

Recommendation 7-1

Capital improvements within the Erie County Parks System should be undertaken by order of priority, as follows:

- *Repair and Removal of Facilities that Compromise Public Safety*
- *Restoration of Significant Heritage Structures*
- *Improvement of Facilities That Extend Core Recreation Opportunities*
- *Construction of New Facilities to Expand Waterfront Opportunities*

7.0 IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

7.1 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES

This section of the report provides strategies and outlines priorities for undertaking the capital works described in the Park Inventory, and in the Trails and Parks Master Plans reports. Given the age and diversity of the parks, and the unique nature of their buildings and structures, a substantial amount of upgrading is needed. In addition, a number of opportunities have been identified to improve the park visitor experience, and to raise the profile and quality of the parks, to meet their marketing potential as a first-class park system. It is anticipated that the capital improvements will need to be undertaken incrementally, and over the term of the master plan, which is assumed to be at least twenty years. Prioritization is therefore needed to ensure that the highest needs for repair and upgrading are undertaken first, followed by projects that expand recreation opportunities.

The following order of priority is recommended for the undertaking of capital improvements, and discussed in the subsequent sections.

1. *Repair and Removal of Facilities that Compromise Public Safety*
2. *Restoration of Significant Heritage Structures*
3. *Improvement of Facilities That Extend Core Recreation Opportunities*
4. *Construction of New Facilities to Expand Waterfront Opportunities*

7.1.1 REPAIR AND REMOVAL OF FACILITIES THAT COMPROMISE PUBLIC SAFETY

The priorities for capital improvements are focused on repairing and improving existing facilities that compromise public safety and ensuring that significant cultural heritage assets are preserved. The park's inventory (summarized in Section 2.0) evaluated the facilities within the parks and ranked their condition from "excellent" to "extremely poor". In order to protect public safety, it is important to place a high priority on repairing or removing all structures that represent hazards that would include facilities that are in "very poor" condition. Of particular concern are structures that have a high degree of interaction such as playgrounds, trails, shelters as well as

bridges, barriers and guards that have deteriorated to the point where they no longer provide the intended function.

7.1.2 RESTORATION OF SIGNIFICANT HERITAGE STRUCTURES

The inventory noted that the Heritage Parks are the oldest in the system and contain the most significant buildings and structures, many of which are in a declining condition. WPA-era structures that have been identified as having historical significance, but are in “extremely poor” or “poor” condition, should be given priority for restoration, rather than removal, in order to preserve these significant heritage assets.

To undertake the restoration and preservation of major facilities such as the Emery Inn and Wendt Mansion, it is important to find adaptive reuses that would act as the catalyst for restoration and could provide revenues to offset capital improvements. Facilities such as the Chestnut Ridge Casino could have their primary function expanded to include more contemporary uses such as a Parks System Visitor Center.

7.1.3 IMPROVEMENT OF FACILITIES THAT EXTEND CORE RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

Ongoing maintenance and repair of deteriorating facilities needs to be further prioritized to include updating facilities and structures that extends core recreation opportunities. For example, restoration of casinos, picnic shelters and restrooms that are used primarily by the public should be given priority over maintenance and support buildings. Consideration should be given to consolidating maintenance facilities and reducing the number of depots, and relocating new maintenance compounds to locations that are not visible or accessible to the public.

Once basic facilities and infrastructure improvements have been undertaken, and the preservation and quality of the park’s heritage resources has been ensured, the focus of attention can be on improvements that enhance the park user experience, and contribute to the marketability of the parks as visitor destinations. This would include improvement and expansion of trails systems, with

accompanying interpretive signage, and construction of new amenities that extend passive uses.

7.1.4 CONSTRUCTION OF NEW FACILITIES TO EXPAND WATERFRONT OPPORTUNITIES

New facilities aimed at revitalizing the waterfront and expanding tourism and recreation opportunities along Lake Erie are also high priorities in the master plan. The County is frequently asked to partner on regional waterfront initiatives and also needs to seek senior level partners to improve and develop County owned waterfront parks. Capital funding and ongoing operating capital needs to be obtained for the redevelopment of Wendt Beach and Bennett Beach. Waterfront parks are the most costly in the system to develop and maintain and require partnerships with the state and other waterfront stakeholders to ensure that the parks are sustainable. A detailed discussion of waterfront opportunities is provided in Section 5.0.

7.2 CAPITAL COST ESTIMATES

Capital cost estimates are appended at the end of this section. Costing reflects the updated design plans and is presented on a park-by-park basis. Costing by trail segment is also appended at the end of this section.

Summary Table of Park Capital Costs:

<i>Akron Fall Park</i>	\$2.0 – \$2.5 million
<i>Chestnut Ridge</i>	\$6.0 – \$6.5 million
<i>Como Lake</i>	\$4.1 – \$4.7 million
<i>Ellicott Creek</i>	\$3.5 – \$4.4 million
<i>Emery Park</i>	\$6.0 – \$7.1 million
<i>Bennett Beach</i>	\$1.5 – \$2.0 million
<i>Wendt Beach</i>	\$2.5 – \$3.0 million
<i>Grover Cleveland</i>	\$500,000 – \$600,000
<i>Sprague Brook</i>	\$670,000 – \$1.0 million
<i>Buffalo River Parks</i>	\$130,000 – \$230,000
<i>Scoby Dam</i>	\$430,000 – \$625,000
<i>Hunters Creek</i>	\$130,000 – \$230,000

Conservation Parks \$200,000 - \$250,000

Sub-total \$27.7 - \$33.2 million

Summary Table of Capital Costs:

Capital Costs \$300,000 - \$430,000

Summary Table of Trail Capital Costs:

On-road Bike Lane \$608,000

On-road Shared Lane \$694,000

Off-road Trail \$31.2 million

Sub-total \$32.5 million

Grand Total \$60.5 - 66.1 million

The cost presented in the estimates suggest that \$33.6 million in capital expenditure is required for the repair and construction of facilities and \$32.5 million is required for the recreational trails over the life of this Master Plan. Clearly, this level of capital investment is currently not available and a strategy for obtaining funding is a key component of the County’s financial, management and operations responsibility.

7.3 MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS CHALLENGES

7.3.1 OVERVIEW OF MANAGEMENT TRENDS

In order to identify appropriate management and operations strategies to meet the challenges of the Parks Department in the future, it was necessary to undertake research and analysis of other similar county parks and recreation operations considered to be “comparable” to those of Erie County. This work indicated that most departments faced the same challenges as Erie County, however, a number of those county parks departments can be credited with being more progressive and successful in their overall operation, and universally

Recommendation 7-2

Parks Department administration needs to be given a greater degree of delegated authority to make day to day management and financial decisions, without being constrained by the requirement of receiving approval for decisions related to approved budgets or routine matters from the county legislature.

Recommendation 7-3

The Parks Department should encourage dialogue and partnership opportunities with other parks agencies and related industry leaders that can add insight and expertise to the Erie County Parks Department operations.

more contemporary than the majority of their peers, in their approach to financial planning and overall service delivery.

In this comparables assessment effort, the project team conducted primary and secondary research that assessed the historical operation of three distinct peer groups:

- *The largest NYS counties based on population;*
- *Counties outside of NYS that were determined to be of similar population size and to have other market characteristics similar to those of Erie County; and*
- *Other smaller NYS counties having attractive economic, demographic, and location-proximity characteristics.*

The current Erie County Parks, Recreation and Forestry funding model is of a traditional design, whereby taxpayer dollars are allocated against the annual budget, with any budget shortfalls being subsidized out of the general county fund. The office of the commissioner is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations, planning and budgeting of the department, and the department and the Commissioner report directly to the County Executive. The County legislature is also influential in the planning and decision-making process, and has the authority to review and decide upon a variety of both minor and major department initiatives specific to funding, planning, and operations.

Of the ten (10) largest New York State counties evaluated by the project, only five (including Erie County) have legitimate and self-contained parks and recreation departments. The four New York State counties besides Erie County have populations ranging from 212,160 (Broome County) to 713,968 (Monroe County), and annual operating and maintenance budgets in the range of \$1,500,000 (Niagara County) to \$11,400,000 (Onondaga County – includes Salt Museum and St. Marie Among the Iroquois museum operations). Additionally, county parks departments outside of New York State that were reviewed (Allegheny County – Pittsburgh; Cuyahoga County – Cleveland; and Milwaukee County – Milwaukee) had populations ranging from 940,164 to 1,393,978 and annual operations and maintenance budgets between \$25,000,000 and \$43,000,000 that typically include a wide variety of golf course, skate park, ice rink and other public participation facility operations.

Departments that are operationally and fiscally successful in both NYS and non-NYS categories tend to have in some combination a number of key characteristics associated with their planning and day-to-day operational efforts. In summary, these successful department characteristics can be articulated as follows:

- *A high degree of decision-making and operational autonomy;*
- *The ability to successfully price revenue-generating facilities at market or close-to-market user rates;*
- *The exhibiting of a high degree of success in securing significant private support-corporate sponsorship dollars;*
- *Are successful at attracting and organizing local volunteers and other free or at-cost resources;*
- *Have the ability and opportunity to establish “enterprise funds” for more active revenue-generating operations;*
- *Have a strong service orientation in their interaction with and understanding of their customers;*
- *Are able to deploy personnel resources in a “best and highest use” fashion so as to aggressively address annual revenue and service goals and objectives; and*
- *Are able to creatively generate successful public-private partnerships by generating and instituting contract and operating policies that encourage such partnership development while at the same time allowing for optimal operating conditions (especially maximization of attendance levels, service levels, and unique programming opportunities) to be achieved.*

Counties with a greater degree of operational, service, and revenue-generating success have a more business-like approach to their planning and management efforts, as opposed to a more traditional operational mindset and orientation typically exhibited by their peers. These contemporary departments have a higher degree of decision-making autonomy than do their peers. They are generally more adept at identifying, responding to, and creating funding mechanisms for addressing market-driven user and program opportunities.

Generally, this peer group research suggests that while major financial, management, and operational improvements have been effected by the Parks Department, it can additionally improve its approach to fiscal planning and execution. Areas for improvement include:

- allocating project funding;
- generating revenues through park operation;
- expanding revenue streams; and
- increasing the autonomy allowed to the department for day-to-day decision-making.

These issues need to be addressed in order to become more effective as a department and to and to be aligned to a greater degree with more contemporary public parks operations within the industry.

7.4 FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

7.4.1 FINANCIAL ISSUES

Although many positive programs have recently been undertaken, a number of impediments stand in the way of implementing the recommendations of the Master Plan and achieving improved financial results. These challenges include:

- *Static or declining tax-based funding that is limits budget growth;*
- *Increasing costs for daily operation and maintenance;*
- *Increasing costs of repair to “heritage facilities” as they deteriorate over time;*
- *Infrequent and irregular facility upgrading resulting in the potential for a very expensive modernization of historic structures;*
- *Expansion of waterfront parks that are costly to operate and which require major capital for new facilities;*
- *Expanding responsibility for the County to take on greater role in parks system funding, maintenance, and management (i.e. Olmstead Parks and regional waterfront operations);*
- *Inability to enter into viable private-public partnerships*

because current lease terms are too short to provide an opportunity for economic payback (i.e. Emery Inn adaptive reuse); and,

- Lack of delegated authority from the legislature limits the department's ability to take advantage situational revenue and program opportunities in response to market conditions.*

While acknowledging this roster of current management challenges, the most efficient allocation of Erie County Parks Department resources ultimately requires making management and operations more efficient while optimizing revenue generation for the individual parks and the parks system as a whole. Strategies that will generate attendance and potentially increase revenues are:

- Maximizing the use of existing parks – optimizing investment in the existing parks system and ensuring that the visitor experience is the best possible (resident and non-resident);*
- Ensuring that the parks are efficiently operated – improving financial returns on investment by ensuring that revenues are maximized and that the parks are being operated efficiently;*
- Selectively developing new parks – ensuring that new investments address unmet community needs or respond to new opportunities that have been identified through market research.*

7.4.2 KEY STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

In order to effect tangible, measurable, consistent and long-term improvement in revenue generation and financial performance, current management policies, and resource allocations need to be evaluated and potentially adjusted to ensure that the Department's operations are sustainable. Strategic questions include:

- In what areas should the Department compete? Does the Erie County Parks Department want to compete with*

Recommendation 7-4

The Parks Department needs to undertake a management and operational study and develop "market driven" business plan to guide decision-making.

Recommendation 7-5

The Parks Department needs to hire qualified technical staff in the areas of marketing, communication and community liaison- facilitation to implement components of the business plan.

private sector providers or other public sector agencies with respect to facility operation and program provision, either now or in the future?;

- *Can outsourcing improve the delivery of services and programs? Should the Erie County Parks Department consider the outsourcing of entire aspects of specialty services or programs to not-for-profit or private sector operators, to improve service levels and revenue-generating opportunities?;*
- *Can market rates apply for products and services? Is the Erie County Parks Department willing to apply a “benefits-based” and “market rate” approach to the pricing of rental fees and program services?*

The Parks Department needs to evaluate different operating models and select the one that best fits the political, financial and operational context. In order to determine the most appropriate model, the Department should undertake a management and operational review and develop a business plan to guide decision-making. The study should review the factors influencing the outcome of future business models including:

- *Analyzing regional market trends;*
- *Identifying target market/s and specialty segments;*
- *Identifying pricing strategies and new revenue opportunities;*
- *Ensuring high quality service delivery;*
- *Establishing a marketing plan and implementation strategy;*
- *Identifying strategic partnerships and alliances; and*
- *Evaluating the costs and benefits of outsourcing.*

An evaluation of comparable operations and current industry literature indicates that it is possible to identify and articulate a methodology for contemporary parks system business planning model. It is recommended that this methodology be considered by the Erie County Parks Department for developing a new business model. This model requires a “market driven” approach to providing services

and programs and necessitates developing a better understanding of current and future park users.

The first steps to creating a business plan involve developing better understanding of current users and the market for the Department's services. It is recommended that the following research be undertaken as first steps:

- *Step 1: Develop a data base of knowledge on current park users (by park and by park classification);*
- *Step 2: Identify a geographically contiguous target market (demographic, economic, social, other characteristics);*
- *Step 3: Conduct a competitive analysis to identify local and regional competitive facilities and programs.*

In order to successfully execute a "market driven" business plan, it will be necessary for the Erie County Parks Department to determine its realistic ability to demonstrate adequate expertise in a number of key functional areas. The Department will need to determine, based on revenue and service level goals, if the skill sets are available internally to develop a creative and sustainable marketing and revenue-generating plan or whether it is necessary to obtain consultants and partners to develop the plan.

The following elements should be required as part of a Terms of Reference for a Business Plan:

- *Market research and analysis;*
- *Cost/benefit financial (ROI) analysis;*
- *Maximization of revenue generation and service provision at special use facilities (golf courses, beaches, other);*
- *Development of a comprehensive marketing plan;*
- *Development of a comprehensive communication plan;*
- *Development of a comprehensive corporate sponsorship program;*
- *Development of a comprehensive grant-writing strategy;*
- *Development of a "friends of", volunteer committee, and strategic planning/community committee infrastructure.*

Without the ability to adequately cover any one or more of these functional areas, it is recommended that the Department make some provision for developing capacity to do so either through hiring in-house staff or by utilization of outside professional consulting services.

7.4.3 OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES

At the tactical level, the Parks Department needs to improve its operations and to achieve higher standards to ensure that the visitor experience is the best it can be.

STREAMLINING PARK PROGRAMMING (PARK EFFICIENCY MODEL)

Determine what facilities and programs to keep, what to enhance, and what to eliminate.

- *Eliminate obsolete programs. If public does not utilize a facility or program, eliminate it and replace it with something that is relevant (facilities and programs can and do grow obsolete). There is a need to track program lifecycles, capacity of facilities and programs, and actual utilization;*
- *Develop an “efficiency model”. Evaluate the core and non-core programs. Determine what the costs are for supporting activities and facilities (“activity-based cost accounting model”), then ask “should we really be doing this, and how much should it cost us if we choose to do it?”;*
- *Is privatization an option? What elements of current park services overlap with services that someone else provides or can someone else provide the service on our behalf in a more cost efficient and effective manner, i.e. privately managed concessions or NYS managed waterfront parks?*
- *Create ‘where appropriate’ a park-by-park annual revenue plan, by evaluating all available assets to*

determine their revenue-generating potential. Create a “benefit-based” pricing model that aligns the cost of providing the service to the benefit that the consumer enjoys i.e. fees for golf should cover the operational costs of providing the facility.

7.4.4 PRICING STRATEGIES

A pricing strategy should be developed that maximizes potential revenues (based on pre-established ROI, competitive, and service provision criteria).

- Programs and facility use should be priced based on Return On Investment (ROI), customer satisfaction, and user return rate criteria;
- A common pricing strategy has been to set prices for program fees for the 20% of the target population who cannot afford to pay, as opposed to setting prices for the 80% who can pay;
- Program fees should be priced at market rates for those who can afford to pay, and to then establish subsidy opportunities (credits, scholarships, underwriting, etc.) for those potential users who cannot afford to pay market rates;
- “\$3.50/hour rule” for pricing – is a recommended value for one recreation hour, based on what people will pay to see a 2-hour movie (\$6-\$7), take a tour of a museum or cultural facility, etc. The providing of \$3.50/hour of value needs to be successfully articulated to the park system’s user public.

Recommendation 7-6

Pricing strategies should be developed based on the capacity of 80% of the target market to pay market rates, as opposed to fixing price points based on the remaining 20% of the market.

7.4.5 FACILITY-PROGRAM CYCLE ANALYSIS

Revenue goals and operating budgets (using “activity/benefits-based budgeting”) need to be established for existing facilities and programs.

- *There is a need to eliminate facilities, programs and services that are in down-cycles, because they will eventually require higher subsidies in order to be maintained than will other facilities and programs that are experiencing up-cycles;*
- *Cycle analysis needs to be made based on actual and projected user trends and regional market demographics, as opposed to administrator/management predispositions and/or the minority opinion of current user groups.*

7.4.6 OUTSOURCING AND VENDOR UTILIZATION STRATEGIES

Outsourcing provides an opportunity to maximize service quality and availability of services without a direct investment from the County. It is essential that the vendor can obtain adequate payback (rate and timeframe) on the required investment. Key criteria for success includes:

- *Bid out contracts properly – open bid process, with credible schedule and timelines;*
- *Facilities and programs to be bid out must be of a high quality to begin with (i.e. they must be attractive, that is potentially profitable, to potential bidders);*
- *Fees to be received by vendors and County must be set at an appropriate level; and*
- *Parks Department oversight must be maintained.*

Recommendation 7-7

Consideration should be given to the establishment of enterprise operation opportunities for those parks operations, facilities, and programs that are capable of realizing significant generated revenues.

Recommendation 7-8

Service contract opportunities with outside service providers and vendors need to reflect contemporary standards with respect to acknowledgement of and adequate payback period for typical capital investments incurred by the vendor/contract partner.

7.5 ACQUISITION AND CONSOLIDATION STRATEGY

The Parks Department is increasingly being asked to take on a greater role in funding, maintenance, and management, for sites within the overall system that are costly to operate and which require major capital development, i.e. the Olmsted Parks and regional waterfront operations. As identified in Section 5.0, the County waterfront landholdings represent only one part of a multi-partner waterfront system that includes local, state, and County government. In the current discussions over the redevelopment of major lands, this will potentially include private sector partners as well. The waterfront strategy recommends entering into dialogue with the State and the City of Buffalo to determine whether greater efficiencies and a higher level of service can be achieved, through a rationalization of the waterfront parks management. That is, identifying an appropriate level of involvement of local, state, and county levels of government across the entire waterfront system.

With discussions over the assumption of the Olmsted Parks from the City of Buffalo, which will be a costly management undertaking, the Parks Department may wish to revisit its involvement in the management of the smaller waterfront sites and the linear parks along Buffalo’s waterfront. At the same time, the high cost of developing and managing Wendt Beach and Bennett Beach represents a significant undertaking for the Parks Department. State grants may be available to assist with capital development, however, long term management and operational needs must also be considered. The State has demonstrated a willingness to assume other similar waterfront sites – Gallagher Beach, Small Boat Harbor, Woodlawn Beach, Evangola State Park. Given the environmental and heritage assets of Wendt and Bennett Beach, and their potential to be user pay supported, they may also be candidate state parks. This would enable the Parks Department to focus its attention on the rejuvenation of the County ‘Heritage Parks’, as well as the Olmsted Parks System.

Recommendation 7-9

The County should acquire and develop new properties only if they support the Mission Statement and if sufficient resources are available for parks management and operations.

Recommendation 7-10

The County should only dispose of, or consolidate, parkland if long-term public recreation uses can be ensured.

Recommendation 7-11

In contemplating acquisitions of new County waterfront sites, or assumption of management of existing sites, the County should consider the role and function of the waterfront park designations (Destination Parks, Windows on the Water, and Linkages). The lands should contribute towards an overall strategy that builds economic renewal of the waterfront communities, promotes waterfront recreation and protects significant environmental and heritage resources. (Recommendation 5.4)

Recommendation 7-12

The County should enter into discussions with the waterfront partners – State, County, Buffalo Museum of Science, City of Buffalo, Local governments, to develop a cohesive system of ownership and management for the Lake Erie/Niagara River waterfront park system that reflects the mandate of each level of government, and ensures a system of high quality, well managed and sustainable parks. (Recommendation 5.5)

Recommendation 7-13

The County should investigate increased opportunities for managing the Forestry Lots for economic benefit, and should monitor the recreation uses and demands on these lands in consideration of the recreation offerings of the overall park system.

Over the past decades the County has achieved objectives for a well-distributed park system that provides recreation opportunities within a reasonable driving distance of all residents. There are still extensive undeveloped land holdings within the system that will likely remain that way for the long term, as demands have not increased significantly in recent years. However, opportunities may arise from time to time for the acquisition of lands that are adjacent to existing parks. These should be considered, at the time, on the basis of their contributions to the park system for either recreation or natural environment protection reasons. Any acquisition or expansion of the system should, however, be consistent with the Mission Statement and should be financially sustainable without burdening the balance of the system. There have also been suggestions in the past of the disposition of certain underutilized County parks. Any disposal of County parks to other parks providers should be very carefully considered within the context of maintaining the park standards that are now well established. The long-term public recreation use and protection of significant natural areas should also be ensured.

The role and function, as well as the economic management of Forestry Lots for revenue generation over the long term should be evaluated. Although no new parks needs were identified at this time, these lands may offer some future potential for nature based or trails related recreation. As communities expand there may also be some interest in selling Forestry Lots for development purposes. Any consideration of this, or opening up the lands for recreation uses, would need to be assessed against the resource management aspects, including both revenue generation potential as well as any broader objectives for retention and protection of forest cover within the County. The recommended undertaking of a Natural Resource Inventory and Management study would assist in this regard.

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IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES / PARK SPECIFIC ACTIONS

PRIORITY KEY

- S Short Term *(1 - 3 years)*
- M Mid Term *(4 - 10 years)*
- L Long Term *(11 - 20+ years)*
- O Ongoing *(Continuing Efforts each year)*