



Oswegoland Park District

Strategic Planning and Goal Development Initiative 2023

Process facilitated by Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies

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**OSWEGOLAND
PARK DISTRICT**

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Oswegoland Park District Background

The Oswegoland Park District is located in Oswego, Illinois. It was established by referendum in 1950 as a separate governmental entity known as a “special district.” The Oswegoland Park District is a governmental agency responsible for acquiring, developing, and maintaining natural areas, parks, and leisure time facilities for area residents.¹ The district is approximately 38 square miles, including all of the Village of Oswego, parts of Montgomery, Aurora, and Plainfield, and all of Boulder Hill. The park district also includes the surrounding countryside of Oswego Township and a small portion of Will County.

The park district is tax supported and uses approximately one half of annual park district taxes to support district operations (e.g., staff salaries). The other half of the park district taxes pays for planning, design, and construction of new facilities, as well as renovation of existing facilities and needed equipment.

A board of five elected commissioners sets policy and carries out the official business of the district. Park Board Commissioners serve six-year terms, without pay. Any resident who is a registered voter may run for a park board seat when elections are held in odd-numbered years.



¹ <https://www.oswegolandparkdistrict.org/about/our-history/>

Executive Summary

Strategic planning is an effective way to identify and confirm an organization’s vision for the future and set organizational purpose and direction by incorporating clear priorities and measurable goals. As an organization, the Oswegoland Park District has followed a regular process of establishing goals for the district and community it serves. In November 2022, the district engaged the Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies (NIU-CGS) to facilitate the process of updating the district’s strategic plan. This process included broad stakeholder feedback ranging from a statistically significant community-wide survey and demographic analysis to focus groups and leadership interviews, all of which were shared at the district’s strategic planning leadership workshop held in July 2023. The workshop served to focus leadership, energize the organization, and engage stakeholders throughout the community.

In March and April 2023, the NIU-CGS team collected stakeholder input that was later shared with the Oswegoland Park District Board of Commissioners and leadership staff who participated in the strategic planning workshop. The findings were used during the workshop sessions to assist participants in making informed decisions related to crafting a strategic vision and future direction for the district and the community it serves. Ultimately, workshop participants created strategic goals focusing on where the district wants to go as an organization in both the short and long term. As was discussed during the workshop, executive-level strategic planning sessions are a staple for progressive organizations and are recommended (and encouraged) to be done regularly. This report provides a summary of the process and presents the consensus on strategic directions and goals for board members and staff.

Strategic Goals/Initiatives

After a series of environmental scanning discussions at the workshop regarding senior-level staff and board members’ visions for the future and an evaluation of the district’s current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, participants were asked to identify short- and long-term goals. In total, the group developed thirteen short-term goals (one- to three-year timeframe) and seven long-term goals (four- to eight-year timeframe).

Workshop participants were asked to identify, via an online post-workshop ranking exercise, which goals developed at the workshop should be given the highest priority. The *top three highest-ranking goals* from each of the four categories are offered below. The highlighted goals offer a process “snapshot,” representing the most important strategic goals or priority areas for the district to address in the months and years ahead. For a full review of all strategic goals developed, discussed, and ranked, please refer to the full report.

Top Ranking Short-Term Goals

Proactively update and modernize current facilities, including the administrative and operation facility

Finish compensation study and evaluate implementation options

Evaluate staffing needs and hire needed staff

- E.g., grant writer, sponsorship recruitment, specific program areas identified in community survey as needed/expanded, purchasing, etc.

Top Ranking Long-Term Goals

Secure more multipurpose, indoor recreation space

- E.g., gymnasiums, multipurpose turf field with lights, potentially partnering with private investors

Prioritize and invest in facility and technology updates and improvements through long-term technology plan/goals

Secure PrairieFest space by extending lease or purchasing land

Strategic Priority Areas

Several high-level priority areas were identified as an outcome of the strategic planning process, and they highlight activities and initiatives that the district plans to focus on in both the short and long term. The strategic priority areas identified during the process (in no particular order) are illustrated below and defined in the full report. They include Facilities Improvement, Collaboration and Communication, and Organizational Advancement.

Strategic Priority Areas



Facilities Improvement



Collaboration and Communication



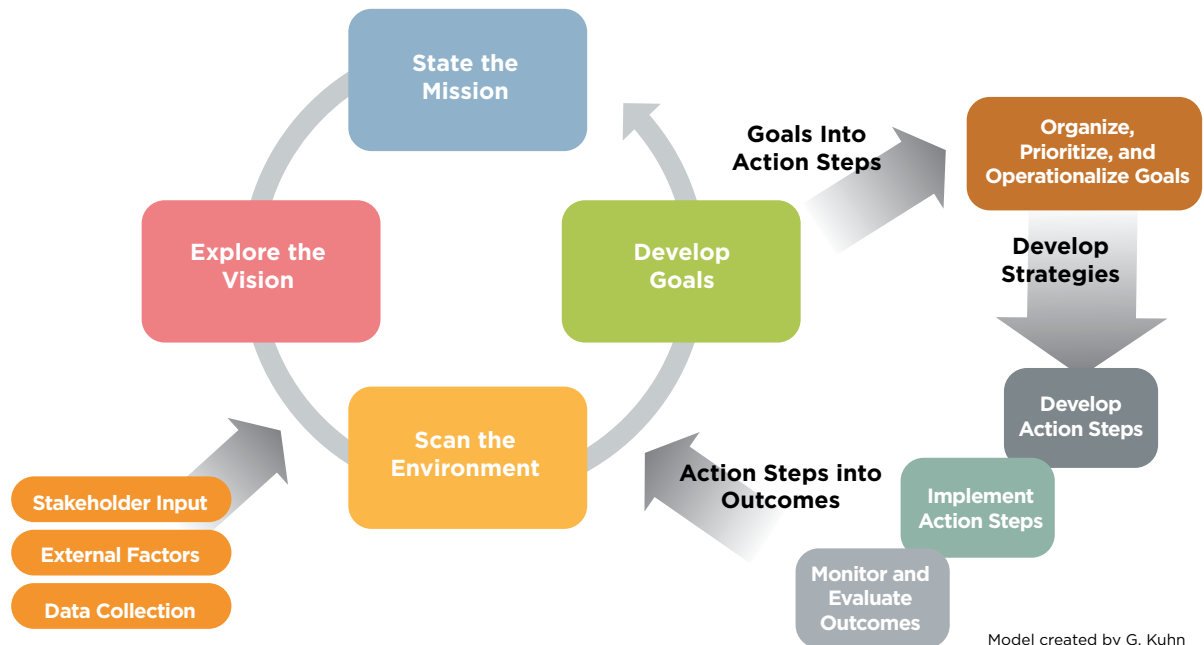
Organizational Advancement

Introduction

As an organization, the Oswegoland Park District has followed a regular process of establishing goals for the district and the community it serves. The Oswegoland Park District Board of Commissioners and senior staff gathered in July 2023 to discuss a future vision for the district and review and establish short- and long-term goals. The workshop provided a positive atmosphere to methodically and strategically determine where the district wants to go as an organization to best serve the community well into the coming years. The value of such processes continues to be recognized by policy-making boards/councils and executive staff in both private and public organizations (Figure 1).

It is important to keep in mind that the judicious use of the district's limited resources (including financial resources and professional staff time) will be key to achieving good results. Only a limited number of goals and objectives can be managed and implemented effectively at any given time. In a very realistic sense, clear and stable priorities must be maintained if the district desires to stretch its resources as far as they can go.

Figure 1. Strategic Planning Model



**Model generally represents the steps that are taken for this type of initiative.*

Pre-Workshop Stakeholder Input

It was important to the district's leadership and elected officials to include broad stakeholder input as part of the environmental scanning component of the strategic planning process. This stakeholder input involved analyzing internal and external factors that shape, influence, and impact the district's activities and mission. To gain perspectives from a cross-section of stakeholders, the NIU-CGS team conducted a statistically significant community survey, a demographic analysis of the park district's service area, and a series of focus group sessions with community members and partners.

Statistically Significant Community Survey

This type of survey is the empirical gold standard for gathering quantitative data about the views of key stakeholders. The purpose of the survey was to gather residents' opinions about the Oswegoland Park District's facilities, programs, and services, and to determine residents' recreation needs. The CGS staff worked closely with the park district staff throughout survey creation and dissemination. The survey questionnaire had 32 questions covering the following topics:

- Overall opinion of the park district
- Awareness and use of the park district
- Satisfaction with the park district
- Value of the park district
- Future direction of the park district
- Sources of information about the park district

An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent on April 5, 2023, and up to six reminder emails were sent to nonrespondents. The questionnaire was also translated into Spanish. The questionnaire was also mailed, and telephone reminder calls were made to nonrespondents. The survey closed on June 15, 2023 with a total of 528 completed surveys received. The data was weighted based on age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Summary and Conclusions:

- The Oswegoland Park District is doing a good job of serving residents.
 - Respondents perceive the Park District to be valuable to their community and household.
 - Satisfaction is high for the Park District parks, facilities, community events, and programs.
 - Satisfaction with customer service received from Park District staff is very high.
 - Most respondents agree with the statement “Members of my household feel we belong at the Oswegoland Park District”.
 - The majority of respondents indicate that their household is likely to use the Park District in the next 12 months.
- The Park District should continue to communicate with residents using a variety of methods.
- It should publicize that financial assistance is available to eligible households.
- The Park District should consider budgeting funds to maintain and improve the current aquatic facilities and acquire land for parks.
- It should consider adding more adult classes.
- It should consider adding more adult sports leagues.
- It should consider studying the feasibility of building a fitness center/gym.

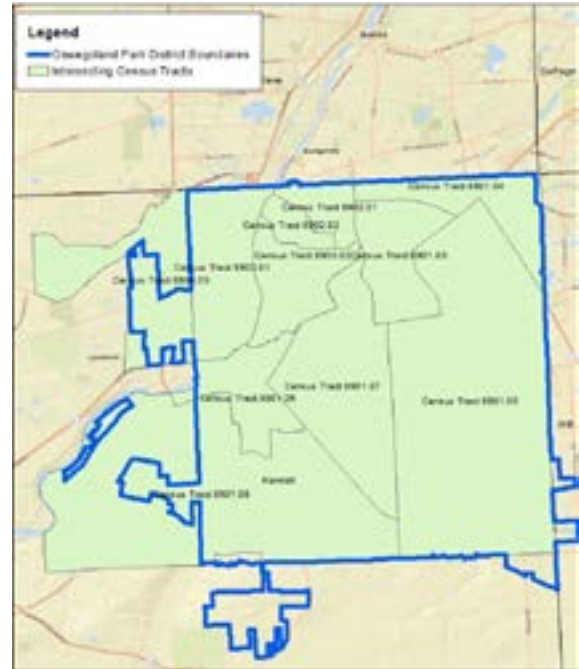
For a full executive summary of the Community Survey, see [Appendix A](#).

Demographic and Economic Profile

The demographic and economic profile of the park district is intended to help inform the strategic planning process by describing the trends affecting the park district and the surrounding region.

The demographic and economic information used census tract and ZIP code approximations of the Oswegoland Park District boundaries and a four-county reference region as context for the district (Figure 2). The data come primarily from the U.S. Census Bureau, Lightcast, and the Illinois Department of Revenue. Below are the key trends found as a result of the demographic analysis.

Figure 2. Oswegoland Park District Boundaries



Key Demographic Trends:

- According to the 2020 Census, the Oswegoland Park District has a total population of 61,621. Continuous population trend data is unavailable for the district, but according to estimates from Lightcast, total population in the 60543 ZIP code grew about 16.2% between 2010 and 2020. For reference, the total population in the four-county reference region increased 2.1% over the decade.
- The population in the park district census tracts has a similar racial and ethnic composition to the surrounding counties. About 1/5 of the population in both geographies identified as Hispanic in the 2020 Census. The majority of the population in both geographies is white (63.3% in the district and 60.5%) in the region. African Americans represent about 7% of the population in both geographies.
- The district is projected to become more diverse between 2022 and 2027. The total population in the 60543 ZIP code is projected to increase 10.0%, but the white population is projected to decline, while all other racial and ethnic groups are projected to increase in population.
- The population in the 60543 ZIP code skews somewhat younger than the surrounding four counties. About 11.7% of the population is over age 65 in the ZIP code, compared to 15.7% in the region.
- There are 18,463 households in the park district. The majority of households are married couples. About 49.0% of married-couple families in the district have one or more children under 18, compared to 44.1% of the region.
- The Oswegoland Park District has a tight housing market, with 99.0% of housing units occupied (84.9% owned and 14.1% rented) and 1.0% vacant. Most of the dwellings are owner-occupied as opposed to rentals.
- The housing stock in the Oswegoland Park District skews newer than in the surrounding counties as a whole. There are considerably fewer housing units built before 1970 (16.0% compared to 29.2% in the four-county region) and significantly more that were built in the 2000s.

- Compared to the region, the park district has a considerably lower proportion of residents in poverty. About 3.7% of all residents in the district have income below the poverty level, compared to 6.7% of the region.
- As is the case in much of the Chicago metro area, the Oswegoland Park District census tracts have significant commuter flows. Nearly all residents commute out for work, and 80.0% of the jobs in the district are held by inbound commuters.
- The three largest employment sectors located in the park district are educational services, retail trade, and accommodation and food services. These are also the three main sectors for employment of residents.
- About 86.6% of equalized assessed property value (EAV) in the Oswegoland Park District is residential, compared to 74.9% of property in the four-county region. Less than 2.0% of the taxable property in the district is industrial. Total property values in the district increased 30.0% over the past five years, compared to a 23.8% increase in the district.

Focus Groups

A total of four in-person focus groups were conducted in April 2023 to gain stakeholder input. Each focus group had approximately eight to fifteen participants representing the following groups:

- Intergovernmental Partners/Civic Groups
- Residents
- Front- and Mid-line Staff I
- Front- and Mid-line Staff II

The focus group sessions were designed as a primer for the strategic planning process. The information presented was shared in summation at the workshop and added exploratory and thematic information for the board and senior leadership team to consider. As a result of the focus group feedback, the facilitators identified three overarching themes presented in Figure 3. The themes represent important topic areas that the district's leadership and board considered as they went through the workshop exercises to develop short- and long-term goals. Therefore, it is not unusual to see alignment between the focus group themes and the priority areas identified as part of the entirety of the process. Please see [Appendix B](#) for a full summary of all focus group questions and aggregated responses for each theme.

Figure 3. Aggregated Focus Group Identified Themes



Outline of Leadership Workshop Exercises and Discussion Sessions

All the discussion sessions in the planning effort employed approaches that were highly participative and interactive. The workshop facilitators utilized a group discussion approach called ‘Nominal Group Technique’ where the facilitator assured participants equal opportunities to speak and share opinions. During the workshop discussions, individuals had the opportunity to generate and share their ideas, as well as participate in small and large group activities allowing them to weigh alternatives and refine their thinking through dialogue. As ideas were shared and debated, the group worked steadily toward a consensus regarding the district’s purpose, future directions, goals, and priorities.

Introductions and Icebreaker Exercise

Describe Oswegoland Park District

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and share how they became involved with the district, either as a board or staff member. Next, they engaged in an introductory/icebreaker exercise titled “garage sale.” Workshop participants collected an item from a “garage sale” table that represented to them an idea, issue, or topic that they felt was important to the district’s future and should be discussed as part of the strategic plan. The exercise was designed to stimulate conversation and help participants describe or identify an important strategic issue or topic that will shape or impact the county’s future. This was a brainstorming exercise. No evaluative or judgmental debate was permitted during this session. Below is a list (Figure 4) and word cloud summary (Figure 5) of those answers.

Figure 4. Garage Sale Icebreaker: important issue, initiative, or idea that should be part of the district’s future? List view

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Calculator | Need to continue to evaluate/update technology, use technology to the best of the Park District’s ability |
| Car charger | Continue improving efficiencies with technology and training |
| Golf ball | Golf course is important recreation, continue to invest in the golf course |
| Thermostat | Park District is a second home to the community—facilitate a sense of community |
| Building block | Want better facilities for employees, better working spaces |
| Softball | Need a community center, functional meeting rooms, etc. |
| Golf ball | Golf course is a space where community members can feel happy and safe |
| Screwdriver | Need new facilities, not working with hand me downs |
| Nail polish | Connection with community needs to be polished—engage with community |
| Rubber duck | Remember the river as a key recreation selling point (capitalize on river recreation) |
| Tractor | Need to ensure there is enough land available to grow, expand for the future |
| Tape | Need to stick together, collaborate, take action on (accountability) goals |
| Dino bone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some antiquated things need to be “dead and buried,” need updating regarding facilities Let frugality go and use our resources/assets, time to do something different |

Figure 5. Garage Sale Icebreaker: important issue, initiative, or idea that should be part of the district's future? Word Cloud view



Visioning for the Future

The board and senior staff next participated in a visioning exercise to describe the desired future direction of the district by answering the following question: “If you left the district and didn’t return for 10-15 years, what do you hope you would see, or think you would see when you returned, with regard to the district and its activities, policies, and initiatives?” Participants were asked to think about their ideas ahead of time and then be ready to share them with the group during the first session of the workshop. Responses are listed below in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Visions of the Future—Hope or think you will see in 10-15 years

| Oswegoland Park District Visions for the Future |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents are engaged and rallied around something big • More residents stay in the area for recreation (sports, facilities, adult leagues, etc.) • New banquet facility for Fox Bend golf course <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Golf course is modernized, i.e., Top Golf, virtual ranges • Younger staff still remains, chooses to stay with Oswegoland Park District • Gravel pit on Route 71 has been taken over as a facility (recreation, community center) • Existing facilities are modernized • New recreation center (1) (indoor) • More community parks, large scale, with amenities at each (different locations) • Better trail connectivity • Access to amenities on river • Synthetic turf fields • Additional nature activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nature park • More activities surrounding/involving the river <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Capitalize on the river • Facility or activity that makes Oswegoland Park District unique |

Environmental Scanning Part I

Surrender or Lead

Next, participants were introduced to a leadership exercise entitled “Surrender or Lead.” Participants were asked, in small groups, to respond to a series of structured questions to reveal hopes, perspectives, challenges, opportunities, and possible barriers based on the collective view of each group. The responses were recorded and are reported below. The bolded and underlined sections are key phrases that the group provided in response to the exercise’s open-ended prompts.

Surrender or Lead Exercise

Group #1

1. We want to **be progressive community leaders**, but **we suffer from paralysis from analysis**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are **investing in staff** and **technology** because **we need to focus on both external customers and internal stakeholders**.
3. If it weren’t for **fear of negative public perception**, we would **be better risk takers**.
4. We need to finally **be proactive**.
5. **Investments in part-time staff** will have the biggest impact on the park district in the coming 2-3 years.

Group #2

1. We want to **be the leaders in facilitating change**, but **with a renewed approach**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are **employees** and **community** because **their vision and engagement will help drive future decisions**.
3. If it weren’t for **overthinking and overanalyzing**, we would **not be paralyzed in decision-making**.
4. We need to finally **take action!!!!**
5. **We** will have the biggest impact on the park district in the coming 2-3 years.

Group #3

1. We want to **be progressive**, but **respectful of financial resources**.
2. The two most important things to focus on are **space** and **staff** because **that’s what drives everything**.
3. If it weren’t for **COVID**, we would **have gone to referendum**.
4. We need to finally **spend money**.
5. **Community growth, costs, and partnerships** will have the biggest impact on the park district in the coming 2-3 years.

Environmental Scanning Exercise Part II

Large Group S.W.O.C. Analysis

The next step of the strategic planning workshop involved reviewing and accounting for the internal and external factors present in the environment that can potentially influence the district, both negatively and positively. Workshop participants were asked to identify the district's **strengths (S)** and **weaknesses (W)**. In what areas does the district regularly excel, and in what areas are there difficulties or shortcomings in terms of expertise, resources, training, etc.? What **opportunities (O)** are on the horizon that can be used to the district's advantage? Conversely, what trends or **challenges (C)** lie ahead that would be obstacles or hindrances? These elements could include both internal and external factors, conditions, trends, regulations, agencies, resources, etc. All responses are captured next.

S.W.O.C. Exercise (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges)

Internal

| STRENGTHS | WEAKNESSES |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff strong and creative • Parks • River • Variety of programs and events • Trails • Experienced staff and board • Strong relationships with staff and board • Good financial position • Community credibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strong customer service • Size of district—more room to build out • Communication with community • Branding a strength—Quality good reputation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilities • True collaboration with community and intergovernmental partners • Staff could better reflect diversity of community • Sometimes hoard older ideas—could purge • Done so well with little—expect to keep status quo • Risk adverse in the past |

External

| OPPORTUNITIES | CHALLENGES |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining Park District's future growth boundary • Outdoor, adult programming <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Connecting to nature, hire nature experts to provide more exposure • Investment in Stewart Farm • Properties in the river corridor (land) • River <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Activities • Partnerships • Rapid population growth, new residents, users • Community credibility, trust • Expand diversity, language amongst staff • Room to grow in district • Riverfront Master Plan • Food trucks/restaurant in Prairie Point • Sponsorships/different funding sources • Consider current trends in future programs, forward thinking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some partnerships and collaboration—multiple stakeholders naturally more challenging • Rapid population growth and keeping up with demand/changes • Plainfield <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Distance, disconnection, border confusion, boundaries • Resident confusion (where do taxes go, boundaries of park district) • How to work with new labor market • Community perception of making decisions, not being cautious, spending money |

Nominal Group Goal Identification

With the preceding discussion sessions and exercises acting as a sound foundation for goal setting, the next exercise provided time for a healthy group discussion and development of goals and/or objectives needed to achieve the future visions as expressed by the board and leadership team.

Participants worked in the same small groups from the Surrender or Lead exercise, which included both board and staff members. Each group was allotted time to develop and then report out the three or four important policy and program goals they thought the district should accomplish. Groups were asked to create goals using two timeframes; **short-term** goals (which could be accomplished in the next one to three years), as well as those that would be considered **long-term** goals (aimed at a four- to eight-year timeframe). Each workgroup then shared their short- and long-term goals with the larger group for feedback and discussion. Goals could be highly specific or general.

Open Group Discussion and Consolidation of Goals/Objectives

This final phase of the discussion served as the forum for board members and staff to discuss, refine, and compare the ideas and goals offered by each participant. Participants gave their opinions and further explained the fit, ideas, and policy outcomes expressed in the goals.

Post-Workshop

Goal Prioritization and Ranking Exercise

After the workshop, the board and leadership team were asked to delineate, via an online ranking exercise, which goals should be given the highest priority. In addition, park district staff who participated in the stakeholder focus groups at the beginning of the process were also asked to complete the ranking survey and their cumulative score was included in the ranking results. The workshop participants and additional staff focus group participants were provided an online ranking tool where point values were assigned to each goal in both the short- and long-term categories. The calculation of goal prioritization consisted of “forced ranking” where the ranking of each identified goal is calculated as the average of the rankings given by all participants. For example, if a goal was given the scores of 2, 5, 6, 6, 1, 2, and 3, the average total would be 3.57. **The lower the score, the higher the priority.** Again, the average totals were based on the rankings provided by the workshop participants and staff. The staff score was represented by a cumulative average of all staff rankings.

The following illustration presents the dashboard of *High*, *Medium*, and *Lower* priority levels for all the strategic goals developed based on the consensus ranking exercise (Figure 7). The goal priority dashboard demonstrates the most important strategic goals, tasks, and objectives for the board and staff to address in the months and years ahead.

Figure 7. Strategic Goals – Priority Dashboard Strategic Goals 2023

| Short-term Goals | Priority Level |
|---|-----------------------|
| Proactively update and modernize current facilities, including the administrative and operation facility | High |
| Finish compensation study and evaluate implementation options | High |
| Evaluate staffing needs and hire needed staff • E.g., grant writer, sponsorship recruitment, specific program areas identified in community survey as needed/expanded, purchasing, etc. | High |
| Evaluate current promotion and compensation structure and evaluate the need for modifying promotion and growth opportunities • Communicate with staff about the growth pathways | High |
| Create a formal continuing education/training policy for staff | Medium |
| Develop mutually beneficial intergovernmental relationships with partners for program space, raising funds • E.g., Oswego Community Unit School District 308, Park Foundation, etc. | Medium |
| Develop and continuously update a technology plan | Medium |
| Create/evaluate key performance indicators (KPIs) for individual development plans (IDPs) | Medium |
| Determine the future of the community center aquatic park | Medium |
| Assess, develop, and implement the Stewart/Willowgate Farm plan | Lower |
| Explore alternative funding strategies for facilities, programs • E.g., grants, non-user fees, programming | Lower |
| Assess, develop, and implement the golf course plan | Lower |
| Begin and/or continue conversations with landowners about future land acquisition/land donation | Lower |
| Long-term Goals | Priority Level |
| Secure more multipurpose, indoor recreation space • E.g., gymnasiums, multipurpose turf field with lights, potentially partnering with private investors | High |
| Prioritize and invest in facility and technology updates and improvements through long-term technology plan/goals | High |
| Secure PrairieFest space by extending lease or purchasing land | Medium |
| Determine what makes the park district stand out, what is unique/niche, and communicate a unified message • Develop the river to the fullest • Create a unique park destination/multiple attractions | Medium |
| Develop a plan for riverfront properties to begin developing | Medium |
| Purchase or build a new clubhouse and banquet facility at Fox Bend Golf Course | Lower |
| Integrate sustainable practices and equipment • E.g., electric vehicle charging stations and sustainable fleet and power equipment | Lower |

Strategic Priority Areas

Based on an evaluation of the entirety of the process, including the community survey, demographic analysis, interviews, focus groups, discussions at the workshop, and the goals developed, several high-level strategic priority areas were identified. These priority areas highlight the activities and initiatives that the organization will focus on in both the short and long term. The strategic priority areas identified as a result of the strategic planning process are illustrated and fully defined below in Figure 8, followed by goal alignment and focus group data related to each area.

Figure 8. Strategic Priority Areas



Priority Area: Facilities Improvement

Proactively modernizing the park district's current facilities, exploring the need for additional/new programmable indoor space, and introducing sustainability initiatives will ensure that the park district's facilities last and expand as needed for years to come. These initiatives will be critical to helping not only with current levels of programming, but also helping the district to adapt to population and demographic changes.

“Facilities Improvement”—related goals from the leadership workshop:

- Proactively update and modernize current facilities, including the administrative and operation facility
- Determine the future of the community center aquatic park
- Begin and continue conversations with landowners about future land acquisition/land donation
- Assess, develop, and implement the golf course plan
- Assess, develop, and implement the Stewart/Willowgate Farm plan
- Explore alternative funding strategies for facilities, programs
 - E.g., grants, non-user fees, programming
- Prioritize and invest in facility and technology updates and improvements
- Integrate sustainable practices and equipment
 - E.g., electric vehicle charging stations and sustainable fleet and power equipment
- Secure more multipurpose, indoor recreation space
 - E.g., gymnasiums, multipurpose turf field with lights, potentially partnering with private investors
- Purchase or build a new clubhouse and banquet facility at Fox Bend Golf Course
- Secure PrairieFest festival space by extending lease or purchasing land

“Facilities Improvement”—aligned comments from stakeholder feedback:

- Ensure facilities are easily adaptable to programming needs
- Renovate existing Prairie Point footprint to address employee needs and specific programming
 - Buy/repurpose existing building for programming
- Multi-purpose recreation center
 - More programmable indoor space (gym and classes)
 - Fitness center/ indoor pool with an expansion of opportunities for indoor recreation
- Update or build new golf course clubhouse with banquet facility
- An indoor area (or covered area) for winter and/or rainy days
- Invest in tools/resources to deliver high-quality services
 - Invest in/update technology

Priority Area: Collaboration and Communication

The park district is uniquely positioned to continue being a leader in parks, recreation, and healthy lifestyles in the Oswegoland area and beyond. The district can collaborate with other intergovernmental organizations to expand programming and program space, and possibly grow funding for district maintenance. In addition, communicating a unified message through different avenues about the park district’s amenities and events will be key for an improving and thriving park district.

“Collaboration and Communication”—related goals from the leadership workshop:

- Develop mutually beneficial intergovernmental relationships with partners for program space, raising funds
 - E.g., Oswego Community Unit School District 308, Park Foundation, etc.
- Develop a plan for Riverfront properties to begin developing
- Determine what makes the park district stand out, what is unique/niche, and communicate a unified message
 - Develop the river to the fullest
 - Create a unique park destination

“Collaboration and Communication”—aligned comments from stakeholder feedback:

- More intergovernmental collaboration, including District 308, on use of gyms and indoor spaces
- Increase communication to community on programs, events, and soliciting volunteers
- Keep community informed of changes or plans to the facilities they use
 - E.g., Fox Bend had a change in employees; perhaps write an email to all course members to inform them, then write an email introducing the person who is taking their place
- Share the program’s mission with volunteers and program participants
 - Develop ideas for how to effectively and positively contribute/volunteer
- Create an annual panel/committee for the PrairieFest performers

Priority Area: Organizational Advancement

To sustain or advance the quality of programming the district provides, it is important to address the park district's organizational needs, including human capital and technology. With the increasing demand for services in the area and competing/limited resources, evaluating staffing needs, addressing recruitment and retention, and ensuring training and education for staff will be key to continued success. This may include increased staffing numbers, compensation evaluation, and improved competencies/cross-training of staff.

“Organizational Advancement”—related goals from the leadership workshop:

- Create a formal continuing education/training policy for staff
- Evaluate current promotion and compensation structure and evaluate the need for modifying promotion and growth opportunities
 - Communicate with staff about the growth pathways
- Finish compensation study and evaluate implementation options
- Evaluate staffing needs and hire needed staff
 - E.g., grant writer, sponsorship recruitment, specific program areas identified in community survey as needed/expanded, purchasing, etc.
- Develop and continuously update a technology plan
- Create/evaluate key performance indicators (KPIs) for individual development plans (IDPs)

“Organizational Advancement”—aligned comments from stakeholder feedback:

- Continue professionalism and training
 - Update security plans and train employees (active shooter)
 - Address certifications and develop employee capacities
 - Eliminate silos
 - Clear organizational chart—updated
 - Be a light! Keep the messaging, offerings, staffers focused on positives... character building, being a good teammate, developing personal skills, being a part of a positive community!
- Examine staffing levels and compensation as a whole
 - Possibly a compensation study to remain competitive
 - Hire more staff
 - Invest in current staff to retain, move part-time to full-time
- Create internal communications plan

Conclusion

The value of the strategic planning process will only be realized if this report is used as an active working guide for both the Oswegoland Park District Board of Commissioners and staff. This document captures the content of the discussions and assists the district's leaders in developing implementation plans for their high-priority goals.

In the park district's ever evolving operating environment, adapting to changes in demographics, community trends, technology advancements, and best practices, among others, will be key. The strategic plan is meant to be a road map for the district with the flexibility to adapt to those changes. Therefore, it is recommended that the district undertake a regular review (monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually) of the strategic plan, its goals, and implementation schedule to identify the need for updates or modifications so the entire district consistently recognizes and meets changes in community needs and expectations. In addition, the district is encouraged to continue to engage in regular strategic planning process updates/renewals every three years.

What is apparent from the exchange of ideas and dialogue during the environmental scanning and strategic planning workshop is that the district is fortunate to have progressive leadership and a management team that is looking ahead and committed to strategic thinking and planning.

We wish you well with the ambitious years that lie ahead.

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Mel Henriksen, featuring a stylized 'M' and 'H'. The signature on the right is for Alli Hoebing, with a more fluid, cursive style.

Mel Henriksen and Alli Hoebing, Project Coordinators and Session Facilitators

Appendix A

Statistically Significant Community Survey Executive Summary

The Oswegoland Park District commissioned the Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) at Northern Illinois University to conduct a multi-mode survey (online survey, mail survey, and telephone reminder calls) of residents. The purpose of the survey was to gather residents' opinions about the Oswegoland Park District's facilities, programs, and services, and to determine residents' recreation needs. The survey was conducted from April 5, 2023, to June 15, 2023. A total of 528 completed surveys were received.

The data was weighted on age, gender, and race/ethnicity using information from the 2017-2021 American Community Survey (ACS). Data weighting key demographic variables ensures that respondents to the survey are representative of the population of all adults in the Oswegoland Park District service area and that the findings can be generalized to the total adult population.

Findings

Overall Opinion of the Park District

- The respondents were asked to rate their overall opinion of the Oswegoland Park District on a scale of 0.0, completely dislike to 10.0, highest regard. 79.4% of respondents rated the Park District a 6.0 or higher. The mean rating given was 7.5.
- When asked what is their favorite thing about the park district the top responses were the parks (16.5%), the variety, number, or type of programs and events (16.5%), the walking and bike trails/paths (11.0%), and the programs/activities for children (10.2%).
- When asked what is their least favorite thing about the park district a wide variety of responses were given. The top responses were cost (9.0%), upkeep/maintenance of parks or facilities (7.0%), lack of a fitness center/gym (4.3%), and the amount of taxes are too high (3.4%).
- Four-fifths (80.0%) of respondents indicated that their household is likely to use the park district during the next 12 months, with 63.2% indicating their household is very likely.

Awareness and Use of the Park District

- Awareness is highest for the PrairieFest (83.2%), Civic Center Aquatic Park (79.2%), Civic Center (77.3%), and Fox Bend Golf Course (73.3%) and lowest for Community Park at Grande Park (27.6%) and South Point Center (43.3%).
- Of the 56.1% of respondents aware of Hudson Crossing Park, 72.9% have visited the park in the past 12 months; the highest percentage of visitors compared to of all the parks/facilities/community events asked about in the survey. Of the 66.1% of respondents aware of Prairie Point Community Park, 72.5% have visited the park in the past 12 months; the second highest percentage of visitors.

Satisfaction with Park District

- The majority of the respondents were satisfied with each of the parks, facilities, and community events asked about in the survey. The highest percentage of respondents indicated they are satisfied with Prairie Point Community Park (95.6%) and the lowest percentages of respondents indicated that they are satisfied with Boulder Point (80.4%) and the Civic Center (80.5%).

- The majority of respondents were satisfied with the appearance (93.7%), cleanliness (93.6%), and maintenance of parks and facilities (88.9%).
- The majority of the respondents were satisfied with the park district programs asked about in the survey. Satisfaction was highest for As We Grow Preschool (98.6%) and dance (97.3%). Satisfaction was lowest for fitness (79.0%), adult classes (81.8%), and adult sports leagues (83.3%).
- Almost one-third (31.3%) of respondents indicated their needs are not being met for adult sports leagues. 42.2% of respondents use the Oswegoland Park District and 21.9% use a private facility for adult sports leagues.
- One-fourth (25.3%) of respondents stated their needs are not being met for adult classes. 37.4% of respondents use the Oswegoland Park District and 25.3% use a private facility.
- 10.4% of respondents reported their needs are not being met for fitness. 37.9% of respondents use a private facility and 33.9% of respondents use the Oswegoland Park District.
- More than four-fifths of respondents were satisfied with the customer service from park district staff (90.9%), the park district social media (82.8%), the ease of registering for programs (82.1%), the Park District website (81.7%), the availability of information about parks/facilities (81.3%), and the availability of information about programs (81.2%).
- Most (85.4%) respondents agree with the statement “Members of my household feel we belong at the Oswegoland Park District.”
- Most (85.0%) respondents who indicated a member of their household identifies with a disability agree with the statement “The Oswegoland Park District has effectively provided accommodations.”

Value of the Park District

- The majority (88.4%) of the respondents believe the park district is valuable to their community. 78.8% of the respondents think the park district is valuable to their household.
- Three-fourths (75.0%) of respondents believe the overall value of the park district, given its share of the property taxes, is excellent or good.
- Only 18.9% of respondents are aware that the park district offers financial assistance to eligible households.

Future Direction of the Park District

- Most (92.2%) respondents are supportive of the park district budgeting funds for maintaining and improving the current aquatic facilities.
- The majority (87.8%) of the respondents are supportive of the park district budgeting funds for acquiring land for parks.

Sources of Information about the Park District

- More than two-fifths (43.7%) of respondents reported they learn about the park district from community banners/signs, with 23.2% indicating it is their preferred source. 43.3% of respondents said they learn about the park district from the park district website, with 23.4% indicating it is their preferred source. 38.9% of respondents stated they learn about the park district from park district emails, with 35.6% saying it is their preferred source. 37.5% of respondents indicated they learn about the park district from the park district seasonal brochure, with 27.5% reporting it is their preferred source. More than one-fourth (28.7%) of respondents reported they learn about the park district from the park district social media, with 21.5% stating it is their preferred source.

Appendix B

Focus Group Feedback

One of the key analytical techniques used for focus group notes is an analyst's search for key phrases, words, or terms that emerged during the focus group sessions, a process known as coding. Coding is done by analysts' individual readings of the data, followed by key term searches with the aid of document software. The words and phrases listed below are the results of the study team's analysis of the collected focus group notes. At a glance, the reader can discover what terms were used or referred to most frequently in the feedback notes. Using individual analysts' coding, the researcher identifies terms that recur across groups and across questions. The results reveal key topics or issues that should be weighed and considered when proceeding with strategic planning discussions.

The information that follows is a summary of key themes and topics that emerged during the exploratory focus group sessions. The focus group sessions served as a primer for the strategic planning process. The information that is presented in this summation was designed to add exploratory and thematic information for the board and leadership staff to consider during the strategic planning workshop.

The same exploratory focus group discussion questions were asked to each focus group and are listed below:

1. How would you describe the district to a stranger or someone who doesn't live or work here?
2. If you left the district tomorrow, and didn't return for 10-15 years, what do you think you'd see, or what do you hope you'd see, when you returned?
3. What do you like best about the district? Related to that, what are the strengths/greatest assets of the district?
4. Conversely, can you identify areas or topics in need of attention or improvement? Related to that, what are the weaknesses/greatest needs for district? Challenges?
5. What are/should be the top priorities for the district over the next three to five years?
6. If you could change or initiate one key item or thing about district, what would it be?

Overall Themes Based on Focus Group Feedback

Staffing and Employee Investment

- Continue professionalism and training—update security plans and train employees (active shooter), address certifications and develop employee capacities.
- Examine staffing levels and compensation as a whole) —consider conducting a compensation study to remain competitive.
- Create internal communications plan—create a clear, updated organizational chart.

Indoor Recreation and Facilities

- Ensure facilities meet the diversity of programming and accessibility needs.
 - Multi-purpose recreation center.
 - Fitness center/ indoor pool with an expansion of opportunities for indoor recreation.
 - » An indoor area (or covered area) to walk dogs in the winter and/or on rainy days.
- Invest in tools/resources to deliver high-quality recreation, including updating technology and developing creative playgrounds, music, theatre, and parks.
- More intergovernmental collaboration on the use of gyms and indoor spaces.

Parks and Programming

- Invest in trails, parks, passive green space.
 - Expansion, improvement of natural areas and engagement/education.
- Reevaluate the cost of providing some programs and services to residents—lower prices.
 - Make programming more affordable possibly through Park District reciprocity.
- Continue to update programming, planning for future growth.
- Increase communication to community on programs, events, and soliciting volunteers.

Top Priorities for All Stakeholders

- More indoor space for expanding programming.
- Invest in staff to retain, move part-time to full-time.
- Continue professionalism and training.
- Renovate existing facilities to address employee needs and specific programming.
- Fitness center/indoor pool with an expansion of opportunities for indoor recreation.
- Increase communication to community on programs, events, and soliciting volunteers.
- Update or build a new golf course clubhouse with banquet facility.