

# The Chicago Park District Decennial Committee Efficiency Report



Approved by the Chicago Park District's  
Committee on Local Government Efficiency on [date]



## I. Purpose

In June of 2022 and subsequently amended in February 2023, Public Act 102-1088 – titled Decennial Committee on Local Government Efficiency Act – was signed into state law.

The Act requires local governmental units (excluding local municipalities and counties) to form a public committee to review efficiencies and accountability within their own organization. The Act requires the committee to consist of the local elected board members, chief executive officer, other officers of the governmental unit, and two residents who reside within the local agencies' jurisdiction.

The two residents must be appointed by the president, with the advice and consent of the commissioners. The committee must meet a minimum of three times and the meetings are required to comply with Open Meetings Act.

Ultimately, the committee must prepare and submit a report to the administrative office of each county board in which the governmental unit is located that provides information about the Chicago Park District's ("Park District") efforts as it relates to efficiencies and accountability efforts undertaken currently and anticipated within the next ten years. The report must be submitted within 18 months after the formation of the committee. After the report is filed, the committee is dissolved for the next ten years. Ultimately, the Board provides the leadership and policy direction for public accountability, with staff implementing this policy within available resources. In an effort to assist the committee with its work, staff has compiled an initial summary of the many efforts already underway as it relates to improved efficiencies and accountability within the forest preserve district.

The Park District formed its Committee on Local Government Efficiency on May 10, 2023, to study efficiencies and report recommendations regarding those efficiencies and increased accountability pursuant to 50 ILCS 70/1, *et seq.* (the "Committee").

## II. Committee Membership

The Committee consisted of the following individuals:<sup>1</sup>

- Modesto Valle, Vice President of the Board
- Robert Castaneda, Commissioner
- Sean Garrett, Commissioner
- Philip Jackson, Commissioner
- Coya Paz Brownrigg, Commissioner
- Marlon Everett, Commissioner
- Rosa Escareño, Chicago Park District General Superintendent & CEO
- Juan Sandoval, Chicago Park District Resident
- Pamela Stauffer, Chicago Park District Resident
- Leonard McGee, Chicago Park District Resident
- Cornelia Gamble, Chicago Park District Resident

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<sup>1</sup> Former members whose membership ended after terms as Commissioners ended include Andrea Telli, Former Commissioner; Shariff Walker, Former Commissioner; Donald Edwards, Former Commissioner; Ashley Hemphill Netzky, Former Commissioner; Jose Muñoz, Former Commissioner; Myetie Hamilton, Former Commissioner

### III. Committee Meetings

The Committee met as follows:

Meeting Date	Meeting Time and Place
June 9, 2023	Fosco (Peter) Park 1312 South Racine Avenue Chicago, IL 60608
July 29, 2024	Chicago Park District Administrative Building 4830 S. Western Ave. Chicago, IL 60609
October 9, 2024	Horner (Henry) Park 2741 W. Montrose Ave. Chicago, IL 60618

Minutes of these meetings are available on the Park District’s website or upon request at the Park District’s administrative office.

Per the Act, “[a]t the conclusion of each meeting, the committee shall conduct a survey of residents who attended asking for input on the matters discussed at the meeting.” The Park District made surveys available after each meeting.

### IV. About the Chicago Park District

The Chicago Park District proudly stands as one of the nation’s largest municipal park districts, boasting an impressive expanse of nearly 9,000 acres of green space, featuring 615 parks, 250 field houses, and 26 miles of lakefront property. The Park District is deeply invested in preserving and expanding its natural havens, promoting active lifestyles, fostering community connections, and showcasing its vibrant culture. The Park District provides an array of recreation, cultural, and social opportunities for Chicagoans and visitors alike; nearly 40 million people visit Park District properties, facilities, or events each year.

**Programs:** In addition to providing ample physical space for Chicagoans, the Park District provides a robust year-round offering of recreational and wellness programs, with nearly 600,000 program and event registrations in 2023. This includes our summer camp offerings, which enrolled over 30,000 young people in summer 2024. Families in need will continue to have access to approximately \$3 million in financial assistance on top of the built-in discounts of our tiered pricing structure.

**Personnel:** The Park District employs nearly 3,000 year-round staff and doubles in size over the summer with the addition of seasonal staff such as lifeguards, recreation leaders, and laborers. The Park District is the largest direct employer of youth (ages 16 to 24) each summer. In summer 2024, the Park District hired 2,547 youth from across the city.

**Budget:** The Park District's 2024 budget is \$574.4 million. Property tax is the largest revenue source, contributing \$310.7 million, which is 54.2% of total resources. The Park District's managed assets, including Soldier Field, harbors, and golf facilities, are expected to generate \$117.2 million in revenue in 2024.

**Organizational Structure:**

**Board of Commissioners**

The Park District is governed by a board of seven non-salaried Commissioners who are appointed by the Mayor of the City of Chicago for five-year terms with the approval of the Chicago City Council. Under the Chicago Park District Code, the Commissioners have a fiduciary duty to act, vote on matters, and govern in the best interest of the Park District.

**Office of Inspector General**

The Office of Inspector General is an independent oversight office, reporting to the Board of Commissioners, that investigates allegations of fraud, waste, abuse, and misconduct pertaining to employees and officers, board members, contractors, subcontractors, vendors, agents and volunteers. It also oversees internal audits.

**Executive Office**

The General Superintendent and Chief Executive Officer leads the Executive Office, which is responsible for the overall management and direction of the Park District and oversees all other departments.

**Office of Prevention & Accountability**

After extensive external expert feedback and input, the Board of Commissioners amended the Chicago Park District Code to establish the Office of Prevention and Accountability (OPA) on April 20, 2022. OPA ensures that the Park District provides an equitable, inclusive, safe and respectful work and recreation environment. It is empowered to prevent misconduct and hold wrongdoers accountable through fair, independent, and thorough investigations into allegations of misconduct.

OPA provides Park District staff with trainings regarding the Human Rights Ordinance and related policies. It collaborates with community partners to ensure that the Park District follows best practices that support its goal of providing a safe and respectful environment.

**Administration**

The Administrative department provides general management and administrative services. It oversees information technology, new business development, revenue, human resources, and workforce development.

**Legal**

The legal department manages issues related to law, risk management, ethics, and the Freedom of Information Act.

**Community Recreation & Programming**

The Community Recreation and Programming Department supervises and implements high-quality recreation and programming opportunities at park fieldhouses, beaches, pools, open spaces, and athletic fields. Programs include Aquatics, Athletics,

Community Sports, Gymnastics, Sailing, Special Olympics, Special Recreation, and Wellness. Management is organized across three regions:

- **The Central Region** offices manage 214 parks located within 26 of the city's 77 community areas. The boundaries run from North Ave to 51<sup>st</sup> Street, east and west from the Lake to city limits.
- **The North Region** is responsible for overseeing 212 parks and playgrounds for diverse communities from Rogers Park to Norwood Park as well as from North Ave Beach to Belmont/Cragin neighborhood.
- **The South Region** oversees more than 200 parks and playgrounds within the boundaries of 51<sup>st</sup> Street on the North end to 138<sup>th</sup> Street on the South end, and from East to West of the city limits.

### **Operations**

The Operations Department is responsible for the management of day-to-day Park District operations and oversees facilities management; capital construction; planning and development; security; natural resources; culture, arts and nature; and outdoor and environmental education.

### **Finance**

The Finance Department is responsible for ensuring the fiscal wellbeing of the Park District and establishing overall guidelines and policies for financial decisions relating to investments, budgeting, accounting and cash management. The Finance Department manages activities related to the budget, Comptroller, purchasing, treasury, and other financial services.

### **Strategy & Engagement**

The Strategy and Engagement Department provides strategic guidance for external and internal district initiatives and manages communications and marketing, districtwide policy and disability policy, community relations, and government and external affairs.

## **V. General Overview of Governing Statutes, Ordinances, Rules, Procedures, Powers, Jurisdiction**

The Park District was established by the Chicago Park District Act in 1933, 70 ILCS 1505/1 *et seq.*

As part of good governance and implementing best practices in the management of day-to-day operations, the Park District has also adopted the following:

- The Chicago Park District Code, available [here](#).
- The Chicago Park District's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan, available [here](#).
- Capital Improvement Plan, available [here](#).
- Land Acquisition Plan, available [here](#).
- Office of Prevention and Accountability Policies, available [here](#).
- Additional program policies, available [here](#).

## Legislative Matters

- **Local:** While the Park District is a separate entity and unit of government that is governed by its own Board of Commissioners, it necessarily also has a close and collaborative relationship with members of the Chicago City Council as they represent their constituents and advocate for what residents would like to see in the parks in their communities. The Park District has also been able to make countless capital improvements using TIF funds with the support of aldermen. Additionally, when called upon, the Park District provides testimony to City Council Committees to share relevant updates regarding ongoing initiatives.
- **State:** The Park District continues to monitor legislation in Springfield regarding capital initiatives, unfunded mandates, and other regulatory matters affecting Parks' operations and finances.
- **Federal:** The Park District submitted 30 Community Project Funding (Federal earmark) requests for FY24. The Park District was successful in obtaining \$5.8 million across six projects in FY23 and \$3 million across four projects in FY22.

## VI. Importance of the Chicago Park District

Having a separate and distinct taxing body for parks, recreation, and conservation within Chicago is extremely beneficial to the community for many reasons, as detailed further in this report.

- **Appointed, non-partisan, non-compensated board.** As mentioned previously, the Park District is governed by a board of seven commissioners. Commissioners must reside within the boundaries of the park district and appointed by the Mayor of the City of Chicago, with approval of City Council. Pursuant to state law, commissioners are non-partisan and serve without compensation.
- **Accessible and focused representation.** Having a dedicated board to oversee these essential facilities, programs, and services provides the Chicago community with increased access to their Park District representatives and allows those representatives to remain focused solely on those facilities, programs, and services. This is contrasted with general purpose governments where elected representatives are responsible for broad oversight on a wide range of issues. This special purpose benefit is particularly advantageous when it comes to budget and finance oversight.
- **Increased transparency.** Having a dedicated unit of local government to provide park and recreation services also improves the relationship between the Park District and its residents because of the transparency and openness related to the board and Park District operations. Having detailed agenda and action items allows taxpayers to be better informed about the inner workings of their local government. When individual units of government are responsible for providing specified services like park districts, transparency is increased because action items and budget procedures are more detailed.

- **Protection of revenues.** Because the Park District is a separate unit of local government, the revenues it generates can only be used for Park District purposes. This assurance is contrasted with general purpose governments that provide a multitude of services such as fire, police, public works, economic development, etc., where revenues that are generated specifically for parks and recreation can be expended on these other services with limited, if any, input from voters.
- **Providing the Chicago community more with less.** The Park District does more with much fewer funding options. Unlike other units of local government that receive direct state funding, and income, sales, use, hotel/motel, motor fuel and other numerous taxes, the Park District's tax revenues come from a modest portion of a resident's overall property tax bill. In fact, the Park District share is only 4.64% of the Chicago property tax bill.

## VII. Shared Services and Partnerships

The Park District works diligently to provide the best possible programs, services, and facilities to our community at the least possible cost. One of the many ways the Park District achieves this goal is by partnering with the City of Chicago, Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Department of Public Health, the State of Illinois, and other units of government, and non-profit organizations. Below is a summary of the current partnerships, agreements, and other relationships that assist the Park District's mission of delivering the best possible services at the least possible cost to our community.

- **Intergovernmental agreements with other units of government:**

The Park District holds roughly:

- 300 intergovernmental agreements with the City of Chicago;
- 15 with Cook County;
- 50 with the State of Illinois; and,
- 15 with the federal government.

The substance of these agreements ranges from:

- Shared use/space agreements, including schools, park fieldhouse, and field shared use with Chicago Public Schools
- Lease agreements
- Efforts to maintain and repair the Chicago shoreline
- TIF agreements
- Bikeshare agreements
- City enforcement of off-street parking meters
- Cultural events:
  - The Park District works closely with the Department of Cultural and Special Events (DCASE) to support local artists and bring free arts and culture programming to every neighborhood in Chicago. DCASE provides financial support through an intergovernmental agreement for the Night Out in the Parks Program, the Culture in My Neighborhood initiative,

environmental education on the Chicago Riverwalk, and public art in parks across Chicago.

- In 2023, DCASE provided \$1.25 million to the Park District in support of these programs. Staff from DCASE and the Park District also collaborate on curation and community engagement around the arts.

- **Partnerships with Athletic Use, Resident, Contractor, and Service Providers**

The Park District's Athletic Use, Resident, Contractor, and Service Provider (ARCS) program enables artists, artist organizations, community groups, organizations, and businesses to enter into a mutual agreement to provide mission-centered programs and services to the public on Park District property. This program allows for the Park District to expand tailored neighborhood programming at low or little cost to the taxpayer. The Park District currently has 293 active ARCS partnerships.

Participation in the ARCS Program is open to organizations that meet the criteria listed in the ARCS Guidelines who are interested in utilizing Park District facilities on a regular basis. Eligible organizations include those that fall under the following categories:

**Athletic Use:** Youth sport leagues and private schools seeking use of athletic space

**Resident:** Organizations seeking space to provide regular, ongoing programming that aligns with the Park District's mission

**Contractor:** Organizations or businesses seeking to provide fee-based programs that align with the Park District's mission

**Service Provider:** Organizations or businesses seeking to provide programs for park-driven programs and events for no fee for participants

All program proposals must align with the Park District's mission and must not unnecessarily duplicate or compete with Park District programs. Partnerships must also be financially sustainable.

- **Brownfield Redevelopment Partnerships**

The Park District is a leader in brownfield redevelopment, which is an important sustainability effort for revitalizing vacant properties, cleaning up the environment, addressing issues of environmental justice, and strengthening the social fabric of communities across Chicago.

Over the last 10 years in the Southeast side of Chicago, the Park District has developed hundreds of acres that were predominantly former industrial and environmentally impacted property. These sites include Big Marsh, Hegewisch Marsh, Marian R. Byrnes Park, Indian Ridge Marsh, and Steelworkers Park.

The Park District worked with local stakeholders as well as regulatory agencies including the Illinois EPA, Illinois DNR, US EPA, US Fish and Wildlife, and the US Geological Survey to investigate and develop remedial goals and objectives which were used in the development



plans. The Park District won a US EPA Brownfields award for its innovative approach to remediation and redevelopment of the Big Marsh property. Importantly, the Park District revitalized the land where its new headquarters sits to remediate and remove the remaining large underground storage tanks located there.

- **Informal cooperation with other units of local government which save taxpayer dollars by eliminating redundancy.**

The Park District collaborates with numerous other local units of government throughout each year. Examples include:

- Ongoing partnerships with the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) to promote wellbeing initiatives and programs in targeted communities. This year, the Park District and CDPH developed two “health hubs” at parks in the Austin and Belmont-Cragin neighborhoods. These parks’ health hubs serve to bring in more wellbeing resources to each neighborhood, including fitness programs, mental health resources, nutrition support, and community activities. The Park District is working to add additional health hubs in other priority communities.
- The Park District works closely with the City of Chicago and its departments for numerous ongoing operations. Examples include:
  - Permits/special events with the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events
  - Safety/crime prevention with the Chicago Police Department and the Mayor’s Office of Community Safety, the Chicago Community Safety Coordination Center, and CDPH.
  - Youth hiring initiatives with the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services
  - Support for unhoused residents with the City of Chicago, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, Chicago Police Department, and Department of Streets and Sanitation.
- The Park District has an extremely strong relationship with Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Numerous teams within the Park District and CPS collaborate on a weekly to monthly basis. These collaborations and partnerships include:
  - Recruitment efforts for summer youth hiring, including ongoing efforts to train future lifeguards
  - Shared program development, such as teen-focused opportunities
  - Collaboration on policy development as it relates to youth, wellness, volunteers, and more.
- The Park District also collaborates with City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) to host multiple Teen Opportunity Fairs on CCC campuses to connect teens (with recreational, educational, vocational, and job readiness opportunities, and opportunities to apply for summer jobs.
- In collaboration with DCASE and other city stakeholder departments, the Park District is participating in three different consultant reviews of special event processes and systems for permitting of special events in the city.

- The Park District works closely with all city departments involved in the planning and coordination of large events including attending weekly Chicago's Office of Emergency Management and Communications (OEMC) Deconfliction meetings and specific event coordination meetings.
  - The Park District hosts large scale events to support its operating budget. In fiscal year 2024, permit revenue from large events is projected to generate roughly \$20 million. This critical revenue source allows the Park District to keep program fees affordable or free, and avoid increases in the property tax levy.
  - In 2022, the Park District implemented new policies that require organizers of large events to submit and deploy a community engagement plan to keep neighboring residents, businesses and other stakeholders abreast of event operations. As part of their community engagement, event organizers are also encouraged to bring economic investment to the community by hiring local residents and securing local vendors. Since the implementation of these new policies, organizers have provided financial support to local parks and schools, organized park clean ups, hosted holiday food and toy drives, and contributed to park capital improvements.
  - The Park District collaborates with the City's Department of Human Resources to glean new ideas to strengthen our hiring and retention efforts. Ongoing efforts include standing meetings with DHR and other City departments and sister agencies to gain insight into best practices and share our own strategies to strengthen our human resources processes and protocols.
- **NeighborSpace**
  - The Park District, the City of Chicago, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County worked together to establish NeighborSpace as a non-profit in 1996. NeighborSpace is the only nonprofit urban land trust in Chicago that preserves and sustains gardens on behalf of dedicated community groups. It provides basic insurance, access to water, and links to support networks so that community groups can focus on gardening. Together, we continue to provide leadership and financial support to protect community-managed open spaces in Chicago.
- **Science & Research Partnerships**
  - **Beach water quality monitoring.** The Park District partners with the University of Illinois at Chicago to manage a program for monitoring the water quality of our swimming beaches using rapid testing methods to protect public health for beach goers.
  - **Scientific research in parks.** In 2023, our parks hosted over 60 active research projects with 41 separate research organizations or institutions. Park District staff actively work to support these efforts and participate in many of them. Examples include monitoring our natural areas for biodiversity and rare plants, studies of urban wildlife, documenting impacts of our natural areas, and monitoring air quality in neighborhoods with environmental justice concerns.

## VIII. Other Examples of Efficient Operations

**Use of volunteers.** One way in which the Park District reduces the burden on taxpayers is through the use of volunteers. Last year, 19,116 individuals provided 98,054 hours of volunteer service to the Park District.

**Park Advisory Councils.** Chicago has 173 active Park Advisory Councils (PACs) who meet regularly to support their local parks and provide Park District staff with an advisory voice on matters related to their specific park regarding facilities and equipment improvements, programming, landscaping, budgeting, safety, security and overall evaluation of service. PACs are separate and independent entities apart from the Park District; they are self-governed with guidance from the Park District.

Park Advisory Councils are comprised of volunteers who are elected by PAC members to represent their community. In addition to providing feedback to the Park District, PACs fundraise, provide additional programming, create partnerships with local experts, and enhance the cultural offerings and special events at their parks.

**Youth employment.** The Park District is a major employer of youth in the community. This summer, the Park District employed over 2,500 youth. Not only is this an efficient way to deliver services, but youth employment serves as a valuable training tool for the future workforce.

**Joint purchasing.** The Park District participates in joint purchasing cooperatives pursuant to the Governmental Joint Purchasing Act (30 ILCS 525/0.01 *et seq.*) thereby saving taxpayer dollars through economies of scale.

- The Park District has joint purchasing agreements with the City of Chicago for support for computer hardware, software, maintenance and installation services; for rental and purchase of heavy equipment; enterprise application system support; professional engineering services; cellular based wireless communications; and specialized maintenance equipment.
- The Park District also participates in the Sourcewell service cooperative, an agency created by the State of Minnesota to provide procurement services to local, state, and federal agencies for specialized landscaping equipment.

**Chicago Park District Foundation.** The Chicago Parks Foundation launched in 2013 as the nonprofit partner of the Chicago parks. This independent 501c3 organization raises funds via private donations, which help alleviate the burden on taxpayers. Most funds are used for capital projects.

**Reliance on Non-Tax Revenue.** Although the Park District is an economic engine for the Chicago community and generates roughly \$1.4 billion annually for the City of Chicago, much revenue for the state and our community in the form of hotel/motel, sales, and motor fuel taxes, the Park District does not receive any of these revenues.

Instead, the Park District provides all of the programs, facilities, and services to the community with a very modest amount of property taxes and from **non-tax sources** such as memberships, program registrations, managed assets fees (such as harbors and golf courses) and other user fees as well as private donations and grants.

## IX. Transparency to the Community

**Accessing Information.** The following information about the Park District may be obtained by residents in the location listed.

**Document**

- Annual budget
- Annual budget and appropriation ordinance
- Agenda and minutes
- Comptroller's annual finance report (AFR)
- Annual audit
- 2025-2030 Strategic plan
- Capital improvement plan

**Location(s) Available**

- [Park District Website](#)
- [Chicago Park District Code](#)
- [Park District Website](#)
- [Park District Website](#)
- [Park District Website](#)
- [Park District Website](#)
- [Park District Website](#)

**Feedback Opportunities.** The Park District offers residents many opportunities to provide feedback. These include:

- The Board of Commissioners meets once each month. Residents may provide public comment at every meeting.
- The Park District's annual Budget and Appropriation Ordinance is available in tentative form at least 30 days prior to its adoption at an open meeting of the Park District board. Additionally, at least one public hearing is held prior to final action, and notice of the hearing is published in the newspaper at least one week prior to the hearing.
- The Park District's annual property tax levy is approved at an open meeting of the Park District board in accordance with the Open Meetings Act. The Park District follows all public notice and hearing requirements under the Truth in Taxation Law prior to the adoption of this annual tax levy. The Park District's annual levy is also subject to the limitations of the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law.
- Residents may contact or request information from the Park District by phone at (312) 742 - PLAY (7529) or email at [play@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:play@chicagoparkdistrict.com).
- **Strategic Plan Community Feedback:** In addition to the above meetings, the Park District engaged in extensive community outreach from December 2023 through June 2024 as part of its development of its 2025-2030 strategic plan, during which the Park District solicited feedback on how to be more efficient and accountable to taxpayers. This engagement included:
  - 10,000+ responses from community, volunteer, and staff surveys
  - 11 in-person and virtual town halls
  - 7 community meetings
  - 5 community interviews
  - 5 teen focus groups
  - 2 community stakeholder roundtables

**Strategic Plan Feedback**

- The Chicago Park District administered an online community survey from December 2023 to February 2024. The survey included questions related to park user experience and satisfaction. Feedback from the survey supported the development of the Park

District's values, goals, and aligned strategies in our 2025-2030 strategic plan, available [here](#).

- The survey was designed to gather input from City of Chicago the following set of topics:
  - Level of engagement with Park District parks, facilities, and/or programs;
  - Transportation mode used to access parks;
  - Parks, facility types, and program types most utilized;
  - Factors inhibiting engagement or participation in parks and/or programs;
  - Level of satisfaction with different features of Chicago Park District;
  - Suggestions on how to improve existing parks, facilities, and/or programs; and,
  - Suggestions on how the Chicago Park District can operate more efficiently.
- The survey was designed using online survey accessibility standards and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The text of the survey was published in five languages (English, Spanish, Arabic, Polish, Simplified Chinese) and distributed across multiple platforms, detailed below:
  - Chicago Park District email lists
  - Chicago Park District social media platforms
  - Town Halls and Community Meetings: The QR code to the survey was made available at all town hall and community meets sessions hosted and attended as part of the strategic planning process.
  - Digital Kiosks and Bus Shelters
- Parks, facility types, and program types most utilized:
  - Respondents were asked to indicate the top three park facility types most frequented. Outdoor spaces ranked first (30%), fieldhouses ranked second (19%), and trails ranked third (15%).
  - The top three reasons why respondents visit parks and facilities are (1) to relax/enjoy, nature, (2) exercise, and (3) attend parks programs and events.
  - Most respondents (76%) visit a Park District Park or facility at least once a week.
  - Respondents were also asked to indicate which programs members of their household have participated. General events (17%), sports (17%), and outdoor and environment (16%) had the highest participation rates.
  - Respondents' favorite park programs are outdoor and environment (23%); sports (20%); and aquatics (17%).
  - Primary factors limited program and activity participation as indicated by respondents are 'programs fill up too quickly' (26%); lack of options for different ages (17%); and inconvenient hours (16%).
- Suggestions on how to improve existing parks, facilities, and/or programs:
  - Respondents feedback on how to improve Park District programs generally fell into one of six categories:
    - Expand facility and program offerings;
    - Improve condition of park facilities;

- Invest in hiring and training of staff;
  - Increase accessibility of park facilities and programs through expanded hours and/or locations;
  - Regularly evaluate park programs, policies, and fees; and,
  - Improve marketing and advertising of park district programs and offerings.
- Suggestions on how the Chicago Park District can operate more efficiently:
  - Respondents feedback on how the Chicago Park District can operate more efficiently similarly focused on the importance of:
    - Investing in maintenance of parks and facilities;
    - Expanding community partnerships and volunteer opportunities to supplement the Park District;
    - Investing in staff;
    - Increasing park safety, security, and cleanliness; and,
    - Actively listening and responding to community input.
- Suggestions on how the Park District can strengthen its communication:
  - Share communications early enough to residents can properly plan ahead or sign up to attend.
  - Increase/expand communication efforts to combat lack of knowledge of what programs are available within neighborhoods or across surrounding neighborhoods.
  - Share communications across a variety of platforms, including non-electronic platforms.
  - Share communications in a wider variety of languages.
- Feedback on opportunities to expand programs:
  - The Chicago Park District provides a magnitude of programs, areas that stood out amongst park users during our strategic plan feedback for improvement include expansion of program hours outside of 8 am to 5 pm, expansion of program offerings for adults, seniors, and teens.
  - Specifically, parks users expressed a need for education opportunities on sustainability, healthy lifestyles, and youth development.
  - Teens were the single most noted demographic group that communities would like to see the Park District increase targeted programs and efforts on. Cultivating safe and open spaces for teens and programs that occur during after school hours, breaks, weekends were noted as key areas to increase teen engagement and support their development. Specifically, teens feel that there are not enough programs and opportunities created for them and the ones that do occur for teens are not marketed across social media platforms that teens utilize, resulting in a lack of awareness and participation.
- Feedback on how individuals would like the Park District to strengthen its impact on communities:

- Support more environmental initiatives and communicate to the public what is being done.
- Continue to serve as a community hub and be a place to create community connections.
- Greater focus on how health and wellness fit into park programs.
- Increased communication across more platforms to reach all community members.
- Continued to invest in communities and building strong and healthy community members.

## X. Facilities

The Park District is a massive entity that is responsible for managing:

- Nearly 9,000 acres of green space
- 615 parks
- Roughly 2,000 acres of natural area
- 52 ornamental gardens
- 33 edible gardens
- 7 golf courses
- 11 harbors
- 11 world-class museums
- 697 baseball/ softball fields
- 518 playgrounds
- 501 tennis courts
- 28.5 miles of lakefront
- 22 beaches
- 77 pools (50 outdoor, 27 indoor)
- One sports/entertainment venue

**Managed Assets.** The Park District's revenue-generating managed assets include Soldier Field, harbors, concessions, paid parking spaces, golf courses, the Northerly Island concert venue, the MLK Family Entertainment Center, sports centers, Maggie Daley Park and others. Through our contractual agreements, the contractors that operate these assets continue to find ways to increase revenues. This year's net revenue is expected to exceed \$40 million. Revenues generated from the assets are used to support local parks and keep programming fees low. These unique amenities require experts to run their specificized programs, like gymnastics, golf, and harbor maintenance.

**Museums in the Park.** Eleven major museums sit on Park District Property and have leases with the Park District. These include: John G. Shedd Aquarium, Adler Planetarium, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago History Museum, DuSable Museum of African American History, The Field Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of Science and Industry, National Museum of Mexican Art, Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture.

Through a unique partnership, the Chicago Park District provides an annual operating subsidy of \$29.6 million to the museums, allocated out of the Park District's property tax levy and the Personal Property Replacement Tax (PPRT). The Park District is required by law to allocate 7.534% of PPRT it receives each year to the Museums. The Park District has the option to provide up to 15 cents per \$100 of the property tax revenue to the Museums. The MIP determines how to divide the subsidy among its members, after which the Park District distributes the subsidy directly to each museum.

**Lincoln Park Zoo.** In 1995, the Park District entered into an agreement to transfer the operations, fundraising and management of the Lincoln Park Zoo to the Lincoln Park Zoological Society and to provide them with annual operating support. The Park District continues to own the zoo. The Society, a nonprofit organization, has done an excellent job in managing the zoo and over the years has increased its budget to provide for new exhibits, improved animal welfare and keep it free to the public.

In 2019, the Park District and the Society extended the term of the agreement to December 2049. The extended term will allow the Society to continue to be able to fundraise for capital campaigns and be able to borrow monies on a long-term basis.

In 2023, \$5.7 million was earmarked to support the Lincoln Park Zoo. Collectively, the remittance to the aquarium, museums and zoo makes up 7% of the total expenses in the 2023 Park District operating budget.

## XI. Programs

### Recreational and Wellness Programs

The Park District offers hundreds of recreational and wellness programs during each of its four seasons (fall, winter, spring, and summer). Programs are available for people of all ages, in neighborhood parks throughout the City of Chicago. For example:

- Early childhood activities such as Kiddie College, Story time & Crafts and Young Scientist are available for infants, toddlers, and preschool children;
- Our year-round Park Kids program is open to give youth and teens a safe place to learn and play with friends during after-school hours;
- Teens can participate in organized activities such as Teens in the Park (TIP) Fest and a variety of sports programs;
- Wellness activities, including Chair Exercise and Yoga classes, are available each day for adults and seniors, allowing them the opportunity to stay active and connected;
- Basketball, volleyball, pickle ball and evening sports leagues are available for adults and seniors giving them the opportunity to stay involved in their neighborhood park.

### Cultural Programming & Events

The Park District also offers an array of cultural events year-round in neighborhood parks throughout the city that allow for parks to become hubs of activity and subsequently making them safe havens. Some of these include:

- Teens in the Parks Fest, Windy City Run, Girls Day of Play, Halloween in the Parks, and [Night Out in the Parks](#). Each year the Park District seeks proposals from Chicago based organizations and individual artists to participate in Night Out in the Parks, programming over 1,000 cultural events citywide.

### Special Recreation Programming

The Park District is a national leader in serving individuals with disabilities. Starting in 1965, employees began to be trained on ways to better serve Chicagoans with disabilities. In 1968, Chicago became the birthplace of the Special Olympics with the Park District playing an integral



role in its development. Today, the Park District strives to enhance the lives of Chicagoans with disabilities by providing a variety of recreation and leisure opportunities. Programs include:

- **Adaptive Sports & Recreation Programs.** These programs are for individuals with a primary physical disability, or individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Programs include adaptive sports, wheelchair sports, and additional recreational opportunities.
- **Sports, Recreation and Leisure Programs.** The Park District hosts programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities and development delays that enhance skill development, encourage socialization, and promote independence.
- **Deaf & Hard of Hearing Programs.** These programs provide an opportunity for individuals with hearing loss to interact with each other through year-round specialized recreation activities, such as pickleball, ceramics, archery, soccer, and bowling.
- **Veteran Programs & Military Initiatives.** These programs empower veterans and activity military through participation in sports, recreation activities, community partnership opportunities, and family events.

## XII. Land Management

**Natural areas in parks.** Our park system is filled with nature. The city's parks are home to nearly 2,000 acres of critical habitat for local and migratory wildlife, accounting for more than 20% of the Park District's total parkland. These unique places provide important benefits for park visitors' physical and mental health and important ecosystem services for in every Chicago neighborhood. Natural areas help to absorb stormwater, reducing basement flooding and sewer overflows into our river system. They help counter the urban heat island effect and are measurably cooler than paved areas on hot summer days.

**Urban forest management.** Chicago's parks host an urban forest of 250,000 trees that provide shade and beauty for park users. Trees also provide many of the same benefits mentioned above with natural areas, such as improving air quality and absorbing stormwater. The Park District plants about 3,000 trees annually, with a focus on maintaining the tree canopy and expanding where possible. The Park District prioritizes tree planting to replace trees that have been removed due to disease or damage and in areas of the city with a history of disinvestment, environmental racism or social vulnerability. The Park District's tree planting program prioritizes species that provide habitat for wildlife, beauty for parks, and that are likely to be resilient as our climate warms in the coming decades.

**Brownfield redevelopment.** To improve environmental conditions and provide more equitable access to healthy green spaces, the Park District focuses brownfield redevelopment efforts on the city's South and West Sides. This process often involves the removal or capping of contaminated soil followed by landscaping and construction to establish the park and associated facilities.

**Illinois EPA Site Remediation Program Participation.** Over the last 15 years the Park District has successfully redeveloped dozens environmentally impacted properties through the State's voluntary Site Remediation Program and received No Further Remediation letters upon completion. This work included working closely with environmental engineering consultants and the Illinois EPA to comprehensively investigate and remediate the sites to make them safe for public use. Some of these sites include Ping Tom, Livingston Field, Montgomery Ward, Schaefer, Chi Chi Wang, Pritzker, Bartelme, Printers Row, Fred Anderson, as well as our new headquarters at 48th and Western and countless smaller playlots.

**Lakefront flooding and storm damage mitigation.** As our climate warms, we are experiencing more intense storms and flooding that impacts park infrastructure, particularly along the lakefront shoreline. We are partnering with CDOT and the federal government to improve our infrastructure so that it is more resilient in the face of climate change. We are investigating natural solutions like naturalized shorelines to help better deal with varying lake levels and stronger storm events.

**River initiatives.** The Park District has created a network of parkland along the river system that provides habitat for wildlife and recreational access for Chicagoans. In addition to providing habitat, natural areas along the river-edge help with stormwater management goals. Our boat houses, docks and nature trails provide access for paddling, rowing, fishing, hiking, bird watching, and spaces where we can host nature education programs.

### XIII. Capital Planning & Construction

The [Capital Improvement Plan](#) (CIP) is the Park District's comprehensive multi-year plan for land acquisition and park development, new building construction, building and facility management, park site improvements, and investment in technology and major equipment. It is funded through General Obligation Bonds, PPRT, revenue from the interest from the sale of parking garages to the City of Chicago in 2006, TIF dollars, Chicago Recovery Program funds, outside funding, and additional bonds.

The 2023-2027 CIP is expected to be funded by \$154.5 million in new General Obligation Bond proceeds and \$262.5 million in outside funding. Additional funding is expected to be identified and committed for projects within the CIP's 5-year timespan. Some of the identified projects for the CIP include:

- Restoring existing staffed field houses and community centers
- Building 50 new pickleball courts across the city
- Continuing to improve the habitat and increase access to the Chicago River
- Installing public Wi-Fi in 60 park fieldhouse buildings and outdoor park space.
  - The Park District is implementing public Wi-Fi in 60 park fieldhouse buildings and outdoor park spaces with a focus on areas of need for broadband infrastructure as part of the larger citywide initiative, providing residents with an opportunity to connect online to support school, work, and play.

### XIV. Sustainable Park Operations

**Renewable fuels.** The Park District has an award-winning program in place to fuel diesel vehicles and equipment with biodiesel. Our diesel equipment on the lakefront runs on biodiesel, a renewable fuel made from used restaurant grease and byproducts from soybean agriculture. Lawnmowers run on a blend of biodiesel and conventional diesel, and refuse trucks run on 100 percent biodiesel. This program reduces carbon emissions and particulate air pollution that is harmful to people with asthma.

**Environmental hazard management.** The Park District supports sustainability efforts by keeping its parks free of environmental hazards for staff and patrons. This work includes the environmentally safe management of asbestos, mold, regulated waste, lead based paint, and lead water service lines.

**Green building.** New construction and major renovations follow the City's sustainability matrix, which includes guidelines such as using sustainable building materials, designing for energy and water efficiency and good indoor air quality, and managing stormwater to reduce flooding.

**Recycling.** Public recycling is paired with garbage collection in every park in our system, both outside and inside of facilities. Prior to the pandemic, we piloted a compost program for food waste in day camps around the city. We also compost our herbaceous landscape waste and partner with the City Department of Streets and Sanitation to reuse or compost woody tree debris.

**Renewable energy credits.** The Park District purchases renewable energy credits for 100% of our electricity usage Districtwide.

**Building energy automation.** Over 70 Park District facilities are integrated into a Building Automation System, allowing our building engineers to manage heating and cooling systems remotely and reduce energy consumption.

**Lighting retrofits.** The Park District has an active program to retrofit both interior and exterior lighting to LED bulbs. This helps to reduce our energy consumption and also saves money through rebates from ComEd. Outdoors, the program is focused on pathway and sports field lighting citywide. Our current focus for indoor lighting upgrades prioritizes parks that are aligned with the City's priority investment areas and summer safety initiatives.

**HVAC improvements.** Since 2020, we have participated in maintenance programs such as the Boiler Tune Up project with Peoples Gas. The project has improved heating efficiency in over 90 facilities.

## XV. Other Benefits

While the Park District is a special purpose district, its impact to the community is multi-faceted and far reaching.

- The Park District's parks, recreational programming, and other opportunities improve the community's overall physical and mental health and wellness, thereby reducing health care costs.
- Before and after school and summer programs offer safe, convenient, and affordable childcare options for working families during critical times when school is not in session.
- As mentioned above, the Park District's open space and trees help improve air and water quality and mitigate flooding.

## XVI. Recommendations for Increased Accountability and Efficiency

As discussed, recommendations and feedback from community members, volunteers, and employees has been incorporated into the Park District's [2025-2030 Strategic Plan](#). The Park District's six new goals each have aligned strategies that aim to address the needs of our constituents.

Additional and supplemental recommendations to increase accountability and efficiency within the Park District include:

- **Continue to strengthen and expand partnerships with sister agencies and city departments**

- The Park District already enjoys strong working relationships with local departments and agencies like CDPH, CPS, and the Chicago Police Department. To continue to provide the most robust services and programs to our communities, the Park District recommends that it continue to work towards common goals with such entities. Examples include:
  - Partnering to recruit more lifeguards to support the reopening of more CPS pools, targeting schools and pools in neighborhoods with lower lifeguard application numbers.
  - Continuing to work alongside CDPH to provide wellness resources to community members through Park District fieldhouses, facilities, and events.
  - Continuing to work alongside the Chicago Police Department, the City of Chicago, the Chicago Community Safety Coordination Center, and OEMC to create and maintain safe spaces in our parks.
- **Strengthen Collaborations with Local Organizations**
  - As highlighted in our strategic plan engagement, Chicagoans are eager for the Park District to establish new and deepen existing partnerships with local community organizations, schools, universities, healthcare organizations, and businesses to co-create and promote park programs that resonate with each neighborhood's unique characteristics and needs.
  - The Park District is already working towards this goal by conducting a community needs assessment, elevating its Health Advisory Council membership with universities, hospitals, and health care organizations; and extending offers to other non-profits and businesses to support Park District fundraising and program implementation efforts.
- **Strengthen and Streamline Background Check Processes.**
  - All park districts are statutorily required to conduct criminal background checks on all employees. The background checks must be done through the Illinois State Police (ISP). Last year, the Park District spent over \$120,000 on criminal background checks. The Park District does not recommend eliminating this mandate because it is necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of children and other park district patrons. However, the State should explore ways in which it could improve the current system and make it less costly for park districts.
  - **In particular, having a unified background check system centralized in the city or county would allow for a more efficient background check process.** Right now, many city agencies use the same background check vendor, but are unable to share results with other agencies. Having a city or other government entity manage the entire process and have the ability to re-run prints at low or no-cost would allow for reduced costs for the Park District and other entities.
  - **Strengthen and streamline the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services State Automatic Child Welfare System process.** This important check process can take weeks to months to complete. Ensuring that DCFS can more quickly review these could strengthen the delivery of services to Chicagoans.

- **Continuation of Technological Adaptations**

- The Park District has moved to strengthen its use of technology to reduce manual effort and increase efficiencies across its systems. Examples include:
  - Moving away from paper timesheets for employees and instead using an online, digital timesheet platform.
  - Maximizing the functionality of our digital human resources application to incorporate benefits enrollment.
  - Streamlining the hiring process by revamping our application platform to make the application process smoother and more transparent for hiring candidates.
- Future efforts to increase efficiencies include strengthening the Park District's volunteer application system to allow for more individuals to provide volunteer opportunities in parks to support community members. The Park District is exploring methods to digitize the application and volunteer management system.

- **Strengthen Communication with Residents**

- Given the feedback from the Park District's strategic plan engagement efforts, the Park District is already working to strengthen its communications with individuals regarding events, opportunities, and other services.
- The Park District is in the process of creating a new website, which is targeted to launch in mid-2025.
- The Park District is also exploring other avenues to strengthen information-sharing with Chicagoans so more residents are aware of and able to take advantage of the programs and services offered, including modernizing our modes of communication to include texting.
- The Park District will be creating an online dashboard on our website for employees and residents to use to track our efforts towards achieving the goals set forth in our 2025-2030 strategic plan.

- **Streamline the regulation and enforcement of Dog Friendly Areas**

- Currently, three separate government entities regulate dog friendly areas, dog tags, and vaccinations – the Cook County Department of Animal and Rabies Control, the City of Chicago's Animal Care and Control, and the Park District. The Chicago Police Department (CPD) serves as the enforcement arm for the Park District.
- Each entity has ordinances and rules regarding dog friendly areas, tags, clean-up, and vaccinations. Both the CPD and the County have the power to ticket individuals in violation of their respective ordinances. The Park District does not have ticketing or arrest powers.
- Enforcement of violations for dog tags, vaccinations, and off-leash regulations could be clarified in Cook County regulations and City of Chicago ordinances. A more efficient process would be for either the City or County to fully manage enforcement of these regulations, especially given that the Park District does not have

enforcement or ticketing powers, unlike the CPD or the Cook County's Administrator and Animal Control Wardens, who are clothed with full police power.

## XVII. Conclusion

This report summarizes the findings of the Park District's Decennial Committee on local efficiencies and increased accountability. In summary, the Park District has sound accountability policies and procedures in-place, recent operational efficiencies and technological improvements implemented, and long-time, growing relationships with other local government entities and community partners. Once this report is made public, the District's Decennial Committee will immediately dissolve until it is reestablished with newly appointed members per section 10 of Public Act 102-108.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

Modesto Valle  
Vice President  
Board of Commissioners  
Chicago Park District

**Dated:** \_\_\_\_\_