

# Zionsville Department of Parks & Recreation

## 2014 Park Department Summary

(Prepared in part for the February 2, 2015 Town Council Meeting)

2014 saw significant progress and/or completion on a variety of projects and initiatives for the Zionsville Parks and Recreation Department and its Park Board. During this time the Department continued to carry out its responsibilities to maintain park facilities, provide and facilitate recreational programs, and carry out special projects. This report summarizes projects and activities of note. For the most part, the report will not discuss all the ongoing activities that abound in the day-to-day operation of the parks. The report will first go into a few generalities and then discuss some specific highlights.

### A Selection of Major Benchmark Examples

*Lake and River Enhancement (LARE) Construction Grant Awarded:* 2014 was another exciting year in terms of successfully navigating the very competitive world of grant funding. It was our first year, in terms of bank stabilization projects utilizing bio-armoring techniques, to apply for this particular source. A separate grant-funded study (discussed further below) had earlier in the year identified that we have four significant areas of bank erosion along the Eagle Creek in Starkey Park. We applied for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources LARE Funds, a 70%/30% matching reimbursement grant (capped at \$100,000 in grant funds). We were extremely pleased to not only receive funding, but to be the only LARE construction project across the state to receive the maximum award of **\$100,000**. In fact, of the 23 total projects, only two others were awarded amounts even over \$60,000.

Because of the State's permitting requirements when working in the State's waterways, this project won't be able to start until the mid-July to mid-August time span. But the work should be completed by the end of September. Once the stream bank work is done and stabilized, we will be able to reroute the nearby earthen trail that is endangered. This grant coupled with the other grant and fund-raising efforts the Park Department has undertaken over the last 6 years has generated nearly \$400,000 in supplemental funding and/or cost savings!

*The Zion Nature Center (ZNC):* 2014 was a year of change for the Park Nature Center. After 7 years of full-time employment and additional park volunteer time such as service on the Park Board (and not including earlier career employment outside of parks in such areas as research and in the employment of a home-builder); our Interpretative Naturalist chose to retire and so informed us in mid-February (the 28<sup>th</sup> being her last day). Fortunately, we have a dedicated cadre of part-time staff with the center and their help combined with Parks staff and Park Board efforts enabled the Center to stay fully open to the public through all of its regular hours. We also have a Friends of the Zion Nature Center support group that could likely have been activated to back us up in these efforts, but it turned out we didn't really need to implement that level.

With days of the notice to the department, the opening was posted in several professional organizations, most with a nationwide distribution. The primary of these was the same professional association which has the certification program with which this park position's job description had long required accreditation. The Park Board's 3-person selection committee poured over 30+ serious applications (not counting others who didn't meet the minimum qualifications). This included some candidates recommended by other interested parties such as the "Friends of..." group. Ten of those candidates were taken through a first round of interviews with the committee. Through that process and series of meetings and discussions after that round of interviews, a group of 3 finalists were identified and run through a final, more grueling, round of interviews. The choice of a final candidate, Ms. Mindy Murdock, was unanimous.

Ms. Murdock became our Park Naturalist after spending 13 years with Cleveland Metro Parks, most recently serving as a Naturalist at the North Chagrin Nature Center. Mindy has a BS in Zoology from Kent State University where she graduated Magna cum Laude and an MS in Biology from the University of Akron.

Once here, one of Mindy's first efforts was working with the Park Board and Park Staff to initiate and complete a strategic planning process through the summer and early fall for the Zion Nature Center. This was the first time such had been performed to the standards of the National Association for Interpretation considered the gold standard in this field for across the nation.

*Zionsville Bicycle Challenge:* Originally suggested by a Park Board member who had participated in something similar, this fun program helps promote bicycling, and returning to (or getting on for the first time) one's bicycle and riding it for fun, fitness, and possibly even transportation. Along the way in this 6-week program, the participants enjoyed a weekly E-newsletter, complete with safety tips, organized and mentored weekly rides at differing skill and distance levels, and weekly door prizes for riding and logging their miles or participating in the weekly rides.

The basic structure was that participants chose whether they are working toward the initial challenge (150 miles in six weeks) or the more advanced level (400 miles in six weeks). They then ride and log their miles. Also, a series of weekly support rides were available, showcasing Zionsville and several of its parks. Workshops and trainings were additionally offered as well. The Park Department partnered with a local bicycling club, Dow AgroCyclists, to help put on this program and the group came through with flying colors. This labor intensive program could likely not have been held at all, and certainly not as successfully, without the countless hours they added to the Park staff and two Board Members who were all involved throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of this event.

Of the 86 participants signed up in this first year, 81 completed their respective mileage challenges. 56 of those were in the 150-Mile Challenge category, and 25 completed their 400-Mile Challenge. All told, over **23,721 miles** were logged! The Zionsville Team had 13,967 miles, with 44 members to the AgroCyclists Team's 33 members. The

AgroCyclists logged a total of 9,754 miles. All the riders completing their respective challenges in the allotted six-weeks receive a specially designed commemorative T-Shirts. The men's and women's leaders at each of the two challenge mileages received a commemorative "Zionsville Street Brick" etched with their name and their miles completed. There is also a traveling award that is Zionsville's to proudly display through 2015 (and to defend in the next Challenge). Several of us have received many positive comments from the participants, all who seemed to have greatly enjoyed the Challenge, the educational and safety material presented in the Challenge Newsletter, and also in the program's associated rides/workshops. Look for this to be a regular event.

### **A Sampling of Grants and Additional Generated Funding (mostly non-tax dollars)**

*\$32,000 Lake and River Enhancement (LARE) Study Grant:* This 80%/20% matching reimbursement grant was actually awarded late in 2013. But the work for it couldn't get started until the winter of 2013-2014, as the associated low-water conditions and the fall leaf-drop assists in the study efforts. This was a small study where Park Board funds leveraged an amount 4 times greater and enabled DNR-approved scientists to study the bank conditions in Starkey Park. We had earlier identified and been watching 4 critical and severe erosional areas along our stream bank in the Park. This 2014 study's work assisted in the determination of just how severe the situation was, how many tons of our park's soil was estimated as being lost to sediment into the stream, and what the predicted rate of decay (and its acceleration) was. This smaller grant was probably a crucial factor in winning the much larger LARE construction grant already discussed above. We are told it is very unusual that an applicant successfully garners a fully-capped construction grant in their first attempt. It is likely this \$32,000 grant's work played a big role in that.

*Land and Water Conservation Fund Grant (LWCF):* This \$200,000 Grant had been previously awarded but the tail end of the Heritage Trail Park construction project was finalized in the spring of 2014. The Indiana Department of Natural Resources' Division of Outdoor Recreation completed their final inspection on this reimbursement grant that assisted in building the park. They released the *last \$20,000* of the LWCF grant funds back to us based on their very complementary final inspection. This money was re-deposited back into the Park fund that had funded the construction so as to be later available for matching other, future park grants and/or to build future park improvements for our citizens.

*4/19/13 State Disaster Flood Relief Funds:* While technically not a grant, this program does certainly represent incoming funds not normally available in most circumstances. This \$26,732 reimbursement of expenses incurred actually represents the very long State process for successfully navigating the involved and paperwork intensive application process. This April 2013 flooding had actually not apparently been significant across the whole state to trip activation of the Federal Flood Relief Program. Instead, this actually reflected the very first time the State of Indiana stepped into that Federal absence to allow communities like ours some chance to recoup these funds. As most of the costliest impacts of that particular flood event were at our Zionsville Golf Course, the Park Board directed these State relief dollars be deposited there.

## **Capital Improvement Projects, Capital Maintenance Projects and Similar Efforts**

*Heritage Trail Park:* The vast bulk of this park was completed by December of 2013. However because early 2014 was already showing signs of one of the worst winters in a decade, we made the tactical decision not to place such park amenities as benches, waste receptacles, grills, bike racks, and picnic tables. We felt it was prudent not to get an extra winter season of wear on the hardware with the expectation of low park site visitation during one of the hardest winters in recent memory. All of this material was already delivered and stored in our department, but our staff merely waited until March of last year to install them (thereby saving money). The Park was brought fully online for its first complete season of use in the early spring of 2014. Heritage Trail Park extends the Rail Trail toward Whitestown and Lebanon, creates an internal trail loop of about ¼-mile in length, creates a playground for ages 2-5, a hard-court for basketball and other similar activities, a bocce court, a picnic shelter, lower maintenance native plantings, green-infrastructure bio-basins to mitigate stormwater quantities and also improve stormwater quality, plus other park features. This is our first park in what had previously (prior to consolidation) been in unincorporated and rural portions of the Township. Future phases are planned to include further trail linkage along the abandoned rail corridor (eventually connecting to Whitestown's efforts to come east), further trails inside the park, additional play equipment for 6-12 year olds, and possibly other components. Public response to the new amenities has been very positive.

*Zionsville Golf Course:* As part of the regular planned equipment upkeep and replacement schedule, 2014 marked the year in which the Zionsville Golf Course was able to replace two pieces of equipment we inherited for our use when the course was purchased (and they were both quite old and well used even back when the course was under private ownership). These two pieces were a fairway mower and our utility cart. They had been maintained by our staff with some parts being rebuilt from scratch (as such became difficult or impossible to purchase. In fact, the utility cart had been overhauled enough times that the brakes were barely functional. The 2014-purchased fairway mower replacement was a demo with less than 25 hours of operation on it. We also saved money on the utility cart by purchasing a (new) 2013 model.

As an additional way to save funds, our staff also replaced an existing boardwalk at the golf course, doing the work in house. Since the course staff replaced it with a kit version and did the work themselves, we saved by not needing to hire a contractor.

Another capital replacement/improvement out at the golf course in 2014 was the resealing and restriping of the parking lot. This should help extend the life of this feature, especially since this has been exposed to periodic floodwater which tends to deposit silt and sediment across it.

And another major capital improvement was the replacement of the original cart and equipment fueling facilities that had been used out at the course by the private owner. In addition to the sheer age of the equipment, times have changed drastically and we wanted to implement stormwater protection measures as well as just get new tanks. The two new tanks (diesel and unleaded fuel) were moved out of the floodplain. This unfortunately,

unavoidably puts them closer to a few of our neighbors' homes (while still well onto Park property). In addition the tanks themselves are more leak resistant than what had been in place. They also are in appropriate containment structures approved by the Town's Stormwater Manger. We also exceeded the necessary stormwater protections by placing them under a roofline (similar to a small open-air sun shelter out in the parks). And we placed them inside a lockable fence enclosure with green privacy slats to help visually screen the units.

And as a final "capital reminder" related to the golf course we continue to earmark and protect funds for planned future major capital issues. This would be for the eventual golf cart fleet replacement anticipated around 2022, depending on wear and tear from play levels). And while at a much slower rate because it will take a much higher price tag, we also are earmarking additional funds for the replacement of the aging and inadequate, antiquated irrigation system

*Zion Nature Center Capital Improvements:* As part of the planned and ongoing capital maintenance program, the Park Board had budgeted, and the Department completed, the replacement of the old furnace and old air conditioner. There were originally two each of these types of units when the operation of the building was transferred to the Parks Department from the Zionsville Schools system. 2014 marked the final replacement of all four of these old heating and cooling units (we had replaced the other two in 2012 and 2013). Now that the Park Department has purchased all four of these new units, these more efficient heating and cooling units can be expected to last for 15 to 20 more years.

*Mulberry Fields Park Crosswalks:* The original construction installed four pedestrian crosswalks (painted-on only). By 2014, the high use of this park had seriously worn the crossing patterns. Again as part of a planned and budgeted maintenance process, we replaced these four and added a fifth, located across the entrance near the street. While costing several thousands of dollars, we went with a thermoplastic type of material which should hold up better and yield a much longer lifespan.

*Replacement of Aging Park Equipment:* While we do contract mowing in the large regularly shaped areas as a cost savings measure vs maintaining a fleet of mowers, we have had a single departmental commercial mower for smaller and/or specialty areas (e.g. such as the edges along the Zionsville Rail Trail). On such areas we usually don't get cost effective bids. As part of the regular capital equipment maintenance program this in-house mower had been planned and budgeted for replacement in 2014 (after having been extended out from the original replacement target of 2012). Quotes were solicited and received and the new unit purchased. While it probably wouldn't hold up to more years of extensive mowing, we plan to retain the original mower as long as feasible. So for the first time, we have a spare in case the main equipment might be out of service for a bit.

## **Recreation and Service Programs (in no particular order)**

*Zionsville Golf Course (ZGC):* The Department completed another season of operation at the ZGC. The dedicated staff did an outstanding job of managing the course this season and we continue to receive many compliments from our clientele. Weather generally cooperated very well until the bottom dropped out in October and November. Up until that point we were on track for one of the best years ever. Once October rolled around, rain and cold temperatures, often with frost in the mornings, really cut into our play time. Weather (mostly too low temperatures or rain) forced closures. For example, we were 24 of the 30 days in November. And in terms of what one might call decent golfing weather, the two months only had 6-8 days and 4-5 days respectively (even though we were open for more than that in each month). While the Clerk-Treasurer's Office hasn't yet closed out the books and provided final official figures, it looks roughly like even with the unusually poor end of the season weather, the course still generated a gross operating revenue of ~\$260,158 (up from ~\$258,696 in 2013).

While golf courses are expensive to operate, ours is generally covering its yearly operational cost and clearing profit besides. This year looks to be no exception. All estimates are pending Clerk-Treasurer Office's final numbers, but currently estimates are that our final 2014 will show a net operating profit in the range of ~\$9,000 to ~\$12,000. For reference, 2013's net operating profits for the year were \$19,684 (this last number itself was severely impacted by the April 2013 flood damage to the tune of \$45,000 or so of negative impact). Also please keep in mind that in 2014, this includes the planned, budgeted capital maintenance items already discussed above. If those two pieces of equipment hadn't been needing replacement, our ending 2014 figures would have been around \$45,000.

15,400 rounds were played in the 2014 season (compared to 16,323 in 2013), the vast bulk of those played as 9 hole rounds. Mike Maguire, Orlin Coleman, and the rest of the course staff hosted numerous special events, 4 regular golf leagues, several middle school matches (and practices), along with school invitationals and tourneys.

*The Zion Nature Center (ZNC) Programing:* As discussed above, 2014 was a transitional year for the Park Department's Zion Nature Center. Even though the hiring process was rapid, with the new staff identified and accepting the offering within about 2 months of the position's opening; effectively the new person wasn't on board until the last of May. When one considers the start-up time inherent in a new hire and the fact that some of the new Park Naturalist's initial efforts were to work with the Park Board and Department to develop the strategic plan for the ZNC and, to a degree, the entire environmental programming efforts across our park system; it's clear that traditional environmental programming absolutely could not fully start until much later in the year.

Effectively we had full programming offerings for at least the latter third of 2014. So our numbers of program offerings were down 43% over 2013's. Actually this is a big win when the programming time span was more like a third of the year. And our overall attendance was also running as if we had fully programmed from July on. Our 2014 environmental programming and ZNC attendance totaled 5756 almost exactly half of the

numbers our previous Naturalist had reported for 2013. And this is without the benefit of the 600 or so traditional attendance out our day camps as we had to cancel those for this year. Day camp hiring efforts start in March and program is typically set by the end of April and the camps themselves run in mostly in June. It would just not have been a reasonable expectation to have a new hire take that on her first two weeks on the job.

Interestingly enough our split of programming attendance vs straight (self-guided) nature center attendance (53% vs. 47%, respectively) also fairly closely followed last year's reported numbers. All this strongly suggests that the enforced and very necessary "recess" in ZNC activities and environmental program did not hurt us at all and by the end of the year we were right back at previous years' levels. We look for a bright future as our Park Naturalist continues to expand her efforts throughout our community.

*Bicycle Family Fun Ride and Bicycle Safety Event:* This annual 7-mile ride was again held as a part of the National Bike Month in May. It starts at Elm Street Green and loops by and through several of our parks, including a significant portion along the beautiful Zionsville Rail-Trail. This year we included an optional 3 mile spur route to Zionsville's newest park, Heritage Trail Park. 10 of the riders chose to add this to their 7 mile day. Those 10 got a tour of the park before heading back for the ending treats. The riders finish in the Farmers' Market area for treats. We had around 35-40 participants depending if one counts ones like a toddler in trailer.

*Mulberry Fields Bike Ride:* In cooperation with one of the summer rides of the Central Indiana Bicycling Association (CIBA), Zionsville Parks and Recreation Department worked with one of CIBA's ride leaders to again cohost a ride out of our Mulberry Fields Park. This ride had 3 loops, each with its own internal shortcut that could be combined in various routes of anywhere from 12 to 100 miles. Even with driving rain squall for 25 minutes right at the start, and wet pavement for much of the time, the ride attracted some 50 participants.

*Lincoln Park Concert Series:* With the cooperation and assistance of the Park Department, the Lincoln Park Concert Series Committee (a spin-off group of the Zionsville Cultural District Committee), attendance expanded from over the last few years and many complements were received. Thanks to the dedicated volunteers on the LPCSC for their efforts and unswerving support in keeping the long standing concert series not only alive, but flourishing. This year's attendance may well have been the highest ever, with several nights having attendance estimates breaking 400+. The Lincoln Park Concert Series Committee estimates the overall attendance on this 9 event program to be 2,850.

*Garden Plot Program:* There were 60 plots rented this year (\$20 each) at Heritage Trail Park. Additionally, 30 plots more were available at Elm Street Green. Both park sites were very successful and well enjoyed by their respective green-thumb enthusiasts.

*Youth Sports Activities:* In cooperation with ZYFL and also the Zionsville Boys and Girls Club, youth football is still going strong at Mulberry Fields Park. With several 100s of

registrants in the sport and weekly games during the 3-month season, plus the coaches, officials and spectators, this program accounted for 1000s of separate visits and countless hours of enjoyment for the participants.

The Zionsville Rugby League also uses Mulberry Fields. Both these programs went well and it is anticipated both will be returning next year. And the Zionsville Lacrosse Leagues is scheduled through the School system for play at our Jennings Field Park.

*As mentioned above, in 2014 the Zionsville Schools continues their rental use of Jennings Field (in exchange for their allowing our use of the Zion Nature Center Building) for practices and special events. Also the Zionsville Middle School uses the nearby Mulberry Fields park for cross-country practice/meets and occasional other uses. And the middle schools use our golf course for their practices and matches.*

*Other Events* in the parks continue to increase. Lincoln Park continues to host numerous weddings, generally at an average of at least one a week during the May-October season. The Sullivan Munce Ghost Walk utilizes Lincoln Park in October as well. Creekside hosts the annual Creekstomp with the ZNC and Stormwater Department. The Rail Trail provided routes for numerous formal events including the Optimist Club's "Hit the Bricks" event, the Z-Run, weekly Indianapolis Hiking Club events, and the St. Vincent Cancer Walk who use several of our park sites along their route (the Walk brought in over 1000 participants and raised over \$340,000). Furthermore, in addition to the formal cooperative bicycle ride with CIBA discussed above, several other CIBA Ride Leaders chose to use Mulberry Fields as a support site on their own weekly scheduled rides.

*The non-profit group, Maplelawn Farmstead, Inc.* continues to work on preservation and programming at the farmstead in our Mulberry Fields Park. This partnership has proven to be a valuable one for the department and the citizens of Zionsville. Maplelawn's recreational contributions were again very successful this year. Highlights from their programs this year include a continuation of their previously successful offerings such as the movie nights.

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Respectfully prepared and submitted  
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Superintendent of Parks & Recreation