

# Percent for Place

## Percent for Place Coalition Comments on Making Recreational Facilities Eligible for USDA Community Facilities Investment

The Percent for Place Coalition is comprised of over two dozen national, regional, and local nonprofit organizations focused on increasing awareness of, and public investment in, civic infrastructure. We define civic infrastructure as the totality of the public spaces where Americans connect with each other: the parks, trails, town squares, main streets, play spaces, libraries, and other public places located in every type of community across the country. This definition includes the recreational facilities that the Department is considering making eligible for funding under the proposed change to the Community Facilities program and is therefore a policy shift we support.

Recreational infrastructure, like other forms of civic infrastructure, is instrumental in bringing communities together, building equitable prosperity, and addressing the quality-of-life issues residents consider vital to leading healthier and happier lives. Rural communities are especially in need of these types of facilities. While many of them have more open green spaces available than cities, those spaces are not often designed to meet the physical and development needs of children in the same way that dedicated recreational structures are. When children have the ability to play in an environment designed for them their confidence goes up, anxiety is reduced, and opportunities for positive peer interactions are increased. That is why having dedicated places for children is considered a high priority by families.

Recreational facilities can also have a profoundly positive impact on a community's economic outlook. Studies have shown that communities which offer a greater array of family-centered amenities witness an increase in other types of investment, increased home values, and a greater ability to attract new residents and retain existing ones. These investments are particularly important for rural areas experiencing outmigration of their young and working-age residents. Population shifts which occurred during the pandemic demonstrated an increased interest by many Americans to move into more rural towns. Their access to outdoor recreational opportunities, affordable housing options, downtown walkability and lower population densities make them attractive destinations for many families. To ensure these families remain, and sustain this growth trajectory, these communities now need the resources to invest in the civic infrastructure that these newer residents want, which includes recreational facilities.

The Percent for Place Coalition applauds the Department for considering this shift in policy. We suggest a broad eligibility of recreational project types (including but not limited to parks, play spaces, trails and greenways) so long as those facilities are broadly accessible to the general public without the imposition of fees. We also hope that the Department considers adopting a definition of civic infrastructure into its authorized rural development investments, which would provide clarity to policymakers and program administrators as they consider how best to support human-centered design principles in rural communities. This would better inform them how to develop the commercial activities, civic programming, and human services supports needed to help communities thrive.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department to discuss this in greater detail, as well as any issues related to the implementation of the Community Facilities and other USDA economic and community development programs.

*Percent for Place is supported by a broad coalition of organizations working to create welcoming and robust civic infrastructure for all Americans.*

