

ISSUE 3

2026 TRENDS IN PARKS & RECREATION CONSTRUCTION:

HOW PUBLIC SPACES ARE EVOLVING TO SERVE MORE PEOPLE IN MORE WAYS



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01:** PARKS ARE GETTING SMARTER
- 02:** MULTI-USE TRAILS ARE HIGH-RETURN INVESTMENTS
- 03:** AGENCIES ARE TURNING TO JOB ORDER CONTRACTING TO MOVE FASTER
- 04:** GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE IS INTEGRATED INTO DESIGN
- 05:** RECREATION CENTERS ARE GOING HYBRID

What used to be considered nice-to-have amenities are now central to how communities are helping their residents stay healthy, safe, and connected.

In 2026, public parks and recreation agencies across the country are adapting to new procurement methods. They are building outdoor and indoor spaces that serve more needs, work for more users, and cost less to maintain. Park District Directors and Board Members are moving beyond simple playgrounds and ballfields. They are now managing complex ecosystems that include flood mitigation, digital connectivity, and intergenerational wellness centers.

From sensory-friendly design to smart irrigation, this guide outlines the five trends shaping parks and recreation construction and improvements for 2026.

PARKS ARE GETTING SMARTER

Maintenance teams can no longer be everywhere at once. That is why lighting, irrigation, and security are being upgraded with connected, automated technology.

Agencies are moving away from scheduled timers and toward sensor-based systems. Smart irrigation now reads soil moisture levels and weather forecasts in real time, preventing sprinklers from running during a rainstorm. This alone saves millions of gallons of water annually for larger districts.

Security is also evolving. New lighting systems boost safety by brightening automatically when motion is detected, while staying dim to save energy when paths are empty. These upgrades reduce operating costs and allow staff to monitor park conditions from a tablet rather than a truck.

THE EFFICIENCY OF AUTOMATION: WAYS SMART TECH PAYS OFF

MASSIVE MARKET GROWTH:
The demand for smart irrigation is skyrocketing, with the market projected to grow at over 18% annually through 2030 as districts prioritize water conservation.

SENSOR PRECISION:
Sensor-based systems now make up 56% of the market, allowing maintenance teams to rely on real-time soil data rather than guesswork.

FEDERAL SUPPORT:
The U.S. EPA is channeling billions into modern water infrastructure, validating the shift toward systems that reduce waste and runoff.



MULTI-USE TRAILS ARE HIGH-RETURN INVESTMENTS

Trails are no longer just for leisure on the weekends. They are becoming critical transportation infrastructure. Walk/bike trails that link schools, transit, and neighborhoods are becoming top-priority projects for local governments.

THE ECONOMICS OF CONNECTION: TRAILS THAT DRIVE GROWTH

PROPERTY VALUE BOOST:

Studies consistently show that proximity to bike paths and trails increases local property values and desirability. (*Journal of Leisure Research.*)

CONNECTIVITY EQUALS USAGE:

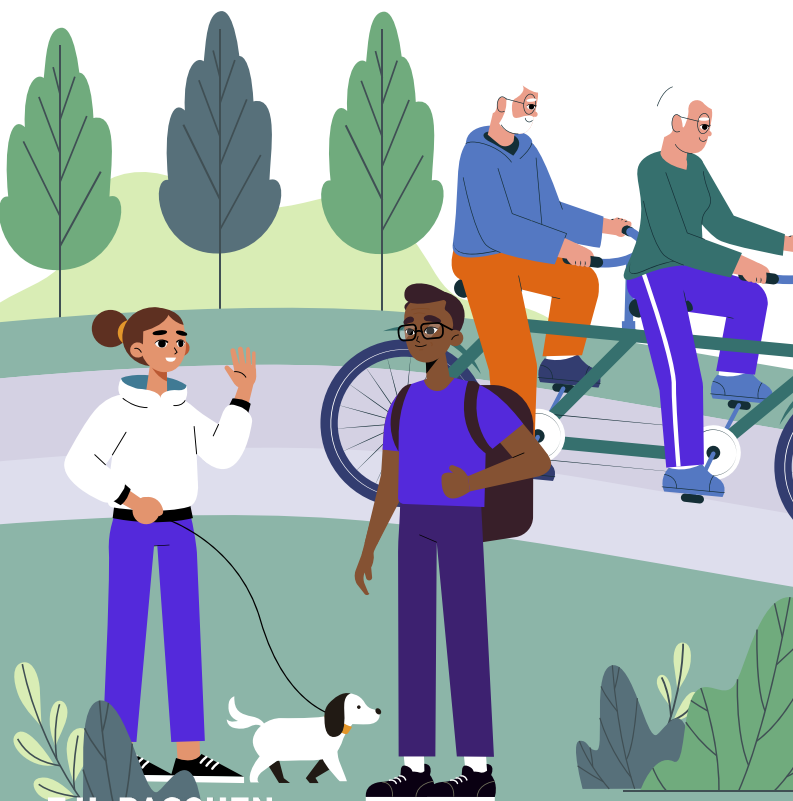
When isolated trails are connected to form a network, usage can increase by as much as 80%, maximizing the public's return on investment. (*"America's Trail Networks Are Essential" published by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC)*)

A SOLID INVESTMENT:

In Wisconsin alone, bicycle-related industries and infrastructure support over 28,000 jobs and generate \$5.36 billion in economic output. (*Economic Impact of Bicycling in Wisconsin Report. Published by Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT).*)

Communities are demanding safe routes that separate pedestrians and cyclists from vehicle traffic. This is driving a boom in "connector" projects including short trail segments that bridge the gap between existing paths, subdivisions, and train stations.

For construction teams, this means managing linear projects that run through backyards and sensitive environments. The payoff is high: these trails increase property values and offer a measurable boost to local economic activity by bringing foot traffic to business corridors.



F.H. PASCHEN

WESTCHESTER-LIBRARY TRAIL: CLOSING THE GAP IN CHESTERON, INDIANA

THE MISSING LINK: F.H. Paschen recently completed a crucial 0.45-mile segment that finally connects the Prairie Duneland Trail to the Dunes Kankakee Trail, creating a continuous regional loop.

SAFE COMMUTES FOR STUDENTS: This isn't just for recreation; it is a safe route for daily life. The trail links neighborhoods directly to Chesterton High School and Dogwood Park, allowing students to get to class and practice without walking on busy roads.

REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY: By filling this specific gap, the project unites a network that stretches from Hobart to the Indiana Dunes. It proves that short, strategic "connector" projects can unlock miles of value for the entire region.

HOW PARK DISTRICTS ARE USING JOC

END-OF-YEAR FUNDING

Use "spend it or lose it" funds on ready-to-go projects, avoiding the long traditional bid process.

TIME-SENSITIVE PROJECTS

When a project must be done now, JOC bypasses the months-long bidding cycle, allowing work to start in days.

LIMITED SCHEDULING WINDOW PROJECTS

Perfect for schools and public buildings. JOC allows teams to complete projects during short breaks (like winter or spring break).

REPLACEMENT PROJECTS

When a critical piece of equipment like a boiler or HVAC unit fails, JOC provides a pre-approved contractor to replace it immediately.

AUGMENT IN-HOUSE STAFF

When your in-house team is overloaded or lacks a specific skill, JOC brings in qualified crews to handle the work, acting as an extension of your staff.

REMEDIATION WORK

For unexpected issues like mold or water damage, JOC allows for a rapid response to assess, contain, and complete repairs.

PARKS & PLAYGROUNDS

A simple way to manage ongoing upgrades, from installing new playground equipment to repairing pathways and facilities.

LEED IMPROVEMENTS

JOC can be used to manage multiple small-scale green upgrades, like new lighting or low-flow fixtures, to help buildings meet sustainability goals.

ADA UPGRADES

Efficiently complete accessibility upgrades across multiple buildings, such as installing ramps, updating restrooms, or adding handrails.

PUNCH LIST

Hire a trusted JOC contractor to complete leftover items from a previous project that another contractor failed to finish.

AGENCIES ARE TURNING TO JOB ORDER CONTRACTING TO MOVE FASTER

More park districts and recreation departments are using Job Order Contracting (JOC) to deliver small-to-midsize projects with greater speed and flexibility.

Whether it is repairing trail segments, replacing shelter roofs, or upgrading park lighting, JOC allows agencies to bypass long bid cycles while still staying compliant. Instead of bidding out every single repair, agencies use a single, competitively awarded contract to handle a steady stream of work.

This is critical for seasonal readiness. If a pool deck needs repair in April, a traditional bid might push construction into July. With JOC, the work can start in weeks, ensuring the facility is ready when the kids get out of school.



GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE IS INTEGRATED INTO DESIGN

Stormwater management is no longer something you hide underground. Permeable surfaces, native plants, and stormwater features are showing up in most new projects.

Midwest communities are dealing with more intense rainfall. Parks are now serving double duty as flood mitigation zones. Engineers and landscape architects are designing recessed ballfields and rain gardens that

hold water during storms to keep it out of residents' basements.

This shifts the construction scope. It requires precise grading and knowledge of native plantings that have deep root systems. These features reduce mowing costs and create habitats for pollinators, turning functional drainage into a community asset.

RECREATION CENTERS ARE GOING HYBRID

The single-use gym is disappearing. From e-sports rooms to indoor walking tracks, new centers are blending fitness, tech, and community.

Agencies are building facilities that serve a toddler in the morning, a teen after school, and a senior in the evening. This means flexible "flex" rooms that can host a yoga class at 9 AM and a community meeting at 7 PM.

Technology is a major driver. New centers include dedicated e-sports lounges to engage teenagers who might not play traditional sports. At the same time, indoor walking tracks are being expanded to serve the active senior population, making the rec center a true multi-generational hub.



MCCOLLUM PARK'S SUSTAINABLE SHIFT: GREEN UPGRADES IN DOWNERS GROVE



ENERGY-EFFICIENT COURT LIGHTING:

The renovated complex, featuring 8 dedicated pickleball courts and 6 tennis courts, installed high-efficiency LED lighting to significantly reduce energy consumption while extending evening play hours.



WATER-SMART SPRAYGROUND:

Unlike older "pump and dump" splash pads that waste millions of gallons, the new Adventure Falls sprayground uses a state-of-the-art recirculation system that filters, treats, and recycles water continuously.



STORMWATER STRATEGY:

Recent infrastructure renovations focused on improving drainage and managing stormwater runoff, building on the park's long-term role as a key detention basin for the surrounding watershed.



HEAT MITIGATION:

The addition of new fabric shade structures over spectator and concession areas reduces the urban heat island effect and cuts down on the energy needed to cool nearby facilities.



DESIGNING FOR ALL AGES: THE MULTI-GENERATIONAL SHIFT

THE TOWERS TRENDS:

Playgrounds and rec centers are going vertical with "tower" structures that appeal to older kids and tweens, keeping them engaged in active play longer.

INCLUSIVE PLAY:

2026 designs are moving beyond minimum ADA compliance to create "social spaces" where children of all abilities can play together, not just side-by-side.

FLEXIBLE PROGRAMMING:

Facilities are shifting toward "hybrid" layouts that allow spaces to transition from fitness studios to community meeting rooms, maximizing utility per square foot.

Parks define the character of a community. They are where neighbors meet and where families grow.

F.H. Paschen brings decades of experience to these public spaces. As a premier JOC contractor and a builder of complex recreational facilities, we know how to work around busy seasons and active public sites. We help agencies maximize their budgets to deliver parks that last.

Let's build spaces that bring people together.





5515 N. East River Rd. Chicago, IL 60656
www.fhпасchen.com | 773.444.3474