



Environment and Resiliency

Worthington's natural systems, including its tree canopy, creek corridors, parks and natural areas, are defining features of the community's character and quality of life. They provide ecological function, moderate stormwater and heat, and contribute to the sense of place that residents and employers value. Environmental stewardship in Worthington is not a standalone concern, it is woven into the choices the community makes across every chapter of this plan.

Land use decisions that support walkable, mixed-use development reduce vehicle miles traveled and concentrate infrastructure more efficiently. Mobility investments in sidewalks, trails, and transit reduce reliance on single-occupancy vehicles. Design standards that require tree canopy, green infrastructure, and quality public space directly protect natural systems while improving daily life. Good planning and environmental responsibility reinforce each other rather than compete.

Worthington has a genuine track record of environmental stewardship. The City maintains more than 5,000 street trees managed by certified arborists, operates a native tree nursery in partnership with the Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed, and has participated in an electric aggregation program since 2019 that matches 100% of participating households' electricity use with wind Renewable Energy Certificates. The City has also reduced road salt use, expanded composting and recycling programs in partnership with SWACO and the Franklin County Soil and Water Conservation District, and used its development review process to preserve mature trees, manage stormwater, and promote green infrastructure.

This chapter builds on that foundation. It is organized around two strategic priorities:

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 14. Lead by Example in Environmental Stewardship and Resilience

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 15. Update the Parks and Recreation Master Plan

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

- Context
- Strategic Priority 14
- Strategic Priority 15

Context

THEMES FROM PUBLIC INPUT

Environmental quality and access to parks and green space were not a standalone mapping category during the first round of public input, but they emerged among the most consistent themes across all categories. These themes were echoed in the second round of public input. The most common themes were:

- Protecting and expanding green space and tree canopy, with residents across many neighborhoods calling for more shade trees along streets and sidewalks, native plantings, pollinator pathways, and the preservation of existing open space on redevelopment sites
- Activating and improving access to Worthington's waterways, including the Olentangy River and Rush Run, with interest in drop-in points for watercraft, trail connections, and naturalized corridors that protect stream environments while making them more accessible
- Incorporating sustainability and green design into new development and public spaces, including rain gardens, green roofs, pollinator gardens, composting, and environmentally conscious design standards for new construction
- Improving and investing in existing parks, with participants noting aging playgrounds, a desire for splash pads, and improved lighting and restrooms
- Creating a new, large gathering park that could accommodate events, concerts, and informal recreation in a central location

KEY CONDITIONS AND TRENDS

Worthington's park system is well-established and well-maintained, but community expectations have evolved since the 2017 Parks Master Plan.

The City maintains 255 acres of parks and open space across 14 parks, providing approximately 12.4 acres per 1,000 residents, well above the national benchmark and above the median of peer communities measured in the 2017 plan. Most of the City is within a ten-minute walk of a park, though gaps exist along the North High Street corridor, the eastern Worthington Estates neighborhood, and the Northeast Area. Parks and Recreation represents the second largest category in the City's operating budget, after public safety, and the Capital Improvements Program has funded improvements to roughly half of the City's parks since 2017. The 2017 plan's benchmarks have largely been met, but acreage alone does not measure quality, condition, or access. The planning process confirmed that residents have evolving expectations for facilities, programming, and new gathering spaces that the existing plan does not fully address.

Worthington's tree canopy is a significant asset, but regulatory tools to protect it are limited. Tree canopy covers 26 percent of Worthington's total land area, higher than Franklin County's 24 percent. Residential neighborhoods carry the highest canopy density; commercial and industrial areas, large-footprint buildings, surface parking lots, and active parks account for the lowest coverage. Despite this strong baseline, Worthington currently lacks the regulatory tools that peer communities use to protect canopy over time, such as lot coverage

limits, stream buffer requirements, and tree removal and replacement standards. This gap is particularly relevant as redevelopment pressure increases on commercial corridors and opportunity sites.

Worthington has an established record of environmental stewardship, but lacks a coordinating sustainability framework.

The City and its partners have implemented a broad range of sustainability initiatives across City operations, development review, parks management, and community programs, catalogued in the table below. These efforts span energy efficiency, waste reduction, green infrastructure, urban forestry, and alternative transportation. These initiatives have developed organically across departments and community organizations without a unifying sustainability plan or measurable targets. The Vision Implementation Team recommended that the City address sustainability in the development and infrastructure planning process through the comprehensive plan update, and to develop

a long-term sustainability plan that addresses other operational tactics and measures.

Worthington has achieved Platinum status in MORPC's Sustainable 2050 program, the region's highest sustainability certification.

Sustainable 2050 is a MORPC program that benchmarks member communities' sustainability efforts and recognizes progress through a tiered certification system — Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Platinum. Platinum status reflects the breadth and depth of Worthington's existing initiatives across energy, urban forestry, waste reduction, water quality, and green infrastructure. This standing puts Worthington among the region's leaders in local government sustainability and provides a foundation for continued progress. It also underscores the case for a more coordinated sustainability framework: a community that has earned the region's highest certification is well-positioned to set formal targets, measure outcomes, and build on what it has already accomplished.

CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

Initiative	Category
Electric aggregation program; 100 percent of participating households' electricity matched with wind Renewable Energy Certificates	Energy
Participates in regional renewable energy procurement initiative	Energy
Converting public building and street lighting to LED; conversions nearly complete at City buildings, all CBD street lights and traffic signals converted	Energy
Upgraded efficiency of municipal buildings through performance-based energy conservation programs	Energy
Contracted preventative maintenance of 200+ HVAC components; replacing outdated systems at Fire Station, Griswold Center, and Community Center	Energy
Six operational EV charging stations including two public DC fast charging stations	Energy / Transportation
Developing an Alternative Fuel Vehicle Fleet Policy; fleet evaluated by Clean Fuels Ohio in 2023	Energy / Transportation
Pursuing Green Fleet Certification	Energy / Transportation
Passed Complete Streets Policy and Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan	Transportation
Sidewalk Gap Program: City pays full cost of filling small gaps through the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board	Transportation

CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

Initiative	Category
Promotes Bike to Work Day annually	Transportation
Maintains 5,061 street trees with certified arborist staff; Street Tree cost-sharing program available to residents	Urban Forestry
Designated Tree City USA by the National Arbor Day Foundation since 1989	Urban Forestry
Worthington Arbor Advisory Committee reviews landscape plans and guides urban forestry decisions	Urban Forestry
Native tree nursery at Godown Park in partnership with Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed	Urban Forestry
Curbside recycling program; e-waste, motor oil, and food scraps drop-off available	Waste Reduction
Compost Exchange program through Worthington Partnership: weekly pickup or drop-off with free compost for members	Waste Reduction
Municipal leaf collection program: over three million pounds collected annually and delivered to composting facility	Waste Reduction
Food waste composting program for Community Center staff	Waste Reduction
Pilot recycling program at Perry Park (2024); planning summer-long pilot for 2025	Waste Reduction
Annual inspections for illicit stormwater discharge	Water Quality
Participates in 9-element plan for the Rush Creek HUC 12 watershed	Water Quality
Issues free rain barrels through Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District; incentivizes green stormwater infrastructure	Water Quality
Enforces floodplain protections through NFIP and local F-1 zoning district	Water Quality
Stormwater management required in recent PUD projects including Stafford Village, Worthington Gateway, and Fresh Thyme	Water Quality
Reduced road salt use through direct liquid application and beet juice extract technologies	Water Quality
Air quality alert day operations plan; Idle-Free Policy adopted	Air Quality
Bottle fillers installed in all City buildings and added as standard when replacing park drinking fountains	Resource Conservation
30 community garden plots at the Community Center; 20 plots at Snouffer Park	Food Systems
Year-round farmers market with 70+ vendors through Worthington Partnership	Food Systems
PACE Assistance Program to support property-assessed clean energy financing	Economic / Development
Solar panel design guidance incorporated into Worthington Design Guidelines	Development
PUD process used to preserve trees, manage stormwater, and incorporate sustainable features in recent developments	Development
Worthington Green Team: volunteer group implementing sustainable community initiatives through Worthington Partnership	Community Programs
Monthly street sweeping program	Operations

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 14:

LEAD BY EXAMPLE IN ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AND RESILIENCE**Why This Matters**

Worthington's tree canopy, creek corridors, and open spaces are defining community assets. The City can lead by example, demonstrating environmental stewardship and resilience through its own capital projects, development standards, and operational decisions. Integrating sustainability and lifecycle thinking into both public and private investment strengthens long-term performance, reduces costs over time, and protects community character.

IMPLEMENTS THESE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Principles 7 and 8.

Alignment with Vision Worthington

This Strategic Priority advances several Vision Worthington commitments:



Worthington is a model for environmental stewardship. Protecting waterways, tree canopy, and open spaces, along with a focus on walkability and bikeability to reduce emissions, reinforces the City's commitment to sustainability.



Worthington offers a high quality of life. Healthy natural systems contribute to physical wellbeing and community identity.



Worthington's leadership is open, forward-thinking and collaborative. Integrating resilience and lifecycle planning into public decisions reflects forward-looking governance.

Implementation Actions

- 14.1. **Develop a coordinating sustainability plan.** Worthington has achieved significant environmental outcomes across City operations, development review, parks management, and community programs, earning Platinum status in MORPC's Sustainable 2050 program, the region's highest certification. These efforts have developed organically across departments and partner organizations without a unifying framework, measurable targets, or a mechanism to track progress over time. A sustainability plan would provide that coordination layer. The Vision Implementation Team's sustainability-focused workgroup specifically identified this as a top priority,

reflecting broad community and stakeholder support. A sustainability plan can be scoped to reflect Worthington's capacity and context. At a minimum, it should establish priority focus areas, identify measurable targets (such as canopy coverage, waste diversion rates, or greenhouse gas reductions), assign lead responsibilities, and define a reporting cadence so that progress can be tracked and communicated to the public. The plan should build on the City's existing initiatives rather than creating a parallel effort. The City should begin by scoping the plan's purpose, structure, and resource requirements. A more focused plan may be achievable with existing staff capacity and regional partners; a more comprehensive effort would likely require external consultant support. Council should determine the appropriate level of effort, drawing on comparable plans from peer communities, before committing to a specific planning process. MORPC, SWACO, the Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District, and Power a Clean Future Ohio are potential partners in this effort.

14.2. Strengthen environmental protection standards.

Worthington's stream corridors, steep slopes, woodlands, and other sensitive areas are defining community assets that warrant clear and consistent protection. The comprehensive regulatory assessment (Action 1.1) should evaluate the City's existing environmental standards, including any applicable provisions, to identify gaps, redundancies, or outdated requirements. The goal is not to layer on new regulation for its own sake, but to ensure that existing standards are clear, enforceable, and well-calibrated for a built-out community where most development takes the form of infill and redevelopment. Where the assessment identifies improvements, the City should consider mapping protected natural resources in a format that can be integrated into development guidance materials, making it easy for applicants to understand applicable standards early in the process. Clear, accessible guidance sets expectations up front, reduces uncertainty for property owners and developers, and provides Staff with effective tools for early pre-application conversations. Any new or refined standards should be designed to protect sensitive areas without creating disproportionate barriers in an already challenging market.

- 14.3. **Integrate green infrastructure into projects.** Green infrastructure encompasses a range of natural and nature-based systems, including bioretention areas, rain gardens, bioswales, tree canopy, permeable surfaces, and green roofs, that manage stormwater, reduce urban heat, improve air and water quality, and enhance the character of public and private spaces. Unlike conventional gray infrastructure, green infrastructure serves multiple functions simultaneously, making it a resilient and cost-effective long-term investment when properly designed and maintained.

Redevelopment within Worthington's Opportunity Areas presents a meaningful chance to move beyond the typical lot-by-lot pattern of stormwater management. Coordinated projects that incorporate green infrastructure across multiple parcels can reduce impervious cover, preserve more usable open space, and contribute to the comfort and character of corridors and public spaces in ways that conventional detention cannot. Techniques such as bioretention areas and rain gardens along key corridors, bioswale islands in parking lots, and green roofs on new buildings can be encouraged through development standards and agreements.

Green infrastructure can carry higher maintenance costs than conventional systems if not designed and managed carefully. As a general principle, green infrastructure installed on private property as part of a development

Add sidebar about green infrastructure

project should be the ongoing responsibility of the property owner, with maintenance obligations established through development agreements or conditions of approval. Where shared or district-scale systems cross multiple ownerships, maintenance responsibilities and cost-sharing arrangements should be clearly defined before those systems are approved. Aesthetics are a related concern, particularly for systems that can appear weedy, overgrown, or dormant during certain seasons. Development standards should address plant selection, seasonal appearance, and weed management to ensure that green infrastructure enhances corridor and site character, especially in visible locations along key corridors and within the Architectural Review District. Action 1.3 should establish enforceable standards that give the City tools to address both maintenance and aesthetic failures over time.

Since Worthington does not currently operate a stormwater utility, funding for shared facilities would most likely flow through capital improvement programming, development agreements, or infrastructure cost-sharing arrangements. District-scale coordination is a best-case scenario that depends on multiple properties redeveloping in proximity and within a similar timeframe, conditions that may not materialize in a community where change is incremental and ownership is fragmented. Even so, it is worth establishing the framework now so that when larger or coordinated projects do come forward, the City is positioned to pursue a more integrated approach rather than defaulting to site-by-site solutions. Where district-scale systems are not feasible, the techniques described above can still be applied at the individual project level to meaningful effect.

14.4. Adopt standards and incentives to preserve tree canopy.

Worthington's tree canopy is a measurable community asset. The City's 2021 Tree Canopy Assessment found that tree canopy covers approximately 38 percent of the City's total land area, with space for canopy coverage to grow. The assessment also documented the canopy's quantifiable benefits, including carbon sequestration, air quality improvement, stormwater interception, and avoided public health costs. Protecting and growing this canopy as redevelopment occurs has both environmental and economic benefits.

TREE CANOPY COVERAGE

The top layer of an individual or group of trees (branches, stems, and leaves) that creates cover over the ground when viewed from above. The total area of a site covered by a tree canopy should be determined by a certified arborist or landscape architect. The City of Worthington's tree canopy coverage was estimated to be 26 percent per the 2022 Tree Canopy Study.

HERITAGE TREES

Individual or group of trees of exceptional size, age, rarity, or significant historical value to the community. They can be recognized as a community landmark and contribute to local identity.

The City should establish a target canopy coverage percentage, building on the 38 percent baseline. The target should be set by City Council, with input from the Arbor Advisory Committee and the Parks and Recreation Commission, with attention to what is practically achievable given development patterns, impervious-surface constraints, and the time required for newly planted trees to reach meaningful canopy size. The target should be tracked and reevaluated every five years.

Capital projects for streets, parks, and public facilities should include generous street and shade tree planting, as well as the protection of significant trees during construction. For private development, applicants should provide details on tree canopy coverage as part of the site plan review process. Coverage requirements should account for the character of each use, recognizing that building footprints, parking, and stormwater areas constrain canopy differently across site types. Where it is impractical to meet minimum canopy requirements on site due to physical, arboricultural, or engineering constraints, a fee-in-lieu option should be available to direct contributions toward canopy investments elsewhere in the City.

The City should also evaluate whether additional tree preservation tools, such as requirements for approval prior to removal of significant trees (heritage trees) on private property, are appropriate and feasible. Any such measures should be carefully scoped to avoid creating undue burdens on property owners while still protecting the canopy assets that most contribute to community character and resilience.

- 14.5. **Embed resilience into capital planning.** To minimize future costs and social disruption, Worthington should integrate climate change adaptation into infrastructure investments to avoid future costs. The City's ability to prepare for and plan for adverse conditions and events can be strengthened by evaluating major infrastructure options based on total cost over a useful lifecycle. This means factoring in long-term operations, maintenance costs, energy use, and replacement costs, as well as performance under extreme weather, flooding, and heat, while accounting for potential future fluctuations. Capital budgeting and CIP criteria can be updated to score projects on these factors in addition to supporting land use and mobility strategies. Over time, infrastructure improvements will be made to enact the community's vision. Embedding resilience criteria in procurement, design standards, and staff guidance will help ensure infrastructure investments are maximized.

RESILIENCE

The long-term ability of communities and citizens to prepare and plan for, recover from, and adapt to adverse conditions and events.

Opportunistic Tools

The Opportunistic Tools are a menu of additional strategies, programs, and partnerships that Worthington may pursue to advance this Strategic Priority. Some reflect work already underway that the City should continue and strengthen; others represent opportunities to expand existing efforts or explore new approaches over time.

- **Native landscaping standards.** Encouraging native plantings in new development, City facilities, rights-of-way, and parking lots can support biodiversity, reduce water and maintenance demands, and improve stormwater performance. Standards in this area should be carefully scoped to promote native plants without creating overly prescriptive requirements that are difficult to administer or that limit reasonable design flexibility.
- **Sustainability recognition programs.** Recognizing residents, businesses, and institutions who have completed sustainable projects can turn high-level visions into visible, concrete actions to motivate others to make their own investments. Over time, a recognition program can become a branding tool for the City, further attracting residents and employers who share the community's values. This could be a program established by the City or a partnership with LEED building credentials, SolSmart Communities, Tree/Bee City USA, etc.
- **Regional environmental partnerships.** Worthington already engages with regional organizations, including MORPC, the Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District, and Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed. Continuing these relationships allows the City to draw on regional expertise, share resources, and advance environmental goals that extend beyond municipal boundaries.
- **Energy efficiency grants and facility benchmarking.** Establishing an energy benchmarking program for City facilities using tools such as ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager (a free tool from the EPA) to compare against peer communities, while also pursuing available federal, state, and utility incentives for energy-efficiency upgrades over time, can reduce energy costs and reinforce Worthington as a regional leader in sustainability.
- **Regional waste reduction and recycling partnerships.** Worthington already partners with SWACO, the Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District, and other organizations on recycling and waste reduction. Continuing to expand these efforts, particularly in areas such as food waste reduction and public education, aligns with the City's broader sustainability vision.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY 15:

UPDATE THE PARKS AND RECREATION MASTER PLAN

Why This Matters

The current Parks & Recreation Master Plan was adopted in 2017 and has guided meaningful investment in Worthington's park system. The next plan should build on that progress while broadening its scope to address both parks and recreation facilities, reflecting the full range of the City's responsibilities in this area. The update should incorporate current community needs, equity considerations, and evolving recreation trends, while remaining grounded in what the City can realistically deliver and sustain over time. Aligning park and recreation investments with this Comprehensive Plan will ensure that future decisions reinforce the community's long-term vision for quality, accessibility, and design.

IMPLEMENTS THESE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Principles 6, 7, and 8.

Alignment with Vision Worthington

This Strategic Priority advances several Vision Worthington commitments:



Worthington offers a high quality of life. High-quality parks and civic spaces enhance daily experience and community pride.



Worthington is connected. Linked parks, trails, and public spaces strengthen social and physical connections.



Worthington is a model for environmental stewardship. Thoughtful park planning protects natural resources and supports sustainable design.

Implementation Actions

15.1. **Update the Parks and Master Plan.** The update should include the following elements:

- **A community visioning process to prioritize improvements and investments.** Since the adoption of the 2017 plan, many of its recommendations have been implemented. An updated, in-depth analysis, vision, and planning process for existing parks and

recreation facilities, along with potential improvements, should be conducted to provide the City and the community with a clear vision and recommendations for these spaces.

- **A survey and benchmarking of amenities in peer communities.** The Parks & Recreation Master Plan update process should build on the extensive public engagement that has occurred through Vision Worthington and Worthington Together to maintain strong community buy-in. The use of benchmarks reported by the National Recreation and Parks Association (e.g., the amount of parkland per 1,000 residents) compared with similar jurisdictions can provide regional insight into what community members may expect.
- **Facilities and improvements at existing parks, with a focus on quality, usability, and long-term maintenance feasibility.** Park accessibility has many health and recreational benefits to neighborhoods and communities overall. These facilities, as well as the Community Center, Griswold Center, and Selby Shelter, should encourage use by all community residents, offering a range of opportunities and activities through updated amenities. As new facilities are installed, careful consideration must be given to their long-term maintenance to ensure they continue to bolster neighborhood livability for years to come.

- **Partnership opportunities with schools, nonprofits, and private entities.** Community members noted a desire to improve parks and open spaces throughout the community. Expanding partnerships with the School District, non-profit organizations, and others can maximize the use of shared resources to bolster these treasured amenities and reduce costs.
- **Awareness of budget constraints and lifecycle cost implications.** A clear schedule for improvements and maintenance should be determined through the updated Parks & Recreation Master Plan. This process must consider the realistic funding available for these projects so that the sequencing of improvements establishes a consistent, predictable pattern for the community and evaluates the City's ability to maintain existing parks and facilities alongside potential new investments.
- **Integration of parks, trails, and civic spaces with Opportunity Area redevelopment strategies.** Key trail connections include Wilson Bridge Rd and High Street. Cooperation with Franklin County, Franklin County Metroparks, Columbus, MORPC, and other partners will facilitate integration into regional plans, which will be essential to achieving a connected network that draws visitors and widens residents' access to nature. A connected network will not only enhance walkability in the identified Opportunity Areas, but can also improve property values.

