



**Marion County Park District
Strategic Plan
2025 - 2029**

**A Vision for
the Future**

Introduction

A Message from the Board of Park Commissioners

A Small Amount of Funding Will Make a Difference

Marion County Park District has been in existence for thirty years. A lack of dedicated funding has prevented the park district from making improvements and adding parks that will improve the quality of life in our communities. A core group of volunteers and park commissioners have accomplished remarkable things since the formation of the park district, including the creation of a twelve-mile multi-purpose trail using grants and donations.



A task as simple as replacing a sign is difficult without funding.

The district is faced with the challenge of taking care of the parks and trails with little funding. A proposed tax levy of 0.4 mills is a small request that will make a dramatic difference to the operation of the park district. For just fourteen dollars (\$14) per year per \$100,000 of valuation (or just four cents per day), the park district will be able to make improvements to existing parks, increase the level of maintenance, expand nature programming, and apply for grants that will create new opportunities for our communities.

The Board of Park Commissioners has created a plan to demonstrate how your tax dollars will be invested in Marion County Parks. After you have reviewed the information, please do not hesitate to contact the park district if you have any questions regarding the proposed tax levy. *Park Commissioners Dan Sheridan, Chair; Janine Williams, Vice Chair; Diane Watson, Secretary; Kathie Reed; and Jennifer Conroy.*

Marion County Park District Strategic Plan 2025-2029 A Vision for the Future

History

Marion County Park District was formed in 1994, when Trella Romine suggested to the Marion County Commissioners that a park district be set up under Ohio Revised Code Section 1545 to accept her donation of the land that is now Terradise. The commissioners enthusiastically supported this idea and submitted an application to the Marion County Probate Court on August 26, 1994, requesting the creation of a park district in accordance with Ohio Revised Code Section 1545.02. The name of the district was to be Marion County Park District and was to include all territory within the county. The court conducted a hearing including testimony in support and opposition to the application. Probate Judge Thomas K. Jenkins filed a court order on October 20, 1994, creating the park district. He subsequently appointed three volunteer park commissioners to begin the work of the park district.

For the first few years, volunteers solely ran the park district. The first employee, Jack Telfer, was hired in 1998 as director, and the district continued to have a park director (most recently,

Karen Kelley) until 2011. After four years of relying solely on volunteers, including Friends of the Prairie Parks, Naturalist James Anderson was hired on a part-time basis in May 2015, and he continues as the only staff member. The park district continues to rely upon volunteers for nearly all park maintenance.

The park board has five commissioners, who serve for three-year terms. Board members serve without any form of compensation. The current commissioners are Dan Sheridan, Chair; Janine Williams, Vice Chair; Diane Watson, Secretary; Kathie Reed; and Jennifer Conroy.

The Marion County Prosecutor's office generously provides legal services when needed. The park district is a political subdivision of the state of Ohio, serving all of Marion County, including the area within townships and municipalities.

Major Accomplishments



In 1996 land was donated by Judge Charlton Myers, and Myers Woods was the first county park property. Trella Romine quickly followed with a donation of property at Terradise, and the village of Caledonia donated the Caledonia Nature Preserve. Greenspur joined the park district when the local match required for a Clean Ohio grant for this seven-acre parcel was donated by former Marion County Commissioner John Watkins.

Holland Road Trailhead was donated by the city of Marion to serve as a trailhead for a rail trail. The park district negotiated with the railroad for more than a dozen years for the purchase of an abandoned rail corridor, finally reaching agreement with CSX in 2009. Construction of a nature center started in late 2009, and the first quarter mile of the Tallgrass Trail was built in late 2010. This project also included construction of the first two bridges of the Tallgrass Trail, at mile 0.25 and mile 0.8.

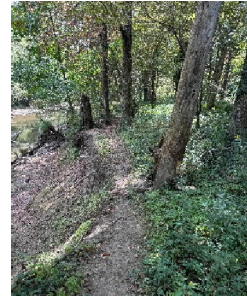
In 2014 the park district used Clean Ohio Green Space funds to purchase an eighty-three-acre property along the second half mile of the Tallgrass Trail from the city of Marion. This contains a fifty-three-acre lake which is popular for fishing and is surrounded by a 1.3-mile walking trail.

In keeping with the goal to extend the trail further, the park district set about raising donations from the community for the local match required for Clean Ohio Trail Fund. Grants were awarded to the park district for four consecutive years. In 2014, the Tallgrass Trail was extended to Espyville, making it 3.7 miles long. The 2015 extension took the trail to Osbun Road at mile 7.3, and in 2016 it stretched nearly to Riley Road, at mile eleven. The trail was completed to the county line in 2017, a project that included building a beautiful tunnel under Riley Road. The total cost for 12.44 miles of trail was about \$3,800,000 including \$800,000 in donations and about \$3,000,000 in grants. A second trailhead was added in DeCliff in 2016, and Construction Trades Academy students from TriRivers built a pavilion at the trailhead in 2019.



Lack of Funding

Marion County Park District has accomplished a great deal with little funding. County Commissioners have historically provided a small amount of money to the park district each year to assist with its operation. In 2024, that funding is expected to total about \$48,000. With only one paid part-time staff member, the park district continues to rely on volunteers and board members to manage, maintain and grow the park district for the benefit of Marion County residents. Some of the park sites currently owned by the park district have not been maintained at an acceptable level due to a lack of resources.



A Vision for the Future

Time to Make a Change

With the potential of other property owners wishing to preserve their properties and the need to improve and care for existing park sites, the park board began discussions internally and with other leaders in the community about seeking a source of funding for the operation of the district. In accordance with the Ohio Revised Code, the only option for the board to fund the park district must be a real estate tax levy. With that knowledge, the board further explored the amount of funding needed to operate the park district in a fiscally conservative fashion going forward.

As required by law, the park district board submitted a request to the county auditor to determine the amount of funding that would be generated by the 0.4 mill tax levy. The auditor reported to the park district that it would generate about \$618,000 annually. With that knowledge, the park board passed a resolution to place a levy request on the ballot in the November 2024 election. The board is requesting approval of the 0.4 mill levy for a period of five years. This will give the park district an opportunity to show the voters what can be accomplished with a dedicated source of funding for the operation of the district.

Moving Forward

Since the park district has had little funding up to now, the levy will provide funds for the district to become fully functional. These expenses are outlined as follows.

Startup Costs

The park district currently maintains an office at the Marion County Office Building. With just one staff member, this space is sufficient to accommodate the current operation of the park district. There are costs associated with the park district becoming fully operational. These include, but are not limited to:

- Staffing – Over the five-year period, staff will be added. A director will be hired to manage the operation of the district, compile policies and procedures, develop and manage the budget and expenditures, apply for grants to supplement local funds for the improvement of the park district, and manage other staff. A part-time administrative assistant will be added to assist with the day-to-day operation of the park district. The naturalist position will be increased from part-time to full-time to expand programming for county residents. A maintenance supervisor will be added to improve the care of park properties and to collaborate with volunteers on maintenance projects. Eventually, a seasonal naturalist and seasonal maintenance workers will be added.

- Office Space – The park board will work with the county to expand office space to accommodate the increased staff. The board will also work to identify and secure a work site for maintenance operations including office space, workspace, and storage space for tools and equipment.
- Equipment – The park district currently has little equipment. During the planning period, equipment needed for the operation and maintenance of the parks will be added. Items such as hand tools, power tools, a pickup truck with snowplow, a zero-turn mower, and an SUV for administrative use will be added.

Operating Costs

As the park district begins its operations, fully maintains its existing parks and trails, and opens new parks and trails, there are operational costs included in the strategic plan. These costs include, but are not limited to:

- Supplies – Expendable supplies for office operations, maintenance, and programs
- Materials – Items used for the construction of improvements.
- Equipment – In addition to startup costs, ongoing replacement and acquisition of needed equipment
- Contracted Services – Expenses such as utilities, equipment repairs, consultants for project design, legal services, etc.
- Other Costs – Items that do not fit in the above categories such as insurance, taxes, etc.

Nature Education



A portion of the staffing costs are associated with the employment of programming staff to conduct nature programming in the parks. Programs will be continued and expanded to assist resident of all ages with a better understanding of the natural world. Programs centered around outdoor activities will be developed to encourage healthy living in nature.

Capital Improvements

The park district will make improvements to existing parks and trails. These improvements will include parking access, restrooms, picnic sites, improved hiking trails. Additional park sites may be added during the planning period as opportunities arise.

Land Acquisition

Property owners in Marion County have expressed an interest in the preservation of their properties for additional park sites. The park district seeks to work with willing landowners for land acquisition. The use of local funds provided by the proposed levy will create opportunities for the park district to utilize grant funds to multiply the local funding for land acquisition.

The park district does not seek to acquire farmlands. Agriculture is an important part of the Marion County history and culture. The park district seeks to preserve areas rich in natural resources such as streams, woodlands, and wetlands from willing donors and sellers. *Although the park district has the power of eminent domain, the park board pledges to not use that power for the acquisition of additional properties.*

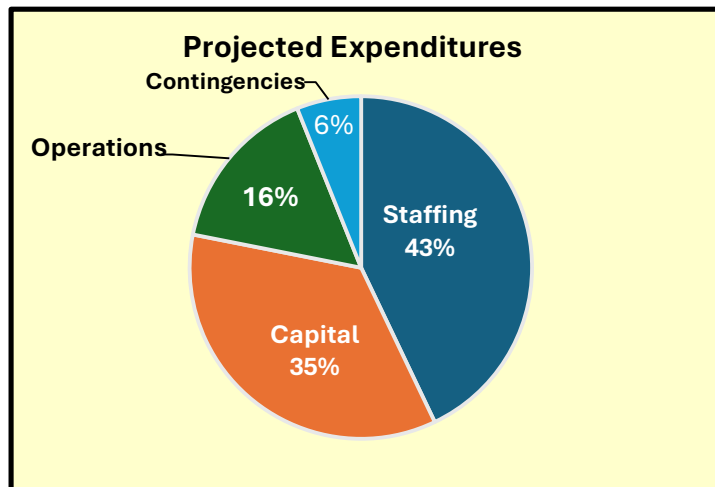
Contingencies

A small portion of the levy has been set aside for unforeseen expenses. This amount is reflected in the pie chart below.

The Cost

This strategic plan has been developed based on the passage of a small 0.4 mill levy for a period of five years. The additional cost to property owners is small, but the funds generated will provide desperately needed funding to make the park district fully operational. The challenge of maintaining a twelve-mile trail and other park sites has become increasingly difficult. The funds provided will have an immediate positive impact on Marion County through the provision of well-maintained parks and trails for the benefit of the residents.

The proposed levy will cost \$14 per year for each \$100,000 of property value or \$1.17 per month. According to Zillow, the average 2024 home value in Marion County is about \$172,000. The cost of the levy for that average home would be about \$24 per year, \$2 per month, or seven cents per day. A small investment that will reap many benefits both now and in the future by improving the quality of life in Marion County.



There are grant programs to assist the park district with park improvements and land acquisition. All these programs require a local match. The funding provided by the proposed levy will permit the park district to seek out funding to multiply the local dollars. The park board pledges to manage the funds provided by the levy in a conservative manner to the maximum benefit of the residents. As a political subdivision of the state, the park district will be audited every two years by the State of Ohio to ensure proper handling of tax dollars.

Nearby Counties

Counties in the area have park districts supported by a tax levy. Crawford County recently renewed its levy at the same rate of 0.4 mill. Passed by sixty-five percent of voters, it was seen as important for the community. In Delaware County to the south, the voters have approved levies totaling 1.37 mills to support the park district. Ashland County has a 0.5 mill levy passed originally by fifty-three percent of the voters and renewed recently passed by seventy-three percent of the voters. The Marion County Park District request is in line with support of park districts in the area. Marion County Park District does not currently have a dedicated source of funding.

