Important announcements

Limited administrative office & phone hours are in effect:

- Office hours: Monday & Thursday, 10 am-2 pm
  or, by appointment: ocparks@miottawa.org
- Phone hours: Monday-Friday, 9 am-4:30 pm
  Administrative Staff: (616) 738-4810
  Nature Center Staff: (616) 786-4847

Facility Closures:

- The Nature Center remains closed, but we will offer outdoor programming this fall—check out pages 6-7.
- All indoor facilities are closed: we are not taking new reservations for those facilities at this time.

Park Closures:

North Ottawa Dunes and Ottawa Sands will be closed November 20-23. More information: news.miottawa.org/nod-os-closed

By the numbers

This spring, Google began offering monthly mobile data reports to provide insights into what has changed in response to policies aimed at combating COVID-19. During the months of May-August, Google reported increases in visits to parks in Ottawa County of between 300%-500% compared to the baseline, or “normal,” day. For more information on these reports, visit: google.com/covid19/mobility

Letter from our Director

What a year it has been so far! Keeping up with the large increase in visitors while managing extremely high water has kept us busy!

You can read all about completed and upcoming projects in this issue, but first, we wanted to express our gratitude for the following:

- The many individuals who pulled garlic mustard in parks this spring. We were unable to host work days, but so many of you went out on your own that we did not fall behind in managing this invasive plant!
- Sharing feedback with us on the multiple surveys we offered over the past few months.
- Participating in our walking program, Step it Up! Though we were unable to offer spring group walks, 900 participants signed up and committed to spending more time being active.
- We generally encourage disconnecting from screens, but this spring we had to bring nature to you at home. Thanks for watching and sharing online programs and videos.
- Joining us on hikes and summer camps when we were able to offer them. We appreciate that you trusted us to lead these programs in a safe way.
- Parks staff here and nationwide who have worked to keep parks open and safe. They are often out of sight, but are there 365 days a year ensuring the parks, programs, and outdoor spaces are ready for you and your families.

Thank you!

A Washington Post article, Pandemic underscores how public parks shape public health, published on July 31, discussed the health risks related to uneven access to parks. It also noted that with shrinking budgets many parks programs will be “on the chopping block.”

We are grateful that citizens of Ottawa County have already determined parks to be an essential service with the renewal of the 10-year Parks & Recreation millage in 2016. Even further, your additional support of the Ottawa County Parks Foundation proves we are a community who values the outdoors and our natural environment.

We have been overwhelmed by the enthusiasm for our parks this year. Our community turned to nature for much needed physical exercise and stress relief during a difficult time. It is because of your civic action, generosity, and love of parks that we are able to offer high quality natural areas and parks services.

Thank you—we are all in this together.

Jason D. Shamblin
Greenway Projects

Macatawa Watershed planning & restoration

Inland improvements
Paw Paw Park is transforming from a highly manicured golf course to a more natural area. We continue to manage the ups and downs of changing from turf grass to diverse ecosystems. In areas where invasive species currently dominate native plants, we will be “starting over” with the goal of establishing native grasses that can be managed long-term. This will reduce invasive plants, such as Canada thistle and Poison hemlock, while improving the park for recreation.

Observatory Update
Pigeon River Greenway
The Shoreline Amateur Astronomical Association (SAAA) has reached their fundraising goal to construct an observatory at Hemlock Crossing County Park. We anticipate a groundbreaking ceremony in 2021. More information coming soon.
Ready to jump right into stargazing? Join us for outdoor programs hosted by the SAAA this fall. Details on page 6.

Trail planning
The Macatawa Greenway Team continues to meet regularly with various stakeholders and agencies. At first, this transformation may look a bit rough, but we look forward to the improvements to follow.
You may notice the poison hemlock flower looks very similar to Queen Anne’s lace. Poison hemlock grows significantly taller and has a smooth stem with purple splotches. Queen Anne’s lace has a hairy stem.

Ottawa Sands Master Plan
Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway & Grand River Greenway

Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway
Featured at the Pumphouse Museum this year is an exhibit on the Lakewood Farm and Zoo, which was located on Lakeshore Drive in Holland. It had many columns similar to the one pictured. Due to high water, this one was recently exposed and fell into Lake Michigan. Over the summer it was moved next to the museum, where it will be permanently displayed.

Trail planning
The Macatawa Greenway Team continues to meet regularly to determine the next steps for connecting the greenway. There are continued discussions and intensive planning with various stakeholders and agencies.

Bend Area & Trail Updates
Grand River Greenway
Bend Area Acquisition
The Parks and Recreation Commission and the Ottawa County Parks Foundation reached an important milestone toward completing the Bend Area and expanding the Grand River Greenway this summer. An agreement was reached with landowners to purchase 87 acres of former gravel-mining land in Georgetown Township. This acquisition is key to a long-term plan to develop a major regional park – the Bend Area – in the County’s most populous local unit and adds vital natural and recreational land to the greenway.

Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) acquisition applications have also been submitted for additional property in the Bend Area, as well as property across from Stearns Creek Park.

Idema Explorers Trail
The second phase of the connection to the Bend Area was completed this summer, linking the property with completed trail in Jenison along Cottonwood Drive. Funding for this segment of trail was provided by the Parks & Recreation millage, Georgetown Charter Township, the Ottawa County Parks Foundation, and the Michigan Department of Transportation’s (MDOT) Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP).

What’s Next?
A $300,000 MNRTF grant was awarded for the Jenison Mill segment of the Idema Explorers Trail, which is currently in the design phase with construction anticipated in 2021.

An MDOT TAP application has been submitted for the Stearns Bayou Connector in Robinson Township (not pictured on the map). The Idema Explorers Trail is a key feature of the Grand River Greenway, which is comprised of 9,000 acres of public land between Grand Haven and Grand Rapids. When complete, the trail will connect the two cities and many communities in between. Stay up to date at grandrivergreenway.org

GET TO KNOW YOUR GREENWAY
Ottawa County Parks & Recreation offers outdoor programs all year long. Check out pages 6-7 for more details about opportunities to Get to Know Your Greenway.

Preserving history
Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway

Parks Foundation Spotlight: Parks for Life Donors Alice & Andy Hoban

Alice and Andy Hoban first became involved with Ottawa County Parks in 2005, helping to form the Friends of Ottawa County Parks, a non-profit organization focused on stewardship and building awareness of the parks system.

Since then, Alice served on the 2006 and 2016 Parks & Recreation millage renewal committees, campaigned to build the Nature Center, and helped to form the Parks Foundation. She is currently a board member for both the Friends of Ottawa County Parks and Parks Foundation.

“As avid hikers, Andy and I appreciate the planning involved to create and maintain trails,” and Alice. “We often comment on the high quality workmanship in the parks.”

Beyond volunteering their time, the Hobans are also donors. They assisted Parks with improvements at Grand Ravines, and they were among the first donors to the Parks Foundation.

Alice and Andy have hiked all of Ottawa County’s parks and open spaces and believe that these greenspaces, as well as nature education, are important for both the economy and quality of life in Ottawa County. Alice and Andy have included the Parks Foundation in their planned giving because:

“Ottawa County Parks will need significant financial resources for into the future to protect and maintain these beautiful spaces. We want to be a part of providing those resources.”

As Parks for Life members, Alice and Andy are helping ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy those wonderful parks, leaving a legacy of protection and conservation of natural land.

Donors who include the Park Foundation in their planned and estate giving are members of Parks for Life. These donors are committed to the sustainability of parks in Ottawa County. The Ottawa County Parks Foundation assists funds to assist the Parks and Recreation Commission in achieving goals for acquiring land, developing parks and providing parks and recreation services to residents and visitors of Ottawa County. Learn more & get involved: ottawacountyparksfoundation.org
Stewardship & Natural Resources

Recovering America’s Wildlife Act

Bi-partisan bill signed into law
Recently passed, the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (RAWA) will provide states, territories, and tribes with $1.4 billion annually to restore essential habitat and implement key conservation strategies, as described in each state’s Wildlife Action Plan. RAWA will fully fund the Michigan Wildlife Action Plan by providing an estimated $27 million annually to the State of Michigan. Currently, these plans are used to inform management decisions about our natural resources and provide support in grant applications. This funding will not only fund state projects, but also projects of their partners, including municipalities. In the past, state grants have typically focused on game species because that is where most of the conservation funding came from. RAWA will allow agencies to focus on more non-game wildlife, such as the state protected Eastern box turtle. It also provides more funding opportunities for common species that are declining in population, like many grassland birds.

Holland Youth Connections
Macatawa River Greenway

Over the summer, a Holland Youth Connections crew worked at Paw Paw Park performing much needed trail maintenance, as well as invasive plant and litter removal. Later in the summer, staff discovered a patch of buckthorn that returned after treatment and had gone to fruit. The crew was able to remove the woody invasives before they propagated. We were thrilled to be able to support this program for a sixth year.

HWA Task Force
Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway

After surveying thousands of hemlocks at Ottawa Sands and North Ottawa Dunes staff has moved onto pest management. To date, nearly 2,000 trees on county park land have been treated for hemlock woolly adelgid. You can identify a tree that has been treated by searching for an aluminum tag at its base. The West Michigan CISMA has treated an additional 7,700 trees on both private and public property, including in Mason County, which is now the most northern location of HWA. Learn more about this forest pest and why identification and treatment is crucial: saveMIhemlocks.org

Riparian Buffer & Forest Restoration
Grand River Greenway

An upcoming project at Eastmanville Farm will restore 52 acres of park land to native ecosystems. You might not have known the area across Leonard Road is part of the park, as it was historically leased for agriculture. Particular emphasis will be on the quarter-mile of Grand River shoreline, which is currently dominated by invasive reed canary grass and dead ash trees. This vegetation will not provide long-term stabilization of the riverbanks, putting them at-risk for erosion, especially during flooding events. A diversity of southern tree species will be used in the restoration to mitigate the effects of predicted climate change. This forward-thinking forest management strategy is recommended by the US Forest Service. Southern tree species we will plant include pawpaw, sycamore, and Kentucky coffee tree. All of these trees grow naturally within our area, but in lower numbers due to the county’s position at the northern edge of the tension zone.

Grant Funding

To help fund this work, we partnered with the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy to secure a nationally competitive grant from the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Climate Adaptation Fund. We were thrilled to be able to support this program for a sixth year.

Volunteer Beach Clean Up

Ottawa County Parks & Recreation is collaborating with MACC and five other West Michigan partners to remove trash from Lake Michigan and local beaches. Parks will receive a sub-award in the amount of $35,100 to support hiring a barge to remove large debris from the lake where land access is limited. Much of this debris has washed onto shore as a result of extremely high water levels. Join us for a volunteer workday to help clear debris from our beaches. All ages welcome. Please register in advance: miOttawa.org/OCPEvents

Sustain Our Great Lakes program, awarded via the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Learn more: news.miottawa.org/oak-savanna-restoration

Riverside Park

The addition of two new culverts to improve fish habitat and user access is underway. This work was funded by the DNR’s Aquatic Habitat Grant program and matched by funds from our millage. Hundreds of feet of shoreline have been armored, but the work paused due to COVID. It will continue after the culvert construction. The shoreline restoration was funded through the Sustain Our Great Lakes program, awarded via the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Learn more: news.miottawa.org/oak-savanna-restoration-update

Prescribed Browsing Project

The eco goats returned for another year of munching invasive plants. They began their work at Bur Oak where their voracious appetite quickly cleared many acres of invasive bittersweet. The goats will spend time at Riverside Park and Eastmanville Bayou. You may visit, but be careful if you touch them... poison ivy oils stay on their fur.

WHAT’S THE TENSION ZONE?

Ecosystems of northern tree species, like Eastern Hemlock, meet southern tree species, such as Tulip tree, and they blend together. Ottawa County is positioned at the northern edge of the tension zone.

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**Family Fun**

**TOT TIME**
$5/child; ages 0-3, with a caregiver
Explore nature through books, music and movement, and a group walk along a stroller and wagon-friendly path.
- Sep 10, 9:45-10:45 am • Hemlock Crossing
- Oct 8, 9:45-10:45 am • Hemlock Crossing
- Nov 9, 9:45-10:45 am • Hemlock Crossing

**WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS - for kids!**
Ages 5+; with a caregiver
Learn about wildlife found in your yards and parks. Each program includes a guided walk and outdoor craft.
- Oct 11, 3-4:30 pm • Hemlock Crossing
- Squirls & Chipmunks: Woodland Acrobat

**FULL HARVEST MOON CELEBRATION**
$5/person; ages 9+
When the sun sets, the meadow and forest come alive. We’ll use the light of the full moon and flashlights to look for crepuscular and nocturnal critters and end the night with s’mores over a campfire!
- Oct 31, 7-9 pm • Pigeon Creek Park

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**Coffee with the Birds & Mug Club**

We may not be able to meet in-person for Coffee with the Birds, but save-the-date for December 5, and we’ll share details with you.

- Bit.ly/birding-email

- Have you taken a bird photo in Ottawa County in 2020 that would look great on our 2021 Mug Club?