

**A**ssessing the recreation needs of Ottawa County involved a number of techniques aimed at gathering as much pertinent data as possible to gain insight into the public's perception of the quality and availability of recreation opportunities in Ottawa County. The following pages briefly review the various methods used during the preparation of this plan and highlights some of the results.

### **2010 COUNTY RESIDENT SURVEY**

One of the primary tools in evaluating current attitudes and desires with regard to outdoor recreation is a scientific survey of county residents. A telephone survey of Ottawa County residents was conducted in the fall of 2010 to provide insight regarding resident needs and preferences for outdoor recreation areas and facilities. The survey, completed by the Frost Research Center of Hope College, was patterned closely after surveys of residents conducted in 1994, 1999 and 2004. The similarity of the surveys allows comparison to reveal changes and possible trends in attitudes among County residents. A complete summary of 2010 survey results is provided in **Appendix D**.

Some particular observations are shown below. Many of these observations have special interest because they can be compared to the similar survey completed in 2004:

- Camping – clear preference to provide both modern and rustic facilities.
- Identity issues remain (i.e., county versus township versus state parks).
- Parks visited – surprising how high Mt. Pisgah and Riley Trails are on list; Pigeon Creek Park very high also – winter use.
- Types of lands to acquire – overall less support was reflected in results – in 60% range as opposed to high 70s or 80s. Historic sites now rank as highest areas to acquire.
- Satisfaction went from 95% in 2004 to 85% in 2010. Cause for concern? Or reflection of overall less positive sentiment.
- Parks were considered a good or excellent value by 93% in 2004 and 87% in current survey.
- Awareness of millage increased from 27% in 2004 to 32% today.
- % in favor of parks millage increased from 75% in 2004 to 81% in 2010.
- Support shown for deer management.
- Somewhat less support for camping, but still positive.
- Somewhat less support for meeting tourist needs, but still positive.
- Significantly less support for buying additional land – but still positive (55%). This makes sense because we 1) have bought a lot of land that has been well publicized, 2) the economy is down, 3) we need less land now – but support indicated allows Commission to keep moving forward with purchases to expand optimum size of parks (i.e., Crockery Creek Natural Area) and make linkages along greenways.
- 32% of households have hunters.
- Support for hunting still low – but higher than before.

Results showing the relative desirability of various activities and facilities was an important part of the survey. Results from both 2004 and 2010 are shown below along with some observations of significant changes.

### Desirability of Ottawa County Park Facilities

2004			2010		
Rank	Desirable	Facilities	Rank	Desirable	Facilities
1	93%	Picnic Facilities	1	98%	Beaches
2	90%	Beaches	2	98%	Picnic Facilities
3	82%	Paths for Biking & Rollerblading	3	96%	Hiking
4	81%	Nature Center	4	95%	Fishing
5	80%	Nature Education Programs	5	94%	Paths for Biking & Rollerblading
6	80%	Hiking	6	94%	Sledding
7	72%	Fishing	7	94%	Cross-country Skiing
8	69%	Camping Facilities	8	93%	Nature Education Programs
9	68%	Sledding	9	93%	Nature Center
10	60%	Golf	10	92%	Camping Facilities
11	59%	Boat Launches	11	92%	Canoeing and Kayaking
12	53%	Public Marinas	12	90%	Boat Launches
13	53%	Dog Parks	13	84%	Water Play Area or Splash Park
14	51%	Cross-country Skiing	14	79%	Public Marinas
15	52%	Horseback Riding	15	79%	Horseback Riding
16	50%	Canoeing and Kayaking	16	78%	Dog Parks
17	39%	Hunting	17	74%	Disc or Frisbee golf
18	32%	Snowmobile Areas	18	66%	Golf
			19	64%	Snowmobile Areas
			20	62%	Hunting

#### Observations

- Hiking moved up from ranking of #6 to #3.
- Support for multi-use bike paths remain high.
- Fishing climbed from #7 to #5 ranking.
- Support for nature center and nature programs stayed strong.
- Cross-country skiing moved up 7 rankings to #7.
- Canoeing and kayaking moved up 5 rankings to #11.
- Golf dropped from #10 to #17.
- Hunting and snowmobiles stayed at bottom.

It should be noted when evaluating these results that the question was asked differently in 2010. Instead of asking about the respondent's individual preference, the question was asked "how desirable is it for Ottawa County residents?". This is likely the reason the results are much higher across the board for the 2010 survey. Analysis should focus on ranking of activities rather than percentage of favorable response for best comparisons.

## **PUBLIC MEETINGS**

A planning workshop was held to provide a forum for identifying and prioritizing attitudes within the community as to how Ottawa County could improve its park and recreation services. Invitations were sent to representatives of local park and recreation departments and local government officials, and the public was notified through news media.

The workshop was held on November 30 of 2010, during preparation of the plan and before final recommendations were developed. The meeting began with introductions and an overview of the planning process and required components for the new parks and open space plan, Park staff proceeded with presentations and discussions regarding the Parks Commission's role, activity needs, and proposed focus areas for acquisition and development in the next five years. The ideas, information, and priorities gathered at the meeting, were tabulated and meeting notes were recorded (**see Appendix E**).

Participants demonstrated strong support for many current Parks Commission priorities in the greenway areas including acquiring new lands, connecting parks via greenways and providing outdoor education programs. Trails and swimming and picnic facilities were identified as a high priorities for continued effort by the Parks Commission.

An additional public comment period was provided at a regular Parks Commission Meeting held on February 2, 2011 to present the plan to the public and accept public comment. Minutes from that meeting are included as **Appendix F**.

## **COMMISSION WORK SESSION AND RETREATS**

In addition to the planning workshop and the public hearing, the Parks Commission also held a special work session on November 18, 2010, to evaluate information which had been collected by that time and to focus efforts for the remainder of the planning process. This work session built on the work completed at two intensive retreat sessions of the Parks Commission conducted in the spring of 2009 and the spring of 2010. These 3-4 hour retreats were designed to provide time for the Commission to focus solely on long-range planning issues. The results of these planning sessions are reflected throughout this plan document and notes and result documents for each are provided in **Appendix G**.

## **ANALYSIS OF LOCAL RECREATION PLANS**

Recreation plans were collected from all local units of government within Ottawa County. The documents were reviewed and plans identified in an effort to refine the direction of the County's park and recreation system.

It was generally concluded from reviewing the local recreation plans that most communities are providing excellent recreation opportunities at the local level. Therefore, the County should not try to duplicate local recreation services but rather complement them by concentrating on larger, resource-based parks, which offer opportunities for picnicking, swimming, hiking, and other uses which rely upon natural features. In addition, the plans reveal that no major initiatives are being proposed that would significantly alter conditions for planning future

County park improvements. Other general observations of emphases in these plans include the following:

- Serving all age groups and abilities including barrier-free issues
- Year-round recreation both indoor and outdoor
- Non-motorized trails with connections to residential areas and schools
- Geographic balance of park sites and amenities
- Starting to address dog park issue
- Natural area protection

A discussion of specific local facilities is provided in Chapter Four, with a complete listing provided in **Appendix C**.

## **ANALYSIS OF OTHER OUTSTANDING PARK SYSTEMS IN MICHIGAN**

An internet search of the websites of ten of Michigan's best and most active park systems was completed to determine what facilities and services are regularly provided in this region and what trends are becoming evident. Several of these systems are leaders regionally in developing programs to serve their residents and are located in areas such as growing suburban Detroit that could serve as models for some aspects of park system evolution in Ottawa County.

The analysis revealed that several activities that Ottawa County Parks does not provide are fairly common in these park systems. Among these are water/splash play, disc golf, dog parks, camping, boat rental, and sports fields and courts. Interestingly, no other park system surveyed provided zip lines or archery facilities.

A chart showing a comparison of these park systems with Ottawa County is included in **Appendix H**.

## **2007 PARK USER SURVEY**

An extensive survey of actual users of the Ottawa County Parks System was conducted in July of 2007. The survey was conducted by the Frost Research Center of Hope College and was patterned after a similar survey completed by Hope College students in the summers of 1993 and 2001. The similarity of the surveys allowed comparisons, which provide insight into how user attitudes have changed in the years between the surveys. Over 900 individual interviews were conducted at 11 County Park locations. **Appendix I** provides a summary of the 2007 survey results.

The following are significant observations from this report:

- 900+ park users surveyed at 11 county parks
  - 54% were Ottawa County residents
  - 46% non-residents (highest at Lakeshore Parks and Grose Park)
  - 16% from out-of-state (highest at Tunnel, North Beach and Musketawa Trail)
- Visitors under age 21 comprised 25-50% of all park users. People over age 50 made up only 13% of the sample.

- 26% of park visitors reported using other Ottawa County Parks. Visitors to the lakeshore parks were least likely to visit other county parks.
- Higher awareness and support for parks millage among park users compared to resident survey.
- High level of satisfaction with parks – few changes recommended.

## REVIEW OF NATIONAL RESEARCH

Several organizations conduct research to determine levels of participation and trends in outdoor recreation at a national level. Some of these findings are applicable to Ottawa County as indicators of potential future needs or areas that need to be evaluated on a regular basis. In particular, the *2010 Outdoor Recreation Participation Report* produced by The Outdoor Foundation and the *2007 National Survey on Recreation and the Environment* provide detailed data to inform park planning and design decisions.

In particular the most recent participation report ranked activities with participation rates as follows:

Walking for fitness	39.1%
Running	15.9%
Camping	15.6%
Bicycling	15.4%
Fishing	14.5%
Hiking	11.6%
Golf	9.6%
Wildlife Viewing	7.6%
Hunting	5.5%
Archery	2.2%
Kayaking	2.2%
Snowmobiling	1.7%
X-Country Skiing	1.5%

Other observations from these reports include:

- 50% of population participates in outdoor recreation activities.
- Continued concern about dropping youth participation, but from 2000-2007 total participants up 4.4% and per capita days up 16%.
- 45% of participants have household income over \$75,000.
- Highest participation by Caucasians followed by Hispanics, then African-Americans.
- Large increase in participation in last decade for running/jogging, hiking, and walking for fitness (Outdoor Participation Report 2010).
- Wildlife viewing/photography and kayaking also up significantly (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment – 2007).
- Fishing, golf, and horseback riding down in last four years.

## **COMMENT CARDS**

For many years the Parks Commission has had an ongoing effort to solicit input from park users through the use of comment cards at the highest use County Parks (see sample card in **Appendix J**). Boxes labeled "Comment Cards" were installed at key locations within the parks and users were encouraged by park staff to share their feelings about the parks. The program has proven very popular and hundreds of comments have been received over the years. Numerous helpful suggestions as well as many compliments have been received. The Parks Commission and Park Staff review and discuss all comment cards received on a regular basis.

## **RESERVATION FACILITY USER SURVEY**

In 2010, a system was put in place to measure satisfaction with services and facilities provided for park patrons paying to reserve facilities in the county park system. All users who have completed a reservation and have an email address are sent a simple survey via email with questions related to their experience with the reservation process, service, and facilities. A portion of the survey also provides opportunities for other comments. To date over 27% of users given the opportunity to participate have responded. This information is being compiled and analyzed to recognize trends and determine areas of possible improvement.

## **STEERING COMMITTEE INPUT**

A steering committee was identified to provide additional outside review and comment about the parks plan document. The committee consisted of seven individuals representing local government, interest groups, and general citizens. Comments and suggestions from this group are included in **Appendix L**.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD**

The draft plan was made available on the Ottawa County Parks website and at nine local public libraries located throughout the county from January 12, 2011 through the date of final approval by the County Board of Commissioners on February 22, 2011. All comments were collected, presented to the Parks Commission, and incorporated into the plan if appropriate.