

Strategic Plan 2025 – 2030

DeKalb County Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Affairs
(RPCA)





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Approved By: _____

Board of Commissioners & Director, Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Affairs

Revised 9/15/2025

Approved By DeKalb County Board of Commissioners on: _____

RPCA 1/15/26: Review Annually to Develop Budget Goals, Monitor Progress, Completion of Goals and Objectives as scheduled.

Next CAPRA Required Review: September 15, 2030

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RPCA 2021-2030 Master Plan guides the strategic direction of the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Affairs (RPCA). The Master Plan was approved by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners on May 24, 2022. It is a working and flexible document that helps the department establish short- and long-term goals proportionate with the county's changing demographics, as well as expressed interests of DeKalb County residents.

The Master Plan was developed through a comprehensive planning process that incorporated stakeholder engagement, community feedback, and internal assessments, the plan identifies priority areas that reflect both current challenges and future opportunities.

KEY PRIORITIES GUIDED BY THE MASTER PLAN

1. Community Engagement and Equity – Broaden access, foster inclusivity, and encourage active participation across all neighborhoods.
2. Programs and Services – Expand recreational, cultural, and educational opportunities with a focus on innovation and diversity.
3. Parks and Facilities – Maintain and enhance infrastructure to ensure safe, accessible, and environmentally sustainable public spaces.
4. Marketing and Communications – Strengthen visibility and public awareness through targeted communication strategies, transparent messaging, and promotion of programs, services, and community impact.
5. Organizational Excellence – Build staff capacity, strengthen leadership, and increase operational efficiency.
6. Financial Sustainability – Secure diverse funding streams, cultivate partnerships, and optimize resources to support long-term growth.

The 2026-2030 Strategic Plan links key priorities with 5-year strategic goals by:

- Creating SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound).
- Assigning responsible parties (e.g., Marketing Division, Recreation Services, Park Operations).
- Establishing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to track progress annually.
- Aligning the annual work plan and budget with these long-term targets.

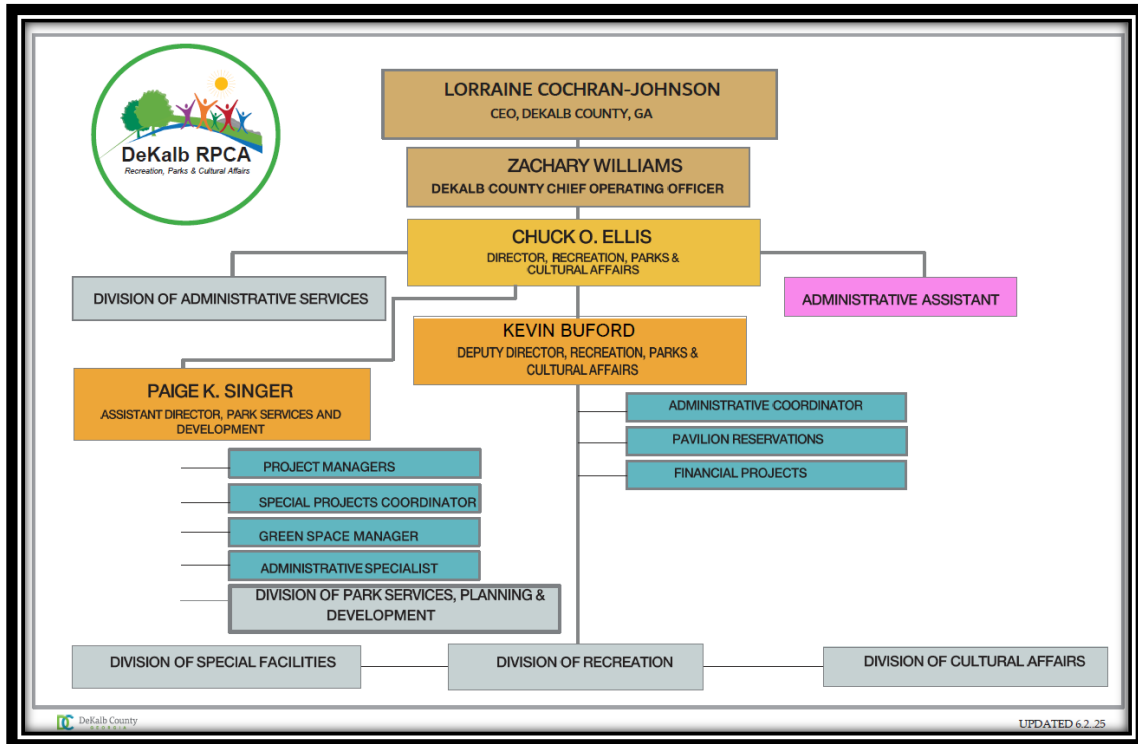
This process demonstrates to the community, staff, and key stakeholders that there is a direct line from the Master Plan to measurable results.



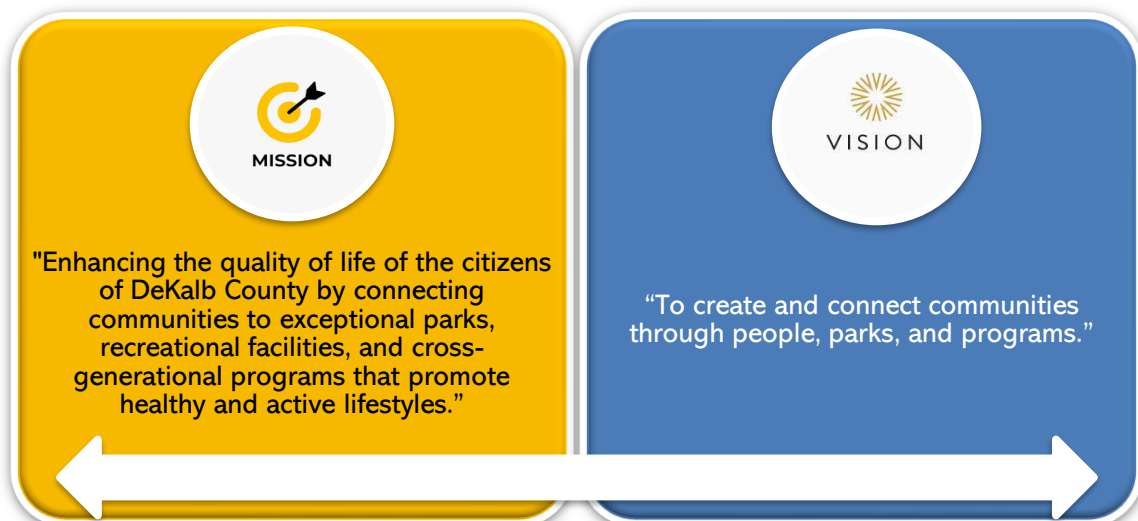
AGENCY PROFILE

In 1953, the DeKalb County park system consisted of 15 parks. Today, Recreation Parks and Cultural Affairs (RPCA) has expanded to a staff of two (2) men to 94 full-time employees and 171 part-time/seasonal employees. The department is led by the Director who reports directly to DeKalb County's Chief Operating Officer (COO) and Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The Deputy Director and Assistant Director report to the Director of RPCA. The Department is organized into five divisions: Administrative Services, Recreation, Park Maintenance and Planning Development, Special Facilities and Cultural Affairs.

RPCA ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



MISSION, VISION



DEKALB COUNTY GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

DeKalb County is unique in that it is the only county in Georgia with an elected chief executive (CEO) independent from the legislative branch. The County's Organizational Act defines the CEO as "having the exclusive power to supervise, direct and control the administration of the county government." The Board of Commissioners is the legislative branch of DeKalb County. The CEO has veto power, which may be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote of the Board of Commissioners.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

CATEGORY	DETAILS
Population (2023–2024)	Approx. 770,300 residents
Growth (2022–2023)	0.12% year-over-year growth
Median Age	36.3 years
Racial Demographics	Black/African American: 51–54%; White: 28–29%; Asian: 6–6.5%; Hispanic/Latino: 10–11%
Foreign-Born Residents	Approx. 16.6% (~126,000 individuals)
Median Household Income (2023)	\$77,683 (up from \$76,044 in 2022)
Poverty Rate	13.5% of residents
Median Property Value	\$331,400
Homeownership Rate	58.5%
Severe Housing Issues (2024)	17.7% of residents
Geography	268 square miles (1.3% water)
County Seat	Decatur
Atlanta Metro Share	About 10% of Atlanta
Key Cities	Brookhaven, Dunwoody, Stonecrest, Decatur, Chamblee, Doraville, Clarkston, Tucker
Notable Locale	Buford Highway International Corridor
K–12 Enrollment	92,000+ students
School District Budget (2022–23)	\$1.09 billion
Higher Education Institutions	Emory University, Oglethorpe University, Georgia Piedmont Technical College, Agnes Scott College, Georgia State University
Public Libraries	22 branches
Transit	MARTA heavy rail, bus, commuter buses
Road Network	Major interstate corridors and arterials
Greenway Projects	Peachtree Creek Greenway & multi-use trails
Major Employers	Emory University, Emory Healthcare, AT&T Mobility, Kroger HQ, DeKalb County School District
Attractions	Stone Mountain Park, Fernbank Museum, Arabia Mountain Nature Preserve, DeKalb History Center
Cultural Identity	Ethnically diverse, especially Clarkston & Buford Highway

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

Effective marketing and communications are essential to achieving the goals of the 2025–2030 Strategic Plan. As identified in the Master Plan, building awareness, and strengthening public trust are critical to expanding participation, fostering equity, and demonstrating the community impact of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Affairs.

Strategic Focus Areas:

- **Brand Visibility:** Elevate the agency’s identity and presence through consistent messaging and storytelling.
- **Community Awareness:** Promote programs, services, and facilities using diverse platforms that reach all demographics.
- **Engagement and Transparency:** Ensure residents receive timely, accessible information that highlights opportunities, outcomes, and the agency’s role in improving quality of life.
- **Partnerships and Advocacy:** Strengthen relationships with local organizations, businesses, and media outlets to amplify the agency’s reach and resources.
- **Digital Innovation:** Leverage technology, social media, and data-driven tools to enhance outreach and measure communication effectiveness.

The largest counties in Georgia by population are Fulton, Gwinnett, Cobb, and DeKalb. They are all included in metro Atlanta. Park and recreation agencies bring a wealth of opportunities to towns and counties that promote improved physical health, a lasting relationship with nature and a vibrant connection to every member of a community. DeKalb County Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Affairs is competing with park agencies in the metro Atlanta area, which encompasses Fulton, Gwinnett, Cobb, as well as cities within DeKalb.

Marketing and Communications is vital to the success of Parks & Recreation Agencies. It helps build community engagement, increase program participation, and justify public investment. Parks and Recreation agencies also contribute significantly to a community’s social cohesion, environmental health, and economic prosperity.

Marketing and Communications was a reoccurring problem expressed by residents during the community engagement phase, as noted by Lose, our Master Plan Consultants. Focus groups, residents, stakeholders, and survey results mentioned weaknesses and improvements needed in communications and marketing. For example, “communications” or a related word was

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

The Division of Cultural Affairs, Marketing and Special Events manages three social media accounts that include Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Social media is essential for the Parks and Recreation Department because it enhances public engagement, improves transparency, and helps promote programs and services effectively. The social media accounts provide followers to programs/events, facility updates, recreation tips, community stories and achievements, environmental education, announcements and volunteer opportunities.



WEBSITE

www.dekalbcounty.gov/parks

The county’s website provides the virtual doorstep to DeKalb County Parks which raises visibility and empowers residents. It acts as a one-stop resource hub for the community to receive key updates, or ways to become engaged.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Father Daughter Dance - 200
Movies in the Park - 150
Fishing Program - 276
Senior Olympics - 301
Neon Fun Run - 130
Fall Festival- 372



PARKS & RECREATION STRATEGIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Each strategic goal is supported by specific objectives, timelines, and performance measures to ensure progress is tracked and reported. These goals directly respond to findings in the Master Plan showing that lack of awareness, safety perceptions, and competition from outside providers are major barriers to participation.

2025 -2028 GOAL	OBJECTIVES
1. Expand and Modernize Facilities	1.1 Upgrade existing parks for safety & ADA compliance 1.2 Add 3 new neighborhood parks 1.3 Expand trail connectivity
2. Advance Community Health & Wellness	2.1 Launch countywide fitness initiatives 2.2 Partner with health providers 2.3 Expand youth enrollment
3. Promote Equity & Inclusion	3.1 Expand multicultural programs 3.2 Strengthen outreach to underserved groups 3.3 Increase affordability & volunteerism
4. Enhance Environmental Stewardship	4.1 Implement Sustainable Parks Initiative 4.2 Expand preserves & wildlife habitats 4.3 Grow community gardens
5. Strengthen Financial Sustainability	5.1 Expand event/facility revenue 5.2 Build public-private partnerships 5.3 Update Cost Recovery Model
6. Build Organizational Excellence	6.1 Staff training & equity focus 6.2 Implement performance dashboards 6.3 Improve cross-division collaboration



PARKS AND RECREATION: GOALS, OBJECTIVES, PERFORMANCE MEASURES, STRATEGIES, EVALUATION, TIMELINE					
Goal	Objectives	Strategies	Measurable Outcomes	Responsible Party	Timeline
1. Expand and Modernize Facilities	1.1 Upgrade existing parks for safety & ADA compliance	Conduct facility audits; prioritize renovations in CIP	100% of parks ADA audit complete; 3 major facility renovations by 2027	RPCA Facilities Division	2025–2027
	1.2 Add 3 new neighborhood parks	Acquire land in underserved areas; secure SPLOST/grants	3 new parks operational by 2028	Planning & Development	2025–2028
	1.3 Expand trail connectivity	Extend greenways and bike/pedestrian paths	+10 miles of greenway added by 2027	Parks/Greenway Unit	2025–2027
2. Advance Community Health & Wellness	2.1 Launch countywide fitness initiatives	Outdoor fitness stations; walking challenges	15% increase in participation in fitness programs	Recreation Division	2025–2026
	2.2 Partner with health providers	Create joint programs on nutrition & disease prevention	3 new health-focused programs launched	Partnerships Unit	2025
	2.3 Expand youth enrollment	Increase after-school, sports, and summer camp slots	15% increase in youth enrollment by 2026	Youth Programs Division	2025–2026
3. Promote Equity & Inclusion	3.1 Expand multicultural programs	Cricket leagues, cultural festivals, diverse arts	5 new multicultural programs launched	Cultural Affairs	2025–2027
	3.2 Strengthen outreach to underserved groups	Partner with schools, nonprofits	+20% participation from underrepresented groups	Community Engagement Team	2025–2027
	3.3 Increase affordability & volunteerism	Expand fee waivers, volunteer programs	200 additional families served; +100 volunteers recruited	Admin & Outreach	2025–2026

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Goal	Objectives	Strategies	Measurable Outcomes	Responsible Party	Timeline
4. Enhance Environmental Stewardship	4.1 Implement Sustainable Parks Initiative	Install green infrastructure, reduce energy use	20% reduction in park facility energy costs by 2027	Parks & Sustainability Unit	2025–2027
	4.2 Expand preserves & wildlife habitats	Acquire sensitive lands; restore habitats	2 new preserves added or expanded	Natural Resources	2025–2028
	4.3 Grow community gardens	Develop food forests with local orgs	5 new gardens/forests installed	Community Partnerships	2025–2027
5. Strengthen Financial Sustainability	5.1 Expand event/facility revenue	Host special events; market rentals	\$250K new revenue streams annually	Finance/Events	2025–2028
	5.2 Build public-private partnerships	Corporate sponsorships; non-profit collaborations	5 new partnerships secured	Director's Office	2025–2026
	5.3 Update Cost Recovery Model	Review fees & recovery targets annually	Updated recovery model adopted	Finance	Annual
6. Build Organizational Excellence	6.1 Staff training & equity focus	Annual training in equity, customer service	100% of staff trained annually	HR/Training	Annual
	6.2 Implement performance dashboards	Develop metrics dashboards for programs	Dashboards live by 2026	IT/Data Unit	2026
	6.3 Improve cross-division collaboration	Quarterly inter-division workshops	4 workshops/year	Director's Office	Ongoing

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mentioned 102 times, and “marketing” was mentioned 115 times. Concerns about the limitations of RPCA's website was another area frequently mentioned, which is a critical component in promoting parks and recreation programs.

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIC GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The Marketing and Communications Strategic Goals are drawn from the RPCA 2021–2030 Master Plan. These objectives address community awareness, equitable outreach, and the need to strengthen RPCA’s brand and reputation.

2025 -2028 GOALS	OBJECTIVES
1. Increase Awareness of RPCA Facilities & Programs	1.1 Develop comprehensive marketing strategy 1.2 Multilingual/multicultural campaigns 1.3 Digital “RPCA Hub”
2. Strengthen RPCA Brand & Reputation	2.1 Promote RPCA as “quality of life leader” 2.2 Improve visibility at events 2.3 “State of Parks & Recreation”
3. Expand Community Engagement via Events & Media	3.1 Promote popular programs 3.2 Social media engagement 3.3 Partner co-promotion
4. Improve Equity in Marketing & Outreach	4.1 Target underserved groups 4.2 Expand bilingual promotion 4.3 Fee assistance awareness
5. Measure & Adapt Marketing Effectiveness	5.1 Track analytics & registrations 5.2 Satisfaction surveys 5.3 Adjust strategies



**MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS GOALS, OBJECTIVES, PERFORMANCE MEASURES,
STRATEGIES, EVALUATION, TIMELINE**

Goal	Objectives	Strategies	Measures of Success	Responsible Party	Timeline
1. Increase Awareness of RPCA Facilities & Programs	1.1 Develop comprehensive marketing strategy	Create a county-wide campaign targeting neighborhoods, schools, and civic groups	25% increase in awareness (survey-based)	Marketing Division	2025–2026
	1.2 Multilingual/multicultural campaigns	Translate materials; promote via ethnic radio & community newsletters	Campaigns launched in 4+ languages	Community Engagement	2025–2027
	1.3 Digital “RPCA Hub”	Launch user-friendly web & mobile tools for schedules and maps	Online traffic +30%; app/portal usage reports	IT & Marketing	2026
2. Strengthen RPCA Brand & Reputation	2.1 Promote RPCA as “quality of life leader”	Use testimonials, storytelling, video campaigns	5 campaigns launched; 90% positive feedback	Marketing Division	Annual
	2.2 Improve visibility at events	RPCA booths at festivals, markets, schools	RPCA represented at 20+ events/year	Community Engagement	Ongoing
	2.3 “State of Parks & Recreation”	Annual report/presentation to public & officials	1 annual report delivered	Director’s Office	Annual
3. Expand Community Engagement Events & Media	3.1 Promote popular programs	Market concerts, movies, nature walks	15% increase in attendance	Program Managers	2025–2026
	3.2 Social media engagement	Daily/weekly campaigns; highlight user-generated content	+25% growth in followers	Marketing Division	Annual
	3.3 Partner co-promotion	Collaborate with schools, churches, nonprofits	10 co-hosted events/year	Partnerships Team	2025–2027

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS GOALS, OBJECTIVES, PERFORMANCE MEASURES, STRATEGIES, EVALUATION, TIMELINE					
Goal	Objectives	Strategies	Measures of Success	Responsible Party	Timeline
4. Improve Equity in Marketing & Outreach	4.1 Target underserved groups	Outreach in Clarkston, seniors, low-income households	20% increase in participation from underserved groups	Equity & Inclusion Team	2025–2028
	4.2 Expand bilingual promotion	Bilingual/bicultural flyers, ads, and media spots	Materials in at least 5 languages	Marketing & Outreach	2025–2027
	4.3 Fee assistance awareness	Promote scholarships & subsidies	200+ families supported annually	Finance & Outreach	Annual
5. Measure & Adapt Marketing Effectiveness	5.1 Track analytics & registrations	Use dashboards to monitor campaign reach	Quarterly analytics reports	IT & Marketing	Quarterly
	5.2 Satisfaction surveys	Annual survey to track awareness and perception	80% satisfaction rate	Director's Office	Annual
	5.3 Adjust strategies	Adapt based on trends & demographics	Updated plan every 3 years	Strategic Planning Team	2025 2028



IMPLEMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- Performance Measures: KPIs tied to each goal (attendance rates, satisfaction surveys, digital analytics, revenue growth, etc.).
- Monitoring: Annual progress reports to leadership, staff, and community.
- Evaluation: Mid-plan review in 2027 to adjust priorities.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of a parks and recreation strategic plan can face significant hurdles related to funding, staffing, infrastructure, community engagement, and political challenges. Even a well-crafted plan can fail if an organization does not have the resources or support to carry it out.

Examples of such challenges may include:

Financial and resource constraints

- Insufficient funding: Parks and recreation departments are often in competition with police and fire services for limited tax dollars. There may be cuts in the County's budget due to growing uncertainty in America's economy.
- Ongoing maintenance costs: DeKalb parks and recreation infrastructure, including parks, trails, and facilities, are aging and require more care over time. The lack of a plan for ongoing maintenance and operations can strain budgets and lead to the degradation of amenities.
- Funding gaps for different projects: It can be complex to secure funding from diverse sources for different projects, as each may have unique requirements and limitations. For instance, funding for a new playground may need to be pieced together from grants, community fundraising, and corporate sponsorships.



Staffing challenges

- Shortages and retention: Many parks and recreation agencies face difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified staff for seasonal, part-time, and even full-time roles. RPCA may be unable to compete with higher wages offered by other employers.
- High workload: With staffing shortages, existing personnel can be overburdened. This can create stress for staff trying to balance maintenance needs, visitor access, and program delivery.
- Lack of staff buy-in: For a plan to succeed, staff at all levels must be committed to its goals. A lack of awareness or reinforcement of the plan's importance can lead to a breakdown during the implementation phase.

Community and political hurdles

- Building public trust: Some DeKalb residents have a deep-seated distrust of the county. CAPRA has assisted RPCA in demonstrating its commitment to the diverse needs of the residents. Engaging residents in a more meaningful and transparent way has become a critical priority post CAPRA Accreditation.
- Balancing diverse interests: Public input often reveals conflicting opinions among community members, stakeholders, and staff. Balancing these diverse perspectives while making difficult decisions about programming and resources is a significant challenge.

- Misaligned expectations: Community engagement efforts can lead to high expectations for improvements that don't align with the available budget or resources. This gap can lead to disappointment and erode public confidence if not managed carefully.
- Political resistance: A strategic plan may face resistance from elected officials or special interest groups. This can manifest from changes in political and/or budgeting priorities.

Institutional and systemic obstacles

- Resistance to change: Employees and administrators tend to be resistant to adopting new technologies, workflows, best practices, or programmatic changes due to their comfort with established norms. It is imperative that adopting new practices based on best practices espoused by CAPRA are clearly communicated to overcome resistance.
- Overcoming internal silos: Effective implementation requires collaboration within RPCA but across different county departments and community agencies. Overcoming organizational silos and working together to leverage resources can be difficult, but it is essential.
- Data-driven decision-making: Many agencies lack the capacity and tools for effective, data-driven decision-making. The lack of reliable data to assess community needs and monitor progress can undermine the plan's effectiveness. CAPRA advocates that data-driven results based on community engagement, program evaluations, and participants' feedback are critical components in making

REGIONAL GROWTH



The 11-county Atlanta region includes Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, and Rockdale counties. Recent data from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) shows a combined population of nearly 5.3 million in this core region as of 2025.

The 11-county Atlanta region added 64,400 residents between April 2024 and April 2025, bringing the total population to 5,285,474, according to a report released by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) on Aug 13, 2025. The 11-county region's growth represents a slight uptick compared to 2023-24, when the region added 62,700 people.

The Atlanta region is growing at a faster rate in the outer suburbs and inner core. Leading the way are Forsyth and Cherokee counties, which each grew at a 2.4% clip, followed by the City of Atlanta (2%), and Henry County (1.75%).

The region's growth is being driven by the economy. Metro Atlanta's job employment base has increased 8% since the pandemic began in early 2020. That's the seventh-highest rate in the nation among major metro areas, trailing only Austin, Orlando, Dallas, Las Vegas, Houston, and Miami.

- **Regional baseline:** ARC forecasts ~856–840k more jobs by 2050 (region-wide) and population growth to ~7.9–8.0M, though slower than earlier projections. Expect steady job growth in professional/business services, hospitality, and manufacturing. (Atlanta Regional Commission, Council for Quality Growth)
- **DeKalb's specific trajectory:** ARC's profile puts DeKalb's 2050 population at ~1.01M (from ~763k today). Translating to a 10-year view, DeKalb likely grows modestly but steadily, with in-fill around MARTA corridors and medical/education hubs. atlantaregional.org
- **Headwinds to watch:** Housing affordability (supply constraints), uneven neighborhood investment, and cost-of-living could temper in-migration—key to Atlanta-area growth.
- **Tailwinds:** The 2025 infrastructure package, transit-adjacent redevelopment, and targeted equitable-growth initiatives should support job attraction/retention and raise productivity, especially if paired with housing production.

DEKALB COUNTY POPULATION & ECONOMIC PROJECTIONS 10-YEAR GROWTH OUTLOOK THROUGH ~2035)

Year	Population	Jobs	Median Household Income (\$)	Housing Units
2025	763,000	390,000	\$ 77,683.00	320,000
2026	769,867	394,680	\$ 79,237.00	322,560
2027	776,796	399,416	\$ 80,821.00	325,140
2028	783,787	404,209	\$ 82,438.00	327,742
2029	790,841	409,060	\$ 84,087.00	330,364
2030	797,959	413,968	\$ 85,768.00	333,006
2031	805,140	418,936	\$ 87,484.00	335,670
2032	812,387	423,963	\$ 89,233.00	338,356
2033	819,698	429,051	\$ 91,018.00	341,063
2034	827,075	434,199	\$ 92,838.00	343,791
2035	834,519	439,410	\$ 94,695.00	346,542

KEY ASSUMPTIONS:

- **DeKalb County Slowing (2025–2035):** According to recent data and forecasts from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) and DeKalb County planning documents, the long-range growth rate for DeKalb County is expected to be slower compared to the wider metro Atlanta area. While DeKalb County is projected to continue growing between 2025 and 2035, the rate of growth is slowing compared to previous decades.

- **Negative domestic migration:** Recent ARC estimates, released in August 2025, indicated that during 2024–2025, more U.S. residents moved out of the central metro Atlanta counties (including DeKalb) than moved in. This indicates that population growth is likely driven more by factors like natural increase and international migration.
- **Job growth centered in the core:** The ARC predicts that much of the future job growth in the region through 2050 will be concentrated in core counties like DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett, which could boost the county's population and economy during the 2025–2035 period.
- **Regional population increase:** While DeKalb's growth rate is slowing, the overall Atlanta region is still projected to add a significant number of residents. The ARC forecasts an increase of 1.8 million people region-wide by 2050

HOUSEHOLD INCOME & UNEMPLOYMENT: DEKALB, FULTON, COBB, GWINNETT, CLAYTON

COUNTY	MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME (2023)	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (JUL 2025)
DeKalb	\$ 77,683.00	3.6
Fulton	\$ 91,490.00	3.6
Cobb	\$ 98,712.00	3.2
Gwinnett	\$ 84,823.00	3.4
Clayton	\$ 58,507.00	4.5

Significant Findings:

- DeKalb sits mid-pack: incomes above Clayton and near Gwinnett's lower bound, below Fulton and Cobb; jobless rate is healthy and very close to Fulton/Gwinnett.
- Cobb leads on incomes with very low unemployment.
- Fulton has high incomes but roughly the same jobless rate as DeKalb.
- Clayton lags on both measures.
- What's driving DeKalb now
- Labor market: Sub-4% unemployment suggests a tight job market; DeKalb tracks metro conditions closely.
- Housing pressure: The Atlanta region lost >230k affordable units (2018–2023), and leaders (including in DeKalb) are pushing preservation/production—this remains a competitiveness risk for employers and workers.
- Public investment: In Feb 2025, DeKalb approved a \$4.27B infrastructure plan (largest in county history), which should support construction employment and long-run productivity (roads, water/sewer, facilities).

The county's Economic Development Strategic Plan and Decide DeKalb emphasize equitable growth (e.g., South DeKalb, Clarkston, Buford Hwy)

GWINNETT & DEKALB COUNTY'S PARK AND RECREATION SYSTEM

Since RPCA Master Plan suggested that Gwinnett County's Park and Recreation System was DeKalb County's major competitor, an assessment of key differences in Park Systems are relative to strategic planning:

Key Differences and Strengths in DeKalb and Gwinnett Park Systems

- **Acreage:** DeKalb County manages over 6,000 acres of parkland compared to Gwinnett's roughly 44 acres of managed parks and green space.
- **Facilities:** Gwinnett has a greater supply of indoor aquatic centers, competition pools, and youth baseball/softball fields. DeKalb has more soccer fields, outdoor basketball courts, and playgrounds than Gwinnett.
- **Attracting Residents:** Both counties likely compete indirectly by offering high-quality amenities that attract residents who want to live in communities with robust park systems.
- **Sports and Recreation Tourism:** Gwinnett's strength in baseball facilities may draw teams and tournaments, while DeKalb's larger acreage could support a wider range of large-scale events.
- **Resource Allocation:** The differing financial capacities and staffing levels suggest that each county is making strategic decisions to invest in different types of park facilities and services based on their unique community needs.

This table provides a side-by-side comparison of DeKalb County and Gwinnett County Park Systems:

Metric	DeKalb County	Gwinnett County
Total parks / parkland	127 parks on 6,506.85 acres	11,714 total acres (8,278 acres maintained)
Recreation & aquatic centers	9 recreation centers; 7 aquatic facilities	269 total facilities (rec & aquatic included)
Trails / greenways	PATH system segments countywide (100+ miles region-wide); county total not published	145+ miles of multi-use paths (expanding under Trails Master Plan)
Aquatics / participation	Not centrally reported in public annual reports	466,257 aquatics admissions (2024); 403,129 program participants (2024)
Awards / standing	–	NRPA Gold Medal finalist (2024); multiple program awards
Department structure	Dept. of Recreation, Parks & Cultural Affairs (combined with cultural arts)	Standalone Parks & Recreation Department (since 2025)
Recent budget reference	FY 2022: \$26.0M (dept. budget)	Budget reported in annual reports; exact 2024 total not highlighted in summary



The DeKalb County E.M.B.A.R.C. Community Youth Farm is a park and community hub which provides children and families with a place to grow food, learn together and engage in fun and exploration.

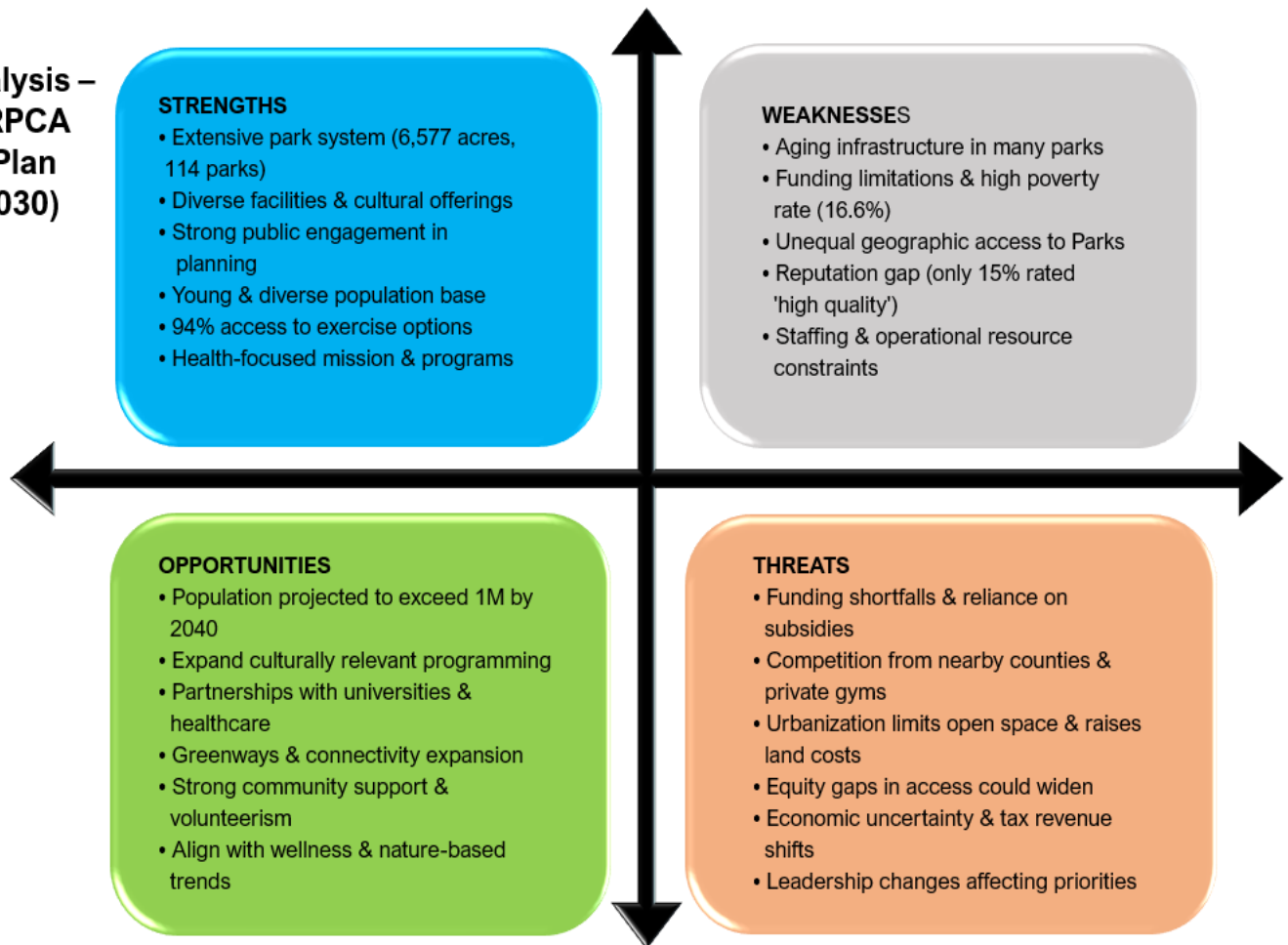
E.M.B.A.R.C. stands for Education, Market, Botanicals, Agriculture, and Recreational Center.



A SWOT ANALYSIS is a realistic, fact-based, data-driven review of an organization. It helps define a company's competitive position, assesses internal and external issues, and evaluates its current and future potential.

Conducting a SWOT analysis determines the factors that will assist the firm in achieving its objectives. A SWOT also identifies the factors that must be minimized or overcome to attain the desired result.

**SWOT Analysis –
DeKalb RPCA
Master Plan
(2021–2030)**



The SWOT Analysis RPCA Strategic Plan is based on a summary of findings in the Master Plan). It ties strengths and challenges to long-term planning. It reveals that RPCA has a strong foundation and community trust, but faces challenges in aging facilities, equity gaps, and funding limitations. With targeted strategies, new partnerships, and innovation, the agency can turn opportunities into long-term successes while mitigating external threats.

CONCLUSION

The RPCA Strategic Plan provides a clear, actionable path forward for the next five years. By aligning priorities with measurable goals, the department ensures that resources are used responsibly, services remain relevant, and facilities meet community needs. By working collaboratively, embracing innovation, and staying true to our mission, RPCA will continue to provide equitable, accessible, and sustainable parks, recreation, and cultural services that enrich lives today and for generations to come.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A: Data Sources & Methodology Appendix

Appendix B: Sample of Master Plan Findings And Recommendations

Sources & Methodology Appendix D

This appendix provides the sources and methodology used to develop the DeKalb County economic snapshot, comparative analysis with neighboring metro-Atlanta counties, and 10-year projections.

- Official Statistics & Data Sources
 - U.S. Census Bureau / American Community Survey (ACS): Provided median household income, poverty levels, and demographic profiles for DeKalb, Fulton, Cobb, Gwinnett, and Clayton counties (2023).
 - U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA): Supplied county-level Gross Domestic Product (GDP) through 2023 for all industries.
 - U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)
 - Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) used for monthly unemployment rates and employment levels across counties.
- Local & Regional Reports
 - Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC): Long-range growth forecasts (population, jobs, housing to 2050) and county profiles.
 - Axios Atlanta (2024 Prosperity/Distress Index): Used to contextualize economic well-being of metro counties.
 - Decide DeKalb Development Authority & DeKalb County Government: Economic development strategic plan, equity growth initiatives, and infrastructure investment details.
 - Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC, 2025): Covered DeKalb's \$4.27 billion infrastructure package and regional affordable housing shortages (loss of 230,000 affordable units from 2018–2023).

Methodology

- Snapshot (2023–2025): Used ACS and BLS/FRED (Federal Reserve Economic Data for income and unemployment; BEA for GDP).
- Comparative Analysis: Cross-county comparison (DeKalb, Fulton, Cobb, Gwinnett, Clayton) using Census ACS and BLS/FRED.
- Projections (2025–2035): Applied ARC's long-range annual growth rates for population (~0.9%), jobs (~1.2%), and housing (~0.8%) to DeKalb's 2025 baselines. Median household income projected with ~2% annual growth (conservative estimate).
- Contextual Factors: Incorporated insights from news and policy sources to capture challenges (housing affordability, inequality) and opportunities (infrastructure investments, equitable growth strategies).

GENERAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS, pages 20-25

The facility assessment findings identified some general trends throughout the system. Overall, the facilities are in fair condition. The planning team noted that these parks have a broad range in age, maintenance levels, design standards, and compliance with current safety and ADA codes. It appears that the County regularly undertakes various renovation projects to rehabilitate old or non-functional park facilities in order to bring these facilities to more current standards and improve the overall quality of the system. Although specific needs vary between parks, several issues were found to be consistent throughout the County, including safety issues, the need for general maintenance, and ADA accessibility issues, among other items. The following summary recommendations should be evaluated by RPCA staff and implemented where feasible:

ADA Compliance

Due to the age of many of the facilities in the County's park inventory, many still contain original design elements that are not in compliance with current accessibility codes. The planning team observed multiple instances of non-compliant parking spaces and pedestrian routes to primary use areas. Many athletic facilities did not have accessible routes to team areas and lack of compliant restroom facilities was also frequently noted. In 2019, the County underwent an ADA evaluation of existing parks and facilities. This evaluation identified numerous rehabilitation projects throughout the system to address code deficiencies. Funding for many of these projects is currently in place for implementation. Re-evaluation of the total system on a recurring basis is recommended to continue to monitor park conditions for code compliance.

Safety Considerations

During the facility assessments, the planning team noted various issues related to park user safety. Guardrails, fencing, and other barriers were sometimes missing or non-compliant with current standards to protect visitors from falls. Some facilities lacked appropriate lighting levels along access routes and parking lots. The planning team also noted that some of the parks have older, mature vegetation near door entries and along pedestrian pathways. This vegetation should be trimmed or removed to provide clear sight lines for users. There are also some isolated locations in the parks where paved sidewalks have up-heaved or subsided, creating tripping hazards along access routes. Trails or sidewalks that cross roads or parking areas should have pedestrian crossings that are clearly marked with striping and appropriate signage.

In 2020, the County underwent a risk assessment of existing facilities. The assessment generally focused on occupied structures and their means of access/egress. The findings in this report identified various rehabilitation projects to reduce risk and enhance user safety and many of these projects are currently funded for implementation. Additional assessments for outdoor park areas should be performed, and all safety evaluations should be updated on a recurring basis to continue to monitor park and facility conditions for potential risks.

Landscape Material and Maintenance Standards

Standards for landscape materials and maintenance give direction to maintenance crews for implementation. Well-maintained park entrance landscaping gives the community the feeling that a park is a welcoming place. Strategic plantings can provide intentional screening, direct visitors, and provide pedestrian traffic control, or can buffer sound.

DeKalb County's RPCA currently has a landscape maintenance program; however, this portion of the department's operations is likely under-funded and under-staffed. During the field assessments, the planning team noted inconsistent maintenance practices between the various facilities. While many parks appear to have their lawn and landscape areas regularly mowed and weeded, there are some facilities that do not appear to have the same frequency of care. Planners also observed multiple instances of bare spots or erosion areas in the parks.

Where feasible, the planning team recommends allocating additional funding in the department's operational budget to expand and enhance the current maintenance program implementation. Expanding this current program will permit additional staff and material resources to improve on known deficiencies, enhance the overall park experience and reduce recurring issues resulting from deferred or unmet maintenance needs. Where feasible, outsourcing these responsibilities may alleviate staff requirements for program expansion, especially for seasonal plantings and shrub trimming.

Athletic Fields and Sport Courts

Athletic field and sport court conditions vary across the park system, largely due to the age of facilities and the period of time since their last renovation. In general, athletic field turf areas appear to be in fair condition, though some bare spots and weeds were observed. Regular field maintenance to improve the quality of the playing area by addressing bare areas, weeds and improving drainage should continue to be implemented. The department should ensure that irrigation systems are operational and functioning as intended, and new irrigation systems should be installed on natural turf athletic fields where there currently are none.

Several sport courts were observed to have had recent renovations to the surfacing systems. Continue to maintain and renovate court surfacing systems to address cracking and striping. Fencing at these athletic facilities should continue to be repaired or replaced to ensure functionality of the facilities, as well as providing both player and spectator safety. Sport lighting system conditions also varied. Many recreation providers are currently converting older sport lighting systems with new LED lighting technology to reduce maintenance and overall operating costs. The County should evaluate their current lighting systems and establish a prioritized schedule for LED lighting conversion at athletic facilities. Athletic facility equipment and furnishings that are damaged or missing should be replaced with new equipment.

Many recreation service providers are currently converting their natural grass ballfields to artificial turf systems. This process extends facility availability for programming by reducing or eliminating facility shut-downs due to rain events or grass maintenance. In addition to opening up additional playing time, many providers are developing these renovated facilities to be multi-purpose. Multi-purpose athletic facilities allow more flexibility in programming and help offset facility deficits by combining multiple sports within a single facility. The planning team recommends that RPCA evaluate current field utilization and determine if conversion to multi-sport artificial turf fields will address facility deficiencies and expand current programming needs. Conversely, field utilization should also be used to determine if existing athletic field facilities are underutilized or unprogrammed. These large outdoor spaces could be repurposed to provide alternative facilities to support current programming needs.



Recreation Centers, Pavilions and Other Structures

Many of the County's indoor facilities require frequent maintenance to address roof leaks, mechanical and plumbing systems, as well as upgrades to flooring and paint. The County should continue to address known issues, track and perform scheduled maintenance, and replace systems that have surpassed their expected service period. The planning team observed that many of the County's outdoor pavilions require new roofs and upgraded paint. In isolated incidents, some potential structural issues such as deteriorated timber supports or rusted steel framework were noted. These structures should be evaluated to determine if repairs are feasible or if replacement is required. Other structures, such as restroom buildings, concession buildings, or scorer's buildings were observed to have varying levels of need, as well. Renovations to address ADA deficiencies in restrooms, service counters, and second floor scoring areas will be required in most locations. Additional renovations to upgrade roofing systems, mechanical equipment and finishes will also be needed. The County should also continue to convert lighting systems to new LED fixtures to reduce maintenance and operating costs. It should be noted that many of the recommendations listed above had been previously identified by RPCA and are being funded by current SPLOST programs for implementation.

Aquatic Facilities

Aquatic Facilities, such as pools and spray pads continue to receive regular maintenance from the County to keep them operational. The County should continue to monitor all aquatic equipment, track and perform scheduled maintenance, and replace equipment that has surpassed the expected operational lifespan. ADA access to pool areas appears to be satisfactory; however, indoor dressing facilities and restrooms may require some renovations to bring them into compliance. Pool deck surfacing should continue to have cracks repaired, and deck replacement is recommended where drainage issues are present.

Playgrounds and Safety Standards

Another prominent issue within some park systems is the non-compliance of playground equipment with safety standards by organizations such as U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and the International Play Equipment Manufacturers' Association (IPEMA). The standards proposed by these organizations are meant to serve as a guideline to help create atmospheres that are safe and pose a minimal threat of injury. Studies show that the majority of injuries sustained on public playgrounds are to the head—a result of falls from the play structure to the ground. For this reason, consideration has been given as to what the critical fall height would be in which a fatal head injury might occur.

Many of the County's playgrounds were noted as having wood mulch surfacing. Playground surface redressing does occur at the county's playgrounds, yet some playgrounds were found to need additional redressing at the time of the site visits. As playgrounds are added to the system and or older equipment is updated, the planning team recommends using alternative surfacing systems, such as poured-in-place rubber surfacing, playground tiles, or artificial turf. While these systems have a high initial cost, they generally have lower maintenance costs and retain safety performance for longer periods of time.



playground turf

RPCA has developed a Playground Safety Checklist for park staff to utilize. The department also currently has a Certified Playground Safety Inspector on staff. The planning team recommends that this checklist continue to complete regular inspections, address safety issues in a timely manner, and retain records of checklists and associated repairs. Where feasible, identify additional staff members for certification training to aid in more frequent inspections and reporting.

Standardized furnishings and equipment, both for the site and buildings, streamlines maintenance and generally makes repair or replacement quicker and more efficient. By standardizing these components, many park providers retain a stockpile of replacement equipment or components that can easily be deployed to address damaged or missing features. This form of standardization also reduces the time necessary to train staff on recommended maintenance and installation practices by limiting the amount of manufacturers and models.

Equitable delivery of recreation services is a core value shared by many service providers. Implementation of an effective design standards policy helps reinforce that a consistent level of quality is provided throughout the system, regardless of a park or facility's location. It is important to note, however, that park typologies can vary greatly, and these standards should take into consideration the unique characteristics of every system asset. For example, a picnic table that would typically be used in a plaza at an urbanized park may not have design aesthetics that would compliment the character of a picnic table that would be used at a pavilion in a nature preserve. For this reason, many park providers elect to develop design standards for individual park typologies, while still retaining a consistent level of quality.

RPCA currently has a system of design standards in place, but this system requires updating to react to newer, more effective materials and styles. Once developed, these updated standards should be deployed in a strategic approach and continue to be implemented over time.

Stormwater Management Improvements

Many of the County's park and recreation facilities were developed prior to establishment of current stormwater management regulations that are required for new development within the County. These regulations are intended to address negative impacts associated with new development, such as increased runoff due to increases in impervious surface area and poor water quality due to erosion, sedimentation and other pollutants. As the County has renovated or expanded parks within the system, they have invested capital dollars to bring these sites into compliance with these regulations. Examples of these improvements include the development of new or expanded stormwater detention facilities, the implementation of bioretention ponds, and removal of eroded sediment from ponds and lakes within their parks. As existing parks continue to be renovated or expanded, the County should likewise continue to improve and expand on current stormwater management strategies to improve the overall health and beauty of its facilities and demonstrate their commitment to being a leader in stewardship of the land.

PATH/Greenway Improvements

As with any other recreation facility, trails and greenways require maintenance and renovation to retain their functionality and provide a safe experience for their users. Repairs and replacement of damaged or missing signage, pavement resurfacing and restriping, and replacement of boardwalk decking are examples of maintenance projects that occur frequently on trails and greenways. DeKalb RPCA currently provides regular inspections to identify immediate maintenance needs as well as upcoming renovation projects. Continuing this process will help to ensure a safe and reliable trail and greenway network in the County.