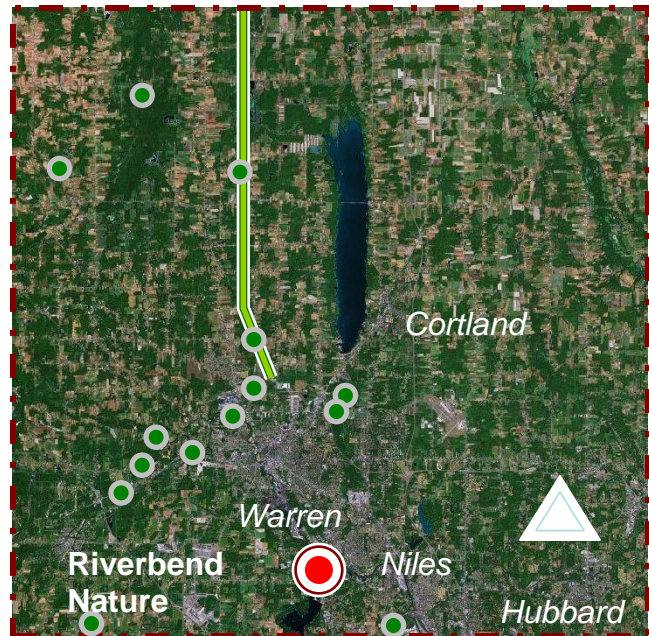


RIVERBEND NATURE PRESERVE

Introductions • History • Present Conditions • Future Development Plans • Implementation Strategies • Statistics

Introduction

MetroParks' Riverbend Nature Preserve comprises 136 acres of deciduous woods, streams, steep terrain, wetlands, and open fields along the Mahoning River. Resting on the border of Niles and Weathersfield Township, the park is located nearby a moderately dense residential neighborhood and not far from downtown Niles. Dirt trails exist along the eastern portion of the property while much of the western end has remained undeveloped. The significant changes in elevation and the variety of environments present on the site provide the opportunity for trail creation and outdoor nature exhibits.



Riverbend Nature Preserve

- Over 130 acres of parkland nestled between Salt Springs Road and the Mahoning River in Weathersfield Township and the City of Niles, featuring open meadows, ample forest, small wetland areas, and steep terrain.
- Opportunities exist for conservation and recreation, including strenuous hiking and mountain biking trails, small-scale wetland mitigation banking, and educational exhibits.
- Future plans include developing and refining park entrances, conducting wildlife and historical inventories, building a network of trails, and enhancing the property with educational signage.

Area Attributes

The park is surrounded by vacant land, commercial activity, industrial uses, and a moderate-density residential community. The preserve is bordered by the Mahoning River to the north while an active rail line and Salt Springs Road traverse the property's southern edge. Also, the land extends over a half mile from east to west. The property may be accessed via Salt Springs Road, Fifth Avenue, and Third Avenue. While the avenues of Third and Fifth are primarily residential roads, traffic densities make them compatible for neighborhood park access. Ideal access to the land, however, would be located off Salt Springs Road near the western end of the site. Additionally, the preserve nearly encapsulates a small high-density residential neighborhood of about 100 homes and a shooting range operated by the Western Reserve Fish Game Protective Association.



History

Riverbend Nature Preserve was attained by the Trumbull County Commissioners in 2007 with the help of a Clean Ohio grant before being donated to the MetroParks. The land had been specifically targeted for protection by the Trumbull County Planning Commission because of its location along the Mahoning River. As a Clean Ohio-funded acquisition, the land must remain in its natural state save for improvements to accommodate public access, education, and passive recreation. Prior to being purchased, the land had remained undeveloped aside from possible storage and agrarian usage. The site is located in the region of the famous Salt Spring, a since-covered saltwater spring that was used by Native Americans and early Westerners for salt harvesting. The Salt Spring is also the origin of the name *Mahoning*, which had translated in the local Native American language as “at the salt lick” at the time of western settlement. Due to the prominence of the Salt Spring and the nature preserve’s proximity along the Mahoning River, there is the possibility that Native Americans could have utilized the site for trading or living purposes.

Present Conditions

A series of dirt trails and pathways already exist on the property and lead into the residential neighborhood along the eastern end of the site. The trail network could be expanded to Salt Springs Road, the only point where vehicles could access the park without driving through residential streets. The park is also accessible from Fifth Avenue and Third Avenue, the main transportation corridor for Niles’ southernmost community. It is also important to note that little recreational opportunities exist nearby.

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) has placed a dermal advisory along Mahoning River in the vicinity of the nature preserve, meaning that canoeists departing or arriving at the site would have to take extra precaution to avoid physical contact with the water. Although the water quality of the Mahoning River has slowly improved over time, the dermal advisory is unlikely to be removed anytime soon.



Riverbend Nature Preserve

Other issues at the site include its history of dumping, a situation that MetroParks will continue to monitor. Also, there is evidence of ATV usage along the existing trails. Because of their impact on the environment and other dangers, MetroParks is working to discourage the operation of unauthorized vehicles within the park. Additionally, the Western Reserve Fish Game Protective Association presently uses the riverfront property along Third Avenue as a shooting range. Any future development would have to consider the location of the association’s existing firing range and the possible trajectory of any projectiles.



Future Development Plans

Because of the park's size and landscape diversity, there are a number of recreational and conservational opportunities. Future developments include conducting a historical and plantlife inventory, expanding the park, and developing mountain bike and pedestrian trails featuring educational signage.

Conduct Inventories

MetroParks may conduct a wildlife inventory to determine the diversity and counts of plants and trees. Additionally, because of the park's proximity to possible Native American trails, an archeological inventory may be performed as well. In particular, it is suspected that the western end of the site could contain artifacts. Another area of consideration is the viability of wetland creation in the park, particularly along the northern end of the site where public access may be limited due to access and proximity to the Western Reserve Fish Game Protective Association. Should a significant portion of land be suitable for wetland creation, MetroParks could pursue the creation of a wetland mitigation bank.

Park Expansion

MetroParks may also look to expand the nature preserve. Due to deed restrictions, certain amenities such as pervious surfaces for parking and pavilions are not permitted anywhere on the existing nature preserve. However, by acquiring adjacent property, MetroParks could attain additional space for parking and shelters, enabling the site to serve as a picnic area and possibly a land lab.

Entrance Opportunities

Opportunities for parking exist along Third Avenue, Fifth Avenue, and Salt Springs Road. The ideal location for parking would be at the western end of the site along Salt Springs Road, which could be enhanced with directional signage from the intersection of Salt Springs Road and State Route 46 in Weathersfield Township. Any additional land acquired through expanding the park could also serve as a good parking area, as pervious parking lots are less expensive to install, and additional visitor amenities could be provided. However, the least expensive parking option may be at the terminus of Fifth Avenue, which still has easy access to Salt Springs Road and immediately connects to existing trails. Third Avenue is another option for parking; however, trails would have to be cut to connect with the existing trail network. Although residential roads, Fifth and Third Avenues are the main roads for the large residential neighborhood. Additionally, the distance visitors would have to travel along Fifth Avenue is minimal. MetroParks may place park entrance signage at all parking areas as well as existing trailheads. MetroParks may also work to establish picnic areas at entrances with high traffic.

Walking & Mountain Biking Trails

MetroParks may utilize the nature preserve's existing trail network and create new pathways for pedestrians and mountain bikers. The terrain of the preserve coupled with existing ATV trails would provide a challenging mountain bike course while offering runners and joggers a strenuous route, not commonly found in Trumbull County's mostly



flat landscape. In most cases the walking and mountain biking trails will be separate from one another. Connections to newer trails along the western portion of the park may eventually be enhanced with a small bridge to traverse the stream located at the center of the park; however, detours are available near the southern edge of the site.



Educational Developments

The nature preserve has many environmental attributes and possibly historical elements which could be detailed with educational signage placed along trails and walkways. Key environmental areas include the stream and surrounding patches of wetlands that bisect the park and the Mahoning Riverbank. Additionally, a land lab could be created if the preserve could be expanded to include lands that permit the construction of a pavilion.



River Access

Because of the dermal advisory along the Mahoning River, however, canoe access should be limited. The road improvements necessary for a standard canoe launch would be cost prohibitive. Rather, MetroParks may seek to establish a primitive canoe launch near the terminus of any future trails that pass along the riverbank. A primitive canoe launch would essentially serve as a canoe-access only area for travelers along the Mahoning River similar to the Woodview Property development proposal. Such a launch is more likely to benefit experienced canoeists familiar with the conditions of the Mahoning River while promoting water trail development.

Implementation Strategies

With regards to implementation, the very first item needing addressed is the creation of a historical inventory for the site as existing documents hint toward the use of the area by Native Americans, and important artifacts may be present. At the same time, MetroParks may work to develop a catalog of trees and other plantlife. With a better understanding of the site's historical and environmental attributes, MetroParks can coordinate with local schools and volunteer groups to create educational signage and design trails around the preserve's prominent features. MetroParks should strive to expand the park by acquiring lands with minimal development restrictions, which will allow for the construction of a pavilion and possibly a pervious parking lot. Without immediate expansion, however, a parking lot could be installed either at Fifth Avenue or, if funds permit, off Salt Springs Road. Connecting trails could be built over time to develop a strong network of mountain bike trails as well as nature paths through the site. As with MetroParks' other properties acquired with Clean Ohio grants, the Riverbend Nature Preserve could conceivably remain open with little maintenance and even in times of financial difficulty.

Riverbend Nature Preserve Implementation Checklist

Phase I – Inventory & Create Public Access

- Perform archaeological inventory
- Determine the feasibility of creating a wetland mitigation bank on site
- Conduct a wildlife inventory and tree count
- Seek additional land without restrictions in order to provide improvements such as pavilions and pervious parking

Phase II – Parkland Enhancements

- Provide parking area along western end of property and at other places as appropriate
- Establish picnic area near parking lot with information kiosk, grills, tables, and portable restroom
- Establish mountain bike and nature trails through the property
- Build trails perpendicular to elevation contours in order to create hilly trails for strenuous exercise opportunities
- Place educational signage highlighting parkland's environmental and historical attributes
- Designate portion of riverbank as a primitive canoe launch

Beyond Phase II

- Explore additional opportunities for the site, including gardens, wildlife restoration sites, and other types of land trails (i.e. bridal)



Riverbend Nature Preserve Statistics

Parkland Attributes:

Acreage: 136.00

Land Cover: Forest, Small Open Spaces

Surrounding L.U.: Vacant, Ind., Comm, Res.

Topography: Steep Terrain

* Riverfront – Canoe Access

* Very Steep Terrain, Dramatic

Daily Traffic Counts:

Salt Springs Road:

1,173

Permitted Uses / Restrictions:

- Facilities to Make Open Space Accessible and Usable

- Park Facilities - Picnic Tables

- Composting or Portable Restrooms

- Pervious Entrance Road & Parking Areas

- Canoe Livery

- Camping Areas

- Natural Trails / Boardwalk Trails

- Observation Decks / Signage

- Education / Nature / Research Study Programs

- Easements to be Given to Sanitary Engineer

- Arboretum / Riparian Forest / Wetland Creation