

The Great Egret Marsh Preserve in Lakeside Marblehead is home to many waterfowl, including the Great Egret.

Courtesy of Park District of Ottawa County

Slow burn:

Decades after its creation, the Park District of Ottawa County has several irons in the outdoor-recreation fire

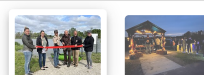
MARK MESZOROS | WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5, 2024

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Courtesy of Park District of Ottawa County

The Park District of Ottawa County hosted a ribbon cutting in May 2023 for the new Little Portage Unit Kayak Launch along the Portage River Water Trail.



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"We have an interesting history."

That's how Jannah Wilson describes the [Park District of Ottawa County](#), of which she is the executive director, during a recent phone interview.

"Interesting history" probably is fair.

"Rich history" wouldn't be.

Neither would "storied history."

Although the park district has existed for more than 30 years, the county having established it in 1992 via chapter 1545 of the Ohio Revised Code, it hasn't REALLY existed until the last few years – not in any meaningful way.

"(There was) no funding for the park district, so it really was inactive for decades," Wilson says.

That all started to change in 2018, she says, with the appointment by a probate judge of a three-person board, which soon expanded to five members.



Courtesy of Park District of Ottawa County
The North Coast Inland Trail extension through Veterans Memorial Park to its terminus at Washington Street in Genoa.

"And then in 2020, we went up for our first levy to actually have funding for the park district, and the levy passed with 62 percent of the vote," she says. "That funding provided the park district with a 0.6-mill levy for 10 years, which is now allowing us to actually develop a park district, but we are starting from the ground up."

Wilson says "we," but she – the district's first employee – wasn't hired until 2022.

And as for the "starting from the ground up" bit, the park district only recently established its first park. The West Harbor Preserve is a 12-acre parcel of land in Catawba Island Township that the [Black Swamp Conservancy](#) donated to the district a few months ago.

"The West Harbor Preserve is definitely a project that we have on the forefront right now," Wilson says. "We're working on a master plan for that property to define where we will have parking and trails and kayak launch in the future and how we will move forward with the habitat-restoration initiatives and the wetland restoration."

Catawba Island Township also is home to the recently acquired 7.6 parcel of undeveloped land, complete with a scenic pond, to be named the Islander Woods and Trailhead. According to a news release, the bond will be named "Bob's Pond" in memory of the late Bob Johnson, who loved it.

The district is also working to blaze trails – and a trail extension.

The latter is a recently paved-and-painted extension of the 75-mile, multicounty [North Coast Inland Trail](#) in Genoa through Veterans Memorial Park to its terminus at Washington Street. A park district news release calls the stretch linking to downtown Genoa "a win for northwest Ohio bicycling enthusiasts and users of the North Coast Inland Trail alike."

"People have been working on that project for decades," Wilson says, "just trying to extend it through the county and get that going, so we've worked to pick up where that left off and keep going with that."

On the east side of the county, the park district is working toward the creation of the Marblehead Peninsula Trail, with a feasibility study having been conducted. The district held an open house in April to get a first round of thoughts from area residents.

"We've had a really good response to the feasibility study," Wilson says. "There's a lot of energy behind the project, a lot of positive feedback from the public, where it seems like this is something that the majority of the public wants and needs in this area."

Not all of the trails the district has a hand in shaping are for feet and bike tires, Wilson also talking up the district's involvement with the [Portage River Water Trail](#), a 36-mile stretch running through a few counties.

"We have several launch sites along the Portage River Water Trail," she says "The sites are managed by various agencies that own the property along the water trail, but the park district is the coordinator for it."

The park district also spreads the love via its Parks and Trails Improvement Grant Program, which makes available thousands of dollars for improvements to parks owned by county villages and townships, as well as Port Clinton.

"That was the first initial thing we got up and running," Wilson says.

Does she have a grand vision for the Park District of Ottawa County?

"Being such a new park district, we have to think big and we have to think small," she says, adding that tasks such as simply paying the bills have to come first.

"I worked for Lorain County Metro Parks for 15 years," so I have a lot of ideas ... (about) what we could do here," she adds. "But our board (members) have their vision for the park district, too, so it's a matter of combining all our grand ideas and trying to take data that has already been compiled and utilizing that, as well."

The district works from an active transportation plan that's been developed for the county and is working on a strategic plan for itself.

"I think (that) will be really beneficial as well pull together some of these preliminary concepts we have and try to develop that vision for the future."

The public is invited to attend [the Park District of Ottawa County's board meetings](#).

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