

# **Updated Strategic Plan 2015-2018**

*Adopted by the Board of Park Commissioners April 16, 2015*

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# Introduction

On August 16, 2014, the Portage Park District Commissioners and the Portage Park Foundation Board met for a mutual strategic planning retreat, facilitated by Foundation Trustee and Organizational Development consultant, Sally Kandel. Our goal was to review and update the 2006-2011 Strategic Plan, and discuss ideas for the future since voters approved the first and only property tax levy to support the Park District on May 6, 2014.

In preparation for this retreat, participants were asked to complete a survey to gather initial brainstorming ideas about the following:

- Portage Park District's Mission, Vision, Values
- Review of the 2006-2011 Strategy Plan
- Campaign Promises
- Other Priorities
  - Education/Programming
  - Outreach/Marketing
  - Administration
- Roles of Park Commissioners and the Foundation Board of Trustees

Responses to the surveys were compiled and sent back to retreat participants. A packet summarizing the responses was prepared and used as a discussion guide for the retreat.

Some of the highlights of the retreat were:

- A writing committee was assigned (Christine Craycroft, Helen Gregory, Scott McKinney and Steve Zabor) to review the feedback on the PPD's mission, vision and values and develop drafts for discussion.
- All sections of the feedback were discussed and recommendations were collectively given.
- Based upon this feedback, Sally Kandel compiled the feedback and wrote the first draft of the goals with Jane Preston Rose reviewing the first draft.

All information was placed in a comprehensive document, using the same format as the 2006-2011 Strategy Plan. Christine Craycroft updated sections on the organization's status to be included in the new plan.

The draft of the plan was presented to the Foundation Board at its September meeting. Members approved the plan at its October meeting and presented it to the Park Commissioners November 2014 for their consideration. After minor modifications by Christine Craycroft and input from the Board of Park Commissioners the final draft was submitted for adoption by the Board at its April, 2015 meeting.

# Organizational Overview

The Portage Park District was formed in 1991 as an independent government agency, a political subdivision of the State of Ohio, whose geographic area is all of Portage County. It is governed by an unpaid, five-member Board of Park Commissioners appointed by the County Probate Judge. Current Board members are Scott McKinney, Allan Orashan, Deborah Petrone, and Elizabeth Tomasko Garner. As of March, 2015 Park Staff include full-time Executive Director Christine Craycroft and part-time Seasonal Maintenance Worker Lee Schaefer. In addition, the Park District has many committed volunteers in all areas of operations, including programming, public outreach, maintenance and resource stewardship.

The Park District's authority is described under the Ohio Revised Code (ORC), Title 15, "Conservation of Natural Resources", Chapter 1545 "Park Districts", which is the same authority under which other county park districts and metroparks operate such as Cleveland Metroparks and Geauga Park District.

Under section 1545.11 "Power to Acquire Property" the following language underpins the purpose of the Portage Park District: *The board of park commissioners may acquire lands either within or without the park district for conversion into forest reserves and for the conservation of the natural resources of the state, including streams, lakes, submerged lands, and swamplands, and to those ends may create parks, parkways, forest reservations, and other reservations and afforest, develop, improve, protect, and promote the use of the same in such manner as the board deems conducive to the general welfare.*

The Park District occupies a unique niche in the hierarchy of parks in the County. In addition to Park District properties, Portage County contains a spectrum of parklands, including State Parks, City Parks and Township parks, as well as privately owned for-profit or non-profit conservation and recreation lands. The Park District does not wish to compete with these other park agencies, which have their own purpose and mission, but rather to partner when appropriate to efficiently meet the needs for natural resources protection and public use and enjoyment.

Generally speaking, the Park District's niche is to provide larger, natural resource-based parks with minimal development, working throughout the County and often crossing municipal and township lines with parks and trails. Conservation of natural areas provides many benefits to the community by providing wildlife habitat and maintaining biodiversity, protecting water supplies, mitigating stormwater and preserving scenic landscapes. The Park District also seeks to provide opportunities for quiet enjoyment of parklands, such as hiking, biking, fishing, picnicking, canoeing, education, birdwatching etc. The Park District's role is generally to provide low-impact facilities for recreation within the context of resource protection, complementing more intensive and organized sports and recreation programs and facilities provided by other parks and recreation agencies.

# History & Accomplishments

The Portage Park District has grown considerably since its origin in 1991, thanks to partnerships and support from Portage County and other governments, non-profit conservation groups and individual donors. In 1996, the annual operating budget was \$15,000 and the only park was Towner's Woods, leased from the County. Since then the Park District has received over \$9 million in grants and donations. The Park District has given programs to thousands of residents and now manages 14 miles of hike and bike trail and 1,400 acres of parkland in 13 properties, 3 of which are regularly open to the public.

Properties operated by the Portage Park District include:

- Towner's Woods (open) 234 acres Franklin Twp.
- Dix Park (open) 103 acres Ravenna Twp.
- Seneca Ponds Park (open) 48 acres Streetsboro
- Headwaters Trail (open) Park District section: 8 miles Garrettsville to Mantua
- The PORTAGE Hike & Bike Trail (open) Park District section: 6 miles Ravenna to Kent & Franklin Twp.
- Berlin Lake Trail (open) 2 miles Deerfield Township
- Chagrin Headwaters Preserve 95 acres Mantua Twp.
- Breakneck Creek Preserve 63 acres Ravenna Twp.
- Walter Preserve 80 acres Palmyra Twp.
- Camp Spelman (open by permit) 58 acres Franklin Twp.
- Gray Birch Bog 22 acres Brimfield Twp.
- Morgan Preserve 504 acres, Shalersville Twp.
- Dix Preserve 10 acres, Rootstown Twp.
- Franklin Bog Preserve 58 acres Franklin Township
- Red Fox Cuyahoga River Boat Access 1.6 acres Shalersville
- Shaw Woods Working Lands Park 145 acres Ravenna Township

The Park District, as a stakeholder in recreation, transportation and natural resources conservation and management, has been involved with leading and contributing to a variety of planning and programming initiatives over the years, including

- Portage County Farmland Preservation Plan
- Portage County Watersheds Plan
- Portage County Parks, Trails and Greenways Plan
- Portage County Regional Planning Commission Subdivision Regulations Update
- Kent State University and Hiram College Bike Plans
- AMATS Bike, Pedestrian and Transportation Plans
- Lake Erie Allegheny Partnership for Biodiversity
- Cuyahoga River Water Trail Planning
- Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition
- Higher Education Service Learning programs

# 30-Year Envisioned Future

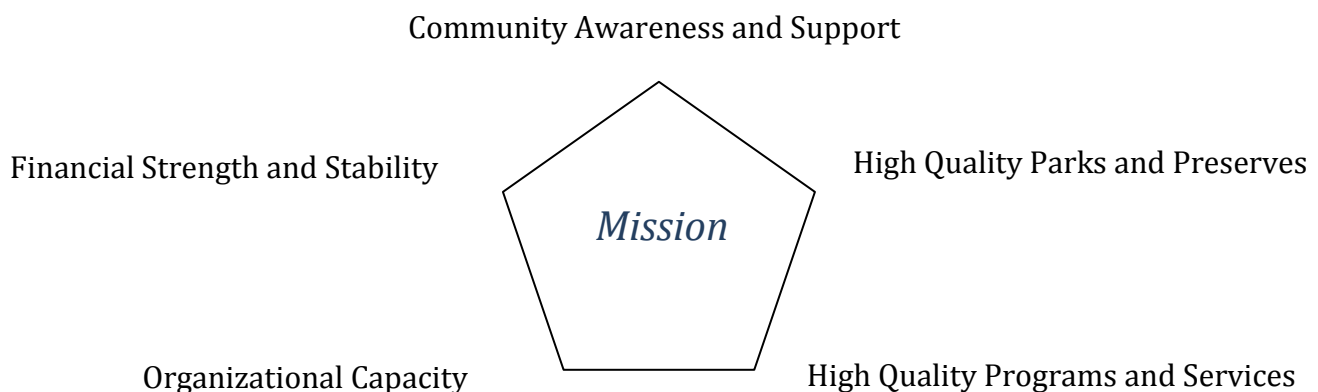
(reprinted from the 2006-2011 Strategy Plan)

Thirty years from now, Portage County will be known for the quality of life its natural areas provide. People will choose to live in Portage County because they value its natural beauty, fresh air, clean water, and rural living. Residents will be aware of the role the Portage Park District plays in maintaining what they treasure. They understand and are willing to pay for the multiple environmental, health, social and economic benefits the Park District provides. People will appreciate and use the Park District's system of interconnected parks, trails, wild areas and preserved cultural sites that tell the history and maintain the rural character of the place they call home. The Park District continues to work with local decision makers to assure built infrastructure is designed with the best interests of the natural environment and local economy in mind.

Generations of children will have experienced and appreciate the wonders of nature thanks to Portage Park District programs. It is a place for all ages to learn how our natural world operates and how people can live in harmony with it. The District's staff continues to be known, loved and admired by community members young and old. Their volunteers continue to be dedicated true stewards of the earth. The support of Portage County residents will provide millions of dollars each year to conserve land and create parks which yield benefits many times that value in clean air and water, wildlife, recreation and improved quality of life which sustains our communities.

## Critical Success Factors

In order for the Park District to make its vision a reality, the planning team identified the actions that will leverage the greatest success in the short and long-term. The following diagram illustrates the Park District's critical factors that influence how successfully we fulfill our mission. These are interdependent areas of operation; decisions and actions in any one area will influence one or more of the other areas, and so the alignment of goals and objectives between program areas and departments is essential.



## Critical Success Factors

# Mission, Vision, Values

## Mission

**The mission of the Portage Park District is to conserve Portage County's natural heritage and provide opportunities for its appreciation and enjoyment.**

We accomplish our mission through services and programs as follows:

### **Conservation Program**

- Planning in cooperation with other local and regional governments and partners to identify important conservation areas and methods.
- Acquiring naturally significant properties that protect air and water quality, wildlife habitat, native plants, and scenic landscapes
- Preserving, restoring and stewarding natural resources
- Serving as an expert consultant in developing land use policies, regulations and conservation options for private and public entities

### **Community Engagement and Education Program**

- Providing the public with learning opportunities about Portage County's natural heritage
- Increasing community awareness of and appreciation for the benefits of environmental conservation, and the methods to achieve it
- Providing opportunities for public participation through planning and volunteer programs
- Increasing public understanding of and support for the value provided by the Portage Park District
- Developing partnerships with educational institutions in Portage County to further research and education

### **Park Development and Maintenance Program**

- Creating parks and trails with facilities that allow for appropriate use, enjoyment and healthy recreation by all ages and abilities
- Developing parks and trails using materials, methods and designs that are environmentally, socially and economically sustainable
- Maintaining safe, clean facilities in a way that enhances visitor experience, while reducing negative impacts on natural resources

### **Administration Program**

- Developing policies and best practices guidelines for all areas of development and management
- Creating and sustaining valuable partnerships
- Pursuing a variety of funding opportunities
- Instilling a positive culture of competence and friendly professionalism with both paid and volunteer staff

## Vision

The Portage Park District conserves important natural areas and is a leader in promoting the sustainable use of land and resources for current and future generations. By creating and managing a countywide system of parks and inter-connected trails, the Park District protects native plants, wildlife, water quality and scenic landscapes. It provides opportunities for public use, education, and enjoyment; improving quality of life; and yielding health, economic, and social benefits that the public values and supports.

## Values

1. **Integrity:** We strive to make our actions and decisions consistently demonstrate mutual respect, honesty, and commitment to our purpose.
2. **Stewardship/Sustainability:** We practice good stewardship helping to ensure the long-term environmental, social, and economic health of Portage County.
3. **Service:** We are committed to serving the people, places and public good of Portage County through our mission.
4. **Fiscal Responsibility:** Having been entrusted with public funding by the residents of Portage County, the Park District will take care to ensure efficiency, effectiveness, fairness and transparency.
5. **Reverence for the Environment:** We share a deep respect for the wonders and beauty of nature, its essential provision of life-sustaining systems, and an appreciation for its spiritual and physical connections to people's lives.

## Planning Categories

To build upon the excellent work done to develop the 2006-2011 Strategy Plan, the retreat participants used the same planning categories, which were slightly updated to the following reflecting current conditions:

- Acquire, Develop, and Maintain High Quality Properties and Facilities
- Deliver High Quality Programs and Services
- Strengthen community awareness and active support for the Portage Park District
- Establish administrative functions to support the Portage Park District
- Formalize and grow the working relationship between the Portage Park District Foundation and the Portage Park District

## Goals 2015-2018

# **GOAL 1: Acquire, Develop and Maintain High Quality Properties and Facilities**

This goal is the heart of the Portage Park District, in fulfillment of its mandate of conservation from the Ohio Revised Code. The Park District acquires properties for natural resource conservation, biodiversity, water quality protection, and public use and enjoyment. Park land and water resources will be developed and maintained adhering to sustainability principles and environmentally sensitive land management practices to reduce resource and energy consumption and waste, reduce pollution, and increase efficiency.

## **A. Develop a Comprehensive Strategic Park Master Plan**

Prepare a Request for Qualifications and hire a consultant to assist in creating the Plan, considering the following:

1. Develop a comprehensive master plan that considers the best use of all properties and is consistent with the PPD mission, visions, and values and aligns with the Strategic Plan
  - a. Develop conceptual development plans for every property
  - b. Develop Facilities' Operations, Maintenance and Improvement 5 and 10-year plans for all parks
  - c. Develop a timeline and budget for implementation
2. Ensure the master plan addresses our campaign promises of:
  - a. Addressing deferred maintenance
  - b. Opening new parkland
  - c. Acquiring and developing new parks and trails
3. Ensure that there is a high degree of public and expert consultation in the master plan development
  - a. Consult with key stakeholder groups including representatives from local governments, other parks agencies, park users, educators, volunteers, partners and neighbors.
  - b. Consider a variety of methods to promote participation, including townhall meetings, focus groups, surveys, interviews, etc.
  - c. Provide opportunities for review and input of the Draft Master Plan
  - d. Ensure that there is a feedback loop for all participants who were consulted
4. Ensure a high degree of involvement from PPD Staff, Commissioners and Foundation members, with the Executive Director managing the process and being the key organizational contact with the consultant
5. Ensure accessibility of facilities according to ADA standards and best practices for inclusion

## **B. Continue to acquire significant trail corridors and natural areas**

1. Develop a Parkland and Trail Right-of-Way Acquisition Policy and Procedures Manual addressing the why, what and how of property acquisition.
2. Partner with other public and private organizations to identify and acquire priority properties
3. Inform landowners of the variety conservation options available and the benefits of land conservation

## **C. Appropriately develop properties to facilitate public use and enjoyment with minimal negative impact**

1. Create a Facilities Development Policy and Guidelines Manual identifying goals for development including purpose of development, size of footprint, materials, methods, design standards, public involvement opportunities and evaluation methods
2. Evaluate emerging technologies and materials to determine appropriate use
3. Reference and utilize LEED standards in development

## **D. Develop a short and long-term maintenance plan**

1. Develop a Resource Conservation and Stewardship Policy and Procedures Manual identifying goals and methods for natural resources conservation, considering
  - a. Biological, geological and historic inventories
  - b. Carrying capacity and health of the ecosystem
  - c. Biodiversity
2. Develop a Maintenance Manual including schedules and best practices for equipment, facilities, trails and grounds maintenance
3. Prioritize maintenance needs based on safety, user experience, safeguarding investments and cost-effectiveness

## **GOAL 2: Strengthen community awareness and active support for the Portage Park District**

Both the Foundation Board of Trustees and the Board of Park Commissioners stressed the importance of keeping the public informed about the Portage Park District's activities and continuing to raise awareness about the value that the Park District brings to our communities. Significant outreach efforts were undertaken during the levy campaign, and it is important that we continue to build on our existing support.

### **A. Develop a comprehensive outreach/marketing plan that addresses the following objectives:**

1. Continue to cultivate relationships with media contacts
  - a. Develop and distribute regular press releases
  - b. Provide regular updates to media on park development plans
  - c. Meet regularly with editorial boards of key newspapers/radio stations
2. Develop a consistent look for the park district with graphic standards (ensure ADA compliance/accessibility)
  - a. Create a Graphic Design Standards manual for literature and signage
  - b. Update signage, information kiosks, and park brochures
  - c. Update traveling display board and presentation materials
3. Ensure open and appropriate organizational and public communication
  - a. Identify authorized Park District spokespersons for different situations
  - b. Develop a Communications Plan, including
    1. Park District image, logo use and brand
    2. Communication consistency
    3. Appropriate communication technologies and media
    4. Communications in times of emergency or stress
    5. Internal organization communication methods and style
    6. Public engagement opportunities and styles
    7. Accommodations for language and accessibility
4. Continue to use the world wide web and social media
  - a. Maintain and update the PPD website
  - b. Expand readership and scope of the PPD electronic newsletter by increasing the mailing list and developing an engaging design
  - c. Use a variety of media to keep the public informed, e.g., video messages, e-blasts, ads, etc.
  - d. Post regular messages on Facebook ; grow the number of Facebook "likes" to 3,000
5. Determine key community events where PPD should have a regular presence
  - a. Identify key community festivals and fairs, e.g., Heritage Festival, Garrettsville Summer Days, Ravenna Balloon Affair, etc.
  - b. Identify key community associations, e.g., Rotary and Chamber of Commerce meetings
  - c. Identify key government and township events, e.g., Township Trustee Dinner
6. Outreach to government officials
  - a. Consider attending meetings once or twice a year to provide progress reports
  - b. Inform officials of Park District activities and plans
  - c. Advocate and educate for appropriate legislative and funding support
  - d. Explore economic development opportunities between the various municipalities, townships and the PPD

7. Consider hiring a staff person dedicated to outreach/marketing

**B. Develop and support a strong stakeholder or “friends” group**

1. Build on the group of volunteers identified during the levy and include diverse interests
2. Assign volunteer coordination as part of a specific employee’s job duties
3. Train volunteer park ‘ambassadors’ to increase exposure
4. Partner with the Park District Foundation on ‘friendraising’ and recognition events
5. Engage park neighbors and user groups with regular communications
6. Communicate advocacy and support needs

**C. Produce and Distribute Outreach Materials**

1. Produce an annual report showcasing the park district’s information including its overall profile, development progress, programs, human resources, plans and financial information
2. Create park brochures and maps for each park and for the Park District in general
3. Produce a monthly newsletter and distribute electronically and in print
4. Distribute materials through a variety of venues including at the parks, special events, local businesses, partner organizations, schools, local government offices, health facilities and libraries
5. Continue to develop and manage the Park District database of contacts and mailing lists by soliciting sign-ups online and in person at events, researching and reaching out to stakeholders, and cross marketing with allied interests

## **GOAL 3: Establish administrative functions to support the Park District**

Establishing a solid administrative foundation for projected growth and development covers three key areas: fiscal responsibility, human resources planning, and general administrative practices. Decisions in these areas will be guided by the PPD Master Plan and the PPD Strategic Plan.

### **A. Demonstrate and practice Fiscal Responsibility**

1. Develop annual and long-term budget(s)
  - a. Develop budgets for human resources, facilities operations, capital projects and major maintenance projects over the life of the 10 year levy
  - b. Conduct forecast planning and track the impact of HB 920 on levy proceeds over time
  - c. Identify cash flow and reserve fund needs
2. Explore revenue generating strategies to support park activities
  - a. Consider enterprises that provide services or goods to the public for a fee
  - b. Consider selling PPD branded products
  - c. Develop a long-range financial plan
3. Pursue grants for acquiring and developing parks and trails
  - a. Research public and private grant opportunities
  - b. Partner with public and private organizations such as the Trust for Public Land and the Western Reserve Land Conservancy to assist with grant seeking and writing
  - c. Develop relationships and share plans with local and regional foundations
4. Maintain an inventory control and recording system

### **B. Create and implement a Human Resources Plan that supports the Park District Comprehensive Master Plan**

1. Employees:
  - a. Establish job classifications, job descriptions, performance evaluation methods, schedule for regular staff meetings, compensation and benefits package
  - b. Partner with the Foundation on job sharing for key staff positions, e.g., office support, outreach coordinator, etc.
  - c. Develop a timeline and priorities for hiring positions
  - d. Identify critical staff development opportunities, including conferences, training, memberships, etc.
  - e. Create employee recognition opportunities
  - f. Identify positions which can generate revenue for the PPD, e.g., a grant writer or fundraiser
2. Park Volunteers
  - a. Develop a bank of volunteer “jobs”—consider different classifications of volunteering, e.g., events planning and implementation, trail maintenance, friend-raising, participant surveying, etc.
  - b. Identify employees who are responsible for volunteer oversight and coordination
  - c. Develop policies and procedures for volunteer recruitment, training, acknowledging and rewarding volunteers
  - d. Solicit volunteers from various areas including scouts, service learning programs, corporate volunteer programs, community service workers, workforce development programs, retirees, internships, etc.
3. Park Commissioners

- a. Update the Park Commissioner job description
- b. Provide the County Probate Judge with ongoing updates on Park District plans and projects. Provide administrative support to the Judge as needed to assist with Commissioner applications
- c. Review Board composition and consider desirable skills and competencies needed for vacancies that can inform the Probate Judge appointment decisions
- d. Update the Park Commissioner manual regarding Board roles and responsibilities; meeting conduct; legal and administrative changes affecting Park Districts
- e. Provide Board training and development opportunities

**C. Continue to represent the Park District through professional affiliations and regional partnerships**

1. Continually identify, develop, monitor and evaluate mutually beneficial partnerships with other local governments, public and private organizations, schools and businesses to further the mission and programs of the Park District
2. Participate on boards and committees which relate to the Park District's mission, including those in the areas of land use, park funding, health, recreation, community development, historic preservation, education, transportation and natural resource conservation
3. Provide and seek advice and support as appropriate to/from allied organizations and interests, including other parks departments, planning agencies and user groups

**D. Establish solid general administrative practices to support PPD growth and development**

1. Review, update and benchmark current policies and procedures with other park districts to assure Best Management Practices
2. Review and acquire necessary information technology equipment, software and training; manage electronic file backup system
3. Revise the records filing system and establish regular procedures for monitoring and adhering to records retention schedules
4. Develop a common Park District calendar to coordinate programs, project timelines, lease and agreement renewals, employee schedules and meetings
5. Develop and maintain a comprehensive contacts database
6. Ensure the strategic plan is a "living document" by holding semi-annual review sessions

## **GOAL 4: Deliver High Quality Programs and Services**

The Portage Park District provides high quality educational and recreational programs. These programs connect people of all ages to Portage County's natural environment, fostering an appreciation for the benefits of conservation and the value of the Park District.

### **A. Develop a two and five year education plan to promote awareness, understanding and appreciation of the natural environment**

1. Hire staff dedicated to nature education programming.
2. Develop relevant educational programs for all ages and abilities using best practices for environmental education and park interpretation
3. Relate program objectives to mandated school educational learning objectives
4. Referencing the results of the Comprehensive Master Parks Plan, identify areas in which the Park District can meet gaps in educational experiences
5. Encourage environmental stewardship through service learning programs
6. Continually monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs

### **B. Develop citizen science and educational research programs**

1. Identify and promote established citizen science and research programs on park district properties
2. Partner with schools and colleges to research issues related to park and natural areas management
3. Identify potential funded research opportunities

### **C. Develop a two and five year recreation program to promote safe, healthy recreation related to parks and trails for all ages and abilities**

1. Reference the Park District Comprehensive Master Plan to identify and address gaps in recreation programs appropriate for the Park District's mission
2. Partner with the KSU outdoor adventure center, private outdoor outfitter businesses, tour agencies, local schools, corporate wellness programs, etc. to develop and promote programs and provide specialized training, equipment and facilities as needed
3. Develop facilities and programs serving users with special needs due to physical and mental disabilities.

## **Goal 5: Enhance the Relationship between the Portage Park District Foundation and Portage Park District**

The Park District Foundation was established in 2010 and has been critical in acquiring funds to maintain Park District operations in a time of severe budget cuts. With public funding for operations now coming from a dedicated tax levy, the Foundation Board can now focus its efforts on fundraising to support and enhance special park programs and facilities.

### **A. Clarify and formalize the relationship between the Park District and the Foundation**

1. Develop a written agreement between the Board of the Foundation and Park District to address the use of Park District office space and equipment and potential administrative staff contracting
2. Develop policies for information sharing and privacy
3. Coordinate public outreach and volunteer development as needed for mutual support

### **B. Assure regular and open communication between organizations**

1. The Executive Director will be the communication liaison between the organizations, serving as an ex-officio member of the Foundation Board
2. Invite a member of the Foundation Board to participate on the Comprehensive Parks Master Plan steering committee
3. Share updated parks plans relevant for fundraising, foundation programs and special events
4. Include information about Foundation support activities in the Park District annual report

### **C. Assist with Fundraising Activities as appropriate**

1. Develop a policy for establishing and approving fundraising activities and events on behalf of, and in association with park properties and programs
2. Sponsor Foundation events as appropriate by providing facilities, materials and services
3. Partner in developing a mutually beneficial activities and special events calendar