

# Your Association



# Our Early Years

by Jannah Wilson, Executive Director, Park District of Ottawa County

Ottawa County, Ohio, is a distinctive part of the state often referred to as Vacationland. The county has 94 miles of combined Lake Erie and Sandusky Bay shoreline, wetlands, rich agricultural lands, and islands including South Bass Island, Middle Bass Island, and North Bass Island. It is home to one of the most iconic lighthouses on the Great Lakes, the Marblehead Lighthouse. On September 1, 1992, the Park District of Ottawa County was established to support conservation and the development of outdoor recreation amenities within this unique region. Yet after initial establishment, the Park District remained dormant for decades due to funding constraints and other factors.

In 2018, things began to change. A three-person Board was reappointed by the Ottawa County probate judge. Momentum was also building around the newly inception of Ottawa County Active Transportation Plan. Board members Gary Kohli, Mike Shadoan, and Angela LeForce began working together to shape a vision for the Park District and how it could become an integral part of the implementation of the Active Transportation Plan. The Park Board grew to a five-person Board with the addition of Judy Indorf and Jack Madison. This power team was pumping life back into the Park District with plans for funding and future projects. In November 2020, the Park District passed its first 0.6 mill levy providing long-needed funding in order to begin operations.

In January 2022, I began my position as director. With funding and ideas in place, it was time to build a Park District. I started with a checklist of basic needs including phone number, office, computer, and printer. In March, we secured an office space to rent. After 30 years, the Park District finally had a physical address!

With the Active Transportation Plan still driving much of the strategic planning for the Park District, trail plans took center stage.

We endured many trail development ups and downs but ended the year with the ongoing development of our Catawba Islander Trail and Greenway Phase One Master Plan, and continued work to extend the North Coast Inland Trail. We also took part in the official designation of the Portage River Water Trail. After designation of the trail, the Park District assumed the role of Water Trail facilitator.

As a way to span our reach throughout the county, we opened the first round of our Parks and Trails Improvement Grant. Grants were awarded in June with the distribution of \$200,000 to nine outdoor recreation projects. The grant program had been a long-standing promise to the political subdivisions of Ottawa County, and it was rewarding to achieve success. The Park District is continuing the grant program in 2023.

While the Park District does not yet own or manage property, we found many creative ways to develop partnerships and network with communities. In August, we hosted our first Bike Safety Day at Hopfinger-Zimmerman

Memorial Park with the Zimmerman family, Sheriff's Office, Health Department, and Friends of Ottawa County Parks. We received \$2,000 in donations to purchase bikes for all 19 participants. Students learned bike safety, repair, maneuverability, and nutrition. The pure excitement of our participants was contagious. The program also represented the need for more outdoor educational programs and spurred plans for future Park District programming. The Park District submitted an application to the OPRA Foundation for a programming grant in order to continue Bike Safety Day, and we were awarded \$2,500 through the grant program.

The Park District has come a long way over the past few years. Several may have dismissed the Park District as a dream of yesteryear, but it wasn't too late to dust off the file and get our Park District moving forward. As the director, I am humbled to work with so many people who care deeply about our vision and who have volunteered countless hours to ensure our success. I am honored to be part of our early years and history in the making.

