

Town Branch Commons:

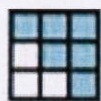
*Bringing the Bluegrass into
The Heart of Lexington*

Strategic Master Plan – Executive Summary

Vision, Governance & Sustainability



PREPARED FOR



Lexington
Downtown
Development
Authority

PREPARED BY



21st
CENTURY
PARKS

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Executive Summary

Great cities have, and preserve, great parks. 21st Century Parks sees the creation and preservation of unexcelled urban parklands and public spaces as one of this century's critical issues of urban planning and infrastructure development. **The 21st century will be an urban century and those cities that build and sustain great park systems will themselves be sustainable and provide a firm foundation for healthy, diverse, economically viable communities.**

As a part of our mission we have developed a process to share what we have learned—in the development and financing of one of the largest fully funded metropolitan parks projects in the country—with others who seek to use parks and public spaces as “city-shaping infrastructure” to help make their communities great places to live and to work. We have found that parks can do many things for a city—create and sustain community, fuel economic development, support the environment and help to create healthy urban ecology, diversify recreation for all ability levels and age groups, improve human health and wellness, redevelop the urban core, and advance educational attainment. We have also learned that parks can only achieve and sustain this impact if the leadership of the project, in its early stages, focuses on the following key issues:

- A clear sense of the **audiences** a new park will serve including specific program elements to deliver that service effectively, and with a clear sense of how to connect and provide access to these audiences.
- A carefully selected menu of park infrastructure and **amenities** to serve these audiences, along with a commitment to high quality, world-class planning, design, and construction.
- A clearly articulated **governance model** defining the roles and responsibilities for the different stakeholders and authorities involved.
- A **sustainable** business plan for operating the park. Parks that are not safe, clean, and tended over the long-term, do not honor the original vision of their founders.

21st Century Parks was engaged by The Lexington Downtown Development Authority (“LDDA”) in early 2014 to collaborate on a strategic master plan to lay the foundations for a world-class planning, design, and construction project that will create both a core central park and connective linear park system that extends through the heart of downtown Lexington, linking the eastern and western edges of the city, and bringing the classic bluegrass landscape into the heart of Lexington. The procedures we used included regional market analysis, site visitation, and most importantly, the deployment of 21st Century Parks’ proprietary strategic master planning process focused on project amenities and audiences, governance, and long-term sustainability as critical pre-design components for a successful urban park system. Our plan builds upon and adds a complimentary strategic agenda to the superb park Master Plan, “*Reviving Town Branch Commons*”, authored by SCAPE/Landscape Architecture PLLC/New York.

We anticipate that this report will be used to guide the LDDA board, the park’s design team and community stakeholders as they implement their plans for Town Branch Commons. As both guiding

document and playbook, this report should provide the leadership group with confidence in its vision as well as an understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in its successful implementation.

Project Touchstones

Details of our recommended strategies for park governance, sustainability, and amenity priorities are contained in this plan, but we also see three vital touchstones for this project:

- **Validation:** The idea of a world-class, city-shaping core park and linear downtown greenway that promotes healthy and active downtown living, showcases the region's ecology, catalyzes economic development, and becomes the key piece of integrating infrastructure for connecting Lexington's existing parks and urban trail systems, is a wonderful and realizable vision. Speaking as someone who has done this, it can work, and it can happen!
- **University Transformation:** The metamorphic and connective impact that a world-class level Town Branch Commons will deliver as "new front doors" to the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University campuses is so great that these institutions must be acknowledged and embraced as key park audiences and involved as essential stakeholders in this project.
- **Realism:** The very long-term nature of this project must be recognized as a challenge to the park's enduring sustainability; the reality is that new public administrations often change and abandon the priorities of previous administrations. A strong park governance structure and a realistic, sustainable funding model will allow Town Branch Commons to forge a consistent, integrated identity, and to maintain focus on long-term priorities through the inevitable changes in administrative leadership.

Recommendations Summary – Key Strategic Goals

This Strategic Plan focuses on six key strategic goals. We have included the immediate action steps supporting each goal in the Recommendations Section of this report. Keep in mind that the supporting tactics will naturally adjust as the project moves from design, to construction, and then to sustaining operations. A laser-like focus on the following six strategic goals will allow the Town Branch Commons team to create a park that is a unique and cherished resource not only for Lexington, but for the surrounding Bluegrass region.

1. *Move quickly to formalize a leadership council to take action on these recommendations, and push the project forward. The group should continue to recruit community leaders, as well as to build awareness of the importance, and the goals, of the project ahead of the public capital campaign.*
2. *Articulate amenity and park design priorities, and the mix of amenities required to serve the desired, Lexington-wide audiences.*

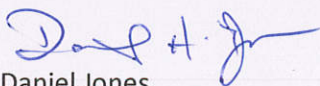
3. *The Mayor, the Urban County Council, and the Leadership Council pledge to pursue a \$75 million funding target for the design, construction and completion of the park system, including underwriting of the first ten years of park operating expenses. Efforts are already under way to pursue local and federal transportation funds to build the initial infrastructure for the project.*
4. *The Blue Grass Community Foundation should begin incubating a Non-Profit Conservancy to manage and maintain the park upon completion. The project should engage likely future executive leadership of the park operations in the early stages of design and construction. (For a complete discussion of governance model recommendations, please refer to [Appendix 1.](#))*
5. *Assess and complete right-of-way acquisitions, enact land protections, and codify design guidelines for the parks to ensure a 100 year Olmsted quality landscape and design legacy for the park system.*
6. *Commit to the establishment of a first-rate park maintenance and operations organization. This structure should focus on delivering services that ensure park conditions and user experiences that are consistently safe, clean, fun, and pleasing for visitors. This consistently great visitor experience becomes the “brand” of the park.*

One final note – personal leadership matters. A great number of visionary and extraordinary park plans are drafted each year to the master plan level. The few that get built are those where a small group of individuals doggedly pursue execution. We see this group in existence around Town Branch Commons. Thanks to an active and expanding group of passionate community stakeholders, the support of the Blue Grass Community Foundation, the strong involvement of the city, and the project management expertise of Lexington Downtown Development Authority, there exists a rare alignment of passion, commitment and professionalism to bring this project to fruition; this should not be taken for granted or allowed to wither on the vine. An intentional project to develop awareness and a key group of community leaders are essential to the long term success of this project!

It is our sincere hope that this strategic master plan will support and fuel the excitement of all stakeholders about the project, as their vision to create a truly transformative, city-shaping park takes form.

I look forward to continuing our conversation about your exciting project and ultimately being a member of the team that makes the vision of Town Branch Commons into reality. Should you have any questions, please contact me at dj@21cparks.org or at 502-584-0350.

Sincerely,



Daniel Jones

President and Chief Executive Officer,
21st Century Parks, Inc.

A Park Vision of Lexington in 2025

It is sometimes difficult to foresee the ways in which well-designed, well-kept, urban parks become transformative spaces that shape cities and neighborhoods, and differentiate the special from the mundane. With that in mind, imagine, for a moment, that ten years from now you could be drifting over Lexington, on a warm spring day, in a hot air balloon, and pass over one of its most transformed spaces, Town Branch Commons, a heavily used urban park etched through the heart of downtown.



Your gentle ride starts outside of Lexington on a sunny Saturday morning; drifting slowly eastwards, the first view is the famous Bluegrass region of Kentucky, with its tree groves, rolling horse farms, sinkholes, and distinctive limestone outcrops and stone walls. Our first glimpse of activity is of bikers on the Legacy Trail: a long, steady stream of colorful shirts engaged in a bike ride fundraiser for a local charity. As we glide over the urban edge and approach downtown, a most remarkable view unfolds: a classic American downtown cut—right

down the middle—with a startling swath of green: Town Branch Commons.

We dip low over the Lexington Hollows section, where the early morning sun glints off the revealed Town Branch stream, a sliver of silver tracing lightly through the fields and hardscapes of Lexington's very own "central park." Even this early, activity abounds: on the Hollow's Great Lawn, two groups of soccer players have set up cones and small nets for pickup games, a couple throws a Frisbee, and runners, walkers and bikers pass through on the numerous paths circling and bisecting the park. Several families with children are huddled around one of the pools in the stream where a naturalist leads a small class as part of a city outdoor education program. Caterers are setting up tents for a series of lunches later that day, and a large picnic pavilion hosts the finish line checkpoint for the charity bike run we passed over outside the city. A temporary stage remains at the edge of the event terrace from an outdoor bluegrass concert the night before. It's a quiet corner of the park this morning, but one that comes alive on game days with thousands of enthusiastic students gathering, tailgating and celebrating.

Equally remarkable in this changed landscape is the line of restaurants with outdoor tables lining the edge of the park. Several new downtown residential buildings are observable and two large cranes herald another round of development. Parking lots for weekday downtown businesses are beginning to fill up with suburban walkers and bikers

attracted downtown for a day in the city's beloved recreational greenway. You also notice that UK and Transylvania University students are trickling out of nearby campus neighborhoods on the connective streets and paths leading to the Vine Street Greenway and Karst Commons park sections, popular hubs for lunches, browsing galleries, recreation, and active downtown living.



As we drift further east, car traffic mingles easily with bikers and joggers in a vibrant downtown streetscape. One large group of bikers is just pulling out from a small restroom and gathering pavilion where they met to launch a long ride along the Town Branch and Legacy Trails, now elegantly linked across the city.

While the infrastructure of inviting lawns, plazas and paths is impressive, equally inspiring is the sense of a natural place in the middle of the city. Lines of trees below trace the riparian corridor of Town Branch, which pools and then flows along riffles through the park, bringing the bluegrass, and nature, into the heart of Lexington. Elegant patches of formal plantings mix with small groves of trees and even some shrubby natural areas along the creek. A lone bird watcher is intent on some resident ducks in the stream.



As we pass over the park's Eastern Headwaters, we spy community gardeners at work, before tracing the bike path as it weaves east of the city, providing access to suburban areas and the beautiful agricultural landscape beyond, for which Lexington is famous. The most remarkable aspect of the entire journey has been the way in which the park—still



only a decade old—has woven itself into the urban fabric of Lexington and shaped the city's urban geography, and its urban culture, while tying that to the wonderful history of Lexington and the natural bluegrass landscape that both underlies it, and has shaped its economy and its people from the city's beginning.

Project Timeline

The timeline below has been developed specifically for this project and assumes optional conditions and a park opening sometime in during Year 3. Delays in the governance, design and capital funding stages may make it necessary to readjust the timeline. One immediate recommendation would be to request a proposal for design and construction documents from the architects to expedite the process once the overall vision and plan are approved by the LDDA board. Consistent and visible progress in the execution of the plan will help tremendously in building public support and in keeping the outstanding community leadership team motivated.

