

VISIONTEAMS

Imagining Allegheny County's Tomorrow

*Dave Fawcett
& Meg
Cheever,
Co-Chairs*

Executive Summary

The Parks, Recreation & Trails Vision Team espoused the belief that the county's abundance of parks, trails and riverfronts is an important component of the region's economic development while simultaneously acting as a mechanism to preserve the integrity of the environment. Furthermore, the team recognized that the County's park system is a major component of the regional value proposition will enhance the region's ability to promote itself as "green" which gives it a strategic and competitive edge in the race to recruit companies, families, individuals, and students to move here.

Using these fundamental beliefs as a point of departure, the team recommends the following:

- **Adopt a Comprehensive Vision of a world-class system of interconnected parks and trails, including a Countywide Riverfront Park, serving residents and visitors throughout Allegheny County**
 - Define our park system not just our traditional county parks, but also our significant trail system and our efforts to develop lengths of linear park along our riverfronts.
 - Include Development of a Countywide Riverfront Park, as contemplated by County Ordinance (No. 52-07-OR) enacted into law in 2006 in the comprehensive vision.
 - Define the system as uninterrupted trails and linear parks running, to the greatest extent possible, with bridge connections and amenities along the way.
 - Endorse the vision of a comprehensive network of trails that, to the greatest extent possible, connect to existing trails, communities, traditional county parks and the riverfronts.
 - View the park system as a substantial competitive advantage for the Pittsburgh region in attracting new business and new residents and boosting recreational tourism.
- **Develop a Unified and Accountable Management Structure, Including Moving Parks Maintenance Crews from the Department of Public Works to a newly-reconstituted Department of Parks and Recreation**
 - Embrace "best practices" in park management which contains all functions directly related to parks management and maintenance.
 - Provide accountability and permit strategic deployment of resources via a unified management structure.
- **Immediately Establish a Woodland Management Program**
 - Commit resources and acquire professional assistance to manage the 9,000 acres of woodlands.
 - Recognize park trees reap environmental and economic benefits.
- **Maximize Revenue from Park Operations and Protect the Dedicated Allegheny Regional Asset District (ARAD) Funding Designated for the County Parks**
 - Establish a county park cost accounting and budgeting system.
 - Revise and modernize policies regulating annual fees and charges for park facilities, programs and services.

- Develop and administer a year-round marketing and public relations plan.
- Review current operations to determine additional sources of revenue.
- Preserve and increase dedicated ARAD funding.
- **Promote a Focus on the “User Experience” including a Coordinated Universal Navigation/Information System**
 - Give primary focus to developing a coordinated universal signage and online/mobile guidance system.
 - Convene a stakeholder group to develop and implement a coordinated system with universal appeal.
- **Implement Development of Countywide Riverfront Park and Connectors**
 - Create a “Trail Ombudsman” within the Unified Park Structure.
 - Develop a List of Priorities and Opportunities for Property Acquisition for the Enhancement of Existing Parks and for Development of Linear Parks, Trails and Related Amenities.
 - Negotiate with Railroads and other Riverfront Property Owners to Acquire Property Interests consistent with Development of a Comprehensive Network of Trails and a Countywide Riverfront Park.
 - Develop Trails and Linear Parks, and Prioritize Bicycle and Pedestrian Improvements, as Part of Transportation Initiatives.
 - Encourage Municipalities with Riverfronts to Adopt Local Zoning Regulations to Protect and Restore Riverfronts and to Facilitate Development of Riverfront Linear Parks, Trails and Amenities.
- **Propose a Referendum to Add to Dedicated Funding for Parks and Trails**

Vision Team Charge

The Parks, Recreation & Trails Vision Team is charged with reviewing the current efforts to address these portions of the county's quality of life experience, to identify coordination of efforts and to make recommendations as to how that coordination can be improved and a process put forth to integrate and collaborate on these efforts as much as possible in order to further the county's overall development

Each vision team, within its charge and conversation, is expected to address sustainability, intergovernmental relations (recognizing existing relationships and identifying potential new ones) and diversity/inclusion. Each of these items should be folded into the recommendations and report made by the team. Additionally, for each recommendation that is made, the scope must be within one of three fields for which the county has a role: the county performs, or should perform, an administrative function related to the recommendation; the recommendation pertains to a financial interest or financial support of the county; and, the recommendation lends itself to advocacy by the county. Those recommendations that do not fit within one of those three fields should not be a focus of the vision team.

Findings & Recommendations

Recommendation # 1(a): Comprehensive Vision

The Allegheny County Vision Team for Parks, Recreation and Trails endorses the vision of a comprehensive world-class system of interconnected parks and trails, including a Countywide Riverfront Park, serving residents and visitors throughout Allegheny County. Thus, our park system should be defined as not just our traditional county parks, but also our significant trail system and our efforts to develop lengths of linear park along our riverfronts.

Recommendation # 1(b): The Vision Should Include Development of a Countywide Riverfront Park, as contemplated by County Ordinance enacted into law in 2006 (County Ordinance No. 52-07-OR attached)

The Team endorses the vision of a Countywide Riverfront Park, defined as uninterrupted trails and linear parks running, to the greatest extent possible, along one side or the other of every major river in the County – the Allegheny, the Monongahela, the Youghiogheny and the Ohio – with bridge connections and amenities along the way. The Team also endorses the vision of a comprehensive network of trails that, to the greatest extent possible, connect to existing trails, communities, traditional county parks and the riverfronts. When combined with the many wonderful traditional parks in the region, this system would be a substantial competitive advantage for the Pittsburgh region in attracting new business and new residents and boosting recreational tourism.

Recommendation # 2: Develop a Unified and Accountable Management Structure, Including Moving Parks Maintenance Crews from the Department of Public Works to a newly-reconstituted Department of Parks and Recreation

The Vision Team endorses a management recommendation made in earlier studies, namely:

Allegheny County should adopt an integrated management structure to manage, restore, maintain, budget and operate the system.

A full ten years have passed since this recommendation was first made to the County. A management study completed in 2005 by Wallace, Roberts & Todd, reminded readers that:

The 2002 Allegheny County Parks Comprehensive Master Plan...recommended numerous changes to help the park system achieve its full potential. Establishment of a new organizational structure to enable a greater focus on the success of the park system was identified as the highest priority recommendation.

The current occupants of the positions of Allegheny County Director of Parks and Recreation and Allegheny County Director of Public Works, who share responsibility for current operation of the existing county park system, attended the Vision Team meeting on April 25, 2012. It was evident that these individuals enjoy excellent communication and work as cooperatively as possible in a “partnership” mode to further the interests of the county park system. Nonetheless, as stated in the 2005 Wallace, Roberts & Todd Report, “Park and recreation functions are not wholly integrated within the new department, with Public Works retaining responsibility for parks maintenance and purchasing”. The “best practices” in park management would be for the Parks & Recreation Department to contain all functions directly related to parks management and

maintenance. Thus, for example, the park maintenance work crews should be transferred from the Department of Public Works to the Parks Department and supervised by the Parks Department on an ongoing basis.

A unified management structure would provide accountability and permit strategic deployment of resources.

Management Objectives Should Be To:

1. Restore and develop the physical and ecological infrastructure of the entire park system.
2. Implement programs that provide a range of activities for people of all ages and interests and that encourage the development of future generations of park and trail stewards.
3. Preserve, interpret and disseminate the history of the parks, respecting the historic character and design of the parks and the social and ecological history of the parks and the region.
4. Upgrade park operations, including enhancement of security, through the development of a park ranger corps.
5. Develop and execute a marketing plan. Advertise and promote to the general public, particularly Allegheny County residents, the entire park system as a unified, comprehensive system, including its traditional parks, trails, linear parks and associated amenities.
6. Determine a prioritized list of capital projects and improvements needed to reach stated objectives, including access agreements and/or acquisition needed for trail gaps.
7. Establish a level of sustainable and consistent financial and volunteer support for park and trail operations, development and restoration.

Recommendation # 3: Immediately Establish a Woodland Management Program

The nine existing County parks currently contain 12,000 acres of parkland – approximately 75% (9,000 acres) of which is woodlands—yet there are not significant resources currently going into woodland management presently, for example, there is no forester, no certified arborist, no tree crew and essentially no Woodland Management Program whatsoever. During the Vision Team Process we learned that about 10-20 acres of South Park is infected with oak wilt, a contagious disease. Without professional assistance, diseases such as oak wilt will spread and woodlands will suffer.

Park trees provide important environmental and economic benefits. In addition to reducing air temperature and absorbing solar radiation and providing bird habitat, they help to keep storm water out of the sewer system, saving the expense of treatment. They also stabilize hillsides, preventing landslides that can close roads and undermine park ecology.

Recommendation # 4: Maximize Revenue from Park Operations and Protect the Dedicated ARAD Funding Designated for the County Parks

A. Maximizing Revenue

The 2007 Study of Allegheny Parks by the American Leisure Institute contains detailed recommendations for maximizing revenue from park operations through the creation and staffing of a marketing and revenue development unit within the parks department to function under the overall leadership of the Parks Director.

The Vision Team urges that these recommendations from the 2007 study be implemented as follows:

1. Establish a county park cost accounting system as a first step.
2. Revise and modernize policies regulating annual fees and charges for park facilities, programs and services, to reflect both the market value and the cost of providing the facility/program. Update the fee and charge schedule every 3-5 years.
3. Develop and administer a year-round marketing and public relations plan.
4. Review golf course operations to determine if contracting for management services is an option for enhancing revenues.
5. Analyze the potential of constructing cabins in North and South Parks for overnight camping as a revenue generator.
6. Analyze the potential for increasing revenue from shelter rental by enabling park users to complete and pay for shelter rentals online.
7. Analyze the potential for increasing usage of and revenues from parks through development and rental of spaces for recreational vehicles (RV's).

B. Protecting Revenue

An additional concern of Vision Team members is the apparent erosion of the dedicated ARAD funding for the Allegheny County Parks. Although the total funding supplied by ARAD has actually increased in the last three years, the portion of the funding designated for "indirect costs, debt service and police" has increased by over 40% in the last three years, leaving less and less for direct services.

Trail groups in Allegheny County currently participate in a joint application prepared by the Allegheny Land Trust (ALT) to the ARAD for funding to complete the riverfront trail system including both land and water trails. The ALT application has been consistently funded; however, funding for this application is not secure and does fluctuate from year to year. This funding is very important for property acquisition and development of the riverfront trail system and provides non-profits and municipalities with valuable match to state and federal grant applications. It should be preserved and increased as much as possible in future years.

Recommendation # 5: Promote a Focus on the “User Experience” including a Coordinated Universal Navigation/Information System

Considerable focus should be placed on strengthening the “User Experience” of those enjoying trails, linear parks, existing county, municipal, and state parks. The Vision Team urges the County Executive to focus on this user experience to promote park system unification that appears seamless to parks users. The first, key element of the strategy should be coordinated universal signage and online/mobile guidance system. Realizing that different parks of the envisioned unified park and trail system are under different municipal managements and that some even belong to disparate trail system hierarchies, team members nonetheless felt that agreement could and should be reached quickly on coordination of signage and other navigation standards so that all future efforts could further this goal.

The Team suggests that the County Executive convene a group of local officials and park groups to discuss, with the goal of reconciling differences and developing and implementing a coordinated system with universal appeal.

Recommendation#6(a-e): Implement Development of Countywide Riverfront Park and Connectors

Recommendations 6 (a-e) are specific recommendations that will bolster the effort to create the Countywide Riverfront Park. These are tools that are drawn from the experiences of Allegheny County, non-profits and local municipalities who are actively working toward this goal.

Recommendation # 6(a): Create a “Trail Ombudsman” within the Unified Park Structure

The County Executive provides leadership related to the development of Allegheny County’s riverfront trail system. Allegheny County is currently partnering with several non-profit groups and with municipalities to add ever-increasing mileage to the riverfront trail system. Team members conveyed the information that 100% of the County riverfronts had been studied and that some percentage of the trail system has been completed (*See Appendix A*). Many of the areas where trails have been constructed could be widened and developed into linear parks that would include standard design features and multiple opportunities to enhance the user experience for walkers, bikers, hikers, joggers, inline skaters and commuters.

Those currently working on completing the riverfront trail system would welcome additional assistance from Allegheny County. A Trail Ombudsman within the unified Parks & Recreation Department could provide the crucially important function of serving as a central repository of all the myriad legal agreements concerning trail segments. The Trail Ombudsman, perhaps in conjunction with a non-profit partner, should maintain a GIS based map of all existing and prospective trail sections, noting who owns relevant parcels, the nature of the ownership interests (e.g., easement or ownership in fee), maintenance requirements and responsibilities, and an estimate of maintenance costs and/or acquisition costs. A Trail Ombudsman also could provide a centralized knowledge base and support for additional land acquisitions, such as furnishing model agreements. It also is necessary for Allegheny County to continue to have robust Land Bank funding available as a revolving fund for emergency land acquisition. The Trail Ombudsman could also encourage usage of the coordinated universal navigation system by providing funding for appropriate signage as a “carrot” to any newly completed trail segments.

One very important tool that is available to Allegheny County is the development of public private partnerships with non-profit organizations and local municipalities related to trail development and maintenance. The Trail Ombudsman could also propose and institutionalize these agreements thereby strengthening partnerships

between local non-profits and municipalities and the county to grow and strengthen our riverfront trail system. This system would reduce the County's maintenance responsibilities, allowing the County to use its limited resources to promote completion of the trail system, to serve a central coordinating and support function, and to centralize information.

Recommendation # 6(b): Develop a List of Priorities and Opportunities for Property Acquisition for the Enhancement of Existing Parks and for Development of Linear Parks, Trails and Related Amenities

Since the county acquired the property for Boyce Park and Settlers Cabin Park over 50 years ago, there have been few major property acquisitions to enhance our existing parks. More recently, Allegheny County has participated in key acquisitions along the Monongahela River as part of completion of the Great Allegheny Passage and key properties along the Allegheny River were acquired as part of completion of the trail connection to Armstrong County, but there is still a substantial amount of property that is needed to complete a continuous system. Although significant opportunities continue to present themselves for acquisition of properties to enhance our park system, significant segments of riverfront property are under-utilized or could be enhanced by being included, in whole or in part, as part of the Countywide Riverfront Park. Certain properties adjacent to our parks and along pathways could be acquired for development of trails or linear parks. These opportunities should be listed and prioritized so that the appropriate party (county, local municipality, non-profit partner) is in a position to acquire property or property interests when the opportunity presents itself.

Recommendation # 6 (c): Negotiate with Railroads and other Riverfront Property Owners to Acquire Property Interests consistent with Development of a Comprehensive Network of Trails and a Countywide Riverfront Park

The Vision Team recognizes a need to bring together resources from our political, business and non-profit communities to negotiate with those entities, mainly railroads, that own large swaths of property, parts of which could be used to complete the vision of a comprehensive network of trails and linear parks into the Countywide Riverfront Park. When negotiations with railroads are contemplated, the personal intervention of the Allegheny County Executive is a necessary prerequisite for success. The additional corporate support which the County Executive can enlist will further enhance the chances for success.

Recommendation #6(d): Develop Trails and Linear Parks, and Prioritize Bicycle and Pedestrian Improvements, as Part of Transportation Initiatives

The Vision Team recommends that Allegheny County take a leadership role in developing linear parks – including trail, bike and pedestrian improvements – as part of new transportation initiatives that are undertaken in the county. Whether it is the reconstruction of major roadways, rehabilitation of a bridge or underpass improvements, these are all projects that are connectors between communities. Often these transportation projects occur along or near planned trail corridors. The Route 28 project is a good example. With some advance planning and partnership with local municipalities and non-profits, partners were able to work with PennDOT to construct a trail connection between the City of Pittsburgh and Millvale Borough. Without this construction as part of the Route 28 reconstruction, this opportunity would have been lost.

Identifying transportation projects and opportunities requires collaboration with other agencies like PennDOT, and require the strong support of local municipalities to make sure that the inclusion of bike and pedestrian improvements is a priority for development in project budgets. The Team recommends that Allegheny County

take the lead in identifying these opportunities and bringing partners together to incorporate the goals of completing the riverfront trail system.

Recommendation #6(e): Encourage Municipalities with Riverfronts to Adopt Local Zoning Regulations to Protect and Restore Riverfronts and to Facilitate Development of Riverfront Linear Parks, Trails and Amenities

Municipal zoning can be an effective way to promote a comprehensive network of riverfront parks, trails and amenities. Draft ordinances presently exist which seek to protect, preserve and/or restore area along our riverfronts and set backs for the development of riverfront parks, trails and amenities consistent with the vision of a Countywide Riverfront Park. The County should incentivize or otherwise encourage widespread adoption of such ordinances.

Recommendation # 7: Propose a Referendum to Add to Dedicated Funding for Parks and Trails

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh was recently successful in passing a binding referendum to add 0.25 mills to real estate taxes in the city with the proceeds going to support maintenance and operations of the Library. Allegheny County should propose a similar referendum to assist efforts to acquire and maintain properties to benefit parks, trails, bikeways, and the development of a Countywide Riverfront Park. Park resources, like libraries, are critical components of a region's vitality and economic viability.

Members

Meg Cheever (Co-Chair)
Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy

Dave Fawcett, Esq. (Co-Chair)
Reed Smith LLP

Malik Bankston
The Kingsley Association

Tom Baxter
Friends of the Riverfront

Fred Bonci
LaQuatra Bonci Associates

The Honorable Jim Burn
Allegheny County Council

Patrick Dowd
City of Pittsburgh

Jay Ferguson
Fifth Third Bank

The Honorable Jim Ferlo
Senate of Pennsylvania

Sylvia Fields
Eden Hall Foundation

The Honorable Nick Futules
Allegheny County Council

Hannah Hardy
PA Environmental Council

Brian Hill
Richard King Mellon Foundation

Tim Inglis
Colcom Foundation

Sean Logan

UPMC

Christine Mayernik

Michael Baker Corporation

Linda McKenna Boxx

Allegheny Trail Alliance

Tony Morrocco

GAI Consultants, Inc.

Lisa Schroeder

Riverlife

John Stephen

Elliott & Davis, P.C.