

2025 — 2029

Comprehensive Parks & Recreation Master Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



1. MASTER PLAN OVERVIEW

Since its inception in 1991, Carmel Clay Parks & Recreation (“CCPR”) has contributed significantly to the quality of life of the Carmel community. As stewards of public spaces, CCPR recognizes the profound impact parks and recreation have on the physical, social, and environmental well-being of the community. Building on CCPR’s 33-year history, the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan (“Master Plan”) serves as a visionary roadmap that will guide CCPR toward sustainable development, equitable access, and the cultivation of vibrant spaces that will foster a sense of belonging for generations.

CCPR manages and maintains nearly 692 park acres and numerous recreation facilities, including the Monon Community Center, The Waterpark, Ralph L. Wilfong Pavilion, and Jill Perelman Pavilion. In addition, CCPR partners with Carmel Clay Schools to offer Extended School Enrichment (“ESE”), an afterschool care program for K-6 grade students located at all 11 Carmel elementary schools. The Summer Camp Series is a component of ESE that offers 13 different summer camps accommodating children ages 5-15. CCPR’s over 650 employees serve millions of visitors each year.

CCPR is recognized as one of the best and most innovative park and recreation agencies in the nation, receiving the National Gold Medal for Excellence in Park and Recreation Management in 2014 and 2020, the highest honor for a municipal park and recreation system.

The department is one of only 203 agencies nationwide that is nationally accredited, demonstrating its commitment to utilizing industry best practices. CCPR has also received national, regional, and state awards for the design of its parks and facilities, outstanding programs, excellence in providing services to people with disabilities, and commitment to environmental stewardship.

A trademark of CCPR, the Master Plan was developed based on extensive community engagement. This inclusive process involved various outreach methods such as community focus groups, an intercept survey at “pop-up-events,” key stakeholder interviews, public forums, and a statistically valid needs analysis survey, alongside an online survey open to all residents and visitors. Merging insights gleaned from these interactions with the community with technical analysis, the final Master Plan serves to guide the management and development of the park system for the next 5+ years to ensure continued high-quality experiences and services for the community.

2. PROJECT PROCESS

The Master Plan followed a process of data collection, public input, on-the-ground study, assessment of existing conditions, market research, and open dialogue with local leadership and key stakeholders. The project process followed a planning path, as illustrated in **Figure 1**:

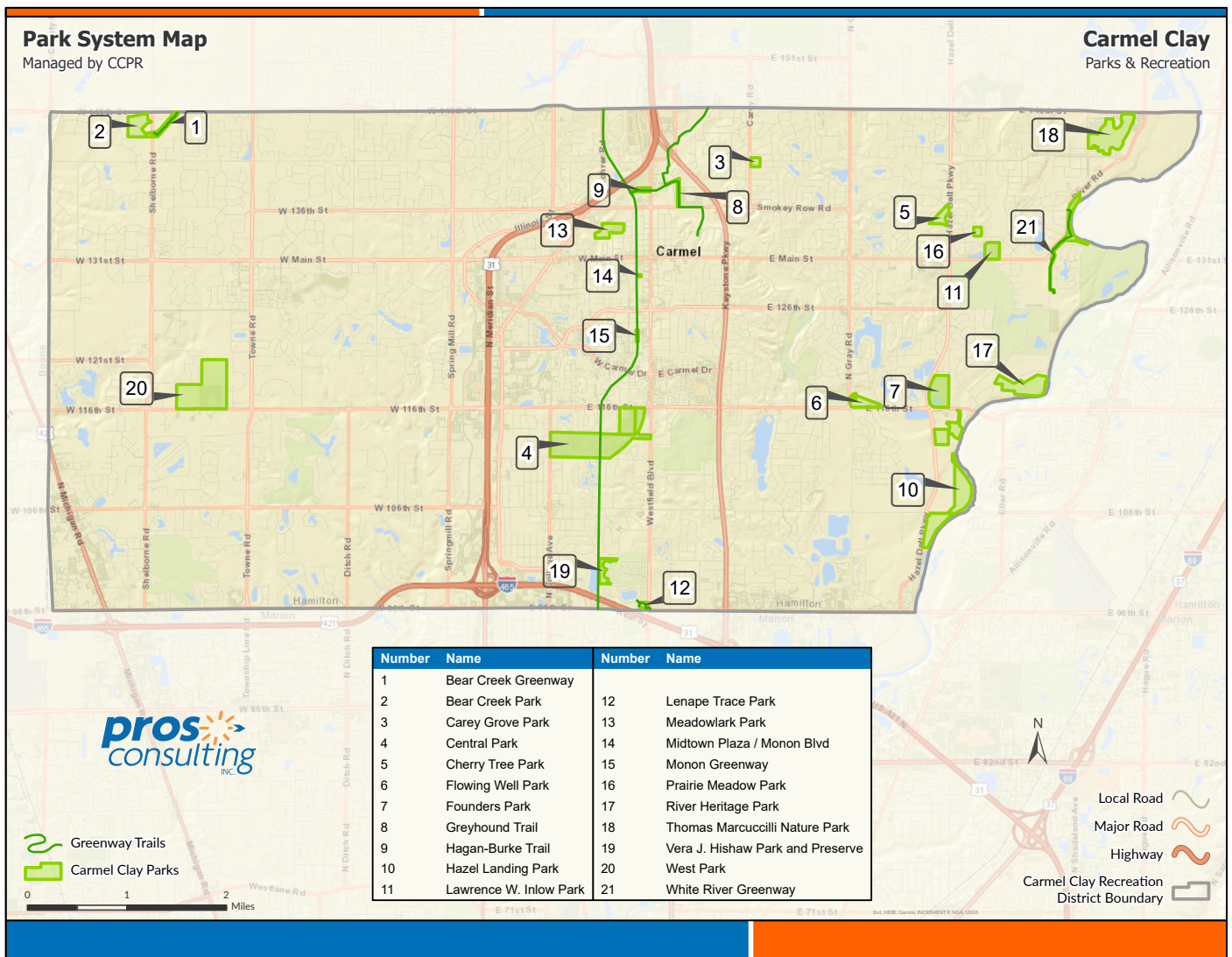


FIGURE 1 - PROJECT PROCESS

3. CURRENT PARKS MAP AND DEFINITION OF PLANNING AREA

The planning area for this Master Plan includes all areas within the boundaries of the City of Carmel. While this plan recognizes that the actual service areas of some CCPR parks, facilities, and programs may extend beyond the defined boundaries of the planning area, the primary purpose of this plan is to first and foremost identify and address the park and recreation needs of Carmel residents. **Map 1** depicts the planning area and location of CCPR parks and greenways.

TOTAL ACRES: 691.86



MAP 1 - CCPR PARK SYSTEM MANAGED BY CCPR

4. VISION AND MISSION

The following outlines the foundational framework for CCPR including vision and mission (**Figure 2**), as well as guiding principles shown below:



FIGURE 2 - CCPR VISION AND MISSION

5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following principles were used to organize the strategies outlined in this plan. Guiding Principles are also the foundation for establishing department and employee goals throughout the planning period.

ENHANCING PARK AND RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Through inspiring parks and innovative services, CCPR contributes to the quality of life and economic vitality of its community.

PROVIDE EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

In a city renowned for its world class parks and facilities, CCPR is dedicated to providing excellent customer service to everyone.

ENSURE THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PARK AND RECREATION SYSTEM

By creating an environmentally and financially sustainable system, CCPR will ensure parks are available for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.

6. CORE VALUES

The following outlines the foundational framework for CCPR's Core Values (**Figure 3**):

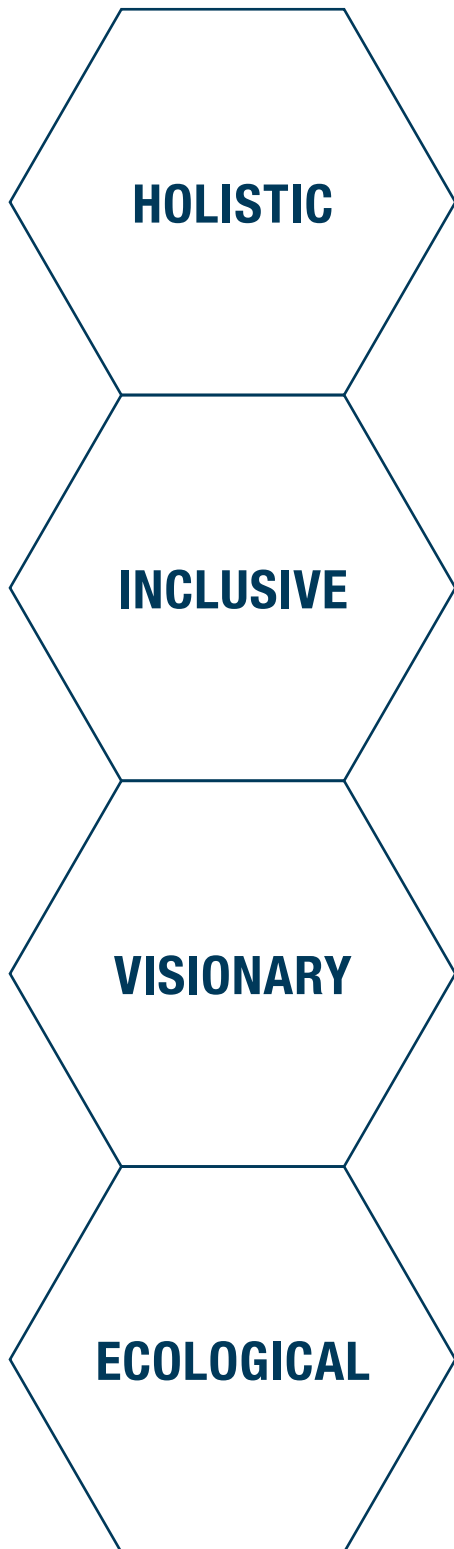


FIGURE 3 - CCPR CORE VALUES

HOLISTIC

For Our Community: Whether in a park or program, you are part of our community. CCPR focuses on positive mental, physical, and environmental health.

For Our Team: We are in the business of people. Our staff are more than their job titles. We value what makes each of us unique, whether it's on or off the job. We know we're not perfect, but we're always striving to show up and learn.

INCLUSIVE

For Our Community: CCPR intentionally develops opportunities for everyone to safely play, learn, and grow.

For Our Team: We understand that our differences are what make us better. We value diverse ideas and backgrounds in our team because they foster growth and forward-thinking.

VISIONARY

For Our Community: Through innovation, CCPR creates state-of-the-art parks, facilities, and engaging programs.

For Our Team: We're movers and shakers. The future is always top of mind, and our vision inspires what we do every single day.

ECOLOGICAL

For Our Community: CCPR continues its pledge to be good stewards of parkland through sustainable choices and environmental education.

For Our Team: We consistently ask how our practices can be more sustainable. We understand that the choices we make today have long-term effects on the world around us.

7. STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

ENHANCE PARK AND RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE COMMUNITY:

- ✓ Acquire additional parks and natural areas, especially in underserved areas.
- ✓ Expand trails, river access, and environmental education along the White River Regional Corridor.
- ✓ Facilitate implementation of a West Regional Corridor.
- ✓ Develop a coordinated Vision Plan for parks and public spaces within Central Carmel.
- ✓ Develop environmental educational facilities and programs.
- ✓ Seek innovative solutions to serve identified underserved and unserved populations.

PROVIDE EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES:

- ✓ Continue to reimagine existing parks through effective planning and appropriate updates.
- ✓ Create nature preserve experiences throughout the park system.
- ✓ Provide a diverse selection of facilities and amenities to accommodate indoor and outdoor recreational pursuits.
- ✓ Balance and expand program opportunities throughout the community.
- ✓ Balance and expand volunteer opportunities throughout the community.
- ✓ Continue reinvestments in revenue facilities by adding or replacing amenities.
- ✓ Attract and retain high-performing employees.
- ✓ Examine internal and external communication efforts.



ENSURE THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PARK AND RECREATION SYSTEM:

- ✓ Develop a long-term funding plan.
- ✓ Continue and expand conservation management practices throughout the park system.
- ✓ Expand environmental education and park stewardship programming to increase appreciation for natural resources.
- ✓ Align business practices to achieve 100% cost recovery for Recreation & Facilities Division and Extended School Enrichment Division.
- ✓ Use Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to drive data-driven decisions regarding services and operations.

8. “FOURWARD” FOCUS

CCPR should aim to fulfill all the recommendations outlined in this Master Plan. However, the following top four (4) priorities are crucial for the next five (5) years. Achieving these goals will necessitate persistent effort and community support, along with collaboration from elected officials, Park Board members, and CCPR. Successfully implementing these objectives will ensure that CCPR remains responsive to the community’s needs and continues to be one of the best-managed park and recreation systems in the country. Here are the key recommendations:

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

- ✔ Secure dedicated funding source(s).
- ✔ Protect use of impact fees for park and recreation infrastructure.
- ✔ Renegotiate interlocal agreement between City and Township.

WHITE RIVER CORRIDOR

- ✔ Celebrate and protect Carmel’s most significant natural resource.
- ✔ Complete White River Greenway and trail connections.
- ✔ Leverage opportunities for outdoor adventure.
- ✔ Collaborate with partners to enhance stewardship in a regional ecosystem.

WEST CARMEL GREENSPACE

- ✔ Begin implementation of Bear Creek Park Master Plan.
- ✔ Continue implementation and development of West Park Master Plan.
- ✔ Secure additional parkland and/or help preserve natural areas.

ACHIEVE MORE THROUGH EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

- ✔ Develop and implement Central Carmel Greenspace Vision Plan.
- ✔ Expand opportunities for senior programming.
- ✔ Explore special event opportunities outside Central Carmel.

9. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

CCPR's financial position must be viewed in several different lights. First, due to its successful management practices, CCPR is an undisputed industry leader in achieving high levels of cost recovery in its operations. CCPR has consistently maintained sufficient reserves to weather unforeseen circumstances in its revenue-generating operations, which was most evident during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic during which no tax subsidies were required for the Monon Community Center or Extended School Enrichment programs.

Second, the City of Carmel has consistently provided additional tax funding necessary for CCPR's General Fund operations to support the expanding amenities in the park system without the capacity to generate revenue. This places the department in a sound position to maintain the recently renovated parks, thanks in large part to the Clay Township Impact Program, and newer park spaces like Monon Boulevard and Midtown Plaza, developed by the City of Carmel.

Third, from 2019-2023, CCPR has made \$59.4 million in capital investments to the park system, predominantly from Central Park Bond LIT and bond proceeds from the Clay Township Impact Program (CTIP). The City of Carmel has likewise contributed through the development of Monon Boulevard and Midtown Plaza, creating valuable park space within a growing Central Carmel.

Fourth, CCPR is exploring additional opportunities to generate earned income with the recent addition of a full-time position dedicated to resource development. This position is tasked with building relationships within the community to secure gifts, donations, sponsorships, and grants that supplement the department's other funding sources. While it is notable CCPR received \$5 million of grants in 2023, it has not historically pursued grants with much effort. The Resource Development Coordinator should help sustain CCPR's efforts to apply for and be awarded grants in the future. At the same time, resource development cannot be viewed as the primary source of capital funding for the park system.

Finally, CCPR faces an uphill challenge with its capital funding that must be addressed immediately for the department to have sustained success. Revenue from impact fees have increasingly been diverted to Carmel Redevelopment Commission projects, impacting the ability to provide new parks and recreation infrastructure aligned with the Master Plan to serve the growing community. More importantly, CCPR will lose its largest recurring source of capital dollars once the Central Park Bond is paid off in January 2025. While Clay Township will retain responsibility for repaying CTIP-related bonds, it will no longer have any contractual obligations under the Interlocal Cooperation Agreement to provide new funding to CCPR.

Without identifying and securing new funding sources, CCPR will not have the financial means to make capital repairs and replacements to existing infrastructure, let alone acquire and develop new assets. If revenue-generating amenities like the Monon Community Center and The Waterpark are not routinely renovated and updated, this will ultimately impact customer satisfaction and result in declining pass sales and revenue, creating a downward cycle for the department. Resolving CCPR's capital funding must be a top objective of the Park Board and elected officials to ensure the long-term success of the park system.





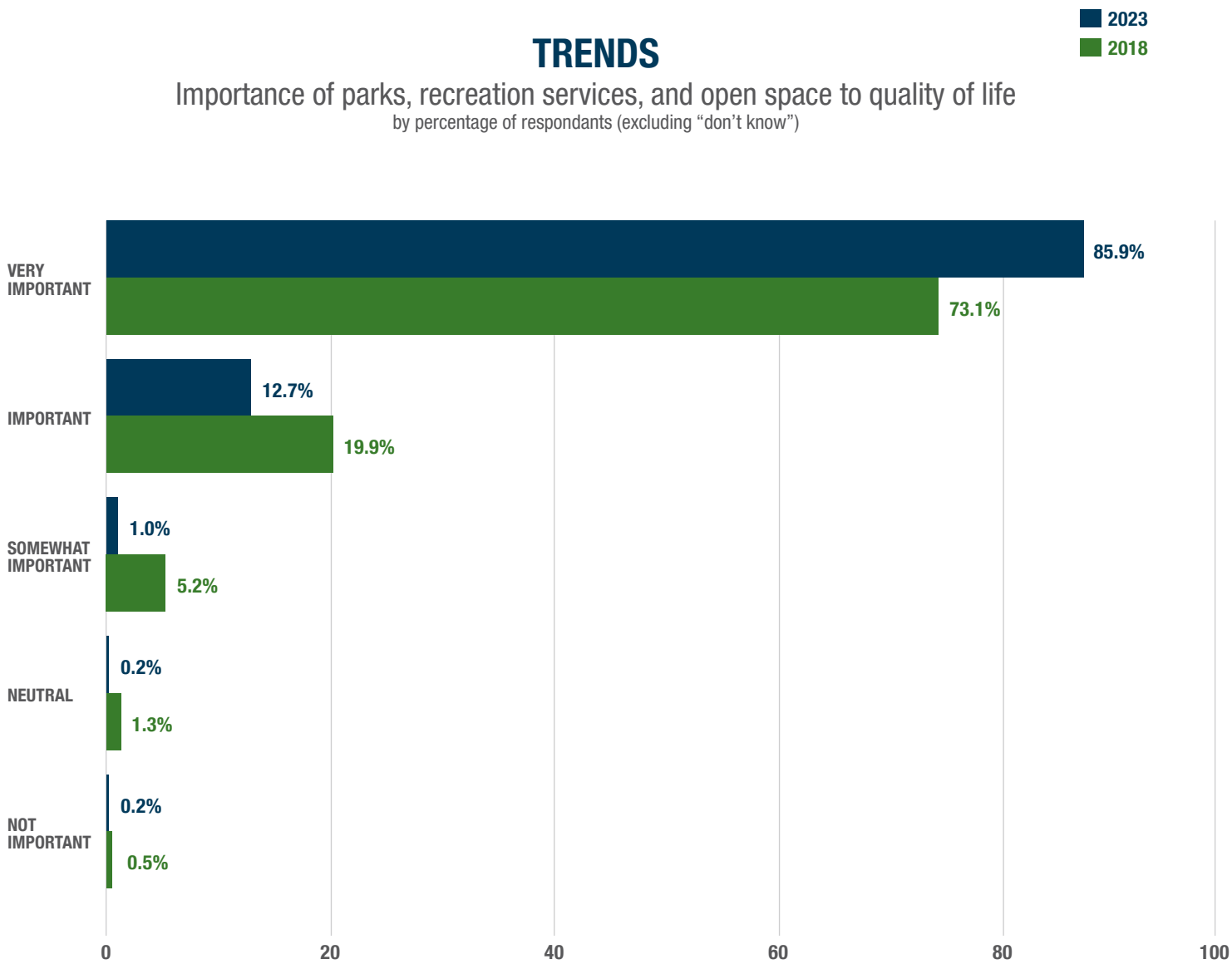
10. CONCLUSION

In its first 33 years of existence, CCPR has achieved an unparalleled level of success in serving the park and recreation needs of the Carmel community. Sound planning grounded on robust public input has been the foundation of this success. This master plan builds upon CCPR's rich history of identifying what residents want from their park and recreation system. Bold new opportunities and strategies for the next five years are identified to sustain and expand upon Carmel's nationally recognized parks and continue meeting expectations of the residents and visitors it serves.

While this master plan provides a blueprint for achieving new heights, the goals and objectives outlined within can only be achieved with sufficient funding. With the loss of approximately \$3.5 million annually in Local Income Taxes (LIT) beginning in 2025, a new capital funding strategy must be implemented immediately to successfully meet the identified park and recreation needs of residents.

The consequences of not addressing the funding issue are severe. CCPR's ability to make capital investments to repair and rehabilitate existing park and recreation infrastructure, let alone construct new amenities demanded by the community, will be severely limited without more funding. Failure to make future reinvestments in the Monon Community Center and The Waterpark will impact their appeal and ability to achieve cost recovery. Simply put, without a long-term funding solution, CCPR faces the real risk of a downward spiral both in maintenance standards and customer satisfaction, something residents with high expectations for quality of life will not tolerate.

Despite the funding challenges, the storyline of this master plan is far from doom and gloom. In just three decades, CCPR has become a revered institution within the community. An amazing 99% of residents view parks, recreation, and open space as very important (86%) or important (13%) as shown in **Figure 4**.

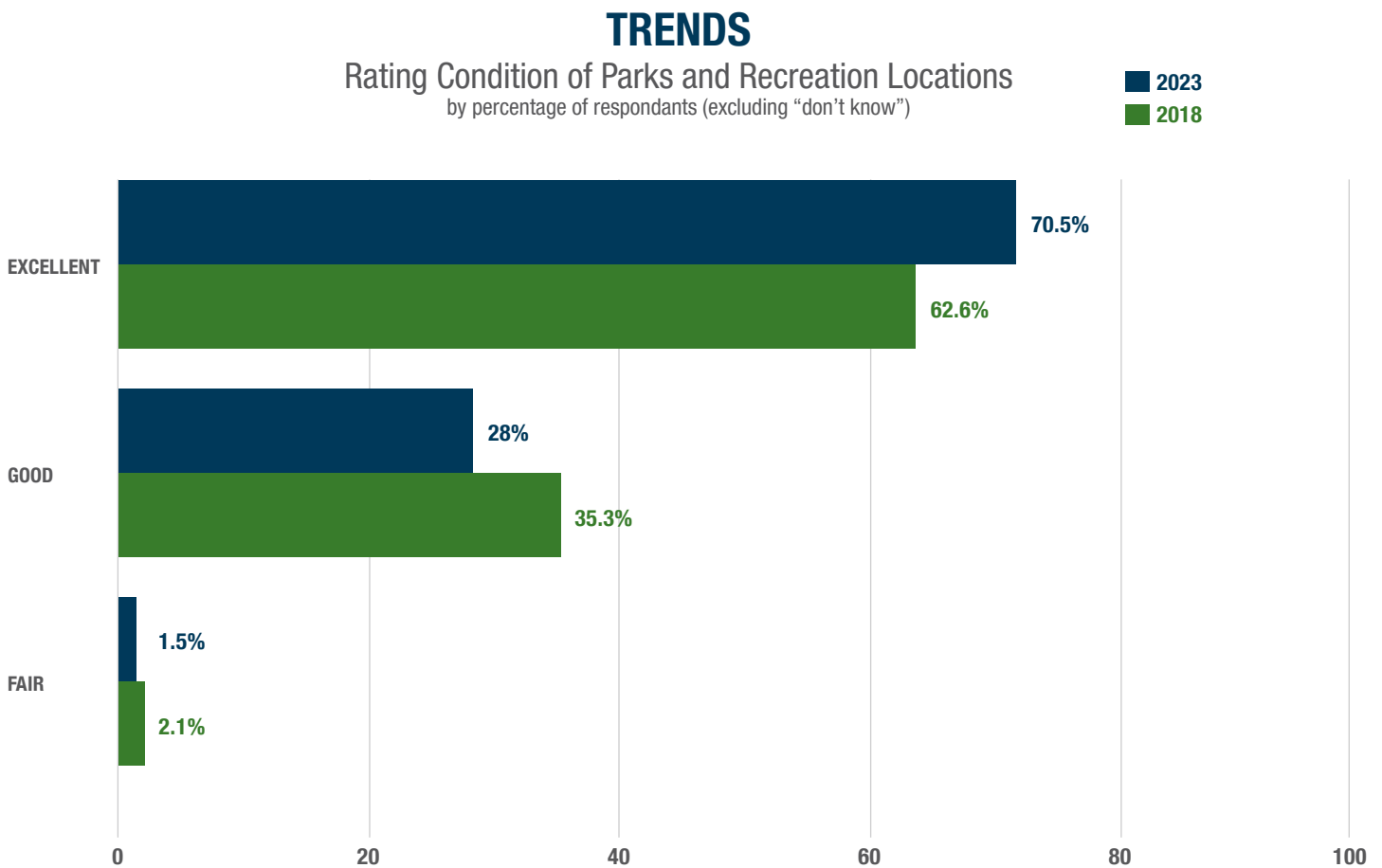


ETC Institute (2023)

FIGURE 4 - TRENDS: IMPORTANCE OF PARK, RECREATION SERVICES, AND OPEN SPACE TO QUALITY OF LIFE

Satisfaction with the overall condition of CCPR locations is similarly high, with 99% ranking them as excellent (71%) and good (28%) as shown in **Figure 5**. To put this in perspective, the national average is 58% - a remarkable 40 percentage points below CCPR. Sound fiscal management has helped CCPR consistently achieve 84% operational cost recovery, compared to a 25% national average. What CCPR has accomplished is truly special and something seldom replicated by other communities. This should give elected officials confidence to continue investing in CCPR.

The pathway chosen by community leaders will have a profound determination on CCPR’s future success. For a park and recreation system created through local grassroot efforts, Carmel and Clay Township residents have always been the driving force behind CCPR. Based on tremendous community support, as well as a high level of commitment from community leaders, the likelihood of overcoming the funding challenge is high. With this plan for a dynamic and transformative future now finalized, it is time to move forward and get things done!



ETC Institute (2023)

FIGURE 5 - TRENDS: RATING CONDITION OF PARKS AND RECREATION LOCATIONS