpose trail, connection to the future regional greenway, expansion of the successful Mills River blueway, bike skills trails, and natural surface trails. All of these trails offer users a different experience and allow park visitors to experience the variety of natural resources present.

PLAY

Mills River has a growing community and strong support for expanded play. In addition to the soon to be upgraded accessible play space, residents would like increased access to nature based play, group play with a gaga pit, interaction with water by including a splash pad, and having access to intergenerational features such as a mini disc golf course.



FITNESS AND SPORTS

Mills River is an active community. On any given day you can see the trail busy with users, the tennis courts are full of players, and the fields have a variety of sports activities. The community would like to see increased access to sports fields, the separation of tennis and pickleball, a place for outdoor fitness and exercise, increased access to trails for running events, the inclusion of sand volleyball, and enhancing the existing ballfield with a batting cage.



THE MASTER PLAN

STRUCTURES

Agriculture and community gathering is important to the Mills River community. The Mills River farmers market would like a place to call home. The proposed pavilion space will not only help provide a home for the farmers market, but also a covered multipurpose space for a variety of programs and activities. It is important to the community future structures reflect the character of the Mills River Community.

The expansion area Master Plan also proposes support facilities such as restrooms, shelters, and an outdoor classroom space that can serve as an events stage for community events and performances.

Access to indoor recreation ranked high as a feature, and is in high demand for the community. The Town has allocated space for future growth for indoor recreation, and also started the conversation for planning for indoor recreation in the future.

The community enjoys access to the county run library which is currently housed in Town Hall. As the Town continues to evaluate its own space needs, residents would like to continue to have access to this county resource.

The existing maintenance facility is located in the heart of the park. The Master Plan relocates maintenance to the outer edge of the park allowing for better access to maintenance and operations needs, and to allocate space for increased storage capacity. This will allow the existing maintenance structure to be evaluated for program re-use and other town services.

NATURE

The Mills River Community is supportive of the protection of, and access to, its incredible natural resources. The Mills River, the adjacent meadows and floodplains, and the open space itself provide a wonderful balance of access to active and passive recreation activities.



ACCESS

Mills River is unique in that users will be able to access the expansion area via car, greenway, and blueway. The Master Plan proposes a new entry point to allow for access to one cohesive park site, to allow for future town hall growth, and to accommodate the impacts of Haywood Road widening. These new access locations and internal park roads will provide an accessible space for users.

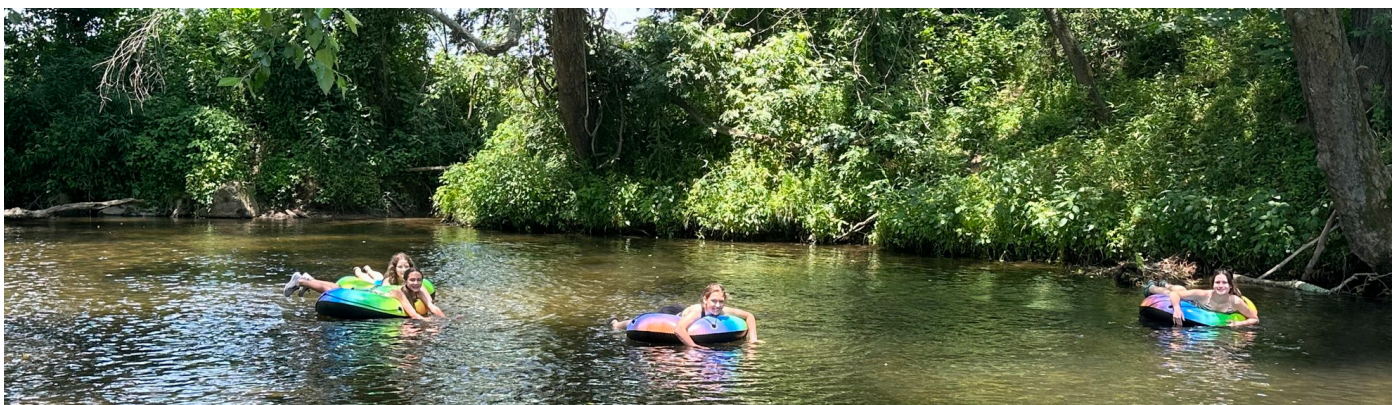


Image from the Town of Mills River Parks and Recreation facebook page

VISION FOR THE EXPANSION



Incorporate large lawn for multi-use events and gathering - Unity Park, SC



Future multi-purpose fields to serve a variety of athletic needs



Future Multi-Purpose pavilion - Camp Thunderbird



Celebrate Nature through access and education



Include water play or Splash Pad - Unity Park, SC

THE PLAN



THE PROGRAM

TRAILS

- Approximately 1.85 miles of paved trail
- 1/2 mile of natural surface trail
- Bike skills area and trails
- Regional greenway connection along Haywood Road

PLAY

- Expanded play and splash pad
- Nature based play area
- Mini disc golf course

FITNESS AND SPORTS

- Fitness zone
- 6 pickleball courts
- 2 full size multi-purpose fields
- Batting cage
- Sand volleyball

STRUCTURES

- Relocated maintenance area
- Multi-purpose pavilion
- 2 restrooms
- 3 shelters
- Recreation area for future building
- Building reuse upon relocation of maintenance

NATURE

- Expanded community garden area
- Expanded river access
- Stream restoration
- Stormwater wetland education
- Expanded birding and nature area
- 3.5 AC of events lawn and multi-purpose space

ACCESS

- Relocated main entry, secondary entry and park road

IMPLEMENTATION

ACQUISITION

The needs of the town continue to grow and having the opportunity to grow recreation access at Mills River Park and the Town Hall campus allows the town to build upon its existing resources and infrastructure. This 70 Acres will help the Town fill recreation access gaps identified in the Comprehensive System-wide plan and during this planning process.

TRANSITION THE USE

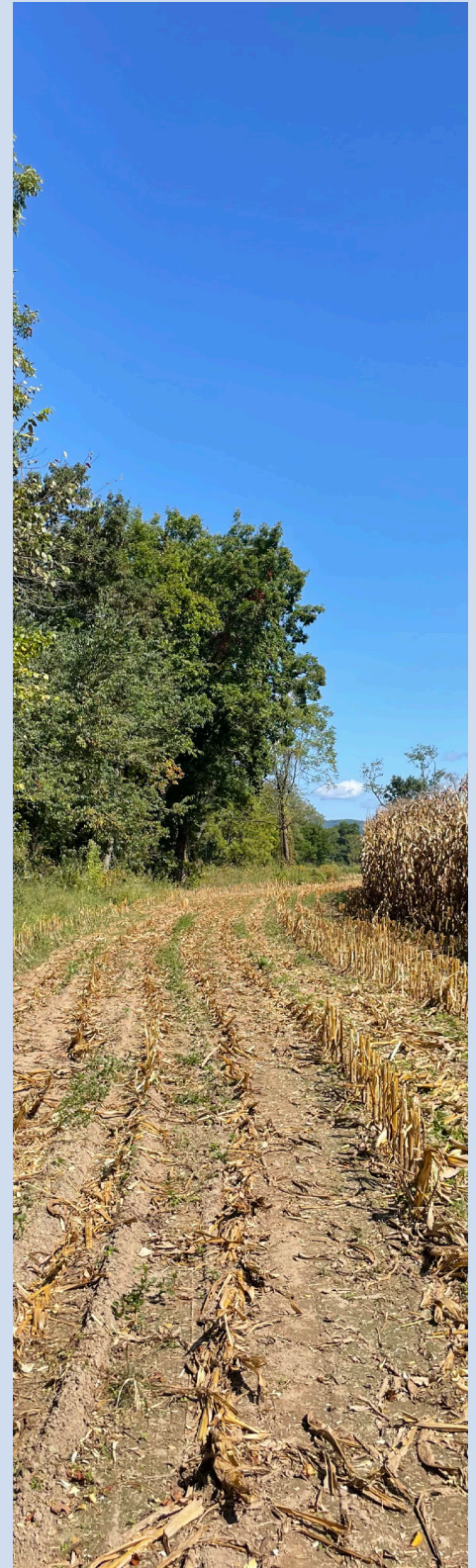
Transitioning the use from a previously held agricultural property to a public recreation resource will require the Town to assess health safety issues associated with existing structures, and access points. Once this has been complete, the public can begin to access the site through adjacent and nearby locations. The town will work toward establishing access to a portion of the site for recreational use as soon as possible.

ACCESS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

In order to provide many of the desired recreation resources presented in the park site master plan, the town will need to evaluate the access and infrastructure needed to provide the resources which have been highlighted as the highest priorities.

PHASE 1 DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION

Once the site has been transitioned from private agriculture, access points along Haywood road which is to be widened have been secured, and stream stabilization has occurred, the town should begin planning and design for the first phase of access to the expansion area. Portions of the site may be opened for stream restoration and informal recreational access until phase 1 has been completed.



FUNDING

FUNDING

Parks and Recreation systems are more frequently utilizing varied sources of revenue to help support capital and operational needs. The methods below are only a few ways to take the next steps in developing the Mills River Park Expansion site. The Town of Mills River has already successfully leveraged many of these sources over the years to develop the existing park site, and it is anticipated this approach will continue as the expansion site and the existing park site become one cohesive town resource.

The following are some of the funding options that should be explored as the park is phased from a privately held agricultural tract to a publicly used recreational resource:

- Bonds
- Capital Fees
- Corporate Sponsorships
- Crowdfunding
- Foundations
- Friends Groups
- Grants
- Impact Fees
- Inter Agency Agreements
- Volunteers
- Partnerships
- Permits
- Private Donations
- Private Public Partnerships
- Project and Program specific fundraisers
- Recreation Service Fees
- Rental Fees
- Reservations
- User Fees

