



# **ALLEGHENY COUNTY PARKS ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AND ACTION PLAN SOUTH PARK**

Prepared for the Allegheny County Parks Foundation  
March, 2017





## FOREWORD

With nine parks encompassing over 12,000 acres, Allegheny County boasts one of the largest regional park systems in the country. While a wide variety of recreational activities make each park a unique destination, nature is the common thread that connects our parks and is our most treasured asset. The abundant resources found in our parks' forests, meadows and streams provide vital habitat for flora and fauna that clean our air and water, pollinate our plants and connect the web of life. We are stewards of these natural sanctuaries and are working to protect them for future generations.

In 2016, the Allegheny County Parks Foundation, together with the Allegheny County Parks Department, partnered with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) to conduct an Ecological Assessment and Action Plan in South Park, the second collaboration of this type. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the natural resources and ecological assets in South Park and determine an implementation plan for protecting, preserving and improving the environmental health of the park.

South Park is a diverse ecosystem with examples of old growth hard wood trees including scarlet and red oaks, American elm, black walnut and butternut hickory; a variety of evergreens; an abundant mix of wildflowers and rare plant species that have a particular conservation value in our region. These include Short's sedge and crepis rattlesnake root, which is listed on the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program "Watch List." Several areas of the park have been penetrated by invasive species and the report urges management to protect native species.

WPC recommends converting several mowed areas to native meadows and new forests, a measure that will provide for a richer wildlife and pollinator habitat. It also noted value in restoring forests degraded by pests such as the emerald ash borer and the disease oak wilt. Protecting stream and wetland environments with riparian buffers and constructing bioswales to manage stormwater runoff were also recommended.

WPC suggested adding interpretive signage to help educate the public about significant historic stone structures and ecological features, developing a sustainable trail plan to guide decisions about which trails to restore and maintain and installing deer exclosures to protect tender native plant species from deer browsing while still allowing hikers access. The Allegheny County Parks Foundation is working with Allegheny County Parks to develop a prioritized set of implementation actions.

We are deeply grateful to the PNC Foundation and the Heinz Endowments for providing the funding to make this report possible. We also thank the outstanding staff at the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and the Allegheny County Parks Department for their expertise and insightful contributions to this report. We look forward to working with the County Parks staff and other partners to implement these recommendations and to continue this important work in all of the Allegheny County Parks.

Caren Glotfelty  
Executive Director

March 2017

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# SOUTH PARK

PARK YOUR LITTER • DON'T LITTER YOUR PARK

2013 ACRES



### Groves and Shelters

1	Alabama	C-1	41	Indiana	B-2
2	Altoona	D-1	44	Lebanon	B-2
3	Baron	C-3	50	Maryland	B-2
4	Bedford	A-2	51	Mercer	C-3
5	Blythe	C-3	52	Millin	B-2
6	Bouquet	C-3	53	Mississippi	B-3
7	Bradlock	C-1	54	Missouri	D-2
8	Bright Star	C-2	56	Monroe	D-1
9	Cadman	C-3	57	Montour	B-2
10	Campbell	C-3	59	Nevin	D-2
11	Celeron	C-2	65	Parcell	C-2
12	Circleville	B-2	66	Phit	A-2
13	Craig	D-3	67	Quebec	C-1
14	Cravenwood	D-3	72	Stevens	D-3
15	Diana	B-2	75	Stone Manse	C-2
16	East Rise	C-1	76	Sunnywood	D-3
17	Eliu	A-2	77	Sunny Slope	C-3
18	Ethelbert	C-2	78	Sunsets Hills	D-2
19	Forbes	C-2	79	Tamarac	A-2
20	Fort Pitt	B-1	80	Texas	C-2
21	Foster	B-2	84	Valley Height	C-1
22	Georgist	C-1	85	Vista	B-2
23	Gist	C-3	87	West Virginia	C-1
24	Glenadon	D-3	88	Willow Tree	C-3
25	Glenale	D-3	89	Wilson	C-2
26	Glenwood	D-3	91	Woodland Crest	D-2
27	Harbee	C-2	92	Grant	C-2
28			93	Outspok	D-3

### Recreation Facilities

<b>ADMINISTRATION OFFICES</b>					
A. Administration Bldg.	D-3		W. Cabin	D-3	
Police Park Information			X. Community House	D-2	
<b>RECREATIONAL FACILITIES</b>			Y. Cottage	B-3	
B. Basketball and Sand Courts	D-3		Z. Rental Buildings	B-3	
C. BMX Track	C-1		(NO. 3,4,6)		
D. Gortigan Drive VIP Center	B-2	C	AA. Home Economics Building	D-3	
Banquet Garden Room			BB. Museum Bldg.	B-1	
18 Hole Miniature Golf			CC. Gazebos & Pond	D-3	
E. Pony Rink	D-3		DD. 100 Acre House	C-1	
F. Golf Course and Club House	D-2		EE. Silent Brook	B-2	
G. Ice Skating Rink	B-2		FF. Spreading Oak	D-1	
H. 3 B's Action Park	C-1		GG. Back Hockey	C-2	
-Boards, Bikes, Blades			<b>SPECIAL INTEREST AREAS:</b>		
I. Tennis Courts	D-3		HH. Camp Rolling Hills	D-3	
J. Wave Swimming Pool	B-2		II. Flower Show Bldg.	D-3	
K. Off Leash Dog Area	C-3		Conservation Theater		
<b>PLAY FIELDS</b>			JJ. Game Preserve	C-3	
L. Edgetruck Field	D-3		KK. Girl Scout Cabin	C-2	
M. Fairgrounds Baseball 1	D-3		LL. Horse Show Ring	D-3	
N. Fairgrounds Baseball 2	D-3		MM. Oliver Miller Homestead	C-2	
O. Fairgrounds Softball	D-3		NN. Round Barn (Horses)	D-3	
P. Alaska Field	C-1		OO. Demo Garden	B-2	
Q. 100 Acres Field	C-1		PP. Nature Center	D-3	
R. Tean Field	C-2		QQ. Model Airplane Field	D-3	
S. Black Ash Little League	E-3		(Permit Required)		
<b>RENTAL FACILITIES</b>			RR. South Park Amphitheater	D-3	
T. Agriculture Hall	B-3		SS. Work Out Trail	D-2	
U. Black Ashes	D-3		(Mobile Springs)		
V. Buffalo Inn	D-3		TT. Flag Retirement Area	D-3	
			<b>OTHER:</b>		
			UU. Park Maint. Center	C-3	

☐ = Accessible    C = Operated by Concession

**Legend**

- ☐ Groves
- ☐ Sheltered Groves
- ☐ Facilities
- ☐ Restrooms
- ☐ AED Defibrillator
- ☐ Recycling Receptacles
- ☐ Playgrounds
- ☐ Universal Playgrounds
- ☐ Accessible
- ☐ Park Trails
- ☐ Parking Lots
- ☐ Wooden Area

ALBANY COUNTY COMPLETE SERVICES  
 201 N. 13th St.  
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 Map Reprinted: April 18, 2012  
 Map Prepared by: G.S. Deane

**SECTION I - INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND METHODS:**

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# South Park - Paved and Woods Trails



**Trail Blazing**  
(and Double Blazing)

A blaze is a paint mark on a tree next to the trail.

Follow the blazes to follow the trail.

A double blaze (like the one above) indicates a trail intersection and turn, or a sudden turn, or some possible point of confusion that requires your attention.

When you see a double blaze, stop and look for the next blaze!

**Trail Legend**

- Bison Ridge Trail  
6 Miles
- Fairgrounds Trail  
1.4 Miles
- Maple Spring Loop  
1.75 Miles  
(Paved, NOT Blazed)
- Corrigan Walkway  
2 Miles  
(Paved, NOT Blazed)
- Other Trails

**Blaze Symbols:**  
South Park Trails

The Bison Ridge Trail is marked by a solid white rectangular blaze and is represented by a solid white line on the map.

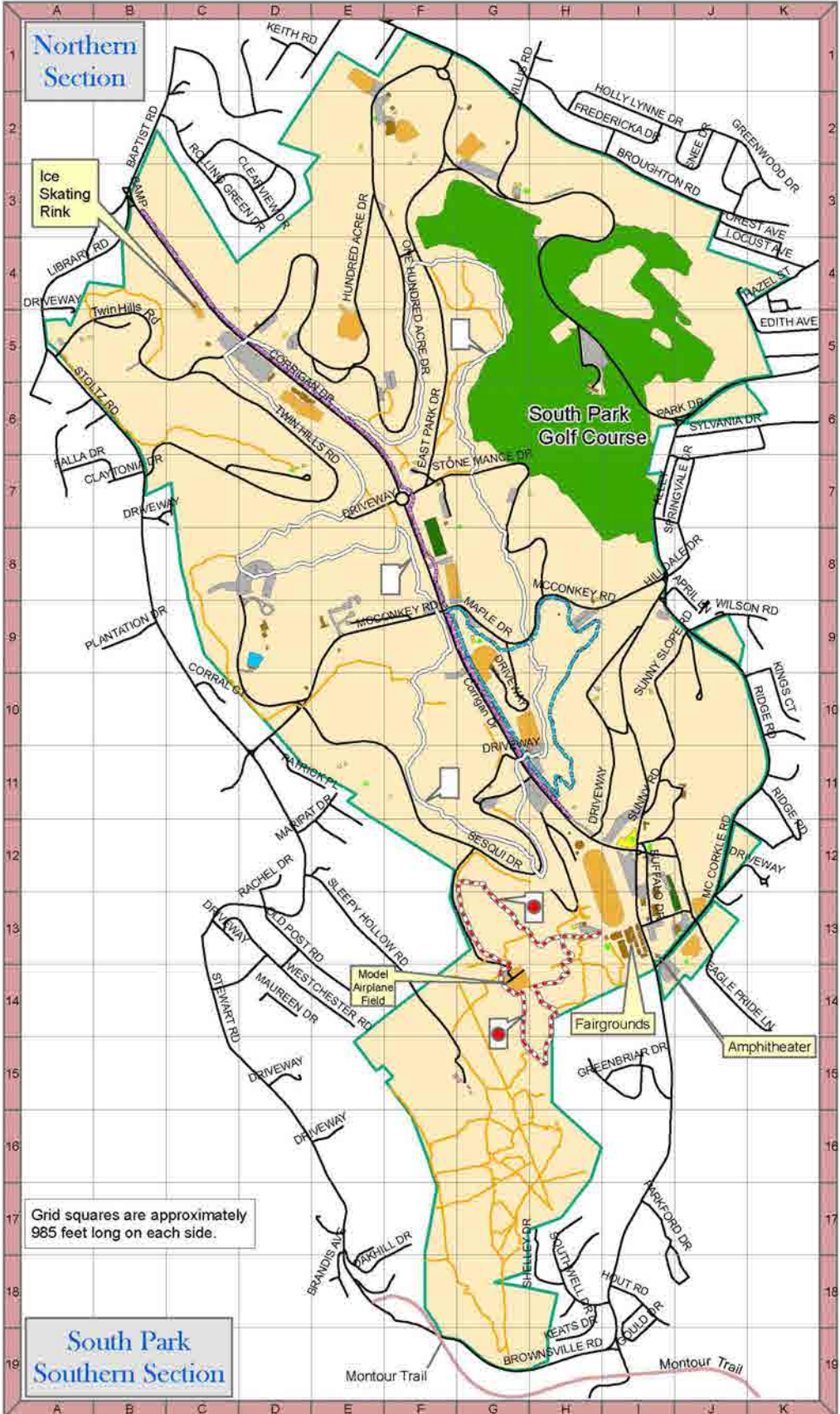
The Fairgrounds Trail is marked by a solid white blaze with a red dot, and is represented by a solid white line overlaid by red dots.

To clarify the blazes, a blaze symbol points to its corresponding blazed trail.

- Bison Ridge Trail
- Fairgrounds Trail

**Park Legend**

- Boundary
- Parking Lots
- Shelters
- Restrooms
- Pools
- Playgrounds
- Park Bldgs
- Ballfields



Grid squares are approximately 985 feet long on each side.



Allegheny County  
Division of Computer Services  
**Geographic Information Systems**  
621 County Office Building  
542 Forbes Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
(412) 350-4760



Scale - 1:16,500

1 inch = 1,375 feet



# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

### *History of South Park—Allegheny County Parks System*

Allegheny County acquired several large parcels of farmland in what was then Snowden Township in the late 1920s. South Park, dedicated together with North Park on June 18, 1927, is one of the first two public parks in Allegheny County. It immediately became a popular regional recreational attraction, hosting a wide array of amenities and events, including the annual County Fair from 1933 to 1973.

South Park is one of the nine parks that comprise the Allegheny County Parks, a regional system encompassing more than 12,000 acres that is managed by the Allegheny County Parks Department with legislative oversight by Allegheny County Council. Rich in recreational, natural, and historic resources and located within a 15 to 20 mile radius from downtown Pittsburgh, the nine parks - Boyce Park, Deer Lakes Park, Harrison Hills Park, Hartwood Acres Park, North Park, Round Hill Park, Settlers Cabin Park, South Park and White Oak Park - are meant to serve all of the communities and citizens of Allegheny County.

### *The Allegheny County Parks Foundation*

“The Allegheny County Parks Foundation (ACPF) supports the improvement, preservation and restoration of nine county parks consisting of 12,000 acres strategically located throughout Allegheny County. The Parks Foundation assists in the transformation of these parks by assembling resources, improving assets, and mobilizing public and private stakeholders to advance strategies and aspirations to make the parks signature assets in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

“ACPF’s overall mission is to help improve, conserve, maintain, protect, preserve and restore park facilities and open spaces, and also to support educational, recreational, natural and cultural activities. These efforts all work to enhance the quality of life for county residents, promote healthy lifestyles, improve the environment, and stimulate economic growth and vibrancy for the region. In partnership with Allegheny County, ACPF strives to enhance the park experience for all users.”

The Allegheny County Parks Foundation has commissioned this report to provide scientific and technical guidance for future enhancements to South Park.

*Western Pennsylvania Conservancy*

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) is one of the oldest and largest environmental organizations in the state. It has helped establish many state parks through its land protection programs, it shepherds the state's database of rare and endangered species, it provides assistance to landowners and communities wishing to protect their watersheds, and is the caretaker of Fallingwater. Its community greening program provides technical assistance and programming to communities desiring to enhance their local quality of life through green strategies including community gardens, tree plantings, and green infrastructure projects. This project has combined expertise from the WPC's Community Gardens and Greenspace Program and the Natural Heritage Program.

*Purpose of the Project*

The purpose of this project is to provide information on the current ecological conditions of South Park and present prioritized recommendations for



Allegheny Park rangers lead a class of school children through the Vale of Cashmere section of South Park.

actions that will enhance the quality and function of the park and improve the park experience for all visitors. The last assessment of the environmental conditions of the county parks was conducted for the Allegheny County Parks Comprehensive Master Plan and was released in 2002. A tremendous amount of change has taken place in the region since then. Allegheny County has been undergoing a transformation of its economy and local environment. Significant changes in the landscape are occurring due to pests and diseases that affect trees and plants, including oak wilt and the emerald ash borer which has killed almost all ash trees in the region. Climate change is affecting storm and weather patterns, growth and introduction of invasive plants and animals as well as air and water quality. In addition, scientific knowledge about how to manage ecological systems and stresses has changed, and a new era has begun with the application of green infrastructure to solve issues related to stormwater, erosion, energy consumption and alternative transportation. All of this change brings the Allegheny County Parks to an opportune moment to reassess conditions, identify needs and opportunities, and craft recommendations for improving the parks both as living ecological systems and as beloved spaces for the many citizens who use them regularly. This is the second ecological assessment and recommendation document that the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has provided for Allegheny County Parks Foundation; Boyce Park concluded in January 2016.

## 1.2 PROFILE OF SOUTH PARK

South Park is located ten miles south of Pittsburgh’s downtown near the southern edge of Allegheny County in the Bethel Park and South Park Township municipalities. The “people’s country clubs,” as North Park and South Park were once called, were originally farmland and much of the wooded areas were created in the late 1920s.

Paul B. Riis, the first Allegheny County Parks Director, believed in combining scenic beauty with active recreation in a natural environment, when creating a park. He used “prairie style” ideas – conservation, restoration and repetition. Only 90 of the initial 1,400 acres of South Park



BMX track located in South Park. Photo courtesy of Trail Pittsburgh.

were wooded; at least 150,000 trees were planted in the Park in its first four years. Riis also felt as though roads should be implemented only when necessary. He also believed that “native” materials be used whenever possible. This is why there were so many stone and wooden structures in the Park, many that still stand today. In the



The South Park structure Lower Cascades after completion, part of Paul B. Riis’ structure using native materials.

1931 Allegheny County Bureau of Parks Annual Report, Riis stated, “*Parks primarily are intended to counteract the effects of pent-up living in cities, the attending irritations and artificialities of civilization. Here the people may find their specific kind of recreation in the wholesome surroundings, atmosphere and spirit of Mother Nature that even for short periods, will tend to recreate the mind and body as nothing else can.*”

Many of Riis’ plans for South Park were not fully realized as he was fired in 1932 when an oppositional County Commissioner, Charles C. McGovern, became majority commissioner. The county fair and its needed amenities,



Historic photo of Kilmer Circle, part of the developments made to South Park with the county fair in the early 1930s.

established in 1933 in South Park, forced the most apparent departure from Riis’ original intention of a more natural park. Federal relief programs helped to pay for many of the upgrades in the Allegheny County Parks in the 1930s. South Park had many unique stone structures built through the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Encompassing 2,013 acres, it is the second largest park in the Allegheny County Parks

system. South Park has an 18-hole golf course, various ball fields, basketball and tennis courts, a wave pool, 58 shelters for rental, a BMX track and skate park, a nature center, deck hockey rink, an ice rink and more than 23 miles of multi-use trails, some of which are paved. There are additional facilities available for rental, a model airplane field, amphitheater, horse show ring and game preserve currently with 11 buffaloes.

Historically, South Park has been a popular regional destination for many different reasons since its inception. The Allegheny County Fair was housed in South Park for nearly 40 years with a half-million visitors visiting the fair each year. The fair ceased in the early 1970s due to reduced farming in Allegheny County. During the late 1960s, South Park was home to an experimental automated mass transit project called the Westinghouse Transit Expressway, or Skybus, that ran along Corrigan Drive until 1972.

### **Literature Cited**

- Block, Ronald J. 12 May 2006. "Saving South Park: Discovering the Past, Finding the Future." Chatham College, Pittsburgh, PA.  
Friends of South Park - Allegheny County Parks. 2016. website: [www.southparkfriends.org](http://www.southparkfriends.org)  
Gangewere, R. Jay. July/August 1986. "Allegheny County Parks." Carnegie Magazine, Pittsburgh, PA.

## **1.3 ECOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF SOUTH PARK METHODS**

### *Team*

The WPC team consisted of its community forestry staff, land protection specialist from the Land Conservation Program, field ecologist, senior ecologist, and community forestry director of the Community Gardens and Greenspace Program.

### *Approach*

The team used aerial photographs to identify likely areas with forest cover; these photos were compared to older photos to identify locations that might have longer-term growth signifying potentially more ecologically significant locations. From these preliminary indications, the park was segmented into areas for further exploration. The field team included the WPC ecologist, community forester, community forestry arborist and additional field staff. They visited the entire park and delineated sections and documented types of forest, types of understory vegetation and other features and conditions. The team used a customized Geographical Information System (GIS) data

collection application to map five distinct management zones that were broken into 78 ecological units (EU) (see Section 2.10). Existing conditions of each unit were documented, analyzed and inventoried. Key environmental features were noted such as seeps, rock outcrops, slopes and open areas.

Problems were noted including erosion, soil compaction, dangerous trees or overgrowth, and conflicts between users and ecosystem. A green infrastructure survey was also completed to identify the most strategic locations to apply green infrastructure to manage stormwater runoff and improve the park's ecological function, aesthetics and sustainability.

### *Intended Users*

This report and accompanying set of maps, charts and resources is intended for use by the Allegheny Parks Foundation and the Allegheny Parks Department staff to protect and restore South Park's natural assets.



WPC staff walk the trails of South Park.