Kent County, Michigan

Multi-Jurisdictional Parks Study

Presentation to the
Kent County Board of Commissioners
September 27, 2012

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Purpose of Study

1. Summarize existing parks and recreation services in Kent County.
   - Agencies
   - Programs
   - Assets
   - Budgets
   - Funding mechanisms
2. Identify and evaluate models of collaboration, operational efficiency and funding.
3. Make recommendations for strategies for participating P&R agencies to consider.

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Findings

- 28 specific findings that, taken together, describe the current state of parks and recreation in Kent County
- Summary of parks and recreation collaboration in Michigan
- An in-depth look at four nationally recognized parks and recreation systems

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Finding 1: Parks and recreation spending by municipalities in Kent County declined 5.9% between 2009 and 2011

Municipality	% Change
– Kent County	- 10.2%
– Grand Rapids City	- 18.4%
– Lowell Township	- 23.9%
– Walker	- 9.0%
– Wyoming	0.3%

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Finding 2: Per capita spending on parks and recreation varies substantially among communities in Kent County

Municipality	Per capital spending
– East Grand Rapids	$155.45
– Walker	$65.11
– Wyoming	$60.78
– Kentwood	$36.86
– Grand Rapids	$35.88
– Ada Township	$24.37
– Kent County	$6.41
– 12 Townships	>$5.00

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Finding 3: Per capita parks and recreation spending in Kent County is lower than averages reported by the NRPA

Jurisdiction Type	Kent County	NRPA Average
All	$37.28	$63.00
County	$6.41	$12.00
Township	$7.52	$27.00
City (>200,000 pop.)	$45.48	$69.00

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Finding 4: Spending for parks and recreation in Kent County is lower per capita than in comparable Michigan Counties

Countywide Spending	2011 P&R Expenditures	2010 Population	$/person	Change 2009-2011
Kent County	$22,468,717	602,622	$37.28	-5.9%
Washtenaw County	$29,041,174	344,791	$84.23	-13.7%
Oakland County	$85,671,449	1,202,362	$71.25	-10.0%
Macomb County	$22,103,181	840,978	$26.28	-5.3%
Ottawa County	$9,708,424	263,801	$36.80	-15.9%
Average of comparables	$36,631,057	662,983	$55.25	-11.2%

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Finding 6: Acres of parkland (all types) per 1000 population in Kent County exceeds the national average

Kent County: 19 acres/1000

National Average: 16 acres/1000 (NRPA PRORAGIS reporting agencies – 2011)

Urban Parkland Average: 39 acres/1000 (Trust for Public Lands – 2010)

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Findings: Collaboration

- Finding 7: Most jurisdictions in Kent County are involved in some form of inter-agency cooperation or service sharing
- Finding 8: Budget challenges make obvious the need for increased collaboration between jurisdictions but have the effect of reducing the capacity for collaboration
- Finding 17: Kent County multi-jurisdictional relationships, particularly those involving schools, tend to be informal and not clearly defined

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Finding 18: There is little independent park and recreation governance authority in Kent County

- Strong park systems have strong, independent governance authority and dedicated funding.
- A parks board or commission is empowered to make decisions, allocate resources and advocate on behalf of parks and recreation.
- Parks and recreation tend to be the first cut and the last restored in difficult economic times.

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Findings: Opportunities for Collaboration

- Finding 20: Needs assessment
- Finding 21: Planning
- Finding 22: Marketing and promotion
- Finding 23: Technology
- Finding 27: Special needs programing

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Conclusions

1. Parks and recreation in Kent County is best described as good, not great.
2. There is a broadly shared view that parks and recreation are key to the quality of life in Kent County, but different agencies have different priorities and there is currently no shared vision for a common approach across jurisdictions.

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Conclusions

3. Parks and recreation agencies throughout have faced significant budget reductions. In some jurisdictions, continued economic challenges and associated declines in parks and recreation spending threaten the quality of parks and access to recreation opportunities. At the same time, some communities with dedicated funding sources continue to maintain services in these challenging times.

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Conclusions

4. Kent County parks and recreation agencies are relatively efficient.
5. There are strong examples of parks and recreation collaboration in Kent County.
6. In the absence of a collaborative governance structure and new funding sources, consolidation of parks and recreation agencies may yield improvements in recreation programming and some back office operations, but will not yield significant operational efficiencies or cost savings.

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A Strategy For Multijurisdictional Parks And Recreation Collaboration

- A new infrastructure for county-wide parks and recreation intergovernmental cooperation that can continue to grow based on experience and need
- Benefits all participating communities and can achieve results that could not be achieved by existing agencies working independently
- A mechanism to pursue, accept and distribute public grant monies and private philanthropic support
- Independent governance structure – overlay, not consolidation
- Millage remains an option

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Recommendations

1. Create a Kent Communities Park and Recreation Authority under PA 321.
2. Implement specific, high-value projects, that benefit multiple (all) parks and recreation jurisdictions in Kent County.
    1. Shared parks and recreation web platform
    2. Multi-jurisdictional planning
    3. Common metrics and reporting
    4. Common hiring system for recreation program staff
    5. Joint marketing
    6. Joint programming (especially for special needs populations)

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Recommendations

- Support the formation of additional multi-jurisdictional authorities where there is a strong case and community support for collaboration.

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Next Steps

1.0 Presentation & Discussion of Parks Study Recommendations

- 1.1 Presentation to Kent County Board of Commissioners and invitations to funders and local units of government to attend presentation. (September, 2012)
- 1.2 Host meetings with local units of government including the Township Supervisors Association and the Urban Mayors and Managers group to present findings of Parks Study. (November, 2012)
- 1.3 Seek feedback and input from local units of government regarding interest in participating in the development of the Authority. (December, 2012)
- 1.4 Create work group of representatives of interested communities appointed by local communities to create framework for Authority (March, 2013)

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Next Steps

2.0 Coordinate Work Group to draft working documents for the formation of the Authority

- 2.1 Identify jurisdiction of proposed Authority, required staff and consulting support (May, 2013)
- 2.2 Assess community support and define priorities (June, 2013)
- 2.3 Draft authority board composition/representation (July 2013)
- 2.4 Draft bylaws and necessary governance documents (August, 2013)
- 2.5 Present draft bylaws to local units for review and discussion (September, 2013)
- 2.6 Request community decision to participate in Authority pending approval of the bylaws by each local unit of government. (October, 2013)

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Next Steps

3.0 Establish Authority

- 3.1 Begin authority operation and set meeting calendar (December, 2013)
- 3.2 Identify initial project(s) and develop work plan(s) (February, 2014)
- 3.3 Establish initial project(s) budget(s) (March, 2014)
- 3.4 Secure initial funding (May, 2014)
- 3.5 Begin implementation of initial project(s) (December, 2014)

4.0 Develop long-range strategic plan (June, 2014)

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Kent County Multi-Jurisdictional Parks Study

Final Report

Presented To The

Kent County Board of Commissioners

September 27, 2012

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Executive Summary

Kent County is home to over 11,000 acres of parkland and 150 miles of non-motorized local and regional trails that are managed by communities in Kent County. These communities include 21 townships, nine cities, five villages and the County itself. These local units of government provide varying degrees of recreational services and programs. The combined cost of operating and maintaining this network of public spaces and programming exceeds $22 million per year county-wide.

Faced with ongoing budget challenges Kent County communities have come together to look for ways to share services, increase revenues, combine operations and strengthen parks and recreation services in Kent County. This study is itself a collaborative effort of several communities and private funders. The study provides an analysis of current operations, assets and finances, and explores the potential strategies for parks and recreation collaboration.

Project objectives

Based on needs identified in prior studies, the objectives for this study were:

1. Summarize existing parks and recreation services in Kent County communities, including:
    a. Agencies
    b. Programs
    c. Assets
    d. Budgets
    e. Funding mechanisms
2. Identify and evaluate models of collaboration, operational efficiency and funding.
3. Make recommendations for strategies for participating parks and recreation agencies to consider.

This project is not a master planning project in the sense that it was not intended to define a vision for what parks and recreation should be in Kent County. This study looks at what is currently being done and identifies new ways for how Kent County communities can come together to improve operations, reduce costs and expand services. To do this, the study examined parks and recreation systems that are considered model, or "great" systems, with the goal of learning from their governance, funding and management systems with lesser attention paid to specific parks, programs and amenities.

Findings and Conclusions

This report details 28 specific findings that, taken together, describe the current state of parks and recreation in Kent County. The report also examines parks and recreation collaboration in Michigan. An in-depth look at four nationally recognized parks and recreation systems is also provided. This information is summarized in six key conclusions.

1. Parks and recreation in Kent County is best described as good, not great.

2. There is a broadly shared view that parks and recreation are key to the quality of life in Kent County, but different agencies have different priorities and there is currently no shared vision for a common approach across jurisdictions.

3. Parks and recreation agencies throughout Kent County have faced significant budget reductions. In some jurisdictions, continued economic challenges and associated declines in parks and recreation spending threaten the quality of parks and access to recreation opportunities. At the same time, some communities with dedicated funding sources continue to maintain services in these challenging times.

4. Kent County parks and recreation agencies are relatively efficient.

5. There are strong examples of parks and recreation collaboration in Kent County.

6. In the absence of a collaborative governance structure and new funding sources, consolidation of parks and recreation agencies may yield improvements in recreation programming and some back office operations, but will not yield significant operational efficiencies or cost savings.

Recommendations

Our findings have characterized the state of parks and recreation as good, not great. Our challenge was to find a way to move beyond *good* in an environment where there is no formal mechanism for working together or sharing resources, where millage support has traditionally been focused on specific projects and communities and where there is no community-wide vision for parks and recreation services which would support a request for additional, community-wide resources. In addition, those communities that have supported millages and provided significant support for their parks and recreation programming within their jurisdiction do not want to see that support redirected or diluted. Certainly, communities with parks millages and more resources are not interested in participating in anything that they may perceive as a "bailout" of struggling agencies.

Given the current state of parks and recreation in Kent County, we had to find a solution that benefited all participating agencies, that produced a return on investment for participating agencies greater than what could not be achieved individually, that brought new resources to parks and recreation and that had a governance process that supported shared goals and decision making.

We considered the possibility of consolidating existing agencies but found it failed to achieve the criteria we listed above. As we discuss in Chapter 4, consolidation has a mixed record of success and is extraordinarily hard to do. In the absence of independent governance it is likely to lead to conflicts. In the absence of additional resources, it will produce no significant efficiencies.

Any discussion of additional resources leads to the question of a parks and recreation millage. We have documented in this report that *great* parks and recreation systems have dedicated tax revenue. Our view is that this is something Kent County residents will likely consider in the future, but at present, there is not a shared vision across communities that would generate support for the millage, and the question of how such a millage would be managed so as to add value to all the independent systems and communities remains unresolved.

A strategy for multijurisdictional parks and recreation collaboration

Our research suggests that there is a need to create a new infrastructure for county-wide parks and recreation intergovernmental cooperation that can continue to grow based on experience and need. The new authority can benefit all participating communities and achieve results that could not be achieved by existing agencies working independently. A new authority could also be a mechanism to pursue, accept and distribute public grant monies and private philanthropic support for collaborative projects that reflect the shared vision of the participating communities. At the same time, this new authority does not threaten local control of existing resources.

We see the authority as undertaking projects that add value to participating agencies (and offer six specific suggestions in Recommendation 2). This is an overlay authority. It does not replace or consolidate existing agencies. We see it doing projects that the existing agencies cannot do alone and that could benefit each participating jurisdiction independently and the system as a whole.

A new authority can also be a mechanism to administer a parks and recreation millage should the participating communities decide to do so at some point in the future. While we do not see this as an initial goal, it is a question that may eventually go before the voters should the authority successfully develop a shared vision for parks and recreation across the county.

We believe that the following three broad recommendations are a critical starting point for Kent County communities to join forces to move parks and recreation from *good to great:*

Recommendation 1: Create a Kent Communities Park and Recreation Authority under PA 321.

Recommendation 2: Implement specific, high-value projects, that benefit multiple (all) parks and recreation jurisdictions in Kent County.

Specifically, we recommend that following six projects:

1. Shared parks and recreation web platform
2. Multi-jurisdictional planning
3. Common metrics and reporting
4. Common hiring system for recreation program staff
5. Joint marketing
6. Joint programming (especially for special needs populations)

Recommendation 3: Support the formation of additional multi-jurisdictional authorities where there is a strong case and community support for collaboration.

Participation in the authority is optional and we expect it to take approximately 18 months to implement the authority and to begin funding and implementing projects that benefit parks and recreation in Kent County.

The Michigan Legislature recognized the need for collaboration in parks and recreation but also understood the enormous barriers to consolidation. The overlay authority allowed

under PA 321 was created as a mechanism to address these barriers. Communities can come together to pursue common goals while continuing to support their own agencies.

The Newaygo Community Recreational Authority, formed in 2006, is one of 13 such authorities formed under PA 321 since 2000. Les Salacina, the Brooks Township Supervisor, states that "**the Authority is one of the most positive things we have done for this community. The Authority has allowed us to focus on providing for facilities that affect the entire region while maintaining our own autonomy for township initiatives.**"

The recommendations offered in this study provide a mechanism for Kent County communities to come together to increase revenue, expand services and to undertake projects that benefit the participating communities that could not be accomplished individually. We describe these recommendations as a *collaborative platform* that allows Kent County communities to work together to move parks and recreation from *good* to *great.*

Chapter 3: Findings – Parks and Recreation in Kent County

(excerpted to focus on those referencing opportunities for collaboration)

Finding 7: Most jurisdictions in Kent County are involved in some form of inter-agency cooperation or service sharing.

A substantial level of inter-jurisdictional cooperation in parks and recreation agencies exists in Kent County – and has for some time. Some of the relationships are formalized through inter-local agreements, facility use agreements and other forms of contract. In addition, some jurisdictions report informal inter-jurisdictional relationships that operate without written agreements.

Kent County is home to two multi-jurisdictional authorities. Both are formed under the Michigan Urban Cooperation Act (1967 PA 7). In 1994, the City of Cedar Springs, Algoma, Courtland, Nelson and Solon townships, and the Cedar Springs Public School District joined together to establish what is now the Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission. The Commission was created for the purpose of planning, operating and providing park and recreational programs and services for the citizens of the participating jurisdictions.

In 2004, Vergennes and Lowell Township and the City of Lowell came together to form the Lowell Area Recreation Authority. The authority is charged with developing a new non-motorized trailway that connects all three municipalities. Under the inter-local agreement, the authority can purchase and acquire property, build and operate trails, hire employees, and seek and accept funding (including private donations and grants). The authority is directed by a seven-member board consisting of officials from each township board, the city council and area residents. In 2010, the authority announced that it had raised nearly $1.1 million for the construction of a new trail.

Schools play an important role in recreation programming in Kent County. (See Findings 13 – 15 for greater discussion of schools.) Six of the fourteen school jurisdictions responding to our survey reported sharing recreation programming with other units of local government. These relationships ranged from facility use agreements to joint recreation programming. Included in this programming is after school programming.

A variety of cooperative arrangements exist for building and grounds maintenance. For example, The City of East Grand Rapids maintains most (not EGR High) of the school athletic fields and coordinates use of those facilities for recreation programming.

Local units of government also cooperate with nonprofit groups on facility use and programming. Plainfield and Grand Rapids Townships, and the partner with the YMCA. Kentwood, Wyoming and Grand Rapids partner with the Kroc Center. Several townships partner with youth athletic associations. Grand Rapids Township partners with the Forest Hills Aquatic Club.

The June, 2010 report of the Kent County Board of Commissioners Parks Subcommittee lists 28 examples of collaboration. Most of these examples are joint land acquisition or development of parks.

While the formality and focus of these partnerships vary, we found that most jurisdictions that participated in this study were engaged in some level of cooperation with some other jurisdiction or service provider. Where economics, geography, capacity and needs align, cooperative relationships are being pursued for parks and recreation in Kent County.

Finding 8: Budget challenges make obvious the need for increased collaboration between jurisdictions but have the effect of reducing the capacity for collaboration.

No one we spoke with questions the value of collaboration and most indicated they would like to do more. Unfortunately, collaboration requires a substantial amount of staff time to plan, implement and manage. Budget reductions lead to contraction of services. This results in a tendency to focus more narrowly on maintaining core services and not on meetings and projects involving other jurisdictions. As one recreation staff person put it in one of our focus groups, "We used to do more, but we seem to be doing less collaboration during the economic downturn."

In years past, all parks and recreation directors met on a periodic basis. They looked for ways to collaborate and share services. This group no longer meets. Recreation staff used to meet across jurisdictions as well but no longer do.

Staffing reductions play a role in the decline of inter-jurisdictional meetings. These reductions are most notable in larger jurisdictions. The City of Grand Rapids has seen its Parks and Recreation staff reduced by nearly half since 2010. In 2010 the City of Grand Rapids had 27 staff members in Parks and Recreation. By 2011 that had been reduced to 15.5 full-time equivalent employees (FTEs). The City of Wyoming had 26 FTE's in 2009. Today there are 21. East Grand Rapids reduced from six to five FTEs in 2010. Kentwood had eight FTEs in 2007. Today there are six.

The impact of reduced allocations to parks and recreation varies by community. Our data does not include information on how budget reductions were achieved. Beyond staffing, there may have been cuts to park maintenance, equipment acquisition, and recreation programs and land acquisition. The full effect of these budget cuts was not determined in this study.

Finding 14: Schools play a critical role in recreation programming in Kent County.

Fourteen of twenty-one schools responded to the survey distributed by the consulting team. Of those, 10 of the schools offer some level of community recreation programming (not school athletics). Similar to the school facility inventory, the program types are almost exclusively related to sports programs such as basketball, swimming, football, volleyball soccer, cheerleading, and tennis. One of the schools offers summer recreation programs. This listing of program inventory includes school district recreation programs but not interscholastic sports programs. In addition, it should be noted that school facilities are also used by other providers of recreation services, such as independent baseball and soccer groups. These uses are not accounted for in our data.

There does not appear to be a relationship between number and types of offerings provided by a school district as compared to offerings by the local municipal parks and recreation agencies. The school programs focus primarily on sports activities and more often limit participation to residents of the district. It should be noted that some school districts restrict participation to in-district residents. This allows recreation agencies to determine unmet needs for sports programming and offer non-redundant programming. The number of schools offering various programs are listed in Exhibit 3.15.

Finding 15: School boundaries are not congruous with city/township boundaries, resulting in complexity in forming working relationships.

As mentioned previously, schools play a critical role in supplying recreation facilities, amenities, and programs. Relying on schools for community recreation needs is complicated by the different boundaries for schools and municipalities. For example, the City of Wyoming has seven school districts within its boundaries. As a result, developing and maintaining relationships and partnerships takes additional time and effort. Creating an overall system for park and recreation services within a community is challenging when many different agencies are involved.

Finding 17: Kent County multi-jurisdictional relationships, particularly those involving schools, tend to be informal and not clearly defined.

As we have noted previously, schools play an important role in recreation programming in Kent County. (See Findings 13 – 15 for greater discussion of schools.) Schools hold a major portion of athletic facilities and play an integral role in community recreation programming. With the very notable exception of the Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission, there is little in the way of formal relationships between schools and other local jurisdictions regarding parks and recreation. Twelve school jurisdictions responded to our question about contracts and formal agreements. Other than Cedar Springs, none reported having any inter-local agreement in place. The city of Grand Rapids does report having joint use of facilities, maintenance, and programming agreements, but many of these agreements are considered outdated.

East Grand Rapids, on the other hand, has a very complex agreement with the schools. This includes a joint agreement for their high school pool. In addition, they have a 50/50 arrangement for maintenance activities between the school district and parks and recreation. There is also a shared sports director position between parks and recreation and the middle school.

For some of the people we spoke with, formal agreements seemed to be unnecessary bureaucracy. Perhaps in some cases this is true and the relationships work well as they are presently constituted. However, in the absence of a clear agreement that defines roles, contributions, expectations and outcomes, we have no way of evaluating whether or not these relationships constitute a productive and appropriate use of public resources. Additionally, in interviews with a school and city which have shared some recreation functions for years, we noted inconsistent interpretation of the informal agreement regarding how revenues and expenditures were to be shared.

Once again, we point to Cedar Springs as an effective model for inter-jurisdictional collaboration. Here the relationship between the schools and the participating jurisdictions is codified in an inter-local agreement as specified in Public Act 7 of 1967. The contribution of resources and the value delivered to the participating communities is well defined and easily measured.

Most other relationships between local jurisdiction and recreational programming providers tend to be relatively simple fee-for-service arrangements. Although the degree of formality in the relationship varies, they are mostly not inter-jurisdictional and consequently do not present the concerns mentioned above.

Finding 18: There is little independent park and recreation governance authority in Kent County.

Strong park systems tend to have strong, independent governance. A parks board or commission is empowered to make decisions, allocate resources and advocate on behalf of parks and recreation.

For example, The Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (Discussed in Chapter 5) is an elected body that oversees a $72 million budget that comes primarily from a city parks levy. In addition to the city parks and recreations centers, the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board operates large parks, primarily within the city boundaries, that are considered regional assets. The Parks Board receives special State funding for these parks.

Here in Michigan, Washtenaw, Oakland and Macomb County are recognized as having strong county parks systems. In all three cases, there are strong county parks commissions that oversee their operation. Although these boards are appointed by their County Boards of Commissioners, they operate with considerable autonomy and manage very large budgets.

The Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority operates a five-county (Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw and Livingston) parks system funded by a perpetual .25 mill property tax on residents in all five counties. Established in 1939 by State Act, the board has two members chosen by the governor and one from each participating county selected by the County Board of Commissioners.

When parks and recreation agencies are operated without a millage and as a functional department under a general legislative authority, such as a county board of commissioners or city council, they become one of many competing priorities. As a result, parks and recreation often do not get the attention they need and are an easy target for budget reductions.

Again, we point to Cedar Springs and Lowell Area authorities as examples of independent governing bodies who manage dedicated resources (although neither has a dedicated millage) to advance their defined priorities. Outside of these two groups, there are many advisory groups for parks and recreation in Kent County communities, but the formal governance rests with the city, township or county board. While an advisory committee may be considered a governance structure in the broadest sense, these groups lack the authority to make decisions and allocate resources.

Finding 20: There is no comprehensive assessment of public priorities for parks and recreation in Kent County.

Most parks and recreation agencies in Kent County have completed some sort of master plan. However, there is no multi-jurisdictional or regional planning process and there is no formal process in place to comprehensively assess public priorities for services. In the absence of this, programs and services are defined and implemented with little regard to what is available in surrounding communities. A statistically valid survey administered approximately every five years should be used to identify the needs, what needs are being met, and identification of gaps in services. Typically the questions on these surveys relate to:

- Extent of need for parks, amenities and programs
- Identification of what facilities, parks and programs are currently being used
- Where household members fulfill their recreation needs
- Extent of unmet needs

- Ideas for desired parks and recreation services that currently do not exist
- Identification of barriers to participation and visitation
- How households find out about services and how they prefer information to be distributed
- Satisfaction levels toward park maintenance, program quality, registration systems, Website, program guides, staff
- Funding priorities

According to Leisure Vision, a firm dedicated to providing needs assessment processes for park and recreation services, best practice agencies complete a statistically valid household survey every five to seven years and analyze results to determine areas of strength and opportunities for improvement with results are typically posted on agency Websites.

These surveys are often supplemented with less formal (and more frequent) methods such as online surveys and program evaluations. Other public input methods include point of contact interviews, online forums, focus groups, and mystery shopping,

Finding 21: There is no mechanism for comprehensive county-wide multi-jurisdictional park and recreation planning in Kent County.

Best practice agencies have institutionalized planning processes. The Benchmark agencies referenced in Chapter 5 all have a commitment to a comprehensive and ongoing planning process. This is true for most, but not all of the Kent County agencies we reviewed. Some of the agencies with completed parks and recreation master plans include: Algoma Township: Recreation Plan, 2008, City of Grandville Recreation Plan, 2005, Vergennes Township: 2007 Recreation Plan, 2007 and Kentwood Park & Recreation Plan, 2010

Given the regional nature of parks and recreation, coordinated local planning, if not comprehensive regional planning, makes sense and should drive multi-jurisdictional programing and park development. As we have noted consistently in this report, Kent County agencies have widely varying levels of programming, park amenities and inter-jurisdictional cooperation. The absence of countywide comprehensive planning is clearly a factor.

A comprehensive planning approach is implemented to gain a system wide perspective of park and recreation development. It establishes spending priorities and is the basis for capital and operational budgets. Elements of planning can include the development of trails and connectivity, park development, recreation program inventory, natural resource management, land acquisition, sustainability approaches, facility development, and the use of technology. In addition, benefits can be derived from an ongoing study of demographic changes to ensure services adapt and correspond to these changes.

Master plan processes usually also include a determination of appropriate level of service standards for parkland and amenities. National Parks and Recreation Association's Park and Recreation Operating Ratio and Geographic Information System (PRORAGIS) database could be used to assist in determining deficiencies in the countywide system. Additional possibilities include identifying where users are coming from to help with more customized marketing.

Finding 22: There is very little coordination of marketing and promotion of park and recreation programming.

There is an opportunity for agencies to gain awareness and increased business by coordinating marketing and promotional efforts. Kent county parks and recreation agencies perform marketing efforts on an individual community basis. We found no evidence of agencies working together to do cross promotion of programs among neighboring agencies. The only coordination appears to be around special event planning to avoid multiple special events on the same date. Agencies partnering with the YMCA and Kroc Center have references to their programs in their park and recreation agency brochures. Yet, programs from neighboring agencies are not mentioned. There may be opportunities to augment offerings by including information of other agencies within marketing materials.

There is wide variation in the level of commitment and support for promotional efforts of park and recreation services. Services are difficult to find on some Websites as they are not prominently featured on the home page of sites. Few agencies use social media, while many do not.

Finding 23: There is limited use of technology to support operations and public access.

Benchmark parks and recreation agencies are on the forefront of using technology to communicate with their users, market their programs and serve the needs of the community. We found little in the way of advanced technology in Kent County parks and recreation agencies.

In Kent County, the presence of park and recreation department Websites, as part of the municipal site, varies from one community to another. Park and recreation services are difficult to find on some Websites. Others have prominence on the home page navigational tool bar, such as East Grand Rapids. The East Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming sites list recreation and events on the city's home page, which makes it very easy for potential customers to find information about services.

Few Kent County agencies have online registration or reservation capabilities. These agencies include East Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids, Kent County, Kentwood, and Wyoming. Kent County currently uses a variety of software applications but is exploring a more unified application for its parks operations. East Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming use RecTrac. Walker uses Max Ice for their ice rink scheduling purposes. Automated registration systems have become an industry standard. According to the National Parks and Recreation Association's Park and Recreation Operating Ratio and Geographic Information System (PRORAGIS). In 2011, 77 percent of all reporting park and recreation agencies had automated registration systems for program registrations.

Nine of the school districts surveyed as part of this study use automated program and registration software. The software systems include: EClassTrack, Active, Schedule Star, School Dude, Ace Ware, RecPro, and DynaCal. Therefore, there are many different software systems being used, and none of the school systems use RecTrac (Vermont Systems).

In addition to the agencies offering online registration, there are some agencies that have their program guides listed on their Website, but without online registration capability. These agencies include Cedar Springs, Kentwood, and Ada Township. All of the agencies have their program guides in a PDF format on their Website. This prevents potential customers from accessing registration from their smart phones. The exception is Wyoming which has online registration and smart phone access.

Aside from Kent County, no agency offers an online reservation system for picnic pavilion, parks, ball field, or facility rental reservation processes. Most agencies require the customer to handle this transaction in person or by telephone.

No Kent County park and recreation agency participates in the NRPA PRORAGIS system. Wyoming does participate in the Annual Michigan Local Government Benchmarking Consortium and this effort includes Parks and Recreation measures. Automated systems can provide agencies with data for decision making and can be used for a performance dashboard. These dashboards support an internal focus on performance as well as external transparency for organizational performance. The following is a dashboard from the Northbrook, IL Park District that measures critical areas of organizational performance. None of the Kent County agencies have this information listed on their Websites.

Finding 27: There is limited programming for special needs individuals in Kent County.

Currently, only Wyoming and Kentwood offer programs for special needs populations. Accessibility of parks and amenities varies throughout the county.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires park and recreation agencies to provide reasonable accommodations in programs and services. This can be accomplished through inclusion support, adaptive equipment, accessible transportation, or stand-alone programs like a special recreation association (a collaboration of agencies) or departmental special recreation services. The Justice Department and lower courts still do not have a clear picture of what is a "reasonable" accommodation and this definition continues to evolve.

Compliance is federally mandated. On March 15, 2012, the 2010 Standards for Accessible Design become effective for new design and construction. Units of local government can no longer opt to use the 1991 Standards. Audits of sites new to the design standards, such as playgrounds, sports fields, sports courts, golf courses, swimming facilities, fitness centers, shooting ranges, places of amusement, fishing areas, boating areas, and more, must be conducted to assure compliance with the new standard.