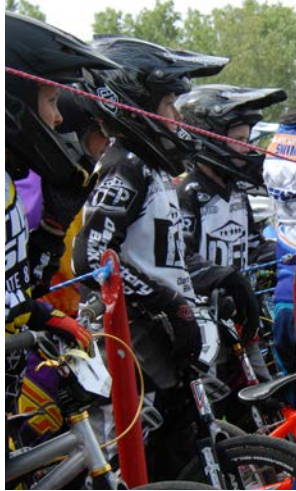


# Golden Oaks

50 Years of Oakland County Parks





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Compiled and written by Jon Noyes  
 Design: Garrett Ebbeling  
 Editing/Production: Mary Zednik



# Why County Parks?

Recreation is central to who we are as human beings. We were made to move, explore, seek adventure, and connect with others. We crave opportunities to relax and enjoy the world around us; and we know that recreational experiences can bring people and communities closer together.

The Oakland County Parks celebrate what it is to live, work, and play in Oakland County – by creating public spaces and events that attract visitors and promote shared experiences among the residents of all 62 cities, villages, and townships.

To accomplish this, the Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission members and staff have spent 50 years hiring the most qualified professionals; exploring cutting-edge technologies; tracking recreational trends; seeking public input; and using a combination of tax revenue, grants, and user fees to create innovative recreational attractions that draw more than 1.8 million visitors annually.

As a result, the County Parks have become integral to enhancing quality of life in Oakland County by providing 13 parks, managing 6,700 acres of public land, and creating hundreds of recreational programs. The County Parks build, maintain and operate myriad recreational facilities including golf courses, campgrounds, waterparks, banquet facilities, nature centers, trails, and mobile recreation units.

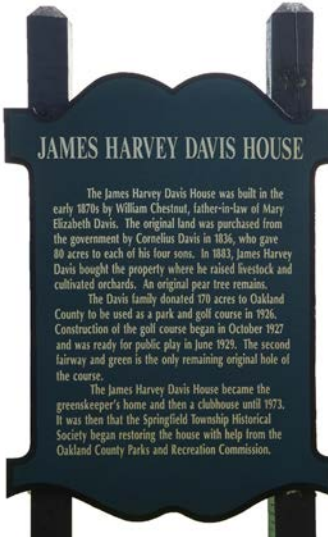
This retrospective is dedicated to those who have invested their time and talent in service to this organization and its mission.



## **In the Beginning, there was the Land...**

In 1926, Manly Davis of the Davis Investment Company made an unprecedented offer to the County of Oakland – 169 acres of his family’s homestead in Davisburg for the creation of a county-owned park. The donated land, in the heart of Springfield Township, boasted rolling hills, oak-covered ridges and the meandering shore of a historic millpond. Although modest in size, the site was a portrait of a rural landscape that had led generations to call Oakland County home. The wish for public recreation that it represented foretold the success of the park system that it would inspire.

The Davis’ gesture was remarkable, in part, because Springfield Township was still a very small agricultural community in the 1920s. Even though nearby Flint, Pontiac, and Detroit had grown exponentially, much of Oakland County was still a mosaic of family-owned farms. The notion of setting aside open space for recreation wouldn’t become a priority for many communities for another half century. No doubt, the Davis Family had seen the change that development brought to the sleepy village they founded. With that realization came the desire to preserve a bit of the landscape they loved so much.



## A New Concept: County-managed Recreation

The Oakland County Board of Supervisors accepted the Davis donation, but without a Parks Department to operate the land, the task of developing and managing the site for recreation was assigned to the Oakland County Road Commission.

It was determined that a golf course would be an appropriate use for the site, creating an attraction that could draw visitors to Springfield Township and provide a source of revenue to offset the cost of facility operation. In 1929, Davisburg Park was opened as a county-owned 9-hole course.



### *If these floors could talk –*

The historic James Harvey Davis House, built prior to 1872 and located on the grounds of Davisburg Park, served as the residence for the golf course caretaker until 1938, and then as the Clubhouse until 1973. Even after restoration by the Springfield Township Historical Society, the home's hardwood floors still bear the marks of more than 40 years of golf spikes.



## An Opportunity for Action

The impetus for the creation of the first county-owned park was the threat posed by rapid urban growth; but the catalyst for the creation of a county-owned parks system was the enabling legislation which provided the legal framework for municipalities to establish recreational authorities.

Forty years after the donation by the Davis family, such legislation came in the form of Michigan's Public Act 261 of 1965, which allowed for the creation of county and regional parks systems under the direction of Parks and Recreation Commissions. In the spring of 1966, the Oakland County Board of Supervisors approved the creation of the Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission and appointed board members to secure funding for the acquisition, development, and operation of the future park system.



### ***Detroit's Greenbelt***

Prior to Public Act 261 of 1965, special legislation was required to create a park system with the ability to acquire, develop and maintain property, charge fees, issue bonds, and seek financial appropriations from municipal general funds or tax levies.

The Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority was created in this fashion (Act 147) in 1939, for the purpose of establishing large, regional parks that would serve the greater Detroit Metropolitan area essentially forming a greenbelt that rings the City of Detroit.



## A Movement Rather Than a Vision

Oakland County Parks did not start with a grand vision for interconnected recreational lands. Rather, the parks system seemed to be the result of elected officials responding directly to their residents, who, like people across the nation, saw recreational pursuits as fundamental to the health of their families and their communities.

This groundswell of interest in the value of recreation coincided with post-World War II economic expansion and the growth of the middle class. With increasing financial security, people began to put a premium on leisure activities, and parks became a priority for public planning and investment.

It was that investment, in the form of State and Federal grants, that made the creation of the Oakland County Parks system not only possible, but also practical.



### ***A time of change***

As a result of public interest in recreational access, a series of funding initiatives were established at both the state and federal levels in the 1960s. Several of these public funding sources were used by the Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission, including:

- *The Federal Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965*
- *Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965*
- *The Federal Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968*
- *The State of Michigan Recreation Bond Fund*

## A strong 'yes' for Oakland parks

EACH ELECTION that it's on the ballot, the 0.25-mill property tax for Oakland County parks seems to win stronger support. And each year, more and more residents find delightful recreation close to home at the nine county parks. The parks are expected to draw 1.2 million fans this year, up 20,000 from last year and 400,000 from nine years ago.

The tax, which brings in about 60 percent of the parks and recreation commis-

sion's \$4.2 million operating and capital budget, has been in effect 18 years. For legal reasons, the ballot language will say "increase," but actually it's a five-year renewal.

We strongly recommend a yes vote on the county proposal Aug. 7. To the owner of a house valued at \$80,000 and assessed at half that amount, the quarter-mill will cost \$12 a year. The revenue helps provide capital money and

holds down admissions fees to an affordable level. Oakland parks are an intermediate form of recreation between the least state parks and the larger, more diverse county parks. County parks cater to a variety of interests for all members of the family. They are convincing evidence that government can do some things right.

Observer & Eccentric Newspapers

## Oakland park fun, well run

WHERE DO YOU take a team of kid baseball players?

It's traditional for a coach to hold a season-ending party. Last year I had taken a group of 10-12-year-old boys to a Tiger baseball game. Other popular choices are cookouts or a visit to Chuck E. Cheese.

But I was looking for something different. I heard of another coach who had taken his players to the wave pool at Waterford Oaks, a park in the Oakland County Parks and Recreation system. It sounded like a good idea.

So on Saturday morning nine boys loaded into my station wagon and we took a 46-minute trip to Waterford Oaks. I was very impressed by the wave pool. The locker room is clean and well-orga-



Nick Sharkey

inside a locker as I had instructed. I was sure the day would be ruined by a stolen clothes bag. Not to worry. An attendant took me to the bag and found where his clothes bag was sitting on the floor.

OAKLAND COUNTY parks have an important day coming up. On Tuesday, Aug. 7, a one-quarter mill operating re-

newal vote will be held at Red Oaks in Royal Oak.

IT HAS LONG been my contention that county parks are great untapped resources. At a time when we are looking for inexpensive recreation close to home, county parks fill the bill.

One of the promises I made myself the beginning of the summer was to visit more county parks. After my experience at Waterford Oaks I'm looking forward to using more parks in August.

I was even more impressed when at the end of the day one of the boys said, "I was more fun than going to the game last year."

In the year of the Tigers, that's a pretty good thing to say.

## Building a Parks System from the Ground Up

The Oakland County Board of Supervisors supported the early development of the park system by not only dedicating a staff member, Kenneth Van Natta, to serve as the park's first director, but also by providing a small amount of funding to the newly formed Parks Commission as it investigated potential acquisitions and grant funding opportunities.

In addition, the County assisted financially by terminating the lease between the Road Commission and Springfield Township for the maintenance and operation of the Davisburg Park Golf Course. This allowed the Parks and Recreation Commission to contract directly with a private golf course operator for the 1966 season, which, in turn, created the first regular revenue stream for the Commission. As small as it was, this revenue stream was important to the Commission as it prepared to place a ballot question before voters for a five-year, one-quarter-mill tax levy.

The millage passed in November of 1966, but with it came the challenge of how to continue to fund the fledgling park system, given that revenue would be unavailable for more than a year as the tax was implemented and funds collected. Once again, the importance of recreation to the quality of life of Oakland County residents prompted the Board of Supervisors to rise to the occasion and provide the Parks and Recreation Commission with a \$100,000 loan to support the hiring of staff and early park operations.







***From Golf to Groveland –***

A busy year, 1967 – the Parks and Recreation Commission terminated the contract with the private golf operator and commenced full operation of the Davisburg Park Golf Course. At the same time, the Parks and Recreation Commission entered into a use agreement for the operation of the Mathews Groveland Estates Recreation Center, known for its campgrounds and swimming beach located off Dixie Highway.

## Low Hanging Fruit –

The notion of user-supported operations had a profound and lasting impact on the young parks system. Even with the voter-approved five-year millage in place, there was a legitimate concern over how park operations could be funded, especially if much of the early tax revenue was needed to provide local matching dollars for acquisition and development grants. It is somewhat hard to imagine, but at that time the idea of a county-managed parks system was very new, and there were legitimate concerns over whether or not residents would support future millage renewal efforts.

As a result, Director Van Natta and the Parks and Recreation Commission targeted existing successful private recreation facilities and lands easily converted to recreational attractions. Specifically, they sought to acquire and build facilities capable of drawing residents from around the county, generating enough revenue to be operationally self-sufficient.



Given the financial realities of the early system, and little or no track record on which to determine public interest, this was a prudent plan for the parks; and one that allowed the system to grow quickly. In less than four years, the Oakland County Parks grew to more than 1,000 acres, establishing four County Parks as recreational destinations for residents: Springfield Oaks, Groveland Oaks, Waterford Oaks and Addison Oaks.



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### *Oakland's Upper Crust -*

In 1969, the Commission acquired the Tudor Hills Gun Club in Addison Township. The club, formerly the family estate of Detroit industrialist Lawrence and his wife, Cora, offered more than 600 acres of rolling hills, swimming ponds, forest, and cleared fields. The site boasted a 27-room mansion that had been renovated as a clubhouse to support public activity; eventually the site would become renowned as a destination banquet facility and campground.



### *In the center of it all -*

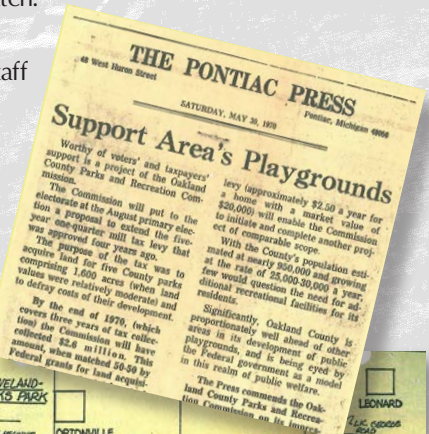
Also in 1969, the Parks and Recreation Commission negotiated the lease, and later the acquisition, of a portion of a former church camp from Oakland County government. The property had previously been acquired for the purpose of expanding Children's Village (a residential treatment and correctional facility for youth offenders operated by the Oakland County Health Department). This created a park (Waterford Oaks) in the geographic center of Oakland County and provided a location for the annual Soap Box Derby Championships.

# Turning to Development

With the acquisition of Addison Oaks in 1969, the Commission became concerned with the pace of park expansion and directed staff to shift their focus to the development and operation of existing park property. This too was a prudent step for the Commission as it prepared for the first renewal of the five-year millage. It was critical to demonstrate value to County residents by continuing to increase recreational access and revenue production through entrance fees and leveraged grant funds.

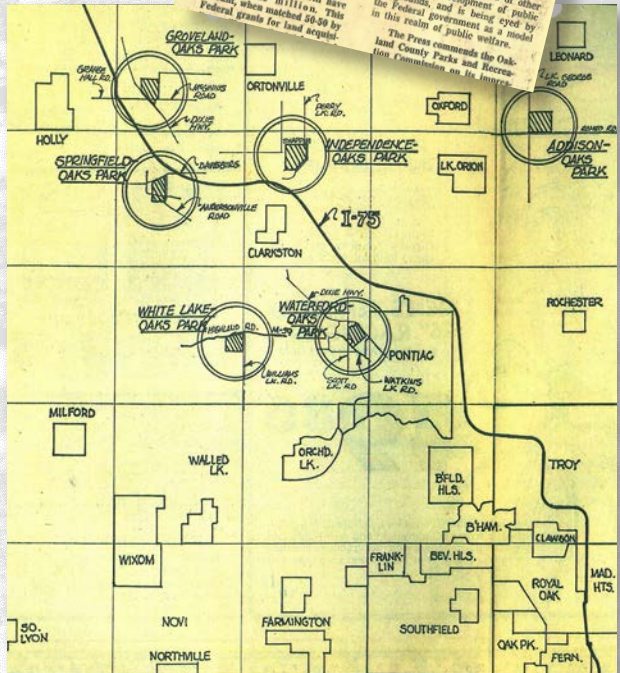
In 1970, the Commission took the millage renewal request to the voters with the slogan “It was a good buy then – A better buy today.” Local newspapers highlighted that the \$2.6 million raised during the first millage cycle was sufficient to fund nearly half of the acquisition and development proposed in the first 5-year recreation plan; and that the remaining funds were being provided by State and Federal grant sources on a 50/50 match.

With the passing of the millage renewal by a two-to-one margin, the Commission directed staff to continue the focus on development, while strategically exploring acquisition to expand the geographic coverage and the revenue-generating capacity of the parks. As a result, park improvements continued at Springfield, Addison, and Groveland Oaks while budget preparations were made for acquisition of Independence Oaks and White Lake Oaks.



## They all end in Oaks

In 1968, the Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission adopted the practice of naming the County Parks according to the local municipality, adding the ubiquitous “Oaks” moniker. This was particularly valuable for a new park system looking to build name recognition and emphasized the conscious effort to locate the County Parks, each with its own personality and charm, strategically throughout Oakland County.



# The Beginning of a Niche –

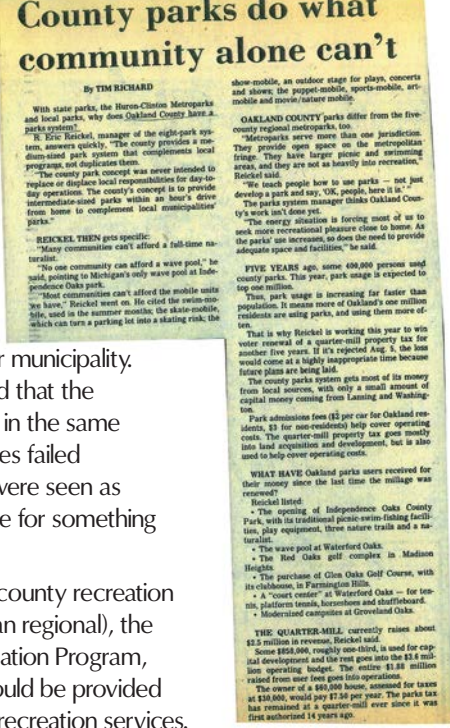
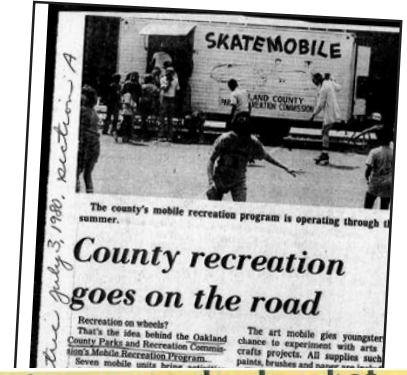
Interestingly, this was the period when the Commission and staff first appeared to consider local context when choosing the type of recreation that would be appropriate for each park.



Revenue generation was still a requirement, but the Commission became much more interested in how activities affected the character of each park and the surrounding community. Skeet shooting at Addison Oaks, for example, may have been an ideal attraction for a hunt club or country estate, but snowmobiles and snowmobile racing events became more appropriate as the park's featured uses turned toward trail development and camping. Similarly, the Commission rejected calls to bring speedboat racing to secluded and pristine Crooked Lake at Independence Oaks – during Independence Oaks' master plan development, it was determined that pedal boats, fishing and rowboat rentals were a better fit for the site than power boats.

This was also the time when the Commission began to assert an informal strategy for the location of County Parks and the facilities that they built. Recreational destinations were seen as the most appropriate way of providing leisure opportunities for all residents, even those who would not have a County Park located in their municipality. Individual members of the Parks Commission noted that the county-wide parks millage passed overwhelmingly in the same urban municipalities where local recreation measures failed simultaneously by the same margins. Such results were seen as confirmation of both recreational need and a desire for something more than pocket parks and playgrounds.

As the Commission looked for a “sweet spot” for county recreation (something more than local and somewhat less than regional), the decision was also made to invest in a Mobile Recreation Program, through which staffed programs and equipment could be provided at a low cost to communities, to supplement local recreation services.



### ***Taking the show on the road -***

The Parks Commission created a unique way of providing recreational services to County residents via a series of Mobile Recreation Units which could be towed to local communities. From its humble beginnings with a Fashion Mobile – complete with sewing machines and make-up stands, Swim Mobiles – to create temporary community pools, and toilet trailers, the program grew to include a variety of staffed recreational units including a Puppet Mobile, mobile stages and bleachers. Buses were added later, to transport residents on recreational adventures.



Puppet Mobile



Movie Mobile



Skate Mobile



Swim Mobile

# Tragedy Presents an Opportunity for New Directions

Director Van Natta, a Landscape Architect by training and profession, was instrumental in helping to launch the fledgling park system, particularly with an early emphasis on the acquisition and rapid transformation of existing successful recreational facilities. There was an early devotion to the idea that County Parks should be self-sustaining. Considering that when the system was first created there was no source of financial support, this was a wise approach. The challenge was that many of the recreational activities that residents wanted were not necessarily good business opportunities.



Eric Reickel, manager of County Parks & R

Following the untimely death of Kenneth Van Natta in December 1971, the Commission chose to adjust course by choosing a new director with a strong background in Parks and Recreation management; someone who could focus on a sustainable parks system rather than self-sustaining parks or individual recreation facilities.

New director, R. Eric Reickel, saw that the overwhelming support for two successive millages was evidence of residents' willingness to pay for recreational services, not just to fund "start-up costs" of acquisition and development.

This pivotal shift allowed the Parks Commission to pursue recreational services for which there was an identifiable need, but not necessarily guaranteed profits.

**Pride is the theme**

By MICHAEL MAFREZEWI

Just across Telegraph Road as the sunbeams, where the county executive, the board of commissioners and county prosecutor speak, there is tension, politics and an austerity budget.

"I'VE GOT THE best job in government," Reickel says again. "They there," he said, pointing east, "they're always dealing with dilemmas. In department."

He is quick to boast of the parks system and its recreation programs. His effectiveness is nearly as great as that of new Detroit Pistons coach Dick Vitale, an energetic, never-say-die promoter who signs his personal correspondence, "Fankhoushally yours."

Reickel is a little more refined, a little more subtle. But he is quick to put out a packet of brochures advertising the parks. He is more than willing to discuss each park and what is "right" with the system.

"WE PROBABLY have the best security system around. We've had some vandalism, but not an extensive amount."

He hangs vandalism and littering in the same category.

"We try to maintain a good image. We try to present the parks in their best light. We try to make our parks attractive."

He says if the county gives people parks they can be proud of, they will respond by taking care of the parks.

"The parks are only as good as the people who use them," he says. "A park without people is of no value."



ERIC REICKEL, Proud of parks



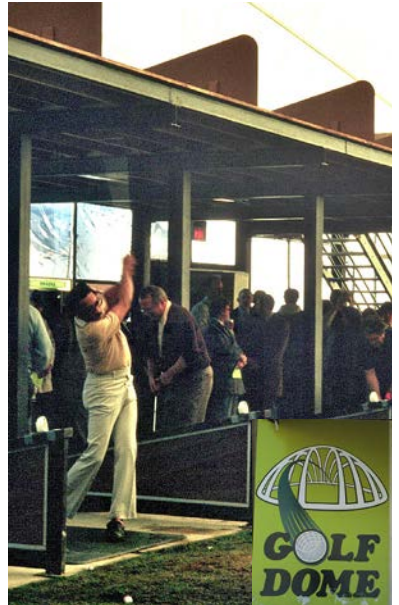
## A Legacy of Firsts...

With the ability to consider millage revenue as a “fee for services,” the Parks Commission directed staff to explore a range of potential new recreational services in addition to continued investment in golf and campgrounds. As a result, the parks system pursued legacy projects like the development of the County Fairgrounds at Springfield Oaks and the development of Red Oaks Golf Course on top of Red Run Drain. It was also able to create a series of signature recreational facilities, including the area’s first Bicycle Motocross (BMX) Track, Michigan’s first Wave-action Pool, and the nation’s first Golf Dome.

Reickel and his successor, Ralph Richard, helped the Parks Commission continue this trend with later additions including the area’s first Disc Golf course (Addison Oaks), southeast Michigan’s first Dog Park (Orion Oaks), and Michigan’s first Refrigerated Toboggan Run (Waterford Oaks).

The success in creating new and unique recreational attractions made Oakland County Parks a nationally-recognized leader in the field of public recreation. It also helped lead voters to approve a 10-year millage renewal cycle instead of the previous five.

Park officials realized that if Oakland County Parks was to continue its role in creating destination attractions, it was necessary to work on longer budgetary timelines where funding would be guaranteed throughout the research, development, and operation of larger facilities. Longer millage cycles also enabled staff the time necessary to track recreational trends, propose cutting-edge projects, create multi-party partnerships, and seek grant funding.







***The next big wave –***

A seminal moment in the history of the County Parks occurred when the Parks Commission opted to replace the proposed Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool and diving facility with a wave-action pool at Waterford Oaks. For the first time, parks staff pursued a project with a potential draw based on its uniqueness rather than its size. The parks system was no longer creating just “more of the same” or doing it better than anyone else – it was defining a whole new way of meeting recreational needs.



***Unique solutions for unique needs –***

Recognizing the importance of creating access to recreational opportunities for people of all abilities, Oakland County Parks was an early adopter of therapeutic recreation programs that remove potential barriers for those with special needs. Oakland County Parks has supported wheelchair basketball leagues, hosted annual dances for those with intellectual disabilities, and invested in equipment from hand-pedal bikes to specially-designed pontoon boats and accessible golf carts, ensuring everyone the opportunity to experience the wonder of Oakland County Parks.





## Riding Out the Storm

By 2008, the County Parks system had grown to 13 parks and more than 6,300 acres. The Parks system continued to burnish its credentials as a recreational leader with the addition of a second waterpark (Red Oaks); development of an Arthur Hills-designed golf course (Lyon Oaks); creation of the area's first public Cricket Pitch with practice cages (Lyon Oaks); and relocation and restoration of one of the largest historic barns in Michigan (Springfield Oaks).

The parks also became an influential advocate for public/private partnerships, which led to the development and maintenance of a mountain bike race course (Addison Oaks) and expansion of the annual Oakland County 4-H Youth Fair (Springfield Oaks) with attendance of more than 100,000 visitors annually.

This seasoned track record and adaptability served the Parks Commission and staff well, as they approached the economic downturn of 2008. In what seemed like a "perfect storm," the Oakland County Parks were inundated with series of challenges, including a plummeting tax base; aging infrastructure that threatened moth-balling of signature recreational facilities; and the sudden departure of one-third of the parks system's full-time staff (as a result of retirement incentives offered by Oakland County).

Executive Officer Dan Stencil (successor to Ralph Richard), along with the Parks Commission, saw creativity, planning, and data-driven decision-making not just as means to weather the economic storm, but as tools to set the parks system on a course for long-term sustainability.



### Kudos

Many past and present staff members and commissioners have been honored for excellence in the parks and recreation field. Both Reickel and Richard, as well as former parks commission chairmen Lewis E Wint and Pecky D. Lewis, were inducted into the mParks (Michigan Recreation and Park Association) Hall of Fame; the parks system was The Sports Foundation Gold Medal Award finalist in 1992 under Richard; and current Executive Officer Dan Stencil, along with Reickel, Richard and former Assistant Director Jon Kipke, have earned the Fellowship Award, mParks' highest individual honor.





## A Legacy for the Future

Severe economic challenges can either drive people apart as they quarrel over scarce resources, or it can bring them together as they face a common threat. The Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission and staff did both.

The agency struggled over how to maintain and expand services with less revenue and greater expenses. But through this adversity, there was an opportunity to consider WHY we have County Parks, and HOW the next 50 years of the County Parks will be shaped.

The County Parks exist because there is a need for shared experiences, which reinforce what it means to be part of the Oakland County community. History shows that even though recreational pursuits change over time, the challenge that drives the parks commission and staff remains the same: to create facilities and events that inspire the participation of visitors and residents from across the County.

Fiscal sustainability over the next half-century will be determined by how well the parks system manages its portfolio of recreational services, balancing basic public access with opportunities to generate revenue. The overall continued success of the parks system will depend on its ability to engage the public, to innovate, and to continue exciting residents with recreation that feels authentically Oakland County.

## Why County Parks?

*As a recreational idea...* the County Parks were born out of a fear for the future loss of a beloved rural landscape.

*As a recreational agency...* the County Parks were a response to a citizen movement that saw leisure as essential to quality of life.

*As a recreational service...* the County Parks are the result of 50 years of innovation, public engagement, and a commitment creating recreational attractions that draw residents from across Oakland County.