



CHAPTER 7 – Strategic Operations & Management Plan

Antietam Lake Park is the newest park in Berks County complementing 12 other parks and sites. They include Allegheny Aqueduct and Beidler House & Mill, Berks County Heritage Area, Berks Leisure Area, Camp Joy, Gring’s Mill Recreation Area, Hunsicker’s Grove, Kaercher Creek Park, Leesport Lock House, Red Bridge Recreation Area, Stonecliffe Recreation Area, and the Youth Recreation Facility. The park system has over 1,200 acres which includes the 643 acre Antietam Lake Park. The acquisition of Antietam Lake Park equated to a 55 percent increase in the system’s amount of parkland. Berks County also owns portions of Neversink Mountain, which will be undergoing a management plan in the next year through the Berks County Conservancy.

For all of these parks to serve as safe, clean, and attractive places for those who live and visit here to experience nature, enjoy active healthy lifestyles, spend time with family and friends, as well as for economic development in Berks County, major management, operation, and financing elements need to be defined and implemented for Antietam Lake Park within the context of the park system as a whole. As Berks County faces the harsh reality of today’s economic downturn, the challenges in operating and improving the parks require continued innovation, partnerships, and a mix of public and private support. This operations and management plan was developed in concert with the professional management team of the Berks County Parks & Recreation Department.

Plan Purpose

The purpose of the Strategic Operations & Management Plan is to establish the foundation, strategies and actions required to improve and manage Antietam Lake Park as an asset to Berks County.

The Strategic Operations & Management Plan is the result of a lengthy process that involved careful public participation; work sessions with county management and staff, discussions with elected and appointed officials, involvement of the Antietam Lake Park Master Plan study committee, and research. The research into park systems shows that parks are vital to the quality of life and essential in attracting and retaining residents and businesses. Some of the strategies used in the successful revitalization of parks include the following:

1. Parks must rank high on the political agenda to get funded.¹
2. The public is involved in the planning, design, and operation of the park.
3. The design conveys a strong vision and purpose for the park.
4. The parks are programmed with many and varied activities for visitors of all ages.
5. The parks and each of its facilities are clean. Clean, attractive appearance is crucial to a park’s success and positive perception by the public and the business community.
6. A mix of public and private funding sources supports park improvements and operation.
7. Parks are an organizing element for initiatives such as economic development, increasing livability of the region, tourism, and so on.
8. Parks and recreation departments, boards, directors and staff must play a leadership role in insuring that parks are part of overall community and economic planning.²

¹ Harnik, Peter. (2000) *Inside City Parks*. Washington, D.C.: Trust for Pubic Land. p xi.

² Garvin, Alexander and Berens, Gayle. (1997) *Urban Parks and Open Space*. (New York: Urban Land Institute) pp 36-40.

Berks County Organization

Berks County operates with an elected Board of Commissioners and a County Administrator that carries out the directives of the Board of Commissioners.

Berks County Commissioners

As the chief elected officials of Berks County, the Board of Commissioners set policy, authorize budgets, determine the organizational structure, oversee management, appoint staff, and appoint the Berks County Parks and Recreation Board. They are the ultimate authority in establishing county policy.

Berks County Parks And Recreation Department

The Berks County Parks & Recreation Department is dedicated to planning, developing, and maintaining a system of parks that provide recreation, and leisure, environmental education and awareness, and cultural and historic education. The open space, recreational areas, and historic sites will be safe, clean, and attractive, and will support a wide range of citizen participation and involvement³. The goals and objectives of the Parks & Recreation Department include the following:

- Make a parks system that is safe clean and attractive available to the citizens,
- Preserve open space through the development and expansion of the park system,
- Enhance park system activities and recreational programming to ensure a mix of activities that appeal to all ages and cultures,
- Preserve historical facilities within the park system and make them available to the citizens,
- Maintain the parks in an excellent condition through a program of preventive maintenance,
- Increase public awareness of the park system and encourage and motivate use and support,
- And obtain adequate funding to ensure that the system can be maintained and supported at levels appropriate to our needs through a combination of public and private partnership funding.

The Department is in transition necessitated by the addition of major facilities within the county as well as in the region. The increase in parkland, the addition of trails, the Schuylkill River Greenway, the Schuylkill Highlands, Neversink Mountain, and the potential disposition of parkland in the City of Reading all impact the Department significantly. In addition, the Department has a full slate of major capital improvement projects underway. This is all being done with the same staffing level as thirty years ago. Addressing management and operations through the Antietam Park Master Plan can be a major step in positioning the Department for the future.

Parks and Recreation Management and Organization

The Director of Parks & Recreation serves as the chief operating manager for the park system. The Department has four major functional areas: Park Maintenance, Interpretive Services, Recreation, and Park Rangers. Staff includes 13 full-time and 23 part time maintenance workers; 14 park attendants; 13 part-time or seasonal rangers; one part-time Volunteer Coordinator; one part-time Marketing

³ Berks County Planning Commission, Berks County Parks & Recreation Department, and Berks County Greenway Plan Steering committee. (2007) **Berks County Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan**. Reading, PA: Berks County Planning Commission. P 209.

Coordinator; five seasonal playground staff, and seven additional seasonal maintenance workers in Interpretive Services.

Since the Department operates within the overall purview of county government, county operating procedures come into play with managing parks and recreation. An example of this is the Berks County study on fleet management. The recommendations of this study will impact the Parks & Recreation Department and operational procedures within Parks & Recreation will require adjustment. The county may potentially contract out all fleet management. This may help the Department to address its ongoing problem of malfunctioning equipment that results in labor downtime.

Berks County Parks and Recreation Board

The Berks County Parks and Recreation Board has nine members appointed by the County Commissioners. The Board is advisory and makes recommendations to the Department and the Berks County Commissioners. The Commissioners set policy and the Department implements the policy. The Board is organized by committee including the Programs and Services Committee and the Maintenance and Facilities Committee.

Administration

A professional parks and recreation manager who is a Certified Park and Recreation Professional serves as the Director. He operates with a cabinet of three other professionals in the areas of Park Maintenance, Interpretive Services, and Recreation. They operate collaboratively as a team.

Park Maintenance

The Park Maintenance Division is responsible for maintaining approximately 1,200 acres of parkland. The level of staffing remains the same as in 1980 before the parkland and holdings more than doubled. Antietam Lake Park has been under the care of the Berks County Park Maintenance Division for about a year. The Park Maintenance Division has wide ranging responsibilities including natural resource management, forestry management, historic structures maintenance, sports field and turf grass management, custodial care, event support, and general park maintenance. Berks County's comprehensive parks and recreation system is a model of public service that supports a blend of both conservation and active healthy living through recreation.

Security

The Rangers provide park security for the Berks County park system. Many of the rangers are police officers in their full-time occupation. One ranger has education and experience in environmental education and has begun to work in this area with the Berks County Parks & Recreation Department. The emphasis of the ranger division is on enforcement. They do not provide interpretive services. The same number of rangers is in place as in decades ago before the expansion of the park system. In addition to the expanded territory to cover, the rangers are also dealing with park attendance levels that have tripled in the last two years.

Interpretive Services

The Interpretive Services Division is responsible for the care, programs, and interpretation of facilities that are so significant that they are listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings. The Division shares responsibility for volunteer services, seasonal staff, programs, and marketing with the Recreation Division.

Recreation

Recreation programs cover eight categories: concert series, festivals, special events, sports leagues and instructional classes, outdoor recreational series, playground programs, park pavilion and special events rentals, and sports complex rentals.

Funding

Table 1 presents the expenditure proposed for 2011 for the Berks County Parks & Recreation Department. The budget is less than one percent (.8%) of the county's operating budget. As shown in revenues presented in Table 2, the Department generates revenues of 26 percent of the budget, a higher rate than the county average of 18 percent among all departments.

Expenditures	Budgeted
Operating Budget	\$3,580,288
Parks and Recreation Budget as percentage of Berks County Operating Budget	.8%
Consumption of County Taxes Parks and Recreation Department	2%

Revenues	Budgeted
Program Fees, Charges, Rentals, Donations, Fines, and Concessions	\$944,862
Average percentage of revenues generated by county departments	18%
Average percentage of revenues generated by Parks and Recreation Department	26%

Currently Berks County Parks & Recreation Department budget is managed as a singular unified departmental budget. The Department is working toward organizing budget expenditures and revenues around cost centers such as according to park, program areas, and other functional areas to be designated. Cost centers will enable the Department to track labor, equipment, supplies and other costs as well as revenue sources. Information in real time will help elected and appointed officials and managers to make more informed decisions, allocate resources to where they are most needed, make staffing decisions, determine fees and charges, and most importantly plan direct, implement, and evaluate departmental operations to conserve resources and provide excellent public service.

Challenges

Several challenges regarding park operations emerged in the master planning process. These included:

- Antietam Lake Park must be considered within the context of the overall Berks County park system. While a master plan traditionally focuses on the specific park being addressed, it is more beneficial in this case to mesh the master plan with the system as a whole. At present the parks and recreation budget and management system is operated as a whole, as cost centers are developed for specific parks, programs and services.
- Funding is the major challenge of the Department and the county. When the 643-acre Antietam Park was added, it more than doubled the size of the park system to 1,200 acres. Commensurate staffing and budget adjustments for the increased responsibility and workload

were not made. The reality of county funding is such that most of the budget must be allocated to mandated activities such as prisons, the justice system, and nursing homes.

- An extensive backlog of maintenance tasks cannot be accomplished with existing resources.
- The focus of the park system has been on cultural and historical resources. The addition of Antietam Lake Park necessitates the addition of natural resource management with different management practices and expertise never before needed in the park system. The Department is already working with the Berks County Conservancy for employee development in natural resource management.
- The goal of improving the conservation value of the forested areas of Antietam Lake Park will require a planned and comprehensive public education program. The requirement to remove trees is likely to result in some public opposition due to lack of understanding of the principles of conservation and forestry management aimed at long-term benefits to the environment.
- A multitude of capital improvement projects are underway. Any one of these projects would be a major initiative but the sum total is above the normal capital improvement program for a county parks department.
- Projects that are expected to increase workload and responsibilities are in the works as well. These include the addition of the maintenance of the Neversink Mountain lands owned by Berks County, potential additional trails of the Schuylkill River Heritage Area, and the assessment of the City of Reading parks to determine the role that Berks County might play in their future operation and management.
- The Department operates over 100 programs along with facilitating a host of special events and facilitating the services provided by others.

In summary, the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department is managed, programmed, and maintained by a team of dedicated professionals who face a large workload beyond the capacity of the staff in place. Funding the additional parkland and facilities of the expanding system is the major issue.

Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles were developed as the foundation for the recommendations for the strategic management and operation of Berks County's park system. The guiding principles should serve as the foundation for all future actions and decision-making.

1. Adopt the mindset that the Berks County Park system is a national treasure. Berks County's park system is a regional asset that features national caliber resources as evident in its role in a national heritage area, the Schuylkill River Greenway.
2. Conserve natural resources especially forests and water as a critical function. The conservation of the site's important natural resources along with the protection of the health, safety, and welfare of park visitors are the foundation of the management of Antietam Lake Park.
3. Offer high quality visitor experiences. Antietam Lake Park will put forward positive memorable experiences in the park to the broad base of visitors from among the 401,000 residents to tourists who come to visit the park via the Schuylkill Highlands and visitation to the Pennsylvania Dutch Country.

4. Operate with a mix of public and private resources sufficient to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public and their natural resources. The County’s investment in the park system will ensure that they are safe, clean, and attractive places for people who live work and visit here to enjoy year round. In addition, a combination of public and private funds and support needs to be generated.
5. Foster partnerships as a cornerstone of effective operations. Stewardship for the parks needs to be cultivated with many partners working collaboratively with Berks County. The existing and potential partners include: Berks County Conservancy, Schuylkill River Heritage Area, Schuylkill Highlands, Natural Lands Trust, the Berks County Historical Society, the Berks Equine Council, the Delaware Valley Orienteering Society, and bicycle clubs.
6. Provide leadership for the park system region-wide. Strong leadership is needed from Berks County in park revitalization and achieving the desired vision for the county park system.
7. Recognize that Berks County’s parks and recreation services are an important economic engine. The operation and management of Berks County parks should be directly connected to the overall economic development planning for Berks County and tourism.

What This Plan Does

The Strategic Plan for Operations & Management of Antietam Lake Park is a tool to:

- Focus on the major issues and opportunities for the operation and management of the park.
- Guide Berks County, community leaders, organizations, partners, and citizens in working towards a common vision and goals.
- Help decision-makers formulate the steps they will take to maintain Antietam Lake Park within the context of the Berks County park system.
- Set a foundation for formalizing and institutionalizing the necessary changes in order to create stability through personnel, management, and political changes.
- Provide a basis for making the case that providing the funding needed to manage, operate and maintain Antietam Lake Park is an investment not a cost. For example, a recent study conducted by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission found that homes near Peace Valley County Park in Bucks County were worth over \$35,532 more than similar homes farther away from the park. The value of public parks in the regional economy runs into hundreds of millions of dollars, attracts and retains businesses, generates tourism, and supports thousands of jobs.

What This Plan Does Not Do

The Strategic Plan for Operations & Management of Antietam Lake Park:

- *Does not* make decisions about the park master plan, specific areas of the park or programs.
- *Does not* offer specific recommendations about staff, numbers of employees, maintenance or program procedures and policies. It is a strategic plan.
- *Does not* preclude future actions or recommendations based upon changing objectives and opportunities. The plan is meant to remain open and flexible as a living document.

Recommendations

To be effective, the operations and management plan needs to be strategic. Focusing on a laundry list of tactical action will only serve to dilute the major directions the Berks County parks system needs to address. The blueprint for the strategic operation and management of Antietam Lake Park within the context of the overall Berks County Parks & Recreation Department includes the following:

1. **Deal with Antietam Lake Park as part of the big picture of the Berks County Parks & Recreation Department.** Continue to work with cabinet level managers in developing strategic actions for the park system including Antietam Lake Park.
2. **Recognize that the Department is an organization in transition.** Not everything can happen at once. But important short-term changes are needed as listed in the following recommendations.
3. **Add Forestry Management as a major function of park management.** The Department has not dealt with forestry in a planned organized manner but rather in a reactive mode when a problem or situation arises. It is the single most important aspect of maintenance and resource management in Antietam Lake Park. Not only is forestry management required but also public education must be incorporated in order to successfully carry out the scale of the forestry management required for this park.
4. **Establish a public education program for the forestry management plan.** Use the ranger with education and expertise in environmental education to develop and carry out the program with an appropriate level of input and assistance from other park staff members. Public education is critical to position the Department to carry out the mission, goals, and master plan for Antietam Lake Park. Some of the changes in the way the forests are managed are likely to generate public concern due to lack of understanding about the nature and goals of these changes for long term conservation. Therefore, a public education plan needs to be designed and implemented prior to any major actions with high public visibility in the forested areas of the park.
5. **Fill the position of Operations Manager.** This position will serve all of the divisions of the Parks & Recreation Department by providing support for carrying out programs, services, maintenance, events, and other initiatives. The Operations Manager will coordinate, advise, and support the activities of management, staff and volunteers in recreation, maintenance, public outreach and education, and conservation. The object of this position is to marshal the resources and carry out the routine functions such as set-up, provision of equipment and supplies, preparation and take-down at programs and events, and other activities that will free the functional area managers to plan, direct, and implement major aspects of their responsibilities.
6. **Retain a contractor to manage the timber harvest and act on the county's behalf during the harvesting program.** The contractor would be a certified arborist with experience in harvesting and negotiating contracts regarding the sale of wood. The person should also buy into the philosophy of managing forestry including harvesting and cutting to meet county goals.
7. **Re-configure the Rangers Division to include interpretation and environmental education functions.** House environmental education in the interpretive division. Because of the size of the park system, consider making some of the rangers full-time in order to ensure that rangers are available at critical times. Move the part-time ranger with expertise in environmental education to a full-time position. Institute flexible hours for that position to ensure public service during peak visitation times.

8. **Assess and revise policies needed for park conservation and use.** Of highest importance is a policy on special events. Include in this policy a resource protection component that spells out which areas of the park can be used and which areas are off-limits during special events in order to protect the nature resources of the park. A revenue policy that incorporates a fees and charges component will also be required.
9. **Institute a formalized maintenance management program.** Develop a workload, cost tracking system using the TRIMS program. Collect data for one calendar year and then assess where hours are going in terms of natural resource management, routine maintenance, building maintenance and events or another configuration that might be more appropriate. Work toward increasing the maintenance staff phasing in the increases over time in light of the information generated through the workload cost tracking. Consider the first hire to be one fulltime maintenance worker to be stationed at Antietam. Try to establish what the backlog is for park maintenance. The Department's mission includes doing preventive maintenance. But due to increasing workload, major projects, and moribund level of resources for operations, maintenance is highly oriented toward emergency demands. Continue to work with the Berks County Conservancy in development of a natural resource management plan for Antietam Lake Park.
10. **Participate in the maintenance management plan for Neversink Mountain.** Participation in this program will have the by-product of assisting with maintenance management planning for the system as a whole, as well as, setting out maintenance requirements and resources needed for Neversink Mountain.
11. **Volunteers are important in supporting park operations.** The Berks County Parks Department uses volunteers extensively. The managers of the Interpretive Services division and the Recreation division oversee volunteers within their areas. The Department also has a part time volunteer coordinator. In challenging times, there is a tendency to gravitate toward increased volunteerism in response to increasing demands and responsibilities and limited funding. However, it is important to note that volunteers are not free. They require recruiting, training, supervision, scheduling, coordination, evaluation and recognition. Managers and staff need to devote time and expertise to the use of volunteers. For maintenance, focusing volunteer efforts on groups rather than individuals would maximize the time of maintenance managers and staff. The maintenance staff is already stretched thin; adding the responsibility for volunteer management should be very strategic in order to balance the time devoted to volunteerism with the benefit received from the volunteer efforts.
12. **Phase in financial support for Antietam Lake Park.** To start with, consider using \$100 per acre for Antietam Lake Park's 643 acres to add to the budget for a total of \$64,300. This would cover the operations manager position that should be considered as the next position to be hired in the park system. Gradually increase the per acre budget for the park in concert with information collected from TRIMS and partnerships with other organizations. Coordinate with the county's fleet management program to strive to get equipment in a continual safe and effective operating condition. Continue to work with partners including the Berks County Conservancy, Schuylkill River Greenway, Schuylkill Highlands, scouts, special events organizations, and others. Consider organizing new partner groups such as a friends of the anglers, trail riders, bicycle, clubs, Equine Council, cross country runners, and most importantly, a Friends of Berks County Parks organization.

Comparative Examples of a Similar Parks

Warwick County Park in Chester County - This 487-acre park is 92 percent forested. The park contains an active day use area of 36 acres. With a budget of \$600,000 for this park, the per-acre cost is roughly \$1,294 per acre. A cost tracking system is underway with one full year of costs anticipated to be in place by January 2011; No doubt this will show a much higher cost per acre for the day use area than for the majority of the park acreage which remains natural as a forest. Examples of per acre costs include \$500 per acre for natural areas at Montour Preserve in Montour and Columbia County with \$1,500 per active acre, and \$500 per acre in Green Lane County Park in Montgomery County.

13. **Establish a Strong Leadership Role for the Berks County Parks & Recreation Department.** the Department needs a point person to act in a strong leadership capacity to lead the way in creating the future of the Berks County park system. This includes the cultivation, support, and recognition of partners. The role of the Director should evolve to become one of outreach and partnership building to generate the level of support needed through public and private resources. From 50 to 60 percent of the director's time should be spent in this area. The way this can be achieved is for the Director to continue to work collaboratively in a team approach to management tapping the valuable work ethic, expertise, knowledge, experience, and character traits of the Department managers and their staff. Figure 1 presents the functional area priorities of the Parks & Recreation Department as established in work sessions with Department managers. They are presented in priority order by functional area and by priority of task within the program area.

Figure 1
Priorities by Functional Area of the Berks County Parks & Recreation Department

Park Maintenance

1. Safety – Mitigate hazards such as tree limbs on trails; provide for public safety in playgrounds, general park areas; grounds and facilities; and ensure the sound structure of public buildings and infrastructure.
2. Preventive Maintenance – Develop a preventive maintenance program for the fleet, equipment, HVAC and utilities, grounds, and natural resource management.
3. Routine Maintenance – Strive to make 80 percent of maintenance operations as planned, scheduled tasks. This includes restroom maintenance, mowing/trimming, sports field care, event support, and general park maintenance.

Natural Resource Conservation

1. Forestry Management – Implement the recommendations of the Forestry Management Plan.
2. Public Education and Outreach – Plan, develop and implement a public education program about the forestry management program to establish public understanding of the forestry management program and foster public support for it.

Cultural and Historic Preservation

1. Heritage Center Tours – Provide tours to foster public understanding and support for the nationally significant holdings of the County including the Gruber Wagon Works, Howard Heister Canal Center, Wertz’s Red Covered Bridge, Melcher’s Grist Mill, and the Deppen Cemetery.
2. Cultural Programs – Conduct programs and offer services that deepen the understanding and increase support for the preservation of the history and culture of Berks County tied to the facilities, artifacts and land under the charge of the Berks County Parks & Recreation Department.

Park Ranger Services

1. Continue to provide park security through the Park Rangers ensuring the safety of the public, protection of priceless county resources, and public perception that the parks are safe places in which to spend time.
2. Add environmental education and interpretation of resources as a function of Park Rangers in a fashion similar to the National Park Service with both enforcement and interpretive rangers. House interpretation within the Interpretive Services Division.

Interpretive Programs

1. Continue to provide interpretive programs for the cultural and historic aspects of the park system.
2. Plan, develop, implement, and evaluate an environmental education program.

Recreation Programs

1. Provide pavilion and special event space rentals so that people can undertake their own activities and events.
2. Administer the sports complex rentals at the Youth Recreation Facility as a public/private management partnership.
3. Manage the three major festivals of the department including Early Bird Fiddle Festival, Step Back in Time Day, and the Heritage Festival.
4. Offer the outdoor concert series with a wide variety of musical performances.
5. Provide special events to foster active healthy lifestyles.
6. Gear the Outdoor Recreation Series to promote stewardship of the environment through enjoyable experiences in the outdoors.
7. Orient the sports leagues for volleyball and tennis as a way to engage citizens in participation in lifelong active recreational pursuits that increase health, offer opportunities for socialization, and build a sense of community.
8. Continue to provide the playground programs as a county/municipal partnership. This is especially important for the small rural communities. They do not have the staff or resources to provide this vital program to keep children active as a way to deal with the epidemic of childhood obesity resulting from lack of physical activity and diet.