

2025 NACPRO Award Recipients & Nominations

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Outstanding Public Official

Nominee: Former Westchester County Executive George Latimer

Organization: Westchester County Dept. of Parks, Recreation and Conservation, New York

Narrative:

Westchester County Executive George Latimer served from 2018 to 2025. Supported the mission of Westchester County Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation (PRC) who maintains 51 plus facilities and 18,000 acres of parkland. PRC's mission: "Create life-enriching experiences at its safe, clean, affordable parks and preserve through responsible leadership." George Latimer believed in our mission and was a passionate supporter of our department's values and pursuits. He supported a generous PRC budget during his tenure. \$43,055,000 allocated for PRC Capital Projects in 2024. Enabled PRC to expand upon existing programs, offer free programs, sponsor major events, update 27 facilities and various infrastructure projects; Example 1: \$3,400,000 capital project The Tarrytown Lighthouse in Sleepy Hollow (on National Register of Historic Places). This capital project boosted Westchester County's tourism and economy. Example 2: Miller House renovation \$2,000,000.

George Latimer valued staff, programs, preservation of our Nationally Accredited Parks and understood the impact and benefit PRC has on the community. Attended parks events, connected with PRC staff and constituents. Incredible speaker, his words heartfelt, relatable and accurate. He listened, understood the needs of his constituents and how their needs related to PRC. He filled all full-time staff positions eliminated by prior County Executive. Commissioner O'Connor viewed George Latimer as a visionary leader.

COVID was a defining time. Established COVID protocols followed by 46 municipalities. Led bi-weekly, weekly and at times daily public briefings in regards to ever-changing COVID information. Glen Island first outdoor COVID vaccination facility in United States. Civic center renovated into a fully operational hospital, served as an indoor vaccination center. 75% of civic center staff relocated, not one employee was laid off. PRC was deemed essential to the community, our parks never closed. Tourists discovered PRC visited from tri-state area and beyond.

Outstanding Support Organization

Nominee: Shedd Aquarium

Organization: Forest Preserves of Cook County, Illinois

Narrative:

Shedd Aquarium (Shedd) is a world-renowned aquarium, research and conservation institution and popular Chicagoland destination. The Shedd's mission aligns closely with the Forest Preserves of Cook County (Forest Preserves) to conserve native species and their habitats and to engage the public in stewardship. Shedd and Forest Preserves are long standing partners and collaborate closely on how to best protect, restore, and research freshwater ecosystems within the preserves and to develop environmental education opportunities to visitors, local communities, and students of all ages. Shedd biologists study the health and populations of wetland species within the Forest Preserves including frogs, salamanders, turtles and mussels. Monitoring and surveying different wildlife species provide crucial information on how their survival is connected to environmental factors and if conservation efforts are having a positive impact on their populations. Shedd has been instrumental in the protection of native animals, including the head-start program for the Illinois state endangered Blanding's turtle. In partnership with the Forest Preserves, Shedd has successfully reared many baby Blanding's turtles at their facilities for eventual release within the forest preserves. As part of the Forest Preserves' Ecological Stewardship program, Shedd works to mobilize people to restore ponds and wetlands and to build a community committed to restoration. Shedd focuses on volunteer recruitment, developing volunteer leadership, and providing support to new volunteers. In addition to leading volunteer workdays, Shedd also engages high school and college students in the study biodiversity at Forest Preserve sites, where they learn to identify invasive species and the impact they have on these habitats and wildlife populations. Shedd's active engagement of residents to care for nature directly contributes to improving the health of this region's watersheds and native flora and fauna.

Park & Recreation Program - Class I

Nominee: County vs County Kickball Event

Organization: Goochland County Parks and Recreation, Virginia

Population class: Class I: Population service area less than 150,000

Narrative:

This year, led by our new Parks and Recreation Director and County Administrator, Goochland came up with a County vs County Kickball Tournament. It was a 6 team round robin tournament held at Hidden Rock Park on a Friday in July. Counties that participated were Goochland, Henrico, Hanover, Fluvanna, and Powhatan. Each team was filled with 20 roster spots with employees in all different departments, each county also was represented by their own jersey/shirt. At the beginning of the Tournament each team gathered on the field like an opening day, there was a ceremonial first roll and kick lead by our Deputy and County Administrator. We also had a Goochland County Employee sing the national anthem. Each team was fighting for the ownership of the County vs County Kickball Belt. The winner was to take the belt and hold the next tournament at one of their parks. The reason for this event was to pull the surrounding counties together, to get time away from the office, and just enjoy the day. Too often, we overlook the fact that we have colleagues in surrounding counties we can rely on for ideas, brainstorming, and an additional perspective. The goal of the tournament was to bring everyone together and reinforce that it is both acceptable and important to step away from the desk and enjoy time outdoors. At the end of the event, Henrico ended up being the Champion and took home the belt. Right now, we are working with Henrico to plan the Kickball Tournament for this July.

Park & Recreation Program - Class II

Nominee: Cherokee Youth Girls Flag Football

Organization: Cherokee Recreation and Parks Agency, Georgia

Population class: Class II: Population service area of 150,001-275,000

Narrative:

The Cherokee Youth Girls' Flag Football Program, launched by Cherokee Recreation & Parks and inspired by the Atlanta Falcons and The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, is a groundbreaking initiative promoting gender equality, individual empowerment, and community development. With over 200 participants in the Fall and 180 in the Spring, this program provides young girls the opportunity to excel in a traditionally male-dominated sport, fostering self-confidence, teamwork, and leadership skills. It features two seasons: a competitive Fall season with complex gameplay on an 80-yard field and a developmental Spring season with simplified rules, emphasizing skill-building on a smaller field. The league also includes an elementary division, reflecting its rapid growth and impact. Strong partnerships and innovative techniques have been pivotal to the program's success. The collaboration with local high school flag football coaches has ensured high-quality training, while grants and participant revenue have supported essential equipment and activities like a skills clinic for 4th-8th graders. These cooperative efforts have created an inclusive space for participants of all skill levels, setting the program apart as a model for community-based athletics. This program has transformed not only its participants but also the broader community. By challenging traditional norms, it has created a supportive environment for girls to thrive while promoting values of empowerment and social responsibility. Participants have engaged in volunteer initiatives, cultivating empathy and active citizenship. As girls' flag football gains national prominence and prepares for its debut at the 2028 Olympic Games, the Cherokee Youth Girls' Flag Football Program stands as a beacon of opportunity, equipping young athletes with the tools to succeed on and off the field.

Park & Recreation Program - Class III

Nominee: Total Eclipse of the Park

Organization: Metroparks Toledo, Ohio

Population class: Class III: Population service area of 275,001-500,000

Narrative:

Toledoans gathered in droves for our Total Eclipse of the Park event. Programming staff and volunteers hosted viewing parties at four different parks and a one-day camp for children. Totality was at 3:12 pm and the weather allowed for an amazing show that was shared by over 19,000 visitors eclipsing our normal 2,000 visitors during that same time frame. Toledo reportedly only had approximately a 31% chance to see the total solar eclipse due to typical cloud cover in April. Even with the low likelihood of visibility, astronomy enthusiasts from all over the country journeyed to our region and were rewarded with an unobstructed view of the eclipse from a beautiful park setting. Metroparks provided eclipse glasses for safe viewing, and a safe and family-friendly viewing party atmosphere complete with eclipse-themed music, lawn games, food and beverages, and skating at Glass City's The Ribbon. Park visitors were able to enjoy many different activities, models, and demonstrations of the science behind the eclipse. Thousands looked through telescopes at the eclipsing sun using special solar filters. Kids made eclipse themed crafts and face shields to attach to the safety glasses. People participated in citizen science data collection for NASA using the GLOBE Observer app, helping to provide information on cloud cover, air temperature, and surface temperatures, helping NASA study how eclipses impact weather. In line with our sustainability initiatives, staff collected used eclipse glasses to be repurposed or properly recycled. From this one-time event, Metroparks created other ongoing programs such as our Star Struck Series. This series interprets many different natural phenomena such as meteor showers and moon phases, bringing attention to the celestial side of nature. Pop up Star struck programs are now bringing over 100 people with as little as 8 hours advance notice!

Park & Recreation Program - Class IV

Nominee: 17-Year Periodical Cicada Education

Organization: Lake County Forest Preserve District, Illinois

Population class: Class IV: Population service area over 500,001

Narrative:

In 2024, the Lake County Forest Preserves had a rare opportunity - one that only arises every 17 years. In May, millions of periodical cicadas tunneled out of the soil, crawled up trees, sang, mated, laid eggs and completed their life cycle across Lake County and Chicagoland. Planning began in early 2023. Multiple departments collaborated to plan programs and events to educate the public on this natural phenomenon, targeting all ages in forest preserves, classrooms, online, and at the Dunn Museum. From April through June, educators presented 127 fully booked programs, reaching 3,488 through school programs, lectures, expert panels, and interactive experiences. Educators, operations, and public safety collaborated to host CicadaFest, a family event featuring tours, crafts, and lectures that drew 1,300 attendees. Museum staff curated Celebrating Cicadas, on exhibit from April to August. It examined the cicada life cycle through interactive displays, cicada song audio clips, specimens from past emergences, and custom illustrations from a local artist. To our knowledge, it was the only museum to host a cicada exhibition, reaching 5,432 visitors. Communications staff established the Forest Preserves as a go-to regional, national and international resource for accurate information and creative public messaging. A robust webpage (LCFPD.org/cicadas) housed videos, illustrations, a time-lapse map of observation data, a podcast episode and more. A cicada-themed local brew was the summer's hot seller at the Beer Garden at Independence Grove. A blend of advertising and earned media drove attendance. Domestic and international radio, TV, print and digital outlets published 117 Forest Preserve stories, reaching 213 million globally. After 19 months, the payoffs were clear. Programs, events, and the exhibition reached 10,220 participants. Combined with media efforts, the 2024 periodical cicada emergence reached more people than any program in the Forest Preserves history.

Park & Recreation Facility - Class II

Nominee: Historic Courthouse Restoration Project

Organization: Washington County, Minnesota

Population class: Class II: Population service area of 150,001-275,000

Narrative:

Washington County's Historic Courthouse, in Stillwater, MN is the oldest standing courthouse in the state and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1870, it served as the county seat of government for over 100 years and is now part of the park system. It operates as a historic site; providing guests with tours, exhibits, community events, and reserveable meeting and event spaces. In 2018 Washington County hired an architecture firm to do a full assessment. A Historic Structures Report was completed in 2023. These reports found water issues from a deteriorating roof, failing mortar joints, and drainage issues that allowed water to pool near the foundation. Because roof repairs would require significant cost and only extend the life of the roof 3-5 years, a large-scale restoration project was approved, and the building was temporarily closed for work that included a full roof replacement with internal gutters, dome and cupola restoration, mortar tuckpointing, brick repair/replacement, and addressing drainage concerns. In total, the project cost \$5.2 million, including design, construction, permits, inspection, and contingencies. The capital investment in the Historic Courthouse clearly demonstrates the dedication that Washington County and the community have to protecting its heritage. The project began in June 2023 and concluded in March 2024 with a grand-reopening event in June. Throughout the process county staff collaborated with a variety of specialized contractors, the local historical society, and the State Historic Preservation Office to ensure the work was completed to high standards and in a way that preserves the historic significance of the building. The restored building is now set to welcome visitors for generations to come. It continues to stand as a monument to the past where the community can experience a physical connection to its roots and take established and cherished community values as part of its identity into the future.

Park & Recreation Facility - Class III

Nominee: Howell Community Park Recreation Center & Pool

Organization: Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Population class: Class III: Population service area of 275,001-500,000

Narrative:

The recent developments at Howell Community Park have culminated in a state-of-the-art recreation center and community pool, marking a significant milestone in providing recreational opportunities for the residents of North Baton Rouge. This new complex replaces the original recreation center and pool house built in 1952, which served as a vital space for the youth of North Baton Rouge to learn how to swim. Unfortunately, the recreation center was forced to close permanently in 2016 due to the devastating flood that impacted a large part of East Baton Rouge Parish. Through collaboration with FEMA and extensive public outreach, BREC set out to reimagine a facility that would meet the community's recreational needs. Perez APC was the lead consultant who worked closely with the Recreation and Parks Department to develop a more resilient site, while Capitol Construction, LLC served as the construction contractor. The newly constructed recreation center building, bathhouse, and pool have been seamlessly integrated into the existing recreational facilities on the site. The facility spans 15,399 square feet and boasts expansive multipurpose rooms that can be subdivided to accommodate a diverse range of events. Additionally, dedicated program space has been allocated for senior programming, while a game room provides a space for young adults to socialize and engage in recreational activities. To address concerns regarding stormwater management and site development, extensive measures were implemented to effectively capture runoff and mitigate the risk of flooding at the site. A comprehensive earthwork initiative created wet and dry ponds across the 113-acre property. The parking area has been enhanced with bioswales featuring vegetation that thrives in wet environments. Ultimately, the new recreation center is a stunning focal point and catalyst for Howell Community Park, exemplifying a harmonious blend of functionality and aesthetics.

Park & Recreation Facility - Class III

Nominee: Hawk Island County Park Renovation

Organization: Ingham County Parks Department, Michigan

Population class: Class III: Population service area of 275,001-500,000

Narrative:

Hawk Island County Park in Lansing, Michigan, recently underwent a major renovation to enhance accessibility and improve recreational facilities. The 100-acre park, originally a reclaimed gravel pit, attracts half a million visitors annually as a year-round destination. The renovation focused on upgrading aging structures, including the boardwalk, fishing docks, and pathways, to meet ADA standards and address growing demand for outdoor spaces. New features include over 1,180 linear feet of accessible walkways, ADA-compliant docks, fishing pods with lower railings for universal access, and additional picnic shelters, benches, trash bins, and recycling stations. A canoe and kayak launch, along with 14 accessible dock slips, expand water-based activities for park visitors. The park's landscape was also transformed, with invasive species replaced by native plants that support local ecosystems and provide scenic vistas. Bio-swales were installed to manage stormwater and improve water quality, while new signage enhances the park's visual appeal. The renovation project was made possible through multiple funding sources, including grants from the Department of Natural Resources, the federal Land & Water Conservation Fund, and the Ingham County Trails & Parks Millage. Collaboration between design teams, contractors, and Ingham County Parks staff ensured that the project stayed on track despite challenges like fluctuating water levels and rising construction costs. These improvements have significantly increased the park's accessibility and functionality, ensuring it remains a valuable community resource for all visitors. The park's transformation offers a blend of inclusivity, natural beauty, and expanded recreational opportunities, making it a cherished destination for the Lansing community and surrounding areas.

Park & Recreation Facility - Class IV

Nominee: Garfield Park Restoration

Organization: Cleveland Metroparks, Ohio

Population class: Class IV: Population service area over 500,001

Narrative:

The Garfield Park Restoration was a transformative, multi-year project to revitalize a historic park on Cleveland's east side, in an underserved community. Originally developed in the late 1800s, the park formerly featured two ponds that attracted generations for water recreation until sediment build-up from the construction boom of the 1950s-60s deteriorated the ecological health of the park and watershed, filling the ponds. The \$10 million project, completed in 2024, included the restoration of the historic two-acre pond offering the long-awaited return of water recreation, including kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, as well as fishing opportunities. The park's improvements also include hiking trails, bridges, a children's play space and ADA accessible boardwalks to foster environmental education and recreation. Additionally, over 1,000 native trees were planted to support biodiversity, while Wolf Creek, a tributary of Mill Creek and the Cuyahoga River, was restored. Historic WPA-era structures, such as a stone arch bridge, were preserved to maintain the park's legacy. The project included a 3,000-square-foot LEED-designed Program Center serving all ages, including the Youth Outdoors program, that strives to meet developmental needs of youth from urban communities. The center uses sustainable technologies, including geothermal heating, solar panels, rainwater harvesting, and repurposed materials from the original boathouse, and features modern restrooms. The project was a collaboration between Cleveland Metroparks, Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, West Creek Conservancy, and Organic Connects, along with over \$2.5 million in private donations. A public engagement process with residents informed the design and implementation. Park visitation has already increased by 7.4% since the project's completion in late 2024. The project's sustainable design and strong community involvement ensure Garfield Park will remain a vital asset for future generations.

Park & Recreation Facility - Class IV

Nominee: Ryerson Education Center

Organization: Lake County Forest Preserve District, Illinois

Population class: Class IV: Population service area over 500,001

Narrative:

Nestled in the floodplain forest in Lake County, Illinois, the Ryerson Education Center (REC) appears to have always been there, situated between magnificent towering oaks. In spring 2024, the Lake County Forest Preserves opened the 2,900 sf net-zero energy building to serve as the center of environmental education programming. With this new facility, the Forest Preserves aims to set the example for building design in an age of climate change. It is the first public building in Lake County to receive certification from Passive House Institute US (Phius). It replaced two aging cabins that hosted Forest Preserve school programs since 1972, serving 10,000 students per year. The new REC will enable us to serve more than 25,000 students from pre-K to 12th grade, in addition to public programs and events. Net-zero energy begins with thoughtful design. The building envelope is composed of 16-inch walls, foam insulation, and an air barrier membrane to create a continuous seal from floor to ceiling, making it eight times more airtight than required by code. Large undivided windows make one feel surrounded by nature. To reach net-zero energy, they had to be triple pane, but bird strikes were a concern. As a result, the REC is the first Phius building to integrate bird safe technology in a triple pane window. The poly-ash siding is made from 70% recycled materials, including fly ash, a coal byproduct. The interior walls and ceilings showcase logs milled from dead or dying oaks in the forest preserves. Rainwater is collected in a 4,000-gallon cistern to supply the toilets. Including site improvements such as dedicated bus parking and an accessible 0.2-mile loop trail, the project totaled \$6 M; \$3.2 M was from grants and donations. The REC is the first of four planned net-zero energy facilities: a new grounds maintenance facility, a golf car storage facility, and the Ryerson Welcome Center. All are part of the Forest Preserves commitment to sustainable business operations.

Trails & Corridors - Class III

Nominee: B2B Trail Title IX Plaza

Organization: Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation, Michigan

Population class: Class III: Population service area of 275,001-500,000

Narrative:

The purpose of the Title IX Plaza was to design an interpretive installation along the 42-mile B2B Trail in Washtenaw County that celebrates the importance of Title IX and serves as a source of inspiration and discovery for all trail users. This project honors the impact of Title IX legislation on women's sports in southeast Michigan. Title IX legislation was part of the Education Amendments of 1972. It was just 37 words, with no mention of sports. Prior to Title IX, very few schools offered teams for girls and women, leaving half of the population unable to compete. The plaza, which opened on August 28, 2024, features 18 women with ties to Southeast Michigan and were selected after an extensive community engagement process. The plaza is a joint project between Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission (WCPARC) and our non-profit trail partner, Huron Waterloo Pathways Initiative (HWPI). The Huron-Clinton Metroparks provided a land easement for WCPARC to construct the plaza along the B2B Trail within Dexter-Huron Metropark. Objectives included designing a space that is both experiential and visual and that is considerate and complementary to the natural surroundings of the park. We utilized the material palette defined within the B2B Trail Interpretive Master Plan. We wanted to ensure the plaza elements, stories, and imagery reflected the diversity of Washtenaw County. It was important for us to reinforce the equitable access to recreation and nature and provide a meaningful experience for all regardless of ability. There has been significant interest in the plaza from all over the Michigan as well as regional interest. Based on research, it is believed this is the only outdoor plaza in the United States dedicated to Title IX.

Trails & Corridors - Class IV

Nominee: Des Plaines River Trail

Organization: Forest Preserves of Cook County, Illinois

Population class: Class IV: Population service area over 500,001

Narrative:

The Des Plaines River Trail, is a regionally significant linear trail system that winds through numerous municipalities and is used by tens of thousands of people each year for recreation and alternative transportation. The 56-mile regional trail extends from Wadsworth, Wisconsin to River Grove, Cook County, Illinois; 28.3 of those miles are owned and managed by the Forest Preserves of Cook County. While the Des Plaines River Trail is a well-used and popular trail, persistent flooding has caused considerable deterioration and safety concerns and has negatively impacted user experience. Starting in 2016, the Forest Preserves, together with local municipalities, including the Village of Rosemont, Village of Schiller Park, and City of Park Ridge explored ways to improve trail user experience and enhance safety and to better connect surrounding communities to the trail system. The first phase of the Des Plaines River Trail improvement project (Touhy to Lawrence Avenues) was completed in 2024. Partners secured over \$15 million in funding complete the first phase of the Des Plaines River Trail improvement project (Touhy to Lawrence Avenues). The improvements included trail reconstruction, rerouting, trail crossing improvements, resurfacing, constructing several boardwalk segments, and one bridge. The second phase of the project which has already begun will bring upgrades between Lawrence Avenue and North Avenue. The entire project will cover more than 10 miles and has an estimated price tag of \$70 million. This complex and ambitious trail improvement project and planning initiative involved substantial community engagement efforts and integrated user concerns and suggestions into the planning process. Many municipalities and partners worked together to find solutions - the resulting preferred trail alignment, trail connections, and the finished trail sections are a testament to the collaborative spirit of this project.

Cultural History

Nominee: Yellow River Post Office Site Field Study

Organization: Gwinnett Parks and Recreation, Georgia

Narrative:

The new Civil War and Reconstruction in Georgia high school field study at Gwinnett's Yellow River Post Office Site in Lilburn exemplifies excellence in historic and cultural programming. Amid national debates on teaching this era, our program helps students explore complex history through primary documents and historic sites. Debuting in November 2024, this program engages students with firsthand accounts, including letters from A.W. McDaniel, a soldier from present-day Duluth; a store ledger by Sarah Hudson, wife of the Yellow River Post Office owner; Gwinnett census data (1840-1860); narratives from formerly enslaved individuals; and excerpts from the Lost Friends column in the Southwestern Christian Advocate. These sources, alongside original structures like the Hudson-Nash House and Gwinnett's only known cabin for the enslaved, create an immersive learning experience. Students rotate through six interactive stations: 1) Cabin for the Enslaved: Examining census data and narratives, students learn about enslavement in Gwinnett, including Ben Simpson's harrowing account of forced relocation. 2) Civil War Medicine: A mock field hospital demonstrates wartime medical practices and the deadly impact of disease. 3) Yellow River Post Office and Store: Students explore wartime shortages and inflation through an interactive lesson inside the historic store. 4) Hudson-Nash House: Investigating Thomas Hudson's shifting political role, students analyze his motivations during secession. 5) Kitchen/Well: A rare detached kitchen highlights wartime food shortages and dietary impacts. 6) Soldier's Daily Life/Laundry: Students compare Union and Confederate uniforms and laundry practices. In fall 2024, 300 Gwinnett high school juniors participated, receiving high praise. This program's innovative use of a historic park site to teach a pivotal era through immersive, hands-on learning truly demonstrates the Power of Place!

Cultural History

Nominee: Historic Schmid Farmhouse Stabilization

Organization: Three Rivers Park District, Minnesota

Narrative:

Within Three Rivers Park District's Lake Minnetonka Regional Park, visitors driving on their way to the Visitor Center and boat launch may have noticed a brief glimpse of ruins of a stone building through the trees along the park road. The ruins are the remnants of a stone farmhouse built in 1876 by Joseph Schmid and are one of few remaining examples in the region of a typical fieldstone farmhouse of a style known as the "Carver Cottage." The site was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2015. Throughout the 30-year history of the park, access to the ruins was discouraged due to potential instability of the remaining structure. That changed in 2024, when the ruins were permanently stabilized, accessibility was improved, and interpretive signs were added to make the site a self-guided feature of Lake Minnetonka Regional Park. The preservation of the Historic Schmid Farmhouse was made possible by a generous donation by Joseph Schmid's great-grandson, Douglas Florian Schmid. The project was conducted in two phases over a two-year period. Phase 1 of the project involved temporary stabilization of the existing structure, removal of debris and development of architectural plans for permanent stabilization. Phase 2 of the project included permanent stabilization of the ruins, public access, seating, and development and installation of interpretive features. The Historic Schmid Farmhouse adds another self-guided cultural history feature to the Three Rivers Parks system, joining the Grimm Farm within Carver Park Reserve, the Historic Pierre Bottineau House in Elm Creek Park Reserve, Noerenberg Memorial Gardens and The Landing. Together, these facilities and structures help park guests discover the stories of the people who have used the lands that now make up the parks over the centuries. Douglas Schmid's donation made it possible and was celebrated with a grand opening event in August 2024.

Conservation

Nominee: Ottawa Sands County Park

Organization: Ottawa County Parks & Recreation, Michigan

Narrative:

Collaborative efforts at Ottawa Sands, a 345-acre site once used for sand mining, sought to transform the park into a vibrant ecological hub. Located at the junction of the Lake Michigan Coastal Greenway and the Grand River Greenway, the park serves as the final link in a six-mile corridor of public land along Lake Michigan. These corridors are ecologically significant, providing vital connections for both people and wildlife. Despite an extensive reclamation effort by the sand mining company, 188 acres of the park were not functioning as intact natural communities. In partnership with Audubon Great Lakes and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) and supported by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and MDNR's Fisheries Habitat Grant program, efforts were initiated to enhance habitat for wildlife. Over 200 logs and woody structures were placed along the lake's edge to create habitat for fish, turtles, and other wildlife. GPS-equipped machinery sculpted the shoreline to precise contours, expanding the littoral zone and enhancing fish spawning areas. Thousands of native plants were introduced, and invasive species were removed through several workdays. Educational signs were also installed on-site to inform visitors about the efforts and their benefits to the ecosystem. Learn more about the regional significance: <https://gl.audubon.org/coastal-wetlands/grand-river-coastal-corridor>

Conservation

Nominee: Land Acquisition and Management Program Rebranding and Community Education Plan

Organization: Sarasota County Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources Department, Florida

Narrative:

The Sarasota Board of County Commissioners approved the Sarasota County 2024 Strategic Plan, identifying “Environmentally Sensitive Lands Communication and Education” as a Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources (PRNR) strategic item. This strategic item aimed to develop and implement a communications and outreach plan to educate the community about Sarasota County’s voter-approved land acquisition programs. PRNR rebranded the existing land acquisition programs, Sarasota County's Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) and Neighborhood Parkland Acquisition Program (NPP) under a unified name - the Land Acquisition and Management Program. The county’s land conservation efforts began in 1999, when voters approved a referendum for a not-to-exceed 0.25 mil ad valorem tax collected through 2019 to be used for the acquisition, protection and management of environmentally sensitive lands. In 2005, voters approved a second referendum extending ESLPP through 2029 and expanding the county’s land protection efforts to include the acquisition and management of neighborhood parkland through NPP. Residents who wish to nominate land for county acquisition may submit a land nomination form for consideration. Sarasota County’s Land Acquisition and Management Program outreach plan provides a cohesive message and brand across all platforms and educates the community on the existence of the program. The plan highlights the county’s ongoing efforts to protect and acquire natural lands and parklands; increase public access to natural areas; and promote the land acquisition program and process. As part of the outreach plan, PRNR developed a Land Acquisition and Management Program logo and brand, a Community Education Plan, a new website within the SarasotaCountyParks.com website, www.SarasotaCountyParks.com/landacquisitions, social media graphics and posts, an informational rack card, e-newsletters, media releases, and a promotional video, <https://youtu.be/bMb2grE4728>

Innovative Financing

Nominee: The Farmer Family Foundation Match and the Great Parks Go Big Campaign

Organization: Great Parks, Ohio

Narrative:

Great Parks Forever, the philanthropic partner of Great Parks, received in June 2024 a \$3 million gift from The Farmer Family Foundation plus a matching gift of up to \$2 million that, together with community donations to secure the full match amount, could push the total value to \$7 million. The Foundation's innovative structure for the gift and its collaborative leadership are having a multiplying effect to generate additional funding toward Great Parks' \$50 million "Go Big" capital campaign. The Farmer Family Foundation helped Great Parks Forever better define the Great Parks story to other community leaders and philanthropists. They have therefore positioned Great Parks for growth far beyond its own generous initial gift. As an example, Great Parks now points out to stakeholders that it is the most visited attraction in the region, more than local amusement parks and major league sports teams. Great Parks is now better at explaining how it offers better access to natural spaces for people of diverse backgrounds and abilities, while delivering important mental and physical wellness benefits for all. Proof points such as these better contextualize Great Parks' role as a community pillar. The innovative structure of the gift comes through a requirement that only gifts up to \$500,000 and made before July 2025 are eligible to be matched. This structure required Great Parks to contact more funders, under a defined timeline, which rapidly led to new relationships and new funding opportunities. Halfway through the match period, \$900,000 in new gifts and multiple new relationships were developed due to this approach. With these creative, innovative and entrepreneurial strategies, the Farmer Family Foundation helped improve how Great Parks Forever operates as a fundraising organization, with benefits that will give back for generations to come.

Marketing

Nominee: Park Prescriptions

Organization: Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation Department, Florida

Narrative:

PBC Parks & Recreation (PBC Parks) has demonstrated exceptional dedication to integrating parks and recreation into public health efforts, transforming traditional marketing and outreach into a powerful tool for community wellness. Recognizing the untapped potential of parks as healthcare resources, PBC Parks forged partnerships with healthcare providers and public health agencies to promote physician-patient discussions on active living through “park prescriptions.” By creating unique cobranded prescription pads in multiple languages and listing nearby parks, PBC Parks made it easier for medical professionals to encourage patients to engage in outdoor activity. These prescriptions connected individuals to free, accessible physical activity opportunities and contribute to stress reduction, stronger social connections, and enhanced mental health. According to the Florida Recreation & Park Association Impact Calculator, the use of Palm Beach County’s parks for preventive health generated over \$5.2 billion in annual healthcare savings, underscoring the far-reaching benefits of this initiative. Expanding on this success, PBC Parks took an innovative approach by collaborating with the County’s Fire Rescue and Health Care District to produce a Park Rx video, reinforcing the vital link between parks and preventive healthcare. This initiative mirrors the Fall Prevention Program, hosted specifically in our park facilities to improve mobility and reduce health risks. By leveraging an extensive network of paved pathways, fitness trails, and nature-based recreation, PBC Parks provides inclusive spaces where people of all ages and abilities can engage in physical activity at no cost. Through strategic partnerships and a shared commitment to community wellness, PBC Parks continues to bridge the gap between healthcare and recreation - transforming parks into outdoor wellness centers and improving lives one prescription at a time. Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/r2wAQtVIWS0>

Marketing

Nominee: Putting People First - Careers with RivCoParks

Organization: Riverside County Regional Park and Open-Space District, California

Narrative:

The "Putting People First - Careers with RivCoParks" campaign was a unique and innovative marketing initiative designed to support critical staffing shortages while elevating the prestige of careers in parks and recreation. In collaboration with RivCoHR, RivCoParks strategically combined exceptional videography, employee storytelling, and targeted social media marketing to create a compelling recruitment campaign to fill the need of multiple positions across RivCoParks including the development of a Homeless Solutions Team. By showcasing Park Rangers and Maintenance Workers, the campaign emphasized their contributions to environmental stewardship, public safety, and community well-being. The initiative launched from January 2024 - July 2024 was equity-centric manner, reinforcing the significance of fostering vibrant, sustainable communities. Leveraging a series of dynamic videos across multiple platforms, RivCoParks remarkably reached a diverse audience, ensuring that recruitment efforts resonated with underrepresented groups. The strategic use of social media advertising, coupled with videography, resulted in significant outcomes and benefits, with a 115% increase in job applications, surpassing previous recruitment efforts and ensuring that essential positions were filled. The campaign also strengthened community engagement, generating over 90,000 video views and a 60% increase in social media followers. Sustainability was a core aspect of the campaign. By focusing on long-term workforce development, the initiative established a replicable model for ongoing recruitment efforts. By creatively highlighting employment opportunities, RivCoParks not only met its hiring goals but also cultivated a deeper appreciation for the vital role park professionals play in the community. This campaign serves as a model for innovative, inclusive recruitment marketing, setting a new standard for engaging and effective workforce development in the parks and recreation field.

Planning Initiative

Nominee: Division Planning Session

Organization: Charlotte County Government, Florida

Narrative:

The Community Services Recreation Division Planning Session (DPS) is an annual two-day meeting for strategizing division operations for the coming year. All supervisory staff participate in the DPS including recreation, aquatics and maintenance. The Community Services Department Director, Recreation Division Manager, and Department Community Services Coordinator each contribute to the planning session. The Recreation Division's five recreation centers and three aquatic facilities provide programs and services throughout Charlotte County, in addition to managing all facility and athletic field rentals. The division is also responsible for operating of the Charlotte Sports Park - spring training home of the Tampa Bay Rays Major League Baseball organization. The Recreation Division is nationally accredited by the Commission for the Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) through the National Recreation and Park Association. As an accredited agency the division is required to maintain an exceptionally high level of standards in the delivery of its programs and services. The DPS has been an annual formal program since 2014 and is now an integral part of the Recreation Division's planning process.

Universal Accessibility

Nominee: Inclusive Programming

Organization: Metroparks Toledo, Ohio

Narrative:

Since beginning our inclusive programming focus in 2024, we've had over 160 requests for adaptations during group and fieldtrip programs. Through our public programs we have served over 3,500 individuals who have identified as needing adaptations. The following are only a few examples of how we have created a culture of inclusivity at our programs. The Recreation Equipment Catalog (REC) which Metroparks created, utilizes universal design as a guide, meaning the information in this catalog helps everyone - with or without disabilities - know what to expect during a program. The easily accessible online REC removes the unknowns of attending a program. Hard questions such as, "Can I do this if I have no arm strength? What if I have trouble hearing?" are answered before arriving at the park. Technology is a great aid but Metroparks also focuses on creativity for inclusivity. For example, our Disabled and Proud Event had over 150 participants - some coming from hours away. This event took 60 volunteers and staff from partner agencies. Activities included a Disability March, 3-vs-3 all-abilities wheelchair basketball tournament, tree climbing, indoor archery, explorer trolley rides, hammocking, and rides on the action track chair, freedom grit chair, and two of our adaptive tricycles. Every programmer is trained on providing adaptations on the fly - this can be seen at all nonregistration based events. A large swimming pool we've made mobile is breaking barriers; a banquet table with sawhorse legs is a transfer board for those who need to go from their wheelchair over the pool edge into the kayak. A mobile aerial rig provides height to replicate the "tree climbing" experience. These mobile programs allow us to travel to underserved areas or to those with transportation limitations. To help supplement our equipment and events we have also received grants and sponsorships totaling over \$40,000.

Social Justice

Nominee: The Wonder Wagon

Organization: Fairfax County Park Authority, Virginia

Narrative:

The Fairfax County Park Authority's (FCPA) new mobile nature center - The Wonder Wagon - demonstrates our commitment to equity, inclusion, and community engagement by removing barriers of access to nature-based programming. FCPA serves more than 1.2 million residents over 400 square miles. Data shows that for many, particularly those in vulnerable neighborhoods, access to FCPA's five award-winning nature centers is often prohibitive due to distance, financial burdens and/or lack of adequate transportation connections. FCPA unveiled 'The Wonder Wagon' to bring nature to the community. The initiative will ensure that all residents, regardless of location or socioeconomic status, have an opportunity to participate in environmental education and stewardship programs. The electric Ford E-Transit van is wrapped in colorful nature-themed art and it definitely draws a crowd. Inside, the van is stocked with bug and wildlife exhibits, binoculars and a wide range of supplies to support hours of nature-based activities and exploration. The van is staffed by a team of naturalists equipped to connect visitors to nature wherever they are - even in more urbanized environments. "This wonderful educational and fun program with its hands-on, interactive activities and opportunities for environmental exploration was able to captivate both the kids and adults," said Salima Hassoni, Youth Services Manager with the George Mason Regional Library. "They were delighted to learn about the fascinating insects and birds that live in and around them and shared with us that they would love to enjoy more Wonder Wagon programs." The Wonder Wagon team forged partnerships with schools and after-school care programs, libraries, non-profit organizations, resource centers and more to host 108 activations reaching 7,400 participants in just eight months of operation. Both rates exceeding the initial goals of 150 events and 3,500 participants over a 12-month period.

Professional - New

Nominee: Rachel Doellman

Organization: Great Parks, Ohio

Population class:

Narrative:

Rachel Doellman joined Great Parks in 2022 and quickly improved how it shares its story with the community - inspiring greater park visitation and strengthening partnerships with key stakeholders. Rachel delivered major innovations to improve Great Parks' appeal to today's guests while strengthening the foundation for future growth. Within just a few months of starting, Rachel launched a new brand identity for Great Parks to better reflect what it means to the community. This generational, multi-year transition touches every aspect of daily operation for its 1,000+ employees and 7 million annual guests. She led marketing efforts for the launch of Great Parks' signature wintertime "Holidays on the Farm" event, growing it from a startup generating a 40% increase in attendance from 2022 to 2023. Rachel launched the "Your Levy Legacy" marketing theme to share the impact of public investment in the parks. She introduced the award-winning Great Parks Passport to encourage broader exploration of the district's 22 destinations, with distribution topping 5,000 in its first half year. Her reenvisioned employee communications platform, "Behind the Wild", and upgraded corporate communications initiative, "Corporate Connections" help the district speak with one voice to these key constituencies. Under Rachel's leadership, Great Parks maintained public support through one of the biggest projects in its history - the renewal of its iconic Sharon Lake. Rachel has been similarly active behind the scenes. She has a prominent role in the district's digital transformation project, including a new website and critical upgrades to back end digital processes. She oversaw the launch of a new project management tool and elevated the district's reputation management practice. Through all of these accomplishments, she was simultaneously building a marketing team with five accomplished professionals, while assuming additional responsibility through management of the Great Parks events team.

Professional - Fellow

Nominee: Beth Landahl

Organization: Dakota County Parks, Minnesota

Narrative:

During Beth's 30-year tenure at Dakota County Parks, she has continuously advocated for inclusion, access, equity, and quality to be imbedded in the parks system through everything we do. Every day she shows up to whole-heartedly serve the public in a way that is kind, genuine and seeks to build not only excellent parks and greenways, but a better world. Some of her achievements include her role in the development of the Park Visitor Services Plan, which was adopted in 2017, and revolutionized Dakota County Parks approach and commitment to providing high-quality and inclusive visitor services to the public. Some of the outcomes of that plan have been the establishment of a parks outreach program, special events program, and increased support for outdoor education opportunities in the parks. From when the plan was adopted in 2017 until 2022, park visitation increased 63% over baseline. From 2006 to 2022, annual visitation grew from 911,000 to 2,919,323. The targets set in the plan for awareness and outreach, outdoor education, events, and facility rentals were met in 2023. The outreach program received the Marketing Award from NACPRO in 2022 due to the support that Beth provided for the program, both in its creation, development, and implementation. In addition to Beth's professional achievements, which are many, she also intentionally cultivates an environment where staff can thrive, connect, and grow. She manages the Visitors Services department in a way that promotes innovation, leadership, ongoing learning, and teamwork. Her open and flexible mindset coupled with a deep experience and understanding of the park's profession has allowed her to embrace new ideas, approaches and ways of navigating our work. This is an uncommon and powerful combination of attributes that allows her not only to be receptive to new ideas, but to champion them.

Professional - Lifetime

Nominee: Ralph Schultz

Organization: Forest Preserve District of Will County, Illinois

Narrative:

For over 31 years, Ralph Schultz has dedicated his career to the Forest Preserve District of Will County, serving as Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer since 2016. His leadership has driven significant expansion, strategic investments, and vital improvements, ensuring the District remains true to its mission of conservation, education, and recreation. Ralph played a key role in increasing the District's land holdings by more than 50%, opening or enhancing nearly 50 access areas and trails, and restoring thousands of acres of natural habitat. His efforts have strengthened public access, preserved critical green spaces, and enhanced biodiversity. Among his many accomplishments, Ralph led recent enhancements to the Four Rivers Environmental Education Center, achieving the National Inclusion Project's first-ever nature center accreditation. He also spearheaded the revitalization of Hidden Oaks Nature Center and oversaw key improvements to regional trails, including the Old Plank Road Trail, Joliet Junction Trail, and the expansion of the Veterans Memorial Trail. His vision became reality with the long-awaited installation of two pedestrian bridges over the DuPage River and Interstate 55, connecting communities and regional trail networks. Beyond his role, Ralph has contributed extensively to professional organizations, serving as a NACPRO Director, Bylaws Committee Chair, and Awards Committee member. He has also been active in IPRA, IACFPD, and Chicago Wilderness, demonstrating his unwavering dedication to public service. Ralph Schultz exemplifies leadership, vision, and commitment, making him an outstanding candidate for the 2025 NACPRO Lifetime Professional Award.

Professional - Lifetime

Nominee: Bill Maasen

Organization: Johnson County Park and Recreation District, Kansas

Narrative:

I am honored to nominate Bill Maasen for the NACPRO Lifetime Award in recognition of his nearly four decades of exceptional service to the park and recreation industry. Bill's career has been transformative, particularly in Johnson County, Kansas, where his vision and leadership has shaped the community's beloved parks and green spaces. He will be retiring on June 21, 2025. Beginning in 1986 as Johnson County Park and Recreation District's (JCPRD) first Land Acquisition Specialist, he successfully acquired thousands of acres for parks, including the development of the JCPRD Streamway Trail System and many regional parks. Bill also secured significant donations, including a \$1 million gift for Kill Creek Park, highlighting his exceptional ability to connect with others. Promoted to Superintendent of Parks & Golf Courses in 2008, Bill raised park maintenance and preservation standards to new heights. His leadership extended to national and regional organizations, where he played key leadership roles in NACPRO, NRPA, KRPA, and the NSPR. Bill has also been a tireless advocate for sustainability, accessibility, and green spaces, contributing to regional planning efforts like the restoration of the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant and the development of the Kansas City MetroGreen initiative. He has had a lasting impact on policy, including his work on NRPA's Open Space Task Force. In addition to his leadership roles, Bill's dedication to professional development is evident in his Certified Park and Recreation Professional certification, as well as numerous honors, such as the KRPA Distinguished Fellow Award and the NRPA Midwest Region Fellow Award. His mentorship of emerging professionals has further solidified his legacy. Bill's dedication to parks and recreation, both locally and nationally, and his commitment to shaping future leaders, make him a deserving recipient of the NACPRO Lifetime Award.