

# CHAPTER 8: ENVIRONMENT



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## INTRODUCTION

The climate we live in, the air we breathe, our natural resources, and our ability to sustain them are foundational to every aspect of life. This chapter highlights the vibrant tapestry of Evanston's natural resources, ecosystems, green infrastructure, and urban tree canopy. Embracing nature-based solutions empowers us to tackle climate change, pollution, and resource scarcity. As our City continues to grow, investing in our natural resources is key to creating a sustainable future that benefits all residents.

POLICY	POLICY STATEMENT
1	Incorporate climate resilience measures into infrastructure projects to expand biodiversity and mitigate future climate impacts, including increased flooding, heat waves, and storm events.
2	Effectively manage and expand natural resources to optimize ecosystem and human and wildlife health.
3	Effectively manage and expand the tree canopy to maximize urban forest benefits.
4	Implement land use practices that benefit soil health.
5	Manage land along the lakeshore and the North Shore Channel to limit habitat degradation and protect and preserve water quality.
6	Ensure a sustainable water supply by protecting Lake Michigan and promoting water conservation practices across residential, commercial, and industrial sectors.
7	Prioritize stormwater management strategies that protect water quality, manage flood risks, and enhance the natural function of wetlands, floodplains, and water bodies.
8	Increase material and resource recycling to reduce environmental burden.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

### ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Even amidst dense development, Evanston boasts a diverse range of natural resources. Our green infrastructure promotes environmental stewardship through recreational opportunities, meaningful programming, and community engagement. Protecting this infrastructure during planning and development is important for sustaining ecosystem health. By preserving green spaces, we elevate quality of life for residents and enhance access to nature – all supported by a growing network of trails that connect neighborhoods with both natural beauty and urban vibrancy.

In our efforts to protect our infrastructure, we must bolster our community's resilience against extreme weather events and changes in climate patterns. Areas along the North Shore Channel remain vulnerable to flooding events, with the lake shore being particularly susceptible to fluctuating water levels in Lake Michigan. This presents challenges in managing both infrastructure and ecosystems.

### WATERBODIES

Evanston boasts 4.25 miles of stunning shoreline along Lake Michigan, a defining feature of our City, complemented by six beaches. Lake Michigan is part of a globally significant ecoregion cherished for its freshwater supply and rich biodiversity. For over 10,000 years, people have been drawn to the Great Lakes, relying on its waters for fishing and transportation. Today, it serves as the largest public drinking water supply in Illinois, supporting nearly 6.6 million people. If the Great Lakes are not managed carefully, this vital resource may be threatened by invasive species, climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction.

Alongside Lake Michigan, the North Shore Channel serves as Evanston's main water corridor. Originally constructed to manage sewage in the early 20th century, it has transformed into a haven for migratory birds and other wildlife. This three-mile channel also offers numerous recreational opportunities from trails and canoeing to rowing and fishing.

### ECOSYSTEMS AND TREE CANOPY

Northeastern Illinois is composed of a mosaic of prairies, woodlands, and wetlands. Forest preserves stretch across nearly 70,000 acres in Cook County – about 11 percent of the region. These areas are core habitats for native species and are integral to the local ecosystem. Striving for harmony between urban development and these vital habitats is key for Evanston. The City is devoted to preserving these natural communities through thoughtful policies, proactive practices, and community initiatives.

Evanston, with its vibrant tree canopy and prime location along Lake Michigan, embodies a strong commitment to environmental stewardship. This dedication has earned us prestigious titles such as Tree City USA, Bird City Illinois, and the Mayors' Monarch Pledge. Our urban forest includes over 32,000 trees throughout the City's parkways, parks, and other public spaces. According to data analyzed by the Chicago Region Trees Initiative, Evanston's tree canopy cover is around 39 percent – more than that of similar communities.<sup>1</sup> The urban forest not only improves water and air quality, but also mitigates flooding, reduces urban heat island effects, provides shade that reduces summer energy use, and improves the overall well-being of community members.

However, tree canopy cover is not uniform throughout the City. Certain areas of eastern and northern Evanston have canopy coverage above 44 percent, while parts of western and southwestern Evanston fall below 20 percent.<sup>2</sup> As we face rising temperatures and increasing extreme weather events, neighborhoods with lower tree coverage are at higher risk of heat-related illnesses, escalating cooling costs, and greater exposure to environmental toxins. Evanston must develop and implement strategies that address these challenges, ensuring that every community enjoys the benefits of a healthy environment.

Our urban trees experience significant challenges, including harsh conditions such as limited soil volume, poor soil quality, disturbances to root structures from utility work, and potential damage from community activities. These stressors make trees vulnerable to invasive pests, disease, and structural flaws. Furthermore, Evanston's tree canopy lacks age diversity. As the City's mature trees reach the end of their natural life, there are fewer midsized canopy trees to take their place.



Source: City of Evanston

Human activity and infrastructure development must harmonize with the natural environment to support a healthy and diverse ecosystem. To facilitate the coexistence and management of local wildlife, the City must encourage positive nature experiences and create best practices to reduce human-wildlife conflict. Supporting and protecting biodiversity requires thoughtful decision-making on the built environment, such as installing nondisruptive lighting systems, as well as stewardship of the natural environment, such as reducing pesticide and chemical fertilizer use.

## KEY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As development continues throughout Evanston, the City has to accommodate growth while preserving our natural environment and mitigating climate change effects. How do we plan for future growth while enhancing our natural resources?

Climate forecasts for northeastern Illinois reveal critical challenges, including rising average temperatures, increased frequency of extreme weather events, a shorter dormant season, and more polar vortex events in winter. Precipitation patterns are changing, leading to extended droughts followed

by intense rainfall. These climate shifts stress our native ecosystems and provide openings for invasive species, mosquitoes, ticks, and other disease carriers to migrate into the area and thrive. Furthermore, rising national water insecurity adds urgency to our local efforts to conserve Lake Michigan's resources, making it nonnegotiable to maintain high water quality for both people and native species. As climate change drives migration toward the Great Lakes region, we must welcome innovative land-use strategies to accommodate an unknown number of climate migrants to our population.

Effective management of our natural resources depends on public entities, private developers, and engaged community members working together. The City is responsible for stewarding publicly owned resources, such as parks and other green spaces; and ensuring ecosystem health through invasive species control, habitat restoration, and strict water quality monitoring. We expect developers to prioritize the conservation of green infrastructure, reclaim and reuse building materials, and adopt innovative practices to reduce emissions and embedded carbon. We can enhance our tree canopy cover, plant native and site-appropriate species, and manage stormwater infiltration effectively. Together, Evanston can take bold steps to create a sustainable and resilient environment for everyone in the community.



Source: City of Evanston

## POLICIES AND ACTIONS

### 1. INCORPORATE CLIMATE RESILIENCE MEASURES INTO INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS TO EXPAND BIODIVERSITY AND MITIGATE FUTURE CLIMATE IMPACTS, INCLUDING INCREASED FLOODING, HEAT WAVES, AND STORM EVENTS.

**ENV 1.1** Require higher building envelope standards and storm- and flood-resilient designs for new developments and redevelopments.

**ENV 1.2** Incentivize green infrastructure efforts that mitigate heat island effects and provide access to green spaces, such as native tree replacement, green roofs, and community gardens.

**ENV 1.3** Educate the community on climate change and resilience.

**ENV 1.4** Require that outdoor lights in public areas follow dark-sky recommendations to reduce light pollution, including using light only where needed, targeting light downward, and using warm lighting at the lowest light level possible.

### 2. EFFECTIVELY MANAGE AND EXPAND NATURAL RESOURCES TO OPTIMIZE ECOSYSTEM AND HUMAN AND WILDLIFE HEALTH.

**ENV 2.1** Monitor ecosystem health through assessments, inventories, and active management practices.

**ENV 2.2** Protect, preserve, and increase habitat for native flora and fauna, using best practices as recognized by industry professionals.

**ENV 2.3** Protect and manage larger green spaces, such as parks and the Ladd Arboretum, that provide critical habitats for native species.

**ENV 2.4** Promote opportunities for education and outreach to community members on ecosystem management and support community organizations that work to protect and restore habitats.

**ENV 2.5** Incentivize native plantings on private property.

**ENV 2.6** Encourage positive nature experiences using best practices to reduce human-wildlife conflict

### 3. EFFECTIVELY MANAGE AND EXPAND THE TREE CANOPY TO OPTIMIZE URBAN FOREST BENEFITS.

**ENV 3.1** Set annual tree-planting targets to increase overall tree canopy and sustainably offset projected tree losses, including setting targets by ward or neighborhood and adjusting for loss of large legacy trees.

**ENV 3.2** Maintain an updated public tree inventory to capture species diversity and assess trends, patterns, and opportunities to guide urban forest management.

**ENV 3.3** Promote urban forest health around vulnerable populations, prioritizing neighborhoods, public parks, schools, and transportation corridors.

**ENV 3.4** Identify funding opportunities that support urban forest health, including removing hazardous trees and planting new trees.

**ENV 3.5** Support efforts to improve tree canopy cover on private property in areas where it is limited, including the western parts of the City.

### 4. IMPLEMENT LAND-USE PRACTICES THAT OPTIMIZE SOIL HEALTH.

**ENV 4.1** Require developers to use environmental preservation methods during construction, including protective fencing and designated pathways.

**ENV 4.2** Implement grading and erosion control standards to maximize plant buffers, replanting, and post-construction soil amendment and restoration.

**ENV 4.3** Use best soil management practices, including reducing impervious surfaces and retaining vegetation during construction.

### 5. MANAGE LAND ALONG THE LAKESHORE AND THE NORTH SHORE CHANNEL TO LIMIT HABITAT DEGRADATION AND PROTECT AND PRESERVE WATER QUALITY.

**ENV 5.1** Protect shoreland areas by encouraging buffer zones that maintain plant cover and reduce pollution in water bodies.

**ENV 5.2** Maintain low-impact recreational infrastructure that allows public access to water bodies while maintaining ecosystem health.

**ENV 5.3** Encourage watershed-based planning that considers human activities, land-water interactions, and impacts on aquatic life in making development decisions.

**ENV 5.4** Develop lakefront-protection strategies that support climate resilience, provide drinking water security, and preserve recreational opportunities.

### 6. ENSURE A SUSTAINABLE WATER SUPPLY BY PROTECTING LAKE MICHIGAN AND PROMOTING WATER CONSERVATION PRACTICES ACROSS RESIDENTIAL, COMMERCIAL, AND INDUSTRIAL SECTORS.

**ENV 6.1** Continue to monitor water quality and make strategic investments to maintain long-term water supply stewardship.

**ENV 6.2** Work together with regional and state regulators as well as community partners to support water conservation and protect Lake Michigan as a water source.

**ENV 6.3** Promote residential conservation strategies, including replacing grass with native residential landscaping, restricting lawn watering in the middle of the day during summer, and requiring new developments to reduce watering demand.

**ENV 6.4** Continue to use technology that allows water users to track their usage and encourage water-saving technologies in both new developments and retrofits.

**ENV 6.5** Expand public education programs focused on protecting water sources, reducing water use, and promoting responsible watering practices.

### 7. PRIORITIZE STORMWATER MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES THAT PROTECT WATER QUALITY, MANAGE FLOOD RISKS, AND ENHANCE THE NATURAL FUNCTION OF WETLANDS, FLOODPLAINS, AND WATER BODIES.

**ENV 7.1** Encourage green infrastructure techniques in residential and commercial developments that slow, capture, and filter stormwater, helping to reduce runoff, prevent flooding, and protect waterways from pollutants.

**ENV 7.2** Enhance public infrastructure by investing in modern stormwater drainage systems that prevent flooding and support long-term community resilience to extreme weather events.

**ENV 7.3** Continue water-quality monitoring programs, including monitoring emerging pollutants like PFAS and microplastics to assess pollution levels and identify areas for intervention.

**ENV 7.4** Support development that increases stormwater retention, such as bioswales, in public and private developments to reduce the burden on municipal infrastructure.

**ENV 7.5** Support incentives for rainwater harvesting and infiltration systems, including permeable pavement, cisterns, and rain barrels.

### 8. INCREASE MATERIAL AND RESOURCE RECYCLING TO REDUCE BURDENS ON THE ENVIRONMENT.

**ENV 8.1** Recover food and compost organics to better manage waste locally.

**ENV 8.2** Reclaim and reuse building materials.

**ENV 8.3** Make it easier to recycle effectively, including through educational and marketing campaigns.

**ENV 8.4** Encourage waste reduction practices.

**ENV 8.5** Attract more circular businesses like package-free shops and thrift stores.

**ENV 8.6** Install better infrastructure and services to avoid litter in business districts.

**ENV 8.7** Support local procurement of goods and services to build a circular economy.

**ENV 8.8** Reduce embedded carbon in building materials and explore opportunities to lower emissions through innovative building material technologies.



Source: City of Evanston

# CHAPTER 9: PARKS, RECREATION, AND OPEN SPACE



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## INTRODUCTION

Parks and open spaces are essential for enhancing people’s physical, mental, and environmental well-being. They improve community health and fitness, elevate quality of life, foster a sense of community, connect people to the natural world, and help preserve natural areas. By providing high-quality parks designed with input from people of all backgrounds, we can increase equitable access and address environmental injustices. A park replacement schedule with equitable components will enable decision-makers to assess how effectively parks meet user needs and determine which parks should be repaired or replaced for the greatest community good.

According to the 2025 Parks and Green Space Strategic Plan, Evanston has five acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, slightly more than half the national average.<sup>1</sup> Communities with high-quality parks tend to have higher property values and attract residents seeking desirable neighborhoods. Making sure all residents have safe access to high-quality parks and open spaces promotes social justice and enhances quality of life. By bridging equity gaps and encouraging participation, Evanston can address the impacts of its past inequitable practices.

POLICY	POLICY STATEMENT
1	Assess existing park and recreation programming and investment levels in all neighborhoods.
2	Align and expand park programming to provide inclusive activities for people of all ages and abilities, adapting to changing community needs and climate impacts.
3	Increase city investment to maintain, operate, and improve equitable park and recreational facilities.
4	Sustain or expand strategies to increase water access.
5	Evaluate and establish a plan to create an accessible public restroom system.
6	Focus on stewardship, education, and investments in urban habitats and natural landscapes citywide.
7	Maintain and execute the 2025 Parks and Green Space Strategic Plan as the primary blueprint for Parks and Recreation.
8	Develop a plan to increase land as it becomes available in areas with a greater need for more parkland until the national average is met.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

Evanston boasts a large variety of community parks, with a total of 89 parks of various sizes offering diverse amenities. The extensive network of public spaces in Evanston includes open and natural spaces in which residents can be active and enjoy nature, including the lakefront and trails along the North Shore Channel. Other spaces, including plazas downtown, community centers, and libraries, are more urban and civic in nature and provide for communal gatherings and social interactions and functions.

The system features 221.5 acres of neighborhood parks, including recreation fields, facilities, and playgrounds serving local communities. Additionally, there are 63 acres designated as community parks that offer larger active fields and specialized facilities, alongside community centers. Evanston has 11.2 acres of beaches, 1.3 acres of tot lots, and 61 acres of undefined open space, providing a varied and inclusive recreational landscape for residents.

The park system is managed by several owners and operators. The City of Evanston owns the majority, managing a total of 213.1 acres. Regional entities like the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) of Greater Chicago and Cook County own land bordering the North Shore Channel of the Chicago Area Waterway System that runs from Evanston’s northeast border, with Wilmette to the southeast corner bordering Chicago and Skokie, and Perkins Woods, a one-block forest preserve in northwestern Evanston. In addition, there are two independent park districts, Ridgeville and Lighthouse, that manage varying portions of parkland in different parts of Evanston, which adds complexity to the City’s ability to meet community needs. Evanston also has a memorandum of understanding with the Skokie Park District to provide Evanston residents access to their pool, Channelside Park sports fields, and Pooch Park Dog Park.

Evanston is proud of its well-distributed and accessible park system, which is illustrated by Figure 4. Responses to the Parks and Green Spaces Community Survey, conducted in 2023 by ETC Institute, indicate that 98 percent of 469 respondents had visited at least one park, recreation center, beach, or other public recreation facility within the last year.<sup>2</sup> Notably, 29 percent rated the overall condition of the parks as excellent, while 56 percent rated conditions as good. However, the accessibility of parks doesn’t automatically equate to meeting the evolving needs of users. The Evanston Parks and Recreation Department offers over 2,875 fitness,

sports, aquatics, environmental, and recreation classes and special events annually. High park usage from community engagement may lead to increased wear and tear. Future park designs should prioritize maintenance requirements and user experience to inform both programming and park planning effectively.

## NOTABLE SPACES

Evanston features an expansive park system that offers the unique opportunity to enjoy the wonders and offerings of Lake Michigan. Parks cover about 50 percent of the Evanston shoreline and offer unique access to spectacular views, sailing opportunities, boat launches, beaches for both humans and dogs, sand dunes, picnic areas, playgrounds, preserved bird habitats, and recreational spaces. The park system boasts a variety of community centers that help provide enriching experiences for patrons. A map of Evanston’s parks can be seen in Figure 4.

There are several local and national historic sites throughout our parklands. **The Noyes Cultural Arts Center (NCAC)** was originally designed as an elementary school by renowned architect Daniel Burnham in 1892 and expanded under the direction of Lawrence Perkins in 1949.<sup>3</sup> Today, the NCAC provides studio space to artists and features theatre and visual arts programming.

**The Harley Clarke Mansion<sup>4</sup>** is a historic English Tudor mansion. The City of Evanston purchased the property from the Sigma Chi National Fraternity in 1965 as part of the development of the Lighthouse Landing Park.<sup>5</sup> The property is a great example of Evanston’s rich historical offerings.



Source: City of Evanston



Source: City of Evanston

The **Jens Jensen Gardens**, associated with the **Harley Clarke Mansion**, allows community members and visitors to experience landscape design from one of the foremost landscape architects of the 20th century. The grounds and water features, as well as the council ring, are popular destinations and are maintained by a dedicated group of volunteers.

Evanston is the proud owner of the **Gross Pointe Lighthouse**, which is part of the **Lighthouse Landing Complex**. The complex includes the City of Evanston parks properties and the Lighthouse Park District park space, the lighthouse, and the fog houses. Leased to the Lighthouse Park District, this member of the National Register of Historic Places is a key identifier of Evanston. The lighthouse is a popular attraction for visitors and serves as the symbol of Evanston in the City's logo. The property boasts a garden maintained by the Garden Club of Evanston and is a Certified Wildlife Habitat registered with The National Wildlife Federation, through its Garden for Wildlife program.

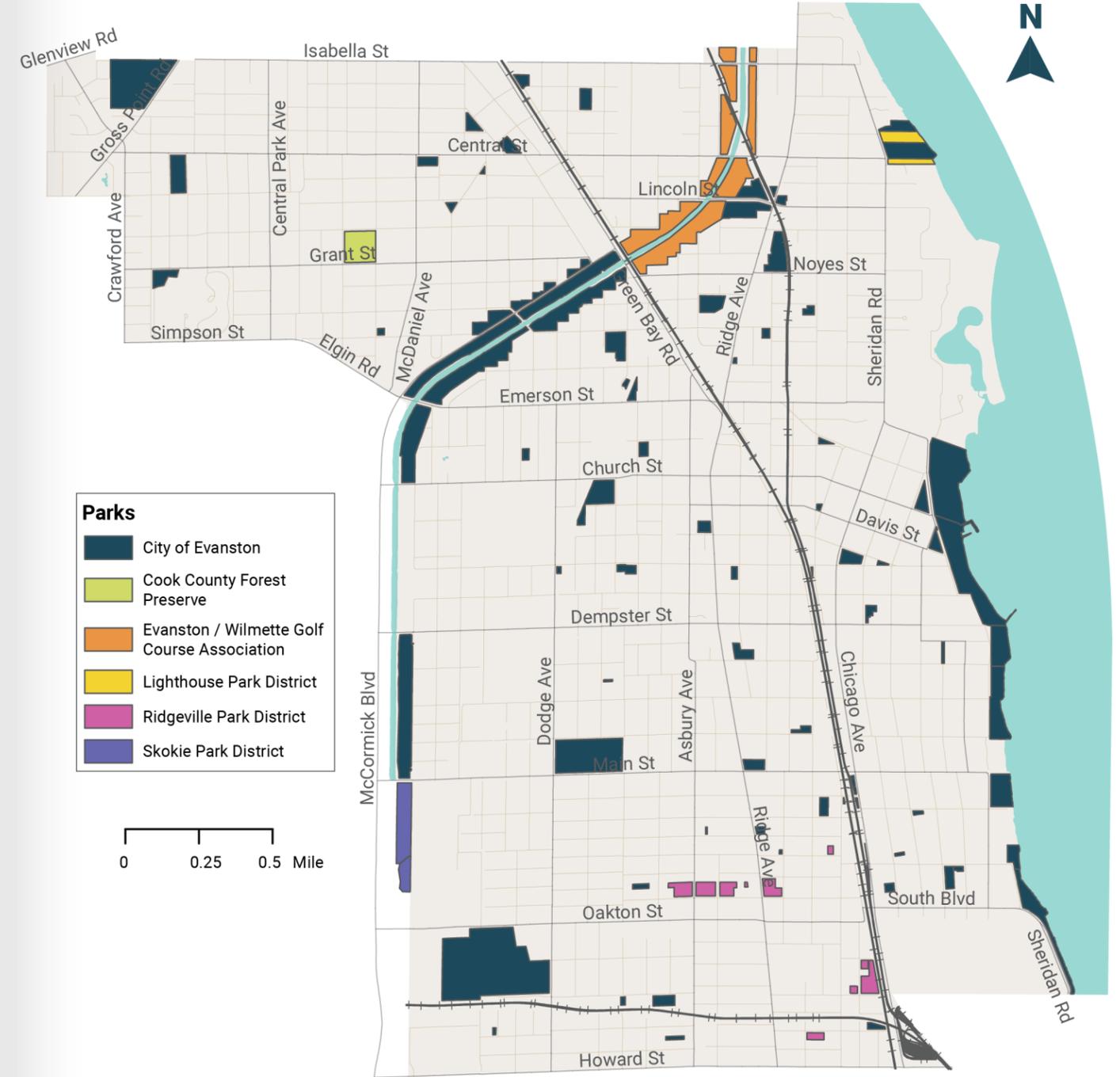
The **Sand Dunes at Lighthouse Beach** are the only publicly owned and accessible sand dunes in Evanston. These dunes were added in the 1970s and have become an important venue for ecological programming as well as a popular area for visitors to enjoy a wind-blown landform with unique characteristics.<sup>6</sup> The Dunes feature a variety of native plants and are maintained by a dedicated group of volunteers. The Dunes are a program site for environmental education classes and camps organized by the Evanston Ecology Center.

The award-winning **Merrick Rose Garden** is another gem of Evanston's park system. The garden exhibits hundreds of rose varieties and is home to the **Centennial Fountain from Fountain Square**. This site is a popular destination for weddings.

The **Evanston Ecology Center** is located in the **Ladd Arboretum**, which runs between the North Shore Canal and McCormick Boulevard on a narrow strip of land that is home to varieties of trees, gardens, sculptures, bicycle paths, and habitat restoration projects. The **Grady Bird Sanctuary** is also located here, and will become home to a new canoe launch facility in the future. The Arboretum is an area of natural beauty. The Evanston Ecology Center serves as the education nucleus of the Arboretum, presenting many programs throughout the year.

**Clark Street Beach** is not only a popular local spot but also serves as a crucial haven for migrating birds. Spanning two acres, the Bird Sanctuary, located on the beach, provides a safe refuge for birds as they travel along the lakefront. This area plays an essential role in supporting birds during their migration, a particularly vulnerable period in their journey. The sanctuary's success is largely due to the efforts of a committed group of volunteers who tend to the area. They help maintain the space, offering a peaceful and supportive environment for the birds as they rest and refuel.

FIGURE 4. PARKS



Source: City of Evanston

**The Evans at Canal Shores** (formerly known as Canal Shores) is managed by KemperSports and is a 3600-yard, par 60-yard layout. While the land is owned by MWRD, the city leases the property and subleases the property to the Evanston Wilmette Golf Course Association. This property is known for its green space, which provides golfing and other recreational opportunities for community members.

**The Lakefront** is a hub for year-round activities including swimming, camps, rentals, lessons, and special events. Visitors can enjoy parks, playgrounds, bike and pedestrian paths, picnic areas, and public restrooms. Within the Lakefront are several notable areas and facilities:

- **The Arrington Lagoon** features beautiful views of fountains, Lake Michigan, the lagoon patio and building, as well as wildlife.
- **Six sandy beaches** are open for swimming from Memorial Day to Labor Day and attract over 160,000 visitors annually.
  - Clark Street Beach
  - Greenwood Street Beach
  - Lee Street Beach
  - Lighthouse Beach
  - Lincoln Street Beach (managed by Northwestern University)
  - South Boulevard Beach
- **Evanston Dog Beach** is a popular off-leash destination for many canine friends and their owners. The dog beach provides an opportunity for dogs to swim, run, and mingle on the shore of Lake Michigan.
- **Two boat launches**
  - Dempster Street Beach Launch Facility - open to nonmotorized vessels
  - Church Street Power Boat Launch - open to motorized vessels.
- **Parks**
  - Clark Square
  - Dawes Park
  - Elliott Park
  - Garden Park
  - Burnham Shores
  - Lawrence O. Lawson Park
  - Lighthouse Landing Park
  - Lunt Park
  - Patriots Park

- Northwestern University manages two lakefront sites open to the public – the **NU Sailing Center** and **Lincoln Street Beach**.

## KEY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

To better understand the condition of existing parks and facilities, a thorough conditions assessment of 154 park amenities was conducted in 2023. The assessment used an integrative approach based on observed conditions during park inventory, the recommended lifecycle from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) Useful Life Criteria, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance outlined in the Evanston ADA Transition Plan. Overall, about two-thirds of the 154 amenities were rated poor or very poor, largely based on facility ages that exceeded the recommended useful life. The assessment found that current funding and maintenance levels available to replace a significant number of park amenities within recommended timeframes are inadequate. Numerous playgrounds, sports fields, and courts have surpassed their recommended lifespan. Playgrounds emerged as a distinct trend in the data because Evanston has substantially more playgrounds than neighboring communities. While many residents have over four playgrounds within a 10-minute walk, a staggering 78 percent are currently in poor or very poor condition. The previous city plan notes that the national standard for park space is 10 acres per 1,000 residents. Evanston falls far below that standard, but because the city is already built out and unlikely to acquire new land, the City must prioritize current park maintenance.

The park system is well-loved, but investment in maintenance has been insufficient to provide the level of experience that users expect. Increased and equitable investment in facilities and services, including those geared toward early childhood development, aged populations, and recreational offerings, will improve quality of life, foster community pride, increase property values, and increase tourism. The inclusion of early childhood development components can provide all children with the opportunity to cultivate social, emotional, motor, cognitive, and literacy skills. Intergenerational design elements increase the appeal and relevance of the parks for everyone. Establishing parks and recreational facilities designed with a focus on public need and robust community

engagement can improve current offerings. A dedicated replacement schedule with appropriate funding will ensure that recreational assets provide safe, relevant, and healthy opportunities for all.

**Parks are easy to access, but there is insufficient acreage per resident.** Evanston's park system, which includes 10 parks in the Ridgeville Park District, three in the Lighthouse Park District, Channel Side and Pooch Parks in the Skokie Park District, and a Cook County Forest Preserve site, has one park for every 987 residents. However, it offers only five acres of parkland per 1,000 residents—just over half the national average. Although park accessibility is comparatively high, the supply does not necessarily meet the community's growing needs or provide equitable facilities and services.

**The system offers diverse amenities, though unevenly distributed.** Amenity mix is determined by calculating the number of a certain amenity type per 1,000 residents. Evanston offers a greater quantity of amenities than peer cities, but these amenities are not evenly distributed. In the northern central and southeastern areas of Evanston, residents have access to over six types of amenities within walking distance, such as ice-skating rinks, dog parks, and tennis courts. Conversely, residents in western Evanston along the Skokie border have much less variety.

**Park facilities are outdated with uneven conditions.** Maintenance investment has been insufficient to provide the level of experience that park users expect. The quality of individual parks and amenities differ substantially. Community members have emphasized the need for enhanced park infrastructure and focus on daily maintenance. Frequently mentioned improvements needed for park infrastructure included servicing or replacing outdated equipment, restrooms, water fountains, seating amenities, and pathways. In addition, park infrastructure and amenities do not always match the needs based on neighborhood demographics. Taking these parameters into consideration will improve the relevance of park spaces for users.

**Our parks are insufficiently maintained in connection with understaffed teams.** Evanston has a dedicated but relatively small team overseeing its many parks and facilities compared to similar-sized communities within the region and across the country, as well as compared to historic hiring and retention trends within the City of Evanston itself. Daily maintenance emerged as the community's foremost priority during the survey.

**Evanston needs improved access to natural experiences, the water, and lakefront amenities.** Connecting with the natural world was identified as highly desirable in future park planning with an emphasis on natural play elements, native landscaping, and unprogrammed spaces that immerse people in nature. Altering design and maintenance practices by using an ecological approach to plant selection, minimizing the use of non-native grasses in parks, and analyzing historical habitats to predict future plant selection will mitigate the negative impacts of climate change. Improving access to beaches and waterfront facilities was consistently mentioned as a top priority for investment.

**Improved inclusion and access can enhance our park system.** Community members shared a variety of barriers that limited their participation in programs and park spaces – especially limited time and lack of awareness. Financial and physical constraints limit some residents' ability to engage with the City's parks and participate in programs. In focus groups, youth and senior residents expressed a shared desire for more inclusive programs and accessible facilities that cater to people of all ages and abilities, emphasizing the importance of diversity and accessibility in Evanston's park system.

**Investment in the Parks System is a necessity.** Years of underinvestment in the park system, staffing, and amenities have brought it to a critical point. With 11 parks with playgrounds that have not been renovated for at least 25 years, investment and updating of the park system can no longer be delayed. With no action, four additional parks will fall into this category in 2025. As zoning codes evolve and populations shift, there will be a growing need to adapt the park system to meet future challenges. Maintaining dedicated capital improvement staff and park system budgets will help improve the current situation where staff time and budgets are divided.

## POLICIES AND ACTIONS

### 1. ASSESS EXISTING PARK AND RECREATION PROGRAMMING AND INVESTMENT LEVELS IN ALL NEIGHBORHOODS.

**PO 1.1** Evaluate program lifespans, park usage, and attendance in accordance with the City's Parks Master Plan.

**PO 1.2** Recognize and evaluate national trends in recreation and leisure studies and be at the forefront of supplying these opportunities to address current and future programming needs.

**PO 1.3** Determine a threshold for the amount of programming a park can support to prevent overprogramming an area that would decrease the positive impacts of the space.

### 2. ALIGN AND EXPAND EXISTING PARK PROGRAMMING TO PROVIDE INCLUSIVE PROGRAMS FOR PEOPLE OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES, INCLUDING ADAPTABILITY TO CHANGING COMMUNITY NEEDS AND CLIMATE IMPACTS.

**PO 2.1** Develop outdoor education programs in partnership with schools and conservation organizations that encourage youth engagement in forest stewardship, wildlife monitoring, and environmental restoration efforts.

**PO 2.2** Support local community groups and organizations in their activities related to improving habitat in green spaces.

**PO 2.3** Invest in right-sizing staffing needs to meet community expectations.

**PO 2.4** Prioritize access and eliminate barriers for residents of all abilities with the greatest unmet needs.

**PO 2.5** Develop criteria to ensure programming meets Evanston's equity, inclusion, and accessibility goals.

### 3. INCREASE CITY INVESTMENT TO MAINTAIN, OPERATE, AND IMPROVE EQUITABLE PARK AND RECREATIONAL FACILITIES.

**PO 3.1** Develop and right-size staffing and implement a training plan to maintain existing facilities.

**PO 3.2** Assess the condition of park facilities and identify equity, inclusivity, and proper amenities needed to align with the demographics of communities served.

**PO 3.3** Develop a multiyear capital improvement and funding plan that includes a park replacement matrix with equity components to support inclusive programs for all ages and abilities.

### 4. SUSTAIN OR INCREASE EFFORTS TO EXPAND WATER ACCESS.

**PO 4.1** Connect the community through a mix of programs and amenities.

**PO 4.2** Invest in offerings that meet community desires for swimming and waterfront views.

**PO 4.3** Increase investment in North Shore Channel.

**PO 4.4** Complete the design and build of the canoe launch facility in collaboration with the Evanston Environmental Association.

### 5. EVALUATE AND ESTABLISH A PLAN TO CREATE AN ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC RESTROOM SYSTEM.

**PO 5.1** Develop a list of existing and potential placement of public bathrooms.

**PO 5.2** Identify parks and public spaces where the current infrastructure could use a bathroom for programming offerings.

**PO 5.3** Identify funding sources to allow for the development and upkeep of the proposed system.



Source: City of Evanston

### 6. INCREASE STRATEGIES FOCUSED ON STEWARDSHIP, EDUCATION, AND INVESTMENTS IN URBAN HABITATS AND NATURAL LANDSCAPES THROUGHOUT THE CITY.

**PO 6.1** Enhance existing naturalized landscapes in a coordinated effort to improve the connectivity, quality, and resilience of the network.

**PO 6.2** Utilize technology to increase ecological knowledge.

**PO 6.3** Manage volunteerism and partnerships to restore naturalized landscapes in alignment with the City's goals.

### 7. MAINTAIN AND EXECUTE THE 2025 PARKS AND GREEN SPACE STRATEGIC PLAN AS THE PRIMARY BLUEPRINT FOR PARKS AND RECREATION.

**PO 7.1** Prioritize recommendations and improvements.

**PO 7.2** Implement items after strategizing with internal departments.

**PO 7.3** Update and adjust the strategic plan over the expected 15-year lifespan.

**PO 7.4** Fund a new strategic plan once the existing plan has outlived its relevant lifespan of 10 to 15 years.

These policies and strategies should be applied in conjunction with the guiding principles and goals contained in the 2025 Parks and Green Space Strategic Plan, which is in development.