

Mission 26

**Building a Connected Parks
and Recreation System
for All of Oakland County**



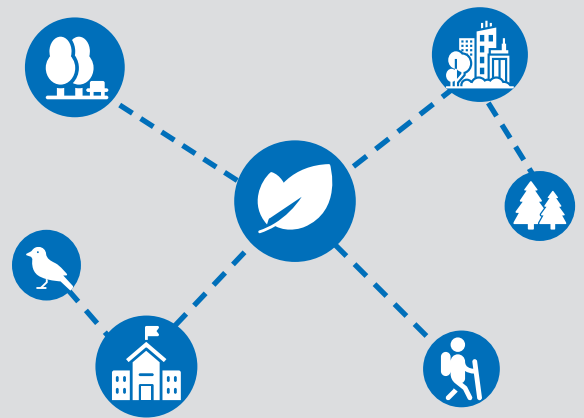
A Fragmented System in a Resource-Rich County



Oakland County should be the envy of nature and park lovers everywhere. We have abundant public lands and protected natural areas, a landscape shaped by lakes, rivers and streams, and outstanding parks where people hike, paddle, fish, play, swim and gather in every season. We also have playgrounds, pools, waterparks, athletic fields, trails, nature centers, river corridors and neighborhood parks across many communities. By almost any measure, the raw ingredients are here.

One of the biggest challenges is not a lack of assets, it's that the public experiences them through a fragmented system of county parks, city and township parks, school campuses, trail partners, nonprofits and other providers. They're each doing important work, but not always connected or easy to navigate as one system.

When opportunities are disconnected, access becomes uneven, standards vary, information is hard to find, and investments can duplicate in some places while gaps persist in others.





Parks Are Everyday Spaces That Keep Life Livable

The pandemic made something unmistakably clear: parks are not optional amenities; they are essential public infrastructure. When schools, offices, gyms and gathering places closed, parks became the primary places where people could move their bodies, protect their mental health and maintain human connection. That role did not disappear when the crisis ended.



Today, rising stress, social isolation, chronic disease and economic pressure shape everyday life. Access to safe, welcoming outdoor spaces directly affects community health and quality of life. Parks function as preventive health systems, mental health buffers and social infrastructure. In this post-pandemic reality, uneven access to parks is not just inconvenient, it's a public health and equity issue.



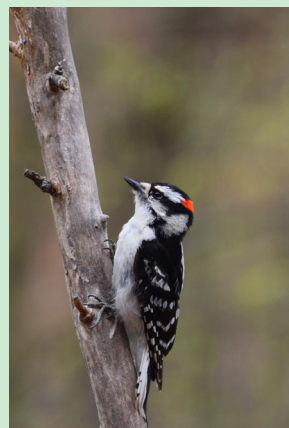


Climate Impacts Are Here. Nature Is Key to Resilience.

Oakland County is already experiencing the effects of changing climate: more intense rainstorms, flooding along rivers and lakes, hotter summer days and growing stress on natural systems and built infrastructure. These impacts are local and visible, showing up in flooded basements, overheated neighborhoods, eroded riverbanks and public spaces that are harder to use during extreme weather.

Healthy natural systems like trees, wetlands, floodplains, rivers and open landscapes can help absorb these pressures and reduce long-term public infrastructure and recovery costs. Where nature is fragmented or degraded, climate impacts are felt more sharply and more often.

Where it is intact, communities are more resilient.





What It Means to Serve All of Oakland County



Serving all of Oakland County means recognizing that a county parks and recreation system exists to reach beyond any single region. County parks are funded by residents across the county, and with that support comes a responsibility to pursue benefit across the county in a way that reflects different community needs and contexts.



Oakland County is large, diverse and unevenly served by recreation assets. Some communities are close to outstanding parks and trails; others face barriers related to distance, transportation, cost, safety or relevance. Serving all of Oakland County does not mean duplicating the same park everywhere. It means understanding different needs in different places and tailoring solutions that expand access in practical ways.

As a countywide system, Oakland County Parks is uniquely positioned to do this work by looking across municipal boundaries, aligning investments, supporting partnerships and helping a fragmented landscape function as a more coherent system for the public.



Pillars of Mission 26



These pillars describe the guiding framework for Mission 26 and are intended to inform planning, partnership development, and decision-making over time.



1. Recreation for All – Proximity & Access

Focus on closing access gaps by bringing high-quality parks, programs and trails closer to where people live, work, and learn. It prioritizes partnerships, modernized amenities and connected greenways and blueways so distance, cost, ability or jurisdictional boundaries are no longer barriers to participation. Success is measured by who can get there and use it, not just what exists.



2. Activation & Health – Four Seasons of Parks Alive with People

Reframe parks as essential health and social infrastructure, designed for consistent, year-round use. The focus is on programming, events and adaptable facilities that drive daily physical activity, mental wellbeing and social connection across all seasons. An empty park is a missed public health opportunity; use and participation are the primary metrics.



3. Learning & Environmental Leadership – Turning Curiosity into Stewardship

Position parks as hands-on learning environments that build environmental literacy, stewardship, and workforce pathways. Through discovery gateways, nature education, volunteer corps and first-time outdoor experiences, parks become places where residents of all ages learn by doing. Early and repeated exposure to nature is treated as a long-term investment in healthier people and more resilient communities.



4. Stewardship & Public Value – Measurable Public Benefit

Centers on earning and sustaining public trust through transparency, sound fiscal management and shared decision-making. Every dollar invested must demonstrate clear, measurable public benefit, supported by open data, community engagement and long-term planning. Trust is not assumed; it is continuously built through accountability and results.



Celebrating 60 Years, Looking to the Future



— 1966: A Foundational Decision

Oakland County leaders chose to protect land and create a county park system that would serve generations, shaping the parks people value today.



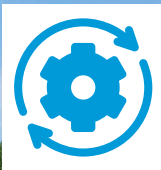
— 2024: A Vote of Confidence

Residents renewed and expanded the parks millage, providing stability and signaling trust and an expectation that parks continue to evolve to meet today's needs.



— Mission 26: A New Vision Based on a Proven Model

In the same year Oakland County Parks was formed, the National Park Service launched Mission 66 to modernize parks through a coordinated, systemwide vision. Today we see an opportunity to use that model as the framework of a long-term vision to strengthen the county park system and help a fragmented recreation landscape work better together, so the county's abundant parks, natural areas and outdoor spaces deliver greater health, resilience and everyday benefit to all residents.



What is Already Happening



The initiatives described below reflect a mix of completed projects, funded work underway, and efforts currently advancing through partnership and public engagement.

Historic Reinvestment Underway

A comprehensive assessment identified more than **\$20 million in deferred maintenance needs** across the county park system. With renewed millage support, roughly **two-thirds of these projects are completed or scheduled as of 2025**, improving safety and reliability while avoiding higher long-term costs.



Revitalization and System Growth Through Partnership

Supported by interlocal partnerships and major funding from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Oakland County Parks is revitalizing legacy parks while expanding access in communities that have historically lacked full-scale county parks. New additions—including **Pontiac Oaks**, **Oak Park Woods at Shepherd Park** and **Southfield Oaks**—represent permanent system growth with long-term stewardship commitments.



Major reinvestments are also underway or in progress at Waterford Oaks, Catalpa Oaks, Red Oaks, and Lyon Oaks, focusing on accessibility, modern infrastructure and four-season use. A signature example is the **Gary R. McGillivray Red Oaks Play Garden**, a universally accessible, intergenerational gathering space.





What's Next: Turning Vision into Action



Mission 26 sets the direction. The next phase is translating that direction into practical, well-designed plans shaped by real use, local context and community insight.

Beginning mid-January, major Mission 26 focus areas will roll out through the Co-Creation Lab on a regular cadence throughout winter and spring, giving residents opportunities to help shape priorities, sequencing and design concepts before decisions are finalized.

The Telegraph Tri-Park District

An emerging vision for Waterford Oaks, Bicentennial Oaks and Pontiac Oaks exploring how these parks could function as a connected district with each park playing a distinct role:

- Waterford Oaks as a potential four-season activity hub
- Bicentennial Oaks as a food- and learning-centered community commons
- Pontiac Oaks as a walk-up lakeside park for children and families

Other Systemwide Focus Areas

- Heritage Park partnership
- Discovery Gateways
- Nature Corps and Urban Environmental Action
- Rouge, Clinton and Huron River corridors
- Protecting critical natural lands, including Clinton River Oaks and Turtle Woods
- PureOakland.com, the one-stop hub for discovering parks and recreation countywide



How Engagement Will Work

Each release on the Co-Creation Lab website will follow a consistent rhythm: Share direction → Invite Input → Refine and communicate next steps. The first release will focus on the Waterford Oaks Transformation Plan



A Clear Path Forward



Taken together, these efforts show how Mission 26 is already taking shape. Revitalization projects are modernizing parks people rely on, partnerships are expanding access, conservation investments are protecting irreplaceable natural lands and systemwide initiatives are improving how parks and recreation work together.

Mission 26 sets a shared direction. The work ahead listening, refining, deciding and delivering will continue to shape how that direction becomes a stronger, more connected and more accessible parks and recreation system for all of Oakland County.



**Great parks make
great communities**



**Great communities
make great people**



**And together, we
make a great county**



Oakland County Parks Leadership



Ebony Bagley
Chair
Executive Committee
Member
Appointed 2019



Yolanda Smith Charles
Vice Chair
Executive Committee
Member
Appointed 2021



Andrea LaFontaine
Secretary
Executive Committee
Member
Appointed 2018



Ann Erickson Gault
Commissioner
Executive Committee
Member
Appointed 2024



Kate Baker
Commissioner
Appointed 2025



Lola Banks
Commissioner
Appointed 2024



Christine Long
Commissioner
Appointed 2009



Eric McPherson
Commissioner
Appointed 2025



Jim Nash
Commissioner
Appointed 2013



Shanell Weatherspoon
Commissioner
Appointed 2024



Chris Ward
Director - Oakland County Parks
Appointed 2021



Alan Jaros
Deputy Director - Oakland County Parks
Appointed 2025