



# COUNTY OF ERIE

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ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING  
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

THOMAS R. HERSEY, JR.  
COMMISSIONER

June 16, 2016

Erie County Legislature  
92 Franklin Street, Fourth Floor  
Buffalo, New York 14202

RE: Comm. 4E-11 – Erie County Parks System – Retention of Consultant to Update the Parks Master Plan

Dear Honorable Members:

In an effort to secure legislative authorization to execute a contract with Wendel Engineering to initiate an essential update of our existing Parks Master Plan, I have reviewed the 2003 Master Plan and offer the following information regarding the implementation of the priority recommendations:

- **2003 Overall System Recommendations**

- The County should focus on its core services, with an emphasis on the provision of passive, nature-oriented recreation and only expand “sports” activities where there is a partner that brings funding and long term operational management and maintenance. These activities should only be undertaken in areas where there is no negative impact on the natural resources and natural environment.
- The County needs to take a lead role when planning and managing regionally significant Parks Resources and continue to support the Lake Erie Greenway, regional and inter-regional trails, as well as protect ecological resources and significant natural environmental areas.
- The County should continue to support the preservation of significant cultural resources such as our heritage parks in order to ensure that these important regional resources are maintained.
  - Includes undertaking adaptive reuse and feasibility studies of our major historic park structures
  - Designate and deploy staff to undertake general parks improvements (paint, repair, replace)
- The County in conjunction with the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District should undertake a comprehensive Natural Resources Management Plan to ensure the protection and

restoration of the County Parks natural systems. This would include the development of an inventory of the County's natural assets.

- Develop and Adopt ecologically sustainable practices for use in all County Parks.
  - Reduce mown areas and restore natural areas and features.
  - Implement an education program.
  - Consider a plant nursery.
  - Conduct selective tree cutting.
- Implement an education program on sound environmental management.
  - Undertake a broad based marketing approach to raise awareness and support for our parks system.
    - Investigate partner and cross marketing opportunities with the VBN, other counties, local municipalities, cultural heritage and recreational groups to package activities and sites for tourism excursions.
  - Design a comprehensive communications plan including website, social media, signage, media campaigns.
  - Create a successful volunteer and community participation program. Build partnerships with local municipalities, agencies, and not-for profit organizations and private sector partners that allow the County to provide higher quality parks than they could undertake otherwise.
    - Harness the enthusiasm and knowledge of special interest groups and community volunteers to assist in managing parks, environmental restoration, and conduct programming.
    - Develop working relationships with organizations such as our Universities and the Buffalo Olmstead Parks Conservancy to improve the quality of service.

- **Implementation Since 2003**

Reviewing the list of funded capital budget projects as well as a list of the recommended Parkland actions presented to the County's All Land Review Committee (ARC) between the years of 2003 and 2016 the following summary of activities undertaken to address the priority recommendations of the 2003 plan:

- Since 2003 the following partnerships have been developed to increase volunteer and stakeholder efforts to help maintain and manage County Parks:
  - The acquisition of Beeman Creek Park by Clarence in 2008.
  - Agreement with the WNY Mountain Bike Association to improve and maintain the trails at Sprague Brook Park in 2012.
  - Bike path easement provided to the Town of Newstead through Akron Falls Park for a bike path.
  - 2013 finalized agreements with Friends of Ellicott Creek to maintain off-leash Dog Park.
  - 2012 Land Access Agreement with the US Army Corps of Engineers to do a pilot invasive plant eradication and restoration project at Times Beach.
  - Established partnerships with Riverkeeper, Alliance for the Great Lakes, Friends of Times Beach and other community groups to assist with continued efforts to control invasives and restore the native environments at the 3 County Pocket Parks along the Buffalo River.

- The Parks Department has initiated the following projects in an effort to properly maintain historic Park Structures:
    - 2012 Removal of old bathhouse at Bennett Beach.
    - 2013 Demolition of the Emery Inn and restoration of shelter #12 at Emery Park.
  - The County continues to lead the region in the development and protection of trail ways, green space and significant natural environments:
    - Continued development and maintenance of the Riverwalk and Lake Shore Trails.
    - Acquisition of 81-acre forestry parcel in the Town of Concord.
    - Acquisition of a 223-acre watershed headwaters parcel in the Town of Concord.
    - Acquisition of 11 acres at Seneca Bluffs in the City of Buffalo.
  - In addition, the Parks Department has received approximately \$1.5 to \$2 Million in capital budget funding annually to address routine maintenance needs (paint, repair and replace) and equipment.
- **Remaining Work to be Done and the Need to Update the Existing Plan**

Erie County has been able to implement many of the low cost and low impact priority recommendations contained in the 2003 Parks Master Plan in a limited capacity due to both financial and administrative resources available.

- Although some progress has been made to more naturalize our management practices and protect and restore our historic structures an overall management plan is needed to put these practices in place system wide as well as address the situation that exists with our crumbling historic structures. Many of these structures are protected by the State Office of Historic Preservation. Any of the work on these historic structures (restore or demolish) needs to be closely coordinated with the State and will be costly.

The Parks Master Plan update work plan includes the in depth analysis of the problems and opportunities associated with the historic structures in our 5 Heritage Parks. This will produce cost information as well as identify the state requirements and processes associated with addressing these structures. This will enable the County to prioritize these concerns and help determine how we proceed.

- The 2003 Parks Master Plan called for the adoption of Best Management Practices system wide to support our natural environments and resources. Although these types of practices have been common place within our Buffalo River Habitat Parks, these opportunities need to specifically evaluate all of our Parks facilities. These practices will not only help support the passive recreation aspect of our parks system, but they will also make overall operations less time consuming and less expensive.

Through the services and experience of a nationally recognized Public Parks System Consultant, Green Play, the proposed Master Plan update will include an organizational management and services assessment. This will produce a set of BMP's and policies to more efficiently and effectively manage and operate our Parks. Our current management and maintenance needs and policies will be benchmarked against the best practices used by other parks systems and CAPRA Accreditation Standards. This evaluation will identify the minimum resources needed to maintain a standard within our parks comparable to other public parks systems throughout the Country.

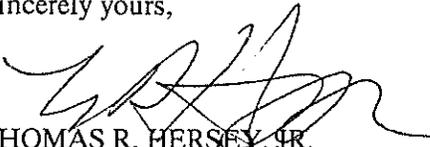
- The 2003 Master Plan recognized a need to make more citizens in Erie County aware of the great natural features, resources, heritage assets, and recreational opportunities that are provided by our County Parks System. The consultant began to create a Marketing and

Communications Strategy to market our system to potential users, user groups and other partners. The 2003 Plan suggested the development of communication tools such as a website, brochure, maps and media releases. The adoption of a marketing plan to increase stakeholder interest in our parks system will also lead to the identification of user groups and other resources that can be leveraged to help manage and protect our parks.

The proposed Master Plan update will provide the Marketing Plan recommended in 2003, but also proposes an extensive and extremely engaging public participation and outreach campaign to educate and survey park users and the general public to build interest in promoting and protecting our parks as well as identify potential partners and user groups to help identify and develop the resources necessary to effectively protect and enhance our parks assets.

As we discussed in the Capital Budget hearings the other day, it is really difficult to allocate adequate resources for this important Parks work when it competes with emergency 911 resources, bridges and roadways. We have a responsibility to evaluate strategies and find a way to provide our Parks system the resources it needs. We need this proposed Master Plan update to build the management policies and public understanding and support necessary to continue to upgrade and turn our parks system back into a widely recognized regional asset.

Sincerely yours,



THOMAS R. HERSEY, JR.

TRH/cw