Feasibility of Establishing a Rural County Park System in Saline County, Missouri

A Report to the Saline County Steering Committee

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Prepared for

Saline County Steering Committee

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Historical Background

The roots of the county park concept appear to date back to the establishment of county fairgrounds, originally the lands adjacent to the county courthouse. The “fairground concept” was initially extended to a “park system” approach in Essex County, New Jersey in 1895 (PRAA, 1930). Neighboring Hudson County, New Jersey adopted the second county park system in 1902. By 1915 the concept had spread to the Midwest, with the establishment of two county park systems in Illinois. By the 1920's, thirty-three counties in the United States had county parks and the national total for county park acreage exceeded 46,000 acres (Fig.1).

A number of influences appear to have affected the early development of park systems by counties. Increasing populations and conversion of wilderness to human uses seem to have created an atmosphere in which communities saw a need to preserve some aspects of their natural setting (Butler, 1935). Other major factors included the shortening of the work week and increased interest in recreation by an increasingly leisure-oriented public. By 1935, county parks had fallen into three major categories; (1) sport recreation, (2) picnic, and (3) reservations (nature reserves) (Butler, 1935). Of course, many parks served multiple functions that included two or three of the categories described.

By 1960, experts in park establishment were using the term “explosion” to describe the growth of county park systems in the United States. Thirty-nine of the fifty states had counties with county park systems. One in nine local parks was a county park by 1960 and, moreover, county parks accounted for 40% of local park acreage in the United States (Warren, 1964). By 1960, the loss of access to local wilderness by county residents appeared to be a growing driver in county park establishment.
By 1986, there were 2,163 County Parks in the United States comprising 5,145,000 acres. Recently, there has been a societal change in which people have more actively sought communities with clean environments and healthy leisure opportunities as places to settle (Godbey, 1989). Recent surveys suggest that 64% of Americans hold leisure to be as important or more important than employment when deciding where to live (Godbey et al, 1992). By 1980, counties varied greatly in the extent of parks. Counties with less than 1000 residents had parks with minimal staffs, whereas more populous counties spent as much as $48,000,000 within a decade on park establishment (Kraus, 1990).

Staffing for county parks appears to vary widely among communities. The national median for municipal park staff appears to be one permanent staff member per 2,750 citizens (MacDonald, 1988). Many communities staff parks with a minimum number of paid personnel and rely on volunteers and seasonal employees.

When available, local government parks appear to be used extensively by citizens. One national survey found that 76% of citizens had used their local parks (Godbey et al, 1992). A surprising 84% of respondents in the same survey said that the community benefitted somewhat or a great deal from having such parks. The 24% that had not used parks seemed to support the existence of local parks. Of the 24% nonpark users, 71% said they believed the parks had been of some benefit to them over the previous year. Citizens reported that local parks provided several benefits to the community including entertainment, learning, relaxation, health, fresh air, nature, social gathering, community spirit and team spirit. Use and appreciation of local parks appears to vary with both sex and income, with higher education levels correlated with greater use and females believing parks are more valuable to the community.

Example County Park Systems

Below are a series of brief examples from across the United States of county park systems. When possible, the systems are described with the aid of a picture of one or parks.

California

Riverside County, California, located southwest of Los Angeles, has 35 county parks that range from archaeological sites to preserved springs. The park shown here is an attempt to preserve the native plateau habitats.
Colorado

El Paso County, Colorado offers one of the most spectacular views for a county park in the United States. The county parks number 11 and the highest elevation within a park is 14,000 feet.

Illinois

McLean County, Illinois, located near Bloomington, has two parks. Both parks are used primarily for hiking and bicycling.

Michigan

Jackson County Michigan is located halfway between Kalamazoo and Ann Arbor. A local resident, William Sparks, built a “cascade waterfall” to attract visitors and “do something for the people of the county.” The waterfalls is now a traditional summer trip for many in Michigan. Now a park, the waterfall is one of 15 county parks in the county, with most of the others being oriented toward experiencing nature.
Missouri

A few counties in Missouri already have park systems or have established park boards that may lead to park systems. They are (alphabetical): Clay County, Green County, Jackson County, Platte County, and St. Louis County. All of these counties are associated with large cities. The premier county park system in Missouri appears to be the Jackson County System which contains 22,000 acres of parkland. Jackson County is often lauded as an example of balancing growth with quality of life. St. Louis County has 63 county parks that comprise 13,000 acres. Lone Elk County Park (top) is one of the few places in Missouri one can see cohabitation of bison, wild turkey, waterfowl, elk and deer. Other sites are oriented toward hiking and horseback riding (bottom). St. Louis County Parks received some attention recently when they entered the competition to be in the Guinness Book of World Records with their "Corn-fusing" maze, currently being considered as the largest corn maze ever built.

New York

Onandaga County, New York has 13 parks (top) that offer views into its Indian and European heritage and natural history. One park recreated the history of European Fishing Villages whereas another explores the history of local Indian tribes. Erie County, New York has 13 parks (below, left) that include a waterfall, views of the Niagara River and a variety of picnic sites and an historical botanical garden (below, right).
Adventure Recreation Classes and Costs from the Clark County Parks System, Nevada.

- Archery $15
- Backpacking Skills $20
- Children's Gun Safety $10
- Desert Survival $20
- Dutch Oven Cooking $25
- Fencing $25
- Fly Tying $20
- Fossil Hunting $20
- Geology of Southern Nevada $20
- Gold Prospecting $10
- Horseback Riding $35
- Land Navigation $20
- Native Plant Identification $20
- Nature Photography $20
- Personal Safety Awareness $25
- Private Pilot Ground School Class = $130.00
- Pilot kit = $117.70, Total is $247.70
- Rock Climbing $30
- Sailing $70
- Scuba Diving Certification $135
- Striper Fishing $20

**Nevada**

Although Clark County encompasses Las Vegas, it contains an amazing 7,927 square miles, much of which is rural. The rural parts of the county are serviced by 24 “rural county parks.” The parks range from a scenic canyon to a historic cemetery to a museum. An interesting aspect of the system is the “Adventure Recreation Classes” which are fee based and apparently money generating.

**Ohio**

Hamilton County, Ohio has 16 parks that encompass 12,000 acres. These parks offer picnic opportunities, hiking, camping and playgrounds. Parking permits are required and cost $3.00 a year or $1.00 for a day. Many park systems that require such permits operate on an honor system with an envelope deposit box available. It is unclear if Saline County could actually impose parking fees, but the answer is probably not (State Statute 64.451 (Committee on Legislative Research, 1994))
Pennsylvania

York County, Pennsylvania has 4,000 acres of parks that emphasize recreation, environmental education and wilderness. It has one of the few parks named in honor of Richard M. Nixon. The park system contains eight properties.

Utah

The County of Utah, in the State of Utah has taken a two pronged approach to county parks. The first prong is a more traditional parks system that contains 11 county parks. The second prong is establishment of a scenic parkway system that is used by both drivers and bicyclists.

Opportunities in Saline County

The opportunities for Saline County in the area of independently establishing a county park system appear to be authorized under Enabling Legislation*. Particularly of interest are sections 64.450 and 64.451 (Committee on Legislative Research, 1994). These sections were not referenced in Supplements to the Statutes and, thus, do not appear to have been recently amended. The pertinent sections follow:

64.450. **County parks – acquisition and maintenance.** – County commissions in all counties in the state of Missouri may set aside five percent of the county revenue fund for the purchase of county parks and the maintenance thereof. Titles to land purchased shall be taken in the name of the county, and each county commission is authorized to set aside a sufficient amount each year for the maintenance of said parks when purchased.

(RSMo 1939 15390)

Prior revision: 1929 14268
County parks, taxes for establishment and maintenance – levy and collection. – 1. When one hundred voters of any county file a petition with the governing body of the county requesting that an annual tax be levied for the establishment and maintenance of free public parks in the county and providing for suitable entertainment therein and specify in their petition a rate of taxation as provided in this section, the governing body of the county shall submit the following question to the voters.

2. The question shall be submitted in substantially the following form:

“Shall a ........% tax per one hundred dollars assessed valuation be levied for public parks?

☐ Yes
☐ No

If the majority of the votes cast on the proposal by the qualified voters voting thereon are in favor of the proposal, then the tax authorized in this section shall be in effect.....The tax....shall be deposited in the county treasury in a special trust fund and shall be used solely for the establishment and maintenance of free public parks in the county and providing for suitable entertainment therein.

* Other statutes that provide options for county park establishment are in Supplement A.

Other opportunities could include collaboration with the Missouri Departments of Natural Resources, Agriculture and/or Conservation to create a program for county parkland that would be designated as “County Parks” but would be funded in part by the affiliated state agency. Such lands could potentially be managed by the Department of Conservation. The Department of Conservation has a program titled “Urban Wild Acres” which has a similar function to that envisioned here (i.e., local government owns land, MDC manages land). Essentially, the Urban Wild Acres program allows local governments in urban areas to acquire land that are then managed as “natural areas” by the Department of Conservation. Such a system, if all partners were involved, would envision signs that read (for example):

**Salt Fork County Park**

*Saline County, Missouri*

Established in Cooperation with the Missouri Departments of Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Conservation.

Managed in Cooperation with the Missouri Department of Conservation
Creating a county park or county park system for Saline County that would involve agencies of the State of Missouri would require the agencies to agree to participate, a process that would take months if the Agency directors were enthusiastic. At this point, Director Saunders of the Department of Agriculture and Director Mahfood of the Department of Conservation have had the generalities of county parks discussed with them in a “smart growth” context. Neither seemed opposed to the idea and their reactions might be characterized as receptive to further discussions. It is important to realize that Saline County would be the first Missouri county targeted for such efforts, but that the state agencies would be agreeing to a process that could potentially involve all 108 of Missouri rural counties.

The first step in the process would be for the Saline County Steering Committee to endorse the concept. The second step would be for the County Commissioners to endorse the prospect of having the University enter into discussions with state agencies about creating such a system. If the agencies decided to proceed, the voters of Saline County, assuming a petition was presented, would need to approve the creation of such a system in Saline County assuming tax expenditures are involved.

One of the most important lessons that was taken from the 23 county park systems that I reviewed (several of which are discussed in this report), is that counties are often creative in the type of system they build. There are no rules, and counties can create the system that works best for their situation and desires. Saline County, if it embarked on this course, would create its unique version of a county park system.
References


Internet sites available for more information:

WWW.INTERLACED.NET/ASHPARKS/
WWW.MCLEAN.GOV/PARKS
WWW.CO.RIVERSIDE.CA.US/ACTIVITY/PARKS
WWW.ERIE.GOV/PARKS
WCPARKS.PREMIERNET.NET/WCPARKS.HTM
WWW.CO.SUFFOLK.NY.US/PARKS/
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WWW.MARINTRAILS.COM
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WWW.HAMILTONCOUNTYPARKS.ORG
WWW.CO.UTAH.UT.US/DEPT/PUBLICWK/PARKS
WWW.YORK-COUNTY.ORG/GOV/AUTH/PARK_MAP.HTM
WWW.ST-LOUISCOUNTYPARKS.COM
WWW.CO.CLARK.NV.US/PARKREC/RURAL.HTM
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WWW.CO.EL-PASO.CO.US/PARKS
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SUPPLEMENT A

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The classification of Saline County as a fourth class appears to provide opportunities for park establishment beyond those mentioned in the feasibility study. As stated in the state statutes:

48.020 Classification 4. All counties which have attained the second classification prior to August 13, 1988, and which would otherwise return to the third classification after August 13, 1988, because of changes in assessed valuation shall remain a county in the second classification and shall operate under the laws of this state applying to the second classification.

The following statutes would appear to be of particular importance in addition to sections 64.450 and 64.451:

64.350. Recreational lands--county planning and recreation commission-- qualifications, term--organization (second class counties).
The county commissions of all counties of the second class shall be empowered, as in sections 64.350 to 64.390 provided, to acquire real estate and other property and improve, maintain and control the same for public recreation purposes and for those purposes there is hereby created a county planning and recreation commission to consist of four members appointed by the county commission of such counties. The members of the planning and recreation commission shall be registered voters of the county and known for their intelligence and integrity and shall have resided in such county for a period of five years prior to the date of their appointment. Not more than two planning and recreation commissioners shall belong to the same political party. The planning and recreation commissioners first appointed shall hold office respectively for the terms of one, two, three or four years as indicated and fixed in the order of their appointment, and all planning and recreation commissioners after the first appointment shall be so appointed for the full term of four years. The planning and recreation commissioners shall serve without compensation. Any one of the planning and recreation commissioners shall be held to have vacated his office in event of his appointment to, or becoming a candidate for, any political office. Vacancies in the planning and recreation commission shall be filled for the unexpired term by the county commission. The planning and recreation commission shall organize by electing one of their number as president, one as vice president, one as secretary and one as treasurer. The planning and recreation commission shall be known and act by and under the name and style of "The County Planning and Recreation Commission of ........ County".

64.360. Recreational lands--powers of county commissions (second class counties).
The county commissions of such counties shall upon the recommendation of the county planning and recreation commission have power: To acquire by purchase, gift, lease, condemnation or otherwise, real estate and other property for public recreational purposes; to designate, lay out, acquire and to construct and maintain highways, bridges, viaducts and other structures necessary to public highways or highway systems, as other county highways are acquired, improved and maintained for such purposes by the method herein provided for acquiring real estate and acquire by any such methods real estate or other property for drains, canals and sewers either within or without such property so acquired for the protection of or as a part of such property,
and the county commission may apportion and turn over to the commission herein created, sufficient federal government funds, state funds or county relief funds to acquire such property and to construct and maintain improvements thereon and to control and operate the properties so acquired.

64.370. Recreational lands--powers of county planning and recreation commission--annual report (second class counties).
The county planning and recreation commission shall have power: To prepare and recommend to the county commission plans relating to the location, extension, construction and improvement of highways, bridges, viaducts, subways, construction and maintenance of sewers and canals, within or without the property so acquired for such purposes; to design, construct and maintain any and all improvement work, buildings or other structures pertaining to the development of such recreational projects as is now herein specifically delegated only to the county commission, and adopt rules and regulations for and control all institutions, businesses, recreations, or other affairs or property within the area acquired without limit, any agreement or contract to the contrary notwithstanding; to contract and be contracted with as authorized agent of the county in connection with the purposes herein authorized; to lease, let, license or grant concessions to such properties or structures under its control on such terms and conditions as will conserve and promote the public interest; to expend money received for all such purposes; provided, that the commission shall on or before the first day of March of each year file a complete report with the county commission showing all moneys received and from what source and expenditures made, which shall be a public record; to make and enforce within its limits any local, police, health, sanitary, public convenience or other regulation as is desirable for the public welfare; to employ suitable persons, labor and expert assistance to acquire such property, design and construct improvements thereon and maintain and control the same.

64.380. Recreational lands--power of county planning and recreation commission to make rules, to contract (second class counties).
For all purposes herein provided for such counties, the commission in its own name may make all necessary rules, regulations, commitments, contracts, agreements or other provisions and apply for and receive in the name of the county or its own name, either directly or through any other body, organization, or agent, any assistance or money or obtain a loan or loans, and pledge the property acquired for any moneys that may be available from the United States government or the state in carrying out the purposes of sections 64.350 to 64.390 and shall cooperate with any city or county and with any official or unofficial body of the federal government, state of Missouri or other states, or counties within or without the state, in the preparation and carrying out of any plans or developments or acquisitions of property whenever such systems or improvements may be of benefit to the people of such county; provided, however, that no real estate shall be acquired within the territory embraced in any public park district already organized and authorized by law, except with the consent of the official body in charge thereof.

64.390 Recreational lands--compensation for acquisition or damage of property (second class counties).
Just compensation shall be paid for all property taken or damaged hereunder by the acquisition of real estate or other property or the improvement thereof and for the purpose of ascertaining
the damages for the taking or improvement of property, the methods of procedure shall be followed in ascertaining the damages sustained by property owners whose property has been taken or damaged as provided by law for ascertaining damages in the case of opening roads and highways and the amount of such damage and costs shall not be assessed and charged against the county, but shall be charged only against the territorial limits of the properties acquired which shall be the sole benefit district, and shall be paid solely from the profits arising from the proceeds of leaseholds and concessions or any other funds accumulating from the management of the project.

END ....END....END....END