

# TRANSPORTATION ACCESS TO PARKS (TAP) STUDY | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION OF SOUTHERN NEVADA (RTC)



Prepared by

**DESIGNWORKSHOP**



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# TRANSPORTATION ACCESS TO PARKS IN SOUTHERN NEVADA

Southern Nevada is home to a beautiful and diverse range of outdoor spaces.

Access to the outdoors is a key part of life in Southern Nevada, but many communities are not able to reach outdoor spaces easily -- or at all. Nearly half of residents cannot walk to a park within 10 minutes, and for many, especially those without cars, parks feel out of reach altogether.

While recent initiatives by the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada (RTC) and their partners have made strides to improve mobility in the region, park access remains stratified by race, place, ability and income. Gaps in park access are distributed across both urban and rural parts of the region, but there are concentrated gap areas in southwestern and northeastern Las Vegas and in North Las Vegas south of the 215 Beltway. These areas also tend to overlap with neighborhoods that have historically not benefitted from infrastructure investments.

Improving access to parks will help everyone experience the benefits of the outdoors.

## THE STUDY

Over the course of one year, the Transportation Access to Parks (TAP) Study investigated how people get to parks in Southern Nevada to develop informed recommendations for addressing barriers and improving access. Some of the study's key questions included:

- What **communities** are left out when it comes to park access?
- What **types of parks** do people want to access?
- What makes getting to a park feel **safe** or **welcoming**?
- What needs to change in Southern Nevada so **all people are able to reach and enjoy outdoor spaces**?

## WHY IT MATTERS

Parks aren't just places to play – they are essential for physical and mental wellbeing. They offer relief from stress and opportunities for physical activity and social connection. In a region as hot as Southern Nevada, they are often the coolest (literally) place to go. For these reasons, it is essential that they are designed and located to serve everyone.



## KEY FINDINGS

Southern Nevadans value the outdoors -- both natural areas and urban parks.

Heat is one of the most significant barriers to accessing parks.

The types of parks people want to visit, and the reasons they can or cannot visit those spaces, are different across demographics and geographies.

42% of Southern Nevadans live in a Park Gap area, meaning they do not have adequate access to parks. Park Gaps are distributed across the region, in both urban and rural areas.

56% of Southern Nevadans can walk to a park within 10 minutes of their home.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

The TAP study provides a framework for providing more bus service and connections to parks, to make it easier for people to reach their favorite outdoor places.

The TAP study offers strategies for making it safer and more comfortable to travel to parks during the Southern Nevada summer.

The TAP study analysis was regional in scale, but it offers insights about specific communities' needs.

The TAP study defines High-Needs Neighborhoods that will be prioritized for park investments due to current gaps in access.

The TAP study addresses many factors that influence residents' walk access to parks and offers strategies for making parks part of day-to-day life in Southern Nevada.

# GOALS



01.

INTEGRATE PARKS INTO EVERYDAY LIFE.

For many people, spending time in outdoor spaces is a luxury: according to the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA), lack of time is the most cited barrier to park access nationally.<sup>1</sup> But even 20 minutes spent outdoors can help reduce stress levels.<sup>2</sup> Travel time can be a considerable barrier in choosing whether to visit a park. The TAP study includes strategies that will make it easier for people to get outdoors in their day-to-day lives. It also provides strategies for raising residents' awareness of available parks and means of traveling to them: people are most likely to enjoy time outdoors when parks are a convenient part of their daily routine.

<sup>1</sup> NRPA, 2023  
<sup>2</sup> NRPA, 2021



02.

CONNECT TO DESTINATION PARKS AND OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE PARKS.

Southern Nevada offers a diverse range of parks, including inclusive playgrounds, adventure play, and natural areas. In fact, the Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan found that 49% of all state residents are estimated to recreate outdoors one day or more in Southern Nevada in the past year.<sup>1</sup> However, Southern Nevada is large, and many of the most desirable parks are at a distance from where people live. This poses a significant challenge to the 8% of Southern Nevada households that are without a personal vehicle.<sup>2</sup> Youth, seniors, and people experiencing disabilities in particular may require options to visit outdoor attractions without driving themselves. The TAP Study includes strategies for getting more people to the most desirable park locations.

<sup>1</sup> Nevada SCORP, 2022  
<sup>2</sup> 2023 Southern Nevada Household Travel Survey Report

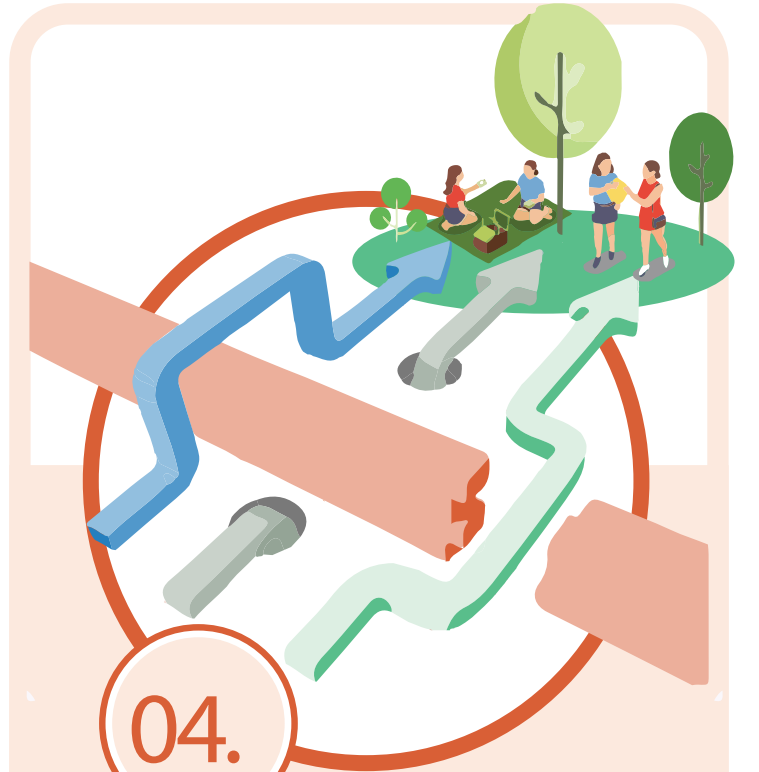


03.

IMPROVE THE EXPERIENCE OF TRAVELING TO PARKS.

Southern Nevada has among the hottest climates in the United States, and it has been identified as the fastest-warming region in the country.<sup>1</sup> The TAP Study includes strategies to make all means of travel to parks more desirable, including strategies to protect pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users from heat.

<sup>1</sup> RTC Extreme Heat Vulnerability Analysis, 2022



04.

REDUCE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING AND ENJOYING OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES.

The ability to reach outdoor spaces - simply getting people from point A to point B - is just a starting point for understanding access to outdoor experiences. Barriers may include other factors that limit enjoyment or desire to spend time outdoors, which depend on individuals' abilities and experiences. The TAP study identifies barriers that limit people's participation in outdoor experiences and the amount of time they spend enjoying the outdoors. It considers the quality of park amenities, parking availability, feelings of safety and welcome, costs and equipment needs.

# KEY FINDINGS

## SOUTHERN NEVADANS WANT TO SPEND TIME OUTDOORS.

Community members reported a strong interest in visiting parks, with 83% of survey respondents indicating that spending time outdoors is important or very important to them and 89% reporting that they visit parks in Southern Nevada. The most preferred places to spend time outdoors, besides one's backyard, were in large parks with many activities or amenities, in places with cooling amenities like trees and water features, and in state or federal lands like Red Rock or Lake Mead.



89%

of survey respondents visit parks or trails in Southern Nevada

## PUBLIC PARK ACCESS IN SOUTHERN NEVADA IS LIMITED BY A LACK OF PEDESTRIAN AND TRANSIT CONNECTIONS TO PRIORITY DESTINATIONS.

Many of the parks in Southern Nevada, especially larger parks and state and federal lands, are challenging to access for households without a car. Survey respondents reported they would visit parks more often if there were more direct bus service, faster bus service, and safer walking paths.

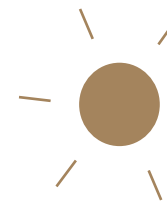


35%

of Southern Nevadans do not have sufficient park access

## NOT ALL BARRIERS TO PARK USE ARE TRANSPORTATION-RELATED.

While ease of walk, bike, and bus access play a key role in park visitation, other, less obvious, factors are equally important. Throughout the process, the impact of extreme heat was continuously emphasized as a reason why people do not travel to or spend time in parks.



HEAT

is the most significant challenge to park access, besides transportation

## TRENDS IN PARK USE VARY BASED ON GEOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL FACTORS

The types of parks and park experiences that people prefer, along with the barriers they experience when accessing parks, vary across communities. Designing a region that offers multimodal access to great parks requires an awareness of different group's experiences traveling to and spending time in parks. This includes people's preferences for types of activities and amenities and feelings of comfort, welcome, and safety.



Some focus groups had a strong preference for **natural areas**, while other preferred **urban parks**.

## URBAN AND RURAL ACCESS LOOK DIFFERENT, BUT THERE MAY BE SHARED SOLUTIONS

The pedestrian, bike, and bus network is primarily concentrated in Southern Nevada's urban core. Expanding these modes of travel in the region's rural areas will be more complicated than simply extending service. However, parks are an essential piece of social infrastructure in many rural communities, and creative solutions are necessary to ensure these spaces are accessible to all.



88%

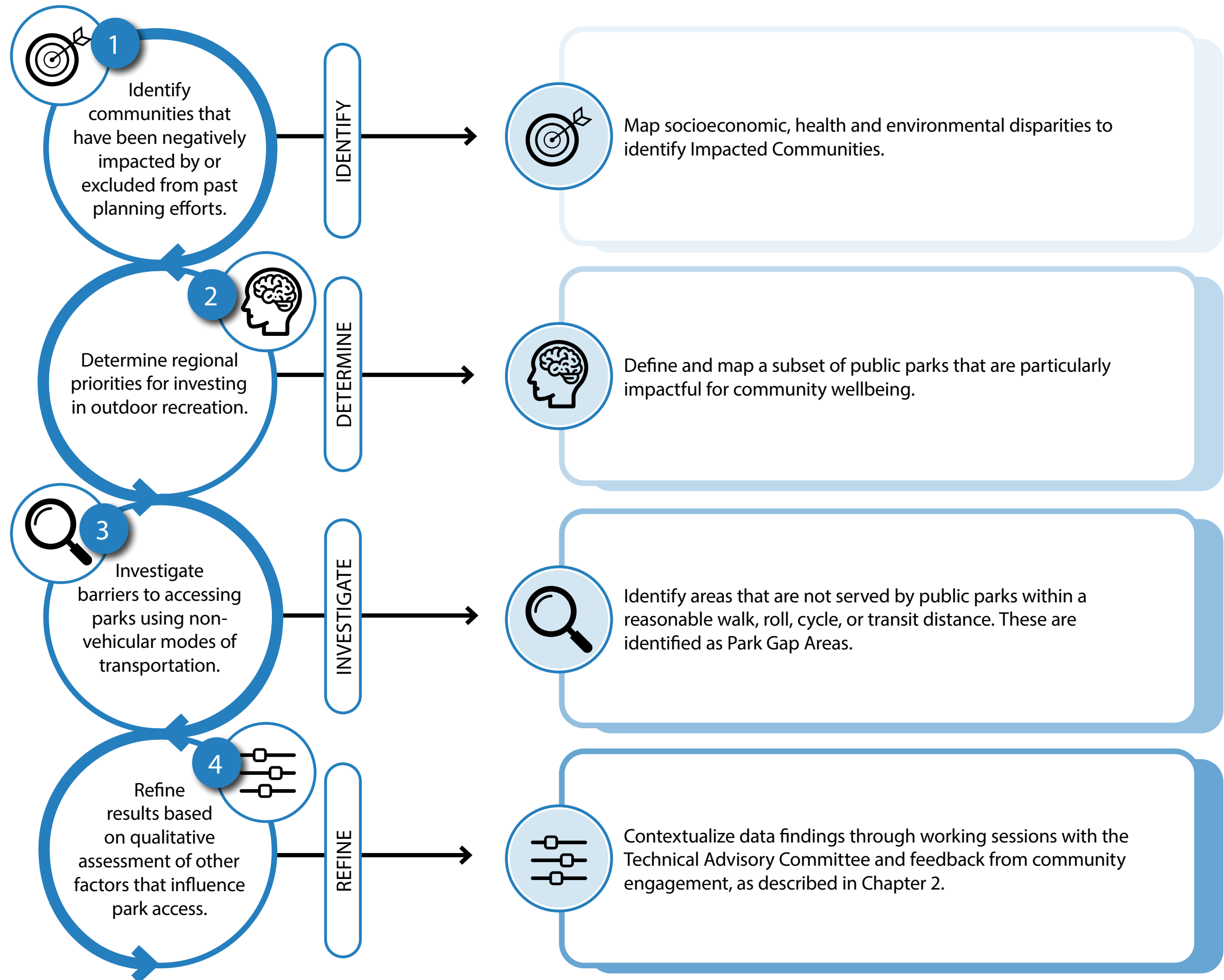
of people living in Park Gaps live in urbanized areas

# METHODOLOGY

As a starting point for developing recommendations, the Transportation Access to Parks Study aims to identify which communities can access which parks and by what means. This requires answering several key questions:

- Who lives in Southern Nevada, and on which communities should RTC focus improvements?
- What types of parks are in Southern Nevada, and which are the most desirable for people to access?
- What means of access are available in Southern Nevada, and how easily can different communities access parks without a car?
- What other factors impact park access in Southern Nevada?

The TAP study methodology was derived by translating these questions into a set of key objectives, each with a corresponding, data-driven approach. The TAP study methodology was designed to rely primarily on data and spatial analysis. However, community and stakeholder engagement was essential for translating these findings to recommendations that consider less measurable dimensions of park access, like the impacts of extreme heat and feelings of comfort and welcome.



# PRIORITY ACTIONS

Achieving the TAP study's goals will require long-term investment and regional coordination. These recommended Priority Actions can kick off immediately following this phase of the study, ensuring RTC can work through the Regional Open Space and Trails (ROST) collaborative to make strides towards implementation.

## 1. IDENTIFY SUSTAINABLE FUNDING STRATEGIES

The Strategies and Action Items proposed in this study do not have dedicated funding and in most cases, lack of funding will be the most significant barrier to implementation. However, upcoming legislation may provide additional opportunities in coming years. As a next step, RTC can identify costs, funding strategies, and partnership opportunities for each Capital Improvement Project. This will allow RTC to move from the current environment of policy setting to implementation.

## 2. DEVELOP A REGIONAL TRIP PLANNING TOOL

For people to access the outdoors, they need to understand what parks are available to them and how they can get there. There is currently no centralized tool for planning travel to parks in Southern Nevada, and there are gaps in information between jurisdictions and transit providers.

To develop a complete inventory of park amenities in the region and integrate this inventory with travel planning tools, RTC can work through the Regional Open Space and Trails (ROST) collaborative to update and consolidate existing tools. This could include a digital tool and a physical wayfinding and signage system.

The digital tool should include information about key park features, like restrooms and walking trails. Park features that help with extreme heat, like water fountains, are especially important. The tool should also include information on ADA accessibility, like the presence of curb cuts or ramps, both along routes and within parks. When the tool is complete, instructions for accessing the tool can be included in wayfinding signage and posted at bus stops, on buses, and in parks.

## 3. CONDUCT ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY OUTREACH

To better understand park needs, RTC can conduct additional outreach with the community at large. This can include targeted outreach with transit users to understand where park access falls within their service priorities. This can also include targeted outreach in rural areas. One of the study's key findings was the importance of park access in rural communities and the specific challenges that rural residents face in accessing parks. To build upon these findings and develop more specific recommendations for rural areas, RTC can conduct targeted outreach and identify partners for expanding transit options in rural areas.

## 4. PILOT NATURE SHUTTLE PROGRAM

The study proposes multiple pick-up and drop-off locations for a pilot nature shuttle program in Southern Nevada. To advance this initiative, RTC can convene a working group of partners, including representation from outdoor recreation nonprofits, potential drop-off points like libraries and community centers, and for-profit sponsors like outdoor outfitters.

## 5. CONTINUE TO IDENTIFY AND SHARE BEST PRACTICES

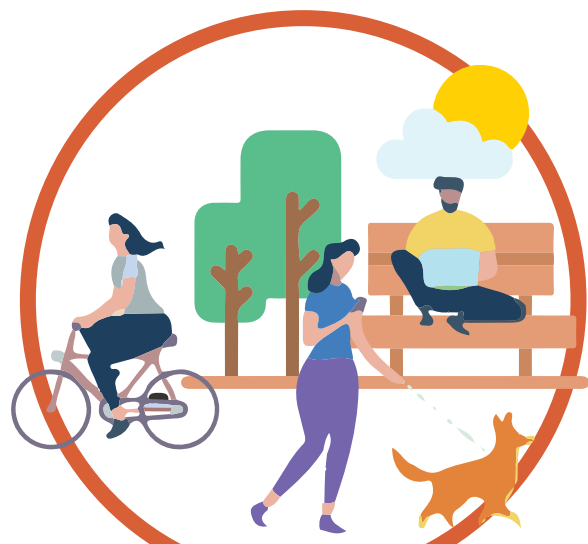
As a regional organization, RTC can help coordinate knowledge-sharing across jurisdictions and publish regional best practices in topics related to transportation access to parks.

The study proposes topics that the Regional Open Space and Trails (ROST) Collaborative can convene around in the short- or mid-term. Priority topics identified through this study include: barriers to walkability, building safe routes to parks, design standards for heat refuge spaces in the right-of-way, park design and programming in Impacted Communities, and integrating heat mitigation for park access into Master Plans.

## 6. AUDIT EXISTING PLANS AND DEVELOP PRIORITY PROJECT LISTS

Implementing the TAP study will require coordination with many important planning and policy documents that guide transportation and park investment across Southern Nevada. To ensure the study's findings are considered alongside other local and regional priorities, RTC can audit existing City and County Master Plans, Parks and Recreation Plans, CIPs, and the Coordinated Transportation Plan to identify what policies are in place and what is missing. Where gaps exist in implementation, RTC can use the findings from the TAP study to identify specific local priorities for improving park access.

# STRATEGIES



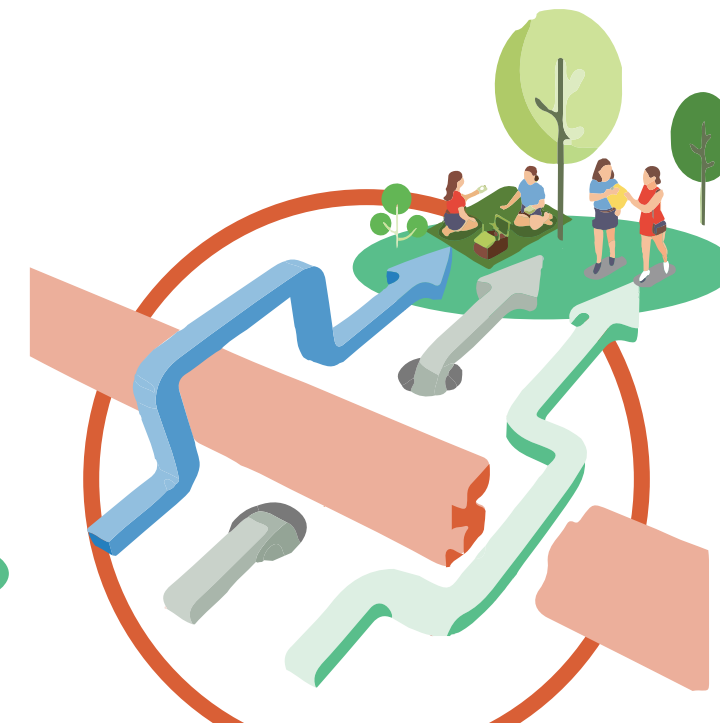
INTEGRATE PARKS INTO EVERYDAY LIFE.



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REDUCE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING AND ENJOYING OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES.

## 01. MAKE IT EASIER TO SAFELY WALK OR ROLL TO A PARK.

Improve walking access to parks by removing physical barriers and adding pedestrian infrastructure.

## 02. BRING PARKS CLOSER TO PEOPLE.

Incorporate green space into transportation routes, increase awareness of existing parks with multi-modal connections, advertise and encourage diverse park and recreation experiences.

## 03. IMPROVE PARK ACCESS WHERE IT IS MOST NEEDED.

Develop regional priorities for investments in parks and transportation in High-Needs Neighborhoods, including specific project lists.

## 04. ADD TRANSPORTATION CONNECTIONS TO PRIORITY PARKS.

Develop a prioritized project list for transportation investments that will improve access to Destination Parks and Outdoor Experience Parks.

## 05. PROMOTE MICROTRANSIT WHERE TRANSPORTATION IS NOT AVAILABLE.

Explore and adopt alternative mobility solutions outside of RTC's service area to address gaps in park access, particularly in rural areas.

## 06. INCORPORATE PARK ACCESS AS A PRIORITY IN TRANSIT SERVICE PLANNING.

Adapt current approaches to transit service planning so park access is considered among other priorities.

## 07. INCORPORATE COOLING INFRASTRUCTURE ALONG TRANSPORTATION ROUTES.

Distribute the cooling benefits of parks along transportation routes by incorporating essential infrastructure like water fountains, shade, and trees.

## 08. MAKE BIKING AND WALKING TO PARKS SAFER AND MORE COMFORTABLE.

Address pedestrian and bike safety along transportation routes to parks. Incorporate amenities within parks and along routes that support multi-modal travel.

## 09. IMPROVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION.

Ensure that important information related to accessing parks is centralized, updated regularly, and accessible to a wide audience.

## 10. ADD FEATURES TO RTC ROUTES THAT ARE "TRANSIT-TO-PARKS" FRIENDLY.

Where transit-to-parks connections exist, identify and address factors that dissuade transit use.

## 11. PROVIDE COMPLEMENTARY SERVICES WHERE TRANSPORTATION CONNECTS TO PARKS.

Build awareness about the benefits and opportunities offered by parks and co-locate complementary services, like those related to public health.

