

Director's Report – July 2025

Jason Knight, Director of Parks and Recreation

Quote of the month: “Over the course of my career, I have listened to countless residents share what parks mean to them — a safe place for kids to play, a quiet spot for reflection, a vital community resource during crisis. These conversations remind me that parks are not just amenities — they are essential to our collective well-being.”- Clement Lau

I read an article last week in the National Recreation and Parks trade blog “Open Spaces”, and it resonated strongly with me. Not just because I am the Director in a community that is facing challenging budget conversations surrounding parks and recreation, but as a human. It highlighted the value of community parks as a part of healthy communities, their value as crime reduction and prevention tools, their value for mental health and connection, and the value of parks as economic drivers. I see the value everyday in interactions with the people that use our facilities- people that might not talk to another person for the rest of the day, people who break a sweat and raise their heart rate before returning to a sedentary life, and people who are just looking for a way to spend time outside. I see it in the smiles of kids that learned a new skill, made a new friend, or discovered a new hobby. It is the best part of my job- and the most challenging, as people ask about some of the practices we have implemented this year as cost saving measures. I try to be honest. We are scaling back operations to reduce costs, and every time I hear some version of the same response, “it doesn’t look good”. I agree. But sometimes, we have to make hard choices to reach our goals- and the goal of this department is to “*provide the highest quality leisure activities, facilities, and services to our community to enhance the health, safety, and quality of life for the citizens of Willard, Missouri.*” We will keep working toward that goal.

I hope you have an opportunity to read the article.

<https://www.nrpa.org/blog/why-we-must-keep-investing-in-parks/>

The Willard Parks and Recreation Department has experienced a productive and impactful July, marked by strong community engagement, increased participation, and several notable program successes.

Aquatics and fitness operations continue to exceed expectations. The Willard Aquatic Center (WAC) has already surpassed its seasonal revenue goal with two weeks remaining in the pool schedule. Party pad rentals and swim lessons remain in high demand, and the swim team reached its target of 150 participants for the summer. Fitness center memberships are on the rise, particularly among residents over 60, and overall facility usage is steadily growing.

Summer camp programs have been a standout success, with attendance well beyond last year’s figures—particularly during summer school weeks, where numbers nearly doubled. A newly hired bus driver and a team of committed seasonal staff have helped manage the increased volume, while a creative approach to low-cost field trips has been met with enthusiastic parental feedback. These efforts have already pushed camp revenue past annual goals weeks ahead of schedule.

Special events and sports programming are thriving. Freedom Fest drew over 1,000 more attendees than in previous years, and events like the Fishing Derby and recent creative workshops filled to capacity. Youth baseball is progressing smoothly under updated rules, and soccer registration is already underway with strong early interest.

Our maintenance team has made significant progress in areas such as bridge repairs, field lighting diagnostics, safety enhancements like speed bumps for camp, and infrastructure improvements including the installation of new pumps at the pool and fencing at soccer. However, major infrastructure needs remain. Persistent roof leaks at the Community Building, outdated or failing sports lighting, overcrowded fitness spaces, and inadequate storage for equipment continue to challenge our operations. The Rec Center and other parks facilities (specifically the community building) are in need of both structural repairs and modernization.

Despite our staff's continued commitment and success in managing resources creatively, the growing gap between rising community expectations and flat support for staffing and capital needs presents a long-term challenge. We remain focused on addressing morale through recognition, team-building, and open communication, while continuing to deliver exceptional services to the community.