

A photograph of a lush green forest. In the center, a small waterfall cascades over several large, moss-covered rocks into a stream. The water is clear and flows over the rocks. The surrounding forest is dense with various green plants, ferns, and trees. The lighting is soft, suggesting a shaded forest environment. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

Richfield Joint Recreation District
2022 Strategic Plan for
Richfield Heritage Preserve

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Special thanks to the 2022 Richfield Joint Recreation District Board of Park Commissioners:

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Introduction

Richfield Joint Recreation District (RJRD) was created in 2014 with the mission to **safeguard, support, and maintain the natural properties of Richfield while encouraging recreation and educational opportunities in the community**. RJRD is supported by property taxes approved by the residents of Richfield Village and Richfield Township. A seven-member Board of Park Commissioners (RJRD Board) governs the district to represent the interests of the community.

The RJRD Board worked with Western Reserve Land Conservancy to protect its first park property, Richfield Heritage Preserve (RHP). RHP is a 336-acre former Girl Scout camp. The land would likely have been sold for development with no public access until residents approved the park levy and bond.

More than a dozen reports, evaluations, and plans have been prepared to guide RHP. A number of obstacles and financial limitations have hindered adherence to these plans. This 2022 Strategic Plan for Richfield Heritage Preserve (2022 Plan) builds on information generated by past investigations, past and present community input, and guidance from the RJRD Board. Appendix A, Community Engagement Summary, outlines the work conducted for the 2022 Plan. The 2022 Plan recommends action to protect and sustain the incredible resources at RHP.

Considerations

RHP is now a favorite destination for people from across Northeast Ohio. Visitors enjoy hiking, experiencing the beauty of the park, and the site's exceptional natural resources. Others have a strong connection to the history, structures, and past uses of the property. In most cases, visitor interests align with those of Richfield residents and the RJRD Board, however there are areas where the Board needs to identify a plan and adhere to realistic park budgets and staff capabilities.

This plan identifies improvements and operations supported by the RJRD. This baseline condition is paired with opportunities for affiliate organizations to pursue efforts that align with the RJRD mission. It is important that long-term plans and any partnerships reflect the input of Richfield residents. Richfield's ongoing support is critical to the success and sustainability of the RJRD.

Plans for a sustainable park must weigh all interests along with realistic funding sources and long-term stewardship obligations. The 2022 Plan reflects the considerations summarized below; key findings and opportunities include:

- **Community Input** – There is support for a quality park but concern about any increased tax burden on residents.
 - Residents recognize efforts but some question lack of direction.
 - Appreciation for the park, trails, and interest in structures must be balanced with self-sufficiency and low operating costs.
 - The original levy amount was modeled after Bath Nature Preserve.
 - Any investment in structures (public or private) should serve a purpose for the public and relate to the park.
 - Ongoing community outreach is needed to help promote awareness of RHP and to invite residents to enjoy the opportunities for recreation and programs.

- **Trails and Connections** – Trail use is the most popular activity at RHP. This was also reflected in the community survey. Trail stakeholders expressed the improvements to existing trails are needed for sustainability and to provide a better visitor experience. See Appendix B for the full Trails Plan.
 - Trail identification, directional signage, and maps are crucial for park user experience. Wayfinding should be updated for clarity and to reflect current park use.
 - Improvements to existing trails and circulation patterns are needed to improve accessibility and to reflect park use.
 - Trail maintenance should have a plan for priority projects, cyclic needs and volunteer assistance.
 - Connecting trails to area parks can leverage a greater trail network and improve the ability for residents to reach RHP without driving.

- **Site History and Cultural Resources**– Oviatt, Kirby, Neal, and Girl Scout history resonate with many users, however most structures were already adapted to non-original uses. A history of the site is included in Appendix K, Previous Studies and Reports, Section 14, National Register Documentation. Various methods of interpreting the site’s history were discussed as part of the Programming working group and are included in Appendix C, Program Recommendations.
 - Oviatt House – currently being restored by Oviatt House Inc. under an agreement with RJRD
 - Kirby residence, mill, and other structures – Friends of RHP have nearly completed restoration of Kirby Mill; other structures associated with the inventor James Kirby are currently vacant.
 - Neal family homes – the homes formerly occupied by the Neal Family are vacant. Amity is being readied to be open for event scheduling in 2023.
 - Camp Crowell Hilaka (a prior use of the property) is recognized as a Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places.
 - Multiple shelters and supporting structures remain from the site’s use as a camp.
 - Appendix D, Historic District Guidance, provides recommendations related to changes to or removal of contributing elements of the Historic District. These changes should be coordinated with the State Office of Historic Preservation (SHPO). Historic District status can be maintained by documenting and interpreting history without retaining every structure.
 - Girl Scouts of Northeast Ohio, the prior owner/operator of the property, determined that camp would be put up for sale as part of consolidation efforts in 2011. They ceased operations in 2011 and placed the property on the market. The Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC) took ownership of the property in 2014. That same year, the residents of Richfield Village and Township passed a capital and operations budget levy. The District was formed and in 2015, the property was transferred from WRLC to RJRD.

- **Natural Resources** – RHP protects exceptionally high-quality natural resources, however additional limits to site development and ongoing stewardship efforts are required to maintain high levels of ecosystem function. Appendix E, Natural Resource Site Investigation and Recommendations, provides findings from natural resource professionals.
 - Clean Ohio funding places a covenant limiting uses over 125 acres (more than one third of the property); however, the covenant does not encompass many of the exceptional headwater streams and highest quality aquatic resources, including:
 - Class III cold water streams found in spot assessments at three locations; more are present on site and need to be documented
 - Category III wetlands (the highest quality designation in Ohio); a full site assessment is needed
 - Areas where two state-endangered plant species are located.

- **Park Operations** - The levy funds RJRD operations. Staff includes a Park Director (currently a joint position working 50% for the Village of Richfield), a maintenance technician, a part time office administrator, and a part time volunteer coordinator.
 - In 2021, volunteers donated approximately \$280,000 in labor and services, with additional tasks completed by affiliate organizations. Volunteer service is essential to RHP operations.
 - Special Interests and Affiliates – RHP benefits from support and stewardship efforts from outside organizations. Going forward, any work or investment needs to align with RJRD priorities and meet the overarching goals for RHP.
 - RJRD carries a fiduciary responsibility and must consider ongoing operational commitments and long-term impacts to the property.
 - Updated roles, requirements, and timeframes need to be formalized in Memorandums of Understanding with supporting organizations.
 - In addition, many supporting partners use facilities and provide a variety of programs that would benefit from policy, planning and evaluation by RHP.
- **Park Facilities** – The park’s infrastructure and facilities must meet health, safety, and welfare requirements and applicable codes to protect the public.
 - Americans with Disabilities (ADA) – RJRD is a public agency and as such is required to meet the terms of ADA Title II. The Department of Justice (DOJ) enforces ADA; any individual may file a complaint to hold RJRD in violation and subject to penalties and enforcement actions from DOJ.
 - Revenue generation – Many ideas were expressed during community engagement. Those ideas have all been given consideration, and the RJRD Board must evaluate appropriateness of a proposed use, impacts to the park, and availability to the public prior to entering into any agreements.

Recommendations

Board members have carefully listened to many voices about the potential uses for the property. As RJRD moves forward with site improvements and expanded programs as included in the detailed plan recommendations, there is also a need to sustainably manage buildings and structures. The Board’s fiduciary duty to Richfield taxpayers makes it necessary to balance potential uses, expenditures, and long-term stewardship of RHP in a formal plan for the ongoing management of the park.

Building on the RJRD mission, the key priorities for RHP and the recommendations associated with each include:

- High quality park amenities
 - Trails: trail use is the most popular activity at RHP. Recommendations for trails include updating the overall trail system from the former destination-focused camp connectors to an organized system traversing the full site. Other recommendations:
 - Develop a system of trail loops for more intuitive navigation
 - Complete trail route naming, adjustments, wayfinding and maps
 - Create accessible opportunities as possible
 - Create an ongoing trails team or committee
 - Refer to Appendix B., Trails Plan, for routes, wayfinding, and detailed proposed actions.
 - Structures: The park property includes a number of open shelters, former houses, and other buildings. Management of these structures needs to be aligned with funding

- Sustainable operations
 - A schedule and estimated cost for maintenance of park infrastructure should be developed to guide decision-making and budgeting. Refer to Appendix F, Proposed Baseline Services and Budget Framework
 - Operations budgets should be developed annually by the Park Director, along with longer term forecasts for capital projects
 - Develop cyclic maintenance plan and prioritize identified trail projects utilizing volunteer or partner assistance where feasible.

- Engagement of Richfield residents
 - Programs – see Appendix C for a full Programs Report and recommendations
 - Create a programming team or committee to operationalize recommendations. Implement program review and data gathering. Expand program and education offerings utilizing more partners and further community input.
 - Consider use of recommended structures and areas to use for new program ideas.
 - Before the levy renewal, plan and execute a MAJOR community event with in-depth invitation that showcases progress made and all that is available at RHP.
 - Longer term - Develop interpretive plan of all the stories/information that need to be told at RHP and how those stories can be told with signage or features (commemorate the site’s past use as a Girl Scout camp, watershed value, other structures or natural features, etc.) Implement interpretive plan with exhibits and educational materials.

- Resource stewardship & education
 - Encourage participation and provide programs that help visitors understand the value of the resources (cultural and natural).

Specifics are added in the Key Actions and Proposed Timelines section below and in Appendix G, Site Master Plan and Appendix H, Matrix of Proposed Actions.

The framework aligns anticipated funding with sustainable RHP park operations, including baseline commitments for park staff, operations, and ongoing facility management. The RJRD Board must empower a strong Park Director to oversee implementation of the plan along with all operations at RHP, including managing the work of volunteers, affiliates, and any modifications to park property. RJRD should reevaluate staffing needs as additional park features and properties are added to the system.

This plan, along with prior plans, calls for a focus on the core mission of RJRD. Recommendations for future park facilities are included, however outcomes and budgets will depend on the final inventory of structures at RHP. The property currently has **37 buildings and shelters**. The management of these structures inevitably requires staff and volunteer time and incurs expenses for utilities, materials, insurance, contractors, and maintenance of access.

Structure Recommendations

RJRD evaluated RHP’s inventory of 37 structures as part of the planning process; see Appendix I, Building Inventory. The inventory is categorized below, with **21 structures** eligible for a Structure Champion Program. Appendix J, 2022 RHP Structure Champion Program, includes the program requirements and forms for the two-step application process. Ancillary outbuildings, sheds, and latrines are not included in this inventory and were not evaluated. Maintenance of any ancillary structures is up to the discretion of the Park Director based on condition, usefulness, and appropriateness.

- **Baseline Commitments / Structures to remain (10):**
 - RJRD commits to maintaining eight structures and honoring existing agreements with affiliate organizations to support two additional structures.
- **Structures eligible for Structure Champion program (21 structures; refer to Appendix J):**
 - Potential structure champions can submit a proposal, including a fundraising plan and project schedule, for consideration by the RJRD Board.
 - If successful, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) will be executed. The champion will assume responsibility for renovation, programing, and ongoing maintenance.
 - RJRD staff will provide project oversight and verify compliance with the terms of the agreement. Failure to meet the terms of the agreement will nullify an MOU.
- **Structures to be removed (6):**
 - The surplus structures do not meet fundamental considerations due to location, access, use, condition, or other issues. Materials will be salvaged for reuse, repurposed, or donated as appropriate.

Key Actions and Proposed Timeline:

RHP is currently in a period of transition from the site’s former use as a camp which in turn, had repurposed former residential facilities. Managing RHP to meet the **mission of RJRD – to safeguard, support, and maintain the natural properties of Richfield while encouraging recreation and educational opportunities in the community** – can adapt and reuse some facilities. Other structures can be activated in ways which complement the park through the efforts of Building Champions.

Determining the exact outcomes for specific buildings requires ongoing guidance from the RJRD Board and management by RJRD staff. The proposed site Master Plan includes options for enhancing the overall use of the site as a park. In some instances, removal of a facility can open up areas for public use and enjoyment without expanding the developed footprint of the park. Better aligning uses to community needs and available staff and funding will result in a more sustainable park. A general timeline is as follows:

Short Term (2023-2025)

- Demonstrate progress and value to Richfield community for levy renewal.
- Develop RJRD Structure Champion proposals for structures beyond baseline commitments
- Review applications and execute MOUs with successful outside Structure Champions. Monitor fundraising and other milestones for compliance
- Pursue outside funding for key projects
- Develop interpretive plan with signage or features to commemorate the site’s past use as a Girl Scout camp. Coordinate proposed structure removals with SHPO
- Document and remove unused structures. Restore sites. Implement interpretive plan
- Complete trails upgrades, route adjustments, and wayfinding with a focus on visitor experience and accessibility
- Prioritize and implement program recommendations for coordinated and accountable programming
- Develop and implement resource management plan
- Ongoing infrastructure maintenance, including paving and fence maintenance

Mid-Range (2026-2031)

- Evaluate operational costs and adjust expenditures as needed
- Utilize outside funds to add key park features
- Integrate site history and interpretive plan to highlight site history

- Continue to monitor Champion program; renovations and programming should be underway. If MOU terms are not met, stabilization efforts will be discontinued
- Continue to advance programming and utilize expanded options for facilities

Long Term (2032 and beyond)

- Update park plans for all RJRD properties and focus on additional park amenities
- Prepare for next levy cycle commitments

Conclusions

The Site Master Plan and Matrix include recommendations for development of RHP as a natural area park. Supporting documents informing this plan include the following appendices:

- A. 2022 Community Engagement summary
- B. 2022 Trails Plan
- C. 2022 Program Recommendations
- D. 2022 Historic District Guidance
- E. 2022 Natural Resource site investigation and recommendation
- F. 2022 Proposed baseline services and budget
- G. 2022 Site Master Plan
- H. 2022 Matrix of Proposed actions
- I. 2022 Building inventory and tiers
- J. 2022 RHP Structure Champion Program
- K. Previous Studies and Reports:
 - 1. 2014 Clean Ohio Assessment and Application
 - 2. 2014 RJRD Levy Promotional Brochure
 - 3. 2014 RJRD Levy Resolution
 - 4. 2014 RJRD Bond Sale resolution
 - 5. 2014 Structure memo
 - 6. 2015 Conservation Report - Western Reserve Land Conservancy
 - 7. 2015 Clean Ohio Deed and Restrictions
 - 8. 2016 Franklin Engineering Report
 - 9. 2017 Bridge Assessments
 - 10. 2017 Memo re. Clean Ohio Demolitions
 - 11. 2017 June Ohio Public Works Commission Correspondence
 - 12. 2017 EDG Master Plan
 - 13. 2017 Keith Shy Recommendations
 - 14. 2018 FMD Architects Gemini and Chagrin Recommendations
 - 15. 2019 ANCA Final Report
 - 16. 2020 National Register documentation
 - 17. 2021 Strategic Plan Notes