

# A Vision for The Commons: Summary of community input November 2016



# **A Vision for The Commons: Summary of community input**

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# Project Overview

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## Methodology

The City of Excelsior's Commons Master Planning Working Group (CMPWG) retained Parenteau Graves in June 2016 to guide a process to define a shared community vision for The Commons, the 13-acre municipal park located in the heart of Excelsior. Working with the CMPWG, Parenteau Graves designed informational materials and a process to gain widespread community input through surveys and focus groups. This community feedback was gathered August–October 2016. The process focused primarily on the key stakeholders for the Commons, defined as the residents and business owners whose local property taxes fund 65% of the park's annual budget.

## Survey

The online survey was available August 25–October 27, 2016, with a paper version available at City Hall. The City sent a postcard with the survey link to every Excelsior resident and business owner and promoted the survey on its website and Facebook page. Community members also posted the survey link on the Excelsior-area NextDoor website, and CMPWG members distributed it via their networks.

The goal was to obtain a minimum of 200 responses. In total, 335 people responded; 221 were residents of Excelsior (defined as where they pay their water and sewer bill), and 114 were non-residents who live in the area and are users of the Commons. (*See Addendum A.*)

## Informational Materials

Parenteau Graves and the CMPWG developed an information packet that was made available on the City's website and was emailed to all who registered for focus groups. The packet provided a history of the Commons; details on current zones, infrastructure, permitting fees, and usage statistics; overview and link to a recent independent condition study of the park; background on how the park is funded; and information about possible new funding streams. (*See Addendum B.*)

## Focus Groups

Focus groups, facilitated by Parenteau Graves, were held in five private homes in diverse locations in Excelsior, plus two in public locations (Excelsior Library and Golden Rule). Parenteau Graves also met with the Downtown Retailers and two Excelsior Rotary groups.

Approximately 80 people attended the focus groups, with another 75 people participating through the Downtown Retailers and Rotary groups. The focus groups allowed Parenteau Graves to explore in depth the community's vision, priorities, and concerns for the Commons. All groups discussed a common set of questions. (*See Addendum C.*)

# Executive Summary

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## Research Overview

The City of Excelsior's Commons Master Planning Working Group (CMPWG) retained Parenteau Graves in June 2016 to guide a process to define a shared community vision for The Commons, the 13-acre municipal park located in the heart of Excelsior. Through a widely distributed survey and numerous focus groups, the community expressed its vision and priorities for the Commons.

## Major Findings

### Part 1: Maintenance & Use

- Maintenance is a critical issue that the City must address prior to any new, major investment in The Commons.
- The City needs a use policy to guide fees for and type of events in the park.
- Individual user fees are not recommended as a way to fund the park.

### Part 2: Design Needs

- The community deeply values the Commons and recognizes that the park needs significant attention and revitalization.
- The design of the Commons should first and foremost reflect the preferences of South Lake Minnetonka residents and businesses.
- While there are many competing needs for revitalization throughout the park, several co-equal priorities emerged from the research:
  - Improve walkability and accessibility.
  - Enhance the beach area and facilities.
  - Address shoreline erosion.
  - Re-design the port to create a welcoming, safe entry to the park.
  - Revamp the bandshell and better design the open space around it.
- Additional priorities cited as very important include adding winter amenities; improving gathering spaces; investigating ways to increase usage of the baseball field plus reimagining the adjacent concessions and bathroom facility; and developing a plan to remove and improve playground equipment.

## Guiding Principles

- Physical improvements to the park should reflect the community's desired scale of use.
- Any new building structures should be designed in keeping with the historic character of Excelsior.
- Any capital improvements to the park should incorporate ongoing cost of maintenance into their project budget.

# Major Findings

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## Part 1: Maintenance & Usage

### **#1 Maintenance is a critical issue that the City must address prior to any new, major investment in The Commons.**

The topic of maintenance was at the forefront of every focus group. In the words of one participant, “The first order of business should be to clean up the Commons so we can really see what needs to be done.” Issues cited included messy garbage, dirty facilities (especially the bathrooms), unkempt beaches, random and aging playground equipment, untended trees, and infrequently shoveled steps in the winter.

There is widespread concern about making any improvements until a sustainable maintenance plan can be put in place. In addition, there is concern that the City doesn’t currently have the expertise on staff to tend to some of the more complex maintenance issues.

### **#2 The City needs a use policy to guide fees for and type of events in the park.**

Walking and quiet uses of the park were ranked most important in terms of usage, followed by swimming and concerts. While the survey showed that the two-thirds of respondents believe usage of the park is “about right” in the busy summer months, many focus group participants expressed concerns about large-scale events that detract from the enjoyment of the Commons. A use policy should reflect and reinforce these preferences and concerns.

The City currently does not have a use policy or screening criteria by which to approve or deny permit requests to host events in the Commons. Applications are decided on a first come, first-served basis and are usually approved. In addition, residents want the City to re-examine permit fees to improve revenues to help park maintenance.

### **#3 Individual user fees are not recommended as a way to fund the park.**

Focus group participants were not particularly receptive to the idea of individual user fees for the park. The majority believe they would be hard to police, require fences, would be unfriendly or discriminatory, or may not even be legal by the park’s public domain status. Most people felt the City could make more revenue through improving the permitting fees/use policy, by investing in attracting people to smaller scale permitted events, and through pricing and continued enforcement of the newly installed electronic parking meters.

A small percentage of people felt a user fee may be something to consider given the financial needs of the park, and that it could be limited to amenities such as the beach.

## Part 2: Design Needs

### **#4 The community deeply values the Commons and recognizes that the park needs significant attention and revitalization.**

Excelsior residents and business owners are deeply invested in their community, holding in high esteem the charming and historic character of the town; its small-town feel and close-knit community; its walkability and range of amenities for the size of the town; and—at the top of many people’s list—the Commons, the extraordinary 13-acre green space that is central to the City of Excelsior’s identity. The Commons is most valued for:

- Offering a multiplicity of uses: beaches, courts, baseball field, kayaks & paddleboards, picnicking, concerts, and more.
- Serving as the community’s lakeshore, with direct public access to Lake Minnetonka.
- Providing a central gathering place for the town.
- Offering wide open green space that is in short supply around the lake.

The community recognizes, however, that the Commons needs significant attention and revitalization in all zones. **No aspect of the park—lawns, beach, shoreline, courts and playgrounds, buildings—achieved an “excellent” or “good” rating.** Buildings received the lowest ranking (below average). A recently conducted independent condition study of the park concurs with the community’s perceptions.

### **#5 The design of the Commons should first and foremost consider the preferences of South Lake Minnetonka residents and businesses.**

Focus group participants clearly expressed a preference for a *remodel* and *revitalization* of the park rather than *radical redesign*.

To inform design, participants were asked if the Commons should best be thought of as a:

- Neighborhood park, primarily for the benefit of Excelsior residents & businesses
- Community park, for the benefit of South Lake Minnetonka residents & businesses
- Regional park, for the benefit of Twin Cities metro residents and businesses

Both survey respondents (62% of residents and 76% of non-residents) and focus group participants chose “community park,” with most saying that the Commons already serves the wider South Lake community but could not handle the traffic of a regional-scale park.

### **#6 While there are many competing needs for revitalization throughout the park, several clear co-equal priorities emerged from the research.**

#### ***High priority: Improve walkability and accessibility.***

Widening and thickening (to handle maintenance equipment) the walkways is a top priority, cited in every focus group and reinforced by survey results, which rated enhanced trails and

sidewalks as the top desired new feature/enhancement. Adding “relief” areas in the sidewalk—where people can stop, rest and talk—also is highly recommended. Many people would like to see a loop added that better connects park zones and that follows the shoreline. And importantly, lack of ADA access is a growing concern that should be addressed.

***High priority: Enhance the beach area and facilities.***

The beach ranks third highest in terms of usage and second highest in terms of interest in new features/enhancements. Of all structures, the bathhouse/beach bathrooms received the highest percentage (85%) of votes to remove, replace or remodel. In addition, several people noted that the design of the changing room is not relevant to today’s usage.

Focus group participants recommended improving the beaches by: 1) Creating clear boundaries between grass, concrete, sand and woodchip paths to deal with erosion and dirty sand conditions; 2) Removing the old playground equipment in the sandy area by the bathroom; 3) Adding beach amenities such as a splash pad or swimming/diving docks.

Focus group participants were divided in interest in adding a seasonal beach café, with some citing the possibility of a private-public partnership to sustainably improve design, maintenance and food options. Survey respondents rated a café as their third highest priority for new enhancements.

***High priority: Address shoreline erosion.***

The shoreline and related erosion is a major and growing concern. There is strong support for addressing the shoreline through natural buffers that could help with both geese overpopulation and erosion.

***High priority: Re-design the port to create a welcoming, safe entry to the park.***

“Disorganized, unsafe, unimpressive, junky, and underwhelming” were the words often used to describe the port area. As the major entrance to the park, many participants noted its lack of welcome and wayfinding, which contribute to a confusing traffic flow of cars and pedestrians, as well as a lack of connection to the downtown district. Many participants also want the paddleboards moved to the beach area because of safety concerns with boats.

***High priority: Revamp the bandshell and better design the open space around it.***

Nearly 80% of survey respondents believe the bandshell needs attention, but there is strong agreement that should it be replaced, the new structure should be more multi-use focused and small in scale. Focus group input ranged from giving the structure a new coat of paint to replacing it with something less dense and more true to the character of Excelsior.

While people greatly value the open green space in front of the bandshell, some noted the need for better design to improve usage. However, there is strong opposition to anything that would block view of the lake.

## #6 Several other additional priorities were cited as very important for the improvement of the Commons.

### **Add winter amenities to increase usage of the Commons in winter.**

Many people would like to add winter amenities to the Commons. An ice rink ranks fairly high in preferences for new amenities, but many focus group participants expressed concerns about cost and maintenance and cited the need for more research. Additional ideas to increase winter usage included snowshoe and ski rentals and a winter festival.

### **Improve gathering spaces.**

The Commons lacks any covered pavilions or spaces where more than a few people can hold an event (baseball team celebration, family reunion, e.g.). Adding well-designed, easily maintained structures is supported, especially if the City could cover the expense by requiring a small fee. Aging grills should be removed, and the picnic area needs redesign and configuration. There was consensus that this area has the best view of the lake but that it's generally unused because of access, poor equipment, and bad layout.

### **Investigate possible strategies to increase usage of baseball field and reimagine the adjacent concessions and bathroom facility.**

There is widespread nostalgia for the ballfield, and people love the view. But the field, in its current status, with problematic drainage and poor lighting, is underutilized. Further data from Little League leaders or other community baseball resources could help bring greater clarity to what is possible and needed before major funds are invested in improvements. In addition, the aging concessions and bathroom facility is considered underutilized, dirty, and unattractive, and 77% of survey respondents said it should be removed, replaced, or remodeled.

### **Develop a plan to remove and improve playground equipment.**

Many focus group participants recommend removing the random and old playground equipment scattered throughout the park (such as at the top of the hill in the picnic area and in the sandy area by the bathroom), and 51% of survey respondents recommend replacement and remodeling. Beyond that, the main playground is now more than 20 years old so a plan to update the equipment should be put in place. In the immediate future, gravel in the playground area should be replaced with a safer material.

### **Additional ideas that merit consideration:**

- Eco-friendly lighting, bike racks, and improved locations to fish received mentions.
- Off leash dogs are considered an issue by many so pop-up dog parks may offer a solution.

## Guiding Principles for Design

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- Physical improvements to the park should reflect the community's desired scale of use.
- Any new building structures should be designed in keeping with the historic character of Excelsior.
- Any capital improvements to the park should incorporate the ongoing cost of maintenance into their project budget.

## Next Steps

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- Master Planning Work Group presents findings to the Excelsior City Council and appropriate City Commissions *(December 2016)*
- City staff develops a maintenance plan and use policy for The Commons *(December 2016–January 2017)*
- Commons Master Planning Work Group considers competencies required for initial planning efforts (landscape design, civil engineering, architectural, etc.) *(December 2016)*
- Master Planning Work Group expands to include more stakeholders *(January 2017)*
- Master Planning Work Group engages design team via RFP process *(January–February 2017)*
- Commons Master Planning process commences with opportunities for public input *(February 2017)*
- Commons Master Plan is completed and accepted by the Excelsior City Council *(date TBD)*

## Addendum A: Survey Findings

Are you a resident of Excelsior (pay your water/sewer bill to the City of Excelsior)?	
Yes	221
No	114

How long have you lived in Excelsior?		
Less than 5 years	60	27%
5–10 years	38	17%
11–20 years	49	22%
More than 20 years	72	33%
No response	2	1%

To which age group do you belong?		
14 and younger	4	1%
15-20	1	0%
21-30	27	8%
31-40	55	16%
41-50	95	28%
51-60	80	24%
61-70	44	13%
71+	25	7%
No Responses	4	1%

Which best describes how often you visit the Commons?		
Several times per week	143	43%
Several times per month	119	36%
Several times per year	71	21%
No Responses	2	1%

How often do you use the Commons from October–April?		
Several times per week	39	12%
Several times per month	204	61%
Several times per year	92	27%
No Responses	0	0%

(scale = 1–7, with 1 being least used)

Rank the following zones of the park in terms of your usage	All	Resident	Non resident
Grassy open field/bandshell	5.17	5.27	4.97
Port/Excelsior Docks	4.61	4.66	4.50
Beach	4.36	4.40	4.29
Scenic overlook hillside areas	4.19	4.18	4.21
Playground	3.80	3.82	3.77
Picnic and BBQ areas	3.04	2.85	3.42
Athletic courts and fields	2.88	2.89	2.85

(scale = 1–9, with 1 being least important)

<b>Rank the following in terms of importance at the Commons</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non resident</b>
Walking	7.08	7.44	6.71
Quiet uses	6.26	6.42	5.93
Swimming	5.46	5.25	5.68
Concerts	5.38	5.54	5.21
Playground	5.21	5.32	5.11
Picnics	4.97	4.78	5.16
Sports	4.17	4.15	4.19
Third-party sponsored events	4.15	3.74	4.57
Fishing	2.47	2.49	2.44

<b>If funds were available, should the bath house/beach bathrooms be:</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non resident</b>
Removed and not replaced	2%	3%	1%
Replaced/redesigned	35%	35%	35%
Remodeled	47%	46%	49%
Left alone	14%	15%	12%
No Responses	2%	2%	3%

<b>If funds were available, should the bandshell be:</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non resident</b>
Removed and not replaced	3%	2%	4%
Replaced/redesigned	39%	44%	28%
Remodeled	36%	30%	47%
Left alone	21%	23%	18%
No Responses	1%	0%	3%

<b>If funds were available, should the concessions/bathroom by the ballfield be:</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non resident</b>
Removed and not replaced	2%	2%	2%
Replaced/redesigned	30%	32%	25%
Remodeled	44%	40%	51%
Left alone	22%	25%	18%
No Responses	2%	1%	4%

<b>If funds were available, should the children's playground by the children's beach be:</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non resident</b>
Removed and not replaced	0%	0%	0%
Replaced/redesigned	20%	18%	21%
Remodeled	31%	31%	33%
Left alone	48%	50%	42%
No Responses	2%	0%	4%

(scale: 4 = excellent; 3 = good; 2 = average; 1 = poor)

<b>How would you rate the condition of each of the following in The Commons?</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non resident</b>
Lawns/gardens/trees	2.87	2.76	3.10
Beach	2.74	2.66	2.90
Shoreline	2.70	2.64	2.81
Facilities (courts & playgrounds)	2.54	2.56	2.50
Facilities (buildings)	1.90	1.86	1.98

<b>Rank your interest in the following possible new features and enhancements for the Commons:</b>	<b>All</b>
Enhanced trails/sidewalks	5.94
Beach and water amenities	5.35
Seasonal beach café	5.27
Ice skating/hockey rink	4.86
Picnic shelter	4.68
Fishing pier	3.84
Dog park	3.24
Other/additional concessions	2.88

<b>In your opinion, is the Commons best thought of as:</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Residents</b>	<b>Non-residents</b>
Neighborhood park	20%	26%	7%
Community park	67%	62%	76%
Regional park	12%	11%	14%
No Responses	2%	1%	3%

<b>How would you describe usage in summer months?</b>	<b>All</b>
Too busy	15%
About right	69%
Not busy enough	11%
Other/No response	5%

<b>How would you describe usage during the off-season (October–April)?</b>	<b>All</b>
Too busy	0%
About right	37%
Not busy enough	59%
Other/No response	4%

# Excelsior Commons Master Planning Project



## **FOCUS GROUP BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

SEPTEMBER 2016

# The Commons – Today

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- The Commons is a 13-acre municipal park located in the heart of Excelsior.
- The park is composed of several distinct “use areas” including:
  1. The “Port”
  2. The docks
  3. Street edge/paved walkway
  4. Event/gathering lawn and band shell
  5. Scenic overlook areas
  6. Athletic courts/fields
  7. Picnic areas
  8. Beach/playground areas



# History of The Commons

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- The establishment of The Commons dates to the inception of Excelsior, appearing on the original plats in 1854 and 1855 as "Public Ground," with no other indication of its intended use.
- Since the 1870s, the Village/City Council and Park Board have leased portions of The Commons for various uses: bath houses, dance pavilion, casino/entertainment pavilion, boat works, commercial and resident docks, and restaurants.



# History of The Commons

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- In addition to formal leases, The Commons has informally been used for camping, picnics, baseball, and pageants, swimming, and concerts, among other uses.
- The physical landscape of The Commons has changed dramatically since its inception through extensive grading and filling of wetlands to create more useable land. A pedestrian wood boardwalk along the lake once connected the Port/Excelsior Docks with the beach area.



# The Commons - Infrastructure

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The physical infrastructure of The Commons includes:

- Bandshell
- Concession stand with restrooms
- Bathhouse with restrooms
- Three playground areas
- Softball diamond (lighted)
- Two tennis courts (lighted)
- Basketball court
- Two beaches
- Benches, picnic tables and grills

The Commons has 110 adjacent, metered parking stalls.

Because Excelsior does not have a Parks & Recreation department, The Commons is maintained by the City's Public Works Department.



# The Commons – Use & Permitting

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- The Commons draws tens of thousand of visitors annually and often hosts large, regional events such as the 4th of July and Art on the Lake.
- Current City policy requires that certain activities obtain a permit, including events that amplify sound, require street closures, assemble more than 10 people on City property, or impact neighboring properties.
- Permit fees range from \$60 for organized use of athletic fields, to \$150 for "minimal impact" events of less than 100 participants, to \$1,000 for "major impact" events. (Event organizers may pay more than \$1,000 if they serve alcohol, reserve parking meters or sell tickets)
- The City does not currently have a use policy or screening criteria/process by which to approve/deny permit requests. Applications are decided on a first come, first-served basis and are usually approved.



## Data Sources

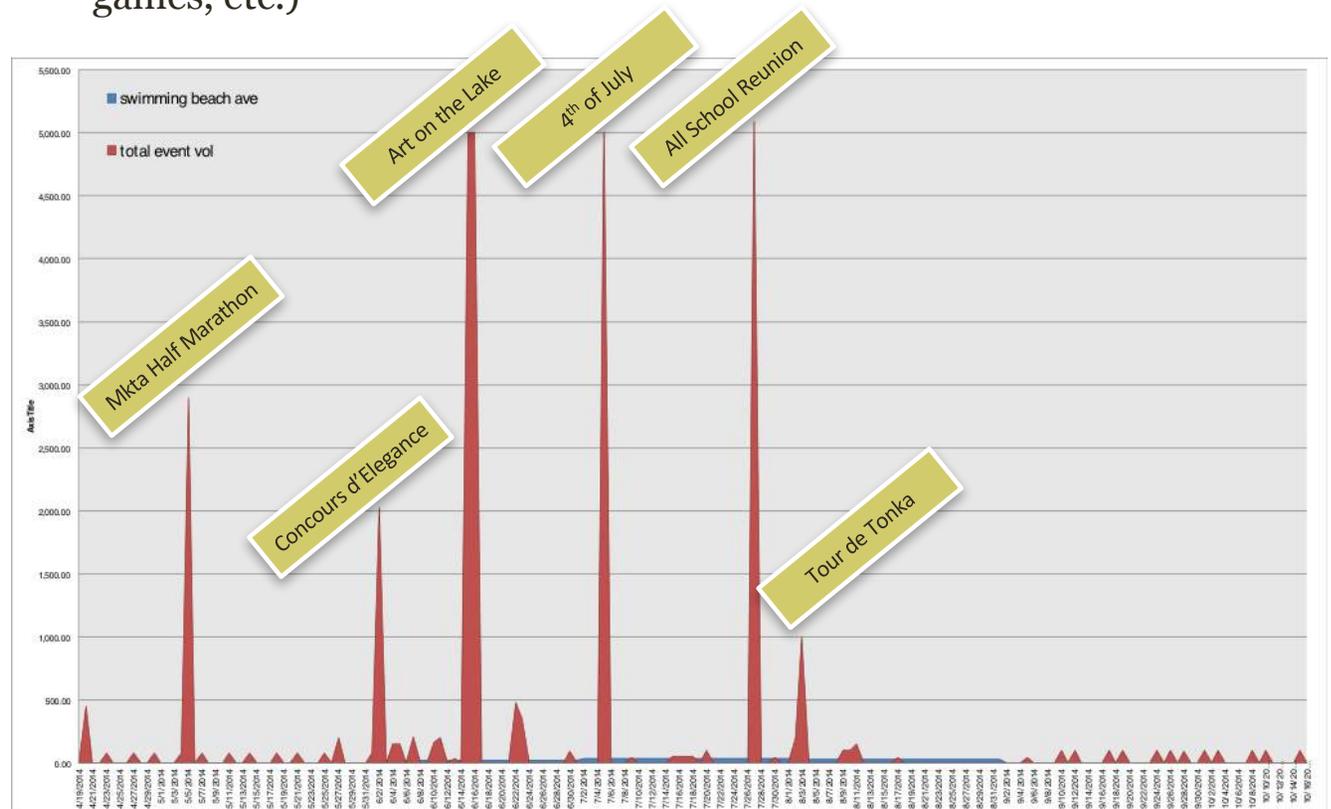
Use data for The Commons is officially collected in two ways:

1. Permit application data
2. Monthly lifeguard reports of beach usage

Using these data sources, it is possible to graph the levels and seasonality of permitted traffic in The Commons.

### Observations (2014 data)

- Use is highly concentrated during summer months.
- No permits were requested between November and April.
- Six events were responsible for the vast majority of permitted traffic.
- Almost all the other 48 permitted events had attendance under 100, with a couple closer to 500.
- In addition to specific events, there are generally scheduled activities in The Commons every day June–August (tennis lessons, softball games, etc.)



# The Commons - Condition

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An **independent study of the condition of The Commons** was conducted in summer 2016 by SRF Consulting Group. The study identified issues and opportunities to:

- Improve user experiences
- Update amenities and accommodations
- Reduce operations and maintenance costs for the City of Excelsior

Report is available at:

<http://www.ci.excelsior.mn.us/DocumentCenter/View/918>

# The Commons – Budget Picture

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## 2016 Figures

- **Excelsior's General Fund annual revenue = \$2M**
  - \$1.3M of the \$2M (65%) comes from local property tax
  - Of the \$1.3M, 66% comes from residents and 34% from commercial property
- **The Parks & Rec allotment is \$208K, or approximately 10% of the City's budget.** The Commons comprises 95% of this budget.
- **Revenue generated in the park** (from concerts, equipment rental, docks, etc.) **is *not* specifically dedicated to The Commons.**

# The Commons – New Potential Sources of Revenue

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## City Funds

- In summer 2016, the City Council committed to increasing the Park Improvement Fund from \$25K to \$100K per year (contingent on approval of proposed residential dock extension).
- Excelsior's new electronic parking meters are expected to generate significantly more revenue for the City, some of which could be allocated to initiatives in The Commons.
- Park dedication funds, collected when property in Excelsior is subdivided.

## Private Funds

- A nonprofit park conservancy, Community for The Commons, was recently formed to solicit private funds for City-approved projects in The Commons.



**New revenue sources will ensure that the Master Plan vision becomes reality.**

# Addendum C: Focus Group Questions & Locations

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## City of Excelsior • Community input on the Commons Focus group questions

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### 15 minutes

- Introductions / Social time

### 15 minutes

- Brief review of leveling doc
- What characteristics set Excelsior apart from other towns? What attributes do you value the most?

### 10 minutes

Successful design identifies the key customer and desired scale of use. Who is the primary “customer” of The Commons from your perspective? What is our desired scale of use? With that in mind, do you think the Commons is best thought of as a:

- Neighborhood park – primarily for the benefit of Excelsior residents & businesses
- Community park – for the benefit of South Lake Minnetonka residents & businesses
- Regional park for the benefit of Twin Cities residents and businesses

### 15 minutes

- How does The Commons contribute to your enjoyment of Excelsior?
- Do any activities/usage detract from your enjoyment of Excelsior?

### 20 minutes

- Over time, the layout of The Commons has evolved in eight distinct use zones: 1. Port, 2. Docks, 3. Street edge walkway, 4. Event lawn/band shell, 5. Scenic overlook area, 6. Athletic courts/fields, 7. Picnic area, 8. Beach/playground. (Have poster of use areas as reference)
- Do you think space in the park is allocated appropriately? If not, what changes would you make to the use zones?
- Is there anything missing from the park?
- Which items do you think should be the highest priority to address?

### 5 minutes

- It has come up from time to time that we charge a user fee for some uses, say the beach. Would you welcome this, and do you think it’s viable?

### 10 minutes

- Is there anything else you want to share with the Master Planning Work Group?