

OTTAWA COUNTY PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION
NATURE EDUCATION CENTER
CASE FOR SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission currently manages 32 natural resource-based parks and open space lands totaling over 5,500 acres. The Nature Education Center project outlined below will provide a home for Ottawa County Parks' educational programs and activities that will focus on the Pigeon River ecosystem as well as natural and cultural features throughout the parks system. People of all ages will benefit from the Nature Education Center's year-round educational program.

“Education promotes awareness; awareness promotes understanding; understanding promotes appreciation; appreciation promotes protection.”

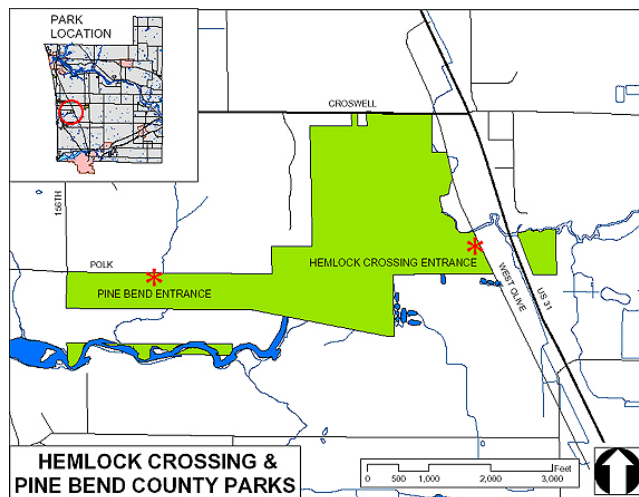
Freeman Tilden, author of *Interpreting Our Heritage*

Protecting park lands through education will ensure that this land legacy will be protected for future generations.

BACKGROUND

Ottawa County has a rich natural and cultural heritage. The Lake Michigan shoreline, freshwater dunes, rivers, wetlands, bayous, and woodlands all contribute to make Ottawa County a very special place. Since its inception in 1987, the Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission has provided year-round recreational and educational opportunities for people of all ages to enjoy and better understand these resources.

Hemlock Crossing, located in Port Sheldon Township along the scenic Pigeon River, is one of the newest and most biologically diverse county parks. The 239 acres for Hemlock Crossing were purchased from eight different private land owners using parks millage funds and Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grants at a total cost of \$1,885,000. The last property was purchased in 2000. The property includes 1.5 miles of frontage on the north bank and one mile on the south bank of the Pigeon River.



In 2003, a major improvement project costing \$1,071,000 was completed at Hemlock Crossing with parks millage funds and a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund improvement grant. These improvements include a paved entry drive and parking area, modern restroom building, a pedestrian bridge over the Pigeon River, a kayak/canoe launch and two small picnic shelters. Over seven miles of hiking and cross country ski trails were also constructed including over one mile of hard-surfaced trail and several scenic overlook platforms. Facilities are built to American Disability Act standards. Hemlock Crossing opened to the public in fall 2003 and has become a popular park for hiking, cross-country skiing, canoeing, kayaking, picnicking, birding and general enjoyment of natural open space.

A natural features inventory of the lower Pigeon River including Hemlock Crossing identified 12 different natural communities including emergent marsh, northern hardwood forest, hardwood swamp, pine plantations and open fields. The inventory tallied over 500 species of plants which is over 20% of the known flora in the entire state of Michigan. Over 110 species of birds as well as a diversity of other animals have also been observed at Hemlock Crossing including several threatened and special concern species of plants and animals.

Cultural features at the site reflect the importance of the Pigeon River to the area's early inhabitants. The west end of the property, now known as Pine Bend, was the location of Fridrichs Point Resort from 1901 to 1918. From 1920 to 1959, a dance hall was operated by the Styx family at the site. In 1998, the property was acquired by parks. The historic house and cottage, built in 1901 as part of the resort, still remain. Parks has renovated the house and it is now used for a variety of functions.

The river also historically provided a source of hemlock bark for leather tanneries in Holland and Grand Haven and was home to prehistoric cultures living along the river. There was also the failed boom town of Port Sheldon near the mouth of the Pigeon River in the 1830s. The river is also known as one of the largest nesting and roosting sites for the extinct passenger pigeon, the river's namesake.

This great diversity at Hemlock Crossing provides a rich and wonderful site to interpret the area's natural and cultural history. After careful consideration by the parks commission, Hemlock Crossing was chosen as the best site in the Ottawa County Parks system for the Nature Education Center. This location will provide a unique opportunity to interpret the river ecosystem while enhancing the outdoor experience of visitors throughout the parks system.

THE NEED

Ottawa County resident surveys in 1999 and 2004 showed overwhelming support for a Nature Education Center within the Ottawa County Parks system. Over 80% of those surveyed ranked a Nature Education Center as desirable or very desirable. An Ottawa County Parks Nature Education Center will address current and future needs for residents and visitors to West Michigan. These needs are described below.

1. Education and Recreation: Essentials for quality of life

Much attention has recently been given to the disconnect between children and the natural world. In his book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2005), Richard Louv reported a growing concern among parents, educators and physicians that children are lacking essential outdoor experiences. Louv makes a case that this change in our relationship with nature has profound implications for the mental, physical and spiritual health of future generations. The Nature Education Center will provide a schedule of comprehensive and multidisciplinary year-round youth programs to reconnect children with the natural world and to provide essential positive outdoor experiences

Yet this ever-widening environmental literacy gap isn't just limited to our children. Recent studies reveal that two-thirds of the American public failed a basic environmental quiz, while 45 million Americans think the ocean is a significant source of freshwater and 130 million believe that hydropower is America's top energy source. These ominous statistics point to an American public that has become increasingly disconnected from the very environment that sustains them. The Nature Education Center will provide a facility and home-base for a wide variety of programs for adults and families. Having an environmentally conscious adult population can have an immediate impact on current issues as well as provide needed role models for children.

Ottawa County provides the "quality of life" that many people seek for their home and recreational activities. Ottawa County Parks provides pristine Lake Michigan beaches for swimming, river and lake access for kayaking and canoeing, and nearly 70 miles of nature trails through dunes, woods, grasslands, wetlands and along rivers and lakes. In addition to hiking, some trails are designated for cross-country skiing, mountain biking and horseback riding. The Nature Education Center will supply information on all properties throughout the parks system so residents can use and appreciate the many opportunities provided by Ottawa County Parks.

2. Lack of a Central Hub to Connect the Parks

The parks millage, grants and private funding have allowed the Ottawa County Parks & Recreation Commission to greatly expand its resources since its inception in 1987. Resident surveys show that park users have a 95% satisfaction rating; however, less than 60% of these people can name more than one county park. This indicates a populace that greatly appreciates the parks, but also doesn't understand the true extent of their offerings. While parks information is available at the parks commission office in the Fillmore Street Complex, this location is far removed and inaccessible to most residents and visitors.

The lack of a central hub to orient residents and visitors undermines the ability of the parks commission to effectively address their needs. The Nature Education Center will fulfill this need by acting as a window into the entire parks system. The center will also serve as a clearing house for all Ottawa County Parks' information that will improve access to and knowledge of this valuable asset.

3. Rapidly Increasing Resident Population and Need for Programs

The population of Ottawa County is increasing rapidly. The U.S. Census reported the 2004 county population estimate as 252,351, an increase of over 5.9% from 2000. As one of the fastest growing counties in the state, providing and maintaining recreational and educational facilities and services is a very real and pressing concern. There is a demand for nature education programs in Ottawa County and west Michigan and the centralized location of the Nature Education Center at Hemlock Crossing will make it easily accessible for area schools and to residents of Ottawa County. The Gillette Nature Center located in P.J. Hoffmaster State Park (Muskegon County) offers school programs that fill with area school groups within hours of opening registration. Because of this demand, many school groups are turned away. Hoffmaster staff, as well as the staff from other area centers, fully support this project and are interested in collaborating on programs and events in the future. Everyone recognizes the increased need to reconnect people with nature.

VISION

Located at Hemlock Crossing along the scenic Pigeon River, the Nature Education Center will be the literal and figurative center of the Ottawa County Parks system.



The mission of the Ottawa County Parks Nature Education Center is to provide year-round natural and cultural history education focused on the Pigeon River corridor as well as natural and cultural features throughout the Ottawa County Parks system for residents and other visitors of all ages.

The over 8,000 square foot Nature Education Center was designed as an in-kind contribution by local architect and past parks commission President Mark Oppenhuizen. The center will be tucked into the woods on the south side of the river with easy access for park visitors and groups. The center is designed as a learning center and includes a 1,600 square foot multi-purpose room that features a real wood fireplace and a large bank of windows overlooking the forest. A 900 square foot classroom located adjacent to the multi-purpose room will provide a pleasant learning environment for a variety of educational programs, activities and events. The center will also feature a wildlife viewing room where visitors can get close-up looks at birds and mammals at an outdoor feeding station, observe native fish species in an aquarium as well as live insects, reptiles and amphibians. Staff offices, meeting rooms and work areas are also included.



A prominent feature of the center will be a circular rotunda/exhibit area constructed of field stone and wood timbers. Four exhibits will be viewed from inside the circle and four from outside the circle. These exhibits will interpret the natural history of the Pigeon River ecosystem as well as provide information on other properties throughout the parks system. These exhibits will prepare visitors for their outdoor experience.

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high performance green buildings. The parks commission is working with the architect and LEED consultants from GMB in Holland in designing the center to be LEED Gold Certified. The LEED program gives building owners and operators the tools they need to have an immediate and measurable impact on their buildings' performance. The program also promotes a whole-building approach to sustainability by recognizing performance in key areas of human and environmental health: sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selection and indoor environmental quality. GMB is donating their services for this aspect of the project.