

Region 2 Planning Commission



MEMORANDUM #2

To: Joint Oversight Committee
Joint Recreation Plan & Operations Study

From: Grant E. Bauman, AICP
R2PC Principal Planner

Date: September 29, 2009

Subject: **Benefits of a Metropolitan Park System**

Staff was directed to list potential benefits of a metropolitan park system which can be used to generate public support of such a system. Accordingly, this memorandum:

- Shows that the City and County park systems already function as a single system in many respects;
- Acknowledges the financial constraints facing the City and County and summarizes public support for common strategies which address the issue; and
- Lists the potential benefits of a combined City and County park system.

A separate memo identifies the general benefits attributed to the provision of parks.

Complementary Systems

Jackson County and the City of Jackson currently maintain park systems worthy of pride. Both systems have a variety of signature facilities which attract people from Jackson, the rest of Jackson County, and beyond. For example, both systems contain premier golf courses. The City's system hosts the Ella Sharp Museum of Art and History, the Hurst Planetarium, and Nixon Park's water and skate parks. The County's system contains the Cascades and the campgrounds located in Swains Lake and Pleasant Lake County Parks.

The two systems also complement each other. The City provides a system of mini-, neighborhood, community and regional parks. The County's system consists of community and regional parks. City residents utilize county parks and citizens living outside of the city utilize city parks. It is probably safe to say that many people make no differentiation between city and county parks, utilizing them as a single system. In fact, due to the juxtaposition of city and county parks, Summit Township provides no parkland of its own. It contributes to both systems by helping to develop the portions of the county-wide trail system which traverse the community.

The recreation programs offered by both park systems are also complementary. For example, Jackson County hosts a series of fireworks displays on or around Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day in Sparks Foundation County Park, which extends into Jackson, providing easy access to City residents. Adult recreation programs provided by the City are already open to anyone, regardless of where they live. Low-cost youth recreation programs are open to all students attending the Jackson Public Schools and local parochial (catholic and protestant) schools, regardless of residency.

Addressing Financial Constraints

Michigan's present economic climate is challenging the ability of municipalities to maintain park systems at current levels given rising costs and reductions in operational funding. This is certainly true for Jackson County and the City of Jackson. A statewide survey conducted during the winter of 2007 gauged support for solutions commonly employed to address the current fiscal situation.¹

The results from the survey showed lukewarm support for half of the strategies and disagreement with the other strategies. For example, respondents indicated strong disagreement with:

- Laying off municipal employees to reduce costs; or
- Cutting the pay and benefits of municipal employees to reduce costs.

Disagreement was the response for:

- Increasing local taxes to generate additional funds; or
- Transferring the responsibility for the services to the county, the state, or a special government district.

Respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with:

- Seeking state or federal aid to help pay for the service;
- Consolidating the provision of services with another local government;
- Contracting the provision of services to a for-profit or nonprofit organization; or
- Contracting the provision of services to another local government.

In short, reducing costs by eliminating municipal employees or reducing the compensation of existing employees received the strongest opposition and increasing taxes or transferring the service to the county or the state were also opposed. Although support for seeking state or federal aid was neutral, it is also not likely given the continuing budget woes in the state capital. That leaves the consolidation of parks and recreation services in some way, shape or form as the most amenable strategy.

Potential Benefits of a Metropolitan System

A metropolitan park system would provide the administrative framework which would allow for the following benefits:

¹Jared Carr of Wayne State University prepared [Support by Michigan Residents for Eight Common Strategies for Confronting Fiscal Stress in Municipal Governments](#), which reports the survey results, for the Land Policy Institute, Michigan State University, in October of 2008.

- Expansion of the City's recreation programs aimed at youth and adults to other parts of the county.

The City's youth programs are funded by a millage through Jackson Public Schools, allowing for no or low cost recreation opportunities to kids attending school through Jackson Public Schools or local parochial schools.

The establishment of millages, school district by school district, throughout the county could result in a countywide recreation program with a youth championships for various sports.

- Further development of a countywide trail system.

The City and County first cooperated with various other local units of government to plan for a countywide trail system in 2002. The "Jackson County Regional Trailway Study" provides a framework of trails throughout the county. Since then, local planning efforts in the Heart of the Lakes Area (the Village of Brooklyn, Columbia Township, Napoleon Township, Norvell Township, and the Columbia School District), Summit Township, Leoni Township, the Village of Concord, and the Grass Lake Area (e.g., Grass Lake Charter Township, Village of Grass Lake, and Grass Lake Community Schools) have expanded upon that effort. The establishment of a metro park system may provide the administrative framework needed for the development of the countywide system.

- Expansion of the City's public art program to other parts of the county.

The City currently uses the proceeds generated from cell towers sited on public lands to fund the placement of sculptures throughout the municipality, including parks. The public art program is administrated by the Public Art Committee of the Arts and Cultural Alliance of Jackson County. Since municipal funds are utilized, the siting of sculptures is currently limited to the City. However, the program could easily be expanded to parks and other public lands throughout the county if sources of funding can be identified and secured.

- Possible admission of other local governments with parks and recreation programs into the metropolitan system.

Other interested townships and villages may wish to join the metro park system. The bylaws of a combined system should allow for this to happen.