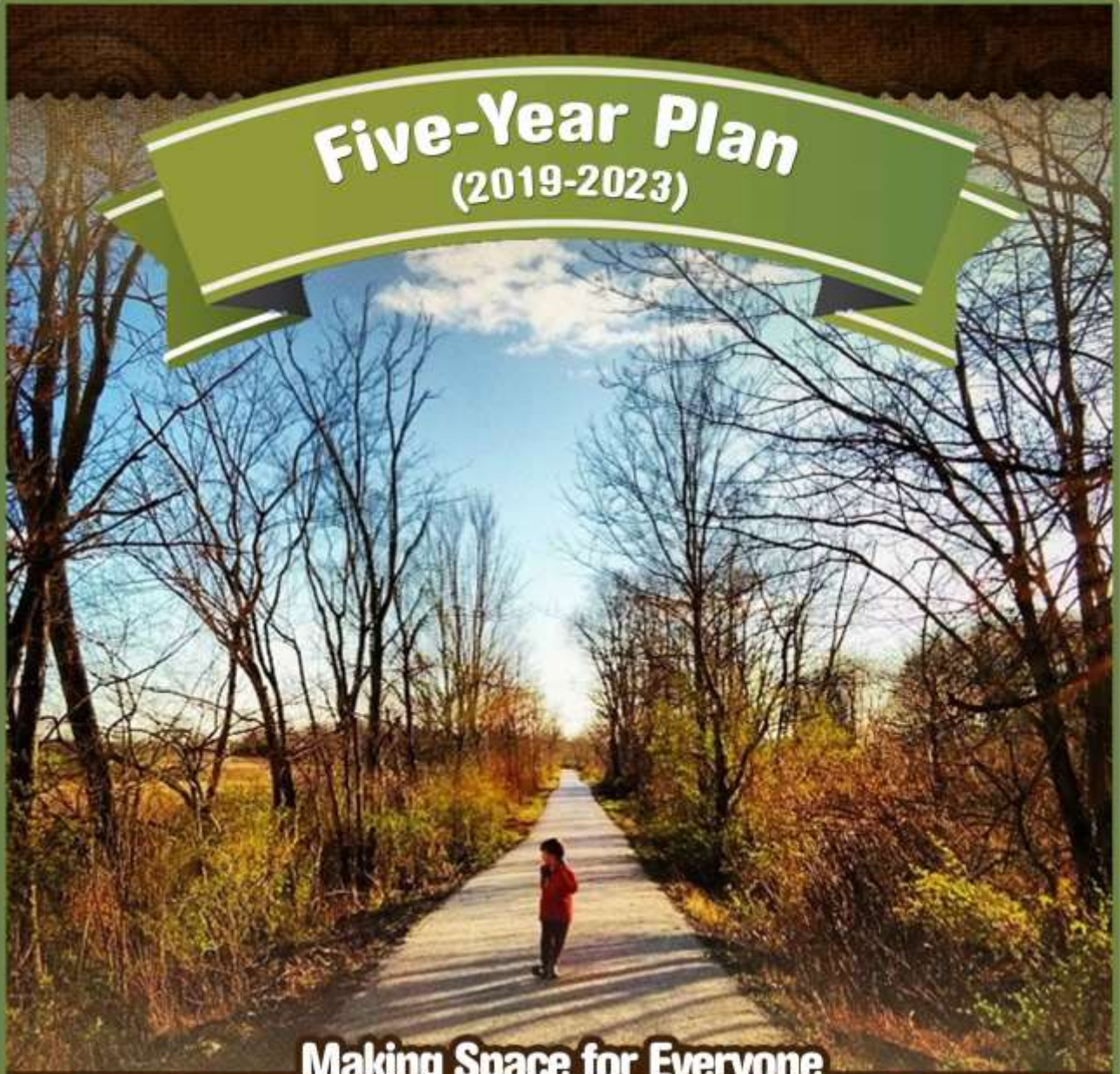


# Five-Year Plan (2019-2023)



**Making Space for Everyone**



April 2019, Prepared by



*Stark Parks' mission is to preserve, manage, and connect natural areas to serve the community through recreation, conservation and education.*

*Stark Parks' vision is that it will be recognized as an essential community asset.*

*Cover Photo: Aqueduct Bridge, Towpath Trail*

# Executive Summary

The 2019-2023 Five-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 2014-2018 Five-Year Plan, which was completed in 2014. 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 five years. New to the plan this year was an online public survey, which received 573 completed responses. The three major sections and general findings in them are as follows:

**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
- Non-participants of outdoor recreation in the US tend to be those whom are older, female, less affluent, and often of minority ethnicities; this creates a possible market to provide additional opportunities or public awareness efforts
- Recreational activities that are the most popular in Ohio are currently passive activities such as trail activities, wildlife observation/photography, picnicking, and boating/canoeing
- Based on comparisons between Stark Parks and other park districts in Ohio, Stark County has and will continue to surpass some districts in terms of acreage, programming, visitorship, etc. as projects are completed

**Part 2**, Operations and Resources, briefly examines the "mission" and organization of the Park District and its revenue sources. In general:

- The role of the Stark Parks has expanded as additional resources have become available, including involvement in the preservation of historic resources, expanded interpretative programming, and floodplain protection
- 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, as well as the need for support-building strategies

**Part 3**, Five-Year Plan Recommendations, discusses and prioritizes recommendations for improvements to the Park District over the next five 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
- Recommendations are made to complete development in a manner that produces stable growth and quality park systems that can be maintained over time, while continuing to focus on building connections that create “destination” experiences for users
- Common requests made by park users include additional programming options pertaining to more advanced programs, adult health and wellness activities, more active recreational opportunities, and a general increase in the frequency of popular programs offered
- 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



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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; and the *Stark County Park District's Five-Year Plan, 2014-2018: Creating Quality Spaces and Destination Places*, completed in 2014.

*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*.

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 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 2014-2018 Plan, and is in 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, Five-Year Plan Recommendations, identifies recommendations for park and trail resources and programming, and prioritizes development for a five-year period. New to the plan this year was an online public survey, which received 573 completed responses. In an effort to obtain the maximum public input, 12 public meetings were also held all over the County to gather input and present draft findings for further feedback.

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.



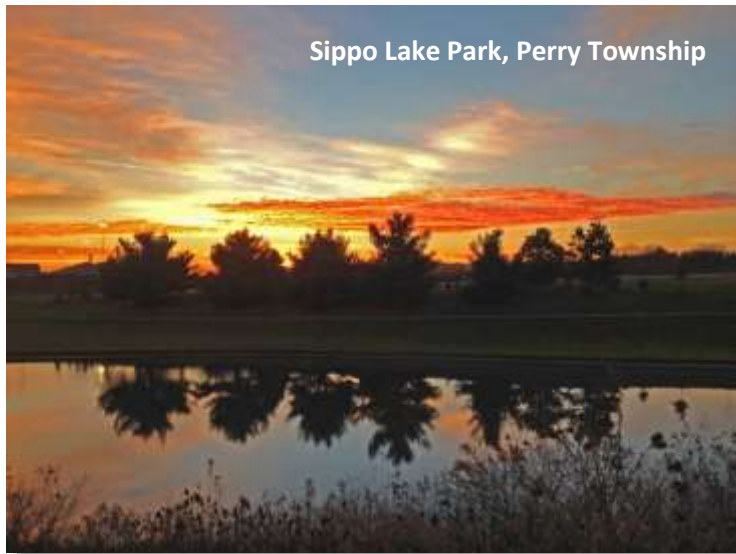


## Part I – Background

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.

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 approved in May of 1997 and generated 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.

The Park District currently operates fifteen parks and oversees approximately 8,230 acres of land, including 1,200 acres of lakes, ponds and reservoirs. These facilities include the Stark County Trail and Greenway System (including the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail) with more than 120 miles of trail throughout Stark County, 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, Whitacre Greer Park, and Quail Hollow Park.



Several parks, such as the trail and greenway network established under the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan*, 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), and the Canal Lands (342 acres which includes 25 miles of the Ohio & Erie Canalway) have undergone major improvements. Whitacre Greer Park, which opened in 2006 through a lease with the Whitacre Greer Company, contains over 2,000 acres with a six mile equestrian-only trail. 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 the State.

Stark Parks has acquired a number of smaller properties through donations and purchase. These tracts will either complement existing parks, will be used as part of the trail and greenway system, or will be developed for other uses. For example, the Fichtner property has been used as a small outdoor education center, as well as temporary housing for wildlife during the construction of the Wildlife Conservation Center.

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 2017, the Park District had over seventy full and part-time employees and an annual operating budget of over \$12 million. This same year, the Park District hosted a national conference, the Special Park District Forum, a prestigious honor that was well-received by attendees. In 2018, the Park District celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, capping half a decade of growth in parks and recreation.



Recent projects have included a new bridge on the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath, north of Bridgeport Quarry and south of Forty Corners Trailheads; a new bridge and kiosk at Cook's Lagoon; construction of Hoover Trail from the Kent State University-Stark campus to Price Park; approximately 1,000 feet of trail connecting the Hoover Trail and Applegrove Street through North Canton; as well as the construction of the Skyland Trailhead on the Sippo Valley Trail. Additionally, the Fry Family Park

opened in August 2017, serving as an anchor for the East Sparta to Minerva trail, and the Wildlife Conservation Center opened in June 2018 at Sippo Lake. Increased funding has allowed for facility planning and created the momentum for implementing park growth plans, especially where related to the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan*.

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 Heritage Corridor has provided a source of federal funding for projects in Stark County and also fostered cooperation between the Park District and local governments, brought attention to District activities, and generated other assistance to the Park District.

Since 2001, the Park District has significantly increased its income from grants and maintained cooperative agreements with numerous political subdivisions, public agencies, and private groups. In 2018, 30 group service projects, 13 Adopt-A-Trail groups and 338 individual volunteers donated a total of 20,075 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.

Annually, Stark Parks receives approximately \$4 million in grants from agencies such as ODNR (Ohio Department of Natural Resources), ODOT (Ohio Department of Transportation), and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) for park projects. Increased staffing and planning efforts made possible with the increased 2012 levy millage have also had other benefits. These include: greatly expanded outreach to the general public and schools; the continued use of the Stark Parks mascot, which assists in outreach; improved signage for park entrances; accessibility improvements; and the partnership with *Friends of Stark Parks*, a nonprofit charitable organization, under Internal Revenue Service tax exemption code 501(c)(3). The availability of levy funds constituted almost 49% of revenue sources in 2017.

## The Changing Role of the Park District

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 water focused), which would be situated in undeveloped rural areas where the needed acreage could be readily obtained.



Deer Creek Reservoir, Lexington Twp.

The original regional plan concept became blurred over time for many reasons but primarily due to the lack of funds. Without funding, the Park District could not acquire significant amounts of open space. Hence, the Park District in its initial years was forced to develop smaller, suburban-area facilities on county-owned property or on donated or inexpensively acquired lands.

Lack of funding in the early years affected the Park District's role in other indirect ways. The growing recreational demands and open space preservation desires of county residents were met through a variety of other efforts. Quail Hollow was developed as a State Park for day-use and reflected a facility based on regional park standards. The Wilderness Center is a privately funded 400-acre nature center providing many of the passive recreational opportunities proposed for a publicly owned regional park system. What would the Park District provide that wasn't already available in our own community?

The designation of the Ohio & Erie Canalway and the lease of the Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs have provided part of the answer to that question. The successful development of portions of the Towpath Trail led to the creation of the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan* and *Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs Master Plan*. More recently, Stark Parks has focused on expanding the multi-purpose trail network connecting the urban and rural areas of the County, as well as the acquisition of larger, undeveloped tracts of land such as Fry Family Park and a portion of the former Tam O' Shanter Golf Course. These are projects with a scope large enough that only the Park District can sufficiently oversee their development. The question has become one of how best can Stark Parks implement developments in a manner to maximize the use of these resources and provide the most benefit to the greatest number of users, all the while in a manner that can sustain the growth over time.

## 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. Again, the key to this is demographics, including not only changing socio-economic characteristics, but also spatial shifts in where and how people live. The demographic changes documented in this plan are derived from the 2010 and 2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate data.

**Aging:** Trends highlighted in previous park studies included an aging population and changing family composition. Both of these trends have continued; additionally, smaller households are a notable development. 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. While total population has decreased slightly between 1980 and 2016, the number and percentage of



persons aged 65 and over has grown each decade. Between 2010 and 2016, the number of persons aged 65 and over increased by 17.3%. It can be assumed that the trends now occurring are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, and plans need to be adjusted accordingly.

The aging issue is one to be carefully considered. The Scripps Gerontology Center of Miami University estimates that the number of persons 60 and over will increase from 22.5% in 2010 to 32.4% in the year 2030 in Stark County, a 9.9% increase in this population. Planning issues relative to this group include not only housing, transportation and care, but also recreation and accessibility. The passive nature of Stark Parks is a positive factor in planning to meet the lifestyle needs of an aging community.

**Figure 1: Stark County's Aging Population**

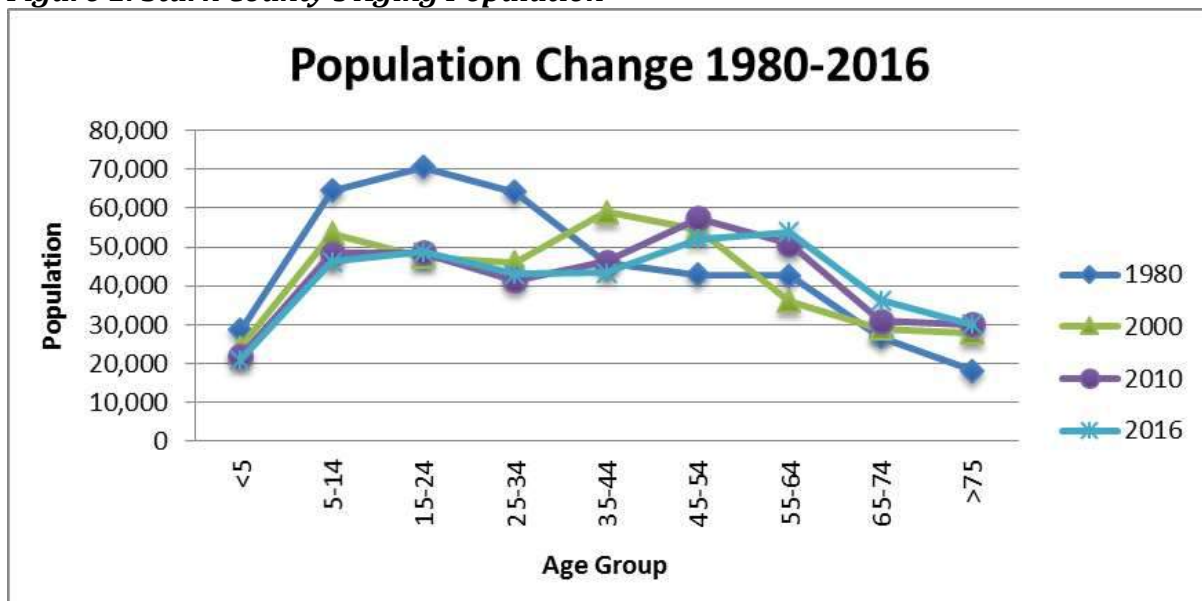


Figure 1: The shift to an older population as the "baby boom" population ages appears as a crest in a wave as it shifts to the right of the chart. Source: 1980-2016 U.S. Censuses & American Community Survey

**Smaller household size:** An analysis of average household size shows that between 1970 and 2010, the average number of persons per household has steadily declined from 3.18 persons in 1970 to 2.42 people in 2010, which continued through 2016, as 28% of Stark County households are only one person. This decline is expected to continue for the foreseeable future, but at a slower rate.

The decline in average household size can be related to more single-parent families, fewer children per family, 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. Households of 1-4 persons numbered 135,204 in 2000, increased to 138,327 in 2010, and increased even further to 139,118 in 2016. This growth in smaller households parallels increased participation in outdoor recreation.

**Figure 2: Household Size and Housing Units**

Persons per Household	Units in 1980	Units in 1990	Units in 2000	Units in 2010	Units in 2016
1	27,754	33,407	38,711	42,453	43,165
2	42,517	46,358	51,469	53,410	55,713
3	24,213	24,790	24,369	23,851	22,935
4	22,035	22,000	20,655	18,613	17,305
5	11,042	8,973	9,044	8,210	7,879
6 or more	6,533	4,045	4,068	4,552	4,104
Total Occupied Units	134,094	139,573	148,316	151,089	151,101
Total Population	378,823	367,585	378,098	375,586	374,762

Source: 1980-2016 U.S. Censuses & American Community Survey

**Educational attainment:** 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 percent with at least a bachelor’s degree was 18%. In 2010, the percentage of persons with at least a high school diploma had increased to 89.6% and those with at least a bachelor’s degree had increased to 20.5%. By 2016, the percentage of persons with at least a high school diploma had increased even further to 90.4% and those with at least a bachelor’s degree had increased to 22.6%. 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 2000 to 2016. Median household income was \$39,824 in 2000 in Stark County. This figure increased to \$44,941 in 2010, representing an increase of over 13% during this ten year period. From 2010 to 2016, median household income in Stark County increased to \$48,714, an increase of over 8% during a six year period. Between 2012 and 2016, Stark County’s rank went from 42<sup>nd</sup> to 37<sup>th</sup> in the state for median income.

**Vehicles per Household:** Through 2010, while the average household size declined, the number of households with three or more vehicles increased. Interestingly, between 2010 and 2016, the number of households with three or more vehicles decreased slightly for the first time since Census data was available for vehicles in 1980 (see following table). This is important

because having access to a vehicle is cited as a factor that increases participation in many outdoor activities. The reasoning behind this decrease can possibly be attributed to the fact that younger people are waiting longer than their parents did to obtain driver’s licenses and make car purchases. The implications for these changing characteristics will be discussed more fully after examining trends in outdoor recreation as, in a number of cases, specific demographic characteristics can be tied to a likelihood of participating in certain activities.

**Figure 3: Vehicles per Household**

Vehicles Available	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016
None	11,705	11,806	10,473	10,095	11,315
1	46,482	44,948	47,329	47,638	49,505
2	52,617	56,288	61,272	59,222	58,267
3 or more	23,290	26,531	29,242	32,167	32,014

Source: 1980-2016 U.S. Censuses & American Community Survey

**Suburbanization:** Knowing where people live is important not only when deciding how to serve them but also in determining how best to preserve resources. The suburbanization of Stark County is one of the more significant trends seen with Census figures, contributing to an accelerating loss of farmland and open space.

While the County population decreased 0.02% between 2010 and 2016 (after decreasing .07% between 2000 and 2010), the number of housing units increased by 0.1% from 165,215 units in 2010 to 165,524 units in 2016. 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 cities of Alliance and North Canton 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 44,000 residents between 1970 and 2016 (over 8,600 since 2010), while Alliance has lost approximately 5,300 residents (over 1,100 since 2010). According to the U.S. Census, Massillon actually gained 943 people since 2010, equaling a slight cumulative gain in population since 1970. It is likely, however, that some of this population gain may also be due to annexations. North Canton also experienced a gain over the last six years of approximately 1,053 people. Most other incorporated communities experienced slight gains or remained nearly the same size.

Approximately 73% of the County’s population is located in the cities of 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 2016, from 18,506 to 40,548 persons in Jackson Township and 11,301 to 30,092 persons in Lake Township. Plain Township also experienced growth between 1970 and 2016, gaining approximately 3,267

residents. 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, however, 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 the park system.

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.

### *Demographics Summary*

Locally, the implication of the trend analysis can be summarized as the following. The 2016 American Community Survey data shows that almost 46 percent of Ohio's population is aged 45 or older, a 4 percent increase just from 2010 Census data. This has an effect on the outdoor recreation habits of residents of Ohio 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

**Physical Activity in Teens:** In the United States, the percentage of children and adolescents affected by obesity has more than tripled since the 1970s. In 2016, 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. 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 to have obesity as an adult. Regular physical activity, including walking, hiking and biking, along with a healthful 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 2017 Recreation Participation Report, one encouraging fact to note is that outdoor participation among youth males' ages 6-17 appears to have been slightly increasing overall. However, outdoor participation among youth females ages 6-17 slightly decreased. The 2017 Participation Report does note that data indicates that adults who were introduced to the outdoors as children were more likely to participate in outdoor activities during adulthood than those who were not exposed to the outdoors as children. Stark Parks, with its extensive trail system and programming options, is in an excellent position to assist in engaging non-active teens for the sake of their health and developing future generations of park patrons. One of the activities where a closer examination may be needed in particular is biking, which according to both the 2011 and 2017 Outdoor Foundation's studies, was reported as the most popular outdoor activity among youth ages 6-17.

**State and national trends:** 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 2018 SCORP (see table below) reported a continued high interest in similar activities as identified in the 2013 SCORP, with a couple of notable additions: canoeing/kayaking and stand-up paddle boarding (SUP). Ohioans have continued to express an increased interest in water-based activities and so the addition of these two activities is not surprising. New to the survey this year was outdoor festivals/concerts/plays, which had a very high participation rate of 54%. Other newly-surveyed activities included night sky viewing, technology-driven recreation (ex: drones), and pickleball. Even though they are still highly popular activities, the report noted that some traditional facilities are continuing to decline in use, such as baseball/softball fields and golf courses.

**Figure 4: Top 10 Outdoor Recreational Activity Trends (2018)**

Rank	Recreation Activity	Percentage of Households Participating
1	Walking/hiking on trail	83%
2	Scenic driving	72%
3	Wildlife viewing/photography	70%
4	Touring historic/heritage sites/farms	66%
5	Picnicking (with or without shelter)	58.50%
6	Bicycling on a paved trail	55%
7	Outdoor festival, concert or play	54%
8	Swimming in a lake, pond, or river	51%
9	Birdwatching	50%
10	Canoeing/kayaking in stream, river, water trail	44%

Source: SCORP 2018

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 2017,” found that running, jogging and hiking were all ranked in the top 5 most popular activities, as were fishing, road/mountain/BMX biking and backpacking/camping. This survey further identified an increased interest overall in camping/RV vehicles and stand-up paddleboarding (SUP).



The Outdoor Foundation’s 2017 study also examined the demographics of those participating in outdoor recreational activities. It found that outdoor participation grew from 48.4% of the U.S. population in 2015 to 48.8% in 2016, representing an addition of 2 million outdoor participants. 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 2016 the figure had risen to 46%. The report continues to confirm that Caucasians make up a large majority of outdoor recreation participants at 73%. African-Americans made up 9% of participants, while Hispanics made up 10% and Asians/Pacific Islanders made up 6% of participants. The 2017 report provided additional demographic information on outdoor participants, including age, income, and education. According to the report, the majority of outdoor participants (37%) are age 45+, earn greater than \$100,000 annually (32%), and are college graduates (27%).



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 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.



Tam O' Shanter Park, Jackson Twp.

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 encourages, 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.

## Trends Toward Linear Trails and Greenways

The move to revitalize aging city centers, the need to preserve natural areas and a national commitment to fitness has increased the number of people out on trails. New concepts in mobility are bringing greenways into the mainstream of transportation. Trails are paths used for walking, bicycling, horseback riding or other forms of recreational activities or transportation. Greenways on the other hand, are corridors of protected open space managed for conservation and recreational purposes.

In recent times, the variety of trail users has increased, and so 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, recumbent bicycles for people with disabilities, and the sturdier design of the mountain bike itself.

Greenways and urban trails have become part of major corridor planning efforts and the catalyst for far-reaching programs of open space and habitat preservation. But beyond the rivers and parklands are several other kinds of corridors (such as rail lines and other transportation right-of-ways, 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 bringing together unrelated developments. Cities and states struggling to fund their crumbling infrastructure are now including trails in utility and transportation projects to provide more services at less cost in one corridor.

Of late, greenways and linear trails have taken on a new importance in the face of growing development pressure on lands and recreation trends. The current concept of greenways is a vision beyond the parks, plants, and visual aspects of the past. Creating new greenways means understanding the dynamics of many types of corridors, and learning to take advantage of opportunity. Trails and greenways positively impact individuals and improve communities by providing not only recreational and transportation opportunities, but also by influencing economic and community development.

Integrated trail systems help to create more walkable, livable communities. Because trails and greenways connect diverse and incompatible land uses, they bridge the isolation of car-based planning and architectural monuments. They can bring people to population centers and create linkages to destination points, while also reducing the dependency on an automobile. Yet, the difficulty of trail projects comes from their most attractive feature: linearity. Gaining ownership or access to land and working with multiple political subdivisions and agencies will always be a challenge associated with trail projects; however, by developing relationships and partnerships, it can be a benefit as well.

## Future Open Space Needs

While regulation is a staple of shaping growth, land conservation is an attractive complement because it is non-prescriptive, market-based, and generally enthusiastically supported by the public. In 2012, voters supported a 0.5 mill increase which raised the total park millage to 1.0 mill. The passage of this levy, which came during a heavy economic recession period, showcased the general public's support for the Park District and their mission then to "acquire, develop and preserve natural areas."

Greenspace can serve as a leveraging tool for planning and zoning, and parks and natural areas can make higher density palatable. The Trust for Public Land calls the linking of parks to other social and land use goals "greenprinting." A comprehensive vision, such as identified in a long-range plan, for determining which spaces should be preserved is vital. In assessing future open space needs, it is also critical to review the existing open space to understand how much is available and the use to which it is put. This is important in determining adequacy and setting future goals. Also vital are the types of parks available and their accessibility to the population. For example, community parks should be within walking distance of developed residential areas.

Adequacy of open space is commonly based on a broad standard of 10 acres per 1,000 residents within the developed urban area and an additional 10 acres per 1,000 residents adjacent to urban areas in rural settings. These standards were developed by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and were intended to be a minimum standard. The more recent NRPA methodology to determine adequacy of open space also suggests conducting a systematic community-wide study to help determine needs. Instead of counting inputs of land and dollars, there is a need to also analyze outcomes, or the benefits, received by residents in terms of recreation, conservation, livability and property value enhancement. This study should also take into consideration the need to accommodate different cultures, citizens' opinions and the wellness/physical fitness movement.

The 2014 Plan noted that Stark County meets the basic standard for the gross amount of open space; however, there are gaps in the types and placement of facilities. These gaps exist mostly in access to community and large urban parks, and natural resource areas in many of the developing townships. It was also noted that in many areas a large percentage of the available open space is dependent upon private and semi-private ownership in the form of golf courses or nonprofit groups preserving wildlife and natural areas. While privately-owned facilities can fulfill needs usually met by public parks, they can be less permanent and provide limited access to the public.

How well do parks meet needs within the local community? Stark County has a diverse selection of parks and open space areas. There are more than 110 municipal parks and playgrounds in the cities of Alliance, Canal Fulton, Canton, Louisville, Massillon and North Canton; over 50 parks in the villages and townships; and 15 parks in the Park District, one of

which is part of the Ohio and Erie National Heritage Canalway. Formerly a state park, Stark Parks took over management of Quail Hollow Park in 2016, and discussion is currently on-going regarding a similar arrangement for Jackson Bog State Nature Preserve. There are also numerous private and semi-public parks and open spaces including campgrounds, golf courses, swim clubs, sportsman's clubs, nonprofit nature preserves, and other facilities, providing many additional acres of park and open space for county residents.

## Planning for Long Term Conservation

Setting up a proper framework for the long-term conservation of open space is vital if the effort is to be

successful. Problems with preserving open space within Stark County include questions related to funding issues, determining responsible entities, obtaining consensus on the type and location of facilities and preserved areas to be acquired, and garnering sufficient public support to implement projects. Deciding how to accomplish the planning process can follow existing methodologies that have been used successfully in many areas of the country, including standards and methods adopted by the NRPA for determining a community's needs. Information derived from common planning methods would include: a complete inventory of all open spaces, including land use types, habitat, ownership, spatial relationships to the population, maintenance and improvement needs, determination of public expectations regarding open space, including possible funding sources, expected lead agencies and evaluating public interest in fiscally supporting these efforts. These answers can be invaluable in helping set priorities for land acquisition. Once these information types are inventoried, the creation of a land use management plan could be developed that identifies target properties for acquisition. This list would assist Stark Parks in achieving maximum conservation values for parkland while also balancing development opportunities.

Within Stark County there are large acreages where minimal development should be allowed for reasons of public health and safety, including water quality. These areas include floodplains, wetlands, flood control dam easement areas, water well fields, aquifer recharge areas, mined/reclaimed areas and landfills. Some of these areas, such as mined/reclaimed lands, have poor value due to disturbed soils and vegetation and destroyed aquifers. Others, such as floodplains, flood easement areas, and well fields, can support limited activities such as farming, hunting, biking, hiking, and fishing.

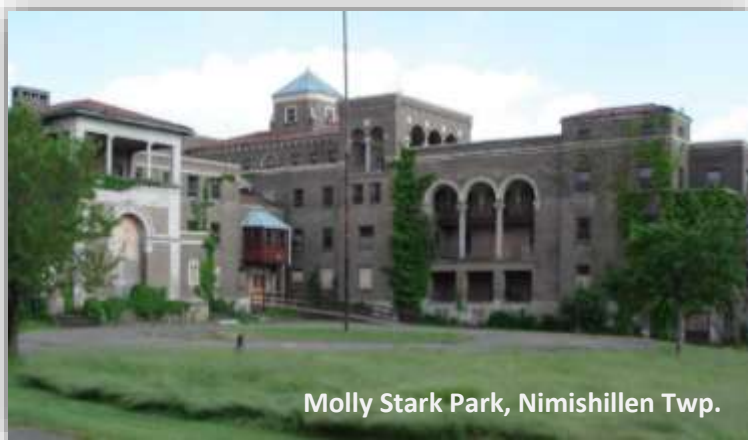


Many of these areas are already in public ownership or have easements that greatly restrict development. Others should be set aside and preserved through public acquisition or clearly demarcated to prevent their development. To accomplish this, subdivision and zoning regulations could strictly regulate them and assist in their identification by showing them on zoning and land use maps. Zoning regulations should prohibit construction in wetland and flood easement areas, provide for riparian corridor setbacks and limit development in prime aquifer recharge areas.

The principal undeveloped open space areas currently overseen by Stark Parks are the major reservoirs of Walborn and Deer Creek, utilized by the City of Alliance as a municipal water supply and leased by the Park District for recreation. Purchasing adjoining properties to protect these resources has been and continues to be an important step in open space preservation for the Park District. Other undeveloped open space areas include the Berlin, Beach City and Bolivar reservoirs, operated by the US Army Corps of Engineers for flood control purposes; flood easement zones under the jurisdiction of the Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District (MWCD); floodplains related to the Tuscarawas and Mahoning Rivers and their tributaries; and the airport protection zone around the Akron-Canton Regional Airport. Currently the Park District oversees 8,000 acres of park lands, including four lakes. As the MWCD collects funds to carry out needed maintenance and improvements of their facilities, Stark Parks could play a valuable role in assisting with the open space preservation anticipated to go along with the MWCD’s efforts.

Suburban and metropolitan areas increasingly struggle with problems of water supply and purity. It is helpful to use parks as buffers to protect streams, canals, rivers and lakes. All over the United States, hydrologists and park planners are designing systems that serve multiple objectives of water management, water quality improvement and recreation. A partnership approach with the Stark County Commissioners on drainage projects is one method in which meeting multiple objectives such as this may be derived.

Another long-term conservation opportunity for Stark Parks to continue exploring are brownfields, such as Molly Stark Park. Brownfields exist nationwide, and funding opportunities



Molly Stark Park, Nimishillen Twp.

are available to reclaim these properties. Some brownfields that can’t be built on can be rehabilitated into valuable park land. Virginia and New York have both converted landfills and former industrial sites into parklands. Brownfield redevelopment plays a key role in smarter growth and these opportunities need further exploration in Stark County. The Park District, as a frontrunner in



growing open space in the County, has capitalized on a key opportunity in this realm. Stark Parks acquired the 35-acre former Molly Stark Hospital site in Nimishillen Township, a former tuberculosis sanitarium that is now a designated brownfield site. Plans are currently underway to determine how best to redevelop this site, but currently the Stark Parks property includes picnic areas with tables, hiking trails, geocaching, as well as a Stark Traffic Garden, Memorial Garden, and Celebration Garden.

## Comparison to 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 first characteristics usually observed in comparing districts is their size. This comparison can be done on several levels, including raw acreage, the number of parks, types of parks, and available facilities. Part of analyzing the size of parks is understanding how to categorize them for specific purposes. Early plans and recommendations for Stark Parks described the hierarchy of parks (neighborhood, community, regional, etc.) and discussed how it should establish a series of large regional parks. This was based upon early park standards (1960s and older) which noted that regional parks were anticipated to be areas of 1,000 acres or larger. The more recent former five-year plans recognized the difficulty in securing such large areas and recommended that Stark Parks should realistically look at smaller areas of 100-200 acres, or larger if possible, as the rapid suburbanization of rural areas has "out-competed" park districts seeking to acquire land.

As noted above, Stark Parks and other county-wide park districts are considered "regional" in nature and are meant to complement smaller municipal and township parks, where more active recreational activities typically occur (team sports, for instance), and national and/or state parks, where long-term passive/active recreation (other than day trips) occur. In evaluating where Stark Parks "fits" into this hierarchy, the importance of size has diminished in value. Whereas in past reports, raw size was seen as more demonstrative of the Park District's comparative status, more current studies emphasize site specificity in determining uses and/or programming that occur. While the acreage of land acquisitions is still important, as noted in the previous five-year plan, Stark Parks should strive to ensure that any new growth is quality growth that will further enhance the mission of the Park District.

When analyzing open space, basic standards as established by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) are based on ratios of population to open space areas, as mentioned previously. It generally recommends that 10 acres of parklands and recreational open space be

available per 1,000 people within the developed urban area and also 10 acres adjacent to the urban area in a rural setting, thus 20 acres per 1,000 people in total. These standards were an outgrowth of recommendations for playground and play-field standards that set recommended sizes for specified purposes, and were intended to be a measure of minimum open space that should be available. More current metrics suggest also using a "systems approach" in determining the need for and the amount of open space that should exist. The systems approach closely resembles part of the process that was followed in creating the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan*, and what is being followed in this plan. The process begins by identifying the customers, obtaining their involvement in determining their needs, developing a strategic plan, and evaluating its overall effectiveness once the plan is instituted.

### *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. 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 the 2017 Ohio Parks and Recreation Association's Park District Benchmarking Survey, and the various districts' annual reports and websites. In this plan, the same park districts were compared as were reviewed in the previous plans (with the inclusion of Trumbull County to slightly expand the sampling size) 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 Districts by Year Established**

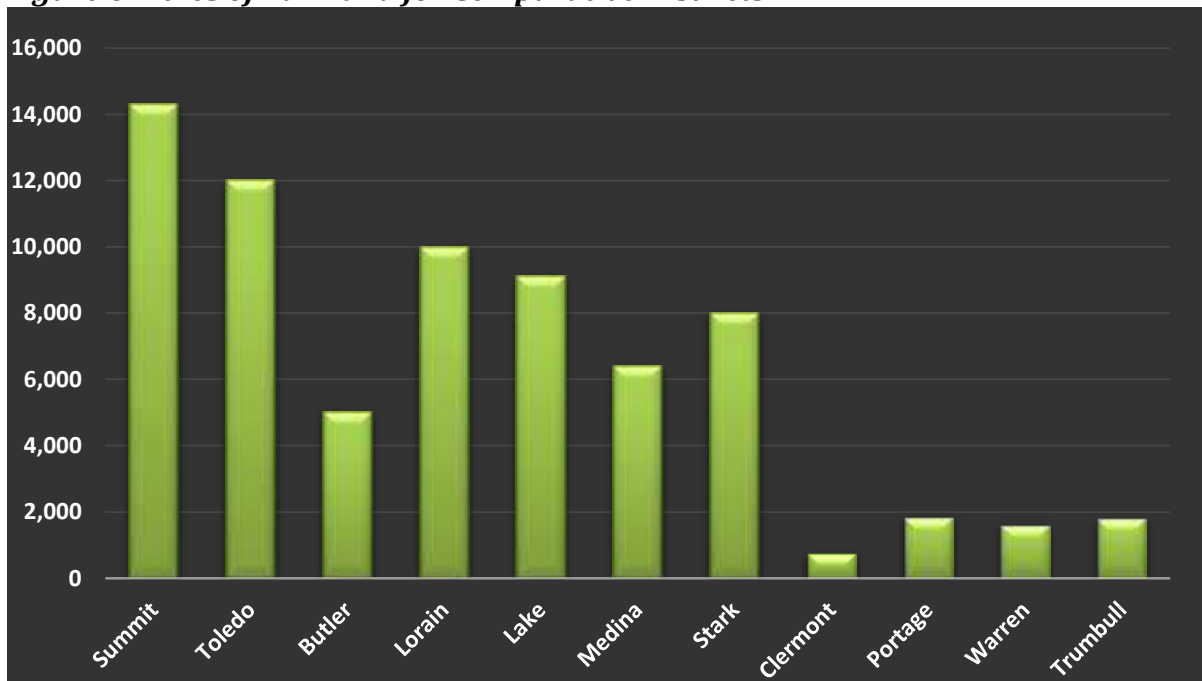
District	Year Established	District Acres	County Population	Acres/1000 Residents	Levy Millage
Summit	1921	14,300	541,372	26.41	1.46
Toledo	1928	12,000	434,800	27.60	2.34
Butler	1955	5,003	373,638	13.39	0.7
Lorain	1957	10,000	304,091	32.88	1.6
Lake	1958	9,100	229,266	39.69	2.7
Medina	1965	6,409	175,543	36.51	1.0
Stark	1967	8,000	374,762	21.35	1.0
Clermont	1970	750	201,092	3.73	0.6
Portage	1992	1,850	161,796	11.43	0.5
Warren	2000	1,600	222,184	7.20	0.0
Trumbull	1961	1,800	204,908	8.78	0.0

Sources: 2017 Ohio Parks and Recreation Association (OPRA) Park District Benchmarking Study, Park District Annual Reports, and the 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate

### 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 ranks above average in terms of total acreage and has experienced a slight gain since the last five-year plan in terms of acres per residents (almost 20 acres/1000 residents in 2013 to over 21 acres/1000 residents in 2016), bringing it up to above average in comparison to the other districts surveyed.

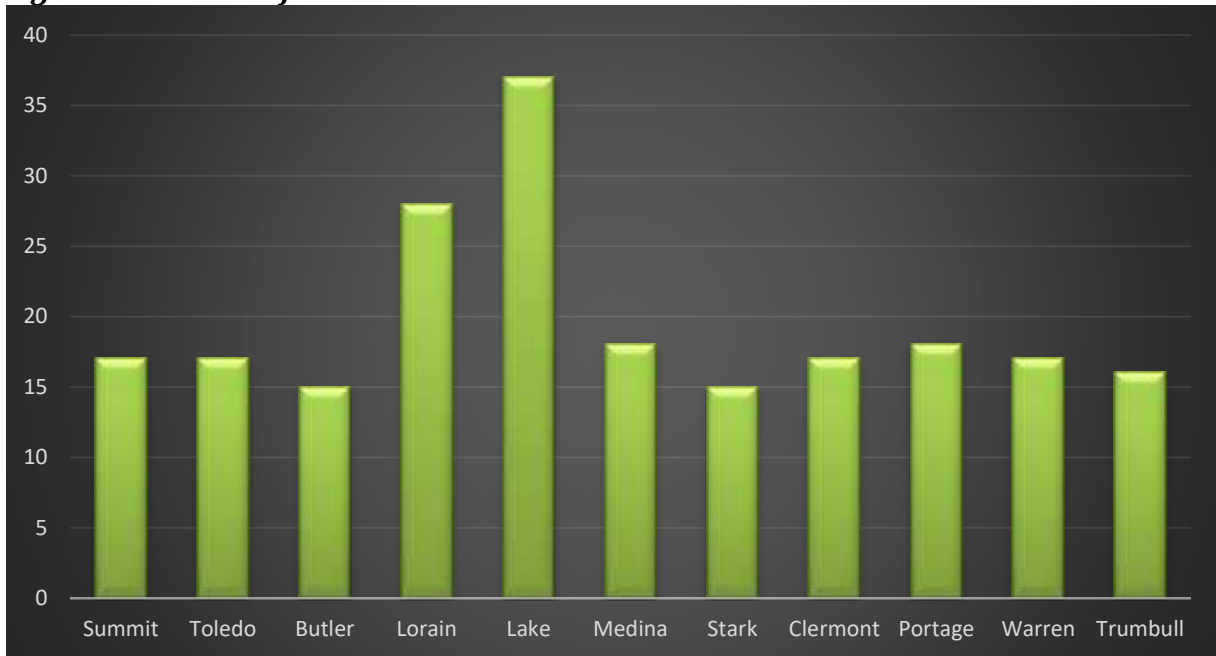
**Figure 6: Acres of Parkland for Comparative Districts**



### *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 19 parks for all of the park districts surveyed, which includes an atypically high number of parks counted for both Lorain and Lake County's park districts.

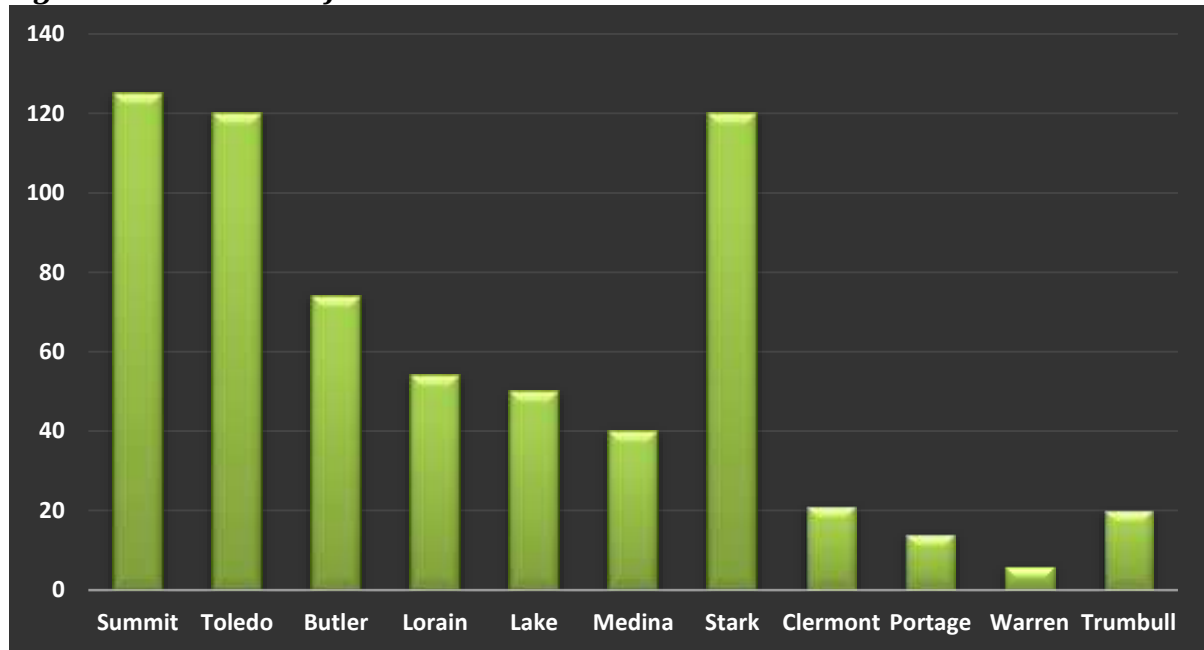
**Figure 7: Number of Parks**



### Trail Lengths

The lengths of trails were also compared. In the graph below, the total Stark County trail mileage has been updated from the previous plan, reflecting the tremendous growth over the past 10 years, from 50 miles of trails in 2006 to over 80 miles in 2013 and 120 miles in 2018. Further changes will be seen as additional portions of the countywide trail and greenway system are completed. As the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan* continues to be implemented, Stark County is becoming a leader in trail mileage.

**Figure 8: Total Miles of Trails**

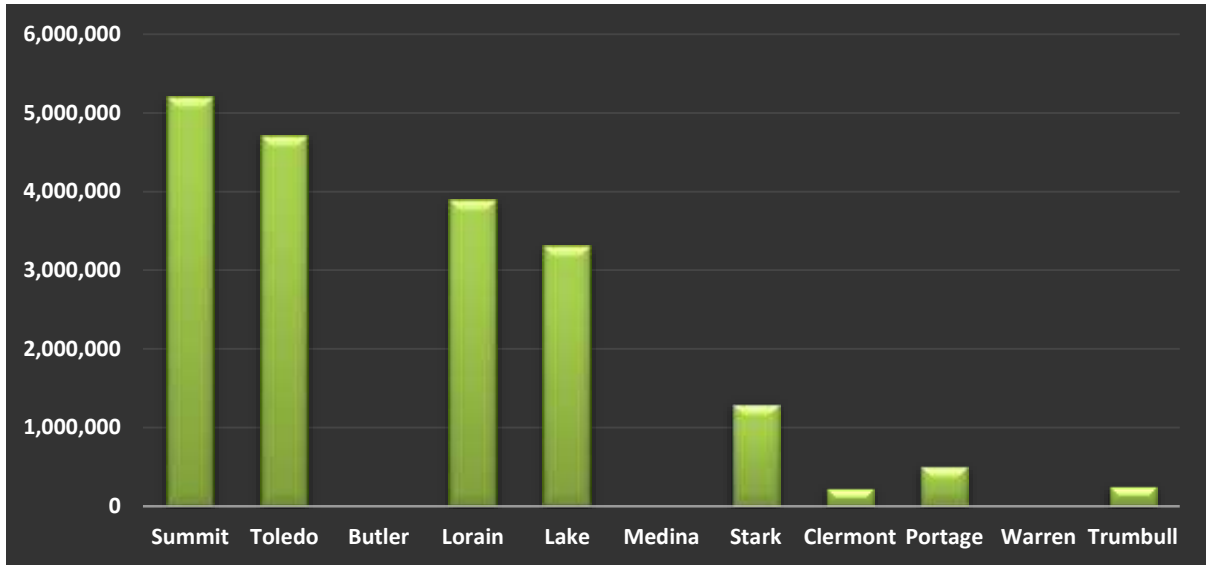


### Annual Visitation

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, and so this figure appears to be appropriate when considering those metrics. In terms of programming, there were over 15,024 attendees at 562 programs offered through Stark Parks in 2016, which was an approximately 5% increase from the previous year.



**Figure 9: Annual Visitors**

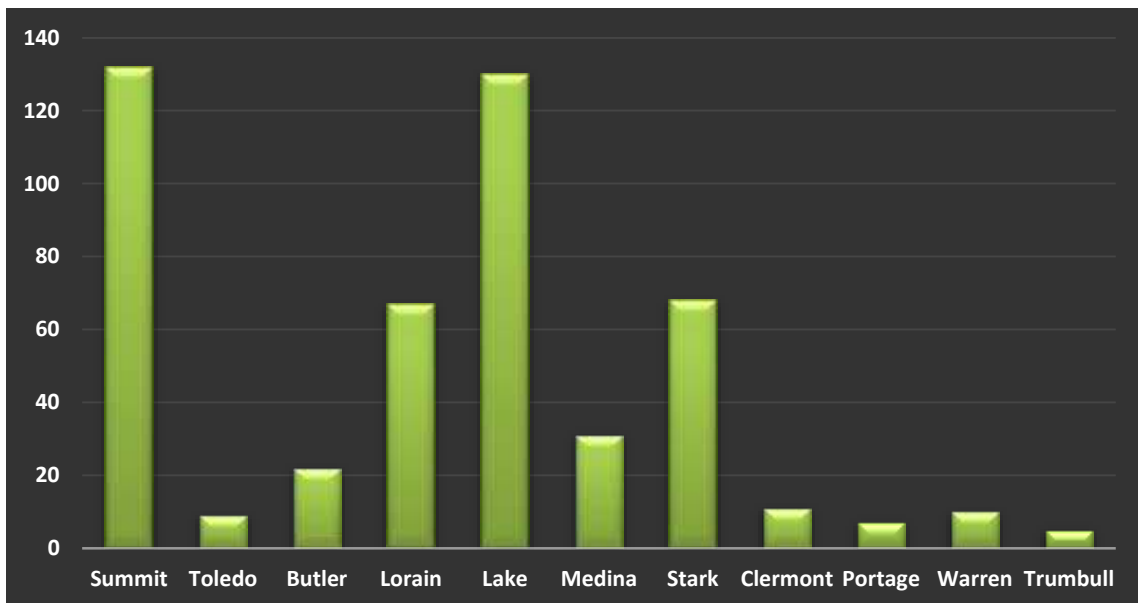


(Columns with no data indicate park districts where data was not available)

### Staff

In 2018, Stark Parks had approximately 68 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 2 full-time employees per every 10,000 residents. Nationally, this figure is almost 8 full-time employees per every 10,000 residents.

**Figure 10: Full-Time Staff by Park District**



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 of the other districts combined. In terms of full-time staff, Stark Parks appears to be mid-range, and also 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.

While total revenue for the various park districts reviewed varied widely, the average percent increase in revenue since 2012 was approximately 20%. Locally, Stark Parks increased from a little over \$4.4 million in 2005, to \$9.9 million in 2012, and 2017 revenues totaled a little over \$14 million. It should be noted, however, 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 expenditures is included in the following section.

## Part II – Operations and Resources

*“Preserve, manage, and connect natural areas to serve the community through recreation, conservation and education. “*

*-Stark Parks Mission Statement*

The mission statement of a Park District should instill a sense of purpose to both park staff and park patrons. The first part of this section will briefly examine the Park District’s mission and vision statements. The last part of the section looks at the Park District’s organizational structure, and current and potential revenue sources.

### Mission and Vision Statements

Since the 2014 Plan, Stark Parks has modified its mission statement. The previous mission statement was “Acquire, preserve, and develop natural areas for passive recreation, conservation, education, and nature appreciation.” That mission statement was slightly altered to remove the emphasis on acquiring and developing lands, as well as on passive recreation. Instead, wording was added to focus on managing and connecting natural areas to serve the community. Through this modification, the role of the Park District is able to better evolve as current needs warrant it.

The current mission statement of the Stark County Park District is similar to many of the other park districts initially surveyed in 2013. All of the districts included a common theme of preserving open space and/or natural areas for their residents (please refer to the Appendix for the complete mission statements of surveyed park districts). While mission statements do not preclude particular actions or activities, it is interesting to note some of the intentions that receive emphasis, and to compare the mission statements over the years. Since 2013, the number of park districts that emphasized land acquisition/development in their mission statements has fallen from five to three. Additionally, the number of park districts that emphasized providing recreational activities/programs fell from eight to four. Perhaps this indicates the changing focus on park districts within the State of Ohio.

Stark Parks’ current vision statement is: “Stark Parks will be recognized as an essential community asset.” This vision is being pursued through the Park District’s continued efforts to identify the needs of both existing and potential park patrons, and meet those needs in a way that improves the overall vitality and livability of Stark County.

### 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 five departments: Administration, Education, Public Safety, Operations and Natural Resources (Finance and Human Resources are included under the umbrella of the Administration Department). Since the publishing of the 2014 Plan, Natural Resources has been added as a separate department.

**Figure 11: Stark Parks Organizational Chart**



In order to better understand the recommendations made for each department in Part III, a brief overview of each department follows:

**Administration Department:** serves to develop and guide the implementation of the Park District’s strategic plan. This department encompasses the following areas of responsibility: marketing, grant writing and event coordination, and information technology. Finance and Human Resource Management with volunteer coordination oversight exist as separate departments under the Administration umbrella.

**Education Department:** focuses on developing, coordinating, and presenting interpretive and educational programming and events in the areas of nature, history, and recreation throughout various locations. This department encompasses the area of enterprises, which

manages the sales and services of the retail portion of the Park District, including concessions, gift shop, facility and marina rentals, etc.

**Public Safety Department:** fully-certified police force that exists to enforce state laws and local park rules and regulations via the use of citations, warnings and custodial arrests. This department also investigates incidents when necessary.

**Operations Department:** encompasses park and trail maintenance, construction, equipment operation, and facility and fleet management for the entire Park District.

**Natural Resources Department:** designs, executes and maintains all aspects of the Park District's land and natural resources management plans. This newly-created department was developed out of a recognized need for additional conservation measures.

## 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 noted earlier, the actual income for Stark Parks is substantially less than it appears in the following table as other sources of "in and out" income are included in total figures. "In and out" income are those funds that Stark Parks 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.

For Stark County, income from the park levy is the most significant source of income for the Park District, which can be seen in the following table outlining revenue sources for the last four years. In addition to the levy income and those sources discussed in the previous paragraph, other substantial sources of income include grants at the federal, state and local level. In November of 2012, Stark Parks successfully passed a levy (0.5 additional mills), which generates approximately \$2.7 million in additional income for the Park District per year. See the following table for a comparison of revenue sources for 2014-2017.



**Figure 12: Stark County Park District Revenue Sources**

REVENUES	2014	2015	2016	2017
Park Levy	6,555,251	6,606,464	6,749,002	6,864,711
Note Sale Proceeds	800,000	795,000	715,000	1,600,000
Intergovernmental Reimbursements	186,144	128,628	268,832	185,899
State Government Shared Revenue	8,348	9,131	8,920	9,014
Carryover	1,487,833	1,998,734	3,015,476	3,568,858
Grants	1,156,611	1,555,325	1,286,213	1,155,016
Marinas & Magnolia Flouring Mills	154,413	172,935	176,443	166,190
Lily Pad	33,315	33,249	34,329	48,487
Rentals and User Fees	66,132	70,307	80,199	83,290
Rentals and User Fees -EG	38,944	34,341	43,575	42,628
Fines and Forfeitures	102	258	16	289
Gifts and Donations	2,200	52	55	332,098
Investment Income	488	2,996	16,143	40,247
Misc.	0	0	0	6,068
Real Estate	0	51,260	370	8,150
Recycling	756	0	465	0
Reimbursements	9,720	11,928	18,067	9,101
Royalties	3,758	16,400	2,293	3,475
Sale of Fixed Assets	10,795	5,751	6,300	15,000
<b>Total Revenues</b>	<b>\$10,514,810</b>	<b>\$11,492,759</b>	<b>\$12,421,698</b>	<b>\$14,138,521</b>

As noted in the Introduction, an online public survey to gather input was conducted for this plan. One of the questions from the online public survey started off by noting that 90% of Stark Parks’ revenue is generated from property tax and grants while less than 10% is generated from sales or fees. The question went on to ask whether respondents would be willing to pay activity fees to help increase revenues; 78% of the respondents answered yes, they would. As the Park District looks for additional ways to help increase revenues, activity fees for some programs or activities may be beneficial. Examples of what other park districts utilize include: tours or special event fees, class fees for popular programs or those requiring specialized instructors (ex. exercise programs), establishing a fee scale for residents vs. non-residents, or offering special membership rates when a membership is purchased.

The online public survey results also found that almost 44% of respondents felt that the most pressing need for outdoor recreation opportunities/programming in Stark County was better trail connectivity; 42% said restrooms and water fountains at trails. While Stark Parks has made great strides in meeting both of these needs, in order to continue achieving these goals, the Park District may need to consider establishing additional activity fees and/or requesting a supplemental levy to help meet these more expensive needs.

## Distribution of Funds

An analysis of how Stark Parks appropriates their funds shows that a majority of the funds are devoted to administration/operating costs and capital projects (see following table). Capital projects include activities such as trail development, facility improvements and land acquisition/related expenditures. Expenses for capital improvements increased from 25% in 2012 to almost 33% of total expenditures in 2017. It is worth pointing out that some categories decreased in expenditure amounts, including Supplies and Materials, and Utilities. With Stark Parks not only increasingly becoming more “digital” in their information-sharing, they also have several “green initiatives” in place which help reduce total expenses.

**Figure 13: Stark County Park District Expenditures**

EXPENDITURES	2014	2015	2016	2017
Personnel & Fringes/Operating	3,060,336	3,211,837	3,670,893	4,052,390
Capital Projects	2,285,404	2,628,101	2,570,666	4,648,053
Grants	0	117,328	0	0
Supplies & Materials	364,882	412,037	452,771	434,159
Utilities	323,269	332,318	314,793	272,835
Purchased Services	656,897	802,574	873,042	1,107,721
Payment on Note	1,700,000	800,000	795,000	715,000
Interest on Note	15,980	5,933	7,928	8,723
Sales Tax	9,262	10,368	10,584	10,763
Property Tax and Assessments	17,594	15,105	25,622	37,272
Special Events/Projects	82,453	141,680	130,993	112,689
Carryover	1,998,734	3,015,476	3,569,408	2,738,917
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$10,514,810</b>	<b>\$11,492,759</b>	<b>\$12,421,698</b>	<b>\$14,138,521</b>

## 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 2012, the 1.0 mill levy generated \$6,864,711 in 2017, representing 48.55% of the Park District's revenue. According to a 2010-2016 compilation of parks and recreation levies issued by the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association, there was an 81.8% successful passage rate for these levies between that timeframe. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a discernable reason(s) for why the passage rate was lower or higher in certain years, such as the number of renewals versus additional levies. The only slight trend noticed was that the failures seemed to be more consistent in some counties over others.

## 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 tapped into.

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

## Federal and State Programs

On December 4, 2015, President Barack Obama signed into law the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act. The FAST Act authorizes \$305 billion over fiscal years 2016 through 2020 for highway, highway safety, public transportation, and other programs. This act includes a Transportation Alternatives (TA) Set-Aside Program similar to previous highway bills, which assists in funding facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists. Proposals for projects using these funds are reviewed by the local metropolitan planning organization (MPO). In Stark County this is the Stark County Area Transportation Study (SCATS), a part of the SCRPC. Stark Parks has received funding from this source multiple times in the past, and it is anticipated that program funding will continue, at least in some measure.

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 184 acres in Lawrence Township for the permanent preservation of a category 3 wetland. 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. Several of those programs are listed in the following table:

**Figure 14: Ohio Department of Natural Resources Grant Programs**

ODNR Grant Program	Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)	NatureWorks Local Projects	Clean Ohio Trail Fund (COTF)	Recreational Trails Program (RTP)	Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partner Program	Capital Community Projects
Application Due Date	Nov. 15	May 1 or June 1 - check webpage	February 1	February 1	Varies, as determined by the National Park Service.	Not Applicable
Maximum Project Award	\$500,000 (min. \$50,000)	County allocation, up to \$150,000	\$500,000	\$150,000	Varies, as determined by the National Park Service.	As appropriated
Required Match	50%	25%	25%	20%	50%	No Match
Funding Source	National Park Service	State Capital Budget	State Capital Budget	Federal Highway Administration	National Park Service	State Capital Budget
ORC Authorization	1504.02 (2)	1557.05	1519.05	1504.02	1504.02 (2)	154.22

Similarly, The Clean Ohio Green Space Conservation Program provides funds for the preservation of open space, sensitive ecological areas, and stream corridors. Grant recipients agree to maintain these properties as open space in perpetuity. This program is administered by the Ohio Public Works Commission (OPWC). Funds from this program have been utilized by the Park District for a number of acquisition projects, including Fry Family Park, a portion of the former Tam O’ Shanter golf course, parts of Walborn Reservoir and various waterway corridors.

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) both 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 lands 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.

Recently, Stark Parks has taken on several projects pertaining to floodplain management, including acquiring grants totaling more than \$2.8 million 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. Restoring these areas to natural floodplains also helps to improve stormwater runoff control and water quality. These sites can then potentially be utilized for activities that have low-to-no impact on the environment, such as parks and trail development. Additional federal and state grants to support this project have since been awarded by these agencies, as well as by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The OEPA also offers grants for similar water quality improvements, including stream bank restoration.

The Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District (MWCD) is a local program that provides grants for projects focused on watershed protection through flood control and water conservation. In 2014, the Park District received a \$100,000 grant from the MWCD to assist with the Zimber Ditch floodplain restoration project noted above. Additional grants for this project have since been awarded annually from the MWCD.

In 2018, Stark Parks received a grant from the Ohio Attorney General's Office to purchase law enforcement body armor. The Park District also received grant funding in 2018 from the Ohio Natural Resources Assistance Council to assist in the purchase of a portion of the former Tam O' Shanter golf course for a reversion back to green space.



Tam O' Shanter Park, Jackson Twp.

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 on 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 \$353,000 to 14 organizations within the National Heritage Area, including Massillon for the replacement of the Lincoln Way Pedestrian Bridge and Canal Fulton for repair work on the dry dock over the canal, both in partnership with Stark Parks.

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 the past include the purchase of Sippo Lake Park and ADA improvements at Sippo Lake Park and Walborn Reservoir; however, 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, including the Celebration Garden at Molly Stark Park, a park district-wide bench program, an established Endowment Fund used towards the new Wildlife Conservation Center at Sippo Lake Park, as well as the long-term maintenance of all park district properties.

Stark Parks also has various volunteer programs to assist with trail cleanup and maintenance, rehabilitating wildlife, education program assistance, and special events. The



**TAILblazers,  
dog-friendly patrol program**

“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 “TAILblazers” program is a similar volunteer program utilizing trained dogs and their owners for pet-related patrol and

“petiquette” advocacy matters. Geared towards canines and their owners, the TAILblazers demonstrate how pet-friendly Stark Parks’ trails are. As growing requests for dog-friendly programs continue, this is likely to become an increasingly popular volunteer program.

In 2018, 338 individual volunteers, 30 group service projects and 13 Adopt-A-Trail groups provided 20,075 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 \$400,000 worth of time donated to Stark Parks that year. 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, Frank S. Esmont Park and David Fichtner Outdoor Education Center. 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, 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.

Throughout Ohio, fines from littering and other petty crimes provide a small amount of funding; however, substantial penalties for the violation of environmental laws have resulted in the creation and/or rehabilitation of parks when these fines were ordered to be paid to park districts. ODNR uses fines to fund its environmental education grants.

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, ODOT, and the Ohio 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 SCRPC, and others. Similarly, local non-governmental organizations include: the Navarre-Bethlehem Township Historical Society, the Jackson Township Historical Society, the Stark Community Foundation, the Canal Fulton Heritage Society, the Ohio Horseman's Council, the Massillon Area Greenways Inc., the Stark County Federation of Conservation Clubs and The Wilderness Center, among others. 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. As noted previously, SCATS is the local MPO for Stark County, and their current long-range plan is the *SCATS 2040 Long Range Plan*. 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 *2040 Plan*.

A total of 27 bicycle-pedestrian projects are planned for completion by the year 2040 and involve more than 120 miles of trails with project costs totaling just over \$16 million dollars. In addition to being eligible for the Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside funding as discussed earlier in this section, these projects may also be eligible for other types of federal transportation funding, depending on the anticipated benefits. Stark Parks has updated the project tables from the 2040 Transportation Plan to reflect completed projects and schedule changes. The revised projects are as follows:

**Figure 15: SCATS Planned Bicycle/Pedestrian Projects, 2019-2040**

***To be completed by 2025:***

TRAIL	FROM	TO	DESCRIPTION	COST	LENGTH (MILES)	YEAR
Covered Bridge Trail	Plain Center Trail	Cleveland Ave.	Trail	\$250,000	2.5	2025
Hoover Trail Ph 5	Price Park	N. Canton YMCA	Trail	\$200,000	1	2023
Iron Horse Trail Ph 3	State St., Alliance	Prospect RR Tracks, Alliance	Trail	\$417,000	1.5	2020
Iron Horse Trail Ph 4	Cenfield, Washington Twp.	SR 153	Trail	\$500,000	1	2021
Jackson Connector Ph 1	KSU/Stark State, Jackson Twp.	On Campus	Trail	\$400,000	1.5	2021
Jackson Connector Ph 2	Fulton Rd. Tunnel-Jackson Bog, Jackson Twp.	Jackson Twp. North Park	Tunnel and Trail	\$1,500,000	1.5	2024
Middle Branch Trail	Lexington Farms, Plain Twp.	Saratoga Hills, Plain Twp.	Trail	\$150,000	1.4	2023
Minerva Connector Trail	Village of Minerva Park	SR 183	Bridge and Trail	\$550,000	1	2024
Nickel Plate Trail Ph 2	Swallen St., Louisville	Stuckey	Trail	\$100,000	4	2025
Olde Muskingum Trail	Walnut St., Massillon	Wooster St., Navarre	Trail	\$550,000	5.5	2025
Sandy Valley Trail	Gerdanville Ave	Greer Ave	Trail	\$75,000	0.75	2020

***To be completed by 2030:***

TRAIL	FROM	TO	DESCRIPTION	COST	LENGTH (MILES)	YEAR
Sippo Lake Connector Ph 2	O & E Canal Trail	Sippo Lake	Trail	\$1,000,000	3.2	2025
Sippo Lake Connector Ph 3	Sippo Lake	West Branch Trail	Trail	\$1,500,000	2.5	2025
Stark Electric RR Trail	Cooks Lagoon, Canton	Louisville	Trail	\$500,000	4	2030
Upper Middle Branch Trail	Saratoga Hills, Plain Twp.	Quail Hollow, Hartville	Trail	\$800,000	7.8	2025

**To be completed by 2035:**

TRAIL	FROM	TO	DESCRIPTION	COST	LENGTH (MILES)	YEAR
East Canton Connector	Louisville	East Canton	On Road	\$40,000	4	2030
Pontius/Price Connector	Quail Hollow	Walborn/Deercreek Reservoirs	On Road	\$105,000	10.5	2030
Sandy Valley Trail	East Sparta	Magnolia/Waynesburg	Trail/on Road	\$1,250,000	3	2031
Sandy Valley Trail	Greer Ave	Minerva	Trail	\$2,500,000	9	2031
Stark Electric Railway	Louisville	Alliance	Trail	\$1,500,000	7	2035
Wilderness Center Trail	Navarre	Wilmot	Trail	\$1,000,000	8.6	2035

**To be completed by 2040:**

TRAIL	FROM	TO	DESCRIPTION	COST	LENGTH (MILES)	YEAR
Jackson Connector	Crystal Springs	Lake Cable	On Road	\$45,000	4.5	2040
Jackson Connector	Lake Cable	Devonshire Park/KSU	On Road	\$45,000	4.5	2040
Mount Pleasant/Dogwood	Lake Cable	Dogwood Park	Trail	\$105,000	11.5	2040
Lower Middle Branch	West Park	East Sparta	Trail	\$235,000	9.5	2040
North Country Loop	Deer Creek	Alliance	Trail	\$400,000	5	2040
West Branch Trail	Arboretum Park	Price Park	Trail	\$400,000	4	2040

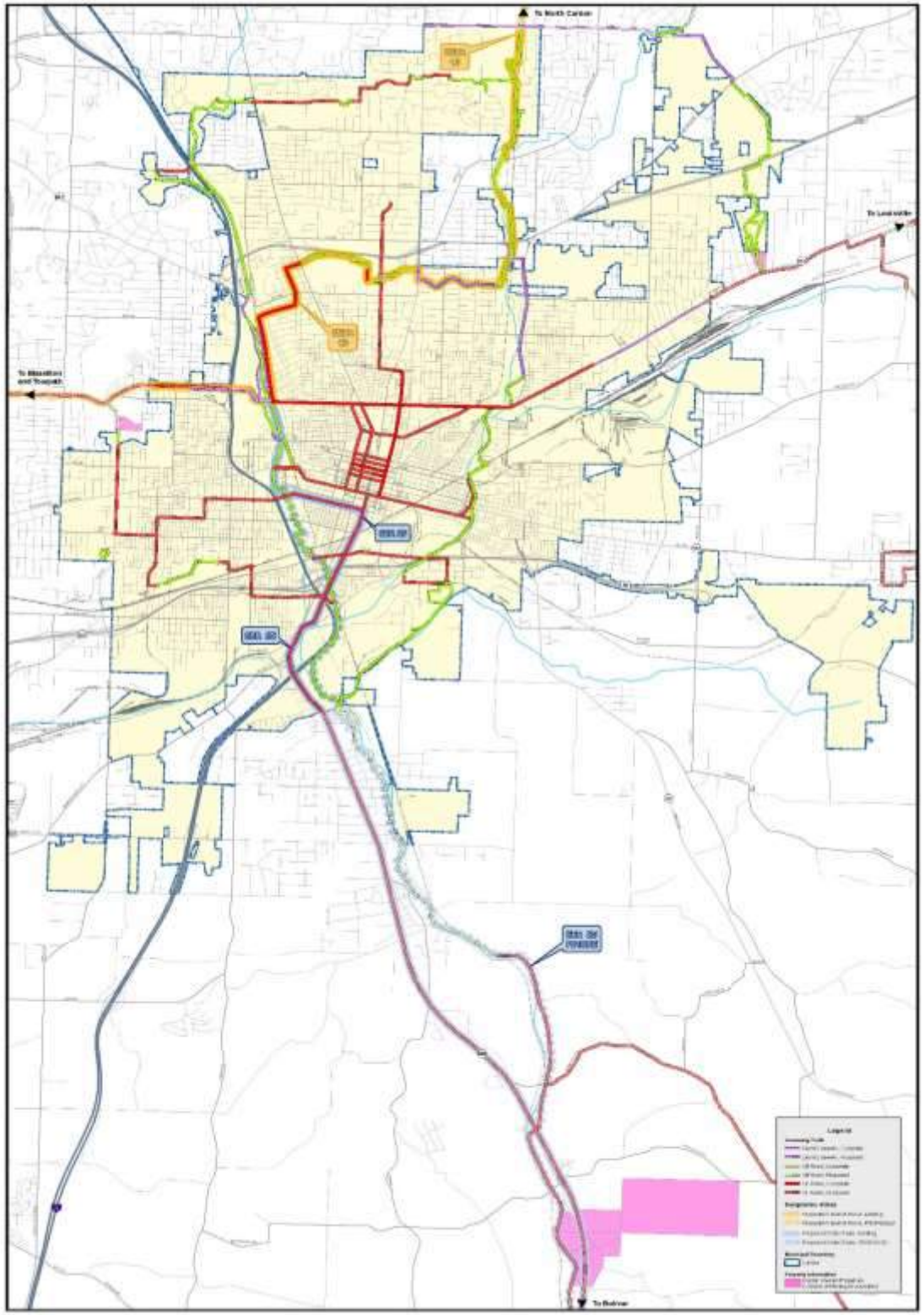
Source: Stark Parks and SCATS 2040 Transportation Plan (pending 2021 update)

Note: These estimates are based on 2019 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 three components and can affect the order in which projects are actually completed.

The City of Canton has also recently 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, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> 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.



Map 1: City of Canton's Bike Routes & Trails Map



 THE CITY OF CANTON  
THOMAS M. BERRIANG, MAYOR  
111 N. 1st St., Canton, OH 44703  
330.229.2100 ext. 2100 | www.cityofcanton.com

### Designated and Proposed Canton Bike Routes & Trails



March 2019  
0 0.5 1 Miles  
604952

## Support-Building Activities

Creating a common place that will draw visitors of all ages, abilities and ethnicities from within the county and beyond largely depends upon getting as many people and communities engaged as possible. Making sure these groups are informed and involved is so critical because they are the ultimate users of the park system. Gaining the support of the public is also critical in continuing the successful passage of levies, as well as for improving communication between Stark Parks and those it serves.

Formal and informal groups are fast becoming important partners in the development of parks in United States. The *Friends of Stark Parks*, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is supporting the Park District in various ways, including promoting outdoor recreational activities in the parks, organizing fundraisers, and supporting volunteer recognition. *Friends of Stark Parks* also serves as a vehicle for receiving donations and for recruiting volunteer labor additional to the core Trailblazers and program/event volunteers.



Public relations and constituency-building activities are also vital components of public involvement. Current Park District efforts are discussed in greater detail in the Recommendations by Department section in Part III. Also included in that section is an overview of new marketing and public engagement trends, as well as recommendations for implementation to help ensure that Stark Parks is reaching the maximum audience possible.

## 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. In a 2015 Study undertaken by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) titled *Americans' Use and Perceptions of Local Recreation and Park Services: A Nationwide Reassessment*, it was found that Americans paid an average of \$70 per person per year in local taxes nationally for recreation and park services in 2015. When asked via a survey undertaken

through the NRPA Study whether they felt their local recreation and park services were worth \$70 per member of their household per year, 79% said yes. Willingness to pay for local recreation and park services was found to be lowest among those who were: younger, less affluent, less educated, unmarried, and/or were non-white. Furthermore, for those respondents that stated they did feel local recreation and park services were worth \$70 per person per year, they were subsequently asked if they felt these services were worth more than that; again, 79% said yes. The average amount respondents were willing to pay was around \$81.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), personal consumption expenditures for recreation services equated to approximately 4% of total expenditures. According to results from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 90% of household income is expended. Therefore, if the average household income in Stark County is \$48,714 (according to the 2012-2016 American Community Survey), 90% of that, or \$43,843 is total income spent each year per household. Based on the BEA statistics, 4% of that, or \$1,754, can be reasonably expected to be spent on recreation services per household each year. This is in keeping with state averages tracked in previous years.

It is important to realize that recreation in Stark County has significant economic impacts and is a vital component of the economy. Numerous businesses benefit directly and indirectly from expenditures on recreational activities. Multiply the average recreation expenditure of Stark County households (\$1,754) by the total number of households (~148,316), and the result is a \$260,000 million impact annually.

While the most current data available does not provide a further breakdown of how recreational dollars were spent by households, it at least provides an insight into what Stark Parks should consider when pricing activities and planning for future offerings.

## Future Financial Needs

Across the nation, park districts are broadening their funding bases beyond the traditional allocations they receive from tax money. This new approach has been necessitated by the dwindling sources of funding of counties, cities and townships.

Even in the economically strong counties where tax-based funding is still growing, the needs and demands are growing even faster. The financial difficulties of counties and cities notwithstanding, citizens in general love their parks and if counties' budgets fall short, other funding mechanisms should be found to sustain park programs and activities. The future sustainability of district parks lies in the ability of park managers to generate funding from private sources such as user fees, donations and corporate promotions. Funding from these sources can accomplish everything from building new facilities or providing new services to simply continuing previous levels of maintenance that would otherwise slip. The Stark Parks online public survey showed that over 78% of respondents would be willing to pay activity fees

to help increase revenues. Going forward, the Park District should analyze which programs activity fees would best be suited for. Once determined, the Park District may also want to consider the utilization of a sliding-fee schedule or discounted rate plan for certain income levels, age groups, etc.

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 - Five-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 suggested recommendations for continued enhancement.

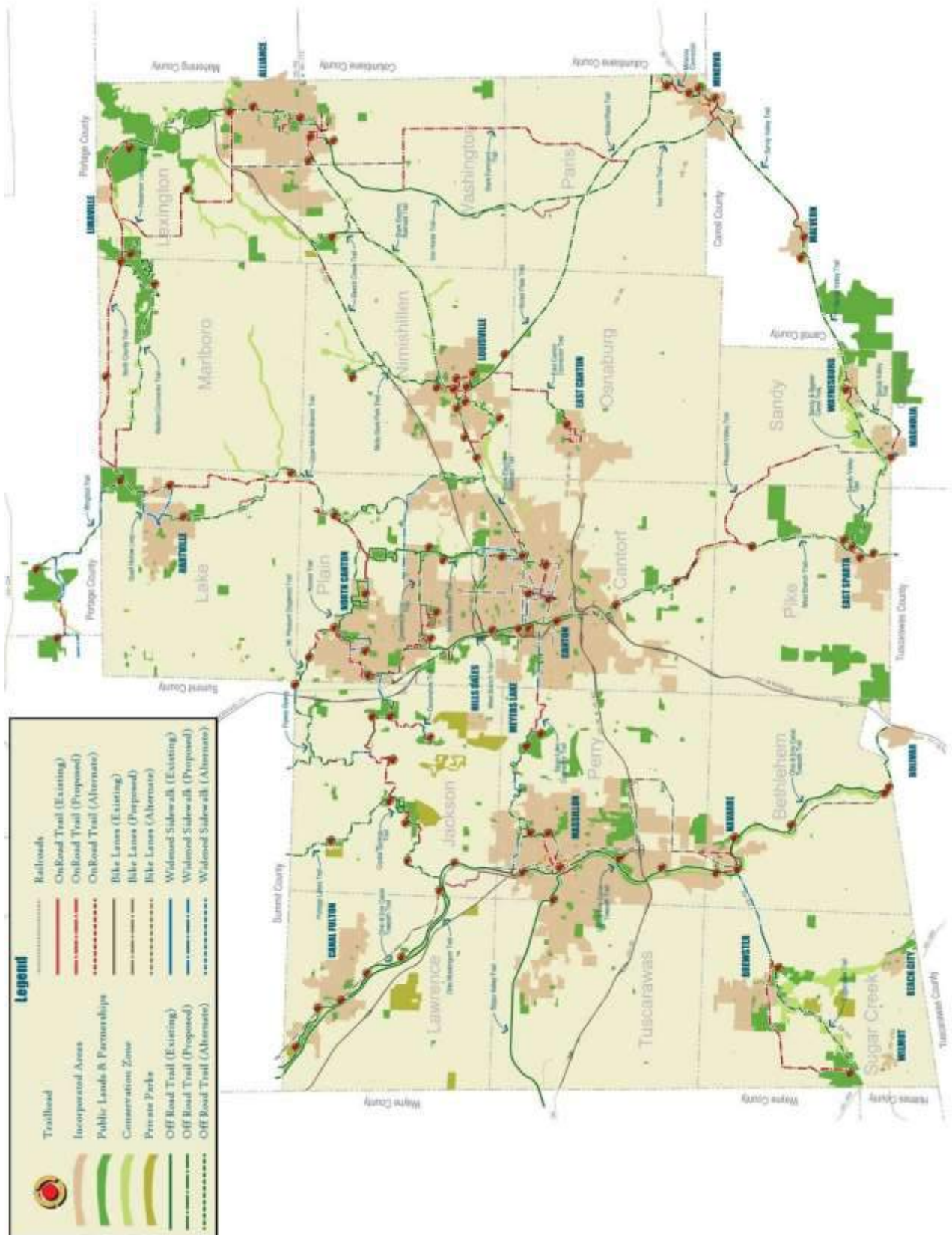
#### *Trails and Greenways*

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. In 2013, the Park District completed an update to the *Trail and Greenway Master Plan*.

The *Stark County Canal Corridor Master Plan* recommended developing a number of visitor centers, trailheads with restroom facilities, and other amenities such as nature and equestrian trails, and repairs and improvement to the canal and feeder system. The success in developing the *Stark County Canal Corridor Master Plan* and subsequent construction facilitated the development of the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan (TGMP)*. 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, the *TGMP* 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 consists of more than 120 miles of hiking and bicycling trails, of which almost 38 miles are also equestrian trails. The *TGMP* identifies a 300 mile network of trails, portions of which are fully developed and/or under construction. Trails include the Canal Towpath Trail, Middle Branch Trail, Hoover Trail, Sippo Valley Trail, Iron Horse Trail, Olde Muskingum Trail, Nickel Plate Trail, Stark Electric Railway Trail, Quail Hollow trails, Sandy Valley Trail, Sippo Lake trails, Walborn Reservoir trails, and the West Branch Trail. 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. 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.





Map 2: Stark County Trail & Greenway Master Plan



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 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 Mount Union University; 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. Some of these trail sections are either under construction; have had their rights-of-way purchased, donated or easements given; or are in public ownership. Other sections have yet to be obtained.

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 2040 Transportation Plan*. 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.

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

**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. This trail will connect to the Middle Branch Trail via a tunnel under Market Avenue; the construction of this tunnel is anticipated to be completed within the first quarter of 2019.

**Middle Branch Trail:** A 6.4 mile trail connecting Canton City to Plain Township, including destinations such as Schreiber Park, Reifsnnyder Park, Martindale Park, Gervasi Vineyard, Veterans Park in Plain Township, and GlenOak High School. There is also a BikeSmart hub at the Veterans Park trailhead (bike rental program discussed in later sections). Requests from the public survey and meetings indicated a desire for additional trail extensions along this trail.

Even though the Hoover and Middle Branch trail systems are newer developments, they both have had a fast-spreading popularity. The high popularity of these trails can be attributed to several factors, including the urban setting of the trails, the central location of them within the county, and the fact that they contain several destination points along them, such as the North Canton YMCA, several 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 (as discussed extensively in the previous 5-year plan). The Towpath Trail, another highly-used trail, is discussed in greater detail in following sections.



**Pioneer Trail:** This newly created 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 eventual plan is to connect this trail to both the Middle Branch and West Branch Trails.

**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 the Covered Bridge Park as it follows the West Branch of the Nimishillen Creek. A BikeSmart hub is located near the Canton Garden Center in Stadium Park. Requests received for this trail were to extend the trail even further. Plans include connections to the hall of Fame Village and the City of Canton Arts District.

**Sippo Valley Trail:** A 10 mile 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 between asphalt and limestone and runs along the Sippo Creek for a majority of the route. Equestrian riding is allowed on the berm of this trail. Public requests received for this trail include trail extensions and additional lighting.

**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. A major portion of this right-of-way has been secured to extend the trail to Navarre.



Olde Muskingum Trail,  
Canal Fulton

**Sandy Valley Trail and Waynesburg Park Loop Trail:** The Waynesburg loop trail is a short, limestone trail looping around 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.

**Mahoning Valley Trail:** A 4.46 mile 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. Construction is underway to construct the section of trail connecting the Mahoning Valley Trail through the City of Alliance to the existing Iron Horse Trail just south of the University of Mount Union campus.

**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 applied for funding to complete this section of trail. Requests from the public survey and meetings indicated a significant desire for trail connections to be completed.

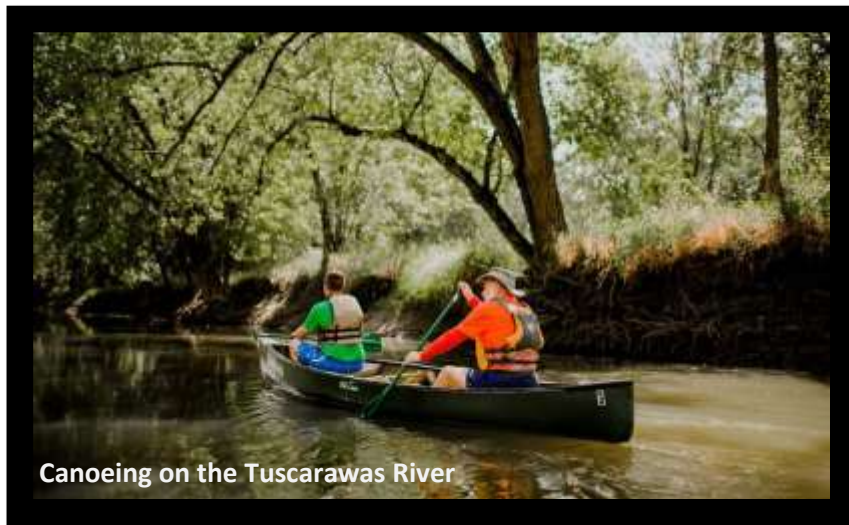
**Nickel Plate Trail:** A 1.08 mile trail made up of a mixture of limestone, on-road and asphalt portions. The northern portion of this trail runs south from Route 44 around Metzger Park in Louisville to Swallen Avenue, and includes an active wetland. The newly-opened southern 3-mile portion runs from 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.

In the eastern section of the County, there are still several unbuilt sections of the proposed trail network. Much of the Stark Electric Railway, Iron Horse and Nickel Plate Trails remain undeveloped. Once completed, these linked trails would eventually form an integrated network of trails in the eastern section of the County to provide access to an expanded list of parks and recreational opportunities, as well as to other destination points in that general area.

### *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. Stark Parks is actively pursuing the acquisition of lands that are necessary to complement the development of the Canal Lands.

### *Ohio & Erie Canalway National Heritage Area and Towpath Trail*



As a major recreational resource within the county, the Ohio & Erie Canalway corridor 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. The Management Plan portrays "journeys" as the primary means by which the public shall experience the corridor. A "journey" begins at a "gateway" center where the public learns the history of the area, and then experiences it as they walk, bike, drive, or ride along the corridor. Planned components of the journeys in the Management Plan include the Towpath Trail as mentioned above, portions of a watered canal available for boats/boating, a 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. The Stark County portion is part of the 110-mile Ohio & Erie Canalway National Heritage Area. The Towpath Trail 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 at Canal Lock 4. This trailhead, which 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," a wharf for the canal boat to dock, permanent restrooms (possibly in conjunction with the Canalway Center), playground equipment, and trail extensions to adjoining neighborhoods. Lock repairs would allow for canal lock demonstrations, and renovations to the brick house would afford the opportunity for additional programming to be offered out of it. It could also serve as a safety station for park rangers.

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, and trail paving in frequent wash-out areas 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.

### *Cook's Lagoon Park*

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, dredged in the summer of 2012, which hosts an annual fishing derby every summer. This park will eventually be a trailhead for the Stark Electric Railroad Trail. Currently, the park features a .25-mile trail suitable for school and public uses. Restrooms and a picnic shelter are planned when the trail connections are completed.



Cook's Lagoon Park 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 to avoid duplicating services and to jointly provide additional programming opportunities. The derby could be scheduled in cooperation with the city so that events at the adjoining city parks could occur as well. Any new trail development should also be coordinated with the city where possible to help ensure a well-designed and connected system.

### *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 newer pedestrian bridge over the reservoir, the Mahoning Valley Trail at Deer



Creek now extends 4.6 miles from Price Street south to the Gaskill Trailhead in Alliance. This park features an ADA accessible fishing pier, a primitive boat ramp, temporary sanitary facilities, paved parking and multiple picnic tables. 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.

Future improvements at Deer Creek include new parking areas, bank stabilization efforts, and either on-road signs or stenciled-on paint delineating the Mahoning Valley Trail route. Also planned are: an expanded and upgraded boat ramp, concession building and permanent restrooms, additional trail development, improved picnic areas, and a boat rental dock. The boat ramp upgrade and a new boat rental dock were identified by the general public and members of park staff as a high priority for this park. The Park District should consider ADA-friendly designs for these improvements. 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 may need to 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. Signage improvements are also recommended for this park.

**Walborn Reservoir** is located in Lexington and Marlboro Townships in Stark County. Its facilities consist of a marina and concession building, ADA-accessible fishing pier, 2-lane boat launch and docks, a picnic shelter, restroom facilities, as well as seven miles of trails with hiking and equestrian access. Recently, a wildlife observation area was added to watch nesting eagles and eaglets. In addition, a new color-coded trail sign system was implemented to indicate the type of trail (shared, equestrian, biking) to allow users to choose their route by color and stay on the indicated path. Current programming includes hiking, paddling programs, fishing, geocaching, and hunting. This park is the site of the Park District's popular annual "Summer Splash", which educates participants on water safety and activities available such as kayaking, canoeing, stand-up paddle boarding and power boating.



**Walborn Reservoir,  
Lexington Twp.**

Over the last several years, Stark Parks has used several Clean Ohio Fund grants to acquire over 200 acres around Walborn Reservoir to protect water quality, functioning floodplains, stream-side forests, viable wildlife habitats, and the area's agricultural heritage.

Much of the land is currently being maintained as a working farm and will remain so until the current lease runs out. Management of existing vegetation will contribute to preventing shoreline erosion as well as reducing turbidity of the water and enhancing water quality of the reservoir. A 15-acre parcel includes a house and several out-buildings. The house will be maintained as a rental property until such time as the Park District has the funds to convert it, possibly to an education/conference center.

Planned future facilities include additional trails and picnic shelters/areas. Recommendations for Walborn Reservoir include adding signage (both directional and interpretive), a canoe/kayak launch, as well as an ADA accessible dock. Recommendations for the Reeder Avenue area include an expanded parking area, picnic shelter, and a restroom facility for year round use (due to the ice fishermen during the winter). Other recommendations include adding a fireside/lecture area, expanding water-related outdoor programming, and studying the feasibility of allowing night fishing. The large amount of undisturbed land at Walborn may also provide an attractive location for additional mountain biking and/or advanced hiking opportunities as well.

### *Fichtner Park and Trail*

This 13-acre property, which was donated to Stark Parks by the family of the late David Fichtner, includes a wetland, fishing pond, wooded 0.4-mile hiking trail, barn, and home near Hartville. The site has been developed as a pond/wetland studies outdoor education center, and also hosts adventure and archery camps. Further development of the site to expand its use will be dependent upon the needs of the community and the feasibility of site repairs. A study should be conducted to analyze the long-term needs for the house and barn to see whether restoration efforts would further the mission of the Park District or whether the building should be removed. Sanitary facility upgrades are also needed at the site, which will need to be addressed should Stark Parks decide to utilize the property for additional activities or programs.

Requests have also been made for additional trails, a reserveable outdoor shelter/pavilion and improved parking. A fireside and birding area would be great additions for the park which would require minimal upgrading, but would provide excellent areas for outdoor programming on topics related to the site and/or surrounding area. The park is a great site for family fishing and would be well suited for self-guided tours around the pond as well as wetland trails. A portable restroom is needed in the near term with consideration for permanent restrooms in the future.

### *Devonshire Park*

Stark Parks manages this 75 acre park, located in Jackson Township. Devonshire Park serves as a headwater to Sippo Creek and features a small wetland, fishing pond and picnic tables, in addition to a 0.65-mile nature trail. At this time, this park primarily serves as a conservation area with no immediate plans for development.

### *Esmont Park and Trail*

This 15.5-acre property, donated to Stark Parks by the family of the late Frank S. Esmont, will 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, a small memorial garden and a picnic table. There are plans to connect the trail across the Mill Street Bridge once Canton Township completes that project. Esmont Park and Trail has been adopted by the South Stark Career Academy Small Animal Science and Care program at Canton South High School.

Currently no park programming is offered at this park; however, its close proximity to several well-developed residential neighborhoods creates an opportunity to reach out to a number of residents within a close distance. Being adjacent to the Nimishillen Creek, water-based programs such as fishing or even sustainability-focused programs covering topics such as water pollution control may be good options for this park. Also, while likely beyond the time frame for this five-year plan, once the Lower Middle Branch Trail is developed, the Nimishillen Creek access at this park may provide a great location for canoes/kayaks to access the water at this future trailhead. This site could also be considered for a “natural play” area where children can interact with natural elements and engage in unstructured play.

### *Fry Family Park*

The 348-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. There is also a main residence and



**Fry Family Park, Pike Twp.**

barn still located on the site. A Master Plan was created for the park in November 2011, which calls for the conversion of the residence into a welcome and nature education center (project plans approved in August 2018), and other features such as a winter sports center and 4-acre fishing/canoeing pond. 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.

Camping is an often-requested activity by park patrons, and due to the location and size of this park, it may make it a good location for this type of activity. Currently, camping is allowed as part of programs offered by the Education Department. Careful consideration would need to be given though as to whether this would be part of a permanent activity or not. Other requests from the public meetings and survey included improved ADA accessibility, trail extensions, and play areas for children at this site.

### *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. Stark Parks recently received a State Capital grant for \$1 million for the restoration of the Magnolia Flouring Mills. The funds will be utilized to complete extensive enhancements and upgrades to the building, including structural rehabilitation. Interpretive programs and guided tours will be offered at the mill once rehabilitation work is complete. The site will eventually serve as a trailhead for the Sandy Valley Loop Trail and the Pleasant Valley Trail.

As Stark Parks looks to the future, long-term goals for this property should be carefully decided. The creation of a master plan is recommended for this site as several features on the property provide opportunities to take this site in a number of different directions. Currently, there is no public access to the upper-story of the mill as the layout does not meet ADA requirements. The Park District should decide whether they want this floor to be viewable by patrons, and if so, then funding will need to be identified to purchase and install some type of lift system. There are also several other features on the property that have the potential for utilization by Stark Parks, including a pond, canal, barn and outbuildings. The Park District has an option to purchase the former residence, which would open up the opportunity for a possible museum/visitors' center at the site. Until the creation of a master plan can be completed, recommendations for this site include pond repairs, 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. The current building condition of the hospital is extremely poor. An asbestos remediation project was completed in 2017, but full brownfield remediation feasibility studies conducted at the site present an extremely cost-prohibitive outlook for renovations without significant funding partners coming forward. Planning is underway to determine long-term goals for the property including other projects for the park. Current programs offered at the park include night hikes, geocaching, and historical site tours. The public has expressed interest in projects such as preserving portions of the building for various purposes/events, creating additional trails for longer hikes at the park, connecting the park to the county-wide trail system, and installing a shelter and restroom facilities. In the short-term, Stark Parks should increase signage, security cameras and/or fencing to deter crime and vandalism. In the long term, Stark Parks should explore partnership and/or grant opportunities that would help preserve the structure.

### *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. Other facilities include two covered picnic shelters, horseshoe courts, a sand volleyball court, as well as a wildlife observation area.

A number of trees and other special plantings, including a wildflower/butterfly area, have been undertaken. Park District programs currently held at the park include 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.



Petros Lake Park, Perry Twp.

Recommendations from the previous five-year plan included the need for additional parking and studying the feasibility of an amphitheater or stage at this park. Driveway repairs and redesign efforts were completed in 2017, adding additional parking at the reconfigured park



entrance as well as expanded parking along Perry Drive. These additions help alleviate congestion generated from associated events, such as the Canton Symphony concerts hosted at the earthen amphitheater. Since the previous plan, additional benches were also added, as was a new kiosk with an updated park map. Recommendations received from the online public survey and meetings included the need for increased general maintenance at this site and a better stocked pond.

### *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 house. There is a visitor



Quail Hollow Park, Hartville

center located within the home, which is also used 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 volley ball court, primitive camping sites, a gift shop, and approximately 13.5 miles of biking, equestrian, and hiking trails. Quail Hollow also offers winter recreation through cross-country skiing rentals, ice skating, and sledding. In addition, the Carriage House Nature Center offers

educational activities. Stark Parks currently has a thirty-year management agreement with the State for Quail Hollow, 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. Some of the future multi-phase projects identified in the plan include additional wayfinding signage, building renovations, pond restoration, paving and parking improvements, trail construction and other site improvements. A variety of public comments were received for this site, in addition to those projects already identified above, including the need for additional mountain bike trails, improved ADA accessibility, trail maintenance, increased camping locations, additional programs for the elderly or disabled, and restroom facilities. Since the Master Plan was completed, the drive entrance has been paved, signage was 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 maintains broad opportunities for the future expansion of Stark Parks.



## *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. Eventually Stark Parks would like to create a loop trail around the entire 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, clubhouse, marina, fishing piers, trails and picnic shelters. The marina includes an air-conditioned and heated building with restrooms, dining space, boat rentals, bait and tackle sales, snack and beverage sales, and fishing and hunting license sales. The clubhouse is an air-conditioned and heated room with a 55-person capacity that includes restrooms and kitchen facilities. 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) and a boat ramp. As the oldest park in the system, this side of the park is showing signs of wear. Accessibility is a challenge with the steep slopes down to the lake and marina, and the sea walls are collapsing in some areas. The sizing and location of the administrative offices and rentable areas should be reviewed with recommendations for improvement.

**Sippo Lake West** can be accessed from Genoa Avenue and includes the Public Safety and Operations compound, trails, a picnic area, and the Joseph J. and Helen M. Sommer Wildlife Conservation Center. Opened in June 2018, the Sommer Wildlife Conservation Center is a 9,400 square foot, \$3 million facility dedicated to the conservation and rehabilitation of native wildlife and their habitat through research, education, 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. In its previous facility, the center treated nearly 2,000 animals per year with a 55% 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.



**Sippo Lake North** is accessed from 12th Street and includes the Exploration Gateway, outdoor picnic shelters, and hiking and biking trails around the lake. 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, a gift shop, banquet/meetings rooms, science classroom, and indoor bird-viewing windows. 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. Visitors can also check out bicycles through the BikeSmart self-service hub located at Sippo Lake North.

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 *the Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan* connections to Sippo Lake, 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, re-stocking the pond, 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, including this section so that the pontoon boat can 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.

### *Whitacre Greer Park*

Whitacre Greer Park, located between Waynesburg and Magnolia, encompasses a 2,000-acre tract of land with six miles of trails reserved exclusively for equestrians. The Park District currently leases the property, including a railway line spanning through the park, from the Whitacre Greer Brick Paving Company. At this time the park is reserved for equestrian users and fishing derbies. Future recommendations for this site include either extending the

easement coverage area or purchasing lands to construct connector trails throughout the park. Additional equestrian trails have been requested, and the large amount of acreage at this site in addition to the equestrian facilities already located here make this park an ideal setting for that type of expansion. Another consideration for this property is overnight equestrian campgrounds, and if the Park District is successful in obtaining additional lands, separate trails for hikers and bicyclists may also be appropriate for this location in the future.



### *Additional Early-Stage Parks*

**Bingham Property:** The Bingham property, located in Marlboro Township, currently consists of an estimated 142 acres of farming area. This property is currently under contract with a hay farmer through 2020. Future considerations for the property include potential trails and possibly wetland restoration efforts for environmental and educational purposes.

**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 historic 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.

**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 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 recently vacated the airplane hangar, also located on the property. 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 funding 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.

## Recommendations by Department

As many of the recommendations are department-specific, the following section breaks out certain recommendations by department. This not only will better allow those individual departments to better map out a course of action, but it will also assist them in evaluating the status of each recommendation over the next five years. The majority of the following recommendations are based on public comments and survey results received throughout this entire planning process.

### *Administration Department*

The Administration Department serves to develop and guide the implementation of the Park District's Strategic Plan. This department encompasses the following areas of responsibility: marketing, grant writing and event coordination, and information technology (IT). Finance and Human Resources Management departments, including volunteer coordination, are housed under the Administration umbrella. Broad in scope, this umbrella of departments is responsible for a wide variety of functions, many of which overlap with other departments.

When asked where funding dollars should be used over the next five years, the top recommendations chosen by the public for this department were: consider more outdoor adventure recreation opportunities; improve mapping and signage of trails and facilities along trails; continue to explore partnerships with other communities/organizations; and continue to work with developers of new construction sites to install trails. Of these, respondents overwhelmingly suggested that continuing to work with developers of new construction sites to install trails, and considering more outdoor adventure recreation opportunities should be the top priorities.

In terms of working with other communities and organizations, Stark Parks is currently working with Jackson Township and the Tam O' Shanter golf course owners to purchase 200+ acres of land for park purposes. They are also currently working with communities such as Canal Fulton, Alliance and Louisville to explore park and trail opportunities in those areas. Stark Parks is also working with the developers of the former Edgewood Golf Course to install trails throughout that development. Comparable collaborations can be seen in the Lexington Farms allotment as well. Similarly, in 2015, the nation's first free bike sharing program was established, BikeSmart. Stark Parks has been a local participant in this program, partnering with the Stark County District Library, SARTA (local transit authority) and Canton City Parks and Recreation Department. Participants in the BikeSmart program need a smart phone or phone capable of texting to check out and return bikes, which are located at many locations throughout urban and suburban areas of Stark County. There are three BikeSmart hubs along biking and hiking trails, including the Exploration Gateway at Sippo Lake. As funding allows, continued partnerships such as these should continue to be explored.



As noted above, this umbrella of departments also oversees public relations efforts and IT. Current public awareness efforts include brochures, the newsletter, radio and newspaper advertising, social media, outreach booths, the Stark Parks website, special events, FeLeap the mascot, the activities of *Friends of Stark Parks*, and volunteers. The quarterly Stark Parks newsletter serves as an important public relations tool by informing the public of Park District events and activities, and encouraging them to participate. In 2017, 86,000

households received the newsletter, which has also helped to draw additional online support. The District's website ([www.starkparks.com](http://www.starkparks.com)) is another important public engagement tool as it provides information about Stark Parks and encourages participation in Stark Parks events. Recognizing the importance of web-based communication tools, the Park District's website has been evolving into a "web system" for managing public comments, documents, volunteer services, facility reservations, and purchases. Recent updates to the Park District's website have included improved maps, the ability to search for facilities by activity or amenity, ADA upgrades, and a user interface that better supports Stark Parks' overall brand; all of these were part of the strategies listed in the previous five-year plan.

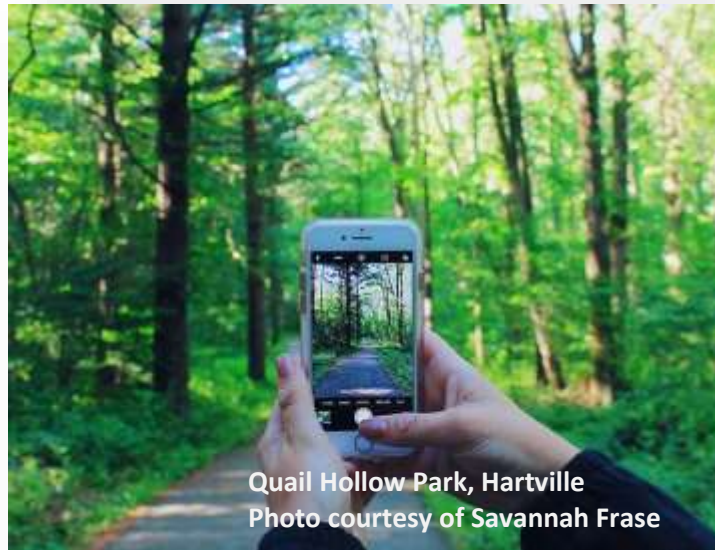
As communication methods and societal trends have become increasingly digital over the past several years, in addition to updating its website, Stark Parks has also increased its presence on various social media channels including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, among others. These communication methods have helped promote Stark Parks as a great destination for outdoor recreation, and have been effective in creating and sustaining the momentum of public attention across all age groups.

Since the previous plan, social media has become a primary platform for information gathering and sharing. The virtual interaction among people and networks allows individuals to view, discuss and share information via mobile and web-based technologies. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube are extremely popular online social networking devices that Stark Parks utilizes heavily to connect with their audience. In 2017, almost 20,000 individuals were reached across these various mediums.

The 2018 SCORP noted that 77% of Americans over 18 have smartphones, up from 55% in 2014. Utilizing these devices can impact how the public receives information and plans for outings, as well as establishing what their expectations are in terms of Wi-Fi accessibility. The American Recreation Coalition's Outdoor Recreation Outlook for 2018 noted a trend towards park patrons increasingly utilizing mobile applications for a variety of park-related matters, such



as booking reservations, planning and tracking hiking mileage, making rental purchases and sharing photos. While the Park District's website has become more of a web-based system, a mobile application that goes beyond the basic provision of park and trail information may be another mechanism to consider. Ideally, this application would include features such as: rental equipment and reservation booking; route planning and GPS tracking; mileage logging; trail alerts and closures; calorie-counting; photo sharing; and real-time distance to nearby points of interest such as restrooms and water fountains. As web-based services continue to expand and advance, the Park District should continue taking steps to ensure that they are up-to-date with new technology as this method of communication is rapidly growing in popularity across all age groups. The continued analysis and implementation of these growing strategies is vital to meeting the needs of the Park District as it continues to expand.



Quail Hollow Park, Hartville  
Photo courtesy of Savannah Frase

### *Education Department*

The Education Department focuses on developing, coordinating, and presenting interpretive and educational programming and events in the areas of nature, history, and recreation throughout various locations. This department encompasses the following area of responsibility: Enterprises, which manages the sales and services of the retail portion of Stark Parks.

When asked where funding dollars should be used over the next five years, the top recommendations chosen by the public for this department were: enhance existing programming; create new programs; increase frequency of programs; undertake more recreational/adventure programming; and increase the types of winter activities offered. Of these, respondents suggested that enhancing existing programming and increasing the frequency of popular programs should be the top priorities. The survey also noted that a large majority of the respondents would support paying fees for some types of programming and events; these fees would help to meet the above-identified requests, and would overall contribute to a more sustainable future financially.



In 2017, Stark Parks held 1,057 programs and special events, which garnered 41,927 total participants. In an effort to meet the growing needs of the general public, the Park District has greatly expanded the number and types of public programs offered, including the Sensational Senior series, Fit Fridays', High Mileage Hikes, Running Stark, Log Rolling and the Hike-A-Hundred club. In addition to these popular activities and other recreation-based programs available, Stark Parks offers a variety of programs focused on topics pertaining to the natural environment and cultural heritage.

In addition to an increased frequency in popular programs, the online survey and public meeting results found that there was a significant desire for more advanced-level programming, adult fitness/wellness programs, and science-based programs. The survey results also showed that there appears to be a high interest in establishing more adventure-type programming, such as rock-climbing or ziplining. While taking on the sole responsibility of these facilities may be beyond the mission of Stark Parks, partnering with other organizations or entities to help fill any gaps in services may be worth consideration, especially as these activities are becoming increasingly popular to the younger generations, and they should require minimally-invasive alterations to the land.



Requests have also been made by park users for more playgrounds to accommodate patrons with young children. Even though playgrounds are not a passive recreation activity, they would require minimal oversight and could even be designed to incorporate some of the unique features of the land, such as a “natural” play area. New and/or additional classes geared towards special needs groups was another need mentioned in the public comments as well as in the previous plan.

Stark Parks hosts special events throughout the year, which attract large audiences and help foster the Park District’s interaction with the general public. Some of these events include Fall Fest, Summer Splash, and various retreats and fishing derbies. One of the goals of Stark Parks is to maximize outreach to underserved areas of the County. By expanding programming opportunities into new park and trail areas, Stark Parks would be able to amplify its exposure in previously underserved areas and encourage participation from residents of those neighborhoods.

As Stark Parks looks forward, they should continue to expand the variety, frequency, and accessibility of programs and events offered. In order to do so, the Park District may need to analyze existing staffing levels to determine if additional staff may be needed to meet these requests.

## *Operations Department*

The Operations Department encompasses park and trail maintenance, construction, and facility and fleet management.

When asked where funding dollars should be used over the next five years, the top recommendations chosen by the public for this department were: increase the number of water fountains and restrooms; expand signage; pave trails/sections that either wash out frequently, are too steep, or are high-volume; enhance existing park and trail facilities; and continue expanding outdoor recreation/natural resource amenities into more rural areas of the County. Of these, respondents suggested that paving trails/sections where needed should be the top priority, followed by increasing the number of water fountains and restrooms. More on these facilities and general trail maintenance is provided in the following General Recommendations section.

Other recommendations noted throughout the public involvement process included installing additional access points on existing waterways, creating usable waterway trails, and increasing the types of winter activities offered. Mountain bike trail network enhancements and additional dog parks were also frequently mentioned. According to the survey results, of the 222 responses, 145 (65%) said that they would like to see dog parks offered. While dog parks may be beyond the scope of the Park District, partnerships with other organizations or entities to help fill “service gaps” with these facilities may be an appropriate place to explore initially. In terms of mountain biking, respondents would like to see more trails, longer trails, and trails with rougher terrains.

## *Natural Resources Department*

The Natural Resources Department designs, executes, and maintains all aspects of the Park District’s land and natural resources management plans. This department also oversees the Wildlife Conservation Center, which is dedicated to the rehabilitation and conservation of local wildlife.



Rufous, a screech owl at Wildlife Conservation Center, Perry Twp.

When asked where funding dollars should be used over the next five years, the top recommendations chosen by the public for this department were: more habitat restoration/regeneration at some sites; additional wilderness areas for natural habitat preservation, wildlife protection/viewing, hunting, and advanced hiking; and partnering with higher-education institutions to collaborate on environmental studies and issues. Of these, respondents suggested that adding wilderness

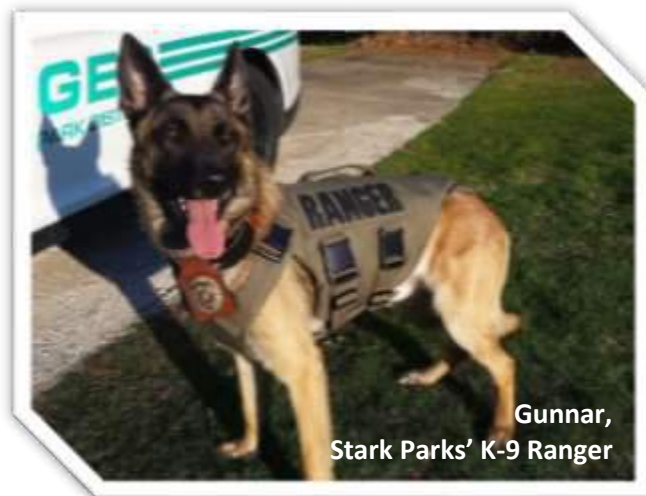
areas for natural habitat preservation, wildlife protection/viewing, hunting and advanced hiking be the top priority. Other suggestions for this department included exploring natural resource-based programming opportunities and improving fishing capabilities at existing locations.

Natural Resources is a newer department for Stark Parks, established based on the recognized need for more conservation efforts. As a newer department, there is less public awareness of the needs associated with it, which also explains why there are fewer recommendations for it. Nevertheless, with continued marketing and public engagement, it is expected that additional recommendations will be identified in the next five years and beyond.

### *Public Safety Department*

The Public Safety Department at the Park District is responsible for keeping the parks safe and secure through the patrols of the Stark County Park Rangers. This department also focuses on educating the public so that they can more safely enjoy the parks, and they are present at all of the Park District's special events.

In 2017, 63 arrests were made, a 12.5% decrease from 2016; however, verbal and written warnings both experienced increases, totaling 667 verbal warnings and 215 written warnings. According to the online public survey, the majority of respondents did not experience any of the listed safety/security concerns at any of the Park District's facilities. Of those that did experience some concerns, a lack of lighting and lack of park security were the top two concerns chosen (16.5% each). Therefore, it is not wholly surprising that when asked where funding dollars should be used over the next five years, the top recommendations chosen by the public for this department were: increase lighting (especially in parking lots); increase security features; and increase patrol/safety presence at parks and trails. Of these, respondents suggested that increasing lighting (in parking lots especially) should be the top priority, followed by increasing security features (ex: cameras).



Gunnar,  
Stark Parks' K-9 Ranger

Along with patrolling and education, the Park Rangers have also used innovative technology to help keep the parks safe. Security cameras have been installed in and outside of facilities in areas that could attract criminal activity. In 2013, the Rangers implemented "body cam" systems which allow the Rangers to wear a shoulder-mounted camera for greater accountability. In 2014, the Park District added their first K-9 Ranger, Gunnar, to the patrol. In addition to detections and searches, Gunnar also appears at many community events. Continued evaluation of these tools,

as well as the exploration of potential locations for additional lighting should be a goal of the Public Safety Department over the next five years.

With additional land being acquired by the Park District in all parts of the County, the Ranger staff may also consider decentralizing and implementing additional bases for starting their shifts to reduce mileage on vehicles and to improve response times.

## General Recommendations for Parks and Trails

In addition to the park- and trail- specific recommendations, and the department-specific recommendations described above, 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, 43.8% of respondents said that better trail connectivity was the most pressing need for outdoor recreation opportunities in Stark County. This need was also noted numerous times during the public meetings. In 2012, Stark Parks had an inventory of 80 miles of trails; in 2018, inventory figures were at 120 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. Furthermore, 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.

**Trail Maintenance and Facilities:** General park and trail maintenance, along with additional restrooms and water fountains, were also identified as top pressing needs for Stark Parks. According to the online public survey, 41.7% of the respondents said that restrooms and water fountains are one of the most pressing needs for outdoor recreation opportunities, followed by better trail maintenance at 23.1%. 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 is 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, trash/recycling bins, and dog-clean up stations were also requested, all of which contribute to a patron's overall experience. Focusing on creating quality spaces, which the above-mentioned amenities contribute to, was a top recommendation from the previous plan, and that recommendation continues to carry forward with this plan.

**Increase General Awareness:** One of the common themes discovered throughout the public comment process in creating this plan was that there appears to be a lack of general understanding on which facilities belong to Stark Parks versus other jurisdictions. While Stark Parks has undertaken substantial support-building activities to increase this understanding, on-going attempts appear to still be needed. With the Park District's recent adoption of a uniform signage standard, as signs are upgraded this should increasingly help. General understanding about park rules is also something that the Park District has recently promoted. 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. 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 upgrades to the website, and color-blind safe colors are now being used in publications and kiosks. An ADA Committee was established to oversee these upgrades.

While attempts have been made at improving accessibility at park facilities, these needs are on-going, which is why this recommendation continues to carry forward in this plan. Additional methods to consider 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 has recently partnered with SARTA on the bike share program and they are also working together to have bike racks installed on their buses, a program being considered for expansion. 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 where able.

**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. In 2012, the coalition completed the Stark County Community Health Improvement Plan, which identified priority areas for public health improvement, based on the findings of the Community Findings Needs Assessment. One of the priority areas identified was obesity and healthy lifestyle choices, an area where Stark Parks can be very beneficial.

As part of one of its core goals to promote community wellness, Stark Parks is considering making some of its parks “smoke-free.” Many communities throughout the country are currently pursuing this route for a variety of different reasons in addition to promoting healthy lifestyles, including: secondhand smoke is harmful; cigarette litter is dangerous; other public facilities such as schools are already tobacco-free; and litter and associated maintenance costs would be reduced. According to the online public survey, 52.1% said that smoking should be banned at all park facilities, and 36.6% said it should be restricted to specific, marked areas. As half of the respondents were not in favor of banning it completely, Stark Parks may want to first start with restricting smoking to certain areas to gauge public support for this type of endeavor. It should also be noted that enforcement of a tobacco-free policy may be somewhat difficult for such an expansive list of properties.

As environmental stewards, another goal of Stark Parks is to continually improve and promote environmental, or “green,” practices both internally and as a district. “Green” initiatives include utilizing renewable energy and eco-friendly technology and products where possible, installing recycling stations along trails and at park facilities, and offering sustainability-based programs on topics such as composting/gardening, rain garden installation, and sustainable farming.



## 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, prepared in 2017, identified the continued loss of natural areas, including prime agricultural lands, to be a very pressing issue. The plan projects that by 2040, without conservation measures in place, vacant lands (not including areas used for agricultural activities) will decline by almost 2,300 acres locally as strip mines are reclaimed and new allotments are developed. Within Stark County there are large acreages where minimal development should be allowed for reasons of public health and safety. These areas include floodplains, wetlands, flood control dam easement areas, water well fields and aquifer recharge areas, mined/reclaimed areas and landfills. Some of these areas, such as mined/reclaimed lands, have poor value due to disturbed soils and destroyed aquifers. Others, such as floodplains, flood easement areas, wetlands, and well fields, can support limited activities such as farming, passive recreation, hunting and fishing.

Many of these areas are already in public ownership or have easements that greatly restrict development. Others should be set aside and preserved through public acquisition or clearly demarcated to prevent their development. Partnerships with organizations such as The Wilderness Center, Ducks Unlimited, and nature and land trusts are encouraged in order to identify these areas and coordinate funding for their preservation and enhancement. In addition to working with local land trusts and nature conservation groups, Stark Parks should coordinate with local jurisdictions to help facilitate these efforts. Many communities already have critical areas within their boundaries identified, which could be incorporated into a county-wide sensitive habitat inventory that Stark Parks could utilize as part of a land acquisition plan. Continuing to acquire flood-prone properties and converting them back to their natural floodplain is something that the Park District has recently been doing, and ideally, will continue to do.

Conservation easements are another method of protecting land from intrusive changes that detract from parks. These legal agreements between landowners and either land trusts or government agencies set certain limits on the use of the land to protect it, while still affording the property owner some use of their property and the ability to sell or transfer it with the restrictions still in place.

Donations to Stark Parks point to another method of obtaining and protecting land. Donations can include trail right-of-ways and land from interested families and businesses. Stark Parks has created a Legacy Fund as a vehicle to channel these donations which can lessen

the hesitancy of possible donors, and helps promote the benefits of donations to the Park District for estate planning, bequests, and other donations.

While there is concern regarding the continued loss of open space throughout Stark County, it is encouraging to see the amount of progress that has been made over the last five years to preserve it. Partnerships with the Wilderness Center and others have been effective in preserving large amounts of open space. Community and county-wide support has grown as these preservation efforts and work on the *Trail and Greenway Master Plan* has been implemented. Because environmental awareness has grown among the general public, many communities have taken more active roles in also protecting natural areas. The importance of Stark Parks' land preservation work in Stark County cannot be over-emphasized.

### *Other Acquisition Efforts*

In addition to conservation measures for critical lands and prime open space areas for general conservation purposes, Stark Parks should also consider acquiring lands that are adjacent to existing parks and trails. This not only ensures the protection of those parks and trails from incompatible land uses, but it also opens up the possibility to expand those facilities. Some of these parks and trails include Sippo Lake, Petros, and Deer Creek and Walborn Reservoirs, as well as the Towpath Trail and other popular trails.



There are a variety of factors to consider when determining whether to acquire land in general. These include: the development potential of the area; what types of recreational facilities are already available nearby; would the acquisition provide a buffer for existing parks and trails; does the area include any special features, such as waterways, unique landscapes or viewsheds; availability of partnerships/collaboration with the affected community; landowner interest; etc.

The purchase of land requires significant resources, therefore Stark Parks should continue to partner with agencies such as land trusts to assist in facilitating larger land acquisition projects. Park District-owned land that is currently under-utilized or too small to provide meaningful results could potentially be traded or sold in exchange for more purposeful lands, especially those adjacent to existing parks. Examples of this type of land acquisition measure can be found in neighboring counties.

The previous five-year plans have also discussed the possibility of acquiring parks operated by other entities. While this recommendation would be based on those entities wanting to divest themselves of these resources, with the loss of local funding, some may now be willing to explore this opportunity. Another possibility is developing partnerships with other entities to manage their facilities. Stark Parks is presently doing this at Quail Hollow Park. Quail Hollow, which operated as a state park since 1975, has been operating under the management of Stark Parks since 2016 via a thirty-year management agreement with the State. Opportunities for acquiring private sportsmen's clubs and other similar facilities if they were planning to dissolve would also be realistic possibilities. One example of this is Stark Parks' recent 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:

**Countywide Comprehensive Park Plan:** Stark Parks, in discussing future plans for parks, has emphasized that the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan* is the framework upon which future county parks will be located and developed. However, while the *Stark County Trail and Greenway Master Plan* can provide this framework, it does not provide sufficient detail for prioritizing or analyzing specific needs for the individual communities, nor detail local plans in order to prioritize connections between parks, or prioritize construction of the different trails themselves. For that reason a Countywide Comprehensive Park Plan, done in partnership with other interested local communities, would be beneficial. A comprehensive plan would include data regarding existing and proposed park facilities throughout all Stark County communities, many of which already have local plans identifying and prioritizing future growth opportunities and improvement areas for their park systems (see information below). The comprehensive plan should contain individual park maps showcasing the unique features of each park, and it could also include a sensitive habitat areas inventory, useful for identifying target areas for future acquisition/conservation consideration. Its scope for development would extend ten, fifteen, or twenty years and would allow for the orderly development of all types of parks and trails, and therefore also helping to: limit duplicative efforts, obtain buy-in from all involved parties, and share costs and resources.

**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, Quail Hollow Park and Molly Stark Park. These individual plans are very detail-oriented and provide specific project recommendations at those parks. These are usually high-profile parks that require careful planning beyond the scope of the five-year plan. Stark Parks should continue to review the existing plans to ensure their current validity.

**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 2040 Transportation Plan. 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. Examples include the City of Canton's Bike and Trail Plan, North Canton's Master 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, 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

Proposed projects listed in Figure 16 were provided by Stark Parks and are listed in order of priority. Most of the projects involve either trail creation or addressing infrastructure needs at existing parks/trails.

**Figure 16: Stark Parks Prioritized Projects for 2019-2023**

	Capital Projects Priority	New Annual Funding	Total
1	Seven (7) Miles of Trail/Year (R-O-W, etc.)	\$1.4 million/year	\$7,000,000
2	Interpretive/Directional/Entrance Signage	\$50,000/year	\$250,000
3	New Picnic Shelters/Restrooms	\$140,000/year	\$700,000
4	Picnic Tables/Benches/Lighting	\$20,000/year	\$100,000
5	Boat Ramps/Docks/Marinas	\$50,000/year	\$250,000
6	New Parking Areas	\$100,000/year	\$500,000
7	Fry Park Development	\$100,000/year	\$500,000
8	Tam O' Shanter Development	\$250,000/year	\$1,250,000
	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$10,550,000</b>

In summary, the completion of projects prioritized by Stark Parks would complement the existing system by providing needed infrastructure and assisting in the provision of basic services. It would also further expand the trail system to create additional connections and routes for users.

Whether the goal is to preserve open space, reduce flooding by protecting stream corridors, provide wildlife rehabilitation and education programs, or to create a tranquil place for contemplation, Stark Parks can be the means to accomplish this throughout Stark County.

One of the most important facets of the plan is that it should be a working document that changes as new programs are added, feedback is analyzed, and resources are added. Each change in the plan will influence other sections such as creating new possibilities in recruiting volunteers or expanding interpretive opportunities. As Stark Parks continues to grow and change, this plan will help guide them in developing in such a manner that maximizes public use and support while also producing a quality park system that can be sustained over time.

## Appendix: Mission Statements

Mission/Vision Statements of Various Park Districts	
Butler	“...to provide a superior park system that maximizes the community’s quality of life through conservation, education and recreation.”
Clermont	“...to acquire, plan, develop, program, and maintain park property in the county for residents and nonresidents alike. To secure the preservation of open space and places of scenic or historic value.”
Greene	“...to conserve and promote Greene County's natural and cultural treasures as an exceptional destination for outdoor experiences while enhancing the quality of life for citizens and visitors.”
Lake	“...to conserve and preserve the natural resources of Lake County while providing a variety of safe, affordable and enjoyable educational and recreational programs and activities that enhance the quality of life in Lake County now and for the generations to follow.”
Lorain	"The Lorain County Metropolitan Park District was established for the responsible use, enjoyment, and accessibility of every citizen of Lorain County. The Park District acquires land to promote and demonstrate the wise use of our natural resources. The Park District strives to preserve and create a diversity of ecosystems while providing educational and recreational opportunities which are compatible with and promote conservation of these resources."
Medina	“...to enhance the quality of all life through education, conservation and the protection of natural resources.”
Mill Creek	“...to provide park, recreational, educational, and open space facilities of regional significance.”
Portage	“...to conserve Portage County's natural heritage and provide opportunities for its appreciation and enjoyment.”
Stark	“To preserve, manage, and connect natural areas to serve the community through recreation, conservation and education.”
Summit	“...to conserve, sustainably manage and value natural resources for the health and enjoyment of our community, and inspire people to connect with nature through clean and safe parks.”
Toledo	“...to conserve the region’s natural resources by creating, developing, improving, protecting, and promoting clean, safe, and natural parks and open spaces for the benefit, enjoyment, education, and general welfare of the public.”

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# Report Preparation

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## ***Stark County Park District***

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*Administration and Project Management.....Sarah Buell*  
*Education.....David Pildner*  
*Natural Resources.....Talula Koch*  
*Public Safety.....Daniel George*  
*Finance.....Barb Wells*  
*Human Resources.....Danijela McGuinness*  
*Operations.....Richard Summers*