



Case for Support April 7, 2017

Introduction

Many Americans have a fascination with England, its history and its customs. Did you know that English deer parks were one of the first known attempts at land preservation? Ironically, the deer parks served exactly the opposite purpose of our parks today. They were formed to keep deer *in*, and commoners *out*! Deer parks gave the aristocracy their own private access to the most desirable land.

Fortunately, parks have changed a lot in the last few hundred years. Today, parks play both a recreational and a developmental role in the community. Parks provide public places for anyone to enjoy nature. However, they are also increasingly essential to the economic development of a region.

Ottawa County features dunes, beaches, rivers, lakes, ravines, old-growth woods, and much more. This county is blessed with abundant variety that's pretty hard to find in one county anywhere else in the state. Having the resources is one thing. Leveraging those resources to enhance public enjoyment and economic growth while providing for long-term preservation is much more complicated.

That is the goal of the Ottawa County Parks Foundation.

Why Do We Need Parks?

Fast forward through hundreds of years of history, and you'll see that humanity has migrated indoors. A very small percentage of our population makes a living outdoors. The rest of us are enclosed by walls, tethered to technology, and closed off from the sights and sounds of the natural environment. This is not healthy. Study after study shows that humans need to be engaged with nature. We are healthier when we get outdoors.

At the same time, our unique and/or magnificent outdoor spaces have become hot commodities. Just look at the price of waterfront property, or homes with stunning tree-lined vistas. Natural beauty draws developers and sells houses. Unfortunately, once land has been purchased for private use or development, it no longer has the potential to benefit the general public.

A strong parks system is the fulcrum that balances public and private interests. It creates value for individuals and also for the community at large.

From an **individual** standpoint, people of all ages and abilities crave a connection to the natural world and the wonderful variety of outdoor experiences that Michigan offers. Not sure that's true? Here's an interesting fact. According to Harvard professor Edward O. Wilson, in the U.S. and Canada, more people visit zoos and aquariums than attend all professional athletic events combined.¹ People are looking for ways to experience the natural world, but they need a place to go. Most people don't have their own significant green space. Parks provide it. They are that "woods in my backyard" that individuals need and want.

From a **community** standpoint, parks create perpetual economic value. Rather than thinking of parks as *hindering* development, we should think of them as *enhancing* development. Proximity to parks increases home values, which also increases the tax base. Outstanding public natural resources draw people of all ages. By the year 2050, approximately 1 in every 4 Americans will be 65 years of age or older. This will be an affluent group of retirees with financial power. They are also mobile, moving to various locations across the country. In a recent study, retirees identified scenic beauty, recreational opportunities, and mild climate as the top three factors impacting their choice of a place to live². The parks system helps make Ottawa County very desirable to this group. Parks are also a critical element of attracting talent to a region. People look at overall quality of life when choosing a place to live, and parks are seen as a significant part of that quality equation. Every Ottawa County resident lives within 15 minutes of a park they can access every day, all year long. Parks can even draw tourists or convention visitors, and expand their view of Michigan beyond the lakeshore.

A strong parks system is a tremendous benefit to both individuals and the community.

How are Ottawa County Parks Funded?

Ottawa County planners and voters had the foresight to propose and approve specific funding for the parks. The Ottawa County Parks & Open Spaces Millage provides tax revenue dedicated to the operation and maintenance of our parks system. Voters have demonstrated growing support for their parks, recently renewing the millage with a 72 percent "Yes" vote. The millage revenue represents the lion's share of the budget. A very small portion comes from fees that are charged for park use.

A dedicated volunteer corps stretches the millage dollars. Parks volunteers donate more than 10,000 hours of their time each year to staffing, cleanup, removing invasive species, and much more. Volunteers provide a friendly face, a guiding hand, manual labor, and a watchful eye at all our parks. This allows the staff to spend its time maintaining and improving the parks.

The millage revenue and the volunteer hours are important, and valuable. They keep the parks open. However, the millage is limited in its ability to provide the large chunks of cash needed to make strategic land purchases or to go beyond the essentials.

¹ Source: "The Diversity of Life" by E.O. Wilson, Copyright 1999

² Source: American Planning Association City Parks Forum Briefing Papers #3, 2007

That is where the Ottawa County Parks Foundation comes into the picture.

What is the Role of the Foundation?

The Parks Commission and the Parks Foundation work together to fulfill the vision for high-quality natural lands linked together for public access. What is the role of the Foundation in this work?

First, the Foundation **raises money for specific, strategic land purchases**. The Parks Commission stewards its dollars very carefully over the course of a millage timeframe to provide routine care and maintenance. This funding process works extremely well for routine work. However, it does not provide the flexibility needed for complex or quick land acquisition opportunities. Desirable land that can be developed typically runs thousands of dollars per acre. Speed of funds access is just as important as the sheer amount of money available for land purchases. State or federal matching fund opportunities for land purchase are limited and they often present a very short window of opportunity. The Foundation is positioned to raise money quickly, and also to draw from its annual fundraising reserves. This allows the county to leverage public dollars for the benefit of our residents.

Second, the Foundation **provides funding over and above the millage revenue** so that the Parks Commission can go, as it is said, “from good to great.” How many times do people start home improvement projects, for instance, only to find that they lack money to finish them the way they dreamed? This would happen to the Parks Commission too, if not for the Foundation. The Foundation exists so that funding limitations do not stand in the way of having truly excellent parks and facilities. Each park can be designed to create a specific user experience and attract more visitors. Generous donor support can add amenities like modern restrooms, trail improvements, signage, launches, and much more. The Parks Foundation enables the Parks Commission to fulfill a compelling vision for a unique experience on each property.

And finally, the Parks Foundation empowers the Parks Commission to **stay ahead of population growth**. Ottawa County continues to grow at a great rate. However, we all know you can't make more land. The time to plan for population growth is before it happens, not after the fact. As one person put it, “I admire what the parks are going to do for my grandchildren's grandchildren.” Parks preserve ecosystems, encourage biodiversity, and create permanent payback for generations to come. It is difficult, if not impossible, to reclaim land that has been developed and return it to a natural state. Through the work of the Parks Foundation and Parks Commission, Ottawa County is well-positioned to size its parks system for the needs of a growing population.

Conclusion

We often hear visitors comment on the quality of our parks, the outstanding programs, and the sheer variety of both venues and activities. We are fortunate that Ottawa County residents are engaged and involved in a way that reflects love of the land and stewardship for the future.

The Parks Foundation provides the vehicle for anyone to make a gift that will yield a lifetime return. By encouraging balance between individual and community benefit, the Foundation ensures that wise investments can be made for today, and for tomorrow.