

FINAL REPORT  
FOR  
KENT COUNTY, MICHIGAN  
MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY  
PHASE II IMPLEMENTATION WORKGROUP

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**MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY, PHASE II IMPLEMENTATION WORKGROUP**

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## ***I. Introduction***

Following submission of the Final Report for the Kent County Multi-jurisdictional Parks Study, (Phase I project) several communities expressed an interest in forming a workgroup to explore the possibility of forming a Kent Communities Park and Recreation Authority under Public Act 321 as recommended in the report. Kent County government took the lead on establishing the workgroup and requested my assistance in the supporting the workgroup and moving toward the establishment of a new authority (Phase II project).

Ultimately, the communities involved decided not to move forward with forming an authority nor with implementation of the other recommendations at this time. This report summarizes the work that was done in conjunction with the Phase II project and provides a brief discussion on the reasons for not moving forward with the recommendations.

## ***II. Summary of Kent County Multi-jurisdictional Parks Study Phase I report***

On September 27, 2012, my consulting team submitted a final report for the Phase I project.

Our overall conclusion in the Phase I report was that on a countywide basis parks and recreation services were good, not great. We provided a platform that would allow participating communities to come together, on a level playing field, to advance parks and recreation in Kent County. We believe that the creation of an Authority could provide a mechanism for Kent County communities to come together to increase revenue, expand services and to undertake projects that benefit the participating communities in ways that could not be accomplished individually. We offered the following three broad recommendations as a critical starting point for Kent County communities to join forces to move parks and recreation from good to great:

Recommendation 1: Create a Kent Communities Park and Recreation Authority under PA 321.

Recommendation 2: Implement specific, high-value projects, that benefit multiple (all) parks and recreation jurisdictions in Kent County.

Specifically, we recommend the following six projects:

1. Shared parks and recreation web platform
2. Multi-jurisdictional planning
3. Common metrics and reporting
4. Common hiring system for recreation program staff
5. Joint marketing
6. Joint programming (especially for special needs populations)

Recommendation 3: Support the formation of additional multi-jurisdictional authorities where there is a strong case and community support for collaboration.

### **III. Phase II tasks and outcomes**

The implementation of an Act 321 authority was expected to take about 18 months. The preliminary work plan is provided in Attachment 1.

To begin Phase II, an invitation was sent to all Kent County cities and townships inviting them to participate in the initial workgroup. At a kick-off meeting, eight jurisdictions were represented which included the cities of East Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids, Walker, and Wyoming and the townships of Sparta and Plainfield, Village of Caledonia, and Kent County.

Initial discussions at the kick-off meeting provided a brief review of the recommendations of the Phase I report. As the discussion ensued with the participants, they began to express concerns with the formation of an authority; some noting a low-turn-out for this meeting and therefore a lack of support from the communities. All indicated that they would return to their various communities to continue the discussion if there was strong support from other communities. By the end of the meeting, it was clear that there was no significant support for the creation of a parks and recreation authority or for any of the potential projects identified.

Some of the concerns with forming an authority were that each individual community has different levels of service and different levels of need. In most cases, citizens seem satisfied with the present level of service.

I requested one-on-one meetings with participants to have private conversations about the issues surrounding the project. I met with representatives from Lowell Township, the Village of Caledonia and the cities of Lowell, Wyoming, Walker and East Grand Rapids. Only the representative from the City of Lowell expressed an interest in continuing the effort, but also indicated that it was not a high priority and that knowledge of the proposed authority was very limited. The other representatives reiterated that this was not a priority issue in their communities and that there were other opportunities for collaboration short of forming an authority.

### **IV. Reasons for not forming an authority**

#### **1. Timing and lack of community interest**

The communities in Kent County are starting to see their financial status stabilize as property values and tax revenues are no longer dropping at the significant rate at which they were. As a result, while communities are still making tough financial and service decisions there is less significant financial pressure to make cuts in services.

For change to occur there needs to be what John Kotter refers to as a *burning platform*.<sup>1</sup> Public sector leaders are, appropriately, risk-adverse. As such, for significant change to occur there must be an imminent need, a sense of urgency and the consequences of not taking action well understood.

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<sup>1</sup>Kotter, John P. Leading Change, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA, 1996.

With the exception of the City of Grand Rapids, most jurisdictions were managing to maintain parks and recreation services at a sufficient level through the economic downturn. In our report, we describe parks and recreation in Kent County as *good, not great*. Grand Rapids parks need significant reinvestment and budget cuts have largely eliminated dedicated parks and recreation staff. Outside of the City, this was viewed as a Grand Rapids problem without regional impact. Any solution benefitting Grand Rapids was viewed with suspicion that it was a *bail-out* funded by nonresident taxpayers.

Since the completion of the Phase I Report, the City of Grand Rapids has taken steps to ask voters for a dedicated millage in November 2013 to assist in creating a financially stable and improved parks and recreation system within the City.

## 2. Lack of common vision

Within most communities in the county, there was little in the way of a common vision for what parks and recreation collaboration might look like. Absent this, any change effort is unlikely to succeed. As Kotter writes, “Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles.”<sup>2</sup>

Participation in the initial (Phase I) multi-jurisdictional task force was based on a wide range of motivations. Some participants hoped for specific outcome – most notably a countywide millage. Others believed that there must be some unseen benefit of collaboration beyond what currently exists. For a few, it was simply a desire to monitor the process rather than further it.

## 3. Limited regional focus and planning

Generally speaking, the parks and recreation systems in each community are viewed as a local amenity, with the exception of a few parks that draw attendees from outside of the jurisdictions in which they are located. There is strong recognition that trails traverse jurisdictional boundaries and therefore are appropriate to be governed by a multi-jurisdictional group – such as an Authority, but that these arrangements are currently being managed by interlocal agreements that are project specific rather than done through an overarching regional process.

## 4. Reluctance to support an additional level of government

Frequent concerns expressed about our recommendation for an overlay authority is that it created another layer of bureaucracy and would be an unelected authority with the power to tax. We share the concern about creating yet another unit of local government and were reluctant to advocate for it in this situation. Nonetheless, we believed that this tool was created by the Michigan legislature to provide a mechanism for multi-jurisdictional collaboration and that it placed sufficient limits on the power of the authority – particularly around taxation. While the legislation is both flexible in application and limited in power, the general consensus of the participants was that the cost associated with the creation of the authority could outweigh the benefits – which, for the most part, they believed were available through other avenues.

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<sup>2</sup> Kotter, p. 25.

## V. Conclusion

The Phase I of the Multi-Jurisdictional Study provided valuable information for communities throughout the County and the initiation of Phase II started the conversation about creating an Authority.

Phase I of the report provided an assessment of the current conditions of parks and recreation services throughout the communities in Kent County. It will likely become a resource for local jurisdictions as they individually pursue planning and grant funding opportunities.

Some of the highlights of the study include the following:

- Parks and Recreation Spending by municipalities in Kent County declined an average of 5.9% between 2009 and 2011.
- Per capita spending varies substantially among communities in Kent County, with East Grand Rapids spending \$155.45 per capita to the County which spends \$6.41 per capita.
- The total number of acres of parkland throughout Kent County is 19 acres. This falls short of the National Association of Parks And Recreation standard of 20 acres per 1,000 but exceeds the national average of 16 acres per 1,000 population.
- Nearly 50% of all funding for parks and recreation is provided through the General Fund, while some communities - such as Wyoming - do not receive any General Fund dollars and are supported solely by a dedicated millage. Six municipalities in Kent County have a dedicated millage for parks and recreation and four school districts have a dedicated millage for recreation.
- Schools are a significant resource for recreation facilities and provide a critical role in recreation programming.

Overall, Phase I of the Multi-Jurisdictional Study provided the basis for the implementation of several high-value projects that could be supported by the formation of an Authority. An additional item to note is that there is no comprehensive assessment of public priorities for parks and recreation in Kent County, which could become an objective of an Authority.

While formation of the Authority was not seen as desirable at this time, the local municipalities in Kent County could partner together at any time through inter-local agreements to implement the high-value projects that were identified through Phase I. If implemented, these projects will continue to provide a platform of moving parks and recreation throughout the county from good to great.

We offered recommendations that we believed would further collaboration beyond what was possible in the absence of a formal structure. We believe the recommendations offer the opportunity to pursue funding, strengthen communication with the public, offer programming and administrative support benefits that cannot otherwise be achieved by individual jurisdictions. We believe that the overlay authority would provide a platform for moving from *good to great*.

We appreciate the opportunity to have participated in this project and the support offered by its many participants. We understand the issues and respect the dynamics that have shaped its outcomes. We hope our findings will continue to inform policy decisions and drive improvements in parks and recreation throughout Kent County. There are many roads that can lead from *good to great* and it is our sincere hope that the communities of Kent County will continue to explore these paths.

**Attachment: Phase II work plan**

	Task	Target Date	Consultant Support	Deliverables
1.0	Create workgroup of representatives of interested communities appointed by local communities to create framework for Authority	March, 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews of key representatives of participating jurisdictions</li> <li>Develop summary of ideas and concerns</li> <li>Draft meeting schedule and agenda</li> <li>Facilitate planning meetings/ workshop</li> <li>Prepare summary document of workgroup recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summary document of issues</li> <li>Workshop agenda</li> <li>Facilitate four hour workshop</li> <li>Summary document of workshop results</li> </ul>
2.0	Coordinate workgroup to draft working documents for the formation of the Authority			
2.1	Identify jurisdiction of proposed Authority, required staff and consulting support	May, 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Based on workgroup recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate three workgroup meetings</li> <li>Meeting summaries</li> </ul>
2.2	Assess community support and define priorities	June, 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interview key opinion leaders</li> <li>Prepare summary document</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summary document of community leader opinions and issues</li> </ul>
2.3	Draft authority board composition/representation	July, 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Based on workgroup recommendations</li> </ul>	
2.4	Draft bylaws and necessary governance documents	August, 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide input to counsel</li> </ul>	
2.5	Present draft bylaws to local units for review and discussion	August, 2013		
2.6	Request community decision to participate in Authority pending approval of the bylaws by each local unit of government.	October, 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Present to local units of government as necessary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presentation materials</li> <li>Up to four presentations to local units of government</li> </ul>
3.0	Establish Authority			
3.1	Begin authority operation and set meeting calendar	December, 2013		
3.2	Identify initial project(s) and develop work plan(s)	February, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draft project summary documents (purpose, budgets, timelines and oversight)</li> <li>Coordinate work of subject matter experts</li> <li>Present recommendations to Authority board</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project summary documents</li> <li>Initial project plan(s)</li> <li>Presentation to Authority board</li> </ul>
3.3	Establish initial project(s) budget(s)	March, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop detailed budgets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Budget documents</li> </ul>
3.4	Secure initial funding	May, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In cooperation with funding expert</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Written case for project funding</li> </ul>
3.5	Begin implementation of initial project(s)	December, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>End of Phase II support</li> </ul>	
4.0	Develop long-range strategic plan	June, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential Phase III project</li> </ul>	