



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Erie County's nearly 10,000 acre Park System represents a diverse collection of natural resources, historic structures, and unique places within the Western New York Region. When the County Parks System was established in 1925, there were initially four parks. Now, almost 100 years later, the system is comprised of 40 sites throughout the County, and provides something for everyone from recreational sports fields to cascading waterfalls, hiking trails, biking pathways, sitting and relaxing in nature, wildlife observing, and much more. The County Parks System provides some of the most popular places to sled, cross-country-ski and ice-skate throughout the winter season. Each season of the year presents great opportunities for the public to enjoy the diverse park settings.

The Erie County Parks Master Plan Update, which was initiated in 2016, is primarily focused on the preservation, enhancement, and improvement of the existing system assets and landscape setting. Previous County Parks Master Plans were completed approximately in 15 year intervals, the last one in 2003. The planning process consisted of public consultation, stakeholder meetings with over 65 local groups and agencies, a parks user survey, numerous meetings, and work sessions. Physical assessment included inventory of all notable assets within the County's heritage parks, and many site visits during different times of the year. Recommendations and analyses were conducted based on extensive outreach and assessment of the County Parks System. The Master Plan Update will be a guide for the County, planners, and administrators to focus on future development of the system. It will inform the County on how to prioritize resources and guide decisions for renovating structures, improving existing amenities, and restoring habitats. Principles that guide project prioritization are rooted in public safety, environmental sustainability, and historic preservation.



Historic photograph of Chestnut Ridge Park

### MISSION STATEMENT

*"The Erie County Park System has traditionally been positioned to fill a niche in the regional parks and recreation framework. Specifically the County park system has emphasized the provision of recreation activities and facilities in natural environment areas as an alternative to localized park settings."*

*The role of the County Park System shall be:*

- *To provide residents opportunities to enjoy recreational pursuits in natural settings on a year round basis;*
- *To protect regionally important areas of scenic, environmental and cultural heritage significance;*
- *To contribute to the economic vitality of the County, and;*
- *To promote public awareness of the resources available within the park system."*

### PROJECT GOALS

- 1** *Improve efficiency of operations*
- 2** *Make the existing park facilities look and function better by improving what already exists before considering adding anything new*
- 3** *Review and improve administrative policies*
- 4** *Improve community awareness and knowledge of park resources*



Recommendations and Implementation Strategies are listed by Administrative (staffing considerations – both administrative and skilled labor positions – and funding – partnerships, grants, and other revenues) and Operations & Maintenance (park naturalization, restoration of heritage structures, and general maintenance and environmental improvements). Since the establishment of the County Parks System, the primary purpose of the system has been to: (i) provide recreation opportunities in naturalistic settings on a county-wide basis, and (ii) preserve open space and unique natural features, some of which are beyond the means of local governments to provide or maintain. It is important for the County to remain true to these original objectives while responding responsibly to changing recreational trends and expectations.

Since the last Master Plan was completed in 2003, many towns, villages, and schools have developed “active” recreation parks resulting in reduced use and need, for these types of recreation facilities within the County Parks System. With this shift in services provided by the local governments, the County should continue to focus on more passive, nature-oriented recreation. Unless a partner provides funding and operational management for a specific recreational amenity, the County should focus on its core nature-based services.

## 2.0 OVERALL SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS

### 2.1 PARKS ADMINISTRATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:

The County should seek grants as well as new partnership agreements and improve existing partnerships to ensure additional resources and funding to maintain and improve the County Parks System. Due to limited funding and staff, grants and partnerships amongst local municipalities, user groups, supporting agencies, and others are imperative to the future growth and stability of the parks. Additionally, it is a top priority for the County to add a full time staff member to maintain and administer partnerships, marketing, and grant research/writing.

Based on organizational observations and staffing assessment, the County should consider adding additional full time field employees and seasonal/part time workers in order to operate more efficiently. Given the historical nature of many of the County Parks System facilities, skilled labor is necessary for efficient operations and maintenance. Plumbers, electricians, masons, mechanics, and carpenters are all constantly needed through the active areas of the Parks System.

### SELECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS FROM THE 2003 MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 **Ellicott Creek Park** - Improve conditions of parking lot at northern end of park; establish a better connection and visibility from Niagara Falls Boulevard. This is one of the few parks, and few specific locations, in the entire system where an asphalt-surfaced parking lot would likely be appropriate- - **DONE**
  - Provided asphalt lot, and sign visible from Niagara Falls Blvd. Parking lot now serves the Ellicott Creek Park on Ellicott Island.
- 2 **Emery Park** - Reduce lawn mowing to provide more natural setting in non-use, little-trafficked areas, and help to shift park maintenance towards restoring older park structures. One significant area to begin the naturalization process would be west of the Maintenance facilities behind the tennis courts- - **DONE/ON-GOING**
  - Many areas of Emery Park have transitioned to a more natural setting through purposeful reduced mowing techniques.
- 3 **Bennett Beach/Wendt Beach** - Establish a stronger linkage between Bennett Beach and the local community through new sidewalks and/or trails, streetscape enhancements, wayfinding signage, maps, etc.; Provide clear linkages from Bennett Beach to area bicycle routes and trails. This is a strong, tightknit lakefront community that comes alive in the summer months- - **DONE/IN PROGRESS**
  - Designed and constructed Evans Shoreline Trail Phases 1 and 3 creating a direct trail

### PRIORITY SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS

Four high-priority recommendations in the Master Plan Update are administrative:

- 1 Actively seek out grants to supplement funding.
- 2 Actively seek out partners.
- 3 Add a position to acquire and coordinate grants and partnerships.
- 4 Add skilled labor positions to lead and supervise general labor and volunteer efforts.

## 2.1.2 PARKS OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

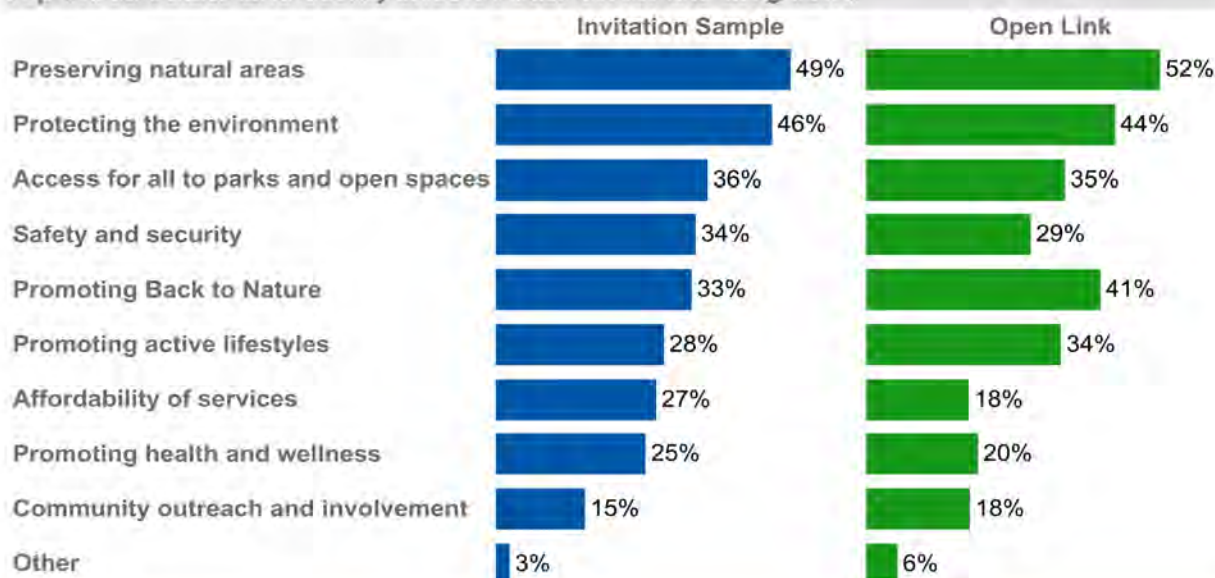
- Four high-priority recommendations in the Master Plan Update relate to overall parks operations and maintenance:
  - **Preservation and Restoration of Natural Systems** – *An initial focus for the County should be the reversion of underutilized yet maintained landscape areas to a more natural state.*
  - **Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage Features** – *The Erie County heritage parks include a large number of Works Progress Administration (WPA) era structures, including casinos, pump shelters, and picnic shelters. The craftsmanship and detail of these structures require particular care to preserve and restore them. Consideration shall be given to acquiring National Register of Historic Places status.*
  - **Improved General Parks Maintenance** – *Due to limited financial resources and staff, general park improvements such as removing derelict structures, restoring older heritage structures, and replacing damaged picnic tables/benches have previously been done reactively, as structures and amenities deteriorated. With this plan, the County has a complete inventory of such structures and amenities, as well as their condition, to proactively conduct maintenance and improvements. The inventory will also help to secure grants for more complex projects.*
  - **Improved Public Communication** – *As improvements are made to ensure a better visitor experience, the County should undertake a broad-based marketing program and strategy including:*
    - Cross-marketing opportunities with Visit Buffalo Niagara (VBN).
    - Highlight and emphasize exposure to park features such as the Shoreline Trail system, Lake Erie beaches, hiking trails, and mountain biking opportunities.
    - Capture tourist interest from regional attractions like Niagara Falls and Letchworth State Park.
    - Extend and enhance outreach through web-based services like the County website and social media outlets.



## TOP THREE VALUES TO FOCUS ON

When asked to select the top three values that parks and recreation should focus on, invitation respondents show the strongest support for preserving natural areas (49%), followed by protecting the environment (46%), access for all to parks and open spaces (36%), and safety and security (34%).

### Top Three Values Erie County Should Focus On for the Long Term



Summary graphic from the Parks User Survey: Displays top values for the Parks Department to work towards based on user responses.





## SIGNIFICANT NEW PARK FEATURES AND DEVELOPMENT

- 1 *Design and construction of four sections of the Shoreline Trail System in Lackawanna and Evans*
- 2 *Two Mile Creek Greenway Trail was constructed*
- 3 *Sherwood Greenway Trail was constructed*
- 4 *Pickleball courts (Akron Falls Park, Como Lake Park, Ellicott Creek Park)*
- 5 *Disk Golf 18 hole courses (Chestnut Ridge Park, Como Lake Park, Ellicott Creek Park, Emery Park)*
- 6 *Cricket Pitch at Ellicott Creek Park*
- 7 *Kayak Launches (Ellicott Creek Park, Seneca Bluffs)*
- 8 *Significant trail improvements (Sprague Brook Park, Hunters Creek Park)*
- 9 *Bark Parks (Ellicott Creek Park, Black Rock Canal Park)*
- 10 *New Programming (Ranger walks, Junior Ranger Program, Movies in the Park)*

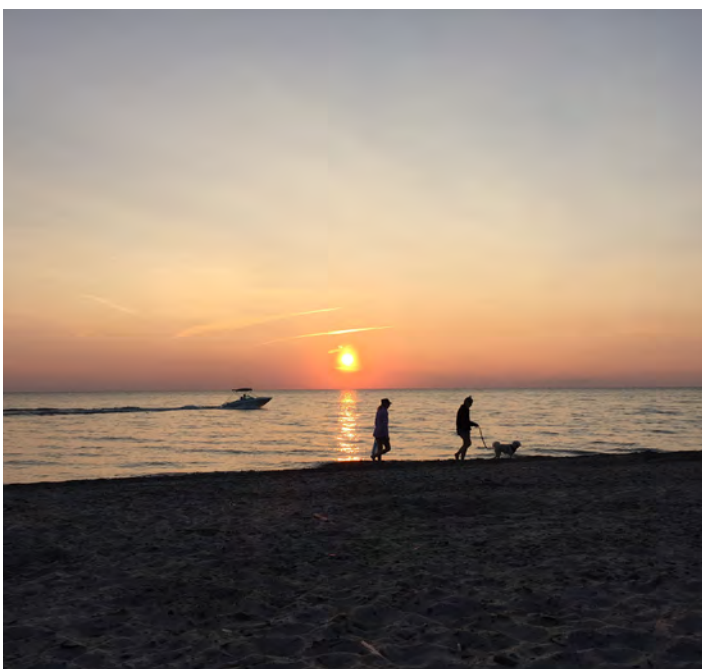
- **Management Zones:** As developed in the 2003 Master Plan, several management zones have been identified to serve the County in organizing resources. These zones each include their own set of management guidelines. The management zones are:
  - **Nature Reserve Zones** - *Includes significant natural features or areas that require active management to ensure the long-term protection of the natural heritage, i.e. woodlands, wetlands, natural open space areas (meadows), waterways, ravines, gorges and escarpment faces, dunes, beaches, steep slopes, etc.*
  - **Recreation Zones** - *Includes the landscaped areas of the parks, in which facilities development is permitted to support low to moderate intensity recreation activities such as sports fields, specialized activities, picnic areas, campgrounds, and parking lots.*
  - **Heritage Zones** - *Includes areas of active cultural heritage or archaeological features that require active management to ensure the preservation of these important heritage assets.*
  - **Service Zones** - *Includes maintenance and service areas for the developed parks, as well as access points or staging areas within the Conservation Parks (e.g. trailheads and parking lots) where minimal use facilities are needed to support allowable uses within the Nature Reserve Zones.*
- **Environmental Focus** in all Management Zones will improve and enhance existing natural areas by minimizing disturbance, maintaining varied habitats, and further refining low-mow and natural regeneration areas. The overall effect will be to protect and improve conditions for wildlife habitats, improve conditions for park users, and utilize existing resources more efficiently. Recommendations include:
  - **Targeted Renaturalization:** *Establish low-mow areas, meadows, natural regeneration, and wildflower zones to allow for naturalization in manicured landscapes which are passive in nature. This measure will also establish vegetated buffers for waterways and minimize erosion in forested areas by planting native understory vegetation.*



Casino at Ellicott Creek Park



Murder Creek - Akron Falls Park



A beautiful sunset night at Bennett Beach

- **Create and Implement Native Plant Policy** to guide and ensure new plantings contribute positively to the ecology of Erie County.
- **Design and implement an Invasive Plant Species Policy** that would provide the framework and authority to address non-native species invasion.

- **Public Awareness and Education recommendations:**

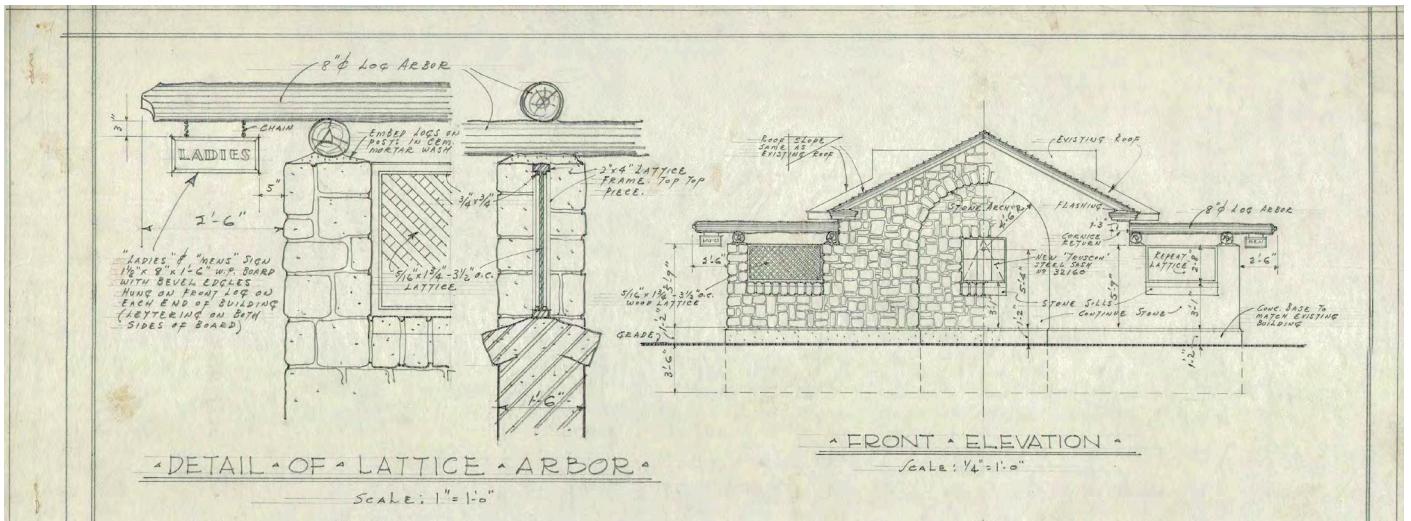
- Collaborate with volunteer and user groups to organize park clean-ups, environmental advocacy, and general enhancements like plantings and trail improvements.
- Implement consistent and clear park signs. Provide additional signage like wayfinding, trailhead maps, and interpretive educational signs. Improve environmental education by providing demonstration projects and interpretive signage highlighting ecological awareness and natural resources.

### 2.1.3 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS BRIEF:

Given the age and diversity of the parks, and the unique nature of their buildings and structures, a substantial amount of maintenance and improvement is needed in the following areas:

- **Safety:** Repair, enhance, and improve existing facilities that compromise public safety, especially the historic heritage assets. As noted and summarized in the parks inventory, prioritize those structures, playgrounds, bridges, guards, etc. deemed in “poor” condition first.
- **Historic Structures:** Restore, preserve, repair, or provide alternative uses to WPA era structures which are in poor condition. Unique assets like the Wendt Mansion may require public/private partnerships and investments that can offset capital funding.
- **Trails:** Improve, enhance, and repair all trails and pathways which are significant features of the Park System. Proper trail design, safety, and signage need to be prioritized to provide an enjoyable experience for users of all abilities.
- **Repair:** Prioritization of the maintenance and repair of parks facilities should be given to those used in high demand which support core recreational opportunities. Once these improvements have been made, consideration should be given to maintenance buildings and other support facilities.

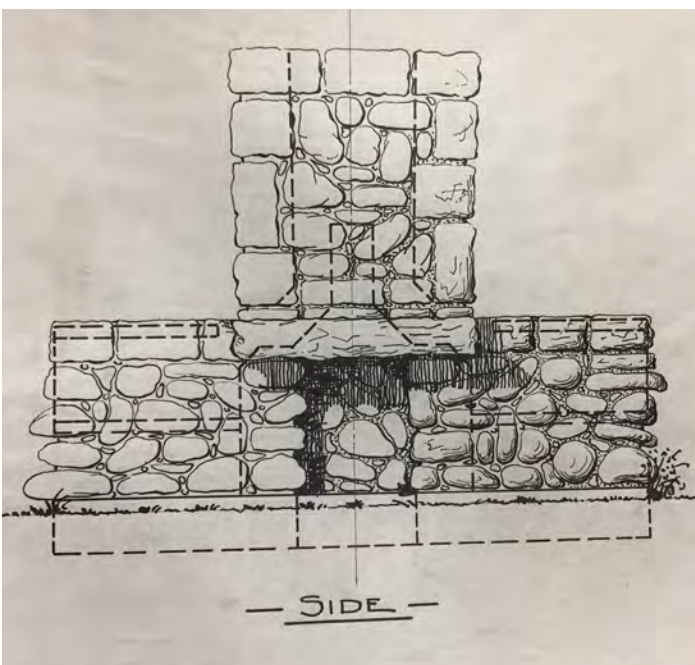




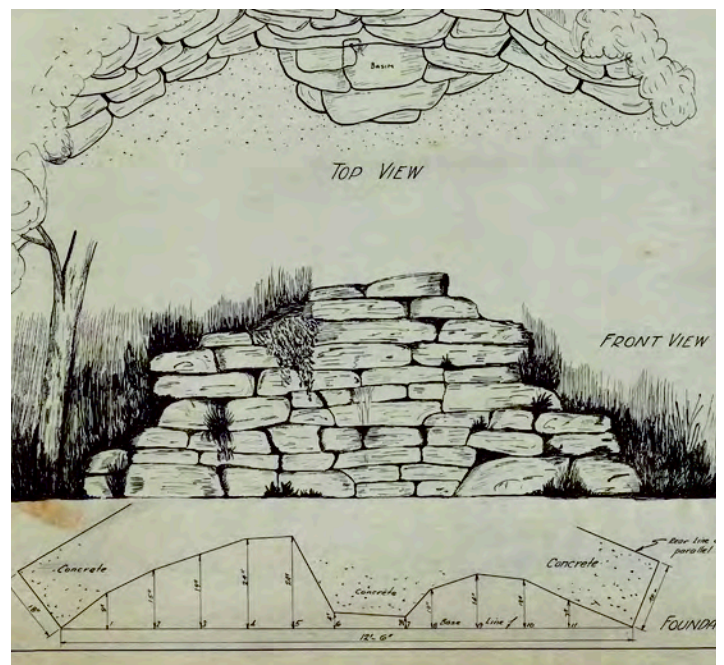
Original WPA comfort station detail



Existing WPA comfort station at Ellicott Creek Park



Historic parks grill detail



Historic spring water fountain detail - Emery Park



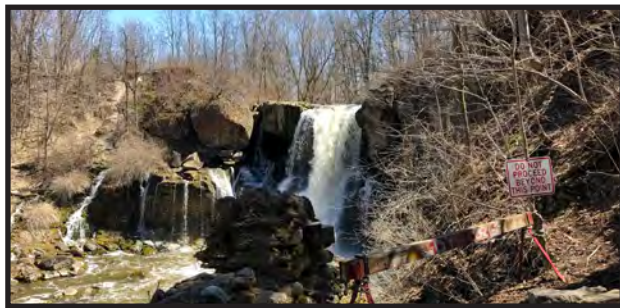
### 3.0 PARK SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

#### HERITAGE PARKS:

- Akron Falls Park - Village of Akron/Town of Newstead
- Chestnut Ridge Park - Town of Orchard Park
- Como Lake Park - Town/Village of Lancaster
- Ellicott Creek Park - Town of Tonawanda
- Emery Park - Town of Aurora

##### Major Recommendations -

- Preserve and repair historic stone structures, including; repoint/clean stonework where needed, replace missing stones, replace or repair roofs, make improvements, etc.
- Reduce lawn mowing to provide natural areas of wildflowers and meadows
- Remove non-compliant playground equipment.
- Relocation of disk golf holes to prevent continuous damage to natural areas and wildlife from excessive foot traffic.



Akron Falls Lower Waterfall



WPA Pump Shelter at Emery Park



Wendt Beach

#### WATERFRONT PARKS:

- Isle View Park - Town of Tonawanda
- Black Rock Canal Park - City of Buffalo
- Tow Path Park - City of Buffalo
- Wendt Beach - Town of Evans
- Bennett Beach - Town of Evans

##### Major Recommendations -

- Maintain and improve Shoreline Trail
- Restore the historic Wendt Mansion. Identify potential adaptive re-use that compliments the park uses.
- Preserve and enhance overall dune environment; Protection of these unique natural features along the Lake Erie shoreline should be prioritized.

#### SPECIAL PURPOSE PARKS:

- Elma Meadows Park - Town of Elma
- Grover Cleveland Golf Course - City of Buffalo
- Sprague Brook Park - Towns of Sardinia and Concord

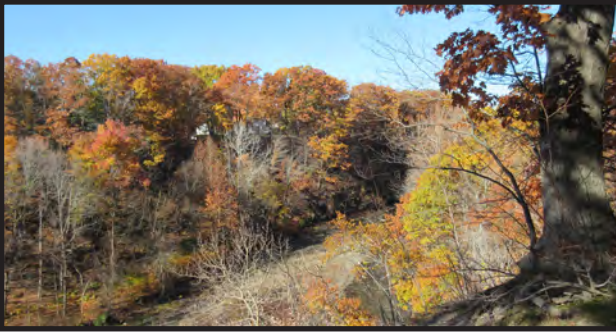
##### Major Recommendations -

- Routinely inspect and provide upkeep of all trails at Sprague Brook
- Restore the Schenck House structure and associated out-buildings.
- Prevent further deterioration of picnic shelters at Elma Meadows. Perform necessary repairs and renovation to keep shelters usable and safe.



Sprague Brook Park





Eighteen Mile Creek Park



Hunters Creek Park

### CONSERVATION PARKS:

- Boston Forest Park - Town of Boston
- Eighteen Mile Creek Park - Town of Hamburg
- Franklin Gulf Park - Town of Eden and Collins
- Hunters Creek Park - Town of Wales
- Scoby Dam Park - Town of Concord
- Eighteen Mile Creek Headwaters Property - Town of Concord

#### Major Recommendations -

- Routinely inspect and provide upkeep of all trails; Remove dangerous tree limbs and other potential hazards; Improve drainage and divert water away from trails where necessary.
- Provide a large trail map at all trail heads; identifying only the official marked trails with proper distance postings, trail conditions, and user difficulties.
- Formalize parking areas and consider expansion in several parks to accommodate increased park usage.

### NATURAL HABITAT PARKS:

- Thomas Higgins Riverfront Park - City of Buffalo
- Red Jacket Riverfront Natural Habitat Park - City of Buffalo
- Seneca Bluffs Natural Habitat Park - City of Buffalo
- Times Beach Nature Preserve - City of Buffalo
- Lakeview Pocket Preserve - Town of Evans

#### Major Recommendations -

- Continue the removal and treatment of invasive species.
- Increase connectivity to habitat parks; via new/future 'greenway' corridors, 'rails to trails' initiatives, bike routes, etc.
- Provide typical park gateway signage and landscaping treatment, as well as trailmaps at all trailheads.



View of the Buffalo River at Red Jacket Riverfront Park



Sugar Shanty at Forestry Lot #1

### FORESTRY LOTS (1-13):

#### Major Recommendations -

- Perform a comprehensive update to the 2003 Forest Management Plan.
- Repair and make improvements to all Forestry Lot structures as many are deteriorating and in rough shape.
- Promote and provide walking, hiking and cross country trails. Coordinate with usergroups whenever possible to expand and enhance recreational and educational opportunities.

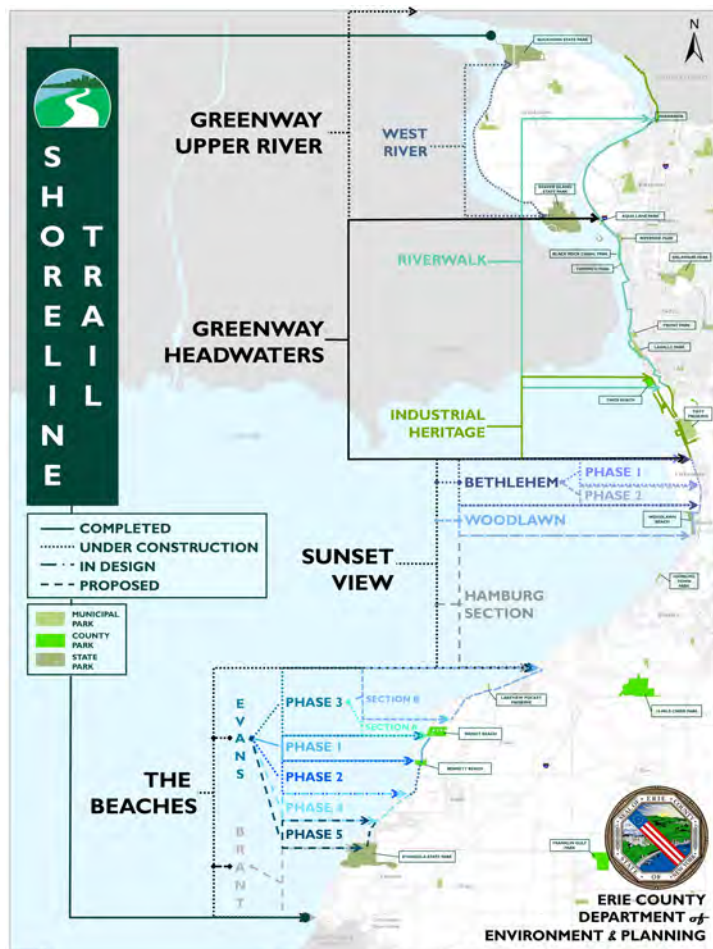


## 4.0 WATERFRONT ACCESS AND TRAILWAYS

Since the 2003 Parks Master Plan, waterfront development in Western New York has become a significant part of the overall economic development opportunities, as well as the role that parks and trailways play as public access to the unique and beautiful waterfront areas. The waterfront strategy builds upon past waterfront planning efforts, and work towards the underlying principles of economic renewal, public accessibility, recreation enhancement, and environmental conservation. The County Departments of Environment and Planning, and the Parks, Recreation and Forestry have played a significant role in enhancing the waterfront due to the ongoing construction and design of the Shoreline Trail System. The Shoreline Trail is a multi-purpose pathway which connects users with waterfront destinations and parks. It is highly recommended that the County continue to promote and maintain the trail, as well as plan additional segments – specifically within the Town of Hamburg.

### Specific Recommendations:

- Identify future opportunities to create new trail segments off of River Road to the waterfront within the Tonawanda portion of the Riverwalk section of the Shoreline Trail. Work with businesses on River Road, and local agencies to begin planning efforts. The Cherry Farm site is one possible area where the trail can loop in towards the river and back out to River Road.
- Basic trail/pathway improvements are needed including trail resurfacing, possible widening, mileage markers, restriping, and bicycle parking, especially within the entire Riverwalk section of the Shoreline Trail.
- Prioritize roadway improvements within the County with elements of Complete Streets and safer accessibility to area parks and attractions.
- Restore and enhance existing waterfront parks and property by providing safe environments for public enjoyment and by practicing conservation principles of improving water quality, removing invasive species, and plantings of native species.



Shoreline Trail Map



Shoreline Trail signage

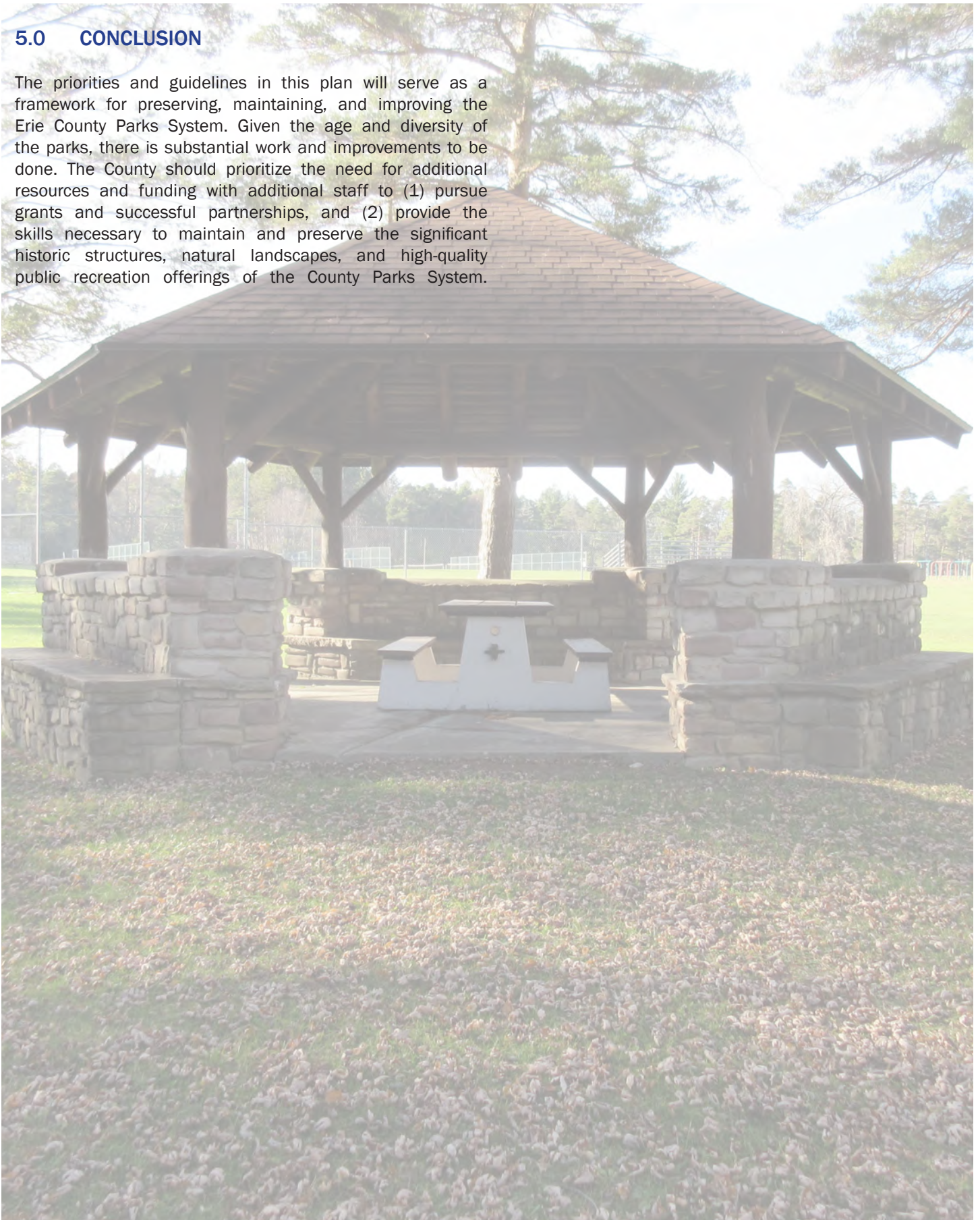


Riverwalk section of the Shoreline Trail at Isle View Park



## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The priorities and guidelines in this plan will serve as a framework for preserving, maintaining, and improving the Erie County Parks System. Given the age and diversity of the parks, there is substantial work and improvements to be done. The County should prioritize the need for additional resources and funding with additional staff to (1) pursue grants and successful partnerships, and (2) provide the skills necessary to maintain and preserve the significant historic structures, natural landscapes, and high-quality public recreation offerings of the County Parks System.



WPA era shelter at Emery Park



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