Bennett Beach

OVERALL SYSTEM MASTER PLAN

TABLE OF CONTENTS: VOLUME 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS: VOLUME 1

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Erie County owns and operates a parks system containing nearly 10,000 acres of land on 40 sites throughout the County. These sites include eleven large multi-purpose parks, eight undeveloped parks, thirteen forestry lots, seven small special-purpose parks and two multi-use recreational trails. The County Park System was originally established in 1925, and initially was comprised of four sites (Chestnut Ridge, Ellicott, Como Lake, and Emery Parks) and 2,280 acres of land. Periodic land acquisition over the years has expanded the original holdings to the Park System's current size.

Previous County Park System Master Plan Updates were prepared in 1961, 1976, 1988, and 2003 (Approximately 15 year intervals). Since the last plan was completed, much has changed within the Park System and throughout the County. The County has invested significant funding towards recommended improvements and has tackled many maintenance concerns. Also, development has occurred around certain parks, Downtown Buffalo and the waterfront over the past few years. Public attitudes and appreciation towards the natural environment have also changed and greatly improved.

People tend to be more sensitive to the natural beauty and cultural significance of the Park System than previously. This sentiment is also evident in recreational trends, which have also evolved, with the County System being less in demand for "active" recreational uses and very much in demand for "passive" recreational uses and more nature-related focuses.

The County initiated this update of its current Park System Master Plan in late 2016, with an expected completion date of late 2018/early 2019. This current update is focused primarily on the preservation, enhancement and improvement of the existing system assets and landscape setting, rather than an unrealistic and expensive "wish-list" of things to be added or changed. The plan is intended to establish a framework for preservation, restoration, and enhancement of the parks over the next 15-20 years. It is recommended that the Master Plan Update be updated on a regular schedule of every twelve to fifteen years, as trends change.

Chestnut Ridge Park

ERIE COUNTY PARKS SYSTEM:
PROGRESS AND INITIATIVES SINCE 2003 PLAN

The Erie County Departments of Parks, Recreation and Forestry, and Environment and Planning have made significant improvements to the parks since the 2003 Master Plan was completed. Despite staffing adjustments and other issues over the years, the Erie County Parks System remains a prominent collection of parks and natural destinations in the Western New York area.

1.1.1 SIGNIFICANT NEW PARK FEATURES AND DEVELOPMENT

- Black Rock Canal Park was completely redeveloped
- Bailey Peninsula Natural habitat Park (now Thomas F. Higgins Riverfront Bridge and Park) was redeveloped and shoreline restored
- Seneca Bluffs Natural Habitat Park shoreline naturalized and restored
- Red Jacket Natural Habitat Park shoreline naturalized and restored
- Tow Path Park was redeveloped
- Design and construction of four sections of the Shoreline Trail System in Lackawanna and Evans
- Two Mile Creek Greenway Trail was constructed
- Sherwood Greenway Trail was constructed
- Pickleball courts (Akron Falls Park, Como Lake Park, Ellicott Creek Park)
- Disc Golf 18 hole courses (Chestnut Ridge Park, Como Lake Park, Ellicott Creek Park, Emery Park)
- Cricket Pitch at Ellicott Creek Park
- Kayak Launches (Ellicott Creek Park, Seneca Bluffs)
- Significant trail improvements (Sprague Brook Park, Hunters Creek Park)
- Bark Parks (Ellicott Creek Park, Black Rock Canal Park)
- New Programming (Ranger walks, Junior Ranger Program, Movies in the Park)
- Isle View Park Tribute Garden
- Multi-generational playgrounds (Ellicott Creek Park, Como Lake Park)
- Emery Inn in Emery Park was demolished
- Transferred part of Akron Falls Park to Newstead (two parcels: one of approximately 6 acres and one of approximately 129 acres)

Interpretive signage at Seneca Bluffs

Disc Golf at Ellicott Creek Park

Como Lake Park Multi-generational Fitness Playground

1.1.2 PARK ACQUISITION

- Eighteen Mile Creek Headwaters Property (2015)
- Seneca Bluffs Natural Habitat Park Expansion (2016)
- Lakeview Pocket Preserve (2017)

1.2.3 SELECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS FROM 2003 MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Chestnut Ridge Park - Relocate trailhead parking location from alongside Seufert Road to a new location on Route 277 at the former horse paddocks. Establish and/or improve trail access into the existing park trail network-* **DONE**
  - **Established new trailhead, trails, and parking area for Eternal Flame Trail**

- *Chestnut Ridge Park - Open up and improve fishing access and opportunities to the edge of the Commissioner's pond - work closely with local sportsman's/ fishing advocacy groups- -* **DONE**
  - **Worked with Boy Scout group to establish wood deck on edge of pond** *for fishing and opportunities to access and view scenic area.*

- *All Parks - Promote four-seasons recreational opportunities in the parks, including the sledding hills, skating rinks and cross-country ski trails-* **DONE**
  - **Parks Department continues to promote and improve winter activities throughout the Park System. Sledding, cross-country skiing, skating, guided Ranger walks, Chestnut Ridge Santaland/Winterfest, are a few of the many recreational opportunities that take place during the winter months.**

- *Ellicott Creek Park - Improve conditions of parking lot at northern end of park; establish a better connection and visibility from Niagara Falls Boulevard. This is one of the few parks, and few specific locations, in the entire system where an asphalt-surfaced parking lot would likely be appropriate- -* **DONE**
  - **Provided asphalt lot, and sign visible from Niagara Falls Blvd. Parking** *lot now serves the Ellicott Creek Bark Park on Ellicott Island.*

- *Emery Park - Reduce lawn mowing to provide more natural setting in non-use, little-trafficked areas, and help to shift park maintenance towards restoring older park structures. One significant area to begin the naturalization process would be west of the Maintenance facilities behind the tennis courts- -* **DONE/ ON-GOING**
  - **Many areas of Emery Park have transitioned to a more natural setting** *through purposeful reduced mowing techniques.*

- *Bennett Beach/Wendt Beach - Establish a stronger linkage between Bennett Beach and the local community through new sidewalks and/or trails, streetscape enhancements, wayfinding signage, maps, etc.; Provide clear linkages from Bennett Beach to area bicycle routes and trails. This is a strong, tight-knit lakefront community that comes alive in the summer months- -* **DONE/ IN PROGRESS**
  - **Designed and constructed Evans Shoreline Trail Phases 1 and3 creating a direct trail connection from Bennett Beach to Wendt Beach. Phase 2 will connect the County Parks to Evans Town Park**

- *Sprague Brook Park - Begin a "re-naturalization" initiative in the park to phase out current practices of regularly mowing large expanses of lawn. Transition the little-used lawn expanses to natural meadows; some areas mowed down once at the end of each season, and others never mowed again-* **DONE/ ON-GOING**
  - **Parks Department have completed significant re-naturalization efforts north of Sprague Brook. Established meadows feature mowed paths for nature walks and views of the scenic countryside.**

New trailhead off of Route 277 at Chestnut Ridge

Deck over the pond at Chestnut Ridge

Reduced mowing area at Emery Park

Naturalized area within Sprague Brook

1.2.4 SIGNIFICANT PARKS CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS
(Additional park improvement projects found in Volume 2)

- Akron Falls Park - Valley Bridge and Brooklyn Street Bridge Replacement .... $ 1,430,000
- Bennett Beach Park - Comfort Station Remodel $78,000
- Black Rock Canal Park - Phases 1, 2, 3 Improvements $300,000
- Chestnut Ridge Park - Parking Lot/Lighting and Accessibility Improvements $587,000
- Chestnut Ridge Park - Tennis Court Resurfacing $260,000
- Como Lake Park - Shelter Improvements $200,000
- Ellicott Creek Park - Tennis Court Improvements $62,000
- Elma Meadows Golf Course - New Irrigation System Installed $1,500,000
- Emery Park - Culvert Replacement $350,000
- Isle View Park - Maintenance Shop Roof Improvements $124,000
- Sprague Brook Park - Electrical Camp Site Conversion $224,000

Valley bridge replacement at Akron Falls Park

Roof improvements to Boy Scout Shelter at Como Lake Park

Tennis courts at Chestnut Ridge Park

Black Rock Canal Park: Promenade Improvements

1.2.5 GRANTS OBTAINED FOR PARKS AND TRAILS IMPROVEMENTS
(Additional park improvement projects found in Volume 2 by park)

Erie County has secured over $18.6 million in the past 15 years in grants focused on public waterfront improvements and protection, transportation alternatives development, and habitat restoration.

GRANTING ORGANIZATION	PROJECT	PARK
NYSDOT	Evans Shoreline Trail Ph.3	Shoreline Trail
NYSDOT	Evans Shoreline Trail Ph.2	Shoreline Trail
FHA	Evans Shoreline Trail Ph.1	Shoreline Trail
USEPA	Buffalo River Habitat Restoration & RAP Project Management	Red Jacket, Higgins, all Buffalo River Sites
USEPA	Buffalo River 61 Smith/NFTA Habitat Restoration	Red Jacket adjacent
USEPA	Erie County Buffalo River RAP Management	All Buffalo River sites
NYS Parks	Seneca Bluffs Frontage Acquisition	Seneca Bluffs
US Fish & Wildlife Service	Seneca Bluffs – Nexgen Acquisition	Seneca Bluffs
NYSDOT NYSDOS/Canal Corp/City of Buffalo/NYPA-Greenway Commission	Shoreline Trail - Black Rock	Black Rock Park
	Black Rock	Black Rock Park
NYSOPRHP	Tow Path Park, Phase 2	Tow Path Park
NYSDOT	Sherwood Greenway Bicycle/Pedestrian Path	Sherwood Greenway Trail
NYSOPRHP	Times Beach Public Access Project	Times Beach
NYS Multimodal 2000 Program	Enter into agreements for ownership of property or easements as may be necessary for infrastructure improvements	Shoreline Trail - Bethlehem
NYSDEC	Tree Inventory	Akron and Como Lake Park
NYSOPRHP	Snowmobile Trail Development: Annual pass from NYSOPRHP	Various parks and forestry lots
NYSDEC	Public "catch and release" fishing site	Eighteen Mile Creek Park

Evans Shoreline Trail

Thomas F. Higgins Riverfront Bridge and Park habitat restoration

ERIE COUNTY PARKS SYSTEM REGIONAL CONTEXT

N

LEGEND
ERIE COUNTY PARKS
STATE PARKS
TOWN/VILLAGE PARKS

COUNTY PARKS
HERITAGE PARKS
MULTI-PURPOSE PARKS
WATERFRONT PARKS
CONSERVATION PARKS
COUNTY FORESTRY LOTS
SHORELINE TRAIL
TWO-MILE CREEK GREENWAY

NIAGARA COUNTY

NIAGARA RIVER

GRAND ISLAND

Ellicott Creek Park

Isle View Park

CITY OF TONAWANDA

TONAWANDA

VILLAGE KENMORE

Black Rock Canal Park

Tow Path Park

BUFFALO

Times Beach Nature Preserve

Red Jacket Riverfront Natural Habitat Park

Thomas F. Higgins Riverfront Bridge & Park

Seneca Bluffs Natural Habitat Park

LACKAWANNA

VILLAGE BLASDEL

LAKE ERIE

CANADA

HAMBURG

VILLAGE HAMBURG

Lakeview Pocket Preserve

Wendt Beach Park

Bennett Beach Park

EVANS

VILLAGE ANGOLA

Eighteen Mile Creek Park

EDEN

Franklin Gulf Park

VILLAGE FARNHAM

BRANT

VILLAGE NORTH COLLINS

NORTH COLLINS

CATTARAUGUS RESERVATION

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

COLLINS

VILLAGE GOWANDA

NEWSTEAD

VILLAGE AKRON

Akron Falls Park

CLARENCE

AMHERST

VILLAGE WILLIAMSVILLE

Grover Cleveland Golf Course

CHEEKTOWAGA

VILLAGE DEPEW

VILLAGE SLOAN

LANCASTER

VILLAGE LANCASTER

Como Lake Park

ALDEN

VILLAGE ALDEN

GENESEE COUNTY

WEST SENECA

ELMA

MARILLA

Elma Meadows Park & Golf Course

VILLAGE ORCHARD PARK

VILLAGE EAST AURORA

ORCHARD PARK

AURORA

Hunters Creek Park

WALES

Chestnut Ridge Park

Emery Park

WYOMING COUNTY

BOSTON

Boston Forest Park

COLDEN

HOLLAND

Sprague Brook Park

6
7
5
4
11

County Forestry Lots

Eighteenmile Creek Headwaters Property

9
8
12
13

County Forestry Lots

SARDINIA

1
2
3

CONCORD

Scoby Dam Park

VILLAGE SPRINGVILLE

CATTARAUGUS COUNTY

1.2   PROJECT TEAM

From the start of this project, the Master Plan Update process has included input and collaboration from a large, comprehensive project team including County leadership and staff, private consultants, various park user groups, and individuals from all over Erie County. To complete the Master Plan update, the County retained the services of a team of park-related consultants to complete the various component parts. The following team prepared the Master Plan Update, which includes: recommendations for the overall Park System, schematic park plans, a strategy for the waterfront parks, management opportunities, and a marketing and financial strategy:

Erie County:

Department of Environment and Planning

Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry

Consultants:

- **Wendel Companies**
  - Physical assessment of park features and conditions (site and architecture)
  - Coordination with County
  - Public outreach
  - Writing and formatting the new report

- **GreenPlay LLC**
  - Parks operations and management assessment
  - Public outreach

- **EDR (Environmental Design & Research)**
  - Environmental assessment of parks

- **RRC Associates**
  - Parks User Survey

The team worked closely throughout the course of the study. The Master Plan Update report is a collaborative effort, with technical background reports documenting the detailed inventory and assessment work.

1.3   STUDY PROCESS

1.3.1   PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Unique to this public outreach process was that the County wanted to get a better handle on all of it's existing resources and amenities within the parks before allowing the public to request new features or other improvements that were not necessarily financially feasible at this point. If independent funding sources or new partnering opportunities were identified, then exceptions could be made.

Public input was solicited during the master plan update process, and guided by the framework of preserving and enhancing what the Park System already offers, versus a typical parks master planning process which may ask "what do you want?" Discussion was more geared towards "how can we be more efficient?" and "what improvements and repairs are needed to keep the park system at its best?"

Given the extent of the Erie County Park System, it was not possible to hold specific meetings for each individual park, but collective meetings were held at strategic locations throughout the County. This public consultation approach included outreach to as many stakeholder groups and individuals as possible throughout the course of the project. Outreach was achieved through the following methods:

1.3.2   STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

Six (6) stakeholder meetings were conducted at various County Park locations and one was organized at Mutual Riverfront Park in Downtown Buffalo. Sixty-five (65) stakeholder groups were represented at these meetings.

The stakeholder meeting locations included:

- Emery Park (Stohrer's Lodge)
- Chestnut Ridge Park (Casino)
- Sprague Brook Park (Casino)
- Ellicott Creek Park (Friendship Building)
- Como Lake Park (2 sessions - Casino)
- Mutual Riverfront Park Museum

Stakeholder meeting at Chestnut Ridge Park

Stakeholder meeting at Mutual Riverfront Park

The stakeholder focus groups and staff interviews allowing the consultant team to gather information for the planning process. The following information was gleaned through those sessions. Survey results supported and highlighted many similar challenges.

Strengths
- Long history in the area/WPA structures
- Residents are looking to connect with the system
- Lots of partners within the parks
- Diversity of activities, assets and amenities

Weaknesses
- Poor engagement
- Social media is an afterthought
- Relying on old tactics brochures, flyers, newsletters
- Confusion about uses, signage, wayfinding
- No ownership within the system
- No consistency in timing or messaging
- Budget isn't allowing for needed upgrades
- Mentality of "we can't"
- Devolving to county logo
- Marketing is an afterthought/not a priority
- Channels aren't reaching consumers
- Parks are missing essential services (restrooms)
- Staff feels stuck – doesn't know where to start
- Website is clunky, too many layers of information

Opportunities
- Upgrade messaging/ what you stand for
- Transition from print to other media (email, text, newsletter)
- Establish a network of ownership
- Upgrade system/promote work accomplished
- Upgrades to provide transparency
- Ask for help
- Attract younger families or outdoor enthusiasts
- Hire/contract marketing staff
- Develop new brand position
- Develop more user-friendly, digital interface
- Create interactive maps with ability to show the entire system
- Incorporate educational program – facts about the system, educational signage, mobile tour
- Collaborate with the Visit Buffalo Niagara Sports Commission

Threats
- Alternative providers use parks without permission
- Political climate is volatile
- Users are controlling the brand

OVERALL KEY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED:

During the initial stages of the project, the following Key Issues were identified for focus:

Organizational:
- Need better marketing and communication of activities and facilities
- Upgrade website
- Increase opportunities to utilize technology to improve customer service and efficiencies
- Increased maintenance staffing to keep up with quality of service and demand
- Explore and develop additional partnerships
- Develop additional volunteer and user group opportunities
- Provide customer service training
- Update policies, manuals, and standard operating procedures (SOP)
- Adopt a donations program and policy
- Adopt a sponsorship and partnership program, agreements, and policy

Programs and Service Delivery:
- Explore opportunities to increase the number of user groups for development and maintenance of facilities and amenities
- Explore opportunities to increase the number of partnerships for events and activities
- Continue to balance between passive and active recreation

Finance:
- Existing funding amount is not adequate to maintain the level of service and quality the public expects from the Parks
- Lack of special event fees
- Employ equitable user fees
- Pursue grant opportunities
- Explore opportunity to establish a Parks Friends Group

PARK USER SURVEY

10. What are the most important areas that, if addressed by the County, would increase your utilization of Erie County parks and recreation facilities? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

01) ☐ Activities/programming
02) ☐ Awareness of programs (communications)
03) ☐ Condition / maintenance of parks or facilities
04) ☐ Customer service/staff knowledge
05) ☐ Handicapped / disabled accessibility
06) ☐ Hours of operation
07) ☐ Lighting for safety

08) ☐ Distance to park or facility
09) ☐ Parking
10) ☐ Pricing/user fees
11) ☐ Safety and security
12) ☐ WiFi connectivity
13) ☐ Other (please specify:_____)

11. In order to understand the community priorities, theoretically, if you had an extra $100 to spend on parks and recreation facilities services and/or programs, with $5 increments being the smallest amount you might use, how would you allocate that $100 across the following categories? You may also leave any items blank for no allocation, but please make sure your allocation totals $100.

$ ☐☐☐ Expand programs and activities (e.g., nature programs, community events, etc.)

$ ☐☐☐ Increase marketing and communications

$ ☐☐☐ Increase trail and pathway connectivity

$ ☐☐☐ Make improvements and/or renovate existing amenities at parks and facilities

$ ☐☐☐ Preserve existing open space

$ ☐☐☐ Repurpose outdoor athletic fields or courts

$ ☐☐☐ Other (please specify: _____)

$ 100 TOTAL

FINANCIAL CHOICES/FEES

The Erie County Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry receives funding through the Erie County General Fund to operate and maintain the existing system of parks, recreation facilities and trails. Additional funding sources are being considered.

12. Would you support any of the following funding mechanisms to fund operations and maintenance costs of parks and recreation facilities and trails in Erie County that currently exist or may be developed in the future?

a. Increase in existing resources:

	DEFINITELY NOT SUPPORT 1	PROBABLY NOT SUPPORT 2	NEUTRAL 3	PROBABLY SUPPORT 4	DEFINITELY SUPPORT 5
Capital budget re-distribution	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Increase property tax	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Increase rental fees	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

b. Additional funding sources:

	DEFINITELY NOT SUPPORT 1	PROBABLY NOT SUPPORT 2	NEUTRAL 3	PROBABLY SUPPORT 4	DEFINITELY SUPPORT 5
Bond referendum (County Bonds with voter approval)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Dedicated park fund within county budget	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Foundation dedicated to the parks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
New property tax dedicated to the parks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
New user fee	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Park User Group/Private sector sponsorship	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. If adjustments to existing rental fees were made (due to increasing costs to provide programs, services, or facilities) which of the following best describes the potential impact, if any, that fee increases would have on your current level of participation?

☐ Moderate rental fee increases would not limit my/our ability to participate at all
☐ Moderate rental fee increases would limit my/our participation somewhat
☐ Moderate rental fee increases would limit my/our participation significantly
☐ Don't know/uncertain

Example of survey questions

1.3.3   PARKS USER SURVEY

The purpose of this survey was to gather public feedback on Erie County Parks and recreation facilities, services, and programs. This survey research effort and subsequent analysis were designed to assist Erie County in developing a master plan regarding existing and potential future facilities and services.

The Parks User Survey was conducted using two primary methods:

1) A **mail-back survey** (with an optional, invitation-only link for online responses)
2) An **open-link web survey** to further encourage responses from residents throughout the County.

A total of 5,000 surveys were mailed to a random sample of Erie County residents in March 2017; recipients also received a reminder postcard about 9 days after the initial mailing. After accounting for undeliverable addresses (81 total), 4,919 surveys were delivered and 585 completed responses were received, resulting in a statistically valid response rate of 11.9 percent. The full survey results can be found in Appendix B .

Summary of Selected Findings
This section provides a brief overview of key findings of the statistically-valid invitation sample.

- **Usage of Existing Facilities is Low; Trails/Pathways are Most-Used Amenity.** Only Chestnut Ridge and Riverwalk have been used by over half of invitation respondents in the past year (69 percent and 51 percent, respectively). The remaining facilities are used much less frequently by invitation respondents, who identified a lack of awareness as the primary reason for not using existing facilities (47 percent). In general, invitation respondents indicated that they are most likely to use trails/pathways (74 percent), picnic shelters (56 percent), and playgrounds (48 percent) on a regular basis.

- **Long-Term Areas of Focus Should Include Preservation of Natural Areas and Protecting the Environment**. When asked to select the top three areas that Erie County Parks & Recreation should focus on for the long term, invitation respondents most commonly chose preserving natural areas (49 percent) and protecting the environment (46 percent). These priorities are further corroborated by other survey results, both quantitative and qualitative.
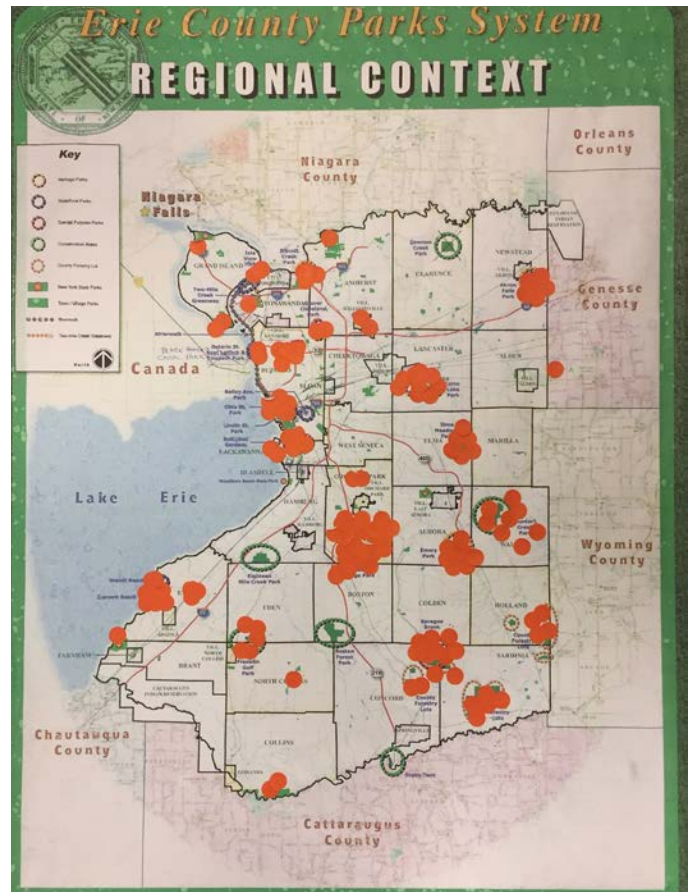
Stakeholder Meeting: Parks which people use
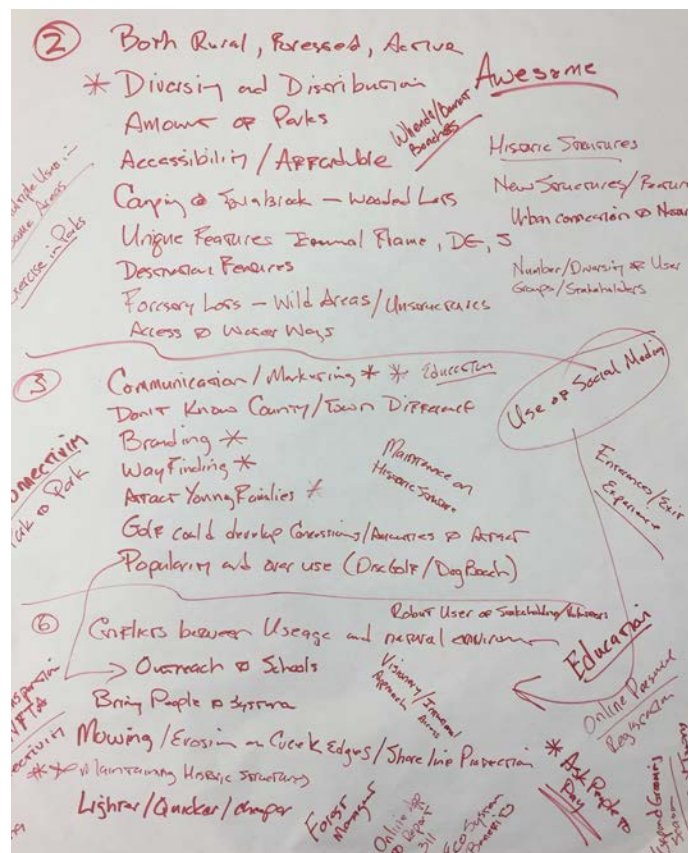
Notes from stakeholder meeting

- **Top Future Priorities for Improvement Include Lake Quality, Trails/Pathways, and Restrooms.** Invitation respondents rated the importance of a variety of potential improvements in Erie County. Rated as most important were lake quality (87 percent rated as important), trail and pathway connectivity (82 percent), and restrooms (80 percent). These amenities are highly important to a majority of invitation sample households and therefore should be priorities for the county moving forward.

- **Maintaining and Improving the Condition of Existing Facilities is Critical.** When asked what areas, if addressed by the County, would increase their usage of parks and recreation facilities, the top response among invitation respondents was condition/maintenance of parks or facilities (67 percent). Respondents also allocated the most amount of money on average towards improving and/or renovating existing amenities at parks and facilities in an exercise where they allocated a hypothetical $100 towards various parks and recreation amenities. Finally, in the open-ended comments, many responses requested various upgrades and improvements to existing Erie County facilities.

- **Respondents Support Increasing Funding, but not if it Impacts their Personal Finances.** Invitation respondents indicated that they support a variety of funding sources for Erie County parks and recreation offerings, with many of the listed options receiving an average rating of 3 or higher on a 5-point scale. However, they were less likely to support funding sources that directly impact them financially, such as an increase in property taxes (average rating 2.0), a new property tax (2.1), or new user fees (2.5).

COMMENTS ON IMPROVING PARKS/FACILITIES

Respondents were asked if they had any comments or suggestions on how existing parks and facilities can be improved to better meet their needs. Commonly mentioned parks/facilities and a brief summary of suggestions for each are illustrated below, along with a selection of verbatim invitation responses relevant to each park/facility. The full listing of responses is provided in the appendix.

Akron Falls
- Focus on safety/security
- Maintain facilities
- Update/improve facilities

Update more picnic areas and playground equipment

Maintain facilities even in off season

Replace missing rails on path to Falls- dangerous

Chestnut Ridge
- Clear and expand trails
- Focus on safety/security
- Upgrade restrooms

Improve trail to "Eternal Flame"

Renovation/repair of bathroom facilities

Limit motor vehicle traffic; enforce very low speed limit; increase number of off road hiking trails. Automobile traffic is a major impediment to enjoyment of the park.

Como Lake Park
- Dredge lake
- Focus on maintenance
- Update/improve facilities

Some dredging could be done in the lake

Updated equipment facilities, more clearly marked bike path/walking path

Cut the grass

Summary findings graphic

Top Three Values Erie County Should Focus On for the Long Term

	Invitation Sample	Open Link
Preserving natural areas	49%	52%
Protecting the environment	46%	44%
Access for all to parks and open spaces	36%	35%
Safety and security	34%	29%
Promoting Back to Nature	33%	41%
Promoting active lifestyles	28%	34%
Affordability of services	27%	18%
Promoting health and wellness	25%	20%
Community outreach and involvement	15%	18%
Other	3%	6%
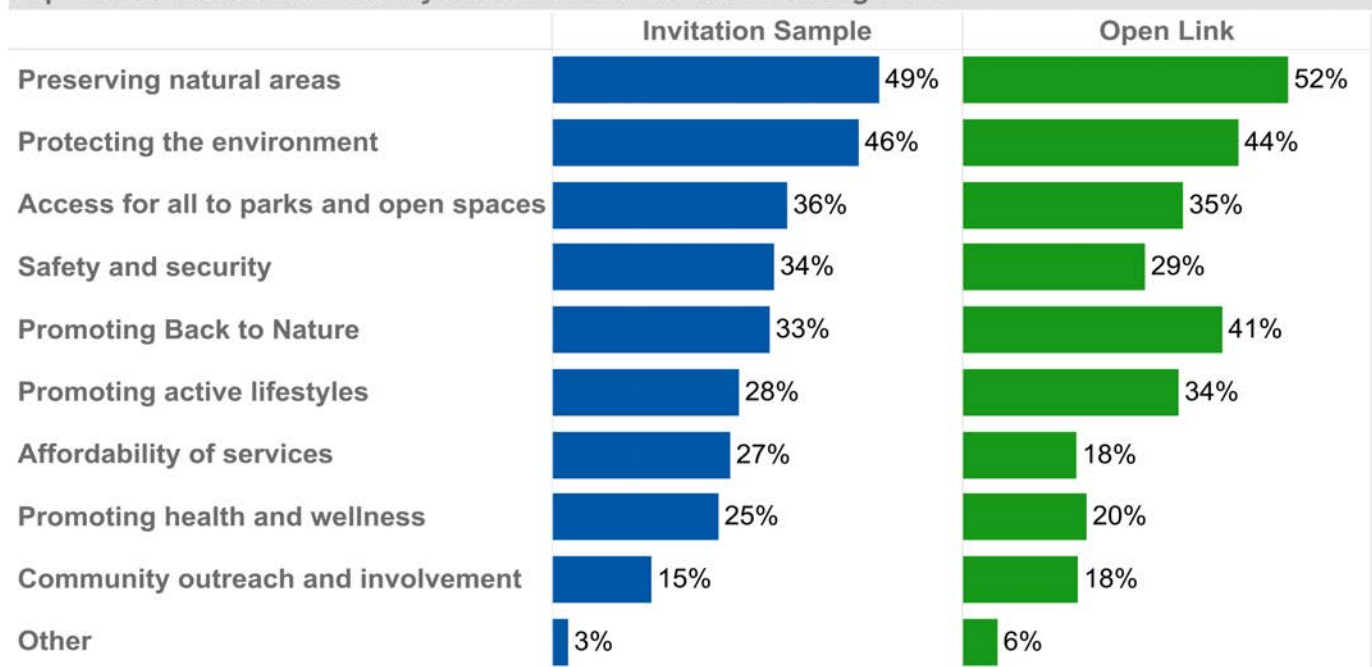
Summary findings graphic

- Focus on Improving Communication. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of invitation respondents rated Erie County's effectiveness at reaching them with parks and recreation information as a "1" or a "2" on a 5-point scale where 1 is "not at all effective" and 5 is "very effective," indicating that improvements to existing communications could be beneficial. Familiarity with Erie County Parks facilities and services is also relatively low, with 31 percent indicating that they are familiar. Local media (62 percent) and the Internet/website (51 percent) topped the list of best ways to reach invitation respondents with parks and recreation information.

- **Priorities Vary Considerably by Location of Residence.** Opinions and priorities among invitation respondents show some differences when segmented by the respondents' geographic location or the population size of the city/town in Erie County in which they reside. These differences can generally be attributed to the different needs in various locations and a slightly different demographic make-up of each of the geographic subgroups.

- **Open Link Sample Respondents Are Especially Invested in Parks and Recreation.** Throughout the results, open link respondents show relatively greater involvement and investment than invitation survey respondents in Erie County parks and recreation. They indicated a higher familiarity rating with parks and recreation services and used all of the existing facilities more frequently than invitation respondents. Open link respondents were also more likely to be supportive of all funding mechanisms that were evaluated. Additionally, open link respondents indicated to a much greater degree that they would like to receive information on parks and recreation services through social networking, which is unsurprising as the open link survey was largely advertised through social media.

1.3.4   MEETINGS AND WORK SESSIONS

In addition to the park user surveys, and the numerous stakeholder group meetings, the project team also met with a number of park user groups and municipalities individually throughout the process on specialized or park-specific issues. Interviews with staff were also conducted to provide information about parks, recreation facilities and services, along with insight regarding the current practices and experiences of the County in serving its residents and visitors.

1.3.5   FINAL PUBLIC OUTREACH

Final public outreach consisted of four outreach methods:

- Online Comment Form on the County website and shared through social media
- Copies of the plan were distributed to the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library (BECPL) System's Orchard Park, Newstead, and Lancaster branches
- Information boards were displayed at the BECPL's Central Library

- Open houses were conducted in Chestnut Ridge Park, Ellicott Creek Park, and Como Lake Park. Casual, "drop-in" public events, they allowed for ample review of the final draft presentation boards and information pertaining to the Park Master Plan Update, as well as one-on-one discussion with members of the project team and/or County officials or staff. The goal of these sessions was to present the final draft of the extensive master planning process and recommended improvements and suggested updates. The team also gathered information from the public and stakeholders that would inform the final edits to the master plan. This format was selected over a formal public hearing/presentation to allow for maximum input from individuals who prefer a more low-key and casual setting for discussing their concerns or sharing their opportunities for enhancement of the Parks System.

First open house at the Casino in Chestnut Ridge Park

Second open house at the Friendship House in Ellicott Creek Park

Final open house at the Casino in Como Lake Park

Master Plan board display at the Buffalo Central Library

ERIE COUNTY PARKS RECREATION & FORESTRY MASTER PLAN UPDATE

ERIE COUNTY PARK SYSTEM

COMMENTS:

We want to hear from you!

Comments received will be reviewed to finalize the
Parks Master Plan Update

First Name:_____

Last Name:_____

Zip Code:_____

Email:_____

Comments:

_____
_____
_____
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wendel GREENPLAY LLC edr

Comment sheet which was available at all open houses and at the Buffalo Central Library display

1.4 MASTER PLAN COMPONENTS

The resulting Master Plan Update is comprised of the following four elements:

1.4.1 INVENTORY AND ASSESSMENT OF EXISTING FACILITIES AND CONDITIONS

This includes a detailed inventory of infrastructure, shelters, furnishings, athletic facilities, play equipment and other appurtenances within the County's heritage parks. A database of inventory information was created to give the County a management tool for future maintenance and funding decisions.

A detailed analysis was also conducted among the oldest parks in the System, mapping and detailing the existing natural/ecological character.

1.4.2 ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS OF OPERATIONS AND MARKETING STRATEGIES

GreenPlay broadly assessed the organizational and management structure and staffing of the Erie County Parks Department to determine effectiveness and efficiency in meeting current and future responsibilities as related to the community's needs:

Level of Service Analysis
- Identification of alternative providers of recreation services to provide insight regarding the market opportunities in the area for potential new partnerships, facilities and services.

- Analysis addressing recreation, parks, natural resources, and related services.

Assessment and Analysis
- Review of previous planning efforts, County historical information.
- Measurement of the current delivery of service for parks, recreation facilities and natural areas using existing County data allowing for a target level of service to be determined that is both feasible and aligned with the desires of citizens as expressed through the citizen survey and public engagement meetings.
- Exploration of finance and funding mechanisms to support development and sustainability within the system.

Needs Assessment
- Consideration of the profile of the community and demographics, including population growth.
- Research of trends related to Erie County and American lifestyles to help guide the efforts of the Parks Department over the next several years.

Operational and Marketing Analysis
- Review and analysis of current marketing practices and current donation practices.
- Review and analysis of the existing outside organization agreements, existing partnerships and sponsorship agreements.

Wendt Beach Schematic Plan: Overall schematic graphic is located in Volume 2, Section 3.4

Shoreline Trail

- Analyze parks, recreation programming, and service delivery.
- Conduct an organizational Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis.
- Develop a broad assessment of the overall parks operations.

Recommendations and Policy Documents:
- Development of standard practice documents for donations, sponsorships, and partnerships management.
- Development of an action plan for marketing and a time-frame to support the implementation of the plan.
- Development of a donations program and policy document.

After considering the organizational observations, staffing assessment, and budgetary limitations, the opinion of the consultant team is that Department staff have done a remarkable job of delivering quality service in the operation of its current system.

Opportunities exist for the County to explore partnerships with local municipalities, agencies, businesses, non-profit, and community-based groups.

1.4.3 REVIEW AND UPDATE OF EXISTING PARK PLANS

All parks in the system were evaluated for maintenance issues and opportunities. Specific recommendations were

prepared for each park in the County System. Recommendations take into account long-term environmental sustainability, current and future recreational opportunities, maintenance requirements, and fiscal responsibility. For the oldest parks in the system with heritage significance, emphasis has been placed on preservation and restoration of original park features. For all parks, the focus is on preserving natural resources and key scenic features, while developing a better system of interpretation and awareness within these beautiful properties.

In addition, several key schematic plans were created for designated areas within the overall system;

- Improvement to the Wendt Beach Heritage Area including the re-use of the Horse Stable building, pedestrian connectivity, and reorganization of the parking area.
- Conceptual design of Seneca Bluffs including a formalized parking area, trails, overlooks, and other amenities.
- Improvements to vehicular circulation and parking areas, including overall impervious pavement reduction and the addition of rain gardens at Chestnut Ridge, Como Lake, and Ellicott Creek Parks.

1.4.4 WATERFRONT ACCESS AND TRAILWAYS

This component of work provides a specific focus on the Niagara River waterfront park system. Highlights include assessing and providing recommendations for the Riverwalk section of the Shoreline Trail and analyzing possible new access points to the River. Three schematic plans were produced including:

- An overall Erie County Strategy context plan highlighting proposed projects and initiatives.
- Conceptual design of the United Refinery parcel and adjacent properties near Isle View Park showing possible trail expansion and connections to the River.
- Two Mile Creek Trailway Extension

1.5 MASTER PLAN DOCUMENTS

The completed Erie County Parks System Master Plan is comprised of six documents, as follows:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
VOL. 1 – OVERALL SYSTEM MASTER PLAN
VOL. 2 – PARK SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS
VOL. 3 – WATERFRONT ACCESS AND TRAILWAYS
VOL. 4 – PARKS INVENTORY AND ASSESSMENT
APPENDIX

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PLANNING CONTEXT

2.1   COUNTY OVERVIEW

2.1.1   REGIONAL SETTING

Erie County is situated at the eastern end of Lake Erie in western New York State and covers 1,054 square miles of land. The County extends over 43 miles from Niagara County to the north to Cattaraugus and Chautauqua Counties to the south, and 24 miles from Genesee and Wyoming Counties to the east with Lake Erie to the west. Erie County possesses approximately 77 miles of shoreline along Lake Erie and the Niagara River. The Province of Ontario, Canada, lies on the west bank of the Niagara River.

Much of the northwest quarter of Erie County includes the heavily-urbanized areas and highest populations of the City of Buffalo and its surrounding first-ring suburbs of Tonawanda, Amherst, Cheektowaga, West Seneca, and City of Lackawanna. This urbanization extends north into Niagara County, through the City of Niagara Falls *(less than 20 miles from Downtown Buffalo)*. Meanwhile the easternmost towns within Erie County and the southern half of the County remain primarily rural in nature with numerous smaller hamlets and villages.

Other metropolitan areas in proximity to Erie County include Rochester (60 miles east), Hamilton, Ontario (60 miles west), Toronto, Ontario (100 miles northwest), Erie, PA (90 miles southwest) and Cleveland, OH (180 miles southwest).

2.1.2   TRANSPORTATION NETWORK

Erie County is well served by various forms of transportation. The New York State Thruway (I-90) passes through Erie County from the southwest to the northeast; this highway is the major interstate route in the region. Other interstate spur routes include: the Niagara Thruway (I-190), linking I-90 with Downtown Buffalo, Niagara Falls and Canada; the Youngmann Highway (I-290) passing through northwest Erie County and bypassing Downtown Buffalo to link I- 90 and I-190; and the Lockport Expressway (I-990), passing northerly through the north-central section of Amherst linking to other area arterials and the City of Lockport in Niagara County. Other limited-access highways serving Erie County include: US 219, linking I-90 in the north with the Village of Springville to the south and passing through south-central Erie County; NY 400, linking I-90 in the north with East Aurora and South Wales in southeastern Erie County; and NY 5, NY 179, NY 198 and NY 33, which form a network of expressways within Buffalo and first-ring suburban towns.

Major east-west state arterials in Erie County include: NY 5 and US 20 (both of which cross New York State from Erie, PA to Albany); NY 354 and US 20A, serving central Erie County; and NY 39, which crosses southern Erie County. Major north-

Erie County is depicted in orange and is one of the most western counties in the State of New York
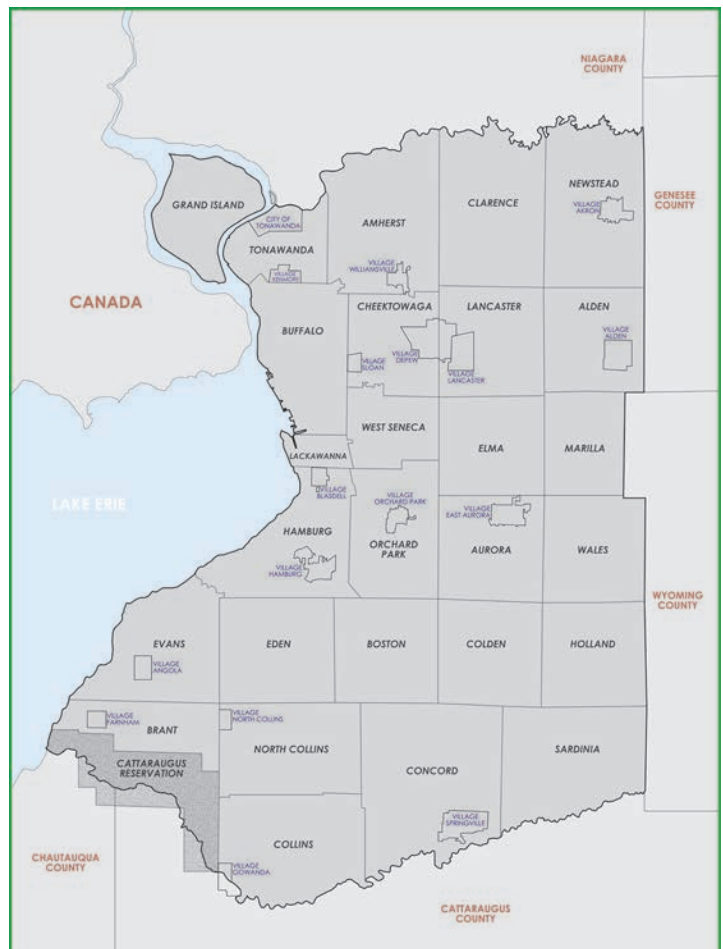
The Towns and Villages of Erie County

south state arterials include: US 62, which passes from Niagara Falls through Buffalo to southwest Erie County; NY 240 and NY 277, serving north-central and south- central Erie County; NY 16, which is a southern extension of NY 400 serving southeast Erie County and proceeding south to Olean; and NY 78, serving central Erie County and proceeding north through the City of Lockport to the Lake Ontario shore.

Highway access to Canada is provided via the Peace Bridge, located one mile north of Downtown Buffalo and spanning the Niagara River between Buffalo and Fort Erie, Ontario. The Canadian terminus of the Peace Bridge is conveniently connected to the Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW), a limited-access highway serving Niagara Falls (ONT), St. Catherines, Hamilton, and Toronto. Additional highway access to Canada is available via three other bridges (the Rainbow, Whirlpool and Lewiston-Queenston Bridges) located in Niagara County. In addition, the Peace Bridge provides convenient access to Highway 3, a major east-west Provincial Highway along the north shore of Lake Erie.

Public transportation within Erie County is provided by the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) , which maintains an extensive bus network primarily serving the urbanized northwestern portion of the County. Regular routes are also provided to most of the 44 municipalities in Erie County. In addition, the NFTA operates a 6.4-mile light rail rapid transit line extending from Downtown Buffalo northwest along Main Street (NY 5) to the State University of New York at Buffalo's South Campus at the Amherst and Tonawanda borders.

The NFTA also operates the Buffalo-Niagara International Airport in the Erie County Town of Cheektowaga, as well as Niagara Falls International Airport in Niagara County.

2.1.2   LAND USE

The most intensely-developed area of Erie County is the northwest portion – specifically the Cities of Buffalo, Lackawanna, and Tonawanda; the Towns of Tonawanda, Cheektowaga, Amherst, and West Seneca; the northern portion of Hamburg; northwest Orchard Park; and the Villages of Depew and Lancaster. This area, which contains roughly 20% of Erie County's total land area, contains approximately 70% of the County's developed land. Suburban sprawl has extended this development further north, east, and south, with more and more open lands disappearing each year.

Residential uses are fairly evenly distributed throughout these areas. Major concentrations of industrial uses exist in South Buffalo and the western third of the Town of Tonawanda, and in the central portions of Cheektowaga and Depew. Strip commercial development occurs along most major highways; significant concentrations of commercial development exist in Downtown Buffalo, the Niagara Falls Boulevard/Sheridan Drive/Maple Road areas of Tonawanda and Amherst, the Main Street/Transit Road area in Amherst and Clarence,

the Walden Avenue/Union Road area in Cheektowaga, and the Ridge Road/Seneca Street area in West Seneca.

Major institutional uses include the three campuses of the State University of New York at Buffalo (North Campus in central Amherst and South Campus in the northeast corner of Buffalo and the Downtown Campus), Buffalo State College, Canisius, Villa Maria, Medaille, and D'Youville College in North Buffalo, Daeman College in Snyder (southwestern Amherst), Hilbert College in Hamburg and the three campuses of SUNY Erie Community College (Amherst, Buffalo, and Hamburg). Other major institutions include the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus (Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo General Medical Center, Gates Vascular Institute, Oishei Children's Hospital) which is one mile north of Downtown and numerous other hospital and health care facilities.

The remainder of Erie County is predominantly rural. Significant development is still occurring in northern Amherst, western Clarence, western Lancaster and in portions of Hamburg and Orchard Park. To a slightly lesser degree development is also occurring in portions of Grand Island, Elma, Aurora, Evans, and Boston. Development in these areas is most frequently single-family residential.

Beyond the developing areas, agriculture remains a dominant land use. Typically, vegetable farming is more intense on the level lands of northeast Erie County than in the hilly south (where dairy farming is common). Vineyards are cultivated in some portions of southwest Erie County. Several important villages and hamlets are located within the rural areas: These include the Villages of Alden and Akron as well as the hamlets of Clarence Hollow, Clarence Center, and Marilla in the northeast; the Villages of East Aurora and Springville, as well as the hamlets of Holland, Colden and Sardinia in the southeast; and the Villages of Angola, Farnham, Gowanda, and North Collins, as well as the hamlets of Eden, Collins, Collins Center, Langford, Boston, North Boston, and Patchin in the southwest. Residential development also occupies most of the lakeshore in Erie County south of the City of Lackawanna, where numerous former "summer" cottage areas have transitioned to year-round residential communities.

2.1.3   ERIE COUNTY HISTORY - ABBREVIATED VERSION

Prior to European settlement Erie County was populated by the Seneca Indians of the Iroquois Confederacy. Today, portions of two Indian Reservations are located in Erie County: The Tonawanda Indian Reservation in extreme northeast Erie County, and the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation in the extreme southwest.

The first European outpost in Erie County – A French trading post at the mouth of the Buffalo River on Lake Erie – was established in 1758. No additional settlement occurred until 1804, when much of Western New York was acquired by the Holland Land Company. The region was surveyed and plans were prepared for a village at the site of present-day downtown Buffalo. Growth

was slow until 1825 due to the area's remoteness and the War of 1812 (the village of Buffalo was burned during the war).

The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 changed everything and transformed Buffalo into a major transshipment point between east coast ports and the midwest. Buffalo's population increased from 2,000 in 1820 to 42,000 by 1850. By 1900 the city's population exceeded 352,000 and was ranked eighth in the country. During this time Buffalo became established as the world's leading grain-milling center. Industrialization, especially steel manufacturing, became dominant in the local economy. In the outskirts the Cities of Tonawanda and North Tonawanda became major centers of a lumber industry, which utilized large stands of forests on Grand Island. At the turn of the century, inexpensive hydroelectricity from Niagara Falls was available to sustain Buffalo's industrial facilities. By 1920 automobile manufacturing was well established. In that year Buffalo's population exceeded 506,000, while the population of Erie County was over 634,000.

This stability has continued and certain population trends have now reversed. Fortunately starting in the mid to late 1800's with the establishment of the Olmsted Park System and Niagara Reservation, the County of Erie had the foresight in the 1920's to acquire significant acreage and scenic landscape areas and establish the start of the County Park System. This created a unique amenity for the fast growing population.

Until the 1940s most of Erie County's population was concentrated in the City of Buffalo (in 1940, out of a total County population of 798,000, roughly 78% (576,000) resided in the City). Post-war suburbanization had changed this population distribution so that by 1960 nearly half of the County's population now resided outside the City limits. Much of the suburban expansion occurred north and east of the City into the Towns of Tonawanda, Amherst, and Cheektowaga (Tonawanda grew from a population of 32,000 in 1940 to 105,000 by 1960).

While post-war suburbanization was significantly changing settlement and land use patterns in the region, post-war economic changes were also occurring. The opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Welland Canal in the late 1950s permitted ocean vessels to navigate the Upper Great Lakes and bypass the ports and transshipment points in Buffalo. Coupled with the declining importance of railroads, the earlier transportation advantages once enjoyed by Buffalo began to diminish. Heavy industry, which had traditionally dominated the regional economy, also began to decline.

The 1970s and 1980s were decades of major economic transition. Steel manufacturing ceased and grain milling was significantly curtailed. The City of Buffalo's population decreased from 532,000 in 1960, to 357,000 in 1980, and under the 2000 census data, dipped to 292,000 people for the first time since the late 1800s; this population exodus has been accompanied by substantial urban deterioration.

During the same time period (1960s - 1980s), however, the population of Erie County remained relatively stable – increasing from 1,064,000 in 1960 to 1,113,000 in 1970, and then decreasing to 1,015,000 in 1980.

Chestnut Ridge Park in Orchard Park, once considered on the outskirts of Buffalo, is now within one of the many expanding towns of Erie County

2.2 NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE SETTING

2.2.1 LANDFORM

The landscapes of the Buffalo-Niagara region were largely shaped some 17,000 years ago, following the latest of the glacial periods that covered much of the continent. As the glaciers receded across the region, they created two vast inland lakes, glacial Lake Iroquois and glacial Lake Tonawanda. The glacial meltwaters receded, leaving Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, surrounded by flat lake plains, and a series of escarpments cutting across these plains. Erie County lies within two distinct topographic areas: the Great Lakes Plain along the lakeshore, and throughout the northern half of the County, and the higher Allegheny Plateau in the south-central and southeastern areas. The Great Lakes Plain is divided by several widely spaced escarpments, including the Onondaga Escarpment, a 50'- to 80'- high ridge which can be seen in Erie County generally following Route 5 from the Buffalo City line through Amherst and Clarence. The escarpment separates the Huron Plain to the north from the Erie Plain to the south.

The Erie Plain extends to the Portage Escarpment in the south, a 150' to 250' beach ridge that delineates the northern limit of the Allegheny Plateau. The Allegheny Plateau itself provides a definitive terrain characterized by steep hills and wide valleys, some of which achieve a vertical elevation change of 300' to 400'. Many of the parks in the County System takes advantage of these unique natural features.

2.2.2 RIVERS AND STREAMS

Erie County lies within the Lake Erie/Niagara River drainage basin, and includes a number of major streams:
- Northern Erie County- Tonawanda Creek, and its major tributaries of Ellicott- Ransom, Black, Beeman, Gott and Murder Creeks;
- Central Erie County – Buffalo River, Cayuga Creek, Cazenovia Creek;
- Southern Erie County – Eighteen Mile Creek, Big Sister Creek, Cattaraugus Creek (which forms the southern County boundary) and its major tributary of Clear Creek

The headwaters of several of the major creek systems originate on the Allegheny Plateau and the Onondaga Escarpment, giving rise to dramatic gorges and waterfalls as the creeks flow toward Lake Erie and the Niagara River. Many of these natural heritage features are protected within the County park system. The valley systems are primarily forested in their upper reaches. Through the Huron Plain, which is generally low lying, poorly draining and flat, river systems are characterized by broad floodplains and numerous wetlands.

2.2.3 CLIMATE

The climate of Erie County is profoundly influenced by the presence of Lake Erie. The climate is moist-continental, having cold temperatures with infrequent, intense precipitation in summer. In Buffalo summer temperature averages 69 degrees, with an average maximum of 78 degrees and a record high of 98 degrees; during winter, temperatures average 26 degrees, with an average minimum of 20 degrees and a record low of –20 degrees. Lake Erie provides a moderating effect on temperatures throughout the year. In the Allegheny Plateau area of Erie County, annual snowfalls vary from 120" to over 140". In contrast, snowfall in northern Erie County averages 70" to 80". About 60% of the snowfall occurs during November, December and January – a fact directly attributable to a relatively warm, open lake combined with cold southwesterly winds, which produce "lake effect" snowfalls.

2.2.4 SIGNIFICANT HABITAT

Although a detailed natural resource inventory has not been undertaken specifically for Erie County, the County parks were historically acquired to protect tracts of lands with significant or scenic natural features, particularly those associated with the creek valley systems, and their associated forested areas. Other sources provide some insight into the terrestrial and aquatic habitat make-up of these systems, and the potential significance of the natural environment areas that are included within the Erie County parks.

Areas of significance that have been identified within Erie County, include the Lake Erie shoreline and Niagara River, which are the Region's most significant natural resources, supporting the Great Lakes fishery, and migratory waterfowl. The Niagara River is renowned as the First Globally Significant Important Bird Area and a prime bird flyway corridor. Linked to the Great Lakes system, Eighteen Mile Creek is an important migratory corridor for songbirds, and contains a diversity of plants and wildlife, including rare and uncommon species. The Cattaraugus Creek and tributaries is the most important Lake Erie tributary for the salmonid fishery within New York State, supporting both spawning and habitat.

A number of wetlands associated with the river systems, and having significant resident and migrant wildlife habitat have been identified in Tonawanda, Lackawanna, Amherst, Cheektowaga, and Buffalo. The most significant in the region being the Tifft Nature Preserve, on the Buffalo River, and the Klydel Wetlands, in North Tonawanda.

2.2.5 CULTURAL HERITAGE

In addition to the historically and naturally significant Erie County Park system, there is also a wealth of other cultural and heritage attractions throughout Erie County, from the urban core to the rural villages and remote countryside. The City of Buffalo has long been the cultural "heart" of the region and includes historical parks and significant architecture, world-renowned arts, and a lively theater district, to mention just a few of the attractions. The area is also home to a strong network of colleges and universities, including the State University of New York at Buffalo. The region is well-known for its professional sports teams including the Buffalo Bills and the Buffalo Sabres.

A partial listing of major regional cultural and heritage attractions is listed in the sidebar at the right.

The Rose Garden at Delaware Park

The Chautauqua Institution Amphitheater

CULTURAL AND HERITAGE ATTRACTIONS

Highlighted cultural and heritage attractions within the City of Buffalo include:
- *Historical Olmsted System of Parks and Parkways*
- *Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens*
- *Key Underground Railroad sites, including the Michigan Street Baptist Church and the Freedom memorial at Broderick Park*
- *Notable buildings by HH Richardson, Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan*
- *Historic Grain Elevators*
- *Albright Knox Art Gallery*
- *Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic site*
- *Buffalo Zoo*
- *Canalside*
- *Historic Allentown Neighborhood*
- *Buffalo and Erie County Naval and Military Park*
- *Darwin Martin House and Complex*
- *Kleinhans Music Hall*
- *Sheas Buffalo Theater*
- *Forest Lawn Cemetery*

A few other major attractions within Erie County include:
- *Historic Erie Canal tours*
- *Our Lady of Victory Basilica, Lackawanna*
- *Graycliff (Frank Lloyd Wright), Evans*
- *Roycroft Campus, East Aurora*

Major cultural and heritage attractions outside of Erie County, but still within a short drive include:
- *Old Fort Niagara, Niagara County*
- *Artpark, Niagara County*
- *Niagara Reservation State Park (Olmsted Park), Niagara County*
- *Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua County*
- *Olde Fort Erie, Ontario*

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OVERALL SYSTEM FRAMEWORK

3.1   ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COUNTY PARK SYSTEM

Since the establishment in 1925 of the County Parks Commission, and the subsequent acquisition and development of the four original County parks, the underlying purpose of the parks system has been consistent – providing recreation opportunities in naturalistic settings on a county-wide basis, and preserving open space and unique natural features that are beyond the means of local governments to provide or maintain.

For the most part, the evolution of the County Park System demonstrates these objectives, and the parks highlight the area's significant scenic and natural features. The original parks of Chestnut Ridge, Emery, Ellicott Creek, and Como Lake were strategically located to take advantage of the area's unique forests and waterways. The acquisition of Akron Falls Park, with its dramatic waterfalls, and the later addition of Eighteen Mile Creek Park, Hunters Creek and Franklin Gulf lands, preserved significant features credited by the dramatic topography of the Onondaga and Portage Escarpments. The acquisition of Wendt Beach in the 1960s and Bennett Beach Park in the 1980s provided for waterfront recreation and ensured the retention of significant beach and dune environments in the public interest.
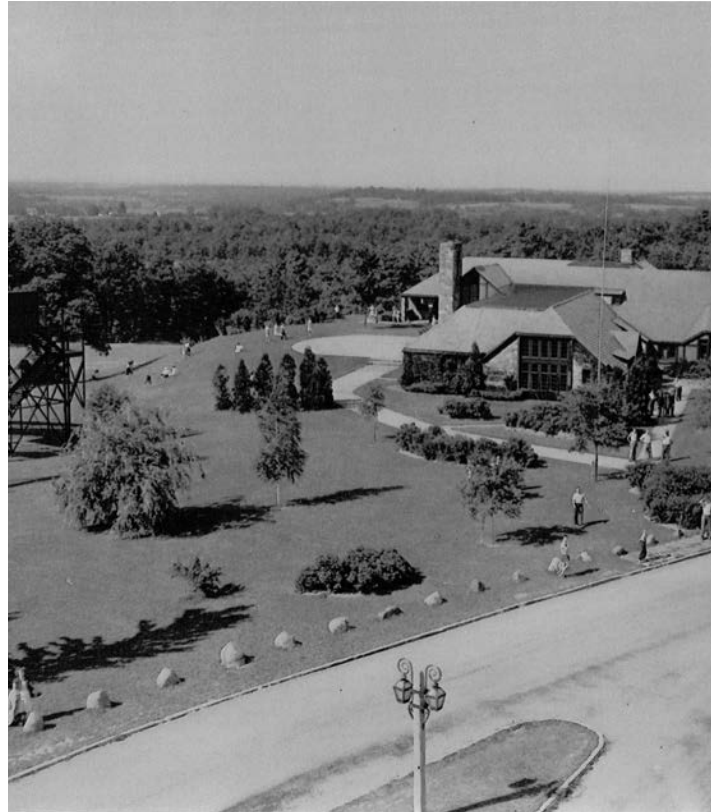
Historic photograph of the Chestnut Ridge Casino (Image Credit: Chestnut Ridge Conservancy)

Sledding at Chestnut Ridge during the winter is one of the most popular activities at the park

At the same time as the park system was developing, the County Parks System was acquiring land and reforesting substantial areas of abandoned farmland, for timber harvesting and conservation purposes. The forest lots represent almost one third of the County's land holdings today which are primarily located in the southeastern portion of the County.

Over the years, as urbanization of the outlying County areas has taken place, increasing demands for recreation activities has led to the addition of a variety of facilities within the County Park System. In parks such as Como Lake and Ellicott Creek, passive recreation areas and open space have been replaced by sports fields, tennis courts, playgrounds and other facilities, with extensive roadways and parking to serve them. The County Parks also include such specialized facilities as a ski hill (Emery), golf courses (Grover Cleveland, Elma Meadows), and toboggan

chutes (Chestnut Ridge), along with sports fields that are used by local community groups. Although several additional County Park sites were acquired through the 1970's to address the increasing population, these parks remain primarily undeveloped as natural forested lots, with the exception of a few trail systems.

The Erie County Park System today is a substantial network that includes developed parkland, waterfront properties, and extensive conservation lands. The amassed land-base is impressive, as is the range, quality, and uniqueness of the natural, scenic and cultural heritage features that the sites encompass. Many are comparable to State Parks. The parkland and conservation lands are well distributed throughout the County, and the System is well utilized by residents throughout the seasons. As a system, the Erie County Parks have the potential to be marketable as a tourist destination, providing that significant resources are preserved and maintained.

Ski Lodge at Emery Park

Ruins at Ellicott Island, Ellicott Creek Park

Shoreline conditions at Seneca Bluffs

Shoreline Trail at Isle View Park

PARK NAME	LOCATION	TOTAL PARK ACRES
Akron Falls	Town of Newstead/Village of Akron	154
Bailey Peninsula	City of Buffalo	5
Bennett Beach	Town of Evans	52
Black Rock Canal	City of Buffalo	8
Boston Forest	Town of Boston	480
Botanical Gardens	City of Buffalo	12
Chestnut Ridge	Town of Orchard Park	1,151
Como Lake	Town/Village of Lancaster	524
Eighteen Mile Creek	Town of Hamburg	466
Ellicott Creek	Town of Tonawanda	165
Elma Meadows	Town of Elma	214
Emery	Town of Aurora	457
Franklin Gulf	Town of Eden/Town of North Collins	631
Grover Cleveland	City of Buffalo	111
Headwaters	Town of Concord	223
Hunters Creek	Town of Wales	756
Isle View	Town of Tonawanda	39
Lakeview Pocket Preserve	Town of Evans	9
Red Jacket	City of Buffalo	12
Riverwalk section of the Shoreline Trail	City of Buffalo Town & City of Tonawanda	10
Scoby Dam	Town of Concord	27
Seneca Bluffs	City of Buffalo	20
Sprague Brook	Town of Concord/Town of Sardinia	967
Times Beach	City of Buffalo	56
Tow Path	City of Buffalo	5
Wendt Beach	Town of Evans	164
Forest Lot #1	Town of Sardinia	200
Forest Lot #2	Town of Sardinia	837
Forest Lot #3	Town of Sardinia	323
Forest Lot #4	Town of Holland	216
Forest Lot #5	Town of Holland	263
Forest Lot #6	Town of Holland	99
Forest Lot #7	Town of Holland	92
Forest Lot #8	Town of Concord	64
Forest Lot #9	Town of Concord	274
Forest Lot #11	Town of Sardinia	93
Forest Lot #12	Town of Sardinia	98
Forest Lot #13	Town of Concord	378
		9,875

The County has continued to acquire parkland, including several smaller properties along the Buffalo River, an 8-acre parcel on Lake Erie called the Lakeview Pocket Preserve, and the 223-acre "Headwaters" conservation property in the Town of Concord.

Past Master Plans have recommended substantial parkland improvements, additional recreation facilities, and new parks development. The current conditions do not warrant substantial new development. Over the past ten to twenty years town parks and school complexes have been developed to meet the demands of active recreation. Fiscal resources, however, have not kept pace with the operational and capital requirements of the existing developed parkland, and significant investments are now needed to maintain and protect the park infrastructure, particularly the heritage structures. The forests and natural environment areas in the developed parks are in need of appropriate management to ensure their sustainability.

At the same time, recreation opportunities have increased at the local level, as suburban areas have developed. In keeping with contemporary design standards, new community areas include neighborhood walk-to parks, with facilities for young families. While larger town / village parks are being developed extensively for active playing fields, to accommodate organized sports leagues, national and regional trends show a growing interest in nature-based and non-structured recreation activities that support both the Baby Boomer and Millennial populations. Cycling and walking rank within the top recreation activities. Mountain biking, snowmobiling, and other linear trails-based activities have become increasingly more popular and are supported by active national and regional organizations. As recreational trends evolve the County Park System will need to periodically re-evaluate certain uses and functions.

3.2 MISSION AND GOALS

It is appropriate and necessary that the County revisit the mandate of the County Park System to ensure that it continues to fulfill its original objectives, while remaining a viable and sustainable entity for future generations. Based on the County Park System's historic role in recreation service delivery, a Mission Statement was affirmed. Accordingly, the Goals and Objectives of the 2003 Master Plan were reviewed for their appropriateness and refined to be relevant to this mandate.

Objective of this Master Plan were to review and update existing park concept plans, and determine recommendations and upgrades for all parks. In determining an appropriate level of development the parks classification system developed in 2003 was referred to as it defined the role and function of existing parkland.

The backshore sandy environment at Bennett Beach Park

The eternal flame at Chestnut Ridge Park

3.2.1 MISSION STATEMENT

Through the study process conducted in 2003, the following Mission Statement was affirmed, and it still remains relevant today:

The Erie County Park System has traditionally been positioned to fill a niche in the regional parks and recreation framework. Specifically the County park system has emphasized the provision of recreation activities and facilities in natural environment areas as an alternative to localized park settings.

The role of the County Park System shall be:

- **To provide residents opportunities to enjoy recreational pursuits in natural settings on a year-round basis;**
- **To protect regionally important areas of scenic, environmental, and cultural heritage significance;**
- **To contribute to the economic vitality of the County, and;**
- **To promote public awareness of the resources available within the park system.**

3.2.2 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The 2003 Master Plan identified seven goals for the Erie County Park System that represent general principles, along with (thirty-one) supporting objectives, that provide detailed guidelines on park standards, physical improvements, operations and maintenance, and administrative functions. The Parks System may now be better served by a new policy framework that reflects contemporary recreation trends, the significant natural and cultural resources that are contained within the park system, and the values that will ensure their protection, enhancement and sustainability.

3.3   PARK CLASSIFICATIONS

Recognizing the diversity and variety of uses within the County parks, a park classification system was developed in 2003 for the Erie County Parks System. The classifications served as a guide to the ongoing management and use of the existing parks and open space lands. It is recognized that within the existing park system, parks may share some of the characteristics of other park categories.

The following park and open space classifications were developed:

- **HERITAGE PARKS**
- **WATERFRONT PARKS** (Destination Parks, "Windows on the Water" and Linkages)
- **SPECIAL PURPOSE PARKS** (golf, camping)
- **CONSERVATION PARKS**
- **FOREST MANAGEMENT AREAS**

3.3.1   HERITAGE PARKS

Heritage parks are represented by the four original 'County Parks' and Akron Falls Park:

Chestnut Ridge, Emery Park, Como Lake, Ellicott Creek (c. 1925) and Akron Falls (constructed as a Village Park in late 1920s - acquired by County c. 1947), are examples of integrated sites with significant scenic, natural and historic significance. Each of the parks has unique, man-made structures of unmatched historical character and beauty, constructed between 1935 and 1943 as part of the WPA (Work Progress Administration) projects. These oldest parks deserve consideration on the "National Register of Historic Places."

ROLE AND FUNCTION

- Primarily natural environment and picnic parks with a focus on environmental systems and cultural heritage preservation and passive recreation.

FACILITIES

- Conservation lands and natural areas;
- Emphasis on passive recreational activities, such as hiking/walking trails, strolling paths, open space, picnic shelters, and limited ancillary facilities such as
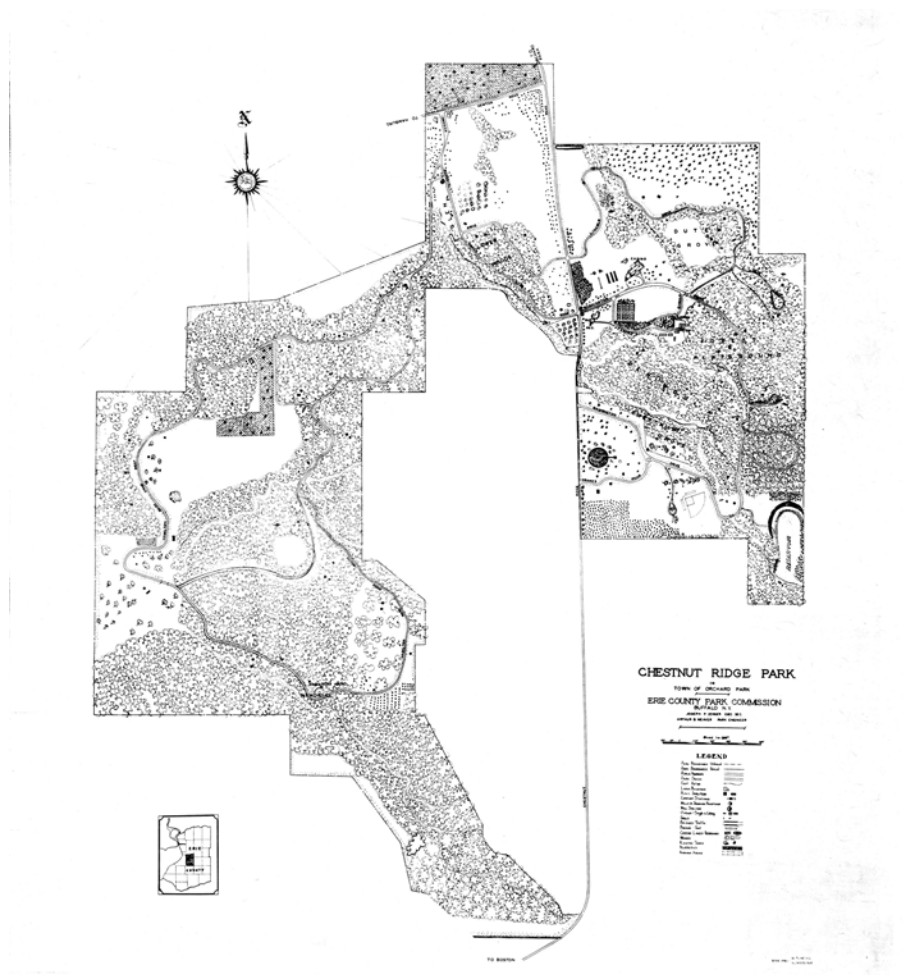
Historic 1940s master plan of Chestnut Ridge Park

Sunset at Isle View Park over the Niagara River

playgrounds and informal play fields.
- Equestrian trails where existing and not compromising the natural environment.
- Support facilities include Casino buildings, shelters, comfort stations, maintenance buildings, etc.

EXISTING MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- Maintaining the integrity of the natural environment through conservation and land management practices;
- Preserving and/or restoring the original historic park structures;
- Promoting nature appreciation through maintenance of trails system for low impact uses;
- Consolidating or eliminating park facilities, for example, simplifying park circulation routes or removing underused active recreation facilities, where appropriate.
- Foster partnership efforts to augment the current Parks offering and opportunities as well as for maintaining, preserving, and restoring the WPA Era and historic structures.

3.3.2   WATERFRONT PARKS

The waterfront parks are a key element of the County Parks System, and include the significant sites of Wendt Beach, Bennett Beach and Isle View Park as well as Black Rock Canal Park, Tow Path Park, and the Shoreline Trail system.

ROLE AND FUNCTION

- Waterfront recreation;
- Natural and cultural heritage preservation.

FACILITIES

- Water-based and beach-front recreation amenities suited to the site's conditions, special features and ecology;
- Picnic areas, trails, ancillary facilities such as parking, washrooms and concession, to support waterfront recreation uses.

EXISTING MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- Maintaining the integrity of the natural environment through conservation and land management practices
- Restoring historic buildings.
- Consolidating park facilities, e.g. simplifying park circulation routes, removing/relocating active recreation facilities.
- Foster partnership efforts to augment the current Parks offering and opportunities.
- Facilitate public access and views to the lake and riverfront –understanding that a direct shoreline trail may not be feasible throughout, however a roadside trail with occasional "windows" punched through to the lake and river is very possible;
- Provide relief in the urban fabric.

LINKAGES

- Contribute to a continuous connected public waterfront; Isle View Park, Tow Path, Riverwalk, etc. with connections to other regional systems such as Ellicott Creek Trail, Scajaquada Trail, etc.
- Trail viewing areas and other waterfront related amenities, subject to environmental considerations, i.e. boat launch, fishing pier.

Beautiful fall color at Elma Meadows Park

Shoreline conditions at Seneca Bluffs Natural Habitat Park

3.3.3   SPECIAL PURPOSE PARKS

Parks with a special purpose, based on unique characteristics, or fulfilling a specific function within the recreation delivery system, Elma Meadows Golf Course, Grover Cleveland Golf Course, Sprague Brook Park Camping Sites, etc.

ROLE AND FUNCTION

- Should meet the mandate of the County Parks system for the protection of natural and cultural heritage resources, and provision of recreation activities in natural settings;
- Should provide alternative to local recreation resources.

FACILITIES

- Varies according to purpose; camping, golf, etc.

EXISTING MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- Varies according to purpose; camping, golf, etc.
- Foster partnership efforts to augment the current Parks offering and opportunities.

3.3.4   CONSERVATION PARKS

Formally undeveloped parks, these lands are to generally remain in a natural state. The primary purpose of these sites is for conservation of the natural environment, and nature-based education and recreation activities; Hunter's Creek, Eighteen Mile Creek, Franklin Gulf, Scoby Dam, Boston Forest and the Buffalo River Natural Habitat Parks. These parks were originally purchased by Erie County to provide future recreational areas as population grew and demand warranted.

ROLE AND FUNCTION

- Management and enhancement of environmental resources, i.e. forest management, fisheries and other wildlife enhancement;
- Self-directed, resource-oriented outdoor recreation that complements the unique and natural features of each site, without compromising environmental integrity, for example, fishing, nature enjoyment, trail uses.

FACILITIES

- Conservation lands and natural areas;
- Trails of a type suited to park environment, with hierarchy based on types of use and skill level;
- Low-impact supporting facilities such as trailheads, modest comfort facilities, informal parking areas, information/interpretive kiosks, directional/way finding signage;
- Modest facilities for outdoor education programming, such as an open-air shelter.

EXISTING MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- Protection of important natural and cultural heritage features;
- Identifying appropriate use areas and trail routes;
- Encourage multi-use trails wherever possible and appropriate to serve the greatest number of users; separate trail uses where necessary if conflict is unavoidable;
- Perimeter landscape buffers in appropriate locations;
- Trails management and safety measures;
- Foster partnership efforts to augment the current Parks offering and opportunities, including trail building, maintenance and patrolling;
- Maintain the "Carry-in / Carry-out" trash policy within these scenic and natural park settings.

3.3.5   FOREST MANAGEMENT AREAS

Forest lots comprised primarily of plantation forests.

ROLE AND FUNCTION

- Management and enhancement of resources through Forest Stand Improvements and promotion of wildlife habitat;
- Resource management for educational opportunities

FACILITIES

- Modest facilities for resource management and/or education programming, Sugar Shanty, Sawmill, warming shelters, informal parking lots or bus drop-offs, open-air shelters;
- Access roads for resource management purposes.

EXISTING MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- Maximizing resource management opportunities while preserving habitat and environment, and long term sustainability;
- Identifying opportunities for education and interpretation programs that focus on resource management;
- Foster partnership efforts to augment the current Parks offering and opportunities. This includes a focus on Environmental-based and Conservation-based organizations that will preserve and enhance these natural settings.

3.4 PARK SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

Erie County has a wide network of parks, ranging from undeveloped parks with few if any "built" amenities, to destination parks, such as Chestnut Ridge Park, that contain a wide variety of facilities. As part of this study, 20 parks, 5 habitat parks, 13 forestry lots, and 2 multi-use trails were examined to assess their existing conditions. The level of assessment varied between the 40 sites.

A detailed assessment was conducted at the 5 heritage parks and at Sprague Brook. Less detailed assessments were conducted at the County's golf courses, undeveloped parks, habitat parks, forestry lots and multi-use trail systems. For the most part, these properties have only very basic features, such as rudimentary roadways or trails, and do not require the same level of management and maintenance that the developed parks require.

Data collected in the field was categorized by Feature Type, and a Feature Subcategory including:

- **Infrastructure:**
  - *Bridge: includes roadway and pedestrian bridges*
  - *Culvert*
  - *Parking*
  - *Signage*
  - *Other: miscellaneous features not associated with the above subcategories*

- **Recreation:**
  - *Athletic Field: sports facility for a sport or athletic activity played on non-paved surfaces, including baseball, softball, and soccer*
  - *Court Sport (Paved): paved sports fields, includes tennis, basketball, and shuffleboard*
  - *Disc Golf*
  - *Playground: play equipment and play structures, including pre-school and school age climbing structures, swings, and associated play surfaces, edging and fencing*
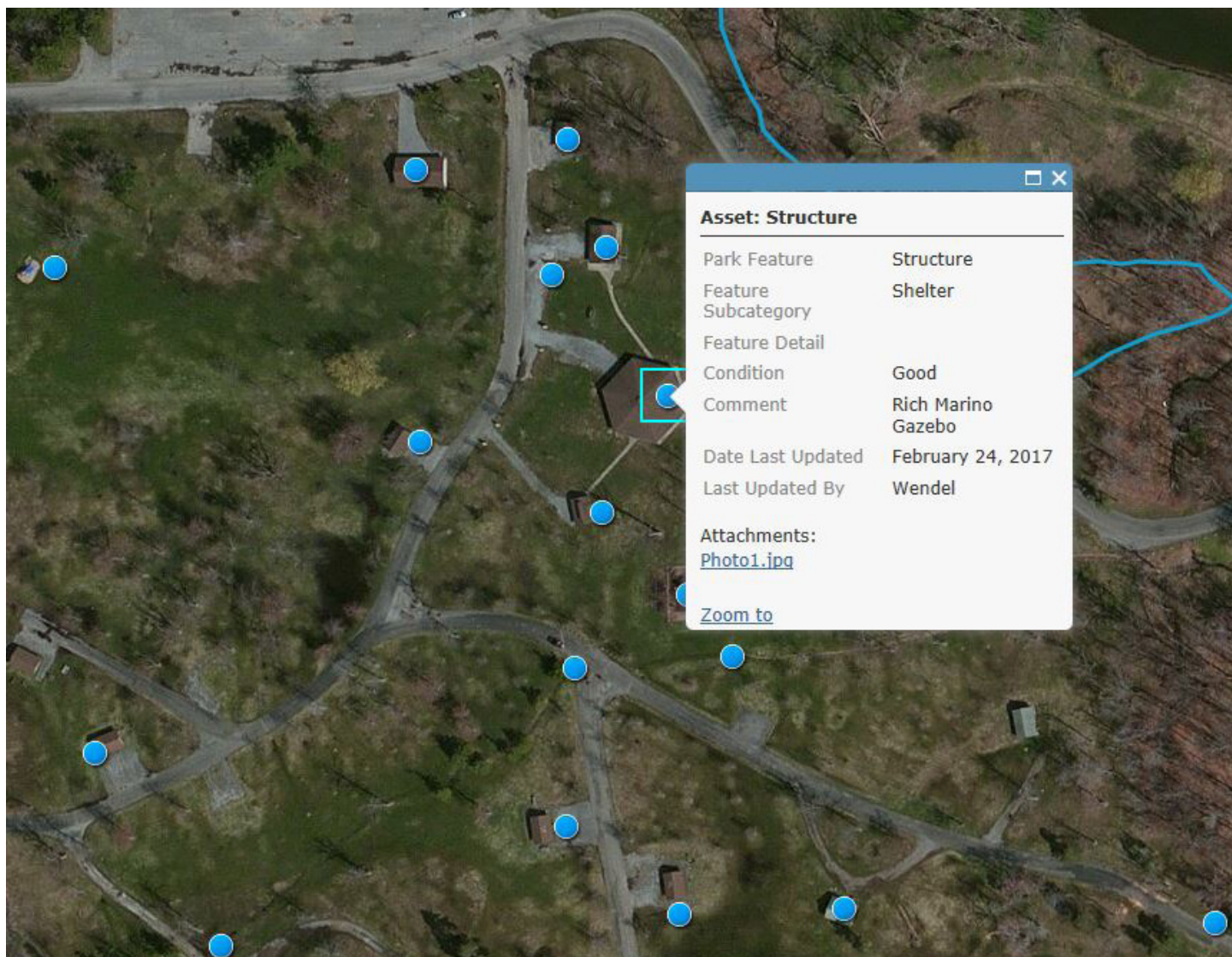
Example of physical data assessment at Como Lake Park

- ○ *Other: miscellaneous features not associated with the above subcategories*
- **Structure:**
  - ○ *Building: enclosed buildings open to the public, such as concession stands, lodges and club houses as well as structures used for support services not open to the public*
  - ○ *Comfort Station*
  - ○ *Historic Structure*
  - ○ *Shelter: buildings used as picnic shelters, generally open-air structures consisting of floor, roof and roof supports*
  - ○ *Other: miscellaneous features not associated with the above subcategories*
- **Trail**
  - ○ *Sign*
  - ○ *Trailhead*
  - ○ *Other: miscellaneous features not associated with the above subcategories.*

In many cases, the database contains additional information about specific items. Photographs of most features are included.

Items in the database were given a general ranking as to their overall condition (Good, Fair, or Poor). If fixtures or building elements were associated with that feature, those items were also rated. Items in generally good shape, showing no major deficiencies, were rated as good. Generally, items rated as good do not require major investment other than routine maintenance, although some small or isolated repairs may be needed. Items that were rated as fair have evidence of damage or wear, or are in need of more significant repairs. They are generally usable and do not have serious deficiencies, but are in need of some investment. Elements with significant damage, deficiencies or repair needs were rated as poor. For items rated poor, required repairs or improvements are more extensive, and may warrant replacement rather than repair.
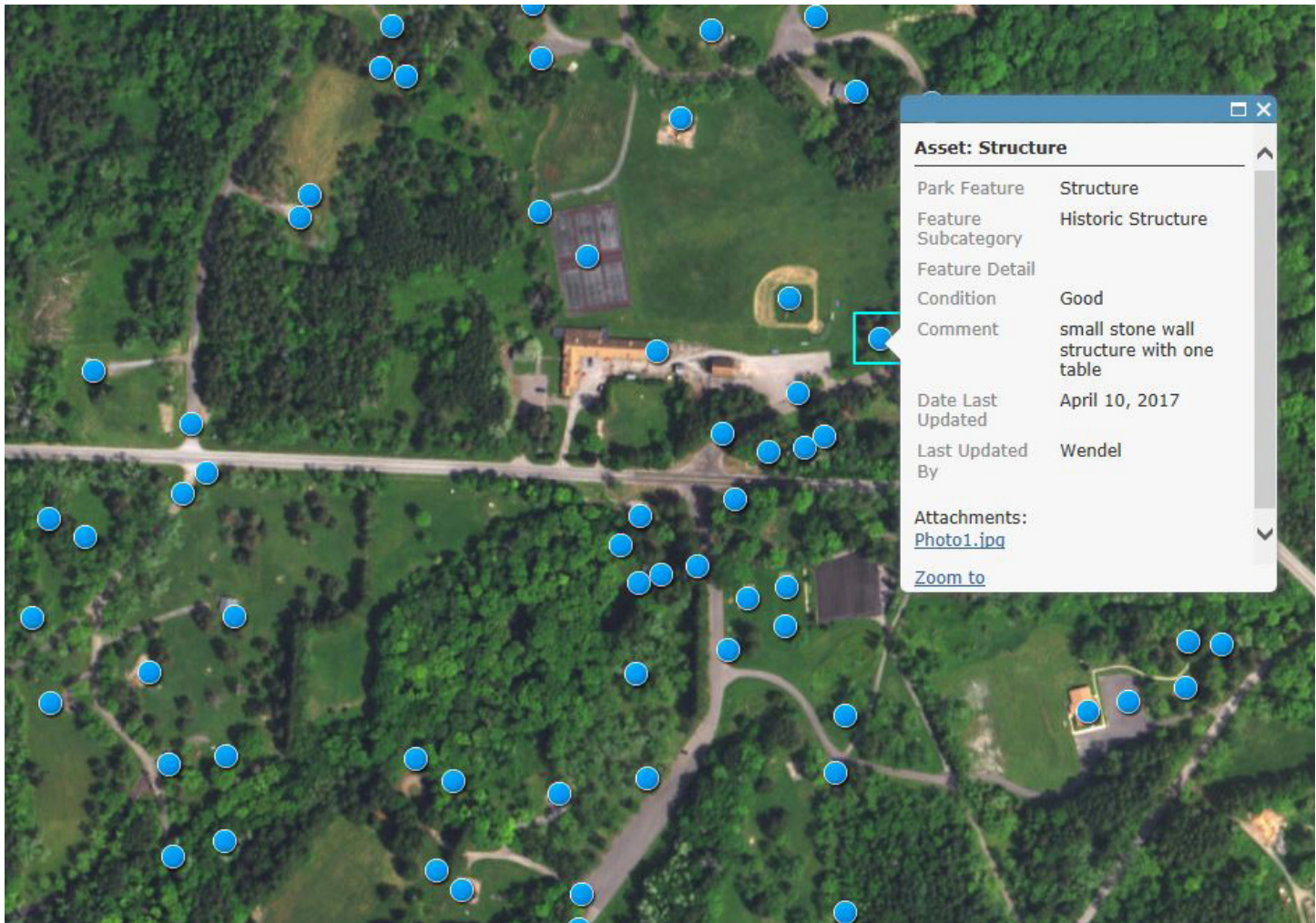
Data collection prepared and completed in the field. The image above is from Emery Park

The database provides Erie County with a valuable tool for parks planning. It provides a centralized, complete picture of the County Parks, and their condition. As repairs or changes to facilities are made, new features added or certain features removed, the database can be updated, and the date of the changes noted. Over time, therefore, the County will be able to monitor and reflect changes to the entire Park System.

3.4.1   OVERVIEW OF INVENTORY

Each of the parks was categorized according to its primary function. The Parks Classifications are discussed in greater detail in Section 3.4, but to summarize here, the inventory contains four separate classifications of parks.

- **Heritage parks:** Chestnut Ridge, Como Lake, Ellicott Creek, and Emery Parks are the four original County Parks, established in 1926. Akron Falls was added to the system in 1947. These five Heritage Parks contain many historic features, such as unique historic buildings, WPA-era stone walls or other structures. They tend to be larger parks, and have a variety of amenities and features.
- **Waterfront parks:** their location and function relates to waterfront recreational activities, although this category encompasses a variety of different parks, ranging from the Black Rock Canal Park, a small, limited- purpose park, to the larger beach parks in Evans.

- **Special Purpose parks:** these parks are noted for a particular strength. Grover Cleveland and Elma Meadows Parks are primarily golf courses, while Sprague Brook is associated with its camping facilities. The Botanical Gardens, although not included in this inventory; its primary function as a conservatory for rare and unique plant species, would be categorized as a Special Purpose park.
- **Conservation parks and Forest Management Areas:** these parks have not been included in the inventory, due to their undeveloped natural character.

The parks range in size from Black Rock Canal Park, which is just over 1 acre, to Chestnut Ridge, which is the largest park in the Erie County system at 1,151 acres. The average size of the parks included in the inventory is approximately 270 acres. The five Heritage parks tend to be larger, while the newer parks tend to be on the smaller side. The County maintains a total inventory of nearly 10,000 acres, but most of this inventory is concentrated in forest management areas or undeveloped parks.

Sprague Brook is a multi-purpose park located in the Towns of Concord and Sardinia

View over the water at Time Beach Nature Preserve; Owned by the City of Buffalo, and maintained by Erie County

3.4.2 CONCLUSION

The Erie County Parks System consists of many diverse landscape types and features, whose condition varies item by item. The inventory prepared will be a valuable tool to help determine where improvements should be targeted, and to track changes as these improvements are made. In general, the Heritage Parks, which represent the most prominent and historic parks in the system, are the most in need of upgrades, and the buildings and structures in these parks are most likely to be in fair or poor condition or in need of repairs.

OVERALL SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. COUNTY ROLE IN RECREATION SERVICES DELIVERY

Over the years, the County Park System has evolved and changed as the population has shifted from the city to the suburbs, and as recreational trends and demands have changed. At one point, the County Parks were pressured to provide all types of recreation, as they served as a gateway for much of the County population. However, more recently, more towns and school districts have developed sports complexes and active recreation facilities, and therefore many of these similar facilities in the County Parks have become obsolete. In a way, this has been a welcome change to the nature and scenic ecological landscapes in many of the County Parks. Now, more passive uses are becoming the norm as the trends towards environmental and natural spaces increase in popularity.

That said, the County should therefore focus on its core services, with an emphasis on the provision of passive, nature-oriented recreation, and continue or expand "sports" functions if there is a partner (sports group, local municipality) that brings funding and long-term operational management and maintenance. The provision of active facilities should only be undertaken in areas where there is no negative impact, either visually or physically on the parks natural areas or heritage resources. Friends of Ellicott Island Bark Park is an example of a successful collaborative arrangement for the use of Ellicott Island which has turned into a very popular destination for dog owners, although it has resulted in severe shoreline erosion.
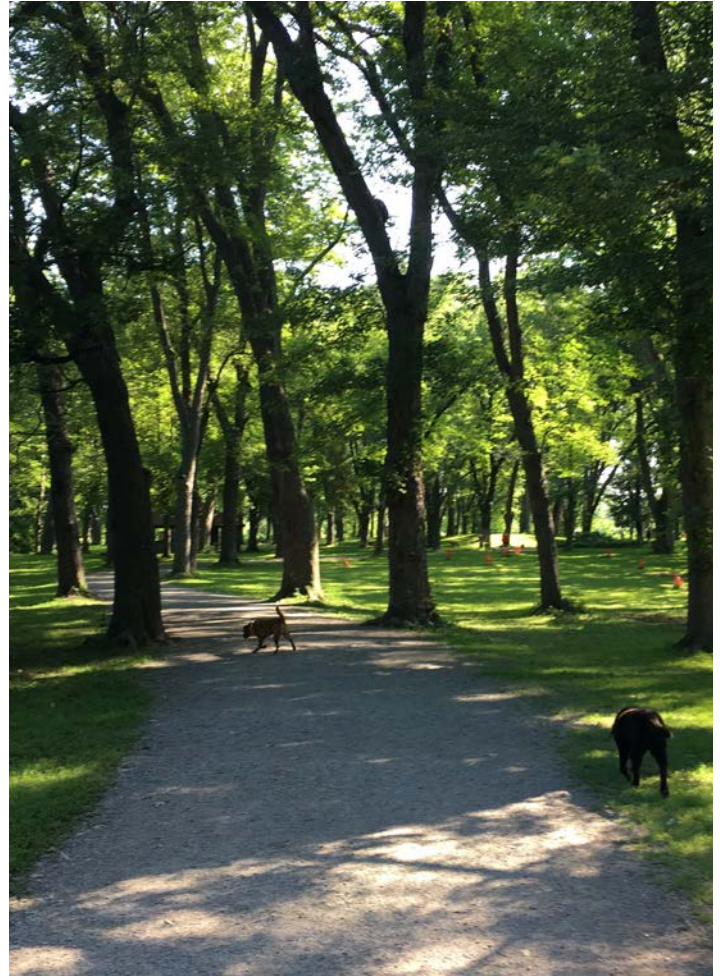
Ellicott Island at Ellicott Creek Park is an example of a successful collaborative partnership with Friends of Ellicott Island Bark Park

Environmental damage to the surrounding wooded area at Chestnut Ridge Park due to foot traffic and popular usage of the disc golf course

4.2 OPEN SPACE SYSTEM PLANNING

Erie County encompasses significant natural environment features, including geological formations, waterways, and forested areas. Many of these are included within the park system. The Erie County Park System, in conjunction with State and municipally owned lands, waterway systems and other natural areas provide the framework for a connected system of greenways, trails corridors, parks and open space lands that support natural environment protection and recreation purposes.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYSOPRHP), have recently undertaken the 2016 update of the New York State Open Space Conservation Plan. First prepared in 1990, the Plan identifies policies and actions for conservation of open space lands, significant natural areas, and cultural heritage sites throughout the State. In recognition of growing public support for the conservation of open space and the underlying principles of environmental and heritage preservation, the 2016 Plan sets a strategy for working collaboratively and in partnership with landowners, private organizations, the federal government and local governments to identify and protect a cohesive framework of open space. Open space is defined as including agricultural lands, forests, wetlands, undeveloped shorelines, public parks, water bodies, and certain archaeological and heritage features. The Plan recognizes that conservation does not necessarily mean acquisition by public agencies.

Cattaraugus Creek at Scoby Dam Park

2016 New York State Open Space Conservation Plan - Goals and Principles

Setting Conservation Goals

- *Protect water quality*
- *Provide accessible, quality, outdoor recreation*
- *Protect wildlife habitats for diversity and the sustainability of flora and fauna*
- *Improve the quality of life and the health of our communities*
- *Maintain critical natural resource-based industries e.g., agriculture and forest products*
- *Address climate change through forest, wetland and riparian area stewardship, ecosystem protection, urban and community forestry, and community planning*
- *Provide places for education and research*
- *Protect and enhance scenic, historic and cultural resources*

Following Conservation Principles

- *Work with partners to establish and achieve conservation goals*
- *Deal fairly and openly with property owners and work cooperatively with local governments and citizens*
- *Identify and expand the variety of conservation tools, methods, strategies and actions available to communities and individuals for protecting a variety of open space resources*
- *Establish conservation priorities through objective measurement of urban and rural land conservation needs and broad-based citizen opinion*
- *Establish priorities for state action to conserve specific open space parcels and cultural resources*
- *Identify future funding needs and stewardship expenses*
- *Strive to combat sprawl through smart growth planning at the local, regional and state level*
- *Obtain meaningful involvement from the environmental justice community in the development of plan priorities*

(Excerpt from the 2016 New York State Open Conservation Plan)

The Open Space Conservation Plan identifies regional priority projects, which are deemed deserving of immediate attention from the NYSDEC, NYSOPRHP, and their partners, based on environmental significance, land use patterns, and recreational and cultural resource preservation needs. The following are identified conservation projects, and their attributes in Erie County. Several of the County Parks are located in proximity to these features.

- **Tonawanda Creek Watershed –** This project would serve to protect one of the major tributaries of the Niagara River in Genesee, Erie and Niagara counties. Ellicott Creek Park and Akron Falls Park are located within the watershed.
- **Buffalo River Watershed –** This project will serve to protect the Buffalo River corridor as well as it's three primary tributaries: Cayuga Creek, Cazenovia Creek and Buffalo Creek.
- **Lake Erie Tributary Gorges –** This project seeks to acquire public access to these unique ecological and geological areas. Areas of interest in Erie County include Eighteen Mile Creek Gorge and Cazenovia Creek Gorge in the Towns of West Seneca and Elma.
- **Niagara River Watershed –** Several priority areas were identified. Protect and expand core forest areas located within five upland sub-basins of the watershed: Eighteen Mile Creek, Buffalo River, Buffalo Creek, Cayuga Creek and Upper Tonawanda Creek.

- **Trails and Trailways –** Protect existing linear corridors and provide for acquisition or easement of existing trails and trailways for additional undeveloped linkage to connect existing trails. These trails should promote compatible, multiple uses to meet public demand for recreational trail use.
- **Urban Wetlands –** Urban wetlands, because of their size, habitat type and quality, provide resident and migration habitat for wildlife, which would otherwise be absent from urban landscapes. Valuable wildlife viewing and outdoor teaching opportunities are obtained from these natural communities, including the Klydel and Tifft wetlands.

It will be important for the County to assist in the identification of significant open space lands within Erie County that contribute to a regional open space system, and to work collaboratively with the State and local municipalities on a comprehensive policy framework that supports open space conservation. The County should take a leadership role in coordinating the services provided when jurisdictions overlap. This is particularly important along the Niagara River, Buffalo River, Lake Erie and other major river or creek corridors such as Eighteen Mile Creek, where the State also has interests. Leadership should be exercised where there is a recreation resource of regional or national significance, like the intra-regional trail systems (the Erie Canalway Trail, the Seaway Trail, waterfront or river-based greenways), and ecological corridors such as the Niagara River, Buffalo River and Lake Erie shoreline.

Eighteen Mile Creek is one of the many significant waterways which traverse through the Parks

4.3 PARKS MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

To meet the County Park's mission and mandate, the focus of park operations and management should be on:

- *Preservation and restoration of cultural heritage features (4.3.1);*
- *Preservation and restoration of the natural systems (4.3.2);*
- *Parks improvements to address safety and liability issues, upgrade park appearances, and enhance the park user experience (4.3.3);*
- *Environmentally responsible parks management (4.3.4);*
- *Improving and maintaining safety with all playground systems (4.3.5);*

Each park needs a management strategy that is tailored to the specific park, its Park Classification, and fits into the overall focuses above. To ensure the preservation and restoration of the natural and cultural heritage features contained within each park, the management of the parks should be based on a "zoning" system that recognizes the carrying capacity of the park and clearly identifies: significant resource protection areas (both cultural and natural), areas for enhancement of ecological functions, and existing or potential facilities development areas.

In support of an environmentally-based park management system, and to ensure the preservation of the significant buildings and structures, there is a need to adopt more contemporary maintenance practices, and provide additional training for staff to develop skills to restore and rebuild declining facilities.

- Ecological management practices would include changing the mowing regimes, establishing re-naturalization strategies and improving aquatic habitats (e.g. rehabilitating open water ponds, establishing natural riparian corridors), and limiting use of herbicides and pesticides.

4.3.1 PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE FEATURES

The Erie County heritage parks include a large number of excellent examples of WPA Era Park structures, including the casinos, pump shelters, and picnic shelters. Constructed with thoughtful design, local materials, and precise craftsmanship, the very unique and historic stone structures are significant for their association with the history of the County and State Park Systems throughout the nation, and the contributions of Depression-era work groups. Their efforts have created structures of lasting quality, in tune with their natural setting that define a style in architecture and landscape design.

Key Recommendations -

> **Key - (Project Type: Project Number)**
> *A - Action Item: Completed at low to no cost by Parks Staff*
> *P - Assistance or completion of project by potential partner/user group*
> *C - Capital project*

The historic Boathouse Ruins at Ellicott Island

- **(A: 1.0)** Hire skilled labor with backgrounds and experience in stone masonry and preservation to repair and improve historic WPA era structures.

- **(A: 2.0)** Utilize Master Plan Update to focus on high priority WPA structures, and perform the necessary repairs/ improvements to preserve the historic character of the parks.

- **(A: 3.0)** Design and construct interpretive signage for signature WPA structures, to improve awareness and appreciation for the historic features.

- **(A: 4.0)** Preserve and maintain Superintendent's Houses; Utilize structures as revenue generators for the Parks System; Potential opportunity for partnerships to take ownership, considering new uses as appropriate.

The historic WPA structures, in combination with the natural environment in which they are situated, would suggest that the Erie County heritage parks are worthy of consideration under the National Register of Historic Places.

- **(A: 5.0)** The County should consider applying for "National Historic Register of Historic Places" status, as designated by the National Parks Service, for the five oldest parks. This would elevate these parks to a new status in the region, equivalent to that bestowed on the Historic Olmsted Parks System in Buffalo (1868 - 1890s), and the Niagara Reservation State Park (1880s-1890s), in Niagara Falls and would qualify the parks for Federal grants for historic preservation/ restoration as funding programs are available.

For designation under the "National Historic Register of Historic Places," a site must demonstrate the following characteristics:
- *"The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture as present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, are at least 50 years old",* and:

- That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or,
- That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or,
- That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or,
- That have yielded or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Positive and negative connotations of designation under "National Historic Register of Historic Places" is as follows:

Pros of Pursuing Designation:
- Additional funding from state and federal levels
- Additional grant opportunities
- More likelihood of private donations from funders

Cons of Pursuing Designation:
- Park improvements would be subject to additional review from the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) when using state or federal funds

(See Appendix C for full discussion of benefits and constraints of National Register of Historic Places designation)

Shelter #33 at Ellicott Island

4.3.2 PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION OF NATURAL SYSTEMS

Currently the Departments of Environment and Planning, and Parks, Recreation and Forestry devote many resources to preservation and restoration of their existing park lands. The Buffalo River Natural Habitat Parks in recent years have seen significant improvements in restored natural habitats and remedial action.

Recommendations:

- **(A: 7.0) To continue to properly manage and maintain Forestry Lots, it is recommended to perform a comprehensive update to the 2003 Forestry Management Plan.**

- **(A: 8.0) Conduct and complete a natural resources inventory plan; identify and inventory rare plants, animals, and significant ecological communities, as well as other natural resource features.**
  - Many species have already been documented in park properties, and it is recommended that the County reach out to The New York Heritage Program and the NYSDEC to accumulate and share knowledge.
  - The Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District (ECSWCD), a local government subdivision established under state law that provides natural resources conservation technical assistance to Erie County residents and units of local government, should be consulted in this endeavor. The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, which provides technical assistance to the ECSWCD in implementing programs, should also be consulted.
  - It is recommended to properly care and maintain for rare animal and plant species into the future, that the County establish a clear mandate to assign responsive oversight to protect these rare resources. Refer and consult with the New York State Protected Plants program and its regulations.

4.3.3 ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE PARKS MANAGEMENT

Considered ecological jewels, the Erie County Parks System should be treated with respect and appreciated for the diverse landscapes and wildlife settings. The use of natural landscaping and naturalization of public open space lands is a practice that is well supported through a number of Federal acts and regulations, and implemented at state and local municipal levels. Leading federal agencies are the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Federal Highway Authority (FHA). The EPA provides assistance to municipalities seeking to meet US Clean Water Act regulations, through the implementation of natural planting programs. At the state levels the most concerted effort toward naturalization has taken place along highway and road rights of ways, stimulated by the FHA which stipulates that 25% of all highway landscaping funds must be spent on the creation and implementation of roadside naturalization programs. Consequently, roadside natural vegetation programs have been undertaken in a number of states.

- **(A: 12.0) Promote and practice naturalized landscapes as a landscape management tool whose principal goal is the restoration of ecological systems**, rather than simply a reduced mowing regime. Although reduced maintenance costs are a potential outcome, the adoption of a natural landscaping for purely financial reasons undermines broader environmental objectives.

4.3.4 GENERAL PARKS IMPROVEMENTS

The Master Plan Update assessment revealed a Park System that offers tremendous recreation potential, as well as a series of unique and memorable scenic, heritage and natural environment resources. However, time and limited financial resources have taken their toll on some of the park's best assets, particularly in the heritage parks. Significant intervention is needed to ensure that the park facilities, heritage structures, and natural environment areas are protected and preserved for future generations. An

"Living Shoreline" construction at Ellicott Creek Park

initial step toward this is the undertaking of general parks improvements that will improve the park user experience and present a revitalized appearance. These activities include:

- **(A: 9.0) Removing or repurposing park site features that present public safety and liability hazards** (for example, non-compliant playground equipment, redundant roadway or parking areas, etc.)
- **(A: 11.0) Removing derelict or deteriorating structures, such as picnic shelters, that do not have heritage significance** (an architectural and structural assessment would be required to determine the fate of certain stone structures).
- **(C: 1.0) Establishing a policy of restoring older heritage structures before building new structures wherever possible.**
- **(C: 2.0) Replacing damaged picnic tables and benches with a consistent style.**

- **(A: 10.0) Establish an interpretive and educational program for each of the heritage parks that promotes the park's unique natural and cultural heritage assets.**
  - Trails and facilities are present that will support such a program, however the trail systems should be reviewed to ensure looped routes and improved access to park 'highlights' such as scenic lookouts and heritage features.
  - A park signage system should be added in conjunction with trail maps. To facilitate both renewal and re-use of the heritage structures, facilities such as stone picnic shelters or the numerous well structures in both Chestnut Ridge and Emery Parks could be utilized as information kiosks, or interpretive pavilions. One or more locations in each of the heritage parks should be selected as initial demonstration projects.
  - Specific opportunities for parks improvements are provided in Volume 2 – Park Specific Recommendations.
  - Transitioning or transforming a facility, such as the Commissioner's Cabin at Chestnut Ridge Park, into an Eco-center focused on the natural environment would be something that could add a major eco-tourism draw into the parks.

Repurposed WPA shelter is now a pergola with its stonework intact at Emery Park

4.3.5   PLAYGROUND SYSTEMS

Playgrounds are about more than equipment. Their location, design and construction speak to humanitarian goals, school activities, community development and planning, which offer cultural context.

Many of the parks contain a collection of playground equipment of varying vintages, manufactures, and condition ranging from single events, like a slide or swing set, to larger playground structures. One concern that needs to be addressed is the identification and removal of older equipment that is deemed unsafe and that pose liability risks for the County. The issues stem from new updated equipment being added to the parks over the years, while older, non-compliant equipment is left in place. Some older equipment can be addressed with appropriate fall protection and other safety upgrades, while some should be removed to avoid any hazardous situations.

Implementation strategies:
- **The County should implement a routine inspection process for play structures.** These inspections should be carried out by a Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI). CPSI's are certified to inspect playgrounds for safety hazards and to ensure compliance with national standards set by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) and Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Any hazards or defects identified during the inspections should be repaired promptly, or access to the event restricted. The two possible scenarios include:
  - *Select Parks staff may become trained CPSI's.*
  - *The County may retain an outside consulting CPSI to conduct the inspections.*

- **The appropriate safety "fall" surface (engineered wood fiber) should be replenished and compacted on an annual basis** to the depths required by the playground equipment manufacturer. Access to play structures that are lacking adequate fall surface should be closed or access restricted.

- **Consider adopting a single manufacturer for playground equipment or replacement pieces.** This provides the County with the ability to stock commonly worn or damaged hardware to perform prompt repairs.

- **Establish a protocol for playground equipment for maintenance, repairs, replacement or adding new equipment:**
  - *Maintenance should include annual cleaning of graffiti or other stains; painting of equipment (per the manufactures recommendations) to prolong the longevity of components; and checking and tightening bolted connections.*
  - *Repairs should be carried out on equipment in serviceable condition, if replacement parts are available and the repair costs are reasonable compared to the value of the equipment.*

"Legacy" wheelbarrow piece at Ellicott Creek Park

Large playground area at Ellicott Creek Park

Non-compliant slide at Akron Falls Park

○ *Equipment with irreplaceable parts, or where the repair costs are nearing or exceeding the cost to provide replacement equipment should be removed.*

○ *Equipment that is unused should be removed.*

○ *Several considerations should be given prior to adding new playground equipment:*
  - *Does the park utilization warrant the addition/replacement of equipment?*
  - *Age and ability appropriateness.*
  - *Context or setting. For Heritage parks preference would be to install equipment with earth tone colors and to limit plastic to an extent.*

• **Establish an Adopt-A-Playground program.** The program can be modeled after New York State's Adopt-A Highway program. The program would be geared towards performing an annual or semi-annual clean-up event which could include potentially minor maintenance, such as painting or spreading out replenished wood fiber fall surface. The program would not turn over the responsibility of maintaining or repairing a playground in a safe condition, this remains the obligation of the County. The purpose of the program is to expand partnership opportunities and bring awareness and recognition within the park system.

• Consideration should be provided for select pieces of "legacy" playground equipment, such as the 'Pumpkin Cinderella Coach' at Akron Falls or the 'Wheel Barrow' at Ellicott Creek. Many of these pieces of equipment, while not compliant with current standards, are great opportunities to reminiscence in a park.

For these select pieces of equipment that are in serviceable condition and do not present an immediate hazard should remain as artwork, and not play equipment.

One suggestion is to relocate all of the "legacy" playground equipment pieces to one location and create, in a sense, a unique sculpture park. Research should be conducted to determine the origins of the pieces and develop interpretive signage that explains the history about the playground equipment. Most of the "legacy" pieces are from the Novelty era of playground construction (1950-1970), however some pieces may be older and may potentially be WPA (1930's-1940's) constructed pieces. This would take some digging into as most of the metal playground pieces built by WPA were scrapped for WWII, but the potential does exist.

Non-compliant slide at Chestnut Ridge Park

4.4   MARKETING STRATEGY

4.4.1   INTRODUCTION

Collectively the Erie County parks offer a unique and marketable experience to County residents and visitors interested in both heritage and nature-based tourist destinations. This represents a powerful marketing and tourism opportunity. The County is the largest provider of park acreage in the area, which hosts a wide variety of amenities, such as:

- Shelters
- Sports fields
- Playgrounds
- Multi-use trails during all seasons (includes designated trails for snowmobiles and equestrian use)
- Disc golf courses
- Orienteering and geo-caching courses
- Casinos, and gathering spaces
- Work Progress Administration-era structures (WPA)
- Natural habitats (forests, meadows, etc.)
- Water access and beaches
- Sledding hills
- Ice skating areas
- Golf courses
- Guided tours and nature walks - Led by Park Rangers

Given the many changes and accomplishments that have taken place in the Erie County Parks System since the last Master Plan was completed in 2003, it is important to take a fresh look at the open space and recreational opportunities for both residents of the County and visitors. From waterfalls and beaches, to historic sites, golf courses and recreational trails, the Erie County Parks System is an incredible resource. The five parks that represent the County's earliest land acquisitions are valuable reminders of the County's history, and warrant special efforts toward protection and preservation. These parks, combined with the outstanding scenic qualities of Akron Falls, Emery Park and Chestnut Ridge Park, and the undeveloped parks of Eighteen Mile Creek, Hunters Creek Park and Franklin Gulf, have resulted in a park system that is second to none within New York State.

While all of these amenities are used, budget constraints have limited the Department's ability to operate, maintain, and upgrade assets to the level expected by the community. Due to the prioritization of other business functions (e.g. parks maintenance), the marketing and communication effort of the Department has decreased; affecting the following channels:

- County website
- County social media – Facebook, Twitter, etc.
- Parks reservation system
- Signage at parks
- Operational policies
- Programs
- Amenities
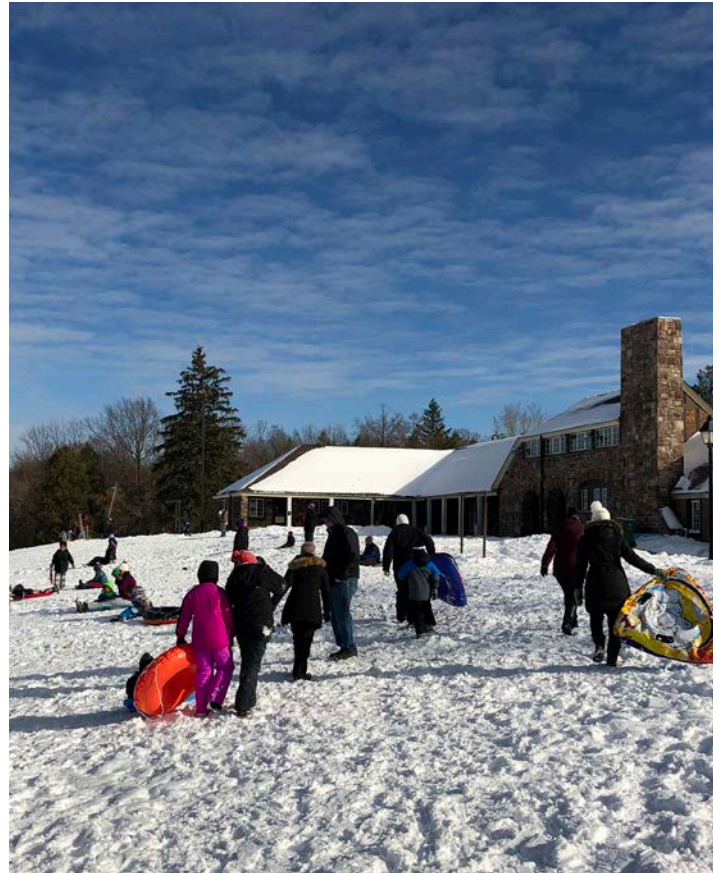
Sled hill at Chestnut Ridge Park

Playground at Akron Falls Park

While these channels are important, it is also clear that the Department does not have a guiding message or brand, ultimately diminishing its users' perception of the system.

The Parks System is currently not well understood and has limited community awareness. Residents seem familiar with parks that are nearby, but do not recognize the rich and complex natural and cultural resources of the broader system. While equally or more beautiful, the Erie County Parks System are often overshadowed by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks System or some regional State Parks. Unfortunately, visitors are not introduced to the County Parks system or its attractions through general tourism information. However, this is getting better through various social media outlets.

Once sufficient upgrades to the County Park System have been undertaken to ensure a quality visitor experience (with initial efforts focused on the heritage parks), the County should undertake a broad-based marketing program to raise awareness of the park system and its cultural and natural history. This will require a focused marketing strategy that will extend beyond the County's usual publicity of the parks.

4.4.2   CROSS-MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

- **(P: 1.0) Explore and/or expand opportunities for partnerships and cross-marketing with Visit Buffalo Niagara (VBN), incorporated cities, towns, villages, and parks and recreation providers** to ensure maximum exposure for the County Park System, and to further promote the heritage and nature-based tourism ("Eco-tourism") potential of the County Park system,
  - *This would involve links to local and regional tourist destinations, as well as in neighboring counties.*
- **(P: 2.0) Prioritize marketing of features in the Erie County System** such as fishing and birding spots, hiking and mountain biking opportunities, the Lake Erie beaches and natural areas, the Shoreline Trail system and the Buffalo and Niagara River system of parks and natural areas.
  - *The County should continue to work with existing networks and publications as well as explore other avenues that focus on regional tourism.*
  - *Another marketing opportunity, from a regional, cultural, and heritage tourism standpoint is to capture some tourists' interest from visitors to Niagara Falls, the historic Niagara Reservation State Park, and other regional attractions.*

Multi-county opportunities and cross-marketing themes that

Akron Falls lower waterfall

could be explored, in combination with the Erie County Park System, include:

- **Erie-Niagara:** *Continued Niagara River linkages, connections to the Falls, Erie Canalway Recreational Corridor, Niagara River Important Bird Area (IBA), Underground Railroad, etc.*
- **Erie–Cattaraugus:** *Zoar Valley State Park, Ski Country connections (Holiday Valley, Holimont, etc.), Underground Railroad sites, Amish Country, linkages down to Allegany State Park, etc.*
- **Erie-Wyoming:** *Linkage to Letchworth State Park, etc.*
- **Riley-Genesee:** *Linkage to Darien Lake State Park and Darien Lake Amusement Park, etc.*
- **Erie-Chautauqua:** *Linkage to Lakeshore Recreational trail from Silver Creek and Dunkirk to the Pennsylvania border, Chautauqua Lake, and Chautauqua Institution.*

4.4.3   MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

The County Parks System needs an extensive public outreach program that builds awareness of the parks system, the variety of facilities and the unique heritage assets. It is clear that the Department does not have a guiding message or brand, ultimately diminishing its users' perception of the system. The communication strategy needs to be multi-faceted, easily accessible and highly visual.

Communication tools should include:

- County website
- County social media – Facebook, Twitter, etc.
- Signage at parks

The County Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department should better utilize the Parks logo on the website, printed materials, signs, vehicles, staff clothing and media relations to develop a consistent brand within the County and region. As the renewal of the Park System takes place, the County should continue to take advantage of all opportunities to gain media exposure to heighten public awareness of the County Parks. The media outreach program would include newspaper articles on park projects, State and County funding announcements, and ongoing updates to the web site.

A Successful Media Outreach Program:

- *Has an important story to tell to the public and targeted market segments;*
- *Has the capacity to create news stories about the parks programs, facilities, history, and initiatives;*
- *Has champions involved in the telling of the Department's story;*
- *Focuses on positive successes, and initiatives;*
- *Coordinates media releases with other non-media activities such as events in the park, volunteer recognition days, facilities/trails openings, funding announcements.*

Clubhouse at Grover Cleveland Golf Course

4.4.4   PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

It is expected, given current economic conditions, that funding the needed improvements and enhancements within the parks system will require not only County resources, but support from other sources (e.g. volunteer groups, the state, corporate sponsors). The County should seek partnerships amongst local municipalities, supporting agencies, and non-government organizations with special interest in the parks. Support can be obtained at both the technical and financial level through agencies such as the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District, both of whom have worked closely with the County in the past on joint venture projects involving environmental restoration efforts.

The efforts of the County, and its partners, would be bolstered by a newly created network of volunteers, cultivated through a 'Friends of Erie County Parks' program. Areas in which volunteer assistance could be provided include environmental and cultural heritage restoration, habitat enhancement projects, trails development and management, events coordination and park programming. An appropriate level of volunteer involvement would need to be reviewed with the Unions, to ensure no conflict is created.

The County currently has agreements in place with the following user groups:

- *Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper;*
- *Friends of Ellicott, Inc.;*
- *India Association of Buffalo;*
- *Niagara Region Disc Golf;*
- *Southern Tier Snowdrifters, Inc.; and*
- *Western New York Area Labor Federation.*

Other potential user/volunteer groups that could provide labor, fund- raising efforts, sponsorship, or in-kind donations of products or services include:

- *community associations*
- *service agencies*
- *youth groups*
- *schools*
- *college service groups*
- *local businesses*
- *professional firms*
- *religious institutions*
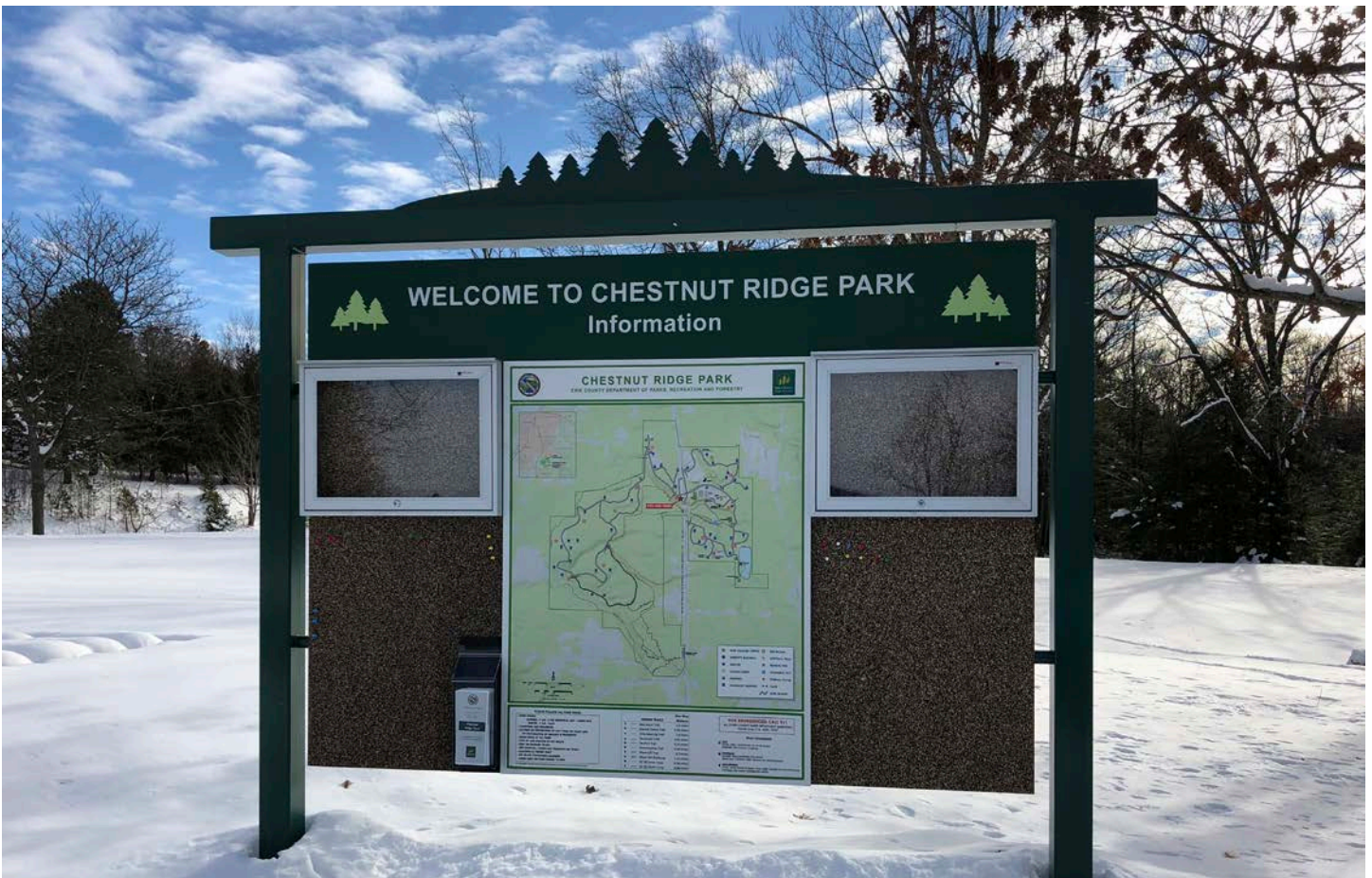
New welcome signage and kiosk at Chestnut Ridge Park

4.5   RECREATION PROGRAMMING ANALYSIS

(Full marketing plan can be found in Volume 1, Section 6.3)

Program Development
Understanding core services in the delivery of parks and recreation services will allow the Erie County Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry to improve upon those areas while developing strategies to assist in the delivery of other services. The basis of determining core services should come from the vision and mission developed by the County and what brings the greatest community benefit in balance with the resources of the Department, current trends, and the market.

The Department offers programs in the following areas:
- *Events*
- *Park Rentals*
- *Golf Courses*
  - *Elma Meadows Golf Course*
  - *Grover Cleveland Golf Course*
- *Park Rangers*
- *Athletic Fields and Facilities*

While the programming service profile of the Department seems limited, multiple organizations and partners/user groups utilize the park system to offer programming within the community. The Department does not need to be involved in the operations of these organizations, but should manage these partnerships consistently to ensure they are able to properly maintain their park system.

4.6   OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE ANALYSIS

Operations
Parks, Recreation and Forestry is responsible for maintaining public open spaces and for providing a quality system of parks, recreation facilities, open spaces and positive leisure opportunities available to all persons in the community. The Department operates a park system made up of nearly 10,000 acres of park lands located across 40 sites throughout the County. These sites are made up of the following:
- 12 large, multi-purpose parks
- 7 undeveloped parks
- 13 forestry lots
- 6 small special-purpose parks
- 2 multi-purpose trails

Maintenance
The County and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry are committed to the highest levels of maintenance. Maintenance throughout the year takes many forms and task including (but not limited to) mowing, snow removal at multiple sites, event support, urban forestry, playgrounds, and historic structure maintenance and repair.

Comfort Station at Chestnut Ridge Park

Facilities and Amenities:

- *(A: 13.0) Maintain and improve existing facilities*
- *(A: 14.0) Develop connections with greenways, bike paths, and trails*
- *(A: 15.0) Address Deferred Maintenance backlog*
- *(A: 16.0) Address low scoring (poorly rated) amenities in parks*
- *(A: 17.0) Address restroom issues*
- *(A: 18.0) Access ADA accessibilities to parks and facilities*
- *(A: 19.0) Develop individual Park Master Plans to address historic facilities preservation and continued demand for use*
- *(P: 3.0) Explore opportunities to non-traditional recreation offerings through user group agreements*
- *(P: 4.0) Explore opportunities for dog parks*

Lancaster Place, facility at Como Lake Park

Conclusion

As the parks and forestry system continues to expand deferred maintenance of structures and open space, and maintenance responsibilities increase, staffing and equipment levels must be increased to meet user expectations and protect the County's parks. In addition to historic amenities and facilities, an emphasis was identified through the focus groups of maintaining current parks and open space that continue to provide a safe, functional, and aesthetically pleasing park system.

Specific recommendations for parks operations are:

- *(A: 20.0) Develop and review written maintenance standards*
- *(A: 21.0) Continue to maintain quality standard park area maintenance*
- *(A: 22.0) Continue providing staff training that is appropriate for the assigned areas of expertise*
- *(A: 23.0) Evaluate the distribution of maintenance staff and areas of responsibilities to ensure the greatest efficiencies of resources on a regular basis*
- *(A: 24.0) Plan for additional needs for staffing, equipment, and resources as the Department continues to grow in response to new user groups, partnerships and community expectations*
- *(A: 25.0) Continuously evaluate existing facilities, develop maintenance needs, and perform identified upgrades that maintain user expectations and quality standards*

Two Mile Creek Greenway

WPA era historic stone comfort station at Emery Park

4.7 FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

4.7.1 CURRENT CONDITIONS

Parks and recreation facilities and services are essential to maintaining Erie County's diverse and desirable community. Parks and recreation services promote and support a community's economic development, crime prevention, and community health. However, not all facilities and services are used equally, nor are their maintenance needs constant from year to year. This Volume and Volume 2 discuss and detail park maintenance and improvement needs.

The Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry is currently funded by two main sources, the largest being the general fund, and grants (many through the Department of Environment & Planning, focused on waterfront projects and transportation alternatives, i.e., trails). The Department generates revenues for some services provided, which become part of the County's general fund.

According to the 2018 *NRPA – Agency Performance Report* and Erie County's Parks Department data:

- On average, park and recreation agencies derive three-fifths of their operating expenditures from general fund tax support, although the percentage of funding from general fund tax support tends to be lower at agencies with larger operating budgets. Erie County's Parks Department derives approximately three-quarters of its operating expenditures from general fund tax support.

- The second biggest source of revenue for most agencies is earned/generated revenues, responsible for an average of 28 percent of operating expenditures. Erie County recovered 21 percent in fiscal year 2017.
- Many agencies depend on special dedicated taxes for part of their budget.
- The typical park and recreation agency dedicates 43 percent of its annual operating budget to the management and maintenance of parks and open space. Erie County dedicated 20 percent in fiscal year 2017.

4.7.2 CURRENT COST RECOVERY

The results of the 2018 *NRPA – Agency Performance Report* show that the typical parks and recreation agency recovers 28 percent of its operating expenses from non-tax revenues. A review of the Erie County budget documents for the Fiscal Year 2017, shows the Erie County's Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry recovered 21 percent for all services in fiscal year 2017, 7 percent lower than the national average.

Figure 1 provides a historical review of revenue to operating expenses over a 13-year period for cost recovery by the Department. As illustrated, revenues have declined while operating expenses have increased over time.

Another way to look at revenues and expenses is on a per capita basis. Using the 2017 *Esri Business Analyst*

Figure 1: Erie County Revenue to Operating Expense Trend
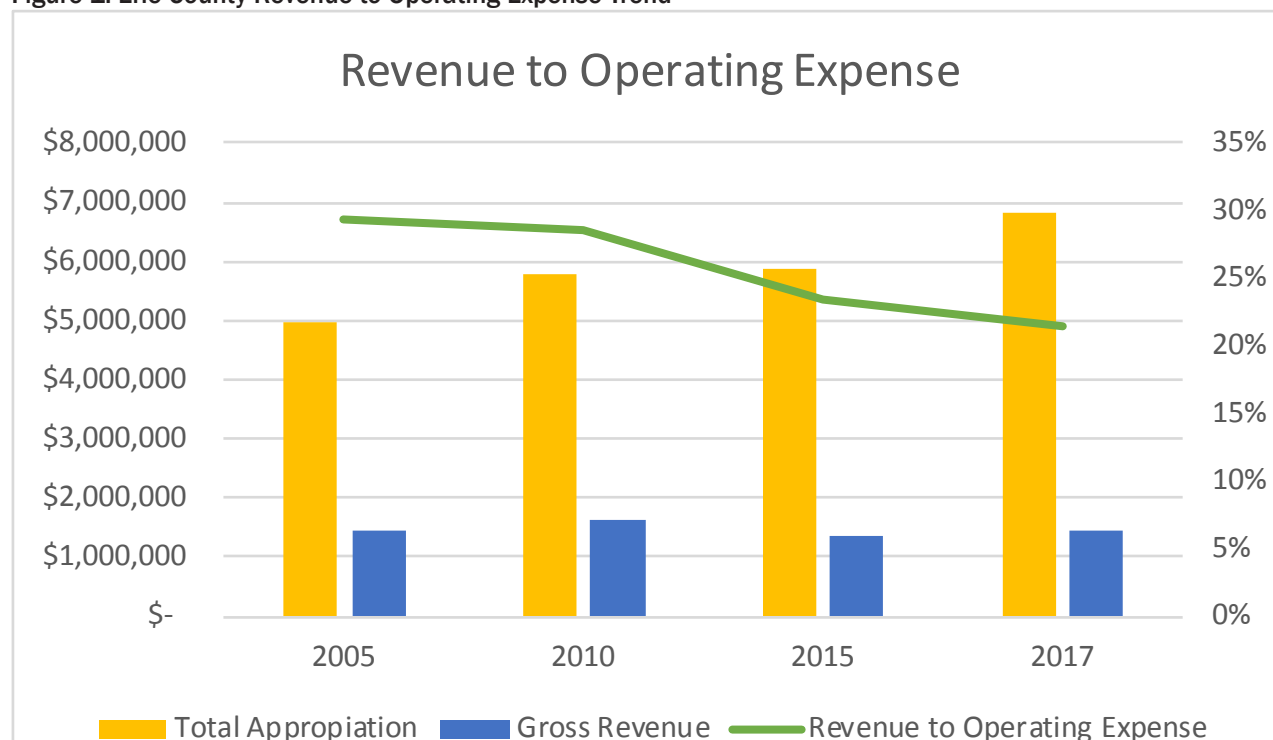
estimates for the population of Erie County of 921,046, the County spent $7.40 for parks and recreation service expenses per capita while generating $1.58 in revenues from programs ($0.95 from golf) and services. This is compared to the 2018 *NRPA – Agency Performance Report* national average of $78.26 for expenses and $19.36 in revenue.

A closer look at the increase in total appropriations for the Department shows that personnel services have increased at a greater rate than other operating expenses. Based on the 2018 *NRPA – Agency Performance Report, t*he typical park and recreation agency dedicates 43 percent of its annual operating budget to the management and maintenance of parks and open space. Erie County dedicated 20 percent in fiscal year 2017. Figure 2 illustrates the increase over time.

4.7.3 PROPOSED COST RECOVERY IMPROVEMENTS

Erie County Parks Master Plan Update focus group and survey respondents expressed support for access to facilities and affordability of services. Lack of funding was also a key concern. Survey respondents support increasing funding, but not if it impacts their personal finances. Invitation respondents indicated that they support a variety of funding sources for Erie County parks and recreation offerings, with many of the listed options receiving an average rating of 3 or higher on a 5-point scale. (The full survey report and summary of the public engagement can be found in the appendix section of the report.)

Table A: Erie County Revenue to Operating Expenses Trend

	2005	2010	2015	2017
Total Appropriation	$4,959,851	$5,796,307	$5,893,162	$6,817,451
Gross Revenue	$1,456,264	$1,650,656	$1,380,540	$1,456,333
Revenue to Operating Expense	29%	28%	23%	21%

Figure 2: Erie County Budget Growth
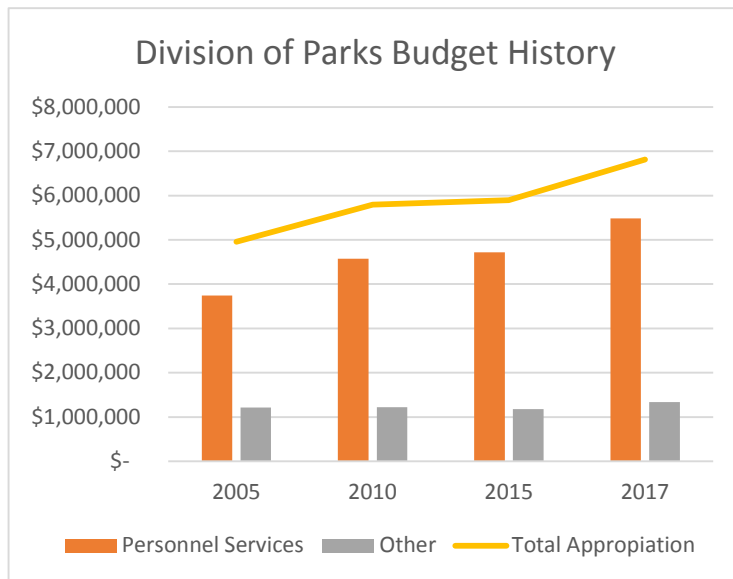
Table B: Erie County Budget Growth

	2005	2010	2015	2017
Personnel Services	$3,742,795	$4,572,814	$4,715,807	$5,482,142
Other	$1,217,056	$1,223,493	$1,177,355	$1,335,309
Total Appropriation	$4,959,851	$5,796,307	$5,893,162	$6,817,451

Impact of Fee Increases on Parks & Recreation Participation

- **Moderate rental fee increases would not limit my/our ability to participate at all**
- **Moderate rental fee increases would limit my/our participation somewhat**
- **Moderate rental fee increases would limit my/our participation significantly**
- **Don't know/uncertain**

Invitation Sample

- 45%
- 28%
- 8%
- 19%

Open Link

- 54%
- 17%
- 10%
- 18%
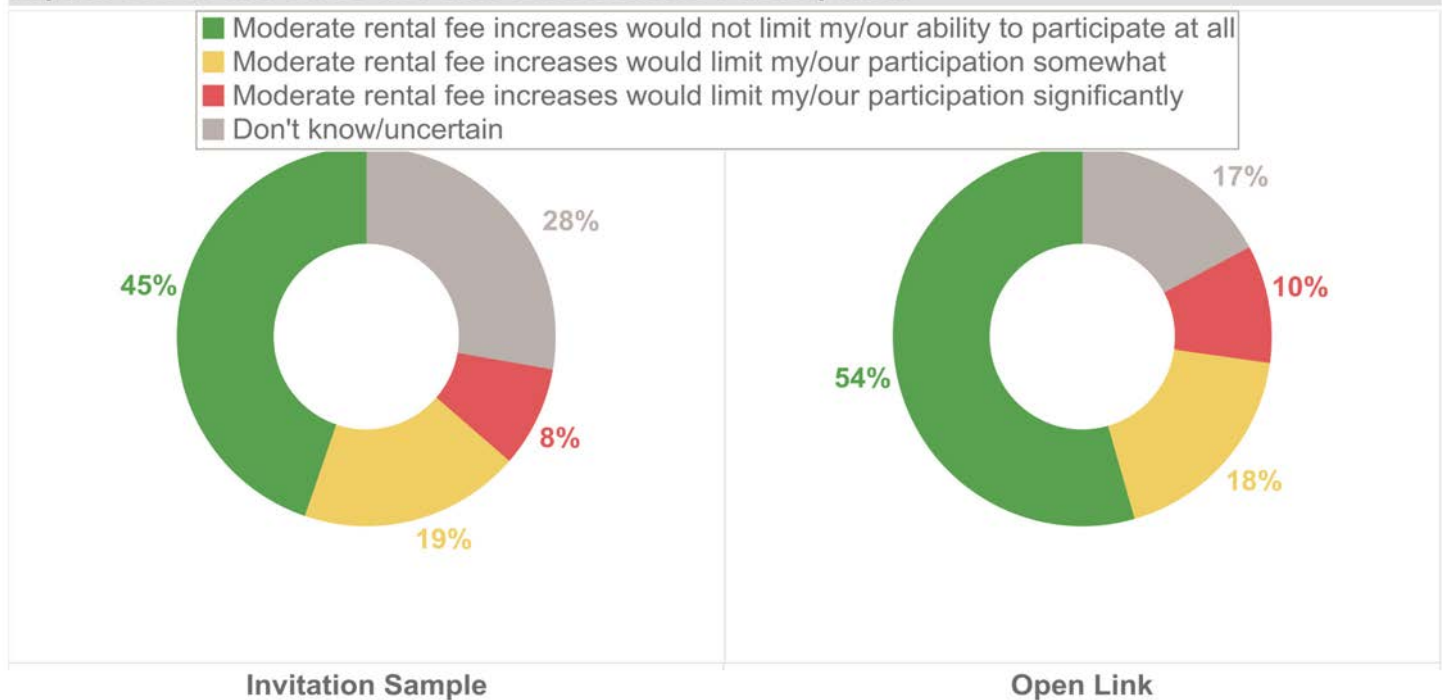
When asked about increasing *existing* resources, invitation respondents were most supportive of County budget redistribution (64% in support/3.7 rating), followed by an increase in rental fees (39% in support/3.0 rating), but were highly against an increase in property taxes (72% not in support/2.0 rating).

Willingness to Support Increases in Existing Resources for Erie County Offerings

		Response	Average Rating
Capital budget re-distribution	Invitation Sample	29% / 46% / 18%	3.7
	Open Link	27% / 48% / 20%	3.8
Increase rental fees	Invitation Sample	15% / 17% / 28% / 33% / 6%	3.0
	Open Link	11% / 18% / 29% / 35% / 8%	3.1
Increase property tax	Invitation Sample	45% / 27% / 15% / 12%	2.0
	Open Link	29% / 29% / 19% / 17% / 7%	2.4

- 1=Definitely not support
- 2=Probably not support
- 3=Neutral
- 4=Probably support
- 5=Definitely support

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Percent of Respondents

1 2 3 4 5
Average Support Rat..

When asked about *additional* funding sources, invitation respondents were most supportive of a fund (75% in support/3.9 rating) or foundations dedicated to the parks (72% in support/3.9 rating), followed by user groups and private sector sponsorships (57% in support/3.6 rating). Respondents were least supportive of a new property tax dedicated to the parks (66% not in support/2.1 rating) or new user fees (49% not in support/2.5 rating).

Willingness to Support Additional Funding Sources for Erie County Offerings

		Response					Average Rating
Foundation dedicated to the parks	Invitation Sample		22%	43%	28%		3.9
	Open Link		14%	51%	32%		4.1
Dedicated park fund within county budget	Invitation Sample		18%	47%	28%		3.9
	Open Link		11%	44%	41%		4.2
Park User Group/Private sector sponsorship	Invitation Sample	7%	7%	29%	37%	20%	3.6
	Open Link		21%	45%	23%		3.7
Bond referendum (County Bonds with voter approval)	Invitation Sample	7%	11%	42%	32%	7%	3.2
	Open Link		12%	36%	34%	12%	3.3
New user fee	Invitation Sample		25%	24%	29%	17%	2.5
	Open Link		25%	23%	26%	20%	2.6
New property tax dedicated to the parks	Invitation Sample		38%	28%	21%	11%	2.1
	Open Link		29%	26%	19%	18% 7%	2.5

Legend:
- 1=Definitely not support
- 2=Probably not support
- 3=Neutral
- 4=Probably support
- 5=Definitely support

Percent of Respondents: 0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Average Support Rat..: 1 2 3 4 5

A community process can help establish an overall cost recovery goal for the Department, varying by the services provided. The 2018 *NRPA – Agency Performance Report* show that the typical parks and recreation agency recovers 28 percent of its operating expenses from non-tax revenues. The cost recovery goals can then be used to improve service, establish facility usage goals and priorities for those uses, and help to define partnerships and community priorities. This funding and cost recovery philosophy acknowledges the tremendous public benefits of parks and recreation to the community. However, Erie County currently does not have a pricing and cost recovery policy.

- **(A: 26.0)** County should develop a resource allocation and pricing philosophy that reflects the values of the community and the responsibility it has to the community. This philosophy will be especially important if the County develops additional facilities and as it renovates facilities, strives for sustainability, and determines how much it desires to subsidize operations and improvements through grants and private sector involvement.

A cost recovery philosophy and policy would support Department practice to review and update fees and charges periodically to ensure they keep pace with actual service costs, cost-of-living changes, and methods or levels of service delivery.

An industry tool called the "Pyramid Methodology" develops and implements a refined cost recovery philosophy and pricing policy based on current "best practices" as determined by the mission of the agency and the program's benefit to the community and/or individual. The development of the cost recovery philosophy and policy is built on a very logical foundation, using the understanding of who is benefiting from the services to determine how much of the costs for that service should be offset. Services are arranged along a continuum of what delivers the greatest individual benefit to what delivers the greatest community benefit. The share of internal and external funds for each level (not necessarily each individual service) is then determined to create an overall cost recovery philosophy.

In general, the more a facility or service provides a community benefit to its citizens as a whole (such as playgrounds, trails, and overall park maintenance) the more that element should be paid for as part of the County's general fund. The more a facility or service provides individual benefits (such as shelter rentals, greens fees, and camping fees) the more that element should be paid for by user fees.

Developing effective ongoing systems that help measure success in reaching cost recovery goals and anticipate potential pitfalls are dependent on the following:

- Understanding of current revenue streams and their sustainability.
- Tracking all expenses and revenues for facilities and services to understand their contributions to overall department cost recovery.
- Analyzing who is benefiting from facilities and services and to what degree they should be subsidized.
- Defining direct costs as those that typically exist purely because of the service and the change with the service.
- Defining indirect costs as those that would typically exist anyway (like full-time staff, utilities, administration, debt service, etc.).
- Acknowledging the full cost of each service (those direct and indirect costs associated with service delivery) and where the service fits on the continuum of who benefits from the service to determine appropriate cost recovery targets.

4.7.4   ADDITIONAL REVENUE POTENTIAL

The Department generates revenue from several sources annually. In 2017, the Department generated $1,564,350 in revenue. The largest portion of that is generated through golf fees (60%). The other major sources come from shelter fees, camping fees, and concession fees.

A potential source of revenue is through the introduction of special event fees. Currently the Department only collects shelter rental fees, at the same rate for small private gatherings, as they do for runs, walks, races, and other large organized private events. These events place an impact on the operations of park staff and maintenance of the facilities used.

Across New York and across the country, parks and recreation departments attempt to recover direct expenses related to outside events hosted in public parks. As a comparison, the consultant team reviewed other localities in the county and how they handle special events. Using the City of Buffalo 2018 Special Event Fee Schedule and the number of events held in Erie County's parks in 2017, the consultant team considered seven (7) potential fees. Based on 100 events, revenue could potentially be $45,125. Figure 3 breaks down the specific fees and potential annual revenue.

4.7.5   FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

The Department should continue to pursue and expand efforts to secure alternative funding that strategically align with the Department's mission and have the community's support including:

- Expand alternative funding through grants
- Explore new community partnerships
- Developing and implementing a special event fee schedule should be prioritized to help recover expenses incurred from events held in parks and help to manage irregular expenditures and maintenance for the Department.
- Consider implementation of a cost recovery and equitable pricing philosophy and policy where revenue goes back into the Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry where they are created sustainably

Based on the capital and operations and maintenance budget estimates identified in this Master Plan, it is imperative that the County maximize the funding and revenue opportunities listed above while balancing affordability within the community.

Critical to this cost recovery undertaking is the support and understanding of elected officials, and ultimately, residents. Whether or not significant changes are called for, the County wants to be certain that it is philosophically-aligned with its residents.

Figure 3: Potential Revenue from Special Event Fees

	Fee	Revenue	Description
Application Fee (per day)	$200	$20,000	includes runs, walks, races, festivals, any like event
Seasonal event fee	$500	$12,500	per event series (an event series is considered 3 days or more)
Food vendors	$40	$4,000	only when selling food
Merchandise vendor	$35	$3,500	only when selling merchandise
Garbage totes	$10	$2,000	per tote, including delivery and pick-up
Tent permits	$25	$625	per tent
Tent permits	$250	$2,500	blanket permit rate for 11 or more tents
Total Estimated Annually		$45,125	based on 100 events per year

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OVERALL SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS: ACTION ITEMS

Type	Project #	Recommendation	Implementation Strategies	Priority	Term	Estimated Cost
A	1.0	Hire skilled labor with backgrounds and experience in masonry and preservation to repair and improve WPA structures.		High	Ongoing	
A	2.0	Utilize Master Plan Update to focus on high priority WPA structures, and perform the necessary repairs/ improvements to preserve the historic character of the parks.		High	Ongoing	Volume 2 Specific Projects
A	3.0	Design and construct interpretive signage for signature WPA structures, to improve the awareness and appreciation for the historic features.		High	6-10 Years	Volume 2 Projects
A	4.0	Preserve and maintain Superintendent's Houses; Utilize structures as revenue generators for the Parks System; Potential opportunity for partnerships to take ownership.		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	6.0	The County should pursue playground system guidelines	Strategies would include routine inspections, annually replenished fall surfaces, single manufacturer for playground equipment, maintenance protocol, and partnership programs	High	Ongoing	In-House
A	7.0	Perform a comprehensive update to the 2003 Forest Management Plan		High	3-5 Years	Varies dependent on scope of work
A	8.0	Environmental management strategies should focus on the return of little used maintained landscape areas to a more natural state through reduced mowing.	Specific focus at heritage parks, low mow, meadow, and regeneration areas.	High	Ongoing	In-House
A	9.0	Close and decommission facilities that present public safety and liability hazards	For example, non-compliant playground equipment, park buildings, redundant roadway or parking areas;	High	Ongoing	In-House

KEY:

A: Action Item: Completed at low to no cost by Parks staff

P: Assistance or completion of project by potential partner/user group

C: Capital Project

POB: Parks Operating Budget

OVERALL SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS: ACTION ITEMS

Type	Project #	Recommendation	Implementation Strategies	Priority	Term	Estimated Cost
A	10.0	Establish interpretive and educational program for each of the heritage parks that promotes the park's unique natural and cultural heritage assets.	Similar to Ranger Walk Program	High	Ongoing	In-House
A	11.0	Removing derelict or deteriorating structures, such as picnic shelters, that do not have heritage significance;	An architectural and structural assessment would be required to determine the fate of certain stone structures.	High	Ongoing	In-House
C	1.0	Establishing a policy of restoring older heritage structures before building new structures wherever possible.	Refer to specific recommendations in Volume 2 of the Master Plan	High	Ongoing	Volume 2 Projects
C	2.0	Replacing damaged picnic tables and benches with a consistent style.		High	Ongoing	P.O.B.
P	1.0	Partnerships and cross-marketing with Visit Buffalo Niagara (VBN), incorporated cities, towns, villages, and parks and recreation providers should be explored and existing agreements expanded.	This would involve links to local and regional tourist destinations that are located within the State Parks System, as well as in neighboring counties.	High	Ongoing	In-House
P	2.0	Features that should be prioritized in the Erie County System include fishing and birding spots, hiking and mountain biking opportunities, the Lake Erie beaches and natural areas, the Shoreline Trail system and the Buffalo and Niagara River system of parks and natural areas.	The County should continue to work with existing networks and publications as well as explore other avenues that focus on regional tourism.	High	Ongoing	In-House
A	5.0	The County should consider applying for "National Historic Register of Historic Places" status, as designated by the National Parks Service, for the five oldest parks.		Medium	6-10 Years	In-House

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PARK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

5.1   PARK MANAGEMENT ZONES

The use of management zones was developed in the 2003 Master Plan to identify management strategies that are consistent with the park classifications (Refer to Park Management maps in Appendix E), and assist in the preservation and enhancement of the County Parks natural and cultural heritage features. On a park-by-park basis, a consistent set of management zones was identified to serve the parks department in organizing fiscal and staff resources, in response to specific maintenance requirements.

The following park management zones were applied to the entire County Parks system, with general management policies noted for each:

A.   **NATURE RESERVE ZONES**
B.   **RECREATION ZONES (ACTIVE AND PASSIVE)**
      ACTIVE: Developed areas with sports field, playgrounds, etc.
      PASSIVE: Undeveloped areas, may be sensitive environmental areas consisting of hiking/nature trails, fishing, wildlife observation, etc.
C.   **HERITAGE ZONES**
D.   **SERVICE ZONES**

Significant natural features or areas that require management to ensure the long-term protection of the natural heritage, i.e. woodlands, wetlands, natural open space areas (meadows), waterways, ravines, gorges and escarpment faces, steep slopes, etc. These zones would be a primary focus of any County Eco-Tourism initiatives.

The WPA era pump shelter pictured above is located in Ellicott Creek Park just off the main park road as you enter from Niagara Falls Blvd. The roof has been restored on this historic parks structure.

A.   NATURE RESERVE ZONES

Includes significant natural features or areas that require management to ensure the long-term protection of the natural heritage, i.e. woodlands, wetlands, natural open space areas (meadows), waterways, ravines, gorges and escarpment faces, dunes, beaches, steep slopes, etc.

MANAGEMENT POLICIES:

- *Identify and protect species and habitats of significance.*
- *Delineate and enforce mowing limits to promote woodland expansion and meadow regeneration. Use seasonal mowing to deter woody species in areas where meadows are encouraged for habitat purposes, i.e. songbird, butterfly. Allow natural regeneration in areas where woodland expansion is desirable, removing only exotic species.*
- *Use native plant species for re-vegetation and restoration efforts. Manage exotic invasive plant species. This will be particularly important in wetland and shoreline areas where invasive species such as purple loosestrife and Japanese knotweed are becoming increasingly problematic.*
- *Evaluate park development projects and park uses for impacts on the natural environment.*
- *Restrict use activities to those with little or no negative impacts to vegetation, wildlife habitat, soil erosion, or water quality, such as hiking trails, access points, and scenic lookouts. Potentially disruptive activities such as park roadways, mountain biking trails, or equestrian trails should be introduced only in areas without environmental sensitivity, and where impacts can be managed and mitigated.*
- *Review existing trails and picnic sites for impacts to natural environment. Close and relocate/rebuild as needed to ensure protection of slopes, creek banks, areas of significant vegetation or habitat.*
- *Develop appropriate strategies to manage wildlife habitat, such as protecting and enhancing native vegetation, providing proper water environments, keeping trails and high-activity areas away from sensitive wildlife zones, etc.*
- *Protect natural features, i.e. woodlands, bluffs, shorelines, escarpment faces, gorges, waterways, dunes, from degradation and visual impacts. This would include keeping high impact activities away from these areas, and/or using natural materials and any improvements such as steps and trails.*
- *Identify monitoring programs for protecting water quality and significant habitat areas.*
- *Restore degraded riparian corridors. Maintain appropriate setbacks for trails and managed areas. Address bank erosion wherever possible.*

- *Establish forest management practices that promote under-story development and canopy regeneration, such as selective thinning to open canopy, culling of less desirable species, or replanting of native species.*
- *Develop and post signage to promote appropriate uses and to foster stewardship, for example park regulations, trail courtesy rules, interpretive signs.*

Sand dune vegetation at Bennett Beach

Marsh vegetation at Times Beach Nature Preserve

B.   RECREATION ZONES (ACTIVE AND PASSIVE)

Includes the landscape maintained areas of the parks, in which facilities development is permitted to support low to moderate intensity recreation activities such as sports fields, specialized activities, picnic areas, campgrounds, and parking lots.

MANAGEMENT POLICIES:

- *Site, design, and use materials on park structures that are unobtrusive and compatible with the surrounding natural environment or heritage character.*
- *Consolidate activity areas to promote informal, passive recreational use and to minimize incursions into natural and open space zones.*
- *Consolidate parking and roadways where possible to simplify circulation systems and reduce space requirements, while ensuring that access is maintained.*

- *Monitor park uses and impacts on natural environment (i.e. large group picnics, events staging). Consider rotation of areas to allow restoration of lawn and understory areas.*
- *Provide screening and buffering of development areas such as parking, maintenance, or storage areas, through planting and vegetation.*
- *Manage vegetation areas to maintain scenic vistas and views.*
- *Restrict artificial lighting to minimum amount necessary for park user safety and security. Use Dark-Sky compliant fixtures that improve lighting efficiency and reduce light pollution. Sports lighting should include shielding and orientation to direct lighting away from natural areas.*

WPA bridge at Chestnut Ridge

C. HERITAGE ZONES

Includes areas of active cultural heritage or archaeological features that require management to ensure the preservation of these important heritage assets. Heritage zones have been identified for the following features:

- Chestnut Ridge Casino, Ellicott Creek Casino, old Boathouse (Castle) ruins on Ellicott Island, and other old stone park casinos,
- Stone picnic shelters and structures including pump houses and kiosks,
- Wendt Mansion & stables,
- Akron Falls dam and pond, bridge, etc.
- Como Lake dam, light house, etc.

These Zones would be the primary focus of any Heritage Tourism Initiatives.

MANAGEMENT POLICIES:

- *Preserve, repair or restore historic park buildings and structures to ensure heritage, safety, and functionality. Repoint stone work and repair roofs to avoid major expenses later on with wholesale repairs and reconstruction.*
- *Ensure rehabilitation of older structures, which promotes flexibility for various future uses. This will include the creative reuse of many of the older structures for more modern uses, such as the Wendt Mansion that could be restored to its former glory as a place to rent for parties, weddings and receptions, meetings, catered events, etc.*
- *Site, design, and use materials on park structures that are unobtrusive and compatible with the surrounding heritage character.*
- *Provide landscape settings in keeping with the time period and history of the site. Where available, this should be based on archival research, and analysis of historic photographs and plans to identify original landscape intents.*
- *Provide screening and buffering of development areas such as parking, maintenance, storage areas, through planting and vegetation.*
- *Manage vegetation areas to maintain scenic vistas and views.*

Historic Lighthouse structure at Como Lake Park

D.   SERVICE ZONES

Includes maintenance and service areas for the developed parks, as well as access points or staging areas within the Conservation Parks (e.g. trailheads and parking lots) where minimal use facilities are needed to support allowable uses within the Nature Reserve Zone.

MANAGEMENT POLICIES:

*   *Site, design, and use materials on park structures that are unobtrusive and compatible with the surrounding natural environment or heritage character;*
*   *Restrict development to areas where little or no negative impacts to vegetation, wildlife habitat, soil stability, or water quality will occur;*
*   *Consolidate uses and activity areas to minimize space requirements and to reduce incursions into the natural or passive areas of the park;*
*   *Provide screening and buffering of development areas through planting and vegetation;*
*   *Monitor uses and impacts on the natural environment, and provide mitigation.*

Maintenance facility at Ellicott Creek Park

Maintenance area at Elma Meadows Golf Course

5.2   ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

5.2.1   MANAGEMENT AND RESTORATION STRATEGIES

The Erie County Parks include extensive natural environment areas with a diverse range of ecosystems and landscape features. The unique geology of Erie County allows a single park system to protect and steward landscapes ranging from bedrock streams and waterfalls, gorges, and wooded slopes, to bottomland forests, floodplain wetlands, and Great Lakes dunes. Each of these areas provides not only scenic beauty, but also important wildlife habitat, sanctuary for native plants, and many less visible but equally important ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, air and water quality protection, and soil nutrient cycling. Although they are preserved from development, these natural areas will require active management to ensure long term protection, and in some cases to restore ecosystems in locations that have been negatively impacted by long-term or historical land use. Such locations can be viewed as opportunities within the management of the parks to enhance and restore wildlife habitat and other ecosystem services, including park visitor experience.

The Parks Department is currently faced with reduced budgetary resources, and must therefore find ways to increase or maintain the ecological value of its properties while at the same time reducing operations and maintenance costs.

The following are broadly significant areas of opportunity for improving ecology and environmental sustainability, each of which is discussed in more detail in following sections:

- *Reduced mowing and naturalization of unused lawn areas and road infrastructure*
- *Planting of young native trees to replace aging overstory species and create an understory layer in naturalized areas*
- *Addressing soil and stream bank erosion, which is in some cases caused by impacts within the park in question, and in others by factors outside the boundaries of Parks property*
- *Addressing non-native species invasion, both nascent and well established*
- *Creating species inventories and related spatial data to aid in current and future management decisions*
- *Creating a Native Plant Policy to ensure new plantings contribute positively to the ecology of Erie County*

The Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District (ECSWCD) is a willing partner in the management of the County's natural resources, and should be engaged in identifying priority conservation or restoration projects, and identifying and implementing remedial actions. Examples include creek bank rehabilitation, slope stabilization, or stormwater management measures.

Nature trail at Red Jacket Riverfront Park

5.2.2 NATURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

A complete and in-depth natural resources inventory can serve as a baseline from which to plan and monitor protection and enhancement of the County's natural areas. To be of best use, this inventory should be spatially referenced and include well-organized Geographic Information System (GIS) data. Working with County GIS staff and local partners such as universities or other organizations to create a set of data layers specific to natural features will allow Parks managers to track the condition of sensitive habitats over time, assess the progress of restoration efforts, record locations of new invasive plant populations, etc. Examples of spatial and environmental data that may prove particularly beneficial include:

- *Ecosystem types, such as beech-maple forest, oak-hickory forest, beach dune, or old field (lands formerly cultivated or grazed but later abandoned). Each area identified can be associated with a list of plants known to occur there, assessment of current ecological condition, etc.*
- *Sensitive/critical areas such as vegetated buffers along watercourses; hydrologically sensitive areas including streams, wetlands, springs, recharge areas, wells; and areas of unique flora/fauna including threatened/ endangered/rare species.*
- *Locations of non-native invasive species to be targeted for removal and for replacement by native vegetation.*
- *Locations of ongoing restoration projects such as prescribed burning.*

Native plantings at Bailey Peninsula Natural Habitat Park

5.2.3 FORESTRY & VEGETATION MANAGEMENT IN PARKS

Native Plants:

Native plant communities are key to ecosystem health, resiliency, and productivity. Native wildlife species have evolved with these communities and are integral parts of the system as well. Many plants depend upon native insects, birds, and small mammals for pollination and seed dispersal, and many of these animal species in turn depend upon the plants for food and shelter. Because of this long evolutionary association, many species cannot thrive in environments dominated by non-native and invasive plants.

A native plant is an indigenous species that occurs naturally in a community, ecosystem or ecoregion without direct or indirect human involvement. Plant species differ in terms of both the location and the size of their native ranges. Some species are naturally found throughout most of North America, for example, while others only naturally occur in very small geographic areas. This variation can lead to confusion. For example, a plant that occurs only on Great Lakes shorelines can be referred to as native to North America, but would not be native if planted in Virginia. In addition, many plants available from commercial nurseries have been bred from native species, but may be sterile or have other genetic characteristics that do not occur in the wild. It is therefore important to be clear as to what is meant when referring to a "native" plant.

Current Conditions:

- The County does not have a Native Plant Policy.

Future Actions/Recommendations:
- **(A: 1.0) Design and Implement a Native Plant Policy for promoting the use of native plants in revegetation projects within the Parks System, and related projects on County managed lands.** Goals of implementing a Native Plant Policy would be to promote the restoration and rehabilitation of native plant communities in support of biological diversity and healthy ecosystem functions. Native plant materials can also be both attractive and beneficial when used in formal plantings, such as landscape beds near buildings or entrance signs.

A Native Plant Policy should address the following considerations:
Native plants should be given primary consideration when selecting plant materials for use in projects. Selections should be genetically appropriate and adapted to on-the-ground ecological conditions (Utilize local seed bank if possible). When and where necessary, non-native species may be used that enhance the likelihood of successful native

plant establishment, survival, growth and adaptation, such as a turf seed that may be used as a temporary cover crop during the establishment of a native meadow seed blend. Plant selections should be written, designed and/or approved by a knowledgeable specialist who is trained in the needs of the plant community where the project will occur. Planting designs and restoration plans should emphasize the importance of going beyond simply revegetating a site for erosion control or aesthetics, and strive for native plant community restoration that addresses a broad range of ecosystem services. The US Forest Service, NYS Parks, and, local to Erie County, the Seneca Nation of Indians, all have Native Plant policies that may be used as a framework for development of a Policy for the County.

Invasive Species Management:

Presidential Executive Order 13112 defines an "invasive species" as one that is:

1) Non-native (or alien) to the ecosystem under consideration and;

2) Whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.

3)Invasive species can be plants, animals, or other organisms. Human activities are the primary means of invasive species introduction. Such species/plants pose a threat to the native biodiversity that is Erie County's natural heritage, and in some cases can have additional undesirable effects such as increasing stream bank erosion.

The management of invasive species is organized by five interconnected challenges:

- ***Enhancement of Prevention Efforts:*** Preventing the introduction of species into new locations is the first line of defense against their potential damages. Invasive species can be introduced intentionally, such as via nurseries or for plantation forestry, or unintentionally as hitchhikers on imports. While the power to prevent the introduction of invasive plant species via regulatory means rests primarily with Federal and State government, the County may consider a Policy that restricts introduction of species across it borders. Such a Policy could be of use, for example, if an invasive species is known to be present in one portion of the state, but not in Erie County.

- ***Design of Surveillance and Invasion Monitoring:*** Although prevention measures can reduce the rate of new species invasions, 100% prevention is neither feasible nor cost-effective. Damaging invaders regularly establish in new regions despite regulatory policies. Early detection and rapid response are key strategies for maximizing the effectiveness of control efforts and minimizing negative impacts once a species has been introduced. Greater surveillance intensity (i.e., larger numbers of visual surveys conducted to detect new populations) generally increases the probability of detecting invasions early, when their control is less costly and more likely to be successful. However, more intensive surveillance is itself more costly. Designing surveillance programs for

Japanese Knotweed at Como Lake Park has taken over the left bank of the creek

early detection of species invasions requires balancing the cost of surveillance with the benefits of earlier detection. When personnel or other resources are limited, programs must decide how best to allocate surveys across the landscape, accounting for variation in risks and costs across locations.

- *Optimal Management of Established Invasions:* Following detection and delineation of an invasive plant population, managers are faced with evaluating control options, including assessment of costs and effectiveness, and deciding whether and/or how aggressively to control the species based on available resources. An Invasive Plant Species Policy should allow for variable conditions to be considered. What methods should be used, and whether the most appropriate goal is to immediately eradicate the population, aim to contain the invasion and/or slow its spread, or simply to mitigate damages, will vary by site and species of concern. In some cases doing nothing may be an appropriate option to consider. A key feature of invasions is that they spread, generally causing increasing damages over time as the extent of the invasion grows. Eradication is most likely to be successful if the invasion is small when detected and if reintroduction is improbable or infrequent. Therefore, eradication may be an optimal goal early in an invasion, but optimal policies might shift to slowing the spread and eventually abandonment as the size of the invasion increases. Therefore, managers must carefully consider strategies that account for how control efforts will affect invasion spread over time and space. Slowing the spread of an invasion can provide substantial benefits by enabling the continued provision of ecosystem benefits or by delaying damage. It may also allow time for new control technologies to be developed, or for affected managers to adapt.

- *Private Control of Invasion Spread:* While substantial work by Federal and State agencies has focused on top-down, centralized approaches for cost-effectively controlling invasions, the management and spread of invasive species often depend largely on the choices of many decision-makers across the regional landscape. Landowners, for example, make individual decisions about whether to suppress invasions on their property.   Similarly, individuals make decisions that affect the transport of invaders to new locations (such as through movement of infested firewood or landscape plants). Therefore, education and encouragement of behavior that facilitates management of invasive species are key to success.

- *Accounting for Uncertainty:* The most challenging part of designing invasive plant species management policies is allowing for uncertainty. An Invasive Plant Species Policy should incorporate enough flexibility to

be easily modified to account for the unknown future pest without unnecessary delay that may reduce the available options a manager has to effectively manage an invasion.

Current conditions:

Specific Invasive Species Control and Management Plans have been developed for Seneca Bluffs, Red Jacket Park, 61 Smith Street and Bailey Peninsula. Many parts of the remaining Parks properties, notably significant areas at Heritage Parks such as Chestnut Ridge and Emery Parks, are currently forested, and not highly impacted by invasive plants. These high quality areas will require consistent surveillance to ensure that nascent invasions do not go undetected. As management strategies for these areas are developed in the future, they can be added to further Invasive Species Management Plans.

While invasive species are present to some extent in all five of the Heritage Parks, extensive infestations are most notable at the more 'urban' Como Lake and Ellicott Creek Parks. Certain areas of these parks, especially stream banks, have large populations of invasive plants, particularly (but not limited to) Japanese Knotweed and non-native genotype Phragmites. At Como Lake Park, for example, large areas of Japanese Knotweed are established along the banks of Cayuga Creek. Japanese Knotweed has been shown to increase stream bank erosion because of its fragile root system and its ability to suppress growth of other plants. Unfortunately, removal and control of the large population of Japanese Knotweed along Cayuga Creek may be difficult to accomplish except as part of a broader restoration project that addresses related and contributing issues.

Similar concerns exist at Ellicott Island within Ellicott Creek Park. There are some areas along Tonawanda Creek where removing invasive shrubs, such as Jetbead, Privet and Honeysuckle, may risk destabilizing the stream bank where erosion is already a major concern. In critical areas, protecting and restoring the stream bank without causing water quality impacts in the process would be a complex project, rather than consisting simply of removing the invasive plants.

Conservation parks also are experiencing issues with invasive species. Hunters Creek Park has emerging invasive Japanese Stiltgrass, as well as Reed Canary Grass, Phragmites, Purple Loosestrife, Wild Parsnip, Mugwort, Multi-flora Rose, Bush Honeysuckle, Japanese Barberry, Buckthorn, Privet, and Autumn Olive.

Invasive insect species are also a concern for the Parks Department. There will be significant loss of canopy Ash trees along Cayuga Creek, for example, due to the Emerald Ash Borer. The Parks Department expects to lose hundreds of trees at Como Lake Park, in close proximity to the established infestation of Japanese Knotweed, which may present an opportunity for the invasive population to spread.

Future Actions/Recommendations:

- **(A: 2.0)** Design and implement an Invasive Plant Species Policy that would provide the framework and authority to address Invasive Species in accordance with industry standards/BMPs as described above.

  - *Enhancement of Prevention Efforts:* Consider a policy that prohibits invasive species introduction to support and strengthen existing Federal and State regulations.
  - **Design of Surveillance and Invasion Monitoring:** Develop a surveillance program for early detection of invasive species that leverages partnerships such as WNYPRISM, EC CCE and others. Currently, the Erie County Park Rangers are trained in the identification of invasive species, but cannot practically conduct physical surveys across the approximately 10,000 acres of park lands. Determine how to allocate available resources to accomplish surveys across the park

properties, accounting for how risks and potential costs may vary across locations.

  - *Optimal Management of Established Invasions:* Delineate and document known existing invasive species populations in order to assess whether the population is rapidly expanding, stable or reducing in size. Allow for variables to be considered. Identify methods that immediately eradicate the population or aim to contain the invasion, slow its spread, or mitigate damages. Shift from pursuing eradication to slowing the spread of the population as the size of the invasion increases.
  - *Private Control of Invasion Spread:* Educate the public through use of appropriate signage at key points within the Parks, and potentially install boot scrapers to reduce the number of hitchhiker seeds entering or exiting a Park.
  - *Accounting for Uncertainty:* Allow for easily modifiable approaches in order to account for the unknown future pest without unnecessary delay.

Park (Landscape) Trees:

Of the nearly 10,000 acre Park system, approximately 1,000 acres are developed. This section focuses on trees in the developed areas of the parks.

Trees do much more than simply beautify our parks. They provide a wide range of important social, economic, and environmental benefits, including improved air quality, stormwater retention, enhanced public health, biodiversity & habitat creation, carbon sequestration, and support of the local economy. Trees that are nurtured within the park environment are part of a community forest that produces benefits far exceeding the cost of planting and care during the trees' lifetimes. Although trees work hard every day - cleaning the air, storing carbon, and providing habitat - they are rarely cared for as needed.

Urban conditions, and even developed park conditions, can be difficult habitat for trees. Soil compaction, air pollution, physical damage and exposure to de-icing salt are examples of stressors urban trees often endure. In these stressful conditions, plants can benefit from practices such as pruning, fertilization, insect and disease treatment, watering and mulching, which are not needed by plants in a natural forest.

A community forest cannot be effectively managed unless its condition is known, which is accomplished through an inventory. Tree inventories focus on the attributes of individual trees, as compared to a Forest inventory which seeks to assess timber attributes on forest stands. A tree inventory may be conducted for many reasons, such as to determine if a community needs to implement an urban

Many dead trees were observed at Ellicott Creek Park

forestry management program, in order to prioritize tree maintenance needs, to plan for the community's future, and to provide a basis for the implementation of a management plan. A tree inventory should provide tree species, size in DBH (diameter at breast height), overall condition such as health and maintenance needs, and presence of insects or diseases.

Current Conditions:

Erie County Parks Department does not have an annual tree planting program. Tree planting projects are intermittent and have historically taken place when a partner, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper (BNW), Boy Scouts or "Friends of" groups, etc. has presented the project. The location or parks selected for planting are chosen at the partner's request. As a result a number of parks have not received new tree plantings to renew the resource and provide environmental benefits. In the recent past BNW has organized tree plantings in Black Rock Canal Park and Seneca Bluffs Natural Habitat Park. BNW secured trees and planting supplies through ReTreeWNY for these efforts, and provided organization and training for volunteers to complete the plantings.

Erie County Parks Department has completed two tree inventories, one at Como Lake Park and the other at Akron Falls Park. The information collected included the number of existing trees, species composition, and the size and condition of individual trees.

The Emerald Ash Borer will have very significant impacts on some areas of the parks. It may be the case that entire woodlands will become savannas in a short time; water tables may rise as large trees are lost in mesic areas, meaning that plant communities may shift towards swamp or other wetland. These changes will be difficult to predict with certainty, but may impact how certain areas of the parks are used.

Recommendations:

- **(A: 3.0)** **Develop a recommended tree species planting list aligned with the Native Plant Policy**
  - Developing a list of preferred tree species makes local nurseries and wholesalers aware of the desires for future tree purchases by the County and allows them to adjust production accordingly.
  - Because tree planting will occur in a variety of site conditions, the list may be categorized by site type:
    - *Park Drives: Trees planted in this site type may need to be more tolerant of deicing salts and potentially compacted soils.*
    - *Shade Trees: Select large growing, long lived trees to maximize aesthetic and environmental benefits.*
    - *Understory Trees: The understory is the layer of vegetation in a forested or wooded area and contains smaller growing and shade tolerant trees as well as shrubs. Understory trees and shrubs are recommended particularly where Natural Regeneration Areas have been identified beneath existing tree canopy.*
  - The County Forester should lead the effort to develop the tree species list and coordinate this effort with ECS&W, NYSDEC, CCE, BNW, and others.
  - LEWPA can provide riparian plantings.

Beautiful mature trees showing fall color at Akron Falls Park

- **(A: 4.0)** Develop a tree establishment plan that would include the schedule for irrigation, mulching, removal of tree support systems, and training pruning.

- **(A: 5.0)** Establish an annual budget allocation for tree planting.

- **(A: 6.0)** Pursue grant funding for tree plantings.
  - *NYSDEC provides a Cost Share Grant program funded through the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which includes a category for tree planting that can supplement a County planting budget.*
  - *Actively seek out funding from non-governmental sources such as local, regional and national foundations, industries and corporations.*

- **(A: 7.0)** Develop annual tree planting plans that are focused and achievable.
  - *Determine a general quantity of trees to be planted at each park*
  - *Identify potential planting locations. Geographically concentrate plantings to effectively and efficiently provide the required care during the establishment period.*
  - *Provide additional tree plantings along the park drives where the trees can provide maximum stormwater management benefit by intercepting rainfall, preventing or delaying the water from reaching impermeable surfaces where it will increase in velocity and contribute to erosion and sedimentation of waterways.*
  - *Provide additional plantings in parks where Emerald Ash Borer has caused or will cause tree loss.*
  - *Provide plantings in parks where mature trees reaching the end of their natural lifespan will require removal.*
  - *Provide understory plantings in areas identified for Natural Regeneration.*

- **(P: 1.0)** Pursue partnerships with Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper, "Friends of" groups and others to develop achievable planting projects. Recent efforts can be replicated across the park system through partnerships with "Friends of" groups and others.

- **(C: 1.0)** Conduct tree inventories in the remaining parks in the system. The data collected should be on trees located within the developed or landscaped (mowed) areas of the park, particularly trees that are in close proximity to shelters, playground equipment, comfort stations and other features that patrons and employees frequent.
  - Pursue grant funding for tree inventories. NYSDEC provides a Cost Share Grant program funded through the EPF, which includes a category for tree inventories that can supplement a County inventory budget. In the last several grant rounds, there was no match required for tree inventories.

- **(A: 8.0)** Pursue grant funding for community forest management planning. NYSDEC provides a Cost Share Grant program funded through the EPF which includes a category for management plans which can supplement a County budget. In the most recent grant rounds, there was no match required for management plans.

- **(C: 2.0)** Develop a community forest management plan. The purpose of a forest management plan is to ensure that a community will enjoy the benefits of trees through proper arboricultural techniques and management practices. A community forest management plan based on recent tree inventory data and analysis of available staff, equipment and budget resources is an essential tool for protecting this valuable resource. The management plan should provide detailed information, recommendations, and resources needed to effectively and proactively manage public trees, including specific recommendations for how to manage the impacts of EAB, HWA or other pest problems that may be present within the Parks.

- **(A: 9.0)** Address over-browsing by deer.
  - *In some areas of the parks, plant diversity is suffering from over-browsing by deer.*
  - *As an educational tool, a series of fenced deer enclosures could demonstrate the impact deer have on plant communities by showing what grows when they cannot reach it. This could be implemented as an exploration of whether introducing deer harvesting makes sense for the County, or simply as a part of providing nature education to visitors. A well-considered and well-managed harvesting program could reduce pressure on deer habitat, improving the health of the deer population and allowing improved habitat for other wildlife.*

Fall color at Como Lake Park

5.2.4 WILDLIFE HABITAT ENHANCEMENT AND PROTECTION

As part of an overall goal of protecting natural heritage in the Erie County Parks, specific management practices can be implemented that increase habitat value for native animal species. Efforts to conserve and restore natural ecosystems will inherently benefit wildlife populations, but in many cases it is possible to go further in addressing the needs of particular species. Broad practices might include the following:

- *Further refine decisions on the nature and location of low-mow and natural regeneration areas based on known or potential presence of desirable species. For example, if a particular species that requires trees is documented in an area, lands adjoining that area might become a higher priority for natural regeneration and tree planting.*

- *Consider the designation of "forever wild" areas (lands that shall be kept forever as wild forests, and shall not be sold or leased to private entities).*

- *Maintain varied habitats according to the needs of targeted species. Mature woodlands, fields in different stages of succession, or shoreline habitat, for example, are all attractive to different species. Some species require large areas of continuous habitat, while others thrive in highly variable, or "patchy" areas.*

- *Minimize disturbance of large, high quality habitat patches, including through enforcement of restrictions*

on motorized vehicles and other activities that are harmful to the preservation of parklands as natural places. Preventing disturbance has many benefits, for example reducing the likelihood of songbird brood parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds.

It is important to recognize the value of all wildlife, including insects, fish, amphibians and reptiles, birds, and mammals. At the present time, there is particular concern nationwide for conservation of pollinators and bats. The recommended conversion of some 80 acres of lawn to "low-mow" and wildflower meadow (see Naturalization Plans, Volume 2) is an opportunity to increase and improve habitat for honey bees and other pollinators, as well as snakes, small mammals, grassland birds, and raptors. The addition over time of approximately 60 acres of forest habitat (see Naturalization Plans, Volume 2) may benefit native bat populations as well as birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

Many County Parks have stream and/or pond habitats, and some contain bog or lakeshore habitats. Measures designed to protect water quality can also enhance stream habitat for fishes and aquatic insect species (see Water Quality section). In addition, streambank restoration projects can incorporate features designed to provide fish habitat.

In many cases, nest boxes can provide additional habitat by simulating natural tree cavities or other typical nesting sites. Examples of species that can benefit from boxes include Barn Owl, American Kestrel, and Wood Duck. Well-designed and carefully located boxes can also provide critical roosting habitat for bats.

For some "specialist" animal species, particular plants are critical.

Naturalization area at Sprague Brook Park

Lawn is mowed right up to the lake edge at Akron Falls Park

Some insects, for example, feed exclusively on one plant species, while some birds may nest only in particular types of trees. If such species are known to occur locally, planting efforts could improve the availability of habitat for them. When rare or delicate species are discovered in the parks, every effort should be made to avoid impacts or disturbance. This could involve temporary closure of certain trails or other park areas, for example.

5.2.5 WATER QUALITY PROTECTION

Efforts to protect and improve water quality in the parks can be grouped into general categories, including riparian habitat buffer and stream protection, stormwater management, and protection from chemical pollutants such as fertilizers and pesticides. Recommended actions that can advance these efforts are described below.

Riparian buffers

- Native vegetation along shorelines can contribute to protection of streams and lakes by acting as a natural filter, reducing the erosive force of stormwater runoff and helping to capture pollutants before they reach the water. Buffers can discourage geese, which protects visitors and water bodies from contamination by goose droppings and associated bacteria. Overhanging vegetation can also protect stream

habitat from excessive rise in water temperature by providing shade. Throughout the Erie County Parks system, many waterbodies are currently well protected by natural settings or appropriate buffers.

- In some locations, notably at Akron Falls Park, lawn is currently mowed up to the edge of waterbodies. A deliberately planted vegetative buffer could protect these locations from bank erosion, and potentially from nutrient pollution. However, it should be noted that such buffers would require monitoring and occasional maintenance to prevent invasion of aggressive non-native plant species, such as Japanese Knotweed, that may currently be prevented from establishing by mowing.

- **(A: 10.0)** Maintain/enhance existing vegetated buffer areas along streams and other waterbodies for filtering of runoff, erosion protection and habitat value.

- **(A: 11.0)** Establish vegetated buffers in critical areas currently lacking in such buffers.

- **(A: 12.0)** Establish recreation and maintenance buffers to prevent accidental damage to shorelines of streams and other waterbodies that are currently lacking a suitable buffer (buffer areas may be no-mow sections, planting filter strips, etc.).

Stream protection

The Erie County Parks contain a variety of stream habitats, including bedrock waterfalls, small woodland creeks, and large meandering streams. Many of the Parks' streams are currently in good condition, but some are suffering from the effects of urban and suburban development surrounding the parks. These include, but are not limited to, increased variability of flow rates, increased susceptibility to flooding and bank erosion, reduced water clarity and increased deposition of sediment, reduced habitat complexity for fish and other wildlife, and excessive rises in water temperature. While reducing many of these effects requires a community-wide effort across the stream's entire watershed, the Parks Department can make the following beneficial improvements within park boundaries.

- **(C: 3.0) Implement stream bank and floodplain restoration projects when and where possible.** Examples of such projects include the recent "living shoreline" demonstration project at Ellicott Creek Park, led by the Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper.

- **(C: 4.0) Relocate or remove adjacent pavements to protect waterbodies.** For example, at Akron Falls Park there is a parking area very close to the stream/ impoundment. This may lead to contaminated runoff entering the stream.
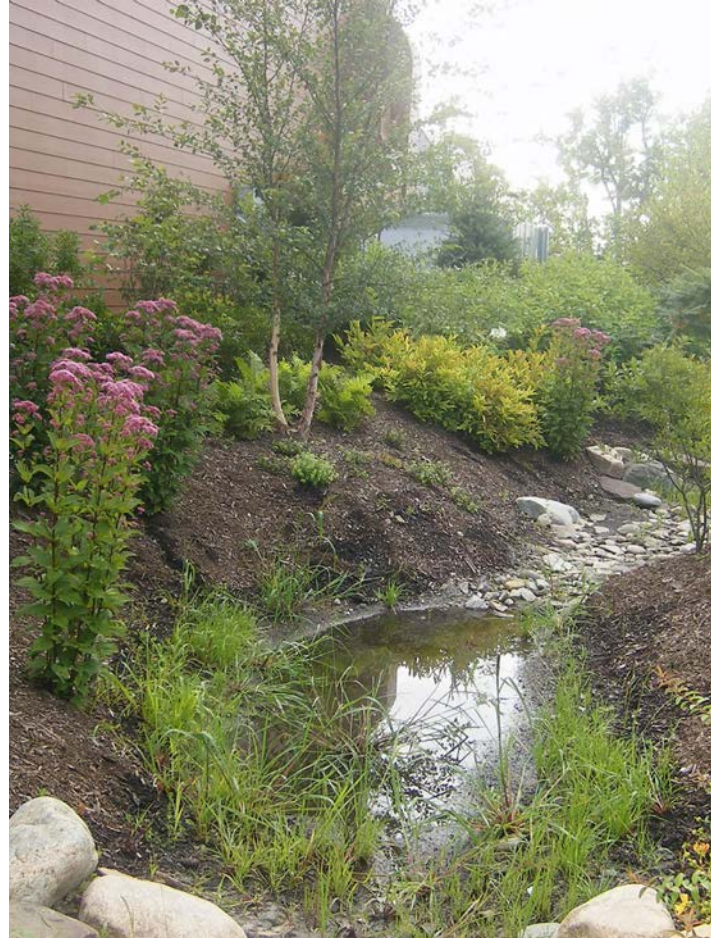
Constructed rain garden - Fletcher Hall (Chautauqua Institution, NY)

Chautauqua Stormwater Management Park - Daylighted stream and rain gardens (Chautauqua Institution, NY)

- **(A: 13.0)** Allow large woody debris and/or leaning trees to remain in streams to provide fish and beneficial insect habitat unless they cause a safety hazard to park visitors or navigation. Possible concerns include upstream flooding, falling tree limbs, or destabilization of banks as the stream adjusts its course around the debris.

Stormwater management

The great majority of the Parks' property is undeveloped and does not produce unnatural stormwater runoff, but in some locations, including roads, parking lots, and buildings, stormwater management practices can help protect the quality of nearby waterbodies by slowing water and capturing pollutants.

Examples of such practices include:

- *Disconnecting roof drainpipes and other outlets that direct stormwater straight to waterbodies.*
- *Collecting rainwater from rooftops in rain barrels for use in irrigating new plantings.*
- *Directing runoff from roads and parking lots to grass filter areas, bioretention or "rain garden" facilities.*
- *Reducing pavement area wherever possible.*
- *Using permeable surfaces such as gravel or pervious pavement on parking areas and limited-use driving lanes.*

Pesticide/fertilizer use

The Parks Department does not currently use a large amount of pesticide or fertilizer. Continuing to avoid unnecessary chemical use can protect environmental quality, and at the same time help to keep maintenance costs as low as possible. Policies and practices that can help prevent environmental damage from chemical use in the future include the following:

- *Use of native plants that are well adapted to the site where they are planted can reduce or eliminate the need for fertilizer. If needed, organic fertilizers such as decomposed manure can be used in place of commercial chemical formulas.*
- *Using Integrated Pest Management (a comprehensive approach to preventing, identifying, and managing pests to limit damage with the least possible expense or hazard to people and the environment) can minimize pesticide use and reduce costs.*
- *Use herbicides only when needed as part of invasive species management efforts.*
- *Follow state standards in creating policies related to chemical use.*
- *Ensure that any fertilizers or pesticides used are stored properly to prevent spills, leakage, or improper use.*

Significant damage to the environment from frequent foot traffic and use of the disc golf course at Chestnut Ridge Park

5.2.6 EROSION CONTROL

Erosion is a consistent issue across the County parks, and has multiple causes, depending upon the setting. These causes include excessive foot traffic in erodible areas, stream channel erosion near road crossings, watershed condition outside the park boundaries, and streambank conditions within the park, including lack of vegetated buffer areas and invasion by Japanese Knotweed.

Current Conditions

Bank erosion is especially evident at Como Lake Park, near the dam, where the banks of Cayuga Creek are very steep and highly eroded. While the ultimate causes of this condition are related to surrounding development and therefore cannot be resolved solely from within the park, shoreline stabilization projects can prevent further deterioration or movement of the stream channel, and increase both visitor safety and natural habitat quality.

At Ellicott Creek Park, bank erosion is present in several areas, but is particularly severe in the Ellicott Island bark park, where some shoreline areas are now entirely bare due to foot and paw traffic. These areas are currently losing soil rapidly, and contributing excessive sediment to Tonawanda Creek. The downstream tip of Ellicott Island will require significant effort to stabilize, due to very steep slopes, hard ground, and severe gully formation.

In some forested areas of Emery and Chestnut Ridge Parks, erosion due to stormwater runoff is apparent. This is particularly evident at Emery Park where a combination of remaining impermeable surfaces and excessive foot traffic on the slope north of the ski area has apparently accelerated the formation of gullies. At Chestnut Ridge, issues are more apparent along paved roads and at locations where roads cross small streams. In some locations, upstream erosion has led to noticeable sediment deposition.

All of the Heritage Parks have a large number of roads throughout them, some of which are confusing and may be unnecessary. Removing some roads would contribute to reducing runoff. However, abandoning roads in place, as has been done in parts of Emery Park, will not change runoff patterns. At Emery Park, abandoned roadways are still contributing to environmental impacts.

Foot traffic associated with disc golf is causing severe erosion and degradation of forest understory conditions at both Chestnut Ridge and Emery Parks. On these courses, many disc golf holes have been sited on or near steep slopes and in otherwise sensitive areas such that players are obliged to walk in highly erodible areas. Foot traffic can damage understory by trampling vegetation and compacting soils, making it impossible for new vegetation to establish. Once soil is bare, it is also more susceptible to scouring by rainwater.
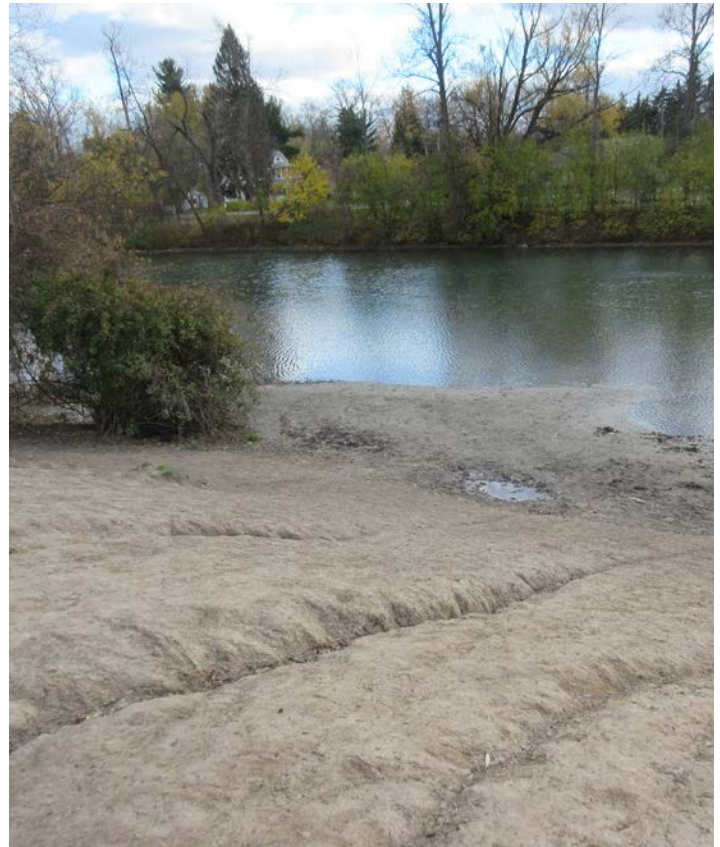
Bank erosion at Ellicott Island bark park

A small road spur at Chestnut Ridge Park, is no longer needed

Recommendations

Restoration of Forest Areas Damaged by Disc Golf - The areas in question are typically steep slopes with intact overstory canopy and delicate soils. Excessive foot traffic has led to erosion of slopes and to hard-packed, bare soil without any vegetation or duff layer (A layer of moderately to highly decomposed leaves, needles, fine twigs, and other organic material found between the mineral soil surface and litter layer of forest soil). Tree roots are exposed throughout the areas, which leads to mud puddles in wet conditions. The following steps outline one possible restoration process for these areas:

1. Define criteria for evaluating success. The goal is for these sections of forest to eventually match the adjacent forest structure and species composition. For each restoration area, record these characteristics so that the restoration can be compared with initial goals and its success evaluated objectively. This provides managers with information that will help them adapt stewardship practices as necessary.

2. Remove foot traffic from the area by relocating the disc golf hole to open lawn areas (i.e. the course layout at Ellicott Creek Park), and if necessary by temporarily fencing the area off. Post signage, e.g. "Please help us restore this forest area by staying on designated trails". Research has shown that trail users are more likely to obey closures, and trail removals are more successful, when signs are worded positively and call attention to personal accountability.

3. Delineate the restoration area using GIS, which will benefit record keeping and monitoring efforts.

4. Carefully use shovels or pry bars to break up the soil surface, allowing water and air to infiltrate, without significant damage to existing tree roots. This can be done without turning the soil, so that what remains of the native soil horizons is not disturbed.

Emery Park disc golf hole

5. Add large woody debris such as felled tree trunks to restore habitat for small wildlife and beneficial organisms, break up water flow patterns, and eventually add organic material to the forest floor. This will also allow organic debris such as leaves and pine needles to be collected naturally instead of washing away in rain events. Over time this should contribute to restoring the forest duff layer that has been lost.

6. Plant native understory vegetation. Mulch to reduce weed competition and cage to prevent damage to young plants by deer and rabbits.

7. Monitor for invasive species, and remove any that appear.

8. Monitor and record changes over time so that progress can be evaluated and strategies adjusted if necessary

5.2.7 ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

- *Plan for projects to educate the public on environmental awareness and natural resources conservation*

- *Initiate demonstration projects to show proper management techniques for the conservation of natural resources (streambank erosion control, buffer maintenance, non-native invasive species control, etc.)*

- *Establish interpretive trails with signage that identify flora, fauna and places of historical and cultural significance.*

Large areas of mowed lawn at Akron Falls Park - that could be transitioned to a no-mow zone with passive uses like nature trails and wildlife observation

Low mow area at Isle View Park

5.2.8 ALTERNATIVE MOWING TECHNIQUES

Many areas of the parks are underused for recreation, but managed as manicured landscapes. The return of these areas to a more natural/passive setting would have environmental benefits, and would allow resources to be redirected to park rehabilitation efforts. This plan recommends locations for reduced mowing, totaling approximately 142 acres across the Heritage Parks.

Several methods can achieve naturalization within a park setting. These include simple alternative vegetation management strategies such as establishing no-mow buffers adjacent to watercourses and woodlots, more proactive approaches involving the re-planting of meadow or woodland areas with native species, and detailed restoration or rehabilitation of degraded watercourses or erosion- prone slopes.

This plan recommends three main general categories of mowing reduction treatment: Natural Regeneration, Low-Mow Meadow, and Wildflower/Meadow. Initial suggestions for where these treatments can be used are presented in Naturalization Maps (see Volume 2). Within each general category, there is flexibility to tailor management to a particular site's needs.

- *Natural Regeneration* – (Approximately 60 acres recommended). The goal of this treatment is to allow natural forests to develop. In most cases, suggested natural regeneration areas are adjacent to existing forest, and serve to expand continuous forest habitat within the parks. Mowing will cease altogether, and woody plant removal will be limited to non-native species. Young native trees of species found in neighboring forest can be planted to speed natural reforestation, and native meadow grass and wildflower seeds may be planted to replace lawn until the tree canopy matures.

- *Low-Mow Meadow* – (Approximately 48 acres recommended) This treatment is recommended in areas that may potentially see different use in the future, and are not intended to be reforested. They would be mowed a specified number of times a year to prevent woody plants from establishing. Within the "low-mow" management category, there exists flexibility for tailoring management to a particular park or zone. A potential sub-type of Low-Mow Area, called Wet Meadow, simply refers to areas that currently tend to remain wet, and therefore may support different plant species than typical Low-Mow Meadow. Wet Meadow is not intended to retain standing water as a pond would.

- *Wildflower/Meadow* – (Approximately 33 acres recommended) In locations with low use but high visibility, such as near park entrances, the Low-Mow Meadow treatment can be modified by the addition of significant native wildflower planting efforts. Several different methods can be used to establish a native wildflower meadow, each with pros and cons:
  - "Precision Prairie Reconstruction" is a relatively new, cost-effective method that uses small-scale disturbances to simulate natural prairie processes. In this method, 15 x 15 foot nodes are rototilled and seeded without the use of herbicide. The combined area of the nodes should be approximately 25% of the total meadow area. The seeded nodes develop native "microcommunities", which can then spread throughout the meadow over time. In an initial study, this method was found to be as effective as the more traditional methods of tilling and seeding 100% of the site, or using herbicide to kill turf and then drill seeding the entire site, at a lower cost.

○ *Common, "Tried and True" methods include 'herbicide / drill seeding' treatments, and 'tilling / broadcast seeding' treatments.*

○ *It is common to use broad spectrum herbicides such as glyphosate to kill existing turf grass prior to planting native seed. The number of applications depends upon the overall project conditions. Herbicide use has the advantage of being very effective in suppressing undesirable plants that would compete with young prairie plants, but has the disadvantages of higher cost and greater potential for unintended environmental impacts than some other methods.*

○ *Grassland seed drills can be used for "no-till" seeding into existing turf, or for increasing diversity in restoration areas. This is most often done after herbicide treatment, but can potentially be used over living turf. This method has the advantage of requiring little soil disturbance, which translates to less erosion and fewer weeds. Grass drills are very specialized equipment, however, and there are significant subtleties involved in their use for planting prairie seed. An experienced operator can greatly increase the rate of success.*

○ *Discing or tilling the area to break up the soil and destroy existing turf before seeding has the advantage of avoiding chemical use, but does create the potential for soil erosion. When using this method, it should be noted that Discing an area larger than one acre may trigger NYSDEC requirements for a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP).*

○ *Broadcast seeding directly into healthy turf grass is not often recommended, as seeds tend not to have adequate soil contact and do not compete well with the non-native grasses. Discing or otherwise removing the turf, for example by burning, before planting greatly increases seed success when using a broadcast method.*

○ *For smaller areas, using plugs / seedling plants can create a more immediate visual effect. This can be combined with seeding, and is sometimes used to create an attractive border strip along the most visible edges of the restoration project.*

Locations for Mowing Reduction

The following are examples of landscape types where reduced mowing and alternative vegetation management strategies would be beneficial within the Erie County Park System.

- **Slopes of 3:1 and steeper** can be hazardous to mow, and generally produce poor turf due to slippage and erosion. These areas should be left unmown or planted with self-sustaining native tree, shrub, and groundcover plant communities.

- **Wet areas** subject to flooding are difficult to mow and do not support good turf. Alternatives include natural regeneration (through elimination of mowing), replanting to include wet woodland species, or development of wetland communities.

- **Individual trees** spaced at intervals in a lawn can create difficult and costly mowing conditions. These can be consolidated into groves or copses by eliminating mowing between the trees and allowing natural groundcovers to establish. The naturalization process can be accelerated by inter-planting with native trees and shrubs.

- **Dense tree groupings or woodland areas** with mown turf under the canopy are impacted by mowing as a result of soil impoverishment and an inability of the woodland to regenerate. Mowing should be discontinued and a natural groundcover allowed to re-establish itself. Alternatively, a native understory can be encouraged through the planting of shade tolerant, woodland groundcovers and shrubs.

- **Woodland, wetland, or creek edges** where frequent mowing is undertaken right up to the edge. Mowing limits should be extended further out from the natural plant community (at least 15 to 20-feet) to provide a natural buffer, and encourage natural regeneration.

- **Rock outcrops:** Where these occur in the landscape, the maintenance of turf up to the edges has little functional or aesthetic value. Natural plant communities should be allowed to re-establish themselves in these areas.

- **Incorporation of demonstration habitat areas.** In conjunction with the naturalization areas, there are opportunities to establish specialized areas that target wildlife or plant communities. Areas such as butterfly meadows or wetland habitats incorporated into the more public areas of the park can serve as excellent projects for both community involvement and education.

5.2.9   TECHNICAL RESOURCES

The Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District (ECSWCD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recommends the following list of resources, which can be accessed at their East Aurora Field Office. Recognizing that natural resources concerns and conservation/management practices are varied and site-specific, and can involve evaluation and planning that may be within the level of expertise of the East Aurora Field Office, the ECSWCD and the NRCS is available to work with the Erie County Parks Department in evaluating natural resources concerns on an as-needed basis.

5.3   PUBLIC AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

A move toward environmental-based management practices for the Erie County Parks will require a focused program of public awareness. In the early stages, reducing mown areas and encouraging natural regeneration can be perceived by the public as neglect. Noticeable improvements to park facilities, e.g. refurbishment of picnic shelters, simple measures such as signage identifying "Natural Regeneration Areas", will go a long way to alleviating public concerns.

Public awareness initiatives could include:

- Dissemination of information on environmental management practices: e.g. park naturalization programs and benefits, woodlot management, water management, water quality improvement measures, or watercourse enhancement projects;

- Collaboration with school boards and local municipalities, in conjunction with other initiatives and programs, to heighten public awareness on environmental initiatives;

- Environmental advocacy at the homeowner level, e.g. planting of non-invasive species adjacent to natural areas, (proper disposal of residential contaminants, yard waste disposal, low maintenance landscapes, water conservation, etc.);

- Provision of educational/interpretive signage in County parks;

- Organizing stream, valley, trail clean-up projects, community planting days;

- Use of the County Parks web site, social media, and community locations (libraries, community centers, shopping malls) to promote projects, events, and issues

Invasive species awareness sign at Seneca Bluffs

Volunteer effort by the Friends of Ellicott Bark Park at Ellicott Creek Park

5.4 VOLUNTEER/PROGRAM POLICY

With the reality of diminishing budgets, reduced labor forces and rising costs, the Erie County Parks Department will need to follow the lead set by communities and counties all over the country and solicit the help of volunteer organizations and individuals to supplement their internal work force to not only maintain the existing level of services and maintenance, but also to begin to increase the level of maintenance and enhancements system wide. Volunteer assistance is in no way meant to remove or reduce the work levels of current Union employees, but rather to supplement and complement Union staff levels with volunteers the Department can take on projects and tasks that cannot be implemented under current staffing levels or budgets, or to tackle projects that are above and beyond all the rest.

As with past volunteer efforts, future endeavors should follow a typical protocol of coordinating all volunteer efforts with Parks Department and Union officials, including receiving approval for the task at hand.

- **(A: 14.0) It is highly recommended that the Parks Department hires a community engagement coordinator to be the primary liason and overseer of all volunteer coordination and efforts.** This would include identifying the task, establishing a definitive time-frame and coordinating with Parks Department staff. Ideal arrangements would be for volunteers to work as a team led by Parks staff.

Seneca Bluffs received much needed volunteer work to help enhance and clean up the park

5.5 SIGNAGE SYSTEM

A new signage system should be developed for the Erie County Park System that updates the existing green and yellow wood signs to a more contemporary styling. They should be designed as a 'family' of signs using a consistent graphic style and the County Parks logo that can also be used on brochures, marketing materials, and the website. Also, given the costs of making changes to park signage, design sign with the ability to easily change out panels.

The following categories of signs are recommended:
1. PARK IDENTIFICATION AND INFORMATION
2. DIRECTIONAL
3. REGULATORY
4. INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION
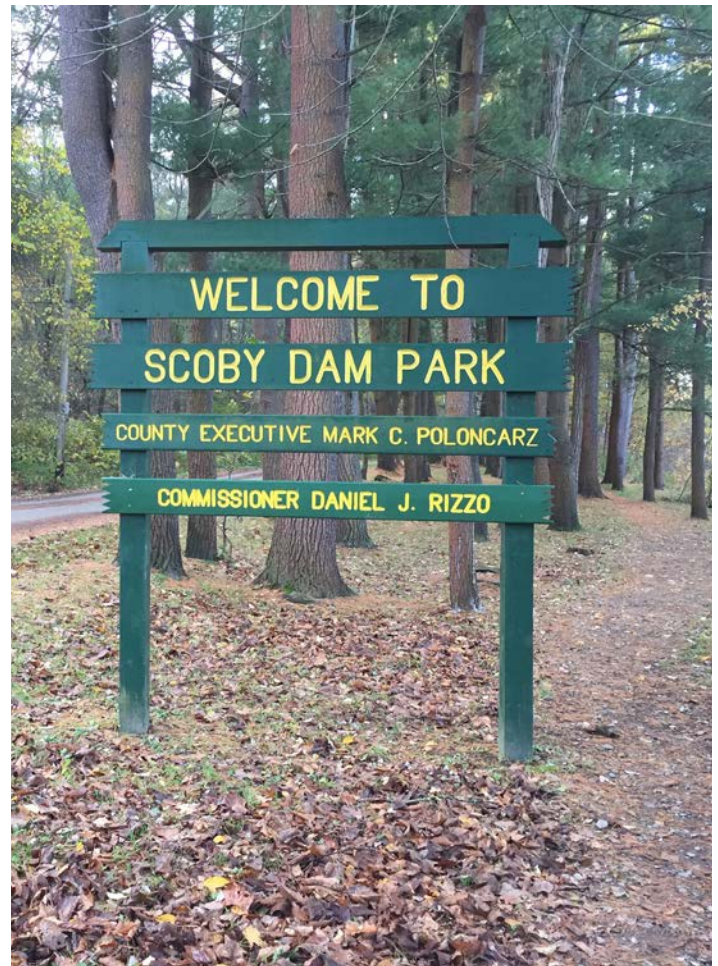
Typical park entry sign

New 2018 sign at Thomas F. Higgins Riverfront Bridge and Park: Potential template for Park sign system

Sign at Black Rock Canal Park off of Niagara Street

Sign at Elma Meadows Park

The following general guidelines should be applied to all signage types:

- *Consistency of design and graphic communication;*
- *Clarity in conveying the desired message to a range of users, from adults to children;*
- *Vandal and weather resistant materials and construction;*
- *Of a size and design that is appropriate, visible and understandable to all park users, i.e. cyclists, motorists and pedestrians;*
- *Compatibility with surroundings, in use of color, materials, size, and placement*
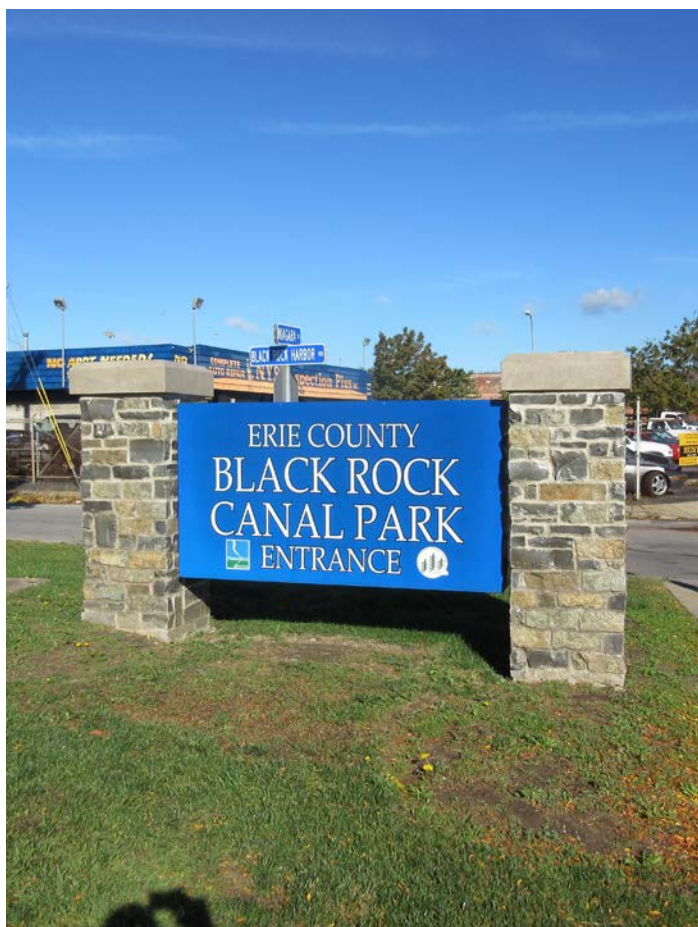
5.5.1 PARK IDENTIFICATION AND INFORMATION SIGNS

These signs would be provided at park entrances and/ or important trailheads, and key park facilities such as the casinos and could include the following information:

Types: Entrance and Information
- Park identification including: the park name, distinctive park system logo and County information (emergency number, park management contact information), operating hours, website address, etc.
- Park map, showing trails, key facilities, picnic areas and shelter numbers and environmental management areas. For parks with complex trail systems, loops

and distances, degree of difficulty, and any notable hazards such as steep slopes should also be marked.
- Optional notice board for promotion of park related events or activities, might be included at parks without indoor facilities. To encourage visitation of other parks, and cross-marketing, postings should include upcoming events at other parks or related non-park community events.

5.5.2 DIRECTIONAL SIGNAGE

Directional signs should be located at road junctions and access points throughout the park, directing users to nearby facilities, or within trail systems and may include:

Types: Wayfinding and Directional ("within the park,"-"to the park")
- *Park name and logo*
- *Directional arrows*
- *Distance markers should be included at main junction of trails or roadways in large parks or extensive trail systems;*

Simple post markers with graphic or color coding that identify trail loops and correspond with an overall route map at the trailheads or on brochures, can be used for complex trail systems.

Directional signs may also include route markers on roads, to

New trailhead kiosk at the foot of the Eternal Flame Trail; Low maintenance plantings with seasonal interest should be installed at the base of the trailhead

direct motorists, cyclists, or pedestrians along scenic or safe routes between the parks and nearby destinations, or communities. These signs should also be designed with a distinctive County Park identity logo and/or color coding and shall be in conformity with recognized standards, as well as conforming to County and American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) standards, for the design of roadway signs. Directional signs could also be posted on main routes directing traffic to specific parking lots within the park system.

5.5.3 REGULATORY SIGNS

Regulatory signs display prohibitive information, warnings and cautions. Areas where regulatory signs may be needed include natural areas where public access is discouraged. For trail systems these may include: potential hazard areas (e.g. steep slopes, or bridges on trail systems), and changes in trail type (multi-use to walking only). Seasonal trail or area closures due to conditions, wildlife considerations or environmental restoration should also be signed.

Types: Park Rules and Warnings

- *Regulatory signs should be designed as part of the overall signage system, using compatible styling and colors;*

- *The message should be easily recognized from a distance (e.g. international symbols, visible colors). Use of metal signs and posts typical of roadway signs is a cost effective design;*

- *Prohibitive or closure information should include a brief, informative explanation noting the reasons for the restriction, encouraging co-operation, and noting whether the situation is temporary or permanent;*

- *Signs identifying 'Natural Regeneration Area' or specific habitat areas, e.g. 'Waterfowl Nesting Area' would also be included within this category of signs.*

Trail warnings for the Eternal Flame Trail are a good example of design and location, but may require additional information (e.g. not suitable for young children, proper footwear is highly encouraged, off-season use of the trail should be only accessed with a partner incase of injury, etc.)

Warning signs at Akron Falls Park

5.5.4 PARK RULES

As part of the Erie County Park Master Plan Update, the current Park Rules and Regulations were reviewed, Local Law 16-1988. These Rules and Regulations are in use in all of the County Parks. However each park is unique in some way and the general rules may not apply equally in all instances.

The current Park Rules are as follows:

1. Park Hours: 7am -Dusk (Winter Hours: Labor Day through Memorial Day) or 9pm (Summer Hours: Memorial Day through Labor Day). Reserved shelters & buildings are accessible from 10am - Park Close. Park staff will unlock the buildings at 10 am and re-lock them at the end of your rental.

2. Shelters are by reservations only. The quantity of people at shelter must not exceed the shelter limits.

3. Reservations (shelter & camping) may be made by calling 716.858.8355 or by submitting an electronic request.

4. Reservation Fees are not transferable or refundable. THERE ARE NO REFUNDS. A fee will be assessed if a check is returned for non-sufficient funds.

5. Preservation of Property: Destruction or defacing of park property is prohibited. Please remove signs at the end of your event. Use of spray paint (including water soluble), staples, nails and tacks is prohibited.

6. Traffic and Parking:
   - Speed limit is 15 mph.
   - NO parking more than 5 feet off roads or where prohibited by sign.
   - Driving off roadways is prohibited.

7. Fires shall be allowed only in grills, camping facilities and fire circles provided for that purpose, or grill furnished by Park patrons. All embers shall be extinguished before leaving the site.

8. Garbage and Refuse: littering and dumping are prohibited. Please use carry-in/carry-out principle and place all garbage in proper refuse containers.

9. Dogs: Must be licensed and kept on leash at ALL TIMES. YOU MUST CLEAN UP AFTER YOUR DOG. Dogs are not allowed on County beaches.

10. Alcoholic Beverages: Beer and wine are by permit only. Shelter permit allows beer and wine (no alcohol in Casino Meeting Room). No other alcoholic beverages allowed. No kegs.

11. All glass containers are prohibited.

12. Unreasonably loud noise or music and disorderly conduct is prohibited.

13. Bounce houses, tents and other outdoor recreational equipment (dunk tanks, miniature golf, etc.) are prohibited. Tents larger than 19' x 19' are prohibited.

14. Commercial Enterprises and Large Events: are prohibited without a permit issued by the Parks Commissioner or his duly appointed agent.

15. Bicyclists: Must wear helmet at all times.

16. Hunting and Trapping: is prohibited in all County Park land. Fishing shall be allowed only in season and where posted.

17. Firearms: Carrying or discharging of firearms is prohibited.

18. ATV's and snowmobiles: Must be insured and registered and remain on designated trails only.

19. ATVs are allowed only in Chestnut Ridge Park in designated outlying trails and by permit only.

20. All rules of permit must be followed. Call 858-8355/ http://www.erie.gov/parks

21. Horses and Riders: prohibited except on designated trails at County Forestry Saw Mill/ Sugar Shack Area (Genesee Rd, Sardinia), Sgt. Mark A. Rademacher Memorial Park/Hunters Creek Park, and Boston Forest.

22. Mountain Biking: Prohibited except on designated trails at Sprague Brook Park and Sgt. Mark A. Rademacher Memorial Park/Hunters Creek Park (Future consideration at Franklin Gulf)

23. Do not cut or destroy any trees, plant life or disturb wildlife.

24. DECORATIONS: May be applied with sticky-tac only. Absolutely no tape, tacks, staples or nails can be used at any time. Nothing can be affixed to ceilings or fans. Tablecloths cannot be stapled or tacked to tables. Absolutely NO BALLOONS. Any damage caused by using unauthorized items will be charged back to the permit holder.

25. Any damage caused to rented facilities will be charged back to the permit holder.

26. Smoke free parks. Please no smoking or vaping.

In addition to the above Park Rules the following trail conduct rules are recommended:

1. Trails are remote, and use is at your own risk. Cell phones and a 'trail buddy' are recommended.

2. Check trail distances and difficulty before heading out. Know your limits in terms of endurance and ability.

3. Respect the natural beauty of the area. Stay on the designated, marked trail system. Trail breaking can cause environmental damage.

4. Do not alter or remove signs and trail markings. Others depend on them.

5. Whatever you carry in, you carry out.

6. In general, trails are multi-use. Please Share the Trail, and respect the rights of other trail users.
   - Wheels yield to Heels yield to Hooves
   - Allow faster riders or walkers to pass you on the left. Indicate your intent to pass.

7. Respect fence lines and no-trespassing signs, and avoid entering private property.

8. Avoid frightening or disturbing wildlife or livestock that may be in close proximity to you.

9. Emergency contact and/or guidelines

5.5.5 INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION SIGNS

These signs would be developed in conjunction with park themes, or special feature areas. Signs may be developed on themes of natural ecosystems, landscape or cultural heritage, flora or fauna or park management practices (e.g. park naturalization). The information presented should be both interesting and informative, and in natural areas, be oriented to building stewardship and responsibility for environmental management.

- *Interpretive/educational signs should be located within a node at viewing locations or rest areas, or at a widened point in a trail system.*

- *Sign design and construction may vary according to the park setting or storyline. A consistent design should be used within each park, and each sign series should be compatible with the County Park System identity.*

- *The presentation of information should be suited to a wide range of users, including adults and children. The message should be both interesting and informative, oriented to educating park users.*

- *For areas of geological interest, for example waterfalls, gorges, exposed ledges, etc., work closely with the Buffalo Museum of Science or other experts (Historical Societies, etc.) to help "tell the story" behind these impressive features.*

Southtowns Scenic Byways signage at Sprague Brook Park

Interpretive signage at the Tribute Garden in Isle View Park
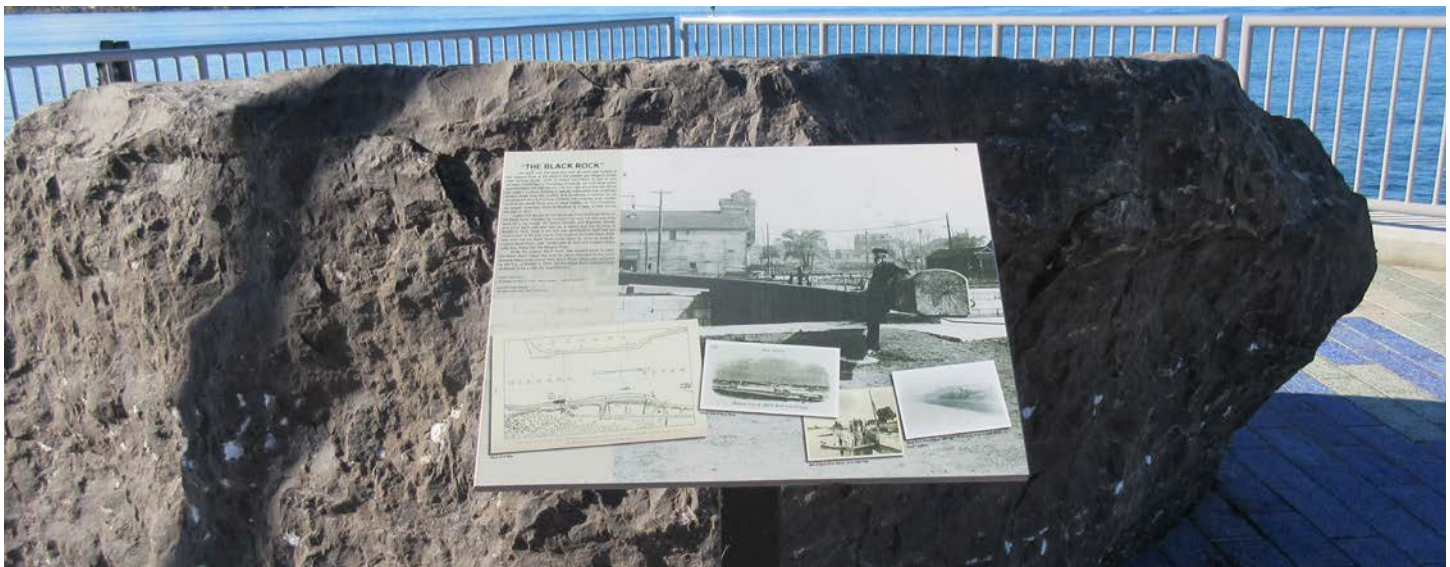
Interpretive signage at Black Rock Canal Park

ACTION ITEMS

Type	Project #	Recommendation	Implementation Strategies	Priority	Term	Estimated Cost
A	1.0	Design and Implement a Native Plant Policy for promoting the use of native plants in revegetation projects within the Parks System, and related projects on County managed lands.	Goals of implementing a Native Plant Policy would be to promote the restoration and rehabilitation of native plant communities in support of biological diversity and healthy ecosystem functions.	High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	2.0	Design and implement an Invasive Plant Species Policy that would provide the framework and authority to address Invasive Species.		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	3.0	Develop a recommended tree species planting list aligned with the Native Plant Policy	Developing a list of preferred tree species makes local nurseries and wholesalers aware of the desires for future tree purchases by the County and allows them to adjust production accordingly.	High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	4.0	Develop a tree establishment plan that would include the schedule for irrigation, mulching, removal of tree support systems, and training pruning.		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	5.0	Establish an annual budget allocation for tree planting.		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	6.0	Pursue grant funding for tree plantings.	NYSDEC provides a Cost Share Grant program funded through the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which includes a category for tree planting that can supplement a County planting budget.	High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	7.0	Develop annual tree planting plans that are focused and achievable.		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	8.0	Pursue grant funding for community forest management planning.	NYSDEC provides a Cost Share Grant program funded through the EPF which includes a category for management plans which can supplement a County budget.	High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	9.0	Address over-browsing by deer.	In some areas of the parks, plant diversity is suffering from over-browsing by deer.	High	Ongoing	In-House

KEY:

A: Action Item: Completed at low to no cost by Parks staff

P: Assistance or completion of project by potential partner/user group

C: Capital Project

POB: Parks Operating Budget

Type	Project #	Recommendation	Implementation Strategies	Priority	Term	Estimated Cost
A	10.0	Maintain/enhance existing vegetated buffer areas along streams and other waterbodies for filtering of runoff, erosion protection and habitat value.		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	11.0	Establish vegetated buffers in critical areas currently lacking in such buffers.		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	12.0	Establish recreation and maintenance buffers to prevent accidental damage to shorelines of streams and other waterbodies that are currently lacking a suitable buffer.	(buffer areas may be no-mow sections, planting filter strips, etc.).	High	Ongoing	In-House
A	13.0	Allow large woody debris and/or leaning trees to remain in streams to provide fish and beneficial insect habitat unless they cause a safety hazard to park visitors or navigation.	Possible concerns include upstream flooding, falling tree limbs, or destabilization of banks as the stream adjusts its course around the debris.	High	Ongoing	In-House
C	1.0	Conduct tree inventories in the remaining parks in the system. The data collected should be on trees located within the developed or landscaped (mowed) areas of the park.	Pursue grant funding for tree inventories. NYSDEC provides a Cost Share Grant program funded through the EPF, which includes a category for tree inventories that can supplement a County inventory budget.	High	3-5 Years	Grant Funding
C	2.0	Develop a community forest management plan.	The purpose of a forest management plan is to ensure that a community will enjoy the benefits of trees through proper arboricultural techniques and management practices.	High	1-2 Years	Grant Funding
C	3.0	Implement stream bank and floodplain restoration projects when and where possible.	Examples of such projects include the recent "living shoreline" demonstration project at Ellicott Creek Park, led by the Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper.	High	Ongoing	Grant Funding, User Groups
C	4.0	Relocate or remove adjacent pavements to protect waterbodies.	For example, at Akron Falls Park there is a parking area very close to the stream/impoundment. This may lead to contaminated runoff entering the stream.	High	3-5 Years	DPW
P	1.0	Pursue partnerships with Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper, "Friends of" groups and others to develop achievable planting projects.	Recent efforts can be replicated across the park system through partnerships with "Friends of" groups and others.	High	Ongoing	In-House

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IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

6.1 PARKS MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES

6.1.1 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 Parks Master Plan reports.

Given the age and diversity of the parks, and the unique nature of their buildings and stone structures, a substantial amount of maintenance and improvement 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 15 to 18 years. Prioritization is therefore needed to ensure that the highest needs for repair and upgrading are undertaken first, followed by projects that improve recreation and other opportunities.

6.1.2 REPAIR AND REMOVAL OF FACILITIES THAT COMPROMISE PUBLIC SAFETY

The priorities for capital improvements are focused on repairing, enhancing, and improving existing facilities that compromise public safety and ensuring that significant cultural heritage assets are preserved. The parks inventory (Volume 4) evaluated the facilities within the parks and ranked their condition from "good" to "poor" (Explained further in Volume 1, page 36). 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 "poor" condition. Of particular concern are structures that have a high degree of interaction such as playgrounds, trails and shelters as well as bridges, barriers and guards that have deteriorated to the point where they no longer provide the intended function.

6.1.3 RESTORATION OF SIGNIFICANT HERITAGE STRUCTURES

The inventory noted that the 5 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 poor condition, should be given priority for preservation, repair or restoration, rather than removal, in order to maintain these significant heritage assets. To undertake the restoration and preservation of major facilities such as the 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. It is also critical

WPA era shelter on Ellicott Island being repaired

WPA shelter at Emery Park

to find an appropriate and viable use for these impressive structures/facilities to make the investment worth while.

6.1.4 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 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 of trails systems, with accompanying interpretive signage, and construction of new amenities that extend passive uses.

6.1.5 PARK NATURALIZATION

Analysis of the parks, specifically the heritage parks, indicated a large number of acres being maintained as manicured landscapes, when these areas should be considered part of a natural/passive setting. While lawn mowing serves a great purpose in certain heavily used areas, it is inappropriate or wastefull in other areas. The Master Plan Update recommends specific areas to reduce mowing using different strategies of naturalization including natural regeneration, low-mow meadow, and wildflower meadow. These areas are identified in the Volume 2 Naturalization maps. Each map shows approximate boundaries of specific sites to restore to a more natural setting.

By implementing these strategies, this would allow additional resources and time for parks staff to rehabilitate and repair historic structures, shelters, recreation areas, etc. Once naturalization strategies are established, this would increase the ecological benefits for the parks to include new habitats, visual interest, nature trails, and learning tools through interpretive signage. Note: There is also an awareness of the increase in harmful ticks that thrive in taller grass settings. A solution to this is to provide mowed grass paths in certain areas through the meadows to allow people to enjoy these natural settings without concern of ticks and pests.

Stone work in need of repairs on WPA bridge at Chestnut Ridge Park

Historic Wendt Mansion in need of extensive rehabilitation

6.1.6   TRAILWAYS

The County Parks System maintains and provides unique trail systems throughout the region from the Shoreline Trail to passive wildlife trails. The County should prioritize the upkeep and expansion of these trails to connect to its many parks and unique attractions. Proper trail design, upkeep, signage, safety measures, and trail amenities should be planned and provided at all Parks System trails. Many County Parks have a series of different types of trails and pathways which need to be expanded upon and featured as unique assets to the regional parks system. Hunters Creek Park is an example of a park with a series of trails catering to many different user types from hikers to mountain bikers and horseback riders.

The County should continue coordination and collaboration with municipalities and local agencies to strategize any nearby trail construction to have connections with County Parks. Improving connectivity and elements of Complete Streets may provide more people access to the unique assets and amenities in the parks.

6.1.7   ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITY AND IMPROVEMENTS

Ongoing efforts in the County Parks System has heavily focused on improving sensitive ecological communities, habitats, and plant/tree species. Coordination with various agencies like NYSDEC, WNYPRISM, AND ECSWD needs to be prioritized to preserve the environmental character and health of the parks. The 'Living Shoreline Project' at Ellicott Creek Park is one example of how the County is strategizing the importance of preserving and enhancing its unique environmental features.

The Erie County Parks System contains many of the region's streams, creeks, waterfalls, mature forests, dune environments, and much more. Focusing on these unique assets will provide the County with a vast array of destinations and marketing opportunities. Whenever possible, provide safe trails, overlooks, and other areas to access these natural features. And when appropriate provide interpretive signage which can educate park patrons to the wildlife and natural features which exist.

In other cases, as indicated in the Master Plan recommendations,

provide rain gardens and bio-swales to filter stormwater run-off, thereby increasing the health of nearby streams and creeks. In areas of erosion, use strategies to remove foot traffic and plant understory plants to repair eroded areas and slopes. These improvements can protect the critical natural assets of park and promote environmental stewardship.

6.1.8   ACQUISITION AND CONSOLIDATION STRATEGY

Over the past decades the County has achieved objectives for a well-distributed park system that provides recreation and nature 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 or otherwise worthy of acquisition consideration. 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 Erie County's Park Protection Law, Department Policies, and should be financially sustainable without burdening the balance of the system. In addition where existing parks can be expanded or protected through the acquisition of an adjacent parcel, then that should be evaluated and considered at that time.

Historic WPA shelter at Emery Park

Como Lake Park

6.2 PARKS OPERATIONS DISCUSSION AND STRATEGIES

Every community and every parks department vary in scope, and no two are operated equally. The size, operations, and structure of each department vary throughout North America. Comparing Erie County's Park System to other counties' in the State of New York or nationally provides, at best, only a partial correlation. To provide some norm or guide, we have used several sources and metrics, but the best benchmark is to look historically at the county to see how it has changed over time.

6.2.1 NRPA PARK METRICS BENCHMARKING

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) produced the *2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review*. This annual report summarizes the key findings from *NRPA Park Metrics*—a benchmarking tool that helps evaluate an agency's performance so they can more effectively manage and plan operating resources and capital facilities. Each agency can use these tools to easily build customized reports and compare their agency to others to gain more funding support, improve operations, and better serve their community. The *2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review* and *NRPA Park Metrics* together represent the most comprehensive collection of park and recreation benchmarks and insights which inform professionals, key stakeholders, and the public on the state of the park and recreation industry. Most of the data in the *2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review* are presented with the medians, along with results at the lower-quartile (lowest 25 percent) and upper-quartile (highest 25 percent). The data allows for insights into where an agency stands compared to typical agencies (i.e., those at the median values) and the full spectrum of agencies at both the high and low quartiles. The hundreds of agencies reporting include jurisdictions such as villages, towns, cities, counties, states, special and independent districts, and even some military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) departments. Jurisdictions' populations varied from as small as 1,600 people to as large as 3.8 million.

It should be noted that the *2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review* does not include "national standards". The reason is simple: no two park and recreation agencies are the same. Different agencies serve different residents with unique needs, desires and challenges. Agencies also have dissimilar funding mechanisms, just as jurisdictions

(Above) NRPA Key Findings Figures

(Right) 2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review Report cover

have different governmental powers. As communities vary in population and their ability/willingness to fund park and recreation amenities, so too should their park and recreation agencies. A successful agency is one that tailors its services to meet the needs and demands of its community. Knowing who uses your agency's resources and the characteristics of the residents who may use those resources in the future (including age, race, and income trends) are also factors in shaping the optimal mix of facilities and services offered. Using the data from *NRPA Park Metrics,* GreenPlay analyzed the Erie County Parks Department on efficiency, personnel, and workload when compared to the self-reported data set of 82 counties throughout the United States and Canada. Looking at **Figures 2 to 4**, those figures reported in red indicate where Erie County falls in relation to the median. However, in many cases the Parks Department is at, or performing better, than the upper-quartile.

6.2.1.1 OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES

Figure 2 shows the efficiency of the Department compared to the national county median. The Department rates higher for acres of parks per 1,000 residents, number of acres per park, and number of residents per park. We also have a greater

Figure 1 shows the 2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review Key Findings for all agencies reporting:

Operating expenditure per capita:	**$78.26**
Revenue-to-operating expenditures:	**28%**
Acres of park land per 1,000 residents	**10.1**
Residents per park:	**2,114**
Full-Time Equivalent Employees (FTE) per 1,000 residents	**7.9**
Total FTE employees	**36**

COUNTY PARK SYSTEM COMPARISON	MONROE COUNTY	ERIE COUNTY
County Population	747,727	921,046
Operating Budget	**$17,034,652.00**	**$6,817,451.00**
Operating Budget (Not including the Seneca Zoo which is 21.6% of the total operating budget)	$13,355,167.17	
*note: Monroe spends about $4,726,331.00 in the zoo (net expense: $914,675.00) whereas EC provides $1,500,000.00 in operating funds to our zoo)		
Operating Expenditure per Capita (not including zoo)	$17.86	$7.40
Grants from NYS Office of Parks & Recreation	$2,927,727.00	$-
Revenues	$7,414,245.00	
Revenues (minus the zoo)	$3,602,589.00	na
Cost Recovery (including the zoo)	44%	na
Cost Recovery (minus the zoo)	27%	21%
Operating Expenditure per Acre	$1,112.93	$681.75
Number of acres of park land	12,000	10,000
Number of parks/parkland	20	40
Number of developed sites	20	19
Number of full time employees	92	61
Number of non-full time employees	72	31
Number of full time employees - minus zoo	62	na
Number of non-full time employees - minus zoo	50	na
Total annual hours worked by non-full-time employees	187,680	29,078
Total annual hours worked by non-full-time employees - minus zoo (averages)	130,333	na
Total number of full-time equivalent employees (FTEs)	152.23	74.98
Total number of full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) - minus zoo	112.66	na

Information was gathered directly from Monroe (Rochester, NY) and Erie County. Numbers and figures are based on 2018 budgets and info for each County.

annual operating expenditure by 3.5 percent or $213,253. The Department rates fall below the median with respect to specific operational expenditures. The Department is below the median in operating expenditures per capita, revenue per capita, total tax expenditure per capita, and operating expenditure per acre of parkland. For full time equivalents (FTEs) per 10,000 people, the Department currently has 0.81 FTEs compared to 10.7 FTE for median and 18.4 for the upper-quartile. FTE includes a mix of full-time, part-time, and seasonal staff. The Department has a greater inventory of parks and acres of parks than the median of counties in the sample and the County allocates less money and personnel to operate and maintain those parks. This imbalance creates issues of extended mowing cycles, focus on maintenance only, and deferred maintenance backlogs.

6.2.1.2 PERSONNEL

The comparison of personnel indicates that the Department rates at or above the median in most categories. However, when compared to the upper-quartile they are below in all reporting criteria. This may be due in part to Department employees being governed by a collective bargaining agreement (i.e. are union members) as Erie County supports fair wages and contracts to benefit both the employees and the taxpayers. Based on the *NRPA Park Metrics,* 33.3 percent of respondents' employees are also covered by a collective bargaining agreement and 67.7 percent are not. One area of importance is the use of non-full-time employees. The Department uses 31 compared to 55 for the median and 165 for the upper-quartile. The operational review and observations, as well as interviews with staff, support the conclusion of the need for additional personnel for operations and maintenance. This need can be filled by using part-time employees during the busiest seasons, to handle specific projects or functions, and as needed to cover vacancies and leave. Another need is for skilled trade positions within the Department, such as mechanics, plumbers, electricians, and equipment operators.

By filling these positions, the Department can function more efficiently and improve response time for work orders.

6.2.1.3 WORKLOAD

The inventory of Erie County Parks, including total number of parks, total park acreage, miles of trails, and number of buildings operated, was in the higher percentile of counties. The Department rated higher in all categories when compared to the median except for developed park acres and square footage of buildings operated for the upper-quartile.

To further review the Department's workload, Erie County' Parks System was compared to other communities that manage between 8,000 and 12,000 acres of parkland. Unlike the all-counties comparisons that included 82 counties, there were only 11 communities that met the acreage specified. These communities included 3 cities, 4 counties, 3 special districts, and 1 independent district, from the states of Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Virginia.

Figure 5 shows the average of the other communities'

Chestnut Ridge Park, pictured above, is the largest park in the system with over 1,100 acres

Figure 2: Operational Efficiencies Comparison Erie County to NRPA Park Metrics

	Erie County NY	# Counties Reporting	Median	Upper Quartile
Operating expenditures per capita	$6	68	$25	$54
Revenue per capita	$2	65	$6	$19
Total revenue to total operating expenditures	27.90%	65	29.20%	51.10%
Total tax expenditures per capita	$5	65	$16	$32
Operating expenditures per acre of parkland	$603	64	$2,463	$6,475
Operating expenditures per FTE	$79,257	65	$83,068	$115,000
FTE's per 10,000 population	0.81	66	2.8	6.8
Acres of parks per 1,000 residents	10.7	65	10.7	18.4
Number of residents per park	24,893	66	8,926	20,422
Number of acres per park	266.32	65	76.9	92
Agency's total annual operating expenditures	$5,942,697	68	$5,729,444	$12,393,913

Figure 3: Personnel Comparison Erie County to NRPA Park Metrics

	Erie County NY	# Counties Reporting	Median	Upper Quartile
Number of full-time employees	61	69	47	106
Number of non-full-time employees	31	65	55	165
Total annual hours worked by non-full-time employees	29,078	59	31,929	84,745
Total number of full-time equivalent employees (FTEs)	74.98	67	75	135.2
Percentage of total full-time equivalents (FTEs) involved in the following operational areas:				
a. Administration	11%	50	15%	20%
b. Operations	8%	50	61.60%	94.80%
c. Maintenance	81%	50	31.10%	44.80%

Figure 4: Workload Comparison Erie County to NRPA Park Metrics

	Erie County NY	# Counties Reporting	Median	Upper Quartile
Total number of parks	40	66	21.5	50
Total park acres	9,854	65	2,438	5,752.20
Developed	1,060	49	984	2,591
Undeveloped	8,794	56	985.5	5,365.80
Total number of trail miles managed or maintained by the agency	67	57	39.6	67
Number of operated buildings	46	55	15	39
Square footage of operated buildings	193,000	46	112,500	277,571.50

Figure 5: Erie County Comparison to Communities with 8,000 to 12,000 Acres of Parkland

	Erie County NY	# Jurisdictions Reporting	Lower Quartile	Median	Upper Quartile
Operating expenditures per capita	$6	10	$35	$58	$160
Revenue per capita	$2	11	$7	$9	$47
Agency's total annual operating expenditures	$5,942,697	10	$10,798,941	$29,298,305	$59,848,950
Total tax expenditures per capita	$5	10	$26	$46	$111
Operating expenditures per acre of parkland	$603	6	$296	$683	$814
Operating expenditures per FTE	$79,257	9	$72,088	$88,712	$143,104
FTE's per 10,000 population	0.81	10	3.6	7.2	14.6
Acres of parks per 1,000 residents	10.70	11	7.6	19.5	48
Number of residents per park	24,893.1	11	4,774.6	6,179.1	20,175.2
Number of acres per park	266.32	11	91.5	174.6	378.5

comparisons to Erie County. The Department was below the average in all categories except number of acres per park. Overall, this supports the need for additional resources to manage and maintain a parks system of this size.

6.2.1.4 CONCLUSIONS

Benchmarking is a tool that assists park and recreation professionals in the effective management and planning for operating resources and capital facilities. Using the *NRPA Park Metrics* data, the team has benchmarked the Erie County Parks Department to other county parks departments reporting from around the USA and Canada. The comparisons are based on the median and the upper-quartile (highest 25 percent) of respondents.

- Erie County Parks Department is above the median for number of parks, total park acres, number of buildings, and miles of trails.
- The Department is below the median for operating expenditures per capita, total tax expenditures per capita, revenue per capita, operating expenditures per acre of parkland, operating expenditure per FTE, and FTEs per 10,000 population.
- The Department employs more full time employees than the median but less part-time employees than the median.
- When comparing percentage of FTEs to areas of responsibility, the Department currently allocates 11 percent to administration, 8 percent to operations and 81 percent to maintenance. This is compared to the median that allocates 15 percent to administration, 61.6 percent to operations and 31.1 percent to maintenance.
- To operate efficiently and meet current demand,

the Department should consider training and redistribution of FTEs between areas of responsibilities as well as increase staffing, both full-time and non-full-time, to meet current demand and increase level of service.

6.2.2 ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

The organizational and management structure of the Parks Department and staffing were assessed to determine effectiveness and efficiency in meeting current and future departmental responsibilities as related to the community's needs. The needs assessment – including input from staff interviews, community and key stakeholder engagement, and level of service analysis, along with the consultant's expertise – has identified a few areas for operational enhancement.

These key organizational issues identified and observed as areas for improvement include:
- Better marketing and communication of activities
- Enhance and improve internal and external communication
- Improve the website so it is current and usable for patrons
- Increase the utilization of technology to improve customer service and efficiencies
- Improve and update park and wayfinding signage and maps
- Increase appropriate partnerships within the community
- Adopt a donations policy and program
- Adopt a sponsorship and partnership policy, program, and agreements

Two Mile Creek Greenway contributes to the County's miles of trails

6.2.3 STAFFING ANALYSIS

Management structure and staffing levels of the Parks Department was assessed to determine effectiveness and efficiency in meeting current and future departmental responsibilities as related to the community's needs. Many observations were taken into account to determine if the Parks Department had the right mix of staffing in the right places within the Department.

The staffing analysis process included the observations and assessments of:

- Community input
- Community satisfaction rates
- Staff focus groups
- Individual staff interviews
- Facility tours
- Observations of quality of maintenance
- Professional knowledge in Parks and Recreation organizations and operations
- SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, & Threats)
- Organizational chart

Example of a WPA-era shelter at Emery Park

6.2.3.1 STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS

The operational and maintenance structure and staffing levels of the Parks Department were assessed to determine effectiveness and efficiency in meeting current and future maintenance and operational responsibilities as related to the current level of service needs and existing deferred maintenance. Parks, Recreation, and Forestry is responsible for maintaining public open spaces and for providing a quality system of parks, recreation facilities, open spaces, and positive leisure opportunities available to all persons in the community. The Department operates a park system made up of nearly 10,000 acres of park lands located across 40 sites throughout the County. These sites are made up of the following:

- 12 large, multi-purpose parks
- 7 undeveloped parks
- 13 forestry lots
- 7 small special-purpose parks
- 2 multi-purpose trails

Currently responsibilities include but are not limited to:

- Mowing
- Trash collection
- Building and comfort station cleaning
- Building and structure maintenance and repairs (shelters and lodges, campgrounds, comfort stations, etc.)
- Tree and brush management, maintenance, and clean-up
- Vehicle and equipment maintenance
- Trail marking and maintenance
- Roadway and driveway maintenance in parks
- WPA and other historic structure maintenance and repair
- Snow removal at multiple sites
- Event support and clean-up
- Urban forestry and forest management
- Playgrounds maintenance, repair, or replacement

The County and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry are committed to the highest levels of maintenance, but the Department is struggling to maintain its inventory of parks, facilities, and trails. Based on the level of service analysis, inventory and existing conditions report, and the current level of staffing, the Department will continue to experience an increasing backlog of deferred maintenance.

Further, after considering all of the organizational observations and staffing assessment, the consultant team has determined that the Parks Department does not have an adequate number of staff to operate its current system with the right mix of staff in the right places within the Department.

The Department has created partnerships in the community that help with particular projects, relieve some pressure on the staff, and provide amenities that the parks would otherwise not have. These partnerships are effective in sustaining current levels but also require additional administrative and supervisory responsibilities from staff.

Currently the Department employs 2.81 full-time employees per park, 1.45 non full-time employees per park, or 3.4 FTEs per park. The park system has just under 10,000 acres of parkland divided over 40 parks for an average of about 250 acres per park. At the current staffing levels, each full-time employee is responsible for maintaining weekly about 95 acres of parkland (19 acres per day) or 78 acres per FTE. This does not include any additional responsibilities. To reduce the acres of parkland per FTE maintained by a total of 10 acres would require the addition of 19 full-time employees and 10 non-full-time employees. **Figure 6** illustrates the distribution of additional employees to achieve this goal. These minimum additions increase the number of full-time employees per park to 3.68 and the number of FTEs per park to 3.9, a 30 percent increase in full-time employees per park.

STAFFING RECOMMENDATIONS

To operate more effectively in the future and to implement the Master Plan, the County and the Parks Department should consider:

- Staffing appropriately for park maintenance based on acres of park land maintained per FTE
- Adding a Community Engagement Manager to coordinate partnerships and user groups, marketing, and grant research and writing
- At least one employee should hold a Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI) Certification
- Ensure that staffing resource levels can maintain existing and updated facilities at or above acceptable standards as the Master Plan is implemented
- Developing a standard for administrative staffing that considers:
  - Number of user groups managed per FTE
  - Number of donations managed per FTE
  - Number of Permits issued and managed per FTE

Shelter renovation - Recommended increased staff will be able to more efficiently improve the Parks System

Figure 6: Current Staffing and Proposed Minimum Needs

Number of Staff by position:	Current	Recommended Addition	Total
Superintendent	3	2	5
Skilled / Trades Worker	1	6	7
Labor Staff	43	9	52
Community Engagement Manager	0	1	1
Ranger	2	2	4

6.3 MARKETING RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the Department's marketing efforts are already developed, in some cases routine, and staffing is limited, it will be a challenge to overhaul its marketing efforts. The following recommendations will focus on areas of opportunity, and be prioritized by pursuing the steps identified below:

- *Develop a consistent brand*
- *Develop goals for the marketing effort as a whole*
- *Define target markets and segments*
- *Define the goals for each channel of communication*

While the political environment and funding decisions are out of the Department's control, it can provide a more positive brand perception through the communication of a consistent message over time. Brand opportunities include:

- *Historical preservation and what it means to the general public*
- *Education of the natural habitat and why they should care about it*
- *Ownership of the parks system*
- *Diversity of the system – beaches to forest*
- *Unique natural features – The Eternal Flame and the programs that are offered to the public*
- *Equitable access for users and groups*
- *Transparency and communication with users*

This section is categorized into the time-frame to complete, and is written to fit within the current efforts of the Department. Recommendations do not call for a complete overhaul of the current marketing strategy, but a gradual incorporation over time. In general, a marketing plan will only last for 3-5 years because target segments (step 3), and channels and methods (steps 4 and 5) of engagement continue to evolve. That said, the Department's brand and overall goals should stay consistent over time with only small changes or shifts along the way.

Year 1 -

TASK 1: (A: 15.0) Prioritize Maintenance and Operation Strategies Identified in the Master Plan

It was clear through the public input process (focus groups/survey) that users expected a higher maintenance standard within the system. Looking at this as a marketing opportunity, the condition and quality of park assets are the most important channels the Department has, and should be the priority of the Department. The recommendations within the master plan are important points of communication that the Department can use to generate excitement and nostalgia in the system moving forward; ultimately supporting other marketing efforts.

Specifically, as recommendations from the Plan are implemented, communicate the improvements through the Department's many channels. For example:
- *Social media*
- *Online resources, like the website or mapping*
- *Signage at park sites*
- *Resources in Casinos, Lodges, or other gathering places*
- *Through partners*

TASK 2: (A: 16.0) Dedicate Resources to Marketing

Without a dedicated staff member or a contracted employee to manage and implement these recommendations moving forward, the Department's marketing efforts will continue to be a secondary business function, and not receive the attention needed to increase awareness and advocacy within the community. In an industry like parks and recreation, where users are engaging with agencies on a daily basis, these efforts need to be intentional, prioritized, and managed on a daily basis.

The Department currently does not have the expertise on staff to prioritize these efforts, manage all facets of marketing (daily, weekly, monthly, etc.) and/or create content.

Understanding the resource restrictions of the Department, options include:
- Defining a role or position on staff, such as a recreation director or outreach coordinator, to combine other needed roles and responsibilities, such as grant-writing and partnership/sponsorship development.
- An internal marketing team comprised of key Department staff and County staff.
- Partner with the VBN to attract and produce events and market county parks.
- Contracting out these services.

TASK 3: (A: 17.0) Establish a Clear Brand Position

Brands are developed through consistent messaging directed at targeted user groups, and should be considered the Department's opportunity to build relationships and advocacy within the community. Current marketing efforts within the Department are perpetuating a weak brand position; allowing the community to perceive that they have little ownership in the park system. It was clear in the focus groups that the community holds a high affinity for the parks system and wants to engage.

The marketing efforts of the Department should focus on what's happening in the park system, what makes the park system and area unique, what feelings do users experience, or what the parks department wants them to experience. Park and recreational opportunities are transformative and unique. The Department's efforts should communicate that. While a good place to start is with the mission statement, a brand position should be shorter, memorable, and invoke feelings about the brand.

Engaging users at this step is crucial in the communication of a brand position. They can provide key insights on appropriate messages, channels, and opportunities.

TASK 4: (A: 18.0) Establish Clear Goals for the Department's Marketing Efforts

The Department's efforts do not have real purpose, and are most often guided as an "as needed" or "as time allows" function. These goals need to be broad based in order to allow flexibility, while still guiding the marketing efforts. Goals should include:
- *Communicating the impact of the park system*
- *Growing awareness of the park system*
- *Developing partnerships*
- *Educate the community about assets within the park*

WPA identification on facade of structure

TASK 5: (A: 19.0) Cleanup Website

The current website for the Department (and County) is an outdated resource. Websites are now less of an archive for data and resources, and more of a social media platform. Websites should:
- *Be the heart of the brand by sharing stories of programs, amenities, and opportunities.*
- *Provide direct action on how users should engage with the parks system.*
- *Be highly visual, less textual.*
- *Be simple.*
- *Allow for users to choose how to interact with the site "path" they would like to go down – example: Avid users' would interact with the site in a different way than new users coming to site for the first time. The site architecture should provide a clear path for both end users.*

The current structure of the website is hierarchical; meaning that once a user begins to click through hyperlinks, they can only start over by going back up the hierarchy. This often leads back to the original home-page and causes the user to start a search over; creating a poor user experience. An example of this is the activity bar across the top of the website. While this function seems to be a simple search, it also leads to a listing which in turn leads the user deeper into the website. Listing parks in this way also assumes that the user has some understanding of where the park is and is willing and able to access it regardless of proximity.

1. *Make it easy for users to return to previous page*
2. *Add home link to top black bar*
3. *Add a map of the parks*
a. *Embed google map or use a map that can be clicked on??*
4. *Use calendar like this: http://www2.erie.gov/ or like this: http://www2.erie.gov/environment/index.php?q=calendar*
5. *How should the new policies be incorporated?*
6. *Need a better way to do this: http://www2.erie.gov/parks/index.php?q=park-improvements*
7. *Typos everywhere ("Sargent", "BOUNCE HOUSES", "verbiage verbatim")*
8. *Prepare to add partners and sponsors thank you page*

Websites should contain information for new users, assuming they have never engaged with the park before. The first thing new users should see or understand is the brand of the Department, and be given a direction on how to engage with it.

Due to the volume of services provided by a parks and recreation agency, the Department could look to "host" their own website outside of the County's current platform, which would link back to the County site. This could take the form a "splash page." An example from Washington State Parks is below:

Example website from Washington State Parks

Note: Because the golf courses are unique amenity within the system, generating a high amount of revenue, it should be determined if they, too, should have their own dedicated website host and/or design.

Erie County Parks Instagram Page

Understanding the need to house information as a public agency, that function could still exist but separately from the Department homepage or through the County's web page.

TASK 6: (A: 20.0) Ensure All Digital Media is Connected and Integrated across Platforms

Users expect a full integration of mobile platforms, meaning that a webpage should connect to Facebook, and Facebook should connect to Twitter, etc. While each platform may be used differently, each should extend the brand of the Department by promoting the same brand and having similar messages and looks.

The website currently allows users to "share" the site across social media platforms, like Facebook and LinkedIn. This function should be revised to provide a call to action (ex. Why should the user share the website?) or changed to a simple hyperlink feature.

TASK 7: (A: 21.0) Establish Consistent Weekly, Monthly, and Quarterly Marketing Efforts

Current marketing efforts are sporadic. For example, if there is an event in the park, it will be posted on the website and/ or social media. In Year 1 of this plan, it is important for the Departments to prioritize its marketing efforts to ensure that over time, messages are promoted on a consistent basis. This will also establish a community awareness, and expectation, of how and when they can engage with the Department.

a. This should be detailed; providing direction for efforts on (at least) a daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly basis.

b. The Department should also schedule weekly marketing meetings to discuss what is happening, what is planned, and what should be prioritized across marketing platforms.

This effort will help the Department prioritize efforts across channels, and may help the Department determine which efforts they could invest or divest from.

If staff or personnel is limited, the Department can assign a day and/or topic to persons on the management team to come up with posts (information about their areas – golf, forest, specific parks, department-wide info, etc.)

TASK 8: (A: 22.0) Establish a Plan to Transition Away from or Redevelop Print Media

While many users expect print advertisements, like brochures and flyers, communication is moving more digital sources. A transition plan should be in place, so that the Department can continue to be relevant to its user base. (Example: The Department should give users the option to obtain print copies with a file library; all material that can be printed from the user's home computer, like the parks passport.).

Understanding that print is already an established channel, the Department should look at ways to cut out or consolidate the information being shared via print media; looking at the audiences that gravitate to this type of media (generally younger populations) is a good filter for what information it should contain.

Alternatives to print media include:
- *E-newsletters – Per County policy, this function would require staff to create the content and an official approval for release to the public.*
- *Direct emails – Per County policy, this function would require staff to create the content and an official approval for release to the public.*
- *Text messages*
- *Online brochures (often consolidating to only a once or twice a year publication)*
- *Calendars – This function is currently available. Staff should continue to evaluate it to ensure it is communicating effectively and efficiently.*
- *Mobile application similar to the Ready Erie app for the county*

### TASK 9: (A: 23.0) Simplify Mapping Features

The maps available through the Department are highly detailed and technical. From a user experience, it is too much information. Maps need to be interactive, show the relationship of amenities within the space, and show the relationship of the park within the system. Users expect maps to look and function similar to Google Maps or Apple Maps; something that they can interact with (zoom in/out, search for features, follow trails, etc.). The current maps do not allow for these types of features. An example of this structure would be the "Explore Our Parks" function. This link goes to a listing of links to parks, which leads to a list of the history and amenities in a specific park. If the user wants to "explore" a new park, they have to go back to the listing and start over. The Department should look for an easier, simpler, and more visual way to translate its resources.

Other departments in Erie County already use simple mapping features to communicate their messages.

For example, the Sheriff's Office uses Google Maps' "pin" function for the drug drop: http://www2.erie.gov/sheriff/index.php?q=drug-dropoff-box-info

The Department should also consider looking at alternatives to traditional mapping functions, such as virtual park tours.

Current park map for Emery Park
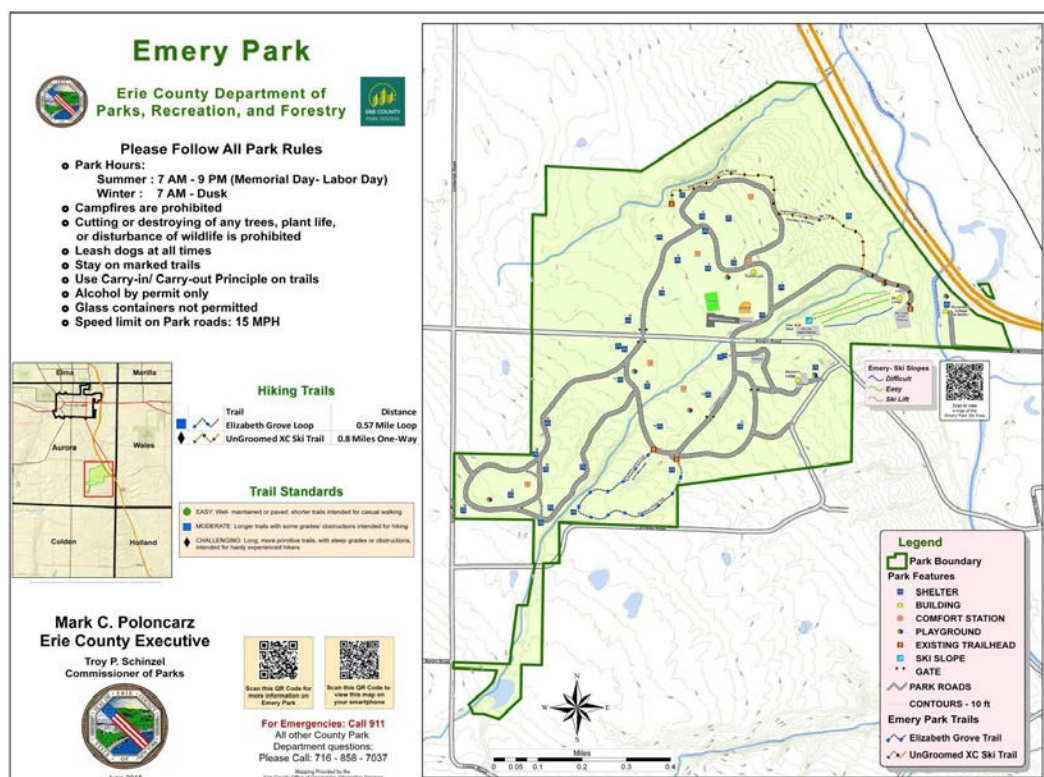
Year 2 -

Year 1 of the plan was prioritized by upgrading the current efforts of the Department to establish consistency through messaging, and through community interaction.

Year 2 focuses on getting more detailed about the efforts from identifying the target audience to influencing maintenance opportunities as a marketing function.

TASK 1: (A: 24.0) Identify Target Segments and Audiences

After the Department establishes a consistent and methodical marketing approach, it should begin to refine its efforts. It should start by establishing target segments within the community. Initial information gathering indicated that the following opportunities exist:
- *User groups and partners*
- *Sports associations/clubs*
- *Young adults with children*
- *Outdoor enthusiasts*

It is often helpful to create a profile of each group; identifying characteristics that bond these groups together:
- *Age*
- *Income*
- *Park usage*
- *Behavior and recreational patterns*
- *Interaction with the Department*
- *Feelings/thoughts towards the system*

Grand opening of the cricket pitch at Ellicott Creek Park, through the County's partnership with the India Association. (Photo Credit: The Buffalo News)

TASK 2: (A: 25.0) Invest/Divest from Appropriate Marketing and Communication Channels

Identifying these profiles will help the Department filter the marketing efforts by selecting the appropriate marketing channels and messages to speak directly to each target audience. Over the course of the plan, the Department should also consider which channels to divest from. Put simply, if the marketing channel does not communicate directly with a targeted audience it should be divested from, even if it's considered a "must have" channel, like Facebook or Instagram.

It is important to remember that each channel does not have to be used, or extend the brand, in the same way. Goals for each channel should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time based.

TASK 3: (A: 26.0) Identify Content Guidelines Across Marketing Channels

Once target audiences are selected, content guidelines for each channel can be created. The Department should use the guidelines to develop messages that are consistent with its brand, goals, and audiences. These guidelines should invoke feelings and engagement with the brand.

TASK 4: (A: 27.0) Identify Characters that Tell the Story of the Parks Department

The Department has a story to tell. All great stories have characters that are memorable and relatable. Maybe the best parks-related example of this is Smoky Bear. His story is about forest fire prevention marketed directly at young people. Characters within the Department can be real or fictional. Opportunities for

Original Casino at Chestnut Ridge Park

characters that can promote the Department's message include:

- *Users*
- *Employees*
- *Commissioner of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry*
- *County Executive*
- *Park Rangers*
- *Santa – on a seasonal basis*

TASK 5: (A: 28.0) Identify Opportunities in Parks to Extend the Brand of the Parks Department

After identifying the brand, goals, and target audiences the Department should use this information to upgrade its biggest marketing channel, the park system. Understanding what the community wants and needs will help prioritize upgrades and maintenance to the system. This should include:

- *Signage (interpretive, wayfinding, park signs)*
- *Casinos*
- *Trails*
- *Support services*
- *Amenities*

Year 3-5 –

TASK 1: (A: 29.0) Continue Consistent Engagement with the Community

Years 3-5 of this plan calls for the Department to remain consistent with the efforts established in Years 1 and 2. Allowing these efforts to play out over time will be a key to success. Continuously changing methods of engagement and messages creates broken channels, resulting in ineffective marketing efforts.

TASK 2: (A: 30.0) Develop Marketing Evaluation Methods

While this function should be prioritized early in a planning process, it is important for the Department to establish marketing as a consistent, every-day operational function. Recommendations in Year 1 and 2 call for a conscious effort to upgrade output and establish consistency. Once the marketing upgrades are in place, the Department should start tracking and measuring its efforts. This could include anything from website click-throughs to shares on social media to emails sent/opened. Adjustments should be made accordingly. Evaluating efforts over time will help to continuously focus on reaching target audiences.

TASK 3: (A: 31.0) Revisit Target Audiences, Marketing Trends, Content Guidelines, and Evaluation Methods in Year 5

Once the plan is fully seen through, the Department should reevaluate its target segments, channels, guidelines, and evaluation methods based on the evolving demographics and priorities of the community.

Stretch Goals –

TASK 1: (A: 32.0) Develop Mobile Applications

Mobile applications are becoming an expected function and service. At the rate that technology is evolving, mobile applications may soon be the top way that people engage with agencies. Currently, the Department is not in a position to develop its own application, and can imitate this function by having a website that is prioritized by mobile functionality. For example:

- *Interactive mapping*
- *Streamlined reservation systems*
- *Incident reporting*
- *Calendars*

ACTION ITEMS

Type	Project #	Recommendation	Implementation Strategies	Priority	Term	Estimated Cost
A	15.0	Prioritize Maintenance and Operation Strategies Identified in the Master Plan		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	16.0	Dedicate Resources to Marketing		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	17.0	Establish a Clear Brand Position		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	18.0	Establish Clear Goals for the Department's Marketing Efforts	These goals need to be broad based in order to allow flexibility, while still guiding the marketing efforts.	High	Ongoing	In-House
A	19.0	Cleanup Website		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	20.0	Ensure All Digital Media is Connected and Integrated across Platforms		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	21.0	Establish Consistent Weekly, Monthly, and Quarterly Marketing Efforts		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	22.0	Establish a Plan to Transition Away from or Redevelop Print Media		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	23.0	Simplify Mapping Features		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	24.0	Identify Target Segments and Audiences		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	25.0	Invest/Divest from Appropriate Marketing and Communication Channels		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	26.0	Identify Content Guidelines Across Marketing Channels		High	1-2 Years	In-House

KEY:

A: Action Item: Completed at low to no cost by Parks staff

P: Assistance or completion of project by potential partner/user group

C: Capital Project

POB: Parks Operating Budget

Type	Project #	Recommendation	Implementation Strategies	Priority	Term	Estimated Cost
A	27.0	Identify Characters that Tell the Story of the Parks Department		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	28.0	Identify Opportunities in Parks to Extend the Brand of the Parks Department		High	1-2 Years	In-House
A	29.0	Continue Consistent Engagement with the Community		High	Ongoing	In-House
A	30.0	Develop Marketing Evaluation Methods		High	3-5 Years	In-House
A	31.0	Revisit Target Audiences, Marketing Trends, Content Guidelines, and Evaluation		High	3-5 Years	In-House
A	32.0	Develop Mobile Applications		High	3-5 Years	In-House

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