

# 2026 NACPRO Award Recipients

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**Key to Classes**

- Class 1 Award: Agencies with a population service area of less than 200,000
- Class 2 Award: Agencies with a population service area from 200,000 – 749,999
- Class 3 Award: Agencies with a population service area from 750,000 – 1,999,999
- Class 4 Award: Agencies with a population service area over 2,000,000

## **Outstanding Public Official**

**Nominee: Kathleen O'Connor, Commissioner**

**Organization:** Westchester County Parks, New York

### **Narrative:**

Appointed in 2010 as the first female Commissioner of Westchester County Parks, Recreation and Conservation, serves as chief executive of New York State's most comprehensive county park systems. 259 full-time employees, \$82 million operating budget, more than 18,000 acres across 50+ facilities, including Amusement Park, Arena, two farms, six golf courses, three beaches, five pools, six nature preserves, and significant cultural resources welcome more than three million visitors annually. The first county parks department in New York State to achieve national accreditation in 2003 and four reaccreditation cycles in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024, reflecting a sustained commitment to national standards of excellence. Commissioner O'Connor introduced the Pride in Parks performance management system, resulting in 98 percent of facilities annually meeting or exceeding established quality benchmarks, and has directed an ongoing capital investment program exceeding \$600 million focused on infrastructure renewal, ecological restoration, biodiversity protection, and long-term conservation stewardship. Her tenure includes significant expansion of recreational programming, engaging more than 500,000 residents each year, as well as nationally recognized leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the establishment of a drive-through testing site at Glen Island and a temporary hospital at the Westchester County Center. Beginning her career in 1980 as a Recreation Supervisor at Camp Morty, she rose through the ranks while championing programs for underserved youth, mentoring future leaders, founding the PRC Academy, serving on professional boards, earning numerous honors, and exemplifying the highest ideals of public service, leaving a lasting legacy of equitable access, environmental stewardship, and community well-being.

## **Outstanding Support Organization**

**Nominee: Cincinnati Off-Road Alliance (CORA)**

**Organization:** Great Parks, Ohio

### **Narrative:**

Cincinnati Off-Road Alliance (CORA), a group committed to advancing a world-class trail system in Greater Cincinnati, is an outstanding support organization for Great Parks, with trail advocacy, collaboration on trail planning and development, event planning and conservation volunteerism to improve parks that host the trails. In 2025, CORA partnered with Great Parks to open two major off-road trails in Hamilton County. The 1.5-mile mountain bike trail at Avoca Trailhead welcomes beginning mountain bikers and hikers, while providing improved access for adaptive mountain bikers, to explore a scenic river valley. CORA is partnering with Great Parks to make this the first in a network of trails along the river. CORA also worked with Great Parks in 2025 on the planning and opening of a new mountain bike skills course and skills loop trail at Mitchell Memorial Forest (MMF). Both additions were instantly successful, attracting new and experienced riders. These new trails build on the years-long partnership between Great Parks and CORA, focusing on what was the first purpose-built mountain bike trail in the county, an 8.2-mile circuit at MMF. CORA takes responsibility for the maintenance of these trails, with volunteer days scheduled May-July. CORA members volunteer beyond trails, through invasive species removal and tree plantings in the parks. All told, in 2025, CORA volunteers gave more than 500 volunteer hours with Great Parks. CORA's marketing efforts have helped make Great Parks trails a significant regional tourism attraction. The CORA team are powerful advocates for improving mountain biking and off-road experiences, benefiting the entire region. CORA's partnership with Great Parks is critically important because trail expansion was the top priority the public established for Great Parks in its master plan. Mountain biking delivers outstanding experiences for park guests while highlighting the natural beauty and conservation leadership that Great Parks offers.

## **Outstanding Volunteer**

**Nominee: Sue Gorr and Anne Stake**

**Organization:** Forest Preserves of Cook County, Illinois

### **Narrative:**

The Forest Preserves of Cook County, one of the largest conservation districts in the nation, relies on dedicated volunteers to help steward over 70,000 acres of public land. Among these volunteers, Sue Gorr and Anne Stake stand out for their extraordinary commitment, leadership, and impact. For more than 20 years, Sue and Anne have served as Site Stewards at Jens Jensen and Deer Grove West, an 1,800-acre preserve complex in northwest Cook County. Leading the Deer Grove Natural Area Volunteers, they have guided restoration work that has revitalized prairie ecosystems, protected migratory bird habitat, and strengthened biodiversity. Their advocacy and collaboration have supported large-scale restoration projects contributing to the 2017 designation of Deer Grove as a Land and Water Reserve. Their stewardship extends beyond fieldwork. They are trained community scientists who monitor rare plants and butterflies, contributing critical data to the Plants of Concern program and the Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network. Sue leads a bumblebee monitoring program through the U. S. Geological Survey, that has resulted in the identification of the federally endangered rusty patched bumble bee at Forest Preserve sites. Sue and Anne lead hands-on restoration efforts, including invasive species management, prescribed burns, and seed collection. Sue manages a native seed program that supports over 100 plant species, while Anne developed and oversees the Weed Watcher program, training volunteers to identify and map invasive plants. Sue and Anne organize and supervise weekly workdays, mentor hundreds of volunteers annually, and foster an inclusive, welcoming community. Their commitment has inspired a new generation of conservation leaders and advocates who will help care for the Forest Preserves. Sue and Anne are truly outstanding volunteers who have helped our public lands thrive, inspired others to volunteer, and mentored future leaders in conservation and stewardship.

## **Outstanding Volunteer**

**Nominee: Dale Shields**

**Organization:** Lake County Forest Preserves, Illinois

### **Narrative:**

Dale Shields has volunteered with the Lake County Forest Preserves since 1989, first in restoration, then in our Native Seed Nursery. In 2023, he added bumble bee monitoring, identifying the federally endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bee and other pollinators in the Forest Preserves. But of all his contributions, the Lake County Seed Collection Guide is perhaps most impactful. At 307 pages, the Guide is an essential restoration tool for both professionals and volunteers. It is a collaboration between Dale, an accomplished photographer, and Stewardship Ecologist Kelly Schultz. It documents 589 native species found in Lake County, but it is relevant far beyond our region. Over 5,000 hours, Dale took more than 6,000 photos to narrow the selection to 2,000 images in the tome. But his work goes well beyond photography. Dale located individual plants in all kinds of habitats, flagged them, then hiked with a backpack of gear to revisit multiple times to capture them at "peak ripeness" during good weather and lighting. He then brought samples to take ex situ shots in a lab. He mastered the technique to stitch images together, determining how to measure the lens and zoom, graph the calculations, and overlay accurate measurements on each photo. The Guide is a critical tool for Forest Preserves staff and volunteers. Approximately 450 books have been given or sold, most in the Midwest, but some as far as New Jersey and Maryland. The largest customer is the 70,000-acre Forest Preserve District of Cook County. It is also free online and has been downloaded more than 1,000 times. Not content with stopping at native seeds, in 2025, Dale began work on a new guide - this time on pollinators. He has been photographing in the preserves for five years, documenting more than 500 species to date, and photographed 100 species in the lab last year. The scope, scale, and reach of Dale's contributions as a volunteer are vast, their value immeasurable. He is most deserving of this award.

## **Park and Recreation Program - Class 4**

**Nominee: Aquatic Adventure Camp**

**Organization:** East Bay Regional Park District, California

### **Narrative:**

For nine seasons, the East Bay Regional Park District's (EBPRD) Aquatic Adventure Camp Program (AACP) has delivered a meaningful, lifesaving impact to East Bay communities by reimagining water safety education and encouraging an engaging park and recreation experience. Designed to serve youth with limited swimming ability, AACP advances equity, access, and public safety through an innovative, recreation-friendly approach. Led by Pete Dequincy and the EBRPD Lifeguard Services team, AACP is a collaborative partnership between the Park District and the California Department of Water Resources, and the Regional Parks Foundation. This collaboration weaves together a state approved safety education with hands-on aquatic recreation, ensuring participants gain practical water competency skills. Alternative from traditional swim lessons, AACP uses a multidisciplinary curriculum that includes swimming, boating, rafting, and stand-up paddleboarding. In 2025, 164 youth with introductory swimming level experiences developed critical self-rescue and decision-making skills at Don Castro Regional Recreation Area. The program is elevated with supervised open-water experience at Lake Del Valle, where participants apply their skills in real life. AACP's measurable model has now served hundreds of children across the East Bay, proving that effective water competency training can be delivered through fun, inclusive park programming. The program also cultivates a strong professional culture, empowering staff to serve as educators, mentors and leaders. The Aquatic Adventure Camp is a high-quality program, engineered by Pete Dequincy and the East Bay Regional Park District Lifeguard Services Team that serves as a model to be replicated nationwide. EBRPD

**Annual Report:** [https://issuu.com/ebprdlifeguardservices/docs/2024\\_annual\\_report](https://issuu.com/ebprdlifeguardservices/docs/2024_annual_report)

## **Park and Recreation Program - Class 1**

**Nominee: Goochland Powhatan Farmers Market**

**Organization:** Goochland County Parks and Recreation, Virginia

### **Narrative:**

The Goochland Powhatan Farmers Market inaugural season marked a resounding success through innovative inter-county collaboration between Goochland and Powhatan Parks and Recreation Departments. Following the retirement of Lisa Dearden, from non-profit RVAg, the counties partnered to deliver weekly markets: Tuesdays at Goochland and Thursdays in Powhatan Village, from May through September. A part-time Market Manager was recruited to lead planning, vendor recruitment, programming, and operations. The manager assumed day-to-day oversight - including setup, vendor check-in, site management, musicians, food trucks, and number counts. At the Goochland Market we welcomed 45 unique vendors and drew 6,185 total visitors across 18 operating days, averaging 344 attendees per week with a peak of 425 on September 30. Revenue totaled \$14,276.88 against a \$15,000 budget, yielding a modest net cost of \$723.12 - nearly break-even in year one, with strong projections for profitability in 2026 via reinstated application fees, reduced one-time expenses, and growing sponsorships from partners like Renewal by Andersen and Goochland Farm Bureau. Vendors gave high marks for organization, communication, welcoming atmosphere, improved visibility, flow, and comfort. The markets delivered fresh local food, supported small businesses, boosted village economic activity, activated public spaces, and fostered community connections, and public health. Marketing through social media spotlights, themed weeks, food trucks, and live music drove strong turnout. Staff feedback emphasized the program's value as a direct extension of Parks and Recreation, building meaningful vendor and resident relationships. This resilient, community-centered launch exemplifies effective partnership, adaptive leadership, and lasting local impact - laying a solid foundation for expansion, including SNAP benefits, family activities, and year-round opportunities in 2026.

## **Park and Recreation Program - Class 4**

**Nominee: Parks with Purpose**

**Organization:** OC Parks, California

### **Narrative:**

Parks with Purpose is a free, engaging 10-week curriculum designed by OC Parks to connect fourth grade students with the natural world around them. Through compelling videos, classroom lessons and outdoor learning components, Parks with Purpose helps students understand and appreciate the natural resources and historical places that OC Parks works to protect. OC Parks manages nearly 60,000 acres of open space, parkland, beaches and historic sites and offers hundreds of free events and programs for all ages and abilities to connect with nature and visit beautiful outdoor spaces. Parks with Purpose offers a unique opportunity to connect students in underserved communities with nature by bringing OC Parks to them in a classroom setting through engaging hands-on lessons and compelling and interactive videos at no cost. Parks with Purpose lesson plans were carefully developed to align with California fourth grade learning standards that seamlessly integrate into the school day using engaging topics including archaeology, paleontology, state history and geology, as well as emphasizing responsible park stewardship through discussions about watersheds, conservation, pollution and more. These concepts form a natural tie-in to OC Parks' rich history and local environmental significance and encourage students to sustain and steward the County's natural, historical and cultural resources. Research has shown there is a "nature gap" that disproportionately impacts low-income communities with access to the benefits of spending time in nature. For most schools in Orange County, the average school budget does not allow for weekly field trips. Parks with Purpose offers a creative solution by bringing relevant park concepts into the classroom for free. Each classroom kit includes all necessary materials to complete the 10-week program, along with tailored video content featuring OC Parks staff in the field and free branded stickers, notebooks and T-shirts for participants.

## **Park and Recreation Program - Class 3**

**Nominee: Movie in the Park / Movies on the Trails**

**Organization:** Orange County Parks and Recreation Division, Florida

### **Narrative:**

Movie in the Park and Movies on the Trails events have a long history with Orange County Parks and Recreation but 2025 was a banner year for attendance with 2,322 adults and kids participating at 15 sites. Special Events staff selected the animated Shrek and Madagascar series, expecting to bring fans of each to more than one location. The movies, held in February, October, November and December 2025, were: Shrek, Shrek 2, Shrek the Third and Shrek Forever After; Madagascar, Madagascar Escape 2 Africa (for Movies on the Trails) and Madagascar 3 "Europe's Most Wanted; and Shrek the Halls and Merry Madagascar as part of one park's annual holiday event. Graphics staff created a flyer listing all movies, dates and locations, which could be handed out throughout the year at community outreach events, as well as a banner for each site. Marketing staff partnered with Orange County's six commissioners: when any of the Commissioners accepted the Facebook co-host request for a movie in their district, it populated to their Facebook event list, thus gaining more exposure and reaching more residents. Each received a pdf and jpg of the individual movie flyer to include in their community e-newsletter. Posting to Parks' Twitter/X, Marketing tagged Commissioners who had an account so they could "retweet". Each month's events were publicized the in Parks and Recreation monthly e-newsletter, which has about 40,000 emails and averages about 20,000 opens. Using a portable projector for DVDs, linked to a sound system, each movie was presented outdoors on a large inflatable screen at 15 parks. Each site also had food vendors and lawn games, such as corn hole, for families to enjoy prior to sunset. Attendance totaled 2,322 adults and kids for the year, giving families hours of togetherness in the outdoors - creating memories for a lifetime.

## **Park and Recreation Program - Class 3**

### **Nominee: Schools in Pools Program**

**Organization:** Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation, Florida

#### **Narrative:**

Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation Department's Aquatics Division, in partnership with the Drowning Prevention Coalition, Children's Services Council, and the School District of Palm Beach County, proudly nominates the Schools in Pools Program at Pioneer Park Aquatic Center in Belle Glade, Florida.

Belle Glade is an underserved community with historically high drowning rates. Recognizing the urgent need for equitable water safety education, the Aquatics Division and its partners developed a collaborative program delivering lifesaving swim instruction directly to elementary students during the school day. This approach removes barriers such as transportation, cost, and access, ensuring all children have the opportunity to learn critical skills.

Funded by the Drowning Prevention Coalition and Children's Services Council, hundreds of students have received free swim lessons and water safety education. A key focus was inclusion, with adaptive instruction for Exceptional Student Education classes so children with disabilities participated safely and successfully. This commitment to equity and accessibility addresses one of the most preventable causes of childhood injury and death.

The program's impact extends beyond swimming competency. It has strengthened trust among schools, families, and parks professionals, fostering community health and safety. Its success has inspired the School District to explore expansion throughout the Glades and countywide, utilizing additional aquatic centers.

Schools in Pools exemplifies excellence in parks and recreation through innovative partnerships, community-focused programming, and measurable public safety outcomes. Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation and its partners are proud of this initiative and its lasting contribution to drowning prevention and community well-being.

## **Park and Recreation Program - Class 2**

### **Nominee: Agents of Discovery**

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

### **Narrative:**

Agents of Discovery is a free, interactive mobile app that transforms Sarasota County Parks into self-guided, outdoor learning adventures for families. Launched in June 2025 by Sarasota County Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources in partnership with University of Florida/IFAS Extension Sarasota County, the program uses place-based missions to engage children and caregivers in hands-on exploration of local ecology, conservation and natural resources. Designed for ages 6 - 12 but enjoyable for all ages, Agents of Discovery blends technology, education and physical activity to encourage outdoor play, environmental awareness and repeat park visitation. Missions can be completed anytime at a participant's own pace, increasing accessibility. Content is available in English with automatic translation into Spanish, French and Mandarin. In 2025, eight missions were active, with four additional missions launched Jan. 1, 2026. Initial missions debuted June 4 at Venice Area Audubon Rookery and Pinecraft Park, followed by Red Bug Slough Preserve on July 1. From June 4 through Dec. 31, 2025, participants completed 771 mission plays, demonstrating strong public engagement. Analytics show mission completion peaked during summer months and winter school break, aligning with family recreation and school-year schedules. Promotion included social media, media releases, print materials, website updates and live outreach at major community events such as National Public Lands Day/Take a Child Outside and the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program 25th Anniversary Celebration. In fall 2025, "Field Agent" incentives were introduced to encourage multi-park participation. Participants earned Mission Badge stickers for completed missions, while families completing all missions received a Field Agent T-shirt or plush toy. By turning parks into interactive classrooms, Agents of Discovery delivers measurable community impact and strengthens how families connect with public lands.

## **Developed Recreation Parks and Facilities - Class 4**

### **Nominee: Loggerhead Park and Mooring Field**

**Organization:** Broward County Parks and Recreation, Florida

### **Narrative:**

Loggerhead Park Mooring Field, opened on October 10, 2025, is a landmark achievement for Broward County Parks and Recreation and the first mooring field of its kind in Broward County. Purposefully designed to expand recreational boating access while safeguarding marine resources, the facility sets a new benchmark for sustainable waterfront recreation. Strategically located along the Intracoastal Waterway in Hollywood, the mooring field features fore-and-aft mooring slips for vessels up to forty feet, offering transient boaters safe, well-regulated overnight accommodations within walking distance of local dining, entertainment, and coastal attractions. Developed through a rigorous, multi-agency permitting process, including approvals from the Broward County Department of Resilient Environment, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, the project reflects a strong commitment to environmental protection and regulatory excellence. The facility incorporates an aluminum floating dock with an on-site sewage pump-out station, freshwater service, and fire safety infrastructure, significantly reducing pollution risks while improving vessel safety and resilience against derelict boats. The facility has quickly proven its value as a safe, well-managed destination for transient boaters. As one of five pocket parks within Hollywood North Beach Park, Loggerhead Park pays tribute to the threatened loggerhead sea turtle while demonstrating how high-intensity recreation and environmental stewardship can coexist. The Loggerhead Park Mooring Field stands as a model of thoughtful planning, operational excellence, and sustainability, establishing a new standard for active waterfront recreation in Broward County

## **Developed Recreation Parks and Facilities - Class 2**

### **Nominee: Lake Betty Park Redevelopment**

**Organization:** Charlotte County Community Services, Florida

### **Narrative:**

Lake Betty is a 3.37-acre neighborhood park situated on the Conway Waterway in the Parkside Community Redevelopment Area. The Parkside CRA was established in 2011 and through their Citizen's Master plan as well as the Charlotte County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Lake Betty was identified as deficient with significant need for improvements. Through the joint efforts of the Community Services Department and the Parkside CRA, the Master Planning process of the park began in 2019. This process included multiple public meetings to gather feedback, presentations of concept plans, grant applications through FRDAP and phased construction. The master planning process was completed in fiscal year 2021 and funding for construction was allocated through Capital Improvement funds and a \$400,000 grant through the Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program with a construction completion date of April 2025. Based on the approved concept plan, phase 1 of construction was completed and the park opened to the public on April 30, 2025. The following new amenities were installed: New 2-5 playground, New 5-12 playground, Ninja Warrior Course, (2) 12x12 pavilions, (1) 12x20 pavilion, Walking paths for accessible connectivity to all amenities. The improvements of this park have provided a positive quality of life impact for all neighbors in the Parkside CRA and Charlotte County. Some social media comments include "beautiful upgrades", "thank you for the team putting it together, it looks amazing so far" and "we saw it and can't wait". Overall, the completion of phase 1 took a run-down neighborhood park and made it a recreation destination!

## **Developed Recreation Parks and Facilities - Class 3**

### **Nominee: Wallace Lake Improvements**

**Organization:** Cleveland Metroparks, Ohio

#### **Narrative:**

In June 2025, Cleveland Metroparks completed the \$2.6 million Wallace Lake Improvement Project, transforming one of the most beloved destinations within Mill Stream Run Reservation, which attracts nearly two million visitors annually. Formerly a sandstone quarry turned swimming lake in the 1940s, Wallace Lake's aging amenities were no longer meeting community needs. This project revitalized the area with modern, accessible, and year-round amenities designed to enhance quality of life, expand recreation and welcome new audiences. Key improvements included a new seasonal concession building, a four-season pavilion with garage doors and fireplace, modern ADA-accessible restrooms, improved beach access, expanded parking, volleyball courts and year-round community gathering spaces. Expanded outdoor education offerings, kayak rentals and new storage for water sports further enhanced recreation. A new paved trail connection links the lake to Cleveland Metroparks' extensive trail network, improving access for visitors. Post-opening surveys revealed that 26% of visitors were experiencing Wallace Lake for the first time, indicating significant regional interest generated by the improvements. The majority of respondents reported being "extremely satisfied" with the new amenities, 98% said they plan to return, and 95% would recommend Wallace Lake to others. Despite opening in June, visitation to the reservation increased by 8% year-over-year, and car counts in parking lots adjacent to Wallace Lake increased 12% year-over-year. The project was funded through corporate and philanthropic support and leveraged in-house planning, design, and construction expertise alongside community partners to minimize expense while maximizing impact. Media outreach, storytelling and the addition of Wallace Lake to the Park District's Summer Concert Series further amplified community awareness. The project ensures Wallace Lake remains accessible, sustainable and welcoming for generations to come.

## **Developed Recreation Parks and Facilities - Class 2**

### **Nominee: Nokomis Community Park Improvements Project**

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

#### **Narrative:**

The mission of Sarasota County Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources is to provide clean, safe and inclusive parks with diverse opportunities for all. This commitment is reflected in improvements completed at Nokomis Community Park in 2025. Celebrated with a ribbon cutting on May 14, 2025, the 17-acre park reopened with enhancements designed to better serve residents and visitors of all ages and abilities. Project improvements include eight new lighted pickleball courts; resurfaced tennis and basketball courts, with added lighting on the tennis courts; shade structures; a large pavilion; picnic shelters; and an outdoor restroom with a drinking fountain. New sidewalks, landscaping and upgraded utilities enhance safety, accessibility and long-term sustainability. These improvements increased the park's capacity to support active recreational use, including organized sports, free play and daily activity. The Nokomis Community Center also received upgrades, including new flooring, fresh paint, updated kitchen cabinets and window treatments, and remodeled restrooms, improving the functionality of indoor rental and gathering spaces. Additional amenities include a large playground, covered outdoor basketball court, kayak launch, fishing pier, shell trails and picnic areas, creating a diverse recreational environment. A redesigned Legacy Trail connection brings users through the park to the outdoor restrooms, establishing Nokomis Community Park as a visible and accessible trailhead and expanding opportunities for active transportation and wellness. The park is also home to the Nokomis Community Garden, established in 2001 with support from a Sarasota County Neighborhood Grant and offering 27 garden plots. In addition, the park provides habitat for gopher tortoises, whose burrows support more than 350 species. Thoughtfully updated and rooted in local history, Nokomis Community Park represents a lasting investment in recreation, connectivity and conservation

## **Developed Recreation Parks and Facilities - Class 4**

### **Nominee: Mississippi Gateway Regional Park Redevelopment**

**Organization:** Three Rivers Park District, Minnesota

#### **Narrative:**

In September 2025, a decade of planning, public engagement, design and construction culminated in a grand opening for the new Mississippi Gateway Regional Park in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. Three Rivers Park District and Brooklyn Park combined parkland each agency owned into one park operated by Three Rivers. Located on the Mississippi River, the park offers a wealth of opportunities for visitors to get close to the river and the surrounding land. Governing bodies for both agencies agreed to the concept of combining the parks, and over 1,200 community members shared feedback about what they would like included. Key new features include: (1) The Gateway Center, a combination visitor center/nature center that is the hub for park exploration and discovery. (2) The Treetop Trail elevated walkway, which provides an accessible route from the Gateway Center 900 feet along a ridgeline and offers unparalleled views of the river floodplain. (3) The Mini-Mississippi water play feature, which allows kids of all ages to splash and wade in a shallow water play area to spark curiosity and creativity about the river. (4) The Mississippi Playway, located on a hillside below the Treetop Trail and featuring slides, climbing rocks and nature play elements.

Mississippi Gateway sets an example for how public agencies can work together to re-think how they deliver services to best meet the needs of the public and how authentic public engagement can help shape an exceptional result. Public feedback about the new park features has been overwhelmingly positive, and daily visits to the Gateway Center have far surpassed visits to the previous facility. The park truly has become a gateway for everyone to connect with the Mississippi River and its dynamic environment, and is poised to help visitors discover nature and the river for generations to come.

## **Trails and Corridors - Class 1**

### **Nominee: Pymatuning Valley Greenway Trail Project**

**Organization:** Ashtabula County Metroparks, Ohio

#### **Narrative:**

A 30 year vision of Ashtabula County Metroparks is becoming reality with the opening of two new sections of the Pymatuning Valley Greenway Trail. This southeastern Ashtabula County trail will eventually link the Western Reserve Greenway in Jefferson to Jamestown and Clarion, Pennsylvania. The newly completed 5.2-mile segments stretch from Leon Road to Maple Street near Andover Village Hall, and from Mill Street to Marvin Road, both finished in Spring 2025. The corridor ends just south of Andover Square near Pymatuning Lake State Park and brings the trail within four miles of the Pennsylvania line, where it will connect to Pymatuning Lake State Park. The \$6.2 million project was funded through grants and contributions from partners including the Civic Development Corporation of Ashtabula County, State Capital funds, Clean Ohio Trail Funds, ODOT, Yamaha and local snowmobile clubs. Two phases are now open, offering a 10-foot-wide, paved, ADA-accessible route through woodlands, wetlands, farmland, ponds, creeks, and wildlife habitats such as a heron rookery. The trail serves walkers, cyclists, runners, skaters, cross-country skiers, snowshoers, snowmobilers, and commuters. User feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The trail provides a vital non-motorized transportation link, connecting students to schools, employees to workplaces, and visitors to Andover and Pymatuning Lake State Park. It also reduces travel distance between nearby villages making travel safer. Businesses along Andover's historic Main Street are already benefiting from increased foot and bike traffic. The proximity to Pymatuning State Park enhances demand for local goods such as fishing and camping supplies. Future connections to the State Park, Jefferson, and the Western Reserve Greenway will expand year-round recreation and strengthen nature-based tourism across Ashtabula County.

Follow our progress at <https://www.facebook.com/ashtabula.metroparks> and [www.ashtabulametroparks.com](http://www.ashtabulametroparks.com)

## **Trails and Corridors - Class 4**

### **Nominee: Santa Ana River Trail Wayfinding Project**

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

#### **Narrative:**

The Santa Ana River Trail Wayfinding Project transformed a fragmented, multi-jurisdictional regional trail into a nationally recognized cohesive, safe, and welcoming recreational trail serving Riverside County communities and beyond. Led by the Riverside County Regional Park and Open-Space District (RivCoParks), the project installed over 200 standardized wayfinding and interpretive signs along 20 miles of trail, improving navigation, safety, and access across five cities and more than 50 landowners. Completed over a multi-year planning, design, and implementation timeframe, the project addressed longstanding challenges caused by inconsistent signage, jurisdictional boundaries, and language barriers. Clear orientation, emergency reference information, flood and speed advisories, and bilingual (English/Spanish) signage were incorporated to support first-time users, active transportation, and equitable access for the more than 36,000 residents living along the corridor. Innovative elements included the creation of a unified trail logo symbolizing the three counties connected by the 110-mile Santa Ana River Trail, durable anti-graffiti materials for long-term maintenance efficiency, and the integration of eleven interpretive panels sharing Indigenous, cultural, and historical stories developed in partnership with the Shishonga Tribe and the National Park Service. The project was funded through an innovative use of ARPA funds, allowing rapid delivery without ongoing operational impacts. Public response has been overwhelmingly positive, with trail counters showing a 20 - 33% increase in use following project completion and strong community feedback through social media and partner agencies. The project's complexity, spanning multiple jurisdictions, agencies, and stakeholders, was successfully managed through collaboration, resulting in a sustainable, replicable model for regional trail facilities that enhances safety, stewardship, and community connection.

## **Community Impact Award**

### **Nominee: Outdoor Explore - An Overnight Experience**

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

#### **Narrative:**

RivCoParks developed the Outdoor Explore special event as part of its Outdoor Equity Initiative to address the "Nature Gap" and underserved community. Many Riverside County residents, particularly low-income families, have never experienced camping due to financial constraints, lack of equipment, limited knowledge, safety concerns, or fear of the unknown. Outdoor Explore was designed to remove these barriers by offering a welcoming, fully supported introduction to camping. Outdoor Explore provides free weekend camping experiences at three Regional Parks. Families receive camping gear valued between \$500 - \$800 per household, guided setup assistance, outdoor education, meals, family activities, campfire programs, and opportunities to win additional equipment. Events have structured programming that builds confidence, promotes park safety and etiquette, and fosters environmental stewardship. Participants also receive a free return-visit camping pass to encourage continued park use. The program prioritizes disadvantaged communities across Riverside County, which spans 7,303 square miles and serves approximately 2.53 million residents, with 11 - 12% living below the poverty line. Outreach targeted families in Winchester, Coachella, Indio, Blythe, Hemet, and San Jacinto through schools, community centers, social service partners, and social media. A reservation system using ESRI Survey123 ensured equitable access and real-time evaluation. Across three inaugural events, approximately 1,000 individuals participated, with over 400 people receiving essential camping gear. RivCoParks invested \$60,000 total, including \$10,000 in camping fee waivers and roughly \$50,000 in equipment, food, and prizes. Customer satisfaction reached 99%, and demand filled within one day of registration opening. Due to strong outcomes and community response, four Outdoor Explore events are planned for 2026, further advancing equitable access, wellness, and lifelong connections to nature.

## **Conservation**

### **Nominee: Seed Amplification Program**

**Organization:** Forest Preserves of Cook County, Illinois

#### **Narrative:**

The Forest Preserves of Cook County's Seed Amplification Program (SAP) launched in collaboration with the Chicago Botanic Garden (CBG) is an innovative initiative that addresses a critical gap in regional restoration efforts - the shortage of locally adapted and genetically diverse native seeds. Native seeds are the foundation of healthy and resilient ecosystems and are critical to human health, wildlife, clean air and water, reduced flooding, and mitigating impacts from climate change. Unfortunately, native seed availability is often limited both locally and nationally as these plants are difficult and time consuming to grow. SAP aims to close this gap using science-based research, data-driven metrics, and leveraging expertise and resources through collaborations and partnerships. Since its inception in 2022, SAP has used a creatively comprehensive approach to seed production utilizing wild seed collection, seed beds, wild seed gardens, large-scale grow-outs, in situ enhancement for at-risk species, and long-term seed banking to secure genetic diversity. Forest Preserves and CBG staff are monitoring collection, production and restoration impacts, and effectiveness - all to reach the goal of producing 2000 pounds of seed annually by 2030. Public support for this program is overwhelmingly positive and enjoys strong volunteer participation. Volunteers as well as workforce development participants are contributing critical labor and expertise to support the program. The Forest Preserves and Chicago Botanic Garden are continuing to conduct community engagement activities to grow awareness of the importance of native seed diversity. We are sharing the successes and lessons learned from this program and hope that this program can serve as a regional and national model. SAP exemplifies an exceptional and innovative conservation achievement that is improving the ecological health of native habitats and public lands.

## **Conservation**

**Nominee: Virmond Park Wetland Restoration and Stormwater Management Project**

**Organization:** Ozaukee County Planning and Parks Department, Wisconsin

### **Narrative:**

The Ozaukee County Planning and Parks Department completed a Wetland Restoration and Stormwater Management Project at Virmond County Park (Park), a 63-acre park in Mequon, Wisconsin with unstable clay bluffs along Lake Michigan. The project implemented recommendations from a Master Plan and Surfacewater/Groundwater Study, which identified that surface water runoff has changed over time causing bluff instability near depressional wetlands. Adjacent residential development has also prevented the continued discharge of surface water from these wetlands and has caused ponding/flooding in the Park and neighboring properties. Objectives included design, engineering, construction and restoration of two expanded wetlands (~1.7 ac) to capture surface water drainage and stormwater from existing wetlands and drainage areas in the problematic park area. Drainage from existing wetlands is now captured with a new sump inlet that allows for discharge away from the bluff into two expanded stormwater wetlands, which provides storage, manages peak flows and improves water quality by allowing TSS, phosphorus and other pollutants to settle, away from the affected neighboring properties. The project advances efforts to manage the park for surface water, stormwater, and groundwater, balances water management with quality native habitat, and manages onsite stormwater along the bluff edge to alleviate neighbor concerns and mitigate bluff erosion. Design and engineering was completed by Emmons and Oliver Resources, Inc. Construction and native restoration was completed by the Ozaukee County Highway and Planning and Parks Departments. Conservation corps teams planted native vegetation to provide coastal habitat, mitigate water quality impacts by filtering and retaining solids and pollutants, assist with stabilizing the bluff, mitigate the loss of the tree canopy due to the invasive emerald ash borer, and provide declining pollinators and birds with key habitat on the Lake Michigan flyway and Important Bird Area.

## **Cultural History**

### **Nominee: Slater Hall Community Center**

**Organization:** Greenville County Parks, Recreation and Tourism, South Carolina

### **Narrative:**

This nomination is for the restoration of Slater Hall in Slater, South Carolina. This project involved the restoration of a historic mill village community center constructed in the 1930's for use in the 21st century. The building was once slated for demolition because it was thought of as unusable and impractical but through the advocacy of its stakeholders the county chose to invest in its future rather than raze it and the community's identity. In accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, the exterior aluminum siding was removed and the underlying wood repaired, the historic windows were refurbished, the roof replaced and the striped awnings installed to promote greater energy efficiency. On the interior, plaster was repaired, missing and deteriorated trim replicated, the original maple floors were patched and refinished, original tile floors replicated, and historic lighting and high-backed sinks reintroduced throughout. In addition to restoring the building to its original appearance the project also brought it up to code, replumbed and rebuilt the restrooms, added a kitchen space, prepped for future technology needs, and discretely added an elevator making the entire building accessible for the first time in its history. The project has resulted in a beautiful piece of architecture being fully utilized once more. The community's senior citizens, people who for the most part grew up in the building as children, now use it almost daily. School age kids also use it for programming all week long making Slater Hall the center of the community once more. This project serves as a case study for what can be accomplished when we look at our existing historic resources, see their potential and commit to doing the right thing for building and a community.

## **Cultural History**

### **Nominee: Bell Ford Bridge Reconstruction**

**Organization:** Hamilton County Parks and Recreation, Indiana

### **Narrative:**

The Bell Ford Bridge reconstruction at Geist Park represents one of Hamilton County Parks and Recreation's (HCPR) most complex and innovative projects. Located in the southeastern corner of Hamilton County at the confluence of Fall Creek and the Geist Reservoir, Geist Park has undergone a series of upgrades in recent years. The centerpiece of these upgrades has been the installation and reconstruction of the historic Bell Ford Bridge, a one-of-a-kind piece of Indiana and engineering history. Originally constructed in 1869, the Bell Ford Bridge is the only known Combination Post Truss bridge remaining in the world and has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 2005. After severe storm damage caused its collapse, Hamilton County acquired the structure from Jackson County in 2018 with the goal of preservation and public reuse. Reconstruction required extensive historical research, technical expertise, and careful planning. Engineers and preservation specialists evaluated thousands of original components and developed a detailed reconstruction plan. Nearly 90 percent of the original iron castings and approximately 40 percent of the original timber were incorporated into the restored bridge. Clear plexiglass side panels were used to allow visitors to view the internal truss system while ensuring safety and long-term durability. Today, the Bell Ford Bridge serves as a critical crossing along the Geist Greenway, improving pedestrian and bicycle connectivity across Fall Creek and linking neighborhoods, schools, and parks. Its presence has increased visitation to Geist Park and established the site as both a recreational destination and a location for historical interpretation. The project was completed through collaboration amongst HCPR, the Hamilton County Highway Department, Jackson County, the City of Fishers, INDOT, and the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization, with federal MPO funding covering the majority of project costs.

## **Innovative Financing**

**Nominee: HighGrain Brewing Partnership**

**Organization:** Great Parks, Ohio

### **Narrative:**

Great Parks implemented an innovative financing partnership with local brewery, HighGrain Brewing, to generate new philanthropic support for nature conservation while expanding community engagement. Through this collaboration, Great Parks and HighGrain launched Parks Light Lager, a co-branded craft beer that directs 5% of sales to Great Parks Forever, the philanthropic partner of Great Parks. Proceeds support conservation work, educational programming and the ongoing stewardship of more than 18,000 acres of protected land. The partnership launched in 2024 with the installation of a large-scale, interactive mural at HighGrain's taproom near Great Parks' Winton Woods, depicting regional greenspaces and wildlife while introducing unfamiliar brewery patrons to Great Parks. In June 2025, the initiative expanded with the release of Parks Light Lager at HighGrain's two taprooms, regional retail outlets and Great Parks' golf courses, snack bars, campgrounds and boathouses. By leveraging an everyday consumer product, Parks Light Lager creates a recurring revenue stream that supplements traditional public funding, grants and earned revenue. Rather than relying on one-time sponsorships or donations, the model ties long-term philanthropic support directly to consumer participation. The initiative reflects Great Parks' commitment to pairing private investment with tax dollars to fulfill priorities identified in its master plan. The partnership between Great Parks and HighGrain Brewing aligns shared values of sustainability and community engagement while requiring minimal operational cost to Great Parks. The visibility of the mural and widespread product distribution have increased awareness and helped establish Parks Light Lager as a recognizable symbol of outdoor recreation and conservation in Greater Cincinnati. Through a familiar, voluntary purchase, customers are empowered to support local parks, strengthening community ownership of the region's natural spaces.

## **Marketing**

### **Nominee: Wine in the Woods Festival**

**Organization:** Howard County Recreation and Parks, Maryland

#### **Narrative:**

Wine in the Woods festival (May 17-18) included wineries, artisans, musicians, breweries, and food. Our department has organized the event for 31 years, attracting 10,000 annually. In 2025, we strived to reach new audiences through robust marketing tactics. From March-May, efforts concentrated on new (providing social media with data on past attendees and collaborating w/ influencers, Google ads, videos, streaming ads) and tried-and-true (social media, posters, signs, dedicated website, radio, street banners, etc.) initiatives. We refined our target by uploading past attendee lists to social media ads - optimizing our return-on-ad-spend; and we committed to high-producing content, including edited and "live" Reels and Stories. This expanded our audience beyond current subscribers. We launched our first "influencer" campaigns, targeting key demographics through local content-creators. One was a ticket giveaway with The Columbia Mom (social media influencer/blogger), delivering 100+ new Instagram followers. Also, a TikTok Influencer engaged with a previously untapped audience (we don't have app). We launched the department's first Google Ad Search campaign. This resulted in increased ticket sales and exposure. Research showed that a successful campaign costs about \$1.00/click - ours was nine cents! The campaign cost \$1,180 (less than one printed ad) and produced 13,515 clicks and 40,201 impressions! Tickets were \$40-\$85, thus nine cents per click on our "purchase" page was excellent! We conservatively gained 1,000+ new customers from this campaign. (We assume it's greater as most buy multiple tickets.) We created (in-house) a 30- and 15-second video about Wine in the Woods and placed it on streaming networks in adjacent zip codes (to event) for \$2,499.98/month. It ran in March and April and netted 67,297 views! These innovative marketing efforts were highly effective and inexpensive compared to print (½-page in publication is \$1,500) and paperless (environmentally friendly).

## **Marketing**

### **Nominee: Suicide Prevention Sign Campaign in Partnership with MHARS**

**Organization:** MetroParks of Butler County, Ohio

#### **Narrative:**

Parks are essential tools for improving mental health, and access to nature can reduce stress and improve well-being. Even people with severe mental illness can find relief by spending time outdoors. While parks can be tools for positive change, they are also places where people may turn when they're in despair. Between 2020-2024, 18 people died by suicide and 17 people died of drug overdoses in Butler County's municipal, township, state, and county parks. MetroParks of Butler County has averaged one suicide a year for the past several years. In 2024, Butler County's local crisis hotline and the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline received over 5,200 calls, demonstrating the local need for mental health support. To address this, MetroParks and the Butler County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery Services Board (MHARS) joined forces to create a sustainable partnership connecting people to life-saving mental health resources. From May to July 2025, MetroParks and MHARS designed and installed mental health crisis lifeline signs in high-traffic areas throughout all 23 MetroParks, making support resources visible to 1.05 million visitors annually. This inter-agency collaboration demonstrates how parks can support and amplify a partner agency's message through strategic marketing. Social media posts reached 23,327 people, approximately 6% of Butler County's population. MetroParks' posts were reshared on MHARS' social media channels, expanding visibility and engagement. Local news outlets also covered the project, ensuring crisis resources reached audiences through multiple channels. The initiative was intentionally designed as a scalable, low-cost, and easy-to-implement model for other park systems. To date, MHARS has expanded this effort through partnerships with five additional park systems, laying the groundwork for a countywide behavioral health prevention network embedded within public green spaces and positioning parks as partners in wellness and crisis prevention.

## **Marketing**

### **Nominee: Find Your Wild**

**Organization:** Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation, Michigan

### **Narrative:**

The Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Find Your Wild! website application illustrates an innovative yet accessible use of technology to solve common challenges among parks agencies in managing location data and in using that data effectively to engage community members in nature-based recreation. We expect the county parks network will find inspiration for how to strategically apply resources to engage new audiences, providing a significant return on investment with low ongoing operating costs. Launched February 2025, Find Your Wild! inspires connection with nature by organizing an overwhelming amount of location-based information into an attractive, clear, responsive website platform. Washtenaw County Parks' Natural Areas Preservation Program has a portfolio of 43 publicly accessible parks and preserves totaling over 6,000 acres throughout the county. Parks' website similarly expanded to a cumbersome inventory of 43 properties that obscured answers to basic questions like which locations have restrooms or allow dogs. Using the ArcGIS Experience Builder platform, Find Your Wild! provides one tap answers to high-frequency questions and enables users to quickly find the precise experience they seek (such as a great fall distance hike with stunning views or a hike for young children with big trees or wide-open views). Not only does it facilitate inspiring experiences, but the platform also creates experiences by engaging the community as co-creators of crowdsourced geotagged images that enrich the visual browsing experience of new trail experiences. Find Your Wild! hosts 113 images of wildlife, nature scenery, trails, and more, submitted by staff, volunteers, and community members. In less than a year, the application has already inspired nearly 32,000 community members to Find Your Wild! Application is embedded into the home page of [washtenaw.org/parks](https://www.washtenaw.org/parks) website and visible at the bottom of this link:

<https://www.washtenaw.org/288/Parks-Recreation>

## **Planning Initiative**

**Nominee: Community Inventory Project**

**Organization:** Charlotte County Community Services, Florida

### **Narrative:**

The Community Inventory Project is a comprehensive planning initiative designed to strengthen program delivery, improve coordination, and ensure equitable access to recreational and community-based services. Developed through a data-driven and collaborative approach, the project involved staff from five recreation facilities, each assigned a specific focus area to support a thorough and methodical data collection process. Staff conducted direct outreach to community organizations and partner agencies to gather detailed information on programs, services, target populations, and service areas, ensuring accuracy and depth in the final inventory. The primary objective was to identify and document programs offered within and surrounding the community by municipal departments, nonprofit organizations, private entities, and educational institutions, creating a centralized planning resource. The completed inventory enhances organizational planning by identifying service gaps, reducing duplication, and supporting strategic partnerships. It has also strengthened interagency relationships by encouraging communication and collaboration among service providers. As a sustainable planning tool, the Community Inventory Project will continue to inform future program development, long-range planning, and community engagement efforts, exemplifying excellence in structured, collaborative, and impactful planning.

## **Planning Initiative**

**Nominee: Planning, Research, and Development Division**

**Organization:** Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation, Florida

### **Narrative:**

In 2025 the Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation Department's Planning, Research, and Development Division demonstrated leadership and innovation by implementing Placer.ai to transform how park usage is currently measured within the County. This initiative addressed a long-standing operational and planning challenge, the lack of consistent and accurate park visitation data. By utilizing Placer.ai's aggregated, anonymized location intelligence, the department replaced manual counts and staff observations with reliable visitation data. Placer.ai allows staff to accurately identify peak usage periods, dwell times, seasonal trends, and attendance at special events across the county. This information directly supports decisions related to each division within our park's department. For the first time, the Department can clearly demonstrate park demand and utilization trends using defensible metrics. A special project utilizing Placer.ai was conducted to determine the service areas for community centers utilizing Placer.ai visitation data. This study identified the percentage of visitors and the geographic areas in which those visitors travel to utilize each community center. The results have allowed the Recreation Services Division to better align program offerings with a verified demand and to plan for potential future expansions of existing centers. Data from this analysis has also allowed the Department to target, through various marketing initiatives, neighborhoods within each service area where visitation data is underrepresented. Additional usage of Placer.ai include monthly visitation reporting and special event specific analysis. The implementation of Placer.ai represents a significant advancement in data driven park planning, placing Palm Beach County as a leader in using the latest technology to enhance public spaces. This achievement demonstrates forward thinking planning, while serving the evolving needs of the community.

## **Universal Accessibility**

**Nominee: Theatre in the Park**

**Organization:** Johnson County Park and Recreation District, Kansas

### **Narrative:**

For over 55 years, Theatre in the Park (TIP) has been a regional cultural cornerstone welcoming approximately 28,000 patrons annually from over 300 zip codes. An affordable and accessible outdoor venue, TIP serves as an important entry point to the arts while providing workforce opportunities for performers, technicians, musicians, and seasonal staff. Informed by a 2021 Concept Plan and JCPRD's ADA Transition Plan, JCPRD identified that aging infrastructure was creating barriers to participation. When State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds became available in 2024, JCPRD's proactive planning allowed for immediate investment in universal equity - transforming TIP into a place where individuals of all abilities can participate fully and independently. The project addressed approximately 150 ADA deficiencies that previously limited access for patrons with disabilities, older adults, caregivers, and families with mobility challenges. Improvements included correcting noncompliant grades, sidewalks, and parking slopes; relocating accessible parking; expanding accessible seating; and constructing family restrooms with adult changing stations and a 67' turning radius. These upgrades move beyond minimum compliance to focus on independence and inclusion. TIP functions as an on ramp to the arts for individuals who may face economic or physical barriers elsewhere. By removing physical obstacles, the project expanded participation while strengthening workforce development. One attendee shared, "We appreciate the upgrade. We can attend to personal restroom procedures with more privacy now. Thank you!" Universal accessibility at TIP contributes to regional economic vitality. With each attendee spending an estimated \$76 in the community, the project supports local businesses and tourism while ensuring TIP remains a welcoming cultural asset. This investment demonstrates how universal equity strengthens participation, community connection, and quality of life for all.

## **Universal Accessibility**

**Nominee:** Lake Atwood Accessibility Improvement Project

**Organization:** McHenry County Conservation District, Illinois

### **Narrative:**

The McHenry County Conservation District proudly nominates the Lake Atwood Accessibility Improvement Project at The Hollows Conservation Area for recognition in accessible site development and expanded outdoor recreation opportunities. Reopened on June 14, 2025, the project represents a transformative milestone in the District's long standing commitment to ensuring that nature is welcoming and available to all. Lake Atwood now features a fully accessible paved trail encircling the lake, a second accessible fishing pier, and an ADA compliant kayak launch, amenities that significantly broaden opportunities for inclusive outdoor recreation. Additional enhancements, including upgraded lighting, benches, and improved parking, further elevate the visitor experience and remove barriers that have historically limited access for individuals with disabilities. The District celebrated the grand reopening with a well attended ribbon cutting ceremony during its annual Hooked on Fishing event, highlighting strong community enthusiasm and support. This project was made possible through a \$200,000 OSLAD grant and an \$80,000 BAAD grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, supplemented by generous contributions from the McHenry County Conservation Foundation. Since its original opening in 1987, The Hollows has been one of the county's most beloved destinations for hiking, paddling, camping, picnicking, and fishing. The recent improvements have sparked heartfelt responses from community members who can now enjoy Lake Atwood in ways previously inaccessible to them. By prioritizing inclusive design and equitable access, the McHenry County Conservation District has set a powerful example of how natural areas can and should be made accessible to everyone. The Lake Atwood project stands as a model for public land agencies committed to expanding outdoor recreation opportunities for all.

## **Professional - New**

**Nominee: Samantha Thies**

**Organization:** Columbus Parks and Recreation, Georgia

### **Narrative:**

Samantha Thies is exceptionally worthy of recognition for this year's award due to her transformative leadership as Community Schools Division Manager for the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department. In just five years with the department, she has produced lasting, measurable impact that has reshaped after-school and out-of-school time programming across Columbus, Georgia. Ms. Thies currently oversees 14 daily after-school programs and has grown participation through intentional program design, consistent quality, and strong community trust. Under her leadership, the division implemented a curriculum exclusively focused on STEAM science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics ensuring students receive enriching, future-ready learning experiences during critical out-of-school hours. A cornerstone of Ms. Thies' success has been her ability to build and strengthen partnerships. She has significantly improved collaboration with the Muscogee County School District, cultivating positive, working relationships with local principals and school leaders. These partnerships have enhanced program alignment, communication, and student support, further solidifying Parks and Recreation as a trusted educational partner. Ms. Thies has also prioritized staff development, ensuring her team receives more training than ever before within the Community Schools Division. This investment has increased program quality, staff retention, and consistency across sites. Through her vision and grant leadership, the department has secured \$778,828 in competitive BOOST grant funding over the past several years, positioning Columbus Parks and Recreation as a statewide leader among park agencies. These funds have expanded access to high-quality programming at little or no cost during a time of increasingly limited resources. Ms. Thies' leadership exemplifies innovation, equity, and excellence, making her highly deserving of this year's recognition

## **Professional - Fellow**

**Nominee: Ken Jones, Director of Land Preservation**

**Organization:** Lake County Forest Preserves, Illinois

### **Narrative:**

2025 was a hugely successful year for land preservation by the Lake County Forest Preserves. A voter referendum passed in November 2024 that, combined with limited bonds, provided \$85 million to protect additional acres. Interest in selling was extremely high in the first year post-referendum, as were expectations from the board and public. Staff estimated the funding will allow us to purchase 2,000 acres over ten years. In just one year, Director of Land Preservation Ken Jones reached 37.5% of that goal, acquiring or placing under contract nearly 750 acres in 2025, including the addition of two new preserves. Ken joined the Forest Preserves as a land preservation intern in July 2002. He transferred his skills and experience as an archivist to organize the land preservation department's systems, records, and procedures. He applied structure and rigor during a time of intense growth: referenda in 1999, 2000, and 2008 provided \$325 million to acquire land and build new trails and preserves. From 2002 through 2024, the Forest Preserves grew by 7,352 acres, nearly 31%. Through his career, Ken developed a depth of knowledge of landowners and property histories; personal relationships with realtors, attorneys, and owners; and deep understanding of the processes, legalities, and terminology needed to move from initial contact to closing, which can span years. To close difficult land transactions in 2025, Ken showed persistence, working through challenges with variety of landowners, from individuals with tax issues, to extended families, to the federal government. At one point in the year, at least 57 separate transactions were in play. He was determined where others would have given up. He works tirelessly to ensure the protection of critical parcels for future generations and goes well beyond what is required in his position description. For these reasons and for the successes in 2025, Ken is most deserving of this award.

<https://www.lcfpd.org/More-Land/>

## **Professional - Fellow**

**Nominee: Kevin Cook**

**Organization:** Westchester County Parks, New York

### **Narrative:**

**Kevin Cook** has served with Westchester County Parks since 2006 and currently serves as Director of Recreation, overseeing a countywide recreation program that serves more than one million residents. He is responsible for program development, staff supervision, budget administration, facility oversight, community engagement, strategic planning, and regulatory compliance.

Under Kevin's leadership, the Recreation Division has expanded year-round programming while maintaining popular traditions that attract diverse audiences and promote active, healthy lifestyles. Many programs are offered free of charge, and he has prioritized inclusive recreation for individuals with disabilities, seniors, and underserved populations.

Signature programs include Bicycle Sundays, the Summer Concert Series, Movies Under the Stars, cultural festivals, youth sports camps, Disabled Dances, senior events, and the Kensico Music Festival and Fireworks. The annual July 3 festival has grown from approximately 2,000 attendees in 2007 to more than 20,000 in 2025. To support this growth, Kevin expanded activities beyond Kensico Dam Plaza to include family programming at Clove Road Field and coordinates the event's extensive public safety and logistical operations.

Kevin oversees hundreds of recreation events each year, managing staff, volunteers, partner agencies, and public safety resources while maintaining high operational standards and fiscal responsibility. He has also introduced innovative offerings such as Puppy Yoga, Zumba, Pop-Up Village, GRIT Ninja Warrior events, and expanded senior and adaptive recreation programs.

Through his leadership, commitment to accessibility, and focus on innovation, Kevin has enhanced recreation opportunities throughout Westchester County and created meaningful experiences for residents of all ages and abilities.

## **Professional - Lifetime**

**Nominee: Harold Harrison**

**Organization:** Cleveland Metroparks, Ohio

### **Narrative:**

Harold Harrison began as Cleveland Metroparks Chief Human Resources Officer in 2010, overseeing all employee hiring, onboarding, recruitment/retention, payroll/benefits, labor/employee relations, succession planning, training/development and volunteer services. Cleveland Metroparks has evolved significantly under Harrison's leadership, expanding nearly 20% in size. This included the establishment of the Lakefront Reservation that required Harrison to oversee the quick, significant expansion of Police, Aquatics and Enterprise departments. Harrison helped drive employee culture, ownership in organizational mission and improved professional development and organizational efficiency for the Park District's 785 full-time staff and 1,200 seasonal employees. His accomplishments include: (1) Launched highly successful employee onboarding program through employee input that connects incoming employees to the mission, values and leadership during a week-long orientation; (2) Strengthened focus on professional development through leadership assessments including quantitative surveys, testing and interviews. The process helps retain top talent (97% organizational retention rate) and provides an employee roadmap for development and success; (3) Streamlined hiring through new online tools to increase efficiency in hiring its annual 1,200 seasonal employees, decreasing time and cost of hiring, reducing staff burden and improving guest service; (4) Introduced a series of Crucial Learning skillsets, including Crucial Conversations training for all employees, providing fundamentals that are woven into our workplace culture and employee handbook; (5) Grown the Volunteer Department (over 7,000 volunteers donated 135,000 hours in 2024), streamlined the intake process and increased community partnerships; (6) Received two National Gold Medal Awards for Excellence in Park and Recreation Management and awarded the NorthCoast 99 award, recognizing top workplaces in Northeast Ohio, 2011 to present.

## **Professional - Lifetime**

**Nominee: Jonathan Vlaming**

**Organization:** Three Rivers Park District, Minnesota

### **Narrative:**

Jonathan Vlaming retired in January after a distinguished 20-year career with Three Rivers Park District that included more than 14 years as Associate Superintendent for Planning, Design and Technology. He has served on the NACPRO Board of Directors for the past eight years and served as NACPRO's liaison to the National Association of Counties for five. Over his Three Rivers career, Jonathan has been involved in acquiring property and developing trails and park projects. Even through the most challenging projects, Jonathan displayed his playful spirit and great sense of humor. Perhaps his most significant contribution was the development and implementation of Three Rivers' five-year Capital Improvement Program (CIP). Juggling hundreds of projects and managing millions of dollars is not an easy task, but Jonathan made it look easy. He presented the CIP to leadership in a way that was transparent, simple to understand and often was accompanied by an original song or poem to lighten the mood. It is not an exaggeration to say Jonathan secured hundreds of millions in funding for Three Rivers. Jonathan was instrumental in planning, design and construction of facilities to help historically underrepresented first-tier communities surrounding Minneapolis connect to nature - efforts that included development of the NACPRO and NRPA award-winning Nine Mile Creek Regional Trail. That trail was built through fully-developed communities and featured more than a mile of boardwalks to elevate the trail above wetlands. He played a key role in the Park District's purchase of a former camp property located on a small lake with some of the best water quality in the Twin Cities region - preserving the land and access to the lake for future generations. His success is due to the great relationships he has built both at Three Rivers and with outside partners. Jonathan has been a wonderful supervisor, colleague and friend, and we hope you'll give him strong consideration for an award.