

Leaving a Legacy of

Open Space

By Vince Urbanski, Environmental Planner

It all started with a selfless act by one Painesville landowner looking to share what he knew was a special piece of his personal property. Forty-five years ago, Bill Wyman's desire to donate 30 acres of his land at the confluence of Big Creek and the Grand River (now Helen Hazen Wyman Park) led to the creation of the Lake County Metropolitan Park District – now known as Lake Metroparks.

Wyman and other community leaders could see the writing on the wall regarding the future landscape of a Lake County they had heretofore known as a rural place with an abundance of open space for people to enjoy more or less as they pleased. This idyllic world was about to change, rolled over by a wave of post-war, baby-boom era population increase and associated development.

Lake Metroparks was created in 1958, 41 years after passage by the Ohio State Legislature of the law setting down the ground rules for county park systems. Arguably the most important element of Ohio Revised Code §1545 gives park districts the power to "acquire lands for the conservation of the natural resources of the state."

During the first 20 years of its existence, a small, ambitious staff and Board of Park Commissioners created the backbone of what you see today in the system of metroparks throughout Lake County. Between 1959 and 1979, guided by a comprehensive plan published by the Lake County Planning Commission, park district leaders acquired significant portions of Hell Hollow Wilderness Area, Hogback Ridge Park, Hidden Valley Park, Indian Point Park, Girdled Road Reservation, Lakeshore Reservation,

Penitentiary Glen Reservation, Chapin Forest Reservation, Mason's Landing Park and Paine Falls Park. At the end of this 20-year period, the total acreage managed by the park district totaled over 3,800 acres.

The last 25 years have been spent filling in the gaps, putting some meat on the bones of those early acquisitions, and addressing some changing trends in outdoor recreation. In 1987, the park district acquired a 235-acre agricultural operation that would become the Farmpark – a facility geared toward education and preservation of a main facet of our cultural heritage.

It also became evident that the way people used open space was changing. With this in mind, the park district acquired two golf courses and constructed a 4.4-mile bicycle/pedestrian facility. Erie Shores Golf Course, Pine Ridge Country Club and the Greenway Corridor have proved successful in meeting growing recreational needs in the community.

However, during this time, the vast majority of acquisitions continued to be aimed at protecting natural resources. What changed in many instances was the way land was protected. Popular parks like Veterans Park, Arcola Creek Park, Fairport Harbor Lakefront Park, Painesville Township Park, Lakefront Lodge and parts of Chagrin River Park aren't owned by the park district. In all cases, the owner of the property, another government agency, and Lake Metroparks have entered into lease-management agreements whereby the day-to-day operation of each facility is handled by the park district without transfer of the property ownership.

Another preferred tool of land

protection used by Lake Metroparks that doesn't involve the transfer of property ownership is the *conservation easement*. Under a conservation easement, the landowner relinquishes certain rights in the property to the park district, the most significant of which is usually the right to develop the land. Through 2003, over 400 acres of land had been permanently protected by conservation easements. Park district staff strives to make the most of every Lake County taxpayer dollar by attracting funds from sources outside the system's typical revenue stream. For example, between 1999 and 2003, Lake Metroparks preserved over 1,100 acres of wetlands, forest lands and retired farm fields valued at nearly \$7 million. In order to reduce the stress on the district's operating budget, the park district tapped federal grants (29% of \$7 million), state grants (13%), wetland and riparian protection funds (15%) and donations (4%), stretching the taxpayer's dollar to the maximum.

So how was the forward vision of those 1950s community leaders? Today Lake County covers a geographic area of 147,663 acres (smallest of Ohio's 88 counties) with a population of over 227,000 (11th out of 88 counties). This translates into a pretty densely populated county and close to 20/20 vision for those past community leaders. It then stands to figure that although Lake County ranks 28th of Ohio's counties in percent of acreage available for outdoor recreation (7%), it only ranks 72nd in outdoor recreation acreage per 1,000 residents (46 acres) (*Ohio Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, 2003*).

What has happened to our county is no secret. You see it on your drive to work or in the *time* it takes you to drive to work.



You see it in the place you live. Our county has become “developed.” Actually, it has been for quite some time. There are currently 1,796 platted subdivisions in Lake County covering 33,000 acres or roughly 22% of the county. There are 1,400 miles of roads within 11,500 acres of right-of-way covered by roughly 4,000 acres of asphalt. Within this mosaic rests 7,000 acres of Lake Metroparks-managed open space.

Some say 7,000 acres is too much. Most think it isn’t. In a 2001 Trust for Public Lands survey of Lake County residents, only 4% of respondents felt that the park district had acquired “too much” land. Meanwhile, 93% of those surveyed gave the park district a favorable rating.

Whether you’re looking at benefits of parks from an environmental, recreational, cultural, or social perspective, the benefits are endless. Even economically,

there are substantial benefits. Studies have shown the value of properties adjacent to and near park land is higher than those not proximate to park land. And what is the economic impact to a community by protecting open space as opposed to building a subdivision on the site? Sure, the protected property may come off the tax base (although not in the case of conservation easements), but it has consistently been shown that taxes paid on residential property do not cover the cost of community services (emergency services, road maintenance, schools, etc.) necessary to support this type of land use. Add to this the idea that property value – and property taxes paid – adjacent to a park is higher than that adjacent to a subdivision and you could argue there’s a positive economic impact to the community through land protection.

This article is not meant to be an

assault on development in Lake County. Certainly there is a balance that needs to be struck between what gets built upon and what gets preserved for the enjoyment of this and future generations while still enabling an economically healthy community. Lake Metroparks and several other state and local conservation agencies have made it a priority to ensure this balance.

As we progress further into the twenty-first century, today’s park district leaders will need to match the vision of those 1950s leaders. With ever shrinking opportunities and ever growing costs, protecting Lake County’s natural heritage won’t be easy, but thankfully by looking at the park system that already exists, you can be assured that your Lake Metroparks is up to the challenge. 🌿