



Van Buren County Parks Commission

Donald Handon
Board of Commission Chambers
219 E Paw Paw Street, Suite 204
Paw Paw, MI 49079



Meeting Minutes – January 14, 2025 10:30 AM

- 1. Call to Order & Attendance** –Chairperson Mike Chappel called the meeting to order at 10:30 AM.

Present: Vice Chair John Small, Becky Grabemeyer, Kurt Doroh, Wayne Nelson, Daywi Cook, Joe Parman, Gail Patterson-Gladney and Emily Hickmott. **Also Present:** Marcy Hamilton, Bekah Schrag, John Faul, Paul DeYoung, and Lisa Ransler

Absent: Paul Garrod (excused)

- 2. Approval of Agenda** - Motion to approve the January 14, 2025 Agenda by Doroh, supported by Parman; Motion: Carried.
- 3. Approval of November 12, 2024 Minutes** – Motion to approve the November 12, 2024 minutes by Doroh, supported by Patterson-Gladney; Motion: Carried.
- 4. Public Comments** - None.
- 5. New Business**

- a. Establish 2025 Meeting Schedule:** The commission reviewed the proposed 2025 meeting schedule for the second Tuesday of the month at 11:00 am with the exception that it would begin at 10:00 am on February 11, November would be on Thursday, November 14 at 11:00 AM

Nelson, supported by Doroh, made a motion to approve the 2025 Parks Commission Meeting Schedule as presented; Motion: Carried.

- b. Review Membership Terms:** A discussion was held regarding commission member terms and bylaws. Ransler will review and report back at the next meeting regarding the need for adopting bylaws and the term status of members.
- c. Strategic Planning Session:** Marcy Hamilton and Bekah Schrag were present from the Southwest Michigan Regional Planning Commission to begin a strategic planning session with the Commission. A key component of the discussion was a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, which helped assess the current state of Van Buren County's parks system. Strengths included the county's natural ecosystems, water and land trails, local partnerships, and newly secured millage funding, all of which provide a strong foundation for future improvements. However, weaknesses such as the small number of parks, the lack of a dedicated parks department, and the competitive nature of grant funding were identified as key challenges that need to be addressed.

Building on these insights, the commission explored opportunities to expand and enhance the parks system. Expanding programming efforts—including youth activities, wellness initiatives, and partnerships with local businesses—was a major focus. Members also discussed improving marketing strategies to increase public awareness and attract visitors. Additionally, diversifying funding sources, such as seeking sponsorships or grants, was seen as essential to maintaining long-term sustainability. At the same time, the commission acknowledged several threats, including limited public engagement, resistance to change from some community members, environmental factors, and the need for better long-term financial planning.

The group also focused on park growth and maintenance strategies, with a strong consensus that maintaining and enhancing existing properties should be the top priority before pursuing expansion. To support this goal, the commission discussed defining priority projects, exploring contract maintenance options, and ensuring that improvements are geographically distributed across the county. Additionally, the commission recognized the need for clear maintenance plans to ensure that current and future parks remain safe, accessible, and well-kept.

Regarding budget and staffing needs, the commission determined that the parks system and budget must grow before the county could establish a dedicated department with additional staff. While some members expressed interest in creating a Parks Department with a director and part-time staff in the future, they agreed that, at this stage, efforts should focus on expanding revenue sources and increasing park usage. The commission also discussed how to strategically allocate millage revenue to maximize its impact and ensure financial stability before committing to structural changes.

Finally, the commission explored ways to expand trails and improve accessibility. Ideas included the development of a county-wide trails master plan, state designation for water trails, and standardized signage at all county parks. Members also discussed how marketing and accessibility improvements could enhance community engagement, including using YouTube videos to promote parks, making launch points for water activities more accessible, and potentially introducing an annual county park pass as a revenue source.

6. Ongoing Business/Reports - None.

7. General Member Comments and Discussion – No additional comments were made.

8. Adjournment: All business being completed, the meeting was adjourned at 12:25 PM with unanimous consent. The next meeting will be February 11, 2025 from 10:00 AM to 12:00 Noon to continue with Strategic Planning.

Submitted by:

Lisa Ransler, Recording Secretary