

Who's in charge of parks?

Has it always been this way?

How can we improve our parks?

Why do parks matter?

Governing the Green

Public parks in Erie County have a long and complex history, evolving over time into a system managed by the state, county, municipalities and non-profit groups. Recent fiscal troubles point to the tenuous nature of funding for parks and the thinning line between local and regional assets. Locally, as elsewhere, public-private partnerships and dedicated funding are emerging as key elements of strong park systems.

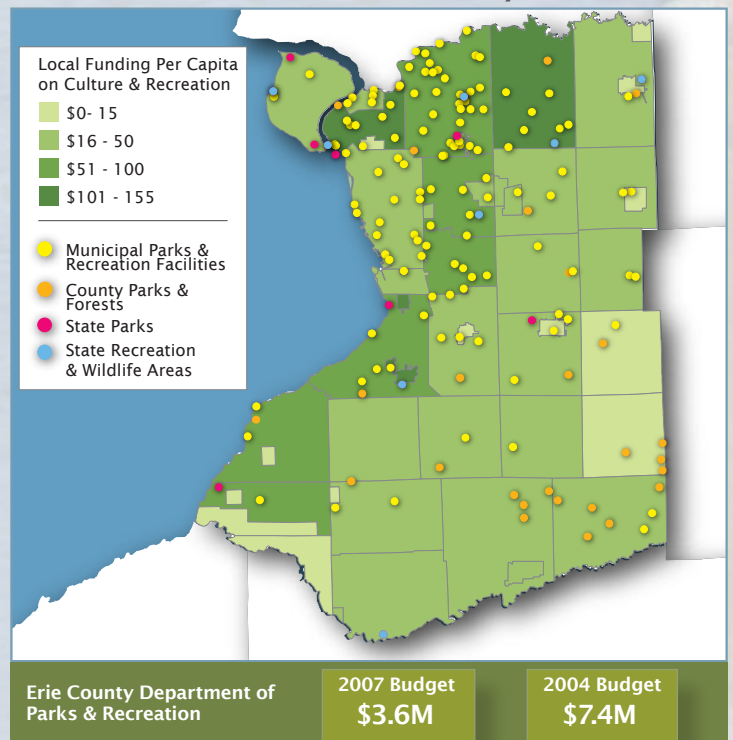
Who's in charge of parks?

Public parks and recreation facilities are among our most valued community assets. They anchor our neighborhoods, preserve key scenic and natural resources, and offer passive and active recreation to a wide range of users.

They are also among our most complex assets to govern, ranging from small local parks, pools and schoolyard playgrounds, to large regional parks and forests. Generally, the governance of these assets in Erie County mirrors their function. Our numerous municipal parks and recreation facilities attract mostly local residents who support them with property taxes and user fees on select activities. County and state facilities are fewer, larger and primarily in rural and waterside settings that draw visitors from a regional base. The county general fund and user fees sustain county parks, while state parks receive support from Albany in addition to revenues from parking and other services.

In recent years, several forces have prompted the region to look anew at these traditional arrangements. The line between local and regional assets has been blurred by suburbanization—increasing the frequency with which we cross local borders for a wide range of activities—and the development of recreational corridors that pass through two or more jurisdictions. At the same time, limited municipal resources for maintaining and upgrading aging facilities have raised concerns about short and long term local capacities to care for and invest in parks, especially in Buffalo. County responsibilities have expanded as a result of these forces, but drastic budget cuts since 2004 have diminished its spending on parks.

Parks and Recreation in Erie County



Sources: New York State Comptroller, *Financial Report on Local Governments* (2005); New York State Office of Cyber Security and Critical Infrastructure Coordination (facility locations); Erie County 2007 Adopted Operating Budget (county parks only)

Key Events in Public Park Development in Erie County



1868-1898
Buffalo's Olmsted parks and parkway system is conceived and created

1925
Erie County Parks Commission established to create parks and manage open space in non-urban areas

1928-1939
Erie County assembles abandoned farmland with intent to reforest, creating a county forest system.

1950's-1960's
Rapid expansion of suburban recreation programs to meet needs of growing populations; expansion of county park system



1986
County acquires Grover Cleveland Golf Course from Buffalo

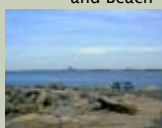
1996
State purchases Woodlawn Beach from private owner



2005
County budget crisis causes temporary closure of county parks



1914
Locksley Park Company, a residential development firm, donates land for Hamburg Town Park and Beach



1925-1930
State begins assembling land for Beaver Island and Buckhorn Island State Parks on Grand Island



1926
County acquires Lancaster Municipal Park from village, renamed Como Lake Park



1981
County takes title to Buffalo Botanical Gardens in South Park



1996
Bennett Beach in Evans transferred from Buffalo to Erie County



2004
Buffalo parks system transferred to Erie County; County contracts with Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy for maintenance of Olmsted parks and parkways



2007
Niagara Greenway plan approved



Sources: *Governance in Erie County: A Foundation for Understanding and Action* (1996, University at Buffalo); municipal, county and organization websites

Has it always been this way?

Park and recreation management in Erie County has evolved over more than a century. As cities and villages swelled during the 19th and early 20th centuries, municipal leaders and prominent citizens called for public parks to improve the health and well-being of urban residents. Frederick Law Olmsted's plans for a park and parkway system in Buffalo, conceived shortly after the Civil War, represented the largest of these undertakings. In many cases, public park development was spurred by the donation or acquisition of private land and added to a recreational mix dominated by privately-held spaces, such as cemeteries, country clubs and private beaches.

After World War I, a number of factors led to the creation of regional parks in non-urban areas, including the abandonment of rural farmland, rising use of automobiles and a growing push to conserve natural resources while

promoting public access. In 1925, the Erie County Parks Commission was created and, within a year, opened four county parks including Como Lake in Lancaster and Chestnut Ridge in Orchard Park. Around this time, the county also began assembling a forest system to provide timber resources and preserve natural habitats. New York State, which created the nation's first state park at Niagara Falls in 1885, entered the Erie County park scene in the 1920s, acquiring land on Grand Island for the future Beaver Island and Buckhorn Island State Parks.

During the 1950s and 60s, in the midst of the baby boom and rapid suburbanization, there was another burst of park-building. The county added several parks to its system and reserved several areas for future park development. State parkland in the county also expanded with the opening of Evangola in 1954 and new facilities at Beaver Island. Also notable was the expansion of activity-oriented recreation programs in suburban communities,

servicing new neighborhoods and their young residents with amenities such as pools, ball diamonds and youth centers.

Since 1980, financial hardship in Buffalo and efforts to enhance efficiency and equity have led to the transfer of several city assets to the county—especially those with regional audiences—including the Botanical Gardens and Grover Cleveland Golf Course. This culminated with the 2004 deal that handed the maintenance of all Buffalo parks to Erie County for an annual payment from the city, immediately followed by an agreement to have the non-profit Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy maintain and manage the Olmsted parks and parkways. County budget troubles have since threatened the stability of county parks and raised new concerns over the maintenance of Buffalo parks. At the same time, planned infusions of state resources into the region's waterfront—including the Niagara Greenway and the proposed Buffalo Harbor State Park—have buoyed prospects along the waterfront.

How can we improve our parks?

Communities everywhere wrestle with allocating sufficient resources for their parks and recreational facilities, often among the first services to face cuts when budgets are tight. In many places—including Erie County—public-private partnerships and dedicated funding sources have emerged as key strategies for maintaining existing assets and seizing opportunities.

Partnerships and reliable public funding are critical

Public-private partnerships describe a broad range of collaborations that governments form with businesses, non-

profits and community groups to assist with park maintenance, improvements and planning. To promote partnerships of all types, entire programs have developed

in some cities to help organize, inform and sustain them, including New York City's Partnerships for Parks.

In their simplest form, partnerships include arrangements with block clubs to maintain a neighborhood park or a church raising funds for a new public playground. Partnerships also include corporate sponsorships, such as the Amherst Pepsi Center and Paddock Chevrolet Golf Dome in Tonawanda. The 2004 agreement between Erie County and the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy represents an advanced level of partnership entailing full management responsibilities. Other partnerships work specifically on providing stable, long-term funding in the form of endowments, some of which focus on funding for specific sites—such as the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo's Johnson Park Restoration Fund to improve Buffalo's first park.

Though partnerships are emerging as critically important complements to public sector resources, they cannot supplant them. A reliable flow of

public funding is critical to forming and sustaining partnerships, competing for grants and pursuing innovative new practices and projects. The recently adopted plan for the Niagara Greenway—supported by a \$450 million commitment over 50 years from the New York Power Authority—demonstrates the power that stable, long-term funding has to promote cooperation and capitalize on a key regional asset.

While funding for the Niagara Greenway is unique and targeted, many regions dedicate public funding for general park operations and capital upgrades or distribute resources for parks on a regional basis. In Cleveland and much of Ohio, independent regional parks districts that raise their own revenues, through taxes, fees and grants, have been in place for decades. Cities like Minneapolis and Chicago have similarly independent boards operating within the city proper. In other places, including Pittsburgh and San Diego, asset funds have been formed to distribute funding for parks and other assets on a regional basis.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP COORDINATION

Partnerships for Parks

A joint program of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation and the City Parks Foundation, Partnerships was formed in 1995 to foster public-private partnerships within a city parks system battered by years of disinvestment. It rallies community support for parks by assisting the formation of neighborhood park groups—bringing together individuals, community service groups, non-profits, businesses and relevant government agencies—and linking them together to share best practices.

LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Urban Forestry Fund

Maintained by the Chautauqua Region Community Foundation since 1992, the Fund is an endowment that provides annual support for the planting of trees by the City of Jamestown Parks Department. Annual grants now total over \$3,000 for tree planting on parkland and along city streets. A "Friends of the Forest" display in City Hall acknowledges all individuals who have contributed more than \$30 to the fund.

STABLE PUBLIC FUNDING

INDEPENDENT PARK SYSTEMS

Cleveland Metroparks

A metropolitan parks district formed in 1917 to serve Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Metroparks operates 16 parks, 6 golf courses, a zoo and 60 miles of all-purpose trails. In 2006, 75% of its \$77 million budget was raised through the district's countywide property tax levy.

Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board

Formed in 1883, the Board operates 170 parks in the City of Minneapolis, including regional parks, local parks, gardens, golf courses and a system of parkways and trails. It has its own taxing authority, raising 70% of its \$53 million budget in 2006 from a city property tax levy, with additional funding for its regional parks provided by the Twin Cities' Metropolitan Council, a multi-purpose regional service board.

ASSET DEVELOPMENT POOLS

Allegheny (PA) Regional Asset District

Formed in 1995, the District receives a set portion of the local sales tax and distributes the funding to a range of regional assets in the Pittsburgh area. Of the \$78 million distributed in 2007, 28% went to parks and trails, while libraries received the greatest share (32%). Regional parks and other large assets receive five-year funding guarantees, while smaller assets compete for funding annually.

Regional Parks Improvement Fund (CA)

Established by City of San Diego ordinance in 2003, the Fund receives half of all revenues from user fees and concessions in excess of \$20 million from the city's 4,200 acre Mission Bay Park. The Fund, which is expected to receive \$2.5 million in 2008, can be used to pay for capital improvements, planning and land acquisitions for the city's regional parks, beaches and trails.



Why do parks matter?

In many regions, parks are becoming far more than neighborhood niceties. In a global economy where skilled workers are very mobile, high-quality parks are regarded as civic trophies that play functional and symbolic roles in attracting and retaining workers and private investment. Chicago's Millennium Park and Atlanta's proposed BeltLine are prominent examples of projects designed to advertise a city's 21st century identity in addition to being places to jog or relax.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition of the many roles that parks play in all aspects of a region's development and redevelopment. They reduce the heat island effect and lower water and air pollution. They add value to surrounding properties and serve as investment focal points for strengthening and revitalizing existing urban and suburban neighborhoods—a key element of the Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth. And in places with significant vacant property problems like Buffalo, parks, forests and other green infrastructure are seen as key elements of strategies to manage and reuse vacant land in a way that adds environmental and economic value to the region—a strategy described in the recent Blueprint Buffalo policy guide from the National Vacant Properties Campaign. Tiff Farm Nature Preserve in South Buffalo, built on a brownfield in the 1970s, is a good example.

Resources for achieving the full potential of parks will always be limited, but building new public-private partnerships, strengthening existing partnerships and finding ways to provide more reliable sources of public funding go a long way toward building, enhancing and sustaining a region's green infrastructure.

For More Information

Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, online at <http://www.buffaloolmstedparks.org/>

Erie County Department of Parks and Recreation, online at <http://www.erie.gov/parks/>

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, online at <http://nysparks.state.ny.us/>

Niagara River Greenway Commission, online at <http://www.niagaragreenway.org/>

Parks & Trails New York, online at <http://www.ptny.org/>

Project of Public Spaces, online at <http://www.pps.org/>

Trust for Public Land, online at <http://www.tpl.org/>

Regional Institute Policy Briefs provide key data and analysis to frame issues, inform decisions and guide policy action.

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