

# 2024 NACPRO Award Recipients & Nominations

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## **Outstanding Public Official**

**Nominee: Commissioner Gary McGillivray**

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

**Narrative:**

Oakland County Parks nominates its Parks and Recreation Commission Chairman Gary R. McGillivray posthumously for recognition of his lifelong service to creating recreation opportunities for Oakland County residents. First elected to the Oakland County Board of Commissioners in November 2008, McGillivray represented county commission District 3 (Hazel Park, Madison Heights and portions of Troy). McGillivray was appointed to the Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission in 2011 and served as its most recent chair until his death in November 2023. Highlights from Commissioner McGillivray's time as chairman include: 1) Steering Oakland County Parks out of an extended period of budget cutbacks that enabled it to make major improvements and expand the system by securing increases in revenue; 2) Establishing partnerships resulting in creation of Holly Oaks ORV Park and transition of Hawthorne Park to Pontiac Oaks County Park; 3) Championing the county acquisition of Madison Heights Nature Center when the city could no longer afford to operate it, and subsequent transition to Red Oaks Nature Center; 4) Ensuring core recreational facilities and services were maintained when the public needed them most during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite staffing shortages and other challenges. During McGillivray's tenure as chairman, Oakland County Parks embarked on a \$20 million endeavor to improve parks in Oakland County communities disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic-American Rescue Plan Fund Act funding. Oakland County Parks contributed \$5.2 million to this initiative. Improvements underway focus on access to facilities and spaces where residents can rest and recharge in nature. In July 2023, plans were announced for an inclusive playground and meeting space in Ambassador Park in Madison Heights called "McGillivray Play Garden." Project plans include a restroom, looping pathways, fitness area, accessible water feature, pollinator garden and play and activity hubs.

## **Outstanding Support Organization**

**Nominee: Friends of Phillippi Estate Park**

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

**Narrative:**

Sarasota County Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources (PRNR) is proud to partner with the Friends of Sarasota County Parks (FOSCP). This nonprofit organization was established to promote community support for Sarasota County's parks. FOSCP has multiple chapters, including Friends of Phillippi Estate Park. The chapter supports this special park that's listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Friends have devoted significant time and effort to preserving the history of the 60-acre Phillippi Estate Park (PEP). They have implemented various fundraising initiatives including the Phillippi Farmhouse Market, Afternoons at the Mansion Lecture Series and, most recently, a new event called History Day in the Park. Funds raised support the restoration of the 1916 Edson Keith Farmhouse, which will serve as an interpretive center with exhibits on archaeological resources, historic structures, and environmental features at the park. To help accomplish this goal, the Friends and PRNR staff and volunteers hosted History Day in the Park. The event offered a journey through time for more than 1,500 attendees who enjoyed reenactments, music, specialized vendors, presentations, and activities for community members of all ages. Through extensive research, creative exhibits and engaging activities, the event brought history to life in a way that was educational and entertaining. The Friends' ability to mobilize many volunteers, engage community members and garner widespread support resulted in a very successful event which raised \$10,000 for the Farmhouse restoration project. Thanks to the continued support of the Friends, the restoration project is currently underway with an anticipated completion in Nov. 2024. They have contributed over \$250,000 towards preservation of the history at PEP. Their willingness to share their time and talents serves as a shining example of the positive change that can be accomplished when individuals come together with a shared purpose.

## **Outstanding Volunteer**

**Nominee: Nels Leutwiler**

**Organization:** Preservation Foundation Board, Illinois

**Narrative:**

When Nels Leutwiler joined the Preservation Foundation Board of Directors in 2010, he was just the third volunteer for the newly established 501c3 charitable partner of the Lake County Forest Preserves. After 15 years of service, including 7 years as president, Leutwiler is term-limited and will step down at the end of 2024. He has overseen remarkable growth: 1) The Preservation Foundation board grew from 3 to 18 civic and business leaders. 2) Professional fundraising staff, all of whom are employees of the Forest Preserves, increased from 2 to 5.5 full-time equivalents. The return on the public's investment in fundraising is 492%. 3) The donor base has tripled. 4) More than \$40 million has been raised to support all aspects of the mission of the Forest Preserves. As president, Leutwiler leads quarterly meetings of the Board of Directors and is an ex officio member of four standing committees. He is a regular presence at donor events, delivering welcoming remarks and introducing speakers. He has traveled across the country to learn and share best practices on how to build effective public-private partnerships. The Preservation Foundation is his top charitable priority, and he gives generously to both annual needs and campaigns. Under his leadership, in 2019 the foundation board and the Lake County Forest Preserves Board of Commissioners passed separate resolutions establishing a shared vision and goal for a long-term endowment. This unique initiative provides a permanent funding source to care for the Forest Preserves restored lands in perpetuity. The resolutions committed the foundation to raise \$20 million and pledged the Forest Preserves to direct investment proceeds to fund critical land management activities, such as retreatment of invasive species, replanting native trees and seeds and prescribed burning. Despite the challenges of launching the campaign at the start of the pandemic, more than \$8.5 million has been raised to date toward the \$20 million goal.

## **Park & Recreation Program**

**Nominee: Dia de los Muertos Celebracion (Class II)**

**Organization:** Washington County Parks, Minnesota

**Narrative:**

Washington County hosted its first bilingual parks program, Dia de los Muertos Celebracion, celebrating a traditional holiday observed across the world, by people of Mexican heritage. The event strived to offer a culturally significant program that would positively impact underrepresented users. Underrepresented users include populations who have historically faced challenges to visit the parks such as financial burdens, cultural adversity, access barriers, and language obstacles. The program engaged participants in meaningful activities that educated on the holiday, its significance to Hispanic cultures, and the humorous undertone the holiday brings to families who are remembering loved ones. Activities included bi-lingual story time, a calavera (sugar skull) scavenger hunt, and themed crafts. This program built and expanded upon internal partnerships with Washington County Libraries and employee resource groups, specifically the Gente (Hispanic/Latinx) group. External partners included a neighboring park agency and a community organization. These partners assisted with reaching the event's target audience, Spanish speakers and Latinx communities. Community impact and support was evident throughout the event and after. Before the event, press releases were published in local newspapers and community newsletters. Excitement displayed from external and internal partners showed high interest in offering such a service. The effort was successful with over 250 participants. High attendance numbers demonstrated an initial desire for a culturally specific program like this and shows that program staff hit the mark when attempting to build foundational programming efforts that draw in Hispanic and Latinx users. The event drew attendees both locally and regionally; many showed program staff appreciation for the Spanish-based activities, and some stated it was their first-time visiting Washington County Parks. The program will be expanded and continued on an annual basis.

**Nominee: Tracks: Elevating the Trail Experience with Augmented Reality (Class III)**

**Organization:** Anoka County Parks, Minnesota

**Narrative:**

The Augmented Reality (AR) Trail Program “Tracks” (completed May 2023) is a groundbreaking initiative which reshapes the trail experience at Bunker Hills Regional Park with one of Minnesota’s first-ever AR trail programs. Imagine walking the trail and witnessing history and nature come alive on your smartphone through holograms and 3D animated images. Anoka County Parks utilized inspiration from the Youth in Parks Survey from the Metropolitan Council, recognizing this park user engagement gap and focused on engaging and empowering the next generation like never before. By leveraging AR, the county is effectively bridging the gap between tech-savvy youth and the outdoors. Recognizing the long-term benefits of youth involvement in parks, Anoka County’s dedication to nurturing their connection to embrace in nature’s wonders. “Tracks” isn’t only about technology; it’s about making nature accessible in a new way. This program aligns with the county’s vision to create inclusive and accessible outdoor experiences, regardless of age, race or ability. The impact of this type of technology along the trail is unique in the way it can cater to specific populations. The augmented reality trail’s inclusive features include translation services for the Hispanic community, visual aids for the hearing-impaired, dyslexic and high contrast fonts and it allows people with accessibility needs to experience Parks up close. Having these unique learning features available to the community will welcome and attract minimally represented populations into the Parks system. Outcomes of this trail so far have been overwhelmingly positive with more than 650 unique app downloads so far. Overall, “Tracks” is a significant achievement as it epitomized forward-thinking, inclusivity and engagement of diverse groups. It is redefining the way parks and trails are experienced and establishing the Anoka County Parks Department as a leader in the advancement of outdoor recreational initiatives.

**Nominee: Blind Sports Day Program (Class IV)**

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

**Narrative:**

Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation Department's Therapeutic Recreation Section held an inaugural Blind Sports Day in Lake Worth, Florida on Saturday, October 14, 2023. October is National Blind Sports Month, a time when the United States Association of Blind Athletes, USABA, encourages and highlights programs around the Country to celebrate, promote and increase awareness of sports for individuals who are blind or have a visual impairment. With a desire to achieve these goals along with increasing participation in local sports, Department employees coordinated and implemented this program. Endless Possibilities for the Disabled, Inc. assisted with promoting and community volunteers with implementation. Fifteen members of The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.'s beep baseball team, two goalball and two Boccia athletes shared sports knowledge, experiences and taught skills. Athlete presence and involvement served as an inspiration to everyone. Having a visual impairment was not a requirement, allowing people of all abilities to experience sports together. All individuals, no matter their level of vision, wore a blindfold to create an equal playing field. Demonstrations of four showcased sports, Beep Baseball, Beep Kickball, Goalball and Boccia for Visual Impairments (VI Boccia) were ongoing with ample time to experience each. During demonstrations, participants experienced sports using senses of hearing and touch. They had a chance to throw and block a Goalball, kick a beep kickball, hit a beep baseball, run to bases, retrieve, and throw a ball, all without vision. For VI Boccia, participants could use verbal cues or a tactile board to locate the target and determine where to throw. In total, 62 community members, 19 athletes, 21 volunteers from six to 74 years old joined in this day of empowerment, inclusion, and fun. Feedback was incredibly positive. Many individuals expressed no previous knowledge of sports highlighted and a desire to participate again.

**Nominee: NewGen (Class IV)**

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

**Narrative:**

The NewGen program is a transformative initiative by Broward County Parks and Recreation, addressing the critical needs of at-risk youth in underserved communities. The program strives to close gaps and promote equality by prioritizing residents from this underserved community. With 23 participants in NewGen Leaders and 55 in NewGen Protégé, this program effectively equips young people with valuable life skills and career preparation tools, empowering them to overcome existing barriers and reach their full potential. NewGen operates under two branches: NewGen Protégé, targeting preteens and early teenagers, and NewGen Leaders, focusing on teenagers emerging into adulthood. Both branches share the core objectives of: Character Development: Nurturing positive values, ethical decision-making, and responsible behavior through workshops, mentorship, and community engagement. Academic Success: Supporting academic achievement through tutoring, study skills development, and college and career readiness programs. Leadership Training: Fostering leadership skills through project-based learning, public speaking opportunities, and community service initiatives. Life Skills Acquisition: Equipping participants with essential life skills, including financial literacy, mindfulness, and healthy coping mechanisms. Society is ever-growing and changing, sometimes at a breakneck pace, and that can often lead to marginalized and underserved communities being left behind, especially in densely populated urban areas such as the Broward Municipal Services District. The NewGen program offers opportunities and life skills to our youth to bridge the gap and allow them to explore ideas and options they may never have been able to access. Our staff encourage and lift our youth by mentoring them and providing valuable life skills that will have lasting impacts on the program participants and the greater community they interact with for years to come.

## **Park & Recreation Facility**

**Nominee: St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park Boat Launch (Class II)**

**Organization:** Washington County Parks, Minnesota

**Narrative:**

This project replaced the well-loved and highly utilized boat launch located within St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park along the wild and scenic St. Croix River. The concrete ramp had deteriorated due to high use and long service life, which led to a steep slope break near the end of the ramp, and a scour hole from users power loading boats onto trailers. The scope of this project provided several key improvements, including reconstructing the ramp with an optimized slope to properly launch boats, adding protection to account for power loading, dredging the harbor and channel to pre-established elevations to improve navigation when water levels are low, resurfacing the parking lot, modifying curbs within the parking lot to improve maneuverability of vehicles towing trailers, and replacing the staircase to the docks with an accessible sidewalk that meets ADA standards. This project utilized two technologies that we wanted to highlight. The first was the use of bathymetric surveys to collect underwater evaluations of the harbor and channel bottoms. Bathymetric surveys use specialized equipment to measure and map the depth of a water body. This was used to estimate quantities in the plans, verify correct depths were obtained during construction, and to calculate final quantities for payment. The second was the use of electrofishing equipment to prevent fish kill prior to dewatering the harbor. A pulsed DC electrofishing boat and backpack electrofishing were used to stun and capture fish from the harbor and safely transfer them to the river. Over 300 fish, including 16 different species were transferred using the electrofishing boat and over 2,000 small fish were transferred using backpack electrofishing. This project revitalized a popular park amenity to make it usable for years to come and did so in a way that improves accessibility with minimal environmental impact.

**Nominee: Glass City Metropark (Class III)**

**Organization:** Metroparks Toledo, Ohio

**Narrative:**

The community debated for decades about how to reimagine former industrial sites beside Toledo's riverfront. Several times, developers announced plans that never materialized, leaving only a street lined with decorative lampposts that locals derided as "the road to nowhere." Since Glass City Metropark opened on one of these sites June 9, 2023, the nearly forgotten waterfront has become one of northwest Ohio's signature attractions. The 70-acre park includes 15,000 linear feet of trails, 17 acres of trees, a 27-acre prairie and more than 3,000 linear feet of improved shoreline. Numerous unique features make the park a year-round outdoors destination: The Ribbon, a 1,000-foot-long ice skating trail; the 41-foot-tall Grosbeak Play Tower; a Prairie and Pollinator themed playscape; a water play area inspired by the Maumee River; a sledding hill; a kayak cove; and public art. There are two buildings: one is available for private functions the other houses a restaurant, restrooms and lockers. In the first three months of operation, people visited Glass City more than 200,000 times. More than 10,000 people skated on The Ribbon in just the first month of its inaugural season. Glass City, where an abandoned power plant once stood, is now one of the region's go-to venues for first dates, family outings, news conferences, a jazz festival and other events. A Fourth of July celebration packed the park with families to view fireworks while enjoying a free concert. The new park is 25 percent of Glass City Riverwalk, a long-range vision to create 300 acres of greenspace on both sides of the river connected by a five-mile multi use path. Funding for the \$48.7 million development included about \$7 million from state and federal grants, as well as philanthropic gifts ranging in amounts from \$5 to \$1.1 million from nearly 400 individuals and corporations.

**Nominee: Mid-America Sports Complex Renovation (Class IV)**

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

**Narrative:**

Johnson County Park and Recreation District's (JCPRD) Mid-America Sports Complex (MASC) is a facility unmatched in the region. The facility received massive renovation in three phases taking place primarily over the winter months, starting in the fall of 2020 with the most recent phase's completion in April of 2023. Renovations include: Conversion of ten 300 ft softball fields to fully synthetic turf; Conversion of two baseball fields to fully synthetic turf; 3 new concession stands designed for efficient operations; A destination concession stand, the FanZone, with upgraded concession offerings, yard games, and a playground; Elimination of 515 ADA barriers. The MASC's project, at a total cost of \$25,998,000, is JCPRD's largest project to date. An innovative approach was taken to ensure sustainability for the facility for years to come. All net revenues and sponsorship revenue generated at the facility are kept in a project fund for future turf replacement. The City of Shawnee (where MASC resides) was enlisted to and agreed to contribute a 2% transient guest sales tax towards this project fund, as well as refunding of annual storm water fees typically paid from JCPRD to Shawnee. The response from the public and tournament providers has been outstanding. The demand to host high level tournaments with significant economic impact is such that an RFP is issued by JCPRD to tournament providers to bid on prime dates each year. An example of the events that draw players nationally include the Top Gun Invitational and the USA World Fastpitch Championships. Local softball and baseball players also benefit by having safe, level, and consistent playing surfaces for league games, with low potential for rainouts. The collaborative approach to MASC has turned a tired, worn facility into a sustainable gem for the community for years to come.

**Nominee: OC Parks' Saddleback Wilderness (Class IV)**

**Organization:** Orange County Parks, California

**Narrative:**

With stunning mountain and ocean views, OC Parks' Saddleback Wilderness is full of adventure waiting to be discovered. The area, located within OC Parks' protected and preserved Irvine Ranch Open Space in Orange County, California, offers 3.3 miles of new trails for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding in a safe, natural environment. Home to an abundance of protected plants and animals, the area was formerly known as Saddleback Park, America's first off-road motorsports park. Some of the historic racetrack's noteworthy features can still be enjoyed, and visitors can learn about its rich history through engaging interpretive programs and educational signage throughout the area. The project was completed almost entirely in-house by OC Parks staff. To carefully balance conservation needs with responsible recreation opportunities, Saddleback Wilderness is open to the public through regularly scheduled guided and self-guided programs in less than two years. Upon opening in April 2023, visitors provided feedback through voluntary surveys to help guide future decisions at Saddleback Wilderness and offer trail name suggestions for three unnamed trails. More than 300 name suggestions were received and reviewed by OC Parks staff and the top selections were voted on by the OC Parks Commission and OC Parks Trails Subcommittee. The winners were Holeshot Trail, an homage to the site's past as Saddleback Park, Whiptail Trail, named after lizards commonly seen in the area and Mirador Trail, highlighting the scenic overlook and panoramic views. Nearly 1,000 people have visited the area and participated in close to 40 programs since opening. The area has been well received by the public and garnered media coverage valued at more than \$2 million. Located in the heart of Orange County and easily accessible for residents and visitors, Saddleback Wilderness expands opportunities for safe, sustainable outdoor recreation in Orange County while preserving precious habitats.

## Trails & Corridors

**Nominee: Sycamore Grove Trail, Bridge, and Stream Stabilization at Governor Bebb MetroPark**  
(Class III)

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

**Narrative:**

The Governor Bebb Pedestrian Bridge, Sycamore Grove Trail, and Dry Fork Whitewater Stream Stabilization Project exemplify collaborative funding for park improvements that positively impact the community they serve. Governor Bebb MetroPark near Okeana, Ohio, has long been a favorite destination for hiking the forested trails, educational events at the pioneer village, and camping at the quiet riverside campground, but now this beloved park can welcome more people to enjoy a walk on the wild side. Since its inception, Governor Bebb MetroPark has protected nearly 60 acres of inaccessible woodland valley between the Ohio-Indiana state line and the Dry Fork Whitewater River, which is prone to frequent flood events throughout its 29 square mile watershed. Decades of erosion resulted in downstream nutrient loading and severe scouring of the riverbank, necessitating two separate relocations of the campground entry drive since 2012. The multi-focus Project was completed on-time and on-budget and included the installation of a 130-foot weathered-steel truss bridge leading to the new 1,800-foot crushed stone, ADA-accessible trail and an additional 2,800 feet of primitive loop trail. Stream stabilization work involved live branch layering, three in-stream energy-deflecting structures, invasive plant removal, and a bioswale pretreatment area for surface runoff. The \$1.3 million Project leveraged funds from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources through a H2Ohio Grant (\$490,000) for Stream Stabilization and a Land and Water Conservation Fund Grant (\$355,000) for trail and bridge costs, in addition to local funds from MetroParks of Butler County. The Project achieves its objective of nutrient and sedimentation load minimization of a regional water resource and provides new trail access for all visitors. The Project also provides incredible educational programming opportunities for creek ecology, water resource management, and surface water treatment.

**Nominee: Swamp Rabbit Trail (Class IV)**

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

**Narrative:**

The Swamp Rabbit Trail network is a regional trail system in Greenville County, South Carolina. First opened in 2009, the rail-trail has grown from 5 miles to 28 miles over the past 15 years. Most recently, the County and City of Greenville partnered to extend the trail by 4 miles along a remaining section of abandoned railway from downtown in Cleveland Park to Midtown. The master plan developed for the trail extension put in place guidelines to lead zoning changes that encourage mixed use development, affordable housing, mobility, and economic development. The 4 mile extension project opened in June 2023 with two new above grade bridges crossing major roadways, two up-fitted existing bridges, and one diagonal at-grade crossing with smart-technology that senses both cars and pedestrians to efficiently and safely manage traffic. The trail welcomed over 750,000 users in 2023 and the additional 4 miles connects thousands of homes, businesses, and communities with active transportation and recreation. Destinations along the new section include the Zoo, the Downtown Airport, Runway Park, Humane Society, and Legacy Park. As an economic driver, the Swamp Rabbit Trail increases business revenue from 10% to 100% with various businesses following the trail for increased exposure to where people are recreating. Greenville County partners with these businesses to offer and promote free trail parking which saves funding needed to build parking lots and drives more business to trailside locations - a win-win scenario on the Swamp Rabbit. Spur trails are underway to further connect the Swamp Rabbit Trail network into communities for increased access to experiencing Greenville County by foot or by bike. To learn more about the impact the Swamp Rabbit Trail has on the Greenville County community, please view the collection of reports, studies and articles compiled on the Swamp Rabbit Trail website: <https://greenvillerec.com/swamprabbit/>

## **Conservation**

**Nominee: Mineral Springs Creek Corridor Restoration**

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

**Narrative:**

In 2023, the Ozaukee County Planning and Parks Department (Department) engineered and constructed a large-scale coastal resiliency/restoration project in the Mineral Springs Creek (MSC) corridor, a tributary to Lake Michigan in the City of Port Washington (City), Ozaukee County, WI. Prioritized by the NACPRO award winning Ecological Prioritization GIS Tool, the Department and partners completed several aquatic connectivity projects including a major dam removal, 4 culvert remediations/replacements, bypass channel reconstruction near a powerplant, and debris jam removals between 2013-2017. In 2018, an unprecedented 500-year rainstorm scoured the stream bed and exposed a sanitary sewer line. In response, the City installed an emergency protection dam structure with a 3-4' drop, creating a major fish passage barrier  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from Lake Michigan, threatening the resilience and stability of the overall stream corridor and rendering previous improvements ineffective. Project activities included restoring the stream bed, re-grading ravine slopes and planting native prairie and trees/shrubs. The utility structure has remained submerged providing for aquatic connectivity. The City coordinated the transfer of Oakland Green Park to the County for restoration to diverse native prairie for resiliency and additional bird and pollinator habitat in the MSC corridor. Project funding and partners included the WDNR, City, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, Fund for Lake Michigan, Lake Michigan Bird Observatory, Great Lakes Community Conservation Corps, We Energies, and landowners. The Department has hosted several tours and events at the site including Love Our Great Lakes Day. This project protected critical utility infrastructure while improving aquatic connectivity and access to high quality habitat essential for aquatic and terrestrial species along Lake Michigan, resiliency, and overall ecological function of the MSC corridor.

## Cultural History

**Nominee: Sankofa Mobile Museum: Remember the Past, Impact the Future**

**Organization:** The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Department of Parks and Recreation, Prince George's County, Maryland

**Narrative:**

Taking its name from the Twi language of Ghana meaning “to retrieve your history to progress forward”, Sankofa is an interactive mobile museum, developed, owned, and operated by the Natural & Historical Resources Division of The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Department of Parks and Recreation, Prince George's County. Free of charge, it travels to schools to expose students to the diverse stories of local inhabitants from 10,000 years ago to today - connecting concepts and context to curriculum and critical thinking. This time-traveling trailer bridges the past to the present through three stations and eight content selections developed with educators to support state curriculum and education standards. Providing students with immersive, thought-provoking experiences aimed to build knowledge and understanding, Sankofa inspires curiosity and instills belonging and empathy. Using augmented and virtual reality technology, students meet a teenaged Civil War soldier, a Black aviation pioneer, a colonial-era businesswoman, a deaf activist, a student who fought for Civil Rights, a Piscataway elder, a modern-day environmentalist, and an enslaved family who sued for their freedom. Through facilitated dialogues, students analyze significant events, ideas, and themes to identify how societies have and have not changed over time. Sankofa benefits the community by providing a truthful exchange about history shared experiences that have shaped society. The interactive components of augmented and virtual reality bring the past to life in a way traditional museum exhibits cannot. Between May and August 2023, Sankofa embarked on a “sneak-peek tour” and engaged over 1000 visitors, including 600 local educators. Since September, the museum has engaged 210 students and scheduled school visits that will exceed 600 students during the 2023-2024 school year. During the summer, Sankofa will make appearances at festivals, day camps, and playgrounds.

## **Innovative Financing**

**Nominee: Leveraging Financial Partnerships**

**Organization:** Cleveland Metroparks, Ohio

**Narrative:**

Cleveland Metroparks (CM) spans 25,000 acres across six counties in Northeast Ohio. The park system includes 18 reservations, a nationally-acclaimed zoo, 9 golf courses, retail and dining operations, and more. CM executes between 20 and 40 capital projects annually and leverages precious tax revenue generated by its levy and multiplies the funds many times over through partnerships and innovative funding while never selling bonds or borrowing money for capital improvements. In addition to CM's ability to offset expenditures by generating revenue through its business operations across parks, zoo, golf, dining, and retail, the organization is exceptionally skilled at securing millions in federal, state and local grants and attracting investments by nonprofits, foundations and individuals. The leveraging of CM funds is apparent in a sample of 19 capital projects in process that are valued at more than \$74 million but which CM has committed \$19.7M to their completion. All other funds are sourced through partnership structures mentioned above. Projects range from new nature play spaces, to regional multi-use trail projects connecting underserved communities to critical infrastructure, as well as visionary long-term projects that will transform Cleveland's lakefront. Partnerships with nonprofits, foundations and individuals are especially impactful as they catalyze capital projects. A \$10M gift from CrossCounty Mortgage is kickstarting the Primate Forest project at CM Zoo, while \$2+M in donations and \$6M in additionally raised funds has supported the redevelopment of Garfield Pond, and a \$13M gift, the largest in CM history, is supporting lakefront connectivity and the rejuvenation of a former city park as the newest addition to the CM system along the burgeoning lakefront. Through impactful partnerships, CM highly leverages their funds multiplying their impact many times over to expand and enhance equitable park access for all.

## **Marketing**

**Nominee: County Fair "Get Out There" Exhibit**

**Organization:** San Diego County Parks & Recreation, California

**Narrative:**

Last summer, the County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) was asked by organizers of the San Diego County Fair to co-lead the planning and design of their Main Exhibit Hall, themed, “Get Out There!”. In less than 4 months, and working with staff from California State Parks, DPR’s Marketing Team took the lead on writing, designing, and building an interactive, 20,000-square-foot “park world” focused on education, exploration and adventure. At a high level, goals were to share information about parks; where to go, what to do, and what to look for. Woven into each display, organizers aimed to share messages of conservation, rehabilitation, sustainability and park ambassadorship. DPR staff designed dozens of original pieces of art for murals and kiosks in addition to writing, researching and vetting through experts dozens of pages of original text for wall panels, coordinating delivery of print materials, artifacts and promotions. Displays showcased San Diego’s rich biodiversity with a floorplan organized by habitats and the differences between them, including: Beaches and Oceans; Deserts and Dunes; Rivers, Lakes and Lagoons; and Mountains and Forests. Sections were also built for: Historic Parks; Native Americans; The Wild West; Water Transportation; Park Milestones; and Camping. Along with displays, park rangers and maintenance workers volunteered for 44 4-hour shifts at an on-site “Ranger Station”, sharing insights with Fair guests, and 28 staff led 20 live presentations on the Hall’s Campfire Stage, covering topics from raptors to wilderness survival. Records show 997,720 visitors attended the 22-day Fair - up nearly 200,000 from 2022, and helping organizers retain their title of being the largest county fair in the U.S. This innovative alliance exposed many fair-goers to DPR’s properties, programs, priorities for the first time, and it contributed to a noticeable uptick in park visitation, online engagement, and event attendance.

## **Planning Initiative**

**Nominee: Universal Design Park Checklists**

**Organization:** Polk County Conservation Board, Iowa

**Narrative:**

Polk County Conservation (PCC) had a vision to eliminate social and environmental barriers commonly faced by 15% of the world's population impacted by some form of disability. This vision inspired the creation of the Athene North Shore Recreation Area, where accessibility and inclusivity are the primary focus. To keep accessibility at the forefront of the park creation process, PCC partnered with Shive-Hattery Architecture and Engineering, and Uncurbed to create Universal Design Checklists. These checklists set forth key universal design considerations needed to support decision-making during the design of programming, parking and entry, interior spaces, playgrounds, trails, and water activities in outdoor public spaces. The creation and implementation of the Universal Design Checklists took place over a three-year period, integrating the eight goals of universal design and principles of co-design to ensure that site amenities and programming were accessible for individuals of all ages and abilities. This process included findings from a focus group of persons with disabilities, including an initial list of essential park components that met the needs of diverse user groups. The qualitative input was combined with data from a multi-disciplinary literature review and benchmarking efforts to further identify community demographics and park user needs. In May 2024, park users will see the ways in which the Universal Design Checklists enabled the thoughtful design and installation of park features and activities that meet the needs of all users. To continue to advocate for the consideration of all user groups, PCC has made the tool freely and widely available to park planners, so they can consciously make evidence-based design decisions which increase opportunities for inclusive, accessible outdoor recreation nationwide. See the full Universal Design Checklists (121 pg): [https://www.shive-hattery.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/All\\_Universal\\_Park\\_Design\\_Checklist.pdf](https://www.shive-hattery.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/All_Universal_Park_Design_Checklist.pdf)

## **Social Justice**

**Nominee: Nature Center at the Summit**

**Organization:** Great Parks, Ohio

**Narrative:**

Nature Center at the Summit (NCTS) is a collaboration between Great Parks and New Prospect Baptist Church on an urban site in Cincinnati that had not previously been served by Great Parks. NCTS (<https://www.greatparks.org/parks/nature-center-at-the-summit>) delivers equitable access to nature exploration opportunities for underserved Black and Jewish communities near the Center. The small greenspace and educational resources positioned at NCTS by Great Parks enable it to offer free guided nature experiences and hands-on nature-based programs, addressing a disconnect from nature that exists in this urban area. Great Parks partners with local community organizations on the development of attractions such as a community garden and then involves the broadest possible audience from targeted neighborhoods for these encounters with nature. The Urban Thrive Festival brought all NCTS themes together in one day. The festival highlighted interactions with nature, urban farming practices, seed planting, access to fresh foods, food sovereignty, local produce and composting, plus health and wellness education and resources. Hikes around NCTS demonstrated all the rich nature that exists even in this highly developed, urban setting. Great Parks applied the intersectionality of community building, mindfulness, art and music to reach more people with the festival. For example, those who came for music also learned about nature in their neighborhood. Importantly, a survey revealed that most attendees were indeed exposed to a new experience at the event, ranging from farming hydroponic vegetables to filleting fish. The 2023 version of Urban Thrive Festival reached approximately 600 attendees, double that of the previous year. By locating NCTS and the Urban Thrive Festival in the urban core of the region, Great Parks is expanding the number of people who can reach its outdoor adventures, opening new connections to nature for people from all backgrounds.

**Nominee: Pathways Internship Program**

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

**Narrative:**

In 2016, Three Rivers Park District launched a paid internship program aiming to introduce youth to careers in parks and recreation and local government. Pathways Internships are open to high school and college students, and provide a hands-on experience for interns to learn and explore career opportunities in parks and recreation. The program began as a collaboration between Three Rivers' Human Resources, Community Engagement and Outdoor Education staff, making an intentional effort to connect with youth who are under-represented within Three Rivers and parks and recreation. Demographic groups under-represented in the park system include residents of first-tier communities; people of color, new immigrants and refugees; and households with average annual income of less than \$50,000. Although the Pathways program includes participants from around the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area, staff have focused heavily on connecting with youth in the first-tier suburban communities surrounding Minneapolis since Three Rivers' primary service area is suburban Hennepin County. Opportunities span across parks and career fields, including park operations, outreach, natural resources and park maintenance, allowing interns to explore different areas of employment in the field. Since the pilot year in 2016, the Pathways program has grown both in the number of interns and in the number of departments and work sites participating. The program started with five interns at four different work sites. In 2023 the program hosted 11 interns during the summer as well as three during the 2023-24 school year. Recognizing that transportation can be a barrier to working at parks, the Three Rivers Park District Foundation provides financial support each year to fund transportation scholarships to ensure participants are able to reliably get to and from their work sites. Participant feedback about the Pathways program has been overwhelmingly positive.

## **Universal Accessibility**

**Nominee: All Abilities Play Inclusion**

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

**Narrative:**

The Palm Beach County Parks and Recreation Department is a nationwide leader in universal accessibility. Through its All Abilities Play Inclusion Program, it provides an outstanding, innovative selection of recreational opportunities and facilities for people with disabilities. The Department operates the CMAA Therapeutic Recreation Complex, offering a state-of-the-art athletic center with adaptive sports equipment, an aquatic center with pool lifts, and programs designed to enhance the quality of life for thousands of adults and children with differing abilities each year. In 2023, the Department continued to expand its All Abilities Play Inclusion Program and leverage media opportunities to raise awareness of it. One of the exciting new additions, coinciding with National Blind Sports Month in October, was its inaugural Blind Sports Day. This event, held at the Therapeutic Recreation Complex in partnership with a local nonprofit, created an opportunity for everyone in the community to experience sports for individuals with visual impairments. During 2023, the Department undertook design work for a Miracle League field. As a fully accessible ball field for individuals with special needs, this exciting facility underscores the Department's unyielding commitment to expanding opportunities for all abilities play. During the past year, the Department's inclusion efforts were featured in several media stories, significantly helping to raise awareness. The aforementioned inaugural Blind Sports Day was featured in a Sun-Sentinel newspaper article. The Therapeutic Recreation Complex and its vast array of activities were highlighted in a segment with local channel WPTV, as well as the "Must See PB" episode of the television program Passport to the Palm Beaches. The Department is proud to support, expand, and promote its exceptional All Abilities Play Inclusion Program to achieve universal accessibility and serve as an inspiration to other agencies throughout the country.

**Nominee: Visually Impaired Persons (VIP) Trail**

**Organization:** El Paso County Parks and Community Services, Colorado

**Narrative:**

The VIP (Visually Impaired Persons) Trail is an initiative that deserves recognition for its impact on inclusivity and accessibility. This standard interpretive trail was converted to cater specifically to individuals with vision impairments, breaking down barriers and ensuring that everyone can experience the wonders of nature. This trail utilizes thoughtful design, featuring a guide rope that individuals can follow throughout the journey. This simple yet effective element allows users to navigate the trail with confidence, encouraging a sense of independence. Knots along the rope signal points of interest where users can engage with interpretive signs. The use of assistive devices (PenFriends) that read these signs aloud enhances the experience, providing valuable information about the surroundings. These audio devices can be checked out for free from the nature center for use along the trail. By converting potential obstacles into points of interaction, the trail bridges the gap between the visually impaired community and the natural world. In developing the VIP Trail, nature center staff worked with a volunteer who is legally blind as well as students and faculty from the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind to ensure that the project incorporated feedback from entities that represented the target audience. The feedback received from this partnership was vital to the success of the trail. The impact of the VIP Trail extends beyond physical navigation; it contributes to the overall well-being and sense of connection for individuals with visual impairment. In recognition of its exceptional efforts in creating an accessible and enriching experience, the VIP Trail stands as an example of innovation, inclusivity, and community engagement. An award for this trail would not only honor the dedication behind its creation but also inspire others to embrace similar initiatives, creating a more inclusive world for all.

## **Professional - New**

**Nominee: Stephanie Bosack**

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

### **Narrative:**

Five years ago, Stephanie Bosack joined the Lake County Forest Preserves, bringing a visionary blend of service-oriented dedication and refined business acumen acquired in the competitive private hospitality industry. Bosack is the quintessential professional and team player, consistently offering her support to fellow members of the Business Development Division. Her commitment shines through in her creative endeavors and relentless efforts to enhance processes and efficiencies. As event operations manager, Bosack has orchestrated significant growth. Starting with just one part-time staff member and an under-utilized facility, she now oversees a team of five, managing two successful event venues, cultural events and a concert series that attracts more than 20,000 guests annually. Her accomplishments are measurable and impressive. They encompass: 1) Revitalizing a defaulted licensed facility, Bosack initiated an "in-house" operation from the ground up. Within just two years, she not only rescued the establishment but also achieved a significant milestone by surpassing \$100,000 in banquet operations. 2) Business revenues experienced a surge, escalating from \$65,000 in 2018 to \$150,000 in 2019. This growth trend persisted, with a sustained 130% increase in 2022 and 2023. Notably, revenues reached their pinnacle at \$200,000 in 2022 at Greenbelt Cultural Center. 3) Demonstrates an outstanding capacity for multitasking and effective prioritization in dynamic and fast-paced environments. 4) Experience creating clear/concise event proposals, contracts, tasks and marketing materials. 5) Developed innovative and efficient processes for the planning and execution of special events, benefiting all team members involved. Bosack's strategic vision, combining the dedication of a public agency with refined business acumen, has not only guided the Lake County Forest Preserves through growth but has also positioned the organization for continued success in a competitive landscape.

## **Professional - Fellow**

**Nominee: Kim Reser, CPRP**

**Organization:** Springfield-Greene County Park Board, Missouri

**Narrative:**

Kim Reser, CPRP has been a “park kid” all her life. She has worked in the city-county public park agency government sector for over 27 years. Currently, Kim is the Assistant Director of Parks and Recreation with the Springfield-Greene County Park Board. She played a significant role from 1997-2011 as part of the leadership team that transitioned the City of Springfield Park Board to the Springfield-Greene County Park Board. This work included: comprehensive master planning; passage of (2) county-wide sales tax initiatives; park project planning/development and staff organizational development. In addition, to her public agency service, Kim serves on the adjunct faculty with Missouri State University. As a per course instructor. Her past national committee and organizational service work includes: NRPA’s National Sports Task Force; 2003 Sports Illustrated Sports Town USA 50th Anniversary Celebration; plus numerous United States Tennis Association Committees over a period of 30 years. Kim is the past (Chair) of the Board of Regents for the Missouri Parks and Recreation Association, Lyle B. Beaver Leadership Development Institute for Park Directors and Agency Administrators while serving on the MRPA Board of Directors. As a lifelong mentor, Kim has been a part of the American Academy of Parks and Recreation Mentor and Mentee Program in the past. Over the years, Kim has been a part of numerous SGCPB agency recognitions and accreditation teams. She served on staff leadership teams who have received the prestigious Gold Medal Agency Grand Plaque Award, MRPA Agency Awards, CAPRA Accreditation and numerous other awards from various national governing bodies of sports. For the many reasons listed above, we are bringing forward Kim Reser for consideration of the Professional Fellow Award.

## **Professional - Lifetime**

**Nominee: Tim Zelek**

**Organization: Great Parks, Ohio**

### **Narrative:**

Retiring Great Parks Chief of Planning Tim Zelek's nearly 30 years of leadership helped steer the agency's growth to a point that it now attracts more than six million guests annually to its unforgettable destinations, while holding more than one-third of Hamilton County's total open space. His efforts played a major role in making Great Parks the wild wonder it is today. Among his many accomplishments are design and planning for Glenwood Gardens, Highfield Discovery Garden, and leading the planning of the Glenwood Gardens to Winton Woods (GG2WW) Trail and the Beechmont Bridge Connector. When Glenwood Gardens opened in 1999, it was praised for its serenity amidst a bustling commercial area. Tim's conceptual design envisioned it as a nature preserve offering refuge from a busy world, showcasing native plants and wildlife, with trails, a relaxing creek and beautiful estate homes transformed into meeting places. The plan also paved the way for signature specialty areas for the future. Tim was instrumental in the design of one of those areas, the Highfield Discovery Garden, which would eventually include eight smaller themed gardens such as the Toad Garden, Wizard's Garden and Trolley Garden, each filled with delightful details that make this a favorite destination for children and families. Tim was essential in the design and planning of the GG2WW Trail, connecting two of Hamilton County's most prominent parks, and the \$7.9 million Beechmont Bridge Connector, a critical link between downtown Cincinnati and the 78-mile Little Miami Scenic Trail. These have been two of the most anticipated trail projects in the region. His relationship building brought many willing sellers and land donors to agree to sell or donate their land to Great Parks, adding approximately 1,600 acres of land that contributes to his legacy of keeping our wide open spaces, open to all.