State of Play: Parks, green spaces improve quality of life

Parks, green spaces linked to quality of life, economic growth

By Charles Oliver & John Stephen  Mar 26, 2017

Valdosta — It was the perfect spring day.
Taking advantage of blue skies, a brilliant sun and warmer temperatures, Mark Sherling watched his two toddlers giggle and scream in delight as they zipped around the playground at Valdosta’s McKey Park.

Spencer, 3, and Norah, 2, never stayed in one place for long, running from the swings to the slide to the stairs in search of their next adventure, their faces full of glee the entire time.

Only feet away from where Spencer and Norah’s excited babbling erupted, 37-year-old Ali Thornhill and a couple of her friends worked through ab exercises on yoga mats, minutes after finishing a run.

Thornhill and her friends just started using the park for cross-training, but she also brings her two children, ages 5 and 6, to the parks whenever she can, saying the city offers a variety of great parks.

All across the SunLight Project coverage area — Valdosta, Dalton, Tifton, Thomasville, Moultrie and Milledgeville, Ga., along with the surrounding counties — people like Sherling and Thornhill visit local parks every day for rest or play, leisure or exercise, to be alone or spend time with friends, for birthday parties or family reunions or athletic events.

Parks and green spaces are a fixture of every city and county, but the public may not realize how vital they are to a community’s success, according to parks and recreation officials.

Of course, people use parks for recreation, family picnics or ballgames. But the impact of quality public parks and green spaces goes much deeper than fun and games.

Parks and green spaces play a key role in improving quality of life, spurring local economic growth, improving overall health and preventing obesity and its related diseases, officials said.

And public parks are constantly delivering these benefits, as children such as Spencer and Norah play in their wonder-filled world of slides and monkey bars.

Parks = A Higher Quality of Life and Economic Growth

A community’s quality of life is directly tied to both the quantity and quality of parks and green spaces in the area, numerous experts said. But quality of life is about more than just a feeling of personal satisfaction. For cities and counties, there’s a bottom line to it, too.

A higher quality of life means more people living and spending money in the area, which attracts growth and economic development — things governments are always chomping at the bit to improve.
A recent study funded by the Greater Dalton Chamber of Commerce found that 62 percent of people holding a job paying $40,000 or more in Whitfield County, live in another county.

Officials are developing a plan to help attract young professionals to live in Whitfield County. The county is still in the early stages of the plan, but community leaders said green spaces will play a major role in the effort.

"Green space is very important to quality of life," said Brian Chastain, Whitfield County parks and recreation department director. "Our goal is to have three nice parks on the north end of the county, the south end and the west side. And in each of them, we want green space. We want walking trails. We want ball fields."

Whitfield County boasts one of the most robust parks and rec agencies in the SunLight coverage area, with 1,400 acres of parks, 5.7 miles of walking and biking trails, 23 playgrounds, 56 athletic fields, 47 tennis courts and two dog parks.

Edwards Park, a 109-acre facility, has anchored the north end of the county for almost 20 years, with ball fields, volleyball courts, basketball courts, tennis courts, a walking trail and other amenities.

Using proceeds from a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax approved by voters in 2015, the county plans to build a community center at the park this summer.

Eight years ago, the county bought 100 acres for the Westside Park. It now contains a pond for fishing, ball fields and what county officials have described as the pride of the park, the Miracle Field, a synthetic/rubberized turf softball field that allows people in wheelchairs and walkers to glide across it and not get stuck in the usual infield dirt.

The bases are painted onto the field — not raised — to allow players to move over them.

Two years ago, the Whitfield County Commission bought 51 acres on the south end of the county for the third park. But officials have not yet said how it will be funded. Chastain said it will probably come from a future SPLOST.

The Dalton parks and recreation department recently received bids back on two major projects that will be funded from the 2015 SPLOST. The city will build a park and recreational facility around its Haig Mill reservoir and make improvements at its existing Lakeshore Park.

The SPLOST provided $5 million for the Haig Mill park, and Parks and Recreation Department
Director Steve Card said the exact amenities will depend on the bids.

But some of the basics he expects include a 3.1-mile walking/biking trail around the park, fishing piers and boating docks for paddle boats and canoes, a picnic pavilion and a playground.

The SPLOST provided $1.4 million for Lakeshore Park.

"That will include a walking trail around the lake, fishing piers, a boardwalk," Card said. "And two of the biggest things will be wetland restoration and bank stabilization of the lake. We are having a lot of erosion of the banks of the lake."

Dalton State College and Dalton Public Schools both use the lake and the adjacent wetlands for education and research.

"It is one of the most diverse wetland areas in our community, especially considering its size," Card said. "The educational opportunities there are unique and we want to expand on them."

While Dalton has long emphasized athletics and sports, Card said the Lakeshore and Haig Mill projects show the city realizes "passive" parks are important.

"Communities around us have seen the benefits of putting recreation facilities around waterways — Chattanooga, Rome, Dahlonega, Augusta," he said. "We have seen that it has affected not only their own citizens in terms of quality of life but also helped attract businesses and young professionals.

“It also brings people in from out of the area. And as we have pursued these sort of green spaces and passive parks, we have heard from our own community (that) this is something they like and want more of.”

Card said Haig Mill, in particular, will anchor a plan to link Dalton with greenways and biking and walking trails.

"We have completed not too long ago a hiking and mountain biking trail on Mount Rachel, which is just a stone's throw away from Haig Mill," he said. "The plan, long term, is to build a blueway and greenway along Mill Creek to connect Haig Mill to Mount Rachel. There's a little bit of grant funding for that already."

“The green spaces are great. But what we really want to do is to connect them all, so that people have the ability to walk or bike from one green space to another.”
The Dalton recreation department has an annual budget of roughly $3 million, with about $550,000 of that coming from rental fees for concession stands and for adult sports.

Card, who was recently named executive director of the Georgia Recreation and Parks Association, said Dalton is unique in not charging fees for its youth sports programs.

"All of our drafted leagues are free," he said. "There are very few, if any, other recreation departments in the state that offer all their youth programs for free. That was one of the things that first attracted me to Dalton when I came here six years ago.

"It showed me that the elected officials and, more importantly, the community valued having no barriers to kids being able to participate in youth sports."

In Valdosta and Lowndes County, parks and rec staff said it's not enough to simply provide great parks and facilities to the community. They also work hard to initiate programs and activities that draw people into the parks and fill the area's recreational needs and wants.

And their plan seems to be working — the Valdosta-Lowndes County Parks and Recreation Authority has been named Georgia's Agency of the Year for its population category for the past three years in a row.

The award acknowledges excellence in a variety of areas — the cleanliness of facilities, the quality of the parks, and the innovation of the agency's programs, among other things.

VLPRA's assets include 940 acres of parks, 29 playgrounds, 36 athletic fields, 15 tennis courts and one dog park.

Jessica Catlett, VLPRA marketing and public relations director, agreed that local parks lay the groundwork for a community's high quality of life.

"When people come to a city or a town, they say, 'What is there to do?' Obviously, they have their job, they have their shopping, they have their day-to-day (tasks), but then beyond that, (they ask), 'What am I going to do to have fun? What can I take my kids to? What kinds of sports can they play? What can we do as a family?' And that's what we provide," Catlett said.

"It is a large responsibility to provide that, and it's one that we do not take for granted."

VLPRA manages almost 1,000 acres of parks and facilities, including dozens of playgrounds,
numerous walking and biking trails, a slew of athletic fields and complexes, several public waterways, a skate park, a dog park, public swimming pools, an 18-hole disc golf course (ranked one of the best in Georgia), a sand volleyball court, fitness centers and an amphitheater.

VLPRA is constantly brainstorming on how to reach more people with innovative programs and fun, fresh activities, Catlett said.

“A lot of agencies have fun things. We pride ourselves on thinking so far outside of the box that it immediately intrigues people,” Catlett said.

One such event is the Stocked Cart Race, where people decorate shopping carts and drag race them in a parking lot. The entrance fee is food that goes to Hungry at Home, an organization dedicated to ending local childhood hunger.

Another is the upcoming Egg-ceptional Egg Hunt, which allows children with disabilities to hunt for eggs, but with a twist.

“(We have) pecan (rollers) for kids in wheelchairs because some of these kids will never be able to pick up their own egg otherwise. That’s innovative. That’s thinking about making it fun and exciting for somebody who may not ever have that opportunity,” Catlett said.

Another program gathers kindergarten through fifth-grade flag football players by their future middle schools. The grouping builds community spirit and allows young children to bond with their future teammates years before they enter middle school, George Page, VLPRA executive director, said.

VLPRA offers the same unique program for basketball and volleyball.

But the VLPRA doesn’t just create fun and games for the community. It’s a thriving economic engine as well.

In 2016, the VLPRA generated a $6 million economic impact from sports tournaments alone.

“When you have tournaments on the weekends, you have people that are spending the night in hotels, buying gas, eating out, shopping, things like that,” Page said.

“So when you look at bringing 2,000-3,000 people to your community on a weekend for two nights, the direct and indirect economic impact is great. It not only helps a small business owner, (but) it also creates service industry jobs.”
Page said great parks are key in attracting families and businesses that are looking for a new home. VLPRA shows no sign of slowing down and has several new projects already in the works. Most are funded by city and county SPLOST.

A public-private partnership with Miracle League of Valdosta will expand Freedom Park to add five more fields, one of which will be made of all rubberized surfaces to serve children and adults with disabilities.

VLPRA also has plans to build a community center in Naylor, expand North Lowndes Park onto 63 more acres, add a new boat ramp on the Alapaha River and upgrade the existing ramps, and add new playground equipment to several parks.

Page said his agency is working with the Department of Natural Resources to possibly create a blueway — a kayak trail system of sorts — that connects to northern counties.

“Our slogan is ‘growing an active community,’ and that’s not an accident,” Catlett said. “When we say that, we mean it.

“We want people to be physically active, of course, but we also want them to be active in their communities. We want them to be active as volunteers. We want them to be active socially. We want them to be active in every possible way.”

Parks = A Healthier Community

Parks can be an important tool in combating health problems such as obesity.

Public health experts warn that lurking inside homes everywhere are unseen killers — stroke, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and cancer. And sitting on the couch only makes their work much easier.

The Southern climate offers many days throughout the year conducive to outdoor activities that promote health and well-being, such as biking, jogging or even fishing. A person can burn around 170 calories an hour from standing on a bank with a fishing pole. A more vigorous activity, such as tennis, can burn upwards of 350 calories an hour. But do people take advantage of opportunities for physical recreation? Southern states account for some of the highest rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and obesity in the country.

A study released in December by the National Center for Health Statistics, for example, suggested
that in 2015 Americans' life expectancy actually declined 0.1 percent from the previous year, the largest drop measured since the 1990s AIDS epidemic and the pandemic flu of 1918 that killed millions around the globe.

Other studies indicate the decline in the country's longevity is most pronounced in the South.

Dr. Gary Swartzentruber, a family practitioner at the Kirk Clinic in Moultrie, said much of the region's high rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes can be chalked up to obesity. He said using local parks for even small amounts of exercise can greatly improve a person's health and decrease the risk of heart attack, stroke or cancer.

Regular exercise doesn't just play a role in a longer life, but it also makes later years more enjoyable. Studies have shown it also improves mental health and reduces anxiety and depression.

Ultimately, taking advantage of the clean air and abundant open space packed with trees and solitude can make a huge difference in a person's life span and quality of life.

In Colquitt County, opportunities to enjoy long days of sun are available for young and old alike.

Moultrie offers swimming pools, a lengthy paved path for walkers and cyclists, playgrounds, picnic areas and organized youth sports. The city also houses the Moose Moss Diving Facility located at the 18-acre Jim Buck Golf Recreation Complex in Southwest Moultrie. The facility, sanctioned by the U.S. Diving and U.S. Olympic Committees, has won a number of awards and trained divers who have won collegiate diving scholarships.

The facility also includes an eight-lane competition pool, a small pool for swimming lessons, eight lighted tennis courts and one practice court, four softball fields — three of which are lighted — a batting cage and the department's offices.

The Colquitt County Commission partners with the city of Moultrie's parks and recreation department to offer these activities, with the governments sharing costs evenly.

For 2016, the estimated costs for each government was $600,000.

The sum is augmented by sports fees, concession sales, pool user and rental fees and SPLOST.

In Baldwin County, Live Healthy Baldwin is on a mission to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic in the county by 2020.
And green space is an essential part of fulfilling the mission, said Jim Lidstone, professor at Georgia College and founder of Live Healthy Baldwin.

“For people to be physically active is an important part of our goals, and green space plays into that,” he said. “Live Healthy Baldwin is all about policy and changes to the built environment to make it easier for people to have access to healthy food and to be physically active.”

Baldwin County has 13 public parks, sports, and recreation areas, including fields and courts for every major sport. Baldwin County also has the 2,000-acre Central State campus, which is technically public land.

The list includes at least 20 miles of existing public walking/biking trails, but Live Healthy Baldwin and others have been planning a trail that would connect Milledgeville from the Oconee River Greenway to the Little Fishing Creek public golf course, a distance of roughly seven extra miles.

The list also includes access to Lake Sinclair and the Oconee River, public awnings and grilling areas, and community gardens such as those at the Collins P. Lee Center in Harrisburg and the Lockerly Arboretum, a nonprofit organization dedicated to maintaining an enormous collection of rare and exotic plants.

Lidstone said while Milledgeville and Baldwin County have several green spaces, some owned by the city and some by the county, but what the area really needs is a central park authority.

“There are certainly some places around but what we don’t have is what I would call a park system,” Lidstone said. “A park system would be one that’s sort of under one management authority, and ideally you’d want to connect those parks so that you didn’t have to get in the car and drive to them. You could get on a street with bike lanes and go to one or the other.”

Despite what’s already being done, parks and rec agencies are always looking ahead to the next project that will make them bigger and better.

Parks = Works in Progress

Parks and recreation officials are constantly working to improve the spaces under their control, conducting repairs on current facilities and brainstorming what the next big project will be. All the work is done with the hope of meeting a community’s recreational needs and keeping residents engaged.

Thomasville's peaceful, picturesque green spaces belie the vigorous planning and ongoing efforts to
maintain and improve the town’s facilities.

An improvement plan is underway at MacIntyre Park. A Weston Park project involves city officials and a steering committee meeting weekly to plan and gather feedback from park users and people who live nearby.

The same type of workshop is planned for Paradise Park in the fall, said Lynn Williams, assistant city manager.

Paradise is an 18-acre park established in downtown Thomasville in the late 1880s during the town’s Victorian-era heyday.

Thomasville, a city of 19,340, contains 307 acres of parks, which include playgrounds, athletic fields, tennis courts, dog parks, walking trails and a skateboarding course. Thomas County’s 2017 recreation budget totals $1.75 million.

Craig Sowell, director of the Tift County Recreation Department, said his department is always doing improvements on its various parks and facilities.

Tift is planning to build more baseball and soccer fields at the E.B. Hamilton complex as well as a football field. In 2010, two neighborhood parks, Puckett and Copeland, were rehabilitated.

Tift County has 130 acres of park facilities, which include the standard features — sporting fields, playgrounds, a gymnasium and even a disc golf course.

However, the county of 40,700 people contains no dog parks, public greenways or public waterways.

Sowell said the county is working with Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College to create a green space near the campus and there are plans to increase access to various facilities by widening roads.

The county has purchased more than 20 acres to the west of the Hamilton complex, but any construction in that area will have to wait until basic infrastructure, such as roads, parking lots and bathrooms, can be installed.

A separate organization, the Tiftarea Greenways Association, has been pushing a plan to create a walking and biking path in Tifton.

The proposed trail would connect the Friendly City Park/E.B. Hamilton Complex to the YMCA, and
eventually to downtown Tifton.

Sowell pointed out that the city and county governments have cooperated in order to bring improvements to parks and green spaces in the Tift area.

Parks and rec officials continue developing new ideas because how a community plays determines how a community works.

The SunLight Project team of journalists who contributed to this report includes Alan Mauldin, Eve Guevara, Patti Dozier and Will Woolever, along with the writers, Charles Oliver and team leader John Stephen.

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Valdosta-Lowndes County Parks

By the Numbers

43 parks and facilities

940 total acres

29 playgrounds

8 paved walking trails

36 athletic fields

43 picnic areas and 29 pavilions

15 tennis courts

4 boat ramps on the Withlacoochee and Little Rivers

2 public swimming pools (one indoor, one outdoor)

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