

SECTION 8

Parks & Recreation



Brown Park Playground was renovated in 1996.

8.1 Introduction

Urban parks, greenspace, and open space are important elements in the identity and image of a community. The personal, social, economic, and environmental benefits of a planned leisure and park system are numerous and include:

providing residents the opportunity to lead balanced lives, achieve full potential, and gain life satisfaction; increasing property values by investing in the environment through parks and the provisions of open space in residential areas; and investing in the foundations of community pride through leisure opportunities and facilities, to improve the quality of the local environment.

Because the City of Merriam is landlocked and has no potential for expansion of its boundaries, strategic planning and acquisition are crucial to the preservation of Merriam’s natural resources, and the future of its park and recreational facilities and program development. The City has prepared a draft Parks and Recreation Master Plan to provide a vision and long-range guidance for the future of Merriam’s parks, recreation and open space system. The following sections summarize the Master Plan and provide an assessment of the existing park system, as well as recommendation for improvements to the system. Refer to Merriam’s Parks and Recreation Master Plan for a more detailed discussion of the City’s parks and recreation system.

8.2 Comparing Existing Park Acreage to National Standards

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the recognized authority in developing recommended guidelines and standards for parks, recreational facilities, and open space. In 1983, the association published Recreation, Park and Open Space Guidelines; the guidelines were further revised in 1996 and are considered to be the model for planning park systems.

One of the key pieces of information needed to apply the standards to the Merriam community is a population projection.

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Population projections provided by Claritis Inc. and the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that Merriam's population will remain fairly stable through 2020. Merriam's population in 1999 was estimated at 11,987. Under the assumption that there is 60 acres of developable vacant land in Merriam and the land will be developed with a similar single family (60%) to multifamily (40%) mix, projected populations for 2005 and 2020 are 12,225 and 12,937 respectively. For the purposes of comparison to NRPA standards, a population of 12,000 was used which is the current population estimate.

The NRPA guidelines listed below summarize the various types of parks and the recommended minimum and maximum standard size and quantity of each type of park. The following sections describe the NRPA standards and compare them against the existing acreage and facilities.

There are currently 128.63 acres of parkland located in Merriam, consisting of 12 parks as shown on Map 8-1. The 12 parks include two mini-parks, two neighborhood parks, one community park, three linear parks, two special use parks, and one natural conservation area. Map 8-1 shows the parks currently owned by the City of Merriam. It also shows parks and recreational facilities owned by other entities but that serve Merriam citizens.

Mini-Parks

Mini-parks are used to service small, isolated neighborhoods or supplement areas with substantial non park-like recreation facilities (i.e., schools) on a walk-to basis. The recommended service area is less than ¼ mile radius and the desirable size is 1 acre or less. NRPA standards recommend a minimum and maximum standard of ¼ acre to ½ acre of mini-parks per 1,000 residents, respectively.



Campbell Park was adopted by employees of GE Capital & Montgomery Ward Credit

Merriam's two mini-parks are Campbell Park and Werner Park. Campbell Park consists of 1.61 acres and is located at 61st Street and Knox Avenue. This park provides playground equipment, picnic tables, and a play field for field games, such as Frisbee or soccer. The playground equipment was installed and partially funded by employees from General Electric Capital. The second mini-park, Werner, consists of 2 acres of undeveloped land located west of Turkey Creek, directly opposite the site for the new Farmers Market at 56th and Merriam Drive. This land was previously donated and may be developed if

and when the Turkey Creek Streamway is extended from Johnson Drive north to 57th Street. Consideration is also being given to extending the Streamway through Werner Park to the Community Center.

Comparison to Standard: Merriam has 3.61 acres of Mini Park land which falls between the minimum and maximum NRPA standard range of 3.00 to 6.00 acres for a population of 12,000. There are a number of areas underserved when this standard is applied. The plan recommends acquiring land as it becomes available to exceed the minimum standard and approach the maximum. When considering future purchases, Merriam should consider school-owned facilities and facilities outside the city limits and not owned by the City of Merriam in determining the underserved areas of the community.

Neighborhood Parks

Neighborhood parks provide intense recreational activities including court games, walking trails, picnicking, and playgrounds. Neighborhood parks are suited for intense development and should be easily accessible by safe walking or bike access to neighborhoods. The recommended service area is a ¼ to ½ mile radius to serve a population or neighborhood, and the desirable size is 15 acres or more. NRPA standards recommend a minimum and maximum standard of 1 to 2 acres per 1,000 residents, respectively.

Merriam has two neighborhood parks, Brown and Vavra Parks. Brown Park is located at 51st Street and Grandview and consists of 3.68 acres. This park provides playground equipment and tennis and basketball courts. Walking paths and a naturally wooded picnic area are provided, as well as opportunities for nature observations along Brown Creek, which runs through the park. The second neighborhood park, Vavra Park, consists of 4.37 acres and is located at 6040 Slater. This heavily used park provides opportunities for passive and active exercise with a 1-mile exercise trail, tennis courts, and newly renovated Aquatic Center. Its naturally wooded area is an attractive venue for family picnics, and is the site of summer special events including Concerts in the Parks and Party in the Park.

Comparison to Standard: Merriam has 8.05 acres of Neighborhood Park land. This does not meet the NRPA’s minimum standard for the population. The standard is 12 to 24 acres for a population of 12,000. The plan recommends that the City acquire land as it becomes available to meet the minimum standard. Consideration should be given to the locations of school-owned facilities and facilities outside the city limits and not owned by the City of Merriam when determining where to locate new neighborhood parks.

Merriam's Parks at a Glance

*The City has 128.63 acres of parks.

*The City has 15 acres of natural preservation located along I-35 West Frontage Road.

*The 12 parks include two mini-parks, two neighborhood parks, one community park, three linear parks, two special use parks and one natural conservation area.

Community Parks

Community parks are the most identifiable park in the city system. They may include areas for intense recreation, such as swimming, or an area of natural quality for outdoor recreation, or a combination of both areas that are available for the entire community. The service area is several neighborhoods in a 1 to 2-mile radius, which is primarily accessible by vehicle, and the desirable size is 25 acres or more. NRPA standards recommend a minimum and maximum standard of 5 to 8 acres per 1,000 residents, respectively.

Antioch Park, a 44-acre community park operated and maintained by the Johnson County Parks and Recreation District (JCPRD), is located at 6501 Antioch Road. This park is heavily utilized by approximately 650,000 visitors annually, including both Merriam residents and non-residents. This park has two fishing lakes, an arboretum and rose garden, four picnic shelters, an outdoor basketball and tennis court, playgrounds, and JCPRD administration offices. Popular activities include catch and release fishing, picnicking, sports, and rose garden weddings. Antioch Park also hosts the annual Turkey Creek Festival, which began in 1996.

Comparison to Standard: The 44 acres of Community Park land does not meet the NRPA standard of 60 to 96 acres for a population of 12,000. Merriam's landlocked boundaries make it difficult to acquire large portions of land for an additional community park. Additionally, because Merriam has a large quantity of other types of parks (72.97 acres), it may not be critical that the maximum standard for community parks be met.



This linear park features many resting places for observing nature and wildlife.

Linear Parks

Linear parks are areas developed for one or more modes of travel, such as hiking or biking, and may also include active play areas. Desirable characteristics include built or natural corridors such as utility easements that link community facilities or other components of the recreational system.

There are currently three linear parks in Merriam, including Turkey Creek Streamway, Town Center, and Quail Creek.

Turkey Creek Streamway consists of 36.91 acres located along Turkey Creek from 75th

Street to Johnson Drive. This park is heavily utilized by walkers, bicyclists, in-line skaters, and citizens who enjoy plant and wildlife observation. This park provides a linear paved walking, skating, and bicycling path, tree and plant identification plaques, a butterfly garden, and access to Turkey Creek.

Streamway Park has heavily wooded areas filled with large native trees and grassland areas with native wildflowers. Many rest areas are included along the path for nature identification and passive recreation. The plan recommends expansion of the Streamway Park from Johnson Drive north linking Werner Park, the Merriam Community Center, Farmer's Market, Waterfall Park and Brown Park. See Map 7-1.

Town Center Park consists of approximately 1.5 acres of landscaped walking area in the Merriam Town Center shopping area. No future additions are currently being planned for this area.

The third linear park, Quail Creek, consists of 5.25 acres and is located adjacent to Quail Creek at 71st Street, west of Grandview. This land was purchased recently as part of a buy-out of 33 homes due to flooding along Quail Creek. This park is currently undeveloped. Future plans may include a playground, walking path, and benches.



Turkey Creek Streamway Park features tree identification plaques placed by Merriam Tree Board.

Comparison to Standard: There is no applicable NRPA standard for service area, and the size should be sufficient to protect the resource and provide maximum use.

Special Use Parks

Special use parks are areas for specialized purposes, such as golf courses, sports complexes, or plazas in or near commercial centers.

Merriam Community Center, Chatlain Park, and Waterfall Park are three special use parks in Merriam. Merriam Community Center is located at 5701 Merriam Drive and consists of 33,000 square feet of finished space on 3 acres of ground. The community center provides a gymnasium used for basketball and aerobic classes, a fitness center and locker rooms, a child care facility, art gallery, game room, historic room, conference room, four classrooms, offices, and an outdoor volleyball court and pre-school playground. The Community Center averages about 70,000 visitors or participants per year and provides many recreational programs and classes, such as wellness, instructional, and arts and crafts. The center is also a popular site for rental activities, and many different groups rent the facility for various functions.

Chatlain Park is a 5.25 acre special use park which became available as part of a buy-out of seven homes due to flooding. This park is located at 63rd Terrace and Carter. No plans for development have been completed, although a playground and park shelter are being considered for future development. A practice field may also be constructed at this park in the future.

Waterfall Park consists of approximately 5.18 acres and is located east of Merriam Drive and north of 53rd Street. This land was recently purchased as part of a buy-out due to flooding and the City is currently evaluating how best to utilize this land. The plan recommends expanding this park to develop a sports complex, with softball or soccer fields.

Comparison to Standard: There is no applicable standard for service area or size, and the desirable characteristics vary within communities.

Natural Area Parks

Natural area parks are areas for protection and management of the natural environment with recreation use as a secondary objective. Activities at this type of park might include picnicking, nature identification, or camping.



Fifteen acres of undeveloped natural preservation area was donated to the City by AT&T.

Merriam has 15 acres of natural preservation area located along West I-35 Frontage Road between 67th and 75th Streets. This acreage was donated to the City by AT&T and is currently undeveloped. This area consists of hilly terrain and undeveloped, wooded area and is home to resident wildlife, including deer, squirrels, and birds. A branch of Quaker Creek runs through this property, emptying into Turkey Creek. Future plans for this acreage have not yet been determined.

Comparison to Standard: There is no applicable NRPA standard and the size should be sufficient to protect the resource. The desirable characteristics vary depending upon the resource being protected.

Acreege Conclusions

NRPA standards recommend that a park system be comprised of a “core” system of parklands, with a total of 6.25 to 10.5 acres of developed open space per 1,000 population. As of 2000, Merriam’s inventory of parkland is 128.63 acres, which is slightly lower than NRPA’s maximum standard of 136.5 acres. Using the 2020 population projection of approximately 13,000, Merriam would need 81.25 acres to 136.5 acres to meet the NRPA’s standards. Using this population projection for 2020, Merriam will meet the minimum acreage recommended currently and fall within the middle of the range. Table 8-1 compares Merriam’s current parks to the NRPA’s community standard using the 13,000 population estimate. The community should not only look at the acreage standards but also determine whether facilities are located throughout the community to serve the citizens effectively.

**Table 8-1
Merriam Parks and Facilities Standards**

Park Classification	Name of Park	Total Acreage
Mini-Parks Service area (less than ¼ mi.) Desired size (1 acre or less) NRPA min. standard=3.25 acres (1/4 acre/1000 pop.) NRPA max. standard=6.5 acres (1/2 acre/1000 pop.)	Campbell Park Werner Park 1.61 acres 2 acres	3.61 acres
Neighborhood Parks Service area (1/4-1/2 mi.) Desired size (15+ acres) NRPA min. standard=13 acres (1 acre/1000 pop.) NRPA max. standard=26 acres (2 acres/1000 pop.)	Brown Park Vavra Park 3.68 acres 4.37 acres	8.05 acres
Community Parks Service area (1-2 mile radius) Desired size (25+ acres) NRPA min. standard=65 acres (5 acres/1000 pop.) NRPA max. standard=104 acres (8 acres/1000 pop.)	Antioch Park 44 acres	44 acres

Park Classification	Name of Park			Total Acreage
Linear Parks Service area (N/A) Desired size (N/A) NRPA min. standard (N/A) NRPA max. standard (N/A)	Turkey Creek Streamway 36.91	Town Center 1.5 acres	Quail Creek 5.25 acres	43.66 acres
Special Use Parks Service area (N/A) Desired size (N/A) NRPA min. standard (N/A) NRPA max. standard (N/A)	Merriam Community Center 3.88 acres	Chatlain Park 5.25 acres	Waterfall Park 5.18 acres	14.31 acres
Natural Resource Areas Service area (N/A) Desired size (N/A) NRPA min. standard (N/A) NRPA max. standard (N/A)	AT&T Donation 15 acres			15 acres
TOTAL=				128.63 acres

Notes:
 N/A=Not applicable. (No standard available).
 Source: Merriam Parks and Recreation Master Plan

Although the total quantity of park land in Merriam (128.63 acres) is only slightly below the maximum standard set by NRPA (136.5 acres), the minimum standard of acreage has not been met for certain types of parks, including neighborhood parks and community parks. Additionally, the total acreage of mini-parks in Merriam is only slightly above the minimum standard for mini-parks set by the NRPA. This is illustrated in Table 8-2.

Additional land in Merriam used for parks and recreation activities include Merriam's four elementary schools. Merriam Elementary is located in the central western area and consists of a total of 9.42 acres. Approximately seven of these acres are used for recreation. Crestview Elementary School consists of a total of 8 acres and is located in the central portion of the city. Approximately half of the total acreage is used for playgrounds and other recreational activities. South Park Elementary School is located in the northeastern area of the city and consists of 6.9 acres with approximately five acres used for recreational purposes. West Antioch Elementary School is located in the southwestern portion of Merriam and consists of a total of 6 acres. Approximately four of these six acres are available for playground and recreational activities. The schools' facilities are available to citizens when not in use by Shawnee Mission School students. Typically, the school facilities most used by the public are playgrounds and outdoor

basketball courts. Baseball and soccer fields are available after school hours when not reserved by permit.

Additionally, two parks located in neighboring communities are most likely used by Merriam residents who live close by. These parks include Highland Park, located in Kansas City, Kansas, just north of Merriam, and Hickory Hills Park, located northeast of Merriam in Overland Park. The total acreage of these parks is 15 and 9.5 acres, respectively. The total acreage of these parks and the parks located at Merriam's four elementary schools is 44.95 acres and would increase Merriam's overall park acreage to 173.58 acres.

Because Merriam has a number of other types of parks, such as linear parks, special use parks, and natural conservation areas with a total of 72.97 acres, it is not critical that more land be acquired. However, it is recommended in this plan that Merriam acquire land as it becomes available in the next ten to twenty years for the development of mini-parks or neighborhood parks in order to ensure coverage for the various geographic areas of Merriam. A preliminary analysis shows that there are several gaps within the present city-owned park system. These four areas include: the northwest area, the northeast area, the central western area, and the southwestern area. Additionally, future land acquisition should be considered for Brown Park, as well as an additional neighborhood park, in order to achieve at least minimum Neighborhood Park acreage standards, as it becomes available.

8.3 Comparison of Existing Park Amenities To NRPA Standards

When developing long-range plans, it is important to compare Merriam's existing inventory of typical amenities for a parks and recreation system versus the NRPA standards based upon population. A population estimate of 12,000 is used in applying the standards because the types of amenities desired over time changes and therefore, a projection for 20 years would not be useful. The comparison Table 8-3 is listed below.

**Table 8-3
Merriam Parks Amenities and Standards**

Amenity	NRPA Standard	Current Inventory
Football/Soccer Field	3	0
Picnic Shelter	6	4
Picnic Tables/Community Park	96	205
Baseball Diamond	4	0
Softball Diamond	8	0
Tennis Court	8	5
Basketball Court	12	6
Handball/Racquetball (4 wall)	3	0
Playgrounds	12	9
Golf Course (9 Holes)	0	0
Swimming Pool/Aquatic Center	3	1
Outdoor Ice Rink	5	2
Trails (Hiking, Jogging, Biking)	3	3
Trails (Interpretive)	5	1
Trails (Exercise)	2	1
Campsites	40	0
Shuffleboard	6	0
Horseshoe	6	0
Volleyball Court	4	1
In-Line Skate Rink	No standard Available	0

Source: Merriam Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

NOTE: Inventory includes current public facilities and school facilities that are available on a drop-in basis.

Based on the amenities compared to NRPA standards, it appears that Merriam has an adequate supply of playgrounds, picnic tables, outdoor basketball courts, tennis courts, and multi-purpose trails. However, seventy-six percent (76%) of citizens responding to a recent survey indicated that their family would utilize hiking/biking trails and forty percent (40%) indicated that their family would utilize playground equipment, tennis courts and outdoor basketball courts if they were included in the design of new parks.

Further study is needed of school owned facilities and facilities outside the city limits but nearby to get a more complete picture. For example, the schools district's outdoor basketball courts are included in the current inventory column and two more are needed to meet the NRPA standard. Two facilities not owned by the City of Merriam or the Shawnee Mission School District are within two blocks of the city limits and three playground facilities are also located within the two block radius of the city limits. As for tennis courts, there are 15 courts that are owned by the private sector and five within the two-block distance of the city limits.

There appears to be a deficiency in the area of sports fields (soccer, baseball, softball) and therefore Merriam is unable to offer youth or adult baseball, softball, or soccer leagues. Forty-one percent (41%) of citizens responding to a recent citizen survey indicated that their families would likely use athletic fields if this amenity were available to them in the new facilities constructed. However, only five percent (5%) of respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the current adult and youth recreational programs offered by the City which may indicate that Merriam citizens are relying on other providers for these types of activities. Merriam parks and recreation personnel have interviewed local youth athletic groups regarding the need for more athletic fields, and the consensus between these groups is that there is definitely a need for more athletic fields in the area and Merriam may be able to serve this market if quality facilities were constructed.



Various amenities, such as biking trails and outdoor basketball courts, would be a welcome addition to the City's park system. These tennis courts at Vavra Park are a popular attraction.

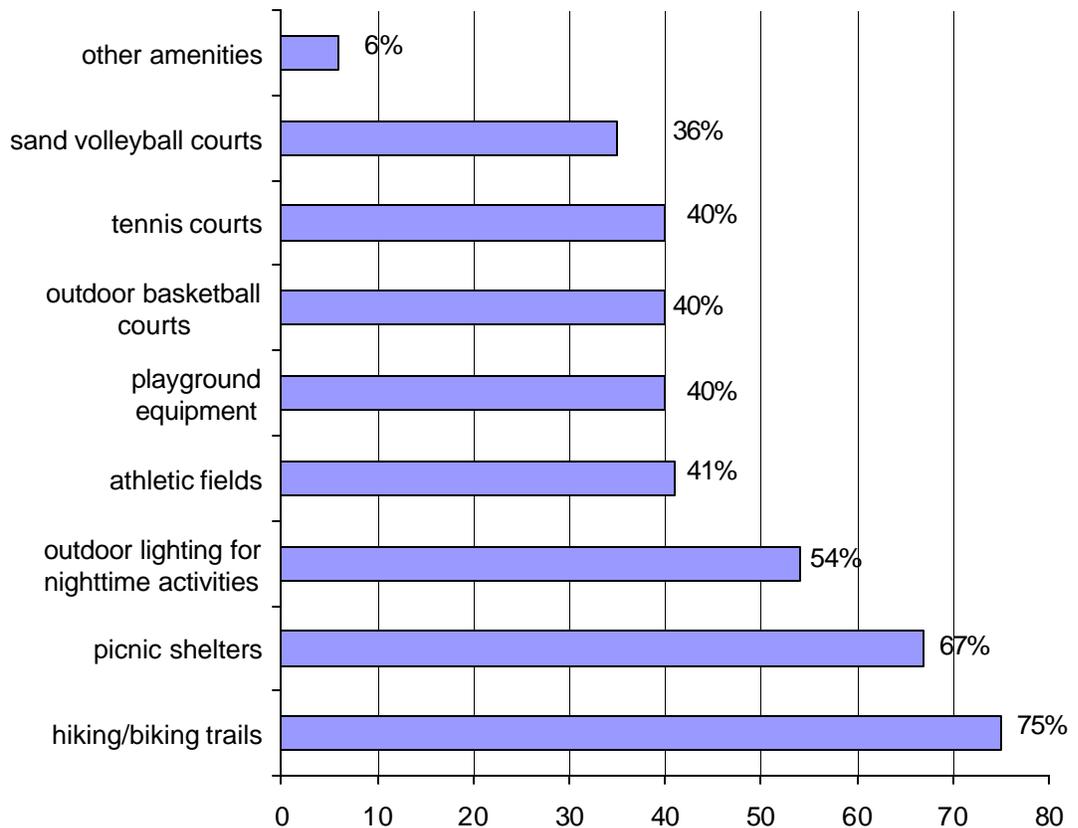
Further study is needed of school owned facilities and facilities outside the city limits but nearby to get a more complete picture. For example, seven baseball fields, two soccer fields and two open play fields are located at school facilities in Merriam and four baseball fields and three soccer fields are outside the city limits but within two blocks of Merriam city limits.

There are no picnic shelters located at neighborhood parks. Consequently, residents who wish to reserve a picnic shelter must compete with all other county residents to reserve one of the nearest shelters at Antioch Park. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of citizens responding to a recent citizen survey indicated their families would likely use picnic shelters if that amenity were available to them in the new facilities constructed.

8.4 Public Opinion and Preferences

The City of Merriam believes public input and opinion is a key process to be used in planning and maintaining the parks and recreation system. In the past ten years, two formal surveys and an informal survey were used to measure citizen opinions prior to renovating the pool and evaluating community center programs. These surveys have also indicated that a larger fitness center, gymnasium, and parking is desired by a number of citizens who use these facilities. A statistically valid citizen survey completed in March 2000, showed that only ten percent (10%) felt additional parks were needed. However, respondents also indicated that if additional facilities were constructed, the following amenities would be utilized by their families:

Figure 8-1
Amenities Residents Would Likely Use
If Included In the Design of New Parks
 (Percentage of residents who would use each amenity)



Source: ETC Institute Direction Finder (March 2000-Merriam, KS)

Planning for the Future of Merriam's Parks

Two age groups are expected to migrate into Merriam over the next twenty years:

People over 75 years of age (particularly older women), and Young adults, including women ages 20 to 24, and men ages 25 to 29.

*The total acreage and amenities available are important to plan for but Merriam should also consider the location of those facilities to encourage walking to and from those facilities.

*Public involvement in decision-making is a key strategy for planning for current and future needs.

Prior to land acquisition or construction of additional amenities, the City conducted a more specific formal survey in the Parks and Recreation brochure to determine residents' preferences and opinion related to the parks and recreation facilities and programs. The Comprehensive Planning Process provided input in terms of citizens' desires for parks and recreational facilities. Based upon the results of these community-input methods, the moderate and high priority projects listed below should be reevaluated and incorporated into the Final Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

8.5 Future Planning Conclusions

Demographic characteristics and trends can be indicators of what facilities, activities, and programs are most likely to be appropriate for Merriam's parks and recreation system. The demographic characteristics most applicable to park and recreation planning are overall population trends (an indicator of the quantity of facilities necessary), population distribution (indicating the location of needed facilities), and age (a principal indicator of the type of facilities and activity mix appropriate for the community). Examining demographic patterns is particularly important in determining how Merriam's needs might differ from state and/or national facilities standards.

Two age groups are expected to migrate into Merriam over the next twenty years. These groups include people over 75 years of age (particularly older women), and young adults, including women ages 20 to 24, and men ages 25 to 29. Fixed city boundaries coupled with both an aging single-family housing stock and new multi-family residential units have created an environment conducive to both young adults and the elderly. There are a number of moderately priced "starter homes" in Merriam which tend to be resold as younger families move into a higher socio-economic level and out of town.

The NRPA guidelines should be used to compare existing facilities against keeping in mind that they are standards and should not be the sole basis for public policy decisions. All facilities and services available to the citizens, not just those that are city-owned should be considered in planning for the future.

In conclusion, the high percentage of single young adults and young families in Merriam suggests the provision of active recreational facilities is a priority for the parks and recreation system. Additionally, the high concentration of older adults suggests a priority for a mix of passive recreational opportunities and programming for older adults. Consequently, planning for parks and recreation should recognize the increasing need for facilities and activities for a wide range of ages. Public education as to these trends and the input tools described will be key to planning appropriately for the leisure needs of future Merriam citizens.