

# County backs \$40M parks plan

### Group sought delay, citing bikeways and other needs

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**CHAPEL HILL** The Orange County Board of Commissioners approved a master plan this month that could add more than \$40 million in parks and recre-

ation facilities over the next 15 years.

The 2030 Master Plan ([bit.ly/1xUpakT](http://bit.ly/1xUpakT)) is the first update to the county's long-range parks and recreation planning since 1988. The first park developed under that plan - Efland-Cheeks Park - opened in 1998.

The first projects the commissioners could consider under the new plan include a Millhouse

Road Park, Northeast District Park, the county's share of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail and continuing work at the Upper Eno Preserve. The master plan also recommends working with Hillsborough to provide baseball and softball fields and joint planning with the towns for new trails, connections, soccer fields and parks.

Commissioner Alice Gordon suggested making projects at

Twin Creeks Park, held over from the 1988 plan, a higher priority in the next decade.

The county's Department of Agricultural, Environment, Parks and Recreation has been working on the new plan since 2012, director David Stancil said. The new plan, based on surveys and discussions with more than 100 residents, is necessary if they want to

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continue seeking grants, he said.

Stancil said collaboration with the towns and the Orange Water and Sewer Authority, which controls the Cane Creek recreation area in western Orange County, is an important part of the new plan. The commissioners will get annual updates, he said, and decide when individual projects should be built as part of the capital improvements budget planning process.

Alan Green, a Bingham Township resident and member of the Parks and Recreation Council, said his hiking club regularly use county parks. This plan, he said, reflects that need, as well as the county's part in a regional transportation plan.

"Those young people ... are developing an interest in parks and hiking and trails," he said. This plan is "a little different from past master plans in that we specifically mention the need for more trails, more connectivity between parks, more greenways."

## Delay sought

The commissioners received a letter before their Nov. 18 meeting from 35 residents, asking them to delay the vote and work with the towns to revise the plan.

One urgent need, the residents said in the letter, is for paved recreational bikeways in the towns and county. They also suggested the county work with OWASA to open reservoir lands for public use and delay projects until the county can meet roughly \$330 million in school building needs.

"Today parks in the coun-

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ty's rural areas are underutilized and the plan does not address the growing needs of recreational cyclists," the letter said. "The plan overlooks nearby state and privately owned parks such as Ayr Mount, (Occaneechee) Speedway and Eno River State Park. It doesn't consider the option to use OWASA's reservoir lands as an alternative to new stand-alone county parks."

Commissioner Earl McKee said he also is concerned about the cost, especially considering the county has identified millions of dollars in other needs, from new and upgraded schools to transportation and affordable housing.

"I'm going to vote for it," he said, "but I will be quite honest, when it comes to specific items and specific parks, specific upgrades, purchases of land, I'm going to look at each one of them

with a hard eye as to whether I think that that is a priority over other priorities that we have."



McKee



Gordon

Gordon, who will retire from the board next month after 24 years, advocated for approving the plan with the understanding it could be updated.

"You do have a chance to revisit this," she said. "The only thing we're approving is the table that lists all the projects. So I think that would take care of some of the public concerns about what we might be spending money for and how we might be prioritizing."

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