

Monmouth County Park System Strategic Plan February 2019

Draft copy pending Board Adoption



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PURPOSE

The purpose of the Strategic Plan is to ensure that the Monmouth County Park System (Park System) has the resources necessary to fulfill its mission. The Strategic Plan is designed to guide the actions of the Park System staff in meeting the challenges and seize the opportunities of the next five years to ensure that the Park System has the financial, physical and human resources necessary to provide outstanding recreational opportunities and exceptional facilities while preserving and protecting open spaces and historic and natural resources.

The Strategic Plan will focus on actions considered to be critical in preparing the agency for the expected internal and external environments within which it operates. It is not an exhaustive list of all agency strategies and activities, nor is it a comprehensive work plan for the routine operation of the agency. It is a set of actions designed to formalize a plan for vibrant growth of the organization as a vital and integral part of responsible County Government, a steward of fragile natural resources, as provider of outstanding recreation and cultural activities and a promoter of healthy living through outdoor activity and family recreation.

The Strategic plan will review the Park System, its organization and budget as it exists to meet current needs and circumstances. The Plan will then identify goals for agency action and strategies to achieve success in securing a stable environment in which to succeed in the future.

ABOUT THE PARK SYSTEM

The Park System is an agency of the County of Monmouth; the Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders provides a portion of the County budget for operations and staffing. The Monmouth County Park System operates under New Jersey Statutes Annotated (NJSA) Title 40:12-1 et seq., permitting counties to create Boards of Recreation Commissioners. The Monmouth County Board of Recreation Commissioners was created by resolution of the Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders on August 1, 1962. The Monmouth County Board of Recreation Commissioners, a nine-member board of lay citizens appointed by the Board of Chosen Freeholders, is the public statutory authority responsible for policy-making functions in the operation of the Monmouth County Park System.

To fulfill its agency mission, the Park System is first and foremost a steward of parks, open spaces, and historic and natural resources. Since the establishment of the first County Park in 1960, the Park System has grown to include 43 park areas on more than 17,000 acres visited by over 6 million persons each year. The diversity and geographic distribution of these park areas mirrors that of the County's nearly 640,000 residents. Examples include Historic Walnford, a National Register of Historic Places site in the largely rural township of Upper Freehold; Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park in the coastal city of Long Branch, where a safe and clean guarded beach and a modern skateplex attract frequent crowds; sprawling Turkey Swamp Park in Freehold Township where the family campgrounds and lake provide an ideal spot for a faraway experience close to home; Hominy Hill Golf Course in Colts Neck, one of six county courses offering a quality golf experience at affordable prices; the rolling, forested Hartshorne Woods Park in Middletown with its challenging trails and breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean and Navesink River; Manasquan Reservoir in Howell, home to a modern Environmental Center and a family of bald eagles; and Holmdel Park in Holmdel, where cross country track meets, group picnics, sledding, and visits to Historic Longstreet Farm are a tradition for generations of Monmouth County families. These and other developed facilities and thousands of acres of undeveloped land are operated and managed by Park System staff and a large corps of volunteers for the use and enjoyment of Monmouth County residents.

In addition to its land and facility management function, the Park System serves nearly 120,000 residents each year through the approximately 5,000 recreation programs offered, primarily at County park facilities. Groups, individuals and families can choose from a variety of program categories. Sports and fitness programs such as Kids Kixx Soccer, Beginner Golf, Learn to Swim, and Yoga at the Shore provide healthy physical activity and teach lifetime recreation skills. The state of the art Creative Arts Center at Thompson Park allows the creative arts offerings to include pottery, ceramics and sculpture building in addition to more traditional painting and drawing classes. Baby Ballet, Ballroom Dance, Theater for Tots, and a trip to an American Indians Arts Festival are examples of other cultural and performance arts programs. Outdoor recreation programs take full advantage of the Park System's outdoor resources where participants can experience sailing, canoeing, kayaking, camping, bicycling, and hiking. Animal life, ecology and exploration are the key themes of the nature activities, many of which are

designed for school and youth groups. Gardening and history are two popular program categories.

Therapeutic recreation programs serve children and adults with special needs; the award winning equestrian program is located at the Sunnyside Equestrian Area in Middletown where an indoor riding arena was funded by the non-profit group Special People United to Ride, or SPUR. The Park System's Urban Recreation Division, established in 1988, offers a full range of programs to residents of the County's State-designated Urban Aid communities for free or at reduced prices, and they operate the Coastal Activity Center, a leased facility in Asbury Park.

Over 2,500 children attend the Park System's weeklong summer camps. Attendance at the Park System's major events, Walnford Day, Monmouth County Fair, Longstreet Farm's Harvest Home Festival, Bayshore Waterfront Park's Wind and Sea Festival, and Thompson Park Day totaled more than 75,000 in 2018. Other events that fill the Park System calendar include the E. Murray Todd Half Marathon, Earth Day Celebration, Wool Days at Longstreet Farm, National Trails Day, Woods Hollow Classic Mountain Bike Race, Timberbrook Triathlon, and the Deep Cut Gardens Open House. The Park System also provides a venue for many events organized by others including charity walkathons and races, horse and dog shows, wedding ceremonies, commercial media shoots, state cross country running meets, and other athletic events.

VISION STATEMENT

The Monmouth County Board of Recreation Commissioners is committed to improving the quality of life of the citizens of Monmouth County as set forth in the Board's adopted County Park and Recreation Policy and the Mission Statement.

The Board will achieve its vision by:

- Providing leadership in the county's open-space, park, recreation and conservation programs;
- Maintaining a strong on-going relationships with national, state and local governments;
- Administering county grants and assistance to the county's municipalities for close to home, open-space preservation and recreation facilities;
- Continuing to provide well maintained and safe county-wide regional open-space, park, recreation and conservation facilities, programs and services to Monmouth County's citizens;
- Continuing to expand opportunities and services that surprise, inspire and delight County Park System guests;
- Continuing to provide strong communities through county park, recreation and conservation;
- Continuing to provide leadership in the preservation and conservation of the county's water resources and other natural and cultural resources of county significance;
- Continuing to educate the public and elected officials and the county leadership as to the benefits and values of open-space, parks, recreation and conservation; and

- Continuing to promote healthy lifestyles and lifetime recreational opportunities for all ages and abilities.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Board of Recreation Commissioners is committed to improving the quality of life of the citizens of Monmouth County by providing open space, park and recreation areas, facilities, programs, and services of the highest quality and to furnishing these recreational and educational opportunities in the most effective, efficient, and economical manner possible. The Board shall pursue this mission in the following ways:

- by studying, planning, acquiring, improving, and managing lands of county significance for parks, recreation, conservation, agricultural, and open-space preservation;
- by protecting and interpreting natural, historic, and cultural resources of county significance;
- by providing recreational facilities, programs, and services to meet the county-wide needs of the citizens of Monmouth County for the recreation and well-being of body, mind, and spirit; and
- by implementing this mission in accordance with the Board's adopted County Park and Recreation Policy and other adopted policies of the Board.

CORE VALUES

Environmental Sustainability

- Commitment to the preservation and conservation of the County's natural resources
- Thoughtful and conservative approach to using resources in day-to-day operations
- Pursuit of proactive measures to support healthy and diverse natural habitats and wildlife
- Teaching a conservation ethic through programs and published materials

Fiscal Responsibility

- Awareness of costs at the most local level to respond to opportunities for cost savings
- Pursuit of revenue producing programs, services and facilities to mitigate the budgetary impact of park operations on taxpayers
- Investment in capital resources to provide modern and responsive facilities for staff and visitors

Citizen Participation

- Abundant opportunities for residents to be involved with park operations through an extensive volunteer program
- Open public meetings that encourage citizen attendance and participation
- Extensive opportunities for citizen feedback through surveys, reviews and evaluations
- Ready access to decision makers to share concerns, complaints, and suggestions
- Clear and convenient access to public records
- Quick response to visitor concerns

Staff Development

- Recruitment of employees who demonstrate the best chance of success and who are inclined to pursue a career with the Park System
- Comprehensive training curriculum to equip staff to meet all challenges
- Challenging, supportive, and participatory work environment to retain staff
- Identification and nurturing of future leaders within agency

Health and Wellness

- Initiatives that promote healthy lifestyles for staff and employees
- Emphasis on programs that introduce wellness of the mind and body

Safety and Security

- Safe and secure environments to promote the optimal visitor experience
- Workplace safety programs and initiatives to protect staff from harm

Creative expression

- Agency culture that encourages creative programs and problem solving

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PARK SYSTEM STRUCTURE

The Park System is headed by the Secretary/Director and the Assistant Director. The Director and Assistant Director are ultimately responsible for all Park System operations and staff. They provide overall guidance on Park System policies and procedures and formulate Park System budgets for review and approval by the County Freeholders. Below the Secretary/Director and the Assistant Director, the Park System is comprised of four primary divisions.

Acquisition & Design

In Acquisition & Design, planning, land preservation, and design personnel work together to ensure that the short-term and long-term open space and recreation needs and expectations of present and future County residents are met; they handle all land acquisition, capital project design and development, project management, and master plan and resource plan development, and provide technical expertise to the Park System's operating units responsible for land and facility management. The graphics department works with all other departments in the production of printed materials and graphic design.

Administrative Services

Administrative Services support all other Park System departments; it maintains a professional cost accounting system, provides control of budgets through the management of payroll, revenue, and expenditures, maintains basic communication services, and serves as the point of contact for customers seeking information about and reservations for Park System programs and facilities. In-house purchasing staff works to ensure that the procurement of goods and services is economical, expeditious, and in conformance with all applicable laws; its central supply division helps to satisfy the material and supply needs of the various operational areas by providing receiving, warehousing, and delivery service while maintaining a secure system of inventory control. In-house human resources staff supports the hiring and training of the Park System's full-time and seasonal staff as well as handling all labor relations, record keeping, regulatory compliance and worker safety. In-house Information Technology staff maintains and support all Park System computer systems. Fundraising and grants procurement are handled by fundraising staff, who also act as staff liaison to our non-profit partners.

Operations & Maintenance

Operations & Maintenance, under the supervision of the Superintendent of Parks, is currently organized in three principal divisions: Park Operations, Construction & Repair, and Golf Courses. Within Park Operations, park areas are organized into four regionally based groups that are each overseen by an Assistant Superintendent of Parks. Each park area has a manager/supervisor who, along with the area's staff, is responsible for the overall maintenance and operation of the area. Golf Course operations and maintenance are organized under a Superintendent of Parks for Golf and a General Manager of Golf Courses with Golf Center Operations and Maintenance Operations assigned for each course.

Construction, Repair & Inspection and Equipment Services personnel keep the structures, facilities, and equipment critical to the delivery of services in working order. Construction, Repair & Inspection staff are organized by trade (mechanics, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, welders, painters, and a sign maker) or as Construction Inspectors and are dispatched to other locations on a job specific basis.

Visitors Services

Visitor Services is currently organized into eleven divisions. Eight of the eleven divisions within Visitor Services are directly responsible for program design and delivery. These include Nature Interpretation staff educating people about their environment and encourage stewardship of existing open space and park land, Cultural Services and Creative Arts staff providing instruction in creative arts, crafts, culinary arts, performing arts, and health and wellness programming, and Urban Recreation providing recreation opportunities to residents of low-income and state-designated urban areas of Monmouth County. These also include Therapeutic Recreation providing access to recreation opportunities for individuals with disabilities in order to enhance physical, cognitive, emotional, and social functioning, Equestrian Division providing fundamental equestrian experiences for people of all abilities, with a major emphasis on offering benefits to individuals with disabilities, Outdoor Adventures promoting personal well-being, social interaction, and environmental awareness through a variety of outdoor adventure activities, and Sports and Fitness providing recreational opportunities for all ages and ability levels which develop skill and interest in lifetime sports and fitness activities.

The other three divisions provide program support. Visitor Services Administration provides department oversight, and provides clerical and managerial support to the other Visitor Services divisions. Marketing and Communications provides existing and potential customers with information about Park System activities, facilities, and services and encourage them to enjoy the benefits that are available by maintaining the agency website, publishing brochures, newsletters, and activity directories, issuing press releases, and advertising Park System programs and facilities. Volunteer Services manages the volunteer program in which individuals and groups are given the opportunity to become involved with the Monmouth County Park System. Volunteer Services administers the recruitment, training, and deployment of volunteers to seasonal and year-round opportunities throughout the Park System.

The Park System also enjoys close relationships with a number of affiliated non-profit groups. The Friends of the Monmouth County Park System is a non-profit charitable organization comprised of area citizens and businesses committed to supporting the Monmouth County Park System. The Friends of the Parks charitable organization provides financial support exclusively for MCPS enhancements, such as preserving historical and natural resources, providing recreational opportunities for urban youth, and providing activities for individuals with disabilities within the community. Special People United to Ride (SPUR) is a non-profit organization of local citizens established in

1981. Members assist the Park System in serving individuals with physical and mental disabilities through horseback riding lessons at the Sunnyside Equestrian Center. The Monmouth Conservation Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving open space. The Foundation has often acquires and holds open space properties until the Park System or a local municipality can purchase and preserve the land.

The Monmouth County Park System enjoys the distinction of being the nation's first accredited park and recreation agency, receiving this distinction in 1994. This accreditation is a reflection of the high standards of fiscal policy, program delivery, and facility and land management observed by the Board of Recreation Commissioners and its staff. The Park System was reaccredited in 1994, 2004, 2009 and 2014 and will undergo a fifth reaccreditation review in 2019. A commitment to self-examination and willingness to evolve as circumstances change is critical to the maintenance of a quality public agency.

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PARK SYSTEM BUDGET

Funds for park system operations, development and maintenance are provided primarily from four budgets, the Operating Budget from the County general appropriation, the Board of Recreation Commissioners Trust Fund, the County Open Space Trust Fund Tax, and the County Annual Capital Budget.

The Operating Budget, part of the larger County of Monmouth Operating Budget, is primarily property tax supported. State law limits the amount by which the County can increase operating expenses each year regardless of changes in revenue. As a result of conservative budget approach at the County level the Operating Budget directly funds only Park System salaries, wages, fringe benefits and makes insurance, legal and IT services, printing, gasoline, and diesel fuel available through central accounts. Some accounts for equipment, supplies and outside services for park development and maintenance appear in the County Operating Budget, but are offset by anticipated Park System revenue returned to the County's General Fund.

The Trust Fund Budget is a special fund outside the County Operating Budget authorized by the same State law that authorizes the Board of Chosen Freeholders to appoint a Board of Recreation Commissioners (N.J.S.A. 40:12-1 et seq). According to the law (N.J.S.A. 40:12-8), the special fund is to be "used only for the purpose of defraying the expense of improving, maintaining or policing the playgrounds and recreation places and for the other expenses of the board." The Park System's Trust Budget is supported by revenue from facilities, programs, and services. The Fees and Charges Policy of the Monmouth County Board of Recreation Commissioners reads in part as follows: "In order to adequately finance the acquisition, development, administration, operation and maintenance of these necessary public park and recreation areas, facilities and services, user fees and charges shall be considered to be a responsible and necessary means of supplementing tax revenues for this purpose." Because Trust Budgets are outside the state-imposed limits on budget increases, the Trust expenses can grow as increased demand for facilities, programs and services generates increased Trust revenue to support them. Without the fees and charges associated with park facilities and programs that feed the Trust Budget, the volume and breadth of Park System services would be limited to that fundable under a fixed and capped operating budget. Whereas the Trust Budget was once used almost exclusively for program-related expenses and resale merchandise, other operational expenses have been shifted to the Trust Budget as the County Operating Budget has been static or reduced in recent years. The Park System is now predominantly reliant on Trust revenue for basic operations and maintenance, including hourly staff wages. Salaries, wages and benefits for full-time employees still come from the Operating Budget. Trust revenue generated by the park areas provides vital support to the operation of the Park System and offsets budget expenses. In 2017 over \$16 million in revenue was collected of which \$9.1 million was retained in the Trust Fund; roughly \$6.9 million was returned to the County General Fund.

Major categories of non-program revenue currently include the following:

- Golf greens fees, reservation cards and fees, golf tournaments, cart rentals, and resale items.

- Facility rentals including shelter buildings, meeting rooms, reservable group use areas, cabins and camp sites, athletic fields/courts, East Freehold Showgrounds, and marina slips and storage.
- Equipment rentals including row boats, kayaks, cross-country skis, and snowshoes.
- User fees for events and activities including wedding ceremonies, model airplane and rocket launching, cross-country meets, professional photography and film production, fishing tournaments, tour boat rides, seasonal beach access and parking fees, and special event permits.

The Open Space Trust Fund Tax, first established in 1989, is a statutorily-authorized dedicated tax for “the acquisition of lands for County park, recreation, conservation, and farmland preservation purposes, as well as for County recreation and conservation development and maintenance purposes.” The Fund has been used for open space acquisition, the construction and improvement of park facilities, and for land acquisition legal services since 1998. In 2013, the Board of Chosen Freeholders approved the allocation of up to 30 percent of the tax collected each year for park development and maintenance. In 2013 20% was allocated, this amounted to \$3,357,468, of which \$3,087,352 was budgeted for maintenance. Maintenance expenses included employee salary and wages as well as construction and maintenance materials; emergency and safety materials; janitorial services; maintenance, repairs, improvements and servicing; grounds maintenance, renovation and restoration work; and professional consulting services.

In 2017, voters approved an increase in collection rate for the Open Space Trust fund, which now stands at 2.75cents per \$100 of assessed value.

Additionally, the Board of Chosen Freeholders allocates \$2 million from the Open Space Trust Fund annually for cooperative projects with Monmouth County municipalities. Both land acquisition and development for park, recreation, and open space purposes are eligible for funding. The Monmouth County Municipal Open Space Grant Program is a competitive program which is administered by the Monmouth County Park System with support for staffing and legal services coming from the Open Space Trust Fund.

Funds for the construction and improvement of recreation facilities are provided by two budgets, the Open Space Trust Fund Tax described above and the County Capital Budget. The County Capital Budget, approved annually by the Board of Chosen Freeholders and funded by a County bond ordinance, annually includes up to \$8 million for major improvement projects.

Public and private grants and donations, although not a stable source of funding, can provide meaningful contributions to the completion of select projects. Recent examples of donations include a \$122,000 donation from the Colts Neck Lions Club for the construction of an addition to Challenger Place playground at Dorbrook Recreation Area.

Government grants in recent years include: NJ Department of Environmental Protection, Green Acres Program, NJDEP Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund (HDSRF) program; Department of Defense, US Navy, Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program; Federal Transportation Alternative Set-Aside Program (TAP) through the NJ Dept of Transportation.

STRENGTHS

- *Stable funding sources* – After a period of budget stagnation and contraction of approved staff positions from 2009 – 2014, the Park System over the past five years has received stable funding from the County’s budget.
- *Consistent support from elected officials and county administration* – Park System staff regularly collaborate with County administration, Finance, Purchasing, Human Resources, Public Works, and Engineering to provide a coordinated approach to operational challenges. Additionally, the Board of Chosen Freeholders consistently shows its support for the Park System through funding and their attendance at park events.
- *Talented professional staff* – higher than average number of employees with advanced degrees and specialized licenses and certifications.
- *Dedicated labor force* – staff regularly accepts broad definitions of their job descriptions and embrace “other duties as assigned”
- *Low staff turnover* – despite cyclical trends with turnover in the Park Ranger and trades titles, there is below average staff turnover. Many seasonal staff return for five or more years which contributes to depth of knowledge and skill in the workforce.
- *Semi-autonomous administrative functions*- the Park System’s ability to retain some autonomy from larger County operations in purchasing, human resources, bookkeeping, and equipment repair contributes to increased efficiency and responsiveness to internal and external demands.
- *Exceptional diversity of recreational program choices*- the Park System is a leader in recreational programming as illustrated in the voluminous offerings in the quarterly Parks and Programs guide.
- *Strong non-profit partners*- Special People United to Ride, the Friends of the Parks, and the Monmouth Conservation Foundation, in addition to providing funding and technical support, provide broad citizen support to the Park System’s mission from their membership bases.
- *Vibrant volunteer program* – the Park System volunteer program has no equal in terms of the diversity of duties and the sincerity of commitment from its corps.
- *Exceptional physical resources*- from natural beaches, to century forests, from freshwater wetlands to scenic vistas, the Park System’s natural holdings represent the best that the County has to offer.
- *Responsive citizenry* - Monmouth County residents love their parks and will support them when called to action, as demonstrated by the recent overwhelming support for an increase in the Open Space tax.

- *Stable union relationship* – the Park System and CWA leadership have a healthy relationship and union grievances are relatively few.

WEAKNESSES

- *Unbalanced regional service* – there is a higher number of programs and recreational facilities in the central and northern regions of the County. Western and south coastal regions lag behind.
- *Limited access options to parks* – access to parks by public transportation and pedestrians is limited. Most visitors come to the parks via private vehicles. This limits opportunities for residents who do not have personal vehicles.
- *Duplication of operations* – decentralized operations sometimes leads to duplication of equipment and supplies.
- *Staff access to information* – field staff has limited access to timely accounting data and other information gathered at Park System headquarters.

OPPORTUNITIES

- *Greater use of technology* – there are many applications available that are not currently employed to improve efficiency of operations.
- *Expansion of connections between public open spaces* – through acquisition and partnership projects, there are many opportunities to connect existing open spaces, both county and municipal, to create extensive green belts.
- *Development of more revenue oriented facilities*- park visitors have demonstrated that they are willing to pay for quality facilities. More fee-based facilities should be explored.
- *Increased operational efficiency*- although Park System staff work across divisions to coordinate operations, there are always opportunities for additional collaboration to reduce duplication of efforts.
- *Strengthened stakeholder support*- the Park System enjoys broad support from County residents but there are opportunities to build greater awareness of the benefits of public open spaces.
- *Increased financial support in the form of donations, gifts, grants and sponsorships*- Monmouth County has tremendous financial resources and there are countless unidentified opportunities for entities to show their support for parks in the forms of contributions and partnerships.

THREATS

- *Aging infrastructure* – as buildings, roads, parking lots, trails, bridges, dams, wells, septic systems and other infrastructure age, they will require more financial resources to upgrade.
- *Government regulation* – new legislation and other state administrative mandates related to environmental permitting, minimum wage, paid sick and family leave, and therapeutic recreation services reporting requirements put an increasing drain on the budget and staff time.
- *Dispersion of operations* – as new park areas are added, developed and staffed, there will be a greater strain on the budget to outfit offices and provide supplies and equipment to operate the facilities.
- *Cost of labor* – an increasing burden on the budget will come from exponentially escalating salaries, wages and fringe benefits.
- *Natural challenges* – severe weather events, invasive plant and insect epidemics, and overpopulation of deer are just some of the natural challenges that will pull resources away from other services.
- *Competition for private sector* – private providers can sometimes respond more quickly to leisure trends and can also be more responsive with pricing and incentives. The recent popularity of Top Golf is an example.
- *Constituent demands for local facilities*- as family schedules become tighter, residents may become less tolerant to drive far distances for recreation programs. They will seek choices that are closer to home.
- *Cyclical nature of recreational and leisure interests* – some recreational interests unpredictably ebb and flow, making it difficult to plan the construction of new facilities and purchase of new equipment. Recent examples of trend sensitive recreation include foot golf, disc golf, pickleball, and stand-up paddle boarding.

ACTION PLAN

CATEGORY:	Administration
ACTION:	Form a committee to plan for the transition to a new accounting application to replace the current custom program.
ASSIGNMENT:	Assistant Director
OUTCOME:	Written recommendation for purchase of new accounting application.
COMPLETION:	September, 2020

CATEGORY: Planning
ACTION: Revise golf course master plans to include construction of additional non-golf recreational amenities
ASSIGNMENT: Chief of Acquisition and Design
OUTCOME: Revised master plans.
COMPLETION: May 2021

CATEGORY: Marketing
ACTION: Develop a coordinated marketing plan for promoting rental sites, especially wedding venues
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendent of Recreation
OUTCOME: Board adopted revision to alcohol policy
COMPLETION: September 2021

CATEGORY: Administration
ACTION: Establish a technology steering committee to plan for growing needs of field staff
ASSIGNMENT: Assistant Director
OUTCOME: Written recommendation for purchase of new hardware and software
COMPLETION: March 2020

CATEGORY: Operations
ACTION: Establish a timeline for the phasing in of greener infrastructure including indoor and outdoor lighting, HVAC systems, energy efficient windows/doors, low flow plumbing fixtures
ASSIGNMENT: Director of Construction and Repair
OUTCOME: Written timeline for purchase and installation of green equipment
COMPLETION: June 2021

CATEGORY: Operations
ACTION: Develop a plan for test use of electric an alternative fuel motor vehicles and maintenance equipment.
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendents of Parks and Golf
OUTCOME: Annual capital equipment budget
COMPLETION: Annual budget cycle

CATEGORY: Human Resources
ACTION: Develop additional opportunities for mentoring, internships, and counselors-in-training to prepare youth for future employment with the Park System

ASSIGNMENT: Director of HR
OUTCOME: Written vacancy announcements for internships
COMPLETION: April 2020

CATEGORY: Facilities
ACTION: Consider expansion of alcohol-permitted rental sites
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendent of Parks
OUTCOME: Written recommendation for Board-designated alcohol permitted sites
COMPLETION: June 2020

CATEGORY: Marketing
ACTION: Develop an app for mobile friendly access to park and program information and registration
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendent of Recreation
OUTCOME: Written recommendation for purchase of new app
COMPLETION: April 2020

CATEGORY: Administration
ACTION: Develop greater staff awareness of operational costs per building, program, and site by distributing data already captured in the cost accounting system
ASSIGNMENT: Assistant Director
OUTCOME: Improved, regular distribution of accounting reports
COMPLETION: October 2019

CATEGORY: Operations
ACTION: Develop a staff incentive program for improvements in operational efficiency
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendent of Parks
COMPLETION: January 2020

CATEGORY: Performance management
ACTION: Develop measurable performance and service standards related to each of the Park System's core values.
ASSIGNMENT: Assistant Director
OUTCOME: Written standards for each department
COMPLETION: March 2020

CATEGORY: Marketing
ACTION: Develop an annual theme that will drive visitation and participation, to be included in Park System publications
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendent of Recreation
OUTCOME: Annual theme promoted in programs and publications
COMPLETION: Ongoing, beginning in 2020

CATEGORY: Fundraising
ACTION: Actively pursue sponsorships for all major events
ASSIGNMENT: Fundraiser
OUTCOME: Annual sponsorship prospectus
COMPLETION: Annually beginning in 2020

CATEGORY: Marketing
ACTION: Develop customer service and satisfaction standards
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendent of Recreation
OUTCOME: Written standards with detailed measurement methods
COMPLETION: June 2020

CATEGORY: Fees and Charges
ACTION: Establish add-on and prime options, for an additional fee, for certain rentals, programs, and services
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendents of Parks, Golf, and Recreation
OUTCOME: Annual fees and charges schedule
COMPLETION: Annually, beginning in 2020

CATEGORY: Concessions
ACTION: Identify opportunities for additional concessions including food and rental services
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendents of Parks and Golf
OUTCOME: Written specifications for new concessions
COMPLETION: Annually, beginning in 2020

CATEGORY: Marketing
ACTION: Consistent messaging to highlight the benefits and accomplishments of the Park System
ASSIGNMENT: Superintendent of Recreation
OUTCOME: Sustained campaign of press releases and media engagements to highlight notable programs and facilities.
COMPLETION: Monthly, beginning in 2019

ADDITIONAL INITIATIVES

Gifts and Donations

Grant monies and donations of cash, although not a stable source of funding can also provide meaningful contributions to the construction or completion of select improvement projects. The Park System should continue working with the Friends of Monmouth County Parks (Friends) to develop donor relations and expand opportunities for giving.

- Expand grant writing and consider hiring a grant writer or contracting with a grant writing consultant to leverage budget with State, Federal and Foundation grants for acquisition, development and natural lands management
- Expand Park Specific donation strategies. Many residents form strong attachments to individual parks and facilities and this may form a basis for concentrated support
- Secure donations of funding for stewardship or improvements along with donations of land to quickly enhance public use of donated land
- Continue cooperation with the Friends on project specific fundraising
- Expand opportunities for Friends fundraising events in conjunction with other Park System events/programs
- Consider an Adopt-a-Park program that focuses on fund raising rather than volunteer stewardship or maintenance activities such as trail building or tree pruning.

Public Relations

Related, in many ways, to our success in securing adequate budgets and increasing our revenue and fundraising is the ability of the Park System to educate the public about our mission and the benefits of public open space. The Park System should develop a regular series of messages and methods for getting those messages out to the public.

Types of Messages:

- Health benefits of Parks/Open Space
- Fiscal/Tax benefits of Parks/Open Space
- Water Supply benefits of Parks/Open Space, including purity and sustainable yield
- Youth development and outdoor activities
- Quality of Life/Business retention from Open Space
- Complexities/Resources needed to manage MCPS
- Benefits of Historical Preservation
- Benefits of Habitat Conservation/Restoration
- Benefits of preservation of species, including future medical/pharmaceutical benefits
- Benefits of Public/Private partnership in Parks/Open Space
- Cost/Benefits of public recreation systems

Methods of Messaging:

- Op Eds and Letters to the Editor
- Speaking Engagements to Civic/Political Groups
- Public Official/Candidate Outreach
- Advertising in Print and other media
- Inserting message in MCPS media and programs
- Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter
- School programs and Youth group outreach
- Senior Citizen programs and outreach
- Church group outreach
- Liaison programs with local Environmental Groups/Environmental Commissions

Volunteers

Volunteers can be found in many different roles throughout the Park System. Some volunteers act as gardeners, historic site interpreters, and program leaders while others contribute to the success of events such as the Monmouth County Fair, Thompson Park Day and the Earth Day. Listed below are the totals for Volunteer Participation for the past two years and a breakdown of all the types of activities engaged in by volunteers.

As is readily apparent, the Volunteer in the Parks program is very successful. The Park System would not be able to be as successful as it is without the hard work of our very dedicated volunteers. The top six categories of volunteer time represent some of the core activities of the Park System. SPUR, Programs and Camps, Gardening and Pruning, Special Events, Trails, and Administration would be difficult, if not impossible to be as successful as they are without our volunteers.

This Strategic Plan does not recommend any specific changes to the volunteer program, other than a continued commitment to expanding the program. The Volunteer Program should continue to be advertised and promoted with all other Park System programs. Greater effort should be made to promote the program, stressing the value it adds to the Park System and the benefits it provides the participants. Any program that can give the public a sense of ownership of the parks which can lead to years of continued support in terms of time, funding and political support is worthy of expansion.

Full-time and hourly Park System staff should continue managing the Volunteer Program as it is clear there is a significant return on the time and effort invested in supporting the volunteer program. Park System departments should continuously review work responsibilities that can be shared with volunteers and leverage those efforts to further Park System goals. There should be an effort in all departments to expand and redefine the work that can be done by volunteers. Not in an effort to reduce or diminish the work of paid staff, but to continue the successful leveraging of volunteer hours into results.

Another form of volunteer program is an Internship Program. Various staff members have mentored interns in different park areas. Natural Resource staff members have mentored students from Rutgers, Hamilton College and High Tech High School and other

program areas have also had interns in recent years. To better leverage another source of skilled labor and the help train and encourage a future generation of parks professionals, the MCPS should institute and coordinate an internship program throughout the Park System.

By creating a coordinated internship program, managed by Volunteer Services, the Park System could expand the current, haphazard program and create a better organized program that can actively reach out to local colleges and even high schools to identify interested students and provide valuable practical experience. Much like the recommendations for volunteer programs, there should be an effort in all departments to expand and redefine the work that can be done by interns. Many colleges would welcome an organized venue for internship opportunities and often have staff dedicated to managing their internship programs.

Inter-agency Cooperation

In times of shrinking budgets and diminishing staff levels, inter-agency cooperation is another method for stretching resources to achieve the same level of service and quality in the Park System. The MCPS currently partners with a number of public agencies at the State, County and local level on a number of projects.

MCPS works most closely with Monmouth County Public Works and Engineering. Being fellow County agencies, it is much easier to engage in cooperative projects without inter-agency agreements. Funding can be streamlined by identifying which departments will supply project management, labor and funding for materials. Examples of Monmouth County Interagency cooperation include the Whale Pond Brook working group, looking at ways to reduce flooding in that watershed. The County Mosquito Extermination Division has specialized equipment that have been used in dredging projects on Park System property. The County Reclamation Center has assisted with demolition projects on Park property, to remove unwanted structures on open space acquisitions.

The County Shade Tree Division has engaged in tree removal from time to time on Park property and County Traffic Safety Division has installed pedestrian crossing signals at Park access points on County Roads. The County Planning Board partnered with the Park System in acquiring grant money for a large storm water mitigation project in the Ramanessin watershed, including various improvements to retention/detention facilities and stream bank stabilization/restoration projects in Holmdel Park. The County Engineering Department has cooperated numerous times with the Park System on designing road ways re-alignments, striping cross walks, and providing design review services.

Park System staff members have also partnered local colleges and University. Park System staff has coordinated with Monmouth University to provide an Archeological Field School; the most recent projects were at Portland Place at Hartshorne Woods. A

GIS mapping, inventory and artifact catalogue of archaeological was completed with Monmouth University at Turkey Swamp Park for the mapping Native American sites.

Park System staff work with a number of State and Federal Agencies, serving as liaisons with USFWS and NJDEP officials regarding coordinated efforts to protect threatened and endangered species at the Manasquan Reservoir and Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park while ensuring continued public utilization. Staff provide assistance and issue permits to conduct activities to researchers at various universities, secondary schools, non-profits, and State and Federal agencies as well as responding to numerous technical assistance requests for information on open space, natural and cultural resource protection and management, historic and archaeological sites, preservation programs and planning, and data availability from engineering and architectural firms, individuals, municipalities, and county, state, and federal agencies.

The Park System also administers the Monmouth County Municipal Open Space Grant Program. The Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders allocates \$2 million annually from the Monmouth County Open Space Trust Fund for cooperative projects with Monmouth County municipalities. Both land acquisition and development for park, recreation, and open space purposes are eligible for funding. The Monmouth County Municipal Open Space Grant Program is a competitive program administered by the Monmouth County Park System on behalf of the Board of Chosen Freeholders. This program creates cooperative opportunities for the Park System to work with various municipalities to achieve local open space and recreation goals. The program also requires that the County be granted conservation easements on the project sites to ensure their use for open space or recreation in perpetuity, requiring monitoring of the easements.

The Park System has representation in various stakeholder groups: Barnegat Bay Partnership Stakeholder; NJDEP Coastal Rules Stakeholder meeting, NJDEP Freshwater Wetlands Stakeholder, NJAS and Duke Deer Management Workshop, Stewardship Roundtable, D&R Greenway, Stewardship Workshop, Park Directors meetings, NJ Forest Service Urban Fire Plan. Staff have participated in 5 stakeholder meetings for NJ Coastal Rules, NJ Freshwater Wetlands Rules, Metedeconk/ Barnegat Bay Partnership, NJ Living Shorelines and the Stewardship Roundtable

Many of these projects represent the Park System acting as a resource; sharing time and expertise with various agencies and entities. While it is important for the Park System to continue to act as a strong partner, efforts should be made to ensure that the Park System takes advantage of every opportunity to rely on partner agencies to provide services. By continuing the strong relationship with other County agencies to provide various services, cost savings are realized by not having to contract for those services to outside firms. County capital expenditures for equipment are most efficient when the equipment is used as much as possible. Park System staff should continue to review projects for possible inclusion in other County department work plans and senior staff should continue to meet with other department counterparts to seek support of inter-agency cooperation.

Succession Plan

The Park System has more than thirty senior staff either eligible for retirement or within three years of retirement eligibility. This represents an impending loss of expertise and institutional knowledge that will be very difficult to weather. The purpose of succession Plan is to ensure the continued effective performance of the MCPS professional leadership staff by making provisions for the development and replacement of key people over time. The initial strategies for succession planning should focus on those current positions most likely to be vacated by retirement within the next five years. The Park System has often identified efficiencies or reorganization as retirements occurred, by eliminating or combining functions based on current staff expertise or transferring program responsibilities to other departments, but certain professional leadership positions will need to be maintained.

Development of qualified candidates from within the current Park System staff is preferred, but core competencies necessary for key functions should be identified and an outside recruitment strategy should be prepared and then implemented as needed. State Civil Service rules complicate the process, by creating job titles that may impair hiring or promotion. Leadership candidates with titles that might affect transfer or promotion should be identified and title revisions to facilitate hiring, transfers and promotion should be made. Methods should be created for the effective transfer of institutional knowledge, such as encouraging key people to give a minimum of three months' notice prior to retirement, creating a pre-retirement knowledge transfer process and appointing replacement personnel prior to retirement to provide a period of transition.

Additional measures should include:

- Identify employees whose strengths, abilities, interests, and performance suggest the potential to serve in a key position within the organization.
 - Solicit recommendations of individuals both within and beyond their departments by Department Heads.
 - Review performance evaluations and past employee awards for leadership candidates.
 - Provide an opportunity for self-nomination.
 - Determine other means for identifying potential future leaders.
- Develop a transformational leadership initiative to prepare leadership candidates for key positions within the organization.
 - Identify opportunities for mentorship between key people and leadership candidates.
 - Identify opportunities for job shadowing of key people by leadership candidates.
 - Identify opportunities for cross-training within and between departments.
 - Identify opportunities for exposure to and the development of management strategies.
 - Develop an in-house training program to provide management level training for leadership candidates.

- Select leadership candidates for special assignments that will allow them to assume more responsibility and perform varied work outside their regular duties.
- Create a mechanism for frequent evaluation and feedback of leadership candidates.

Training and Mentoring

As mentioned in the succession planning sections above, the Park System should develop methods or the effective transfer of institutional knowledge from senior staff to junior staff. The Park System should also develop an in-house training program to provide management level training for leadership candidates. The Park System is strengthened by a well trained staff that can provide a broad range of services. Providing cross-departmental training and cross-discipline training creates a better informed staff and can ensure continuity of services in case of staff reductions, extended illness or leaves of absence. Team building exercises, both within departments and across departments help maintain staff morale and can build relationships that will also aid in ensuring continuity of services in case of staff reductions, extended illness or leaves of absence.

Training should be an integral part of all department operations. Internal and external training opportunities should be provided to all full time staff within their area of expertise as well as within associated areas of interest. Training should focus on improving professional competency, new skill building in specific skill areas and integrating state of the art methods into overall parks management. Continued participation in conferences, seminars, webinars and association meetings should be allowed and encouraged. Travel and conference attendance budgets should be included in annual budgets and every effort should be maintained to allow staff members to participate in training opportunities as much as possible. If budgets do not allow for an annual training opportunity for each staff member, consideration should be given to allow access to these opportunities on a rotating basis to ensure training opportunities are provided at least every few years and skills learned at training and conference sessions should be brought back and passed on in internal training opportunities.

Internal training opportunities should also continue to be provided. Senior staff should endeavor to provide seminars and training sessions to new employees and to provide continuing training sessions to experienced staff. Departments should develop internal training seminars and consider assigning “brown bag lunch” topics to staff members to prepare and present to their departments on a regular basis. Other Park System staff should be encouraged to attend seminars in other departments as time and work responsibilities allow. Webinars can be a very cost effective way for department staff to receive new training together.