

# COLUMBUS PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT MILESTONES



Donner Park | Columbus Parks and Recreation Department | Mill Race Park 100 YEARS | VIEARS



Mill Race Park

14

In my years with the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department, I have seen tremendous growth in so many programs within our community. The department manages 700+ acres of land, 21 parks, 10 specialty facilities and 20+ miles of trails. Looking at our accomplishments over the past 70 years, I am both amazed and impressed. We would not be as successful as we are today if it were not for those past and present supporters and volunteers believing in our department.

There are countless examples of our accomplishments, most of which have produced positive impacts throughout our community and are still observable today.

Our programs, parks and facilities focus on health and wellness for our community. Areas of focus include ensuring that all people have safe access to quality programming and facilities, and promoting healthy eating and physical activity. Partnering with the Park Foundation to create ColumBike was a health initiative to get people out and active. Also, maintaining and expanding our People Trail network, hosting events and programs such as Mill Race Marathon, Youth Triathlon, swim meets, tournaments and recreation programs are all evidence of our living our mission statement.

Parks and Recreation plays a vital role in the conservation of our environment. In a world where people are increasingly disconnected from nature, local parks are essential in protecting our public resources – land, water, trees, open spaces and wildlife. We have been good stewards of conservation practices by creating our monarch butterfly gardens, planting an average of 100 trees per year, organizing trail and park cleanups with the help of many volunteer groups, building a green rooftop at The Commons during the construction and improving energy efficiency at Hamilton Community Center and Ice Arena.

We ensure social equity by providing opportunities for all people to benefit from our local parks and recreation. We provide low fee or no fee programs for individuals and families. We have, in cooperation with our Park Foundation, supported the Chuck Wilt Youth Scholarship program to provide assistance to disadvantaged families. We have provided inclusive programming, such as Gym Buddies, Special Swim and our sensory programs.

These substantial accomplishments from our past and present are just a part of the reason for our celebration. I take great pride in looking back on what we have accomplished as a department and knowing that it is really just the beginning. Our collective work and vision have set us on the path to a future where we are poised to celebrate many accomplishments. Our mission statement, "Enriching Lives ... Building Community," guides us as we move forward, ensuring that we always keep the people in our community at the center of our focus. We are currently putting the final touches on our next comprehensive, five-year master plan, and we are very excited for the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your director of Columbus Parks and Recreation. I look forward to many more celebratory years to come.



MARK JONES





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#### contents

### COLUMBUS PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT MILESTONES

8	Donner Park
14	Timeline
20	Outstanding directors
26	A swim program for all
30	The People Trail
34	Revival of Mill Race Park
38	The beginning of Mill Race Park
42	Monster mystery
44	Chap Blackwell
48	Staff highlights
52	The Park Foundation
54	Diverse programs
<b>56</b>	Awards and accolades
<b>58</b>	The future of Donner Center
60	What's next?
:	

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Former Republic associate editor and county historian Harry McCawley, who died Sept. 28 after a battle with cancer, wrote four articles specifically for this publication. Though he was very ill at the time, Harry was eager to participate in this project. While these are the last articles he wrote for publication, his impact on the community he loved so much will be felt for years to come.

> Photos from The Republic archives, and the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department.

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# Donner Par turns 100

## AND LOOKS AHEAD

WILLIAM H. DONNER is often credited with the creation of Columbus' first city-owned park 100 years ago. The Columbus native did, indeed, purchase the land then known as Perry Park and donate it to the city, but only after his mother asked him to.

Mary Jane (Johnson) Donner was born in New York. She moved to Hope as a teenager and married well-known jeweler Frederick Donner in 1857. They moved to Columbus in 1864, residing at the northwest corner of Seventh and Franklin streets. She was an ardent supporter of Prohibition and the temperance movement. She was also fond of trees.

In the spring of 1916 it was announced that the county would receive bids for the Perry Park property, a site earlier considered for the county hospital. No bids were received, and Commissioner Charles Wagner began preparing the paperwork to order all the trees in Perry Park cut down so the land could be platted and sold as city lots.







Upon hearing this news, Mary Donner contacted her son, William, a successful Philadelphia industrialist. She asked him to buy the property and give the land to the city. So he did. He promptly sent a telegram stating he would buy the land. After the exchange of more telegrams the price was set at \$20,000, with Donner notifying Wagner that the "check is in the mail."

"I could not stand to see those trees cut," Mary Donner said at the time.

In June, William Donner arrived











in Columbus to inspect the property. He was concerned about a strip of land bordering the northern edge of the park property, land where homes could be built with backyards directly facing the park. He met with the land owner, Franklin H. Clevenger, and bought the property for \$2,400.

The deed to Donner Park was formally presented to Mayor H.K. Volland on Feb. 27, 1917.

Because of Mary Donner's action to save the property, Columbus residents

felt it only proper to rename Perry Park in her honor. When Volland telegraphed William Donner to ask whether the family preferred Mary Donner Park or Donner Park, the reply came back, "Understand mother to say that she regards shorter name preferable."

So while William Donner paid for the park, it is actually named not in his honor but in honor of his mother, Mary.

The gift of Donner Park came with some stipulations, most notably William's suggestion that 19th Street be permanently closed through the park area as he felt it marred the beauty of the property. This did not happen for another 30 years.

The Donner Park shelter house was built in 1925, and in June 1930 the park was enlarged at its east side with the gift of the Mary Louise Wieser Playground. On July 9, the first wading pool was opened in the playground portion of the park.

City officials have closed Donner Park only twice. Both occurred in the





same week in July 1935, in honor of the passing of Mary Louise Wieser and Mary Jane Donner.

#### MUSIC IN THE PARK

During the 1930s, Columbus City Band concerts were moved to the Donner Park shelter house. In the 1950s some of the concerts were held near the new Donner pool.

The Donner Park variety shows began in 1926 and ran for nearly 40 years. They were an offshoot of the band entertainment, and for several years both types of programs could be enjoyed on different nights of the week. Shows were first managed by Carl Becker, followed by Charles "Fuzzy" Sewell. In the 1950s and '60s, Arnold "Smokey Joe" Miller became manager and a popular emcee. Among the favorite park programs were the amateur hours.

After several years with no variety shows, they were revived in the late 1990s by local music store owner Tom Pickett under sponsorship of the Kiwanis Club. These shows continue every summer.

#### **EVERYONE INTO THE POOL**

In 1947 William Donner presented Columbus with yet another gift, a swimming pool and a community center. The Parks and Recreation Department is marking the 70th anniversary of this gift this year, along with the centennial of the park itself.

Donner Center, the city's first



community center, was renovated in the mid-1980s and the pool a decade later. Seventy years after its opening, Donner Center is once again in need of repair and renovation, and options are being discussed.

Last July, a celebration to mark 100 years of Donner Park and give back to the Columbus community drew hundreds of people to the public area despite sweltering heat. Pony rides, watermelon-eating contests, a dunk tank and free swimming at Donner Aquatic Center were among activities to thank community residents for continued support over the years.

The celebration was a trip down memory lane for Susan Grott Grodecki and her sister, Catherine Grott. Grodecki recalled that they spent much of their childhood at Donner Park, where they learned to swim. The siblings lived on Franklin Street nearby and often made the trek to Donner growing up.

"We didn't need Mom and Dad to come over here," Grodecki said. "It really established a lifelong love of swimming."

#### **SAVE THE TREES**

So what about all those trees Mary Donner felt so strongly about preserving?

In 1918 the first plat of trees in the park was made. More than half (201) of the 400 trees were walnut. The rest of the inventory consisted of 59 beech, 50 maple, 33 ash, 20 locust, 13 oak, nine elm, three sycamore, two mulberry, two Osage orange, and two hickory. Walnut was in high demand during World War I for the making of gun stocks. There was some fear in the community that the government would confiscate the walnut trees in Donner to support the war effort, but it never happened.

#### **COMMUNITYASSET**

One hundred years after its creation, Donner Park remains the perfect place to work on your tan or stay cool in the pool on a hot summer day. It's a great spot to enjoy a picnic under the shade of a tree or watch the little ones attack the playground equipment.

It's a wonderful place to catch a free variety show on a summer Saturday night, play some tennis or pickleball or just enjoy a quiet stroll among the brightly colored trees in the fall.

Albert "Hutch" Schumaker was among visitors viewing the historical scrapbooks on display at July's centennial celebration. The lifelong Columbus resident said he spent many of his childhood years in Donner Park. He described it as a great community asset for families, one he still enjoys.

"I think many people haven't discovered it or have forgotten about it," Schumaker said. "It's really important for us to remember our past."

One hundred years after William H. Donner said yes to his mother's request, the Donner family's gift to Columbus is truly one that keeps on giving.

And while the Donners donated the land, it is the men, women and children of Columbus — along with countless dedicated city officials and hard-working Parks and Rec employees — who have made Donner Park the crown jewel of the city's parks system.

As Donner Park begins its second century, every effort is being made to keep that crown jewel shining just as brightly as ever.

Note: Much of the historical information in this article comes from "The Park That Was Almost a Hospital: A History of Donner Park" by David Sechrest.

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COLUMBUS PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT 13

logbook

#### COLUMBUS PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT TIMELINE 1917 - 2016

#### »**→**1917

William H. Donner presented the deed to Donner Park to Mayor H. K. Volland. Donner Park becomes the first city-owned park.

#### **»**→1925

Donner Park shelter house is built.

#### »→1947

William H. Donner gives the community center (now Donner Center) to the department.

First Parks and Recreation Board.

#### »→1948

Paul Stacker moves to Columbus and becomes the first director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

Donner Swimming Pool (now Donner Aquatic Center) opens on July 4. The pool was a gift from William H. Donner.

#### **»→1949**

First After-Prom Party – Donner Center.

#### »→1958

Renovations to the Donner Park shelter house are completed.

Lincoln Center is donated by Clarence Hamilton family.

First Parks and Recreation Master Plan is completed.

#### »→1959

Bill R. Wilson becomes the second director of Parks and Recreation.

#### »**→1960**

Park board and school board sign a school/park agreement to share land and facilities for use by the community.

#### »+1966-68

Rocky Ford Par 3 Golf Course built by Parks and Recreation maintenance staff.

#### »→1969

Organization of first youth hockey league in Columbus.

#### »→1970

David L. Ison becomes the third director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

#### »+1972

The current Parks and Recreation emblem (logo) is designed by Bruce Bottum and Associates.

A new entrance to the pool opens, which allows swimmers to enter the pool from outside the building instead of through the hallways of Donner Center.

#### »→1973

Chuck Wilt is loaned by Cummins Engine Co. as interim director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

Bob Gillikin becomes the fourth director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

Donner swimming pool hosts the annual Indiana State Age Group Swimming and Diving Long Course Championships for the first time.

#### »+→1975

First Parks and Recreation bond issue (\$2.1 million)

Lincoln Center enclosed.

Lincoln Park softball renovation.

Greenbelt golf and tennis courts.

Donner Center and pool renovated.

#### »→1977

Chuck Wilt becomes the fifth director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

Clifty Park renovated through a \$300,000 Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grant.

#### »→1978

First Jack Cramer Ideals of Athletic Competition Award is presented to Dudley Moore.

#### »→1980

Additional Noblitt Park land donated.

#### »→1981

Harrison Ridge Park donated to the city, and the development of the park is funded through a \$100,000 Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grant.

#### **»**→1982

Chuck Wilt named president of Indiana Parks and Recreation Association.

#### »+1983

Park board given "Best in Nation" award by the National Recreation and Park Association.



#### **»**→1984

Columbus selected as host city for White River Park State Games.

Greenbelt Golf Course clubhouse dedicated.

Parks and Recreation Department accredited (1 of 4 in Indiana) by the Indiana Park and Recreation Association.

#### »→1985

Bond issue for \$1.375 million passed to renovate Donner Center.

Partnership formed between Parks and Recreation Department and Bartholomew County Hospital for fitness, creating the Body Fit program.

#### »→1986

Dedication of the newly renovated Donner Center (\$1.4 million bond issue passed).

A 160-foot long and 20-foot high water slide added to the pool.

#### »→1987

First section of People Trails construction (19th Street and Hawcreek to Donner Park to Noblitt Park to Mill Race Park).

Park board agrees to assume responsibility for the operation of Columbus Gymnastics Center.



Festival of Lights

#### **»**→1988

Parks and Recreation Department, Driftwood Valley Arts Council and The Commons board formed the Columbus Area Arts Council.

1988 Hoosier Celebration program held at Mill Race Park with Gov. Robert Orr opening the event. It attracts more than 10,000 people to Columbus.

The Columbus Park Foundation is formed to help raise funds for parks and recreation programs and facilities.

#### »→1989

First Festival of Lights held at Mill Race Park.

Clifty Park Youth baseball complex dedicated.

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the first of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

#### **»**→1990

Park board honored a second time with the National Recreation and Park Association Board and Commission Award.

Lincoln Center received federal Department of Energy Award for conservation equipment design.

#### »+1990-1991

Mill Race Park Project Community Fund Drive raises \$3.6 million. U.S. Congress supports the use of Atterbury Job Corps to provide \$2 million in supplies and labor for the project. An additional 17 acres are donated for Mill Race Park.

#### »→1992

The newly renovated Mill Race Park is dedicated.

#### »→1993

Park board signs contract with Columbus Softball Association to run summer leagues at Lincoln Park.

First Chautauqua of the Arts is held at Mill Race Park.

#### »-1994

Lincoln-Central Neighborhood Family Center project begins with Parks and Recreation establishing a year-round recreation program.

#### 1995

Richard Wigh Soccer Complex is dedicated at Westenedge Park (now Blackwell Park).

Parks and Recreation Department receives National Recreation and Park Administration Gold Medal Award as the most outstanding department in the U.S. for cities with population of 20,000 to 50,000.

Lincoln Center rededicated as Hamilton Center.

McCullough's Run Park land received as a donation.



#### COLUMBUS PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT TIMELINE 1917 - 2016

#### »**→**1996

Rededication of Ninth Street Park (formerly Wilson Park) through a partnership with Lincoln-Central Neighborhood Family Center.

Dedication of 100 cherry trees given by our sister city, Miyoshi, Japan, for Harrison Ridge and Clifty Parks.

#### »→1997

Bond issue for \$4 million passes for Parks and Recreation for renovation of Donner Pool, Lincoln softball complex, a new maintenance facility and a new golf course irrigation system.

Economic Development Bond issue for \$3.9 million passed to support the renovation of the Foundation for Youth, which includes the addition of the Columbus Gymnastics Center as part of the facility.

Parks and Recreation Department receives donation of land for Oakbrook Park.

#### »→1998

Columbus Gymnastics Center opened at the new location at Foundation for Youth.

Irrigation system completed at Greenbelt Golf Course.

Construction begins on new Park Service Center.

New Lincoln Park softball complex reopened.

Columbus Park Foundation accepts a donation of 49 acres of land for future development of Northbrook Park.

Hamilton Center Ice Arena celebrates 40 years.

#### »+1999

Parks and Recreation and Columbus Area Arts Council partner to establish the Teen Council with Bartholomew County Youth Development Commission.

Jolie Crider Skate Park dedicated.

New playgrounds established at Donner Park, Foundation for Youth and Harrison Ridge Park.

Mill Race Park trails renovated.

Park Operations Service Center completed.



Earl Dickey and his wife, Frances, stand on the sidelines at the Lincoln Park ball diamonds in 1962, marking Earl Dickey's first season as a spectator following his retirement as director of the Junior Baseball program.

#### »**→**2000

Parks and Recreation Department receives two major federal grants: \$926,000 from the Indiana Department of Transportation for the development of a 5.5 mile section of the Hawcreek People Trail and a \$162,000 grant for the development of McCullough's Run Park from the Land and Water Conservation Fund through the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

Parks and Recreation assists Su Casa Columbus in forming a Hispanic Soccer League.

Westenedge Park renamed Chapman T. Blackwell III Park in honor of Chap Blackwell III, who served as a Park Board member for 32 years.

Tennis courts at Donner Center are rededicated as the Robert B. Burnett Memorial Tennis Courts in memory of Bob Burnett, the former director of the Parks and Recreation summer tennis program and former Columbus East High School tennis coach.

Diamond 1 at Lincoln Park was dedicated as Dickey Field in memory of Earl and Frances Dickey, who helped start Columbus youth baseball at Lincoln Park in the late 1940s and 1950s.

#### »**→**2001

Chuck Wilt receives the Indiana University W.W. Patty Distinguished Alumni Award from the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation.

Playground equipment at Mead Village Park replaced.

Lincoln batting cages installed and opened.

A lighted fountain installed at Mill Race Park North Lake in memory of Nancy Blackwell.

\$162,000 Land Water Conservation Fund grant for McCullough's Run Park.

#### »→2002

Chuck Wilt celebrates 25 years as director of Columbus Parks and Recreation Department on April 1.

Received a Land Water Conservation Fund grant for \$756,000 for additional connections within the People Trails system.

First Tour de Trails held in September at Mill Race Park.

The department commissions Indiana University's Public Opinion Laboratory to conduct a telephone survey to assess citizens' satisfaction with the services provided by the department.

#### »→2003

Chuck Wilt is elected vice president of the Columbus Visitors Center Board of Directors.

The department adopts the "Hearts 'N Parks" program into its programming.

The street through Mill Race Park is renamed Carl Miske Drive in honor of the late Carl Miske.

Total economic impact of Parks and Recreation events totals around \$500,000 in hotel, restaurant, gasoline and retail business.

#### »→2004

Ed Curtin elected a national fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Chuck Wilt will become president of the Columbus Visitors Center Board of Directors in 2005.

First year for USSSA Girls 16 & Under Fast Pitch Softball World Series.

#### »+→2005

Mayor Fred Armstrong and the Columbus City Council receive the Indiana Parks and Recreation Association's Essential Services Recognition and Community Support Award.

First year for the USSSA Men's Major Softball National Invitational Tournament.

First year for the USSSA Girls Fast Pitch Softball Indiana State Tournament .

Grand opening of the Haw Creek Trail.

DAC collaborates with CARE to host a time for dog owners to bring their pooches for a swim in the Donner Pool.



Tour de Trails



#### COLUMBUS PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT TIMELINE 1917 - 2016

#### »**→**2006

Columbus wins the National America in Bloom Award in October.

Chuck Wilt elected presidentelect of the American Academy for Parks and Recreation Administration.

2005 NCMA Design Award of Honor: Landscape for the Haw Creek Bike Path.

Indiana Ready Mixed Concrete Association 2006 Concrete Achievement Award for Excellence in Concrete Construction for the city of Columbus Parks Department -Blackwell Park, Freedom Field.

Laura Garrett chosen as a participant in the Rotary Group Study Exchange to Tochigi, Japan, in May 2007.

Movable floor installed at Donner Aquatic Center that permits the floor to be raised for a water depth of 14 inches or lowered for a water depth of 5 feet. This enables the department to better utilize the main swimming pool for swim lessons, community recreation use and competitive swim meets.

Freedom Field (accessible playground) opens in November.



#### »+2007

Columbus Parks and Recreation celebrates 60th anniversary with community.

Haw Creek People Trail development completed with donations from the campaign matched by 80 percent INDOT/ federal grant support.

#### »→2008

Ben Wagner appointed assistant director for Columbus Parks and Recreation.

25 new "C" shape bicycle racks were installed around the city through cooperative efforts of Columbus Park Foundation and community supporters.

Columbus Dog Park Association was formed and after much research identified Clifty Park as the proposed site for a dog park.

Flooding in June caused major maintenance issues for the department, including dealing with the loss of the bridge at the north end of Greenbelt Golf Course.

#### »→2009

Groundbreaking held for the new Commons.

Groundbreaking held for Mill Race Center in Mill Race Park.

Working in conjunction with Bartholomew Consolidated School Corp., the department's athletic team renovated baseball diamonds at Clifty Park for use by Columbus North High School until its new home fields were constructed.

#### »+•2010

Chuck Wilt retires after 33 years as director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

Ben Wagner becomes the sixth director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

Dog Park opens at Clifty Park in November.

Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce Project of the Year for Sports Tourism presented to the department and the Columbus Area Visitors Center

#### »→2011

Columbus Parks and Recreation selected to maintain and manage the new Commons.

Grand opening for The Commons, "the community living room," is held with Alice Curry leading the celebration committee.

Mill Race Center and new Transit Facility open at Mill Race Park.

Owens Bend Trail development is completed, and the grand opening is held.

New water slide installed at Donner Aquatic Center.

#### »→2012

Donner Aquatic Center hosts Central Zone Swim Meet for the first time.

#### »**→**2013

Hamilton hosted the first Turkey Trot 5K walk/run on Thanksgiving morning with 110 participants and \$615 raised for the Chuck Wilt Youth Scholarship Program.

The first Festival of Lights Christmas Village was held at The Commons, with an estimated 1,000 guests visiting throughout the day.

Park operations took the lead on a plan for the emerald ash borer and are working with several city departments and community experts to develop a strategy and implementation plan to address this invasive insect.

The department completed a land exchange with BCSC that connects Noblitt Park with Mill Race Park.

The department added green space to Ninth Street Park and a shelter house to Oakbrook Park.

#### »+>2014

Mark Jones becomes the seventh director of Columbus Parks and Recreation.

Columbus Parks and Recreation Lincoln Park earned the National Softball Association's 2014 Outstanding Park Award. Sports tourism becomes a growing business in Columbus and Bartholomew County.

#### »→2015

In October the parks department regained management of both Greenbelt and Rocky Ford Par 3 golf courses. The courses had been previously contracted out and managed by golf pro Steve Cohen.

Hamilton Center renovations completed, and the building is renamed Hamilton Community Center and Ice Arena.

#### »**→**2016

The Columbus Dog Park Association gives the dog park to the department.

The first outdoor pickleball courts in Columbus completed at Donner Park.

A new filtration system installed in the lap pool, providing a more efficient use of water that will keep water cleaner while reducing expenses.

The Rocky Ford Par 3 Golf Course becomes home to the First Tee program.

Rocky Ford Par 3 also saw the installation of a new irrigation system that will help with the course conditions and water efficiency.

The brick patio donation program at HCCIA completed.

Cindy Brummett retires from Columbus Parks and Recreation with 48 years with the city and 45 with Parks and Recreation.



# LEADING THE WAY

Three defining directors brought benefits for multiple generations

By Harry McCawley

In its 70-year history, the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department has been led by seven people. Each has left a lasting impression on the department and the community through a variety of programs, projects and physical structures.

> Three, however, stand apart, not just in terms of longevity of service or projects they shepherded through to successful completion, but for the quality of life they helped the city attain: Paul Stacker, Bill Wilson and Chuck Wilt.

#### **OPOOSITE PAGE**

Paul Stacker, the first Columbus Parks and Recreation Department director, and Earl Hammack, the first park maintenance director.

#### PAUL STACKER

When he was being interviewed by the Columbus Park Board in 1948 for the new position of director, Stacker and the city seemed ideal fits.

At the time he was serving in a similar position in Neenah, Wisconsin. That town boasted one of the 10 leading swimming pools in the country, and it was one of his duties to supervise its operation. Ironically, Columbus was in the process of completing construction of its own nationally recognized pool, a gift from Columbus native and Pennsylvania philanthropist William Donner.

The area in Donner Park was a busy place in 1948. In addition to the pool, work was underway on Donner Center, also donated by Donner and considered to be one of the city's earliest community centers. Stacker was told he would also be responsible for both facilities.

At Neenah he headed all phases of adult and juvenile recreation, the same areas he would supervise in Columbus.

There was one other area of similar duties. At Neenah he was superintendent of the city cemetery, the same job he was asked to take on in Columbus.

He was offered a salary of \$4,000 a year, and he accepted.

During his tenure, which would stretch to 1959, Stacker initiated a number of programs based on existing and the yet-to-be-opened facilities and operations.

Columbus attorney Lee Hamilton, second from the right, admired a plaque presented to him in 1962 in gratitude for his service as president of the Columbus Foundation for Youth. Looking on were, from left: George Hjelte, representing a California consulting firm that charted a master plan for the city's recreation; Paul Stacker, executive director of the foundation; and Marion Dietrich, who would succeed Hamilton as foundation president. The pool was a natural fit for aquatic programs introduced by Stacker that had been previously unfamiliar to local residents. Among them were swim festivals (remember the Exchange Club's annual Aqua Queen competition and the tin cans bearing photos of a candidate on store counters?), free swim lessons and the popular practice of dumping huge blocks of ice into the pool on unbearably hot days.

The most endearing of his programs, however, and one that would change lives, were the swim sessions he conducted for children with physical disabilities. Stacker served not only as administrator but teacher, cheerleader and father figure for scores of local children who before his arrival considered the pool a closed facility for them.

He also instituted a number of improvements to the physical campus, added picnic tables to various park properties, created parking facilities and installed lighted walkways, shuffleboard courts and horseshoe pits to Donner Park. He also installed an outdoor basketball court.



One of his most popular innovations was the creation of the city's first "After Prom Party." While certainly not new to Stacker – Neenah had launched a similar operation years earlier following the death of a teen in an alcohol-fueled incident after a school prom – the program met with instant success after its introduction in 1949.

Stacker was also instrumental in the development of several structural improvements within the department. Chief among them has to be completion of the Lincoln Center ice skating rink in 1958. Designed by renowned architect Harry Weese, the rink and adjoining center met with instant success. Years later the rink was covered, making it one of the few enclosed skating facilities in the state. In 1996 it was also renamed Hamilton Center in honor of the local family of benefactors who were instrumental in its creation.

In 1959, Stacker changed hats but kept the same uniform he had maintained over the previous 11 years. He was asked to be director of the Columbus Foundation for Youth. In that role he continued the same philosophy that had carried him to such great success with the Parks and Recreation Department.

Opposite page: Bill Wilson, at far right in photo, walked alongside the Clifty Creek covered bridge in 1966 when the 19th-century structure was moved from its location on Azalia Road to a new home in Mill Race Park. Wilson is shown below when he became parks and recreation director in 1959.



#### **BILL WILSON**

In 1964 during a prepared speech at the dedication of Otter Creek Golf Course, J. Irwin Miller, Columbus philanthropist and chairman of Cummins Engine Co., offered this simple explanation for the generosity embodied in the gift his company had made to Columbus:

"We would like to see this community come to be, not the cheapest but the very best community of its size in the country."

Chief among those areas through which that goal was envisioned was that of its parks and recreational opportunities for the young families Miller and his company hoped to attract.

By that time, Wilson had been director of the city's Parks and Recreation Department for five years.

He certainly was not unfamiliar with Columbus nor the work he would take on. He had come to the city in 1957 when he was hired as director of the Columbus Boys Club. Prior to that



he had served three years as assistant director of the Bloomington Parks and Recreation system.

In Columbus he already had a base to build from, multiple recreational opportunities for individuals and families developed through such forums as Donner pool, center and park; the Lincoln Center ice skating rink; and numerous playgrounds and ballparks.

Wilson took on an even more ambitious mission – several elements of which would serve to erase some of the city's worst eyesores – to develop longrange plans for development of the city's recreational infrastructure.

Easily the most complex was to become involved in the removal of the infamous "Death Valley," aptly named for its location on the other side of the tracks at the southern edge of the city limits. Deemed a "blighted area" because of the deplorable conditions under which the residents lived in a collection of tar paper shacks shared with animals and surrounded by wild brush.

In typical Columbus fashion, the mission became a model for the philosophy adopted in so many community projects – the public-private sector mission. It included such myriad entities as students from the new Job Corps at Camp Atterbury; professional contractors and their amateur counterparts; innovative designers and practical-minded engineers; generous suppliers and willing volunteers. The unlikely combination of workers brought about a minor miracle in transforming a true death valley into what became Mill Race Park.

It was developed on parcels of land that Stacker had been instructed to purchase several years earlier.

Chief among the improvements was the transfer of the oldest covered bridge in the county to the park where it would serve as a centerpiece. A photo of that transfer process shows Wilson running alongside the crumbling structure as the truck on which it was precariously perched rumbled across ruts and other impediments to a smooth ride. He looked ready to hold up any part about to fall off the truck.

While that might embody one of the physical aspects of his work, it was his vision and that of others that would help guide Columbus into the next century.

One aspect of that was development of a "park-school" concept by which the school and park systems would combine to offer greater recreational opportunities for both students and residents.

One important example of that plan was tied to the opening of the swimming pool at Columbus East High School in the 1970s, which both parties agreed to make available to the other. It was also used in the availability to local residents of school gymnasiums when not in use by students. The same applied to parks department ball fields when schools needed a venue for practice or a game. One of the most important additions to the department's physical structure was the development of Rocky Ford Par 3 Golf Course.

While the physical composition of the department grew in Wilson's tenure, it was the planning process that arguably had the greatest impact on his community.

When Vermont planner Elwood Allen laid out his vision for the community in 1958, it was believed to be one of the first long-range plans ever chartered by a community the size of Columbus in the nation. He urged the city to go outside its boundaries to purchase land for future recreational use.

City leaders wasted no time in acting on that suggestion, immediately purchasing property that today is the site for three different parks and the Par 3 course.

In 1970, Wilson was given an offer he couldn't refuse – the opportunity to return to his adopted hometown of Bloomington, where he had last served as assistant to the director of the Parks and Recreation Department. This time he would serve in the top job.

Opposite page: Longtime Columbus Parks and Recreation Department Director Chuck Wilt, left, talks with current director Mark Jones in 2014, before a dedication ceremony in Wilt's honor.



Columbus Parks and Recreation Director Chuck Wilt adjusted skates for his daughter, Nancy, in 1977 as they prepared to go onto the ice of the newly opened Lincoln Center Ice Rink.

#### **CHUCK WILT**

Wilson was followed in his role as head of the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department by Dave Ison and Bob Gillikin, and each was able to build on the courses of action developed by their predecessors in addition to leaving their own marks on the overall community.

But both were also to precede the man who in a great sense redefined the role of parks and recreation director and transformed the department into an agency that came to be known as the "go to" operative for much of the city.

Wilt certainly inherited most of the roles given to Stacker and Wilson, but even those assignments paled alongside the new duties that were continually heaped upon him by other agencies in search for someone "who could get the job done."

Some of that background came from his work in the recreation area at Cummins Engine Co., where he



learned how to quickly adapt to changing conditions.

As word of that ability spread throughout the community, so did requests for his services. In many cases he served as a collaborator instead of a "for hire specialist."

For instance, he teamed with Columbus Area Visitors Center Director Lynn Lucas in forging one of the most important initiatives in the city's economy. By utilizing multiple sports facilities throughout the city and the expertise of parks department personnel, Wilt and Lucas were able to transform the offerings of the two agencies into a sports tourism industry. That drew hundreds of teams to local facilities, which in turn drew thousands of visitors to the state. All of that added tens of millions of extra dollars to the local economy, an amount that is expected to grow in the coming years.

In another instance, upon the ap-

proval of a contested bond issue for the restructured Commons, the Parks and Recreation Department was once again called upon to assist in management and maintenance of the facility, easing budget concerns for the city.

That same role was assumed by the department upon the opening of Mill Race Center, in addition to added functions such as assisting in the planning and eventual operation of the facility.

Ending years of concerns and doubts as to responsibility for youth activities and sports at the Foundation for Youth, the department not only took a lead role in the financing and reconstruction of the facility in the 1990s but also became an equal partner in managing and maintaining many of the recreational programs there.

But easily the most used and popular undertaking in Wilt's tenure was the development and continued expansion of the popular People Trail system that has opened the pleasure of leisure-time walking and running to tens of thousands of residents and visitors.

It would be impossible in this assigned amount of space to continue the recitation of Wilt's 33-year tenure of service to the Columbus community. He retired in 2010, leaving Columbus much the better.

He was succeeded by the highly regarded Ben Wagner, who two years earlier had been chosen as part of the park board's leadership succession plan. Unfortunately, due to a change in mayoral administrations, he was demoted and later resigned from the department.

He was followed by the current director, Mark Jones, who has a lot to offer the community with his own skills and who can follow the examples set by previous leaders like Paul Stacker, Bill Wilson and Chuck Wilt.





Paul Stacker and Maynard Noll were steadfast supporters of special-needs children

By Harry McCawley

t was the summer of 1950 and Paul Stacker was in a period of adjustment. He was getting used to his new hometown, his new job and his new swimming pool.

He had been brought to Columbus two years earlier from Neenah, Wisconsin, where he served as director of recreation for the city. His duties in Columbus were much more detailed than what was expected of him in Neenah.

In Columbus he was in charge of all youth and adult recreational activities, overseeing all the city's parks, acting as chief custodian for those properties and even managing the City Cemetery. In filling all those roles he was paid a salary of \$4,000 a year.

There was one other responsibility he was asked to take on – the management and promotion of the city's magnificent new swimming pool that had been donated to the city by Columbus native William Donner and been given his name.

Despite his newness to the community during that summer in 1950, Stacker saw in the swimming pool an opportunity to play a meaningful role in the lives of scores of children who might have otherwise been consigned to watching others swim, jump off diving boards and splash in the water.

Today, those youngsters are usually referred to in terms such as "special-needs children." It was another era in 1950 when even a nationally recognized organization bore the name of Easter Seals Crippled Children's Society. It was under the auspices of that organization that Stacker started the



swim program at Donner Pool, serving as director, coach, instructor, cheerleader and wheelchair pusher.

He did all this clad in a swimsuit just like his young students. He conducted the sessions over the noon hour, skipping his own lunch to work with the children.

Giving up his lunch hour was only one of the contributions he made to the program. He also paid for all subsidiary costs out of his own pocket, and at the end of the summer sessions he invited the children and their parents to a picnic at his Tamerix Lake home, where they were treated to a fried chicken lunch with all the trimmings. He also provided boat rides around Harrison Lake and gave the children wagon rides over the rolling hillsides on his property.

His dedication to the children who enrolled in the program ran deep. In a 1968 interview he said, "These kids will do their best for you one day, and the next day they will try even harder."

Those feelings were reciprocated by the children and their parents. The late Marybelle Gossman, a former copy editor at The Republic, recalled the effect he had on her daughter, Barbara, who had been deaf from an early age but still learned to swim at Donner Pool.

"He (Stacker) treated her just like she was one of the other kids," she said. "At the same time you always knew he was keeping a special eye on her. He encouraged her."

Gossman recalled his actions in helping another student. "I can

still see him helping her up and down the ladder," she said. "He was just that way with all of those kids in the program."

The program met with instant success in terms of participation. During one summer, more than 33 children participated in the activities. By that time Stacker was authorized to hire instructors to manage the large number of participants. He also arranged for funding so that children could be picked up by taxis to be transported to Paul Stacker, pushing the wheelchair, and Maynard Noll, right, are shown in familiar roles helping children with disabilities at Donner Pool. "These kids will do their best for you one day, and the next day they will try even harder."

- Paul Stacker

and from the pool, but even that began to stretch his resources.

An answer to that issue was presented in 1954 when Columbus auto dealer Maynard Noll volunteered the services of his dealership to shuttle the children from their homes to the pool and back. His involvement ran far beyond the loan of shuttle vans and drivers. Although there was no known personal experience with childhood disabilities in his life, he was deeply involved in the formation of an Easter Seals chapter in Bartholomew County.

Regardless of his motivation, Noll jumped into Stacker's program with all of the energy he could muster. He not only transported the kids, he also served as a bookkeeper, charting the progress of each child and always jotting down encouraging comments about them.

Stacker stayed involved in the program even after he resigned his position as director of parks and recreation in 1959 to become director of the Foundation for Youth. At some point in his career, it was estimated that he had donated 1,500 lunch hours to helping his children. That came to an end in 1973 when doctors ordered him to curtail his outside activities after he was diagnosed with skin cancer.

Noll continued his involvement in the swim program but also branched out into other areas of assisting chil-



dren with special needs. This developed into a hands-on mission in helping children and their families with everyday needs. For several years he and other volunteers would go into the homes of these children and help them get ready for school.

Out of that program came a special story involving two Columbus youngsters - Mike and Mark Reardon. Both were afflicted with a form of muscular dystrophy, and Noll was on hand to personally assist them and their family through their daily routines. Incidentally, both boys were participants in Stacker's swim program. Sadly, both boys died in their teens. In a way, they had become part of Noll's family.

Paul Stacker died in 1993. Maynard Noll passed away in 1997. There is a fitting summary to their lives in their final resting places. Stacker is buried in City Cemetery, one of the properties he was hired to manage and only a short distance from the pool where he taught so many children to swim. Noll is buried in Garland Brook Cemetery in a plot next to the graves of Mike and Mark Reardon.



Congratulations! From your friends at THE REPUBLIC

# ON THE RIGHT PATH

Community partnerships contribute to growth of People Trail

By Jennifer Willhite

THE LAUNCH of the People Trail project and subsequent formation of the Columbus Park Foundation in the late 1980s is the basis of a more than 30-year-old relationship that has fostered the overall mission of the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department.

In 1987, the first installment of the gettin People Trail, which, in part, connected Donner, Noblitt and Mill Race not for parks, was completed. The project was with anticipated to last for several years fundi and, consequently, brought up the issue of ongoing funding. Soon after, the Columbus Park Foundation was established. For more than three **"Prior to the People** 

For more than three decades, the foundation has played a fundamental role in the fundraising efforts to make the construction of nearly 20+ miles of People Trail a reality, as well as additional parks and recreation projects in the Columbus area.

Most of the People Trail project has been funded by the Columbus Park Foundation since its formation in 1988, says Dave Hayward, executive director of the Columbus Department of Public Works. "The foundation has a strong sense of ownership of that project," he says. "We would not be where we are if it weren't for the Columbus Park Foundation."

The majority of money the foundation has raised is from private individuals and companies that have contributed to the foundation specifically for the People Trail, Hayward says. Among the list of long-standing partners that regularly offer monetary support are Cummins Inc., Columbus Regional Health and Heritage Fund – the Community Foundation of Bartholomew County.

"These partnerships are crucial," Hayward says. "We wouldn't be getting as much done and wouldn't have much of a trail system if it were not for these entities who have worked with us over the years." Additional funding is sourced from the city and the federal government, he says.

> The adoption of the People Trail project served as a turning point for the foundation itself, says Chip Orben, president of the Columbus Park Foundation. "Prior to the People Trail project, it was a passive foundation that solicited funds for general park programs," he says. "It became a much more progressive foundation, going out seeking donations rather than letting them come in and sending out a mailer."

In addition to its continued expansion, the People Trail project is garnering further attention as some of the first sections, completed nearly 30 years ago, need maintenance, Hayward says.

In 2012, the Park Foundation launched a campaign to raise \$1 million to cover the cost of the People Trail expansion. Not only did the foundation meet its goal, but it is still using those funds today, Hayward says.

"We are always involved with the People Trail and continue to make

Trail project, it was a passive foundation that solicited funds for general park programs. It became a much more progressive foundation, going out seeking donations rather than letting them come in and sending out a mailer." – DAVE HAYWARD



advancements there," Orben says. "We continue to work the ColumBike program as well, and we are also looking at pickleball courts potentially and being that fundraising arm for the parks department."

The foundation is currently involved with additional projects, including Safe Routes to Schools and the Hawcreek Trail, Hayward says. Safe Routes to Schools is a program born of a national partnership designed to help children get to school safely by bicycling or walking. Parkside and Richards elementary schools are the current focus of the program, he says.

The Hawcreek Trail project focuses on nearly 5 miles of trail that runs along Haw Creek from State Street to Columbus Municipal Airport. The current focal point is a bottleneck near the 25th Street and National Road intersection where residents following the trail must detour along 25th Street and cross the bridge before returning to the trail.

"The new section we are building will allow users of the trail to cross the creek and then go under the 25th Street bridge," Hayward says. "So it will be safer and more attractive to people."

The Hawcreek project, which is slated to be completed in late October, will also incorporate a historic steel truss bridge preserved by the county, he says.

Orben says the solicitation of funds from the community is not a "blind ask." The foundation acts on the concerns and recommendations from the community and then, in turn, seeks to create partnerships between the parks department and the community to acquire the necessary funds. Generally speaking, the funds secured from the community and private donors are matched by the federal government, he says.

"That is similar to what is going on right now with the Hawcreek Trail," he says. "There are some federal dollars involved there that are being matched by the Park Foundation and the parks department."

All the projects currently in progress or under consideration and those waiting to be started are only made possible through the Columbus Park Foundation and its community partnerships, Orben says. It is the city's parks and People Trail that contribute to Columbus being such a vibrant community, but keeping that vibrancy requires continued attention, he says.

"People want to live in a community with good parks, schools and health care," he says. "We want to be able to checkmark those, but we also have to be constantly re-evaluating the needs of the community."

#### **COLUMBUS PARK BOARD**

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The Columbus Park Board meets the second Thursday of every month at 4 p.m. in Council Chambers at City Hall (unless otherwise advertised).

#### COLUMBUS PARK FOUNDATION BOARD

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#### CONGRATULATIONS TO A GREAT COMMUNITY PARTNER







#### COMMUNITY COMMITMENT RESURRECTED

# MILL RACE PARK

#### By Harry McCawley

t can be said that it took a perfect storm – a rare confluence of events – to create what has come to be one of the crown jewels of Columbus.

Truth is it took a lot more, not the least of which was a commonly held desire to bring back to life a small downtown park that had been crafted from a virtual wilderness three decades earlier by an assortment of professional contractors, civic leaders and everyday citizens.

"Bring back to life" is an understatement. The first version of Mill Race Park was developed by erasing from the downtown an area aptly called Death Valley and putting in its place a modest but welcoming green space that was embraced by the community.

Unfortunately with the passage of time and the changing of attitudes, the park so many people helped to create began to deteriorate. Mother Nature certainly didn't help. Created alongside the banks of the East Fork of the White River, the park was susceptible to frequent flooding, often forcing organizers to cancel or postpone community events.

The weather also took its toll on some popular structures erected for community events. A wooden playhouse used for performances by groups such as the Mill Race Players was blown over so many times that organizers had it dismantled and staged their productions elsewhere.

One of the more innovative undertakings was the toy train used to provide rides throughout the park for children and parents. Oddly enough the public showed little interest in the feature, and the train and its tracks were removed from the park within a few years of their introduction.

The saddest commentary on the degradation of the park was human nature. Inadequate lighting and its remote location served as open invitations to vandals and individuals with illicit activities on their mind.





Wild rumors about nighttime activities in the park spread like wildfire. One particular tale – the emergence from the neighboring river of what came to be called the "Mill Race Monster" in the mid-1970s – became a headline feature on several tabloid newspaper front pages around the country and in more recent years was revived on cable television. For the record, the "monster" was believed by police to be a local prankster.

Of greater concern were reported drug deals and other illicit activities that made the park a "no go" place at night. Instead of throwing up their hands and letting the downtown park deteriorate even further, city leaders had other objectives in mind – thus, the "perfect storm."

In 1989, noting the approach in 1992 of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' voyage to the New World and the city's connection to that discoverer, Mayor Robert Stewart formed a committee of leaders from the public and private sectors to develop a legacy project, a lasting tribute not just to the man for whom the city was named but for the community that had evolved over the past 178 years. A 50-member committee of community volunteers was formed and given the mission of developing plans for a world-class park. Local businessman Hutch Schumaker was selected as the chairman. Unlike the small and makeshift park that was developed by volunteers in the early 1960s, planning for the new version took on a complex air involving experts from across the nation.

Key in this selection process were renowned landscape and structural designers Michael Van Valkenburgh of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Stanley Saitowitz of San Francisco, who were given the charge to redesign and expand the park. Instead of forcing their ideas on the clients, Van Valkenburgh and Saitowitz worked from concepts and ideas provided by community members as to what they wanted in the park.

Out of this process came three major goals for the overall plan as outlined by Schumaker in the book "The Columbus Way":

- To commemorate the diverse social and cultural history of the park.
- To celebrate the park's proximity to the rivers by creating a water-dom-inated landscape.
- To create a provocative civic landscape that speaks of the present and anticipates the needs of the future.

The price tag on the project was enormous to say the least. Officially the total cost came to over \$8 million, but that does not take into account all of the donated labor and materials. Amazingly, it was not necessary to sell bonds, although the Parks and Recreation Department did pull out some funds from its capital budget.



Under the leadership of Arvin Industries Chairman Jim Baker, who was appointed to head the fund drive, more than \$3.7 million was raised over a sixmonth period. Architectural fees were paid by the Cummins Engine Foundation, which also donated adjoining properties for the park expansion.

Other community foundations, especially those of Arvin Industries, Irwin-Sweeney-Miller, Irwin Financial and the Heritage Fund, created a \$2 for \$1 challenge grant to encourage residents to purchase structures, trees, trail sections and other areas of the park.

The fundraisers did not stop at local sources. Almost \$2 million in labor, materials and equipment to the project was donated by the national Job Corps program to shape and ready the park for its physical and landscape areas. That assistance came about in great part by the lobbying efforts of Arvin Industries Vice President Fred Meyer, Schumaker and Stewart, who met with U.S. Sens. Dan Coats and Dick


Lugar and Rep. Phil Sharp. Over 200 Job Corps trainees were involved from 1990 to 1992, making it the largest community project ever undertaken by the national Job Corps.

The involvement of the Job Corps trainees involved a complex set of negotiations with local contractors and labor unions. Denny King of Dunlap and Co. chaired a group that included fellow contractors David Doup of Taylor Bros., Fritz Kiel of Repp & Mundt, John Spangler of Contractors United, Harold Force of Force Construction and Jesse Brand of Brands Lumber Co. The group met with leaders of local trade unions and hammered out an agreement to allow the Job Corps trainees and instructors to provide inkind labor. Each of the contractors also agreed to adopt a park structure and build it at cost.

Construction began in the summer of 1990, and Van Valkenburgh and Saitowitz relied on local support to ensure their visions became realiWalkway designed by Stanley Saitowitz and installed in 1992.

ty. Parks and Recreation Director Chuck Wilt served a coordinating role throughout the planning and construction process. To that end he worked with Wilbur McDonald, a retired Cummins facilities engineer, in providing construction expertise.

Van Valkenburgh also turned to Mark Lindenlaub to be his on-site

Mill Race Park was redesigned by Michael Van Valkenburgh. representative in assisting Wilt. The experience proved valuable in many respects because Lindenlaub elected to remain in Columbus, where he was an important force in the development of Housing Partnerships Inc. Not all of the

original visions came into reality. One, the covered outdoor amphitheater, had to be scaled back because of costs. The shell had to be taken out of the plans, but the amphitheater has fulfilled one major desire by playing host to numerous outdoor events.

The goal of meeting the original opening date in October 1992 was deemed unattainable by organizers because of a number of unanticipated obstacles, mostly involving the weather. However they got the park ready enough in 1992 to stage a one-day celebration. The next day the park was closed again and not officially reopened until June 1993.

Today Mill Race Park II stands as a prime example of the Columbus spirit. It is another jewel in which the community can take great pride.



By Harry McCawley

leading the way

> THE PHRASE "living on the other side of the tracks" had a literal meaning in the downtown Columbus of the first half of the 20th century. It was called Death Valley.

> "Impoverished" is too luxurious a word for those consigned to live there in plywood or even cardboard shacks randomly shielded by tar paper. In the rainy seasons they coped through floods that often washed away their poorly rooted homes. The luckier ones were sometimes protected from floods by the abandoned cars and trucks they chose as their abodes. In the winter, families relied on heat from coal that fell off passing train cars and was collected by children each day.

> Floodwaters and inadequate heating supplies were just some of the discomforts with which Death Valley residents had to cope. The place stank. In addition to the smells from within the makeshift camp, there was an overpowering odor from a neighbor to the immediate north

The W.W. Mooney Tannery had been converting animal hides into clothing and furniture coverings since the 19th century. It had also been producing noxious odors that not only blanketed Death Valley and its inhabitants but also drifted into the nearby downtown business and residential districts. Leaders within those two sectors of the community demanded that something be done about the area.

That something was the removal and relocation of the families forced to live there, the purchase of the land along the East Fork of the White River and the Mooney Tannery, the enormous task of clearing what amounted to a mini-forest of abandoned shanties and wild brush, and the creation of an entity that would become a centerpiece of the downtown area – Mill Race Park.

It was to be a community undertaking, but one loosely knit group emerged that came to be identified with the park and the banks of the river that ran alongside it – the River Rats.

The effort to erase Death Valley from the downtown landscape – if not from the community's memory – had a mixed parentage. One source was



the headquarters of Cummins Engine Co., where leaders were concerned about the image the area projected to the young families the company was trying to recruit.

In 1963, M. Tom Harrison, a Bartholomew County native and facilities manager for the engine maker, met with Mayor E.A. Welmer to urge him to bring together a coalition of community activists to find ways to not only remove the eyesore on the south side of the railroad tracks but to relocate the families living there to more hospitable areas in the community.

But first the land had to be acquired. On May 16, 1963, Welmer met with more than 200 business and professional leaders at a luncheon in the Fiesta Restaurant. It was a fitting location since the restaurant was practically a neighbor to Death Valley.

The message was blunt. First the city needed to raise \$145,000 to purchase 66 acres of land along the river that would be used for a park, pay for limited development of the area and hire a park planner. By the end of the

## "Carl (Miske) was always a catalyst. We had plenty of volunteers, but he was always there keeping things going." — HERB BOESCHEN

luncheon \$61,100 had been pledged on the spot.

That wasn't all that Welmer wanted from the group. He told them that the option to buy the vacated Mooney Tannery and its surrounding property would expire in 12 days. The price tag was \$80,000. Over the next 10 days, representatives of the city's public and private sectors had pledged \$112,723, enough to purchase all the tracts of land and assure that the tannery property would be turned over to the city.

Relocation of the Death Valley tenants began immediately, although

there was a sense of nostalgia among some of them. To many this had been their lifelong home. One resident, Sylvia Worton, remembers being married under a tree near the entrance of what is

now the park and has written several books about her experiences growing up in Death Valley. For most though, the transition was an escape.

One of the first steps in the process was the hiring of a park planner. The Columbus Park Board had experience in that kind of process, having earlier commissioned Elwood Allen of Vermont to develop a long-range plan for the department, one of the first of its kind in the nation.

Allen's preliminary plan was ambitious. It called for creation of a children's zoo, an electric fountain and a music shell outdoor theater, all costing in the range of \$360,000 to \$450,000. Also included in his plan were two large picnic areas, paved roadways, five parking areas, a chain of ponds, a children's playground, a boat launching and recreation area,

Carl Miske, left, Head Rat of the River Rats, is shown displaying the group's flag with fellow member Glenn Flint.



a large grass mall with paved walkways and park benches, and a mile-long bicycle trail.

One large and important tract of land was the area occupied by the mammoth Mooney Tannery. Allen was unable to fit it into his park concept but suggested

it could be used as the site for a museum, garden apartments, post office or private shops to echo the pioneer architectural style of nearby Nashville.

Some of the elements were abandoned along the way, but many of Allen's ideas were incorporated into the final version of what would be Mill Race Park. By the start of 1964, less than a year after the planning and fundraising process had been launched, work began on the conversion of a jungle into an urban oasis.

Much of the heavy lifting in the removal of the forest and surround-

ing wildlife was consigned to construction companies, which loaned earth-moving equipment to the property in a months-long project. They also had volunteer labor, from very unlikely sources.

At the start of the process a group of downtown business leaders came together to offer their services under the banner of the Mill Race Tannery Site Development Project committee. That long and convoluted name was shortened a few years later to the River Rats.

These volunteers were put under the charge of Virgil Taylor and Jim Dunn, leaders of local firms Taylor Bros. and Carr and Dunn Associates. They were faced with tight budgets, but they had willing hands to perform labor. Depending on how you look at it, they were also blessed with the laxity of government regulations.

One of the key figures in working around the tight budgets and amateur laborers was Carl Miske, owner of a downtown dress shop, who had headed the original Mill Race Tannery Site Development Committee. It was he who coined the River Rats name simply because it was more reflective of the hard work that was to be performed by the group.

One member of the fledgling group was Herb Boeschen, a farmer and Bartholomew County commissioner, who reflected on some of the difficulties they encountered.

"I've never seen brush like that," he said in a 1988 interview. "I remember I was on a bulldozer, and I'd have to stop every few feet, hop out and climb on the dozer so I could see what was ahead."

Then there were the wild animals. Boeschen recalled going into an area once populated with the cardboard shacks and encountering a dog and her litter. "Somebody had left her behind in one of the shacks, and when we approached it was obvious she wasn't go-



ing to let someone tear her house down until she had taken some chunks out of them first," he said. "And she wasn't alone. There were all kinds of wild dogs running around in there."

Unappealing as the work might have been, Miske was still able to cajole organizations and individuals to join the effort. "Carl was always a catalyst," Boeschen recalled. "We had plenty of volunteers, but he was always there keeping things going."

"I really didn't have to do much convincing," Miske remembered years later. "Often all I had to do was ask. I remember one instance when we needed some special equipment to pump out the lagoons, and I approached Mr. (Loren) LaBrec of LaBrec Construction. I didn't know the man and I was sort of nervous, but he hardly waited for me to finish my presentation before he asked, 'When and where do you need it?'"

The project caught the public imagination and other groups joined:

- The Boy Scouts tore down one of the brick buildings at the tannery site.
- Police officers volunteered their off-duty time to clear underbrush.

- Several farmers loaned their tractors to supplement construction company equipment.
- A bricklayers union took the bricks from the tannery site and erected an entrance to the park off Fifth Street.
- Members of the Jaycees cut down trees and carted away thousands of branches.

After all the debris had been removed, Let's Grow Garden Club launched a beautification program for the park.

All of these efforts turned out to be a prelude for one of the most challenging and endearing projects in the entire undertaking – the placement of the oldest covered bridge in Bartholomew County over the park's major pond. Here too, the effort required another fundraising project — \$18,500 to move the wooden structure that had spanned Clifty Creek on Azalia Road from that area through a part of downtown Columbus and into the park.

The money proved the easy part. Area schoolchildren staged fundraising operations and contributed \$13,500 to the effort. It took three months to raise the total required amount.

The move was a logistical masterpiece, requiring constant movement of power lines and traffic re-routings, but when the bridge was reassembled the community recognized a jewel in the midst of what had been a downtown blight.

Over the next few years, a number of features were added. The children's zoo was never realized, but an outdoor wooden shelter for stage productions by the Mill Race Players was erected. In 1967, the Jaycees donated a twocar, 20-passenger, steam-powered toy train and a mile-long track running through the park to the city.

Indeed, many of Allen's original plans were adopted, but in time some of them fell by the wayside. The toy train enjoyed great popularity at the start, but maintenance problems prohibited its use near the end of the summer of 1967. When it was repaired and put in operation the next year, it declined in popularity, and park officials agreed to sell the operation to officials at Ceraland, the recreational area for Cummins employees and their families at the time.

The covered shelter used by the Mill Race Players beginning in 1969 also enjoyed initial success, but the elements eventually took control. After a six-year run the wooden structure was flattened by heavy winds, and officials decided to eliminate the feature from the park. Arguably one of the most devastating losses was the original wooden bridge that was destroyed in a Nov. 30, 1985, fire set by youths cooking hot dogs on the wooden floor boards.

Despite those setbacks, the hard work by so many volunteers and the unending generosity of so many residents left an indelible mark in the memory of the original Mill Race Park. It also set the stage for the community jewel that followed it.

# BEWARE THE MONSTER OF MILL RACE PARK

By Harry McCawley

ON NOV. 1, 1974, two groups of girls made separate reports to Columbus police that they had witnessed a "green, hairy and large" creature walking upright in Mill Race Park. Out of those two reports grew a legend that has not only persisted but grown, primarily in the cyber world. It has put Columbus on the map of paranormal activity and spawned a 2015 segment of a television series, "Monsters and Mysteries in America."

Unfortunately, Nov. 1, 1974, must have been a slow news day in Columbus because the reports of the monster sightings made the front page. Events that followed made it a real story that had scary aspects, aside from a "green, hairy and large" creature in a downtown park.

The girls making the initial reports were described in the news story as "young." The first sighting was somewhat unusual because it occurred at 3 p.m., and monsters aren't normally associated with daylight hours.

The entire story might have been dismissed, but the second report — stemming from a sighting around 11 p.m., a more normal hour for monsters — got some attention because the victims not only saw the monster in the park but watched as it jumped on their car, leaving "claw marks in the paint."

The story might have gone away after that initial publicity, but it resurfaced in the next week, this time because of some real concerns that people might get hurt, not the monster but the people seeking him.

On Nov. 8, The Republic reported, again on Page One, that the monster situation had gotten out of hand. According to the story, police and park personnel had counted on a single night dozens of individuals in cars and on foot searching an area in the park near the initial sightings. Some of the searchers were armed with clubs and knives. Concerned that someone might mistake a fellow searcher for the monster and act accordingly, officials asked that people stay out of the park at night.

The request was not heeded. If anything, it increased the number of hunters. In hindsight, it might not have been a good idea to put that kind of story on Page One.

In the meantime there had been another "monster sighting," this one a bit more credible because it came from Rick Duckworth, the city's dogcatcher. These days, we call that job animal control officer. He reported that he had seen the creature during a daytime patrol of the area and described it as something that "looked like a person wrapped in blankets and wearing a mask."

The possibility that the monster might have been someone playing a prank didn't quench the zeal of the monster hunters. Things got so bad that parks and recreation officials closed the park from dusk to dawn. Security personnel were stationed at the entrance and in a three-night period turned away more than 225 cars.

By this time the story had gone viral in 1970s terms. It was picked up by The Indianapolis Star and in turn the AP and UPI wire services. Columbus police were getting inquiries from around the country, so many that officer Ken St. John was pulled off his routine duties and designated as the city's "monster control officer."

Ironically, that turned out to be a watershed event. Media interest in the story faded and so did visits to the park by monster hunters.

It should have stayed that way, but the Internet and paranormal investigators came along to revive it in the 21st century. One of those investigators, Neil Arnold of Kent, England, included a chapter on the monster in a book called "Dark Lore 5" in 2010.

Police eventually determined that the monster was really a young man pulling a prank.



A drawing by Tyra Cataline that ran in the Oct. 31, 1993, edition of The Republic.





# WISIONARY VOLUNTEER

Chap Blackwell was key player in department's evolution

By Barney Quick

any names are associated with the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department legacy, but perhaps none more so than the late Chap Blackwell, who served on the park board from 1965 until 1997, and on the park foundation board from then until his 2015 death. Ask others who might also qualify, and they become effusive in explaining why Blackwell was key to the department's direction over the last half-century.

When Blackwell got behind something, he did so wholeheartedly. The Kentucky native rode a bicycle in the first Indiana University Little 500 in 1951 and was involved in a volunteer capacity for the next several decades.

In 1965, situated in Columbus and at Cummins, he was appointed to the park board and started spotting talent at the engine company that he thought could make significant contributions to the parks program.

One such person who came onto Blackwell's radar screen was Chuck Wilt, with whom he worked in personnel and corporate recreation capacities.

"Chap was one of my original bosses at Cummins," says Wilt. "In 1973 the parks director's job came open. Chap went to Cummins management and said, 'Can I borrow Chuck for three months?"

They worked on recruiting a director, deciding on Bob Gillikin, who held the position during the mid-1970s.

"Bob really got involved in the bond issue for putting a roof on Hamilton Center. That was a really big deal," says Wilt. "He had good working relationships with Cummins executives like Jim Henderson."

Blackwell was instrumental in that effort, according to Wilt.

"He and the park board got all the community groups together for this multifaceted bond issue."

Wilt and Gillikin actually switched organizations in 1977, and again, Blackwell played a role.

"Chap knew I was looking to get back into recreation at that time," says Westenedge Park is renamed in honor of Chap Blackwell, second from right, in 2000. From left, park board member Paige Gifford, parks director Chuck Wilt and Mayor Fred Armstrong help honor Blackwell.



Wilt. "That had been my major in college. Bob went to Cummins and wound up with a big distributorship in Texas."

Wilt served as department director for 33 years. He points out that Blackwell was active in the National Recreation and Park Association: "He'd go to conferences with his staff and come back with a lot of great ideas." Wilt gives another example of the vision Blackwell brought to his position: "He was a big advocate for soccer in the early 1970s, before it was a very well-known sport. Look at it now and look at the facilities for it at Blackwell Park."

Probably the best-known story from the department's Blackwell years is that of Donner Center acquiring a water slide.

"It was one of the first municipal slides in Indiana," recalls Wilt. "Chap got to know one of the owners of Miracle Equipment. That company had come out with these slides and came to Chap and me. Well, we didn't have the money to buy one."

Not everyone was initially enthusiastic about the idea anyway.

"The staff was really against it,"

says Wilt. "This was March of 1986. Putting in a slide during March and April and having it open for Memorial Day seemed impossible."

That's where Blackwell's understanding of the importance of cultivating personal relationships came in.

"The Miracle Equipment owner knew other cities would want one if Columbus got one," Wilt explains. "We reached an agreement in which he'd install it at his cost, and the department would raise admission fees by 50 cents. He got a percentage of that, as did the department, and within a few years we had it paid for."

The People Trails network, the Lincoln Park Softball Complex and the formation of the Columbus Area Arts Council are other department milestones that bear the mark of Blackwell's presence.

Hutch Schumaker, a retired Columbus businessman whose family has been civically involved in the city for generations, has vivid memories of his father Albert's friendship with Blackwell.

"They were joined at the hip," he says. "My dad was the City Council liaison to the parks department, and he and Chap were beer-drinking buddies. A lot of parks and recreation conversations took place around our family room table. It was a casual setting, but they were serious and dedicated about it. They provided a wealth of institutional knowledge that was invaluable to Chuck [Wilt]."

Wilt concurs: "I never knew what



was going to happen when I went into a meeting with those guys."

In conversations with those who knew Blackwell, the image of a true leader emerges. The key traits — vision, the ability to spot the right people for certain roles, and the knack for getting them to stretch themselves so as to rise to the occasion — come up repeatedly.

"Back in the day, you got things done by having personal conversations with people, getting people to step up and do things that went beyond their normal skill sets," says Schumaker.

As Wilt puts it, "Chap rallied people. He constantly challenged the community and its politicians. Any time citizens came up with an idea, he was the person they'd come to."



During a 2012 reunion in Columbus, Chap Blackwell, standing at right, gathered with friends he had worked with in his 32 years on the park board. From left, seated: Dudley Moore, Harry McCawley and Bill Wilson. Standing at left was Chuck Wilt.





## Carleen Fry

## HAMILTON COMMUNITY CENTER AND ICE ARENA PROGRAM COORDINATOR

#### What first drew you to parks and recreation?

»All three of my children were involved in parks and recreation activities. They all really loved ice skating and became very involved in figure skating and hockey.

## When did you begin your career with parks and recreation?

»I began working at Hamilton Community Center and Ice Arena in September 2011.

#### What are your accomplishments?

»In my time as manager, I have increased and diversified programming opportunities in an otherwise sports heavy venue. With the transition of the ice arena back into a community center, our focus has shifted to provide more family friendly, low fee and no fee programs for our community. We have increased our participation numbers in all of our programs and provided new opportunities for the community to boast about.

During the 2016 fiscal year, the ice arena turned a profit for the first time ever, a feat that not many arenas across the U.S. are able to say they have done. By filling empty ice time, working with our facilities staff to conserve energy and supplies, finding sponsorships and donated goods, and our growth in programming, we were able to say we operated in the black.

I have taken great pride in the relationships I have built with our user groups, acting as a liaison to

help build their programs, which in turn betters our programs. Relationships with Indiana University, Columbus Youth Hockey, Lincoln Center Figure Skating Club, Total Package Hockey and others help to build our reputation and our programs.

I have focused on bringing in tournaments, camps and competitions that contribute to the economic impact of Columbus. Events such as our 3 on 3 hockey, broomball tournaments, collegiate figure skating competitions, hockey camps, the ice show, variety camps, and so many more help keep people coming into our community.

#### What five words best describe you?

»Enthusiastic, helpful, friendly, dependable and innovative

#### What is most interesting about your work?

»Working with the skaters and seeing how much they grow in their skating skills and character skills.

#### What has been your greatest challenge(s)?

»Keeping up with everyday changes and trying to promote a fun, active and safe place for people of all ages to come to.

## When not on the clock, what's your favorite way to unwind and why?

»I love going on walks and being with my family. I am a huge fan of the Pittsburgh Penguins and during hockey season I am watching all of their games. Go Pens!





**Carleen Fry** 

## Tonia Medaris

PAYROLL/HUMAN RESOURCE SPECIALIST

## What first drew you to parks and recreation?

»I have played parks and rec volleyball for close to 30 years. I took swim lessons and spent a lot of time at Donner when I was a child. I grew up living just a few blocks from Donner Park. I was actually looking through the newspaper help wanted ads for someone else and saw the position for payroll open at Donner. I wasn't looking for a change at the time, but it piqued my interest and I decided to apply. I am very glad I did.

## When did you begin your career with parks and recreation?

»Sept. 28, 1990

## What five words best describe you?

»Compassionate, loyal, dependable, devoted, congenial

#### What is most interesting about your work?

»My co-workers, of course. They all keep it interesting. We are like one big family sharing all of its accomplishments, concerns and just life together. About the actual work though, I have always loved working with numbers and balancing. I enjoy working with people, so what better way than being able to meet every employee during the hiring/ paperwork process. I really enjoy the variety of work from payroll, to customer service, to working with managers, to the challenges of bank reconciliation.

#### What has been your greatest challenge(s)?

»Probably the biggest challenge with my work would be not having a budget system and payroll system that work together that fits our department's needs. I have always had to do double entry to be able to get the information our managers need to monitor their programs.

## When not on the clock, what's your favorite way to unwind and why?

»Spending time with family. I enjoy relaxing and listening to my daughter, Reagan (15), play piano and sing in the evening while she is practicing. I also enjoy spending time with my grandson, Bryson (7), taking walks and playing games. I have a new grandson, Maddix (born 8/31/17). I am looking forward to spending time with him also. My favorite hobbies are playing parks and rec volleyball and scrapbooking. I hope to become a professional scrapbooker when I retire.

## Shanda Sasse

THE COMMONS MANAGER

#### What first drew you to parks and recreation?

»Working for our Columbus Parks and Recreation Department offers the opportunity to promote healthy, active lifestyles for our community. Guests visiting our parks and facilities strengthen friendships, celebrate milestones and enjoy the natural beauty of our parks through the lens of sports, arts and community.

When did you begin your career with parks and recreation? »October 2013

What five words best describe you? »Professional, grateful, optimistic, analytical, giggly

#### What is most interesting about your work?

»It's an honor to support The Commons where locals and guests visit to play, take in the sights and celebrate milestones in their lives. We strive to be good stewards to this place, the memories it has created and continues to create for our community.

#### What has been your greatest challenge(s)?

»We are constantly striving to provide the best experience possible for our guests and analyzing ways to improve that guest experience while balancing the operational needs. It's a welcome challenge that keeps each day productive.

When not on the clock, what's your favorite way to unwind and why?

»Lakeside, Latin jazz playing in the background and good company.





**Keith VanDeventer** 

## Keith VanDeventer

GOLF PRO/MANAGER

## What first drew you to parks and recreation?

»The opportunity to manage city golf courses and to be involved with The First Tee of Columbus, which is a national program carried out at the local level across the U.S.

When did you begin your career with parks and recreation? »January 2016

### What are your accomplishments?

»We have been tremendously successful in introducing youth programming to the game of golf and to our courses. We are now the home of The First Tee of Indiana – Columbus program that focuses on golf skill development as well as personal development for youths ages 7 to 18.

We have also introduced and been successful at programming for beginning golfers and women, two populations that were not adequately being reached by our courses.

Since regaining management of the golf courses (Greenbelt and Rocky Ford Par 3) we have hired a greens superintendent, Aaron Brua, and together we have worked hard to improve course conditions while maintaining our budget.

Managing golf courses is an extremely social business, and I have worked hard to build and maintain relationships with individuals both in the community and who come through the door at our courses.

## What five words best describe you?

»Old-fashioned, dependable, loyal, hard-working and caring

## What is most interesting about your work?

»Every day is different at the golf courses. You have the opportunity to interact with lots of different people.

#### What has been your greatest challenge(s)? »Finding the time to accomplish everything that I want to get done.

## When not on the clock, what's your favorite way to unwind and why?

»Being with my wife and boys is my top priority. I also enjoy golfing and doing projects around our house.



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## **COLUMBUS PARK FOUNDATION**

FOCUSES ON FUNDRAISING

By Jennifer Willhite

THE COLUMBUS PARK Foundation is known as the driving financial force behind the success of Columbus Parks and Recreation Department projects, but its own health is dependent on community support.

Established in 1988, the foundation has worked to create and maintain a number of valuable partnerships in the Columbus community, both public and private, says Chip Orben, president of the foundation.

The Columbus Park Foundation's mission to "aid and encourage the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department in the acquisition, conservation



People Trail

and development of lands for park and recreation purposes" is one that foundation members realized would require consistent community support.

"It goes back to when the Park Foundation was put together, quite frankly," Orben says. "When we found out how much the People Trails project was going to cost, there was no way the city could do it on its own." Virtually all the fundraising for the People Trail project was done through public solicitation, he says.

It was at that point that the Columbus Park Foundation became the main fundraising entity used to garner the community participation and financial support necessary to set and accomplish the department's goals, such as the continued development and maintenance of the People Trail, as well as Colum-Bike and Safe Routes to Schools.

Fundraising is generally a multistep process that begins with offering a presentation to the Columbus Park Foundation Board of Directors about potential projects, why they are important and how they will impact the community. Once the project is approved, then the fundraising portion begins.

Many of the Columbus Park Foundation's longtime partners, including Cummins Inc., Columbus Regional Health and the Heritage Fund — the Community Foundation of Bar-

tholomew County, offer more than just monetary support, says Orben.

Columbus Park Foundation board member John Elwood says Columbus' employers play a central role in the establishment and maintenance of the partnerships. The collaboration between public and private entities is part of what makes Columbus so unique, he says.

"I think anytime you have employers who are involved with the community, they definitely help with their pocketbook," Elwood says. "They have so many employees, they create a nice base of volunteers and offer them the latitude to participate in community events. I think that is pretty special when you have local businesses that make it possible for their employees to feel a sense of community."

The benefits of the Columbus Park Foundation's partnerships are far-reaching, including green space, improving the quality of life for Columbus' residents and outstanding parks and playgrounds, and offer a win/ win situation, Elwood says.

"One of the things I am passionate about and the Columbus Park Foundation does is help those who are less privileged," he says.

Orben says community input about needs and potential projects is generally the catalyst for fundraising. However, it is not a guarantee. "The partners could very well be people in the community that believe in proposed projects and make a donation because they agree with the mission of the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department," Orben says.

Over the years, the community's firm belief in the mission of building community and enriching lives is an



element that has held true for area business partners as well. "It is all about how we make the community an attractive place to live," he says. "The amenities of the parks are certainly a draw knowing there are a variety of programs involved."

Elwood, a lifelong resident of Columbus, says he knows firsthand how special Columbus is and says his work as a board member with the

Chip Orben

Columbus Park Foundation is a reflection of that familiarity. He considers it part of his role to not only maintain current partnerships, but increase them. He adds that it is important for area residents to know that the foundation is a good steward of the money raised for anticipated and existing projects.

A key to growing the donor base and support is recognizing there will always be a need for private funding, he says. "We have ambitious goals in Columbus. We don't want to be average. We want to be an exceptional city, a city that is known to be one of the best in the country for the size it is."





# SOMETHING FOR

## Diverse programming gives parks department broad reach

By Jennifer Willhite

s the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department celebrates its 70th anniversary, its growth continues to meet the community's changing needs. Director Mark Jones says the organization takes great pride in the more than 300 programs it offers.

"We collaborate with different groups in the area to benefit the community," he says. "The parks department is so much more than just your playgrounds, swing sets and slides. We are healthy lifestyle, and people are becoming more active. Our parks department takes a huge role in that. We like to be front and center along with our partner, Healthy Communities." The diversity of programming offered year-round by the department is as varied as its participants. From youths to senior citizens, there is a program to fit about every interest and skill level, including aquatic, wellness, sports and recreation. Also a number of free community events are offered throughout the year, such as variety shows at the Donner Park shelter house and festivals and fun days at Donner Center.

The department itself is also an economic driver, Jones says. In 2016, sports tournaments offered a more than \$5 million impact for the Columbus community.

"We do a slew of tournaments, including soccer and lacrosse, which bring in a large stream of revenue," says Nikki Murphy, director of sports programs. "If you look over the past three years, we have on average over the last 3 years, \$14.6 million in direct spending each year for the city of Columbus. The tournaments bring revenue and people into town and raise money for the department."

The various facilities managed by the department, such as The Commons and Hamilton Community Center and Ice Arena, are assets for everyone and exemplify its public and private partnerships, Jones says.

"We just recently made some upgrades and put close to \$3 million into the ice arena," he says. "And fundraising wise, we raised \$1.2 million from the private sector, and the Columbus Park Foundation was part of that as well."

In 2015, the department assumed management of Greenbelt and Rocky Ford Par 3 Golf Course. And with that transition, it has been able to better reach some populations. Seniors are now more involved in golf leagues and outings, and course memberships have been on the rise, Murphy says. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, youth involvement on the greens has doubled. Rocky Ford Par 3 Golf Course is home to the First Tee program, which introduces area youths to the sport of golf and focuses on personal development as a whole. Participants, who range in age from 6 to 18, learn about golf, healthy habits and core values, such as honesty, integrity and leadership.

"It is pretty cool to see the kids get hooked on the program and golf in general," Murphy says. "It is kind of cool for us in the parks department to focus on our mission of building community and enriching lives and seeing it out on the course with these kids especially."

Jones adds that part of that mission includes listening to area taxpayers.

The department's beneficial impact on the community is multifaceted. If you look at it from different perspectives, you can see how fortunate the department is to get to work with private partnerships that help make the department successful, Murphy says.

"I think there are tons of benefits to the community, including economic partnerships, health and wellness, and a social aspect like with the People Trails," she says. "The People Trails are a safe people-powered transportation system that allows you to get out and meet your neighbors."

The Columbus Parks and Recreation Department is much more than just the programs it offers; it is also the people behind the scenes who work hard to help make the programs possible – from donors to department employees and volunteers. When Murphy accepted the position of director of sports programs in 2015, she was impressed with the long-term dedication of the staff, she says.

"They are invested in the people of this community. I have never seen a staff that does so much. It is a huge credit to how the department is run."

As the department looks to the future, Jones says, it is developing a detailed plan for the next five years, including gathering input from the community about what it wants, which will help determine the organization's direction.

"We are strategizing to figure out what comes after that," he says. "We listen to the community, and what comes out as top priorities are the directions we head toward."



# AWARDS

## **»+1979**

The Indiana Park and Recreation Association presents the Outstanding Service Award to the department in appreciation for outstanding contribution in the field of recreation in the area of Programs for Special Populations.

## **»**→1981

National Recreation and Park Association Great Lakes Regional Council presents Columbus Department of Parks and Recreation with the Outstanding Board and Commission Award.

## **→**1983

Park Board awarded "Best in Nation" award by the National Recreation and Park Association.

## »→1989

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the first of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

The Indiana Park and Recreation Association honors the department with a Special Recognition Certificate in appreciation for outstanding contribution to the field of recreation in the area of conference leadership for hosting the 1989 Indiana Park and Recreation Conference.

## »**→1990**

Park Board honored a second time with the National Recreation and Park Association Board and Commission Award.

Lincoln Center received federal Department of Energy Award for conservation equipment design.

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the second of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

## **»**→1991

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the third of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

## »→1992

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the fourth of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

The Indiana Park and Recreation Association recognizes the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department for hosting the 1992 IPRA Convention.

## »**→1993**

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the fifth of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

The Boston Society of Landscape Architects presents Mill Race Park with the Honor Award for Projects Outside the BSLA Area.

## »→1994

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the sixth of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

## »→1995

Parks and Recreation Department is named a finalist for the National Recreation and Park Association's Gold Medal Award – the seventh of seven times the department will be named a finalist.

Parks and Recreation Department receives National Recreation and Park Administration Gold Medal Award as the most outstanding department in the U.S. for cities with population of 20,000 to 50,000.

## »**→**2001

Chuck Wilt receives the Indiana University W.W. Patty Distinguished Alumni Award from the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation.

Columbus Parks and Recreation is awarded the Best Non-Commercial Float at the Ethnic Expo Parade.

## »→2005

Mayor Fred Armstrong and the Columbus City Council receive the Indiana Parks and Recreation Association's Essential Services Recognition and Community Support Award.

## »+>2006

Columbus awarded the National America in Bloom Award in October.

2005 NCMA Design Award of Honor: Landscape for the Haw Creek Bike Path.

Indiana Ready Mixed Concrete Association 2006 Concrete Achievement Award for Excellence in Concrete Construction for the City of Columbus Parks Department -Blackwell Park, Freedom Field.

## »→2014

Columbus Parks and Recreation Lincoln Park earned the National Softball Association's 2014 Outstanding Park Award. Sports tourism becoming a growing business in Columbus and Bartholomew County.



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## The many-million dollar question: WHAT ABOUT DONNER?

By Barney Quick

Table tennis enthusiasts play in a doubles league at Donner Center.

GENERATIONS OF SWIMMERS,

pancake breakfast enthusiasts, political candidate debate attendees and high school dance crowds treasure their memories of Donner Center. But the Columbus institution is arriving at a moment of decision. It can't go on in its present form without major repairs and upgrades, and its basic design is not well-suited to public expectations for a modern community center.

It was built in 1947 and has under-

gone some renovation. Still, signs of age abound: leaking water from ceiling tile, peeling ceiling paint in the locker rooms and kitchen equipment that is less than stateof-the-art, to put it charitably. It

also sports features that inhibit flexible use. For instance, the space of the multipurpose room is broken up by two large columns.

"On the surface, it might look cheaper to renovate, but at the end of the day, you'd be throwing a \$4 million Band-Aid on a 70-year-old building," says Parks and Recreation Director Mark Jones. "If you started fresh, you would probably see more real change."

The question of how broad an array of functions a new facility would serve then arises. One current school of thought among community center developers says that maximum flexibility should be the goal. Some such facilities include fitness centers, courts for playing various sports, meeting and banquet space, and a cafe.

Jones stresses that the process of specifying just what kind of identity a new Donner Center would assume is just beginning. Still, he thinks such a building could offer even more to the community than the current location.

"With the Clarion Hotel, [a recently closed west-side establishment that included a conference center] going away,



the city needs space," he says. "The Commons is getting calls all the time from people who would have booked there."

He feels there is still a need for pools and courts to serve a broader population than those already in existence are designed to serve.

"Foundation for Youth does a good job, so good that its facilities are full. It's the same with area schools, so we can't use them."

Jones also wonders if the city couldn't use more space for its younger and older populations, as well as its arts community.

"We take a lot of pride in our partnerships. Are there partners we could work with for Donner? Could we team up with Mill Race Players, maybe have some kind of stage? Could Donner become a satellite location to accommodate kids in midtown and the west side? Could it be a satellite location for senior activity?"

An August meeting facilitated by Ryan Cambridge of Browning Day Dierdorf and Mullins and encompassing all facets of the parks department's current five-year plan spent a great deal of time on the Donner Center question. Several of those present were disinclined to make a fitness center function central to a community center's identity.

Board member Mark Levett pointed out that there are several fitness centers in operation around the city, and that even Mill Race Center has that function among its amenities, to which Cambridge responded that "there are studies that suggest they draw an entirely different crowd" from those who use the weights, machines and treadmills at modern community centers, because a significant portion of the population still finds private sector gyms unaffordable.

A new building of any kind on the ground where the current Donner Center stands is going to involve considerable cost, and, obviously, the more that is asked of it in terms of functions, the more the price tag goes up.

At the meeting, the question of the appetite in the community for a bond issue arose. Cambridge said that presenting the most compelling case possible was key to any bond initiative's

Mark Jones, director of the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department, points to issues with the ceiling in the women's locker room at Donner Center.

success, and that the current facility's central location and the regard for it as a Columbus institution could help greatly with that.

"The bigger a story you can tell, the better you can sell it," he asserted, adding that "Donner is the heart, and you have to do something with it."

Cambridge invited those present to imagine a wide range of possibilities for the Donner location. He pointed out that the large green space just east of the swimming pool is under-utilized.

That said, Cambridge did also mention the former wastewater treatment plant on the city's south side as well as vacant box-store buildings around town as possibilities for a community center.

In a sense, the considerations surrounding Donner Center are a microcosm of the questions driving formulation of the Parks and Recreation Department's overall master plan:

How can the greatest range of demographics be served? How can such a place remain busy in every season? How can overlap of services be minimized while not overlooking the needs of any age group or section of the city?

Jones realizes this set of issues is going to be front and center among his department's priorities, and he's enlisting area minds who want to set themselves to the task: "We're forming a team to dig into this."



## PARKS DEPARTMENT LOOKS TO FUTURE

## Residents share ideas for recreation improvements

By Barney Quick

The big challenge faced by the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department is that the city has high standards for its quality of life relative to typical Midwestern cities. That means that it can't merely think in terms of what's affordable by conventional means.

The department is guided by fiveyear plans, in large part because they are required by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources for obtaining grant funding, but also, according to department Director Mark Jones, because they keep feedback from the public about what it wants on something like a real-time basis.

"Our customers are the citizens," he says. "We take our cue from what they say they want."

Wants, such as new spaces or facilities, and needs, such as maintaining current properties, have dollar figures attached to them, of course. This means that budget considerations for parks and recreation are subject to the same constraints as those found in any household or business. That, in turn, means setting priorities and looking at resources beyond taxes and fees.

"Nobody ever has all the money they need," says Ryan P. Cambridge, planning practice leader for Browning Day Mullins Dierdorf, the Indianapolis-based firm serving as a consultant to the department as it formulates the current plan. At an Aug. 10 implementation meeting for the master planning process, he spoke of two approaches to funding: paying as you go and immediate mechanisms for generating funds for big projects.

That meeting was one step in the process of crafting the current plan. It had been preceded by interviews of stakeholders and staff, focus groups, surveys, analyses of demographics and services, and a visioning workshop at which 14 groups were represented.

The August meeting was where Cambridge presented the high-priority, intermediate-priority and lower-priority needs arrived at through the methods used to that point.

The highest priority need, as determined by input from the public and particular stakeholders, was indoor recreation centers. This opened yet more realms of discussion. As Cambridge told the board, there are four basic service delivery models for indoor recreation: centralized, decentralized, a model focused on venues and what purposes they will serve, and a model focused on activity.

Beyond considerations of function and number, there is the question of location. Cambridge told the board that the three likeliest potential locations for a state-of-the-art indoor facility would be downtown, at either Mill Race Park or the site of the former wastewater treatment plant, in a retrofitted vacant big-box store space, or in some kind of expansion and retrofit of Donner Center.

Cambridge said that the contemporary model for such a facility is one that is multifaceted and that meets the needs of a wide array of demographics, in short, a place that is neither solely for recreation nor meetings and events. The board was left with a clear sense that



the next task in that regard would be to clarify what and where such a center should be.

Board members also acknowledged that questions of services overlapping with those provided by existing resources, such as the gyms and pools at Foundation for Youth and city schools, and The Commons, would have to be addressed. At that point, it would become more clear to the board what kinds of funding avenues, such as a bond or private-sector contributions, would be warranted.

The second-highest priority reported was bikeways and trails. Cambridge observed that the original conception of the city's trail system was as a recreational amenity, but that it's grown into a transportation component.

Jeff Bergman, director of planning for Columbus and Bartholomew County, pointed out that aspects of the system might then fall under the purview of the Board of Works.

The plan, as of its early-August stage of development, proposes 11 trailheads at existing parks, with three more at proposed future parks. These would serve as infrastructure to support the trail network and would presumably rely on technology such as trail and park apps. They would also provide transfer points for different modes of transportation. Cambridge offered the vision of every citizen being able to walk three blocks to access a trail.



There was a general consensus that a trail system connection between Noblitt and Donner parks was something that could and should be addressed soon.

The subject of growing the park system is on planners' minds. Columbus is expected to increase its population by 15.8 percent by 2030.

"By then, if you do nothing, your level of service is going to drop," Cambridge told the board. He said that the current level is 15 acres per 1,000 residents, which he said is good for the Midwest.

He pointed out the potential for stringing together currently owned park spaces situated along waterways, saying, "Your whole downtown is hugged by a park area," and described adding a proposed Flat Rock River natural area, west of Mill Race Park and north of Jonathan Moore Pike, to what is already there as "low-hanging fruit. Something you can do today is get a seat at the table for discussion on the interchange at State Roads 11 and 46."

He did mention two areas on the northeast side, though, saying that Northbrook Park and Everroad Park ought to be further developed, as those areas are underserved.

One question still being examined was whether smaller parks are better suited to new developments, or whether impact fees paid by developers might be better used if they were pooled for financing a larger community park with more amenities.

Jones says that Browning Day Mullins Dierdorf was one of four consultant firms to respond to the department's request for proposal.

"They were financially best suited for us," he says. "I'd also gotten to know Ryan from sitting with him on the Indiana Parks and Recreation Board."

Jones sees his department as offering quality-of-life benefits to Columbus in a broad sense, noting that, for instance, it's at the forefront of addressing the city's obesity rate.

"When millennials are looking for a job, they want to know what's available to do after hours," he notes.

Thus does his department take great care to ensure Columbus is a place where there is always plenty to do.

Our entire broadcasting family would like to Congratulate the **Parks Department** for serving our community for over **75 years**.













- 1. The Mill Race tower under construction.
- 2. The Smith Elementary School Jumphound Gang performed during the 1990 groundbreaking ceremonies at Mill Race Park.
- 3. A fitness class at Donner Center.
- 4. Donner Pool has been a popular place to cool off since the late 1940s.
- 5. The Columbus City Band performs near the Donner Park shelter house.









6. Congressman-elect Lee Hamilton, his wife, Nancy, and their son, Doug, 4, were among 652 skaters at the 1964 opening of Lincoln Center Ice Rink. That number set a record for skaters at a single session.

7. Pictured from left, Erin Blystone, Bethany Scruton, Stephanie Baker, Beth Weldenhalt and Page Kirkpatrick learned to ice skate with instructor Elizabeth Fernandes at Lincoln Center ice rink in 1991. From The Republic archives

- 8. Columbus Parks and Recreation Department staff, 1949.
- 9. Donner Center used to have a snack bar. The pool was outside the windows to the right.
- 10. Construction of the Custer-Nugent Amphitheater in Mill Race Park.









