Parks and recreation

Westwood Hills Nature Center
Construction is underway on the new interpretive center at Westwood Hills Nature Center. The entire project will be completed in 2020. The building will be 13,700 square feet with three multi-purpose rooms, separate exhibit space, a raptor area, conference room and an outdoor educational water feature.

A main goal of the new interpretive center is to be zero energy, with 100 percent of the building’s annual energy needs supplied by onsite renewable energy. A photovoltaic grid on the roof will produce solar energy and 40 geothermal wells will help heat and cool the building. This design aspect aligns with the city’s Climate Action Plan goals.

Westwood Hills Nature Center will remain open to the public throughout the project, including the current interpretive center. Parking is available on West Franklin Avenue with a trail leading to the interpretive center. Visitors can enjoy 3.5 miles of trails, host a birthday party or participate in a wide variety of nature programming.

Project updates
Visit www.stlouispark.org/whnc/new-interpretive-center, or text SLPMN WHNC to 468311 for updates.

St. Louis Park, Minnesota, continues to thrive as one of the region’s most successful communities with strong redevelopment, increasing home values and a diverse mix of businesses. The following pages offer a glimpse into city activities.

2019 Report to the Community
In 2018, the St. Louis Park City Council adopted the following strategic priorities, based on community input received through the Vision 3.0 and 2040 Comprehensive Plan update.

St. Louis Park is committed to:

- Continuing to lead in environmental stewardship.
- Being a leader in racial equity and inclusion in order to create a more just and inclusive community for all.
- Creating opportunities to build social capital through community engagement.
- Providing a variety of options for people to make their way around the city comfortably, safely and reliably.
- Providing a broad range of housing and neighborhood-oriented development.

In 2018, St. Louis Park adopted the most ambitious Climate Action Plan in Minnesota. The plan sets goals for the city to be carbon neutral by 2040 and receive 100 of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, reinforcing St. Louis Park’s longstanding reputation in environmental leadership.

2018 accomplishments

- Hosted a Solar Power Hour bulk buy event, and provided a solar suitability assessment map to help residents and businesses determine their potential for solar photovoltaic systems.
- Powered four of eight city buildings with renewable electricity.
- Installed solar arrays on Fire Station 2 and the Municipal Service Center.
- Earned SolSmart bronze designation for taking steps to address barriers to solar energy and foster the growth of local solar markets.
- Joined the Mayors National Climate Action Agenda, a national network of U.S. mayors collaborating on climate.

2019 plans

- Expand electric vehicle charging equipment in public parking lots.
- Develop options for energy audits related to home sales.
- Work with businesses on environmental issues and supporting the Climate Action Plan.
- Expand renewable purchasing by the city and add more solar installations to city buildings.
- Continue to build resources and programming for the community.
- Provide additional events to reach the community on energy efficiency, renewables, electric vehicles and other options.
In 2018, the city completed its race equity framework and began the first year of a five-year assessment plan using the Intercultural Development Inventory and Multicultural Organizational Development tools. The city continues to look for ways to recruit staff of color and to create retention programs for current employees of color.

Race equity and inclusion initiatives for 2019 include investments in small businesses and services that are owned by persons of color and indigenous individuals and expanding racial equity within all areas of city businesses and services.

Background
In 2016, a team of St. Louis Park City Council members and city staff participated in a year-long program on advancing racial equity. This program was facilitated by the League of Minnesota Cities along with the Government Alliance on Race and Equity Center for Social Inclusion. It provided an introduction to the roles, responsibilities and opportunities for government to advance racial equity. Through that process the city developed a race equity statement.

City of St. Louis Park race equity statement
If the practices, programs and services of the city are not fair, inclusive and equitable to all, the potential of the community and those it serves is diminished. From an elected, appointed and staffing perspective, our organization does not mirror the community. We will strive for racial equity by building understanding of the issues in our organization and intentionally and proactively take measures that break down barriers to just and inclusive community.

Community engagement vehicle
In 2018, the city purchased and equipped a community engagement vehicle to be used for mobile meetings and events throughout the city. To request the community engagement vehicle at your neighborhood event, contact Darius Gray, community organizer, at dgray@stlouispark.org.

Community organizers
A full-time community organizer joined city staff in 2019 and began working with neighborhood liaisons and overall community engagement in the city. Additional part-time staff will assist with outreach and community engagement efforts to ensure that everyone in the city has a voice and can participate effectively in decisions and activities.

Crime-free, drug-free rental housing ordinance under review
The St. Louis Park City Council selected 13 members for the crime-free, drug-free rental housing ordinance workgroup, which met for the first time in April 2019. The process to review and analyze the crime-free rental housing ordinance and report the outcome to city council is expected to take about six months.
**Housing**

**Affordable housing**
The city's housing authority administers several federally funded rental assistance programs that provide rental assistance annually to about 500 low-income households. It also partners with Hennepin County to administer a rental assistance program that targets people experiencing long-term homelessness. The city recently introduced these additional programs to assist with affordable housing.

**4d affordable housing incentive program**
This program helps preserve affordable homes in the city by giving apartment owners property tax reductions if they agree to keep 20 percent or more of their rental units affordable. The program also offers grants to help owners make safety and energy efficient improvements at their properties.

**Legacy program**
The city provides owners of multifamily, naturally occurring affordable housing apartment properties with resources and connections to help create new affordable housing and to prevent the loss of existing, at-risk affordable housing.

**Kids in the Park rent assistance program**
Housing instability keeps students from attending school consistently and diminishes their likelihood of achieving key measures like reading proficiency, a predictor of future success. The Kids in the Park rent assistance program helps low-income St. Louis Park rental households who have children attending St. Louis Park Public Schools to remain in their current housing through a flat monthly rental assistance payment.

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**Mobility**

**Southwest Light Rail Transit**
After years of planning, construction for the Metropolitan Council's Southwest Light Rail Transit (SWLRT) Green Line Extension started in May 2019. Paid passenger service is expected to start in 2023. Visit [www.swlrt.org](http://www.swlrt.org) to sign up for weekly construction updates.

**Mobility sharing**
Mobility sharing — a transportation solution ideal for short distance, point-to-point trips — often employs bikes or scooters that can be used within a specific service area. After extensive research, in early 2019, the city passed an ordinance requiring mobility sharing services to be licensed before operating in the city, and limiting the number of licenses available. Visit [www.stlouispark.org/mobility-sharing](http://www.stlouispark.org/mobility-sharing) for more information.

**Connect the Park reaches halfway mark**
2018 marked the halfway point of Connect the Park, the city's 10-year Capital Improvement Plan to add more bikeways, sidewalks and trails throughout the community. The city and its partners have installed almost 13 miles of on-street bikeways and just over eight miles of sidewalks and two miles of trails in the city. An additional 22.5 miles of bikeways, seven miles of sidewalks and 1.4 miles of trails are planned in the next four years of Connect the Park. This includes connecting the future SWLRT stations to the rest of the city with sidewalks and bikeways. Visit [www.stlouispark.org/connect-the-park](http://www.stlouispark.org/connect-the-park) to learn more.
2040 Comprehensive Plan
The St. Louis Park 2040 Comprehensive Plan includes goals and strategies for racial equity and inclusion, environmental stewardship, mobility, housing and neighborhood oriented development and community engagement. Notably, the land use plan allows for two-family dwelling units in low-density residential areas. The updated plan is a culmination of two years of community outreach about the city’s values and vision and feedback on the plan.

In 2019, planned zoning changes will implement transit-oriented development along the Southwest Light Rail Transit (SWLRT) improve the mixed-use zoning district, allow accessory dwelling units in low-density residential areas and require electric vehicle charging infrastructure in new and expanded parking lots/ramps and at all new gas/fueling stations. The city will also explore using density bonuses as a way to encourage more affordable housing development.

Development
St. Louis Park continues to be a highly sought after location for new investment, a trend expected to continue with construction of the SWLRT. Over the past two years, four new multifamily housing developments were completed resulting in 623 residential units of which 54 qualify as affordable. In 2019, six multifamily housing developments will be under construction, resulting in 950 additional residential units of which 244 will qualify as affordable.

Over the past two years, two new hotels were built, adding 268 rooms. Plans are in place to build two more hotels, with a total of 210 rooms. The city recently added approximately 230,000 square feet of new industrial space, has a new 84,000 square foot corporate headquarters building under construction and has another 336,000 square foot office building approved for construction.

Pavement management
This project includes pavement rehabilitation, concrete repair, utility replacement, sidewalks and traffic control changes on street segments in the Elmwood, Brooklawns and Brookside neighborhoods.

Aquila Avenue
The city completed a mill and overlay of Aquila Avenue from West 36th Street to Highway 7, along with minor utility work.

Texas Avenue south of Highway 7
The cities of St. Louis Park and Hopkins partnered to make street, bikeway, sidewalk and utility improvements south of Highway 7 along Texas Avenue and Division Street. Bike lanes were installed on Texas Avenue, providing a connection to the bike lanes north of Highway 7 on Texas Avenue, as well as to the regional trail south of Texas Avenue through the South Oak Hill Neighborhood. New sidewalk was built on both sides of the road between Highway 7 and Division Street and on the east side of Texas Avenue from Division Street to Lake Street.

Alley reconstruction
The gravel and bituminous alleys located in the Sorenson Neighborhood were reconstructed with concrete in 2018.
Police department

Body-worn cameras implemented
In April 2019, St. Louis Park police officers began using body-worn cameras to capture evidence from police-citizen contacts, to ensure accurate reports, to allow for transparency and accountability in policing and to protect the civil rights of the community. Visit www.stlouispark.org/body-worn-cameras to learn more.

Police substation added
A police substation was recently added at The Shoppes at Knollwood, joining locations at the Shops at West End and Excelsior & Grand. Substations provide a place for officers to write reports, meet citizens to investigate crime reports, hold community meetings and conduct other business. Substations aren’t staffed according to a schedule; however, officers are encouraged to make frequent use of these facilities to engage with the community.

Mental health call response
Calls involving mental health issues include complex factors that are challenging to police officers. The department is leading an effort to effectively address mental health incidents through training, a follow-up program for mental health crisis calls, use of dispatch records to provide responders and dispatchers with relevant information and a workgroup to develop mental health initiative policies and procedures.

New policy for sexual assault reports
The police department is adopting a new policy for responding to reports of sexual assault with a goal to provide maximum protection and support to victims of sexual assault or abuse through a coordinated program of law enforcement and victim services, with an emphasis on a victim-centered approach.

Fire department

Bike patrols added
The St. Louis Park Fire Department rolled out bike patrols with emergency medical technicians (EMTs) to cover the city’s 38 miles of bike trails and 56 neighborhood parks, as well as special events like the Fourth of July fireworks, parades and road races. Bike patrols allow for easier access where larger crowds are gathered.

Each bike carries approximately 40 pounds of medical equipment, including trauma dressings, spinal immobilization, oxygen and an automated external defibrillator (AED). The extra weight requires precision and balance to navigate parks and trails. Firefighter EMTs train on obstacle courses designed to perfect their bike skills so they can operate effectively in crowds, off road or on the trails. Many also train while off duty to maintain adequate strength and endurance.

Community health initiative
The fire department has been working on a community health initiative to connect residents with needed resources. Target groups include:
• Seniors who wish to live at home and remain independent
• Family members managing care for a loved one
• Individuals who use the 911 system to manage health care needs

The program will identify patients who use 911 frequently and connect them to services, allow emergency personnel to build an electronic health care record that triggers a referral to a primary care physician, connect all care team members and allow billing for services within the health care system.
### Elections

**Ranked-choice voting debuts with 2019 election**

The City of St. Louis Park adopted ranked-choice voting in 2018 for mayor and city council elections, held in odd-numbered years. With the first election slated for 2019, an extensive outreach and education program is underway to teach voters about ranked-choice voting. The elections team is traveling throughout the community to meet and speak with local civic groups, including neighborhood organizations, faith communities, schools and businesses, to educate people on ranked-choice voting and voting in general.

Outreach efforts include initiatives that target historically underserved populations, youth and those who face additional challenges when voting. A mobile voting project will take early voting opportunities into targeted areas of the community where voter participation is historically low, while mock elections are educating and engaging the community on ranked-choice voting. Many materials related to outreach and education for community members and organizations are available, including pocket voter guides, new resident welcome packets and elections toolkits.

Civic education efforts will continue past the first ranked-choice election, including an annual student election program for St. Louis Park High School students and an election ambassador program for community leaders. City staff are also teaching a series of St. Louis Park Community Education courses on civic engagement and elections for adults and middle school students.

### Finance

**Property tax levy set for 2019**

For 2019, the St. Louis Park City Council approved a final property tax levy increase of 4.35 percent over 2018, marking the third straight year the final levy increase has decreased from the previous year. This final approved levy was the conclusion of several months of budget discussions between city council and staff.

Contributing to the increased levy are ongoing replacement and maintenance of infrastructure, including city roads, parks, buildings, technology and debt service, as well as the costs for continuing to provide quality service to residents. The increase will also support the city’s Vision 3.0 and comprehensive plan goals and the city council strategic priorities in the areas of environment, race equity and inclusion, ranked-choice voting (for mayor and city council elections) and housing initiatives. Visit [www.stlouispark.org/finance](http://www.stlouispark.org/finance) for details.

**City earns AAA bond rating**

In March 2019, the independent bond rating agency Standard & Poor’s (S&P) re-affirmed its highest rating of “AAA” for the city. St. Louis Park is one of 26 cities in the state with this rating. Bond ratings are a reflection of the city’s financial strength and stability. The report highlighted the city’s very strong economy, management, budgetary flexibility and liquidity, in addition to its strong budgetary performance, debt and contingent liability position. With the top credit rating, the City of St. Louis Park receives the lowest possible borrowing costs on current and future debt issuances, and can refinance outstanding debt at lower interest rates.
**Water Treatment Plant #4 returns to service**

Early in 2019, Water Treatment Plant #4 returned to service providing water to St. Louis Park residents. Located at 4701 W. 41st St., the plant was taken out of service at the end of 2016 after testing showed that while some volatile organic compounds (VOCs) were being reduced by an implemented short-term treatment solution, others were still increasing. The city worked with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and the Minnesota Department of Health to design and implement upgrades to treat all identified contaminants, regardless of their source, down to published advisory levels. The upgrades included adding two air stripper units to treat the VOCs found in the water at this plant, as well as many other upgrades.

**Changes to city solid waste collection**

In October 2018, Waste Management began providing residential yard waste and organics collection, in addition to the garbage and recycling collection provided by the company the previous five years. The new contract allowed for some changes to the program, including separate collection of organics and yard waste and availability of every-other-week garbage collection for residents with 20- or 30-gallon garbage service and who participate in the organics collection or manage food scraps through backyard composting.

**Organics collection**

St. Louis Park offers curbside collection of recycling, organics, yard waste and garbage to about 12,300 residential households. More than 4,100 households participate in the organics collection program.

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**Permit valuation**

The city continues to see high building permit valuation. In 2018, the building permit valuation was $170 million compared to $124 million in 2017.

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**Online plan submission**

As of Jan. 1, 2019, the main way to submit most residential and commercial permits is online through ePermits. Building plans should be submitted through ProjectDox. If you can’t submit your application online, inspections department staff at city hall can help. A computer is also available at the inspections counter at city hall to submit your plans online. Visit [www.stlouispark.org/permits](http://www.stlouispark.org/permits) for information.

Online submissions significantly reduce the amount of paper used during the approval process, which helps meet the city initiative to reduce paper use. Some inspections may be scheduled electronically. This gives homeowners and contractors the chance to schedule an inspection any time of the day, not just during city hall office hours. It also allows the same inspector to follow a project through to completion.