

# KOSCIUSKO COUNTY PARK SYSTEM: BRIDGING THE GAPS AND CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

Investigation and proposal for establishing a countywide park system within Kosciusko County, Indiana.

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# Kosciusko County Park System

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# Kosciusko County Park System

## Introduction

County wide park systems are used in surrounding counties to link together the communities and townships which reside in those areas. They work to bolster the efforts and funding for the local park systems they represent. This research based white paper is meant to lay a foundation for the development of a county wide park system by providing insights on background, examples of county parks in surrounding counties, benefits of a county wide system, current and new possible locations, funding opportunities currently available. It is the hope of the authors that the next KLA group will find our idea insightful and be able to pick up the torch and take this idea one step further.

## Background of Kosciusko County Parks

Previously two Kosciusko Leadership Academy white papers were presented to create and fund a county park system in 1991 and again in 2001. The first paper "Establishing a Kosciusko County Park System" outlined steps required to form a park board, choose land, obtain grants, and plan activities and facilities. (Skinner & Rider, 1991). The second paper "Funding For A County Park" expanded on the obstacles to forming the county park, which was funding and the county government resistance to a park. The resistance was noted that the individual communities and the lakes provide suitable recreation in Kosciusko county. (Davis, Grames, & Haecker, 2001). No action was taken following those papers, presumably due to a lack of support of the project. Currently the existing parks and recreational resources in Kosciusko County are developed and managed by individual communities, private foundations, or the state of Indiana.

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## Kosciusko County Recreation by the Numbers



Kosciusko County is home to over 78,000 residents within approximately 17 different communities and is divided into 17 townships. Each community has individual systems for the maintenance of the public parks, ball fields, playgrounds, rental facilities, libraries, and entertainment or educational programs. The tourism and travel industry contributed over \$162 million to the county economy and residents contributed over \$18 million in direct spending to the local tourism industry (Kosciusko County Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2017).

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There are over 100 lakes within Kosciusko county, which currently generate \$313 million dollars annually to the local economy (Bingham & Bosch, 2016). There are at least 7 beaches, many boat launches, and a few campgrounds or group camps that allow some public access to the water. However, most of the recreation options associated with the lakes stop at the water's edge and are still limited to a smaller portion of the population.

Kosciusko County has five independent trail systems totaling to approximately 25 miles in the Warsaw, Winona Lake, and Syracuse communities. Over the last couple of decades, different community groups have attempted to generate trails and connect the individual trail projects, only to encounter roadblocks in funding, land acquisition, ownership, and maintenance.

Kosciusko County houses six different nature preserves: Bock Nature Preserve near Akron, Pisgah Marsh Area near Pierceton, Wildwood Nature Preserve near Silver Lake, Glenwood Nature Preserve near Etna Green, Koinonia Environmental Center near Pierceton, and Tri-County Fish and Wildlife Area near Syracuse. The preserves are owned by private and state entities. Additionally, recreation at the nature preserves is often limited to walking on trails and nature observation.

Finally, Kosciusko County has two rivers (Tippecanoe River and Eel River) flowing through it with many feeder streams. Parts of both rivers can be navigated with canoes and kayaks, but access is limited due to very few entry and exit points and almost non-existent livery services for transportation and equipment rentals.

## Benefits and Comparisons of Countywide Park System

A countywide park system could offer numerous benefits ranging from preservation, education, recreation, and community association. County parks could offer a focused approach for tying the

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independent land preservation or recreation projects together. The public would benefit with having county parks that complement the existing parks and recreation programs or help take the existing parks the next level by expanding past the current jurisdictions. A countywide park system could help grow tourism or assist in the preservation of the at-risk habitat and species. Kosciusko County would benefit by having more nature areas, hiking trails, ski trails, and other non-water based recreation opportunities.

The Allen County Parks Department (ACPD) surrounding Fort Wayne is a prime example of a countywide park system that is thriving and adding value to the community in and around Fort Wayne. The ACPD was established in 1965 by the Allen County Council with assistance from the Fort Wayne Parks Department with the passage of the Indiana Park and Recreation law. Land was first acquired in the 1970's and has grown to include five properties that total about 1100 acres of land. The ACPD is more passivation recreation for education, conservation, and preservation, which compliments the active recreation that the city and municipal parks offer (ball diamonds, soccer fields, pools, courts, etc.). Allen County does not have any state parks or recreation areas, therefore the ACPD provides the state park experience minus the campgrounds. (Baxter, 2017) The ACPD operates on funds generated through multiple sources including county government, rentals, user fees, program fees, grants, and donations. The staff salaries are provided by the county government and the rest of the operating and maintenance expenses are supplied by the user fees and other sources. The parks are individually unique and offer a wide range of activities in more natural settings. Deer Run Wilderness Area offers group programs that include a 30 element challenge course (climbing, ziplines, obstacles, etc.) and outdoor skills learning. Fox Island at the southern end of the county offers a nature center, picnic shelters, campfire pits, grills, swimming beach, fishing, hiking, bird observation building, playgrounds, dog beach, cross country skiing, and over 600 acres of natural areas. Three other parks at the northern

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end of the county offers access to Cedar Creek and many of the same activities that Fox Island offers. ACPD also offers summer day camps that provide safe places for kids to explore and learn outdoor skills, which makes great alternatives to standard daycare. Finally, ACPD offers unique educational opportunities offered through specimen dissection, biology, and chemistry courses for homeschool students or others wanting science based learning experiences. (Allen County Parks, n.d.)

The Fulton County Parks (FCP) system is a great example of a grass roots approach to a start of a countywide park system in recent years. A group of Fulton County citizens approached the county council around the year 2000 to form a county park board. The first property was acquired in 2005 and the FCP has grown to include 4 properties. The parks include access to the Tippecanoe River, a meeting center, picnic areas, fishing, pavilions, a butterfly garden, and some walking trails. Currently the FCP do not receive funds from the county government or taxes and solely operate on donations, grants, and volunteers. The FCP board has formed partnerships with the Division of Nature Preserves and with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources to help with funding and land preservation. (Walsh, 2017)

### **Park System Formation and Funding**

Opportunities for funding the county park system can come in many forms. From private donations from private individuals and local business, to grants, to land trust, and even the possibility for state funding. To begin the funding for the Kosciusko County Park system it is recommended that we first look to grants to get the initial startup capital required.

Grants are available from many current programs offered nationally and at the state level. The Hometown Indiana Grant Program Act, which is sponsored through the Indiana DNR is a program that provides grants for 50% of the cost for and acquisition and development of recreational sites (Indiana

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Department of Natural Resources). Appropriations of these funds are determined every two years and the total allotment is divided among the Department of Natural Resources division of Outdoor Recreation. State funds however cannot be accepted by the recipients until 50% matching cost is accumulated (Indiana Department of Natural Resources). Amounts that can be requested for matching can total between \$10,000 and \$200,000 dollars (Indiana Department of Natural Resources). Other Possible Grant opportunities are listed below:

- Indiana Community Improvement/Development Grants, which provides funding to organizations that are working in Indiana to improve the quality of life in their communities. These grants focus on Arts and Culture, Education (Wildlife Education), health and community welfare (Indiana Grant Opportunities, 2017). More Information can be found at [www.siafoundation.org](http://www.siafoundation.org)
- Youth Service America offers service learning grants to Indiana and surrounding states. These grants are awarded to recipients who are working to fight childhood obesity (Indiana Grant Opportunities, 2017).
- Payback Foundation is a grant program sponsored by former colts quarterback Peyton Manning. This program provides funding to organizations that provide educational and leadership opportunities for at risk youths (Indiana Grant Opportunities, 2017).
- Access to Recreation is a grant program sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg foundation. Grant funding is allocated to recreational programs in Indiana and the surrounding states (Indiana Grant Opportunities, 2017).

There are also a few charitable organization and land trust foundations which grant funding could be obtain from. The Dekko Foundation provides grant funding in northern Indiana to organizations

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focusing on child development (Dekko Foundation, n.d.). This is one of the main reason we continue to stress that each of the identified plots of land be used as an educational opportunity. It seems that education is a key point in receiving funding from foundations. Another foundation is the Acres Land Trust. Acres Land Trust provides guidance on funding, acquires, and helps to maintain land and natural habitat with the goal of promoting knowledge and appreciation of our natural resources (Acres Land Trust, n.d.). They strive to provide scientific and educational opportunities about these natural resources to their communities. Acres land trust will also partner with local organization to promote awareness within the surrounding communities as well (Acres Land Trust, n.d.).

Another alternative for funding the County park system would be to work with state and local officials to pass a legislative bill to provide funding. When speaking with State Representative Curt Nisly he had mentioned that he believes it is the responsibility for the state to provide funding for these public good areas to the community. A “public good” is a commodity or service that is provided to all members of a society by the government, without requiring profits. State Rep. Nisly Stated, “That a public good is and should be accessible to anyone in the community and that is it a function of the state and local governments to provide that public good to its citizens.” He pointed out an example to this as well. Just north of Kosciusko County is the Pumpkin Vine bike trails, which run from Middlebury to Goshen. The funding for this trail was established through house bill 1174, and authored by Wes Culver. This bill establish a task force which looked to connect existing bike trails, estimate cost, find funding, prepare a timeline for completion and also changed some Indiana law regarding safe cycling.

### **Possible Locations**

Possible locations have been identified throughout Kosciusko County. Each of these locations and potential locations are free and public good spaces, which could potentially benefit from a county

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wide park system which could align the community and strengthen funding behind these community resources. There are many different seasonal activities which could take place at these locations. Some can even be used as wildlife education outpost for local school and youth organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Identified in the next section are areas in each quadrant of the community to provide a county wide reach, extending to many of the townships.



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### Leesburg Gravel Pit:

Located just south of Leesburg and north of W 600 N, The Leesburg Gravel pit is owned by Phend & Brown, Inc which is an earthmoving and highway construction company. Since Phend & Brown was established in 1922 they have been removing the resources in this area to create aggregates and asphalt paving materials, which has created a small lake and an area of underutilized land. This area consists of grass and marshlands and could be utilized as a greenway for hiking, cycling, cross country skiing, and other public activities. There is also an abundance of fish in this lake and it is not uncommon to see many cars parked on the side of W. 600 N. as eager fishermen, ignoring the no trespassing signs, take advantage of the fish that were placed there. This site is already being used as a public good by these fishermen regardless of legality.



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### City County Athletic Complex (CCAC):

The CCAC is a 65 acre, not-for-profit sports facility which was established in 1992 (CCAC, n.d.).

This area consists of lighted baseball and soccer fields that serve as an established public good for the community. It is currently funded by local businesses in the community, membership dues, grants, and does require some city and county assistance (CCAC, n.d.). This area would be bolstered by a countywide park system by aligning resources and funding and connecting them throughout the community. This area is a primary recreational site for intramural sporting events, picnic and other outdoor leisure activities.



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### Glenwood Nature Preserve:

The Glenwood Nature preserve is another active public good location which could be benefited by a county wide park system in that it would help maintain the integrity and provide financial backing to this land. Located at 7008 W. 650N, Etna Green, the nature preserve was established as a gift in 2003 through the Acres Land trust. This property is currently used for hiking, running, bird watching (Acres Land Trust, n.d.). The total length of the trail is one mile. This property could potentially be used as a wildlife education location for youth, with the establishment of a wildlife post.



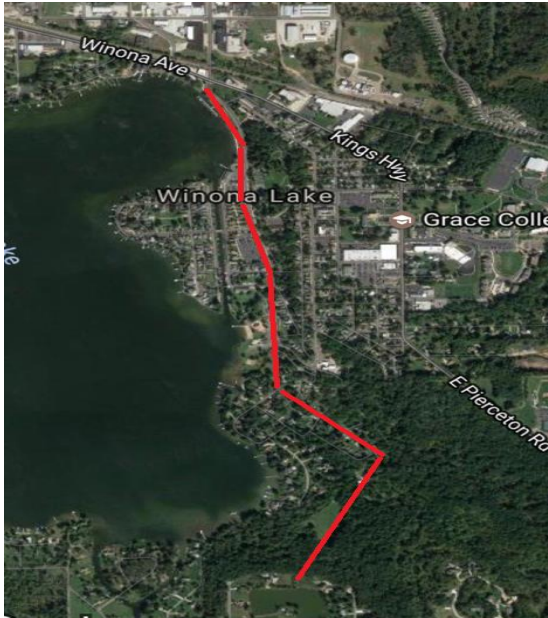
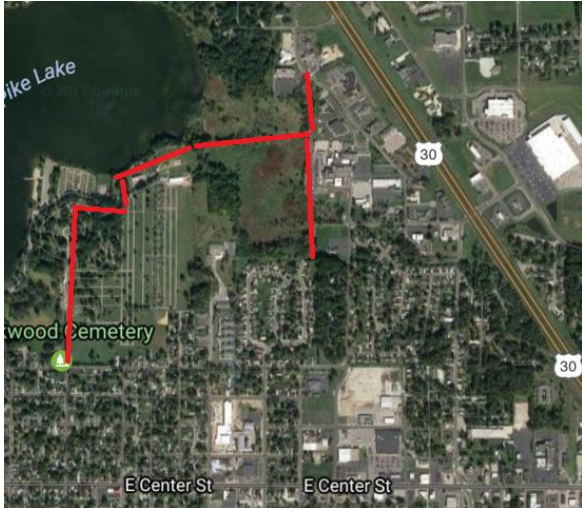
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### Heritage Trails:

The Heritage Trails (Hoosier Rails To Trails, 2017) are located in downtown Warsaw and Winona Lake. The first trail, located west of downtown Warsaw begins at the Zimmer campus and extends to the CCAC. The second trail, located east of downtown Warsaw extends from Oakwood Cemetery, continues around the shores of Pike Lake and ends at Kosciusko community hospital. Finally the third trail begins at the entrance to Winona Lake Township on Winona Ave. and extends a little over a mile south to Roy Street. Primary activities at these sites include walking, biking, jogging, and rollerblading. More importantly these areas connect public good resources to main living and employment hubs, such as Zimmer, Grace College, and the Village of Winona. The Heritage Trail locations could be bolstered by a county wide park system through financing and extending those greenways to other locations facilitated by the park system.



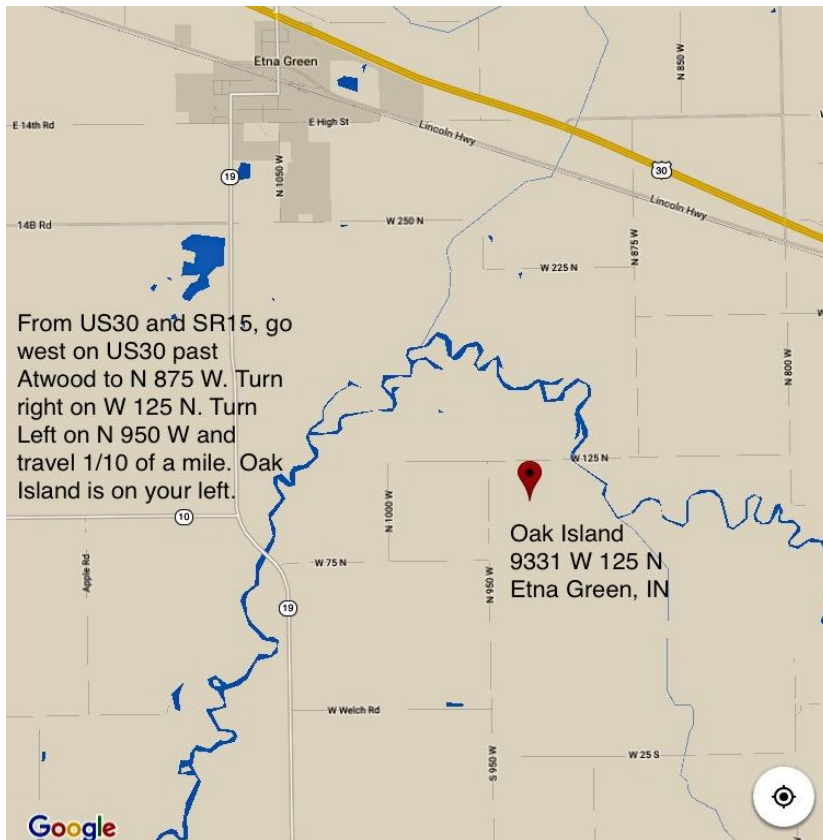
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### Oak Island:

Located at 9331 W. 125 N, Etna Green this patch of underutilized land is a great spot for hiking, bird watching and jogging. It has the potential to also be used, much like Glenwood, as a wildlife education site for youth and schools. This underestimated and under-represented location could be bolstered by a county park system through financing, maintenance, and expanding community knowledge of the location.

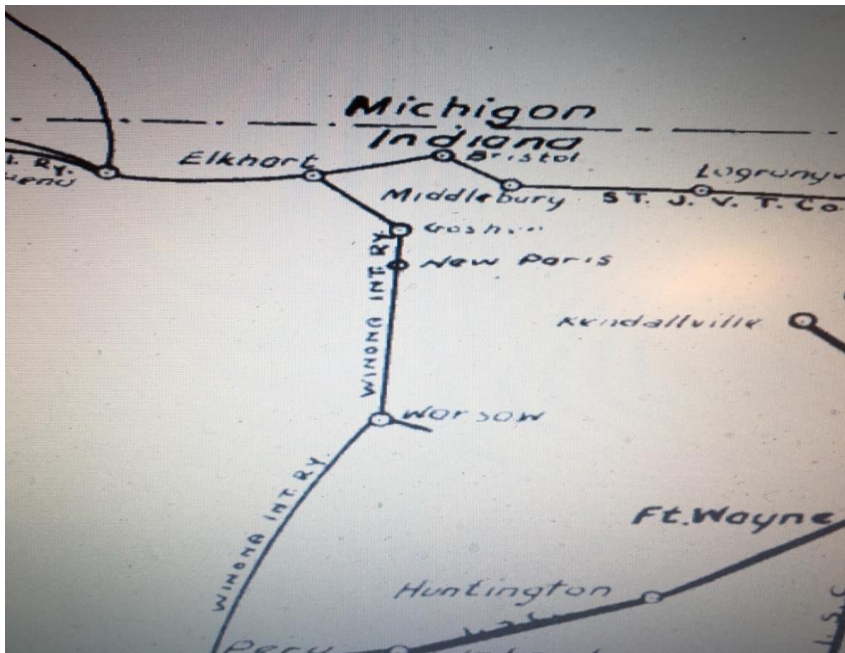




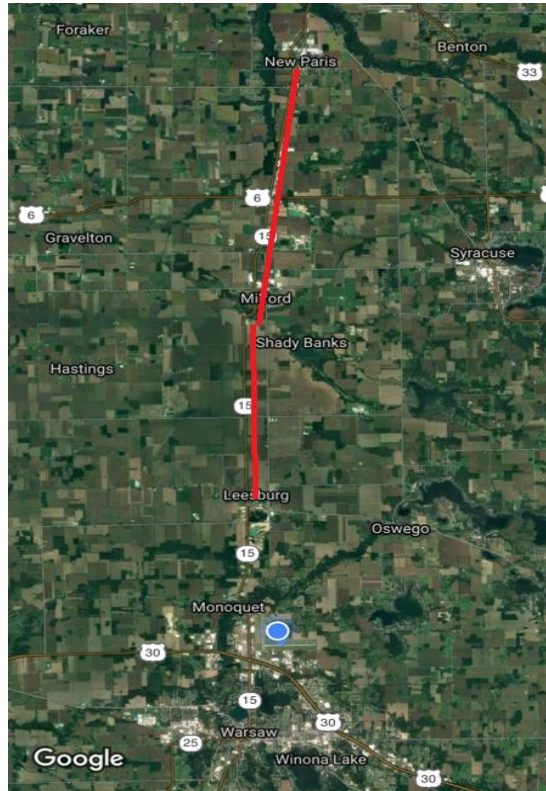
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### Winona Railroad:

In the early 1900s and up until 1952 the Winona Railway system connected Warsaw to both Peru and Goshen, Indiana (Plank, 2008). This stretch of railway operated as passenger and freight transportation during the time of the horse and buggy. Little remains of the Winona Railway today. There is however some still visible signed along state road 15 stretching from Leesburg, through Milford and to New Paris. Driving north up state road 15 if you look closely you can see a flat area of ground which extends the length of the highway. This is an area, which we believe have great potential for countywide connection and a possible countywide park system. This area of underutilized ground could be converted into a bike, hiking, running, cross country skiing and jogging trail.



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Other possible locations with could potentially benefit from a Countywide Park System would be the Maker space, Warsaw Water Wonder, and the river roots canoes and kayaks projects. Each of the locations will require some type of countywide involvement by making the community aware of their presence and can also help with upkeep of the properties.

### Conclusion and Next Steps

The addition of a county wide park system in Kosciusko County will benefit all of its 78,000 current residents and 17 townships. The system will create a stronger presence and bolster funding to

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these areas. The current and new possible locations will expand the reach of these parks to not only the city of Warsaw, but around the smaller towns as well. It will also help increase awareness of some of the areas we have mentioned, which will open up education opportunities for youth as well as allow current residents the opportunity to enjoy the Counties natural resources. We believe there could be a great benefit to the community to create a Kosciusko County Park System to bridge gaps with the existing recreation options. The next steps are to form a Kosciusko County Park Board, develop master plans, secure funding, acquire property, and start building parks. As demonstrated by neighboring county parks, this project may take years of dedication and planning to reap the long term benefits.

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