



FINAL DRAFT

Portage Park District Master Plan

For Fun, for Health, for Life!

Portage County, Ohio

November, 2016



A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Portage Park District Master Plan
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Portage County, Ohio

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Judge Robert Berger

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PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT MASTER PLAN

PORTAGE COUNTY, OHIO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Located in northeastern Ohio, Portage County encompasses approximately 504 square miles of land area. The County is named for an old Native American trail called the Portage Path, now located in Summit County after that county was formed from a portion of Portage County.

Portage County has a population of 161,553 and contains 30 different jurisdictions: 5 cities, 7 villages, and 18 townships. The County's location is important because it is situated upstream of rivers and streams that supply water to large numbers of residents of northeastern Ohio. These characteristics make the planning of the area and preservation of land and water resources of critical importance.

The Portage Park District formed in 1991 as an independent political subdivision with jurisdiction over the entirety of Portage County. An unpaid Board of Park Commissioners governs the Portage Park District. The Park Commissioners are appointed by the Portage County Probate Judge. The Board oversees the Executive Director and is responsible for setting policy, developing rules and regulations, and approving the budget.

The Park District's oldest property, Towner's Woods, was acquired in phases by Portage County in the 1970's as a potential water supply, prior to the establishment of the Park District. The park opened to the public in 1975 and was dedicated in 1976. The operation of the property was turned over to the Portage Park District upon its formation.



The Park District has continuously added properties to its inventory, primarily through

donations and using funding from grants. The Park District inventory consists of 17 properties encompassing 1,782 acres, including three trail corridors or linear parks. Nine of these properties (representing 1,219 acres) were not open for public use at the beginning of this process but two have since opened (Shaw Woods and Morgan Park).

THE NEED FOR A PLAN

Over the past 15 years, the Portage Park District has received over \$9 million worth of grants and donations. The Park District has historically received funding from the Portage County General Fund with the approval of the Portage County Commissioners.

Starting in 2015, the majority of funds for Portage Park District operations and improvement come from a ½ mill property tax approved by voters in 2014. The levy will generate approximately \$1.6 million per year for 10 years.

With the passage of this levy, the Park District needs a plan to make informed decisions on the use of these public funds. A plan is also needed to determine the role of the Park District in the provision of parks and recreation services in Portage County. Several cities, villages, and townships provide local, close-to-home and more active recreation areas, and the State of Ohio and other non-profit organizations offer both parks, preserves, and other land for recreation and conservation. Changes to the makeup of the population also have implications to both the current and future needs for parks and recreation in Portage County.

Recognizing that the needs of the population should be assessed, the Board of Park Commissioners and staff of the Park District determined that a comprehensive process should be completed to determine the needs of the County over the next 10 years, leading to the authorization of this Master Plan. The Board appointed a Steering Committee to guide the planning process.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARKS

The development of a plan for the Portage Park District is important because parks

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provide a number of benefits and services to the community. Additionally, the Park District has a responsibility to manage parkland in an efficient manner that is consistent with the health, safety, and welfare of the community. The Portage Park District Master Plan will assist and direct the management of these lands and facilities.

The quality of the local parks and recreation system is one indicator of the overall quality of life of a community. Natural areas like those provided in Portage Park District properties provide many benefits to the residents of Portage County. Woodlands, for example, provide space for recreational opportunities such as hiking, bird watching, camping, fishing, and hunting that improve quality of life by reducing stress and helping residents remain active.

Woodlands provide many other benefits, including improvements to air quality, soil stability, and the local climate (blocking winds and providing shade). Wooded areas also reduce stormwater runoff, and provide food, habitat, and shelter for wildlife. Wetlands absorb precipitation, trap sediment, slow runoff, and recharge groundwater.



Parks provide numerous benefits to the health and wellness of a community. For example, parks can be an effective component of a strategy to address issues such as poor nutrition, hunger, obesity, and physical inactivity. Studies also indicate that a connection to nature can relieve stress, improve interpersonal relationships, and improves mental health.

Finally, parks are important because they can serve as gathering places for the community and can help cultivate community ties, leading to a sense of connectedness that

promote a more livable and desirable community.

A CITIZEN DRIVEN PLAN

The purpose of this plan is to address the needs of the community, so a primary focus of the planning process was to identify those needs. A number of methods were utilized to determine the needs and desires of Portage County residents for parks, recreation, open space, and trails. The public was involved in the process through the following methods:

1. Two public workshops to kick-off the process (over 50 attendees)
2. A statistically valid Parks and Recreation Survey conducted by ETC Institute that was completed by 527 households
3. A web-based and handout survey that was completed by 160 residents
4. An active Parks District Master Plan Steering Committee
5. Meetings with over 20 stakeholder groups
6. An online engagement website, Portage Park District Strategic Master Plan, powered by mySidewalk
7. Presentations of the public input findings

WHAT PORTAGE COUNTY RESIDENTS SAID

The information gathered from the various public input methods was used to identify the needs of Portage County residents. A summary of the findings from the public input process is provided below.

Statistically Valid Mail Survey

1. Seventy-one percent (71%) of residents visited a park offered by the Portage Park District over the past year, and 44% of these residents visited parks more than 11 times.
2. The PORTAGE Hike and Bike Trail was the most visited facility (49% reporting visiting), followed by Towner's Woods (35%).
3. The top reasons for not using parks more often included:
 - Do not know what is offered (50%)
 - Do not know location of facilities (34%)
 - Program or facility not offered (25%)
4. The improvements households would most like to see to existing parks included:
 - Improve/add restrooms (53%)

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- Improve hiking/walking trails (41%)
 - Expand trails (36%)
 - Bike trails (35%)
 - Drinking fountains (32%)
5. Eighty-one percent (81%) of households are either “very supportive” or “somewhat supportive” of Park District actions to upgrade older parks and recreation facilities. Other actions with very high levels of support included:
- Provide opportunities to connect children with nature (78%)
 - Develop new recreational trails and connect existing trails (77%)
- Web Survey respondents were generally more supportive of all potential actions.
6. The most needed parks and recreation facilities for households were:
- Walking and hiking trails (70%)
 - Paved bike trails (57%)
 - Natural areas/nature parks (56%)
 - Picnic shelters/picnic areas (51%)
- The largest number of households had unmet needs for the following facilities: walking and hiking trails, paved bike trails, a sled hill, and natural areas/nature parks.
7. The most needed recreation programs for households were:
- Adult fitness and wellness (43%)
 - Cycling (39%)
 - Concerts (34%)
 - Fishing (33%)
 - 50+ programs (32%)
- The largest number of households had unmet needs for the following programs: adult fitness and wellness programs, concerts, 50+ programs, heritage and history programs, and nature education programs.
8. Respondents were asked how they would allocate \$100 among different types of parks and recreation facility improvements in Portage County. The top responses ranked as follows:
- Improve/maintain existing parks
 - Develop new walking and biking trails
 - Conserve land for wildlife habitat and water quality protection

Portage Park District Strategic Master Plan Website (powered by mySidewalk)

1. Walking or hiking was by far the highest ranked option for how respondents utilize the parks (95%), followed by bike riding (69%) and enjoying nature (64%).
2. The top features users included in a vision of the future were:
 - Extend and connect existing trails
 - Mountain biking trails
 - More hiking trails

Public Workshop and Stakeholder Groups

Reoccurring themes included:

- Trail connections to destinations inside and outside the County
- Trail amenities – signage, restrooms, pavilions
- Closed parks open to the public
- Water trails developed and enhanced
- Development of equestrian trails and an equestrian park
- Nature education programs offered
- Partnerships utilized to maximize efforts
- Cooperation between local and regional organizations
- Set an example of land stewardship and protection
- Greater awareness of Park District parks and programs by Portage County residents



The input gathered from all of the methods yielded similar results. Several common themes appeared in all methods of public input. Residents would like to see upgrades to existing facilities, more trails, and more program offerings.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

The needs analysis portion of this Master Plan examined level of service guidelines, land

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conservation priorities, and the geographic distribution of parks in Portage County.

Level of Service Guidelines

The services offered by the Portage Park District are best accomplished through targeted acquisitions based on resources, but acreage standards can be useful to set targets for acquisitions (both countywide and in various county regions).

Two commonly used methods of analyzing parkland service levels in a community are included in this plan: acres per population and percentage of total land area. The guidelines presented in Chapter IV use 20 acres per 1,000 population and 1% of total land area as 10-year targets for the Portage Park District.

The acreage targets, which are derived in part from the benchmarking survey of other park districts, are intended to serve as a realistic and feasible acquisition goal for the Portage Park District over the next 10 years. The approximately 1,500 additional acres necessary to meet these targets would put the Park District near the median of the comparison districts, assuming those districts acquired no additional land over the next 10 years.

Facility level of service guidelines are also included in this Master Plan. These guidelines are based on the desires of Portage County residents and indicate needs for a variety of facilities, most notably trails of all types.

Conservation Priorities

As a conservation focused agency, the Portage Park District must prioritize the conservation value of any potential acquisition over other considerations. The Western Reserve Land Conservancy Model provides a method of evaluating the probability of conservation value for land in Portage County. This model, in conjunction with data for specific natural resources, provides a resource for identifying potential acquisition.

An analysis of vacant parcels in Portage County indicates nearly 300 parcels (covering over 18,000 acres) that likely contain land with high conservation value, based on the Western Reserve Land Conservancy Model.

Geographic Distribution

Analysis of the geographic distribution of parks and facilities indicates that most Portage

County residents live within a short drive of some park amenities.

The most notable areas outside of the service areas for parks are portions of Hiram and Randolph Townships, although smaller gaps are apparent throughout Portage County. Gaps are also apparent throughout Portage County for trail access, playgrounds, and, to a lesser extent, picnic shelters.

STRATEGIC PLAN

Vision Statement

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

Residents and visitors will encounter the following characteristics in Portage Park District facilities, programs, and interactions with staff.

1. Integrity
2. Stewardship/Sustainability
3. Service
4. Fiscal Responsibility
5. Reverence for the Environment

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Mission Statement

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

Guiding Principles

We accomplish our mission through services and programs as follows:

1. 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.

2. 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

3. 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

4. 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

Goals and Objectives

This Master Plan includes five goals each with a series of objectives that further describe how the Portage Park District will invest time, energy, and resources over the next ten years. The goals and objective are provided in the ensuing text. Strategies represent the concrete, specific actions the District will take to accomplish each of these objectives. These 178 actions follow directly from the vision and can be found in the Action Plan (Chapter X).

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

Objectives:

- 1.1. Develop a Comprehensive Strategic Park System Master Plan
- 1.2. Continue to acquire significant trail corridors and natural areas
- 1.3. Appropriately develop properties to facilitate public use and enjoyment with minimal negative impact
- 1.4. Continue to emphasize the conservation, restoration, and stewardship of natural resources as a principal purpose of the Portage Park District
- 1.5. Implement the levy campaign promises
- 1.6. Develop a short and long-term maintenance plan

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

Objectives:

- 2.1. Develop a comprehensive outreach/marketing plan

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- 2.2. Develop and support a strong stakeholder or "friends" group
- 2.3. Produce and distribute outreach materials

GOAL 3: Establish administrative functions to support the Park District

Objectives:

- 3.1. Demonstrate and practice Fiscal Responsibility
- 3.2. Create and implement a Human Resources Plan that supports the Park District Strategic Master Plan
- 3.3. Utilize ongoing training to ensure highly proficient and passionate staff, Board, and volunteers, consistent with the community expectation of excellence for the Park District
- 3.4. Continue to represent the Park District through professional affiliations and regional partnerships
- 3.5. Establish solid general administrative practices to support PPD growth and development
- 3.6. Establish and develop facilities to support the functions of the Park District

GOAL 4: Deliver High Quality Programs and Services

Objectives:

- 4.1. Develop a two and five-year education plan to promote awareness, understanding and appreciation of the natural environment
- 4.2. Develop citizen science and educational research programs
- 4.3. Develop a two and five-year recreation program to promote safe, healthy recreation related to parks and trails for all ages and abilities

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

Objectives:

- 5.1. Clarify and formalize the relationship between the Park District and the Foundation
- 5.2. Assure regular and open communication between organizations
- 5.3. Assist with Fundraising Activities

DISTRICT-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

The ensuing text presents the overall recommendations for the Portage Park District for the next ten years. Key concepts are listed first followed by specific strategies for operations, programs, land acquisition, and facility development.

Key Concepts

The key concepts are organized by the guiding principles established in the Strategic Plan.

1. Conservation Program

- Conserve, manage, and restore high priority natural resource assets.
- Develop a maximum of 10% of Park District lands for public use.
- Attain a goal of an additional 1,500 acres of Park District land in ten years.

2. Community Engagement and Education: Connecting People with Nature

- Establish stronger relationships with partners for research, land acquisition, nature education, healthy lifestyle initiatives, and much more.
- Offer a range of programming at sites that can best support each program and support the Mission and Vision of the Portage Park District.

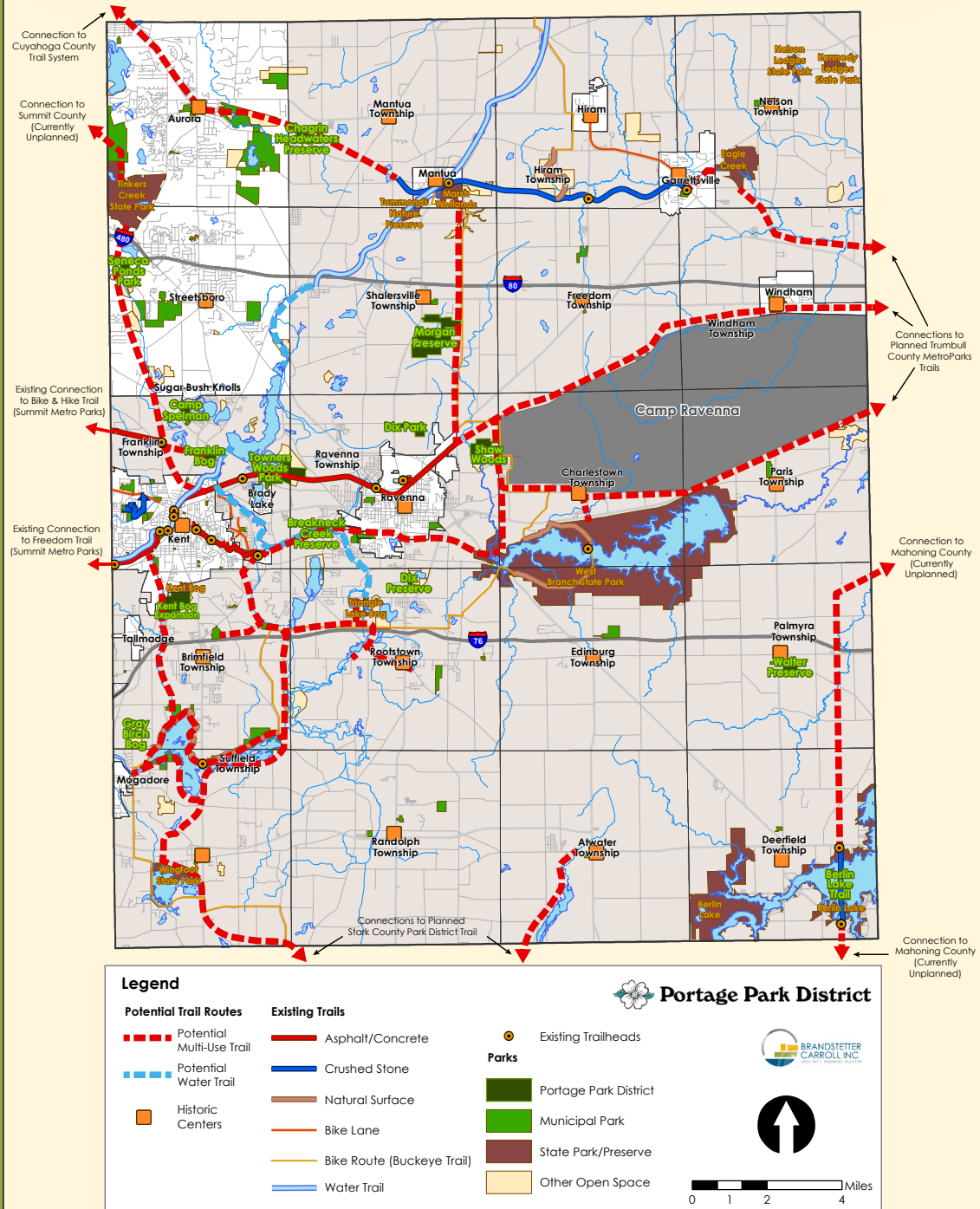
3. Park Development and Maintenance Program

- Open up the Park District's current properties for public use within the next ten years.
- Provide trail connections to destinations inside and outside of the County with a trailhead within a ten-minute drive of every Portage County household (see the Potential Future Trail Routes map - right).



Potential Future Trail Routes

Portage Park District Master Plan
Portage County, Ohio



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- Provide a variety of trail use opportunities throughout the County.
- Improve water trail opportunities on Breakneck Creek and the Cuyahoga River.
- Provide camping at Breakneck Creek Preserve, Morgan Park, and Camp Spelman, with long term camping at Towners Woods when the Hike and Bike Trail continues to several states.
- Provide additional passive oriented facilities such as picnic shelters, nature based playgrounds, reservable meeting facilities, and small event venues.



- Update and improve trail and wayfinding signage throughout the County.
- Implement planning, design, and maintenance practices that serve as examples of best management practices.
- Practice natural areas management and stewardship to maintain and improve the quality of the resources.
- Develop and open only those park properties appropriate for public use.

4. Effective and Efficient Administration

- Develop a headquarters, visitor center, operations center, and program venue for the District.
- Increase partnerships for programming, conservation, and park and trail creation and use.
- Expand the role of volunteers.
- Practice fiscal responsibility.

Operations Recommendations

1. Establish a volunteer program to help raise funds and implement this Master Plan
2. Seek grants and partnerships for additional

3. Expand awareness of programming opportunities
4. Encourage professional and career development plans for all staff

Program Recommendations

1. Ensure the availability of program offerings for all residents regardless of age or ability level
2. Expand program offerings to include a wide variety of activities

Land Acquisition Recommendations

1. Place the highest emphasis on the acquisition of properties with high conservation value
2. Consider service gaps when evaluating potential acquisitions
3. Acquire property suitable for facilities that are unsuitable at current properties (outdoor theater, mountain bike trails, etc.)

Facility Development Recommendations

1. Focus initial efforts on opening and developing facilities at existing properties, including those currently closed to the public
2. Plan and begin to implement a county-wide system of trails (see map)
3. Develop future properties to include facilities currently unavailable to Portage County residents
4. Develop Master Plans for existing and future properties to ensure design is consistent with public preferences

INDIVIDUAL PARK RECOMMENDATIONS

The following lists focus on the key recommendations for each Portage Park District property. Concept plans are provided for each property in Chapter IX. All parks need signage and support facilities which are not included in these lists. Chapter IX of this Master Plan includes cost estimates and detailed descriptions of the outlined improvements.

1. Breakneck Creek Preserve

- Hiking Trail
- Small Shelter
- Fishing Dock
- Kayak/Canoe Launch

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- Observation Tower
- Parking Lot

2. Camp Spelman

- Accessible Trail
- Hiking Trail
- Three Season Shelter
- Kayak/Canoe Launch
- Primitive Camping Area
- Permanent Tent Structures
- Parking Lot



3. Chagrin Headwaters Preserve

- Accessible Trail
- Hiking Trail
- Parking Lot
- Small Shelter

4. Dix Park

- Accessible Trail
- Native Restoration
- Hiking Trail
- Parking Lot Expansion
- Large Shelter
- Nature Play and Picnic Area

5. Dix Preserve

- Small Shelter
- Accessible Trail
- Hiking Trail
- Native Restoration

6. Franklin Bog

- Hiking Trail
- Native Restoration
- Parking Lot
- Fishing Dock

7. Gray Birch Bog

- Bog Kiosk
- Boardwalk (foot bridge)
- Hiking Trail

8. Kent Bog

- Bog Kiosk
- Hiking Trail

9. Morgan Park

- Accessible Trail
- Hiking Trail
- Bridge
- Shelter
- Native Orchard & Arboretum
- Primitive Camping Area
- Native Restoration



10. Seneca Ponds Park

- Picnic Area
- Accessible Trail
- Native Restoration
- Parking Lot
- Fishing Dock
- Stone Treatment at Pond



11. Shaw Woods

- Equestrian/Accessible Trail
- Equestrian/Hiking Trail
- Native Restoration (utility corridor)
- Multi Seasonal Shelter
- Overlook with Kiosk
- Bridge

12. Towner's Woods

- Accessible Trail
- Hiking Trail
- Pavilion Replacement
- Brady Tower Welcome Center
- Picnic Area
- Hike and Bike Trail relocation
- Birdwatching Kiosk/Bird Blind
- Primitive Camping Area
- West Knoll Shelter Replacement

13. Walter Preserve

- Accessible Trail
- Hiking Trail
- Native Restoration
- Parking Lot

IMPLEMENTATION

Cost estimates for the individual properties in Chapter IX include recommendations for phasing in order to prioritize improvements and spread the costs over the 10-year timeframe of this Master Plan. The implementation and maintenance costs for these and other recommendations of the plan are also included in Chapter VII.

The recommendations in this plan would lead to the development of approximately 150 additional acres of parkland within the Portage Park District properties. This development would yield a developed percentage of approximately 5% of Park District land if the District acquired 1,500 additional acres as recommended in this plan. This developed percentage would be safely within the goal of developing a maximum of 10% of Park District lands for public use.

The development of additional facilities, combined with the acquisition of land and the development of additional programs will require the expansion of the Portage Park District staff. These new staff members will represent approximately 6 additional employees (compared to the 2016 staffing level).

The cost to implement the recommendations of this Master Plan and operate the resulting facilities is in excess of the Park District's roughly \$1.6 million annual budget. As a result, the realization of the vision of this Master Plan will take more than 10 years and will likely require the expansion of funding, collaboration with local jurisdictions and regional organizations, and significant volunteer efforts by motivated members of the community.