

The Need for a Current Parks and Recreation Plan

Years of research by social and behavioral professionals have established the fact that the availability of leisure time is fundamental to one's mental and physical health and general quality of life. Whether involved as a teacher, factory laborer, childcare administrator, lawyer, or any other time-demanding activity, the lack of personal leisure time will ultimately result in physical and mental strain, which can lead to health deterioration.

Because counties, like all municipalities, are interested in providing for the health, safety and welfare of their residents, it is important that Ottawa County direct time and effort to provide quality recreation services and facilities for its residents and visitors to enable them to enjoy available leisure time. To direct this effort, proper planning is essential to take advantage of opportunities, maximize positive impacts, and efficiently use available resources. While this may be true for all counties, it has particular relevance to Ottawa County today for several reasons.

First, Ottawa County is blessed with a natural resource base as extensive as any other county in the State. The Lake Michigan shoreline, sand dune formations, waterways, wetlands, bayous, and woodlands all contribute to make Ottawa County a very special environment. These resources have potential to support many healthy leisure-time activities. The fact that county park systems typically include a large component of natural resource-based activities further highlights the tremendous opportunities for outdoor recreation that could be provided by Ottawa County.

Second, the population of Ottawa County has increased rapidly in recent decades and, despite a recent pause due to the economy, is likely to continue to grow in the future. The Ottawa County Planning Department reported the 2010 County population estimate as 263,671, an increase of 10.6% from 2000. As one of the fastest-growing counties in the state, planning and maintaining recreational facilities and services to meet the needs of a growing population is a very real and pressing concern.

Third, providing a high quality of life for residents is a key component in maintaining a healthy and growing local economy. Quality outdoor resources and activities are vital to retaining and attracting young, highly educated, and productive residents to form the basis of a thriving future economy in Ottawa County. Businesses that require this type of workforce will, in turn, more seriously consider Ottawa County if they can be assured that talented and desirable employees will want to stay in the area on a permanent basis.

A final related reason to provide quality recreation services and facilities is the County's large and growing tourist trade and its economic implications. The shoreline of Lake Michigan acts like a magnet during the warmer months and attracts not only County residents, but also visitors from all over the State and beyond. This migration of tourists into Ottawa County during the summer months places great strain on the existing recreation facilities, but at the

same time serves as a strong foundation for the economic well-being of the County. Providing adequate and attractive recreation opportunities for visitors will continue to facilitate this particular segment of the local economy.

The *2011 Ottawa County Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan* is the latest of a series of plans prepared for the County to address these needs. In 1970, a preliminary recreation plan for Ottawa County was prepared and followed by a 1975 update. To continue the planning process initiated in 1970, a second parks and recreation plan update was prepared in 1983 while administration of the parks was still under the authority of the Ottawa County Road Commission.

In 1989, the Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission completed its first plan since the Commission was formed in 1986. This plan established an aggressive approach to upgrading the park system and expanding access to Lake Michigan. The 1989 plan was followed by the 1995 Parks and Open Space Plan which provided solid direction for improving and expanding the park system and laid the groundwork for the County Parks millage, which was approved by voters in 1996. The next plan, the *2000 Ottawa County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan*, recognized the significant progress made toward implementing recommendations from the 1995 Plan, and provided more details for establishment of the basic framework of the system of river based greenways.

The 2006 Plan continued the strong emphasis on open space protection begun in the 1995 plan while providing a clearer vision for the trails and facilities which could be developed on the lands. This plan also laid the groundwork for a ten-year renewal of the county parks millage and included a long-range budget projection demonstrating what could be accomplished with a diversified funding strategy using millage funds in combination with fee revenues, grant funds, donations and other funding sources.

This latest plan continues to build on the work of the previous plans but with an even more urgent and focused look at priorities. Funding decreases resulting from the loss of County general fund contributions and a decrease in property tax revenues from the parks millage have necessitated delay of several projects including both proposed developments and acquisitions. Wise use of available funds to best meet goals and objectives is a top priority. Aside from funding concerns, this plan also recognizes the evolving nature of the park system. As goals for acquisition are met, less focus is needed on bulk land purchases, and more emphasis is placed on targeted projects to improve and link existing park lands.

In conclusion, an up-to-date parks and recreation plan is needed to best use available resources to meet the growing needs of county residents. The plan seeks to do this in a manner that recognizes the unique circumstances that currently exist in Ottawa County and are likely to extend into the foreseeable future. It is the intent of this plan to meet this goal in a comprehensive and objectively defensible manner that can be relied upon to guide the multitude of decisions required of the Parks Commission and its staff.