



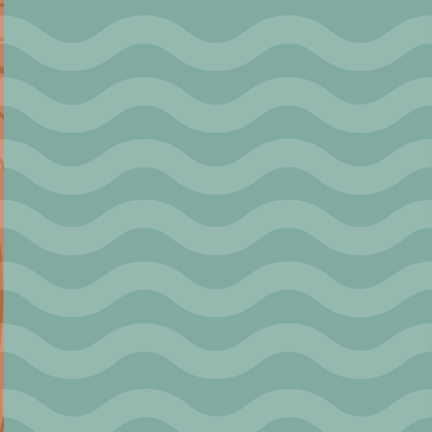
**2023**  
ANNUAL REPORT

**BUILDING A  
CONSERVATION  
LEGACY**





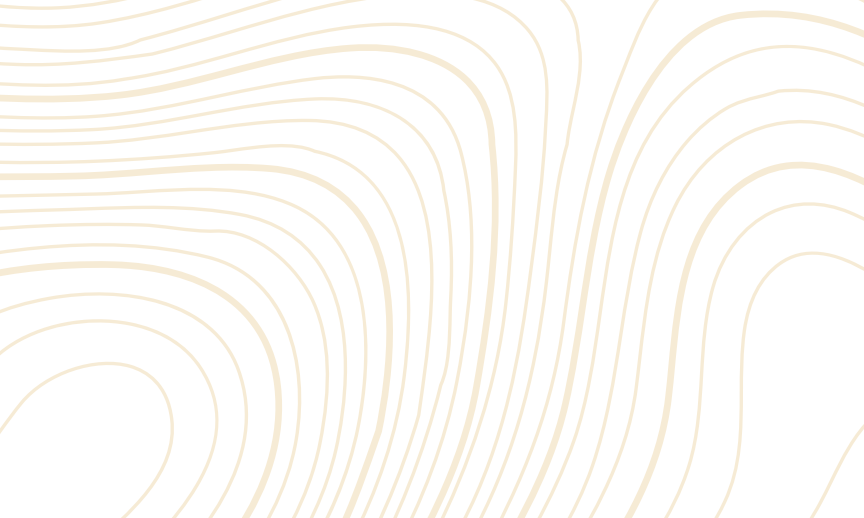
# FIND YOUR WILD



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**2023 Board of Park Commissioners**  
 (Left to Right) Doug Abrams, William J. Burwinkel,  
 Caren Laverty, Melissa Wegman, Marcus Thompson



**Todd Palmeter**  
 Chief Executive Officer



**Judge of  
 Probate Court,**  
 the Honorable  
 Judge Ralph E.  
 Winkler

## A MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

After years of planning and engaging our community, Great Parks launched our first Comprehensive Master Plan in 2019. This strategic roadmap of priorities sets ambitious goals to build a future for our county-wide system. 2023 brought many exciting milestones to achieving these goals including the plans for a new park in Westwood and a new Blueway and Trail System along the Great Miami River and Whitewater River in western Hamilton County. From pizza box mailers to community open houses, I am proud of the extensive work that has been implemented to engage the communities where these new projects are located. This engagement includes community surveys, input from stakeholder groups, and people of all ages, socio-economic statuses, races, and religions.

Engaging with the community through events in our outdoor spaces continues to be a priority. This year, we once again celebrated our beloved Hispanic Heritage Festival and launched the Urban Thrive Festival at our Nature Center at the Summit location in Roselawn. The Urban Thrive Festival celebrated all the ways a community can thrive, including interactions with nature, sustainable living, access to fresh foods, appreciation of the local arts, and the importance of mental well-being. We also celebrated record attendance at the annual Kids Outdoor Adventure Expo, our largest educational event with thousands of children and families enjoying nature-based experiences at Winton Woods Harbor.

Many exciting projects were completed this year, including the Music Garden located within Highfield Discovery Garden at Glenwood Gardens. This interactive and accessible addition offers a fun way for children to be the star of their show while immersed in a natural setting. We also completed a much-anticipated Fitness Equipment circuit and trail at Woodland Mound, which offers guests a dynamic way to stay active on these challenging structures.

An additional milestone we are proud to celebrate is the acquisition of an 240 acres adjoining Miami Whitewater Forest, which will be preserved as natural habitat with the opportunity for future hiking trails, further solidifying Great Parks as the largest land owner in Hamilton County.

Continue reading this report to get a glimpse into the amazing work the employees and volunteers of Great Parks have done to protect these big lands. On behalf of the Board of Park Commissioners, thank you for supporting Great Parks as we plant the seeds of change to leave a lasting legacy for our region and its residents.

**Be wild, be well.**

Todd



# SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2023, over 300 million Americans used social media. Great Parks leverages social media to communicate with our audiences across various platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and X. These channels are an efficient and cost-effective platform to engage and update a wide range of audiences, both new to Great Parks and longtime followers.

We want to thank our online followers for their digital support and for continuing to share all the fun ways they find their wild.

66,733

Total Followers in 2023



34,966 Followers



Impressions  
↑+68%\*



Video Views  
↑+242%\*



24,498 Followers



Impressions  
↑+56%\*



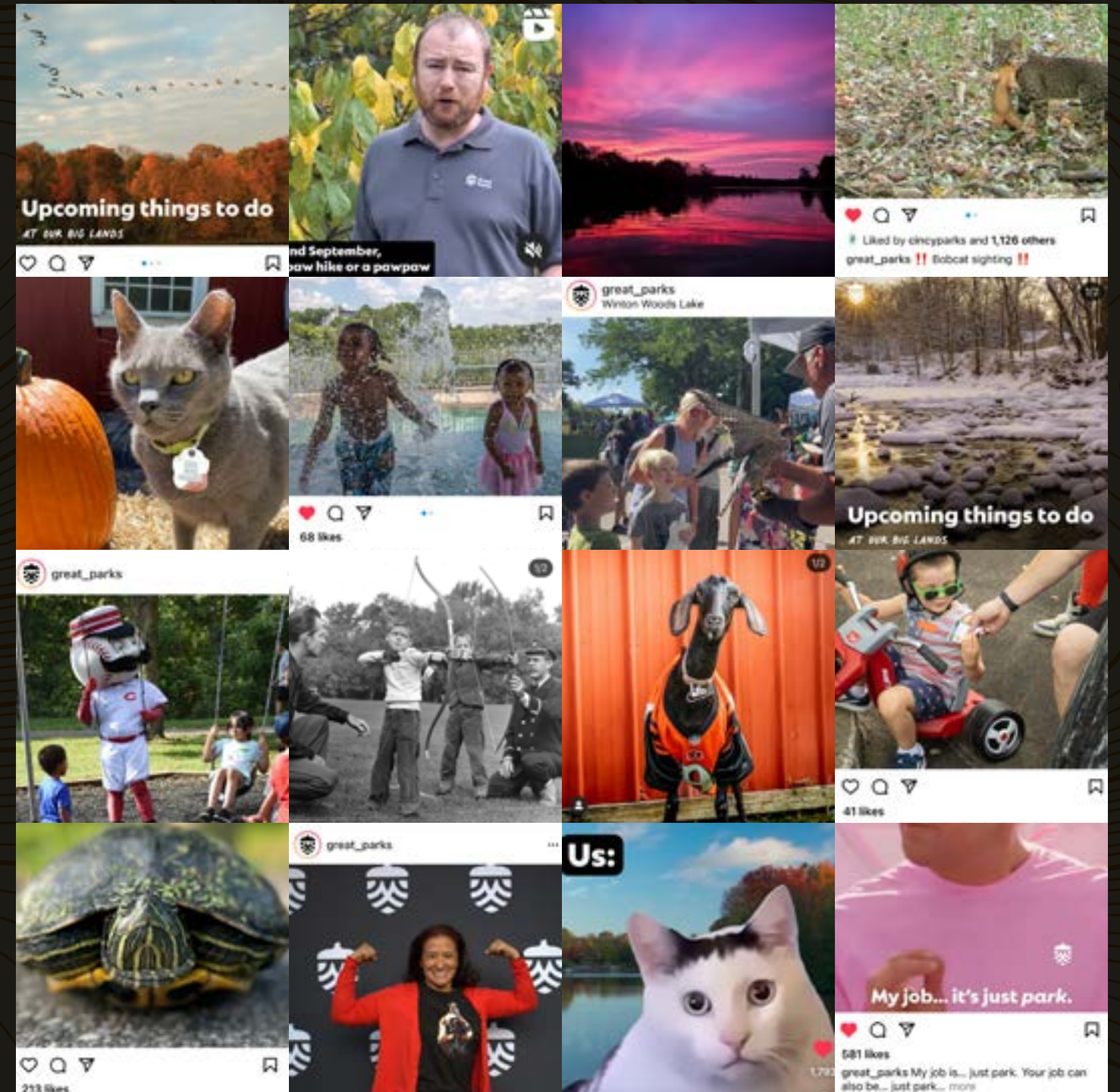
Video Views  
↑+132%\*

↑ +11%\*

Overall Follower Growth Across All Platforms

\*Over 2022

2023 was an all-time yearly **engagement record** in the history of Great Parks on social media





# 85%

of Great Parks acreage is protected as undeveloped natural space.



4.9%  
Brushland



59%  
Forest



7.8%  
Meadow



4.8%  
Prairie



5.0%  
Water



3.7%  
Wetlands



2,390  
Trees Planted  
in 2023



18,080  
Total Acreage

## BIG LANDS, BIGGER IMPACT

**Conserving and protecting the region's wide-open spaces for future generations**

Conservation is the core of Great Parks' mission; from arborists to conservation biologists to watershed specialists, our dedicated team of experts diligently works to protect the beautiful tracts of wild spaces in Hamilton County.

Great Parks conservation work ensures Hamilton County is a community in which southwest Ohio's natural heritage thrives. Land management and conservation across 18,080 acres also provide a space for people to enjoy positive outdoor experiences and understand the value of conservation of natural resources first-hand. Some of our land management priorities include ensuring a diverse representation of native plants, animals, and habitats, with a vision to protect and restore resilient native ecosystems within Great Parks.

### **FUN FACT!**

There were 11 sightings of the state-threatened Kirtland's snake (*Clonophis kirtlandii*) at Great Parks in 2023!

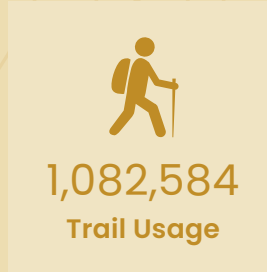


# CONNECTING THE REGION TO THE NATURAL WORLD

Collectively, as the top-visited destination in the region, Great Parks offers unique outdoor spaces for everyone. From a stroll through a meadow to paddling adventures, our 22 parks and conservation areas provide plenty of ways to *Find Your Wild* across Hamilton County.



**106,745**  
Attendees for  
Programs &  
Events in 2023



**Types of Activities**  
baseball, bicycling, boating, camping, dog parks, disc golf, fishing, geocaching, golf, horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking, paddling, picnicking, playgrounds, soccer, softball, volleyball, and winter activities.





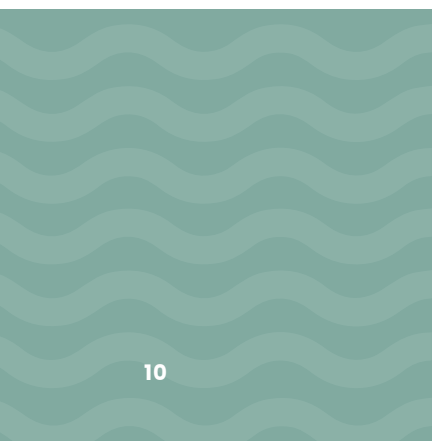
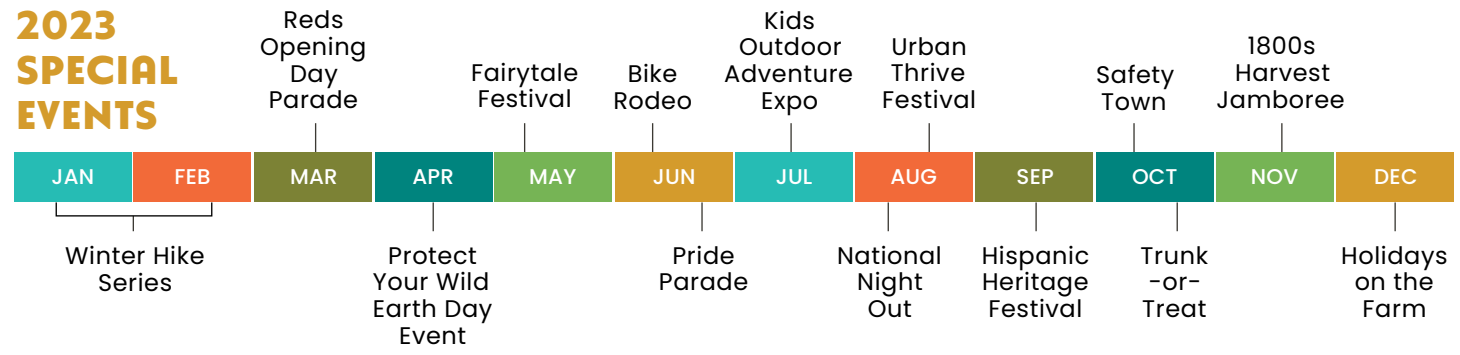
**Kids Outdoor Adventure Expo: Record Breaking Attendance in 2023**



**40% Increase in Attendance at Holidays on the Farm**



**2023 SPECIAL EVENTS**







"A perfect pairing of nature and music."



## MUSIC GARDEN GRAND OPENING

The whimsical new Music Garden located within Glenwood Gardens is a unique gathering place and magical play space that blends a love of music and the chance to reconnect with the natural world.



This interactive garden is full of kid-friendly surprises. All-weather percussion instruments welcome performers of every skill level to fill the air with music. Dancing in the breeze are musically themed plantings such as lyrical blues meadow sage, fiddlehead fern, and spring symphony foam flower. An accessible path winds through the garden in the shape of a treble clef. To top it all off, hanging above the stage's wood-wind-shaped columns are notes to the song "You Are My Sunshine."

The Music Garden represents an important investment by Great Parks into offerings that integrate nature, programming, sensory experiences, and amenities to be accessible to all ages and abilities. It is our eighth themed garden at Highfield Discovery Garden.



# LAND ACQUISITION

## Expanding your big lands

Reaching a major conservation milestone, Great Parks pushed our total land holdings beyond 18,000 acres by acquiring land near Miami Whitewater Forest. **The new 240 acres advance Great Parks' position as the largest landowner in Hamilton County.**

The wooded property sits west of the Miami Whitewater Forest soccer complex and the Simmonds Family Dog Park. Great Parks will remove invasive species, reforest habitats, and update the park master plan for the addition of trail connections.

Great Parks adopted a land management policy in 1975 which requires 80 percent of our total land holdings to be maintained in a natural state and managed for ecological benefits.

Currently, 85% of our land is preserved as natural spaces.



"Great Parks land accounts for one-third of Hamilton County's open space."





## WEST REGION BLUEWAY & TRAIL SYSTEM

### **A transformative trail & waterway connection**

New waterway recreation and conservation opportunities are in the future for the Great Miami River and Whitewater River corridors, as Great Parks has started gathering public input toward developing a master plan for the West Region Blueway & Trail System. This system will bring together new land and water-based trails, river access points, new program opportunities, and habitat restoration projects along a 35-mile stretch from the northern Hamilton County line to the Ohio River.

When complete, the system will connect both western Hamilton County rivers with four Great Parks destinations at Miami Whitewater Forest, Campbell Lakes Preserve, Mitchell Memorial Forest, Oak Glen Nature Preserve, and Shawnee Lookout, plus communities in between. Establishing a defined blueway system is a major priority of the Great Parks Comprehensive Master Plan, and we look forward to continued collaboration with local communities and jurisdictions in the years to come to design and build the system.



# SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP

Sustainability means preserving wide-open spaces for future generations. We partner with like-minded organizations to drive impactful progress. Great Parks collaborates with the City of Cincinnati to produce biochar from wood waste and composted manure at Parky's Farm. We also work with Queen City Compost to divert food waste from landfills at Winton Woods. These initiatives help offset the regional carbon footprint and provide nutrients for soil and vegetation. Additionally, we teamed up with Matthew 25 Ministries to repurpose 700 pounds of dated uniform items for countries in need. Our holiday lights recycling program, supported by

Cohen Recycling, recycled old light strands, with proceeds benefiting Great Parks. We expanded our existing metal recycling partnership with Cohen through our first electronic waste recycling event, which recycled over 11 thousand pounds of e-waste. Our inaugural Protect Your Wild event, coinciding with Earth Day, extended the Winton Lake Cleanup, removing litter and engaging volunteers in a festive Earth Day celebration after collecting over 200 bags of trash and recyclables.



Over **112 Tons** of Material Diverted from Landfills



Over **112 Tons** of material diverted from landfills, roughly the same weight as **55 cars**.



**700 lb**  
donated uniforms



**11,000 lb**  
e-waste recycled



Over **200 Bags** of trash & recycling were collected at the Protect Your Wild Earth Day event.





## URBAN OASIS COMING TO WESTWOOD

After extensive community engagement and feedback, Great Parks is thrilled to announce the master plan for a new park coming to Westwood!

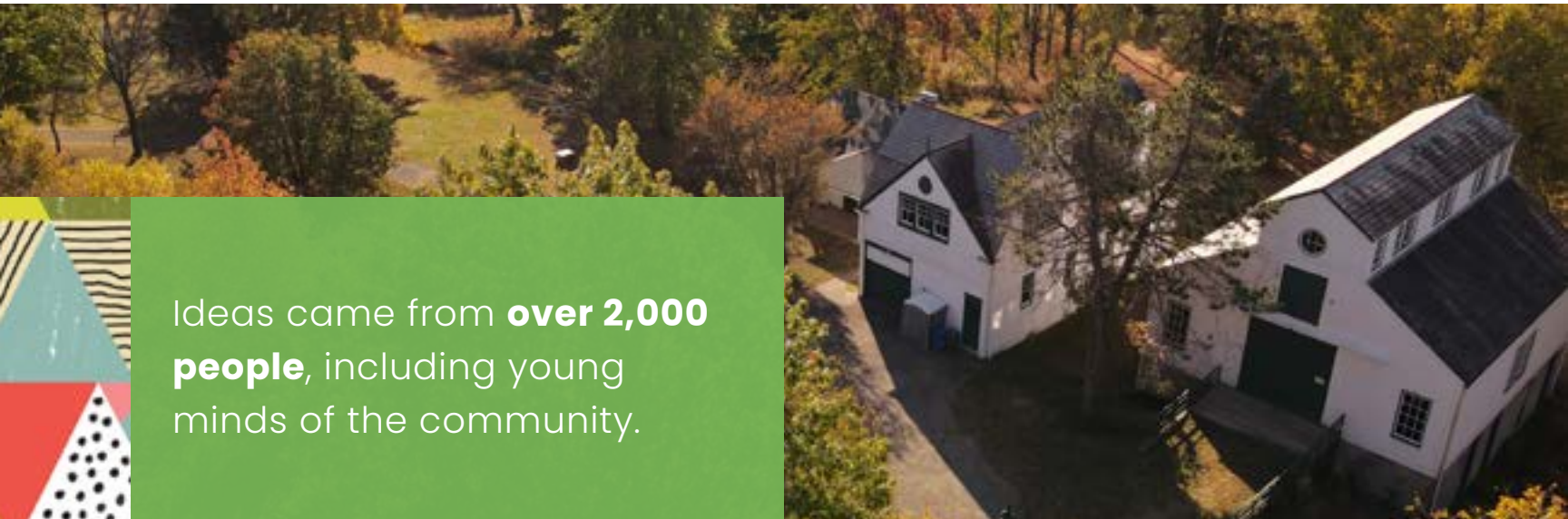
Great Parks acquired the former Gamble estate property in 2021. Since that time, staff have engaged in dialogue and design collaboration with the community, including Westwood Elementary students, to plan the park's future. The master plan includes an accessible trail network, boardwalks, natural playscapes, gathering spaces, and educational opportunities. One of the first priorities is to expand pedestrian access to make it even easier for people to enjoy natural surface trails currently available.

Great Parks is working on a funding strategy and timeline for the completion of the entire master plan, which will be divided into multiple phases and has an estimated cost over \$18 million.



## WOODLAND MOUND FITNESS EQUIPMENT

Completing the new fitness equipment circuit at Woodland Mound created an accessible fitness experience that elevated how guests of all abilities get active and find their wild at this park. Visitors to Woodland Mound will now have ten fitness stations and a 0.2-mile accessible path connecting each feature, enabling all to enjoy the fitness benefits.



Ideas came from **over 2,000 people**, including young minds of the community.





# SHARON WOODS FITNESS TRAIL & STORM WATER IMPROVEMENTS

Keeping the parks open year-round involves ongoing large-scale maintenance and capital improvement projects to facilities and critical infrastructure across our hundreds of facilities and amenities. This project is an example of the type of work that goes on behind the scenes to keep our Great Parks open and enjoyable.

The goal of the project was to enhance the trail experience for our guests in anticipation of the 2024 Sharon Lake Improvement Project. With increased use of the trail expected, it was necessary to repave the trail to provide an improved walking surface for guests. Nearly 100 tons of asphalt were used in the project. This project also included the replacement of three failed storm water culverts under the trail. While most don't see this work, Great Parks must maintain this critical infrastructure to keep the parks safe and accessible.



Critical  
Infrastructure  
Projects



# WOODLAND MOUND DISC GOLF RENOVATION

Great Parks unveiled a new and improved Disc Golf Course at Woodland Mound in 2023. The improvements included replacing worn tee pads with larger concrete pads for a more level play surface that meets USDGA standards. New baskets, signage, and course layout were also completed. Great Parks collaborated with the Greater Cincinnati Disc Golf Association to ensure the end product provided a course that disc golfers of all skill levels could enjoy for years to come. We were excited to celebrate the completion of these upgrades with our inaugural Hops & Hyzers disc golf tournament in partnership with HighGrain Brewing.





New in  
2024

In 2023...



300 lb  
Native Seeds  
Harvested



12,000  
New Plants  
Grown



## SHAKER TRACE NURSERY PROJECT

Great Parks will soon begin a major renovation and addition to the Shaker Trace Nursery at Miami Whitewater Forest. This site specializes in preserving the ecological integrity of the region through the propagation of native plants. The project is pursuing a gold Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) rating. We are using this project as an opportunity to be a precedent-setting sustainable building project for Great Parks. The entire campus is also being designed to produce all the energy needed for operation through solar power. Great Parks will be applying for an International Living Future Institute Zero Energy Certification. The project will take an innovative and unique approach to building renovation by ensuring a colony of

Big Brown Bats residing in the existing barn will have dedicated space to stay.

Construction is anticipated to begin in mid-2024 and will include a seed processing facility with climate-controlled seed storage, a new greenhouse, renovation of the historic drying barn to create a flexible gathering space for programming and events, updated workspace, and a new 0.5 mile shared-use trail to connect the nursery with the existing outer loop of the 7.8-mile Shaker Trace shared-use trail at Miami Whitewater Forest.





New in  
2024



## SHARON WOODS PLAYGROUND

This nature-inspired playground project will provide a new destination play experience and replace the existing Sharon Centre playground. The new play features will provide an upgraded and all-inclusive experience that incorporates a theme reflective of the unique character and landscape of Sharon Woods. The design includes a primary play structure inspired by birds' nests, features resembling local flora and fauna such as warblers, crayfish, dragonflies, and cattails, stone outcroppings and native plants reminiscent of the nearby Sharon Creek gorge.

Construction is anticipated to begin in the spring, with playground completion in the fall.

New in  
2024



## SKILLS LOOP & PUMP TRACK

As the first designated mountain bike trail in Hamilton County, Mitchell Memorial Forest will further solidify itself as a premier destination for mountain bikers of all skill levels when a new Skill Loop and Pump Track is added to the park. The existing mountain bike trails are geared toward intermediate and advanced users. The Skill Loop and Pump track will provide a great addition for beginner riders. The pump track will allow riders to get familiar with the techniques of mountain biking in a safe, beginner environment. The skills loop will be interwoven into the existing mountain bike trail and provide a loop to help the rider advance the techniques they learned on the pump track. Riders will be able to circle through the pump track and skills loop until they are ready to advance to the existing 8 miles of mountain bike trails. Construction and completion of the Skills Loop and Pump Track is planned for the summer and fall.

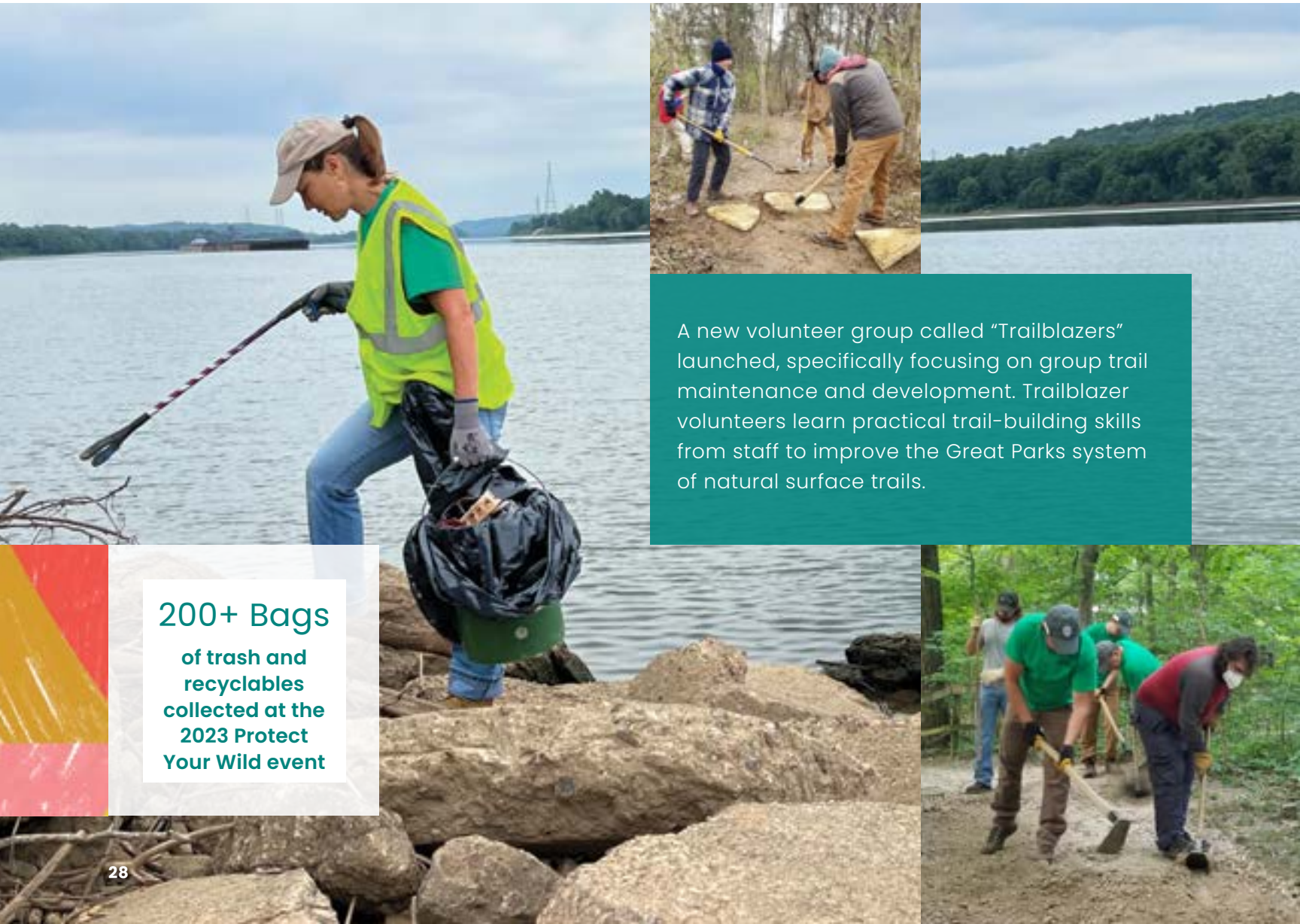






# OUR VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are essential to the success of Great Parks. In 2023, 1,251 volunteers dedicated their time to supporting Great Parks employees in land management, conservation projects, community events, and more. If you or your company would like to get involved, please visit [GreatParks.org/get-involved/volunteer](https://GreatParks.org/get-involved/volunteer).



A new volunteer group called "Trailblazers" launched, specifically focusing on group trail maintenance and development. Trailblazer volunteers learn practical trail-building skills from staff to improve the Great Parks system of natural surface trails.

**200+ Bags**

of trash and recyclables collected at the 2023 Protect Your Wild event

**1,251** Total Volunteers Contributed  
**26,613** Volunteer Hours

-  **6** Community Volunteer Days
-  **1,115** Bags of Trash Collected
-  **111** Bags of Recycling Collected
-  **390** Trees Planted
-  **11,407 Feet** of natural surface trail improvement.
-  **6,000 Feet** of trail improved at Sharon Woods on our most extensive trail work day.
-  **Over 49 Acres** of invasive plants removed.
-  **Nearly 1.5 Acres** of invasive plants removed in 2 hours on our largest invasive plant removal day.



# TOMORROW'S GREEN LEADERS

As we safeguard the region's natural spaces, we are also inspiring a new generation of parks leadership. For the third consecutive year, Great Parks partnered with the Groundwork Ohio River Valley Green Team. Two teams of high school students and a young adult leader joined staff on an eight-week workforce development program as they helped with conservation, sustainability, and recreation projects across our destinations.

From conservation work at Embshoff Woods and Glenwood Gardens, to trail maintenance at Woodland Mound, and supervising a children's fishing station at Winton Woods, the Green Team learned how different career paths at Great Parks offer opportunities to use passion for making a difference in their community.



93.5

hours of professional development



906 Feet  
of trail  
improvements



1.7 Acres  
invasive species  
removed



15  
garden sites  
improved





# AWARDS & RECOGNITION



**Director of Finance Kathy Volk and Chief Financial Officer Andrew Collins** received the Government Finance Officers Association's Award of Financial Reporting Achievement.

Great Parks received the **Ohio Auditor of State Award with Distinction** for our 2022 audit.



Great Parks received the Government Finance Officers Association's (GFOA) Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting and the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award.

Great Parks received a **Certificate of Recognition from the Ohio House of Representatives** congratulating us on earning the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States & Canada. This recognition was sponsored by Representatives Jessica Miranda, Dani Isaacsohn, Cecil Thomas, Sedrick Denson, and Rachel Baker.



## Ohio Parks & Recreation Association Awards of Excellence

**Marketing Innovation 3rd Place:** *Find Your Winter Wild*  
**Recreation 2nd Place:** *Kids Outdoor Adventure Expo*  
**Recreation 3rd Place:** *Urban Thrive Festival*



Sports & Fitness –  
**Golf Course:**  
**Sharon Woods Golf Course**

Great Parks wins 2023 NACPRO Trails & Corridors – Class IV Award for the **Beechmont Bridge Connector**



The Ranger Department was recognized by the **Mental Health America of Northern Kentucky and Southwest Ohio (MHANS)**.

**Ranger Sergeant Dan Hodapp** was recognized for working with the MHANS team and other social service agencies to find solutions for homeless persons in the parks.

Ellequate certified Great Parks as a **Bronze-Level Leader in Workplace Equity**



**Best Golf Course:**  
**Great Parks Golf Courses**



# PLANTING THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

In 2023, Great Parks Forever, the philanthropic partner of Great Parks, continued to Go Big and deliver on its commitment to leading the region in conservation and preservation. Great Parks has provided the citizens of Hamilton County with an exceptional environment to work, live, play, and learn. Through strategic initiatives and community engagement, we have not only sustained but enhanced the natural beauty of our parks for current and future residents to enjoy. This dedication is evident in the numerous projects and programs we have implemented, fostering a deeper connection between the community and the natural world. From trail

enhancements to educational outreach, every endeavor reflects our passion for creating a lasting impact on the well-being of both our residents and the environment.

With the help of our committed and generous donors, Great Parks Forever has received more than \$12.5 million in private commitments in 2023 to plant the seeds of change for our region.

Learn the many ways you can invest in Great Parks.

[GreatParksForever.org](https://GreatParksForever.org)



**\$12.5 Million** in private funding commitments to Great Parks Forever in 2023.



▲ 2023 Rootball at Rhinegeist Brewery



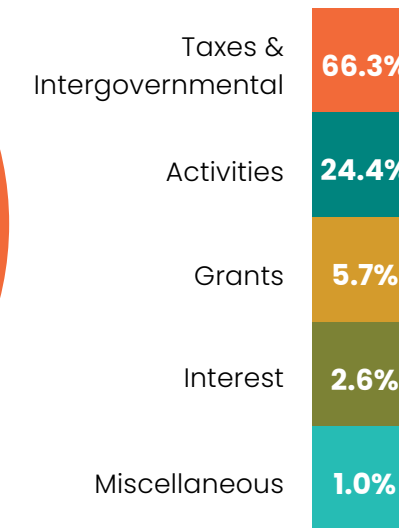
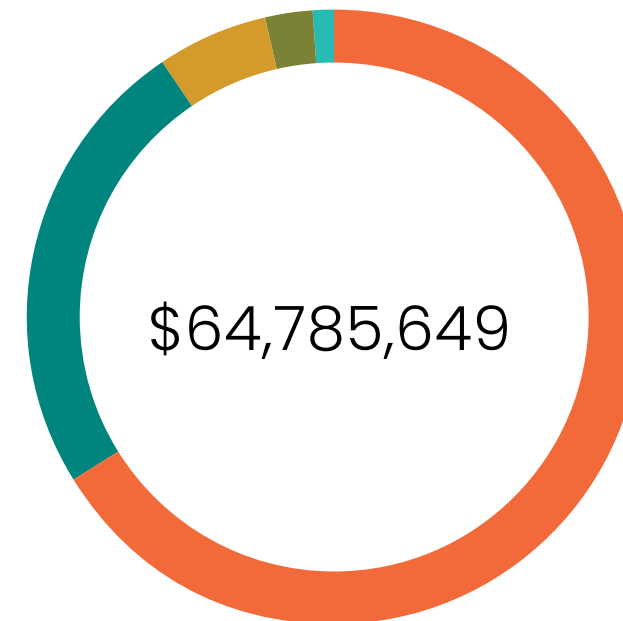
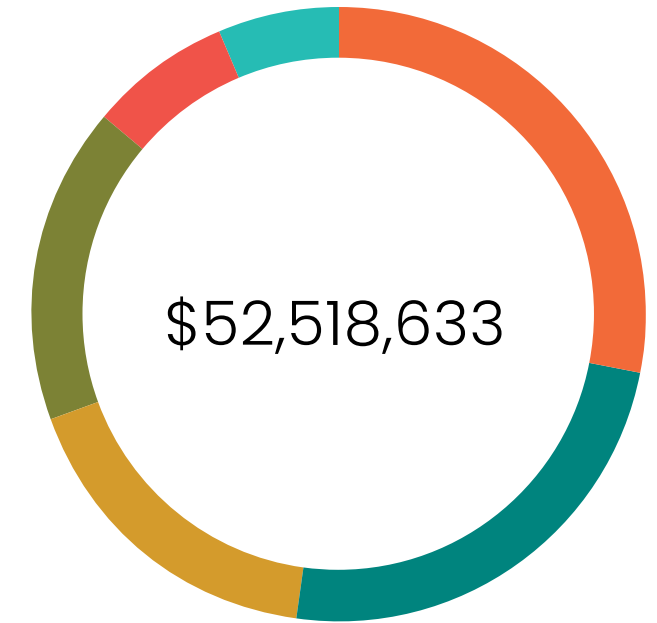
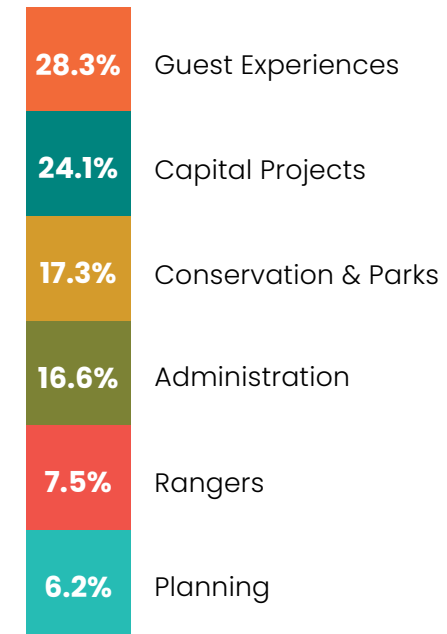
# FINANCIALS

Thank you to the voters of Hamilton County, who, in November 2021, passed a 10-year 0.95 mill levy to support critical infrastructure and park and facility master plan projects. These funds allow Great Parks to maintain existing facilities and amenities, provide ongoing recreation and wellness opportunities, preserve and protect over 18,000 acres and build and maintain trails across the region. Additional funding leveraged by our earned revenue through activities, programming, and events, along with state and federal grants and donor generated private funding from Great Parks Forever, help support the priorities of our 10-year Comprehensive Master Plan.

Local parks generated **\$5 billion in economic impact** in the State of Ohio in 2021.

*National Recreation & Parks Association 2023 Economic Impact of Local Parks Report*

Expenses ▶



◀ Revenue





**Great Parks of Hamilton County**

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Cincinnati, OH 45231  
513-521-7275 | GreatParks.org

**2023 Board of Park Commissioners**

Doug Abrams, William J. Burwinkel,  
Caren Laverty, Marcus Thompson,  
Melissa Wegman

**Chief Executive Officer**

Todd Palmetter



If anyone believes they have been subjected to discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, age, national origin, religion, ancestry, physical or mental disability, you may file a complaint alleging discrimination with the Office of Equal Opportunity, Dept. of Interior, Washington D.C. 20240.