



**Cary**

# **Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources**

## **System Plan**

**Approved December 12, 2024**

# Preamble

In Cary, plans are aspirational roadmaps intended to help accomplish long-term visions in an ever-changing world; they are not fixed promises based on a known, fully predictable, and static future. This plan was developed using the best information available alongside the priorities and values of the sitting Town Council and citizens of Cary at the time of publication.

Implementation will evolve and adapt in response to technological innovations, demographic shifts, emerging issues, and related fiscal circumstances as well as changes in the legislative, regulatory, economic, and geopolitical environment as future budgets are adopted to carry out items described herein.

# Mission & Vision

Cary Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources (PRCR) aims to provide high-quality and accessible programs, services, parks, and facilities that inspire and enrich the lives of all Cary citizens.

Cary PRCR engages citizens to discover the extraordinary, create memories, strengthen the community, and experience the highest quality of life.

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# 1

# Introduction

**This chapter introduces the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources (PRCR) System Plan, including an overview of the plan's purpose and process with the added context of recent and historical planning efforts.**





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# Introduction

Cary Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources (PRCR) provides something for everyone within a unique parks system.

From a high-quality network of diverse parks and greenways to an impressive range of sports and entertainment venues, cultural arts facilities and recreational programs, Cary PRCR works to meet the needs of all its residents and visitors, today and in the future. Awarded a National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) gold medal in 2016, Cary is a national leader in providing high-quality activities and spaces for

residents and visitors alike. These spaces are vital to the experience of living in Cary, where 56.2% of residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park, facility, or greenway.<sup>1</sup> Residents value having a connection to their natural environment, top-tier sports and entertainment venues, arts and cultural facilities, diverse programming options, along with convenient access to the greater Triangle area.

The benefits of living in Cary are no secret. In 2024, Cary tied for the #2 ranking in Livability's list of Top 100 Best Places to Live in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Having garnered accolades like this over the past two decades, Cary has experienced remarkable growth and currently has a population of 187,000.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cary PRCR, 2023.

<sup>2</sup>"Triangle town named the second-most livable spot in the US, study says. Here's why", Newsobserver.com, May 2, 2024.

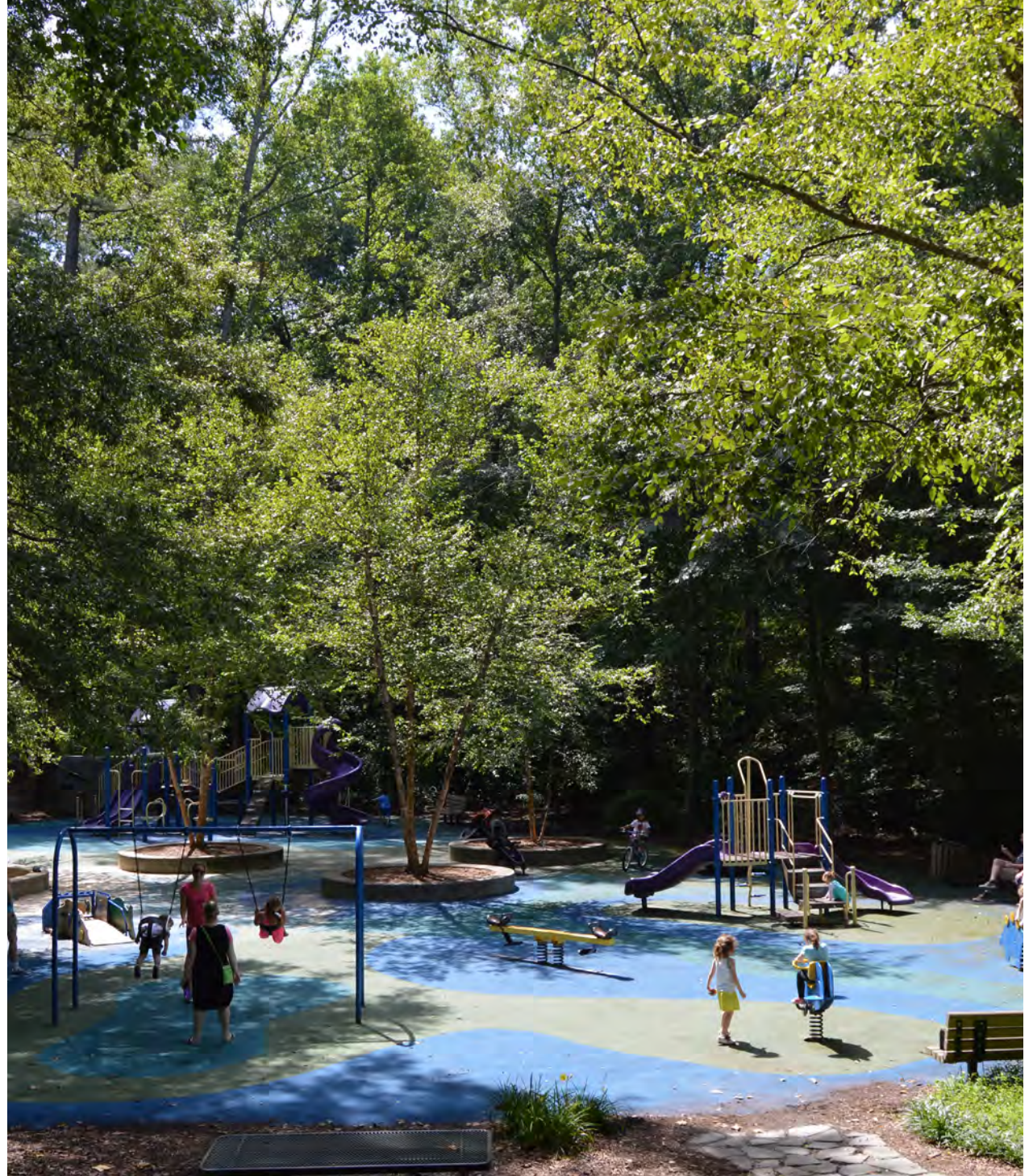
<sup>3</sup>Town of Cary, January 2024.



## An Evolving System

Thanks to proactive efforts to expand the parks system in recent years, Cary is positioned to be a well-distributed system where all residents enjoy convenient access to a variety of parks, greenways, facilities, sports and entertainment venues, and programs. Currently, Cary has 2,690 park acres and over 95 miles of greenways.<sup>1</sup> As Cary continues to grow, demand for convenient access to these spaces and experiences will also grow. Cary will need to continue to find strategic ways to keep up with demand and an evolving level of service.

- Image at far left: Signage at Cary Lazy Daze
- Image at middle left: Dragon boat races at Asia Fest
- Image at left: Summer camp participants



● MacDonald Woods Park Playground

<sup>1</sup>Cary PRCR, 2024.



● Pickleball at Cary Tennis Park

## Sports and Entertainment

Cary is a lively hub for sports and entertainment thanks to several top-notch venues that boost the region's active culture and economy. These venues include WakeMed Soccer Park, Thomas Brooks Park, USA Baseball National Training Complex, Cary Tennis Park, and Koka Booth Amphitheatre. Known for having excellent amenities, equipment, maintenance, and upkeep, these facilities play host to everything from local sports leagues to world-caliber events and festivals that cater to enthusiasts of all levels.

Beyond hosting events, these venues foster community engagement and promote healthy living through accessible, comprehensive programming. Each facility fills a need determined by Cary's diverse and vibrant culture, which has turned them into beloved gathering spots for community members to get together and celebrate Cary as a premier hub for sports and entertainment.

Together, these venues not only drive economic growth but also foster deep community involvement and uphold a high standard of living, making Cary an even more desirable place to reside in and visit.



## Arts and Culture

Cary boasts a vibrant cultural scene enriched by venues that contribute uniquely to the town's artistic and historical tapestry, offering diverse programming that engages the community and draws visitors from near and far. The Cary Arts Center, The Cary Theater, and the Page-Walker Arts and History Center all play a vital role in the town's celebration of culture and the arts.

The Cary Arts Center is a bustling theater and performing arts hub in Downtown Cary. It hosts performances by local ballet, community theater, and youth groups, continuing a legacy of education that dates back to the 1870s. Built in 1946, The Cary Theater holds art house cinema and live performances, offering independent and classic films, live music, and stand-up comedy. The Page-Walker Arts and History Center is a historic landmark that offers a blend of art, history, and community activities, including art exhibitions, educational

programs, and cultural events throughout the year. Cary also comes alive year-round with a diverse lineup of cultural and arts festivals. From the colorful Spring Daze Arts & Crafts Festival in April to the iconic Lazy Daze Arts & Crafts Festival in August, and numerous cultural celebrations throughout the year, there's always something to experience.

Beyond these signature events, Cary celebrates annual traditions with events like Arbor Day, Independence Day, and Black History Appreciation Month. Each event embodies Cary's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and unity, highlighting the contributions of every culture within our community. Through these festivities, Cary educates, engages, and champions positive change while showcasing Cary's rich cultural arts and world-class facilities.

## Downtown Cary Park

Downtown Cary Park is not just a beautiful space but a lively community hub that enriches the town's cultural and social life, drawing visitors and locals to enjoy its many amenities and events. Phase 1 of the Park opened in 2017 with its iconic fountain and plaza, now known as Frantz Square. Spanning seven acres, Downtown Cary Park now includes a playground, a performing arts pavilion, fire pits, a great lawn, and more. The Park hosts nearly 750+ programs<sup>1</sup> and events annually, making it a cornerstone of Downtown Cary and a magnet for visitors from across the region.

- **Image at top left: "Light Passage" (Haddad Drugan, LLC 2023) at Downtown Cary Park.**
- **Image at top middle: People hula-hooping at Downtown Cary Park.**
- **Image at top right: Clay Studio class at Cary Arts Center**

<sup>1</sup>Cary PRCR, 2023.

# Plan Purpose



The Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources System Plan will guide the growth and development of Cary's parks, greenways, facilities, sports and entertainment venues, and programs for the next 20 years.

Building off previous planning efforts such as the 2012 Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Master Plan, this update to the plan assesses how Cary's community has changed over the past decade and sets new goals for the coming decade.



The PRCR system plan captures the community's needs and sets a vision for the future. This plan will be used as a guidance document with the flexibility to evolve based on the community's changing needs, new trends, or economic performance. Timelines and responsibilities for implementation may evolve along with Council priorities and organizational changes.



# Defining Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources

What kinds of places make up Cary Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources? Whether it's Cary's 2,690 acres of parks, 95-plus miles of greenways<sup>1</sup>, arts and cultural programs, recreation amenities, sports and entertainment venues, or historic resources, Cary PRCR offers something for everyone.

<sup>1</sup>Cary PRCR, 2023.



places to walk or ride  
a bike

places for  
outdoor  
experiences

## Special-Use Facilities

places for older  
adults



places to gather with friends  
and neighbors

## Sports & Entertainment Venues

places to watch a  
game or event



## Community Centers

places for  
inclusive play



places to get active

## Recreation Facilities & Programs



# History of PRCR Planning

Cary's history of parks, open space, and greenway planning began in 1968, when the Cary Chamber of Commerce saw the increasing need for recreation facilities and developed Jordan Hall as a community center. The early 1970s featured the development of several parks, including Urban Park and Heater Park, and the creation of the Greenway Commission in 1975.<sup>1</sup>

The 1978 Comprehensive Greenway and Parks Plan included a set of 10 goals, many of which are still relevant to Cary's parks and open space system today. These goals emphasized having sufficient recreation resources to meet demand, and providing an equitable distribution of recreational opportunities regardless of economic or social status. They also emphasized the importance of maintaining several types of recreation experiences throughout the park system to meet the needs of various users and for recreation areas to maintain high quality through continued planning, design, and ongoing maintenance.

<sup>1</sup>The Comprehensive Greenway and Parks Plan, 1978.



**“As shopping centers spring up and subdivisions grow where forests flourished in the past and meadows used to lay, it becomes more apparent that we need to be concerned with the public outdoor aspect of recreation.”**

- The Comprehensive Greenway and Parks Plan, Cary, NC, 1978

At this point in Cary's planning history, parks were divided into three major types: metro, community, and neighborhood.

The 1978 plan highlights the future of Cary's greenways through the late 1980s and into the early 2000s. The decision to initially locate greenways on floodplain land less suitable for development would continue, serving as a valuable way to both preserve open space and benefit Cary's natural systems, while allowing for expanded access to open space and recreation throughout Cary.

Planning for parks and greenways continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s with the 1998 Parks, Greenways, and Bikeways Master Plan, the 2001 Open Space and Historic Resources Plan, and the 2003 Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Facilities Master Plan. While all of these plans emphasized a commitment to continuing to provide convenient and affordable access to a balanced parks and greenways system in the face of increasing growth, the 2003 plan placed a new emphasis on expanding access to cultural arts opportunities and expressing a more substantial commitment to

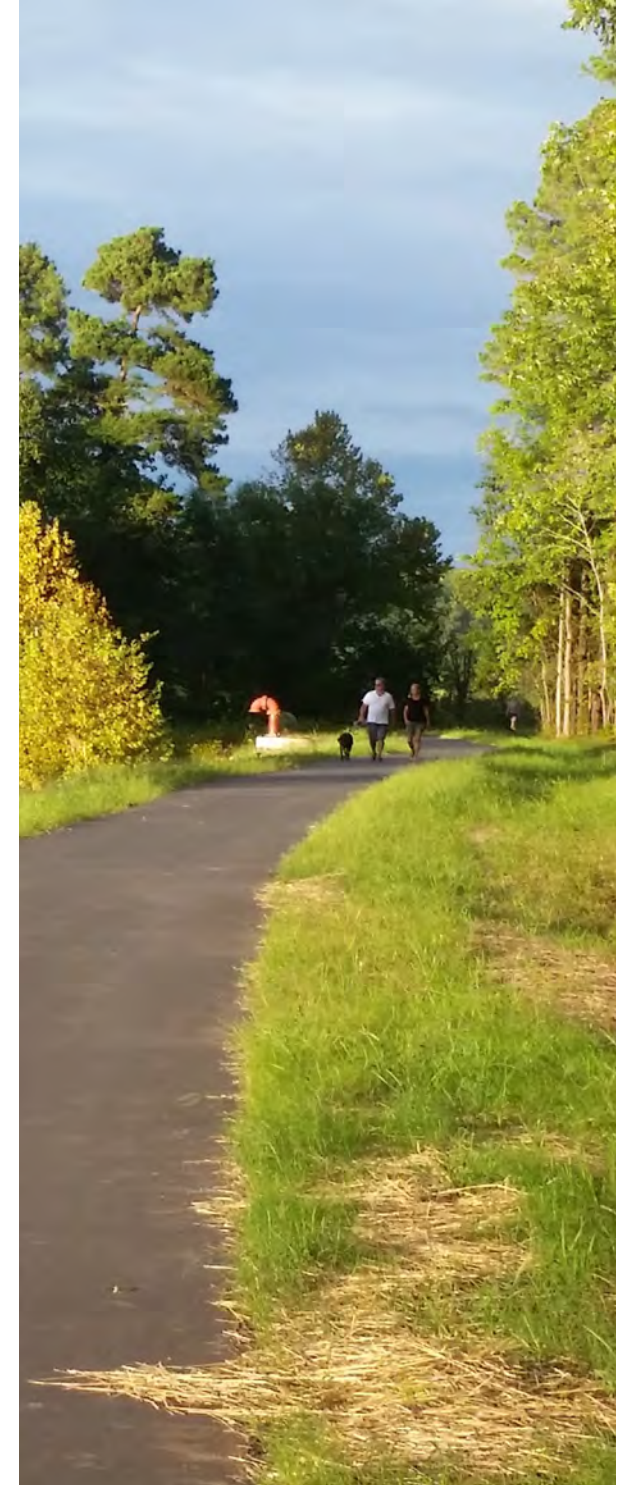
● **Map at left: Projected greenways development from 1988–2001, 1978 Comprehensive Greenway and Parks Plan**

environmental stewardship and land preservation.

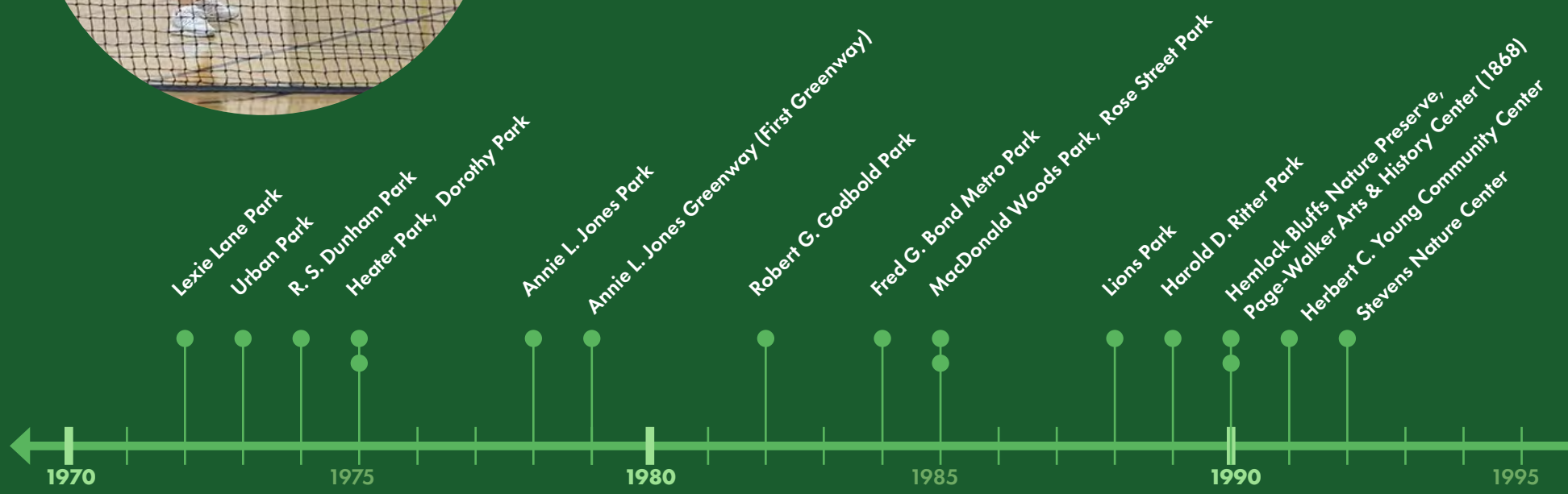
From 2000 to 2012, Cary heavily invested in its art facilities and sports and entertainment venues, ushering in a new era of PRCR experiences. These new facilities included Thomas Brooks Park, Cary Tennis Park, Koka Booth Amphitheatre, WakeMed Soccer Park, USA Baseball National Training Complex, and the Cary Arts Center. For further information on facilities investment in Cary, see the PRCR Parks timeline on the following page.

Today, in addition to amenities owned by Cary, a wide range of facilities are available to Cary residents through other private facilities, such as the YMCA, the Triangle Aquatic Center, private fitness centers, or homeowner associations (HOAs). Cary also plays a significant role in collaborating with other jurisdictions and community organizations. Cary's facilities serve as a host site for many recreation and sports programs, tournaments, cultural arts performances, and events.

● **Image at right: Crabtree Creek Greenway**



# Timeline of Cary Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources





North Cary Park  
 Davis Drive Park  
 Marla Dorrel Park  
 Bond Park Community Center  
 Cary Senior Center  
 Thomas Brooks Park  
 Cary High School Fields  
 Preston Soccer Fields  
 Cary Tennis Park Phase I  
 Ed Yerha Park



Neighborhood Park at  
 McCrimmon Parkway  
 Neighborhood Park at Fire  
 Station Road  
 USA Baseball National  
 Training Complex Indoor Infield

# Recent Planning Context

Cary consistently works on many planning efforts to ensure the needs of all community members are met. The Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources System Plan is part of the Imagine Cary Community Plan. The Plan focuses on understanding the current needs of Cary residents to plan for the future of parks, greenways, special facilities, recreation and cultural arts facilities and programs, and historic and cultural resources and programming.

This plan aligns with other ongoing planning efforts such as the Open Space Plan, the Sustainability and Climate Action Strategy, the Urban Forest Master Plan, the Bike Cary plan, and ongoing historic preservation and stormwater management planning.

## Imagine Cary

**2017, 2025**

The Imagine Cary Community Plan, adopted in 2017, is Cary's comprehensive plan created by the community. The plan defines a long-term vision, policies, and strategic actions for Cary through 2040. In the 2025 update to the plan, Cary builds upon the strong foundation established in 2017 while incorporating new insights and addressing contemporary challenges. The update focuses specifically on a new preface and the LIVE, ENRICH, and SERVE chapters.

## Sustainability and Climate Action Strategy

**Ongoing**

The Sustainability and Climate Action Strategy is a campaign to explore the impacts of climate change, identify challenges and opportunities, and implement solutions that work for the community.

## Open Space Plan

**Ongoing**

This plan sets new goals for Cary's system of diverse open spaces to foster ecological and climate resilience while enhancing quality of life for Cary. The plan defines open space, assesses Cary's inventory of protected and unprotected lands, and focuses on land and open space preservation. Recommendations focus on supporting the long-term health, sustainability, and enrichment of Cary's diverse open space network, guiding future land acquisition, and exploring best practices and partnerships for land and wildlife management.



## Urban Forest Master Plan

**2024**

The Urban Forest Master Plan is a 10-year plan that outlines a strategic and ongoing investment in the health, maintenance, and long-term resilience of Cary's tree canopy. The planning process for the Urban Forest Master Plan continued Cary's long-standing commitment to implement tree-related policies that advance sustainable practices and programs and help to maintain Cary's high quality of life.



## Bike Cary

**Ongoing**

The Bike Cary Plan aims to create a comprehensive multimodal network throughout Cary by identifying priority corridors and filling gaps in Cary's existing bike and greenway system. The Bike Cary Plan focuses primarily on on-road connections and the PRCR plan focuses on greenway connections. Together, Cary's greenways and on-road bike facilities create a network of over 200 miles across Cary,<sup>1</sup> linking the community to places such as schools, parks, neighborhoods, and jobs.

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<sup>1</sup>Bike Cary Plan, [cary.gov](http://cary.gov).



## Public Art Master Plan

**2012**

The 2012 Cary Public Art Master Plan updated the 2001 plan and provided a new platform for public art policies, guidelines, and recommendations. Through a community outreach process that included focus groups, public forums, workshops, and interviews, the plan offers ideas and recommendations for the Cary Public Art Program. The plan suggests venues, art types, and themes for public art based on public input and an urban design analysis of existing and desired conditions. In addition, it identifies educational and outreach programs.



## Historic Preservation Master Plan

### 2010

The Historic Preservation Master Plan provides a framework for the development of Cary's first formal preservation program, and serves as a guide for proactive preservation decision-making over the next 10 years. Many of the plan's key goals are relevant to Cary's parks and open space plans, including preserving and protecting Cary's historical context, resources, structures, and landscapes and raising awareness of historic preservation by educating the community about Cary's history and the environmental and economic value of historic preservation.

## Stormwater Master Plan

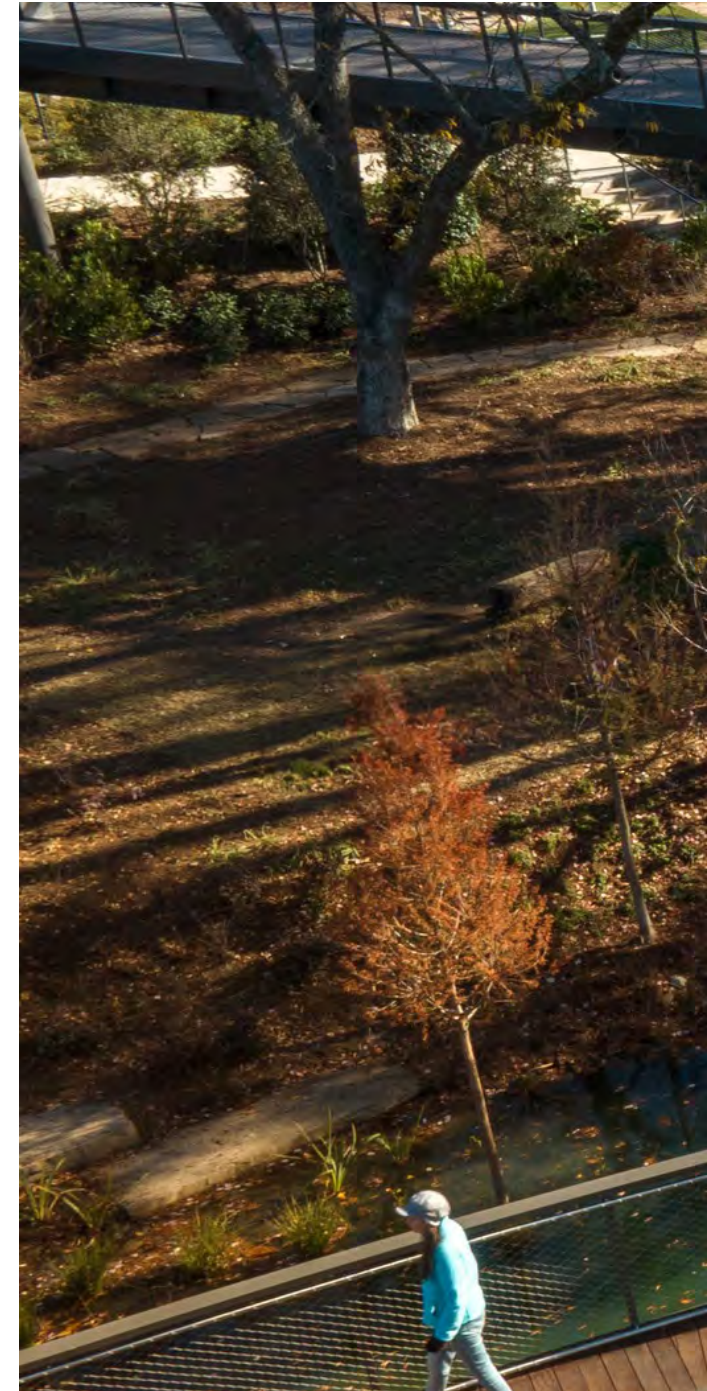
### 2013

The Stormwater Master Plan explores the history of Cary's Stormwater Management Program, assesses the programs' current condition, and proposes a framework for stormwater management for the next 10 to 20 years.

## White Oak Creek Conservation Management Plan

### Ongoing

A management plan for almost 500 acres of open space along White Oak Creek between N.C. 55 and Jordan Lake.<sup>1</sup> White Oak Creek Greenway traverses the northern edge of the conservation area. This management plan may prompt the designation of this area as a preserve or natural area.



● Downtown Cary Park

<sup>1</sup>White Oak Conservation Management Plan, [carync.gov](http://carync.gov)



# Planning Process

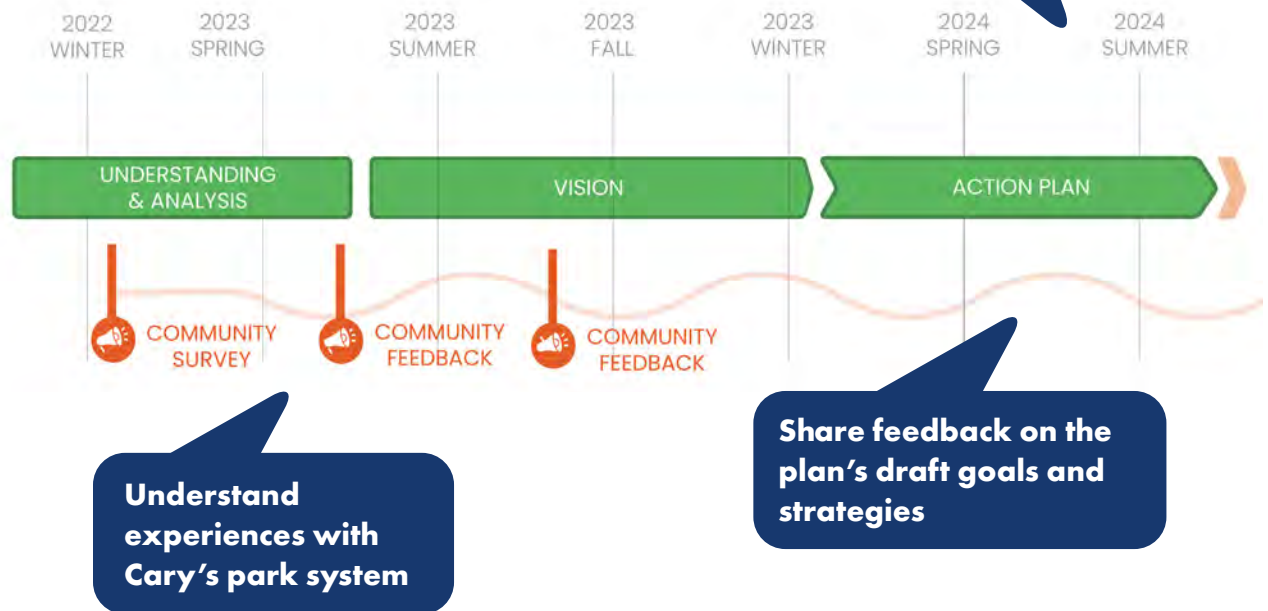
The Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources System Plan underwent a 16-month planning process that began in the winter of 2022.

In the first half of the process, the planning team analyzed Cary's park system to understand needs. This needs assessment, combined with community and Cary staff feedback, formed the basis for the plan's vision and goals. Community engagement was key to the plans' recommendations, with three major milestones for receiving community feedback.

During the **analysis** and needs assessment process, Cary provided key opportunities for community members to share thoughts about their experiences with offerings, including:

- Parks
- Greenways
- Special Facilities
- Sports and Entertainment Venues
- Recreation Facilities
- Cultural Arts Facilities
- Historic Resources
- Programs

● Cary PRCR Plan Project Timeline



Outline goals, objectives, and a future implementation framework

Understand experiences with Cary's park system

Share feedback on the plan's draft goals and strategies

In the **visioning** process, Cary provided opportunities for community members to share their feedback on the plan's draft goals and strategies. The final part of the planning process involved developing an **action plan** that outlined goals, strategies, and a future implementation framework.



● Parks tour with the planning team



● Child sharing drawing made at Lazy Daze summer engagement



● Pop-up engagement at Cary Lazy Daze