Prior to 2012, the Hart County Recreation Department had never gone through a comprehensive planning process to guide capital spending or program development. The Hart County Archway Partnership and Recreation Department had been frequent partners, with UGA landscape architecture interns developing a number of designs and renderings for county recreation facilities. In early 2012, Recreation Director Jim Owens and County Administrator Jon Caime approached the Hart County Archway Partnership to request help with collecting community input and developing a comprehensive plan for recreation in Hart County.

After visiting with several other recreation departments to learn about their planning efforts, Owens and Archway Professional Ilka McConnell formed a small committee to outline a timeline and milestones for the planning process. They met with the Recreation Advisory Board to hear their ideas and worked with them to develop an updated mission statement for the Hart County Recreation Department. McConnell and Archway Partnership public administration graduate student Megan Miller facilitated two public community input meetings, with Recreation Advisory Board members serving as table facilitators. Miller led a youth focus group with the assistance of Hart County 4-H Specialist Brandi Shiflet. Public opinions and ideas were also gathered through online and paper surveys. In total, roughly 200 local residents provided feedback during the community input process.

The work of Owens, Recreation Advisory Board members, and the Hart County Archway Partnership not only engaged the public, but also saved the County money. McConnell documented the community input, conducted a benchmark survey of neighboring and similar recreation departments, and incorporated existing park designs to create a comprehensive master plan document. Archway graduate assistant Rosanna Cruz provided graphic design for the plan. County Administrator Caime estimates: “To hire a consultant to do this plan would have cost in the neighborhood of $35,000-$50,000. The impact of this plan will be far reaching for Hart County in quality of life as well as financial.” More importantly, he asserts, “This plan will help guide the recreation of Hart County for the coming decade with both capital investments and program development. For the first time in our history, we will have a plan developed by the community through community input to guide us in the development of the recreation programs that are important to the community.”

As Owens observes: “Our Long Range Master Plan document will never be complete. The document has been designed to be an ever-changing and evolving process as the needs and desires of the citizens of Hart County change and evolve. I look forward to working with Archway in the future to move forward with the implementation of the plans outlined in our Master Plan.”

Advancing Community Priorities: Planning and visioning for the future is one of the key community priorities identified to focus the efforts of the Hart County Archway Partnership. Assisting the Hart County Recreation Department by engaging the public in recreation planning for the future furthers this priority by creating a community vision and a roadmap. This plan will help to guide future capital and programmatic budgeting for recreation in Hart County and improve local recreation opportunities.