Chapter Seven

Benchmarks
COMMUNITY BENCHMARKING

INTRODUCTION
The purpose of benchmarking is to assist the planning team in setting goals and generating ideas for parks and recreation facilities in the County. The benchmarking study provides an exploration of the parks and recreation facilities and structure of counties comparable to St. Joseph County.

The main purpose is to assist St. Joseph County in finding comparisons for measurement and setting standards. By delineating the parks and recreation system of any one of the benchmark counties, St. Joseph can compare, contrast, and plan its future facilities and programs in a measurable context. The benchmark counties in this study were chosen because of their comparable context of being fairly large counties located on or next to a river and/or with nearby expressways. Another factor that was considered in choosing the benchmark counties was population and potential population growth.

METHODOLOGY
Data for the benchmarking was acquired through review of several peer agencies. Some data was not available through research or through the National Parks and Recreation’s (NRPA) Park Metrics database, formerly PRORAGIS. The data being collected was acquired from park agency websites, park master plans, phone conversations, or other online sources such as news articles. The information that was acquired for each agency will vary based on the methods in which the agency collects and maintains the data.

BENCHMARK COUNTIES
Elkhart County is located in north central Indiana just east of St. Joseph County and shares the St. Joseph River as a natural resource. It has about 65,000 fewer residents than St. Joseph County. Hamilton County is in central Indiana and borders Indianapolis to the northeast. It has two main thoroughfares, US 31 and Interstate 69, and the White River flows through the county. There are about 50,000 more residents than St. Joseph County. Hamilton County has 11 parks totaling 1,420 acres.

Vanderburgh County is in Southern Indiana on the Ohio River. The Wabash River runs to the west of the county and Interstates 64 and 69 run along the border. There are about 90,000 fewer residents than in St. Joseph County. Vanderburgh County was the outlier, with a much smaller acreage. St. Joseph County is comparable to the other two counties in total acreage and acreage per 1,000 residents. Vanderburgh County was the outlier, with a much smaller acreage. St. Joseph County is comparable to the other two counties in total acreage and acreage per 1,000 residents.

NUMBER OF PARKS
Three of the four parks agencies had between eight and twelve parks. Vanderburgh County was the outlier with only one park, but that park is programmed with more amenities than many of the other parks in the benchmarking analysis. At eight parks, St. Joseph County is in line with the other benchmarking communities.

NUMBER OF AMENITIES
Most of the county parks in the benchmarking study focus on passive recreation and providing access to natural areas. Some parks included amenities such as ball fields, pools, and playgrounds, but most commonly parks had trails, shelters, and restrooms. For most amenities, St. Joseph County had more than or a similar amount as the benchmarked county parks agencies. Although it is included in the table below, benchmarking active recreation amenities such as pools and ball fields isn’t as applicable since those types of amenities are not a focus of St. Joseph County Parks. Many of the municipal parks within the county focus on active recreation amenities.

BENCHMARKING MATRIX
Below is a matrix that compares the acreage, number of parks, and types of amenities between St. Joseph County Parks and the other three benchmarking counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark County</th>
<th>St. Joseph</th>
<th>Vanderburgh</th>
<th>Elkhart</th>
<th>Hamilton</th>
<th>Vigo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>270,434</td>
<td>181,721</td>
<td>203,781</td>
<td>323,747</td>
<td>107,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Acreage (ac)</td>
<td>1,332</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>1,120</td>
<td>1,589</td>
<td>885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acreage per 1,000 residents</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>8.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Parks</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball Fields</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playgrounds</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball Courts</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer Fields</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volleyball Courts</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Use/Walking Trails (mi)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pools/Splash Pads</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amphitheater</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat Launch</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groomed Cross-Country Skiing Trail/Bikes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature Center</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campgrounds</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (28 sites)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (106 sites)</td>
<td>3 (157 sites)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing Piers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature Preserve</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrooms</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking Areas</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Eight
Needs Analysis
NEEDS ANALYSIS & LEVEL OF SERVICE STANDARDS

“Successful, functional parks are those under intense use by a diverse set of companies and residents.”
Jane Jacobs
The Death and Life of Great American Cities

PARK ACREAGE LEVEL OF SERVICE STANDARDS
The Indiana Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) guidelines for recreation lands was reviewed to determine standards for level of service.¹ These guidelines recommend 20 acres of recreation lands per 1,000 population at the local or county level. St. Joseph County has roughly 270,000 residents, so for SCORP’s recommended level of service, this equates to 5,400 acres of park land. St. Joseph County Parks have about 1,400 acres of park land, so by itself, St. Joseph County falls short of the recommended level by 3,900 acres. However, when combined with other parks in the county, including South Bend and Mishawaka parks systems, St. Joseph County is close to the recommended acreage. In addition to the county and city parks, St. Joseph is home to the 3,480-acre Potato Creek State Park. Utilizing the total parks level of service benchmark of 55 acres per 1,000 residents, SCORP recommends 14,580 acres for total recreational lands in the county.

LEVEL OF SERVICE ANALYSIS
To better understand the service of St. Joseph County Parks and the strategies it implements to achieve its overall goals, this Master Plan process reviewed to determine standards for level of service. The information was then used to verify existing County Parks Level-of-Service (LOS) successes and gaps, using three typical metrics: system acreage, amenities, and access. Common in the public sector, civic departments and agencies utilize LOS standards to plan and monitor the quality of services provided to their constituents. A common example of this is the LOS roadway scores that transportation engineers and planners use to categorize traffic flow. “Grades” are assigned to roadways based on speed, density, and other performance measures. In all cases, these metrics tell only part of the overall story, emphasizing the need for reframing the measures of success that do not directly relate to parks and recreation agencies. Based on the 2018 NRPA data standards and insights for park and recreation agencies. Based on the 2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review Key Findings, the typical park and recreation agency offers:²

- One park for every 2.114 residents served
- 10.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents
- Operating expenditure per capita of $78.26/Year
- Revenue-To-Operating expenditure of 28%
- 7.9 full-time equivalent employees per 10,000 residents

Despite this information, determining LOS standards for parks and recreation systems can be challenging for several reasons.

- Parks and recreation systems can be measured in different ways. (Parkland acreage, numbers of recreation facilities, distance to parks and facilities, qualities of parks and facilities, operating costs, revenues, etc.).
- LOS metrics differ between various components of a parks system (For example, trail versus nature preserve).
- Appropriate LOS standards may also differ based on the community context. (Such as proximity to urbanized or rural areas).
- Type of park (For example, local park versus regional park)

With this in mind, the NRPA also notes that the diversity of communities and their park systems does not necessarily lend to comparing different systems against each other. More specifically, the recommendation is that benchmarking internal data will most optimally serve St. Joseph County.

ACREAGE LEVEL OF SERVICE
Acreage LOS evaluates the total amount of park acreage a community has when compared with its current and projected population (expressed in acres per 1,000 residents). This methodology is often one of the most widely utilized due to its ease of calculation. It is generally regarded that the higher the acreage LOS, the higher the quality of life enjoyed by the community’s residents.

City, town, and other privately owned recreation spaces would reduce the county’s overall deficiency, but only for the population that has access to them.

The public survey and other data collected during this process suggests that priorities for additional parkland include developing the Anderson Road property, extending trails, adding land contiguous to existing parks, and expanding toward the underserved areas of St. Joseph County.

¹ The full up to date SCORP report can be found at IN.gov website located in the IDNR webpages and downloaded as a pdf.
² NRPA Park Metrics can be found at https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/ParkMetrics/
ACCESS LEVEL OF SERVICE

Access LOS is used to analyze the distance residents must travel to utilize parks and recreation facilities within the County. Driven by priorities of reaching underserved populations and reducing the perception that county parks are too far away, St. Joseph County Parks must determine acceptable and/or aspirational distances based on its existing and proposed transportation network, as well as its goals for multimodal access.

Based on feedback received from the Public Input Survey and additional stakeholder group input, access to the parks was a perceived barrier to people using parks more frequently. The Project Team analyzed access to County Parks determining that most residents have access to a City or County Park within a 10-minute drive. Access to a County Park is less convenient for residents living in the southern part of the county. However, Potato Creek State Park is located in the southern part of the county and the population density is far less in this sector. While there may be financial and operational problems associated with adding park land in the southern part of the county, the Parks Board should consider adding park land strategically if the proper opportunity arises.

Categorizing the Parks based on acreage, types of amenities available, and programs offered, the access to the parks is reasonable and consistent with other similar counties in Indiana. However, a perceived issue of travel distance to County Parks is present, so if a higher LOS is desired, additional parks, trails, and greenways/blueways will be needed to improve County resident access and perception.

Blue dots indicate County parks.
Blue circles represent a five-mile radius.
Orange dots indicate South Bend parks.
Green dots indicate Mishawaka parks.
Orange & green circles represent a two-mile radius.