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## **Expanded Partnerships Could Help Address Milwaukee County Parks' Unmet Needs**

*Collaboration among local governments could yield mutual benefits, report finds*

While the massive unmet capital and maintenance needs facing the Milwaukee County Parks will require a variety of far-reaching solutions, one strategy that county leaders could immediately pursue is partnering with municipalities and other local governments, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

The parks have been strengthened by a number of such partnerships in recent decades, but building on them will likely involve formal processes and new steps to maximize mutual benefits. For example, Milwaukee County may need to give greater say about parks uses to municipalities, whose local financing tools in turn could be used to help improve parks infrastructure and amenities. Parks leaders also could develop clearer guidelines for collaboration with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), which has strong flood management interests in several county parks and could partner more extensively on capital projects that would benefit both parties.

These concepts already have been put into practice in some cases by parks officials, according to the report. But it finds they may “be difficult for them to implement on a wider scale without funding for additional staff and a shared vision from elected county leaders.”

In studies like our 2021 report [“Sinking Treasure.”](#) the Forum has long documented the Milwaukee County parks’ declining property tax support, shrinking workforce, growing reliance on earned revenues such as concession sales, and mounting capital needs. In this study, parks leaders asked the Forum to consider how to expand existing partnerships with MMSD and municipalities.

### **Vast array of parks assets; many are deteriorating**

Milwaukee County owns 142 parks, open spaces, and other sites, 12 parkways, and 184 miles of county-maintained trails, totaling more than 15,000 acres, or about 10% of land in the county. It owns many paved assets and 451 parks buildings, as well as sports facilities, pools, playgrounds, marinas, and golf courses. Many of these assets are deteriorating: one estimate found deferred maintenance and capital project needs over a 25-year period totaled \$417 million in 2020 dollars, or roughly \$496 million today without including the needs of the Mitchell Park Domes.

The parks system’s operating budget also faces challenges. Our research documented a decline of 51% in inflation-adjusted operations spending from 1989 to 2019. The system has become more reliant on generating revenue from admissions and concessions fees; this trend has increased pressure to keep those assets in good repair, limiting funding to maintain the rest of the system.

There are bright spots, however: the county's new additional 0.4% percent sales tax is helping to fund a \$3 million increase in the county parks operating budget this year. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) also funded \$17.4 million in parks capital projects.

### **Potential shift in county's focus**

County officials suggest one potential strategy for the future would be to convert some existing parkland to natural areas that could be managed less intensively, potentially in collaboration with MMSD in cases where the district has flood management objectives within parks. This would be accompanied by a shift in the county's focus from promoting active recreation to ensuring opportunities for passive recreation. Parks department staff could continue to work with municipalities and school districts in the county to ensure that recreation and programming continued within those parks where strong demand exists.

MMSD has jurisdiction over rivers and tributaries running through more than 40 county parks and parkways. This overlap, coupled with similarities in environmental missions, provides opportunities for collaboration. In Pulaski Park and Jackson Park, for example, MMSD replaced county parks assets that were disturbed during waterway projects. Our analysis suggests similar opportunities exist in other county parks, such as Wilson and McCarty. Also, the county and MMSD could partner to replace or reduce aging paved assets in parks and in the process reduce runoff.

MMSD also has a goal to plant 6 million trees over the next decade to capture 150 million gallons of storm water. That goal might be bolstered by collaboration with the county on activities within county parks, such as planting native plants or other landscape changes.

### **Some fruitful partnerships with municipalities already exist**

While municipalities have their own financial challenges, they have an interest in strong area parks and also have access to financial tools that the county does not, such as development impact fees and tax incremental financing (TIF). Some municipalities have already partnered with the parks department, including Oak Creek, Milwaukee, and Greenfield. One partnership, in Kulwicki Park in Greenfield, allows the city to expand recreational opportunities for its citizens in return for maintaining certain parks infrastructure and amenities. A more recent pending agreement between the county and city of Milwaukee would use city TIF monies to help finance a series of improvements to Red Arrow Park.

The report explains how, with additional structure and effort, such partnerships could be expanded to more parks and municipalities. While these individual agreements will likely remain modest in size, by streamlining the process for arriving at them, the county could still potentially negotiate more of them to help alleviate its overall maintenance and capital needs.

The report concludes that collaboration with MMSD and municipal governments will not fully address the daunting fiscal challenges facing county parks, but it could form an important part of the solution. If county officials agree on this objective, a possible next step would be to develop mechanisms for enhanced county outreach and staffing capacity to seek expanded partnerships.

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