



Fall 2021 Change Academy CITY PLAN 2040 Session 2 Notes

For this session, participants read the Healthy Community, Harmony with Nature, and Livable Built Environment sections of City Plan 2040.

Observations: We began this session by asking participants to share their observations about, and reactions to, this week's reading. One participant noted that elements of the Harmony with Nature section were present in other portions of the plan. Multiple participants were interested in the issue of increasing the tree canopy throughout the city. One participant noted that action items were identified, but that the organizations to complete them were not.

Conversation: Michael Clark, Director of the City of Roanoke's Parks and Recreation department, answered questions about his department's role within the comprehensive plan.

- The mission of the Parks and Recreation department is “build a welcoming community through play.” Mr. Clark said that his department's role is to make Roanoke more livable. COVID-19 showed the importance of parks and public spaces
- Parks and Recreation's work connects to other key focus areas in the city, including public safety, social services, economic development, education, and socioemotional development
- Neighborhood parks provide people with an opportunity for respite and to reconnect with the outdoors. The department's goal is for there to be a park within a safe ten-minute walk of every citizen's home. Right now, this is true for about 70% of Roanokers.
- The city's oldest parks are from 1906, and the oldest rec center was built in 1907; the newest was built in 1965. In the 1960s and 1970s, some landfills were turned into parks.
- The department is working to align its work with the comprehensive plan's focus on equity in multiple ways:
 - Staff are intentional about cycling their focus of amenities and maintenance across different parts of the city. The department is aware that equality and equity are not the same thing.
 - When Parks and Recreation was developing its 2019-2028 Master Plan, its staff went to neighborhoods, which increased citizen engagement. Through this listening, the department learned how close-knit neighborhoods are, and has been able to focus on specific neighborhood needs.
 - The focus on equity influences program planning. For example, the department has realized that the scholarship applications for program participation are actually a barrier for some families
- “How it's always been done” is a challenge. The department is working to identify gaps and to shift resources to address those needs. While programs are planned 6-9 months out, COVID-19 has showed a need to be nimble.

- An overall challenge is the way Virginia classifies cities. This creates competition between neighboring municipalities, instead of allowing them to grow together. We have the right people and organizations to create change, though.
- 10 years ago, Roanoke consciously branded its outdoors, which has been a vehicle for economic development and an advocacy tool. People appreciate our area's natural environment.
- Parks and Recreation cannot do its work alone. It fosters partnerships with organizations like Trees Roanoke, Pathfinders for Greenways, the Civitans, the Ruritans, Blue-Ridge Off-Road Cyclists, and numerous volunteers. Parks and Recreation typically engages more volunteer hours from the community than all the other City departments combined. Organizations like Trees Roanoke help ensure that the City is replacing about as many trees each year as we are losing

Q&A: Participants then asked Mr. Clark some questions. Below are some of his responses:

- We lose most of our trees through weather, car accidents, and age.
- The number one thing that the Parks and Recreation department needs from citizens is for citizens to take ownership of their neighborhood parks. This includes picking up trash on the greenway and calling the department if there are any issues.
- The City and County collaborate to avoid duplication of services. The region works together to encourage sports tourism, such as bringing the IronMan race to Roanoke.
- One challenge to park development is the need to address deferred maintenance first. A deferred maintenance budget, separate from the capital budget, would help.
- When equipment needs to be replaced, the department tries to come up with innovative replacements that address neighborhood needs. For example, instead of updating a basketball court, the neighborhood might benefit more from the basketball court being replaced with a pickleball court.
- A large proportion of the city's playgrounds were built around the same time and are very similar. The department is trying to build more individual playgrounds unique to neighborhoods.
- Rec centers and pools (which were built in 1972) are being updated in a citizen-driven process that included a statistically valid survey and an online survey. Parks and Recreation even asked its afterschool youth participants what they wanted to see in upgraded facilities. Parks and Recreation currently has \$17 million for this work, which will make a positive impact.
- There is a need to get over perceptions about different neighborhoods. Programs like greenway tours can help people experience other neighborhoods
- Examples of collaboration include the Kiwanis Club's development of an outdoor learning space near the Melrose Branch Library and the Belmont Park Story Walk.
- Mr. Clark asked participants to guess the number of parks in the City of Roanoke. Including parks, greenways, and plazas, there are 72.

Large Group Discussion: We then discussed these portions of City Plan 2040 in the large group for the remainder of the session.

- A participant asked if there was a way for community work to have a structure that enables education on health topics
- One challenge to park use is making sure that they are perceived as safe

- The two neighborhoods most deficient in park space are Greater Deyerle and Monterey
- The Complete Streets group brings together staff from the City’s Planning, Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and Arts divisions to review street projects for livability. This group’s work has led to the planting of more trees and the development of more sidewalks and bike lanes.
- The City is planning to build a more intermediate/advanced set of workout equipment in River’s Edge North
- One participant commented that “we need to address/expose the underlying racist legacy of this independent city arrangement.” The group concluded that not having the independent city structure would lead to more growth.
- Mr. Clark said that it is important to be intentional about development and redevelopment plans both as parts of neighborhoods and as parts of the city as a whole. It’s important to pick the right projects and spaces, and to make sure that everyone has a voice.
- According to Sustainable Roanoke data, only one percent of the plastic used in the city is recycled.
- One participant suggested having composting as a municipal program.
- The City doesn’t do this work alone.
- According to one participant, “Roanoke is a small enough city where you can make change.”

Additional Resources:

Independent cities article from

Cathy: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1988/10/05/plan-to-merge-independent-cities-counties-challenges-va-tradition/a2995a70-3ad5-4e63-9edd-eeb6c6b17939/>

A 2012 urban forestry report by Virginia

Tech: <https://www.urbanforestry.frec.vt.edu/STREETS/reports/RoanokeReport.pdf>

A New York Times article about heat mapping:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/24/climate/racism-redlining-cities-global-warming.html>

Liz's data--the 2019 Roanoke Valley Community Healthy Living

Index: <https://www.roanoke.edu/documents/CommunityHealthInnovation/2019RVCHLIFinalReport.pdf>

Parks & Rec's 2019-2028 Master Plan: <https://www.playroanoke.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/MP-FINAL.pdf>