

# Reviving Public Recreation

## Initiative Summary Statement:

Revive and repair public parks and recreation damaged by Hurricane Ian.

## Initiative Description:

**Objective:** The rebuilding effort gives the County the opportunity to repair, renovate, and modernize park and recreation facilities, making them ADA accessible, energy efficient, and resilient while expanding civic leisure activities that can benefit residents and visitors of all ages. In addition to repairing damaged athletic fields, pools and bandshells, the recovery can also include expanding public access through growing the multi-modality trail network and linear parks in the region. This network of hiking, paddling, and recreational trails connects greenways and blueways acquired through the Conservation 20/20 Program. Parks are one place that democratizes the residents and encourages civic engagement. The domain of parks and recreation is a dynamic one that has direct implications for other sectors of the community.

**Need:** Hurricane Ian damaged and destroyed many parks as well as the recreational, cultural, and operational amenities within them; this level of damage far exceeds the normal budgets required to operate and maintain these spaces, which has resulted in a large rebuilding funding gap. The County is world renowned for its natural resources, beaches, and preserves. These recreational resources contribute to the reputation and economic vitality of the community. Tourists also travel for sporting events like the River Romp Regatta on the Caloosahatchee River or baseball's Roy Hobbs World Series tournaments. Many special cultural events occur in park bandshells and stages throughout the County. Reviving these facilities lessens the negative economic impact of the storm over the long-term. The COVID-19 pandemic increased resident engagement with public parks and trails, reinforcing the health and fitness benefits of being outdoors. The pandemic also amplified support for constructing more active, outdoor recreational and cultural facilities, especially in underserved areas and places where there is high demand.

Federal funding through the FEMA Public Assistance (PA) program, specifically Category G, helps to restore facilities to pre-storm conditions. However, there is an opportunity within PA to use the funding as a basis for revisioning and expanding public facilities at these locations. This includes opportunities to make them more resilient in the future, as well as more attractive to residents and visitors. While slow to occur, Public Assistance (PA) funding is a vital basis for these repairs.

**Regional Approach:** Together, the region can strategize for the revitalization of public recreation amenities and coordinate the funding opportunities so that the County remains a desirable destination to live, work, and visit. Building in layers of resiliency can be achieved through creating better quality-of-life with more open space and greenways; encouraging more active lifestyles; distributing and expanding access to parks, recreation, culture, and natural resources to all neighborhoods; diversifying economic drivers; and continued environmental conservation that elevates the importance of wildlife habitats and local ecosystem. There is already a thorough understanding of needed repairs and improvements; the Lee County Parks and Recreation Department and each municipality conducted an inventory assessment and prioritized needed repairs for FEMA reimbursement purposes.

While residents and visitors may be attracted by the beautiful beaches of the County, they also enjoy paddling along the Great Calusa Blueway trail, biking down the John Yarbrough Linear Park, attending concerts at the Riverside Park amphitheater in Bonita Springs, painting at the Cape Coral Art Center, strolling through shady Fort Myers while appreciating the preserved Royal palm trees, or participating in baseball tournaments and spending money at restaurants, retail shops and hotels. For years, the County has been improving its park and recreation facilities. Through the Conservation 20/20 Program, Lee County has acquired more than 31,000 acres of environmentally sensitive lands, allowing the community to participate in and appreciate the natural world in parks and preserves. Because of Hurricane Ian, some repetitive loss areas may be converted to open space to reduce future risk of harm to community members and financial damages. Repetitive loss areas exist across the County and municipal boundaries; a regional perspective on identifying these areas and deciding their optimum use could result in opportunities to provide prominent passive public recreation. The creation of new recreational amenities would provide residents and visitors with additional access to natural areas and contribute to a high quality of life.

Unique opportunities to convert unused rail lines to new trails and pathways are being considered in transportation planning. Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization is an established regional coordinating body focused on transportation. They have produced a feasibility study on Rails to Trails that supports the expansion of acquiring land for a multimodal network of multi-use paths that could foster active linear parks, contribute to water management, protect native habitats for plants and animals and educate the public about natural resources. Together the region can apply for funding, determine the feasibility of projects, and build community support for reviving public recreation spaces.

**Impact:** Repairing and updating the existing park and recreation amenities that were damaged by Hurricane Ian is essential for returning the County to pre-storm conditions, and rebuilding provides the region an opportunity to expand natural amenities for the entire community. Augmenting the parks and trails creates resilience in the community in the economic, environmental, and healthcare realms.

Tourism is one of the greatest economic drivers of the region. Tourists and residents rely on sustainable access to the natural resources of Southwest Florida. This drives the economy and creates jobs. Recreational amenities often inspire visitors to return annually, become seasonal residents, and transition to permanent residents. As for the environmental benefits, passive public recreation allows the possibility for public land to also be used for diverse functions like open space conservation and sustaining wildlife habitats as well as infrastructure needs like water management, water quality, and flood control. Healthy biodiverse ecosystems can help mitigate erosion and buffer storm damage. It provides an opportunity for the community to engage with their natural surroundings, create a deeper appreciation of nature and understand the value of ecosystem services, encapsulating the need to promote the protection of natural resources. And finally, reviving public recreation contributes physical and mental health benefits for the residents of the County. Research has shown that being active in nature and socializing outdoors can decrease stress, improve cognition, lessen anxiety, and reduce depression symptoms. It can also improve sleep, boost immune function, increase cardiovascular functioning while reducing obesity, blood pressure, and risk for diabetes and cancer. These factors combined make for a healthier population and put less strain on the healthcare system and reduce costs throughout the County. Developing more paths and trails will also provide more safety for bikers and walkers compared to alternate routes. The benefits of funding and expanding parks and recreation are exponential.

### **Key Considerations:**

- Priority should be given to repairing, renovating, and redeveloping facilities damaged by Hurricane Ian.
- As parks and trails are expanded across the County, land management that considers various sectors from natural resources to economic development can contribute to sustainable development.
- While the County and municipalities have begun to identify priority projects and determined funding gaps, consider a cooperative and regional approach to reviving public recreation. Developing networks of recreational activities that cross jurisdictional boundaries can provide social and economic benefits on a wider geographic scale and

encourage the population to be more active outdoors as a component of a high quality-of-life.

- Incorporate arts and culture sector into the design and approach to parks.

## Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Cultural Resources, Infrastructure, Natural Resources, and Economic Recovery

## Stakeholders:

- Municipal governments and departmental experts
  - Parks and Recreation
  - Sports Development
  - Natural Resources
  - Public Works
  - Transportation
- County government and departmental experts
  - Parks and Recreation
  - Visitor and Convention Bureau
  - Conservation 20/20
  - Natural Resources
  - Department of Transportation
  - Metropolitan Planning Organization
  - Sports Development
  - Department of Public Safety
- Major arts institutions in Lee County
- Arts organizations in Lee County
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- University Partnerships
- Friends of BERT
- Non-profit organizations that provide essential youth sports and recreational services.

## Potential Funding Sources:

- Environmental Protection Agency
- United States Department of Transportation
- United States Department of Energy
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- United States Department of Agriculture
- United States Department of the Interior

- United States Army Corps of Engineers
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- The Land and Water Conservation Fund Coalition
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation
- Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles
- Florida Department of Transportation

## Resources:

- Lee County Rail-Trail Feasibility Study Briefing Report (2021)
- County and municipal comprehensive plans
- Sanibel Shared Use Path Plan
- Public Assistance Reports

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