



A Fine-Tuned Plan

Meeting the increased demand for outdoor play

BY ANDREW PACK

Whether you're going to a local nature trail for daily hikes, camping on weekends, or simply observing wildlife at the local preserve, outdoor activities have increased significantly in the last couple of years due to the pandemic, and parks and recreation departments are seeing the value in making plans to sustain that healthy growth into the future.

According to a recent report from the Outdoor Foundation, 8.1 million more Americans went hiking in 2020 compared to 2019, while another 7.9 million more went

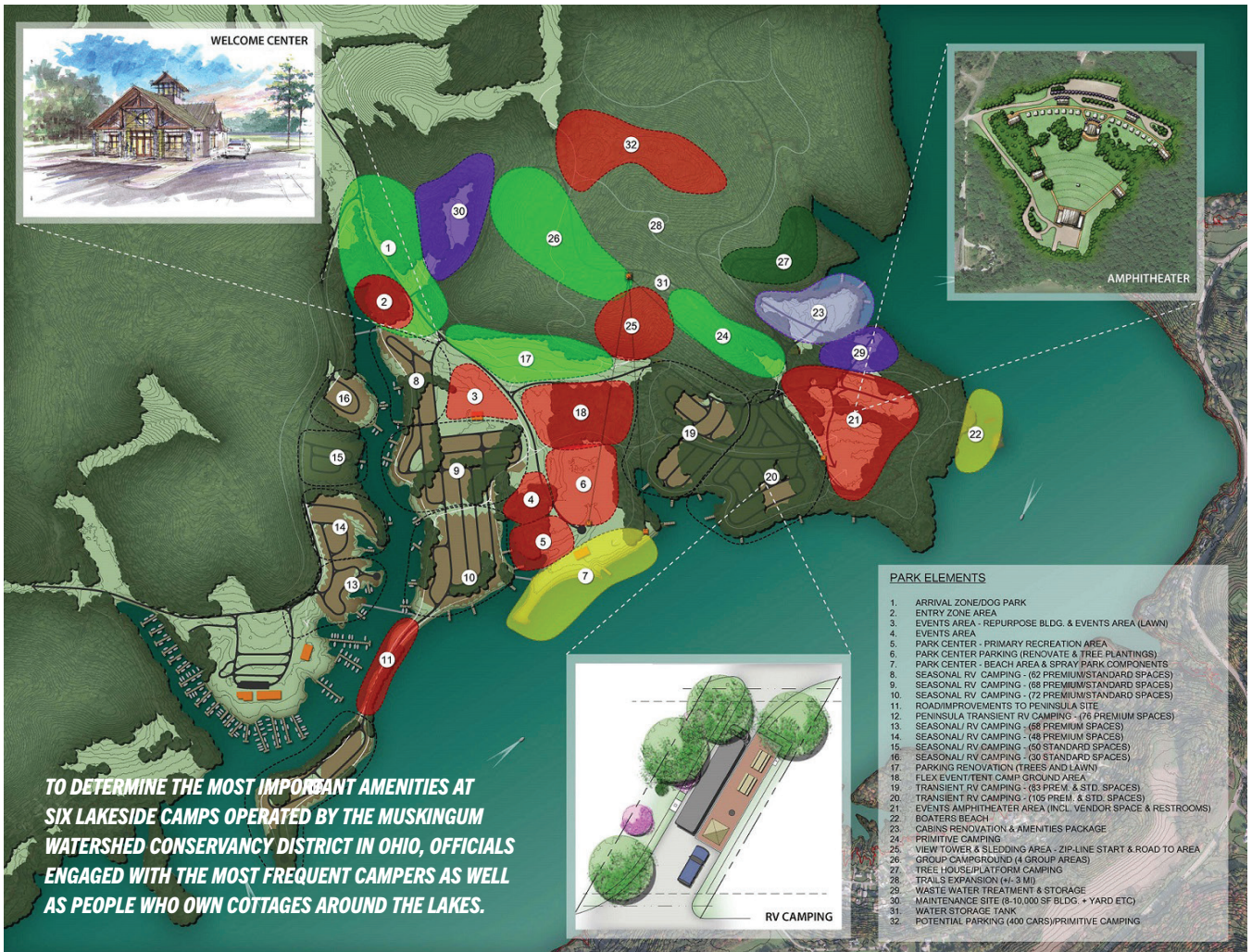


MASTER PLANS ARE OFTEN NEEDED TO APPLY FOR FEDERAL AND STATE GRANTS AND TO PROVIDE THE OPERATIONAL TRANSPARENCY THAT IS ESSENTIAL WHEN ASKING CITIZENS TO SUPPORT FUNDING CAMPAIGNS THAT CAN LEAD TO NEW AND RESTORED FACILITIES.

camping, and 3.4 million more participated in freshwater fishing. At the heart of all this activity were city, county, and state parks and recreation districts—many of which experienced unprecedented participation in a wide variety of programs that helped people get outside and closer to nature.

The Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District (MWCD) in Ohio, for example, saw its annual attendance record smashed in 2020 after welcoming an estimated 380,000 more visits to the district's parks,

marinas, and campgrounds, as compared to the year before. Fortunately, administrators said they felt prepared for the increased use of the facilities since the district had completed a long-needed master plan in 2014, as well as several individual lake-park upgrades by 2019. The plan helped prioritize and complete improvement projects at parks and campgrounds just prior to the influx of visitors that began in May 2020, according to Eric Stechschulte, MWCD deputy chief of planning and projects.



“With any master plan, it’s a living, breathing document. They’re not just a static document meant to be followed to the tee,” Stechschulte says. “Our plan gave us a good foundation and a roadmap going forward that we’ve worked off of ever since, and it’s been a very good tool for us.”

THE BENEFITS OF MASTER PLANNING

Master planning for parks and recreation is an effective way to prioritize and budget for capital-improvement projects while also supporting and creating amenities and programs based on what local communities want. Master plans are often needed to apply for federal and state grants and to provide the operational transparency that is essential when asking citizens to support funding campaigns that can lead to new sportsplexes, community rec centers, and restored parks, trails, and campgrounds.

One of the key benefits to the master-planning process for parks and recreation is engaging a community and cultivating a sense of ownership among its citizens. Early on, planners should connect with key stakeholders—schools, YMCAs and other local recreation centers, and nonprofit organizations—to get

input, feedback, and support for the plan within the community.

Engaging the public often involves sending out surveys to residents and hosting public meetings, but every community solicits public opinions differently.

“Some communities have leaders that gauge interests among residents through informal discussions rather than formal public meetings,” Woolpert Senior Landscape Architect and Design Director Bruce Rankin says. “Public input is invaluable to the master-planning process to establish a community’s recreational priorities, and to help evaluate what sites have and what they don’t have. This helps parks and recreation departments determine the cadence and what type of programming and facility improvements should be pursued within a given budget.”

Rankin adds that residents who get involved in the master-planning process gain a deeper understanding as to why planning and budgeting are necessary when there is an array of potential projects to consider.

“The planning process is critical to ensuring the needs and trends in a community are accurately reflected and document the rationale behind master-plan decisions,” he says. “This contributes to the creation of

a living plan and provides a sound basis for adapting plan specifics to evolving user needs and patterns as the plan is implemented.”

MWCD officials said that dynamic held true through their master-planning process, which uncovered more than \$300-million worth of potential improvement projects along the district’s 8,000 square miles of the Muskingum Watershed. The watershed is fed by 14 lakes, eight of which feature campgrounds and marinas. For input on its master plan—addressing six lakeside campgrounds and three marinas—MWCD officials engaged with its most frequent campers, as well as people who own cottages around the lakes. Several public meetings were held to communicate the district’s needs.

“Our main focus was on upgrading our campgrounds, many of which were built in the 1960s and 1970s and had outdated utilities,” Stechschulte says. “Wastewater-treatment plants and upgrading electric and water lines are all expensive and important projects, but they’re not the types of projects that the public gets excited about. Sharing details about those necessary projects early on in the planning process helped spread the word about what we were doing and why we were doing it.”

MWCD sent a second survey to campers and related parties to gauge what amenities they would prefer to have at sites. District officials said surveys will be issued periodically, and that information will be collected, evaluated, and used to update the master plan.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY MASTER-PLAN INGREDIENTS

Just as MWCD officials are using their master plan to help formulate the district’s five-year budget, comprehensive master plans are informing parks and recreation investment decisions in Mecklenburg County and the city of Belmont, both in North Carolina.

In 2019, Belmont updated its comprehensive parks and recreation master plan, which will remain an active document that guides capital-improvement decisions through 2029. With a growing population that currently stands at roughly 12,750, Belmont manages nine community parks as well as walking trails, and offers programs enjoyed by residents throughout the region. City planners connected with local schools, the YMCA, and Holy Angels—a local nonprofit agency that advocates for children with disabilities—to contribute to the master-planning process.

Belmont Parks and Recreation Director Zip Stowe says creating those partnerships during the master-planning process was key, not only in obtaining approval for grants to pay for projects, but providing opportunities to lower operational costs and expand parks and recreation programming.

“We were able to acquire a grant that was used to pay for the installation of an inclusive playground for children with disabilities within our park system,” Stowe says. “Through the partnership with the schools, we were able to have about 300 kids participate in our basketball program without actually having our own facility.”



IN BELMONT, N.C., MASTER PLANS RESULTED IN A NEW WATER PARK AND SOCCER COMPLEX. PLANS FOR A REC CENTER THAT WERE ONCE SHELVED HAVE SINCE RESURFACED AND CONSTRUCTION BEGAN IN AUGUST.



Belmont's previous parks and recreation master plan resulted in a new waterpark and soccer complex, but the city had to shelve two projects because of the 2008 economic downturn—a new rec center and a skate park. Those plans have been resurrected with the city's new master plan, as rec center construction began in August, while construction of the skate park began in September.

Stowe says the new 45,000-square-foot rec center will provide much-needed space for a variety of sports, enabling the city to accommodate the needs of more local residents in its programming. Revenue to operate the facility—in part from participation fees and hosting events—had to be identified during the master-planning process to obtain approval from city council.

"Belmont is a great place for recreation. We have great participation within the city for our current sports, but we haven't had the space to accommodate a lot of people," Stowe says. "This new facility we're building is going to be our main facility for years to

come. It will help us out tremendously in providing recreation for the city and surrounding area."

THE MECK PLAYBOOK

Mecklenburg County is the largest county in North Carolina, fueled by the rapid growth that has occurred over the last few decades in Charlotte and six other municipalities. The county's parks and recreation department maintains most of the 22,000 acres of parkland that are spread across 525 square miles. Parks and recreation sites are diverse in the county, with 28 nature preserves on the outskirts of Charlotte and numerous smaller parks and recreation areas within the city.

For its master plan, the county partnered with state and regional municipalities, as well as the local public school system to find the best ways to provide programming and manage multiple diverse sites. Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Director Lee Jones says these partnerships help provide the leverage needed to increase and expand parks and recreation services to best serve the area's growing population.

"We meet with the city leadership two or three times a year to explore goals and aspirations, particularly around budget season," Jones says. "We look at our comprehensive master plans that we've done in the past, and we look at geographic equity to make sure we provide the same level of facilities and parks and recreation amenities and opportunities throughout Mecklenburg County."

While funding capital-improvement projects is always a challenge, Mecklenburg County has the additional challenge of connecting communities through greenways because of the unique layout



of Charlotte. Tributaries and streams serve as barriers between residential developments and existing parks. Greenways and trails consistently rank as a top priority among residents, based on the feedback provided in annual surveys.

“We work with the incorporated municipalities to see how we can bridge that gap to provide the best connectivity that we can, and we try to follow the standards set forth by the National Recreation and Parks Association so that there is a park amenity as close to or if not closer than a 10-minute walk for every resident,” Jones says.

Mecklenburg County’s parks and recreation master plan is called the “Meck Playbook,” and it outlines action plans for the next 10 years in terms of land acquisition, programming, staffing, maintenance, and operations and reinvestment.

“There are a lot of voices in Mecklenburg County that had not been heard prior to the latest update to the master plan because they felt they wouldn’t be listened to—lower-income communities; those who have physical, emotional or intellectual challenges; as well as our senior citizens were among those not being heard,” Jones says. “We specifically reached out to those people because, in the parks and recreation department that I’m the director of, everyone is welcome and has a stake in what we do. That was a really eye-opening and very meaningful learning experience for us in this particular master-plan process.”

PLANNING FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

Although the surge in outdoor activity fueled by the pandemic is beginning to plateau, parks and recreation departments will continue to have the opportunity to provide invaluable amenities, resources, and services to support healthy communities.

“Parks and recreation master plans serve as roadmaps for operations and investments that elevate the quality of life for individuals around the world,” Rankin says. “By creating comprehensive master plans that leverage and amplify the value of each location, specific to the needs of that community, cities and counties provide a sustainable and

engaging outdoor destination that their residents and visitors can enjoy for many years to come.” **PRB**

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