

# Recreation Needs Assessment

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**2007 RECREATION NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR KENT COUNTY PARKS**  
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*December 24, 2007*

## Introduction

Kent County has 44 county parks, trails and other sites administered by the Kent County Parks Department. Of those 39 have some level of development to accommodate visitation. Their management is focused on helping meet the recreation and resource conservation needs of Kent County residents. These parks encompass more than 6,500 acres and range in size from 2 acres to more than a thousand acres. They are located across the county, with Kent County parks found in 19 of the 21 townships and most of the major municipalities. They provide a wide range of recreational opportunity to Kent County residents. This includes picnic/passive recreation, water sports, non-motorized trail activities, resource appreciation, camping, preservation and more active organized sports.

To meet the needs of Kent County's growing and diverse population of 599,524 (as projected for 2005 by the US Census Bureau, 2006), it is critical to plan ahead. Every five years the Kent County Parks Department updates the Kent County Parks Master Plan. The plan ties together the past, present and future in a cohesive, rational manner. It is also a necessary element in applying for and securing grants from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The grants provide from 50% - 75% of the total costs for approved land acquisition and development projects.

One of the critical elements in this update is to accurately assess the current and near future recreational needs of Kent County residents. The DNR uses citizen opinion on recreation priorities as a key consideration in evaluating plans and funding requests from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, Land and Water Conservation Fund and other grants it administers. One of the recommended ways of securing a broad range of citizen input is through a survey. This has advantages over solely using public information meetings or citizen advisory groups. It reaches a broader cross section of residents. It also allows a greater number of people to comment on recreation priorities in a standardized format. Finally, membership in a special interest group or aggressive behavior during a meeting provides no advantage. Surveys may either be focused on park visitors or county residents. A focus on county residents includes both those who visit the parks and those who do not, hence reaching a broader range of the county's citizenry. Conversely, visitor surveys gather the opinions not only of park visitors, but include visitors who reside outside of the county as well as those from within.

In 1989, Kent County Parks conducted a park user survey. The 1997 and 2002 Kent County Park needs assessments were targeted at county residents and were conducted by the Department of Park, Recreation and Tourism Resources of Michigan State University. The rationale was that since the majority of park operating expenses were paid for by general tax dollars, it was important to provide an opportunity for the range of county residents to express their opinions. Further, the previous survey had focused exclusively on park visitors.

In 2007, Kent County retained the Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies of Michigan State University (MSU) to conduct the Kent County recreation needs assessment survey. This document reports the results of the 2007 county recreation needs assessment survey.

## Methods

To accurately and efficiently assess the recreation needs of Kent County residents, a household mail survey was chosen. Registered voters were deemed as most representative of Kent County households. The Kent County Clerk reported that there were over 400,000 registered voters in the county in fall of 2007. Through cooperation with the County Clerk and Kent County Parks, MSU was provided with two samples of 1,000 randomly selected registered voters and their mailing addresses on labels.

The questionnaire was written by the senior author and Kent County Parks staff, further reviewed by Kent County Parks staff and approved by the Michigan State University Internal Review Board to ensure the rights of those sampled were fully protected. The survey was designed to elicit information on:

- Demographic characteristics of respondents;
- Kent County Park use by household;
- Barriers to Kent County Parks visitation;
- Satisfaction with the parks by park visitors;
- Importance of park attributes to residents;
- Recreational activities of county residents;
- Priorities in parkland acquisition;
- Priorities in park development
- Preferred sources of park funding;

It was also designed to provide some comparable data points to the 2002 survey so trends in regards to recreation participation, opinions concerning park management options, and other issues could be examined. The sample was confidential. No one other than the researchers knew the persons sampled, whether they responded or the nature of their individual responses.

The first mailing of the questionnaire was sent September 27, 2007 to the first full sample of 1,000 registered voters. The packet mailed contained a cover letter explaining the survey, a map of the Kent County Parks, the questionnaire and a business reply envelope in which to return the completed questionnaire (Appendix A). A reminder postcard was sent on October 12 to those who had not responded by that date. Due to a poor response rate and confusion with a question that asked people to both note if they participated in an activity and rank its importance, the original questionnaire was revised and shortened to delete the ranking question. A new sample of 1,000 registered voters was then selected. However, the 100 respondents/responses from the first survey were entered except for the ranking question regarding the importance of activities. A first mailing of the shortened questionnaire was sent on November 2, 2007. A reminder postcard was sent on November 14, 2007 to those who had not responded by that date. A second mailing of the questionnaire with a revised cover letter was sent on November 23, 2007 to those who had not responded by that date. Unlike the study in 2002, the Kent County Parks decided not to use a third and final mailing of the questionnaire to non-respondents by certified mail. While using this technique elicits additional responses, it also elicits irritation among some non-respondents and concerns about cost. Despite the additional selection of the sample and printing and mailing of the second, shortened version of the questionnaire, the survey was done without additional expense from the agreed upon contract price between Kent County and MSU.

When questionnaires were returned to MSU, data were entered by the junior author and analysis was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

## Results and Discussion

Of the 2,000 total sample (initial long questionnaire and shortened version distributed) the U.S. Postal Service returned 186 (9.3%) as non-deliverable. The most common reason was the person no longer

resided at the address provided on the voter registration and the forwarding order, if any, had expired. Of the remaining 1,814 valid addresses, 348 (19.2%) returned usable questionnaires. This provides a sufficient number for analysis. In general, compared to the 2000 Census, the proportion of response by jurisdiction is similar to the proportion of population by jurisdiction. However, response from the City of Grand Rapids, even though it makes up one quarter of the respondents, is somewhat lower than the City's proportion of Kent County's population.

**Table 9. Proportion of Kent County residents and respondents by jurisdiction**

City, Township or Village	Percent	Percent 2000
Ada Township	2.0	1.7
Algoma Township	1.2	1.3
Alpine Township/Comstock Park	2.6	2.4
Bowne Township	0.6	0.5
Byron Township/Byron Center/Cutlerville	4.6	3.0
Caledonia Township/Village	2.0	1.6
Cannon Township	2.0	2.1
Cascade Township/Forest Hills	2.9	2.6
City of Cedar Springs	1.4	0.5
City of Grand Rapids/East Grand Rapids	25.0	36.3
City of Grandville	1.4	2.1
City of Kentwood	7.2	7.9
City of Rockford	1.4	0.8
City of Walker	4.6	3.8
City of Wyoming	9.8	12.1
Courtland Township	0.9	1.0
Gaines Township	3.7	2.2
Grand Rapids Township	3.4	2.4
Grattan Township	1.5	0.6
Lowell Township/City	2.0	1.6
Nelson Township/Sand Lake Village	0.3	0.6
Oakfield Township	2.0	0.9
Plainfield Township/Northview	6.6	5.3
Solon Township	1.2	0.8
Sparta Township/Village	2.3	1.6
Spencer Township	1.1	0.6
Tyrone Township/Village of Casnovia/Kent City Village	2.6	0.7
Vergennes Township	0.6	0.6
Did not answer	3.2	0.0
Total	100.1	100.2

(a) Totals may not add to 100.0% due to rounding

(b) Source: [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=05000US26081&-\\_box\\_head\\_nbr=GCT-PH1&-ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF1\\_U&-redoLog=true&-mt\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF1\\_U\\_GCTPH1\\_CO2&-format=CO-2&-CONTEXT=gct](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=05000US26081&-_box_head_nbr=GCT-PH1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-redoLog=true&-mt_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_GCTPH1_CO2&-format=CO-2&-CONTEXT=gct)

## Kent County Park Use and Users

Of the respondents, 78% reported that they, or someone in their household, had visited one or more Kent County parks during the previous 12 months. Compared to 2002 when 52% noted they had visited a park in the past 12 months and coupled with the lower response rate, this suggests that while there may have been an increase in the proportion visiting parks, there also may have been a lower percentage of non-park visitor residents responding to the survey. Park

visitor households were more likely to have children, to be white to be younger and to be less likely to contain a disabled household member than households where no one visited the parks in the past year (Table 10).

**Table 10. Selected demographic characteristics of Kent County resident respondents and their households**

Characteristic	Kent County Park Visitor	Kent County Park Non-Visitor	All Respondents
Percentage of white respondents	96.2%	88.1%	94.0%
Percentage of female respondents	58.1%	65.7%	58.6%
Percentage of households with one or more children 18 or younger	44.8%	18.8%	39.4%
Percentage of households with someone with a disability	12.5%	25.4%	15.5%
Mean number of adults (19 or older) living in household	2.1 adults	2.2 adults	2.1 adults
Mean age of respondent	47.6 years	55.0 years	49.2 years

The park most frequently cited as being visited in the past 12 months was Kent Trails, closely followed by Millenium and Fallasburg (Table 11). There were 15 other parks that were visited by 5% or more of the respondent households in the past year. When asked about which park was most important to their household, five parks were mentioned by 5% or more of the respondents, headed by Kent Trails and including Millenium, Fallasburg, Warren R. Townsend and Wabasis Lake. Of the 34 parks listed with some level of development to accommodate visitation, 28 were mentioned by one or more respondents as most important to their household. This suggests that many components of the park system are important to Kent County residents.

**Table 11. Percent respondents who visited specific Kent County parks in the past 12 months**

Park/Facility	Visitation Percent	Most Important Percent
Kent Trails	29.0%	16.9%
Millennium	28.1	12.4
Fallasburg	24.3	7.9
Douglas Walker	17.1	4.1
Townsend (Warren R)	13.9	6.6
Johnson (Henry A)	13.3	1.7
Wabasis Lake	12.8	6.6
Long Lake	9.9	4.1
Rouge River	9.9	2.9
Pickrel Lake	8.7	2.9
L.E. Kaufman Golfcourse	8.1	3.3
Dwight Lydell	7.5	2.1
Myers Lake	7.5	2.5
Palmer (Linus C)	6.7	2.1
Brewer (Earl)	6.4	2.9
Caledonia Lakeside	6.4	2.5
Dutton Shadyside	6.1	2.1
Seidman	5.8	3.7

Park/Facility	Visitation Percent	Most Important Percent
Creekside	4.1	2.1
Lamoreaux (Donald J)	4.1	0.8
Thornapple Riverbend	4.1	0.8
Wahlfield	4.1	0.8
Provin Trails	3.2	1.2
Gordon	2.9	0.8
Chief Hazy Cloud	2.6	-
Fisk Knob	2.6	-
Knapp Valley Forest	2.6	0.8
Lamoreaux Memorial	2.6	-
Coldwater River	2.0	0.8
Cooper Creek	0.9	0.4
Bettes Memorial	0.3	-
Spencer Forest	0.3	0.4
Luton	-	-
Ruehs (Fred W)	-	-
All (a)	-	3.7
Total	NA	100.0%

(a) All was not a choice on the questionnaire

### Reasons for Not Visiting Kent County Parks

All respondents were asked in an open-ended question the two most important reasons why they had not visited Kent County Parks at all or more during the past 12 months. Lack of time was the most commonly reported first and second most important reason (Table 12). When the first and second most important reason categories are combined, over half of the respondents noted that lack of time was a major barrier to park visitation. Other factors noted by 10% or more of the respondents were no interest/better things to do, no one to visit parks with, age, lack of events, disability/health issues, rather go somewhere else and fees.

**Table 12. Two most important reasons for not visiting a Kent County park in the past year**

Reason	1 <sup>st</sup> Most Important Reason Percent	2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Important Reason Percent	Either 1 <sup>st</sup> or 2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Important Reason Percent
No time	32.8%	22.0%	54.8%
No interest/better things to do	13.4	14.6	28.0
Rather go somewhere else	10.4	-	10.4
Age	9.0	4.9	13.9
No one to go with	9.0	7.3	16.3
Proximity to home	7.5	-	7.5
Disability/health	6.0	7.3	13.3
Just moved	4.5	-	4.5
Quality of parks	3.0	-	3.0
Fees	3.0	7.3	10.3
No events	1.5	12.2	13.7
Own equipment	-	9.8	9.8
Unaware	-	9.8	9.8
Weather	-	2.4	2.4
Drugs	-	2.4	2.4
Total	100.0%	100.0%	NA

## Recommended Changes to Increase Kent County Park Use

When asked an open-ended question about what one most important change could the parks make to start or increase the respondent's use of the parks, visitor household respondents had a larger array of suggestions than non-visitor household respondents (Table 13). While one quarter of visitor households had no suggestion other than keep up the good work, their most common suggestion for a specific improvement was more and better non-motorized trails. Other suggestion made by more than 5% of visitor households were more/better/cleaner restrooms, more activities/festivals/events, better maintenance, reduce or eliminate fees and more convenience/better parking. For non-visitor respondents, while almost half had no specific suggestion, the most common specific suggestion was to improve information/marketing about Kent County Parks. Other specific suggestions made by 5% or more were reduce/eliminate fees, more convenience/better parking and more activities/events/festivals.

**Table 13. One most important change to increase visitation**

Reason	Percent Visitors	Percent Non-Visitors
None/nothing/don't know/keep up the good work	25.0%	44.7%
More/better non-motorized trails	12.8	-
More/better/cleaner restrooms	8.1	2.6
More activities/events/festivals	7.4	5.3
Better maintenance	7.4	2.6
Reduce/eliminate fees	5.4	7.9
More convenience/better parking	5.4	5.3
Allow animals/more dog parks	4.7	-
More information/marketing	3.4	18.4
More areas for children	3.4	2.6
More security/law enforcement	3.4	2.6
Better/more fishing/hunting	2.7	-
More swimming areas	2.0	-
More soccer fields	1.4	-
Too crowded	1.4	-
Family pass at Millennium	0.7	2.6
Concession stands	0.7	-
More staff	0.7	-
Bleachers at baseball/softball fields	0.7	-
Other (a)	3.4	5.3
Total	100.0%	100.0%

(a) Other incl: better health, longer fall weather, tongue in cheek when gas prices are lower, when there is more room for weddings

## Recreational Activities of Kent County Residents

Another important aspect of the needs assessment is to understand the recreational habits and interests of Kent County residents and to link that to current and potential opportunities/facilities provided in the Kent County Parks. From a selected list of activities, the most common recreational activity reported for Kent County residents was walking/hiking, followed by picnicking, nature observation, bicycling on hard surface trails and swimming at a beach (Table 14). When segmented by visitor and non-visitor households, the top five activities were the same for park visitor households and very similar for non-visitor households with only camping replacing bicycling on hard surface trails. When asked which were the top three activities/opportunities that Kent County Parks needed to provide more of, responses did not necessarily track with current participation levels. For all residents, more

hiking/walking opportunities was the most common suggestion, followed by more camping, park festivals, fishing and beach swimming. For current visitor households, hiking/walking was most commonly mentioned as needing to be increased, followed by more opportunities for camping, park festivals, beach swimming and fishing. For non-visitor households, canoe/kayak opportunities were most commonly mentioned followed by hard surfaced bicycling, hiking/walking, camping and park festivals. Fortunately, many of the suggestions are not mutually exclusive such as a hard surfaced trail system that accommodates both walking and bicycling, as well as in-line skating and use by the disabled. Also, water based activities such as swimming, fishing and canoe/kayak use can be done on the same water body and lake/river access to facilitate these activities can be developed along with camping opportunities and nature programs. Finally new blueways may provide additional opportunities for canoeing/kayaking, fishing and other water based recreation.

**Table 14. Participation in recreational activities during past 12 months and proportion in top three of needing more opportunities in Kent County Parks for Kent County Park visitor and non-visitor households**

Type of opportunity or facility	Visitors		Non-visitors		All	
	% Participate	% in top 3 of more needed in KC Parks	% Participate	% in top 3 of more needed in KC Parks	% Participate	% in top 3 of more needed in KC Parks
Hike/walk	66.2%	29.2%	34.4%	27.9%	60.2%	28.8%
Picnic	64.7	6.8	27.9	-	58.1	5.7
Bike on hard-surface trails	47.2	15.1	23.0	29.3	42.8	16.9
Nature observe/bird watch	45.4	11.6	27.9	17.0	42.2	13.2
Beach swimming	45.0	17.2	29.5	12.2	42.5	17.0
Playground activities	43.1	8.1	18.0	7.7	38.6	8.0
Camping	35.3	23.7	24.6	26.2	33.2	24.1
Attend park festivals	34.9	19.9	14.8	18.5	31.4	19.5
Fishing	32.7	17.5	16.4	17.0	29.6	17.2
Walk dog/other pet	29.0	13.5	18.0	4.5	26.6	12.3
Sunbathing	28.6	1.9	13.1	-	25.4	1.6
Golfing	25.3	7.1	14.8	7.7	23.1	7.2
Canoe/kayak	23.0	8.0	13.1	29.4	21.3	10.7
Logging	22.7	6.2	9.8	-	20.1	5.3
Baseball/softball	21.6	4.6	11.5	-	19.8	4.0
Reserving shelter or lodge	20.4	3.9	14.8	16.8	19.8	5.7
Hunting	17.5	13.0	9.8	4.5	15.9	11.7
Cross country skiing	17.1	9.6	14.8	6.3	16.5	9.0
Nature center activities	16.4	3.6	6.6	10.8	14.7	4.6
Outdoor ice skating	14.9	8.1	9.8	16.8	13.8	9.7
Mountain bike	14.1	6.4	4.9	4.5	12.3	6.2
In-line skate	13.8	8.6	6.6	6.3	12.3	8.1
Nature programs	12.6	15.4	4.9	7.7	11.4	14.2
Disc golfing	10.8	5.4	1.6	-	9.0	4.7
Sand volleyball	10.8	2.9	6.6	4.5	10.5	3.3
Soccer	10.8	2.8	4.9	-	9.9	2.5
Power boating	9.7	5.2	4.9	-	8.7	3.6
Horseback ride	7.1	10.5	1.6	4.5	6.0	9.6
Other (a)	5.2	2.5	1.6	-	4.5	-
Geocaching	2.6	-	3.3	-	2.7	-
BMX bike	2.2	0.8	-	4.5	1.8	1.4

(a) Includes: sledding/tubing, tennis, snow shoeing, tennis, basketball, rugby game, science study, solitude, crafts, sledding, tubing, activities for children, water access, white water rapids, paved trails.

## Satisfaction with Kent County Parks

When park visitors were asked about their satisfaction with selected park characteristics, they generally gave the parks high marks (Table 15). Visitors rated the overall beauty of the site, nature and cleanliness with an average rating of 4 or more on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). Lowest rated was programs. This is the only area in which more than 10% of visitor respondent households rated performance very poor through poor. However, it should be noted that Kent County Parks Department is a “parks” department and not a “recreation” department. While the public may show an interest in expanding program and event offerings, such activities generally fall outside the current scope of the Department.

**Table 15. Park visitor household satisfaction with the performance of Kent County parks**

Characteristic	Mean (a)	Very good	Good	OK	Poor	Very Poor
Overall beauty of parks	4.3	43.8%	46.9%	9.3%	-	-
Wildlife/trees/nature	4.3	42.5	44.0	13.1	-	0.4%
Cleanliness	4.0	28.9	45.5	22.9	2.4%	0.4
Friendliness of staff	3.9	29.0	36.0	32.7	1.4	0.9
Facilities (shelters, courts, etc.)	3.9	26.5	38.8	31.4	3.3	-
Safety and security	3.8	26.1	36.5	32.1	4.8	0.4
Price/fees	3.8	28.6	31.5	33.2	5.5	1.3
Level of crowding	3.8	25.5	36.8	34.0	3.6	-
Programs (nature, events, etc.)	3.5	15.8	34.0	37.9	9.9	2.5

(a) Rating scale: 5=very good; 4=good; 3=ok; 2=poor; 1=very poor

Non-visitor respondents similarly provided the highest ratings for the overall beauty of the parks and nature aspects (Table 16). Among lowest ratings, 10% or more ranked price/fees, safety and security, and programs as poor or very poor.

**Table 16. Non-visitor household satisfaction with the performance of Kent County parks**

Characteristic	Mean (a)	Very good	Good	OK	Poor	Very Poor
Overall beauty of parks	4.4	41.9%	51.6%	6.5%	-	-
Wildlife/trees/nature	4.3	43.3	46.7	6.7	-	3.3%
Friendliness of staff	4.1	27.8	50.0	22.2	-	-
Facilities (shelters, courts, etc.)	3.9	26.9	42.3	26.9	3.8%	-
Cleanliness	3.9	25.9	40.7	29.6	3.7	-
Safety and security	3.6	10.0	50.0	25.0	15.0	-
Level of crowding	3.5	3.8	50.0	38.5	7.7	-
Programs (nature, events, etc.)	3.3	9.5	38.1	38.1	4.8	9.5
Price/fees	3.2	9.1	27.3	40.9	22.7	-

(a) Rating scale: 5=very good; 4=good; 3=ok; 2=poor; 1=very poor

## Importance of Park Characteristics

All respondents were asked to rate the importance of selected characteristics in choosing a park or recreation site. Cleanliness and safety and security were the highest ranked aspects, noted by more than 90% of respondents as either extremely or very important in their park visitation decisions (Table 17). The least important aspect was programming, noted by 36% of respondents as extremely or very important.

**Table 17. Characteristic importance of park/facility**

Characteristic	Mean (a)	Extremely important percentage	Very important percentage	Moderately important percentage	Slightly important percentage	Not important percentage
Cleanliness	4.6	67.0%	26.6%	5.8%	-	0.6%
Safety and security	4.6	67.3	23.5	7.2	1.0%	1.0
Overall beauty of site	4.3	45.3	40.8	12.9	0.6	0.3
Wildlife/trees/nature	4.3	49.0	34.1	14.9	1.3	0.6
Close to home/easy to get to	4.2	49.0	29.9	16.2	3.2	1.6
Good system of trails	4.1	39.3	37.0	18.0	3.3	2.3
Price/fees	4.0	36.1	37.1	19.0	4.8	2.9
Not crowded	4.0	31.7	42.2	21.9	2.0	2.3
Activities (fish, hike, swim, etc.)	3.9	33.8	34.8	21.7	4.3	5.4
Facilities (shelters, courts, etc.)	3.8	30.5	36.7	23.3	5.2	4.3
Courteous staff	3.8	32.3	31.6	24.6	7.4	4.0
Lake or river access	3.7	31.6	25.5	27.2	9.2	6.5
Programs (nature ed., events, etc.)	3.1	15.2	19.7	33.2	18.7	13.1

(a) Rating scale: 5=extremely important; 4=very important; 3=moderately important; 2=slightly important; 1=not important

The relationship of the importance of a park characteristic (Table 7) to the performance of the Kent County Parks in that area (Tables 5 and 6) provides important clues to needed areas of emphasis for Kent County Parks management. The larger the negative gap between the average rating of importance for a park characteristic and the mean rating Kent County Park visitors and non-visitors gave the parks in that area, the more important it is to work on. This is especially true of characteristics that visitors noted were extremely or highly important.

In two key areas identified as the most important to Kent County residents, the gap between the rating of importance and performance suggests additional efforts might be needed. These areas are “cleanliness” and “safety and security.” Cleanliness received a 4.6 average rating for importance. On performance, visitor households rated cleanliness at 4.0 and non-visitor households rated it at 3.9. While these performance ratings average “Good,” the department should strive for “Very Good” given the “extremely high” importance rating. Likewise, safety and security averaged 4.6 for importance and received a 3.8 rating for performance by visitor households and a 3.6 by non-visitor households. Here, despite the “extremely high” importance rating, the Department is scoring less than “good” on performance.

In two important aspects visitor household respondents differed significantly from non-visitor respondents in regards to their perceptions of the current situation. Non-visitors are much more likely to be less satisfied with the performance of Kent County Parks regarding price and crowding. Much of the difference may be due to perceptions about Millennium Park. Unlike most other Kent County Parks, the beach and splashpad at Millennium do charge a fee for entrance and the park (especially the beach) is often featured on local news outlets showing considerable use during holiday periods such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. For visitors who are currently

paying the fee and who may visit the park at a variety of times when it may be less busy than a summer holiday afternoon, the perception is likely to be that the fees and use levels are acceptable. Those not visiting Millennium may be basing their lower satisfaction ratings on media representations of fees or perceived crowding rather than first-hand experiences. Better informing residents about the range of free opportunities in Kent County Parks could help encourage non-visitors to visit the parks or at least improve their satisfaction ratings.

In most other areas, performance ratings generally met or exceeded visitor expectations.

### Kent County Parks Development and Acquisition Priorities

Kent County Parks has proceeded over the past 15 years on a path of preserving additional green space, developing interconnecting non-motorized trails/transportation, developing opportunities for additional types of outdoor recreation and acquiring additional parkland, both through enlarging existing parks and acquiring a few new large regional parks. When asked about their continued support for this approach, Kent County voters were generally positive, with the strongest support for preserving green space and developing interconnecting trails between parks and communities (Table 18). In the case of acquiring new, large regional parks, almost half (46.8%) were supportive, 40.9% were neutral and 12.2% negative . When asked about support for no additional acquisition, a majority (54%) were opposed the statement “do not acquire more land”, while 35% were neutral and 11% in favor. In summary, there is considerable stated support for additional acquisition and little stated opposition.

**Table 18. Level of support for continuing Kent County Parks land acquisition and development directions**

Land acquisition options	Mean (a)	Strongly support percentage	Moderately support percentage	Neutral percentage	Moderately oppose percent	Strongly oppose percent
Preserving more natural areas/green space	4.6	69.7%	20.6%	9.1%	-	0.6%
Developing a system of trails between parks/communities	4.3	52.7	29.8	14.6	1.6%	1.3
Developing a wider range of recreational opportunities	3.9	32.7	34.3	29.5	1.6	1.9
Buy land to expand the size of current County parks	3.8	27.5	35.5	31.6	3.8	1.6
Create a few new large, regional parks	3.5	22.3	24.5	40.9	7.2	5.0
Do not acquire more land	2.3	4.6	6.2	35.5	20.2	33.6

(a) Rating scale: 5=strongly support; 4=moderately support; 3=neutral; 2=moderately oppose; 1=strongly oppose

### Funding Kent County Parks

While there was clear direction from respondents regarding Kent County Park land acquisition and development, there was less agreement about how to fund the park system beyond continuing to maintain the system’s funding from Kent County’s general tax base (Table 19). The greatest opposition to additional funding sources was in regards to increasing fees for park uses

that already have fees and charging a motor vehicle entry fee at parks where motor vehicle entrance is currently free.

**Table 19. Support for existing and potential new Kent County Park funding sources**

Source of funding	Mean (a)	Strongly support percent	Moderately support percent	Neutral percent	Moderately oppose percent	Strongly oppose percent
Maintain park system funding from Kent County's general tax base	4.1	41.7%	35.4%	17.8%	3.2%	1.9%
Expand park system funding from Kent County's general tax base	3.4	17.7	27.9	33.1	16.1	5.2
Expand range of activities with fees	3.2	9.6	33.9	32.3	13.4	10.9
Dedicate a portion of property taxes to supporting the park system	3.2	13.3	33.0	25.9	14.6	13.3
Increase fees for park uses that already have fees	2.8	6.7	24.2	25.5	30.9	12.7
Charge an entry fee for vehicles at certain County parks where entry is currently free	2.6	7.3	21.5	19.6	27.5	24.1

(a) Rating scale: 5=strongly support; 4=moderately support; 3=neutral; 2=moderately oppose; 1=strongly oppose

In response to an open-ended question about any other sources of funding they would support, 14% of respondents listed an additional source. The most commonly mentioned other source was donations/grants. This area was not part of the close-ended question regarding funding as grants/donations are already the cornerstone for most capital development in the system, often providing the majority of the funding for park acquisition and development. Moreover, most grants and many large donations tend to come with stipulations that they only be used for capital improvements, not day-to-day operations.

One funding mechanism that is becoming increasingly common in Michigan and elsewhere as a way to fund park and recreation capital improvements and operations is a voter-approved, dedicated millage. Kent County voters were asked to provide guidance on conditions of any potential Kent County Parks dedicated millage. The three conditions they most supported were a millage where funds were shared among all local units in Kent County for parks and trails, one that must be renewed every 5 years and one that is able to be used for both capital improvements and day to day operations (Table 20). While there is a substantial amount of ambivalence about a Kent County Parks millage, when asked about their agreement with the statement "I will not support a Kent County Parks millage" only 21% agreed with the statement, while 38% were neutral and 41% disagreed. This suggests many respondents have an open mind on the subject and how such a proposal is structured would be crucial.

**Table 20. Level of support for selected dedicated park millage options in Kent County**

Condition	Mean (a)	Strongly agree percent	Agree percent	No feelings either way percent	Oppose percent	Strongly oppose percent
Funds shared among cities, townships and the county for parks and trails across Kent County	3.6	22.3%	38.2%	25.9%	8.0%	5.6%
Must be renewed by voters every 5 years	3.6	19.3	38.5	30.7	6.8	4.7

Condition	Mean (a)	Strongly agree percent	Agree percent	No feelings either way percent	Oppose percent	Strongly oppose percent
Funds used to acquire land and to improve and operate County Parks	3.6	21.5	33.9	28.5	11.1	5.0
Admission fees to Kent County Parks must be eliminated for residents	3.3	20.0	24.3	29.8	20.0	5.9
Funds only used to acquire new land or improve County Parks	3.3	14.8	31.6	28.9	17.2	7.6
Funds only used to acquire new land for County Parks	2.9	10.0	18.6	35.9	23.4	12.1
I will not support a Kent County Parks millage	2.7	12.8	8.5	38.0	17.7	23.0
Admission fees in Kent County Parks must be eliminated for all visitors	2.6	6.9	10.5	34.5	31.6	16.4

(a) Rating scale: 5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=no feelings either way; 2=oppose; 1=strongly oppose

When asked how much additional property tax per year they would be willing to support for a dedicated Kent County Parks millage, 80% noted they would support some level of property tax increase and 20% would support no increase (Table 21). Of those who would support additional property taxes for Kent County parks, all would support at least \$12 per year, but less than half would support more than \$24 per year. On a house with a \$200,000 value and a \$100,000 state equalized value, this would be the equivalent of a 0.24 mills dedicated to parks.

**Table 21. Percent of respondents supporting additional property tax for Kent County Parks by annual amount**

Property Tax Amount	Percent
\$84 per year (\$7 per month)	7.9%
\$60 per year (\$5 per month)	11.3
\$36 per year (\$3 per month)	15.4
\$24 per year (\$2 per month)	25.2
\$12 per year (\$1 per month)	19.8
\$0 per year (no millage for parks)	20.4
Total	100.0%

## Comparison to 1997 and 2002 Survey Results

Comparison to the 1997 and 2002 survey results should be made on a broad, directional approach, not a specific, detailed percent by percent comparison due to the lower response rate in 2007. This is likely due to not using certified mail to contact members of the sample who had not responded to two mailings of the questionnaire and a post card reminder as was done in the previous two studies. It was felt by Kent County Park staff in 2007 that this was unnecessarily intrusive and irritated some sampled in the past. Because of this approach, non-park users, who were more likely to respond to the certified letter in the past studies, were less likely to participate. Rather, those who responded were more likely to be those who had a stronger stake in Kent County Parks, such as members of park user households.

With this caveat, it is apparent that there is continued strong support for Kent County Parks among park visitor and non-visitor households. The role of the parks in providing green space and in developing a non-motorized trail system that meets the recreational, health/fitness and non-

motorized transportation needs of many is well recognized and appears to be strengthened over past surveys. There continues to be strong support to acquire additional parklands for green space conservation, non-motorized trails and expanding the footprint of existing parks.

In terms of funding beyond the current approach of using county general tax dollars and selected user fees to support Kent County Parks, there is increasing interest in the idea of a dedicated millage for parks.

Finally, what is most important to residents in selecting a park has not changed: cleanliness, safety and security and nature continue to be rated at the top. And as was noted in the past two needs assessments, there continues to be room for improvement in the areas of cleanliness and safety and security. There is continued strong support for acquisition of lands for conservation of green space and for the further development of non-motorized trails. Overall, the Kent County Parks continue to receive a good report card with voters.

## **Conclusion**

The survey results show that the Kent County Parks serve a large proportion of Kent County residents. These current and potential visitors find a wide variety of recreational opportunities in the parks that fit their recreation patterns. Residents continued to support the directions taken by the Kent County Parks to judiciously expand the system focusing on nature conservation and connected non-motorized trails.

Respondents also supported continuing county general fund support for Kent County Park operations. Coupled with this was a more favorable response regarding a potential Kent County Parks dedicated millage than past needs assessment studies. This was balanced by minimal support for increasing existing fees or implementing fees for activities and park entry that is currently free.

In addition to the responses to the standardized questions, respondents were given an opportunity to comment on any aspect of the survey or the Kent County Parks. Of the 345 respondents, 127 (37%) provided such comments. They are printed verbatim organized by the township or municipality of the respondent and found in Appendix B. While difficult to characterize, most are supportive of some aspect of parks or the park system (e.g. trails), while a number ask for specific improvements focused on a particular park or situation (most often Millennium). Some are negative to parks or question the need for additional park funding.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of many. From the Kent County Parks, Director Roger Sabine and Business Manager Bob Papp provided valuable input throughout the needs assessment. Kent County Clerk Mary Hollinrake, through the Office of Elections, was most helpful in providing voter registration records in a timely manner and useful format.