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# Chapter 1: History

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## History of the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission

The Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission was created by the County Board of Commissioners when it approved a resolution introduced by Commissioner Meri Lou Murray calling for the development of a County Parks and Recreation program. There was a recognition that Washtenaw County was undergoing rapid urbanization and population growth. Much of this growth was taking place in township areas where very few provisions were being made for the recreational needs of this burgeoning population, nor was there any effort to preserve significant open spaces for public use.

In 1965 the State Legislature adopted enabling legislation permitting counties to create park and recreation commissions. Public Act 261 spelled out the powers of these commissions and the composition of their membership. Both Oakland and Genesee Counties had already undertaken successful programs under this new act. Two previous efforts in 1960 and 1968 to initiate a county park program in Washtenaw County had failed. Those efforts would have placed the park system under the County Road Commission acting as park trustees. The Road Commission operated four small roadside parks which were turned over to the new Parks Commission in 1973. (A legislative act passed in 1931 permitted road commissions to serve as park trustees. There was a demand in those days for roadside parks because a popular recreation in the 20s and 30s was for families to take Sunday drives in the country armed with a picnic hamper.)

The new Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission (WCPRC) held its first meeting in August, 1973. It negotiated a general fund budget of approximately \$60,000 with the Board of Commissioners. One of its first tasks was to develop a five-year park and recreation plan to submit to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) so that it could qualify for Federal Land and Water Conservation grants. It was assisted in this endeavor by a planner on loan from the County Planning Commission. The Road Commission contracted to continue maintenance of the four inherited parks until such time as WCPRC had its own staff. WCPRC also drew up a position description for a park and recreation director with plans to conduct a nation-wide search for the best candidate.

The commission also planned to ask voters, at some future date, to authorize a county-wide millage to support the creation and operation of a county park system. To assist in developing priorities, the commission, in the summer of 1974, contracted with the University of Michigan Survey Research Center to conduct a survey of county residents to determine their recreational activities, needs and priorities.

The new commission was aided immeasurably by the recruitment in August, 1974, of Robert Gamble, who served as the first Parks Director from 1974-1980, when he left to become Acting County Administrator, just prior to his retirement. Prior to joining WCPRC, he had developed an extensive county-wide program for Nassau County on Long Island, New York, also an area of rapid population growth. As soon as he arrived in Washtenaw County, he undertook a survey of potential park sites, each of which underwent careful scrutiny and evaluation. Top priority was given to a 312-acre property on Independence Lake in Webster Township. This property was under the ownership of Edwards Brothers, Inc., a printing firm in Ann Arbor. Edwards Brothers, and the Argus camera company before them, had used the property as a recreational area for their employees. One of the top priorities revealed by the survey conducted by the Survey Research Center was the need for more beach swimming, a priority only surpassed by the need to preserve open space. Mr. Gamble also identified the site of Rolling Hills Park as another top priority. With a limited budget from the County General Fund, Mr. Gamble took advantage of federal funding under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program to develop the beginning of a park staff, several of whom have continued with the commission as permanent staff to the present day. CETA was developed as an economic stimulus program by the Ford Administration, during a time of recession in the mid-seventies. Another economic stimulus program provided construction grants to local governments which had plans that could be executed without delay. One of the small roadside parks inherited from the Road Commission, Park Lyndon, was actually located on a 205-acre property which the State of Michigan had turned over to the county after the 1960 election as a result of Ms. Genevieve Gillette's efforts. Ms. Gillette, a landscape architect who devoted a lifetime to promoting state parks, was a Washtenaw County resident and was instrumental in the 1960 county park effort. She was aware

of a provision in the state law that enabled counties to request the state to transfer land to the county if the state had no plans for it. Ms. Gillette had been appointed an honorary member of WCPRC in 1973 in recognition of her earlier role.

Park Lyndon is divided by North Territorial Road into two, almost equal, parcels. The existing roadside facility was located north of the road. In 1975, Mr. Gamble had plans drawn up for a parking lot, picnic pavilion, toilets and a small cabin to be built on the south parcel. A construction grant soon followed. He also had CETA employees begin to develop nature trails to take advantage of natural features including a hardwood forest and a small pond on the south side, and fens and bogs on the north side. Mr. Gamble also took advantage of county ownership of the 127-acre county farm, formerly the County Poor Farm dating back to 1836. County Poor Farms were common in the days before New Deal-type safety net programs such as social security. Elderly and indigent persons without family support were boarded at the poor farm where they became wards of the County. In 1919, a county hospital was built on Washtenaw Ave. near Platt Rd., but by 1971 it no longer met state standards and was closed, and torn down in 1976. At some point the County Farm ceased to operate as a poor farm. It was then leased to farmers who continued the farming operations until the early 60s. As late as 1962 or 1963, you could see Holstein cows grazing in the pasture adjacent to Washtenaw Avenue.

The County Farm had been identified as a potential park site in WCPRC's first five-year plan and, in fact, some recreational use had already begun there. In 1965, the City of Ann Arbor arranged to lease the fourteen-acre woodlot at the northwest corner of the farm to develop as a park. A parking lot, a picnic shelter, and a nature trail through the woods was provided with a great deal of the work performed by volunteers from the Ann Arbor Jaycees. The park was named Park Washtenaw of Ann Arbor. In 1972, the newly organized Project Grow, a community gardening project with seven other sites around Ann Arbor, was authorized by the County Board of Commissioners to develop a garden site at the County Farm, which continues to the present. Three years later Mr. Gamble obtained permission to develop an approximately 1½-mile exercise-fitness trail (parcour) at the County Farm. CETA workers constructed and installed the equipment for the trail.

In 1976, the Parks and Recreation Commission was ready to submit the plans for an expanded park and recreation program to the County's electorate for approval of a 10-year, ¼ mill levy, to fund such a program. A brochure was developed describing the program, which would include beach swimming, active sports, preservation of unique natural and historic areas, jogging and exercise trails, cross-country ski trails, nature interpretation and other activities. The proposal was placed on the August 1976 primary election ballot, and a campaign to explain the program to voters was undertaken. The levy failed, however, falling just 349 votes short of approval. The next day park commissioners decided to ask the Board of Commissioners to place the proposal back on the ballot for the November general election, to which the Board of Commissioners agreed. In November the proposal passed with a 5,000-vote margin of victory.

There was another piece of good news that month. Earlier in 1976, Mr. Gamble had persuaded the Commission to submit an application for a Federal Land and Water Conservation matching grant to purchase the property at Independence Lake in anticipation of voters approving the park millage. In November, the Commission was informed that the grant was approved.

WCPRC was quite successful in the next several years in the competition for grant support from the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LAWCON), which was administered by the MDNR. Once the Independence Lake property was acquired, a LAWCON grant supplemented county funds in the first phase development of the park. Independence Lake Park was opened to the public on Memorial Day weekend in 1980. Other LAWCON grants followed to aid purchase and development of Rolling Hills Park. In 1979, the County Board of Commissioners turned over control of the County Farm to WCPRC to develop as a county park. With the assistance of another LAWCON grant, development of a master plan for the park was begun in 1981, and completed in 1983. The City's lease of Park Washtenaw was terminated, and Park Washtenaw was merged into the County Farm Park. The year 1981 also saw the addition of the Osborne Mill Riverland Preserve. Birders had long used this 39-acre Huron-River-shoreline property, just east of the Delhi Metropark. The Audubon Society and the Washtenaw Land Conservancy, jointly, purchased the property

with the assistance of the Nature Conservancy and gave the property to WCPRC. In 1982, WCPRC tapped a new source of supplemental funding, obtaining a grant from the State Land Trust Fund of \$250,000 to assist in the purchase of the historic gristmill on Fleming Creek, founded in 1873 by William Parker and operated by the Parker family until 1959. A purchase agreement was signed in 1983 and restoration of the mill buildings was completed in 1984. First phase development of Rolling Hills Park was also begun in 1984 and completed in 1985 in time for a late winter opening in February to inaugurate the toboggan run and the cross county ski trail.

So far in this brief history, emphasis has been placed on facilities development, but a great deal of emphasis in Mr. Gamble's tenure was an extensive use of the CETA program to not only enable WCPRC to replace Road Commission maintenance crews with its own, but also to develop and staff a broad variety of recreation programs, in many cases making use of the facilities of other municipalities frequently where no such programming was taking place. In 1978, County Administration assigned a building at the County Service Center on Hogback Road to WCPRC to use both as office space and as a recreation center. The building had a gymnasium, with locker room, classrooms and a large conference room, as well as office space, having been a Roman Catholic Seminary. A variety of recreation programs and classes were developed to make use of this facility.

In 1984, at the request of WCPRC, the County Board of Commissioners placed a millage renewal proposal on the ballot two years before it would have been necessary. The thinking was that in the event the millage failed to get voter approval it would have another chance to be placed on the general election ballot in 1986. 1984 was a presidential election year and voter turnout was large and the renewal of the quarter-mill tax levy was approved by 61.5 % of the voters. 1984 was a watershed year in another sense; as more parks and programs were developed, more of its resources would be needed for operations and maintenance and less would be available for new acquisitions and further development. Commissioners began to think about asking voters for additional support for further growth of WCPRC programs and facilities.

In January 1985, Roger Shedlock, who had served as WCPRC Director since Mr. Gamble retired in 1980, resigned. Fred Barkley, who had previously served as Deputy Director of the Washtenaw County Metropolitan Planning Commission, replaced him. After the CETA program was phased out, WCPRC, had to rely on its own resources to staff both facilities maintenance and also continued recreation programming. Mr. Barkley brought significant management skills to the Commission enabling it to operate its many new facilities with very modest increases in full-time staff. Mr. Barkley also began to plan for the future. WCPRC had been developing the plan outlined initially in 1976. Some Commissioners had long dreamed of developing a water park, similar to the one operated by Oakland County. It also became clear that the Recreation Center at the County Service Center was not only old and in poor condition, but also that it was too small to meet the demands being placed upon it. In 1988, emboldened by the support it had received in 1984, WCPRC asked voters to approve an additional quarter-mill to enable it to proceed with plans for a water park development at Rolling Hills and to build a new 50,000 square foot state-of-the-art recreation center at County Farm Park on the site of the former county hospital. In November 1988, voters approved that request as well. In 1991 the water park and the new recreation center were opened to the public. In 1994, property was purchased for the commission's first golf course - Pierce Lake, which opened to the public in 1996.

Two more millage renewals were placed before the voters in the 1990s. In 1994 another millage was placed on the ballot and renewed; this has become WCPRC's basic operating millage. In 1998, voters were asked to approve an extension of the acquisition and development millage for another ten years. The program outlined in that proposal included development of a countywide greenway trail system with a commitment of \$10 million to its development. It included further improvements at Independence Lake Park, and at Rolling Hills Park, it included the addition of a "lazy river" to the water park. Also included in the development and acquisition millage was a plan for park development in the southwest section of the county. That goal was achieved in September 2002, with the opening of Sharon Mills County Park. The Staebler Farm property was purchased in the fast-growing northeast section of the county, and is awaiting design and development. The construction of the new

WCPRC administrative office building at the County Farm Park permitted the transfer of the administrative staff out of the Meri Lou Murray Recreation Center and the expansion of the area assigned to the very popular weight and aerobics program.

In 2000, the County Board of Commissioners adopted ordinance No.128 establishing the Natural Areas Preservation Program (NAPP) to preserve and protect unique natural areas within the county and assigned the responsibility for administering the program to the Parks and Recreation Commission with the advice of an expert advisory committee. In November 2000, 64% of county voters approved a 10-year, ¼ mill levy to fund NAPP. Several parcels have since been purchased under this program and others are being considered. In January 2001, Fred Barkley retired as WCPRC Director. His successor, Robert Tetens, also with training and experience as a planner, has maintained the pace of development that has characterized WCPRC for most of its history.

