**Chapter 4 County of Berks Park & Recreation**

**Mission Statement:**

The Berks County Parks and 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 spaces, recreational areas, and historical sites within the parks will be clean, safe, attractive, and will support a wide range of citizen participation and involvement.

**Goals and Objectives:**

It is the goal of the Parks and Recreation Department to make available to the citizens of Berks County a park system that is safe, attractive and clean; to preserve open space through the development and expansion of the park system; to enhance our park system activities and recreational programming to ensure a mix of activities that appeal to all ages and cultures; to preserve the historical facilities within our park system and to make those facilities available to our citizens; to maintain our parks in excellent condition through an effective program of preventive maintenance; to increase the public awareness of our park system and to encourage and motivate use and support; and to obtain adequate funding to ensure our system can be maintained and supported at levels appropriate to our needs through a combination of public and private partnership funding.

**WORKLOAD INDICATORS**

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<td>Number of Special Events</td>
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**Organization, Administration and Personnel:**

**General Operation and Basic Function**

The 1,180-acre Parks & Recreation Department includes the 5-mile long Tulpehocken Creek Valley Park system, Kaercher Creek Park, the Allegheny Aqueduct Historical Park, the Leesport Lockhouse, Camp Joy, Antietam Lake, Hunsicker’s Grove and the Youth Recreation Facility. Within the Tulpehocken Creek Valley Park are a number of different recreational and historic areas including: the Union Canal Bicycle and Walking Trail designated as a National Recreation Trail, the Red Bridge Recreation Area, Stonecliffe Recreation Area and Action Park, the Berks Leisure Area, the Gring’s Mill Recreation Area, the Berks County Heritage Center, and the restored Union Canal Lock No. 47E.

The Berks County Heritage Center encompasses the Gruber Wagon Works, a National Historic Landmark built in 1882; the C. Howard Hiester Canal Center which has artifacts of the Schuylkill Navigation System and focuses on the history of the Union and
Schuylkill Canals, Wertz’s “Red” Covered Bridge, listed on the National Register and built in 1867; Melcher's Grist Mill and the Deppen Cemetery. The Heritage Center is open for tours May through October.

The 1824 Allegheny Aqueduct (which includes 1783 Beidler House), located in Gibraltar, and the 1845 Leesport Lock House are both listed on the National Register of Historic Sites.

The Recreation Division coordinates a wide range of programs and training of leaders for playgrounds throughout the County. The season’s culminating activity is the playground Festival of Arts, which encompasses music, dance, costume, drama, art and the awards presentation. The Recreation staff also works with the Office of Aging in promoting Senior Week in the Park and the Senior Art, Photography and Woodworking Contest.

The maintenance portion of this department is comprised of 13 full-time and 39 part-time employees. They are responsible for the overall upkeep of all buildings, grounds and equipment. These services are in cooperation with volunteers, youth detention and prison labor. These services are supported within the County level through the facilities and engineering department by means of tradesmen level repairs.

Programs and Festivals

The Department presents a summer Sunday evening concert series – Memorial Day through Labor Day, an Interpretive Series of programs, lectures and workshops throughout the year, and a Kid’s Summer Series. The department works cooperatively with the Roving Nature Center to present environmental education day camps. The department offers a summer adult volleyball league, tennis clinics and “Match & Play” for tennis players. The Action Park features an annual Skills and Tricks Competition, and camps for beginner skateboarders and BMX bikers. Annual special events include an Easter “Egg-stravaganza”, Go Fly a Kite Day, Children’s Fishing Rodeo, the Fiddle and Acoustic Music Mini-Fest, the Heritage Festival and Pa German Day Celebration, Living History programs at the Beidler house, and the month-long Holiday Lights program in December.

Facilities, Equipment and Projects

The Department preserves and maintains over 1,180 acres of land; 13 different parks, including nine athletic fields, 6 historic sites and more than 60 additional structures. Facilities are available for picnic, athletic and other special event rentals.
Facilities: The 62 structures in the department are primarily maintained by the department's own employees. Most painting, carpentry, plumbing and roofing projects are completed in-house. Major repairs are contracted out.

Equipment: The grounds equipment this department uses totals more than 160 pieces and 15 vehicles. Other pieces would include small power hand tools, sound equipment and tents. All of these items are maintained within the department by Parks and Recreation employees with the exception of vehicles and certain repairs on larger tractors.

Projects: Capital and operating project lists are generated and updated monthly. The capital project list currently stands at approximately 44 jobs. Most will be forwarded to the next year for completion with only a few to be finished within the fiscal year.

Ranger Statement

The security/ranger portion of the department is comprised of 12 part-time rangers and 1 part-time supervisor. They are responsible for the overall well-being of staff and park patrons through leisure visits or reservations. They are, in essence, the designated liaison for our department interacting with park visitors on a regular basis. They are also to uphold the ordinance and regulations prescribed through verbal warnings and regular ticketing.

Volunteers

The Department depends on the assistance and support of a staff of volunteers to offer programs to the public. There are currently 138 volunteers on our mailing list – of that number 117 volunteered in 2006. These people assist with activities at special events with duties ranging from program handout and information, to face painting, crafts workshops, craft preparation, decorating, herb garden maintenance, painting of park buildings, parking assistants, Santa's, Easter Bunny, MC's at events, home-crafts demonstrations, snack bar and country store clerks, ticket desk duties, as well as tour guides at the Heritage Center. The total number of hours per year averages about 30 hours per person, however there is a small group who volunteer well over 200 hours each year. The department also relies on the support of several local schools and colleges to support the larger events with

![Volunteers preparing for Easter Egg-stravaganza](image-url)
volunteer staff. The Reading Muhlenberg Vo-Tech School has been involved for 10 years.

The department recruits through the Volunteer Center of the United Way, word-of-mouth and at public speaking programs. Training for volunteers begins each March and runs throughout the season as necessary. Staff attends college volunteer fairs and events for recruitment, as time permits.

A monthly newsletter is sent out to keep volunteers informed of all Department activities. An annual volunteer recognition dinner is scheduled each spring before the season kicks off. Field trips are planned that may be of interest. Volunteers are invited to attend training workshops as available.

Without these people the department would not be able to offer the variety of different activities at each event. Volunteers are crucial to our overall operation.

Public Relations

All events, festivals, concerts and programs are promoted through press releases and public service announcements to media contacts in print, radio and television. Events are marketed at no cost through various methods. Advertising of events is determined by event size and budget.

The department provides Public Outreach programs to various service organizations, groups and schools. Logos for the Parks and the Heritage Center are utilized on printed materials and new park signage.

Parks & Recreation Board

The Board is appointed by the County Commissioners for a four-year term. They serve on committees that support the operation and functions of the Parks and Recreation Department – Personnel; Planning, Acquisition and Development; Programs and Services; Budget; Foundation /Funding and the Open Space Council. They report to the County Commissioners. The Board maintains and administers a checking and savings account to assist with Department operations.

Friends of Berks County Parks Fund

The Parks and Recreation Department partnered with Berks County Community Foundation to establish the Friends of Berks County Parks Fund. Members of the public can make a tax-deductible gift to the fund. The Parks and Recreation Board can make a recommendation as to how those funds will be used.

Cooperative Effort With Other Recreation Providers

The department works regularly with other local Parks & Recreation agencies within the County, sharing information, ideas and occasionally equipment. This group attempts to meet monthly to keep up to date on activities and to discuss common problems to reach solutions. All members willingly share resources and expertise as needed.

Berks County Parks and Recreation Department is the lead organization in a countywide partnership of over 12 agencies
representing recreation, health and education promoting the Keystone Active Zone campaign. In 2007, a second activity book was published for students in grades 4-6, with a variety of activities to be completed at parks, playgrounds or trails over the summer. County parks can be found on the www.KeystoneActiveZone.com website. This group will be putting together a map of the County listing public parks and trails with the assistance of the Berks County Planning Commission.
4.1 Facility Profiles

Below are descriptions of existing County maintained facilities followed by an overview of proposed and potential projects.

*Tulpehocken Creek Valley Park Note: Collectively the Union Canal Trail, Stonecliffe, Berks Leisure Area, Grings Mill Recreation Area, the Heritage Center and the Red Bridge Recreation Area are known as the Tulpehocken Creek Valley Park.

Antietam Lake

Description and History: The Antietam Lake property was a 479.24-acre city owned watershed consisting of a small man-made lake and its associated forested lands. This watershed was part of the city’s water supply system until the 1970’s, is used by County residents for passive recreation pursuits, particularly fishing and hiking, and contains the Reading Nature Center and a late century stone farmhouse. Combined with the adjacent Mt. Penn Reserve, owned by the City of Reading, and Earl Trust land, these properties form a 1600+ acre green backdrop along the eastern boundary of the City. The majority of the Antietam Lake property is located in Lower Alsace Township with a small portion extending into Alsace Township.

Since 2000 the City of Reading has been considering selling the Antietam Lake property. After many legal issues, including the City wanting to sell it to a private investor and developer, the County proceeded with condemnation in 2005 and filed a Declaration of Taking to acquire fee simple title to the property for a public recreation place and a public park. Lower Alsace Township and the State are contributing financially to help the County with the purchase of the property. Currently, the County, Township and Reading Water Authority are sharing maintenance responsibilities. The County will have to address repair issues with the dam, inventory the property and prepare a master plan for the park land.

Location: Lower Alsace Township, 230 Angora Road

Ownership: Berks County

Classification: Natural Resource Area

Total Area: 479.24 Acres

Allegheny Aqueduct Historic Park/Beidler House and Grist Mill

Description and History: The aqueduct is a 112-foot long structure consisting of five red sandstone and brownstone arches,
built in 1824 as part of the Schuylkill Navigation Company Canal System to carry the water of the canal and canal boats over the Allegheny Creek. Operation of both the canal and aqueduct ended in 1931. In 1983, the Schuylkill River Greenway Association began efforts to restore the aqueduct, and had the structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. Adjacent to the aqueduct property stands the 1783 Beidler House built for the operator of a nearby grist mill. The County acquired these properties and has plans for developing this area into a County interpretive historical park.

**Location:** Robeson Township; 1130 Old River Road, Gibraltar, near Rt. 724

**Ownership:** Berks County

**Classification:** Special Use Park

**Total Area:** 34.9 acres

**Managed Area:** 9.57 acres

**Historic structures:** 1824 Aqueduct (National Register of Historic Places), 1783 Beidler House (eligible for National Register), 1762 Mill ruins

**Existing uses/facilities and Condition:**
- Aqueduct
- Restored House
- Grist Mill ruins
- Restrooms
- Parking: 4 regular, 1 handicap
- Handicap Accessibility: parking, restrooms and first floor of house

**Programs/Festivals hosted:** A Walk Through Time-Open House and Living History Program, Colonial Candlelight Holiday Reception

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Site development
- Complete boundary survey
- Construct picnic pavilion and supporting facilities
- Construct a connecting trail system to include Beidler House, Aqueduct, Schuylkill River, Exeter Township, and Thun Trail
- Construct parking areas
- Provide signage, lighting, landscaping
- Construct boat launching facility on the Schuylkill River to become part of SRGA’s water trail
- Rehabilitate Beidler House to become Interpretive Center
- Provide educational exhibits and displays
- Establish meeting room for school groups and office space
- Utilize artifacts from C. Howard Hiester Canal Collection
- Sediment removal or stream deflectors

**Berks Leisure Area**

**Description and History:** The senior citizens of Berks County were responsible for the naming of this facility and also contributed financially to the development. Facilities include a picnic pavilion, badminton and shuffleboard courts, and horseshoe pits. The Sheeler House, a colonial revival structure, serves as the office for the Recreation staff and the County Park Rangers. The iron and wood footbridge provides access to the...
Union Canal Trail on the opposite side of the Tulpehocken Creek. This bridge marks the location of a mule bridge that was used for the operation of the Union Canal. Crossing over the bridge are the remains of lift Lock No. 51.

**Location:** Wyomissing Borough; 1901 Tulpehocken Road near Berkshire Blvd.

**Ownership:** Berks County

**Classification:** Neighborhood Park

**Total Area:** 7.1 acres

**Managed Area:** 6.5

**Historic structures:** None

**Existing uses/facilities and Condition:**

- Pavilion
- Electricity with reservation
- Restrooms - seasonal
- Picnic tables
- Grills
- Large Stone Barbeque Grill
- Badminton (1)
- Horseshoes (1)
- Quoits (1)
- Shuffleboard (2)
- Walking Trail
- Footbridge
- Information Bulletin Board

Handicap Accessibility: parking, restrooms, and picnic areas

2 – Parking Areas
- Staff parking: 6 (1 HC)
- Ranger Vehicle Spaces: 4
- Remaining Spaces: 26 (2 HC)

**Total: 39 (3HC)**

**Short-term repairs or needs:**

- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Steps/wall restoration
- Repoint all stonework
- Replace roof on pavilion
- Repair stone stairway
Camp Joy

**Description and History:** Camp Joy serves as a weekday resident/day camp during the summer months. It is also available to organized groups for picnics, retreats, and other events on summer weekends and throughout the week during the autumn, winter, and spring. A central lodge houses a kitchen, dining room, showers, restrooms and a multi-purpose-room. Six overnight cabins and outdoor recreation facilities are also available.

**Location:** Bern Township, south of County Welfare Road on Berks County Welfare Tract, 1120 Berks Road

**Ownership:** Berks County

**Classification:** Special Use Park

**Total Area:** 25.4 acres

**Managed Area:** 17.7

**Historic structures:** the Pool and Bathhouse were constructed in 1935-39 as a W.P.A. project

**Existing uses/facilities and Condition:**
- Lodge
- 6 Cabins
- Staff Cabin
- 3 Gazebos
- Softball Field
- Basketball Court
- Volleyball Court
- Horseshoe pits
- Quoits
- Grills
- Picnic Tables
- Concrete Bridge over Marietta Creek
- Handicap Accessibility: limited - parking, lodge (first floor only), no restroom access
- Parking Area
  - **Total:** ~30 spaces

**Programs/Festivals hosted:**

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Rehabilitate restrooms
- Pave existing stone parking area
- Paint exterior of lodge and cabins
- Replace plumbing and electrical lines
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Masonry repairs around lodge
- Color coat basketball court

**Gring's Mill Recreation Area**

**Description and History:** This park was the former site of a commercial grist mill, barn and homestead constructed by William Gring. These historic buildings house the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department's administration (1831 stone house) and maintenance offices (1811 grist mill). The 1896 barn has been converted into a visitor's information area, housing limited group meeting facilities, snack bar and restrooms. Outdoor recreation facilities include tennis courts, softball field, picnic area and children's play area, exercise course, and sand
and macadam volleyball courts. Annual festivals, several interpretive lecture programs, and Sunday evening concerts at the outdoor amphitheatre highlight summer activities. Gring’s Mill also hosts the Holiday Lights Program during the month of December. The concrete bridge and dam were built around 1931 to provide access from the Althouse home to the rest of his property. An electrical generating station on the bridge provided electricity for experiments by Scott Althouse, owner of Althouse Chemical Company. The bridge now connects the recreation area to the Union Canal Trail located on the opposite side of the Tulpehocken Creek.

Location: Spring Township, 2083 Tulpehocken Road.

Ownership: Berks County

Classification: Community Park

Total Area: 45.8 acres
Managed Area: 32.56

Historic structures: 1831 stone house, 1811 grist mill, 1896 barn, 1931 bridge, Tully House and barn

Existing uses/facilities and Condition:

- Park office building
- Maintenance building
- Visitors center/snack bar/meeting room (electricity with reservation) /information area
- Tully house and barn
- Amphitheatre
- Baseball/Softball Field
- ParCourse 18 Station Exercise cluster
- Fitness course
- Horseshoes (2)
- Quoits (2)
- Grills
- Picnic Tables
- Play equipment
- 1 Lighted Shuffleboard Court
- Sand Volleyball
- Lighted Volleyball courts (2)
- Tennis courts (6)
- Walking Trail
- Bridge
- Picnic Area (electricity with reservation)
- Picnic area restrooms (seasonal use only)
- Year-round restrooms
- Information Bulletin Board
- Handicap Accessibility: parking, restrooms, picnic areas and barn, no access to office
- Parking Areas
  - Tennis Courts: 25 (1 HC)
  - Gravel Lot: ~16
  - Office/Barn Area: 12
  - Main lot: 52 (3 HC)
  - Total: 105 (4 HC)

Programs/Festivals hosted: Holiday Lights, Summer Concert Series, Senior Week in the Park, Eggstravaganza, adult co-ed volleyball league, tennis clinics, and various interpretive programs

Short-term repairs or needs:

- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Construct picnic pavilion with restrooms
- Rehabilitate outdoor amphitheatre
- Construct a structure that provides shelter for musicians and better sound distribution
- Replace electrical wiring and outlets
- Change stonework and improve performing surface in amphitheatre
- Rehabilitate Tully House facility
- Perform structural work on stone bank barn, paint roof
- Improve access road and create handicap parking area and service delivery
- Upgrade electrical system
- Rehabilitate play area, meeting all safety requirements
- Replace and rehabilitate playground equipment
- Install new play surface
- Install new security and fire system in maintenance building
- Rehabilitate “Tully the Turtle” area in amphitheatre
- Develop parking area for visitors and staff at Park Office
- Develop interpretive display for barn lower level
- Bridge inspection/rehabilitation
- Repair/replace sliding mill doors
- Asphalt barn ramp and parking lot
- Generating station roof repairs
- Upper restroom refurbishment
- Office landscape design
- New maintenance facility
- Stone wall restoration at office
- Overhead wire at restrooms needs to be buried underground

**Berks County Heritage Center**

**Description and History:** The Heritage Center has been developed as an historical interpretive complex of relocated and restored structures commemorating important eras of our cultural history. The Gruber Wagon Works, C. Howard Hiester Canal Center, Wertz’s Bridge, the Deppen Cemetery, Melcher’s Grist Mill, Reeser Farm House, various memorials, and remnants of the Union Canal towpath are all located within the Heritage Center. The Heritage Center hosts the annual Heritage Festival in October and several other annual events, along with a seasonal interpretive series featuring workshops and programs for all ages.

**Gruber Wagon Works**- Erected in 1882 by Franklin Gruber, the wagon works is recognized as one of the most complete surviving examples of an integrated rural manufactory of its kind in the nation. The wagon works fashioned wagons for farm and industrial use until production stopped in the 1950’s. The two and one-half story T-shaped frame building holds over 19,000 artifacts, machinery and tools, and depicts the business’s peak production years of the early 1900’s. Originally located near Mt. Pleasant in Berks County, the wagon works was moved by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1976-1977 to prevent its inundation
by the Blue Marsh Lake project. In 1972, the shop was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1978, the wagon works was designated as a National Historic Landmark by the United States Government, commemorating its historical significance as an industry from a bygone era of American craftsmen.

**C. Howard Hiester Canal Center** - This education center presents the story of the important contribution the canal transportation system made to the history of Berks County and this country’s early growth. Canals saw their rise and fall in the 19th century. They offered means of bulk transportation and travel in the era prior to railroads when the only alternative to walking was the horse and wagon. The C. Howard Hiester canal collection consists of artifacts from the active days of local canals, and is considered to be the most extensive private collection of 19th century canal memorabilia in existence today. This collection is displayed in the restored barn at the Heritage Center.

**Wertz’s (Red) Bridge** - The Wertz’s “Red” Bridge is a 204-foot clear span combination truss arch wooden covered bridge built in 1867. The bridge, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, is recognized as the longest single span covered bridge still in existence in Pennsylvania today. The covered bridge allows pedestrians to pass over the Tulpehocken Creek, and links the Heritage Center and Union Canal Trail to the Red Bridge Recreation Area.

**Deppen Cemetery** - Also known as the Catholic Cemetery, was relocated from its original location near Mount Pleasant. Buried here are Irish workers who died of “Swamp Fever” while building
the Union Canal, in addition to local residents from Mount Pleasant.

Melcher’s Grist Mill- Relocated from Bally, Berks County, this restored grist mill was built around 1888 for the Nicklos Melcher family. The mill represents a rare and complete example of a water-powered farm mill used to serve only the needs of the farm on which it was located. This family-owned mill operated through the use of millstones for grinding cornmeal and grains into feed for animals.

Reeser Farm House- This early 19th century stone farmhouse, barn and several outbuildings represents the agricultural life-style of early Berks County. The land was actively farmed until 1978 when the farm was acquired by Berks County for development of its park system. The farmhouse serves as the main office and information center for the Heritage Center, and the barn houses the canal center and visitor conveniences.

Location: Bern Township; along the Tulpehocken Creek at 1102 Red Bridge Road, 1/2 mile southwest of the Rte. 183 and Rte. 222 interchange.

Ownership: Berks County

Classification: Special Use Park

Total Area: 41.4 acres
Managed Area: 40.64

Historic structures: 1882 Gruber Wagon Works (National Historic Landmark, National Register of Historic Places), Wertz’s Red Bridge (National Register of Historic Places), 1888 Melcher’s Grist Mill, Early 19th century Reeser’s Farm House and barn (housing the Canal Center) and other outbuildings, Mildred the Canal Houseboat, Deppen Cemetery

Existing uses/facilities and Condition:
- Park office
- Wagon Works Museum
- Iron Storage Shed
- Canal Center Museum
- Silo
- Houseboat (Mildred)
- Grist Mill
- Covered Bridge
- Meeting Area
- Brick Smokehouse
- Milkhouse
- Wooden Pig Pen
- Pumphouse
- Windmill
- Herb Garden
- Walking Trail
- Open Field
- Cemetery
- Bicentennial Monument
- Police Memorial
- Distelfink Sculpture
- Restrooms (year round)
- Maintenance Building
- Picnic Tables
- Handicap Accessibility: yes – limited parking, restrooms, canal center, first floor office, limited access at wagon museum
- Snack Bar
- Country Store
- Parking Area
  Shop Area: 5
Office Area: 4  
Main Lot: ~ 60 (2 HC)  
Total: ~ 70

**Programs/Festivals hosted:** Tuesday to Sunday tours May through October, Heritage Festival, Fiddle & Acoustic Music Mini Fest, Big Wheel Mini-apolis 500, Step Back In Time, Various Interpretive Programs, Nature Day Camps

**Master Plan:** Berks County Heritage Center Master Plan, Prepared by John Milner Associates, 1980; Rosser Study

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Rehabilitate Gruber Wagon Works: Replace deteriorating exterior siding without changing the historic aura of the inside of the building; Rehabilitate/replace windows and doors; Exterior painting
- Construct visitors center to serve Wagon Works and Canal Center. Center should include entrance/ticket area, orientation theater, gift shop, restrooms, restoration work shop, public meeting/program room, and staff administration offices.
- Construct exhibit/display structure (pre-engineered building) adjacent to Gruber Wagon Works, approximately 10,000 square feet, with climate control, fire and security systems, lighting to exhibit wagons, sleighs, and other artifacts.
- Construct additional pre-engineered maintenance building, approximately 8,000 to 10,000 square feet to house maintenance activities of the department.
- Archival and collection storage area with proper climate control
- Asphalt maintenance driveway
- Master lock system (half complete)
- Security system at maintenance facility

- Re-trench phone line to maintenance building
- Masonry work around barn
- Fuel tanks installed at maintenance building
- Investigate acquisition of adjacent land

**Hunsicker’s Grove**

**Description and History:** The park was the site of an early iron ore quarry, which supplied a nearby iron furnace. In 1929, Levinus Hunsicker acquired the property from the Crane Ironworks Company. The small quarry filled with water creates a three-acre lake. The property remained in the Hunsicker family, and was converted into a commercial picnic grove. The County acquired the grove in 1994, and made structural, mechanical, and cosmetic improvements to the pavilion, kitchen and restrooms before re-opening the facility. The grove is now a public park and also available by reservation for large group picnics.

![Pond at Hunsicker's Grove](Pond at Hunsicker's Grove)
**Location:** Longswamp Township, 9350 Longswamp Road, Mertztown

**Ownership:** Berks County

**Classification:** Special Use Park

**Total Area:** 48 acres

**Managed Area:** 16.26

**Existing uses/facilities and Condition:**
- Lake/quarry
- Fishing Dock
- 2 Pavilions, 1 with kitchen (electricity with reservation)
- Restroom
- Small Bungalow Cottage/utility room
- Picnic Tables
- Grills
- Large Stone/Brick Barbecue Grill (3)
- Gazebo
- Horseshoes (1)
- Quoits (1)
- Sand Volleyball
- Walking Trail
- Handicap Accessibility: parking, restrooms, picnic areas and fishing dock
- Parking Areas
  - Gravel/Stone lot: 108 spaces
  - HC lot near restrooms: 4 spaces
  - **Total:** 112

**Programs/Festivals hosted:** Children’s Fishing Rodeo, summer concert series

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Construct new play area with playground equipment and surfacing
- Install oven hood in kitchen area of pavilion
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Riparian buffer installed for overflow stream from pond
- Bungalow removed or rehabilitated
- Improve walking trail

**Kaercher Creek Park**

**Description and History:** The park is developed around a 40-acre man-made lake, complete with a fishing dock, boat dock and a boat-launching ramp for non-motorized boats. The Pennsylvania Fish Commission stocks the lake with a variety of fish. Family oriented facilities feature a lodge, picnic pavilion, children’s play apparatus, walking trails and volleyball courts. Several concerts and interpretive programs are presented at the park throughout the summer.

Proposed plans by the Northern Berks Recreation Commission include a baseball field, midget and full-size soccer fields, and parking.

**Location:** Windsor Township, 3401 Old Route 22 (State Street)
Ownership: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania acting through the Pennsylvania Fish Commission. The commonwealth leased the site to the County for a forty-year term in January, 1973. In 2007, 22.5 acres were sub-leased to North Berks Recreation Commission.

Classification: Large Urban/Suburban Park

Total Area: 183.7 acres
Managed Area: 47.99

Historic structures: None

Existing uses/facilities and Condition:

Pavilion
Lodge w/meeting area
Exercise cluster
Fishing dock
Fishing area-handicap accessible
Horseshoes (2)
Play equipment
Quoits (2)
Volleyball (2)
Sand Volleyball
Walking Trail
Grills
Large Stone Barbeque Grills (2)
Picnic tables
Restrooms
Electricity with reservations
Boat Launching Ramp
Information Bulletin Board
Handicap Accessibility: restrooms, lodge, picnic areas and fishing dock

Parking Areas:
Leisure area parking:  76 (2 HC)
Boat area parking:  16 regular (1 HC)
16 extra long (1 HC)

Total: 108 (4 HC)

Programs/Festivals hosted: Summer concert series, and various interpretive programs

Short-term repairs or needs:
- Rehabilitate lodge building: Repair windows and doors; Exterior and interior painting
- Rehabilitate Bathrooms: Replace fixtures, lighting; Paint and repair as needed; Replace doors and windows
• Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
• Dam repairs
• Water fountains
• Master lock system
• Color coat volleyball courts
• Construct heated break room in maintenance area of lodge
• Asphalt (repair) main entrance to park
• New signage for walking trail
• Renew lease with Commonwealth or negotiate purchase

Leesport Lock House

Description and History: The lock house was built in 1834 by the Schuylkill Navigation Company next to the canal lock in Leesport to house the lock keeper and his family. The lock keeper not only operated the lock, but also maintained the canal half-way between the locks before and after the lock house. His family raised fruit and vegetables to sell to the boatmen and passengers, and also prepared meals for these people. The Leesport Lock House Foundation purchased the house in 1976 and restored it to the period of 1880-1910 when canal usage and community life were at their height. The following year the property was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The County acquired the property in 1992 and maintains the grounds, the exterior and mechanical systems of the two and one-half story stone building. The Foundation continues to use and care for the interior and furnishings of the lock house. The building is available for small group meetings and educational tours.

Ownership: Berks County
Classification: Special Use Park
Total Area: 1.4 acres
Managed Area: 1.37
Historic structures: 1834 lock house (National register of Historic Places)

Existing uses/facilities and Condition:
Meeting area
Restrooms
Handicap Accessibility: limited

Programs/Festivals hosted: Interpretive programs
Hosted by Leesport Lock House Foundation:
Strawberry Fest and Pig Roast
Holiday Open House

Short-term repairs or needs:
• Rehabilitate lock house
• Exterior painting
• Replace wooden porch
• Repair house foundation
• Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
• Investigate Acquisition of adjacent land

Location: Leesport Borough; 27 E. Wall Street, two blocks west of Rt. 61
Red Bridge Recreation Area

**Description and History:** The recreation area consists of a picnic pavilion, badminton court, and children’s play area. A short path connects the park to Wertz’s “Red” Bridge, which allows pedestrians to pass over the Tulpehocken Creek to the Union Canal Trail and Berks County Heritage Center.

**Location:** Spring Township, 2141 Tulpehocken Road.

**Ownership:** Berks County

**Classification:** Neighborhood Park

**Total Area:** 4.33 acres

**Managed Area:** 4.33

**Historic structures:** None

**Existing uses/facilities and Condition:**
- Pavilion
- Electricity with reservation
- Badminton Court
- Fishing area-accessible
- Horseshoes (1)
- Quoits (1)
- Play equipment
- Walking trail
- Grills
- Large Stone Barbecue Grill
- Picnic tables
- Restrooms
- Handicap accessibility: parking, restrooms, picnic areas and pavilion

Parking Area

**Total:** 37 (1 HC)

**Programs/Festivals hosted:**

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Rehabilitate restroom
- Replace fixtures, lighting
- Paint and repair as needed
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Stream bank restoration
- Upgrade play equipment

Stonecliffe Recreation Area

**Description and History:** This area, built between 1969 and 1971, was the first park built in the County system. The recreation area is situated on land that formerly was Gring’s limestone quarry in the late 19th to 20th century. Family-oriented recreation

![Union Canal Trail at Stonecliffe Recreation Area](image-url)
and athletics are the focus of this park, as facilities include a children’s play area, picnic area, fitness station, fishing dock, volleyball and basketball courts, an Action Park for skaters and bikers, and a soccer field. The Union Canal Trail passes through the park along the Tulpehocken Creek.

**Location:** City of Reading, at Columbia Street/Monroe Street, 1200 Monroe Street

**Ownership:** County of Berks

**Classification:** Neighborhood Park

**Total Area:** 11.3 acres  
**Managed Area:** 11.09

**Historic structures:** None

Existing uses/facilities and Condition:

- Lighted Action Park for Bikes/Blades/Boards includes
  - quarter pipes that range in height from 3-5’, three-sided pyramid with curved rectangular grind rail, double pump hump, grind box with angled edge, skate table with kicker ramp, kinked rectangular grind rail, straight round grind rail, kinked round grind rail, 5’ hip and spine, and 3 ledges.
- Lighted Basketball court
- Volleyball Courts (2)
- ParCourse Exercise Course with Disabled Option
- 3/8 mile Bicycle Skills Course
- Fishing dock/Pier
- Play equipment
- Shuffleboard (2)
- Checkers Tables (2)
- Soccer field
- Walking trail
- Grills
- Picnic tables
- Restrooms - seasonal
- Information Bulletin Board
- Handicap accessibility: parking, restrooms, picnic areas, and action park

**Parking Areas**
- Lower lot: 56 (4 HC)
- Upper lot: 51
- **Total: 107 (4 HC)**

**Programs/Festivals hosted:** Triple B Skills & Tricks Competition

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Rehabilitate restrooms by replacing fixtures, lighting, painting and repairs as needed
- Replace damaged metal doors and windows
- Resurface basketball court and walkways
- Rehabilitate soccer field
- Install new playground equipment and surfacing
- Replace drinking fountains and outdoor lights
- Signage and landscaping
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- CDBG restoration project
- Landscape design
- Masonry repairs of flagstone and brick
Union Canal Bicycle and Walking Trail

**Description and History:** The trail winds along the Tulpehocken Creek, tracing the former canal towpath (canal operated from 1827 to 1884) from the Reading City limits northward to Reber's Bridge. Designated as a National Recreation Trail, this four and one-half mile trail is utilized year-round for hiking, jogging, biking, cross-country skiing, bird watching, and as a means for visiting the recreation and historic areas. Located along the trail is Union Canal Lock No. 47E, which was restored in 1976. Access points to the trail are located at Stonecliffe Recreation Area, Berks Leisure Area, Gring's Mill Recreation Area, Berks County Heritage Center, Red Bridge Recreation Area, and at Reber’s Bridge. Built of crushed stone the trail averages 6-8 feet in width.

**Location:** City of Reading and Bern Township, along the Tulpehocken Creek

**Ownership:** Berks County

**Classification:** Greenway

**Total Area:** 170.7 acres

**Managed Area:** 31.97

**Historic structures:** Union Canal Lock No. 47E and other canal and mill remnants

**Existing uses/facilities and Condition:**
- Walking trail
- Various canal and mill related remnants
- Handicap accessibility
- Footbridge over Plum Creek
- Restored Canal Lock (Lock #47)
- Footbridge over Union Canal Stream
- Footbridge over drainage stream

**Programs/Festivals hosted:**
- Site of many fundraising walks for non-profit groups

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Signage put in place at Lock 47E
- Restoration of lock gates and stone walls of Lock 47E
Youth Recreation Facility

**Description and History:** Constructed in 1991-92 at one of the County-owned farms that make-up the 800+ acre Berks County North Campus, this active recreation facility is comprised of four soccer fields and four ball fields: a legion baseball field, little league field, softball field, and tee-ball field. Teams interested in using these fields must make arrangements with the County park office. The adaptive nature trail, designed for physically challenged individuals, is also located at this facility. Three different elevated wooden trails weave through the pine grove. An adaptive play area for physically challenged children is being developed for this facility.

**Location:** Bern Township, 1098 County Welfare Road

**Ownership:** Berks County

**Classification:** Sports Complex

**Total Area:** 117.42 acres

**Managed Area:** 62.82

**Historic structures:** 19th century Farmstead

**Existing uses/facilities and Condition:**
- Adaptive Nature Trail
- 4 Soccer fields (one lighted)
- Lighted softball field
- Tee-ball field
- Little league baseball field
- Legion baseball field
- Concession stand

- Restrooms – Seasonal
- Farm house
- Barn
- Maintenance Building
- Brick Smokehouse
- Corn Crib
- Press Box Building
- Handicap accessibility: parking, restrooms, adaptive trail and other field areas

**Parking Areas**
- Shop Area/Small lot: 9
- Adaptive Recreation Area: 24 (2 HC)
- Main Lot: 273 (8 HC)

**Total: 306 (10 HC)**

**Programs/Festivals hosted:** Go Fly a Kite Day

**Short-term repairs or needs:**
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering
- Phase I for Adaptive Play Area
  - Construct restroom facility
  - Construct two shelters, one for picnic activities and the other as a play shelter
  - Complete paved walkway system
  - Install drinking fountain, benches, lighting and 911 call box
  - Landscaping

**Long-term needs:**
- Phase II for Adaptive Play Area
  - Construct play areas with apparatus and courts, usable by individuals with disabilities
  - Construct sensory garden and interpretive trail for individuals with sight difficulties
Proposed County Park Projects

Hay Creek Trail

Description and History: Proposed acquisition and development of a walking and bicycle trail along the former railroad line near Hay Creek. The abandoned rail line extends 9.7 miles from just south of Birdsboro to Elverson, Chester County. This trail would provide a critical link to an inter-county trail system, with potential connections to the Thun Trail (Schuylkill River Trail), Horse-Shoe Trail, French Creek State Park, and Chester County trails. The project has received funding through the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation’s Transportation Enhancement Program and is currently approaching the acquisition phase.

Location: Robeson Township, Union Township, Caernarvon Township, New Morgan Borough

Ownership: Currently private-ROW to be acquired by County

Classification: Greenway

Short-term repairs or needs:
- Acquisition of 9.72 miles of railroad ROW (Coatesville Secondary Track)

Long-term needs:
- Construct 8’ wide trail using crushed stone
- Rehabilitation of four existing bridges
- Construct two new footbridges across Hay Creek
- Provide trailheads and signage
- Landscaping
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering

Union Canal Trail-Blue Marsh Connector Trail

Description and History: To be constructed in 2007-08, this trail will close a two-mile missing link between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer’s Blue Marsh Lake Trail system and Berks County’s Union Canal Trail. By extending the Union Canal Trail from Reber’s Bridge to the Blue Marsh Dam Stilling Basin, it will create a 40-mile trail network from the City of Reading to Bernville. The trail will be constructed on the Union Canal towpath for the lower section and on a new alignment for the major section of the two-mile length. An existing parking area and access road is provided mid-way on the trail length. The trail will vary in width from 6’ to 12’, depending on location and terrain, and will consist of a stone base with stone screening placed on top. Construction is funded through the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation’s Transportation Enhancement Program and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Location: Bern Township, along Tulpehocken Creek.

Ownership: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers owns most of the property on which the trail is located, except for several hundred feet on County land. The COE will provide law enforcement for the portion of the trail located within their property boundary. The County Parks Department will maintain the entire two-mile trail under the same program used for the County’s Union Canal Trail.
Classification: Greenway

Managed Area: 8' wide trail, 2 miles is length

Historic structures: Union Canal Ruins

Existing uses/facilities and Condition:

Short-term repairs or needs:
- Construction of 2-mile connector trail
- Replace entrance sign with a standard sign using uniform design, color and lettering

Long-term needs:

Overall priority: High Priority-construction

Potential County Park Projects

Neversink Mountain Park

Description and History: Neversink Mountain is one of two mountains that frame the City of Reading. The mountain forms the southeastern boundary of the City, and is comprised of land in five additional surrounding municipalities. These six communities account for more than 35% of all housing units in Berks County. Neversink Mountain possesses several unique characteristics and opportunities. One of the more important characteristics of the mountain is its visibility. It can be seen from areas throughout the metropolitan area as it provides a green background to the growing urban and suburban areas. Extensive scenic views and panoramas are also available from the mountain itself.

Neversink Mountain is approximately 2 miles in length and averages about one mile in width, and includes approximately 1,350 acres. It has three distinct peaks, a hollowed-out hidden cove in the eastern end, and its rocky walls on the south side form the horseshoe curve in the Schuylkill River. The mountain has a special series of environments and several rare and endangered plant and animal species are identified by PNDI. The mountain also has a unique history including lumbering, quarrying, transportation, and as a tourism mecca in the late 1800’s. Tourist attractions and resort hotels were developed on the mountain, primarily by the Neversink Mountain Railroad Company, and were served by trolley and train. All of these former uses have left a legacy of over 20 miles of scenic trails that provide access to the mountaintop.

In the 1990’s two studies and a resulting long range plan were prepared for the Berks County Conservancy and the City of Reading, both recommending that the mountain be preserved as a natural park and wildlife sanctuary, and be placed under the stewardship of a single entity. The County’s 1994 Open Space and Recreation Plan also recommended that it be protected and used for passive recreation, including trails, scenic overlooks, picnic areas, and nature study. In addition to the recommendations mentioned above, major components of the long-range plan include:

- Size of park should be approximately 900 acres.
- Primary access would be via hiking and biking trails. Motor vehicle access would be limited to access points/parking lots located around the base of the mountain and to an area at the top that is central to the ridge where a visitor’s center would be located.
Overall, approximately 12 miles of hiking/biking trails are proposed, using much of the existing trail system, especially the bed of the former Neversink Mountain Railroad. Many of the lesser trails would be closed to provide for larger undisturbed tracts for wildlife sanctuary.

The trail system would consist of four components. There would be a ridge top network that would allow for the exploration of all peaks, ridge environment and high-elevation vantage points. A mid-level trail system would encircle most of the mountain and connect to the ridge top system. At key points along the lower slopes, access trails would connect the mid-level trails with parking areas and local streets. A fourth component would link the mountain to the Schuylkill River.

- Opportunity exists to develop more than 25 scenic overlooks.
- Preserve and restore some of the historic features and remnants.

Since the completion of the studies, land acquisition has been spearheaded by the Berks County Conservancy with financial support from the County, State, and William Penn Foundation. Approximately two-thirds of the land has been acquired (eased or fee-simple). It has been suggested that Berks County assume the primary responsibility for project development and park operations. However, while supporting acquisition efforts the County has not agreed to take responsibility for development of the site as a County park at this time.
Chapter 4.2 Major Projects and Capital Budgets

Approved 2007 Capital Budget
(Major Projects above $50,000)

1. Antietam Lake: Acquisition, repairs to structure of dam and improvements
   - $4,000,000 Growing Greener
   - $2,000,000 DCNR Grant

2. Construction of a 2-mile connector between the end of the Union Canal Trail at Reber’s Bridge Road and the Blue Marsh Trail system at Stilling Basin Road (to be completed in 2008):
   - $377,242 Penn DOT Grant
   - $288,438 General Fund
   - $180,000 DCNR Grant

3. Hay Creek Trail – acquisition of 79 parcels to assemble the 9.72 miles of trail (to be completed in 2008)
   - $439,838 Growing Greener
   - $131,596 Penn DOT Grant

4. Rehabilitation of Stonecliffe Recreation Area located in the 19th Ward, City of Reading; the County’s first park area completed 1969-1971.
   - $ 182,425 CDBG Program

5. Gruber Wagon Works rehabilitation to determine structural defects, replace deteriorated exterior siding, windows and doors.
   Estimated $100,000 CDBG program and PA Historical and Museum Commission

6. Consulting Services required to prepare cost estimates, construction drawings, and specifications for grant applications and major projects.
   - $75,000 General Fund

7. Replacement of entrance signs at 11 County Parks
   - $55,000 General Fund

Proposed 2008 Capital Budget
(Major projects above $50,000)

1. Antietam Lake
   A. Repairs of dam required by PA Dept. of Environmental Protection.
   - $ 1,159,438 County Growing Greener
   - $ 840,562 State Growing Greener
   - $ 1,000,000 Municipal Funds

   B. Master Plan, site improvements, park and recreational development.
   - $ 500,000 other municipal funds

2. Completion of the 2-mile connector trail between the Union Canal Trail and Blue Marsh Trail system
   - $ 188,621 Penn DOT grant
Chapter 4.2 Major Projects

$ 144,219 General Fund
$ 90,000 DCNR grant

3. Complete acquisition of 79 parcels to assemble the proposed 9.72 mile Hay Creek Trail

$376,898 Penn DOT grant
$413,102 PA Growing Greener II

4. Rehabilitation of Stonecliffe Recreation Area located in the 19th Ward, City of Reading

$ 182,425 CDBG Grant
$ 240,000 DCNR Grant
$ 57,575 General Fund

5. Adaptive Recreation Area – Install restrooms and picnic pavilions at the Youth Recreation Facility to serve individuals with disabilities.

$ 102,300 DCNR grant
$ 102,300 General Fund


$220,000 General Fund

7. Consulting services required for major projects and grant submissions.

$ 60,000 General Fund

Proposed 2009 Capital Budget
(Major projects above $50,000)

1. Consulting services, trail construction, bridge repair for Hay Creek Trail.

$1,369,086 County Growing Greener
$ 130,914 PA Growing Greener II

2. Rehabilitation of the Gruber Wagon Works, a National Historic Landmark – to include structural restoration, replacing deteriorated exterior siding, doors and windows

$ To Be Decided – CDBG Program
PA Historical and Museum Commission

Major Projects Listed for Funding Consideration

1. Based on the County’s Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan, consideration should be given to preserving future County park land, historic preservation and/or open space protection.

2. Consideration should be given to easement acquisition for the protection of threatened County park land, historic sites, or other recreation facilities.

3. Rehabilitate playground areas at Hunsicker’s Grove, Kaercher Creek Park and Gring’s Mill Recreation Area.

4. Upgrade electrical service at Gring’s Mill Recreation Area; installed in 1974 with 600 AMP service. Holiday Lights program has reached maximum capacity.
5. Construct picnic pavilion with fireplace and restrooms at Gring’s Mill Recreation Area; (no shelter exists at the present time – water and sewer connections are in place).

6. Develop the Allegheny Aqueduct Historical Park to include:
   a. Boat launching dock for the Schuylkill River Water Trail
   b. Boundary survey, construct roadway, parking area, picnic shelter and trails.
   c. Utilize the 1783 Beidler House located at Allegheny Aqueduct Historical Park for canal exhibits, display, meeting rooms and office space.

7. Rehabilitate Gring’s Mill Amphitheatre which was built in 1974; install backdrop panels and cover for better sound distribution, replace electric wiring and outlets, change stonework.

8. Rehabilitation work required on the concrete bridge at Gring’s Mill Recreation Area.

9. Visitor’s Center for Berks County Heritage Center to include orientation room, theater area, office and workshop space.

10. Restoration of Union Canal Lock #47 adjacent to the bicycle and walking trail.
Chapter 4.3 County of Berks Parks and Recreation Board Recommendations

The Berks County Parks and Recreation Board (Board) is a nine-member advisory board appointed by the County Commissioner. The Board is making the following recommendations in determining the future of the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department (Department):

- Upon adoption of the Berks County Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan by the County Commissioners, the Planning Commission, in cooperation with the Board, should establish a priority listing of the most important regional land, natural areas, historic resources and linkages for inclusion into the County’s park system. The Berks County Open Space and Recreation Advisory Council should be involved in this process.

- The Planning Commission, Board, and Open Space and Recreation Council should be considering long-term acquisition of regional park sites that can be purchased now for future development. The County’s line-of-credit funding program should be utilized for the acquisition/easement of future sites along with the protection needed to existing park sites.

- The County should evaluate all existing park, recreation and historic sites within the present system to determine whether additional land should be acquired to protect the property from development, encroachment, or other non-compatible uses. At the same time, consideration should be given to divesting or leasing certain sites, if appropriate.

- The Department should continue its networking with the Berks County Museum Council, the Society for the Preservation of the Gruber Wagon Works, and local historical organizations. Should the opportunity arise, the Board should consider the transfer of historic structures to other organizations capable of operating and maintaining them.

- The Program and Services Committee should meet with Department staff to evaluate and determine what programs and events support the Department’s mission. Criteria for retaining or eliminating programs should be based on attendance, costs per participant, staff time and service provided to the public.

- With the reduction of the maintenance staff, the Maintenance and Facilities Committee must work with the Department to keep all existing areas maintained at the same level. Preventative maintenance initiatives must be established and performed if maintenance costs are to be kept in line. The current operation of outdated and unsafe equipment burdens the County with undue costs which new, more efficient equipment would relieve. All additional park, recreation or historic sites placed under the present system will require additional funding to operate and maintain them.

- As the future direction of the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department is determined by the County Commissioners, Planning Commission and Parks and Recreation Board, a system analysis should be completed by an outside consulting group to determine staffing levels and new skills needed to meet the future roles and responsibilities of the Department.

- As the County park system continues to grow; with the acquisition of Antietam Lake; construction of the Union Canal Connector Trail; acquisition and development of the Hay Creek Trail; and possible transfer of the Schuylkill
River Trail, additional staff will be required for the administration, operation and maintenance of these facilities. The Board sees a need for and recommends:
- (1) **Full-time Maintenance Worker** and (2) **Part-Time Park Rangers** – to be added as soon as the County assumes maintenance and security responsibilities for Antietam Lake
- **Trails Manager** – individual to coordinate and manage the County’s existing and proposed trails:
  a. Union Canal Bicycle and Walking Trail
  b. 2-mile connector trail to the Blue Marsh trail system
  c. Existing and proposed trail system at Antietam Lake
  d. Acquisition and construction of the 9.72-mile Hay Creek Trail.
  e. County involvement in the abandoned Route 82 trail at Birdsboro.
  f. Proposed transfer of the Thun Trail from Reading south to the Montgomery County line
  g. Possible trail system on Neversink Mountain.
- **Archivist/Museum Coordinator** – at present the County operates and maintains six historic sites/structures; most notable is the Gruber Wagon Works, designated as a National Historic Landmark. A full-time person should be retained capable of recording and cataloguing all artifacts/records; applying for historic preservation grants; determining preservation and maintenance needs; and assisting with the operation of historic sites.

- Change the Park Ranger status from part-time to full-time as the security needs of the Department have increased. The present Park Ranger staff is 12, all part-time, which makes it difficult to schedule and have the security that is required at all park, recreation and historic sites throughout the year. With an increase in park attendance and reservations, along with the new parks and trails, the County should be considering the safety of the public using the park system.

- The Board must advocate for adequate funding to insure the park system can be maintained and supported at levels appropriate to its needs.

- The County should continue to fund consulting services within the Department’s capital budget for use in preparing site plans, cost estimates and construction drawings required for grant applications and the budget process.

- The Board will continue to evaluate the Department’s program and reservation fees on an annual basis.

- The County is presently leasing Kaercher Creek Park from the PA Fish and Boat Commission. Consideration must be given to whether the County will re-negotiate its lease in 2013 or consider transfer of ownership.

- Recommendation has been made to have the County take over ownership of the Schuylkill River Trail (Thun Trail) from Reading south to the Montgomery County line. Should this transfer occur, the County must provide the staffing along with the funding to operate and maintain another addition to the park system. The Department should also be represented on the Board of the Schuylkill National and State Heritage Area.
Chapter 4.4 County of Berks Parks and Recreation Department Structure
4.5 Berks County Parks and Recreation Department Peer Review

Peer Review Preface

During 2006 the County hired a consultant to coordinate a peer review of the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department. The purpose of this review was for a team of peers to evaluate the Parks and Recreation Department as well as its facilities and develop recommendations to improve the department’s services and better meet citizens’ needs. This review was financed in part by a grant from the Community Conservation Partnership Program under the administration of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Recreation and Conservation.

In the near future, the Berks County Parks and Recreation Board and the County Commissioners will discuss how to implement the recommendations of the Peer Review.

Berks County Parks and Recreation Department Peer Review

Introduction

This peer review team report is dedicated to moving Berks County into its future role for parks, recreation, greenways and open space. The report recommendations focus the Parks and Recreation Department’s priorities on its key mission: preserving and celebrating Berks County’s abundant natural resources and rich cultural heritage.

Four parks and recreation professionals helped craft this report: Ron Ahlbrandt, Director, Montgomery County Parks and Heritage Services Department; Ed Chubb, Director, Dauphin County Parks and Recreation Department; Sue Landes, Executive Director, Lancaster Recreation Commission; and John Mikowychok, Director, Chester County Department of Parks and Recreation.

As working professionals, we know well the trials of shaping extensive park systems and recreation programs amid tight budgets and escalating costs. We know, too, the rewards of working with citizen volunteers, community agencies and corporate partners.

Berks County is blessed with regional parks and trails, scenic waterways and rich heritage resources. These assets form a quality of life that you have shown you are dedicated to improving – by considering this peer review team report. Spectacular parks and memorable recreation programs don’t enhance the quality of one’s life, they define it.

The Berks County Parks and Recreation Department put itself squarely under scrutiny in a bid to improve. The peer review team was welcomed into Berks County to ask questions, to look around.

The timeline for the peer review was as follows:

May/June 2006: Review inventory materials on facilities, administration, personnel, programs, maintenance and finances of the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department.

July 2006: Interview key persons including staff, County Commissioners and major stakeholders; tour Berks County park sites.
Submit report with recommendations to incorporate into the Berks County Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan to improve Parks and Recreation Department services and better meet citizen needs.

Report Structure

This peer review team report contains an overview evaluation of the operation of the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department and recommendations for its future. As such, it will become a section of the 2006 Berks County Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan.

This report is the result of three days of work by the four parks and recreation professionals who made up the peer review team: a day of touring the parks, a day of interviews and a day back at home to reflect on what we saw and heard and put our thoughts down on paper.

The report begins with a brief description of the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department. Next, the significant assets of the Department and the issues we feel are important to address are discussed. Recommendations are then presented to position the Department to take on its future role for parks, recreation, greenways and open space. The appendix includes a summary of the results of key person interviews and descriptions of the three county parks and recreation departments represented by team members.

Snapshot Description

The Berks County Parks and Recreation Department is a system of 1,138 acres of community and regional parks and historical facilities serving 373,638 residents (2000 population). This acreage total includes the recently acquired and undeveloped Antietam Lake property. The County’s most stellar group of park properties is within the greenbelt along the Tulpehocken Creek. This includes the Berks County Heritage Center, Union Canal Bicycle and Walking Trail and the Gring’s Mill, Red Bridge, Berks Leisure and Stonecliffe Recreation Areas.

The Department operates two interpretive facilities at the Heritage Center complex, the C. Howard Hiester Canal Center and Museum and the Gruber Wagon Works. Both facilities complement the meandering Tulpehocken Creek and take visitors back into the 19th century through authentic interpretation to showcase the County’s heritage related to commerce. The Department also manages smaller historical sites including the Leesport Lock House and Allegheny Aqueduct Historical Park.

The Allegheny Aqueduct Historical Park and Beidler House and Mill properties along the Schuylkill River can potentially be connected to the Thun Trail. There are also opportunities for connector trails from the Union Canal Bicycle and Walking Trail to Blue Marsh Lake (a two-mile connection), the Hay Creek Trail (9.7 miles) and the Neversink Mountain Park (potentially, 12 miles of trails with over 25 scenic overlooks). These properties represent a bright future for Berks County, particularly if funds can be leveraged from other governmental and private sources.

Berks County’s park system encompasses special projects from prior administration’s priorities such as lighted ball fields, a police memorial and a bicentennial memorial. These facilities were expensive to construct and are expensive to maintain. The Department operates several other specialized resources: the skate park at the Stonecliffe Recreation Area, the elevated, handicapped accessible trail at the Youth Recreation Facility; and the lodge facilities at Camp Joy.

The Department manages small to mid-sized parks in the more rural areas of Berks County that surround small bodies of water, including a Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission facility.
(Kaercher Creek Park, 184 acres, 40+-acre lake) and a former quarry site (Hunsicker’s Grove, 48 acres, three-acre lake). The above sites, along with plans to preserve Antietam Lake, (560 acres, 13-acre lake) position Berks County to accommodate one of the fastest-growing activities in outdoor recreation over the past decade, the paddle sports of canoeing and kayaking. Coupled with its landholdings along the Tulpehocken Creek and Schuylkill River, the Department could make an identity for itself, recreation-wise, on water-based parks alone.

More than 125 educational and recreational programs and special events are held for County residents to enjoy and experience the park system.

The Department’s mission is: The Berks County Parks and Recreation Department is charged with the development, operation and maintenance of all County-owned parks, recreation facilities and historic sites. The Department is responsible for providing recreational opportunities as well as addressing the interpretive and educational needs as related to these facilities.

According to its organizational chart, the Department employs 20 full-time and 64 part-time staff. It has an operating budget (2006) of $1.8 million, consisting of $1.3 million for payroll and $.5 million for services and supplies. The Heritage Center and Youth Recreation Facility are separate cost centers with budgets of $97,775 and $70,257 (2006) not included in the Parks and Recreation Department budget. Full-time salaries associated with these properties, however, are a part of the overall Department budget. A capital improvements budget of $2.2 million comes mainly from grant funds. Estimated revenue to be generated through user fees and charges in 2006 is $71,500.

**Assets and Issues**

The key assets of and issues facing the recreation, parks and open space system are presented so that Berks County can clearly see its opportunities and challenges for the future. This establishes the current situation within the County’s parks and recreation system, and shows areas to build upon and areas to improve.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Area</th>
<th>Assets</th>
<th>Issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recreation Administration</td>
<td>The County has had citizen involvement in its park system since 1964, when the first park was acquired and the Park Board was formed. It merged with the Recreation Board in 1970.</td>
<td>The Park and Recreation Board is not actively involved in advocating for and implementing the mission of the Department.</td>
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<td>Current professional staff is very committed to and capable of meeting the current objectives of the Department.</td>
<td>The direction of the Department (regional trail system, heritage resources, active and passive recreation, etc.) is not clearly defined.</td>
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<td>Current Director of Parks and Recreation has provided extensive, innovative leadership and professionalism in development of the current park system.</td>
<td>The Department is not an active partner with the Schuylkill River Greenway Association to develop and maintain trail opportunities along the Schuylkill River. The Department does not play a significant role in the preservation of open space in the County.</td>
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<td>The Heritage Center has a strong core of 40 some volunteers who help to staff its operation.</td>
<td>The Department Director is expected to retire within five years and a new Director needs to be appointed.</td>
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<td>(continued) Recreation Administration</td>
<td>Staffing levels for the Department are the same as they were back in the early 1980s, 25 years ago. Key positions to support the Department’s mission do not exist.</td>
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<td>Marketing and publicity for Department facilities and services is very limited.</td>
<td>Department administrative staff is housed in two or three different locations.</td>
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<td>The Department has no full-time park rangers.</td>
<td>The Department has three part-time employees for every one full-time employee.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Department has three part-time employees for every one full-time employee.</td>
<td>Current full-time salaries for professional staff aren’t high enough to attract qualified, experienced individuals when positions need to be filled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The title of the Department does not reflect the facilities it operates or its overall responsibilities. Heritage Services, Trails and Greenways are missing.</td>
<td>Department appears to not be a major player in many County initiatives that are related to parks and recreation</td>
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### Study Area: Assets and Issues

#### Park and Recreation Facilities

- **16 sites are managed by the County.**
  - The County has been in the parks business for over 40 years.
  - The County operates some great regional facilities that impact the urban and suburban core of Reading (Stonelife, Gring's Mill, Union Canal Trail, Heritage Center).
  - Heritage resources are impressive. The Gruber Wagon Works is a National Historic Landmark.
  - The County has led the way for stream valley preservation starting with the Tulpehocken Creek corridor in the 1960s.

- **10 of 16 the sites are located in the Metro Reading region:** Bern Township (5), City of Reading (2), Wyomissing Borough (1) and Spring Township (2). Other regions are underserved by the County. Department facilities are absent in the east and west.

- **County owns a number of small park sites that are not regional attractions.**
- **The Director of Parks and Recreation does not seem to be involved in the planning process for land acquisition.**
- **Some sites under County ownership are unrelated to the Department’s mission.**
- **There is no trail to connect the Union Canal Towpath and the Blue Marsh trails.**
- **The Hay Creek Trail is not completed.**
- **Park entrance signs are not consistent.** Few directional road signs exist to help visitors locate park entrances.

#### Finances

- **The Natural Land, Farmland and Open Space Conservation Program is an excellent start to funding preservation of important natural areas and open space.**

#### Recreation Programs

- **A diverse schedule of recreation programs is offered.**
- **Some current programming may not be appropriate as the County’s role.**

#### Finances (continued)

- **Funding is the most critical issue facing the Department.** Funds are needed to support and effectively maintain the expanding park system and historic sites. Sites are being added while the availability of additional public funding is limited.

### Study Area: Assets and Issues

#### Maintenance, Security and Accessibility

- **Overall grounds maintenance is good.**
- **Maintenance management plans are not completed for existing parks, making it difficult to evaluate the ability of current staff to take on new initiatives.**
- **The Department has been assigned responsibilities which have resulted in understaffing and underfunding.**
- **Park sites have lots of mowed grass acreage.**
- **Historic buildings are costly to maintain.**
- **Housing of maintenance equipment is scattered over more than 10 different facilities.**
- **Grounds maintenance equipment is outdated.**
- **The maintenance headquarters at Gring’s Mill is in a very poor location, at the center of public activity areas.**

#### Finances

- **The line of credit program does not seem to address the purchase of additional County park land.**
- **Adequate funds are not budgeted annually for capital repairs and improvements to existing facilities.**
- **No revenue policy exists for the Department.**
- **Fees charged for the use of Department facilities may be below market rates.**
- **The Friends of Berks County Parks Fund has no plan in place to raise money. It currently totals about $15,000.**
- **Maintenance management and operations costs for Antietam Lake have not been determined.** The task of estimating these costs was started but not finished.
Recommendations

The Parks and Recreation Department has challenges it must address if existing County facilities are to remain well-maintained, safe and attractive. The Department’s ability to meet these challenges hinges on determining the Department’s priorities and key responsibilities to Berks County citizens and on obtaining the necessary resources. By refocusing its mission, the Department will be better positioned to continue to meet residents’ needs for regional parks and greenways, while providing memorable community events to celebrate Berks County’s rich heritage.

As stewards of the County’s open space resources, the Department needs to capitalize on new opportunities and tap partnership resources to best to serve the public. Important decisions need to be made about new opportunities such as the Neversink Mountain properties, Schuylkill River Trail and Antietam Lake.

What should the role of the County Parks and Recreation Department be for parks, greenways, open space, recreation programs, heritage services and trails?

The following recommendations help to answer this question. They provide elected officials, board members, staff, community organizations and citizens with tools that can lead Berks County towards the future to do the best job possible in creating, enhancing and sustaining its parks and open space system.

#1 – Evaluating Current Parks and Historic Sites against Mission
A clear vision is needed for a centralized system of County parks, historic sites, greenways, trails and natural areas. County parks and open space assets should be planned, managed and maintained as an integrated, coordinated system, linked by trails and greenways. The Department must also maintain the balance between public enjoyment of open space and historic sites, and the need to protect the character of the resources themselves.

Those resources which have the potential to provide the broadest public benefit and are of County-wide significance should be emphasized and protected within the County system. The County park system should provide mostly passive recreation opportunities for enjoyment of scenic natural resources. Active recreation facilities should be de-emphasized, with the exception of trails.

Berks County does not presently have a “parks system.” The County needs to identify what the parks system should be from a physical standpoint, and then determine how its resources will be established and operated as an integrated County system.

The “anchor sites” for the County park system should be determined. To do this, County park sites and historic properties should be prioritized in order of importance as part of the parks system. The functional uses of each park should be evaluated to determine if they serve a regional significance. If a current facility is determined to be more localized in nature, the County should consider alternative ownership methods that maintain public access such as divestiture or leasing. Current park sites that the County should consider divesting, leasing or contracting out include the Youth Recreation Facility and Camp Joy.

- The County should divest itself of management of active recreation facilities with intense maintenance requirements, particularly lighted ball fields. Those responsibilities typically rest with local municipalities, not county departments. The facilities at the Youth Recreation Facility could be sold or leased to Bern Township as a community park. A cooperative, long-term agreement with Bern Township or an outright bargain sale of the property would provide local control over these active-use facilities, while freeing up the County
Parks and Recreation Department to focus its resources on other priorities.

- The Department should explore private management of its Camp Joy facility. The large meeting room in the lodge, coupled with support facilities (commercial kitchen, patio, fireplace, restrooms and small break-out rooms), pool and outdoor activity areas, cabins and spacious grounds may make a suitable summer day camp or retreat facility. The Department should consider hiring a consultant to make recommendations for improvements which will spur private investment and successful, adaptive re-use. This facility has the potential to ultimately be a major revenue generator for the County, rather than an expense. If it is not feasible to contract the operation of Camp Joy, the County should consider hiring a staff person to market and operate the facility. Camp Joy has tremendous revenue potential and is not presently being utilized to its fullest. Camp Joy facilities should produce revenue that will easily offset the salary and benefits. A marketing and programming plan needs to be developed for its use and promotion.

#2 – Determining the Future Direction of the Department

The Department should take the lead role in greenway and trail development and acquisition. Completing the County trail system should be a major priority for the Department. These trails are a significant resource to linking existing resources in the current parks and open space system. Park usage trends are moving away from traditional parks and towards greenways and trails.

The Department should focus its attention on improving and enhancing those historic resources having the most potential to improve tourism and economic development. The Heritage Center facilities should be at the top of the list.

The County Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan should identify the most important regionally significant land, natural areas, historic resources and linkages to acquire for the future County park system.

The County is being asked to take on and is considering ownership of many sites. Antietam Lake, regional lands at Neversink Mountain, regional trails along the Schuylkill River and trail connections are more aligned with the Department’s traditional mission than some of the existing County park sites. These potential new park sites are all important to the County’s open space system.

- The Thun Trail: The Schuylkill River Greenway Association (SRGA) will be finishing the Schuylkill River Trail Thun Section from Pottstown to Reading very soon. A grant has been received to do the trail signage and fund a staff person’s salary for two years to do a marketing and maintenance plan. Every County that the trail passes through (Schuylkill, Chester, Montgomery and Philadelphia) has accepted ownership and maintenance responsibilities for it. Berks County needs to do the same. This trail should definitely become a part of the County parks system. Two other Schuylkill River Trail pieces, the Berks County section of an 8 ½-mile section from Hamburg to Auburn called the Bartrum Trail and a 30-mile stretch from Hamburg to Reading, should also become County responsibility when they are finished.

- Antietam Lake: Given its history as a recreation spot for the greater Reading area, its role as a watershed and the support from area municipalities, Antietam Lake should be preserved and become a County park. The County needs to fully understand the commitment it will take to create a safe and positive park experience and give the Department the resources necessary to accommodate development and maintenance of the park.
4.5 Peer Report

- **Neversink Mountain Park:** This regional park will potentially be 900 acres. Neversink Mountain has a unique history, special environmental areas, extensive scenic views and over 20 miles of trails. This vast open space area is visible from the entire metropolitan Reading area. The County should take over ownership and assume the responsibility for this park’s development and operation. This wonderful natural resource should be protected and enhanced so that residents may enjoy it.

- **Hay Creek Trail:** The acquisition and development of this 9.7-mile abandoned rail line into a walking and bicycle trail should be a major priority for the County. The Hay Creek Trail will provide critical links to an inter-county trail system. Once completed, the Department should operate and maintain this trail.

- **Extension of the Union Canal Trail to Blue Marsh:** This is an essential connection to the existing trail system at Blue Marsh Lake. With the popularity of the current County trail, completing this extension should be made a high priority.

#3 – **Undertaking a Systems Analysis**

A systems analysis of all operational functions of the Department should be completed by an outside consultant group to determine staffing levels and new skills needed to meet the future roles and responsibilities of the Department. An independent study should be done of facility maintenance, landscape maintenance and visitor services (including recreation programs and interpretive services) for the County park system.

Assessing the operational requirements of the park system and the appropriate level of County staff and funding needed to maintain the existing system will also help to determine the ability of the Department to take on new initiatives.

Examples of areas that could provide savings are:

- Some park acreage may not need to be mowed; it may be better off maintained in a natural state.
- Maintenance equipment is housed in many different facilities. Consolidating this equipment somewhat will improve staff ability to perform maintenance by centralizing needed tools, equipment and supplies.
- Grounds maintenance equipment may be outdated and inefficient. Replacement of this equipment may save money as less man hours are needed to maintain both the equipment and the park areas.

A thorough evaluation of the maintenance and operation practices for the facilities and landscapes of each County park site should be undertaken to identify the appropriate level of care, required equipment and necessary staff. A park maintenance system should be adopted that is prioritized across the system, not just for individual parks.

For example, Montgomery County recently solicited proposals for Facility Maintenance, Landscape Maintenance and Visitor Services Plans similar to the ones suggested here for Berks County. The scope of work topic list for Landscape Maintenance is included in this report’s appendix.

#4 – **Eliminating Non-Essential Recreation Programs**

An evaluation should take place to determine what types of recreation programs should be provided by the Department, because some of the current County-operated programs do not support the Department’s core mission. For example, playground programs, tennis lessons and volleyball leagues are not recreation programs typically provided by County government. Sponsoring these types of recreation programs is a waste of precious staff resources. It also results in unnecessary
duplication of programs that are being provided or should be provided by municipal parks and recreation departments and non-profit and for-profit recreation providers, rather than County government.

Interpretive programs, environmental education programs and special events that bring people out to the parks do support the Department’s mission and should continue. However, labor-intensive special events should be evaluated for the return on investment. Does the attendance warrant the financial commitment of staff resources?

Program staff resources could be better focused on supporting the Department’s core mission and the important task of marketing the parks system rather than running municipal athletic leagues. Recommendation #5 reinforces this need.

**#5 – Increasing Community Awareness of the Park System**

A strong marketing approach is needed to make residents aware of the parks, programs, trails, historic resources, facilities and greenways owned and operated by the County. An orchestrated marketing plan should be developed that emphasizes customer satisfaction, opportunities for eco-tourism and heritage tourism, volunteer support and private sector involvement in funding.

The Department should publish a newsletter three times each year. These types of items should be included in the newsletter: park improvements, volunteer needs, maintenance activities, nature-related news, upcoming programs, staff and volunteer news, facility reservation information, recent donations and park directions.

Along with the newsletter, the Department should begin a membership program. County Parks membership should be operated through the Friends of Berks County Parks Fund. The benefits of membership could include items such as: a one-year subscription to the newsletter, special event coupons, special “members first” programs, pavilion rental discount, program calendar and first chance to register for programs. Membership categories should be developed at set fees, such as: student, individual, family, contributor, patrons and corporate, with a fee scale from $10 to $250. An opportunity to give an additional tax deductible contribution to the Friends of Berks County Parks Fund should be offered.

Education of government, business and community leaders about the value of the County park system and parks and recreation in general should be a priority. Such efforts are important to acquire community partnerships and financial support. The County’s natural, scenic and historic resources can become destinations for heritage and eco-tourism that will spur economic development, community revitalization and increased visitation. Spreading this message is the primary responsibility of staff and the Parks and Recreation Board.

**#6 – Re-Evaluating Program Fees**

Many of the recreation and interpretive programs offered by the County have fees. These fees are nominal ($2 to $5, except for tennis lessons and volleyball leagues). However, fees limit participation by low-income residents. It may also not be cost effective to charge fees because administering them is time consuming. The County is spending precious staff resources collecting little bits of money. The County should consider making its recreation and interpretive programs free to the public. This will open the program doors to all, regardless of income, and eliminate the time spent collecting money. The Department should offer most programs with no pre-registration required if the program has no fee. Large-scale special events could still have fees which may be easiest to administer as per vehicle parking fees. An entire season of interpretive programs can be underwritten by a business, as well. Any costs associated with offering the programs can be covered this way, and the public can be admitted free of charge.
#7 – Implementing the Line of Credit Program
A top priority for the line of credit funding should be addressing the deferred maintenance and capital improvement needs within the existing County park system. Commitment of capital dollars is a must to keep existing facilities from declining and the cost for needed repairs from escalating.

Another top priority should be the County acquisition of properties of regional significance that fit into the mission of the Department. Recommendation #8 provides more details on this. Natural resources and open space protection are important. However, if the open space is not accessible to the public, it does not meet citizen's needs for recreation.

Decisions on what land to acquire with the line of credit funding should be based on unbiased professional recommendations. The Open Space and Recreation Advisory Board should not be the decision making body. Its role should be to review the recommendations and provide advice. This money is precious and needs to be spent in the best way possible for the benefit of present and future County citizens. A professional without vested interest in certain sites should prioritize projects for funding.

The line of credit funds should be used to leverage other money. A municipal open space planning and acquisition program should be developed that will provide matching funds to municipalities to do Open Space Plans and acquire property for future park and trail development. This type of program will encourage local involvement in parks, recreation and open space and act as a springboard for improved local planning. A component which provides matching monies to develop active recreation facilities such as ball fields will go a long way to increase the long-term responsibilities for this type of recreation with local municipalities, and decrease the County’s need to continue providing them.

The County has a small municipal park land grant program in place currently. It is not funded sufficiently to make much of a difference in municipal park land acquisition. The grant amounts need to be substantially higher.

#8 – Acquiring Additional Regional Park Land
Sections of the County lack County parks. The County should consider long-term acquisitions of regional park sites in the southeast and western parts of the County. The County park system is centered in the central Reading area (Wyomissing Borough, Bern and Spring Townships, City of Reading), with outposts in the north central (Windsor Township, leased), northeast (Longswamp Township), and south central (Robeson Township) areas of the County. The Department should work with the County Planning Commission to consider appropriate, available open space acreages of 200-500 acres in the southeast and, as a second priority, to the extreme west/northwest, so Berks County residents have a regional County park within a Planning Commission-determined service area. Land needs to be purchased before it's gone and lost to development.

Sizable open space parcels for a regional park in the southeast may be hard to come by. Also, the County’s planning processes may consider the “Big Woods areas” of French Creek State Park and Hopewell Furnace as sufficient regional open space. Or, the Department’s trail connections for the long-term may address a County presence in this area.

The Department’s northeast park, the 48-acre Hunsicker’s Grove, is a fine facility with some great amenities. The acreage of this park should be increased. As adjacent land becomes available, the County should purchase it to bring this site to a regional park size. Land should also be added to other existing park sites when it is available.

Acquisition of natural corridors and abandoned railroad lines for trails and greenways is important and should be done quickly.
when land becomes available. The Berks County Conservancy 
can purchase property and obtain funds faster than the County. 
The Department should work closely with the Conservancy on 
land acquisition.

Development of parks and trails should be done in future years 
when funding becomes available. The priority now should be to 
purchase land for future expansion of the park system.

#9 – Purchasing and Preserving Kaercher Creek Park
The County should re-negotiate its long-term lease with the 
Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission for Kaercher Creek 
Park, and acquire it by fee-simple ownership as a regional 
County Park. This facility is ample size for a regional park 
(nearly 200 acres) and it has attractive water-based frontage for 
long-term County park development. This outright purchase will 
insure that the acreage is kept in open space, and the County’s 
investments in capital development will be maximized.

Kaercher Creek Park’s potential for passive water-based 
recreation fits in with the mission of the Department. It provides 
a regional park in an area of the County outside of the Metro 
Reading section and is close to a population center.

The County should not lease the southeast portion of Kaercher 
Creek Park to the Northern Berks Recreation Commission for 
active recreation for local sports leagues. This lake deserves a 
critical mass of undeveloped land and buffers from conflicting 
active recreation, to make it a wildlife and people sanctuary. 
There are sufficient open space areas in the immediate vicinity 
of this park that a local municipality can acquire and develop 
with active-use facilities without compromising the aesthetic 
character of this lake.

The County should also not over-develop Kaercher Creek Park 
with waterfront facilities; the mass of forested land on the south 
side of the lake should be preserved and managed for its mature 
forest ecosystem, with minimal intrusion of trails. This lake has 
the potential to provide passive, lakefront recreation which 
complements the active, water-based recreation activities of 
Blue Marsh Lake. Possibilities include: a nature center, fishing 
piers, sailboat and boat launching areas, lakefront trails for 
hiking and biking, shore fishing areas and segregated wildlife 
areas.

Berks County could minimize its ongoing maintenance costs at 
Kaercher Creek Park by converting many mowed turf areas to 
warm season grass meadows, and increasing natural plantings 
and “no-mow” treatments at the lake’s edge. This would result in 
greatly reduced manpower costs, improved water recharge, 
improved wildlife diversity, lessened problems with nuisance 
wildlife such as Canadian geese and ultimately improved 
ecology in the lake. The County should consider expanding its 
land holdings eastward, to preserve the stream corridor which 
feeds the lake and to increase total acreage of the property to 
250-400 acres. This will reduce agricultural runoff, prevent 
residential developments from compromising lake views, 
increase the lake’s capacity for passive recreation use such as 
group pavilions, and increase the desirability of this regional 
park as a destination for more residents.

#10 – Pursuing Collaborative Partnerships for Historic 
Properties
The County should continue its networking with local historical 
commissions and the Berks County Historical Society. In 
particular, efforts with the former could yield long-term 
agreements for managing other historic buildings. The 
successful collaboration at the Leesport Lock House – where 
the similarly-named Foundation maintains the interior and the 
Department maintains the exterior – should be emulated at other 
properties such as the Beidler House in Robeson Township.

Areas such as the Leesport Lock House and the Beidler House 
will continue to require Department financial and staff resources 
for their operation. The visitor usage of these facilities, their 
relationship to the adjacent trails or park areas and their 
potential best use should be evaluated. The County should
encourage the preservation and utilization of historic buildings but not necessarily own them unless the acquisition is important to the park system.

The County should apply for a PHMC Keystone grant to do an analysis and major maintenance plan to preserve and maintain its historic resources. A report should also be completed on adaptive uses of the facilities.

#11 – Increasing Involvement with SRGA
The Director of the Department (or his designee as an alternate) should have a standing seat on the Board of the Schuylkill River National and State Heritage Area, also known as the Schuylkill River Greenway Association (SRGA). The County’s connections to the Schuylkill River and its tributaries form an integral part of the Department’s purpose and mission. The SRGA shares this vision and the two entities would mutually benefit from increased networking for existing projects as well as future trail connections.

For example, the Allegheny Aqueduct Historical Park is accessible from the Schuylkill River Trail. With its historical significance as being on the National Register of Historic Places it will be an important park within the County greenway system. The Leesport Lock House is also located along the Schuylkill River.

#12 – Re-Naming Parks
The County should abandon generic names for its parks and recreation areas in favor of more memorable and more marketable titles. Examples of generic names include the “Berks Leisure Area” and “Youth Recreation Facility.” Generic titles like these have the effect of making the facilities sound dull and uninviting. A park’s name should give it a specific identity with some pizzazz.

For instance, amusement theme park names like “Great Adventure,” “Kings Dominion” and “Dorney Park Wildwater Kingdom” contain action words or reference historical features. Berks County’s park names should make people inquire about the name’s origins. A park’s name should make its location unique and unmistakable in promotional campaigns.

Good examples exist within the County park system now: “Stonecliffe Recreation Area,” “Hunsicker’s Grove,” and “Gring’s Mill” all have names with a well-grounded, local orientation that invite visitors to come out and explore.

#13 – Promoting the Tulpehocken Creek Valley Park
The facilities along the Tulpehocken Creek should be promoted under one name to unify their purpose. The larger Gring’s Mill and the Heritage Center facilities should be integrated with smaller facilities such as the Red Bridge Recreation Area, Union Canal Bicycle and Walking Trail and the Berks Leisure Area into a cohesive, linear 370-acre regional park. The Department has used the name “Tulpehocken Creek Valley Park” to encompass these properties; however, this name is not used in any promotional material or on any park signs. Marketing these park sites together can start with the name Tulpehocken Creek Valley Park being more prominently used at each site, in newsletters and brochures and on the Department’s website.

#14 – Installing New Park Entrance and Road Signs
The park entrance signs at all County park sites should be replaced with unified signs designed to show visually that this is a park system. The Department logo should be used on the signs. Road signs to direct visitors to the park entrances are also needed.

#15 – Changing the Department Name
The abundance and integrity of the Department’s historical and cultural facilities place that component on par with its natural resources and parks and recreation facilities. The County should integrate “Heritage” into the Department’s name.
In addition, Berks County has had a long and successful greenway preservation history and the new Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan places a major emphasis on identifying greenways and hubs. This points to an increased role for the Parks and Recreation Department to operate and maintain not only the Tulpehocken Creek sites and but also new trail and greenway endeavors. A new title for the Department could be: Berks County Parks, Greenways and Heritage Services Department.

#16 – Identifying the Department’s Future Leader
Berks County Parks and Recreation Department has made an indelible mark on the County’s preservation of publicly-accessible open space, while integrating its historical resources into a system of parks and linear corridors under the able leadership of its long-time Director, Bill Semmel. As Bill nears the end of his career, the County will need to replace him with a person who can successfully lead the Department into its future.

The Director of Parks and Recreation position needs to be redefined so that work is directed to key issues of developing new partnerships and initiatives, preserving open space and focusing on regional objectives with future-oriented leadership. The following factors are key qualifications, skills and traits for the next Director:

- Master’s Degree in parks and recreation, public administration or closely related field, with a minimum of 10 years of parks and recreation administration experience.
- Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP).
- Preferred management style that is collaborative and emphasizes team management.
- Ability to create a sound fiscal program that includes budgeting, capital projects, budget management and the development of creative funding strategies, including fund raising.
- Administrative skills based on positive human relations, interactive communication skills, ability to delegate and maintain high visibility and accessibility.
- An in-depth understanding of the Commissioner/Department Head relationship and the ability to cultivate a positive working relationship with all Commissioners.
- An in-depth understanding of the mission of a dynamic park and recreation department and the importance, as well as the role of, an advisory parks and recreation board in accomplishing that mission.
- Ability to function effectively in a fast-paced environment and deal with people under stressful and demanding situations.
- Ability to maintain and improve Department services with a high level of customer satisfaction.
- Knowledge of how to network. Being out in the public with key stakeholders and organizations should occupy about 60 percent of a Director’s time. About 20 percent of the time should be focused on putting in place management systems that support effective decision making. The remaining 20 percent of the time should be spent on operations via delegation, reporting, evaluating and kicking things up to the next level.
- Great public speaking ability and excellent written communication skills. Putting forth the vision of an outstanding parks and recreation system is important.
The Director has to be able to convince business people, the tourism industry, County officials, non-profits and others about the value and benefits of the Berks County parks system along with its potential.

- Evidence of a high level of professional expertise and skills to manage the parks and recreation system.
- Ability to recognize opportunities that are there for the taking. The person has to be clued in and have a level of awareness about how to tap resources. He or she has to be self-motivated and industrious.
- Ability to be patient while working with a sense of urgency, being inclined to seek help and recognize limits. The person must be able to work within reality while working the system.
- Great integrity, honesty, self-confidence and charisma with superb leadership skills.

#17 – Exploring Revenue Generation Opportunities
Private and public sponsorship and collaboration should be developed. To sustain a viable park and historic sites system the private and public sectors must work together to provide financial and volunteer support.

Realistically, finding and obtaining new sources of financial support is going to require hiring an experienced professional. County investment in a development staff position will pay off in increased funding for County projects. The Friends of Berks County Parks Fund should be the vehicle for funding solicitation. People are more willing to give money to a foundation than to government.

A percentage of County hotel tax revenues should be considered as a way to fund capital improvement and operations needs at historic properties. These sites are definitely tourist destinations; tax dollars that come mainly from outside the County should help to pay for major maintenance and development projects. These tax dollars can be leveraged with grants from DCNR, DCED and DEP.

Maintenance fees should be charged to outside groups when they use a County park for a fundraising event, such as a walk-a-thon. The fee should completely cover the costs of items such as maintenance and ranger services.

Current revenue generated by the Department from its facilities and services is extremely minimal. The Department should adopt a revenue policy which sets standards for how fees will be determined. Fees charged for current facilities should be set at the “going rate” for similar facilities which will help to recover more of the facility operating costs. The park system needs to maximize income at its existing revenue-producing facilities (Camp Joy, pavilions and snack bars).

#18 – Strengthening the Friends of Berks County Parks Fund
The County needs a volunteer board that is dedicated solely to raising and managing funds to improve and expand park land and recreation facilities. A Friends of Berks County Parks Fund Board should be formed and a development plan should be put in place to allow citizens and businesses to invest in the County parks system. Appointing the right individuals will be the key to this board’s success. This Fund should be used for monetary donations to enhance the parks system, and the board that is recommended would focus entirely on soliciting and raising money. A planned giving and endowment program should be started, so that individuals have a way to leave money to the Fund in their estate plans.

#19 – Prioritizing Staffing Needs
The continued growth of the parks system will require the hiring of more staff. The County’s capacity to plan, staff, support and manage its parks and open space areas needs to be enhanced.
The Department should have an organizational structure that provides the Director with key resource professionals for facility development and maintenance, heritage preservation, tourism development and funding resource development (private funds and grants).

Successful implementation of the Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan will require sufficient staff to accomplish Plan goals in a timely manner. The County should create these additional staff positions as a high priority:

- At least one full-time maintenance position. A staff position will be needed for the Antietam Lake property.
- A full-time development officer to build partnerships and raise funds for the Friends of the Berks County Parks Fund. To make money, the County needs to spend money.
- A full-time marketing specialist to promote public awareness of the parks system, promote the parks and historic sites as tourist destinations and foster volunteer support.
- A full-time historic preservation/heritage person to interface with state agencies and grant sources to maintain and develop historic sites. The County has a major commitment to historic preservation. This staff position should work with municipalities on the results of the County-wide survey of historic properties (done as part of this Plan) to create a County inventory.
- A full-time chief park ranger to coordinate the park ranger staff and provide environmental education and interpretive services programs.
- A full-time open space planner to implement the recommendations of the Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan and the line of credit funding program.

Funding for additional full-time maintenance staff is limited, plus there is not enough off-season maintenance work to add full-time staff. For these reasons the County should strongly consider offering part-time maintenance positions with health insurance benefits. This will lower turnover rates and attract well-qualified candidates. At least three of the current part-time maintenance positions should be reclassified to part-time ranger positions for trail security and maintenance. Ideally these positions should also offer health insurance benefits. Another staff position for the County to consider is an archivist position to preserve and record what the County already owns.

The Department’s administrative staff (with the exception of the Superintendent of Interpretive Services who is essentially a site manager and whose office should remain at the Heritage Center) should be housed at the same office. Doing so will enhance communication and the ability of staff to work together to meet the Department’s mission. It will also increase work efficiency through items like shared copiers, networked computers and shared clerical help. Perhaps the best reason for the administrative staff to be in one place is to most conveniently serve the public.

#20 – Implementing the Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan

The Planning Commission should be the lead agency with the responsibility to implement the Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan. Projects recommended in the Plan should be prioritized. A Planning Commission employee should be appointed to coordinate Plan implementation. Ideally, because of the magnitude and importance of this Plan, this should be a new staff position.

The Parks and Recreation Department should work closely with the Planning Commission on Plan implementation. The Department should be responsible for operations and development, while the Planning Commission should coordinate acquisition and financing projects.

#21 – Preparing Site Specific Park Master Plans
New or updated Master Plans should be completed for all current County park facilities and future acquisitions of regional significance (such as Antietam Lake) to determine future operational cost. This process will enable the County to identify development and program priorities. There is a great need for capital investment in the current County parks system. A Capital Improvement Plan prioritizing improvements and repairs over a five-year period is essential to properly maintain park, historic and trail assets.

Appendix

Key Person Interview Results

The peer review team interviewed 27 key people in person. Each was asked the same questions, which are included at the end of this section. A summary of the interview results follows.

The Role of Berks County Parks and Recreation Department:

- Trails and Parks – The Department exists to provide publicly accessible open space, park areas and recreation facilities for residents to enjoy. Trails and greenways should be a major focus for the County. The County should take the lead role in trail development and operation to create a regional, multi-jurisdictional system of parks and trails. The Department should help to preserve lands for future parks and trails as land values are increasing and development is happening in the east and north sections of the County. The Department should provide leadership and common vision for trails and greenways because individual municipalities cannot do this.

- Historic Preservation – Historic preservation is part of the culture of the County and should be a high priority for the Department. As far as historic preservation, the County has no inventory or historic marker program. No agency is taking the lead.

- Land Preservation – Preserving land and open space should be a priority. It should be more important than operating parks. The Department should provide the leadership to buy land and bank it for potential future development as parks or trails.

- Recreation Opportunities – The Department should offer opportunities that allow citizens to interact with nature and history. The Department should also serve as a clearinghouse of outdoor recreation opportunities available to County citizens, whether they are County, municipality, state, non-profit or for-profit operated.

Concerns about Parks and Recreation Department:

- Staffing – Staff should be in one office so that they can “operate as a team.” The Department is understaffed and probably not “top heavy” enough with upper management and especially senior staff. Staff needs to reflect the population’s diversity, particularly Latinos. The Department may be reaching the time when a stepped up enforcement and security role is needed for park rangers. Staff feels stretched thin in terms of security and administration.

The job description for the Director should be re-written. Planning for parks should be the responsibility of the Planning Commission, not the Parks and Recreation Department. The Parks and Recreation Department doesn’t have the staff or vision. The Department has too many part-time and not enough full-time staff. The current number of staff is the same as in the mid-1970s. The Department could use Superintendents at some regional parks.
Marketing – Marketing should be a much higher priority. The Department needs to do a much better job promoting parks and getting people out to them. The Parks and Recreation Department is not highly visible. There is little recognition by the public of the park system, its mission and its importance to the community.

Programs – Recreation programs need to change and get re-focused. They are serving a limited audience. Cooperative programming is needed. Programs should be evaluated as to their benefit and the reasons they are offered. The recreation staff is highly productive. However, there should be more integration between event planning and overall efforts to revitalize communities. County special events are important and should be continued.

Pace of Work – Projects don’t get completed. Projects don’t move forward. Work is too slow. Too many grant extensions are needed. Union Canal Trail and Hay Creek Trail are not finished. There seems to be no middle role between planning and operations. The Department needs to have a project development and completion focus.

Leadership – What was done in the past was fine, but the Parks and Recreation Department is ready to move to another level now with new leadership.

Mission – The Department’s mission is not well defined. The Department considers itself a maintenance and recreation department, not a player in what’s happening outside the current parks. There is no guiding mission for some historic properties owned by the County. They are open limited hours and generate little revenue.

Finances and Maintenance Management – The Department needs to provide a realistic assessment of long-term capital needs and the on-going cost to maintain properties. The proper budget should be determined for the park areas currently operated and those to be added in the future. The Department does a nice job of mowing grass but trail and building maintenance gets deferred. The Friends of the Berks County Parks and their associated fund are in place; however, they could be more broadly focused to all areas of the County. User demand should justify expenses. Parks that are heavily used should receive more funds for operation.

Skill Set for Next Parks and Recreation Director: On the question of who will take William Semmel’s place when he retires, and be successful: The next person will need to have great presentation skills and the ability to influence people, have networking skills to build partnerships and be assertive in asking the tough questions regarding increased funding for the Department.

The Director should also be a professional in the parks and recreation field with the proper education and background, plus years of experience. He or she needs to have excellent political, management and communication skills. The next Director should be a go-getter who can determine what resources are needed to get a project done and then lead the way and get it done in a timely manner. He or she should have strong business sense and financial savvy with an understanding of costs and constraints. The ability to provide advice and details on how the County park system should be shaped, with a broad vision and big picture view of where the County park system fits in the overall County scheme, will be important. Other key assets would be someone who 1) is visionary, with an awareness of how citizen demands and the field of parks and recreation are changing; 2) has marketing savvy, with an understanding of what the public wants and the ability to carry the message and advocate for parks and recreation; and 3) has strategic planning...
and partnership development, project management and grant writing skills.

Concerns about Maintenance and Capital Improvements:
Virtually everyone interviewed had genuine concerns for the continued maintenance of and capital improvements for the Department’s parks and heritage resources. When interviewees were asked to prioritize Berks County’s funding commitment to five areas, “Maintenance of Existing Parks” and “Capital Repair and Improvements to Existing Parks” were ranked as the top priorities. Most recognized that Open Space Protection was an over-riding need, but commented that maintaining what the County already owns was ultimately a greater priority. There was strong consensus that protection of open space is necessary while it’s still possible, financially and availability wise. This concept was articulated by most of the interviewees.

Many expressed their amazement with the quality and quantity of maintenance of the County’s facilities. Several expressed their belief that County employees are genuinely dedicated to their work and maintain facilities with an efficiency that creates an image of parks that seem beyond the manpower resources available. All felt the facilities were well maintained but were probably being done with limited personnel and equipment. More preventive maintenance programs are needed, to keep the County from spending far more due to the lack of preventive maintenance. Staff members are concerned about deterioration of the exterior of Gruber Wagon Works.

There was concern that the Department cannot continue to have more properties assigned to it for maintenance without an increase in maintenance staff. Otherwise, the Department won’t be able to sustain the workload for the long-term. The general consensus was that acquisition of Antietam Lake should proceed with the County taking the lead as long as the resources to maintain it are available. Some felt there is too much maintenance along stream corridors, with mowing to the water’s edge.

Concerns about Historic Preservation:
Many felt that, in the absence of a strong County role and assumption of historic preservation responsibilities, local municipalities would not preserve historic properties. This suggests that the County Planning Commission should provide education to municipalities on the roles of local Historical Commissions, which may foster greater local involvement in historic building preservation. Another comment was that Berks County should employ its own, full-time Historic Preservation Officer. There were questions as to whether the Berks County Historical Society should take on a greater role for remote facilities. There were questions by more than one person about the role of the Berks County Historical Society in meeting some local historic preservation needs. Several persons were not aware of this Society’s projects, noting that they were only aware that the Society maintains an historical collection in Reading. This suggests that the Society needs to broaden its publicity and outreach programs and serve as a catalyst for local historical commissions.

Concerns about the Wagon Works/Canal Center:
There should be some industrial equipment actually operated at the Heritage Center, and specifically at the Wagon Works. There needs to be precautions taken in planning this, to avoid hazards to visitors; however, these obstacles can be overcome. The end result will be greatly increased interpretation. With the exception of local school groups, most visitors to the Canal Center are from outside the County. This suggests a targeted marketing effort to Berks County adults. Museum exhibits at the Canal Center are too static; they need to be rotated or new exhibits developed to encourage repeat visits.

Divestiture of Some Facilities:
Several persons expressed concern that “Once it’s lost, you don’t get it back.” There were some who expressed methods of insuring against this loss, such as conservation easements for facilities transferred to others. Many persons interviewed noted
that, in the absence of the County Parks and Recreation Department’s provision of facilities for active recreation, local municipalities would not meet this need.

**Funding and Utilization of the New Line of Credit:**
Concern was expressed that there is an increasing shift away from open space preservation towards farmland preservation. While farmland preservation is important, the public access benefits of increased funding for parks are significant and should not be a secondary priority. The Department needs an advocacy group and a constituency which will support them receiving a portion of the upcoming $36 million line of credit. As far as the $36 million line of credit, the Department was not at the table and obviously not a dynamic part of what was going on.

Municipalities should be required to prepare Open Space and Recreation Plans to receive County funds from the line of credit program. The County should provide a large matching funds program that will entice municipalities to plan for and preserve open space and park land. Municipalities should be given a financial incentive to do a plan, such as not being able to participate in the line of credit program unless a plan has been completed or receiving funds from the line of credit program to complete Open Space and Recreation Plans.

**Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan Implementation:**
The majority of those interviewed agreed that the implementation of the new Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan should rest primarily with the Berks County Planning Commission, with Parks and Recreation Department collaboration. The majority of those interviewed agreed that the Planning Commission with the assistance of the Parks and Recreation Department and key advisory boards should take the lead in developing recommendations for the County Commissioners on open space, parks and greenway acquisitions. The Berks County Conservancy can purchase property faster and can obtain funds quicker than the County. The Conservancy role should be to identify special places and preserve critical habitats, wildlife corridors and environmentally sensitive areas. It can also match funds and partners and collaborative efforts.

**List of Key Persons**
1. Judy Schwank, Berks County Commissioner
2. Mark Scott, Berks County Commissioner
3. Tom Gajewski, Berks County Commissioner
4. Bill Dennis, Berks County Administrator
5. Kim Murphy, Berks County Conservancy
6. Bob Behling, Executive Vice President, River Place Development Corporation
7. Kurt Zwikl, Executive Director, Schuylkill River Heritage Area
8. Bob Moore, Chair, Berks County Parks and Recreation Board
9. Cheryl Auchenbach, Berks County Planning Commission
10. Scott Wales, Berks County Planning Commission
11. Shannon Rossman, Berks County Planning Commission
12. Russell Riegel, Volunteer/Part-Time Maintenance, Berks County Heritage Center
13. Tom Moore, Director of Philanthropic Services, Berks County Community Foundation
14. Glenn Weinrich, Canal Historian/Volunteer, Berks County Heritage Center
15. Brian Kistler, Park Maintenance Supervisor, Berks County
16. Cathy Wegener, Superintendent of Interpretive Services, Berks County
17. Phil Whitmoyer, Volunteer, Berks County Heritage Center
18. Leon Mazurie, Director, Spring Township Parks and Recreation Department
19. Joe Seltzer, Director, Exeter Township Parks and Recreation Department
20. Bryan Kutz, Youth Recreation Facility Coordinator, Berks County
21. Leonard Good, Trout Unlimited
22. Bob Showalter, Berks County Parks and Recreation Board
23. Al Schoenebeck, Park Manager, Blue Marsh Lake
24. Eileen Shoener, Volunteer and Former Berks County Parks and Recreation Board Member
25. Becky Richards, Superintendent of Recreation, Berks County
26. Neil McNutt, Former Park Operations Manager, Berks County
27. Jim Thorne, National Lands Trust

Key Person Interview Questions

1. What do you think Berks County government’s role should be for:

2. What major concerns and issues do you have concerning the Berks County Parks and Recreation Department? What would you change, if you could? What isn’t happening that should be? Why?

3. Are you willing to spend/allocate County funds for capital repairs to existing County parks facilities?

4. What agency should be responsible for implementing this Greenway, Parks and Recreation Plan? What’s your greatest expectation for this plan?

5. Would you support other ways to operate and maintain some County sites, rather than County staff? For example, lease, contract or divestiture?

6. Do you know the mission of the County Parks and Recreation Department?

7. What is your perception of: How County parks are maintained? How County parks are visited? How County recreation programs are attended? How the County Parks and Recreation Department is staffed?

8. Why isn’t a significant portion of the proposed $36 million County line of credit allocated to capital projects for repair and upkeep of existing County parks? Have you considered a municipal open space acquisition program similar to Lancaster, Chester and Montgomery County programs, with County money matched by local governments?

9. Maintenance needs increase as land is acquired. Would you support increased staffing for the Parks and Recreation Department for sites such as Antietam Lake?

10. What do you see as the skill set and qualifications needed for the next Berks County Parks and Recreation Director to move the Department into the future?

11. Given that Berks County has limited funds, what is your priority ranking for the following (top = 1, bottom = 5):
   Open Space Protection? __________
   Development of Trails and Greenways? __________
   Provision of Recreation Programs/Env. Education/Interpretive Services? __________
   Maintenance of Existing Parks? __________
   Capital Repair and Improvements to Existing Parks? __________

12. Is there anything else you’d like us to know???
Snapshot Descriptions of Chester, Dauphin and Montgomery County Departments

Chester County Department of Parks and Recreation
The Chester County Department of Parks and Recreation is a system of regional parks, historical sites and trails that serves 433,501 residents (2000 population). The Department manages some 5,000 acres of open space, including three regional parks, one special purpose park (Springton Manor Farm, a model farm with a National Register Manor House), three silt basins along the Schuylkill River (including the Black Rock Sanctuary, a 120-acre property with wetlands, interpretive trail and river-front boat launch) and two regional trails. There are also three park sites varying in size from 400-500 acres each, targeted as future regional parks.

The Department's mission is: To enhance the quality of life through educational programs, recreational opportunities and partnerships. The Department serves the community by protecting and managing open space while interpreting natural, cultural and historical resources.

The Department employs 56 full-time and 83 part-time, seasonal employees. It has a budget (2006) of $6.2 million, consisting of $3.8 million for payroll, $2.1 million for operating supplies and services and $.3 million for capital equipment. The Department also has a capital bond program for acquisition, large-scale development and infrastructure replacement of $3.6 million (2006).

Dauphin County Parks and Recreation Department
The Dauphin County Parks and Recreation Department consists of four small regional parks, Fort Hunter Park and Conservancy, Wildwood Lake Sanctuary with Olewine Nature Center, Wiconisco Creek Park and Lykens Glen Park, totaling 500+ acres. Its park system serves 251,798 residents (2000 population). Presently the County is a partner with a 501c3, incorporated association endeavoring to develop a 20+-mile rail-trail in northern Dauphin County. Recreation programs are conducted by the Department for the benefit of the citizens of the County and park special events are a feature of each of the parks, including Fort Hunter Day, Wetlands Weekend at Wildwood and the Lykens Glen Fall Fest.

The Department’s mission is:
- To provide publicly-accessible facilities and programs that will enrich the lives of Dauphin County residents through constructive, wholesome leisure activities.
- To improve the physical and mental health of county citizens through participation in special events, recreation programs and outdoor activities.
- To improve park facilities that are safe, attractive and well managed so that they contribute to the quality of life for individuals, families and businesses.
- To preserve publicly valued open space, unique areas, historic sites and other large tracts of land that otherwise would not be protected by individuals or local units of government.
- To encourage the wise use of natural resources by providing environmental education opportunities to children and adults that stress ecological concepts and relationships.

The annual budget (2006) of the Department is $1.6 million in three cost centers: general department administration, Fort Hunter and Wildwood. Full-time salaries amount to $636,300 for 15 positions and $82,000 for 10 part-time positions. Expenditures for the Wildwood and Fort Hunter cost centers, which amount to $517,000, are paid for out of the county’s hotel/bed tax dollars. Operating expenses for Dauphin County Parks and Recreation Department are roughly $1 million.
Montgomery County Parks and Heritage Services Department

The Montgomery County Parks and Heritage Services Department owns and/or manages more than 6,000 acres of public open space, including eight parks, a major natural area, five historic sites and lands along four primary County greenways, with 34 miles of existing County trails to be augmented by another 28 miles scheduled for development by 2007. Parks, historic sites and trails are interconnected, as well as linking to local community and regional resources. The Department serves 750,097 residents (2000 population).

The Department’s mission is: *To provide the premier system of natural, recreational and historical sites in this region and state by giving an exceptional visitor experience that encourages respect and understanding for the County’s natural and cultural resources.*

The Department has a full-time staff of 90 and it employs 58 part-time staff. It has an operating budget (2006) of $6.4 million, consisting of $5.5 million for payroll and benefits and $.9 million for operating supplies and services. The Department has a capital projects fund of $1.4 million, and has approved park and historic site improvement projects totaling $2.6 million that are funded through the County’s Green Fields/Green Towns program (2006). Additionally, this open space program has earmarked $11 million (2006) for protection of land and development of County trails and greenways, acquisition of significant parcels of open space that have been identified in the County open space plan, and protection of land and improvements to the Schuylkill Greenway.

Montgomery County Parks and Heritage Services
Scope Topic List: Landscape Management RFP

1. Basic System Goals
   a. Consistency and correlation of plans, expertise, and objectives

   - Consistency with strategic plan objectives and recommendations
   - Consistency with Facilities Maintenance and Visitor Services implementation plans
   - Integration of staff expertise, experience, and goals
   - Appropriate relationship to local and regional objectives

b. Consistency in level of care of county-managed landscapes

   - System wide consistency of high-quality landscape maintenance
   - Ongoing consistency of landscape maintenance at each site
   - Consistency of maintenance for trails and trail corridors

c. Standards of care for county-managed landscapes

   - Desirable and realistic system wide level of care
   - Appropriate level of care for specific landscape types

d. Diversity of county-owned and/or managed landscape types

   - Variable levels of formal management for public-use versus background landscapes
   - Various types of landscapes at each site
   - Various types of landscapes within trail corridors
     - Landscapes in transition or maintained in interrupted successional stage
     - Landscapes as habitat and natural resource
     - Types of county owned and/or managed landscapes
       - Critical natural areas/habitats
       - Natural landscapes / native vegetation areas
       - Woodlands
Meadows and fields
Ponds, streams, reservoirs, shorelines
Floodplains and riparian buffers
  • General park landscapes
  • Agricultural landscapes – crop fields, pastures
  • Intensive use areas – playing fields, picnic areas
  • Heritage landscapes
  • Historic gardens
  • Formal or informal parking facilities
  • Public squares
  • Trails and pathways within specific sites
  • Multi-use trails and trail context landscapes
● Different care level for emergency landscape maintenance

e. Overall balance between resource protection and public use or access

● Characterizing the landscape and prioritizing its resource value
● Understanding the management needs of the landscape
● Understanding the significance of the landscape – scenic, heritage, context
● Public expectations for access to the landscape
  ● Threshold of damage for type of landscape

f. Effective level of landscape care and maintenance

● Carrying capacity of landscape types and individual site landscapes
● Desirability / need for public access and activity
● Opportunities for landscape restoration
● Impact of landscape use on adjoining environmental systems
● Impact of landscape character on scenic views
● Opportunities for best management practices / sustaining critical species
● Opportunities for interpretation, demonstration, environmental education
● Opportunities to facilitate wildlife migration corridors

g. Special considerations for heritage landscapes and historic gardens

● Level of authenticity of the heritage landscape
● Period plantings versus period-type plantings
● Role and authenticity of site furnishings, garden elements, vistas, materials
● Need for research and documentation
  ● Relationship of heritage landscape context to historic experience
● Visual relationship between historic buildings and surrounding site
  ● Character of the heritage landscape
  ● Special maintenance techniques
  ● Opportunities for public access and enjoyment
  ● Opportunities for historic restoration and interpretation
  ● Archeological considerations

h. Special considerations for trail landscapes

● Maintaining scenic and natural beauty of trail experience
● Working with edge and linear landscape areas
● Buffering trail users from adjoining uses
● Protecting the privacy of adjoining properties
● Screen and barrier plantings for access control
● Channeling trail traffic through sensitive landscapes
● Modifying the landscape to include scenic overlooks, fishing / canoe access, etc.
● Landscape protection policies during trail construction
● Landscape considerations in selecting trail alignments
● Restoration of corridor landscapes
● Managing litter, graffiti
4.5 Peer Report

i. Incorporation of green construction techniques

- Garden structures, pathways, infrastructure
- Blending with required authenticity of landscape
- Opportunities for education and interpretation

j. Use of best management practices

- Priority policy for use in county system
- Publicity and use of demonstration projects
- BMPs for IPM, storm water management, groundwater recharge
- Environmentally friendly, non-polluting, organic approach
- Energy efficiency

2. Information Gathering and Evaluation

a. Baseline Conditions

- **System wide**
  - Existing types of landscapes; approximate acreages by management type
  - Overall issues – health, condition, landscape integrity, native vs invasives
  - Personnel – including numbers, job descriptions, and skillsets
  - Maintenance records, work tracking
  - Stewardship partnerships, cooperative relationships
  - Funding streams
  - Equipment – types and quantities

- **Site specific**
  - Heritage landscapes, special scenic areas, NAI sites
  - Unique habitat areas, migration corridors, high quality streams
  - Demonstration projects and landscape restoration areas

b. Current needs assessment per existing conditions

- Evaluation of immediate landscape maintenance needs
- Prioritization and timeline for deferrable landscape maintenance needs
- Cost/benefit analysis of current versus change in management techniques
- Support resources needed
- Limits on, or increase of, public access

c. Projected needs assessment per system goals

- Equipment, storage, and infrastructure
- Support resources
- Site specific management strategies to be addressed in separate site master plan
- Long-term landscape management/maintenance plans
- Resource management and conservation plans

d. Models for study and reference

- Examples of natural landscape management strategies in public landscapes
- Models for green construction and best management practices
- Models for research, restoration, and management of heritage landscapes
- Models for restoration and management of high-use
3. Recommendations

a. Establishing carrying capacity

- Clarifying specific needs and sensitivity of landscape types
- Assessment of landscape threats (deer damage, pollution, storm water runoff)
- Specific thresholds or seasons of public access to minimize damage
- Tailoring uses and visitor limits to landscape carrying capacity

b. Standards for landscape management

- System wide landscape management standards
- Landscape-specific standards by type of landscape
  - Heritage/cultural related landscape standards
  - Public use landscape management standards
  - Trail landscape management standards
- Realistic expectations of level of care and degree of access
- Degree of fragmentation versus large landscape maintenance blocks
- Sustainability of landscape use and technique over time
- Feasibility of access to maintain as desired
- Deer management policy

c. Visitor accessibility

- ADA/universal accessibility
- Controlling and channeling public access
- Scheduling and performing landscape management in public use areas
- Scenic access to “off-limits” landscapes
- Controlling access during specific seasons or during storm events
- Avoiding damage from overuse or inappropriate use
- Seasonal or occasional event use of sensitive landscapes
- Access to water resources

d. Safety and security

- Identifying and repairing potentially dangerous landscape situations
- Visitor safety in the landscape; accessibility for patrolling and emergencies
- Safety priorities and guidelines
  - Priority/emergency maintenance relating to public safety
  - Protection of public during landscape maintenance activity
  - Employees doing maintenance work
  - Responsible equipment use
- Hazardous materials use and storage
- Warning signs and landscape barriers
- Hazard trees
- Disaster protocols
- Safe work practices; training of personnel in OSHA regulations

e. Staffing

- Overall needs and policies
  - Evaluation of job descriptions and skill sets
  - Making the most of existing expertise
  - Numbers and roles
    - System level
    - Site specific in coordination with master plans and maintenance plans
  - Credentials and Certifications
  - Coordination and flow of responsibilities
    - System staff
    - Site staff
- Specialized needs
4.5 Peer Report

- Ongoing training staff in natural landscape installation, maintenance, restoration
- Specialized training/credentials for:
  - Arboriculture, forest and meadow management, ecological systems
  - Proper planting, mowing, mulching techniques, pest and invasive controls
  - Plant identification, riparian restoration, controlled burn
  - Landscape best management practices
- Specialized expertise: heritage landscape management/restoration/interpretation
- Coordination of land management strategies with skillsets of maintenance staff
- Skills and responsibilities of contractors/subcontractors
- Coordination and supervision for contractors/subcontractors/vendors

**f. Equipment, technological needs, support services**

- Equipment and materials
  - Sharing of equipment
  - Site specific equipment needs
  - Storage and transportation of equipment and materials
  - Supply chain issues
  - Specifications
  - Efficient allocation, appropriate types and quantities
  - Outsourcing landscape management to minimize equipment needs
- Equipment maintenance
  - Division of labor with Facilities Maintenance staff
  - Staff skillsets versus outsourcing
- Technological needs
  - Cell phones, communications devices
  - Portable computers for work tracking, record keeping
  - Internet access
- Support services
  - Sharing personnel; utilizing specialized staff talents/expertise
  - Timely support from system staff, other departments, outside resources

**g. Coordination and cooperation**

- Departmental roles, relationships, and responsibilities
  - Between regions
  - System to site specific
  - Retaining efficiency, timeliness, site-specific knowledge
- Other departments
  - Public Property, Roads and Bridges, Planning Commission
  - Commissioners
- Other agencies and authorities – resolution of conflicting land use objectives
- Utilities – maintenance of shared corridors
- Formal landscape management relationships with farmers, other landowners
- Outsourcing – formalized contracts and agreements

**h. Outreach and partnerships**

- Using volunteer experts and willing service organizations
- Using court adjudicated volunteers
- Coordinating grant and demonstration projects with non-profit partners
- Collaborative landscape restoration projects – municipal or state partners
- Public relations; using the landscape as a teaching tool

**i. Monitoring and measurement**

- Measures of success – public perception, public safety
4.5 Peer Report

- Measures of success – habitat restoration, scenic improvement, cost reductions
- Measures of success – numbers of site and trail users
- Work tracking, scheduling
- Incorporating new techniques and approaches
- Evaluating results of green construction, best management practices
- Regular assessment of direction, goal setting, cost/benefit

j. Property boundary and encroachment issues

- Identifying key and problem boundaries
- Addressing encroachments, dumping, incompatible management techniques
- Landscape management techniques for controlling inappropriate access
- Being a good neighbor

4. Financial considerations

a. Budgeting

- Determining budgetary needs and future projections
- Allocating budget resources – system-wide versus project specific
- Routine landscape maintenance versus landscape improvement/restoration
- Dealing with unexpected costs

b. Cost centers

- Sharing and projecting budgets with other departments

c. Funding

- Other public / private sources – grants, cost-sharing
- Donations, gifts, sponsorships

d. Balancing public dollars with levels of care

- Appropriate balance
- Ensuring funding for appropriate management of sensitive areas
- Increasing funding as new land is acquired
- Increasing resources as new trail miles are added

5. Policy manual, guidelines, appendices, action steps

a. Format, distribution, and purpose of manual

b. Process of updating

c. Incorporation of both system wide and program specific guidelines

d. Appendices

- Best management practices and green construction methods
- Relationship to site master plans and resource management plans
- Recommended reference library; “librarian” responsibilities
- Relevant models
- Implementation matrix – roles, responsibilities, timeline
- Additional recommended studies or products
- Budget guidelines
- Funding strategies