



# 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission  
October 1, 2019 - September 30, 2020

# Letter from the Director

This year has been a challenging one for many reasons, but there has been a silver lining. As a community, we have re-connected to nature, collectively venturing outdoors more often for our general well-being. Parks became essential to coping with the unknown. This phenomena was not isolated to Ottawa County.



Throughout the year, many national news articles emphasized the connection between the health and wellness of communities in relation to their access to parks.

In Ottawa County, we have been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm for our parks this year and couldn't be more thankful residents determined parks to be an essential service with the renewal of the 10-year Parks & Recreation millage in 2016. It is because of civic action, generosity, and love of parks that we are able to offer high-quality natural areas and parks services.

The summer season brought even more visitors, undeterred by the effects of extremely high water levels throughout the county, but especially along the lakeshore. Lake Michigan has left its mark and there is much work to be done when the lake recedes.

A rather difficult moment of 2020 was losing former Parks & Recreation Commission President and Ottawa County Parks Foundation Board Member, David VanGinhoven, in June. His leadership, integrity, and love of the outdoors is widely known, and he will be missed by many.

This year challenged us all in many ways, but we made it through and learned to adapt. We are proud of park staff here, and nationwide, who worked to keep parks open and safe during this year when parks proved to be more important than ever.

Jason D. Shamblin, Director  
Ottawa County Parks & Recreation

## By the numbers

This spring, Google began offering monthly mobile data reports to provide insights into what has changed in response to policies aimed at combating COVID-19.

During the months of May-August, Google reported increases in visits to parks in Ottawa County of between **300%-500%** compared to the baseline, or "normal," day. For more information on these reports, visit: [google.com/covid19/mobility](https://google.com/covid19/mobility)



Photo by Fely Sapid Dewey



## 2020 Awards

John Scholtz, former Director of Ottawa County Parks & Recreation, received the 2019 Key Partner Award from MSU Extension.



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# Navigating Challenges: Adapting to COVID

In March, parks were deemed essential and remained open while many other places closed. The parks suddenly became popular with new users and regulars alike.

Working with the County's COVID response team, we made adjustments to support the popularity of parks:

- Limit parking at the most popular parks
- Posted signs about social distancing
- Created and shared a COVID park etiquette video on social media
- Made many trails one-way
- Temporarily closed restrooms and playgrounds
- Closed indoor reservation facilities



COVID etiquette signage posted at busy parks

Most visitors were understanding as we navigated the many Executive Orders and CDC recommendations to keep our visitors safe, but still continued to offer outdoor recreation.

We committed to providing nature programs and resources, even though our Nature Center was closed. Though many were new to the medium, staff produced 30 virtual programs and built a resource library for students, parents, and teachers to access for free:

[miOttawa.org/naturetoyou](http://miOttawa.org/naturetoyou)

As the months rolled on, we were able to obtain cleaning supplies and Personal Protective Equipment needed to re-open restrooms, just in time for the summer season.

When outdoor gathering restrictions were loosened, we were able to offer outdoor reservation facilities and re-open playgrounds and the Grand Ravines Dog Park. We also held summer camps and outdoor programming with smaller groups of participants.

While indoor gathering restrictions fluctuated, we were not able to re-open our indoor facilities to meet new requirements, and 865 reservations including weddings, anniversaries, and family reunions had to be canceled.

Through all of this, park staff was able to work in the field or from home every day to perform their essential duties.

Even with the many obstacles we faced, parks were clean and safe every day. Improvements and repairs continued, and most importantly, enjoyment of the parks continued.

*[I] wanted to let the Ottawa County Park staff know that they are appreciated. In an effort to get out of the house during the pandemic, I decided to visit all the [Ottawa County Parks] beginning in April. Today I finished the job. After walking, paddling, and biking all the parks, I am much more aware of how fortunate we are to live in Ottawa County. There are some truly beautiful places in our county that I never knew existed. It's been one of the few silver linings of the pandemic for me.*

– Tory Carter, Ottawa County Resident



Limited overflow parking at Rosy Mound Natural Area



Closed restroom



Socially-distanced presentation at Stearns Creek Park



Thru hike at North Ottawa Dunes



Whistle of the Whip-poor-will program at Pigeon Creek Park

# Navigating Challenges: High Water

## High Water Damage

High water continued to be a major issue and required staff to monitor stairs, boardwalks, overlooks, bridges, boat launches, kayak launches, and some trail routes.

As Lake Michigan rose, our beaches turned into sand cliffs, forcing the removal of wooden access structures at Rosy Mound, Tunnel Park, and Kirk Park. Debris in the form of lumber from other's stairs, docks, and boardwalks continued to wash up on beaches in large quantities after every storm. Sets of stairs that have been buried for decades were exposed and then left hanging from the cliff before staff were able to remove them. Access to the dog beach at Kirk Park and the dune ridge trail fell victim to the waves as well. Many houses that neighbor North Beach Park were in danger of falling into the lake before the Parks & Recreation Commission allowed a contractor to use the park to stage materials and equipment to save these homes.

Inland, the rivers overflowed their banks, closing boat launches at Deer Creek, Eastmanville Bayou, Grand River Park, and Riverside Park. The universal kayak launches were modified to adjust to the high water, but installation on the flooded banks still proved difficult.

Paths near the river or in low areas remained flooded most of the year, and concrete along Lake Macatawa was undercut and nearly lost. North Ottawa Dunes was saturated from the high water table when we allowed water to be pumped into the park to save surrounding homes from flooding.



Ridge trail at Kirk Park collapsed due to erosion



Closed platform at Rosy Mound Natural Area; stairs to the lake were removed in FY19



Buried stairs at Kirk Park



Access to neighbors via North Beach Park



Flooded trail at Riverside Park

## Macatawa Watershed Clean Up

### Lakeshore Coastal Greenway Macatawa River Greenway



In partnership with the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council and five other West Michigan partners, the Lakeshore Clean Up Coalition was formed. Beach clean ups were hosted late in the year in an effort to remove the debris on the beach due to high water levels.

This work was funded by a Trash Removal in Great Lakes Communities grant through the Environmental Protection Agency and will continue next year.

Learn more: [the-macc.org/cleanup-events](http://the-macc.org/cleanup-events)

## LAKESHORE CLEANUP COALITION



Beach clean-up volunteers at lakeshore parks



# Highlights on the Lakeshore

## Ottawa Sands Master Plan

### Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway

Ottawa County Parks & Recreation began a formal master plan design process for the Ottawa Sands early in the year.

The process included formal input sessions with various stakeholder groups including, local municipalities; further input from park staff, leadership, and friends; as well as engagement with the general public through an online survey, Instagram photo challenge, and on-site field day.

The site was also analyzed from both natural resource and recreational perspectives. On-site work included a vegetation and natural community inventory, wetland inventory, a herpetology study, lake evaluation, and numerous site walks by the site design team and others.

The process will culminate with a final comprehensive plan for site preservation, restoration/natural enhancement and recreational improvements.

More information about this master plan:  
[miOttawa.org/ottawasands](http://miOttawa.org/ottawasands)



Ottawa Sands Park Field Day



Community Visioning Plan Open House event at Coast Guard Park

### miOTTAWA SANDS PARK

The Instagram Photo Vision Challenge invited park visitors to share photos of what they love most or would like to see more of at the park!

## Ottawa Beach Marina

### Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway

Further south along the lakeshore, in Holland, the first year of operation at the Historic Ottawa Beach Marina on Lake Macatawa was successful. More information on marina revenue can be found on page 11.



Aerial view of Ottawa Beach Marina

## Partner Feature: Pumphouse Museum & Learning Center

### Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway

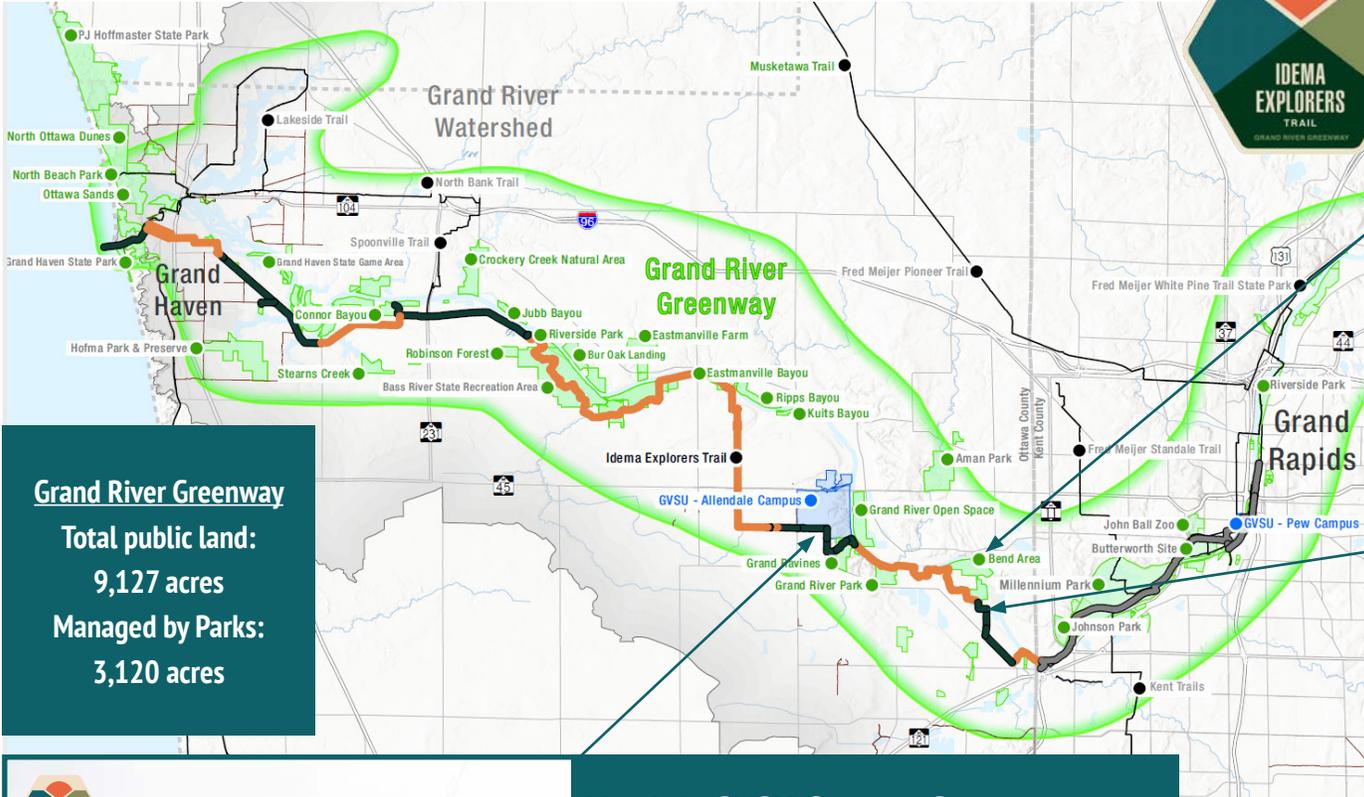
Despite COVID restrictions, our partner, the Historic Ottawa Beach Society, was able to safely welcome nearly 1,000 visitors to the Pumphouse Museum & Learning Center this year to enjoy the Holland's Earliest Amusements exhibit.

The exhibit told the stories of the parallel creation, operation, and demise of both Lakewood Farm and Zoo and Jenison Electric Park. At its peak, Lakewood drew 1,000,000 visitors a year, and, with Jenison Park, marked the beginning of Holland as a tourist mecca.



Pumphouse Museum & Learning Center

# Greenway Trails



**Grand River Greenway**  
 Total public land:  
 9,127 acres  
 Managed by Parks:  
 3,120 acres

## Bend Area Expansion

### Grand River Greenway

The Bend Area was expanded not once, but twice this year, now totaling 421 acres! The expansion of this park has long been planned as part of the greenway.

**2020 Bend Area expansions**

## Trail Planning & Construction

### Grand River Greenway

Efforts continued to finalize a route for the proposed non-motorized paved trail along the Grand River including, working with landowners, securing funding, and developing preliminary and final design and engineering plans for the Stearns Connector, Eastmanville Connector, Bass River, and Jenison Mill Segments of the trail.

**Trail construction along 12th Avenue in Georgetown Township, completed this summer**

## Versluis GVSU Campus Segment

### Grand River Greenway

Partners gathered on Grand Valley State University's campus to celebrate the completion of the Versluis GVSU Campus Segment of the Idema Explorers Trail. The completed trail now connects Grand Ravines to GVSU's Allendale campus and the Allendale business district.

**Pictured: Matt Fenske, Judge Peter Versluis, Bea Idema, President Philomena V. Mantella, Ambassador Peter Secchia, and Greg DeJong**

## Trail Planning

### Macatawa River Greenway

The Macatawa Greenway Team continues to meet regularly to determine the next steps for connecting the greenway. There are continued discussions and intensive planning with various stakeholders and agencies.

**Velo Kids on the Macatawa River Greenway Trail through Upper Macatawa Natural Area**

# Restoration & Stewardship

## Bayou Connectivity

### Grand River Greenway

Three new culverts were added under an access drive to improve fish habitat and user access at Riverside Park. This work was funded by the DNR's Aquatic Habitat Grant program and matched by funds from our millage.

Nearly 1,000' of Grand River shoreline was armored to protect it from erosion. Shoreline restoration was funded through the Sustain Our Great Lakes program, awarded via the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Learn more: [news.miottawa.org/riverside-restoration-update](https://news.miottawa.org/riverside-restoration-update)



New culvert being placed under road



Shoreline armoring

## Riparian Restoration

### Grand River Greenway

Partnering with the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, the Parks & Recreation Commission secured a nationally competitive grant from the Wildlife Conservation Society's Climate Adaptation Fund for a project on a 52-acre section of Eastmanville Farm along the Grand River.

Staff began preparing the site for the creation of a bur oak savanna, a once abundant ecosystem in Michigan.

Learn more: [news.miottawa.org/efarm-restoration](https://news.miottawa.org/efarm-restoration)



Eastmanville Farm south of Leonard Rd

## Hemlock Woolly Adelgid (HWA) Task Force

### Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway

After surveying thousands of hemlocks at Ottawa Sands and North Ottawa Dunes, staff moved on to pest management. Nearly 2,000 trees on county park land have been treated for hemlock woolly adelgid. You can identify a tree that has been treated by searching for an aluminum tag at its base.

The West Michigan CISMA has treated an additional 7,700 trees on both private and public property, including in Mason County, which is now the most northern location of HWA. Learn more about this forest pest and how you can help: [saveMIhemlocks.org](https://saveMIhemlocks.org)



HEMLOCK WOOLLY ADELGID

## Oak Savanna Restoration

### Grand River Greenway

A significant portion of restoration work was completed at Stearns Creek Park to encourage growth of native species. Harvesting old pine plantations allows more sunlight to shine through, welcoming plant species that thrive in an oak savanna ecosystem, like the Eastern prickly pear, as well as the wildlife those plants support, like the Eastern box turtle.

Learn more: [news.miottawa.org/oak-savanna-restoration](https://news.miottawa.org/oak-savanna-restoration)



Pine removal at Stearns Creek Park



## Parks Volunteers

Typically Parks staff can rely on about 10,000 hours of volunteer support, with the majority focused on stewardship tasks, such as invasive plant removal and seed collection. Nearly half of those hours are attributed to school groups. Unfortunately in 2020, most school-based outings were canceled. Thankfully we still had many volunteers work on their own or with a group later in the year. We look forward to seeing more students soon!



Thank you to all of our volunteers! From maintaining trails to natural resources support, we are grateful for your time and effort.

# Ottawa County Parks Nature Center

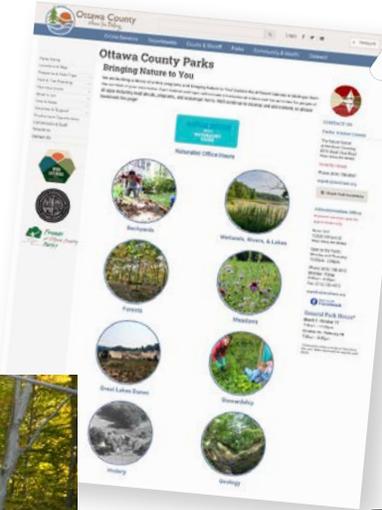
## 10 Years of Nature Education

### Pigeon River Greenway

Our Nature Center, located at Hemlock Crossing County Park, celebrated its 10th anniversary this year. We weren't able to gather for a large party as planned, but we were proud to be able to adapt to new COVID restrictions to still provide nature program and activities to people of all ages – both in-person and online.

In partnership with Loutit District Library, Spring Lake District Library, the Tri-Cities Historical Museum, the City of Grand Haven, and the Village of Spring Lake we offered a number of family-friendly story walks along accessible trails in parks.

Photo by Blair Celano



Did you know that birding was an activity that saw a major increase in popularity during COVID shutdowns?

We saw many new faces when bird walks resumed.



## 2020: The Year of the Video

Though many were new to the medium, staff produced 30 virtual programs and built a resource library for students, parents, and teachers to access for free:

[miOttawa.org/naturetoyou](http://miOttawa.org/naturetoyou)

The videos were also shared on social media and by e-mail. Check out some examples below!



Read alouds and Gabagouache tour

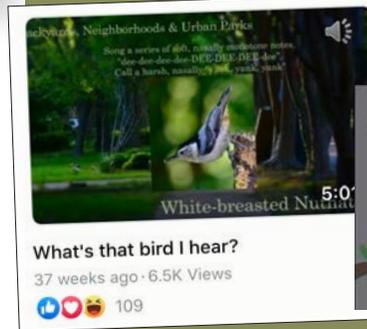


Wildlife Encounters program with "live" searches in the species' habitat



Spring Beauty

Wildflower ID and accompanying Scavenger Hunt activities



Bird identification by sound for a variety of habitats, including your backyard!



Spring volunteer workdays were canceled, but this video ID'ing garlic mustard encouraged park visitors to remove this invasive plant on their own!

# Supporting Organizations

While income from fees and permits provide an important source of operating revenues, the voter-supported parks millage provides core funding for Ottawa County Parks. In addition to supporting a wide variety of park improvements and operations, the millage helps secure grant funds that are critical to the expansion and improvement of the park system. The 10-year millage was renewed in 2016 with over 72% of public support.

## Ottawa County Parks Foundation

As the park system has grown over the past 20 years, so has the percentage of the millage required to operate and maintain properties. While the bulk of the funds will be used for that purpose, there are still new projects on the horizon, including:

- Construction of trails along the Grand River and Macatawa River Greenways
- Extension of the Pigeon River Greenway
- Expansion and development of the Bend Area and Ottawa Sands
- Support of nature education programming

The Ottawa County Parks Foundation exists to raise funds to assist the Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission in achieving its goal and is expected to have an expanding role in the future.

In 2020, the Parks Foundation secured pledges for over \$600,000 for parks projects, including the Grand River Greenway. While they were unable to host in-person fundraising events, they worked hard to offer virtual alternatives and continued to raise funds through their Stewardship Circle and Park Sustainers Club.

Learn more: [ottawacountyparksfoundation.org](http://ottawacountyparksfoundation.org)



Board Members Marjie Viveen and Bobbi Sabine share a laugh at the Foundation's Jigsaw Puzzle Contest on February 15, 2020

## Friends of Ottawa County Parks

The Friends of Ottawa County Parks (FOOCP) is a membership-based organization that supports the parks through stewardship and monitoring, as well as community outreach. Unfortunately, many of their typical outreach activities were limited this year.



FOOCP was one of our earliest supporters of the Prescribed Browsing Project. Throughout the years they have supported the program by purchasing feed, fencing, and veterinarian care.

The Grants Committee awarded the first grant from the Statera Stewardship Fund to support PARKS BINGO in cooperation with OAISD through *Little Read Lakeshore*, a larger effort hosted by Hope College.

They also continued to support the Nature Center by donating goodies for Coffee with the Birds Mug Club members.

Learn more: [friendsofocp.org](http://friendsofocp.org)



Many of our Friends are active volunteers and are part of the Park Stewards. This group meets once a week and goes on all sorts of adventures to care for our natural resources.



# Operating Revenue

## Operating Parks through a Pandemic

From a revenue standpoint, Ottawa County Parks & Recreation had a consistent year. While many facility rental reservations had to be canceled, motor vehicle permit sales were at an all-time high.

When many parks budgets are on the “chopping block” due to budget constraints on local governments, we were grateful for our operating millage and support from the Ottawa County Parks Foundation.

The Parks & Recreation millage continues to be a key factor in our ability to secure large grants.

## Interesting Operations Facts

- Pigeon Creek Lodge was only open 11 days in FY2020 (14 days in FY2019 and 30 days in FY2018)
- Rentals canceled due to COVID: 865
- Rental Facilities cleaned before and after their rental: 563 (1,540 in FY2019)
- Special events held in parks: 51 (25 canceled due to COVID) (173 in 2019)
- Commercial Photography permits issued or renewed: 19

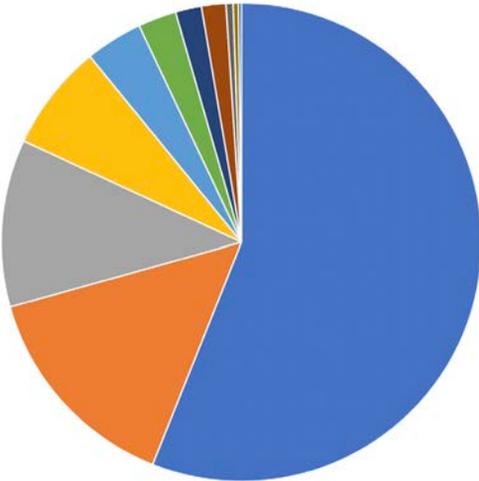


The Pigeon Creek Lodge transitioned to nearly all compostable disposables, partnered with a compost company, and offered re-usable mugs, with beverage discounts as incentives.



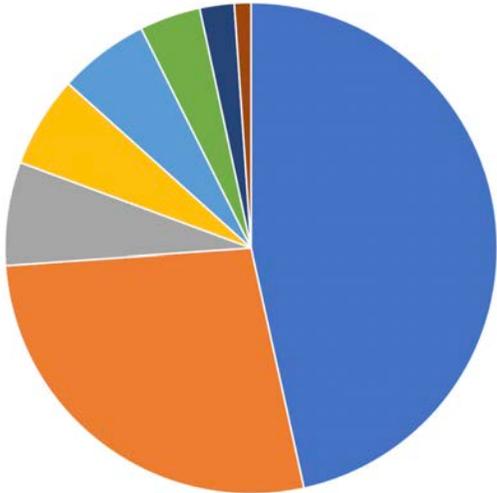
Despite smaller beaches, we welcomed more visitors to Lake Michigan than ever before, with masks on, of course.

### 2020 Revenues



- Millage Revenue - \$3,974,723
- Grant Revenue - \$1,037,730
- Marina Bond - \$800,000
- Motor Vehicle Permits - \$511,226
- Other Revenue - \$273,353.00
- Ottawa County Parks Foundation - \$183,255
- Ottawa Beach Marina - \$124,224
- Facility Reservations - \$116,288
- Nature Center Revenue - \$33,547
- Pigeon Creek Lodge - \$25,420
- Grand Ravines Dog Park - \$14,147
- Total: \$7,093,913**

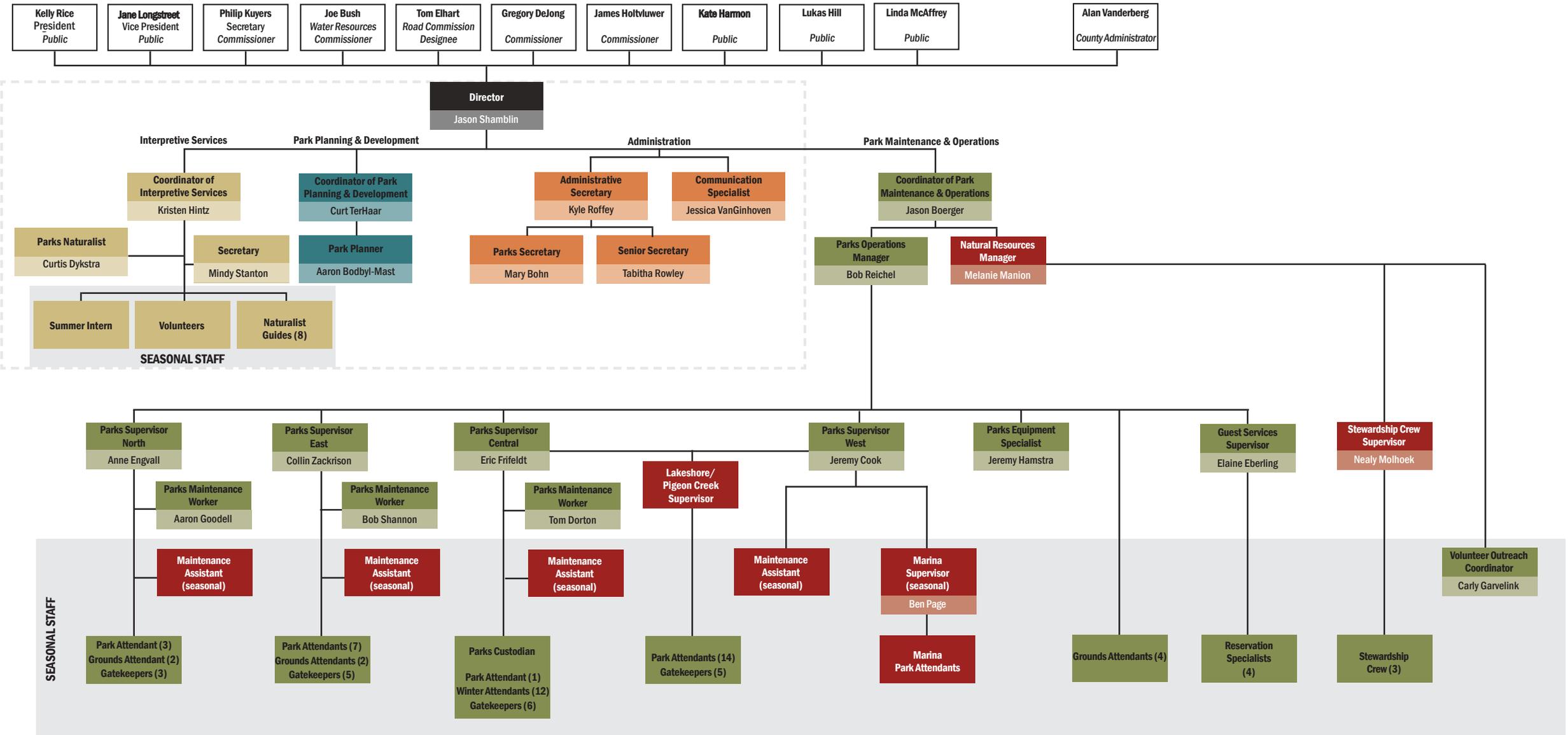
### 2020 Expenses



- Salaries - \$2,688,013
- Capital Outlay - \$1,578,309
- Contracted Services - \$391,157
- Supplies - \$347,603
- Maintenance & Repair - \$343,508
- Operating Expenses - \$231,907
- Utilities - \$103,410
- Insurance - \$63,054
- Total: \$5,773,961**

# Board & Staff

as of January 2021



# Property Data

PROPERTY DATA	ACREAGE	WATER FRONTAGE (Linear feet)		
		Lake Michigan Frontage	River Frontage	Bayou & Inland Lake Frontage
Parks and Open Spaces	Total Acres			
<b>GRAND RIVER GREENWAY</b>				
Idema Explorers Trail				
Stearns Creek	118			6,213
Connor Bayou	142		4,563	1,687
Crockery Creek Natural Area	334		2,640	
Jubb Bayou (Open Space)	97		4,589	4,026
Riverside Park	95		6,737	
Bur Oak Landing (Open Space)	263		7,392	5,267
Eastmanville Farm	229		1,365	
Eastmanville Bayou Open Space	157		9,364	8,300
Deer Creek Park	2		530	
Ripps Bayou (Open Space)	173		7,550	7,992
Kuits Bayou (Open Space)	80		6,191	2,650
Grand River Open Space	279		7,890	
Grand River Ravines	202		2,640	
Grand River Park	162		2,505	
Bend Area (Open Space)	421		10,032	33,263
Un-named Site - GTTowship (4 parcels)	31		647	
<b>Grand River Greenway Total</b>	<b>2,785</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>74,635</b>	<b>63,185</b>
<b>PIGEON RIVER GREENWAY</b>				
Hemlock Crossing/Pine Bend	239		7,920	
Pigeon River Open Space	46		2,354	
Pigeon Creek Park	282		3,200	
Pigeon Creek Forest (Open Space)	130			
<b>Pigeon River Greenway Total</b>	<b>697</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>13,474</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>MACATAWA RIVER GREENWAY</b>				
Paw Paw Park	172			
Adams Street Landing	10		1,100	
Hawthorn Pond	40		1,792	
96th Ave Property	5		1,471	
Upper Macatawa Natural Area	612		13,100	
<b>Macatawa River Greenway Total</b>	<b>839</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>17,463</b>	<b>0</b>

PROPERTY DATA	ACREAGE	WATER FRONTAGE (Linear feet)		
		Lake Michigan Frontage	River Frontage	Bayou & Inland Lake Frontage
Parks and Open Spaces	Total Acres			
<b>LAKE MICHIGAN COASTAL GREENWAY</b>				
North Ottawa Dunes	593			
North Beach Park	7	745		
Ottawa Sands	345		5,740	8,400
Rosy Mound Natural Area	164	3,450		
Kirk Park	68	1,850		
Olive Shores	21	738		
Tunnel Park	23	950		
Historic Ottawa Beach Parks	58	756		2,560
<b>Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway Total</b>	<b>1,279</b>	<b>8,489</b>	<b>5,740</b>	<b>10,960</b>
<b>GENERAL PARKS, OPEN SPACES, TRAILS</b>				
Musketawa Trail				
Un-named Site - Wright Township	8			
Grose Park	40			823
Marne Bog (Open Space)	83			
Robinson Forest (Open Space)	80			
Johnson Street Forest (Open Space)	50			
Hiawatha Forest (Open Space)	365			
Hager Park	104			
Port Sheldon Natural Area (Open Space)	440			
VanBuren Street Dunes (Open Space)	120			
Spring Grove Park	16			
Riley Trails	300			
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,606</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>823</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>7,206</b>	<b>8,489</b>	<b>111,312</b>	<b>74,968</b>