

# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Project Overview and Objectives

As one of the fastest growing cities in Oklahoma, Owasso has made the transition from a small agricultural community into a diverse city in which thousands of residents make their home. Alongside this rapid growth in population, the city has experienced dynamic growth in business and retail opportunities. As Owasso has grown and changed, so have the needs of its residents as they look to their community to become the place where they can work and enjoy time with family and friends. As a result, Owasso's services and amenities must also evolve to meet the needs of citizens. The Owasso Quality of Life Initiative is intended to create a long-term vision that will guide the city's growth as a sustainable and desirable place to live and work.

The primary goal of this effort is to improve and promote quality of life elements and activities that will help expand the livability of the community for its residents, and serve as an encouragement to those who want to become part of an exceptional community. The Quality of Life Initiative will be part of the city's comprehensive planning efforts to incorporate characteristics that are associated with livability. It represents a unique opportunity to create community gathering places, and to integrate and expand parks and recreation throughout the city in a creative manner that improves upon the quality of life enjoyed by residents. It will increase accessibility to natural landscapes and amenities not currently available within the city.

A key component of this initiative is to build upon the community strengths in which Owasso already excels, and then to create an innovative vision to add the missing ingredients that can elevate the city from "really good" to "great." Ultimately, the objective is to plan quality of life amenities that result in the attitude of *"I wouldn't want to live anywhere else!"*

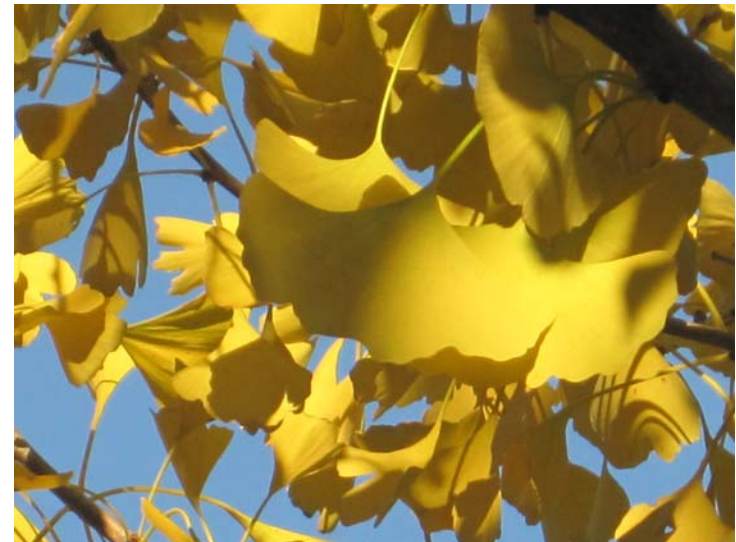




Figure 1: Owasso Location Map

## 1.2 What is Quality of Life?

Defining what the phrase *Quality of Life* means is fundamental to this planning initiative. There are a myriad of definitions for this phrase and it can take on a different meaning for every person. Some of the elements that are usually associated with good quality of life include good schools, walking / biking trails, recreational opportunities, nice parks, scenic open spaces and attractive architecture and landscape features. Quality of life also generally includes cultural facilities, community gathering places and art. Basic elements such as affordable housing and well-maintained streets can also be considered to improve quality of life.

*Expansion Management* ranks quality of life for communities by evaluating the following criteria:

- Standard of Living
- Quality of Workforce
- Lack of Traffic Congestion
- Quality of Schools
- Adult Education Levels
- Housing Affordability
- Continuing Education
- Access to Air Travel
- Peace of Mind

In reality, quality of life is highly subjective and an individual choice. It can include intangibles like a sense of well being or security. Ultimately, it is the way that Owasso's residents answer this question that matters most to allow for the creation of a vision that meets their goals. A major focus of this study has centered on involving Owasso's citizens toward this end.





*There are many definitions for quality of life; however, for purposes of this project it is defined as “the things in your community that you take pride in and enjoy”.*

### 1.3 Why is Quality of Life Important?

A recent television news segment highlighted a ranking of communities with populations under 50,000. A joint effort by CNN, Fortune and Money magazines produced *BEST PLACES TO LIVE - Money's list of America's best small towns*. The top small communities offered great school systems, short drives to larger metropolitan cities, strong economies with good jobs, great healthcare, low crime rates, plenty of shopping and Americana with a small town feel, and in almost every case, numerous recreational opportunities for their residents. Here are some brief looks at what the top five most livable small towns in America have to offer: #1 – Louisville, CO – “The top reason residents give for moving here? The great outdoors - Louisville is laced with nearly 30 miles of trails, Rocky Mountain National Park is less than an hour away, and eight world-class ski resorts are within two hours.” #2 – Chanhassen, MN – “The town has 11 lakes, 34 parks, and the 1,047-acre Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.” #3 – Papillion, NE – “Papillion has acres of open space. Last year the town opened Sumpter Amphitheater, a \$1.5 million performing arts center that hosts free movies, concerts, and wine tastings. And a new AAA baseball stadium is planned for 2011.” #4 – Middleton, WI – “The town has a 1,000-acre network of parks, bike paths, and running and cross-country ski trails.” #5 – Milton, MA – “Milton is full of historic homes, tree-lined streets, and well-tended gardens, plus lots of parks and playgrounds.”

Owasso has all the requisite amenities of these great communities except for one key missing ingredient – standout recreation, health, and entertainment features. Granted, some of the lo-

cales that were recognized are blessed with incredible physical settings, but many that aren't have made up for their locations with man made amenities for all to enjoy. Whether it is a network of trails and bike paths, a festival park and amphitheater, a sports park makeover, a nature center, a water park, or simply key enhancements to existing parks, Owasso can benefit in the decades ahead from the differentiating recreational and aesthetic features that create real quality of life. Owasso has spent the last fifteen years allocating a major portion of Capital Improvement funds to streets, water, wastewater, and public safety. Owasso's school system is top notch. Healthcare options are tremendous. Owasso has excellent shopping and a small town feel, and at the same time has quick access to everything Tulsa has to offer. *What Owasso doesn't have are those key amenities that make new generations feel that this is where they want to raise their families; those features that can be shown off to visitors and that catch the attention of prospective new residents.*

Owasso has so much to be proud of and thankful for, but could benefit even more with those “quality of life” amenities that create pride of ownership and the attitude of “We wouldn't want to live anywhere else. We love living and playing in Owasso.” **“Quality of Life” includes not only the previously mentioned basics, but also the well planned recreational and cultural features that give the community a “wow” factor. Accessibility to parks, activities, and nature has a tremendous impact on the overall quality of lifestyle.**

The high value placed upon outdoor recreation is evident when you drive by Centennial Park on a nice day. It is not uncommon

to see twenty or more cars in the parking lot that belong to people enjoying one of the community's nicest trail systems or our new disc golf course. Many are typically enjoying the children's playground or fishing in the small lake there. Or you see it when you drive by Rayola Park on a warm day and note that the new splash park is literally brimming with small children enjoying the water features there. You see it in the busloads and families spending hours upon hours at the Sports Park or at Funtastic Island, the culmination of a great citywide team efforts. However, to stay on the leading edge when it comes to retaining and attracting families to Owasso, the community needs much more than a few nice parks and a place for children to play ball.

Creating excellent quality of life goes far beyond aesthetics and amenities for its residents; there are significant economic benefits as well. It has been demonstrated many times in the Tulsa area alone that quality of life plays a major role in attracting and retaining jobs. Oklahoma City also provides a strong example that substantial private investment has followed the community's decision to invest in their downtown through the MAPS program.

With the increased mobility of today's businesses, they often decide to locate their companies in areas with a high quality of life (such as natural amenities). Two of the fastest growing sectors in the economy, people working in knowledge-based industries and retirees, often have a choice of where to live. Surveys have consistently identified natural amenities and recreational opportunities as key factors determining where entrepreneurs and retirees choose to locate. For companies relocating a relatively high percentage of professional talent, quality of life issues

can be a critical factor. Quality of life will directly impact the ability of a company to entice people to move with the job. For national recruiting, it can make the difference in whether or not they can attract the best talent.

Real estate industry analysts also confirm quality of life as a determining factor in real estate values and economic vitality. One 1998 industry report calls livability "a litmus test for determining the strength of the real estate investment market. If people want to live in place, companies, stores, hotels and apartments will follow." A 1996 report by Arthur Anderson Consulting Company found that executives increasingly choose to work in locations that offer a high quality of life outside of the workplace. Availability of education was also found to be of prime importance, and not far behind were recreation, cultural institutions and a safe environment. Proximity to open space was considered an important benefit, too.

Across the United States, parks and open space are increasingly recognized as vital to the quality of life levels that fuel economic health. Convenient access to parks and open space has become an important measure of community wealth - an important way to attract businesses and residents by guaranteeing both quality of life and economic vitality. According to *Attracting Investment*, (The Trust for Public Land) corporate CEOs say that quality of life is the third most important factor in locating a business, behind only access to domestic markets and availability of skilled labor.

## 1.4 Planning Process

The consulting team (Alaback Design Associates and Guy Engineering Services) met regularly throughout the project's duration with a committed group of City of Owasso representatives. An essential part of the project's scope was the integration of community participation throughout the entire planning process. Obtaining meaningful public input was critical to ensure that the plans created reflected the desires of the citizens. The following summary provides an overview of the major steps in the planning process to develop the Owasso Quality of Life Initiative:

- **EXISTING CONDITIONS INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS**

The first major phase of the planning effort was an analysis of city-wide features that had the potential to influence future quality of life improvements, with a focus on parks / trails, community gathering places and youth sports. This inventory also included an evaluation of the existing sidewalk system and opportunities for streetscape enhancement.

- **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND OUTREACH**

A primary focus for this initiative was to engage the citizens of Owasso in a significant participation effort. The main objective for public outreach was to clearly identify the type of community that Owasso residents desire for their future. Working closely with City of Owasso staff, the project team facilitated a series of five community workshops to allow residents to express their goals, desires and concerns for Owasso's future growth. A web-based civic engagement

campaign, developed in conjunction with Wikiplanning, also allowed for citizen input over a three-month period. Additional efforts to gain community feedback included a workshop with Owasso's 7th grade students and a half-day workshop with City of Owasso department leaders.

- **DEVELOPMENT OF PROPOSED QUALITY OF LIFE PLAN**

Based upon the information learned from the analysis and community outreach tasks, a preliminary plan was developed for proposed quality of life enhancements. The plan establishes a long-range vision for the community to reach the objectives outlined earlier in this chapter. Specific products for this task include a PowerPoint presentation and a comprehensive report that describes proposed enhancements in both narrative and graphic form. Following review and refinement of the preliminary plan, the Owasso Quality of Life Initiative findings will be presented to the community.



*A major public participation effort allowed the citizens of Owasso to identify their desired vision for the city's future.*