

Oro Valley unveils Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment

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Oro Valley's long anticipated Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment Report has been completed. During the May 19 council study session, the key findings of the report were discussed, laying down the foundation for where and how Oro Valley will invest in recreational services for the next five to 10 years.

The community input obtained for the report identified four key recreational amenities that residents in Oro Valley overwhelmingly want more of: open space conservation areas, hard and soft surface trails and swimming pools and splash pads.

"All four of those certainly outpace all of the other opportunities, not to say that the others aren't important to your community, they just weren't as important as open space, trails and swimming pools," said Mike Svetz, a principal of PROS Consulting, which assisted the town with the assessment.

The report shows a significant interest from residents in preserving the closed golf course at Rancho Vistoso as open space, which contradicts current plans to develop some of the property into single-family houses, casitas and a potential senior care facility.

Community respondents also indicated they want the town to reinvest in the community center and two town-owned 18-hole golf courses, and provide more trails connected to existing parks. Out of all town-owned amenities, Steam Pump Ranch and paved trails are the most frequently used by residents.

Outreach for the needs assessment consisted of focus groups and town hall meetings, a project website and multiple surveys. Feedback from the meetings suggested that park development can lead to economic development, and that by investing in their park system and facilities, the town could in turn attract new businesses and opportunities to the area.

“The aquatic center and the golf course are likely your two largest economic drivers from a park and recreation systems perspective,” Svetz said.

Oro Valley has roughly 46,000 residents. In 15 years, the population is projected to grow to 55,000 people. Nearly 50 percent of Oro Valley residents are aged 55 years or older. By 2034, it is projected that nearly 60 percent will be 55 years or older.

Councilmember Rhonda Piña said that although the population consists of mostly older residents, families with children also live in Oro Valley and the town should be able to grow child-friendly amenities for them as well.

“There were a couple generations of kids who did not have some of the amenities that we would have liked to have had,” Piña said.

Through a statistically valid survey—which Svetz said is the only “scientific and defensible method” to understand community needs—residents indicated that without increasing taxes, they want the town to invest money in maintaining existing park facilities and services, purchasing land to preserve open space and expand trails in existing parks.

Feedback from the survey also indicated that in general, Oro Valley does not have enough parks, restroom buildings and open space areas.

“All of this—the community expressed to us—really needs to be rooted in financial strategies that are sustainable to take care of what you already have, but strategically grow the system in the direction that allows for the greatest level of productivity of park and recreation spaces in the town,” Svetz said.

Luckily, 95 percent of Oro Valley’s parks and recreation facilities were given a condition rating by its residents that exceeded national averages. Town facilities across the board were overwhelmingly rated as “good” or “excellent.”

However, the recreational programs and services provided by the town received mostly “fair” or “poor” ratings. Svetz said this is likely because the town is hosting programs in places that are currently undergoing capital improvements, such as the community center, or they aren’t hosting them in the right place at all.

Mayor Joe Winfield noted that the survey also shows resident interest in expanding the town's offerings to include fitness and wellness programs, adult learning classes and senior programs and services. He questioned whether the issue with programs was one of quantity or quality.

"I think it's a combination of both," Svetz responded. "Part of the discussion ... is what are the inherent issues that are creating the quality issue? I think it's always important to get the quality right, first and foremost, and then once you get the quality right, you then [consult] your community about where to expand the programs and services that you directly provide to your community."

Svetz said COVID-19 actually provides an opportunity to reimagine programs in a creative way that prioritizes quality first. He believes the expansion might be limited for the next few years anyway because of the virus and its associated financial impacts.

Councilmember Melanie Barrett said she wants future planning to focus on providing equity between neighborhoods and age demographics when it comes to recreation.

"Obviously trails and open spaces came out really high on the list," Barrett said. "And that doesn't surprise me because I know how important open space and trails are to our community, and I know that they could be used for every age group."

Svetz said the next steps will include a level of service analysis to determine how well each amenity provides access to various residents.

Within the next five to six months, PROS Consulting and the Town of Oro Valley will be working on establishing level of service standards, a recreation programming assessment, a capital improvement plan, funding strategies and more in order to finalize plans for the future of the town's parks and recreation department.

Svetz said that parks and recreation facilities aren't viewed as infrastructure in the same way that roads and buildings are. These facilities have life cycles, he said, and those costs will be accounted for in whatever plans they finalize with.

"We are a firm that is not going to give you a bunch of visionary recommendations," Svetz told the council. "We are going to give you recommendations that are realistic, implementable and financially sustainable."