



Great Parks

Comprehensive Master Plan

2019-2028 | HAMILTON COUNTY, OH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 1930, GREAT PARKS OF HAMILTON COUNTY HAS ESTABLISHED ONE OF THE STATE'S LARGEST AND MOST DIVERSE INVENTORIES OF PARKS, NATURE PRESERVES AND CONSERVATION AREAS. GREAT PARKS CURRENTLY MANAGES MORE THAN 17,600 ACRES OF GREENSPACE INCLUDING MORE THAN 25 MILES OF RIVER FRONTAGE ALONG ECOLOGICALLY IMPORTANT AND RECREATIONALLY VALUABLE RIPARIAN CORRIDORS ACROSS HAMILTON COUNTY.

In 2016, Hamilton County voters overwhelmingly approved the Great Parks' replacement levy. This highlights the community's passion and support of the park district. Strong voter support, the establishment and growth of the Great Parks Forever philanthropic organization, and strategic partnering on multijurisdictional initiatives have allowed Great Parks to continue to build what is one of the country's finest regional park districts.

An inclusive and thorough community planning process helped to create this Comprehensive Master Plan, which will guide parks, facilities, programming and services over the next 10 years ending in 2028. The planning team has worked with Great Parks staff, a community Advisory Committee, stakeholders and the residents of Hamilton County to tackle the following questions:

- **How do we continue to build bonds** between people and nature as Hamilton County grows and society changes?
- **How do we advance the legacy of conservation** while exploring opportunities for public use and education?
- **How do we build on the cultural, natural and historical qualities** of Hamilton County to create educational and exciting park experiences?
- **How do we equitably improve physical connectivity** and social access to the parks system?
- **How do we inspire the next generation** of environmental stewards of Hamilton County?

THE COMPREHENSIVE MASTER PLAN ESTABLISHES FIVE GOALS FOR GREAT PARKS TO...

1

BE A RECOGNIZED LEADER IN **CONSERVATION**

2

PROVIDE INNOVATIVE **PROGRAMMING** AS A GATEWAY TO NATURE EXPLORATION

3

CREATE OUTSTANDING **EXPERIENCES**

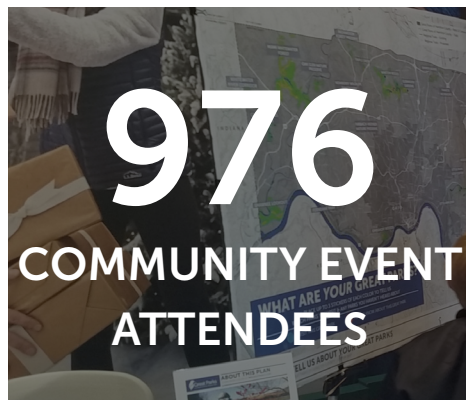
4

ADVANCE **FISCAL HEALTH**

5

OPERATE WITH **HIGH STANDARDS** OF EXCELLENCE

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



PLAN INSIGHTS + ANALYSIS

1

There is strong public support for conservation and preservation of natural lands.

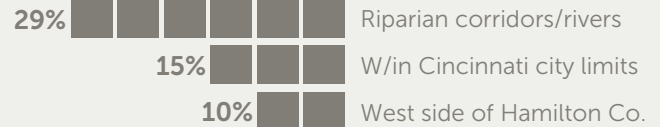
"Preserve as many natural areas as possible, as soon as possible. Please!"

"The Little Miami River is beautiful and I believe needs to be protected and preserved."

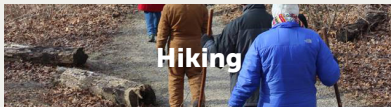
84%

of survey respondents are supportive of Great Parks purchasing land that protects the environment.

Where in Hamilton County should Great Parks prioritize acquisition of land for conservation?



Favorite Things to do at a Great Park



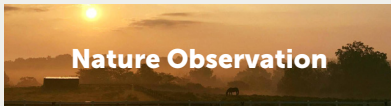
Hiking

62%



Trail Walking/Running

61%



Nature Observation

38%

89%

of county-wide survey respondents have visited a Great Park or facility within the past year, which is 8 points higher than the national average.

20%

of county-wide survey respondents have participated in nature programming within the past year, which is 15 points lower than the national average.

2

Great Parks has a higher facility visitation rate than the national average.



3

Community members are seeking active recreation programs and special events.

"More free activities for teens and twenty somethings. I'd love an adult playground."

57%

of county residents agree that their physical health & fitness is a primary benefit of parks and conservation areas.

Top 3 Priority Activities:

- 1 Fitness & wellness programs
- 2 Special events/festivals
- 3 Outdoor adventure programs

27%

of county residents are expected to participate in walking for exercise.

4

Community members are seeking more nature trails, paved walking trails and biking trails.

98%

of survey respondents believe it is important to use protected areas to provide a connected network of trails and to develop new nature trails.

Highest community priorities for facilities in the future include:

1. Paved walking & biking trails
2. Nature trails

"Create networks of trails within parks that give users multiple route choices of different lengths and types of experiences."

"It would be nice to have some longer trails within parts of parks that are not developed or at least have current trails make deeper forays into the wilder part of the parks"

"We need transit to access parks for as many residents as possible."

"Connectivity is the key. Make it possible to access parks via trails."

87%

of county-wide survey respondents drive to reach Great Parks programs & activities.

42%

of county-wide survey respondents have walked or biked to reach Great Parks programs & activities.

5

The vast majority of visitors drive to reach parks and participate in programs.

6

The community is most willing to support park facility updates and new trails with tax dollars.

The top three community priorities for future investment are:

1. Updated facilities

The greatest number of county-wide survey respondents would be willing to fund updates and repairs for older park facilities.

2. Trails

The second greatest number of county-wide survey respondents would be willing to fund the development of new shared use trails.

3. Greenways

The third greatest number of county-wide survey respondents would be willing to fund the development of greenways in the floodplains of the county's rivers and creeks.

THE IMPACT OF GREAT PARKS



GREAT PARKS...

CONSERVATION



128,000

New trees planted since 2013

83%

Parkland preserved as undeveloped natural areas



25

Miles of frontage on 4 major rivers

10,000

Acres of forests



1,800

Acres of grassland

RECREATION



212,000

Rounds of golf per year

218,000

Athletics visits per year



79,000

Boat rentals per year

151,000

Visits to reservable picnic areas, shelters, or lodges per year



...HAS SOMETHING TO OFFER EVERYONE

EDUCATION

7,500

Programs attracting...



135,000

Program attendees per year



134,000

Special Event attendees per year

195,000

Nature Center visits per year



47,132

Volunteer hours from...

1,775

Total volunteers (2018)

ECONOMIC IMPACT



\$91.9 M

Total economic impact (2015)

2,065

Jobs supported



\$4.22

Return on investment per dollar of tax funding for Great Parks



6 GOLF COURSES*

4 DISC GOLF COURSES

2 DOG PARKS

4 CAMPGROUNDS

8.1 MILES OF MOUNTAIN BIKING TRAILS

58 RESERVABLE PICNIC SHELTERS

158 ACRES OF PARKLAND ACQUIRED IN 2018

* Shawnee Lookout Golf Course is scheduled to close in 2019.

THE IMPACT OF GREAT PARKS

7.8%

of Hamilton County's
tree canopy is within a
Great Park

1.1

million trail visits
per year

Great Parks
represent

1/3

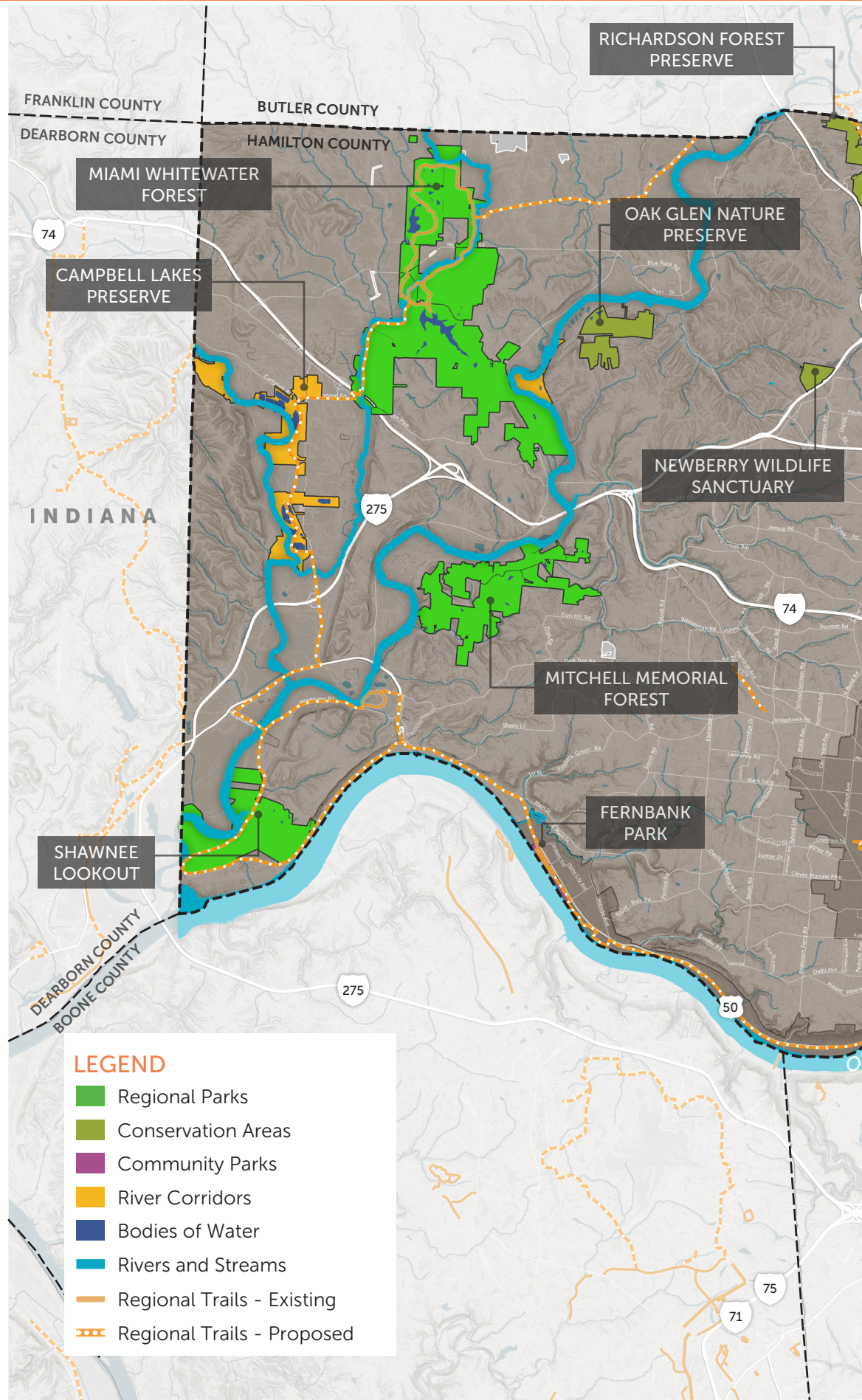
of Hamilton County's
total open space

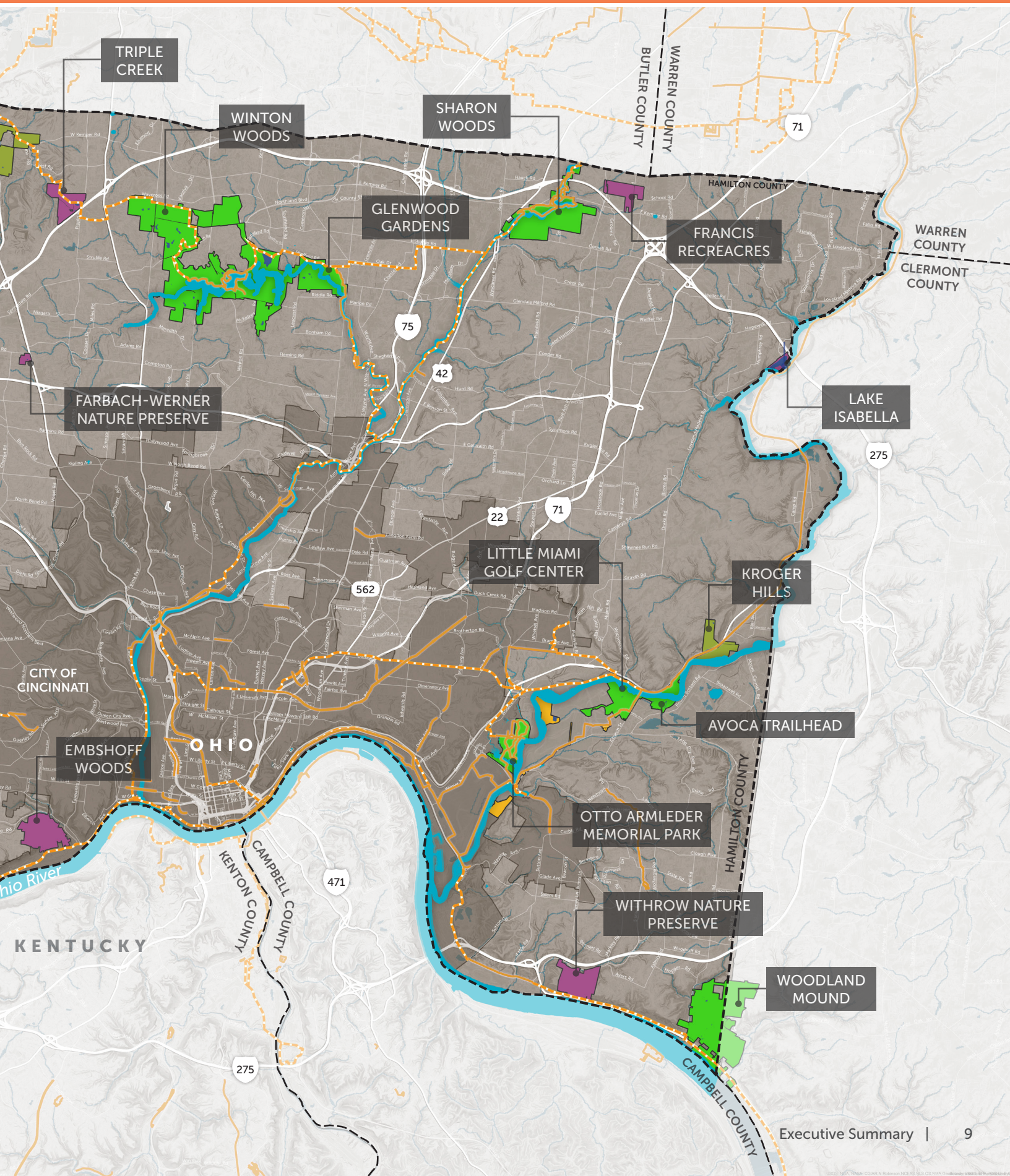
78

miles of trails
within Great Parks

83%

of Great Parks land
preserved as
undeveloped
natural areas





RECOMMENDATIONS

1. BE A RECOGNIZED LEADER IN CONSERVATION

OBJECTIVE: ESTABLISH GREAT PARKS OF HAMILTON COUNTY AS A SYSTEM OF CONNECTED AND ECOLOGICALLY RESILIENT CONSERVATION AREAS, RIVER CORRIDORS AND PARKS.

Great Parks is in a unique position to be the regional leader for conservation and connections. Moving forward, the district-wide strategy will focus on connecting the county as a system of parks, conservation areas, paved trails, unpaved trails and blueways. This will protect the county's natural resources through conservation and land use while inviting residents of, and visitors to, Hamilton County to connect with nature through both self-directed and guided exploration. It will also inspire users to adopt conservation practices in their homes and businesses.

These recommendations are organized into three categories:

PROTECT

- » Formalize approach to land use
- » Formalize criteria and methods for land acquisition
- » Foster sustainability and ecological resiliency
- » Establish a regional conservation community

CONNECT

- » Be a leader in trails for the region
- » Increase level of service for trails
- » Focus on trails of all types and complete missing connections
- » Partner with other trail-building and managing entities

EXPLORE

- » Provide measured access to conservation areas
- » Enhance the experience of using trails for exercise

CASE STUDY: BATTELLE DARBY CREEK METRO PARK AND NATURE CENTER

GALLOWAY, OH



An environmental education nature center serves as the centerpiece for Battelle Darby Creek Metro Park—the largest park in the Columbus and Franklin County Metro Park system. The nature center is a 14,000 square foot LEED Silver certified building, featuring climate responsive design, geothermal heat pumps, a green roof, bioswales, and rain gardens. At the heart of the nature center is a 53-foot living stream, which is stocked with aquatic creatures that can be found in the Big Darby Creek River. The stream is surrounded by other exhibits and interactive programs are held in the space. The park itself contains over 1,600 acres of restored wetlands and prairies. A herd of bison roam some of those prairies and visitors can catch a glimpse of them from the deck of the nature center or several other overlooks. A multi-use trail network within the park is highly used for both walking and biking.

2. PROVIDE INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING AS A GATEWAY TO NATURE EXPLORATION

OBJECTIVE: ADOPT A PROGRAMMING PHILOSOPHY AND APPROACH DEDICATED TO WELLNESS, ADVENTURE AND ENRICHMENT TO ENSURE THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMPACTFUL AND EVOLVING PROGRAMMING.

The programming philosophy will guide Great Parks' staff to provide innovative programs based on community interests and desires for enrichment—including a focus on adventure and wellness. Systems of tracking and measuring success will enable programs to grow and evolve, to meet shared goals across the park district and to be informed by national best practices.

The programming philosophy recommendations are organized into two categories:

PROGRAMMING EVALUATION + LIFECYCLE

- » Make data-driven decisions
- » Establish a program evaluation cycle (with lifecycle stages)
- » Increase participation by inspiring users to try something new
- » Track similar providers and duplication of services

PROGRAM TYPES + LOCATIONS

- » Expand and enhance the core program areas with a focus on trends in recreation and demographics
- » Increase adventure and wellness recreation events and programs
- » Enhance the current user experience by maintaining popular facilities
- » Approach programming from a system-wide perspective

CASE STUDY: CLEVELAND METROPARKS PROGRAMMING

CUYAHOGA COUNTY, OH



Cleveland Metroparks offers a wide variety of programming to serve their visitors. Some of their outdoor recreation programming includes a Youth Adventure Seeker Series, which teaches various outdoor recreation skills from kayaking and rock climbing to mountain biking, navigation, and camp cooking. They also offer skills-based classes for adults, such as orienteering, kayaking, backcountry cooking, and mountain biking. They also have recreation events, like fishing festivals and different types of race events.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. CREATE OUTSTANDING EXPERIENCES

OBJECTIVE: INTEGRATE NATURE, PROGRAMMING AND FACILITIES TO PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY AND UNIQUE OFFERINGS IN EVERY PARK THAT INSTILL LASTING MEMORIES IN ALL USERS.

The placemaking strategy focuses on the creation of outstanding experiences that connect people with nature through learning and exploration. The strategy combines permanent improvements such as trails, buildings and play structures with temporary activities such as events and programs.

These recommendations are organized into two categories:

PLACEMAKING STRATEGIES

- » Enhance the experiences that give each park an identity
- » Create a fresh approach to current visitor centers
- » Invest in new play and education experiences
- » Embrace the cultural heritage of each park
- » Increase adventure recreation experiences
- » Establish a defined blueway system

EQUITABLE ACCESS

- » Increase access to parks
- » Enhance pedestrian connections to parks
- » Increase alternative transportation access to parks
- » Expand access for users with mobility and ability challenges

CASE STUDY: SUMMIT PARK NATURE PLAYSCAPE

BLUE ASH, OH



Designed with adventurous kids in mind, the nature playscape at Summit Park includes two child-sized ziplines, a shallow creek, sand pits, log play structures, underground hobbit hole, and a rope spinner. The nature playscape utilizes natural elements and building materials, such as water, grass, sand, mud, sticks, and timber. The park helps to encourage unstructured play in a safe environment, connect children with nature, teach risk taking, and promote imagination and creativity.

4. ADVANCE FISCAL HEALTH

OBJECTIVE: ENSURE THE PARK SYSTEM IS FINANCIALLY BALANCED AND SUSTAINABLE.

Great Parks has an exceptional record for fiscal responsibility and earned revenue, as well as strong public support of its funding strategies. The fiscal health recommendations focus on the financial balance of Great Parks and sustainability of the park district in the future by examining opportunities to expand partnerships and other funding and revenue sources, revising pricing strategies, developing business plans and operations strategies and continuing to utilize financial planning best practices.

The fiscal health recommendations are organized into three categories:

FINANCIAL PLANNING

- » Track assets and cost of ownership across life of facilities
- » Expand, explore and implement varied funding strategies
- » Identify program- and facility-specific operational funding strategies
- » Develop regional park business plans

PARTNERSHIPS

- » Adopt a comprehensive partnership philosophy
- » Emphasize collaboration and leverage strategic partnerships

PRICING STRATEGY

- » Expand existing pricing strategy
- » Adopt income, price and cost recovery policies
- » Update naming rights policy

CASE STUDY: HERO USA

COLUMBUS, OH



HERO USA, Inc., a Columbus-based nonprofit organization, provides opportunities for youth to participate in outdoor sports in order to give them a safe place to socialize, exercise, and develop lifelong skills. They are specifically devoted to making a difference for youth who face social, physical, and economic challenges. They focus on sports like kayaking, canoeing, and paddleboarding. In partnership with the City of Columbus Recreation and Parks Department, they offer paddling experiences along the Scioto and Olentangy Rivers through downtown Columbus. Other programs offered include adaptive adventures, safety education classes, and special events. They also work closely with other community organizations to combine fundraising and philanthropic efforts, like river cleanup events.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. OPERATE WITH HIGH STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

OBJECTIVE: MAXIMIZE THE EFFICIENCY AND PRODUCTIVITY OF STAFF, VOLUNTEERS, FACILITIES AND PROGRAMMING THROUGH PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT.

Great Parks of Hamilton County aspires to be a nationally-recognized agency. To support this aspiration, multiple levels of recommendations have been developed to increase performance. The operations recommendations ensure Great Parks has systems in place for decision making that are consistent across departments, foster efficient and effective management and team dynamics, utilize technology, expand diversity and inclusion, and enhance customer satisfaction.

The operations recommendations are organized into five categories:

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT + EVALUATION

- » Conduct annual evaluations
- » Develop program standards
- » Create a program development and decision-making matrix
- » Implement a program development process

TECHNOLOGY

- » Use technology to gather participant data
- » Communicate progress and changes
- » Incorporate partner organization data

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

- » Continue to enhance current organizational structure
- » Articulate organizational functions

DIVERSITY + INCLUSION

- » Track participation
- » Support organizational diversity
- » Develop gateway and in-demand programs

EFFICIENCY + EFFECTIVENESS

- » Enhance staff training and development
- » Establish key performance indicators
- » Conduct a capacity demand analysis
- » Enhance customer satisfaction
- » Standardize labor tracking

CASE STUDY: DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION INITIATIVE

GREAT PARKS



In 2017 – 2018 Great Parks engaged Pope Consulting to facilitate a Diversity and Inclusion initiative. A Diversity and Inclusion Committee made up of select Great Parks staff and leadership were engaged in the process. The effort included analysis of staff performance evaluations, executive interviews, focus groups, an employee survey and a two-day facilitated seminar. The summation of this effort will be a Diversity & Inclusion Plan with specific action items to be implemented by staff.

The initiative asked: “What should Great Parks do to attract, retain, develop and grow a diverse workforce in a highly-inclusive work environment?” Recommendations from Pope’s findings include:

- » Provide unconscious bias training for all employees
- » Form a D&I council to act as internal and external ambassadors for guests and employees
- » Develop a plan for internal succession planning, mentoring and professional development
- » Utilize non-traditional recruiting tactics

Great Parks can support diversity within the organization by implementing and regularly updating this plan, and by expanding its support of diversity and inclusion in parks and programming.

PRIORITIES

The recommendations of this plan have been distilled into the following top eight priorities for implementation:



BUILD MORE TRAILS

Trail expansion and connections should create a balanced system of trails of all types. Improvements should include paved and unpaved trails, with a focus on trails within the parks, filling in missing trail connections across the county and increasing trail/park access to underserved areas and adjacent neighborhoods.



ADD PROGRAMMING AND EVENTS FOR DIVERSE AUDIENCES

New and renewed programs should reflect community interests and emerging trends in nature-based recreation and education. These include gateway programs to reach new audiences, programs focusing on wellness and adventure, community events and non-traditional sports.



PROVIDE ACCESS TO CONSERVATION AREAS

Provide access to explore and understand conservation areas—emphasizing their beauty and importance, while measuring against potential negative impacts to habitats and species. Access may include improved parking and trails, special programs and technological resources.



ESTABLISH A DEFINED BLUEWAY SYSTEM

Increase watercraft access points along the Great Miami, Little Miami, Whitewater and Ohio Rivers, and Mill Creek. Establish safe and user-friendly routes with defined places to put in and take out watercraft, signage systems, and online safety and real-time water conditions information.



FOCUS ON PARTNERSHIPS

Establish relationships with operational and service partners, vendor partners, cross-promotion partners and Great Parks Forever. Partnerships can be utilized for programs and events, cultural resources, capital projects, marketing and public engagement.



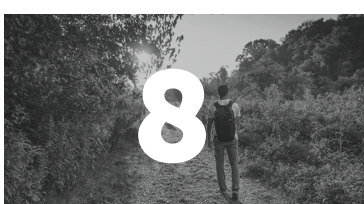
BUILD ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Continue to acquire and protect the natural assets of Hamilton County. Anticipate future threats and implement adaptive plans to increase the biological integrity of natural systems. Engage the public in conservation education and research.



EXPAND ACCESS FOR ALL USERS

Pursue new nature-based opportunities near underserved populations. Enhance pedestrian connections from neighborhoods to parks. Advocate with regional transit providers for increased transit stops near parks. Enhance accessibility of facilities and programs for all ages and abilities.



PLAN FOR THE FUTURE OF EVERY PARK

Use the Comprehensive Master Plan to guide Park and Facility Master Plans for all parks—including specific improvements and action steps for enhancing experiences in every park.

Great Parks would like to thank all of those who participated in the creation of the Comprehensive Master Plan, including public workshops, community events, stakeholder interviews, and surveys. In addition, we would like to recognize and thank the following individuals for their support, direction, and guidance throughout the planning process.

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Parks**

**FIND
YOUR
WILD**

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pros
consulting
Inspiring Communities to Lead Forward

