

Chapter 4 – Benefits of Parks, Trails, and Open Spaces



Introduction

Parks, trails, and open spaces improve our physical and psychological health, strengthen pride in our communities, and make our County and neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work. Overwhelming evidence demonstrates the social, community, environmental, individual and economic benefits that parks, trails, and open spaces bring to a community and its residents, as shown in Fig. 4.1. Some benefits are easily quantifiable while many are not. This chapter summarizes some of the most significant benefits afforded by the existence of parks, trails, and open spaces that have been proven to be experienced and valued by residents, visitors, and local communities of Washington County. See Appendix C for additional details on the benefits of parks, trails, and open spaces.



Figure 4.1
BENEFITS OF PARKS, TRAILS, AND OPEN SPACES



Social and Community Benefits

Among the most important benefits, though perhaps the most difficult to quantify, are the social benefits provided by the existence of parks, trails, and open spaces.

Publicly-accessible parks, trails, and open spaces can serve as important community development tools. They make communities more livable by offering recreational opportunities for everyone including at-risk youth, low-income children, and low-income families. Parks can provide a place in low-income neighborhoods where people can experience a sense of community. In turn, they reduce crime, enhance childhood development, and create stronger communities.

Social Benefits Experienced in Washington County

The following are examples of how parks, trails, and open spaces provide social benefits and build a stronger sense of community in Washington County:

- In 2015, the eighth annual educational fishing clinic was held at Sandy Knoll County Park providing a learning opportunity for Washington County’s youth and enhancing their appreciation for nature. The event drew a total of 397 kids, and brought approximately 1,000 people into the park.

- Parks can serve as venues for large athletic events such as cross country meets and soccer leagues. Homestead Hollow Park hosts local high school cross country meets annually.
- The “Adrenaline Race Series” sponsored by Elevate, Inc., is held annually on the Eisenbahn State Trail. The marathon, half marathon, quarter marathon, and 5K events that start and end in downtown West Bend, had a total of 429 race finishers in 2015. The event draws participants from local communities and from around the state and country.
- The Washington County Park and Trail System provides many venues that offer and encourage opportunities for social engagements including 26 reservable shelters, 12 parks offering picnic areas, nine parks offering playground equipment, and four parks offering beach swimming (as displayed in detail in Table 2.4 in Chapter 2).
- In 2011, there were approximately 52 public parks in Washington County that included at least one playground offering opportunities for children to interact and play. Thirty-seven of the 52 parks included at least one playground with ADA accessibility.
- Numerous community events and festivals are held in community parks throughout Washington County, bringing members of the community together and strengthening pride in the community.



The swimming beach at Leonard J. Yahr County Park is one of four offered within the Washington County Park and Trail System and offers a place for families to gather and engage in recreation.

Environmental Benefits

The acquisition of land for parks and open spaces and the establishment of public trails contribute to a broad range of environmental benefits. Examples of benefits that preservation of environmentally significant land can result in include:

- ***Protection of wildlife, plant communities, and biological diversity***

Acquiring land for parks and open spaces should result in proper monitoring and action taking place to ensure true and necessary protection occurs. Proper actions may include invasive species identification and removal.



Parks and open spaces, especially those that include wetlands such as Homestead Hollow Park shown above, are important resources for the ecological health and diversity of wildlife in the County.

- ***Conservation of native communities and provide habitat for species of concern***

Parks and open spaces, especially those that include wetlands, are important resources for the ecological health and diversity of the County. Such natural resource areas can account for a large variety of species, genetic variability, and variety in ecosystems. Wetlands provide essential breeding, nesting, resting, and feeding grounds and provide escape cover for many forms of fish and wildlife.



Fellenz Woods is a 160-acre open space property owned by the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust that includes 1.5 miles of undeveloped Milwaukee River frontage and 15 acres of lowland forest and is preserved in perpetuity.

- ***Enhancement of air quality***

Woodlands provide many significant environmental benefits. The U.S. Forest Service calculated that over a 50-year lifetime, one tree generates \$31,250 worth of oxygen, provides \$62,000 worth of air pollution control, recycles \$37,500 worth of water, and controls \$31,250 worth of soil erosion.¹

Also in regards to air quality improvement, trails can be used for commuting purposes by non-motorized vehicles, therefore eliminating air pollution otherwise produced by motor vehicles as well as decreasing the number of vehicles on roadways, reducing traffic congestion.

- ***Enhancement of water quality and natural stormwater management services***

Preserving land in a pervious state ensures that rainwater will be able to infiltrate into the ground, recharging groundwater supply resulting in greater flood protection, better erosion control, and reduced pollution.



¹ ConservationTools.org, Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, (<http://conservationtools.org/guides/98-Economic-Benefits-of-Parks>)

Environmental Benefits Provided by the Washington County Park and Trail System

Protection of biological diversity is an environmental benefit of the Washington County Park and Trail System. In 2015, the County system encompassed and protected a total of approximately:

- 315 acres of natural areas
- 599 acres of primary environmental corridors
- 47 acres of isolated natural resource areas
- 132 acres of floodplains
- 320 acres of wetlands
- 11,300 feet (over two miles) of aquatic habitat sites (river and lake frontage) that run through or adjacent to County parks
 - 8,400 feet of aquatic habitat sites (river frontage) running through County parks
 - 2,900 feet of aquatic habitat sites (river and lake frontage) running adjacent to County parks



The Washington County Park and Trail System encompasses large natural resource areas (Glacier Hills County Park shown above) ensuring protection, proper monitoring, and necessary action occurs to sustain the integrity natural resource base within.

As of 2009, there were numerous rare or threatened plant and animal species living in critical species habitat and aquatic sites located outside of natural areas in Washington County. Examples of such species include: Ginseng, American gromwell, Black tern, Small yellow lady's slipper, Golden seal, Great egret, Red-shouldered hawk, and Showy lady's slipper. Protection of habitat sites supporting these species is critical to the survival of the species.

Individual Benefits

Access to public parks, trails, and open spaces can clearly affect the quality of life in a community and Washington County residents have made it clear how important park and open spaces are to them. As explained in Chapter III (Key Finding #9), it has been statistically proven that Washington County's park and trail system has made a significant positive impact on residents' lives.

Some of the primary benefits that residents of Washington County have experienced include:

- ***Improved Physical Health***

Now more than ever poor physical health, especially obesity, is a profound problem for residents of Wisconsin and Washington County. Increased physical activity is associated with lower risks of type 2 diabetes, cancer, stroke, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and premature mortality, independent of obesity.

Statistical information on physical health and obesity for the State of Wisconsin and Washington County can be found on-line at www.countyhealthrankings.org/wisconsin. In 2017, of the 72 counties in the State of Wisconsin, Washington County ranked fifth best for "Health Outcomes" (how healthy a county is) and fourth best for "Health Factors" (what influences the health of the county).

- **Improved Mental Health**

Effects of Green Scenery

Beyond the recreational opportunities offered by parks, a growing body of research shows that contact with the natural world improves not just physical, but also psychological health. People that live near or commonly visit parks or open spaces tend to have a common understanding of how the calming views of trees and green lawns, the singing of birds, the fresh air, and the scents produced by nature can have a positive effect on a person's mental state of mind.



This couple relaxes and enjoys the view of Little Cedar Lake within Ackerman's Grove County Park.

Effects of Physical Activity

The U.S. Surgeon General has found that people who engage in regular physical activity benefit from reduced risk of premature death; as well as a variety of other health issues. Physical activity also produces important psychological benefits. It relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety, improves mood, and enhances psychological well-being.²

- **Improved Quality of Life**

Quality of life is the standard of health, comfort, and happiness experienced by an individual or group. Standard indicators of the quality of life include not only wealth and employment but also the built environment, physical and mental health, education, recreation and leisure time, and social belonging.³



² ConservationTools.org, Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, (http://conservationtools.org/library_items/729-The-Benefits-of-Parks-Why-America-Needs-More-City-Parks-and-Open-Space)

³ [Gregory, Derek](#); Johnston, Ron; Pratt, Geraldine; [Watts, Michael](#) et al., eds. (June 2009). "Quality of Life". Dictionary of Human Geography (5th ed.). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Access to public parks and open spaces can clearly affect the quality of life in a community and Washington County residents have made it clear how important park and open spaces are. As explained in Chapter III (Key Finding #9), statistics prove that Washington County’s park and trail system has made a significant positive impact on residents’ overall quality of life.

Economic Benefits

Parks, trails and outdoor recreation are major contributors to the national and state economy.

The active outdoor recreation industry:

At the National level

- Contributes \$730 billion annually to the economy
- Supports nearly 6.5 million jobs
- Generates \$49 billion in annual tax revenue
- Provides sustainable growth in many rural communities

At the State level

- Contributes \$9.7 billion annually to the economy
- Supports 129,000 jobs
- Generates \$570 million in annual tax revenue
- Accounts for nearly four percent of the gross state product.⁴

A community’s park or trail system not only provides health and environmental benefits, a sense of community, and a higher quality of life, it is also good for the bottom line.

Attraction of Investment and Creation of Jobs

Parks and open spaces create a high quality of life that attracts tax-paying businesses and residents to communities. Nationwide, easy access to parks and open space has become a new measure of community wealth—an important way to attract businesses and residents by guaranteeing both quality of life and economic health.

The same sentiments are echoed by local governments and recreational businesses in Washington County. As demonstrated in the Public Outreach Events Summary Report, local governments and recreational businesses in Washington County experience economic benefits due to the existence of parks and trails in local communities. Local governments, land trusts, and recreational business representatives would like to see the County invest in additional park and trail developments – particularly a countywide trail system and nature-based recreational parks. To maximize the benefits of such investments, they recommend that specific activities and/or amenities be offered

Parks and trails play a major role in economic growth by:

- significantly increasing property values
- attracting and retaining businesses
- attracting and retaining a talented workforce
- revitalizing cities and communities
- boosting the tourism industry
- creating jobs
- increasing tax revenues

⁴ Outdoor Industry Association. *The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy*. (ResearchRecreationEconomyStateWisconsin.pdf)

such as additional bike trails, groomed cross-country ski trails, mountain biking trails, water trails (for canoeing and kayaking), and informational nature trail signage.

Increased Property Values

Homebuyers prefer homes close to parks and open space. The real estate market consistently demonstrates that many people are willing to pay a larger amount for a property located close to parks and open space. As many communities have invested in parks and trails and have experienced economic benefits resulting from increased property values, the same concept has been proven to also be occurring in Washington County.



The Eisenbahn State Trail is often used as a source of exercise during work breaks in the City of West Bend.

“The Economic Benefits of Green Infrastructure”⁵

A study conducted in 2002, analyzed the impact of parks on residential property values. Two parks in Washington County were analyzed: Jackson Park, a 25-acre neighborhood park in the Village of Jackson; and Homestead Hollow County Park, a 98-acre park located in the Village of Germantown. In summary, the study proved that total assessed values of properties were affected as follows:

Jackson Park Analysis (included 501 properties)

- With all things being equal, the total assessed value of residential properties increased by over \$100 for every 1 foot closer the property is to Jackson Park, up to 200 feet from the park.
- Properties between 401 ft.-600 ft. of Jackson Park experienced an increase in total assessed value of almost \$10 as the property is 1 foot closer to the park.

Homestead Hollow County Park Analysis (included 133 properties)

- With all things equal, the total assessed value of residential properties increased by almost \$5 for every 1 foot closer the property is to Homestead Hollow County Park, up to 2,640 feet from the park.

⁵ *Debora Sielski, The Economic Benefits of Green Infrastructure, (2002).*

Tourism Dollars

Across the U.S., parks, rivers, scenic lands, wildlife areas, and open space help to support the \$502 billion tourism industry. As signature pieces in a community, parks act as a marketing tool to attract businesses and conventions. Parks can be used to hold festivals, concerts and athletic events, bringing additional boosts to the local economy.



The West Bend \$1,000 Cache Ba\$h is an annual geocaching event headquartered out of Regner Park in the City of West Bend (shown above). In 2013, the 2-day event drew approximately 1,700 attendees from 33 states and six countries and was estimated to generate \$485,000 for the local economy.

Economic Benefits of Trails

Trails allow communities to increase commerce, support and create jobs, increase property values, reduce commuter costs and provide low-cost health benefits by encouraging exercise. An organized trail system is a desirable amenity and can contribute to the economic vitality of a community. A trail can guide both visitors and residents through diverse neighborhoods, past interesting shops, enticing restaurants, and many other businesses in downtown areas. Revenue generated from trail related recreation and sports activities provide substantial income and employment opportunities. Well-managed multi-use trails running through communities can foster substantial, sustainable economic activity through business development and tourism.



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Trails encourage the establishment of “clean” industries and businesses such as cafes, bike shops, and bed and breakfasts in communities along or near a trail. Two examples of this occurring in the nation include:

- After just one season following the opening of the Missouri River State Trail, 61 businesses along the trail found the trail positively impacted their businesses, 11 said it strongly influenced their decision on where to locate, and 17 increased their business size.
- A 1995 survey of metro-Denver real estate agents found 73 percent believed a home near a trail would be easier to sell.⁶

Lower Health Care Costs with Trail Development

A National Park Service study compared people who lead sedentary lifestyles to those who exercise regularly. The study found that exercisers filed 14 percent fewer healthcare claims, spent

⁶ ConservationTools.org, Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, (<http://conservationtools.org/guides/97-Economic-Benefits-of-Trails>)

30 percent fewer days in the hospital, and had 41 percent fewer claims greater than \$5,000. The anticipated national benefits of increased participation in physical fitness include reductions in both the direct and indirect costs of illness and disease, improvement in lifestyle, and a reduction in geriatric costs.⁷



Eisenbahn State Trail

⁷ *The Economic Benefits of Trails, American Hiking Society, (<http://atfiles.org/files/pdf/econAHS.pdf>)*