

# COMMUNITY FOCUS REPORT



## *2021 UPDATE*

*A series of white papers on the report's 11 primary topics will be published on a rolling basis ahead of the 2021 edition. For news, podcasts and more information, visit [springfieldcommunityfocus.org](https://springfieldcommunityfocus.org).*

## ***RECREATION, SPORTS & LEISURE***

Partnerships create enrichment and economic development opportunities for the Springfield area.

## 2021 UPDATE: RECREATION, SPORTS & LEISURE

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**BLUE RIBBONS** Community collaboration · Trails and connections · Sports tourism

**RED FLAGS** Green space preservation · Obesity · Parks, trails and sports infrastructure funding

# Parks offer welcome respite, but funding remains unstable

**W**hen the COVID-19 pandemic hit and closed down businesses and institutions, parks and trails became essential to maintaining a sense of normalcy. The city's already-busy 104 parks locations and 75-plus miles of built trails bustled with activity during the Springfield's two-month shutdown and slow reopening in 2020. Passive park and trail usage remains strong as residents have developed new habits that include time outdoors.

The Springfield-Greene County Park Board, in collaboration with more than 300 community partner groups, remains the center of recreation, sports and leisure in our community. By partnering with Ozark Greenways, Friends of the Garden, Friends of the Zoo, Springfield Sister Cities Association and other groups, the area's parks offer a diverse array of outdoor experiences, including sports, gardening and cultural enrichment. In partnership with schools, local sports teams, health care and private investors, residents have ample access to sports leagues, fitness programs and outdoor adventures.

Parks and recreation are more than just playgrounds; they are economic drivers. Sports tournaments and parks attractions such as Dickerson Park Zoo and Springfield Botanical Gardens draw thousands of overnight visitors to Springfield. In an employee-driven job market, parks and outdoor experiences help attract new talent to the area and enhance quality of life for employees who build lives here. High-quality parks and trails add value to real estate, enhancing nearby property values by 10–15% and helping maintain a sense of community.

But reinvestment in the parks system has become a challenge, as funding for new projects has become more reliant on grants and private donations.

### BLUE RIBBONS

A consistent Blue Ribbon from previous reports has been **community collaboration** to keep Springfield's parks and recreation spaces up to date. The Park Board currently has an active partnership with more than 250 local organizations, and more than 900 individual volunteers collaborate to provide programs, events, sports leagues and facilities. Without these partners, many community sports and recreation opportunities would not be possible.

Springfield Public Schools is a primary partner, providing facilities for SPARC before- and after-school programs,



PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRINGFIELD-GREENE COUNTY PARK BOARD  
Private donations have become an important source of funding of parks programs, like the \$27,680 donation from Bass Pro Shops for 40 new kayaks at Lake Springfield Park in April 2021. The donation allowed the Springfield-Greene County Park Board to replace worn boats after a busy 2020 rental season.

### COVID-19 IMPACT

**T**hroughout a frightening and frustrating pandemic, Springfield residents have viewed parks, trails and outdoor recreation opportunities in a new light. A visit to the park or a walk on a trail provided a priceless outlet for residents of all ages who were told to stay home and avoid contact with others for weeks.

While many parks systems across the country closed entirely, the Park Board was dedicated to keeping outdoor spaces open, working closely with the Springfield-Greene County Health Department to ensure visitor safety and eventually restore services and amenities.

Almost overnight, parks and trails became busy with families and individuals seeking fresh air, exercise and a change of scenery. Lake Springfield Park processed more than 4,000 boat rentals in 2020, despite opening a month late due to city emergency orders. This was a 25% increase over 2019. Golf activity also surged during 2020, generating nearly \$400,000 more in revenue than the previous year. In other parks, staff noted full parking lots and an unexpected measure of activity: a marked increase in garbage collected from trash

cans along trails and picnic areas.

Parks continued to partner with the Health Department to safely reopen family centers and sports programs by encouraging face coverings, screening for symptoms, checking temperatures and limiting capacity to prevent spread of COVID-19. After the city's emergency orders were lifted, a new normal remained in place, including increased personal space in popular workout classes and frequent cleaning of common surfaces.

While passive parks use and outdoor experiences remained strong throughout the pandemic, overall parks revenue took a \$1.2 million hit, as memberships, program registrations and events were canceled or scaled back. Reimbursements from the City of Springfield, and CARES Act funding through Greene County, helped stabilize the Parks budget.

As COVID vaccination became available in our area, the Park Board was able to assist the Health Department by hosting several well-attended vaccination clinics at Rutledge-Wilson Farm Park, Jordan Valley Ice Park, family centers and Dickerson Park Zoo.





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sports leagues, clubs and summer camp for more than two decades. Starting in fall 2021, Springfield Public Schools' new grant-funded SHINE program provided before- and after-school care to all schools, allowing SPARC, Boys & Girls Clubs of Springfield, Springfield Dream Center and YMCA to expand partnerships within schools. The school district also shares numerous playgrounds with the park system and uses Park Board sports facilities including baseball, tennis, soccer and golf. In summer, the district provides programming with Summer Explore and outdoor experiences on park properties.

City Utilities of Springfield is working with area nonprofits to add recreational opportunities at Fellows Lake. Ozark Greenways and TrailSpring are partnering to redevelop 33 miles of multiuse trails, and the Watershed Committee of the Ozarks is now managing marina and boat-rental operations. When complete, Fellows Lake will be a signature recreation destination for biking, paddling and other outdoor activities.

The Springfield Art Museum, neighboring Phelps Grove Park since 1958, developed its 30-year Master Plan, calling for greater connectivity between the two city-owned properties. Phase 1 of the plan is underway, improving museum grounds by widening and naturalizing Fassnight Creek, reconfiguring museum parking, improving exterior lighting, and creating trail connections to both sides of Phelps Grove Park. The creek-widening project also calls for extending the Fassnight Creek Greenway from the museum property through Phelps Grove Park to the existing trailhead at Jefferson Avenue. Phase 1 is funded by a combination of state and federal grants and the City of Springfield's ¼-cent capital improvement sales tax.

Various "friends" groups provide invaluable financial, advocacy and volunteer support to the Park Board, in particular, Friends of the Zoo, which funds a significant portion of Dickerson Park Zoo operations, and Friends of the Garden, which builds and advocates for development at Springfield Botanical Gardens.

Donors have been making a huge

impact in parks in recent years. During the past two years, private donors and foundations have funded development of a new playground at Lafayette Park, the Sensory Garden Fountain and the new Rose Garden at Springfield Botanical Gardens (via Friends of the Garden), and major renovations at Cooper Tennis Complex. Bass Pro Shops donated 40 new kayaks to Lake Springfield Park in April, replacing several boats that were worn out after a record-breaking 2020 boat rental season.

The National Park Service's Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, which sees 200,000 visitors annually, recently completed a \$3.5 million renovation of its visitor center, funded in part by \$500,000 in private donations raised locally by the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Foundation, and matched by \$500,000 in federal funds. The expansion enhances the visitor experience by adding 1,800 square feet of exhibit space, with room for interactive displays and historic artifacts.

Ozark Greenways has partnered with the Park Board, the City of Springfield, City Utilities, the Ozarks Transportation Organization, private donors and others to build and expand **trails and connections** that consistently rank among the community's favorite assets. Trail development emerged as a top community priority in the city's Forward SGF visioning project. The area's more than 75 miles of developed greenway have consistently stayed busy with walkers, runners, cyclists and nature enthusiasts, especially during the pandemic.

A significant trail-related project on the horizon is the City of Springfield's Grant Avenue Parkway project, with plans for off-street pedestrian and bicycle pathways and other traffic upgrades along a two-mile stretch of Grant Avenue, connecting downtown with Sunshine Street and Wonders of Wildlife National Museum and Aquarium, reinvigorating neighborhoods and economic opportunities along the way. The project will fill a vital gap in the Ozark Greenways trail network, as well as establish new connections within parks, neighborhoods and schools. The city has secured \$21 million in federal funding for the project, which

### SUCCESS STORY

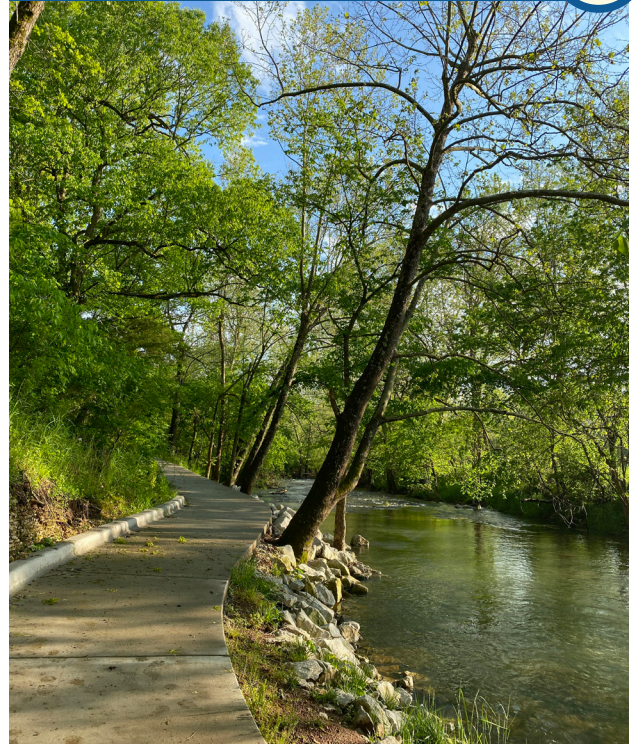


PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRINGFIELD-GREENE COUNTY PARK BOARD

**T**he Fulbright Spring Greenway is a destination trail just north of Springfield city limits, now an uninterrupted seven miles long, with the latest connecting section opening in 2020.

Starting at Ritter Springs Park, this rural greenway meanders along the South Dry Sac River to David C. Murray Park, Lost Hill Park and Truman Elementary School-Park. Trail users cross the river several times, including on a scenic bridge just east of the David C. Murray Park trailhead.

This trail leads through wooded hillsides, pastureland and river bottom near several caves, passing through patches of native prairie, wetland and woods. Today, the greenway corridor passes through habitat for a range of wildlife including snakes, turtles, deer, woodchucks, turkeys, hawks, bald eagles and many species of songbirds.

A portion of the trail passes through the former Fulbright Landfill, operated by the City of Springfield from 1962–1969. This area was designated a Superfund site in 1983, but significant cleanup, including removal of hazardous materials, soil replacement, erosion control and ongoing groundwater monitoring, has helped restore the area for recreational use.

Throughout the corridor, visitors encounter wayfinding kiosks that highlight unique natural, cultural and historical aspects of the area, and two delightful public art installations, including a colorful mural west of Lost Hill Park.

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requires a \$5 million local match. The City recently selected a team of contractors, landscape architects, engineers and consultants led by Radmacher Brothers Excavating Co., in partnership with project designers Cook, Flatt & Strobel (CFS) Engineering and Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects, to design and construct the Grant Avenue Parkway improvements. Construction is expected to begin in 2022 with completion anticipated in 2024.

Ozark Greenways has continued to add and connect segments on the Fulbright Spring Greenway. As of July 2020, the trail now spans 7 uninterrupted miles north of Springfield, connecting Truman Elementary School to Lost Hill Park, David C. Murray Trailhead and Ritter Springs Park.

Also, a portion of the asphalt trail on the busy Galloway Creek Greenway is being rebuilt in concrete, south of Sequiota Park, and near Covington Street, a new trail spur is underway, connecting to the Brentwood neighborhood by way of new sidewalks and a signaled crosswalk across Lone Pine Avenue. Both projects are funded through state and federal grants combined with the city's ½-cent Transportation Sales Tax.

Further south, plans for the Chadwick Flyer Trail will convert a portion of the former Frisco railway into greenway, between Lake Springfield and the City of Ozark's Community Center — the first greenway to connect to Christian County. About one-tenth of the proposed 7.5-mile trail is already in place, along Olde World Estates. With a \$50,000 anonymous gift, the Community Foundation of the Ozarks established a fund for the Chadwick Flyer Trail development, estimated to cost \$8 million.

The Fellows Lake trail project is one of several bike trail developments and facility upgrades proposed by TrailSpring under the Dirt66 moniker. The 66-mile plan calls for connecting and further developing several existing parks, greenways and recreation areas north of Springfield. TrailSpring also is the developer of the 400-acre Two Rivers Bike Park, which opened in 2013 south of Nixa.

In April 2021, the Community Foundation of the Ozarks announced an

### LEGISLATIVE IMPACT

Several of our community's favorites parks and recreation spots owe their creation to a federal law passed early in Lyndon Johnson's presidency.

In 1964, Congress approved and Johnson signed landmark legislation designed to help meet the nation's growing need to preserve, develop and ensure public access to outdoor recreation facilities. The Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 is funded through federal energy revenues, mainly offshore gas and oil leases. Nearly \$19 billion has been appropriated over the last 55 years through the LWCF, serving as a key building block for public areas ranging from national parks to local playgrounds and ballfields.

Since 1965, 60% of LWCF appropriations have funded federal land acquisition through the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, totaling \$11.4 billion.

But more Americans have been directly impacted by the much smaller LWCF State Grants program, which has provided \$4.8 billion for acquisition and development of parks and outdoor recreation areas at the state and local level. In Missouri, the State Grants program is administered through Missouri State Parks. Any local government, city, county or school is eligible to apply for up to \$500,000 per project, with a minimum 50% match. Eligible projects typically include parks, trails, outdoor sports infrastructure, picnic and camping areas, and access for boating and fishing.

In Springfield and Greene County, LWCF provided key funding for development of several recreation areas, including the Springfield-Greene County Park Board's Nathanael Greene/Close Memorial Park, Ritter Springs Park, Meador Park, Doling Park and Cooper Park Sports Complex; Ozark Greenway's South Creek and Wilson's Creek Greenways; the Missouri Department of

Conservation's Joe Crighton Access; and Springfield Public Schools' Mr. Nick's Playground.

Perhaps more important than the initial funding, the fund also provides lasting protection for parks and recreation facilities. Property developed using LWCF assistance is required to be operated and maintained in perpetuity for public outdoor recreation use. This provision prevents sale or significant change of use of park and recreation areas, ensuring continuity of operation as the property was originally developed.

"It's hard to overstate the impact that Land and Water Conservation Fund grants have had on virtually every local park system throughout the country—it truly is an amazing legacy" said Bob Belote, director of parks for the Springfield-Greene County Park Board. "Such is the case with our park system and the wide variety of park, trail and natural areas we've been able to develop through the years, with LWCF helping lead the way."

Annual appropriations for the LWCF have varied over the years, and the legislation itself was set to expire in 1989, 2015 and 2018, with Congress approving temporary renewals along the way.

In 2020, Congress passed and the president signed the Great American Outdoors Act, which established the new National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, designed to support deferred maintenance on federal lands up to \$1.9 billion a year—more than four times the average annual LWCF appropriation. Again, the funding comes from federal energy development revenues.

The Great American Outdoors Act also permanently funds the LWCF at an annual \$900 million—more than double the average annual amount. This legislation ensures, among other initiatives, that grants remain available to state and local governments for future development of outdoor recreation facilities, providing exciting opportunities for generations to come.

anonymous donation of \$4 million that will provide long-term stability to four Springfield-based environmental groups: Ozark Greenways, TrailSpring, Watershed Committee of the Ozarks and the James River Basin Partnership. The donation established an endowment for each organization, providing annual distributions to fund operations and projects.

**Sports tourism** remains a Blue

Ribbon for Springfield, which serves as a hub for sports competitions. Despite economic downturns from recessions and the pandemic, athletes, coaches and extended families have continued to travel to Springfield for tournaments and championships, bringing revenue to the city's hotels, restaurants, retail outlets and tourist attractions.

By actively partnering with the Park





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Board and other facilities, the Springfield Sports Commission, the Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau, national sports governing bodies and area universities, the City of Springfield attracts and retains state and national events such as the National Christian Homeschool Basketball Championships, now booked for Springfield through 2025, and bringing 8,000–10,000 visitors to Springfield each March. The BMX Gold Cup Finals return to Springfield in 2021, and several Missouri State High School Activities Association state championships take place in the city, including tennis, golf, softball and basketball, which is booked for Missouri State University's JQH Arena through 2022.

Professional sports bring visitors to the area as well. The average pre-pandemic annual attendance of the Springfield Cardinals, the AA affiliate of Major League Baseball's St. Louis Cardinals, was 320,000–350,000. After the cancellation of the entire 2020 season, the Cardinals returned to a regular schedule in 2021, with full stadium capacity restored at Hammons Field June 1.

The pandemic forced the Springfield Lasers Professional Tennis Team to play the 2020 and 2021 seasons at an out-of-state location with the rest of the World Team Tennis league. The Lasers, who won the league championship in 2018 and 2019, look forward to returning home to Springfield's Cooper Tennis Complex in 2022, where the team has hosted internationally ranked tennis stars every July since 1996.

Two new projects will help bolster the community's ability to attract and host large soccer tournaments. Ground was broken in April on the Betty & Bobby Allison Sports Town, a privately run destination sports complex in northwest Springfield, next to Deer Lake Golf Course. According to the Springfield Business Journal, the \$22 million development includes 12 soccer fields, including a turf championship field with seating for 1,500, and a 90,000-square-foot indoor complex, containing soccer fields and basketball and volleyball courts. Local philanthropist Bobby Allison is contributing more than \$3 million to the

project, and Sporting Springfield Soccer Club, a development academy affiliate of Major League Soccer's Sporting Kansas City, plans to call the development home. The City of Springfield has agreed with co-developers Philcrest Properties and L5 Sports Management & Consulting to reimburse up to \$2.1 million in infrastructure development, if the developers meet certain obligations.

The Springfield City Council also committed \$5 million to help fund planned upgrades at Lake Country Soccer complex in the Park Board's Cooper Park—one of the seven facility enhancements recommended by the Springfield Sports Commission's 2019 "Huddle Up" study. The funding is a significant boost to Lake Country's \$10 million capital campaign, which calls for renovation of eight outdoor soccer fields, new locker rooms and restrooms, concessions and concourse. The city funding may allow all these improvements to be done at once, rather than the original five phases.

In August, Springfield City Council agreed to purchase the Fieldhouse Sportscenter, a 46,000-square-foot indoor facility featuring four basketball courts that can be converted to eight volleyball courts. After nine years of successful private operation, the previous owners approached the Park Board about buying the facility in early 2021, with the intent of continuing operation as a sports facility. Other potential buyers would likely have converted the facility for non-sports use. The Park Board plans to maintain league play for more than 400 basketball and volleyball teams at the Fieldhouse, build upon existing tournaments and events, and expand programming to include pickleball and other sports. The \$7.5 million purchase will be repaid over 15 years, by both the City and the Park Board.

Additional existing sports facilities need reinvestment and expansion to compete for tournament bids. The MSHSAA State baseball championships are scheduled to take place in Ozark's US Baseball Park from 2021 to 2025. This same tournament was held at Springfield's Meador Park from 2007 to 2012 as well as in numerous previous years, before it relocated to newer facilities.

### RED FLAGS

The Red Flags for recreation, sports and leisure from the 2019 Community Focus Report remain. **Preserving green space** for future parks, trails and natural areas has been noted as a Red Flag since 2011, with little progress made. Springfield still ranks far behind comparable cities in the number of parks and total acres managed. Numerous reports, including Field Guide 2030 (both the Recreation & Leisure and Growth Management & Land Use sections), as well as the Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2021, have recommended expansion of public park land. New park acquisition and development was dramatic from 2001 to 2012, when dedicated Parks sales taxes provided funding for capital improvements. After that funding stream expired, parks development slowed significantly. Without dedicated funding for expansion, the Park Board has limited options for participating in purchase agreements or cost-shares for new parks.

**Obesity** has been a Red Flag noted in numerous previous reports, with statewide adult obesity rates growing from 23.9% in 2004 to a 34.8% in 2019. Greene County rates typically have been higher than the rest of the state. Childhood and adolescent obesity rates are also rising. Parks and recreation development, including family centers, sports, senior-citizen classes and youth programs, is dedicated to getting residents active and encouraging new habits that counter obesity and related health concerns.

Since the 2009 Community Focus Report, **stable public funding for parks, trails and sports infrastructure** remains the No. 1 concern. This trend is evident across the parks and recreation community, as Lake Country Soccer, Friends of the Garden, Friends of the Zoo, Ozark Greenways, the Wilson's Creek National Battlefield Foundation and the Park Board rely on grants, private donors and special funding for capital improvement projects.

The Park Board's budget comes from sales tax revenue dedicated to parks and user fees, and apart from grants and special projects, the Park Board receives

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no revenue from the City of Springfield, Greene County or the State of Missouri. Countywide capital improvement sales taxes in 2001 and 2006 provided significant funding for parks, but the 2006 tax was not renewed after sunseting in 2012. There is no timeline for placing a parks issue on the ballot in Greene County or Springfield in the near future.

A list of unfunded parks projects, ranging from green space acquisition and facility upgrades to deferred maintenance and equipment replacement, now totals about \$50 million, up from \$47 million in 2019.

The lack of public funding reached a crisis point as the Park Board finalized its FY2020–21 budget, which required making \$1.24 million in cuts ranging from closing swimming pools to reducing facility hours and eliminating some events and programs. These cuts were made in March 2020, just days before COVID-related emergency orders led to facility closures and program cancellations. Despite popularity of outdoor spaces and trails during the pandemic, the Park Board lost more than \$1.2 million in revenue, as facilities and programs remained closed or operated with limited capacity.

The City of Springfield helped provide some funding stability through the pandemic, and the Park Board received \$1.17 million in CARES Act reimbursement through Greene County. But many cuts made the previous year were not restored in the 2021–22 budget.

Missouri minimum-wage increases, approved by voters in November 2018, profoundly affected the Park Board's labor costs. The Park Board is one of Springfield's largest employers for youth and seasonal workers, ranging from lifeguards

to ballfield maintenance, concessions, sports officials and more—about 400 positions in all. By law, minimum wage increased from \$7.85 an hour in 2018 to a current \$10.30 an hour and will reach \$12 an hour by 2024. Those changes mean the Park Board would spend an additional \$1.3 million every year by 2024 to cover the same 400 seasonal positions. With no new funding source available, parks have reduced hiring and shortened seasons and hours to cover costs.

Compounding the rising cost of workers, Springfield, like much of the country, is experiencing an acute labor shortage, and the Park Board has struggled to fill open positions and compete with employers offering higher starting wages.

Until a new funding source is secured, the majority of recommendations in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2021, Field Guide 2030 and the Forward SGF 2040 all remain on hold. The Park Board has limited options to address sports infrastructure upgrades, joint environmental projects, neighborhood park restoration and long-term land acquisition.

Despite the essential role parks has played for the community during the pandemic, as well as private reinvestment, grants and special projects, Springfield's high-quality park amenities face gradual decline without stable funding.

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*The Recreation, Sports & Leisure 2021 Update was produced by Jenny Fillmer Edwards of Springfield-Greene County Park Board with input from: Bob Belote, Jim Fisher, Lance Kettering, Mary Kromrey, John Mackey, Anne-Mary McGrath, Kristen Milam, Karen Mellinger, Jerry Mitchell, Nick Nelson, Kim Reser, Francis Skalicky and Diana Tyndall.*