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Introduction
INTRODUCTION

Plan Process, Purpose and Scope

The St. Joseph County Parks and Recreation Board undertook this park master planning process in order to prioritize community needs, assure that the greatest benefit is achieved from each dollar spent, and expand funding and grant opportunities.

Facility improvements and program recommendations proposed in this plan will be based on the following factors:

- An assessment of current facilities and programs
- Review of the 2014-2018 St. Joseph County Parks Five-Year Master Plan
- Input from the community at large and stakeholder groups
- Input from the St. Joseph County Parks and Recreation Board
- An evaluation of the present opportunities, constraints, and goals.

The proposed recommendations serve as a guide for the development of recreational resources and amenities for the next five years and prioritize improvements to the park facilities and recreation programs that will most benefit the St. Joseph County community.

Specifically, this Five-Year Master Plan aims to accomplish the following:

- Discover strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats.
- Acquire input and gather support from the citizens of St. Joseph County and surrounding areas.
- Analyze information and public input to determine strategies, priorities, and an action plan for the next five years.
- Obtain Parks Board adoption of the plan.
- Submit a final plan to IDNR by April 15, 2019 and receive approval from IDNR for Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Program eligibility.
- Identify opportunities to add or improve Parks and Recreation programs and amenities.
- Serve as a supporting document to secure funding for proposed projects.

Master Parks Plan Objectives

The primary objectives of this plan, the Parks Board, and Parks Department, are as follows:

- Serve as a supporting document to secure funding for proposed projects.
- Identify opportunities to add or improve Parks and Recreation programs and amenities.
- Serve as a supporting document to secure funding for proposed projects.

How to Use the Plan

The Five-Year Master Plan should be used as a guiding document for the future of St. Joseph County Parks and Recreation services. The plan sets forth the goals, action plan, proposed projects, strategies, and potential costs associated with improvements over the next Five-Years and beyond.

The plan analyzes existing conditions, natural features, social and demographic factors, and many other contextual elements that impact the usage and goals for St. Joseph County Parks. In addition, public engagement provided a great deal of information on how people currently use the parks and how they would like to use the parks in the future. Results of the public input survey are included in the report and appendices.

The recommendations of the plan are summarized through an action plan matrix. This matrix identifies goals, strategies, and action items for the parks system, and where applicable, provides an anticipated cost range, time line for implementation, and potential resources or partnerships for the project.

This plan also allows the County to be eligible for the Land and Water Conservation Fund grant. The LWCF grant can be used to acquire land and develop new parks, or make capital improvements to existing parks. In addition to the LWCF, the plan increases St. Joseph County’s chances to secure other grants by having a master plan in place that is rooted in public input. Many funding entities are more likely to award grants to applicants that have previously gone through planning efforts for the proposed project because they know there is a higher probability for a successful project and a better return on investment.
PLANNING PROCESS

Discovery

Inventory and Analysis: The project team worked in a macro-level and micro-level approach to analyze the parks system and its facilities, amenities, and programs. Previous plans and studies were reviewed to gain a broad view, while analysis of existing conditions at an intimate level provided detailed insight into the condition of the parks and how they are used.

Stakeholder Group Meetings: Early in the process, the planning team met with the Parks Board, Foundation Board, Friends of Bendix Woods & Spicer Lake, and Parks Staff to discuss the current condition of the parks and how the parks could be improved in the coming years. Discussions ranged from broad mission and policy goals to specific maintenance and amenity items.

Facility Reviews: The parks were analyzed to determine the condition and maintenance needs, visitor experience, accessibility, and how the amenities aligned with other parks and the overall park system goals.

Public Engagement

Pop-Up Engagement Events: Pop-up engagement booths were set up at several parks and community events during the planning process to seek input and spread awareness. This helped the team connect with approximately 1,000 people in addition to the standard public meetings and surveys.

Public Meetings: Public meetings were held to give any resident an opportunity to provide in-person input. The first meeting was held on June 28, 2018 at St. Patrick’s County Park to gather input, and the second meeting was held on February 7, 2019 to present the draft plan and obtain feedback.

Public Input Survey: A survey was released to the public and was promoted through the website, social media, flyers at libraries and other locations in the community, and via word of mouth. A total of 560 responses were received.

Analysis

Analysis of Information Gathered: During the discovery and public engagement phases of the planning process, a large amount of information was gathered. The information was analyzed and combined into a thorough, yet easy-to-understand summary that was presented to, and discussed with, the Parks Board and other stakeholder groups.

Meeting with Advisory Group: Two meetings were held with the project advisory group to discuss the plan process, the information gathered, and to determine how that would shape future goals, strategies, and action items over the next five years and beyond.

Envisioning

After meeting with stakeholder groups and the advisory group, the vision and goals for the parks were developed. The planning team worked with parks staff to further develop the five major goals with supporting strategies and action items to guide the parks department over the next five years. Goals covered the entire spectrum of parks facilities, operations, maintenance, and administration. Strategies were aligned with the new goals, some of which were a continuation from years past considered integral to the parks’ continued mission, while others address more recent issues and trends that will be a priority in the coming years.

Implementation

Finally, the process looked at ways to implement the goals and strategies to make sure St. Joseph County Parks can accomplish a majority of them over the next five years. Through partnerships, funding mechanisms, and leveraging available new and existing resources, the Parks Department can find ways to build on past accomplishments and create new opportunities for future success.