



Executive Summary



Purpose of the Master Plan Update

The Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission Master Plan sets forth the vision, goals and capital improvement schedule for the five-year period 2004-2008. This document was designed to study the changing human geography, natural features, current and projected recreational needs and to provide recommended action steps with prioritized recommendations for the entire parks system as well as the existing Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission (WCPRC) facilities.

Park and recreation agencies applying for grant funding from the State of Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) are required to update and submit a Parks and Recreation Master Plan every five years.

The Master Plan Update fulfills the MDNR requirement, but more importantly maps a course for the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission through 2008.

How the Plan Was Developed

Public input formed the foundation for the 2004-2008 Plan Update. A Core Advisory Group (CAG) visioning meeting was held June 20, 2003 and included representatives of local governmental and recreational agencies, public and private recreation providers, interest and user groups and WCPRC staff. This public input was augmented with information gathered in a random telephone survey conducted in the spring of 2003 and complemented prior survey work done by the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority (HCMA).

Recommendations were developed using the goals and vision established during the CAG workshop and the needs identified by WCPRC employees during staff visioning meetings. The Johnson Hill • Land Ethics Studio refined the goals and needs expressed by the public and staff while adding recommendations based on site observations and analysis of county demographic trends, recreational needs and accepted standards. These combined recommendations were presented to the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission for further refinement and eventual approval.

Recommendations

This update includes administrative, programming and facility recommendations. These recommendations establish a set of goals for the Parks and Recreation Commission over the next five years. Additionally, the recommendations will shape the vision for Washtenaw County and provide the focus for capital improvements, program implementation and property acquisition over the next five years.

Greenways

The development of a county-wide network of trails and greenways continues to be the most important issue to many county residents and park users. Survey respondents, CAG participants and staff cite the development of a connected system of trails as the most important objective for WCPRC during the next decade. With significant portions of the Huron River Border-to-Border Trail nearing construction or in the design stage, continuing to build on these efforts remains a principal focus of the 2004-2008 Master Plan Update.

Natural Areas

Washtenaw County voters approved a ¼ mill tax in November 2000 to fund natural areas preservation. This program, administered by WCPRC, retains tremendous support among County residents. In addition to purchasing natural areas, it is critical to develop natural resource management plans for these areas as well as the other Commission-owned properties. Invasive species remain a major threat to the ecological integrity of the natural landscape and management strategies need to be developed to effectively and efficiently combat these species.

Environmental and Cultural Education

Washtenaw County Parks are rich in both environmental and cultural features. These provide opportunities for interpretation and observation and are important building blocks for future environmental stewardship. Options to expand educational exhibits and programming should be explored.

Additional Facilities

As the County's population grows and diversifies, the need for additional recreation facilities, programs and opportunities will increase. The growing southern portion of Washtenaw County is served by only two WCPRC parks - Sharon Mills and Rolling Hills. There is a need to develop additional outdoor facilities in proximity to the population centers of Milan, Saline and Manchester.

Furthermore, as the community becomes more diverse, there will be a need to address changing recreational needs by exploring alternative recreation opportunities. Activities such as skateboarding and in-line skating have become popular recreational pursuits, particularly for youths and young adults. These individuals might be better served by WCPRC via the development of additional skating opportunities.

Off-leash dog park facilities provide users with both social and recreational activities. The growing demand for an off-leash facility in the County is not being met by any local agency or municipality. WCPRC has the opportunity to address this need.

Similarly, outdoor winter activities are limited at WCPRC facilities, leaving many parks underutilized for many months during the year. Developing winter programs and encouraging outdoor winter activities are also opportunities that should be addressed in the 2004-2008 period.

Traditionally, park development has relied on a combination of funding sources - funds from the county-wide millage along with federal and state grant funds. As state and federal programs experience cutbacks, available funds decrease while competition for them increases. In light of the current financial conditions, it is critical to develop inter-agency and inter-jurisdictional partnerships. A proposed Recreation Summit, planned for early 2004, is designed to bring together municipal and private recreation providers to strengthen these partnerships and to encourage regional cooperation.

Administration

Among County residents, WCPRC is often confused with municipal or regional parks and recreation facilities operated and administered by different organizations. This confusion is due, in large part, to limited brand recognition and a history of limited marketing. Marketing, advertising and special event coordination are important to build the image of Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission as well as to expand the number of people served by its programs. WCPRC facilities have a wealth of natural, cultural and recreational resources that will be better used by the public if they know more about them. WCPRC has expanded its use of marketing and promotional tools over the past few years to strengthen its brand recognition among citizens of Washtenaw County.

Maintenance

As the County park system expands and adds additional facilities and natural areas, maintenance takes on additional importance. Survey respondents and CAG participants all placed a high value on maintaining existing facilities to County standards. As the park system expands and is used by more residents, maintaining these facilities becomes more difficult. Continued emphasis must be placed on the development of efficient maintenance strategies and resource allocation.

Implementation

At current funding levels, the recommendations contained in this plan update cannot all be implemented in the 2004-2008 time frame of the Plan. Each set of recommendations is prioritized. While it is not expected that all of these recommendations can be achieved relying upon WCPRC operating budget funds of approximately \$4.5 million dollars a year, those projects that may be eligible for grant and/or public-private partnerships are identified in the Capital Improvements Schedule.