

Warren County Launches New Era for Parks and Recreation

By Holly Luberto

WARREN COUNTY - The Warren County Board of County Commissioners announced a series of major initiatives to strengthen the management, stewardship, and future development of the Warren County Park System.

The actions include the creation of a Division of Parks and Recreation within the Department of Land Preservation; the establishment of a Warren County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board; and the adoption of the first comprehensive update to the County's park rules in more than 25 years.

"Our open space has become one of Warren County's greatest assets, and we're proud to announce a series of measures that will ensure our parks continue to grow, improve, and serve residents for generations to come," said Commissioner Director Lori Ciesla.

A Park System That Has Nearly Doubled in Size

When the county first began purchasing open space for preservation purposes 40 years ago it had one 4-acre park in the center of Belvidere known as Garrett D. Wall Park. Today, the county's park system includes 173 parcels totaling more than 2,900 acres. These lands contain various forests, meadows, wetlands, streams, and waterbody habitats, including a 69-acre spring-fed lake, as well as cultivated farmland, manicured lawns, and other improved areas, with 11 parking areas, 10 buildings, three pavilions, two museums, multiple historic structures, and more than 26 miles of trails.

Investing in the Future

Recognizing the tremendous growth of the park system, the Warren County Board of County Commissioners has established a dedicated Division of Parks and Recreation within the Department of Land Preservation to oversee park operations, maintenance, stewardship, recreation programming, capital improvements, historic sites, natural resource management, and future enhancement of the County's parks and trails.

"Good government means adapting to changing needs, Commissioner Deputy Director James R. Kern III said, adding, "The people of Warren County have invested in preserving thousands of acres of open space over the years and this reorganization ensures clear accountability and makes sure that the public's investment continues to benefit residents through thoughtful management, maintenance, and recreation."

Citizen Leadership Will Continue

The Commissioners also approved the creation of the Warren County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, which succeeds the former Board of Recreation Commission created in 1987.

Current Board members will continue serving, ensuring that the experience, institutional knowledge, and volunteer spirit that helped build today's park system remain an important part of its future.

"The Board of Recreation Commissioners helped transform what was once a very modest county park system into one that has become a source of pride for Warren County, and we thank every past and present volunteer for their dedication and look forward to continuing that partnership through the new Advisory Board," Commissioner Jason J. Sarnoski said.

Modern Rules for a Modern Park System

The Commissioners also adopted new Warren County Park System Rules, replacing regulations originally adopted in 1999.

The updated rules establish consistent standards for park operations, visitor safety, recreational activities, special events, permits, protection of natural and historic resources, and stewardship of County park properties.

Planning the Next Generation of Parks

These actions come as Warren County continues preparing its comprehensive Open Space, Recreation, and Parks Plan.

The planning process includes extensive public outreach, community surveys, stakeholder meetings, and public workshops to identify priorities for future park improvements, trail development, recreation programming, accessibility, conservation, and historic preservation.

"We encourage residents to participate in the planning process by completing the County's public survey and attending upcoming public engagement events throughout the summer," urged Ryan Conklin, Director of the Warren County Planning Department. A link to the online survey is available on the warrenparks.com website. County staff and the county's planning consultants from Brandstetter Carroll, Inc. will also be tabling the Hackettstown Street Fair on July 19 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and the Warren County Farmers' Fair & Balloon Festival on July 25 from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Residents are invited to visit and share their thoughts about the future of the county's park system.

Looking Toward November

As part of this long-term vision, the County Commissioners also will be placing a non-binding public question on the November ballot seeking voter support for expanding the allowable uses of the County's voter-approved Open Space Trust Fund.

If supported by voters and approved by the Commissioners, dedicated Trust Fund revenues could be used not only to preserve land but also to improve, develop, restore, and maintain county parks, trails, recreation facilities, historic sites, and other public amenities.

"Warren County has made a tremendous investment in preserving open space over the past three decades," said Corey Tierney, Director of the Warren County Department of Land Preservation. "As some of our preserved lands mature into parks and recreational destinations, we believe it is important to invest in maintaining and improving these public assets so they can be enjoyed by future generations."



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By State Rep. Tarah Probst

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