

DESIGNING PARKS FOR ALL AGES

What Older Adult Park Audits Can Teach Communities About Access, Belonging, and Public Space

**A report on the Age Friendly Olmsted County park audit initiative prepared for
Age-Friendly Minnesota Technical Assistance Grant reporting.**

Dave Beal
Age Friendly Olmsted County
Family Service Rochester
July 2026

AGE FRIENDLY
OLMSTED COUNTY
Livable communities for longer lives.



Acknowledgments

Age Friendly Olmsted County is led by Family Service Rochester. The park-audit work described here was made possible through the participation of older residents, neighborhood leaders, community volunteers, Age-Friendly Minnesota, Rochester Parks and Recreation staff and leadership, the Rochester Park Board, and other public and community partners. The report recognizes the practical knowledge contributed by residents who walked sites, completed worksheets, joined focus groups, reviewed concepts, and described what makes a public space usable or unusable in everyday life.

This report draws on AFOC's Community Assessment, 2023-2025 Action Plan, 2023-2025 Progress Report, completed park-audit report, Central Park audit materials, related project records, the Minnesota Field Scan of Older Adults and Nature, and national guidance from AARP, the World Health Organization, the American Planning Association, the National Recreation and Park Association, and other sources listed in Appendix E.

Generative artificial intelligence was used as a writing and research-support tool in the preparation of this report, including assistance with organizing source material, developing draft language, editing, and document structure.

All factual claims, interpretations, recommendations, and citations were reviewed and approved by the author. Responsibility for the final content rests with Age Friendly Olmsted County and Family Service Rochester.

Two companion documents are included with this report: *Parks for All Ages*, a white paper on the age friendly assessment and continuous improvement of parks in the city of Rochester, Minnesota, and the *Central Park Audit Report*, which provides an example of the audit process and findings at one Rochester park.

Although this report was prepared with support from the TAP Grant, it documents a body of work that began before the grant period. The *Parks for All Ages* paper and the Rolling Green Park audit provided an early foundation for the approach later expanded through the grant-supported audits, analysis, and community engagement described in this report.

Contents

Executive Summary

1. Purpose, Scope, and Central Proposition
 2. From Community Assessment to Park Practice
 3. Why Parks Matter Across the Life Course
 4. What All-Ages, All-Abilities Park Design Requires
 5. The AFOC Park-Audit Method
 6. Partnership as the Core Implementation Strategy
 7. Portfolio of Park and Recreation Projects
 8. Central Park: An Exemplar Case Study
 9. Evidence of Strategy, Progress, and Public Value
 10. An I2L2-Informed Interpretation of the Work
 11. Generalizable Lessons for Other Communities
 12. Recommendations for the Next Phase
 13. Conclusion
- Appendices A-C

Executive Summary

Age Friendly Olmsted County (AFOC), led by Family Service Rochester, has developed park audits and related public-space engagement as a practical way to bring older adult experience into municipal planning. The work began with broad findings from the AFOC Community Assessment: public spaces must be truly accessible; people must be safe and feel safe; and greenspace, trails, parks, and connection to nature should be treated as basic community infrastructure rather than optional amenities. The 2023-2025 Action Plan then called for older adult concerns to inform public planning and policy. Park audits became one of the clearest ways to put those commitments into practice.

The value of a park audit lies less in the worksheet than in what happens around it. A useful audit starts with a real decision still open to influence. It brings in people who use the park—and people who avoid it. It slows the walk down enough to notice what is easy to miss from a plan sheet or a drive-by visit. Then someone must turn those observations into information parks staff can use, return the findings to residents, and stay with the work long enough to see what happens next.

AFOC's park-audit practice is best understood as a civic translation function: residents describe how a place works in lived experience; AFOC organizes that knowledge; parks professionals determine how it can responsibly inform public decisions.

The work covers neighborhood parks, established community parks, a historic downtown park, smaller-community sites, a proposed regional recreation complex, and an outdoor fitness partnership. Central Park is the most developed case. Older adult auditors valued its fountain, mature trees, history, shade, quiet character, and downtown location. They also identified uneven surfaces, hard-to-see edges, unstable or unsuitable seating, concerns about lighting and restrooms, conflicts with faster-moving bicycles and scooters, and a lack of regular activity. Their central message was not to remake the park into something else. It was to preserve what gives the park meaning while making it safer, more comfortable, more legible, and more actively used.

The broader project portfolio shows that age-friendly practice can enter the parks system at several points: early site assessment, neighborhood improvement, master planning, capital planning, recreation programming, grant development, and partnership-based implementation. Rolling Green Park connects nearby older residents with practical neighborhood improvements. Martin Luther King Jr. Park and Silver Lake Park demonstrate the value of an age lens in established community spaces. Oronoco extends the practice beyond Rochester. The Sports and Recreation Complex focus groups bring older adult access into major capital discussion. The Soldiers Field FitLot initiative moves from assessment toward installation, fundraising, programming, fall-risk reduction, and intergenerational use.

AFOC should be careful about what it claims. It does not own the parks, control public budgets, conduct engineering reviews, or make final design decisions. The available evidence does show

something worthwhile: aging concerns became more visible in park discussions; a working relationship with Rochester Parks and Recreation grew stronger; resident observations were organized in forms staff could use; and individual park projects became connected to a broader age-friendly purpose. Evidence of direct population-level impact is not yet available.

I2L2—Impact, Influence, Leverage, and Learning—offers a useful way to read this record without turning it into a formal scorecard. The hoped-for impact is straightforward: parks are safer, easier to use, and more welcoming. Getting there also requires influence on planning habits, use of grants and partner resources, and honest learning about when resident input changes a decision and when it does not.

A social health infrastructure lens adds another part of the story. A park is not only a place to exercise or spend time in nature. It can also be where someone sees the same walker each morning, exchanges a few words with a neighbor, watches children play, meets a friend, or simply sits among other people. Those small contacts can matter a great deal after retirement, bereavement, disability, caregiving, reduced driving, or a change in health has narrowed a person's daily world.

Public ownership alone does not make a park socially useful. People must be able to get there, find a comfortable place to stay, understand how the space works, feel welcome, and have some reason to return. That makes absence important evidence. Who is not there? Is the barrier a crossing, a missing bench, a lack of shade, fear of harassment, unfamiliar programming, or the feeling that the place belongs to somebody else?

Principal Conclusions

1. Park access is cumulative. No single feature makes a park age-friendly; usability emerges from the combined performance of arrival routes, surfaces, grades, seating, shade, restrooms, signs, lighting, maintenance, safety, and reasons to visit.
2. Age-friendly design is usually ordinary public design done consistently well. Smooth routes, visible edges, stable seating with arms and backs, shade, clear wayfinding, maintained restrooms, and predictable access benefit people across ages and abilities.
3. Community engagement is most useful before decisions harden. Audits have greatest value when site selection, concept development, maintenance priorities, or programming choices remain open.
4. Relationships are infrastructure. A dependable channel between AFOC and Parks and Recreation may be more consequential than any single audit because it allows future projects to receive earlier and better-informed input.
5. Programming is part of usability. A physically accessible park can remain socially inaccessible when people have little reason to enter, stay, or return.
6. Resident audits complement—but do not replace—technical review. Their value is to reveal lived barriers, confidence, comfort, and patterns of avoidance that standards and plans may not fully capture.
7. Parks also support social health. Their value can be as simple as seeing familiar faces, sitting near activity, meeting a neighbor, bringing a grandchild, or having a public place where one is still part of community life.

1. Purpose, Scope, and Central Proposition

This report has two purposes. First, it documents AFOC’s park audits and related recreation projects for public use, partner learning, and Age-Friendly Minnesota Technical Assistance Grant reporting. Second, it draws practical lessons from the work of communities and park agencies seeking to include older adults in the planning, design, operation, and activation of public spaces.

The report goes beyond listing individual sites. It follows the work from the community assessment into actual park projects, looks closely at the relationship with Rochester Parks and Recreation, separates documented progress from hoped-for results, and identifies what would make the approach more useful the next time.

The central proposition

Older adults need the public park system to work across the full range of human age, ability, confidence, mobility, and life circumstance.

Two common mistakes weaken this work. One is to treat aging as a special concern to be added after the main planning is done. The other is to assume that meeting a minimum accessibility requirement means a place that works well in daily life. A park can meet a standard and still be hard to reach, tiring to cross, confusing, empty, or uncomfortable for someone with limited stamina, low vision, balance concerns, cognitive change, caregiving duties, or fear of falling. AFOC’s role is to make these realities of longer life more visible in ordinary public decisions.

2. From Community Assessment to Park Practice

2.1 Local foundation

Olmsted County joined the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities in 2020. The county asked Family Service Rochester to convene the community assessment and action-planning process. The resulting 2021 assessment and 2022 combined assessment/action-plan publication identified nine findings, including three with direct relevance to parks and public space: people must be safe and feel safe; public spaces must be truly accessible; and greenspace, trails, parks, and connection to nature should be basic not a bonus.

The assessment also emphasized broad inclusion across income, race, ethnicity, geography, and physical or cognitive ability. This matters for park planning because “older adults” are not a uniform user group. A retired homeowner near a downtown park, an older renter without a car, an adult with early cognitive change, a grandparent supervising children, a rural resident, and a person using a mobility device may experience the same park in fundamentally different ways.

2.2 Action-plan connection

The 2023-2025 Action Plan organized AFOC’s work around community supports and health services, aging-in-place readiness, and community engagement. Goal 6—ensuring that the concerns of older adults inform public planning and policy—provides the clearest mandate for park audits. The method converts a broad governance commitment into a visible public practice: asking older residents to examine a real place, record what they experience, and place that knowledge in front of the agency responsible for the site.

2.3 Progress-report context

The 2023-2025 Progress Report described AFOC’s strongest contribution as convening, connecting, and embedding an aging lens in existing community discussions. Walk audits, park audits, public-space reviews, housing work, and recreation engagement were not stand-alone service programs. They were attempts to influence how established systems make decisions. The report also acknowledged the limits: AFOC’s influence is strongest in planning and relationship building, while implementation depends on partner authority, budgets, workforce, and capital cycles.

Local document	Relevant commitment	How the park work responds
Community Assessment (2021)	Public spaces must be accessible; people must be and feel safe; parks and nature are basic.	Audits test those findings at the scale of actual routes, benches, surfaces, amenities, and use.
2023-2025 Action Plan	Older adult concerns should inform public planning and policy.	Residents are engaged as planning contributors rather than only program participants.
2023-2025 Progress Report	AFOC adds value by convening, connecting, and embedding an aging lens.	The park partnership places age-friendly knowledge inside an existing municipal decision system.
TAP Grant work	Use technical assistance to advance park and walk audits and strengthen public-space practice.	The grant supports tools, engagement, documentation, and transfer of lessons.

3. Why Parks Matter Across the Life Course

3.1 Health and movement

Parks can support walking, strength, balance, flexibility, stress reduction, and informal physical activity. Their value is not limited to formal exercise. A short walk to a fountain, a shaded bench, gardening, watching children, or attending a small event can increase movement and time outdoors. For many older adults, the decisive factor is not whether a park contains an exercise feature; it is whether the entire trip can be completed with confidence.

3.2 Social connection and belonging

Public parks are among the few places where a person can spend time without buying something, joining an organization, receiving a referral, or explaining a need. They support planned gatherings, but their quieter role may be just as important: seeing familiar faces, watching activity, talking with a neighbor, or sitting near others without having to join in. That becomes more valuable when retirement, caregiving, disability, loss, or reduced driving has made a person's world smaller.

Section 3.6 looks more closely at the ordinary conditions that make those contacts possible: a route that feels manageable, a bench in the right place, shade on a hot day, a restroom people can find, and enough regular activity that someone expects to see others there.

3.3 Nature and restoration

The Minnesota Field Scan of Older Adults and Nature documents the health, well-being, social, cultural, and intergenerational value of nature access while also describing barriers related to transportation, information, safety, seasonality, ability, and program design. AFOC's park audits bring that statewide question to the site level: what specific conditions make nature and outdoor space available in practice?

3.4 Climate and seasonal usability

Age-friendly public space must account for heat, glare, storms, snow, ice, freeze-thaw damage, and changing seasonal patterns. Shade, drinking water, tree canopy, shelter, drainage, snow clearance, surface maintenance, and seating materials affect both comfort and risk. In Minnesota, seasonal operations are design decisions: a route that is usable in June but routinely obstructed or icy in winter is not reliably accessible.

3.5 Public value beyond older adults

Many features prioritized by older adults have broad benefits. A bench with arms helps a person stand, but also serves a pregnant visitor or someone recovering from injury. Clear signs assist low-vision users and first-time visitors. Smooth routes help wheelchairs, walkers, strollers, children on small bicycles, and maintenance crews. Shade benefits anyone during heat. Restrooms, lighting, predictable circulation, and social activity improve the experience of families and visitors of every age.

The practical test is not whether a park contains an age-friendly feature. It is whether people with different bodies and circumstances can arrive, understand the space, move through it, rest, participate, and leave with confidence.

3.6 Parks as Social Health Infrastructure

Social infrastructure is a useful name for the ordinary places and organizations that allow community life to happen. Parks, libraries, sidewalks, transit stops, community centers, markets, and cafes all can play that role. For older adults, the idea is a reminder that aging in place depends on more than the house. It also depends on what remains reachable outside the front door.

Social health does not rest only on close family ties or organized programs. It also grows through familiar, lighter connections: the neighbor recognized on a path, the same dog walker seen most mornings, a staff member who says hello, another grandparent at the playground, or a volunteer who remembers a name. Social scientists often call these 'weak ties.' The phrase sounds slight, but the relationships are not. They provide recognition, information, reassurance, and the feeling that someone would notice an absence.

A park allows several levels of participation at once. One person may take a class. Another may meet a friend, watch grandchildren, volunteer in a garden, or exchange greetings while walking. Someone else may sit near an event and never formally join it. That still counts. The freedom to be among other people without registering, purchasing, performing, or disclosing a need is one of the quiet strengths of a public park.

Social connection depends on physical conditions

That social role depends on ordinary design and operating choices. A bench determines whether someone can stay. A safe crossing determines whether the visit starts at all. Shade, shelter, restrooms, lighting, and maintenance affect comfort and confidence. Tables and small gathering places make conversation easier. Regular programming gives people a reason to arrive at the same time. None of these features work alone; together they make lingering and repeated contact more likely.

Social infrastructure is not equally available

The same opportunity is not available to everyone. Race, income, disability, language, gender, sexual identity, transportation, neighborhood investment, fear of harassment, and past experiences of exclusion can all shape whether a person sees a park as a place for them. An audit should therefore look beyond whether the gate is open. It should ask who comes, who stays away, and what might explain the difference.

From social infrastructure to social health infrastructure

This report uses the phrase social health infrastructure to make the health connection plain. The term refers to public places and community systems that give people routine chances to move,

be recognized, notice one another, exchange informal support, take part, and belong. Parks do not replace family, health care, social services, or organized programs. They can, however, help people remain visible and connected before a problem becomes a crisis.

For public planning, this widens the measure of a successful park. Acreage, equipment, and event attendance still matter. So do more everyday questions: Can people reach the site? Can they stay comfortably? Do they see other people there? Can they take part in more than one way? Is there enough regular use for familiarity to grow?

3.7 From Statewide Field Scan to Local Practice

The *Minnesota Field Scan of Older Adults and Nature* asks a broad statewide question: what would make it easier for older Minnesotans, across different abilities, cultures, communities, and circumstances, to spend time in nature? It describes the health, social, cultural, and intergenerational value of nature while identifying barriers related to transportation, information, safety, season, physical ability, cost, and program design.

The AFOC park-audit work takes up a narrower and practical question: how do those barriers and opportunities appear at a particular park, and how can what residents observe inform an actual public decision? The audits translate broad findings into details that can be seen and discussed: arrival routes, crossings, surfaces, seating, shade, restrooms, signs, maintenance, programming, and whether people feel confident entering, remaining, and returning.

The TAP initiative adds a local implementation layer. It provides a repeatable way to gather lived-experience knowledge, place it before the agency responsible for the site, distinguish resident observation from technical review, and follow what happens afterward. The relationship with Rochester Parks and Recreation is therefore part of the method, not simply a setting in which the audits occurred.

Read together, the Field Scan describes the breadth of Minnesota's need and opportunity. This report illustrates one way a community can act on that knowledge through ordinary park planning, maintenance, programming, and capital decisions. It does not replace the Field Scan's wider treatment of nature, culture, equity, ecology, and statewide field-building, nor does one local portfolio establish statewide results. Its contribution is more grounded: it shows how broad age-friendly principles can become visible at the scale of a route, a bench, a restroom, a program, a project decision, and an ongoing public relationship.

The Field Scan explains why access to nature matters and what stands in the way. The AFOC work shows what one local path from knowledge to practice can look like.

4. What All-Ages, All-Abilities Park Design Requires

All-ages, all-abilities design is best judged by the whole trip and the whole visit, not by a checklist of isolated amenities. The principles below bring together AFOC findings with guidance from WHO, AARP, APA, and the parks field.

Principle	Practical meaning
Arrival is part of the park	Sidewalks, crossings, transit stops, parking, drop-off, bicycle routes, and nearby housing determine who can reach the site.
Continuous routes matter more than symbolic access	A single accessible entrance is insufficient if key destinations, seating, restrooms, or program spaces are disconnected.
Rest is mobility infrastructure	Benches, leaning rails, tables, shade, and rest intervals extend the distance many people can travel.
Legibility reduces cognitive and emotional load	Clear entrances, visible destinations, consistent signs, contrast, landmarks, and simple route choices support people with low vision, anxiety, fatigue, or cognitive change.
Perceived safety is a real use condition	Lighting, sightlines, traffic, maintenance, restroom condition, conflicts among modes, and the presence of other users affect willingness to enter and remain.
Programming completes the physical environment	Regular, low-cost reasons to visit can turn an empty but attractive space into a dependable civic place.
Maintenance determines whether design promises endure	Cracks, heaving pavement, loose surfaces, blocked routes, failing lights, or poorly cleared snow can erase the benefit of otherwise strong design.
Choice supports dignity	Users should be able to choose sun or shade, activity or quiet, social proximity or retreat, direct or leisurely routes, and different levels of physical challenge.
Preservation and accessibility can reinforce each other	Historic identity, mature trees, and valued landscape features should be protected while routes, edges, seating, and information are improved.
Universal design should exceed minimum compliance where feasible	Minimum standards establish a floor. Good public design anticipates the range and variability of actual users.
Design for sociability without requiring participation	Provide comfortable edges, facing or angled seating, tables, visible activity, quiet observation points, and recurring low-threshold uses so people can be alone,

Principle	Practical meaning
	together, or somewhere in between.

5. The AFOC Park-Audit Method

5.1 What the method is

AFOC park audits are structured reviews of lived experience. Participants visit a park, pay attention to specific conditions, and record what works, what gets in the way, and what they would change. The method grew from walk audits, but a park requires a wider view. People need to be able not only to move through it, but also to sit, gather, play, observe, find nature, understand the place, and decide whether they want to return.

5.2 What the method is not

- It is not a formal ADA compliance inspection.
- It is not an engineering, architectural, landscape-architectural, or legal review.
- It is not a statistically representative survey unless designed and sampled as one.
- It is not a promise that every observation will be implemented.
- It is not an invitation to transfer public-agency responsibility to volunteers.

5.3 Recommended audit cycle

8. Select a site where resident input can still affect a decision, maintenance priority, funding request, programming choice, or concept.
9. Clarify the question with the responsible agency. A focused audit produces more useful findings than a generic inspection.
10. Recruit users and nonusers with varied mobility, vision, confidence, caregiving roles, cultural backgrounds, and proximity to the site.
11. Provide a brief orientation, safety expectations, the limits of the audit, and a simple observation tool.
12. Walk at the pace of the slowest participant and allow time to sit, look, discuss, and experience transitions.
13. Record both assets and barriers. Preservation priorities are as important as deficiencies.
14. Synthesize repeated themes while preserving significant minority observations and contradictions.
15. Return findings to participants and the agency. Distinguish quick maintenance items, design questions, programming opportunities, and items requiring technical review.
16. Document the agency response and identify a next decision point.
17. Revisit the site after action or at an agreed interval to close the feedback loop.

5.4 What to observe

Domain	Questions
Approach and arrival	Can people reach the site from nearby housing, transit, sidewalks, parking, trails, or drop-off? Are crossings and entrances evident?
Movement	Are routes continuous, stable, sufficiently wide, well-drained, and understandable? Are grades, steps, edges, and mode conflicts manageable?
Rest and comfort	Are there frequent seats with backs and arms, tables that accommodate mobility devices, shade, shelter, and choices of sun or shade?
Amenities	Are restrooms, drinking water, trash receptacles, bicycle parking, and emergency information present, visible, and maintained?
Safety	Do lighting, sightlines, activity, maintenance, traffic, and restroom conditions support both actual and perceived safety?
Identity and nature	What trees, views, historic features, landscapes, or cultural meanings should be protected?
Social and program use	Are there reasons to visit regularly? Can people join without equipment, high fees, or extensive advance planning?
Seasonal operation	How do heat, glare, snow, ice, drainage, leaf debris, and maintenance affect use across seasons?
Social infrastructure	What kinds of encounters can occur here? Can people watch, greet, gather, volunteer, accompany others, or participate without registration? Who appears absent, and what conditions may explain that absence?

6. Partnership as the Core Implementation Strategy

The working relationship with Rochester Parks and Recreation is what gives the audits practical value. Residents and AFOC can identify a problem or possibility. Parks staff bring the authority,

technical knowledge, operating responsibility, and access to planning and capital processes needed to decide what happens next.

6.1 Why the relationship worked

- AFOC brought a defined contribution: older adult engagement, age-friendly framing, facilitation, and synthesis.
- Parks staff retained professional and public authority. The process did not ask them to surrender technical judgment.
- Projects were attached to real places and decisions rather than abstract statements about inclusion.
- The tone emphasized useful advisement rather than accusation or compliance policing.
- Repeated contact allowed trust and shared language to develop over time.
- The relationship broadened from audit activity to grants, focus groups, concept discussions, and the FitLot initiative.

6.2 The division of roles

Actor	Primary role
Older residents and community participants	Describe lived use, nonuse, comfort, barriers, valued features, and desired activity.
AFOC / Family Service Rochester	Convene, recruit, orient, facilitate, document, translate, communicate, and maintain follow-up.
Parks and Recreation staff	Provide project context, evaluate feasibility, connect findings to operations and planning, and identify technical review.
Park Board / elected and appointed leaders	Set policy, authorize projects, approve resources, and maintain public accountability.
Design and engineering professionals	Assess standards, technical constraints, alternatives, costs, risk, and implementation.
Community partners and funders	Contribute outreach, programming, expertise, grants, equipment, volunteers, and activation support.

6.3 The partnership risk

The word partnership can hide weak follow-through. Hearing residents and receiving a report are useful steps, but they are not the end of the work. The next phase should record what the agency accepted, deferred, rejected, or sent for technical review, along with the reason. That is not a scorecard for staff. It is a way to respect residents’ time and build a clearer public record.

The standard should be neither “every suggestion was adopted” nor “a meeting occurred.” The standard is a transparent chain from observation to professional response to decision.

7. Portfolio of Park and Recreation Projects

These projects matter partly because they are different. They show several ways an age-friendly perspective can enter park planning: a neighborhood improvement, a historic park review, a major capital discussion, a fitness installation, or the route that connects a resident to the park in the first place.

Project	Planning context	AFOC contribution	Strategic significance
Central Park	Historic downtown park and principal case study	Older adult audit focused on access, surfaces, seating, shade, safety, restroom clarity, identity, landscape, and activation.	Demonstrates preservation-plus-usability and the cumulative nature of access.
Rolling Green Park	Neighborhood park near older adult housing	Resident observations and community-grant-supported improvements.	Shows how proximity, seating, shade, gathering, and route quality affect everyday use.
Martin Luther King Jr. Park	Established community park	Age-friendly review within a park carrying neighborhood and civic significance.	Connects inclusion to dignity, identity, comfort, and daily use.
Silver Lake Park	Large, highly visible community park	AFOC input identified by Parks and Recreation as useful to project consideration.	Shows the age lens can contribute to major established sites.
Oronoco parks	Smaller-city / regional network context	Adaptation of audit practice outside Rochester.	Tests transferability to smaller communities and differing staff capacity.
Sports and Recreation Complex	Major capital and system-planning proposal	Pre- and post-referendum older adult focus groups and access discussion.	Moves the lens from site details to recreation equity and public investment.

Project	Planning context	AFOC contribution	Strategic significance
Soldiers Field FitLot	Outdoor fitness partnership	Donation, fundraising, installation planning, and prospective programming.	Moves from assessment to implementation and connects strength, balance, flexibility, fall prevention, and intergenerational use.
Walk and roll audits	Routes, transit access, and public realm	Sidewalk, intersection, crossing, lighting, bench, and transit-stop observation.	Demonstrates that park access begins beyond park boundaries.

Taken together, the projects begin to show a local network rather than a set of unrelated sites. A neighborhood park can become part of a person’s weekly routine. A downtown park can keep older residents visible in civic life. A recreation complex can offer more structured participation. FitLot programming can bring people back at regular times. Walk-and-roll work determines whether those places are actually reachable from housing, transit, and everyday errands.

That network is only as strong as its missing links. A well-designed park cannot do much for someone who faces an unsafe crossing, an inaccessible transit stop, a long route without a bench, or a sidewalk that is not cleared in winter.

7.1 A portfolio, not a program inventory

The projects show AFOC entering existing public processes when an age-friendly perspective may be useful. They do not yet make up a uniform program. Each site used somewhat different recruitment, reporting, and follow-up. That flexibility helped the work fit the situation.

8. Central Park: An Exemplar Case Study

8.1 Why Central Park matters

Central Park is a prominent historic public space in downtown Rochester near older adult housing and major civic, health, commercial, and cultural destinations. Its fountain, mature trees, plaza, Heritage House, shade, and quiet character give it identity. At the same time, a historic space can accumulate surfaces, edges, furnishings, circulation patterns, and operational conditions that reduce confidence for people who move more slowly or cautiously.

8.2 Audit approach

The completed summary drew on seven completed or partially completed worksheet sets and one annotated handout. Because the materials included handwritten comments and were not a

representative survey, the synthesis emphasized recurring themes, strong observations, and planning implications rather than numerical claims.

8.3 What participants valued

- The fountain and the park’s historic identity.
- Mature trees, shade, and the sense of enclosure they provide.
- A quiet atmosphere in the center of the city.
- The plaza and Heritage House.
- Potential for walking, small gatherings, observation, and connection with nearby residents.
- The possibility of adding activity without erasing the park’s character.

8.4 What limited use

Theme	Observed concern	Planning interpretation
Access and movement	Uneven pavement, broken brick, steps, hard-to-see edges, and trip hazards.	Prioritize key desire lines and destination routes for professional surface and edge review.
Seating and tables	Need for stable seating, shorter chairs, arms, backs, accessible tables, and choices of sun or shade.	Treat seating as mobility infrastructure; develop a furnishing standard and placement plan.
Lighting and visibility	Concern about lighting, sightlines, and comfort at different times.	Review lighting and vegetation together; test perception as well as measured illumination.
Mode conflicts	Bicycles and scooters moving faster than some users expected.	Clarify circulation, speeds, and shared-space cues; consider design and operational responses.
Restrooms	Uncertainty or concern about availability, visibility, condition, and comfort.	Make restroom information clear and include condition and access in operations review.
Landscape	Desire for flowers, texture, seasonal interest, and native planting without blocked sightlines.	Pair beauty, ecological value, visibility, and maintenance capacity.
Use and activation	The park needs more regular reasons to visit and remain.	Pilot music, walks, small exhibits, classes, food, or social activity before major capital change.

8.4A Central Park as social health infrastructure

Central Park could become an important everyday social place downtown. It is close to older adult housing and other destinations. It has shade, familiar landmarks, a fountain, historic features, and a quiet setting where a person can sit without being pushed into an activity. The plaza also gives the park room for occasional events and shared civic use.

The audit also explains why those strengths do not automatically lead to regular use. A person may leave early or not come at all if the seating feels unstable, the route looks hazardous, the restroom is hard to find, the lighting feels poor, or scooters and bicycles pass too close. An event calendar alone will not fix that. Access, comfort, visibility, and activity must work together, with room for both quiet use and more public occasions.

A practical test for future concepts is simple: could someone living nearby make Central Park part of an ordinary week, rather than visiting only for a special event? Repeated use is how a public place becomes familiar. It is how people begin to recognize one another, notice changes, and feel that the place belongs to them too.

8.5 The planning direction

The Central Park findings support an incremental and protective approach. Preserve the fountain, tree canopy, history, and quiet character. Repair or prioritize surface hazards along key routes. Improve seating and tables. Clarify restrooms and wayfinding. Review lighting, visibility, and mode conflicts. Add landscape interest without compromising sightlines. Test small programming interventions and return to older residents with concept options before final decisions.

Central Park's strongest lesson is that usability depends on the combined effect of many modest conditions. A beautiful park can remain underused when surfaces, seating, signs, restrooms, lighting, and activity fall short.

8.6 Limits of the case

The audit cannot establish how common each concern is, whether a condition meets a legal standard, what an engineering remedy would cost, or what change caused a later outcome. It does provide a careful account of what this group noticed, valued, worried about, and believed would make the park easier to use. That is useful evidence for setting priorities, developing concepts, referring maintenance issues, and deciding where professional review is needed.

9. Evidence of Strategy, Progress, and Public Value

A report meant for broad circulation should be clear about the difference between what has happened and what is still hoped for. The record supports several claims. Other outcomes remain unproven.

9.1 Evidence that is reasonably supported

Claim	Available evidence	Strength / limitation
AFOC translated assessment findings into concrete public-space practice.	The community assessment and action plan explicitly identify accessibility, safety, parks, nature, and public-planning participation; audits operationalize those commitments.	Strong documentary alignment.
A working relationship with Parks and Recreation developed.	Multiple park sites, staff engagement, Park Board grant activity, recreation focus groups, and FitLot work show repeated interaction.	Strong evidence of relationship; quality should be tracked through future response and implementation.
Older adult observations were made visible to planners.	Completed worksheets, site summaries, reports, presentations, and project discussions.	Strong process evidence; adoption of individual recommendations is unevenly documented.
The method generated practical design and operations insights.	Repeated findings on surfaces, seating, shade, signs, lighting, restrooms, maintenance, safety, and activation.	Strong qualitative evidence; not a representative survey.
The work leveraged other assets.	Technical assistance, Park Board grant support, staff expertise, community participation, and FitLot partnership.	Credible evidence; monetary and in-kind value should be quantified prospectively.
The work informed AFOC strategy.	Progress-report lessons emphasize early engagement, narrower priorities, partner authority, and implementation readiness.	Strong learning evidence.
Park conditions improved because of the audits.	Rolling Green improvements and project-specific references indicate movement, but a complete before/after record is not yet assembled.	Promising but incomplete.
Population health, park	No rigorous outcome study is	Not established; should not

Claim	Available evidence	Strength / limitation
use, falls, isolation, or equity improved.	available.	be claimed.
The work strengthened social health infrastructure.	Audit findings connect physical access, seating, shade, programming, perceived safety, and social participation; project discussions increasingly frame parks as settings for belonging and connection.	Strong conceptual and qualitative evidence; direct change in social networks, isolation, or sustained use has not yet been measured.

9.2 Public value to the parks system

- Earlier visibility of barriers that may otherwise emerge late in design or after construction.
- Access to participants whose experiences are not always captured in public meetings.
- Plain-language accounts of confidence, comfort, avoidance, and perceived safety.
- Support for grant narratives and public justification tied to health, inclusion, and community engagement.
- Opportunities to test low-cost activation before major capital commitments.
- A repeatable source of community feedback that complements professional standards and system plans.
- A clearer way to see how design, maintenance, and programming either encourage everyday contact or quietly discourage it.

9.3 Public value to the age-friendly field

- A concrete method for moving from broad age-friendly domains to site-level action.
- A model of influence without formal authority.
- A realistic division between lived-experience expertise and technical expertise.
- A way to connect outdoor space, transportation, social participation, health, and inclusion.
- A portfolio approach that can fit large cities, neighborhood parks, and smaller communities.
- A reminder that relationships and learning are necessary outcomes on the path to visible physical change.
- A way to address social isolation through ordinary public-space decisions without turning a park into a clinical program.

10. An I2L2-Informed Interpretation of the Work

Impact, Influence, Leverage, and Learning (I2L2), developed by ORS Impact, is helpful here because AFOC works through other institutions rather than controlling every result. This report

does not score the initiative with I2L2. It uses the framework to keep four questions in view: What changed for people? What changed in planning or practice? What resources were brought together? What did the partners learn?

Dimension	Meaning in this park context	Illustrative evidence or question
Impact	Changes in people’s experience or in the usability, safety, access, health value, or belonging supported by a place.	Did more people use the park? Did confidence, comfort, access, or participation improve? Were barriers removed?
Influence	Changes in planning assumptions, agendas, professional routines, relationships, policies, concepts, or public understanding.	Were older adult observations considered earlier? Did staff add seating, shade, restroom clarity, or activation to the planning frame?
Leverage	Public, philanthropic, organizational, technical, or community resources mobilized because relationships and ideas aligned.	Did audits strengthen grants, staff attention, Park Board support, FitLot fundraising, volunteer engagement, or partner programming?
Learning	Knowledge that improves future strategy, project selection, engagement, design review, and accountability.	When is an audit most useful? Who was missing? Which findings were actionable? What should be standardized or abandoned?

Social health impact is unlikely to look like every visitor joining a group or forming a close friendship. More believable signs would be people staying longer, returning more often, seeing a wider mix of users, having more chances for casual contact, and feeling that the space is meant for them as well as for younger, faster, or more able users.

Influence may show up in the questions staff begin to ask: Who is missing? Does the seating invite people to stay or talk? Is activity regular enough for people to expect others there? Can residents reach the park from housing or transit? Leverage may come from neighborhood groups, senior housing, libraries, arts organizations, health partners, instructors, volunteers, or local businesses. Learning comes from seeing which combinations of design, maintenance, and activity lead to repeat use—and which produce only a one-time event.

10.1 What this lens prevents

This keeps the report from making either of two mistakes: calling the work successful because meetings were held and reports were written or calling it unsuccessful because AFOC cannot by itself prove fewer falls, less isolation, or better chronic disease outcomes. Long-term impact still

matters. So do the changes in public practice, resources, and knowledge that may be needed to reach it.

10.2 The line of sight to impact

AFOC directly controls the way it recruits, facilitates, documents, communicates, and follows up. It can influence what receives attention, how a project is framed, who is included, and what partners consider important. It cannot determine capital budgets, maintenance schedules, final designs, park use, or health outcomes on its own. Future evaluation should be honest about those different levels of responsibility.

The conceptual value of I2L2 here is honesty: keep the public benefit in view, name the institutional changes that make it possible, identify the resources that were mobilized, and treat learning as a requirement for better action not as a consolation prize.

11. Generalizable Lessons for Other Communities

Lesson	Why it matters
Begin with a live public decision	An audit attached to real planning, maintenance, grant, or programming question is more likely to matter than a generic exercise.
Invite non-users, not only current users	People who avoid a park because of surfaces, fear, transport, heat, or uncertainty may reveal the most important barriers.
Ask what should be protected	Asset-based questions reduce defensiveness and improve design by identifying identity, memory, nature, and social meaning.
Separate observation from technical determination	Residents can credibly report a route that feels unsafe or unusable; professionals determine compliance, severity, remedy, and cost.
Design the feedback loop before the event	Participants should know when findings will be returned, who will respond, and what next decision the information may affect.
Use a common core and site-specific modules	Every audit should address access, movement, rest, amenities, safety, identity, programming, and seasonality, with added questions tailored to the

Lesson	Why it matters
	project.
Treat seating, shade, restrooms, and maintenance as systems	These features need standards, inventories, replacement cycles, and operating responsibility—not one-time requests.
Pair physical audit with activation	Programming can reveal latent demand, increase perceived safety, and test how people use a place before capital investment.
Document disagreement	Different users may want quiet and activity, openness and enclosure, preservation and change. The report should make tradeoffs visible.
Measure response, not just participation	Track what was accepted, acted upon, deferred, rejected, or referred, along with reasons.
Re-audit selectively	Before/after observation is useful when a project changed materially or when the same barrier has persisted.
Keep the practice proportionate	Not every site requires a major report. Use a short memo for small maintenance questions and deeper engagement for consequential projects.
Design for weak ties and passive participation	People need places where they can exchange a greeting, recognize familiar faces, observe activity, or sit among others without joining a formal program.
Ask who is missing	Nonuse may indicate transportation barriers, discomfort, cultural exclusion, fear, unsuitable programming, or an absence of basic amenities—not lack of interest.
Plan networks, not isolated sites	A park's social value depends on sidewalks, crossings, transit, nearby housing, benches, and other destinations that make routine use possible.

12. Recommendations for the Next Phase

12.1 Establish a formal but lightweight park-engagement protocol

- Adopt site-selection criteria: decision relevance, partner readiness, equity value, resident interest, and realistic follow-up.
- Use a standard core worksheet with optional modules for historic parks, natural areas, playgrounds, fitness spaces, trails, and major capital projects.
- Name a Parks and Recreation contact and an AFOC contact for each audit.
- Agree in advance on the response format and timeline.
- Store audit records, photos, responses, and follow-up in a simple project log.

12.2 Create an age-friendly park design and operations checklist

The checklist should combine resident experience with applicable accessibility standards and city practice. It should cover the full visit: arrival, continuous routes, surfaces, crossings, grades, edges, seating, shade, water, restrooms, lighting, signs, conflicts among users, maintenance, snow and ice, emergency information, programming, and ease of understanding. It should guide discussion, not be presented as a substitute for code review or professional judgment.

12.3 Build an accountable response tracker

Finding	Agency response	Disposition	Responsible unit	Timing	Follow-up evidence
Example: unstable seating near primary route	Review furniture condition and replacement options	Accepted for review	Parks operations	Q3 2026	Work order / replacement record
Example: unclear restroom access	Confirm hours, signs, and maintenance responsibility	Quick action	Operations / communications	30 days	Updated sign and web information
Example: scooter conflict	Observe speeds and circulation; consider signs or design cue	Needs study	Planning / mobility partners	Seasonal observation	Observation memo / concept

12.4 Develop seating, shade, and restroom strategy

These issues appear often enough to deserve more than one-off fixes. Parks and Recreation could inventory where seating is located, what condition it is in, whether it has backs and arms, and whether a mobility device can fit alongside it. The same review could map gaps in shade and tree canopy and clarify where restrooms are available, when they are open, what condition they are in, and whether people can find them. AFOC can help identify priority locations and test whether public information makes sense to users.

12.5 Integrate age-friendly review into capital and master planning

AFOC should be invited while concepts are still taking shape, not after a preferred design is nearly complete. For major projects, an older adult and disability-informed review could occur early in design and again before final decisions, with staff recording how the comments were handled.

12.6 Connect parks to routes and transit

Where feasible, a park audit should include the first and last several blocks of the trip. Findings from the walk-and-roll audits, LINK BRT work, sidewalk planning, crossings, winter maintenance, and mode-shift efforts should be connected to park access. A high-quality path inside the park is of little use to someone who cannot safely cross the street beside it.

12.7 Move the FitLot from equipment to sustained public-health practice

- Plan shade, seating, accessible circulation, nearby restrooms, signs, and safe arrival as part of the installation.
- Train instructors and partners to provide periodic orientation and inclusive programming.
- Offer beginner and caregiver-friendly sessions, not only self-guided exercise.
- Develop a maintenance and inspection plan.
- Track use, confidence, repeat participation, and partner referrals without overmedicalizing a public park.

12.8 Strengthen equity and representation

Future audits should make a deliberate effort to include low-income older adults, renters, rural residents, people with disabilities, culturally diverse residents, caregivers, people who do not drive, and people who are not already connected to aging organizations. That also means addressing the barriers to participation in the audit itself: transportation, timing, language, weather, stamina, hearing, and digital access.

12.9 Create a learning agenda

- Which audit findings are most often acted upon, and which are routinely deferred?
- At what stage of planning does older adult input have the greatest effect?
- Which populations are missing from audit participation and why?
- Do low-cost activation pilots increase use and perceived safety?

- How do winter conditions change conclusions reached during warm-weather audits?
- Can repeated themes support system-wide standards for seating, signs, restrooms, shade, and maintenance?
- What evidence would be sufficient to show that the partnership is improving public decisions, even before population outcomes are measurable?

12.10 Adopt a social health infrastructure strategy

AFOC and Parks and Recreation should treat selected parks, routes, and gathering places as parts of one social health network. This does not require a new bureaucracy. It means using the same question across site selection, design review, programming, partner recruitment, and follow-up: does this place help people remain connected to ordinary community life?

- Map parks in relation to older adult housing, transit, libraries, community centers, clinics, shopping, trails, and other routine destinations.
- Identify locations where benches, shade, crossings, restrooms, or winter maintenance would extend the distance and duration of community participation.
- Develop recurring, low-cost activities that allow different levels of engagement, including observation and drop-in participation.
- Recruit partners whose presence can create predictable use: neighborhood groups, senior housing, arts and cultural organizations, health and recreation providers, libraries, schools, and volunteer groups.
- Observe who uses and does not use the space at different times, seasons, and program conditions.
- Track repeat use, comfort, informal interaction, diversity of participation, and participant accounts of recognition and belonging, while avoiding intrusive surveillance or medicalization.
- Use small pilots to learn whether seating arrangements, mobile programming, temporary shade, wayfinding, or scheduled activity changes social use before committing to larger capital work.

The limits should remain clear. Parks cannot solve loneliness, inequity, or unmet care needs by themselves. Their contribution is more basic and often less visible. They make it easier for people to get out, be seen, encounter others, and take part in community life without first becoming a client or patient.

13. Conclusion

AFOC's park-audit work points to a practical truth. A public space does not become age-friendly because it carries the label, includes one accessible feature, or hosts a single meeting. It becomes more usable through repeated attention to the whole experience: getting there, moving through the site, finding a place to rest, understanding what is available, seeing other people, and feeling welcome enough to return.

The clearest achievement is not that every barrier has been removed. It is that older residents now have a more dependable route into park planning and project discussion. The work moved from broad community findings to observations at specific sites, then into an ongoing relationship with the parks system, grant activity, capital discussions, programming, and the FitLot partnership.

The next step is accountability. Residents should be able to see what happened to their observations. Parks staff should receive concise information tied to actual decisions. AFOC should track what it influenced, what resources were brought together, what changed on the ground, and what the partners learned—without claiming more than the evidence allows. That is how a modest practice becomes a dependable one.

Parks for all ages are not created only by major construction. They are created by smooth routes, stable seats, shade, signs, restrooms, light, maintenance, welcome, useful activity and the public habit of asking who can use the place with confidence.

Social health infrastructure gives one more reason to care about this work. Communities often respond to isolation after it has become serious, through a referral, a program, or a clinical concern. Parks work earlier and more quietly. When they are reachable, comfortable, active, and welcoming, they give people repeated chances to remain part of public life. That contribution is easy to miss because it looks ordinary.

For AFOC, the idea connects small park details to the larger realities of longer life. A bench is not just furniture when it lets someone reach a destination, remain outside, meet a neighbor, or watch a grandchild. A safe route is not just transportation when it preserves access to community life. A recurring activity is not just recreation when it gives people a reason to return and recognize one another. Small public conditions can add up to a larger difference.

Appendix A. Project Inventory and Evidence Record

Site / project	Stage	Primary evidence currently available	Evidence still needed
Central Park	Audit completed; planning follow-up needed	Worksheets, annotated materials, thematic summary, report recommendations	Agency response, concept influence, action record, resident follow-up, before/after conditions
Rolling Green Park	Improvement / grant activity	Park Board community grant, project references, older adult proximity rationale	Detailed before/after record, resident response, use observation
MLK Jr. Park	Review / engagement	Project references and age-friendly contribution	Full audit record, agency response, follow-up
Silver Lake Park	Planning contribution	Parks staff identification of useful AFOC input	Specific recommendations, disposition, outcome
Oronoco parks	Adaptation / regional practice	Project references and network context	Site records, local response, transfer lessons
Sports and Recreation Complex	Capital planning / focus groups	Pre- and post-referendum engagement records	Participant profile, themes, response, later design influence
Soldiers Field FitLot	Implementation development	Park Board approval/donation materials, fundraising and partner planning	Final design, installation, programming, maintenance, use and experience data

Appendix B. Model Older Adult Park Audit Checklist

Before the visit

- Confirm project question, agency contact, weather plan, accessible meeting point, restroom information, emergency procedure, and participant accommodations.
- Recruit a mix of current users, occasional users, and people who avoid the site.
- Explain that the audit is lived-experience input, not a formal compliance inspection.

Arrival

- Sidewalks, crossings, transit, parking, drop-off, bicycle access, entrance visibility, grades, curb ramps, snow/ice implications.

Movement

- Continuous routes; surface stability; width; slope; drainage; steps; handrails; edge contrast; obstructions; desire lines; bicycle/scooter conflicts.

Rest and comfort

- Seat spacing; backs; arms; seat height; stability; accessible adjacent space; tables; shade; shelter; sun choice; drinking water.

Information and amenities

- Maps; signs; font and contrast; landmarks; restroom visibility and condition; trash; emergency information; hours and seasonal access.

Safety and dignity

- Lighting; sightlines; activity; noise; traffic; maintenance; litter; harassment concerns; perceived safety at different times.

Nature and identity

- Trees; canopy; habitat; flowers; views; historic and cultural features; quiet; sensory quality; features that must be protected.

Participation

- Walking; sitting; observing; caregiving; children; fitness; events; quiet activity; spontaneous social contact; cost and equipment barriers.

Social connection and public life

- Can a person be present without being required to register, buy something, exercise, or join a group?
- Do seating and tables support conversation, observation, caregiving, and mobility devices?
- Are there predictable times when other people are present?
- What weak ties, informal contacts, volunteering, intergenerational use, or mutual support could the place enable?
- Who is not using the space, and what physical, cultural, social, or transportation barriers may contribute?
- Does the park connect to other social infrastructure such as housing, transit, libraries, community centers, shops, and trails?

Closing questions

- What makes you want to return? What makes you hesitate? What one small change matters most? What should never be lost?

Appendix C. References and Source Notes

Age Friendly Olmsted County. 2021. Age-Friendly Olmsted County Community Assessment Findings Report. Family Service Rochester.

Age Friendly Olmsted County. 2022. Age-Friendly Olmsted County Community Assessment Report and 2023-2025 Action Plan. Family Service Rochester.

Age Friendly Olmsted County. 2026. Progress, Partnerships, and Priorities: Age Friendly Olmsted County Progress Report, 2023-2025 Action Plan. Family Service Rochester.

Age Friendly Olmsted County. 2026. Parks for All Ages in Practice: Older Adult Park Audits, Public Space Partnerships, and Age Friendly Planning in Olmsted County. Public draft, May 2026.

Age-Friendly Minnesota. 2024. A Field Scan of Older Adults and Nature in Minnesota.

AARP Livable Communities. AARP Walk Audit Tool Kit and Worksheets.

<https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/getting-around/aarp-walk-audit-tool-kit.html>

AARP Livable Communities. The 8 Domains of Livability. <https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2016/8-domains-of-livability-introduction.html>

AARP. AARP Livability Index: Methods and Sources. <https://livabilityindex.aarp.org/methods-sources>

American Planning Association. 2021. Planning for the Needs of an Aging Population. Planning.

American Planning Association. 2021. Planning for Dementia-Friendly Communities. PAS Memo.

American Planning Association. 2024. Finding Solutions for Older Adults to Age in Grace. Planning.

American Planning Association. 2024. The Importance of Intergenerational Community Placemaking.

National Recreation and Park Association. 2021. CAPRA National Accreditation Standards.

National Recreation and Park Association. CAPRA Agency Accreditation Standards.

<https://www.nrpa.org/certification/accreditation/CAPRA/capra-standards/>

ORS Impact. 2023. I2L2: Impact, Influence, Leverage, and Learning.

UCLA Complete Streets Initiative. 2014. Placemaking for an Aging Population: Guidelines for Senior-Friendly Parks.

World Health Organization. 2007. Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide.

World Health Organization. Checklist of Essential Features of Age-Friendly Cities.

World Health Organization. 2015. Measuring the Age-Friendliness of Cities: A Guide to Using Core Indicators.

World Health Organization. Age-Friendly World: Outdoor Spaces and Buildings.

U.S. Department of Justice. 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design.

U.S. Access Board. Accessibility Guidelines for Outdoor Developed Areas.

Klinenberg, Eric. 2018. Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life. New York: Crown.

Yarker, Sophie, Patty Doran, and Tine Buffel. 2025. "Ageing in Place: A Social Infrastructure Perspective." Quality in Ageing and Older Adults. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAOA-06-2025-0056>.

Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." American Journal of Sociology 78(6): 1360-1380.

Oldenburg, Ray. 1989. The Great Good Place. New York: Paragon House.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Healthy People 2030: Social Determinants of Health; Social and Community Context; Neighborhood and Built Environment.

Parks for All Ages:

A white paper on the age friendly assessment and continuous improvement of parks in the city of Rochester, Minnesota

August 7, 2023

Walt Rothwell
Dave Beal



Increased Interest in Aging Actively

- » 14.4% of Olmsted County residents were 65+ in 2015
- » According to a 2013 survey, issues related to aging (elderhealth) was cited as one of the most pressing community health issues in Olmsted county

Implications for Parks & Recreation

- » More senior recreation
- » More mid-day recreation programs
- » Less strenuous outdoor recreation- more walking, gardening, culture, etc.
- » Desire for volunteer opportunities

Rochester Parks & Recreation 2015/2016 System Plan



INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by demographic shifts and a growing emphasis on community inclusivity, the concept of age-friendly park design is taking center stage in the realm of urban planning and recreation development. As our community continues to evolve, the need for public spaces that address the diverse needs and preferences of all generations becomes increasingly evident. This white paper considers the intersection of age friendly park design principles and those principles set forth by the National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA).

Parks serve as essential hubs for physical activity, social interaction, relaxation, and cultural enrichment. The vision of age-friendly park design aligns seamlessly with CAPRA's commitment to excellence in park and recreation management, ensuring that public spaces are thoughtfully designed, accessible, and responsive to the unique requirements of people of all ages.

In preparing this white paper, we do not to assume or imply that parks in the City of Rochester are not currently "age friendly." Rather, our purpose is to:

- (1) Lay the groundwork for how the age friendliness of our parks might be assessed in keeping the continuous improvement process shared by AARP Network of Age Friendly States and Communities and NRPA's CAPRA; and,
- (2) Propose this shared commitment to continuous improvement can serve as a basis for collaboration between Age Friendly Olmsted County and the City of Rochester Parks and Recreation Department.

I. AGE FRIENDLY PARKS

Age friendly parks serve as vital community spaces where individuals of all ages can come together, engage in recreational activities, and foster social connections. However, the design of these parks often overlooks the potential for intergenerational interaction and fails to cater to the diverse needs of different age groups. Designing age friendly parks provides numerous benefits they offer to individuals and communities.

Promoting Social Cohesion:

Age friendly parks provide opportunities for people of different ages to interact, connect, and build relationships. By creating spaces that encourage intergenerational mingling, these parks foster a sense of community and social cohesion. Children can learn from the wisdom and experiences of older adults, while older adults can experience the joy and vitality of youth. Interactions among different age groups promote understanding, empathy, and a shared sense of belonging.

Encouraging Active Lifestyles:

Designing public parks that cater to multiple age groups promotes active and healthy lifestyles. By incorporating a variety of amenities such as playgrounds, sports courts, walking paths, and fitness stations, these parks encourage physical activity among children, adults, and older adults

alike. Shared activities and exercise opportunities motivate individuals of all ages to engage in regular physical exercise, leading to improved health and well-being across the community.

Enhancing Mental Well-being:

Age friendly parks have a positive impact on mental well-being. They provide spaces for relaxation, recreation, and connection, which can reduce stress and improve overall mental health. Intergenerational interactions foster a sense of purpose and belonging, combating feelings of isolation or loneliness among older adults and promoting the development of social skills and empathy in children. The park becomes a hub for positive social experiences and a source of emotional support for individuals of all ages.

Learning and Skill Development:

Age friendly parks offer unique opportunities for learning and skill development. Children can learn from older adults, benefiting from their knowledge, experiences, and wisdom. Older adults, in turn, can engage in activities that keep their minds sharp and active, such as teaching, storytelling, or mentoring. By creating spaces for knowledge sharing, these parks contribute to lifelong learning and promote intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Strengthening Community Bonds:

Age friendly parks strengthen community bonds and encourages civic engagement. These parks become gathering spaces where people from all walks of life can come together, fostering a sense of unity and shared responsibility for the community's well-being. Collaborative efforts, such as organizing events, maintaining the park, or participating in intergenerational activities, create a stronger sense of community ownership and pride.

Creating Inclusive Spaces:

Age friendly parks promote inclusivity by catering to the needs of individuals of all abilities, cultures, and backgrounds. By incorporating accessible design features, such as ramps, sensory elements, and seating with varied heights, these parks ensure that people with disabilities, older adults, and caregivers can navigate and enjoy the space comfortably. Inclusive parks send a powerful message of acceptance and equal participation, fostering a more inclusive and equitable community.

By promoting intergenerational mingling, active lifestyles, mental well-being, learning opportunities, community bonds, and inclusivity, age friendly parks contribute to the overall health, happiness, and vitality of individuals and communities.

II. WHY AGE-FRIENDLY PARK DESIGN?

Age friendly parks are designed to address the needs and preferences of individuals across different age groups, promoting inclusivity and well-being. Here are three compelling arguments for the importance of age-friendly parks:

- *Enhancing Quality of Life for All Ages:* Age friendly parks create spaces that improve the quality of life for individuals of all ages. By providing accessible amenities, comfortable seating, and well-maintained pathways, these parks enable people to engage in physical activity, socialize,

and connect with nature. They offer opportunities for recreation, relaxation, and enjoyment, contributing to the overall well-being and happiness of individuals across generations.

- *Promoting Health and Active Lifestyles:* Age-friendly parks play a crucial role in promoting health and active lifestyles for people of all ages. These parks offer a range of activities and facilities, including walking paths, playgrounds, sports courts, and fitness stations, encouraging physical exercise and movement. Regular physical activity has numerous health benefits, such as reducing the risk of chronic diseases, improving cardiovascular fitness, enhancing mobility, and boosting mental well-being. Age-friendly parks provide accessible and inclusive environments that motivate individuals to stay active and maintain healthy habits.
- *Fostering Social Interaction and Community Cohesion:* Age-friendly parks serve as gathering spaces where people from different generations can come together, fostering social interaction and community cohesion. These parks create opportunities for intergenerational connections, enabling older adults, children, and individuals of all ages to engage in shared activities, learn from one another, and build relationships. Intergenerational interactions promote empathy, understanding, and respect, breaking down stereotypes and bridging the gap between generations. Age-friendly parks strengthen the sense of community and social support networks, leading to increased social connectedness and a stronger sense of belonging for all park visitors.

III. AGE FRIENDLY PARK DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

When designing public parks specifically for older adults, it is important to consider their unique needs and preferences. Here are five design elements that provide excellent public parks for older adults in Rochester, MN:

1. **Age Friendly Amenities:** Incorporate amenities that cater to the needs of older adults. This includes installing comfortable seating areas with backrests and armrests, shaded areas for relaxation, and accessible paths for easy mobility. Consider including fitness stations specifically designed for older adults to promote physical activity and overall well-being.
2. **Safety and Accessibility:** Ensure that the park is designed with safety and accessibility in mind. Install proper lighting to enhance visibility during evening hours, maintain even walking surfaces, and provide handrails and ramps for easy navigation. Clear signage and wayfinding markers should be placed throughout the park to assist older adults in finding their way and prevent any potential hazards.
3. **Social Spaces and Programs:** Create designated social spaces within the park where older adults can gather, socialize, and engage in activities. Designate picnic areas, community gardens, or outdoor seating arrangements that facilitate interactions and foster a sense of community. Additionally, consider organizing programs or events specifically tailored for older adults, such as group walks, exercise classes, or educational workshops.

4. **Natural Elements and Wellness:** Integrate natural elements and wellness features that promote relaxation and tranquility. Incorporate walking paths surrounded by greenery, gardens with fragrant flowers and herbs, and areas for meditation or tai chi. Access to nature has proven benefits for mental and physical well-being, providing a peaceful environment for older adults to enjoy.
5. **Accessibility to Services:** Locate the parks in proximity to essential services for older adults. Ensure that there are nearby amenities such as public transportation stops, accessible parking spaces, and restrooms. Older adults should be able to access the park easily and have their basic needs met without significant barriers.

These design elements provide public parks that address the needs and preferences of older adults. These parks will not only enhance the quality of life for older adults but also contribute to the overall well-being and inclusivity of the community.

IV. COMPARING CAPRA AND AGE FRIENDLY PARK DESIGN

The Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) sets standards for the management and operation of public parks, while age-friendly park design focuses on creating inclusive and accessible spaces for individuals of all ages, particularly older adults.

Here is a brief comparison of where the two approaches most closely align:

CAPRA Standards:

- **Safety and Risk Management:** CAPRA guidelines prioritize safety measures, such as regular inspections, maintenance of equipment, and appropriate signage, to minimize potential risks to park visitors.
- **Facility and Program Development:** CAPRA standards focus on offering a range of facilities and programs to meet the diverse needs and interests of the community. This may include sports fields, playgrounds, picnic areas, and organized activities.
- **Community Engagement and Partnerships:** CAPRA encourages park agencies to actively engage with the community, seek input from stakeholders, and develop partnerships to enhance park services and programs.

Age Friendly Parks Design Principles:

- **Accessibility and Inclusivity:** Age-friendly public parks emphasize creating accessible spaces that accommodate the needs of all individuals, including older adults and people with disabilities. This includes features like smooth walking paths, seating areas, accessible restrooms, and design elements that consider physical limitations and sensory impairments.
- **Age-Appropriate Amenities:** Age-friendly parks incorporate amenities that specifically address the preferences and abilities of older adults, such as fitness equipment designed for their needs, seating with backrests and armrests, and spaces for socialization and relaxation.

- *Intergenerational Engagement:* Age-friendly parks promote intergenerational interaction and programming. They encourage activities and spaces that facilitate connections and learning opportunities between different age groups, fostering a sense of community and shared experiences.
- *Health and Well-being:* Age-friendly parks prioritize features that support physical and mental well-being, such as walking paths, outdoor exercise equipment, accessible gardens, and areas for quiet reflection or meditation.
- *Safety and Security:* Similar to CAPRA standards, age-friendly parks emphasize safety. This includes proper lighting, clear signage, maintenance of pathways and equipment, and measures to ensure park visitors feel secure.

V. ASSESSING AGE FRIENDLINESS

Designing an assessment tool that combines CAPRA public park standards with age-friendly public design principles can help evaluate the effectiveness and inclusivity of public parks. Here is a suggested framework for such an assessment tool:

1. ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY:

- a. Are park pathways and amenities designed to be accessible for individuals with disabilities and older adults?
- b. Is there a sufficient number of seating areas with backrests and armrests throughout the park?
- c. Are there accessible restroom facilities available for park visitors?

2. AGE APPROPRIATE AMENITIES:

- a. Does the park provide fitness equipment that caters to the needs of older adults?
- b. Are there designated areas for socialization and relaxation within the park?
- c. Does the park offer amenities that are suitable for individuals of different age groups, including children, adults, and older adults?

3. INTERGENERATIONAL ENGAGEMENT:

- a. Are there spaces or programming that encourage intergenerational interactions and activities?
- b. Does the park provide opportunities for learning, mentorship, or shared experiences between different age groups?
- c. Are there designated areas or facilities that promote intergenerational engagement?

4. HEALTH AND WELL-BEING:

- a. Does the park offer amenities and facilities that support physical activity and promote a healthy lifestyle?
- b. Are there walking paths or trails available for park visitors of all ages?
- c. Does the park provide spaces for relaxation, meditation, or quiet reflection?

5. SAFETY AND SECURITY:

- a. Is there proper lighting throughout the park to ensure visibility and safety, especially during evening hours?
- b. Are there clear and visible signage to guide park visitors and communicate park rules?
- c. Is there a system in place for addressing safety concerns and monitoring park security?

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS:

- a. Does the park department actively engage with the local community, seeking input and feedback?
- b. Are there partnerships established with community organizations or stakeholders to enhance park services and programs?
- c. Does the park provide opportunities for community involvement in park planning and decision-making processes?

The assessment tool can be structured as a questionnaire or checklist, where each criterion is evaluated on a scale or with specific yes/no responses. Park managers, local authorities, and community members can utilize this tool to assess the compliance of public parks with both CAPRA standards and age-friendly public design principles. The results can then be used to identify areas for improvement and guide future park development and management strategies.

The “Park Toolkit” included in *AARP’s Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of all Ages* can be used to follow up with a more detailed assessment.

VI. PROPOSED AGE FRIENDLY OLMSTED COUNTY (AFOC) AND THE CITY OF ROCHESTER PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT (RPRD) COLLABORATION

AFOC and RPRD can work together synergistically to create inclusive and vibrant public spaces consistent with age friendly park design principles and CAPRA standards. By aligning our goals, we can enhance the overall well-being and quality of life for community members.

Here's an overview of how these we might cooperate:

- 1. Shared Vision:** AFOC and RPRD share a common vision of creating accessible, welcoming, and diverse public spaces that cater to individuals of all ages. We recognize the importance of promoting social interaction, physical activity, and community engagement within these spaces.
- 2. Community Engagement:** AFOC actively engages with community members, including seniors, to gather insights and feedback about their needs, preferences, and expectations regarding park facilities and programming. This valuable input informs the RPRD’s decision-making process, ensuring that the design and offerings are responsive to the community's desires.
- 3. Inclusive Park Design:** The RPRD integrates age-friendly design principles into its planning process, aligning with CAPRA standards that emphasize inclusivity, accessibility, and universal design. Playgrounds, seating areas, pathways, and amenities are designed to accommodate diverse age groups, mobility levels, and abilities.

4. **Intergenerational Programming:** AFOC collaborates with the RPRD to develop and promote age friendly programs and events within the park spaces. These activities foster connections between different generations, encouraging mutual learning, understanding, and social bonds.
5. **Safety and Security:** AFOC and RPRD work together to ensure that the park spaces meet safety and security standards outlined by CAPRA. Clear sightlines, appropriate lighting, and well-maintained facilities create a secure environment for people of all ages to enjoy.
6. **Education and Awareness:** AFOC contributes to raising awareness within the community about the benefits of age-friendly park design and helps community members appreciate the efforts being made RPRD to create spaces that cater to their diverse needs.
7. **Feedback and Continuous Improvement:** Regular feedback loops are established between the AFOC and RPRD. This ensures that the park design and programming remain responsive to evolving community needs and preferences, aligning with CAPRA's emphasis on continuous improvement.
8. **Collaborative Advocacy:** AFOC and RPRD collaborate to advocate for funding, resources, and policies that support the ongoing development and maintenance of age-friendly parks. Our joint efforts amplify the message and garner community and stakeholder support.

CONCLUSION

Age-friendly parks provide a range of benefits that enhance the quality of life for individuals across generations. They promote physical activity, support health and well-being, foster social interaction and community cohesion, and create inclusive spaces that cater to the diverse needs and preferences of people of all ages.

Designing and maintaining age-friendly parks is essential for creating vibrant, healthy, and inclusive communities where individuals can thrive and enjoy the benefits of outdoor spaces. These parks provide spaces for people of all ages to interact, engage in physical activities, and foster social connections.

Incorporating both CAPRA standards and age friendly principles will lead to well-managed parks that provide diverse amenities, prioritize safety, and create environments where people of all ages can enjoy recreational activities and foster social connections.

APPENDIX

CAPRA STANDARDS AND THE AGE-FRIENDLY OLMSTED COUNTY 2022-2025 ACTION PLAN

CAPRA = The National Accreditation Standards,
Commission for Accreditation of Park & Recreation
Agencies, Sixth Edition, 2019 ([link](#))

AFOC = Age-Friendly Olmsted County 2022-2025 Action Plan,
September 2022 ([link](#))

Age-Friendly Olmsted County (AFOC) is a cross-sector initiative to ensure that residents of Olmsted County have what they need to live with autonomy and dignity in all life's stages. When Olmsted County became a member of the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities in early 2020, it officially joined a global movement, with roots in the World Health Organization, to help cities and communities respond to an aging population and prepare for a permanently older society.

Our Rochester volunteers have been reviewing related issues in the City of Rochester, which fall primarily within the domain of the Parks and Recreation Department. This document highlights shared values and goals in relation to the CAPRA accreditation process, and to the Department's System Plan.

Section 1 – Planning & Policy, Community Engagement

Community Involvement (CAPRA fundamental standard 2.9, page 40)

Standard: The agency shall include community involvement in the planning process that includes ongoing and systematic outreach to include the entire community. It is critical that the diversity of individuals (i.e., all cultures, ages, and abilities) and local, regional, and national non-governmental community organizations, agencies, businesses, and service providers such as the Red Cross, Sierra Club, Trust for Public Land, YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Club, and local foundations and employers are afforded opportunities for input.

Recreation Programming Plan (CAPRA fundamental standard 6.1, page 113)

Standard: Leisure and recreation are integral to a community's social, cultural and economic development. The agency shall have a Recreation Program Plan (RPP) covering 2-3 years that is updated periodically and shall address all leisure and recreation programs and services.

Recreation Programming Plan (CAPRA fundamental standard 6.1, p.114)

f. Programs and Services Management Matrix (include agency's matrix for a sample facility, program, service and special event with the following categories):

- i. Program types (self-directed [6.1.3], leader-directed [6.1.4], etc.);*
- ii. Genders, life stage/age groups (pre-school, teen, senior, family, etc.);*
- iii. Data/statistical collection (surveys, demographic reports, etc.);*
- iv. SMART (specific, measurable, relevant, achievable, time-bound) program objectives and evaluation
(6.2*);*
- v. Scope of program opportunities/classification formats (6.3) (special event, drop-in, etc.; equipment rental and checkout, etc.; leisure education open house, checklist, etc.; aquatics, after-school,*

arts, etc.);

vi. Outreach to diverse and underserved populations (6.31*);

vii. Health and wellness promotion (6.4.1) (physical, emotional, social, etc.); and

viii. Program promotion

Scope of Program Opportunities (CAPRA standard 6.3, page 122)

Suggested Evidence of Compliance: Provide a matrix or listing of programs by fields, demonstrating clearly how the agency provides opportunities for proficiency levels, socioeconomic levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, and genders.

Rochester Park & Rec system plan (RPRSP) approved 2016 (link)	AFOC Action Plan (link) items and relevant AARP resources
<p>Changing Health Trends (RPRSP p.24) Increased interest in aging actively Implications for Parks & Recreation: <i>More <u>senior</u> recreation</i> <i>More mid-day recreation programs</i></p> <p>Demographic Overview (RPRSP p.31) <u>Age and Gender</u> <i>Currently Rochester is a relatively youthful city... Population projections, however, show an <u>aging population by 2040. The largest percentage growth will be in the 65 to 85 cohort...</u></i></p>	<p>AFOC action plan proposals: Goal #6: Ensure concerns of older adults inform public planning and policy</p> <p>6.ii Parks and recreational facilities are expanded and planned with an intention to support older adult access and activities <i>Engage the Rochester Park & Rec system for mutual goals</i> <i>Review park assets for age-friendly accessibility and activities</i></p> <p>6.iii Opportunities to promote age-friendly planning, policy, and community outcomes are pursued as appropriate <i>Sponsor forums. Earned media coverage. Engage in public meetings and hearings, community engagement & research projects</i></p> <p>AARP Roadmap to Livability: Creating Parks & Public Spaces for People of All Ages D20447: <i>invite the community</i> (p. 10) <i>build broad-based alliances</i> (p. 10) <i>encourage stewardship</i> (p. 10) <i>slow down the streets</i> (p. 12) <i>remove barriers, take back space</i> (p. 14, 16) <i>find champions in unlikely places</i> (p. 18) <i>identify shared goals: outreach to neighborhood assns, senior communities</i> (p. 18)</p>

Section 2 – Community Supports & Health Services

Programs and Services Management (CAPRA standard 6.1, page 111)

Park and recreation agencies should have a program that educates the public about the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits that leisure (time, activity, experience) and participation in self- directed and leader-directed recreation activities provide. It should include the three (3) behavior domains: psychomotor (manipulation and coordination of physical skills and abilities), affective (interests, appreciations, attitudes and values) and cognitive (intellectual skills and abilities).

Rochester Park & Rec system plan (RPRSP) approved 2016 (link)	AFOC Action Plan (link) items and relevant AARP resources
	<p>AFOC action plan proposals:</p> <p>Goal #3: Develop cross-sector, holistic, culturally appropriate <u>dementia</u> informed approach to care AFOC action plan proposals:</p> <p>3.ii Promote cross-referral & integrate a communication protocol among partnering entities</p> <p>3.ii.2 compile community service, resources, education opportunities regarding dementia support.</p> <p>3.iii Connect family, friends and neighbor care partners of persons with dementia to services, education and resources</p> <p>3.iii.1 1. BIPOC Outreach with care partners</p> <p>3.iii.3 3. BIPOC Outreach for ongoing communication and case management for as long as care partner/person with dementia desires</p> <p>non-AARP programming option: European "Cycling Without Age" model (CyclingWithoutAge.org)</p>

Section 3 – Education on Aging in Place

Leisure education program examples (CAPRA, standard 6.1, p.112)

Community presentations regarding leisure benefits at libraries, senior citizen centers, special recreation associations, and at business and industry meetings.

<p>Rochester Park & Rec system plan (RPRSP) approved 2016 (link)</p>	<p>AFOC Action Plan (link) items and relevant AARP resources</p>
<p>Community Health (RPRSP, p.15) <i>Recreation programs that are offered for all <u>ages</u> and income levels promote lifelong learning opportunities and a supportive community atmosphere. Specific programs can provide enjoyable learning activities for youth, keep <u>seniors</u> active and connected, or educate all community members about the importance of <u>active living</u> and sustainability.</i></p> <p>Cultivate Health (RPRSP, p.64) <i>Today, few can argue the need for parks and recreation to cultivate a culture of <u>well-being and active living</u> within a community. Rochester especially, because of its role as host and home to the Mayo Clinic and its visitors, must embrace and meet this need with vigor. In recognition of this, the Parks and Recreation Department will:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>* Provide a diversity of quality facilities to support <u>life-long activity</u></i> <i>* Support <u>healthy living</u> by providing a pedestrian/bicycling network</i> <i>* Offer programming and education to support healthy choices</i> <i>* Protect environmental health through sustainability initiatives</i> 	<p>AFOC action plan proposals: Goal #5: Education on Aging in Place is widely available and utilized. <i>Form a senior education coordinating committee Identify/assess existing ed resources (venue, presentations, & subject matter experts) curate available materials and maintain a directory develop communication strategies to drive awareness across County</i></p> <p>Examples of AFOC education modules: Home safety and fall prevention In-home healthcare services and how to access them Transportation considerations and options Technology tools for progressive impairment (vision, hearing, dexterity, tactile sensation) Fitness, health, diet, and exercise Social considerations (friends, groups, learning opportunities)</p> <p>AARP Roadmap to Livability: Creating Parks & Public Spaces for People of All Ages D20447: <i>fitness lots suitable for adults & seniors</i> (p. 8, 21) <i>off-season & slack-time use of buildings and concessions</i></p> <p>Creating Parks & Pub Spaces: <i>Walk audit: promote senior friendly park places</i> <i>public space audit</i> <i>public space field study</i></p>

Section 4 – Outreach, Networking, Combatting Ageism

No CAPRA correlate identified

<p>Rochester Park & Rec system plan (RPRSP) approved 2016 (link)</p>	<p>AFOC Action Plan (link) items and relevant AARP resources</p>
<p>Changing Health Trends (RPRSP p.24) Increasing physical + mental health problems Implications for Parks & Recreation: <i>More support for <u>active living</u></i> <i>New fitness opportunities</i></p> <p>Programming (RPRSP p.101) captions & body text <i>*Utilize permanent park facilities as <u>event spaces</u> when possible</i> <i>* Promote <u>Active living at all ages</u></i> <i>1.1.3. Collaborate with cultural groups to provide <u>community events in the parks.</u></i> <i>1.1.6 Collaborate with the schools and other organizations to provide <u>community education in the parks.</u></i></p> <p>Public Health (RPRSP p.108) <i>1. Leverage Parks and Recreation to <u>Improve Public Health and Well-Being</u></i> <i>1.1 Encourage <u>active living</u></i> <i>1.1.3. Add outdoor equipment adjacent to playgrounds to <u>support adult activity while children are playing.</u></i> <i>1.1.4. Add <u>outdoor equipment along trails</u></i> <i>1.1.5. Increase exposure to the array of recreational opportunities by providing low-cost and low commitment trial programs targeted towards children, <u>seniors</u>, and immigrants.</i> <i>1.2. Seek, support, and engage potential partners in addressing <u>public health.</u></i></p>	<p>Goal #1: Increase availability of affordable Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) AFOC action plan proposals: 1.i HCBS reflect the cultural needs of diverse aging communities: 1.i.1 <i>community engagement sessions with BIPOC elders and care partners</i> 1.ii HCBS availability shared with and understood by rural and low to moderate income older adults & care 1.ii.3 <i>improve and expand education, visibility, and services for low-income and rural elders</i></p>

Section 4 – Outreach, Networking, Combatting Ageism *continued*

No CAPRA correlate identified

Rochester Park & Rec system plan (RPRSP) approved 2016 (link)	AFOC Action Plan (link) items and relevant AARP resources
<p>Toolkit to include resources on <u>fitness, mobility, balance, fall risk, gait aids, emergency call options, senior housing options</u></p>	<p>Goal #4: Effective tools & protocols are available for identified providers and individuals.</p> <p>AARP Roadmap to Livability website • book</p> <p>AARP Roadmap to Livability: Community Listening Session Tool Kit D20362</p> <p>AARP Roadmap to Livability: Creating Parks & Public Spaces for People of All Ages D20447</p> <p>Provide Activities (p.6)</p> <p>Design for All (p.8)</p> <p>Engage and Energize (p.10)</p> <p>Put Pedestrians First (p.12), especially “slow down the streets”</p> <p>Remove Barriers (p.14)</p> <p>Think Outside the Box (p.18)</p> <p>AARP Livability Index for Rochester • Olmsted County • Minnesota</p> <p>ParkServe database (tpl.org/city/rochester-minnesota), ParkEvaluator</p> <p>AARP Walk Audit tool Kit (p.24)</p> <p>Programming Calendar (p.36)</p> <p>AARP Walk Audit Toolkit D20381</p> <p>AARP Home Fit Guide D18959</p>

No CAPRA correlate identified

Rochester Park & Rec system plan (RPRSP) approved 2016 (link)	AFOC Action Plan (link) items and relevant AARP resources
<p>Funding Recommendations (RPRSP p.118)</p> <p><i>1.2.11. Continue to work collaboratively with Public Works and <u>Olmsted County Planning on development, trail and bikeway projects, and environmental initiatives.</u></i></p>	<p>AFOC action plan proposals:</p> <p>Goal #7: Extend age-friendly network participation in Olmsted County Cross communication:</p> <p>Olmsted Co & local park organizations</p> <p>Rochester and other municipal agencies</p> <p>secondary education: UMR, WSU, RCTC</p> <p>age-friendly advocacy: AF Minnesota, SEMAAA, AARP</p> <p>related groups: 125 Live, specialty organizations</p> <p>AARP Roadmap to Livability: Creating Parks & Public Spaces for People of All Ages D20447</p>

Section 4 – Outreach, Networking, Combatting Ageism *continued*

No CAPRA correlate identified

<p>Rochester Park & Rec system plan (RPRSP) approved 2016 (link) City of Rochester 2022-2023 Action Plan - 2022 Quarter 3 Update (link)</p>	<p>AFOC Action Plan (link) items and relevant AARP resources</p>
<p>Changing Health Trends (RPRSP p.24) Increased interest in <u>aging</u> actively Implications for Parks & Recreation: <i>More <u>senior</u> recreation</i> <i>More <u>mid-day</u> recreation programs</i> Definition of diversity (2022 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Action Plan Update, City of Rochester) <i>Variation in human identity including but not limited to <u>age</u>, <u>race</u>, <u>ethnicity</u>, <u>ability/disability</u>, <u>gender</u> <u>identity</u>, <u>sexual orientation</u>, <u>socio-</u> <u>economic status</u>, <u>veteran status</u>, and <u>migrant status</u>.</i></p>	<p>AFOC action plan proposals: Goal #8: Address age-based barriers to opportunity and access 8.i Built environments in Olmsted County communities are safe and accessible <i>Promote and support walking audits</i> 8.ii DEI policies and initiatives prominently include ageism <i>Review DEI policies and initiatives for inclusion of ageism</i> 8.iii Public educated about ageism <i>Develop media campaigns to decrease tolerance of ageism</i> Opportunities for outreach & engagement of the senior community <i>Offer concession facility & shelter use during idle hours (in & outdoor) for senior social activities in a public-private partnership with AARP or AFOC partners</i></p>

Section 5 – Funding Opportunities

Key short-term enhancements to the System Plan

- walk audits of current parks and trails
- expand placement of benches at rest intervals on trails
- expand placement of adult fitness-related equipment in parks, including in more quiet/tranquil locations
- rest strips??

Past grant success of local projects:

- Rochester Friendship Park in Meadow Park neighborhood: 2020 Mayo Clinic grant for \$50,000
<https://www.postbulletin.com/community/new-mural-park-the-result-of-neighborhoods-unity>

Potential grant funding avenues:

- National
 - AARP Community Challenge Grants <https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/community-challenge/>
 - AARP Foundation Grants Program <https://www.aarp.org/aarp-foundation/grants/>
 - National Endowment for the Humanities <https://www.neh.gov/grants>
 - National Institute on Aging <https://www.nia.nih.gov/research/grants-funding>
 - UIS Bank Community Possible Grant Program <https://www.usbank.com/about-us-bank/community/community-possible-grant-program.html>
 - US Federal <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/search-grants.html>
- State
 - Age-Friendly Minnesota Grants Program <https://mn.gov/dhs/age-friendly-mn/>
 - McKnight Foundation: Vibrant & Equitable Communities
<https://www.mcknight.org/grants/for-grant-seekers/>
 - Minn Department of Administration <https://mn.gov/grants/>
 - Minn Department of Human Services: Live Well at Home Grants
<https://mn.gov/dhs/partners-and-providers/grants-rfps/live-well/>
 - Minn DHS is seeking to support Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Caregivers
<http://mn.gov/dhs/partners-and-providers/grants-rfps/open-rfps/index.jsp?id=1053-579123>
 - Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage Grants Program
<https://www.mnhs.org/preservation/legacy-grants/about>
<https://www.mnhs.org/preservation/legacy-grants/funded-projects>
 - Minnesota Humanities Center grants <https://www.mnhum.org/what-we-do/grants/>
- County/Local
 - Mayo Clinic Community Contributions Program
<https://communityengagement.mayoclinic.org/rochester/submit-a-proposal/>
 - Mayo Clinic EverybodyIN Fund for Change Grants
<https://communityengagement.mayoclinic.org/everybodyin/>
 - Rochester Area Foundation Better Communities Grants
<https://rochesterarea.org/nonprofits/better-communities-grants/>

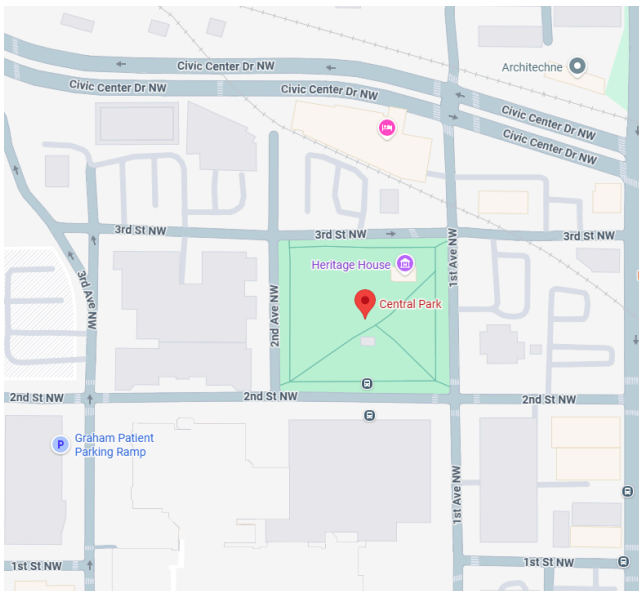
CENTRAL PARK PLAZA

Dedicated July 30, 2004

In 1856, W.D. Lowery donated his cow pasture to establish Rochester's first park, Central Park. In the 1800s Central Park was the gathering place for picnics, band concerts and ice cream socials with a majestic fountain as the centerpiece.

In 2004, Rochester's 150th anniversary, Leadership Greater Rochester—a program of the Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce—partnered with Rochester Park and Recreation Department to restore the majesty of Central Park. This project included replacing the fountain, creating a brick plaza, replacing the sidewalks and improving accessibility for everyone.

The Leadership Greater Rochester class of 2004 would like to recognize the following community members for their generous support of our vision of Enhancing the Future While Preserving the Past.



Central Park Audit

Summary Report for Rochester Parks and Recreation

May 2026

AGE FRIENDLY
OLMSTED COUNTY
Livable communities for longer lives.

Central Park Older Adult Park Audit

Summary Report for Rochester Parks and Recreation

*Prepared from scanned audit worksheets and handwritten notes
submitted through Age Friendly Olmsted County*

May 2026

Purpose of this report: Compile practical observations from older adult park audit worksheets for Central Park near Charter House. The audit was designed as a resident observation exercise, not a technical engineering inspection. Comments below should be read as lived-experience feedback to inform future park planning, maintenance, accessibility, safety, and programming decisions.

Executive Summary

Older adult auditors generally described Central Park as valued, pleasant, shaded, and full of potential. The park's fountain, mature trees, and historic character were repeatedly identified as features to protect. At the same time, the worksheets point to several practical barriers that affect comfort, safety, and use, especially for older adults and people with mobility or vision concerns.

- Overall impression: Mostly positive, with several auditors rating the park as good for safety, comfort, welcome, ease of movement, and pleasantness. A few rated key elements only fair or poor, especially where safety, seating, or park usability were concerned.
- Most valued features: Fountain, mature trees, shade, historic character, quiet atmosphere, central gathering space, and proximity to Charter House.
- Recurring concerns: Uneven pavement and brick surfaces, trip hazards, hard-to-see edges, speeding bikes or scooters, traffic proximity, restroom usability and location, litter, lighting, and perceptions of safety.
- Most common improvements requested: More stable and age-friendly seating, chairs or benches with arms and backs, better tables, improved lighting, safer walking surfaces, more landscaping, clearer signs, restroom attention, and more regular activity in the park.
- General conclusions: Auditors did not call for a complete redesign. The strongest message was to preserve the park's historic, shaded, quiet character while making it safer, more comfortable, more accessible, and more actively used.

Findings at a Glance

Theme	What auditors noticed
Access and movement	Most auditors could enter and move through the park, but several noted uneven pavement, broken bricks, steps, hard-to-see edges, and trip hazards.
Seating and tables	Seating was appreciated but often described as needing improvement. Notes called for shorter chairs, arms, backs, stable tables, and more seating.
Fountain, trees, and history	The fountain, mature trees, and historic character were repeatedly named as assets that should not be lost.
Safety and comfort	Concerns included lighting, traffic, speeding bikes/scooters, litter, restroom concerns, visibility, and a desire for emergency call options.
Landscape and identity	Auditors asked for better landscaping, color, texture, native plantings, and maintenance that does not block visibility.
Use and programming	Auditors suggested music, small events, walking groups, exercise classes, workshops, pop-up exhibits, food trucks, and other regular uses.

Background and Method

The Central Park audit used a park audit worksheet focused on access, movement, seating, shade, comfort, the plaza and fountain, historic character, safety, maintenance, visibility, usefulness for older adults, and desired improvements.

There were six auditors. Five were residents of the Charter House senior living community selected by Charter House staff. The residents were two men and three women ages 70+, white, one using a cane. The sixth auditor was a Charter House staff member who assisted in organizing the audit. Auditors were accompanied by Jeff Feece, Park Planner, City of Rochester Parks and Recreation Department and Dave Beal, Age-Friendly Olmsted County Coordinator, Family Service Rochester.

After a brief orientation regarding park audits, the role of a park auditor, and the park audit worksheets (included with this report), the participants walked to Central Park which is adjacent to the Charter House residence building. The group walked through the park, offering and discussing their observations followed by a general discussion.

The worksheet asked auditors to check boxes and add handwritten comments. This report organizes those comments into themes. The emphasis is on repeated themes rather than exact survey tabulation.

Detailed Findings

1. Overall impression of the park

Overall ratings leaned positive. Multiple worksheets marked the park as good for comfort, welcome, ease of movement, and pleasantness. Several fair ratings appeared for safety, comfort, or pleasantness, suggesting that the park is valued but not yet consistently comfortable for all older adults.

Handwritten descriptions included phrases such as “active, cool, peaceful,” “calm,” “historic,” and “filled with potential to be a central treasured park.” One auditor concluded simply that the park “needs work.”

The overall tone was not rejection of the park. It was an invitation to improve a valued public space while protecting what makes it distinctive.

2. Getting to and moving through the park

Most auditors were able to enter from Charter House or nearby sidewalks, but several marked the experience as only somewhat easy or noted issues with traffic and nearby street conditions.

Positive checkmarks appeared for smooth, wide, easy-to-follow paths and mobility-device friendliness, but these were offset by written concerns about uneven pavement, broken brick, steps, hard-to-see edges, and trip hazards.

Several comments raised bike and scooter speed or traffic as a safety concern. This is especially important because older adults may need more time to react, cross, or navigate shared spaces.

3. Seating, tables, shade, and comfort

Shade was one of the park's strengths. Auditors consistently valued the mature trees and generally found enough shade.

Seating and tables were a more mixed finding. Comments mentioned chairs without arms, furniture in disrepair, wobbly tables and chairs, a need for shorter chairs with arms, a need for more seating, and picnic tables needing improvement.

The worksheets suggest that seating should be treated as core accessibility infrastructure, not just a convenience. For many older adults, the difference between a pass-through park and a usable park is the availability of stable, well-placed seating with arms and backs.

4. Plaza, fountain, and historic character

The fountain, plaza, Heritage House, mature trees, and historic character were repeatedly identified as important. "Fountain" and "big trees" were among the most common answers to what the park should not lose.

Auditors generally saw the central plaza as attractive and meaningful but needing maintenance, better signage, and attention to repair. Some comments suggested that the central area can remain a gathering place if surfaces, seating, and supporting features are improved.

The historic character appears to be a major source of identity. Several comments called for highlighting or interpreting the park's heritage and historic significance rather than allowing those features to fade into the background.

5. Safety, maintenance, and visibility

Safety concerns were among the most repeated findings. Auditors checked or wrote comments about uneven pavement, trip hazards, poor lighting, hard-to-see edges, litter, restroom concerns, and landscaping that can block visibility.

Perceptions of safety also mattered. Some notes mentioned restrooms not being usable or not open to the public, concerns about vagrancy or people lingering, and a desire for emergency call boxes or call stations similar to those used on campuses or in parking ramps.

These comments point to a combination of physical repairs, maintenance routines, visibility improvements, lighting review, and activation. A park that is used regularly and visibly cared for is likely to feel safer.

6. Usefulness for older adults

Auditors identified quiet sitting, reading, visiting, small gathering, walking through, fountain/history, and occasional programming as appropriate uses for the park.

Suggested additions included music, exercise, activities, workshops, group walks, pop-up exhibits, ice cream or food trucks, and other small events. These ideas imply that Central Park could serve both as a quiet refuge and as a modest neighborhood gathering place.

The strongest programming theme was not large-scale events. It was regular, manageable activity that gives older adults a reason to enter, stay, and feel connected to the space.

Identified Preferences

- 1. Start with safety and accessibility repairs.** Review and address uneven pavement, broken brick, hard-to-see edges, steps, and trip hazards. Focus first on the most-used paths from Charter House, sidewalks, plaza entries, benches, fountain, and any restroom or destination points.
- 2. Upgrade seating as an age-friendly feature.** Provide a mix of stable benches and chairs with arms and backs. Include seating in shade and sun, near the fountain, along routes, and around gathering spaces. Avoid furniture that is too low, too wobbly, or difficult to rise from.
- 3. Preserve and highlight the fountain, mature trees, and historic character.** Make these features anchors of the future plan. Improve maintenance, interpretation, and signage so visitors understand why the park matters.
- 4. Improve lighting, visibility, and perceived safety.** Assess lighting, sightlines, landscaping height, restroom visibility, and areas where people may feel isolated. Consider emergency call options, clearer wayfinding, and routine maintenance practices that reinforce care and safety.
- 5. Address restroom access and usability.** Clarify whether restrooms are intended for public use and, if so, make them visible, signed, accessible, and reliably maintained. If not, communicate nearby alternatives and consider future facility needs.
- 6. Add landscape beauty while maintaining open sightlines.** Use plantings for color, texture, seasonal interest, and possibly native species, while avoiding plantings that block visibility or narrow accessible movement routes.
- 7. Test small-scale programming and activation.** Pilot group walks, music, exercise classes, pop-up exhibits, workshops, seasonal events, or regular small gatherings. Programming can help determine what improvements will support real use.
- 8. Return to older adults with concept options.** Before finalizing a plan, share two or three concept alternatives with Charter House residents and other older adults. Ask which features would make them use the park more often and which features must be protected.

Possible Quick Wins

- Remove or repair the most obvious trip hazards and uneven brick or pavement areas.
- Add or reposition a small number of stable chairs or benches with arms and backs.
- Inspect and repair wobbly tables and movable chairs; remove furniture that is unsafe or difficult to use.
- Improve lighting and edge visibility where feasible.
- Add temporary signs explaining the fountain, Heritage House, and historic park character.
- Trim or adjust landscaping that blocks visibility while preserving shade and mature trees.
- Clarify restroom availability and improve signage if public restrooms are available.
- Pilot one or two small recurring activities, such as a weekly walk, coffee gathering, music hour, or pop-up exhibit.

Themes Reflected in Individual Worksheets

Notable comments and themes
Mixed overall ratings; concerns about usefulness and safety; comments about limited usable options, need for tables/chairs with arms, flowers/landscaping, activities, and protecting the historic house/park character.
Annotated handout emphasized practical observations such as fountain, stairs without arms, uneven ground, tables/chairs, daytime activity, and possible programs such as group walks, exercise classes, workshops, and events.
Described the park as “filled with potential” and a possible treasured central park. Noted busy street context, possible nighttime uncertainty, need for signage, lighting in the center space, improved chairs/tables, maintenance, and historic interpretation.
Described the park as “active, cool, peaceful.” Marked concerns about pavement, trip hazards, restrooms, and landscaping. Recommended protecting trees, improving landscaping, and not losing big trees and the fountain.
Described the park as calm and historic. Noted uneven pavement, poor lighting, restroom concerns, need for better paths, lighting, flowers/landscaping, activities, and more safety. Emphasized fountain protection.
Raised safety concerns, including scooters/bikes traveling fast and people lingering. Suggested emergency call boxes, better furniture, landscape upgrades, and possible quiet or meditative space.
Saw the park as nice and useful, but noted steps, broken or uneven bricks, small wobbly tables/chairs, lighting and trip hazards. Suggested more benches, shade, paths, lighting, landscaping, activities, restrooms, signage, and regular pop-up activities. Identified the fountain as a feature to keep.
Generally positive overall ratings. Noted need for more seating, safety concerns about speeding bikes/scooters, and value in historic significance, quiet space, and beautiful fountain.