

Stark Parks 10-Year Comprehensive Plan (2026-2035)

Connecting Nature. Connecting Community



Mission: To enrich the quality of life in Stark County by conserving and connecting our natural and cultural resources, while providing meaningful recreation and education opportunities that bring value to everyone in our community.

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Executive Summary

The 2026-2035 Ten-Year Plan for the Stark County Park District is a three-chapter report prepared by the Stark County Regional Planning Commission. This report is an update to the Park District's 2019-2023 Five-Year Plan, which was completed in 2018. This plan seeks to give an update of progress made on projects listed in the previous plan, incorporate suggestions from park staff and the public, and describe and prioritize projects for the next ten years. An online survey was made available from January 2025 through June 2025 for public input. There were also nine public meetings held throughout the County to gather additional feedback and data from the community.

The plan consists of the three major sections:

Part 1 discusses baseline data about the park district and Stark County, as in the previous plans, and includes an analysis comparing Stark County's park system to other counties. In general:

- The residents of Stark County are aging, more educated, more affluent, and are composed of smaller families than in the past, all indicators that participation rates in passive outdoor activities will increase and alternative means of transportation should be explored
- Outdoor recreation participation among youth children is increasing, although participation is less frequent
- The 65 and up cohort is no longer the smallest age cohort participating in outdoor recreation
- Mental health has emerged as a critical public health priority and opportunities for recreation can help overall emotional well-being
- Recreational activities that are the most popular in Ohio are currently passive activities such as trail activities, wildlife observation/photography, and picnicking
- Based on comparisons between Stark Parks and other park districts in Ohio, Stark County ranks below average for the acres of parkland by district, but is above average for miles of trails

Part 2 evaluates the current mission statement, pursuing to adopt a new one that better aligns with the current functions, and reviews the organization of the Park District its revenue sources and expenditures. In general:

- The role of Stark Parks continues to expand, and offers much more to the community than just recreation, conservation, and education

- The organizational structure is briefly discussed, as well as Park District success in forming partnerships with the public and other governmental entities, and success in attracting grants and funding for projects
- Various revenue sources and development options are highlighted in order to help diversify funding sources, which has become a necessity due to decreasing financial resources provided to counties, cities, villages, and townships

Part 3, Ten-Year Plan Recommendations, discusses and prioritizes recommendations for improvements to the Park District over the next ten years. In general:

- Recommendations are made for projects and planning which will complement current projects and plans, including the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan, individual park and community plans, and countywide land use and transportation plans
- Continue to prioritize trail connectivity, especially to destination places and community hubs, through active transportation planning, focusing on both high-demand and underserved areas, with the support from community stakeholders
- Invest in trail and facility maintenance, improved signage, permanent restrooms, water-based programs, and other amenities, while balancing new additions to the park system with upkeep of the existing park inventory
- Expand inclusive, flexible programming for all ages and abilities, increasing the capacity for popular programs and reducing barriers to participate
- Increased efforts should be made to improve the accessibility and sustainability of the Park District. This includes installing ADA amenities, partnering with the local transit authority and promoting “green” initiatives both internally and throughout the park district
- Open space benefits the public in terms of recreation, conservation, water quality, livability, and property value enhancement. Stark Parks should analyze open space preservation and acquisition opportunities, where feasible, for these reasons, prioritizing acquiring properties adjacent to existing parks and trails to protect assets from incompatible development

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Introduction

The Stark County Park District (Park District or Stark Parks) and the Stark County Regional Planning Commission (SCRPC) have had a long relationship in developing park planning documents. These include the Stark County Park District: Past Achievements - Future Alternatives completed in 1987; the Stark County Park and Open Space Five Year Plan: 1995- 1999 completed in 1994; the Stark County Park District Five-Year Plan: Visions for the Future 2000 – 2005, completed in 2001; the Stark County Park District’s Park and Open Space Plan, 2006-2010: Keep Stark Green and Growing, completed in 2006; the Stark County Park District’s Five-Year Plan, 2014-2018: Creating Quality Spaces and Destination Places, completed in 2014; and the Stark County Park District’s Five-Year Plan, 2019-2023: Making Space for Everyone.

Past Achievements - Future Alternatives (1987) contained a short history of the Park District and an analysis of levy attempts and failures. It compared several successful park districts to Stark County’s efforts and provided alternative frameworks for the park district, as well as recommendations for garnering public support for the district.

In 1994, the Five-Year Plan built upon the success of the 0.2 mill levy passed in 1987. It discussed the changing role of the Park District and needs of the community and identified maintenance and improvements needed for the existing parks as well as suggestions for locating future parks. It also listed goals and strategies for the five-year period of 1995-1999.

Visions for the Future (2000-2005) built upon the achievements of the past five years, as all of the recommendations of the previous documents had been fulfilled. The successes included: renovation of existing facilities; acquisition of new park lands accessible to the residents of eastern Stark County; improvement of working relationships and the coordination of recreational services with local governments; and participation in the development of the Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Canalway, as well as other linear corridors.

Keep Stark Green and Growing, prepared in 2006, analyzed baseline data on the existing park district and Stark County, and reviewed comparisons made between Stark County’s park system and several other counties. This plan also examined the “vision” of the district, its organization and revenue sources, and reviewed progress made since the previous five-year plan and made recommendations on future park and trail projects.

In 2014, Creating Quality Spaces and Destination Places gave an update on progress made since the previous plan, incorporated suggestions from park staff and the public, and

described and prioritized projects through 2018. This 2014 Plan Update was prepared and completed in concert with the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan.

Completed in 2018, Making Space for Everyone likewise provided an update on progress achieved since the prior plan, reflected on input from public participation activities, prioritizing projects over the five-year period, and aligned with broader county goals and existing trails and greenway plans.

The updated Stark County Canal Corridor Master Plan, originally prepared in 1996, the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan, last updated in 2013, the Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs Master Plan, completed in 1999, the Fry Family Park Plan, created in 2011, and the Quail Hollow Park Master Plan, written in 2017, are among the other documents created to assist in the development and success of the Park District.

This current document builds upon the 2019-2023 Five Year Plan. With prior plans covering a five-year period, this plan will extend to a ten-year period to encompass the long-term goals of the Park District. The plan is divided into three sections: Part 1, Background, provides baseline data on the existing park district and Stark County, and reviews the comparison between Stark County's park system and several other counties; Part 2, Resources and Operations, examines the "mission" of the district, its organization and revenue sources; and Part 3, Ten-Year Plan Recommendations, identifies recommendations for park and trail resources and programming, and prioritizes development for a ten-year period. An online survey was made available to the public from May to August and received 471 responses. Additionally, there were nine public meetings held throughout the County where information on the planning process was provided, and interactive activities took place to obtain additional feedback and comments from the community.

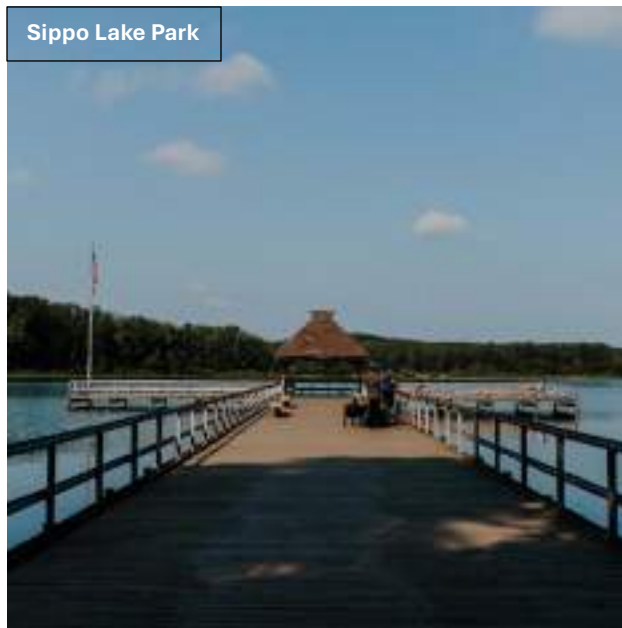
The goal of this study is to assist the Park District in completing development in a manner that will maximize public use and support, and plan in a manner that produces a quality park system that can be sustained over time.



Part I – Park District Profile, Current Trends, and Future Needs

Background

The Stark County Park District was formed in 1967 after regional planning studies demonstrated a need and strong community support for countywide park and recreational facilities. A three member Park Board was appointed by the Stark County Probate Court to administer and operate the Park District and organize initial efforts to pass a levy in November 1967 for the purpose of "acquisition, development, operation and maintenance of a park system in Stark County, Ohio." This three-member Park Board was the first in Ohio to increase to five members in January 2006.



Sippo Lake Park

After voter rejections over nearly two decades, the Board was successful in passing a 0.2-mill park levy in May of 1988. This levy generated approximately \$700,000 annually over a five-year period. The 0.2-mill levy was renewed in May 1993 and raised about \$750,000 per year. A replacement levy, for 0.5 mills, was about \$2,500,000 annually. In 2002, another replacement levy was approved, which resulted in an increase to approximately \$3,200,000 per year in income. In 2012, voters approved a 1.0-mill levy, which has generated approximately \$6.4 million per

year for the Park District. The 2012 levy assisted to offset the loss of funds from the phasing out of the personal property tax and the reduction in local government funds, while also expanding the Park District's ability to service more of the county. In 2019, the Park District proposed a tax increase to replace the expiring 1.0-mill levy with a 1.2-mill levy to support facility expansion and maintenance; however, the measure did not pass. In May 2020, voters approved a renewal of the existing 1.0-mill levy, which now generates approximately \$7 million annually for the Park District, but is still based on the 2012 valuations.

The early regional open space plans for Stark County as developed in the 1960s envisioned a countywide metropolitan park organization which would provide recreational facilities at a hierarchical level between the smaller community parks of the municipalities and the larger state parks. Essentially the proposed system would be built around one or more multi-use parks of approximately 500-1,000 acres. The original concept of regional parks included a strong natural resource component (preferably focused on protecting water quality), which would be situated in undeveloped rural areas where the needed acreage could be readily obtained.

The initial increase in income from the 1997 levy approval occurred at a critical time as the Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor was established in 1996. The creation of the Heritage Corridor was a key milestone for Stark County driving interest in trails and recreation throughout the region. The Corridor and projects related to its improvement has served as a source of federal funding for projects in Stark County and also fostered cooperation between the Park District and local governments.

Voter approval of park operating levies has been crucial in enabling the Park District to grow and implement needed improvements. Increased financing has transformed the Park District from a "caretaker" role, struggling to meet minimal maintenance needs, to a District able to implement major projects and facility improvements. At the end of 2024, the Park District had over seventy full and part-time employees and an annual operating budget of over \$19 million with levy funds constituting approximately 69% of revenue sources.



The Park District currently operates fifteen parks and oversees approximately 6,800 acres of land, including 4 lakes; 4 historic properties; over 120 miles of hiking, biking, and equestrian trails; and wildlife rehabilitation services. These facilities include the Stark County Trail and Greenway System, and parks such as Deer Creek Reservoir, Petros Lake Park, Sippo Lake Park, Fry Family Park, Magnolia Flouring Mills, Molly Stark Park, Tam O' Shanter Park, Walborn Reservoir, Pike Ridge Park, and Quail Hollow Park.

Several parks and trails are a mix of ownership, which includes various public and private entities. The District's three largest facilities, Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs (2,800 acres combined) managed by Stark Parks but owned by the City of Alliance, and the Canal Lands (342 acres which includes 25 miles of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath), managed by Stark Parks but portions are owned by the Stark County Commissioners, City of Canal Fulton, City of Massillon, and Village of Navarre. Quail Hollow Park contains over 700 acres with approximately fourteen miles of trails and has been operated since early 2016 through a management agreement between Stark Parks and, owner, the State of Ohio.

Over the years, Stark Parks has acquired a number of smaller properties through private donations and partnerships with various government entities. The Park District should evaluate whether these properties continue to provide meaningful benefits within the Stark Parks system, such as enhancing existing parks, serving as trailheads, or contributing to trail connectivity. Where appropriate, the District may also consider alternative uses that allow these properties to attain their greatest value to the community. These smaller parks include Cook's Lagoon, Devonshire Park, Esmont Park, Fichtner Park and Molly Stark Park. In 2024, the decision was made to eliminate Whitacre Greer Park as a Stark Parks' managed property. With only a quarter of the park being located within Stark County, focus was shifted to the newly managed Pike Ridge Park which is nearby and wholly located within the county boundaries.

Park operating levies have allowed the Park District to be competitive in acquiring grants from various federal, state and local sources. Ability to use operating funds for small portions of the project match allows the Park District to bring those federal and state resources back to benefit the residents of Stark County.

Grant-driven improvements completed since the previous plan include: the Market Avenue tunnel connecting the Hoover and Middle Branch Trail systems; the final connection of the Iron Horse Trail through Alliance; the Fulton Road tunnel for the Jackson Connector Trail; the Kent State University/Stark State Campus Trail; the Middle Branch Trail extension from the Market Avenue tunnel through Lexington Farms, Saratoga Hills and Al Leno Park, as well as a paved portion of trail between 55th Street and Colonial Boulevard; a

feasibility study to connect the Village of Minerva to the Nickel Plate Trail; and the replacement of two failing pedestrian bridges along the Sippo Valley Trail.



Park improvements utilizing grant funds over the past five years include: ADA accessibility and interpretive signage upgrades at the Crystal Spring Trailhead along the Ohio and Erie Canal Towpath including the restoration of a portion of the historic Route 21 brick pavers; ADA kayak/canoe launch installations; Walborn Reservoir wetland restoration; Fry Family Park renovation of the homestead to a visitor center and the construction of a park shelter, trails, signage, and a large-scale reforestation and prairie planting effort; an accessibility study for the Magnolia Flouring Mills; the demolition of the blighted former Molly Stark hospital; new flushable restrooms at Petros Lake Park; Quail Hollow Park upgrades included paving of the entrance road; and extensive upgrades to Tam O'Shanter Park with the reconfiguration of the parking lot and driveways as well as habitat restoration. Grant funding was essential for the completion of these projects and was only possible because Stark Parks had the operating budget to facilitate the project and meet the matching requirements.

Annually, Stark Parks receives approximately \$4 million in grants from agencies such as ODNR (Ohio Department of Natural Resources), ODOT (Ohio Department of Transportation), Ohio Public Works Commission (OPWC) and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) for park and trail projects.

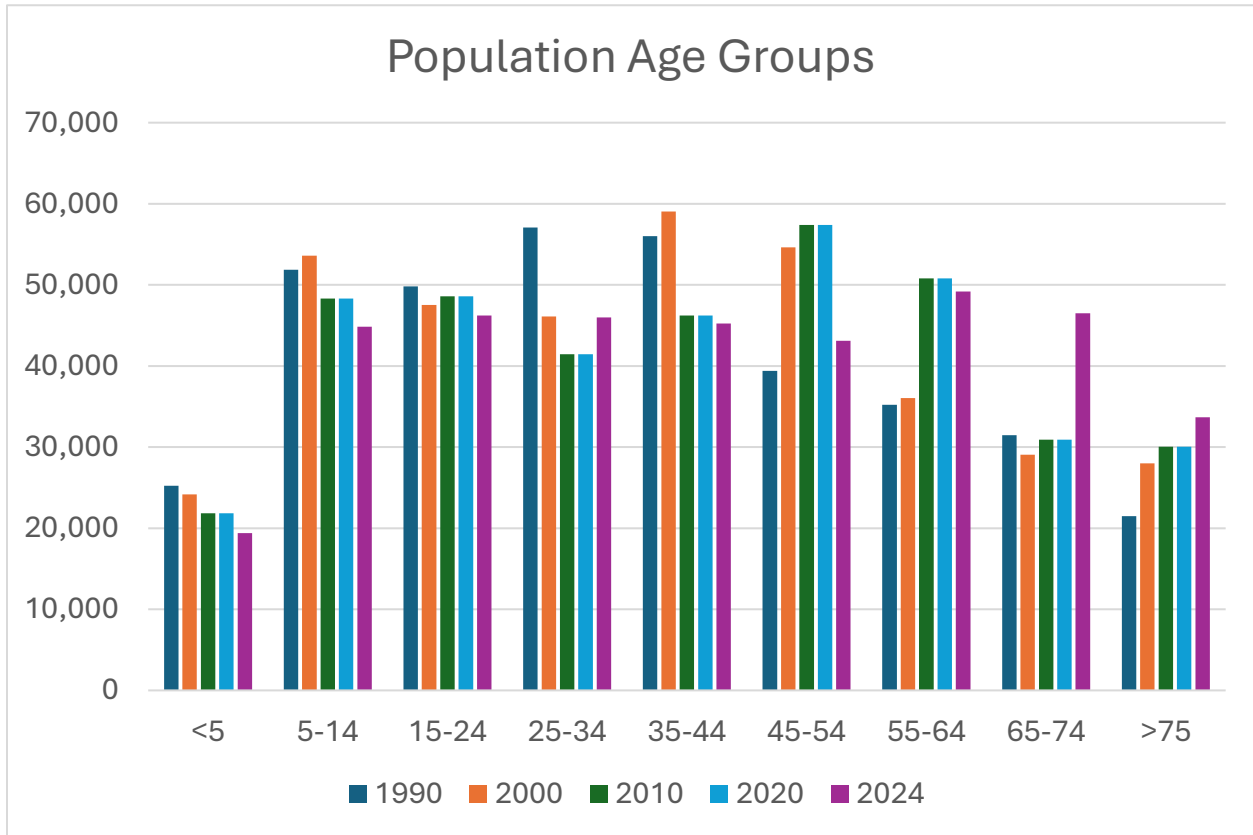
In addition to grant funding, the Park District has garnered support through cooperative agreements with numerous political subdivisions, public agencies, private groups and volunteers. In 2024, 32 group service projects, 11 Adopt-A-Trail groups and 145 active long-term volunteers donated a total of 16,139 hours of volunteer time to Stark Parks. Volunteers help maintain the trail systems, rehabilitate wildlife, protect important natural, historic and cultural resources, and assist with educating and engaging the local community to increase support for the parks.

Demographics

For meaningful planning to be done and to achieve anticipated goals, it is imperative to consider the demographic characteristics of the target population whose lives the plan seeks to improve. To optimize the use of available natural resources and recreational services, both the users and resources must be understood. Key to this understanding is the socio-economic characteristics as well as the spatial shifts in where and how people live. The demographic changes documented in this plan are derived from the 2010; 2016; 2023; and 2024 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate data as well as the 2020 Census Data.

Trends highlighted in previous park studies included an aging population, a changing family composition, and smaller households, which have continued since the previous plan was completed. The median age of Ohio's population has steadily increased with the aging of the baby boomer generation. In Stark County, the median age has steadily increased from 30.8 years in 1980, to 40.6 years in 2010, to 41.7 years in 2016, to 42.2 in 2023. Projections show the median age will continue to rise through 2050; however, it increases only modestly as the baby boomer generation begins to reach their end of life. While total population decreased slightly between 1980 and 2024, the number and percentage of persons aged 65 and over has grown each decade. Between 2016 and 2024, the number of persons aged 65 and over increased by 20.8%.

Figure 1: Stark County Population Age Groups



Sources: 1990; 2000; 2010; 2020; 2024 U.S. Census Data

According to the Ohio Department of Development’s 2023 State of Ohio Population Projection Report, the aging population is one of the factors that play into the projected population loss for the foreseeable future. The increase in mortality rates in 2020 from the Coronavirus Pandemic appears to have accelerated the timeline for the declining populations. Another factor playing a role in the loss of population is the declining fertility. In 2020, the total fertility rate was approximately 1.7 births per female, which is 10% decline from the previous decade. Trends show women are delaying childbirth or and having fewer children overall. As a result, the number of persons per household is decreasing. Since 2016 both the number of one-person households and two-person households experienced increases, while three- and four-family households have seen declines. In 1970 the average number of persons per household was 3.18, while in 2024, the average number was 2.35. In addition to the lower fertility rate, other factors that may contribute to the smaller household sizes include, more single-parent families, a reduction in the more traditional two-parent families relative to other family types including single households, stepfamilies, and non-family households. The older population has an impact on household size as well, as increased life spans allow more years as empty-nesters, creating more childless and single-person households than in the past.

Family size impacts participation in outdoor recreation as well. As family size increases from one member up to four, participation increases. It then drops as size increases with five or more members. As the smaller household sizes continue to increase, participation in outdoor activity has experienced increases as well.

Figure 2: Stark County Household Size and Housing Units

Persons per Household	Units in 1990	Units in 2000	Units in 2010	Units in 2020
1	33,407	38,711	42,453	46,716
2	46,358	51,469	53,410	55,826
3	24,790	24,369	23,851	22,106
4 or more	35,018	33,767	31,375	29,674
Total Occupied Units	139,573	148,316	151,089	155,392
Total Population	367,585	378,098	375,586	374,853
<i>Sources: 1990; 2000; 2010; 2020 U.S. Census Data</i>				

Other pertinent data, as it relates to recreation participation, includes educational attainment, occupation, income, and the number of housing units. In 2000, the percentage of persons with at least a high school diploma was 83% and the percentage with at least a bachelor’s degree was 18%. In 2010, the percentage of persons with at least a high school diploma increased to 89.6% and those with at least a bachelor’s degree increased to 20.5%. By 2024, the percentage of persons with at least a high school diploma had increased even further to 91.2% and those with at least a bachelor’s degree had increased to 25.2%. This growth in educational attainment also parallels the growth in outdoor recreation, as studies have found that higher education tends to correlate with increased participation in outdoor recreation.

Household income: Median household income has grown considerably from 2010 to 2024. Median household income was \$44,941 in 2010 in Stark County. This figure increased to \$55,045 in 2020 representing an increase of over 22% during this ten-year period. From 2020 to 2024, median household income in Stark County increased to \$67,934, an increase of over 23% during a four-year period.

Vehicles per Household: Through 2010, while the average household size declined, the number of households with three or more vehicles increased. Between 2010 and 2016, there was a slight decrease in the number of households with three or more vehicles; however, in 2024 there was an increase. The number of vehicles per household increased for one-, two-, and three-vehicle households from 2016 to 2024, and the number of households without a vehicle also experienced an increase. Lack of accessible

transportation (whether public or private) may limit an individual’s opportunity to participate in outdoor recreation.

Figure 3: Vehicles per Household

Vehicles Available	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
None	11,705	11,806	10,473	10,095	10,805
1	46,482	44,948	47,329	47,638	50,379
2	52,617	56,288	61,272	59,222	58,278
3 or more	23,290	26,531	29,242	32,167	34,860
<i>Source: 1980; 1990; 2000; 2010; 2020 U.S. Census Data</i>					

While the County population decreased 0.2% between 2020 and 2024, the number of housing units increased by 1.1% from 166,995 units in 2020 to 168,819 units in 2024. With such a slight decrease in population, this increase in housing units can be directly correlated to a redistribution of population to previously undeveloped areas.

The city of Alliance lost housing units while Massillon and Canton experienced slight gains, which may partially be attributable to annexations as the city of Canton has experienced a loss of more than 40,000 residents between 1970 and 2024 (approximately 1,600 since 2020), while Alliance has lost approximately 5,000 residents (approximately 100 since 2020).

Approximately 79% of the County’s population is located in the cities of Alliance, Canton, Massillon, and North Canton, and the townships of Jackson, Lake, Perry, and Plain. The most significant growth has generally occurred in the unincorporated areas of Stark County. Jackson Township and Lake Township experienced extensive growth between 1970 and 2024, from 18,506 to 43,306 persons in Jackson Township and 11,301 to 30,324 persons in Lake Township. Plain Township also experienced growth between 1970 and 2024, gaining approximately 3,682 residents. It should be noted that Plain Township’s population was 31,945 in 1970. The general growth in these townships reflects the population movement from concentrated urban areas into formerly rural settings, especially into the north and central areas of the County. One national trend that should be noted here is the decrease in this suburbanization trend for certain population groups desiring to live closer to urban cores. Studies have shown that a large percentage of these groups, which include young, urban professionals and childless families, prefer to live closer to urban areas where they can live, work and play within a walkable area. As this trend is forecasted to continue, Stark Parks should continue to collaborate with the urban areas of the County to ensure that these groups also have access to parks.

As trends continue toward an aging and more suburbanized population overall, alternative modes of transportation will need to be factored into future planning efforts. Certain population groups such as children, elderly adults, and disabled persons, who may not have access to personal vehicles, are oftentimes left without easy access to outdoor recreation. This is also true for those who simply do not wish to own a car. Amenities such as public transportation, bikeways, or pedestrian paths are all vital transportation elements in creating equitable and healthy communities.

Locally, the implication of the trend analysis can be summarized as the following. The 2024 American Community Survey data shows that almost 46 percent of Stark County's population is aged 45 or older. This has an effect on the outdoor recreation habits of residents of Stark County in that they are more likely to pursue lifelong and less strenuous activities such as walking, gardening, bird watching, or golf. Furthermore, while communities will continue to have a need for traditional outdoor recreation areas and facilities, future development plans, facility designs, and programming should strive to serve all ages and abilities. Alternative modes of transportation to access these facilities should also be considered.

Recreational Activity Trends

Recreational activity trends and health statistics were derived from a number of sources including the U.S. Center for Disease Control; Stark County Community Health Improvement Plan; Ohio's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan; the National Recreation and Park Association; and Outdoor Participation Trends Report. In the United States, the percentage of children and adolescents affected by obesity has more than tripled since the 1970s. In 2024, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly one in five school-aged children and young people (6-19 years old) were obese. The prevalence of obesity increased with age. From 2017 to March 2020, obesity prevalence was 12.7% among U.S. children 2-5 years old, 20.7% among those 6-11, and 22.2% among adolescents 12-19. Childhood obesity has immediate and long-term effects on health, including increased risks for certain diseases, increased risk for the emotional trauma associated with bullying and low self-esteem, as well as increased risk of obesity as an adult. Regular physical activity, including walking, hiking, and biking, along with a healthy diet, is vital in helping to prevent obesity and many chronic health conditions.

The CDC cites community and neighborhood design and safety as a factor that can contribute to childhood obesity. Access to safe parks has an effect on whether teens meet

recommendations for physical activity or get any activity at all. The prevalence of regular physical activity is lower among teens that live in urban areas versus those who live in rural areas. Also, teens from lower-income homes have fewer options for physical activity, and so they are more dependent on nearby parks; however, many of the parks located in disadvantaged neighborhoods are less likely to be considered safe, therefore resulting in an even less likelihood for those teens to be physically active than teens living in more privileged neighborhoods. Increasing availability of and access to safe spaces for physical activity is a particularly promising strategy for encouraging physical activity among all adolescents.

According to the Outdoor Foundation's 2025 Recreation Participation Report, one encouraging fact to note is that outdoor participation among youth children ages 6-17 appears to have been slightly increasing overall; however, they are participating less frequently every year. In 2014, the average number of outings for youth children was 88.8 visits, which decreased to 67.9 in 2024. Some reasons why the frequency of participation has fallen may include increased screen time on televisions, cell phones, and tablets; more demands on personal time of kids and parents; and inflation, among others. The report emphasizes that since the participation rates are so high, focusing on the increase in the frequency of participation could have more impact on outdoor participation habits in the future, as adults who were introduced to the outdoors as children are more likely to participate in outdoor activities during adulthood than those who were not exposed to the outdoors as children. Youth who participate when they are young, especially with their families, are more likely to participate throughout their lifetimes.

In 2024, the outdoor activities most frequently participated in by youth included camping, bicycling, fishing, running/jogging or trail running, and hiking. With its extensive trail network and diverse programming offerings, Stark Parks is well positioned to engage currently inactive teens, support their physical well-being, and help cultivate the next generation of park users.

In recent years, mental health has emerged as a critical public health priority, with rising rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and other conditions prompting policymakers, health professionals, and community leaders to seek scalable, preventative solutions. According to national health organizations, one in five U.S. adults lives with a mental illness, and the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the focus on psychological well-being by increasing demand for support services while simultaneously exposing gaps in access to care. Parks and recreation have increasingly been recognized not just as places for leisure or physical activity, but as vital contributors to mental health and community wellness. A growing body of research and community surveys shows that spending time in green space and engaging

in recreational activities can meaningfully improve mood, reduce stress, and enhance overall emotional well-being. For example, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) reports that more than 90 % of adults say that time spent at parks positively affects their mental health, including benefits from social interaction, nature exposure, and physical activity. Access to green spaces is also linked with measurable reductions in symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly when individuals live near parks or spend regular time outside. In fact, evidence from recent studies suggests that even brief exposure (e.g., 15 minutes) to urban green space can significantly improve emotional well-being, supporting the idea that parks are a powerful, preventative public health resource.

A number of studies provide information on changing recreational trends at both the statewide and national level. The Ohio Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) outlines basic population and recreational activity trends and remains the most current plan regarding Ohio specifically. The 2024 SCORP (see table below) reported a continued high interest in similar activities as identified in the 2018 SCORP, with the addition of playground activity into the top ten and canoeing/kayaking decreasing in participation. Although canoeing and kayaking dropped out of the top ten activities participated in, it showed the highest level of interest without participation, indicating a desire but lack of time, skill, and/or equipment.

Figure 4: 2024 SCORP Top Ten Outdoor Recreational Activity Trends

Rank	Recreation Activity	Percent
1	Walking/Hiking on Trail	89%
2	Scenic Driving	89%
3	Playground	84%
4	Wildlife Viewing/Photography	77%
5	Picnicking - Sheltered & No Shelter	71%
6	Touring Historic/Heritage Sites, Farms	71%
7	Birdwatching	70%
8	Biking on a Paved Trail	66%
9	Outdoor Festival/Concert/Play	66%
10	Swimming	62%

Source: 2024 SCORP

Nationally, the Outdoor Foundation (a not-for-profit organization established by the Outdoor Industry Association) has published an annual outdoor recreation participation report since 1998, which provides information and data on a range of activities at the national level. The most recent report, “Outdoor Participation Report 2025,” found that

outdoor activities with the highest number of core participants included biking, fishing, hiking, camping and RV camping. Core participants are the most frequent participants in outdoor activities. Each activity has a frequency threshold to determine if the participant is considered a core participant, and the frequency required varies by activity. Although the number of individuals engaging in outdoor recreation has increased, the frequency of the participants has been decreasing, which has resulted in a decrease in the number of core participants.

The Outdoor Foundation's 2025 study also examined the demographics of those participating in outdoor recreational activities. It found that outdoor participation grew 3% from 2023 to 58.6% in 2024, an increase of 5.3 million participants, representing 181.1 million total outdoor



participants; however, the average outing per person has decreased by 5 outings per year. The report also showed that the gender imbalance of participants seems to be gradually diminishing. In 2004, the report showed only 36% of participants were female, whereas in 2024 the figure had risen to 53.2%. The report continues to confirm that Caucasians make up a large majority of outdoor recreation participants at 66%. African Americans made up 11% of participants, while Hispanics made up 15% and Asians/Pacific Islanders made up 5% of participants. There was a 12.8% (2.3 million) increase in African American participants and 11.8% (2.8 million) increase in Hispanic participants, while Caucasians experienced a 1.1% (1.3 million) decrease.

The 2025 report provided additional demographic information on outdoor participants, including age, income, and education. Just six years ago, the 65+ age group was the smallest age cohort in outdoor recreation, but in 2024 it was bigger than the 55 to 64, 45 to 54, 6 to 12, and 18 to 24 age cohorts. People in the \$75,000 to \$99,000 household income category are most likely to participate in outdoor recreation (by participation rate) but make up the smallest income cohort by number of participants. One third of all outdoor recreation participants live in households with \$100,000 or more in annual income, and 62.1% of people in that income cohort participate in outdoor recreation. The number of

participants with a high school diploma increased by 11.2% between 2023 and 2024, making it the fastest growing education category, although all education categories experienced growth.

The U.S. Forest Service's 2010 Resources Planning Act Assessment, updated in September 2016, provides regional recreation participation projections for the four Resources Planning Act regions (Ohio is included in the North Region). The Assessment anticipates that growth in outdoor recreation participation will be less in the North Region because population growth is lowest here. However, the report states that the fastest growing activities in the Region will be developed skiing, day hiking, and horseback riding on trails. The Assessment



Quail Hollow Park

also focuses on the potential negative implications of climate change on the number of annual outdoor recreation days per participant. The report does note that trends in outdoor recreation participation will shift as the proportion of minority groups in the population grows, age levels increase, urbanization becomes more widespread, and economic conditions

change. However, for most activities across most regions, African American populations are the least likely to participate. Given the growing diversity among the U.S. population, the overwhelmingly low participation levels of non-Caucasians should be an important consideration in future park planning and programming, as should reaching those who are younger and in lower income brackets.

What does this mean for Stark County? Available data indicate that participation in outdoor recreational activities has evolved over the last 50 years. What people choose to participate in now is vastly different from what previous generations did, due to both changing preferences and the variety of opportunities now offered to them. Studies also continue to point out that participation in outdoor recreational activities has continued to grow for the past decade. It therefore implies that in the near future, facilities must be expanded to accommodate the growing demand for such outdoor recreational activities. Although the "baby boomers" are aging, the median age of residents in Stark County

remains low enough that even strenuous outdoor pursuits are not hampered by age. It is clear that the growing popularity of some outdoor activities in Stark County cannot be overemphasized. Residents of Stark County would be likely to participate in a number of activities, most of which are the passive-type recreation that the Park District supports, such as trail usage and nature viewing/photography. Activities that are increasing in popularity for this region include mountain biking and multi-use trails for walking, hiking, and bicycling. Local interest has also been expressed in paddle activities along the waterways, birding, and sports courts/courses (disc golf, volleyball, etc.). Parks and/or programs for these activities may need to be expanded to encourage growing participation, or partnerships developed to best serve these interests. A focus on attracting those who tend to be non-participants (female, less affluent, non-Caucasian, disabled, teens) is also highly recommended.



Trail Diversity and a Shift Toward Active Transportation

The successful development of portions of the Towpath Trail prompted the creation of the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan in 1996. Later updated in 2014, the plan has guided the development of Stark Parks' – largely off-road - trail system for decades. More recently, after years of impressive growth of the trail network, Stark Parks must now focus on the best way to complete this plan to serve the changing needs of the County.

Greenways and trails have become increasingly important as development pressures rise and recreation trends evolve. Today's greenway concept extends beyond traditional park and aesthetic values, emphasizing the need to understand and leverage a wide range of corridor types. Trails and greenways enhance individual well-being and strengthen

communities by offering recreational and transportation options while supporting economic growth and community development.

Hike and Bike trails and routes have become part of major corridor planning efforts and a catalyst for open space and habitat preservation. But beyond the rivers and parklands are several other kinds of corridors (such as rail lines and other transportation rights-of-way, utility corridors, and irrigation and flood control waterways) in which trails and recreation can be included. Trails and greenways are also ways of mixing uses and connecting significant community developments. Cities and states struggling to fund infrastructure are now including trails in utility and transportation projects to provide more services at less cost in one corridor.



Over time, the variety of trail users has increased, as has the diversity of activities on trails. The mountain bicyclist is now more common in many areas than traditional hikers and equestrians. New technological innovations have also changed the dynamic of the trail system, including “racing strollers” pushed by a jogging adult,

motorized bicycles, and recumbent bicycles for people with disabilities. E-bikes, in particular, are changing the dynamics of the user groups on some trail systems and on-roads. The Ohio Department of Transportation’s Walk.Bike.Ohio Policy Plan represents the agency’s first comprehensive effort dedicated specifically to walking and bicycling policies and programs across the state. The plan provides a framework to guide statewide policies, programs, and future investments in bicycle infrastructure, with careful consideration for how Ohioans of all ages and abilities use bicycles and other active transportation modes. As e-bikes continue to grow in popularity, they are increasingly shaping discussions about facility design, accessibility, and the types of accommodations riders expect. In addition, ODOT provides resources outlining Ohio’s e-bike laws and “share the road” guidance to help clarify responsibilities for all roadway users.

Integrated trail systems foster more walkable, livable communities by connecting people to population centers and key destinations while reducing reliance on automobiles. By linking diverse land uses, trails and greenways help overcome the isolation created by car-oriented planning. Their greatest strength—linearity—also presents challenges, as projects often require land access and coordination across multiple jurisdictions and agencies. However, these challenges can become opportunities through strong partnerships and collaborative relationships.

The move to revitalize aging city centers, the need to preserve natural areas, a national commitment to fitness, and an increased need for non-motorized transportation has increased the number of people out on trails and bike routes. New concepts in mobility are connecting recreational trails and greenways into the mainstream of transportation. Trails are paths used for walking, bicycling, horseback riding, or other forms of recreational activities or transportation, while greenways are considered corridors of protected open space managed for conservation and recreational purposes. Bike routes are on-road routes which may also serve as part of the state and federal bike-route system and should be considered as part of an overall active transportation plan. Active transportation, as defined by the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), refers to human-powered or human-scaled travel—primarily walking and bicycling—supported by infrastructure like sidewalks, bike lanes, and paths. With a desire to expand the multi-purpose trail network connecting the urban and rural areas of the County, the Park District can look to existing roadways as potential connectors for trail gaps that cannot be completed with off-road options. It will be critical for the Park District to keep the evolving needs of the County in mind, as well as the diversity of opportunities for trail connections, as it updates its trail and transportation plan moving forward.

Future Open Space Needs

Greenspace can be a powerful planning and zoning tool, with parks and natural areas helping make higher-density development more acceptable. The Trust for Public Land refers to this integration of parks with broader social and land use objectives as “greenprinting.” A comprehensive long-range vision is essential for identifying which lands should be preserved. Evaluating future open space needs also requires assessing existing open space, including its availability, use, park types, and accessibility. This analysis helps determine adequacy and establish future goals, such as ensuring community parks are within walking distance of residential areas.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, park districts across the United States were thrust into an unprecedented public health crisis that reshaped how people used outdoor spaces. As indoor facilities such as recreation centers, playgrounds, community centers, and sports complexes were closed to prevent virus spread, many communities turned to parks and trails as vital outlets for physical activity, mental health support, and safe social engagement. The pandemic highlighted how essential outdoor recreation areas are for the community.

Open space adequacy is often measured using the NRPA's minimum standard of 10 acres per 1,000 residents in developed urban areas, with an additional 10 acres per 1,000 residents in adjacent rural areas. Additionally, the NRPA report indicates that a typical park and recreation agency has one park for every 2,411 residents. More recent NRPA guidance emphasizes moving beyond total number of parks and acreage alone by conducting comprehensive, community-wide assessments to identify needs. This approach focuses on outcomes—such as recreational opportunities, conservation benefits, livability, increased property values, and community health— cultural diversity, public input, and wellness and fitness priorities should also be taken into account when conducting these assessments.

The 2014 and 2019 Plans found that while Stark County meets the minimum standard for the overall amount of open space,

deficiencies remain in the type and distribution of facilities. These gaps are most evident in access to community and large urban parks, as well as natural resource areas, particularly in developing townships. The plans also noted that a significant share of existing open space relies on private or semi-private ownership, such as golf courses or nonprofit-managed conservation lands. Although these privately owned spaces can help meet recreational needs typically served by public parks, they are often less permanent and offer more limited public access.



Stark County offers a wide range of parks and open spaces. The cities of Alliance, Canal Fulton, Canton, Louisville, Massillon, and North Canton contain more than 120 municipal parks and playgrounds, while villages and townships account for over 50 additional parks. The Park District manages 15 parks, including the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath. Beyond public parklands, the county is also served by numerous private and semi-public open spaces—such as campgrounds, golf courses, swim clubs, sportsman’s clubs, nonprofit nature preserves, and other facilities—collectively providing substantial additional park and open space acreage for residents.

Planning for Long Term Conservation

Creating a strong framework for long-term open space conservation is critical to sustained success. In Stark County, preservation efforts face several challenges, including securing reliable funding, determining responsible entities, reaching agreement on the type and location of facilities and protected areas, and building public support to advance projects. These challenges can be addressed through established planning practices that have been successfully applied nationwide, such as the NRPA’s standards and methodologies for evaluating and meeting community needs.

Information gathered through standard planning practices would include a comprehensive inventory of all open spaces, detailing land use, habitat, ownership, spatial relationship to populations, and maintenance or improvement needs. It would also assess public expectations for open space, including potential funding sources, lead agencies, and willingness to provide financial support. Together, this information is critical for establishing land acquisition priorities. Once compiled, it can inform the development of a land use management plan that identifies priority properties for acquisition, helping Stark Parks maximize conservation value while balancing opportunities for development.

Stark County contains extensive areas where development should be severely limited to protect public health, safety, and water resources. These areas include floodplains, wetlands, flood control dam easements, water well fields, aquifer recharge zones, mined or reclaimed lands, and landfills. Certain sites, particularly mined or reclaimed areas, have reduced suitability for development due to disrupted soils, degraded vegetation, and damaged aquifers. Other areas, such as floodplains, flood easements, and water well field zones, may accommodate low impact uses including agriculture, hunting, bicycling, hiking, and fishing.

Suburban and metropolitan communities are facing growing challenges related to water availability and water quality. Parks can play an important role as protective buffers for streams, canals, rivers, and lakes. Across the United States, hydrologists and park planners are developing integrated systems that address multiple goals, including effective water management, improved water quality, and recreational opportunities. One way to achieve these shared objectives is through a collaborative partnership with the Stark County Commissioners on drainage-related projects.

Many of these areas are already publicly owned or protected by easements that significantly limit development. Other areas should be reserved and conserved either through public acquisition or through clear designation to prevent future development. This can be achieved through subdivision and zoning regulations that both strictly control these lands and aid in their identification by depicting them on zoning and land use maps. Zoning provisions should prohibit development within wetlands and flood easement areas, require setbacks along riparian corridors, and restrict development in critical aquifer recharge zones. In certain cases, public access should also be limited or prohibited to safeguard sensitive resources and species, ensuring long-term preservation of these areas.



While most of Stark Parks properties remain “passive recreation” parks, meaning that the level of development and environmental impact of activities is low, some tracts are almost or completely serving as “preserve” areas. Walborn and Deer Creek Reservoirs, which serve as municipal water supplies for the City of Alliance and are leased to the Park District for recreational use, function in

this way. While small portions of these lands are developed for public access and recreation, large tracts remain as buffers to development, protecting water quality. The acquisition of adjacent properties and restoration of properties currently under its management has been, and remains, a key component of the Park District’s open space preservation strategy in this area. The Nimishillen Creek Preserve is another example of preserved land protecting sensitive habitats. The roughly 183-acre property was acquired in 2018, fully funded through a Water Resource Restoration Sponsor Program (WRRSP) grant, and has undergone extensive habitat restoration to protect its sensitive wetland areas,

since its purchase. Without public parking or facilities, the property remains closed and preserved for the foreseeable future. Various, small, undeveloped tracts also exist within Stark Parks system that have either been acquired as part of a future trail connector, donated and were never developed for various reasons or were acquired for specific habitat protection purposes that don't lend themselves to recreational use and development.

Additional undeveloped open space in Stark County includes the Berlin, Beach City, and Bolivar reservoirs, which are operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for flood control; flood easement lands administered by the Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District (MWCD); floodplains associated with the Tuscarawas and Mahoning Rivers and their tributaries; and the airport protection zone surrounding the Akron–Canton Regional Airport. As the MWCD generates funding to address maintenance and improvement needs at its facilities, Stark Parks is well positioned to support and enhance the complementary open space preservation efforts expected to accompany these initiatives.

Another long-term conservation strategy for Stark Parks to pursue involves the continued exploration of brownfield sites. Brownfields are found across the country, and a variety of funding programs exist to support their reclamation. While some brownfield properties are unsuitable for development, many can be successfully rehabilitated into meaningful parkland. States such as Virginia and New York have demonstrated this potential by converting former landfills and industrial sites into public parks. Brownfield redevelopment supports smarter growth practices, and similar opportunities warrant further consideration in Stark County.

Stark Parks acquired the 35-acre former Molly Stark Hospital property in Nimishillen Township, previously a tuberculosis sanitarium and now designated as a brownfield site. Following multiple structural assessments, it was determined that rehabilitation of the existing buildings was not feasible. The Park District subsequently completed demolition of the structures using a brownfield remediation grant. With site cleanup nearing completion, planning discussions regarding the future use of the property can now move forward to determine the property's best use.



Comparison of Other Park Districts

The purpose of this section is three-fold:

- 1. To provide a basis for understanding park standards and how resources are categorized*
- 2. To compare Park District resources with those of other similar districts*
- 3. To suggest opportunities for types of facilities and programs which other communities utilize*

One of the primary factors commonly examined when comparing park districts is overall size. This comparison can occur at multiple levels, including total acreage, number of parks, park classifications, and the range of available facilities. Evaluating park size also requires an understanding of how parks are categorized for specific functions. Earlier planning efforts and recommendations for Stark Parks outlined a park hierarchy, such as neighborhood, community, and regional parks, and emphasized the development of large regional parks. These recommendations were rooted in early park planning standards from the 1960s and earlier, which typically defined regional parks as areas encompassing 1,000 acres or more. More recent five-year plans acknowledged the practical challenges of acquiring parcels of that magnitude and instead recommended that Stark Parks pursue sites, generally in the range of 100 to 200 acres, or larger when feasible. This shift reflects the reality that rapid suburban development has increasingly limited the ability of park districts to compete for large tracts of land.

As discussed above, Stark Parks and other countywide park districts function at a regional scale and are intended to complement smaller municipal and township parks, where more active recreational uses, such as organized sports, typically occur, as well as state and national parks, which often support longer-term passive and active recreation beyond day use. In assessing Stark Parks' role within this hierarchy, park size is an important factor, but more recent studies place an even greater emphasis on site-specific characteristics, such as water quality potential, proximity to other parks and trails or unique access or appropriateness for desirable recreation. Although land acquisition remains an important consideration, as noted in the previous five-year plan, Stark Parks should prioritize growth that emphasizes quality over quantity and advances the overall mission of the Park District.

In evaluating open space, the NRPA establishes baseline standards that rely on population-to-open-space ratios, as previously noted. These guidelines generally recommend providing 10 acres of parkland and recreational open space per 1,000 residents within developed urban areas, along with an additional 10 acres per 1,000 residents in adjacent rural settings, for a total of 20 acres per 1,000 people. Originally derived from playground and athletic field standards that defined recommended site sizes for specific uses, these benchmarks were intended to represent minimum open space requirements. More recent methodologies, however, emphasize a "systems approach" to determining both the need for and appropriate quantity of open space. This approach

closely mirrors the planning process used in the development of the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan and is reflected in this plan as well. It begins with identifying key user groups, engaging them to understand their needs, formulating a strategic plan, and assessing its overall effectiveness following implementation.

District to District Comparison

Comparison with peers is a useful tool in planning. In the previous two plans (2006 and 2014), several park districts answered a short survey that provided data to compare the districts. The 2019 plan utilized data from the 2017 Ohio Parks and Recreation Association’s Park District Benchmarking Survey, and other various annual reports and websites. A review of the data generated from those surveys remains helpful. The revised comparisons incorporate progress that Stark Parks and the other park districts have made since the last comparison and includes data available from annual reports, comprehensive and strategic plans, and websites. In this plan, the same park districts were compared as were reviewed in the previous plans in an effort to maintain a broad-range, multi-year comparison among the different agencies.

Park districts compared include: MetroParks of Butler County, Clermont County Park District, Lake Metroparks, Lorain County Metroparks, Medina County Park District, Portage County Park District, Summit Metro Parks, Metroparks Toledo (Lucas County), Trumbull County MetroParks and Warren County Park District.

Data compared between the districts included topics such as their establishment dates, number of parks, acreage, miles of trails, staffing levels, and funding sources.

It was generally found that the age of a district and its total residential population were the most influential factors impacting park districts. Older, more populated districts tend to have more acreage, more fiscal support (higher levies), more facilities, and larger staffs.

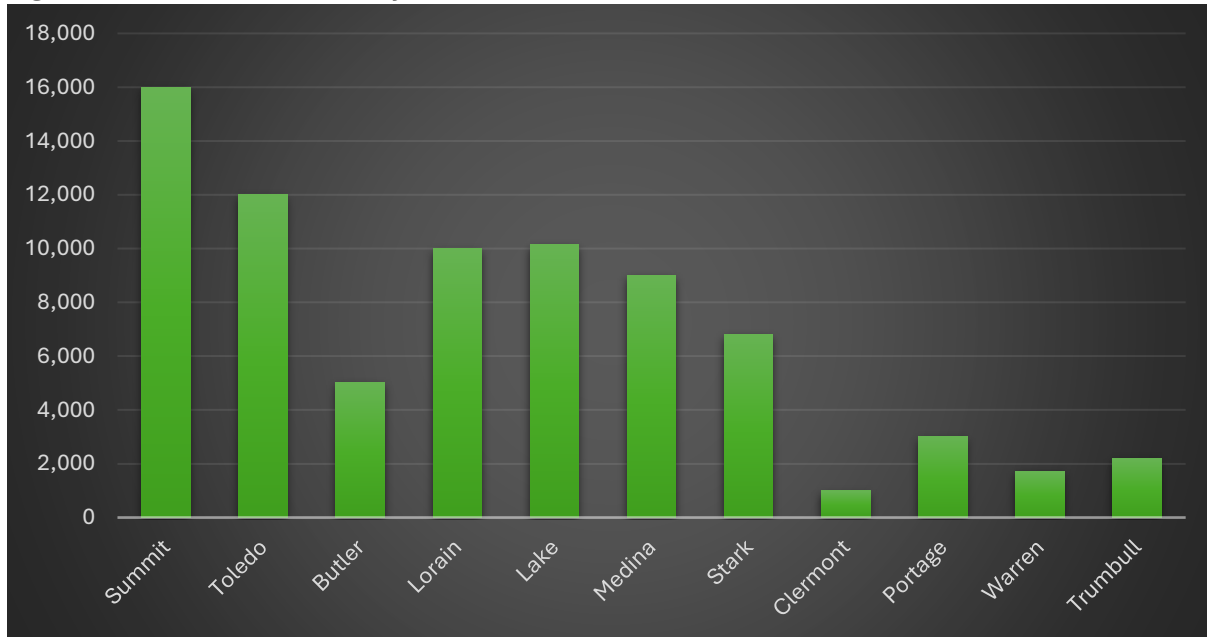
Figure 5: Park District by Year Established

Park District	Year Established	District Acres	County Population	Acres/1000 Residents	Levy Millage
Summit	1921	16,000	538,370	29.7	2
Toledo	1928	12,000	426,291	28.1	1.44
Butler	1955	5,003	399,542	12.5	0.5
Lorain	1957	10,000	322,030	31.1	1.6
Lake	1958	10,145	232,360	43.7	1.9
Medina	1965	9,000	184,625	48.7	1
Stark	1967	6,800	374,091	18.2	1
Clermont	1970	1,000	214,123	4.7	0.5
Portage	1992	3,000	163,839	18.3	1
Warren	2000	1,716	256,059	6.7	0
Trumbull	1961	2,200	200,300	11.0	0

Acres and Population of Districts

As the previous table and following graph show, older districts generally have more acreage in parkland, higher ratios of acreage per residents, and are more likely to be supported by tax levies. In comparison to the other districts surveyed, Stark Parks finds itself in the middle of the pack with approximately 18.3 acres per 1,000 residents, slightly below the average of 23 acres per 1,000 residents.

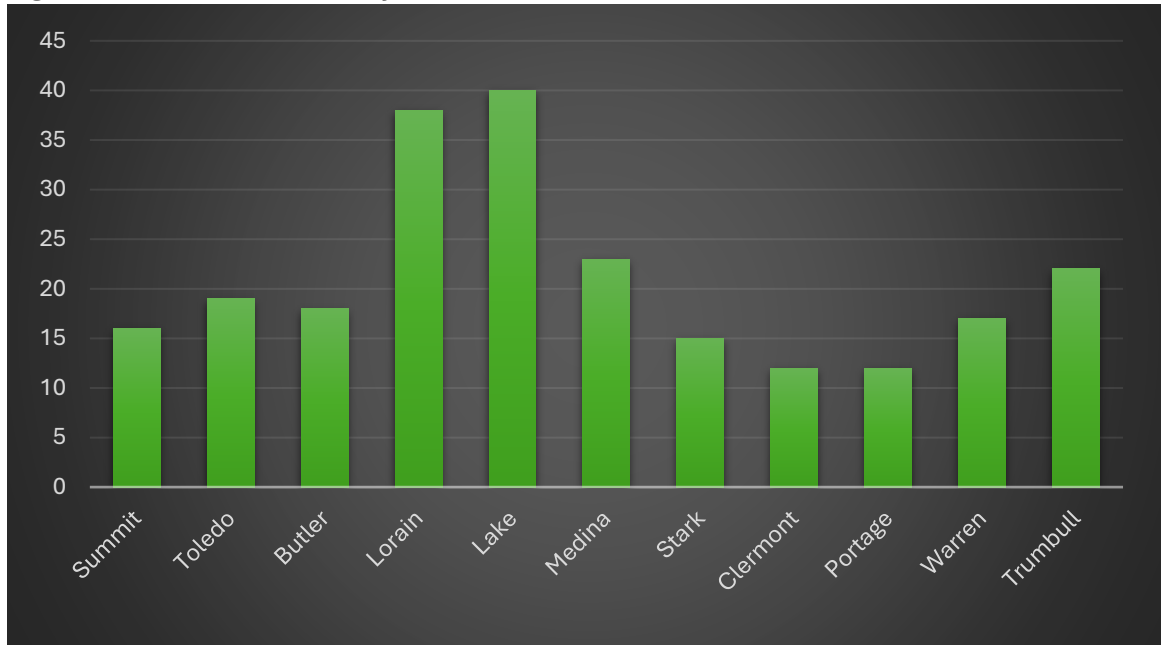
Figure 6: Acres of Parkland by District



Number of Park Facilities

The number and type of facilities that each district operates and/or owns can be related to a number of factors, including the age of the district, as well as the population growth (or decline) of the community. In terms of the number of parks, Stark County currently has 15 parks. This is just slightly lower than the average of 20 parks for all the park districts surveyed, which includes an atypically high number of parks counted for both Lorain and Lake County's park districts. Additionally, some of the other park districts include preservation areas and future parks within their count of number of parks, which Stark Parks does not.

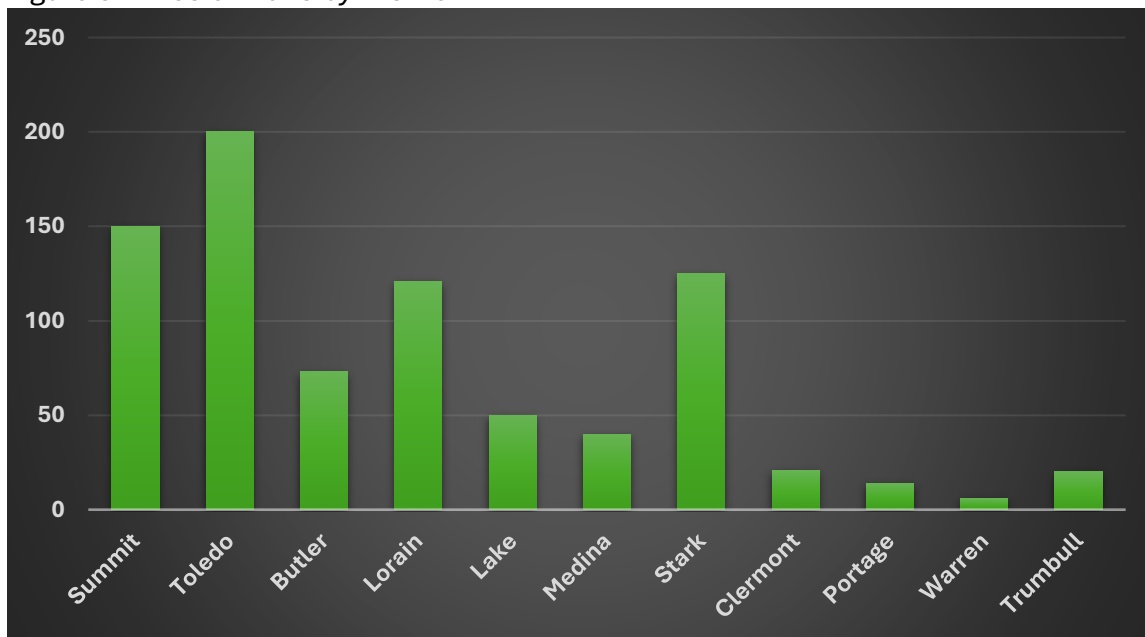
Figure 7: Number of Parks by District



Trail Lengths

The lengths of trails were also compared. Stark County experienced exceptional growth over the past 20 years of the trail system, almost tripling from 50 miles of trails in 2006 to 125 in 2025. With an average of 72.8 miles of trails per park district, Stark County is well above the median. Further changes will be seen as additional portions of the trail plan are completed and as Stark County establishes itself as a leader in trail mileage.

Figure 8: Miles of Trails by District



Annual Visitation

While previous plans compared the frequency and types of programs offered and their attendance, several districts do not track this information, and so a comparison of park visitors was compared for this plan to give a more comprehensive district comparison. Stark Parks ranks fifth behind Summit, Toledo, Lorain and Lake Park districts. Stark Parks also ranks fifth behind these same districts in terms of acreage and county population, so this figure appears to be appropriate when considering those metrics. In terms of programming, there were 13,569 attendees at 345 public programs offered through Stark Parks in 2024. Compared to the previous year there were less attendees, but also fewer programs offered. Additionally, there were 167 programs requested, with 13,651 participants.

Figure 9: Annual Visitation by District

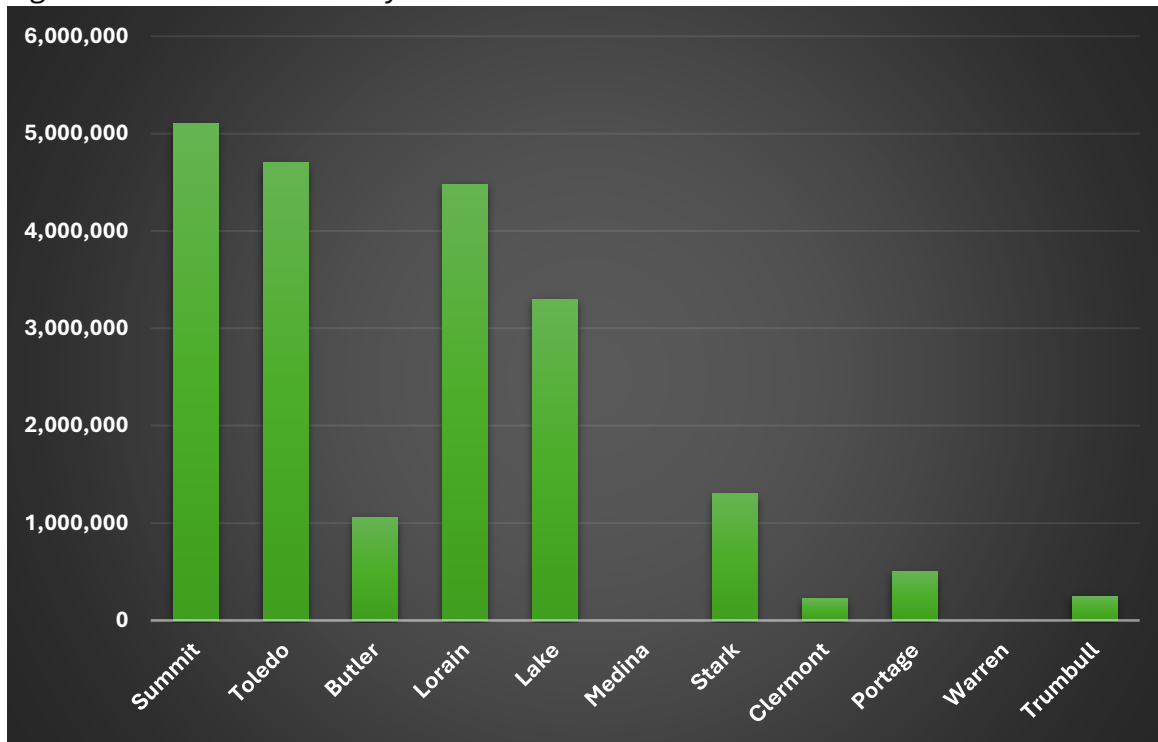


Figure 10: Programs Offered by Stark Parks

Public Programs			
Year	# programs	# Participants	Participants per Program
2019	634	19,473	30.7
2020	797	16583	20.8
2021	780	14116	18.1
2022	783	18861	24.1
2023	408	15735	38.6
2024	345	13569	39.3
Totals	3,747	98,337	

Figure 11: Programs Requested by Community Members for Stark Parks

Requested Programs	# programs	# Participants	Participants per Program
Year	480	13,547	28.2
2019	170	12,321	72.5
2020	187	18,074	96.7
2021	304	32,374	106.5
2022	252	24,059	95.5
2023	169	13,172	77.9
2024	167	13,651	81.7
Totals	1,729	127,198	

While programming statistics are tracked through reservation systems, accurately tracking annual visitation, special event attendance and trail counts remains a significant challenge for park managers, as the lack of a standardized industry method often prevents direct comparisons between regional park districts. Stark Parks recently completed a comprehensive study, partially funded by the Stark County Regional Planning Commission, aimed at improving data accuracy. Partnering with transportation consultants Toole Design, Inc., the study analyzed multiple data models, including innovative methods like StreetLight Data, Placer.ai, and Miovision cameras for the best modelling platform for Stark Parks' needs.

Accurate user counts are critical, not only for year-over-year comparisons, but for funding eligibility, prioritization of improvements and analysis of whether investments are meeting their goals. Toole Design provided recommendations on how Stark Parks can leverage existing, raw user counts to project reliable county-wide annual estimates. Continued collaboration with the Stark County Area Transportation Study (SCATS) will ensure the model's accuracy improves annually, helping to better prioritize investments and future maintenance. As technology and modeling software evolve, Stark Parks is positioned to maximize these tools to maintain the most accurate, data-driven user counts for its parks and trails.

Figure 12: Parks User Count Data from Placer.ai Analysis

Park	2024	2025	2024-2025 Average
Cooks Lagoon	20,800	20,600	20,700
Deer Creek Reservoir	66,200	29,300	47,750
Devonshire Park	5,800	5,200	5,500
Esmont Park	12,900	11,200	12,050
Fichtner Park	4,500	5,500	5,000
Fry Family Park	54,300	54,300	54,300
Magnolia Flouring Mills	3,200	3,600	3,400
Petros Lake Park	187,000	183,000	185,000
Pike Ridge Park	Opened March 2025	4,100	4,100
Quail Hollow Park	134,000	135,400	134,700
Sippo Lake Park	410,000	399,000	404,500
Walborn Reservoir	63,400	56,600	60,000
TOTAL			972,425

Figure 13: Trails User Count Data from StreetLight Analysis from 2025 Toole Study

Park	Annual Average
Campus Trail	49,518
Hoover Trail – High School	103,903
Hoover Trail – Ballfields	12,775
Iron Horse Trail	21,535
Mahoning Valley Trail	15,938
Middle Branch Trail – Tunnel	5,475
Middle Branch Trail – 55 th Street	151,718
Minerva Connector Trail	42,097
Nickel Plate Trail – Crowl Street	2,798
Pioneer Trail	23,117
Sandy Valley Trail	8,030
Stark Electric Railway	5,475
Sippo Valley Trail – Skyland Avenue	5,232
Towpath – Lock 4 Trailhead	40,150
Towpath – Lake Avenue Trailhead	21,778
Towpath – Craig Pittman Trailhead	18,493
West Branch Trail	36,013
TOTAL	564,045

Tallying these major parks and trails visitation gives an annual visitor count of over one and half million visits. This represents a significant number of people who may be visiting from within or beyond Stark County’s borders and offering opportunities to capitalize and enhance the economic development and tourism potential the park district holds.

Staff

In 2024, Stark Parks had approximately 66 full-time employees, which is similar to the

staffing for Lorain County Metro Parks, but significantly lower than Lake or Summit Metro Parks. Stark Parks' staffing equates to approximately 1.7 full-time employees per every 10,000 residents. Nationally, this figure is almost 9 full-time employees per every 10,000 residents according to the 2024 National Recreation and Park Association Agency Performance Review.

Staffing, of course, is directly related to the number of facilities and types of programs offered. Lake and Summit County, which strongly emphasize educational activities, have almost as many full-time staff as all the other districts combined. In terms of full-time staff, Stark Parks appears to be mid-range, and utilizes part-time and seasonal staff, not to mention countless dedicated volunteers that help to supplement staffing needs.

General Revenue Sources

Current levy millage (if applicable) and estimated annual revenue/income were also compared among the park districts. When analyzing income from all sources for the districts, the most significant source was property tax levies, followed by categories including local government and general funds, grants, fees and sales, donations, and interest. Oil and gas royalties and leases are sources of income that may see an increase in certain locations as the oil and gas industry expands in Ohio.

Generally speaking, park revenue levels tend to correspond to the age of a district. Older, more established districts usually have greater incomes and larger millage levies. However, that is not always the case as some districts have no tax levy and instead rely primarily on funding from grants, and county, and local government assistance funds.

Total revenue for the various park districts reviewed varied widely, as well as the average percent increase in revenue since 2016. Locally, Stark Parks experienced a decrease in revenue. Compared to 2016; 2024 received approximately \$1 million less in grant funding, additionally, the carryover balance from 2023 to 2024 was approximately \$1 million less than the carryover from 2015 to 2016. These two categories help explain the reduction in revenue between the two years. It should be noted that the actual income is substantially less than it appears as other sources of "in and out" income are included in total figures. "In and out" income are those funds that the Park District never has full possession of as actual cash, but which must be included for accounting purposes, including note sales (loans) that must be repaid and grants paid on behalf of the Park District by other entities. Further discussion on Stark Parks' revenue and expenditure is included in the following section.

Part II – Operations and Resources

Mission Statement

Stark Parks undertook a comprehensive evaluation of its existing mission statement, “Preserve, manage, and connect natural areas to serve the community through recreation, conservation and education”, to ensure it accurately reflects the needs of the community and aligns with organizational priorities. This evaluation incorporated public and stakeholder input, staff perspectives, and benchmarking against similar park districts.

Public participation played a central role in evaluating the functions and priorities of the park district. During public meetings, attendees were asked to rank the importance of various park functions, which are provided in the table below.

Figure 14: Ranking of Stark Parks Functions

Rank	Function of Stark Parks
1	Community Trail Connections
2	Wildlife Conservation
3	Recreation Opportunities
4	Conservation of Greenspace
5	Health and Wellness Opportunities
6	Historic Preservation
7	Educational Programming
8	Economic Development
9	Tourism
10	Cultural Appreciation
11	Agricultural Education

These rankings highlight that while traditional park functions such as conservation, recreation, and education remain central, additional priorities such as community connectivity, health and wellness, and economic development have emerged as increasingly important to the public.

An online survey further quantified community perspectives, asking participants to indicate their agreement with statements about the park district’s role. Responses indicated strong community support for the park district’s contributions to education (79%), community connection (88%), health and wellness (88%), accessibility (70%), and overall livability (82%). Additionally, the survey highlighted perceptions of economic impact, with 61% agreeing the park district attracts new businesses, 68% noting increased property values,

and 48% acknowledging tourism benefits. Historical preservation (64%) and educational opportunities (79%) were also affirmed as important community functions. It should also be noted that within the survey and during the exercise at the public meetings, participants expressed that Stark Parks' priority should be maintaining park land already within the Park District's system, rather than expanding and acquiring more acreage, with concerns that additional acreage may result in the existing parks not receiving the necessary attention to remain clean and safe.

Based on the findings from the public surveys and meetings, a presentation was given to the Park District staff and stakeholders. This presentation highlighted the community members' perspectives on the Park District and services it provides. Additionally, a number of mission statements from similar park districts were provided for the attendees to review and rank their favorite mission statements.

Both staff and stakeholder discussions emphasized the need for a mission statement that is concise, clear, and broad enough to guide the organization without attempting to list every activity or service. Recommendations determined maintaining a focus on overarching goals and providing definitions where necessary, rather than expanding the mission statement to

capture every specific function was preferred. This approach ensures the mission remains flexible while still reflecting the organization's commitment to serving the community and maintaining what it has.



With the adoption of this comprehensive plan, a new mission statement will also be adopted, which is ***“to enrich the quality of life in Stark County by conserving and connecting our natural and cultural resources, while providing meaningful recreation and education opportunities that bring value to everyone in our community.”***

Within the new mission statement, there are several terms that can be defined further to capture the mission and vision of the park district.

Quality of Life: This refers to the overall well-being of the residents. Stark Parks provides access to safe, well-maintained parks, trails, and natural areas with opportunities for recreation that support physical health, mental wellness, social connectivity, environmental sustainability, economic development, and community identity that helps to enhance the livelihood of the Stark County community.

Conservation: Conservation is the deliberate protection of valuable resources. This encompasses not only natural assets such as land, water, wildlife, vegetation, and ecological systems, but also historic and cultural resources. Conservation efforts may involve acquiring parkland for sustainable community use; restoring or securing environmentally sensitive areas with limited public access to safeguard wildlife and native plant communities; or obtaining historically significant properties that require preservation or restoration.

Connection: Stark Parks plays a vital role in fostering community connectivity throughout Stark County. The Park District is committed to developing a comprehensive trail system that links parks and key destinations across the county's cities, villages, and townships. In addition, Stark Parks strengthens community ties through educational initiatives and diverse programming opportunities. Together, these efforts cultivate meaningful connections among people, places, and the natural environment.

Resources: Resources are the collective natural, cultural, and physical assets managed by the Park District for public benefit. These resources form the foundation for recreation, conservation, preservation, education, and community enrichment. These resources also help support economic development efforts and boost tourism for the local economy.

Recreation: Recreation refers to the leisure activities undertaken during free time that contribute to physical health, mental well-being, and social connection. Recreation covers a broad spectrum of experiences offered within parks, open spaces, trails, and natural areas to serve the diverse community interests. Stark Parks focuses on passive recreation which favors activities with minimal impacts to the environment such as hiking, biking, horseback riding, birdwatching, picnicking, and photography, as well as fishing and hunting.

Education: Education extends beyond classroom-style instruction. It includes interpretive programming, environmental learning, historical and cultural awareness, recreational skill development, and experiential opportunities that help individuals understand the value of conservation, public lands, and healthy lifestyles. Education within a park district framework is about strengthening the relationship between people, place,

and purpose, ensuring that public spaces are not only enjoyed, but understood and sustainably supported for future generations. Stark Parks strives to “bring parks to the people” through park programming to better connect with the urban and rural communities where access may be a barrier.

Value: Value is the measurable and perceived benefit delivered to the community through responsible stewardship of public resources. It reflects how effectively the district brings value to the community through support of economic development, tourism, and community development through improvements to public health and environmental benefits such as flood control and stormwater management while helping to retain and attract residents, visitors, and businesses.

Everyone: Everyone refers to the full diversity of individuals and groups within the community Stark Parks serves, without limitation based on age, ability, income, race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or life circumstance. Stark Parks will strive to create spaces that are welcoming for all members of the community, aspiring to be accessible and inclusive for all.

Community: Community is the diverse group of residents, businesses, visitors, organizations, and stakeholders within Stark County who share a common interest in accessible recreation, preserved natural spaces, cultural appreciation, and opportunities for social connection, health, and environmental stewardship. Stark Parks prides itself on working with the community members and partners to make Stark County a great place to live, work, and play.

Organizational Chart

The Park District’s organizational chart begins, as all public agency charts should, with the general public as the primary head of the organization. This emphasizes that Stark Parks must respond to the public’s desires and concerns in order to maintain its support.

The Park District is an independent political subdivision governed by a five-member Park Board. The Park Director, who reports directly to the Park Board, oversees the Park District staff. The current internal configuration of Stark Parks consists of several departments: Finance Department, Enterprise Department, Capital Planning & Projects Department, Natural Resources Department, Development Department, Community Engagement Department, Education & Programs Department, Public Safety Department, Maintenance & Construction Department – Facilities Group, Maintenance & Construction Department –

Park and Trail Maintenance & Construction Groups, and Wildlife Conservation Center Department.

The following is an overview of each department within the Park District.

Finance Department: The Finance Department is responsible for managing and overseeing the district's financial resources and ensuring fiscal responsibility. Key functions of this department include: Budgeting and Financial Planning; Revenue Management; Financial Reporting; Audit and Compliance; Purchasing and Procurement; and Payroll. Overall, the financial department is essential in maintaining the financial integrity and sustainability of the park district, enabling it to continue serving the community effectively.

Enterprise Department: The Enterprises Department effectively manages all aspects of the retail activities for the Stark County Park District including but not limited to operations of two marina locations, sales and rental process of events, and mobile concessions for events. Meets all appropriate state regulations relating to sales and services of food related items and ensures park patrons receive goods and services with outstanding customer service.

Capital Planning & Projects Department: The Capital Planning & Projects Department develops and guides the implementation of the Stark County Park District's long-range plans. Communicates with park leadership, staff, park partners and the public to develop priorities for park and trail projects. Provides end-to-end project management to execute strategic and park master plans.

Natural Resources Department: The Natural Resources Department plans, directs, and supervises all aspects of the Stark County Park District's (Stark Parks) land and natural resources throughout Stark County. Responsible for assisting in implementation of various programs pertaining to identification and removal of invasive species, habitat restoration, cultivation of native vegetation, natural resource surveys, wetland delineations, etc.

Development Department: The Development Department is responsible for identifying and securing revenue to support the mission of Stark Parks and to fund operational, capital, and long-term sustainability expenses of the parks. Revenues should be secured through a variety of sources including but not limited to grants, sponsorships, capital campaigns, donations, annual campaigns, fundraising events and contributions from partner entities such as Friends of Stark Parks (FSP) and Quail Hollow Volunteer Association (QHVA) in order to achieve the goals set forth in the Park District's mission and strategic plans. This position will work with established nonprofit partners and foundations

to attract contributions and seek new opportunities for fund development. Organize and attend special events sponsored by the Park District and other organizations/partners.

Community Engagement Department: The Community Engagement Department oversees the planning, organization, and management of the District’s community engagement, marketing, and communication services, both internal and external. It plays a key role in developing and nurturing long-term relationships with community agencies and stakeholders, facilitating the creation of new partnerships. The department is responsible for increasing awareness of the Park District, acting as a liaison between outside organizations, community agencies, and the public. Additionally, it manages volunteer programs, overseeing recruitment, training, and coordination of volunteers. The department also handles online content creation, social media planning, execution, and performance measurement.

Education & Programs Department: The Education & Programs Department is responsible for developing and administering short- and long-term goals for the Stark County Park District’s Education Department; including development, oversight, and evaluation of various education programs, outreach and engagement activities taking “parks to the people”, and special events that integrate and support the Park’s overall strategic initiatives. Responsible for developing, coordinating, and presenting interpretive and educational programming and events in the areas of nature, history, and recreation throughout various locations within the Stark County Park District.

Public Safety Department: The public safety department is responsible for enforcing Ohio state laws and park rules and regulations by use of citations, warnings, and custodial arrests. The department patrols Stark County Park District parks, land and/or historic sites by emergency equipped vehicle, bicycle, on foot and/or by use of specialized vehicles (motorcycle, boat, ATV, etc.). Provides law enforcement services at special events and activities. Assists park visitors; promotes public relations by providing information and directions, answering questions, and conducting educational programs concerning the Stark County Park District’s law enforcement program. The department also promotes public relations by providing educational programs concerning the Stark County Park District, law enforcement and security to schools, civic groups, and park visitors.

Maintenance & Construction Department – Facilities Group: The Facilities Team is responsible for maintaining Stark Park’s buildings and grounds ensuring good housekeeping and appearance, including flower beds. Responsible for effective scheduling, coordination, oversight and completion of maintenance and grounds projects at various park grounds, buildings or structures. Conducts trash route throughout the county on a frequent basis depending on season. Responsible for event setup/cleanup

throughout the park district Assures operational efficiency of all building equipment such as heating, plumbing, ventilation and lighting and is responsible for short- and long-term planning for replacement and preventative maintenance programs for all facility systems. The team is responsible for working with volunteer groups on various projects.

Maintenance & Construction Department – Park and Trail Maintenance & Construction

Groups: The Parks & Trails Teams performs lawn maintenance (effectively operating a variety of lawn maintenance equipment) including cutting and trimming grass, tree services, and is responsible for trash removal and snow removal at different park locations, as needed. Perform trail maintenance duties including working in a two-to-four-person crew completing tasks such as operating appropriate small and large equipment (chipper, brush hog, mower, chainsaw, etc.), spreading materials, spraying unwanted foliage, trail surface repair, signage installations, bench installations etc. The team is responsible for working with volunteer groups on various projects. The Construction Crew is responsible for a variety of duties associated with construction work leading to building and maintaining trails, parks, facilities and parking lots including but not limited to performing clearing, grading, paving, finish grading, and carpentry. Responsible for construction duties for a variety of trail, building and/or structure projects including loading/unloading building materials, hauling materials and equipment, building of temporary structures, digging, trenching, or compacting areas as needed to prepare for construction.

Wildlife Conservation Center Department: The Wildlife Conservation Center staff play a vital role in the care, rehabilitation, and release of injured, orphaned, or displaced wildlife in Ohio. Working closely with wildlife organizations, animal control agencies, and veterinary professionals, the wildlife conservation center provides critical support to ensure the well-being and successful reintegration of native wildlife into their natural habitats.

Revenues and Expenditures

As the Stark Parks continues to grow and expand, synonymously, so will expenses. It is imperative that careful planning be undertaken to ensure that adequate sources of income are obtained to cover the increased expenses. Below is an overview of what revenue sources Stark Parks receives, and how these incomes are expended.

Sources of Income

As mentioned previously, the actual income for Stark Parks is significantly lower than the amounts shown in the table below, because the totals include certain “in and out” funds.

These “in and out” funds are not fully retained as cash by Stark Parks but must be accounted for. They include items such as note sales (loans) that require repayment and grants disbursed on behalf of the Park District by other organizations.

Figure 15: Stark Parks Revenue Sources

Revenue	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Carry-Over	\$225,182.56	\$1,397,508.74	\$1,399,812.72	\$1,313,527.27	\$2,113,444.18
Previous Year Liquidations	\$395,600.18	\$327,335.97	\$370,814.79	\$389,598.46	254,761.43
Taxes – Real Estate Property	\$6,390,455.69	\$6,477,628.57	\$6,584,340.19	\$6,645,240.59	6,676,890.18
Taxes – Manufactured Home	\$7,394.15	\$7,905.87	\$8,190.90	\$8,606.96	\$8,315.58
User Fees	\$63,018.35	\$96,280.84	\$93,281.08	\$72,097.55	\$69,229.33
Sales	\$7,139.90	\$116,879.41	\$112,722.41	\$123,773.77	\$100,046.26
Licenses and Permits	-	-	-	2,000.00	-
Fines and Forfeitures	\$360.00	\$26.00	-	\$5.00	\$69.98
Federal Direct Grant	-	-	-	-	\$7,007.89
Federal Indirect Grant	\$37,525.62	-	-	-	-
State Operating Grant	\$1,446.00	-	\$199,378.54	\$792,099.69	\$212,459.12
State Capital Grant	\$919,478.38	\$139,731.27	\$293,370.07	-	\$72,582.38
Local Operating Grant	-	-	-	-	\$15,000.00
Local Capital Grant	-	-	-	\$50,000.00	-
P.I.L.O.T.-LOCAL	\$10,356.92	\$3,686.80	\$9,502.90	\$3,358.80	\$9,110.12
State Governmental Shared Revenues	\$9,833.16	\$11,109.47	\$11,947.36	\$12,324.50	\$11,779.22
Real Property Rollbacks	\$795,057.15	\$795,402.69	\$765,734.39	\$764,341.55	\$774,173.29
Intergovernmental Reimbursement	-	\$200.00	-	-	\$600.00
Intergovernmental – County Reimbursements	\$1,750.00	\$162,247.53	\$972.76	\$264,105.82	\$134,156.55
Intergovernmental – Local Reimbursements	\$22,762.00	\$22,000.00	\$11,000.00	\$7,750.00	-
Investment Income	\$13,638.82	\$1,498.33	\$33,696.29	\$127,681.43	\$134,494.83
Other Revenue – Damage Claims	\$3,436.37	\$27,718.32	\$19,965.47	\$53,928.56	\$20,224.26
Other Revenue – Prior Year Reimbursement	\$71.50	\$189,224.98	-	-	-
Other Revenue – Miscellaneous	\$9,252.25	\$2,082.52	\$470.65	\$26,160.82	\$6,097.63
Gifts and Donations	\$153,812.75	\$18,683.93	-	-	\$30,000.00
Other Revenue – Miscellaneous – Special Projects	\$138,419.66	\$16,362.00	\$1,177,083.54	\$62,733.39	\$8,095.47
Other Revenue – Miscellaneous – Private Grant	\$980.00	\$1,000.00	\$999.00	\$51,000.00	\$16,474.26
Other Revenue – Miscellaneous – Reimbursable Settlement	-	-	-	-	\$3,652.88
Other Revenue – Miscellaneous – Jury Duty	\$60.00	\$20.00	\$50.00	\$40.00	\$60.00
Other Revenue – Rentals/Leases	-	-	\$3,000.00	-	-
Other Revenue – Retals/Leases – Royalties	\$2,926.47	\$4,493.11	\$7,921.40	\$4,722.24	\$7,751.23
Transfers In	-	-	-	-	\$12,623.65
Sale of Capital Assets – Personal Property	\$3,900.00	-	\$1,563.52	-	-
Other Revenue – Prior Year Reimbursements	-	\$4,215.95	\$1,563.52	-	-
Other Revenue – Prior Year Reimbursements	-	\$543.99	-	-	-
User Fees – Exploration Gateway	-	-	-	-	-
User Fees	\$9,812.38	\$14,345.45	\$27,657.39	-	-
Sales	-	-	\$8,025.82	-	-
Reimbursement – County	\$50,000.00	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	\$9,307,926.50	\$9,851,285.25	\$11,155,297.54	\$10,868,907.25	\$10,779,509.99

In Stark County, the park levy represents the Park District’s primary source of revenue, as illustrated in the table below showing revenue sources over the past four years. Beyond levy income and the sources mentioned previously, significant additional funding comes from federal, state, and local grants. In March 2020, Stark Parks successfully secured a 1-mill renewal levy, based on property values from the original 2012 levy and generating roughly \$7 million annually for the Park District. The following table provides a comparison of revenue sources for 2019–2024.

Less than 5% of the Park District’s revenue is generated from user fees, rentals, and other miscellaneous sources. Earlier plans surveyed participants on their willingness to pay activity fees to support additional revenue. The results showed that most park users were open to paying fees for various activities. As the Park District continues enhancing existing park facilities and acquiring land for conservation and connectivity, implementing user fees for specific activities could help offset some of the costs associated with these efforts.

Distribution of Funds

An examination of Stark Parks’ budget allocation reveals that most funds are directed toward personal services and capital expenditure. Capital expenditures encompass activities such as trail construction, facility upgrades, and land acquisition-related costs. Over the past five years, this expenditure has represented up to 27% of the annual budget. Such projects are typically planned several years in advance to ensure prudent financial management, strategic prioritization, and efficient use of available resources. Given the substantial investment required, long-term planning enables the Park District to schedule projects in alignment with expected revenues, including potential grant opportunities.

Figure 16: Stark Parks Expenditures

Expenditures	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Personnel Services	\$4,347,887.27	\$4,593,561.94	\$5,180,405.48	\$5,473,741.32	\$5,698,226.96
Supplies	\$509,100.95	\$697,039.13	\$667,629.52	\$652,303.69	\$592,946.11
Purchased Services	\$814,562.24	\$827,278.33	\$826,733.95	\$820,314.88	\$795,678.37
Capital Outlay	\$1,282,067.00	\$1,181,435.90	\$2,638,271.78	\$814,549.96	\$1,452,486.88
Other Allocation	\$155,022.41	\$153,413.24	\$149,771.92	\$118,762.86	\$436,346.71
Transfer Out	\$683,170.44	\$300,251.55	\$293,966.38	\$552,032.44	\$32,056.29
TOTAL	\$7,791,810.31	\$7,752,980.09	\$9,756,779.03	\$8,431,705.15	\$9,007,741.32

Revenue Resources and Planning Assistance

A number of funding sources are available to meet the Park District's goals. While a tax levy pays for the operation of the parks, the support of the public and others helps to shape the vision of Stark Parks, determining the how, why, and what it does. Therefore, this section includes not only discussion concerning fiscal resources, but also methods of building public support.

Federal and state programs, local funding, foundations, non-profit organizations, private individuals, and corporate assistance are some of the fiscal resources available. This section will provide a background to some of the programs currently relevant to Stark Parks.

Levy Millage

As seen previously, levy income is by far the most significant source of funding for Stark Parks. Approved in 2020 for renewal, the 1.0-mill levy generated \$7,459,379 in 2024, representing 69.27% of the Park District's revenue. The Park District's current levy is based on 2012 valuations as previously mentioned. The 8-year term expires in 2028, and Stark Parks is analyzing their finances to determine the millage required for their next ballot initiative. Given the increasing costs of operational expenses, the parks will need to increase their revenues to maintain current levels of services, reinvest in aging infrastructure, and upgrade existing properties. According to a 2010-2025 compilation of parks and recreation levies issued by the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association, there was an 81.96% successful passage rate for these levies across the State between that timeframe.

Grants

The Park District has done an outstanding job of applying for and receiving grants. Matching these grants with local dollars and in-kind services has maximized every dollar. Below is a brief synopsis of some of the funding sources available, most of which Stark Parks has already taken advantage of.

Directories with detailed information about program and funding opportunities are available at the Stark County District Library and other sources online. The *Foundation Directory Online* is a tool available through the library that lists resources for locating nonprofit funding. Other resources include: *Candid (formerly known as The Foundation Center)*, *Assistance Listings through sam.gov*, *Grants.gov*, and the *National Center for Charitable Statistics*, which lists private foundations within Stark County.

The Conservation Fund is a national organization that assists in the acquisition and conservation of land and water resources to help protect properties for wildlife, recreation and/or historical significance. In 2018, Stark Parks received a grant from this entity to acquire 183 acres in Lawrence Township for the permanent preservation of the Nimishillen Creek Preserve, a Category 3 wetland, through a WRRSP grant. Other federal agencies available to assist with Park District programming and revenue support include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (discussed in greater detail below).

The State of Ohio provides both program and revenue support, which can supplement federal and local funds for park planning and development. The principal state agency involved in recreational and open space planning is the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Within ODNR are a number of divisions that offer specific support services and access to federal and state funds. Some grant opportunities include:

Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization (AMLER) Grant: These funds are designated for the reclamation of coal-mined lands abandoned prior to 1977. The grant's objective is to promote economic growth and/or community development.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): This grant program provides up to 50% reimbursement assistance for state and local government subdivisions for the acquisition, development, and rehabilitation of recreational areas.

Clean Ohio Trail Fund (COTF): The COTF seeks to improve outdoor recreational opportunities for Ohioans by funding trails for outdoor pursuits of all kinds. This grant be utilized for land acquisition for a trail, new trails or connector-trail development, and cost of engineering and design. There is a 25% match associated with this grant.

NatureWorks: The NatureWorks grant program provides up to 75% reimbursement assistance for local government subdivisions (townships, villages, cities, counties, park districts, joint recreation districts, and conservancy districts) for the acquisition, development, and rehabilitation of recreational areas.

Recreational Trails Program: Eligible projects include development of urban trail linkages, trail head, and trailside facilities; maintenance of existing trails; restoration of trail areas damaged by usage; improving access for people with disabilities; acquisition of easements and property; development and construction of new trails; purchase and lease of recreational trail construction and maintenance equipment; environment and safety education programs related to trails. Recently, Stark Parks has been successful in securing Recreational Trails Program grants to fund portions of the bridge replacements along the Sippo Valley Trail.



Tam O'Shanter Park

The Clean Ohio Green Space Conservation Program: Funding is dedicated to environmental conservation including acquisition of green space and the protection and enhancement of river and stream corridors. Grant recipients agree to maintain the properties in perpetuity to be enjoyed and cherished for

generations to come. This program is administered by the Ohio Public Works Commission (OPWC) and awards up to 75 percent of the estimated costs for projects. Funds from this program have been utilized by the Park District for a number of acquisition projects, including Fry Family Park, the Tam O' Shanter golf course, parts of Walborn Reservoir, and various waterway corridors. In recent years, funding has also provided a conservation easement for Pike Ridge Park, enhancements and prairie restoration at Petros Lake Park, site improvements to Magnolia Flouring Mills, and acquisition of approximately 17 acres along the Nimishillen Creek in Canton Township.

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA): both agencies manage various programs related to community brownfield assistance, including the OEPA's Voluntary Action Program (VAP) and the USEPA's Brownfields Assessment and Cleanup Grants. These programs are designed to assist in the cleanup and reuse of contaminated land or brownfields. As the Park District plans connections in municipalities, these programs might provide assistance where trails pass through areas formerly used by heavy industry, including funds for both cleanup and acquisition of land. Stark Parks was the recipient of these cleanup funds in 2014, when the USEPA awarded the Park District \$200,000 for some remediation at the Molly Stark Hospital.

The Ohio Department of Development also offers programming for brownfield remediation through the Building Demolition & Site Revitalization Program (BDSR) and Brownfield Remediation Program. In 2025, the Park District was able to partner with the Stark County Land Bank and Stark County Commissioners to secure funding for asbestos abatement and demolition of the former Molly Stark Hospital at Molly Stark Park. The Stark County Land Bank has also provided funding assistance through their Demolition Assistance Program for the removal of dilapidated structures at both Tam O'Shanter Park and Quail Hollow Park.

In the past, Stark Parks has taken on several projects pertaining to floodplain management, including acquiring grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Ohio Emergency Management Agency (OEMA) to help buy and remove flood-damaged homes along the Zimber Ditch and to permanently convert those areas back to natural floodplains. These sites can then potentially be utilized for activities that have low-to-no impact on the environment, such as parks and trail development. The OEPA also offers grants for similar water quality improvements, including stream bank restoration.

The Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District (MWCD) has local programs that provide grants for projects focused on watershed protection through flood control and water conservation. The Park District has received grant funding from the MWCD to assist with the Zimber Ditch floodplain restoration project noted above. MWCD funding has also assisted in the acquisition of category three wetlands in Lawrence Township and the removal of woody debris along the Tuscarawas River.

Over the years, Stark Parks has received grants from the Ohio Attorney General's Office to purchase law enforcement body armor.

The Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program of the National Park Service offers planning assistance for community-led natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation projects. They can help with projects such as park and trail design work, or river access and conservation improvements.



Another source which passes federal funds through a local decision-making body is the Ohio & Erie Canal Association (OECA), the management association for the Ohio & Erie Canalway. Since the founding of the Canalway, over \$10.3 million has been awarded from Congress for projects and programs within the National Heritage Area. In 2018, the OECA awarded \$355,000 to 14 organizations within the

National Heritage Area. Recently, Stark Parks received funding for the Crystal Springs Trailhead Improvements in 2022. 2025 OECA funds were awarded to support signage improvements along the 25 miles of the Towpath Trail.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development have also assisted the Park District in previous years. These funds are available for projects that either primarily benefit low- and moderate-income persons, eliminate slum and blighting conditions, or address an urgent community need. Projects that have received CDBG funds in



Petros Lake Park

the past include the purchase of Sippo Lake Park and ADA improvements at Sippo Lake Park and Walborn Reservoir. Most recently a restroom project was completed at Petros Lake Park. It should be noted that recreational projects are generally a low priority for CDBG funding (even when being used to meet ADA accessibility requirements).

The Ohio Arts Council is another State source, providing grants to help foster and encourage the development of the arts and assist in the preservation of Ohio’s cultural heritage. While the grant guidelines should be analyzed in greater detail, projects that focus on the historical or cultural history of this area, such as interpretive signage, may be potential candidates for this grant. Similarly, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which is the largest annual funder of the arts in the United States, may be another resource as the Park District looks to expand future programming opportunities.

Many agencies and societies offer smaller grants, that when combined with other funds can greatly assist in funding larger-scale projects. Some of these groups include historical societies, ArtsInStark (the local arts council), and preservation or rehabilitation societies such as the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) or the Society for the Preservation of Old Mills (SPOOM).

Other Sources of Income and Assistance

As noted previously, foundations and corporations can be a major source of either funds or resources to assist Stark Parks. Volunteer labor can also contribute significant value. Friends of Stark Parks is a local non-profit volunteer organization founded in 1997 dedicated to preserving and developing the Park District’s trails and parks. This group assists with promoting the park uses and services, sponsoring programs and fundraising activities, and assisting with projects and events. Money raised from Friends of Stark Parks

has supported a variety of projects for Stark Parks facilities, a park district wide bench donor program that provides pollinator fields, benches, and tree plantings throughout Stark Parks. Friends has also established an Endowment Fund through Stark Community Foundation in support of the park district and an endowment sub-fund to support the perpetual maintenance of the Wildlife Conservation Center at Sippo Lake Park. Recent project funding has supported tree planting in various parks, boat launches at Deer Creek Reservoir and Sippo Lake Park, the replacement of a bridge along the Sippo Valley Trail, a new water trailhead along the Tuscarawas River in Canal Fulton, and the replacement of a bridge at Sippo Lake Park. Friends of Stark Parks continues to sponsor the Summer Serenades concert series and promote a number of Stark Parks programs.

The Quail Hollow Volunteer Association (QHVA) is another significant support organization to Stark Parks. The QHVA is a 501c(3) organization which was formed in 1982 with a mission to “promote and enhance the Quail Hollow Park facilities and offer opportunities for the public to discover the natural and cultural history of the area. To encourage historical research of the property, collect, preserve, restore and protect the historic area and legacy of the H.B. Stewart Family”. Recent projects and contributions have led to interior improvements and upgrades to the gardens.

Stark Parks also has various volunteer programs to assist with trail cleanup and maintenance, rehabilitating wildlife, education program assistance, and special events. The “Trailblazers” program uses trained volunteers that monitor the trails on foot and bicycle. As representatives and



ambassadors for the Park District, they undergo certification training in civilian CPR and first aid, and learn general information on the history and resources, both natural and commercial, of the area that they patrol. Volunteers maintain their own equipment packs for patrolling including first aid kits. The Wildlife Conservation Center has volunteer opportunities as well. Through observation and training, volunteers learn cleaning and housekeeping protocols, species-specific diet preparation, hygiene and safety protocols, and species identification and facts. Other volunteer opportunities include natural resources monitoring projects, removal of invasive species, and collecting/cleaning native

seeds; event assistance; Adopt a Trail Groups; service groups; scout projects; and being a community or mascot ambassador.



Between 2019 and 2024, Stark Parks had 993 long-term volunteers (served over 10 hours per year), 180 group service projects and 70 Adopt-a-Trail groups, providing 99,048 hours of volunteer service in various capacities, including Trailblazers,

wildlife rehab volunteers, landscaping, events, and more. Based on an hourly rate equivalent to approximately \$20 per hour (using current state wages in similar fields), this amounts to approximately \$1,980,960 worth of time donated to Stark Parks over the five-year period. Volunteers are clearly a vital part of Stark Park's success. It is, and will continue to be, critical to realize the invaluable support received from this group, and as the Park District continues to grow, the number of volunteer opportunities available should also increase.

Private gifts of cash, land, materials, and donated services are also resources that Stark Parks has used and can expand upon. The Park District has received several substantial donations of land, including the Fry Family Park, Esmont Park, and Fichtner Park. Private individuals, as well as real estate developers, have donated easements and/or land for the county-wide trail system. These types of donations are critical to the development of the trail network as it simplifies routing the trail and making connections.

Funding from local and regional governmental agencies can also be significant. Agencies that have provided funding in the past include the Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District, the City of North Canton, the Stark County Commissioners, the Stark County Health Department, the Stark County Land Reutilization Corporation, and the Stark-Tuscarawas-Wayne Joint Solid Waste Management District. Others have assisted in construction projects by supplying materials and/or labor. These partnerships significantly

broaden the network of support for the Park District. Formalized partnerships provide support by distributing costs between those participating in projects, assisting in defining roles, clarifying agency commitments and responsibilities (which lessens potential conflicts in jurisdictional matters), and pave the way for future working relationships.

Other agencies and nonprofit organizations are able to assist by contributing in-kind services as well as technical assistance to various park and recreation programs and/or planning efforts, including: federal and state agencies such as the National Park Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Ohio Development Services Agency, the Ohio Historical Society, Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Local governmental agencies with similar abilities include: the Canton/Stark County Convention and Visitors' Bureau, the Stark Soil and Water Conservation District, the Stark County Engineer's Office, the Stark County Health Department, the Stark County Regional Planning Commission (SCRPC), and others. Similarly, local non-governmental organizations also provide support and include historical societies, local foundations, the Stark County Federation of Conservation Clubs, the Wilderness Center, and the Stark County Beekeepers Association as well as trail groups such as the Ohio Horseman's Council, the Massillon Area Greenways Inc., Ohio to Erie Trail and Cleveland Chapter of Area Mountain Biking Association (CAMBA) and the Buckeye Trail Association. National organizations include: the Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited, Wildlife Legislative Fund of America, the Association of National Heritage Areas, the American Farmland Trust, and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. Most of these organizations have state chapters that can assist in local projects.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities Planning

In order to be eligible for federal transportation funding, projects must be included in the local metropolitan planning organization's (MPO) long-range plan. Stark County Area Transportation Study (SCATS) is the local MPO for Stark County, and their current long-range plan is the Moving Stark Forward 2050. The Stark County Park District's Trail and Greenway Master Plan primarily forms the backbone of the majority of pedestrian and bicycle planning projects in the 2050 Plan.

A total of 19 bicycle-pedestrian projects are planned for completion by the year 2050 and involve more than 214 miles of trails with project costs totaling just under \$12 million dollars. These projects may be eligible for other types of federal transportation funding, depending on the anticipated benefits. Stark Parks has updated the project tables from the 2050 Transportation Plan to reflect completed projects and schedule changes. The revised projects are as follows:

Figure 17: SCATS Planned Bicycle/Pedestrian Projects, 2025-2050

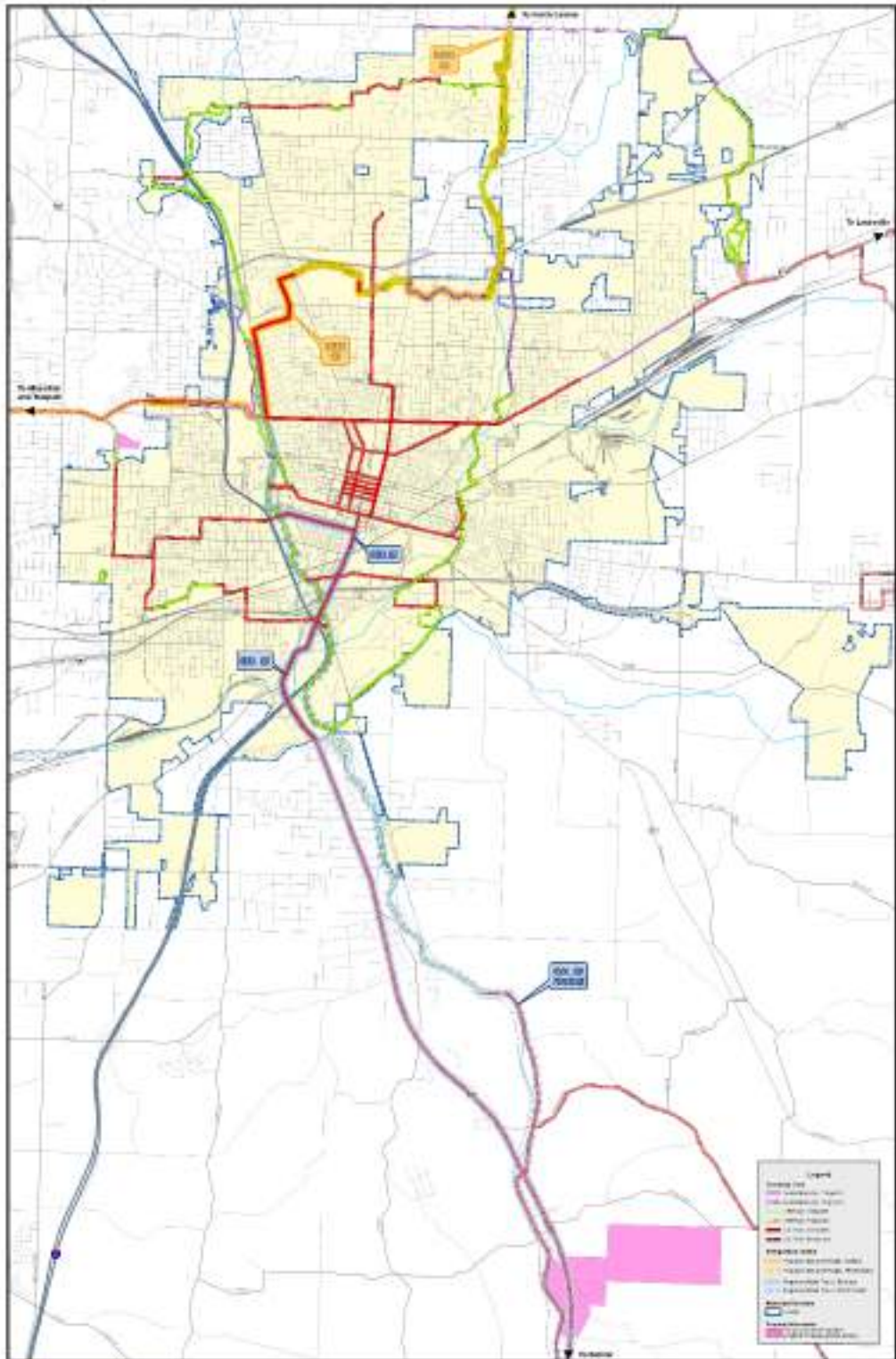
Name/Location	Termini		Type of Work	Estimate	Year
Minerva Bridge	Brock Park	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 900,000.00	2025
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 11	between Deermont & Bison	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 450,000.00	2025
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 8	between Bison & 17th	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 900,000.00	2026
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 1	between Alabama & Ben Fulton	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 400,000.00	2027
Hoover Trail	Marquard to Market	Off-Road	Trail Paving	\$ 50,000.00	2028
Minerva Connector Trail	Brock Park to Nickel Plate Trail	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 2,500,000.00	2028
Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath	Lake Ave to 40 Corners	Off-Road	Trail Paving	\$ 600,000.00	2029
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 3	between Ben Fulton & Manchester	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 700,000.00	2029
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 2	between Alabama & Ben Fulton	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 900,000.00	2030
Middle Branch Trail	55th to Schneider	Off-Road	Trail Paving	\$ 500,000.00	2030
Hoover Trail	Price Park to NC YMCA	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 200,000.00	2031
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 10	between 17th & 6th	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 1,000,000.00	2031
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 5	between Manchester & Skyland	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 750,000.00	2032
Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath	40 Corners to Canal Fulton	Off-Road	Trail Paving	\$ 1,000,000.00	2032
Middle Branch Trail	Schneider to Easton	Off-Road	Trail Paving	\$ 500,000.00	2033
Sippo Valley Trail Bridge 6	between Kenyon & Deermont	Off-Road	Bridge Replacement	\$ 750,000.00	2033
Sippo Valley Trail	Wayne Co. to Massillon	Off-Road	Trail Paving	\$ 1,100,000.00	2034
North County/Walborn Connector Trail	Quail Hollow Park to Bingham	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 500,000.00	2034
North County/Walborn Connector Trail	Bingham to Deer Creek Park	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 750,000.00	2035
Upper Middle Branch Trail	Quail Hollow Park to Middle Branch Trail	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 750,000.00	2035
Quail Hollow Connector Trail Phase 2	Quail Hollow Park to Lake Elementary School	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 750,000.00	2036
Jackson Connector Trail	Devonshire Park to Campus Trail	On Road	New Route	\$ 300,000.00	2036
Jackson Connector Trail	Devonshire Park to Tam O'Shanter Park	On Road	New Route	\$ 800,000.00	2037
Iron Horse Trail	Cenfield to SR 153	Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2037
Iron Horse Trail/Nickel Plate Trail Connector	Minerva to Alliance	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2038
Iron Horse Trail/Nickel Plate Trail Connector	Minerva to Louisville	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2039
Sippo Connector Trail	Towpath Trail to Sippo Lake Park	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 800,000.00	2040
Sippo Connector Trail	Sippo Lake Park to City of Canton	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2041
Jackson Connector Trail	Towpath Trail to Jackson Tunnel	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 500,000.00	2042
Jackson Connector Trail	Jackson Tunnel to Devonshire Park	On Road	New Route	\$ 500,000.00	2043
Stark Electric Roadway Trail	SERR to Metzger Park (Louisville)	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2044
Sandy Valley Trail	Fry Family Park to Magnolia Mill	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,500,000.00	2045
Sandy Valley Trail	Magnolia Mill to Waynesburg/Sandy Valley Trail	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2046
Sugar Creek Connector Trail	Towpath at US 62 to Wildemess Center (Wilmot)	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2047
Middle Branch to SERR	Middle Branch Trail at Genasi Station to Franklin School House to SERR Trail	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2048
West Branch Trail	Esmont Park to Pike Ridge Park to Fry Park	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 800,000.00	2049
Covered Bridge Trail	West Branch Trail at Covered Bridge to 49th St	On Road/Off-Road	New Route	\$ 1,000,000.00	2050

Note: These estimates are based on 2025 cost projections and may not reflect increases for inflation. This schedule for proposed trail construction will be impacted by the level of political support in the area a trail is planned, as well as the availability of land and funds for acquisition and construction. Strong partnerships are necessary for the presence of these components and can affect the order in which projects are actually completed.

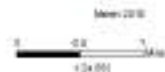
Source: SCATS 2050 Moving Stark Forward

The City of Canton has completed a Comprehensive Plan, updated in 2016, that integrates long-range bike and trail planning within the corporation limits, and aims to provide bike access across the entire city. In September 2013, bike lanes on Walnut Avenue, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Streets were officially dedicated as part of Canton’s Downtown Bike Loop. This loop is part of Canton’s Bike Routes and Trails Plan, which was last updated in March 2018 (see following map). The City aims to coordinate local routes, including those identified in the Park District’s Trail and Greenway Master Plan, with the state- and federally- designated routes (most of which have already been constructed as off-road trails). Collaboration with the City of Canton on future Park District projects affecting this area will be a great asset in ensuring the highest success of future trail development.

Figure 18: Designated and Proposed Canton Bike Routes & Trails (2018)



Designated and Proposed Canton Bike Routes & Trails



Public Expenditure

Leisure is often considered to be discretionary or free time, away from work and other responsibilities, where participants choose and control their activities. Outdoor recreation is a major component of leisure, usually included in leisure spending figures unless reported otherwise. Outdoor recreation and leisure expenditures can account for a substantial part of the public's discretionary spending.

Understanding how the public spends money when participating in recreational activities is important to park planners making decisions about fund-generating activities in the parks. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, personal consumption expenditures on recreation services in Ohio was approximately \$1,871 per person in 2024. Recreation services included parks, sports centers, membership clubs, theaters, museums, and other similar activities.

Recreation plays a significant and multifaceted role in economic development, impacting communities both directly and indirectly. On a direct level, spending on recreational activities, facilities, and equipment represents a substantial economic engine. When residents and visitors purchase items such as sports gear, bicycles, kayaks, or fitness memberships, or pay for entry to parks, trails, and recreational programs, this generates revenue for local businesses and creates jobs within retail, service, and manufacturing sectors. Similarly, investment in public recreational infrastructure, such as building and maintaining parks, trails, recreation centers, and sports complexes, stimulates economic activity through construction, maintenance, and facility management, supporting both short-term employment and long-term community assets.

Indirectly, recreation contributes to economic development by attracting people and businesses to a community. Well-planned recreational amenities draw participants from outside the area, who spend money on lodging, dining, transportation, and entertainment, thereby bolstering the local tourism economy. In addition, areas with high-quality recreational offerings are more attractive to employers and entrepreneurs, who consider access to leisure opportunities an important factor when deciding where to locate businesses and recruit talent. This, in turn, can increase property values, generate additional tax revenue, and support a more vibrant, dynamic local economy. Survey results indicated that participants agreed that Stark Parks plays a role in attracting new businesses, increasing property values, and providing a desirable place to live.

In essence, recreation is not only a source of enjoyment and well-being but also a driver of economic vitality. By stimulating spending on equipment and experiences, attracting visitors, supporting local businesses, and creating an environment appealing to new

residents and enterprises, recreation becomes a strategic component of community development and long-term economic growth.

Future Financial Needs

Nationwide, park districts are increasingly diversifying their funding sources beyond the traditional reliance on tax revenues. This shift has become necessary due to the decreasing financial resources available to counties, cities, and townships. Even in economically strong counties where tax-based funding continues to grow, the demand for park services is rising even more rapidly. Despite the fiscal challenges faced by local governments, the public remains highly supportive of parks. When budgets fall short, alternative funding strategies are essential to sustain park programs and activities.

The long-term viability of park districts depends on their ability to secure private funding through user fees, donations, and corporate sponsorships. Such funding can support a wide range of needs, from constructing new facilities or offering new services to maintaining existing programs at consistent levels. Moving forward, the Park District should assess which programs are best suited for activity fees. Additionally, it may be beneficial to implement a sliding-fee structure or discounted rates for specific income levels, age groups, or other targeted populations.

The next section shows scheduled park district projects with recommendations for additional projects identified through this study. Funding needs for these projects depend upon the continued availability of a levy, government grants, and private sources of funding. Without these funds, Stark Parks would be unable to complete projects as scheduled and would need to increase the timeframe for scheduling projects or possibly eliminate some projects altogether.

Part III – Ten-Year Plan Recommendations

This section discusses recommendations to the Stark County Park District for improvements to existing and planned parks and trails, ideas for new programs and educational activities, marketing suggestions, and recommendations for future land development and/or protection measures.

Existing Facilities and Recommendations

In examining the present facilities, we will describe their origins, ownership, how they fit into Stark Parks' mission, and suggest recommendations for continued enhancement.

Trails, Greenways and Active Transportation Planning

The first major Park District-sponsored plan for trails and greenways was the Stark County Canal Corridor Master Plan which was quickly followed by the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan in 1999 and updated in 2014. This plan, as described previously, is a long-range plan that spreads the benefits of multi-purpose trails throughout the County, in addition to providing a framework for park development and preservation of natural areas. As with all plans, it is not meant to be a static document, but instead one that provides a general framework for future park planning that can be modified to accommodate growth and change over time.

Currently, Stark Parks operates more than 125 miles of hiking, biking and equestrian trails out of the 300-mile network identified in the plan which include the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail, Middle Branch Trail, Campus Trail, Hoover Trail, Sippo Valley Trail, Pioneer Trail, Iron Horse Trail, Olde Muskingum Trail, Nickel Plate Trail, Stark Electric Railway Trail, Sandy Valley Trail, and the West Branch Trail as well as trails within each park. The goal of the Park District is to ensure that trails and greenway systems provide connections or access to parks, open space, historic and cultural sites, and other facilities to preserve the resources they pass through, and to expand the recreational and educational resources available throughout the County offering the community accessible outdoor spaces to escape urban life and enjoy recreational activities. An example of this can be seen in the "Emerald Necklace" of the Cleveland Metroparks. The concept of greenways tying park elements together has been in use since the inception of landscape architecture.

This goal of integrating the trails and the greenways into the general park and open space system was consciously articulated in the Trail and Greenway Master Plan and pursued vigorously throughout the last two decades. The Park District has received awards for its planned growth from both the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association and the American Society of Landscape Architects. Sections of the system include several miles managed in partnership with other communities, such as: the Sippo Valley Trail; portions of the Nickel Plate Trail, operated by the city of Louisville; the Iron Horse Trail, created and maintained via a three-way partnership with the City of Alliance and University of Mount Union; parts of the Stark Electric Railway Trail, operated by the City of Canton; and the Pioneer Trail, created and maintained via a three-way partnership with the City of Canton and Malone University. Recently the focus has shifted away from trail acquisitions involving private property to exploring connections via bike routes. Concerns over planning drawings involving private property have led to a desire for finalizing connections via existing road routes while always looking for willing property owners who are interested in partnering with the Park District for off-road options.

The TGMP comprises a number of major trails and connector trails that would tie parks and a number of community assets into a comprehensive network. These trails represent an enormous opportunity for the Stark County community that would bring incalculable benefits in recreation, education, resource preservation, tourism, and other economic development. Made up of on-road trails, off-road trails, and trails on sidewalks and greenways, the more than 300 miles would represent one of the most comprehensive multi-use trail networks ever built in the U.S. Although no complete cost estimates for the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan have been tabulated, a number of projects related to the TGMP have recently been completed and provide an idea of the general cost for trailheads and trail construction.

Trails receive priority for development based on a number of factors, including those located in high population areas likely to generate maximum usage, sections in areas with scenery or attractions likely to draw users, and in areas receiving development support. Some of the proposed high priority trails include the Minerva Connector Trail, Sandy Valley Trail, Sandy and Beaver Canal Trail, Iron Horse Trail, Nickel Plate Trail, and Hoover Trail. Federal and state appropriations for projects will also drive the order in which projects are completed.

As mentioned earlier, the TGMP is also used as the bicycle and pedestrian facilities plan for the Stark County Area Transportation Study Year 2050 Transportation Plan “Moving Stark Forward 2050”. The importance of this is two-fold: (1) projects must be included in this plan in order to qualify for federal transportation funds, and (2) trail connections are taken into

consideration when other roadway improvements are undertaken. Thus, possible impediments to completing the trail are lessened as pedestrian and bicycle access needs are taken into account where bridges are being improved or planned, and pedestrian/bicycle underpasses can be incorporated into other projects where possible.

The evolving role of the Trail and Greenway Plan through the transition from a focus on recreational trail planning to an Active Transportation Plan will be an important next step for the Park District. As off-road trail segments become increasingly challenging to connect, the utilization of existing infrastructure and roads will become necessary as the county continues to be developed. With substantial portions of the trail system completed, public support has increased as usage of trails grow and benefits of the trail system become evident. Support and demand for bicycle and pedestrian trails, as well as bicycle lanes and incorporating bicycle friendly designs into roadways is evidenced by the Stark County Regional Planning Commission's Comprehensive Plan 2040, which incorporates encouraging walkable neighborhoods and includes pedestrian and bicycle facilities as a necessary quality-of-life issue.

Following is a brief overview of some of the more frequented or noteworthy trails, including planned projects and/or project recommendations:

Campus Trail: An approximately 1.4-mile trail follows the main campus driveway and connects academic buildings and parking lots with nearby residential areas and The Strip shopping center. The trail consists of crushed limestone and concrete sidewalks. The eastern end of the trail connects to the western terminus of the Hoover Trail crossing over Dressler, Whipple, and following Glenwood to Price Park in North Canton. A grand opening for this trail was held since the completion of the last comprehensive plan. Requests from public participation include providing a connection to Devonshire Park and Trail, and continuing additional connections through Jackson Township.



Hoover Trail: A 5.34-mile trail connecting Washington Square, Walsh University's Hoover Park, Hoover High School, North Canton's baseball fields, and the Hoover District. This trail is mostly limestone with asphalt reinforcement in a few areas and is surrounded by natural areas suitable for wildlife viewing. Since the completion of the 2019-2024 Comprehensive Plan, the Market Avenue tunnel was completed, connecting the trail to the Middle Branch



Trail. A paving project from Marquardt to Market Ave. will improve the surface and is scheduled for 2028. Survey results indicated that the Hoover Trail was the third most visited trail by respondents. Accessible restroom facilities are a common request for this system. Additionally, connectivity requests were mentioned in the public survey

proposing connections to West Branch Trail and Saratoga Hills Trail, as well as a bridge over the creek that separates two sections of the trail within the Hoover Community Recreation Complex Area.

Iron Horse Trail: The limestone trail begins just south of the University of Mount Union campus and continues 4.58 miles south of Cenfield Street, primarily along the former



railroad right-of-way that ran between Alliance and Minerva. First Christian Church in Alliance serves as a trailhead along this route. The Park District owns from Cenfield to SR 153, and has an interest in extending this trail. Since the completion of the previous comprehensive plan, a connected trail through Alliance to the Iron Horse Trail was completed. Requests from the public

survey and meetings indicated a significant desire for additional trail connections to be completed. The public survey also mentioned the need for additional parking and benches along the trail.

Mahoning Valley Trail: A 4.46-mile crushed limestone trail connecting the Deer Creek Reservoir to Early Hill Park on the north side of the City of Alliance. There is fishing access and wildlife viewing opportunities along this trail. Recently, a connection from the Mahoning Valley Trail through the City of Alliance to the existing Iron Horse Trail just



south of the University of Mount Union campus was completed. Comments from the public survey included addressing the curve/steep hill existing on the trail. Additional concerns raised were utilizing the trail during hunting season and working with the City to address trash and dumping.



Middle Branch Trail: A 7.7-mile trail connecting Canton City to Plain Township, including destinations such as Schreiber Park, Reifsnnyder Park, Oak Park, Martindale Park, Gervasi Vineyard, Veterans Park in Plain Township, and GlenOak High School. A recent paving project improves over a two-mile section between 55th Street to Colonial Boulevard with an asphalt surface.

The fast-spreading popularity of this trail has led it to become one of the most utilized trails within the County, narrowly edging out the Towpath Trail for the most visited in Stark Parks' system. The high popularity can be attributed to several factors, including the urban setting, central location within the county, and key destination points, such as the North Canton YMCA, parks including a dog park, a high school, winery, shopping, and several restaurants.

As the Park District contemplates building or expanding future trails, continuing to incorporate destination points such as these should be a key consideration for future trail locations. Results from the public survey requested additional connections for Middle Branch Trail, specifically to Pioneer and West Branch trails, as well as making improvements for accessibility for all abilities.

Upper Middle Branch Trail - Boettler Property: The Boettler property, located in Plain Township, will serve as a trailhead for the Upper Middle Branch Trail. The barn was destroyed due to arson years ago, but the Park District plans to utilize the site for trail connections heading north to Hartville's Quail Hollow Park, west to the Middle Branch Trail, and south to the old Franklin Schoolhouse. Stark Parks worked closely with the Stark County Engineer's Office as they completed the bridge and realignment of Werner Church Road. This bridge allows for passage of the trail underneath it. The Park District is working towards acquiring right-of-way from the Saratoga Hills and Boettler Park property northward to develop those connections.

Nickel Plate Trail: A 1.08-mile trail made up of a mixture of limestone, on-road, and asphalt portions. The northern portion of this trail runs south from Route 44 around Metzger Park in Louisville to Swallen Avenue and includes an active wetland. The southern 3-mile portion runs from Route 183 to Baird Avenue in Minerva. Equestrian riding is allowed on the berm of this trail. Requests from the public survey and meetings indicated a significant desire for connections to be completed for this trail. Requests for benches along the trail were also mentioned.



In the eastern portion of the County, several segments of the proposed trail network remain incomplete. Significant portions of the Stark Electric Railway, Iron Horse, and Nickel Plate Trails have yet to be developed. With the implementation of a comprehensive active transportation plan, improved on-road connections will help

bridge these gaps and make linking the trail segments more achievable. Once completed, these interconnected trails would create a cohesive network across the eastern County, expanding access to parks, recreational amenities, and other key destinations throughout the area.

Olde Muskingum Trail: A 5.75-mile limestone trail that follows the Tuscarawas River from Canal Fulton to Jackson Township. Equestrian riding is allowed on the berm of this trail.

Pioneer Trail: This 1.34-mile trail connects Market Avenue to Cleveland Avenue, beginning near Route 62 and Market, and traveling west through Malone University and Canton's Weis Park. The off-road trail portion is primarily crushed limestone. The on-road portion runs through the Vassar Park neighborhood to Stadium Park. The City of Canton has designated a route connecting east toward the Middle Branch Trail and west to the West Branch Trail.

Sandy Valley Trail and Waynesburg Park Loop Trail: The Waynesburg Loop Trail is a short, limestone trail encircling the Waynesburg Village Park. A small, second portion of the trail connects West Street to Greer Street in Waynesburg. The Sandy Valley Trail will eventually connect the communities of East Sparta, Magnolia, Waynesburg, Malvern, and Minerva, with Fry Family Park serving as a major trailhead. Comments from the public survey states improvements are needed to the trail surface. Community members within this area



expressed the need for trail connections through this area. The North Country Trail traverses eastern Ohio and currently passes through Stark County near both Minerva and Magnolia. The route of the trail is currently on road through these areas, but parallels Stark Parks proposed route. The Park District should continue conversations to partner

with the North Country Trail Association to strategically plan the trail route and development within this area.

Sippo Valley Trail: A 10.8-mile (7.9 miles in Stark County) trail connecting Massillon and Dalton in Wayne County. This trail also connects to the Towpath Trail in Massillon. This trail is made up of a combination of crushed asphalt and limestone sections and runs along the Sippo Creek for a majority of the route. Equestrian riding is allowed on the berm of this trail. According to the online survey, this trail was the fourth



most visited trail. Public requests received for this trail include more paved sections, more trail connections from the surrounding communities, and adding a bicycle rack. Additionally, the Park District should continue to replace bridges along the trail as needed.

West Branch Trail: This 4.42-mile limestone trail connects several amenities in Canton City, including West Park, Mother Goose Land, Waterworks Park, Monument Park, Stadium Park, and Covered Bridge Park as it follows the West Branch of the Nimishillen Creek. Requests received for this trail were to extend the trail even further, and make a connection to the Hoover Trail. Additional comments received from the survey discussed safety along this trail as a concern, specifically between Fulton and 38th. The West Branch Trail was the fifth most visited trail according to the online survey.

Canal Lands: The Canal Lands are remnants of the Ohio & Erie Canal that were transferred by Ohio to the Board of Stark County Commissioners in the 1960s and 1970s and are currently leased to Stark Parks. The lands total about 342 acres and include physical remnants of the canal such as the canal prism (both watered and un-watered), portions of feeder systems, locks, spillways, and other features. This park stretches from the northwest corner of Stark County down to its southern boundary and then continues into Tuscarawas County. It is the north/south linkage in the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan* on the west side of the county. Major features of the Canal Lands include the Lock 4 trailhead and the Towpath Trail, both discussed in greater detail below. The acquisition of Canal Lands and adjacent properties that would complement these holdings is beneficial both for the preservation of the history of the canal, but also for ecological purposes of protecting floodplain and improving water quality.

Ohio & Erie Canalway National Heritage Area and Towpath Trail: As a major recreational resource within the county, the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail has attracted a great deal of support and recognition for Stark Parks. The value of this is incalculable as it generates funding, donations, and opens needed doors and lines of communication. Out of the 110-mile Canalway stretching from Cleveland to New Philadelphia, approximately 25 miles pass through Stark County. The role of the Canalway is to preserve the historic, natural and cultural resources significant to the interpretation of the canal era, as well as the pre- and post-canal eras, throughout the region that it shaped.

The administrative organization formed to direct the management of the Canalway corridor is the Ohio & Erie Canalway Association (OECA) The OECA oversees implementation of the Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor Management Plan and disburses federal funds as grant monies to various projects throughout the Canalway corridor. Planned components of the journeys in the Management Plan include the Towpath Trail, portions of the watered canal available for boats/boating, the scenic byway, and also a scenic/commuter rail line connecting Cleveland, Akron, and Canton. The Stark County Canal Corridor Master Plan is the planning document for the canal in Stark County and was completed in 1996 through the cooperation and participation of the three cities and villages and four townships through which it passes.

The Towpath Trail is a 25-mile north/south trail stretching across the entire county and runs parallel to the Tuscarawas River and Olde Muskingum Trail. Over the past several years, the Towpath Trail has taken the top spot for most visitations based on survey responses and geospatial data; however, according to the online survey, this trail dropped down to the second most visit trail after Middle Branch Trail, as only an average of 178 participants per month had visited the Towpath Trail compared to the 180 who had visited the Middle

Branch Trail. The Stark County portion of the 110-mile Ohio & Erie Canalway National Heritage Area features a crushed limestone surface, and support facilities including a number of small trailheads with limited parking, temporary sanitary facilities, and several larger trailheads that include more substantial facilities for picnicking, etc. One of the most notable trailheads along the Ohio & Erie Canal is the Lock 4 Trailhead. This trailhead, portions of which are owned by the Canal Fulton Heritage Society, is located on Erie Avenue just south of the city of Canal Fulton, includes an operational canal lock, a reproduction of the “lock tender's house” and associated structures, and is the southern terminus of the St. Helena III canal boat ride operated by the City of Canal Fulton. Other facilities at this trailhead include a small fishing pier, picnic tables, grills, and portable restrooms. The Park District has improved the parking and signage at Lock 4 and held public meetings to plan other improvements. Proposed improvements include repairs to the lock, renovations of the brick “lock tender’s house,” restroom installation, parking lot paving, spillway improvements, culvert repairs/replacements, and additional paving along the trail. Support from the Canal Fulton Historic Society, along with collaborative partnerships with the City of Canal Fulton, can help turn these planned improvements into reality.



Comments received from the online public survey and public meetings noted a request for additional waterway activities. A canoe/kayak dock on the river that is easily accessible from the parking lot may be something for Stark Parks to consider as future improvements are studied. A canoe landing would also provide an extra attraction for those renting canoes in Canal Fulton. Designated birding and wildlife viewing locations may also be beneficial in the area between the canal and river. Requests for additional access points onto the trail, the installation of increased wayfinding and interpretive signage, trail paving in frequent washout areas, overall trail maintenance, and the need for sanitary facilities were also made in the public survey and meetings. Other considerations made in the previous 5-Year Plan included more primitive campsites within this general area, as well as security cameras at the brick building. Currently, Destination Cleveland is completing a

Towpath Trail Research project which is aimed at promoting the Towpath Trail as a multi-day experience. Initial findings show that many users of the Towpath Trail either start or end their trips in Stark County.

Cook's Lagoon: This 4-acre park is part of a county-owned tract of land located in the city of Canton on the north side of Mahoning Road NE, along the east bank of the Middle Branch of the Nimishillen Creek. The major feature of this park is a small fishing pond, which hosts a fishing derby each summer. Early plans for the park called for it to serve as a trailhead for the Stark Electric Railway Trail. Currently, the park features a .25-mile trail suitable for school and public uses. Restrooms and a picnic shelter would be nice additions to the park.

Cook's Lagoon is in close proximity to Canton's Nimisilla Park, which includes restrooms, playground apparatus, extensive picnicking facilities, shelters, and ball fields, which could serve as shared resources along with additional programming opportunities. There was mention of donating the park to the City of Canton due to the proximity of the other city parks, which would allow the Park District to focus resources elsewhere and streamline resources to avoid duplication of services.

Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs: Both of these parks are included in the same planning document, the *Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs Master Plan*. These two parks include about 2,800 acres of open space and water and were leased from the City of Alliance by the Park District in 1998. Ownership of the reservoirs and surrounding publicly-owned lands is divided between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the City of Alliance.



Deer Creek Reservoir is located in Lexington Township in Stark County, and currently serves as the primary water source for the City of Alliance and as a trailhead for the Mahoning Valley Trail. With the installation of the pedestrian bridge over the reservoir spillway, the Mahoning Valley Trail at Deer Creek Reservoir extends 4.6 miles

from Price Street south to the Gaskill Trailhead in Alliance. This park features a fishing pier, temporary sanitary facilities, and picnicking areas. The area is largely undeveloped and

conserved as open space to help in the protection of the main water supply for the City of Alliance. In addition, Deer Creek Reservoir serves as important flood control area for the Army Corps of Engineers.

Since the completion of the previous plan, there have been parking lot and boat ramp upgrades, ADA kayak/canoe launch installation, kayak/canoe “beach” launch area regrading, installation of a new kiosk with trail map, updated directional signage for the Mahoning Valley Trail, and additional paddleboarding programs. Future plans for the park include providing concessions in some form, upgraded fishing areas, and permanent restrooms. Other suggestions for future improvements include a campfire programming area, kayaking programs, additional trails, and a reservable shelter. With the boating facility improvements, increased recreational paddling opportunities should be considered. Also, the rugged terrain of much of the park may lend itself to more advanced level hiking trails or mountain biking opportunities, both of which have been frequently requested by the public. The stocking of more fish was also requested in the public survey.

Walborn Reservoir is located in Lexington and Marlboro Townships in Stark County. Its facilities consist of a marina and concession building, fishing pier, 2-lane boat launch and docks, standard and trailer parking, a reservable picnic shelter, restroom facilities, a wildlife observation area to view nesting pairs of adult eagles, as well as seven miles of trails with hiking and equestrian access. Activities include hiking, paddling, fishing, geocaching, and hunting. Walborn Reservoir Park is fifth most visited park according to the online survey, and over 59% of participants believe it is very important to focus resources here.

Planned future facilities include additional trails and picnic areas. Recommendations for Walborn Reservoir include more natural surface trails, having the trail loop around, additional fish stocking, more water-related programming, and overall maintenance. The large amount of undisturbed land at Walborn may also provide an attractive location for additional mountain biking and/or advanced hiking opportunities.

Bingham Property: Stark Parks used Clean Ohio Fund grants to acquire the 200-acre Bingham property, adjacent to the Walborn Reservoir furthering its goal to protect water quality, functioning floodplains, stream-side forests, and viable wildlife habitats. The Bingham property is located in Marlboro Township and was recently part of an in lieu fee mitigation program to restore seventy acres of land to wetland. A site improvement plan was recently submitted for review for the installation of a parking lot, with development of trails throughout the property in the future.

White Property: The White Property is located adjacent to Walborn Reservoir. It has been acquired for the purposes of preservation of open space and watershed protection also through the use of Clean Ohio Funds. The property is currently used for access to view a nesting pair of bald eagles, and for a variety of educational purposes. The previous owner operated an airplane hangar on the site which still remains. Various plans are being evaluated for use of the structures on-site and how best to serve the public with the understanding that only limited development can occur due to development restrictions. Previous suggestions for the property made by park patrons included: converting the hangar to an education center or rock-climbing facility, or establishing this site as an outfitter-type property to include more active recreation opportunities.

Devonshire Park: Stark Parks manages this 77-acre park, located in Jackson Township and owned by the Stark County Commissioners. Devonshire Park serves as a headwater to Sippo Creek and features a small wetland, fishing pond, and picnic tables, in addition to a 0.7-mile nature trail. With the development of the Tam O'Shanter Park in close proximity, connections between the two parks should be considered, as well as making a connection to the Campus Trail and Jackson Connector trails.

Esmont Park: This 15.5-acre property, donated to Stark Parks by the family of the late Frank S. Esmont, could serve as a trailhead for the proposed Lower Middle Branch Trail along the Nimishillen Creek, near Thurman Munson Memorial Stadium in Canton Township. It features a small loop trail and wooded area.

Due to the small footprint and limited regional significance of this property, Stark Parks should consider what the best use for this site is and if its value as a trailhead could still be realized by partnering with the City on long-term management.

Fichtner Park: This 13-acre property, which was donated to Stark Parks by the family of the late David Fichtner, includes a wetland, fishing pond, and wooded 0.4-mile hiking trail near Hartville. The site has been developed as a pond/wetland studies outdoor education center, and also hosts adventure and archery camps. Requests have also been made for additional trails, a reservable outdoor shelter/pavilion, and improved parking.

Because of this park's small footprint and limited connection potential to trail systems, Stark Parks should consider what the best overall use for the property is for the future.

Fry Family Park: The 360-acre Fry Family Park was purchased by Stark Parks in the interest of outdoor recreation and to honor the service of the late Richard Fry, the Park District's first director, and his family. The Fry Family Park, which is located in Pike Township, is a beautiful property consisting of rolling hills, hardwood forests, a pond, wetlands, and a riparian corridor. The property was purchased with a main residence and barn still located

on the site. A Master Plan was created for the park in November 2011, which called for the conversion of the residence into a welcome and visitor center, which was completed in 2020. The visitor center includes a science lab, library, classroom and multi-purpose room, as well as rental and outdoor gathering space. The majority of the park will be devoted to retaining and/or restoring some of its natural features, including forest lands, wetlands, and meadows. Currently, the park offers bird watching, fishing, hiking, and a picnic shelter. The park will also eventually serve as a trailhead for the Sandy Valley Trail.



Converting the barn to an event venue has been requested. Other requests from the public meetings and survey included improved ADA accessibility, trail extensions, installation of a fishing boardwalk, more programming and activities, play areas for children, and increased ranger presence. This area could also be considered for mountain

biking trails, and the wooded and hilly terrain would be well-suited for this activity.

Magnolia Flouring Mills: This historic mill in Magnolia was purchased by Stark Parks in October 2005. Consisting of approximately 13 acres, the site includes water rights to the Sandy & Beaver Canal, Army Corps of Engineers levy, and the guard lock at the connection between the Sandy & Beaver Canal and Sandy Creek. Since the completion of the previous plan, Stark Parks utilized a \$1 million State Capital grant to complete extensive enhancements and upgrades to the building, including structural rehabilitation. In 2023, Stark Parks worked with historic architects to design an accessible pathway through the first floor of the Magnolia Mills as well as improved restrooms and parking. The proposed work will be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Office to ensure it is keeping with the character of the site and buildings as outlined on the National Registry of Historic Places. Interpretive programs and guided tours are currently offered by reservation, but will be much improved after the upgrades are complete. The site will eventually serve as a trailhead for the Sandy Valley Loop Trail.



Recommendations for this site include completing the upgrades outlined on the proposed site plan, cut back vegetation along the canal, removal or repair of dilapidated structures, adding interpretive signage, walking tours, and creating self-guided walking brochures for visitors to follow as they tour the Village of Magnolia. This guide

would help further one of Stark Parks' continued goals of creating destination experiences for park and trail users. The mill site lends itself to multiple potential programming and shared community events, such as living history days, farmers' markets, movie nights, and fall festivals.

Molly Stark Park: Molly Stark Park, located in Nimishillen Township, is the site of a former 1930s tuberculosis hospital. In 2009, the Stark County Commissioners transferred ownership of the property to the Park District, which has been working to develop it into a 35-acre park. Picnic tables, hiking trails, and a Celebration Garden have improved the property since 2009. In 2025 the hospital was demolished utilizing Ohio Department of Development Brownfield Remediation Funds. Preservation of the building was explored, however, restoration to the structure was cost prohibitive. The Park District is currently exploring options for the best future use of the property.

Petros Lake Park: Petros Lake Park is located in Perry Township on Perry Drive just north of Faircrest Avenue. Its 127-acres include a 12-acre lake stocked for fishing, a 1.2-mile limestone surfaced trail along its shore suitable for walking and jogging, and three short natural surface trails. The park is also home to a one-mile Mindfulness Walk with ten mental health stations along the route. Other facilities include two covered picnic shelters, horseshoe courts, a sand volleyball court, as well as a wildlife observation area. Currently, a permanent restroom facility is being constructed at the park. Petros ranked as the fourth most visited park according to the online survey.

An extensive habitat restoration process took place in 2024 and 2025 to remove invasive pear trees and reseed the area with prairie plantings. Funded by a Clean Ohio grant, the restoration was the first phase of the grant which will be followed by upgrades to the 1-mile



loop trail on the north side of the park. Park District programs held at the park over the years have included an annual fall festival, a catfish derby, and wildlife hikes. Several adjoining tracts of land remain mostly undeveloped and should be reviewed for acquisition before incompatible uses arise.

Recommendations received

from the online public survey and meetings included the need for increased general maintenance at this site, a better stocked pond, and increased accessibility for accessing the pond. There was also mention of concerns over the number of dog owners not practicing etiquette when using the trail and properly cleaning up after their pet.

Pike Ridge Park: Once a sewer treatment area, the City of Canton remediated and naturalized the property years ago after operations ceased. Stark Parks then worked with the City of Canton on a twenty-five-year development and management agreement for the future park, which was opened to the public in 2025 with limited amenities. The 520-acre property in Pike Township features rolling hills with elevated views of the surrounding area, several ponds, and over 5 miles of trails for hiking and horseback riding only. A master plan for the park to identify locations for trail expansions, facility locations, parking, and other amenities based on public input should be completed to guide the future development of the park.

Quail Hollow Park: Operating as a state park since 1975 and managed by Stark Parks since 2016, Quail Hollow Park features over 700-acres of natural areas surrounding a 40-room Manor House on the National Register of Historic Places. The manor house is currently utilized for educational and community events and can be rented for group functions. Other amenities offered at the park include a fishing dock, picnic areas, restrooms, a playground, a sand volleyball court, primitive camping sites, and approximately 13.5 miles of biking, equestrian, and hiking trails. Quail Hollow Park also offers winter recreation through cross-country skiing rentals, snowshoeing, and ice skating. In addition, the Carriage House offers educational activities and meeting space.

A capital campaign, currently underway, has raised funds through the Stark County Community Foundations and State Capital Grant program to upgrade the Carriage house.



The goal of this first phase of the campaign is to shift meeting and rental activities to the Carriage House to reduce wear and tear on the larger Manor House, so the focus there can be on historic tours and preservation. According to the online survey Quail Hollow Park was the second most visited in Stark Parks' system. Placer.ai

data from 2025 showed approximately 134,000 visits from 66,900 different visitors over a one-year period. Stark Parks currently has a thirty-year management agreement with the State for Quail Hollow Park, which is acting as a driver for trail connections in the surrounding Lake Township community. A Master Plan was completed for this park in 2017 after gathering public input. Some of the future multi-phase projects identified in that plan include upgrades and maintenance of the historic structures, improved public access, wayfinding signage, pond restoration, paving and parking improvements, trail construction, and upgraded restrooms. Since the completion of the previous plan, some structures that were in disrepair were removed from the site. Since the Master Plan was completed, the drive entrance has been paved, signage was extensively updated, and trails have been improved or reclaimed. The site was also evaluated for additional mountain biking trails; however, it was determined that there was not adequate space/terrain for a quality addition. The Park District will continue focusing on improving existing trails and working with the Cleveland Area Mountain Biking Association (CAMBA) on trail maintenance. Located in one of the fastest growing suburban areas in Stark County, Quail Hollow Park maintains broad opportunities for the future expansion of Stark Parks. Requests for providing a connection from Quail Hollow Park to the commercial areas within the Village of Hartville were also requested. When asked if it was important for Stark Parks to focus their resources on Quail Hollow Park in the online survey, over 70% indicated it was very important.

Sippo Lake Park: Sippo Lake Park contains approximately 300 acres with 107 acres of that being water and wetland areas. This park is located in Perry Township between Genoa Avenue, 12th Street NW, and Perry Drive NW, with entrances off those three streets. Although mostly leased from the County Commissioners, the District does own several acres of the park, which has enabled them to complete a trail connecting the eastern,



western, and northern sections of Sippo Lake Park and to provide the site for the Exploration Gateway Center. According to the online survey, Sippo Lake Park is the most visited park within the system. Placer.ai data from 2025 revealed over 410,000 park visitations from over 130,000 individuals over a one-year period. Additionally,

over 78% of respondents to the online survey indicated it was very important to focus resources at Sippo Lake Park. This park is divided into three sections and is the most extensively developed park of the Park District.

Sippo Lake East is accessed off Tyner Street from Perry Drive NW and includes the park administration office, marina, fishing piers, trails, and picnic shelters. The marina includes an air-conditioned and heated building with restrooms, boat rentals, bait and tackle sales, snack and beverage sales. An outdoor covered deck complements the view of the lake from inside. Shelters include a small shelter and a larger shelter with an attached kitchen. Other facilities include several fishing piers (most notably the 216-foot Sherban fishing pier), a boat ramp, and recently installed ADA-accessible kayak and canoe launch. As the oldest park in the system, this side of the park shows signs of wear. Several participants in the public survey identified the marina, deck, and pavilion as needing upgrades. Accessibility upgrades have been made to address the steep slopes down to the lake and marina, but the steep drive access for boat launches still poses a challenge. This site should be a priority for evaluating the best way to deliver the most popular amenities and needed functions in a safe and accessible way.

Sippo Lake West can be accessed from Genoa Avenue and includes the Public Safety and Maintenance & Construction compound, trails, a picnic area, wildlife viewing area, and the Joseph J. and Helen M. Sommer Wildlife Conservation Center. Opened in June 2018, the Wildlife Conservation Center is a 9,400 square foot facility dedicated to the conservation and rehabilitation of native wildlife and their habitat through education, awareness and quality animal care. The center includes indoor exam, quarantine, and recovery rooms for injured wildlife, and outdoor enclosures for waterfowl, mammal, raptor, and songbird recovery. The center treats approximately 1,500 animals per year with a 65% release rate. Non-releasable live wildlife are also housed at the center as educational program

ambassadors. A site plan for access to the west side of the lake was created in 2017. Although the center has only been open for seven years, evaluation of the ambassador enclosures should be completed to determine if upgrades are warranted. Due to space limitations at the center, programming must be limited to smaller group sizes. Adding a shelter or expanding the education space on the west side of the park should be explored, in addition to adequate parking. Live coverage of the Wildlife Conservation Center was requested in the public survey.

Sippo Lake North is accessed from 12th Street and includes the Exploration Gateway, outdoor picnic shelter, and hiking and biking trails. The 46,896 square foot Exploration Gateway (EG) was built in 2007 as part of a partnership between Stark Parks and the Stark County District Library. The EG contains the Perry-Sippo Branch Library, the Congressman Ralph Regula Canalway Center interactive exhibit hall, banquet/meetings rooms, and science classroom. The Exploration Gateway offers field trips, workshops, and lectures. A trail links the Exploration Gateway to the administrative offices and facilities on the west and east sides of Sippo Lake. Relocating the administrative offices to the Exploration Gateway facility should be taken into consideration if it is determined the staff is outgrowing their current facility.

There is currently no public transportation service to this site; however due to the large constituent base of the EG and the Park District as a whole, the Park District should continue to pursue a partnership with SARTA, the local transit authority, to reach out to the underserved populations in the County by providing park and trail access opportunities for all. Along those lines, ADA accessibility improvements should also continue to be furthered at this location.

The Park District should review remaining tracts of vacant land adjacent to Sippo Lake Park for possible acquisition if they would: complement current developments, serve to facilitate development of trail connections to Sippo Lake Park, or protect the water quality of Sippo Lake. A loop trail around the entire park itself would also be a great feature to allow visitors to explore the full park without having to drive from one location to another. Other operational requests for this park include dredging the lake, additional stocking of the lake, and adding more lighting and parking. While there are regulatory issues with dredging the entire lake, the Park District does desire to do some spot dredging, particularly to allow the pontoon boat to access the dock.

While a large number of programs are currently offered at this park, the Park District should attempt to expand the selection even more as the space and resources currently available at Sippo Lake Park make this location an ideal setting for different types of programs. Based on comments received, programming topics to consider expanding/enhancing

include: science-based programming, wildlife protection, adult health and fitness, or programming geared towards special needs groups. Requests were also made for college-level environmental education courses, particularly through the development of a partnership with the universities or even high schools that offer dual-credit courses.

Tam O'Shanter Park: Stark Parks acquired Tam O'Shanter Park in 2019 and has been transforming the former golf course into a naturalized park since that time. Restoration has included planting of trees, wildflowers, warm season grasses, and wetland plugs. Parking lots and driveway reconfigurations along with a restroom project have also occurred. The park consists of 3 miles of mostly natural surface trails, a fishing pond, sledding area, shelter, and clubhouse. Though it is a more recent addition to the Stark Parks' system, Tam O'Shanter Park came in third in attendance when online survey participants indicated which parks they had visited. Additionally, over 66% of respondents said it was very important to focus resources at Tam O'Shanter Park. Recommendations from the survey include paving some of the trails for wheelchair/stroller access, mountain biking opportunities, interpretive signage, additional shelters, and clubhouse renovations. Providing a connection to nearby Devonshire Park should also be taken into consideration.

General Recommendations for Parks and Trails

In addition to the park- and trail- specific recommendations, there are a number of more general, on-going recommendations for Stark Parks to continue pursuing. Many are, and will continue to be, carryovers from previous five-year plans. Below is an overview of the current recommendations, including updates from previous years where available.

Trail Expansion and Connectivity: According to the online survey results, 60.4% of respondents said that better trail connectivity was very important. This need was also noted numerous times during the public meetings. Of the activities discussed in the survey, walking, hiking, and jogging were the top activities of all respondents, followed by cycling. In 2012, Stark Parks had an inventory of 80 miles of trails; in 2024, inventory figures were at 125 miles. While significant strides have been made to increase total trail mileage, this type of project takes time, funding, and land availability. Partnerships with entities such as local conservation/wildlife organizations and local communities are oftentimes critical in trail expansion and connectivity, and therefore these relationships should continue to be pursued as they can lend themselves to additional land and/or funding. Trail expansion and connectivity will continue to be high-priority projects for the Park District in the ensuing years. While 72.2% of respondents to the survey indicated they utilize trails primarily for

recreation, 24.7% indicated they were interested in utilizing trails for both commuting and recreation. Therefore, as mentioned in the previous plan, all attempts should be made to ensure that these future trails connect to destination points, such as schools, public spaces, bike shops, other park facilities, and neighboring communities. The development of an Active Transportation plan for the County, as previously discussed, will help identify locations for trail connections both on- and off-road to more strategically expand the trail system. Within Stark County, Jackson Township, Plain Township, and Canton City received the most tallies for where trail connections are needed within the online survey; however, the underserved areas of the County should also be considered. It should be noted that discussions with adjacent property owners to reduce trespassing and better collaboration on trail locations should continue to be prioritized.

Trail and Facility Maintenance and Improvements: General Park and trail maintenance, along with better signage and additional restrooms and water fountains, were also identified as top pressing needs for Stark Parks. According to the online public survey, 84% indicated trail maintenance was very important; 61% indicated better signage was very important; and 52.1% indicated flush restrooms were very important. Certain measures for improving maintenance capabilities may include increasing trail monitors, routinely updating park facilities' maintenance schedules, and monitoring them via a real-time tracking system. Park staffing levels should be analyzed to determine whether additional maintenance staff are needed to keep up with the increasing Park District coverage. Also, maintenance agreements with neighboring park districts may need to be developed and/or revised regarding maintenance oversight and responsibilities at certain parks or trails.

Public survey and meeting respondents also stated that they would like restrooms provided in additional locations, and they would prefer some of the temporary facilities to be converted into permanent restrooms. The provision of these facilities does include an inherent increase in maintenance needs and security monitoring, and so the Park District should carefully evaluate where these types of facilities and/or conversions would be most beneficial. Additional water fountains, benches, trash/recycling bins, and dog-clean up stations were also requested, all of which contribute to a patron's overall positive experience.

Along with adding additional amenities to the park system, upkeep of the existing facilities was also a concern identified in the public survey, with 67% of participants indicating facility maintenance was very important. While several additional amenities were requested, these additions should be balanced with continued investment in the upkeep of existing facilities. Capital improvement project planning can assist with continuing the upgrades needed to the existing park system, while also incorporating new features. As the

Park District expands their facility inventory, the staff needed to keep these facilities in working order should be evaluated.

Focusing on creating quality spaces, which the above-mentioned amenities contribute to, was a top recommendation from the previous plans, and that recommendation continues to carry forward with this plan.

Education and Programming: Education and programming are central to fulfilling the Park District’s mission to serve the community, foster lifelong learning, and encourage meaningful engagement with parks and natural spaces. Public input indicates strong community support for expanding and enhancing Park District education and programming. Survey participants consistently requested an increase in the number of programs, particularly children’s programming offered on weekends, to better align with family schedules and to increase accessibility.

Residents also emphasized the importance of inclusive programming for people of all abilities, along with expanded offerings for seniors and specialized experiences. These priorities highlight the community’s desire for diverse, engaging programs that serve residents at all stages of life and varying abilities.

Survey feedback identified participation barriers related to required preregistration, which limits spontaneity and walk-in attendance, as well as insufficient capacity in popular programs. A more flexible program structure that includes both preregistered and drop-in opportunities, along with additional program sessions or spaces, would better meet demand.

Respondents also noted the need for improved marketing and communication, stating that program and event offerings are not always well known. Strengthening outreach through clearer, more consistent messaging across multiple platforms will be essential to increasing awareness and participation.

Safety: Overall safety was mentioned throughout the planning process. 81% indicated making improvements to safety concerns was very important. Requests for additional rangers at the parks and trails were mentioned within the online survey and at several of the public meetings. Additional ranger stations spread throughout Stark County may be needed to address the concerns of the community.

Increase General Awareness: General understanding about park rules was mentioned several times through public participation. Many comments were in regard to etiquette of individuals visiting the parks.



Additionally, better signage was another item that has been identified in the planning process. Requests for improved signage throughout the parks was mentioned. Although the Park District has made great strides in updating signage in recent years, these efforts should be continued. Rules concerning general safety awareness, park operations and trail etiquette should be routinely discussed via different platforms to ensure that all park patrons are aware of them.

Accessibility: Accessibility both to, and within, park facilities is another area that the Park District should continually work to advance. Currently, the Park District's goal is to add a section of accessible trail in each of its major parks and sections of high use community connection trails. This includes paving trail surfaces in key areas, ensuring trails are not exceeding a 5% slope grade, and upgrading parking access. This need was also recommended in the previous five-year plan, and as a result, funding has been allocated annually by the Park District towards Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) upgrades to park facilities and informational materials. Recent projects include: accessible picnic tables, ramps, ADA kayak and canoe launch areas, ADA upgrades to the website, and color-blind safe colors, now being used in publications and kiosks. An ADA Committee was established to oversee these upgrades and a park-assessment for needed improvements was completed in 2024. Responses from the online survey indicated it was very important to provide accommodation for individuals who are aging (78%), with disabilities (75%), with special needs (65%), and utilizing different modes of communication (60%).



While attempts have been made at improving accessibility at park facilities, these needs are ongoing. Additional considerations for improving accessibility within park grounds and facilities include installing ADA-compliant features such as boat ramps, ADA-accessible portable toilets, and pavement markings. The Park District may also want to consider

creating bilingual brochures to post both on the website and at kiosks. As the demand increases, bilingual signage may also be warranted.

As noted previously, Stark Parks had partnered with SARTA on the bike share program, and they also worked together to have bike racks installed on their buses. In the future, the two

entities may also want to explore other methods for helping to reach those individuals who may not have access to the parks and trails. Overlapping bus routes and trail routes onto a single map would be a great way to show bus riders where they can best access certain parks and trails. Also, adding bus service to the Exploration Gateway would allow residents to not only access the public library, but it would also provide them the opportunity to experience park programming and outdoor education activities that would otherwise not be available to them. Accessibility improvements such as these mentioned above would benefit not only disabled persons, but older adults, young children, and households without vehicles as well. In order to truly serve as many patrons as possible, accommodations need to be made wherever feasible.

Healthy and Sustainable Communities: Stark Parks is part of a coalition, which includes the hospitals, county health department, and higher education institutions to improve the health of Stark County. The 2023-2025 Stark County Community Health Improvement Plan discusses social determinants of health (SDOH) as having a greater influence on health than genetic factors or access to healthcare services. SDOH are conditions in the environment in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks. Some examples of SDOH include access to physical activity and polluted air and water. Addressing the SDOH was identified as a priority that should be considered for all initiatives within the plan. One of the priority areas was addressing mental health concerns. Access to parks provides a place to help reduce stress, anxiety, and symptoms of depression. By providing park space throughout Stark County, individuals may have more opportunities to participate in recreation to address mental health needs.

As part of its core goals to promote community wellness, Stark Parks placed smoking restrictions throughout the parks. Smoking of tobacco or other plants, e-cigarettes, or other vaporizer devices is prohibited in all areas of the park except in parking areas or other designated spaces.

As environmental stewards, another goal of Stark Parks is to continually improve and promote environmental or sustainable practices both internally and as a district. Sustainable initiatives include utilizing renewable energy and eco-friendly technology and products where possible, installing recycling stations at park facilities, and offering sustainability-based programs on topics such as composting/gardening and rain garden installation. Stark Parks has a “Sustainability Committee that focuses on promoting environmentally-friendly outcomes. Recent projects prompted by the Sustainability



Committee include: Earth Day Everyday” volunteer opportunities that allow citizens to participate in sustainable activities on park properties year round, including seed collection and cleaning, invasive species removal, electronic recycling drop off days, property restoration and naturalization projects, river, trail, and park clean ups, free public compost drop off locations, converting landscaped flower beds around park buildings to naturalized pollinator spaces and programmatic support and host site of the Stark County offering of the Ohio Certified Volunteer Naturalist (OCVN) program.

Longer-Term Park and Land Development Recommendations

The following section discusses suggestions for Stark Parks to explore as it acquires land to create new parks and develops methods to protect existing ones.

Open Space Conservation

The Stark County Regional Planning Commission’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan (2017) identified the ongoing loss of natural areas—including prime agricultural land—as a critical concern. The plan projects that, in the absence of conservation measures, vacant land (excluding active agricultural land) will decrease by nearly 2,300 acres by 2040 as reclaimed strip mines are redeveloped and new residential allotments are constructed.

Throughout Stark County, there are extensive areas where development should be limited or avoided altogether due to public health and safety considerations. These include

floodplains, wetlands, flood control dam easement areas, water well fields, aquifer recharge areas, mined and reclaimed lands, and landfills. Some of these lands—particularly mined and reclaimed areas—have limited development potential due to disturbed soils and compromised aquifers. Other areas, such as floodplains, wetlands, flood easement areas, and well fields, may support only low intensity uses, including agriculture, passive recreation, hunting, and fishing.



Many of these sensitive lands are already publicly owned or encumbered by easements that significantly restrict development. However, additional areas should be protected through public acquisition or clearly designated to prevent incompatible uses. Partnerships with organizations such as The Wilderness Center, Ducks Unlimited, the Trust for Public Land, West Creek

Conservancy and other nature- and land-conservation trusts are strongly encouraged to help identify priority properties and coordinate funding for their preservation and enhancement. In addition, Stark Parks should continue collaborating with local jurisdictions to advance these efforts. Numerous communities have already identified critical environmental areas within their boundaries, which could be incorporated into a countywide sensitive habitat inventory to support Stark Parks' land acquisition planning.

The Park District has made meaningful progress in acquiring flood-prone properties and restoring them to their natural floodplain functions, an approach that should continue in the future. Conservation easements provide another effective tool for protecting land from intrusive changes that could diminish park values. These voluntary legal agreements between landowners and land trusts or government entities establish limits on land use while allowing owners to retain ownership and transfer the property with protections in place.

Land and easement donations further contribute to open space preservation efforts. Donations may include property, trail rights-of-way, or other interests from families and

businesses wishing to support conservation. Stark Parks' Legacy Fund through the Stark County Community Foundation serves as an important mechanism to facilitate these contributions by highlighting the advantages of charitable giving, including estate planning, bequests, and other long-term donation strategies.

While the continued loss of open space in Stark County remains a concern, the progress achieved over the past five years is encouraging. Strategic partnerships have resulted in the preservation of significant open space. Public and community support has increased alongside the implementation of preservation initiatives and the Trail and Greenway Master Plan. As environmental awareness continues to grow, many communities are taking a more active role in safeguarding natural areas. The importance of Stark Parks' leadership in land preservation throughout Stark County cannot be overstated.

Other Acquisition Efforts

In addition to conserving critical lands and prime open space for broad conservation purposes, Stark Parks should also prioritize the acquisition of properties located adjacent to existing parks and trails. Acquiring adjoining lands helps protect these assets from incompatible land uses while creating



opportunities for future expansion and enhancement. Key areas where this approach may be particularly beneficial include Sippo Lake Park, Petros Lake Park, Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs, the Towpath Trail, Middle Branch Trail, and other heavily used trail corridors.

Several factors should be evaluated when considering potential land acquisitions, including the area's development pressure, the availability of nearby recreational facilities, the opportunity to create buffers for existing parks and trails, and the presence of special features such as waterways, scenic viewsheds, or distinctive landscapes. Additional considerations include the potential for partnerships or collaboration with local communities, landowner interest, and overall feasibility.

Because land acquisition requires substantial financial resources, Stark Parks should continue to collaborate with land trusts and other agencies to help facilitate larger or more complex acquisitions. In some cases, District-owned properties that are underutilized or too small to provide meaningful recreational or conservation value could be sold or exchanged for higher-priority parcels, particularly those that connect to or expand existing parks. Similar land exchange strategies have been successfully implemented in neighboring counties.

Previous five-year plans have also explored the potential acquisition of parks currently operated by other entities. While such opportunities are contingent on those organizations choosing to divest, recent reductions in local funding may make some owners more open to these discussions. Another viable approach is establishing management partnerships to operate facilities owned by other entities, as demonstrated by Stark Parks' management of Quail Hollow Park. Formerly a state park beginning in 1975, Quail Hollow Park has been managed by Stark Parks since 2016 through a thirty-year agreement with the State. Additionally, the acquisition of private sportsmen's clubs or similar properties that may be dissolving could represent realistic future opportunities, as illustrated by Stark Parks' acquisition of a portion of the former Tam O'Shanter Golf Course.

Other Plans and Studies

Information is vital to successfully plan and gain support for projects. There are a number of data gathering activities and plans that could further assist Stark Parks in meeting its mission. These include surveys, long-range plans, and targeted studies to meet specific needs. Some of the existing plans and studies available throughout the County are outlined below. Also described are plans that Stark Parks should consider exploring in the future:

Active Transportation Plan: Active transportation is human-powered transportation that engages people in healthy physical activity while they travel from place to place. People walking, bicycling, using strollers, wheelchairs/mobility devices, skateboarding, and rollerblading are engaged in active transportation. An active transportation plan can help strengthen connections between parks, trails, neighborhoods, and community destinations identifying both on- and off-road routes. From an economic and operational standpoint, active transportation planning can strengthen funding competitiveness and partnerships.

Ultimately, an active transportation plan allows the Park District to maximize the value of their existing assets while planning strategically for future growth. By connecting people to parks and parks to communities, the Park



District reinforces its role as leaders in recreation, conservation, public health, and community connectivity, creating a safer, healthier, and more resilient transportation network for residents and visitors alike.

Individual Park Master Plans: Individual master plans either currently exist or are in the works for several parks within the District including: Walborn and Deer Creek Reservoirs, Fry Family Park, Magnolia Flouring Mills, Quail Hollow Park, and Tam O’Shanter Park. These park-specific plans are typically more detailed in nature, providing tailored recommendations and specific project guidance for the individual park they address. They are often developed for high-profile parks that require a level of analysis and planning beyond the scope of the five-year plan. Stark Parks should continue to review existing plans to ensure they remain current, relevant, and aligned with district goals. Additionally, as new areas for park land are acquired, the need for park-specific plans should be evaluated.

Stark County 2040 Comprehensive Plan: In 2017, the Stark County Regional Planning Commission created a long-range plan for the County which highlighted trends pertaining to the County as a whole, including: population, economy, land use, housing and transportation. Based on the trends discovered, the plan provides various recommendations regarding issues, projects and strategies to improve life in Stark County while simultaneously being sensitive to the social, economic and environmental concerns of the citizens of the region. The transportation portion of the plan has been updated out to 2040 but up-to-date information on transportation-related projects should be pulled from the official SCATS Moving Stark Forward 2050 Transportation Plan. Recently, SCATS has adopted a Comprehensive Safety Action Plan for Stark County. With the adoption of the plan, communities within the Stark County are now eligible to apply for state and federal funding for various safety projects, specifically Safe Streets and Roads for All. An update to the current 2040 plan is anticipated to be completed in 2028, extending to the year 2050. As the Park District continues to move forward, they should periodically review these plans to verify that any new projects complement other county planning efforts.

SARTA Maps and Plans: The Stark Area Regional Transit Authority (SARTA) provides over two million passenger trips per year in Stark County. This public bus service is available to all residents, including those with disabilities. Overlaying SARTA's fixed routes with existing park and trail locations will better allow bus users to more easily locate these



facilities and determine how best to access them. As part of Stark Parks' effort to reach out to underserved populations across the County, partnering with SARTA will provide an excellent opportunity to help meet this goal.

Local Plans: Several communities throughout the County currently have some type of long-range plan(s) for their area or anticipate the adoption of a comprehensive plan in the near future. Examples include the City of Canton's Bike and Trail Plan, North Canton's Master Plan, Canton Township's Comprehensive Plan, Perry Township's Comprehensive Plan, Plain Township's Mini-Master Plan, the City of Canal Fulton's Comprehensive Plan, the Village of East Canton & Osnaburg Township's Joint Community Plan, Village of Minerva Community Master Plan, and Jackson Township's Comprehensive Plan. Coordinating with the various plans for each community will help create a better connected and more efficient system through collaboration and shared resources. The positive outcomes may also encourage other non-participating communities to consider partnering with Stark Parks on plans for their area as well.

Prioritized Projects

The table on the following pages shows the proposed capital improvement budget for the various parks and trails over the next ten years. Some of the projects include upgrades for ADA accessibility, parking and driveway improvements, nature play areas, existing facility upgrades, park design and planning, trail construction and repairs, infrastructure improvements, and additional amenities.

Figure 19: Stark Parks Projects 2026-2035

Capital Project Priority List 2026-2035		
Park	Project Name	Estimated Total Project Cost
Fry Family Park	ADA Accessible Boardwalk	\$250,000.00
-	Natural Play Area	\$50,000.00
-	Barn Parking Lot and Driveway	\$75,000.00
-	Visitor Center Upgrades	\$250,000.00
Magnolia Flouring Mills	Carriage House Improvements	\$300,000.00
-	Outbuilding Improvements	\$300,000.00
-	Interpretive Center and Interpretive Exhibits inside the Mills and on the Property	\$300,000.00
-	Guard Lock Repair	\$200,000.00
Pike Ridge Park	Preliminary Site Design	\$124,120.00
-	Trail Construction	\$75,000.00
-	Parking Lot Improvements	\$750,000.00
-	Full Site Build Out	\$1,500,000.00
-	Shelter/Restroom	\$500,000.00
-	Kayak/Canoe Launch West Side	\$100,000.00
-	Archery Range	\$75,000.00
Quail Hollow Park	Carriage House Renovation, ADA Parking for Carriage and Manor House	\$1,181,500.00
-	Manor House HVAC	\$500,000.00
-	Boardwalk Replacement	\$500,000.00
-	Manor House Fire Alarm	\$25,000.00
-	Manor House Interior Accessibility Upgrades	\$360,000.00
-	New Shelter Construction	\$500,000.00
-	Nature Play	\$250,000.00
-	New Play Area Construction	\$500,000.00
-	Manor House Windows	\$360,000.00
-	Driveway Lighting	\$500,000.00
-	“Little House” Upgrades	\$380,000.00
-	Manor House Windows	\$500,000.00
-	Renovate Maids Cottage	\$250,000.00
Sippo Lake Park – East	Marina Access Drive Reconfiguration	\$900,000.00
-	Renovate Marina	\$500,000.00
-	Renovate Canalway Exhibit Hall and Offices	\$2,440,475.00
Sippo Lake Park – North	Exploration Gateway – Atrium Mezzanine	\$500,000.00
-	Exploration Gateway – Nature Play	\$100,000.00
-	Exploration Gateway – Façade Improvements	\$119,300.00
-	Ranger Headquarters	\$3,300,000.00
Sippo Lake Park – West	Marina Relocation and Shelter to Sippo West	\$2,500,000.00
-	Dredging Sippo Lake	\$200,000.00

-	WCC Flight Cage Expansion	\$200,000.00
-	Nature Center/Classroom Enhancement	\$500,000.00
-	Phase II Renovation of Clubhouse	\$5,000,000.00
Tam O'Shanter Park	Driving Range Building Renovation	\$150,000.00
-	Nature Play Area	\$100,000.00
Walborn Reservoir	Repair/Replace Boardwalk/Fishing Dock	\$5,000,000.00
-	White Property Improvements	\$500,000.00
-	White Property Archery Range	\$25,000.00
Trail	Project Name	Estimated Project Cost
Devonshire Connector Trail	Devonshire to Campus Trail via Lake Cable – on road	\$300,000.00
Hoover Trail	Pave Hoover Trail Marquardt to Market	\$362,496.00
-	Sign/Develop Hoover Trail Price Park to NC YMCA	\$500,000.00
-	New Restroom	\$400,000.00
Jackson Connector Trail	Connection from Tam O'Shanter to Devonshire Park	\$300,000.00
Middle Branch Trail	Pave Middle Branch Trail Schneider to 55 th	\$377,980.00
-	Pave Middle Branch Trail Easton to Schneider	\$500,000.00
-	Upgrade Franklin Schoolhouse	\$750,000.00
Middle Branch Trail (Upper)	Middle Branch Trail Connector to Quail Hollow Park	\$750,000.00
Minerva Connector Trail	Trail from Iron Horse Trail to Brock Park, Minerva	\$2,333,470.00
-	Minerva Connector Trail Bridge over SR 183	\$550,000.00
North Country Trail	Quail Hollow Park to Bingham – on road route	\$500,000.00
-	Bingham to Deer Creek Park – on road/off-road route	\$750,000.00
O&E Canal Towpath Trail	Restroom at Lock IV	\$460,000.00
-	Lock IV Trailhead – Locktenders House	\$200,000.00
-	Lock IV Trailhead – Lock/Gate	\$500,000.00
-	Lock IV Trailhead – Parking Lot Paving	\$100,000.00
-	Lock IV Trailhead – Spillway Repair	\$100,000.00
-	Cherry Street to Lake Avenue – Towpath Paving	\$2,950,965.50
-	Wildcat Culvert – Repair/Replacement	\$150,000.00
Quail Hollow Connector Trail	Phase II – Quail Hollow Park to Lake Elementary	\$750,000.00
Sandy Valley Trail	Magnolia Flouring Mills to Waynesburg	\$1,000,000.00
Sippo Valley Trail	Bridge #8 Replacement	\$967,365.00
-	Bridge #1 Replacement	\$442,920.00
-	Bridge #6A Replacement	\$15,000.00
-	Bridge #3 Replacement	\$622,691.34
-	Bridge #2 Replacement	\$795,468.75

-	Bridge #10 Replacement	\$1,020,600.00
-	Bridge #5 Replacement	\$1,058,400.00
-	Skyland Avenue Parking	\$75,000.00
-	Bridge #4 Replacement	\$269,000.00
-	Bridge #6 Replacement	\$750,000.00
-	Sippo Valley Trail Paving	\$1,100,000.00

Stark Parks Prioritized Projects for 2026-2035

In conclusion, the implementation of projects prioritized by Stark Parks over the next ten years will strengthen and enhance the existing park system by delivering critical infrastructure improvements and supporting the continued provision of essential services. These improvements will support the preservation and upkeep of existing facilities, enhance accessibility and inclusivity for users of all abilities, add new amenities, expand and connect the trail network, and improve overall access and user experience throughout the park system.

Whether the objective is to preserve open space, mitigate flooding through the protection of stream corridors, provide wildlife rehabilitation and environmental education programs, or offer quiet spaces for reflection, Stark Parks serves as a vital vehicle for achieving these goals across Stark County.

A critical component of this plan is its role as a living, adaptable document, one that evolves as new programs are introduced, public feedback is evaluated, and resources become available. Updates to the plan will influence and inform other areas, such as volunteer recruitment opportunities and expanded interpretive programming. As Stark Parks continues to grow and change, this plan will provide clear guidance to ensure development that maximizes public use and support while sustaining a high-quality park system for generations to come.

Appendix

Bibliography

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Making Space for Everyone, Stark Parks 5-Year Plan, 2019-2023; 2018

National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2025

National Recreation and Park Association Agency Performance Review; National Recreation and Park Association; 2023

Ohio Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP); Ohio Department of Natural Resources; 2024

Outdoor Participation Trends Report; Outdoor Foundation; 2024; 2025

Stark County 2040 Comprehensive Plan; Stark County Regional Planning Commission; 2017

Stark County 2050 Moving Stark Forward; Stark County Area Transportation Study; 2023

Stark County Community Health Improvement Plan; Stark County Community Health Needs Assessment Advisory Committee; 2023

State of Ohio Population Projections; Ohio Department of Development; 2023

U.S. Census; U.S. Census Bureau; 2010; 2020

Report Preparation

Stark County Regional Planning Commission (SCRPC)

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Jonelle Melnichenko, Chief of Planning
Corine Valentine, Planner II
Nicole Blunk, Senior Regional Planner
Malia Burgasser, Senior Public Relations Planner

Stark County Park District (Stark Parks)

Ten Year Planning Committee

Daniel Moeglin, Executive Director
Derek Gordon, Deputy Director
Sarah Buell, Capital Projects & Planning Manager
Angela Palomba, Community Engagement Manager
Mary Greuber, Development Manager
William Meismer, Capital Projects & Planning Coordinator

Additional Members of the Management Team

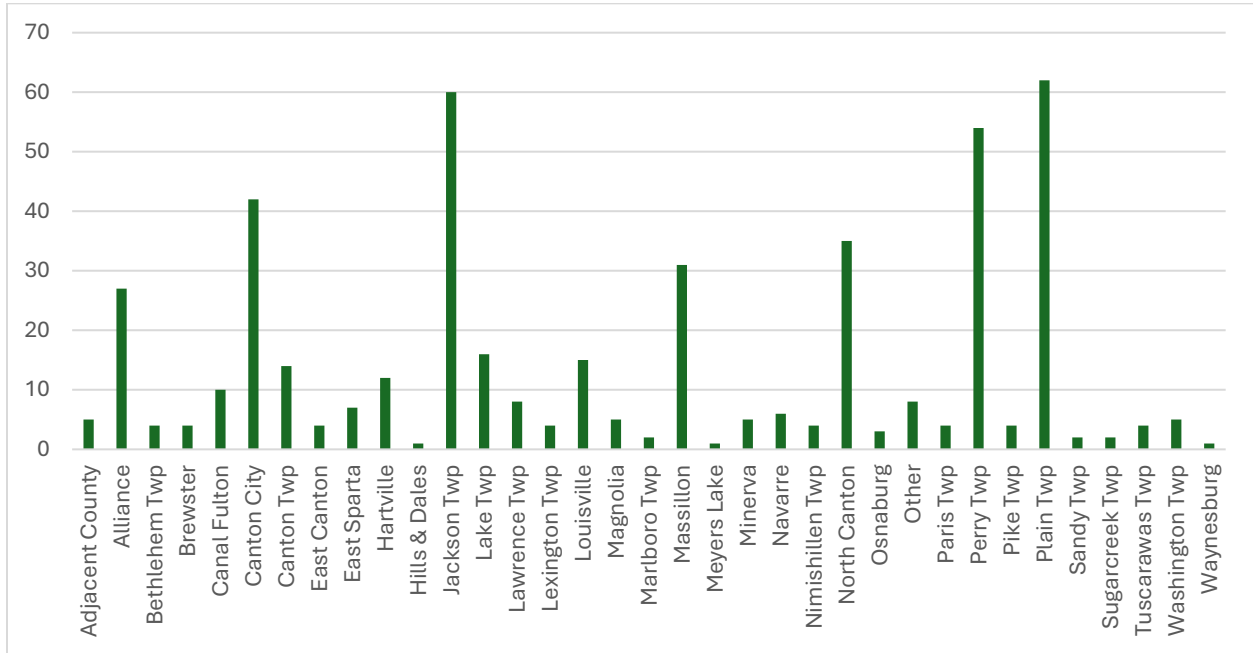
David Green, Education & Programs Manager
Barbara Wells, Financial Manager
Chelsie Haupt, Human Resources Manager
Michael Duplay, IT Manager
Richard Summers, Maintenance & Construction Manager
Justin Laps, Public Safety Manager
Stephon Echague, Wildlife Rehabilitation Manager

Stark County Park Board of Commissioners

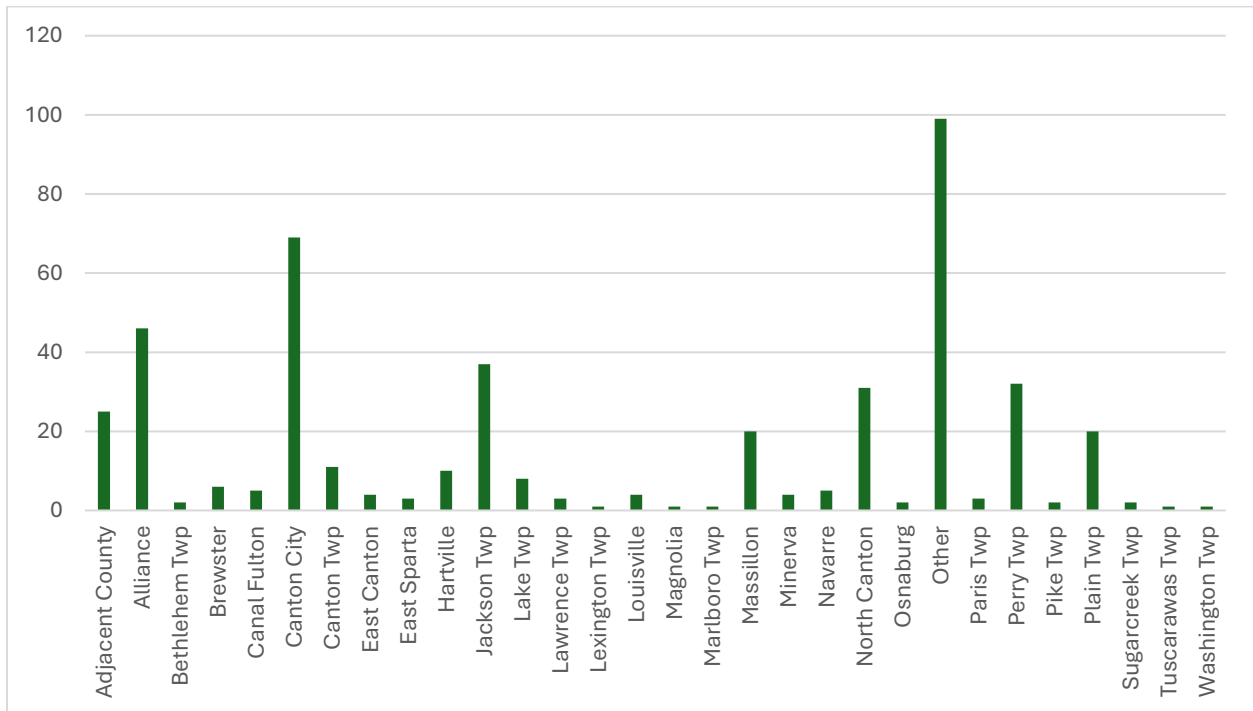
Dr. Jennifer Clevinger
Susan Clark Chaddock
Katie Cerrone
Ralph Dublikar
David Regula

Survey Results

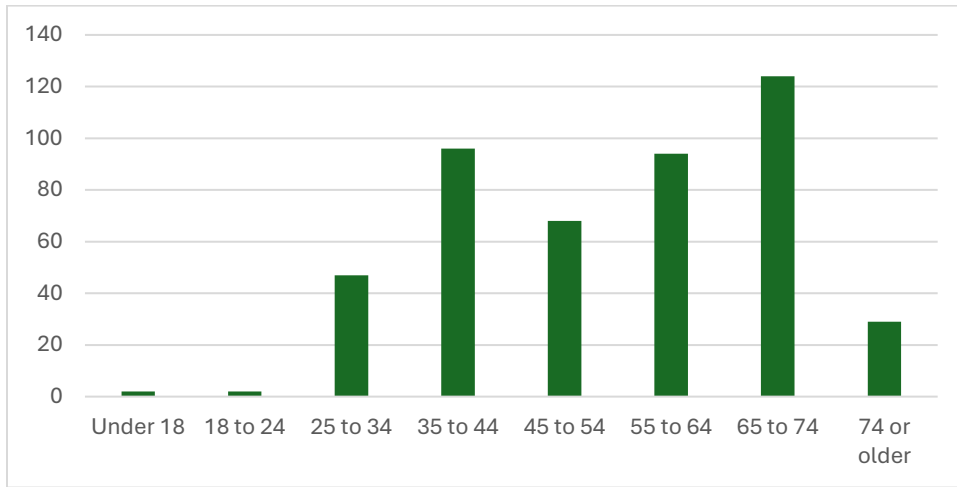
What city, village, or township do you LIVE in?



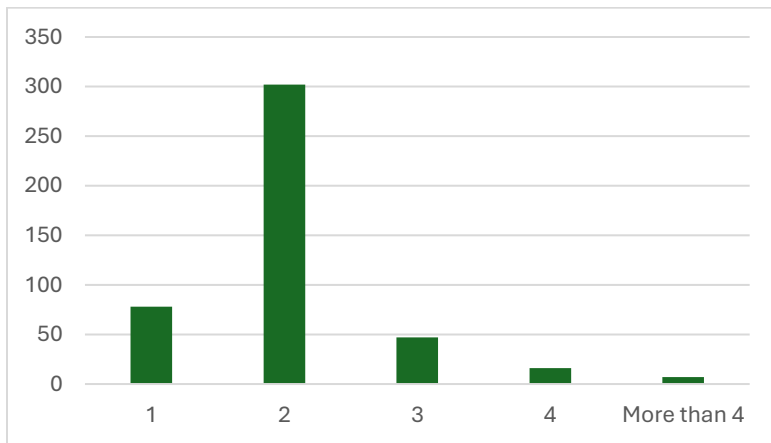
Which city, village, or township do you WORK in?



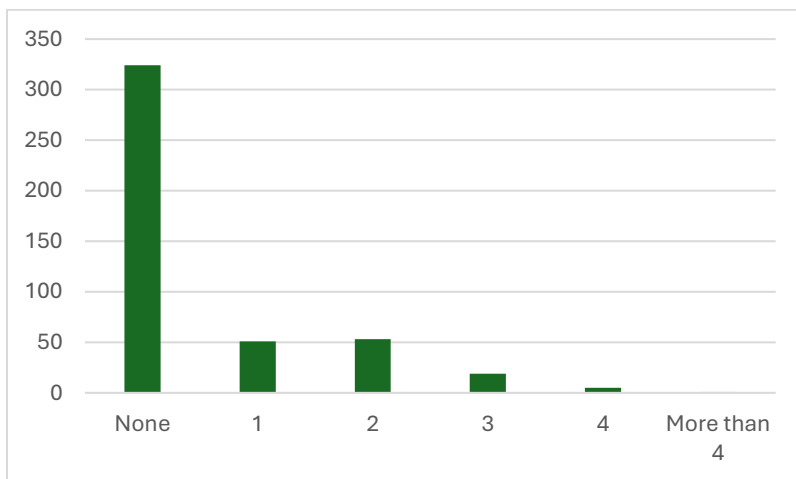
What is your age?



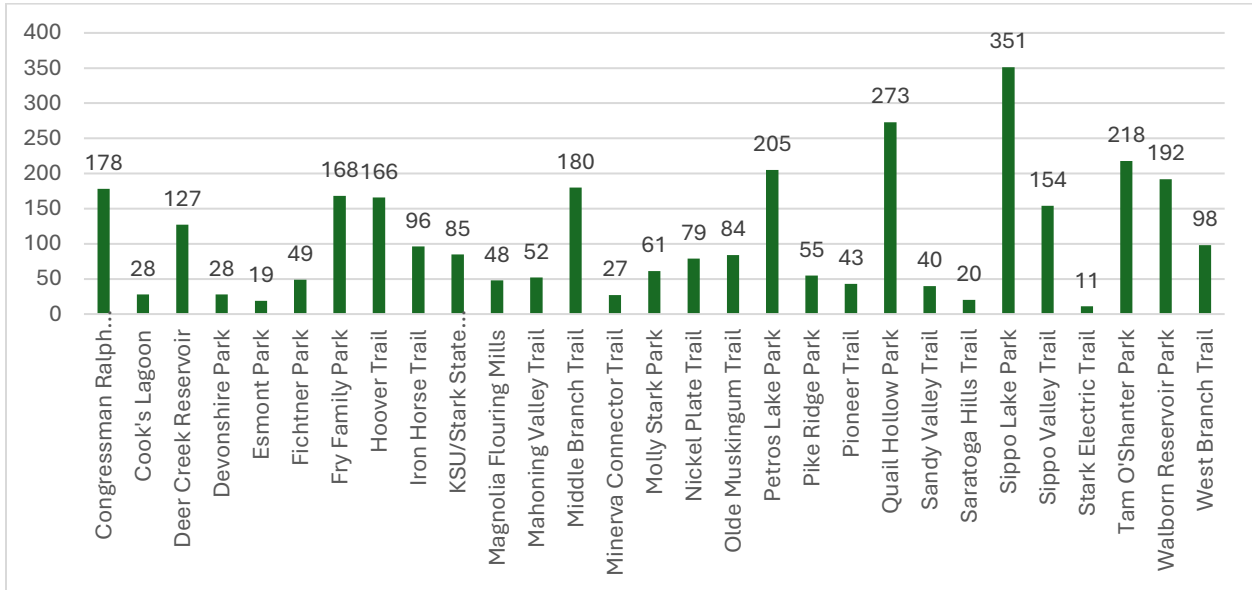
How many adults live in your household?



How many children live in your household?



Which of the following parks and trails have you visited in the past year?



What is your impression of the Stark County Park District (Stark Parks)?

Satisfaction with:	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Don't know
Overall Condition	34%	53%	9%	2%	1%
Cleanliness	44%	44%	10%	1%	2%
Helpfulness of Staff	42%	22%	6%	0.8%	29%
Safety and Security	34%	44%	14%	0.6%	8%
Recreation Opportunities	31%	47%	16%	3%	3%
Overall Satisfaction	50%	39%	9%	0.8%	0.2%

How often did you participate in the following activities at a Stark Parks facility in the past year?

Activity	1 or More Times/ Week	Once or Twice/ Month	A Few Times During the Year	Interested, but Did Not Participate	Not Interested
Walking/Hiking/Jogging	39%	28%	26%	4%	2%
Cycling	14%	11%	21%	22%	33%
Wildlife Viewing/Photography	15%	15%	27%	21%	22%
Bird Watching	14%	14%	20%	23%	29%
Visiting Wildlife Conservation Center	4%	6%	46%	33%	11%
Paddling	3%	9%	26%	41%	21%
Attending a Special Event	3%	4%	37%	41%	15%
Fishing	3%	6%	12%	25%	53%
Attending a Concert	2%	3%	19%	51%	25%
Picnicking	3%	6%	38%	34%	18%
Mountain Biking	2%	3%	6%	20%	68%
Recreational/Adventure Programming	2%	4%	22%	63%	2%
Nature/ Educational Programming	1%	6%	32%	43%	17%
Winter Sports	2%	1%	10%	38%	49%
Power Boating	1%	2%	5%	24%	68%
Guided Hikes	1%	1%	10%	51%	36%
Renting a Facility	1%	0.5%	7%	48%	44%
Horseback Riding	1%	1%	2%	24%	72%
Touring Historic Buildings	1%	4%	15%	59%	21%
Geocaching	0.5%	2%	7%	28%	63%
Camping	0%	0.5%	6%	38%	56%

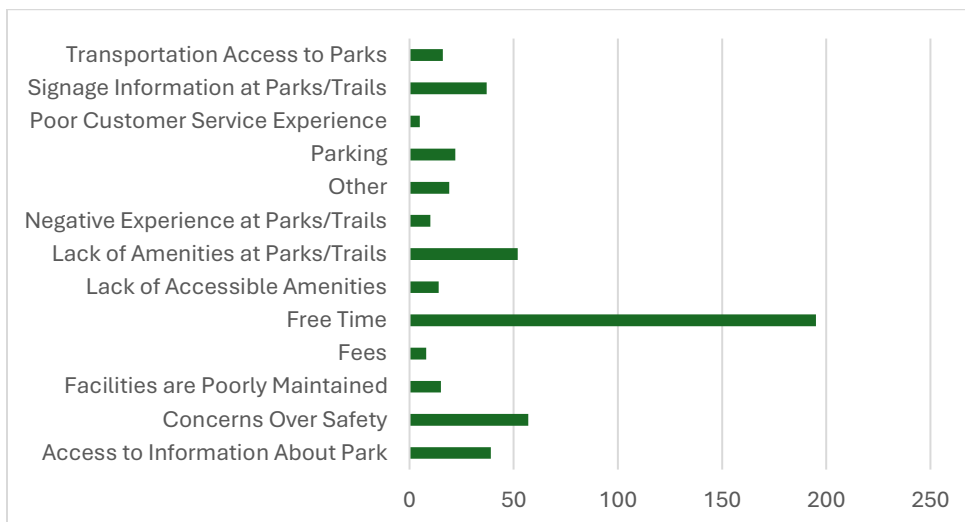
How satisfied were you with your experience of the following activities at a Stark Parks facility in the past year?

Activity	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Not Applicable
Walking/Hiking/Jogging	47%	42%	4%	0.4%	6%
Cycling	15%	27%	4%	0.4%	53%
Wildlife Viewing/Photography	20%	37%	1%	0%	42%
Bird Watching	17%	34%	1%	0%	48%
Visiting Wildlife Conservation Center	26%	30%	0.7%	0%	44%
Paddling	14%	22%	2%	0%	61%
Attending a Special Event	17%	26%	0.9%	0%	56%
Fishing	3%	16%	2%	0.9%	79%
Attending a Concert	12%	12%	1%	0.2%	75%
Picnicking	11%	37%	2%	1%	49%
Mountain Biking	4%	8%	2%	1%	85%
Recreational/Adventure Programming	9%	18%	2%	0%	70%
Nature/ Educational Programming	16%	24%	2%	0.2%	58%
Winter Sports	5%	8%	0.9%	0.9%	84%
Power Boating	2%	5%	2%	0.7%	91%
Guided Hikes	5%	12%	0.9%	0%	83%
Horseback Riding	1%	4%	0.2%	0.2%	95%
Touring Historic Buildings	7%	14%	2%	0.4%	77%
Geocaching	2%	8%	1%	0.4%	88%
Camping	1%	2%	2%	1%	93%

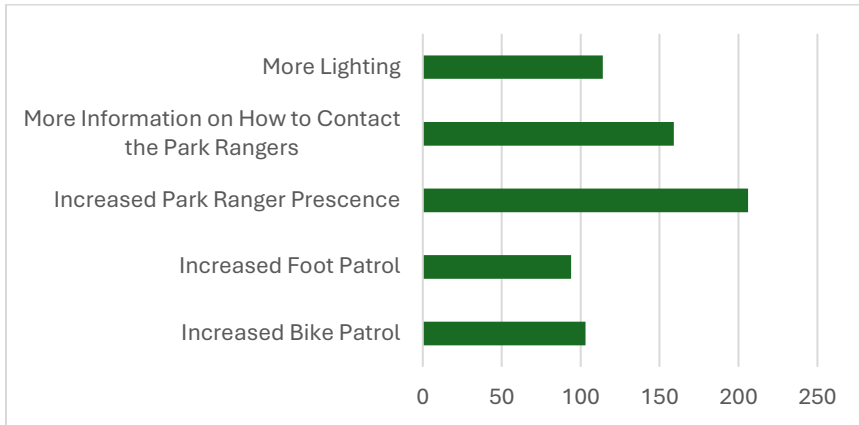
How would you rate the importance of improvements for the following activities over the next ten years?

Improvement	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Trail Maintenance	84%	15%	1%
Safety	81%	14%	4%
Hike & Bike Trails	75%	22%	3%
Facilities Maintenance	67%	30%	3%
Signage	61%	34%	5%
Trail Connectivity	60%	31%	9%
Wildlife Rehabilitation Center	59%	32%	9%
Flush Restrooms	52%	36%	12%
Nature/Educational Programming	49%	38%	13%
Disability Friendly Access	50%	40%	10%
Natural Play Areas	47%	37%	16%
Fitness/Wellness Programs	40%	44%	16%
Special Events	38%	47%	15%
Picnic Shelters	37%	50%	13%
Recreation Equipment for Rent or Borrow	36%	45%	19%
Paddling Access	31%	47%	23%
Launch Ramps/Boat Access	28%	45%	27%
Rentals/Reservations	27%	53%	20%
Fishing Access	24%	46%	30%
Mountain Bike Trails	16%	42%	42%
Archery Ranges	18%	40%	42%
Equestrian Trails	11%	37%	51%

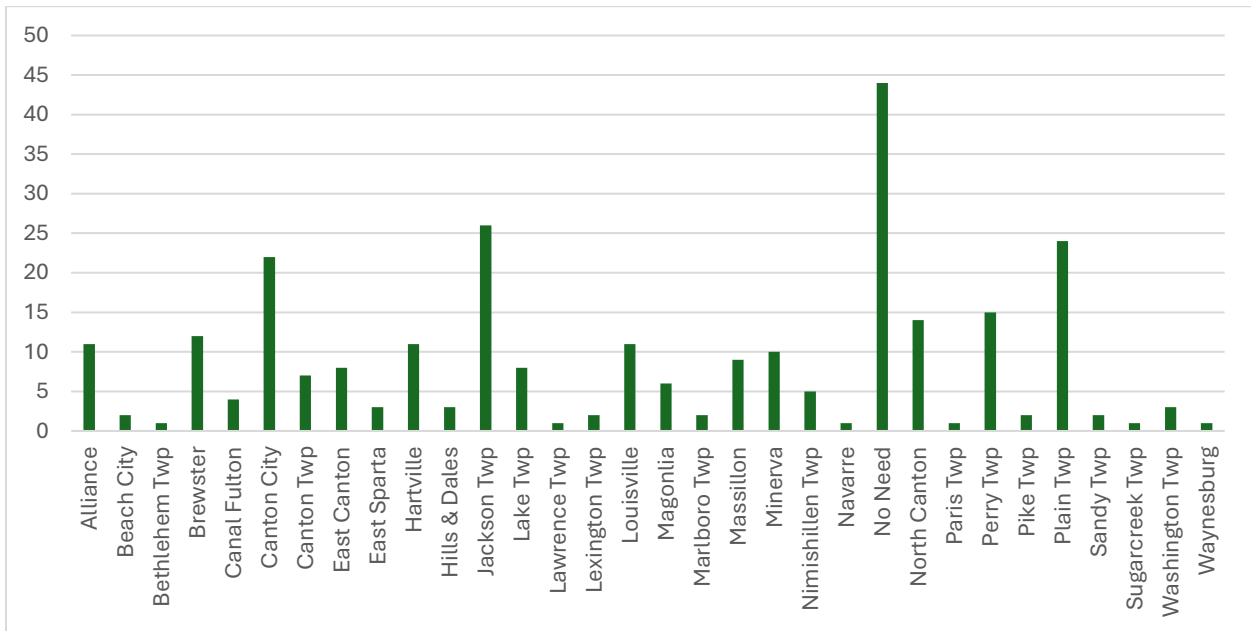
What are the biggest barriers to participating in outdoor recreation in this area? Please select no more than two (2).



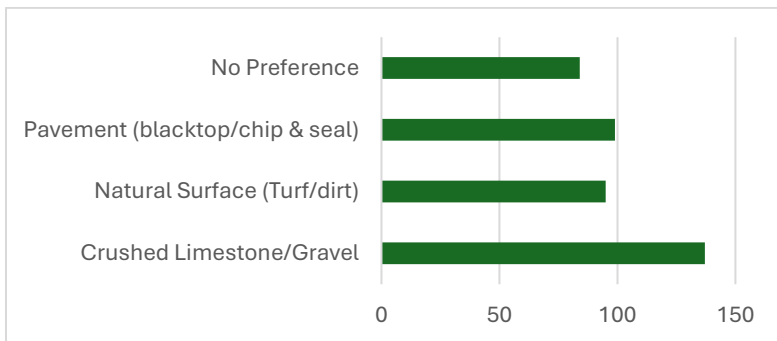
What safety/security improvements would you like to see at Stark County Park District parks and trails? Select all that apply.



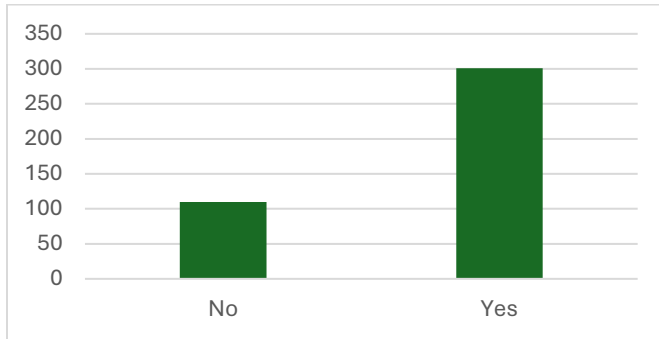
Where do you think trail connectivity is needed in Stark County?



What trail surface do you prefer?



Do you think additional parkland/conservation areas/green spaces are needed in Stark County?



Do you agree that Stark Parks provides the following functions?

Statement:	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Attracts New Businesses and Residents	61%	33%	6%
Provides Opportunities for Education	79%	19%	2%
Provides Places for People to Connect	88%	10%	2%
Provides Space for Health and Wellness	88%	10%	2%
Increases Property Values	68%	27%	5%
Attracts Tourists	48%	44%	8%
Preserves Historical Resources	64%	31%	4%
Provides Space for People of All Abilities and Backgrounds	70%	27%	3%
Provides a Desirable Place to Live	82%	15%	2%

How important is it that Stark Parks provides accommodations for the following:

Individuals	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Who Are Aging	78%	21%	0.9%
With Disabilities	75%	23%	2%
With Special Mental Needs	65%	31%	4%
Utilizing Different Modes of Communication	60%	35%	4%

Where should Stark Parks focus their resources?

Park	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Congressman Ralph Regula Towpath	60%	36%	3%
Cook's Lagoon	11%	56%	32%
Deer Creek Reservoir	38%	52%	11%
Devonshire Park	10%	58%	32%
Esmont Park	10%	55%	34%
Fichtner Park	14%	57%	29%
Fry Family Park	46%	42%	11%
Magnolia Flouring Mills	27%	51%	21%
Molly Stark Park	33%	40%	27%
Petros Lake Park	49%	44%	7%
Pike Ridge Park	35%	49%	16%
Quail Hollow Park	70%	25%	5%
Sippo Lake Park	78%	19%	3%
Tam O'Shanter Park	67%	27%	6%
Walborn Reservoir	60%	34%	6%

What elements are most important for Stark Parks to provide as part of its mission statement?

Element/Function	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Agricultural Education	30%	53%	18%
Conservation of Greenspaces	82%	17%	1%
Cultural Appreciation	37%	44%	19%
Community Trail Connections	60%	32%	8%
Economic Development	30%	51%	19%
Educational Programming	61%	34%	5%
Health and Wellness	69%	28%	3%
Historic Preservation	57%	36%	7%
Recreation Opportunities	80%	19%	2%
Tourism	30%	54%	16%
Wildlife Conservation and Rehabilitation	73%	23%	4%

Menitmeter Results

Rank the following parks in order of importance.

Rank	Park
1	Sippo Lake Park
2	Congressman Ralph Regula Towpath Trail & Park
3	Quail Hollow Park
4	Tam O'Shanter Park
5	Walborn Reservoir
6	Petros Lake Park
7	Fry Family Park
8	Deer Creek Reservoir
9	Magnolia Flouring Mills
10	Molly Stark Park
11	Pike Ridge Park
12	Devonshire Park
13	Cook's Lagoon
14	Fichtner Park
15	Esmont Park

On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), how would you rate the following statements.

Statement:	Rating
Stark Parks attracts new businesses	3.4
Stark Parks provides places for people to connect	4.0
Stark Parks provides opportunities for education	4.0
Stark Parks provides spaces to improve health and wellness	4.3
Stark Parks increases property values	3.3
Stark Parks attracts tourists	3.3
Stark Parks preserves historical resources	3.8
Stark Parks provides spaces for people of all abilities and backgrounds	4.0

Rank the following functions by order of importance for Stark Parks to focus on.

Rank	Function
1	Community Trail Connections
2	Wildlife Conservation and Rehabilitation
3	Recreation Opportunities
4	Conservation of Greenspace
5	Health and Wellness Opportunities
6	Historic Preservation
7	Educational Programming
8	Economic Development
9	Tourism
10	Cultural Appreciation
11	Agricultural Education