November
2011

The Fry Family Park

Stark County Park District

Master Plan Report

STARK PARKS
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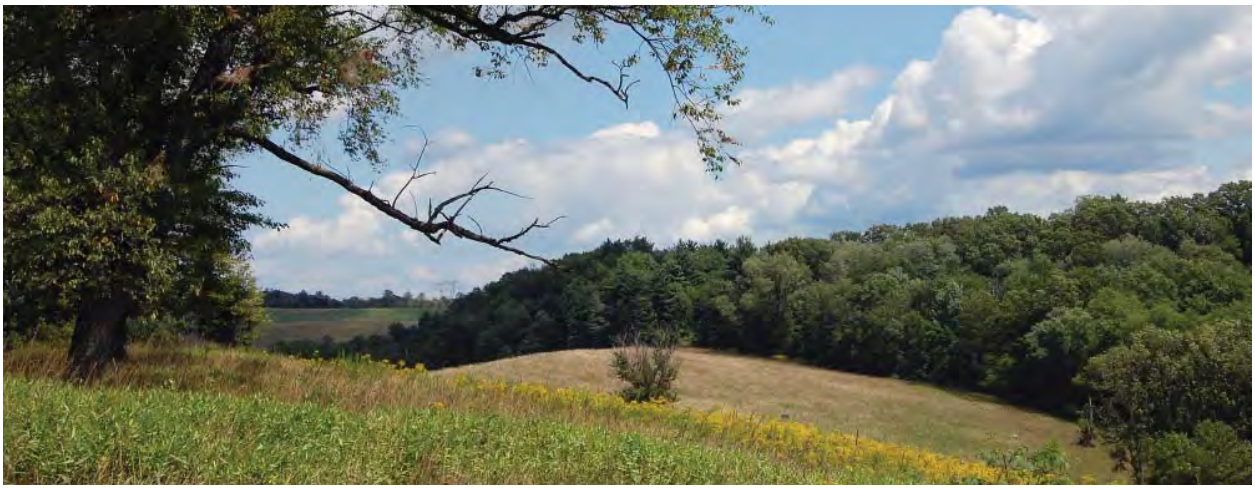


The 322.52-acre Fry Farm near the intersections of State Route 800 (Cleveland Avenue, SE) with Westbrook and Farber Streets has been a fixture in Pike Township since the mid-twentieth century. It's located about 8 miles southeast of Canton in Stark County along the Middle Branch of Nimishillen Creek and the nearby Village of East Sparta. The farm is really an assemblage of parcels that partially recreates the original Fry farmstead of the late nineteenth century. Comprised of woodlands and peaceful, rolling hills with spectacular views across the southern Stark County rural landscape, the farm was operated during most of its existence as a cattle and horse farm. Its owner Harold Fry, whose late son Richard was Stark Parks' first director, tended the farm throughout the last half-century and recently conveyed the property to the Stark County Park District. He retains a life estate on the property. The Park District with the help of the Trust for Public Land acquired a Clean Ohio Conservation Fund grant and a Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grant to make this purchase possible.

In an effort to envision the future of The Fry Family Park, Stark Parks engaged Environmental Design Group in late 2010 to develop a long-term master plan for the property, its buildings and connections to the Park District's other facilities in the southeast corner of the County. Stark Parks has had a long-standing interest in the property, realizing the property's unique environment that complements its other park holdings and extensive network of trails. The Park District views The Fry Family Park as a restorative park environment for visitors, one of seclusion and retreat that takes advantage of the farm's natural character. Given its location and its natural attributes, the vision of a "retreat to nature" perfectly captures its potential.

Next steps include completing the purchase of the Fry Farm, carrying out the terms of Mr. Fry's life estate, management plans for restoration and enhancement of natural systems, and initial development of trails and visitor access parking. More detailed information about implementation can be found in the **Implementation & Next Steps** section of this report.

Inventory


Front of Residence as viewed from Entry Drive

Existing Facilities

The farm features a main residence and a barn, both built in the 1960's. The residence is a sprawling, low profile, single-story frame structure with wood and stone siding and a basement exposed to grade at the back of the structure. The interior of the house captures views of the farm from every room with a continuous deck and deep canopy wrapping the building and a patio below at the lower level. It is located at the end of one of the property's ridgelines, overlooking a 4-acre farm pond. The main entry to the house is located at the first floor level, at the end of a 2,700 foot long farm drive off Farber Road. Farber Road parallels a portion of the southern property line. A branch drive off the main drive leads to the barn, which served the property as stalls for Mr. Fry's horses and for farm maintenance equipment. A large attached garage connects with the house at the main level and a residential-sized swimming pool and mechanical shed is located off the patio at the lower level.

The barn is of pole building construction with steel trusses forming a clear span of the interior and wood siding and large sliding doors forming the exterior envelope. The stalls create a loft space above them in the building's interior and are located along one wall of the structure. Both buildings are substantial and in good repair.

The existing farm pond was built about the same time as the structures, as were a series of unimproved farm drives. The drives lead to the various fields on the property, the pond, the woodlands and gas and oil well facilities along the property's eastern and northern property lines. The pond is well stocked with warm water fish species and is controlled by a small earthen dam. A smaller pond is located in the eastern portion of the property, apparently when that portion of the site was strip mined and reclaimed for its coal reserves. Except for the uniformity of landforms in this area of the site, it is difficult to tell today that mining took place. The drive that leads to this side of the property from Farber Street, also serves an adjacent farm residence and a neighboring gun club firing range.

The site is also accessed from Westbrook Street on the north at two locations. The westerly approach at the intersection of

North End of Residence looking South

South End of Residence looking North

Eastern Corner of Barn Showing Horse Stables

Northern Corner of Barn

Barn as seen from Entry Drive

Westbrook with Cleveland Avenue, SE has the site's best access point to East Sparta Village. It also is the location of a former skating pond and spring on the property used by the local residents. The second access point, at about the mid-point of the property's northern boundary along Westbrook Street, serves two gas and oil well facilities along a farm drive.

At some point in the mid-twentieth century Cleveland Avenue, SE was realigned and straightened along the property's western boundary. That straightening cut-off a portion of the Middle Branch Nimishillen Creek and its floodplain, leaving an ox-bow like depression on the property that remains today as a linear shaped shallow pond. That area is discussed further under the Natural Features section of this report.

Machine Shop & Storefront

Village of East Sparta

Adjacent Land Uses

The nearby Village of East Sparta is the most prominent adjacent land use. The Village of about 800 residents includes a town square, a cemetery, post office, town hall, fire station, church and residential neighborhood and is located across the Middle Branch Nimishillen Creek and S.R. 800 from the park. It can be accessed by both Farber and Westbrook Streets. Nearby to the south along Cleveland Avenue is the Sandy Valley Branch of the Stark County District Library and Sandy Valley Community Park owned by the Village. The local historical society owns and is in process of rebuilding a log cabin at the corner of Westbrook Street and Cleveland Avenues. Elsewhere and nearby are several farm houses and farm compounds. The Village of Magnolia is located about 2 miles southeast of the property and accessible from either Westbrook or Farber Streets from the property. Also of note at the intersection of S.R. 800 and Farber Street is a closed machine shop and storefront. An older portion of the building was relocated to its new site at the time Cleveland Avenue was realigned.

Note Slate Roof of Old Storefront Building

Historical Society's Log Cabin Restoration

Oil Well

Utilities

On-site utilities include the previously mentioned oil and gas wells and their associated tank batteries and shallow burial flow lines, overhead electric service to the property (lines leading to the house have been buried), a septic tank and tile field serving the house, and well water service available at the house. Gas service has not been provided to date but is available locally.

Tank Battery

Natural Features

Vegetation

The park property features significant stands of Oak-Hickory hardwood forest in various stages of succession, in addition to about two-thirds of the site that is in pasture. The cut-off portion of the Nimishillen Creek floodplain is either in pasture or reverted to low quality wetlands but the ox-bow itself and adjoining wetland forest remnant are intact and are of high quality.

Several adjacent properties are being considered as part of this plan. The adjacent property to the southwest includes oak-hickory forest on the uplands and old field and scrub-shrub wetlands in a field adjacent to the machine shop. The tributary stream corridor on adjacent property to the southeast toward Magnolia is partly forested with a third growth stand of mixed hardwoods, partly along the edge of an evergreen plantation and within a pastured area with a thinly established riparian zone. These patterns are noted on the attached Vegetation and Hydrology Analysis Map (**Appendix A**).

Slopes & Soils

The property slopes mostly toward the 4-acre pond with northern and southern fields sloping away from the property. Slopes are rolling and quite dramatic, forming ridge tops with very long views in a panorama of the surrounding countryside. Slopes also form very enclosed spaces in the tributary valleys, so that views there are quite internalized and limited.

This area of the County is located in unglaciated terrain. Soils here have been formed as acidic residual soils derived from weathering of the underlying shale, siltstone and sandstone bedrock. They are mostly thinly bedded, less than three or four feet in thickness. Soils are mostly well draining, except in the bottomlands and have moderate to low fertility, making them better suited to grasslands or forest than cultivated farmlands. The floodplain soils of the Nimishillen valley are less permeable and deeper, having been developed by alluvial deposition of stream sediments. Some of these soils are gravelly outwash soils and so, are freer draining.

These patterns are noted on the attached Slope and Soils Analysis Maps (**Appendix A**).

Nimishillen Creek Ox-bow & Floodplain Remnant

Drainage

In this unglaciated portion of the County, eons of scour and erosion have produced a dramatic landscape of deeply carved tributary valleys, steeply sloping terrain and high ridges with spectacular views. The Fry Farm property is no exception. Probably the singularly most notable attribute of the site is its dramatic topography. The site is carved by several headwaters tributary streams, mostly flowing toward the 4-acre farm pond and the Nimishillen Creek ox-bow.

The site's watershed is mostly captured within the property, terminating in the cut-off Nimishillen Creek valley, except for fields along the north and south property lines. This on-site control of site drainage offers opportunity for demonstrating watershed characteristics and employing water quality enhancement measures, whose effects can be readily appreciated on-site.

These patterns are noted on the attached Vegetation and Hydrology Analysis Map (**Appendix A**).

Fry Pond

One of the Numerous Streams Located within the Property

Public Involvement

A series of public meetings were held (March 10, July 11, & November 15, 2011) throughout the planning period to assess public preferences for the park. A committee of Stark Parks staff was formed to spearhead the planning effort. Environmental Design Group facilitated the meetings.

At the first public workshop held in East Sparta Village at their Village Hall, a presentation of park attributes was provided and three work stations were provided for community discussion. These included the Farm, the Buildings and the Connections. Following the presentation, guests were invited to identify key attributes of the site and neighborhood, desired outcomes for the park, local history and cultural attributes, and potential connections to regional resources like East Sparta Village, Sandy Valley Community Park and Magnolia Village. The meeting was well attended. The second public meeting held at nearby Pike Township's meeting facilities presented the concept to a small audience. The comments resulting from the first meeting were outlined as part of the presentation. Because of the number of guests attending, a joint question and answer session was held to discuss preferences among the ideas presented. Guests at both meetings enthusiastically received the concepts and looked forward to the eventual development of the park and trail connections. A third and final public meeting presented the results of the planning process and discussed the intended next steps in development of the park. The public's general consensus toward the master plan was favorable.

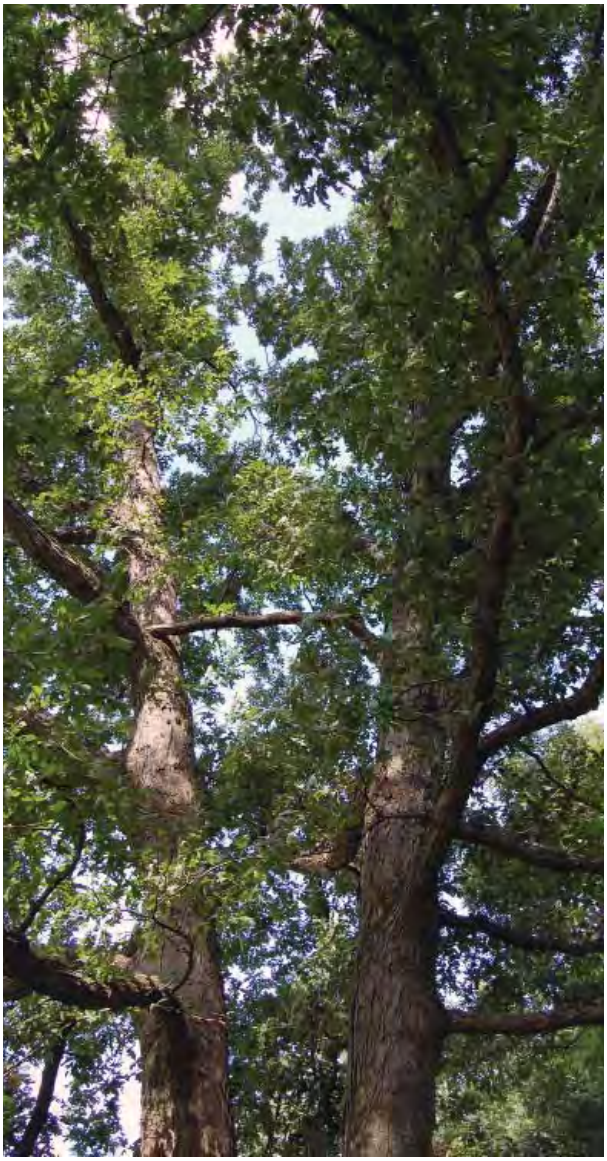
Park Concept

A View from the Residence across the Property's Rolling Terrain

The vision for The Fry Family Park is consistent with the goals set originally, namely that of a "retreat to nature". The fabulous views, rolling terrain and spatial definition created by the topography take full advantage of in the plan's development. The park's control of its headwaters watershed underlies the plan's emphasis on sound environmental stewardship practices. Habitat enhancements in the plan build on those already present and the main residence is repurposed as a central resource for nature study. While the emphasis of the new park has changed from the days of farming the property, the heritage of the old farm is recalled at the entrance by retaining a portion of the pastures along the entrance drive and Farber Road.

The proposed series of trail and greenway corridors encourage park use by a wider audience through connections to the surrounding communities and to other Stark Parks resources in the region.

The Master Plan Maps are located in **Appendix B**.



Watershed Based Management Practices

The plan calls for holistic thinking about the site's watershed in establishing a rationale for site management. Most of the site's watershed is naturally directed toward the 4-acre farm pond and ox-bow wetland. The plan suggests the opportunity to install a series of water management buffers and filters in advance of these features to improve water quality and reduce the impact of storms on the Nimishillen Creek downstream of the site, the pond and wetland. Minimizing pavement in park development, installing bioswales, rain gardens and other water infiltration features, creating and enhancing wetland buffers at localized drainage controls, reestablishing forests and treed buffers on the steeper hillsides and establishing native meadows on former pasture lands are all efforts that have a positive effect on water resources.

The portions of the site draining directly off-site are included in this thinking. Created and enhanced wetland buffers are proposed in advance of culverts at drainage discharges from the park. These are found along the park's perimeter, so they have the added value of being visible for interpretation. The entry pasture that is proposed to be saved can serve to test the water quality benefits of this approach by demonstrating comparative water quality in this area to that elsewhere in the park.

A couple of the Locals take a Walk

Habitat Enhancements

The park's character is defined by its rolling terrain. This creates opportunity for forming secluded outdoor spaces and long-views to the horizon but also for creating a diversity of wildlife habitat to benefit nature and the visitor experience. The plan calls for conversion of much of the site's former pasture to build this diversity over time. As mentioned, forests are restored on many of the site's steeper pastured slopes. These future forested areas will connect existing forest fragments into a more cohesive forest, improving the resulting forest's wildlife value. They also provide the opportunity to control views and define outdoor spaces for the many proposed visitor activities.

Several existing forested areas have been logged over time and their current state is affected as a result. These areas are in various stages of succession and are proposed to be managed long-term for eventual restoration of the native mixed hardwood forest that once graced the property. An isolated segment of the existing forest off Westbrook Road retains much of its second growth canopy. This area

is proposed to be protected as a deep woods preserve of the forest, free of visitor access to encourage forest wildlife preferring this isolation, like the Scarlet Tanager, Warbler species or Pileated Woodpecker.

Forest edges are proposed to be enhanced with understory plantings to transition to old field and meadow areas, providing forest edge cover for meadow inhabitants. On the adjacent flatter hilltops and ridgelines native meadows are proposed to be established, providing habitat for insects, songbirds and other meadow wildlife. Several of the former pastures are proposed to be managed as old fields, made up of meadow and pioneer tree species, providing yet another habitat type for wildlife like grouse and turkey that favor the cover of old fields . This pattern of forest and field offers the visitor the treat of expanded wildlife observation opportunity but also controls views and forms outdoor spaces for visitor activities and still maintains the long views that are so captivating on the current site.

Wetlands are an important contributor to habitat diversity. Past farming practices on-site limited their presence and so, the plan emphasizes their restoration, creation and enhancement. A particularly unique environment once existed associated with the on-site ox-bow wetland of the Nimishillen Creek. The ox-bow and its associated former floodplain are proposed to be restored as a forested and emergent wetland for the variety of insects, amphibians, shorebirds and other aquatic species that normally inhabit them. Elsewhere, at the future maintenance center site, a substantial emergent wetland restoration is proposed in association with the old field present there and numerous pocket created wetlands are proposed throughout the park as water quality enhancements.

These natural area enhancements all provide opportunity for development of visitor access for nature viewing and education.

Nature Center

The central core of the plan includes the former residence, proposed to be converted as a nature education center. The plan calls for the main park drive to terminate at the center in a 50 car parking lot, outfitted with highly interpreted green practices. The building will feature a visitor arrival area, a multiple purpose meeting and event space, a nature gallery of exhibits, a nature lab and workshop, a nature observation room and library, staff offices, and restrooms for building visitors and restrooms with outdoor entrances for park visitors. It will retain its two levels with the upper level being more event and display focused with a nature lab located in the former garage, while the lower level which includes meeting space and the nature observation room is connected to an outdoor nature patio. The swimming pool area will be adapted into a water garden, butterfly and insect garden, patio gathering space and seating. It is separated from the nature observation area immediately outside of the nature study room by a densely planted buffer. A forest will be replanted between and patio and existing forest that will come right up to the building in the observation area and space is provided for several wildlife feeding and watering stations. An exterior accessible trail is planned to connect upper level and lower level facilities.

Exterior to the center and near the upper level parking lot is a nature play area in a grove of old spruce trees. It's themed around the trees there with a tree house perched among the treetops and a series of elevated boardwalks interconnecting the tree house with nature activity zones. These include a water/sand play area, a climbing and scaling feature, a story-telling circle and a nature fort. The trees would be limbed up to remove dead branches and open up the space.

The Architectural Master Plan Maps are located in **Appendix E** and Fry Family Park Master Plan Maps are located in **Appendix C**.

Existing Farm Entry Drive just before the Barn is in View

Park Road & Access

The park roads generally follow the existing pattern of paved farm drives and have been expanded to include access to several new use areas. To facilitate car traffic throughout the park the drives have been widened to 18-foot wide two lane drives. This has the dual benefit of limiting conflict with the “retreat to nature” goal, while providing a substantial park drive experience that permits the visiting public to experience the park upon arrival. Parking is provided at convenient points along the drive at each of the proposed activity areas.

Existing Entry Drive near the Main Entrance

A View from the Property's Highest Point

Park Shelters

Several park shelters are proposed to provide opportunities for gatherings of various sizes for reunions or family picnics. The largest of these is proposed to be a renovation of the existing barn. Seating for 150 people is possible there with restrooms, storage, food warming area/vending machine concession and sliding panels for tempering winds in the cooler months. The restrooms and concession area are proposed to be heated while the large picnicking room is intended to be unheated, except for a large fireplace. This building serves the dual purpose of a reservable shelter and a concession and restroom area for general park visitors, particularly those visiting the 4-acre lake.

Two new open air picnic shelters are proposed off the park drive, seating about 50 people each. These picnic areas will include a small parking lot, informal play lawn and a drinking fountain. Restrooms are not provided, except at the other facilities.

Fry Pond

The existing 4-acre pond is conveniently located to both the nature center and the large reserved shelter. It is proposed to provide seasonal water activities including youth fishing and canoe rentals. An accessible fishing pier is proposed as is a dock for rentals. The nearby large reserved shelter is outfitted with a vending machine concession and restroom area accessible from the outside of the structure for fishing and boating rentals and snacks. The pond also features a small canopied overlook and seating area off the picnic area lawn with a fire ring and views to the pond.

Proposed Sledding & Tobogganing Hill

Winter Sports Center & Trailhead

A 30-car trailhead and activity area parking lot near the intersection of S.R. 800 and Westbrook Street serves as the arrival area for a proposed winter sports center. It features a visitor information kiosk, rain garden/natural spring access feature and orientation/rest area. Accessible nearby is a proposed north facing sledding and tobogganing hill with the landing zone near the parking lot. A trail leads to a hilltop warming shelter with fireplace and connection to a series of cross-country trails. The lower trail also leads from the parking lot to an ice skating plaza located on a boardwalk over the ox-bow wetland. Natural surface skating is proposed to be permitted when temperatures permit on the shallow ox-bow waters.

The trailhead location also benefits by its proximity across S.R. 800 from the local historical society's restoration of a log house. That project is projected to be a visitor attraction of local history and as such, when combined with the parking lot, provides the potential to form a gateway to the Village of East Sparta.

Ox-bow during Winter

Ox-bow during Winter

Proposed Trailhead Location at Existing Westbrook Pull-off

Old Storefront

Maintenance & Library/Visitor Center

On a parcel located at the intersection of S.R. 800 and Farber Street is located an existing machine shop, garage and storefront proposed to be converted to a regional maintenance center for Stark Parks and Visitor Center/ District Library to replace the one nearby serving the Sandy Valley. The 28.94 acre property is proposed to be acquired from its current owner and be connected to the park with a looped trail and boardwalk at a proposed wetland restoration area on the property.

A 50-car parking lot is provided with separate Visitor Center/Library and Maintenance Center entrances. The Maintenance Center entrance provides access to a series of overhead doors at the rear of the building, a small storage yard for bulk materials and staff parking. An arrival loop drive and entry rain garden are proposed to permit convenient book drops and visitor drop-offs at the building entrance. A park experience is provided at the visitor facility through a looped trail and boardwalk that serves the visitor information center function of the new facility. The visitor center is proposed to face S.R. 800 in the old storefront and may include displays of East Sparta history that the local historical society maintains or information about Stark Parks facilities.

Magnolia Mill

One of the Many
Unimproved Farm Drives

Park Trail Network & Connections

The park features an extensive series of nature trails, providing access to the diverse natural experience of the new park. These are proposed to be natural surfaced and of various lengths that loop and interconnect with each other to provide a variety of experiences and levels of challenge for visitors to choose from. They navigate nearly every part and activity area of the park, except for the deep woods preserve which excludes nature trails. Over 4 miles of nature trail are proposed.

A multi-purpose soft surfaced paved trail for bicycling and hiking is proposed to connect the park with East Sparta and Magnolia. This trail bisects the park, beginning at the northwest corner of the park at the Winter Sports Center trailhead, passing by Fry Pond and the Nature Center, traveling within a ridge top meadow before leaving the site at the southeast corner of the property. The connection to East Sparta is proposed to extend the trail across S.R. 800 at a signaled pedestrian crossing and follow Main Avenue, SE to the Village. The Village owns property against the Middle Branch

Old Railroad Corridor adjacent to Cemetery looking North

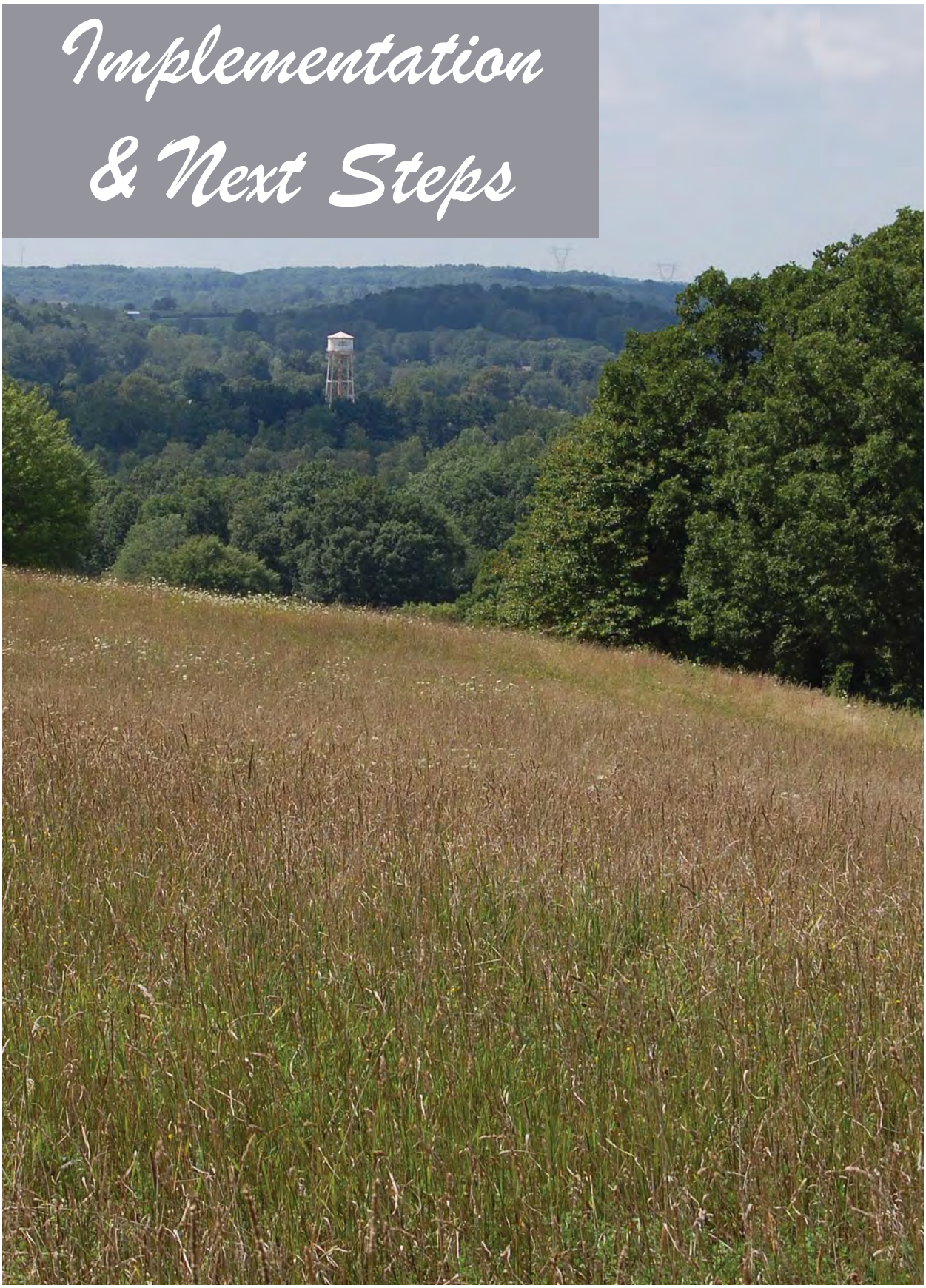
Proposed Trail Crossing at Bowmont

Nimishillen Creek in this area and the trail is proposed to be placed within that greenbelt.

A potential connection from East Sparta Village Center to Sandy Valley Community Park exists along an old rail bed partly owned by the Village and a nearby local industry. The potential route would begin at the north in the Village at a small parking area across Walnut Street, SE from its War Memorial Park. It would follow the old rail corridor near the Village's Cemetery and eventually cross the Middle Branch Nimishillen Creek into the Community Park. The length of the connector is about 0.5 miles.

A proposed greenway connection to Magnolia is proposed to follow along a tributary stream of the Sandy Creek. The trail would be located in a 200-foot wide proposed greenway, following the stream to a bridge crossing the Sandy Creek at Magnolia Park. About half of the greenway is in a wooded parcel adjacent to pasture lands, while the remaining portion is located along a rather thinly planted riparian zone associated with the stream in an otherwise farm field. Riparian zone restoration is proposed along this reach of the greenway. The trail crosses Bowmont Street at about the halfway point of the greenway and passes by a County Sanitary Sewage Lagoon facility. The proposed greenway is almost entirely on private property and could be acquired either as a conservation/access easement or fee simple purchase, whichever is most amenable to the owners. A long-term strategy for a separate equestrian trail paralleling the multi-purpose trail should be considered once the opportunity to connect Magnolia with the 2000-acre Whitacre-Greer tract is realized. Until that time the available length of the trail does not justify equestrian use, either at the park or within the connector greenway.

Implementation & Next Steps



Implementation & Next Steps

The plan for Fry Farm is ambitious, requiring considerable coordination and time for it to be realized. Restoring the natural environs, for example, is a long-term strategy that may be implemented in stages without affecting the park's visitation. Stark Parks is committed to the park's master plan vision and plans implementation over a twenty year period.

Initially, purchase of the property must be completed and agreement terms concerning Mr. Fry's life estate must be carried out. Also important to the park's future are purchase agreements with the current land owner of the property at the intersection of S.R. 800 and Farber Street SE and with Stark County District Library concerning future joint use of the facility there. The Park District is currently seeking grant funds to accomplish these goals.

Initial development plans should center on the site's natural systems and providing access. Best management practices are proposed for the site and include such features as the

control and eradication of invasive and non-native species, grasslands management and conversion to meadow/forest, and wetlands restoration and creation in the bottomlands. Concentrating on those resources that have the greatest environmental impact should be considered, such as the drainage outfall wetlands along the public roads or the wetland restoration at the future maintenance facility. Monitoring stations of site water quality are planned for early implementation so that base line data can be collected prior to improvements.

Trails and visitor parking can begin to be developed as time and resources allow. Initially, Stark Parks plans to limit park visitation to group opportunities led by Park District staff. Once initial development of trails and visitor parking occur, the terms of the Park District's agreement with Mr. Fry are met and staff is assigned to the park, it will be opened to a broader usage by the visiting public. The Park District's development of trails can be cost effectively developed as natural surface trails until such time as connections are achieved beyond the park for multi-purpose trail usage. Initially, parking should be improved at the entry points to the park and at trailheads, such as at Westbrook Road and along the main entry road. Adhering to sustainable principles when constructing these visitor facilities will build awareness of the park's vision as a sustainable education resource.