

National Trends in Parks and Recreation (2024–2025)

Local park and recreation agencies across the United States are navigating significant trends that are reshaping facilities, programming, and operations in 2024 and 2025. National organizations like the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) have identified a range of emerging themes—from technological innovations to shifts in recreation habits—that are influencing how parks and recreation services are delivered. Below is an overview of key national trends:

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION IN PARKS AND RECREATION

New technologies are rapidly transforming park management and visitor experiences. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is poised to be a disruptive force in the field, affecting “virtually everything we do from this point forward,” according to NRPA. Park agencies are beginning to use AI tools to automate and enhance many tasks: for example, AI chatbots can handle customer inquiries and provide faster responses to residents, while AI-driven analytics can help count visitors, monitor facility systems, and even assist in planning new parks. These applications are already being implemented at a brisk pace rather than being distant ideas. At the same time, the proliferation of mobile apps and smart devices raises privacy concerns. There are more than 1,000 location-aware apps tracking users’ movements, creating real-time location logs wherever people go. This trend has implications for park agencies that use apps for engagement or fitness challenges, highlighting the need to balance technological convenience with privacy protections.

CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

With climate change impacts becoming more evident, parks and recreation agencies are increasingly focusing on sustainability and resilience. NRPA observes that we are “approaching, if not already living in, a post-climate change world,” meaning park systems must adapt to more extreme conditions. Parks play a vital role in helping communities cope with climate challenges. They serve as natural infrastructure for stormwater management and flood control, provide shade and cooling to mitigate urban heat islands, and preserve biodiversity. This role will only grow in importance: parks of all sizes will be key to reducing heat-related health risks, preventing flooding, and improving air quality in cities. In fact, the resilience provided by parks may become “one of the most lasting proofs of just how essential parks are to all communities”.

To cope with immediate climate effects like extreme heat, many recreation departments are adjusting programming schedules and facility hours. In hot regions, activities are being shifted to cooler times of day: for example, Austin, Texas running clubs now meet before dawn, and Phoenix has introduced guided night hikes to avoid daytime heat. Some agencies are experimenting with opening parks earlier or staying open later in summer to give residents safe outdoor options during cooler hours. These adaptations reflect a broader trend of climate-responsive management in parks.

EVOLVING RECREATION ACTIVITIES AND AMENITIES

The types of activities people pursue in parks are shifting, and park amenities are evolving accordingly. One of the most notable phenomena is the pickleball boom. Pickleball remains the fastest-growing sport in the nation, continuing its “seemingly unstoppable march” into communities. This paddle sport’s popularity, especially among older adults (though enjoyed by all ages), is generally a positive trend: it promotes healthy, social recreation. impacts but has also led to noise complaints in various communities. Park agencies are addressing these concerns by implementing noise-reduction measures and carefully siting new courts to balance this demand with community needs. In short, pickleball’s rise is forcing creative solutions to balance demand with community impacts.

Other recreational amenities on the rise include dog parks and disc golf courses. Dog ownership spiked during the pandemic, and now 45% of U.S. households include a dog. With 85% of dog owners considering their pets family members, communities are demanding spaces for dogs to exercise and socialize. It’s no surprise that dog parks remain the fastest-growing type of park in America. Many park systems are adding off-leash dog areas, though they face hurdles like securing enough land, funding, and expertise in dog park design. Similarly, disc golf continues to be popular as a low-cost, outdoor activity for a range of ages (some new parks, as we’ll see in Broken Arrow, are planning disc golf courses as part of their amenities).

Finally, park agencies are refreshing their programming and events to align with contemporary interests. A scan of trends for 2024 shows high interest in community-oriented events. Park departments report that family engagement nights (e.g. family movie nights, game nights), seasonal festivals, and fitness programming are drawing strong participation. Even niche offerings like holiday karaoke events or intergenerational activities branded as “eldertainment” and “kidult” programs (playful activities for seniors and for adults who are young at heart) are gaining traction. Partnerships with libraries and other community organizations to co-host events are also on the rise. Many agencies note that expanding these programs, especially festivals, has led them to hire more part-time staff to meet the demand. All of these trends underscore a common theme: parks and recreation in 2024–2025 is not static. It is a dynamic field adapting to technology, climate, and cultural shifts to continue enriching public life.

SHIFTS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AND RECREATION DEMAND

Underlying the national trends is a noticeable shift in consumer behavior related to parks and recreation. Americans’ attitudes, preferences, and usage patterns for recreation activities have evolved in recent years, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Municipal recreation providers are paying close attention to these changes in program demand, outdoor activity preferences, wellness priorities, and technology use among their constituents. Key observations include:

Park Usage and Importance: Americans continue to heavily use and value their local parks. According to NRPA survey data, 7 in 10 U.S. residents visited a local park or recreation facility at least once during the past year. More than three in five people report visiting a park in just the last month, illustrating that park visits are a routine part of life for a majority of the public. Parks are also a factor in life decisions: 84% of U.S. adults say that the presence of nearby high-quality parks and recreation amenities is important when choosing a place to live. Likewise, community surveys show that about 88% of Americans believe it is vital for their local park and rec agency to engage with every member of the community (underscoring expectations for inclusive, accessible services). These figures highlight how parks are seen as essential infrastructure for quality of life and community well-being.

Recreation as Social Connection and Stress Relief: Many people view park activities as a way to bond with family/friends and to improve mental health. In surveys, spending time with family or taking a break from daily stresses consistently emerge as top reasons people visit parks. This aligns with a broader consumer priority on wellness and balance. The pandemic, in particular, reinforced the idea of parks as respite spaces for relaxation, safe socializing, and emotional relief. Now, even as normal routines resume, the public's desire for recreation that supports mental wellness (walking in nature, yoga in the park, peaceful outdoor dining, etc.) remains high. Park agencies are responding by offering more mindfulness programs, outdoor fitness classes, and family-oriented events to foster social connection.

Changes in Outdoor Activity Preferences: A striking post-2020 development is how people's patterns of outdoor physical activity have shifted. Early in the pandemic, outdoor walking and trail use surged as gyms closed and people sought safe activities. Paradoxically, data now shows that overall walking trips have declined by 36% nationwide since 2019. An analysis by transportation analytics firm StreetLight Data found this significant drop in walking activity, with some urban areas in the Midwest seeing declines as high as 50%. One interpretation of this trend, as noted by StreetLight's Emily Adler, is that walking may be becoming primarily a form of recreation rather than transportation. In warmer regions, walking levels have rebounded more (suggesting people are walking for leisure/exercise where it's pleasant), whereas in many cities fewer people are walking to commute or run errands. This shift presents both a challenge and an opportunity for park and recreation departments. The challenge is that more sedentary lifestyles are a public health concern; the opportunity is that parks can actively promote walking and activity. Park professionals are seizing this moment by organizing guided walks, self-guided trail challenges, and community walking clubs to encourage residents to get moving. Such programs – from senior strolls to “walk with a ranger” events – are tailor-made for parks to lead, helping convert the recreational walking trend into improved health outcomes.

Surging Demand for Certain Sports and Activities: The recreational interests of consumers are driving booms in certain activities. As discussed, pickleball has seen an unprecedented surge in participation. This has translated into waitlists for local pickleball leagues, busy courts, and a clamor for more facilities. Many municipalities are

re-purposing underused tennis or basketball courts into pickleball courts to meet demand. Similarly, interest in disc golf and cricket is emerging in communities where these were previously niche activities. The growth of cricket, tied to changing local demographics, indicates that recreation departments must be attuned to cultural shifts – for instance, by adding cricket pitches, kabaddi fields, or other non-traditional sports if there is a community for them. Dog walking and dog park usage have also become a staple of recreation for dog-owning households. Park agencies report heavy use of dog parks and even the rise of dog-centric events (like “yappy hours” or dog-friendly festivals) as consumers seek outlets to recreate with their pets. Overall, people are looking for a diverse array of activities in parks, from high-energy sports to low-impact leisure, and they expect their local park systems to accommodate that diversity.

Program Participation and Community Events: Consumers are showing a strong appetite for community-based recreation programs. After periods of social distancing, there’s increased enthusiasm for events that bring people together. For example, family events and festivals have seen high turnout. Many families with children are eager for safe, local entertainment options – whether it’s outdoor movie nights, seasonal holiday events, or cultural festivals. Parks and recreation departments across the country have noted that family engagement nights, seasonal festivals, fitness classes, and even quirky events like holiday karaoke are “hot” in 2024. Older adults and teenagers alike are seeking more interactive experiences, hence the popularity of “eldertainment” activities (engaging seniors in games, dances, or tech classes) and “kidult” programs (letting adults indulge in playful activities like nerf battles or crafts). This reflects a consumer desire for playfulness and lifelong recreation, people of all ages want opportunities for fun, learning, and socializing beyond traditional age-segmented programs. Additionally, community priorities around education and literacy have led to joint programs between parks and libraries (for instance, story walks in parks or library-hosted workshops in recreation centers). Such collaborations make programs more enriching and draw in broader audiences.

Integration of Technology in Recreation Experiences: The impact of technology on consumer behavior is multifaceted. On one hand, technology has enabled new forms of recreation, for example, fitness apps that turn park trails into interactive courses, augmented reality games in parks, or simply the ability to discover parks via online maps and social media. Many people now use smartphone apps to find hiking paths or to track their exercise in the park. On the other hand, the ubiquity of tech can compete with outdoor time (excessive screen time) or raise concerns when tech follows people into the park. The previously mentioned location-tracking apps are a double-edged sword: they help individuals record their runs or bike rides, but they also mean that a person’s presence in a public park is being logged by third parties. We’re also seeing the rise of tech-enhanced recreation equipment (like smart bikes, VR fitness games) which could change how people exercise. For park agencies, meeting consumers’ tech expectations might involve providing Wi-Fi in parks, offering charging stations, or using social media influencers to promote park programs. In fact, social networks and influencers play a growing role in recreation decisions—trendy park features or photogenic spots can go viral, suddenly increasing visitor interest. Consumers now

often discover recreation opportunities online first. The parks and recreation field is adjusting by boosting its digital engagement and possibly by exploring futuristic offerings (like the drone food delivery concept) that align with tech-friendly lifestyles.

In summary, today's recreation consumers are health-conscious, community-minded, and tech-aware. They prioritize inclusive, convenient, and meaningful experiences whether that means a well-maintained trail for a calming walk, a pickleball court for friendly competition, or a community festival to connect with neighbors. Understanding these preferences is crucial for municipal parks and recreation departments as they plan programs and allocate resources.

To illustrate some of these consumer and participation trends, the following table summarizes a few key examples:

Activity or Program	Trend Insight
Walking	Recreational walking is popular, yet overall walking trips are down 36% since 2019; parks are promoting walking groups to counter sedentary behavior.
Pickleball	Fastest-growing sport nationally, attracting all ages. Demand for courts is high, though noise complaints have led cities to implement new rules and noise mitigation.
Dog Parks	Dog ownership at ~45% of households drives the creation of more dog parks. Off-leash areas are the fastest-growing park amenity type, though securing land and funding remains a challenge.
Family & Community Events	High interest in family fun nights, seasonal festivals, and intergenerational activities ("eldertainment," "kidults"). Many agencies are expanding such programs and hiring extra staff to run them.
Tech-Enhanced Recreation	Growing use of apps, fitness trackers, and drones in outdoor recreation. Early adopters embrace conveniences like drone-delivered refreshments in parks, and agencies are exploring tech to improve experiences.

These examples demonstrate how consumer behavior is steering parks and recreation services. Agencies that stay attuned to these trends are better able to plan facilities and programs that resonate with their community's needs.

Specific Trends Impacting Parks and Recreation Services

DIVERSIFICATION OF RECREATION ACTIVITIES

New and growing recreational activities such as pickleball, walking soccer, outdoor fitness challenges, and nature-based programs are gaining traction across a broad range of users. To remain responsive, Broken Arrow must adapt facility designs and program offerings to reflect these emerging preferences.

Continued growth of outdoor participation

Outdoor recreation participation reached a record high in 2024, with over 175.8 million Americans engaging in activities such as hiking, biking, and wildlife observation. Enhancing trail systems, greenways, and open space preserves should remain a high planning priority.

Intergenerational and community-centric programming

There is an increased emphasis on developing programs and spaces that serve multiple generations together. Recreation offerings that blend fitness, culture, arts, and environmental education are in demand to create stronger community connections.

Infrastructure Modernization and Facility Maintenance

Maintaining and upgrading existing park facilities is increasingly prioritized nationwide to ensure safety, accessibility, and user satisfaction. Regular reinvestment in infrastructure is essential for sustaining high-quality service levels.

Environmental Sustainability

Agencies are adopting sustainable design practices, enhancing native landscapes, and focusing on ecological preservation in both new development and renovation projects. These practices contribute to community resilience and long-term resource stewardship.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR BROKEN ARROW

The findings from this Leisure Trends Analysis directly inform the Department's comprehensive planning initiatives. To align with current and future trends, Broken Arrow Parks and Recreation should prioritize:

Expansion of walkable park access and connected trail networks.

Development of flexible indoor recreation spaces and outdoor adventure opportunities.

Strategic investment in aquatics facilities and nature-based recreation.

Integration of smart technology and user experience enhancements.

Strengthening of sustainability practices and natural resource conservation.

CONCLUSION

The City of Broken Arrow Parks and Recreation Department is committed to evidence-based planning and continuous improvement. This Leisure Trends Analysis demonstrates an understanding of national and emerging recreation trends and ensures the Department's strategies are forward-looking, community-centered, and aligned with CAPRA standards. Through proactive adaptation to these trends, Broken Arrow will continue to provide exceptional recreation opportunities, preserve the city's natural assets, and enhance the overall quality of life for its residents.