

Goals and Objectives

The mission of the Kent County Parks Department is to enhance the quality of life in Kent County by establishing and maintaining outstanding parks to meet the needs of the county's growing population. The department will efficiently provide recognized recreational, environmental and social benefits. This will be accomplished through adherence to high standards and coordination with individuals and organizations.

While individual parks may support active or sports-oriented recreation, the general focus of the department is on preserving open space and providing recreational access to high-quality natural areas. The department also provides leadership in developing and maintaining multi-jurisdictional recreational trails.

In keeping with this mission and in consideration of the public input gathered during the planning process, the following goals and objectives have been developed for the 2009-2013 Parks, Recreation and Natural Areas Master Plan.

Communications

People who responded to the needs assessment survey who had not visited a Kent County Park in the past year indicated that more public information or better marketing would be most likely to increase their park use. The Kent County Parks Department has long held that communicating opportunities to county residents is critical to exceptional public service. The Department has made improvements since the 2003 plan, including expanded information and services on its website and updated marketing literature. Even so, marketing and public communication remain areas where significant improvement is needed.

In developing themes for marketing and public education efforts, Kent County Parks will seek to address some of the key reasons survey respondents indicated for not visiting county parks more often. For example, reasons cited such as lack of time, proximity to home, age, health, or disabilities suggest the Department might need to do a better job of promoting the convenience and accessibility of county parks.

Goal: Expand public outreach, brand recognition and support for Kent County Parks.

Objective: Develop an in-house contact list of 10,000 county residents for distribution of Green Places newsletter and other targeted communications pieces.

Objective: Develop a plan to improve the utility and appeal of the Parks Department website and implement by 2011.

Objective: Establish and maintain a schedule of disseminating at least one press release or public service announcement per month by 2011.

Objective: Reduce to 10% or less the number of non-park visitors who express a need for more information or marketing to increase their likelihood of visiting Kent County Parks.

Programs

The Kent County Parks Department currently provides minimal public programming in the parks. This is due to a combination of budget limitations and the Department's emphasis on conserving natural resources and providing passive recreation opportunities. Program offerings include only occasional annual events and nature programs for children at Wabasis Campground. Because of this lack of emphasis on public programs, survey responses regarding public satisfaction with, and interest in, county park programs can be ambiguous. This is especially true since different respondents might have entirely different concepts of programs at Kent County parks. The survey suggested "nature events, etc." to help define park programs, but some respondents also might have envisioned art fairs, music events, organized sports programs or other offerings more common at other parks.

In the 2002 needs assessment survey, 31% of respondents indicated that county park programs were either very or extremely important to them. In the 2007 survey, this figure rose to 35% of respondents. While this increase might suggest growing demand for park programs, responses regarding satisfaction with current programs offer a different view. In 2002, 41% of respondents rated county park programs as good or very good. In 2007, this figure rose to 49% of respondents. So, the needs assessment surveys seem to suggest both growing demand for programs and growing satisfaction with current program offerings.

Moreover, in both the 2002 and 2007 surveys, the average performance rating for programs scored significantly higher than the average rating for the importance of those programs to park users. This positive gap suggests that improved or expanded programs need not necessarily be a high priority for Kent County Parks.

Goal: Provide public programming as allowed by the Department's resources and mission.

Objective: Develop a strategic plan for Kent County Parks programs in 2012.

Objective: Begin implementation of recommendations from program plan in 2013.

Park and Trail Development

In ranking the importance of park characteristics, respondents to the needs assessment survey tended to favor natural areas over developed sites. More than 83% of respondents ranked both natural features and the overall beauty of a site as extremely or very important.

A good system of trails was extremely or very important to 76% of respondents. Developed facilities, such as shelters and courts also were valued but less so, being extremely or very important to 67% of respondents.

The Kent County Parks Department holds several properties that currently are minimally developed or not developed at all for public access. These include Thornapple Riverbend, Two Rivers, Luton, Chief Hazy Cloud (expansion), and Kroes Parks, as well as the regional park in Lowell Township and Lepard Preserve. Development of these parklands will depend on available funding for improvements and ongoing operations, as well as local public need and interest. Any development should be consistent with demonstrated public support for preserving natural areas and providing hiking and walking trail opportunities. Development of other facilities should remain concentrated in recreation cores for each park to avoid negatively impacting the park's scenic qualities.

Regarding trail opportunities, several similar comments were received during the plan review period in support of opening more natural-surfaced trails to mountain biking. However, in the broader random survey of 2,000 county residents, only 6% suggested the County should place expanding mountain biking opportunities among its top three priorities. Prioritizing other types of trail use scored significantly higher, including more hiking/walking trails (29%), hard-surfaced bike trails (17%), opportunities for walking dogs (12%), equestrian trails (10%), cross-country ski trails (9%) and in-line skating trails (8%). Some of these modes of recreation could be compatible on shared-use trail systems. However, allowable uses on new or existing trails must continue to balance quality of experience and resource limitations, given these broader public demands.

The overriding need for parks of regional scope (200+ acres) also should be kept in mind as plans are considered for these undeveloped parklands. Of the seven properties listed above, three encompass less than 200 acres, Two Rivers Park, Kroes Park and Lepard Preserve. If future expansion is possible at one of these parks, plans for significant development should take this into account.

In addition to the parklands listed above that are essentially undeveloped, some parks in the system also include large tracts that can be further developed for public use. Most notable among these is Millennium Park, where recent acquisitions have prepared the way for significant trail development. Some development also is possible in the northern region of Wahlfield Park.

Finally, over the five year horizon of this plan, Kent County Parks will complete the significant development of new hard-surfaced trails along the M-6 corridor and along a mixed corridor connecting the White Pine Trail to the Musketawa Trail.

Goal: Strategically develop parklands in County ownership as need arises and funding allows.

- Objective:** Develop Lepard Preserve with adequate parking and an interpretive trail loop.
- Objective:** Develop Luton Park with trails and parking.
- Objective:** Provide public access to new land acquired at Chief Hazy Cloud Park by developing parking and a scenic trail loop.
- Objective:** Develop a 16-mile trail network with access points to allow for recreation on extensive publicly held lands at Millennium Park.
- Objective:** Complete 8.5 miles of new hard-surfaced trail along the M-6 corridor, connecting Kent Trails to the Paul Henry Thornapple Trail.
- Objective:** Establish a 6.5 mile hard-surfaced connector trail joining the Fred Meijer White Pine Trail State Park with the Musketawa Trail.
- Objective:** Provide public access with trails and fishing opportunities at Thornapple Riverbend Park.

Improvements

Kent County Parks continually strives to improve the facilities and quality of recreational opportunities available in its parks. Plans for improvements to county parks are driven by several guiding factors, including:

- The ongoing need to replace and/or improve aging structures and facilities;
- The continuing need to improve accessibility for people with disabilities, in support of the Americans with Disability Act guidelines;
- Evolving public needs and expectations for recreational opportunities; and
- Available funding and resources.

The Needs Assessment Survey conducted for this master plan provides solid guidance on public expectations for improved park facilities. When asked to identify the types of facilities which are needed most in the county, respondents agreed in several areas. By far, the greatest need identified was for more **hiking and walking opportunities**, followed closely by **camping**. Areas for **fishing** and **beach swimming**, and **hard-surfaced trails for biking** also scored highly.

Non-park visitors scored some types of facilities much higher than park visitors. These responses are particularly instructive as the Department seeks to improve the appeal of its parks for all county residents. Facilities that non-park users valued significantly more than regular park visitors included hard-surfaced trails for biking, camping sites, areas for canoeing or kayaking, ice-skating opportunities, and shelters and lodges available for

reservations. Because Kent County Parks already offers a wide variety of open and enclosed shelters for use by reservation, the result in that area may call for better communication regarding these opportunities and/or improvements to the shelters themselves to enhance their appeal.

Lastly, when asked what might be done to encourage greater use of county parks, park visitors scored **restroom improvements** somewhat higher than all other responses, with the exception of improvements to non-motorized trails.

This public input is invaluable in prioritizing the Department's objectives for park improvements over the coming five years.

Goal: Continually improve facilities to provide diverse, high-quality recreational opportunities that meet public demand.

Objective: Increase Kent County Parks' average accessibility assessment score for all parks and trails from 2.48 to 2.75 (*see page 15 for explanation of scoring*). Focus particularly on continued playground enhancements, and improved access to water resources, shelters, restrooms and trail systems.

Objective: Improve hiking and walking opportunities on natural surfaced trails by redesigning and reconstructing trail systems at two parks.

Objective: Improve opportunities for recreation on hard-surfaced trails by reconstructing 15 miles of Kent Trails to a minimum 10ft wide standard.

Objective: Provide more choices for campers by building at least three additional cabins for rental at Wabasis Lake Campground.

Objective: Seek increased opportunities for water-based recreation through improvements to facilities relating to swimming, fishing and canoeing and kayaking.

Objective: Address public desire for better restroom facilities through strategic improvements and new construction.

Objective: Enhance the appeal of certain enclosed shelters by replacing "picnic table" furnishings with more versatile tables and chairs.

Objective: Upgrade other facilities as needed, and in keeping with this plan, to meet safety requirements and public demand for high-quality recreational opportunities.

Objective: Review distribution of recreational opportunities through the county park system and consider appropriateness of development of new facilities.

Land Acquisition

Over the past five years, Kent County Parks has made solid progress in expanding parklands. The department's parks and green spaces total 6,701 acres, compared to 5,300 acres at the writing of the last plan. Recent acquisitions included 86 acres for Fallasburg Park, 96 acres for Chief Hazy Could Park, 349 acres for an eventual regional park in Lowell, and more than 400 acres at Millennium Park. Acquisitions for new parks included the 52 acre Lepard Preserve and the 91 acre Two Rivers Park. Most of these acquisitions intentionally addressed a deficit in recreation land in the southeast of the county, identified in the 1997 master plan.

In prior master plans, the Kent County Parks Department relied on earlier guidelines set by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) that called for 20 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. It was assumed that half of this target would be met by local municipalities and the remaining 10 acres per 1,000 residents would be met by Kent County. However, newer NRPA guidelines categorize parkland into "local parks" (of less than 200 acres) and "regional space" (of 200 acres or more). By setting different guidelines for local and regional parks, the newer guidelines help agencies focus on providing the types of parkland to which they are most suited.

As shown in Table 8 (*page 53*), Kent County's greatest need for public recreational space is for regional parks of at least 200 acres in size. NRPA's minimum guideline for parks of this size is 15 acres per 1,000 residents. In this category, Kent County currently has only 9.1 acres per 1,000 residents. Furthermore, **Kent County Parks provides more than 95% of the recreational space of this scope within the county.** Focusing on the county's deficit in regional recreational space allows Kent County Parks to better understand its role among local partners in providing public recreation space. This approach also encourages Kent County to focus its acquisition efforts on expanding current county parks to convert them to regional-class recreational spaces.

The Right Place of Grand Rapids forecasts that Kent County's population will reach 618,346 by 2012². For this population, an additional 3,665 acres in regional-scope parks are needed just to meet the minimum guideline of 15 acres per 1,000 residents. Not only are we significantly behind the minimum for regional parks, but continued population growth will push this target even higher. Land acquisition must be a priority if the County expects to meet the future needs of its citizens, especially in regards to large regional parks.

Based on results of the Needs Assessment Survey, Kent County residents clearly back continued land acquisition by Kent County Parks, with certain caveats. A full 90% of

² "West Michigan Growth Statistics – April 2008"; The Right Place, Inc., pp. 5 (<http://www.rightplace.org/regionalStatistics/>)

respondents supported acquiring land to preserve more natural areas or green space. Acquisition to develop trails between parks and communities was supported by 83% of respondents. Also, buying land to **expand** current County parks received more support than buying land to **create** large new parks, with 63% supporting expanding parks and 47% backing new large parks. Only 11% of respondents thought Kent County Parks Department should **not** acquire more land for parks or trails.

This strong support for continued land acquisition is consistent with prior surveys. In fact support may have increased over our last survey, conducted in 2002. In that survey 75% backed acquiring land for natural areas, compared with 90% in 2007. Support for acquiring land for trails also grew, with 75% support in 2002 increasing to 83% in 2007. At the same time, those who thought the County should not acquire more parkland at all also increased slightly, from 7% in 2002 to 11% in 2007.

In summary, Kent County lags significantly behind national standards for regional recreational spaces, defined as 200+ acre parks or green spaces. Based on 2012 population estimates, an additional 3,665 acres need to be classified as regional parks just to meet the minimum guideline of 15 acres per 1,000 people. The Kent County Parks Department is essentially the only agency or organization working to establish regional parkland in the county. To continue to progress toward national standards, this plan sets a goal of increasing regional quality parkland to at least 10 acres per 1,000 people by 2013. The public strongly supports continued acquisition of land by the County, particularly for preserving natural areas, establishing corridors for connecting trails, and expanding current parks. Discontent with continued acquisition remains minimal, but a slight up-tick was noted between the 2002 to 2007 surveys. This reinforces the importance of accountability and strategic use of resources in all acquisition activities.

Goal: Continue to address the growing need for additional recreational space in Kent County through strategic acquisition of parklands, green spaces and trail corridors.

Objective: Reduce the county's deficit in regional-quality recreational space (i.e., parks of 200+ acres) by expanding current parks. Acquire 1,000 additional acres by 2013.

Objective: As opportunities arise, acquire land to conserve unique natural or cultural areas.

Objective: Where possible and appropriate, permanently protect key trail routes through the acquisition of easements or land corridors.

Objective: Acquire select parcels to improve overall public access and/or the quality of recreational experiences for existing parks and trails.

Operations and Management

Maintenance and Safety

Respondents to the needs assessment survey ranked cleanliness, and safety and security, as the most important features in selecting a park or recreation facility. Generally, Kent County Parks scored well for performance in these areas. Yet, more than one in four ranked the parks as “poor” or just “ok” for cleanliness and one in three gave these lower scores for safety and security. Clearly, the Parks Department has some room for improvement in these areas.

Park visitors tended to score Kent County Parks slightly better on cleanliness and safety/security than non-visitors. With this in mind, it is possible that, to some extent, non-visitors may have scored based on impressions or word of mouth rather than personal experiences. This suggests that the need for performance improvements might go hand-in-hand with a need to better promote the cleanliness and safety of county parks.

Goal: Kent County Parks will be recognized by park patrons for clean and safe recreation facilities.

Objective: Increase average performance scores for cleanliness and safety/security to “good” or better.

Goal: Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of maintenance operations.

Objective: Implement a centralized maintenance record-keeping system to track history and to better project needs of park facilities and features.

Objective: Develop a system for regular site evaluation to better identify, predict and plan for maintenance needs.

Volunteers

Kent County Parks recognizes the benefits of a parks volunteer program. The Department wants to provide quality opportunities for members of the public to contribute meaningfully to the park system through volunteer service. However, currently potential volunteers are managed inconsistently throughout the system. The Department offers no central point of contact for volunteers and has no consistent recruitment, training, or recognition programs in place. Because of this lack of a formal volunteer program, Kent County Parks is missing out on untapped potential for assistance in park maintenance and operations. An effective volunteer program also would improve community relations and strengthen bonds with local residents and interest groups.

Goal: Provide quality volunteer opportunities that are both rewarding for participants and beneficial to Kent County Parks.

- Objective:** Implement a staffed volunteer program in 2009, including recruitment, training, coordination, retention and recognition.
- Objective:** Record at least 5,000 hours of volunteer service annually by 2013.
- Objective:** Achieve an overall favorable rating of volunteer experiences in annual volunteer surveys.

Staffing

In recent decades, acres of land, miles of trail, and total parks under management by Kent County Parks have grown substantially. Yet, during the same period, budgetary limitations and public expectations for lean government operations have forced the department to adapt by cutting staffing. Overall staffing in the Kent County Parks Department has declined significantly. Today the department is both more efficient and becoming more strained to meet ongoing operational needs. For instance, meeting public expectations for improved maintenance and security, as discussed above, likely will require more rather than less staffing. At the same time, as evidenced by this and past Needs Assessment Surveys, there is a continuing degree of public expectation for educational programs and events within the parks. Kent County Parks must continue to strategically address staffing needs within the limitations of funding and public expectations.

Goal: Ensure that staffing levels continue to address public needs and to meet the overall operations and management needs of the Kent County Parks system.

- Objective:** Establish a full-time naturalist position by 2013.
- Objective:** Continue to respond to evolving requirements for park and facility management by adjusting staffing structure as needed.

Funding

With limitations in general fund support, Kent County Parks traditionally has been very effective at securing outside funding. This has been true particularly with regards to state grants for land acquisition and major development projects. The development of Millennium Park also continues to set new benchmarks for funding from private donors and local corporations and foundations. As a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Kent County Parks Foundation also stands poised to become a major partner in developing private funding support.

Even with increasingly diverse funding sources, local matches from the County's General Fund will continue to be crucial in leveraging and securing outside funding, whether from the State or from private entities. The County's commitment of capital improvement project dollars toward parks acquisition and development projects must be renewed to ensure that

a lack of local matching dollars does not hamstring the fundraising activities of the Parks Department.

Responses to the Needs Assessment survey showed strongest support for maintaining or expanding funding from the County's general fund base. Increasing current fees and charging new vehicle entry fees received the least support. Only 21% of respondents said they would oppose a dedicated parks millage. Sixty percent would support a millage of at least 0.24. In considering options for a millage, respondents were most likely to support a shared proposal that funded land acquisition, improvements and operations for parks and trails at all municipal levels within the county. Comments received during the plan review period also indicated support for a joint millage for acquisition of parkland and preservation of farmland or other open spaces. Respondents also tended to support a five-year renewal for any millage.

Goal: Protect the quality and sustainability of the Kent County Parks system by continuing to develop and grow diverse funding sources.

Objective: Continue to cultivate funding proportionally, so that no single source accounts for more than 40% of total support for all department activities (*see page 12 for 2008 data*).

Objective: Support capacity-building and long-range planning efforts of the Kent County Parks Foundation with technical assistance and other resources as appropriate.

Objective: Secure a minimum of \$250,000 per year through 2013 in capital improvement funding for parkland acquisition.

Objective: Complete a feasibility study on a potential parks millage by 2011. Consider options for a shared millage with county programs that preserve open space.