

# County Administrator's Digest

April 26, 2013

Alan G. Vanderberg, County Administrator

County of Ottawa  
Administrator's Office  
12220 Fillmore Street  
West Olive, MI 49460  
(616) 738-4068  
avanderberg@miottawa.org  
www.miottawa.org

The past week two weeks have certainly been challenging nationally with the Boston Marathon attack, regionally with the record flooding and for the County with the horse farm situation that unfolded last week.

## HORSE FARM

I received my first call about a situation involving undernourished horses at a location on Cleveland Road in Wright Township at about 11:00 a.m. Wednesday. The conversation was with a woman who owns a horse ranch and she was calling from Delaware. Minutes after hanging up, a caller from Utah expressed concerns with the same location. Then the calls started rolling in...We ultimately received hundreds of calls from approximately 20 different states and Canada.

A local animal activist had photographed nearly 20 horses and a donkey in various conditions and posted the photos on her Facebook which is linked to horse rescue operations across the nation. My name, title, and direct phone line were included with the photos, along with a request to call me as the person who had the authority to rescue the animals. One impacting image showed a dead horse in the paddock. About half the callers had questions as to what was going on and the other half were insulting and threatening. Most had no patience for how Michigan law works regarding property rights and insisted that I immediately remove the horses. An even great number of callers had no idea how County government works, at least in Michigan, and assumed that the Sheriff and its sub unit Animal Control, as well as the Prosecutor, report to the County Administrator.

The real fun came when people kept sharing the story to their friends on Facebook and even though we put out information to the media and some on the original Facebook post, because of the continued sharing, even two and three days later people are still calling in as if it is fresh news. While it was heartening to see the passionate concern that many callers had for the plight of the horses, it was disturbing to hear all of the assumptions regarding our County character and assumed lack of resources to deal with this. I was even accused of not caring about the heritage of America and what the horse symbolizes to this heritage when the horses were not removed immediately.

The good news is that the system worked as it should. The Animal Control Unit of the Sheriff's Office completed a report, which the Prosecutor's Office reviewed



and determined that criminal charges were not warranted at this time. Also, the property owner fully cooperated with authorities in dealing with the situation. I've included below information sent to me by Undersheriff Greg Steigenga which outlines steps taken to deal with this situation.

1. The Sheriff's Office through its Animal Control Unit has been involved with this situation ever since we were made aware of the concern by a citizen. (April 18, 2013)
2. Our Animal Control Unit conducted an initial investigation and made immediate acknowledgement that food/water was in place along with assisting the owner in moving the horses to an area of the property that was not being flooded at the time by the heavy rains.
3. Two Animal Control Officers from our agency then made arrangements the very next morning to meet a Veterinarian with the West Michigan Veterinary Service on the property along with the horses/property owner to take even a closer look at the animals themselves and the conditions in which they were being kept.
4. During that inspection, the Veterinarian determined that there were 18 horses, one donkey and one deceased horse on the property and that the owner had placed a tarp over the deceased horse until arrangements could be made for removal. It was also noted at that time that adequate food and water was in place for the animals.
5. During that initial inspection it was also noted by the Veterinarian that many of the horses on the property were of an old age and were showing signs of that aging that are not consistent with not having food or water available to them. He also noted through records that the animals were current on vaccinations.
6. The Veterinarian also examined the deceased horse and could not make an exact determination of the cause of death but he indicated that death could have come as a result of old age, stress from the heavy rains/flooding or a lightning strike.
7. The inspection conducted by the Veterinarian and the Animal Control Officers did reveal some concerns with some of the sheltering in place for the animals and the owner acknowledged these concerns. In addition specific improvements were pointed out to the owner in these areas and he was receptive to making these changes moving forward.
8. As a result of the inspection and our agency's investigation, a report and the Veterinarian's findings were turned over to the Prosecutor's Office for review of possible criminal behavior on the part of the owner in this instance. Based on the situation at hand and the fact that the owner was cooperating with making some necessary improvements moving forward, the Prosecutor did not authorize a criminal charge(s) against the owner at this time.
9. A plan has been put in to place by the Veterinarian, our Animal Control Unit and the owner moving forward that will include the following:

- Our Animal Control Unit and the Veterinarian will continue to monitor the premises for adequate food and water for the animals moving forward.
  - The Veterinarian will work with the owner to reduce the number of animals on the premises by euthanizing some of the older horses that are underweight.
  - Repair and improvements to the sheltering areas is completed by the owner.
  - Clean-up of the majority of the junk items and metal hazards around the horse paddocks and to improve the general appearance of the premises.
  - By the Veterinarian assisting the owner with some additional vaccines, de-wormers and dental care.
10. In the event we discover non-compliance on the part of the owner in areas of animal care, the matter will again be documented and turned over to the Prosecutor's Office for further review and alternative placement options will be considered as needed.
11. The Veterinarian was at the farm on 4/25/2013 and euthanized two of the older/sickly horses and at this point several of the other horses have been moved off site to various other farms for care and keeping based on the owner's attempt to remedy this situation.

A couple of news links on this event follow:

[Dead, starved horses found; owner not charged](#)

[Not enough evidence in horse neglect case](#)

## **FLOOD**

### ***Beth Thomas, Emergency Management Director***

- The Red Cross distributed clean-up kits across Ottawa County on April 25 & 26
- Total Preliminary Damage Assessment is estimated at \$3,216,420
  - Preliminary Public Damage Assessment is estimated at \$2,830,420
    - Roads and Bridges \$279,920
    - Water Control Facilities \$2,430,000
    - Public Buildings \$55,000
    - Public Utilities \$19,000
    - Parks and Recreational Facilities \$46,500

- Preliminary Private Damage Assessment is \$386,000
  - 5 homes considered major
  - 85 homes considered minor
  - 30 homes considered affected
- River levels have gone down to 15.1 ft. still 2 ft. over flood stage at 13.3 ft., hope to reach flood stage sometime this weekend
- Local Declaration of Emergency extended to May 14

***Lisa Stefanovsky, Health Officer***

"The Ottawa County Public Health Department is providing guidance to residents affected by recent flooding. Possible disease causing contaminants, such as fecal matter or agricultural and industrial by-products, may be present in flood waters. Contact with flood waters may also be a health hazard. For more information on flood health concerns; such as wells, septic systems, food safety, flood clean up, mold prevention, licensed well drillers or septic pumpers, please visit <http://www.miottawa.org/MediaRoom/flooding.htm> or call (616) 393-5645"

<http://www.miottawa.org/blog/>

**LAW WEEK** (Kevin Bowling)

The 20<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court, 58<sup>th</sup> District Court, Ottawa County Probate Court and the Legal Self-Help Center would like to invite you to attend our celebration of Law Week 2013. Law Week is a celebration of Law Day, May 1<sup>st</sup> each year. Our celebration includes various events ranging from seminars on relevant legal topics and a mock trial to the recognition of public service by former judges. This year our program will be held the week of April 29 – May 3.

I have attached a copy of the brochure that explains in detail the topics that will be presented along with a schedule. The events being held throughout the week are free and open to the public.

**PARK TOWNSHIP STRATEGIC PLANNING**

Administrative Intern Chris Eakin and I spent more time Wednesday evening assisting Park Township with their strategic planning efforts. It was a productive session as the Township Board developed a vision statement, mission statement, values statement, over-arching goals and reviewed a draft work plan.

## **JOHN SCHOLTZ FEATURE ARTICLE**

The Bridge newsletter of The Center For Michigan had an excellent article about the accomplishments of Parks Director John Scholtz (see below).

[In Ottawa County, parks leader shepherds quarter-century of green growth](#)

[Featured Quality of Life Success](#) — 16 April 2013

**By Jeff Alexander/Bridge Magazine contributor**

The Lake Michigan coast near Grand Haven features two spectacular natural areas, each of which gives rise to towering sand dunes that are cloaked by lush forests.



John Scholtz, as head of Ottawa County's Parks Commission, has spearheaded a massive increase in parks acreage in the county just west of Grand Rapids. He's shown on a bridge spanning the eponymous waterway in Pigeon Creek Park in West Olive. (Bridge photo/Sam Zomer)

The Rosy Mound Natural Area and North Ottawa Dunes are stellar examples of freshwater dune ecosystems in the Great Lakes region, which has the largest assemblage of freshwater dunes on the planet.

Both sites would likely be sand mines or residential subdivisions today were it not for the work of Ottawa County Parks Commission Director John Scholtz.

Local officials and conservation leaders say Scholtz, 59, has been the central figure in efforts to increase public ownership of park lands and preserve valuable natural features in Ottawa County — one of Michigan's fastest-growing counties.

"John Scholtz is the Teddy Roosevelt of Ottawa County," said Spring Lake Township Supervisor John Nash. Roosevelt, a century ago, established five national parks and is considered one of the nation's greatest conservation leaders.

### **Twenty-five years at parks helm**

Scholtz has been at the helm of [the Ottawa County Parks Commission](#) since 1987. He was hired from the

Saginaw County Parks Department shortly after Ottawa County created its Parks Commission.

At the time, Ottawa County owned 419 acres of park; today, the figure is 6,349 acres of land in 40 parks and natural areas.

The county's parks portfolio includes six parks with Lake Michigan beaches, 14 parks or natural areas along the Grand River, 70 miles of recreational trails and a year-round recreation program.

"It's a world-class county park system because of citizens who cared enough to establish designated funding and John's quiet, trusted leadership and vision," said Julie Stoneman, program manager at the Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy in Grand Ledge. "John might not be aware of how powerful his role has been ... and he won't take credit."

Scholtz said Ottawa County's establishment of a Parks Commission in the 1980s, followed by a parks millage that county voters first approved in 1996, laid the foundation for an ambitious land acquisition program. That millage now generates about \$3 million annually — all of which goes to the parks system.

But it was Scholtz who leveraged revenue from the parks millage to obtain numerous large grants from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund over the last quarter-century.

In fact, Ottawa County has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the Natural Resources Trust Fund, **a state fund that uses oil and gas royalties to acquire and develop recreational land**. The Trust Fund has given the county \$15.1 million in grants over the past three decades, according to state data.

"I think we've been able to acquire properties that captured the public's imagination ... and we presented quality projects to the Trust Fund," Scholtz said.

Ann Conklin, chief operating officer at the Michigan Recreation and Parks Association, said Scholtz is a leader among municipal parks managers.

"He understands the process of getting grants, he develops quality projects that the community wants and those are tied to great planning," Conklin said. "He's really been a pioneer in a lot of ways."

Scholtz says he's always had "a love of the natural resources in this area" — a passion that led him to earn an advanced degree in parks management at Michigan State University and into a long career.

### Rapid growth spurs parks drive

#### Ottawa County parks, by the numbers:

**6,349:** Acres of county-owned parks, trails and natural areas.

**5,930:** Acres of land the county parks system has acquired since 1987.

**40:** County-owned parks and natural areas.

**14:** Parks or natural areas along the Grand River.

**6:** County parks on the Lake Michigan shoreline.

**\$15.1 million:** Sum of grants the county parks system has received from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund.

**53:** Percent of Ottawa County voters in 1996 who approved a 10-year property tax of 0.33 mills to increase funding for the parks system.

**67:** Percent of voters who approved a 10-year renewal of the parks millage in 2006.

**\$3 million:** Approximate revenue generated annually by the parks millage. (Actual revenue varies yearly, depending on property values).

Sources: Ottawa County and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Ottawa County began its aggressive pursuit of parklands in the mid-1990s. Scholtz said many residents were concerned that rapid growth was consuming too much open space, particularly near Lake Michigan, the Grand River and other waterways.

“I think your average person could see that we were losing a lot of open space,” Scholtz said. “There was this sense that if we didn’t do something in the 1990s it was going to be too late.”

The 1996 parks millage of 0.33 mills was supported by 53 percent of Ottawa County voters. In 2007, 67 percent of county voters supported a 10-year renewal of the millage.

Given the anti-tax sentiment with many voters, it seems almost quaint that Scholtz and the Parks Commission were able to raise property taxes for parks in one of Michigan’s most politically conservative counties. (Mitt Romney won 68 percent of the county’s votes in 2012 – outpacing his statewide total by nearly 25 percentage points.)

Scholtz said the keys were: Allowing voters to decide the fate of a parks millage; leveraging county funds to secure state grants; convincing politically conservative voters that acquiring parkland was an investment in the community’s future; and making good on the promise to develop high-quality parks.

The state Trust Fund contributed \$3.9 million toward Ottawa County’s purchase of the 513-acre North Ottawa Dunes property from a sand mining firm. The county chipped in \$2.1 million and local residents donated the remaining \$1.5 million.

But Scholtz’s calm demeanor, reputation and savvy negotiating skills created an opportunity for the county to acquire the North Ottawa Dunes.

He intervened amid a heated public debate over plans to mine the dunes and then build homes on the site. Scholtz persuaded the mining firm’s owners to sell Ottawa County the site for \$2 million less than its appraised value.

That acquisition was one of Scholtz’s greatest achievements because it fit with his underlying mission: To create greenways that preserve large tracts of undeveloped land while providing recreational opportunities for the public.

The North Ottawa Dunes project created a five-mile long greenway along the Lake Michigan coast by linking the county’s North Beach Park to P.J. Hoffmaster State Park in Norton Shores.

The county has also acquired large tracts of land to create greenways along the Grand River.

“The best way to preserve the ecological integrity of the landscape is to focus on corridors, so wildlife can move; even plants move within corridors,” Scholtz said.

This stewardship of the outdoors has become a family affair, too.

Scholtz’s wife, April, is land protection director for the Land Conservancy of West Michigan.

Fittingly, Scholtz's private interests mirror his career. The married father of two likes to hike, cross-country ski and lakeshores:

"I actively use our parks, so I see the system from a park user's perspective."

**GVMC WEEKLY UPDATE** (John Weiss)

[Click here](#) for the most recent updates.