



Great Parks of Hamilton County

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



Contents

Numbers to Know	3
Keeping Trails Open	5
Online Experiences	6
Innovative Programming	7
Great Miami Riverway	8
Protecting the Mill Creek	9
Volunteers	10
The Heron Society	11
Sponsors, Partners & Grants	12
Awards	13
Planning for a Bright Future	14
Financials	15



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Great Parks, Here for You

Despite the challenges of 2020, I am honored to share some remarkable accomplishments from Great Parks of Hamilton County in this Annual Report. We are proud to provide 17,742 acres of protected greenspace through 21 parks and preserves and Nature Center at The Summit to serve as the backdrop for your stories and memories.

At the onset of COVID-19, we knew Great Parks would have a significant role in supporting our community in every facet of your lives – home, work, family, school and health and wellness. The community needed their parks.

With very few options for escape from the pandemic, residents relied upon Great Parks and, most notably, our 78 miles of trails. Trails provided a safe way to enjoy the outdoors. In fact, the need for trails was so high that staff temporarily converted some roadways into additional trails.

With social distancing and stay-at-home mandates in place, staff and volunteers adjusted by focusing on providing excellent service and accessible virtual resources for education to meet the additional needs of Hamilton County families and their children. Even when residents and local schools couldn't make it to the parks, Great Parks still served as a valuable resource for them.

As we reflect upon the year, I hope Great Parks played a significant role in your wellbeing. From mental wellness and physical fitness to small group outings and quiet moments in nature, we are here for you and we will be here for generations to come.

On behalf of the Board of Park Commissioners, thank you for your ongoing support and for continuing to visit Great Parks. We look forward to creating amazing experiences for you in 2021!

Todd Palmeter, Chief Executive Officer



From left to right: Joseph C. Seta, Geraldine Warner, Marcus Thompson, HC Buck Niehoff, William J. Burwinkel. Judge Ralph E. Winkler.



Board of Park Commissioners serve without compensation and are appointed by the Judge of Probate Court, the Honorable Judge Ralph E. Winkler.

Numbers to Know



17,742

Acres of land protected

As the largest landowner in Hamilton County, our **21** parks and nature preserves and Nature Center at The Summit provided space for more than **5.1 million** guests to explore and connect with nature this year!



83%

Of our land is preserved as natural area

Plant community surveys at Mitchell Memorial Forest documented **120** native species, including wildflowers like blue-eyed Mary, Dutchman's breeches, blue phlox and smooth Solomon's seal.



1,559,280

Guests explored our trails

Trail usage was up **62%** in 2020. That's more than **599,000** guests who walked, ran, biked, hiked and explored our 78 miles of trails this year.



204,725

Golf rounds enjoyed this year

As golf courses reopened, guests hit the links, hitting more than **3.9 million** range balls this year. Despite the pandemic, golf courses experienced record numbers and provided a safe way for guests to exercise and focus on wellness throughout the year.



Keeping Trails Safe & Open

The parks have been my saving grace during the COVID-19 restrictions. My friend and I have been checking off so many trails and have almost earned our 'master hiker' status! Thanks for keeping things green and growing, Great Parks!
– Emily, Great Parks Forever contributor

Trails are one of Great Parks' top priorities, as outlined in the Comprehensive Master Plan. While the plan focuses on the next decade, trails have never been more important to our community than they have been this year. The connection to nature and improved mental and physical wellness that trails provide has become invaluable in the midst of the worldwide pandemic of 2020.

While many other wellness outlets were forced to close or limit capacity, trail usage increased 62%. In response to this demand, Great Parks focused on trail improvements and also temporarily converted several roads to trails for additional space.

In addition to keeping trails open, Great Parks continued to innovate by building more trails and expanding access for all users through initiatives to maintain and expand trails. Here are a few highlights:

Columbia Connector

The first two phases of the three-phase Columbia Connector trail project were completed in September 2020. The trail will eventually connect the Little Miami Scenic Trail to the Village of Mariemont and Wasson Way, providing access to the high school, library, neighborhoods and business district, and boosting economic development. The connector

will provide a safer alternative to current travel along a busy state route and expand access to one of the longest multi-use trails in the United States. The project was made possible with funding from local, state and federal resources.

Timberlakes Trail Reroute

Timberlakes Trail, located in Miami Whitewater Forest, underwent a reroute in late 2020 to create a more scenic and enjoyable experience for trail users. A new sustainable alignment was planned and constructed, which improves drainage by design while providing a better hiking experience. Volunteers helped to transplant native species from the trail corridor to preserve as many plants as possible. The reroute guides the trail through more native vegetation areas, offers open views through the forest understory and winds along a creek, improving the user experience.

Trail Supporters

Great Parks Adopt-A-Trail volunteer program continued through the unstable year. Volunteers improved 2,742 feet of trail by fixing trail slopes, improving surfaces and removing water bars, an aged system for trail drainage, all resulting in a safer and more enjoyable hiking experience for trail users.

Great Parks Forever, the philanthropic partner of Great Parks, launched a new way to invest in trails. This year, organizations or individuals were able to start supporting the trails financially. The program's first supporter is BiS, sponsor of the Trout Lily Trail at Withrow Nature Preserve. Their investment helps support regular trail maintenance and upkeep.



Outstanding Online Experiences

Congratulations on your efforts to help families cope with this period of quarantine. Your COVID-19 webpage is filled with great activities and encouragement for people to get out in nature.
– Nancy, Great Parks Forever contributor

In March, Great Parks introduced Parks@Home, a multi-channel, digital initiative in response to the Ohio Public Health Director's Stay at Home order. The initiative was designed to connect people to nature online, wherever they are, and was specifically geared towards families with smaller children.

Through the online hub, families could find nature journaling prompts and daily coloring pages, aimed at teaching kids all about observing the nature around them and native Ohio plants and animals. Blog posts offered more in-depth knowledge on specific nature related topics, such as how to identify and remove invasive plants.

Social media featured more interactive videos and activities. Fairy Garden Fridays taught kids how

to make a fairy garden at home with recycled materials, while Nature Time-Out videos provided brief glimpses into nature for stress relief. Instagram scavenger hunts prompted kids and adults alike to explore the outdoors. But by far, the most popular feature of Parks@Home was daily Facebook Live broadcasts, where topics ranged from Interpreters giving a glimpse into the life of an emerald ash borer to conservation specialists explaining how Great Parks staff execute a prescribed fire safely. The videos reached an average of 4,320 people per video. The Parks@Home website averaged 1,992 online weekly visits, with many originating from social media.

The initiative was made possible with support from The Charles H. Dater Foundation, Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr. Foundation, Interact for Health, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, The Andrew Jergens Foundation, The Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Manuel D. & Rhoda Mayerson Foundation and the John A Schroth Family Charitable Trust, PNC Charitable Trust.



Innovative Approaches to Programming

This COVID situation has been a humbling experience & I have been so grateful to be able to enjoy our wonderful parks during this time. It keeps me sane. I thank you for your work.
– Margaret, Great Parks Forever contributor

For the safety of Hamilton County residents, Great Parks shifted many programs online. Through video calls, gardening classes, fitness programs and more, education staff continued to find new and innovative ways to continue teaching about nature.

Adventure Outpost in Winton Woods transitioned Naturally Fit, a new fitness series, to an online course. This gave guests the option to exercise at a park or right from home. Through a set of downloadable training videos, certified staff taught participants how to get more enjoyment out of their favorite activities through natural movement.

Do-it-yourself kits were created for purchase throughout the year. This new approach to programming allowed guests to learn how to plant their own container garden, create their own sustainable holiday gifts, build pioneer crafts and more from the safety of their homes. Guests picked

up supplies from specified locations and had the option to hop on a video chat with staff to complete their activities together.

When the school year ended, Great Parks continued to bring nature into people's homes with virtual day camps. Children explored the outdoors in their own backyard. Families picked up supplies the week before camp, and children met online each day in the morning before completing a series of outside activities.

In the fall, staff pivoted from providing virtual day camps to virtual school field trips. Field trips included 45-minute video chats with Interpreters, targeted to meet Ohio's Learning Standards, and had optional hands-on activities to enhance each lesson.

Virtual programming has been well received and it has expanded access to nature education for the community. Interpreters conducted 108 virtual programs including day camps, adult programs, classroom programs and classroom field trips for 2,277 people. As restrictions loosened, Great Parks continued to provide a mix of in-person and virtual programming.



Great Miami Riverway Coalition

Several of the parks visits were firsts for us, and we've been truly impressed with the entire park system – so just wanted to give you and the entire Great Parks system a shout-out to thank you for providing such a wide breadth of beautiful, well kept, and diverse set of parks for us to enjoy. We look forward to continuing taking advantage of our stay-cation as we continue to explore all of these great gems!
– Dan, Great Parks Forever contributor

In 2020, Great Parks of Hamilton County continued to develop plans, projects and partnerships to benefit the environment and the community.

Great Parks joined the Great Miami Riverway Coalition in September 2020, becoming the first organization in Hamilton County, and the fourth park district in the state, to become a member. The coalition works to promote riverfront investment and economic development along a 99-mile section of the Great Miami River to attract visitation to southwestern Ohio. Tourism along the Great Miami

River corridor currently supports 9,110 jobs and represents a \$773 million in economic impact.

The coalition includes many members, all of which are located along the Great Miami River, including the cities of Sidney, Dayton and Hamilton as well as Five Rivers Metroparks, Miami County Park District and MetroParks of Butler County, among others. Recent funded activities include an online trail conditions map, digital commercials to promote the region and the installation of 150 signs highlighting key attractions and connections throughout the region.

As a member, Great Parks will be part of a growing collaboration that encourages use of recreational assets and the strengthening of river corridor communities. Currently, Great Parks protects nearly seven miles along the Great Miami River corridor that will help to connect surrounding communities with greenspace and blueways.



Protecting the Mill Creek

In June, Great Parks collaborated with Mill Creek Alliance and Osprey Initiative, a national environmental solutions organization, to install a trash boom in Winton Woods. The Litter Gitter device was designed to intercept trash that gets into streams and waterways, which eventually ends up in our lakes and rivers. The system, developed by Osprey Initiative, includes a metal cage attached to lines that are secured between banks. This particular boom was installed at the West Fork of the Mill Creek before it enters Winton Lake. Trash continues to be collected and sorted, especially after heavy rains, to determine what types of waste is getting into water and from where. Litter that enters Winton Lake from the Mill Creek or other tributaries harms habitat and wildlife and is an eyesore for park guests.

The Litter Gitter is part of a one-year national pilot program funded by Coca-Cola Consolidated, Inc. The trash boom at Winton Woods is one of three additional systems that has been installed along the Mill Creek. This partnership allows Great Parks to continue to support innovative conservation initiatives that protect blueways and greenspace for years to come.





Volunteers Making a Difference

In spite of the pandemic and shifting state regulations, our volunteers found innovative ways to assist Great Parks. Some individuals stepped into new roles to provide support by making masks for all Great Parks staff, while others served in invasive plant removal, animal care, field surveying, native seed collecting, herpetofauna monitoring, beekeeping and more.

One of the largest projects for groups this year was installing the first floating wetlands at Parky's Farm. GE Aviation employees helped build and install five artificial islands of perforated mats. The wetlands included 1,600 native perennial plugs of eight native plant species.

The benefits of a floating wetland is filtering water to reduce nutrient loading, which can improve water quality. Additionally, with the plants used, the wetlands will create a habitat for native pollinators, insects and wildlife.

Though this year was challenging, Great Parks remained resilient thanks to the many people who gave their time and talents, and continued to make a difference in the community.

668
Volunteers

17,124
Hours Served

23.9
**Acres of Invasive
Plants Removed**



The Heron Society

In honor of the great blue heron, an iconic beacon standing ever vigilant over natural landscapes, Great Parks Forever created a club for donors who share in and contribute to our transformative vision. Members of the Heron Society make the promise of conservation accessible, the promise of education lifelong and the promise of sustainability achievable.

Launched in 2020, the monthly giving program of the Heron Society was a quick success. More than 30 people pledged a monthly gift in the program's first year. These loyal donors, and all of Great Parks' supporters, stand as examples of champions who can translate an early conservation promise into everyday experiences and lasting legacies.

\$425,514

**Given to
Great Parks**
Through Great Parks Forever

Sponsorships, Partnerships & Grants

Sponsors, partners and grants supported capital costs and provided quality programs. In turn, Great Parks provided enhanced experiences for residents by supplementing tax dollars. Thank you to each sponsor, partner and grantor for their support!

SPONSORSHIPS



Great Parks relied on sponsorships to maintain and develop trails and produce programs and events, including the following:

- Parks@Home, presented by the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr. Foundation
- New trail sponsorship program, Trout Lily Trail sponsored by BiS
- 2020 Winter Hike Series, presented by Roads Rivers and Trails

Held at five park locations, Great Parks partnered with Roads Rivers and Trails to present the 2020 Winter Hike Series held on Saturdays in January and February. Guests have been enjoying these challenging hikes for over 35 years *(Photo taken pre-pandemic)*.

PARTNERSHIPS



Great Parks is dedicated to developing and maintaining strategic partnerships to help our community. 2020 partners included:

- Alleen Company
- Cincinnati 2030 District
- Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library
- Cohen
- Columbia Township
- Fifty West Brewing Company
- GE Aviation
- Great Miami Riverway Coalition
- International Paper
- MadTree Brewing
- Science Around Cincy
- Tri-State Trails

GRANTS



\$767,494

Grants help Great Parks offset the cost of capital projects and programs. Some of these projects include installation of accessible canoe/kayak launches, Parks@Home virtual programming, the first phase of a new connector trail and an online community fitness program. In 2020, we were awarded \$767,494 in grant funding.

Projects: \$702,697
Programs: \$64,797



Awards

Great Parks has a dedicated team of employees and volunteers committed to providing the best in recreation experiences and outdoor education for all park guests. Awards for 2020 included:

Sarah Kent, Outreach Manager, Nature Center at The Summit – 101.1 The WIZ 30 Under 30 Award

Amy Roell, Director of Education and Events – National Association for Interpretation Master Interpretive Manager Award

Jessica Spencer, Director of Natural Resources – Cincinnati Business Courier Forty Under 40 Award

Matt Starr, PGA Golf Professional – Golf Range Association of America Top 100 Growth of the Game Teaching Professional

Meadow Links & Golf Academy – Golf Range Association of America Top 50 Stand Alone Range

Parks@Home – MarCom International Award

Sensory Friendly Programming – Ohio Parks and Recreation Association Award of Excellence

Great Parks Rangers – Ohio Collaborative Law Enforcement Certification

Finance Department – Government Finance Officers Association Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting

Map Series – Esri User Conference Awards



Planning for a Bright Future

Many people have benefitted from your decision to remain open to the public during the pandemic. Thank you for providing access to the beautiful, calming spaces within our parks.
– Kathleen, Great Parks Forever contributor

Following the completion of its Comprehensive Master Plan in 2019, Great Parks embarked on a two-year project to create detailed master plans for every park and facility in the district. These plans utilize feedback and ideas gathered from the public, stakeholders and park users to ensure future changes benefit everyone in the community.

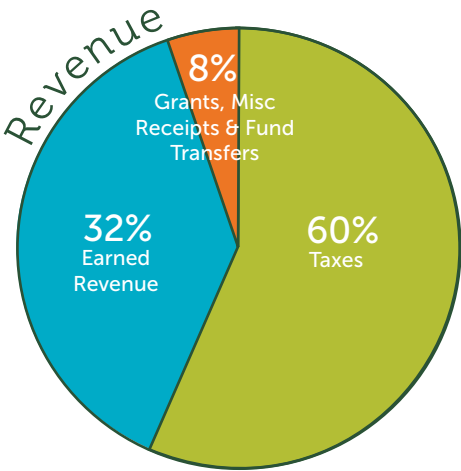
In the wake of the pandemic, Great Parks needed to find innovative and safe ways to gather public input

when new state health guidelines went into effect. Masked, socially distanced staff utilized oversized dry-erase surveys to engage with small groups of guests in the parks. Online surveys were also heavily promoted through signs in the parks and social media, as well as sidewalk stickers at adjacent bus stops and posters at community locations such as libraries, recreation centers and grocery stores.

To date, Great Parks has conducted more than 40 virtual and in-person events and gathered nearly 2,300 survey responses. The feedback will be used to develop draft Park and Facility Master Plans, which will be ready for public review in spring 2021.

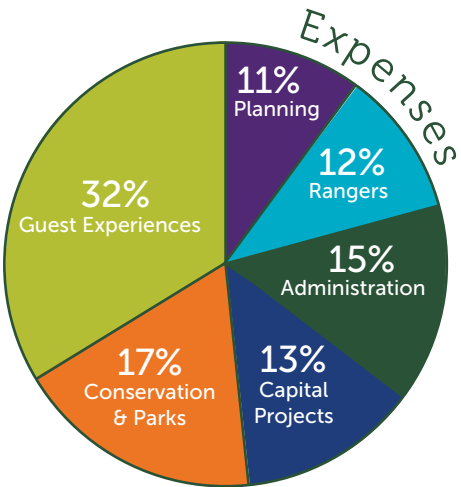


Financials



2020 Financial Summary

General Fund	
Unencumbered	\$ 15,465,979
Encumbered	<u>3,292,668</u>
Balance 1/1/2020	18,758,647
Revenue Received	33,937,170
Total Funds Available	<u>\$ 52,695,817</u>
Expended	34,016,770
Balance 12/31/2020	\$ 18,679,048



Revenue	
Taxes	\$ 20,302,379
Earned Revenue	
Adventure Outpost	7,336
Athletics	98,924
Banquets & Catering	65,183
Harbors	1,416,406
Campgrounds	744,748
Golf Courses	6,774,552
Interpreters	35,769
Welcome Booths	1,228,567
Nature's Niche	143,305
Park's Farm	246,702
Reservations	197,476
Special Events	25,621
Total Earned Revenue	<u>10,984,589</u>
Grants, Misc. Receipts & Fund Transfers	<u>2,650,202</u>
Total Revenue	<u>\$ 33,937,170</u>

Expenses	
Administration	
Finance	\$ 1,566,380
Human Resources	1,055,369
Volunteer Resources	220,729
IT & Data Management	1,878,088
Philanthropy	301,774
Capital Projects	4,496,074
Conservation & Parks	
Parks Maintenance	5,019,301
Natural Resources	832,857
Guest Experiences	
Education & Events	1,482,811
Golf	5,317,709
Guest Experiences	4,110,430
Planning	
Facilities & Infrastructure	1,639,550
Marketing & Public Engagement	1,037,622
Design & Land Acquisition	1,124,045
Rangers	3,934,029
Total Expenses	<u>\$ 34,016,770</u>



Great Parks
of Hamilton County

**Great Parks of
Hamilton County**
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2020 Board of Park Commissioners:

William J. Burwinkel	Marcus Thompson
HC Buck Niehoff	Geraldine Warner
Joseph C. Seta	

Chief Executive Officer: Todd Palmetter



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