

TOWNSHIP OF COVERT VAN BUREN COUNTY MICHIGAN

COMMUNITY PARK, RECREATION, OPEN SPACE, AND GREENWAY PLAN

2017 – 2022



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A. COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

JURISDICTION AND PURPOSE

The planning area under consideration is the limits of Covert Township. This represents the jurisdictional limits of the Covert Township Park Advisory Board.

The purpose of the Community Park, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plan (referred to throughout the document as the Parks and Recreation Plan) for the development of the Covert Township Parks System is to establish a strategic plan of actions which will result in the continued provision of park lands for parks and related facilities. The plan is designed to serve as a measurement tool, determining the amount of park land and facilities available in the Township when compared to state and nationally recognized park and recreation standards for communities with a similar size population.

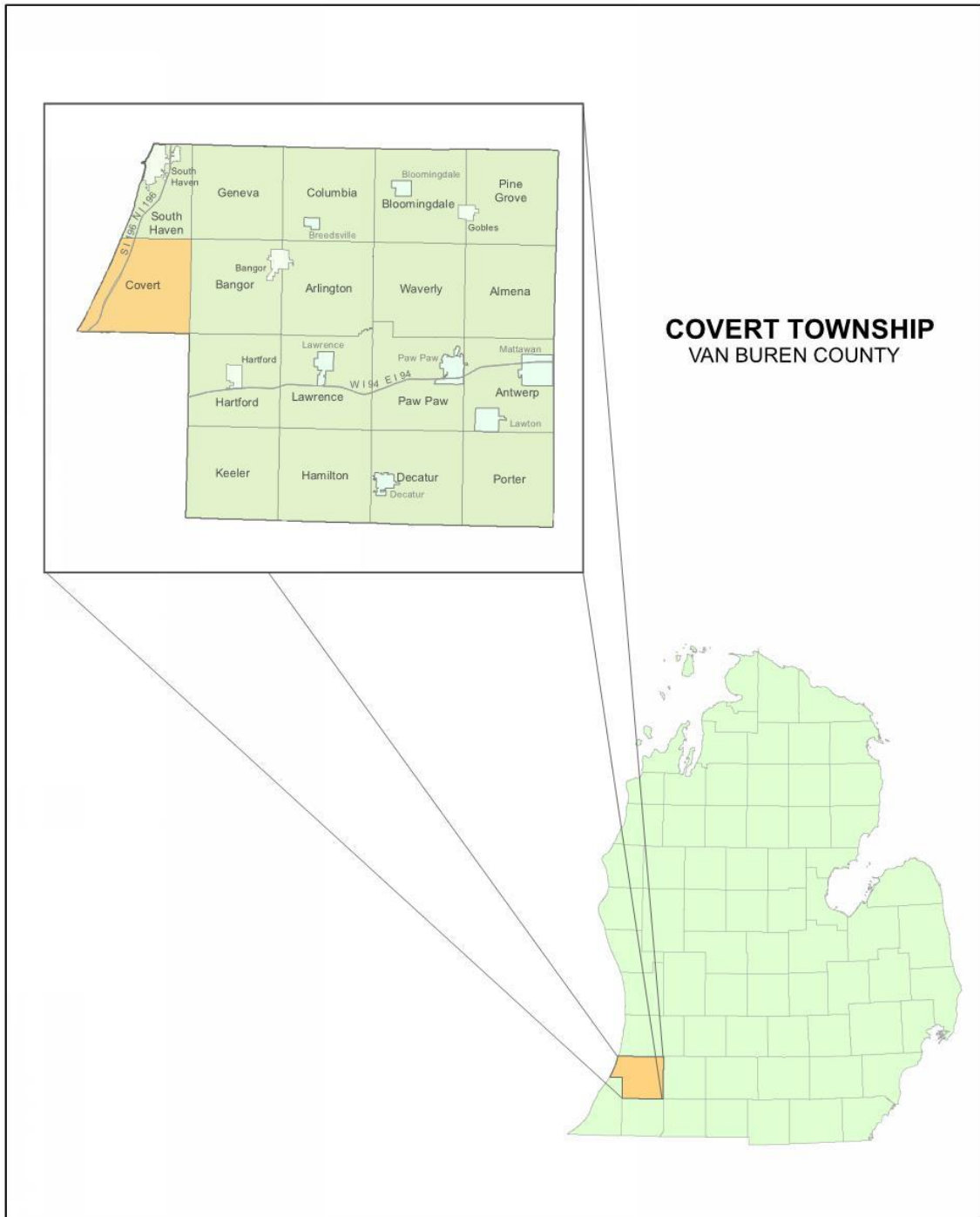
The plan is a working document. It will serve as a guide for the orderly completion of specific actions for continued improvement. It also serves to resolve any current and future identified needs within the Covert Township Parks System.

This document has been prepared to conform with the community recreation planning guidelines established by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), Recreation Services Division. This completed plan will be submitted to the MDNR to fulfill the requirements for an approved recreation plan update which is a prerequisite to the submission of applications for MDNR financial assistance. That assistance will be sought to implement specific projects included in the Covert Township Parks and Recreation Plan.

LOCATION

Covert Township is in Van Buren County on the west side of the State of Michigan. Located on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan it is 35 square miles in size. It is transected by I-196, a major arterial route providing easy access between the Township and the Chicago, IL, northern Indiana population centers, and the greater Grand Rapids, MI area.

Figure 1 – Regional Location Map



HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Covert Township was originally known after its organization as the township of Deerfield. Its name was suggestive of the early pioneer days, when the deer roamed unharmed through its forests. However, with other towns and villages of the same name in the State, a bill was introduced into the Legislature in 1876, changing the name to Covert. It is located on the western side of Van Buren County, its western border being the waters of Lake Michigan. On its northern side is the City of South Haven, on the east the Village of Bangor, while Berrien County joins it on the south.

Following its formation, very little progress was made in its development until the mid 1800's. The heavily timbered lands represented an obstacle to the pioneer. There were no rich prairie lands and every acre of tillable soil was obtained at a cost of much labor in clearing.

In 1845 the first settler Benoni Young migrated from the distant State of Maine where he lived an isolated life on 160 acres with his family, amid the forest. An early saw mill was built in 1857 which started the true development of the township. With the harvesting of timber to fuel the growth of Chicago, cleared land was available for settlement.

The Township historically served as the center of agriculture and commerce for the surrounding countryside, due to the location of the rail line and proximity to Blue Star Highway running parallel to the Lake Michigan shoreline. The Township today retains its agricultural orientation with several farming operations located principally in the southern and eastern portion of the Township.

However, per the 2014 American Community Survey estimates, more Township residents commute to jobs located in more distant communities than work in jobs located in the Township. Over sixty (60%) percent of the Township residents employed in the work force commute 20 minutes or more to their place of employment.

In addition to providing housing for residents a newer emerging demographic trend has developed. Seasonal and other "weekend" residents have acquired homes in the Township for part-year occupancy. Some of those part-year residents do become full-year residents. This trend lost some momentum during the Great Recession, however, there are indications that this newer historical trend is being re-established concurrent with an improving overall economy.

PLANNING, ZONING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Township prepared its first Master Plan in 2004. A companion document the “Covert Township Coastal Management Plan” was also completed in 2004. In combination, both documents established a framework for future land use. In the preparation of these two documents, the Township addressed many critical future development issues. The preparation of the initial Park and Recreation Plan was a result of discussions completed in the preparation of those two documents. It established the need to have a formal Parks and Recreation Plan for the Township.

SOILS

The General Soils Map of Van Buren County indicates the primary soil type within the Township are of the Oakville Association. This association is characterized as having undulating to very steep topography with well drained sandy soils on beach ridges and dunes.

To the east of Blue Star Highway, the soil changes to the Kingsville-Covert-Pipestone or Capac-riddles – Selfridge Associations. These associations are characterized as nearly level, with poor to moderately well drained sandy soils on lake plains and out wash plains.

These soil types have very dramatic and different land use planning considerations. Along Lake Michigan, the sand dunes have been determined to be fragile significant environmental resources and designated as “Critical Sand Dunes” under State Law. In the eastern portion of the Township it is typically easier to accommodate development, however, certain portions do have heavier soils and soils having higher water tables which tend to limit ability to develop.

Portions of land areas bordering streams and other wet low areas are designated as floodplain and wetland areas especially along the Brandywine and Cedar creeks. It must also be noted there are sizable areas along these rivers and other portions of the natural drainage system that tend to hold water in wet weather due to soil composition.

While the poorly drained areas in the Township are not easily developed, these areas can easily be adapted for use as passive or active park and recreational uses or dedicated as undeveloped open space. Some of the property currently owned by the Nature Conservancy used for permanently preserved open space preservation exhibit these soil types.

VEGETATION

A portion of the Township's native vegetation has been lost to logging, agriculture and residential home development. However, there are considerable areas where second-growth mature trees remain undisturbed. These areas provide unique "pockets" of natural beauty and offer areas important for wildlife habitat.

CLIMATE

The average temperatures in the Township range from below 32° in the winter, to 82° in the summer. Average annual rainfall is 37 inches and the average seasonal snowfall is 70 inches. The climate generally supports year-round recreation with only minor limitations for winter activities.

LAND USE PATTERNS

The land use inventory conducted for the Master Plan documented the primary land use in the Township was agriculture and forested lands (71%) with slightly more than five percent used for non-agricultural uses including residential, commercial, and industrial purposes.

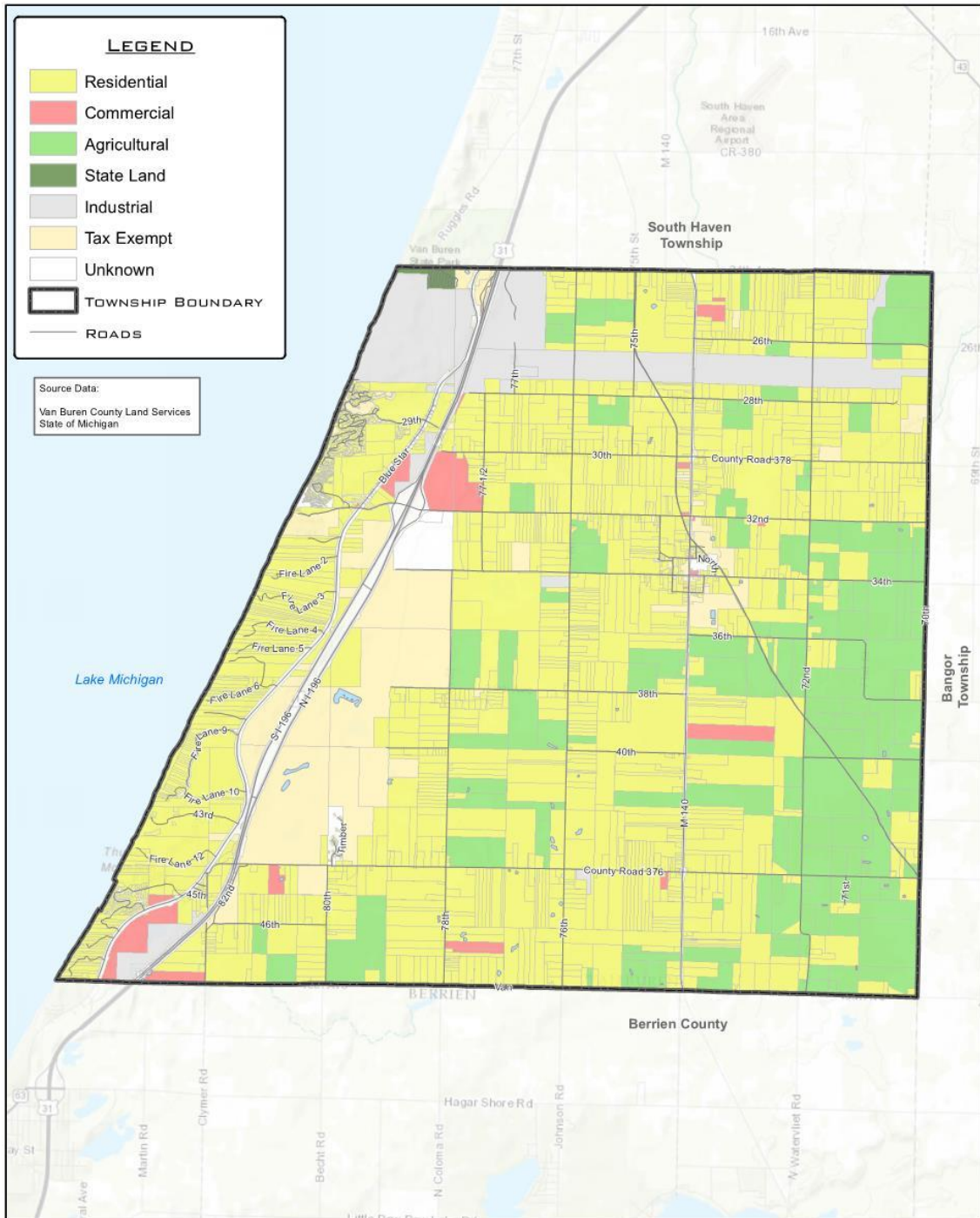
The map on the following page (Figure 2) shows the current pattern of land use. The information contained in the map was obtained from Van Buren County.

UTILITIES

The Township currently provides municipal water services along nearly every road in the Township. The Township provides municipal wastewater services only in the "Covert" area to support the use of community wastewater collection and treatment systems for higher density residential and other developments in the non-serviced portion of the Township.

Gas and electric service is provided by Consumers Power Company, Midwest Energy Cooperative, Indiana Michigan Power Company or Michigan Gas Utilities Corporation. Several providers provide local telephone service. There are no limitations with regards to the availability of required utilities to serve any properties contemplated for park and recreation development.

Figure 2. Existing Land Use Map



TRANSPORTATION

From a recreation planning perspective, the Township’s transportation network poses no barrier to public utilization of the Township park system. The presence of the State Highway system in conjunction with the County Road system, makes accessible every possible location for a park or recreational facility in the Township accessible from a surfaced road.

ECONOMIC AND EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS

In the Township, there are two major employers Entergy - Palisades Nuclear Plant and Tenaska Capital Management - New Covert Generating Plant. The Township does have some scattered commercial development along M-140, especially in the Covert municipal area. According to the 2014 American Community Survey, 13.6 percent of the Township labor force are unemployed. The labor force is composed of 1,119 persons, of which 22.9 percent are employed in production, transportation, and material moving occupations, 20.7 percent are employed in sales and office occupations and 20.4 percent are employed in service occupations.

POPULATION

Historic population counts and future projections are presented in Table 2. This data shows an increasing population growth trend for the Township during the previous 30 years. This population count does not recognize the summer population increase due to seasonal and recreational home occupancy. During the past ten years, the overall population has declined. This is most likely due to the cumulative effects of an aging population and the overall economic recession.

Table 1 - Population

| Year | Covert Population | Percent Change | County Population | Percent Change |
|-------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2020 | 2,798 | -3.1% | 73,882 | -3.1% |
| 2010 | 2,888 | -8.1% | 76,258 | -.01% |
| 2000 | 3,141 | 10.0% | 76,263 | 8.5% |
| 1990 | 2,855 | 5.5% | 70,300 | 5.2% |
| 1980 | 2,706 | 1.8% | 66,814 | 18.1% |
| 1970 | 2,659 | | 56,568 | |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

The Township Planning Commission had projected a substantial increase in population growth. The rationale for this increase was based on several significant trends. These include 1) the installation of the Township water system, 2) support for the use of community wastewater

collection and treatment systems; and, 3) the limited supply of developable land along the Lake Michigan shoreline in southern Michigan which has “pushed” seasonal home demand into Covert Township.

The economic recession depressed demand for seasonal homes. People who may have purchased a seasonal home which, in some instances turned into a year-round home, have not entered the housing market. This had the effect of depressing population growth. With the end of the recession and the associated renewed housing market it is anticipated that the overall population will stabilize or grow slightly over the next decade.

COMMUNITY POPULATION PROJECTION FOR PLANNING PURPOSES

Planning for the overall amount of park land depends on the total population of the Township in the future. Since the Township wishes to place special emphasis on the needs for public recreation services in the future, establishing a future population projection is important for the analysis of the amount of land that should be reserved for parks and recreation purposes.

Based on the preceding analysis, the Park Advisory Board believes that in the Year 2020 the population of the Township will be approximately 3,000 residents.

AGE OF RESIDENTS

The age of Township residents is important to park and recreation planning, because different age groups will seek different recreation and leisure time pursuits.

TABLE 2 - AGE OF RESIDENTS IN 2010

| Age Group in Years | <5 | 5-19 | 20-24 | 25-44 | 45-59 | 60-84 | 85+ |
|--------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Count | 219 | 750 | 179 | 624 | 625 | 460 | 31 |
| Percent Total | 7.6% | 26.0% | 6.2% | 21.6% | 21.7% | 15.9% | 1.1% |

Source: US Census 2010

SEX AND RACIAL COMPOSITION OF RESIDENTS

The Township population is composed of 51.3 percent females and 48.7 percent males. Of the population, 50.2 percent are white, 24.2 Black or African American, 30.5 percent Hispanic or Latino and the remaining representing American Indian, Asian and Pacific Islanders, other races or mixed-race.

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT OF RESIDENTS

Another important characteristic of the population of Township residents is their educational attainment level. This information is contained in the following table.

TABLE 3 - EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF RESIDENTS IN 2014

| Grade Level | Count | Percent Total |
|--------------------------------------|-------|---------------|
| 9th to 12th grade, no diploma | 210 | 11.8% |
| High school graduate (or equivalent) | 612 | 34.3% |
| Some college and those with degrees | 644 | 36.1% |
| Total - persons 25 years and older | 1,783 | 60.3% |

Source: 2014 American Community Survey Estimates

RESIDENT INCOME LEVELS

The data in the following table indicates that the average household income in the Township was \$45,274 per the 2014 American Community Survey Estimates. Of the 598 families in the Township in 2014, 27.9 percent had family income below the poverty line.

TABLE 4 - HOUSEHOLD INCOME & POVERTY DATA

| | |
|--|----------|
| Average Household Income – 2014 | \$45,274 |
| Total Number of Families in Poverty - 2014 | 27.9% |
| Percent of State of Michigan Household Income (\$49,576) | 91.3% |
| Percent of Van Buren County Household Income (\$46,008) | 98.4% |
| <i>Source: 2014 American Community Survey Estimates</i> | |

SPECIAL POPULATION GROUPS

According to the 2014 American Community Survey Estimates information, 9.9% of the residents of the Township can be classified as having some mobility or other disability which may require special recreational facilities. The Park Advisory Board believes using data from the 2014 American Community Survey Estimates, there are 260 persons aged 18 years and above who have mobility problems or other disabilities for which barrier free access may be needed.

The Park Advisory Board also believes this number can increase substantially during the summer tourist and summer resident season. During the summer, the population of elderly persons increases, which indicates a larger portion of the population may use parks facilities and may have access and mobility limitations. Therefore, the Township has established a policy that all new facilities will conform to the American Disabilities Act requirements for physical access.

PLANNING IMPLICATIONS OF POPULATION TRENDS

To summarize the population characteristics of Township, the following observations can be made:

1. The population of Township will stabilize in the future. While the increase originally projected to occur during the past decade in fact was a decline during the next several years that rate of decline is projected to moderate. Longer term projections reflect a stable or slightly increasing population.

2. The demand for park, recreation, and leisure time services for residents of all ages in the Township will continue in the future.
3. The overall age of the population will become older. However, aging will be mitigated by a modest influx of younger households into the Township especially new families who will seek suburban housing opportunities.
4. The attraction of the community to new residents will continue to be the availability of services including schools, location, and a less expensive living environment as well as easy access to area and regional employment opportunities.

These population indicators demonstrate that parks and recreation services will continue to be in demand in the future.

B. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

FORMATION AND LEGAL AUTHORITY

Resolution of the Township Board on March 9, 2004 established the Covert Township Park Advisory Board. The Park Advisory Board serves as an advisory body to the Township Board. Specific duties delegated to the Park Advisory Board were set forth in section *E. Mission, Goals, and Objectives* of this document.

MEMBERSHIP

The Township Park Advisory Board consists of five members appointed by the Township Supervisor with concurrence of the Township Board. Current members and officers of the Park Advisory Board are listed in the preface to this Plan.

Meetings are held upon the call of the Chair typically on a quarterly basis. All meetings are held in the Covert Township Hall which provides barrier free access for the general public. Township policy and State of Michigan law, requires that “all” meetings of the Park Advisory Board, except as otherwise permitted by law, shall be open to the public and held in compliance with Act No. 267 of Public Acts of Michigan of 1967 as amended. That Act may be amended in the future which specifies what meetings will be open meetings according to the Open Meetings Acts.

ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

There are three major functional areas of responsibility for the Covert Township Parks System. Below is a brief description of each functional area:

Day-to-Day Maintenance and Capital Improvements - Day-to-day maintenance of the Covert Park Beach and Campground is the responsibility of the Parks Manager. The remaining parks are maintained by the Covert Township Public Works Department. Maintenance projects costing more than \$500.00 are approved by the Township Board.

The Park Advisory Board can recommend capital projects to the Township Board for funding and authorization.

An annual budget is prepared for parks maintenance which includes funds necessary for the maintenance and capital improvements scheduled to be completed. The Township Supervisor prepares the budget in cooperation with the Park Advisory Board prior to formal presentation and adoption by the Township Board. It is the responsibility of the Township Board to oversee the completion of all capital improvement projects, and the fulfillment of routine maintenance projects identified in the annual budget.

Programming of Park Facilities - The Park Advisory Board desires to work cooperatively with local organizations and the schools regarding the scheduling and programming of parks and other facilities provided in the Township Park System. The Park Advisory Board intends to explore the provision of cooperative agreements with the schools or other community-based organizations to provide recreational activities within Covert parks.

Planning and Development of Parks and Related Facilities - This plan embodies duties and responsibilities of the Park Advisory Board. It demonstrates the commitment of the Park Advisory Board for planning of facilities, recommending acquisition of lands for new or expanded parks facilities and the development of both new and existing facilities.

Volunteers – Currently there are no organized volunteer efforts in support of the Township parks. In past years, there have been some sporadic volunteer activities focused primarily on clean-up at Bicentennial Park. As the new Bicentennial Park and the new Reading Garden are developed it is the intention of the Park Advisory Board to develop a volunteer effort to assist with park clean-up, plantings, etc.

FUNDING

The Park Advisory Board will continue to request from the Township Board an annual budget to fulfill approved recommendations. This annual budget will be established as a separate department account in the Township accounting system.

Special projects, such as the construction improvements within an existing park using a state or federal grant is accounted for as a special capital account. This approach separates special projects from operational and re-occurring annual spending required to maintain the system.

The Township currently has established overnight camping and beach access parking fees for

the Covert Township (Lake Michigan) Park facility. There are no other fees charged for use of other Township Park facilities.

There is often the need for services beyond the capacity of existing personnel which are purchased through a competitive process as established by the Township Board. Some examples of services secured through this manner include the tree removal, general construction work or the renovation or maintenance of existing structures and facilities.

Below is a summary of annual expenditures of the Township for the maintenance and capital improvements made to the Township Parks. All the funds allocated for park purposes have been used for the daily maintenance of the parks and for minor development needs.

The table also shows actual revenue realized by the Township from the park operations. The past two years has seen a significant increase in revenue resulting in a positive net revenue.

Table 5. Revenue and Expenditures

| | 2013/14 | 2014/15 | 2015/16 | 2016/17 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Revenue - fees from camping and parking fees | \$96,977 | \$76,444 | \$114,325 | \$140,000 |
| Township Budget - Expense allocation | \$116,570 | \$115,700 | \$117,347 | \$111,141 |
| Operation Expenses | \$119,073 | \$91,407 | \$100,321 | \$63,117 |
| Capital Improvement Expenses | \$3,000 | \$28,326 | \$1,700 | \$52,500 |
| Total Expenses | \$122,073 | \$119,733 | \$102,021 | \$115,617 |
| Actual vs. Budgeted Expenses | \$5,503 | \$4,033 | -\$15,326 | \$4,476 |
| Net Revenue | -\$25,096 | -\$43,289 | \$12,304 | \$24,383 |

In summary, during the past four years, the Township Board has annually budgeted on average \$115,190 to maintain the Township Parks System. The Township Board has indicated, to the extent that financial resources are available, that similar funding will be provided in the future.

C. FACILITIES INVENTORY AND FUTURE NEEDS

EXISTING COVERT TOWNSHIP PARK AND RECREATION FACILITIES

The following is a list of all parks and recreation facilities in the Township. The list was compiled from information supplied in the previous plan; input from stakeholders; and, visual observations. The locations are shown in Figure 3 – Park Location Map on the following page.

Bicentennial Park – This is a 0.5-acre Township owned park located in the center of Covert accessed from M-140. It contains 2 merry-go-rounds, 2 swing sets, 2 picnic tables, and 2 children sitting apparatus which will be removed in 2017 since the park is not ADA accessible and will be replaced and relocated in a new, accessible Bicentennial Park. ADA ranking 1 – none of the facilities/park area meet accessibility guidelines.

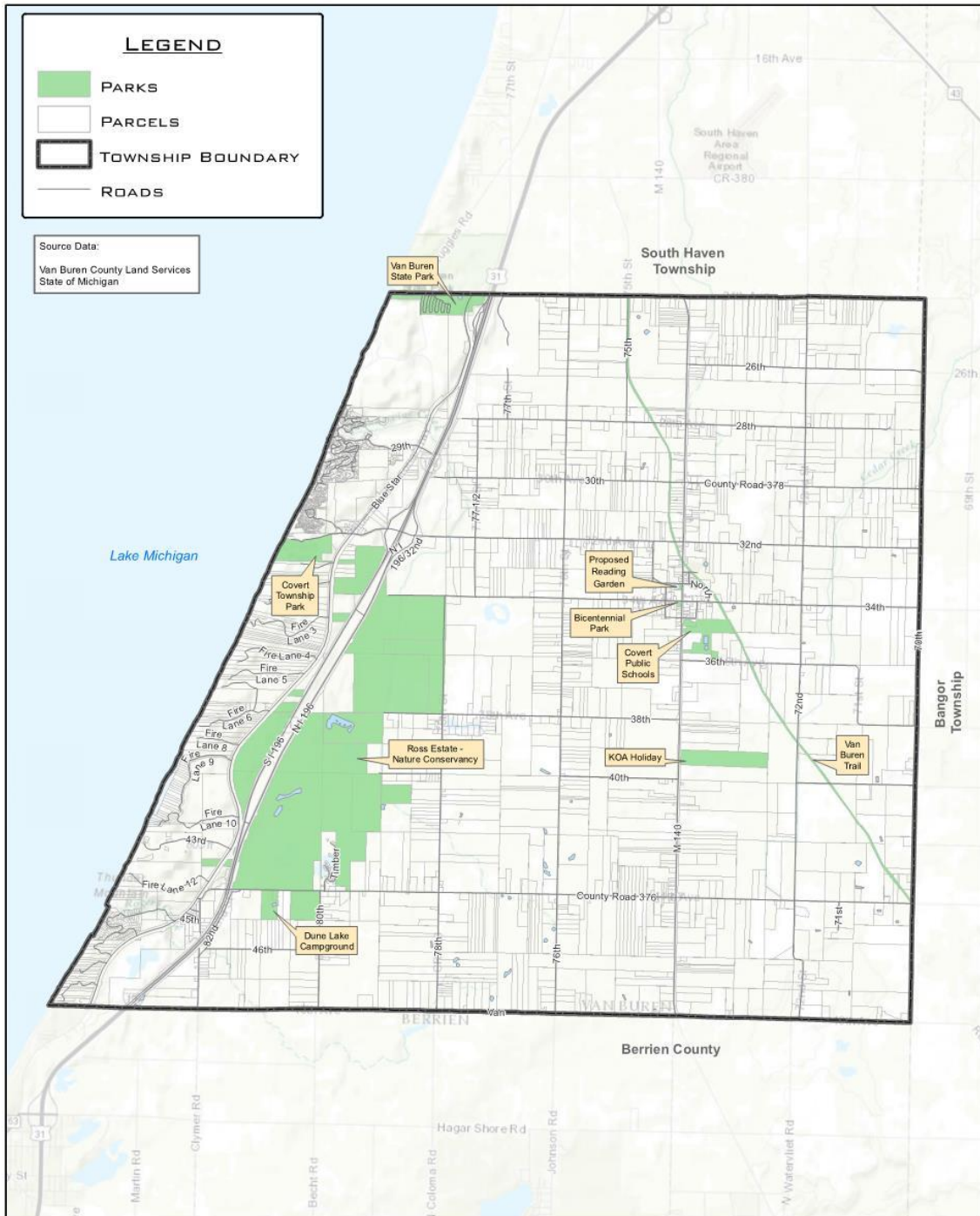
Covert Park Beach and Campground – This is a 50-acre Township owned park located at the terminus of 32nd Avenue at Lake Michigan. It contains 2 playgrounds, picnic tables, 1 picnic shelter, 62 camping sites and over 1,100 ± lineal feet of Lake Michigan beach frontage. ADA ranking 2 – some of the facilities/park area meet accessibility guidelines.

Van Buren State Park – This is a State Park consisting of 400-acres of land area, situated on the shores of Lake Michigan, located 3 miles south of South Haven. It contains 1 playground, 1 picnic shelter, 220 modern camping sites, Lake Michigan beach frontage swimming access, and hiking trails with a portion of the site reserved for seasonal hunting access.

Van Buren Trail – This State Park runs diagonally through the Township beginning at the northern boundary near 76th Avenue and proceeding southwestwards through Covert and exiting the Township at the eastern boundary near CR376. Trail rules allow hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling.

Covert Public Schools – The Covert School District has a 55-acre high school property with the following park and recreation facilities: 3 basketball courts, 4 jungle gyms, 2 swing sets, 1 soccer field, 1 football field, 2 merry-go-rounds, 1 see saw, 2 baseball fields, 3 tennis courts and 1 track.

Figure 3 – Park Location Map



Dune Lake Campground – This is a private owned and operated campground located on CR 376. The facility houses 82 camping sites along an inland pond. Amenities include nature trails, miniature golf, a playground, a volleyball court, ping pong tables, horse shoe pits, a badminton court and a small swimming lake.

Ross Coastal Plain Marsh Preserve – Of special note is the Ross Estate, approximately 1,449 acres of permanently preserved open space owned by The Nature Conservancy located between Blue Star Highway and County Road 376, running east of US-196 northward to 34th Avenue. There is no public access to this property.

KOA Holiday– An 80-acre private KOA of America camping ground located south of downtown Covert on Michigan 140. The campground hosts a heated pool and family oriented activities.

ANALYSIS OF LAND AREA COMPLIANCE WITH PLANNING STANDARDS

The current Township Parks and Recreation System is composed of 50.5 acres of land. With the inclusion of the school district property a total of 105.5-acres of land is available for park and recreation use, excluding state park land. Based on the recommended state and national standard (10.2 acres per 1,000 population), the Township population in the Year 2020 totaling 2,798 residents would require a total land area of 29.4 acres. With a current inventory of 50.5 acres there is a land surplus.

When evaluating this standard, consideration may be given to park and recreation facilities used by nonresidents, especially seasonal residents. An increase of fifty (50%) percent is recommended for this planning purpose. According to the calculations shown in Table 5, the land necessary to meet the standard of the existing population plus 50% of that number is 44.1 acres. Overall to meet the needs of the residents and seasonal and non-residents the Township has, in fact, a small land surplus. Therefore, no land acquisition is planned.

TABLE 6 – EXISTING LAND AREA AS COMPARED TO NATIONAL STANDARDS

| | Land area required <i>(10.5 acres per 1,000 population)</i> |
|--|--|
| Township Population 2020 – 2,798 persons | 29.4-acres |
| Current Township Land Area Inventory | 50.5-acres |

TABLE 6 – EXISTING LAND AREA AS COMPARED TO NATIONAL STANDARDS

| | |
|--|------------|
| Land Area Surplus | 21.1-acres |
| Seasonal Population Consideration – 50% | 44.1-acres |
| Total Surplus Land – 2020 (See text for explanation) | 6.4-acres |
| <i>Source: Calculations by Wightman & Associates, Inc.</i> | |

FACILITY STANDARDS ANALYSIS

The National Parks and Recreation Association has established facility standards that suggest the number of specific activities/facilities that a community should provide based on the population of the community. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources uses these standards to determine the needs of various community for recreational facility development funds.

The standards address three types of park facilities defined as follows:

Mini-Park - A specialized facility that serves a concentrated or limited population group or specific group such as tots or senior citizens with the typical site being between 0.25 and 0.5-acres in area. Recommended desirable minimum site size – 1-acre.

***Analysis:** Bicentennial Park would be classified as a mini-park.*

Special Use – Neighborhood Park/Playground – An area for intense recreational activities, such as field games, court games, crafts, playground apparatus area, skating, picnicking, wading pools, etc., with the typical site size being between 1.0 and 2.0-acres in land area. Recommended desirable minimum size – 15-acres.

***Analysis:** The School District facilities would be considered a neighborhood playground park.*

Community Park – Area of diverse environmental quality. May include areas suited for intense recreational facilities, such as athletic complexes, or large swimming pools. May be an area of natural quality for outdoor recreation, such as walking, viewing, sitting, or picnicking. Maybe any combination of the above, depending on the site suitability and

community need, with the typical site size being between 5.0 and 8.0 acres in area.
Recommended desirable minimum site size – 25-acres.

Analysis: Both Covert Park Beach and Campground and the Van Buren Trail would be classified as community parks.

The standards further define specific activities and facilities that should be made available in these facilities. This analysis considers the needs of the 2020 future community population. A summary of this analysis is contained in Table 7.

TABLE 7 – FACILITY DEVELOPMENT ANALYSIS

| Activity/Facility | Standard | Number Required per 2020 Population | Current Inventory | Availability |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Basketball 1. Youth 2. High School 3. Collegiate | 1 per 5,000 population | 1 Court 1 Court 1 Court | Three | |
| Tennis | 1 per 2,000 population | 3 Court | Three | School |
| Volleyball | 1 per 5,000 population | 1 Court | None | |
| Baseball 1. Official 2. Little League | 1 per 5,000 population 1 per 5,000 population | 1 Diamond 1 Diamond | One One | |
| Soccer | 1 per 10,000 population | 1 Field | One | |
| Running track/trails | 1 per 20,000 population/community | | One | |
| Softball | 1 per 5,000 population | 1 Diamond | None | |

Source: Recreation, Parks and Open Space Standards and Guidelines - National Recreation and Parks Association

This analysis documents that there is a very limited number of deficiencies in the current activity and facility inventory. The only identified deficiencies per this analysis is badminton courts.

REGIONAL PATHWAYS/TRAILS

In southwest Michigan, the provision of pathways/trails has become a major objective of local community planners, the Van Buren County and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. Over the past several years, plans have been prepared identifying several regional trail alignments designed to connect major population centers with park and recreation facilities in Van Buren County and to connect with similar pathway alignments in adjoining counties.

The impetus for this originates from state and federal funding sources where emphasis on the award of construction funds has been heavily weighted toward projects that incorporate pathways/trails, especially those that connect population and activity centers. There are two forms of pathways/trails. The first is use of existing streets and roads by designation of bike trail routes, some with construction of expanded surface shoulders. These are most often funded through state/federal highway funds with the required local funding match provided by the local unit of government. Other state funds, most notably from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, provide resources for off-road alignments. Again, the local matching funds are usually derived from local community sources.

The MDNR has prepared a state-wide trail plan, detailing an overall plan for a series of alignments that connect population centers within Michigan and providing connections to adjoining states. Within the context of this state-wide planning objective, the Southwestern Michigan Association of Trails has been organized to prepare a master physical alignment plan and investment strategy for a trail system that would achieve state and local objectives. The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, under contract from the Michigan Department of Transportation completed a Non-Motorized Pathway Trail Plan in 2004. This plan shows existing pathways/trails for a nine-county area of southern Michigan. It was updated in the summer of 2016 to reflect the current trail system status.

PATHWAY/TRAIL PLANS IMPACTING COVERT TOWNSHIP

Due to the geographic location and presence of Covert Park Beach and Campground, Van Buren State Park, and the Kal Haven (including the area's first canoe trail), and Van Buren

Trails the future location of connective pathways/trails will be important to the Township. Additionally, pathways/trails are the second most sought after activity of many recreational user surveys conducted in Southwestern Michigan. The following is a summary of current plans:

Southwest Michigan Non-Motorized Transportation Plan (2011) – The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission completed a pathway/trail plan for southwest Michigan as part of transportation planning responsibilities, funded in part, by the Michigan Department of Transportation.

Great Lakes Trail (1999) – The Purdue University Regional Design Studio prepared a Trail Plan in association with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. The plan identifies a pathway/trail alignment along the Lake Michigan shoreline the length of Van Buren County. The plan calls for the creation of a shared-use path within the Blue Star Highway corridor connecting park facilities in Berrien County to the Covert Park Beach and Campground, Van Buren State Park, Kal Haven and Covert Trail and the beaches in the City of South Haven.

Lake Michigan Water Trail Southwest – The southwest portion of the Lake Michigan Water Trail is from the Michigan/Indiana state line to Holland, Michigan. One paddles along spectacular sand dunes, wilderness areas, Covert Park Beach and Campground, and Van Buren State Park providing many opportunities to play and rest.

Blue Star Highway Trail (2006) – Constructed and expanded road side shoulder trail along Blue Star Highway beginning at the southern County line running northward past the Covert Park Beach and Campground into South Haven.

Waterway Trails – There are no inland waterway trails in Covert Township. The four creeks including Brandywine, Rogers, Cedar and Deerlick are essentially drainage ways with intermittent flows within Covert Township, and as such they do not have potential as waterway trails.

BENEFITS OF PATHWAYS/TRAILS

Literature provides information identifying several benefits of having pathways/trails within a community. These include:

1. Real estate sales studies indicate that homes with access to a pathway/trail sell at faster pace and at premiums when compared to similar homes within the same market area.
2. Pathways/trails provide open space and pleasant community views, desired by residents and visitors alike.
3. Pathways/trails provide an opportunity to attract tourists and visitors.
4. Pathways/trails provide an opportunity for biking, walking, hiking, and cross country skiing as healthful activities for residents to participate.
5. Pathways/trails provide an alternative means of commuting and lessen dependence on the use of the auto for intra-community trips

RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE OF THE COMMUNITY

Residents of the Covert Township area have several opportunities to enjoy park and recreation pursuits located within western Van Buren County. Most notable is the private and public facilities located in surrounding communities of Benton Harbor, South Haven, Bangor and Kalamazoo, all within easy commuting distances.

BARRIER-FREE COMPLIANCE

The Park Advisory Board has advised, and the Township Board recognizes, that all new construction will observe ADA compliance requirements.

D. DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING PROCESS AND THE PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process began in the spring of 2016. The Park Advisory Board recognized several pending needs among which was the fact that Bicentennial Park was underutilized. Therefore, a recommendation was made and approved by the Township Board that the following actions be taken:

- Relocate Bicentennial Park which is currently located adjacent to the library to the corner of Lake Street and M-140 on land already owned by the Township. This would increase both the visibility and usability of the park by providing more space and additional features.
- Repurpose the current Bicentennial Park to a reading garden taking advantage of its location next to the library.
- Update the 2006 Parks and Recreation Plan which was overdue.

The planning process began with consideration of the plan to relocate Bicentennial Park and repurpose the current park as a reading garden. The planning process then moved to developing this update to the 5-year Park and Recreation Plan.

The Action Plan is a key element of this plan. It was developed in conjunction with input of the members of the Park Advisory Board, Planning Commission, Township Board members. The actions proposed in the Park and Recreation Plan reflects public input the Park Advisory Board has received during regularly scheduled meetings and several public meetings called to solicit public comment and input during the visioning for the relocated Bicentennial Park as well as this updated plan. Therefore, citizens and others concerned, have been given every opportunity to review, comment, provide input into the plan and participate in the planning process prior to the adoption of the Plan.

PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS

Extensive opportunities were provided both internally and externally during the review and adoption procedure. Input began with consideration of the plan to relocate Bicentennial Park and develop the existing site into a reading garden. Three sessions were held during regular meetings of the Park Advisory Board. During those meetings, conceptual plans were developed and recommended by the Park Advisory Board. Information was shared and approved by the Township Board. Additional detail on Bicentennial Park and the reading garden are provided in the Action Plan which is part of this document.

The next step involved the preparation of a draft of this plan. It began with a review of the 2006 Covert Township Parks and Recreation Plan, the Covert Township Master Development Plan, and the Covert Township Coastal Management Plan. Annual expenditures for the operation and maintenance of current facilities and analysis of Township data including demographics, land-use, zoning, transportation, natural features, and Township budget information were also considered.

The draft plan was prepared. It was reviewed and input provided by the Park Advisory Board in November, 2016.

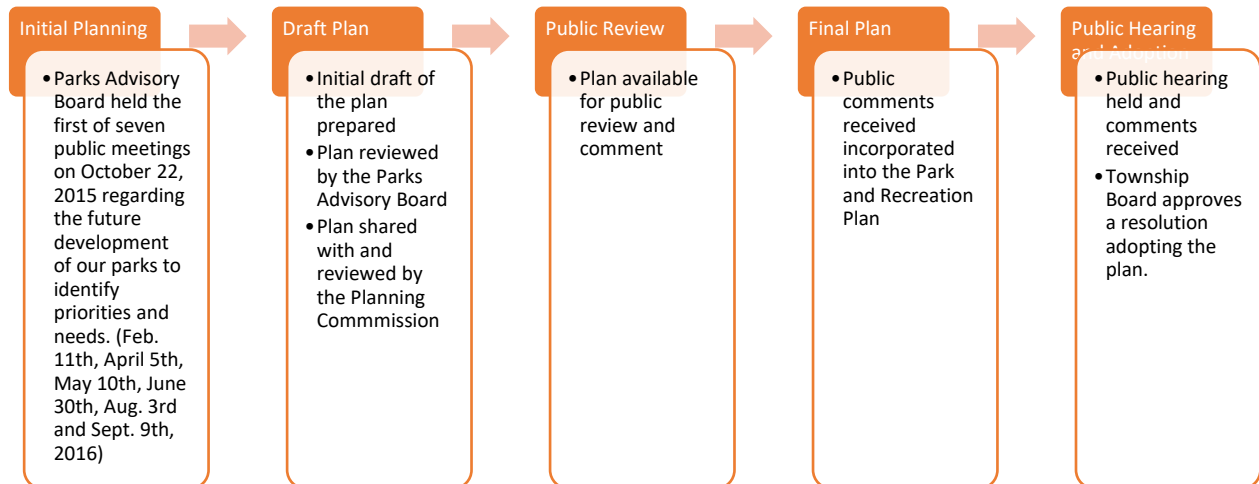
Additionally, since the Parks and Recreation Plan could impact work of the Planning Commission the draft Parks and Recreation Plan was transmitted to the Township Planning Commission. Input received from the Commission was incorporated into the final draft for public presentation purposes. The input from the Planning Commission was received during a regular scheduled meeting open to the public held on December 14th, 2016.

The final draft plan was available for public review and comment from December 26th, 2016 to January 25th, 2017. This represented the required 30-day review period.

Following the public review period a public hearing was held by the Township Board on February 14th, 2017. Once the public hearing was concluded the Township Board formally approved the plan with the stipulation that any public comments received be incorporated into the plan.

The following graphic depicts the overall review and adoption procedure. It begins with the planning of Bicentennial Park and concludes with the adoption by the Township Board of this 5-

Figure 4. Overview of the Public Input and Plan Development Process



Additional public input will be provided as actions are advanced to the implementation stage. It is a stated policy of Covert Township to afford citizens and other interested parties the opportunity to review and comment on each specific action proposed for completion by the Park Advisory Board prior to the implementation of the action. This assures that every citizen will be given every opportunity for public input and can shape the proposed action prior to the start of implementation of the proposed action.

The Park Advisory Board will recommend amendments to this plan from time-to-time subject to the same procedural requirements for public input, notice and comment. This process is designed to ensure that the Parks and Recreation Plan is responsive to the ever-changing values, and opportunities found within Covert Township.

E. MISSION, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES

BACKGROUND

In 2004, The Township Board established a Park Advisory Board. The Commission was later renamed as the Covert Township Park Advisory Board. This Board was assigned to undertake several specific studies and actions including the following:

- 1. The preparation and recommendation to the Township Board for adoption of a master plan for the development of the Township Parks System,*
- 2. To recommend a budget covering the acquisitions, development, maintenance, and operation of the Township Parks System,*
- 3. To recommend to the Township Board capital improvement projects and funding opportunities for the construction of improvements to the Township Parks System,*
- 4. To recommend to the Township Board policies, rules, and regulations related to the use, operations, and maintenance of the Township Parks System, and,*
- 5. To prepare and recommend to the Township Board for adoption periodic 5-year updates to the Parks and Recreation Plan.*

The following principles, established by consensus of the Park Advisory Board in the form of a mission statement, define the role of the Park Advisory Board and its decision-making responsibility. This mission statement guides the decision-making procedures as the Board fulfills its duties as set forth in the action creating the Park Advisory Board.

MISSION STATEMENT

It is the mission of the Covert Township Park Advisory Board to advise the Township Board concerning the planning, acquisition, development and maintenance of properties and facilities enabling the provision of a responsive, efficient, and innovative Township Parks delivery system which provides parks and recreational opportunities for residents of and visitors to Covert

Township. The Covert Township park system shall be composed of a variety of services, park areas and special facilities that contribute to the well-being of the individual, the family and the attractiveness, social and economic health of the Township, operated in cooperation with interested community organizations, including the Covert School District and Van Buren Civic Organization among others.

NEED FOR THE PLAN

There are many reasons for the preparation of the *Covert Township Parks and Recreation Plan* including:

- Recognition that a Parks and Recreation Plan addressing the role of the Township in providing parks and recreation facilities for the Township was needed,
- To assess the need for additional parks, recreation, and open space land areas in the Township to serve existing and future residents of the Township based on 2010 Census data and future population projections,
- To assess the needs and opportunities to expand recreational tourism activities within the Township especially inter community pathways and trails, that cater to bicycle enthusiasts,
- To define future improvements and establish a capital improvements budget for facilities within the Township and to identify possible specific cooperative projects that may be in the Township,
- To identify new community-wide facility needs that would also add facilities attractive to visitors,
- To discuss concepts for the provision of open space and greenways that could provide attractive routes and connection to regional pathways and trails for use by residents and visitors, especially routes that would connect with pathways and trails being advocated by Van Buren County and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission,
- To identify the opportunity to expand tourism, especially interstate day visitors seeking use of Covert Park Beach and Campground.

- To submit the approved Plan to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) to secure the Township's eligibility to request MDNR Recreation Division grant finding assistance, and
- To provide a Five-Year Action Plan for public review and acceptance for future park and recreation services for residents and visitors alike.

F. ACTION PROGRAM

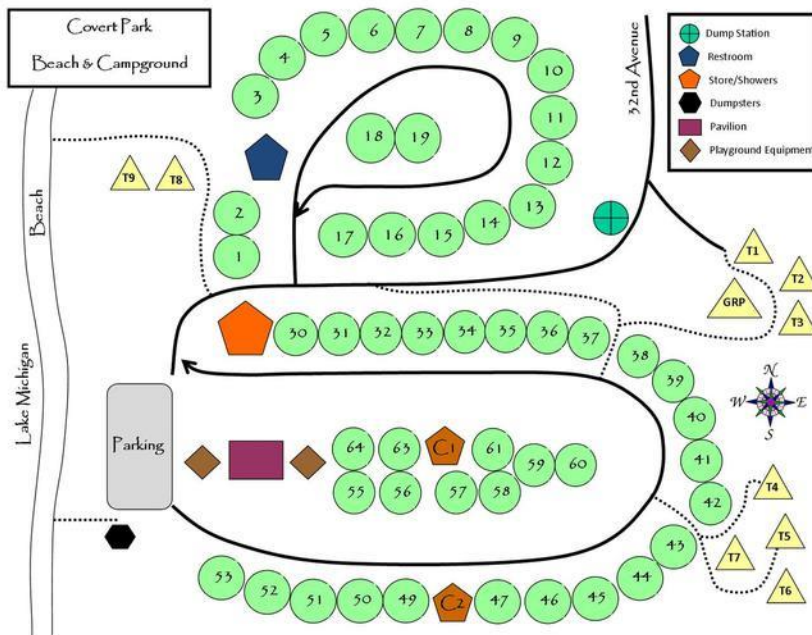
INTRODUCTION

This section of the Plan contains recommendations for development of the parks and trails under the control of the Township. The basis of the recommendation is consistent with the preferences voiced by the Park Advisory Board and identified by the Planning Commission during preparation of the Township Master Development Plan. In addition, the public input was received during the preparation of the Plan and guidance from representatives of organized park, recreation and other leisure time activity groups was considered.

FACILITY AND TRAIL PLAN BACKGROUND, RATIONALE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Covert Township Park Beach and Campground – This is the largest and most heavily used park facility in the Township. The figure below illustrates the general configuration of the campground.

Figure 5. Covert Park Beach and Campground



In 2016 the facilities were open for 154 days, hosting approximately 1,587 day-use vehicles, or an average of 10 vehicles per day. Covert residents are entitled to a free seasonal pass for access to the beach and day use areas. It is estimated that less than 10% of the day users were residents.

Camping facilities provide a total of 62 camping sites. Of those 11 are primitive sites which means they don't have water or electric. One courtesy primitive site is provided to the Manager.

The campground experienced high utilization during 2016. Open from mid-May to mid-October the monthly occupancy averages are shown in Table 8.

On several weekends the camp was completely full with reservations. However, due to last minute cancelations staff was unable to fill the vacancy, thus no weekends show 100% occupancy.

In 2016 this facility was under new management. The new management attracted a variety of new campers who promised to return. Covert is fortunate with its location along the shores of Lake Michigan. The camp also offers two primitive camp sites with a view of Lake Michigan. These two sites are very popular due to their unique location. Campers refer to the Covert Park Beach and Campground as a “Hidden Gem”.

TABLE 8 – CAMPGROUND UTILIZATION RATE

| Month | Occupancy Average | Notes |
|-----------|-------------------|--|
| May | 57% | Only open 15 days - 90% occupancy on Memorial Day weekend |
| June | 76% | Average occupancy increased to 93% after schools closed |
| July | 95% | |
| August | 92% | |
| September | 58% | Labor Day weekend 98% occupancy - overall occupancy declined after school opened |
| October | 24% | Only open 15 days |

Management works closely with the Township to improve this park. Many of the facilities are very old and in dire need of replacement.

Rationale: Park Advisory Board indicated that the future of this park was of top priority as this park is the “key” to the provision of recreation needs expressed by Township residents. It also serves as a revenue source, proceeds of which can be used for improvement to other existing and potential future park facilities.

The Advisory Board recognizes that very little capital improvements and replacement maintenance has occurred since the original construction of the park in the early 1980's. As such, the current park layout, buildings and other improvements need substantial rehabilitation. Additionally, demand for camping sites having access to Lake Michigan beach frontage has increased by residents and visitors alike.

Recommendations:

1. **Restrooms:** The following represent needed restroom improvements.
 - a. **Southern Loop of the Campground:** Build new restrooms and showers for the southern loop of the campground. The current facility does not have appropriate drainage or ventilation. It has an inadequate number of bathroom and shower stalls. The shower stalls are made of wood and extremely difficult to keep free and clear of mold. These facilities get an extreme amount of use during the season and they are very old and inadequate. This is a major capital improvement item, but one of the most important to complete to keep the clientele. Approximate cost estimated to be \$200,000.
 - b. **Primitive Area Restroom:** Convert the old pump house into a restroom facility for the primitive area. The cost is estimated to be \$2000.
2. **Office Building:** Problems associated with the office building include:
 - **Stairs:** Replace with new stairs on both sides of the office building. The railroad tie steps have deteriorated and are unsafe to continue to use. This represents a safety hazard.
 - **Drainage:** Water flows from the road towards the building. It has started to undermine the building in the northwest corner. While rebuilding the stairs, two catch basins should be installed at the top of each set of stairs to redirect the water elsewhere.

- **Retaining Walls:** Rebuild the retaining walls on the west side of the building as well as improving the landscape on the west-side for stabilization purposes as well as aesthetic considerations.

These three items will be addressed as one project with the cost estimated to be \$30,000 to \$40,000.

3. **Cabins:** Build two additional cabins. It is anticipated that the cost of constructing new cabins will be recuperated within the first two years of use. The goal is to use the remaining available area for the cabins while not expanding further into the natural areas. The cost estimate is approximately \$10,000 each.
4. **Electric Service:** Upgrade electric to all camp sites. Currently these is 30-amp service to most sites in addition to 110-amp service available at only a few sites. Service should be upgraded to a minimum of 50-amp service at all sites. The cost is estimated to be \$65,000.
5. **Beach Access:** Reconstruct the steps to the beach with a handicap accessible ramp down to the beach. These steps and overlook should both be ADA compliant in providing access to the beach. The cost is estimated to be \$150,000.
6. **Additional Hiking Trails:** Add additional hiking trails to existing trails throughout the park. This will require MDNR approval since this whole park is in a critical dunes area. The cost is estimated at \$150,000 dependent upon final design.
7. **Leveling Campsites:** Several camp sites in the southern loop need to be leveled. The cost is estimated to be \$5,000.

Bicentennial Park & Trailhead – This park is currently located on the north side of downtown and serves as a neighborhood playground for surrounding residents. It contained a veteran’s memorial that has been relocated to a site at the southwest corner of Lake and M-140.

The advisory committee recognizes the community importance of Bicentennial Park as a neighborhood gathering place, especially for the youth of the community.

Rationale: This park currently underserves the Township residents due to aging equipment, lack of ADA accessibility, negative perceptions, and poor visibility from M-140. The park is 0.5 acres in size. The physical size of the property area inhibits the future role of this park. The playground must be replaced and brought up to current quality standards for new equipment. The lack of ADA accessibility is of major concern and future improvements must bring the park up to current code requirements.

Recommendations:

1. Relocate Bicentennial Park to the southwest corner of Lake and M-140 and rename it **Bicentennial Park & Trailhead**. This site is located about 1,600 feet west of Van Buren State Park Trail, a county trail that ties into the regionally serving Kal-Haven Trail, and 3 miles east of US Bike Route 35, a long-distance cycling route spanning multiple states. This site also provides much higher visibility, adjacency to other municipal buildings, and better accessibility to students after school due to the nearby K-12 facility. The location of the current and proposed new Bicentennial Park is shown on the following page. This property is also one (1) acre in size, which effectively doubles the current park’s area.
2. Install trailhead facilities and signage/wayfinding, public gathering facilities, new playground equipment that meets current safety and accessibility standards, and ADA accessible pathways. The conceptual plan for the new Bicentennial Park is shown on a following page.

Estimated Budget: A preliminary budget of \$796,000 has been estimated for this project and will be completed in phases, phase one is targeted for 2018.

Reading Garden – Convert the existing Bicentennial Park when it is relocated to the southwest corner of Lake and M-140 into a reading garden. The conceptual plan is shown on a following page.

Rationale: Conversion of the existing park into a reading garden will take advantage of the location adjacent to the library. It will keep an existing recreation area in the inventory of facilities for the residents of the Township.

Recommendations:

1. Construct a public gathering facility in the form of a terraced slope facing a band shell
2. Terracing the slope will provide an opportunity to grade the path to meet ADA requirements
3. Runoff from the site can be used to enhance the site with a fountain, terraced bioswale, runnel and rain water feature.
4. A tree lounge deck and several benches strategically located will provide “quiet areas” for residents and patrons of the library.

Estimated Budget: A preliminary budget of \$695,000 has been estimated for this project.

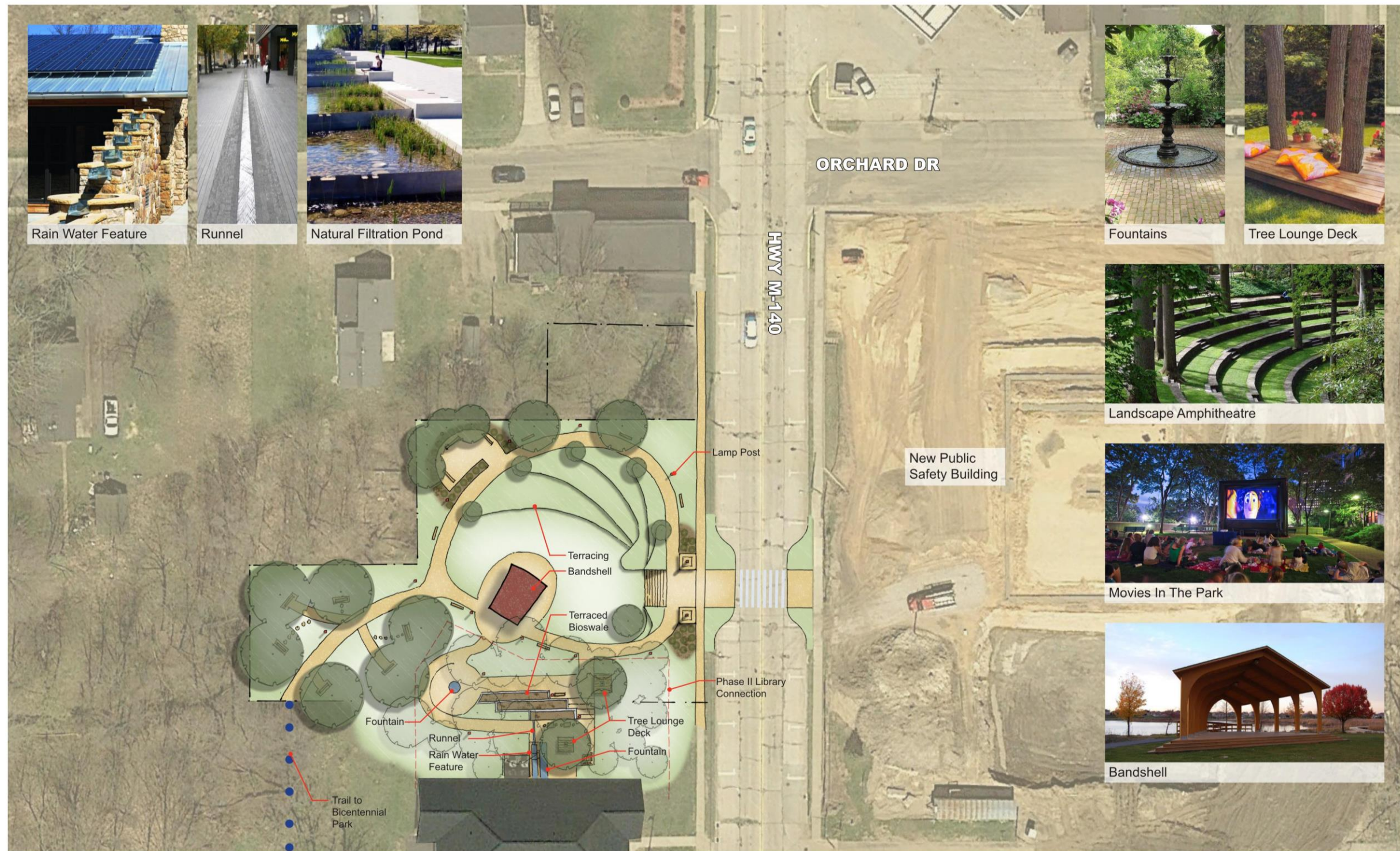
Figure 6. Bicentennial Park and Reading Garden Park Location Map



Figure 7. New Bicentennial Park Concept



Figure 8. New Reading Garden Concept



COVERT TOWNSHIP PATHWAY AND TRAIL PLAN

Figure 9 illustrates the planning concept for the provision of pathways and trails for Covert Township. The concept of this plan is to connect to a regional system that would allow residents to travel along the Lake Michigan shore to designated activity centers.

The following actions would be required to fully implement this plan:

1. Construct a 2-3 mile off-road trail or road-side trail beginning at Covert Park Beach and Campground running northward to the Van Buren State Park. This is estimated to cost approximately \$250,000.
2. Construct an expanded road side shoulder trail along County Road 378 beginning at Covert Park Beach and Campground running eastward to the Van Buren Trail located in Covert. The project budget is \$200,000.
3. Construct a trail connecting the new Bicentennial Park with the new Reading Garden. That trail can be constructed on Township owned property to the west side of the current fire station and the library. The project budget is \$117,000.

Figure 9 – Covert Township Pathways/Trails Plan



CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN AND SCHEDULE

The following table summarizes the projects listed in the Action Plan. For each item a priority has been assigned as follows:

- High - safety and security/accessibility
- Moderate - positive impact on usability and/or revenue
- Low - like to have for aesthetic or functionality reasons

The purpose of the priority assignment is to establish a guideline for action. A high priority project that represents a response to a health and safety or security/accessibility issue would, and should, take precedence over a project that represents and aesthetic or functionality improvement.

Where appropriate the project(s) has been divided into phases. While Bicentennial Park and the Reading Garden are currently divided into phases it is anticipated that other projects will be separated into phases in the future. When that occurs, the public will be notified and the change to this plan will be handled in accordance with state guidelines.

Finally, the projects have been grouped by year and then by priority.

Table 9. Capital Improvement Plan and Schedule

| Year | Park/Facility | Description | Estimated Cost | Priority |
|------|---|--|----------------------------|----------|
| 2017 | Covert Township Park Beach and Campground | <p>One project which includes the following actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replace with new stairs on both sides of the office building • Install two catch basins at the top of each set of stairs by the office to redirect the water • Rebuild the retaining walls and improve the landscaping on the west side of the office building for stabilization purposes as well as aesthetic considerations | \$30,000 to \$40,000 | High |

Table 9. Capital Improvement Plan and Schedule

| Year | Park/Facility | Description | Estimated Cost | Priority |
|------|---|--|----------------|----------|
| 2018 | Covert Township Park Beach and Campground | Build two additional cabins | \$20,000 | Moderate |
| | Covert Township Park Beach and Campground | Several camp sites in the southern loop need to be leveled. | \$5,000 | Low |
| | Bicentennial Park & Trailhead Phase 1 | Relocate Bicentennial Park to the corner of Lake and M-140. Install: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trailhead Facilities and signage/wayfinding for Van Buren Trail and US Bike Route 35. new playground equipment that meets current safety and accessibility standards ADA accessible pathways Appropriate landscaping and lighting to support Phase 1 | \$372,000 | High |
| 2019 | Covert Township Park Beach and Campground | Build new restrooms and showers for the southern loop of the campground | \$200,000 | Moderate |
| | Covert Township Park Beach and Campground | Convert the old pump house into a restroom facility for the primitive area | \$2,000 | Moderate |
| | Covert Township Park Beach and Campground | Upgrade electric to all camp sites. Service should be upgraded to a minimum of 50-amp service at all sites. | \$65,000 | Moderate |
| | Bicentennial Park & Trailhead Phase 2 | Install the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public gathering facilities Bathrooms Multi-court Art work Landscaping and lighting to support Phase 2 | \$424,000 | High |

Table 9. Capital Improvement Plan and Schedule

| Year | Park/Facility | Description | Estimated Cost | Priority |
|------|---|--|----------------|----------|
| 2020 | Covert Township Park Beach and Campground | Add additional hiking trails to existing trails throughout the park. | \$150,000 | Low |
| | Reading Garden – Phase 1 | Construct a public gathering facility with a terraced slope and band shell. Install paths meeting ADA requirements. Add benches throughout the park. | \$350,000 | High |
| | Covert Paths/Trails | Construct an expanded road side shoulder trail along County Road 378 beginning at Covert Park Beach and Campground running eastward to the Van Buren Trail located in Covert | \$200,000 | Low |
| 2021 | Covert Paths/Trails | Construct a 2-3 mile off road trail or road side beginning at Covert Park Beach and Campground running northward to the Van Buren State Park. | \$250,000 | Moderate |
| | Covert Paths/Trails | Connect the new Bicentennial Park to the Reading Garden via a north/south path | \$117,000 | Low |
| | Reading Garden – Phase 2 | Utilize runoff with a fountain, terraced bioswale, runnel and rain water feature. Construct tree lounges. | \$368,000 | High |
| 2022 | Parks Connecting Trail | Construct an ADA accessible trail between Bicentennial Park and the Reading Garden including wayfinding to Van Buren Trail State Park | \$117,000 | High |