

## 1.1 Portage County Watersheds Plan Executive Summary



In 2004 the Portage County Regional Planning Commission received a grant from the USDA Forest Service Watershed & Clean Water Grant Program through the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry to develop a plan to conserve critical natural resource areas and to foster natural resource stewardship in response to Portage County's continuing growth. Portage County is strategically located because it contains the headwaters and upstream portions of several rivers and streams that supply water to major populations in Northeast Ohio. This strategic location with respect to water supply and the fact that the County is in an earlier stage of development compared to more urbanized areas surrounding it, puts it at a crossroads regarding careful planning for growth and wise management of resources. The grant was awarded to create a plan and develop an educational program for natural resource stewardship including a conservation workshop. The plan was to serve as a guide to help local government officials and others identify and promote conservation of the County's critical natural resources with the goal of preserving water quality.

### Partners

Portage County Regional Planning has been the lead organization for the Watersheds Plan project. The primary partners included the Portage County Board of Commissioners and the Portage Park District who provided generous matching in-kind and cash contributions. Representatives from the following organizations contributed in-kind time, expertise and support by serving on the Steering Committee and attending meetings: American Heritage River and Cuyahoga River Remedial Action Plan, Breakneck Creek Coalition, Davey Resource Group, Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, Northeast Ohio Four County Regional Planning & Development Organization (NEFCO), Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, Portage County Office of Economic Development, Portage County Water Resources, Portage Soil & Water Conservation District, and the Western Reserve Resource Conservation & Development Council's Countryside Program. The expertise tapped for this project transcended political boundaries in the best sense of watershed planning.

An Advisory Committee was also created to provide input from other Portage County stakeholders who have an interest in watershed health and planning and to assure a broad base of support throughout the County for the Plan. Advisory Committee members included the Aggregate Industry, City of Akron Water Supply, Home Builders Association, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Portage County Emergency Management Agency, Portage County Engineer, Portage County Health District, Portage County Township Association, the Ravenna Training & Logistics Site, as well as citizens representing a variety of interests. They attended three meetings and supplied comments and advice in the process of creating the Watersheds Plan.

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### Vision & Mission

The **vision** of the Plan is “*to protect and enhance watershed health in Portage County.*” The **mission** is “*to create a watershed plan that promotes protection and enhancement of natural resources, sustainable development, and public participation in watershed health.*”

The project’s main objectives as stated in the original proposal were to:

1. Develop base data of the existing natural resources in Portage County, particularly the wetlands, woodlands and riparian areas, using digital mapping techniques.
2. Establish criteria to identify those wetlands and forests most critical for protection, preservation and restoration in the County’s watersheds (priority conservation areas).
3. Develop strategies that lead to improved watershed health and the protection of the priority conservation areas identified.
4. Develop educational programs and strategies that result in improved watershed health and stewardship of natural resources.

### Natural Resource Inventory

The first step in the plan was to inventory and map the riparian corridors, woodlands and wetlands in Portage County. Davey Resource Group won the contract to inventory these resources and they completed the mapping in November 2004. Woodlands were identified by approximate age or type and wetlands were identified by type. All mapping was done using geographic information systems technology to enable comparisons and analyses of the data.

To the extent feasible, watersheds were the basic unit of analysis for the Plan. Portage County is located on a major water basin divide between Lake Erie and the Ohio River. The County has 12 primary watersheds associated with major streams or rivers, three of them draining into the Mahoning River and the rest into the Lake Erie basin.

### Existing Conditions & Trends

The existing social and physical characteristics of the county were compiled for the Watersheds Plan to provide a basis for examining changes and development patterns. Between 1960 and 2000, the population of the County grew 66%, from 91,789 to 152,061. The overall population growth for the State of Ohio for this same period was 17%. Between 2000 and 2020, the county’s overall population is expected to increase by 24% to 189,141, a higher growth rate than the 12% experienced between 1980 and 2000. Vacant land decreased from 73% of the County in 1990 to 65% in 2000 and predictions suggests this trend will continue for some time. Most of the growth in recent years has been in the western half of the county in the Lake Erie watershed. The greatest concentrations of retail, commercial and industrial enterprises are found in areas of the county where central sewer and water are available, particularly in the cities of Aurora, Streetsboro, Kent and Ravenna and in Brimfield Township. The Ohio River Basin, occupying the eastern portion of the County, has had more dispersed residential development, primarily along the road frontage. Growth of older cities and villages has lagged behind more suburban areas such as Streetsboro and Aurora.

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### Issues

In conjunction with documenting the natural resources and other existing conditions, the issues facing the county with regards to conserving natural resources and protecting water quality were researched and summarized in early 2005 with the help of both committees. The main issues identified related to changes in land use that resulted in altered surface water flow and negative impacts to the natural landscape and water resources. Issues included:

- Storm water management
- Increased impervious surfaces
- Flooding
- Wastewater management
- Solid and hazardous waste management
- Resource consumption
- Threats to biodiversity

When analyzed at the county level, the frequency and threat level of the issues varied across the county with the western half experiencing more immediate threats from urban/suburban development and the eastern half facing threats from solid and hazardous waste management, agricultural runoff, and dispersed development impacts. Current efforts are already underway to alleviate some of the issues. Storm water management has become a primary focus of 11 communities (and Kent State University) affected by the EPA's Phase II storm water regulations associated with the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permitting process. The Portage County Board of Commissioners and the Portage Soil & Water Conservation District have taken a lead role assisting 8 of these communities in complying with the requirements of this NPDES permitting process. New state rules for household sewage treatment systems will also have an impact on wastewater management in the County. Understanding and managing the consumption of natural resources such as sand, gravel, oil, gas, timber, and water were also identified as important issues. Strategies devised to address the issues ranged from educational programs, to voluntary management plans, to better collection and dissemination of data.

### Natural Resource Assessment & Priority Conservation Areas

While all natural resources merit careful management and conservation, the goal of the plan was to identify priority conservation areas in Portage County to enable limited resources to be directed to those areas most in need of stewardship and to effect any necessary changes to land use policies and practices that negatively impact those resources. The Steering Committee created a scoring system for the inventoried wetlands and woodlands that focused on larger, intact areas and those that provided water quality protection due to their proximity to water features. Using digital mapping, each wetland or woodland area was ranked on the following criteria:

- Large, undisturbed system
- Multiple vegetation community
- Important buffer
- Proximity to other significant woodlands, wetlands or riparian corridors
- Potential for vernal pools (wetlands only)
- Within 300 feet of a named stream
- Within 500 feet of a stream ranked as high quality by the OEPA
- Adjacent to or within a source water protection area
- Adjacent to or within a protected area (parks, easement protected areas, reservoir protection areas, etc.)

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A map was created showing the priority conservation areas and their ranking. It is hoped these priority areas will form the basis for local communities, watershed groups, land conservancies, the Portage Park District, and other stakeholders to target and coordinate efforts and funds in a more holistic approach to conservation, preservation, and management of natural resources in the County and region.

## Goals, Objectives & Strategies

The three main goals of the Watershed Plan are to:

- ★ ***Protect and enhance the natural resources of Portage County***
- ★ ***Encourage public awareness of and involvement in watershed health and protection***
- ★ ***Encourage sustainable development in Portage County***

The first goal's aim is the natural resources themselves – with objectives and strategies that directly conserve and manage wetlands, forests and riparian areas with the underlying goal of preserving water quality. The second goal is the educational component of the Plan with many organizations and agencies participating in educational activities targeting residents, from grade school age children through adults, government workers, local officials, businesses, and those in the land development professions. Establishment of local watershed groups to create broad based stakeholder interest and to promote conservation and protection within local watersheds is a main objective and one that will help carry the county-wide plan beyond its more general strategies. The third goal concentrates on how growth should occur in Portage County and ways to make it more environmentally friendly.

Strategies to achieve these three goals include a mix of incentives, regulatory and legislative measures, policies, and educational actions. Because watersheds and ecosystems do not conform to political boundaries, public and private partnerships will need to be forged to effectively carry out many of these strategies. Our economic and social well being and quality of life, now and for future generations, are dependent on ensuring we have a healthy environment and livable communities. These strategies suggest steps we can take as individuals, groups and as a community to protect what is of immeasurable value.

## Public Meetings & Workshop

Two public meetings were held in April 2006 to inform the public about the Watersheds Plan and to obtain comments. The Conservation Workshop on June 22, 2006, featured four speakers who presented topics ranging from tools for sustainable growth to preserving trees on development sites to ways of preserving land with conservation easements.

## Dissemination & Use of the Watersheds Plan

The final Plan will be posted on a website and executive summaries and CDs of the full Plan as well as poster-size maps of Priority Wetlands & Woodlands will be distributed to local officials in the County as well as agencies and organizations. Digital data for users of geographic information systems will also be available. With widespread distribution and annual updates, the Plan will be a working document available for further refinement and expansion. It is intended for use in decision-making and for educational purposes.



Contact Portage County Regional Planning Commission at 330-297-3613 for more information.