

## **Executive Summary**

The Manistee County Regional Parks, Recreation, and Trail Development Plan is a county-wide parks and recreation plan that is based on the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Guidelines for the Development of Community Park, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plans. The report assesses the social and economic characteristics of Manistee County that are relevant to parks and recreation, current recreation trends in Manistee County, the administrative structure of local bodies of government within the County, and feedback from a student input session.

The goal of this report is to provide recommendations for the improvement of Manistee County's parks, recreation, and trails with consideration of the existing recreational assets, local and national recreation trends, and input from the County's youth. The recommendations also consider the current administrative structure of each local body of government and the recreation sites that are a priority. Each local body of government was asked to prioritize their recreation sites on a scale of 1-3, with 1 being the highest priority. Although explicit guidelines as to how to prioritize were not given, the majority of the communities prioritized sites by their level of use and their need of improvements.

Following the DNR guidelines, the practicum team developed and distributed an administrative survey (see Appendix B) for community leaders in each of the Manistee County local bodies of government, with the intention of learning about the community's parks and recreation structure, funding, and partnerships. Twenty (20) local bodies of government completed the survey, including the county as a whole. Maple Grove Township did not complete the survey. The completed survey with an accompanying narrative for each local body of government is available in Appendix A.

Working with the Manistee County Planning Department and Alliance for Economic Success, the Practicum Team hosted a student input session with local high school age students at Manistee High School on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015. The session gathered information on student's preferred recreation activities; current usage of parks, trails, and recreation facilities; and vision for the future through a SWOT analysis and mapping exercises.

Through research and data collection, a recreation analysis was developed and a socioeconomic profile was written. The intention of these sections was to develop a clear understanding of Manistee County's character as it relates to parks and recreation. Data on the recreational environment supports that Manistee County residents' recreational spending and activities align with the county's natural assets. The lakes, beaches, forests, and trails in the county support a partially recreation-based flow of currency. Residents are fishing, golfing, hunting, swimming, and walking outdoors; which means they are purchasing gear, equipment, and accessories to support their recreation activities. They are also spending money on tents and camping gear, boats, and RVs to enjoy the outdoors. Finally, Manistee County is equipped with the natural assets to offer the recreation activities that are most popular nationally: running, biking, fishing, camping, and hiking.

Manistee County attracts a significant seasonal resident and tourist population who visit regularly because of the beautiful weather, the vast number of rivers, waterways, and lakes, and the number of recreation opportunities available. They are accommodated in tents or RVs in campgrounds, area cabins, hotels, bed & breakfasts, and seasonal homes. Many seasonal residents arrive during the summer months when the beaches, rivers, trails, and parks are most accessible. The average seasonal resident is interested in outdoor recreation and keeps boats, fishing gear, bicycles, yard toys, downhill or cross country skis, and hunting gear at their seasonal home.

Recommendations for improving parks and recreation in Manistee County cover a broad spectrum of opportunities for improvements. It was found that administrative capacity was lacking in the majority of the local bodies of government; parks and recreation departments were only established in 10% of communities. Funding for operation and maintenance, recreation programming, and capital improvements were also lacking. It is recommended that the local bodies of government create a multi-jurisdictional parks and recreation department or committee to improve collaboration between communities.

The lack of available information online regarding parks and recreation opportunities is another possible area of improvement; many students at the input session stated that they did not have the information available to them that would enable them to utilize many of the county's recreation resources. It is recommended that more detailed information regarding recreation sites, their amenities, and safety information, all be placed online to encourage greater use of the county's many recreation sites.

Students also expressed interest in themed adventure racing. These races, such as color runs or "mudders" are becoming very popular nationally, and many students expressed interest in bringing this style of events to Manistee County. It is recommended that the County conduct additional research into the popularity and feasibility of these events.

Bird watching is also a popular leisurely recreation activity. There are currently only a few sites in the County that are designated specifically for bird watching, and it is therefore recommended that the County consider increasing the number of bird watching and wildlife viewing locations.

Downtown Manistee is a very popular area for recreation activities. Numerous students signified problems with partaking in recreation activities downtown: the lack of an indoor recreation facility, lack of places to rent water-based activity equipment, lack of bike lanes, and the number and quality of courts for sports such as basketball, tennis, and volleyball. It is recommended that Manistee County research into the feasibility of developing an indoor recreation facility as well as encouraging activity rental businesses to open up in the County. It is also recommended that the County assess and map existing bike lines, as well as explore the development of new bike lanes. Lastly, it is recommended that the county assess the current quantity and quality of sport courts downtown and considers improving or constructing additional courts.