

# STARKE COUNTY

## FIVE YEAR PARKS MASTER PLAN

### 2022-2026



## **PARK BOARD**

Chris Lawrence  
 Stephen 'Rik' Ritzler  
 Karl Swihart  
 Richard Ballard, President  
 Kathy Norem  
 Wendy McIntire, Secretary

## **COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

Charles Chesak, President  
 Bryan Cavender, Vice President  
 Mark Gourley

## **COUNTY COUNCIL**

David Pearman, President  
 Brad Hazleton, Vice President  
 Todd Leinbach  
 Howard Bailey  
 Don Binkley  
 Kay Gudeman  
 Don White

## **COUNTY ATTORNEY**

Marty Lucas

## **COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

Bass Lake Campground  
 Bass Lake Property Owners Association  
 Koontz Lake Association  
 Prairie Trails Club, Inc.  
 Town of Hamlet  
 Town of North Judson  
 City of Knox

## **PLAN COMPLETED BY:**



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## INTRODUCTION

The Starke County Park Board has been working diligently to create a network of outdoor recreation opportunities for the residents and visitors of Starke County.

The updated plan will continue to build and expand the goals identified in the 2017 plan. The park board continues to devote time and efforts to improve and maintain Bass Lake Beach and Campground and the Starke County Forest. Other county owned or publicly dedicated properties are being explored for potential park use.

This plan will address the existing conditions, public input, needs, development, maintenance, and operations of current and future park properties.

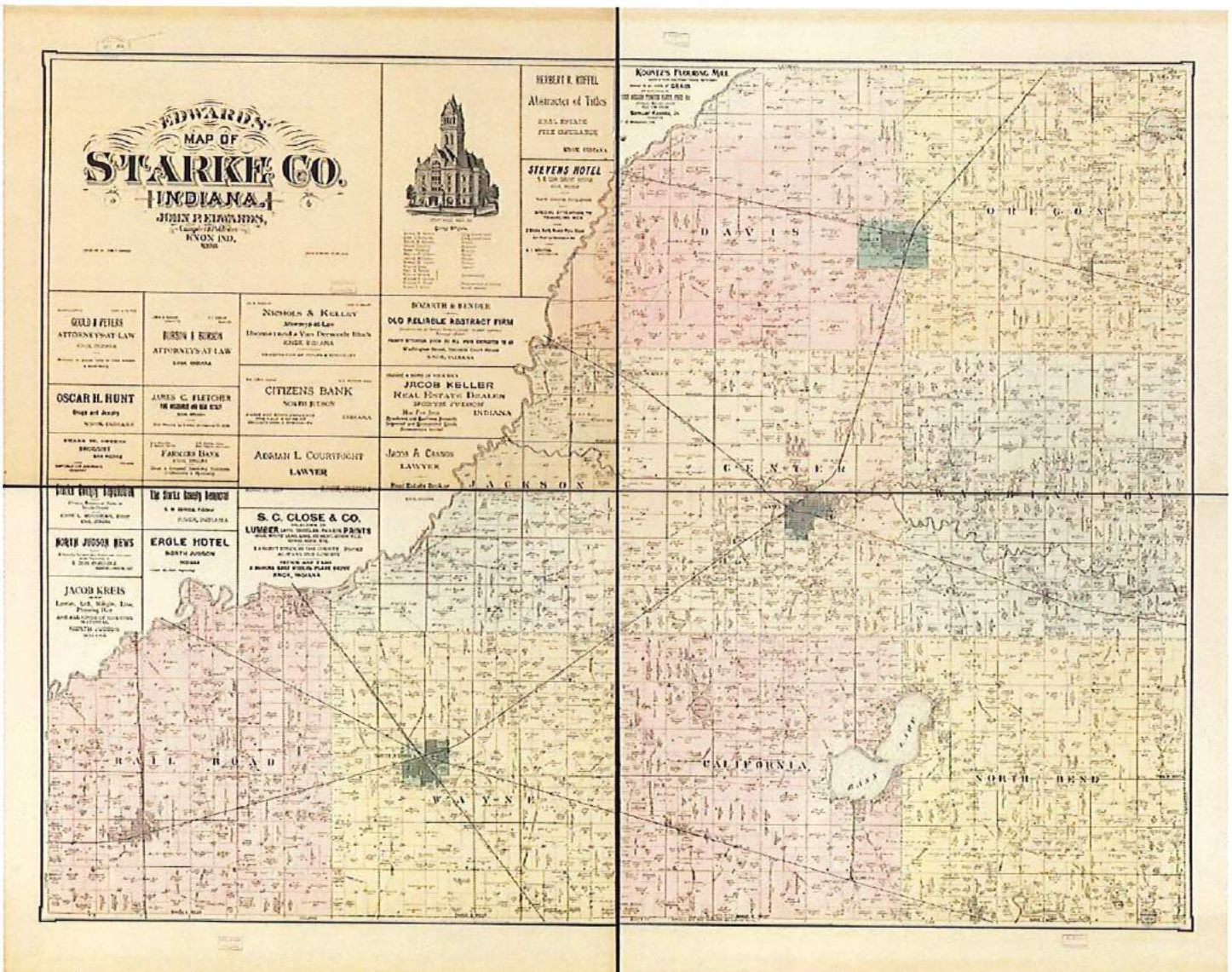
## DEFINITION OF THE PLANNING AREA

The planning area for this master plan is the same as the service area, all of Starke County. This plan will look at regional connections and impacts of park improvements as Starke County is home to seasonal and part time visitors who utilize Koontz Lake and Bass Lake. Outdoor recreation is a versatile amenity that provides abundant opportunities for locals and tourists alike.

## PARK BOARD

The Starke County Park Board was formed in 2014 to establish and improve enhanced outdoor recreation opportunities at Bass Lake Beach and Campground, Starke County Forest and explore additional properties across the county.

The Park Board is looking to expand programming to meet the needs of the residents and users of the parks.



The Park Board consists of five members, appointed by County Commissioners, County Council, and Judge of Circuit Court. The Park Board members are as follows:

Chris Lawrence  
Commissioner Appointment

Stephen 'Rik' Ritzler  
Council Appointment

Karl Swihart  
Council Appointment

Richard Ballard  
Judge of Circuit Court Appointment

Kathy Norem  
Judge of Circuit Court Appointment

Wendy McIntire

#### **PARKS DEPARTMENT**

In 2021 the Starke County Parks Board took a step towards an active parks department. A full time position was created for a County Parks Superintendent.

The Parks Department does not currently have a designated office space and has been provided an operating budget of \$20,000 from Starke County. Additional maintenance and programming are covered by income from Bass Lake Beach and Campground admissions and rentals.

Starke County Forest is managed by the Parks Department and onsite forester, Bruce Wakeland. Wakeland donated the forest to the county 10 years ago and has still been a prominent part of managing and operating the property.

#### **GOALS OF THE PLAN**

The Starke County Parks Master Plan establishes goals to direct and lead the board and department. Majority of the goals remain the same from the previous plan.

A portion or parts of the original goals were implemented. The board and public believe these goals are still important and need to be pursued further. It is also understood that goals can be fluid to move with the direction and circumstances of the system.

- Create awareness of existing facilities and programs.
- Utilize plan to prioritize projects and obtain funding.
- Address system-wide issues such as maintenance and improvements, signage, education, and connectivity.
- Identify future properties for outdoor recreation in underserved areas of Starke County.
- Explore connections and partnerships, locally and regionally, to expand the current trail network.

#### **PLANNING PROCESS**

Through the planning process goals were reimagined to better pursue the current direction of outdoor recreation for Starke County.

The existing facilities were evaluated with the Parks Superintendent and frequent users.

The public provided extensive feedback through two surveys and public meeting.

Needs as well as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were identified and analyzed for the park system.



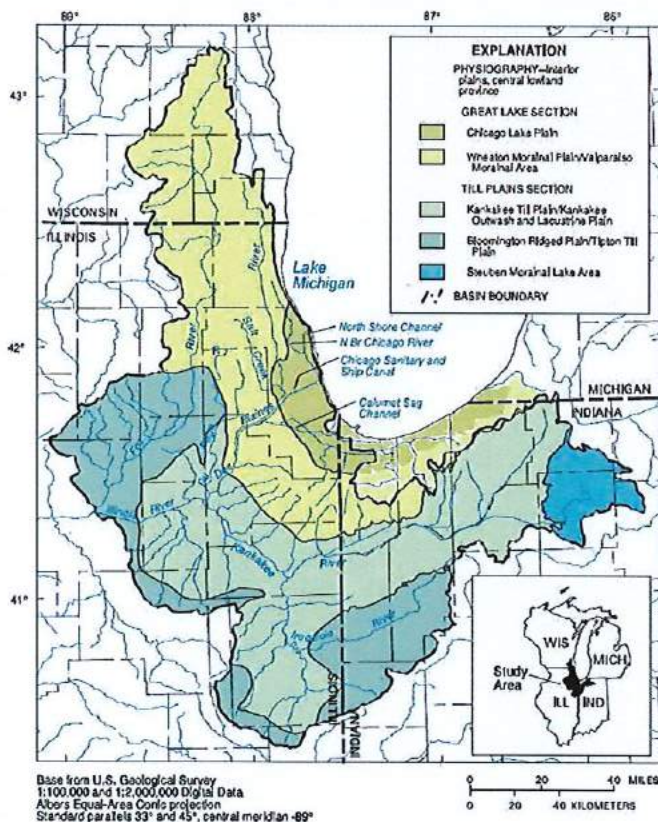
## NATURAL FEATURES & LANDSCAPE

### TOPOGRAPHY

Starke County, Indiana is located in the northwest section of the state. The southwestern and southeastern portions of the county are situated within the Upper Wabash River Basin with the remaining parts located in the Kankakee River Basin.

Starke County consists of primarily flat agricultural area with some rolling hills and highland areas. Part of the Kankakee Outwash Plain, (light green in the figure below) formed the landscape of Starke County. Meltwaters eroded away valleys, carrying mud and sand. As the slope lessened, the water slowed and deposited sand on the Outwash Plain creating flat plains interspersed with sand dunes. The highland part is referred to as the Kankakee-Sands Region and the lowland, Kankakee Marsh Region.

The elevation ranges from 780 feet above sea



level in the southeastern part of the county to about 660 feet above sea level in the southwestern part. This minimal change in elevation makes Starke County a great area for development of large flat open recreational

spaces.

### GEOLOGY/SOILS

The geology of Starke County is quite diverse. Some areas have sandy loam soils suitable for development of urban areas and others have high water tables and wet soils that make urban development undesirable.

Most of the soils in the county are poorly suited for parks and intensive recreational areas. Wetness, ponding, and flooding are major limitations. Most areas are better suited for passive recreation including wilderness areas and providing habitat for wildlife.



Photo of Starke County Forest

### FOREST RESOURCES

Starke County is on the edge of the Grant Prairie Natural Region and the predominant native vegetation was a mosaic of sand prairies, black oak, savannas, and marsh lands. Trees native to Starke County in upland areas include black oak, white oak, sassafras and hickory. In wetter areas the most common trees are river birch, sycamore, cottonwood, and pin oak. Around 10-15% of Starke County is made up of wooded areas. The largest is the Kankakee State Fish and Game Area.

The Starke County Forest has a forest management plan that is updated by the local, onsite forester. There are large plantings of several species of trees, planted at different stages over the last few decades. This property is protected by an irrevocable trust agreement to



to keep it a managed forest and passive recreational resource for Starke County.

The Emerald Ash Borer has been located in Starke County in several locations including Bass Lake Beach and Campground.

### WATER RESOURCES

Prominent lakes and rivers in Starke County play a prominent role in environmental, recreational, and economic opportunities.

The Kankakee River gives Starke County its unique shape as the northwest border of the county. English Lake, no longer in existence, was part of the Kankakee River when it was more than two miles wide. The town of English Lake remains as a reminder of what once was.

The Yellow River, a tributary of the Kankakee

flows through the county. The Yellow River can serve as a blueway, providing recreational opportunities for kayaks and canoes. Public Access is provided in Knox at Wythogan Park. Additional access sites across the county should be explored.

Bass Lake is the fourth largest natural lake in Indiana. It is a popular location for residents and tourists. It was noted in the 1900s as the 'playground for the rich and famous'. Land around the lake is mostly private residential, but the county owns a large property, Bass Lake Beach, and several smaller lake front properties are subject to public dedications. Bass Lake should continue to be a focus for recreational opportunities in Starke County.

Koontz Lake is located in the northeastern corner of Starke County. An eastern portion of the lake is



Map of water resources in Starke County.

in Marshall County. Surrounding the lake are mostly private residences with some lakefront areas subject to public dedication. The state owns a public access site by the dam.

Round Lake is a small lake nearly surrounded by an IDNR fish and wildlife preserve with public access. Part of the Tippecanoe River is in Starke County, public access should be explored. Smaller watercourses in Starke County are managed for drainage with limited recreational value. Other small lakes such as Hartz Lake could provide some recreational opportunity.

Flooding occurs along the Yellow River and other waterways, impacts have been minimal. Koontz Lake water levels is controlled by a dam. Bass Lake is a natural, spring fed lake. However with the current draught seasons, the Bass Lake's levels are lower than in previous years. This has caused some issues with the location of boat lifts and access to the beach. With the ebb and flow of the water levels, the beach areas has begun to disappear.

Some invasive species have been observed such as Eurasian Water Milfoil. The Bass Lake Conservancy District is in charge of maintaining water level and clarity, and has used grants to control invasive species as necessary. Starke County Purdue Extension operates a research center on Bass Lake that is involved in environmental issues.

### **MAN-MADE, HISTORICAL, & CULTURAL TRANSPORTATION LINKS**

Starke County has two major highways, US 30 which connects the county to Plymouth to the east and Valparaiso to the west, and US 35 which connects the county to La Porte to the north and Winamac/Logansport to the south. Several state roads traverse the county as well. SR 10 goes around the south side of Bass Lake and connects the county to Culver to the east. SR 23 goes by the west side of Koontz Lake and connects to Walkerton and South Bend.

Starke County Airport (KOXI) is located just north of SR 8, northwest of Knox. The airport has asphalt runways, and fuel service.

Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, such as trails, continue to grow in importance and popularity. The North Judson Eerie Trail runs from North Judson southeast towards Bass Lake and Tippecanoe River State Park connecting to US 35. While the trail pavement ends at US 35, the right of way continues to Monterey in Pulaski County. The trail is part of the trans-continental Discovery Trail and US Bicycle Route 35. IT is a 10' wide asphalt trail and a portion of the trail also has an equestrian trail adjacent to it. Opportunities for expanded trail systems must be integrated into future transportation planning in the county. Regional trail plans exist and should be evaluated for regional connections to Starke County.

North Judson is a hub for railroad activity and is home to the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum. At its peak, as many as 125 trains per day passed through this area. While the majority of the railroads are no longer operational, the railroad is an important part of the history of North Judson and Starke County. The Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum operates tours and programs to showcase the railroad to visitors such as Pumpkin Train and Santa Train for seasonal events.

### **INDUSTRY**

Starke County's industrial base is varied with heavy emphasis on the steel, related components, plastics, automotive, agricultural, home, and container industries. Industry partners enjoy low taxes, available land and commercial properties, and an affordable work force. Unemployment rates have steadily decreased over the last ten years with a slight uptick in 2020. About half of the population lives in Starke County but commutes to a job outside of the county. A small portion of the workforce commutes into Starke County for employment. The type of recreational facility needed by the workforce should be analyzed as well as the structure of current and future programs to meet the needs of the workers of Starke County.

### **PARKS DEPARTMENT HISTORY**

The Park Board was established in 2014. In 2021, a staff position was established as well as a budget. There are properties owned by the county or have public dedications, some of which have been or currently are used for recreational



purposes. The two main properties are the Starke County Forest and the Bass Lake Beach and Campground. The county is working to establish a park system that will improve the quality of life for its residents. As properties are identified and developed, programs and activities are added, and management and maintenance is required, the parks department and staff is critical to the success of the Starke County Parks.

### CULTURE IN STARKE COUNTY

Starke County is a place of rich history and heritage. The county takes pride in its events and celebrations highlighting its history. Stark County knows it is home to many jewels that attract and retain residents. From agritourism, railroads, and beautiful recreation assets, Starke County's culture is thriving.



*Photo from Starke County Visitor's Guide 2022.*

Some events and festivals include:

- Starke County Spring Has Sprung Bloomer Run
- Last Saturday Concert @ Koontz Lake
- City of Knox Movies in the Park
- Bass Lake Festival
- Starke County 4H Fair
- City of Knox Concert in the Park
- Yellowstone Festival
- Shivering Shin Dig @ San Pierre
- Hamlet Haunted Fairgrounds
- Tails & Trails Dog Walk
- Hoosier Valley Railroad Event Trains
- Starke County Historical Society Ice Cream Social
- North Judson Mint Festival
- Starke County Chamber Movies in the Park

### PARTNERSHIPS

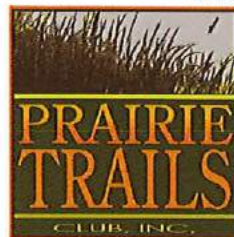
Several organizations in Starke County have worked and continue to work to promote quality of place. The Starke County Chamber of Commerce and Starke County Economic Development Foundation work to develop young professionals in the area through the Strake County Young Professionals group. The group meets monthly to discuss attracting and retaining residents through arts and culture.

In 2019, Starke County was a finalist community for Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs STELLAR communities program. Out of this, Constellation of Starke was formed and the group focuses on making Starke County a quality place to live, work and play. The focus of their projects is adding outdoor recreation amenities to existing parks and building opportunities for county parks. These projects have been monumental for enhancing outdoor recreation for the residents and visitors of Starke County.

Projects include:

- Restrooms at Norwayne Field in North Judson to support the recently completed splash pad.
- New picnic shelter and parking area at Wythogan Park in Knox to support the recently completed splash pad.
- Restrooms, parking, and trailhead for Bass Lake.
- New picnic shelter at Koontz Lake Beach.

Visit Starke County highlights community events and programming that make Starke County unique.



**SOCIAL & ECONOMIC FACTORS****POPULATION**

Population 2020	23,049
Population Change since 2010	-1.3%

**AGE & SEX (2019)**

Persons under 5 years	5.6%
Persons under 18 years	17.9%
Persons under 45 years	30.7%
Persons under 65 years	27.9%
Persons over 65 years	17.8%
Median Age	41.5 years

**RACE ORIGIN (2019)**

White	97.2%
Asian	.3%
Black or African American	.9%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	.1%
Two or More Races	1.0%
Hispanic or Latino	3.8%

**HOUSING**

Total Housing Units	11,165
Owner Occupied Housing Rate	76.6%
Renter Occupied Housing Rate	15.2%
Seasonal Housing Rate	9.9%

Residential housing permits 2020	59
Single Family	66.6%
Two Family	1.9%
Three and Four Family	1.3%
Five Families and More	30.2%

**EDUCATION**

High School Graduate or higher,	
Percent of person 25 yrs +	84.9%
Bachelor's Degree or higher,	
Percent of person 25 yrs +	11.9%

**ECONOMY**

Total Civilian Labor Force	9,730
Employed	8,947
Unemployed	783
Unemployment Rate	
November 2021	2.4%

**TRANSPORTATION**

Average Commute to Work	29.3 minutes
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**INCOME & POVERTY**

Median Household Income	\$54,001
Per Capita Income	\$38,910
Persons in Poverty	13.3%

*All statistical information was obtained from Stats Indiana utilizing Census data.*

**SUMMARY**

Starke County has seen a constant decrease in population since 2000. The population continues to age with the largest age groups being those over 45. The median age has increased from 37 in 2015 to 41.5 in 2020. This is higher than the states average of 38.

The median household income has increased and persons in poverty has decreased since 2000.

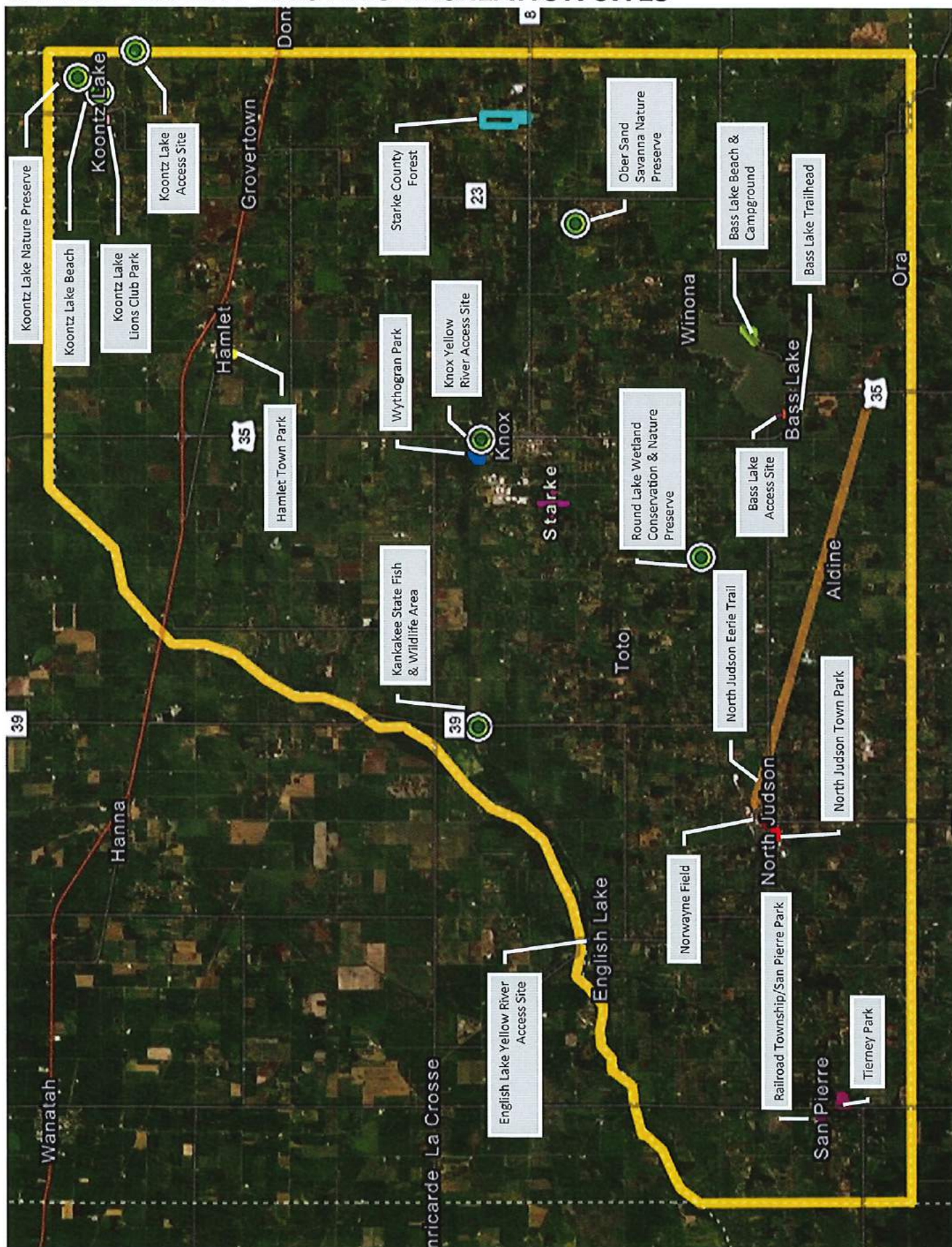
Starke County's rate of high school graduation has increased and is now greater than that of those with just a bachelor's degree. This is proving that programs to assist students to complete their high school education is working for Starke

County. Other skill based, non traditional 2 and 4 year programs, are also seeing an increase thanks to efforts of the Starke County Initiative for Lifelong Learning (SCILL).

The county is taking initiatives to retain residents by making quality of place a priority. Making recreational opportunities affordable and accessible are key to attracting young working professionals and families. Maintaining these properties and growing programs also needs to be a focus. Fees for park usage for visitors or seasonal passes for facilities would draw income and provide opportunities to enjoy for residents and visitors alike.



## STARKE COUNTY EXISTING RECREATION SITES





**BASS LAKE BEACH & CAMPGROUND**

In 2002, the State of Indiana conveyed the Bass Lake Beach and Campground property to Starke County, subject to deed restriction requiring that the property be used for public outdoor recreation as defined by the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The property is owned by the county and is maintained by the county and campground volunteers.

The property includes a beach on Bass Lake, with about 1,900 feet of frontage, the Beach House, pavilions, restrooms, and a gatehouse.

Across State Road 10 from the beach is the campground. The campground is comprised of mainly seasonal campers with minimal availability for weekly, weekend, or daily camping. A small area for tent camping is available.

The opportunity for the property to be a star of Starke County is possible. The lake and support facilities are a great asset for attraction for visitors. The amount of beach frontage, dock slips for boaters, parking, and a Beach House there is great potential. However, issues still remain with maintenance, current conditions of the facilities, and general management of the property.

Some of the recurrent issues affecting the usage of the beach facilities include:

- It is open and operational only part time
- The Beach House is nonoperational. There are no restrooms, concessions, or rentals available inside.
- Restrooms do not meet ADA standards, are in poor condition, and not regularly cleaned.
- ADA compliance is lacking throughout the site.
- Playground equipment is outdated and unsafe.
- No lifeguards.
- General upkeep and daily maintenance is nonexistent and the facilities are deteriorating.

Issues at the campground affecting the usage include:

- Minimal overnight spots are available due to seasonal renters.
- Restrooms and bathhouse do not meet ADA standards.
- No onsite property manager.
- Property needs cleaned up.
- Tent camping spots are minimal with old amenities.
- Playground is outdated and dangerous.
- Major issues with dump station.

These facilities are full of potential. Steps need to be taken by the Park Board and county to ensure these properties can be maintained to benefit residents and visitors, and support economic development.





# BASS LAKE BEACH & CAMPGROUND







*Indiana DNR maintains a public access boat launch on the southwest side of Bass Lake.*



*Sunset from the pier at Bass Lake Beach.*



*Gate house at entrance into Bass Lake Beach area.*



*Beach House with back patio.*



*Historic photos of patrons enjoying Bass Lake*







### STARKE COUNTY FOREST

In 2011, Forester Bruce Wakeland donated the Starke County Forest property to the county through an irrevocable trust agreement. Provisions in the agreement made the land permanently a public space for wildlife conservation, timber harvesting, and forestry management. The trust agreement also states that Mr. Wakeland will remain as the property manager.

The property encumbers a total of 129 acres made up of three parcels of wetland and forest. Trails are provided to navigate the terrain and explore the natural beauty of the area. The forest is intended to be self-supporting through the sale of timber produced on the premises. The property is not subsidized by taxes, funds, or assessments other than the sale of products from the forest, voluntary donations of funds, labor or grants.

The Forest is part of the Indiana Classified Forest Program. An active forest management plan states property management and identification of species, a state forester also inspects the property every five years, and a certified harvest must perform any timber harvesting on the site.

The property is a four season recreational asset for the county. In order to accommodate users, in 2018 access road and parking improvements were made through a \$15,200 grant from the Hardesty Memorial Endowment Fund and funds from the trust to provide upgrade the old access trail to a gravel road and a cul-de-sac for parking. The project also include native plantings in the middle of the parking area. Many locals do not know about this gem and improvements of this nature are helping to make the Forest stand out to residents and visitors.

In 2020 a guided self tour was put together by Mr. Wakeland and is available on the Starke County Parks website in print and audio.

Additional programming should be explored within the bounds of the trust and respect to the natural setting of the property.





*2018 ribbon cutting for improvements.*



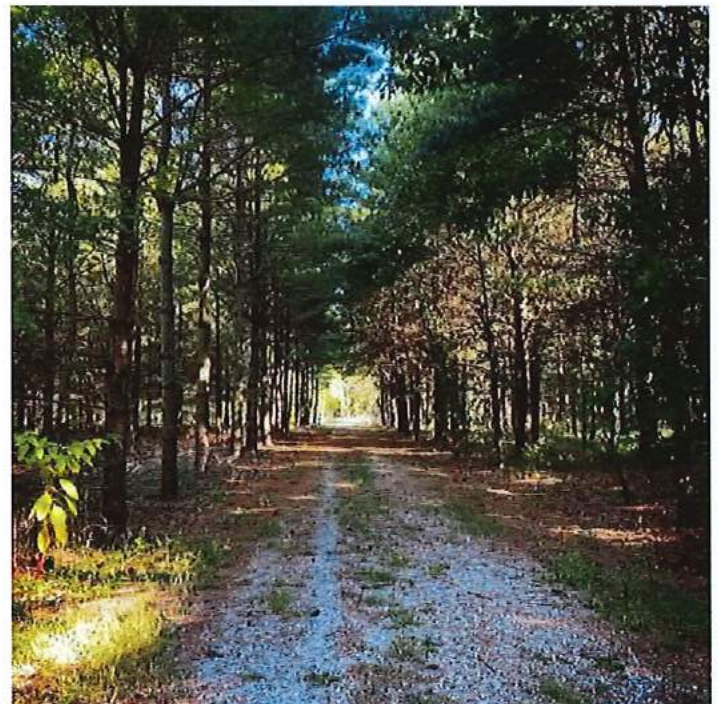
*Improvements developed an access road and parking area.*



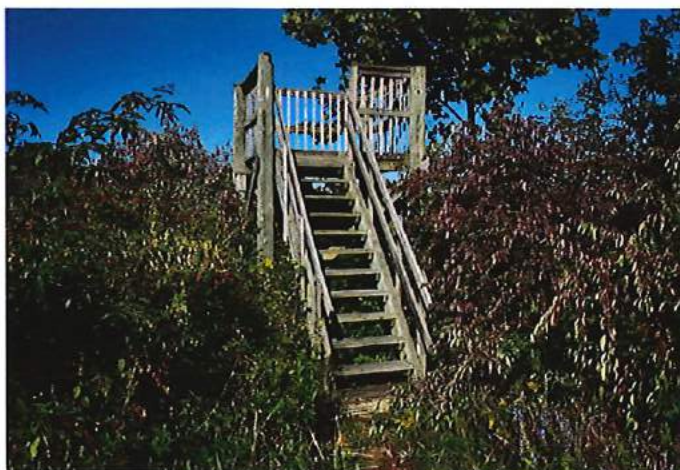
*Several species of birds can be found in the Forest.*



*Fog sits on a wetland area in the Forest.*



*Improving access to the Forest has been key to increasing patronage.*



*Unique features and plants create a draw for residents and tourists to explore the Forest.*



## **ACCESSIBILITY & FEDERAL STANDARDS**

### **STATEMENT OF ACCESSIBILITY**

Starke County Parks will provide reasonable conditions and improvements for people with disabilities to all of our facilities, programs, activities, and services. This include utilizing universal design and inclusion principles that provides access and inclusion for people with all types of disabilities.

The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act requires that local governments remove barriers to access in facilities, programs, activities, and services. Starke County will provide accessibility modifications that meet ADA guidelines, for any significant alterations of an existing facility, building or amenity. Beyond physical alterations and improvements, inclusion and universal design will be utilized for development of programs, services, communication, signage, policies, and procedures.

Starke County has an ADA Transition Plan in place. The County's ADA Coordinator is Joe Williams. Mr. Williams is also the Emergency Management Agency director. A grievance procedure is in place for those who feel they have discriminated against because of their disability or the their friends or family with disabilities. For more information contact:

#### **Joe Williams**

ADA/Title VI Coordinator / EMA Director  
jwilliams@co.starket.in.us / (574) 772-9100 x 182

### **CURRENT ACCESSIBILITY**

The Bass Lake Beach and Campground has minimal accessibility. Accessible parking spaces are marked, but are located in the gravel parking area and are overgrown with grass and weeds. The beach house has accessible sidewalks and entrances that meet minimum standards, but the restrooms are not accessible. The picnic pavilion does not have an accessible route to it or offer accessible amenities in the shelter. The bath house is also not accessible and in need of updates. The playground does not meet ADA requirements. The bath house facilities at the campground also do not meet ADA requirements.

Starke County Forest does not have ADA provisions. The parking area is not paved and there are no designated parking spaces. The trails are not ADA accessible.

### **PROPOSED ACCESSIBILITY**

The Bass Lake Beach, Beach House restrooms have been closed for a while due to necessary maintenance and upgrades. The facility is in need of a major renovation to make the facility ADA accessible. Structurally the facility has a great set up and the compliance issues should not be too large of a hurdle to overcome and implement. Initial estimates for this project are around \$50,000-\$75,000. The picnic shelter is in need of ADA upgrades with accessible tables and a path to access the pavilion. The proposed pavilion access and estimated at \$10,000. The playground needs new equipment, accessible paths, and ADA compliant surfacing, estimates for this project are around \$150,000. This cost could be reduced if the playground at the Beach is removed and focus is placed on the playground at the Campground. This cost has the potential to be reduced by 50% since infrastructure for accessible paths is already in place at the campground.

At Starke County Forest, an accessible parking space should be created and access to the trail should be provided. With the natural setting, materials such as asphalt and concrete do not seem appropriate, however a compacted aggregate will meet the needs of an ADA accessible path. Trail access and parking improvements are estimated at \$5,000.

These improvements are necessary to create an inclusive park system. Funds for these improvements could come from bonds, grants, donations, or county funding.

## **SWOT ANALYSIS**

### **STRENGTHS**

Starke County is home to many natural attractions including Bass Lake, Koontz Lake, the Tippecanoe River, Yellow River, several nature preserves, a Forest and many other areas and amenities provide outdoor recreation.

The North Judson Eerie Trail is a popular amenity for cyclists, walkers, and runners. The trail is owned by the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum and is maintained by the Prairie Trails Club on a volunteer basis.

The community is behind the Park Board with the hiring of a full time park superintendent.

### **WEAKNESSES**

Major weakness for the parks system is the lack of advertising and signage. Many people in the county are unaware of the Starke County Forest and what it offers residents. The addition of the new website is helping to navigate, direct, and inform users what amenities are available, but increasing the public's knowledge would be beneficial.

Opportunities for connections between the areas of recreation have not been explored. The communities of Starke County are not connected to the county owned recreation areas. Connections exist for municipal properties and do not extend.

Relationship building is necessary to grow and improve the park system. The public feels the park board has not worked to improve failing properties but with the addition of a parks superintendent the hope is to develop an improved public relationships.

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

The properties of the Starke County Park System have great potential to be major attractions and economic drivers for the area.

Bass Lake Beach and Campground should be a top focus for the board. These properties provide recreation opportunity but also can be an income generator for general maintenance and future improvements.

There are opportunities to utilize and improve local access for navigable waters including adding access sites to the Yellow River and other bodies of water in the county.

Expanding the North Judson Eerie Trail is a great opportunity to improve connectivity. In addition to increased connections, exploring a potential lease agreement with the County, Hoosier Valley Rail Museum and Prairie Trails Group or a combination of. This would help make improvements and have more control for safety.

The Starke County Forest has opportunities to develop additional amenities, programs, and activities to make the most of this one of a kind properties.

Several parcels on Bass Lake and Koontz Lake are subject to public dedication and could have the potential to be developed as small parks.

Partnering with other organizations to promote and grow the parks is a huge opportunity for Starke County. This has proven successful with projects of the Constellation of Starke movement.

### **THREATS**

A comment seen over and over again as a major threat is overall safety. This is safety from failing facilities and safety from a lack of patrols or law enforcement presence during after hours at park properties. Enhanced security lighting and cameras could be beneficial to deter this type of activity.

Funding is a major threat, probably the top threat. Even though the park board now has a budget, it is still minimal to accomplish and maintain properties. Greater financial support and funding resources need to be explored to successfully develop a park system and park department.



## **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

### **PUBLIC INPUT MEETING**

A public meeting was held on November 9 in the evening. It was advertised in the local newspaper and online. The meeting was attended by 30 people; 24 were members of the public. The sign-in sheet is provided in the Appendix.

A presentation of the project was given at the beginning of the meeting. The portion of the meeting discussed the planning process including an update on the public input survey and next steps of the process.

Public input surveys were available for those who haven't been able to take the survey.

After the presentation the public and park board were invited to work their way through various tables to provide input on the parks properties, identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, evaluate current goals and provide direction for updated goals, and explore other recreation opportunities in the county. While others were working on the worksheets, it provided time for the planning team to have conversations with those who were less comfortable writing their comments down.

The work session lasted about thirty minutes. This provided ample time for the public and park board to discuss the topics listed. After the work session conversation continued regarding additional properties and fine tuning the goals.

The conversation between the public and the park board was full of emotion and ideas to make the parks an asset for Starke County.

The public input meeting lasted just over an hour to be respectful of the regular park board meeting.

Information gathered from the public meeting is provided in the Appendix.

### **DRAFT PLAN PUBLIC PRESENTATION**

A public meeting for presentation of the draft plan and public feedback will be held in March in accordance with the Park Board meeting. Information obtained from this meeting will be

combined with comments received on the draft from the public as well as from IDNR to make the final revisions to the draft plan.

### **USER INPUT SURVEYS**

A survey was developed to gather the public's opinion regarding the current status and future plans for the Starke County Parke System. Questions were asked about the existing facilities and what people feel is missing. Other questions included park utilization, programming, and potential funding sources.

Printed copies of the survey were distributed during the October Park Board Meeting. The Parks Superintendent also distributed paper copies to the Bass Lake Campground. Eleven paper copies were returned. The survey went live on October 8 and closed November 19.

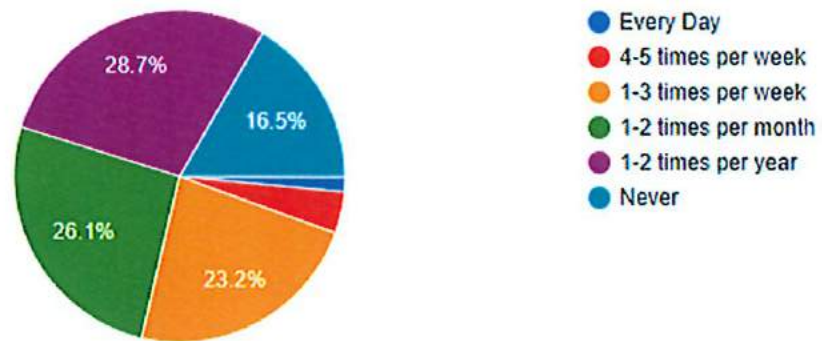
The survey was heavily promoted via email lists and on social media by Bass Lake Beach and Campground and Koontz Lake Association pages. It was listed on the county's website and on the WKVI radio's website.

272 online responses were received and combined with the paper copies totaled 283 responses were provided. Survey highlights are provided on the following pages with charts and graphs. The full survey results are provided in the Appendix.

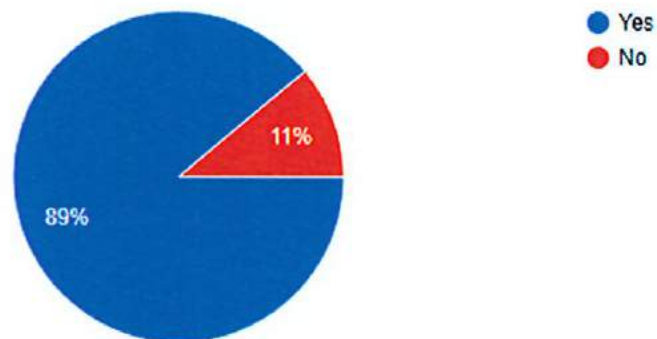
### **FINAL PLAN PUBLIC PRESENTATION**

A final presentation of the plan will be held at the April Parks Board Meeting. At this meeting the board will adopt by resolution the completed plan.

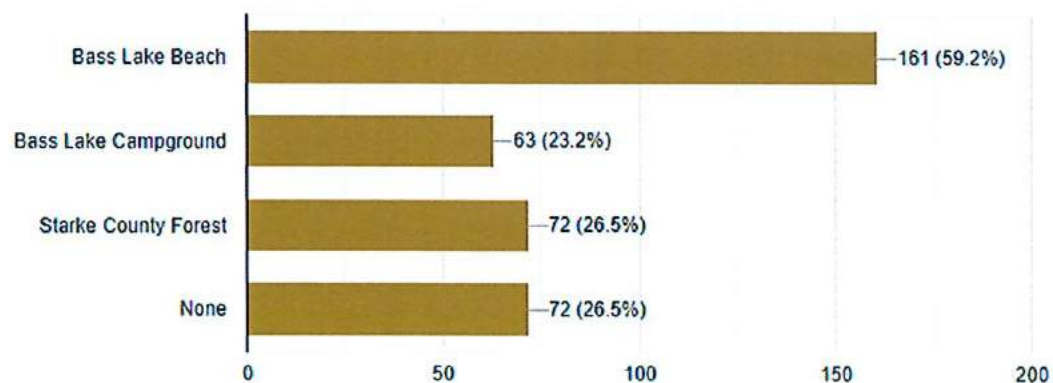
How often do you use the Starke County Parks?



Do you believe Starke County Parks provide an essential service to the community?



Which Starke County Park have you or your family visited the most in the past 12 months?  
Please select all that apply.





## NEEDS ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION

The needs analysis was put together utilizing information gathered from public input, input from the board, the parks superintendent, and other comments from the public.

Common threads throughout all input were identified and focused on facility issues, suggestions for improvements, opportunities for financial success for the department and programs.

It also considered public perception of the parks and programs. If public perception of facilities is poor, the public will not utilize facilities and it becomes hindrance to growth.

A strategic action plan was developed that identifies projects for Starke County to focus on and guide implementation for the next five years and beyond.

## SUMMARY OF ISSUES

### GENERAL/OVERALL

- Parks need support and funding from County Commissioners and Council.
- Maintenance plans for properties are nonexistent.
- Properties lack ADA compliance.
- Lack of awareness of properties outside of Bass Lake Beach and Campground.
- Marketing strategy and branding is needed to create Starke County Parks image.

### BASS LAKE BEACH & CAMPGROUND

- Majority of amenities lack accessibility
- The Beach House is closed and in need of improvements.
- Restrooms are not functioning or code compliant.
- The beach is eroding and the quality of sand is poor.
- Playground equipment is outdated, unsafe and not ADA compliant.
- Amenities such as equipment rentals and concessions are not available on site.
- Minimal amenities and activities beyond the beach and lake.
- Boat piers and docks need to be addressed.

- Parking lot needs updated.
- It is difficult for the public to use the campground because most camp sites are seasonal, not nightly or weekly.
- Campground sites do not offer full hookups.
- Campground roads are in need of improvements.

### STARKE COUNTY FOREST

- Lighting is minimal on property.
- No restrooms.

### KOONTZ LAKE TIPPECANOE DRIVE BEACH

- It is not well known that this property is part of Starke County through public dedication.
- The beach is not accessible.
- No amenities are currently available.
- Parking is minimal and the road is narrow especially for emergency vehicles.
- Signage and lighting are minimal.

### YELLOW RIVER ACCESS SITE

- Additional education could benefit this site.

### NORTH JUDSON EERIE TRAIL

- There is potential for the county to lease the trail from the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum. This would create opportunity for improvements and maintenance.
- Additional connections need to be explored to connect other areas.

### ENGLISH LAKE YELLOW RIVER ACCESS SITE

- Parking and boat launch can be improved.
- Improved signage and education of site would be beneficial.

**NATIONAL STANDARDS**

Currently Starke County meets the minimum standards for open space. Based on the standards, a parks system the size of Starke County's should have about 6 to 10 acres of developed open space per 1,000 residents. Starke County has about 23,000 residents, there should be 150 to 200 acres of developed park space. The Bass Lake Beach and Campground is 18 acres, and the Starke County Forest is 128 acres. The Kankakee State Fish and Wildlife Area is a large open space that offers passive recreation in a natural setting. Between all of these properties the county owns nearly 150 acres of park land. The downfall is majority of this acreage is natural area with trails. Additional parks providing different uses would be highly beneficial to the county.

**WHAT IS NEEDED IN STARKE COUNTY?**

Starke County's properties offer outdoor recreation opportunities for its residents. Public support is plentiful and demonstrated through the public input received for this plan. The parks department is still in its infancy and has a long way to go to become fully developed in regards to maintenance planning, capital improvements, marketing and education and programming. Additional financial support is necessary to continue to make improvements and grow the park system and department.

The addition of the Parks Department website has been a great first start for educating people on the parks properties. Added value can be seen through increased outlets for information such as social media. This is also a great way to involve other public partners to help each other promote programs and reach a greater market. A marketing strategy will be able to help identify ways to better reach park users and promote programs and activities. This can also help to brand the parks and create a unique identifier to Starke County Parks, currently all of the properties look like state owned properties due to the colors and signage utilized. Creative branding can do a lot to help market the parks.

Signage and wayfinding needs to be implemented and updated. Wayfinding signs along roadways would create awareness of facilities and help

guide people to the parks. The website has been a great start to providing information, but hard copies could still be beneficial to have available. These can be provided to local businesses, Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development, and government offices to showcase and highlight these great features of Starke County.

**BASS LAKE BEACH & CAMPGROUND**

This property is a gem for the area. It once was the playground for the wealthy but now is in need of great repairs and updating. However with a strategic vision, Bass Lake Beach and Campground can once again become a regional asset.

The public loves this property for the lake and the views that come with it. For many, they have been lifelong residents and patrons of the Beach area and have many memories enjoying Bass Lake. Access to the water and beach for enjoyment and boating is a draw for visitors.

The public would like to see scheduled property maintenance recurring throughout the year to provide better management. The bathhouse and Beach House need major renovations and should be a priority to provide basic amenities.

The boat docks and piers are rented seasonally and offer limited access for occasional or daily boaters. Also something the parks board needs to find a solution to is boaters anchoring in the lake and utilizing the beach without purchasing a day pass or utilizing others seasonal passes. The current system is missing out on income that could be used for operations and maintenance.

The campground needs to find a way to better accommodate weekly and nightly visitors. Currently majority of the sites are occupied by seasonal campers, greatly limiting the number of available spots for other campers. It was discussed a number of seasonal spots would be available, it had not been determined how those would be selected whether by lottery or other means.

A workshare program was discussed for campers to be able to assist with day to day maintenance and operations of the campground and beach area (working the gatehouse or future



opportunities at the Beach House). The workshare program could allow seasonal campers to receive a discounted rate on seasonal fees.

This potential solution could help ease the burden of O & M on the park board and system. It would also eliminate the utilization of full time or part time staff.

Additional amenities like Wi-Fi capability would be beneficial to bring the facilities more up to date compared to other like facilities.

#### **BASS LAKE TRAILHEAD (S CR 450 E / E SR 210)**

This property was identified with the Constellation of Starke working group. This project would provide trailhead amenities for bicyclists and other trail users. Restrooms, benches and water fountains are planned as well as parking for boat trailers and cars.

#### **STARKE COUNTY FOREST**

The Starke County Forest is a beautiful property protected by irrevocable trust to remain forested land open to the public. In recent years more has been done to help the public become more aware of this great resource. The addition of an improved access lane and parking area provide basic amenities to users. The signage at the entrance to the Forest is minimal and hard to spot as it blends with the scenery. Additional directional signage could help users locate the property.

Forester Wakeland has provided audio tours of the property on the Starke County Parks website. Hard copies and visual maps are available at the information sign on the property near the parking area.

Additional ADA amenities, such as an compact aggregate trail could make the facility ADA compliant. This property offers natural beauty and some of the best bird watching in Starke County and proper accommodations should be made to be make it inclusive.

Plant and tree identification could make the Forest an asset for local schools to offer nature based education. Or the addition of guided tours and walks based on special plants that are unique

to the Forest or Starke County.

The trails have the potential to offer a variety of multi season recreation. Nature walks, runs and biking or cross country skiing and snowshoeing could be great programs for the winter months. Offering rentals provides a unique experience to users but also offers a potential income generator for the parks.

The addition of other amenities such as restrooms and benches would make great additions to making the Forest more user friendly.

#### **TRAIL SYSTEM**

The public would like to see more trails to connect facilities. Many enjoy the existing network but would like to see that extend to other areas for greater connectivity.

The county should look into leasing the North Judson Eerie Trail from the Hoosier Valley Railroad Museum. This could help improve maintenance and safety by being able to utilize county resources.

The county should also look to further develop the trail system, expanding upon the existing North Judson Eerie Trail. Additional connections to the trail and throughout the county should be explored as opportunities arise. To help with this, the county should look to regional trail plans and the North Judson Eerie Trail Future Vision Phase Plan to plan future routes and help acquire property through INDOT or other programs such as the Indiana Recreational Trail Program.

#### **KOONTZ LAKE TIPPECANOE DRIVE BEACH**

This property was one identified with the Constellation of Starke working group and a improvement plan has been developed to include access, a picnic pavilion with tables and grills. A small parking area is planned.

Parking is an issue on this property. The lane is narrow and parking is limited. Additional lighting and signage could benefit this property.

Additionally like other small beaches, a metered parking area could be a solution to maximize parking capabilities.

**YELLOW RIVER ACCESS SITE**

Locating additional access sites along the Yellow River would provide additional opportunities to utilize a local natural resource. Currently there are only two public access sites established. This makes for a long trip to go from Wythogan Park in Knox to English Lake.

The addition of an access site at Range Road would serve as a mid point between the two. This could be a huge offering for outfitters to provide day trips with lunch stops or overnight camping at the halfway point.

**ENGLISH LAKE ACCESS SITE**

Both access site require minor upgrades. English Lake could benefit from upgrades to parking and lighting as well at the boat launch.

Both facilities could also benefit from additional signage and wayfinding.

**KOONTZ LAKE LIONS CLUB PARK**

Initial conversations have taken place with the local Lions Club in order to develop a partnership for the Parks Department to take on this park property. What this partnership or agreement look like have yet to be determined or publicly discussed.

**ADDITIONAL PUBLIC INPUT ON FUTURE PARK PROPERTIES**

A second survey was utilized to gather public input on additional park properties or where the parks board should look to expand the parks network.

This survey asked where the public saw opportunities for added outdoor recreation in all of the townships of Starke County.

This survey ran from December 2nd through December 17th and 26 responses were collected. This survey was published online on the website and through email list.

The group understood the rate of responses could be hindered due to the amount of response on the initial survey. However the input received would still be essential to future planning for the parks. The following is a summary of that survey, full results are available in the Appendix.

**RECREATION AT KOONTZ LAKE**

- Walking trails
- Rentals
- More defined beach area
- Playground area

**RECREATION IN RAILROAD TOWNSHIP**

- Picnic shelter
- Playground equipment
- Eerie Trail link connection
- Self guided nature trail of prairie area
- Riverwalk along the Yellow or Kankakee Rivers
- Encumber former nursing home on US 421 for park

**RECREATION IN WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP**

- Events at the Forest
- Ice skating
- Cross County Skiing
- Partner with Township Fire Department to utilize field south of station for events

**RECREATION IN WAYNE TOWNSHIP**

- Regularly scheduled walks/runs/biking
- Woodland loop off of Eerie Trail; extend Eerie Trail NW of North Judson
- Cooperative Park project with Town of North Judson

**RECREATION IN JACKSON TOWNSHIP**

- Better water fowl observation area at SR 8/39

**RECREATION IN DAVIS TOWNSHIP**

- Respondents were unsure what could be added here.

**RECREATION IN OREGON TOWNSHIP**

- Park area for Groverton (Census Designated Place) possibly near the existing EMS station north of US 30

**RECREATION IN CENTER TOWNSHIP**

- Rehabilitate the existing railroad bridge
- Cooperative park project with City of Knox
- Kayaking/Canoeing
- Outfitter

**RECREATION IN CALIFORNIA TOWNSHIP**

- Improved access to Round Lake Nature Preserve
- Construct small boardwalk at Round Lake to



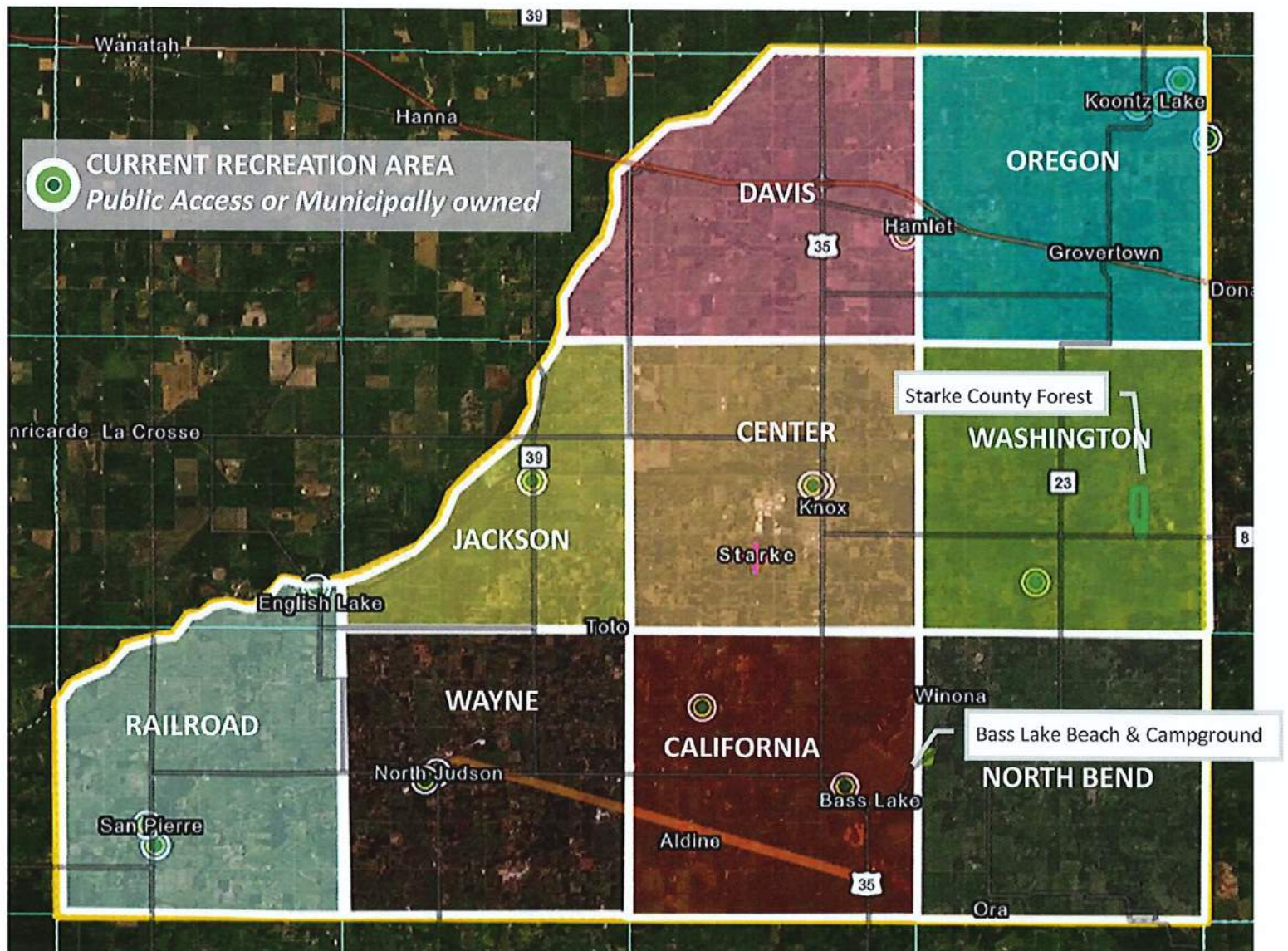
access wetland

- Create trail connections to local amenities such as shopping
- Outdoor area for concerts, farmers market
- Dog park
- Bike and walking trails around Round Lake

#### RECREATION IN NORTH BEND TOWNSHIP

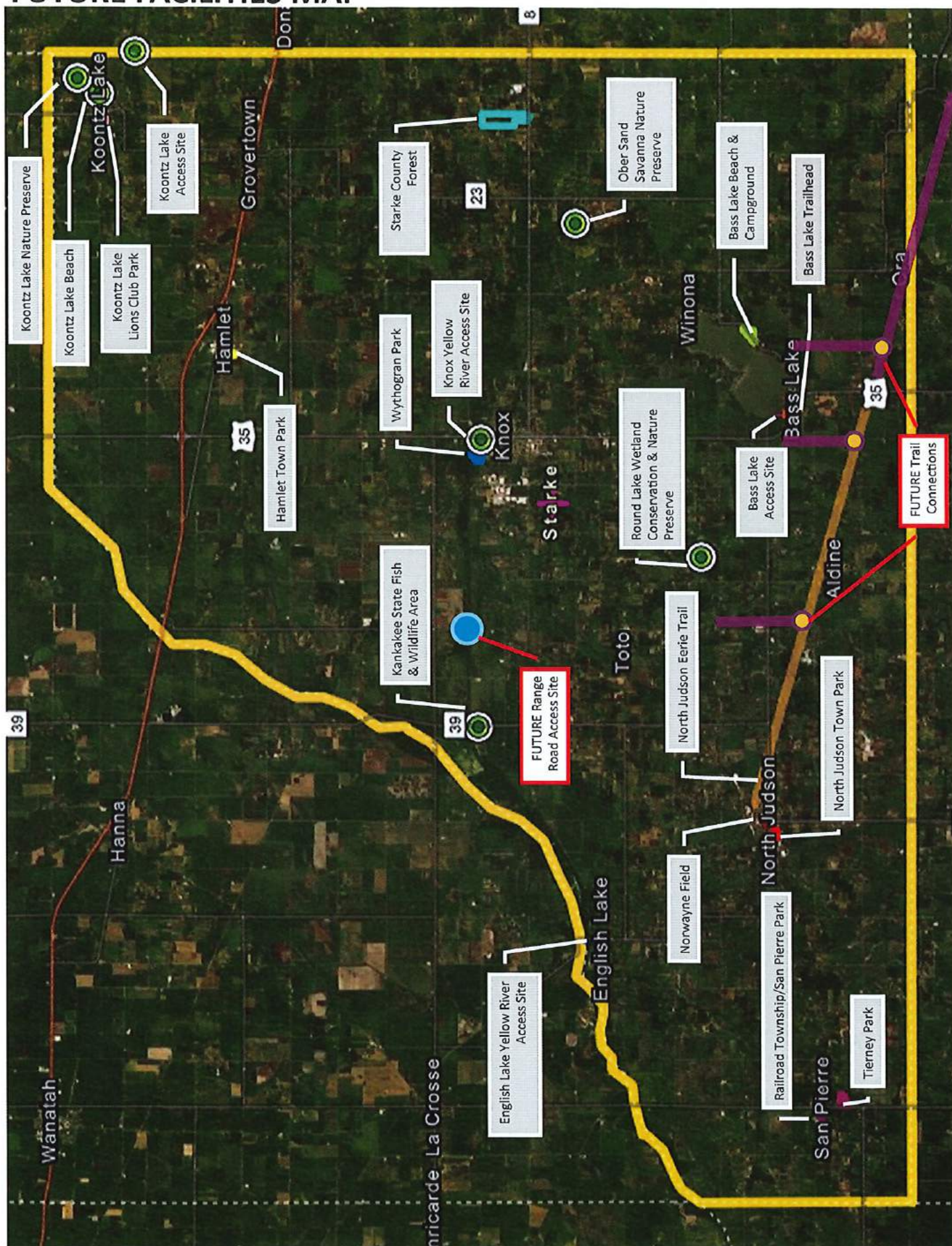
- Rentals at Bass Lake
- Make Bass Lake year round attraction
- Build on new trail extension to Monterey; connect via bike route to Bass Lake

## TOWNSHIP MAP





## FUTURE FACILITIES MAP





Starke County Parks 5 Year Action Plan						
Description	Cost/Budget	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Implementing Partners						
<b>Bass Lake Beach</b>						
Docks	\$ 60,000	\$ 30,000	\$ 30,000			CEDIT Funds
Beach House	\$ 50,000	\$ 20,000	\$ 15,000	\$ 15,000		Local Grants/ budget
Pavilions	\$ 10,000		\$ 10,000			Budget
Restrooms	\$ 30,000		\$ 15,000		\$ 15,000	Grant funds
Kayak Rentals	\$ 25,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 5,000	Grant Funds/budget
Removal of swim platform	\$ 25,000		\$ 25,000			Parks & Wildlife Grant
Beach Restoration	\$ 50,000		\$ 25,000	\$ 25,000		Parks and Wildlife Grant
Signage for Beach	\$ 20,000		\$ 5,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 5,000	CVB Grant
Beautification	\$ 20,000		\$ 5,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 5,000	Budget/Local Grant
Roadway upgrade	\$ 40,000		\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	Budget/donations/ local grants
<b>Bass Lake Campground</b>						
Lift Station	\$ 25,000	\$ 25,000				Budget
Restroom remodel	\$ 25,000		\$ 25,000			Budget/Local Grant
Machinery and Equipment	\$ 62,000	\$ 12,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 20,000	\$ 10,000	Budget
Electrical upgrade	\$ 250,000			\$ 250,000		County/Grants/Donations/Budget
Sewers	\$ 1,000,000				\$1,000,000	County/Grants/Donations/Budget
Tent site upgrades/pavilion	\$ 20,000		\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000		Budget
Campground expansion	\$ 500,000				\$ 500,000	County/Grants/Donations/Budget
Expansion upgrades	\$ 500,000					County/Grants/Donations/Budget
Drainage upgrades	\$ 40,000		\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	Budget/Local Grant
Roadway upgrades	\$ 30,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000		Budget/donations
Playground Equipment	\$ 75,000		\$ 45,000	\$ 30,000		Budget/Grants/Donations

Starke County Parks 5 Year Action Plan						
Description	Cost/Budget	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026 Implementing Part-
<b>Starke County Forest</b>						
Equipment	\$ 40,000		\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	Budget
Maps/Trail markers	\$ 10,000		\$ 5,000		\$ 5,000	CVB Grant
Cross Country skiing	\$ 10,000	\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000	Budget
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>\$ 2,917,000</b>	<b>\$ 108,044</b>	<b>\$ 276,046</b>	<b>\$ 411,048</b>	<b>\$ 1,581,050</b>	<b>\$ 586,052</b>

*Additional Programming can be planned within each year. A marketing plan would be an additional cost as well as larger programs where additional equipment would need to be purchased. Partnering with other local organizations to coordinate and hold programs could benefit the current budget situation of the Department especially knowing the large scale projects that need to take place to bring the facilities back to fully operational.*

#### APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION

The prioritization and action schedule provide a road map for necessary projects. The next five years is very focused on maintenance. Many of the properties as noted by the public are in need of repair and the parks board and department need to take note of where the public wants to see improvements.

Department expansion is tricky to navigate when current facilities are failing the users. Basic programming can be done with a budget in mind to accommodate such large scale projects.

Budgeting and looking to local funding partners is essential and necessary to see long term success to build up the parks system. Each year has a check list or target projects to focus on. With this knowledge and establishing budgets and what can be accomplished in that year financially, progress can be achieved.

This also offers an opportunity to evaluate existing programs and see potential for income producing activities. The two can go hand in hand. Building and restructuring programs can be done while

other projects are being navigated.

When projects are being developed it is key to maintain transparency. Informing the public along the way aids in buy in for project success and allows the public to be a part of the process. It is key to remember the public are the facility users. If a project is not developed with them, project success may not be seen or supported.

Completing small scale projects and improvements and adding activities and programming can be huge to track success. This encourages growth and participation for future projects.

A variety of funding resources are available to fund projects. A mixed funding approach will be encouraged to be utilized for large scale projects to maximize the amount of money. State and federal grants typically require a local match. Leveraging local resources such as community foundation grants and donations, can reduce the amount of county funding required.



**FUNDING & STATE AGENCY PROGRAMS****• INDIANA TRAILS PROGRAM**

The Indiana Trails Program is a new trails program that will replace the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) in 2021. The new ITP program will be similar to Indiana's existing RTP and will still be administered by Department of Natural Resources Division of Outdoor Recreation. The main difference is that funds for ITP will now be state dollars rather than federal funds.

**• NEXT LEVEL TRAILS**

Next Level Trails will invest \$150 million – the largest infusion of State trail funding in Indiana history – toward the development of regionally and locally significant trails throughout Indiana. As part of Governor Holcomb's broader Next Level Connections infrastructure program, Next Level Trails (NLT) is designed to incentivize collaborative efforts to accelerate trail connections. The Department of Natural Resources will administer the program.

**• LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND**

The Land and Water Conservation Fund was passed by Congress in 1965 to assist eligible governmental units in the providing new outdoor recreation opportunities. The LWCF was permanently reauthorized in March 2019. The LWCF is a matching assistance program that provides grants for 50% of the cost for the acquisition and/or development of outdoor recreation sites and facilities.

**• CREATING PLACES**

This program is run as a collaborative effort between the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority and Patronicity, a crowd funding community based organization. This grant provides a match of up to \$50,000 for projects that meet their fundraising goal through a crowdfunding platform. Local governments and non-profits can submit their projects and may include streetscape, beautification, mural implementation, informational kiosks and wayfinding, enhancing walkability, access to public amenities and infrastructure for bike and non-motorized paths.

**LOCAL FUNDING RESOURCES**

- **PARKS & RECREATION GENERAL BUDGET**
- **NON-REVERTING ACCOUNTS**
- **GIFTS & DONATIONS**
- **CUMULATIVE CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT FUND**
- **LEASE PURCHASE**
- **RECREATIONAL IMPACT FEES**
- **USER FEES**