

Assessing recreation needs requires the planning process to go beyond identifying what general programs, lands, and facilities should be provided. Below is a discussion of the needs assessment as it pertains to selected activities and facilities which the Parks Commission feels are consistent with its role as a recreation provider in Ottawa County. The list likely does not include all types of recreation areas and facilities that may be considered for development by the Commission.

SWIMMING / BEACH ACTIVITIES

Swimming is a highly popular recreational activity that is a key attraction in the Ottawa County Park System. Because of the basic differences between Lake Michigan beaches and inland water bodies, they are discussed separately below.

Lake Michigan - The beautiful white sand beaches of Lake Michigan in Ottawa County and throughout West Michigan are arguably among the best in the world. Evidence of this is the popularity of the Michigan State Parks located in Ottawa County, with Holland and Grand Haven State Parks consistently ranked in the top three in statewide attendance. Ottawa County's four developed parks on Lake Michigan are the busiest parks in the County Park system during the warm summer months. They include North Beach, Kirk and Tunnel Parks plus the Rosy Mound Natural Area. The county park system also includes 756 feet of shoreline on Lake Michigan in Park Township, adjacent to and immediately north of the Holland State Park beach. This property, part of that known as the Historic Ottawa Beach Parks, is accessed through Holland State Park and is available for public beach use.

The attraction of the Lake Michigan shoreline parks goes beyond simply the enjoyment of beach activities. These parks provide visitors an opportunity to experience and enjoy the vast open space that Lake Michigan has to offer. Hundreds of square miles of open water provide an extraordinary backdrop for both active and passive recreation pursuits.

The demand for access to Lake Michigan beaches frequently exceeds the supply during peak summer periods. The Parks Commission has long recognized that the dunes and beaches along the coast of Lake Michigan are the county's most important recreational resource. This realization led the Parks Commission to acquire and improve the Rosy Mound property on Lake Michigan in Grand Haven Township for Lake Michigan access. It also influenced the Parks Commission to study the Lake Michigan shoreline to identify other possible opportunities, knowing that few opportunities exist to assemble larger blocks of natural land along the highly coveted shoreline.

In 2001, the Parks Commission identified a target area and acquired an undeveloped parcel with 200 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline in Port Sheldon Township. In 2009, with help from a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant, the Parks Commission acquired an additional 538 feet of adjacent undeveloped lake frontage to complete land acquisition for a new Lake

Michigan beach park in this location. The site's rugged terrain and high-quality natural features were factors which influenced the park master planning process resulting in a plan which limits parking to 50 cars and emphasizes preservation of the site's unique natural setting. The Parks Commission is current seeking grant assistance for park improvements and hopes to have the park fully functional for the 2012 season.

The 2010 summer season brought exceptional beach weather, resulting in extremely high use of all public parks in Ottawa County providing Lake Michigan beach access. There were many days when all parks were filled to capacity along the lakeshore. Despite less rapid population growth, steady tourism and residents seeking close-to-home recreation opportunities lead to the belief that public demand for Lake Michigan beach access can be expected to continue to exceed the supply in the future.

Review of the Lake Michigan shoreline reveals very few opportunities remaining for park development on a scale typical for County involvement. Efforts to increase shoreline access should consider the needs of County residents who are driving to the shoreline, local residents who can walk or bike to the shoreline, and visitors to the County. All possible strategies involving all levels of government should be explored to increase shoreline access before opportunities disappear and as development pressure along the shoreline intensifies. Local units of government, for example, should be encouraged to work with the Road Commission to protect and enhance road-end access points to Lake Michigan.

Another example as to how shoreline access can be expanded without acquiring additional waterfront is the North Ottawa Dunes project. A recently constructed trail and stairs connects North Ottawa Dunes parking in Ferrysburg's Coast Guard Park to North Beach Park. Since North Beach Park has ample beach capacity but limited parking, the potential exists for some beach goers to park at Coast Guard Park and hike to the beach at North Beach Park or even further north to the beaches within Hoffmaster State Park. Similar strategies should be explored at other sites to maximize public access to the lakeshore.

Inland - While Ottawa County's Lake Michigan beaches are clearly the area's most popular swimming and sunbathing attractions, inland water bodies should be recognized for their potential to meet more localized swimming needs. This potential appears particularly high for residents who live in eastern Ottawa County, the furthest distance from the Lake Michigan shoreline. It should also be noted that inland water bodies have some advantages over Lake Michigan beaches in that they typically warm sooner and are not subject to high wave conditions, which frequently limit use at Lake Michigan beaches.

Other than Grose Park in Chester Township, with its swimming beach on Crockery Lake, natural lakes are not common in eastern Ottawa County. A number of small lakes, the result of gravel mining, do exist, however, offering good recreation potential. Georgetown Township successfully operates a public beach developed on a gravel pit lake at its 8th Avenue Park.

Another excellent example of swimming opportunities that can be provided through gravel pit development is Kent County's Millennium Park. This 1,500-acre park, located just east of the Ottawa-Kent County line, has attracted large numbers of beachgoers since opening in 2003. The park offers a large public beach with high use capacity and many amenities.

Swimming potential was a key factor motivating Ottawa County's decision to fund a master plan for the Bend Area in Georgetown Township. The Bend Area is the name given to the large maze of gravel pits north of Fillmore Street and Cottonwood Drive. The master plan demonstrates that this area has the potential for a large public beach located on an approximate 150-acre water body which could provide excellent swimming and other water-based recreation opportunities. Land acquisition for this project has begun with an initial 188-acre purchase.

An additional opportunity for a swimming facility is potentially available at the Upper Macatawa Natural Area. Adjacent to the restoration areas, an 80-acre property owned by the Ottawa County Road Commission and currently used for mineral extraction has the potential to provide swimming opportunities by coordinating extraction activities with park planning. A series of meetings with the Road Commission led to agreement to include the property in the park master plan. The Parks Commission and Road Commission have agreed to work together on shaping the site for future park use, provided the Road Commission can extract the mineral needed for its purposes. At present, no specific timetable has been identified for mineral extraction, but both parties recognize that mineral extraction will continue for many years into the future.

Efforts should continue to identify water resources which can meet the water-based recreation needs of Ottawa County residents, particularly in eastern and central Ottawa County.

BOATING

Recreational boating (i.e. power boats, sail boats, etc.) in Ottawa County is another tremendously popular activity. The Grand River, Spring Lake, and Lake Macatawa serve as focal points for boating activity, with all offering prime access to Lake Michigan. Boat traffic in these areas is extremely heavy during the peak summer months.

Presently, Ottawa County's role in boating involves the provision of boat launches at Riverside Park, Grand River Park, and Deer Creek Park. Ottawa County Parks also leases property to Parkside Marina on Lake Macatawa which provides approximately 80 slips with easy access to Lake Michigan.

Riverside Park, located on the Grand River, has a large fee-based launch site, which provides access to the upper stretches of the deeper dredged river channel. The United States Army Corps of Engineers historically dredged the channel up to the Bass River gravel pits located immediately upstream of Riverside Park. Regular dredging operations were discontinued when gravel mining ended in the 1970s, but the river channel has maintained a functional depth for recreational boating. Upstream of Riverside Park, in the portion of river served by both Deer Creek and Grand River Parks, water depths limit boating to small or shallow draft vessels.

The State of Michigan, through its Waterways Program, has taken the lead role in meeting the launch ramp needs of recreational boaters in Michigan. The three launches operated by Ottawa County Parks have each been funded with assistance from State boating programs. Additional launches are provided by numerous other local park agencies, most developed with assistance from State funds. An example is the Grand Haven Township launch on the Grand River at 144th

Avenue, which was developed with State assistance. An evaluation of the need for Ottawa County Parks to expand its role in the provision of boat launches should consider a number of questions: Is the demand for boating growing in Ottawa County? Are there water resources in Ottawa County suitable for boating that are currently under-served by boat launches? Which level of government is the most logical service provider?

In assessing these questions, the Parks Commission generally feels navigable waters of the County are generally well served by the current system of launches. The economic down-turn in recent years has depressed growth in recreational boating. Even when boating was at its peak with launch ramps at or exceeding capacity on prime summer weekends, overcrowding on Spring Lake, Lake Macatawa and its connecting waters was perceived to be a problem by many people, bringing into question the desirability of expanding launch capacity further.

Boater access to the upper portions of the Grand River within Ottawa County should be studied further. The launch at Grand River Park and a Kent County launch located just across the county line provide the primary access points. Further consideration should be given to additional launch capacity in conjunction with the Grand River Greenway implementation, but overall, current demand appears to be met adequately by the existing launches.

However, access to the many small bayous acquired as part of the Grand River Greenway initiative should be studied on an individual basis. Most are suitable for smaller boats with limited or no motors, but some sites, like the Eastmanville Bayou property, warrant small motorized boat access to facilitate fishing. A small boat launch at this location is currently (2010/11) under construction.

A boating-related issue requiring further study relates to access needs of personal watercraft. The numbers of personal watercraft in Ottawa County have grown significantly in recent years. The affordability of these water craft combined with technological advances have allowed greater numbers of people to enjoy boating. The large numbers of these craft have also raised policy issues.

Because personal watercraft are typically smaller and lighter, they can often be launched in areas with less-developed ramp facilities. However, when this involves Lake Michigan beaches, they bring with them serious safety concerns, fuel smells and noise, which are disruptive to traditional beach users. Ottawa County Parks has taken steps to discourage the use of personal watercraft at North Beach and Tunnel Parks due to conflicts with swimmers and sunbathers. Similar steps have been taken at the State Parks.

Another issue of concern with personal watercraft is their use in areas that have been previously inaccessible to high-speed powerboats. The smaller size of these craft combined with their jet propulsion allows them to travel through shallower waters with less concern for grounding. Concerns relate to the use of high-speed watercraft in areas like the upper Grand River, which has significant wildlife value and has until recently experienced relatively little boat traffic. Further study is needed to assess impacts of personal watercraft on wildlife and to develop appropriate policies.

As noted above, Parks Commission involvement in marinas has been limited to the lease of property on Lake Macatawa to a private marina operation. In general, the Parks Commission

feels the private sector does an adequate job of meeting needs for marina services in Ottawa County. However, as owner of the Historic Ottawa Beach Parks, with its ideal marina location to provide boating access to Lake Michigan and its history of marina use, Ottawa County has an inherent interest in marina operations at this location. The master plan for the Historic Ottawa Beach Parks calls for continued marina operations in this location and the vision as established in the plan will provide a greatly enhanced setting for a marina when the plan is fully implemented.

Ottawa County's current lease to Parkside Marina, which operates approximately 80 slips in this area, is under review. The lease is short-term, on a year-to-year basis. The Parks Commission has indicated it desires to look at alternatives, including possible county ownership and operation of a marina in this location. The potential to provide for an enhanced marina that would improve the aesthetics and overall public recreation value of the site should be considered. Financial feasibility should be evaluated as well as administrative issues. As a potential revenue-producing facility, the operation could help to diversify the Parks Commission's funding base (a goal of the Parks Commission), which has moderate support from county residents. The 2010 county resident survey revealed that 53% of county residents agreed with the statement "The County should develop revenue-producing facilities such as campgrounds, golf courses, or marinas to help finance the park system."

To assist in evaluating the possibility of an expanded role in marina operations at the Historic Ottawa Beach Parks, Ottawa County Parks has submitted a grant proposal (spring, 2010) to the state's Coastal Management Program for a study entitled "Macatawa Shoreline and Marina Planning Project." If approved, the grant will help fund a consultant to study and plan for public use of the county parks owned Lake Macatawa shoreline which includes the marina. The study would assess the potential for an improved and possible expanded marina at that location and its economic viability. It would also look at options for ownership and operation of the marina including benefits of both public and private operation. The Parks Commission is hopeful the study can be completed in 2011.

In summary, Ottawa County Parks has a limited role in meeting boater needs in Ottawa County. Future efforts should focus on evaluating access needs in the upper Grand River within Ottawa County and policies addressing personal watercraft access. Ottawa County Parks will also further evaluate the Historic Ottawa Beach Parks on Lake Macatawa to determine how to best provide marina facilities in this prime location near Lake Michigan.

CANOEING/KAYAKING

Ottawa County has not been known historically as a destination for canoeing and kayaking; however, the tremendous increase in the popularity of kayaking in recent years has greatly expanded the demand for access to local water resources. A kayak/canoe launch was constructed at Hemlock Crossing in 2003 providing access to the Pigeon River. Since its development, use has grown tremendously as paddlers enjoy the scenic stretch of river between US-31 and Lakeshore Drive. Kayakers use both the Hemlock Crossing launch and the Sheldon Landing downstream access point operated by Port Sheldon Township. Consideration is currently being given to adding another landing at Pine Bend to provide paddlers an opportunity to stop and explore this site which includes the historic Weaver House.

Kayaking and canoeing activity has increased significantly on not only the Pigeon River but also the Macatawa River and the Grand River upstream of Riverside Park. Ottawa County Parks installed a launch at Adams Street Landing on the Macatawa River in Holland Township. This launch receives significant use when water levels are higher in the spring and fall. Ottawa County Parks is working closely with the Outdoor Discovery Center Macatawa Greenway (ODCMG), a local non-profit group, to preserve land and provide access on the Macatawa River. The ODCMG runs many canoe and kayak trips on the Macatawa River each year and awareness and use of this river resource is increasing. Further study is underway to determine the need for additional access points on the Macatawa River.

Canoeists and kayakers have also been discovering the Grand River as a paddling resource. The number of boats using existing access points has risen significantly in recent years. To help promote the vast opportunities for paddling on the Grand River and its tributaries in Ottawa County, Ottawa County Parks established the Grand River Heritage Water Trail in 2010. The initial focus has been to provide paddlers web-based information on access points to help paddlers plan their trips. The river is divided into “reaches” and information is also provided on natural and historic features within each reach. Efforts are underway to expand the water trail to include signs located on the river to help orient paddlers.

As demand for access on the Grand River has grown, Ottawa County Parks has begun planning new facilities. The new park development on the Grand River at Eastmanville Bayou (on 68th Avenue just west and south of the bridge) is under construction which will provide canoe and kayak access to the Grand River, as well as small fishing boat access to Eastmanville Bayou, as noted previously. A barrier-free hard surface pathway between the parking area and the Grand River will provide canoe and kayak access to a floating dock on the river. The dock system will include rollers to allow paddlers to launch and retrieve on a stable, accessible surface. Pending its success and popularity, this dock system may be installed at other locations including Connor Bayou and Grand River Park to provide a network of barrier-free launches on the Grand River. Ottawa County Parks is currently assessing its properties on the Grand River as potential locations for canoe and kayak access in an effort to provide efficient and attractive access points for paddlers.

The Crockery Creek, a major tributary to the Grand River, is one of the few other watercourses in Ottawa County with potential for canoeing and kayaking. Many paddlers on the Grand River currently explore upstream from the river mouth. The Crockery Creek Natural Area includes approximately two miles of riverfront on the east bank of the river and an effort has been made to keep the waterway free of obstructions in this area. Consideration should be given to locating an upstream launch site and maintaining a clear water course downstream to the Grand River to provide an added resource for paddlers in Ottawa County.

In addition to rivers and streams, kayakers and canoeists also seek out opportunities on other types of water bodies. Sea kayaks on Lake Michigan are becoming popular, and provisions have been made to allow launching these watercraft at North Beach Park. Other opportunities can be provided on small bayous offering opportunities to explore and view wildlife. Access can be a limiting factor on many of the smaller water bodies.

The 2010 county resident survey revealed strong support for canoeing and kayaking with 92% of respondents indicating programs and facilities for paddlers were either moderately

desirable or very desirable. Meeting canoeing and kayaking needs in Ottawa County will require continued examination of suitable water bodies followed by additional study of access needs. Further study of access needs on the Grand, Pigeon and Macatawa Rivers plus their bayous should be undertaken with the goal of working toward a connected system of access points and water trails which will facilitate a variety of user preferences for trip length, level of difficulty, and other amenities.

In addition to provision of access, future consideration should be given to development of a canoe/kayak livery to serve the large number of potential users who do not own watercraft. Presently, Ottawa County Parks has identified a possible location for a livery at its Grand River Ravines property located just south of Grand Valley State University. Further study should be undertaken into the feasibility of this possible facility and the potential market for canoe and kayak rental. During this process, consideration should be given to the potential for the private sector to meet this need, recognizing that some canoe and kayak outfitters have begun operating in the area to provide rentals and assistance with trip planning and logistics.

FISHING

Fishing in Ottawa County is a tremendously popular sport on Lake Michigan, as well as on smaller inland waters, and has important economic benefits. The popularity of fishing was reflected in the 2010 County Resident Survey, with 95% of the respondents listing fishing as a moderately desirable or very desirable recreation activity. Area sport fish include salmon, lake trout, perch, pike, bass, panfish, and others. These fish are available to boaters who require launch facilities to access the area water bodies. Providing adequate boat launch opportunities is one obvious way of serving this group. The Riverside Park boat launch is particularly popular with anglers and has been a favored location for large bass-fishing tournaments in past years. The addition of a launch for small boats on Eastmanville Bayou is primarily motivated by a desire to provide fishing access to this water body, which has proven to be extremely popular as a fishing destination following purchase of this property in 2008.

Provision of shore fishing access and facilities is another way of serving anglers, including ice fishermen in the winter. Most park properties with waterfront receive some fishing pressure. Given that the Ottawa County Park system offers over 26 miles of frontage on Lake Michigan and major rivers and bayous, a vast resource exists for anglers to explore. In addition to shoreline access, a number of improved fishing access points are currently available in Ottawa County Parks including a barrier-free fishing dock at Riverside Park, a large fishing dock (also barrier free) at Grand River Park, and a barrier-free fishing dock at Grose Park on Crockery Lake. Shore fishing is also popular at Riverside Park, Deer Creek Park, and Grand River Park and at some Lake Michigan locations in the early spring and fall. One popular fishing dock along the Lake Macatawa shoreline at the Historic Ottawa Beach parks was opened in 2008 and another, much larger project, the Holland Harbor Fishing Access Project, is currently under construction with completion anticipated in 2011. This project will provide multiple docks and barrier-free fishing structures in a highly productive fishery in Lake Macatawa near the river mouth at Lake Michigan. Funding assistance for this project has been provided by the Great Lakes Fishery Trust.

A number of other unique fishing opportunities are available in the county park system, including Ripps Bayou. This mile-long narrow, remote bayou in Polkton Township is entirely

owned by Ottawa County Parks and currently accessible to the general public only from the Grand River. Anglers historically access the bayou by portaging small boats from the Grand River approximately 200 feet to the bayou. In addition to this site and Eastmanville Bayou mentioned earlier, other bayou fishing opportunities are available at Jubb Bayou, Bur Oak Landing (Rice Lake), Kuits Bayou and the Bend Area where recent parkland acquisitions have opened access to water bodies which have previously lacked public access. Yet an additional opportunity for fishing access was made available when Ottawa County Parks partnered with Holland Township to acquire the Hawthorn Pond Natural Area. Holland Township will be developing the site for fishing access in 2011.

Ottawa County Parks has cooperated with efforts of Trout Unlimited and other parties to improve habitat for trout in the Pigeon River. Although very little trout water exists in Ottawa County, the Pigeon River is a designated trout stream west of 120th Avenue. The Parks Commission desires to cooperate with efforts to improve this fishery with a goal of providing quality trout fishing opportunities in Ottawa County at some point in the future.

In addition to shore fishing available in Ottawa County Parks, quality fishing opportunities also exist at a number of city and township parks in the county, including Grand Haven Township's Pottawattamie Park, the City of Grand Haven's Chinook Pier Park, Spring Lake's Mill Point Park and Holland's Kollen and VanBragt Parks. Fishing from the piers in Grand Haven, Holland, and Port Sheldon is also very popular.

The Parks Commission will continue to evaluate existing and future parklands with a goal to provide a wide range of fishing opportunities for the public.

CAMPING

Ottawa County is a popular camping destination as reflected in unusually high occupancy rates at area State Parks and a well-established commercial campground industry. Most public sector camping opportunities are provided at the popular State Park campgrounds on Lake Michigan. Generally, private campgrounds lack access to unique natural resource features but offer visitors close access to major transportation routes (particularly US-31), full service sites, and amenities such as arcades, swimming pools and other attractions.

The 2010 county resident survey revealed strong support for camping in the county park system with 92% of respondents listing camping as moderately or very desirable. When asked what type of camping opportunities they prefer, it was clear that residents would prefer a mix of modern and rustic facilities.

Residents may be looking to the county to provide camping opportunities in settings with significant natural resource features. In the past, the Parks Commission has been concerned with competing with the private sector but has long felt that camping should be considered in existing or future County Parks when a particular site offers a resource-based camping experience not generally available in the private sector or when/if the private sector does not meet the demand for overnight camping.

A recent review of campgrounds throughout West Michigan revealed a wide range of public and private facilities with diverse facility types. In general, most successful public

campgrounds are based around a significant water feature as a major amenity for swimming, fishing and other water-based recreation activities. Most successful sites are also located relatively close to major travel corridors such as US-31. Sites within the Ottawa County Park system with water features, the space needed for a public campground, and near travel corridors are extremely limited. The Parks Commission feels it is important to operate a campground in a revenue neutral manner, which means site selection is of the utmost importance.

Based on the strength of its ranking in the resident survey and among Park Commissioners, efforts should intensify to assess existing and potential sites as to their suitability for development of a public campground that would provide natural resource-based camping experiences for residents and visitors to Ottawa County. Further study of the camping should address issues such as the mix of rustic and modern facilities, the types of amenities needed, the operational demands a campground will place on the park administrative capabilities, and a range of other issues.

In addition to the traditional public campgrounds discussed above, the Parks Commission is concerned with the needs of scouts, church groups and other organized groups for camping opportunities. Two facilities in the county park system currently help meet this need. Groups may reserve the Kirk Park Lodge between September and May for overnight group outings. Twenty-four bunks are available in a rustic building with a fireplace, kitchen, and restrooms. For groups desiring an outdoor experience, a group campground was developed at Pigeon Creek Park as part of the 1995 construction project. This barrier-free rustic camp area offers parking, restrooms, water, tent sites, fire pits, picnic tables, and access to park trails.

INTERPRETATION OF NATURAL FEATURES

Ottawa County has a rich natural and cultural history. Over 6,000 acres of natural land is managed by the Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission, providing a unique outdoor classroom to interpret the diverse natural features to park visitors of all ages throughout the year. In addition, a number of park properties include buildings and other features of cultural significance such as the Weaver House at Pine Bend. With its focus on resource-based parks and greenways, it is important that Ottawa County Parks offer a variety of interpretive programs to give a better understanding of this natural and cultural history to park visitors.

In 1998, the Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission hired its first full-time parks naturalist to develop, coordinate, and implement interpretive services in the parks system, resulting in the development of a wide variety of year-around interpretive programs for people of all ages. These programs included interpretive walks, field trips, workshops and other activities. Programs have been conducted throughout the county park system and have proven to be very popular.

Based on that popularity and a desire to expand services in line with the growing park system, Ottawa County Parks included the construction of a Nature Education Center in phase two of the Pigeon River Greenway Master Plan. When the parks millage was renewed in 2006, staff began planning for the new center. A second full-time naturalist was hired in 2009, and the center opened its doors in April 2010. The Ottawa County Parks Nature Education Center, located at Hemlock Crossing, is an 8,000-square-foot facility designed to serve as a base of

operations for interpretive programs in the county park system and also functions as an information center for the entire parks system. The center is certified as a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) building at the gold level.

In order to expand programs, especially to schools and other youth groups, a number of part-time Naturalist Guides were hired in 2010. Many school groups have visited the center during its first year of operation and the school program is anticipated to expand in the future. While many interpretive programs are focused at Hemlock Crossing because of the proximity of the educational facility, a wide range of programs will continue to be offered throughout the park system, taking advantage of the unique natural and cultural features in the various parks. An example of this is to provide dune ecology programs at parks such as the Rosy Mound Natural Area and Olive Shores.

Another method of interpretation is through wayside interpretive signs that have been designed, fabricated, and installed at several parks to interpret natural and cultural features of these sites. Interpretive signs can be found at the Rosy Mound Natural Area, Hemlock Crossing, Pine Bend, North Beach Park, Mt. Pisgah and Tunnel Parks. In addition, trailhead signs have been installed at most parks and open spaces which provide another opportunity to provide interpretive and general information.

One often-overlooked area of interpretation is self-discovery. Many visitors desire to visit parks alone or with friends and family and are not interested in a naturalist-led interpretive program. These visitors are best accommodated by providing properties with unique features along with an attractive and easy-to-navigate trail system and other facilities. Land acquisitions, the opening of new parks, and the design of many miles of trails are providing this opportunity. Parks maps are now available on the parks' web site for those wishing to explore new areas.

The Future of Interpretation for Ottawa County Parks

Parks interpretive staff expects that programs and participation will continue to increase, especially with the new Nature Education Center. As the part-time Naturalist Guides become better trained, they will also be able to conduct family and adult programs in addition to school and other youth programs. Other interpretive features that can be developed in various parks include self-guided trails and additional interpretive signs.

WALKING/HIKING

Surveys across the nation reveal a high level of public interest and support for expanded walking and hiking opportunities. A national trend toward walking for exercise further supports the need for trails. County residents ranked hiking as one of their top activities, with 96% listing this activity as moderately or very desirable.

While fitness and greater contact with the outdoor environment are listed as reasons for engaging in this activity, it is the availability of interesting natural features that may be the biggest factor in the enjoyment of the hiking experience. Meeting the area demand for hiking facilities should focus on areas with unique natural features and address the need for varying degrees of trail difficulty, length, and distribution of trails throughout the County. The

overwhelming popularity of the Rosy Mound Natural Area, opened in the spring of 2004, is likely due to the combination of outstanding scenic beauty of the site with an accessible trail surface attractive to all types of trail users. Similarly, the Mt. Pisgah Dune Stairs and associated trails have been tremendously popular since opening in late 2008. Dune overlooks at this site offer some of the best views in the county and attract a wide range of users from tourists to local residents and exercisers to people exploring nature.

The 1989 Parks Plan first noted that while numerous parks offered trails of 1 to 3 miles in length, no opportunities existed for longer-distance hiking opportunities. Pigeon Creek Park was identified as a location for a regional trails center, which led to the development of the popular 10-mile multi-use trail system that exists today. The popularity of this site influenced the Parks Commission to develop the 6-mile trail system at Hemlock Crossing and Pine Bend on the Pigeon River, which opened in the fall of 2003. Additional sites with longer distance trails now exist at Riley Trails (6.7 miles of multi-use trails), the Upper Macatawa Natural Area (over 5 miles of hiking trails), North Ottawa Dunes with over 8 miles of hiking trails, and the Musketawa Trail with 10 miles within Ottawa County. These large parks with long distance hiking opportunities have greatly expanded opportunities available to hikers in Ottawa County in recent years.

Ottawa County Parks also offers quality hiking opportunities at Grand River Park in Georgetown Township and at Kirk Park in Grand Haven Township. Each park offers between 2 and 3 miles of trail with challenging terrain in attractive settings. The Rosy Mound Natural Area, mentioned above, is an attractive hiking area, and additional hiking opportunities exist at Grose Park and Hager Park, each with approximately 2 miles of trail. Recent trail improvements at Riverside Park, made possible by a lease of 31 acres of Bass River Recreation Area land from the State, resulted in the addition of 2 miles of highly scenic waterfront trails at this park.

Recently acquired properties offer tremendous potential to expand hiking opportunities. In light of the high popularity of hiking, Ottawa County Parks should continue its focus on expanding hiking trails where possible within the park system to maximize the opportunities available and the proximity of trails to where people live. Some examples of park properties appropriate for new or expanded hiking trails are listed below along with a rough estimate of potential trail length:

- Bend Area – 4 miles
- Bur Oak Landing – 4 miles
- Connor Bayou – 3 miles
- Eastmanville Bayou – 2 miles
- Grand River Open Space (Tallmadge Township) – 2 miles
- Johnson Street Forest Hiawatha Forest – 1 mile
- Jubb Bayou – 1.5 miles
- Macatawa Open Space (former Holland Country Club) – 2.5 miles
- Olive Shores – 1 mile
- Port Sheldon Natural Area – 5 miles
- Robinson Forest – 1.5 miles
- Van Buren Dunes – 1.5 miles

WINTER SPORTS

Ottawa County's climate permits participation in a full range of winter sports activities, particularly in the snow belt area located along the Lake Michigan shoreline. Presently, winter sports activities in the County Parks include cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and sledding at a number of parks that are open year around.

Pigeon Creek Park has been the focal point for winter recreation opportunities in the county park system. Sledding is provided at the park in addition to 10 miles of trail groomed regularly for both classic cross-country skiers as well as ski skating.

Cross-country Skiing

The 2010 county resident survey indicated that 94% of county residents identified cross-country skiing as moderately or very desirable compared to 51% in 2004. Meeting the demand for cross-country ski opportunities is, to a large degree, similar to hiking trails. Health, fitness, and general enjoyment, along with greater contact with the outdoor environment are primary reasons individuals participate in the activity. Accordingly, a variety of trail lengths and levels of difficulty are critical elements to be considered in responding to this demand. As with hiking trails, a need exists to offer longer trail distances to provide attractive and worthwhile opportunities for this sport.

Pigeon Creek Park has been a tremendous success in terms of attracting large numbers of skiers because of the quality of skiing opportunities provided. The park offers over 10 miles of groomed ski trails for all skill levels, plus trails for ski skaters as well as classic skiers. Its rolling terrain combined with diverse natural features makes it an attractive destination. The lodge/warming house is important to the facility's success because it provides ski rental and concessions, and serves as a gathering spot for skiers before and after their outing. The park's three miles of lighted trails extend park hours until 10:00 p.m., an important consideration given the shortened daylight hours during the winter months. Visitor bureaus in Holland and Grand Haven promote Pigeon Creek Park as a ski destination with a goal of attracting overnight visitors to the area.

Trends in cross-country skiing suggest the numbers of skiers will be steady and increasing in the future, driven by fitness motivation and those seeking opportunities to enjoy the out-of-doors in the winter. Presently it is common for Pigeon Creek Park to reach capacity (150+ cars) by mid-day on weekends and continue at maximum capacity until early evening. With an average stay for most visitors estimated at two hours, it is clear that a tremendous number of users are accommodated in a busy weekend at the park.

Skiers will likely continue to want well-groomed trails including opportunities for ski skating. However, trends suggest skiers also desire adventure at a realistic level in the form of narrower trails offering a sense of discovery. This was considered in planning the trails at Hemlock Crossing and Pine Bend, which offer 6 miles of ungroomed trails, geared for the more adventurous skiers seeking a more secluded and rustic outdoor experience, in comparison to Pigeon Creek Park. The addition of the Nature Education Center, which can be used as a warming location, will likely increase ski use at this park.

The Parks Commission should continue to evaluate lands and facilities for potential to expand cross-country ski opportunities. As with hiking, cross-country skiing is a logical activity to offer in large natural resource-based park areas and can usually be accommodated for minimal expense. The goal should be to offer a range of opportunities to serve everyone from the ski skater, requiring a more developed facility, to skiers desiring a more rustic or backcountry experience. Consideration should be given to working with tourism interests to provide facilities that can serve as winter attractions during this typically slow tourist season while also providing high quality cross-country ski opportunities for county residents.

Sledding/Tobogganing

Sledding opportunities were favored by 67% of county residents in the 2004 survey, but dropped to 55% identifying the activity as moderately or very desirable in the 2010 survey. As noted previously, sledding hills at Pigeon Creek Park have been extremely popular. Other existing facilities are limited to small, informal facilities provided by local communities. An exception is Holland's VanRaalte Farm Park with its large, lighted sledding runs. One unique regional facility in the area is the winter sports park located at Muskegon State Park, which features a high quality luge run in addition to lighted cross-country skiing and ice-skating. The luge is a highly specialized winter sport activity that is open to members of the general public that are willing to pay a fee and take the necessary lessons.

Other than Pigeon Creek Park, no other organized sledding opportunities exist in the County Park system. However, the Riverside Park master plan calls for development of a sledding area utilizing an existing hill. In addition, Ottawa County's recent project to recap the 40-acre closed landfill located within the 300 acre Riley Trails site created an opportunity to reshape the northeasterly facing slopes to maximize the site's value for sledding use in the future. The capped landfill is closed at the present time until methane gas emissions from vent pipes in the landfill are reduced to safe levels. In addition to Riverside Park and Riley Trails, other County Parks should also be evaluated for their potential to provide close-to-home sledding opportunities for area residents.

Ice Skating

Outdoor ice skating opportunities have generally been considered a local government recreation responsibility, since they have traditionally been provided on the neighborhood level or in community parks. While Ottawa County Parks supports local governments taking the lead role in this area, it should also evaluate the potential to develop a large destination ice rink as part of a future winter facility for countywide use. The potential exists for a warming house, restrooms and other support facilities to serve users of multiple winter activities. Following this logic, it would make sense to consider adding an ice rink at Pigeon Creek Park where skiing and sledding already exist; however, the site and support facilities are already beyond maximum capacity during peak periods and no logical location exists for an ice rink given the current layout of the site. Consideration should be given to possible inclusion of an ice rink when sledding facilities are added at Riley Trails in the future.

Snowmobiling

Snowmobiling was the lowest ranked activity within the County Resident Survey. This activity,

similar to ATV use, requires extensive acreage for safe enjoyment of the sport, which is normally beyond the scope of the County's potential. However, snowmobiles have been included as a designated winter use on the Musketawa Trail (winter operations administered by the State) because this facility has the length of trail needed to provide a meaningful snowmobile experience.

BICYCLING / NON-MOTORIZED TRAILS

The 2010 county resident survey revealed that 94% of residents feel “paths for biking and rollerblading” are either very desirable (62%) or moderately desirable (32%). Not only have recent surveys revealed strong support for bicycle and non-motorized trails, but also anyone familiar with Ottawa County knows of this demand merely by observing existing trails and summer events in the county focusing on bicycling, rollerblading, and other trail activities. Another important sub-group within the biking community, mountain bikers, were not addressed specifically in the resident survey, but the unique needs of this user group are assessed later in this chapter.

Meeting the demand for expansion and development of new trails must address three particular user groups; 1) those persons who use the trails as functional linkages between two points, 2) those persons who use the trails for fitness, health and general enjoyment reasons, and 3) those persons who may use the trails as a recreation destination. Each user group has its own needs, though some may overlap, and the development of bicycle trails must be responsive to these needs.

Trail development can best be accomplished by a cooperative effort involving all levels of government. Many local units of government in Ottawa County have made bike paths a high priority and have passed millages to provide funding for development of local bike path systems. These efforts have resulted in a vast network of local trails that is promoted in a brochure produced in a joint effort between Ottawa County Parks, the Holland Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Grand Haven–Spring Lake Area Visitor Bureau.

Non-Motorized Pathway Study

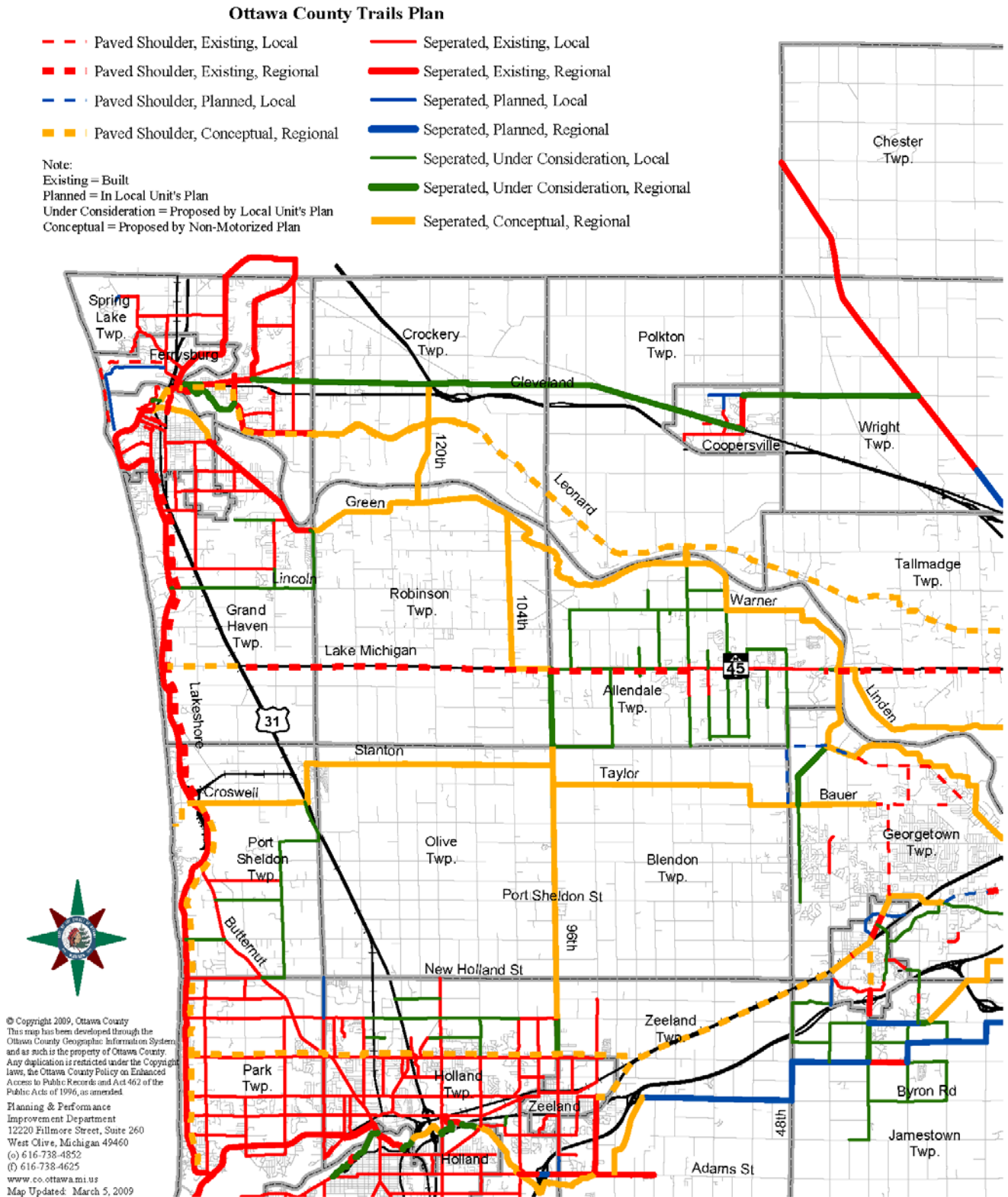
In an effort to provide leadership, expertise, and general assistance to local municipalities interested in developing and expanding their local non-motorized circulation network, the Parks Commission teamed with Ottawa County Planning Commission in completing the *Ottawa County Non-Motorized Pathway Study* in 2002.

The executive summary of the Non-Motorized Pathway Study is included as **Appendix K** and the proposed plan (updated 1/12/2011) shown in **Figure 6.1**. The plan focuses on the county regional trail linkages – those that connect communities. It proposes both a separated pathway system and widened road shoulders in key locations. Currently, separated pathways along roadways are the most common type of pathways in Ottawa County. The plan recommends that separated pathways be 8 to 14 feet wide, and that paved road shoulders be a minimum 4-foot width, consistent with nationally accepted standards.

In 2004, the County Road Commission re-paved approximately 7 miles of Lakeshore Drive between Hayes and Fillmore streets and an additional approximately 2 miles in 2005. This

Figure 6.1 Non-motorized Pathway Plan

**Ottawa County Non-Motorized Pathways Map
with Existing, Proposed, and Conceptual Pathways
Updated 1/12/2011**



project offered an opportunity to widen the paved shoulders from the Road Commission's standard width of 3 feet to 4 feet wide to meet AASHTO (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) bike path standards. The County, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Planning and Performance Improvement Department and Road Commission all shared the additional cost four ways, and the wider shoulders were installed. Much of Lakeshore Drive now offers both a separated pathway and widened shoulder, providing an alternative for the bicyclists, and increasing the importance and appeal of Lakeshore Drive as a recreational and commuter corridor.

Regional Trails

Ottawa County Parks recognizes it has a role to play in providing or assisting with non-motorized trails that have a regional recreational appeal. As far back as 1990, Ottawa County Parks along with Muskegon County was approached by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment (MDNRE) to consider a partnership in the development of a linear park on the abandoned railroad right-of-way between Marne and Muskegon. An extensive planning and public hearing process ensued and the right-of-way was acquired by the State in 1991. A 12-foot-wide asphalt trail and staging/parking areas were constructed in 1997. Known as the Musketawa Trail, Ottawa County Parks accepted its partnership responsibility and manages the 10-mile segment of the Musketawa Trail located in Ottawa County, with staging areas in Marne and Conklin.

The Parks Commission has supported the concept of linking the Musketawa Trail, which currently terminates at its east end near Marne, to the White Pine Trail in Kent County. Kent County Parks was awarded funding as part of a transportation bill in 2005 and is partnering with the State of Michigan in 2010 and 2011 to acquire the necessary easements and construct the trail.

The Parks Commission participates in and supports the West Michigan Trails and Greenways Coalition, which is actively pursuing funding for other regional trail connections in West Michigan, including a trail from the Upper Macatawa Conservation Area, through Zeeland and Jamestown Townships and linking to the Kent Trails in Kent County. Known as the Fred Meijer Kenowa Trail, the trail is being spearheaded by Zeeland and Jamestown Townships in Ottawa County and Byron Township in Kent County. Ottawa County Parks has committed \$200,000 toward the trail based on its regional importance and the existence of the Upper Macatawa Natural Area and Spring Grove Park along the route.

Greenway Trails

Ottawa County's efforts to establish greenways along the Grand, Pigeon and Macatawa Rivers provide excellent opportunities for establishment of destination recreational trails within these corridors. With their scenic attributes, linear nature and concentration of parklands, greenways have the potential to incorporate trails that can meet non-motorized transportation needs and provide a significant destination for outdoor enthusiasts.

Macatawa Greenway Trail: Working with its non-profit partner, the Outdoor Discovery Center Macatawa Greenway, the Parks Commission's vision of establishing a paved, multi-purpose greenway trail within the greenway corridor is slowly progressing. It is believed that

construction of the Fred Meijer Kenowa Trail will be a major boost to the Macatawa Greenway trail, with its connection between the Upper Macatawa Natural Area and trails in Kent County. Ottawa County Parks has built a half-mile of paved trail in the Upper Macatawa Natural Area and has applied for federal transportation enhancement funds to connect through the site to Byron Road to link to the Fred Meijer Kenowa Trail which is scheduled for construction in 2011.

When completed, the trail through the Upper Macatawa Natural Area will link to the existing bike path on Adams Street, providing connections for path users to the existing bike path network in the Holland area. Future efforts will focus on extending the greenway trail along the river corridor as ownership or easements are put in place, with a long-term goal of establishing a linkage to the City of Holland's riverfront parks, including Windmill Island and Window on the Waterfront.

Grand River Greenway Trail: Although no actual trail has been constructed, significant progress has been made in the acquisition of key riverfront parcels to preserve land and provide for a variety of recreational uses which include a future paved multi-use greenway trail. In one area, between Riverside Park and Eastmanville Bayou, continuous public ownership extends for over six miles along the Grand River. Efforts will continue to create linkages between riverfront parks and open space lands with a goal to identify and begin construction of a trail segment within the next five years. As with the Macatawa Greenway Trail, funding issues and coordination of roles with local units of government are key considerations before beginning actual trail construction.

Non-Motorized Trail Summary

The identified roles of Ottawa County Parks in the provision of bike paths and non-motorized trails in Ottawa County include the following:

- To promote a connected system of trails and pathways through efforts like the Non-Motorized Pathway Study and bike path brochures.
- To fulfill its partnership responsibility with the DNRE and operate the Musketawa Trail, a true linear park and regional recreation destination.
- To support the linkage of regional trails in West Michigan.
- To work to develop greenway trails as multi-purpose regional recreational pathways in greenway corridors along the Grand, the Macatawa River, and the Coastal Greenway (Note that the vision for Pigeon River Greenway trails is unpaved, rustic trails for hiking, cross-country skiing, equestrians, etc.).

Mountain Biking

An important sub-group of the biking community is mountain biking, which involves the use of specialized bikes to ride over rugged terrain. Currently, the county permits mountain bikes on designated trails at Pigeon Creek Park, Grand River Park and Riley Trails. Other opportunities for mountain biking on public lands in Ottawa County exist at the Bass River State Recreation Area. It should be noted that existing trails in Ottawa County Parks are generally shorter, wider, and flatter than preferred by skilled mountain bikers. Overall, opportunities for quality mountain biking experiences in Ottawa County are lacking.

Consideration should be given to the development of expanded mountain biking opportunities in the county park system with input from user groups. Provision of narrower trails with longer distance over varied terrain should be explored. User groups should be consulted concerning site selection and facility design. As with other trail uses, site selection must consider environmental impacts of the sport, which can lead to erosion and potential damage to plant communities. Erosion is of particular concern due to the erodible nature of much of the county's soil. Potential for conflicts with other user groups (i.e., hikers, equestrians, etc.) must also be considered.

PLAYGROUNDS

Ottawa County Parks provides many playgrounds within the county park system. These playgrounds are important because they provide an active recreation outlet for young children and are particularly important as support facilities for large group picnic outings.

Neighborhood or community park playgrounds, which are located in close proximity to population concentrations, are typically considered a local government responsibility. Because many rural communities do not have an active park system, many of the County Parks fill the need for playgrounds in these communities.

Beyond serving strictly local recreation needs or as support facilities in a larger park setting, playgrounds can be developed as destination facilities attracting users from a 10- to 20-mile radius. Playgrounds of this magnitude are considered appropriate for the county park system. The Age of Discovery Playground at Hager Park is an excellent example of a destination playground, with its extensive play apparatus and unique theme tied to the adjacent terrain map of the United States. The playground at Tunnel Park, while not on the same scale as the Hager Park playground, provides a unique attraction due to its adjacent dune climb.

Because of the anticipated growth of the county park system, the development of new playgrounds in conjunction with large group picnic areas is likely. It is important to consider the unique opportunities for connections that may exist between playgrounds and the natural environment. Playgrounds can be not only a place for children to play but to learn as well. In this regard, "natural playgrounds" are an emerging trend in playground design which should be considered. These designated outdoor areas utilize natural materials including rocks, boulders, wood, water, landform, and even living plants to form an interactive environment for children to play in and manipulate.

PICNICKING

Picnicking is an important recreational activity within the Ottawa County Park System and one of the most popular. The 2010 County Resident Survey found that picnic facilities had the second highest mean score of the activities listed, with 98% of respondents classifying the activity as moderately or very desirable. Opportunities for picnicking exist at the majority of the developed County Parks. Facilities range from enclosed picnic buildings with kitchens to picnic tables in a wooded setting.

For planning purposes, it is important to distinguish between smaller family picnics and large group outings. Small family-sized groups can normally utilize a few tables and grills on a first-

come, first-served basis and have their needs met without making arrangements in advance through the county parks office. Large group outings, however, normally desire advance reservations and have more extensive facility requirements.

A wide range of facilities is currently available for reservation by larger groups within the County Park System. In order to schedule reservations in advance, it is necessary to have park staff on-site to oversee reservations, perform necessary cleaning, and complete other operational tasks. Parks with on-site staff and facilities which are reserved in advance include eight picnic shelters, seven enclosed picnic buildings, one group picnic area, the Vander Laan and DeVries Rooms at Hager Park, the Pigeon Creek Park lodge, and the Weaver House, with the latter four having more modern indoor facilities. The total number of annual reservations has grown to over 1,000 in 2010, serving 63,000 park users.

Large group picnics are clearly a popular activity within the park system and demand is expected to continue to increase. Expansion of large group picnic facilities is recommended and many of the current park master plans reflect this need with the addition of picnic shelters. In addition, two future projects are anticipated to address this need, including the renovation of the Connor Bayou house for group use and a structure at the Grand River Ravines site which will be acquired as part of pending land acquisition. Both of these facilities are expected to serve a range of uses including business retreats, family outings, weddings, and other functions.

One apparent need that is not yet reflected in any current park plans is the provision of a group facility capable of accommodating 200 to 500 people. The county parks office receives many requests for facilities to serve larger sized groups but all current facilities are targeted at groups ranging from 50 to 125. Meeting the needs of these larger group gatherings includes not only provision of a large shelter and adequate tables but also adequate support facilities such as parking, restrooms, play area and possibly volleyball and similar group activities. Consideration should be given to establishment of a large group shelter in a centralized, accessible location in the future.

GOLF

Over the years, the potential for development of a golf course in the county park system has been discussed frequently but never fully evaluated. Many county park systems in Michigan and around the country operate golf courses to provide recreation for their residents and as revenue-producing facilities. In some high growth and urbanized areas, public courses are provided to maintain adequate golf opportunities as privately owned golf courses give way to development pressure. The goal in these situations is typically to provide economically priced golf activity for county residents. In other park systems, golf courses are developed as revenue-producing facilities and many feature amenities designed to attract golfers seeking a higher quality and more exclusive golfing experience. No formal study or evaluation has occurred to determine the particular market segment that would be served if a course were to be developed in Ottawa County or whether such an endeavor would be economically feasible.

Previous surveys of county residents revealed that the majority of county residents do not consider development of a golf course a high priority for Ottawa County Parks. In the 2010 survey, county residents ranked golf low relative to other priorities, but did show support for the activity.

The Parks Commission feels that development of a public golf course is not a high priority at the present time, especially with a general decline in golf participation in recent years and the relative health and abundance of privately owned public courses in Ottawa County. Further study should occur in the future to ascertain whether development of a golf course could further the goals of the County Parks. Questions to be addressed should include: Would provision of a county golf course provide recreation opportunities that are not currently available in Ottawa County through the private sector? What market segment would a county golf course serve? Would a golf course generate surplus funds that could offset other operating costs? Could a golf course development be a tool to preserve open space? These and many other questions would need to be addressed before making a decision to develop a golf course in the county park system.

HUNTING

Ottawa County Parks is one of just a few county park systems in Michigan that provides opportunities for hunting on county park-managed lands. Hunting opportunities are provided on many of the open space properties and at selected park properties within the County Park system. A range of hunting opportunities is provided, including open hunting (in accordance with DNR rules and regulations) on approximately 791 acres; archery deer hunting only, with no permits required on approximately 1,120 acres; and archery hunting by special permit on approximately 886 acres.

Although hunting was revealed to be one of the less popular activities ranked in the county resident survey, the Parks Commission feels it is important to consider a range of concerns in evaluating this issue:

- Hunting has been a long-standing use on many of the county's Open Space Lands.
- There is a strong tradition of hunting in Ottawa County.
- Hunting can be an important tool in management of certain wildlife populations (most notably deer). A good example of this is the population control hunt initiated in 2005 by the MDNRE at P.J. Hoffmaster State Park.
- Hunting requires no facility development and therefore has limited start-up costs.
- Encroaching suburban development on park-managed lands will likely result in increasing safety concerns associated with hunting, particularly regarding the use of firearms.
- Managing properties offering both hunting and general recreational use has great potential for user conflicts, with general recreational users shying away from hunting areas.

The Parks Commission will continue to evaluate properties on an individual basis as to their suitability for hunting. The intent is to continue to allow hunting on properties that are larger and receive less general recreational use.

GEOCACHING

Capitalizing on recent technology, geocaching is a family-friendly activity that has grown rapidly in popularity in recent years. It combines the use of global positioning system (GPS) and internet technology with the exploration of parks, fields, streets, and communities. A

geocache is typically a small weather resistant container that contains a logbook and an assortment of “treasures” for the finder. These geocaches are hidden by players over a wide geographic area and listed on an internet site for other players to see. A player visits the web site, documents a geocache location in degrees latitude and longitude, then uses a hand-held GPS receiver to locate the geocache. Once found, the player signs the log and if they take part of the “treasure,” they are expected to leave something in return, typically of equal or greater value. Ottawa County Parks has established guidelines which support geocaching in the county parks while protecting high quality natural features.

EQUESTRIAN TRAILS

Horse-back riding is a popular activity in Ottawa County. Many equestrians are actively seeking public lands with riding trails and are equipped to trailer their horse to these locations. Although the percentage of horse owners is low in the general population relative to other user groups, the activity is one which the Parks Commission feels fits with its role of providing large resource-based parks.

Designated horse trails exist at three locations within the Ottawa County Parks system. The Musketawa Trail, located on a former rail line, features a separate horse path along much of the 10-mile section located in Ottawa County. More popular with equestrians are the trails at Pigeon Creek Park, where equestrians have had access to over three miles of trails for many years. Equestrian trails are kept separate from hiking and mountain bike trails to avoid conflict and because horse traffic softens up trail surfaces, making them difficult to use for hikers and bikers. Recently developed equestrian facilities and trails at Eastmanville Farm are gaining in popularity at this unique county park with its historic barn and rolling hills and fields. Approximately three and a half miles of trail exist currently at this site, with more planned in the near future.

In addition to equestrian trails in the County Parks, the State’s Bass River Recreation Area also offers several miles of horse-back riding trails.

The Parks Commission envisions focusing equestrian use at the sites identified above with no plans currently to add sites in the future. Short-term plans call for expansion of trails where possible at existing sites. As noted above, the potential exists to add additional equestrian facilities and amenities at Eastmanville Farm in the near future. Additional study should be undertaken as needed to explore the county parks’ role in meeting future needs of the equestrian community.

DISC GOLF

Disc golf, sometimes referred to as frisbee golf, is a sport that appears to be growing in popularity in recent years. It is played like ball golf, except the goal is to throw a golf disc (frisbee) into a basket instead of hitting a ball into a hole. In 1990, there were about 300 courses world-wide, and by 2009 the number had grown to 3,000.

Two disc golf courses are known to exist in Ottawa County, both provided by Township Parks Departments (Spring Lake and Park). Several county park systems in Michigan provide disc golf courses and report that the courses are well used and appreciated by their residents. A

number of individuals have approached Ottawa County Parks in recent years, particularly in the Holland area, requesting Ottawa County Parks develop a course on one of its properties. The Parks Commission feels this activity may be a good fit within the county park system and is currently assessing the feasibility of installing a course at the Macatawa Open Space property (formerly Holland Country Club). The feasibility and appropriateness of a facility of this type at this site will be assessed in conjunction with master planning for this park which is scheduled to occur in early 2011.

DOG PARKS

The Parks Commission has been studying the issue of dog parks for several years to determine whether it should be the role of Ottawa County Parks to provide dog parks within the county park system. A dog park, for this discussion, is considered to be a fenced-in area where the public is allowed to bring dogs and run them off leash. Many large county and regional park systems in the Midwest have elected to provide dog parks within their park systems. Most are near large urban areas where opportunities to run dogs off leash are limited.

In recent years, Ottawa County Parks has been approached by individuals encouraging Ottawa County Parks to provide a dog park in the Georgetown Township area – possibly at the Fillmore at the Bend Open Space. The Parks Commission indicated initially that the development of a dog facility in eastern Ottawa County was a possibility in the future, pending further study, but not an immediate priority.

In recent years, two local units of government have opened dog parks in Ottawa County – Park Township and the City of Ferrysburg. Both of these dog parks are fenced-in areas under three acres in size where the public can bring their dogs for an off-leash experience. Various amenities are provided for the dogs as well as their owners. Both of these facilities have been well received by the public.

County and regional park systems with dog parks typically provide larger fenced-in areas, five to ten acres in size, which serve as a destination for dog owners who are willing to drive further distances to reach one of these facilities. Oakland County Parks, in Southeast Michigan, has established a goal of providing four dog parks, once in each quadrant. Oakland County's dog parks, like many of dog parks in the larger park systems, have entry fees for admission.

Unlike many park departments where dogs must always be leashed, Ottawa County Parks allows dogs off leash in its open space lands. A current initiative (2010-2011) to expand trails within its open space lands provides the potential to greatly expand opportunities for dog owners desiring to run their dogs off leash in the county park system. Note that properties designated as parks, as opposed to the lesser-developed open space lands, have strict leash rules.

It should be noted that while the trails on open space lands allow dogs off leash, they do not provide the secure, fenced area that is desired by many dog owners. Some dog owners are primarily seeking a place to walk their dog off-leash, while others are seeking to allow their dog to socialize with other dogs in a large, fenced-in setting.

The county resident survey reveals support for dog parks to be in the lower range of the

activities surveyed, but still positive. The Parks Commission acknowledges that the dog park concept is quite new and not well understood by most people. In assessing this issue, the Parks Commission determined that Ottawa County Parks should take steps to include a dog park in the master plan for the Grand River Ravines property in Georgetown Township which will likely encompass the adjacent Fillmore at the Bend Open Space. Potential to provide a larger, 5- to 10-acre fenced dog park at this site will be explored in more detail during the master planning process schedule to occur in 2011 and likely included in the first phase development scheduled for 2012 or 2013. At the same time, efforts will continue to expand trails within open space lands to provide additional off-leash opportunities for dog walkers. The Parks Commission will also continue to monitor local government involvement in dog parks and assess the need for larger dog parks throughout Ottawa County.

OTHER RECREATION FACILITIES

The above list of recreation activities and facilities is not intended to include all possible areas of involvement by the Parks Commission. Ongoing study and evaluation is needed to assess involvement in new areas considered appropriate for Ottawa County Parks, given its stated mission and focus on a natural resource-based system of parks and programs. At the Eastmanville Farm property, for example, a partnership with the agricultural community is being explored to establish an educational farm to interpret this important part of the county's heritage for the public. A new trend, zip lines, is being studied to determine whether this type of facility could fit within the county park system. The Parks Commission will continue to focus on traditional resource-based recreation activities while also assessing new and emerging activities as to their appropriateness and feasibility to be offered within the county park system.

