

# Chapter 6 – Parks & Recreation Partnership

## *Management and Operation of Parks and Recreation in Monroe County*

One of the primary goals of this project was to identify the role and mission of the Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission. The County's Open Space Program and this Open Space Plan provided the catalyst for assessing the current functions with an eye towards future direction.

This is a golden time for parks and recreation in Monroe County. Everything is in place to create the parks and recreation system of the future:

1. The County is developing an Open Space Plan.
2. The municipalities will be doing open space, parks, and recreation plans.
3. The municipalities will be organized as regions to maximize resources.
4. Funding is available from both the Monroe County Open Space Program and Pennsylvania's *Growing Greener* program, as well as from DCNR's Community Conservation Partnerships Program.
5. Public support for open space protection, resource conservation, greenways, parks, and recreation is evident through the public participation process and the approval of the open space referendum.
6. The County's fine history of partnerships serves as the basis for creating the parks, recreation, greenways, and open space system of the future.

Never before in Pennsylvania has such an opportunity been available in one county.

### **Overview of the Commission**

The Commission has been in existence for over 25 years. During that time, the primary emphasis of the Commission has been on programs and services. The Commission recently developed its first park on 11 acres at the Commission's headquarters in Snydersville. The Commission has only one park and a skeletal staff with a service area of 605 square miles.

The Commission relies on schools for program sites. While this is a practice that should continue, the Commission represents only one of a number of user groups that the schools grant permission for facility use.

Since the 1970s, the Commission has served in the role of chief public parks and recreation agency for Monroe County, including the municipalities. No jurisdictions had local parks and recreation departments. This makes sense given the populations of the municipalities: only Stroud has a population of over 10,000. This is the population base generally viewed as the point at which a parks and recreation position is viable. The populations of the other 19 municipalities ranged from 733 to 8,798 in 1990. Local volunteers served on community parks and recreation boards. Board members served as volunteers as well or hired seasonal staff for community recreation. Stroud Township is the only municipality with a parks and recreation professional. This is a part-time position.

### **Recreation and Park Commission**

The nine-member advisory commission is appointed by the County Commissioners as an advisory board. The members serve as a sounding board for programs and services, cooperative efforts, and park development and operations. The open space program has enabled the Commission to play a key role in planning the future of the County's parks, recreation, and open space. The Commission has participated in six work sessions for this plan. Commission members provided valuable insight and direction with regard to creating a countywide system of parks.

### **Public Perception of Monroe County's Recreation and Park Commission**

The public perceives the Commission in a most positive light. The public participation process found that the public recognizes that the Commission has been operating with minimal resources for decades. The public supports the Commission's efforts in parks and recreation and would like to expand and build upon their success.

### **Management Team**

A parks and recreation professional director heads the Recreation and Park Commission. Along with the Director, there are two full-time year-round program recreation managers, one administrative coordinator, and one senior office assistant. The Commission hires seasonal staff for various positions. Park maintenance for the Monroe County Park and the Burnley Workshop athletic fields is provided by inmates from the prison on the adjoining site.

### **Nature Centers**

Monroe County has two nature centers: Kettle Creek and Meesing. These are operated by the Monroe County Conservation District. Monroe County provides about half of the operating costs for these centers with the other half of the funding coming from a variety of sources.

## County Park Systems

For Monroe County to determine how its parks and recreation could function, a look at county park systems elsewhere provides a context.

In Pennsylvania, government operates with a combination of strong local and weak county government. This operating framework is evident in most county park and recreation systems. Counties such as Chester, Montgomery, and Bucks have served as models to Monroe County for the Open Space Program. These counties all have county park departments as well as numerous local parks and recreation departments. Some of their local departments are bigger in terms of facilities, staff, and budget than Monroe County's operation.

In Pennsylvania, county park systems generally operate with the philosophy of providing natural resource-based facilities and outdoor recreation opportunities. The provision of recreation programs and services is generally regarded as a local government function. While other counties do provide programs, these programs generally focus on environmental education and are defined in terms of outdoor recreation and special events.

The State of Maryland may offer the more relevant example for Monroe County's park and recreation system to emulate. In Maryland, government operations are county-based, rather than municipal-based. Maryland counties provide the parks and recreation facilities and services countywide. They are also responsible for resource protection, land conservation, and historic/cultural resource preservation. Because of the efficiency and avoidance in the duplication of facilities and services, the systems have been able to develop with great effectiveness and maximum public service.

In Pennsylvania, the municipalities typically provide the center for government services. The municipalities in Monroe County are small, have limited services, have expressed the desire for the County to take a stronger role in parks and recreation, and already have a successful working partnership going back decades in working with the County in recreation, conservation, environmental education, and parks. In contrast to Pennsylvania counties, Maryland counties offer a host of recreation programs and services, indoor year-round recreation, and a wide range of facilities for recreation. This approach seems to be more in line with what the municipalities in Monroe County have expressed as a desired approach to parks and recreation. As Pennsylvania moves more in the direction of partnerships and regional planning, Monroe County is already the leader in the commonwealth. Maryland operations represent a model with years of experience, which can light the way here.

Table 6-1 presents information about county park and recreation systems as a base for comparison for Monroe County. It is important to note in making the comparisons that the park systems shown in the table have been in existence for decades, starting as long ago as 1920, to Lancaster, which was established in 1972. This should serve as the catalyst for expanding Monroe County's Park system. The long-range view needs to be considered. As other successful county park systems have shown, it takes decades to establish a county park system.

Table 6.1 County Park Systems					
County	Population	Number of County Parks	Size Range in Acres	Total County Park Acres	Population Ratio
<b>Pennsylvania</b>					
Lancaster	422,822	6 parks and 2 trails	n/a	2,003	5 acres/1,000
Montgomery	679,784	6	107-3,100	4,687	7 acres/1,000
Chester	376,396	9	300-890	3,693	10 acres/1,000
Bucks	539,501	22	8-1,525	6,000	11.1 acres/1,000
<b>Maryland</b>					
Prince Georges	764,000	9 county  Hundreds of local parks totaling 6,000 acres  37 community centers	200-7,000  1-200	17,000  <u>6,000</u> 23,000	30 acres/1,000

**Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission: The Future**

The Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission has been struggling with its role and identity in the County for many years. Through the planning and public participation process for this project, the citizens have provided the direction they would like to see the County take in parks and recreation.

The message was clear in public forums and interviews: the County needs to take a stronger role in parks and recreation. In directing the County to take a stronger role, the participants in the forums and interviews outlined the actions needed:

1. Buy land and develop County parks.
2. Help manage the greenways and trails that will be established in the County.

3. Provide recreation services targeted at year-round residents. This should include year-round opportunities. Indoor recreation centers are needed, and in Monroe County, are more appropriate at the County than local level.
4. Develop family fitness and sports complexes to serve residents throughout the County. These should be quality wellness and sports facilities that people could use throughout their lifetimes.
5. Set the standard for parks and recreation in Monroe County. With the regions about to develop their own plans, acquire land, and ultimately develop parks and recreation facilities, Monroe County should serve as a model in public service, design, operations, management, and maintenance. Quality should be the key ingredient in all endeavors. People will pay for and support *quality* services.
6. Partnerships are important. Collaboration with the municipalities and the schools should reach a higher level.
7. The County does not always have to be the direct provider of services. Serving as a facilitator and conveyer of information about services are important roles for the Commission. An example would be to provide training for recreation leaders employed by other providers such as Homeowner Associations.

### **Options for County Parks and Recreation Organization**

Given the direction set forth by the public, the County has the following options for operating the Recreation and Park Commission:

- A. Stay the Same
- B. Strong County - similar to the Prince Georges County model
- C. Parks Partnership - a combination of strong county in collaboration with other providers

#### **A - Stay the Same Option**

In this option, the Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission would continue to provide programs and services as they have in the past. Programs and services should evolve as trends change in interest and participation levels. In response to public comments, the programs should be broadened to serve families, older people, and teens.

#### **B - Strong County Option**

If Monroe County were to create a strong county parks and recreation system, the County Recreation and Park Commission would be responsible for providing programs, services, parks, and recreation facilities throughout Monroe County. This would preclude any responsibility on the part of the municipalities. Partnerships could continue with other providers, but for the most part, Monroe County would be responsible for all aspects of county public recreation.

### C - Parks Partnership

Under this option, Monroe County would take the lead in creating a countywide system for parks, trails, and recreation. The regions would be responsible for providing close-to-home parks, recreation facilities, programs, and services. The Conservation District would continue in their role in managing conservation lands and providing environmental education. Partnerships with other providers would be developed or enhanced. Especially important is the cultivation of a collaborative relationship with the school districts.

### Preferred Option

The preferred option is the Parks Partnership. The criteria and direction set forth in the public participation process indicate that the County needs to have a County park system to set the standard for quality parks and recreation opportunities and to involve partners in the process.

The spirit of collaboration and regional cooperation is evident in Monroe County. It is supported at the local, county, and state levels. The formation of regional planning areas among the municipalities is a major accomplishment. The fact that each one of the 20 municipalities is participating in regional planning is remarkable. These working relationships should be fostered and serve as the foundation for parks and recreation in the County.

### Parks Partnership: County Operations

In this scenario, the role of the County would change over the next ten years as the county and regional systems are developed. The roles would include:

- Open Space Acquisition - With the ambitious program of open space acquisition and \$10,000,000 in county funds, the County needs an acquisition manager. This position would be responsible for managing the county's land acquisition program. This position should be housed within the Planning Commission. A real estate specialist skilled in the various methods of procuring land is needed. This can be a staff position, an independent contractor or a combination of staff position and consultants with expertise in relevant areas.
- Land Management - The acquisition of open space will require land management. Land management should fall under the responsibility of a number of organizations:
  - ◇ Natural Areas - Conservation District and private conservancies.
  - ◇ Greenways and Trails - The natural areas of the greenways should be managed by the Conservation District. Trails and trailheads should be under the Recreation and Park Commission who would develop a volunteer program for aspects of trail maintenance.
  - ◇ Parkland - Recreation and Park Commission. Natural areas in parks should be a collaborative effort with the Conservation District. The

Conservation District should participate in park planning to insure that sound environmental elements are incorporated.

- Park Development - As the County buys land for county parks, the development of master site plans, construction, operation, and maintenance will become an important function of the commission. This will become a major responsibility of the Recreation and Park Director. In other departments undergoing expansion, a shift in responsibilities was required so that the director could focus on the expansion. This may require an additional position for programs.
- Indoor Recreation - It is likely that if a regional recreation center were to be developed in Monroe County, the county would be responsible for it. Partnerships with other providers such as the regions, the hospital, university, and commercial providers would be essential. But the county would still have the ultimate responsibility.
- Trails - Since trails are a top priority in Monroe, planning and developing trails will be a whole work element unto itself. There are many aspects to trail development and operations:

- ◇ Trail planning
- ◇ Design
- ◇ Public outreach and education
- ◇ Funding - public, private, grants
- ◇ Volunteer Management
- ◇ Maintenance

This function is of such magnitude and workload that a position should be created for trail manager. This person would need to coordinate closely with the Planning Commission in greenway planning. The position should be housed in the Recreation and Park Commission because ultimately that is where the operations and management will be for trails.

- Programs and Services - The role of the Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission should evolve over the next decade as the regional parks and recreation systems come online. The County should look towards programming on a larger scale and facilitating recreation delivery by others. Programs should have a countywide focus leaving day-to-day, close-to-home programs the responsibility of the regions. Roles should include:
  - ◇ Catalyst for countywide parks and recreation partnerships. Bringing providers of varying interests together to focus on parks and recreation as a whole in Monroe County is important.

- ◇ Bringing social service providers together to work on issues in common is a way to position parks and recreation as an essential service in the community. Parks and recreation is a tool to solve community problems.
- ◇ Special events.
- ◇ Train-the-trainers - Aquatics, program leadership, camps, and age-group programming should be year-round outreach efforts in order to expand the delivery of services throughout the County.
- ◇ Information broker - Establish the Commission as an authority on recreation service information. Technology and marketing should be used to promote convenient, current access to information by the people of Monroe County.
- ◇ Quality of Life Mission - The Commission should be geared towards promoting lifetime recreation, fitness, and wellness. The Department should be geared towards developing lifetime fitness facilities and programs geared to keeping people interested in participating in healthy lifestyles. The Surgeon General identified the lack of physical activity as the number one public health issue in America. The Commission can provide facilities and services to combat this in Monroe County.
- ◇ Environmental Education - As an important county function, the Conservation District should continue to be responsible for this function. An additional environmental specialist(s) will be needed as the system grows.

As regional recreation is established over the next decade, the County's role will evolve so that ultimately Monroe County would have a true county park system with countywide programs, parks and recreation facilities.

- Maintenance - At present, prison inmates provide maintenance for the county park. As new parks are developed, the county will be responsible for additional maintenance requirements. Options for this include:
  - ◇ In-house maintenance with regional maintenance units
  - ◇ Contracting out maintenance functions
  - ◇ Cooperative agreements with the regions
  - ◇ Combination of the above

A maintenance management plan needs to be created for facilities during the planning stages. The Commission needs to look long-term at its organizational structure and personnel requirements for park maintenance.

- Financing - The Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission would be responsible for developing a revenue policy. The revenue policy will set forth all aspects of financing parks and recreation. This should include a mix of public and private sources including fundraising, gifts, grants, bequests, fees and charges, and other sources. The goal should be for Monroe County to have a budget based on 40 percent non-tax sources. At present, the County operates with a budget based upon 57 percent revenue generated from non-tax sources. As facilities are added and maintenance requirements increase, this percentage will decrease as a function of maintenance costs.

#### Parks Partnership: Regional Operations

With the small populations of the municipalities of Monroe County, it makes sense for them to stay organized as regions for the purposes of parks and recreation. The benefits of regional cooperation include:

- Economy of working together
- Cost savings
- Avoidance of duplication of services
- Maximum use of tax dollars
- Distribution of overhead
- Maximum use of capital
- Solving problems that cross municipal boundaries
- Obtaining special skills, programs, or facilities that individual municipalities could not afford alone
- Critical mass of numbers make public services possible in areas where the population of a single population is not enough

In the Park Partnership Option, the regional recreation and park organizations would be responsible for providing close-to-home parks and recreation facilities and programs. The populations of each region warrant the establishment of a full-time year-round director for parks and recreation. The Director would be responsible for similar roles and the same types of functions as the county director but on a regional level.

#### Approach to Establishing Regional Recreation

The regional recreation plans are the first step in setting up regional parks and recreation systems. The county plan should be used as a planning tool for the regional plans. The recommendations and ideas set forth in the county plan need to be revised in accordance with the needs and opportunities identified in the regional planning.

The next step in establishing the regional system is hiring directors. The County and regions could take advantage of DCNR's Circuit Rider Program under *Growing Greener*. Under this program, the state funds parks and recreation directors for municipalities that agree to cooperate in operating parks and recreation. The funding is good for four years with 100 percent funding the first year, decreasing to 75, 50, and 25 percent over the next three years. The goal is to give the regions time to establish the regional parks and recreation system along with the funding base from a mix of revenue sources to continue operations.

There is an open season on circuit rider grants. The regions could apply at any time for such a grant.

## Conclusions

Monroe County needs to seize the opportunity of the favorable conditions regarding open space and grant funds to grow the Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission. While the Commission has been operating for nearly 30 years, the factors are in place to make the system a truly great parks and recreation system. Combined with the potential partners, the regions established by the municipalities, state and national parks, and the tourism industry, Monroe County can become a model for the effective delivery of leisure services nationwide. The County cannot do this alone. The whole idea of creating the county park system is rooted in partnerships as alternative revenue sources.

Monroe County's goal is to become Pennsylvania's most livable county. The vision for a future parks and recreation system is as follows:

### Vision for a Future Parks and Recreation System

Parks and recreation is an essential service that enhances the quality of life in Monroe County by preserving the environment, fostering personal wellness, strengthening community, preventing crime, and contributing to a healthy economy. The County will provide an integrated, regionally-based parks and recreation system that:

- Fosters stewardship of the County's natural, cultural, and historic resources.
- Meets and anticipates the needs of the citizens for recreational pursuits within a leisure environment.
- Aspires to the highest standard of excellence in public service through cooperative partnerships with diverse county, state, and national organizations and the private sector.

### Mission Statement

The Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission is committed to developing a comprehensive parks and recreation system in partnership with the municipal regions, school districts, and other partners. The system will include:

- Preservation, enhancement, and protection of open space to enrich the quality of life for present and future generations in a safe and secure environment.
- A countywide system of parks and recreation facilities, recreation programs, and services year-round that respond to the changing needs within the County.

## Recommendations

To achieve the vision of making Monroe County's most livable county, in part, through parks, greenways and recreation, the following actions should be considered:

1. Formalize the role and mission of the Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission. Since a focus of this project was on the role the County should play in parks and recreation, the planning process determined that the County should take a strong role in the provision of natural resource protection, open space conservation, greenways and trails, parks, and recreation. The County needs to adopt the vision and mission for Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission.

A host of issues was identified related to this question. In broad terms, these issues could be categorized as recreation programs; marketing and outreach, keeping pace with trends in terms of facilities and services, financing, partnerships, management, and regional recreation. Many work sessions touched upon these issues and launched a host of questions that need to be addressed over time and in a strategic fashion. The County should consider doing a full-scale recreation plan to address these issues as the regional plans are being developed.

2. Provide sufficient resources. Ensure that adequate fiscal and human resources are available to implement the vision and mission for Monroe County's future parks and recreation system and to carry out all tasks for the greatest benefit of the public.
3. Establish regional partnerships within the County. Work with the regions in developing their parks, recreation, and open space plans. Help to create strategies that will establish a countywide system of parks. Work with the regions in their discussion on the potential for obtaining circuit riders. Collaborate with the Open Space Coordinator in the Planning Commission to determine proper role and function in the regional plans.
4. Hold a retreat for Commission planning purposes. In light of this Open Space Plan, the Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission should have a retreat – one for board members and one for the management team. The purpose of the retreat should be to focus on roles and responsibilities, future directions, tasks, and goals for the Commission. The retreat should be off-site.
5. Hold work sessions on County Park Land acquisition. The Recreation and Park Commission needs to have work sessions on land acquisition. While this plan provides criteria for selecting open space for parkland and the maps indicate

potential parcels, the process for actual site identification and the acquisition needs to be formulated.

6. Establish a task force for indoor recreation. With indoor recreation emerging as a high priority, a task force should be organized to consider this issue and the possible options for indoor recreation centers. The County could consider having a feasibility study done for an indoor recreation center(s). This study could address an arts center as part of a community recreation center.
7. Develop a program management plan. Assess county programs and services. Develop a program and service plan that fosters the development of a county parks and recreation system with regional partners. As part of the plan, develop a transition program to implement changes in the present programs and services as the county role changes and regional recreation is established. This role will evolve over the next decade as the regional plans are implemented and partnerships solidified. The County should strive towards providing a strong role in accordance with public opinion.
8. Write impact statements for projects. As new projects are considered, develop an impact statement for the workload that it will generate. Identify the fiscal and human resources that will be necessary to ensure that the project will be successfully accomplished.
9. Establish regional open space and recreation councils. These councils could foster discussion throughout the County. They could consist of parks and recreation board representatives, special interests groups, state and national park people, and conservation groups. Meetings could be held twice a year.

If the regions decide to pursue the circuit rider program, a Monroe County Circuit Rider Council should be formed for the circuit riders and the Monroe County Recreation and Park Commission Director to work together.

10. Build in field trips to look at successful operations elsewhere. Field trips should be built into the planning process so that elected and appointed officials and the management team could see first hand similar facilities or operations elsewhere. The investment of time and money generates a solid return in terms of the knowledge and information that is needed to develop the kinds of facilities needed in Monroe County.