

## 4.0 SYSTEM-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

Comprehensive action designed to fundamentally change the direction of the Allegheny County Parks will be necessary if the mission, goals, and objectives described in Chapter 3.0 are to be realized. The required actions range from operational changes to improvements to recreational facilities and programs to steps to conserve the parks' rich natural and historic resources. This chapter presents recommendations for actions at the scale of the park system as a whole to achieve the desired future for the Allegheny County parks system. Recommendations specific to each of the nine parks within the system are presented in Chapter 5.0.

It is readily apparent from the breadth of the recommendations contained in this and the subsequent chapter that they will require a period of years before they can be fully implemented. Certain recommendations, such as the establishment of a new organizational structure, must be set in motion first to set the foundation for subsequent actions. Others, such as repairs to existing facilities in poor condition, are higher priorities than longer-range propositions such as development of major new facilities. Chapter 6.0 lays out a strategy for implementing the recommendations set forth in Chapters 4.0 and 5.0, including priorities for both non-capital and capital actions.

### 4.1 PARKS SYSTEM OPERATIONS

#### 4.1.1 Organization

**Action: Implement a new organizational structure for the county parks system.**

One of the most significant benefits of the Allegheny County Parks Comprehensive Master Plan is the opportunity to define an organization and operating structure for the parks system in the twenty-first century. The Parks 2000 Committee and Parks Advisory Board have reiterated their desire for a parks system that compares favorably to other high performance parks organizations, including National Gold Medal Award Programs of cities of a similar size.

The most significant step in achieving this objective lies in defining the organizational structure. The type of organization will

determine whether the parks and recreation function can be provided in a creative, entrepreneurial manner that enhances the quality and diversity of services available to county residents while addressing the need for financial sustainability. A successful organizational structure will be one that enables the vision, mission, and goals established for the parks system to be implemented. It will attract contributions from the community in the form of both monetary and personal resources, in order to enhance and improve the quality of park facilities and programs.

Initially, the following five options for the future organization of the Allegheny County Parks were defined for consideration in the master planning process:

1. Maintain the parks and recreation function as a division of the Department of Public Works.
2. Re-establish a new Parks and Recreation Department within Allegheny County Government.
3. Establish a Parks and Recreation Department with a Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee reporting to the Executive Branch of County Government (County Executive/County Manager).
4. Establish a Parks and Recreation Commission under the Executive Branch, with a Parks and Recreation Department reporting to the Commission.
5. Establish an independent Parks and Recreation Authority as defined under the Pennsylvania State Code.

Each of the above options has various strengths and impacts on the county government and its citizens based upon the powers that would be vested in the organization. Many of the significant differences relate to legal responsibility, liability, taxing authority, powers of eminent domain, financial bonding capabilities, funding authority, hiring of personnel, and establishment of fees and charges, as well as the routine operation of the organization. Some of the benefits and impacts of each alternative are summarized below:

***Department of Public Works Division:*** As an operating division within the Department of Public Works, the recreation and park maintenance functions are fragmented and the opportunity lost to develop a vision, mission, and operational focus for the County's park and recreational needs. The Parks and Recreation Division serves as a major conduit of funding for the Public Works Department. As a major provider of capital and maintenance projects, the Department of Public Works does bring a level of organizational, technical, and operational expertise that had not existed within the former Parks and Recreation Department for

some time. Moreover, certain economies have been realized in the use of Public Works resources to provide maintenance services to parks and recreation. The Public Works Department has also begun to introduce new management information and budgeting systems to parks and recreations functions that will allow for better management oversight.

***Parks and Recreation Department:*** Re-establishing a Parks and Recreation Department reporting to the Executive Branch would enhance the visibility of parks and recreation services to the Allegheny County community. The County would maintain all political, financial, and operational controls that currently exist. While this structure would provide a greater focus on the parks and recreation mission, it would not enhance the opportunity for the Parks and Recreation Department to operate in an entrepreneurial manner or to attract increased financial and human resource support from the community.

***Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee:*** A Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee reporting to the Executive Branch, established in concert with a Parks and Recreation Department, would benefit the County by enhancing citizen involvement in policy-making on parks and recreation issues. Control of parks and recreation services would be maintained within the county government. Political impacts on County Council decisions and the operational issues of the Parks and Recreation Department would be buffered somewhat by the inclusion of citizen input in the decision-making process. However, the Committee would have lesser ability to leverage financial and other support from the community than a more independent commission or authority.

***Parks and Recreation Commission:*** Establishing a Parks and Recreation Commission as a non-profit, quasi-public entity of the Allegheny County government would provide a balance in which the County would delegate responsibilities to the Commission while maintaining a degree of control and authority through a formal agreement. A Commission could be delegated the responsibilities for human resources, including:

- Establishment of pay and performance plans
- Recruitment and training of personnel
- Establishment of fees and charges
- Procurement and contracting authority
- Establishment of an annual budget for operations and capital expenditures
- Other general operating responsibilities

The County would maintain title and control of park properties, establish general tax revenue allocations, and retain the powers of eminent domain and county bonding authority for capital development. The Commission would have greater ability to generate community grants and financial contributions (e.g., by sponsoring development of a foundation or “friends of” group) and to establish and attract volunteers to support many of the cultural, historical, and environmental amenities of the park system. The Executive Branch would be responsible for the appointment of the members of the Commission, but would be removed from the day-to-day political issues of operating a park system.

***Parks and Recreation Authority:*** Of the five organizational options for managing the county parks system, a Parks and Recreation Authority would have the most independence. In creating such an authority, the County would further delegate legal powers in accordance with state code by providing the ability to use eminent domain, issue bonds, and maintain title to public lands in the name of the authority. Although independent, the Parks Authority would not have any taxing powers. It should be noted that while the authority (or an independent commission) could operate in a more entrepreneurial manner, it would not relieve the County of the need to provide general fund tax dollars to support many of the non-revenue generating services and programs provided by the parks.

Each of the above options provides for various levels of potential success based upon the mission, goals, and objectives for the Allegheny County Parks described in Chapter 3.0. This plan makes the following priority recommendations regarding the future organization of the parks system:

***1. Separate the parks and recreation function from the Department of Public Works.***

This recommendation is not meant as a criticism of the Department of Public Works, which is doing a commendable job in managing the parks given its larger mission, competing priorities, and limited resources. Rather, it is intended to provide the parks and recreation function with a higher level of visibility and accountability, and to create an organization with a clearer management focus and sense of vision/mission.

***2. Establish the parks and recreation function as an independent entity under the auspices of Allegheny County government.***

Only with a greater level of autonomy for parks and recreation will management practices that enhance and improve the quality of the services, facilities, and programs offered by the

Allegheny County Parks be possible. The potential benefits to be achieved are significant, including the enhanced ability to:

- Hire and retain professional parks and recreation managers
- Make decisions that are in the best interest of the parks and recreation function
- Operate in a more entrepreneurial fashion, to increase the level of performance expectations, and to recognize performance
- Attract new monetary resources and increased levels of community support that would not be available to a direct unit (department) of county government

The recommended, independent structure could be either a commission or an authority. Regardless of organizational type, the new structure should provide a buffer between the organization and political structure in terms of involvement in day-to-day operations and decision-making. At the same time, the structure should ensure that the County's elected officials maintain a reasonable level of control over the parks and recreation function (e.g., through appointment of commission/authority members, budgetary controls, and control over the use of the County's bonding resources to fund capital projects). While an authority would offer the most independence, a commission would be easier to establish and would provide a reasonable balance between autonomy and county control.

For the purposes of this plan, it is assumed that the new organizational structure will be a commission. The initial steps to implement a Parks and Recreation Commission would generally be as follows:

1. Legislation is passed to establish the preferred governance structure, including responsibilities, number of appointments, and types.
2. The Executive Branch designates a task force to advertise and interview for commission members, so that responsible, interested and qualified members are identified.
3. The Commission members are appointed. Members need not have a professional background in parks and recreation. However, they must have a sincere interest and commitment to put the welfare of the Allegheny County Parks first.
4. The Commission joins the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) and the Pennsylvania Association of Parks to obtain assistance in determining the qualifications for an executive director, developing a full position description, establishing a viable salary range, and advertising the position.

5. A director is hired. This individual will then work with the Commission and County government to establish a transition plan which addresses the specifics of moving from the current structure to governance.

#### 4.1.2 Management and Staffing

Several separate but related actions are recommended to improve the management and staffing of the Allegheny County parks. Together with a new organizational structure, these actions will help create a more effective, entrepreneurial system with a clearer focus on the parks and recreation mission.

**Action: Initiate a national recruiting effort to identify and retain a top parks and recreation professional to manage the Allegheny County Parks.**

The priority management recommendation is to retain a new executive director for the parks system who is educated and trained in comprehensive parks management, stewardship of open space and parklands, and providing leisure services in the form of recreation and resource management. Preferred qualifications for a director would include the following:

- A minimum of ten years of management experience at a high level
- A Masters degree in Parks and Recreation Management and/or a related field such as Public Administration or Business Management
- Certification as a Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP) as designated by the National Recreation and Parks Association

The new parks director should have the background and experience to lead the County's parks and recreation functions by balancing active and passive recreation, conservation, and revenue-producing facilities. He/she should have the ability to integrate natural and historical resources, recreational facilities and services, and park planning activities to provide quality programs for a broad spectrum of park patrons. Also important is the need to focus on park patron customer service and on fee-based programs which are supported by user fees as opposed to being totally funded by tax dollars. The parks director will coordinate park programs, with an emphasis serving the leisure time and stewardship needs of the community, while working with all other public and private resources to create a balanced parks system.

**Action: Recruit more parks and recreation professionals to fill management positions as they become available.**

Thoroughly trained and educated park professionals should staff all management levels within the park system. In addition to the Director these positions would include, but not be limited to, a deputy director, division chiefs, park managers, naturalists, golf superintendent, recreational programmers, and facility managers. Persons filling these key positions should have specific training and education related to their areas of responsibility. This action should be an ongoing priority initiated by scheduling current incumbents in key positions for training and educational programs and identifying new/additional positions required. Initial impact would be for training costs and for any new/additional positions. Over time, vacant management positions would be filled with professionals meeting experience, training, and education requirements, which would be coordinated with the current or revised county pay scale. The result of this action will be an agency better trained in the management and delivery of services to park patrons, creation of new and innovative programs serving existing and future needs, and increased revenue generation through best management practices and new programs.

**Action: Establish a comprehensive park management position for each park.**

To increase accountability and focus, the individual parks should each be assigned a Park Manager with responsibility for the overall management of that park. The responsibilities of the managers would include but not be limited to:

- Operating facilities and programs
- Preparing, managing and being held accountable for the annual parks budget
- Financial management, including managing revenue-producing facilities
- Coordinating all programs, rentals, schedules, and special activities
- Hiring all full time and seasonal employees
- Supervising routine site maintenance such as mowing, trash pick up, facility cleaning, trail, picnic area, ball field maintenance
- Coordinating resource management, conservation, and preservation activities

**Action: Implement an effective performance evaluation, compensation, and incentive system that is explicitly tied to operating goals and objectives.**

At present, many of the park and recreation position descriptions are outdated, professional development opportunities are non-existent, and pay levels are low compared to other parks systems. There is also a lack of defined performance standards and evaluation processes to measure employee effectiveness. Many of the existing senior staff are nearing retirement and the current salary levels will make it difficult to recruit and retain professionally trained, educated, and motivated employees per the previous recommendation. Immediately following establishment of a new organizational structure as recommended in Section 4.1.1 above, an initiative should be undertaken to comprehensively revise and update position descriptions. As part of this initiative, pay levels should be re-evaluated to ensure fair and equitable compensation commensurate with the requirements of each position. Similarly, a performance appraisal and evaluation system should be instituted to define clear objectives and standards to be used in evaluating the effectiveness of employee work performance. This system should be tied to an employee incentive program that encourages and recognizes top-level performance.

**Action: Establish a team-oriented approach to management. At a minimum, involve park managers, maintenance supervisors, area supervisors, and others in developing operating goals and objectives.**

Presently, clearly defined organizational goals and objectives are lacking for the Allegheny County Parks. Mid-level management personnel have limited involvement in developing the operational objectives for parks and recreation services. Teamwork as an administrative management tool to foster a visionary, entrepreneurial, creative, and effective organization is similarly lacking. It is recommended that a team management approach be used to involve park managers, maintenance supervisors, area supervisors, and others in the development of operating goals and objectives. The operating staff can provide significant input and be motivated and challenged by the objectives, which they can assist in defining as a part of the restructuring of the Allegheny County park and recreation functions recommended by this Plan.

**Action: Enhance professional skills of staff by encouraging and making resources available for ongoing training and education.**

The professional development of county parks and recreation staff should be encouraged by providing resources for employees to attend professional conferences, workshops, parks and recreation-related school programs, continuing education, and other career

enhancing opportunities. This investment in employee development will promote a more effective and motivated staff.

#### 4.1.3 Maintenance and Risk Management

##### A. Maintenance

**Action: Implement a new maintenance management system designed to improve the upkeep of park and recreational facilities and grounds.**

The current maintenance management system should be thoroughly updated and revised to specify standardized procedures to be applied throughout the parks system to improve the quality and efficiency of maintenance operations. Risk management should be an integral part of the maintenance management system (see Section 4.1.3B). The system should also address appropriate treatment of sensitive natural and cultural resources (see Section 4.4).

Currently, Department of Public Works employees have little background in park maintenance practices. Maintenance personnel should receive training to ensure that they are familiar with the procedures specified by the maintenance management system. It is recommended that a Park Facility Coordinator be trained to oversee and direct park maintenance activities performed by employees.

Aspects of the proposed maintenance management system discussed below include:

- Dedicated maintenance crews for each park
- Outsourcing of trades functions
- Equipment standardization
- Annual equipment replacement fund
- Park maintenance standards
- Park maintenance budgets

**Crews:** Each park should have assigned a core maintenance crew under the supervision and control of the park manager. These crews would be responsible for general maintenance functions, mowing, trash and litter removal, ball field maintenance, trail maintenance, facility custodial functions, etc. The crews could initially remain within the Public Works Department. After a period of transition it is expected that they would come under the aegis of the new parks organization (e.g., a Commission). The Public Works Department would continue to provide trades such as electrical, plumbing, construction and facility repair and charge

the Commission an agreed rate for these services. Likewise, the park maintenance personnel could be used by the Public Works Department during the parks “off season” upon payment of an agreed rate to the Commission.

***Outsourcing Trades Functions:*** In the current system, there are times when certain maintenance functions require trade persons (plumbers, electricians, etc.) but due to heavy workloads the needed repairs cannot be accomplished by in-house personnel in a timely manner. This can increase the ultimate repair cost due to continued deterioration, affect quality of customer services, or in some cases shut down a facility. It is recommended that contracts be established with private vendors meeting labor/management requirements established between the County and local unions. Contracts would be set up on a unit cost basis. Park managers, maintenance supervisors, or other authorized personnel would have immediate access to pre-qualified trade persons for needed repairs. The use of these contracts can also offset the establishment of new positions as the demand for these services increase.

***Equipment Standardization:*** Currently several types of park maintenance equipment have been standardized. Efforts should be made to standardize all non-specialized maintenance equipment. An example would be mowing equipment where specifications are prepared to procure the best-suited piece of equipment for certain types of mowing. The application of this equipment would be the same from park to park. Standardization would make routine maintenance and repair of the equipment more efficient by reducing down time, parts inventory, and repair costs and by eliminating duplication. Using the right piece of equipment for a specific job also produces efficiencies by eliminating the need for follow up maintenance. The following are types of equipment that could be standardized:

- Vehicles/trucks
- Tractors
- Tractor attachments, mowers, loaders, etc.
- Push/walk behind mowers
- Riding mowers
- Chain saws
- Leaf blowers
- Generators
- Golf course equipment

Maintenance supervisors, groundskeepers, and site managers all should be involved in writing the specifications for the equipment

and in routinely evaluating existing and new products as they become available.

***Annual Equipment Replacement Fund:*** An annual equipment replacement fund should be established for certain types of equipment requiring substantial capital outlay, for example: vehicles, trucks, tractors, and major mowing equipment. A replacement fund would provide funding in a timely manner to keep efficient and operable equipment available, help eliminate costly repairs to old and worn out equipment, eliminate down time, and sustain maintenance schedules. The replacement fund should be part of the maintenance management system. When equipment meets the requirements for replacement, funds would be available for immediate procurement.

***Park Maintenance Standards:*** Setting uniform standards for the care of all facilities will improve efficiency and allow for a measure of productivity in park and facility maintenance. Park maintenance should be monitored and compared to the “Park Maintenance Standards” published by the National Recreation and Park Association. This publication assists in determining the appropriate level of maintenance of park facilities based on size and usage and provides productivity standards that are useful in determining the efficiency of park maintenance staff. This publication is also a valuable tool for estimating maintenance requirements of proposed projects and, with current cost estimating guides, can assist in establishing park maintenance budgets.

Based on the standards presented in the above listed publication, it is recommended that the County establish a parks maintenance program using a combination of Mode II and Mode III for typical park maintenance and a combination of Modes IV and V for Open Space Reserves and Natural Areas.

Mode II is intended for park areas with reasonably high visitation, such as playgrounds and ballfields that require a higher level of care. Mode III provides for moderate maintenance intensity associated with moderate to low levels of development, moderate to low levels of visitation, or agencies that, because of budget restrictions, cannot afford a higher intensity of maintenance. Based upon this combination of modes, standards for typical park maintenance for these areas are presented in Appendix A.

Mode IV is intended for undeveloped areas with low levels of park visitation. Mode V provides level of care standards for natural areas that receive a high number of visitations.

**Park Maintenance Budgets:** By utilizing departmental productivity rates, labor rates, and expenses associated with operating vehicles, the cost of maintenance activities can be estimated for budgetary purposes. As part of the maintenance management system, maintenance costs should be estimated on an annual basis. In addition, the costs associated with maintaining facilities after events and rentals should be isolated. These costs should be recovered by the County in accordance with the cost recovery policy recommended in Section 4.1.4C.

## **B. Risk Management**

### **Action: Develop and implement a risk management plan.**

Development and implementation of a risk management plan for parks and recreation facilities is of the highest importance for the safety of the residents and also serves to minimize the County's liability exposure. The basic goal of risk management is accident prevention. When facilities and programs are provided for public use, every precaution should be taken to ensure user safety. Documentation of all risk management procedures is essential, not only for good record keeping and maintenance scheduling, but also to provide evidence in case of legal action.

The County's risk management plan should be based on the competence and training of recreation and maintenance staff. Staff should be trained in safety procedures and should be expected to be constantly aware of the condition of facilities used. Staff should be trained to recognize and post unsafe conditions, prevent the use of unsafe equipment and facilities, and report safety hazards in writing so they can be remedied in a timely manner. Regularly scheduled safety inspections should be conducted by trained staff at every facility available for public use. Written work orders should be issued for needed repairs and completed work should be documented.

Adequate liability insurance must be kept up-to-date. As new programs and facilities are developed, liability insurance coverage should be revised to reflect new conditions. Regular communication with insurance carriers is essential. Both risk to users and insurance costs can be reduced if all existing and proposed facilities are brought into compliance with current safety standards and guidelines.

Development of a maintenance management system is essential to risk management (see Section 4.1.3A above). The maintenance management system should set standards that will keep recreation facilities safe, reduce liability risks, and plan for prevention of accidents. In order to accomplish these objectives, the County

should develop and follow a complete preventive maintenance and risk management program. All facilities should be scheduled for regular inspection and assessment. In the spring and summer, these inspections can be performed when a site is visited for mowing. A written inspection form should be completed and minor repairs should be made immediately. Areas or equipment needing major repairs or having parts missing should be posted as unsafe, reported in writing, and repaired as soon as possible.

Projects should be prioritized according to existing condition and usage. Work on these projects should be scheduled in accordance with the regular mowing, inspection, and repair schedule.

Routine equipment maintenance and servicing must be scheduled and performed on a regular basis. Maintenance equipment is expensive and should last a long time. With proper care, replacement of maintenance equipment can be kept to a minimum. An equipment and tool inventory should be kept accurate and up-to-date to assure the availability of proper tools when they are needed. As previously noted, an annual equipment replacement fund should be established to provide for new maintenance equipment and a regular replacement program.

Regular review of legal requirements and inspections for conformance to sanitary regulations, criteria for licensing, fire laws, building codes, bathing codes, pesticide applications, and safety procedures should be a priority for the maintenance staff. The County should keep up to date with safety standards such as those published by the American Society for Testing Materials and the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Maintenance staff should receive training in play equipment safety assessment and in the operation of hazardous maintenance equipment. At least one person should maintain certification as a playground safety inspector. The County should obtain a playground equipment safety kit (such as the one manufactured by Little Tikes Commercial Playground Equipment for the National Playground Safety Institute) and use it on an ongoing basis to monitor playground safety.

#### 4.1.4 Finances

##### A. Financial Management

**Action: Develop and implement a long-range financial management plan.**

Preparation of and adherence to a financial management plan is essential to the long-term fiscal health of the Allegheny County Parks. The purpose of this plan would be to project revenues, expenditures and necessary fee increases on a yearly basis for an extended period of time (e.g., eight to ten years). The financial plan would be updated on an annual basis and should include input from the public in addition to the parks organizational group and its staff. Public involvement could be accomplished through park advisory groups, special interest groups, and open public meetings. This process would keep the public involved and aware of the need for the Park Commission to maintain a fee structure level sufficient to meet budgetary needs. For additional discussion of this topic, see Section 6.3 (Long-Term Financial Plan).

##### B. Budget

**Action: Promote budget accountability through involvement of staff in the process, establishment of specific financial expectations, provision of regular financial performance feedback, and provision of financial incentives based on performance.**

Developing the parks and recreation budget should be an inclusive effort, beginning with the line staff, to identify the requirements of each park site or administrative function. This process should include definition of goals and objectives to justify budgetary requests and performance measures for the outcomes of proposed initiatives. Involving employees in the decision-making process will encourage them to take an active role in monitoring budget performance and meeting targets, thus significantly improving accountability. The budget should include projections for revenues as well as expenditures, so that each park unit has a clear understanding of the overall financial results it is expected to achieve. Flexibility should be provided to recognize outstanding performance of park sites where net income exceeds projections by allowing the excess income to be allocated to that site for use on under or non-funded projects.

The budget should be developed in conformance with the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) budget standards.

### C. Cost Recovery

**Action: Implement a policy that defines cost recovery expectations for facilities and programs offered by the county parks, to be used in setting fees and charges to the public.**

All park and recreation facilities, programs and services come at an expense to the County. Many recreational facilities and programs are provided to the County residents as a public service, with no expectation of recovering their costs. On the other hand, the County provides many recreational facilities and programs that can be a financial burden if their costs are not recovered.

In addition, while the County's focus is to provide recreational opportunities for residents of Allegheny County, it is evident (and appropriate) that many non-residents enjoy use of the county parks.

To address these issues and assist in achieving a financially sustainable parks system, the County should adopt a Cost Recovery Policy that defines expectations for recovering direct and indirect costs associated with providing park and recreation facilities, programs and services. This policy should be based on the following four principles:

1. Basic recreational facilities, programs, and services should be provided at no cost to participants.
2. Specialized recreational facilities, programs, and services should generate revenue to meet their costs while providing additional revenue to assist in covering the costs of providing basic services and developing new recreational facilities, programs, and services.
3. Fees and charges should be reduced for those who cannot afford to participate in a recreational facility, program, or service due to financial limitations.
4. As permitted by state law, non-residents should be charged more to utilize recreational opportunities provided for Allegheny County residents.

It is recommended that the County use the following categories to define cost recovery expectations when establishing fees and charges for recreational facilities, programs, and services:

- Basic Services
- Service Programs
- Merit Programs
- Special Interest Programs and Facilities
- Outside Activities

**Basic Services:** No cost recovery should be expected from recreational activities defined as basic services. As the minimal, essential recreational opportunities provided in a public parks environment, these activities should be offered as a free service to the public with no admission or registration fee. Examples of basic services and facilities include, but are not limited to, the following: general park maintenance, special features, gardens, trails, playgrounds, passive recreational areas, and the unreserved use of tennis courts, shelters, and unlighted athletic fields.

Public funds should be used to develop and maintain parkland and recreational facilities used for basic services. No efforts at cost recovery will be made for the use of basic facilities and services, with the exception of reserved or scheduled use. A reservation fee should be collected for the reserved or scheduled use of the park area or facility in question for the following reasons:

- The process of reserving the park area or facility requires the expenditure of administrative resources to create the benefit
- The patron(s) enjoys the added value of exclusive, reserved use of the park area or facility

**Service Programs:** Service programs should be offered with minimal cost recovery expectations. Specifically, fee contributions should cover 25% of direct and indirect program and facility costs. These County-sponsored activities are provided as services to the public and offer limited revenue opportunities through registration or participation fees. Examples include basic aquatic programs, cultural special events, Senior Olympics, and basic environmental education, cultural, and historic interpretation programs.

**Merit Programs:** Partial cost recovery should be expected from merit programs. Examples of merit programs include special instructional activities, day camps, admission fees and user fees, advanced aquatic programs, and advanced environmental education, cultural, and historic interpretation programs. To provide affordable registration fees and promote participation in all department managed activities, the cost recovery objective for merit programs should be 50 to 100% of direct and indirect program and facility costs.

**Special Interest Programs and Facilities:** A cost recovery objective of 120% should be provided for programs and facilities that are highly specialized in nature. In general, these programs require an agreement or special payment to a highly specialized expert/provider or are designed to meet the needs of a special interest group. Some examples include: golf courses, ski slopes,

tournaments, special events, rental fees, sales revenue, permit fees, special services fees, and regional and national acts and events.

***Outside Activities:*** Events or activities organized and/or operated by entities other than the County (i.e., private profit and non-profit organizations and businesses) should be subject to appropriate charges. Activities or services offered by for-profit businesses should recover 120% of direct and indirect costs in addition to, or as part of, permit fees or a payment as specified in a negotiated contract. Non-profit organizational activities should be charged 110% of direct costs and all fees normally levied for services provided by the Department.

***Reduction of Fees for Low to Moderate Income Families:*** The County recognizes that the fees and charges established based on the cost recovery policy may result in facilities, programs, and services that are not affordable to all county residents. Therefore, the following policy to reduce fees and charges is recommended to ensure that all residents have access to Allegheny County's park and recreation facilities, programs, and services:

- Patrons must submit evidence, on an annual basis, of low/moderate income status as defined by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Acceptable evidence is limited to a WIC Card, Public Assistance Card, or Reduced/Free Lunch Program Card. No other evidence should be deemed acceptable by department staff.
- Patrons providing evidence of low/moderate income status should be given the opportunity to participate in department programs for 25% of the published fees.

***Non-Resident Fees and Charges:*** Non-resident use of the County park system comes at the expense of Allegheny County taxpayers. To ease the financial burden placed on the parks system by non-resident use, it is recommended the County adopt a policy for non-resident fees and charges. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, state law allows governing bodies to charge non-residents up to 150% of the fee or charge published for residents of their jurisdiction.

To effectively implement a cost recovery policy, the County must be able to determine the direct and indirect costs associated with a particular facility, program, or service. Direct costs are defined as those costs that are incurred as a result of providing a particular facility, program, or service. Direct facility costs typically include staff, custodial, utilities, supplies, and contracted costs associated with the use of the facility. Direct program costs include instructor

salaries, materials and supplies, and any other costs associated with providing the particular program.

Indirect costs are defined as the expenditure of time and/or materials in support of programs, facilities, or services. Indirect costs typically include administrative time, materials and equipment, and expanded personnel time (e.g., use of county police) needed to support the activity.

#### 4.1.5 Other Operational Issues

##### A. Customer Service

**Action: Prepare a customer service plan that defines service standards and methods for responding to customer service issues.**

Enhancing the quality of customer service is essential to improve the level of satisfaction of county residents with the Allegheny County parks and to increase the citizen user base. A customer service plan should be developed to define service standards and methods of responding to user and citizen issues. The plan should delegate to park or facility supervisors the ability to resolve unusual customer issues and satisfy customer needs. The service plan should define expectations for staff, establish procedures for staff training and monitoring of services provided to customers, and provide incentives to recognize employees for outstanding and exemplary performance.

##### B. Information Services

**Action: Expand the use of computerized systems and the Internet in park systems operations.**

As the Allegheny County parks move forward into the twenty-first century, it is essential that the continued growth and development of technology and the role that it plays in parks and recreation settings be embraced. As a management tool for maintenance, budgeting, inventory, payroll processing, and internal and customer communications (facility scheduling and reservations, program registrations, point of sale systems and memberships, etc.) increased computerization will greatly enhance the efforts of Allegheny County to become a high performance organization. The use of the Internet by citizens to access and conduct business on line (by registering for programs, reserving tee times, scheduling facilities, etc.) and obtaining general information on the park system will continue to grow in the coming years. Parks and recreation services must keep pace with changing technology to be effective.

### C. Park Police and Security

#### **Action: Evaluate the role of the Allegheny County Police in the Allegheny County Parks.**

Allegheny County should undertake an evaluation of County Police services being charged to the parks system. While good working relations exist between the Parks Division and the Police Department, observations suggest that police activities that occur outside the parks could inadvertently be charged against the park budget, resulting in parks funding being utilized to support general county police services. The evaluation should also include consideration of using private security services or volunteers as auxiliary police for duties for which a non-sworn officer could be used, such as facility security, parking supervision, or traffic and crowd control for special events.

### D. Volunteers/Partnerships

#### **Action: Implement a program to expand the involvement of volunteers and corporate and institutional partners in the Allegheny County Parks.**

The opportunity to increase the involvement of volunteers in park activities, including both individuals and groups, is significant and generally untapped within existing county park operations, with the exception of isolated instances such as the Oliver Miller Homestead Associates in South Park. With the rich and diverse historic, environmental, and recreational resources within the parks, the potential to encourage contributions of human and financial resources is enormous. A program designed to tap into this potential by “growing” volunteer involvement and associated financial support for the county parks should be developed.

A number of different volunteer programs contribute to park operations throughout the country. The following are some specific program examples:

***Deputy Park Rangers:*** Some volunteers in Prospect Park, located in Brooklyn, New York, act as deputy park rangers and work with city police to enhance park security.

***Bicycle Patrol/Horse Patrol:*** In Mount Diablo State Park, CA, volunteers patrol roads and trails to provide information, directions and first aid to park visitors.

***Living History:*** Volunteers research and develop historical characters and costumes for presentation in interpretive programs in Mount Diablo State Park.

***Roving Docent:*** In a number of park systems, volunteers hike a particular trail or staff a park facility in order to provide interpretation and general information to park visitors.

***Other:*** Specific talents are often incorporated in volunteer programs. Volunteers with appropriate experience and interests can work as bird specialists, photo assistants, and mechanics, to name just a few.

In Allegheny County, the use of volunteers must take into consideration a number of unique local factors, including recognition of the areas of responsibility of various labor unions. However, the use of volunteers has great potential to enhance operations and/or reduce budgetary requirements. Given the size of the County's population base, a level of volunteer participation equal to 10,000 to 30,000 person hours could easily be achieved.

Management and administration are key to a successful volunteer program. Attention must be paid to volunteer recruitment and training, establishment of responsibilities, monitoring of performance, and recognition of volunteer contributions.

An incentive program is another integral part of a successful volunteer program that maintains and grows its base of volunteers. There are many different types of incentive programs, all based on an important premise: a volunteer's contribution needs to be acknowledged. The acknowledgement could be a T-shirt, a fee-free day at the park, a party for all volunteers, a thank you in the local paper which includes a list of volunteers, etc.

Specific actions recommended as part of a volunteer program for the Allegheny County Parks include:

- ***Establish a dedicated friends/volunteer coordinator position.*** This initial position should be filled by an entrepreneurial individual with a background in volunteer organizing, nonprofit work, and/or fundraising. Over time, additional professional personnel could be added as justified by the level of activity and private funding generated by the volunteer program.
- ***Expand volunteer and friends programs in scope and park coverage.*** The primary role of the volunteer coordinator will be to act as a catalyst in promoting increased volunteer activity for specific projects (e.g., upgrading and maintaining a particular trail system) or at the park level (i.e., through friends groups). Many other park systems have organized "friends" or "adopt-a-park" groups that are active at the level of the parks system or individual parks within the system. Encouraging

establishment such groups to solicit human resource and financial support should be considered for the Allegheny County Parks (see Section 6.3.5).

- ***Establish a corporate sponsorship program.*** In addition to individual citizens and friends groups, the volunteer program could extend to businesses through the involvement of employees in park projects and financial sponsorships (see Section 6.3.5).

## **E. Marketing/Public Relations**

### **Action: Implement an active public outreach and marketing plan.**

The Department of Public Works currently lacks budgeted financial resources to advertise and market existing revenue-based facilities and programs as well as other county park activities. A comprehensive marketing and advertising program for the parks should be developed, including newspaper, radio, and TV advertising, direct mailed circulars and flyers, and a coordinated public relations program. New informational materials should be prepared in conjunction with the program, including updated brochures that present key information on each park with maps showing accurate locations of park facilities. A dedicated staff person(s) should be allocated for this critical business function. The costs of implementing this program can be offset through the increased revenues that would be achieved by this effort. For additional discussion of this topic, see Section 6.4 (Marketing Plan).

## **4.2 RECREATIONAL FACILITIES**

### **4.2.1 Capital Improvements**

#### **Action: Develop and implement a capital improvements budgeting process that addresses needs for repairs and upgrades to existing facilities and development of new facilities.**

The analysis of existing facilities conducted for this plan indicates that 61% of the county park facilities will require significant repairs within the next five years to address deferred maintenance (see Section 2.2.3). In addition, enhancement of existing and development of new facilities will be needed to meet emerging recreational needs and plan objectives such as increased revenue generation (see Section 2.4).

Given current levels of funding for the parks, it is evident that there will not be sufficient money available to address all the needed capital improvements within the foreseeable future.

Therefore, a process must be developed to provide the County with the basis for allocating resources to implement the improvements in a logical manner. This plan recommends that the County adopt a capital improvements budgeting process consisting of two steps:

- Step One: Determine Appropriateness of Capital Investment
- Step Two: Establish Priorities

***Step One:*** First, the County must determine whether it is appropriate to invest capital improvement dollars in the many existing county park facilities identified as needing attention. The need for new facilities must also be addressed in the decision-making process. It is recommended that the following series of questions be asked of each recreational facility to determine if capital investment is warranted:

Regional Significance

1. Will the facility satisfy a regionally significant recreational need?

Use Considerations

2. Is there a demand for the facility? Is market demand likely to grow in the future?
3. Is the facility available to a wide spectrum of county residents?
4. Is/will the facility be utilized sufficiently to warrant capital investment?
5. If the facility is existing, is it obsolete?

Site Considerations

6. Is there sufficient land to accommodate the facility and required support functions?
7. Will the facility impact sensitive environmental or historic resources?
8. Is the facility compatible with adjacent land uses?
9. If the facility does not pass questions 6, 7, and/or 8, is there an alternative location that will, either in this park or another county park?

Cost/Benefit Analysis

10. Do/will the revenues from the facility support operating and maintenance costs in accordance with the County's cost recovery policy?
11. If the facility cannot be managed in a financially feasible manner by county staff, can the County partner with an outside entity to help manage and operate it, thus reducing costs? (Examples of outside entities include a private concessionaire, non-profit organization, or local municipality.)

12. If the facility does not pass questions 10 and 11, is there a community/social benefit to subsidizing the facility? (For example, does it provide recreational opportunities for at-risk youth, the physically and mentally challenged, women and minorities, etc.?)
13. Does the facility provide an ancillary use that will benefit other facilities (e.g., a water reservoir that may reduce the operating costs of the Boyce Park ski slope)?

***Step Two:*** The second step in the proposed capital improvements budgeting process is to prioritize individual projects to allow the County to maximize use of the limited funds it has available. A three tiered prioritization system is recommended that emphasizes attention to deferred maintenance needs over development of new facilities. ***High priority*** projects include those required to address identified hazards (risk management) and facilities in poor condition (immediate repair need), plus high profile “demonstration projects” provided in each park.<sup>1</sup> ***Medium priority*** projects are required to address facilities in fair condition (mid-term repair need). ***Low priority*** projects include development of new facilities and expansions of existing facilities. Specific criteria for identifying each category of capital improvement are as follows:

High Priority: Risk Management/Immediate Repair Need/Demonstration Projects

- Health, safety, and welfare/hazard reduction (e.g., upgrades to outdated play equipment throughout the parks)
- Accessibility improvements to address the Americans with Disabilities Act
- Facility not functional for the intended use per the facilities analysis
- Facility in poor condition per the facilities analysis
- Demonstration project in each park

Medium Priority: Mid-Term Repair Need

- Facility in fair condition per the facilities analysis

---

<sup>1</sup> The idea of initiating a demonstration project in each park deviates from the emphasis on addressing the deferred maintenance needs of existing facilities before developing new (or expanding existing) ones. However, such projects would demonstrate the County’s renewed commitment to the future of its parks, generating publicity and momentum for further investment. Moreover, it is possible that private sponsorships or donations could help fund these projects. Potential demonstration projects are identified in the recommendations for individual parks in Section 4.2.

Low Priority: Development of New/Expansion of Existing Facilities

- Construct/upgrade revenue-producing facilities (must generate 120% of operating costs, or County agrees to subsidize the facility)
- Construct/upgrade facilities to meet new trends in recreation
- Construct/upgrade facilities to take advantage of partnerships that benefit the parks system
- Construct/upgrade ancillary facilities that benefit revenue-producing facilities

A proposed capital improvements plan based upon the above categories and criteria is presented in Section 6.2.

**Action: Implement a policy that specifies criteria for approving development of new facilities in the Allegheny County Parks.**

The County receives frequent requests from user groups, local municipalities, and others to develop portions of the parks for various recreational purposes. Over time the County has accommodated these requests on an ad-hoc basis, resulting in athletic field complexes and other facilities used by specific user groups located throughout the parks.

Requests for new facilities in the county parks will continue as the land available for recreation in local municipalities becomes scarcer and new recreational trends emerge. At the same time, the amount of available land in the county parks is limited and potentially competing objectives such as natural resource preservation, the costs of operating new facilities, and the recreational facility needs identified by this plan must be taken into account. To address these issues, it is recommended that the County adopt a formal policy to be used in deciding whether or not to approve requests for new facilities. This policy should use the criteria identified above in step one of the proposed capital improvements budgeting process (Questions 1 to 13) as the basis for evaluating such requests.

While the above policy can be applied immediately by the County, evaluating requests for new facilities will ultimately be the responsibility of the Commission or other new parks organization. Inevitably, some degree of judgement will need to be exercised in applying the criteria to individual proposals. Nevertheless, the criteria provide a framework for rational, informed decision-making to replace the current system whereby decisions are too often made on an ad-hoc basis. To aid in this process, parks and recreation staff should be responsible for preparing a report that evaluates each request for a new facility against the criteria for use by decision-makers.

## 4.2.2 Accessibility

**Action: Initiate a program to improve the accessibility of county park facilities to persons with disabilities.**

The findings of the facilities analysis indicate that close to three-quarters of facilities in the county parks lack adequate access for persons with disabilities. To address this situation, the County should initiate an ongoing program to bring non-compliant facilities up to the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As noted in Section 4.2.1, accessibility improvements to address ADA requirements are ranked as a high priority in project evaluation for the proposed capital improvements budgeting process. In many cases, relatively low-cost measures, such as installation of a stable, firm, and slip resistant surface from the point of access (parking lot) to the facility (e.g., picnic shelter), would make the facility accessible. The County should make funding available to address such minor improvements. Facilities requiring more extensive work to meet ADA requirements should be scheduled for attention as part of the capital improvements budgeting process.

## 4.3 PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

### 4.3.1 Recreational Programs

**Action: Implement a policy that specifies criteria for the provision of recreational programs within the Allegheny County Parks.**

Twenty-eight percent of those who responded to the mail survey of county residents conducted for the Comprehensive Master Plan felt that the County should develop additional program opportunities within the park system. When asked what types of additional types of programming should be provided, respondents by more than a ten to one margin indicated a preference for special events. The results indicate respondents do not believe it is the role of the County Parks system to provide recreational programs that are currently provided at the local level. Thus, they emphasized special events.

The role of recreation programming in the Allegheny County parks system needs to be defined. It is recommended that the following policy be adopted for the provision of recreational programs in the county parks:

*Allegheny County Park and Recreation will provide unique recreational programming opportunities for Allegheny County residents. In addition,*

*the County will provide programming opportunities to complement recreational facilities in the county parks. Recreation programs must be available to all County residents without regard to age, race, sex, disability, financial status, or religion.*

Typically, a program schedule is designed around meeting the needs of various segments of population within a defined service area. Traditionally, this has involved classifying program opportunities into the following categories:

- Pre-school programming
- Youth non-sports programming
- Youth sports programming
- Teen programming
- Adult programming
- Senior programming
- Special event programming

Current trends in recreation are now also focusing on inter-generational programming. This style of programming provides social as well as recreational benefits to its participants.

Given the abundance of recreational programs currently offered by local municipalities in organized sports, the County should limit active sports programming to coach and player clinics. Coach and player clinics are typically not offered at the municipal level and are generally offered through local colleges and universities. A partnership between the County and a local college or university would offer the potential to generate additional revenue in the park system, while not requiring the construction of new recreational facilities.

To properly plan and administer recreational opportunities for the physically and mentally challenged, it is recommended that the County hire a Therapeutic Recreation specialist. Currently, physically and mentally challenged individuals can participate in recreational programs only if they have the ability to participate in the general programming opportunities available to the general public.

With respect to programs in support of existing recreational facilities such as the golf courses, swimming pools, skating rinks, and the ski slope, the potential exists to significantly increase the amount of programming and the revenue-generating potential of the facilities if the County is willing to charge more competitive rates.

Given the fiscal needs of the county parks, planning for additional programming should give priority to aggressive expansion of fee-based programs, particularly those that generate revenues in excess of costs. Implementation of expanded fee-based programs will generate additional income to support the general operating budget, specifically programs and facilities offered at little or no cost and the expanded marketing program that is proposed to promote utilization. As described in Section 6.3.4, health/fitness and related programs could be a significant source of new revenues for the county parks system.

The staffing approach to expansion of fee-based programs should recognize both the importance of volume of participation and the fact that participation is largely a local phenomenon. It is recommended that major parks such as North Park, South Park, and Boyce Park have dedicated staff programmers for core programs and contractors for specialty programs. Core programs would include health, fitness, nature, and youth. The mixed use of staff programmers and contractors would provide the agency with greater profit potential, and greater control over quality and liability. It does, however, mean greater financial risks for programs that might be under-subscribed.

The minimum financial objective for individual programs should be the recovery of all direct and indirect expenses. Ideally, additional revenues would translate into additional income. Based on this approach, pricing should be set with an eye on the competitive market and the economics of an individual program. Prices would be set to break even at some minimum level attendance, which would be below capacity and expectations. Additional participation above the break-even level would send dollars almost entirely to the bottom line.

As discussed in Section 6.4, marketing for specific programs, beyond listings in the recommended activity guide, would be done at the local level. This local program marketing would consist mainly of flyer type materials announcing certain activities, and would be targeted to repeat users and specific local audiences.

It is recommended that the County implement the following recreational programming policy to ensure that decisions on program offerings are consistent with the goals and objectives set by this Comprehensive Master Plan. This policy entails an evaluation process consisting of two steps:

- Step One: Determine Appropriateness of Programs
- Step Two: Establish Priorities

**Step One:** First, the County must determine if support of existing or potential new programs is warranted. The following series of questions should be asked in this evaluation:

Regional Significance

1. Will the program satisfy a regionally significant recreational need? Or is it more appropriately provided at the local level?

Use Considerations

2. Is there demand for the program? Is market demand likely to grow in the future?
3. Is the program available to a wide spectrum of county residents?
4. Is/will the program be utilized sufficiently to warrant county support?
5. If the program is existing, is it obsolete?

Cost/Benefit Analysis

6. Do/will the revenues from the program cover costs in accordance with the County's cost recovery policy?
7. If the program cannot be managed in a financially feasible manner by county staff, can the County partner with an outside entity to help manage and operate it, thus reducing costs? (Examples of outside entities include a private concessionaire, non-profit organization, or local municipality.)
8. If the facility does not pass questions 6 and 7, is there a community/social benefit to subsidizing the program? (For example, does it provide recreational opportunities for at-risk youth, the physically and mentally challenged, women and minorities, etc.?)

**Step Two:** The second step is to prioritize the annual budget for program offerings in the county parks. Given the limited funds available, the County should establish a system to prioritize program offerings. A two-tiered prioritization system is recommended.

High Priority

- Revenue-generating programs (e.g., aquatic and golf programs)
- Programs to increase utilization of existing facilities
- Recreational programs for at-risk youth
- Programs for persons with disabilities
- Programs associated with new demonstration projects (see Section 4.2.1)
- Expanded and new programs centered on interpretation of natural and historic resources

Medium Priority

- Programs associated with new recreational facilities
- Programs to increase diversity of offerings (programs for all ages, balance of environmental, athletic and special event programs, etc.)
- New and innovative programs

**4.3.2 Educational Programs****Action: Implement expanded and new educational programs centered on the interpretation of natural and historic resources.**

Currently, nature programs are offered by the park naturalists in North, South, and Boyce Parks, while programs interpreting the parks' rich historic resources are virtually non-existent with the exception of the Oliver Miller Homestead in South Park. As noted in the recreational programming policy proposed above, provision of expanded and new programs centered on interpretation of natural and historic resources should be a high priority for the county parks system. The programs currently offered in North, South, and Boyce Parks provide a good foundation for expansion of environmental education programming, including opportunities in other parks in the system. Program offerings to teach residents (and employees) about the historic significance of the county parks will need to be developed from the beginning. Planning for development of these programs should be conducted as part of a Preservation Plan for the parks (see Section 4.4.2).

Expanded marketing efforts by the County will be critical to increasing participation and supporting the financial viability of expanded educational programming. The park naturalists have developed a good mix of programs, but the success of these programs has been somewhat limited by lack of knowledge about their availability.

**4.3.3 Special Events****Action: Implement a policy that specifies criteria for approving special events in the Allegheny County Parks.**

In the mail survey of county residents administered as part of research for the Comprehensive Master Plan, special event programming was the type of programming that was most widely participated in, and which received the most support for enhanced offerings. Music and festivals, in particular, received high marks.

The County has historically provided facilities at minimal cost to outside vendors desiring to host an event in a county park. In

doing so, the County has not taken into account the value of the facility being provided nor the extent of indirect costs associated with hosting the events (preparing the park for the event, providing traffic control, cleaning up following event completion, etc.). Accurate accounting both of the profits for the outside vendor and the costs to the County are essential to allow a reasonable cost recovery policy to be implemented.

The events hosted by the county parks are very popular. However, more attention needs to be paid to their impacts both on the parks themselves and on neighboring communities. It appears that some of the existing events, such as the Festival of Lights, have major impacts on park neighbors. The County must consider these impacts and address them either by alleviating the concerns or by scaling back the event so that there is minimal impact.

With this background, it is recommended that additional special events programming be provided within the Allegheny County Parks. At the same time, the County should adopt a policy to ensure that 1) special events make a positive rather than a negative contribution to the finances of the parks system and 2) adverse impacts from special events on adjacent land uses are minimized.

The initial focus of additional programming should be on smaller activities rather than the mega-events, such as the Rib Cookoff and Festival of Lights, which are popular today. More frequent, smaller events will still draw participants but will be less costly and disruptive to stage. Examples that respond to the resident survey results could include a Jazz Festival, Folk Festival, Wine Tasting, and a variety of Holiday Festivals.

The minimum financial objective for sponsoring special events or providing the venue for events staged by others would be to break even (i.e., to recover all direct and indirect operating expenses). This goal first and foremost requires development of a cost accounting system that will track these expenses. For county-sponsored events, admission fees and concession revenues should be supplemented by sponsorship revenues to achieve the desired break even performance. For events sponsored by others, user fees should be set at a level that accomplishes the same objective. Further, for commercial events, user fees should allow the agency to share in the profitability of the event, by setting the base rent at the break even level, coupled with a sliding scale percent of gross revenues to be paid to the County.

To aid in implementing these recommendations, the County should adopt a policy that identifies specific criteria for approving

special events staged by the County or outside vendors in county parks. The criteria should be as follows:

Regional Significance

1. Is the event regionally significant?

Use Considerations

2. Is there a demand for the event?
3. Is the event available to a wide spectrum of county residents?

Site Considerations

4. Is there sufficient land to accommodate the event and its required support facilities (e.g., parking)?
5. Will the event result in significant impacts on park resources?
6. Will the event result in significant impacts on adjacent land uses?

Cost/Benefit Analysis

7. Will revenues cover the costs of staging the event in accordance with the County's cost recovery policy?
8. If the event cannot be staged in a financially feasible manner by county staff, can the County partner with an outside entity to manage it?
9. If the facility does not pass questions 7 and 8, is there a community/social benefit to subsidizing the facility?

Generally, large events, particularly those sponsored by outside vendors, should be placed in the "Special Interest Programs and Facilities" category under the proposed cost recovery policy presented in Section 4.1.4C. This designation means that they should be required to produce 120% of the County's direct and indirect expenses associated with hosting the event.

With respect to Question 9, many non-profit and corporate foundations have been established solely to fund programs that achieve community/social benefits (e.g., providing cultural opportunities for low to moderate income families who otherwise could not enjoy them). The County should be proactive in identifying sponsors and securing funding for such events. It is recommended that the County host these events only if a sponsor(s) can be identified to cover 100% of the direct costs.

## 4.4 NATURAL, CULTURAL, AND HISTORIC RESOURCES

### 4.4.1 Natural Resources

#### A. Conservation Areas

**Action: Implement a conservation area program to protect areas of natural significance in the county parks.**

As a priority action to protect significant natural habitat areas, the County should formally designate conservation areas within the county parks and implement guidelines for their management and preservation. Two types of conservation areas are recommended: natural areas and open space reserves. Areas recommended for these designations in the individual county parks are identified in Chapter 5.0. The following text provides an overview of the management objectives for each type of area.

**Natural Areas:** The primary focus of Natural Areas would be to protect and manage for special concern species included on state or federal protection lists. These areas are also intended to highlight and protect those species and natural communities that are deemed to be rare or in need of special protection on a regional basis.

The management of Natural Areas should focus on the protection of the special concern species for which the area is designated. Management plans for the areas must take into account the nature of the plant or animal and its habitat and life history requirements, in order to assure that the needs of the species are being met to the highest degree possible. As a part of the management plan, action should be taken to monitor the target species and assure that viable, healthy populations are maintained.

Development within the Natural Areas should be limited to foot trails. These paths should be minimally constructed but be of the highest possible quality with good drainage, adequate stream crossings, and avoidance of excessive slope among other proper design parameters. Trails should not be developed to a width that would open the tree canopy above them. If fill material is needed to maintain gradient or provide drainage, the chemistry of the material should be considered and matched to the soil chemistry of the surrounding area. All seeps should be avoided during trail development.

Picnic facilities, roads, or other recreational development should be discouraged within Natural Areas except for those already existing at the boundaries. In some areas, it is recommended that existing facilities be removed.

Some portions of areas suggested as Natural Areas are now in the pioneer stages of natural succession and steps should be taken to accelerate maturation of woodlands through acceptable forestry practices. The goal of the revegetation should be to bring the forests to, and maintain them as, late successional communities native to this region. There should be no removal of dead or downed trees, other than the cutting of trees for public safety.

Existing facilities remain in some of the parks where Natural Areas are suggested. For the most part these facilities are no longer being used and are deteriorated beyond reasonable repair. The remaining portions of these facilities should be removed and the landscape recontoured to original grade. Replanting of disturbed sites in Natural Areas should be done with native materials collected from the immediate region. Where possible, revegetation should be left to natural regeneration from surrounding habitats with attention paid to control of invasive species.

***Open Space Reserves:*** The primary focus of Open Space Reserves would be to provide relatively large and/or secluded landscapes for passive outdoor recreational activities.

The management of Open Space Reserves should focus on providing visitors with land to enjoy the wide diversity of natural features found in Allegheny County and its parks. There should be a minimum of constructed facilities. Trails for pedestrians, bicycles, and horses would be the central features of development in these Reserves. Trail activities could be combined in those areas where the paths are wide enough to accommodate all three activities. In other areas trails would be separated and designated for single use only.

As the premier feature of an Open Space Reserve, there should be one major trail winding through the area and forming a central loop. From the central trail, minor paths and single use designated trails would lead to various portions of the Open Space Reserve. The complete trail system should be internally connected with key portions and facilities of the park such as playgrounds, major picnic areas, and park entrances. In addition, it should be externally linked to adjacent communities.

Management of the natural features in the Open Space Reserve would be less intense than in the Natural Areas. Natural regrowth of existing woodlands would be the standard. Control of exotic and invasive plant species would not be practiced except where the spread of these species might impact an adjacent Natural Area or be a problem to adjacent landowners.

Maintaining a diversity of habitats in Open Space Reserves includes retaining existing meadows and old fields. Annual mowing of some areas should be part of management of the reserves. In addition, other areas could be specified for mowing or brushing at longer intervals to maintain shrubby old fields and young forests. Such treatments should be specified in the resource management plans developed with the input of park naturalists or contracted ecologists (see resource management plan recommendation below).

Active picnic facilities in areas designated as Open Space Reserves would continue to be maintained. Pavilions and recreational features that are no longer being used should be removed to the extent that they are not a danger to the visiting public, but they need not be completely removed as recommended for the Natural Areas.

The designation of conservation areas is a new concept for the Allegheny County Parks. Park users and adjacent residents will need to be informed of this program and every effort should be made to explain the reason for the designation. The areas should be signed at key entry points with explanatory materials; park naturalists should use the areas for organized walks and educational outings by local schools; and public information materials should be developed to further the understanding of the Natural Areas in particular. In addition, the boundaries should be marked with small distinctive signs to alert visitors that they are entering specially designated portions of the park.

For conservation areas to succeed as intended, the County must also educate park managers and maintenance personnel on the proper management techniques for these areas. The boundaries of the areas should be marked with blazes to assist in management and protection. If the Natural Areas and Open Space Reserves are adopted and properly implemented, the County should see a reduction in operating expenses because less frequent maintenance activities will be required.

## **B. Natural Resource Management**

### **Action: Prepare and implement resource management plans for each park.**

To provide balanced consideration of existing management and maintenance activities, careful scrutiny of the impacts of new facilities and programs on natural resources, and to establish a standard of superior land stewardship within the parks system, a resource management plan should be developed for each of the parks. Park naturalists should be involved in development of these

plans and be responsible for overseeing their implementation. Moreover, it is important that the park managers and park naturalists work as teams, bringing an understanding of ecological functions and resources together with the practical considerations of facilities planning, construction and maintenance. An outline of the recommended contents of the park resource management plans is provided in Appendix B.

**Action: Incorporate resource management guidelines into the county park maintenance management system.**

The recommendations for park system operations include implementation of a new maintenance management system designed to improve the upkeep of park and recreational facilities and grounds (see Section 4.1.3A). This system should incorporate guidelines for the conservation of natural resources in accordance with the park resource management plans, with a particular focus on designated open space and natural areas, riparian zones, and other environmentally sensitive areas. Park management and maintenance personnel should receive training regarding the objectives of the resource management plans and the associated guidelines. The resource management guidelines should include the following:

- Encourage use of native vegetation
- Provide vegetated buffer strips along all watercourses
- Control aggressive exotic species
- Maintain or increase forest cover in natural areas and open space reserves
- Keep biomass within the system (e.g., do not remove dead trees or limbs unless they pose an imminent safety hazard)
- Minimize the use of chemicals in landscape maintenance (herbicides, insecticides, chemical fertilizers, etc.)
- Maintain “soft” edges or transitions between different types of habitat
- Use appropriate measures to maintain trails and pathways
- Adjust the frequency of mowing to establish meadow habitats in certain areas, as appropriate to the level of use

The recommended guidelines are outlined in more detail in Appendix B.

Several resource management issues merit additional discussion. These issues include mowing practices (noted above), management of white-tailed deer, and the environmental impacts of park dumps/storage areas.

**Mowing Practices:** Areas of regularly mowed grass, some of which are quite large, are common features that give a lawn-like feeling to much of the landscape of the Allegheny County parks. For many visitors manicured grass is a desirable aspect of the parks that provides areas for play, informal picnics, and relaxation in a secure setting. For these reasons, the retention of areas of regularly mowed areas in the more heavily used portions of the park should be continued. Regular mowing is appropriate around picnic pavilions and groves and facilities such as the skating rinks, pools, lodges, etc. There should also be large open lawn areas for such activities as sunbathing, impromptu games of catch, and walking, especially in places where visitors congregate.

However, in areas away from groves and other places that visitors use less frequently a less intensive schedule of mowing should be considered. To lessen the abruptness of this change, mowing could first be reduced to two or three times a season in a gradual transition from a regularly mowed lawn towards a grassy meadow condition. Depending on the location and intensity of visitor use, the final goal should be an annual mowing.

Some open areas should be planted with warm season grasses that would require an annual mowing or less. In addition, open habitat wildflowers should be introduced to brighten the areas and add to the value of the habitat. These changes would keep areas open for visitor enjoyment while cutting down on maintenance costs, stemming erosion problems, supplying habitat for grassland plants and animals (especially birds), and providing greater infiltration of water to replenish groundwater systems. The Pennsylvania Game Commission could be a partner in advising on the creation of grassland meadows given its experience with warm season grasses.

Mowing in the parks should also be timed to minimize impacts on wildlife. Areas maintained as open grassy or grassy/herbaceous (wildflower) meadows will require an annual mowing. The mowing should not take place in the late spring or early summer since this is the nesting period for grassland birds and the mowing would destroy nests. Similarly, meadows are fall feeding areas for such species as the monarch butterfly. Migrating butterflies feed as larva and then enter a period of change while still using the plant on which they fed. Mowing early in the fall would destroy larva and interrupt the cycle of the butterfly.

Areas that are being mowed must be considered for the appropriateness of the equipment being used. Large tractor mounted gang cutters are suitable for large, generally level to gently sloping dry sites. However, it appears that often the same heavy equipment used on large fields is applied to steeper, more fragile,

and moist to wet areas. In these instances the equipment damages the site by scalping, churning and exposing soils, and creating deep ruts. In the case of trails, it is especially important to use equipment sized to trail width and conditions.

As a general recommendation, the resource management plans should incorporate review of each area mowed, considering the density of use by visitors, the potential value to control erosion, and the value as existing or potential wildlife habitat. As with the recommendation to designate conservation areas within the parks, adjustments to mowing practices should be coupled with an informational program to inform the public of the reasons for the changes (e.g., posting of attractive and informative signs on affected areas).

***Deer Management:*** The overabundance of white-tailed deer in Allegheny County, and throughout Pennsylvania, is well known. Often the parks are singled out as areas that act as reservoirs for deer due

to the no-hunting policy that has been in place for many years. Although the parks do have high populations of deer, they are probably no denser than in surrounding suburban landscapes.

However, parks and other larger areas of uninhabited open land are often the places where control of the deer population can be carried out most easily. There have been several programs in the past to reduce deer populations in a number of the county parks. These efforts should continue under the guidance of the Pennsylvania Game Commission. In addition, there should be increased efforts to control deer in the parks as new methods, strategies, and regulations are adopted. The options available will often be contentious and stir public debate, but the Allegheny County parks system provides the opportunity to take a leading role through good planning and actions with a sound scientific and wildlife management basis.

Control of deer populations benefits not only surrounding communities that are suffering damage to ornamental shrubs and garden plants, but also the internal habitats of the park. In many instances the forest structure of the parks has been severely damaged by deer removing both the herbaceous layer and a whole generation of seedling and sapling tree growth. If deer populations in the parks are not brought under control soon, some of the herbaceous species that presently occur in the parks will be locally extirpated and may not have an adequate seed source to recover without extensive and costly replanting. This issue is of particular concern in the Natural Areas, which have the highest natural habitat value in the county parks.

**Park Dump/Storage Areas:** Each park contains a dump/storage area used for a variety of usable and waste materials. These dumps are usually in out-of-the-way areas and most park users are unaware of their presence. However, most of the dumps are in undeveloped areas that are used by visitors enjoying more natural portions of the park landscapes. They are generally unsightly and in some instances constitute environmental hazards (e.g., erosion and runoff into watercourses). To resolve this issue, guidelines for the storage and disposal of waste materials generated by the parks should be established. In addition to conditions at individual park dumpsites, the guidelines should address the following:

- Components of waste generated by the parks that might be recycled and reused
- Organic wastes that could be composted for use in park landscapes
- Potentially hazardous materials that should be handled in a manner other than storage on bare ground

### **C. Trails**

#### **Action: Establish and maintain defined trail systems throughout the Allegheny County Parks.**

Public input received in the course of preparing the Comprehensive Master Plan has consistently identified walking/hiking trails and bicycle paths as among the most popular and heavily used facilities in the county parks. Equestrian trail use is also a popular activity in some parks. However, trails throughout the parks system are poorly designated and maintained. Although all of the parks have maps that highlight developed facilities, the trails indicated on the maps are seldom marked on the ground, are usually only a very small portion of the paths that actually exist, and for the most part are inaccurately shown.

To accommodate popular demand for recreational trail use, trails in the county parks should be accurately located and shown on maps. Once mapped, specific trails should be designated as “official” trails and maintained as such. Maintenance of the trails should focus first on adequate drainage to make the paths usable year round and minimize the damage that results when visitors either walk or ride through wet/muddy areas or create wider trails by attempting to avoid them.

Proper treatment of stream crossings is essential to establishing a good trail system. Elaborate solutions such as bridges are expensive to build and maintain. Simpler measures such as large stones placed

with heavy but appropriately sized equipment are less costly to install and require very low maintenance.

A standard trail marking system is needed. Trail signs are expensive to make and place, and once in the park are objects of vandals. A more economical solution is to use painted blazes of different geometric shapes and colors placed on trees to guide visitors. At intersections of trails, single posts with routed trail names assure users they are on the intended path. Many guides and standards have been published by various agencies and groups; these should be used as a model to develop standard trail construction, maintenance, blazing, and signage for all of the Allegheny County Parks.

One key element of a trail program for the parks is the specific designation of trail use. Although there can be overlap between walkers, horses, and bicyclists where the trails are wide (greater than 12-foot width), narrower trails should be specified for a single use. As previously noted, there needs to be an complete inventory and mapping of existing trails, followed by a process of suggesting and designating a specific use for each of those trails.

In many instances, users have created the trails that are now in place in the parks. For example, Hartwood has a long tradition of equestrian use and many of the trails through the park extend into and through adjacent communities. In other parks, off-road or mountain bike visitors and adjacent landowners have created trails. The County should enlist the community, especially those using the trails on a regular basis, in mapping trails and ultimately in suggesting specific use designations to avoid conflicts and ensure that trail activities are compatible with the natural resources of the park.

This process of community involvement should extend to enlisting the user public in the maintenance of the trail system on a voluntary basis. One of the premier trails within and linking the parks is the Rachael Carson Trail, which begins in North Park and extends across the northeastern portion of Allegheny County to its terminus in Harrison Hills Park. Volunteers cleared and blazed the original route, constructed stream crossings and other tread improvements, and currently maintain the trail. This model could be used to promote the formation of "Friends" groups to assist in the maintenance of specific trails or trail systems in each of the parks. As with any other volunteer activity in the parks, all work from the original layout to continuing maintenance should be approved by the park manager in collaboration with the park naturalist. Involvement of the park naturalist is especially important

to assure that new trails are located and built to avoid damage to sensitive environmental resources.

To adequately address trail issues in the county parks, it is recommended that trail management guidelines be developed for application in designing trail systems in each park. The guidelines should provide clear and concise direction on the following:

- Trail location and placement
- Trail design for resource management zones (Natural Areas, Open Space Reserves)
- Trail design for different use modes (hiking/walking, bicycle, equestrian, etc.)
- Trail design for multi-use corridors
- Design guidelines for crossings (streams, roads, etc.)
- Support components (trailheads, rest areas, signage, etc.)
- Operations and maintenance
- Prioritization of proposed trail improvements
- Funding

The recommended guidelines are outlined in more detail in Appendix B. Additional recommendations for trail development standards are provided in Appendix C.

#### **D. Hydrology**

##### **Action: Develop and implement watershed management plans for each of the county parks.**

All of the Allegheny County Parks have some form of water body integrated into the park's layout or design. The water body may be a central feature of the parks, such as the North Park Lake, or merely a means of conveying water through the park. Many of these waters originate upstream of, or beyond, the park's boundaries, making the park a portion of a larger watershed. Stormwater runoff and erosion are issues of concern in many of the parks where they are impacting the quality of water not only within the park, but in the watershed as a whole. To address these issues, it is recommended that watershed management plans be developed for each of the parks, starting with those identified as having the most pressing needs. The purpose of the plan would be to define management practices and strategies to help achieve an environmentally healthy watershed. In conjunction with watershed management study, a stormwater management study encompassing the parks system as a whole and the individual parks should also be undertaken. Recommended guidelines for the watershed and stormwater management plans are presented in Appendix B.

Funding for such activities is available through the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's "Growing Greener" Program.

#### 4.4.2 Historic and Cultural Resources

**Action: Prepare and implement a Preservation Plan to protect significant historic and cultural resources in the county parks.**

Extraordinary historic and cultural resources – including a number that have national significance – exist within the Allegheny County Parks, and many of these resources are endangered. Some historic properties are deteriorating. Others have been the subject of well-intended rehabilitation projects undertaken without considering the historic significance of the properties, resulting in the introduction of incompatible materials and architectural features. Little or no interpretive information is available to make the public or park employees aware of the value of the resources.

Given the rich historic and cultural legacy of the Allegheny County parks, the County should prepare a Preservation Plan for the purpose of protecting and promoting the system's significant resources. The documentation provided in the Inventory and Analysis Report provides a good foundation for preparing the plan. The plan should address the following:

- Resources in need of protection
- Strategies for preserving identified resources
- Archives and records management
- Public interpretation and education
- Partnerships with local organizations and volunteers
- Funding sources for historic preservation and interpretative activities

A variety of strategies should be used to protect the resources. Formal recognition of properties eligible for National Register listing or other historic designation would highlight the importance of preserving them, contribute to public interpretation and education, and enhance the attractiveness of and possibility of obtaining funding for restoration projects. Protection of historically significant properties should be incorporated as a basic principle into park management, operations, and maintenance policies and procedures. Steps should be taken to stabilize and protect historically significant properties that are vacant or deteriorating. Where appropriate, opportunities for adaptive reuse as a way to maintain these properties should also be explored, perhaps in conjunction with private sector partners using available tax credits

and other financial tools available for designated historic properties.

Archives and records management is an important issue because many of the original drawings, photos, and other materials that document the historic significance of the parks have been lost over the years or, if still in possession of the County, are not maintained in a secure fashion. Remaining materials should be collected, catalogued, and protected from deterioration.

Major opportunities exist to teach the public about the parks' historic resources. Interpretive and educational programs would highlight the importance of these resources, provide positive publicity for the parks, and potentially enhance economic activity in the County through heritage tourism linkages. Placing interpretive signs at key properties would be a simple and inexpensive beginning. In addition, brochures should be prepared to describe historic properties at the system-wide and individual park levels. Eventually, organized tours and other programs focusing on resources in individual parks should be developed. Human resource and financial support from local historical organizations and volunteers could be solicited for all of these activities.

A variety of funding sources are available for historic preservation activities that could potentially be used both to develop the Preservation Plan and to implement the strategies recommended in the Plan. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission is one source that funds three grant programs: Certified Local Government Grants, Keystone Historic Preservation Grants, and Pennsylvania History and Museum Grants.

## 4.5 CIRCULATION

### 4.5.1 Signage

**Action: Develop standards for a system-wide wayfinding signage system. Prepare and implement signage plans for each park.**

While park users from adjacent communities may be familiar with nearby county parks, wayfinding is more difficult for less frequent visitors. In general, directional signage to all of the county parks, and the sequence of visitor arrival and entry to the parks, is poor. Local and state roads continue through many of the parks, disrupting any arrival sequence and making it difficult to determine where the park begins and ends. The locations of individual facilities within a park in relation to each other are often unclear.

To address these issues, it is recommended that the County develop a unified wayfinding signage system for the parks. This system should include a hierarchy of three levels of signage:

1. Signs directing visitors to a park from the external road system
2. Signs directing users to individual facilities within the park
3. Informational signage regarding park usage, parking, general park rules, and rules for each particular area

The signs should follow a consistent design template (color, letter style, size hierarchy, etc.) to be instantly recognizable as representing the Allegheny County Parks. The County has a distinctive template that has traditionally been used for internal park signage, but this template is not consistently applied within the parks. Directional signs to the parks should be installed at strategic locations along major roadways leading to the parks beginning at major access points (e.g., limited access highway exits). Coordination with PennDOT will be necessary for roadways maintained by the state.

As a first step in developing a wayfinding signage system, system-wide standards should be developed for the design and placement of the three types of signs. Plans should then be prepared and implemented for each park specifying the content and locations of individual signs.

#### 4.5.2 Pedestrian and Vehicular Circulation

**Action: Implement a program to address priority pedestrian/vehicular conflicts and hazards within the county parks.**

As noted in Section 2.2.6, through vehicular traffic on many park roads, combined with the variety of ways park users move about the parks (driving, biking, walking, etc.), creates the potential for conflicts and safety hazards within certain parks. As a high priority, the County should initiate a program to address identified locations of need due to the lack of designated sidewalks/paths (or adequate separation in some instances where designated paths do exist), signage, and/or crosswalks. The heavily used Corrigan Drive in South Park and the road/path system around North Park Lake are of particular concern. In addition, many intersections and other locations where park users must cross roads to access park facilities lack signage and pedestrian crosswalks.

Conflicts between vehicles and users of multi-use trails were addressed in the 1990 *North Park and South Park Trail Improvement Feasibility Study* and the associated *North Park and South Park Traffic Study*. Many of the concepts contained in these studies are still valid

and should be considered for implementation. However, the *Trail Improvement Feasibility Study* contains outdated trail development standards; recommendations for updating these standards are provided in Appendix C. Recommendations for improvements to address pedestrian/vehicular conflicts in individual parks are presented in Chapter 5.0.

Traffic volume and speeds are an issue in parks such as North and South, particularly where roads convey significant amounts of non-park related through traffic. Attendees of public meetings conducted for the Comprehensive Master Plan suggested the need for better enforcement of speed limits, a recommendation that certainly should be pursued but will require additional commitment of manpower by County Police. Another strategy that should be considered is use of traffic calming measures in appropriate locations to slow vehicular traffic and reduce hazards to pedestrians, bicyclists, and others. Examples of traffic calming measures include speed humps/speed tables, traffic circles, sharp bends and chicanes (S-curves), and narrowing of the roadway at intersections or other strategic locations.

**Action: Evaluate internal park roadways for the need to address traffic flow problems, sight distance, or alignment deficiencies.**

Appropriate to a rural park setting, many of the roadways within the parks are narrow, winding roads that are not designed to modern engineering standards for design factors such as sight distance and vertical and horizontal alignment. Because these roads typically convey low volumes of traffic and promote slower vehicular speeds appropriate to a park, capital investment to improve them to present day standards is in most cases not warranted and in any event would be costly and detrimental to the character of the parks. Nevertheless, some internal park road segments are in need of evaluation to determine if measures should be taken to improve vehicular safety. Potential measures include installing warning signs, lowering speed limits, and selective clearing of vegetation. More substantial improvements (road widening or regrading) should be considered only in particularly severe circumstances.

In addition to sight distance and alignment deficiencies found along certain road segments located throughout the parks, some of the more heavily traveled roads within North and South Park in particular are subject to traffic flow problems at intersections during peak commuting periods or special events. These intersections should be evaluated to determine if improvements can be made to help alleviate these problems.

Specific recommendations to address sight distance, alignment, and traffic flow issues in each park are presented in Chapter 5.0.

### 4.5.3 Public Transit

**Action: Initiate discussions with the Port Authority on improving public transit service to the county parks.**

Currently, residents who wish to visit the Allegheny County Parks but do not have access to an automobile have limited options. Bus service operated by the Port Authority of Allegheny County is available to four of the nine parks in the system (North Park, South Park, Settler's Cabin Park, and Hartwood). Only North Park and Hartwood are served by routes that connect directly to downtown Pittsburgh. Service is limited, particularly on weekends when there is more demand to visit the parks.

As part of a strategy to boost park usage and make the parks more accessible to all Allegheny County residents, the County should work with the Port Authority to expand and improve bus service to the parks.

## 4.6 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Action: Use economic development potential as a criterion in evaluating proposals to develop new facilities and programs.**

Studies undertaken in other jurisdictions have documented the economic development contribution of parks and recreation resources. Specifically, parks and recreation programs and facilities serve to attract non-county visitors (and dollars) into a local area; they contribute to business recruitment and tourism promotion; and proximity to parks property results in enhanced property values.

The economic impacts and benefits of the Allegheny County Parks are described in Section 2.2.7. Reflective of these benefits, the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance features Allegheny Parks icons, such as the boathouse at North Park, wave pools, and golf courses, on its recruitment brochures and relocation package. Similarly, the Greater Pittsburgh Visitors Bureau prominently features park assets in their promotional materials.

The benefits of the county parks for the economic vitality of Allegheny County should be recognized. Therefore, the County should adopt the following policies for application in park system planning and development to strengthen the economic contributions of the county parks:

1. Priority should be given to regionally serving facilities and programs, in order to continue attracting non-local users and dollars into Allegheny County.
2. The evaluation of proposals to upgrade existing facilities and programs, as well as add new ones, should consider their appeal for business recruitment and tourism promotion purposes.
3. Improvements in the interface between park properties and adjacent communities should be planned to establish or enhance a positive relationship, in order to maximize the impact on adjacent property values.

## 4.7 OTHER SYSTEM-WIDE RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.7.1 Open Space

**Action: Work with public and private sector partners to connect county parks to a county-wide system of greenways and open space.**

Sixty-eight percent of those who responded to the mail survey of county residents conducted for the Comprehensive Master Plan indicated that it is important or very important that the county parks be linked with a greenway trail system. This sentiment reflects an active movement to develop a regional trail system. As documented in the Inventory and Analysis Report, previous planning documents have recognized the opportunity to develop such a system with linkages between county parks as a key component. Figure 4-1 illustrates the network of existing and potential trails proposed in the 1995 Allegheny County Greenway Plan in relation to the county parks. This regional trail network would be 140 miles in length.

Currently the Allegheny Land Trust, the Allegheny Trail Alliance, and the City of Pittsburgh, in partnership with other membership-based organizations, are focusing on implementing trails that 1) will be multi-purpose in nature and 2) are expected to receive a high level of use. Representatives of these organizations have been meeting as the trail committee of the Allegheny Land Trust to prepare annual joint funding proposals to the Allegheny County Regional Asset District. To reinforce the proposals, a Regional Trail Plan has been developed to prioritize funding and development opportunities (Figure 4-2).

It is recommended that the Allegheny Land Trust's Regional Trail Plan be used by the County to establish priorities for linkages of county parks to the regional trail network. However, the County

must also remain aware of development and advocacy activities surrounding other proposed trail segments and take action as necessary to protect and secure opportunities to connect these corridors to the county parks. Linkage opportunities for specific parks are identified in Chapter 5.0.

**Action: Work with local municipalities to preserve valuable open space lands adjacent to county parks.**

As documented in the Inventory and Analysis Report, some of the parks are bordered by privately owned undeveloped lands that contain valuable natural resources. The Policy Framework set forth in Chapter 3.0 of this Master Plan states that the County should consider acquisition of new parkland where appropriate to conserve important resources adjacent to existing county parks, connect county parks to the county-wide open space, and/or preserve resources of county-wide significance. Given current fiscal conditions and the other pressing needs of the parks system the amount of funding available for such acquisitions is limited. However, alternatives exist that could allow for the preservation of lands next to the parks without outright purchase by the County. In particular, a regulatory approach termed “cluster” or “open space” development allows for preservation of environmentally sensitive areas while concentrating development in more suitable portions of the property. This approach could potentially be applied through local municipal land development regulations to protect selected areas with conservation value adjacent to county parks. The protected land could remain under private ownership with a permanent conservation easement, be added to the county park, or be transferred to local land trusts or conservancies such as the Allegheny Land Trust or Pine Creek Land Conservation Trust.

In 1993, the County published a manual entitled “Improving Local Development Regulations: A handbook for Municipal Officials.” This manual outlines procedures and provides model ordinances to guide municipalities in implementing plans at the local level. It includes recommended strategies related to trails, greenways, open space, and protection of environmentally sensitive resources. The strategies include many that are appropriate to consider for areas in the vicinity of county parks. It is recommended that the County assist local municipalities in identifying strategies appropriate to their local situations. Moreover, the County could provide technical assistance and serve as a resource to the municipalities as they put the mechanisms in place to implement the recommendations.

## 4.7.2 Park Design

### **Action: Develop and implement unified design guidelines for park facilities.**

The parks system currently lacks standards for the design of facilities and other landscape components such as picnic shelters, parking areas, trails, and plantings. Standard shelter designs apparently existed at one time for North and South Parks and design standards were prepared in the early 1960s for the six regional parks that were about to be developed. However, these standards were not carried forward to the present time. Currently, decisions on design and materials appear to be made case-by-case based on mostly pragmatic considerations. The result is a parks system that features well-designed older facilities, many of which have historic significance, but in which more recently constructed facilities and supporting infrastructure such as parking lots lack design continuity and in some instances detract from the visual character of the parks.

To address this situation, a comprehensive set of design guidelines should be developed for the county parks. These guidelines should establish a consistent design framework for the parks system as a whole while incorporating flexibility to address the specific character of individual parks (as expressed in the park signatures) and allow for creativity in responding to differing circumstances, such as the facility context or available construction budget. In addition to the design of various types of facilities, the design guidelines should address the following major components of the parks system:

- Paths/trails – for various uses
- Vehicular circulation and parking
- Site drainage and utilities
- Natural resource preservation/restoration (coordinate with resource management plans – see Section 4.4.1)
- Historic resource preservation/restoration (coordinate with Preservation Plan – see Section 4.4.2)
- Landscape elements – plant materials, walls, fences, benches and other sight furnishings, lighting, etc.
- Signage (see Section 4.5.1)
- Gateway entrances to the parks (appropriate treatments)

Development of the design guidelines should be coordinated with the County's standard maintenance procedures to ensure that park facilities and landscapes are designed to facilitate efficient, low-cost maintenance. Objectives such as the use of natural, renewable, and recycled materials; use of native plant species; water and energy

conservation; and reduced waste should also be taken into consideration in developing the guidelines.

**Action: Develop and implement master plans for each specific park in the system.**

The purpose of this Comprehensive Master Plan is to define overall goals, objectives, and policies for the future management and development of the Allegheny County parks system. It also presents conceptual recommendations for the treatment of each of the nine county parks in Chapter 5.0. Within the framework set by the Comprehensive Master Plan, more detailed design development is needed to address specific issues at each park. Examples of these issues include the layout of individual facilities; design of circulation networks to accommodate vehicular, pedestrian, and other types of circulation; and strategies to protect each park's unique natural and cultural resources. Rather than conducting this more detailed planning on a piecemeal, project-by-project basis, each park should have an overall master plan to ensure that facilities and programs are planned and developed in a coordinated manner that achieves the objectives set for the park and the parks system as a whole.

#### 4.7.3 Carrying Capacity

**Action: Conduct analyses to determine the carrying capacity of each county park.**

A widely accepted definition of carrying capacity is “the character of the use that can be supported over a specific time by an area developed at a certain level without causing excessive damage to either the physical environment or the experience of the visitor.”

The National Park Service has developed the following three principal components of carrying capacity:

1. ***Physical carrying capacity:*** the ecological or physical capabilities of natural, historic, and cultural resources to sustain certain levels of visitor use without reaching unacceptable levels of damage. Each landscape may have varying abilities to absorb different kinds of and levels of visitor use before unacceptable levels of impact occur.
2. ***Sociological carrying capacity:*** the ability of visitors to enjoy and appreciate these resources without interference by other visitors. Determining sociological carrying capacity can be one of the most difficult parts of the three components. Identifying numbers relating to visitation of an area is not a valid determinant of a quality visitor experience. Other factors such as visitor behavior, preconceived expectations and social

norms of the dominate user group can also effect visitor enjoyment.

3. ***Infrastructure carrying capacity***: the type and amount of support facilities and management that have been or can be applied to the activity to mitigate unwanted impacts.

This plan recommends that the County conduct analyses to determine the carrying capacity of each park in the system, establish policies to manage park visitation within the constraints of their carrying capacity, and establish monitoring criteria to determine whether the carrying capacities are being exceeded. These analyses should be coordinated with development of park resource management plans and park master plans (see Sections 4.4.1B and 4.7.2, respectively).

In order to maintain the desired visitor experience at each park, a systematic approach to evaluating the carrying capacity should be implemented. This process should occur on a seasonal basis and when there is suspicion that areas are exceeding their carrying capacity. In addition, the impact of programs and special events on carrying capacity must be considered and the special events adjusted as required to achieve the desired experience.

The following process will allow park management to determine when the park carrying capacity is being exceeded and when corrective actions need to be undertaken:

1. Establish subareas within each park based on type of use, ecological and physical capabilities, and preconceived expectations of visitor experience within the zone.
2. Select quality indicators, specific standards, and monitoring techniques for each subarea.
3. Compare desired conditions with existing conditions.
4. Identify probable causes to address excess visitation/use.
5. Identify management strategies to address discrepancies.

Appropriate standards for resource indicators should be selected for their ability to indicate the relative tolerance of impacts to the park, based upon the judgment of park planners. To determine visitor expectations to the various subareas of each park, user surveys should be conducted at various times throughout the year, during both heavy and low visitation periods.

Indicators of impacts on natural, cultural and historic resources may include: vegetation, water quality, presence of litter, general quality of the environment, natural beauty, and the number of people. Indicators of sociological impacts may include: the number

of people, traffic, cleanliness of facilities, and adequate number of facilities. Indicators of impacts on park infrastructure and management may include: traffic control, security, crowd control, and appropriate number of facilities.

The overall purpose of this process is not to limit park visitation but to manage it in a way that positively affects the visitor experience. The process should result in improved distribution of visitors, more careful management of the natural, cultural, and historic resources, and increased understanding of relationships to adjacent residents and host communities.

#### 4.7.4 Intergovernmental Coordination

**Action: Establish a process for coordinating with municipalities on county park issues of significant local concern.**

The Allegheny County Parks provide numerous benefits for local municipalities, including the provision of diverse recreation and leisure opportunities, preservation of scenic open space, and enhancement of property values. At the same time, some activities in the parks, such as special events or uses located next to park borders, have the potential to impact residents of surrounding communities. Moreover, there are issues of common concern on which the County and the communities neighboring the parks could work together to achieve mutual benefit (e.g., preservation of open space adjacent to the parks as described in Section 4.7.1 above).

For the above reasons, the County should initiate formal and informal processes for coordinating with local municipalities on county park projects and issues of mutual concern. Comprised of citizen representatives from communities adjacent to the parks, the Parks Advisory Board created by the County to provide input to developing this Comprehensive Master Plan represents a good start in this direction. Continuation of this or a similar entity to act as a “sounding board” on park activities of significant local concern would be one way to provide ongoing coordination. Notification of and coordination with potentially affected municipalities should be incorporated as a regular procedure in county planning for significant park activities such as major special events or new facilities and programs. Advance notices could also be sent out to keep municipalities apprised of more routine activities in the parks.

Another significant issue of mutual concern is the provision of local recreational opportunities for residents of communities surrounding the parks. The Policy Framework in Chapter 3.0 states that the focus of the Allegheny County Parks should be on

**regional recreation** (i.e., that are related to the natural environment and/or are of a size or scale beyond the capabilities of municipalities to provide). At the same time, local municipalities are experiencing increasing pressures to provide for the recreational needs of residents and often lack readily available land to accommodate public recreational uses. As part of intergovernmental coordination, the County should provide technical assistance and support to local jurisdictions in planning for and developing locally serving recreational facilities. The purpose of this approach would be to explore proactive, mutually beneficial solutions as an alternative to use of the county parks as a “relief valve” for local recreational needs.

#### 4.7.5 Park Boundaries

**Action: Survey and field delineate the boundaries of the Allegheny County Parks.**

Good survey information and accurate boundary mapping is lacking for the county parks. Moreover, it is generally difficult to determine the locations of park boundaries in the field. This lack of clear boundary delineation leads to confusion when park visitors leave public land and enter private ground. It also makes it difficult for new or infrequent visitors to become oriented to particular parks (see Section 4.5.1). In a worst-case scenario, it could lead to timber theft and loss of land by adverse possession.

The lack of accurate mapped boundaries complicates planning for park resources and facilities. The boundary information for the park-specific maps prepared for this Comprehensive Master Plan, for example, is derived from the computerized information provided by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission. This information is not based on a ground survey and is inaccurate in many locations. While the database used for the maps contains much information that can be used to develop updated park brochures with more accurate facility locations than the current ones, the boundary information will continue to be inaccurate unless tied to a survey.

To address these issues, surveys should be conducted of the outer boundaries of all of the Allegheny County Parks. The boundaries should be marked in the field with distinctive blazing such as those use by the Pennsylvania State Parks, Pennsylvania Bureau of Forests, and Pennsylvania Game Commission.