

catawba county parks



master plan
2026 - 2036



catawba county
parks

MAKING. LIVING. BETTER.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Catawba County Parks would like to thank the individuals, organizations, and community partners who contributed their time, expertise, and perspectives throughout the development of this Master Plan, including

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Catawba Lands Conservancy
Carolina Thread Trail
Great State Trails Coalition
Northwest NC Mountain Bike Alliance
Tarheel Trailblazers
City of Hickory Parks, Recreation & Sports Tourism
Town of Maiden Parks and Recreation
Catawba County Public Health
Historical Association of Catawba County
Centro Latino**

and the many Catawba County residents and community members who participated in surveys, focus groups, public engagement activities, and other opportunities to provide input.



catawba county parks

Dear Catawba County Residents and Visitors,

I am excited to introduce the 2026 update to the Catawba County Parks Master Plan. This marks our first comprehensive planning update since 2015, representing a monumental milestone in shaping the future vision of our park system.

Our parks, trails, and natural resources play a vital role in making Catawba County a thriving, healthy, and welcoming place for everyone. To ensure these spaces serve you, we gathered invaluable feedback directly from the people who enjoy them, as well as from those who are discovering them for the first time. Throughout the planning process, we heard from residents, park users, community members, and industry partners about their experiences, priorities, and vision for the future of our parks. This feedback was crucial in helping us evaluate our strengths, identify community needs, and explore opportunities for growth and improvement across our entire park system. Whether you are a regular park user, a parent, a nature lover, or someone seeking more ways to enjoy the outdoors, your perspective helped shape the final roadmap for our parks.

A strong park system promotes public health, boosts property values, fosters environmental stewardship, and offers meaningful recreation and learning opportunities for all ages. By working together, we have created a master plan that truly reflects the values, needs, and aspirations of our growing and evolving community.

This updated Master Plan will guide the direction of our parks for the next decade and beyond. Thank you for your time, support, and dedication to crafting a vibrant future for Catawba County Parks. We are:

Making. Living. Better.

With appreciation,

David Wagg
Catawba County Parks Director

catawbacountync.gov

Mailing/Shipping Address: 25 Government Drive, Newton, NC 28658
Physical Address: 2247 36th Ave. NE, Hickory, NC 28601

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

Catawba County Parks developed this 2026 update to the Catawba County Parks Master Plan to guide investment and management of the County’s park system over the next 10 years. Since the last comprehensive update in 2015, the County has grown steadily, with population projected to reach 172,629 by 2035. In response to population growth and rising park visitation, the Parks Department became a standalone department in 2024. This plan uses data, community input, and analysis to guide decisions about the system’s 1,494 acres, four parks, and 44.64 miles of trails, in support of the department’s mission: **“Preserving Catawba County’s unique and diverse natural heritage through education and conservation, while providing quality passive recreation and wellness opportunities.”**



PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process evaluated the County’s parkland, trails, amenities, staffing, maintenance, operations, and level of service, benchmarked against national standards and peer agencies. County trails already exceed the national median benchmark, with 44.64 miles compared with a national median of 29 miles. The County provides approximately 9 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, close to the national median of 9.2 acres. Because Catawba County Parks is a conservation- and passive-recreation-focused system, the plan emphasizes preservation of natural resources, quality park experiences, and accessible opportunities for recreation and wellness rather than acreage alone.

Community input shaped the planning process and recommendations. Six community engagement events, four focus groups, an interjurisdictional meeting, and a statistically valid survey of 416 respondents engaged residents, park users, staff, County leadership, conservation organizations, and regional recreation and trail organizations. Among those surveyed, 85% reported satisfaction with current parks, and 83% support adding more.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES
Top priorities identified through community engagement

- Trail expansion and greenway connectivity
- Nature-based recreation
- Outdoor and environmental education
- Accessibility and inclusive recreation
- Land conservation and stewardship

RECOMMENDATIONS + IMPLEMENTATION

The plan translates these findings into a 10-year framework of recommendations organized around five themes.

PROTECT WHAT MATTERS	Protect and steward the County's unique landscapes, ecosystems, and historical and cultural resources for future generations.
CONNECT TO NATURE	Provide meaningful opportunities to explore, learn, and engage with the outdoors in ways that foster personal connection.
SUPPORT WELLNESS	Support physical and mental well-being through accessible, passive recreation experiences in natural settings.
INVEST IN QUALITY EXPERIENCES	Ensure parks and amenities are safe, clean, and thoughtfully maintained to provide a consistently high-quality experience.
INSPIRE STEWARDSHIP	Use parks as places of learning that encourage awareness, appreciation, and care for natural resources.

Each recommendation is further broken down into specific action items, with implementation time frames of short- (0–3 years), near- (4–6 years), or long-term (7–10 years), as well as potential partners and funding sources. Implementation will depend on a combination of County investment, grants, donations, and partnerships, allowing the County to prioritize needs and pursue opportunities as they arise while maintaining and improving the parks it already owns and manages.

This Master Plan provides Catawba County Parks with a practical roadmap for the next decade—grounded in community input, data, and responsible investment. It will guide the County in protecting its natural heritage, strengthening the existing park system, and providing meaningful outdoor opportunities for residents and visitors.



INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The mission of Catawba County Parks is to preserve Catawba County's unique and diverse natural heritage through education and conservation while providing quality passive recreation and wellness opportunities.

Catawba County is located within the Catawba River Region, a well-established hub of history, natural resources, and economic vitality. The County is recognized for its rich history, vibrant arts and cultural offerings, and extensive park system that provides diverse outdoor recreation and nature-based experiences. This commitment to community and quality of life is reflected in the County's mission: "Making. Living. Better."

The Catawba County Park System was established in 1999 with the opening of Riverbend Park, protecting approximately 450 acres along the Catawba River. Bakers Mountain Park followed in 2002, adding nearly 190 acres of conserved land. St. Stephens Park, originally developed in 1979, reopened under County management in 2008 following significant renovations. In 2019, Riverbend Park expanded by an additional 209 acres, further enhancing recreational opportunities and natural resource conservation within the park system. Most recently, Mountain Creek Park opened in 2022, preserving an additional 606 acres along Lake Norman. Today, Catawba County Parks manages approximately 1,500 acres of natural habitat, providing residents and visitors with opportunities to connect with nature while protecting valuable natural resources.

Catawba County continues to experience growth and investment in its economy, educational institutions, infrastructure, and public amenities. Strong population growth, increasing tourism activity, and continued private and public investment are enhancing the County's quality of life and strengthening its long-term economic vitality. As the community grows, the park system plays an increasingly important role in conserving natural resources, supporting health and wellness, attracting visitors, and providing accessible outdoor recreation opportunities. Catawba County Parks is well positioned to meet future needs and leverage future funding opportunities while contributing to the County's continued growth, attractiveness, and overall quality of life.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

- Hickory, Newton, and Conover are recognized for furniture craftsmanship, arts, history, and vibrant civic life.
- Notable cultural, educational, and historic destinations include the Catawba Science Center, Hickory Museum of Art, and Murray's Mill Historic Site.
- Higher education institutions strengthen education, workforce development, and community vitality.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

- Major investments in education, technology, and infrastructure are strengthening Catawba County's economic outlook.
- A diversified economy supported by healthcare, education, advanced manufacturing, and technology sustains local employment opportunities.
- Major employers and continued investment reinforce the County's role as a growing regional economic center.

TOURISM IMPACT

- Visitor spending reached \$351.03 million in 2024, demonstrating the strength and resilience of Catawba County's tourism economy.
- The travel and tourism industry directly supports more than 2,500 jobs, generates significant state and local tax revenues, and reduced the local tax burden by approximately \$157 per resident in 2024.
- Parks, natural resources, cultural attractions, and community events contribute to the County's appeal as a regional destination.

RECREATION IMPACT

- Catawba County offers an extensive network of county and local parks, trails, lakes, and natural areas.
- The County provides regional opportunities for mountain biking, paddling, fishing, hiking, and other outdoor recreation activities.
- Diverse natural landscapes support recreation, conservation, environmental stewardship, and outdoor education

PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

Catawba County is pursuing a Parks Master Plan to better understand where the County should continue to invest to meet the needs and desires of residents and visitors, as well as efficiently use the current resources to manage the operations and services effectively. The newly formed Catawba County Parks Department is responsible for all county-owned recreational land and facilities. As the County continues to grow, it is critical to develop a comprehensive recreation and conservation vision and set the strategic direction to meet demand generated by new residents, regional growth, and changes in the County's needs.

In the context of Catawba County, this master plan will guide improvements surrounding natural spaces, facilities and operations, staffing, and maintenance. Focused over a 10-year planning horizon, this document is a resource for officials and the public alike to understand current park offerings and anticipate needs over that same period. The action and implementation plan provides decision makers with a framework to guide and prioritize project implementation. Through this planning effort, the County will also be able to identify local, state, and federal funding sources to expand the system.



 **Figure 1: Bakers Mountain**

 **Figure 2 (Right): Kayaking at Mountain Creek Park**



PLAN CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

A thorough review of Catawba County's and adjacent municipalities' comprehensive plans, parks and recreation master plans, and bicycle and pedestrian plans provided an understanding of the policies and priorities guiding future growth and development throughout the region. The recommendations presented in this Master Plan are intended to complement and align with County and municipal planning efforts.

INVENTORY + ANALYSIS

The Inventory and Analysis chapter examines demographic data and recreation trends at the national and local levels, using Census data, County demographics, and national publications to identify current and future patterns in recreation, conservation, and participation. This chapter also includes an analysis of the existing park system, including an evaluation of current recreation programs and a comprehensive assessment of staffing and maintenance needs. An analysis of the existing greenway and trail system was conducted to identify opportunities and constraints for future greenways. The benchmarking and Level of Service (LOS) assessments evaluate current and future needs for park acreage, trail mileage, and operational standards compared to national standards and best practices. These metrics are population-based, allowing the County to expand to meet future demand for parks and open spaces.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Development of the plan included thorough input from staff, focus groups, community input meetings, and festival event attendance. The process was designed to be transparent and equitable, and engage the widest range of visitors possible. The engagement effort consisted of public meetings, staff and county leadership input, and a statistically valid survey. Community engagement results along with the findings from the inventory and analysis formed the basis for determining the overall community needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS + ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The recommendations and prioritized implementation plan provides a framework to guide park, facility, open space, and operational improvements for the future. It is structured to guide decision-making for County policy. Each recommendation is prioritized as short-term (zero to three years), mid-term (four to six years) or long-term (seven to ten years). Criteria for recommendation prioritization vary based on the context of the recommendation. Criteria may range from land availability to financial implications and are firmly rooted in community preferences.



 **Figure 3: Riverbend Park**

PLANNING CONTEXT

Catawba County Parks was established in 1999 as part of the County’s Planning and Parks Department, laying the foundation for a coordinated approach to park development, land conservation, and recreation services. In August 2024, in response to population growth and a significant increase in park visitation, the program evolved into a standalone Parks Department. Under its previous structure, the County completed several important planning efforts, including the *Catawba County Comprehensive Parks Master Plan 2015–2025*, which provided strategic direction for land acquisition, facility development, and passive recreation programming strategies. Building on this foundation, the newly established Department is now positioned to carry forward and refine this vision to better align with the needs and expectations of today’s residents and visitors. Through this plan, the Department intends to get a better understanding of the community’s needs and make more effective use of public funds to make meaningful improvements to park amenities.

DEPARTMENT STRENGTHS

The department’s strengths are rooted in its knowledgeable and passionate staff, who are deeply committed to outdoor recreation and environmental education. Staff work diligently to conserve significant natural areas within a growing region of the state, reinforcing the department’s leadership in resource stewardship. Catawba County Parks has built a strong and trusted reputation within the community, supported by consistent backing from County leadership. The department provides inclusive opportunities that promote health and wellness for residents of all backgrounds and abilities, while also fostering civic engagement by creating meaningful opportunities for residents to participate in planning and shaping the future of the park system.

DEPARTMENT TIMELINE



PLANNING PROCESS + PURPOSE

 Prioritize goals and objectives for a 10-year planning horizon	 Identify and resolve gaps and deficiencies	 Catalog community needs and wants
 Create a 10-year work plan for staff	 Engage community, staff and decision makers	 Validate decisions against other planning efforts
 Benchmarking to inform County goals	 Generate population-based goals for new parkland, trails and more	 Qualify for State and Federal grant funding opportunities

Comprehensive planning provides the data, analysis, and strategic direction that Catawba County needs to make informed, reasonable, and responsible decisions that reflect the community’s evolving needs. By assessing population trends, recreational amenities, program and event offerings, and operational challenges, the planning process ensures that resources are allocated efficiently and that parks and passive recreation services remain relevant and accessible.

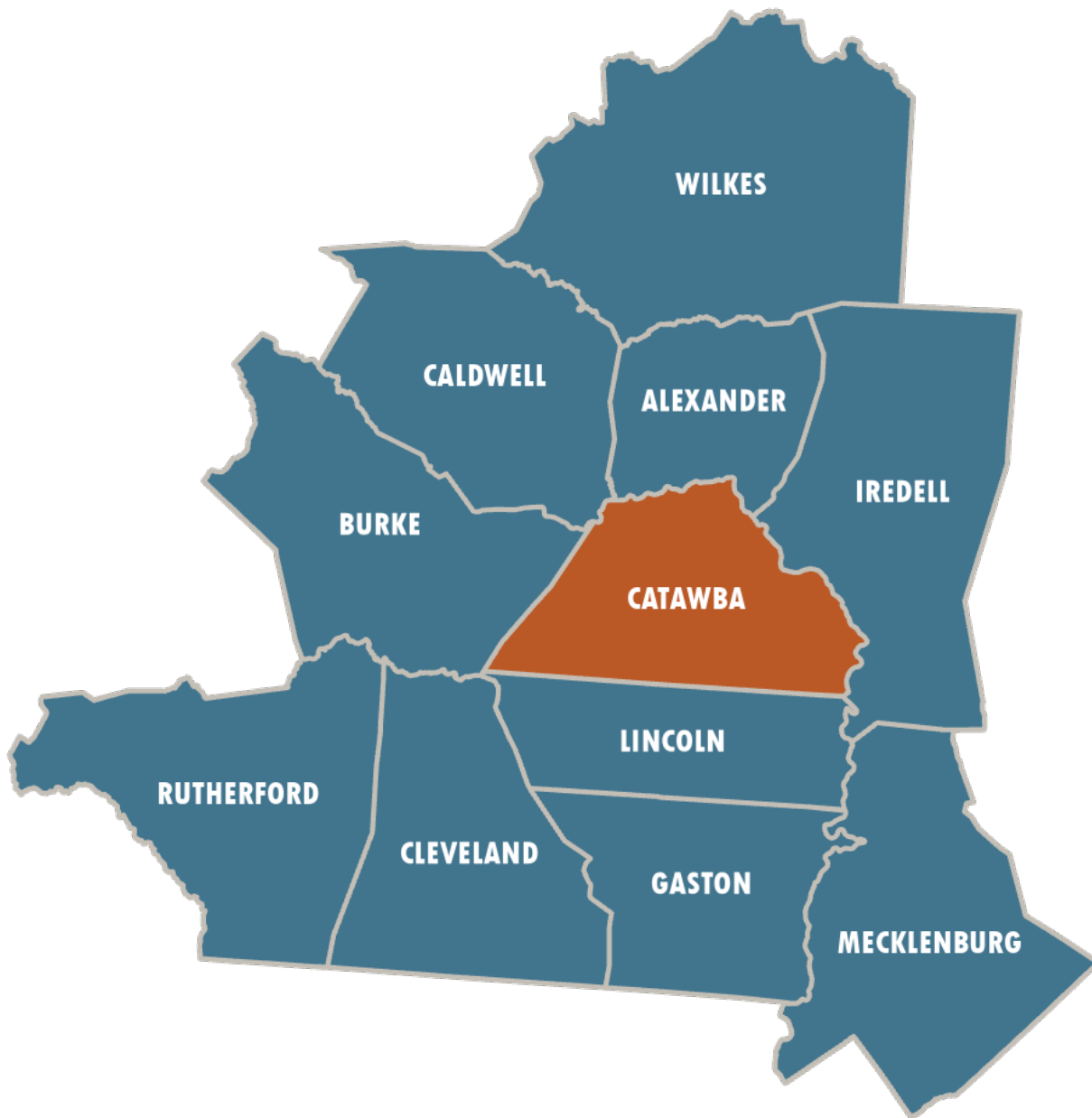
A well-developed plan also helps a county balance immediate priorities with long-term goals, positioning it to secure funding opportunities, strengthen partnerships, and enhance the quality of life for residents. Ultimately, comprehensive planning serves as a roadmap for sustainable growth, guiding investments in parks, amenities, and programming to meet the needs of both current and future generations.

This plan was developed through a collaborative process that engaged residents, staff, and key stakeholders, incorporating their insights through public input, staff discussions, and data-driven analysis to ensure it reflects community needs and departmental priorities.



 **Figure 4: Bakers Mountain Park**

REGIONAL CONTEXT



 **Figure 5: Map of Counties Surrounding Catawba**

Catawba County is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, in the western part of the Piedmont region of North Carolina. The counties that border Catawba County are: Caldwell, Alexander, Burke, Lincoln, and Iredell Counties. Within the County, there are four cities: Claremont, Conover, Hickory, and Newton. There are also four towns: Brookford, Catawba, Long View, and Maiden, along with ten unincorporated communities and eight townships. The County seat in Catawba County is Newton; however, the largest town within the County is Hickory. The County is home to Lenoir-Rhyne University and an Appalachian State University campus, both located in Hickory. There are over 800 businesses within the County, ranging from manufacturing, retail, healthcare, hospitality, and many more. Catawba County is first in North Carolina for the highest concentration of manufacturing and has notable manufacturers such as CommScope, Corning Optical Communications, and Prysmian. Catawba County's economy is focused mainly on furniture production as the City of Hickory has been a long-time North Carolina leader in furniture production. Other manufactured goods include textiles and a growing fiber optics equipment industry.

**CATAWBA COUNTY IS
LOCATED WITHIN AN
HOUR'S DRIVE OF THE
CHARLOTTE DOUGLAS
INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT**

**23 COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES ARE
LOCATED WITHIN A 50
MILE RADIUS OF THE
COUNTY**

**30 PERCENT OF THE
COUNTY'S WORKFORCE
IS EMPLOYED IN
MANUFACTURING**

**89.6 PERCENT OF THE
COUNTY RESIDENTS
HAVE OBTAINED A HIGH
SCHOOL DEGREE**

1

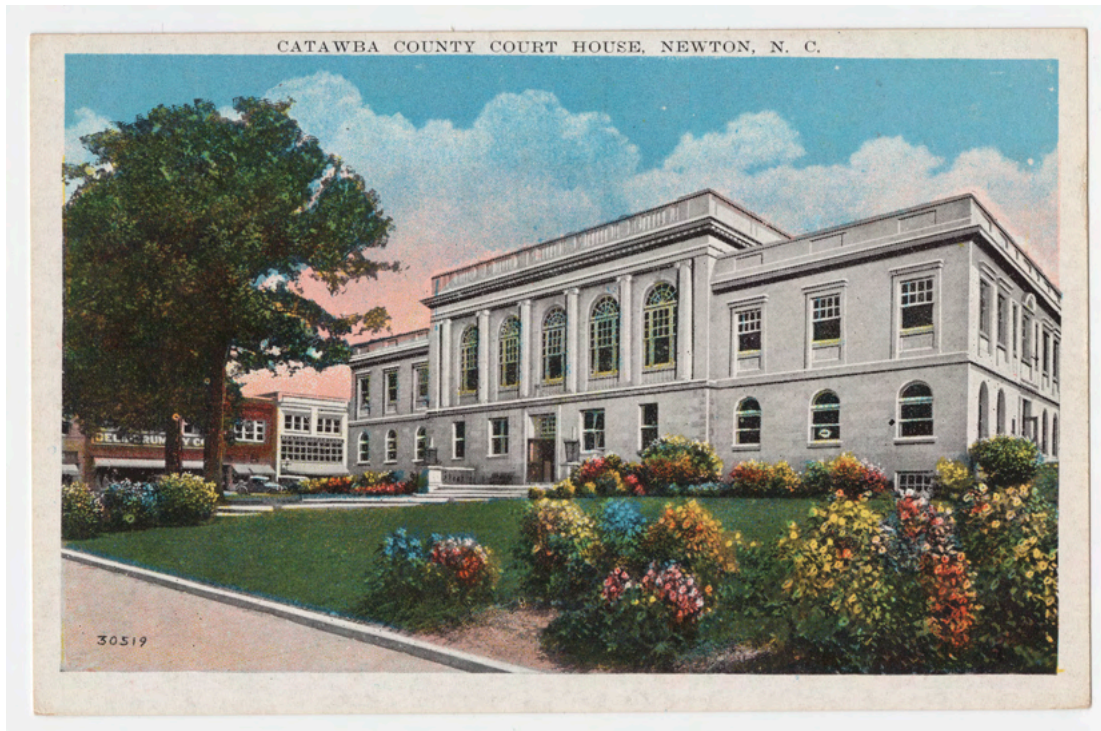
HISTORIC CONTEXT²

The area now known as Catawba County has been home to the Catawba Nation for centuries and takes its name from the Catawba people. European settlement began in the mid-18th century, including the arrival of Adam Sherrill and his eight sons from Pennsylvania in 1747, followed by the establishment of John Beatty's ford, an important early crossing of the Catawba River. German and Scotch-Irish settlers, including Andreas Killian, Robert Leeper, and Jacob Forney, helped establish farming communities throughout the region, and many local creeks, roads, and other landmarks continue to bear their names. Catawba County was established in 1842 when the North Carolina General Assembly divided Lincoln County, creating a new county to serve the growing population of the area.

¹ "Catawba County Profile 2025." Catawba Economic Development Corporation n.d. https://www.catawbaedc.org/_files/ugd/c58181_7a83e3e1f2d44887b2b5e8ed-feb5c4a3.pdf.

² Martin, Jonathan. "Catawba County (1842)." North Carolina History Project n.d. <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/catawba-county-1842/>.

There are several historic sites as well as annual events celebrating the historic legacy in Catawba County. Popular landmarks include Bunker Hill Covered Bridge, Murray's Mill, Shuford House & Gardens, Maple Grove and Harper House. The Hickory Motor Speedway, operating for over 40 years, has been the starting place for some of America's most famous drivers. Cultural events in Catawba County are sponsored by the Arts Culture Catawba, the Western Piedmont Symphony, Catawba County Library System, the Hickory Public Library, the Green Room Community Theatre, and the Hickory Community Theatre among many others. Oktoberfest, the Old Soldiers Reunion Celebration, Foothills Folk Art Festival, the Catawba Valley Pottery and Antiques Festival, and Hart Square Heritage Festival are some of the popular events held in Catawba County.



 **Figure 6: Former Catawba County Court House, Circa 1915**

NATURAL RESOURCES³

Catawba County is distinguished by its ecological diversity and abundance of natural resources, which shape both the region's character and the wide range of recreational opportunities available. The County is home to 57 major streams, including Jacob Fork, Camp Creek, Henry Fork, Clark Creek, Balls Creek, and Maiden Creek, as well as larger waterways such as Lake Hickory, Lake Norman, and the Catawba River. Flowing directly through the County, the Catawba River is part of the larger Catawba-Wateree system that stretches from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina into South Carolina, providing drinking water, wildlife habitat, and recreational access across the region.

The region's lakes, rivers, and mountains are defining features of Catawba County's landscape, supporting a wide range of recreational opportunities including boating, fishing, paddling, hiking, and wildlife observation. Notable natural features include the Catawba River, Lake Hickory, Lookout Shoals Lake, Lake Norman, and Bakers Mountain.

³Rossell, C. Reed, and Jeff Levi. "Inventory of Significant Natural Areas of Catawba County, North Carolina." <i>N.C. Natural Heritage Trust Fund, Dept. of Environmental and Natural Resources; Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina</i>, 2002. April 1. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/inventory-of-significant-natural-areas-of-catawba-county-north-carolina/2559876?item=2577875>.

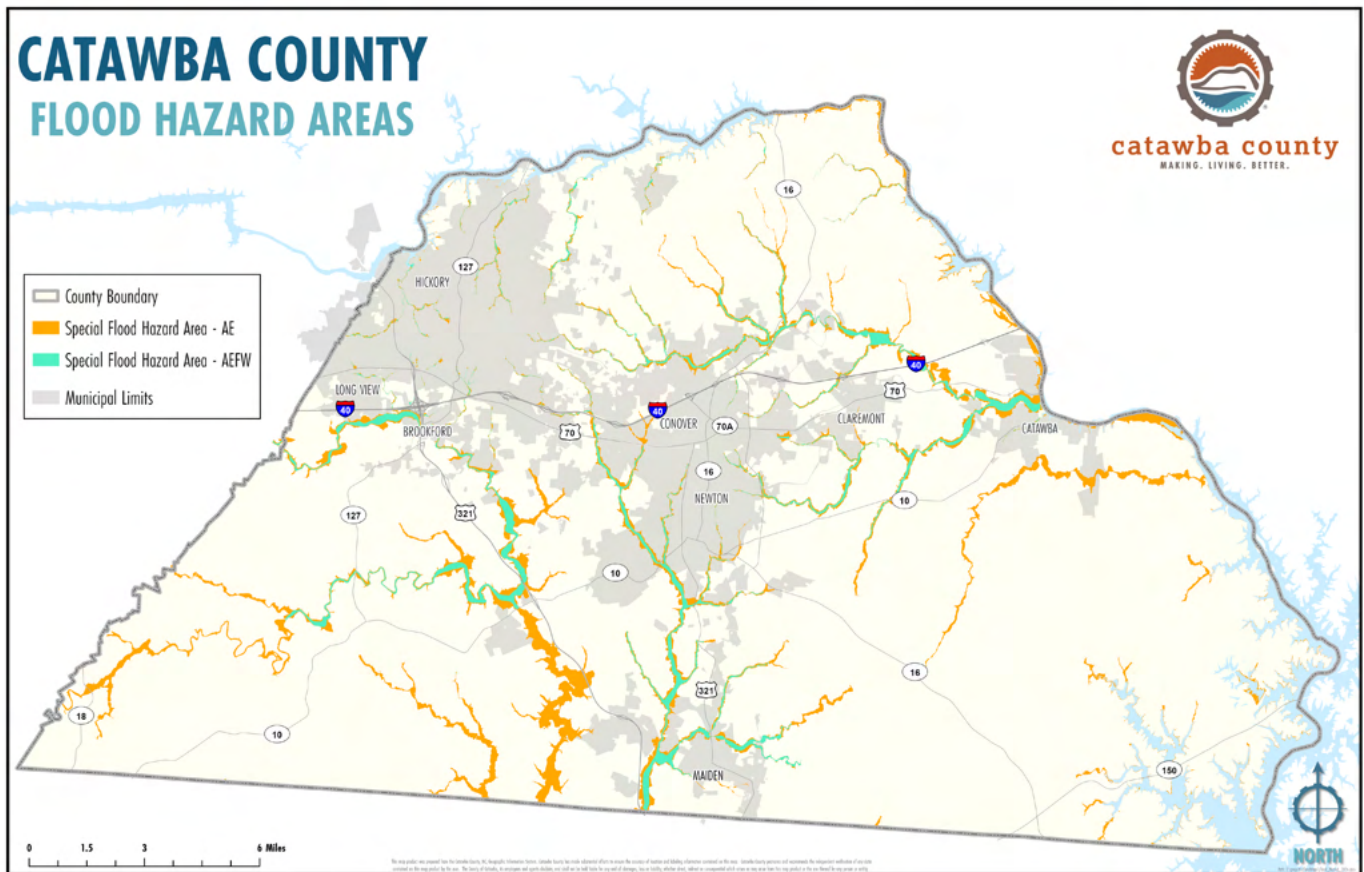


Figure 7: Catawba County Flood Zone

Source: Catawba County GIS

The Catawba River is central to the county's park system, providing access to water-based recreation and scenic natural areas, while Lake Norman extends into the county's southeastern corner. Created by Cowans Ford Dam, Lake Norman spans more than 32,000 acres with approximately 520 miles of shoreline, making it the largest man-made freshwater lake in North Carolina and an important recreational and ecological resource for the region.

Beyond its waterways, Catawba County encompasses eleven Significant Natural Heritage Areas recognized for their ecological importance at the county, state, and national levels. Among these, Bakers Mountain is recognized for its high-quality natural communities and its role in supporting a variety of rare plant and animal species. Riverbend, Mountain Creek, and St. Stephens Parks also protect important resources that contribute to the county's biodiversity and ecological health. These parks and protected areas encompass forests, streams, river and lakefront habitats, grasslands, and wildlife corridors that support native species and help conserve Catawba County's landscape.

Together, the rivers, lakes, mountains, and heritage areas underscore the richness of Catawba County's natural environment. They not only sustain rare and diverse ecosystems but also provide residents and visitors with opportunities to connect with nature through recreation, conservation, and appreciation of the county's distinctive landscape.

Figure 8 (Right): Catawba River



RELEVANT PLANS + STUDIES

OVERVIEW

This plan was developed based on the county-wide growth, existing planning documents, and development regulations. It aligns with current policies, ongoing planning activities, and regional trends shaping Catawba County's future. The next section reviews relevant town plans, emphasizing key initiatives and policies that influence the direction of this comprehensive plan.

FERC DUKE RECREATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE RELICENSING AGREEMENT 2009

In exchange for Duke Energy's rental of public land for power production, Duke Energy is required to provide non-power benefits to the community, such as energy conservation, water quality, recreation, and fish and wildlife protection. This is in accordance with the requirements of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). The original agreement was first made in 1958 and most recently relicensed in 2009.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Duke Energy to market the Oxford Access Area for lease for multi-use recreation, including RV campground & bathhouse and dump station, marine pump out, primitive camping, paved parking, picnic facilities, bank fishing, trails, and restrooms. North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) to manage boat access, lease to manage all other facilities.
- Duke Energy to improve existing gravel parking & extend portage trail for the Oxford Dam Canoe Portage, along with developing a fishing area (maintained by NCWRC).
- Duke Energy to develop and manage a one- to five-acre trailered boat access area with parking, restrooms, and primitive camping downstream of the bend in Lookout Shoals Lake.
- Duke Energy to provide up to \$220,000 in cost-sharing for the acquisition and development of a 50-foot wide easement for a 1.5 mile long trail between Riverbend Park and Upper Lookout Shoals access area.
- Duke Energy to develop and manage a portage trail with canoe/kayak access and signage around Lookout Shoals Dam.
- Duke Energy to support the acquisition of 600 acres for the Mountain Creek Park up to \$1,140,000. If the property is not acquired by the County for the park, Duke Energy will acquire 20-30 acres and develop a canoe and kayak launch, restrooms, a fishing pier, a swimming beach, and paved parking.
- Duke Energy to market the Island Point Access Area (approx. 140 acres) for development of multi-use recreation area including trails, fishing, picnic facilities, swimming, RV camping with a bathhouse, boat access, restrooms, and a marine pump out. Duke Energy to work in partnership with Catawba County to form a work group and develop a site plan for the area. Targeted timing is specified for each of these improvements within the relicensing agreement.

PREVIOUS CATAWBA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PARKS MASTER PLAN 2015

Catawba County first adopted a Parks Master Plan in 2007. The plan was updated in 2015 to respond to changing demographics, community expectations, and funding requirements. Catawba County focuses on providing large-scale passive recreation, finding that most patrons visit their spaces for health and wellness and outdoor experience which is reflected by this master plan.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In 2015, the community valued the county's trails the most, but wanted to see expanded picnic areas, consistent and reliable staffing, events, and environmental educational programming.
- In 2015, the southeast corner of the County was identified as an area without and in need of a regional park facility.
- Key partners identified in this plan are Catawba County Schools, YMCA of Catawba County, Co-operative Extension, Duke Energy, Optimist/Recreation Organizations, Catawba Valley Medical Center, Frye Regional Medical Center, Catawba County Public Health, Lenoir-Rhyne University, Catawba Valley Community College, Catawba Science Center, local municipalities, North Carolina Department of Transportation, Catawba Valley

Visitors Bureau, Catawba County Historical Association, and various civic non-profit organizations (such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America).

- The plan placed top priority on improving operating hours and staffing so that personnel are present at least six days a week. Other high priorities included the maintenance and improvement of existing parks, land acquisition contiguous to existing or future parks, the Bunker Hill Covered Bridge project, and the future Mountain Creek Park (598-acre parcel in the southeastern part of the county).
- At the time, the most notable expected demographic change was an increase in-migrating seniors.
- The Carolina Thread Trail was an existing initiative when this plan was developed, which intended to create a network of pedestrian corridors connecting parks, schools, and other destinations throughout the County.
- The implementation framework within this plan provided a list of potential funding sources to be explored and a list of recommendations. There were no timing or tracking metrics for measuring progress established with this plan.

PARK RENOVATIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

- Assess all facilities to ensure compliance with current Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.
- Park facilities should be maintained and improved so they are inviting places that are desirable to visit.
- When property that is contiguous to existing and future parks becomes available, efforts should be made to evaluate and acquire the property if deemed beneficial.
- Expand the frequency of scheduled guided environmental education programs.
- Develop stewardship and community volunteer programs for the Parks.
- Expand the signage system for parks and greenways.
- Connect greenways and public facilities through trails. Protect natural habitat corridors through connected preservation buffers.
- Promote land uses and site designs that make walking/bicycling convenient and enjoyable.

PARK DEVELOPMENT

- Develop a County-wide marketing plan for the parks.

- County staff should meet with existing and potential partners to determine needs and explore opportunities
- Allow for monetary park donations, which can be designated for specific purposes.
- Continue to meet periodically with the Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG), municipalities, and school systems within Catawba County to discuss development and recreation projects that are planned or are underway within the County.
- Land donations should be accepted for use as a park, or accepted and sold with funds going into the Parks Trust Fund for other park improvements or land purchase.
- Continue to gain insight from the Parks Advisory Committee to expand ways that the parks can continue to help provide health, educational, and economic benefits to Catawba County citizens.

CATAWBA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN 2024

This plan integrates the seven small area plans and three corridor plans adopted in the early 2000s to mid-2010s into one inclusive document with updated perspectives. The key components of the comprehensive land use plan included demographics, transportation, resources and services, parks and recreation, natural and cultural resources, agriculture, housing, economic development and tourism, land use and growth management, and small area plans.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The County owns and operates four parks: Bakers Mountain, Mountain Creek, Riverbend, and St. Stephens. Riverbend, and Bakers Mountain Parks were created using matching fund grants from the NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF).
- The Board of Commissioners' Strategic Plan, first created in 2016-2017, includes a focus area specific to fully leveraging the County's natural, environmental, and cultural amenities.
- The plan breaks up the recommendations into five main sections: Parks & Recreation, Natural & Cultural Resources, Agriculture, Land Use, and Small Area Plan.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS MASTER PLAN

- The plan calls to evaluate opportunities to attract large-scale recreation projects as a strategy to

promote tourism and yield economic impact.

- The plan has several recommendations that support the development of greenways and trails in order to make the sites more walkable or bikeable. The plan also supports linking the parks through shared-use paths.
- The plan emphasizes partnering with community organizations, other local governments, and non-profits to build, maintain, and enhance parks that provide for quality of life and healthy lifestyles, along with wildlife habitat.
- The plan encourages property owners to maintain structures of value that are listed, determined eligible, or on the study list for the National Register of Historic Places and for the historical society to identify and promote these properties on the National Register.
- The plan supports innovative approaches to forest resource management and supports programs to increase access to healthy food.
- Evaluate potential land acquisitions that may be eligible for Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) or NC Land and Water Fund grant funding
- The plan recommends that the County establish meaningful “Gateways” to increase a sense of place. Parks or historic resources can be a part of the Gateway design and creating place. Potential gateways include NC 16 near the Lincoln County line, Interstate 40 near the Burke and Iredell County lines, NC 150 near the Iredell County line, and US 321 near the Lincoln and Caldwell County lines.

CONOVER PARKS MASTER PLAN 2008

The City of Conover is the third most populous municipality within Catawba County. It is the geographic center of Catawba County. The plan focused on goals and strategies for how and when the city should accept land dedication, manage park maintenance, interface with the community regarding their park systems, develop partnerships, and win funding.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The plan recommends that Conover coordinate with Hickory, Newton, Claremont, and Catawba County on the Carolina Thread Trail, which is a regional greenway system.
- The plan ultimately chooses to focus on maintenance of the current system, and asks the city to consider the founding and funding of a Parks Program whose sole purpose is the management,

operation, and planning of parks.

- The plan recommends greenway improvements as a priority to connect residential developments to each other and to nearby parks within the northwest quadrant. Lyle Creek Greenway was highlighted as an important, long-planned greenway route.
- The plan highlights preferred locations for additional neighborhood parks within the southwest and southeast quadrants.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS MASTER PLAN

- The plan recommends developing a working partnership with the administrators of the Shuford YMCA to coordinate and assist in recreational improvements in the City.
- The plan calls for the City to participate in the Carolina Thread Trail Initiative.
- Greenways and pedestrian paths are recommended in appropriate areas throughout the City in accordance with the Pedestrian Plan.
- The plan recommends a trail system or pedestrian and bike connection between parks should be developed where available.
- Existing parks and land currently owned by the City should be strongly considered for improvements to meet increasing park needs and demands.
- The implementation of the Parks Master Plan with the current Land Development Plan should be coordinated. The siting and design of parks should further the goals of the Land Development Plan.
- The plan recommends that an urban forestry program be developed to encourage the preservation and planting of trees on public and private property.

NEWTON PARKS AND RECREATION MASTER PLAN 2016

The City of Newton is the second largest municipality within Catawba County and was historically a manufacturing-based city. Newton’s first Parks and Recreation Master Plan was adopted in 1988. The plan focused on park renovations, park expansions, and program recommendations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Provide playground equipment for a range of age groups at city parks.
- An interactive water feature should be provided at Southside Park, the swimming pool, or downtown.
- A dog park should be considered for Southside Park, Jacob Fork Park, or a new location.
- The plan recommends hiring one additional full-time program provider and one additional part-time program provider.
- Plan for new parkland acquisition in the “gaps in the service areas” as shown on the Master Plan Map.
- Examine the need for a Program Supervisor to focus on seniors’ programming.
- Implement outdoor movies and special events in downtown.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS MASTER PLAN

- The plan recommends completing an NCDOT Pedestrian Plan to assess sidewalk gaps.
- The plan recommends planning for new parkland acquisition in the “gaps in the service areas” as shown on the Master Plan Map.
- Improving internal park trails and completing key connections to the Newton Heritage Greenway Trails.

CITY OF HICKORY COMPREHENSIVE PARKS, RECREATION, AND SPORTS TOURISM MASTER PLAN 2023

The City of Hickory is the largest municipality in Catawba County. The 2023 Master Plan builds on a 1997 Parks & Recreation Master Plan and a 2010 Recreation Needs Assessment. The plan has a very detailed list of recommendations, organized by the plans overarching principles: Improvement and Maximization of Existing Assets, Communication of Existing Assets, Growth Planning, Sports Tourism, Increased Focus on Natural Assets and Education, Equitable and Inclusive Access to Recreation, Continuity with City Goals, Strengths and Identity, Implementation of Nationally Recognized Administrative and Operational Practices.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The plan included a comprehensive list of grant opportunities that can be provided to non-profit entities who may wish to work with the City of Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism offerings.
- The plan also identified key funding opportunities for the City of Hickory to pursue directly.
- The plan included an implementation (application) matrix which provided action items for each recommendation item, the responsible party, the priority level, and the order of magnitude of cost (OMC). Action Items are organized into Near Term (two-three years), Mid-term (four-six years), and Long-term (seven-ten years).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS MASTER PLAN

- The plan recommends taking a partnership with the Northwest Mountain Biking Alliance to the next level.
- The plan recommends seeking realignment of conceptual routes in the Carolina Thread Trail Master Plan to match emerging needs.
- The plan seeks to develop a Parks, Recreation, and Sports Tourism-Specific Marketing and Communication Plan.
- The plan recommends adjusting the City website to assist recreation seekers looking for specific forms of recreation or amenities. Along with creating a recreation guide and park directory for individuals with disabilities.
- The plan recommends increasing mountain biking opportunities in the area.
- The plan recommends creating a community-wide environmental awareness and stewardship education program along with seeking partnerships that promote natural education, environmental stewardship, and sustainability.
- The plan considers a partnership with the Conservation Corps of North Carolina to increase focus on stewardship of natural assets and the augmentation of natural area maintenance.
- Review parks, facilities, and program efforts with consideration of demographic projection and underserved populations.
- The plan strives to equally distribute parks, trails, and amenities among city quadrants.
- Increase walkability and bikeable footprint of the City through prioritization of the Walk. Bike. Hickory Pedestrian + Bicycle Plan.

- Create synergy between offerings to the senior population and individuals with disabilities.
- Finalize ADA transition plan for City's public spaces and increase the number of staff with ADA certifications for its implementation.
- Adopt a rating system for trails that accounts for individuals with disabilities.

HICKORY CREATING OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES 2024-2029

This is a five-year Strategic Plan that is focused on economic development, specifically increasing tourism, small business development, enhancing quality of life, infrastructure development, and attracting outdoor gear manufacturers. The plan is organized into Strategies, Goals, Objectives, Actions, and Tasks.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- One of the main objectives of this plan is to grow the economy based on diverse industries and commerce, including the outdoor recreation sector.
- The plan also aims to support the development of regional commercial centers and support Hickory as the regional center for cultural events and outdoor regional activities.
- Encourage educational achievement and workforce development efforts within the outdoor recreation sector by partnering with area Universities and colleges, along with the local school system.
- Develop Entrepreneurial Initiatives through mapping the entrepreneurial ecosystem to identify all available business support organizations, committees, and other resources available to encourage entrepreneurial success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS MASTER PLAN

- Support the development of a unit of the State Parks System within Catawba County.
- Incorporate additional outdoor recreation-oriented activities into existing and new events that occur within the city.
- Promote enhancements along Lake Hickory area to create a more vibrant district.
- Support continued development, expansion, and utilization of the regional trails, including the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT), Wilderness Gateway State Trail, Burke River Trail, etc.
- Become an official VisitNC OutdoorNC 'Trail Town Stewardship Designated Program'.

COMMON THEMES IN PREVIOUS PLANS

1. Greenway Connectivity and Expansion:

Nearly all of the plans identified greenway development as a key recommendation to support walkability, active transportation, and regional trail connectivity. Greenways are also recognized as valuable assets for connecting residents to nature and reducing reliance on vehicles.

2. Equity in Access to Recreation: Several plans identify disparities in access to parks and recreational amenities, particularly in underserved and rapidly growing areas. To address these gaps, they recommend strategic land acquisitions to support the development of new parks and facilities. These efforts aim to ensure a more equitable distribution of recreational opportunities, improve proximity to open space, and better serve diverse community needs over time.

3. Partnerships: Several master plans recognize partnerships as a critical strategy for enhancing park systems and expanding recreational opportunities. These plans emphasize collaboration with local governments, schools, nonprofit organizations, land conservancies, and private entities to leverage shared resources, expertise, and funding. By fostering strategic partnerships, communities can improve access to parks and programs, support the development of greenways and open space, and enhance long-term stewardship of natural and recreational assets.

4. Environmental Stewardship: Many master plans emphasize the importance of environmental stewardship as a guiding principle for the development and management of park systems. These plans highlight the role of parks and open spaces in preserving natural resources, protecting habitats, and promoting sustainable practices. They also highlight the importance of creating meaningful connections between people and the natural environment through accessible trails, nature-based programs, and educational opportunities. By balancing conservation with accessibility, these plans promote experiences that enable residents and visitors to engage with and appreciate the region's natural resources while fostering a broader commitment to environmental stewardship.



DEMOGRAPHICS

INTRODUCTION

A clear understanding of community demographics is essential for effective long-range planning. In Catawba County, ongoing population growth and demographic shifts shape the goals and direction of the Parks, ensuring it meets evolving community needs.

As the population grows, changes in age, race, and income influence demand for different types of facilities and programs. Recreational preferences also evolve over time, driving the need for new activities and offerings—even when demographics remain stable.

This chapter summarizes Catawba County's current demographics, future population projections through 2035, and national and local recreation trends. Together, this data informs recommendations that respond to both present and future needs in parks, greenways, and recreation.

DATA SOURCES

This analysis uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau (USCB), Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), North Carolina State Demographer's Office, and Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI). ESRI, a global Geographic Information System provider, compiles data from the USCB and local sources to produce current population estimates and five-year projections using a proprietary methodology. Their data, available at the Census Block level, is designed for detailed small-area analysis.

ESRI recommends supplementing its forecasts with local knowledge to capture nuances not reflected in national datasets. While population projections provide a general sense of growth and change, they are not exact. This plan uses them alongside other data points to guide recommendations, recognizing that projections are estimates, not absolutes.

USCB data forms the core of the demographic analysis, drawn from the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey. It informs geographic mobility and special population trends. Additional demographic characteristics are derived through various analytical methods.

BLS data is included to assess employment trends, including job levels and unemployment rates.

AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH

Average annual growth is a measure for determining the rate of growth per year over a given period. The average annual growth rate is useful for showing the rate at which population growth is occurring per year, when population estimate data available spans a multi-year period. An indication of past growth can be used to form the basis for projecting the population for a future year. Data obtained from the ESRI indicates the County's average annual growth rate is 0.43 percent.

Catawba County	0.43%
North Carolina	1.5%¹
United States	0.8%²

¹ Cline, Michael . "North Carolina Now Home to Over 11 Million People." Office of State Budget and Management, 2024. December 20. <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2024/12/20/north-carolina-now-home-over-11-million-people>.

² Wilder, Kristie. "New 2024 Population Estimates Show Nation's Population Grew by About 1% to 340.1 Million Since 2023." United States Census Bureau, 2024. December 19. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2024/12/population-estimates.html>.

POPULATION PROJECTIONS

ESRI's Community Profile uses the latest American Community Survey and other proprietary data for the current year, 2025, and makes a projection for 2030. Population projections through 2035 were developed using the average annual growth rate between 2025 and 2030.

Population - 2025	Population - 2035
166,064	172,629

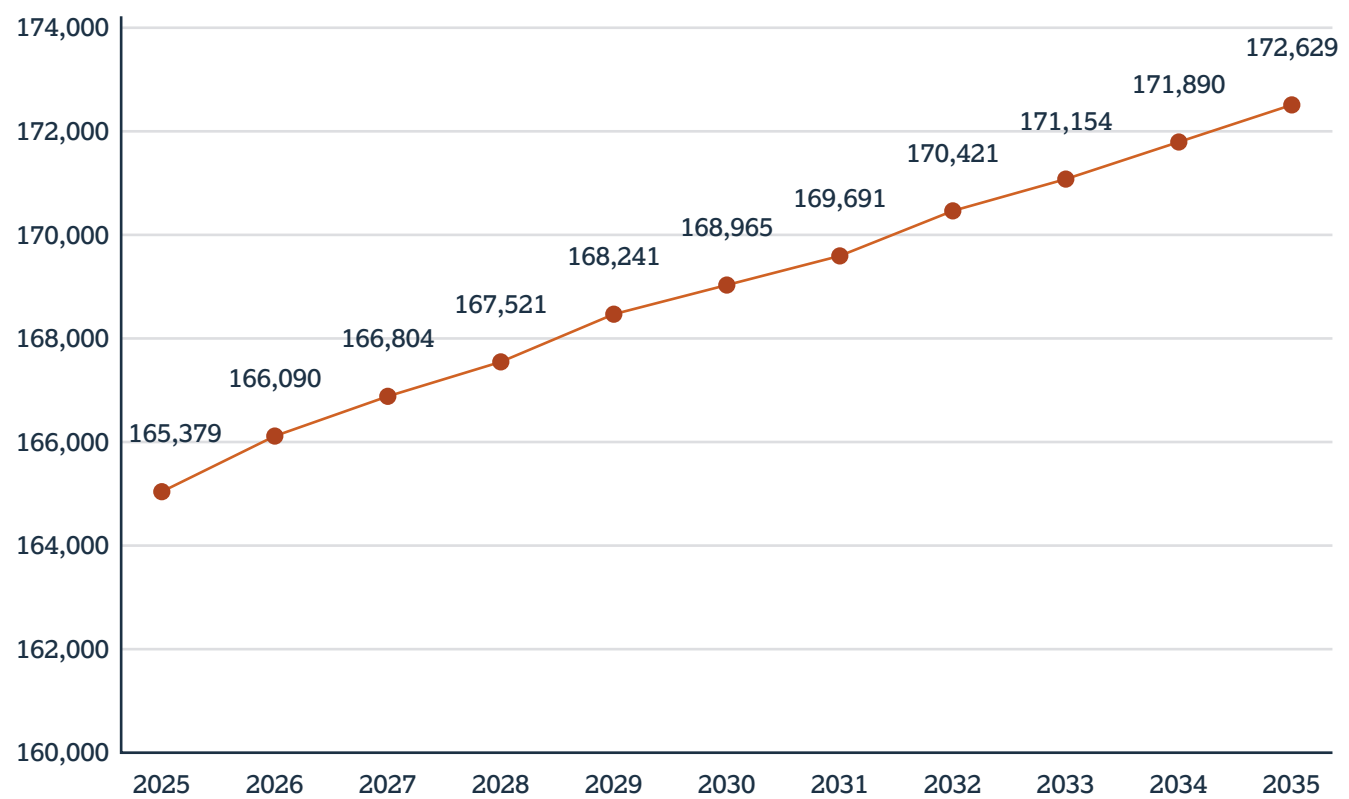


Figure 1: Population Growth

AGE SEGMENT

The median age in Catawba County in 2025 was 43.3, compared to 39.2 for North Carolina and 39.1 for the United States. Projections show that the median age is trending older in the County, as it is in the state and nationwide. Figure 2 presents the changing proportions of the age cohorts based on population estimates and projections from 2025 through 2035. Negative trends in this chart do not necessarily mean that residents in those age groups are disappearing from the County, rather that the proportion of the population within that age range is shrinking. The proportional charts show children and youth population proportions decreasing by 0.14 percent and 0.20 percent respectively. The growth trend for adults (ages 25-54) is slightly declining, but a more granular breakdown of age shows strong growth (0.16 percent) in the portion of the population aged 35-44. The percentage of the population over 55 has a strong annual growth rate of 0.34 percent, meaning that over time the percentage of the population within this age bracket will continue to increase.

Median Age (2024)		
Catawba County	North Carolina	United States
43.3	39.2 ³	39.1 ⁴

³ Eanes, Zachary, and Alex Fitzpatrick . “North Carolina Is Getting Older.” <i>Axios</i>, 2025. June 27. <https://www.axios.com/local/raleigh/2025/06/27/north-carolina-aging-population-grows>.

⁴ Wilder, Kristie, and Paul Mackun. “An Aging Nation: U.S. Median Age Surpassed 39 in 2024.” <i>United States Census Bureau</i>, 2025. June 26. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2025/06/metro-areas-median-age.html>.

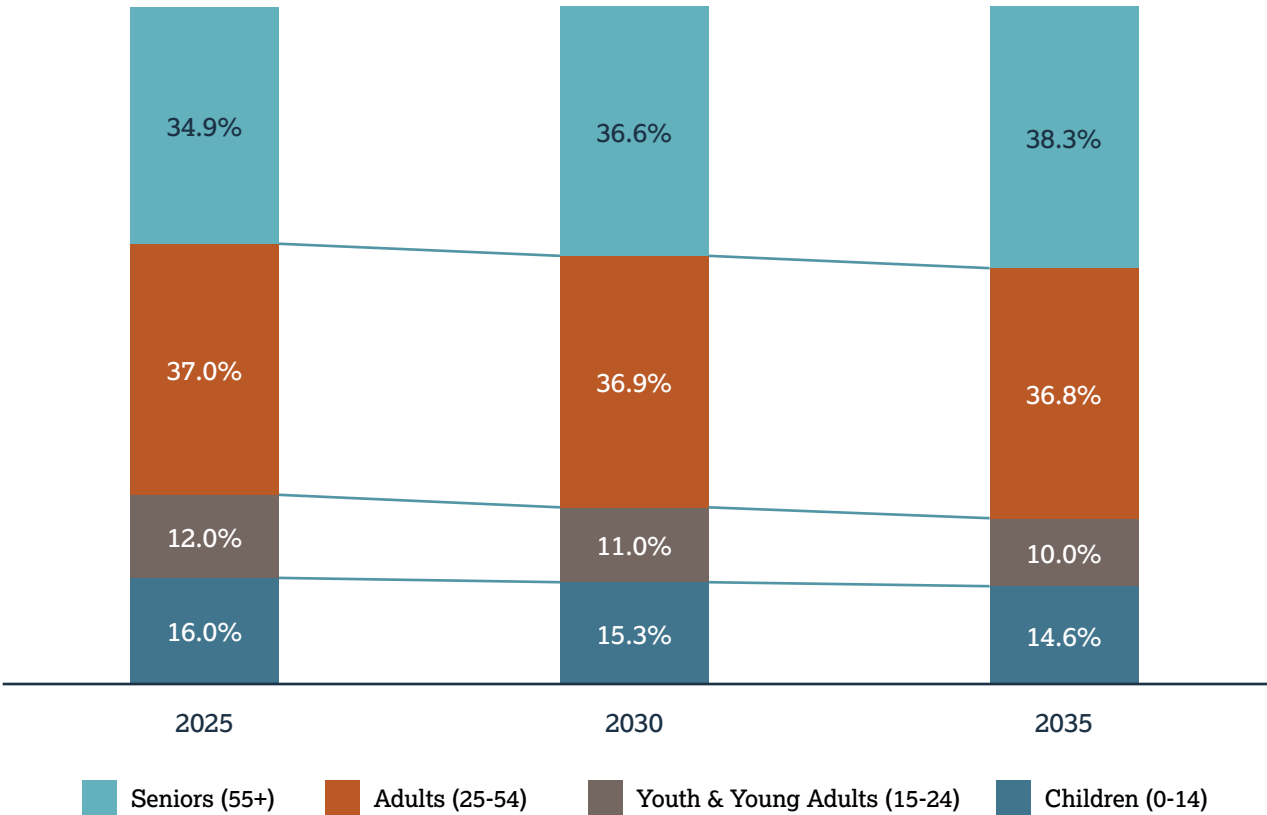


Figure 2: Population Segmentation (Age)

FAMILY COMPOSITION

Household composition in Catawba County reflects an aging population and a growing share of older adults. Approximately 43.8% of all households include at least one resident aged 60 or older, indicating a significant presence of seniors across the community. In contrast, only 28.1% of households include one or more individuals under the age of 18, highlighting a comparatively smaller proportion of families with children. These patterns are consistent with the trends shown in Figure 2, which depict a relatively large share of residents aged 55 and older and a relatively lower share of children ages 0–15.

Among households with children, the age distribution further emphasizes this shift. Only 5.3% of households contain children under the age of five, while 12.2% include children between the ages of 5 and 14. Lower numbers of young children are common in communities with aging populations.

43.8%
**OF HOMES INCLUDE AT
LEAST ONE RESIDENT AGED
60 OR OLDER**

28.1%
**OF HOUSEHOLDS INCLUDE
ONE OR MORE
INDIVIDUALS UNDER 18**

2.94
**IS THE AVERAGE FAMILY
SIZE IN CATAWBA COUNTY**

5.3%
**OF CHILDREN IN CATAWBA
COUNTY ARE UNDER FIVE
YEARS OLD**

RACE & ETHNICITY

Estimates show that currently, residents identifying as White Alone make up over 72 percent of the population. In the coming years, this will shift as the populations of non-white individuals increases. As seen in Figure 3, the largest growth will be experienced in the portion of the population that identifies as Some Other Race or Two or More Races with a projected increase from 14.1 percent of the total population to 16.1 percent.

The only other segments showing positive annual growth are Black Alone and Asian Alone, but both are fairly low, 0.02 and 0.08 percent growth annually; thus the portions of the population identifying as Black Alone and Asian Alone are relatively static. Hispanic Origin is quantified separately as it is a uniquely American demographic identifier used to describe the pan-ethnic communities of the Spanish-speaking countries. This means that while people in this community may share similar ethnicities, individuals may identify with different racial groups; the Hispanic Origin identifier allows for those individuals to be counted and represented more accurately. The percent of the population of Hispanic Origin is experiencing a positive annual growth rate of 0.18 percent per year and will make up 13.7 percent of the population by 2035, meaning they would make up a larger share of the population than any other racial identity except for White Alone.



Figure 3: Population Segmentation (Race)

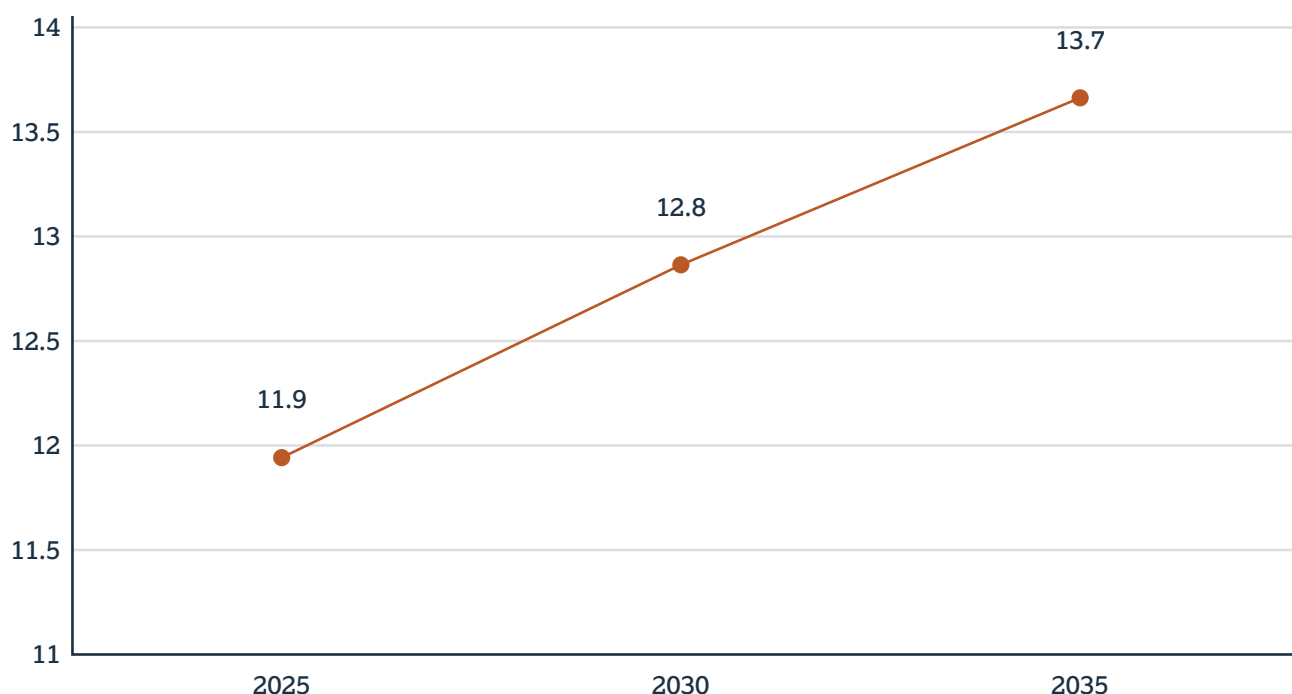


Figure 4: Population of Hispanic Origin (Percentage)

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Figure 5 shows the proportional distribution of income for households in Catawba County. Currently, over half of the population (55.2 percent) has a household income of under \$75,000; however, the percentage of the population making less than \$75,000 is experiencing a marked decline, with these households experiencing an annual growth rate of -1.16 percent. By 2030, households earning less than \$75,000 will shrink to less than half of the households in the County.

According to the ESRI Community Profile, the median household income in 2025 was \$66,607, a figure that is projected to increase to \$86,277 by 2035. The current median household income is approximately 6 percent lower than the median household income in North Carolina and more than 15 percent lower than that for the United States.

Median Household Income (2024)		
Catawba County	North Carolina	United States
\$66,607	\$70,804 ⁵	\$77,719 ⁶

⁵ "North Carolina State Profile." United States Census Bureau n.d. https://data.census.gov/profile/North_Carolina?g=040XX00US37.

⁶ "United States Profile ." United States Census Bureau n.d. <https://data.census.gov/profile>.

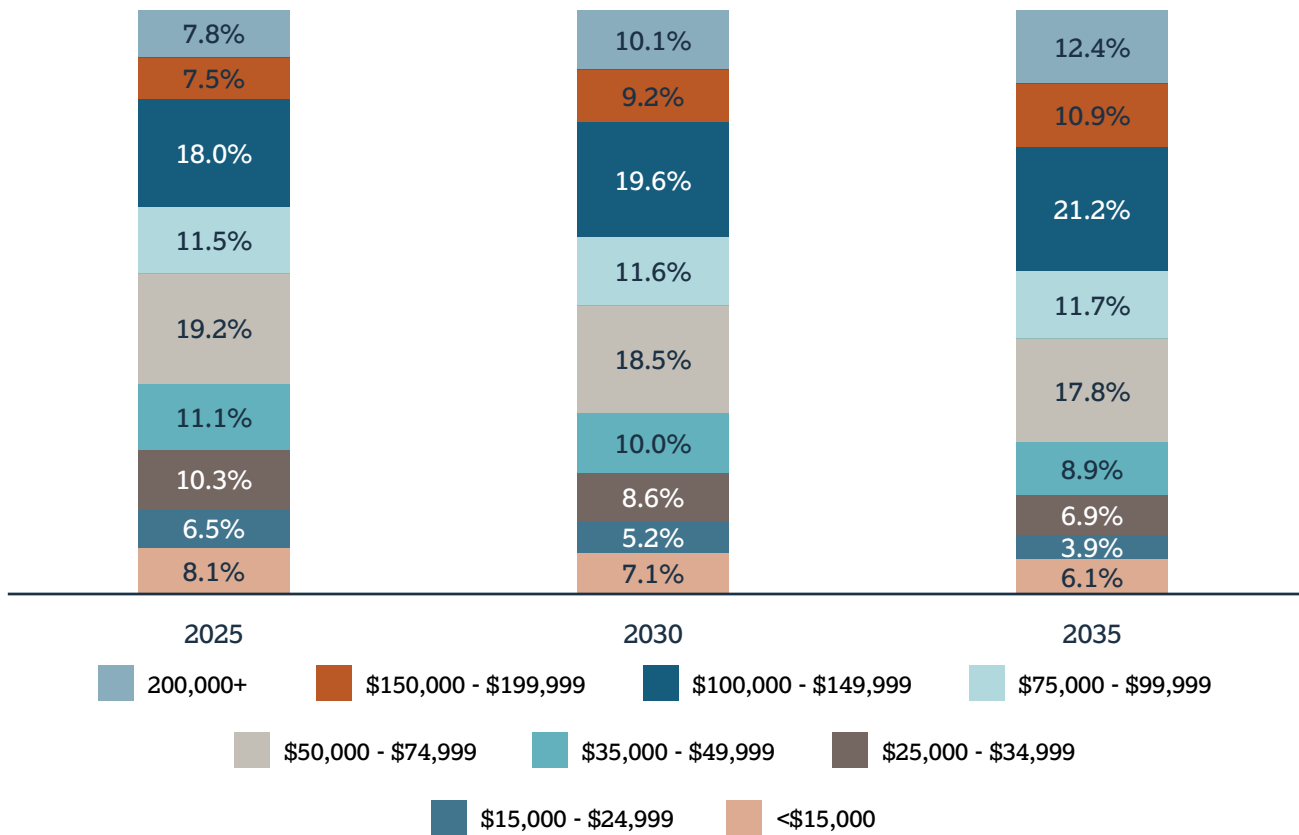


Figure 5: Population Segmentation (Income)

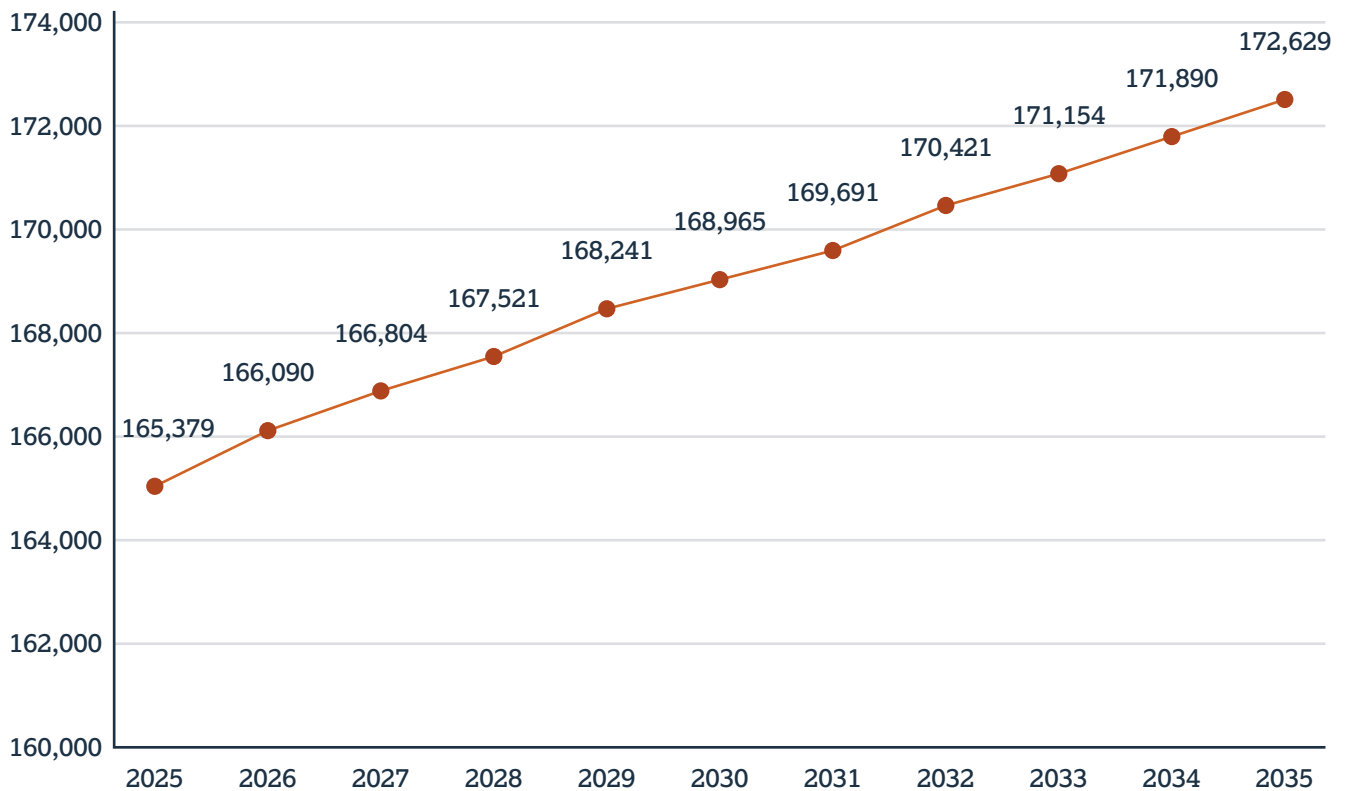


Figure 6: Median Household Income

EDUCATION

Catawba County's population is well-educated. According to estimates for 2025, 41.5 percent of the population has attained some type of degree beyond a high school diploma or equivalent and 89.6 percent has obtained at least a high school diploma or equivalent.

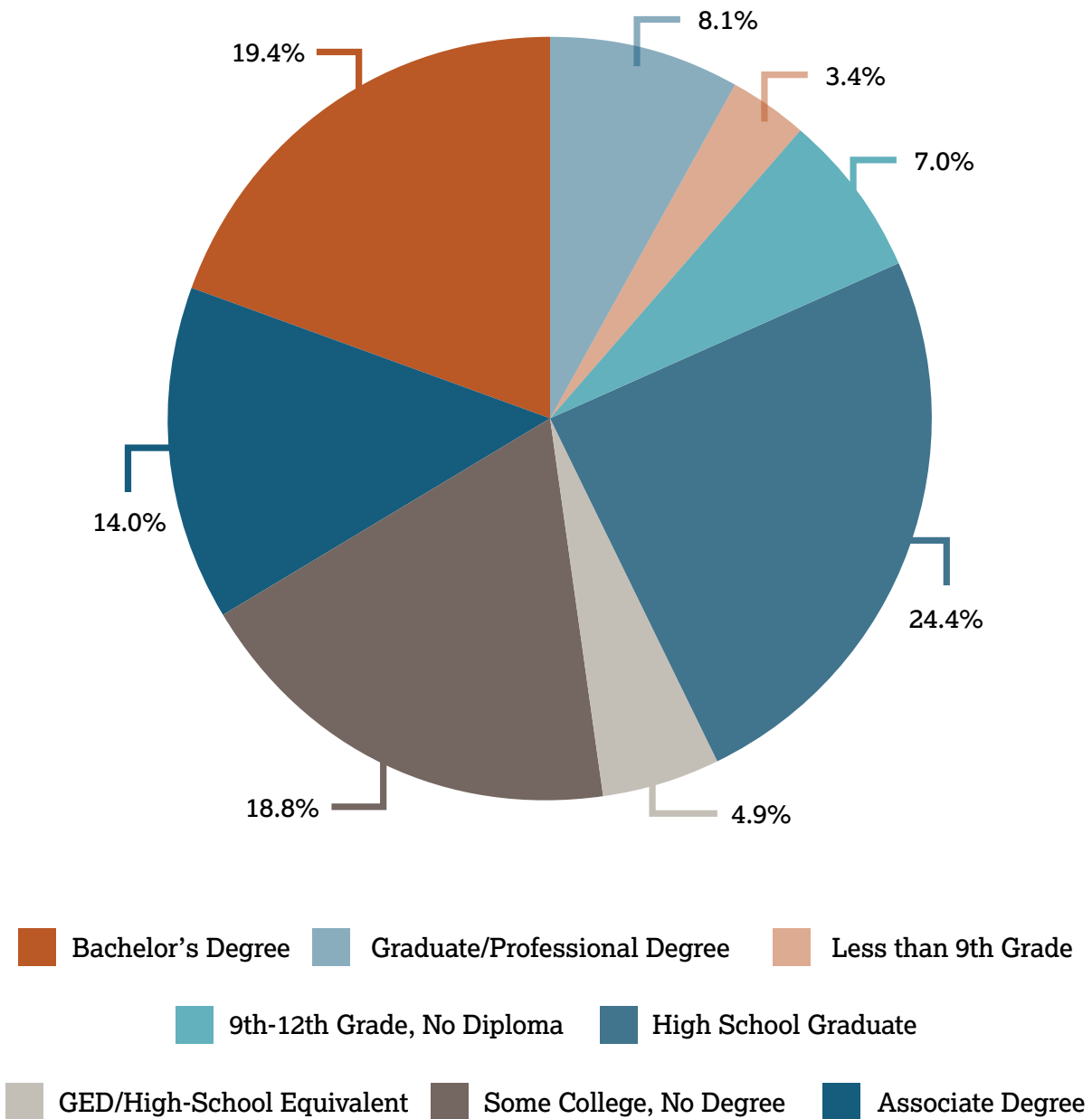
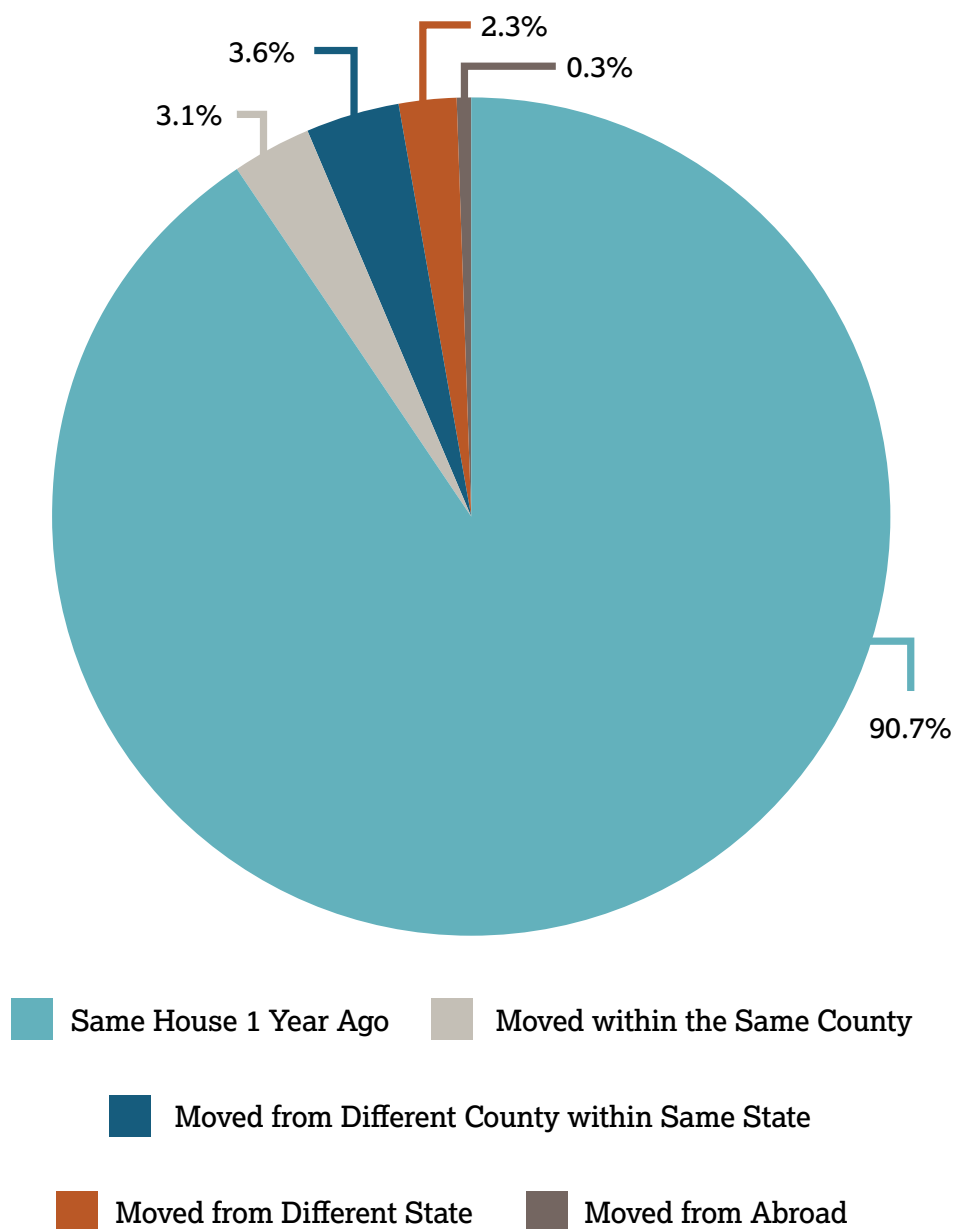


Figure 7: Education Attainment

HOUSING TENURE & GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY

Geographic mobility assesses the percentage of the population that lived in the same house they lived in the year prior, or, if they do not live in the same house where they moved from, allowing for four different options: Moved Within the Same County, Moved from Different County Within the Same State, Moved from Different State and Moved from Abroad.

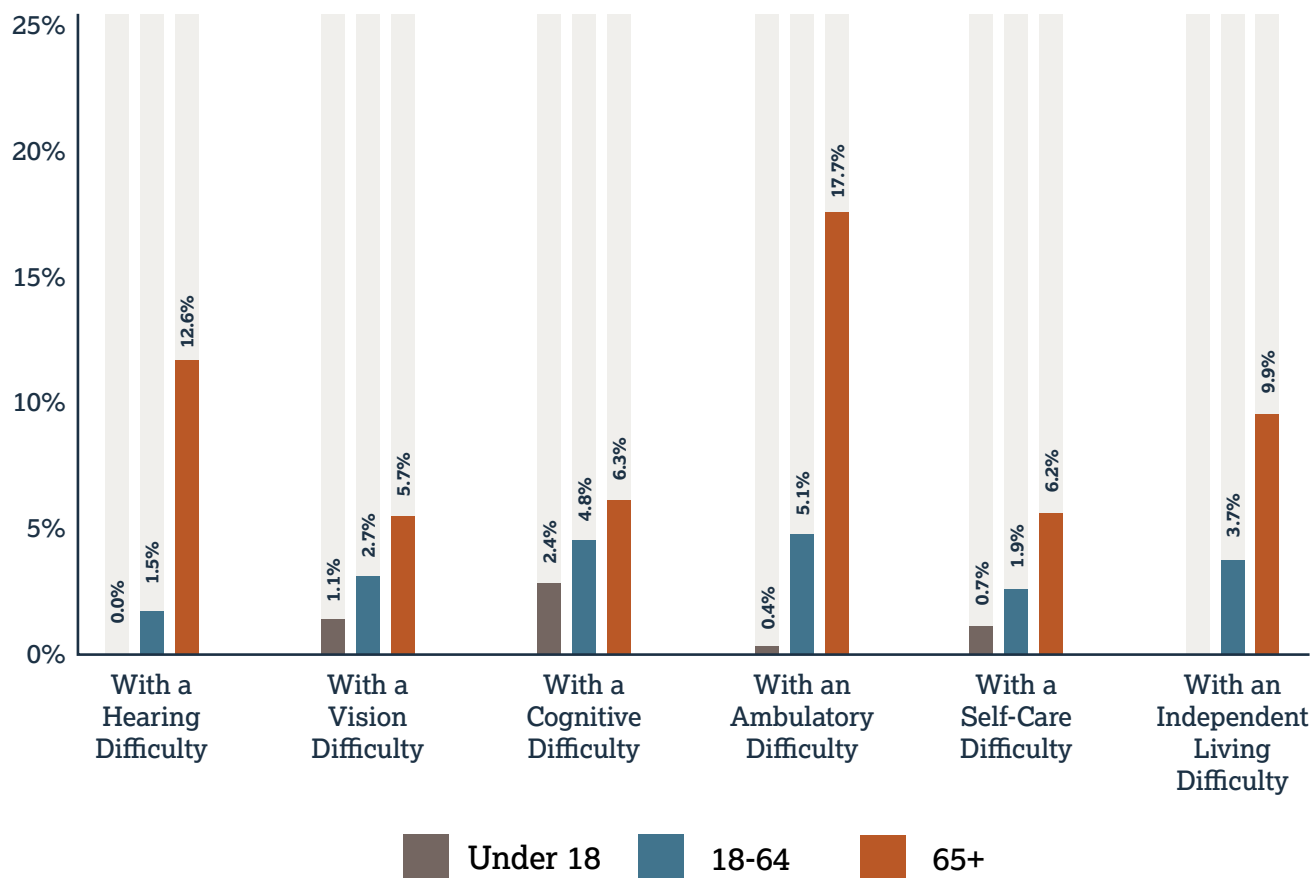
Looking at estimates for 2023, housing tenure in Catawba County year-over-year is high, with 90.7 percent of individuals living in the same home they did the year prior. Among those moving into the County annually, most (3.6 percent of the total population) are coming from a different county in North Carolina. Individuals moving from within Catawba County, from other states and from abroad comprise 3.1, 2.3, and 0.3 percent of the population, respectively.



 **Figure 8: Geographic Mobility**

SPECIAL POPULATIONS

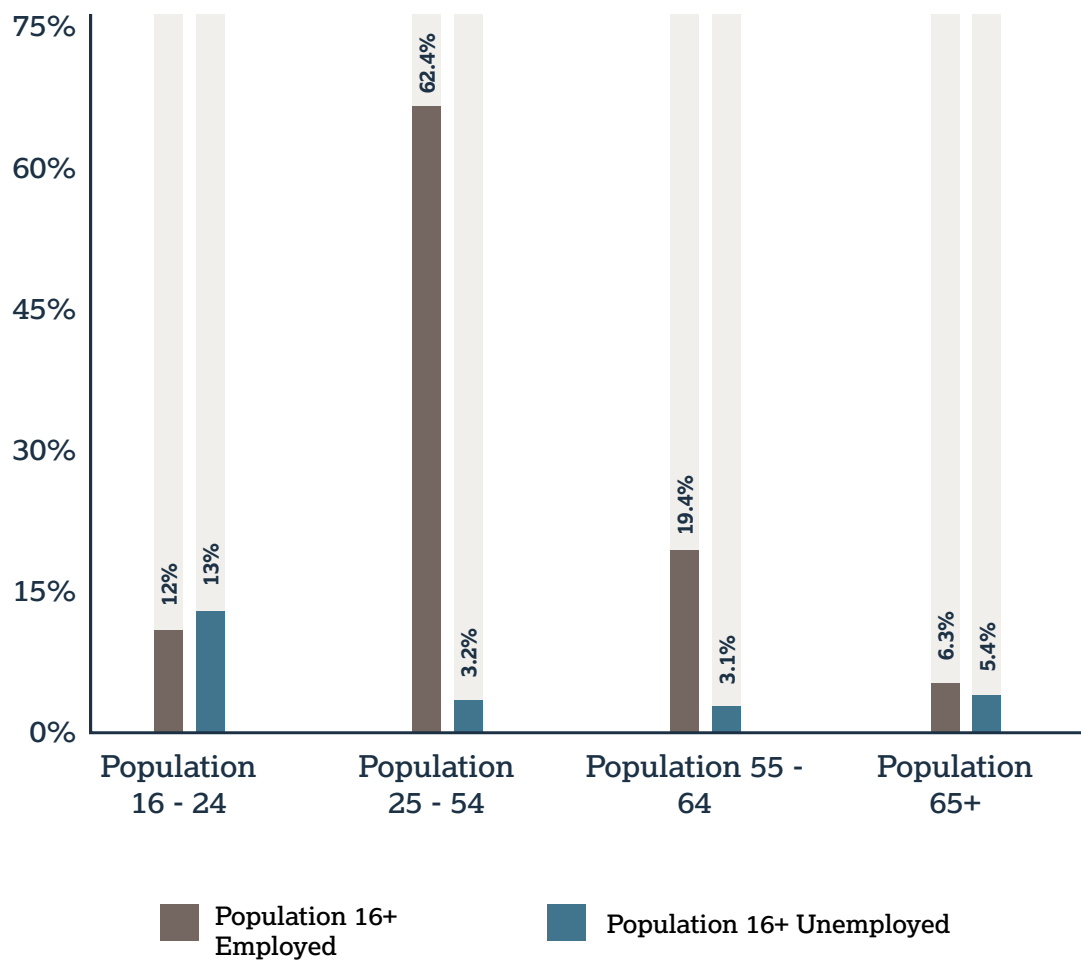
Figure 9 shows the percentage of the overall population in Catawba County with a disability based on American Community Survey estimates. The 64-and-older age segment is experiencing the highest level of disability. The most common disability is ambulatory difficulty, defined as an impairment that prevents or impedes walking, followed by hearing difficulty and independent living and cognitive difficulties, which are present in the population at roughly the same prevalence.



 **Figure 9: Disability Status**

EMPLOYMENT

Figure 10 shows the percentage of the 16+ population within Catawba County population that is either employed or unemployed in 2025 based on the U.S. Census Bureau data. The 25-54 age segment is experiencing the highest level of employment with around 62.4% of individuals being employed. The 16-24 age segment has the highest level of unemployment with 13% being unemployed.



 **Figure 10: Employment Status**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following summary of findings highlights the key demographic trends that will influence the future of parks in Catawba County:

- With the population projected to grow by 7,000 individuals in the next 10 years, the demand for recreational programs, activities, and services will increase.
- The County should anticipate providing for an older population with a potential increase in demand for amenities and programs tailored for older adults to support their well-being and facilitate an active lifestyle.
- With a significant portion of residents holding at least a high school degree, there is potential for more educational and culturally enriching programs within the parks.
- As the Hispanic population is growing, it is important to introduce bilingual signage, programs, and materials.
- Many individuals are staying in the same house and not many individuals are moving into the county. As the majority of residents remain long-term community members rather than newcomers, it is important to continuously introduce new recreation opportunities to keep them engaged with the parks.
- The median household income is 15% below the national average. As the County continues to grow, it is important to consider the affordability of programs and fee structures, as well as the need to provide free, accessible public green space for residents with more limited disposable income than the national norm.



 **Figure 11: St. Stephens Park**



**RECREATION
TRENDS + ANALYSIS**

NATIONAL RECREATION TRENDS

INTRODUCTION

Recreation trends provide important insights into how community interests and needs are evolving, and help to identify changing demand for programs, amenities, and services. Responding to these trends allows parks and recreation departments to ensure their offerings remain relevant, responsive, and aligned with community expectations. This assessment examines both local and national trends, along with broader developments within the parks and recreation field. Together, these insights highlight factors likely to influence service delivery in Catawba County over the next decade, supporting a proactive approach to planning, programming, and resource allocation.

OVERVIEW

The National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) releases an annual report identifying key trends shaping parks and recreation agencies and organizations across the nation. These trends support agencies in remaining proactive, innovative, and responsive to their communities by highlighting emerging needs, challenges, and opportunities within the field. The assessment draws on the 2026 report, which is based on data collected over the previous year. The report highlights the growing importance of climate change, the integration of advanced technologies, and trending recreation programs.¹



 **Figure 1: Pickleball at Mountain Creek Park**

¹ “Top Trends in Parks and Recreation 2026 | Feature | Parks & Recreation Magazine | NRPA.” n.d. <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2026/December/top-trends-in-parks-and-recreation-2026/>.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Research highlights the serious health risks associated with prolonged exposure to extreme heat, underscoring how climate change is shaping the future of parks and recreation. The 2026 NRPA Trends report explains how parks and recreation agencies are adapting to hotter temperatures and rising sea levels. An emerging trend for 2026 is “greenhushing,” the practice of intentionally downplaying or withholding communication about sustainability initiatives to avoid public scrutiny related to unmet environmental goals.

TECHNOLOGY

Advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) are reshaping how parks and recreation agencies carry out many of their core functions. AI tools are being developed to enhance customer service through chatbots and automated assistance, providing visitors with quick responses to common questions about facilities, programs, and events. AI-powered systems also streamline program registration and scheduling for classes, leagues, and special events by managing enrollment, waitlists, and reminders more efficiently. In addition, AI-enabled communication platforms are being developed to send real-time notifications about weather-related cancellations and schedule changes, as well as to coordinate automatic rescheduling when disruptions occur. Together, these applications improve operational efficiency, reduce administrative workload, and create a more responsive and user-friendly experience for the public.

RECREATION PROGRAMS

Parks and recreation programming continues to expand and evolve, incorporating both new and established activities to better meet diverse community needs and interests. The program trends outlined below illustrate key shifts in offerings that respond to changing demographics, preferences, and recreational priorities. A more detailed review and assessment into recreation programming is provided in the Programming Assessment.

PICKLEBALL

Pickleball continues to be one of the fastest-growing sports across all age groups, experiencing more than 300 percent growth in participation over recent years. Its appeal stems from a relatively low barrier to entry, modest facility requirements, and an inclusive design that attracts youth, adults, and older adults alike. As a result,

communities nationwide are rapidly adding pickleball courts to existing tennis facilities, parks, and recreation centers to meet growing demand. However, the sport’s rapid expansion has also introduced new challenges related to noise impacts for outdoor courts. The distinctive, high-frequency sound produced during matches has led to noise complaints from nearby residents, especially where courts are located close to homes. In response, many cities are evaluating how and where pickleball facilities are sited.²

FITNESS PROGRAMMING

Demand for adult fitness programming continues to rise as adults increasingly seek structured group activities that support physical health, social interaction, and overall well-being. In addition to traditional fitness classes, an emerging demographic, often referred to as “kidults”, is influencing program development. This group includes adults drawn to playful, engaging, and activity-based programs typically associated with youth, while still aligning with adult fitness goals. In response, parks and recreation agencies are expanding adult-oriented programs and events that emphasize recreation, variety, and experiential participation.

MULTI-GENERATIONAL + INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Multi-generational and intergenerational programming is gaining momentum as communities seek opportunities to connect people across age groups. Parks and recreation agencies are increasingly dedicating staff time, funding, and creative resources to developing programs that intentionally engage older adults alongside adults, youth, and families. These initiatives foster social connection, reduce age-related isolation, and build relationships across generations. From shared fitness classes and arts programs to educational workshops and community events, intergenerational programs support lifelong wellness while strengthening community cohesion.

² Leahy, Charles. “Why the Pop, Pop, Pop of Pickleball Needs a Zoning Solution.” American Planning Association, November 14, 2025. <https://www.planning.org/planning/2025/nov/why-the-pop-pop-pop-of-pickleball-needs-a-zoning-solution/>.

SPORTS + FITNESS INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION TRENDS

OVERVIEW

The Sports and Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) produces an annual Topline Participation Report³, described as the largest single-source sports, fitness, and leisure activity participation study in the United States. This report tracks participation patterns across 126 sports, recreation, and fitness activities, providing insight to broader physical activity trends. Based on responses from over 18,000 survey participants, the data offers a statistically accurate snapshot of how Americans aged six and older participate in physical activities.

The SFIA report serves as a key resource for parks and recreation professionals to identify emerging activity trends and potential areas for program development. This assessment uses the most current SFIA report published in 2026 and based on data collected in 2025. *Note: All snow sport seasonal data were derived from the same participation tracking study. However, seasonal data is derived from October 2024 through April 2025 dates rather than the annual 12-month period.*

OVERALL PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES

In 2025, 80.5 percent of Americans participated in at least one sport or fitness activity. This equates to 250 million Americans who were considered active, which is a 0.6 percent increase from 2024.

Overall, CORE participation, as defined below by SFIA, continued to grow in 2025. CORE participation reached 158.8 million Americans, a 1.3 percent increase year-over-year, which is also reflected within the overall activity with an increase of 1.2 percent. After several years of gradual decline, CORE participants have held steady at 63.5 percent in 2025.

Active Participant

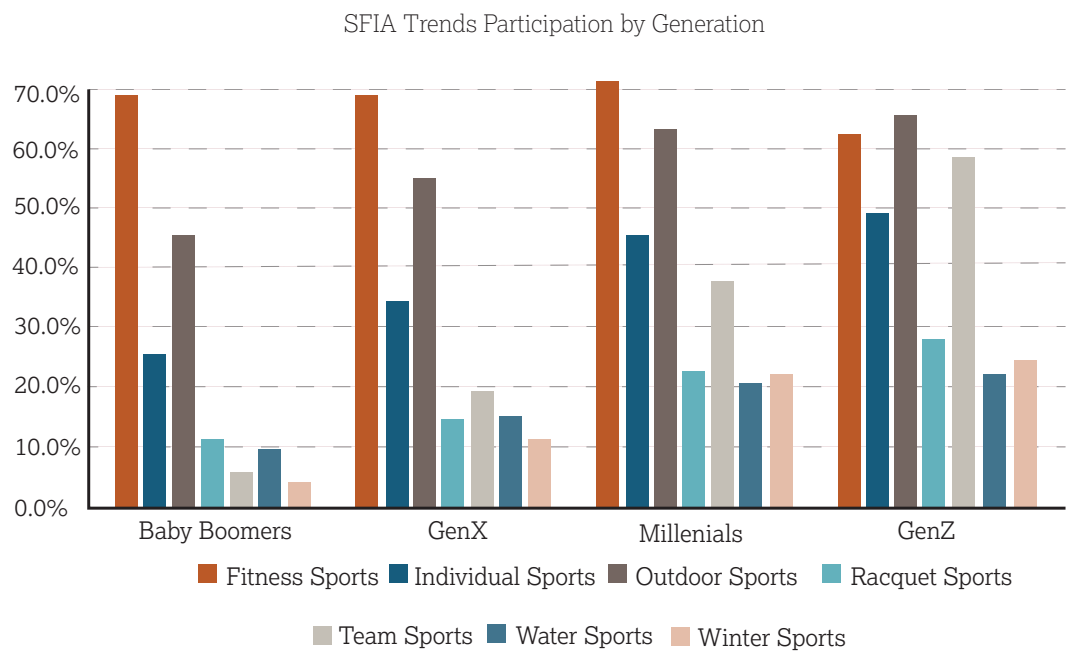
An individual is considered **active** if they participate in at least one sport or activity at least once in the past year. This is the lowest barometer for measuring activity and the metric used for SFIA's research.

CORE Participant

A **CORE** participant is defined as the individuals who participate in the majority of play occasions for each sport or activity.

³ "2026 Topline Participation Report: Sports, Fitness, and Leisure Activities." *Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA)*n.d.

PARTICIPATION RATES BY GENERATION



 **Figure 2: SFIA Trends Participation by Generation**

BABY BOOMERS (1945 - 1964)

Baby Boomers report a 69.4 percent participation rate in fitness sports, the second highest among generations. Outdoor sports are the next most common category for Baby Boomers with 45.0 percent of participants, followed by individual sports with 24.0 percent. Participation in team sports, racquet sports, and winter sports is minimal, with all categories remaining below 11 percent. Baby Boomer participation suggests an interest in individual sports and traditional recreation.

GENERATION X (1965-1979)

Generation X shows a strong preference for fitness sports (69.1 percent) and outdoor sports (55.4 percent). This generation reflects slightly more interest in team, racquet, water, and winter sports in comparison to Baby Boomers, with participation rates ranging from 11 percent to 20 percent. Generation X participation suggests an interest in traditional recreation and emerging trends.

MILLENNIAL (1980-1999)

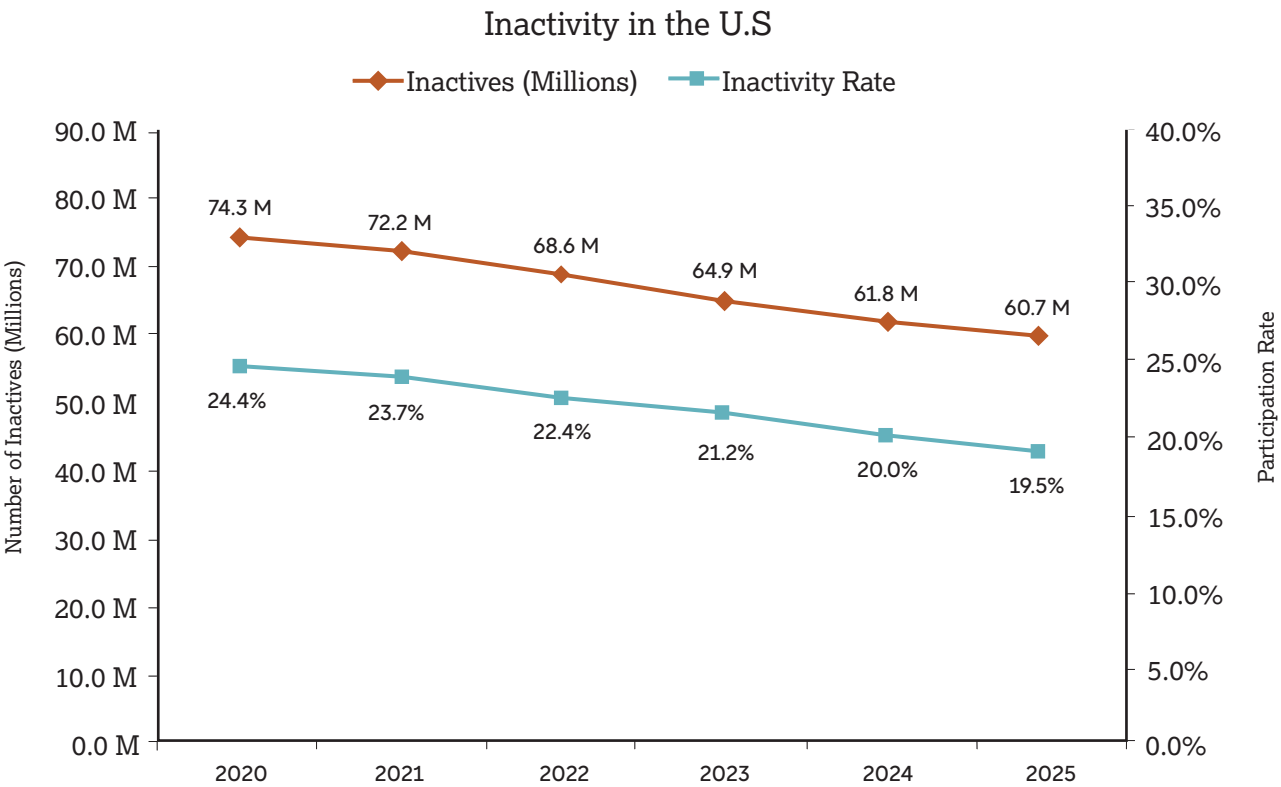
Millennials show the highest participation rate in fitness sports, with 70.6 percent involved, followed by outdoor sports at 64.2 percent. Compared to Generation X and Baby Boomers, this generation displays more interest in racquet, water, and winter sports, with participation ranging from 21 percent to 27 percent. Winter sports participation within Millennials increased by 12.7 percent since 2024, contributing to a total participation change of 52.4 percent from 2021 to 2025. Millennial participation suggests an interest in a wide array of recreation, both traditional and emerging trends.

GENERATION Z (2000+)

Generation Z has high participation across multiple categories. Team sports have a high participation rate (59.6 percent) in comparison to other generations. This generation shows more interest in racquet, water, and winter sports with participation ranging from 21 percent to 27 percent. Water sports participation within Generation Z increased by 10.4 percent since 2024, contributing to a total participation change of 33.8 percent from 2021 to 2025. Generation Z participation suggests an interest in a wide array of recreation, both traditional and emerging trends.

INACTIVITY TRENDS

Inactivity refers to individuals who do not participate in sports, fitness, or recreational activities during a year. In 2020, 74.3 million individuals were considered inactive representing an inactivity rate of 24.4 percent. By 2025, this number had declined to 60.7 million, with an inactivity rate of 19.5 percent. This marks the seventh consecutive year of decline and the lowest inactivity rate. A consistent decline suggests that Americans are engaging in physical activity and are shifting toward active lifestyles.



 **Figure 3: Inactivity and Participation Rates of Individuals**

INACTIVITY + INCOME

Both SFIA and other researchers have determined that income disparities remain a factor in inactivity levels. Lower-income households (under \$25,000 annually) have the highest rate of inactivity at 35.7 percent compared to 12.2 percent for households that earn more than \$100,000 a year. Inactivity decreased across all income levels in 2025, with the largest decreases being among the \$50,000 to \$74,000 (4.0%) and \$25,000 to \$49,000 (3.9%) households.

INACTIVITY + AGE

Inactivity declined across nearly all age groups, signaling encouraging progress in overall physical activity participation. Children ages 6 to 12 showed the largest improvement, with inactivity down by 6.7 percent. While most age groups were declining in inactivity, teens ages 13 to 17 increased in inactivity by 4.4 percent. This increase in inactivity among teens highlights the importance of targeted youth-focused programming.

INTENT TO PARTICIPATE

The 2026 SFIA report also highlights activity intentions for the year ahead, revealing which sports or fitness pursuits individuals intend to start, continue, or stop within the next 12 months. This data provides valuable insight into shifting preferences, helping parks and recreation departments and other providers anticipate demand and tailor offerings accordingly.

Among inactive individuals, patterns in future activity participation begin to emerge. Youth ages 6 to 17 show interest in outdoor activities, while young adults ages 18 to 34 demonstrate greater interest in running and cardio-based fitness. Beyond early adulthood, an interest in outdoor recreation reemerges and remains strong among adults ages 35 to 65 and older.



 Figure 4: Cornhole at St. Stephens Park

	6-12	13-17	18-24	25-34
1	Camping	Fishing	Running or Jogging	Cardio Fitness
2	Running or Jogging	Running or Jogging	Cardio Fitness	Running or Jogging
3	Fishing	Camping	Working out with free weights	Working Out with Free Weights
4	Swimming for Fitness	Treadmill	Treadmill	Treadmill
5	Basketball	Working Out with Free Weights	Working Out Using Machines	Working Out Using Machines
6	Bicycling	Cardio Fitness	Camping	Camping
7	Hiking	Basketball	Hiking	Swimming for Fitness
8	Cardio Fitness	Bicycling	Bicycling	Fishing
9	Soccer	Hiking	Basketball	Hiking
10	Baseball	Swimming for Fitness	Yoga	Yoga

 **Table 1: SFIA Activity Intentions by Age Group, Listed in Order of Intention**

	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
1	Camping	Camping	Fishing	Fishing
2	Cardio Fitness	Fishing	Camping	Treadmill
3	Running or Jogging	Cardio Fitness	Treadmill	Camping
4	Treadmill	Treadmill	Cardio Fitness	Cardio Fitness
5	Working Out with Free Weights	Working Out with Free Weights	Working Out with Free Weights	Swimming for Fitness
6	Fishing	Yoga	Hiking	Working Out with Free Weights
7	Hiking	Running or Jogging	Swimming for Fitness	Yoga
8	Working Out Using Machines	Working Out Using Machines	Yoga	Hiking
9	Swimming for Fitness	Hiking	Working Out Using Machines	Working Out Using Machines
10	Yoga	Swimming for Fitness	Shooting	Shooting

LOCAL RECREATION TRENDS

Local recreational trends are sourced from the Environmental Systems Research Institute's (ESRI) Market Potential Index (MPI) score. ⁴ The MPI is a measure that compares demand for a product or service within a pre-determined geographic area to the national demand for that product or service.

MPI data provides details about what type of goods, services, and activities consumers use and demand. It includes consumer attitudes on topics such as spending, health, and the environment. The products or services included within this comparison are specific to parks and recreation activities, though the products or services are not necessarily indicative of the County's facility or program offerings. Demand for recreational activities is measured by an individual's participation in a certain activity within the past 12 months.

The trends presented below were obtained in 2025 from ESRI's Market Potential Index Profile for Catawba County. The table lists the parks and recreation activities most popular among Catawba County residents as indicated by having the highest MPI values. While some percentages may appear high or low, pairing them with MPI values helps assess the relative demand for each activity. MPI values of 100 indicate demand within Catawba County is equal to the national average; values above 100 suggest higher demand than the national average; and values below 100 suggest lower demand than the national average. For instance, an MPI of 130 indicates 30 percent higher demand than the national average, while an MPI of 85 reflects 15 percent lower demand.

It's important to note that a higher MPI does not necessarily mean an activity is broadly popular, nor does a lower MPI indicate broad unpopularity. Both the percentage of participants and the MPI value must be considered when making decisions. For example, an activity with 30 percent participation and an MPI over 100 is likely a strong candidate for investment, while an activity with one percent participation and a high MPI may not justify significant resources. For niche activities, partnerships with private providers could be an effective strategy to connect residents with options.



 **Figure 5: Fishing at Mountain Creek Park**

⁴ Schaetzel, Stacy, and Gemma Goodale-Sussen. "Got Five Minutes? Get to Know the Market Potential Data." ArcGIS Blog, 2022. July 6. <https://www.esri.com/arcgis-blog/products/esri-demographics/business/five-minutes-market-potential>.

RECREATION TRENDS

The table below lists the parks and recreation activities most popular with Catawba County residents, as indicated by having the highest percentage of participants and highest MPI values. This data is derived from spending associated with sports and equipment and captures participation in public leagues, private leagues, and individual participation. Most activities can be done individually and with little specialized equipment. Walking, jogging, running and biking are activities that residents can participate in anywhere, though they may choose to pursue these activities in public parks and greenways. Swimming, weightlifting, and fishing are activities that can be pursued at a specific location and may require additional equipment and resources. The popularity of these activities suggests that the County should continue to offer opportunities for residents to participate in these activities and invest resources to enhance those offerings. The MPI analysis of the top seven recreation activities in Catawba County indicates that, while these activities are

Activity	% Participating	Market Potential Index (MPI)
Fishing (Fresh Water)	12.9%	121
Swimming	14.6%	93
Walking for Exercise	28.3%	91
Weight Lifting	10.7%	91
Hiking	13.5%	84
Bicycling (Road)	9.2%	81
Jogging or Running	8.2%	73

 **Table 2: Most Popular Recreation Activities in Catawba County**



 **Figure 6: Hiking at Bakers Mountain Park**



Figure 7: Kayaking at Riverbend Park

popular in the County, they are no more popular there than they are nationwide. Of the 36 recreation activities analyzed in ESRI's MPI, only nine have MPI values above 100, indicating that recreational activity participation is generally lower in the County than at the national level. This may reflect differences in participation preferences or potential barriers to access for some residents, such as economic constraints. The nine activities with MPI values above 100 are listed below.

Activity	% Participating	Market Potential Index (MPI)
Hunting with Shotgun	3.6%	130
Hunting with Rifle	4.4%	126
Fishing (Fresh Water)	12.9%	121
Target Shooting	6.1%	113
Horseback Riding	2.3%	112
Motorcycling	3.1%	110
Archery	2.6%	105
Rollerskating	1.6%	104
Boating (Power)	5.2%	102

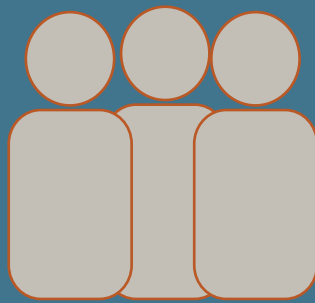
Table 3: Recreation Activities with MPI Values Over 100 in Catawba County

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- As AI technologies become more practical for park operations, Catawba County has an opportunity to integrate smart tools into clerical and administrative functions.
- Nationally, individuals across multiple age groups show strong interest in fishing. Enhancing fishing access and offering beginner fishing programs could serve existing interest while creating a space for new participants.
- Fitness-oriented activities continue to show strong participation across all generations, indicating that investments in trails and outdoor fitness stations are well-positioned to support reliable, long-term community use.
- Outdoor sports rank as the second most participated activity across all generations, indicating that investments in activities such as mountain biking, wildlife viewing, and fishing are likely to experience consistent and sustained community use.
- Inactivity among lower-income households remains high. By focusing on providing low cost recreation opportunities, Catawba County can continue to support equitable participation.
- Nationally, inactivity is on the decline for every age group aside from teens (13 to 17) where it is increasing. This trend suggests that there is a growing need for targeted strategies to better engage youth in active recreation.
- Both individual sports and outdoor sports are increasing across generations. This reflects a growing demand for flexible, self-directed, and nature-based recreation opportunities.
- Locally, trends show that residents are interested in walking and other low-barrier activities, such as jogging, biking, and hiking, reinforcing the importance of trails, greenways, and flexible outdoor spaces.
- Nationally, the intent to participate in camping, fishing, and hiking appear frequently across all age groups, reinforcing the value of preserving natural areas and expanding nature-based recreation opportunities.



 **Figure 8: Hiking at Bakers Mountain Park**



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is a foundational component of any planning process, ensuring that the vision, priorities, and strategies reflect the needs and values of residents and park users. The approach to community engagement includes input from community members, Catawba County Parks staff, and survey data.

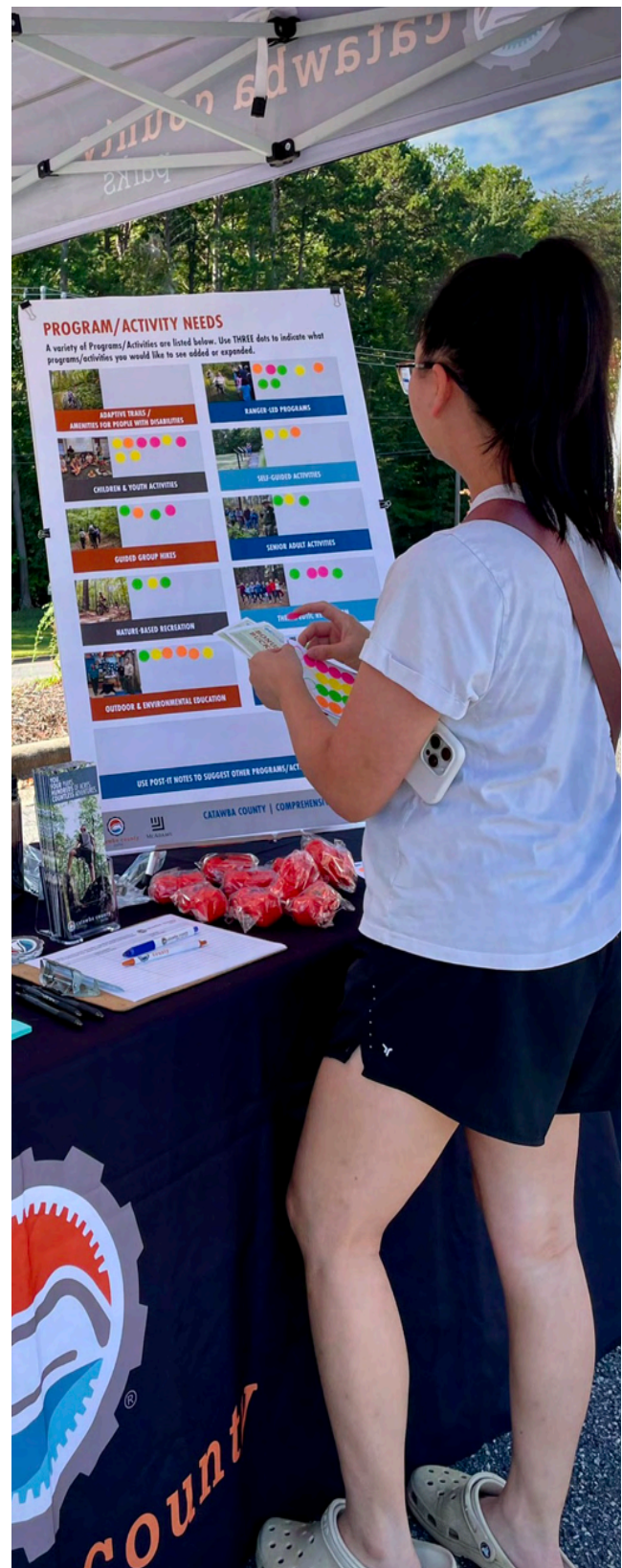
The engagement process consisted of six public engagement meetings, a statistically valid survey, asset mapping, four focus groups, and an interjurisdictional meeting. One of the key strategies for outreach to the Catawba County community was to engage people where they were already gathering. This approach emphasized meeting residents in familiar settings such as parks, festivals, or farmers' markets to be able to hear from the voices of the community. A statistically valid survey was also conducted to gather input from community members who may not participate in community events.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS + POP-UPS

A series of six community engagement events were held to inform the public about the project and to learn from the community about their values, their amenity preferences, and future recreation programs. At each event, community members provided feedback on three boards and through conversations with Catawba County Parks Department staff.

The three boards gathered feedback through dot votes. Community members were encouraged to vote on their top three values using dots. If they did not see a value reflected on the board, sticky notes were made available for them to provide additional responses. The boards included the following:

- Board One focused on Community Values.
- Board Two focused on potential amenities that can be added or expanded within the parks.
- Board Three sought feedback on programs and activities that community members would like added or expanded within the parks.



 **Figure 1: Catawba County Public Health Farmers Market**



FARMERS MARKET POP-UP

Catawba County Parks hosted a pop-up event on September 18, 2025 at the Catawba County Public Health Farmers Market. The Catawba County Public Health Farmers Market operates from June to September on Thursdays from 10am to 1pm.

TOP PROGRAMS:

1. Children + Youth Activities
2. Nature-Based Recreation
3. Outdoor + Environmental Education, Self-Guided Activities, Therapeutic Recreation

TOP AMENITIES

1. Playgrounds
2. Greenway Trail System
3. Picnic Areas, Dog Park

TOP COMMUNITY VALUES

1. Environment + Nature
2. Health + Wellness, Education + Learning
3. People + Community



TOP PROGRAMS:

1. Children + Youth Activities
2. Volunteer Opportunities
3. Outdoor + Environmental Education, Guided Group Hikes

TOP AMENITIES

1. Hiking/Walking Trails
2. Greenway Trail System
3. Dog Park

TOP COMMUNITY VALUES

1. Environment + Nature
2. Health + Wellness
3. Arts + Culture

TODOS SOMOS AMERICA FESTIVAL POP-UP

The Todos Somos America Festival was held on September 21, 2025 under the Sails in Downtown Hickory. Catawba County Parks hosted a pop-up table at the festival for community members to provide feedback on future amenities and programs.



COMMUNITY MEETING

Catawba County Parks hosted a community meeting on the evening of September 25, 2025 at the Main Library in Newton.

TOP PROGRAMS:

1. Outdoor + Environmental Education
2. Ranger-Led Programs
3. Adaptive Trails/Amenities for People with Disabilities, Volunteer Opportunities

TOP AMENITIES

1. Hiking/Walking Trails
2. Literacy Trails, Nature Center
3. ADA Accessible Trails, Dog Park, Greenway Trail System, Paddle Launch, Playgrounds

TOP COMMUNITY VALUES

1. Environment + Nature
2. Equity + Inclusion
3. People + Community, Connectivity + Growth



TOP PROGRAMS:

1. Nature-Based Recreation
2. Children + Youth Activities
3. Outdoor + Environmental Education

TOP AMENITIES

1. Hiking/Walking Trails
2. Greenway Trail System, Playgrounds
3. Nature Center

TOP COMMUNITY VALUES

1. Environment + Nature
2. Health + Wellness, Education + Learning
3. People + Community

HARVEST FOLK FESTIVAL

Catawba County Parks hosted a pop-up table on September 27, 2025 at the Harvest Folk Festival. The Harvest Folk Festival takes place at Murray's Mill in the Town of Catawba and brings community members together to celebrate fall traditions.



BAKERS MOUNTAIN PARK POP-UP

Catawba County Parks hosted a pop-up on November 1, 2025 at Bakers Mountain Park.

TOP PROGRAMS:

1. Nature-based Recreation
2. Self-Guided Activities
3. Children + Youth Activities

TOP AMENITIES

1. Hiking/Walking Trails
2. Biking Trails
3. Greenway Trail System

TOP COMMUNITY VALUES

1. Environment + Nature
2. Health + Wellness
3. Education + Learning



TOP PROGRAMS:

1. Nature-Based Recreation
2. Outdoor + Environmental Education
3. Volunteer Opportunities

TOP AMENITIES

1. Hiking/Walking Trails
2. Greenway Trail System
3. Biking Trails

TOP COMMUNITY VALUES

1. Health + Wellness
2. Environment + Nature
3. Education + Learning

RIVERBEND PARK POP-UP

Catawba County Parks hosted a pop-up on November 9, 2025 at Riverbend Park.

SUMMARY OF WHAT WE HEARD

Environment and nature is a key value for most community members. Residents are also keenly interested in nature-based recreation and environmental education programs. Community members also show interest in either expanding or adding hiking and walking trails and enhancing the greenway trail system. The community values of Environment + Nature and Health + Wellness are acutely aligned with this interest, and reflects a desire to be physically active while immersed in a natural setting.

TOP THREE AMENITIES

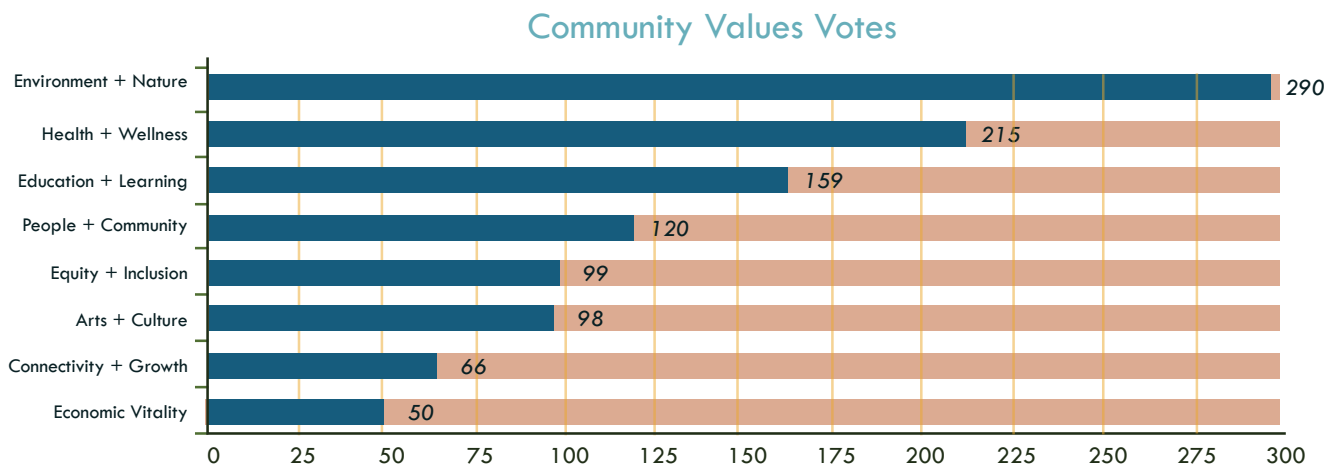
- 1. Hiking/Walking Trails
- 2. Greenway Trail System
- 3. Playgrounds

TOP THREE PROGRAMS

- 1. Nature-Based Recreation
- 2. Children + Youth Activities
- 3. Outdoor + Environmental Education

TOP THREE COMMUNITY VALUES

- 1. Environment + Nature
- 2. Health + Wellness
- 3. Education + Learning



 **Figure 2: Community Value Votes from Community Engagement**

Amenities Votes

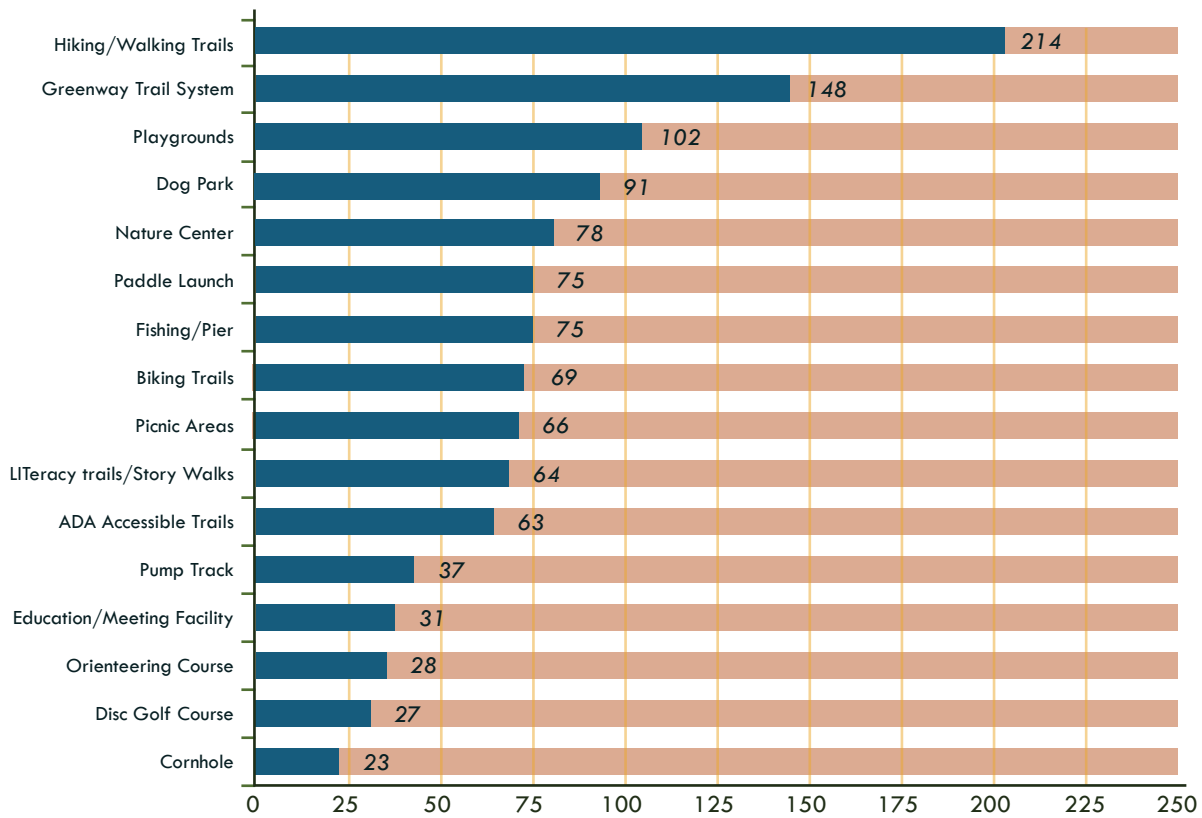


Figure 3: Amenity Votes from Community Engagement

Programming Votes

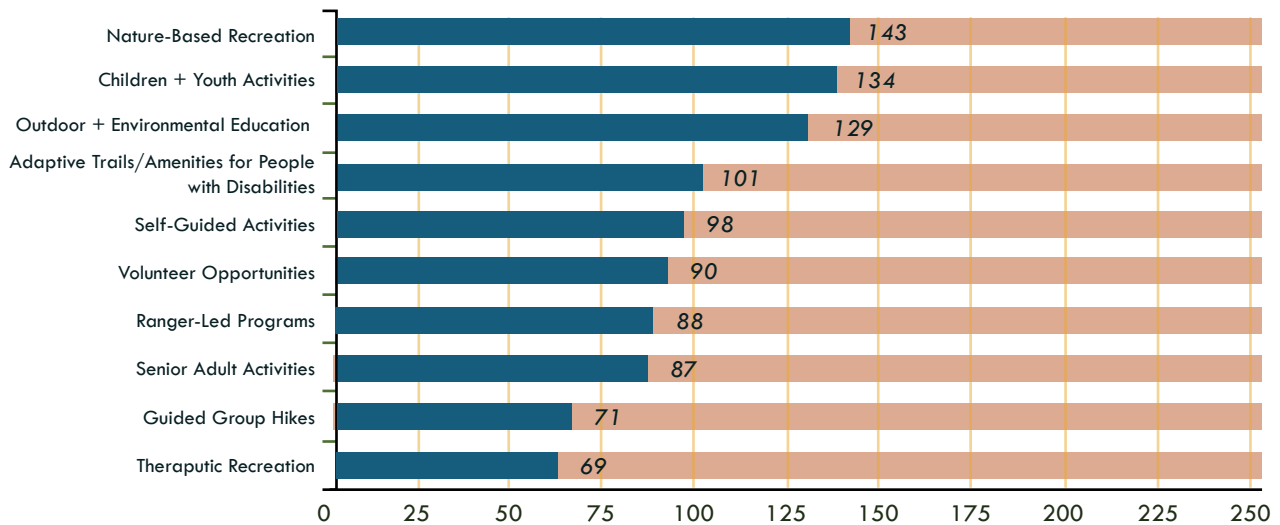


Figure 4: Programming Votes from Community Engagement

FOCUS GROUPS

INTRODUCTION

Focus group meetings provide an opportunity to gather input from groups whose interests align with and complement the agency's mission. Guided discussions encouraged participants to contribute toward the development of a well-rounded park system grounded in shared values. Participants spoke from their unique perspectives, sharing their needs, priorities, and concerns, as well as those of the communities they represent. Together, each group's input added meaningful value to the overall understanding of community needs. The groups included community members from specific user groups and individual interviews with Catawba County leaders. Activating the parks, educational components, and optimizing existing parks were highlighted as important values through these interviews. These focus groups took place in late April 2026.

LAND CONSERVATION FOCUS GROUP

STRONGEST ASSETS

The land conservation focus group highlighted the natural landscapes across all of the parks. The group emphasized that each park protects distinct environments under development pressure and serve as refuges from asphalt and development while providing habitat for wildlife. Another key asset the group mentioned was the ranger expertise and land management. The staff actively manages protected land for the community. The rangers' ecological knowledge and programming help build conservation awareness. Additionally, the focus group highlighted how Catawba County has a clear mission alignment with a focus on preservation and conservation of green spaces, supported by staff who understand the ecological value of what they're protecting.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENTS + ENHANCEMENTS

Ecological management was a key opportunity focused on during the land conservation focus group. Suggestions included developing forest management and land management plans to address fire, drought, and environmental concerns. Participants also emphasized the importance of balancing human recreation with wildlife

habitat creation. Several members noted the importance of land acquisition for land conservation and the addition of new trails. Members of the group also brought forth the idea of adaptive bike trails and suggested offering adaptive equipment along with guides who understand how to use the equipment. The group also highlighted the importance of conservation education through programming and encouraged Catawba County to offer a wide variety of programming to reach more people.

TRAIL USER FOCUS GROUP

STRONGEST ASSETS

The trail user focus group indicated that the strongest asset at Catawba County Parks is the variety of trail experiences. The participants spoke of the different environments at each of the parks, the wide array of difficulty levels for trails, and the availability of ranger-led programs. Participants noted that the trails are designed in a way that allows them to mix routes to adjust mileage up or down.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENTS + ENHANCEMENTS

The group suggested that one key opportunity is to address navigation confusion within the trails, such as on the Bakers Mountain trails. Within the group, there was a desire for the plan to help shape the parks into spaces that are accessible for a diverse group of people. Several members within the group noted that the trails are very popular on the weekends and suggested early morning trail access for morning people or runners. Like other groups, land acquisition was noted as a desire in order to develop new trails.

MOUNTAIN BIKING FOCUS GROUP

STRONGEST ASSETS

Like other groups, the mountain biking focus group noted that one of the strongest assets of Catawba County Parks is the variety of trails, in particular the Mountain Creek trails. The group also stated that the other strongest asset is the multi-use recreation available.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENTS + ENHANCEMENTS

One of the opportunities that was brought forth by the mountain biking group was setting up clear wayfinding with a number system alongside the names of the trails. Several members of the group suggested adding mountain biking trails to other parks, such as Riverbend. Another common suggestion was for the Mountain Creek pump track to be paved.

GENERAL PUBLIC FOCUS GROUP

STRONGEST ASSETS

Similar to other groups, the general public focus group noted that the trail system is a strong asset within the parks. Several participants stated that they appreciate the natural landscapes within the parks along with the wildlife, such as the birds. Other participants brought up their appreciation for the multi-use opportunities and the presence of rangers on site.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENTS + ENHANCEMENTS

Participants spoke of several enhancements that could occur within the parks. One participant made note of the kayak launch at Mountain Creek Park and it should be less steep. Another participant mentioned improved markings on the trails to better indicate which direction trail users should be going. Several participants commented on accessibility improvements, such as more accessible trails and improvements to the bathrooms. Participants also noted a desire for more volunteer opportunities within the parks.



 **Figure 5: Todos Somos America Festival Pop-Up**

TRENDS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

**STRONG
APPRECIATION
FOR NATURAL,
CONSERVED
LANDSCAPES**

**TRAILS ARE A CORE
SYSTEM ASSET**

**GROWING DEMAND
FOR ACCESSIBILITY
AND INCLUSIVE
DESIGN**

**DESIRES FOR CLEAR
WAYFINDING
SYSTEMS WITHIN
THE TRAILS**

**INTEREST IN LAND
ACQUISITION AND
TRAIL SYSTEM
EXPANSION**

**DESIRE FOR
EDUCATION,
PROGRAMMING,
AND VOLUNTEERING**



 **Figure 6: Community Meeting at Catawba County Main Library in Newton, NC**

INTERJURISDICTIONAL MEETING

OVERVIEW

The interjurisdictional meeting took place on April 22, 2026. The goal of this meeting was to understand the current collaboration with the municipalities and how it can be improved in the future. During the meeting, it was brought up that existing collaborative efforts are limited, and any collaboration that does occur is usually program-related. Direct collaboration on parks and greenways have always been limited. Participants cited limited staffing, time constraints, and the challenge of planning beyond immediate operational needs as primary barriers to more extensive interjurisdictional collaboration. Ideas for future collaboration included joint 5K series, coordinated hikes, and shared planning for trail connectivity, with recognition that regular meetings or quarterly lunch sessions could help maintain momentum and foster partnerships.

SCIENTIFIC SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

The community engagement process includes a statistically significant survey that polls a representative population of Catawba County. The survey provides an opportunity to hear from community members who may not typically attend events or otherwise participate in the community engagement process. The survey also balances responses from special interest groups.

ETC Institute managed the survey process and sent packets to a random sample of Catawba County households. Each household could respond by mail or through a unique online link, and all respondents were matched to a verified address to ensure accuracy. The goal was to collect a minimum of 400 surveys, and this target was met with 416 residents submitting responses. These results met the standard measures of statistical reliability, with a margin of error of +/- 4.8 at the 95% level of confidence.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND PRIORITIES

USE OF PARKS

Residents were asked to identify the park they visited most frequently. Riverbend Park (66%) and Mountain Creek Park (55%) emerged as the two most commonly visited parks in the past year. Visitation frequency varied, with respondents reporting visits a few times per year (27%), six or more times per year (27%), or monthly (24%). Overall, 85% of respondents indicated they are either “somewhat satisfied” (37%) or “very satisfied” (48%) with the condition of parks in Catawba County.

PARK AND RECREATION LOCATIONS

Respondents reported using City of Hickory parks (62%), National Park Service sites (60%), and North Carolina State Parks (57%). When asked which parks they visit most frequently, City of Hickory parks (28%) and Catawba County Parks (14%) were identified as the primary destinations.

BARRIERS TO USE

Residents reported that the most common reasons why households have not participated in recreation programs or do not participate are due to not knowing what is offered (15%), the distance from home (15%), and being not interested/too busy (12%).

COMMUNICATION METHODS

The three most common ways respondents learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities are via Facebook (51%), friends and neighbors (49%), and the Catawba County website (40%). From the respondents, there is a strong desire for an online event calendar to learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities, with 55% saying they would utilize this.

OUTDOOR SPACES

When asked why residents spend time outdoors, residents most commonly cited three primary motivations: personal fitness or physical wellness (76%), spending time in nature (76%), and recreation or fun (71%). The maximum amount of time respondents are willing to travel to visit a park is typically 15 to 30 minutes (34%) or 30 to 60 minutes (29%).

PUBLIC PARKS + GREEN SPACES

Residents were asked whether they think that Catawba County needs additional parks. Almost half of the respondents (44%) think there is some need for additional parks, and 39% say there is a great need for additional parks. Most residents (83%) agree that the existence of public parks and green spaces is “very important” to the quality of life in Catawba County.

SATISFACTION WITH VALUE

Residents were asked about their overall satisfaction with Catawba County Parks. Most respondents reported that they feel either “somewhat satisfied” (42%) or “very satisfied” (38%) with the overall value their household receives from Catawba County Parks.

EVENTS/PROGRAM USE

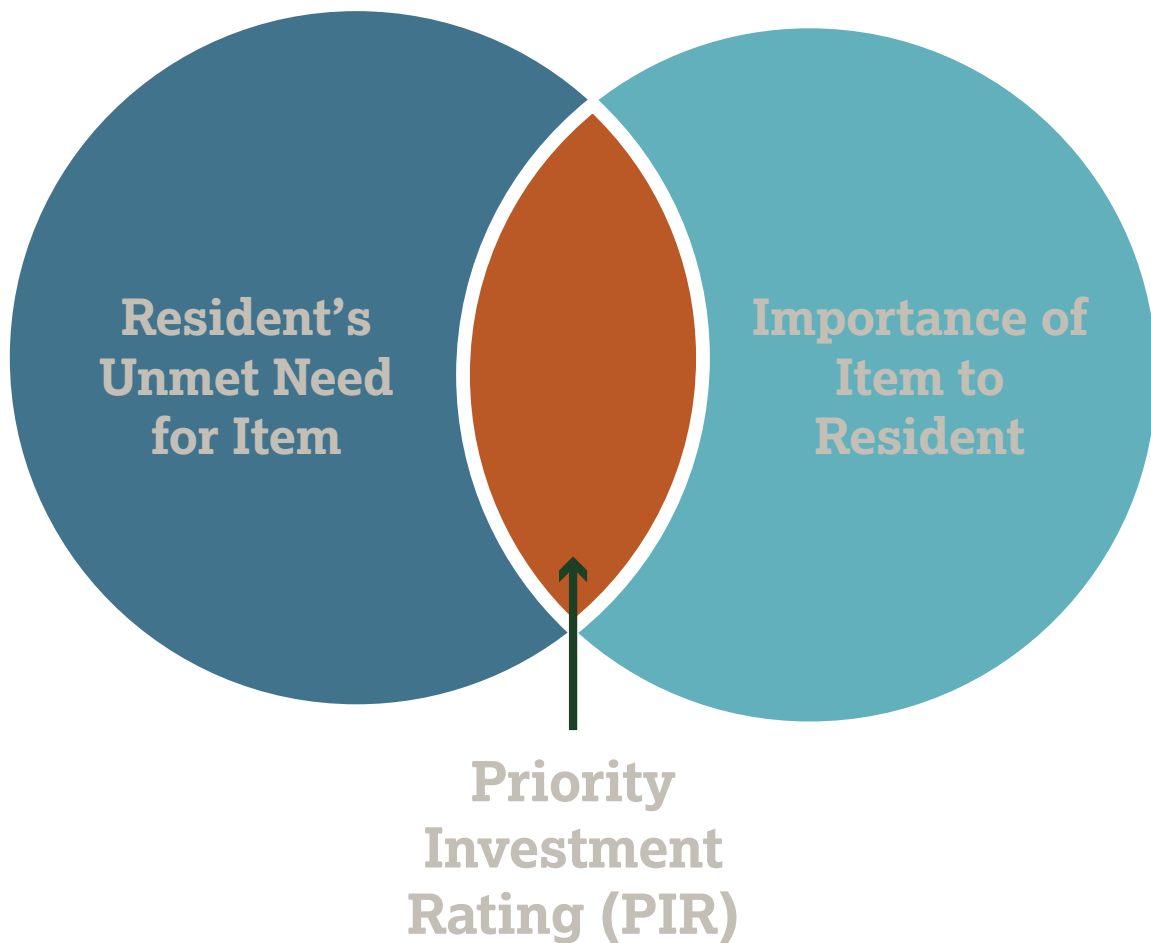
When asked whether they participated in a Catawba County park event or program in the past year, 21% of respondents said yes. Of the respondents who participated in an event or program, 51% rated the overall quality of the programs as “excellent” and 43% “good”.



 **Figure 7: Mountain Biking at Mountain Creek Park**

PRIORITY INVESTMENT RATING

The priority investment rating (PIR) was developed by ETC Institute to provide organizations with an objective tool to evaluate the urgency that should be placed on recreation and parks investments. The priority investment rating combines and equally weighs 1) the importance that residents place on amenities/facilities and 2) how many residents have unmet needs from a facility or amenity.



 **Figure 8: Understanding the Priority Investment Rating**

RECREATION FACILITY, AMENITY, AND ACTIVITY NEEDS + PRIORITIES

The survey asked residents whether their household had a need for each of the 10 parks and recreation programs and to rate how well their needs for each were currently being met. This information helps identify which households had the highest levels of unmet need within the community.

The three programs with the highest number of households that have an unmet need:

1. Outdoor and Environmental Education
2. Nature-Based Recreation
3. Ranger-Led programs

In addition to identifying specific program needs, residents were asked to rank the programs they consider most important. Based on the number of times each program appeared within respondents' top four choices, the following programs emerge as the highest priorities for the community:

1. Nature-Based Recreation (44%)
2. Self-Guided Activities (39%)
3. Outdoor Environmental Education (28%) and Children/Youth Activities (28%)
4. Senior Adult Activities (27%)

Based on the Priority Investment Rating (PIR), the following amenities were rated as highest priorities for investment:

1. Hiking/Walking Trails (PIR = 153)
2. Greenway Trail System (PIR = 138)
3. Nature Center (PIR = 133)

Priorities for Recreational Amenities Investments

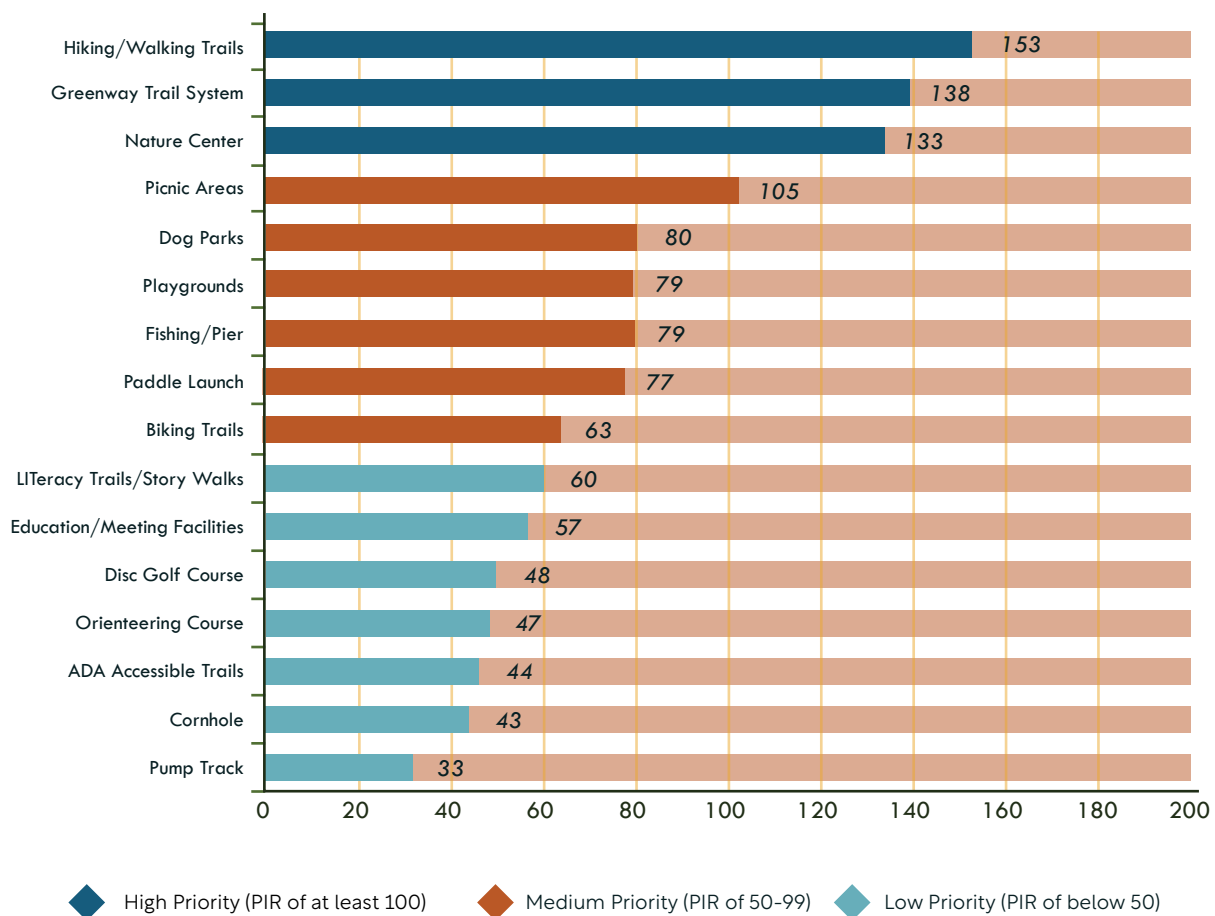


Figure 9: Priorities for Investment in Amenities

Priorities for Recreational Programs + Activities Investments

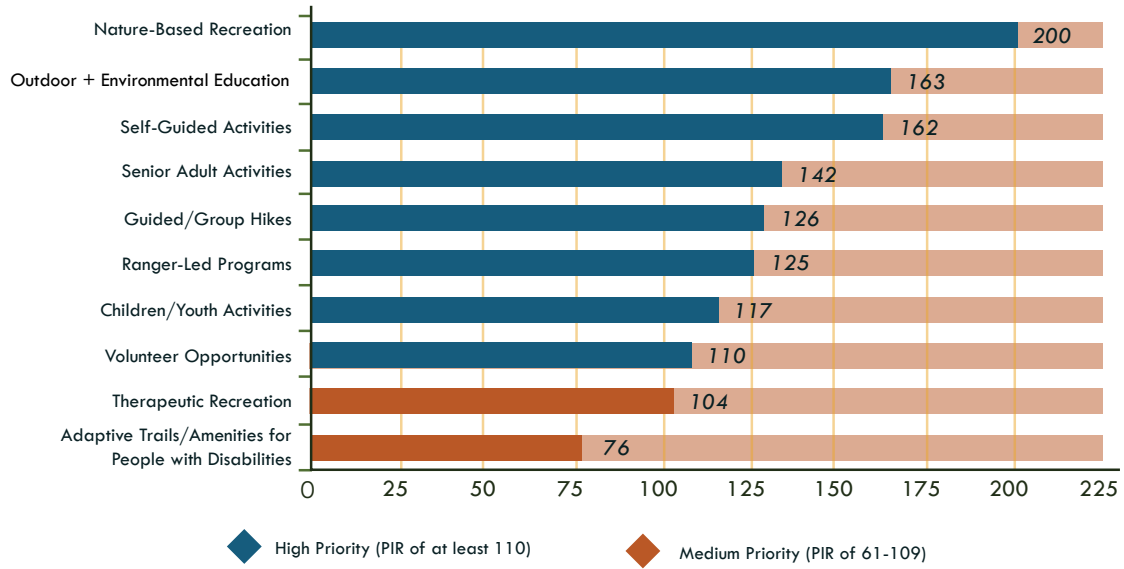


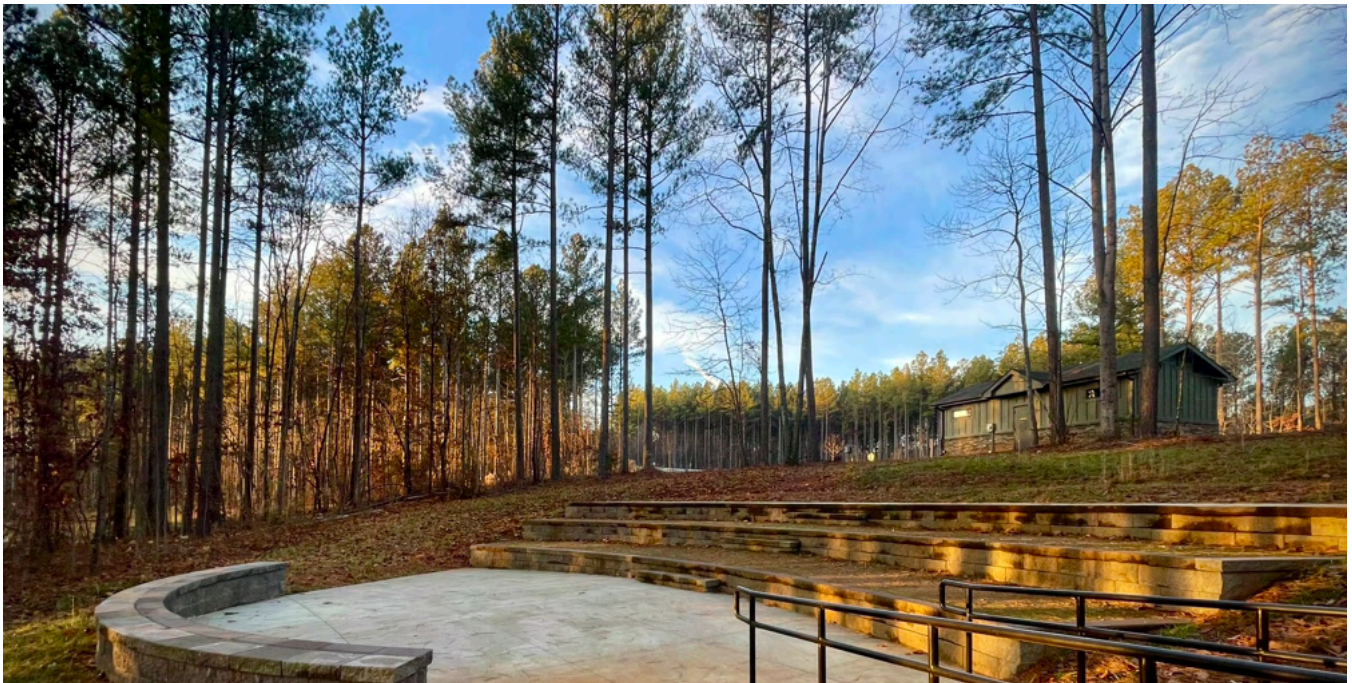
Figure 10: Priorities for Investments in Programs



Figure 11: Guided Hike at Riverbend Park

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Environment and nature are the community's highest priorities, consistently ranking as the top community value across engagement events, focus groups, and survey responses.
- Trails are the most desired park amenity, with hiking/walking trails and greenway trail system expansion emerging as the highest priorities for future investment.
- Nature-based recreation is the most requested program area, followed by children and youth activities and outdoor/environmental education programs.
- Residents highly value parks and open spaces, with 83% indicating that public parks and green spaces are very important to quality of life in Catawba County.
- There is strong support for expanding the park system, as 83% of survey respondents reported some or great need for additional parks and recreational opportunities.
- Overall satisfaction with the park system is high, with 85% of respondents reporting they are somewhat or very satisfied with park conditions.
- Natural landscapes and conservation efforts are viewed as key strengths, with focus group participants highlighting the importance of protecting natural resources, wildlife habitat, and scenic environments.
- Accessibility and inclusive recreation are growing priorities, including a desire for accessible trails, adaptive recreation opportunities, and improved ADA amenities.
- Wayfinding and navigation improvements are needed, particularly along trail systems where users reported confusion and a desire for clearer signage and trail markers.
- Community members support expanding trail networks and acquiring additional land, creating new opportunities for recreation, conservation, and connectivity.
- Educational programming and stewardship opportunities are highly valued, including ranger-led programs, environmental education, and volunteer opportunities.
- Awareness is a barrier to participation, as many residents reported not knowing what programs are offered and expressed interest in improved communication and an online events calendar.



 **Figure 12: Outdoor Classroom at Mountain Creek Park**

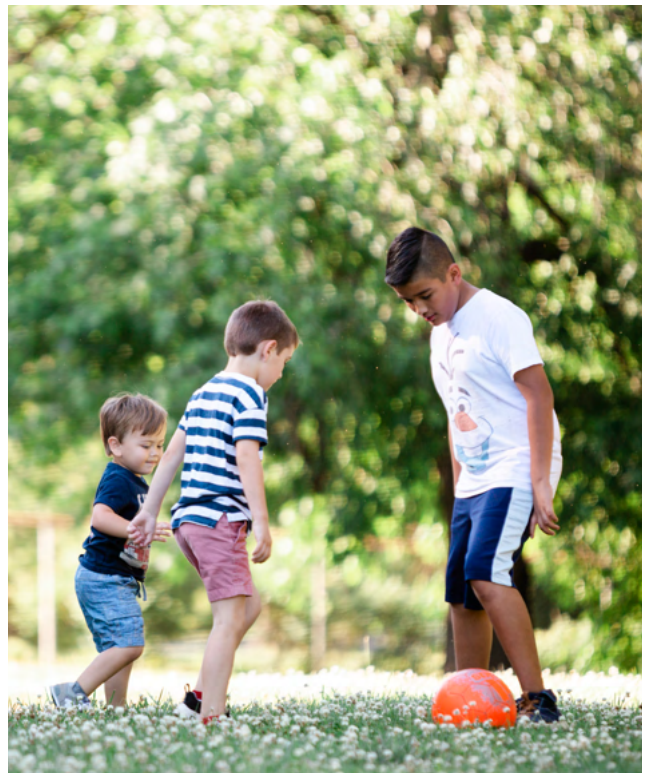


INVENTORY + ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Catawba County owns and manages four parks—Bakers Mountain Park, Mountain Creek Park, Riverbend Park, and St. Stephens Park—encompassing nearly 1,500 acres of preserved natural habitat and offering nearly 50 miles of trails for passive recreation in nature. Distributed across all four corners of the county, these parks provide accessible outdoor opportunities for residents and visitors countywide—Mountain Creek Park in the southeast, Riverbend Park in the northeast, St. Stephens Park in the northwest, and Bakers Mountain Park in the southwest.

Each park offers a distinct experience rooted in the County's natural landscape. Bakers Mountain Park, located at the highest elevation point in the county, is known for its prominent presence on the landscape and offers a haven for hikers with an advanced trail network featuring a mountain-top observation deck with sweeping views. Mountain Creek Park, the County's newest outdoor destination, sits along Lake Norman and is known for its



 **Figure 1: Children Playing at St. Stephens Park**



 **Figure 2: Catawba County Parks System Map**



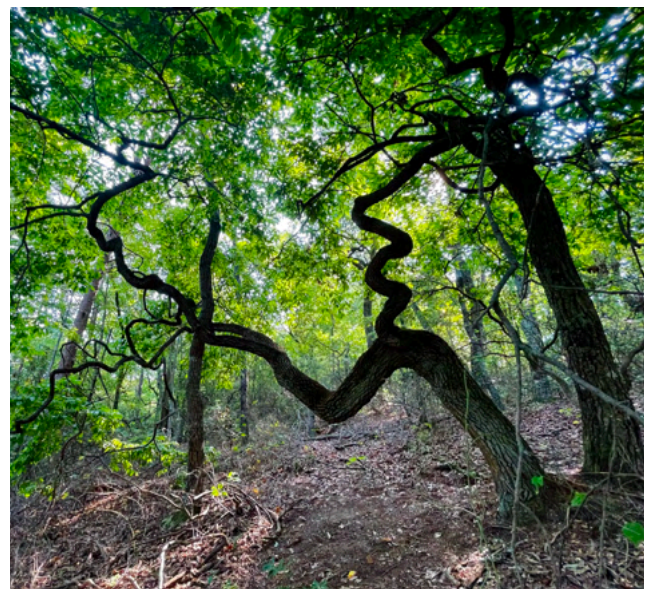
 **Figure 3: Fishing Pier at Mountain Creek Park**

premier mountain biking experience, with an extensive trail system and pump track complemented by a range of outdoor recreation opportunities. Riverbend Park, located along the Catawba River, is defined by its riverfront setting, featuring 1.25 miles of shoreline with access for paddling, fishing, and exploring riverfront and inland trails. St. Stephens Park serves as an urban oasis, offering a respite in nature and spaces for family recreation, highlighted by its signature off-leash dog park.

Together, these outdoor spaces support a wide range of passive recreational activities, including hiking, walking, trail running, biking, paddling, fishing, birding, wildlife observation, picnicking, and so much more. The park system emphasizes connection with nature and encourages visitors to curate their own experiences in the outdoors. In addition to the County's passive parks, more than 50 municipal parks throughout Catawba County provide opportunities for active recreation, including splash pads, disc golf, playgrounds, and organized sports.

Along with their recreational value, Catawba County's parks function as nature preserves, protecting a diverse range of habitats and supporting a wide variety of plant and wildlife species, including some that are rare or of

conservation concern. Across the four parks, visitors can experience hardwood forests, riparian corridors, and native grasslands that contribute to the ecological richness of the region. Bakers Mountain Park, a geologically significant monadnock, offers unique topography and



 **Figure 4: Sourwood Tree at Bakers Mountain Park**

habitat conditions not found elsewhere in the county. Riverbend Park and Mountain Creek Park, both situated along major water bodies and shaped in part by their history as former loblolly pine plantations, now provide important natural areas that continue to evolve through restoration and stewardship. Together, these landscapes reflect the County's commitment to preserving natural resources while providing opportunities for the public to experience and connect with the outdoors.

METHODOLOGY

The park assessment evaluates the overall condition of the Catawba County park system, using both system-wide and individual park reviews to understand service levels and performance. The assessment is split into two main categories: physical attributes and visitor experience. Physical attributes such as maintenance, cleanliness, aesthetic features, and well-functioning recreational amenities can impact the user's experience. Subjective components such as user perception and human behavior can also impact the user's experience and opinion of the park.

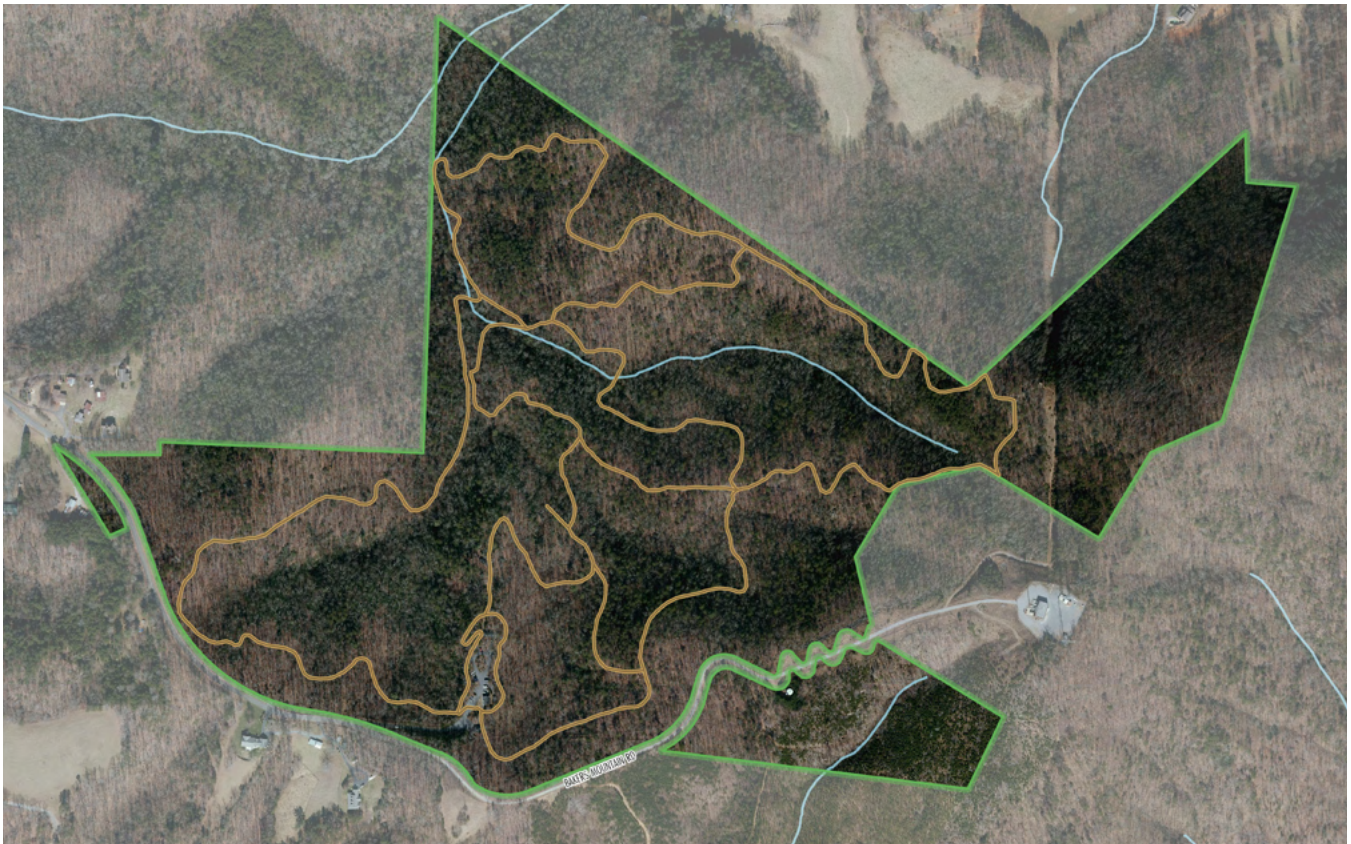
Within the assessment, the STARs Scale provides a checklist of questions and attributes of park quality. These are measured on a scale of 1-5 to generate an overall score for each park. The overall score is calculated by an average of the total points, and the score determines the condition of the park, whether it needs renovations or replacements. The park assessment is an ongoing, iterative process that the department can use to maintain a high-performing park system and plan for the future.



 **Figure 5: LIteracy Trail at Bakers Mountain Park**



 **Figure 6: STARs Scale**



BAKERS MOUNTAIN PARK

OVERVIEW

6680 BAKERS MOUNTAIN ROAD, HICKORY, NC 28602

Bakers Mountain Park is located at the highest elevation point in Catawba County (1,780 feet) and features 189 acres of mature Chestnut Oak forest. The park offers nearly 4.5 miles of easy to advanced trails that are a haven for hikers and are often used as a training ground for tackling the nearby Appalachian Trail. The trail system ascends through forested terrain to a mountain-top observation deck with sweeping, year-round views.

PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT

STRUCTURES/ARCHITECTURE

- Main Building which encompasses a Park Office and Public Restrooms
- Storage Building
- Picnic Shelters
- Observation Platform
- Gazebo
- Old Homesites

Within walking distance of the trailheads at Bakers Mountain Park, visitors will find a large parking lot, public restrooms, and the Main Building which includes the Park Office. The park's two Picnic Shelters are located along the trails and provide visitors with picnic tables, grills, and protection from the elements. The first picnic shelter is located along the paved trail directly adjacent to the parking lot and the other is located along the A.G. Clark Trail, less than 1/8th of a mile from the trailhead. Picnic shelters function on a first-come, first-served basis or can be reserved ahead of time. The Observation Platform rests along Bakers Mountain Loop and offers seating and panoramic views of Catawba Valley, Grandfather Mountain, and Mount Mitchell among other prominent mountain ranges. The Gazebo is located along Bakers Mountain Loop trail next to the Observation Platform.

ATTRIBUTE	POINTS
PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT	
Structures/Architecture	2
Recreation	3
Furnishings + Signage	2
Landscape	3
Infrastructure	2
Cleanliness	4
VISITOR EXPERIENCE	
Arrival	3
Perception of Safety	3
Sense of Welcome	3
Community Connections	2
STARS SCORE	2/5
Consider Renovation	

There are two Old Homesites which contain remnants of historic structures. The first is located along the A.G. Clark Trail and marks the former cabin site of A.G. Clark, with a memorial plaque commemorating his legacy. The second is located near the intersection of Chestnut Ridge Trail and Bakers Mountain Loop Trail and features a chimney which remains from a former hunting cabin.

RECREATION

- +/- 0.25 miles of paved trail with a LiTeracy Trail
- +/- 4.32 miles of natural surface trails

Bakers Mountain Park offers paved trails, natural surface trails, and an observation platform. The paved trail, that is the LiTeracy Trail, weaves literature, information, and technology amongst the trees. It offers an innovative way for visitors to enjoy reading and the outdoors simultaneously. The trail includes a series of eighteen stations that trace the storyline of a children's book while offering the opportunity to exercise in the outdoors. The featured book is changed on a quarterly basis. The natural surface trails meander through a Chestnut Oak

forest and differ in length and sightseeing. These trails are accessed off of the paved trail from the parking lot. Visitors may bring their dogs as long as they are leashed. Biking is not allowed on the trails.

FURNISHINGS + SIGNAGE

- Main Entry Sign
- Secondary Entry Sign
- Picnic Tables
- Benches
- Dog Waste Bag Dispensers
- Dog Waste Receptacles
- Trash Receptacles
- Grills
- Park Information Kiosk
- Trail Map Stands
- Trail Markers
- LiTeracy Trail story signs
- Educational Signage
- A.G. Clark Memorial Plaque



Figure 7: Bakers Mountain Park Old Homesite

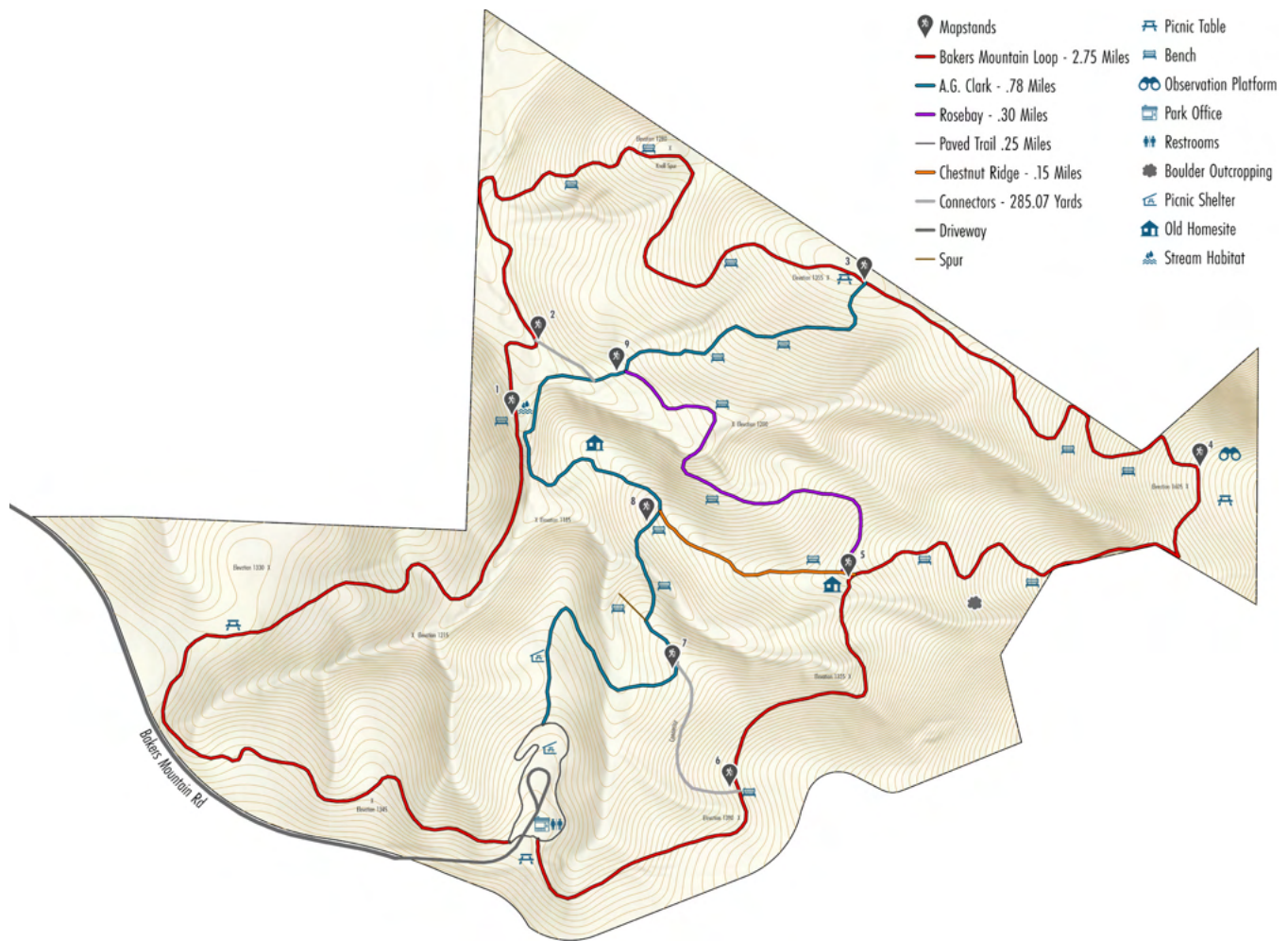


Figure 8: Bakers Mountain Park Trail Map

Bakers Mountain Park offers a variety of furnishings and educational signage throughout the site. The park's Main Entry Sign features natural stone and is placed at the fork in the road between Bakers Mountain Road and a service road. The sign reads "Welcome to Bakers Mountain Park Catawba County Parks" with an arrow pointing visitors to the park. The Secondary Entry Sign can be seen at the Main Building. This sign is smaller and made of wood. There are picnic tables scattered throughout the site including under two picnic shelters and along the Bakers Mountain Loop trail. Benches are offered throughout the site with each trail providing at least one. Trash receptacles are placed adjacent to the parking lot and along the trails. The trash receptacles are not bear-proof. Grills are available for visitors' use and located at the picnic shelters. Signage for the trails comes in the form of nine map stands, trail markers, and a LiTeracy Trail. The Trail Map Stands are each numbered

for orientation and are located mainly at intersections of trails. Trail markers with assigned colors are placed along each trail. At the head of each trail there is a post with the name of the trail. The LiTeracy Trail along a paved path includes signs with a children's book page illustrations. The Old Homesite along A.G. Clark trail has a plaque in memoriam of A.G. Clark. There are no lights in the park.

LANDSCAPE

- Chestnut Oak forest with native trees and shrubs
- Boulder Outcroppings
- Stream Habitat + Water Feature

There is a water feature, a stream habitat, and two boulder outcroppings which can all be viewed from the trails. The trails are maintained, and Park Rangers regularly

Figure 9: Right, Bakers Mountain Park Observation Platform

clear leaves from the trails to maintain trail visibility. Due to storm erosion, tree roots, and steep terrain, there are trip hazards along the trails.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- +/- (35) parking spaces, including +/- (2) ADA accessible spaces
- Metal Vehicular Access Gate, manual
- Wooden Pedestrian Bridge

Bakers Mountain Park provides parking, including ADA accessible spaces, via a curbless asphalt parking lot. Each parking space has a wheelstop. ADA accessible spaces are provided near the Main Building as well as the paved trail. The parking lot does not have a sidewalk associated and does not have ADA accessible striping from the parking spaces to the Main Building. Overflow parking takes place when needed along Bakers Mountain Road. The drive to the park has a metal gate to block access when the park is closed. The Main Building has walkways to its entries via a curb ramp from the parking lot. There is a wooden pedestrian bridge which connects the A.G. Clark and Bakers Mountain Loop trails and crosses a small stream.

CLEANLINESS

Bakers Mountain Park is a clean, well maintained park with little to no litter.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

ARRIVAL

Visitors are welcomed to Bakers Mountain Park by the Main Entry Sign located at the fork in the road between Bakers Mountain Road and a service road. This sign is accompanied by a metal gate which is open during park hours. Visitors next see parking spaces and adjacent to these, a gathering space with two picnic tables. Continuing along the drive, visitors see the Main Building and adjacent to it, a small wooden sign reading "Bakers Mountain Park." Across from these stands a Park Information Kiosk that displays a park map with the park's amenities identified. The park's drive loops and in the center of this is another gathering space with picnic tables and beyond those, a picnic shelter is visible. There are no signs pointing visitors in the direction of individual amenities.

PERCEPTION OF SAFETY

The park is well maintained and the parking area has high visibility in the daylight. Lighting is not provided in the park. Benches are provided along the trails for rest. Canopy from trees provides shade. Visible trail markers and trail map stands keep visitors oriented while hiking. There are two picnic shelters which offer temporary protection from the elements but because both are in close proximity to the parking lot, they are not quickly accessible from most of the trails.





Figure 10: Park Superintendent Leading a Tour on a Trail at Bakers Mountain Park

SENSE OF WELCOME

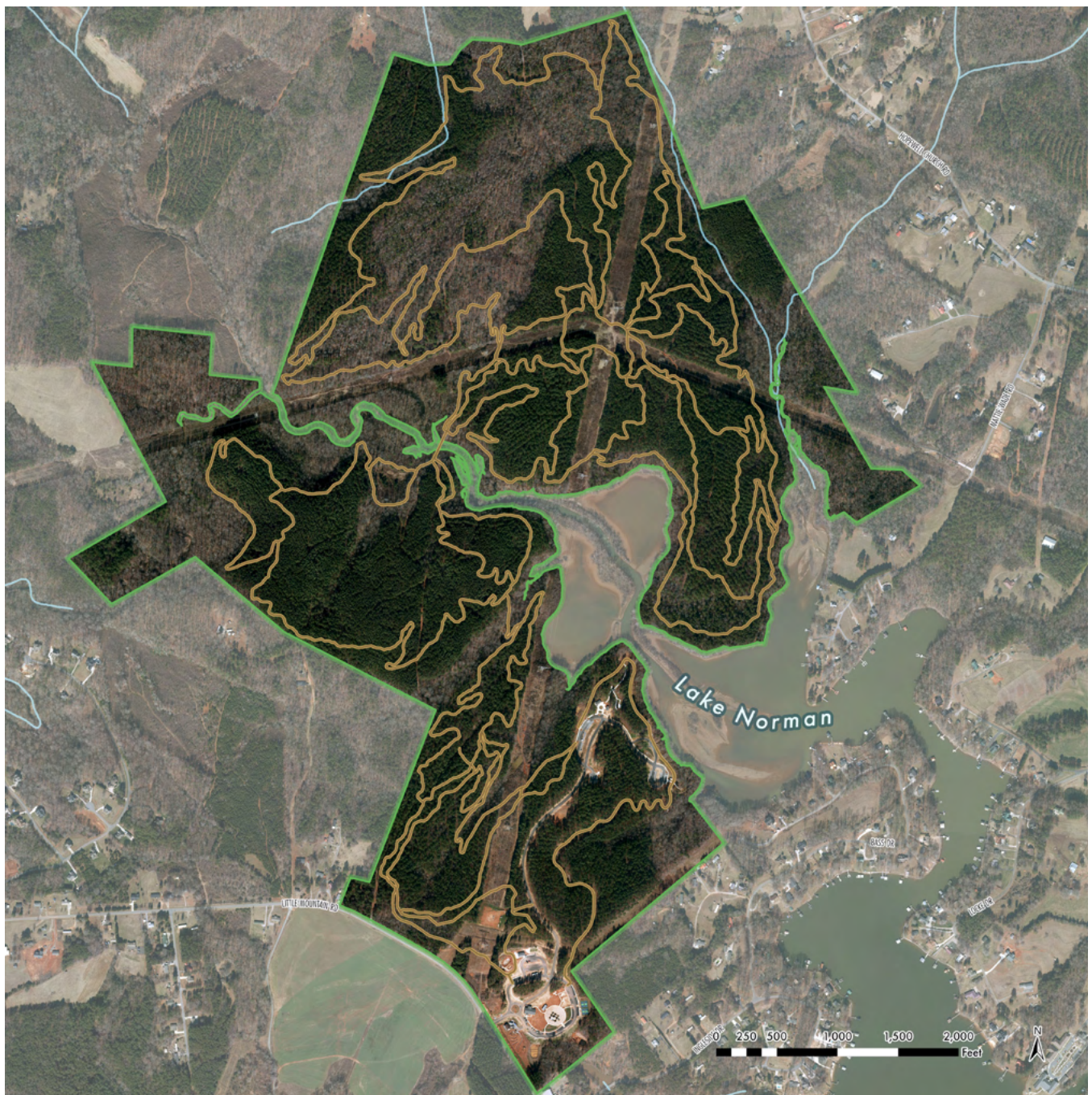
The park provides a sense of arrival for all, offering signs and maps that allow visitors to enjoy the park at their own pace. The park offers volunteer programs which allow visitors to create a personal connection to the park. The park can be limiting for individuals with varying skill levels and mobility challenges as most of the trails are strenuous and natural surface. Amenities available along paved trails include picnic shelters, a LIteracy Trail, restrooms, and the Park Office. Because only 3% of the trails are paved, the majority of the trails are considered moderate to strenuous and natural surface, and the signs are exclusively in English, the site is lacking in inclusive offerings.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The park's sense of welcome creates an environment that attracts individuals, families, volunteers, and small groups. The two picnic shelters offer opportunities for central gathering for small events and informal respite. The picnic shelter can accommodate 50 people and the park is ideal for small gatherings centered on experiences in nature. The park offers a 'Bird Checklist' to engage users with wildlife. Educational events open to the public are held at the park periodically. Volunteer opportunities and the option to request a guided tour with a park ranger builds visitors' connection to the park.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Carry out a prescribed burn to control invasive species and help native vegetation thrive.
- Rebuild trails as needed to repair erosion.
- Add way-finding signs throughout the park to increase visitors' awareness of all the amenities and where to find them.
- Install an internal pathway to lead visitors to amenities.
- Update park signage and educational panels with branded designs, and include Spanish versions of any text.
- Explore the addition of a Visitor Center and additional parking.
- Plan for additional storage facilities as needed.
- Update the restrooms for better ADA accessibility and modern design.
- Expand the recreation facilities and gathering spaces for more options.
- Install visible entry sign with Catawba County standard branding.
- Install external branded directional signage at nearby intersections to increase park awareness.



MOUNTAIN CREEK PARK

OVERVIEW

**6554 LITTLE MOUNTAIN ROAD, SHERRILLS FORD
NC 28673**

Mountain Creek Park is the County's newest outdoor destination and boasts a 606-acre park located along

the northwestern tip of Lake Norman. Mountain biking is at the heart of the park, which features an extensive trail network designed to support a range of riding styles and skill levels. In addition to its trail system, the park attracts a wide range of visitors with opportunities for outdoor play, lake access, and spaces for gathering.

ATTRIBUTE	POINTS
PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT	
Structures/Architecture	4
Recreation	5
Furnishings + Signage	4
Landscape	4
Infrastructure	4
Cleanliness	3
VISITOR EXPERIENCE	
Arrival	4
Perception of Safety	5
Sense of Welcome	4
Community Connections	5
STARS SCORE	4/5
Tops Most Peers	

PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT

STRUCTURES/ARCHITECTURE

- Kitty Barnes Nature Center, which includes public restrooms and Park Office
- Maintenance Building
- Picnic Shelters with Restroom Facilities nearby
- Little Free Library
- American Flag Retirement Drop Box
- Fishing Pier
- Paddle Launch
- Playground

The Kitty Barnes Nature Center includes informational displays and exhibits, live reptiles, taxidermy animals, books, and hands-on activities to educate visitors about local plants, insects, and wildlife. A nature-themed selfie mural is painted for photo opportunities for visitors. Outside the Kitty Barnes Nature Center are public restroom facilities. A Little Free Library and an American

flag retirement drop box are also outside the center placed in beautifully landscaped islands. There's also a bench located outside the center for rest and reflection. The park has three covered picnic shelters with picnic tables available on a first-come, first-served basis or can be reserved ahead of time. The Picnic Shelters are spread around the site, one adjacent to the Pump Track and Tot Track, one adjacent to the Playground, and one near the Outdoor Classroom. They are all accessed via paved trails.

RECREATION

- +/- 0.9 miles Paved Trails
- +/- 14.55 miles Multi-Use, Natural Surface Trails
- +/- 0.58 miles Hikers Only, Natural Surface Trails
- +/- 3.81 miles Biking Only, Natural Surface Trails
- 1.2 acre Pump Track
- Tot Track
- Bike Tool Stations
- Playground, ADA Accessible
- Outdoor Classroom
- 1.6 acre Off-Leash Dog Park, split between a section for any size dogs and a section for dogs under 30 lbs
- Pickleball Courts
- Observation Platform

Mountain Creek Park offers a variety of recreation opportunities that attract all ages and skill levels. The park's trail network includes a mix of multi-use trails shared by bikers and hikers, "biking only" trails, and a "hiker-only" trail providing roughly 20 miles of trails, including a paved ADA-accessible trail that winds through a cove to picnic areas and lakeside amenities. The Pump Track consists of a looped sequence of rollers, berms, and banked turns for riders to practice balance, learn skills, and improve their confidence on a bike. Adjacent to the Pump Track is a Tot Track with a simple rolling singletrack. Bike Tool Stations for common bike maintenance are located at the pump track and at the lakefront trailhead. The trails, Pump Track, and Tot Track are accessed via paved paths.



Figure 11: Mountain Creek Park Map

For children, the park offers a treehouse-style Playground inspired by nature and designed for children of all abilities to engage, challenge, and promote well-being and discovery. The Playground includes slides, rope bridges and skywalks, a climbing wall, an ADA-accessible mountain laurel tunnel, a sky hammock, a vine climb, and a rope swing. The playground serves children ages 5 to 12. The playground resides near the Kitty Barnes Nature Center and a Picnic Shelter which creates easy access to shade and restrooms. The Playground's surfacing is mulch and can be a mobility issue for individuals in wheelchairs or those who use mobility aids. For children and adults alike, the park offers an Outdoor Classroom for learning and relaxing. It features a curved, tiered, amphitheater-style space for presentations and educational events. The upper level is accessible to persons with disabilities and a restroom facility is within walking distance.

For dog owners, there is one Dog Park separated into two by fencing. One side of the Dog Park is open to dogs of any size and the other side is for small dogs under 30 pounds. The Dog Park offers outdoor space for off-leash enjoyment and exercise. Leashed dogs are allowed on trails throughout the park.

The park offers four Pickleball Courts which are available on a first-come, first-served basis. The Pickleball Courts are located across from the Playground, Picnic Shelter, and the Kitty Barnes Nature Center which allows for easy access to restrooms.

Mountain Creek Park resides at the northwestern tip of Lake Norman. The lake, along with the park's namesake Mountain Creek, provide opportunities for water-related activities. The paddle launch, located off a paved trail northeast of the parking lot, allows users to launch canoes, kayaks, and paddle boards. Due to the steepness, length, and height of the launch ramp, as well as the varying water levels, the Paddle Launch can present a safety hazard. A fishing pier within walking distance of the launch includes benches and is T-shaped to accommodate multiple users for fishing and wildlife observation. The observation platform, accessible via a short paved path from the fishing pier, includes tables and a grill for picnicking in a natural setting ideal for viewing local flora and fauna.

FURNISHINGS + SIGNAGE

- Main Entry Sign
- Picnic Tables
- Benches
- Trash Receptacles
- Dog Waste Bag Dispensers
- Dog Waste Receptacles
- Grills
- Trail Map Stands
- Trail Markers
- Carolina Thread Trail Markers
- Water Fountains
- Water Bottle Fill Stations

Mountain Creek Park offers a variety of furnishings and signage throughout the site. The park displays the Main Entry Sign at the park's entrance along Little Mountain Road. The sign features stone and standard Catawba County branding. There are picnic tables scattered throughout the site including under three picnic shelters, at a plaza adjacent to the playground, and near the Outdoor Classroom. Benches are offered throughout the site including at the Kitty Barnes Nature Center entrance, along the Stormie Normie trail, and surrounding the Playground. Trash and Dog Waste Receptacles are placed throughout the site including at the Kitty Barnes Nature Center, Playground, Dog Parks, and along the paved ADA trail. Grills are available for use at the Picnic Shelters. Water Fountains with Water Bottle Fill Stations are offered near the restrooms at the main building. Way-finding signs are displayed as visitors enter the park and throughout the park's drive. Signage for the trails comes in the form of map stands and trail markers. There are no lights in the parking lot or along the trail.

LANDSCAPE

- Loblolly Pine, Beech, Hickory, and Oak Forest
- Mudflats

Mountain Creek Park is home to a variety of landscapes and provides habitat for many animals. Mudflats are exposed during times when the lake levels are low, pro-

viding habitat for shorebirds, wading birds, river otters, beavers, turtles, and other wildlife. The Beech, Hickory, and Oak Forest is home animals such as to chipmunks, American mink, turkey, and whitetail deer. A variety of plant life can be found throughout the park. The landscaped areas surrounding the amenities on site are well maintained by staff and volunteers. There is presence of invasive species on site.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- +/- (275) parking spaces, including +/- (15) ADA accessible spaces, +/- (37) gravel spaces, +/- (7) parallel spaces
- Overflow Parking
- Metal Vehicular Access Gate, manual
- Pedestrian Bridge

Mountain Creek Park provides parking, including ADA accessible spaces, via curbside asphalt parking lots, gravel spaces, and an overflow parking area on natural turf. Each pull-in parking space has a wheelstop. ADA accessible spaces are provided near each main amenity. Each paved parking lot has sidewalks associated. The Kitty Barnes Nature Center has walkways to its entries including a striped walkway from the parking north of the Kitty Barnes Nature Center which allows safe access for visitors on busy days. These striped crosswalks are present at each intersection of road and sidewalk. The entry to the park has a metal gate to block access when the park is closed. There is a pedestrian truss bridge of weathering steel and natural timber decking raised high above the water on concrete pilings along Loblolly Loop that crosses Mountain Creek.

CLEANLINESS

Mountain Creek Park is clean and well-maintained. Litter is present on site but minimal.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

ARRIVAL

Visitors are welcomed to Mountain Creek Park by the Main Entry Sign at the park's entrance. The sign makes the park noticeable from the street for visitors and passersby. Visitors can see the Kitty Barnes Nature Center, Maintenance Building, mature tree stands, and the roundabout easily while entering the park. Once on

the park's drive, visitors see decorative boulders and the metal access gate. Visitors next see way-finding signs which direct them to their preferred amenity. The site has a roundabout with mulch, pollinator plants, and flagpoles which welcome guests as they select which direction to head. The Kitty Barnes Nature Center has attractive, well-kept landscaping. The Playground, Picnic Tables, Picnic Shelter, and Pickleball Courts are all highly visible from the parking adjacent to the Kitty Barnes Nature Center.

PERCEPTION OF SAFETY

The park is well maintained and the parking areas have high visibility in the daylight. Lighting is not provided as the park closes at sunset. Benches are provided along the paved ADA trail and there are also several surrounding the Playground. Canopy from trees provides shade for visitors while on the trails and at the Outdoor Classroom. Visible trail markers and trail map stands keep visitors oriented while hiking. There are three picnic shelters which offer temporary shelter from the elements but because they are in close proximity to the parking areas but not along the trails, they are not quickly accessible from most of the trails. Restrooms are available throughout the site including at the Kitty Barnes Nature Center and at all the Picnic Shelters.

SENSE OF WELCOME

The park offers a sense of arrival for all, offering signs, maps, and a variety of amenities that allow visitors to enjoy the park at their own pace and to connect with nature. Mountain Creek Park also boasts miles of trails ranging from easy to most challenging which allows individuals with varying skill levels to participate. There is a 0.9-mile paved ADA-accessible trail that winds through a quiet cove to a picnic area and lakeside amenities. Additionally, because all the amenities are accessed via paved paths, excluding the natural path trails and bike paths, the park is accessible for users with mobility challenges. The Playground includes an ADA-accessible tunnel offering an inclusive play option. The Outdoor Classroom's upper level is accessible. The signs at the park are exclusively in English but provide policy and way-finding information. The park is ideal for large gatherings as the picnic shelters abut large, open spaces ideal for gatherings of varying sizes.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

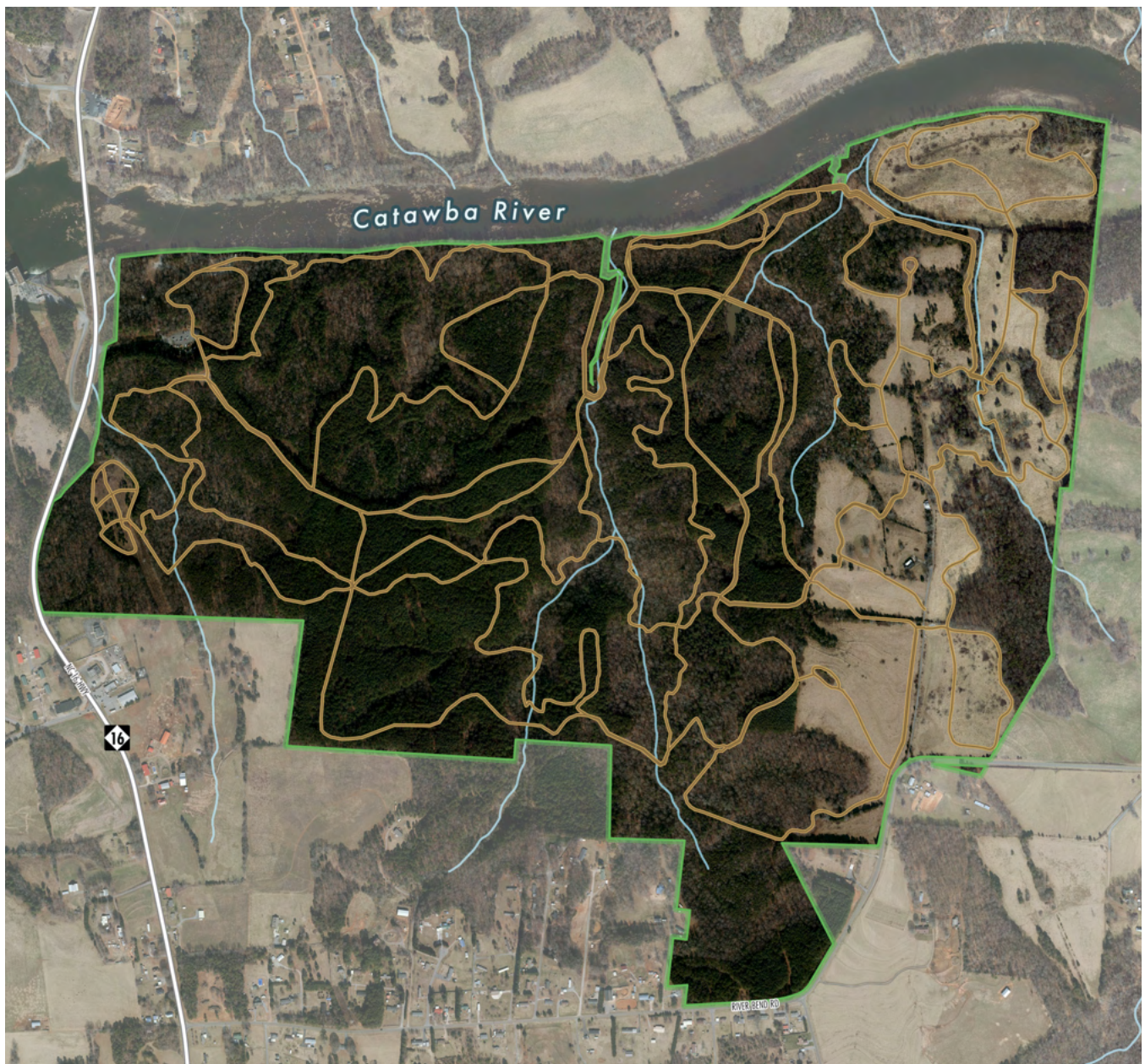
The park's sense of welcome creates an environment that attracts individuals, families, volunteers, and groups of varying size. The variety of amenities support recreation for different age groups, interests, and abilities. The amenities range in degree of passive and active which allow visitors to choose their level of activity. Visitors can connect with nature by themselves or enjoy a group activity. The Picnic Shelters offer opportunities for gathering for events and informal respite. The Kitty Barnes Nature Center offers displays, exhibits, and hands-on activities to educate users about local plants, insects, and wildlife. It offers a reservable space for the community. The Outdoor Classroom is not currently reservable but open for use to the public on a first-come, first-served basis. Educational events open to the public are held at the park periodically. Volunteer opportunities and the option to request a guided tour with a Park Ranger build a lasting connection to the land and encourage environmental stewardship.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Replace non-native Loblolly Pines and reintroduce native species trees.
- Remove invasive species to help native vegetation thrive.
- Add environmental education signs to help visitors learn about the wildlife present.
- Update the surfacing of the Playground to meet ADA-accessibility standards.
- Replace the Paddle Launch with a safer option that can be used year-round when the water is low.
- Update park signs to include Spanish versions of text.
- Install shade options around the playground to provide respite for caregivers and children.
- Install external branded directional signage at nearby intersections to increase park awareness.



 **Figure 12: Playground at Mountain Creek Park**



RIVERBEND PARK

OVERVIEW

6700 N NC HWY 16, CONOVER NC 28613

Riverbend Park spans 690 acres along the Catawba River and features 1.25 miles of shoreline and 20 miles of trails. The park's trail system winds through a variety of landscapes, including riparian corridors, upland forests, and native grasslands. With direct access to the river for paddling and fishing, the park offers a diverse outdoor experience shaped by its connection to the water.

PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT

STRUCTURES/ARCHITECTURE

- Main Building with Park Office and an Employee Only Restroom
- Restroom Facility
- Education Meeting Facility with Restrooms
- Picnic Shelters

- HawkWatch Site Shelter
- Storage Building
- Carport
- Bean House with Garage
- Barn
- Old Homesite
- Corn Crib

Riverbend Park has a variety of structures on site. The Park Office, Restroom Facility, and Education Meeting Facility are adjacent to the main parking lot. The Park Office and Restroom Facility are original to the park since its opening in 1999, while the Education Meeting Facility was added seven years later. There is also a Storage Building and Carport located on site for staff use. Although the buildings have been well-maintained by staff, they show signs of their age. Along the Catawba River is a Picnic Shelter with picnic tables, located off a gravel drive that begins at the end of the paved parking area. The gravel drive leads to the River Access Ramp.

ATTRIBUTE	POINTS
PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT	
Structures/Architecture	3
Recreation	3
Furnishings + Signage	2
Landscape	3
Infrastructure	2
Cleanliness	3
VISITOR EXPERIENCE	
Arrival	3
Perception of Safety	3
Sense of Welcome	4
Community Connections	4
STARS SCORE	3/5
	Acceptable

On the eastern side of the park, the HawkWatch Site Shelter along the Orange and Green Trails provides a covered refuge for hikers during inclement weather. Temporary restroom facilities are located nearby. The Bean House and Garage, the former residence and farmstead of the Harriet Hafer Bean family, remain on site along with the remnants of an earlier homesite, including a surviving chimney visible from the Green and Yellow Trails. A historic barn and a preserved 1930s corn crib further reflect the property's agricultural heritage and contribute to its historic character.

RECREATION

- +/- 20.22 miles of Trails
- Access to the Upper Catawba River Trail
- One-acre Off-Leash Dog Park, Any Size
- Fishing
- Access Ramp
- Observation Platform
- Orienteering Course

Riverbend Park offers a variety of recreation opportunities that attract all ages and skill levels. The park's trail network includes a mix of multi-use trails, though some may be inappropriate for biking. The trails are a mixture of single lane natural trails and wide gravel and grass based trails that traverse forests and meadows.

For dog owners, there is a fenced Dog Park which offers green space for off-leash enjoyment and exercise for dogs of all sizes. Leashed dogs are allowed on trails throughout the park.

Riverbend Park resides along the Catawba River and provides opportunity for water related activities like fishing and paddling. Fishing is available along the bank of Catawba River or the 0.75 acre pond along the Green, Yellow, and Red Trails. Bass, bream, yellow perch, and catfish are the common species in the area. An Access Ramp into the Catawba River is available at the end of the park's drive offering kayakers and canoers an area to drop in. The circular drive located adjacent to this Access Ramp allows for easy loading and unloading.

An ADA accessible Observation Platform located off the lower parking lot allows for unrestricted views of the Catawba River, with two benches also located near here for reflection amongst the unique flora and fauna

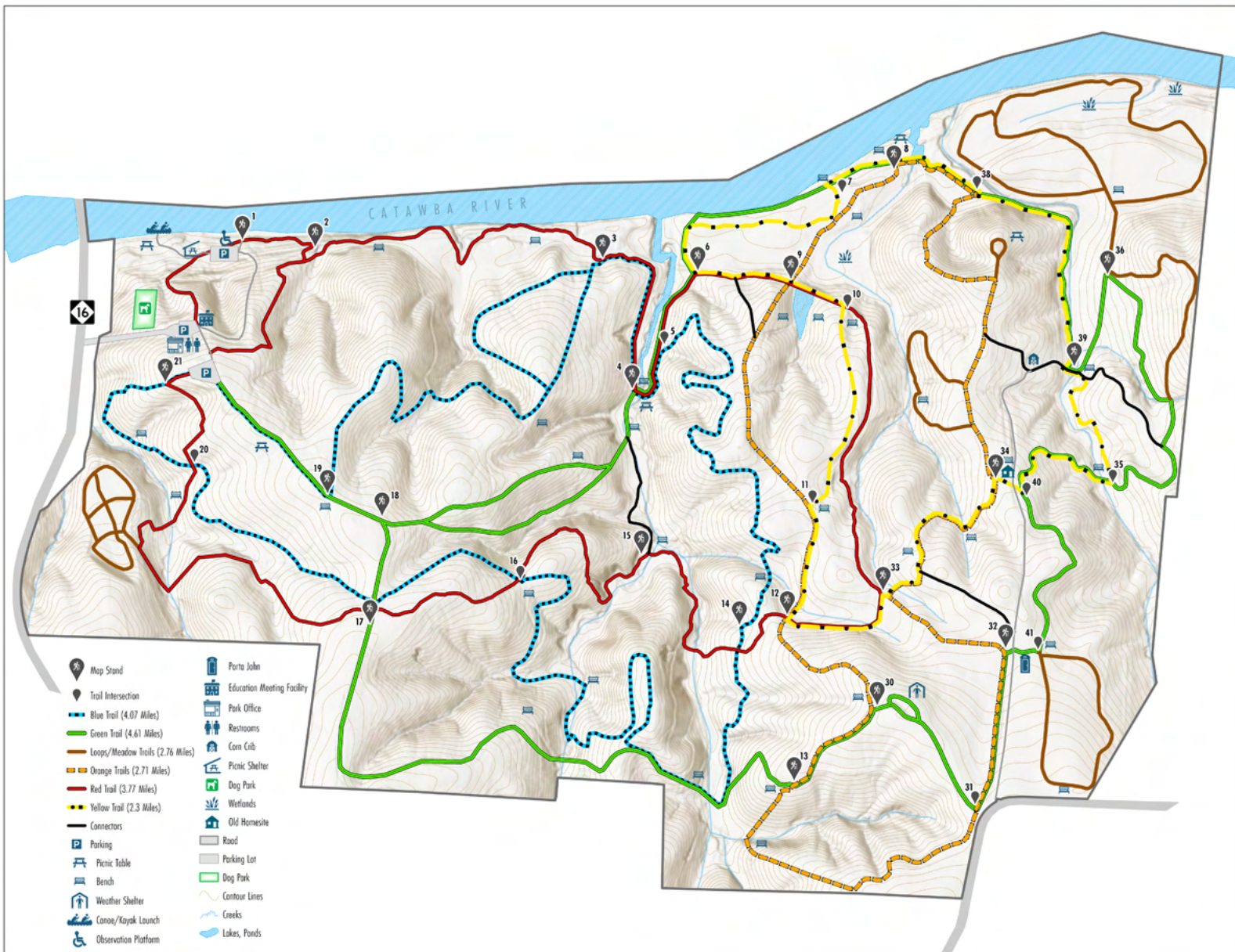


Figure 13: Riverbend Park Map

of the park. People can also fish and observe wildlife from the Observation Platform. An Orienteering Course was installed in October 2023, and offers visitors an outdoor navigation activity. The various Picnic Tables, Picnic Shelters, and outdoor spaces offer great spots for visitors to enjoy a picnic outdoors.

FURNISHINGS + SIGNAGE

- Entry Sign Columns
- Park Hours Sign
- Picnic Tables
- Benches
- Trash Receptacles
- Dog Waste Bag Dispensers
- Dog Waste Receptacles
- Grills
- A Bi-level Pedestal Fountain with an Upper Bottle Filler, Lower Drinking Fountain, and Pet Fountain Located Outside the Park Office
- Educational/Informational Signage
- Park Information Kiosk
- Trail Map Stands
- Trail Markers
- Partial Fencing at Old Homesite

Riverbend Park offers a variety of furnishings and signage throughout the site. The park displays Entry Sign Columns at the park entrance along NC Hwy 16. The columns are stone with inset signs that read “Riverbend Park.” Just past these, a park hours sign is displayed. At the main parking lot, a kiosk provides park information and maps. At the end of the main parking lot there are signs pointing visitors to Overflow Parking and Trailheads, River Parking and Picnic Areas, and three colored arrows in red, blue, and green that direct to the trailheads. As visitors approach the parking for river access, a sign is displayed with park rules. There are Picnic Tables under two Picnic Shelters, near the kayak and canoe access point, and at various locations along the trails. Benches are offered throughout the site including at the Park Office and along the trails. Trash and Dog Waste Receptacles are placed throughout the site including at the Park Office, Dog Park, and along the trails. Grills

are available for use at each Picnic Shelter. A Water Fountain with a Water Bottle Fill Station is available at the Park Office. Signage for the trails comes in the form of map stands and trail markers. There are no lights in the parking lot or along the trails. Both the Dog Park and the Corn Crib have chain-link fencing.

LANDSCAPE

- Wetland Habitat
- Hardwood, Loblolly Pine, and Upland Forests
- Native Grasslands/Meadows

Riverbend Park features a variety of landscapes, including freshwater wetlands that provide important habitat for birds, reptiles, mammals, and other wildlife. Great Blue Herons, Canada Geese, Wood Ducks, and Bald Eagles can be viewed near the Catawba River. In the forests, whitetail deer and wild turkeys can be spotted. Riverbend Park is mainly Hardwood and Loblolly Pine forest, with acres of grassland and meadows filled with seasonal wildflowers. The landscaped areas surrounding the Park Office, Education Meeting Facility, and Restrooms are well maintained by staff and volunteers. There is presence of invasive species on site.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- +/- (55) parking spaces, including +/- (10) ADA accessible spaces
- Main Parking
- Riverside Parking
- Overflow, Gravel Parking
- Special Events/Bean Property Parking
- Metal Vehicular Access Gate, manual

Riverbend Park provides parking, including ADA accessible spaces, via partially curbed asphalt parking lots and an overflow gravel parking area. ADA accessible spaces are provided near each main amenity. Not all the parking lots have sidewalks associated with them, but all ADA accessible spaces are connected to paved walks. The Park Office has paved walkways to its entries. The drive to the park has a metal gate to block access when the park is closed. Erosion along the Catawba River and trails is visible.

CLEANLINESS

Riverbend Park is clean and well-maintained with no visible litter.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

ARRIVAL

Visitors are welcomed into Riverbend Park by two stone entry columns. The signs are not easily visible from the street for visitors and passersby. The park's entry drive is scenic with mature trees and green vegetation. Once on the park's drive, visitors first see the metal access gate and signs for park hours and way-finding. Then they'll see the Park Office, Restrooms, and Education Meeting Facility once they enter the parking lot. The Park Office and Restrooms have attractive, well-kept landscaping. For those parking in the lower parking spaces, stairs are offered as the most convenient way to get to the Park Office and Restrooms. There are ADA accessible parking spaces further along the drive that allow users access to the Park Office and Restrooms. Adjacent to the main parking lot is a Park Information Kiosk with park information, maps, and educational information.

PERCEPTION OF SAFETY

The park is well maintained and the parking areas have visibility in the daylight. Lighting is not provided. Benches are provided at the Park Office and along the trails for rest. Picnic Tables are available throughout the site. Visible trail markers and trail map stands keep visitors oriented while hiking and biking. The Picnic Shelter and HawkWatch Site Shelter offer temporary shelter from the elements but because the park has a vast network of trails, these options are not always quickly accessible. Restrooms are available at the Park Office and temporary restroom facilities are located near the Bean House.

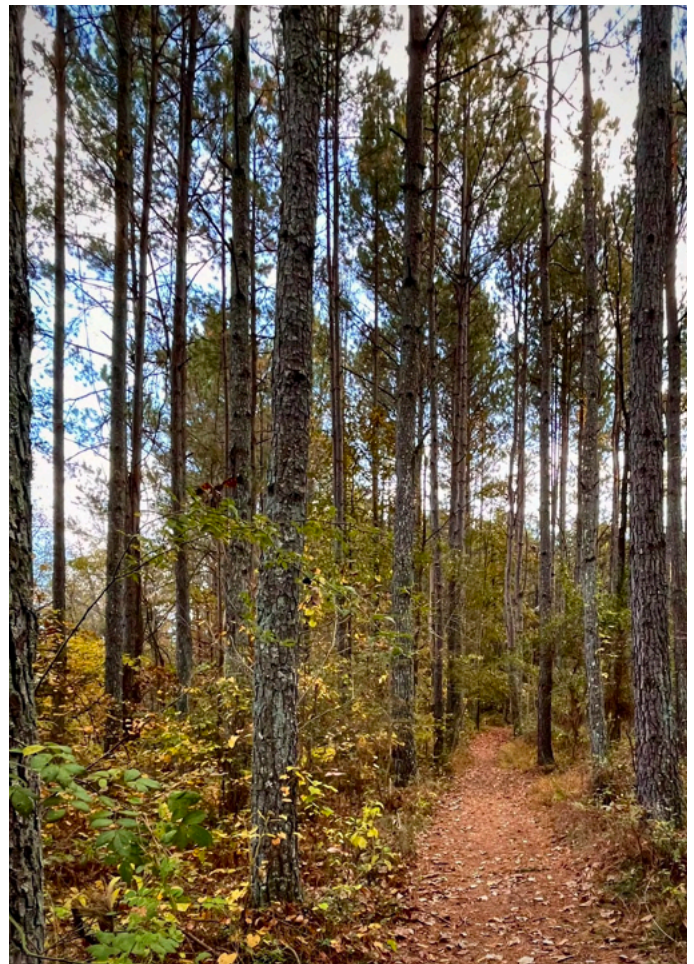
SENSE OF WELCOME

Visitors to Riverbend Park feel welcomed and oriented thanks to wayfinding signage that clearly showcases all that is offered on site. The site features an ADA-accessible river Observation Platform, providing inclusive access to river views and nature observation opportunities. The existing signage does provide clear directions on trail routes and the location of amenities for park visitors.

The Picnic Shelter along the Catawba River presents a unique scenery that can accommodate larger gatherings, while the Picnic Shelter near the Education Building can accommodate smaller groups.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

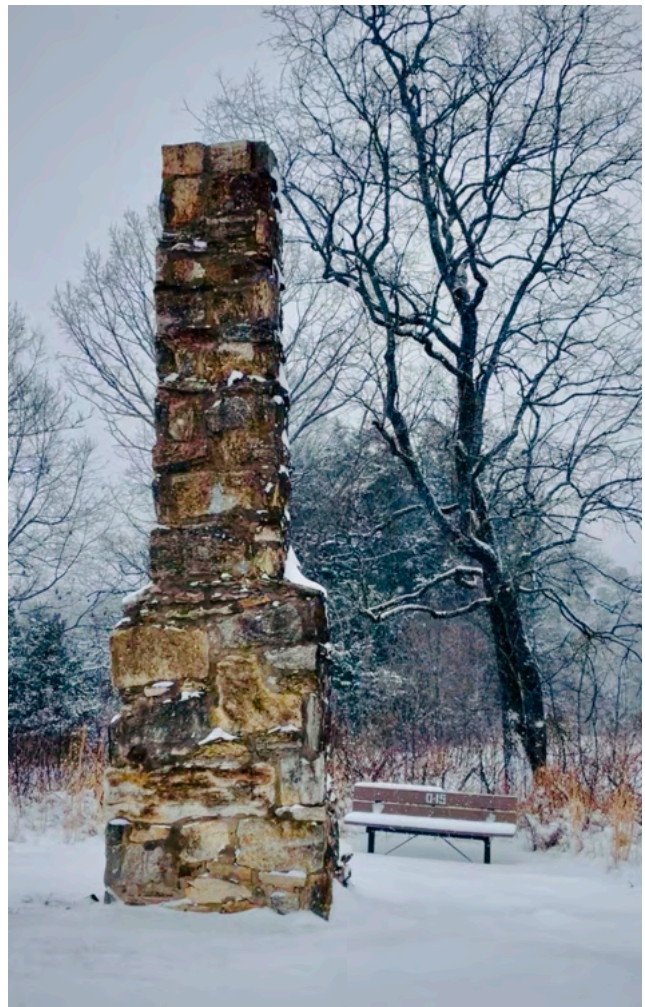
Riverbend Park creates an environment that attracts individuals, families, volunteers, and groups of varying size. The variety of amenities support recreation for different age groups, interests, and abilities. Visitors can connect with nature by themselves or as a group. The Education Meeting Facility serves as a space for larger groups to host private events. The park periodically hosts educational events open to the public. Additional opportunities for community members to engage with the park include volunteer activities and guided tours led by park rangers.



 **Figure 14: Trail at Riverbend Park**

OPPORTUNITIES

- Remove invasive species to help native vegetation thrive.
- Update the Access Ramp to have a distinct path to the water.
- Develop a plan for the Bean House property.
- Update signs to include Spanish versions of text.
- Install way-finding signs throughout the park to help inform visitors of all the amenities and their locations.
- Install pathways to lead visitors to amenities between the main parking lot and the parking lot adjacent to the river.
- Create clear distinction between the Park Office, Restrooms, and the Education Meeting Facility so visitors can quickly identify where to go for their questions.
- Repair trails that have eroded.
- Install infrastructure for the stability of the Catawba River where it has eroded.
- Install visible entry sign with Catawba County standard branding.
- Install external branded directional signage at nearby intersections to increase park awareness.



 **Figure 15: Chimney at Riverbend Park**



 **Figure 16: Grasslands at Riverbend Park**



ST. STEPHENS PARK

OVERVIEW

2247 36TH AVE NE, HICKORY NC 28601

St. Stephens Park is a nine-acre neighborhood park located on the outskirts of Hickory. The park is centered around play, with spaces for children and families as well as a signature off-leash dog park that has become a popular gathering place for visitors and their pets. A walking path and open areas support informal recreation and activity throughout the park.

PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT

STRUCTURES/ARCHITECTURE

- Park Office and Restroom Facility
- Picnic Shelter with a Storage Room
- Dog Park Shelter
- Old Pump House

St. Stephens Park has a variety of structures on site. The Park Office is adjacent to the parking lot and can be accessed via a paved pathway. The Park Office building encompasses the Public Restrooms which are accessed from the outside of the building via a paved path abutting the parking lot. The Picnic Shelter is situated on a concrete pad adjacent to the parking lot, with gravel areas along the sides that provide access to the playground. The Picnic Shelter includes four picnic tables and a Storage Room for park ranger use. The Dog Park Shelter is placed in the center of the Dog Park and provides shade and seating for visitors.

RECREATION

- 0.33 mile loop trail
- Playground
- Cornhole Boards
- Two Acre Off-Leash Dog Park for Any Size Dogs, with a separate Dog Park for Dogs under 30 pounds

ATTRIBUTE	POINTS
PHYSICAL ASSESSMENT	
Structures/Architecture	4
Recreation	4
Furnishings + Signage	3
Landscape	3
Infrastructure	3
Cleanliness	5
VISITOR EXPERIENCE	
Arrival	4
Perception of Safety	4
Sense of Welcome	4
Community Connections	4
STARS SCORE	3.8/5
	Tops Most Peers

St. Stephens Park offers diverse recreational opportunities that appeal to all ages and interests. For hikers and walkers, the park offers a 0.33 mile hiking loop which unofficially starts at the Park Office, leads through a garden, and then into a wooded area. The LITeracy Trail winds through a garden planted with native plants and offers an innovative way to enjoy reading and the outdoors together. The path is part concrete pavement and part gravel. The trail consists of 18 stations that trace the storyline of a children's book while also offering opportunities for exercise. The featured book is changed on a quarterly basis.

For dog owners, St. Stephens Park offers a two-acre fenced Any Size Dog Park, as well as a separate Dog Park for dogs under 30 pounds. Both areas provide green space for off-leash exercise and enjoyment. The Any Size Dog Park includes agility features for dogs and their owners, and the Dog Park Shelter is located within this area. The Any Size Dog Park is accessed via a gravel path from the parking lot. The Dog Park for dogs under 30 pounds can be accessed via a flat paved path from the parking lot or via the gravel LITeracy Trail. Leashed dogs are permitted throughout the park.

The Playground offers space for children to play. It includes a main play structure, a climbing feature, two swings, a baby swing, and an expression swing. The Playground is on an engineered wood fiber surface and accessed via a gravel path adjacent to the parking lot, behind the Picnic Shelter. There is a ramp placed for users with mobility challenges to enter the Playground as well as an ADA accessible path of compacted gravel.

Cornhole is available for visitors adjacent to the Picnic Shelter and the Playground and is accessed via gravel path from the parking lot. The Cornhole Boards sit atop concrete pads with a lawn between them and bench seating along the side. Cornhole Bags are also provided for use.

The Picnic Shelter offers a shaded space for picnicking, while a picnic table behind the Park Office on a concrete pad provides a sunnier alternative. A grill is located adjacent to the Picnic Shelter for visitor use.

The LITeracy Trail's native plantings are a particularly popular spot for pollinators and the bird feeding stations on site attract a variety of birds. The park's creek bottom habitat is frequented by red foxes, wild turkeys, spotted salamanders, raccoons, opossums, and white squirrels.

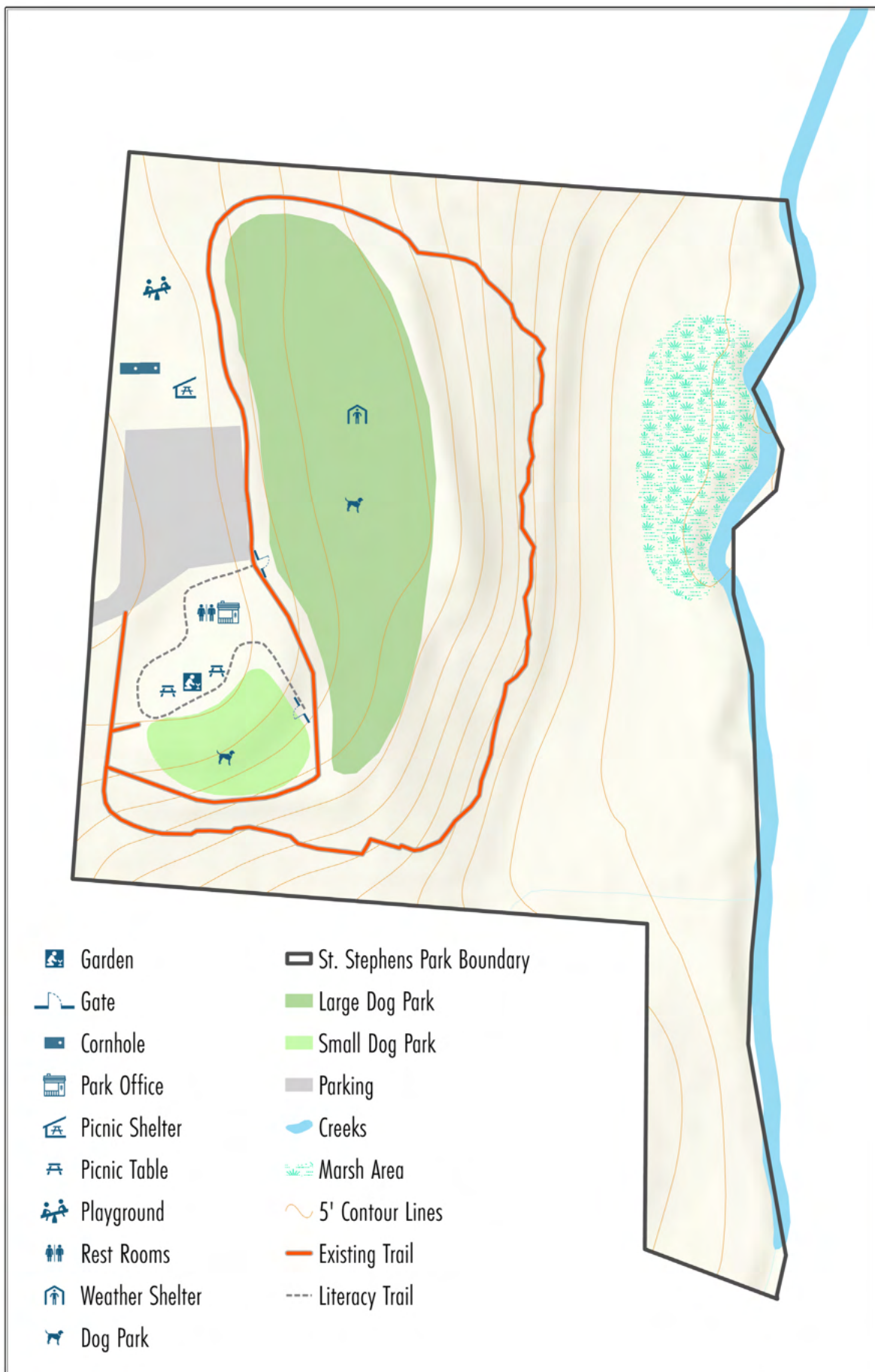


Figure 17: St. Stephens Park Map

FURNISHINGS + SIGNAGE

- Park Sign
- Park Hours Sign
- Park Entry Sign
- Park Branding on Picnic Shelter Wall
- Picnic Tables
- Benches
- Trash Receptacles
- Dog Waste Bag Dispensers
- Dog Waste Receptacles
- Grill
- Water Fountain
- Fencing at Dog Park
- Dog Agility Equipment
- Perimeter Fence
- Cornhole Boards
- LiTeracy Trail

St. Stephens Park offers a variety of furnishings and signage. At the corner of Kool Park Road NE and 36th Ave NE, visitors will see a small green sign with the park's name and two small arrows in white lettering pointing to its location. The first sign visitors see when entering the park is the Park Hours Sign attached to the park's perimeter fence. The park displays the Entry Sign past the park's access gate. The sign is branded and metal reading "St. Stephens Park - Catawba County Park System - 2247 36th Avenue NE". At the Picnic Shelter along the back wall is a Catawba County Parks logo with "St. Stephens Park" written below. There are picnic tables located under the Picnic Shelter and behind the Park Office. Benches are also offered throughout the site. Trash and Dog Waste Receptacles are placed throughout the site including at the Park Office, Dog Park, and at the Picnic Shelter. A Grill is available for use at the Picnic Shelter. A Water Fountain is available on the side of the Park Office by the restrooms and water is available at the Dog Park. The Dog Park and complete park is fenced via chain-link. There are four Cornhole Boards for visitors' enjoyment as well at the 18 LiTeracy Stations. There are no lights at the park.

LANDSCAPE

- Native Plantings
- Creek Bottom Habitat

St. Stephens Park's entry landscaping, Park Office landscaping, Dog Park, and Cornhole Boards lawn are well maintained. The park has native plantings along the LiTeracy Trail that attract pollinators. The park has a creek which provides habitat for various animals and plants. There is presence of an invasive species of English ivy along the trail.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- +/- (42) parking spaces, including +/- (2) ADA accessible spaces
- Chain Link Vehicular Access Gate, manual

St. Stephens Park provides parking, including ADA accessible spaces, via a curbless asphalt parking lot. The ADA accessible spaces have wheel stops and are located adjacent to the Dog Park and Park Office. The entry to the park has a chain link gate to block access when the park is closed. There is a compacted gravel path connecting the Picnic Shelter, Playground, and Cornhole Boards to the Park Office and Restrooms.

CLEANLINESS

St. Stephens Park is clean and well-maintained with no visible litter.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

ARRIVAL

Visitors are welcomed to St. Stephens Park via branded signage with the County logo and colors. The park's entry drive is within a neighborhood and next to Clyde Campbell Elementary School. There are no way-finding signs present on site to make users aware of the amenity offerings or direct them to their locations.

PERCEPTION OF SAFETY

The park is well maintained and the parking areas have visibility in the daylight. Lighting is not provided. Benches are provided at the Park Office, next to the Cornhole Boards, and next to the Playground for visitor comfort. Picnic Tables are available under the Picnic Shelter and behind the Park Office for gathering. Canopy trees along the trails, next to the Cornhole Boards, and in the Dog Park provide shade for visitors. There are no way-finding signs to orient and educate visitors. The Picnic Shelter offers temporary protection from the elements. Restrooms are available at the Park Office and easily accessible from the parking lot and trails but require a walk through the parking lot for visitors using the Picnic Shelter, the Cornhole Boards, or the Playground.

SENSE OF WELCOME

The park offers a sense of arrival via signs and inviting landscaping. The signs are exclusively in English. The lack of way-finding signs and park maps can be challenging for new visitors. The gravel paths to the Picnic Shelter, Playground, and the Cornhole Boards as well as the mulch surface at the Playground may present a challenge to users with mobility limitations. The park can accommodate small gatherings at the Picnic Shelter which can be used on a first-come, first-served basis or can be reserved ahead of time. Because the park offers a variety of amenities for varying ages, interests, and abilities, the park is a popular destination for County residents.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

St. Stephens Park serves as a space for community members to drop in with their children to play and as a space for dog owners to meet up and let their dogs run freely in the fenced-in Dog Park. The park's location adjacent to Clyde Campbell Elementary School means school children and their guardians visit the park after school. The residential nature of this park allows it to serve as a space for the surrounding neighborhood to gather and enjoy time and connection to nature.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Install seating and shade around the playground area.
- Create signage that includes Spanish.
- Install way-finding signs throughout the park to help inform visitors of all the amenities and their locations.
- Install internal pathway to lead visitors from amenities on all sides of the parking lot without having to walk through the parking lot.
- Install a branded directional sign at the intersection of Kool Park Road NE and 36th Avenue NE to increase park awareness.
- Upgrade gravel paths.
- Maintain the Playground surface to be ADA compliant.
- Install visible entry sign with Catawba County standard branding.



 **Figure 18: St. Stephens Park LITeracy Trail**





**LEVEL OF
SERVICE**

INTRODUCTION

Park systems today must serve a broader purpose than simply providing active recreation facilities. While traditional measures often focus on acreage and amenities, modern park systems are equally responsible for conserving natural resources, preserving cultural and environmental assets, and providing opportunities for residents to connect with nature. These functions are especially important in a growing community, where development pressures can impact the landscapes, waterways, forests, and open spaces that contribute to a county's local identity.

Parks play a vital role in protecting natural spaces and preserving scenic landscapes. Conserved lands improve water quality¹, support wildlife habitat, and contribute to long-term community sustainability. At the same time, these spaces offer opportunities for passive recreation such as walking, hiking, nature observation, fishing, paddling, and simply enjoying the outdoors. For many residents of Catawba County, access to natural areas and quiet outdoor experiences is just as important as access to programmed recreation facilities and athletic amenities that you might find in municipalities like Hickory or Newton.

Traditionally, the Level of Service (LOS) assessment has been used as a quantitative measure of the amount of park and recreation resources provided to a community. These types of assessments often evaluate metrics such as park acreage, trail mileage, recreation facilities, staffing levels, and operating budgets relative to the population. While these measures provide useful benchmarks, they do not fully capture the value of a park system or the experiences it provides.

A traditional LOS approach places emphasis on quantity but may overlook quality, accessibility, stewardship, and resource conservation. For example, a preserved natural area that protects critical habitat, provides access to a river, and offers opportunities for passive recreation may deliver significant community value despite having few developed amenities. Similarly, a well-maintained community park with accessible trails and meaningful programming may provide greater public benefit than a larger park with limited functionality or poor condition. Traditional LOS metrics alone do not account for these differences.

Conventional LOS measurements also neglect to consider where facilities and natural resources are located. A community may appear adequately served based on overall acreage or facility counts, yet residents in some areas may still lack convenient access to parks, trails, natural areas, or other recreational opportunities. This is especially true of a county as large as Catawba County, which covers over 400 square miles. Additionally, this plan is accessing a county parks system which works in partnership with local municipalities which are also providing recreational opportunities to residents. Understanding both the quantity, jurisdictional responsibility, and geographic distribution of park resources is critical to ensuring fair access to parks across Catawba County.

For these reasons, this plan embraces a modern approach to Level of Service that recognizes the multiple roles parks play within a community. In addition to measuring park infrastructure, LOS should also reflect the County's commitment to preservation, environmental stewardship, and the provision of passive recreation opportunities. By balancing active recreation needs like mountain biking, hiking, and running, with the protection of natural and cultural resources, Catawba County Parks has created a park system that supports community health, environmental resilience, and quality of life for current and future generations.

This plan does not adopt any single industry standard in its entirety. Instead, it draws from the system assessment, resource inventory, staff expertise, and community input to establish standards and performance measures that reflect Catawba County's unique character, priorities, and opportunities. As the County grows, these metrics will serve as a framework for guiding investments, protecting valuable resources, and ensuring that the Parks Department services continue to meet community needs.

¹ Gay ET, Martin KL, Caldwell PV (2025) Projected land use changes will cause water quality degradation at drinking water intakes across a regional watershed. PLOS Water 4(4): e0000313. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pwat.0000313>

The Department's LOS framework is therefore organized around two complementary objectives:

1. **Assess Existing Conditions** – Evaluate the current system to identify service gaps, geographic inequities, resource needs, conservation priorities, and opportunities for improvement.
2. **Establish Meaningful Performance Measures** – Develop metrics that balance recreation demand with resource stewardship, helping guide future investments in parks, trails, natural areas, and recreational services.

Together, these measures provide a more holistic understanding of the parks and recreation system, one that values not only the amount of recreation provided, but also the protection of natural resources, the preservation of community character, and residents' access to meaningful outdoor experiences.

CURRENT LEVEL OF SERVICE	NRPA BENCHMARKING	PROPOSED LEVEL OF SERVICE
Measures the Department's current offerings. The analysis is local. This analysis asks: <i>What do we offer?</i> The Level of Service analysis identifies what the County is currently offering, based on the current population at the time of the review. This metric forms a baseline standard that is population-based moving into the future. The analysis addresses two questions: what is offered, and how much does the County offer to the current population?	Compares measures among similar jurisdictions across the US. The analysis is national. This analysis asks: <i>What do others offer?</i> The NRPA benchmarking analysis relies on the annual NRPA Parks Metrics Report to compare with communities across the US that share similar characteristics with Catawba County. This generates an understanding of the Department's strengths and chosen areas of expertise. Shortcomings in benchmarking may represent deficiencies or areas that have been deprioritized in favor of other priorities.	Measures the Department's future offerings based on projected population and growth. The analysis is local. This analysis asks: <i>What should we offer or anticipate to offer in the next ten years?</i> National standards and best practices serve as an "ideal state" for parks and recreation in a community. These standards may account for emerging trends communities are beginning to implement. When compared with the national standards, they set the achievable goal for the next ten years. This analysis answers the question: what and how much should Catawba County provide over the course of the next ten years to satisfy the needs of the projected population?

LEVEL OF SERVICE

LOS measures how much access to parks, trails, and indoor facility space residents have based on the park system's current inventory and the jurisdiction's total population. Parks and recreation LOS metrics cannot be used as absolute recommended standards, but they can be helpful in determining deficits or surpluses within what the Department provides in anticipation of the growth or change it will experience over a period of ten years. The Level of Service, combined with benchmarking and best practices, will provide the foundation for this plan's recommendations of how much parkland, trails, and indoor facility space the Department should acquire or construct to meet the recreation needs for the future, based on population growth.

Note: As a department with a mission focused on passive recreation and a prioritization of land conservation, Catawba County Parks relies upon local municipalities to fill the gaps for active recreation provisions for County residents. This is not an uncommon partnership between county agencies and the municipalities within that county. What makes Catawba County unique is the sheer size of the parks and conservation efforts occurring across the County, as well as the many natural resources like lakes and rivers that provide residents with amenities that the NRPA Agency Performance Report does not consider or survey agencies for.

METHODOLOGY

In this Benchmarking and Level of Service Analysis, data was obtained from the 2025 National Agency Performance Review² by the National Parks and Recreation Association (NRPA), the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to park agencies throughout the United States. The NRPA obtains data from thousands of park and recreation agencies nationally and shares their information to assist park agencies to improve their park systems and to meet the needs of the residents in the communities they serve.

For this assessment, Catawba County’s data and data from the NRPA was organized by ten metrics for the areas to be compared. The population for Catawba County and the NRPA Parks Metrics Data are paralleled by relating to “per 1,000 residents” rather than the total population. Some data for residents are calculated per capita and in percentages, and the overall comparison must be viewed with this in mind. The benchmark analysis used the most up-to-date information possible and is a sample of operating metrics that factor budgets, staffing levels, and park-land data. In order to compare as close as possible to NRPA’s population data, the population segment (100,000 to 249,999) was used for the population comparison to Catawba County. Importantly, the NRPA metrics are collected on municipalities, not county governments, so these comparisons are not meant to be 1:1 but rather a piece of data to contextualize what’s being provided throughout the County. This analysis also only included parkland owned and/or operated by the County while the population figures are calculated countywide. Parks within municipalities were not counted towards the County’s inventory.

Catawba County’s benchmark data was derived from the following information:

2025 Population	166,064
2035 Population Projection	172,629
Total developed parkland acreage	1,494 acres
Miles of trails maintained by the County	44.64 miles
Total Indoor Recreation Space	5,202 Square Feet
Parks and Recreation Operating Budget	\$1,584,869
Full-Time Employees (FTE’s) for all park operations	20
FTE Staff members dedicated to Operations + Maintenance	4

²“2025 National Agency Performance Review.” National Parks and Recreation Associationn.d. <https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/research/research-reports/2025-agency-performance-review-report.pdf>.

The level of service is a ratio that includes the current offering of parkland, trails, and facility space, divided by a portion of the current population. Parkland and trails are calculated based on a rate per 1,000 residents, and indoor facility space is based on a per capita rate, or rate per 1 resident. This difference reflects reporting standards created by the NRPA. *Note: Numbers have been rounded to two decimal places.*

Parks and Recreation Offering

Portion of Population*

=

Level of Service

(*EITHER per 1,000 population OR per capita)

This formula is used to determine the current level of service for any given population number. The current level of service is determined using the current population, and the future level of service is determined based on future population projections. This plan determines the 2035 level of service using population projections determined in the Demographic Trends chapter.

CURRENT LEVEL OF SERVICE

Catawba County Parks’ current Level of Service is summarized in the table below. The table shows the offerings for parkland, trails, and selected park amenities.

The purpose of this analysis is to establish a baseline level of service standard for the Department’s current and future offerings, based on the existing and projected population. Using a population-based level of service (LOS) metric provides a consistent framework for forecasting future demand for parkland, trails, and park amenities based on projected population growth.

ANALYSIS

This benchmarking analysis summarizes data for the following categories:

- Parkland
- Trails
- Finances
- Capital Improvement Budget
- Staffing

It can be tempting to view metrics above the median as indicators of success and those below the median as deficiencies. Likewise, there is often an assumption that lower metrics should be raised to match a benchmark, while higher metrics suggest overinvestment or exceptional performance.

In reality, these measures are best understood as reflections of where a community has chosen to invest its resources. Higher values may indicate services that are especially important to the Department, while lower values may reflect areas that are either emerging needs or lower priorities. Benchmarking and LOS analysis can highlight strengths and opportunities for improvement, but individual metrics should always be interpreted within the broader context of the entire system rather than in isolation.

Catawba County (Population= 166,064 ;Projected = 172,629)			
National Recreation and Parks Association & Best Practice Recommendations (NRPA Population Range = 100,000 – 249,000)			
Metric	Catawba County	NRPA Median Quartile	NRPA Lower Quartile
Acres of developed park land per 1,000 residents	9 acres	9.2 acres	16.5 acres
Total trail miles	44.64 miles	29 miles	111 miles
Operating Expenditure per park operations FTE	\$63,395	\$119,515	\$144,869
Operating Expenditure per acre of Park-land	\$1,061	\$8,264	\$16,311
Operating Expenditures per capita	\$10	\$94	\$157
Staffing (FTEs) per 10,000 residents	0.002	8.2	12.2

PARKLAND

	Current Offering	Current LOS	NRPA LOS	Needed to Meet NRPA LOS (Current Pop.)	Needed to Meet NRPA LOS (Future Pop.)
	Total Acres	(Acres/Per 1,000 Residents)		Acres	
Option 1 (Median Quartile)	1,494	9	9.2	1,527 (+33)	1,588 (+94)
Option 2 (Upper Quartile)	1,494	9	16.5	2,740 (+1,246)	2,848 (+1,354)

As shown in the chart above, the Department is nearly meeting the median average in comparison to agencies of a similar size, falling short just 0.2 acres per 1,000 residents. As Catawba County continues to grow over the 10-year planning horizon, an additional 33 acres of parkland would need to be acquired in order to meet current median LOS of 9.2 acres per 1,000 residents, bringing the total parkland acreage to 1,527 acres. If the County would like to increase the LOS to exceed industry standards and meet the upper quartile NRPA standard of 16.5 acres/1,000 residents, that increases parkland needs to 2,470 total acres for the current population and 2,848 total acres for the 2035 projected population.

It is necessary to emphasize the contextualization of existing conditions and resources that are readily available in the local environment to make an informed decision regarding the level of service standards. Every agency has its own unique set of realities that may present barriers to achieving a baseline level of service. This is particularly

true of parkland acquisition. Many local governments have a limited ability to acquire land for various reasons. As a County, focus has to be on the entire county as opposed to a more geographically limited municipality. This means that the population it is serving can be rather large and geographically dispersed, making it harder for strategic land acquisition. To accomplish the goal of increasing Level of Service, the Department may consider partnering with land conservancy agencies to increase park designated lands within the County’s jurisdiction, sharing both fiscal resources and staffing to maintain these spaces.

INDOOR RECREATION SPACE

LOS analysis often considers indoor recreation facilities, like a community center that contains single sport or multi-use courts. Catawba County Parks does not provide indoor recreation facilities; however, there is a nature center at Mountain Creek Park. Of the over 900 agencies assessed within the 2025 Agency Performance Review report, 35% provide nature centers. The median number of residents per facility for populations similar to those of Catawba County is 143,480 residents. As Catawba County Parks is providing one Nature Center to its 166,064 residents, it can stand to adjust its offerings in the coming future to allocate for population growth.

TRAIL MILES

Current Offerings	NRPA LOS (Median Quartile)	NRPA (Upper Quartile)	Needed to Meet NRPA LOS (Upper Quartile)
Total Miles	Miles		
44.64	29	57	12.04

As shown in the chart above, the Department is currently exceeding the median quartile metric for trails provided by an agency. These trails are an invaluable local resource for hikers, walkers, runners, and mountain bikers. The miles of trails noted within this chart are solely those located within the four parks within the system and maintained by the Catawba County Parks. Greenway development, connectivity, and closing gaps in the larger regional trail system are mentioned in greater detail in the High Level Connectivity Assessment chapter.

STAFFING

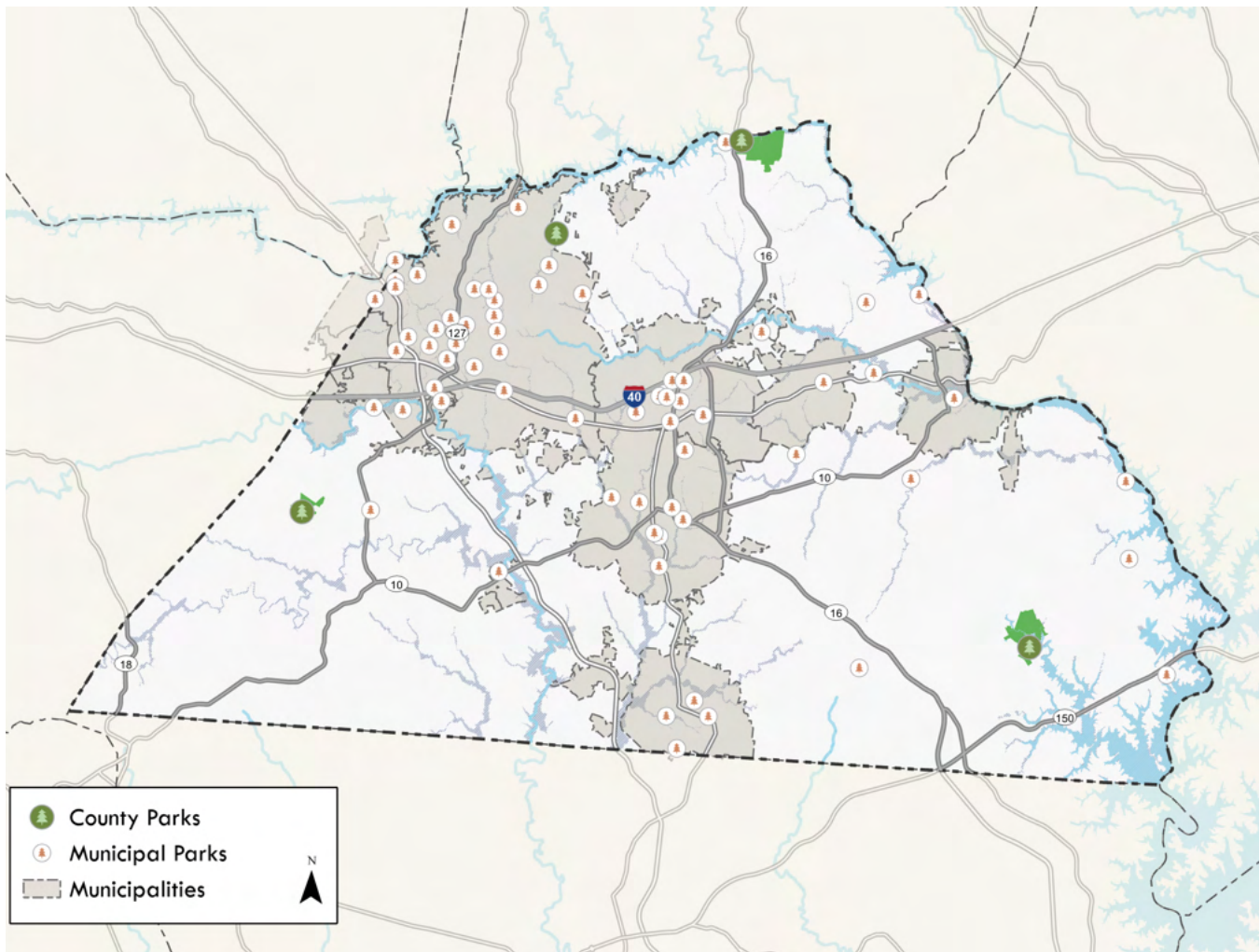
One area in which Catawba County did not exceed or meet the median NRPA standard is staffing and operational expenditures. A low staffing level and operational budget can lead to stresses upon the system in terms of maintenance, programming, and overall staff well-being. The numbers provided within this agency report are from a surveying of 900 agencies by NRPA. A localized, Catawba County specific assessment of staffing and the Department’s financials can be found in the Financial Analysis and Operations, Programming, and Staffing assessments within this plan.

A MAPPING EXERCISE IN PARKS

Understanding the existing distribution of park land across Catawba County helps identify gaps in service and opportunities to expand access to parks and passive recreation amenities in underserved areas. This component of the Level of Service analysis examines where parks are currently located throughout the County and identifies areas with limited access.

PARKLAND DISTRIBUTION

Based on the analysis, parkland and recreation facilities in Catawba County are not evenly distributed throughout the county. While municipalities within the county provide many local park and recreation opportunities, access to countywide facilities varies by location as the County parks are located near the edges of the county lines. Because county boundaries are fixed, it is important to evaluate both the needs of existing residents and areas where future growth is expected. When considering the distribution of all parks and recreation facilities across the county, including those operated by municipalities, several areas of Catawba County appear to have limited access to recreation opportunities. These gaps are most evident in areas that are farther from municipal boundaries and have fewer public recreation resources nearby. Understanding where service gaps exist will help guide future investments and ensure that parks and passive recreation opportunities are distributed fairly across the county as growth continues.



 **Figure 1: Map of Parks within Catawba County**

ACCESS TO PARKS

When looking for locations to expand the park network, an understanding of current access to the existing inventory of parkland is critical. Efforts to expand should prioritize areas that are currently lacking in reasonable access as opposed to areas where access is plentiful. Given that this is a County-wide assessment and there is no transit infrastructure that operates county-wide, the metric adopted is drive time.

Based on the scientific survey conducted as part of this planning process, the maximum desirable drive time to a facility was 15 to 30 minutes. A network analysis of drive times was conducted using benchmarks of a 10-, 20-, and 30-minute drive to facilities. This analysis did not include municipal park data.

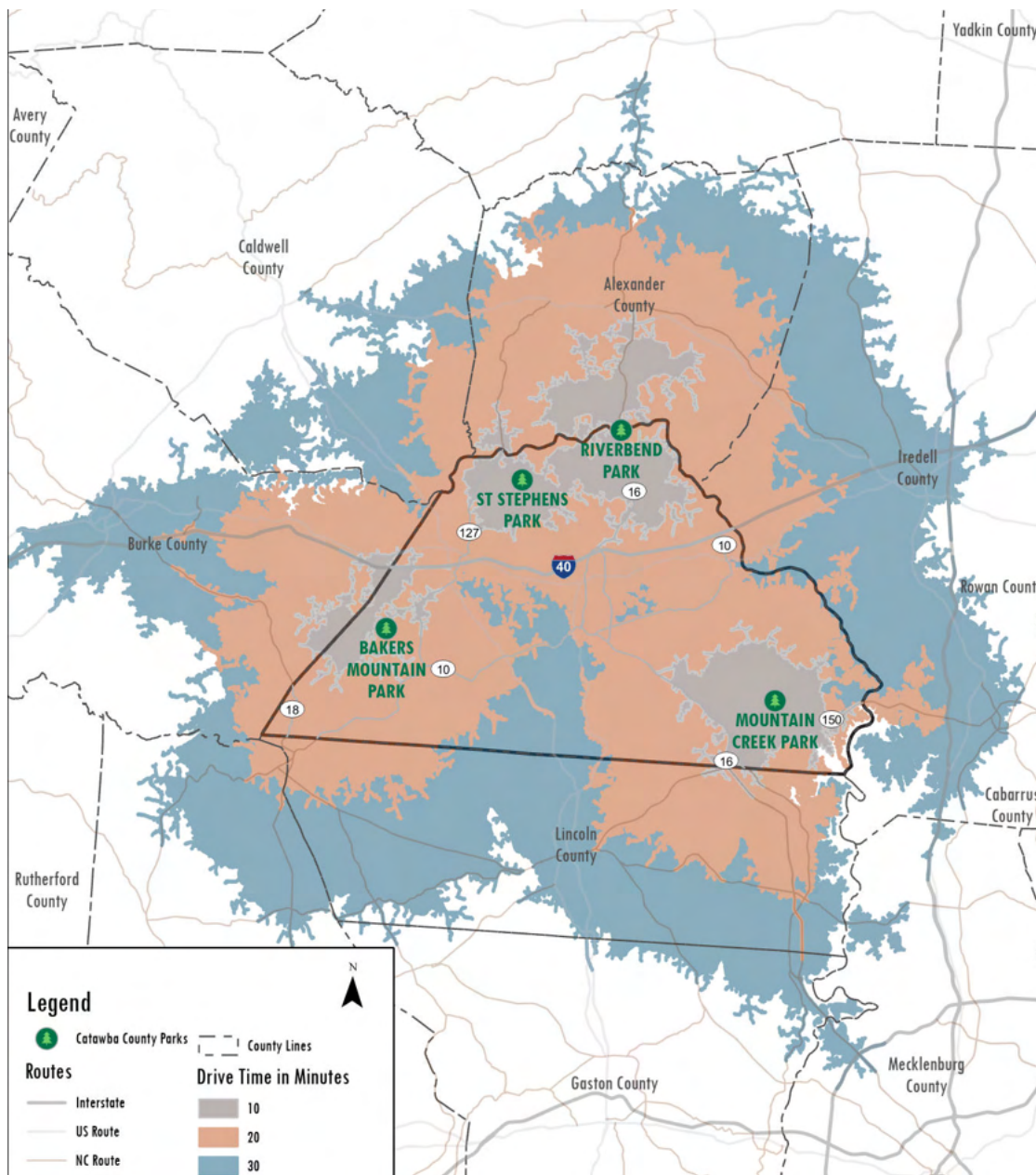


Figure 2: Drive Shed Map of Catawba County

As seen on the map, most County residents are within a 10 to 20 minute drive to a park within the system. There is a small area along the Lincoln County border extending toward Interstate 40 that is more than a 30-minute drive from a park. This area could be considered a priority for future park development to improve access and reduce drive times for nearby residents.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Level of Service (LOS) assessment takes a broader approach than traditional park system evaluations by recognizing that Catawba County's role extends beyond providing recreation facilities to include conservation, environmental stewardship, preservation of natural resources, and passive recreation opportunities. The assessment emphasizes that success should not be measured solely by acreage or facility counts, but also by access, quality, resource protection, and the overall recreational experience provided to residents.

KEY FINDINGS

- Catawba County currently provides approximately 1,494 acres of protected parkland, equating to nine acres per 1,000 residents which is close to the NRPA median benchmark of 9.2 acres per 1,000 residents.
- The County maintains roughly 45 miles of trails, exceeding the NRPA median benchmark of 29 miles.
- Trails are identified as one of the Department's strongest assets, supporting hiking, walking, running, mountain biking, as well as broader regional trail initiatives such as the Carolina Thread Trail.
- While the system performs well today, continued investments in connectivity and regional trail gap closures are recommended.
- The assessment repeatedly emphasizes that preserved lands can provide substantial community value even when they contain few developed facilities.
- County parks are not evenly distributed across the county, with facilities generally located near the edges of the county boundary.
- A drive-time analysis found that most residents are within a 10 to 20 minute drive of a County park.

OPPORTUNITIES

- To maintain the current median standard as the population grows, the County would need to add approximately 94 acres of parkland by 2035.
- To increase their offerings and close the gap between service areas, the County could prioritize investment in acquiring land where the current drive time to a County park exceeds 20-minutes.
- While nature centers are not universally provided by park agencies, population growth may eventually warrant an additional indoor environmental education or interpretive facility.
- The benchmarking analysis shows that Catawba County Parks has operating expenditures and staffing levels below NRPA median benchmarks, indicating the opportunity to strategically increase staff and expenditures.



**FINANCIAL
ANALYSIS**

INTRODUCTION

To support a stronger long-term financial approach and more informed decision-making, PROS Consulting conducted a financial analysis for the Catawba County Parks Department (“Department”). This analysis is based on financial data, budget documents, and supporting materials provided by the Department as part of the project data request, with a focus on understanding financial performance, expenditure trends, and resource needs over the past five years. The intent is to identify the key factors influencing the Department’s current financial position and to establish a foundation for strengthening fiscal management, resource planning, and long-term sustainability.

The analysis evaluates several components of the Department’s financial framework, including budget structure, financial policies, expenditure patterns, and existing funding practices. Particular attention is given to how resources are currently allocated, how financial information is tracked, and where opportunities may exist to better align funding with community priorities, capital needs, and operational responsibilities. Rather than focusing primarily on generating additional user-based revenue, the analysis emphasizes the importance of pursuing grants, cultivating donations, strengthening sponsorship opportunities, and leveraging partnerships as tools to support park improvements, conservation efforts, facility enhancements, and expanded public benefit.

Findings from this analysis are intended to inform actionable strategies that improve financial transparency, support stronger tracking and reporting, and position the Department to more effectively seek outside funding and philanthropic support. Ultimately, this effort will help the Department strengthen its financial practices, pursue supplemental funding opportunities, and ensure long-term fiscal health while continuing to deliver high-quality parks, facilities, natural resources, and services to County residents.

ANALYSIS PERIOD

Catawba County, North Carolina, operates on a fiscal year that runs from July 1 to June 30. This annual schedule governs the county’s budgeting, accounting, and financial reporting, with the budget for the upcoming year typically finalized before the start of the new fiscal period.

The analysis period includes fiscal years 2021/22 – 2025/26. Capital Improvements are included for the analysis period and also includes the Capital Improvement Plan for fiscal years 2026/27 through 2030/31.

DEPARTMENT EXPENDITURES

The Department expenditure trends reflect significant overall budget growth, driven primarily by increases in personnel costs, with more variable patterns in operations and an absence of capital investment in recent years, likely due to shifting County priorities. This decrease is also following a significant capital investment in opening Mountain Creek Park. Total expenditures increased from \$749,749 in FY2021 to \$1,584,869 in FY2026, representing more than a 111% increase over the six-year period. This growth indicates a substantial expansion in the Department’s operational costs and scale with the opening of Mountain Creek Park.



 **Figure 1: Mountain Creek Park**

Catawba County Parks Expenditure (2021-2026)						
Parks Budget	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26
Personnel	\$439,398	\$1,040,052	\$1,132,221	\$1,206,994	\$1,206,519	\$1,336,654
Operations	\$214,351	\$153,820	\$182,517	\$200,593	\$328,993	\$248,215
Capital	\$96,000	\$45,580	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total	\$749,749	\$1,239,452	\$1,314,738	\$1,407,587	\$1,535,512	\$1,584,869

Personnel costs are the primary driver of this increase, rising from \$439,398 in FY2021 to \$1,336,654 in FY2026, more than tripling over the analysis period. The most significant jump occurs between FY2021 and FY2022, suggesting the addition of full-time staff positions to manage Mountain Creek Park. From FY2022 onward, personnel expenditures continue to grow steadily each year, reinforcing that staffing investments have become a dominant component of the Department's budget. By FY2026, personnel accounts for approximately 84% of total expenditures, which is notably high and may limit flexibility in other areas of the budget such as programming and amenity expansion.

Operations expenditures show a more fluctuating pattern over time. After declining from \$214,351 in FY2021 to \$153,820 in FY2022, operational spending gradually increases through FY2025, peaking at \$328,993, before decreasing again to \$248,215 in FY2026. This variability suggests that operational funding may be more reactive and influenced by short-term needs, inflationary pressures, or specific service adjustments. While operations funding has grown overall, it has not kept pace proportionally with personnel, indicating a potential imbalance between staffing levels and the resources required to support the parks and facilities maintenance. A capital expenditures analysis can be found below in Department Capital Improvements.

DEPARTMENT REVENUE

The revenue trends for the Catawba County Parks Department from FY2021 through FY2025 reflect a limited and inconsistent revenue structure, with minimal overall contribution to departmental funding. Total revenues increased from \$3,230 in FY2021 to a peak of \$28,060 in FY2023, before declining to \$24,436 in FY2024 and dropping further to \$22,580 in FY2025. While this pattern indicates some early growth, particularly between FY2021 and FY2023, the consistent decline underscores the absence of a stable and sustainable revenue framework.

Catawba County Parks Revenue (2021-2026)					
Parks Revenues	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Donations - Parks	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$40	\$0
Park Fees + Permits	\$3,230	\$9,455	\$28,060	\$24,396	\$22,580
Park Souvenir Sales	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Total	\$3,230	\$9,455	\$28,060	\$24,436	\$22,580

A key factor influencing this trend is the introduction of educational and meeting room rentals at Mountain Creek Park, which became available in FY2022 following the park's opening. The increase in revenues from FY2022 through FY2024, driven primarily by park fees and permits, likely reflects initial utilization of these new rentable spaces, demonstrating the Department's ability to generate earned income when appropriate facilities are available. However, despite this opportunity, revenue levels remain modest, suggesting that these spaces are either underutilized, not fully marketed, or not supported by a pricing policy.

DEPARTMENT FEES

The following are the Catawba County Parks Fees:

Catawba County Parks - Park Fees	
Fees	Cost
Educational/Meeting Room	\$100 for half day, \$150 for full day rental
Picnic Shelter	\$20 per hour, per shelter, two-hour minimum
Vendor/Sales Permit	\$50 per day

Overall, the data highlights a significant opportunity to strengthen revenue generation and financial sustainability. Building on the foundation established with the Mountain Creek Park rentals, the Department should focus on expanding and optimizing facility rentals, implementing a clear and consistent pricing policy, improving marketing and utilization of available spaces, and exploring additional revenue streams such as programs, partnerships, and sponsorships. These efforts will be critical to increasing cost recovery and supporting long-term financial resilience.

DEPARTMENT CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

The capital improvements data for the Department from FY2021 through FY2025 reflects a limited and inconsistent investment pattern, with all recorded capital expenditures occurring in the first two years of the period and no documented investment from FY2023 through FY2025. Total capital spending over the five-year period amounts to \$141,580, with \$96,000 invested in FY2021 and \$45,580 in FY2022, followed by three consecutive years with no reported capital improvements.

In FY2021, investments were directed exclusively toward Bakers Mountain Park (\$30,000) and Mountain Creek Park (\$66,000), indicating targeted, park-specific equipment rather than improvements or a systemwide approach. Notably, Riverbend Park and St. Stephens Park—both key assets within the system received no capital funding during this year. In FY2022, funding shifted away from individual parks and was allocated at the department level (\$45,580) for equipment.

From FY2023 through FY2025, the absence of capital investment across all parks and the department is a significant finding. This gap most likely suggests a pause in capital spending following the development of Mountain Creek Park (opened June 18, 2022), reliance on alternative funding sources not reflected in this data set, or potential constraints in available funding. Regardless of the cause, the lack of ongoing investment raises concerns about deferred maintenance, asset lifecycle management, and the ability to sustain quality facilities and amenities over time. This is concerning for Riverbend, Bakers Mountain, and St. Stephens Parks as they are not newly developed like Mountain Creek Park.

Catawba County Parks Capital Improvements					
	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Riverbend Park	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Bakers Mountain Park	\$30,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Mountain Creek Park	\$66,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
St. Stephens Park	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Department	\$0	\$45,580	\$0	\$0	\$0
CIP Totals	\$96,000	\$45,580	\$0	\$0	\$0

Overall, the data indicates that capital investment in Catawba County Parks has been reactive and sporadic rather than sustained. The absence of consistent funding across multiple years limits the Department's ability to proactively address infrastructure needs, plan for long-term asset replacement, and implement systemwide improvements. Moving forward, establishing a predictable and recurring capital funding strategy will be critical to maintaining existing assets, addressing deferred maintenance, and aligning future investments with community priorities and system growth.

DEPARTMENT CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN (FY2026-FY2030)

The proposed five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) reflects a highly front-loaded investment strategy, with the majority of funding concentrated in FY26 and FY28. FY26 alone accounts for over half of the total planned investment at approximately \$1.17 million, followed by a significant spike in FY28 driven primarily by a large capital project at Bakers Mountain Park. In contrast, FY27, FY29, and FY30 show relatively minimal investment levels. This distribution indicates a focus on addressing immediate infrastructure and deferred maintenance needs early in the planning period, followed by limited sustained reinvestment in later years.

PRIMARY INVESTMENT THEMES

- **Asset Preservation & Deferred Maintenance:** A significant portion of the CIP is dedicated to asset preservation and deferred maintenance, with Riverbend Park receiving the largest share of these investments.
- **Major Capital Investment at Bakers Mountain:** The most notable capital investment occurs in FY28 with a \$900,000 parking lot project at Bakers Mountain Park. This represents the single largest expenditure in the plan and suggests increasing demand and capacity constraints at this location.
- **Limited Programmatic and Amenity Expansion:** Across the five-year period, there is relatively limited investment in projects that directly enhance recreation experiences or expand programming opportunities. While some improvements such as a dog park, trail development, and a kayak launch are included, they are modest in scale compared to infrastructure investments.
- **Lack of Ongoing Lifecycle Investment:** Following the peak investment years, the CIP shows a significant decline in funding levels in FY29 and FY30. This lack of sustained capital reinvestment suggests the absence of a structured, ongoing lifecycle replacement program.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN STRATEGIES

Establish a Rolling Lifecycle Replacement Program

- Allocate annual funding (not episodic spikes)
- Tie to asset inventory and condition assessments

Balance Maintenance with Visible Community Impact Projects

- Pair infrastructure projects with amenity upgrades
- Ensure residents see tangible improvements

Leverage External Funding More Aggressively

- FEMA (resilience)
- LWCF / state grants
- Naming Rights/ sponsorships for trails, dog parks, launches, etc.

FUNDING + REVENUE STRATEGIES

A diversified funding strategy is essential to helping Catawba County Parks maintain existing assets, address priority needs, and advance future improvements identified through the master plan. Rather than relying on a single source, the County can combine public revenues, grants, user-based revenues, partnerships, philanthropic support, capital financing tools, and private-sector opportunities to match the most appropriate funding source with each project or service.

As the park system grows and community expectations evolve, it may also become necessary to adapt existing funding approaches and introduce new funding sources to achieve priority projects or to share in the delivery of services with partners. This flexibility will allow the County to respond to changing demands, expand capacity, and ensure long-term sustainability of park operations and improvements.

The goal is not to maximize revenue at the expense of public access, but to leverage County investment, reduce financial risk, and expand the resources available for critical repairs, enhancements, conservation, programming, and visionary projects. Each funding source carries different requirements, limitations, administrative demands, and long-term implications.

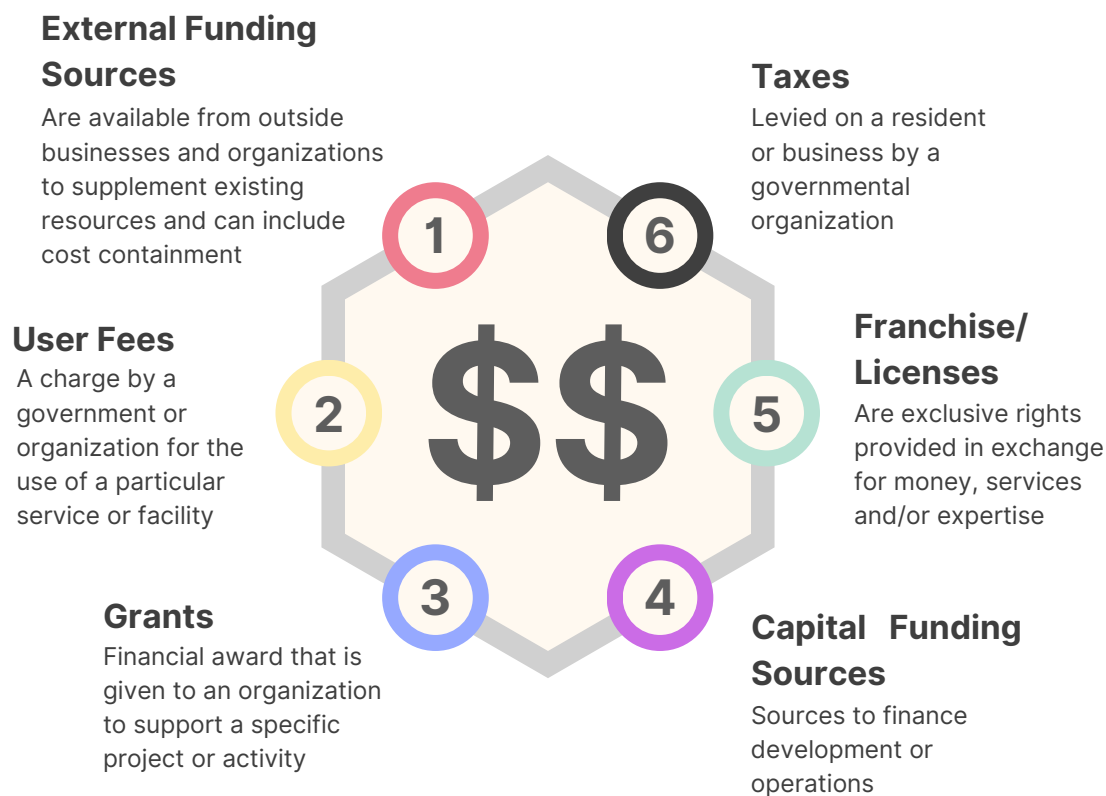


Figure 2: The Variety of Funding Sources Available to the Department

Catawba County has a range of funding tools available to help support the continued stewardship, improvement, and long-term sustainability of its park system. The most effective approach will be to match the appropriate funding source to the type of need, using dependable County resources for core responsibilities while leveraging grants, partnerships, earned revenues, and other external sources where they can extend local investment.

The following funding categories represent the most practical areas for the County to explore first as it implements master plan priorities. Not every source will be appropriate for every project, and some may require policy changes, partnerships, voter approval, or additional legal review. Together, however, they provide a framework for diversifying resources, addressing critical needs, advancing enhancements, and positioning larger visionary projects for implementation

Catawba County Funding Strategies to Explore First		
Funding Category	Potential Sources to Explore First	Typical Use in Parks
External Funding	Corporate sponsorships, non-profit partnerships, foundation support, Friends of the Parks groups	Programming, amenities, special projects, or matching funds.
User Fees	Facility rentals, program fees, tournament fees, shelter reservations, membership or pass programs	Operations support, maintenance, or programming funds.
Grants	NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF), Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), or private foundation grants	Capital projects, land acquisition, major renovations
Capital Fees	Impact fees, system development fees, developer contributions, or mitigation payments	New park development, expansion of facilities, infrastructure
Franchise / Licenses	Utility franchise fees, concession agreements, vendor licensing, or naming rights	Revenue generation for operations and capital reinvestment
Taxes	Property tax allocation, dedicated sales tax, bond referendum, or special district taxes	Core operations, large-scale capital improvements, long-term system investment



 **Figure 3: NC State Parks Has Awarded Over \$300,000,000 in Grants to Departments through PARTF and LWCF**

CONCLUSION

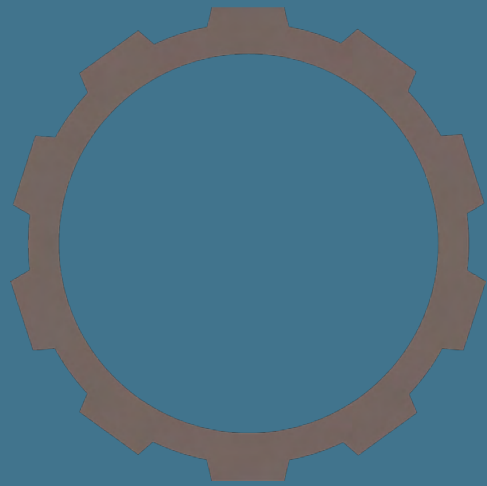
The financial analysis of the Department indicates a system that has experienced significant growth in expenditures, particularly in personnel, without a corresponding increase in revenue generation or consistent capital reinvestment. While the Department has expanded its operational capacity, largely due to the addition of Mountain Creek Park, the current financial structure is heavily reliant on County subsidy, with minimal cost recovery and limited diversification of revenue streams. At the same time, the absence of sustained capital investment in recent years and the front-loaded nature of the future CIP present risks related to deferred maintenance, asset lifecycle management, and long-term financial sustainability.

To strengthen the Department's financial position, a few actions should be considered. First, the Department should establish and adopt a pricing and cost recovery policy that aligns fees with the County's overall philosophy while maintaining equitable access. Second, there is a need to consider expanding revenue streams, building on the opportunity presented by Mountain Creek Park through increased rental utilization, naming rights/ sponsorships, and partnerships. Finally, it is important to create a dedicated and recurring capital funding strategy, including a lifecycle replacement program, to ensure consistent reinvestment in aging assets and avoid future deferred maintenance challenges.

Overall, by balancing expenditures with improved revenue generation, strengthening financial policies, and committing to consistent capital reinvestment, the Department can enhance its financial stability while continuing to provide high-quality parks, facilities, and services to the community.



 **Figure 4: Bakers Mountain Park**



**OPERATIONS,
PROGRAMMING,
+ STAFFING
ANALYSIS**

INTRODUCTION

The Catawba County Parks (“Department”) Operations, Programming, and Staffing Analysis (“Analysis”) is being completed as a key component of the overall Parks Master Plan process. As the County’s population continues to grow, the park system will need to grow commensurate with the demand for more parks and trails. Since the Parks Department is advancing as a standalone department, it is important to understand not only what park improvements are needed, but also how the Department is organized, staffed, funded, maintained, and supported to deliver those improvements over time. The Analysis provides this foundation by evaluating existing operations, identifying current strengths and challenges, and defining the key operational focus areas needed to support long-term success.

PURPOSE OF THE OPERATIONS + STAFFING ANALYSIS

The purpose of the Analysis is to assess the Department’s current operating environment and determine how well existing resources, systems, staffing levels, internal processes, financial practices, and capital planning efforts align with the future direction of the park system. This Analysis considers the Department’s recent growth, expanded responsibilities, evolving programming role, maintenance demands, administrative processes, and long-term stewardship needs. It also recognizes the County’s philosophy that parks are a public good supported by tax dollars and should remain broadly accessible to residents.

As part of the Master Plan, the Analysis helps connect community priorities and future park investments with the internal capacity required to implement and maintain them. Recommendations are organized as key focus areas that provide practical direction for improving efficiency, strengthening coordination, supporting staff, modernizing systems, enhancing visitor experience, and establishing a more structured approach to capital reinvestment and lifecycle replacement. These focus areas are intended to help Catawba County protect its existing park assets, responsibly manage system growth, and position the Department to continue providing high-quality parks, natural areas, facilities, programs, and public services for residents and visitors.

METHODOLOGY

Park and facility tours with County leadership and focus groups with Parks staff were conducted in October 2025. These tours allowed for observation of park conditions, infrastructure, maintenance needs, visitor use, and improvement opportunities, while also capturing site-specific insights and operational challenges. Input from employees was gathered in-person and virtually across operations, maintenance, programming, and administration. Discussions highlighted key themes such as staffing capacity, training needs, project delivery, coordination, program planning, reservation processes, and opportunities to improve efficiency and communication.

Additional materials provided by County staff including fee structures, budget data, capital improvement information, and operational records helped establish a baseline understanding of the Department’s structure, planning practices, financial position, and service delivery. Findings and recommendations are based on this combined analysis and are intended to guide operational improvements, align resources with future priorities, and support effective implementation of the Parks Master Plan.



 **Figure 1: Riverbend Park Superintendent and Community Member at the Annual Hummingbird Banding**

SYSTEM OVERVIEW

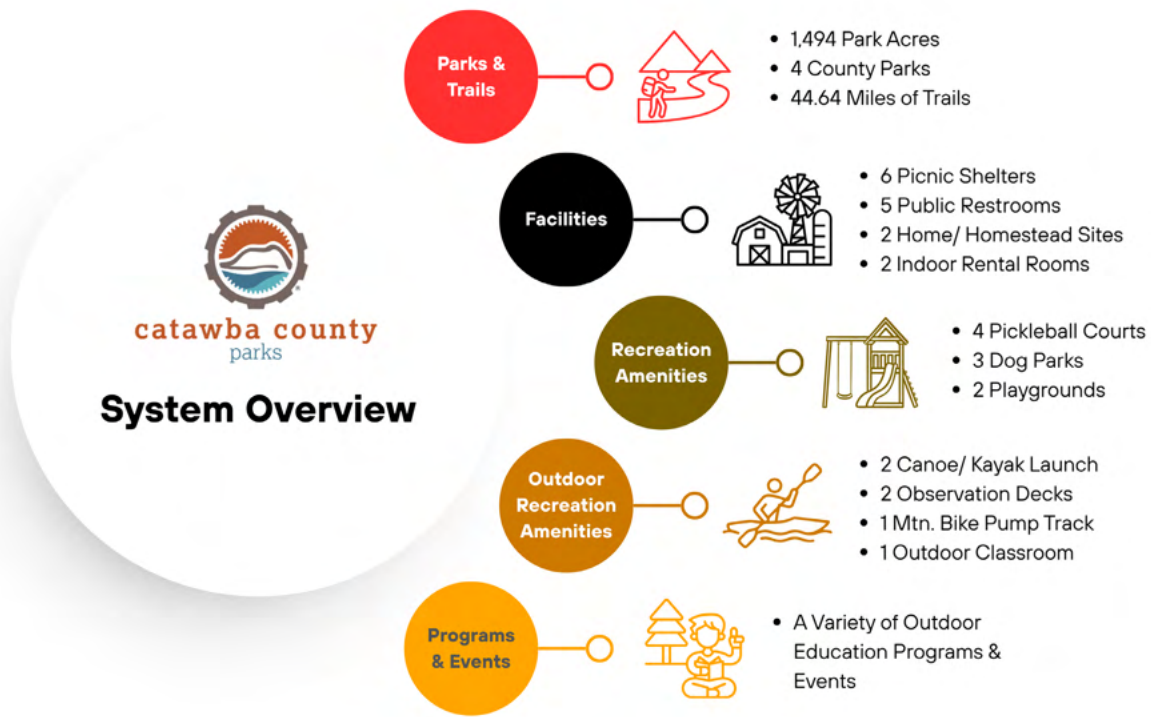


Figure 2: Overview of Parks

The Department is a small, growing organization working to maximize its impact with limited staffing, lean resources, and a strong commitment to maintaining high-quality parks and natural areas. Its operating model reflects the County's broader philosophy of keeping government efficient, avoiding unnecessary expansion of public services, and being thoughtful about how tax dollars are used. Within this context, the Department has focused primarily on stewardship, maintenance, visitor services, natural resource protection, and preserving the natural quality of the park system. As capacity allows, the Department also seeks to expand environmental education and nature-based programming that directly supports its conservation and stewardship mission, rather than developing a broader portfolio of non-natural resource-based recreation programs or extensive fee-based services.

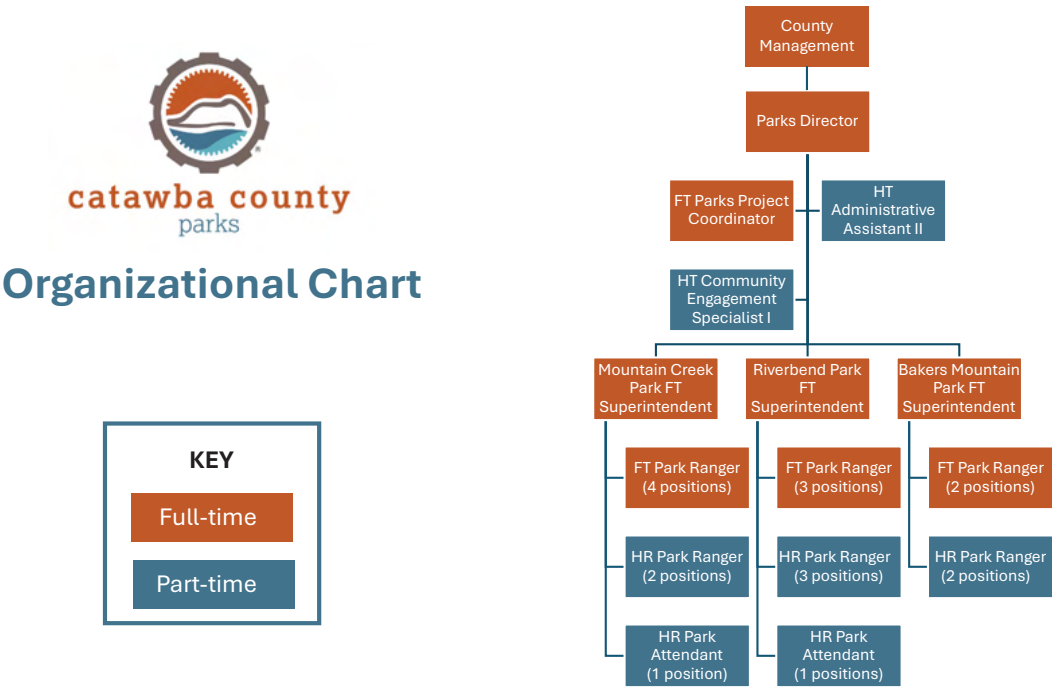
The County's leadership has expressed a desire for the Master Plan to provide a strategic compass that helps evaluate future opportunities without creating an overly tactical or burdensome plan. This includes balancing the optimization of existing parks, the protection of natural areas, potential expansion through contiguous land acquisition, and the need to preserve quality of life in a growing county. Leadership also emphasized that the system should consider the broader parks and recreation ecosystem across Catawba County, including the role municipalities play in serving active outdoor recreation needs, while the County continues to function more like a state park system focused on nature, conservation, education, and passive recreation.

DEPARTMENT EVOLUTION + ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

The Department has transitioned from being part of a broader Planning and Parks structure into a standalone Parks Department. This transition is an important existing condition because it reflects the County’s recognition that parks are no longer simply a “nice to have” service, but an essential quality-of-life function. Leadership noted that the Board has increasingly recognized parks as important to livability and economic vitality, while also maintaining a fiscally conservative approach to growth and public investment.

As a standalone department, the Department is still building the systems, operating standards, policies, staffing approaches, and operating practices needed to support long-term operations. The Department is responsible for managing diverse park landscapes, natural areas, trails, visitor services, maintenance needs, safety concerns, educational opportunities, and emerging program interests. Staff and leadership described the County system as operating more like a state park system than a traditional municipal recreation department, with a primary focus on natural resources, trails, passive recreation, education, and park-based experiences.

This evolution creates both opportunity and pressure. The Department now has clearer leadership, increased visibility, and stronger identity, but it also carries greater expectations for park management consistency, maintenance, visitor experience, and long-term planning. Staff identified “being our own department,” having a department head, dedicated superintendents, passionate staff, strong trails, varied landscapes, and improved community engagement as current strengths.



 **Figure 3: Organization Chart**

REVENUE, FEES, + PUBLIC ACCESS PHILOSOPHY

Catawba County’s parks funding philosophy is grounded in the belief that parks are a public good supported by tax dollars and should remain broadly accessible to residents. Leadership clearly indicated that the County is not seeking to turn parks into a revenue-generation model and does not support fee strategies that would create barriers to access, such as charging out-of-county visitors at the gate.

Existing fees should continue to be focused on reserved or exclusive uses, such as exclusive use of picnic shelters through benefit-based use of a costly asset, meeting rooms, and other special-use situations where a specific user receives priority access to a public asset. This approach is consistent with the County's desire to avoid overburdening taxpayers while also avoiding a model that asks residents to "pay twice" for general park access.

The stronger opportunity for supplemental support is through grants, donations, sponsorships, conservancy support, friends groups, and partnerships. Leadership discussed interest in sustainability through conservancies and a potential "Friends of Department" model, while also recognizing the importance of building such efforts carefully so they do not fail due to lack of capacity or community ownership. The Department also identified opportunities for volunteer support, including trail maintenance, clean-up days, special events, and light-duty stewardship activities.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT + LIFECYCLE CONDITIONS

The County has made important investments in its park system, but the Department needs a more structured approach to capital improvement planning, asset management, and lifecycle replacement. Existing capital needs include parking, erosion control, trail access, signage, infrastructure, restrooms, playground considerations, storage, technology, and facility improvements. Staff identified needs such as Bakers Mountain parking, Bean House side parking at Riverbend, Mountain Creek kayak launch, roadside signage, ADA accessibility, erosion control, storage, better internet and technology, and infrastructure improvements.

Leadership also emphasized the importance of optimizing existing parks before expanding substantially. The direction from leadership was to "optimize existing, expand contiguous," and avoid growing the system with additional standalone parks unless a strategic opportunity clearly aligns with the County's long-term direction. This reinforces the need for the Master Plan to identify both low-hanging fruit and longer-term capital structure.

A more formal lifecycle replacement program would help the County understand the value of existing assets, anticipate repair and replacement needs, and reinvest consistently over time. County leadership discussed the importance of defining asset value and considering annual reinvestment into capital based on that value. This is especially important because some parks-related capital work is completed by other County departments, such as facilities, and may not appear directly in the Parks Department budget. Tracking these investments across departments would provide a more accurate understanding of total park system reinvestment.

STAFFING, TRAINING, + WORKFORCE CAPACITY

The Department's staff are one of its greatest strengths. Staff and leadership described the workforce as passionate, knowledgeable, enthusiastic, capable of strong storm clean-up response, and committed to maintaining parks and landscapes at a high level within existing resources. The Department has also stabilized from prior staffing challenges and has improved basic training and elective training opportunities.

However, the Department's staffing model is lean, and staff capacity limits the amount of work that can be added without affecting core maintenance, safety, and visitor service responsibilities. Leadership noted that operations are understaffed during busy periods and that rangers are often performing multiple roles. Staff also identified closing parks alone at night, rule enforcement, response time from law enforcement, and feeling unsafe at times as operational concerns.

Training, onboarding, cross-training, and internal communication are important existing needs. Staff noted that an onboarding checklist is being developed, communication has been improving through leadership updates, and continuing education is a strength. Moving forward, the Department would benefit from continued investment in structured training, documented procedures, backup coverage, and clear standards that allow a small team to operate consistently without creating unnecessary bureaucracy. The National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials offers a lot of training opportunities for county park employees, especially in park safety, interpretation, and policy management.

PROGRAMMING EXISTING CONDITIONS

Programming should be understood as a separate function from general operations and staffing, but it is directly limited by available staff capacity. The Department is not positioned, nor does leadership appear to desire it to become, a full-service recreation programming agency that activates County park spaces for youth and adults through programming such as youth sports, after school programs, day camps, adult athletics, or senior center programming. There are currently other municipalities that are providing these types of services. Instead, programming should remain focused on nature-based, educational, interpretive, stewardship, and outdoor experiences that align with the County's park identity and natural resource mission.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMS + COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Catawba County Parks provides a focused range of environmental education and nature-based recreation opportunities that connect residents with the County's parks and natural resources. Programming is delivered primarily through self-guided activities, ranger-led experiences, educational programs, community partnerships, and group service projects. Rather than operating traditional recreation programs or summer camps, the Department works with schools, libraries, clubs, nonprofit organizations, and other community groups to expand its reach while remaining aligned with available staffing and resources.

The Department should establish a centralized, easily accessible programming database that allows staff at all four parks to efficiently replicate, adapt, and deliver successful programs and events. Each program record should identify the purpose, target audience, staffing requirements, implementation steps, schedule, site needs, supplies, equipment, safety considerations, estimated costs, partnership opportunities, marketing needs, and post-program evaluation results. Standardized program development worksheets should also be included to promote consistency in planning, documentation, and service delivery across the park system. In addition, the Department should implement a consistent framework for evaluating program outcomes to ensure resources are allocated effectively, helping to identify when programs experience low attendance, limited participation, or do not provide a strong visitor experience so that adjustments or reallocation of staff and funding can be made as needed. This shared resource would reduce duplicated effort, preserve institutional knowledge, support staff training, and make it easier to offer similar environmental education and outdoor recreation opportunities at multiple parks while allowing for site-specific adjustments.

UNDERSTANDING OUTDOOR + ENVIRONMENTAL RECREATION

- **Outdoor Recreation:** Activities that take place in parks, natural areas, trails, and waterways to support physical activity, wellness, and enjoyment of the outdoors.
- **Environmental Recreation:** Nature-based activities that help people experience and appreciate local landscapes, plants, wildlife, and ecosystems.
- **Environmental Education:** Programs and experiences that teach participants about natural resources, conservation, wildlife, water, and ecological systems.
- **Passive Recreation:** Low-impact activities such as walking, picnicking, wildlife viewing, photography, reading, and self-guided trail experiences.
- **Interpretive Programming:** Guided or self-directed activities that help visitors better understand a park's natural, cultural, or historical resources.
- **Environmental Stewardship:** The responsible care of parks and natural resources through conservation, habitat restoration, volunteer projects, and sustainable use.

The following are the types and examples of programming and events provided by Catawba County Parks:

Self-Guided and Passive Programs

- Trail Challenge
- Interpretive route at Bakers Mountain Park
- LiTeracy Trails at St. Stephens and Bakers Mountain parks
- Orienteering course at Riverbend Park

Ranger-Led and Educational Programs

- Monthly ranger-led Trail Challenge hikes
- Educational programs for school and homeschool groups
- Guided hikes for hiking clubs and community groups
- Career Day participation at local schools
- Environmental presentations for community organizations and clubs
- Educational booths at local festivals and events

Youth and Summer Partnerships

The Department does not operate traditional summer camps but supports youth programming through partnerships, including:

- Nature-themed programs for library summer reading events
- Educational hikes with the YMCA, 4-H, churches, Boys & Girls Clubs, and other youth-serving organizations

Senior and Community Group Activities

- Programs and presentations for garden clubs
- Guided walks and environmental education activities for senior and community groups
- Support for library walking clubs and similar wellness activities

Seasonal and Special Events

Past annual and seasonal events have included:

- Riverbend Park Woodcock Walk
- First Day Hikes
- Riverbend Park Hawk Migration Week
- Riverbend Park Hummingbird Banding

Community Partnerships

Partnership-based activities include:

- Public volunteer workdays
- Carolina Thread Trail hikes
- Lake Norman Garden Club Arbor Day events
- Library programs, including walking clubs and Yoga at the Park
- Environmental and recreational activities delivered with civic, nonprofit, educational, and community organizations

Volunteer and Service Projects

- Eagle Scout and Boy Scout projects
- High school student service projects
- Volunteer projects with community groups and organizations
- Park improvement and environmental stewardship activities

Visitor Services

- Shelter rentals
- Group hike coordination
- Support for organized educational and community park activities

The key existing condition is that programming can grow strategically, but not substantially without additional capacity or partnerships. Staff noted that other park responsibilities make it difficult to expand programming and that effi-

ciencies are needed. Leadership also described the County’s role in programming as limited, with guided hikes and amenity-based activities being appropriate, while broader activation of parks is not a primary goal.

Partnerships and contracted programming may provide a practical path forward. Staff noted opportunities to work more with state parks, birds of prey organizations, schools, libraries, and other partners, and expressed openness to contracting out programming where appropriate. The Department would benefit from a simple annual program framework that identifies seasonal programs staff can offer, clarifies partner-led opportunities, and ensures that programming does not compete with core park operations. Creating an outdoor expo event where youth can learn of the various types of outdoor recreation in an introductory capacity with multiple partners can help develop future park users and stewards.

Priorities for Recreational Programs + Activities Investments

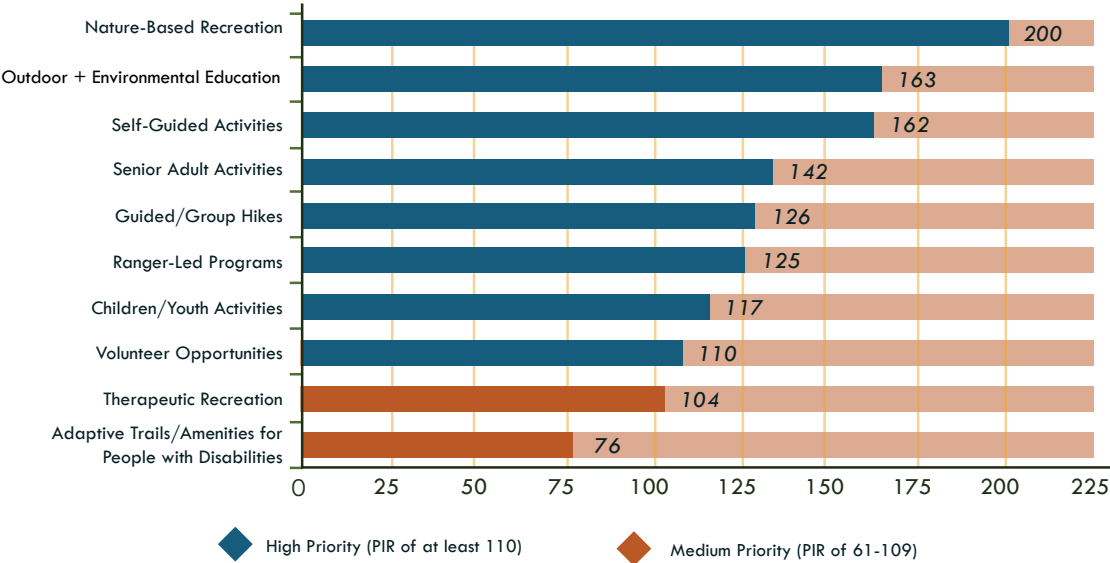


Figure 4: Priorities for Investments in Programs



Figure 5: Park Stewardship Day at St. Stephens Park with VisitHickoryNC

ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS + INTERNAL COORDINATION

As a small department, the Department needs simple, efficient administrative systems that reduce workload rather than create additional layers of process. Current administrative needs include policies and procedures, maintenance management, equipment lifecycle planning, volunteer coordination, reservations, internal communication, and program coordination. During the administration meeting, staff indicated that the Department needs best-practice policies and procedures for all levels of operations, and that draft policies are being developed.

Manual or informal systems create pressure on staff capacity. Facility and shelter reservations, volunteer coordination, program scheduling, and internal communication require clear processes and shared visibility. Focus group input identified the need for standardized program planning, improved communication between management and park rangers, and a more consistent approach to program decisions.

Technology is also an existing need. Staff identified better technology and internet capabilities as operational challenges. Improving administrative systems does not mean growing government; rather, it means giving a small department the tools to work more efficiently, reduce duplicated effort, improve customer service, and make better use of existing staff time.

PROJECT DELIVERY + DECISION-MAKING

Project delivery and decision-making are important existing conditions because small improvements can have a meaningful impact when staff capacity and funding are limited. Staff identified past examples where low-cost, high-impact improvements were delayed due to unclear approvals, communication issues, or decisions that were not fully understood by those closest to park operations. Staff also noted frustration when program ideas or school outreach concepts are developed and later stopped by legal or leadership analysis.

Leadership wants the Master Plan to serve as a strategic compass that helps the County evaluate opportunities as they arise. This is especially important in a fiscally conservative environment where the County does not want to overextend services or create long-term obligations that are not aligned with policy direction. A practical decision-making framework can help staff and leadership determine which opportunities should move forward, which should be modified, and which should be allowed to pass.

The Department would benefit from clearer project intake, prioritization, and approval pathways. This should include a way to advance low-cost improvements, evaluate partnership opportunities, consider operational impacts, and ensure that decisions reflect the County's values of stewardship, access, efficiency, safety, and fiscal responsibility. The goal is not to create more bureaucracy, but to create clarity so that staff can implement aligned improvements efficiently and leadership can make informed decisions with confidence.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Catawba County Parks is a small, maturing department that is maximizing its impact with lean resources. The Department has made meaningful progress as a standalone agency and is increasingly recognized as an essential quality-of-life service, while still operating within a fiscally conservative County environment.
- The Department's strongest assets are its staff, natural landscapes, trails, acreage, and state-park-like identity. Staff are knowledgeable, passionate, resourceful, and committed to maintaining parks well within current capacity.
- The County's park system is best positioned as a nature-based, conservation-oriented system rather than a traditional recreation programming agency. The Department's core role should remain focused on stewardship, maintenance, visitor services, trails, natural areas, education, and passive recreation.
- Leadership supports keeping government efficient and avoiding unnecessary expansion of services. Future recommendations should help the Department improve systems, standards, partnerships, and capital planning without creating an overly complex or burdensome operating model.
- Staffing levels currently limit the Department's ability to significantly expand programming or take on major new operational responsibilities. Programming can grow strategically through nature-based activities, guided hikes, school outreach, partnerships, and contracted services, but substantial expansion would require additional capacity.
- Existing programming is growing, but it needs a simple and consistent framework. The Department would benefit from an annual program plan, seasonal program list, shared program calendar, partner guidelines, and basic program development standards that support consistency without adding unnecessary bureaucracy.
- Maintenance and daily operations are being performed well, but staff capacity is stretched during peak periods. Rangers and park staff often balance visitor services, maintenance, safety, programs, and emergency response, which can interrupt routine work and limit efficiency.
- The Department needs continued investment in training, onboarding, cross-training, and backup coverage. These improvements would help maintain service quality, reduce reliance on individual staff knowledge, and support consistent operations across parks.
- Administrative systems need to be modernized to reduce staff burden. Online reservations, shared scheduling tools, clearer workflows, and improved technology would help the Department serve the public more efficiently while making better use of existing staff time.
- Policies, procedures, and operating standards are still being developed. The Department would benefit from practical standards for maintenance, volunteer use, reservations, program delivery, closing procedures, safety, project approvals, and customer service.
- Capital planning should become more structured and recurring. The County needs a clearer lifecycle replacement program, asset inventory, condition assessment process, and annual reinvestment approach to protect existing parks and reduce deferred maintenance.
- Some parks-related capital investments are funded outside the Parks Department budget. Tracking all park-related improvements across County departments would provide a more accurate picture of total investment and future needs.
- Future growth should focus first on optimizing existing parks and expanding contiguous land when strategically appropriate. This approach aligns with County leadership's desire to protect natural resources, avoid unnecessary expansion, and preserve land before opportunities are lost.
- Project delivery and decision-making need clearer pathways. A simple project intake and prioritization process would help advance low-cost, high-impact improvements, evaluate opportunities, and avoid delays caused by unclear approvals.
- Public access should remain central to the County's funding philosophy. Fees should continue to focus on reserved or exclusive use, while grants, donations, sponsorships, volunteers, friends groups, conservancies, and partnerships should be prioritized as supplemental support tools.
- The Master Plan should serve as a strategic compass. Rather than creating an overly detailed or rigid operating manual, the plan should help leadership and staff evaluate opportunities, set priorities, protect existing assets, and make fiscally responsible decisions over time.



**HIGH-LEVEL
CONNECTIVITY
ASSESSMENT**

CATAWBA COUNTY CONTEXT

Developing a countywide greenway system is a complex undertaking that requires consistent capital improvement funding, project management staff, and partner agency coordination. To date, Catawba County Parks has focused on delivering exceptional experiences for visitors within their parks and has not developed greenway trail infrastructure outside of county park boundaries. Due to the significant investment required to launch a greenway development program, Catawba County Parks' approach is to focus on leveraging partnerships that exist within Catawba County to advance the countywide greenway network. The following chapter supports Catawba County Parks' direction to focus their existing capacity on partnerships that will lead to increased greenway trail access within the County. Given the County's preference to develop the County's trail network by leveraging ongoing work and partnerships, the next section outlines the organizations and partners working to develop trails in Catawba County.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

CATAWBA COUNTY GREENWAY NETWORK

Catawba County is a Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) community, and the Catawba County Carolina Thread Trail Master Plan serves as the greenway network vision for the County. The Carolina Thread Trail is a network of greenways, trails and blueways across the greater Charlotte region, connecting 15 counties, two states and 2.9 million people. Over 425 miles of trails and 170 miles of blueway are currently open to the public, and over 1,175 additional miles are planned to link people, places, and communities. The CTT Master Plan adopted in 2010 by Catawba County Commissioners is the most current greenway guiding plan in the County. The CTT Plan proposes approximately 140 miles of greenway trails connecting and traveling through the County's eight incorporated municipalities. As of spring 2026, the municipalities and other CTT partners have completed roughly 43 miles of the CTT network throughout Catawba County. A sample of the trails include:

- Lyle Creek Greenway (City of Conover)
- Murray's Mill Trail (Unincorporated Catawba County)
- Bunker Hill Covered Bridge Trail (City of Claremont)
- Mountain Creek Park Trails (Unincorporated Catawba County)
- Heritage Trail Greenway (City of Newton)
- Bakers Mountain Park Trail (Unincorporated Catawba County)
- Hickory Greenway at Glen C Hilton, Jr. Memorial Park (City of Hickory)

The Carolina Thread Trail organization, in partnership with communities in its 15-county coverage area, began an effort to update each county master plan. Catawba County is an active participant in the update process which is projected to be completed by Summer of 2027. Once the CTT Master Plan update is complete, Catawba County Commissioners will be asked to adopt the new revised Catawba County network map.



 **Figure 1: Catawba County Supports Partner Organizations like these in Trail Development**

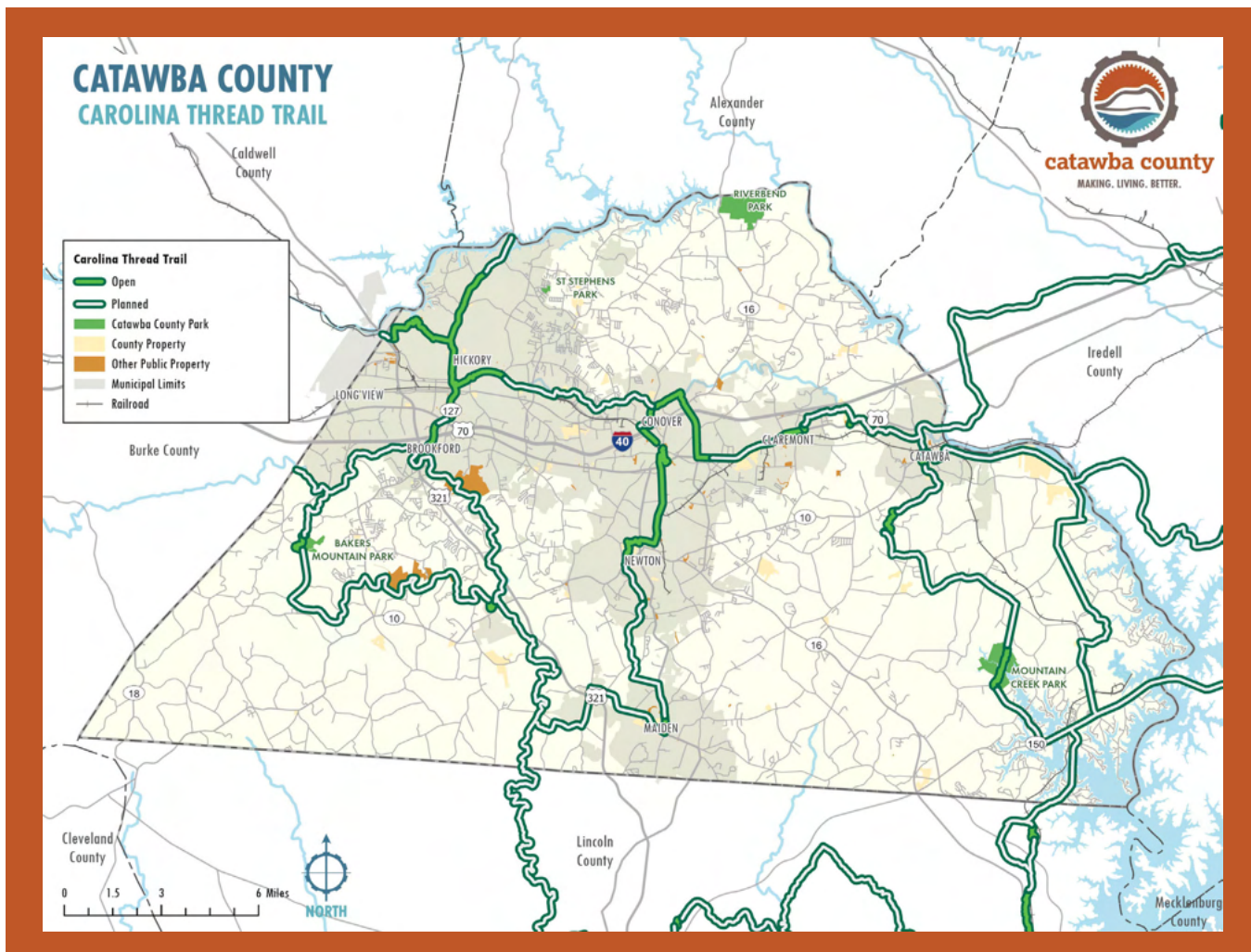


Figure 2: Map of the current (2010) Catawba County Carolina Thread Trail Network

STATE TRAILS IN CATAWBA COUNTY

North Carolina is home to 15 authorized State Trails, which are a collection of long-distance trails authorized by the North Carolina General Assembly that include blueways (paddle trails), natural surface, and paved trails also known as greenways. Catawba County is home to two State Trails: the Wilderness Gateway State Trail (WGST) and the South Fork Passage State Trail (SFPST). Once authorized, a State Trail is an official part of the North Carolina State Parks System.

State Trail status provides planning support through the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation's Trails Program along with access to the Complete the Trails Program (CTP), a legislative funding allocation only available to authorized State Trails. CTP funds may be distributed by the Division of Parks and Recreation to a nonprofit or local government partner for each State Trail.

Each State Trail has a partner organization. These partner organizations are nonprofits that lead advocacy, promotion, volunteer recruitment, planning, and trail construction. Each State Trail partner organization is responsible for distributing the funds allocated to each State Trail through the state's Complete the Trail Fund.

WILDERNESS GATEWAY STATE TRAIL

Authorized by the General Assembly in 2019, The Wilderness Gateway State Trail (WGST) will connect the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail near Chimney Rock State Park along the boundary of Rutherford and McDowell counties to South Mountains State Park in Burke County. Heading east from South Mountains State Park, the WGST creates a loop through Catawba County, connecting the municipalities of Hickory, Conover, Newton, and Maiden. The planned WGST corridor represents approximately 170 miles of trail, with roughly 80 miles planned within Catawba County. Bakers Mountain Park is a major recreational and ecological asset proposed for inclusion along the Wilderness Gateway State Trail in Catawba County. Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina is the Wilderness Gateway State Trail's official partner organization which provides them access to Complete the Trails Program capacity building funds through the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources to advance the State Trail's completion.

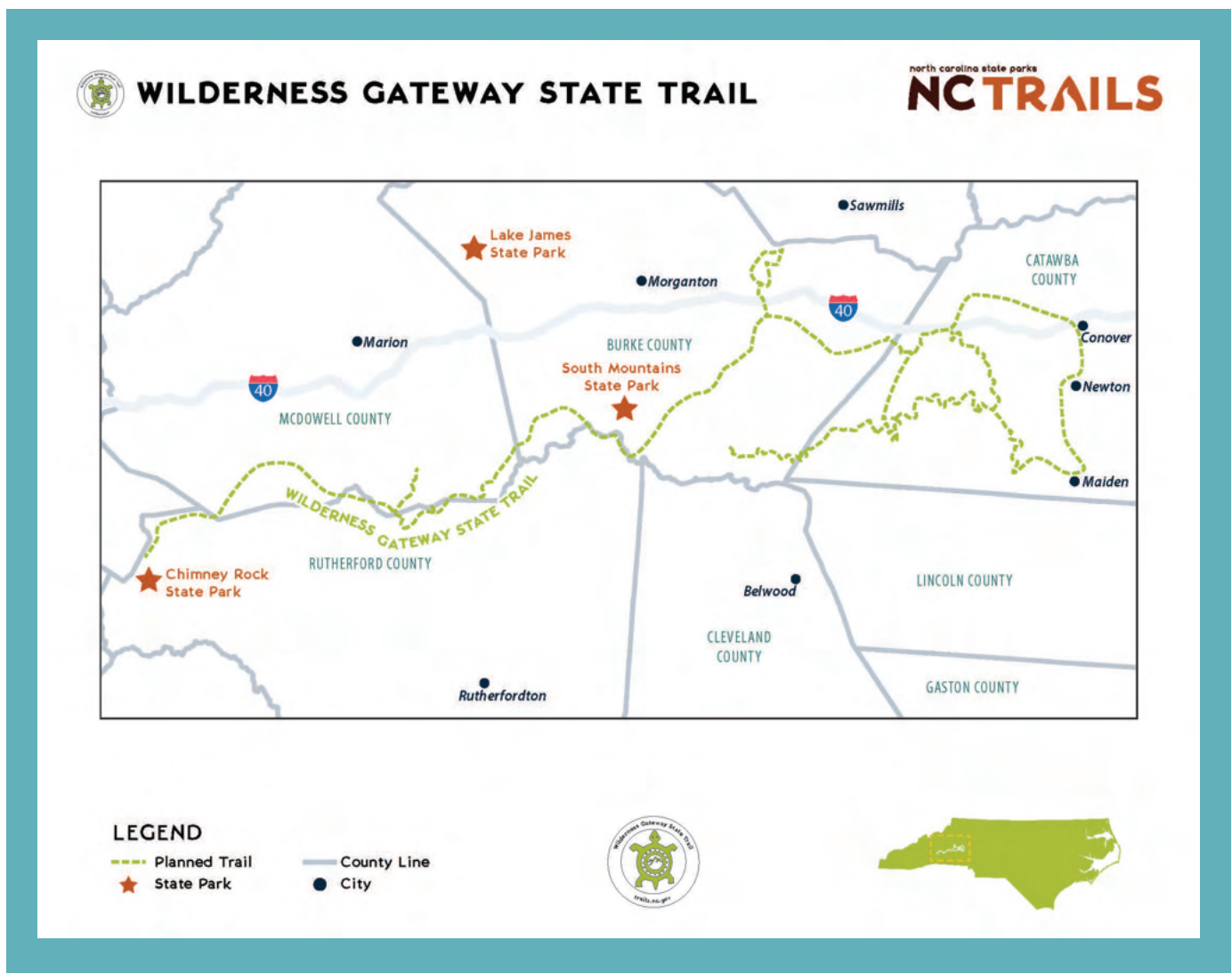


 Figure 3: Official Wilderness Gateway State Trail Map

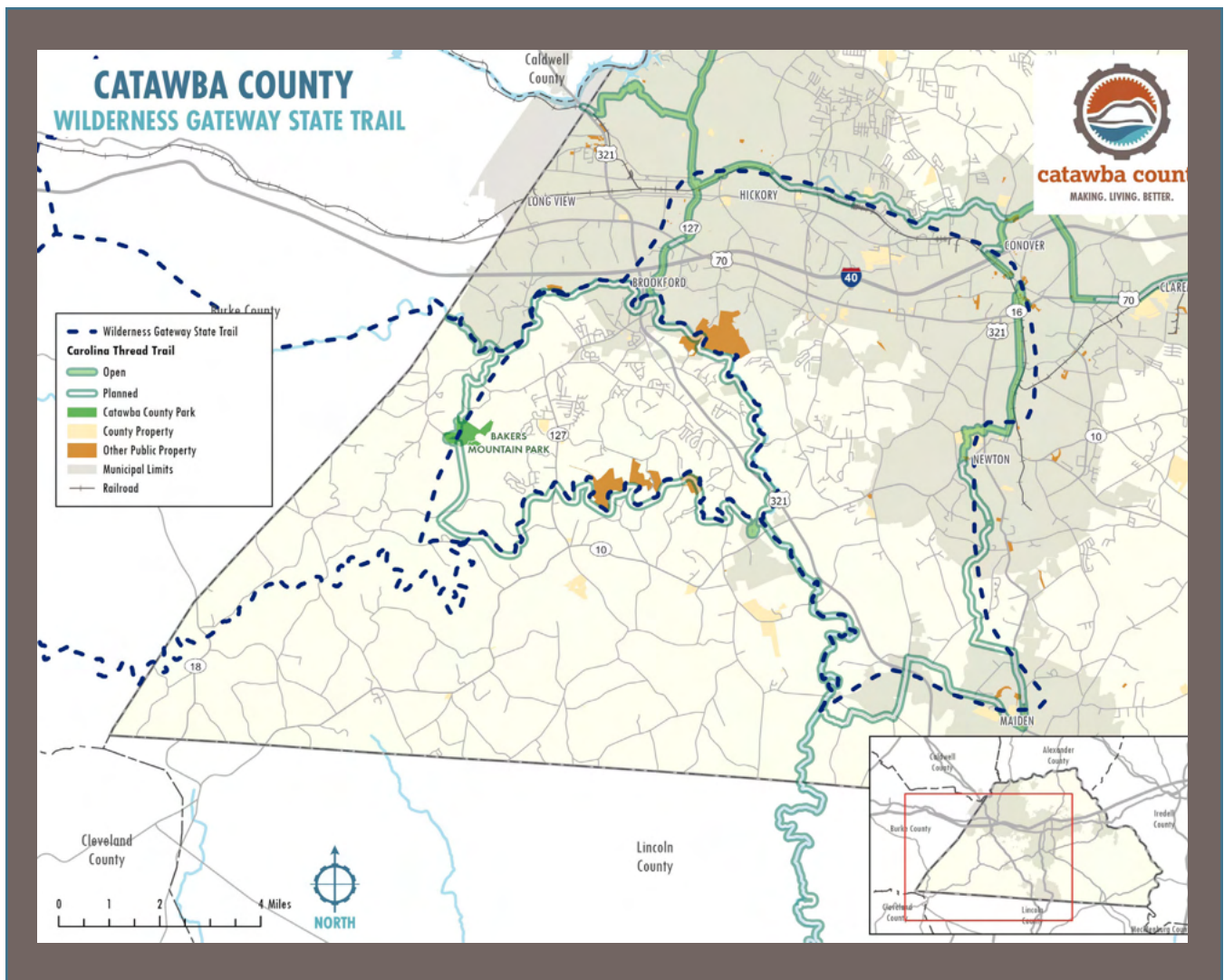


Figure 4: Wilderness Gateway State Trail in Catawba County

SOUTH FORK PASSAGE STATE TRAIL

The South Fork River, formed by the Jacob Fork and Henry Fork Rivers in North Carolina's South Mountains, flows east from Catawba County's foothills to Lake Wylie. Beginning in Catawba County, the South Fork Passage State Trail (SFPST) follows the river south from Jacob Fork Park through Lincoln and Gaston counties in NC before terminating at the NC/SC border of Gaston County and York County, SC. Authorized by the General Assembly in 2026, the SFPST will be North Carolina's third hybrid land and water (blueway) trail. The SFPST's planned corridor spans roughly 60 miles with about eight miles of planned corridor in Catawba County. The Catawba Lands Conservancy and the Carolina Thread Trail are the South Fork Passage State Trail's official partner organizations.

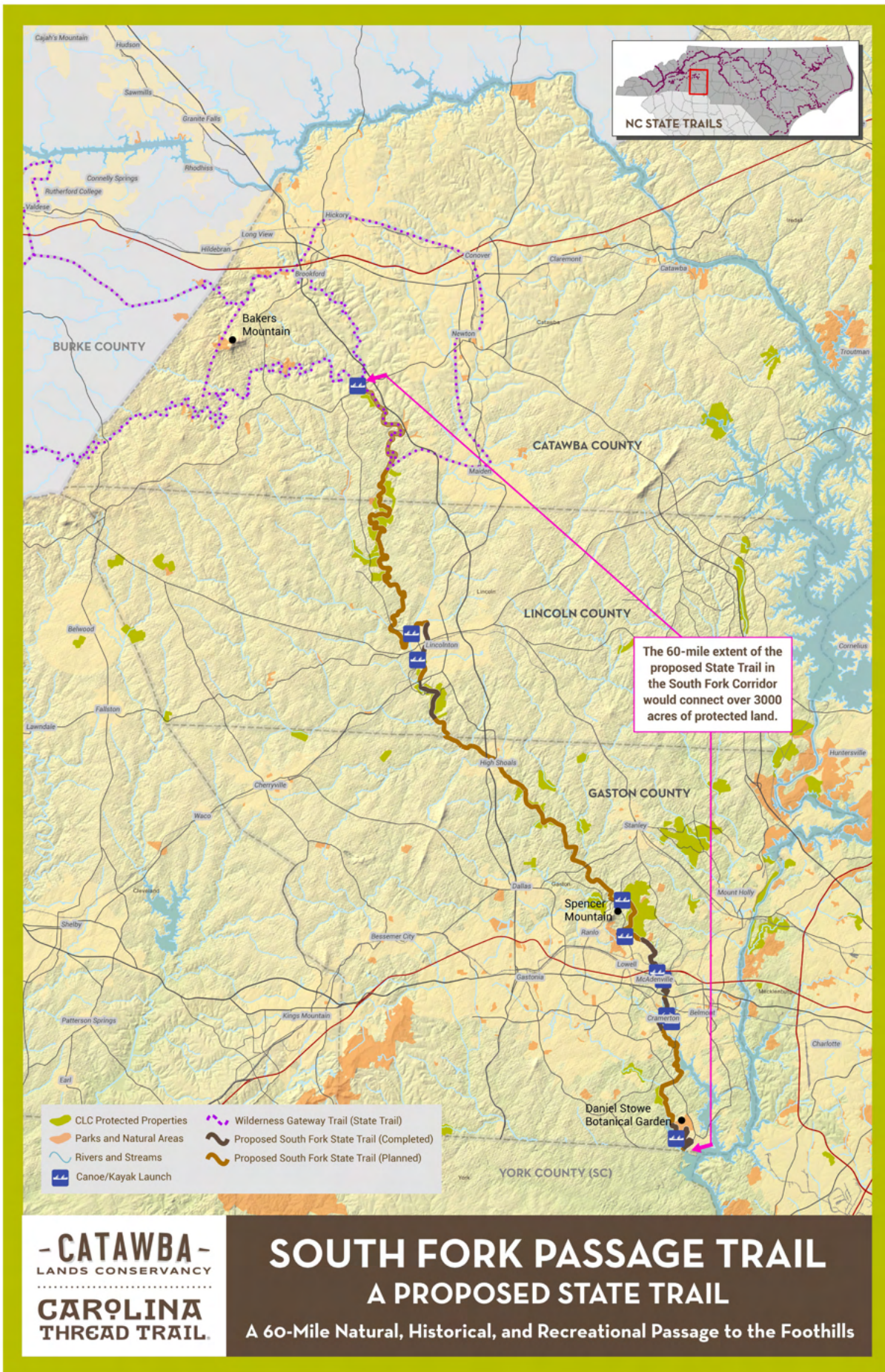


Figure 5: South Fork Passage State Trail Map

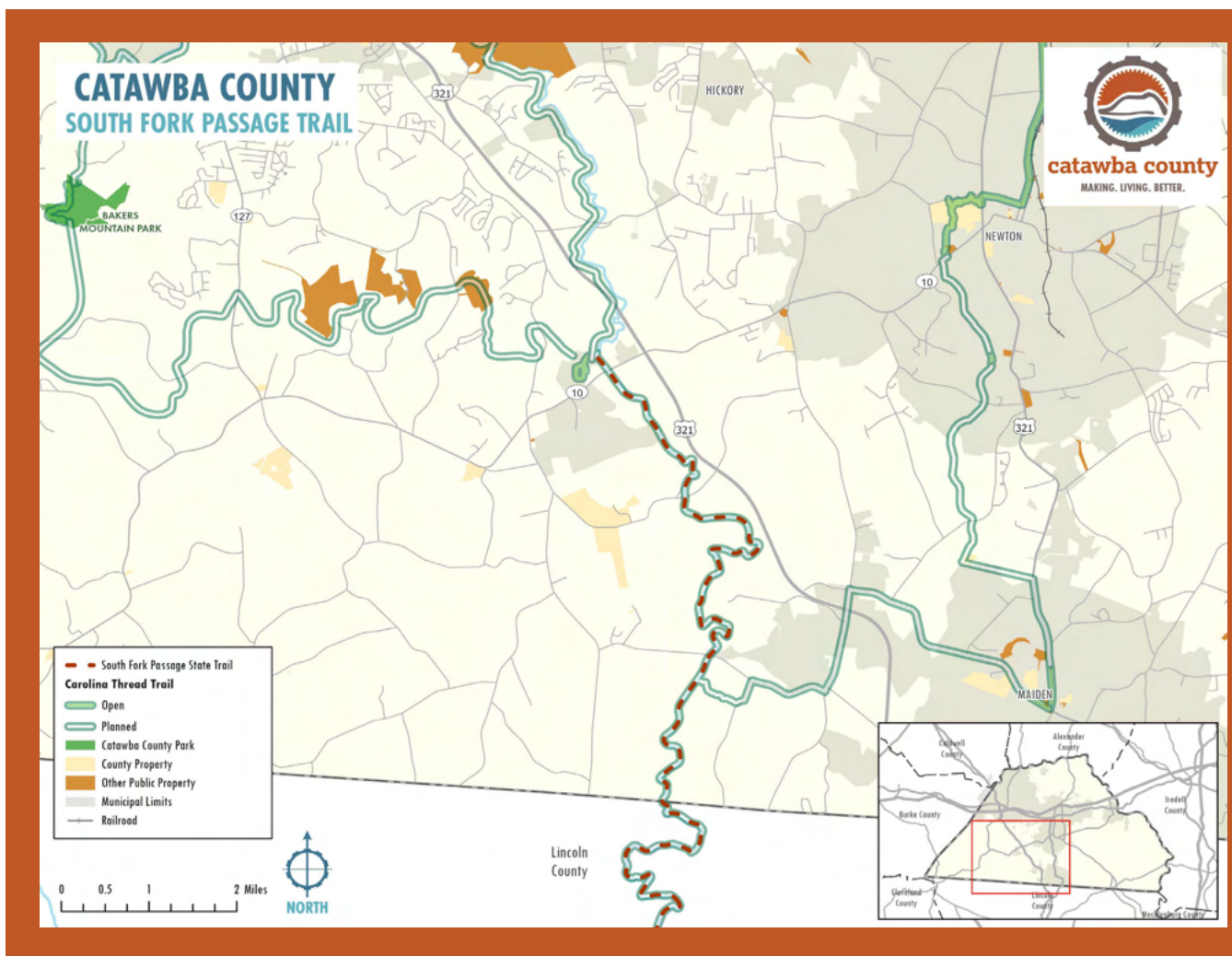


Figure 6: South Fork Passage State Trail in Catawba County

CITIES AND TOWNS GREENWAY DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the network formed by the Carolina Thread Trail and the two State Trails, Catawba County's municipalities have planned for and developed portions of their local greenway networks. Spanning over 10 miles, Hickory Trail is comprised of five unique multi-use trails (City Walk, Riverwalk, Aviation Walk, Ridgeview Walk, and OLLE Art Walk) and serves as an anchor within Catawba County for both the Carolina Thread Trail network and the Wilderness Gateway State Trail by providing direct access into and through the County's largest urbanized area.

Conover's Lyle Creek Greenway is a 1.6 mile trail just north of downtown along the Carolina Thread Trail network. Newton's Heritage Trail Greenway runs along Hildebran Creek and connects to downtown Newton on the Carolina Thread Trail Network. Gateway Trail Greenway is located on the west side of Conover and connects to downtown.

Community	Trail	Length
Conover	Lyle Creek Greenway	1.6 Miles
Conover	Gateway Park Greenway	1 Mile
Hickory	City Walk	2.5 Miles
Hickory	Riverwalk	3.47 Miles
Hickory	Aviation Walk	3.7 Miles
Hickory	Historic Ridgeview Walk	1.2 Miles
Hickory	OLLE Art Walk	2.3 Miles
Newton	Heritage Trail Greenway	1.5 Miles

 **Table 1: Trails in Catawba County**



 **Figure 7: Carolina Thread Trail at Mountain Creek Park**

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

Building upon the analysis and inventory of existing resources, the planning team identified opportunities and constraints that may impact the planning and development of greenways and trails in Catawba County. This analysis aims to better understand where Catawba County can most effectively support greenway development in the County given that the department's strategy is to serve as a supporting partner to other greenway construction initiatives throughout the County.

OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities are circumstances that create good conditions for success or progress. For greenways, these often involve access to land, funding, or staff capacity. The following conditions and resources represent existing opportunities to advance greenway planning and development in Catawba County. Catawba County, working with its partners, can leverage these opportunities as catalysts for greenway development.

STATE AUTHORIZED TRAILS

The General Assembly authorized the Wilderness Gateway State Trail and the South Fork Passage State Trail after Catawba County adopted the previous Parks Master Plan. The presence of two State Trails is an opportunity in that it brings in both human and capital resources to advance these corridors. The Complete the Trails Fund provides funding to support planning, construction, promotion, and maintenance of State Trails, while the State Trail partner organizations (Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, Catawba Land Conservancy, and the Carolina Thread Trail) provide human resources to ensure the projects continue to advance. Catawba County, its municipalities, and other partners have a role as sponsors of individual trail sections to plan, develop, and manage State Trails in collaboration with partner organizations and North Carolina State Parks.

north carolina state parks

NC TRAILS

 **Figure 8: The NC Trails Program administers the "Complete the Trail" Fund**

CAROLINA THREAD TRAIL MASTER PLAN UPDATE

The Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) is currently updating all 15 of their countywide master plans. The revised CTT network produced through this planning effort will better reflect current conditions in Catawba County by incorporating greenway trails that have been planned and completed since its adoption in 2010.

LAND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Catawba County Planning reviews land development plans and requires the dedication of trail easements consistent with the adopted CTT master plan network. This will continue to be an important opportunity for reserving easements and acquiring the land needed to ultimately connect the Carolina Thread Trail in Catawba County. The Catawba County Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) also requires that sidewalk be located along the frontage of new residential developments where the property is part of an approved multi-modal plan like the CTT plan or another NCDOT bicycle or pedestrian plan.

DUKE ENERGY RECREATION SITES

Duke Energy is required by the Federal Energy Regulation Commission (FERC) to seek relicensing to operate its hydroelectric power activities. As part of the relicensing process, Duke Energy maintains a Recreation Management Plan for their properties along Lake Hickory, the Catawba River, Lake Norman, and Lookout Shoals Lake in Catawba County. These FERC recreation sites are assets the County can leverage for trailheads that serve the Carolina Thread Trail as well as launch sites for paddle trails.

CONSTRAINTS

Constraints are circumstances that limit opportunities for success or progress. For greenways, these often involve access to land, funding, or staff capacity. The following conditions and resources represent existing barriers to advancing greenway planning and development in Catawba County. These constraints can be addressed through partnerships with like-minded agencies and organizations.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT CAPACITY

Managing, operating, and maintaining a greenway trail network requires additional professional staff capacity. Increasing staff capacity can be accomplished within the County or through the support of partner organizations and agencies.

COUNTY CAPITAL FUNDING

The capital funding required for greenway planning, design, construction, and maintenance is significant. Implementing standalone greenway projects will require new levels of funding.

LAND ACQUISITION

With the assistance of the Foothills Land Conservancy, the Catawba Lands Conservancy, and the North Carolina Land and Water Fund to acquire land for both trail and park properties, Catawba County has furthered its mission of providing passive recreation opportunities to residents of the county and visitors to the region.

GREENWAY IMPLEMENTATION

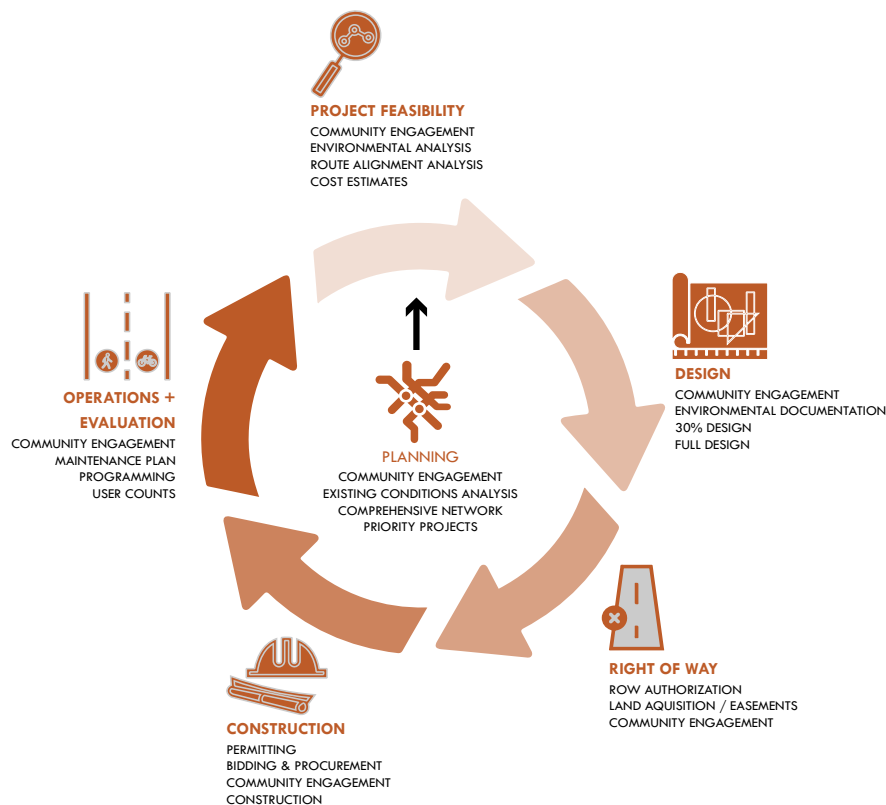
While Catawba County does not have plans to construct greenways, they support agencies who want to advance greenway and trail projects. The following sections outline the greenway development process and highlight where and how Catawba County can support partners at each project development phase.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

While greenway projects take many years to advance from master planning to a completed project, most follow a standard project development process. The following section summarizes the six phases of the greenway project development process and highlights where Catawba County has an opportunity to engage with trail development partners.

PLANNING

The Planning phase focuses on establishing a greenway network within a defined geography. This phase involves gathering community input, analyzing existing conditions, identifying potential network corridors, and prioritizing corridors for future project development. The outcomes of the planning process help ensure that land development projects reserve space for—or construct—segments of the larger greenway network. Planning also helps major infrastructure projects (such as NCDOT roadway improvements and utility projects) anticipate the future presence of greenways or incorporate trail construction within their project limits.



 **Figure 9: The Project Development Process**

OPPORTUNITY

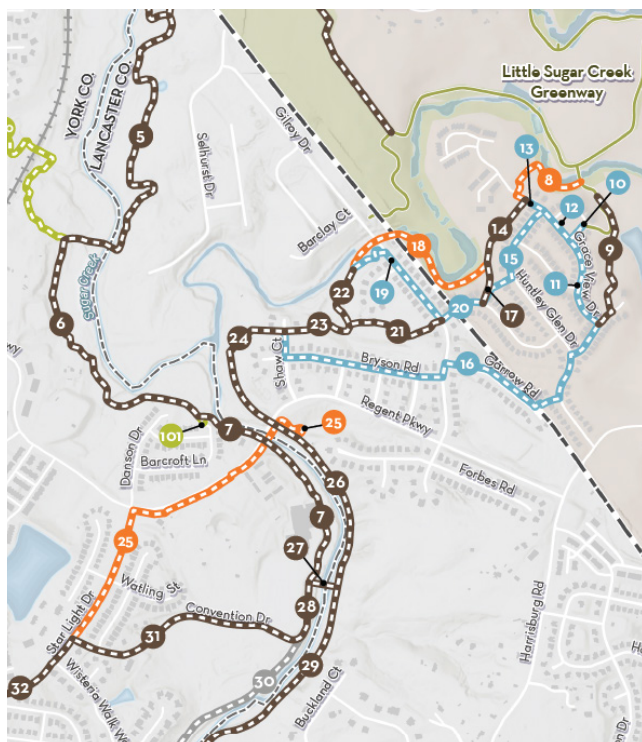
Catawba County can support the planning phase by working with municipalities, state trail partners, NCDOT, and regional agencies to identify strategies to prioritize corridors that improve access to parks, schools, downtowns, and other community destinations.

FEASIBILITY

The Feasibility phase refines route alternatives for a selected greenway corridor, allowing for a more detailed evaluation of engineering constraints, environmental considerations, and constructability. Property owners may be engaged to provide more specific feedback on alignment alternatives than was possible during the planning phase. Feasibility studies culminate in a refined cost estimate that can be used with greater confidence to budget for the design and construction phases. The cost estimate and content from a feasibility study provides valuable supporting documentation for grant applications.

OPPORTUNITY

During Feasibility, Catawba County can help move priority corridors forward by supporting grant applications, sharing GIS and property information, coordinating with affected departments and agencies, and helping partners evaluate alignment options that best connect County parks and other public assets.



 **Figure 10: Alternatives Analysis from a Carolina Thread Trail Feasibility Study in York County, SC**



 **Figure 11: Carolina Thread Trail Planning Meeting**

LAND ACQUISITION

The Land Acquisition phase typically begins once a project reaches approximately 60 percent design. During this phase, negotiations are initiated for fee simple property purchases or easements necessary to support greenway construction and public access. In some cases, property acquisition may occur earlier in the process, depending on landowner interest and existing relationships. Early acquisition is often pursued in partnership with nonprofit land conservation organizations.

OPPORTUNITY

Catawba County can support land acquisition by continuing to require or encourage trail easement dedication through the development review process and by helping partners identify publicly owned land, willing landowners, and opportunities for coordinated easement strategies.

CONSTRUCTION

The Construction phase includes advertising the project for bids and procuring a qualified construction contractor. Throughout construction, the managing agency oversees progress through construction administration services and regular site inspections. Once the work is completed and inspections confirm compliance with project standards, the public agency formally accepts the project and assumes responsibility for ongoing maintenance.

OPPORTUNITY

Although Catawba County does not intend to lead trail construction, it can still support this phase by endorsing partner-led projects, coordinating access across County-owned property where appropriate, and helping align construction schedules with related public projects and funding opportunities.

OPERATIONS + MAINTENANCE

The Operations and Maintenance phase begins with the development of a maintenance plan and, where feasible, the installation of trail user counters to track usage. Community programming and outreach can play a key role in activating the greenway, encouraging use, and maximizing the long-term community benefits of the completed trail.

OPPORTUNITY

For completed trail segments led by partner agencies, Catawba County can support long-term operations by coordinating programming, promotion, wayfinding, and user education that increase awareness and use of the broader network.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The implementation of the greenway trail network in Catawba County will only be possible through collaboration with multiple partner agencies and organizations. This section outlines key partners that Catawba County will work in close collaboration with as it seeks to advance trail corridors throughout the County.

CAROLINA THREAD TRAIL + CATAWBA LANDS CONSERVANCY

The Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) is a network of greenways, trails and blueways across the greater Charlotte region, connecting 15 counties, two states and 2.9 million people. Over 425 miles of trails and 170 miles of blueway are currently open to the public, and over 1,175 additional miles are planned to link together people, places, and communities. The CTT is housed within the Catawba Lands Conservancy (CLC) and serves an additional purpose of helping to preserve natural areas and provide places for recreation, transportation, and conservation for all people within its reach.

The CTT is a 501(c) (3) with three full-time staff dedicated to advancing trail planning and development throughout the 15-county CTT region. They also call upon resources

from the broader CLC team (16 additional staff members) to advance the Thread Trail's mission. In addition to staff capacity, the CTT supports a rolling implementation grant program. The implementation grant program offers funding to jump start project development and attract additional funding from public and private sources in support of trail development along the CTT network. Implementation grant awards support corridor planning, design, land acquisition, and construction projects.



 Figure 12: Carolina Thread Trail at Hickory City Park

The CTT also serves as the designated partner organization for the South Fork Passage State Trail.

Each State Trail partner organization is eligible to apply for funds through the State's Complete the Trails Program which can be used to implement sections of the South Fork Passage State Trail in Catawba County.

OPPORTUNITY

Catawba County Parks can continue to support greenway planning by being an active partner in the Carolina Thread Trail Master Plan Update process, and support the County Commission's adoption of the revised CTT network. As opportunities arise, Catawba County can take advantage of the CTT implementation grant program to advance planning or feasibility for the priority opportunity corridors identified in this plan. Remaining connected to the CTT's planning for the South Fork Passage State Trail will be important.

FOOTHILLS CONSERVANCY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina (FCNC) is an accredited land trust dedicated to permanently protecting land and water in Western North Carolina for the benefit of people and all living things. They serve eight counties: Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cleveland, Lincoln, McDowell, and Rutherford. In addition to land preservation, FCNC has a robust trails program and serves as the designated partner organization for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail (WGST).

As the designated partner organization, FCNC leads planning and implementation activities for the WGST. Their Trails Program Director and Trails Program Coordinator serve as the primary resources for the WGST and they are supported by nine additional staff within the organization. As a designated state trail partner organization, FCNC is eligible to apply for funds through the State's Complete the Trails Program to support the development of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail in Catawba County.

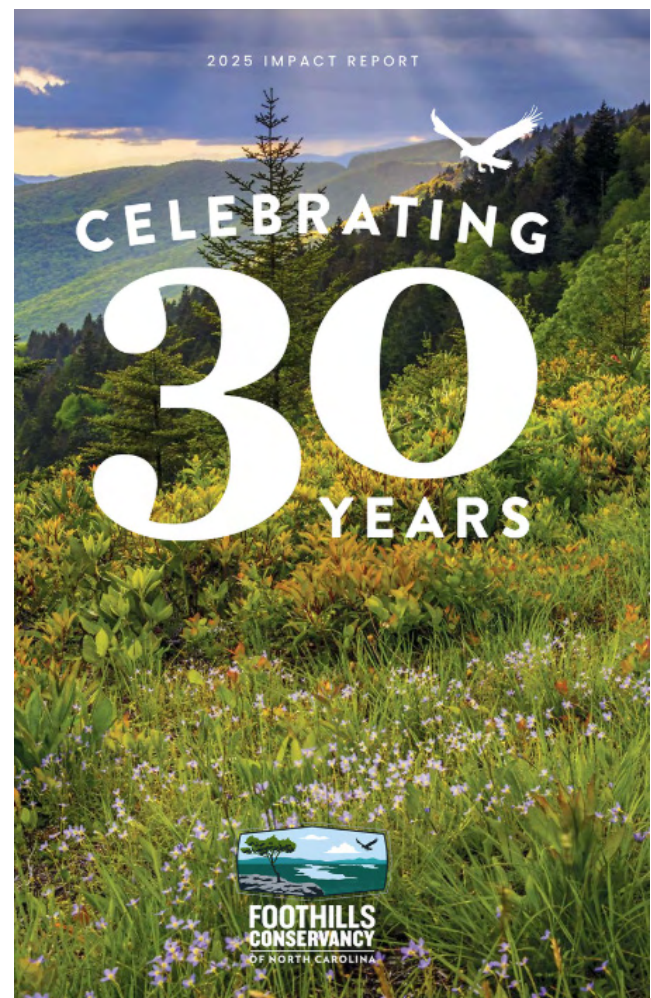
OPPORTUNITY

FCNC will continue to be a major driver for land acquisition related to the Wilderness Gateway State Trail. Catawba County Parks can stay engaged with FCNC and offer to partner on land acquisition projects and consider adding conserved property to the parks system as applicable.

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (NCDOT) DIVISION 12 AND INTEGRATED MOBILITY DIVISION (IMD)

NCDOT is responsible for maintaining roads and bridges across the state. The state is divided into 14 NCDOT divisions with Catawba County falling within Division 12. Division 12 staff maintain streets, plan projects, and administer project design and construction within Catawba County for highway widening and complete street projects. Division staff also assist in prioritizing projects for the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, which funds all major roadway projects on NCDOT roads.

NCDOT's Integrated Mobility Division (IMD) provides leadership for safe, affordable, and innovative multi-



 **Figure 13: Since 1995, Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina has protected over 74,000 acres, Forever and For the Benefit of All.**

modal transportation. IMD has played an instrumental role in regional greenway trail development and advancement since its creation in 2019. IMD is responsible for managing state and federal funds for bicycle and pedestrian programs, providing expertise on multimodal planning, technology, innovation, and mobility trends.

OPPORTUNITY

As NCDOT projects enter the design phase, Catawba County can engage the IMD to ensure project design accounts for the presence of the County's planned greenway network.

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS

Municipal agencies representing the towns and cities within Catawba County are focused on expanding greenway trail networks within their municipal limits. There are eight jurisdictions (Hickory, Conover, Newton, Maiden, Longview, Brookford, Claremont, and Catawba) within Catawba County, and all will be key partners in achieving a connected countywide greenway network.

Each municipality will have its own unique level of capacity for supporting the development of the Catawba County regional greenway network. Hickory, for example, has staff dedicated to procuring grants and managing construction projects that have led to the successful implementation of the Hickory Trail. While Hickory is certainly the most well positioned local government partner to assist with developing the regional greenway network, each jurisdiction is an active partner planning for the Catawba County greenway network through the Carolina Thread Trail. Most have some capacity (even if limited) to support grant application submittals, contribute to land acquisition through land development approvals, and partner to manage greenway projects within their municipal boundaries that fall along the Catawba County greenway network.

OPPORTUNITY

Catawba County can coordinate at a regular interval (bi-annually) to stay informed on the projects and priorities municipal partners are pursuing along the Carolina Thread Trail network. County staff can provide letters of support for grant applications where municipal projects will build out sections of the Carolina Thread Trail.



 **Figure 14: River Walk in Hickory, NC**

PARTNER CAPACITY MATRIX

Catawba County has many opportunities to support trail development. The following matrix indicates the level to which each partner organization has capacity to assist with tasks related to implementing the Catawba County greenway network.

- **Green** indicates a task is a **primary service provided by the organization with capacity available to advance the task.**
- **Yellow** indicates a task that **overlaps with the organization's functions, but capacity may be limited to advance the task.**
- **Red** indicates a task that is either **not aligned with the organization's function, or there is no current capacity to advance the task.**

Partner Name	Partner Type	Planning Support	Project Funding	Grant Oversight	Project Management	Land Acquisition	Operations and Maintenance
Catawba County	Local Government Organization	Green	Red	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Yellow
Catawba Lands Conservancy/Carolina Thread Trail	Non-Profit Land Trust	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow
Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina	Non-Profit Land Trust	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow
Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization	Regional Government Organization	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Red
NCDOT Division 12	State of North Carolina Agency	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red
Municipal Government	Local Government Organization	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow

 **Table 2: Partner Matrix**

GREENWAY MAINTENANCE BEST PRACTICE

Paved greenway trails that are consistently maintained have lower maintenance costs over time and provide a safer and better user experience. In addition to prolonging the useful life of a greenway trail, proper maintenance promotes a positive relationship with adjacent landowners and ensures greenway trails are seen as a valued asset to communities along its route. This plan recommends starting with the development of a maintenance plan to identify resources, allocate responsibilities, and identify local partners, and external funding sources. The maintenance plan should be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure maintenance operations remain consistent over time and the County can respond to lessons learned and changes in operational goals, objectives and policies. All cost estimates referenced in this section for maintenance tasks were sourced from the 2015 Rails to Trails Conservancy Maintenance Practices and Costs of Rail Trails study and adjusted to present value¹. Key components for a maintenance plan include:

- Understanding future needs of the system and assessing the capacity of staff to meet those needs.
- Creating a facility inventory system to track and understand the routine maintenance of pavement conditions, culverts, bridges, structures, signs and other amenities.
- Establishing baseline maintenance costs for routing activities such as mowing, edging, landscaping, trash clean up, debris clearing, drainage, seasonal maintenance, repaving, crack sealing, and structure repair.

¹ Knoch, Carl, and Tom Sexton. "Maintenance Practices and Costs of Rail-Trails." Rails to Trails Conservancy , 2015. June 1. <https://www.railstotrails.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Maintenance-Practices-and-Costs-of-Rail-Trails.pdf>.

- Understanding labor costs and identifying what tasks can be accomplished with municipal staff versus contractors.
- Using technology to collect data on facility conditions to support maintenance activities.
- Developing a methodology to prioritize maintenance activities based on condition and available funds.

ANNUAL PER-MILE COST OF TRAIL MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES

Trail maintenance costs vary significantly depending on the context and amount of amenities provided. Based on data from the Rails to Trails Conservancy, the range of maintenance cost per mile (excluding major reconstruction) is described below:

Task	Type	Frequency	Cost
Mowing	Routine	Ongoing/ As Needed	\$1,000 per mile
Tree Removal			\$1,500 per mile
Bridge Inspection**	Inspections	Every 2-5 years	\$10,000 to \$15,000
Asphalt Crack Sealing	Minor Repairs	Every 1-5 years	\$310 per mile
Asphalt Sealcoating		Every 1-5 years	\$350 per mile
Asphalt Resurfacing	Major Reconstruction	Every 10 years	\$23,000 per mile*
Concrete Resurfacing		Every 30 years	\$36,000 per mile*
Boardwalk Rebuilding		Every 10-15 years	

 **Table 3: Annual Cost of Trail Maintenance Activities**

* Annualized cost, assuming 5% cost escalation rate per year, compounded annually

**Varies based on size and location of bridge. Only major municipalities or those in mountainous areas have recurring contracts for pedestrian bridge inspections.

PRIORITY OPPORTUNITY CORRIDORS

The planning team identified priority opportunity corridors to assist in guiding the efforts of Catawba County as they support regional greenway trail development within the County. These corridors focus on leveraging momentum from partner organizations, allowing Catawba County to provide meaningful support for achieving enhanced greenway connectivity to the County's major park assets.

BAKERS MOUNTAIN PARK CONNECTIONS

Bakers Mountain Park has been recognized as a premier ecological asset in the Western Piedmont of North Carolina and a prominent destination for both the CTT and the WGST. NCDOT is advancing State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) Project U-2530A along NC 127 South between US 321 and Mountain View Elementary. When complete, U-2530A will include a ten foot-wide multi-use path. Fully funded in the STIP, construction is projected to begin in 2029. From the southern terminus of the U-2530 multi-use path, Catawba County and its partners have an opportunity to pursue trail easements, or fee simple land acquisition to further connectivity throughout the county. Amendments to the CTT and WGST alignments may be needed to pursue this connection as shown in Figure 15.

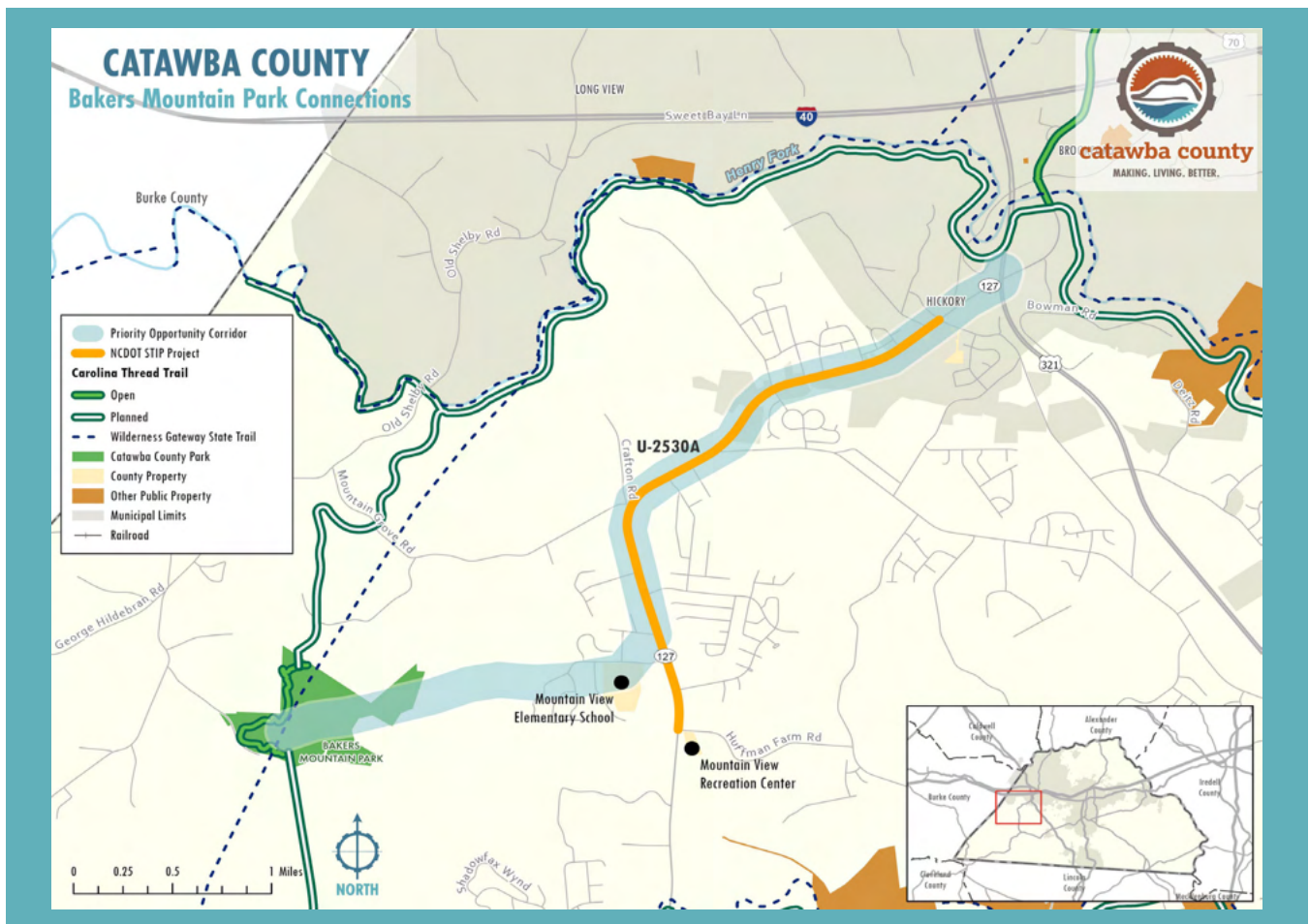


Figure 15: Bakers Mountain Park Connections Priority Opportunity Corridor

PROJECT CORRIDOR CHARACTERISTICS:

- Five miles
- Multi-use path alongside NC 127
- NCDOT is responsible for project delivery

PROJECT PARTNERS:

- NCDOT
- Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina
- Carolina Thread Trail
- Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization

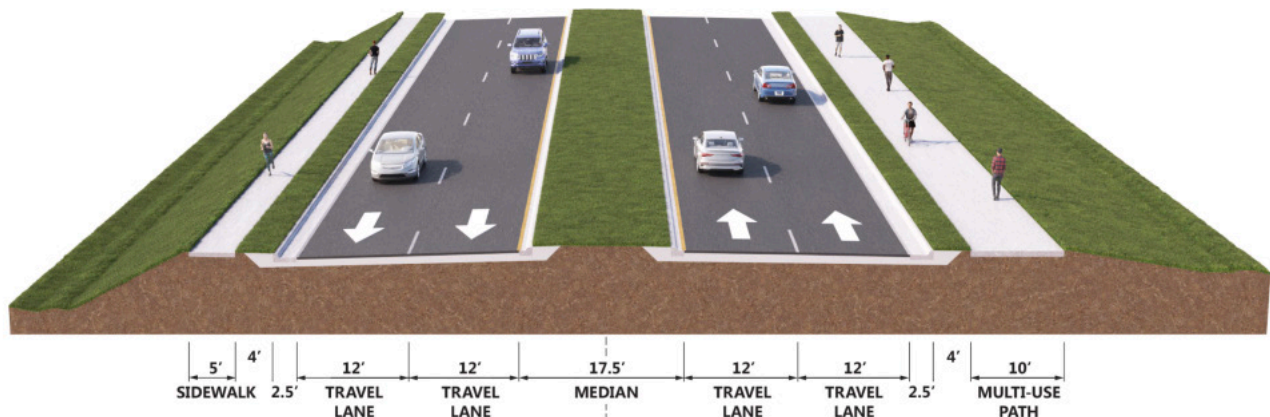


Figure 16: Future NC 127 cross section (Source: NCDOT)

CATAWBA RIVER GREENWAY

Riverbend Park provides a strong anchor for greenway connectivity in Catawba County and is situated along a section of the Catawba River that is poised for more recreation investments through Duke Energy's FERC relicensing plan. Approximately three miles downriver, Duke Energy is planning to develop the 22-acre Upper Lookout Shoals Access Area with a boat ramp, parking, restrooms, walking trails, and kayak launch. A trail connecting Riverbend Park with the Upper Lookout area is a priority opportunity that warrants a closer look at two possible trail alignments. The first is a greenway trail following the Catawba River and the second is a multi-use side path that follows Riverbend Road. To support future project development, Catawba County could support amendments to the Carolina Thread Trail network as needed to pursue the connections as shown in Figure 17.

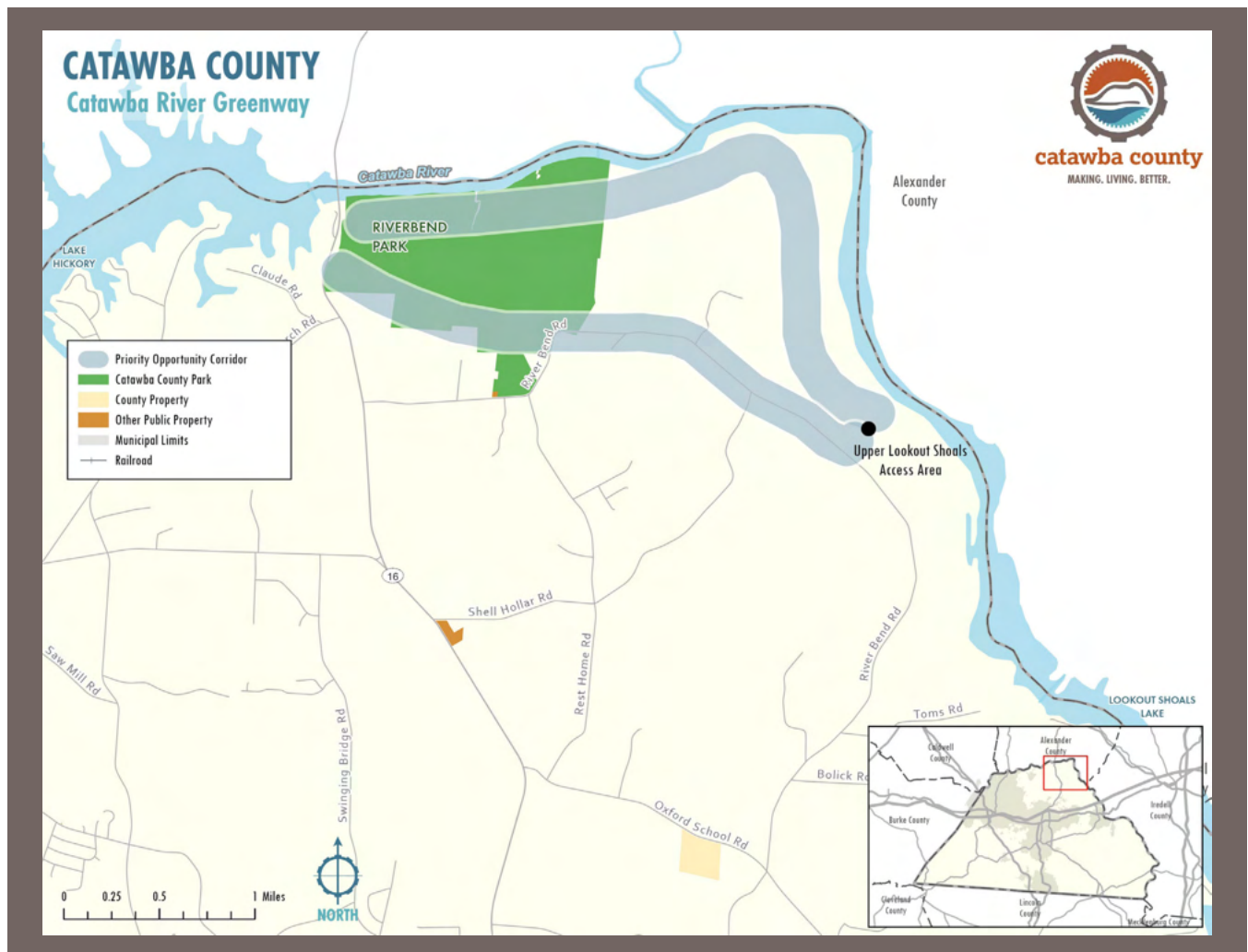


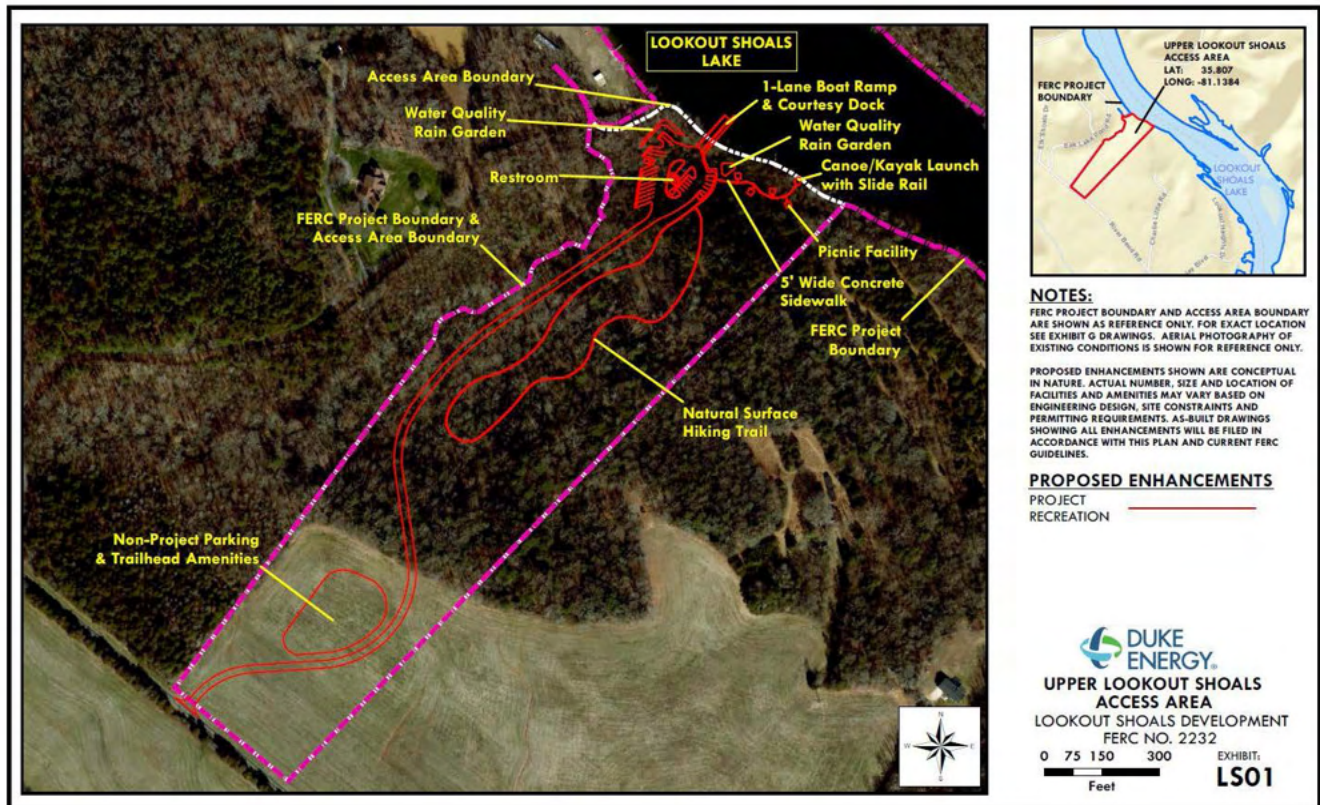
Figure 17: Catawba River Greenway Connections Priority Opportunity Corridor

PROJECT CORRIDOR CHARACTERISTICS:

- Four miles
- Greenway trail along the Catawba River or a multi-use path alongside Riverbend Road

PROJECT PARTNERS:

- NCDOT
- Carolina Thread Trail
- Greater Hickory Area Metropolitan Planning Organization



~22 Acres

Figure 18: Duke Energy Proposed Enhancements for Upper Lookout Shoals Access Area



Figure 19: Oxford Dam at Riverbend Park

MOUNTAIN CREEK PARK TO NC 150

Mountain Creek Park is located near the rapidly developing NC 150 corridor on the western shores of Lake Norman. Mixed use commercial and residential developments have been recently completed just a few miles south of the park along the future CTT network. NCDOT is currently designing a major road widening project along NC 150 (STIP project R-2307A) which will include sidewalks and connections to new homes and commercial areas along the NC 150 corridor. The park entrance is two miles from the NC 150 project via Little Mountain Road, which presents an opportunity to develop a multi-use path between the park and the NCDOT project, providing a new CTT connection.

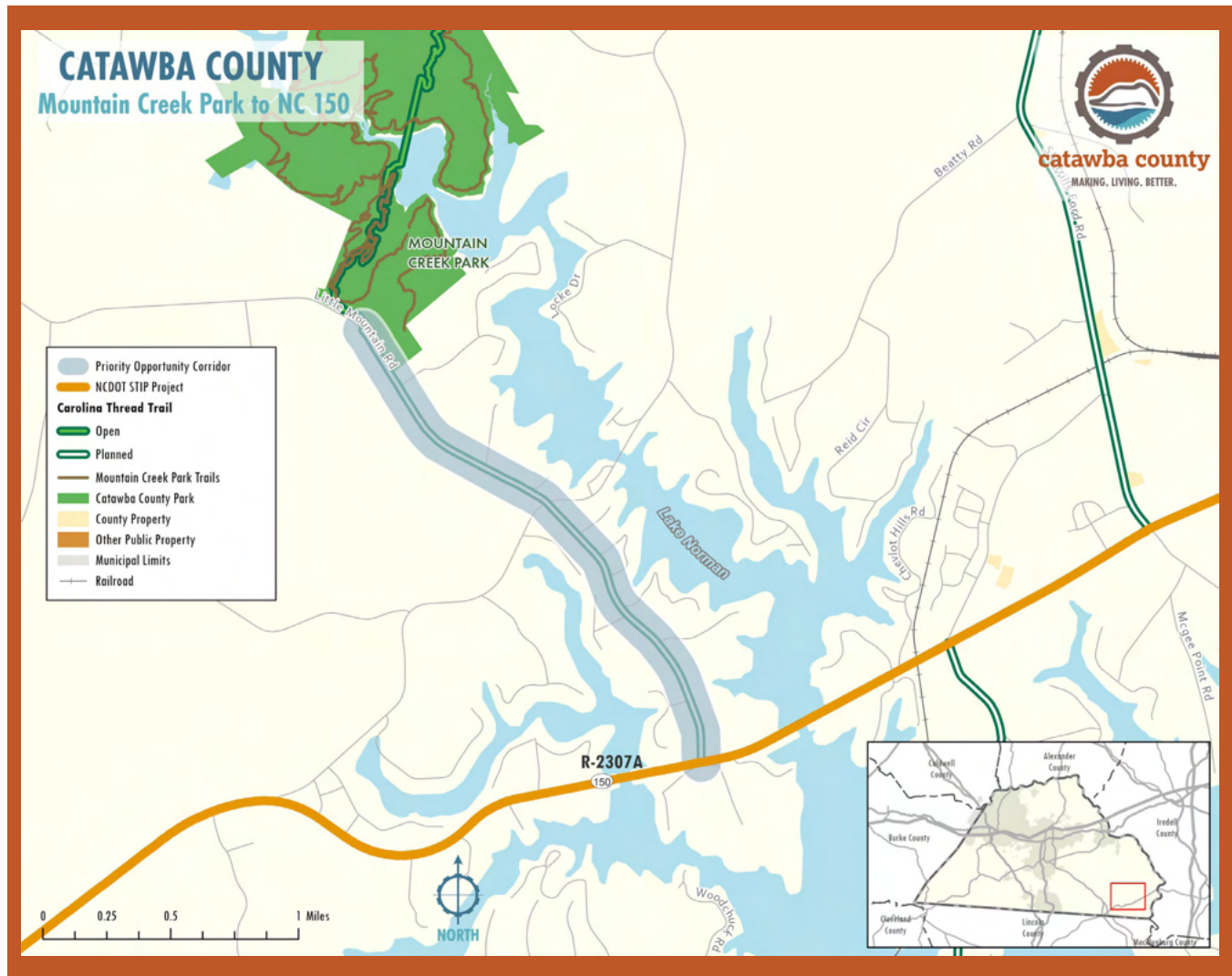


Figure 20: Mountain Creek Park to NC 150 Connections Priority Opportunity Corridor

PROJECT CORRIDOR CHARACTERISTICS:

- Two miles
- Multi-use path along Little Mountain Road

PROJECT PARTNERS:

- NCDOT
- Carolina Thread Trail
- Greater Hickory Area Metropolitan Planning Organization

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Catawba County has a dynamic existing trail system with strong support from its municipal and State Trails partners. Located at the crossroads of two state trails and within the growing Carolina Thread Trail network, Catawba County is ripe with opportunity for expanding trails. This approach creates three priority areas that Catawba County should focus on as it seeks to expand its greenway and trail network:

PARTNERSHIPS

Building and maintaining strong relationships with the partner agencies and staff responsible for funding and developing trails in Catawba County is essential to delivering projects. Catawba County should closely coordinate with partner agencies to align goals and pursue opportunities as they arise.

FUNDING

While Catawba County intends to focus on leveraging partnerships, they have a role to play in securing the resources needed to construct greenways. Catawba County should be prepared to assist with providing local matches required for grants, and to work with its municipalities, the Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization, and NCDOT to incorporate greenway facilities into planned roadway projects.

LAND ACCESS

Acquiring land and easements for planned greenway alignments is critical to expanding the countywide trail network. Catawba County should continue to work with its municipal, state, and conservation partners to identify opportunities to use existing land and make strategic acquisitions that support new greenway corridors.



 **Figure 21: Mountain Creek Park**



RECOMMENDATIONS + IMPLEMENTATION

OVERVIEW

The recommendations presented in this chapter are guided by the vision of preserving Catawba County's unique and diverse natural heritage through education and conservation while providing quality passive recreation and wellness opportunities. Building upon the County's extensive natural resources, including the Catawba River corridor, lakes, forests, open spaces, and wildlife habitats, these recommendations are intended to protect and enhance the landscapes that define the community's character and quality of life. The strategies focus on expanding opportunities for passive recreational activities, strengthening environmental education and stewardship initiatives, and continuing to build nature-based experiences that support physical and mental well-being. Successful implementation will depend on continued collaboration with municipalities, state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, schools, conservation partners, and private stakeholders. Leveraging these partnerships, along with a combination of local funding, grants, donations, and other external funding sources, will be critical to advancing conservation efforts, improving passive recreation, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of Catawba County's parks and natural resources.

THEMES

OVERVIEW

The recommendations presented in this plan are organized into thematic focus areas that reflect the community's priorities, needs, and vision. These themes provide a clear framework for implementation by grouping related strategies and projects into common areas of focus. By organizing recommendations around key themes, the plan establishes a cohesive roadmap that guides investment, decision-making, and long-term system improvements while ensuring individual actions contribute to broader community goals.

THEME ONE - PROTECT WHAT MATTERS

Protect and steward the County's unique landscapes, ecosystems, and historical and cultural resources for future generations.

Catawba County Parks is dedicated to conserving environmentally sensitive areas, protecting wildlife habitats, and promoting responsible management of natural

resources. Equally important is the preservation of the County's rich history and cultural heritage through the protection of historic landmarks and cultural landscapes. Through strategic partnerships, thoughtful planning, and long-term stewardship practices, these resources can continue to enhance quality of life, support environmental resilience, and foster a strong sense of place for generations to come.

THEME TWO - CONNECT TO NATURE

Provide meaningful opportunities to explore, learn, and engage with the outdoors in ways that foster personal connection.

By offering diverse passive recreation experiences, educational programs, and interpretive signage, Catawba County Parks can encourage people of all ages and cultural backgrounds to discover and appreciate its natural landscapes. Opportunities such as trails, nature-based recreation, environmental education, wildlife observation, cultural interpretation, and hands-on learning experiences can deepen understanding of local resources while promoting physical activity, mental well-being, and lifelong stewardship. Creating welcoming and engaging outdoor experiences helps build lasting connections to the environment, strengthens community identity, and inspires residents to value and protect the County's natural and cultural assets.

THEME THREE - SUPPORT WELLNESS

Support physical and mental well-being through accessible, passive recreation experiences in natural settings.

Parks, open spaces, trails, waterways, and natural areas offer valuable environments where residents can walk, observe wildlife, enjoy scenic views, spend time with family and friends, or simply experience the restorative benefits of nature. By ensuring these spaces are welcoming, comfortable, and accessible to individuals of all ages and abilities, the County can promote equitable access to outdoor experiences that reduce stress, support mental health, and encourage active lifestyles. Thoughtfully designed amenities such as walking trails, overlooks, seating areas, nature viewing opportunities, and quiet gathering spaces can create environments that foster wellness while preserving the natural character of the landscape. Investing in passive recreation opportunities strengthens quality of life, enhances community health, and provides residents with meaningful ways to reconnect with nature and improve overall well-being.

THEME FOUR - INVEST IN QUALITY EXPERIENCES

Ensure parks and amenities are safe, clean, and thoughtfully maintained to provide a consistently high-quality experience.

Providing a positive user experience requires balancing routine upkeep with long-term planning for facility improvements, modernization efforts, and evolving community needs. This includes maintaining trails, landscaping, playgrounds, signage, restrooms, and other amenities to high standards while prioritizing cleanliness, visibility, and accessibility throughout the park system. Emphasizing safety through thoughtful design, risk management practices, and regular inspections can further create welcoming environments where users feel comfortable recreating and gathering. By investing in effective operations and maintenance practices, staff training, sustainable management approaches, and adequate funding, the County can ensure that its parks and recreation system continues to deliver reliable, enjoyable, and high-quality experiences. Consistent stewardship of these public spaces strengthens community trust, enhances quality of life, and supports the long-term vitality and sustainability of the park system.

THEME FIVE - INSPIRE STEWARDSHIP

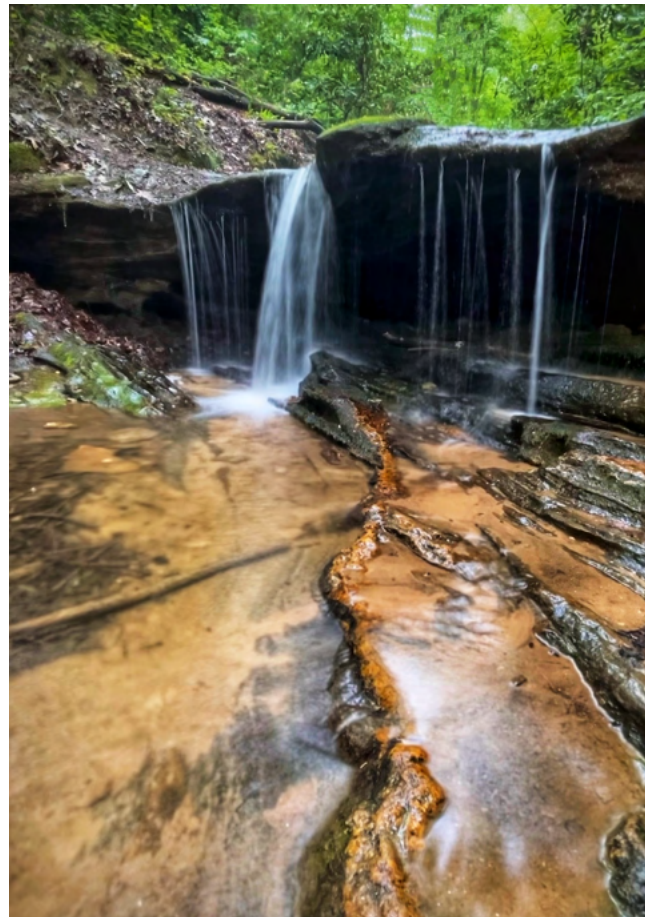
Use parks as places of learning that encourage awareness, appreciation, and care for natural resources.

Parks play a vital role in connecting people to nature and building awareness of local ecosystems, wildlife habitats, water resources, and conservation efforts. By encouraging exploration and discovery, these spaces can help foster a sense of responsibility and stewardship among community members, empowering them to become active participants in protecting and preserving natural resources. Educational experiences can also strengthen community understanding of sustainability, environmental challenges, and the importance of conservation practices that support long-term ecological health. Through partnerships with schools, community organizations, conservation groups, and cultural institutions, the County can expand opportunities for lifelong learning and environmental engagement. By positioning parks as places of both recreation and education, the County can create meaningful experiences that deepen connections to the natural world, enrich community knowledge, and inspire future generations to value, protect, and care for the resources that define the County's unique character.

POTENTIAL FUNDING SOURCES

This chapter identifies potential funding sources based on current grant eligibility. Grant funding availability and program requirements can change over time due to federal and state policy requirements. Potential grants relevant to Catawba County Parks include:

- Recreational Trails Program (RTP)
- Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)
- Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF)
- Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program (ORLP)
- North Carolina Complete the Trails Program (CTP)
- Great Trails State Program (GTSP)
- Accessibility for Parks Program (AP Grant)



 **Figure 1: Bakers Mountain Park Water Feature**

Protect What Matters

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Expand and protect existing park lands through strategic land acquisition and conservation partnerships.	Coordinate with Catawba Lands Conservancy and Foothills Conservancy to evaluate conservation opportunities.	X				Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	
	Develop criteria for evaluating future land acquisition opportunities, including ecological value, park expansion potential, public access, and long-term management needs.	X				Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy Catawba County Planning	
	Identify priority parcels adjacent to existing County parks for potential acquisition, easement, or conservation protection.		X			Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Acquire land around Bakers Mountain, Riverbend, or Mountain Creek Park as the opportunity arises.			X		Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Consider acquisitions of parcels within service gap areas as noted on the Drive Shed Map within the LOS Chapter. These land acquisitions could expand the system's reach and ensure all are within a reasonable distance to a County park.			X		Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	LWCF PARTF ORLP
Restore and manage natural habitats through invasive species removal, native plant restoration, and resource stewardship.	Identify priority areas within each park for invasive species removal and native habitat restoration.	X				Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	NCLWF LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Develop park-specific natural resource management strategies for forests, riparian areas, meadows, and sensitive habitats.		X			NC State Parks Catawba Riverkeeper NC Land and Water Fund	NCLWF LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Incorporate restoration projects into volunteer workdays and partner-led stewardship events.	X			X		NCLWF LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Track restoration progress over time through routine site assessments and maintenance records.		X		X	Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Catawba Riverkeeper	

Protect What Matters

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Preserve significant cultural and historical resources and incorporate them into future planning efforts.	Inventory known historic, cultural, and legacy resources within the park system.	X				Catawba County Museum of History Historical Association of Catawba County	
	Evaluate whether resources should be preserved, interpreted, adaptively reused, or documented.	X				Catawba County Museum of History Historical Association of Catawba County	
	Incorporate cultural and historic interpretation into signage, programming, and self-guided experiences.	X			X	Catawba County Museum of History Historical Association of Catawba County	LWCF PARTF ORLP
Strengthen partnerships with conservation organizations to advance long-term preservation goals.	Establish regular coordination meetings with conservation partners.	X				Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	
	Identify shared priorities for land conservation, greenway connectivity, and habitat protection.	X				Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy NC Land and Water Fund	NCLWF LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Collaborate on grant applications, landowner outreach, and conservation funding opportunities.	X			X	Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Develop partner roles for acquisition, stewardship, restoration, education, and long-term management.		X			Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Develop a Land Management Plan to guide the County's long term goals.	X			X		
	Consider a new position for an internal Land Management Coordinator to work alongside partner organizations to bring forth the goals set within the Land Management Plan.		X			Catawba Lands Conservancy Foothills Conservancy	"LWCF PARTF ORLP

Connect to Nature

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Expand passive recreation experiences that encourage exploration and discovery.	Enhance existing trail experiences through improved signage, trail loops, and points of interest.	X				Carolina Thread Trail NC Trails Program	RTP LWCF PARTF ORLP CTP GTSP
	Identify opportunities for low-impact amenities such as overlooks, nature observation areas, quiet seating areas, and interpretive trails.		X			NC Trails Program	RTP LWCF PARTF ORLP CTP GTSP
	Add small-scale nature-based features that support individual exploration without over-programming the parks.		X				LWCF PARTF ORLP
	Continue to collaborate with the Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) and other regional partners.				X	Carolina Thread Trail NC Trails Program	RTP LWCF PARTF ORLP CTP GTSP
Develop interpretive and educational experiences that highlight natural and cultural resources.	Develop self-guided tours, trail-based learning opportunities, or seasonal nature education materials.	X				NC State Parks	
	Create interpretive sign themes for each park based on its unique ecology, history, and recreational identity.		X				
	Incorporate multilingual interpretation where appropriate to improve access and inclusion.		X			Centro Latino Catawba County Library System	PARTF
	Create a permanent position for environmental education and cultural resource initiatives and programming.			X			

Connect to Nature

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Integrate arts, culture, and nature through partnerships, programming, and special events.	Partner with local arts organizations and institutions to host nature-based art, music, or theater events in parks.	X				Arts Culture Catawba	
	Identify park locations that can support small-scale arts and cultural programming without impacting natural resources.	X				Arts Culture Catawba	
	Explore rotating outdoor art installations, nature photography events, plein air painting, or cultural performances.		X			Arts Culture Catawba	
	Pursue shared funding opportunities with arts, cultural, and educational organizations to bring more permanent art features like painted benches, murals, etc.				X	Arts Culture Catawba Catawba County Schools	
Strengthen connections between parks and community institutions such as libraries, museums, and schools.	Coordinate with libraries, museums, schools, and educational partners to expand outdoor learning programs.	X			X	Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library System NC State Parks	
	Develop recurring nature-based activities tied to reading, art, science, and environmental education.		X			Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library System NC State Parks Arts Culture Catawba	PARTF
	Create opportunities for school groups and youth organizations to use parks as outdoor classrooms.	X				Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library System NC State Parks	
	Build partner-led programming into annual park calendars.		X			Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library System NC State Parks	

Support Wellness

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Create spaces that support reflection, mindfulness, and connection to nature.	Identify quiet areas within existing parks that could support reflection, meditation, birding, or nature observation.	X					
	Add seating, shade, overlooks, or small gathering areas that support quiet use.		X				PARTF
	Incorporate these quiet area spaces into trail systems and accessible routes where feasible.		X				PARTF
	Establish a County design standard that ensures new additions remain simple, natural, and consistent with the passive park experience.			X			
Expand wellness-focused programs and activities within County parks.	Support partner-led low-impact wellness programs such as yoga, guided walks, and mindfulness activities within County parks.	X				Catawba County Public Health Department of Social Services Catawba Valley Health System Catawba County Library System	
	Identify which parks are best suited for different types of wellness programming based on setting, access, and amenities.	X				Catawba County Public Health Department of Social Services Catawba Valley Health System	
	Develop seasonal wellness programming that encourages repeat visitation and use of natural spaces.		X			Catawba County Public Health Department of Social Services Catawba Valley Health System	

Support Wellness

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Partner with health, social service, and community organizations to deliver wellness initiatives.	Coordinate with Public Health and the Department of Social Services to identify programs or outreach resources that could be hosted in parks.	X			X	Catawba County Public Health Department of Social Services Catawba Valley Health System	
	Reestablish a relationship with the NC Cooperative Extension as it relates to programming efforts within County parks and sharing of environmental education resources.					NC Cooperative Extension	
	Explore partnerships with healthcare providers and wellness organizations to support trail use and outdoor recreation.		X			Catawba County Public Health Department of Social Services Catawba Valley Health System	
	Provide park spaces for partner-led programs that align with physical, mental, and social well-being.		X			Catawba County Public Health Department of Social Services Catawba Valley Health System	
	Develop shared messaging that promotes parks as accessible wellness resources.		X			Catawba County Public Health Department of Social Services Catawba Valley Health System	
Increase opportunities for residents of all ages and abilities to enjoy healthy outdoor experiences.	Expand passive programming that supports older adults, families, youth, and residents with varying ability levels.	X					
	Evaluate comfort amenities such as seating, shade, water access, and restrooms to support longer visits.		X				AP Grant

Invest in Quality Experiences

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Implement a proactive approach to facility maintenance, replacement, and capital improvements.	Develop a lifecycle replacement schedule for major park assets, including restrooms, shelters, signs, trails, parking areas, and support facilities.	X					
	Use site assessments to identify short-term repairs, mid-term improvements, and long-term capital investments.		X				
	Establish annual maintenance priorities based on safety, accessibility, visitor experience, and asset condition.	X					
	Coordinate capital needs with future budgeting and grant opportunities.	X			X		PARTF ORLP AP Grant



 **Figure 2: St. Stephens Park**

Invest in Quality Experiences

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Improve accessibility, wayfinding, safety, and visitor comfort throughout the park system.	Install consistent wayfinding signs, park maps, and amenity identification signs across the system ensuring signs are accessible, engaging, and consistent with County branding.	X					PARTF
	Conduct an ADA Transition Plan to identify gaps in accessibility at Catawba County Parks.	X					
	Update the Mountain Creek kayak launch to make it more accessible.		X			Duke Energy	AP Grant
	Update trails to make them Adaptive Trails, increasing opportunities for individuals who use wheelchairs, mobility aids, or adaptive equipment.			X		Adaptive Trails Program NC Trails Program	AP Grant
	Update signage to include Spanish and other inclusive communication strategies where appropriate.	X					PARTF
	Improve accessible pathways between parking, restrooms, picnic areas, playgrounds, trailheads, and visitor amenities.		X		X		AP Grant
	Address known safety concerns such as erosion, trip hazards, unclear circulation, and difficult access points.		X		X		

Invest in Quality Experiences

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Strengthen operational capacity through investments in maintenance and support facilities.	Assess internal operational needs, including storage, maintenance sheds, equipment space, staffing support areas, and vehicle access.	X					
	Identify priority organizational improvements that would help staff maintain parks more efficiently.	X					
	Include internal facilities in capital planning alongside public-facing improvements.		X				
	Evaluate whether current maintenance spaces are adequate for existing and future system needs.		X				
	Construct a new maintenance storage facility at Bakers Mountain Park.		X				
Evaluate aging or underutilized facilities to identify future opportunities and priorities.	Conduct facility assessment for the "Bean House", to understand how the structure can be utilized within the system.	X					
	Conduct a site specific master plan for the "Bean House", the adjacent parking area, and the road access.		X				
	Evaluate potential future uses, including volunteer training, educational programs, storage, interpretation, or limited public use.	X					
	Identify costs, constraints, funding challenges, and long-term operational implications to create a standard operation procedure (SOP) prior to major investments.		X				

Inspire Stewardship

Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Expand environmental education and interpretive programming.	Develop ranger-led programs focused on ecology, wildlife, conservation, history, and outdoor skills.	X				Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library NC State Parks	
	Create educational programming tied to each park's unique natural resources.		X			Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library NC State Parks	
	Work with partners to create an annual schedule using parks as outdoor classrooms for schools, youth groups, and community organizations.		X			Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library NC State Parks Scouting Organizations	
	Coordinate education efforts with signage, volunteer programs, and partner-led events.	X			X	Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library NC State Parks	
Build a structured volunteer program that supports conservation, education, and maintenance efforts.	Establish a formal volunteer framework with roles, expectations, training, and recognition.	X					
	Identify recurring volunteer opportunities such as trail maintenance, invasive species removal, litter cleanups, habitat restoration, and event support.	X					
	Establish a volunteer coordinator role or volunteer-led coordinator model to help organize efforts.		X				

Inspire Stewardship							
Recommendation	Action Item	Time Frame				Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources
		Short Term (0-3 Years)	Near Term (4-6 Years)	Long Term (7-10 Years)	Ongoing		
Develop partnerships with schools, Scouts, nonprofits, and community organizations to advance stewardship initiatives.	Create service-learning opportunities for schools and youth organizations.	X				Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library NC State Parks Scouting Organizations	
	Partner with Scout groups on trail work, maintenance, habitat projects, and educational initiatives.		X			Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library NC State Parks Scouting Organizations	
	Coordinate with civic groups and non-profits for recurring stewardship days.	X				Catawba County Schools Catawba County Library NC State Parks Scouting Organizations	
	Develop a menu of volunteer projects appropriate for different ages, abilities, and group sizes.		X				
Leverage volunteer contributions to strengthen grant competitiveness and community ownership of park resources.	Track volunteer participation and hours to support reporting, planning, and grant applications.	X					
	Document volunteer accomplishments through photos, project summaries, and annual reports.	X			X		
	Recognize volunteers publicly to build long-term ownership and support for County parks.	X			X		

APPENDIX



2026

Catawba County, NC

Parks Needs Assessment Survey

Findings Report



ETC
INSTITUTE

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Executive Summary

2026 Catawba County Parks and Recreation Survey Executive Summary

Overview

ETC Institute administered a parks and recreation needs assessment survey for Catawba County during the months of winter 2026. This survey will be used to gather input to help determine community recreation needs for the county.

Methodology

ETC Institute mailed a survey packet to a random sample of households in Catawba County. Each survey packet contained a cover letter, a copy of the survey, and a postage-paid return envelope. Residents who received the survey were given the option of returning the survey by mail or completing it online at *CatawbaCountySurvey.org*.

After the surveys were mailed, ETC Institute followed up with residents to encourage participation. To prevent people who were not residents of Catawba County from participating, everyone who completed the survey online was required to enter their home address prior to submitting the survey. ETC Institute then matched the addresses that were entered online with the addresses that were originally selected for the random sample. If the address from a survey completed online did not match one of the addresses selected for the sample, the online survey was not included in the final database for this report.

The goal was to collect a minimum of 400 surveys from residents. The goal was met with 416 surveys collected. The overall results for the sample of 416 surveys has a precision of at least ± 4.8 at the 95% level of confidence.

This report contains the following:

- Charts showing the overall results of the survey (Section 2)
- Priority Investment Rating (PIR) that identifies priorities for facilities and programs (Section 3)
- Benchmarks comparing data from Catawba County to national averages (Section 4)
- Tabular data showing the overall results for all questions on the survey (Section 5)
- Answers to open-ended questions (Section 6)
- A copy of the cover letter and survey instrument (Section 7)

The major findings of the survey are summarized in the following pages.

Major Findings

Use of Parks. The highest percentage of respondents report visiting Riverbend Park (66%) and Mountain Creek Park (55%) in the past year. When asked to select the park they visit most often, Mountain Creek Park (39%) and Riverbend Park (38%) were the most commonly chosen answers. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of respondents visit a few times a year, 27% say six times or more per year, and 24% say monthly. Eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents feel “somewhat satisfied” (37%) or “very satisfied” (48%) with the overall condition of parks in Catawba County.

Parks and Recreation Locations. The highest percentage of respondents report using City of Hickory (62%), National Park Service (60%), and North Carolina State Parks (57%). City of Hickory (28%) and Catawba County Parks (14%) are visited most often.

Barriers to Use. The most commonly selected reasons why households have not participated in recreation programs or do not more often participate are not knowing what is offered (15%), distance from home (15%), and not interested/too busy (12%).

Communication Methods. Respondents most commonly learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities via Facebook (51%), friends and neighbors (49%), and the Catawba County website (40%). Over half (55%) of respondents said they would utilize an online event calendar to learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

Outdoor Spaces. The highest percentage of respondents say they use outdoor spaces for personal fitness/physical wellness (76%), time in nature (76%), and for fun (71%). The maximum amount of time respondents say they would travel to visit parks or outdoor spaces is 15-30 minutes (34%) or 30-60 minutes (29%).

Public Parks and Green Spaces. Forty-four percent (44%) of respondents think there is some need for additional parks and 39% say there is great need for additional parks. Most respondents (83%) say the existence of public parks and green spaces is “very important” to the quality of life in Catawba County.

Satisfaction with Value. Most respondents (80%) feel either “somewhat satisfied” (42%) or “very satisfied” (38%) with the overall value their household receives from Catawba County Parks.

Events/Programs Use. Twenty-one percent (21%) of respondents report participating in a Catawba County park event/program in the past year. Of these respondents, 51% rated the overall quality of programs as “excellent” and 43% “good”.

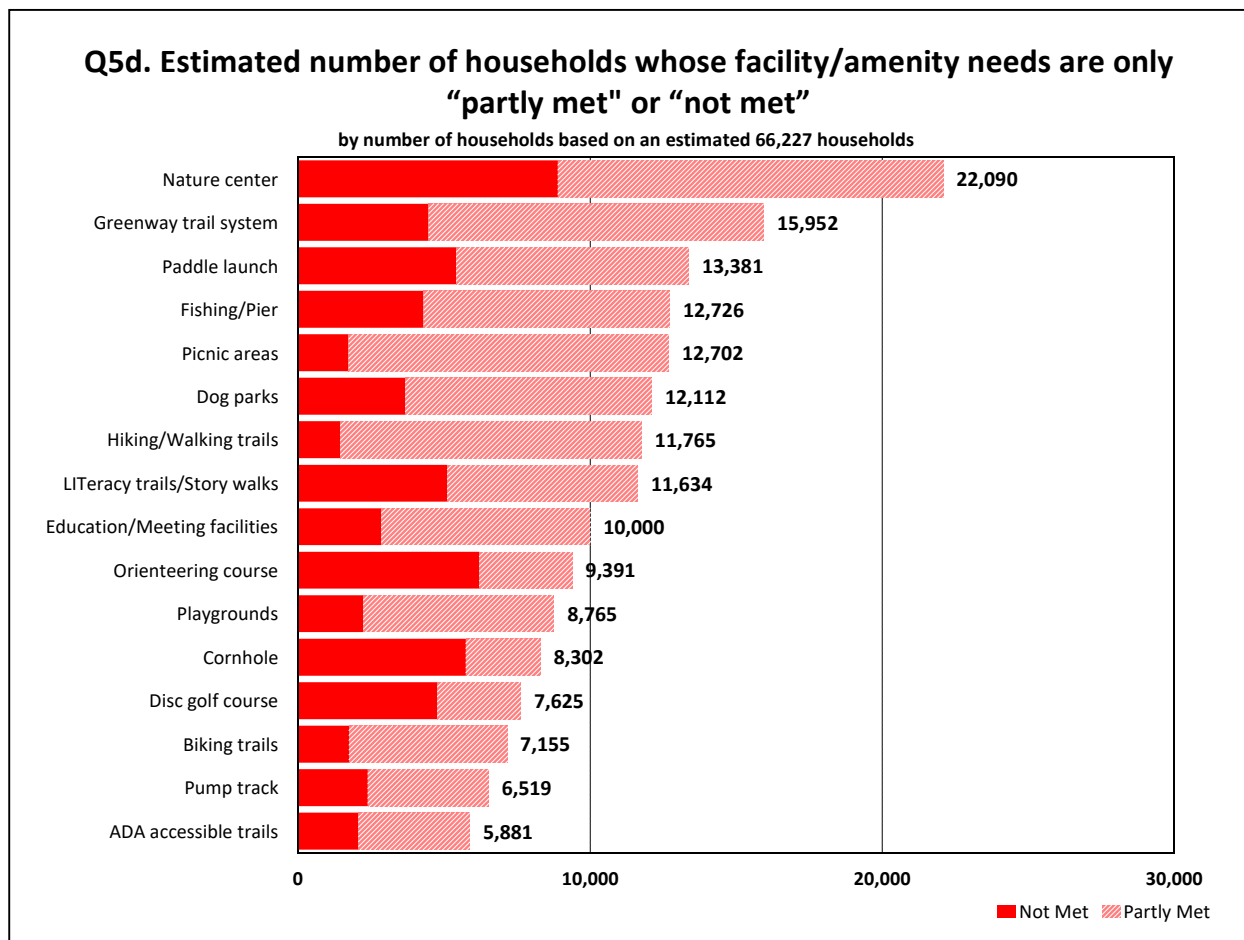
Parks and Recreation Facilities and Amenities Needs and Priorities

Facility/Amenity Needs: Respondents were asked to identify if their household had a need for 16 parks and recreation facilities/amenities and to rate how well their needs for each were currently being met. Based on this analysis, ETC Institute was able to estimate the number of households in the community that had the greatest “unmet” need for various facilities/amenities.

The three facilities/amenities with the highest number of households that have an unmet need:

1. Nature Center – 22,090 households
2. Greenway trail system – 15,952 households
3. Paddle launch – 13,381 households

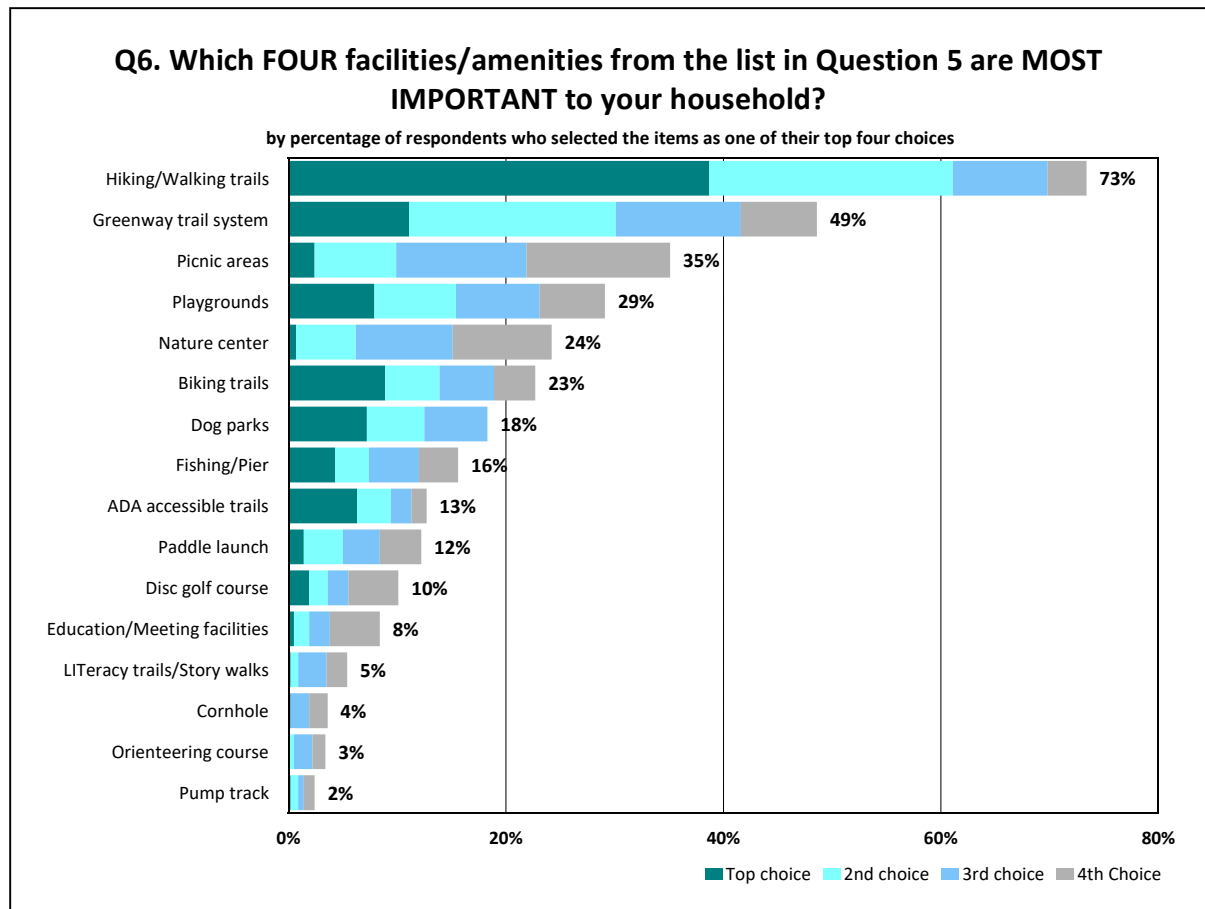
The estimated number of households that have unmet needs for each of the 16 facilities/amenities assessed is shown in the chart below.



Parks and Recreation Facilities/Amenities Importance: In addition to assessing the needs for each facility/amenity, ETC Institute also assessed the importance that residents placed on each item. Based on the sum of respondents' top four choices, these were the four amenities/facilities ranked most important to residents:

1. Hiking/walking trails (73%)
2. Greenway trail system (49%)
3. Picnic areas (35%)
4. Playgrounds (29%)

The percentage of residents who selected each facility/amenity as one of their top four choices is shown in the chart below.

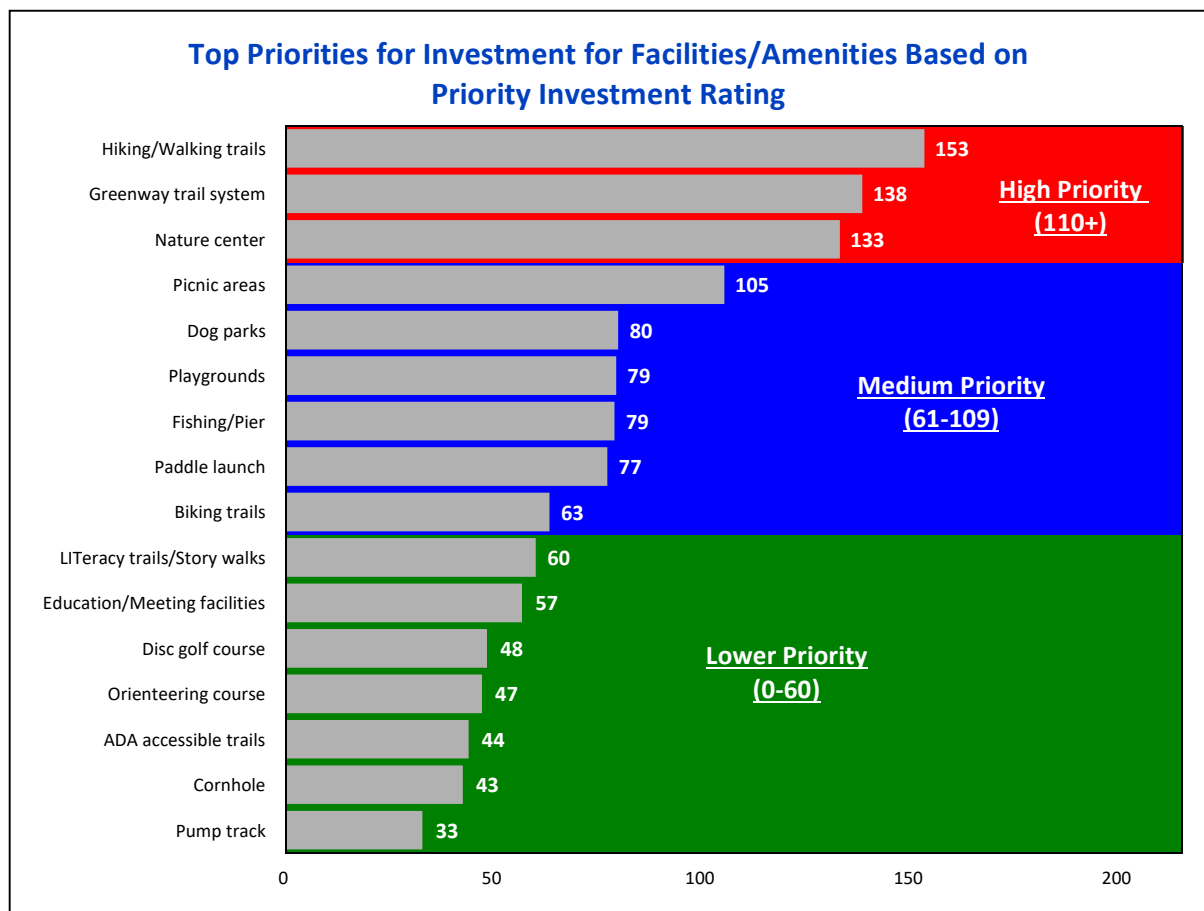


Priorities for Facilities/Amenities Investments: The **Priority Investment Rating (PIR)** was developed by ETC Institute to provide organizations with an objective tool for evaluating the priority that should be placed on recreation and parks investments. The Priority Investment Rating (PIR) equally weighs (1) the importance that residents place on amenities/facilities and (2) how many residents have unmet needs for the facility/amenity. [Details regarding the methodology for this analysis are provided in Section 3 of this report.]

Based the Priority Investment Rating (PIR), the following facilities/amenities were rated as high priorities for investment:

- Hiking/walking trails (PIR=153)
- Greenway trail system (PIR=138)
- Nature center (PIR=133)

The chart below shows the Priority Investment Rating for each of the 16 amenities/facilities assessed on the survey.



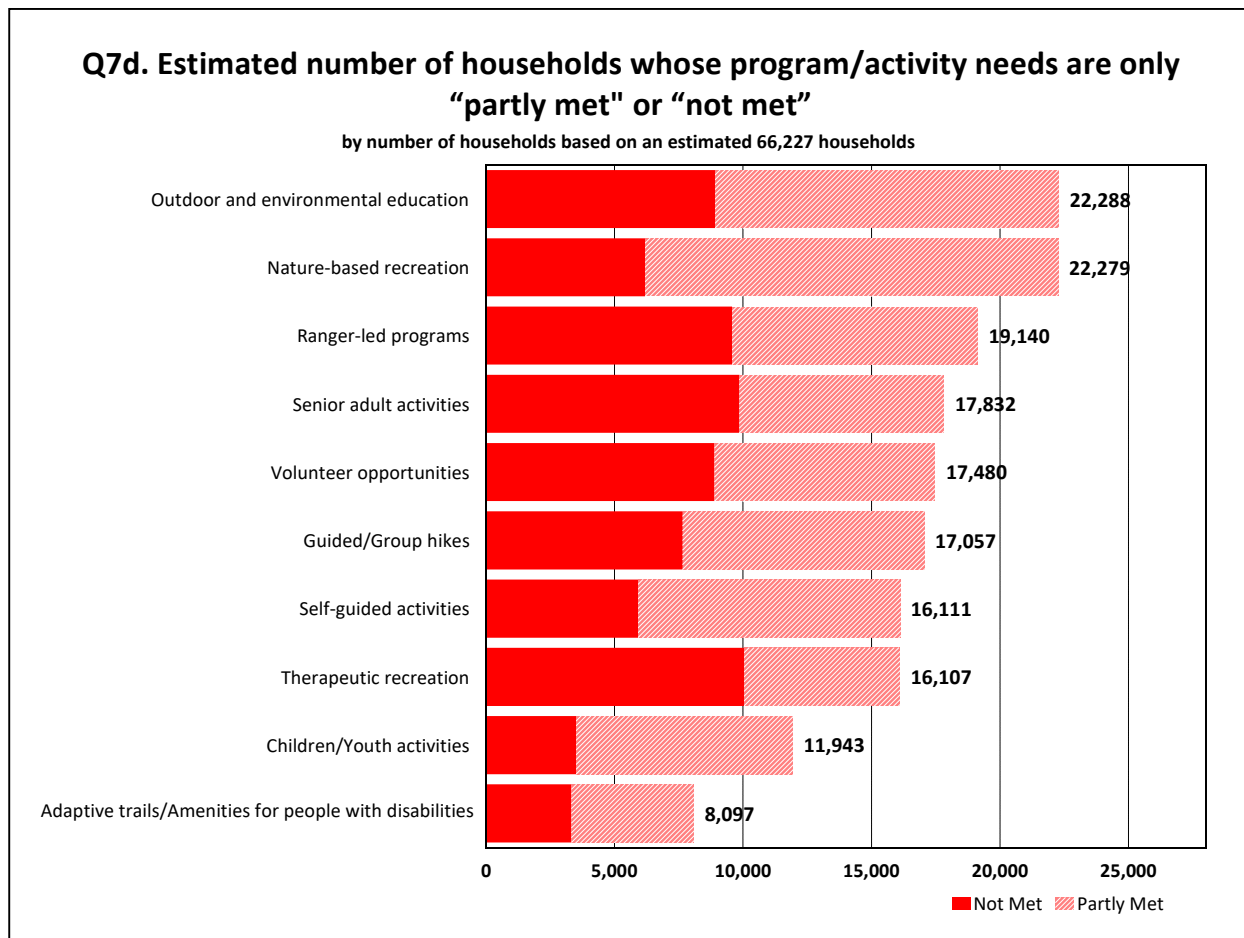
Parks and Recreation Programs/Activities Needs and Priorities

Program/Activity Needs: Respondents were asked to identify if their household had a need for 10 parks and recreation programs/activities and to rate how well their needs for each were currently being met. Based on this analysis, ETC Institute was able to estimate the number of households in the community that had the greatest “unmet” need for various programs/activities.

The three programs/activities with the highest number of households that have an unmet need:

1. Outdoor and environmental education – 22,288 households
2. Nature-based recreation – 22,279 households
3. Ranger-led programs – 19,140 households

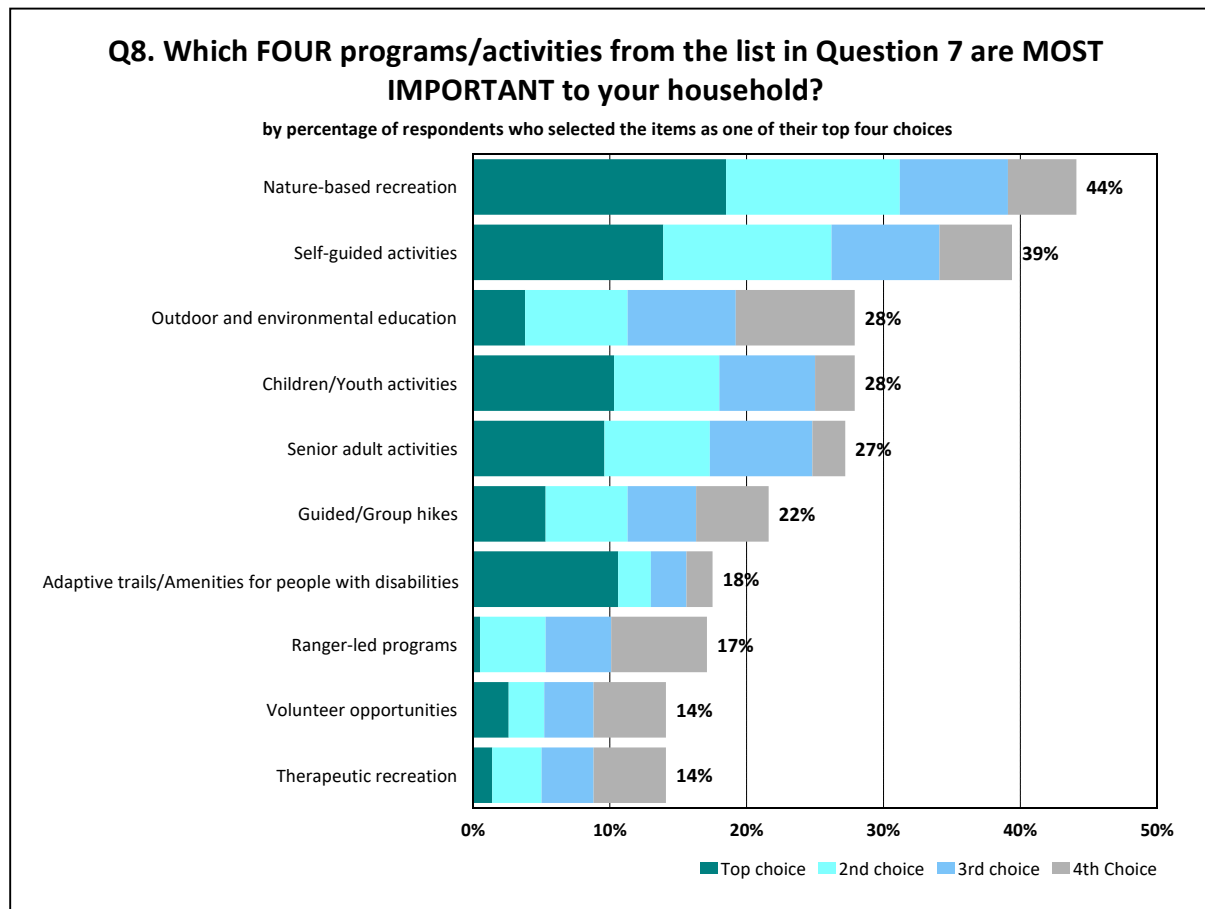
The estimated number of households that have unmet needs for each of the 10 facilities/amenities assessed is shown in the chart below.



Parks and Recreation Programs/Activities Importance: In addition to assessing the needs for each program/activity, ETC Institute also assessed the importance that residents placed on each item. Based on the sum of respondents' top four choices, these were the four programs/activities ranked most important to residents:

1. Nature-based recreation (44%)
2. Self-guided activities (39%)
3. Outdoor environmental education (28%) and Children/youth activities (28%)
4. Senior adult activities (27%)

The percentage of residents who selected each program/activity as one of their top four choices is shown in the chart below.

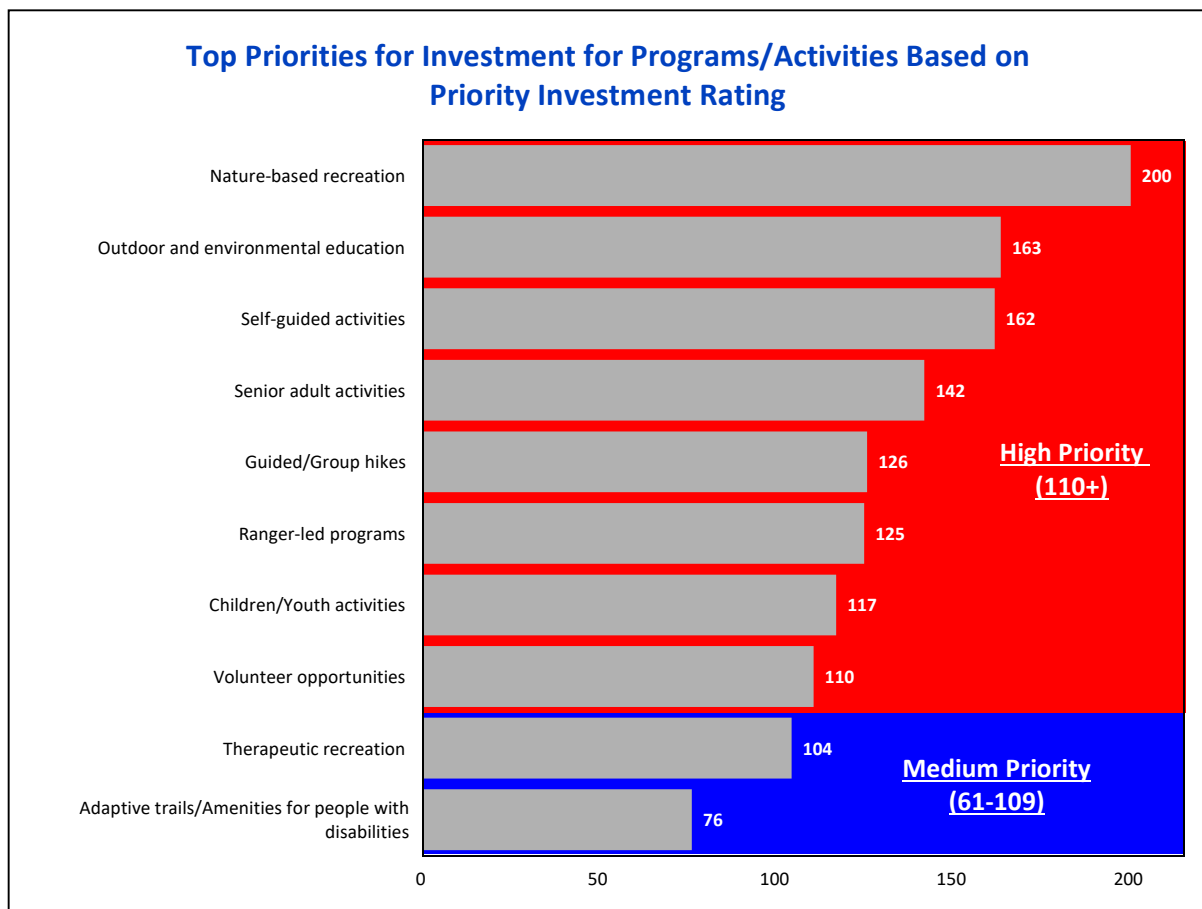


Priorities for Program/Activity Investments: The **Priority Investment Rating (PIR)** was developed by ETC Institute to provide organizations with an objective tool for evaluating the priority that should be placed on recreation and parks investments. The Priority Investment Rating (PIR) equally weighs (1) the importance that residents place on programs/activities and (2) how many residents have unmet needs for the program/activity. [Details regarding the methodology for this analysis are provided in Section 3 of this report.]

Based the Priority Investment Rating (PIR), the following programs/activities were rated as high priorities for investment:

- Nature-based recreation (PIR=200)
- Outdoor environmental education (PIR=163)
- Self-guided activities (PIR=162)
- Senior adult activities (PIR=142)
- Guided/group hikes (PIR=126)
- Ranger-led programs (PIR=125)
- Children/youth activities (PIR=117)
- Volunteer opportunities (PIR=110)

The chart below shows the Priority Investment Rating for each of the 10 programs/activities assessed on the survey.

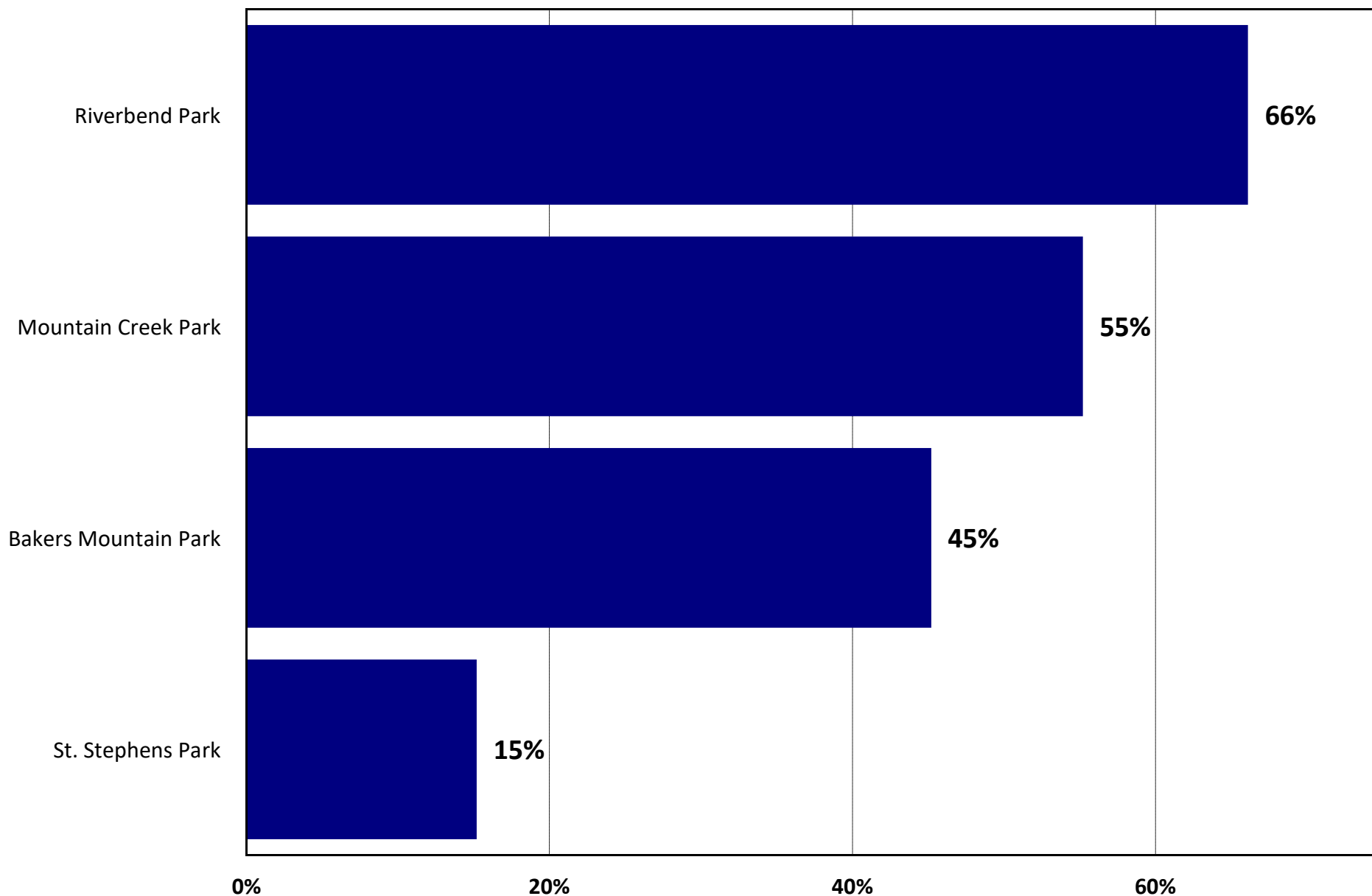




Charts & Graphs

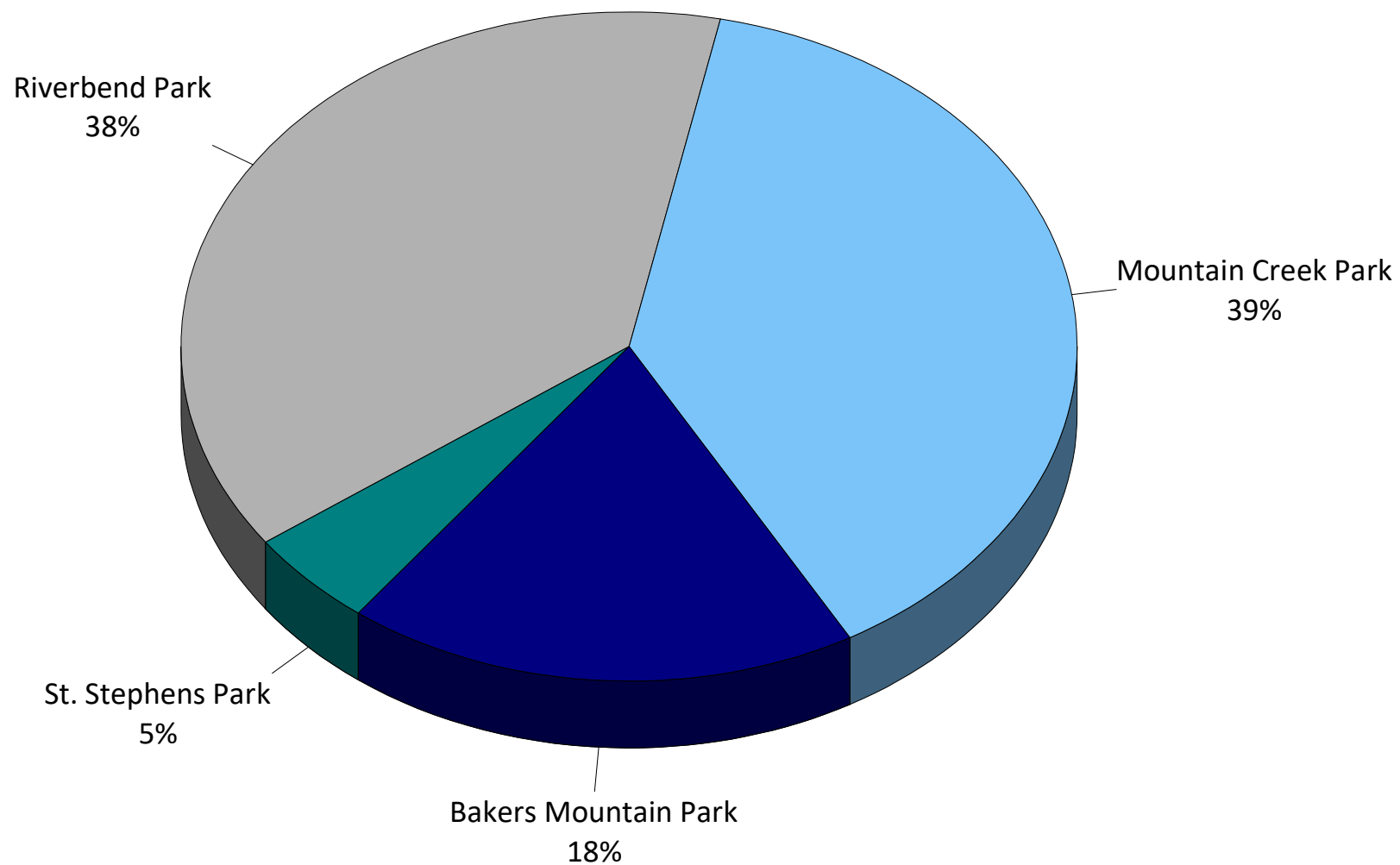
Q1. Which of the following Catawba County parks have you or members of your household visited during the past year?

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made) (excluding "none of these")



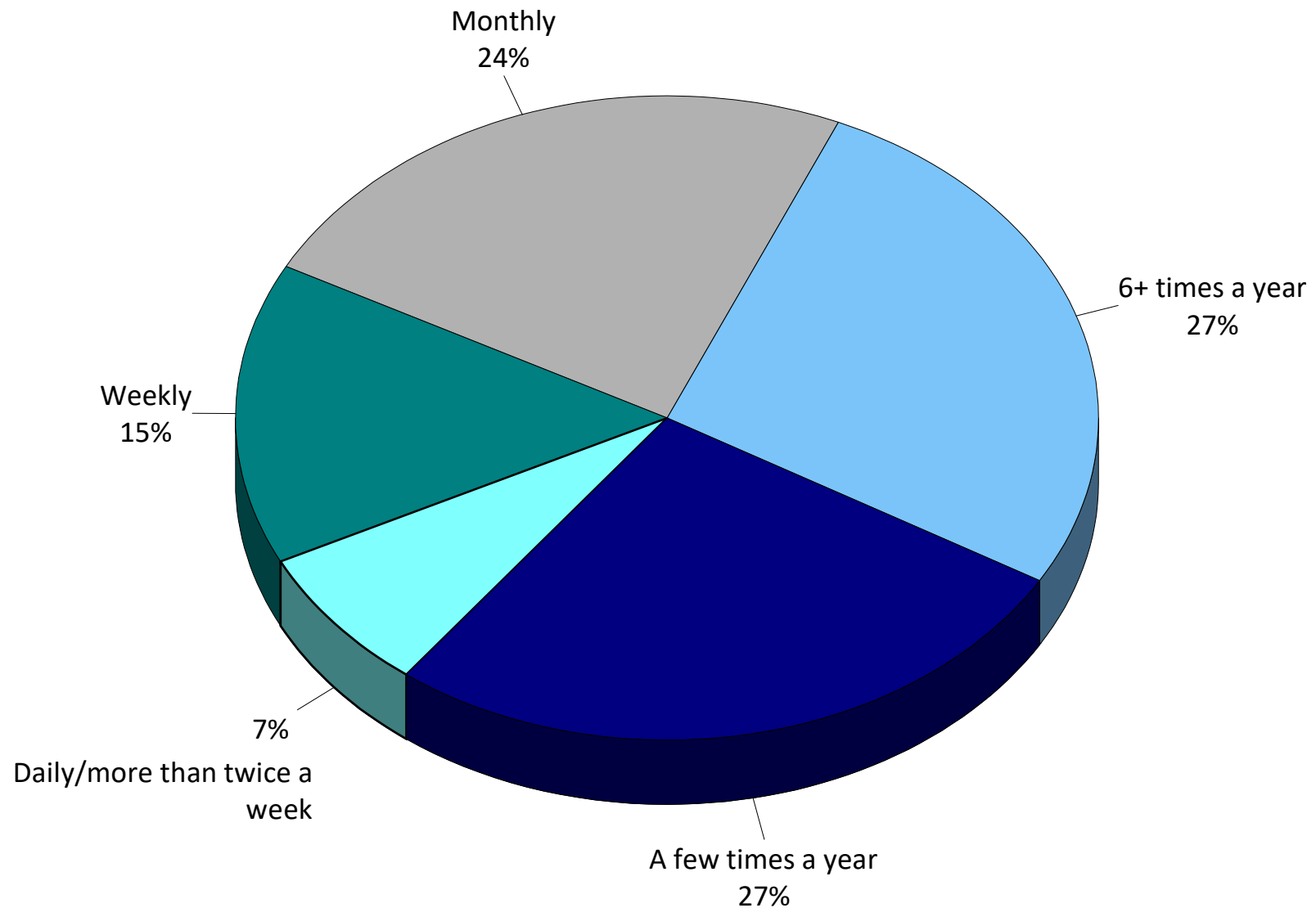
Q1a. Which Catawba County park do you visit most often?

by percentage of respondents who report visiting a park in the past year



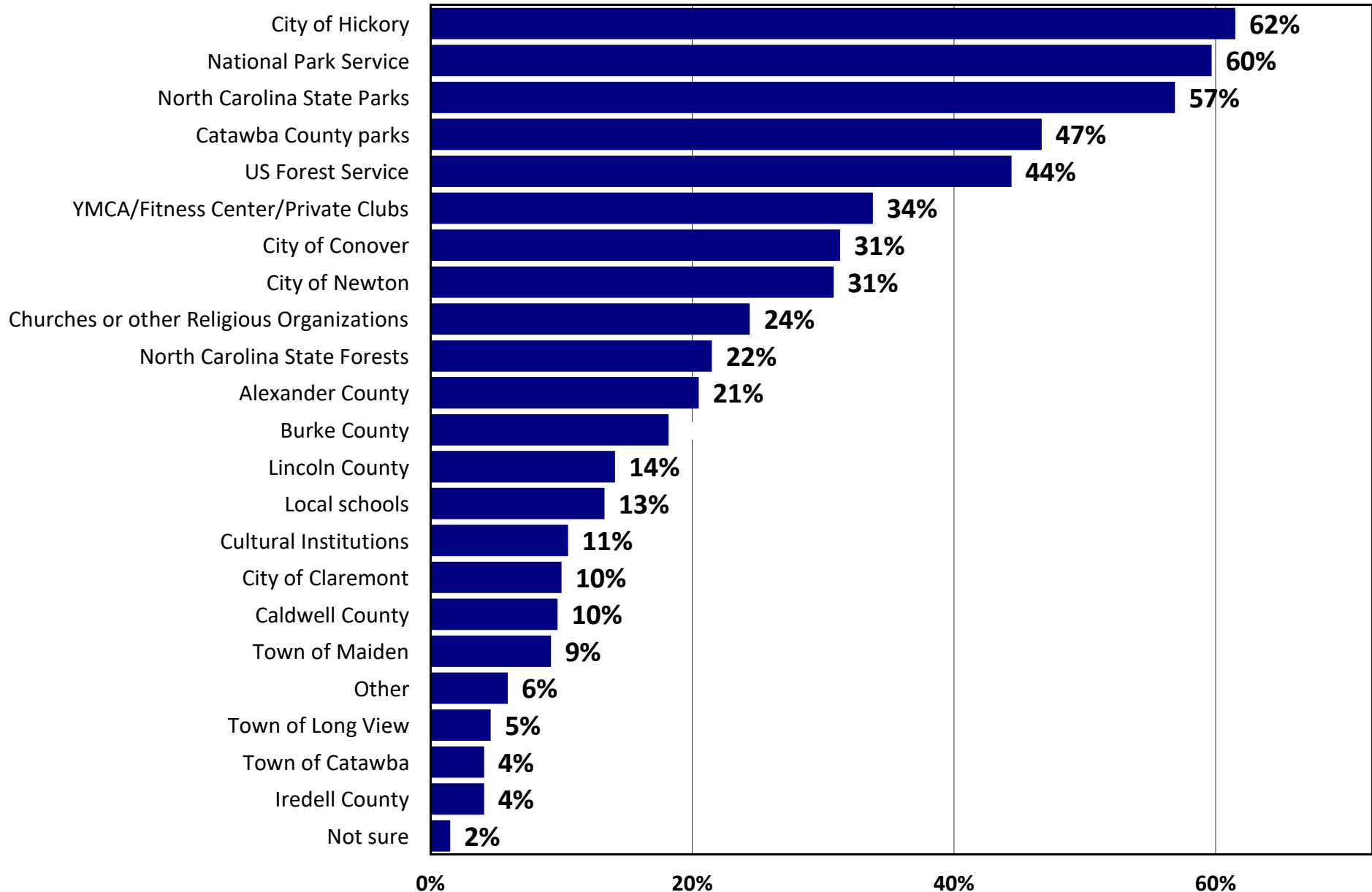
Q1b. How often do you come to a Catawba County park?

by percentage of respondents who report visiting a park in the past year (excluding "not provided")



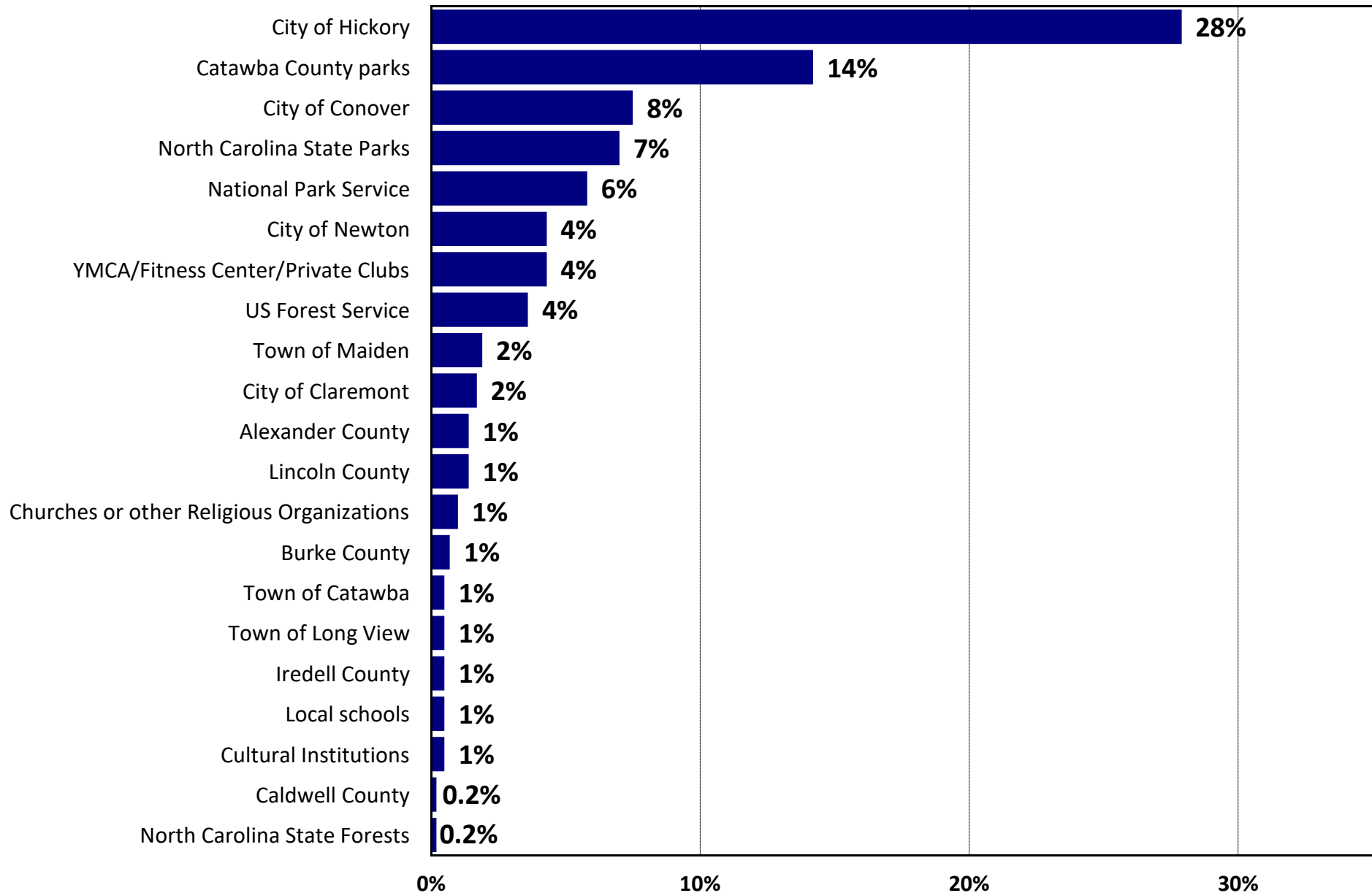
Q2. Which parks or recreation locations do you or other members of your household use or visit?

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made) (excluding "none")



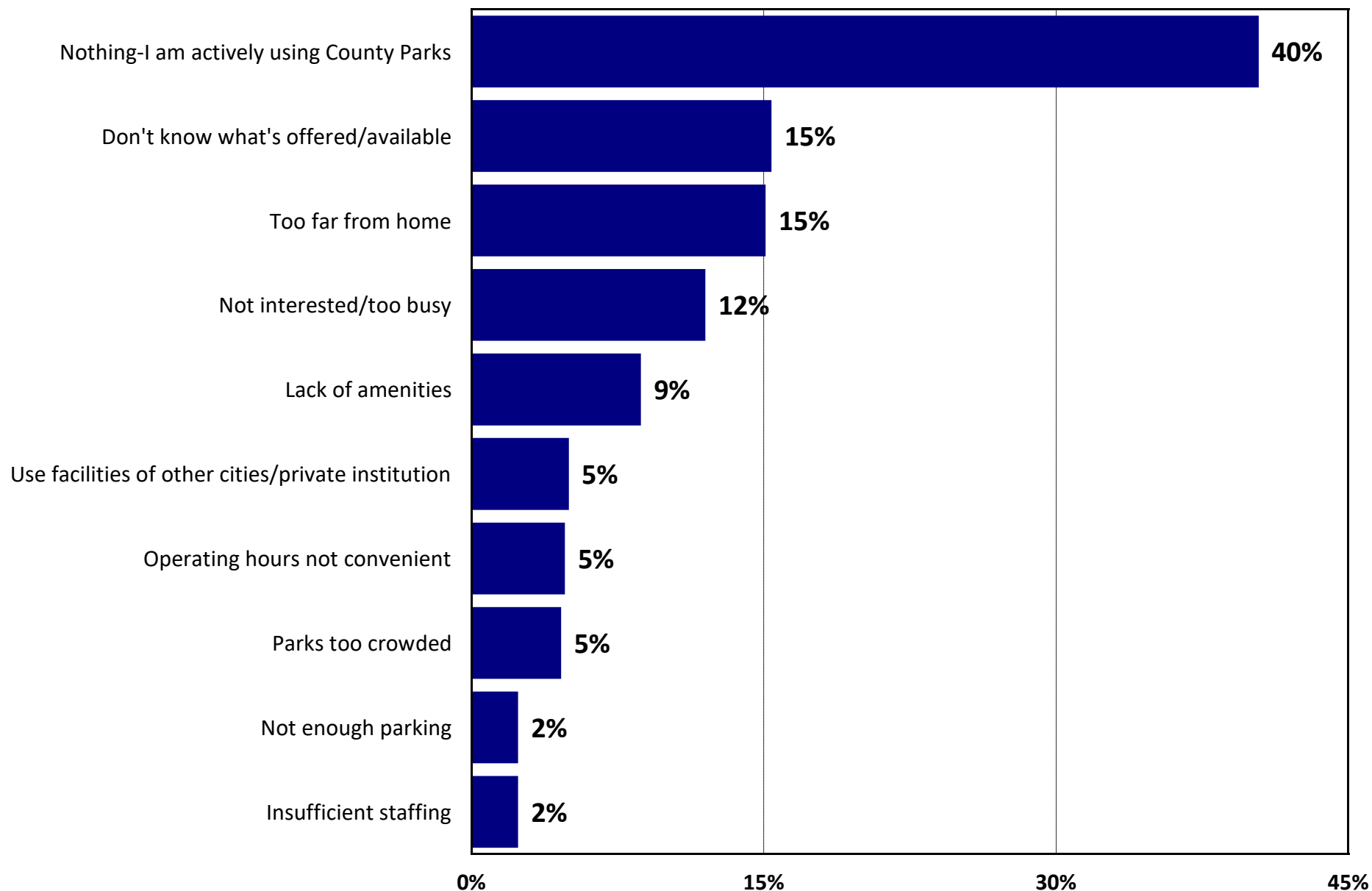
Q2a. Of the locations listed in Question 2, which ONE do you visit most for your household's recreation needs?

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made) (excluding "none")



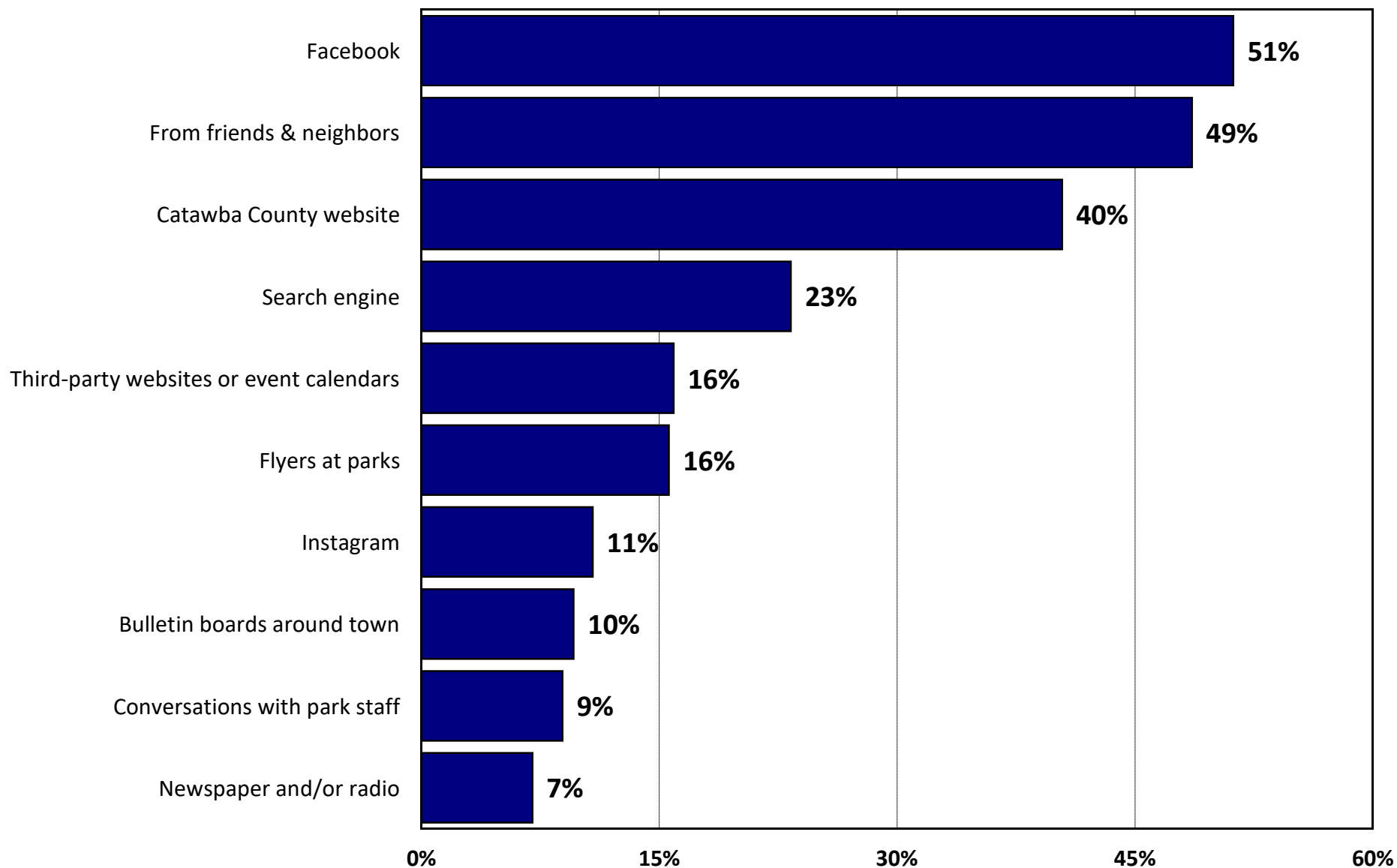
Q3. Which of the following reasons prevent you or other members of your household from visiting Catawba County parks?

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made)



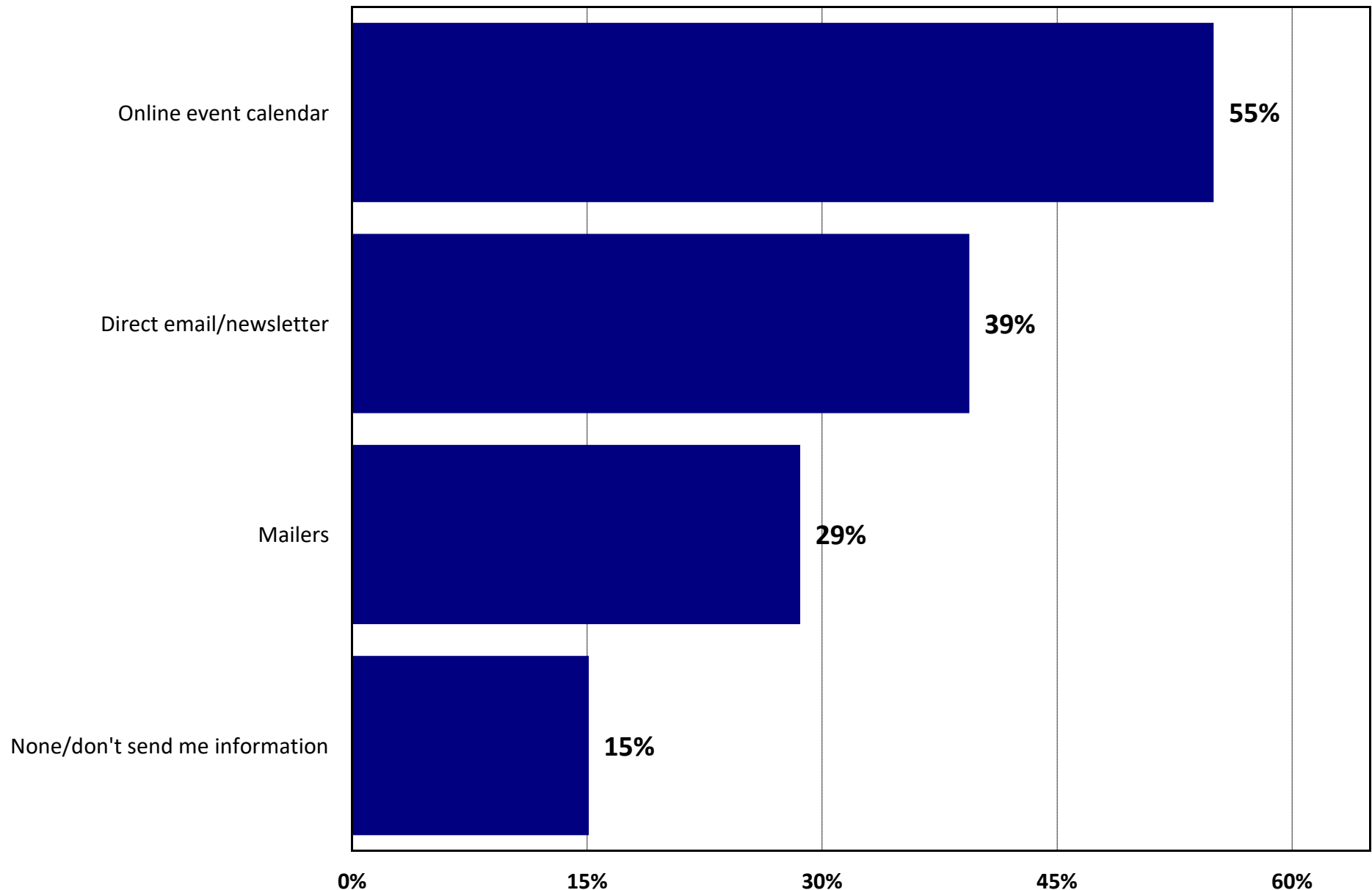
Q4. From the following list, please check all the ways you learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made)



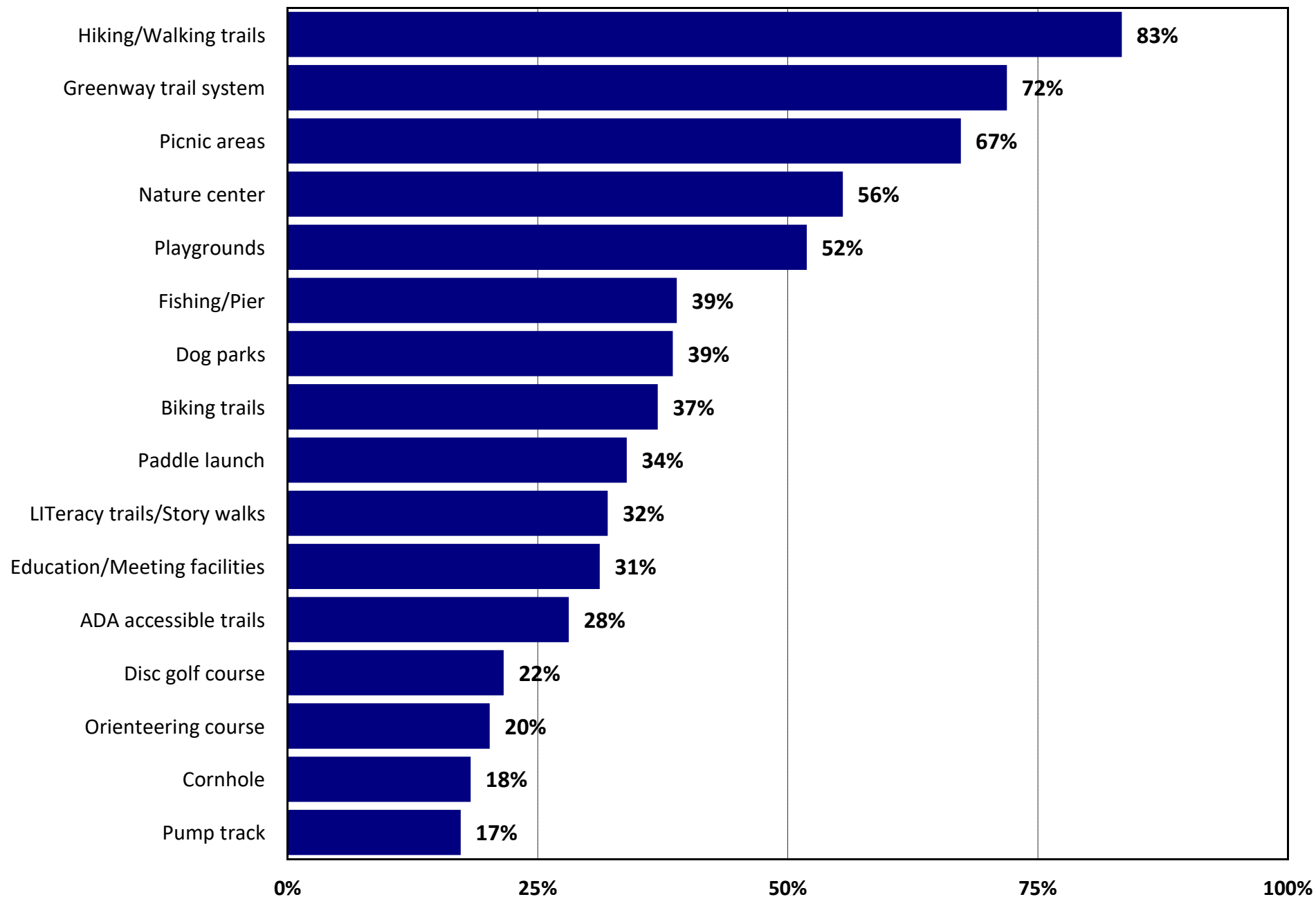
Q4a. From the following list, please check all the resources you would utilize to learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made)



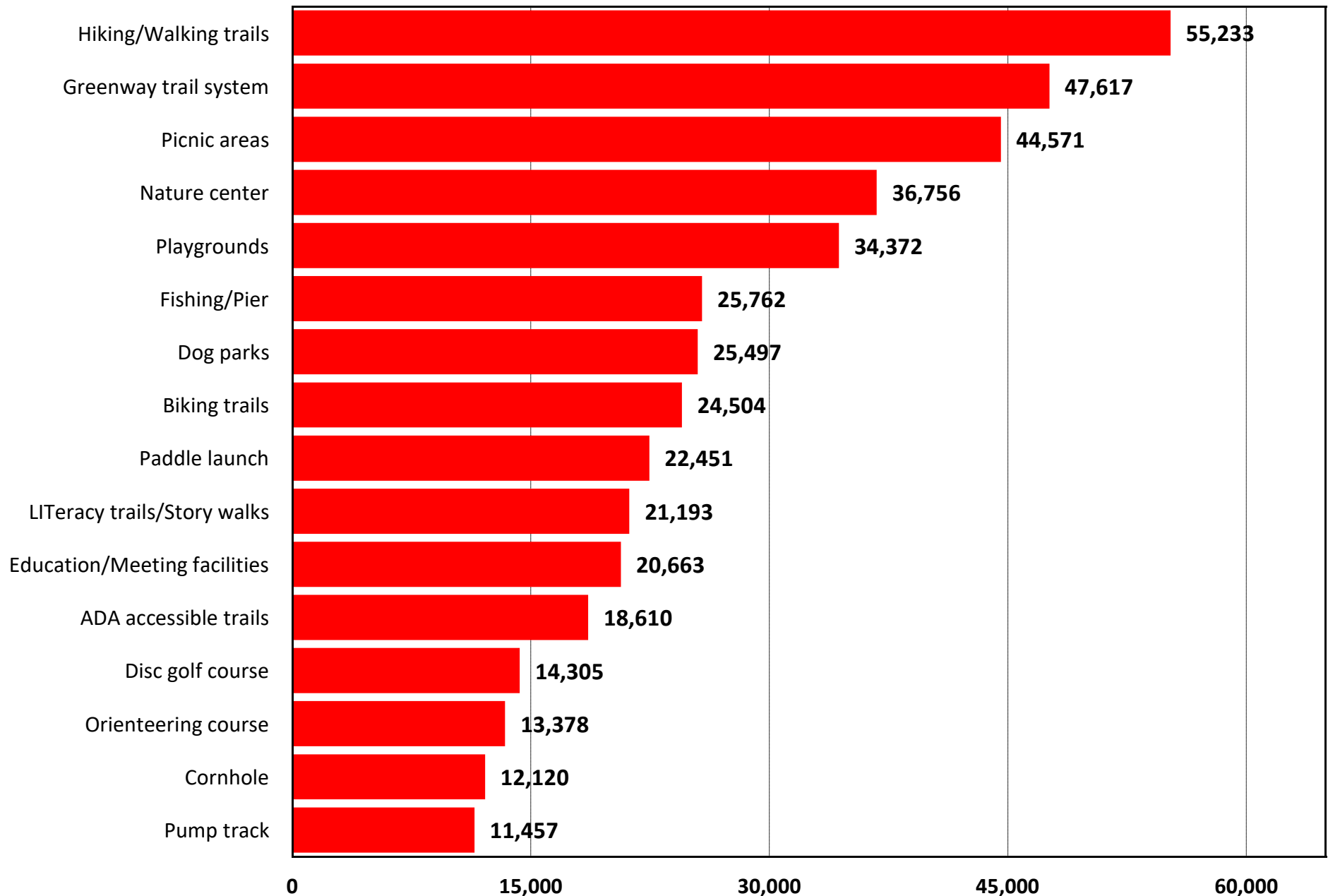
Q5. Need for Facility/Amenity

by percentage of respondents who indicated need



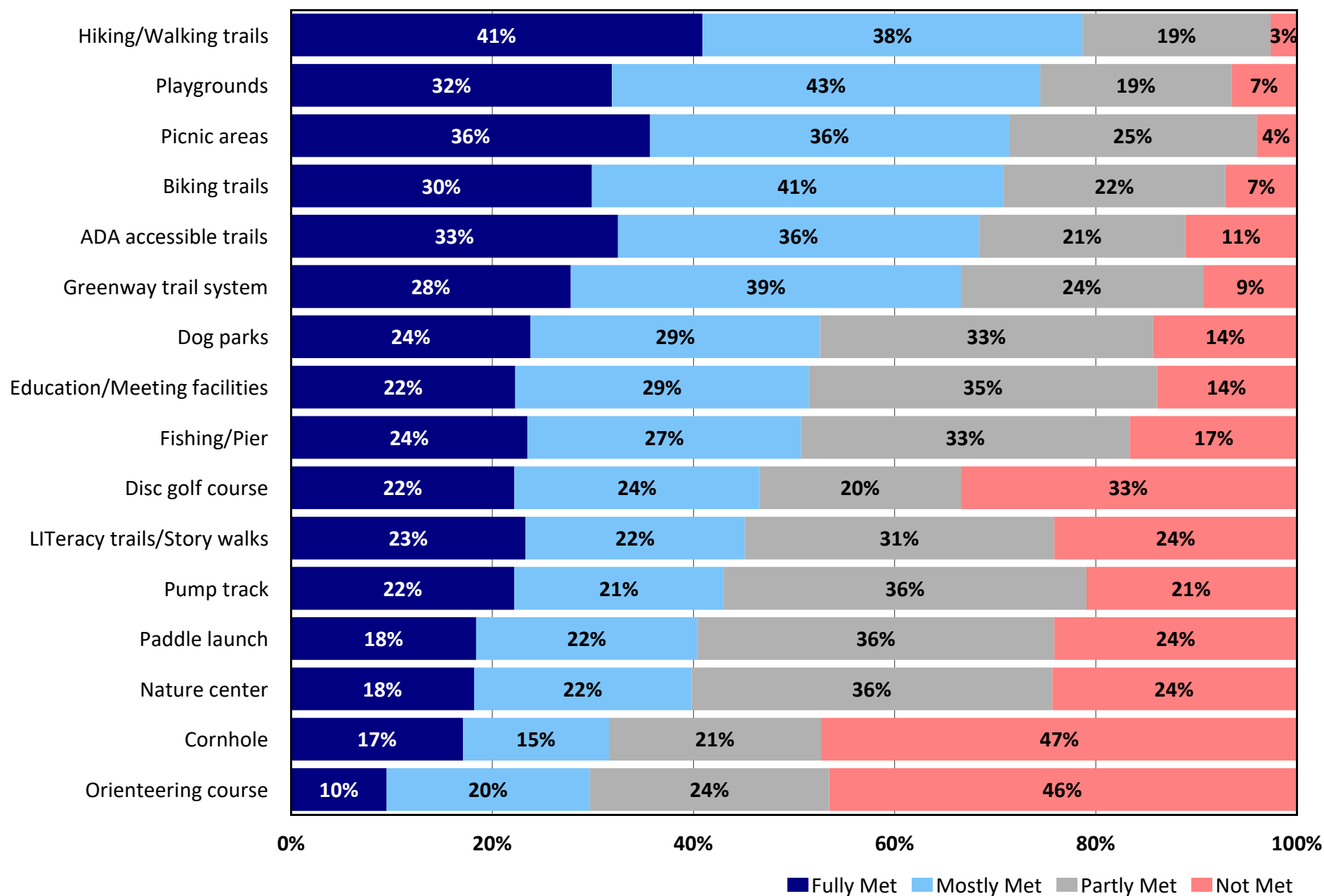
Q5b. Estimated number of households who have a need for facilities/amenities

by number of households based on an estimated 66,227 households



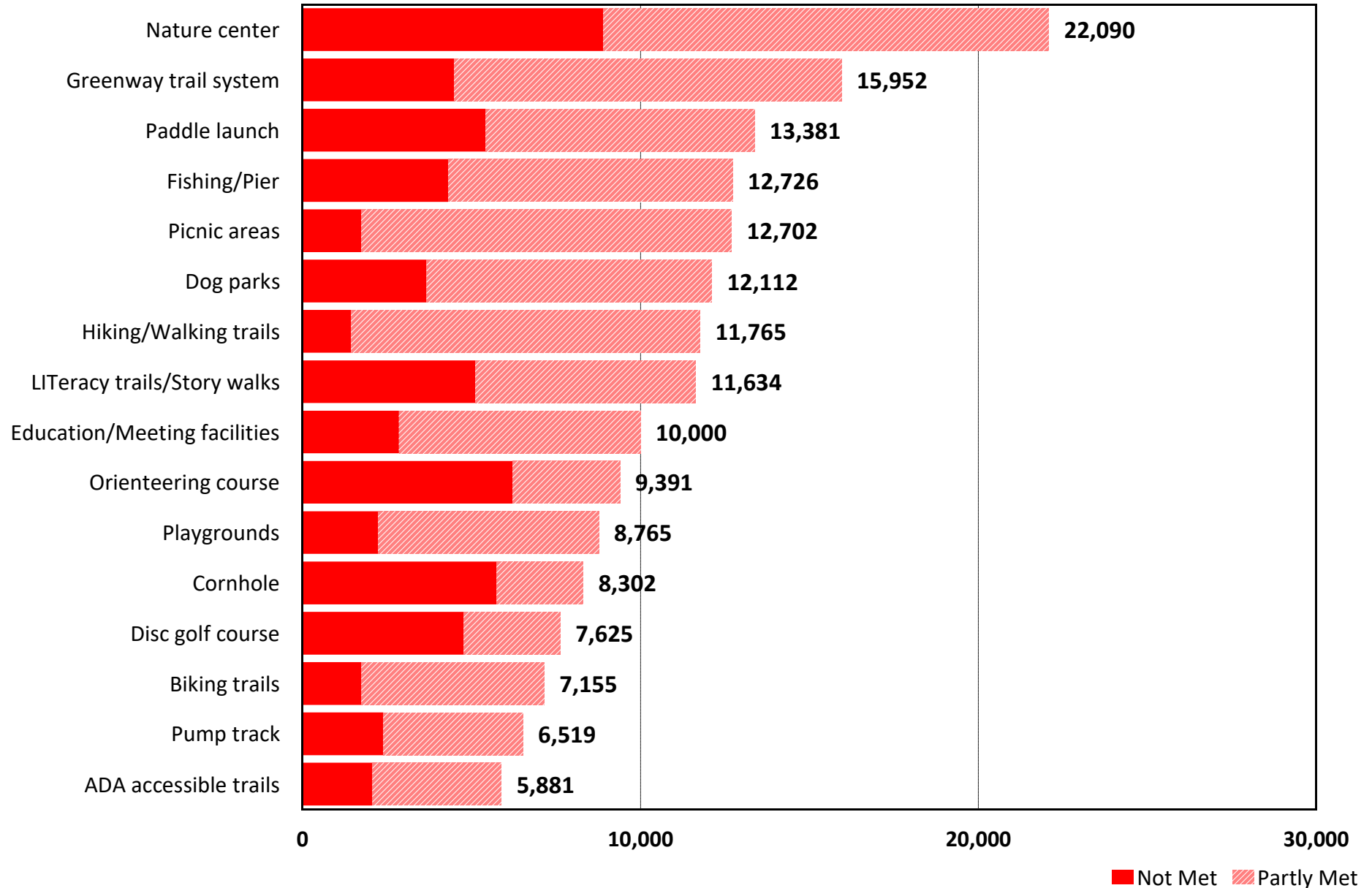
Q5c. Please indicate how well your needs are met for facilities/amenities

by percentage of respondents (excluding "no need")



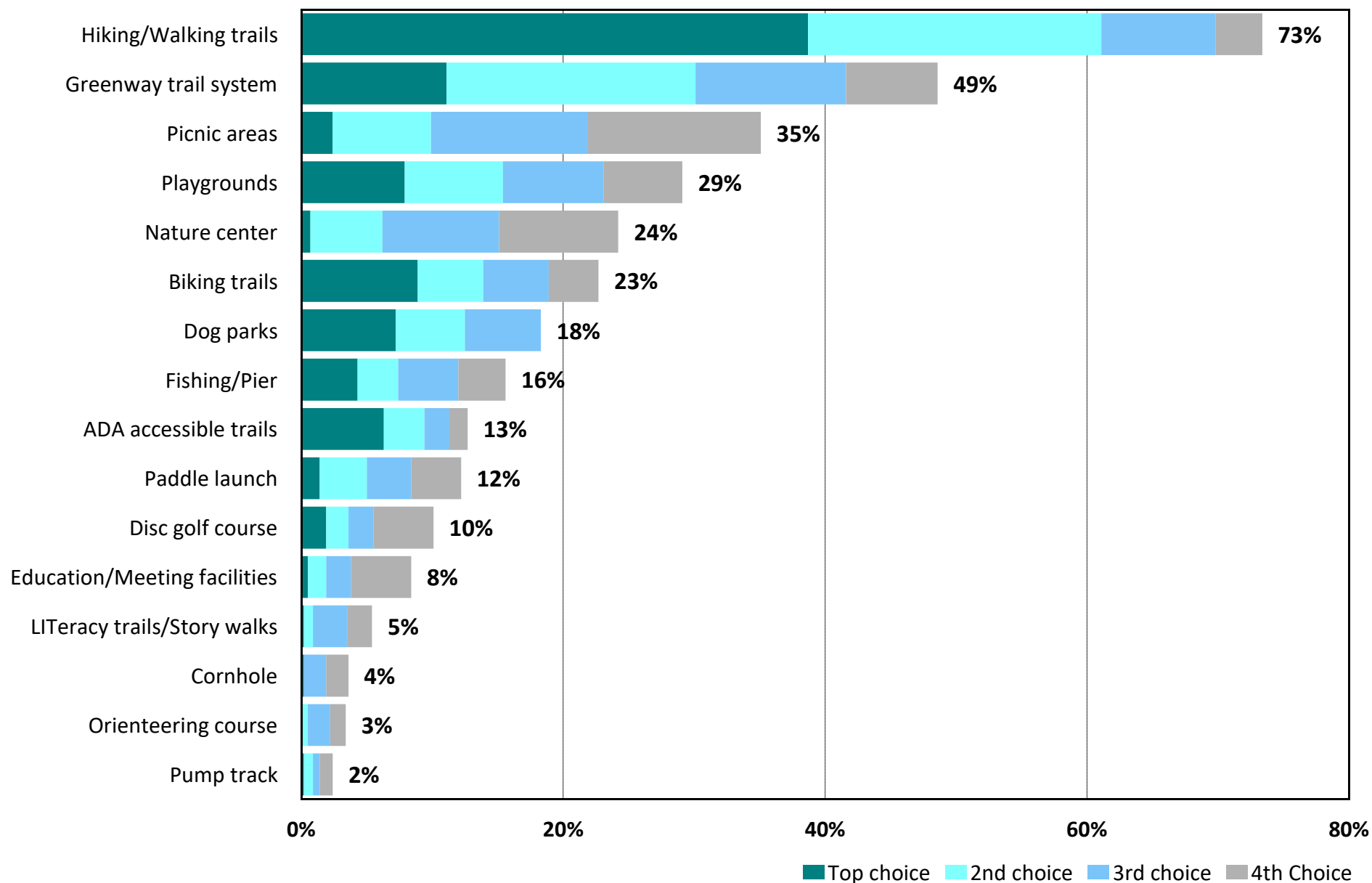
Q5d. Estimated number of households whose facility/amenity needs are only “partly met” or “not met”

by number of households based on an estimated 66,227 households



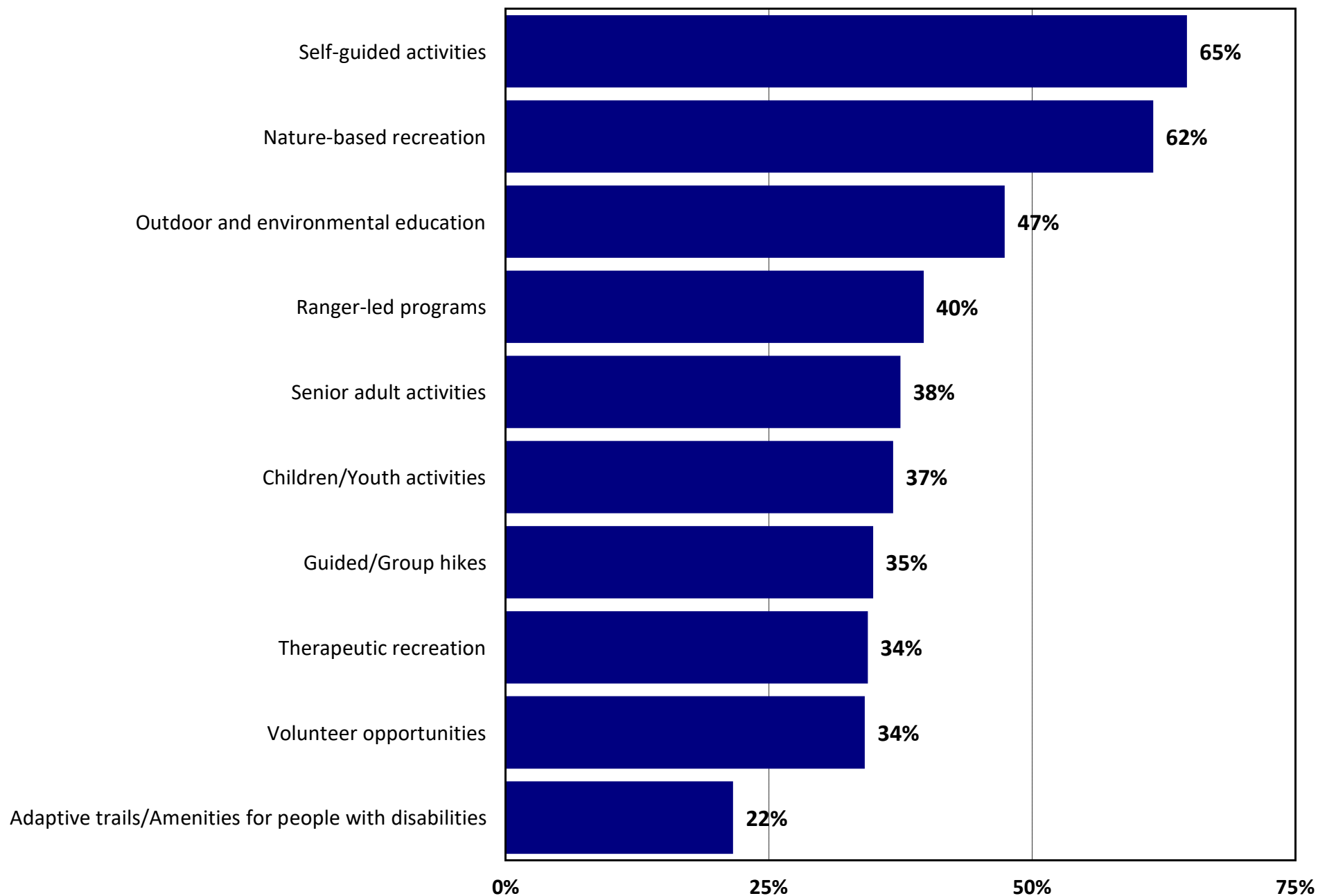
Q6. Which FOUR facilities/amenities from the list in Question 5 are MOST IMPORTANT to your household?

by percentage of respondents who selected the items as one of their top four choices



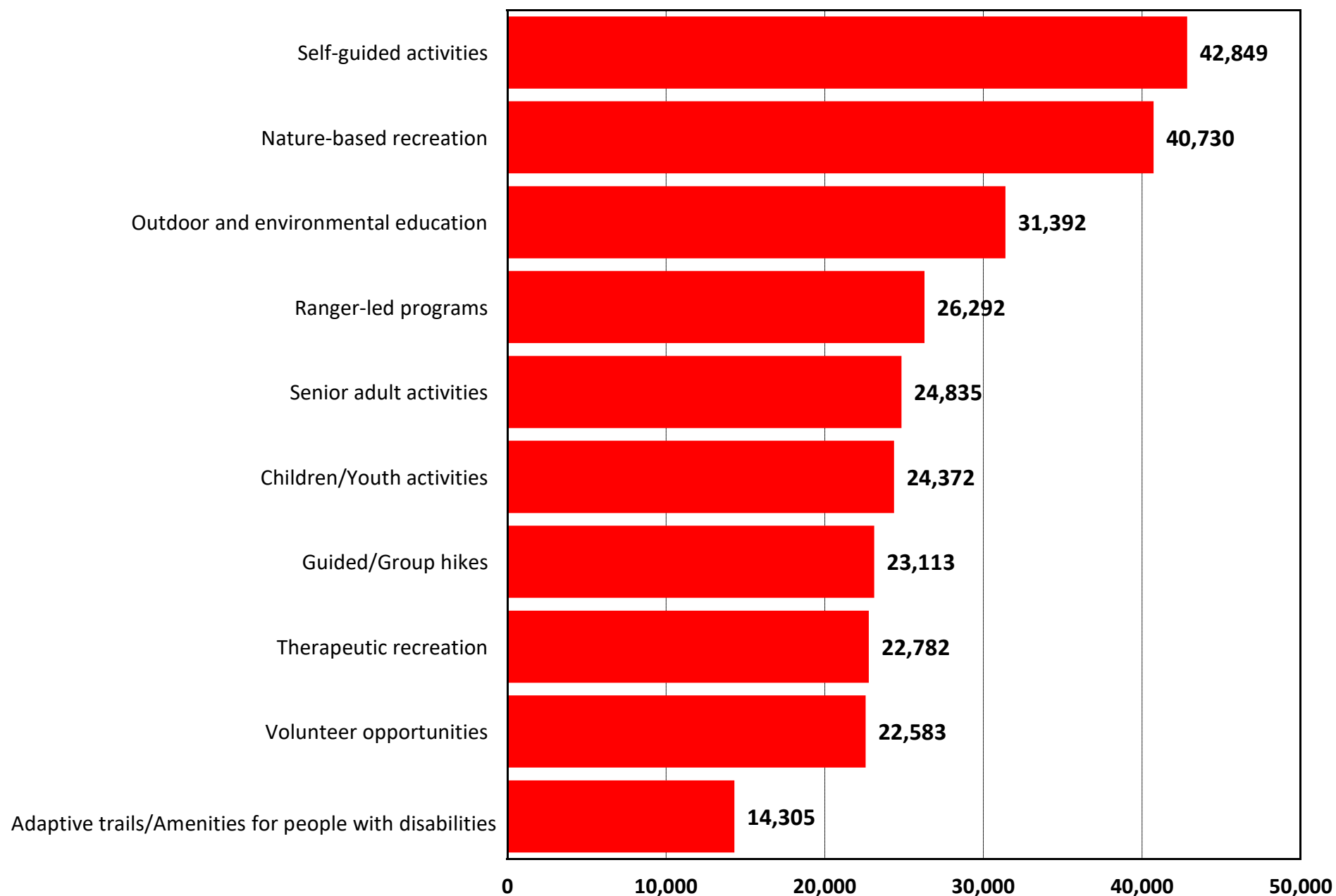
Q7. Need for Programs/Activities

by percentage of respondents who indicated need



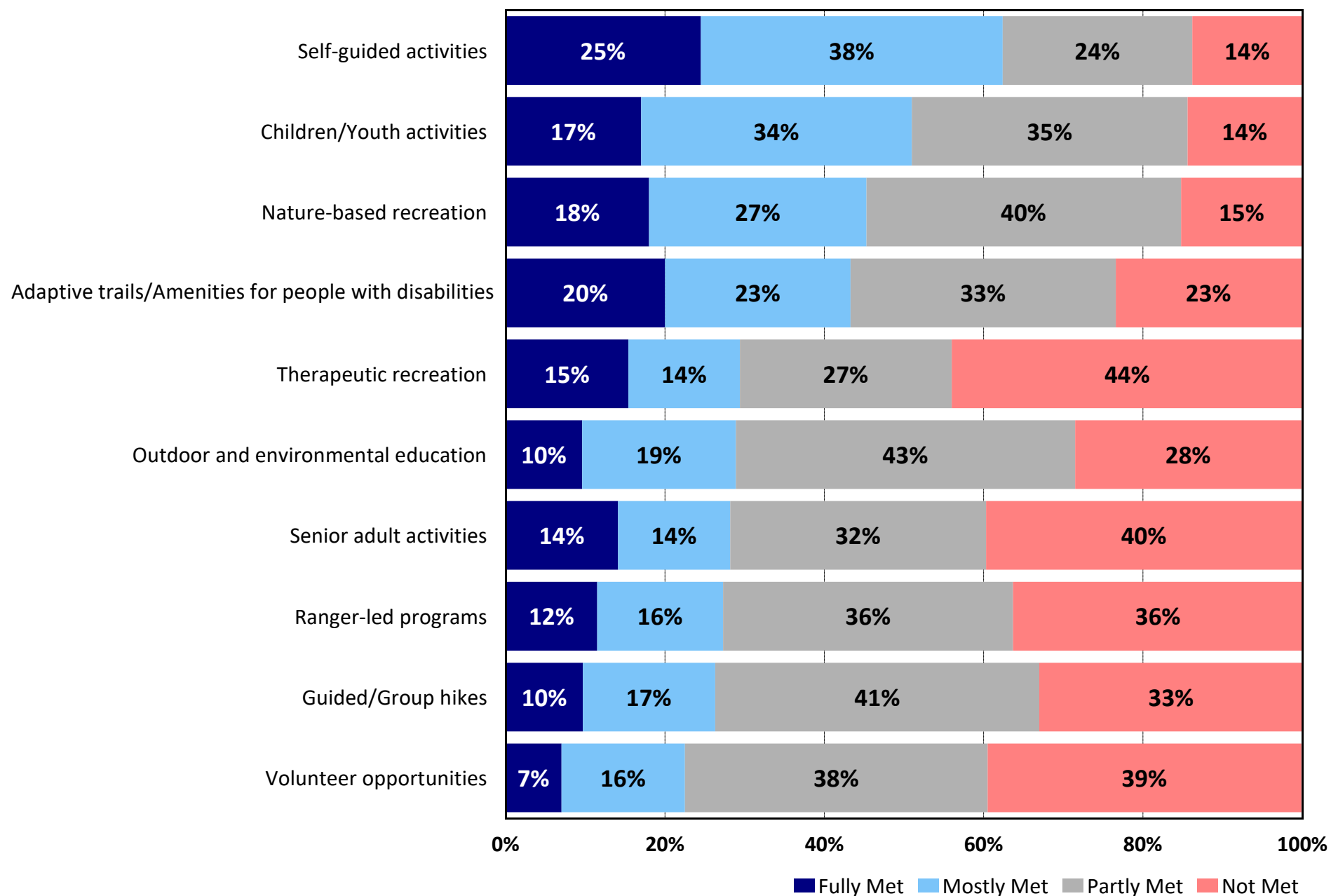
Q7b. Estimated number of households who have a need for programs/activities

by number of households based on an estimated 66,227 households



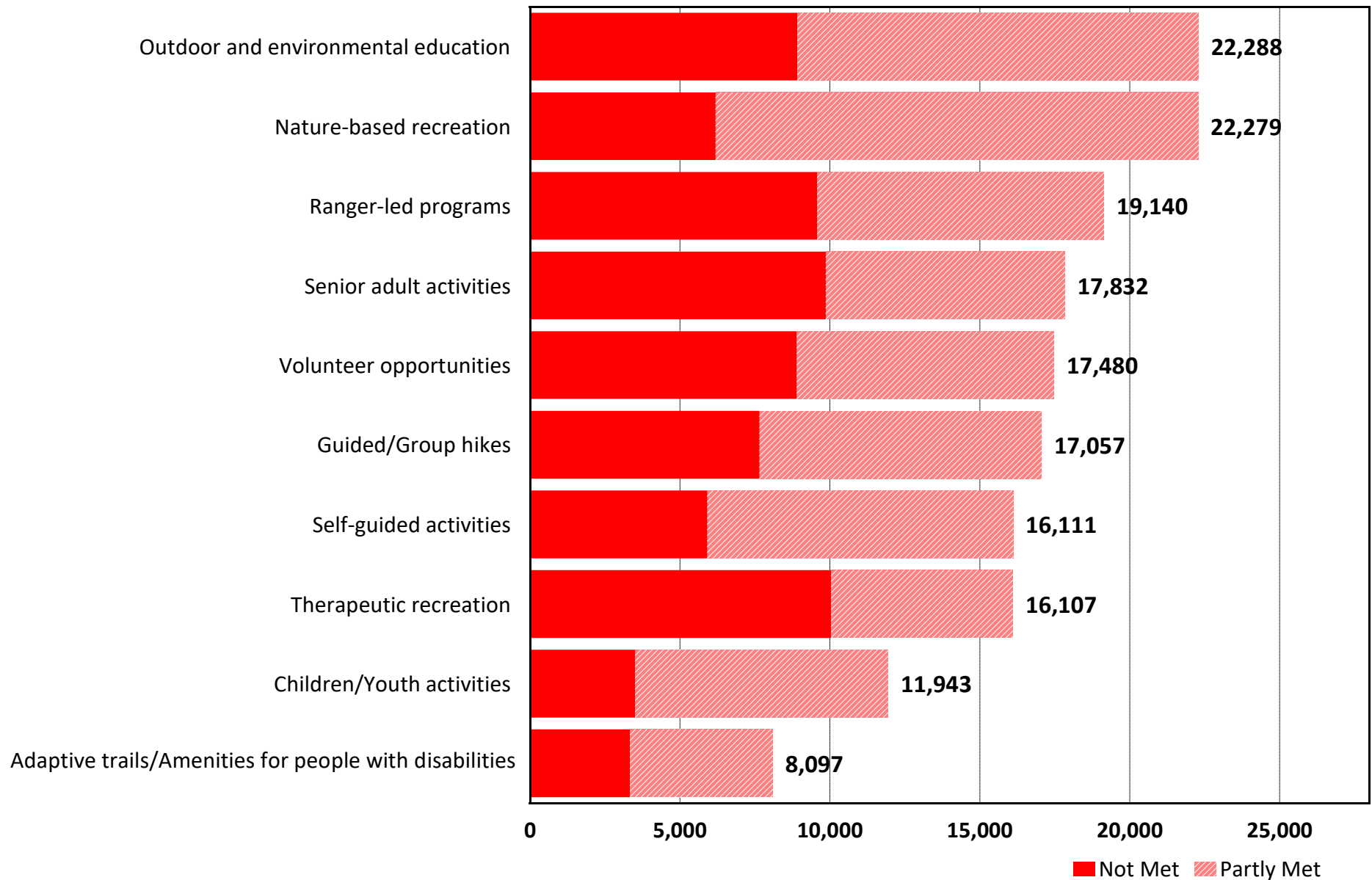
Q7c. Please indicate how well your needs are met for programs/activities

by percentage of respondents (excluding "no need")



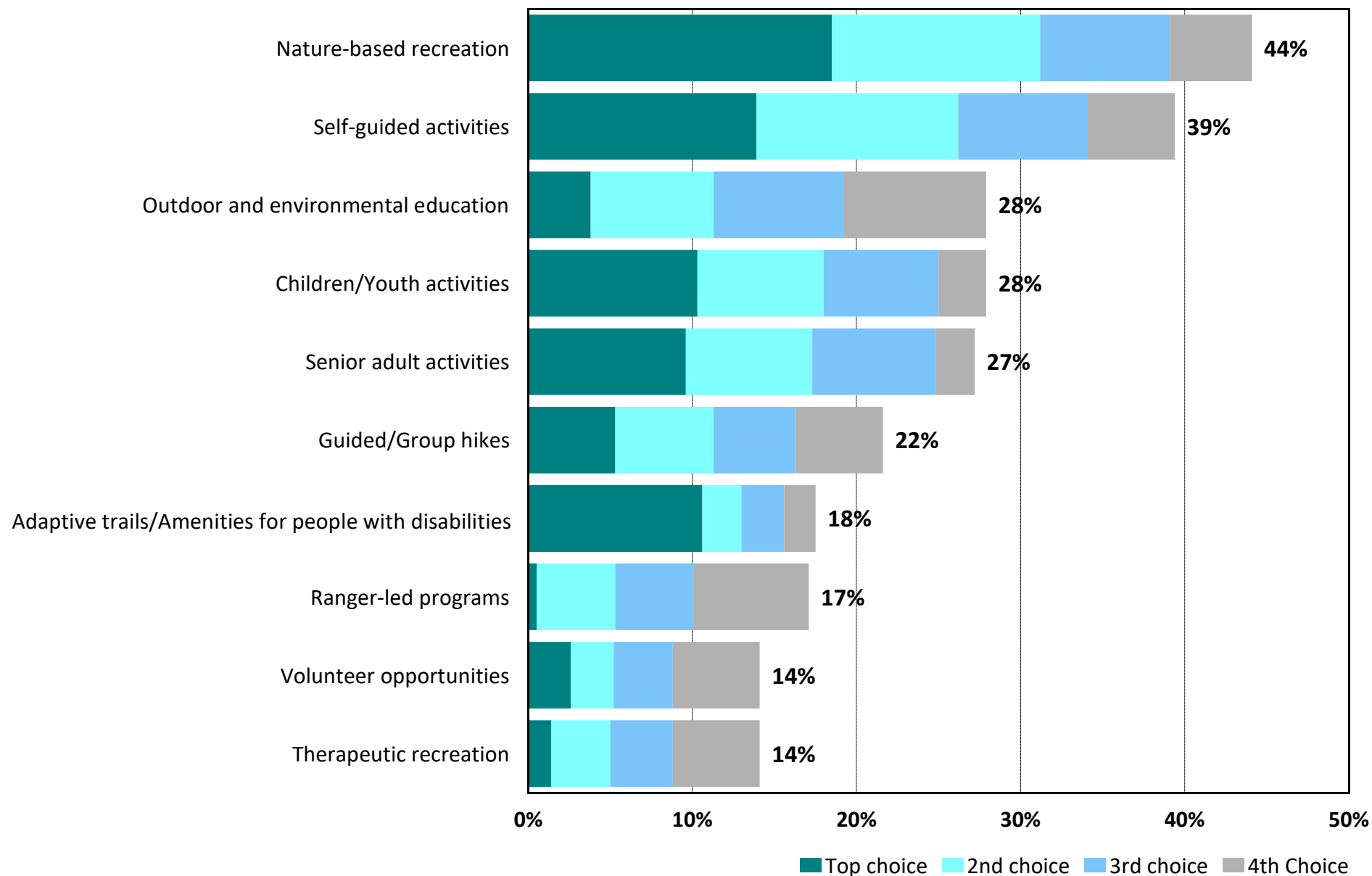
Q7d. Estimated number of households whose program/activity needs are only “partly met” or “not met”

by number of households based on an estimated 66,227 households



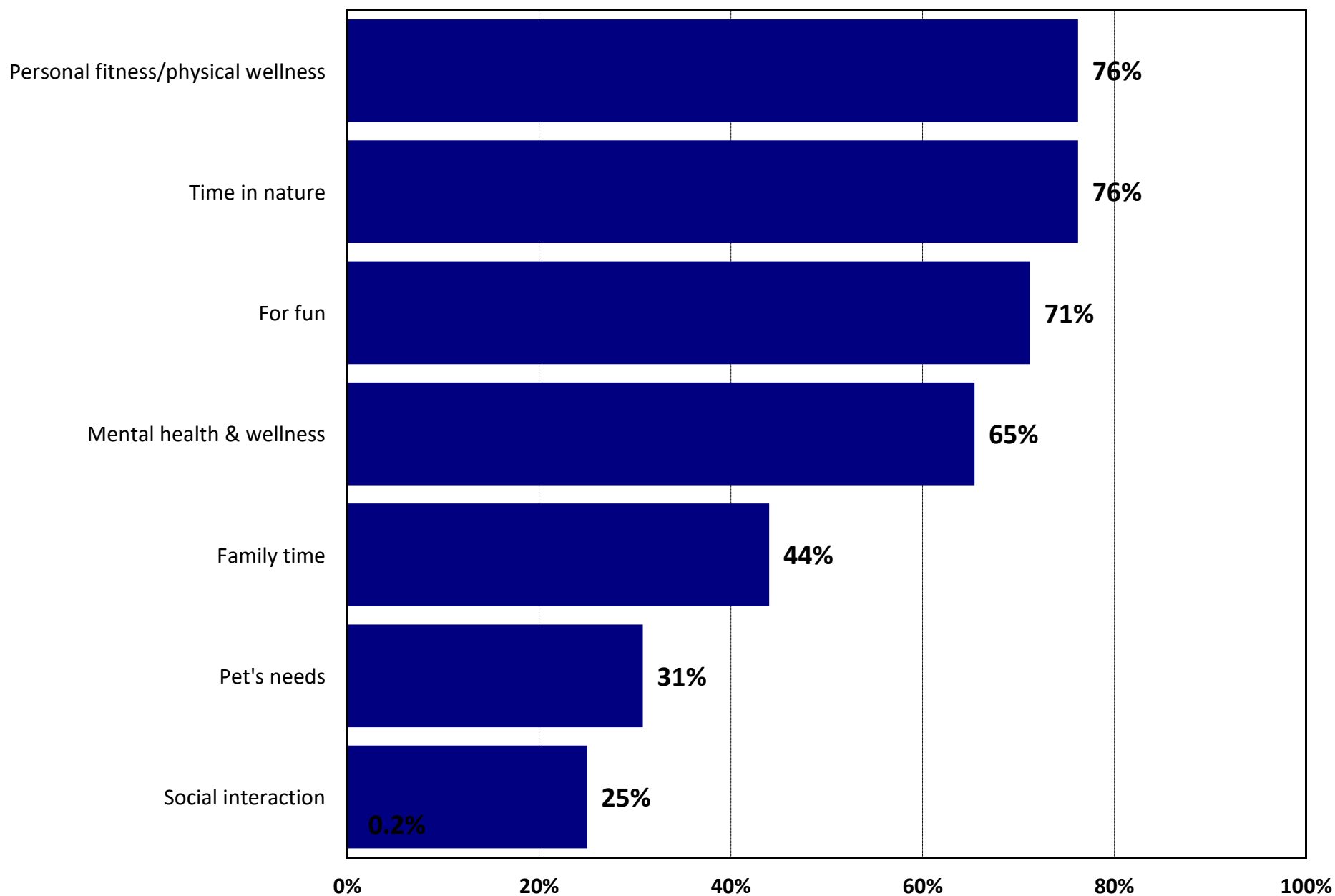
Q8. Which FOUR programs/activities from the list in Question 7 are MOST IMPORTANT to your household?

by percentage of respondents who selected the items as one of their top four choices



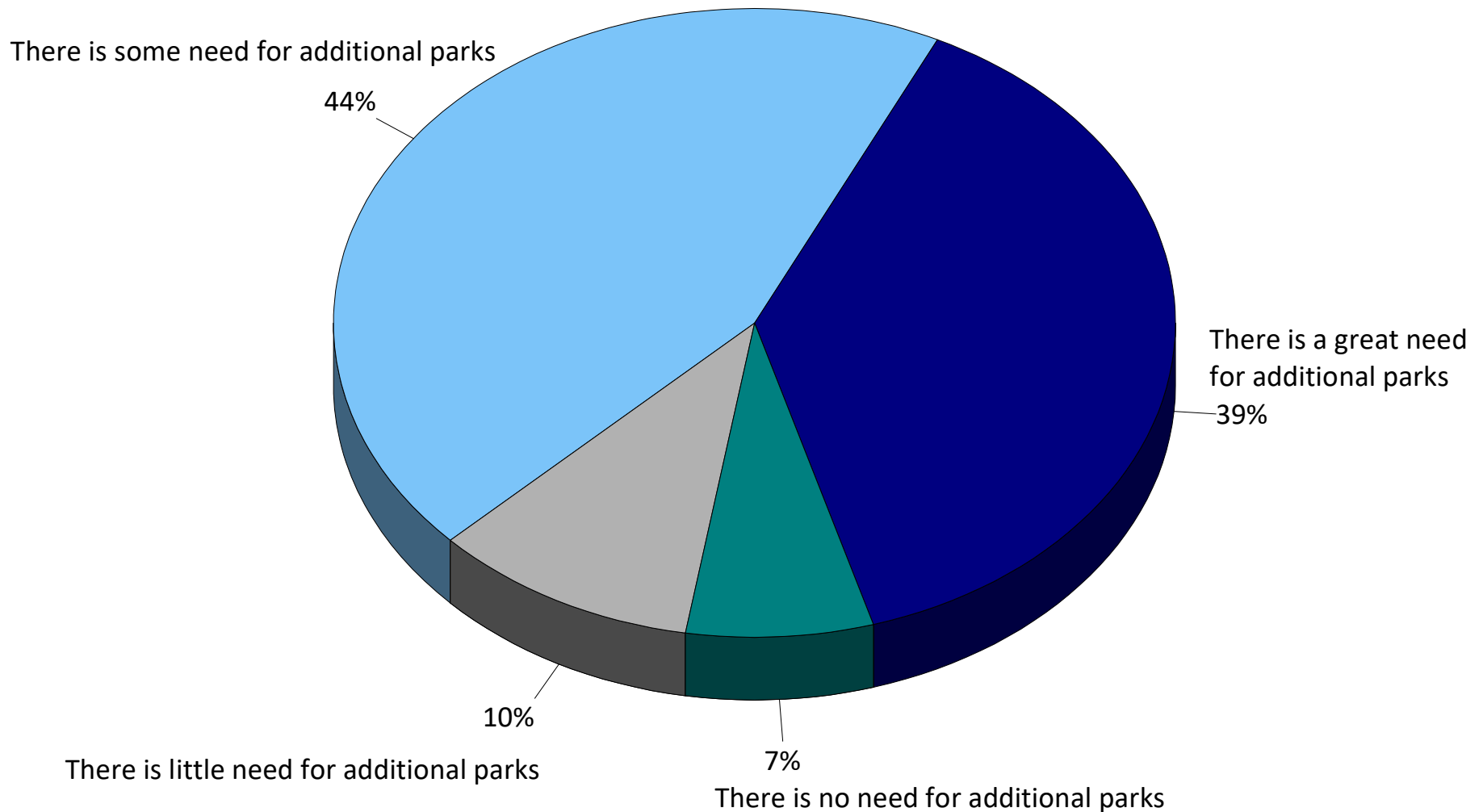
Q9. What are the primary reasons you use outdoor spaces?

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made)



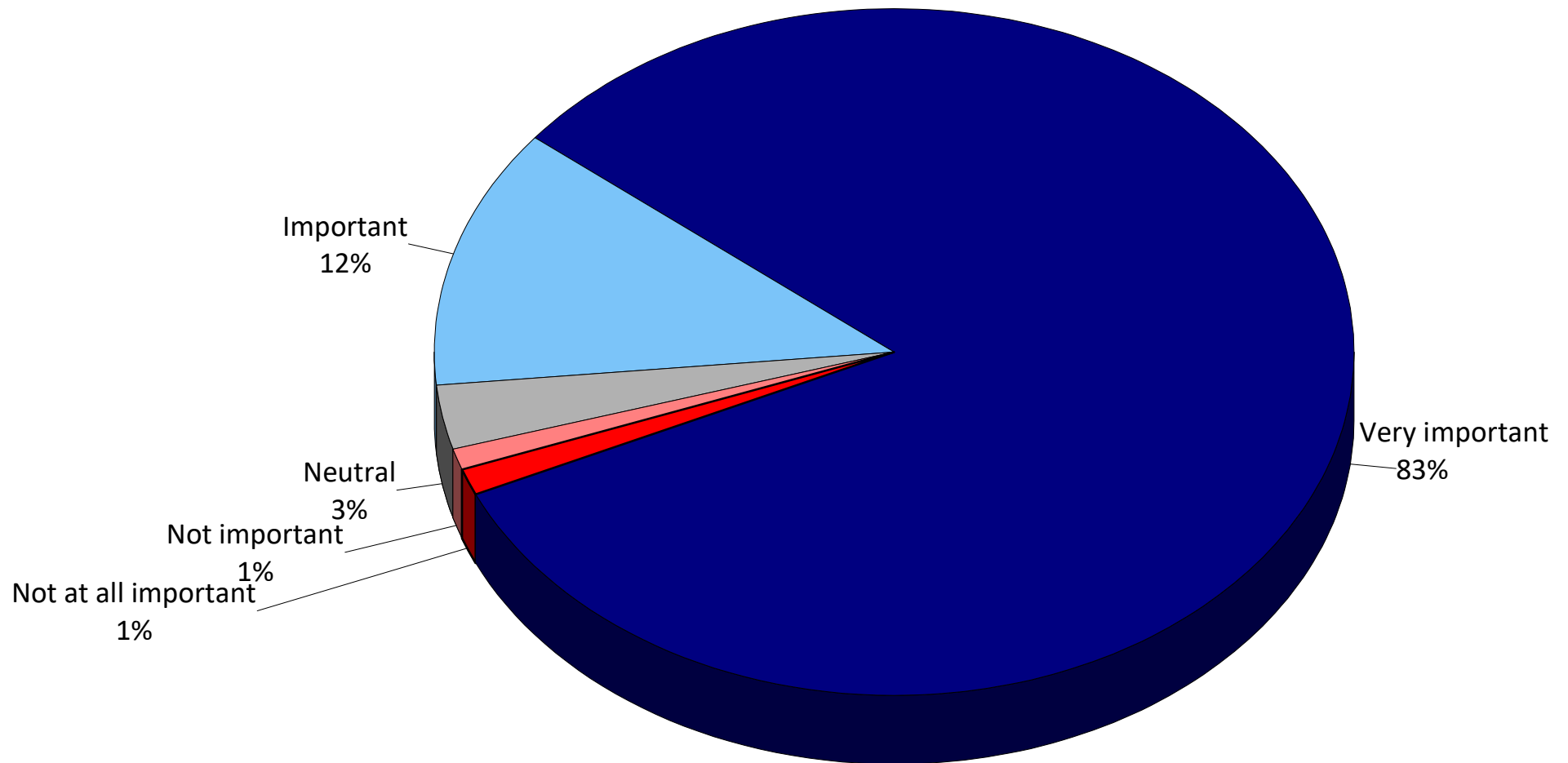
Q10. In your opinion, which of the following options best describes the need for additional public parks and green spaces in Catawba County?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided")



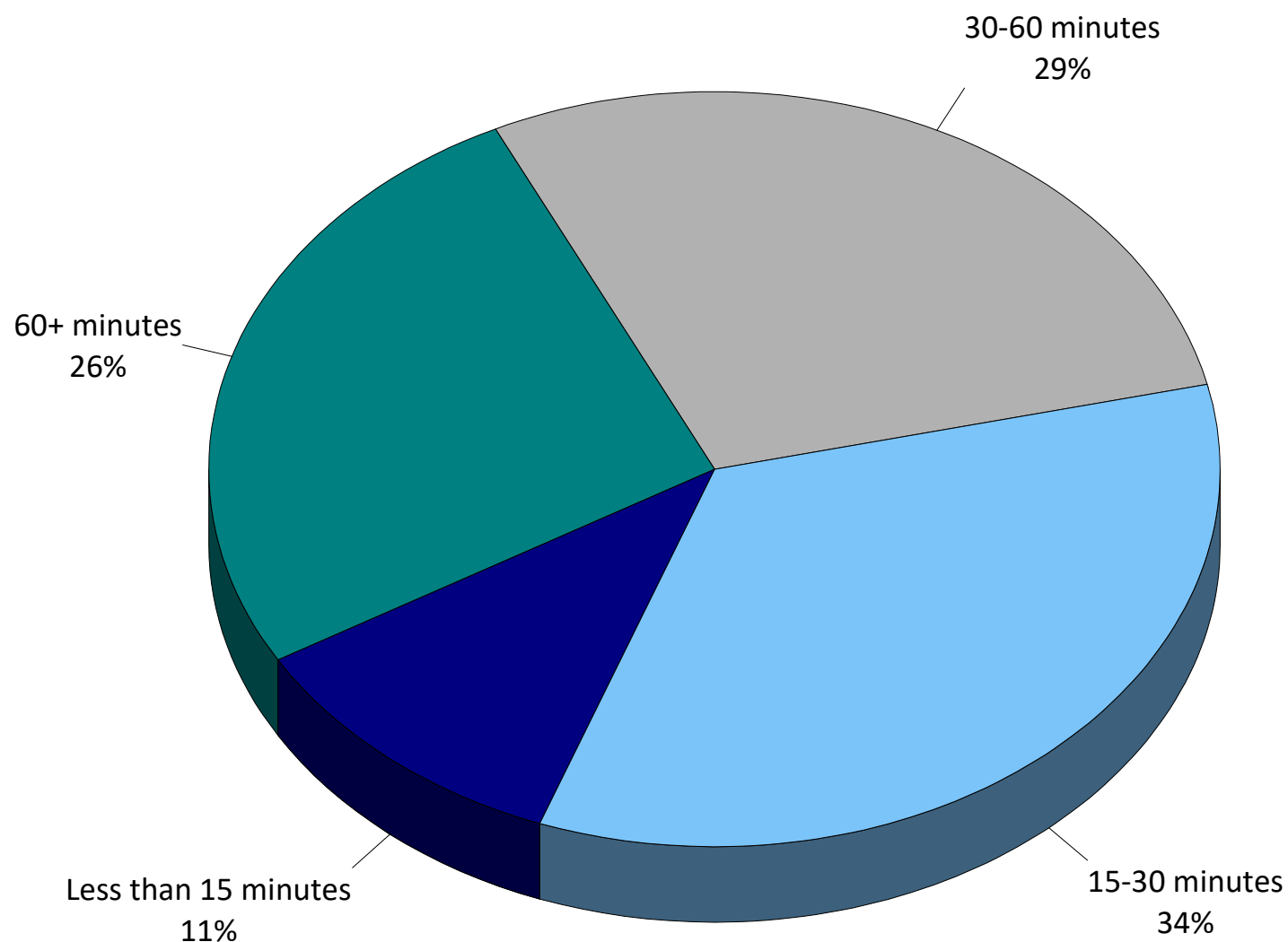
Q11. In your opinion, how important is the existence of public parks and green spaces to the quality of life in Catawba County?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided")



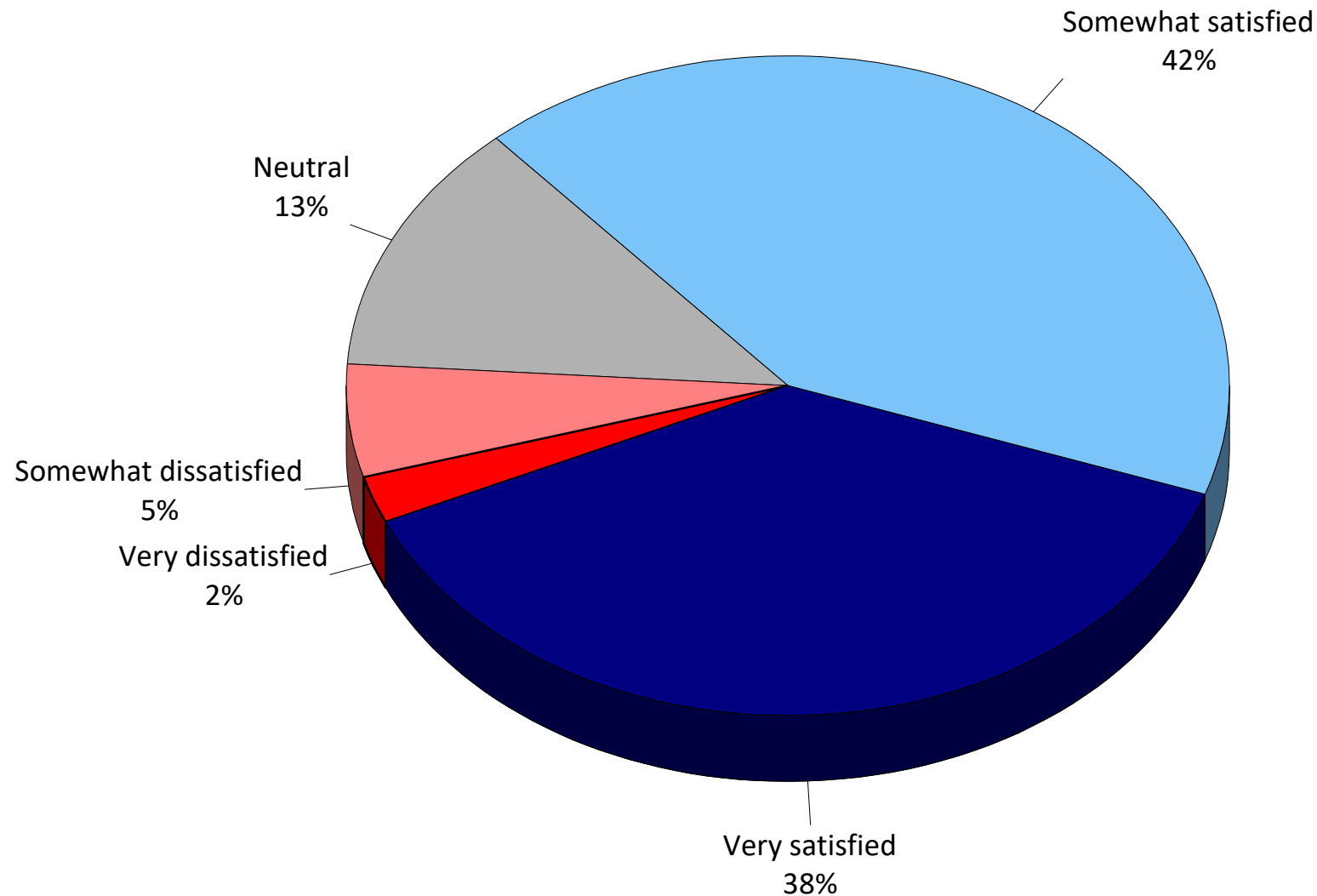
Q12. What is the MAXIMUM distance in minutes you would travel to visit parks and outdoor spaces?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided")



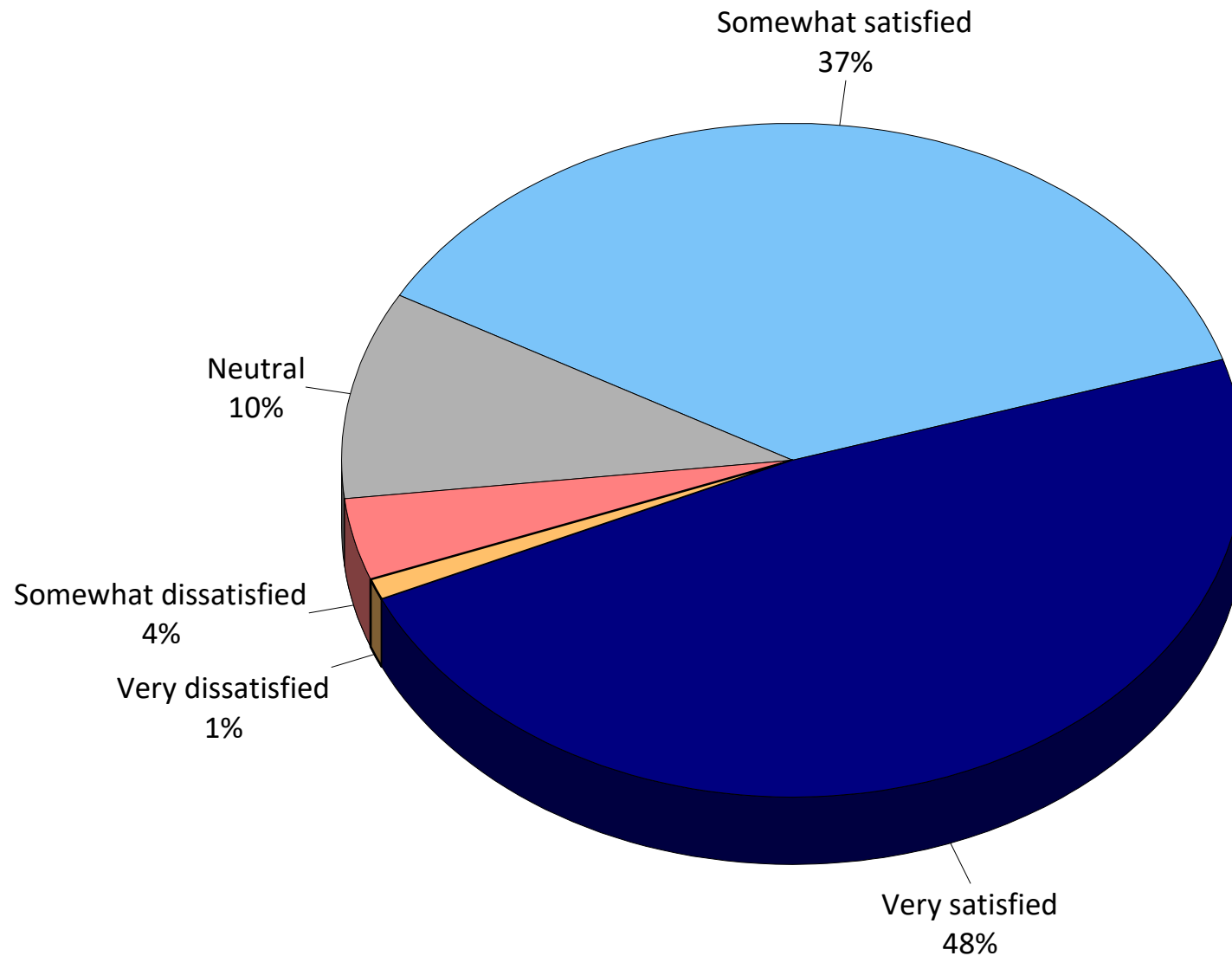
Q13. How satisfied are you with the overall value your household receives from Catawba County Parks?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "don't know")



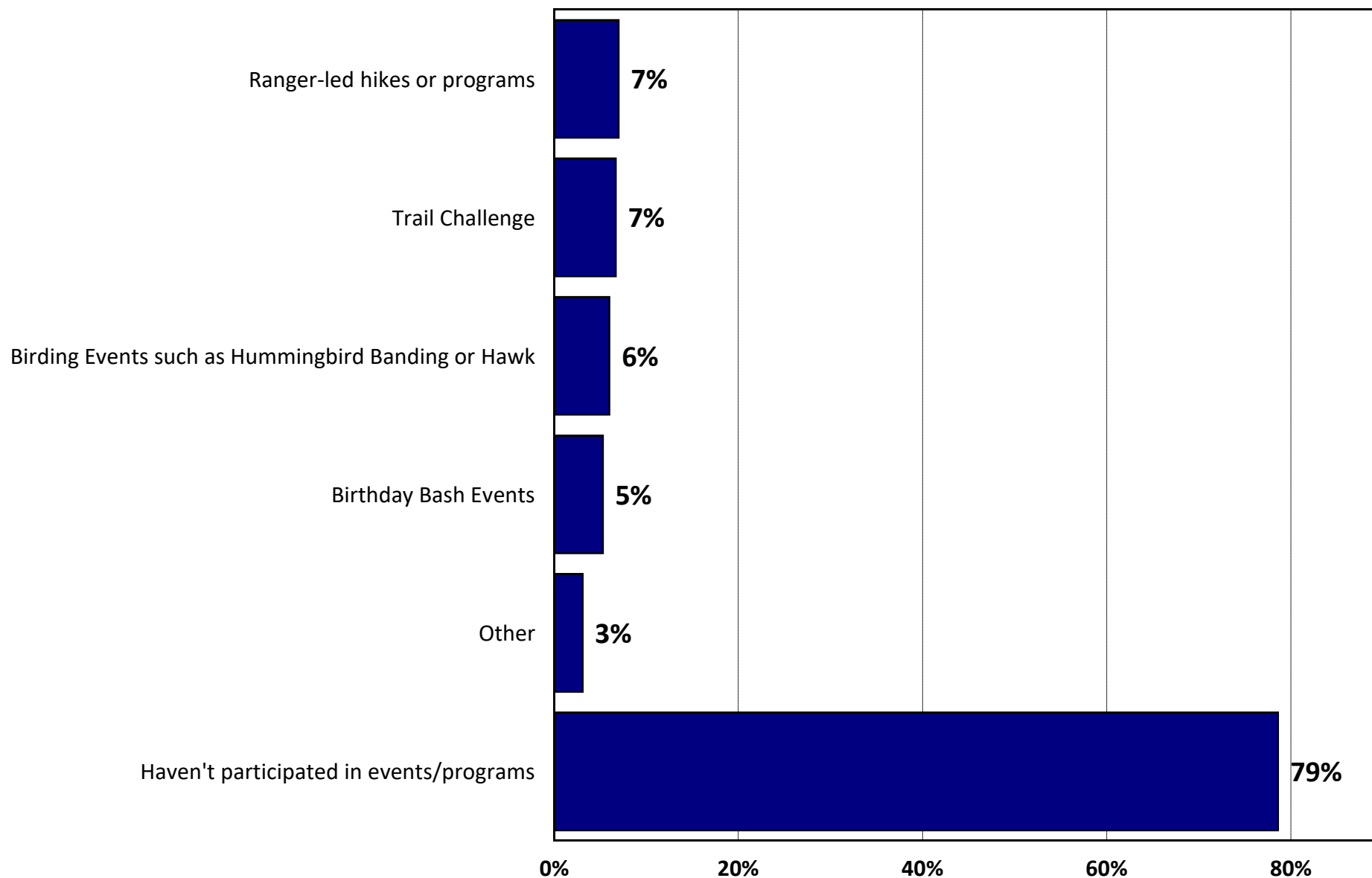
Q14. How satisfied are you with the overall condition of the Catawba County parks you have visited?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "don't know")



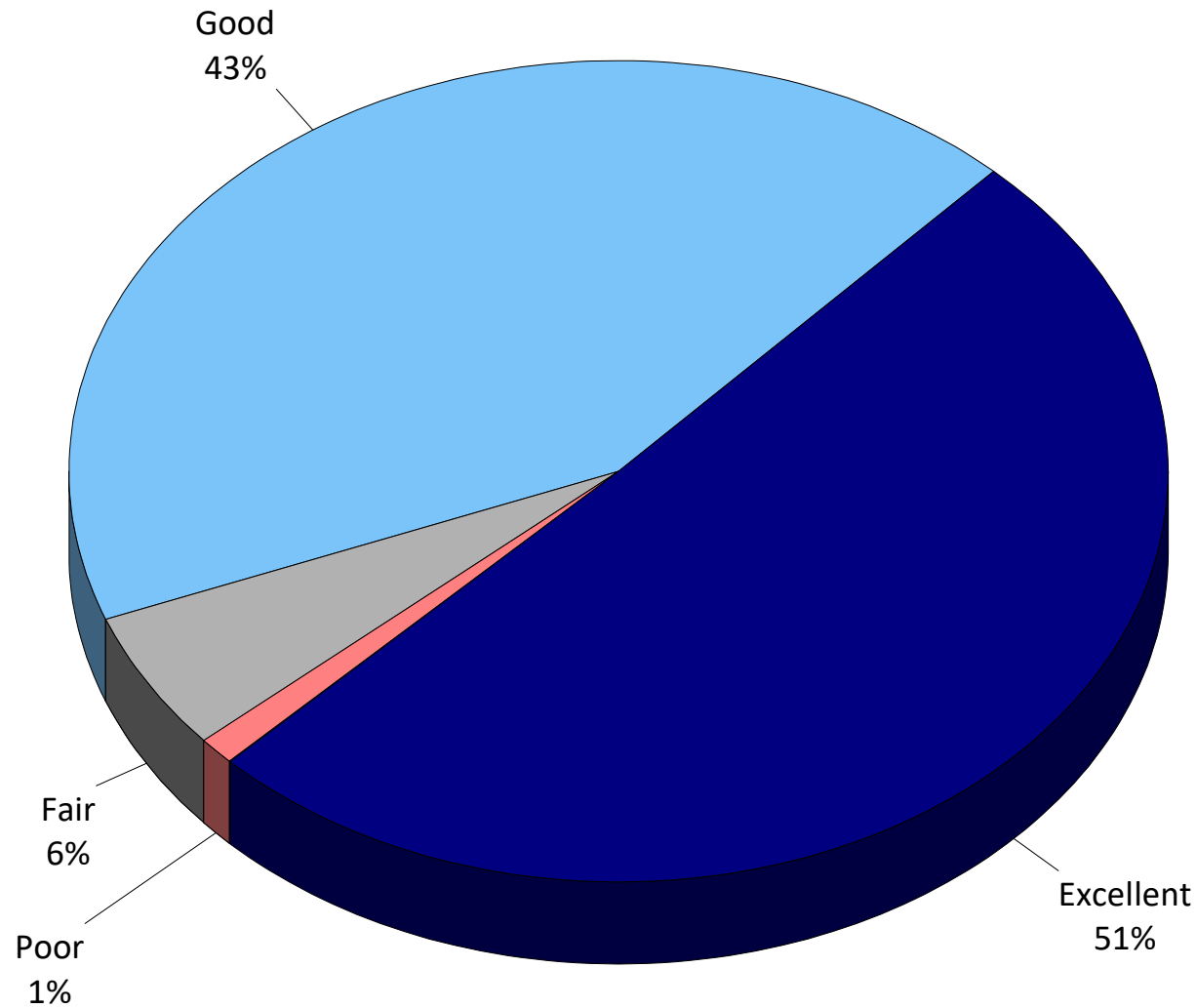
Q15. Have you participated in any of the following Catawba County park events/programs within the last 12 months?

by percentage of respondents (multiple selections could be made)



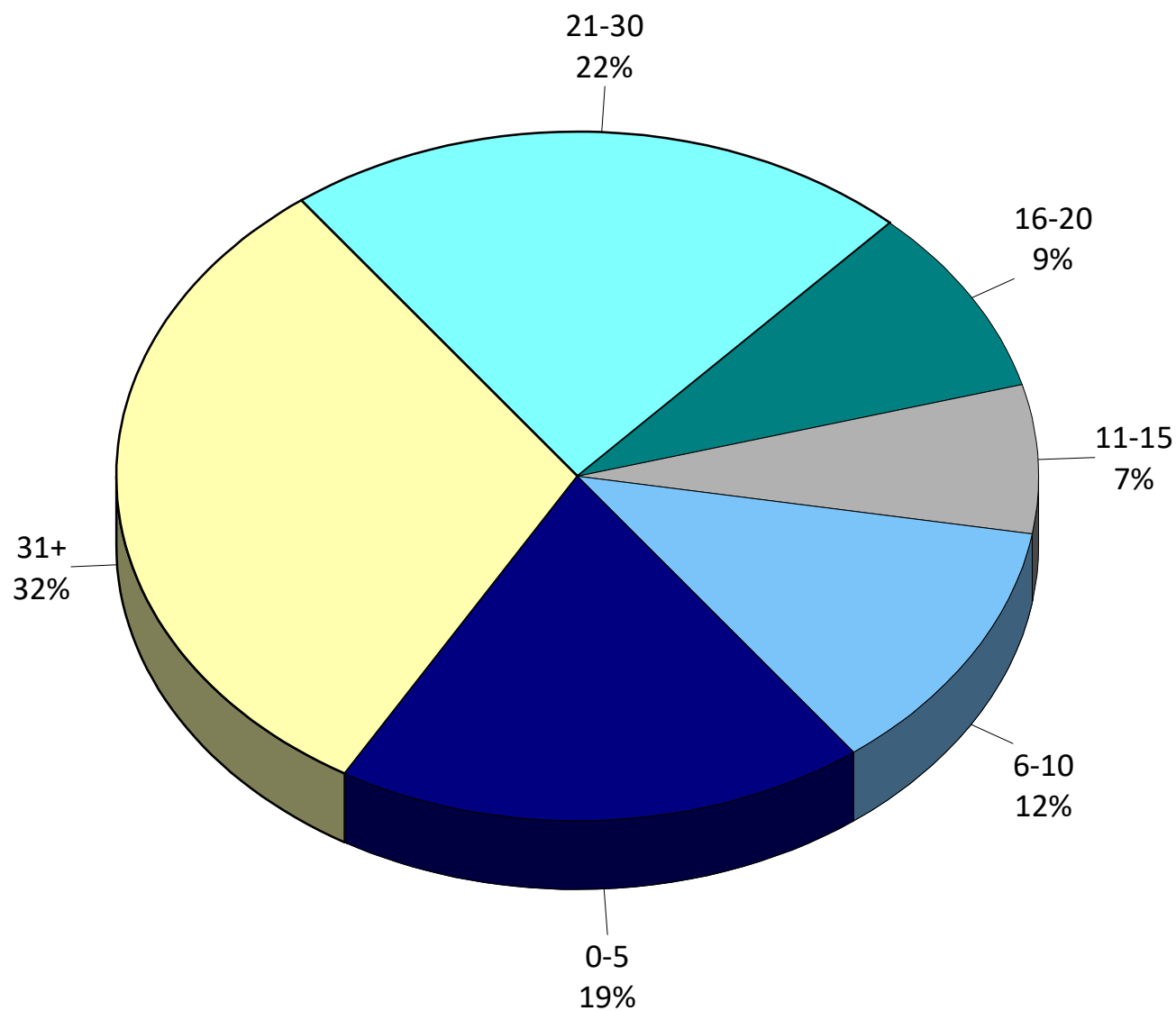
Q15a. How would you rate the overall quality of the programs you have participated in?

by percentage of respondents who report participating in events/programs (excluding "don't know")



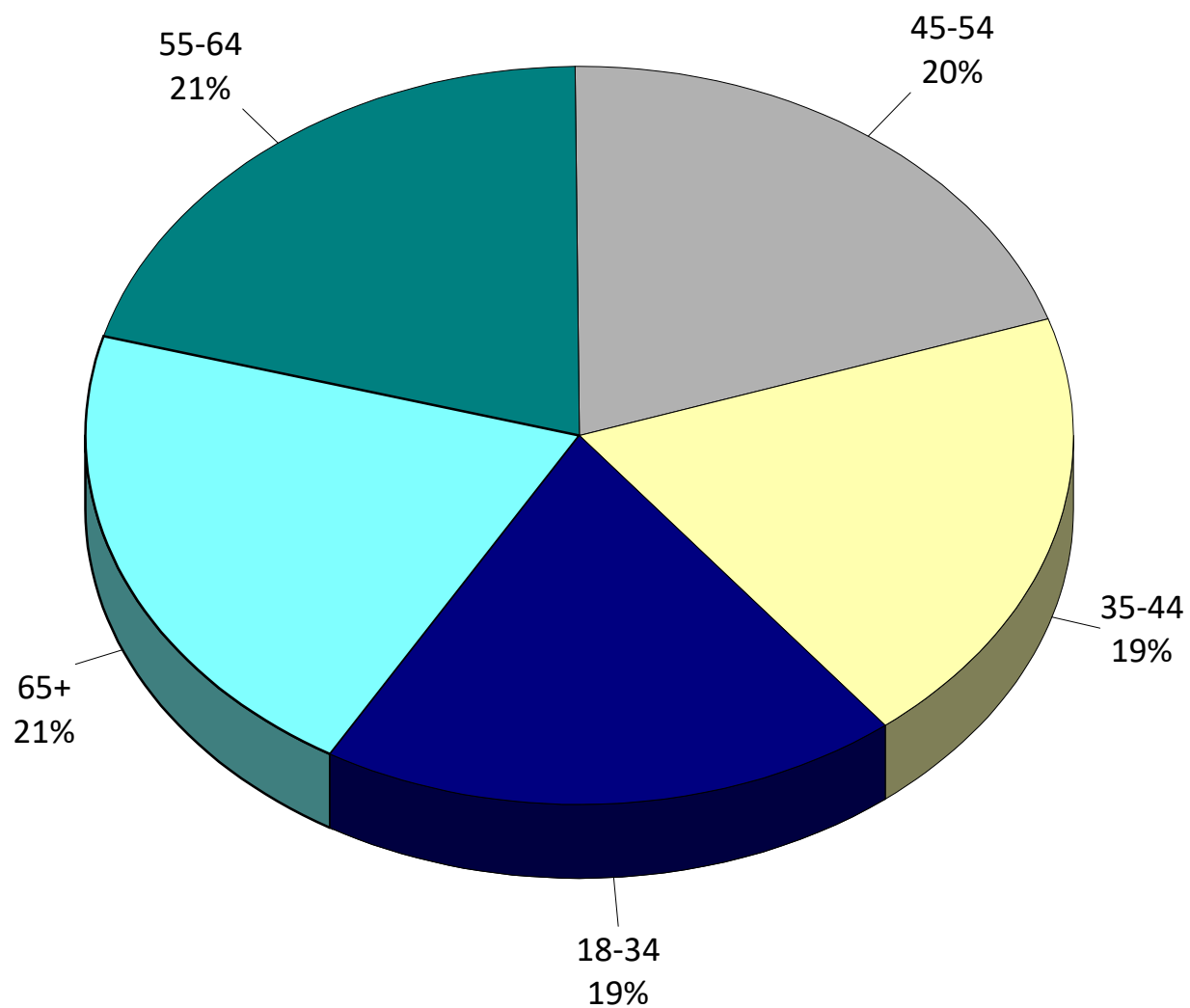
Q17. Approximately how many years have you lived in Catawba County?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided")



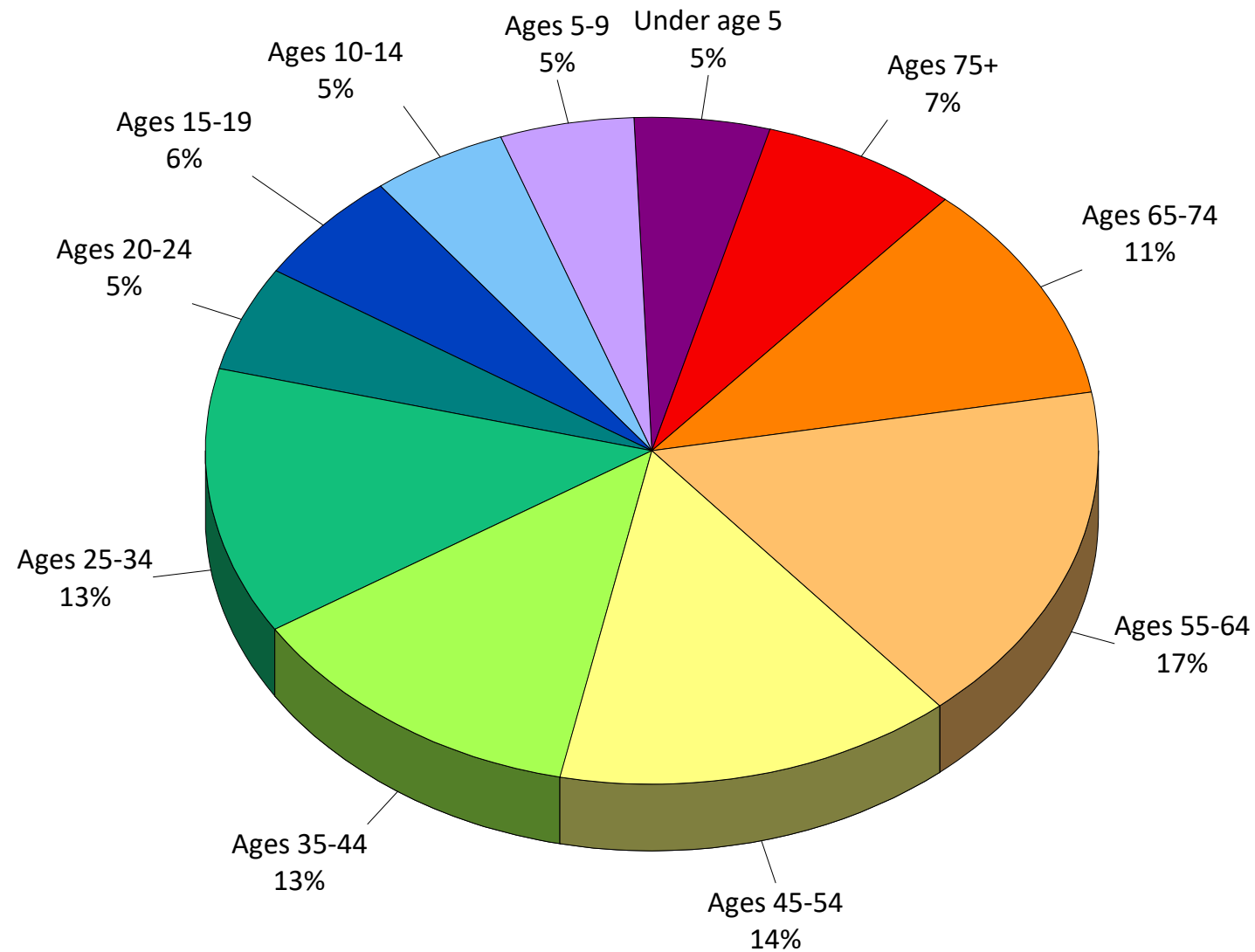
Q18. What is your age?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided")



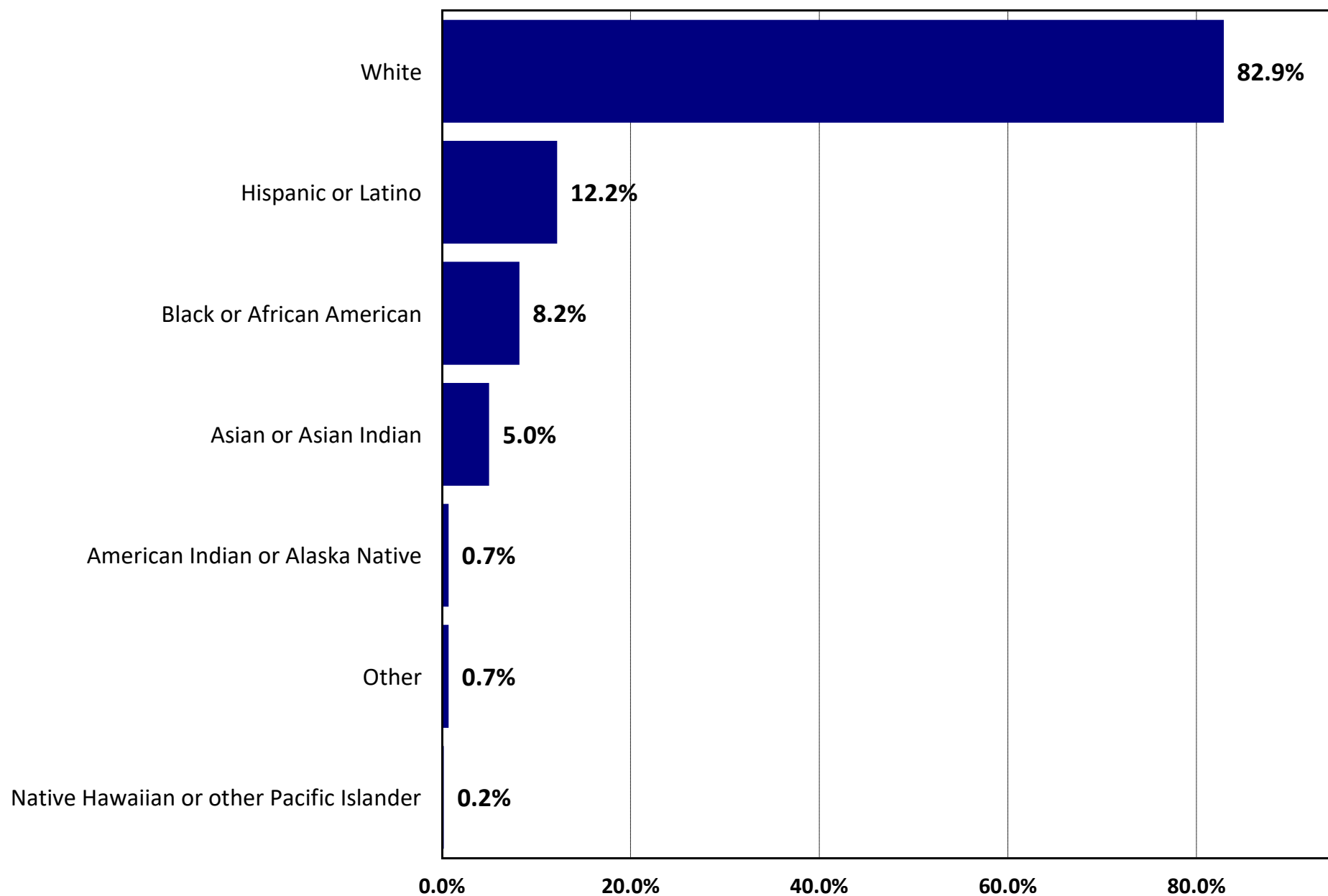
Q19. Including yourself, how many people in your household are:

by percentage of persons in household



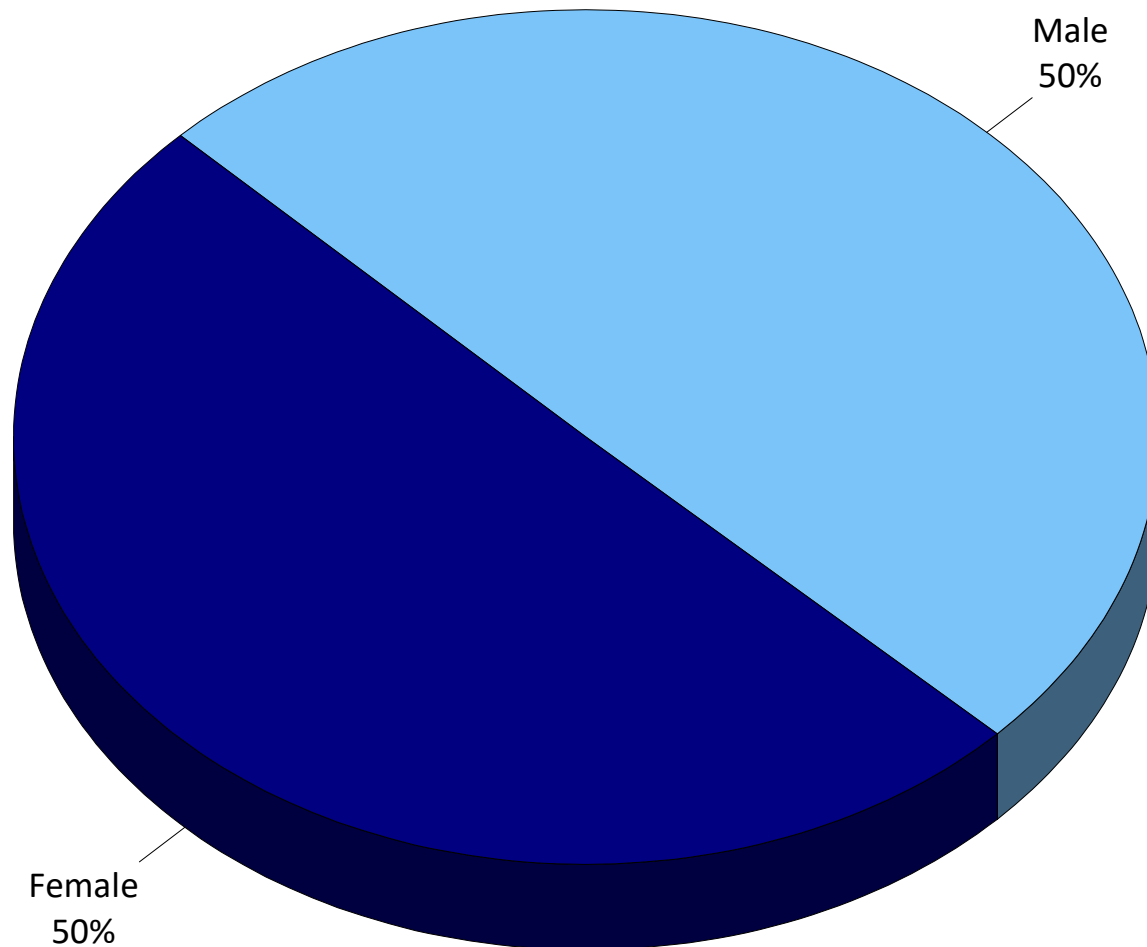
Q20. Which of the following BEST describes your race?

by percentage of respondents (excluding "prefer not to answer")



Q21. Your gender:

by percentage of respondents (excluding "not provided")



3

**Priority Investment
Rating**

Priority Investment Rating

Catawba County, NC

The **Priority Investment Rating (PIR)** was developed by ETC Institute to provide governments with an objective tool for evaluating the priority that should be placed on parks and recreation investments. The Priority Investment Rating was developed by ETC Institute to identify the facilities and programs residents think should receive the highest priority for investment. The priority investment rating reflects the importance residents place on items (sum of top 4 choices) and the unmet needs (needs that are not met or only partly met) for each facility/program relative to the facility/program that rated the highest overall. Since decisions related to future investments should consider both the level of unmet need and the importance of facilities and programs, the PIR weights each of these components equally.

The PIR reflects the sum of the Unmet Needs Rating and the Importance Rating as shown in the equation below:

$$\text{PIR} = \text{UNR} + \text{IR}$$

For example, if the Unmet Needs Rating for Community Gardens were 98.9 (out of 100) and the Importance Rating for Community Gardens were 21.6 (out of 100), the Priority Investment Rating for Community Gardens would be 120.5 (out of 200).

How to Analyze the Charts:

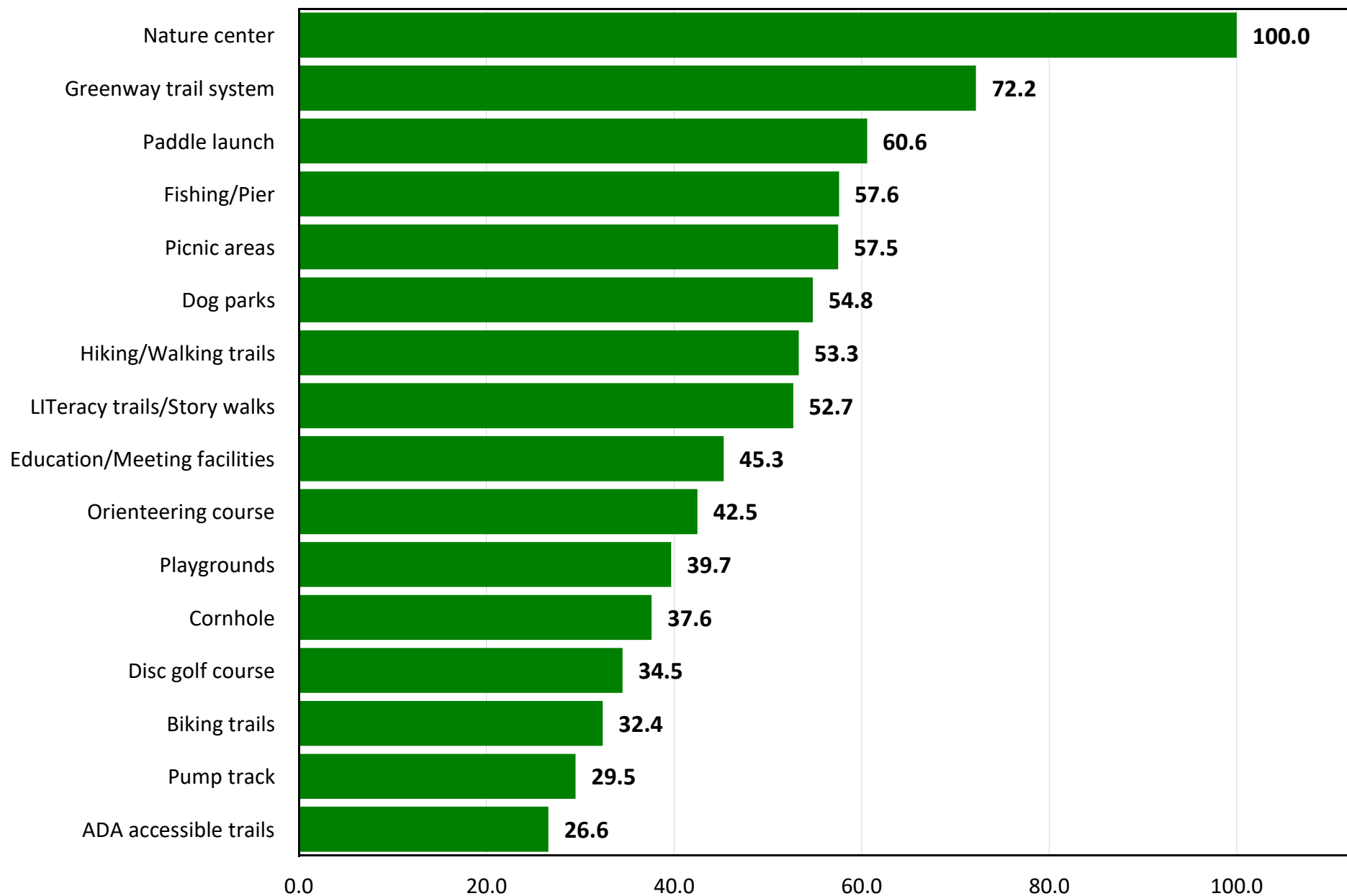
- **High Priority Areas** are those with a PIR of at least 110. A rating of 110 or above generally indicates there is a relatively high level of unmet need and residents generally think it is important to fund improvements in these areas. Improvements in this area are likely to have a positive impact on the greatest number of households.
- **Medium Priority Areas** are those with a PIR of 61-109. A rating in this range generally indicates there is a medium to high level of unmet need or a significant percentage of residents generally think it is important to fund improvements in these areas.
- **Low Priority Areas** are those with a PIR below 60. A rating in this range generally indicates there is a relatively low level of unmet need and residents do not think it is important to fund improvements in these areas. Improvements may be warranted if the needs of very specialized populations are being targeted.

The following pages show the Unmet Needs Rating, Importance Rating, and Priority Investment Rating for facilities and programs.

Unmet Needs Rating for Facilities/Amenities

the rating for the item with the most unmet need=100

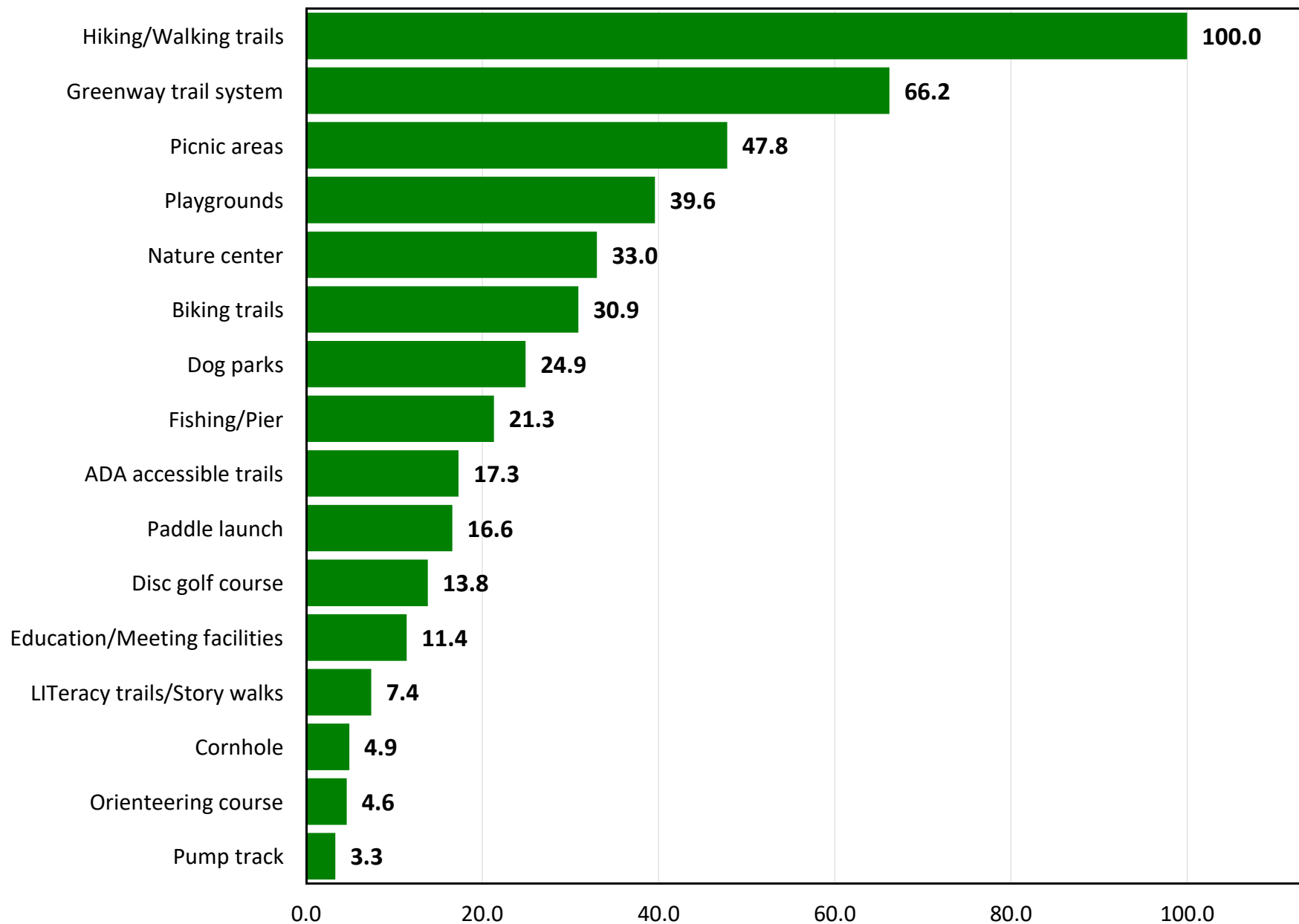
the rating of all other items reflects the relative amount of unmet need for each item compared to the item with the most unmet need



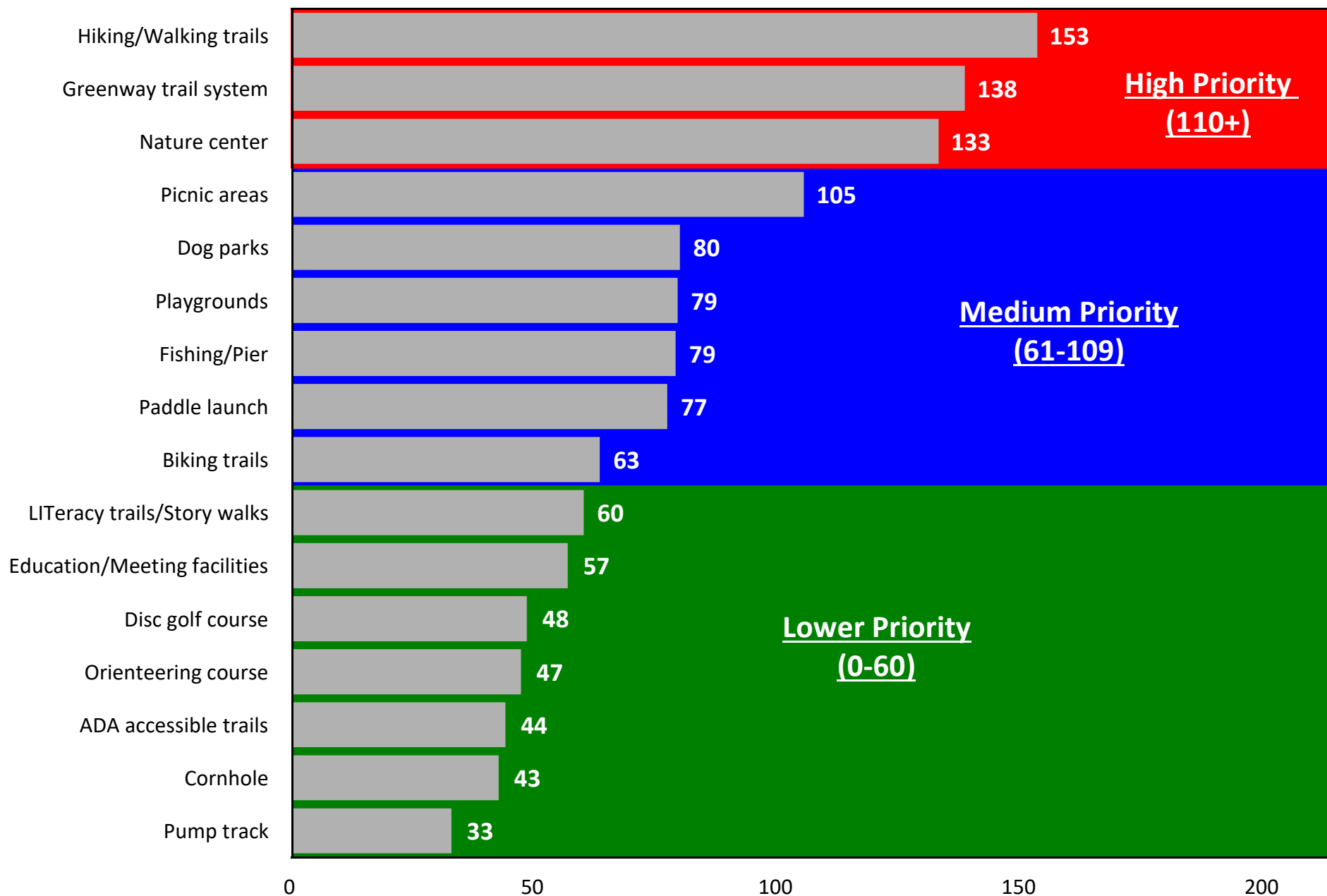
Importance Rating for Facilities/Amenities

the rating for the item rated as the most important=100

the rating of all other items reflects the relative level of importance for each item compared to the item rated as the most important



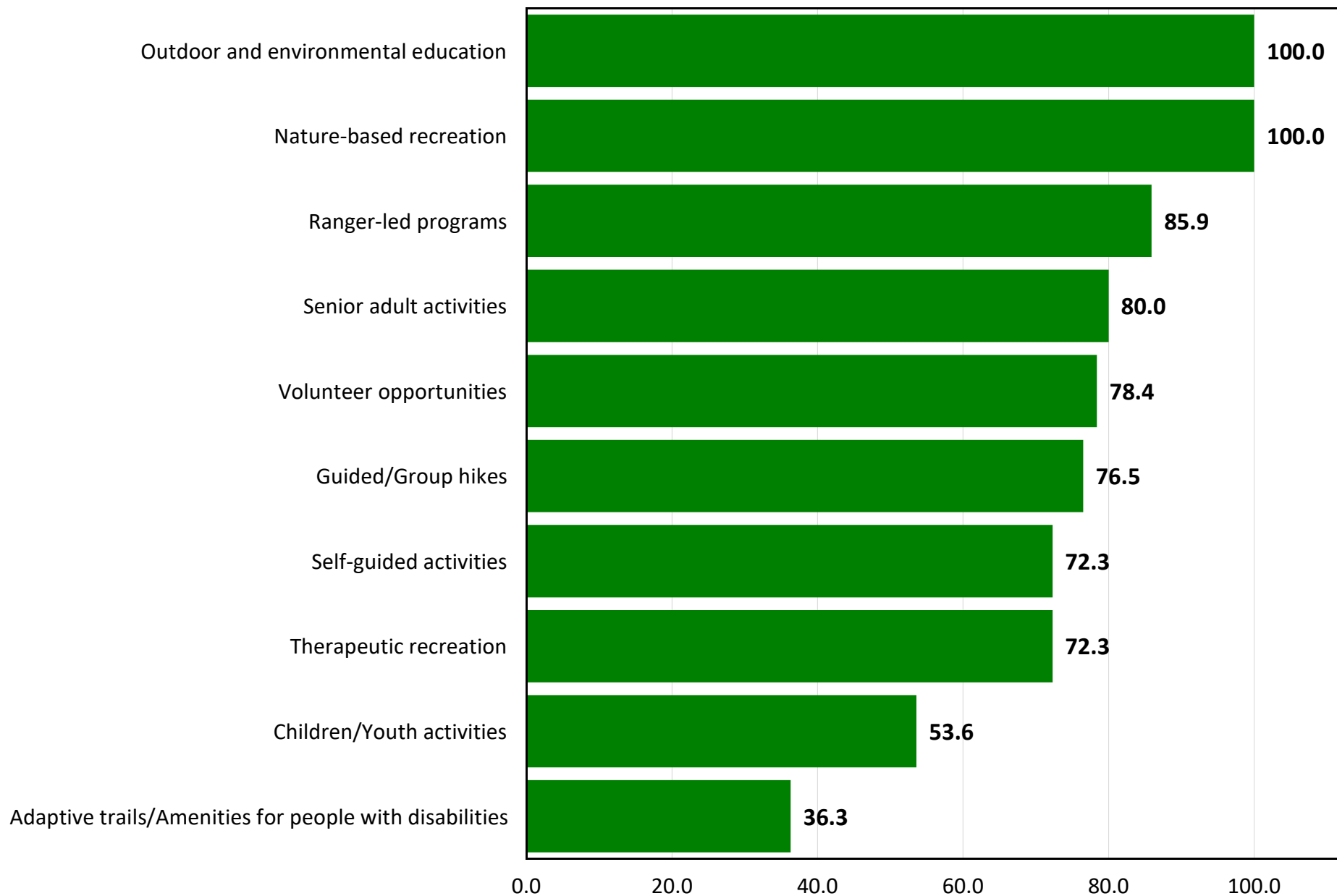
Top Priorities for Investment for Facilities/Amenities Based on Priority Investment Rating



Unmet Needs Rating for Programs/Activities

the rating for the item with the most unmet need=100

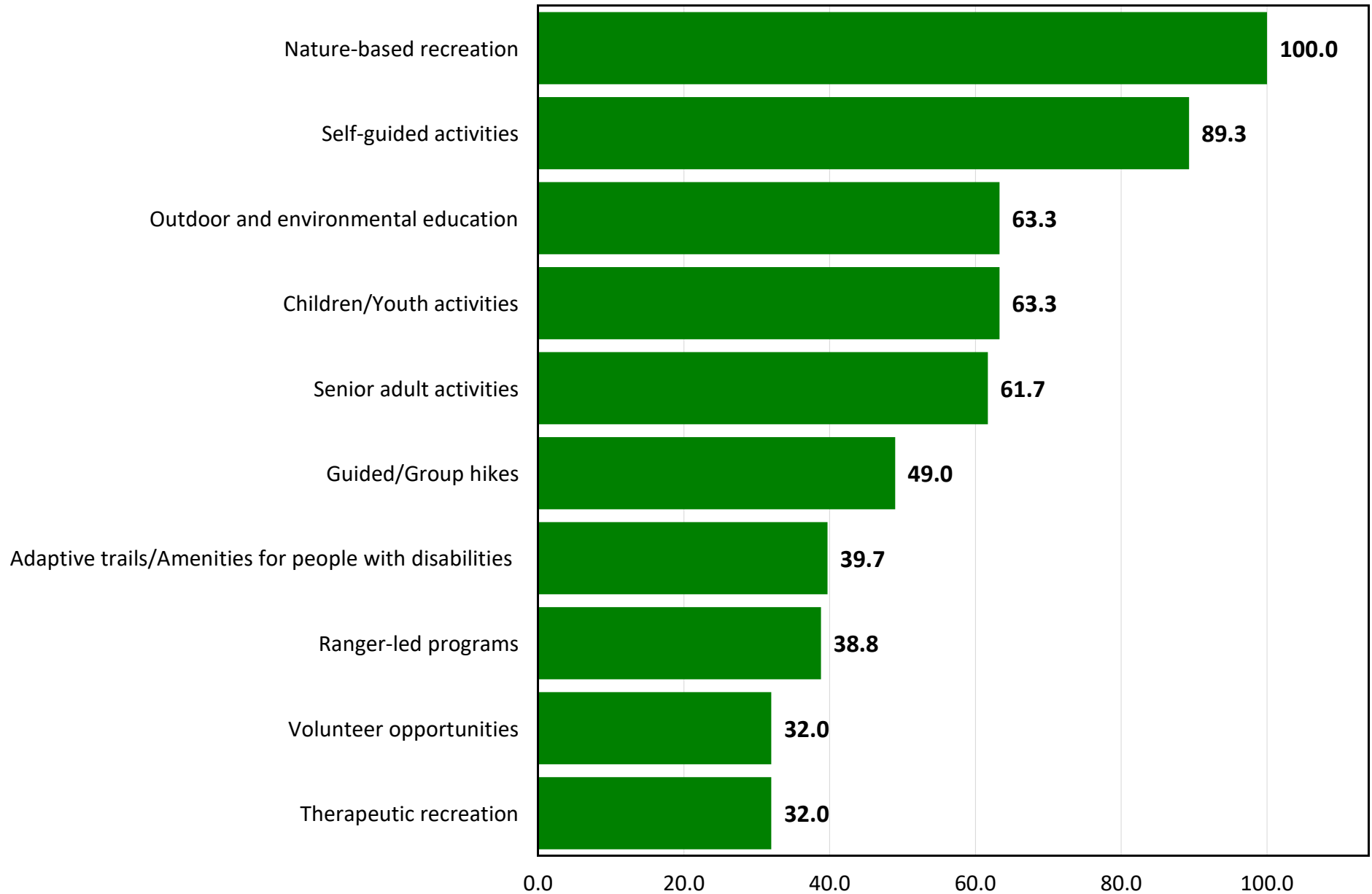
the rating of all other items reflects the relative amount of unmet need for each item compared to the item with the most unmet need



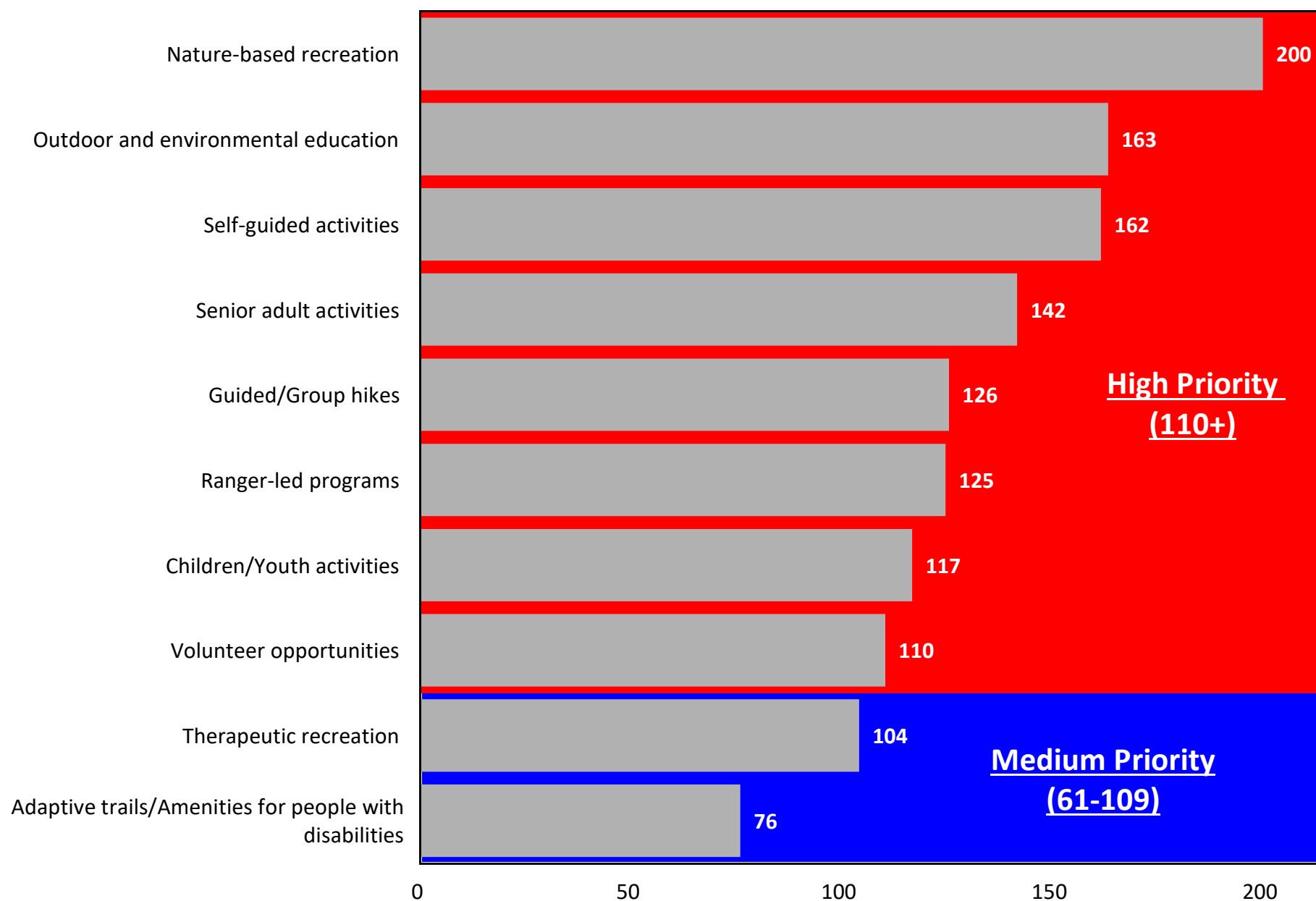
Importance Rating for Programs/Activities

the rating for the item rated as the most important=100

the rating of all other items reflects the relative level of importance for each item compared to the item rated as the most important



Top Priorities for Investment for Programs/Activities Based on Priority Investment Rating





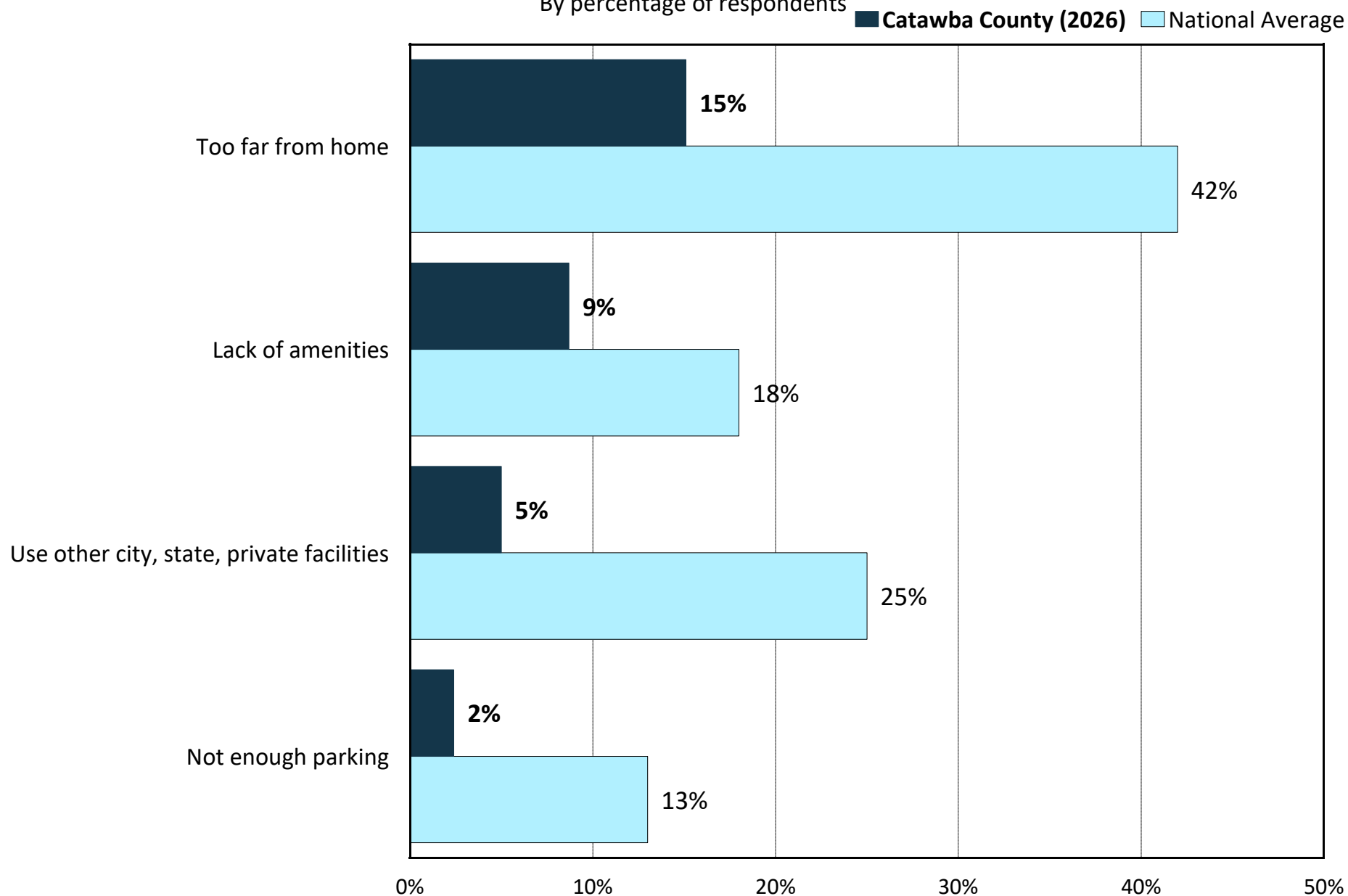
Benchmarks

National Benchmarks

Note: The benchmarking data contained in this report is protected intellectual property. Any reproduction of the benchmarking information in this report by persons or organizations not directly affiliated with Catawba County is not authorized without written consent from ETC Institute.

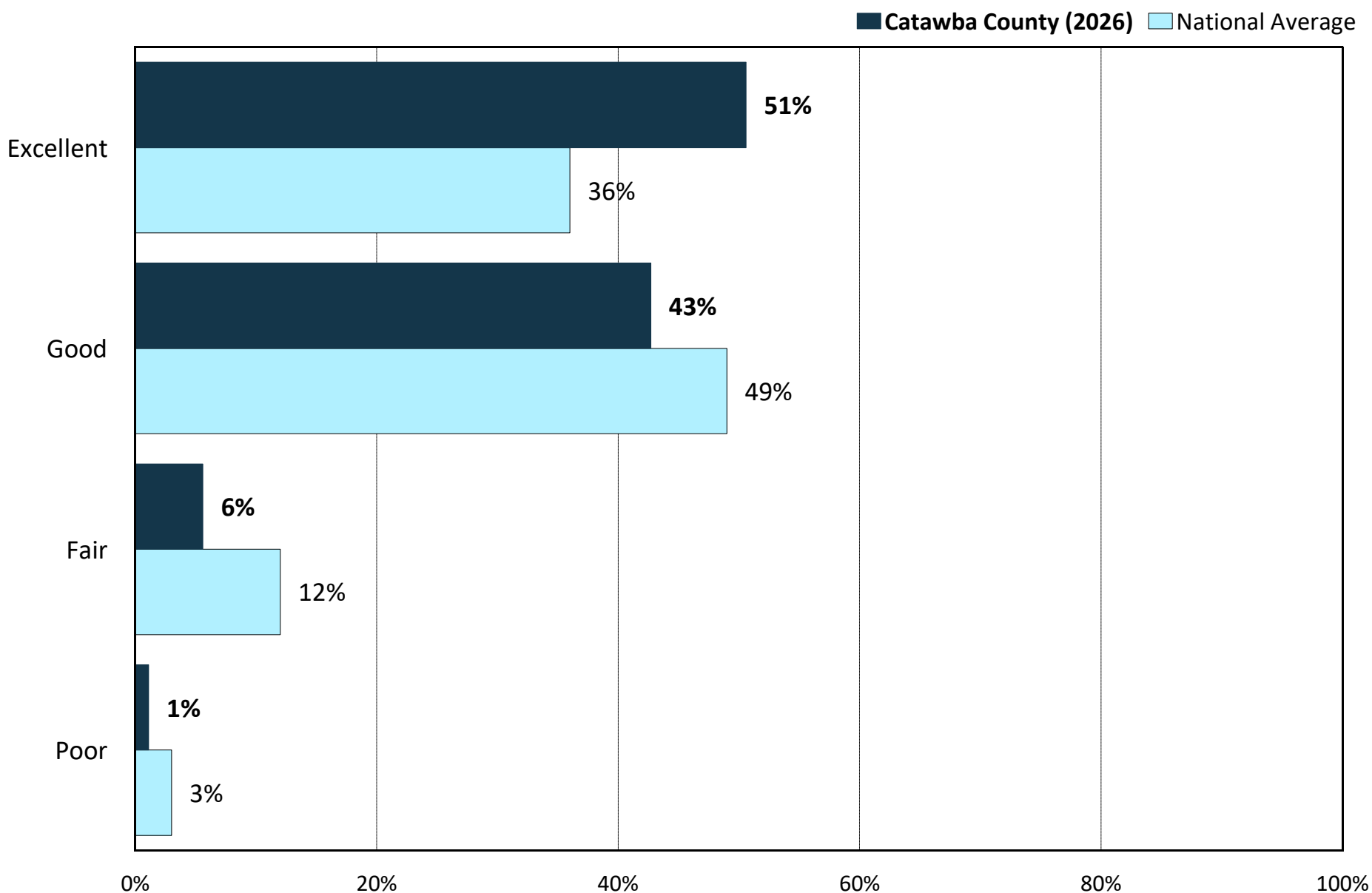
Please check all of the reasons that prevent you from visiting parks and recreation facilities and amenities or what prevents you from visiting them more often.

By percentage of respondents

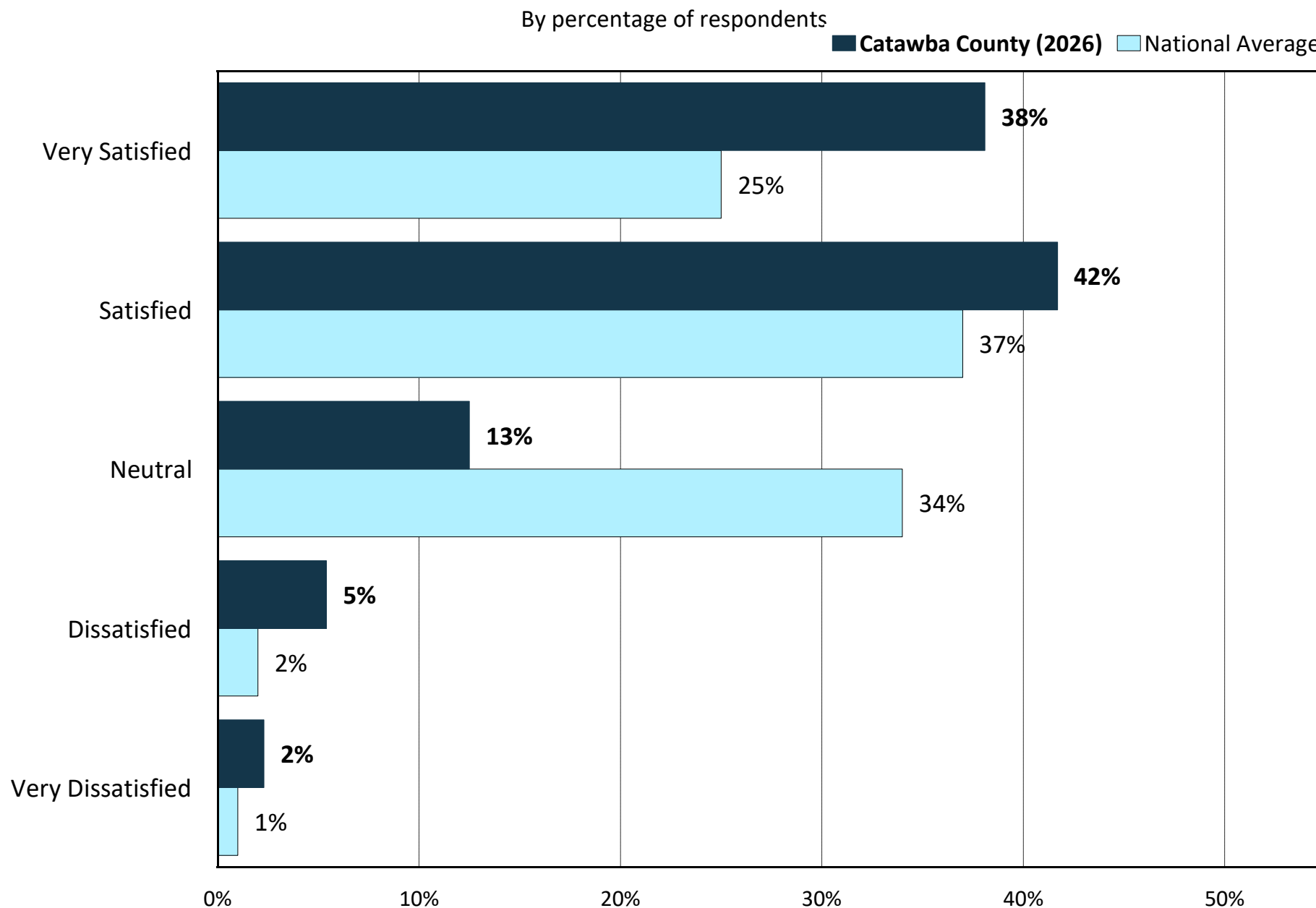


Please rate the overall quality of all the parks and recreation programs you and the members of your households have used over the past year.

By percentage of respondents



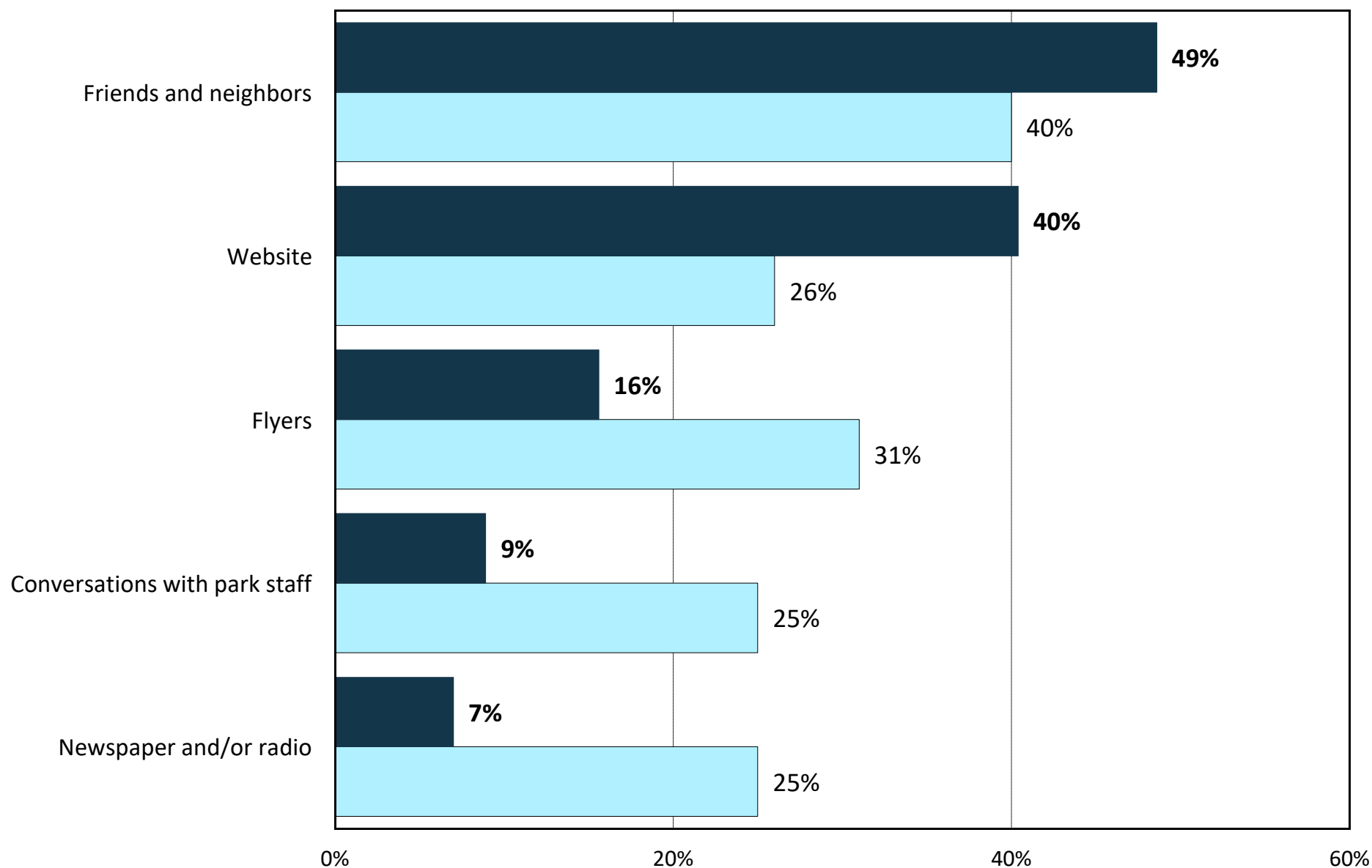
Rate your overall level of satisfaction with the value your household receives from the parks and recreation programs, activities, and events offered in your community.



Please check all the ways you currently use to learn about parks and recreation programs, activities, and events in your community

By percentage of respondent

■ Catawba County (2026) ■ National Average



5

Tabular Data

Q1. Which of the following Catawba County parks have you or members of your household visited during the past year?

Q1. Catawba County parks your household members
have visited during past year

	Number	Percent
Bakers Mountain Park	140	33.7 %
Mountain Creek Park	171	41.1 %
Riverbend Park	205	49.3 %
St. Stephens Park	47	11.3 %
None of these	106	25.5 %
Total	669	

(WITHOUT "NONE OF THESE")

Q1. Which of the following Catawba County parks have you or members of your household visited during the past year? (without "none of these")

Q1. Catawba County parks your household members
have visited during past year

	Number	Percent
Riverbend Park	205	66.1 %
Mountain Creek Park	171	55.2 %
Bakers Mountain Park	140	45.2 %
St. Stephens Park	47	15.2 %
Total	563	

Q1a. Which Catawba County park do you visit most often?

Q1a. Which Catawba County parks do you visit most
often

	Number	Percent
Bakers Mountain Park	57	18.4 %
Mountain Creek Park	120	38.7 %
Riverbend Park	118	38.1 %
St. Stephens Park	15	4.8 %
Total	310	100.0 %

Q1b. How often do you come to a Catawba County park?

Q1b. How often do you come to a Catawba County park

	Number	Percent
A few times a year	83	26.8 %
6+ times a year	83	26.8 %
Monthly	73	23.5 %
Weekly	46	14.8 %
Daily/more than twice a week	23	7.4 %
Not provided	2	0.6 %
Total	310	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "NOT PROVIDED")

Q1b. How often do you come to a Catawba County park? (without "not provided")

Q1b. How often do you come to a Catawba County park

	Number	Percent
A few times a year	83	26.9 %
6+ times a year	83	26.9 %
Monthly	73	23.7 %
Weekly	46	14.9 %
Daily/more than twice a week	23	7.5 %
Total	308	100.0 %

Q2. Which parks or recreation locations do you or other members of your household use or visit?

Q2. Which parks or recreation locations do your household members use or visit	Number	Percent
City of Hickory (Glenn Hilton Park, Hickory City Park, Riverwalk, etc.)	240	57.7 %
City of Newton (Jacob Fork Park, Southside Park, etc.)	120	28.8 %
City of Conover (Conover City Park, Downtown Park, etc.)	122	29.3 %
City of Claremont (Claremont City Park)	39	9.4 %
Town of Catawba (David A. Hunsucker Memorial Park)	16	3.8 %
Town of Long View (Long View Recreation Center)	18	4.3 %
Town of Maiden (Maiden Municipal Park, Union Street Park, Rosenwald Park)	36	8.7 %
Alexander County (Rocky Face Park, Wittenburg Access Area, etc.)	80	19.2 %
Burke County (Valdese Lakeside Park, Catawba Meadows Park, etc.)	71	17.1 %
Caldwell County (Lakeside Park, TH Broyhill Walking Park, etc.)	38	9.1 %
Iredell County (Bingleaf Slopes Park, Signal Hill Trail, etc.)	16	3.8 %
Lincoln County (Betty G. Ross Park, Marcia H. Cloninger Rail Trail, etc.)	55	13.2 %
North Carolina State Parks (South Mountains State Park, Lake James State Park, etc.)	222	53.4 %
North Carolina State Forests (DuPont State Recreational Forest, Tuttle Educational State Forest, etc.)	84	20.2 %
National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, etc.)	233	56.0 %
US Forest Service (Pisgah National Forest, Wilson Creek, Linville Gorge, etc.)	173	41.6 %
Local schools	52	12.5 %
YMCA/Fitness Center/Private Clubs	132	31.7 %
Cultural Institutions	41	9.9 %
Churches or other Religious Organizations	95	22.8 %
Catawba County parks	182	43.8 %
Not sure	6	1.4 %
Other	23	5.5 %
None	26	6.3 %
Total	2120	

(WITHOUT "NONE")**Q2. Which parks or recreation locations do you or other members of your household use or visit?**
(without "none")

Q2. Which parks or recreation locations do your household members use or visit	Number	Percent
City of Hickory (Glenn Hilton Park, Hickory City Park, Riverwalk, etc.)	240	61.5 %
National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, etc.)	233	59.7 %
North Carolina State Parks (South Mountains State Park, Lake James State Park, etc.)	222	56.9 %
Catawba County parks	182	46.7 %
US Forest Service (Pisgah National Forest, Wilson Creek, Linville Gorge, etc.)	173	44.4 %
YMCA/Fitness Center/Private Clubs	132	33.8 %
City of Conover (Conover City Park, Downtown Park, etc.)	122	31.3 %
City of Newton (Jacob Fork Park, Southside Park, etc.)	120	30.8 %
Churches or other Religious Organizations	95	24.4 %
North Carolina State Forests (DuPont State Recreational Forest, Tuttle Educational State Forest, etc.)	84	21.5 %
Alexander County (Rocky Face Park, Wittenburg Access Area, etc.)	80	20.5 %
Burke County (Valdese Lakeside Park, Catawba Meadows Park, etc.)	71	18.2 %
Lincoln County (Betty G. Ross Park, Marcia H. Cloninger Rail Trail, etc.)	55	14.1 %
Local schools	52	13.3 %
Cultural Institutions	41	10.5 %
City of Claremont (Claremont City Park)	39	10.0 %
Caldwell County (Lakeside Park, TH Broyhill Walking Park, etc.)	38	9.7 %
Town of Maiden (Maiden Municipal Park, Union Street Park, Rosenwald Park)	36	9.2 %
Other	23	5.9 %
Town of Long View (Long View Recreation Center)	18	4.6 %
Town of Catawba (David A. Hunsucker Memorial Park)	16	4.1 %
Iredell County (Bigleaf Slopes Park, Signal Hill Trail, etc.)	16	4.1 %
Not sure	6	1.5 %
Total	2094	

Q2-22. Park name:

Q2-22. Park name	Number	Percent
Geitner	1	20.0 %
Lake Norman	1	20.0 %
Henry Fork River	1	20.0 %
Cliff Teague Park	1	20.0 %
Meisher Park	1	20.0 %
Total	5	100.0 %

Q2-23. Other:

<u>Q2-23. Other</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Hart Square	1	5.9 %
Bowling alley, ceramics studio at LP Frans Stadium	1	5.9 %
City streets	1	5.9 %
Lake Hickory Trails	1	5.9 %
Marzeppa Park	1	5.9 %
NC Arboretum, Table Rock	1	5.9 %
Cornelius Greenways	1	5.9 %
Jaycee Park, Lake Hickory Trails	1	5.9 %
Jaycee Park	1	5.9 %
Ramsey Creek Park	1	5.9 %
Startown Optimist	1	5.9 %
Hickory Recreation centers-Highland and Ridgeview Weekly	1	5.9 %
Southside, Newton is the cleanest and always empty	1	5.9 %
Brookford	1	5.9 %
Dog parks	1	5.9 %
Dog parks with fencing-St Stephen's	1	5.9 %
Mecklenburg County parks	1	5.9 %
Total	17	100.0 %

Q2a. Of the locations listed in Question 2, which ONE do you visit most for your household's recreation needs?

Q2a. Which one do you visit most for your household's recreation needs	Number	Percent
City of Hickory (Glenn Hilton Park, Hickory City Park, Riverwalk, etc.)	116	27.9 %
City of Newton (Jacob Fork Park, Southside Park, etc.)	18	4.3 %
City of Conover (Conover City Park, Downtown Park, etc.)	31	7.5 %
City of Claremont (Claremont City Park)	7	1.7 %
Town of Catawba (David A. Hunsucker Memorial Park)	2	0.5 %
Town of Long View (Long View Recreation Center)	2	0.5 %
Town of Maiden (Maiden Municipal Park, Union Street Park, Rosenwald Park)	8	1.9 %
Alexander County (Rocky Face Park, Wittenburg Access Area, etc.)	6	1.4 %
Burke County (Valdese Lakeside Park, Catawba Meadows Park, etc.)	3	0.7 %
Caldwell County (Lakeside Park, TH Broyhill Walking Park, etc.)	1	0.2 %
Iredell County (Bingleaf Slopes Park, Signal Hill Trail, etc.)	2	0.5 %
Lincoln County (Betty G. Ross Park, Marcia H. Cloninger Rail Trail, etc.)	6	1.4 %
North Carolina State Parks (South Mountains State Park, Lake James State Park, etc.)	29	7.0 %
North Carolina State Forests (DuPont State Recreational Forest, Tuttle Educational State Forest, etc.)	1	0.2 %
National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, etc.)	24	5.8 %
US Forest Service (Pisgah National Forest, Wilson Creek, Linville Gorge, etc.)	15	3.6 %
Local schools	2	0.5 %
YMCA/Fitness Center/Private Clubs	18	4.3 %
Cultural Institutions	2	0.5 %
Churches or other Religious Organizations	4	1.0 %
Catawba County parks	59	14.2 %
Not sure	4	1.0 %
Other	11	2.6 %
None chosen	45	10.8 %
Total	416	100.0 %

Q3. Which of the following reasons prevent you or other members of your household from visiting Catawba County parks?

Q3. Reasons that prevent your household members from visiting Catawba County parks	Number	Percent
Lack of amenities	36	8.7 %
Too far from home	63	15.1 %
Operating hours not convenient	20	4.8 %
Not enough parking	10	2.4 %
Insufficient staffing	10	2.4 %
Parks too crowded	19	4.6 %
Don't know what's offered/available	64	15.4 %
Not interested/too busy	50	12.0 %
Use facilities of other cities/private institutions	21	5.0 %
Nothing-I am actively using County Parks	168	40.4 %
Other	38	9.1 %
Total	499	

Q4. From the following list, please check all the ways you learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

Q4. Ways you learn about Catawba County Parks programs & activities	Number	Percent
Catawba County website	168	40.4 %
Flyers at parks	65	15.6 %
Bulletin boards around town	40	9.6 %
Conversations with park staff	37	8.9 %
Facebook	213	51.2 %
Instagram	45	10.8 %
Third-party websites or event calendars	66	15.9 %
Newspaper and/or radio	29	7.0 %
From friends & neighbors	202	48.6 %
Search engine	97	23.3 %
Other	11	2.6 %
Total	973	

Q4a. From the following list, please check all the resources you would utilize to learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

Q4a. All resources you would utilize to learn about Catawba County Parks programs & activities	Number	Percent
Direct email/newsletter	164	39.4 %
Mailers	119	28.6 %
Online event calendar	229	55.0 %
None/don't send me information	63	15.1 %
Other	15	3.6 %
Total	590	

Q4a-5. Other:

Q4a-5. Other	Number	Percent
Facebook	6	50.0 %
Social media posts	1	8.3 %
Catawba County website	1	8.3 %
Instagram	1	8.3 %
Monthly text link to updated information and details	1	8.3 %
Social media, Instagram ads, Facebook	1	8.3 %
Social media	1	8.3 %
Total	12	100.0 %

Q5. Please indicate how well your needs are being met for each of the amenities listed below on a scale of 4 to 1, where 4 means your needs are "Fully Met," and 1 means your needs are "Not Met" at all.

(N=416)

	Fully met	Mostly met	Partly met	Not met	No need
Q5-1. ADA accessible trails	9.1%	10.1%	5.8%	3.1%	71.9%
Q5-2. Biking trails	11.1%	15.1%	8.2%	2.6%	63.0%
Q5-3. Cornhole	3.1%	2.6%	3.8%	8.7%	81.7%
Q5-4. Disc golf course	4.8%	5.3%	4.3%	7.2%	78.4%
Q5-5. Dog parks	9.1%	11.1%	12.7%	5.5%	61.5%
Q5-6. Education/meeting facilities	7.0%	9.1%	10.8%	4.3%	68.8%
Q5-7. Fishing/pier	9.1%	10.6%	12.7%	6.5%	61.1%
Q5-8. Greenway trail system	20.0%	27.9%	17.3%	6.7%	28.1%
Q5-9. Hiking/walking trails	34.1%	31.5%	15.6%	2.2%	16.6%
Q5-10. LITeracy trails/story walks	7.5%	7.0%	9.9%	7.7%	68.0%
Q5-11. Nature center	10.1%	12.0%	20.0%	13.5%	44.5%
Q5-12. Orienteering course	1.9%	4.1%	4.8%	9.4%	79.8%
Q5-13. Paddle launch	6.3%	7.5%	12.0%	8.2%	66.1%
Q5-14. Picnic areas	24.0%	24.0%	16.6%	2.6%	32.7%
Q5-15. Playgrounds	16.6%	22.1%	9.9%	3.4%	48.1%
Q5-16. Pump track	3.8%	3.6%	6.3%	3.6%	82.7%
Q5-17. Other	0.2%	1.2%	1.0%	3.6%	94.0%

(WITHOUT "NO NEED")

Q5. Please indicate how well your needs are being met for each of the amenities listed below on a scale of 4 to 1, where 4 means your needs are "Fully Met," and 1 means your needs are "Not Met" at all. (without "no need")

(N=416)

	Fully met	Mostly met	Partly met	Not met
Q5-1. ADA accessible trails	32.5%	35.9%	20.5%	11.1%
Q5-2. Biking trails	29.9%	40.9%	22.1%	7.1%
Q5-3. Cornhole	17.1%	14.5%	21.1%	47.4%
Q5-4. Disc golf course	22.2%	24.4%	20.0%	33.3%
Q5-5. Dog parks	23.8%	28.8%	33.1%	14.4%
Q5-6. Education/meeting facilities	22.3%	29.2%	34.6%	13.8%
Q5-7. Fishing/pier	23.5%	27.2%	32.7%	16.7%
Q5-8. Greenway trail system	27.8%	38.8%	24.1%	9.4%
Q5-9. Hiking/walking trails	40.9%	37.8%	18.7%	2.6%
Q5-10. LITeracy trails/story walks	23.3%	21.8%	30.8%	24.1%
Q5-11. Nature center	18.2%	21.6%	35.9%	24.2%
Q5-12. Orienteering course	9.5%	20.2%	23.8%	46.4%
Q5-13. Paddle launch	18.4%	22.0%	35.5%	24.1%
Q5-14. Picnic areas	35.7%	35.7%	24.6%	3.9%
Q5-15. Playgrounds	31.9%	42.6%	19.0%	6.5%
Q5-16. Pump track	22.2%	20.8%	36.1%	20.8%
Q5-17. Other	4.0%	20.0%	16.0%	60.0%

Q6. Which FOUR of the amenities listed in Question 5 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q6. Top choice	Number	Percent
ADA accessible trails	26	6.3 %
Biking trails	37	8.9 %
Cornhole	1	0.2 %
Disc golf course	8	1.9 %
Dog parks	30	7.2 %
Education/meeting facilities	2	0.5 %
Fishing/pier	18	4.3 %
Greenway trail system	46	11.1 %
Hiking/walking trails	161	38.7 %
LITeracy trails/story walks	1	0.2 %
Nature center	3	0.7 %
Paddle launch	6	1.4 %
Picnic areas	10	2.4 %
Playgrounds	33	7.9 %
Pump track	1	0.2 %
None chosen	33	7.9 %
Total	416	100.0 %

Q6. Which FOUR of the amenities listed in Question 5 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q6. 2nd choice	Number	Percent
ADA accessible trails	13	3.1 %
Biking trails	21	5.0 %
Disc golf course	7	1.7 %
Dog parks	22	5.3 %
Education/meeting facilities	6	1.4 %
Fishing/pier	13	3.1 %
Greenway trail system	79	19.0 %
Hiking/walking trails	93	22.4 %
LITeracy trails/story walks	3	0.7 %
Nature center	23	5.5 %
Orienteering course	2	0.5 %
Paddle launch	15	3.6 %
Picnic areas	31	7.5 %
Playgrounds	31	7.5 %
Pump track	3	0.7 %
None chosen	54	13.0 %
Total	416	100.0 %

Q6. Which FOUR of the amenities listed in Question 5 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q6. 3rd choice	Number	Percent
ADA accessible trails	8	1.9 %
Biking trails	21	5.0 %
Cornhole	7	1.7 %
Disc golf course	8	1.9 %
Dog parks	24	5.8 %
Education/meeting facilities	8	1.9 %
Fishing/pier	19	4.6 %
Greenway trail system	48	11.5 %
Hiking/walking trails	36	8.7 %
LITeracy trails/story walks	11	2.6 %
Nature center	37	8.9 %
Orienteering course	7	1.7 %
Paddle launch	14	3.4 %
Picnic areas	50	12.0 %
Playgrounds	32	7.7 %
Pump track	2	0.5 %
None chosen	84	20.2 %
Total	416	100.0 %

Q6. Which FOUR of the amenities listed in Question 5 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q6. 4th choice	Number	Percent
ADA accessible trails	6	1.4 %
Biking trails	16	3.8 %
Disc golf course	7	1.7 %
Dog parks	19	4.6 %
Education/meeting facilities	19	4.6 %
Fishing/pier	15	3.6 %
Greenway trail system	29	7.0 %
Hiking/walking trails	15	3.6 %
LITeracy trails/story walks	8	1.9 %
Nature center	38	9.1 %
Orienteering course	5	1.2 %
Paddle launch	16	3.8 %
Picnic areas	55	13.2 %
Playgrounds	25	6.0 %
Pump track	4	1.0 %
None chosen	139	33.4 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(SUM OF TOP 4 RESPONSES)**Q6. Which FOUR of the amenities listed in Question 5 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household? (top 4)**

Q6. Top choice	Number	Percent
ADA accessible trails	53	12.7 %
Biking trails	95	22.8 %
Cornhole	8	1.9 %
Disc golf course	30	7.2 %
Dog parks	95	22.8 %
Education/meeting facilities	35	8.4 %
Fishing/pier	65	15.6 %
Greenway trail system	202	48.6 %
Hiking/walking trails	305	73.3 %
LITeracy trails/story walks	23	5.5 %
Nature center	101	24.3 %
Orienteering course	14	3.4 %
Paddle launch	51	12.3 %
Picnic areas	146	35.1 %
Playgrounds	121	29.1 %
Pump track	10	2.4 %
None chosen	33	7.9 %
Total	1387	

Q7. Please indicate how well your needs are being met for each of the programs/activities listed below on a scale of 4 to 1, where 4 means your needs are "Fully Met," and 1 means your needs are "Not Met" at all.

(N=416)

	Fully met	Mostly met	Partly met	Not met	No need
Q7-1. Adaptive trails/amenities for people with disabilities	4.3%	5.0%	7.2%	5.0%	78.4%
Q7-2. Children/youth activities	6.3%	12.5%	12.7%	5.3%	63.2%
Q7-3. Guided/group hikes	3.4%	5.8%	14.2%	11.5%	65.1%
Q7-4. Nature-based recreation	11.1%	16.8%	24.3%	9.4%	38.5%
Q7-5. Outdoor & environmental education	4.6%	9.1%	20.2%	13.5%	52.6%
Q7-6. Ranger-led programs	4.6%	6.3%	14.4%	14.4%	60.3%
Q7-7. Self-guided activities	15.9%	24.5%	15.4%	8.9%	35.3%
Q7-8. Senior adult activities	5.3%	5.3%	12.0%	14.9%	62.5%
Q7-9. Therapeutic recreation	5.3%	4.8%	9.1%	15.1%	65.6%
Q7-10. Volunteer opportunities	2.4%	5.3%	13.0%	13.5%	65.9%
Q7-11. Other	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	2.2%	97.4%

(WITHOUT "NO NEED")

Q7. Please indicate how well your needs are being met for each of the programs/activities listed below on a scale of 4 to 1, where 4 means your needs are "Fully Met," and 1 means your needs are "Not Met" at all. (without "no need")

(N=416)

	Fully met	Mostly met	Partly met	Not met
Q7-1. Adaptive trails/amenities for people with disabilities	20.0%	23.3%	33.3%	23.3%
Q7-2. Children/youth activities	17.0%	34.0%	34.6%	14.4%
Q7-3. Guided/group hikes	9.7%	16.6%	40.7%	33.1%
Q7-4. Nature-based recreation	18.0%	27.3%	39.5%	15.2%
Q7-5. Outdoor & environmental education	9.6%	19.3%	42.6%	28.4%
Q7-6. Ranger-led programs	11.5%	15.8%	36.4%	36.4%
Q7-7. Self-guided activities	24.5%	37.9%	23.8%	13.8%
Q7-8. Senior adult activities	14.1%	14.1%	32.1%	39.7%
Q7-9. Therapeutic recreation	15.4%	14.0%	26.6%	44.1%
Q7-10. Volunteer opportunities	7.0%	15.5%	38.0%	39.4%
Q7-11. Other	9.1%	9.1%	0.0%	81.8%

Q8. Which FOUR of the programs/activities listed in Question 7 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q8. Top choice	Number	Percent
Adaptive trails/amenities for people with disabilities	44	10.6 %
Children/youth activities	43	10.3 %
Guided/group hikes	22	5.3 %
Nature-based recreation	77	18.5 %
Outdoor & environmental education	16	3.8 %
Ranger-led programs	2	0.5 %
Self-guided activities	58	13.9 %
Senior adult activities	40	9.6 %
Therapeutic recreation	6	1.4 %
Volunteer opportunities	11	2.6 %
None chosen	97	23.3 %
Total	416	100.0 %

Q8. Which FOUR of the programs/activities listed in Question 7 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q8. 2nd choice	Number	Percent
Adaptive trails/amenities for people with disabilities	10	2.4 %
Children/youth activities	32	7.7 %
Guided/group hikes	25	6.0 %
Nature-based recreation	53	12.7 %

Outdoor & environmental education	31	7.5 %
Ranger-led programs	20	4.8 %
Self-guided activities	51	12.3 %
Senior adult activities	32	7.7 %
Therapeutic recreation	15	3.6 %
Volunteer opportunities	11	2.6 %
None chosen	136	32.7 %
Total	416	100.0 %

Q8. Which FOUR of the programs/activities listed in Question 7 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q8. 3rd choice	Number	Percent
Adaptive trails/amenities for people with disabilities	11	2.6 %
Children/youth activities	29	7.0 %
Guided/group hikes	21	5.0 %
Nature-based recreation	33	7.9 %
Outdoor & environmental education	33	7.9 %
Ranger-led programs	20	4.8 %
Self-guided activities	33	7.9 %
Senior adult activities	31	7.5 %
Therapeutic recreation	16	3.8 %
Volunteer opportunities	15	3.6 %
None chosen	174	41.8 %
Total	416	100.0 %

Q8. Which FOUR of the programs/activities listed in Question 7 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household?

Q8. 4th choice	Number	Percent
Adaptive trails/amenities for people with disabilities	8	1.9 %
Children/youth activities	12	2.9 %
Guided/group hikes	22	5.3 %
Nature-based recreation	21	5.0 %
Outdoor & environmental education	36	8.7 %
Ranger-led programs	29	7.0 %
Self-guided activities	22	5.3 %
Senior adult activities	10	2.4 %
Therapeutic recreation	22	5.3 %
Volunteer opportunities	22	5.3 %
None chosen	212	51.0 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(SUM OF TOP 4 RESPONSES)

Q8. Which FOUR of the programs/activities listed in Question 7 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household? (top 4)

Q8. Top choice	Number	Percent
Adaptive trails/amenities for people with disabilities	73	17.5 %
Children/youth activities	116	27.9 %
Guided/group hikes	90	21.6 %
Nature-based recreation	184	44.2 %
Outdoor & environmental education	116	27.9 %
Ranger-led programs	71	17.1 %
Self-guided activities	164	39.4 %
Senior adult activities	113	27.2 %
Therapeutic recreation	59	14.2 %
Volunteer opportunities	59	14.2 %
None chosen	97	23.3 %
Total	1142	

Q9. What are the primary reasons you use outdoor spaces?

Q9. Primary reasons why you use outdoor spaces	Number	Percent
Personal fitness/physical wellness	317	76.2 %
For fun	296	71.2 %
Mental health & wellness	272	65.4 %
Social interaction	104	25.0 %
Family time	183	44.0 %
Pet's needs	128	30.8 %
Time in nature	317	76.2 %
Other	8	1.9 %
Total	1625	

Q9-8. Other:

Q9-8. Other	Number	Percent
Equine Trail Riding	1	12.5 %
Conditions	1	12.5 %
Birding	1	12.5 %
School	1	12.5 %
Tennis	1	12.5 %
Pickleball	1	12.5 %
Kids play	1	12.5 %
Fly fishing	1	12.5 %
Total	8	100.0 %

Q10. In your opinion, which of the following options best describes the need for additional public parks and green spaces in Catawba County?

Q10. Option best describes the need for additional public parks & green spaces in Catawba County	Number	Percent
There is a great need for additional parks	149	35.8 %
There is some need for additional parks	171	41.1 %
There is little need for additional parks	40	9.6 %
There is no need for additional parks	27	6.5 %
Not provided	29	7.0 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "NOT PROVIDED")**Q10. In your opinion, which of the following options best describes the need for additional public parks and green spaces in Catawba County? (without "not provided")**

Q10. Option best describes the need for additional public parks & green spaces in Catawba County	Number	Percent
There is a great need for additional parks	149	38.5 %
There is some need for additional parks	171	44.2 %
There is little need for additional parks	40	10.3 %
There is no need for additional parks	27	7.0 %
Total	387	100.0 %

Q11. In your opinion, how important is the existence of public parks and green spaces to the quality of life in Catawba County?

Q11. How important is the existence of public parks & green spaces to quality of life in Catawba County	Number	Percent
Very important	333	80.0 %
Important	49	11.8 %
Neutral	12	2.9 %
Not important	4	1.0 %
Not at all important	5	1.2 %
Not provided	13	3.1 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "NOT PROVIDED")**Q11. In your opinion, how important is the existence of public parks and green spaces to the quality of life in Catawba County? (without "not provided")**

Q11. How important is the existence of public parks & green spaces to quality of life in Catawba County	Number	Percent
Very important	333	82.6 %
Important	49	12.2 %
Neutral	12	3.0 %
Not important	4	1.0 %
Not at all important	5	1.2 %
Total	403	100.0 %

Q12. What is the MAXIMUM distance in minutes you would travel to visit parks and outdoor spaces?

Q12. Maxium distance in minutes you would travel to visit parks & outdoor spaces	Number	Percent
Less than 15 minutes	45	10.8 %
15-30 minutes	137	32.9 %
30-60 minutes	115	27.6 %
60+ minutes	106	25.5 %
Not provided	13	3.1 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "NOT PROVIDED")**Q12. What is the MAXIMUM distance in minutes you would travel to visit parks and outdoor spaces?
(without "not provided")**

Q12. Maximum distance in minutes you would travel to visit parks & outdoor spaces	Number	Percent
Less than 15 minutes	45	11.2 %
15-30 minutes	137	34.0 %
30-60 minutes	115	28.5 %
60+ minutes	106	26.3 %
Total	403	100.0 %

Q13. How satisfied are you with the overall value your household receives from Catawba County Parks?

Q13. How satisfied are you with overall value your household receives from Catawba County Parks	Number	Percent
Very satisfied	149	35.8 %
Somewhat satisfied	163	39.2 %
Neutral	49	11.8 %
Somewhat dissatisfied	21	5.0 %
Very dissatisfied	9	2.2 %
Don't know	25	6.0 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "DON'T KNOW")**Q13. How satisfied are you with the overall value your household receives from Catawba County Parks?
(without "don't know")**

Q13. How satisfied are you with overall value your household receives from Catawba County Parks	Number	Percent
Very satisfied	149	38.1 %
Somewhat satisfied	163	41.7 %
Neutral	49	12.5 %
Somewhat dissatisfied	21	5.4 %
Very dissatisfied	9	2.3 %
Total	391	100.0 %

Q14. How satisfied are you with the overall condition of the Catawba County parks you have visited?

Q14. How satisfied are you with overall condition of Catawba County parks you have visited	Number	Percent
Very satisfied	186	44.7 %
Somewhat satisfied	144	34.6 %
Neutral	38	9.1 %
Somewhat dissatisfied	15	3.6 %
Very dissatisfied	4	1.0 %
Don't know	29	7.0 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "DON'T KNOW")**Q14. How satisfied are you with the overall condition of the Catawba County parks you have visited?**
(without "don't know")

Q14. How satisfied are you with overall condition of

Catawba County parks you have visited	Number	Percent
Very satisfied	186	48.1 %
Somewhat satisfied	144	37.2 %
Neutral	38	9.8 %
Somewhat dissatisfied	15	3.9 %
Very dissatisfied	4	1.0 %
Total	387	100.0 %

Q15. Have you participated in any of the following Catawba County park events/programs within the last 12 months?

Q15. Which following Catawba County park events/

programs have you participated in within last 12 months	Number	Percent
Ranger-led hikes or programs	29	7.0 %
Trail Challenge	28	6.7 %
Birding Events such as Hummingbird Banding or Hawk Watch	25	6.0 %
Birthday Bash Events	22	5.3 %
Other	13	3.1 %
Haven't participated in events/programs	327	78.6 %
Total	444	

Q15-5. Other:

Q15-5. Other	Number	Percent
Pet activities	1	8.3 %
Crafting at most of the location at the libraries	1	8.3 %
We have participated in park cleanups	1	8.3 %
Dog walks	1	8.3 %
Fishing	1	8.3 %
Tennis	1	8.3 %
Walking for exercise	1	8.3 %
I just like to sit and people watch	1	8.3 %
Field trip	1	8.3 %
Park Clean Up	1	8.3 %
Walk with group from rec center	1	8.3 %
Kids education area at MTN Creek Park	1	8.3 %
Total	12	100.0 %

Q15a. How would you rate the overall quality of the programs you have participated in?Q15a. How would you rate overall quality of programs
you have participated in

	Number	Percent
Excellent	45	50.6 %
Good	38	42.7 %
Fair	5	5.6 %
Poor	1	1.1 %
Total	89	100.0 %

Q17. Approximately how many years have you lived in Catawba County?

Q17. How many years have you lived in Catawba

County	Number	Percent
0-5	74	17.8 %
6-10	49	11.8 %
11-15	27	6.5 %
16-20	36	8.7 %
21-30	88	21.2 %
31+	126	30.3 %
Not provided	16	3.8 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "NOT PROVIDED")**Q17. Approximately how many years have you lived in Catawba County? (without "not provided")**

Q17. How many years have you lived in Catawba

County	Number	Percent
0-5	74	18.5 %
6-10	49	12.3 %
11-15	27	6.8 %
16-20	36	9.0 %
21-30	88	22.0 %
31+	126	31.5 %
Total	400	100.0 %

Q18. What is your age?

Q18. Your age

	Number	Percent
18-34	77	18.5 %
35-44	79	19.0 %
45-54	82	19.7 %
55-64	84	20.2 %
65+	85	20.4 %
Not provided	9	2.2 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "NOT PROVIDED")**Q18. What is your age? (without "not provided")**

Q18. Your age

	Number	Percent
18-34	77	18.9 %
35-44	79	19.4 %
45-54	82	20.1 %
55-64	84	20.6 %
65+	85	20.9 %
Total	407	100.0 %

Q19. Including yourself, how many people in your household are:

	Mean	Sum
number	2.6	1048
Under age 5	0.1	50
Ages 5-9	0.1	50
Ages 10-14	0.1	52
Ages 15-19	0.1	59
Ages 20-24	0.1	54
Ages 25-34	0.3	134
Ages 35-44	0.3	135
Ages 45-54	0.4	150
Ages 55-64	0.4	174
Ages 65-74	0.3	114
Ages 75+	0.2	76

Q20. Which of the following BEST describes your race?

Q20. Your race	Number	Percent
Asian or Asian Indian	20	4.8 %
Black or African American	33	7.9 %
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	0.7 %
White	334	80.3 %
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	0.2 %
Hispanic or Latino	49	11.8 %
Prefer not to answer	13	3.1 %
Other	3	0.7 %
Total	456	

(WITHOUT "PREFER NOT TO ANSWER")**Q20. Which of the following BEST describes your race? (without "prefer not to answer")**

Q20. Your race	Number	Percent
White	334	82.9 %
Hispanic or Latino	49	12.2 %
Black or African American	33	8.2 %
Asian or Asian Indian	20	5.0 %
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	0.7 %
Other	3	0.7 %
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	0.2 %
Total	443	

Q20-8. Self-describe your race:

Q20-8. Self-describe your race	Number	Percent
Multi-racial	1	33.3 %
Appalachian American	1	33.3 %
Mixed	1	33.3 %
Total	3	100.0 %

Q21. Your gender:

Q21. Your gender	Number	Percent
Male	205	49.3 %
Female	207	49.8 %
Not provided	4	1.0 %
Total	416	100.0 %

(WITHOUT "NOT PROVIDED")**Q21. Your gender: (without "not provided")**

Q21. Your gender	Number	Percent
Male	205	49.8 %
Female	207	50.2 %
Total	412	100.0 %



Open-Ended Comments

Open-Ended Question Responses

Q3—"Other": Which of the following reasons prevent you or other members of your household from visiting Catawba County parks?

- Adventuring outside the area-and time.
- At Mountain Creek Park I would like more "hike only" trails, and hike only of longer length. This Park is so heavily weighted to mountain bikers that hikers and walkers have to use "dual use" and bikers are less than courteous and buzz past at dangerous pace!
- Bike trails closed
- Convenience. They aren't actually too far - but Southside Park is just the easiest for me.
- Difficult to access safely on foot from our house.
- Disappointed that there is not a park in the entire county that you can trailer in & ride horses
- Elderly now.. walking limited
- Health reasons that limit my activity at this time.
- I am waiting on a transplant, can't go out in public at this time.
- I don't feel safe at parks.
- I geocache and not a lot of geocaches in the parks.
- I go when time permits
- I used to like playing tennis at the Hickory city park, but almost every time we get good weather, there is usually a tournament and get run off. The parks dept and I came to a solution-post court reservations for at least 24 hrs. in advance(at the court. They made up clipboards to post them and it has NEVER been used. The parks dept should sell the tennis facility to a private club because it isn't operated as a city park, more like a club for certain privileged people. Posting in a email is NOT public notice.
- In a wheelchair. Parking and park access. Things available for wheelchair bound
- Lack of shade in playgrounds
- Longview has been neglected, it needs to be upgraded.
- Love the parks and I need to make it a priority to visit more. Catawba County is doing an excellent job promoting the parks and there is something for any one of all ages and fitness levels.
- Mountain Creek Kayak access is hard to use.
- Need something toddler friendly
- No equestrian trails
- No equine trails
- Not enough good fishing spots. The new parks fishing spot is kind of a joke.
- Not open due to damage from the hurricane.
- Often not enough benches for those with mobility challenges. Wound up on "easy" trails that are NOT easy to navigate with mobility issues. Maps often not detailed enough, trail blazes often unclear.
- Other than Mountain Creek Park, the others are not close.
- Parks upkeep
- Physically unable
- Physically unable; wheelchair bound

- Safety
- Security concerns
- Single person so I don't go alone.
- Time, busy schedule and use the YMCA most.
- Too busy and lazy. Used to use them more.
- Trails Closed
- Use parks to play disc golf
- We don't get full use of Mountain Creek Park trails due to mountain bikers not sharing trails well. They don't announce themselves. We need parallel hiking trails. We've lived here for 36 years.
- Weather
- Weather

Q4—"Other": From the following list, please check all the ways you learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

- All trails
- City of Conover's flyers
- Driving by, and I live close by.
- I don't know of any activities/events happening at the local level. No Facebook. No Instagram. A newspaper? Please. I don't actively search online.
- I see them as I drive around, except the Mountain park. I was told about it and it is awesome!
- It's two miles from my house
- Mail
- None
- Rec center bulletin postings or highland Rec ctr emails
- Schools
- TV

Q5—"Other": Need for amenities/facilities

- Basketball and baseball
- Bathrooms
- Camping
- ceramics, needs more items poured more hours
- Disc golf course and Swings at mountain creek
- Enough parking
- Equestrian trails
- I would like to see workout equipment at more parks (Conover has). More tennis courts, not just pickle ball. Would be amazing to have better and destination pump tracks. County pool at a park would be ideal. More and better shelter space.
- I would love a work out station trail. You hike and stop every so often to do a certain exercise on a piece of equipment
- Lack of water at dog park at Mountain creek
- Lake access for public
- More pickleball. Interactive games and fitness activities along trails. More benches. A pool!

- Mountain Creek needs a motor boat launch.
- Need so many more wild/native plants and flowers throughout all the parks. The need is severe, due to lack of people planting organic native plants for all wildlife.
- No Equine Trails
- Parks should be open all hours
- Pickleball
- Pickleball
- Pickleball courts
- Pickleball courts
- Restroom facilities
- Road bike trail system
- Splash pad/pool
- Sport facilities, ex basketball hoops
- Tennis

Q7—"Other": Need for programs/activities

- A trail workout with stations you stop at along the way to do specific workouts . Also more benches to take a rest
- Equestrian trails
- Equine Trails
- I would enjoy a place where I could easily be able to rent Kayaks on an hourly basis and be helped into the. And coached a little so as a relative "newbie " I could experience kayaking.
- Kayak launch area could use improvement at Mountain Creek Park
- More programming! Outdoor Summer Camps and regular kids meet ups to encourage love and respect for the outdoors.
- Motor boat launch.
- Pool!
- Service dog parks
- Tennis
- Workout equipment

Q16—"Is there any other information you would like to share with us regarding Catawba County parks, programs, or amenities?"

- all were excellent, most still are, ceramics has not been as good lately (due to no selection of pieces to paint) our of needed paints.
- Appreciate Catawba County investing in the parks. It's one of the reasons my family and I love our community.
- As a household, we have benefited greatly by the parks and recent years. Mental health individually, physical health regularly, but also mental and social health for my aging parent with limited wheelchair mobility. Thank you!
- As a Part 107 Drone pilot I think drone flights should be allowed at Catawba County Parks. I think a lack of understanding of FAA rules and regulations lead to such bans. The FAA rules provide all necessary safeguards for drone flights.

- Bakers mountain used to have multiple trash cans. So many trash cans were removed. I wish they'd put them back. Especially for those who pick up pet waste. Also the bridges at bakers. All three were removed.
- Bathrooms need to be cleaned. I am willing to be hired for cleanup of leftover dog/animal feces.
- Before any more parks are created, put the cost to the taxpayers. Between Hickory, Conover, Newton and the County , we already have more than the national averages. All parks come at a cost, initial cost and reoccurring costs. Taxpayers are c already struggling to pay taxes, we don't need them raised any more so we have to work a second job to pay the taxes for the parks that now we can't use because of it.
- Bub Geitner Park needs a lot more parking spots.
- Catawba County Parks are underrated and you are doing a good job. Keep up the good work.
- Closest to my address
- Community gardens, workout equipment outside, pump tracks, clubs (hiking, running, nature, canoe). Rock climbing, botanical garden, art in parks!
- Complete the Olle Art Walk to connect City Walk and Riverwalk as soon as possible. Also, it would be nice to have a park walkable to downtown similar to Unity Park in Greenville South Carolina.
- Conover Park needs a basketball court; Zahr Baker needs wind sales for summertime; Jacob Fork bathrooms are always locked and can't walk that track.
- Conversion of Long View (and Southwest Hickory) Greenways (Sewer right of ways) into trail system for resident's use.
- Cut new bike trails in Riverbend, similar to mountain Creek.
- Do not see as much use as there should be.
- Dog parks need more grass; also need dog park/walks in Longview.
- Easier access at parks/events for adults and seniors. It would also be helpful to receive texts that would take us to the information so we can see what's coming up.
- Fixing broken pavement; empty trash cans; clean and paint benches.
- Get rid of rangers and buy more land and make more playgrounds.
- Glenn Hilton Park was historically a great park that has gone way downhill. The nature wetlands used to be beautiful.
- Great county parks. They are a major perk to living in our county. Mountain Creek is a gem for mountain bikers and trail runners. Bakers is great for hiking.
- Guided night bike rides at Mt. Creek.
- Having an occasional pamphlet reminder of activities would be nice.
- I am new to the area. I've done some exploring but I think county organized events would be great. I would be more interested in events that are geared to people 45 and over or all ages. It would be a way to meet people and be involved in community activities.
- I appreciate the improvements recently made - picnic tables, trash, pick up, provided doggy bags, etc.
- I enjoy my parks. The more the merrier. The more that involves water, the better. Love trails and nature and ways to cool off in the summer. Love having picnics and BBQing.
- I love the thread trails, city walks, and all the green spaces. I am out walking every day...even in bad weather. I see the same people using parks every week....so there is a huge group of

continuous users. I am a walker of dogs and that group heavily uses parks. I am sad the county dog parks lost their Rangers. They were what kept the dog parks safe. I appreciate that Catawba County does so much.

- I loved the idea of the trail challenge, but due to mobility issues, there was no chance at all I could complete it. There must be a way, maybe tracking overall miles, for those of us who must stick to easier surfaces and shorter distance
- I need to get more plugged into the CCP events. I have no idea what's available. Greenway would be nice to walk and ride bikes.
- I think I am missing out on a lot by not knowing about it! Mountain creek is awesome!
- I wish we had additional park facilities providing lake/water access
- I would like more young adult activities that would peak my interest. More social events would be good.
- I would like to know about volunteer opportunities.
- I would love for the County to purchase the property south of Bakers Mountain (400+ acres) before it gets developed. It is a great piece of land for hiking. Maybe a joint project with the county government and the private sector.
- I would love more opportunities for educational events that people could volunteer to support!
- I would love to see a senior walking group
- I would love to see greenways in Sherrills ford. Traveling to mountain creek is out of the way.
- I would love to see more things added to Bruce Meisner Park
- I'd love for more lighted pathways. It starts getting dark after the fall time change when I get off work. It would be great to have a safe and lighted (even temporary) greenway in Newton. Not sure if that's town or county.
- I'm grateful for our park system
- I'm grateful for the beautiful parks in my area. It improves my quality of life as well as my mental and physical well-being.
- In Auburn Washington, they have a hall just for seniors to go have lunch, meet together and we would pay 3 to 5 dollars apiece with free lunch to the poor.
- It would be great if there were a splash pads.
- It's disturbing when, homeless are found sleeping on park benches in the morning. I don't want my kid seeing that."
- Keep it fully funded. Too many places are being cut down. We need these green spaces.
- Keep it up! The one park I always go to is beautiful. Some guy always maintains it well.
- Keep up the good work!
- Love going to Mountain Creek. The paved path could use more attention. Add more dog waste stations or garbage cans.
- Love the sponsored community concerts
- Making Kayaking rental accessible to those who do not own kayaks or cannot transport them to water portals.
- more communication to public on events and activities; more communication about Riverwalk on lake-open or closed?
- More diverse walking trails
- More handicap parking.

- More parking for weekend, more trails and clean bathrooms
- More Pickleball courts and security at parks.
- More pickleball courts are needed in various locations!
- More unique experiences for kids and fun
- Water slide into the lake or something special to each park
- More shade at the mountain creek park playground
- Most of the restrooms need to be updated
- Mountain Creek needs a motor boat launch.
- My family and I really enjoy the bike trails! We would like to see the pump track at Broyhill/Geitner park improved if possible.
- My family enjoys walking trails/greenways in Morganton, Lenoir, and Hickory.
- Need more parking at Bakers Mountain
- Need more pickleball courts
- Need more shelter tables for parties and more updated restrooms.
- Need walking sticks, more seats, list all flowers, a dog waste bags for pets
- Not enough knowledge about programs and events.
- Overcrowded
- Parks and amenities are very important for families and ones mental health.
- Plant more flowers
- Please, please preserve land and open space!
- Please please please make more trails for walking running and biking
- Please provide information on activities at the parks. Not everyone gets actively information from websites.
- Please repair storm damage at Riverbend.
- Riverbend field trip-excellent!
- Senior programs and activities would be great. That way I can meet people my age and make new friends.
- Southside park's bathroom's could use an update!
- Splash pads at Henry Fork River
- Thank you for all you do!
- Thank you for the walking trails that you guys made recently, especially the walking besides Catawba River in Granite Falls/Hickory. My new favorite spot for walking and enjoying the outdoor!
- The Geitner Park needs benches for people with children or animals, the elderly, or anybody that needs a break. They also need trash cans so people won't throw trash on the ground which they will if there's nothing available.
- The parks are very well maintained. The bathrooms are well kept, clean and have toilet paper. We also enjoyed the Pickleball courts; and we ride bikes on the greenways. The expansion of the Greenway is important to us.
- The staff are very kind.
- The upgrades to the parks over the last year have been great! I didn't know a lot of these programs exist. I think using a social media platform to promote activities would be very helpful!

- There needs to be a park where you can walk and hike in the Mountain View/Vale area. There is nothing out this way as far as I know except for Jacob's Fork and the trail around the baseball fields, which is not long. If you walk on the bike trail, you get run over by bikes.
- There needs to be more freedom for the parks to organize their own programs. The parttime person they have will only allow what she wants and shuts down anything the rangers propose
- There needs to be more space allotted for parks and green space due to rapid growth of the area.
- There used to be a Catawba Valley Outdoors Club, run by volunteers, which held a variety of events, including trail maintenance. Maybe Catawba County Parks could sponsor such an initiative? It might prove useful!
- There's a noticeable amount of litter and trash when I have visited the parks.
- They are used by the drug addicts and homeless as a hang out space. Maybe having more staff would make it harder for people to go shoot up in the bathrooms or parking lots.
- They do a great job! The parks were one of the reasons we chose to live in Hickory. I've lost my walking partners so would love to have others to meet up with on a scheduled basis. Always brag to out-of-staters about our parks and trails. Well done!
- Upkeep of the plate equipment needs priority; cleaner parks; people need to adhere to the no smoking at parks.
- Very happy with Mountain Creek Park. It's close to my home.
- Waste of tax money.
- We love Catawba County parks and are so glad they are well cared for.
- We need a skate and scooter park
- We need more basketball, pickleball and especially volleyball courts.
- We need some trails for road bike rides or shoulder on roads
- "We quit using the dog parks at Mountain Creek due to the lack of benches throughout the park. The existing benches were placed directly in the path of incoming dogs/owners and I'm the full sun. They aren't usable in summer months due the heat that radiates from them.
- Also, it causes conflict between the dogs that are in the park and new humans and dogs entering the park. Really poor placement, and not enough benches in total."
- "What you guys did with the downtown conover park across from the police station is awesome. I really love it, I would like more swings though... I used to love the swing set that was more downhill near the forested area, it was the only thing I did at that park but now I just walk around and use the spiny thing.
- In newton though, most of the time the buttons you use to cross the road doesn't work so that needs fixing pls. I really like walking places"
- When my daughter was young, we visited almost all the parks around Catawba county. But we were especially thankful to the staff at Riverbend for their mushroom walks and the hummingbird banding programs. We did those more than once with friends and our homeschool groups. Now that it's just my husband and I nearing retirement age, we love hiking at Riverbend. The trails are wonderful and well kept. The staff is always nice. We feel very fortunate to live close to it because I think it's the best park Catawba county has. I like that there aren't playgrounds and such. It's purely natural with picnic tables around. But they do have the education building for programs still.

- When will the Sandy Pines Park be completed.
- Would enjoy tent camping opportunities at Bakers Mtn Park, if possible, thanks for everything your staff does.
- Would love a calendar for any homeschooling events and opportunities.
- Would love to be able to ride horses
- Would love to do the trail challenge. I found out about it too late
- Would love to have more ranger-led birding walks, native plants at the parks (and remove/replace invasive plants at our local parks/greenways) and we would love to see more greenways (especially in Claremont)!



Survey Instrument



catawba county parks

Dear Catawba County Residents and Visitors,

As Director of Catawba County Parks, I am excited to announce a vitally important project — development of our Parks Master Plan. This will be our first comprehensive planning update since 2015, marking a significant step forward in crafting the future of our park system.

Our parks, trails, and natural resources play a vital role in making Catawba County a thriving, healthy, and welcoming place for everyone. To ensure it stays this way, we want to hear directly from the people who enjoy these spaces — and just as importantly, from those who may not currently use them — and that's why we need your help.

We kindly ask you to participate in the Parks Master Plan Survey. Your feedback is crucial in helping us evaluate current strengths, identify community needs, and explore opportunities for improvement across our park system. Whether you are a regular park user, a parent, a nature lover, or someone seeking more ways to enjoy the outdoors, your perspective is highly valued and will play a key role in guiding the future of our parks.

A strong park system promotes public health, boosts property values, fosters environmental stewardship, and offers meaningful recreation and learning opportunities for all ages. By working together, we can create a master plan that reflects the values, needs, and aspirations of our growing and evolving community.

Please take a few moments to complete the included survey. Your voices will play a pivotal role in shaping the vision and direction of our parks for the next decade and beyond.

Thank you for your time, support, and dedication to building a vibrant future for Catawba County Parks — one that will inspire and enrich generations to come.

With appreciation,

David Waggoner
Catawba County Parks Director

catawbacountync.gov

Mailing/Shipping Address: 25 Government Drive, Newton, NC 28658

Physical Address: 2247 36th Ave. NE, Hickory, NC 28601



Catawba County Parks Needs Assessment Survey

Please have an adult in your household complete this survey. Your input will be used to assess community recreation needs and priorities for Catawba County. You may complete the survey online at catawbacountysurvey.org.

1. Which of the following Catawba County parks have you or members of your household visited during the past year? [Check all that apply.]

- ☐ (1) Bakers Mountain Park ☐ (3) Riverbend Park ☐ (5) None of these [Skip to Q2.]
☐ (2) Mountain Creek Park ☐ (4) St. Stephens Park

1a. Which Catawba County park do you visit most often? [Write in your answer below using the numbers from the list in Question 1.]

Park visited most often: _____

1b. How often do you come to a Catawba County park?

- ☐ (1) A few times a year ☐ (4) Weekly
☐ (2) 6 or more times a year ☐ (5) Daily/More than twice a week
☐ (3) Monthly ☐ (6) Never

2. Which parks or recreation locations do you or other members of your household use or visit? [Check all that apply.]

- ☐ (01) City of Hickory (Glenn Hilton Park, Hickory City Park, Riverwalk, etc.)
☐ (02) City of Newton (Jacob Fork Park, Southside Park, etc.)
☐ (03) City of Conover (Conover City Park, Downtown Park, etc.)
☐ (04) City of Claremont (Claremont City Park)
☐ (05) Town of Catawba (David A. Hunsucker Memorial Park)
☐ (06) Town of Long View (Long View Recreation Center)
☐ (07) Town of Maiden (Maiden Municipal Park, Union Street Park, Rosenwald Park)
☐ (08) Alexander County (Rocky Face Park, Wittenburg Access Area, etc.)
☐ (09) Burke County (Valdese Lakeside Park, Catawba Meadows Park, etc.)
☐ (10) Caldwell County (Lakeside Park, TH Broyhill Walking Park, etc.)
☐ (11) Iredell County (Bingleaf Slopes Park, Signal Hill Trail, etc.)
☐ (12) Lincoln County (Betty G. Ross Park, Marcia H. Cloninger Rail Trail, etc.)
☐ (13) North Carolina State Parks (South Mountains State Park, Lake James State Park, etc.)
☐ (14) North Carolina State Forests (DuPont State Recreational Forest, Tuttle Educational State Forest, etc.)
☐ (15) National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, etc.)
☐ (16) US Forest Service (Pisgah National Forest, Wilson Creek, Linville Gorge, etc.)
☐ (17) Local Schools
☐ (18) YMCA/Fitness Center/Private Clubs
☐ (19) Cultural Institutions
☐ (20) Churches or Other Religious Organizations
☐ (21) Catawba County Parks
☐ (22) Not Sure: Park Name: _____
☐ (23) Other: _____
☐ (99) None

2a. Of the locations listed in Question 2, which ONE do you visit most for your household's recreation needs? [Write in your answer using the numbers from the list in Question 2 that corresponds to the location your household visits most; if you visit Catawba County parks the most, write "21".]

Most visited location: _____

3. Which of the following reasons prevent you or other members of your household from visiting Catawba County parks? (If you currently use them, what prevents you from visiting them more often?) [Check all that apply.]

- ☐ (01) Lack of amenities
☐ (02) Too far from home
☐ (03) Operating hours not convenient
☐ (04) Not enough parking
☐ (05) Insufficient staffing
☐ (06) Poor customer service
☐ (07) Parks too crowded
☐ (08) Don't know what's offered/available
☐ (09) Not interested/too busy
☐ (10) Use facilities of other cities/private institutions
☐ (11) Nothing - I am actively using the County Parks
☐ (12) Other: _____

4. From the following list, please check all the ways you learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

- ☐ (01) Catawba County website
☐ (02) Flyers at parks
☐ (03) Bulletin boards around town
☐ (04) Conversations with park staff
☐ (05) Facebook
☐ (06) Instagram
☐ (07) Third-party websites or event calendars
☐ (08) Newspaper and/or radio
☐ (09) From friends and neighbors
☐ (10) Search engine
☐ (11) Other: _____

- 4a. From the following list, please check all the resources you would utilize to learn about Catawba County Parks programs and activities.

- ☐ (1) Direct email/newsletter
☐ (2) Mailers
☐ (3) Online event calendar
☐ (4) None/Don't send me information
☐ (5) Other: _____

5. Please indicate how well your needs are being met for each of the amenities listed below on a scale of 4 to 1, where 4 means your needs are "Fully Met," and 1 means your needs are "Not Met" at all. If you do not have a need for an item listed, please circle "9" for "No Need."

Amenity	Fully Met	Mostly Met	Partly Met	Not Met	No Need
01. ADA accessible trails	4	3	2	1	9
02. Biking trails	4	3	2	1	9
03. Cornhole	4	3	2	1	9
04. Disc golf course	4	3	2	1	9
05. Dog parks	4	3	2	1	9
06. Education/Meeting facilities	4	3	2	1	9
07. Fishing/Pier	4	3	2	1	9
08. Greenway trail system	4	3	2	1	9
09. Hiking/Walking trails	4	3	2	1	9
10. LiTeracy trails/Story walks	4	3	2	1	9
11. Nature center	4	3	2	1	9
12. Orienteering course	4	3	2	1	9
13. Paddle launch	4	3	2	1	9
14. Picnic areas	4	3	2	1	9
15. Playgrounds	4	3	2	1	9
16. Pump track	4	3	2	1	9
17. Other: _____	4	3	2	1	9

6. Which FOUR of the amenities listed in Question 5 do you think are MOST IMPORTANT to members of your household? [Write in your answers below using the numbers from the list in Question 5, or circle "NONE."]

1st: _____ 2nd: _____ 3rd: _____ 4th: _____ NONE

7. Please indicate how well your needs are being met for each of the programs/activities listed below on a scale of 4 to 1, where 4 means your needs are "Fully Met," and 1 means your needs are "Not Met" at all. If you do not have a need for an item listed, please circle "9" for "No Need."

Program/Activity	Fully Met	Mostly Met	Partly Met	Not Met	No Need
01. Adaptive trails/Amenities for people with disabilities	4	3	2	1	9
02. Children/Youth activities	4	3	2	1	9
03. Guided/Group hikes	4	3	2	1	9
04. Nature-based recreation	4	3	2	1	9
05. Outdoor and environmental education	4	3	2	1	9
06. Ranger-led programs	4	3	2	1	9
07. Self-guided activities	4	3	2	1	9
08. Senior adult activities	4	3	2	1	9
09. Therapeutic recreation	4	3	2	1	9
10. Volunteer opportunities	4	3	2	1	9
11. Other: _____	4	3	2	1	9

8. Which **FOUR** of the programs/activities listed in Question 7 do you think are **MOST IMPORTANT** to members of your household? [Write in your answers below using the numbers from the list in Question 7, or circle "NONE."]

1st: _____ 2nd: _____ 3rd: _____ 4th: _____ NONE

9. What are the primary reasons you use outdoor spaces? [Check all that apply.]

_____(1) Personal fitness/physical wellness _____(5) Family time
 _____(2) For fun _____(6) Pet's needs
 _____(3) Mental health and wellness _____(7) Time in nature
 _____(4) Social interaction _____(8) Other: _____

10. In your opinion, which of the following options best describes the need for additional public parks and green spaces in Catawba County?

_____(1) There is a great need for additional parks _____(3) There is little need for additional parks
 _____(2) There is some need for additional parks _____(4) There is no need for additional parks

11. In your opinion, how important is the existence of public parks and green spaces to the quality of life in Catawba County?

_____(5) Very important _____(3) Neutral _____(1) Not at all important
 _____(4) Important _____(2) Not important

12. What is the **MAXIMUM** distance in minutes you would travel to visit parks and outdoor spaces?

_____ (1) Less than 15 minutes _____ (2) 15-30 minutes _____ (3) 30-60 minutes _____ (4) More than 60 minutes

13. How satisfied are you with the overall value your household receives from Catawba County Parks?

_____(5) Very satisfied _____(3) Neutral _____(1) Very dissatisfied
 _____(4) Somewhat satisfied _____(2) Somewhat dissatisfied _____(9) Don't know

14. How satisfied are you with the overall condition of the Catawba County parks you have visited?

_____(5) Very satisfied _____(3) Neutral _____(1) Very dissatisfied
 _____(4) Somewhat satisfied _____(2) Somewhat dissatisfied _____(9) Don't know

- 15. Have you participated in any of the following Catawba County park events/programs within the last 12 months? [Check all that apply.]**

☐ (1) Ranger-led hikes or programs
☐ (2) Trail Challenge
☐ (3) Birding Events such as Hummingbird Banding or Hawk Watch
☐ (4) Birthday Bash Events
☐ (5) Other: _____
☐ (6) Haven't participated in events/programs [Skip to Q16.]

- 15a. How would you rate the overall quality of the programs you have participated in?**

☐ (4) Excellent ☐ (3) Good ☐ (2) Fair ☐ (1) Poor

- 16. Is there any other information you would like to share with us regarding Catawba County parks, programs, or amenities?**

Demographics

- 17. Approximately how many years have you lived in Catawba County? [Write "0" if less than one year.]**

_____ years

- 18. What is your age? _____ years**

- 19. Including yourself, how many people in your household are:**

Under age 5: _____	Ages 15-19: _____	Ages 35-44: _____	Ages 65-74: _____
Ages 5-9: _____	Ages 20-24: _____	Ages 45-54: _____	Ages 75+: _____
Ages 10-14: _____	Ages 25-34: _____	Ages 55-64: _____	

- 20. Which of the following BEST describes your race? [Check all that apply.]**

☐ (01) Asian or Asian Indian	☐ (05) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
☐ (02) Black or African American	☐ (06) Hispanic or Latino
☐ (03) American Indian or Alaska Native	☐ (88) Prefer not to answer
☐ (04) White	☐ (99) Other: _____

- 21. Your gender:** ☐ (1) Male ☐ (2) Female

- 22. [OPTIONAL] Would you like to receive future information regarding Catawba County Parks or updates on the Parks Master Plan?**

☐ (1) Yes [Answer Q22a.] ☐ (2) No

- 22a. Please provide your contact information below.**

Your Name: _____ Phone: _____

Email: _____

This concludes the survey - thank you for your time!

Please return your completed survey in the enclosed postage-paid envelope addressed to:
ETC Institute, 725 W. Frontier Circle, Olathe, KS 66061.

Your responses will remain completely confidential.
The information to the right will ONLY be used to help
identify the level of need in your area. Thank you!

INTERNAL WORK PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect What Matters							
Protect and steward the County's unique landscapes, ecosystems, historical, and cultural resources for future generations.							
Recommendation	Action Item	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources	ST (0-4 years)	MT (4-7 years)	LT (7-10 years)	OG (ongoing)
Establish a rolling capital asset and lifecycle replacement program.	Complete a department-wide inventory of park facilities, site infrastructure, equipment, and major natural-resource assets.	Parks; Facilities Services; IT/GIS		X			
	Conduct condition assessments and identify deferred maintenance, safety, accessibility, and replacement needs.	Parks; Facilities Services; Risk Management		X			
	Assign an expected useful life, replacement year, preliminary cost, and responsible department to each asset.	Parks; Facilities Services; Finance/Budget		X			
	Consider developing a lifecycle replacement fund, where 5% of the value of new assets added to the park system is placed into a reserve annually.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Administration					X
	Develop a prioritized 10-year repair and replacement schedule linked to the County's rolling CIP.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Administration		X			
	Establish a recurring annual capital allocation that reduces reliance on episodic funding spikes.	County Administration; Finance/Budget		X			
	Update the asset inventory, condition ratings, replacement costs, and priorities annually.	Parks; Facilities Services; IT/GIS					X
	Identify underutilized assets and determine whether to reinvest or divest.	Parks; Finance/Budget; Facilities Services					X
	Track lifecycle work completed and report progress during the annual budget and CIP process.	Parks; Finance/Budget; Facilities Services					X
	Use the lifecycle plan to reduce deferred maintenance and guide reinvestment before system expansion.	Parks; County Administration; Facilities Services					X
Establish site-based natural-resource stewardship and maintenance plans (Land Management Plans).	Define the conservation, visitor-experience, and resource-protection objectives that distinguish each park and guide how it should be maintained.	Parks; County Planning; environmental partners		X			
	Inventory sensitive habitats, invasive species, erosion, drainage, shoreline, forest, meadow, trail-impact, and cultural-resource management needs.	Parks; GIS; Soil and Water Conservation; Cooperative Extension		X			
	Establish management zones and practical maintenance levels for developed areas, trails, natural areas, restoration areas, and sensitive-resource locations.	Parks; Facilities Services; environmental partners		X			
	Prepare an annual stewardship work plan for invasive-species control, erosion reduction, habitat enhancement, trail impacts, vegetation management, and resource monitoring.	Parks; Soil and Water Conservation; Cooperative Extension		X			
	Clarify which stewardship tasks are appropriate for staff, skilled contractors, technical partners, and supervised volunteers.	Parks; Risk Management; Procurement; volunteer partners		X			
	Hire a Land Management Coordinator across the entire system to build land use plans that support the county's overall values in stewardship.	Finance/Budget; County Administration; Parks		X			
	Integrate stewardship tasks, equipment needs, and seasonal timing into the annual operating work plan, maintenance schedule, and budget process.	Parks; Finance/Budget; Facilities Services		X			
	Track completed work and resource conditions through photographs, GIS records, work orders, and repeatable field observations.	Parks; GIS; IT					X
	Review and update site stewardship plans after major storms, capital projects, significant ecological change, or new land acquisition.	Parks; Facilities Services; environmental partners					X
Establish a unified process to track all parks-related capital	Develop site master plans to direct future park system capital spending as the foundation for a unified process.	Parks; County Planning; environmental partners, County Administration, Residents			X		

Track all parks-related capital investment.	Create a shared capital ledger that captures parks projects funded through Parks, Facilities, discretionary, and other County budgets. Reconcile and report total parks-related capital investment annually to improve transparency and future planning.	Finance/Budget; Facilities Services; Parks Finance/Budget; County Administration; Parks	X		X
Develop a long-term vision and investment plan for the Bean property/house.	Complete a facility condition, code, accessibility, and preservation assessment for the Bean property/house.	Parks; Facilities Services; County Planning	X		
	Evaluate feasible public uses such as programming, education, administration, events, and preservation including staffing and operating costs.	Parks; County Planning; local historical/cultural organizations County	X		
	Select a preferred use and incorporate phased improvements and operating needs into the rolling CIP.	County Administration; Finance/Budget; Facilities Services		X	

Connect to Nature							
Provide meaningful opportunities to explore, learn, and engage with the outdoors in ways that foster personal connection.							
Recommendation	Action Item	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources	ST (0-4 years)	MT (4-7 years)	LT (7-10 years)	OG (ongoing)
Balance infrastructure reinvestment with visible community-impact projects that improve access to nature.	Identify opportunities to pair major infrastructure work with trails, launches, wayfinding, overlooks, educational features, and accessibility upgrades.	Parks; Facilities/Engineering; County Planning		X			
	Add community-impact criteria to CIP scoring, including access to nature, use, accessibility, public visibility, and long-term stewardship.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Planning		X			
	Use visitation, reservation, maintenance, and community-input data to prioritize nature-based improvements.	Parks; IT/GIS; Communications		X			
	Coordinate amenity upgrades and enhancements with planned shoreline, parking, restroom, and facility projects.	Parks; Facilities/Engineering; project consultants					X
	Advance near-term projects such as trails, dog-park improvements, kayak launches, and educational amenities while larger infrastructure projects proceed.	Parks; user groups; nonprofit partners			X		
	Evaluate operating and maintenance requirements before adding new nature-based amenities.	Parks; Facilities Services; Finance/Budget		X			
	Communicate completed improvements and the public benefits they provide to leadership in public meetings.	Parks; County Communications					X
	Use resident feedback and post-project performance to guide the next round of visible improvements.	Parks; County Communications; community partners					X
Establish a focused annual nature-based programming framework aligned with available staff capacity.	Set an annual program-capacity target using the current manageable level of approximately 48 programs or events and the staff time available by season.	Parks leadership; park superintendents; ranger staff		X			
	Create a seasonal program matrix organized by park, audience, topic, duration, staffing need, operational impact, and potential delivery partner.	Parks programming staff; park superintendents		X			
	Prioritize the highest-interest areas identified in the Review: nature-based recreation, outdoor and environmental education, self-guided activities, senior activities, guided hikes, ranger-led programs, youth activities, and volunteer opportunities.	Parks; County Communications; community partners		X			
	Define an appropriate mix of staff-led, partner-led, contracted, and self-guided experiences so programming does not compete with core maintenance and visitor-service duties.	Parks; Procurement; partner organizations		X			
	Use a concise program development worksheet that addresses purpose, audience, accessibility, staffing, supplies, risk, cost, marketing, registration, and park-operating impacts.	Parks; Risk Management; Finance; Communications		X			
	Place programs on a shared calendar with rentals, maintenance work, volunteer events, capital construction, and partner activities.	Parks; IT; Facilities Services		X			
	Pilot a repeatable set of core seasonal programs at Mountain Creek and Riverbend before adapting successful offerings for other parks.	Parks; libraries; schools; environmental organizations			X		
	Track attendance, cancellations, participant feedback, partner performance, staff time, and operational impacts for each program.	Parks; IT; County Communications					X
	Review the program mix annually and repeat, modify, partner, or discontinue activities based on results and Department capacity.	Parks leadership; park superintendents					X
	Audit trailheads, orientation maps, trail markers, interpretive signs, observation areas, and existing digital information at each park.	Parks; GIS; County Communications		X			
	Identify low-cost opportunities such as themed walks, family nature challenges, birding routes, QR-linked content, observation prompts, and seasonal discovery activities.	Parks; libraries; schools; environmental organizations		X			

Expand self-guided, interpretive, and trail-based experiences throughout the park system.	Develop accurate site-specific stories about natural resources, land use, Indigenous history, local history, and cultural features with qualified partners.	Parks; historical organizations; tribal representatives; libraries	X		
	Use clear language, accessible formats, and reliable information about trail length, surface, grade, difficulty, hazards, and available amenities.	Parks; ADA/accessibility advisors; County Communications	X		
	Standardize wayfinding and trail-confidence markers while allowing each park to retain its unique natural identity.	Parks; GIS; County Communications; Facilities Services	X		
	Create maintenance, inspection, content-review, and replacement schedules for signs, markers, maps, and digital links.	Parks; Facilities Services; IT	X		
	Pilot a complete self-guided experience at one park and evaluate use, visitor understanding, accessibility, and maintenance demands.	Parks; community partners; volunteers		X	
	Phase successful elements into other parks based on priority, site character, and available operating capacity.	Parks; Facilities Services; County Administration			X
	Establish a budget to refresh interpretive content and use visitor feedback and field observations to improve experiences over time.	Parks; County Communications; resource partners			X

Support Wellness							
Support physical and mental well-being through accessible, passive recreation experiences in natural settings.							
Recommendation	Action Item	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources	ST (0-4 years)	MT (4-7 years)	LT (7-10 years)	OG (ongoing)
Adopt an accessible fee and pricing policy aligned with County values.	Adopt a formal policy affirming that general park access remains broadly available and that fees focus on reserved or exclusive uses.	Parks; County Administration; Legal		X			
	Define fee-setting principles for shelters, the Mountain Creek meeting room, permits, deposits, refunds, waivers, and adjustments.	Parks; Finance; Legal		X			
	Document approval authority and standard procedures for establishing or changing fees.	County Administration; Finance; Legal		X			
	Review fees on a regular cycle based on affordability, demand, administrative effort, and customer experience—not revenue maximization.	Parks; Finance; County Administration					X
	Monitor whether fees create barriers to access and adjust policy or procedures when needed.	Parks; County Administration; community partners					X
	Publish clear fee, deposit, cancellation, and refund information online before customers reserve a space.	Parks; County Communications		X			
	Coordinate the fee policy with the online reservation system so rules are applied consistently.	Parks; IT; Finance		X			
Strengthen park safety, closing, and emergency-response practices.	Use reservation and utilization data to inform future fee reviews and policy exceptions.	Parks; IT; Finance					X
	Document opening, inspection, closing, key-control, and lone-worker procedures for each park and facility.	Parks; Risk Management; Human Resources		X			
	Assess peak-season, evening, park-closing, special-event, and emergency coverage by site, day, and time.	Parks leadership; park superintendents; Human Resources		X			
	Define minimum staffing, check-in, and backup expectations for higher-risk times, locations, and activities.	Parks; Human Resources; Risk Management		X			
	Coordinate response protocols, contact lists, access points, gate procedures, and site maps with law enforcement, fire, EMS, and emergency management.	Sheriff/Law Enforcement; Fire/EMS; Emergency Management; Parks		X			
	Address radio, cellular, internet, alarm, camera, lighting, and emergency-location-signage gaps where they affect staff or visitor safety.	Parks; IT; Facilities Services; Emergency Management			X		
	Standardize incident, rule-enforcement, near-miss, injury, and after-action reporting so patterns can be identified.	Parks; Risk Management; Human Resources		X			
	Provide recurring training in de-escalation, rule enforcement, first aid/CPR/AED, severe weather, missing persons, and emergency communications.	Parks; Risk Management; Fire/EMS; law enforcement					X
	Create a uniformed look to staff and vehicles that project authority to support the Departments position when dealing with incidents and park closings.	Parks; Emergency Management; EMS law enforcement		X			
	Conduct periodic tabletop or field drills and revise procedures based on lessons learned.	Parks; Emergency Management; Fire/EMS; law enforcement					X
	Communicate park rules, emergency contacts, closure information, and visitor expectations consistently across signs, websites, and reservation materials.	Parks; County Communications; IT					X
	Complete a park-by-park accessibility and barrier assessment covering parking, routes, restrooms, shelters, trailheads, seating, signage, communications, and digital information.	Parks; Facilities Services; Risk Management; accessibility advisors		X			
	Identify at least one accessible or lower-barrier experience at each park, or clearly communicate limitations where terrain or site conditions constrain access.	Parks; GIS; County Communications		X			
	Prioritize seating, rest areas, shade, drinking water, wayfinding, surface improvements, restroom access, and trailhead information that support older adults, families, and beginning users.	Parks; Facilities Services; senior and health partners		X			

Improve inclusive access to passive recreation and nature-based wellness experiences.	Define standards for common park amenities such as shelter, benches, trash cans, restrooms, fencing, signage, playgrounds, etc.	Parks	X	
	Develop low-intensity self-guided routes and nature experiences suitable for older adults, caregivers, families, and visitors seeking restorative outdoor activity.	Parks; senior services; health organizations; libraries	X	
	Incorporate universal-design and accessibility criteria into all repair, replacement, trail, signage, and new-amenity projects.	Parks; Facilities Services; County Planning; project consultants		X
	Engage disability, senior, health, caregiver, and therapeutic-recreation organizations to review priorities and proposed improvements.	Parks; community health partners; disability organizations	X	
	Publish accurate accessibility, trail-difficulty, parking, restroom, seating, and amenity information online and at park entrances.	Parks; GIS; County Communications; IT		X
	Complete the highest-priority access improvements through the rolling CIP and maintenance work plan.	Parks; Facilities Services; Finance/Budget		X
	Track access-related requests and feedback and update improvement priorities annually.	Parks; County Communications; community partners		X

Invest in Quality Experiences							
Ensure parks and amenities are safe, clean, and thoughtfully maintained to provide a consistently high-quality experience.							
Recommendation	Action Item	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources	ST (0-4 years)	MT (4-7 years)	LT (7-10 years)	OG (ongoing)
Implement an online reservation and rental management system.	Document functional requirements for shelter rentals, educational building at Riverbend, and the Mountain Creek Park meeting room.	Parks; IT; Finance		X			
	Evaluate and select software that meets County technology, payment, procurement, records, and security standards.	Parks; IT; Finance; Procurement		X			
	Configure real-time availability, online requests, fees and deposits, permits, confirmations, cancellations, refunds, and reporting.	Parks; IT; Finance; software provider		X			
	Establish staff roles, approval workflows, customer-service standards, and backup procedures.	Parks; IT; County Administration		X			
	Publish clear rental rules, availability, instructions, and frequently asked questions.	Parks; County Communications		X			
	Train staff and pilot the system before full implementation.	Parks; IT; software provider		X			
	Use system data to track utilization, peak demand, cancellations, revenue, and maintenance impacts.	Parks; IT; Finance; Facilities Services					X
	Review system performance annually and expand it to other reservable assets when warranted.	Parks; IT; County Administration					X
Create a one-page annual operating work plan supported by practical service standards.	Identify annual priorities for maintenance, stewardship, programs, volunteer events, capital projects, technology, and major administrative work.	Parks leadership; park superintendents		X			
	Assign a lead, support role, target quarter, dependency, and expected outcome to each major priority.	Parks leadership; County Administration		X			
	Confirm that the plan fits available staffing, equipment, operating funds, seasonal conditions, and emergency-response responsibilities.	Parks; Finance/Budget; Facilities Services		X			
	Develop concise standards for opening and closing, rule enforcement, visitor response, customer service, maintenance levels, emergency communication, reservations, volunteers, and program delivery.	Parks; Risk Management; Human Resources		X			
	Define consistent baseline service expectations across parks while allowing each site to retain its unique natural character and operating needs.	Parks leadership; park superintendents; Facilities Services		X			
	Place the annual plan and major operating impacts on a shared calendar and review progress through brief monthly or quarterly management check-ins.	Parks; IT; Facilities Services					X
	Adjust the plan after storms, emergencies, construction changes, staffing disruptions, or new County priorities.	Parks leadership; County Administration					X
	Prepare a short year-end progress summary, identify carryforward work, and use the results to inform the next budget and CIP cycle.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Administration					X
Strengthen onboarding, training, cross-training, and evidence-based workforce (capacity) coverage.	Create role-based onboarding checklists for full-time, part-time, seasonal, ranger, maintenance, programming, and administrative staff.	Parks; Human Resources; Risk Management		X			
	Join the National Association of County Parks and Recreation Officials (NACPRO) to gain access to resources that will assist with standards and best practices.	Parks		X			
	Use 30-, 60-, and 90-day onboarding plans that identify required knowledge, site orientation, equipment proficiency, safety training, and supervisor check-ins.	Parks supervisors; Human Resources		X			
	Document site-specific procedures, equipment instructions, emergency information, and key contacts in concise field-ready job aids.	Parks; Risk Management; Facilities Services		X			
	Develop a training matrix that identifies required certifications, renewal dates, elective development opportunities, and role-specific competencies.	Parks; Human Resources; Risk Management		X			
	Maintain an annual training calendar and budget that includes relevant county-parks, safety, interpretation, and policy-management opportunities.	Parks; Human Resources; Finance/Budget; NACPRO					X
	Cross-train staff for reservations, park closing, emergency response, program support, basic maintenance, and essential site-specific duties.	Parks supervisors; park superintendents		X			

	Identify primary and backup coverage for essential functions and maintain current job aids so responsibilities do not depend on one employee.	Parks leadership; Human Resources	X	
	Track visitation, maintenance workload, emergencies, overtime, deferred work, lone coverage, and peak-period demands to identify service gaps.	Parks; Human Resources; Finance/Budget		X
	Evaluate seasonal, part-time, contractual, partnership, and volunteer options before recommending permanent staffing expansion.	Parks; Human Resources; Procurement; community partners		X
	Use documented workload and service impacts to support annual staffing decisions and realistic service expectations.	Parks; Human Resources; Finance/Budget; County Administration		X
	Continue to build the Parks Standard Operating Procedure Manual for consistent implementation of policies, standards and training.	Parks; Human Resources; County Administration	X	
Align operating resources with Department growth and responsibilities.	Complete an annual assessment of staffing, equipment, supplies, maintenance funding, and visitor-service resources.	Parks; Finance/Budget; HR; Facilities Services		X
	Document service-level impacts and resource gaps within annual operating budget and CIP requests.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Administration		X
	Estimate staffing, maintenance, utilities, equipment, and lifecycle costs before approving new capital projects.	Parks; Finance/Budget; Facilities Services		X
Modernize administrative coordination, maintenance tracking, and field technology.	Complete a simple technology and connectivity needs assessment for each park, facility, and staff function.	Parks; IT; Emergency Management	X	
	Create a shared internal calendar for programs, rentals, volunteer events, maintenance impacts, staff coverage, partner activities, and construction.	Parks; IT; Facilities Services	X	
	Establish a central shared location for current procedures, forms, program materials, site information, agreements, and project-status records.	Parks; IT; Records Management	X	
	Improve internet, cellular, radio, and secure network access where gaps affect reservations, communication, emergency response, or field productivity.	Parks; IT; Facilities Services; Emergency Management		X
	Evaluate a simple maintenance-management or work-order approach that supports recurring tasks, service requests, inspections, asset history, and backlog tracking.	Parks; Facilities Services; IT; Procurement	X	
	Provide secure mobile access to the tools and information staff need in the field without creating duplicate data-entry requirements.	Parks; IT; Records Management		X
	Standardize basic data definitions, ownership, reporting frequency, records retention, and privacy/security responsibilities.	Parks; IT; Records Management; Legal	X	
	Train staff on new tools, designate system owners, and document backup procedures.	Parks; IT; software providers	X	
	Review system use and data quality annually and retire tools or reports that do not reduce workload or improve decisions.	Parks; IT; County Administration		X
	Develop a park system maintenance management plan to address preventative maintenance, routine maintenance, and standardize amenities to increase efficiencies.	Parks; Facilities Services	X	
Strengthen the CIP as a balanced decision-making tool.	Apply consistent CIP criteria for condition, safety, accessibility, community impact, operating cost, and project readiness.	Parks; Finance/Budget; Facilities Services; Planning	X	
	Review and update the rolling CIP annually to balance asset preservation, lifecycle replacement, and new amenities.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Administration		X

Inspire Stewardship							
Use parks as places of learning that encourage awareness, appreciation, and care for natural resources.							
Recommendation	Action Item	Potential Partners	Potential Funding Sources	ST (0-4 years)	MT (4-7 years)	LT (7-10 years)	OG (ongoing)
Build a coordinated grant and partnership development program.	Create grant-ready project sheets for priority capital, natural-resource, trail, educational, and accessibility projects.	Parks; County Grants; Planning; Facilities Services	Grants	X			
	Include scope, cost, schedule, match requirements, community impact, readiness, and maintenance commitments on each project sheet.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Grants	Grants	X			
	Maintain an annual calendar of federal, state, foundation, and local funding opportunities.	County Grants; Parks; Finance County	Grants				X
	Assign lead and support roles for opportunity tracking, applications, administration, and reporting.	Administration; County Grants; Parks; Finance		X			
	Match priority projects to eligible opportunities and partners well before application deadlines.	Parks; County Grants; regional/state agencies; nonprofits	Grants, Partnerships				X
	Track application outcomes, reporting requirements, and lessons learned to improve future submissions.	County Grants; Finance; Parks	Grants, Partnerships				X
	Use community-impact and project-readiness information to support grant applications and philanthropic outreach.	Parks; County Communications; community partners	Grants, Partnerships				X
	Coordinate grants and partnerships with the rolling CIP and annual budget.	Parks; Finance/Budget; County Grants	Grants, Partnerships				X
Build a coordinated partner-led education, outreach, and reusable program-delivery system.	Inventory potential partners such as state parks, schools, libraries, birds-of-prey organizations, historical and cultural organizations, arts groups, colleges, and environmental nonprofits.	Parks; schools; libraries; state parks; nonprofit organizations		X			
	Define criteria for partner-led and contracted programs, including mission alignment, public benefit, staff impact, safety, accessibility, quality, and long-term operating expectations.	Parks; Risk Management; Procurement; County Administration			X		
	Develop a standard partner agreement covering scope, roles, insurance, safety, supplies, fees, registration, marketing, data, cancellations, ownership of materials, and evaluation.	Parks; Legal; Risk Management; Procurement		X			
	Create an annual partner-outreach and program calendar that is coordinated with park operations, rentals, maintenance, school schedules, and seasonal resource conditions.	Parks; partner organizations; schools; libraries		X			
	Build a reusable program library with outlines for guided hikes, educational talks, school outreach, outdoor-classroom activities, stewardship programs, and partner-led experiences.	Parks; schools; libraries; environmental and cultural partners		X			
	For each program outline, document learning objectives, audience, duration, staffing, supplies, accessibility, risk, site needs, weather alternatives, and follow-up materials.	Parks; Risk Management; partner organizations		X			
	Develop scalable outreach formats including park field experiences, in-school or library programs, family programs, self-guided materials, and loanable education resources.	Parks; schools; libraries; County Communications				X	
	Pilot partner-led and outreach programs with a small number of qualified organizations before expanding the approach.	Parks; selected partner organizations				X	
	Observe program quality and track attendance, participant feedback, staff time, partner reliability, safety issues, and park-operating impacts.	Parks; IT; Risk Management					X
	Renew, modify, or discontinue partner arrangements based on performance, public benefit, capacity, and alignment with the County's nature-based mission.	Parks leadership; County Administration; Procurement					X
	Define the Department's goals for volunteer support and identify tasks that meaningfully advance trail care, clean-up, stewardship, special events, interpretation, and advocacy.	Parks; County Administration; community organizations		X			

Establish a structured volunteer and Friends-of-Parks development pathway.	Create volunteer role descriptions that distinguish low-risk public service from work requiring technical skill, certification, equipment, or contractor oversight.	Parks; Risk Management; Human Resources	X	
	Adopt practical procedures for applications, screening, waivers, supervision, youth participation, tools, personal protective equipment, incident reporting, and recordkeeping.	Parks; Risk Management; Human Resources; Legal	X	
	Assign a staff coordinator (potentially a volunteer as volunteer coordinator?) and confirm the time required to recruit, schedule, train, supervise, and recognize volunteers.	Parks leadership; Human Resources	X	
	Develop an annual calendar of manageable volunteer workdays that aligns with seasonal stewardship and maintenance priorities.	Parks; park superintendents; environmental partners	X	
	Provide orientation, task-specific training, safety briefings, check-in procedures, and clear limits on volunteer responsibilities.	Parks; Risk Management; partner organizations	X	
	Track participation, hours, completed work, incidents, supplies, staff time, and volunteer feedback.	Parks; IT; County Communications		X
	Recognize volunteers and communicate the public value of completed stewardship work without overstating replacement of professional staff.	Parks; County Communications; County Administration		X
	Pilot the volunteer framework at selected parks and refine it before expanding systemwide.	Parks; volunteer groups; environmental organizations	X	
	After a sustained volunteer base and community leadership emerge, evaluate the purpose, governance, legal structure, fundraising role, and staff support required for a Friends-of-Parks or conservancy organization.	County Administration; Legal; Parks; community leaders	X	
Establish a sponsorship and naming-rights policy before pursuing opportunities.	Proceed with a formal Friends or conservancy structure only when leadership, capacity, accountability, and long-term community ownership are in place.	County Administration; Parks; Legal; community board		X
	Evaluate appropriate assets and community acceptance for sponsorship and naming-rights opportunities.	Parks; County Administration; Communications	X	
	Adopt criteria for eligibility, valuation, term, recognition, procurement, conflicts, and approval before solicitation.	Legal; Finance; County Administration; Communications	X	
Formalize donations and in-kind contribution procedures.	Pilot selected opportunities for trails, dog parks, launches, or educational amenities and review results.	Parks; local businesses; nonprofit partners	X	
	Create a clear process for accepting, documenting, restricting, recognizing, and reporting donations and in-kind support.	Finance; Legal; Parks; Communications	X	
	Build relationships with foundations, nonprofits, volunteer groups, and residents around priority park projects.	Parks; foundations; nonprofits; volunteer groups		X