

**P**arks and recreation plans, including past efforts of Ottawa County, commonly state the need to plan for future park and open space needs, but rarely is there a concerted effort to analyze and plan for open space needs beyond the requirements of parklands and recreation facilities. The term "open space," although difficult to define, includes parklands, but is a much broader concept encompassing a wide range of undeveloped lands. For purposes of this plan, open space is broadly defined as **land which is free from intensive development and where the natural or cultural character of the land has been preserved or can be restored.**

As in the 2006 plan, a key objective of the 2011 plan is to clearly define the Parks and Recreation Commission's role in the protection of open space. The job of protecting open space in Ottawa County is a huge task which falls upon a wide range of entities. In addition to Ottawa County Parks, responsibility to address the task lies with local planning and parks commissions, the Ottawa County Planning Commission, private nonprofit land conservancy groups, and various state regulatory agencies.

Based on the results of past long-range planning efforts, the role of Ottawa County Parks in the protection of open space lands has emerged as one of identifying and acquiring select high-quality natural and recreational lands for use by the public. Clearly, it is not feasible to protect a large percentage of the land base as open space in Ottawa County through direct acquisition. However, by acquiring key high-quality natural and recreational lands, the County Parks Commission can provide the core natural lands which can serve as a basic green infrastructure for the county's future growth. The responsibility lies with local planning agencies and others to implement the necessary land use controls to limit sprawl and promote growth patterns which preserve open space.

This chapter will first explore the value of natural features and open space and comment on public support for these efforts. A review is then provided of past open space planning efforts which are important to understanding how the Commission's approach to open space planning has evolved. Park and open space acreage standards are discussed and guidelines are identified to help evaluate needs on a countywide basis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a detailed review of various land acquisition and greenway initiatives established by the Parks Commission and the direction of each is assessed.

#### THE VALUE OF NATURAL FEATURES AND OPEN SPACE

General attitudes toward land have changed in recent decades as people have become more aware of the effects of human activity on the environment. A new realization has emerged that development activities which destroy natural features and remove open space carry greater long-term costs. These costs include the loss of water quality and wildlife habitat and diminished attractiveness for tourism and other economic development. The natural and open space features of Ottawa County - its lakes, rivers and streams, sand dunes, wetlands, forests,

grasslands and agricultural lands - also create a special character and unique “sense of place” that can be damaged by insensitive alterations to these features.

Most citizens now recognize that protected natural features and open space contribute to the County's outstanding quality of life. Some of the general benefits of protecting and conserving these features include:

- Pure supplies of municipal and private water sources
- Wildlife habitat
- Groundwater recharge and purification, flood control, pollution protection and the support of unique plant and animal life
- Recreational opportunities including hiking, skiing, swimming, sledding, nature study, fishing, photography and related pursuits
- Aesthetics (views, serenity, rural nature, etc.)
- Educational and research opportunities (natural history, biology, geology, ecology, etc.)
- Economic opportunities in areas such as farming, forestry and tourism plus the improved ability to attract and retain businesses

Citizens in Ottawa County are acutely aware of the quality of the environment and appear to support strong policies protecting environmental assets and open spaces. County residents, increasingly sensitive to the value of their environment, are generally supportive of reasonable policies to help ensure that these resources will be present for future generations to enjoy. The County Resident Survey conducted in 2010 showed similar results to the earlier surveys revealing a strong interest in open space protection as noted in the findings cited below.

- 55% felt there is a need to acquire additional land for future public use. Although this percentage is lower than previous surveys, it represents significant support, even in these times of relative economic uncertainty.
- 83% felt that "protection of Ottawa County's best remaining natural areas should be a high priority for future land acquisition."
- 83% felt that significant portions of parks should be kept in a natural and undisturbed state for preservation purposes.

## REVIEW OF PAST PLANNING EFFORTS

The 2011 Plan seeks to build off previous plans to establish a workable framework for open space planning in Ottawa County. Recognizing the many unique natural and open space resources found throughout Ottawa County and the threat to these assets posed by the County's growth and sprawl, the Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission seeks to take a proactive position to preserve and protect selected resources of countywide significance for future generations.

As noted in Chapter 1, there have been many excellent plans prepared for the county park system over the years. As part of the current planning process, past plans have been reviewed in an effort to evaluate and benefit from previous planning efforts. The 1995 plan utilized a basic approach to identify open space areas for protection involving mapping a wide range of natural, cultural and recreation features for all of Ottawa County. Studying the results of the overlay mapping process revealed concentrations of features that were then identified as "Areas of Interest." These areas of interest led to a focus in the 2000 Plan on greenways along the Grand, Macatawa and Pigeon River corridors. This emphasis was reinforced and expanded

in the 2006 plan with the addition of the Lake Michigan coastal greenway as a focus area. Not surprisingly, a look back 40 years to the 1970 Parks Plan reveals a focus on these same natural resource areas for development of parks and preserves.

Results from the 1995 Plan were used along with additional information to structure the 1996 millage proposal to provide dedicated funds to expand the County's park and open space system. The Parks Commission structured a millage proposal that included the establishment of greenways along the three key river corridors as the foundation for the millage campaign. Millage campaign language described the greenway initiative as follows:

*Many of Ottawa County's best remaining natural features are associated with its rivers. The Parks Commission has identified three high priority river corridors for establishment of greenways. The goal would be to protect selected high quality natural, historic, and recreational lands through public/private partnerships with a long-range goal of providing a linked system of natural preserves, parks, and historic sites. Opportunities would be provided for hiking, biking, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, canoeing, and other recreational activities.*

The 2006 millage renewal proposal built on these goals with a specific objective of adding at least 1800 acres to the park and open space systems as well as developing new parks, expanding existing facilities, and continuing high quality maintenance and land stewardship.

## LAND ACQUISITION CRITERIA

As the Parks Commission began assessing lands for acquisition, it soon became clear that well-defined land acquisition criteria were needed to help with the evaluation process. The following acquisition criteria have been adopted as a guide for use in reviewing properties under consideration for purchase. It is important to note that while a point system is used (see Appendix L for actual copy of worksheet) and properties are ranked, the purpose of the criteria is primarily a discussion tool to be used in the decision-making process.

Property Acquisition Criteria:

### NATURAL FEATURES

- Presence of unique or rare type of ecological association, natural community, or species that could be protected or sustained in a park setting.
- Occurrence of unique or dramatic geological or topographical features (e.g., ravines, glacial landforms, barrier dunes, steep slopes, gravel pit lakes, etc.).
- Presence of water-related natural features. Examples include Lake Michigan shoreline, riparian lands (i.e., riverfront or lakefront), streams, wetlands, etc.

### SOCIAL-ENVIRONMENTAL FEATURES

- Recreation value in terms of type, uniqueness, and quality of recreational use anticipated at the site. Also, consider factors such as appropriateness of the site for the uses intended, the general attractiveness of the site and its surroundings, the suitability of the site for recreation development and meeting needs of special populations and the impact the proposed recreation development would have on the natural environment.
- Historical importance of the site. Does the site offer the opportunity to protect

significant historical features? Do opportunities exist for historical interpretation to the public?

- Size of overall acquisition project. Park plan guidelines require 100 to 500 acres to fit the definition of an area-wide or regional park, with larger sites receiving higher priority. Size is less important when evaluating lands as part of recreation corridors (e.g., greenways).
- Location of site. Consider the following factors:
  - a) Is part of a greenway/recreation corridor linking other public/natural lands; is part of an identified greenway project.
  - b) Is contiguous with or complementary to existing park or open space areas.
  - c) Provides access to park or open space areas.
  - d) Is located in a highly populated area or high-growth portion of Ottawa County.
  - e) Compatibility with adjacent land uses.
  - f) Potential for adverse development (e.g., higher importance given to sites where threat of development is imminent).
  - g) Lands possessing outstanding scenic qualities visible to the public from highways, public waterways, or park areas.

#### *ECONOMIC FACTORS*

- Is the property available for sale with a willing seller?
- Sale price.
- Revenue production potential.
- Environmental and development issues related to the property. What developmental limitations exist? Are high maintenance costs anticipated? Is environmental restoration required?
- Will the project provide significant economic benefits to the county? Does the project have significant potential to attract tourists or enhance the attractiveness of the county as a place to locate employment-producing enterprises?

#### *PARK AND OPEN SPACE ACREAGE GUIDELINES*

Standards have been used by many park and recreation agencies in the past to provide a benchmark or guide to help establish goals for the basic quantity of park and open space lands to set aside for the future. Although the Parks and Recreation Commission acknowledges standards of this type are somewhat subjective in nature, they can be an important tool in establishing goals.

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in its *Recreation, Park and Open Space Standards and Guidelines* identifies a classification system for park and open spaces and suggest acreage guidelines. For "local/close-to-home space" including city and township parks, a guideline of 6.25 to 10.5 acres per 1,000 population is suggested. For "regional space," comparable to the role of Ottawa County Parks, including regional/metropolitan parks and regional park preserves, NRPA suggests a standard of 15 to 20 acres per 1,000.

After considering survey results and other factors involved in evaluating park and open space needs in Ottawa County, the Parks Commission has adopted a guideline of a minimum of 20 acres per 1,000 population for county park and open space lands. In developing the guideline the Parks Commission has taken into consideration the strong public interest in preservation of

natural lands and open space; the overall need for parklands and facilities to meet identified activity needs; and the importance of tourism in Ottawa County and the added demand this places upon parklands.

In recent years, as key acquisitions have been completed, additional criteria have grown in importance. In particular the goal of optimizing each park site in terms of habitat protection, aesthetics, and function has become a primary consideration. In addition, land necessary to facilitate connections between parks, population centers, or other points of interest is also high on the list of acquisition priorities. Connections can be important both for linking habitat in the greenway corridors and for trail linkages.

## GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING

Ottawa County's focus on greenways is essentially a component of a broader and relatively new way of looking at green space preservation in the country, which is increasingly referred to as *green infrastructure planning*. As the name implies, green infrastructure planning views green space as essential to the functioning of a community. One description, put forth by the work group of The Conservation Fund and USDA Forest Service, reads as follows:

*"Green infrastructure is our nation's natural life support system – an interconnected network of waterways, wetlands, woodlands, wildlife habitats, and other natural areas; greenways, parks and other conservation lands; working farms, ranches and forests; and wilderness and other open spaces that support native species, maintain natural ecological processes, sustain air and water resources and contribute to the health and quality of life for America's communities and people."*

Green infrastructure planning challenges the park and open space planners to think more broadly and consider the health of the natural system beyond park and recreation needs. Mark Benedict and Edward McMahon refer to the following green infrastructure principles in their article "Green Infrastructure: Smart Conservation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century":

- 1) Green infrastructure should be the framework for conservation and development.
- 2) Design and plan green infrastructure before development.
- 3) Linkage is key.
- 4) Green infrastructure functions across multiple jurisdictions and at different scales.
- 5) Green infrastructure is grounded in science and land-use planning theories and practices.
- 6) Green infrastructure is a critical public investment.
- 7) Green infrastructure involves diverse stakeholders.

The West Michigan Strategic Alliance, a regional planning entity focusing on five counties in West Michigan, conducted a series of design charrettes with a goal to develop a long-term vision for green infrastructure priorities in the West Michigan region. Ottawa County Parks staff and many commissioners participated in the planning. Maps and reports summarizing the process were released in early January of 2005.

## GREENWAY INITIATIVES

As noted above, Ottawa County has identified the establishment of greenways along the Grand, Pigeon, and Macatawa Rivers in Ottawa County as a high priority. The 2006 Plan introduced a fourth greenway focus, the Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway. Detailed assessments of each proposed greenway corridor will be provided in this section. First, however, some general information on greenways is provided.

The word "greenway" is a relatively new term which can be defined as 1) a linear open space established along either a natural corridor, such as a riverfront, stream valley, or ridgeline, or overland along a railroad right-of-way converted to recreational use, a canal, a scenic road, or other route, 2) any natural or landscaped course for pedestrian or bicycle passage, 3) an open-space connector linking parks, nature reserves, cultural features, or historic sites with each other and with populated areas, and 4) locally, certain strip or linear parks designated as a parkway or greenbelt (Source: Charles Little, *Greenways for America*).

There are literally hundreds of greenway projects underway across the United States. Their popularity stems from the growing awareness that preserving linear corridors serves the interests of protecting both natural habitat and providing opportunities for public recreation. Corridors of protected natural lands allow wildlife and plant life to migrate through the linear space to meet habitat needs. Trail-related recreation activities such as biking, rollerblading, and hiking are ideally suited to greenway corridors and have been growing in popularity in recent years.

Ottawa County's greenway initiatives focus on key river corridors and the Lake Michigan shoreline because these areas contain a concentration of the county's remaining high-quality natural features and offer the potential to preserve large acreages of natural lands in a linked system. It is important to note that the scope of the greenway projects is very large, and in order to be successful and protect a significant portion of the natural landscape, it will be necessary to involve the efforts of many different entities, all working toward the same basic goal. Potential partners include private landowners, state and local governments, businesses, and nonprofit groups such as the Land Conservancy of West Michigan, the Audubon Society, and others.

### **Grand River Greenway**

The 2000 Parks Plan identified the Grand River and surrounding lands as a key natural corridor in Ottawa County. The plan proposed the following greenway vision, a vision that still accurately reflects the Parks Commission's greenway concept:

- Prime natural features including many of Ottawa County's best remaining wetlands, floodplain forests, ravines, rare plant communities and other ecologically significant areas would be protected for future generations.
- An extensive natural corridor would be protected, which would protect wildlife populations by providing a route for wildlife migration.
- Key recreation areas along the river would be acquired and made available for public use.
- Facilities for picnicking, nature study, hiking, fishing, boating and other popular



recreation activities would be provided which would help meet long-range recreation needs in Ottawa County.

- Recreation areas would be connected by pathways for bicycling, hiking, and other recreational uses. Pathways would be constructed adjacent to the river in some places and run along existing roadways in other areas where private property or sensitive natural features preclude access to the riverfront.
- Private sector involvement would be encouraged in the establishment of the greenway through development of commercial recreation facilities (i.e., campgrounds, marinas, etc.), restaurants, or other compatible developments.
- Private landowner rights would be protected in all cases. Creation of a greenway would not involve a government taking of land. Where acquisition of property rights is considered desirable, it would be accomplished only with the cooperation and agreement of the owner.
- Greenway planning and implementation would be a cooperative effort involving public/private partnership of citizens, organizations, businesses, and government agencies at all levels.
- The greenway would help maintain and increase the quality of life for Ottawa County residents and would have positive economic benefits for the County as a whole, as well as landowners adjacent to the greenway.

The Parks Commission continues to make progress toward the development of a master plan for the Grand River Greenway. Given the large scale and complexity of the Grand River corridor in Ottawa County, development of a detailed master plan is a huge task which will take many years to complete. Consideration should be given to re-establishing an advisory group, similar to the Grand River Greenway Advisory Group that met for several years in the late 1990s to help guide planning and implementation of the greenway. The advisory group could include landowners, interested citizens, representatives from governmental agencies and environmental groups and would meet periodically to advise the Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission on various greenway issues.

A conceptual plan for the Grand River Greenway in Ottawa County is shown in **Figure 8.1**. This concept plan represents a step toward development of a detailed master plan for the river corridor. The vision for the Grand River Greenway is to link greenway lands with a hard-surface trail. Trail construction is the final step in the process following acquisition efforts. Consideration should be given to development of the trail in segments as primary land acquisition in a segment is completed. The long-range goal is to provide a hard-surface trail linking Grand Haven, where the existing pathway already extends to 144<sup>th</sup> Avenue, to Georgetown Township and nearby Kent County trails.

The conceptual plan divides the river corridor into three segments based generally on the character of the river and the level of development in the area. The *Urban Greenway Segment* consists of the western portion of the river from Lake Michigan to approximately 120<sup>th</sup> Avenue. This segment is fairly developed and offers limited opportunities for large-scale land acquisition. A fair amount of public land is in place, as is a system of non-motorized paths including well-used paths that generally follow the river along area roads.

Ottawa County Parks was successful in acquiring a key 142-acre site, Connor Bayou, on the eastern edge of this segment during 2004 and 2005. With just under a mile of riverfront, this

site offers significant potential for a range of outdoor recreation activities. Preliminary target activities include picnicking, fishing, boating, trails, and nature study. Ottawa County's greenway focus in this area could also include acquisition of points of interest along the river corridor, trail expansion, and enhancement, acquisition of key natural lands, preservation of cultural and historic features, and other efforts to be identified.

The *Rural Conservation Greenway Segment* extends from approximately 120th Avenue east to M-45. This portion of the river is the most rural segment and contains primarily farming and residential land uses. The Crockery Creek and Bass River are two significant tributaries located in this stretch of river, and both have large expanses of natural lands located near their confluence with the Grand River. Opportunities still exist in this segment for relatively large-scale land acquisition. There is a need to further study lands and evaluate the potential to establish or expand parks and open spaces. During the past few years, Ottawa County has continued to acquire significant lands in this segment as opportunities have arisen. Properties acquired include multiple purchases to make up the Bur Oak Landing Open Space and Kuits Bayou and a key linkage piece between Deer Creek Park and Ripps Bayou.

Another property of special significance in this segment is the Bass River Recreation Area located adjacent to Ottawa County's Riverside Park. Bass River was expanded in 2001 with the 550-acre Bakale tract and now includes over 3 miles of riverfront. The undeveloped Bass River site is managed jointly by the Michigan State Parks and Recreation Division and the Michigan Wildlife Division and is slated to be developed as a State Recreation Area in the future. Land analysis and use-zone planning has been initiated by the State, with input from Ottawa County Parks. Additional coordination will be needed to maximize recreation opportunities that span state and county properties.

The potential to acquire other high-quality natural and recreational lands exists in this segment and the Parks Commission will continue to monitor and evaluate opportunities.

The *East Transition Greenway Segment* runs from M-45 to the Kent County line and consists of a more urban and suburban area. Although opportunities for larger-scale land acquisition still exist, they are diminishing as Ottawa County's largest and fastest-growing population concentration expands toward the river.

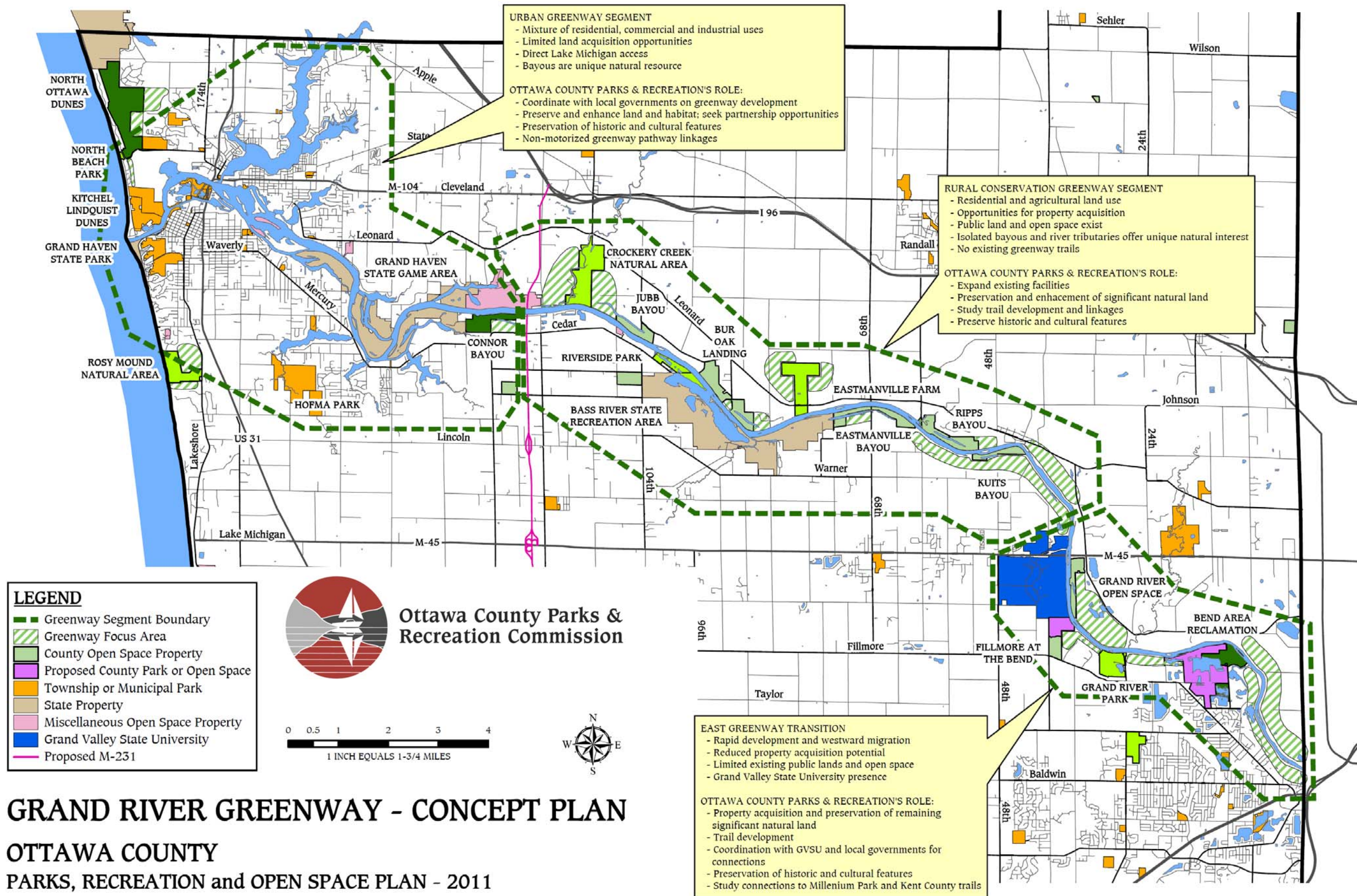
Grand Valley State University is located in this segment and the university controls an expansive stretch of unique natural land along the river. With over a mile of frontage encompassing a large portion of the Grand Valley ravines, the area was designated by the Natural Features Inventory of Ottawa County (1987) as one of the highest-quality natural sites remaining in Ottawa County. Portions of the ravine system with high-quality natural lands extend south of the campus on private lands along the river to Grand River Park.

Lands acquired and current projects in the *East Transition Greenway Segment* include the 111-acre Grand River Open Space property located across the Grand River from GVSU, two purchases totaling 258 acres to anchor the potentially much larger Bend Area, and the pending purchase of the Grand River Ravines site (100 acres) directly south of GVSU and adjacent to the Fillmore at the Bend Open Space.

Overall, this segment of river is near the highest population concentration and is experiencing



Figure 8.1 - Grand River Greenway Concept





the most rapid changes in land use. Opportunities must be evaluated and acted upon in order to put in place a system of green space before the landscape is fully developed. Special attention should be focused on greenway trail linkages between sites before development precludes this opportunity.

### **Pigeon River Greenway**

In contrast to the Grand River, the Pigeon River is much smaller and therefore somewhat easier to evaluate in terms of greenway potential. A greenway master-planning process was undertaken in 2000 with funding assistance from the Coastal Management Program administered by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. The Pigeon River is a relatively high-quality river corridor, with intact adjacent wetlands and much of the main branch of the river still in forest cover with good water quality overall. In recent years, the DNR has resumed planting trout in the river downstream of 120<sup>th</sup> Avenue, an indicator that water quality levels have improved.

The Pigeon River Greenway Concept Plan (**Figure 9.2**) shows the river corridor from approximately 116<sup>th</sup> Avenue west to Lake Michigan. There is an extraordinary amount of diversity of natural and recreational resources in this stretch of river. In the upper stretches, the river runs through a mixture of upland forests and wetlands, with large expanses of native woodlands still intact.

Pigeon Creek Park is located in this upper segment. The park encompasses 282 acres and approximately 3/4 miles of natural riverfront and offers a wide range of activities with a focus on trails for hiking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, and mountain biking.

Upstream of Pigeon Creek Park, the river is natural and flows through a wooded corridor for approximately one to two miles before it splits into drainage courses and loses its natural character. Potential exists for park/greenway expansion in this stretch of river, and additional study is needed.

Downstream of Pigeon Creek Park, before US-31, the two-mile stretch of river is undeveloped and heavily wooded with rolling hills, wetlands, and attractive natural features. The extensive tract of land that the river flows through is primarily in one large ownership with some smaller ownership immediately east of US-31. Two of these parcels, 30 acres of wooded riverfront, were donated to Ottawa County in 2005 and 2006 by a conservation-minded landowner. The large ownership, or portions thereof, would be highly attractive as a future addition to the greenway system and additional investigation is needed to evaluate this potential further. Currently the land is well managed as a private conservation reserve and does not appear to be under immediate threat of development.

The Pigeon River Greenway Master Plan focused on the lower stretch of river west of US-31 and provided detailed concepts for the eventual development of Hemlock Crossing and Pine Bend parks. These parks provide great access to the natural lands along the Pigeon River and house the new Nature Education Center and the historic Weaver House, a unique rental facility.

Consumers Energy has large land holdings that border these parks and extend to Lakeshore Drive, including nearly one and one-half miles of natural riverfront land. A significant portion

of their land holdings in this area is used for fly ash disposal. However, Consumers has dedicated extensive acreage and all of their riverfront for conservation purposes and sponsors a biological field station that offers educational opportunities for area schools.

The plan shows a concept for a continuous trail which is proposed to run through Ottawa County property and extend through Consumers Energy property out to Lakeshore Drive. The trail could connect to the Lakeshore Drive bike path that runs between Holland and Grand Haven. Port Sheldon Township operates a small park on Lakeshore Drive with riverfront that serves potentially serve as a downstream staging area for trail users and canoeists and kayakers. Ottawa County Parks is seeking to collaborate with Consumers Energy on the greenway, which could eventually lead to construction of a trail through their conservation property. Ottawa County Parks should continually monitor the Consumers Energy natural riverfront land, seeking trail access or possible long-term acquisition.

The Parks Commission's vision of a trail through the Pigeon River greenway differs somewhat from other greenway projects. Unlike the Grand River greenway trail, for example, which would include a paved connector pathway, the Pigeon River trail is envisioned to be an unpaved nature trail suitable for hiking, cross-country skiing, and nature study. Recent (2010) development of a separated roadside bike path along Croswell Street, between Lakeshore Drive and West Olive Road, provides a logical route for bicycles, and will eventually be linked to Hemlock Crossing.

West of Lakeshore Drive, the Pigeon River flows into Pigeon Lake before emptying into Lake Michigan through the Consumers Energy pierheads. Opportunities for land acquisition in this area are limited due to extensive development on Pigeon Lake. Public recreation opportunities currently existing in this area include a large DNR boat launch located on the north side of the lake along Lakeshore Drive. Public access facilities also include a public boardwalk constructed by Consumers Energy to provide fishing and pedestrian access to their north pier. The boardwalk runs along the edge of Pigeon Lake from an interior location where parking is provided.

A long-range vision for the Pigeon River Greenway should include a continuous trail running from Pigeon Creek Park west to Lake Michigan. Although not on the immediate horizon, and contingent upon decisions of private landowners as well as funding availability, such a trail could be a tremendous asset, exposing trail users to some of the best natural features in the county including upland forests, wooded wetlands, Great Lakes marshes, and coastal dunes.

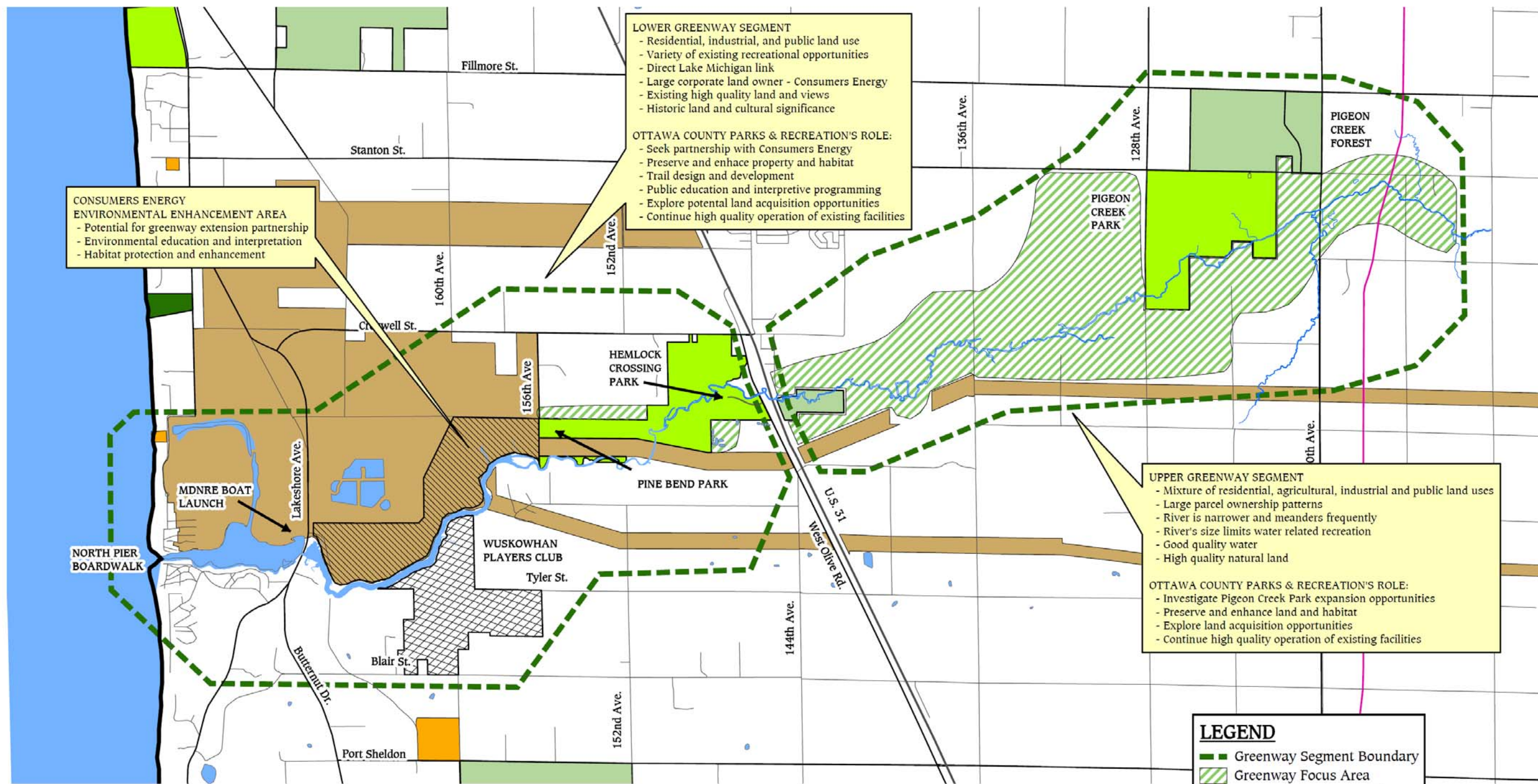
### **Macatawa River Greenway**

The Macatawa River drains a large expanse of southern Ottawa County and flows through the suburbanizing countryside in Zeeland and Holland Townships before entering the already highly developed City of Holland and Lake Macatawa. Although highly impacted by non-point source pollutants, the river is an under-rated recreation resource with many attractive amenities including extensive natural lands, expansive wetlands, and scenic views. This analysis focuses on the main branch of the river flowing from northeast Zeeland Township on through Lake Macatawa to Lake Michigan.

In addition to assessing the physical resources of the river, it is important to note from the



Figure 8.2 - Pigeon River Greenway Concept



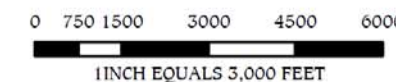
# PIGEON RIVER GREENWAY - CONCEPT PLAN

OTTAWA COUNTY

PARKS, RECREATION and OPEN SPACE PLAN - 2011



Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission



outset that the Macatawa River has a tremendous resource not found presently on the Grand and Pigeon Rivers - a strong advocacy group. The Outdoor Discovery Center Macatawa Greenway (ODCMG) is a nonprofit group committed to preserving and connecting natural habitats, waterways, and open lands in the Macatawa watershed. Although the organization's focus is upon the entire watershed, they are concentrating much of their initial effort on the protection of land and trail establishment on the main river branch from Windmill Island upstream through Zeeland Township.

**Figure 8.3** shows a basic concept plan and analysis for the Macatawa River. The river corridor is divided into four segments. The first segment, in the upper stretches of the river, called the *Upper Macatawa Greenway Segment*, encompasses a portion of river that runs through fairly open, agricultural land with relatively large ownership blocks. The river has been channelized in the upper portion of this segment and has less natural character than in lower stretches of river. The floodplain is broad through this area, and vast areas flood in major storm events.

Several years ago the ODCMG spearheaded a vision-setting session for the upper Macatawa drainage area which fostered the idea to permanently protect certain critical lands north of Adams Road and east of 88th Avenue along the Upper Macatawa River drainage in order to create a significant greenway, enhance the area's water management capabilities, and establish a new park for the area's rapidly growing population. This vision, which Ottawa County Parks was a key player in developing, led to the establishment of the Upper Macatawa Natural Area. This park is unique in that the Parks Commission has established diverse goals for the site including 1) provide park and open space land, 2) create and restore wildlife habitat, 3) improve water quality, and 4) expand flood storage. In addition to addressing a range of needs in the community, these broader goals provide more diverse opportunities for funding assistance.

The reference to enhancing the area's water management capabilities complements plans of the Macatawa Watershed Project, an EPA-funded project to improve water quality in the Macatawa Watershed. This organization calls for restoration efforts in the upper portion of the river to help reduce sedimentation and phosphorous loading in the river.

As with the other river greenway projects, successful implementation of the Macatawa River Greenway project will require the combined efforts of many governmental agencies as well as private and nonprofit groups. The Ottawa County Parks and Recreation Commission views itself as a key organization to implement portions of the greenway and has targeted the Upper Macatawa Natural Area as one of its top priorities in the watershed.

The *Middle Macatawa Greenway Corridor*, the next river segment to the west, is in a high-growth area. Although still rural in nature, the area is rapidly developing and opportunities for land preservation and greenway establishment are disappearing. This area has some quality natural land remaining and is very scenic with expansive vistas. Additional study and investigation is needed to assess potential for park and greenway establishment in this area. Ottawa County Parks has a significant presence in this area with the initial construction of facilities at Adams Street Landing, a highly visible location along a very busy primary road, and the purchase of the much larger former Holland Country Club property. Greenway Partners, Ridge Point Church and the ODCMG also hold significant acreage, making the idea of connecting these parcels with a greenway trail appear feasible in the next several years. Given the



difficulty of physical and financial obstacles in the lower reaches of the Macatawa River, this zone appears to be a priority in the near future.

Until recently, the next segment, called the *Lower Macatawa Greenway Corridor*, had received significant attention in terms of assessment and study through the Macatawa Greenway Partnership, Ottawa County Parks and local government units. This cooperation eventually led to a Lower Macatawa River Master Plan completed in 2008. Because of its linkage to the more urbanized Holland area including Windmill Island and Window on the Waterfront, this segment has been designated a high priority and efforts are underway to acquire key lands and easements. As mentioned above, however, development of facilities in this segment is difficult and greenway partners have been reluctant to move forward too quickly, given current economic conditions.

Despite its more urbanized nature, quality natural lands still exist in this stretch of river, most significantly the wetlands in the lower portion. The river throughout this segment is highly conducive to canoeing and kayaking. Windmill Island, a unique attraction featuring an authentic Dutch windmill, is located in the Macatawa Marsh at the west edge of this segment. The Macatawa Greenway Partnership has been active and successful in acquiring some small parcels and easements east of Windmill Island with a short-term goal of linking to the City of Holland's Paw Paw Preserve. The city of Holland recently completed a master-planning process for waterfront land in this area which calls for extensive boardwalks through the marsh to improve connections between the downtown and Windmill Island.

The last segment, called the *Lake Macatawa Segment*, is highly developed with limited opportunities for larger-scale land acquisitions. Existing parklands in this segment include Holland's Kollen Park, the major public access point on the south side of the lake; Holland Township's Dunton Park, providing the major public access point on the northeast end of the Lake; Park Township's efforts to preserve lands along two small watersheds to the lake, including the Winstrom Preserve, and Pine Creek Bay; and the Holland State Park and Ottawa County's Historic Ottawa Beach Parks, providing the linkage to Lake Michigan. Additional study is needed to determine Ottawa County's role in greenway implementation in this segment. Efforts should focus on potential for expanding access to Lake Michigan and assessing possible park development. The Historic Ottawa Beach Parks is discussed under the Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway.

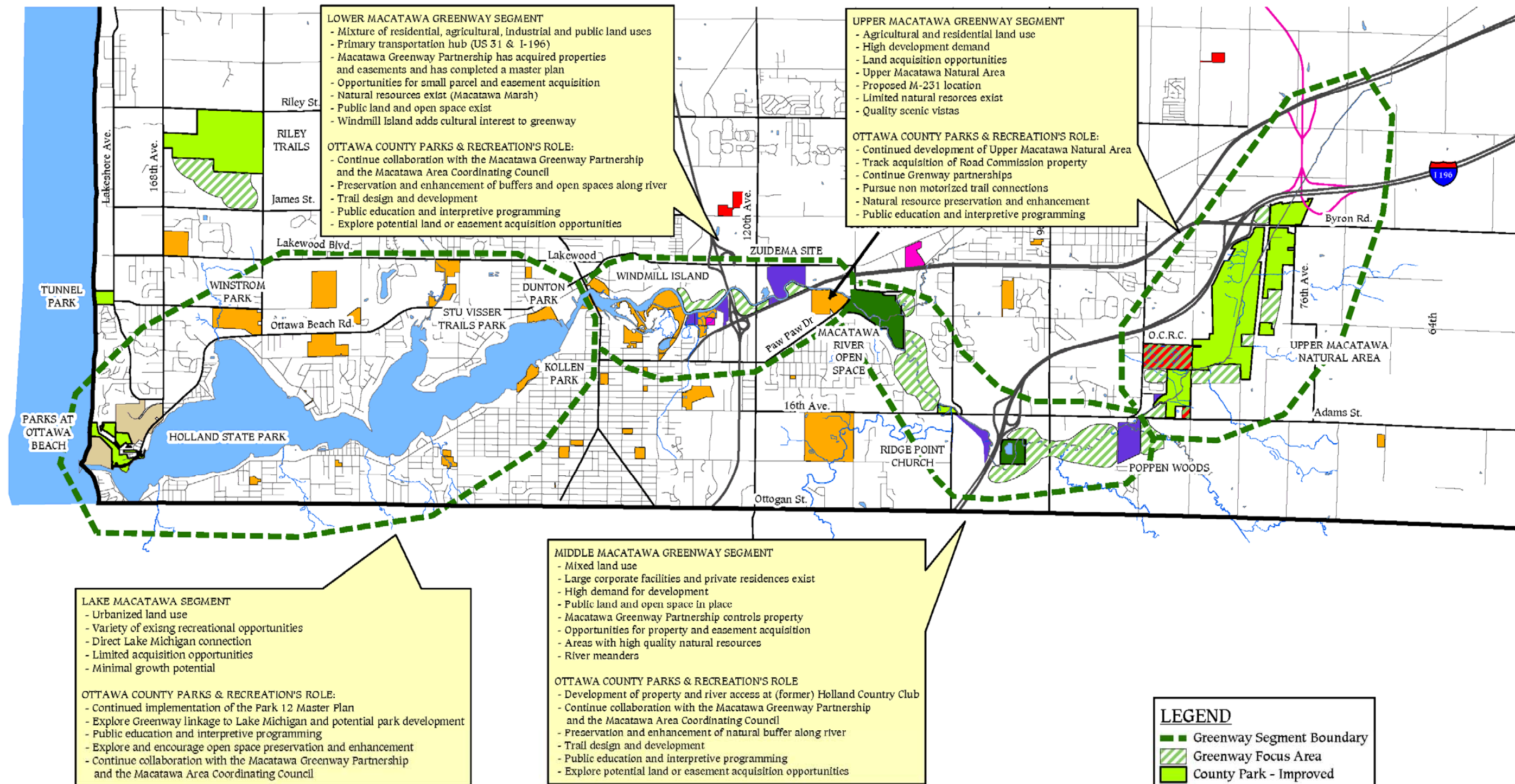
### **Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway**

Ottawa County's Lake Michigan shoreline and associated sand dunes comprise a tremendous recreational resource that attracts millions of parks visitors each year. It is also a well-defined linear corridor with a large number of public parks that are linked via the Lakeshore Drive bike path. The corridor also has extensive forested lands and unique natural features (i.e., dunes, waterfront, etc.) that have tremendous habitat importance for wildlife, particularly migratory birds. Considering all of these factors, the Parks Commission has made the decision to view the county's shoreline resources as a Coastal Greenway and consider the planning for this greenway in the same framework as the river-based greenways (See **Figures 9.4 and 9.5**).

Currently, access to Lake Michigan is provided through combined efforts of the State, County and local units of government. The State of Michigan operates three parks with Lake Michigan



Figure 8.3 - Macatawa River Greenway Concept



# MACATAWA RIVER GREENWAY - CONCEPT PLAN

OTTAWA COUNTY

PARKS, RECREATION and OPEN SPACE PLAN - 2011



Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission

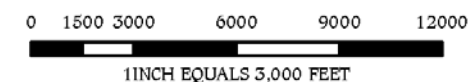
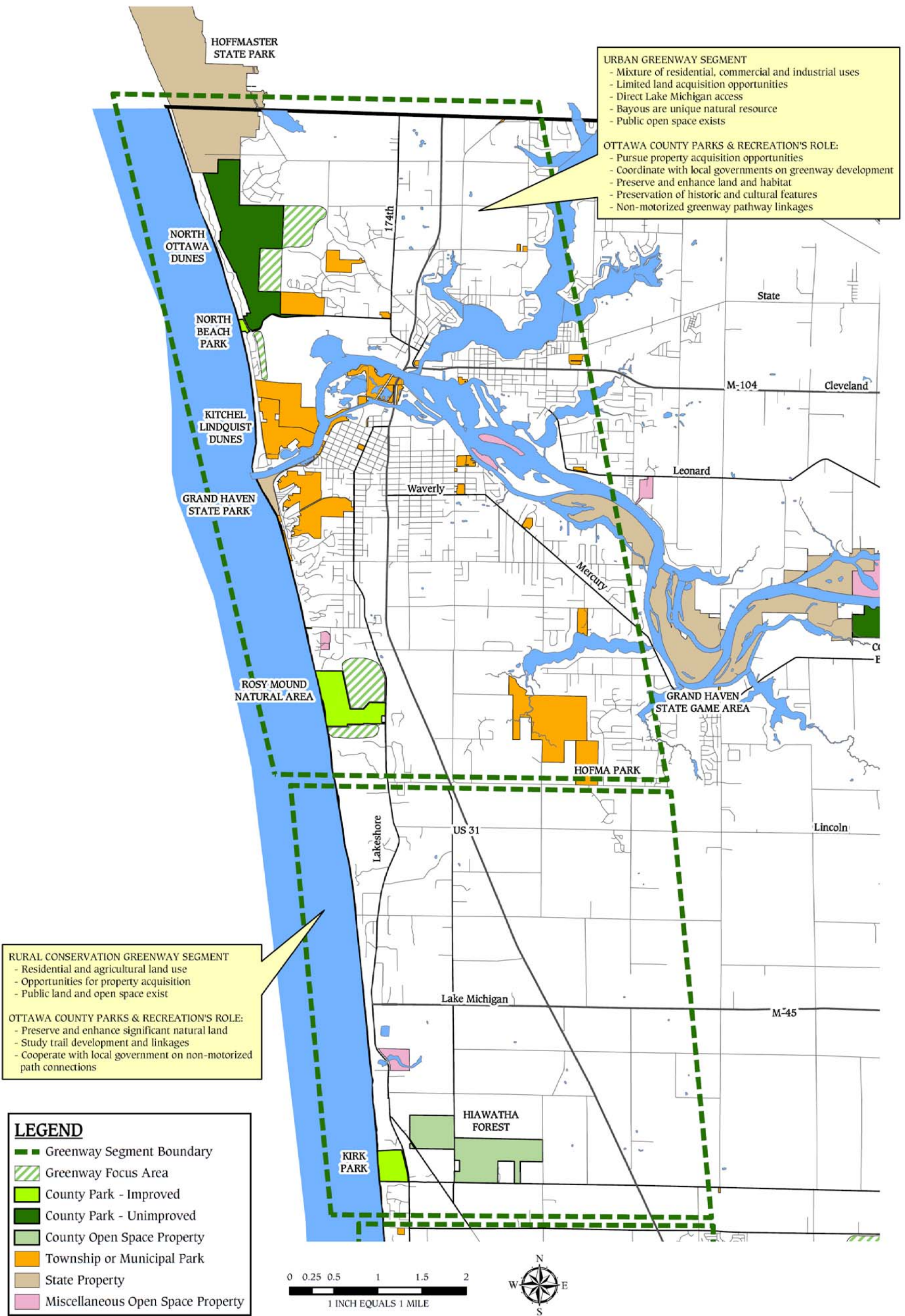




Figure 8.4 - North Coastal Greenway Concept

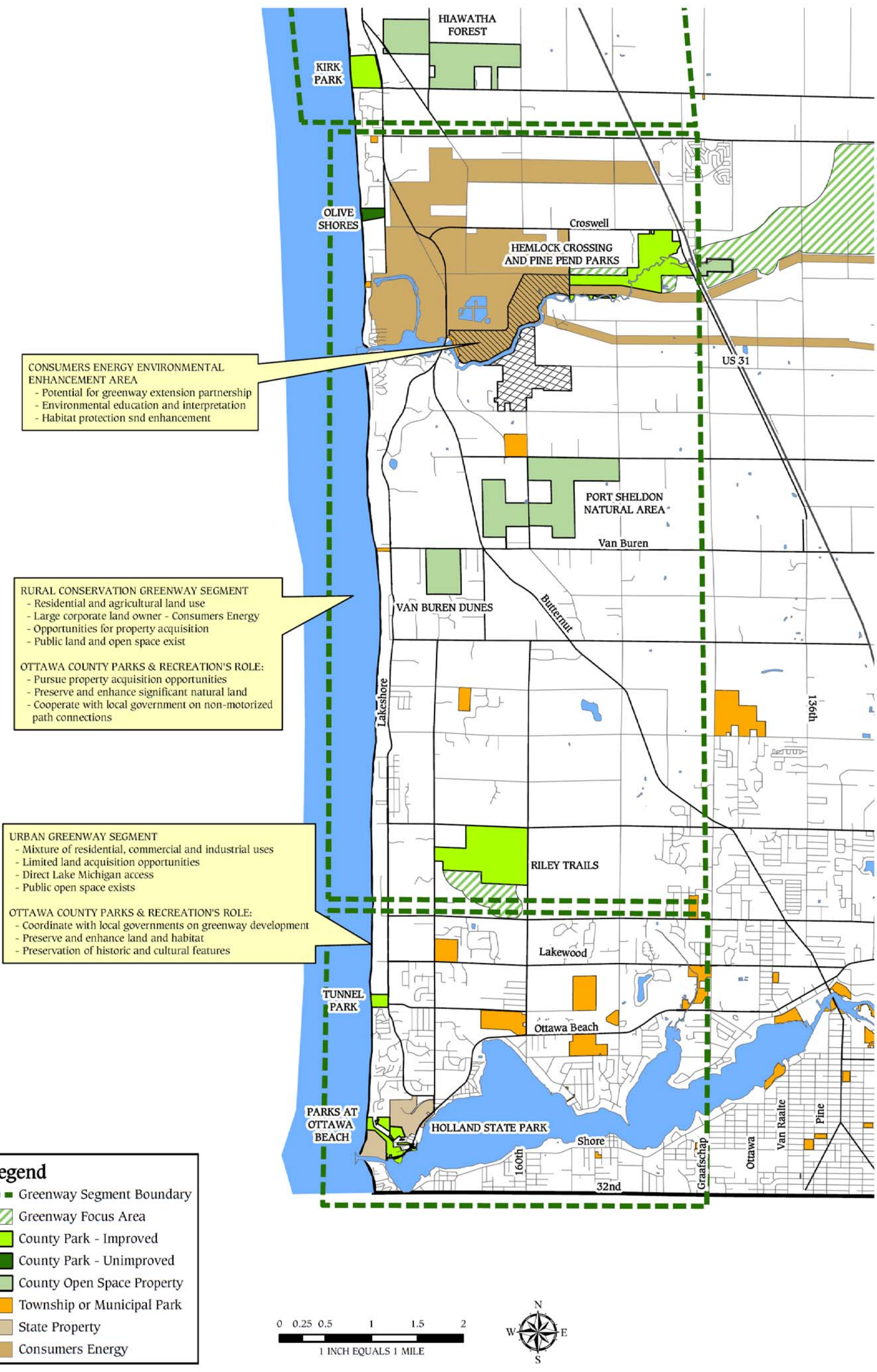


**NORTH COASTAL GREENWAY - CONCEPT PLAN**  
**OTTAWA COUNTY**  
**PARKS, RECREATION and OPEN SPACE PLAN - 2011**





Figure 8.5 - South Coastal Greenway Concept



# SOUTH COASTAL GREENWAY - CONCEPT PLAN

OTTAWA COUNTY  
PARKS, RECREATION and OPEN SPACE PLAN - 2011



frontage in Ottawa County, including P.J. Hoffmaster, Grand Haven and Holland State Parks. County parks with Lake Michigan frontage include North Beach Park (745 feet), Rosy Mound Natural Area (3,400 feet), Kirk Park (1,850 feet), Olive Shores (738 feet, purchase completed in 2009) and Tunnel Park (950 feet). Ottawa County also owns Lake Michigan frontage adjacent to Holland State Park as part of the Historic Ottawa Beach Parks (756 feet). Local parks with Lake Michigan frontage are limited but include Grand Haven's City Beach, Grand Haven Township's Brucker Beach, and Port Sheldon Township's Kouw and Winds Nest Parks. In addition, several road ends with established public access provide additional Lake Michigan access.

The most significant recent accomplishment was the completion of purchases at the Olive Shores site in 2009. Acquisition of two parcels directly north and south of existing county-owned property with a relatively small amount of Lake Michigan beach produce a new 20-acre park site with over 700 feet of usable shoreline. This amount of lakeshore provides adequate space for significant public use while protecting the existing character and habitat of the site. Although currently open to the public, planned improvements will make this site more accessible for all park users to enjoy its large pristine dune, forests, and open grasslands.

In total, an estimated 20,000 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline is in public ownership. This amounts to approximately 15% of the total shoreline in Ottawa County. Further public acquisition opportunities are limited, but unique situations to enhance public access need to be considered if they become available.

Although desirable, properties need not have Lake Michigan frontage to be important for the Coastal Greenway. The North Ottawa Dunes Acquisition Project, involving the acquisition of 500 acres of pristine forested dune property, is an outstanding example of a greenway project that adds significantly to the area's green infrastructure. This property was acquired in December 2005 for \$7 million with funding assistance (\$3.9 million) from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and \$1.4 million in private funds raised by project partners, including the Land Conservancy of West Michigan and the Committee to Acquire North Ottawa Dunes.

The qualities that make it outstanding include its 1) *size*: large acreage that stretches nearly two miles, 2) *special natural features*: high quality dunes with significant topography, mature forest, rare and threatened plants, 3) *linkage*: the site connects P.J. Hoffmaster State Park to the county's North Beach Park to Ferrysburg's Coast Guard Park and also undeveloped Spring Lake Township property, 4) *wildlife habitat*: combined with other parklands, the property preserves and links a vast wildlife habitat area with importance for many species, and 5) *recreation potential*: the site can support a wide range of trail activities and recreational activities including hiking, cross-country skiing, wildlife viewing, picnicking, hunting, etc.

The potential to expand the North Ottawa Dunes property to its maximum possible size should be explored. Spring Lake Township has shown strong support for the North Ottawa Dunes project including a willingness to trade 100 acres of township park land for a key adjacent 80-acre parcel to expand the North Ottawa Dunes site. The 80-acre property is currently owned by a private party that is exploring development options.

Future study should also focus on the potential to link the site to Grand Haven City dune property and Ferrysburg's Kitchel-Lindquist Dunes, located to the south. This connection could



be important in the future for both people and wildlife.

The coastal corridor should be studied further to seek opportunities to preserve significant natural lands and habitat, especially those that can link to existing public lands. High priority should be given to expanding existing parks where possible.

As noted previously in discussions of the river greenways, local units of government, private entities, and non-profit groups should be encouraged to play a role in preserving land within the coastal greenway. Local units of government currently operate numerous parks within the greenway corridor. Consumers Energy, with its huge landholdings at the Campbell Plant in Port Sheldon, controls a tremendous amount of natural land along the coastline. The Land Conservancy of West Michigan also has several important preserves along the shoreline.

#### GENERAL PARK, OPEN SPACE, AND TRAIL ACQUISITION

In addition to four greenways, Ottawa County Parks is interested in other opportunities to acquire new parks and open space lands. The 1996 millage campaign identified the greenways and Lake Michigan as target areas but also called for "general park, open space and trail acquisition" in other portions of the county where opportunities exist to protect significant natural features and open space properties.

Land acquisition criteria as identified previously will be used to assess various opportunities to create new county parks. There is a need to systematically evaluate portions of Ottawa County not already under study as part of the greenway programs or Lake Michigan shoreline study. Ottawa County's Geographic Information System has proven to be of great assistance in assessing lands on a countywide basis. Within this category, lands should also be considered which are in high-growth areas and, although potentially lacking outstanding natural features, may provide important open space in the future. Expansion of existing parks and open space lands is also a high priority. The Parks Commission will be continually studying and evaluating the potential to add lands to existing sites when quality lands are available and park use levels warrant expansion.

Pathways and trails are another focus of the Parks Commission. As indicated previously, the Parks Commission operates the Musketawa Trail, and trails are planned as part of the greenway projects. Initial concept plans call for hard-surface trails as a component of both the Grand River Greenway and Macatawa River Greenway. These trails could be part of a countywide system of trails that provide recreation experiences and also serve non-motorized transportation needs.

As referenced in Chapter 7, the Ottawa County Planning Commission, in conjunction with County Parks, completed a non-motorized pathway study in Ottawa County in 2002. The study recommended a system of regional trail linkages for both separated pathways and widened road shoulders. In accordance with the plan recommendations, Ottawa County Parks assisted with the funding of widened road shoulders as a demonstration project along an approximate 9-mile stretch of Lakeshore Drive as part of the Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway. The County Parks is also involved and cooperating with efforts to complete the Fred Meijer Kenowa Trail in southern Ottawa County and connect the Musketawa Trail to the White Pine Trail in northern Ottawa and Kent Counties.