

# Public Input and Planning Processes

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## Overview

The Kent County Parks Department enhances the quality of life in Kent County by establishing and maintaining outstanding parks and natural areas to meet the needs of the county's growing population. Through its facilities, operations and programs the department seeks to efficiently provide recognized recreational, environmental and social benefits that adhere to high standards. This 2009 Parks, Recreation and Natural Areas Master Plan establishes general guidelines to meet this vision over the next five years. It was developed with broad public input and a careful review of current needs and opportunities for improvement.

This plan is viewed as a dynamic document. While general goals are expected to remain consistent over the life of the plan, specific objectives and action items may be adapted to respond to new challenges, evolving demands and unanticipated opportunities.

## Public Involvement

Meeting the recreational needs and expectations of the public is the key driving force behind the mission of the Kent County Parks Department. In developing this plan, the Department actively solicited public input and participation. From initial concept through final plan adoption, the Department sought and incorporated public involvement through four distinct methods.

### Needs Assessment

Through a survey sent to two thousand households within Kent County, the Parks Department and Michigan State University solicited public opinions on a variety of topics relating to county parks. Results and discussion of this survey are presented in detail in the following section, "Recreation Needs Assessment." A copy of the survey is provided in Appendix A and comments received from the survey are provided in Appendix B.

### Public Review

A draft of the plan was made available for public review for approximately seven weeks during the May and June of 2008. Public notice of this availability was printed in the Grand Rapids Press. The plan was available for review online, at the public library and at the Parks Department's administrative office. The public was asked to submit written

comments and any comments received are provided in Appendix C, along with a copy of the notice of availability.

### **Public Presentation and Open House**

Two consecutive public meetings were held featuring a presentation on the results of the needs assessment and a presentation on the plan itself. Presentations were followed by Q & A and opportunities to review the draft plan. The public was invited to comment and any comments received from these meetings are reproduced in Appendix D, along with a copy of the meeting notice and details on its publication.

### **Public Comment Preceding Plan Adoption**

At its meeting on 12/11/2008, the Kent County Board of Commissioners adopted the plan following a final opportunity for public comment. Public notice of this meeting was published one week in advance. Minutes of the meeting, any comments received and information on the public notice are provided in Appendix E.

## **Review of Current Facilities, Operations and Programs**

### **Comparison to Recreation Standards**

Planning for the size of a park system requires a shared understanding of the desired level of service. Previous plans have addressed this in different ways. While the 1972 plan set a goal of acquiring 14,000 acres by 1990, plans completed in 1967, 1977, 1980, and 1985 all supported a goal of 20 acres of county parkland per 1,000 residents.

The 1992 plan refined the goal of 20 acres per 1,000 people by recognizing the role of local municipalities. It proposed that Kent County Parks provide half the goal (10 acres per 1,000 residents) and local government units provide the other half. The 1997 and 2003 plans supported this interpretation. Finally, a 2001 Subcommittee report approved by the County Board of Commissioners set a goal of 7,500 acres of county parkland by 2025.

The current plan for 2009 further refines Kent County's long-standing goal for parkland acquisition. This plan recognizes that the County is unique among local municipalities in its ability to develop and manage parks of *regional* scale. As detailed below, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has defined separate guidelines for regional and local park acreage. Moving forward, Kent County will focus on meeting NRPA guidelines for regional-quality park lands.

Local communities must define their own expectations for the provision of recreational space. National standards provide some guidance, and they encourage communities to set separate goals for local and regional parks. Small and large parks meet different public needs and generally require different levels of resources to create and operate. By

recognizing separate goals based on park size, the County can focus more intently on its own strength, developing and managing larger regional parks.

Specifically, the standards developed jointly by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and the American Academy of Park and Recreation Administration categorize parks as either “Local/Close-to-Home Space” or “Regional Space” with different broad guidelines for each. Linear parks also are considered separately. This classification system is summarized under the heading “Criteria for Open Space/Natural Areas Acquisition.” Table 8 below lists current totals for Kent County in these primary categories.

**Table 8. Comparison of Public Recreation Space to National Standards**

	Kent County	Local Units of Gov’t	Total	Acres per 1,000 people (2012 pop est)	NRPA Recreation Standard
Local/Close-to-Home Parks	1,321	5,020	6,341	10.3	6.25 – 10.5
Regional Space (200+ acres)	5,380	230	5,610	9.1	15 – 20
Linear Parks	26.3 miles				

While the County and its local partners mostly are meeting guidelines for “local, close-to-home” park acreage, the County has a pressing need for additional parkland of regional scope. Regional parks are generally considered to be at least 200 acres in size. The minimum goal for regional parks recommended by the NRPA is 15 acres per 1,000 residents. Currently, Kent County is 3,600 acres short of meeting this target.

Creating and managing a park of 200 or more acres requires a level of resources that is typically unique to the County. Not surprisingly, the Kent County Parks Department oversees more than 95% of regional park acreage within Kent County. Because of this, the responsibility for meeting the need for regional parks has traditionally fallen to the County and will continue to do so in the future. With a significant deficit in regional parks, the Kent County Parks Department must focus its efforts to provide parkland of regional scope.

Accordingly, this plan emphasizes the County’s role in *meeting the community’s need for regional recreational space*. The department should eventually adopt a long term goal of providing 15 acres of regional parkland per 1,000 residents. However, within the timeframe covered by this plan, setting a goal of 10 acres of County-provided regional parkland per 1,000 residents is both meaningful and achievable. Assuming the majority of new acquisitions would increase total regional parkland, meeting the target of 7,500 acres set earlier by the Board of Commissioners would achieve this goal.

Results of the public needs assessment are discussed in detail in the Public Input section of this plan, but one aspect is particularly relevant here. Of those responding to the survey, 90% supported acquisition of more natural areas and green space, yet only 47%

supported the creation of “new large regional parks.” A greater number (63%) backed the expansion of current county parks. These results may suggest that the Kent County Parks Department should seek to meet the NRPA standard for regional space primarily by expanding existing parks through acquisition of additional natural or open land. In practice, the Department already follows this approach. With the exception of highly unique land recently purchased at the confluence of two rivers, all land acquired since 2003 has increased the size of previously existing parks.

### **Criteria for Open Space/Natural Area Acquisition**

Given ongoing population growth and development pressure within the county, it is imperative for the Kent County Parks Department to continue its aggressive program of acquiring land for parks to meet the current and future needs of county residents. Yet, while the Department must be ready to respond quickly as opportunities arise, lands that are acquired must logically compliment the current Park System and meet basic criteria for conservation priorities. The Parks Department must remain vigilant in accepting only quality pieces of property that will function well as parkland, with an emphasis on parks of regional scope.

In summary, to become a part of the Kent County Park system, a piece of property must contain high-quality natural features and/or exceptional recreational potential, and:

- The proposed parcel must add to an existing park, or
- The proposed parcel must be to establish a Special Use Area where size is not critical in the formula for park success, or
- Some feature of the proposed parcel must be so unique or attractive that the parks staff and County Board deem that the protection of the feature, natural or man-made, is more important than other requirements.

Following is a list of the types of parks<sup>1</sup> that are in the park system at the present time and that the Kent County Parks Department may wish to add in the future.

#### **Local/Close-to-Home Space (NRPA standard = 6.25 – 10.5 acres per 1,000 people)**

Neighborhood Park Desirable size = 15+ acres  
Area for intense recreational activities such as field games, court games, crafts, playground apparatus area, skating, picnicking, wading pools, etc. Suited for intense development. Easily accessible to neighborhood population – geographically centered with walking and bike access. May be developed as a school-park facility.

Community Park Desirable size = 25+ acres  
Area of diverse environmental quality. May include areas suited for intense recreational facilities, such as athletic complexes or large swimming pools. May be

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<sup>1</sup> From Lancaster, 1990, Recreation, Park, and Open Space Standards and Guidelines, pp. 56-57, published by the National Recreation and Park Association

an area of natural quality for outdoor recreation, such as walking, viewing, sitting or picnicking. May be any combination of the above, depending upon site suitability and community need. May include natural features, such as water bodies, and areas suited for intense development. Easily accessible to neighborhood served.

**Regional Space (NRPA standard = 15 – 20 acres per 1,000 people)**

Regional/Metropolitan Park Desirable size = 200+ acres  
Area of natural or ornamental quality for outdoor recreation, such as picnicking, boating, fishing, swimming, camping and trail uses; may include play areas. Contiguous to or encompassing natural resources.

Regional Park Preserve Desirable size = 1,000+ acres  
Area of natural quality for nature-oriented outdoor recreation, such as viewing and studying nature, wildlife habitat, conservation, swimming, picnicking, hiking, fishing, boating, camping and trail uses. May include active play areas. Generally, 80% of the land is reserved for conservation and natural resource management, with less than 20% used for recreation development. Diverse or unique natural resources, such as lakes, streams, marshes, flora, fauna, topography.