



FORT KEARNY STATE HISTORICAL PARK AND STATE RECREATION AREA MASTER PLAN

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ADOPTED JANUARY 2022

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Fishing and camping at Fort Kearny SRA.

BACKGROUND



Crane viewing on the Platte River.

Nestled along the Platte River in Central Nebraska, just six miles from the City of Kearney, is Fort Kearny State Historical Park (SHP) and State Recreation Area (SRA). The 40-acre SHP, once used as a safe haven for Overland Trail travelers, Pony Express riders and gold prospectors, is now preserved as a State Historical Park. Just a mile northeast, the 243-acre SRA offers diverse recreational opportunities, such as hiking, biking, crane viewing, fishing, swimming, disc golf, and camping. These two parks receive the majority of their visitation between Memorial Day and Labor Day each calendar year, with March and April seeing high visitation numbers during crane migration.

PURPOSE

The Fort Kearny Master Plan is a collaborative effort among internal Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) stakeholders, external partners, and the public. NGPC administration identified these two park areas as having a wealth of opportunity for historical and recreational activities to serve the public; and a need to plan for future development. The purpose of this document is to provide a long-term plan that strikes a balance between the historical integrity of each area and sustainable recreational opportunities within the landscape to remain a viable part of the state park system.

Improvements at these park areas over the last 50 years have included enhancements for both active and passive recreational uses. However, certain design elements of each area have led to a lack of connectivity and overall unity of the amenities within the parks. This plan establishes a framework for cohesive future park improvements, while preserving the existing uses valued by the visitors, staff and volunteers. Vision statements for each park, goals, and future development plans are outlined in this plan for the two areas. This plan is a living

document and will change over time as additional assessments assist the Parks Division in making development decisions.

LOCATION

Fort Kearny SRA is located in south-central Nebraska, six miles south of the City of Kearney. Abutted to the north by the Platte River and Interstate 80 corridor, this recreation area is also near the communities of Minden and Gibbon (*Figure 1*). Just three miles south of the SRA on HWY 50A, is the entrance to the state historical park. Fort Kearny SRA and SHP are located on the northern border of Kearney County and Buffalo County. The majority of the SRA is located in Buffalo County, with the exception of the 57-acres acquired in 2020 and some of the eastern day-use area. The SHP is located in Kearney County (*Figure 1*).

Past park user surveys and national studies indicate people are willing to travel between 60 and 100 miles to recreate. Within 60 miles, there are 132 outdoor recreation areas, which includes 63 wildlife management areas (WMAs) and 11 state recreation areas owned or managed by NGPC (*Figure 2*). The willingness to travel farther distances is influenced by several factors, such as amenities, facilities, and overnight camping opportunities versus day-use areas. Other recreation areas nearby provide competition for the visitor experience, but also an opportunity for visitors to stay longer and experience other forms of outdoor recreation and learn about historical and cultural resources.

Figure 1

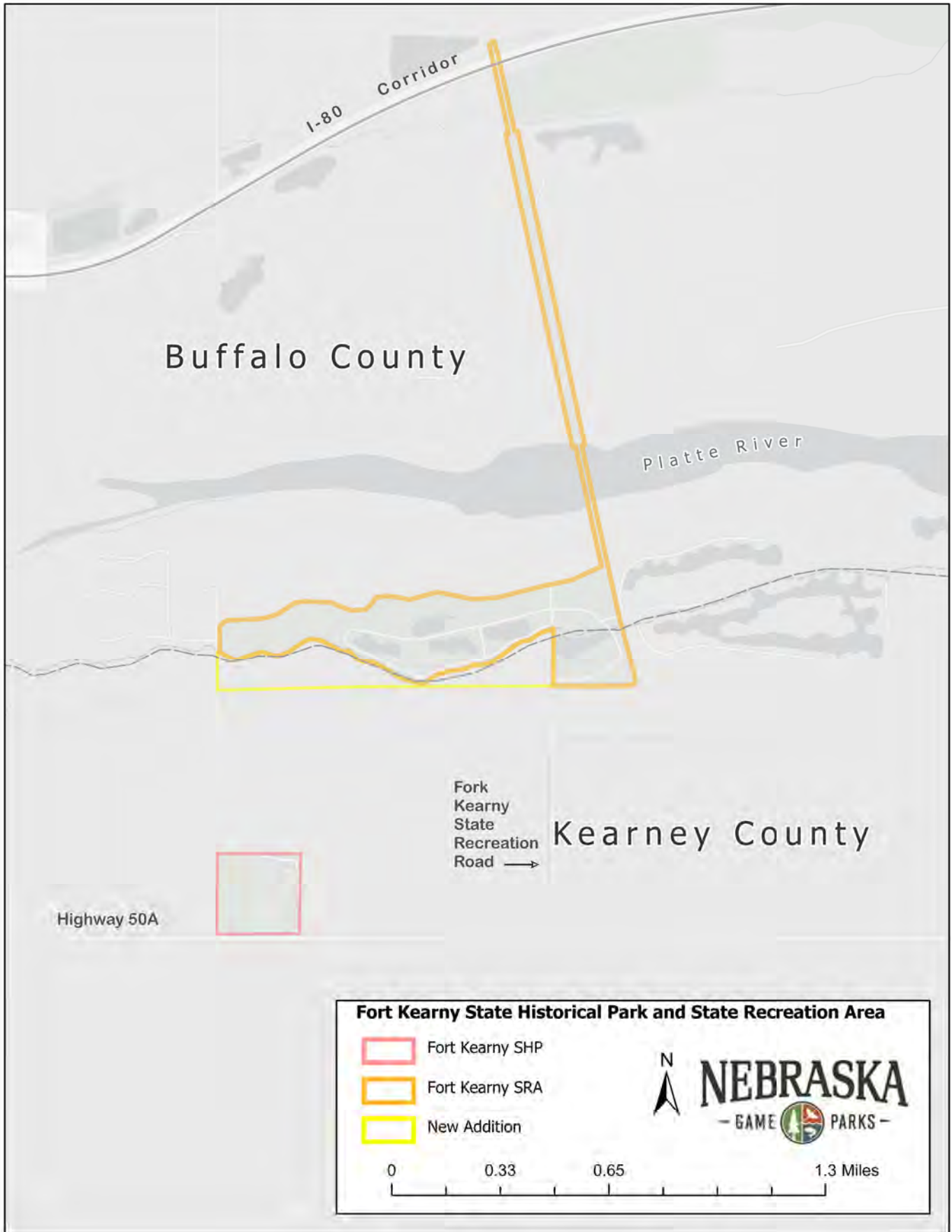
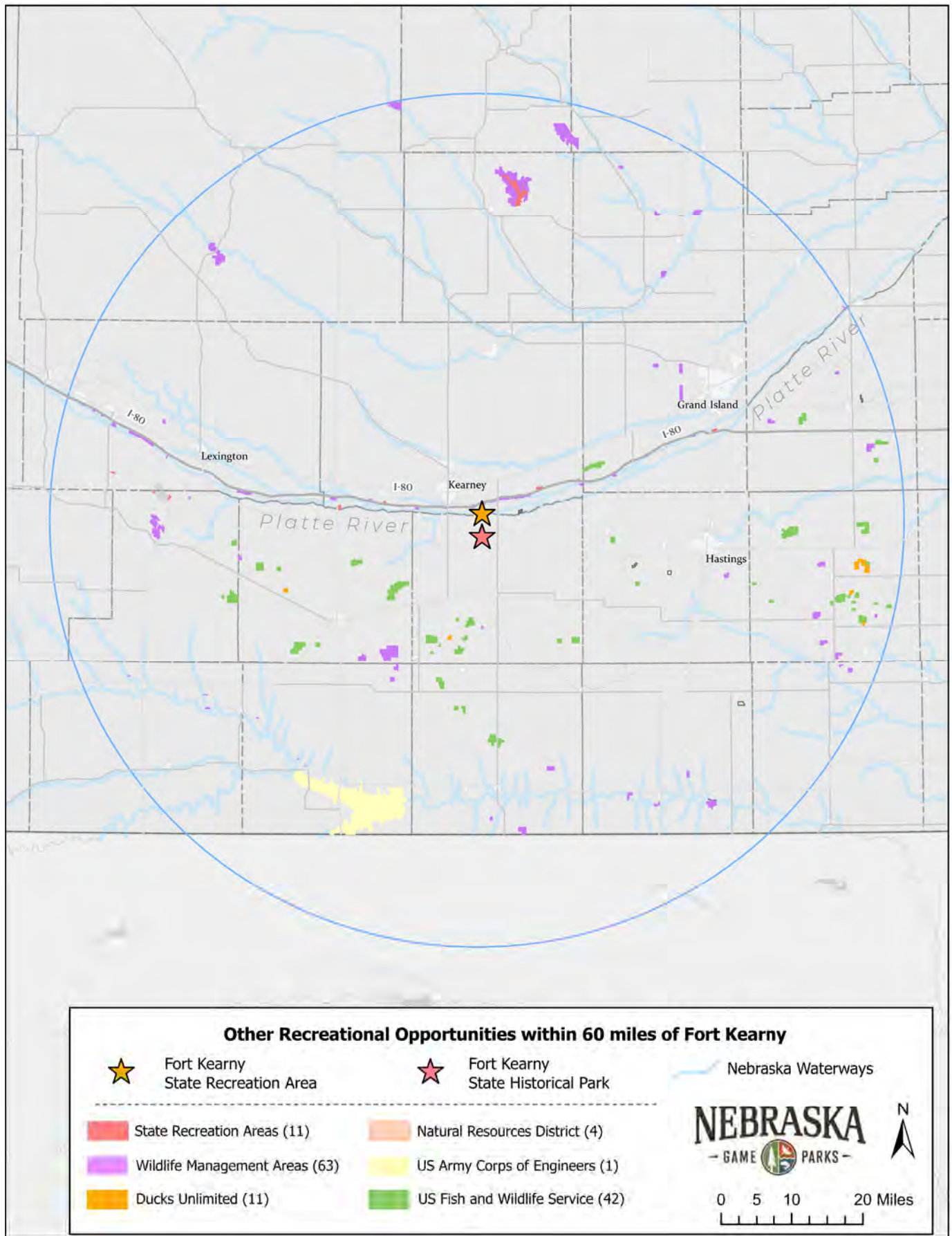
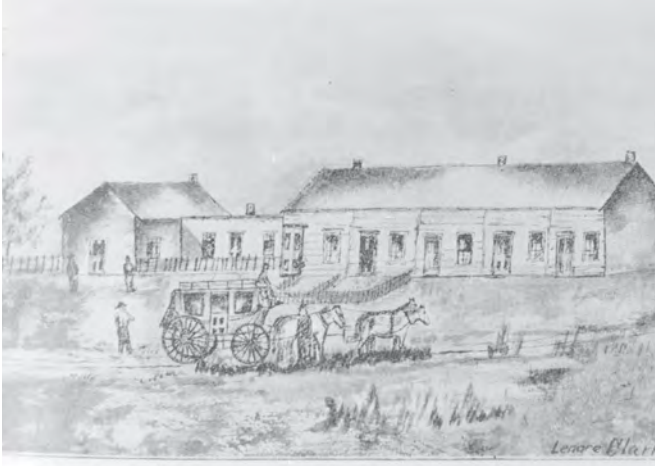


Figure 2





Post office and post buildings.

According to History Nebraska, there are 24 historical markers in Kearney and Buffalo counties, offering the opportunity to learn about the rich history along the Great Platte River Road. There are also several museums within these two counties for the public to learn about the history and culture of the area. This increases the competitiveness of Fort Kearny as a primary destination to learn about history, and this will be considered as future programming and events are developed.



Blacksmithing.

Historical Markers Near Fort Kearny¹

- Dobytown
- Gibbon, 1871-1971
- University of Nebraska at Kearney
- Kearney Cotton Mill
- Historic Kearney
- 1872 Lowell 1972
- Watson Ranch
- Kearney - Fort Kearny
- Gibbon
- The Great Plains
- Walker's Ranch
- Fort Kearny
- The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad
- Axtell, Nebraska
- Elm Creek
- Nebraska Centre - Boyd Ranche
- Post South Loup Fork "Fort Banishment"
- The Great Platte River Road
- Civilian Conservation Corps, Ravenna, Nebraska
- Joseph E. Johnson and The Huntsman's Echo
- Osco Cemetery and School
- Buffalo County's Lincoln Highway Seedling Mile
- Blue Mills and Glenwood Park
- The Kearney Army Air Field
- Susan Hale Lone Grave

Buffalo County Museums²

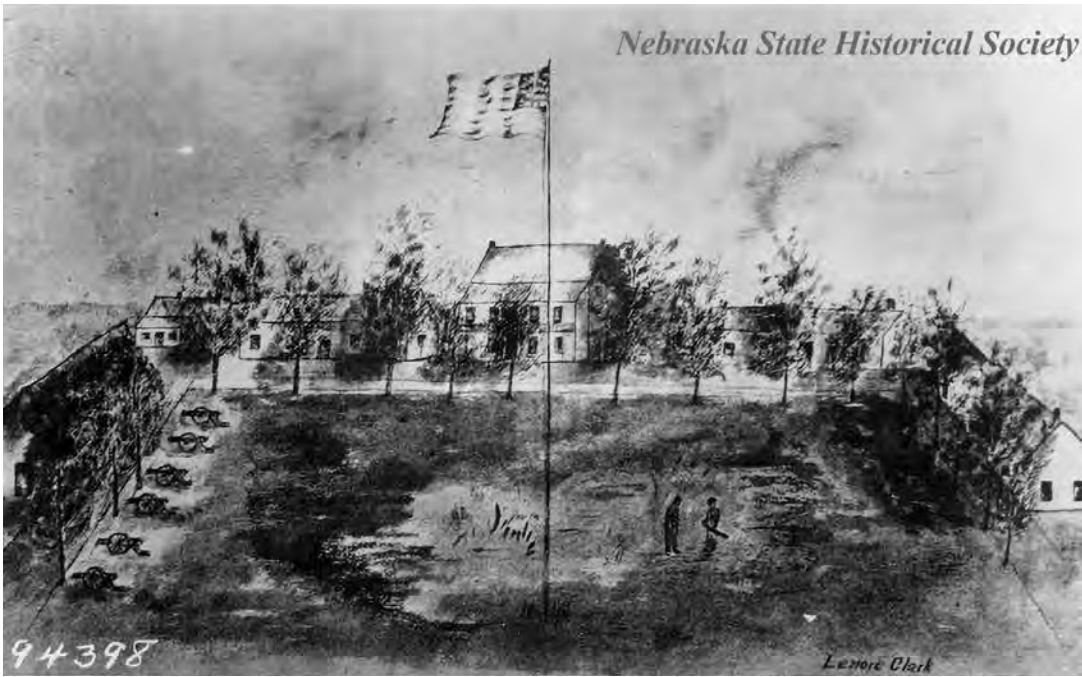
- Trails & Rails Museum
- Nebraska Firefighters Museum
- Fort Kearney Museum
- Museum of Nebraska Art
- G.W. Frank Museum of History and Culture
- Kearney Area Children's Museum
- The Archway

Kearney County Museums²

- Kearney County Historical Museum
- Pioneer Village

¹Source: <https://history.nebraska.gov/visit/nebraska-historical-marker-program>

²Source: <http://www.bchs.us/>



Fort Kearny parade grounds.



Blacksmithing exhibit and covered wagons.

HISTORY

NGPC acquired and developed many park areas across the state in the 1960s. These park areas were developed with similar intent, to provide recreational opportunities on the landscape as quickly as possible. This predicated many of the development decisions made for park areas, including Fort Kearny.

State Historical Park

The state historical park has a vast and unique history. Old Fort Kearny was relocated six miles southeast of the City of Kearney in 1848 from Nebraska City. The Fort was relocated to its current location because it was farther westward and offered protection to emigrants passing by on the Oregon Trail, which runs right through the Fort. The land originally belonged to the Pawnee Indians and was ceded to the United States in 1833. Fort Kearny also served as a home station offering food and shelter for Oregon Trail travelers, Pony Express riders, Pawnee and Mormon scouts and construction crews building the Union Pacific Railroad. The park name came from Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, who passed away in 1848 after his honorary service in the U.S. military. Fort Kearny was established in 1848.

Fort Kearny was built in a location where eastern trails joined to form the Great Platte River Road to the west. Fort Kearny was one of the bases of operation when the Army subdued the Sioux in 1855 after attacks on emigrant trains and travelers. The Fort served as a Pony Express Station from 1860 to 1861, and was the most western point of departure into Indian Territory. In 1860, the Missouri and Western Telegraph Company built its line westward as far as Fort Kearny, where express riders took the communications from the wire and rushed them westward. For the next year, Fort Kearny was the farthest western terminus of the telegraph.

In the early 1860s, the Fort became an important freight route, hauling coal-mining equipment to Denver and food supplies to several locations between Fort Kearny and Utah Territory. The majority of food supplies included oat and corn for livestock. In 1860, many freight wagons passed through, requiring thousands of oxen and men. If not for the Fort and the protection it provided, the vast movement of freight would not have been possible. At this time, the Fort was very busy with travelers and had a post office, large storehouse, several barns, shops, and a hospital to accommodate travelers. In 1864, the one-acre stockade was built for protection of travelers and livestock.

In the late 1860s, the overland route that ran through the Fort became obsolete with the rail lines becoming the safer, preferred option for quicker travel and freight. As a result, the need for Fort Kearny as a protection and communication center was heavily diminished. In 1869, the Fort was used as a testing site for ammunition manufactured by the Ordnance Department and private firms. In 1871, the military post was abandoned, the buildings were torn down, and the land was opened for homesteading.



Aerial view of Fort Kearny looking northwest.

In the late 1870s, William Dungan acquired the land and, realizing the historic value, did not disturb the site aside from his home built in the southwest corner of the property.

In 1906, a reunion was held at the site, where a resolution was adopted to form an organization whose purpose was to make a national park out of the site. Thus, the Fort Kearny National Park Association was formed. The association was renamed in 1922 as the Fort Kearny Memorial Association.

In 1928, the land was advertised for Referee Sale. John Lowe bought the land and sold it immediately to the Fort Kearny Memorial Association for the price he paid at \$135 per acre. The association was dissolved in the 1930s after donating the land to NGPC. Fort Kearny was declared a State Historical Park in 1959. A restoration plan, completed by engineering firm Clark Enerson in 1948, highlighted future restoration of the SHP and indicated surveys that were necessary to determine historically sensitive areas that should not be disturbed. Much of the reconstruction of buildings outlined in the plan and the survey efforts did not take place. However, some building reconstruction has occurred. Notable recommendations in the plan were:

- To keep intact the stockade and parade ground areas so that no motor traffic cuts between these elements.
- To bring motor traffic as near as possible to the center of the park in such a way that visitors are discharged at points convenient to all parts of the park.
- Complete and faithful restoration of the Officers' Quarters to be used as a museum.
- Replacements for the cottonwoods which are rapidly dying out.

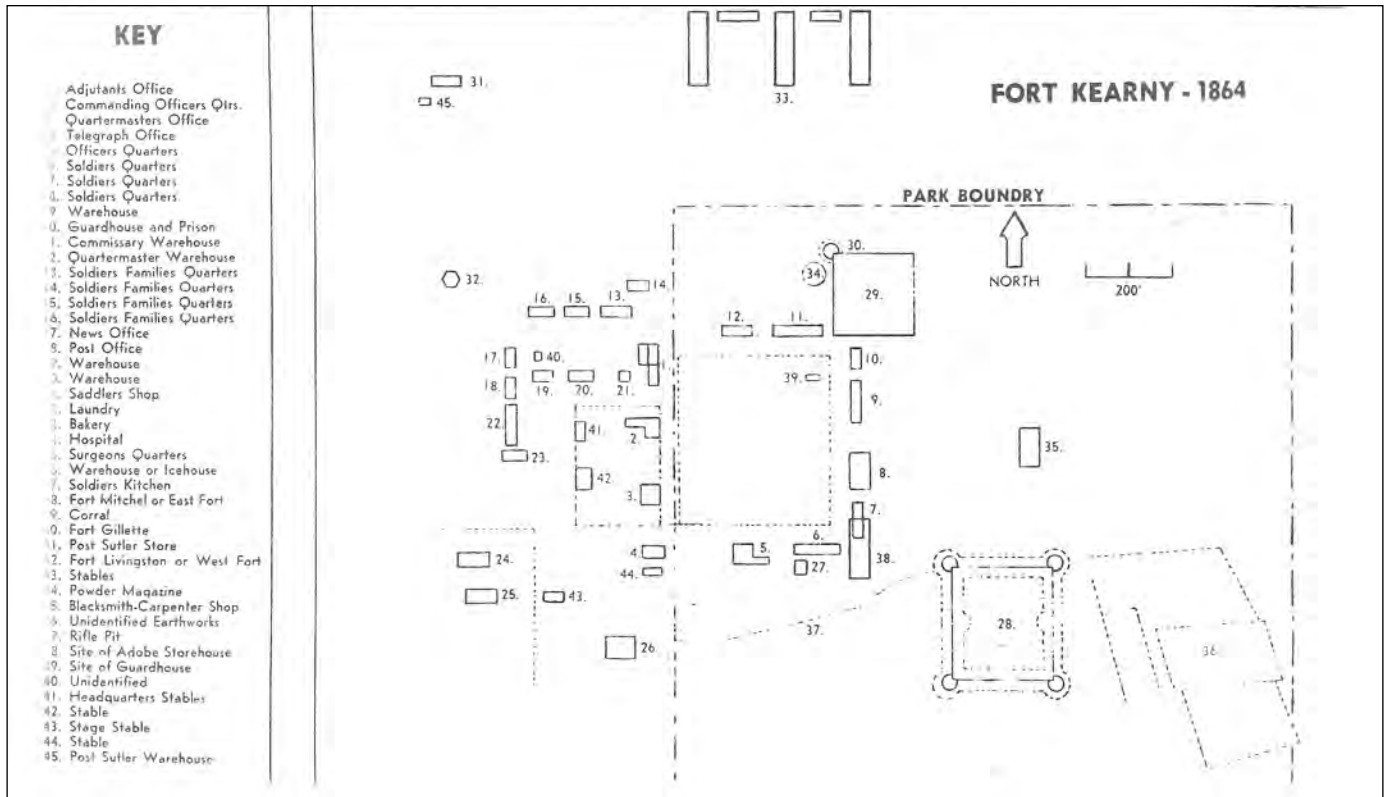
The planning and construction period of this area started in the 1960s and 70s. Archaeological surveys were conducted in 1960, 1961, and again in 1964 as a cooperative agreement between NGPC and the Nebraska State Historical Society – now known as History Nebraska. These archaeological surveys informed NGPC on where to build the stockade, blacksmith, and powder magazine building reconstructions that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The chronology of the physical development of the site is shown to the right.

Additional buildings were located on the western edge of the Fort, but that property is privately owned today.

- **1961** – First superintendent hired and housing built
- **1962** – Stockade rebuilt
- **1966** – Blacksmith and carpenter shop reconstructed
- **1968** – Museum and visitor center built
- **1968** – Dedication and opening of the park to the public in June
- **1976** – Powder magazine reconstructed
- **1986** – Reconstructed powder magazine redone due to collapse
- **1973 and 1986** – Interpretive displays in visitor center constructed



Building the Union Pacific Railroad.



This map was produced as part of one of the Archaeological Excavations in the early 1960s and is also found in the Fort Kearny National Register of Historic Places.



Fishing at the Outdoor Discovery Expo.



Fishing near the swimming beach.



Aerial view of hike-bike bridges over the Platte River.

State Recreation Area

Just a mile north of the state historical park, is the 243-acre Fort Kearny State Recreation Area. Acquisition of land that would become the SRA began in 1960, when Kearney County donated 30 acres to NGPC. This was followed by NGPC purchasing approximately 122 acres from Steve Lowe in 1966. An additional 34 acres were donated by Buffalo and Kearney counties in 1977. The newly acquired 57 acres was purchased by NGPC from the Game and Parks Foundation in 2020.

Historically, the seven sandpit lakes located on the property were islands of water used for grazing and drinking water for cattle. The military harvested nearby timber for building structures and cooking. Today, every lake except Lake 7 in the east area is known as the Vine Island area due to the hydrological shape of the ponds on the landscape and their use during World War II. The sand pits located on the property were constructed during WWII to provide sand and gravel that was shipped by rail to the largest U.S. WWII Naval Ammunition Depot in Hastings, Nebraska, for construction of bunkers during the war. Shortly after WWII, the spur line that ran through Vine Island was no longer needed and was abandoned. Roadways now cover the once active rail line that ran through the SRA.

Today, the seven sandpits at the SRA offer unique recreational opportunities to guests visiting Fort Kearny. Several of the amenities located at the SRA were completed through volunteer projects and private donations by friends of the park. This includes many of the fishing piers, benches, and picnic shelters. The years of unwavering community support for this park over the course of its development have been a foundational piece of the success it has had since inception.



Biking along the Fort Kearny hike-bike trail.

A notable example of community support, facilitated by the Fort Kearny Preservation, Restoration, and Development (PRD) board, is the 13.2-mile hike-bike trail located on the northeast side of the property. The land was acquired in 1977 from the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad and became the first rail-to-trail conversion in Nebraska. Bridges were planked in 1980, offering connectivity from the start of the trail within the SRA campground, leading to the Platte River and eventual connection to Cottonmill Park in Kearney. The sandhill cranes attract many visitors to the bridges along the trail during their migration season in early spring. The picnic shelters along the trail offer ideal locations to rest and have picnics. The Bassway Strip Wildlife Management Area, directly east of the bike trail, offers plentiful opportunities for wildlife viewing. The PRD board continues to support the maintenance and beautification of the trail and park today.

Shortly after the park was established as a SRA in the 1960s, construction of campgrounds began, and since then the park has grown to offer basic camping and 120-amp electrical camp pad sites for visitors. The SRA has seen much development over time, including camping upgrades, shower facilities, swimming beach, a disc golf course, horseshoe pit, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compliant fishing piers, among other opportunities. Development of some of the amenities at this park in the 1960s include a swimming beach and youth group area that is heavily used by Scout troops and church groups. In the 1980s, an ADA-compliant shower facility and bathroom were built, followed by a playground and disc golf course in the east side of the park in the 1990s.

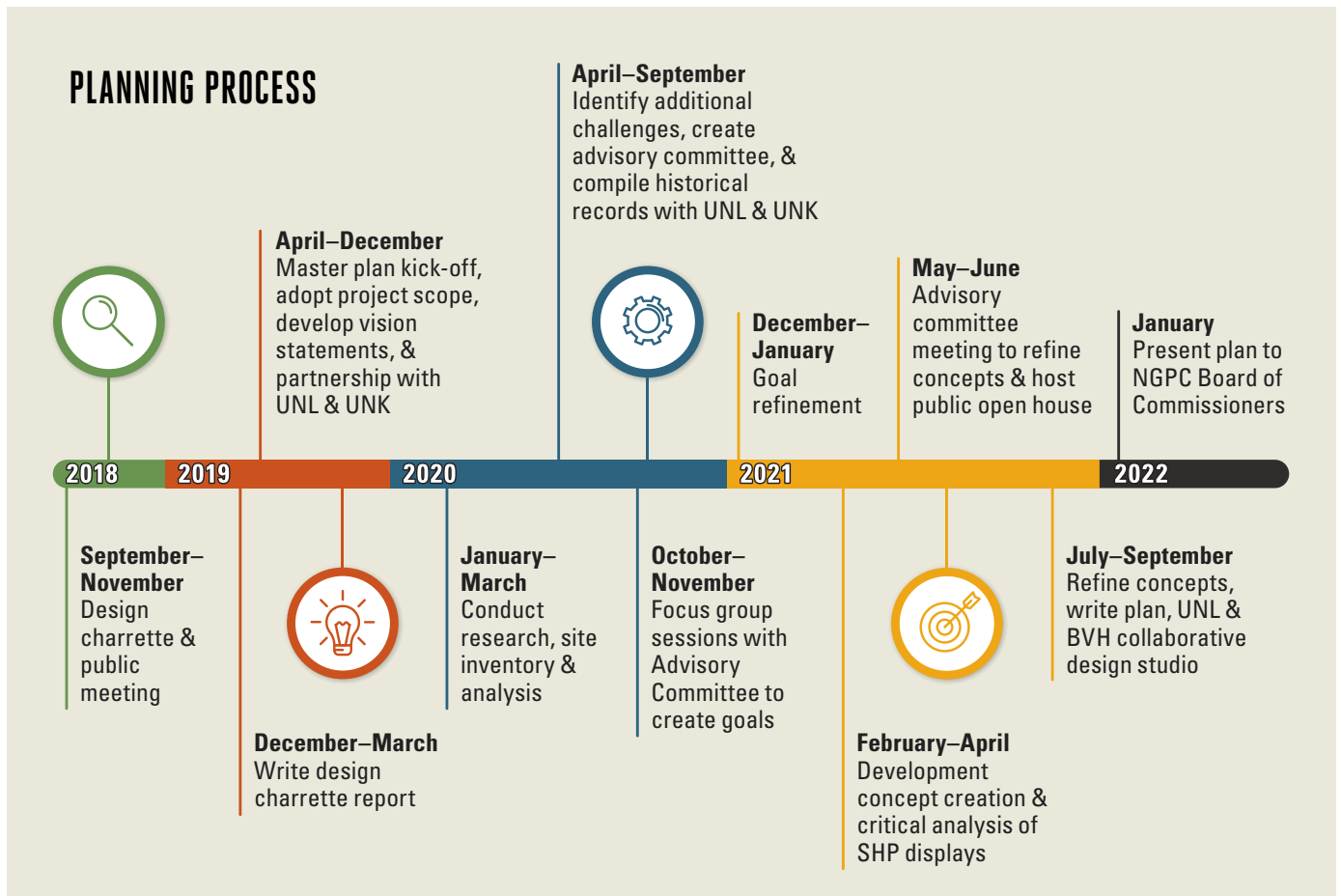
PLANNING PROCESS

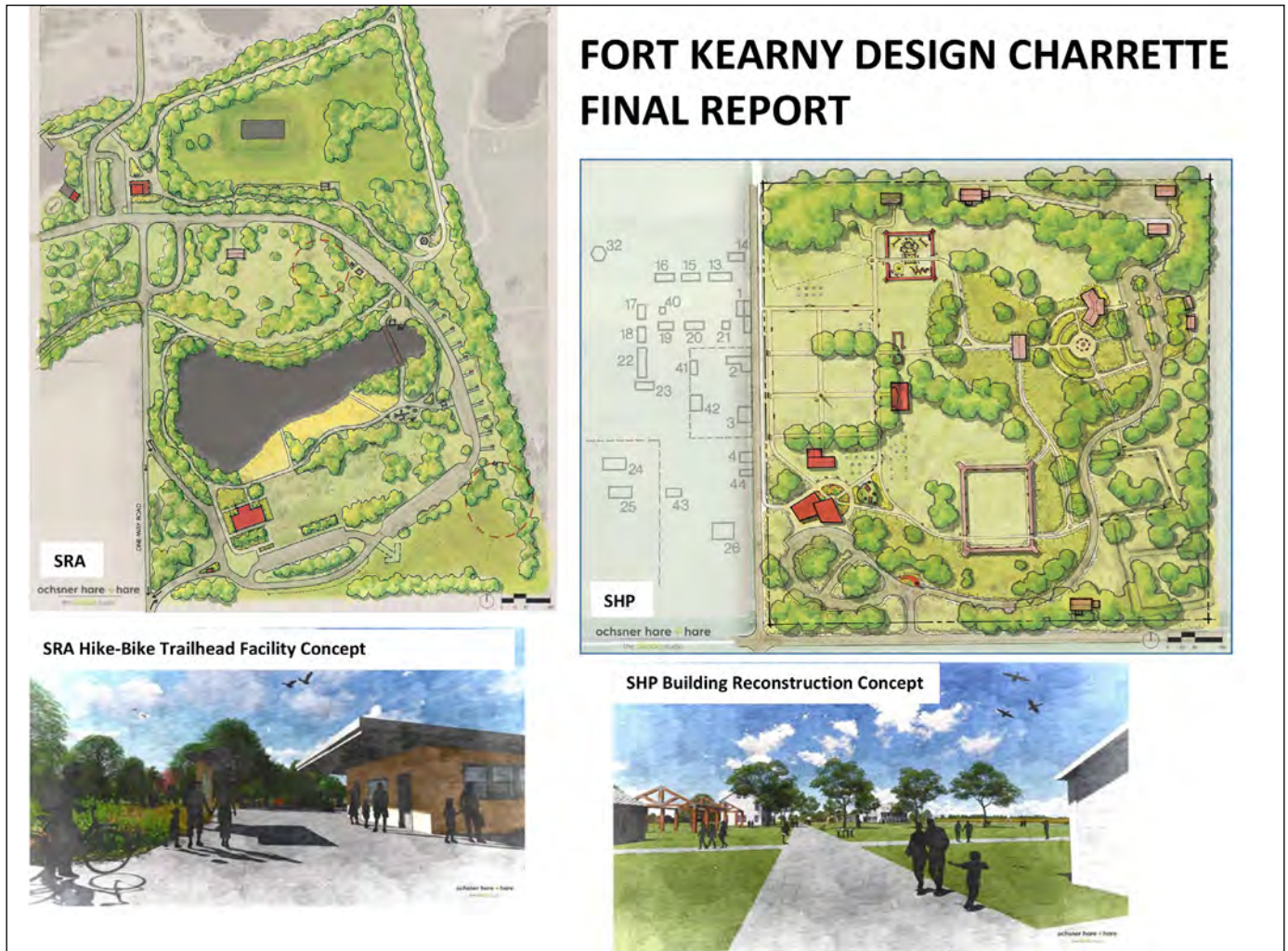
A collaborative public participation process was implemented for this plan with two major components, the Design Charrette and the Master Planning. The purpose was to engage the public and NGPC staff with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process for these two areas. The Planning and Parks divisions established the following approach to lead the planning process (Figure 3).



Presentation of conceptual drawings at the Design Charrette.

Figure 3





Cover of Fort Kearny Design Charrette Final Report.

Design Charrette

Between August and November 2018, a Visioning and Design Charrette process took place for the Fort Kearny SRA and SHP. A Design Charrette brings together all of the experts that have a stake in the planning process to assist in designing alternatives that will bring the vision concepts to life. This process included two site visits, vision and design input sessions, and a public open house. The focus was to generate ideas on how to improve infrastructure, historical interpretation opportunities, and specific amenities at each area. NGPC hired Ochsner Hare and Hare, a design studio of Olsson Associates, to assist with the vignettes and design concepts generated during the charrette process.

The Design Charrette report identified three priority areas for the SHP and SRA. The areas of interest for the SHP were a new entrance with a visitor center, unique camping opportunities, and updated historical exhibits. At the SRA, the east side of the park was the primary focus, with particular improvements to the park entrance, a multipurpose building, and a more pronounced trailhead connection with bike hammock camping nearby. The Design Charrette report was written in 2019. The charrette was a springboard to creating the master plan, and the concepts within it were integrated into the development plan for these two areas.



Fort Kearny Master Plan open house.



Fort Kearny Master Plan open house.

Master Planning Process

In 2019, the master planning process began for Fort Kearny by utilizing the Design Charrette concepts and feedback from the public to create vision statements for each area. The first half of 2020 involved research, site inventory and analysis for the plan. In March 2020, travel and in-person meetings were halted due to the coronavirus pandemic. The planning team had to adjust and begin virtual meetings for the plan. The core Parks team and Planning team met every two to three weeks starting in May of 2020, until the completion of this plan.

The partnership between the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), University of Nebraska-Kearney (UNK), and NGPC started in 2019, when professors from the universities approached NGPC to assist the agency in historical park planning projects. A path forward was created and began in summer and fall of 2020, when students from UNL in landscape architecture and UNK in public history assisted NGPC by researching and compiling information for the Cultural Landscape Inventory (CLI) and digitally archiving historical records. A CLI documents the chronology, physical history, historical development, landscape characteristics and associated features within the park. The findings in the CLI will be used to assist in future development of the park. Periods of significance for this project included the Fort period between 1848 and 1871 and the park planning period in the 1960s. NGPC recognizes the importance of utilizing this information for the implementation of this plan and creating future programs, events, and displays in the parks.

In August 2020, an advisory committee was developed with stakeholders from the Kearney Visitors Bureau, UNL, UNK, avid park users, History Nebraska, and NGPC staff. Twelve focus group meetings were held in October and November 2020 centered around six key areas for each park:

- Recreation
- Culture and History
- Natural Resources
- Education and Interpretation
- Marketing
- Operation and Maintenance

Advisory Committee members attended specific sessions based on their expertise to assist in writing the goals, strategies, and action items for the plan. Ideas generated in these focus groups led to the creation of the 10 goals for the Fort Kearny Master Plan.

In spring and summer of 2021, students at UNK created an ESRI StoryMap to relay important historical information discovered in the CLI process to the public. UNK students also conducted critical analyses of the displays within the SHP to assist NGPC in future display upgrades. In fall of 2021, NGPC collaborated with BVH Architecture and UNL in designing specific facilities and amenities for the SRA and SHP in a collaborative design studio.

In June 2021, NGPC held a stakeholder meeting with the advisory committee to gather feedback about the goals and development maps generated based on their involvement in the focus groups in 2020. Ideas were incorporated into the concepts for the public open house that was held on June 22, 2021. A virtual public engagement option was available for feedback on the NGPC website for two weeks after the open house. Ideas generated were considered in the final iteration of the plan. In January 2022, the plan was presented and adopted by the NGPC Board of Commissioners. The development process for this plan is dependent upon funding, inclusive public and private partnerships. More detail is in the development section of this plan.

SITE INVENTORIES



Living history reenactment at the historical park.

To understand the existing conditions of these two park areas, site inventories were conducted during the Design Charrette process and again during the master planning process. The inventories helped identify areas in need of improvement, upgrades, and renovations. Based on this background information and site visits, the following synopses outline the condition of the existing facilities and amenities at each park.

STATE HISTORICAL PARK

Existing Park Uses

Visitation at the historical park was estimated at 19,939 in 2019 and 10,674 in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of the visitor center and many of the indoor exhibits, which led to lower visitation at the park during 2020. The 40-acre site is used by both residents and non-residents due to the proximity to nearby towns, the I-80 corridor, and the immense interest from visitors around the world to view the sandhill crane migration each spring.

The historical park is relatively flat, with the exception of the earthworks located in the southeast corner and the mounds surrounding the stockade. The existing cottonwoods are native and some were grown from cuttings of the original cottonwoods that were planted in the parade grounds 175 years ago. The visitor center is open from March 1 to April 15 and May 1 to September 30. The visitor center houses historical exhibits and artifacts related to the Fort, educating

the public about the lifestyle and history of the people that once lived at the Fort.

Guests are encouraged to continue to visit the Fort in the off-season. Once parked, guests can use the informational signage near the parking lot to self-guide when the visitor center is closed. The signage provides a direct path to the blacksmith carpenter shop and self-guided routes throughout the park space. Figures 4 and 5 show the location of amenities and a more detailed site inventory of the historical park.

Programming Summary

The existing programming at the SHP includes living history reenactments, Dutch oven cooking, crane viewing tours, cannon firing, and guided walking tours of collections and exhibits. The visitor center is also used as an information and education center during crane migration season in the spring and contains an interpretive exhibit related to the migration. The theater within the existing visitor center has a variety of uses that include, but are not limited to: teaching the public about crane migration, history of Fort Kearny, and ecological significance of the parks.

Figure 4

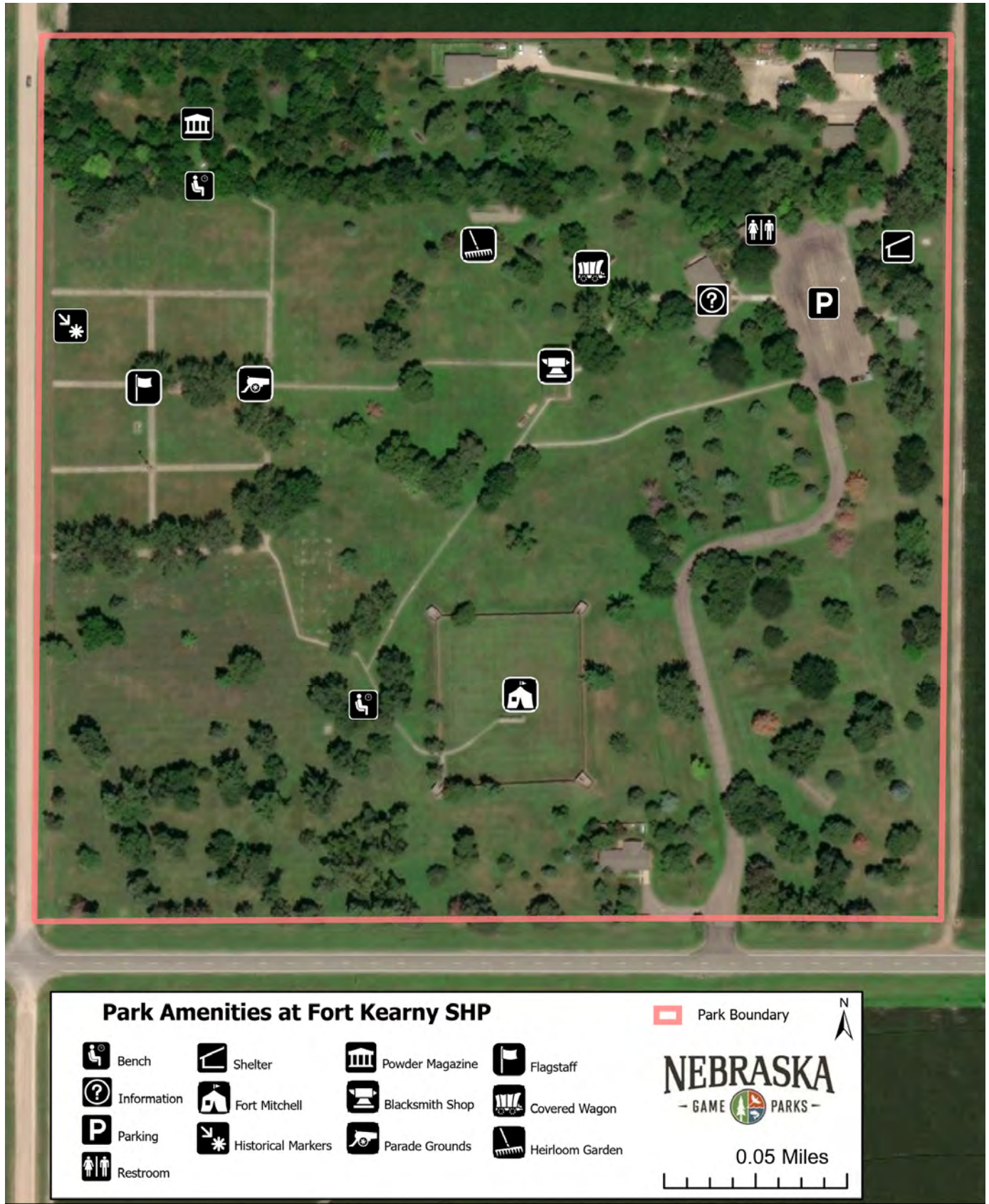


Figure 5



SITE INVENTORY

FORT KEARNY STATE HISTORICAL PARK
KEARNEY, NE

VISIONING CHARRETTE SEPTEMBER 20, 2018 | PROJECT NUMBER 018-2597



Park Access

The historical park can be accessed via Interstate 80 and Highway 10 from the east or Highway 44 from the west, which both lead to the entrance on Highway 50A. Signs along the highways direct visitors to the park area. The park is surrounded by private cropland. Highway 50A is located on the south end, where the entrance is located. It is not entirely clear that guests should continue down the road toward the visitor center due to the location of the park superintendent’s house, which is located at the entrance to the park.

Park Facilities and Amenities

Visitor Center

The visitor center is ADA-compliant and offers connectivity to the park itself with a back door that leads out to the Fort grounds. A valid park entry permit is required for the park and an additional \$2 is collected to walk the grounds. There are books for sale within the visitor center that offer guests the opportunity to dive deeper into the cultural and historical aspects of the Fort life.

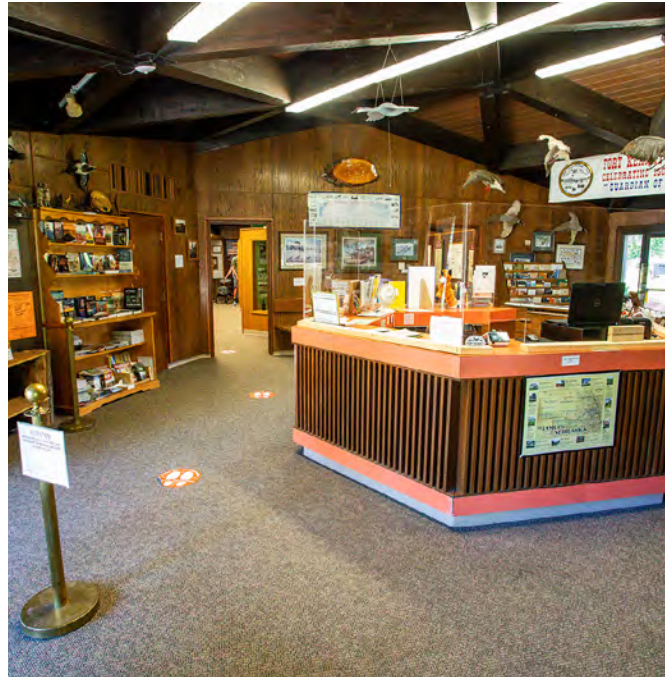
The visitor center has 32 displays, 26 of which are lighted. The displays educate the public primarily about the Fort soldiers and what the Fort once looked like between 1848 and 1871. Minimal information within the exhibits cover the pre-Fort period, Pawnee scouts, Indigenous people, and Oregon and Mormon trails nearby. Many of the displays are antiquated and need to be replaced or updated since they have not been updated since the 1980s. A more holistic representation of the pre- and post-Fort era is needed to portray the culture, society, military, wildlife, flora, and fauna of the site. A sandhill crane educational exhibit in the visitor center was constructed in the early 1980s.

Structurally, the visitor center has repairs that need to be made and the HVAC system needs replaced. There is inadequate storage space for artifacts, maps, and historical records within the visitor center. Files are kept in a back room without environmental controls to safeguard them.

Parking and Roads

Parking for the visitor center and historical park is adequate for the number of guests visiting the park, aside from crane viewing season when the parking lot reaches capacity on certain days. There are 73 stalls in the existing parking lot. The concrete within the parking lot is in good condition and functional.

There is one main road that starts at the entrance of the SHP, heads north toward the visitor center and wraps around west toward a large storage building, ending at the second park superintendent’s home. The roadway is in good condition and should be considered a connectivity piece in future development plans.



Visitor center.



Visitor center.



Visitor center.



Picnic shelter and benches.

Picnic Shelter and Benches

There is one picnic shelter located on the property just east of the parking lot. It is heavily used throughout the recreation season for crane viewing and picnicking. The picnic shelter was an Eagle Scout project coordinated by P. Garrison Lowe in 2010 with support of many donors who helped make the project possible. There are several picnic tables within the shelter; some require refurbishment or replacement.

There are five permanent benches throughout the park, each bolted to the ground and in good condition. Two are located near the entrance of the stockade beneath a cottonwood tree, one near the parade grounds, and the others near the powder magazine exhibit. No pathways exist to connect to the benches, which makes them non-ADA-compliant.

Historical Marker and Monument

The SHP is on the National Register of Historic Places and has a historical marker located on the pathway leading from the parking lot to the first intersection node. The historical marker is in good condition and provides guests with an understanding of why the Fort was established and how it safeguarded the westward expansion of the travelers along Oregon and Mormon trails.

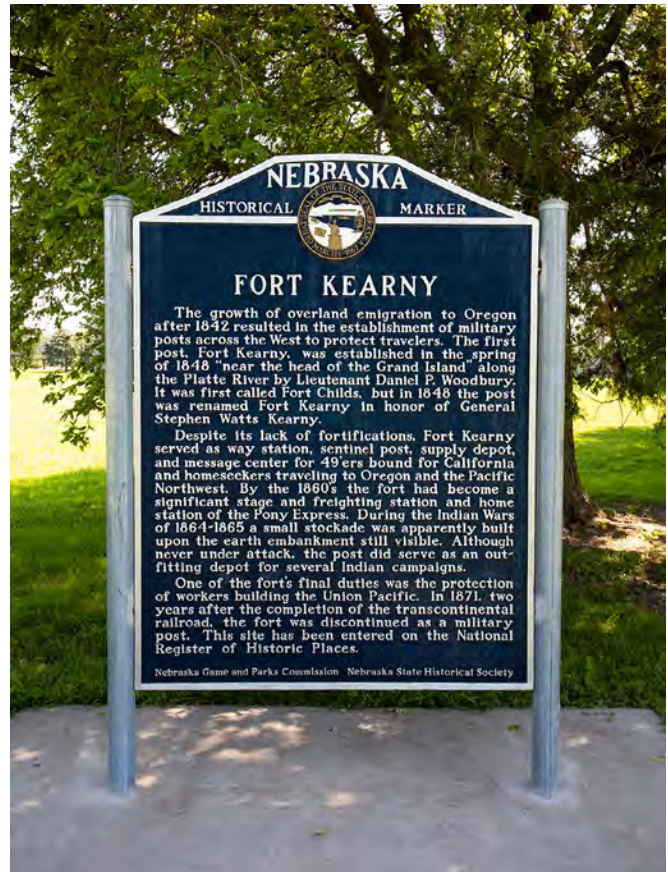
There is one historical monument on the parade grounds. It is in good condition and shows when the Fort was established and decommissioned.

Restroom

There is one restroom at the SHP located at the north end of the parking lot. It is ADA-compliant and equipped with three stalls each for men and women. It is in good, functional condition.

Pathways

Circulation of pathways at the SHP are disconnected, with insufficient cross-circulation, leading to confusion. A recommendation in this plan is to improve pedestrian traffic circulation and address the ADA compliance issues with existing pathways.



Historical marker.



Historical monument.

Fort Mitchell Stockade

The stockade is the most popular exhibit at the SHP. Guests flock to this exhibit first as they enter the park space. There is one pathway that leads into and out of the stockade. The pathway connects to an interpretive display that was developed in the 1970s. The display is antiquated and needs updated. Many of the boards within the stockade and the outposts need replaced or refurbished.

Powder Magazine Exhibit

The powder magazine building displays the types of ammunition and explosive gunpowder housed in the building when the Fort was active. This exhibit is not ADA-compliant and the display case is empty without interpretive elements describing the exhibit. There is a display sign outside the building, describing the purpose of the powder magazine building. The display was completed in the 1980s and is subsequently faded and needs replaced.

Parade Grounds

There is a flag pole located in the middle of the parade grounds that was once surrounded by buildings. The posts in the parade grounds outline the original placement of buildings that once existed at the Fort. There are currently no reconstructed buildings on the parade grounds. These include the adobe storehouse, officer's quarters, soldiers' barracks, commanding officer's quarters, hospital, jail, adjutant's office, commissary and quartermaster warehouse.

Some of the posts need replaced, but the majority are embedded by concrete footings that keep them in place. There are 14 displays on the parade grounds that are severely sunbaked and difficult to read, causing confusion for visitors.

Open Areas

There are two open areas within the SHP. One to the right of the entrance, known as the earthworks, has been undisturbed. The other located in the center of the property was historically used as an area to play baseball. Today, it is used for living history events and other programming.

A horse corral area just north of the powder magazine exhibit is used for horses during reenactment events.

Storage Facility

There is one storage facility on the park grounds located in the northeast corner of the park, housing artifacts and maintenance equipment. The facility does not have environmental controls to safeguard the artifacts.



Stockade.



Powder Magazine Entrance.



Powder Magazine Exhibit.

Superintendent Houses

There are two park superintendent dwellings on the site. The first park superintendent's house is located on the west side of the entrance and guests must bypass it to get to the visitor center. It is not apparent upon arrival at the park that you shouldn't turn into the superintendent's house. The other park superintendent's house is located beyond the storage building on the northeast corner of the park. Both houses are in good condition.

Blacksmith Carpenter Shop

The blacksmith shop displays carpentry examples from when the Fort was active. The facility does not have environmental controls to safeguard the artifacts on display, and the signage for this exhibit is severely outdated. The artifacts have not been archived or appropriately documented in this exhibit to determine what pieces should stay on display and those that should be removed or stored in another location. Organization of this exhibit is needed.

Covered Wagon and Steam Engine

The covered wagon reconstruction was completed in the 1970s by the Youth Development Center. The wagon represents the Oregon Trail travelers that once migrated through the area. The wagon cover is in good condition, but the frame needs repainted. The steam engine is in working condition and the public enjoys listening to the whistle when they visit. There is no interpretation near the steam engine to explain its use, which causes confusion.

Cannon

The cannon firing area is a very popular attraction for visitors because it portrays one of the safeguarding mechanisms available during the Fort period to use in case of an attack. The park typically has three events per year where they fire the cannon during reenactment programming. The cannon is in good condition.

Vegetation

There are several pine trees southwest of the stockade that are decaying and need to be removed. There are dead trees near the entrance to the SHP that need to be removed and new plantings added to enhance the space.



Blacksmith Carpenter Shop.



Covered Wagon.



Cannon.

STATE RECREATION AREA

Existing Recreation Park Uses

Visitation at the SRA was 88,080 in 2019 and 99,736 in 2020. Unlike the SHP, the SRA had plentiful opportunities for people to stay socially distanced during the pandemic in 2020. With less competition for indoor recreation, the state park system became a top pick for users to find leisure and recreate during a very difficult year. This helps explain the increase in visitation numbers at the SRA during 2020.

The SRA has seven sand pit lakes that total 21 acres of water among the 243-acre park. Anglers can fish for bluegill, channel catfish, crappie and largemouth bass, among other species. Rainbow trout is seasonally stocked in Lake 6 (see Figure 6).

Facilities include camping, showers, a dump and fill station, modern restrooms, drinking water, picnic tables, grills, picnic shelters, accessible fishing pier, swimming beach, nature trail, non-power boating, and the 13.2-mile hike-bike trail. Flora and fauna of the Platte Valley can be enjoyed from the trail or from the adjacent Bassway Strip Wildlife Management Area. The SRA also has a playground, trailhead, amphitheater, horseshoe pits, Frisbee golf course, and a pollinator garden for visitors. Figure 8b shows the location of existing amenities and a detailed inventory outlining the traffic circulation patterns at the SRA.

Some amenities and facilities at the SRA were upgraded in 2020, with electrical campground pads upgraded to 50 amps and a boom toilet put in near the hike-bike trail. A complete inventory of the recreation area amenities is in Table 1.

Programming Summary

The SRA has a lot of different types of programming throughout the year. The year kicks off with the First Day Hike event in January, followed by Dutch oven cooking demonstrations, espresso bar event, and a chili feed during crane migration season. Then in mid-summer, the park hosts a Buffalo County School Day to teach kids about pollinators, fishing, and birds. Trout in the Classroom and the statewide Free Fishing and Park Entry Day also occur during the recreation season, which allows visitors to enter without a park pass to fish and recreate.

The SRA hosts the annual NGPC Fort Kearny Outdoor Discovery Expo the first weekend of May, which brings thousands of visitors to the area. This event provides students in the surrounding area a chance to experience outdoor activities like archery, kayaking, shooting sports, atlatl, rock climbing, and fishing.

The SRA also offers guided horse trail rides beginning at the youth group area, located near the amphitheater indicated on the map in Figure 7. The path travels in a 3-mile loop through the tallgrass prairie on the north side of the campgrounds and lakes.



Buffalo County School Day.



Outdoor Discovery Expo.



Outdoor Discovery Expo.

Figure 6

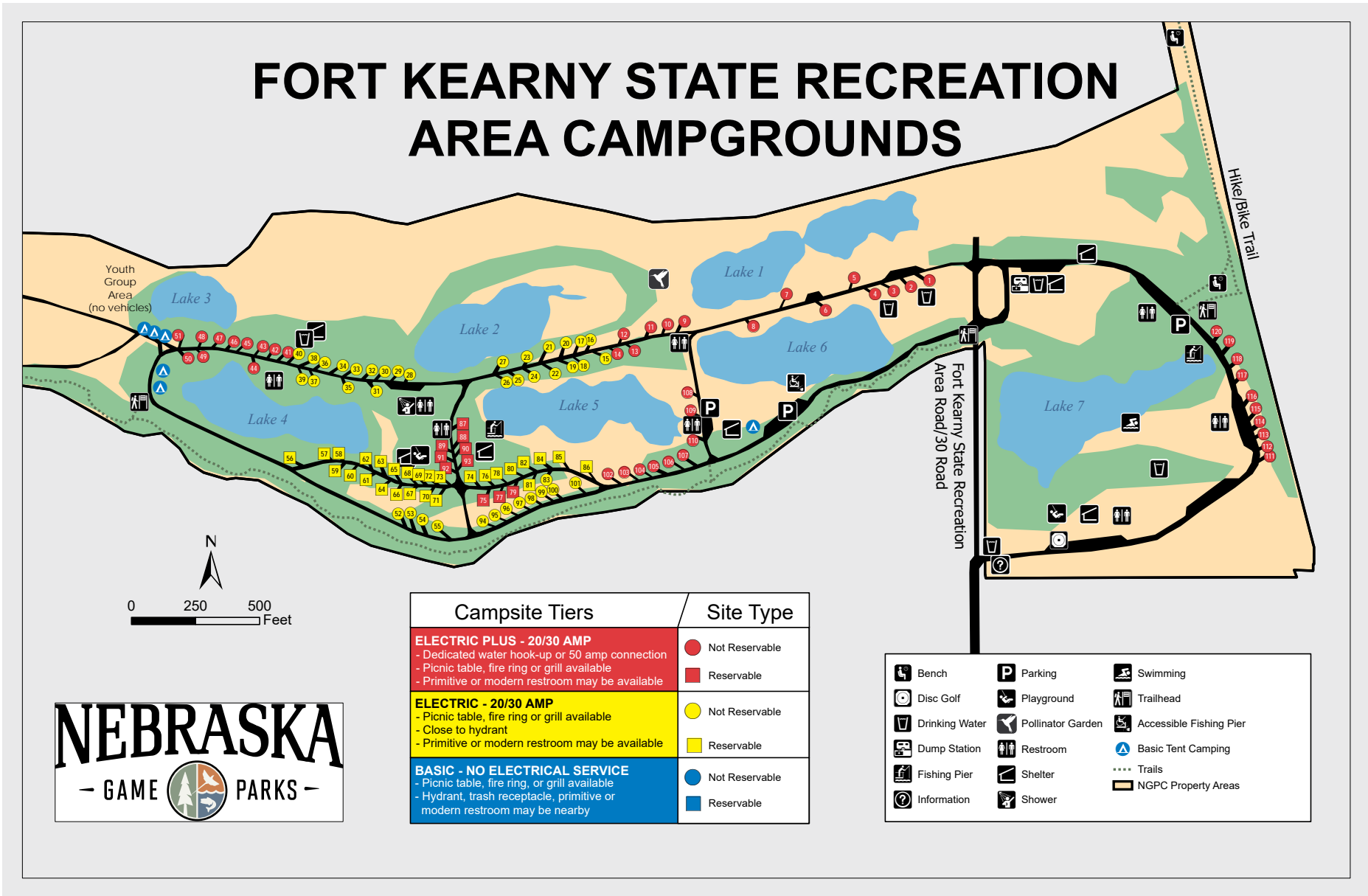


Figure 7

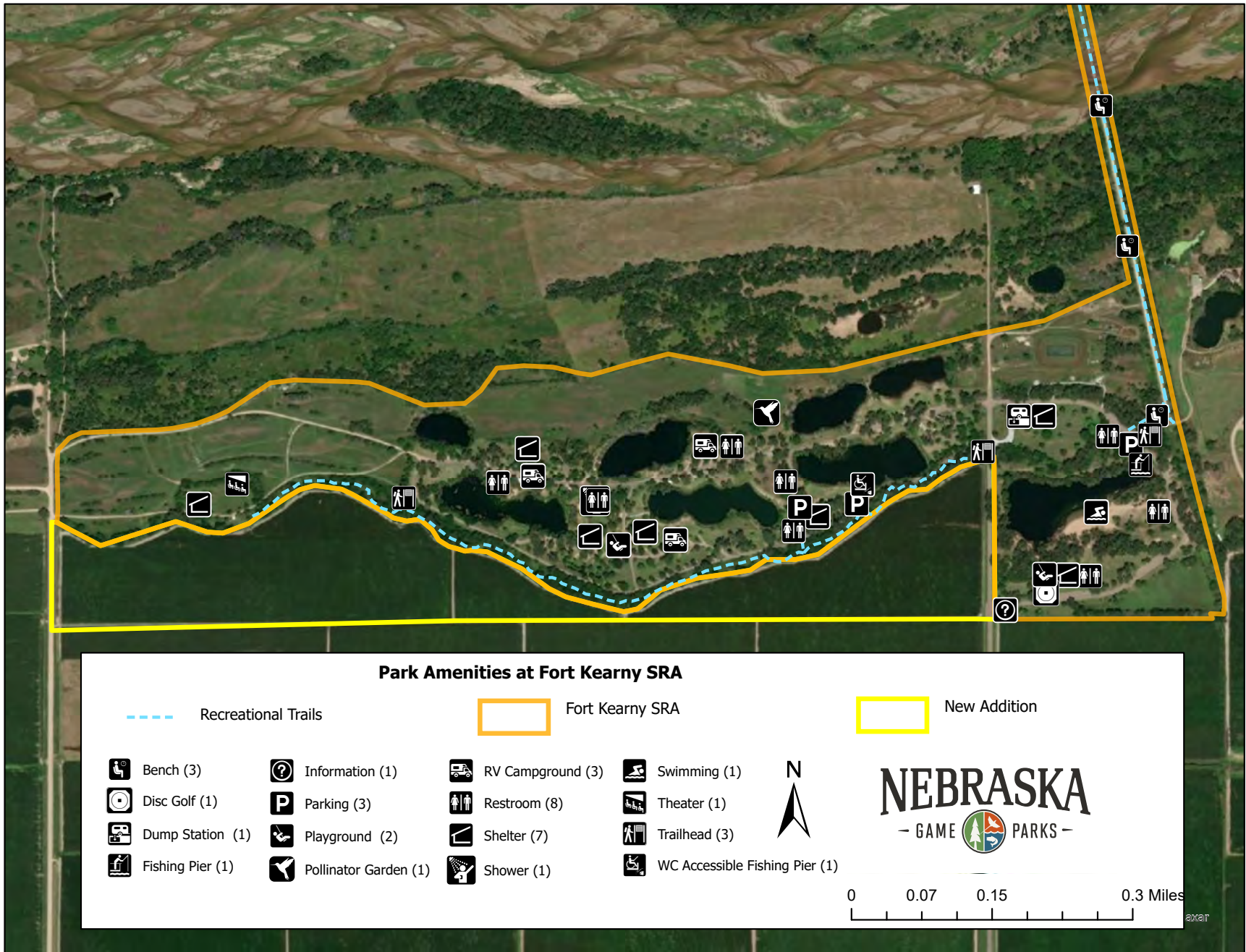


Figure 8a



SITE INVENTORY (EAST)

FORT KEARNY STATE RECREATION AREA
KEARNEY, NE

VISIONING CHARRETTE SEPTEMBER 20, 2018 | PROJECT NUMBER 018-2597



Figure 8b



Site Inventory (West)

Fort Kearny State Recreation Area
Kearney, NE



Park Access

The SRA can be accessed via Interstate 80 and Highway 10 from the east or Highway 44 from the west, which both lead to the entrance on Fort Kearny State Recreation Area Road. Signs along the highways direct visitors to the park area. The park is abutted by the Platte River to the north, the Bassway WMA and Summer Haven lake development to the east; and cropland to the south and west.

Park Facilities and Amenities

Entrance

The welcome sign to the SRA is in poor condition and needs replaced with a new sign and landscaping. The park’s kiosk is located opposite of the driver side window, making it difficult for guests to stop at the kiosk.

Roads and Traffic Flow

The roads at the SRA are in good condition. There is no turnaround location upon entering the park, making it difficult to exit without making a loop around the park in the east or west side. The Fort Kearny State Recreation Area Road turns into a private roadway for the SRA but has a sign alerting guests not to enter.

There is a one-way loop around the east area of the park indicated in Figures 8a and 8b. There is also a one-way loop into and out of the campground area. Due to the small amount of space that exists between the ponds and campsites, the roadways are narrow. This has been a safety hazard in the past with bikers and campers.

Parking, Trash Receptacles, Restrooms and Shower House

There are 143 parking stalls in the park. Parking has been a challenge at the SRA for years, given the limited space available to provide parking. This plan recognizes this issue, and we will continue to find creative ways to add additional parking. The current parking areas are in working condition and close to amenities. Some are ADA-compliant and some are not.

The open lawn areas to the northwest and southeast corners of the SRA are used for overflow parking during large events, like the Expo and crane migration season. The open area in the northwest corner is hayed annually.

There are 17 trash receptacles within the park, primarily in high-use areas and near campgrounds. Seven of the 17 are located within the east area, ten are in the campgrounds. There is currently no recycling program at the park.

There is one shower building at the park with ten stalls and an ADA-compliant restroom. This facility is in good condition; however, it does need a new pump and electrical box. To accommodate the increase in demand for shower facilities at this park, another shower house would be beneficial near Lakes 5 and 6.

There are eight restroom facilities at the park, two in the east area and the remaining six in the campgrounds.

Table 1 outlines the number of spaces in each parking lot, trash receptacles, and restroom facilities at the park. The table starts in the east area near the playground and makes a one-way loop around the park.



SRA entrance.

Table 1

Location	Parking Stalls	Trash Receptacles	Restrooms
Beach - South	27	2	1
Beach - East	18	1	—
East Loop	17	1	1
Hike-Bike Trail	21	2	1
Large Group Shelter	14	1	—
Dump Station	—	1	—
Near Pad 3	12	1	—
Near Pad 6	7	1	—
Near Pad 11	—	1	—
Near Pad 27	—	1	—
Near Pad 31	12	1	1
Near Pad 41	—	1	1
Near Pad 60	—	1	—
Near Pad 73	—	3	—
Near Basic 110	10	1	1
Near Fishing Pier	17	1	—

Wastewater Lagoon

The wastewater lagoon is located just to the north of the east area. It was recently renovated and runs efficiently. The location is out of sight from guests and has a fence around it. Phragmites have started to show up around the lagoon, but the park superintendents are aware and are addressing this issue.

Dump and Fill Station

The dump and fill station is new and in great condition. The station provides an easy turnaround radius for campers; however, there have been some complaints about the water hydrants releasing water very slow, making it time consuming to fill up. The hydrants release water slower due to the safety equipment installed on them. Since it is a new facility, there is minimal landscaping and could use a tree or shrub belt outlining the area since it is at the terminus right before entering the campground.

Playground

There are two playgrounds at the SRA. One, which is located in the east area and was installed in the 1990s, continues to see much use. It is conveniently located near restrooms and the swimming beach, making it a popular area to play. The other playground is located in the west camping area and also gets a lot of use by guests at the park. The equipment on both of these playgrounds is near its useful life expectancy and will need to be evaluated for safety and accessibility as this plan is implemented.

Frisbee Golf

The Frisbee golf course is located in the east area and is a very popular amenity. It provides guests a unique experience traveling through pine trees and along the perimeter of Lake 7. The sign and starting point are near the east playground. The sign needs replaced and revamped with clearer directions and a map of the course.

Horseshoe Pits

The horseshoe pits are located behind RV camping spots near Lake 1, which makes them difficult to locate and access. There is no signage indicating that the horseshoe area is located behind the campsites and a shelter belt of pine trees. This amenity is in good condition but would be better suited in another location. The campground host has access to the horseshoes stored in the shower house building for the public to use upon request.

Pollinator Garden

There is a pollinator garden between Lakes 1 and 2 that isn't apparent from the road. There is a mowed path around the garden area and an interpretive sign educating the public about the importance of pollinator gardens. The sign needs updated and wayfinding signage from the road could encourage guests to visit the pollinator plots to learn about them.



Frisbee golf course.



Horseshoe pits.



Pollinator garden.

Special Use Area

Just south of the lagoon is the self-serve shooting gallery that has a picnic shelter and picnic tables. The shelter and tables are in working condition but could use some general maintenance. The only time this space is utilized is during the expo each year. This is primarily due to the location. The range can be accessed from two small footpaths from the recreation road that loops around the east area. It is not entirely clear there is an archery range due to the lack of signage and the tree line that camouflages the space. The lack of staff to assist with the range is also a limitation. Relocating the range is a necessity in order for guests to use it. There is a storage building located just to the east of the range that is dilapidated and needs removed.

Fishing Piers

The fishing pier in the east area is located on the northeast side of Lake 7. It was built in 1984 as a Kiwanis project. A second fishing pier is located on the southwest side of Lake 6 and has a concrete path that leads from the parking lot to the ADA-compliant pier. Some general maintenance is needed for both piers, but they are in working condition.

The third fishing pier at the park is located on the west side of Lake 2. It was constructed by Eagle Scouts and is not ADA-compliant. Some of the boards need leveled and replaced.

Boat Launch

Lake 7 is a no-wake lake. There are no boat ramps or docks for fishing aside from Lake 7, which has access for kayaks and canoes to enter the lake for recreational use. There is no formal kayak/canoe launch site at this park.

Swimming Beach

The swimming beach can be accessed from two entrances within the east area. The first entrance is located just to the north of the playground and leach field. The other entrance is on the east side near the parking lot. Signage at each entrance needs replaced and updated. The beach is well-maintained each summer by park staff and buoys in the water indicate where the drop-off is located.

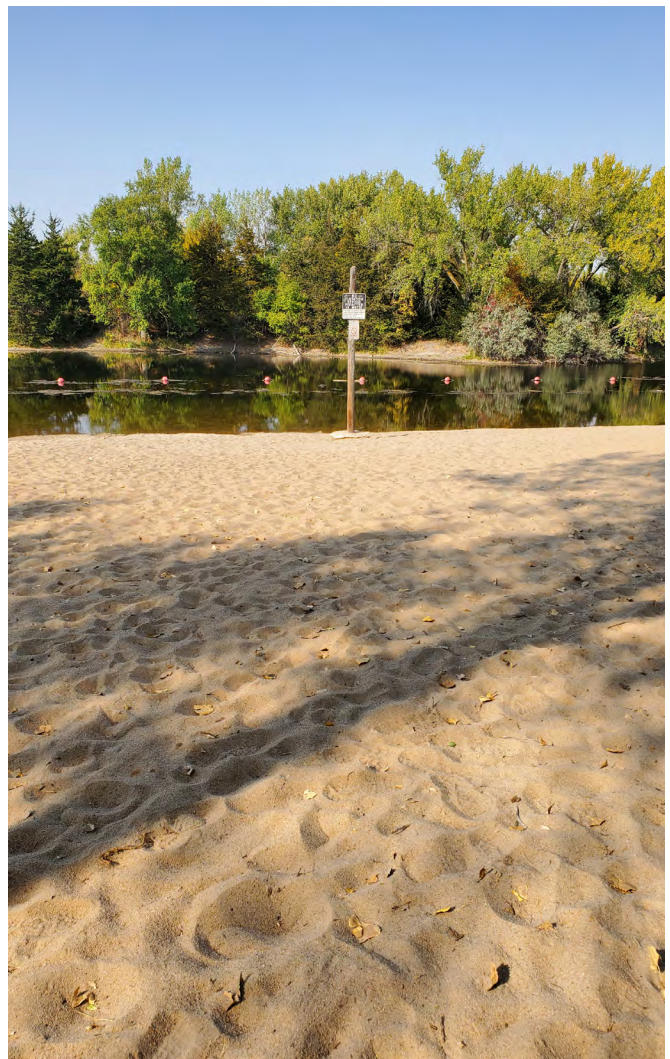
Picnic Shelters

The east side of the park has two picnic shelters. One wooden picnic shelter, which was an Eagle Scout project, is located near the east playground and is in working condition. The other is located on the north side of Lake 7 and has a brick fireplace. Some brick on the fireplace needs replaced, the electricity works, and the frame of the shelter is in good condition. Both shelters are heavily used throughout the recreation and crane migration seasons.

There are four picnic shelters in the west campground area. All of these are made of wood with a concrete base. They are all in good condition and functional. They are first-come, first-served shelters. Going east to west, the first shelter is located on the south side of Lake 6 and is easily accessible from nearby parking and basic campsites. There are two other shelters between Lakes 4 and 5 near the RV campgrounds.



Fishing pier.



Swimming beach.

The last picnic shelter is between Lakes 2 and 3, behind campsites, making it difficult for the public to access. It does not give the indication of a first-come, first-served picnic shelter due to the location and should be relocated.



RV campground.

Campgrounds

There are two main campgrounds at the SRA: East and West. East Campground, also known as Livingston, offers Electric Plus sites and the West Campground, also known as Vine Island, offers Electric Plus, Electric, and Basic campsites. The Electric plus sites are 50 amp, whereas, the Electric sites are 20/30 amp. Camping reservations are available for half of the electrical campsites. All other camping is first-come, first-served. These campgrounds are typically at capacity every weekend from Memorial Day to Labor Day. There are 54 50-amp RV camping pads, 66 20/30-amp campsites, and six basic campsites at the park.

The information kiosk near the Vine Island campground displays the rules, regulations, upcoming events and opportunities at the park. The kiosk is decorated with seasonal décor by the campground host. The pitfall of the informational signage near the shower house and campground is that campers must go back to the entrance of the park to pay for their campsite, instead of having a camp registration box near the information sign. The solution for this is to install a pay box near the campground in the near future.

Youth Group Area

The Youth Group Area is a special-use area that must be reserved. It is primarily used by Scout troops for their ceremonies and overnight trips. The area has an amphitheater, picnic shelter, and restroom. The benches in the amphitheater need repaired or replaced, the restroom was recently replaced with a boom concrete toilet, and the picnic shelter built by an Eagle Scout is in good condition. There is no electricity in this area and it has been discussed as an amenity that would benefit anyone using this area. No vehicles are allowed and it is a pack-in, pack-out area. There is parking located right on the outside of the area to the north. There is running water in this location via well-water. The area has a maximum capacity of 30 people. Overall, this area is in good condition but not widely used or promoted to the general public.



Amphitheater.



Youth group picnic shelter.

Hike-Bike Trail

The 13.2-mile multi-use hike-bike trail located on the east side of the SRA, and offers guests the opportunity to hike or bike on a multi-surface trail. The trail is concrete with limestone on one side of the trail. It is heavily used by guests from within the SRA and the citizens of Kearney. It was the first rails-to-trails project in Nebraska, crossing both channels of the Platte River with decked bridges that were once part of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad.

There are three access points along the trail for parking – the south entrance with parking in the SRA, another parking area near Kilgore Road, and the north entrance just north of I-80. The entrance near Kilgore Road leads to a picnic shelter and tables for viewing the wildlife pond area to the west and is owned and managed cooperatively by NGPC and the Platte River Recovery Implementation Foundation. This would be a great location for interpretive signage about wildlife viewing opportunities.

The wayfinding signage is easy to identify within the SRA and leads to the trailhead. The trailhead gazebo was built by the Kearney Kiwanis Club in the 1980s. The gazebo has outdated signage, except for a few interpretive signs on the north side that were recently updated and designed using the NGPC Style Guide for Interpretive Signage. The benches surrounding the gazebo need repaired or replaced.

Several benches and interpretive signage have been added along the trail in the last few years, starting by the first Platte River bridge heading north. The signage encourages guests to look out onto the river to view wildlife, but you can't see past the trees. Some maintenance to uncover this viewshed is needed. The other signs along the trail continue to educate the public about the sandhill cranes, and flora and fauna.

The picnic shelter near Kilgore Road is in great condition and so are the benches and picnic tables within it. The benches along the trail are made of recycled rubber and have plaques indicating financial supporters.

Phragmites, an invasive plant species, are established along the river's embankment and right-of-way along the trail. Park staff treat these invasive species each year, but they will continue to be a problem in the future as these species spread by ribosomes beneath the surface, making them difficult to eradicate.

Graffiti along the trail bridges and the I-80 underpass – which is property of Nebraska Department of Transportation (NDOT) – continue to be a problem the park superintendents would like to work with NDOT to address.



Hike-Bike trail.



Benches and interpretive signage along hike-bike trail.



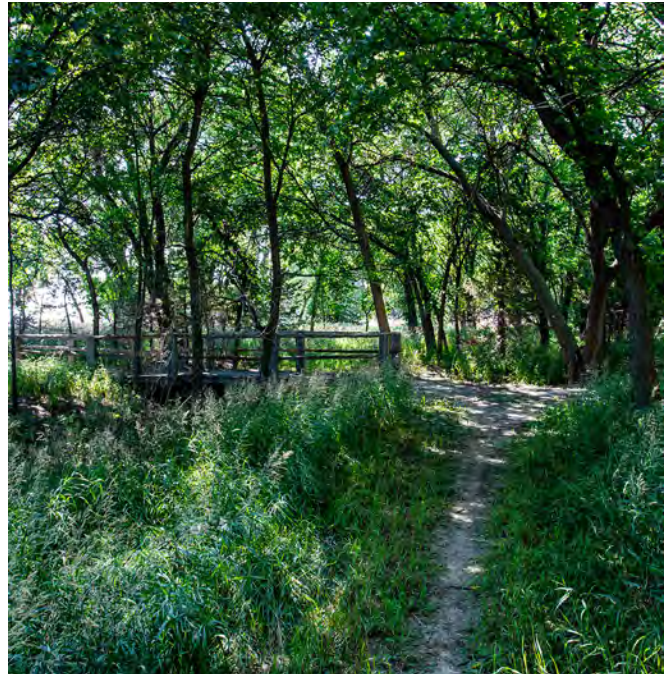
Trailhead gazebo.

Nature Trail

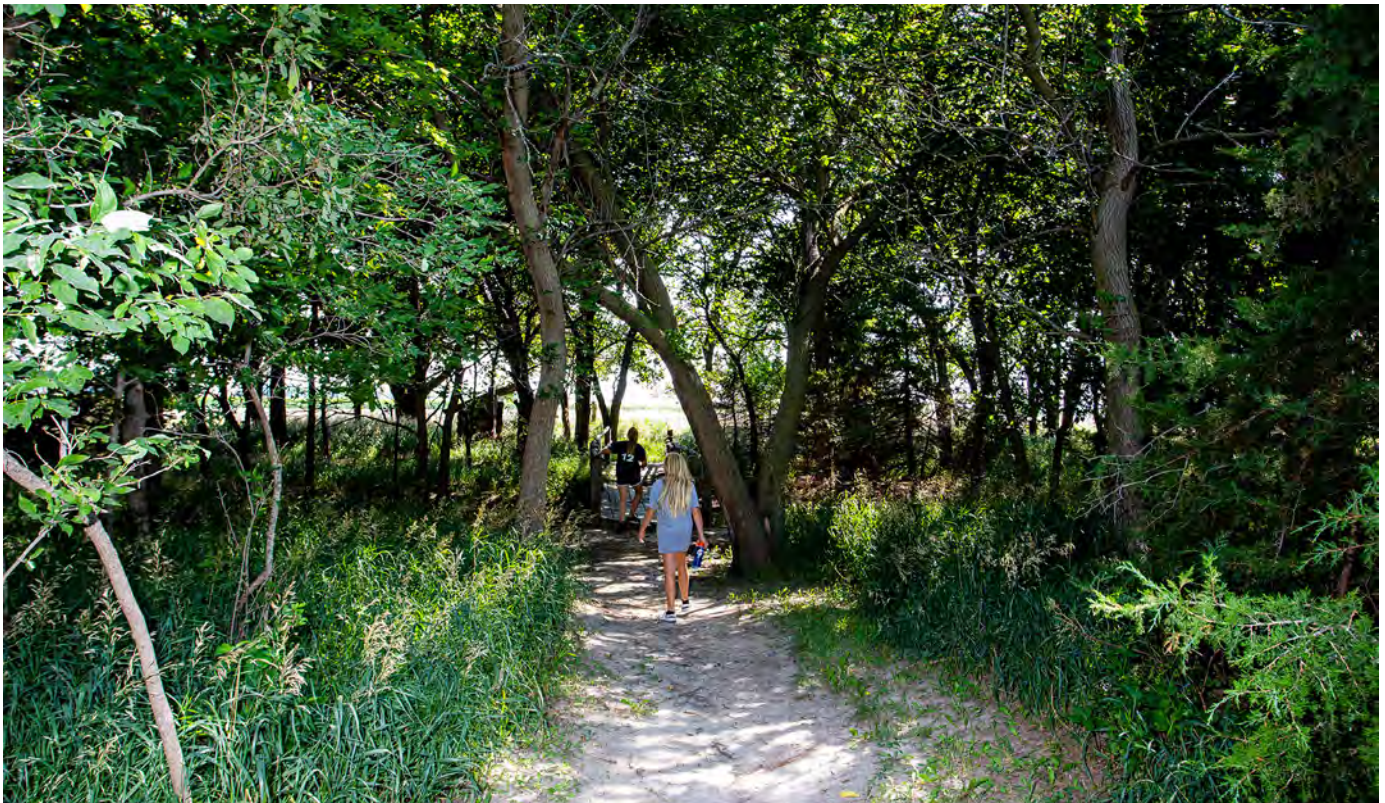
The nature trail has a very different purpose and use by the public compared to the hike-bike trail. This trail is primarily used by guests who want to walk and hike. A lot of guests enjoy walking their dogs along this trail as well. The trail has a beautiful tree canopy overhead with cottonwood, mulberry, American elm, hackberry, green ash, cedar, box elder, walnut, dogwood, and willow shrubs. This rich diversity provides the public with a secluded experience with nature and wildlife. The trail runs along the south edge of the park and can be accessed from the far west of the park or east side of the park.

The trailhead for this trail is located on the west side of Fort Kearny State Recreation Road near the west campground road exit, making it a safety hazard for users. A painted crosswalk or other location for the trailhead could remedy this issue. There are seven bridges and two benches along the nature trail, which were built by Eagle Scouts over the years. The bridges and benches need repaired and boards need replaced.

Temporary viewing blinds are placed along the trail during sandhill crane migration season. This allows guests to view cranes to the south of the trail, in the newly acquired land that was used for commercial crops.



Nature trail.



Nature trail.

DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT PLAN

INTRODUCTION

The development goals for the parks were developed using a holistic approach, involving NGPC staff, technical experts, stakeholders, and the public. The goals in this plan address amenity improvements, educational activities, program enhancements, management issues, and how to reach a broad spectrum of users.

NGPC recognizes the need for phases of development when implementing this long-term plan because there are several items to accomplish. Three phases of development have been identified, each contingent upon factors such as funding, cultural/historical impacts, and the state’s biennium budgets. These phases ensure that intentional, proactive planning can occur.

This is a living document that can and will change as survey efforts and engineering studies inform the feasibility of the development. It is assumed that any of these master plan concepts can be initiated via additional stages or singularly if funding becomes available and as priorities are re-evaluated to meet the demand of the public.



Family Day from the Outdoor Discovery Program at Fort Kearny SHP.

VISION STATEMENTS

Separate vision statements were established for the historical park and the recreation area to highlight the differences between these two park areas. These vision statements embody the current and future long-term goals of the parks.



Fort Kearny State Historical Park Vision Statement

To provide meaningful experiences to visitors through quality historic preservation and interpretation, while maintaining the park’s relevance now and for the future.



Fort Kearny State Recreation Area Vision Statement

To provide quality, dynamic outdoor recreation experiences that are inclusive of all users, while maintaining the natural setting of the park as well as its association with the area’s history.

GOALS AND COMMUNITY DESIRES

Chapter 1 of this plan described the planning process and public participation that took place in creating the master plan. The remainder of this chapter outlines how the public’s input was used to develop the goals and how that influenced the master plan concept maps presented.

Demographics

Demographics of the region can assist in managing these park areas in the best long-term interests of the public and the resources NGPC protects. Understanding the motivations of people can provide pertinent information for park managers to consider when managing recreational and historical properties in a manner that resonates with guests and their interests. Understanding the area’s demographics help to inform our messaging and shows the best method(s) to provide it.

The majority of park property lies within Kearney County. Just six miles north, in Buffalo County, is the city of Kearney, which is home to 67 percent of the population in Buffalo County – 33,464 people – and the University of Nebraska-Kearney campus. It is important to consider the differences in demographics between Kearney and Buffalo counties to inform the development of programs, events, and amenities within the parks. A comparison chart of basic demographic information in these two counties is summarized below. The size of each county differs drastically; however, the breakdown of income, age, and race give a clearer picture of the general population in this area.

Table 2

	Kearney County	Buffalo County
Population	6,495	49,659
Median Age	39.6	33.5
Median Household Income	\$60,266	\$59,431
Ethnicity		
White	91.7%	86.6%
Hispanic	6.5%	9.3%
Black or African American	0.4%	1.2%
American Indian or Pacific Islander	0.7%	0.7%
Asian	0.4%	1.5%
Other	0.3%	0.7%

Source: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/buffalocountynebraska/PST045219>



Birdwatching during School Day at Fort Kearny SRA.

According to the 2019 Census, the median household income and age in Kearney County is \$60,266 and approximately 40 years, respectively. Buffalo County is similar with a median household income just under \$60,000 and a median age of approximately 34. Compared to Nebraska as a whole, these counties are right around the median household income of \$59,116, which must be taken into account when developing cost of programs, camping, and other features at the parks.

About 25 percent of the population of both counties is 18 years of age or younger and around 20 percent are 65 or older. The majority of Kearney County is white, making up around 92 percent of the population, followed by Hispanic at 6.5 percent, and African American, American Indian, and Asian making up the remainder. Understanding the interests of diverse populations is one of the goals in this plan and necessary when implementing the first historical park goal.

Maintaining our relevancy for our current and future park users within Nebraska, along I-80, and beyond our borders is of utmost importance. NGPC must offer engaging programs and events that entice users to return to park areas. In 2020, NGPC saw a tremendous increase in users at our park areas. Now is the opportune time to implement this plan to retain new and existing users.

Goals

The goals were developed through community engagement, a design charrette, and consultation with planners, historians, and professionals. There are 10 goals in total, five specifically for the historical park, three for the recreation area, and two regarding financial stability and partnerships, which apply to both parks. Many of the goals, strategies, and action items work in-concert with one another.

Goals are defined as broad statements that portray what the park wants to accomplish in the future. The *strategies* are the methods used to accomplish the goal identified. The *action items* are specific steps needed to accomplish the strategy and work toward the overarching goal.

STATE HISTORICAL PARK GOALS

The five goals for the historical park focus on programming, interpretation, infrastructure, creating a navigable park space, and protecting cultural and historical resources within the park. Through conversations with the public and the stakeholders involved in this planning process, it was determined that a mix of passive and active uses were desired to enhance the visitor experience. The public expressed concern that the historical park, in its current state, lacked the necessary elements to make it a space that meets the needs of diverse users and age groups. These concepts are reflected in several of the historical park goals.

Goal 1: Cultivate understanding, appreciation, and enhancement of the historical resources at the Fort through quality exhibits, educational programs and events that focus on the broader context of the Fort

Strategy 1.1: Design quality exhibits that are meaningful and accessible to all guests.

Action Items:

- a. Conduct inventory and assessment of current displays. Develop a prioritized list based on this assessment and display needs.
- b. Collaborate with partners to compile and digitally archive historical records to assist in the creation of interactive displays, programs, events, and marketing efforts.
- c. Develop historical and cultural displays for the Fort and the visitor center using archived information, Cultural Landscape Inventory (CLI), and ArcGIS StoryMap data.
- d. Develop a research and interpretation plan for designing “engagement stations” where both active and passive opportunities are available for guests to participate.



Reenactors light off cannons at the fort for park guests at Fort Kearny SHP.

- e. Identify ways to ensure displays are inclusive of visitors and are ADA-compliant.
- f. Identify funding sources for new displays.

Strategy 1.2: Expand education and interpretation offerings to increase visitation of non-traditional visitors.

Action Items:

- a. Evaluate current demographic visitation numbers and create benchmarks for the future to encourage new users.
- b. Evaluate current programs, events, flyers, and promotional materials; and identify ways to improve offerings that entice non-traditional visitors.
- c. Identify intended users to reach, and gather input on what types of education and interpretive elements they would like to see within the park.
- d. Develop active and passive educational programs and opportunities relevant to the Fort period to encourage guests to visit the Fort (e.g., canning, tanning hides, etc.).
- e. Develop a distribution and marketing plan of interpretation and curriculum to encourage new guests to visit the park. Cross-market with SRA.
- f. Determine facility and amenity needs for additional educational and interpretive programming.
- g. Coordinate with appropriate partners to develop curriculum and events that reach varied and non-traditional visitors in-person and digitally (e.g., programs that align with State Social Studies standards to encourage school groups to visit the area).
- h. Identify funding for additional programming and events.



Reenactors at Fort Kearny SHP.

Goal 2: Create a navigable park space with self-guided pathways

Strategy 2.1: Redesign pathways within the park and develop signage to assist self-navigation within the park.

Action Items:

- a. Coordinate with Engineering Division to determine location and condition of utilities throughout the park to ensure pathways do not interfere.
- b. Partner with Engineering Division to determine applicable design standards for walkways and wayfinding signage.
- c. Consult with appropriate agencies to determine historically sensitive areas within the park space that can help identify the flow of the walkways.
- d. Utilize Design Charrette renderings and vignettes in designing pathways to connect park amenities.
- e. Hire a consultant and work with Engineering Division for final design and construction of pathways that are ADA-compliant.
- f. Use NGPC Style Guide for Interpretive Signage and Universal Trail Signage Guide for appropriate signage and update ArcGIS trails application with location of new pathways once constructed.

Goal 3: Develop infrastructure that meets the needs of constituents, while maintaining the historical integrity of the landscape

Strategy 3.1: Determine suitable locations for historically relevant infrastructure, displays, indoor/outdoor education classrooms, and events.

Action Items:

- a. Use findings from the Cultural Landscape Inventory (CLI) to determine culturally sensitive areas to avoid on the landscape.
- b. Identify locations that need additional assessments and information to determine feasibility of developing infrastructure, programs, and events.
- c. Gather input from existing and potential guests to determine visitor experience preferences.
- d. Identify locations for indoor and/or outdoor education classroom space for student field trips, the public, programs and events, etc.
- e. Determine feasibility and location for natural playscape that can be themed around the park's history.
- f. Develop a decision-making matrix to assist in assessing the feasibility of infrastructure development or modifications that enhance experiences for intended users.
- g. Develop a decision-making matrix that determines the impacts of undertakings on cultural resources to inform management decisions that protect all known cultural resources.



Carpenter tools on display at Fort Kearny SHP.



Fort Kearny SHP entrance.

Strategy 3.2: Identify feasible experiential opportunities that have minimal impact to the cultural landscape.

Action Items:

- a. Utilize findings in CLI, archaeological, and utility surveys to understand location(s) of historically sensitive areas on the landscape to avoid placing infrastructure, but highlight in minimally invasive ways.
- b. Research unique camping and historical reconstruction opportunities that are historically sensitive and pragmatic for the space to determine feasibility at the Fort (e.g.; officer's quarters, soldier's barracks).
- c. Conduct cost/benefit analysis of camping opportunities and return on investment of each option.
- d. Coordinate with Engineering Division to determine design standards for unique experiential opportunities with particular emphasis on safety and accessibility.
- e. Investigate collaborative public/private partnership opportunities for activities, reconstructions, and/or overnight lodging to draw broader visitor base and provide added revenue (e.g., Tentrr – a camping company).
- f. Create natural playscape that appropriately depicts history of the Fort and Indigenous people.

Strategy 3.3: Analyze the feasibility of relocating the entrance and building a new visitor center at the Fort; and the types of displays desired within the visitor center.

Action Items:

- a. Coordinate with appropriate divisions and agencies to assess the option of rehabilitation of the existing visitor center, including the operational challenges.

- b. Conduct assessments and appropriate surveys to determine cultural and historical findings of potential relocation area(s) for a new visitor center. Review Design Charrette possibilities of relocating the entrance and constructing a new visitor center.
- c. Develop historically accurate displays that portray a holistic representation of Fort life and Indigenous people.
- d. Conduct cost/benefit analysis of reconstructing roads to navigate new entrance and visitor center location.
- e. Evaluate ability to archive historical materials in storage space within the visitor center and indoor educational classroom space.
- f. Identify funding sources and grant opportunities.

Strategy 3.4: Develop operation and maintenance inspection protocols to protect and preserve the cultural and natural resources of the park.

Action Items:

- a. Utilize findings of CLI in this effort and research similar checklists of historic sites to aid in creation of checklist.
- b. Create protocols that assess the cultural landscape features, museum collections, historic architecture, archaeological resources, and natural resources to improve the management and care of park resources.

Goal 4: Protect and preserve cultural and historical resources within the park

Strategy 4.1: Ensure historical integrity of artifacts is preserved.

Action Items:

- a. Create action plan for artifacts to ensure compliance with the Standards of Historic Preservation of Artifacts.
- b. Catalogue historical records and physical objects to ensure the integrity of artifacts are preserved.
- c. Provide viable display and storage space and environmental controls necessary to preserve artifacts.
- d. Conduct feasibility study for preservation of artifacts for state historical parks. Determine if renovating one of the existing buildings at the SHP or new construction would be feasible.
- e. Provide professional growth opportunities for the cultural curator and interpretation staff.
- f. Assess ability to hire a curator to assist with preservation and cataloging of artifacts.

Strategy 4.2: Create suitable habitat that enhances the landscape, while preserving the integrity of the adapted habitats that currently exist.

Action Items:

- a. Remove decaying, dangerous, or invasive vegetation.
- b. Survey existing plant species and devise a plan for incorporating historically native vegetation relevant to the Fort planning period, including native pollinator gardens. Prioritize plantings based on specific areas of the park and implementation phases for landscaping plans.
- c. Create a collaborative team including NGPC horticulturalists, parks and engineering staff, and UNK to determine suitable locations for tree plantings and determine landscaping design.
- d. Highlight landscape features through interpretive signage and plant identification labels to educate the public about the importance and significance of those landscaping elements.



Reenactor at the Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo at Fort Kearny SHP.

Goal 5: Develop a robust plan for generating revenue at the SHP to ensure support for preserving and protecting these cultural resources

Strategy 5.1: Research revenue generating opportunities.

Action Items:

- a. Research economic studies conducted for historical areas and interview other state and national historical managers to identify revenue generating options.
- b. Collaborate with partners, donors, and the public to determine demand for new amenities on the landscape such as historical reconstruction, programming, experiential opportunities, and development.
- c. Conduct cost/benefit analysis to determine opportunities to pursue.
- d. Evaluate ways to capitalize on crane viewing season.



School Day from the Outdoor Discovery Program at Fort Kearny SHP.

Strategy 5.2: Develop a robust marketing plan to increase visitation as well as participation in programs, events, and amenities that target traditional and non-traditional visitors.

Action Items:

- a. Determine multi-channel marketing methodologies and desired outcomes to achieve for programs, events, and amenities at the park.
- b. Evaluate marketing needs of recreation season and off-season periods to meet the needs of visitors.
- c. Prioritize marketing initiatives for specific programs and events.
- d. Identify nearby and regional partner organizations and agencies to collaborate with marketing initiatives (e.g., hotels, Kearney Visitors Bureau, schools, local businesses, Oregon-California Trail Association (OCTA), Pony Express, etc.).



Roasting hot dogs on Family Day at Fort Kearny SHP.



Fly fishing at Fort Kearny SRA.

STATE RECREATION AREA GOALS

The three goals for the recreation area focus on unique opportunities for guests, safeguarding natural resources, enhancing fishing access, and developing infrastructure to meet the needs of current and future guests. Through public meetings, support was shown for additional camping opportunities that include areas for tent campers away from RVs, group camping areas, and additional RV pad sites. Strong opinions from the public about the conversion of what were once tent camp sites into RV pads were noted and NGPC has incorporated additional tent camping opportunities into the development concept maps. There was also demand for maintained and expanded crane and wildlife viewing opportunities, a multi-use event facility, and enhanced shoreline fishing access.

Goal 1: Create and manage recreational opportunities that are memorable for all guests

Strategy 1.1: Determine the recreational needs of visitors.

Action Items:

- a. Use survey results from multiple sources to assist in understanding user recreational patterns and preferences.
- b. Connect with organizations in nearby communities to build relationships and understand their recreational preferences.

- c. Develop an evaluation matrix to determine usefulness of current and future offerings.
- d. Identify and implement changes to programs and events to engage visitors.
- e. Offer seasonal programs and events to entice visitors to the park during the main recreation season (Memorial Day to Labor Day) and shoulder seasons (early spring and later fall).
- f. Create accessible recreational amenities (e.g., a kayak launch site and shower house facility on east side of park).

Strategy 1.2: Develop a marketing and outreach plan for recreational opportunities, educational programs, and events.

Action Items:

- a. Coordinate with Communications Division to determine marketing strategies and implementation plan for events and programs.
- b. Partner with local and regional organizations in marketing initiatives (e.g., hotels, Kearney Visitors Bureau, schools, local businesses, bus tours, highway travelers, Family Motor Coach Association, etc.).
- c. Prioritize marketing initiatives for specific programs and events.

Strategy 1.3: Develop innovative educational programming for the Youth Group Area that focuses on understanding and appreciating outdoor recreation and ecological significance of the park.

Action Items:

- a. Determine educational programs that could utilize the Youth Group Area in southwest area of park.
- b. Determine feasibility of adding utilities in this area and ADA compliance to enhance user experience when using this area for programming.

Strategy 1.4: Develop natural playscape area(s) that illustrate the Central Platte River biologically unique landscape and upgrade existing playground equipment.

Action Items:

- a. Identify suitable location(s) for natural playscape areas and utilize natural playscape guide to assist in planning and designing natural playscape.
- b. Upgrade existing playground equipment.
- c. Coordinate with Engineering Division to identify support facilities for infrastructure and appropriate design standards for natural playscape and playground.
- d. Collaborate with Fish and Wildlife Education Division and Planning and Programming to develop age appropriate play areas with appropriate materials.

Strategy 1.5: Develop an interpretive trail to connect SRA and SHP to enhance user interactions with natural landscape and historical features.

Action Items:

- a. Determine ROW access, easement agreements, and county requirements for proposed trail construction
- b. Work with appropriate departments to understand required permits or assessments (e.g., Threatened and Endangered species, SHPO, utilities, etc.).
- c. Utilize historical and ecological findings from CLI to assist in creating interpretation elements along the trail that highlight the natural landscape and historical aspects of the SRA and SHP, respectively.
- d. Reference NGPC Style Guide for Interpretive Signage and the Universal Trail Signage Guide in design of trail.
- e. Identify funding opportunities for this initiative.

Strategy 1.6: Identify suitable locations to highlight historical significance of the SRA through interpretive signage.

Action Items:

- a. Research historical and cultural aspects of the SRA and relationship to the SHP.
- b. Determine relevant information to emphasize regarding cultural/historical aspects of the SRA and identify locations.
- c. Consult with professionals and the NGPC Style Guide for Interpretive Signage to design interpretive signage.
- d. Determine funding mechanisms for this effort.

Strategy 1.7: Improve crane viewing opportunities.

Action Items:

- a. Identify suitable locations along the nature trail for additional temporary crane viewing blinds for guests to observe cranes during daylight hours.
- b. Develop a reservation plan for renting select blinds during crane migration season.
- c. Identify areas to maintain and improve crane viewing opportunities, including other agency venues.
- d. Determine feasibility of longterm RV and tent camping opportunities during migration season.

Strategy 1.8: Create a plan for development of newly acquired land on southwest end of park.

Action Items:

- a. Determine suitable recreational opportunities and needs of intended users for newly acquired acres.
- b. Conduct assessments with appropriate agencies and Engineering Division to understand feasibility of development ideas.
- c. Specifically identify seasonal experiences, crane viewing, camping, and areas for expo activities within the development area.
- d. Identify funding sources for new development.



The view from the crane viewing and hiking bridge at Fort Kearny SRA.

Goal 2: Enhance and protect the natural resources of the park

Strategy 2.1: Preserve, protect, and restore the natural abundance and active plant populations and enhance angler access within the park.

Action Items:

- a. Develop a plan to manage the invasive species influencing native vegetation.
- b. Create decision-making tools and protocols for management of vegetation within the park.
- c. Utilize aquatic studies and park user surveys to understand angler usage and needs to improve access to ponds.
- d. Determine suitable locations for shoreline angler access and ADA-compliant angler access.
- e. Improve fish habitat and growth potential by working with appropriate experts.

Goal 3: Evaluate feasibility and implementation of improved, additional, or redeveloped infrastructure to enhance recreational experiences for guests

Strategy 3.1: Determine suitable location and plan for outdoor skills area(s) to use for special events and year-round use.

Action Items:

- a. Collaborate with experts to identify location of utilities and feasibility of specific locations within the park for an outdoor skills area.
- b. Work with appropriate divisions to determine design and layout of area for transitional and aquatic programs and activities.
- c. Determine staffing and training needs for the area.
- d. Hire consultant and work with Engineering Division to assist with design and construction of area.
- e. Develop an events calendar to assist with coordinating efforts between multiple divisions on events/programs to take place in outdoor skills area.
- f. Conduct fundraising efforts and identify funding sources for area.

Strategy 3.2: Determine maintenance and operational needs for nature trail.

Action Items:

- a. Assess condition of trail, vegetation, bridges, and infrastructure along the trail to identify safety concerns. Conduct necessary maintenance.
- b. Evaluate entrance areas to trail, interpretive and trailhead signage, and support facilities such as parking or restrooms to enhance amenities and maintenance of the nature trail.
- c. Implement safe crosswalk area for visitors to access nature trail.
- d. Create process for inspections and maintenance activities to ensure trail maintenance is a priority.

Strategy 3.3: Redesign entrance of the park to ensure easy traffic flow and identification of park entry.

Action Items:

- a. Identify vehicle circulation patterns to assist in design.
- b. Collaborate with Engineering Division and appropriate experts to determine suitable design options for entrance.
- c. Determine type of signage, design features, and regulation requirements for entrance.
- d. Collaborate with horticulturalists to beautify entrance with landscaping features.
- e. Install additional traffic flow signs near entrance and throughout park for safety.

Strategy 3.4: Develop multi-use facility for programs, events, welcome center, and educational classroom.

Action Items:

- a. Determine feasible location by working with experts and appropriate agency divisions.
- b. Establish potential design options given desired functionality and parking capability.
- c. Examine revenue generating options for facility.
- d. Identify fundraising mechanisms for this initiative.



Archery at the Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo at Fort Kearny SRA.

Strategy 3.5: Ensure all amenities are accessible to the public.

Action Items:

- a. Identify new locations for picnic shelter between Lakes #2 and #3, and horseshoe pit, to increase accessibility and use of amenities.
- b. Create action plan for moving amenities to accessible locations.
- c. Maintain accessible amenities by identifying operation and maintenance needs of each.

Strategy 3.6: Evaluate maintenance of current campgrounds and feasibility of additional camp sites at the park.

Action Items:

- a. Identify suitable campsites to convert to concrete pads, location for additional concrete pads, and ability to convert campsite areas to electrical.
- b. Identify additional support facilities for camping areas.
- c. Conduct routine inspections of vegetation, trees, trash receptacles, and other support amenities to enhance camping experience.
- d. Coordinate with Engineering Division and appropriate professionals to determine feasibility for design and installation of additional camping pads.
- e. Evaluate feasibility of bicycle hammock camping, tent, RV, and other unique types of camping opportunities for this area.

HISTORICAL PARK & RECREATION AREA GOALS

Goal 1: Strategically plan for future budgets that adequately support park areas

Strategy 1.1: Develop park budget forecasting reports for current and future developments.

Action Items:

- a. Review distribution of current budget allocations across the Ft. Kearny, Union Pacific, and Sandy Channel recreation areas.
- b. Identify additional budget allocation to operate and maintain new development and improvements at each area.
- c. Create a fundraising initiative for specific development projects.
- d. Research grant opportunities for future development.
- e. Determine cost/benefit analysis of specific development ideas to ensure feasible economic investment decisions.

Strategy 1.2: Determine staffing needs for programs/ events and maintenance of current and newly developed infrastructure.

Action Items:

- a. Determine number and type of staff needed to host events and programs and to carry out maintenance responsibilities.
- b. Explore volunteer/friends groups to assist with programs, events, or concession agreements.
- c. Develop events calendar to plan for staffing needs.
- d. Identify type of staff training necessary for each program, event, and maintenance activity and build that cost into the budget.
- e. Coordinate with appropriate agency staff to determine staff training and certifications needed.



School Day at the Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo at Fort Kearny SRA.

Strategy 1.3: Develop database to track equipment, facilities, and repairs.

Action Items:

- a. Conduct inventory of all equipment, facilities, and amenities to document useful life, condition, and necessary replacement/repairs to plan for future biennium budgets.
- b. Develop database suitable for maintenance records.
- c. Conduct general maintenance in campgrounds such as trimming trees and leveling pad sites to enhance visitor experience.
- d. Continue to upgrade restrooms to boom toilets and maintain cleanliness of existing restrooms.

Strategy 1.4: Implement tracking mechanism for development projects to comport with agency-wide initiative.

Action Items:

- a. Ensure that all capital projects are included within the capital budget for NGPC to complete.
- b. Communicate with pertinent staff involved in projects to ensure an organized and coordinated effort occurs.

Goal 2: Grow strategic partnerships that foster a sense of ownership and pride within the parks

Strategy 2.1: Maintain and enhance effective partnerships to assist in future programs, events, and development at the parks.

Action Items:

- a. Assess current and potential partners and identify gaps to assist with programs and events at the parks.
- b. Determine the role each existing partner could play in the development and facilitation of programs and events at the parks.
- c. Gain feedback from all partners about how to foster more commitment with future events and programming.
- d. Identify, expand, and enhance priority partnerships that align closely with the vision for each park area.
- e. Develop a volunteer recruitment and recognition program to assist with programs and events.
- f. Meet annually with partner groups to coordinate upcoming programs and events.



Tent camping at Fort Kearny SRA.



Teddy Roosevelt reenactor during School Day at Fort Kearny SRA.



Reenactors pose by the old fort walls at Fort Kearny SHP.

DESIRED PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

Projects are listed for each park to phase development over the next several years. The timeline of development is contingent upon funding. These phases are based on input from the public, the advisory committee and NGPC staff. Each project outlined corresponds with specific strategies and action items within the Fort Kearny goals, except for the survey efforts that must occur to inform development decisions.

Cost estimates will be developed to assist with fundraising for design and construction of the projects outlined. NGPC did not incorporate costs into this plan since costs of design and construction materials can change dramatically from year-to-year. Costs are expected to fluctuate based on economic factors beyond NGPC influence, as well as surveys that will provide details that dictate associated costs for design and construction.

NGPC will explore private and public funding sources to finance future park enhancements as defined in this master plan. Funding may include grants, private donations, and capital improvement budgeting. This plan is will remain fluid and adjust priority projects based on the ability to secure funds, public demand, and feasibility of development.

FORT KEARNY STATE HISTORICAL PARK PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

Phase I Projects (1-3 years)

Year 1-2

Conduct archaeological, historical, and engineering surveys of the park to inform development decisions.

Year 1

Identify location for storage of artifacts
(*Goal 4, Strategy 4.1*).

Year 1

Research revenue generating opportunities
(*Goal 5, Strategy 5.1*).

Year 1

Update displays within the park, focusing on parade grounds and stockade (*Goal 1, Strategy 1.1*).

Year 1-2

Conduct a feasibility study of new visitor center and new entrance location (*Goal 3, Strategy 3.3*).

Year 1-3

Develop baseline knowledge of visitation at the park and expand education and interpretation offerings to increase visitation of non-traditional users (*Goal 1, Strategy 1.2*).

Year 2-3

Develop a robust marketing plan to increase visitation for programs, events, and amenities that target traditional and non-traditional users (*Goal 5, Strategy 5.2*).

Year 2-3

Catalogue historical records to ensure the integrity of artifacts (*Goal 1, Strategy 1.1; Goal 4, Strategy 4.1*).

Ongoing

Develop an operation and maintenance inspection checklist to protect and preserve the cultural and natural resources of the park (*Goal 3, Strategy 3.4*).

Ongoing

Inventory existing plants, remove decaying vegetation, and develop management plan for non-native species (*Goal 4, Strategy 4.2*).

Phase II Projects (4-6 years)

Year 4-5

Based on archaeological, historical, and engineering surveys, design and construct new entrance to the park and visitor center with historical displays (*Goal 3, Strategy 3.3*).

Year 4-6

Determine suitable locations for historically relevant infrastructure, displays, natural playscape(s), indoor/outdoor education classrooms, and events (*Goal 3, Strategy 3.1*).

Year 5-6

Update displays within the blacksmith shop, and powder magazine buildings and develop new exhibits (*Goal 1, Strategy 1.1*).

Year 5-6

Develop active and passive educational programs and opportunities relevant to the Fort period to engage guests (*Goal 1, Strategy 1.2*).

Phase III Projects (7-10 years)

Year 7-10

Design and build historic reconstructions to enhance unique opportunities at the park (*Goal 3, Strategy 3.2*).

Year 8-9

Redesign walking paths within the park (*Goal 2, Strategy 2.1*).

Year 9

Create suitable habitat that enhances the landscape, while preserving the integrity of the adapted habitats that currently exist (*Goal 4, Strategy 4.2*).

Ongoing

Based upon our annual implementation plan, the Fort Kearny parks team will review which projects are next.

FORT KEARNY STATE RECREATION AREA PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

Phase I Projects (1-3 years)

Year 1-2

Conduct engineering and historical/cultural surveys of park to inform development decisions.

Year 1-2

Develop partnerships with nearby landowners for potential trail to connect the parks
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.5*).

Year 1-2

Determine the recreational needs of multiple visitors
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.1*).

Year 1-2

Identify development plan for the 57 acres
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.8*).

Year 1-2

Design and construct shower house facility on east side of the park
(*Goal 3, Strategy 3.6*).

Year 1-3

Upgrade campsites to electrical and identify locations for additional camping opportunities such as bike hammock camping
(*Goal 3, Strategy 3.6*).

Year 2

Develop themed natural playscape area(s) that represent the history and biologically unique flora and fauna within the park
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.4*).

Year 2-3

Research potential to connect SRA and SHP via trail
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.5*).

Year 2-3

Redesign entrance to the park
(*Goal 3, Strategy 3.3*).

Ongoing

Ensure all amenities are in accessible locations to the public e.g., horseshoe pit and picnic shelter
(*Goal 3, Strategy 3.5*).

Ongoing

Improve crane viewing opportunities
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.7*).

Ongoing

Preserve, protect, and restore the natural abundance and diversity of native plant populations and enhance angler and water access within the park
(*Goal 2, Strategy 2.1*).

Phase II Projects (4-6 years)

Year 4-5

Develop marketing and outreach plan for recreational opportunities, educational programs, and events
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.2*).

Year 4-6

Develop multi-use facility for programs/events
(*Goal 3, Strategy 3.4*).

Phase III Projects (7-10 years)

Year 6-7

Determine suitable amenities for 57-acre area and start developing outdoor skills area(s) for events and year-round use
(*Goal 3, Strategy 3.1*).

Year 7

Determine viable trailhead location for nature trail and prioritize maintenance needs
(*Goal 3, Strategy 3.2*).

Year 7-10

Implement development plan for 57-acres
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.8*).

Ongoing

Develop new and innovative educational programming for the Youth Group Area that focuses on understanding and appreciating outdoor recreation and the ecological significance of the park
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.3*).

Ongoing

Identify suitable locations to highlight historical significance of the SRA through interpretive signage
(*Goal 1, Strategy 1.6*).

Ongoing

Based upon our annual implementation plan, the Fort Kearny parks team will review which projects are next.

DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT PLAN

The development concepts portray the desired location of specific amenities, facilities, and infrastructure supported by NGPC, the advisory committee, and the public. The exact location of feasible infrastructure will depend on engineering, cultural, archaeological, and other site assessments that will take place when implementing this plan. There are three maps in this section. One shows the entire historical park, and the other two divide the recreation area between east and west to show potential development for each side of the park.

STATE HISTORICAL PARK

Figure 9 illustrates the proposed master plan development concept for the historical park. The conceptual master plan provides agency staff flexibility to determine final design details that embody the community's vision for the park. The public highly supported these concepts based on the Design Charrette, open house, and advisory committee meetings.

New Entrance

A new entrance is proposed to the west of the fort, opening to views of the historical site and entry sign which directs traffic to a dispersed parking area among the trees at the new visitor center. This was the preferred option by the public because it provides a more inviting, easily identifiable experience off Highway 50A. The new entrance should connect both the new and existing parking. Priority will be placed on maintaining and enhancing views of the historical park as drivers pull into the site, as well as avoiding encroaching on any areas of archaeological interest. It was confirmed with the Department of Transportation during the Design Charrette process that the driveway location shown is well within the acceptable distance from 29 Road (currently 500', minimum 200').

Visitor Center

A new visitor center is proposed for the southwest corner of the park where Lt. William Dungan's ranch once resided. This location is preferred by the public and stakeholders because it refocuses the park by centering on the historical side, and it allows the existing visitor center to be repurposed. The new visitor center will have modern, but subdued architecture, which makes clear that it is not a historic structure, but blends in and does not take away from the historic nature of the park. Signage located outside the visitor center orients guests to explore the park. The historical monuments could be relocated near the visitor center to entice visitors to learn about the sites purpose when it was active from 1848-1871. Interactive and historically accurate exhibits within the visitor center would display several topics such as: Fort life, Pawnee Scouts, Indigenous people, community members, Oregon and Mormon Trail travelers, and crane migration. Other features within the visitor center include a meeting space, restrooms, gift shop, and environmentally controlled storage space for rotated artifacts.



Family Day from the Outdoor Discovery Program at Fort Kearny SHP.

One of the two hike/bike path entrances is located near the visitor center for guests coming from the recreational park. The other is located near the edge of the parade grounds.

Parade Ground Reconstructions

Reconstructed buildings at the site will provide a way for the public to engage in the livelihood activities of the people that lived at the Fort and understand those that passed through the Fort collecting supplies for their journey west. It is critically important to replicate historically significant features of the Fort that offer an engaging and interpretive experience. Creating a prioritized list of reconstructed buildings is a priority of this plan, including the officer's quarters, soldier's barracks, commissary, and others based on the studies conducted in Phase I.

Interpretive Play Fort – Natural Playscape

A reconstructed Fort Mitchel is proposed to be interpreted as a play fort using natural features. This would be located near the Powder Magazine exhibit, enticing visitors to go beyond the parade grounds, which is currently confusing for the public because of the lack of circulation in the park. This play area would be equipped with materials to build a Fort and plenty of space for educational purposes.

Repurposed Education Center

The existing visitor center is proposed to be repurposed as an education center. To expand partnerships with nearby schools and community organizations, this facility could be used to educate the public about the Fort, crane migration, and equally used as a space for the annual Outdoor Discovery Expo. Meeting State Science and Social Study Standards would be priority in creating programs for this space to build partnerships with schools.

Figure 9

Proposed Master Plan Concept for Fort Kearny State Historical Park



1. 3D Interpretive Signs
2. Reconstructed Officer's Quarters
3. New Visitors Center
4. Bike Parking
5. New Parking Lot With Green Space
6. New Entrance Drive
7. Cannon and Firing Range
8. Interpretive Play Fort
9. Partial Reconstruction or Other Interpretation
10. Reconstructed Soldier's Barracks
11. Interpretive Walkway
12. Perimeter Fort Loop With Interpretive Signage
13. New Fort Entrance
14. Entry Signage
15. Site Supervisor's House
16. Education Center/Crane Viewing Building
17. Reconfigured Parking
18. Picnic Shelters Used For Crane Viewing Opportunities
19. Outdoor Classroom/Amphitheater
20. Heirloom Gardens
21. Southwest Earthworks Interpretive Trail
22. Entry Plaza
23. Natural Vegetative Buffer
24. Prairie
25. Lawn
26. Trail Connector From SRA

ochsner hare + hare
the olsson studio

Outdoor Classroom/Amphitheater

Directly west of the Education Center building are proposed Pawnee Heirloom Gardens, an outdoor classroom, and amphitheater for events, programs, and the general public to explore at their leisure. Plants would be identified for educational purposes.

Temporary Crane Blinds and Repurposed Picnic Shelter for Additional Crane Viewing

The picnic shelter located on the east side of the Education Center (or current visitor center) parking lot is proposed to be seasonally repurposed as a wildlife viewing area to be used during migration season to view the cranes in nearby cornfields. Additional temporary blinds are proposed along the perimeter of the park for rental during migration season.

Southeast Earthworks Interpretive Trail

A minimally invasive interpretive trail is proposed through the southeast earthworks site. Use of virtual reality or applications that walk the user through the experience was preferred by the public. As with the rest of this historical site, archaeological considerations will impact the options for development and interpretation in this area.

New Entrances to Fort Mitchell

Heading west from the new visitor center is Fort Mitchell, which is also known as the stockade. The public showed interest in enhancing this exhibit to learn about how it was used. Therefore, an internal walking path with interpretive signage along the perimeter of the wooden walled structure is proposed. Miniature bronze displays/statues could be depicted in several points to entice visitors to experience the entire Fort. Two additional points to enter and exit Fort Mitchell on the east are proposed. The first one leads to the Southeast Earthworks Interpretive Trail and the other to the Education Center. The current entrance/exit on the west side leads to the visitor center.

Pathways

The north side of the new visitor center opens directly into the parade grounds, orienting visitors to newly reconstructed historic buildings, with other structures displayed such as miniature bronze replicas, partial reconstructions, and/or virtual 3D models accessible by mobile app or other technology. A new path is proposed to run along the far west side of the parade grounds with interpretive signage that helps visitors visualize the fort grounds as they once stood on the adjacent land. North of the parade grounds, the cannon firing range has been relocated adjacent to the Powder Magazine exhibit. A second entrance/exit on the east side of the existing fort would create comfortable pedestrian circulation throughout the park, leading back to the new visitor center location. The material used for the redesigned pathways throughout the park could be concrete, crushed limestone, wood chips, or other ADA-compliant materials.



Wildlife display at the Outdoor Discovery Program at Fort Kearny SHP.



Sandhill cranes in a field near Fort Kearny SHP.



Sandhill cranes fly above the Platte River as the sun rises behind Doniphan in the distance.



Turkey hunting workshop at the Outdoor Discovery Program at Fort Kearny SHP.

STATE RECREATION AREA

Figures 10 and 11 show the proposed master plan development concepts for the east and west areas of the recreation area. The east recreation area map was created as part of the Design Charrette; whereas, the west recreation area map was created as part of the ongoing master plan process, which is why the two differ in style. These concepts provide long-term success and expansion of amenities and facilities in this park to meet the needs of the public now and into the future. It also allows for flexibility for designers to determine the most functional use of the additional campgrounds, natural playscape, multi-use facility, and other amenities.

Proposed Master Plan Concept for State Recreation Area – East

Figure 10 shows the east side of the recreation area. It's important to have the right mix of amenities and facilities that appease multiple users in the park; and enhancing the traffic circulation patterns to ensure safety and navigation throughout the park. The development plan for the east side of the recreation area is presented in a counterclockwise fashion starting from the right-hand side of the map by the kiosk booth.

Relocated Entrance Drive and Kiosk

The relocated entrance proposed orients visitors to the east, improves traffic circulation, and places the kiosk on the driver's side of vehicles. This allows for a kiosk to be placed in the center of the road, with ample parking nearby for the multi-use facility and temporary check-in parking. Turn radius for campers must be priority in final design of the new entry road.

Multi-use Facility

Beyond the new entrance is the multi-use facility, which offers indoor and outdoor space, electricity, and restrooms. The facility is proposed to be rented for events and programs to accommodate guests. One of two ADA-compliant beach access points are to the north of the facility and offer all guests safe access to the beach. The option to make the beach space private with a screened vegetative barrier is being considered. Temporary spaces for camping registration and permits are located west of the multi-use facility to fill out self-serve information. Additional longterm and spillover event parking is available on the south side. An event lawn also spills out to the east of the facility, offering photo opportunities and area for children to play or the public to use during events.

ADA-Compliant Beach Access and Bridge

The second ADA-compliant beach access point is located on the east end of the beach near the public parking lot on the east side of the east recreation area loop. The bridge crossing the pond adds connectivity to the walking path and amenities on the north side of the pond. The bridge is designed to allow for boater and kayak access beneath it.

Outdoor Classroom and Natural Play Area

Leading up to the beach from the eastern-most parking lot is an outdoor classroom for use during the expo and by the general public. Crossing the bridge onto the north side of the pond is a second natural play area and outdoor classroom in the open lawn area between the picnic shelter and bicycle hammock camping.

New Trail Loops, Trailhead and Support Facilities

An additional trailhead, with support facilities, is proposed to be located at the north end of the park at the terminus of Fort Kearny Recreation Area Road. Support facilities would include a pavilion with restrooms, signage, seating, and designated parking. Access to the private property north of this location should be preserved and designed to reduce confusion. A new trail loop connecting guests to the existing hike/bike trail offers guests the opportunity to loop back to the new trailhead and parking areas.

The new loop trail curves east at the northernmost point of the property and runs along the park boundary. New plantings, including large canopy trees and fragrant pollinator gardens, are installed along this path to screen the treatment pond. The loop trail joins the current hike/bike trail north of the current trailhead. Hikers and bikers can choose to follow the path south to its current trailhead or continue the loop trail back to the northwest through the trees along the road to reach the new trailhead. The hike/bike trail can still be accessed from the current trailhead.

This additional trailhead is especially important because it also connects the western part of the park, and ultimately the SHP, to the current hike/bike trail. Another advantage is the additional parking for crane migration season or day-users wanting to visit the hike/bike trail.

Another trail would be created around the lake, offering guests a walking path and shoreline fishing access. This is helpful for day-users and campers along the east side who want to be near the water or guests using the multi-use facility.

Bicycle Hammock Camping

Bike hammock camping stations are proposed in two locations; one on the southern end of the electrical RV pads, and the other across the road from the existing hike-bike trailhead and restroom facilities. These sites would be considered primitive, without electricity or fire rings.

Kayak Launch Site

A kayak launch is located on the east side of the pond with parking to allow for kayak, canoe, and boat launch access. This was highly supported by the public in both public meetings. Kayakers are allowed on all sand pit lakes at Ft. Kearny SRA, but this would provide the only designated put in/ take out location.

New Shower House Facility

An additional shower house facility has been a public demand at Fort Kearny and there are plans to install a new facility to accommodate campers and visitors in the east side of the park.

Figure 10

Proposed Master Plan Concept for Fort Kearny State Recreation Area – East



- 1. Pond Overlook Shelter and Deck
- 2. Natural Play Area
- 3. Overflow Flex Parking
- 4. Boat/Kayak Launch
- 5. Multi-Use Event Facility
- 6. Temporary Welcome Center Check-In Parking
- 7. Pay Booth/Kiosk
- 8. Relocated Entrance Drive
- 9. Rerouted Road
- 10. Trailhead Signage
- 11. Trailhead Restrooms
- 12. Private Event Beach Option
- 13. Public Access Beach
- 14. ADA Beach Access
- 15. New Hike/Bike Trail Connections
- 16. Parking
- 17. Updated Interpretive Node
- 18. Bridge
- 19. Bike Camping
- 20. Outdoor Classroom
- 21. Pollinator Plantings as Screening/Buffer
- 22. Event Lawn
- 23. Prairie
- 24. Outdoor Classroom/Natural Playground
- 25. Trail Loop Around Lake
- 26. New Restroom Facility
- 27. New Shower House

Proposed Master Plan Concept for State Recreation Area - West

Figure 11 shows the west side of the recreation area. The development plan for the west side of the recreation area is described in a counter-clockwise fashion following the one-way traffic loop around the campground and support facilities, starting with the campground in the top right-hand corner. The number location is an approximation that could change based on engineering and cultural assessments of the landscape.

The Design Charrette focused on the historical park and east side of the recreation area. The west side of the recreation area was not considered during that part of the planning process but is incorporated into the final master plan development concepts (Figure 11).

Hike/Bike Trail Connector Loop

Located along the northern border of park, is the proposed loop created for public hike/bike and concessionaire equestrian use. This loop trail extends east and connects to the trailhead in the east area of the park. The trail loop continues west toward the additional camping area and connects with the nature trail along the south side of the park. From here, the trail joins the connector trail leading to the historical park. This trail would connect the Kearney community to the historical park, which goes beyond the current connection of the hike/bike trail leading to the recreation area.

Shoreline Improvements

Shoreline access was highly supported by the public. NGPC has identified several potential locations for improving shoreline access, which are highlighted in yellow in Figure 11. This would involve thinning some of the invasive shrubs and non-native plants. It would not involve removal of mature cottonwoods and other native trees and plantings that enhance the ecological health of the flora and fauna. This could provide additional opportunity for fishing.

Additional Camping & Routine Maintenance

The public expressed tremendous support for additional camping on the newly acquired 57-acres and throughout the park. Particularly, there were several comments from the public wanting more tent camping away from RV campgrounds, group camping opportunities, and additional electrical camp pad sites. RV campers would like to see existing pad sites leveled, trees trimmed to a height above campers, and cleaner restrooms. Figure 11 identifies two potential areas for additional camping. An engineering feasibility study will be necessary to determine if Primitive, Basic, or Electric camping is most feasible for these locations when implementing this plan.

Natural Playscape

A natural playscape is located behind the shower house building, directly between two areas of the campground. The playscape would be constructed of natural elements specifically themed around the Central Platte River biologically unique landscape, history of the area, and crane migration. A natural playscape is an area that consists of elements from



Camping and picnic table cookout at Fort Kearny SRA.

the earth such as logs, tree stumps, boulders, and plants. They may also have a mixture of slides and nets to climb.

57-Acre Development

Camping will be strongly considered on the west portion of the newly acquired 57-acres. The type of camping will be determined as this plan is implemented. Camping was the number one amenity the public wanted to see on this area. Maintaining wildlife viewing opportunities and an area for expo activities were closely behind camping as other options for this area. Temporary wildlife viewing blinds and open space for expo activities are identified on the east portion of this area in Figure 11.

Temporary Crane Viewing Blinds and Additional Parking

A key area supported by the public was enhancing access and resources for crane viewers. This development concept provides temporary crane viewing blinds along the south side of the nature trail and additional parking during crane migration season on the southeast section of the west area of the park. The vegetation buffer along the road allows for a quiet, serene experience to watch wildlife.

Relocated Nature Trailhead

An updated nature trail trailhead is relocated to the south side of the recreation road for safer access to the nature trail. Proper wayfinding signage helps visitors access the trail and understand the relevance of this trail placement along the South Platte River channel. Volunteers will continue to maintain the benches and bridges in this area as part of an ongoing Eagle Scout project. The vegetation buffer will allow for a secluded entrance to the trail away from traffic along Fort Kearny State Recreation Road.

Figure 11

PROPOSED MASTER PLAN CONCEPT FOR FORT KEARNY RECREATION AREA - WEST



Proposed Development Concepts

1 Natural Playscape	6 Relocated Nature Trailhead
2 Additional Camping	7 Trail Connector Loop
3 Temporary Crane Viewing Blind	8 Shoreline Access
4 New Parking Lot	9 Open Lawn for Expo Activities and Crane Viewing
5 Vegetation Buffer	10 Trail Connector to SHP



ANNUAL IMPLEMENTATION

To ensure success, steps have been outlined for the creation of an annual implementation plan. Creating a brief implementation plan for the upcoming year provides many benefits. Such as, clarity of understanding the next action items and projects to focus on, accountability to ensure projects are on track, and improved communication and cooperation amongst the team and community to ensure progress is occurring.

The Fort Kearny parks team will assess the projects outlined in this plan to identify next steps to address for the upcoming year by referencing the prioritized list of development projects. This allows NGPC to remain flexible in elevating specific projects from certain phases based on fundraising, survey outcomes, ability to finance the project, and public demand. NGPC is committed to adaptive management techniques to ensure the longterm success of these parks.

The six key components of the annual implementation plan should include:

- a. An outline of the goals and action items that should be accomplished that year. Using the prioritization for phases of development as a starting place and reviewing the past year's goals and action items.
- b. An assignment of roles and responsibilities to ensure a clear picture of what needs to be done and by whom.
- c. A schedule to track progress for the projects that keeps all stakeholders in the loop.
- d. Identification of the resources that need to be allocated to make sure the plan can be executed. This includes financial resources, materials, staffing, and the details of how materials will be procured, etc.
- e. A definition of the metrics on how it will be determined that the projects are a success. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) must be included to establish the measurability of success and failure. This also allows for the measurement of progress and the celebration of milestones.
- f. A contingency plan to ensure the staff know how to deal with issues that could come up, such as budgetary increases, not enough resources, or deadlines that cannot be met. This allows for staff to ensure they won't get off-track when the challenges arise.

Implementation requires coordinated effort among NGPC, the community, and partners on an ongoing basis. Identifying what has been accomplished, where we're going in the upcoming year, and what should be addressed based on difficulties staff have encountered are all important pieces to consider. Implementing this annual plan will ensure Fort Kearny continues to thrive as an inviting destination for residents and non-residents of Nebraska.



Ropes course at the Fort Kearny Outdoor Expo at Fort Kearny SRA.



Bonfire at the Outdoor Discovery Program at Fort Kearny SRA.



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