

Proposal for Parks and Recreation Department Funding *without Rec Center Fees*

submitted by Vice Mayor Mike Courtney

Starting in January, the City plans to charge fees for Lawrence recreation facilities and plans to close open access to our downtown Community Building. In response to this plan, more than 3,660 people have signed the No Fees for Lawrence Rec Center petition. Additionally, more than 2,000 survey respondents, which was 82% of all respondents, also opposed these fees.

The following Proposal for Parks and Recreation Department Funding is primarily based on the 2025 Parks, Recreation & Culture Master Plan. This plan outlines a multi-factorial approach to examining and improving the Parks, Recreation & Culture department's budget, and it includes suggestions for financial, business, and marketing strategies; revenue generation; operational reductions; and donations.

The implementation of suggestion provided by the Master Plan and two other well-informed community-generated proposals, could provide a sustainable funding plan for our community's Parks, Recreation & Culture department.

Proposal Details

- Maintain free and open access to recreation facilities, including, the Community Building:
 - For a 6-month option, use \$250,000 of the \$2,177,000 allocated in the 2026 budget for restoring the City's General Fund balance. For a 12-month option, use \$500,000 of these funds.
 - Extend the appointment of an interim Parks, Recreation, and Culture Director until January of 2027 for a savings of \$103,000 (plus cost of benefits). This covers more than a fifth of the cost of free access to the recreation facilities.
- Work with the PRC Advisory Board and/or with an independently-appointed group to investigate all revenue management, operational management, and funding opportunity recommendations included in the following documents
 - [2025 Parks, Recreation, and Culture Master Plan](#)
 - [Marilyn Hull's submission to the City Commission](#)
 - [No Fees for Lawrence Rec Centers Petition](#)
- Some of these funding recommendations include
 - Establish a Parks Foundation or Friends Group to fundraise for the Parks, Recreation, and Culture Department. Solicit donations from individuals, local

businesses, and philanthropies, and form an endowment to receive and invest donations for a recurring source of revenue.

- Pursue sponsorships and advertising revenue from local, regional, and national businesses.
 - Increase fees for tournaments.
 - Expand high-demand PRC classes and cancel under-performing ones.
 - Partner with Douglas County for funding to support free access to Douglas County residents.
 - Host special community fundraising events.
 - Better advertise existing revenue-generating activities.
 - Increase concession revenue.
 - Explore grant opportunities focused on health and community enhancement.
- During 2026, gather usage data at all recreation facilities.
 - The Parks, Recreation, and Culture department has recently invested in and installed the technology to track users, so they can issue and scan free identification cards to gather data for total individual users and total visits by youths, seniors, residents, and non-residents.
 - Gather all data regarding attendance and revenues from tournaments and other special events.
 - Assess the revenue generated by other changes in PRC charges, including tournament spectator fees and increases to fees for classes, aquatics, and golf course access.
 - Further examine the expenditure reductions proposed in the [July 15, 2025 City Commission agenda item report \(slide 6\)](#).
 - Explore materials and labor donation to build ADA accessible ramp for the north entrance of the Community Building to halve the expenses required to staff two entrances.

Parks, Recreation, and Culture 2025 Master Plan

Summary of Funding + Revenue Strategies

This proposal's recommendations are rooted in the City's Parks, Recreation & Culture Master Plan, passed in March of 2025. This plan was developed by consultants from Confluence in conjunction with many members of the PRC staff, advisory board, steering committee, cultural arts commission, and the City Commission ([pg 3](#)). Additionally, [the City invested \\$190,000](#) in the development of this foundational planning document for our City's PRC department.

The PRC Master Plan outlines Funding + Revenue Strategies ([Section 8, pg 160-174](#)), and this section provides a multi-factorial approach to examining and improving the Parks, Recreation & Culture department's budget. The suggestions are a combination of financial, business, and marketing strategies; revenue generation; operational reductions; and donations. These, in total, could provide a sustainable funding plan for our community's recreation facilities.

Charging fees is only one of almost 50 financial management suggestions and only one of 50 funding strategies offered in this plan. Our community has repeatedly expressed its substantial support for maintaining free access to our recreation facilities. Just as the City provides free bus service and a supportive homeless program, many in our community strongly support fully equitable access to our community PRC facilities.

The Master Plan provides a broad scope of financial options that the City could implement to maintain free access to recreation facilities. Because there are many creative options to explore, I believe the City would be best served by deferring PRC facility fees until 2027 and spending adequate time exploring and implementing many elements of this plan.

Master Plan Finance Recommendations

([Section 8, pg 160-165](#))

Finance

- **Create a Business Development division to pursue grants, partnerships, and sponsorships.**
- **Develop business plans for all revenue-generating opportunities.**
- Consider **separate revenue funds** for major facilities.
- Establish **specific budgets** for revenue-generating facilities (aquatics, golf, sports pavilion) to maximize earned income.
- Maintain an **annual revenue plan**.
- Retain additional revenue within the department to improve their service.
- Clarify the state of the City's parks and recreation **sales tax**.
- Review staff wages for market competitiveness and percentage of PRC operational budget (should be no more than 55-60%).

Cost Evaluation

- **Assess true costs** of providing program services, and facility and asset maintenance.
- Provide **expected maintenance costs** for all parks and facilities.
- Assess assets, identify carrying costs of assets, and identify **needed capital improvements**.
- Provide cost-benefit analyses and expected operational costs for **proposed capital projects**.
- **Track user analytics**, including special events and tournaments.

Revenue Generation

- **Invest in marketing and branding** (3-5% of operational costs) to increase revenue.
- **Sell sponsorships and advertising** for facilities and PRC events. Sell ad space in guides or on scoreboards.
- **Negotiate agreements with private and not-for-profit groups** that use PRC facilities in order to retain sufficient revenue to cover true costs and generate profit for the PRC department.
- **Host special fundraisers**.
- **Provide concessions** or negotiate profitable agreements with outside concession providers.
- **Lease land** to private operators for recreation (e.g., driving ranges, marinas); lease land along trails for concession operations; or **lease underground rights** along trails for fiber optics/utilities.
- **Charge fees** that are competitive in the marketplace
- **Do not provide discounts** to different sectors of the community.
- Charge **higher prices for services** that are less aligned with department mission.
- Implement **market strategies** to be economically competitive.

Operational Management

- Employee staff who can **functionally operate the PRC system**. Reward productive employees.
- **“Design parks and recreation facilities for efficiency, productivity and to produce revenue.”**
- **Train staff** on business and financial operations, and require staff to track and meet specific performance outcomes.
- Identify and **reduce un-used facilities** or amenities.
- **Maintain competitive equipment** for revenue-generating facilities.
- **Contract out services** when financially beneficial.
- Organize **volunteer days** with community members or corporate partners to improve parks.
- **Educate community** about the Department’s costs to help residents value PRC services.

Fundraising

- **Establish a Friends Group, Park Foundation, and/or Park Conservancy to fundraise for PRC funds, scholarships, and/or endowments.**
 - **Comparable-sized cities' foundations typically raise \$1-2 million a year.**
 - **Conservancies can fund partial or full management of specific parks.**
- Establish clear policies and agreements for **public/public, public/non-profit, and public/private partnerships** in order to develop consistent, equitable partnerships. Consistently review agreements and outcomes.
- See Funding Strategies below.

Master Plan Funding Strategy Recommendations ([Section 8, pg 166-174](#))

External Funding

- **Corporate Sponsorships:** Funding for facilities, programs, and events.
- **Crowdfunding:** Web-based fundraising for specific projects.
- **Partnerships:** Joint development/operation with other agencies or private businesses.
- **Friends Groups, Conservancies, & Foundations:** Private fundraising groups for specific parks or general support.
- **Private Donations, Gifts, and Irrevocable Remainder Trusts:** Land, money, or in-kind service donations.
- **Fundraisers:** Host annual fundraisers.
- **Volunteerism:** Reducing labor costs through donated time.
- **Capital Funding**
- **Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT):** Public-private partnerships where private entities build and operate facilities before transferring them back to the public.
- **Capital Fees:** Surcharges on revenue-producing facilities to pay off improvements.
- **Development/Impact Fees:** Assessments on new residential/commercial developments to fund PRC development.
- **Special Funds:** Utilization of federal funds like ARPA or Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund.

User Fees

- **Recreation Service Fees:** Dedicated fees for organized activities' uses of facilities (leagues, classes).
- **Facilities and Parks Fees:** Daily fees for access to City facilities and parks.
- **Ticket Sales/Admissions:** Fees for self-directed access (pools, rinks).
- **Permits:** Fees for individuals to use parks for financial gain.
- **Reservations:** Charges for exclusive use of space (picnic shelters, special events).
- **Equipment Rental:** Fees for renting tables, tents, bikes, etc.

Grants

- **Federal/State:** Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), Recreational Trail Program (RTP), CDBG, Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP).

- **Specialized:** Urban Forestry, Historic Preservation, Partnership Enhancement Monetary Grant Program, NRPA Grants.

Tax Support

- **Property Taxes:** Standard ad valorem taxes.
- **Sales Tax:** Dedicated taxes for parks (popular in high-tourism areas).
- **Transient (Hotel) Tax:** Tax on lodging to fund tourism-driving facilities (sports complexes).
- **Special Districts:** TIF (Tax Increment Financing), PID (Public Improvement District), Benefit Districts.

Franchises & Licenses

- **Pouring Rights:** Exclusive agreements with beverage companies (e.g., Pepsi/Coke).
- **Naming Rights:** Selling naming rights for buildings or parks.
- **Concession Management:** Contracting food/retail sales for a % of gross revenue.
- **Land Leases:** Leasing land to private operators for recreation (e.g., driving ranges, marinas) or underground rights along trails for fiber optics/utilities.

Marilyn Hull's Proposal, Summary

Marilyn Hull served on the Parks & Rec Advisory Board for six years. She developed these suggestions based on her knowledge of, and experience with, the department and recently submitted them to the City Commission. [Her full proposal can be seen here.](#)

1. Build a Realistic Friends/Foundation Strategy—Not a Wishful One
2. Strategic Hiring Freeze and Payroll Discipline
3. Sponsorships and Advertising: Capture Untapped Revenue
4. Raise SPL Tournament Rental Fees to Match the Market
5. Allocate a Fair Share of Visitor Tax Revenues to PRC
6. Cancel Chronically Under-Enrolled Classes
7. Expand High-Demand Programs

No Fees for Lawrence Rec Centers Petition Proposal

- Partnerships with local businesses,
- Community fundraising events,
- Increasing fees for tournaments,
- Charging spectator fees at tournaments,
- Finding additional sponsorships,
- Better advertising existing revenue-generating activities,
- Increasing concession revenue, and
- Exploring grant opportunities focused on health and community enhancement.