

County parks opening to a host of improvements

ESCANABA, MI April 2, 2014—Michigan's Delta County-owned parks will open this spring to a host of improvements made in the last three to four years.

The Delta County Board of Commissioners had two goals with the improvements, says vice chair Mary Harrington: (1) to make the parks financially self-sufficient; and (2) to make the parks more attractive to tourists and residents both.

"Recreation is a big thing for people in this county," she says. "As commissioners, we want to find ways of putting money back into the county and giving people something they can say is theirs, and that they can use and enjoy."

An avid camper herself, Harrington says she believes they're succeeding.

Delta County owns four parks, including two with campgrounds considered to be the "bread and butter" of the system: Pioneer Trail Park and Campground on the Escanaba River, about midway between Escanaba and Gladstone; Fuller Park and Campground on Lake Michigan and the Bark River, about 16 miles south of Escanaba; Sac Bay Park on Big Bay de Noc, near the south end of the Garden Peninsula; and Rapid River Falls Park, on the Rapid River north of the town of the same name. Sac Bay and Rapid River are day parks only.

All the parks have been managed and maintained by the Delta Conservation District (DCD) since late 2010. The DCD also manages county forestland for the board.

"Before the Conservation District took over, the state of the parks was really sad," Harrington says. "They dove in and took on the monumental task of remodeling them."

Pioneer Trail Park

Rory Mattson, executive director of the DCD, explains saying, "The infrastructure was shot." At Pioneer Trail Park, in particular, "the electrical was a nightmare," and some of the restrooms were so dilapidated as to draw media attention.

Almost immediately, the water and electrical systems at Pioneer Trail were upgraded and several RV camping sites added, including some pull-through sites big enough to accommodate even luxury motor coaches. Eighty of the 96 RV sites now have not only 50-amp electricity (up from 20- and 30-amp), but water and access to WiFi and cable television service.

In addition, at Pioneer Trail:

- the restrooms nearest the pavilion were completely rebuilt;
- the restrooms at the 16-site rustic campground, and the bathhouse and laundromat at the RV campground were repaired;
- the RV dumping station was repaired;
- the roads and the boat launch ramp were repaired;
- a new children's playground was built near the pavilion;
- the former park manager's house was remodeled for use as park and DCD offices, a camp store, and a wildlife showroom;
- the workshop next to the house was insulated for year-round use, and electricity installed;
- a professionally designed 18-hole disc golf course was built at the park, where discs are available for rent; and
- some kayaks were made available for rent.

The old open-air pavilion at Pioneer Trail Park is being repaired now, and a new, year-round pavilion, with restrooms and a full kitchen, is expected to open beside it in time for the Independence Day holiday. Likewise, a second RV dumping station is planned for the park, and another nine holes will be added to the disc golf course.

Pioneer Trail Park has also started hosting themed events for registered campers. An Easter event, including an egg hunt and a demonstration by the Upper Michigan Raptor Rehabilitation and Wildlife Center, is set for June 21, and a Halloween event, with trick-or-treating and a haunted house, for September 20.

Fuller Park

"Fuller Park needed an overhaul, too," Mattson says, and it got it.

Improvements there included:

- expanding the sand beach;
- creating a playground using equipment relocated from Pioneer Trail Park;
- repairing the restrooms, the bathhouse, boat launch ramp, and RV dumping station;
- adding several RV camping sites, for a total of 45, all now with water and 50-amp electricity; and
- pulling out tree stumps and leveling all the RV camping sites.

A new 10-site rustic campground is expected to be in place at Fuller by opening time, and some picnic tables placed near the flowing well there.

Mattson estimated the total cost of improvements to the two parks so far at about \$400,000, most of it paid for with income generated by the parks themselves. He says attendance is up and campground revenues have almost doubled, as a result of the changes. The parks have benefitted from gifts, too, from grants from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Trust Fund, and, to a lesser extent, from the sale of firewood at Pioneer Trail, and proceeds from the camp store. In addition, local businesses are invited to sponsor holes on the disc golf course, in exchange for having their names appear on maps and on signs yet to be installed.

Harrington says the county appropriates just \$50,000 a year to the parks, largely to pay the full-time parks manager's salary and for one seasonal worker. Mattson and the DCD administrator are paid by the DCD, and any summer Michigan Youth Corps workers by the state.

Sac Bay and Rapid River Falls parks

Income from the two campgrounds will help improve the day parks, too, Mattson says.

"We've been concentrating on the two money-making parks, so we could generate revenue to fix up the other ones."

Tentative plans for Sac Bay this year are to fix the beach, repair or replace the vault toilets, and repair the changing building. Longer term, Mattson anticipates developing a rustic campground on the property, and building two rental cabins to make money for that park.

"The Rapid River day park is in pretty good shape," he says, but some picnic tables may be added to it, and a theme park is under consideration for 2017 or '18.

Harrington says, "The whole county board is behind the parks system, not just for bringing in tourism, but for our residents to enjoy their parks and see some of their tax dollars actually at work. We want to see the parks continue to be maintained."

Camping fees, seasonal contracts and more information about the parks can be found on the Internet at <http://www.deltacountyparks.com>, or call 906-786-1020. The parks will be open for five months, May 12-October 12, when office hours will be 10 a.m.-8 p.m. daily.