



# NEEDS IDENTIFICATION 3

## 3.1 Overview

The common thread in the concerns and initiatives highlighted throughout Chapter Two is *the need for greenspace*. Without acquiring the variety of land types necessary for parks, greenways, and open space, the aforementioned concerns cannot be fully resolved.

This chapter assesses the need for greenspace for current and future populations, as expressed by national, statewide and countywide level of service (LOS) studies. The need for greenspace also is assessed according to public input provided by the participants of Charleston County's greenbelt planning process.

## 3.2 The Need for Greenspace

Over the past several decades, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has recommended standards for the provision of open space, park and recreation facilities in communities. Using these and other standards, planning professionals often use the term "level of service" or "LOS" to calibrate how well the needs of a community are being met by existing and planned greenspace and facilities.

For purposes of this Greenbelt Plan, LOS can be described as a measurement of supply versus demand for greenspace, trail and other "passive" recreational facilities that serve residents of Charleston County. ("Passive" generally refers to non-competitive and non-team sports activities such as walking, bicycling, picnicking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing and enjoying open space.)



Clearly the distance to, and availability of, greenspace is an important factor in determining whether a community adequately serves its population. Factors such as actual physical distance; amount and type of greenspace; and the level of accessibility to users of all ages, income groups and abilities are typically some of the elements considered.

While optimal distances and population ratios for active parks have been fairly well defined by national standards, access to greenspace has been less specific, though this is changing. Recent surveys by the *American Association of Home Builders* and *National Association of Realtors*, for example, (see [www.nahb.com/news/smartsurvey2002.htm](http://www.nahb.com/news/smartsurvey2002.htm)) suggest a high demand for readily-accessible trail and open space facilities. Walking, jogging and bike trails ranked 2nd from the top of the “important to very important” list of amenities and a 1994 Survey by American Lives, Inc. showed that 77% of respondents ranked natural open space as a “must” for successful communities. American Trails, Inc., a national trails and greenway advocacy organization recommends accessible trails within 15 minutes of every American home. The implication from these and other national studies is that there is a strong desire for trails and open space within convenient walking distance from home and work.

A typical LOS analysis tabulates a classification list of types of parks, open space and recreation facilities by distance in miles from users and the size of the population served within the service radius. An overall ratio of 20 acres of all types of active-use parkland per 1000 population has been established by the NRPA as a typical baseline for communities. For Charleston County, if the NRPA standards are applied, as the Park and Recreation Commission (PRC) did through its Open Space Analysis, then the local governments should be providing approximately 6,480 acres of active-use parkland for community residents. Based on current supply, the PRC determined that 4,674 acres of regional parkland for County residents was needed.

Using NRPA guidelines for LOS can be helpful in measuring how well community needs are met and in defending planned future investment in facilities.

However, these guidelines have limitations. They address only a limited range of classifications of park, recreational and open space amenities. They do not differentiate by community, demographics, climate, region of the country, market and other factors. For example, there may be myriad types of greenspace and lifestyle activities that are popular in Charleston County that may not enjoy the same popularity in Charlotte, Atlanta or Orlando. Also, they do not offer measurable quantities of several kinds of facilities such as natural resource areas, greenways and trails. Finally, the 1995 NRPA Park, Recreation, Open Space and Greenway Guidelines publication, the latest standards guideline in use, does not list specific LOS ratios for open space.

For this and other reasons, the NRPA has more recently taken the stance that fixed numerical standards may be too limited to be applied across the board as a sole determinant of LOS. Rather, NRPA recommends that the unique demographic, market preferences, trends and environmental factors of each community be considered as well. Therefore, NRPA guidelines and similar LOS standards should be taken as **only one benchmark** for comparison and a number of other factors should be considered. Some of these include:

- Demographic and leisure activity trends
- Opinion surveys
- Comments at public forums by user groups and stakeholders
- Input from planning professionals and public officials
- Market reckoning
- Studies on the benefits of open space, natural parks and trails
- Comparisons to other communities regionally and nationwide

Some communities have recommended numerical standards that might be useful as a starting point for determining additional LOS figures for Charleston County. For example, the New Jersey Green Acres Program suggests “balanced land use” guidelines in its 1999 recommendations. It suggests that individual municipalities set aside 3% of their developed and/or developable areas for recreation. The guidelines also



advocate that counties set aside 7%. The National Park Service standards (dating back to 1966) recommend 0.5-miles of bike trail and 0.5 miles of foot trails per 1000 population, though it should be noted that urban trail use has increased substantially since 1966. Studies in San Diego suggest a minimum baseline of 0.84 miles of trail per 1000 residents within 15 minutes travel time.

#### **Trails in Charleston County**

Given Charleston County's Census 2000 population of 309,000, this suggests that a minimum of 252 miles of trail to be developed

Wake County, North Carolina, Gwinnett County, Georgia and Las Vegas, Nevada have performed different needs assessments and have determined that in response to rapid growth and development, 30% of the jurisdictional land base should be conserved and protected as "open space." New York City has already protected 30% of its land area as greenspace. The State of Georgia has established a goal of 20% mandatory greenspace conservation. Two large private developments, the Woodlands, Houston, Texas and Summerlin, Las Vegas, Nevada, have also used a 30% goal for protected open space.

#### **30% Open Space Goal in Charleston County**

If a 30% standard for open space were applied in Charleston County, approximately 200,000 acres of the County's 669,311 acres of land should be protected as greenspace. Currently, there is approximately 161,384 acres of greenspace in Charleston County that has been conserved by federal, state and local governments and private sector land trusts.

#### **3.2.1 Level of Service in South Carolina**

The South Carolina Department of Parks Recreation and Tourism (SCPRT) is the designated agency responsible for statewide outdoor recreation planning. In 2002, the SCPRT produced the South Carolina Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). In order to determine current and long-range recreational demand in South Carolina, SCPRT launched a comprehensive needs assessment process in 1999. The process involved many inputs, including: a

comprehensive review of demographic and economic data, surveys and interviews of State residents, a series of regional public meetings and interagency meetings, and a review of state and national trends in outdoor recreation.

The review demonstrated that "walking for pleasure or exercise" is the activity in which the largest percentage of state residents (82.8%) participates, and is the most frequent form of recreation overall. Also relevant to Charleston County is the SCORP's mention of nature-based tourism and cultural/heritage tourism. Both of these activities are cited as growing nationally and are encouraged by the State of South Carolina as a strategy to fulfill recreational needs while simultaneously providing economic benefits to local communities, especially in rural areas.

In addition, the South Carolina Conservation Bank Act was established in 2000 by the General Assembly and signed into law by the Governor in 2002. The Act is funded by placing twenty-five cents out of each one dollar thirty-five cents of the Documentary Deed Stamp recording fee into a trust for the Conservation Bank to carry out the Act. Funding began in July 2004. The program is designed to protect natural resources and support individual property rights. Landowners who wish to participate may sell property outright or sell conservation easements and retain traditional use of the land. Only willing landowners participate in the program. No one can be forced to sell land or provide easements. The Act, however, does not set a goal for greenspace conservation throughout South Carolina.

#### **3.2.2 Level of Service in Charleston County**

The Open Space Analysis 2002-2015 (see Chapter 2) conducted by the Charleston County Park and Recreation Department, determines the quantities and locations of regional parkland acres needed relative to population growth and national standards. The Analysis also breaks down needs and recommendations for specific areas throughout the County.

The PRC's needs analysis indicates that more than 200 miles of new trails and an additional 4,674 regional parkland acres are required to meet the recreation needs of the County's projected population for the year 2015.







*The SCORP demonstrated that “walking for pleasure or exercise” is the activity in which the largest percentage of state residents participate. Above, visitors to James’s Island County Park in Charleston County enjoy the opportunity for passive recreation.*

The greatest needs indicated by the analysis are around the population centers, concentrated in the West Ashley, East Cooper and North Charleston planning areas (see map on following page, 3-5).

The municipalities of Charleston, North Charleston and Mount Pleasant have completed comprehensive park and recreation master plans for their communities. Mount Pleasant has created an open space foundation to promote conservation resources and develop new park facilities. These local governments have used NRPA-based standards to define and satisfy community needs.

### 3.3 Public Input

The Greenbelt planning process provided the residents of Charleston County with multiple avenues for participation and involvement with the development of this Plan. These included meetings, such as the Public Open House Workshops (see below and Appendix B: Summary of Public Workshops), the Greenbelt Advisory Board meetings (see page 1-2, Greenbelt Advisory Board), special interest group meetings, meetings with community leaders, and, as with all public matters, contact with County staff and County Council Members has remained an option. Involvement was also possible through the County Web Site ([www.smallchangeforbigchange.org](http://www.smallchangeforbigchange.org)) and the public comment forms. Additionally, information about the progress of the Plan was available in the Greenbelt Newsletter, press releases, and local media reporting.

Finally, public input was further incorporated through the findings of existing planning efforts for growth, land use management, and parks and recreation development, all of which were developed with their own degree of public input (see page 2-7, Current Growth Management Plans).

#### 3.3.1 September Public Open House Workshops

For facilitation of the September public open house workshops, the project consultant and members of the GAB spoke with public participants and produced presentations, greenspace resource maps, public input maps, comment forms, flyers, presentation boards, and a project newsletter. The resource maps included a series of existing conditions layers which outlined the current greenspace occupied by federal, state, county, municipal, and private/non-profit organizations. Having a clear understanding of where the County stands in terms of greenspace allowed for more thorough input from the public.

The workshops provided opportunities for the residents of Charleston County to help shape the future of their communities by voicing their opinion about greenspace in the County. There were three public meetings, with one West County workshop, one centrally located, and one in East Cooper. This gave residents in each part of the County a good opportunity to participate early in the planning process by communicating directly with the GAB and project consultant. Additionally, public input was received through information mailed in by county residents in the form of letters, comment forms, and independent studies.

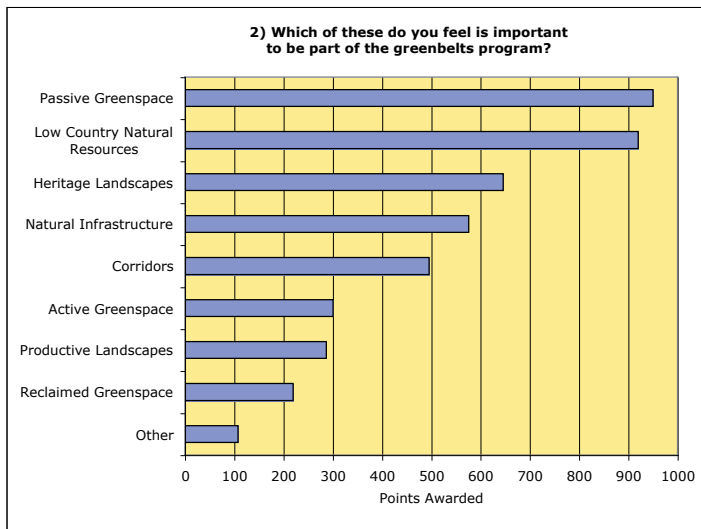


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*This chart represent feedback gathered from the September Public Workshop Comment Forms. For full results, see Appendix B: Summary of Public Workshops.*

Workshop participants feel that the most important parts of the greenbelt program are by far passive greenspace and Lowcountry natural resources. The same participants also expressed that wildlife habitat protection and walking and biking are unmistakably their most preferred uses for protected greenspace. For a more detailed analysis of the workshop results, see Appendix B, Summary of Public Workshops.

### 3.3.2 March Public Meetings

During the week of March 6, a series of four public meetings were held to present the Draft Comprehensive Greenbelt Plan to the citizens of Charleston County. Meetings were conducted on March 6 at the John's Island Public Library, March 7 at the Charleston Museum, March 8 at the Charleston County Public Services Building and March 9 at the Mount Pleasant Public Library. The meetings were attended by 180 County residents. The project consultant began each meeting with a presentation of the Draft Comprehensive Greenbelt Plan. This was followed by an open question and answer session. Each meeting concluded with residents reviewing the draft plan maps and filling out a public comment form. Results of the March meeting's public comment form are summarized in Appendix B, Summary of Public Workshops.

### 3.3.3 Community Leaders & Special Interest Groups

Another form of needs assessment that took place consisted of meeting with various community leaders



and hearing first hand what they envisioned for the success of the Charleston County Greenbelt Plan. By meeting with mayors, regional planning agencies, conservation groups, wildlife specialists, and many others, the planning team was able to better understand the various goals, visions, and objectives of the County's many stakeholders.

City and Town Officials from the City of Charleston, the City of North Charleston, and the Town of Mount Pleasant all met with the project consultant and later composed a letter voicing their need for greenspace. The Mayors expressed how if rural areas were to be kept rural, then municipalities would bear the burden of a growing population. While these community leaders are willing to provide the density necessary for such a growth pattern, they also expressed the need for greenbelt funds to leverage the necessary capital for the acquisition of greenspace within their municipalities. The municipal greenspace is crucial in providing a high quality of life for residents by offsetting many of the negative impacts associated with high-density living environments.

Conversely, an Eco-Focus Group Meeting revealed the great need for conservation of continuous portions of land in Charleston County's rural areas. Representatives from local non-profit organizations and individual stakeholders in the conservation community attended the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to identify existing studies and GIS data that provided information regarding ecologically sensitive land within the County that is currently unprotected. Since no such data was readily available at the time of the focus group meeting, the participants expressed that a process should be pursued that takes into account ecologically sensitive criteria for protecting greenspace.

## 3.4 Forecasting Future Greenspace Needs

Charleston County voters approved the Sales Tax Referendum for Greenbelts in large measure because they believed that it would help offset growth from an expanded road network. Voters clearly indicated a strong preference to conserve as much greenspace as practical for future generations. During the first round of public workshops, participants echoed what voters concluded,

and added a bit more detail; preferring that Greenbelt funding be used to a) conserve native ecosystems of the County and b) build a comprehensive network of bicycle, pedestrian and greenway trails that would link residents to these resources.

These goals are supported by the South Carolina SCORP and the PRC, both of which determine that conservation of natural resources and trail facility development to be among the top priorities not only in Charleston County but also throughout South Carolina.

**3.4.1. Establishing a Goal for Greenspace Protection**

Based on both public input and technical analysis, the consultant recommends that Charleston County establish a goal of conserving 30% of its available land resources as protected and conserved greenspace. This goal would include greenspace that is held in public ownership, and which is accessible and usable by the public to whatever degree is possible. Translating this recommendation into a numeric goal means that Charleston County would seek to conserve and protect 200,000 acres of land. Again, the consultant recommends

this as a minimum goal in order to meet the needs of the community 25 years from now (Fiscal Year 2031).

As a point of comparison, the consultant has examined other exemplary open space systems from around the Southeastern United States. Table 3.1 below shows how Charleston County would compare with other communities that have established similar open space programs.

**3.4.2 Establishing a Goal for Bicycle, Pedestrian and Trail Development**

Additionally, the consultant recommends that Charleston County establish as a goal the future development of 200 miles of comprehensive, interconnected system of bicycle, pedestrian and greenway trails. The consultant recommends this as a minimum goal to meet the needs of the community 25 years from now.

As a point of comparison, the consultant has examined other exemplary trail and greenway systems from around the Southeastern United States. Table 3.2 below shows how Charleston County would compare with other communities that have established similar trail and greenway programs.

Table 3.1 Summary Greenspace Conservation Comparison				
Community	Goal (acres)	% of County	Population	Land Area (square miles)
Wake County, North Carolina	165,000	30%	750,000	860
Gwinnett County, Georgia	50,000	20%	700,000	477
Jefferson County, Colorado	100,000	20%	527,000	774
Charleston County, South Carolina	200,000	30%	326,762	1046

Table 3.2 Summary Trail Mileage Comparison			
Community	Goal (miles)	Actual (miles)	Actual (trails)
Raleigh, NC: Capital Area Greenways	200	51	28
Mecklenburg County, NC Greenways	166	22	10
Lexington, KY Greenway System	216	15	18
Gwinnett County, GA Greenway System	180	10	17
Charleston County	200	18*	10

\*For details, see page 2-16: Existing Hiking/Biking Trails in Charleston County

