



INTRODUCTION

A new SCORP offers the chance to track and analyze the many changes and new trends in Indiana and nationwide since the last SCORP. Consistent with recent research analysis, investments in outdoor recreation, trails, and local parks support workforce attraction, tourism growth, and small-community vitality. This SCORP emphasizes place-based public recreation improvements that yield economic, health, and environmental co-benefits statewide. The provision of parks and recreation in Indiana is often directly affected by these changes and trends. Some of these changes include changing demographics and socioeconomics; the continuing children and nature movement; the growing statewide obesity epidemic; and the increasing importance and economic benefits of Indiana travel, tourism and outdoor recreation, both statewide and to individual local communities.

Data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and similar sources yield the following socioeconomic changes in the state:

- **Hoosier Population Growth Increasing:** The 2024 U.S. Census estimates (American FactFinder – US Census, American Community Survey Annual Estimates, 07/2024), that the state has grown in population. The growth was from 6,790,497 US Census ACS estimated population in 2020, to 6,924,275 in 2024, a 1.97% increase. For the 2021 SCORP, Indiana had observed an estimated 1.44% population growth rate, from 2014 to 2018.
- **Even Older Hoosiers:** Indiana is still aging slightly. The state’s median age has risen from 37.7 in 2017, to 38.3, according to the 2020 Census. People continue to live longer, and medical care and access are improving.
- **The Baby Boomers Reach 60:** Baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) began turning 65 in 2011. In 2025, the youngest of the baby boomers reached 60 years of age.
- **Hoosiers Earning More:** Median household adjusted income in Indiana was \$54,181 in 2017, compared to \$69,477, according to 2023 Census estimates.
- **Fewer Hoosiers Living Under Same Roof:** Average Indiana household size has fallen to 2.00 (according to the 2023 Census estimates) down from 2.54 in 2018.
- **Unemployment Still Falling:** Indiana’s September 2024 statewide seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 4.3%, down from the mid-COVID-19-pandemic April 2020 unemployment rate of 16.8%. By comparison, Indiana’s unemployment rate in March 2008 was 5.1%. Meaning that the state is below both prerecession and prepandemic unemployment levels. (IN Dept. of Workforce Dev.; 2008/2019/2024)
- **Transportation/Warehousing and Professional/Technical Employment Improving:** In the Indiana Dept. of Workforce Development 2024 Economic

Analysis Report (published in October 2024), the top three highest employment increases for the period of 2019 to 2023 were in Transportation/Warehousing, Professional/Technical Services, and Construction. The top three declining industries in that same period were in Mining, Information, and Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation.

- **Poverty Slightly Decreasing in Indiana:** The percentage of Indiana families living below poverty level has declined from 13.3% in 2017, to 12.3% in 2023 according to Census estimates. For comparison purposes, in 2023, the Census estimated that the nationwide poverty rate was 11.1%.
- **Gasoline Costs Higher:** The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) on March 4, 2019, EIA reported that the U.S. average price per gallon was \$2.42/gallon. On June 30, 2025, the EIA reported the U.S. average price per gallon was \$3.16/gallon. (U.S. Energy Info Admin, 2019 & 2025).

RESEARCH STUDY FINDS THAT INVESTMENTS IN QUALITY OF LIFE AND PLACE BOOST GROWTH IN SMALL PLACES

A 2022 research study by three midwestern researchers (Weinstein, Et. Al., 2022) found that local government investments in quality of life and place increase growth in small and mid-sized midwestern communities. In 2022, the Brookings Institution (A Washington D.C. nonprofit research organization) published a commentary by the study's authors (Austin, Weinstein, Hicks & Wornell, 2022) summarizing the research. The commentary elaborated on the study's economic development data comparing investments in quality of life versus the traditional methods of doling out incentives to attract or retain employers or attempting to attract or support business with lower taxes and labor costs. According to the commentary: "... there is compelling new data that these traditional economic development tools may be ineffective compared to investments in quality of life and place. Our research on smaller communities has found that community amenities such as recreation opportunities, cultural activities, and excellent services (e.g., good schools, transportation options) are likely bigger contributors to healthy local economies than traditional "business-friendly" measures. Smaller places with a higher quality of life experience

both higher employment and population growth than similarly situated communities, including those that rank high by traditional economic competitiveness measures. The methodology of this new research uses the preferences of households and businesses themselves, rather than the external rankings of factors that make a community a nice place to live. Previous research (CBEC, 2016) shows people are willing to pay higher housing prices and even accept lower wages to live in towns they think offer a higher quality of life. Similarly, businesses are willing to pay higher real estate prices and offer higher wages to locate in places with more productive workers." "... After estimating quality of life (what makes a place attractive to households) and quality of business environment (what makes a place especially productive and attractive to businesses) in communities across the Midwest, we found quality of life matters more for population growth, employment growth, and lower poverty rates than quality of business environment." "... A shift in focus toward quality of life also favors regional cooperation rather than the zero-sum game of fiscal incentives. Places that focus narrowly on quality of business environment end up competing with their neighbors, reducing not only their own economic success but also the population and employment growth of their neighbors. Conversely, improving quality of life in a place improves the economic success not only of their own town, but also for nearby communities with the ability to enjoy the amenities their neighbors offer. The importance of quality of life in economic development has been growing in recent decades, as prospective residents increasingly demand such amenities. But the change has come so slowly that it has gone unnoticed by many. Even if the populations that move to quality of life Midwest communities are relatively small in number, these are small places to begin with, and newcomers can help reverse historic patterns of population decline." (Austin, Et. Al., 2022).

MORE BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR TIME FOR CHILDREN

In March of 2025, The University of Delaware's Cooperative Extension Program published an article written by Jenny Trufio that discussed the "5 Reasons Kids Need Outdoor Time." According to the article, "Outdoor time is crucial for kids' physical, mental, and

social development.” Here are just a few reasons why it’s important for kids to spend time outside:

“Physical Health

- Encourages exercise and movement, promoting strength, coordination, and cardiovascular health.
- Increases Vitamin D levels, which supports bone development and immune function.
- Reduces the risk of obesity by promoting active play.

Mental and Emotional Well-Being

- Lowers stress and anxiety by providing a natural, calming environment.
- Enhances mood and reduces symptoms of ADHD by improving focus and reducing hyperactivity.
- Encourages creativity and imagination through unstructured play.”

Cognitive and Academic Benefits

- Improves problem-solving and critical thinking skills through exploration and hands-on learning.
- Enhances concentration and attention span, leading to better academic performance.
- Stimulates curiosity and a love for nature, fostering environmental awareness.

Social Skills and Emotional Growth

- Promotes teamwork and cooperation through

group activities and games.

- Develops resilience and independence by allowing kids to take risks and solve challenges.
- Encourages communication skills by interacting with peers in a less structured setting.

Connection to Nature

- Fosters environmental responsibility and appreciation of the natural world.
- Provides a sense of wonder and exploration, making learning fun and engaging.”

Regular outdoor play is essential for a well-rounded childhood, supporting both immediate well-being and long-term development.”

INDIANA'S OBESITY EPIDEMIC IS STILL INCREASING

Indiana’s statewide obesity epidemic has increased since the 2020 SCORP. According to the 2023 U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), the world’s largest ongoing telephone public health survey, over one-third (38% up from 33.6% in 2017) of Hoosiers are obese (i.e., have a body mass index of 30 or greater). This ranks Indiana as having the eighth highest adult obesity rate in the nation. Health care expenses from Indiana’s obesity epidemic are estimated at \$9.3



billion annually, according to the 2023 GlobalData study: “Obesity’s Impact on Indiana’s Economy and Labor Force.”

<https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/risk-factors/risk-factors.html> On the CDC’s “Risk Factors for Obesity” page, there is a discussion of obesity risk factors related to systems and the environment we live in: “Health is influenced by the conditions in which people live, learn, work, and play. Health can also be influenced by forces and policies that shape these conditions. These factors affect a person’s ability to make healthy choices and influence their risk of gaining excess weight and developing obesity.

Examples include:

- Access to healthy, affordable foods and beverages.
- Access to safe places for physical activity.
- Community design to support activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations.
- Supportive childcare and school environments.
- Access to high-quality health care services.
- Safe housing and transportation.
- Economic stability.”

Another benchmark in measuring Indiana’s overall health is a yearly report by the United Health Foundation: “America’s Health Rankings: 2024 Annual Report.” The report is the longest-running (35 years) annual assessment of the nation’s health on a state-by-state basis. The report provides yearly data to serve as a benchmark for states and to spark data-driven discussions on opportunities to promote the health and well-being of our country. Eighty-eight measures that span five categories of health are evaluated this year (2024). The 2018 data from this report ranked Indiana as the 41st healthiest state in the country; fortunately, in 2024, Indiana improved five places to 36th healthiest. Indiana’s worst areas driving the bottom third ranking were health outcomes, behaviors, social and economic factors, and clinical care.

INDIANA’S ECONOMY PREDICTED TO REMAIN STABLE

According to the article: “Indiana’s Outlook for 2025” by Carol O. Rogers (Indiana Business Research Center at IU’s Kelley School of Business), written in Winter 2024, for the Indiana Business Review, Volume

99, No. 5, published online at: <https://www.ibrc.indiana.edu/ibr/2024/outlook/indiana.html> : “...national measures are likely to result in a job-creation slowdown for Indiana, but at the same time, Indiana personal income growth should hold its own. Looking through 2025 and beyond, both employment and income show acceptable growth, although both will remain slightly below the national rate. Indiana has seen strong growth in the number of jobs since the pandemic, not only recouping what was lost in 2020, but surpassing pre-pandemic levels. ...When we look at Indiana industry sectors, three things stand out ... First, the post-pandemic restart process is now close to complete. Second, job creation during the next three years (2024-2026) shifts to the services sector and away from manufacturing. And third, construction growth was strong before, during and after the pandemic. Our model shows that total employment will continue to grow in Indiana, but will begin to slow next year and into 2026. Our current outlook for Indiana is fair-to-middling, as we forecast a slowdown in overall employment growth similar to pre-2020 levels. At the same time, Indiana personal income growth will slow during the middle half of our forecast and then stabilize.”

INDIANA TOURISM AND OUTDOOR RECREATION IS A GROWING COMPONENT OF INDIANA’S ECONOMY

Indiana’s economy is seeing even larger benefits from tourism. According to a 2023 Rockport Analytics study commissioned by the Indiana Destination Development Corporation, it was another excellent year, with 81.7 million visitors spending nearly \$16.2 billion on lodging, food, entertainment, shopping and transportation across Indiana. According to the study: “Indiana’s tourism industry achieved remarkable growth in 2023, cementing its role as a significant driver of economic vitality and job creation. Visitor spending surged by 7.0%, reaching \$16.2 billion, which contributed \$10.4 billion to Indiana’s Gross State Product (GSP). This represents 2.1% of the state’s economy, with tourism remaining one of Indiana’s top 15 employers. Visitor activity supported more than 208,500 jobs, surpassing pre-pandemic levels and reflecting a 4% increase from 2022. Wages for tourism-related roles climbed to \$4 billion, while indirect and induced employment contributed



an additional \$2.4 billion in wages. For every dollar spent by visitors, 65 cents stayed in the state, further bolstering local businesses and communities. Visitor volume grew modestly, by 1.2% to 81.7 million stays, remaining just below the 2019 peak of 82.7 million. Notably, international travel led growth with a 26% increase, and business travel also saw gains of 2.3%. Spending growth was more robust, fueled by a higher average spend-per-trip. Day trips drove the largest increases in travel volume, surpassing pre-pandemic levels, while leisure travel grew by nearly 1%, and overnight stays edged closer to full recovery. Indiana's tourism sector also delivered significant benefits to federal, state and local governments, generating \$3 billion in tax revenue. This included \$1.1 billion in state taxes and \$694 million in local taxes, which alleviated tax burdens on residents by approximately \$583 per household. The revenues supported public services such as education and is enough to pay for 120,000 students or the salaries of more than 29,000 teachers, highlighting the state tourism industry's broader impact. Indiana outpaced nation-

al recovery trends in key metrics, including domestic visitor spending and tourism GDP. However, challenges remain, such as narrowing the gap in international visitor spending and regaining the state's pre-pandemic ranking as the 12th largest tourism employer. Looking ahead, continued investment in tourism and its component industries will be vital to sustaining growth and ensuring Indiana remains a compelling destination for both domestic and international travelers."

Park professionals across Indiana still share anecdotal park-use evidence in local parks and recreation master plans reviewed by the DNR still indicate that local and regional park use is rising, keeping pace with the gradual post-pandemic improvement of the economy. There is support for this perception from the national level from a 2025 study by the Outdoor Industry Association: the "Outdoor Recreation Participation Trends Report." According to the report, "In 2024, the outdoor recreation participant base grew 3% to a record 181.1 million participants, or 58.6% of all Americans age 6 and older. There were

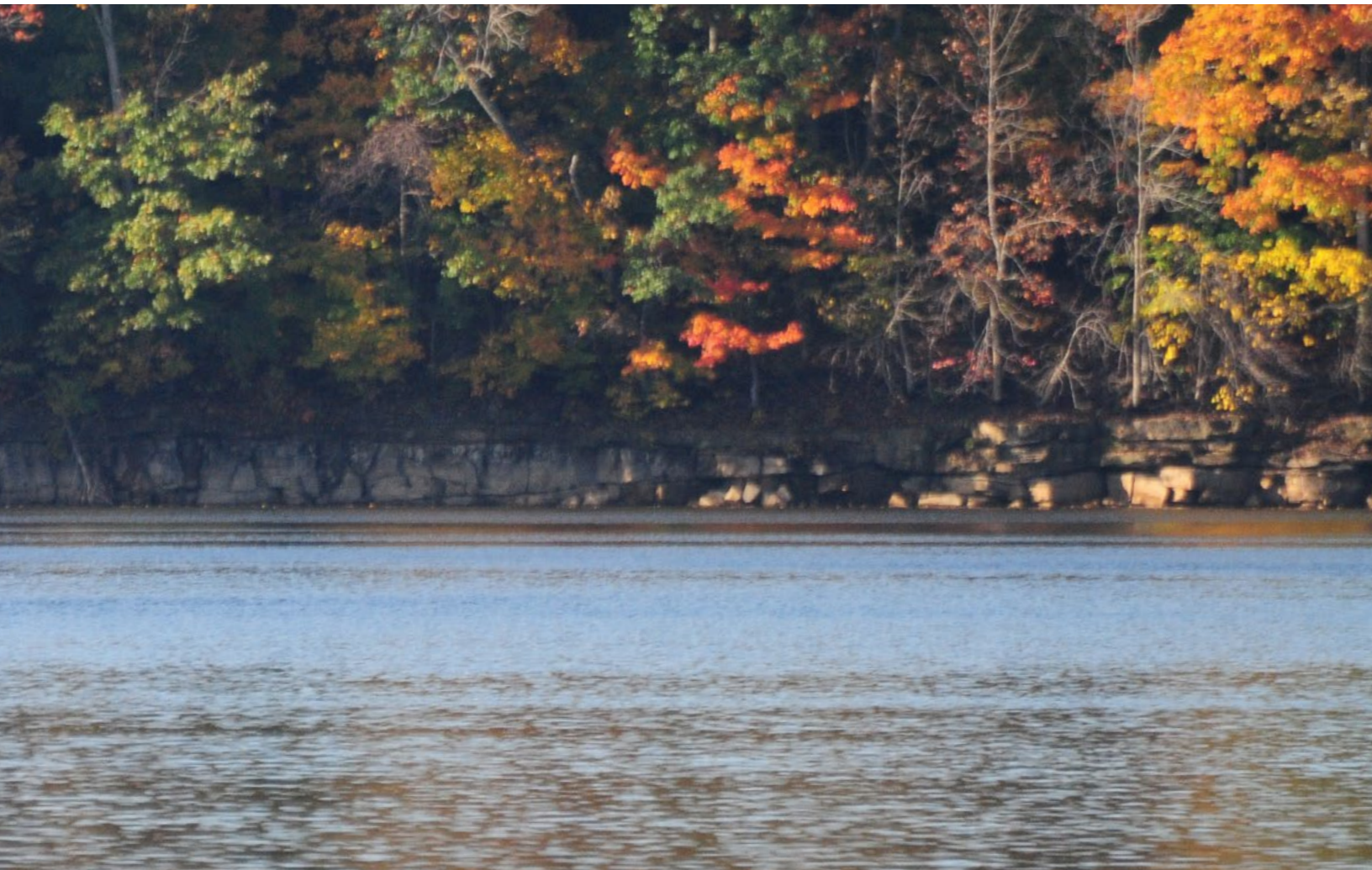


significant increases in the number of youth and seniors, participants with more than \$100K in annual income, participants in the South, participants with a high school diploma and no college education, and Black and Hispanic participants. Additionally, the number of “core” – or most frequent participants increased by 5.7% (five million participants). Participants are most attracted to walking, hiking, fishing, camping, bicycling, and running outdoors, and each of those major activities gained an average of 2.1 million participants. Nearly every signal in the 2024 participation data is positive for prolonged growth. Despite weakening economic conditions, the prospect of growth in the number of Americans who participate in outdoor recreation is very strong.” “...The relatively low growth in the number of outings compared to the growth in the number of participants demonstrates the transition to a more “casual” (less frequent participation) participant base overall.” “... The number of White participants fell 1.1% in 2024 to 121.1 million, which is 1.3 million fewer participants than 2023. Additionally, there were 382,000

fewer Asian/Pacific Islanders participating in 2024. Households with children have a 66% participation rate in outdoor activities, which was a record high in 2024. Overall, the bulk of the growth came from outside of the white, middle-aged, bachelor’s degree-carrying cohort.”

This study agrees with the DNR’s longitudinal research in the past five SCORPs, each of which shows outdoor pedestrian use (including day hiking) as the most popular outdoor recreation activity among Indiana residents.

Even considering the significant economic impact of Indiana’s public parks and recreation and the still-growing use of the state’s recreation lands, it is still prudent to ask if investing in public outdoor recreation space has any tangible benefit for state governments. Many people agree that having quality parks and recreation sites and facilities improves the quality of life in a community, but does it really affect a state’s fiscal health? In 2023, the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) worked with the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason Uni-



versity to create a fifth iteration of an earlier study on the “The Economic Impact of Parks: An Examination of the Fiscal Effects of Operations and Capital Spending by Local Park and Recreation Agencies on the United States Economy.” The study analyzed detailed economic data from the U.S. Census Bureau to look at these economic impacts at the national and state levels. According to the study, “Local public park and recreation agencies in the United States generated more than \$201 billion in economic activity and supported almost 1.1 million jobs that boosted labor income by more than \$63 billion from their operations and capital spending in 2021.” The study also went on to examine the economic effects at the state level: “This study also examined the economic impact of local park and recreation agencies; spending in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The methodology used in the state-level analysis mirrored that for the national study. The estimates of total economic impacts include the direct, indirect, and induced effects of operations and capital spending by local park and recreation agencies in each state and the District of Columbia.” In Indiana, local parks and recreation created 9,422 jobs in 2021; \$318,649,774 in salaries, wages and benefits was also generated due to local government parks and recreation; and \$543,058,517 in additional statewide Gross Domestic Product came from local parks and recreation providers in 2021. Local parks and recreation agency transactions generated \$1,269,172,310 in economic activity in Indiana in 2021, ranking the state 27th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia.

DNR has created this SCORP as a way to share research and other information with state residents, park professionals, park board members, urban planners, government officials and many more. DNR has a strong tradition of blending public opinion and input from parks-and-recreation professionals in the field to understand current and future recreational needs and preferences statewide. The next section of this chapter contains the priorities that emerged from the collected data and analysis from this SCORP.

OUTDOOR RECREATION PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC PARKS AND RECREATION PROVIDERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Based on the data contained in this SCORP, these goals and objectives are recommended, in random

order, to guide decision-making in parks-and-recreation and natural resources management for the next five years.

1. Develop more trails and bicycle/pedestrian facilities.
 - a. Whenever possible, acquire rights-of-way, easements and railroad corridors for future trail development from willing sellers, rail-banking, donors or partners.
 - b. Integrate bike/pedestrian facilities of all types into long-term planning of community infrastructure design and construction whenever possible.
 - c. Emphasize trails and bike/pedestrian facilities as means to connect and improve existing and future outdoor recreation facilities, as well as tie into community infrastructure.
 - d. Encourage development of trail facilities of all kinds for bike/pedestrian use: urban, rural, long-distance, connector, commuter, recreational, exercise/wellness, etc.
 - e. Require trail development using accessible, sustainable design and surfacing wherever possible.
2. Continue emphasizing Indiana’s aquatic resources, both natural and human-made.
 - a. Preserve and protect rivers, lakes, streams, wetlands and riparian corridors when and wherever possible through acquisition, education, funding, restoration and development of new areas to enhance both swimming and boating opportunities.
 - b. Encourage actions that improve the quality of Indiana’s waters as well as user access to all types of aquatic recreation resources.
 - c. Whenever possible, provide or enhance access to natural and human-made aquatic resources, such as splash pads, pools, water features, wetlands, ponds, lakes, access/launch sites, etc.
3. Protect and enhance Indiana’s natural and outdoor recreation resources.
 - a. Use the 2026 SCORP Participation Study’s top five favorite outdoor recreation activities when considering parks and recreation user preferences: hiking/walking/running; camp-

- ing; boating/canoeing/kayaking; swimming/water activities; and fishing.
- b. Protect Indiana's natural heritage by identifying and preserving significant natural areas, including wildlife/fish habitats for endangered, rare, threatened or species of special concern.
 - c. Protect Indiana's outdoor recreation potential by identifying and preserving areas with existing or potential outdoor recreation opportunities or access.
 - d. Provide for education of the citizens of Indiana in environmental stewardship and wise use of Indiana's natural resources.
 - e. Consider the improvements possible in water and air quality, brownfield remediation, tourism and commerce, and economic development created by enhancing outdoor recreation.
4. Encourage and promote outdoor recreation participation.
 - a. Use outdoor recreation as a tool to fight the continuing obesity epidemic by offering locations to participate in as many kinds of healthy exercise as possible and facilitating lifestyle change that encourages lifelong healthy living.
 - b. Encourage continued development of new outdoor recreation facilities, especially in areas of expanding population growth, high user demand, or significant gaps in service provision.
 - c. Encourage development of more neighborhood-level outdoor recreation facilities that meet local needs close to home, preferably within walking or biking distance of residential areas, libraries, schools, retail areas, medical facilities, etc.
 - d. Provide outdoor recreation opportunities for all user demographics, including all ages, abilities and skill levels.
 - e. Consider options for using special events, fairs, festivals, and concerts to attract users to your parks and facilities.
 5. Provide funding for outdoor recreation development at the state and local levels.
 - a. Explore alternative funding methods such as public/private partnerships, recreation impact fees (RIF), cooperative agreements, cost sharing, corporate sponsorships, etc.
 - b. Continue to administer state-level grant programs such as Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grants, Indiana Trails Program (ITP) grants, Wabash River Heritage Corridor Fund grants, and Indiana Shooting Range grants.
 - c. Emphasize parks and recreation facilities that are cost-efficient and financially self-supporting while promoting financially affordable access to the greatest number of users possible.
 - d. Consider the benefits of parks and recreation toward community economic development, tourism, job growth, urban and rural revitalization, reduction of health care costs and improving quality of life.
 - e. Use existing financial resources as efficiently and effectively as possible; consider strategies such as detailed cost-benefit analysis for choosing public provision or privatization of services, maintenance or construction, multi-agency bulk purchases, interagency work-sharing agreements, volunteers and "friends" groups, and other means to control the costs of operations and maintenance.
 - f. Use energy-efficient, cost-saving sustainable designs, materials and energy sources in facility development, such as LED lights, motion-sensing light switches, and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) building certifications/very energy-efficient designs.