

2021



**LOCAL PARKS ASSESSMENT**  
WALTON COUNTY, FLORIDA

RELEASED: JULY 21, 2021

# Healthy Walton PARKS

The logo for 'Healthy Walton Parks' features the text 'Healthy Walton' in a teal, sans-serif font above the word 'PARKS' in a larger, bold, lime-green font. To the left of 'PARKS' are three stylized trees of varying heights. To the right is a park bench with a light pole and a trash can next to it. The entire graphic is set against a thin horizontal line.

The Healthy Walton Parks Initiative began as an activity of the 2020-2022 Community Health Improvement Plan. The plan is implemented by a group of community members representing different agencies, organizations, and businesses working together to make Walton County a healthier place to live. The Healthy Walton Parks Initiative seeks to offer guidance and support to local governments in order to develop healthy parks for all ages and abilities. This activity is part of the Healthy Places Workgroup.



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## BACKGROUND

This assessment was conducted for the Walton Community Health Improvement Partnership (WCHIP) as a part of the Healthy Walton Parks Initiative. It was conducted by Paige Simmons, a Master of Public Health candidate at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University. It was conducted in collaboration with Florida Department of Health in Walton County (DOH-Walton) and community partners. This project was funded by the Region IV Public Health Training Center within the Public Health Learning Network, which provides public health workforce training and student field placements nationwide.

### **WCHIP believes that parks should be the epicenter of health in communities.**

That is why parks, and other public “green” spaces that support health, is included in the neighborhood and built environment key area of the social determinants of health<sup>1</sup>. There is empirical evidence that supports an intervention for improving the neighborhood resources in rural areas, including sidewalks, bike lanes, playgrounds, fitness facilities, and parks and green spaces, to reduce barriers for individuals to be more physically active<sup>2,3</sup>. Adequate and safe parks and green spaces are an important community asset for individuals across the lifespan. From children to older adults, parks and green spaces are vital to improve all aspects of a healthy community: mental health, physical health, spiritual health, social health and environmental health<sup>2,4,5,6,7</sup>.

Parks and green spaces also help create a more resilient, equitable, and cohesive community. Evidence of this can be found recently from the COVID-19 pandemic. Parks became an outdoor activity that individuals and families could enjoy while practicing social and physical distancing. Research also founded evidence that having a higher ratio of parks and green spaces in a community actually mitigated the racial disparity in SARS-CoV-2 infection rates in the United States<sup>8</sup>.

## PARTICIPANTS

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## METHODS

The assessment began by identifying all public parks in Walton County, Florida. Parks included within this assessment were chosen using inclusion criteria: must promote rest and physical activity. A total of 29 parks met this criteria and were ultimately assessed. Parks were visited by participants the week of May 24-28, 2021 in order to conduct an assessment. The primary tool used to carry out this assessment was PhotoVoice. PhotoVoice is a qualitative assessment tool used to reflect reality and show the perspective of a community member through pictures. PhotoVoice is commonly used in public health initiatives because it has the ability to visually represent issues often overlooked within a community.

The assessment participants took pictures of the parks that displayed the perspective of a community member as well as any noticeable areas of improvement. Photos were then compiled together and organized using Google Photos. An Excel sheet was created using relevant Healthy Walton Parks Criteria Matrix to assess qualitative data collected at parks. The assessment used the following components defined as the Healthy Walton Park Criteria:

- Shade
- Informational Signage
- Relaxation Stations
- Hydration Stations
- Physical Fitness (Aerobic Activity, Strength Training, Stability and Balance)
- Accessibility
- Green Spaces and Community Gardens
- Cleanliness and Safety

Each park received a “yes”, “no”, or “somewhat” mark, indicating how well criteria was met. “Somewhat” was indicated if there were aspects of the park that did not meet criteria fully. Data from the Excel sheet was then transformed into pie charts in order to visualize the results of the assessment.

## PARKS ASSESSED

Casey Park  
Cat Island Park  
ChIPLEY Park  
Choctaw Beach Park  
Douglass Crossroads Park  
Driftwood Estates  
Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center  
Florence Park  
Flowersview Park  
Freeport Sports Complex  
Gaskin Park  
Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex  
Glendale Park  
Harbeson Field  
Harry A. Laird Park  
Helen McCall Park  
Lake Stanley Park  
Lakewood Park  
Legion Park  
Morrison Springs Park  
Mossy Head Park  
Padgett Park  
Pat Covell Park #1  
Pat Covell Park #2  
Paxton Baseball Complex  
Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs  
Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs  
Villa Tasso Pocket Park  
Wee Care Park



# ASSESSMENT FINDINGS





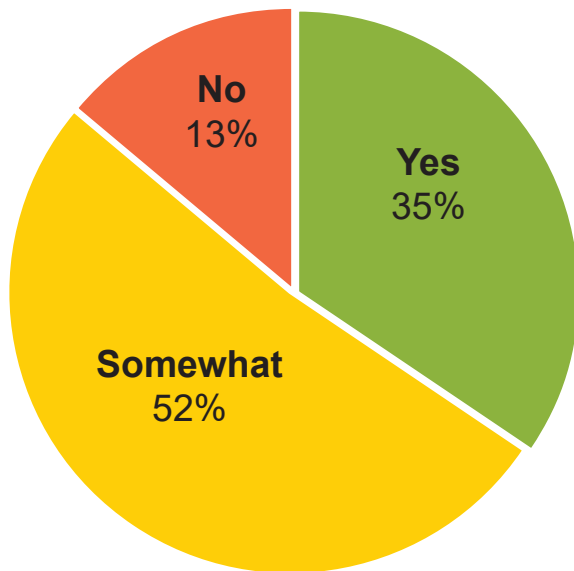
Morrison Springs Park

# SHADE

Shade is a crucial component of parks and playgrounds for several reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is because it protects our skin from the sun’s harmful rays. Additionally, shade can have added benefits for park goers and city planners. On average, shaded structures above playgrounds keep playground equipment an average of 20 degrees cooler, extend the life of playground equipment, and keep equipment cool to the touch<sup>9</sup>. This can not only save money in the long run, but it can prolong periods of physical activity as park goers will get fatigued less easily<sup>10</sup>. Shade also helps to prevent injury and burns from the hot equipment

Walton county parks were assessed on whether they had adequate shade. This included natural shade from trees and shaded structures such as pavilions and playground shade structures. In total, 10 parks were indicated as having adequate shade, 15 were indicated as having “somewhat” adequate shade, and four parks were indicated as not having adequate shade.

**Does the park have adequate shade?**



- Casey Park
- ChIPLEY Park
- Freeport Sports Complex
- Harry A. Laird Park
- Helen McCall Park
- Lake Stanley Park
- Lakewood Park
- Legion Park
- Morrison Springs Park
- Mossy Head Park
- Cat Island Park
- Choctaw Beach Park
- Douglass Crossroads Park
- Driftwood Estates
- Florence Park
- Gaskin Park
- Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex
- Glendale Park
- Padgett Park
- Pat Covell Park #1
- Pat Covell Park #2
- Paxton Baseball Complex
- Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs
- Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs
- Wee Care Park
- Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center
- Flowersview Park
- Harbeson Field
- Villa Tasso Pocket Park





Casey Park



Helen McCall Park



Flowersview Park



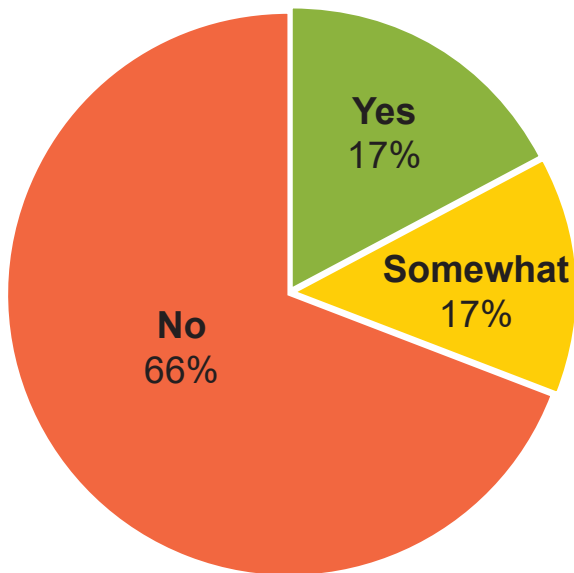
Harbeson Field

# INFORMATIONAL SIGNAGE

Informational signage can inform park goers about park rules and whereabouts, educate visitors about wildlife or native plant species, and even encourage certain healthy behaviors. Signs that display maps of the park can not only give park goers a sense of direction and security, but have been shown to have a positive impact on physical activity. One recent study showed that parks offering maps and brochures of running trails were associated with an 11% increase in park goer’s use of the trail lasting 60 minutes or longer<sup>11</sup>. Signs that promote healthy behaviors, such as ones that discourage tobacco use, have been shown to be effective in behavior change<sup>12,13</sup>. Additionally, tobacco free signage can reduce cigarette litter, limit secondhand smoke exposure, and influence social norms<sup>14</sup>. Walton County has been recognized as one of the fastest growing counties in the nation, which includes an increasing percentage of Hispanic residents<sup>15</sup>. Parks that offer signs in multiple languages can help everyone enjoy the benefits of parks.

Parks were assessed on whether they had adequate signage such as park rules, park maps, directions, educational signs, signs that discourage tobacco or alcohol use in park, or signs with Spanish translations. In total, 20 parks were identified as not having informational signage, four somewhat had informational signage, and five did have adequate informational signage.

**Does the park have adequate signage?**



- Gaskin Park  
Padgett Park  
Paxton Baseball Complex  
Freeport Sports Complex  
Lakewood Park
- Choctaw Beach Park  
Pat Covell Park #2  
Lake Stanley Park  
Morrison Springs Park  
Wee Care Park
- Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center  
Flowersview Park  
Harbeson Field  
Villa Tasso Pocket Park  
Cat Island Park  
Douglass Crossroads Park  
Driftwood Estates  
Florence Park  
Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex  
Glendale Park  
Pat Covell Park #1  
Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs  
Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs  
Casey Park  
Chiple Park  
Harry A. Laird Park  
Helen McCall Park  
Legion Park  
Mossy Head Park





Paxton Baseball Complex



Freeport Sports Complex



Wee Care Park



J.C. Alford (Gaskin) Park



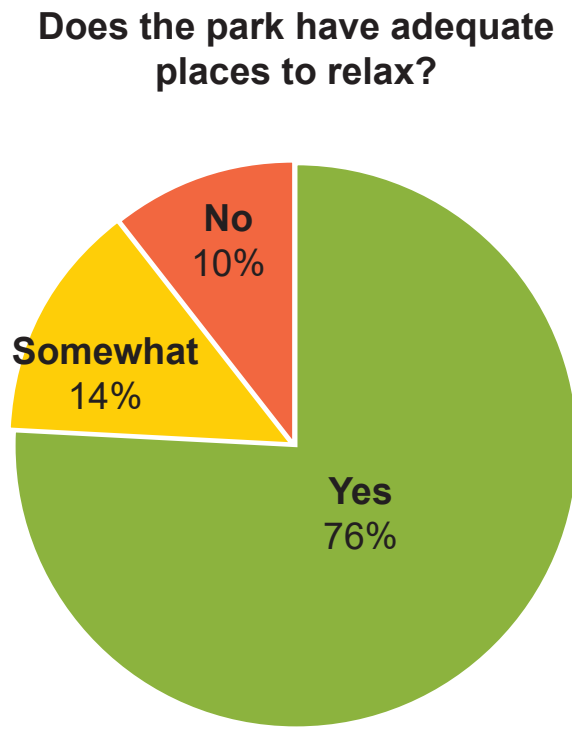
Wee Care Park



# RELAXATION STATIONS

Relaxation stations are otherwise known as shaded areas, bathrooms, and seating for park goers. While the goal is to promote movement and physical activity for park goers, it is just as important to ensure they have adequate areas to cool down and catch their breath. In addition, having designated areas for park goers to relax allows them to stay at parks longer.

Parks were assessed on whether they had adequate relaxation stations including shaded areas, seating, and bathrooms. In total, 22 parks were classified as having adequate relaxation stations, four were classified as having “somewhat” adequate relaxation stations, and three were classified as not having adequate relaxation stations.



- Cat Island Park
- Douglass Crossroads Park
- Driftwood Estates
- Florence Park
- Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex
- Glendale Park
- Pat Covell Park #1
- Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs
- Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs
- Wee Care Park
- Casey Park
- Chiplew Park
- Harry A. Laird Park
- Helen McCall Park
- Legion Park
- Mossy Head Park
- Pat Covell Park #2
- Lake Stanley Park
- Morrison Springs Park
- Padgett Park
- Freeport Sports Complex
- Lakewood Park
- Flowersview Park
- Choctaw Beach Park
- Gaskin Park
- Paxton Baseball Complex
- Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center
- Harbeson Field
- Villa Tasso Pocket Park





Lakewood Park



Mossy Head Park



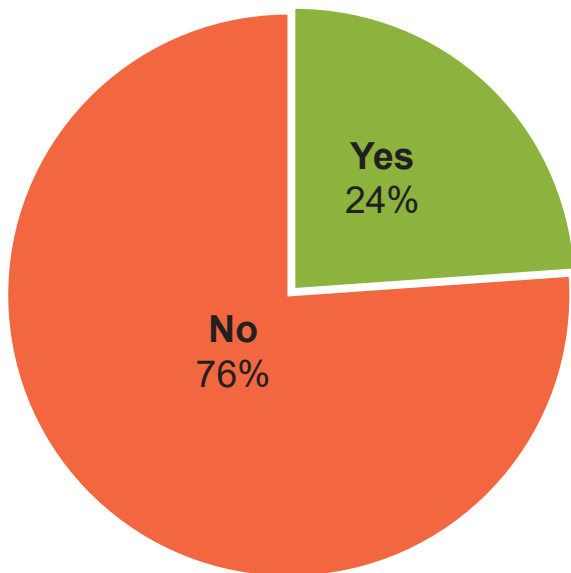
Douglass Crossroads Park

# HYDRATION STATIONS

Drinking water fountains provide free, public access to clean drinking water and allow park goers to hydrate in the Florida heat. In hot climates and while engaging in physical activity, the body will produce sweat as a mechanism to cool the skin<sup>16</sup>. Hydration is critical to the body's ability to regulate its temperature and there can be serious health consequences to dehydration<sup>17</sup>. In addition, drinking water fountains at public parks can serve as a healthy, eco-friendly alternative to sugary drinks and bottled water that would otherwise be consumed at the park<sup>17</sup>. To reduce the risk of disease spread, water fountains that include a water bottle fill feature is recommended.

Parks were assessed on whether they had a hydration station, including water fountains. Seven parks had water fountains while 22 parks did not.

**Does the park have adequate places to hydrate?**



- Harbeson Field
- Gaskin Park
- Florence Park
- Pat Covell Park #1
- Wee Care Park
- Mossy Head Park
- Padgett Park
- Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center
- Villa Tasso Pocket Park
- Flowersview Park
- Choctaw Beach Park
- Paxton Baseball Complex
- Cat Island Park
- Douglass Crossroads Park
- Driftwood Estates
- Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex
- Glendale Park
- Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs
- Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs
- Casey Park
- Chipleigh Park
- Harry A. Laird Park
- Helen McCall Park
- Legion Park
- Pat Covell Park #2
- Lake Stanley Park
- Morrison Springs Park
- Freeport Sports Complex
- Lakewood Park





Florence Park



Pat Covell Park #1



J.C. Alford (Gaskin) Park

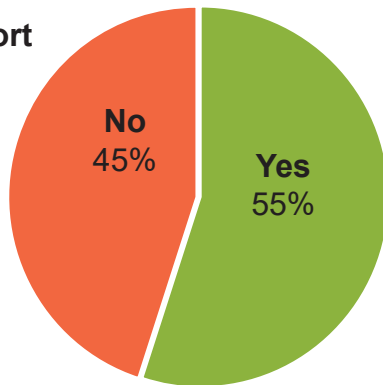


# PHYSICAL FITNESS

Regular physical activity has many health benefits. It can reduce an individual's risk of developing chronic disease, improve mental health, and increase life expectancy<sup>18</sup>. While the benefits of engaging in physical activity are relatively well-known, most Americans are not active enough, according to the CDC<sup>19,20</sup>. An additional benefit to providing fitness opportunities in parks is that it can provide access for community members who may not be able to afford or access a gym membership. This can help make equitable strides to a healthy community made up of all residents<sup>21</sup>.

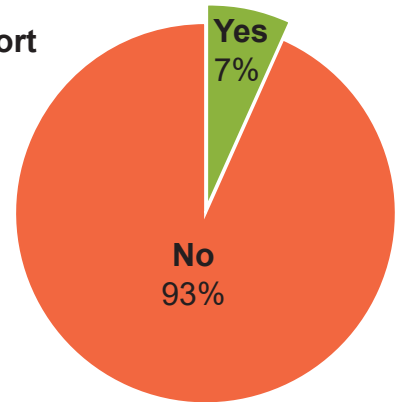
Parks were assessed on whether they had aerobic activity, strength training, and stability and balance areas. Paved running trails, skate parks, playground equipment, pools, tennis, and pickleball courts are just a few ways parks can promote aerobic activity among park goers of all ages. Parks were also assessed on whether they had strength training activity areas. Examples of a strength training activity area included calisthenic stations (pull-up bars, dip stations, etc.) and plyometric stations (box jumps, etc.) 16 parks offered a type of aerobic activity while 13 parks did not. Only two parks had a strength training area while the remaining 27 did not. No parks had stability and balance equipment or stations.

## Does the park support aerobic activity?



- █ Lakewood Park
- █ Harbeson Field
- █ Gaskin Park
- █ Wee Care Park
- █ Chipley Park
- █ Casey Park
- █ Mossy Head Park
- █ Padgett Park
- █ Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs
- █ Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs
- █ Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center
- █ Douglass Crossroads Park
- █ Driftwood Estates
- █ Harry A. Laird Park
- █ Morrison Springs Park
- █ Freeport Sports Complex
- █ Villa Tasso Pocket Park
- █ Flowersview Park
- █ Choctaw Beach Park
- █ Paxton Baseball Complex
- █ Cat Island Park
- █ Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex
- █ Glendale Park
- █ Helen McCall Park
- █ Legion Park
- █ Pat Covell Park #2
- █ Lake Stanley Park
- █ Florence Park
- █ Pat Covell Park #1

## Does the park support strength training?



- █ Casey Park
- █ Chipley Park
- █ Lakewood Park
- █ Harbeson Field
- █ Gaskin Park
- █ Glendale Park
- █ Legion Park
- █ Driftwood Estates
- █ Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs
- █ Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs
- █ Villa Tasso Pocket Park
- █ Flowersview Park
- █ Choctaw Beach Park
- █ Paxton Baseball Complex
- █ Cat Island Park
- █ Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center
- █ Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex
- █ Helen McCall Park
- █ Pat Covell Park #2
- █ Lake Stanley Park
- █ Florence Park
- █ Pat Covell Park #1
- █ Douglass Crossroads Park
- █ Harry A. Laird Park
- █ Morrison Springs Park
- █ Mossy Head Park
- █ Padgett Park
- █ Freeport Sports Complex
- █ Wee Care Park



Eagle Springs Golf Course and Recreation Center



Wee Care Park

Freeport Sports Complex



Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs



Eagle Springs Golf Course and Recreation Center

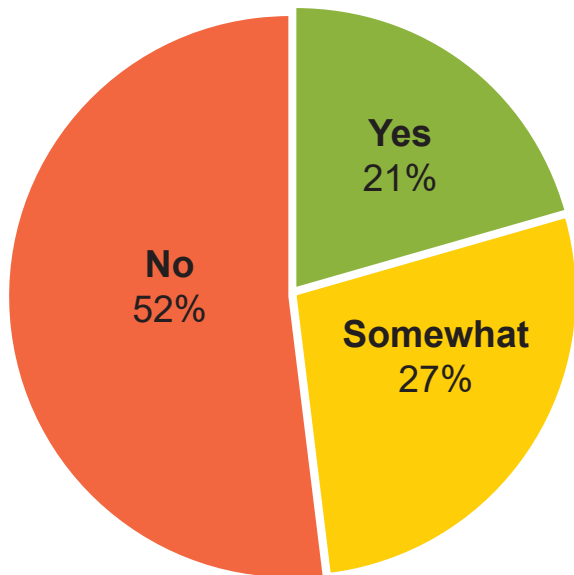


# ACCESSIBILITY

In striving towards making Walton County parks “multigenerational,” city planners must take into account older and or disabled park goers that are more likely to have limited mobility. 16.6% of Walton county residents are considered disabled, which is higher than the state and national average<sup>15</sup>. This further highlights the importance that parks be fully accessible to disabled and older adult populations so they can have an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of visiting Walton county parks.

Parks were assessed on how accessible they were for park goers of all levels of mobility. Examples of parks that are considered “accessible” include handicap ramps, well-kept sidewalks, wide bathroom stalls, and handicap swings. Six parks were considered mobility accessible, eight were considered “somewhat” mobility accessible, and 15 were considered not mobility accessible.

**Is all aspects of the park accessible to individuals with disabilities?**



- Helen McCall Park  
ChIPLEY Park  
Harry A. Laird Park  
Padgett Park  
Freeport Sports Complex  
Wee Care Park
- Paxton Baseball Complex  
Glendale Park  
Pat Covell Park #2  
Douglass Crossroads Park  
Driftwood Estates  
Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs  
Morrison Springs Park  
Gaskin Park
- Villa Tasso Pocket Park  
Flowersview Park  
Choctaw Beach Park  
Cat Island Park  
Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex  
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Lake Stanley Park  
Florence Park  
Pat Covell Park #1  
Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center  
Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs  
Casey Park  
Lakewood Park  
Harbeson Field  
Mossy Head Park





ChIPLEY Park



Cat Island Park



Flowersview Park



Helen McCall Park



Gene Hurley Park

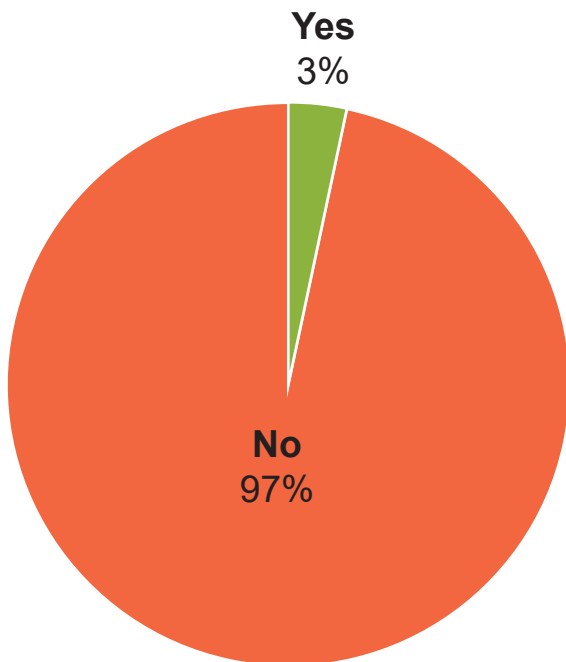


# GREEN SPACES & COMMUNITY GARDENS

Parts of northern Walton County are considered a “food desert”, meaning there is limited access to fresh, affordable, and nutritious food. In 2016, the food insecurity rate among all Walton County residents was observed at 15.1%, which is higher than the state average<sup>22</sup>. Community gardens have been shown to improve access to fresh food, improve dietary intake, and strengthen a sense of community<sup>23</sup>. Additionally, green spaces can promote community building as they serve as a great place for individuals to exercise together or to host community events.

Parks were assessed on whether they had community gardens or green spaces. One park had a community garden, while the remaining 28 did not have a community garden or designated green spaces.

**Is there a designated green space or community garden in the park?**



- Padgett Park
- Villa Tasso Pocket Park
- Flowersview Park
- Choctaw Beach Park
- Cat Island Park
- Gene Hurley & Recreation Complex
- Legion Park
- Lake Stanley Park
- Florence Park
- Pat Covell Park #1
- Eagle Springs Golf Course & Recreation Center
- Tennis Courts - DeFuniak Springs
- Casey Park
- Lakewood Park
- Harbeson Field
- Mossy Head Park
- Paxton Baseball Complex
- Glendale Park
- Pat Covell Park #2
- Douglass Crossroads Park
- Driftwood Estates
- Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs
- Morrison Springs Park
- Gaskin Park
- Helen McCall Park
- Chiple Park
- Harry A. Laird Park
- Freeport Sports Complex
- Wee Care Park

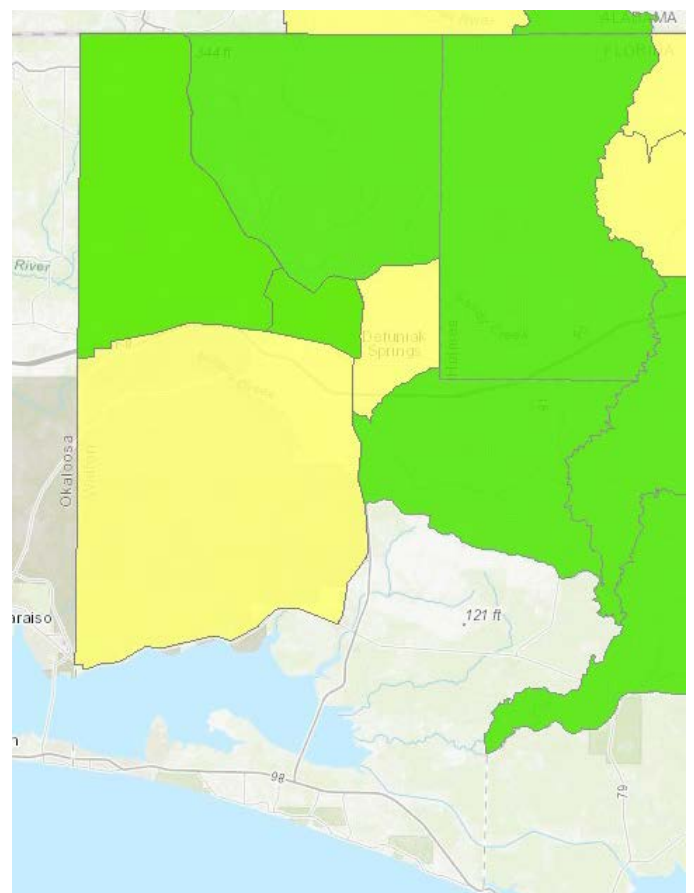




## LOCAL FOOD DESERTS<sup>24</sup>

Some low-income communities in the United States lack stores that sell healthy and affordable food. The lack of store access in these communities—sometimes called food deserts—may contribute to poor diet, obesity, and other diet-related illness. Low-income census tracts with a substantial number or share of residents with low levels of access to retail outlets selling healthy and affordable foods are defined as food deserts. Supermarkets and large grocery stores—defined as food stores with at least \$2 million in annual sales and containing all the major food departments—are used as proxies for sources of healthy and affordable food.

- Low Income and Low Access
- Low Income and Low Access Using Vehicle Access

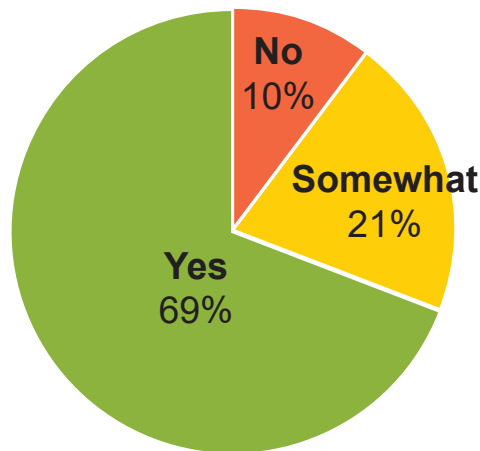


# CLEANLINESS & SAFETY

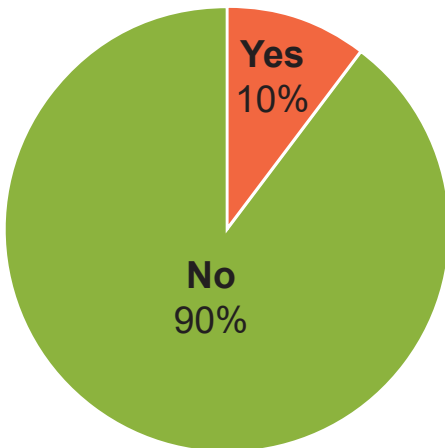
When you visit a park, you might not think about the factors that combine to make this environment pleasant and safe. A park that is clean and well-maintained offers a safe and enjoyable place for people to visit for hiking, picnicking, sporting activities, or just relaxing. Overall, most of the local parks are clean and completely safe for residents to enjoy. There were some findings that could limit residents' desire to go to their local park.

The most prevalent litter in parks was from tobacco use. Tobacco litter adds to the overall cost of cleaning up our parks. Cigarette litter takes 10 to 15 years to break down. Having signage to promote a clean air and a tobacco-free environment in parks can help mitigate some of this litter in local parks. Other issues at parks included prevalent graffiti at three parks (Pat Covell Park #1, Skate Park - DeFuniak Springs, and Choctaw Beach Park). What participants identified as "safety hazards" existed in four parks. This included majorly broken sidewalks, walking paths that were uneven and covered in leaf debris that caused slippage, and exposed rusted nails on handrails.

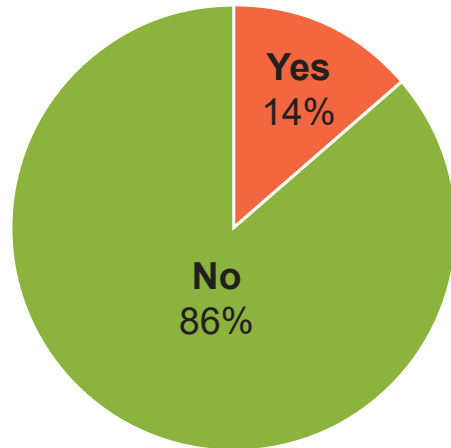
**Is the park clean?**



**Is there any graffiti present in the park?**



**Is there one or more safety hazard(s) present in the park?**







Choctaw Beach Park



Pat Covell Park #1



Choctaw Beach Park



Cat Island Park



ChIPLEY Park



Mossy Head Park



Choctaw Beach Park









# RECOMMENDATIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- 1. Incorporate more informational signage.** Many parks lacked sufficient signage. It would be beneficial to include signs at parks such as directions, park maps, and ones that discourage tobacco use. There should be consideration for incorporating signs that have translations to Spanish, especially for parks in communities with Hispanic residents.
- 2. Create more opportunities for park goers to engage in physical activity.** While most parks offered aerobic activities, only a couple parks offered opportunities for flexibility and strength training. Flexibility and strength training are important parts of physical health and parks should encourage these activities by providing outdoor exercise equipment and clear instructions with pictures about how activities should be performed.
- 3. Consider placing more community gardens.** The addition of community gardens in north Walton County could help alleviate the effects of food insecurity. This could also be fruit trees. This initiative could be managed by local organizations and faith-based partners, which could further promote community cohesion.
- 4. Add more shade to parks.** Many parks lacked shade from the dangerous Florida sun. Shaded structures such as pavilions and playground canopies can provide relief from the sun in the main areas of parks. Natural shade, such as trees, can serve as a low-cost alternative to shaded structures that also has environmental benefits.
- 5. Place more water fountains.** The goal is for park goers to be physically active, so there should be at least one water fountain at each park to allow for hydration. The addition of water fountains serves an important purpose year-round, but especially during hot summer days.
- 6. Make parks a representation of the community's culture.** Walton County is a great place to live, learn, work, play, and pray. Parks should show the uniqueness and colorfulness of the neighborhoods they are in. This will help make sure parks are a useful and valued asset for local families.
- 7. Improve accessibility of parks.** Most parks had some aspects that offered accessibility to park goers with limited mobility, but were inconsistent throughout the whole park. Members of the older adult or disability community could help with a more in-depth audit of park accessibility, as well as give recommendations about how to make parks more friendly to individuals with varying levels of mobility.
- 8. Adopt a local standard for parks.** Basic criteria is needed to make sure all existing parks meet a specific standard of available features and all future parks are developed to at least that standard. This will make sure parks in all neighborhoods are similar.
- 9. Apply for grants.** The Florida State Park Foundation Inc. has grant opportunities to fund accessibility, equipment, and educational enhancements for Florida parks. Other grant opportunities exist through AARP, National Recreation and Parks Association, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and other sources.



# Healthy Walton PARKS

## CURRENT ACTIVITIES:

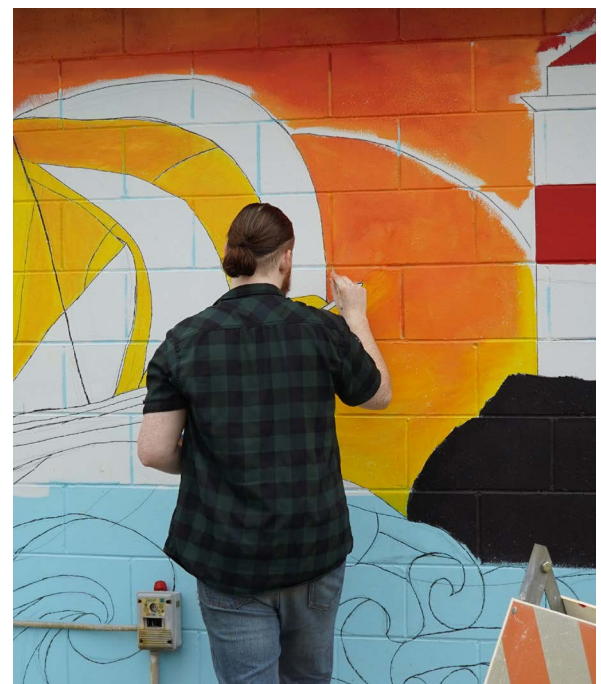
### Multigenerational Parks

Multigenerational parks offer opportunities for all park users to increase physical activity with multiple activities of varying intensities. Currently, WCHIP has created specific criteria which serves as a guide for local government to designate a park as a “multigenerational park.” After designation, the park will receive a sign to show the designation to park goers and the community. The goal is to make sure that parks are designed for all ages and abilities.



### Art in the Park

WCHIP partnered with the Walton County Sheriff’s Office, Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County, the Walton County Prevention Coalition, and others on the “Art in the Park” project. The project’s goal is to reduce vandalism of local parks while making them a more vibrant place that represents the culture of Walton County. The first project was on April 17, 2021 with art students from South Walton High School. Students painted murals at Driftwood Estates Park in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. Students submitted mural ideas to a panel of members of surrounding Home Owners Associations (HOAs), and the HOAs selected the murals that they thought best represented the community.



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