

# Introduction to Park Planning



# Chapter 1 :: Introduction to Park Planning



## Abilene's Need for Parks and Recreation

Quality of life is an important factor to the citizens that call Abilene their home. Quality of life encompasses many areas including the ability to get good jobs, the ability to get around the city easily, the feeling that Abilene is a safe place to live in, and the availability of attractive homes and neighborhoods in which to live.

One of the most important aspects of quality of life is the availability of high quality parks and recreation opportunities. Parks and recreation influence every aspect of our lives. They allow us to experience new activities and encourage us to lead a healthy lifestyle. Attractive parks and natural areas are often the first place that visitors view in our communities. Parks provide a very visible reminder of the beauty of the land that we choose to live in. Parks are also one of the most visible elements of a city government at work, and can instill a strong sense of pride in the residents of a community. A good parks and recreation system lets both residents and visitors know that the leadership of a city is interested in the well being of its citizens.

## Purpose of the Parks Master Plan

Abilene's previous Park System Master Plan was completed in 2008, and it superseded a plan that was completed in 1997. The 2008 Plan has been an excellent guide for the City over the past several years, helping the park system remain viable through a period of considerable change in both Texas and in Abilene itself. The 2008 plan identified the need for new park development in underserved areas, the need to continue to renovate existing parks, and the need to update and expand trail facilities. Renovation of some park and youth athletic facilities was accomplished, but new park development in the southern sector of the City was not funded.

One other major recommendation that was not funded during the last ten years was the development of a family aquatic center to serve all of Abilene. The next decade brings new changes and challenges, and this plan will be a key guiding tool for staff during that time.

A good park system does not occur randomly, but rather requires a series of orderly steps. It responds to the interests of all citizens it serves, and not just the needs of a select few. This master plan establishes goals and priorities, and provides an assessment of Abilene's parks system in the year 2014. The Park Planning process allows the citizens of Abilene to determine what their preferred park and recreation priorities should be. This plan:

- Points out deficiencies in the system and recommends alternatives to address and correct those deficiencies.
- Looks at the potential growth of the City over the next 5 to 10 years, and assesses where additional facilities will be needed as growth occurs, and what types of facilities are most needed.
- Guides staff in acquiring land to meet current and future park and open space needs.
- Prioritizes key recommendations of the plan so that the most significant deficiencies are addressed as quickly as possible.
- Is intended to guide staff and city leaders in determining where and how parks funding should be allocated over the next five years.

### Parks Master Planning Process

The park planning process is illustrated by the diagram to the right. The most important component of the process is the input of Abilene's citizens, staff and elected officials. This plan should fully embrace the needs, concerns, and dreams of the residents of Abilene.

The plan is divided into sections that address existing facilities and key needs, then lays out recommendations for each type of park facility and major programs for the City. The plan divided each recommendation into two categories:

- The first part addresses those actions that are immediate and that should be undertaken to renovate or better utilize existing facilities. It also addresses actions that meet the needs of today's population.
- The second part of recommendations addresses longer range, visionary actions that can establish Abilene's parks position as one of the best systems in the region.

**Goals for Parks & Recreation**

**Abilene Today**

**Existing Standards & Parks**

**Needs Assessment**

**A Trails Plan for Abilene**

**Indoor Recreation & Aquatics**

**Master Plan Recommendations**

**Implementation Strategy**



## Master Plan Timeframe

The master plan is formulated to address the timeframe through the next ten years; however, many of the recommendations are valid for a period of more than ten years, and should be reassessed periodically. Per planning requirements issued by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), the plan should be updated after a five year period, or before if any major developments occur which significantly alter the recreation needs of the City. The following steps are recommended for periodic review of this master plan:

- An annual workshop by the Parks and Recreation staff with the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and the Abilene City Council should be conducted to review progress and success.
- More frequent updates may be required if special needs or occurrences require modifications to the plan.
- In all cases, public involvement through citizen meetings, interviews, and workshops should be included in any updating process.

## Jurisdiction and Recreation Provider

The plan analyzes the park needs of the City of Abilene and its extra territorial jurisdiction (ETJ). The recommendations of this plan will be implemented by the City of Abilene, and is intended to cover the entire city limits, as well as the areas of the surrounding ETJ. The city limits of Abilene includes approximately 112 square miles with 6 square miles of water and 106 square miles of land, and the ETJ encompasses an area of 264 square miles.

The City of Abilene is the primary governmental entity charged with providing recreational facilities for its citizens. Ancillary recreational facilities are provided by Abilene ISD and Wylie ISD on school campuses, Taylor County, Jones County, area colleges and universities, the YMCA, and the Boys & Girls Club.

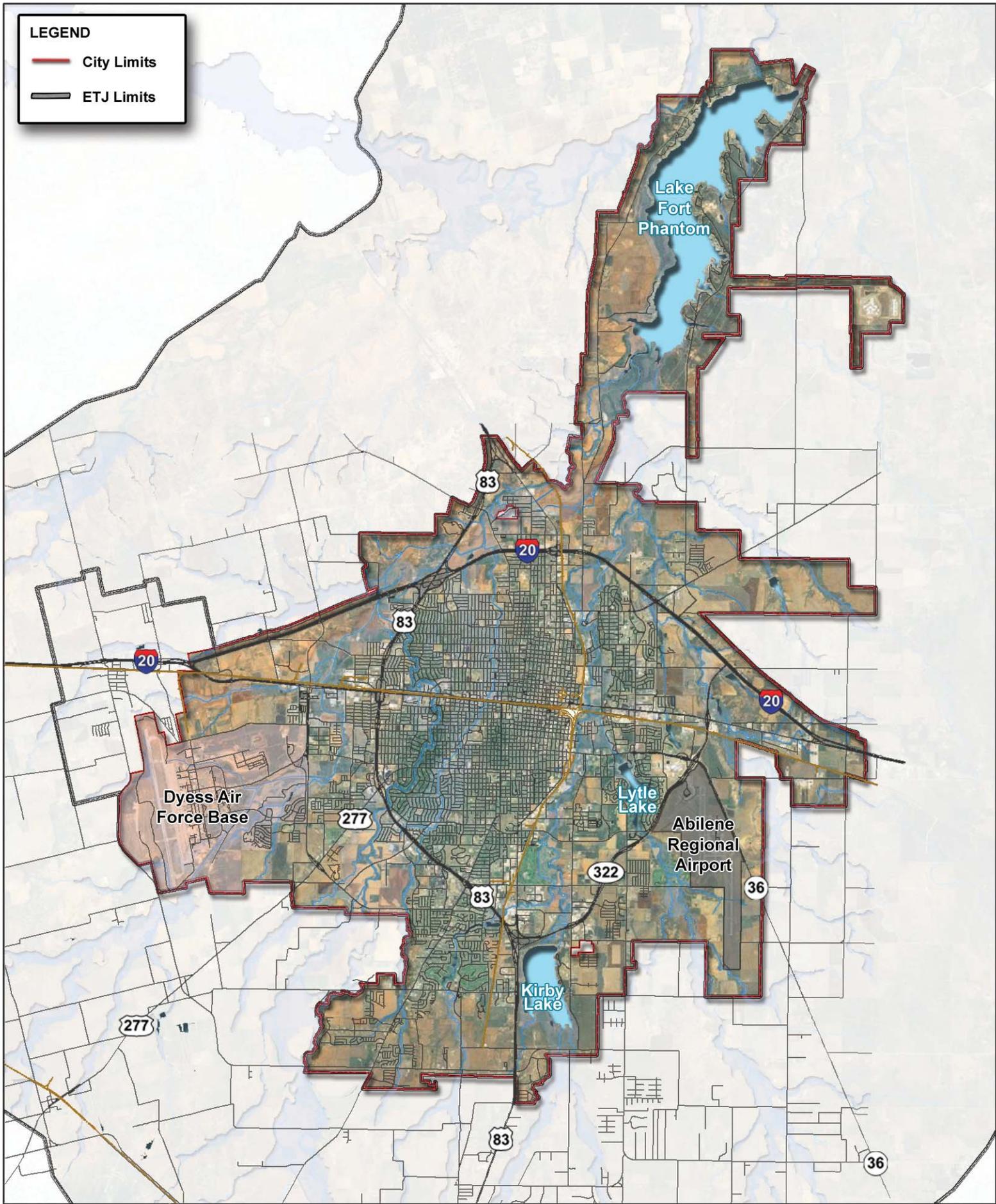
The implementation of this plan will be lead by the City of Abilene Community Services Department through the Parks and Recreation Divisions. However, everyone in Abilene has a vested interest in ensuring the parks system in the City becomes one of the best in the region. This includes:

- All governmental entities including the City of Abilene, the counties, the school districts, and other advisory group entities such as the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, by providing partnerships opportunities.
- The business community in Abilene, including property owners, developers, commercial entities, and others by developing trails connecting to their business or offering recreational programs.
- All citizens of Abilene and the surrounding ETJ, no matter which part of the City they live in by getting involved in the planning process and utilizing the facilities.

The parks master plan follows the general guidelines for local park master plans established by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD). This document will be filed with TPWD and allows the City to better quality for grant opportunities as they become available.

**LEGEND**

- City Limits
- ETJ Limits



# Abilene City Limits

Abilene Parks, Recreation & Senior Facilities Master Plan



GRAPHIC SCALE

0 0.5 1 2 Miles

## Guiding Principles of Abilene's Parks and Recreation System

Goals and objectives for a plan such as this create the foundation for guiding future decisions and development. Goals are an important part of the park planning process in that they provide the underlying philosophical framework for decisions and also guide decision makers on issues. The goals expressed in this plan reflect the desires of the citizens, elected and appointed officials, and the staff of Abilene.

Goals shown in this section and throughout this report are based on input received from the citizen survey, during public meetings, stakeholder interviews, and meetings with the Parks and Recreation Department staff.

**Goals** describe the desired outcome for a plan. They are different from a vision in that they speak directly about a component of the overall system.

**Objectives** are identified statements or policies that work toward the goal. It is more specific than a goal, and addresses particular issues related to the elements to achieve the desired goal.

**Actions** include specific strategies or steps to take in order to reach a specified objective. Action items are specific enough to include a recommended timeframe for implementation, other agencies or entities to partner with, and often a potential cost range.

**Benchmarks** are target measures which the objectives and actions are working toward. They measure progress toward achieving the goal over time, and are ways to measure progress of plan implementation.

*The Excellent Park System*, written by Peter Harnik and published by the Trust for Public Lands in 2003, lists seven major measures of an excellent park system. Those measures are discussed below, and are incorporated into the plan goals shown on the following pages.

- 1. A clear expression of purpose** – A clear purpose for the system must be in place, expressed through a mission statement and have goals that define precisely what the system is expected to provide. The park system needs of the citizens of Abilene are evolving, and the City must respond to new demands for an active and vibrant park system.
- 2. Ongoing planning and community involvement** – The excellent parks system has a plan that it follows and updates periodically. It also involves its residents in the development of the plan and major decisions undertaken by the system. Abilene has done well in planning, with both park system and overall comprehensive plans that are actively used to guide actions.
- 3. Sufficient assets in land, staffing, and equipment to meet the system's goals** – The Parks System must have adequate land, know how much parkland it has and where, and have adequate operating funds and “a regular infusion of capital funds for major construction and repairs and land acquisition.” While Abilene has better than average land assets, it has lacked major funding infusions that would allow it to be an active and vibrant system. The City faces a major choice - maintain a system that is “just there” or truly support a park system that can become a major driving force in making the City a great place to live in Texas.
- 4. Equitable access** – Parks should be readily accessible, no matter where residents live. Ten minutes on foot in dense areas and ten minutes by bicycle in suburban areas is recommended by the author. Access for persons with different disabilities or for residents that cannot afford the full cost of programs should also be provided. Parks in many parts of Abilene are very accessible, but growth in the southern part of the City has moved ahead of the supply of parks.
- 5. User satisfaction** – Citizens should fully use the park facilities and be satisfied with what they are provided with. Cities should record usership, and should periodically query their residents to determine the level of resident satisfaction. The citizens of Abilene, through ongoing input, appreciate the system they have, but have expressed their desire for a better park system.
- 6. Safety from physical hazards and crime** – Park users should feel safe when they use the facilities anywhere in the City. Abilene is considered a very safe place, and in general citizens feel that their parks are safe.
- 7. Benefits for the City beyond the boundaries of the parks system** – The excellent parks system clearly provides environmental, economic, health and learning benefits for its residents. Abilene must allow its park system to become an important piece of the economic foundation that brings new jobs and industry to the City.

## Goals and Objectives

These goals and objectives are partly based on the *Seven Measures of an Excellent Park System* and follow the goals expressed in the 2008 Parks, Recreation and Senior Facilities Master Plan. Input from citizens, staff and stakeholders was also used to develop the fundamental guiding goals of the future parks system for Abilene.

### **Goal 1: Aim to establish Abilene's park system as one of the premier park systems in the western half of Texas**

- 1.1 Implement a long-range program for continued improvement of Abilene's parks system based upon The Parks, Recreation and Senior Facilities Master Plan.
- 1.2 Identify benchmarks that will indicate progress towards meeting this goal.
- 1.3 Identify areas with the greatest need for park facilities, pursue the acquisition of land or resources as needed, and develop facilities where needed.
- 1.4 Frequently encourage and provide opportunities for citizens to participate in planning, development, maintenance, and operation of the City's parks, recreation and open space system.
- 1.5 Periodically update the long-range plan and standards to reflect changing conditions in the City and provide a forum for citizen input.
- 1.6 Preserve the ability to respond to unique acquisition or development opportunities as they arise, even if out of the proposed sequence of improvements, provided that they respond to key needs and goals.

### **Goal 2: Focus on addressing indoor as well as outdoor recreation needs over the next five to ten years**

- 2.1 Develop excellent indoor recreation facilities that provide affordable fitness and program alternatives throughout Abilene.
- 2.2 Work with public, semi-public and private entities to provide access throughout the City.
- 2.3 Continue to provide excellent senior recreation facilities at both a central location and at satellite facilities that already exist.
- 2.4 Focus on fitness as a key benefit of indoor recreation facilities.

### **Goal 3: Ensure that the park system will be accessible**

- 3.1 The City will work towards providing parks, trails, and open spaces in an adequate amount in all parts of Abilene.
- 3.2 Parks will be located so that every citizen of Abilene has close access to a park. In the near future, no one in Abilene will live farther than ½ mile from a park, and in many parts of Abilene residents may be within ¼ mile of a park, green space, or trail access point.
- 3.3 In newly developed parks of the City, adequate parkland will be allocated from the beginning of development, so that the target levels of service of this plan are met.

3.4 A variety of park sizes and facility types are readily available. The parks system will work towards providing a mix of small and large parks, trails, open spaces, and indoor recreation facilities. The system will work towards meeting parks, trails and open space goals. In other parts of the City, appropriate steps will be initiated to come closer to the facility and service goals of this plan.

## **Goal 4: The System will be well funded, and will actively pursue partnership opportunities**

- 4.1 The parks system will be funded to a level that corresponds to its importance to the citizens of Abilene. It will be encouraged to flourish.
- 4.2 Provide City parks staff with the manpower and funding resources to maintain all parkland and facilities in a superior manner. Continue to provide adequate operations and maintenance resources as new recreational facilities are developed and added to the parks system.
- 4.3 The parks system will use all available land resources. Every land resource in the City will be considered for its potential as a park or open space resource so that there are as many open space and suitable park sites as possible. Schools and drainage corridors should be considered in the overall parks equation of the City.
- 4.4 School parks must be a vital part of the parks system. Parks adjacent to elementary or secondary school sites must be a vital resource for the citizens of Abilene in the future. The Abilene Independent School District, the Wylie Independent School District and the City of Abilene will actively work together to serve the citizens of Abilene.
- 4.5 Work to strengthen local organizations that can assist with providing park and recreation facilities and programs for the residents of Abilene.
- 4.6 Actively pursue mechanisms that allow the private sector to build or fund some park and recreation facilities in Abilene.
- 4.7 Coordinate extensively with other recreation providers in the areas. Consider joint development of park and recreation facilities and programs where those opportunities can be shown to adequately fulfill the needs of the citizens of Abilene.

## **Goal 5: The System will identify and focus first on “core” services**

- 5.1 The department will focus on providing basic services that serve a significant portion of the population. These will be measured against five desired outcomes:
  - Livability of the Community – Provides diverse recreational opportunities and experiences for all citizens of Abilene.
  - Health – Provides opportunities to improve the health of everyone in Abilene.
  - Youth – Provides learning and recreational experiences for the youth of Abilene.
  - Revenue – Provides opportunities for revenue, but only if not at the expense of the other desired outcomes.
  - Outdoors – Provides opportunities to experience the outdoors in many ways.

## Goal 6: Parks in Abilene will be extraordinary and timeless

- 6.1 The parks in Abilene will express the natural beauty and cultural diversity of the City. The parks should look like they belong in Abilene.
- 6.2 Resolve to create parks that are unusual, extraordinary and that stand out.
- 6.3 The entire parks system, with its lands and buildings, should be one of the most visible features in the City and express the character of Abilene.
- 6.4 Develop parks that represent the natural beauty of the area and that fit in with the scenery by using complementary materials.
- 6.5 Use materials that are native to the area, and that are already commonly used such as boulders, native rock, shrubs, and trees.
- 6.6 Use a distinctive appearance and architectural features for park buildings as the focal points of parks. Use strong architectural statements that draw attention to the parks.
- 6.7 Actively promote the beautification of key corridors and nature sites.

## Goal 7: Parks will be community focal points

- 7.1 Place parks so that they become readily visible focal points of the community around them.
- 7.2 Think of parks as a green center for neighborhoods. Treat parks as key green areas and central features of their neighborhoods. Larger parks should become beautiful focal areas of that part of the City.
- 7.3 Incorporate unique design features to make each park unique.

## Goal 8: The City will focus on connectivity and linkage

- 8.1 Establish and fund a goal to truly develop a network of pedestrian and bicycle facilities throughout Abilene.
- 8.2 Trails and linear parks will equally focus on connectivity and leisure uses. Develop a trails system that will link a variety of destinations, especially neighborhoods to area schools, parks, local retail, centers of government, and indoor recreation.
- 8.3 Work towards creating pedestrian and bikeway corridors and pathways to connect all parts of the City.
- 8.4 Trails and linear parks will be a vital part of the parks system. A spine system of linear parks and trails should be extended, so that the goal of one day linking all parts of the City via scenic parkways and linear parks can be achieved.

## Goal 9: The City will continue to value and preserve open space

- 9.1 Encourage educational institutions, semi-private land trusts, and other nonprofit organizations to acquire, manage, and maintain natural and open space conservation areas within the City and its ETJ.

9.2 Continue to preserve open space and undeveloped parkland as a community wide asset, especially in the north around Lake Fort Phantom, and in the south where new neighborhoods are rapidly being created.

9.3 Use drainage as opportunities to “create” open space. Use the many drainage corridors and creeks throughout the City as park assets, not just as conduits for storm water. Plan so that roads can be run alongside drainage areas, and add trees to create linear parkways.

## **Goal 10: Detention and drainage will be used as a green opportunity**

10.1 Treat drainage ponds and detention basins as mini parks or green areas. Plant vegetation around detention basins to convert them into attractive open space.

10.2 Avoid deep detention unless critical. In the future, avoid deep detention basins except on a regional scale. Use natural basins as potential large parks.

## **Goal 11: The system will focus on sustainability**

11.1 Convert portions of existing parks to more drought-tolerant designs and focus on lowering water consumption.

11.2 Incorporate energy and sustainable features into all buildings and parks in the future. Include features that emphasize sustainability if efficiency savings can be demonstrated over time.

## **Goal 12: The system will continue to focus on reducing maintenance**

12.1 Use cost effective maintenance techniques. Water usage, equipment, and staff allocations will all be designed to promote the most efficient maintenance of park facilities, while maintaining parks in the best manner possible.

12.2 Design facilities to reduce maintenance. All park facilities will be designed to reduce the amount of maintenance that they require.

These 12 goals will be adopted as part of this plan, and will serve to help guide future decisions regarding parks, recreation and open space in Abilene.