



COLUMBIA TOWNSHIP 5-YEAR PARK PLAN

*A Vision for Parks,
and Open Space*

Draft for Public Review

Columbia Township, Van Buren County, Michigan

**Draft 5-Year Plan out for 30 days of public comment
August 1, 2026 to August 30, 2026**



Prepared by the Parks & Recreation Citizens Committee

for approval by the Columbia Township Planning Commission and Township Board of Trustees

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Columbia Township extends its sincere gratitude to the community members, local officials, and volunteers who contributed their time, energy, and expertise to the development of the **2026–2031 Five-Year Parks & Recreation Plan**. Your involvement shaped a roadmap to expand recreation opportunities, improve public health, and ensure universally accessible spaces for ages and stages of Township residents.

Columbia Township Board of Trustees. Supervisor Ken Speicher, Clerk Kara Hartman Laraway, Treasurer Mary Phelps, Trustee Gary Gruss, Trustee Jason Bull.

Columbia Township Planning Commission. Chair Kate Schrank, Vice-Chair David Marcelletti, Secretary Jay Foskey, Ex-Officio Ken Speicher, Commissioner Frank Grubisich.

Parks & Recreation Citizens Committee. Kyle Brush, Fiorella McKenna, Kimberly Robertson, and Kate Schrank.

Community Partners & Regional Stakeholders. Special thanks to the **Disability Network of Southwest Michigan, Market One**, and **MEDC**, for their guidance on Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) grants and park plan requirements, and safe, accessible regional non-motorized connections.

Finally, we extend our deepest appreciation to the residents of Columbia Township whose survey participation and public comments directly shaped the goals, objectives, and actions within this plan.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE
 - A. Township Board
 - B. Planning Commission - Enabling Legislation
 - C. Recreation Budget & Funding Sources
 - D. Parks Citizen Committee
 - E. Park Maintenance
 - F. Township Board Administration of the Plan
3. COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION
 - A. Map of Columbia Township.
 - B. Township Geography and Primary Land Use.
 - C. Socioeconomic & Demographic Breakdown
 1. Township Population (1960-2020)
 2. Residents by Age
 3. Number of Households
 4. High Poverty Rate in Township
 5. Household Income
 6. High Disability Rate in Township
 7. High Poverty & Disability Rates in Township
 - D. Transportation
 - E. Needs Assessment
 1. Demographic Realities and Equity Focus
 2. Current Facility Deficiencies (the “Recreation Desert”)
 3. Early Input Survey Findings
 4. Summary of Identified Needs
4. RECREATION INVENTORY
 - A. Inventory methods
 - B. Township Hall Park – Kal-Haven Trail Boundary
 - C. Nearby Parks Inventory Table
 - D. Insights from Nearby Parks Inventory
 - E. Columbia Township Park Aerial View
 - F. Future Park & Recreation Considerations
 - G. Grant Status
5. ADA ACCESSIBILITY
 - A. Current Status
 - B. Path to Improvement

6. DESCRIPTION OF PLANNING PROCESS
 - A. Citizens Park Committee
 - B. Early Input Survey
7. DESCRIPTION OF PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS
 - A. 30-day Public Comment on draft Plan (Aug 1-August 30)
 - B. Public Hearing on Sept. 9, 2026
8. GOALS & OBJECTIVES
 - A. SCORP Goal 1: Improve Collaboration With Outdoor Recreation Stakeholders.
 - B. SCORP Goal 2: Improve And Expand Recreational Access For All Residents And Visitors Of All Backgrounds And Abilities.
 - C. SCORP Goal 3: Increase Outdoor Recreation to Improve Physical Health
 - D. SCORP Goal 4: Increase Local Prosperity with Outdoor Recreation that Supports Life Quality
9. FIVE-YEAR ACTION PLAN FOR PARK DEVELOPMENT
 - A. Action and Funding Plan
 - B. Role of Volunteers and Stewardship
 - C. Draft Park Schematic for Public Comment
10. APPENDIX
 - A. Early Input Survey Questions & Raw Data Summary & Compilation of Public Comments
 - B. SW Michigan Disabilities Network - Letter of Support

1. INTRODUCTION

Columbia Township has prepared its first Five-Year Parks and Recreation Plan for 2026–2031 (Plan). This Plan serves as Columbia Township’s guiding document for park development and recreational land-use decisions over the next five years. It supports the Township Master Plan, with particular emphasis on Goal 5: *Provide Public Parks, Recreation and Open Space Opportunities for the Township*. Strategy 1 calls for researching funding options to improve Township-owned land and making recommendations to the Board. Strategy 2 focuses on identifying and promoting public access for Township residents.

The Plan establishes a clear framework for expanding local recreation opportunities, improving public health and safety, and strengthening regional connectivity. Importantly, it focuses on projects that will compete well for MDNR grant funds. A central focus of the Plan is linking the Township’s only park - an 11-acre manicured parcel directly behind Township Hall (Park)—to the Kal-Haven Trail, the Township’s sole State recreational asset. This connection will significantly increase recreational accessibility for residents of all ages and abilities, many of whom currently experience a recreation desert.

In August 2025, the Township formed a citizen-led Parks Committee to guide development of the Plan which includes a draft Park Schematic (Appendix, Attachment C). The Parks Committee provided regular updates to the Columbia Township Planning Commission (PC). Early public input was gathered through an online survey conducted from June 16 to July 11, 2026. Seventy (70) individuals responded, 82% of whom were Township residents. Respondents’ top priorities were incorporated into the draft Plan and used to shape the order of recommended improvements.

The draft Plan is available for public review for a 30-day comment period from August 1 to August 30, 2026. A public hearing will be held on Wednesday, September 9, 2026 at Township Hall. Following the hearing, the Parks Committee will again integrate public comments and priorities before submitting the Plan to the Planning Commission for a recommendation. Final approval rests with the Columbia Township Board (“Board”).

The Plan focuses on developing the Township’s Park into a community park accessible to users of all ages and abilities. Because the Kal-Haven Trail runs directly behind the Park, the Plan includes a formal trail connection to enhance regional access while adding essential park infrastructure that supports local health, safety, and recreation.

The Plan was developed in accordance with Michigan’s Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Its goals and objectives align with SCORP priorities and support long-range recreation planning for Columbia Township.

A MDNR-approved recreation plan is required for eligibility for Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, Land and Water Conservation Fund, Recreation Passport, and other MDNR-administered grants. Upon approval, Columbia Township intends to pursue grant funding to support Park development.

The Plan is available for review on the Township’s website at www.columbiatwp.org and at Township Hall during regular business hours.

2. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

A. Township Board. Columbia Township residents elect a five-member Township Board. The Township Supervisor oversees the Township’s budget and manages ongoing projects and activities. The Clerk administers elections, maintains official records, and manages Township meetings, along with additional duties assigned by the Supervisor. The Treasurer manages Township finances, billing, and taxpayer records, and performs other responsibilities as directed by the Supervisor. The Township Zoning Administrator oversees zoning, planning, code enforcement, and site plan review. A part-time secretary provides administrative support at Township Hall.

B. Planning Commission (PC) – Enabling Legislation. The Township Board appoints members to the Planning Commission, which was established under the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (Act 33 of 2008) and the Michigan Zoning Enabling Act (Act 110 of 2006, as amended). The Planning Commission serves as an advisory body to the Township Board. While the PC provides recommendations on planning and zoning matters, the Township Board retains final legal and financial authority.

C. Recreation Budget & Funding Sources. The Township Board holds ultimate authority over the park budget and all funding decisions. Anticipated funding sources for Park development include private donations, crowdfunding, Township capital contributions, and grants administered by the MDNR and other agencies.

D. Parks Citizen Committee. In August 2025, the Planning Commission Chair invited residents to form a citizen Parks Committee. The Committee has met regularly over the past year to develop park guidelines for PC review, prepare a park schematic, and contribute to the substance of this Plan. Committee members also relayed public input gathered through meetings and informal conversations within the community.

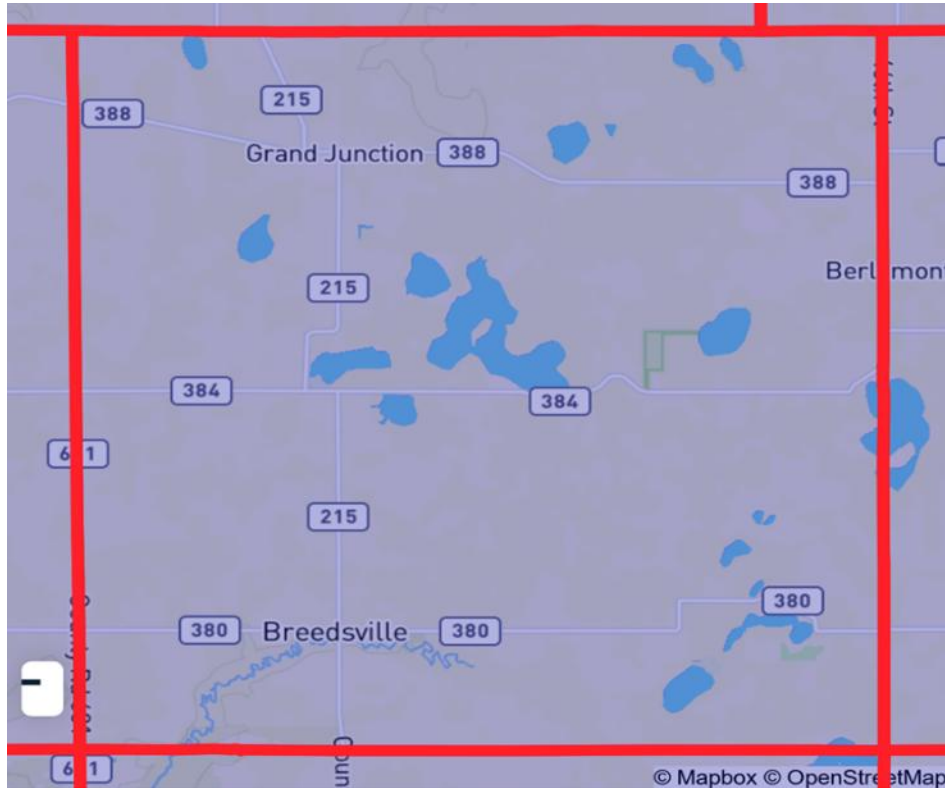
E. Park Maintenance. The Township Board employs a part-time maintenance professional during the spring and summer seasons to maintain Township recreational facilities. This individual also performs general maintenance, mowing and landscaping, and generally oversees care of Township Hall property.

F. Township Board Administration of the Plan. Upon approving the Plan, the Township Board will (1) administer the Plan to ensure its implementation meets stated goals, objectives, and the Action Plan, which are aligned to meet community needs and state grant development priorities, and (2) establish a standing Parks Committee to support the Board’s ongoing review, implementation tracking, and update of the five-year in order for the Township to be grant ready. For budgeting and facility maintenance scheduling, the Township Board will function as the Township’s de facto “Recreation Director.”

3. COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

The Community Description is a snapshot of the primary physical and socioeconomic characteristics of Columbia Township in Van Buren County. This information helps identify future parks and recreation needs for the community.

A. Map Of Columbia Township



B. Township Geography And Primary Land Use

Columbia Township is a rural township often called the Blueberry Capital of the World, and it covers about 36 square miles in north central Van Buren County, with agriculture making up 84% of its land. The area also features 14 lakes (about 1,000 acres) that feature single family homes, 20 miles of rivers and streams connected to the Black River watershed, as well as wetlands and woodlands. The Village of Breedsville is in the Township's southwest quadrant, and the Village of Grand Junction is at CR 215 and Phoenix Road/CR 388.

- **14 Freshwater Lakes.** Our small, freshwater lakes attract and influx of summer visitors and tourists.
- **Land Preservation Areas.** Columbia Township contains five designated land preserves: two conservation easements

managed by the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, two conservation areas overseen by the Michigan Nature Association, and one directly supervised by Columbia Township.

- The Township currently lacks open, safe, paved, and smooth sidewalks or walking paths for pedestrian use, as well as play equipment for children, making it a recreation desert for many,

C. SOCIOECONOMIC & DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

1. Township Population 1960-2020

Columbia Township's population peaked at 2,714 in 2000 and dropped to 2,546 by 2020, a decline of 6.19%. Compared to neighboring areas, this change was moderate; Van Buren County saw a slight decrease of 0.89% over the same period.

Municipality	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	% Change 2000-2020
Arlington Township	1,392	1,645	1,884	1,929	2,075	2,073	1,958	-5.78%
Bangor Township	1,443	1,708	1,993	1,948	2,121	2,147	1,939	-8.58%
Bloomington Township	1,176	1,493	1,953	2,351	3,364	3,103	2,930	-12.90%
Columbia Township	1,374	1,657	2,004	2,339	2,714	2,588	2,546	-6.19%
Geneva Township	1,850	2,392	2,984	3,162	3,975	3,573	3,416	-14.06%
Hartford Township	1,746	2,211	2,707	3,032	3,159	3,274	3,021	-4.37%
Lawrence Township	1,421	1,555	2,114	2,115	3,341	3,259	3,289	-1.56%
Paw Paw Township	2,067	2,592	3,207	3,645	7,091	7,041	6,881	-2.96%
Waverly Township	1,044	1,313	2,130	2,188	2,467	2,554	2,506	1.58%
City of Bangor	2,109	2,050	2,001	1,922	1,933	1,885	2,016	4.29%
Van Buren County	48,395	56,173	66,814	70,060	76,263	76,258	75,587	-0.89%
1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020 Decennial Census								

2. Residents By Age

According to the 2020 US Census, the Township's median age is 41.2 years of age. Most of the Township (54%) residents are under the age of 44, with children and teens making up 25% of Township residents.

Municipality	Median Age	2020 Population	Percent Age 0-19	Percent Age 20-44	Percent Age 45-64	Percent Age 65 and Over
Arlington Township	44.9	1,958	24.60%	25.60%	29.50%	20.30%
Bangor Township	41.1	1,939	26.70%	27.50%	27.10%	18.70%
Bloomington Township	46.4	2,930	22.30%	26.30%	30.10%	21.30%
Columbia Township	41.2	2,546	25.70%	28.90%	27.90%	17.60%
Geneva Township	42.5	3,416	25.30%	27.50%	28.70%	18.60%
Hartford Township	40.6	3,021	28.10%	26.70%	27.80%	17.40%
Lawrence Township	41	3,289	25.80%	29.00%	25.90%	19.30%
Paw Paw Township	44.1	6,881	22.50%	28.30%	27.70%	21.50%
Waverly Township	42.5	2,506	24.90%	28.20%	30.10%	16.70%
City of Bangor	34.4	2,016	31.70%	31.90%	23.30%	13.00%
Van Buren County	42.1	75,587	25.50%	28.60%	28.00%	18.10%
2020 Decennial Census						

A large youth population - nearly one in four residents - creates ongoing demand for children's play areas and active recreation space. At the same time, almost one in five residents are over age 65, underscoring the need for safe, open, paved walking paths and other older-adult recreation opportunities. With a median age of 41.2, slightly younger than the county average, Columbia Township must prioritize multigenerational facilities that serve both families and seniors.

The Township recognizes the need for amenities that support young families, including playgrounds, sports areas, and safe paths, along with accessible infrastructure such as restrooms, benches, and paved walkways. As the population ages, there will be more retirees available for volunteer activities, but also increased demand for passive recreation and ADA-compliant park features. Meeting the needs of both youth and elders remains a central priority of this Plan.

3. NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS IN TOWNSHIP 2020

According to the 2020 US Census, there are 1,486 total households in Columbia Township, or 4% of total households in Van Buren County. In 2010, there were 1511 total households in Columbia Township.

4. HIGH POVERTY RATE IN TOWNSHIP

Municipality	Poverty Rate
Arlington Township	14.30%
Bangor Township	13.20%
Bloomington Township	10.40%
Columbia Township	21.10%
Geneva Township	7.60%
Hartford Township	10.80%
Lawrence Township	8.60%
Paw Paw Township	8.80%
Waverly Township	3.20%
City of Bangor	13.30%
Van Buren County	13.70%
Michigan	13.20%
2020 ACS Census Bureau	

The Township's poverty rate is higher than in neighboring townships, the County, and the State, indicating notable economic hardship among residents.

5. HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Columbia Township's economy features moderate average incomes and income disparities that may impact recreation access. The median household income is \$63,048, below the Michigan median of \$69,100. About 30% of households earn under \$50,000, and 59% earn less than \$100,000.

6. HIGH DISABILITY RATE IN TOWNSHIP

Columbia Township’s disability rate sits at **23.5%** — nearly double Van Buren County’s level and far above Michigan’s **14.7%** average. With **one in four residents** already affected and numbers expected to climb as the population ages, MDNR grant reviewers place strong emphasis on **ADA-compliant recreation upgrades**. That includes accessible paths and ramps, park restrooms, inclusive playground equipment, benches with transfer space, and clear, high-contrast signage.

Columbia Township, Van Buren County, Michigan	
DISABILITY TYPE	PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS WITH DISABILITY
With a hearing difficulty	3.80%
With a vision difficulty	0.70%
With a cognitive difficulty	5.50%
With an ambulatory difficulty	5.70%
With self-care difficulty	1.30%
With an independent living difficulty	6.50%

7. COMBINED HIGH POVERTY & DISABILITY RATES

Because 23.5% of residents live with a disability (well above state average) and 21.1% experience poverty, standard park metrics do not do justice. The Plan relies on equity-based planning to ensure universal design elements (ADA walkways, accessible restrooms, inclusive play structures) are prioritized.

D. TRANSPORTATION

Columbia Township’s rural nature offers open space and a strong farming tradition but also makes recreation access challenging due to its dispersed population. Township Hall serves as the only real hub in our community. So, developing the park directly behind Township Hall is prudent given that this location already is accessible by county roads and has a parking lot.

Columbia Township's road network includes the Van Buren County Road system, private roads to local lakes, agricultural service roads. State Road M-43, two miles south of the Township, connects Kalamazoo and South Haven. CR 384 runs east-west through Grand Junction and northern Columbia Township, while CR 215 is the main north-south route linking Grand Junction and M-43. CR 388/Phoenix Road also provides an east-west connection from Grand Junction Center to South Haven.

E. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

To accurately determine the recreational and open-space needs of Columbia Township, the Parks and Recreation Committee analyzed local demographic data, evaluated the current inventory of facilities, and solicited direct feedback through an

Early Input Survey. Because standard park metrics alone do not capture the unique profile of our community, this assessment relies on Equity-Based Planning to ensure all people, regardless of ability or income, have access to high-quality public spaces.

1. **Demographic Realities and Equity Focus.** Our demographic data reveals a community with specific accessibility needs:
 - Nearly one in four Columbia Township residents (23.5%) live with a physical or cognitive disability, which is significantly higher than the state average of 14.7%.
 - Furthermore, 21.1% of our residents live in poverty.
 - Children and teens make up approximately 25% of the Township's population.
 - These statistics mean that future recreational developments need to prioritize Universal Design, ensuring barrier-free, ADA-compliant accessibility for all generations.
2. **Current Facility Deficiencies (The "Recreation Desert").** When comparing our community's demographic profile against our current recreational inventory, severe deficiencies are apparent:
 - The Township currently lacks open, safe, paved sidewalks or walking paths for pedestrians.
 - There is no ADA-compliant play equipment or paved perimeter walking paths located anywhere within the Township's borders.
 - The existing 11-acre Township Park features only an open field and a dilapidated baseball diamond, currently earning a MDNR accessibility score of 1 out of 5.
 - Due to these gaps, residents must travel between 5 and 20 miles to access functional play equipment or paved trails in neighboring municipalities such as South Haven, Bangor, or Bloomingdale.
3. **Early Public Input Survey Findings** To ensure our planning aligned with resident desires, the Township conducted an Early Input Recreation Survey from June 15 to July 11. The results clearly demonstrated a community consensus:
 - Ninety-two (92%) of respondents support developing the existing 11-acre township park.
 - The top amenities requested were directly tied to accessibility and safety: 1) Playground equipment (with benches and picnic tables), 2) park restroom/drinking fountain, and (3) a paved walking trail with a safe connection to the Kal-Haven Trail.
 - The public feedback strongly supports transforming the current recreation desert into a functional, multi-generational hub.
4. **Summary of Identified Needs.** The intersection of our high disability rate, the current lack of local infrastructure, and the requests from the public survey results in three data-driven priorities:
 - Inclusive Play Spaces: The addition of ADA-accessible playground equipment to serve the township's youth.
 - Park restroom with drinking fountain.

- Accessible Pedestrian Infrastructure: The immediate installation of a paved perimeter path to accommodate wheelchairs, strollers, and safe walking.
- Regional Connectivity: The development of a safe, non-motorized connection to the Kal-Haven State Park Trail, maximizing access to a major state asset located directly adjacent to our Township Park.

4. RECREATION INVENTORY

A. Inventory Methods. This inventory of existing parks and recreational facilities was compiled with physical visits and Google AI. In April 2025, an in-person accessibility barrier review of the 11-acre park was conducted by the Disability Network of Southwest Michigan, in April 2026. **The Letter of Support from this organization is in the Appendix.**

Columbia Township maintains one park, an 11-acre open space that is immediately south of the Township Hall. It includes a small pavilion with picnic tables, and an open, manicured field, which can be used for baseball/softball games. The Kal-Haven State Park railway crosses through the Township along the south boundary of the 11-acre park.

B. Aerial View of Township Hall Park – Kal-Haven Trail Boundary



DRAFT 5 YEAR PARK PLAN FOR PUBLIC COMMENT 8/1/26 TO 8/30/26

1. Four land preserves are within the Township; two are conservation easements managed by the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, one is a conservation area run by the Michigan Nature Association, and one is a 40-acre wooded parcel that is under the direct supervision of Columbia Township.
2. There are 14 local lakes and ponds within Columbia Township's borders. Public boat access is available to many of these bodies of water is available.

C. Nearby Parks Inventory Table. Columbia Township is rural and primarily agricultural (84% of land), these surrounding facilities provide the current parks and recreational framework for the area:

Facility Name	Paved Path / Walking Trail?	Children's Play Equipment?	Soccer / Sports Fields?	Distance from Columbia Township Hall
Township Park (Behind Hall), Columbia Township	No (Proposed for 2027-28)	No (Proposed for 2030-31)	Open field; dilapidated baseball diamond	Directly behind Township Hall
Kal-Haven State Park Trail, 30 miles trail between Kalamazoo to South Haven	Yes (Limestone/Paved segments)	No	No	Directly behind Township Hall
South Beach, South Haven	No (Features sand/pier access)	Yes (Excellent condition)	No	12 to 15 miles from Township Hall
Kids Corner (Monroe Park), South Haven	Not specified	Yes (Excellent wooden structure)	Ball diamond	12 to 15 miles from Township Hall
Stanley Johnston Park, South Haven	Not specified	Yes (Swing sets)	Basketball courts	12 to 15 miles from Township Hall
Breedsville Park	No	Yes (Dilapidated)	No	5 to 7 miles from Township Hall
Shady Brook Park, Bloomingdale	Not specified	Yes	Not specified	7 to 10 miles from Township Hall
Kiwanis Park, Bangor	Yes (Nature trail)	Yes (New equipment)	No	10 to 12 miles from Township Hall
Lions Park, Bangor	Yes (Nature trail)	Not specified	No	10 to 12 miles from Township Hall
Van Buren State Park, South Haven	Yes (Hiking/Biking trails)	Yes	No	20 miles from Township Hall

D. Insights from Nearby Parks Inventory

1. **Neighboring Access:** Residents currently travel between **5 and 20 miles** to access functional play equipment or paved trails in South Haven, Bangor, or Bloomingdale.
2. **South Beach (South Haven):** Located **12 to 15 miles** from Columbia Township Hall. This is a high-quality play equipment and splash pad, though it lacks a traditional paved interior walking loop.

E. Columbia Township Park: This is the primary focus of the 2026-2031 plan. A Park Schematic is included in the Appendix as Attachment C, and also included in Section 9C of this Plan under the Action Plan. The township aims to address the local

"recreation desert" by installing its own **1/2-mile paved walkway** and **accessible playground** to serve the 25% of residents who are youth and 23.5% who have a disability.

F. Future Park & Recreation Considerations

1. Soccer Field, Basketball, and Pickle Ball have all been suggested - and are located on the Park Schematic - but did not receive top priority in the Early Input Survey.
2. Another popular suggestion is a larger pavilion/stage/event set up for community events and social gatherings
3. **The public comment survey for this draft Plan invites you to rank current top priorities (play equipment with benches and tables, park restroom, walking path, and connection to Kal-Haven Trail) and the future considerations listed above, and any other suggestions you may not see here.**

G. Grant Status Report

Columbia Township applied for a MDNR grant in 2021 and was denied. Otherwise, the Township has not applied for nor been awarded any previous MDNR recreational grants. Therefore, there are no post-completion self-certification reports required or available.

5. ADA Accessibility

- A. Current Status.** The Columbia Township Hall and adjacent Township Park currently serve the community as a meeting space. Indoor facilities include administrative offices, a community meeting room, service kitchen, and washrooms. Outdoor facilities include the Township Park which has a small pavilion with two picnic tables and an open, mowed field. There are no other amenities at Township Park. **Applying MDNR's ranking system - 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) - Columbia Township's only park currently has an accessibility score of 1.**

This ranking is defined by the following characteristics of the existing facility:

- **Lack of Accessible Routes:** The park is described as an 11-acre open, manicured field with no paved perimeter walkways or smooth paths for pedestrian use.
- **Infrastructure Deficiencies:** The existing baseball diamond is noted as "dilapidated," and there is currently no play equipment for children.
- **Barrier Assessment:** Nearly one in four township residents (23.5%) live with a disability, yet the current site lacks wheelchair-friendly paths, ramps, and inclusive playground equipment.

- B. Path to Improvement:** The 2026–2031 Five-Year Plan is specifically designed to raise this score through the following "Action Plan" phases:

- **Phase 1 (2026–27):** Begin raising funds for 1st priority - **universal access playground equipment, picnic tables and benches.**
- **Phase 2 (2027–28):** Install 1st Priority. Seek MDNR development grant for 2nd priority - **a compliant park restroom/drinking fountain with security**

cameras. Grant requires Township cost share of 25%. Activate Parks standing committee to organize community events at the Park.

- **Phase 3 (2028-29):** Install 2nd Priority, Seek MDNR development grant for 3rd priority - **ADA-compliant 1/2-mile paved perimeter walkway with connection to Kal-Haven trail. Township 25% cost share.**
- **Phase 4 (2029-30) :** Install ADA walkway and connection to Kal-Haven trail. Finalize park installations. Continue Parks committee to organize events at the Park.
- **Phase 5 (2030–31):** Committee starts process of updating the 5-year Parks & Recreation plan.

Once these improvements are completed, the park would likely qualify for an **accessibility score of 4 or 5**, indicating that the entire park and all associated facilities are fully accessible.

6. DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING PROCESS

A. Citizens Park Committee. In August 2025, the Chair of the Planning Commission established a Citizens Park Committee to guide development of the Township’s five-year recreation plan. The Committee met regularly throughout the planning period and provided ongoing progress updates to both the Planning Commission and the Township Board. To ensure broad awareness and accessibility, the Planning Commission used its Facebook page and other public notices to invite residents to each Committee meeting. This approach reflects MDNR guidance encouraging early and inclusive public engagement, noting that “special efforts may be required to involve segments of the population whose concerns are often overlooked” and that early input “increases ownership of the plan by community members.”

Committee membership represented the Township’s major age groups and family structures. Two members are under age 44 and have school-age children; one member is under age 55 with a school-age child; and one member is over age 65 with grandchildren. This demographic mix ensured that perspectives from younger families, mid-career adults, and older residents were incorporated. As stated in the MDNR guidelines, ***“If your community has substantial minority, low-income, disabled or elderly populations, identify and address their needs and concerns.”*** The MDNR emphasizes that communities must consider demographic characteristics, including low income, disabled, and elderly populations, when assessing recreation needs.

Throughout the planning process, the Committee worked toward consensus when evaluating community needs and priorities. Committee decisions were informed by the Township Master Plan, updated demographic data, and public comments received through the Early Input Survey and review of the draft park schematic. This methodology aligns with MDNR recommendations that communities use planning methods that encourage broad participation, noting that traditional public meetings often limit engagement. The MDNR states that “methods such as surveys, questionnaires, workshops, stakeholder

meetings, focus groups, or visioning sessions are encouraged because they facilitate more public participation from all segments of the population.”

Given the Township’s unusually high poverty rates and significant disability indicators, the Committee adopted an equity-based planning framework rather than relying solely on standard municipal park metrics. This approach is consistent with MDNR guidance on equity-based planning, which emphasizes community engagement, inclusion, and ensuring that “all people have access to programs, facilities and public spaces in the community.” The resulting planning process was iterative, transparent, and community-centered, reflecting both the MDNR’s required elements and the Township’s commitment to equitable access to recreation opportunities.

B. Early Input Survey. The Committee solicited early public input between June 15 and July 11, 2026, consistent with MDNR requirements that early input occur before preparing the draft plan and within one year of adoption. The survey was distributed through the Planning Commission’s Facebook page, the Township website, announcements at public Planning Commission meetings, and word of mouth. This outreach reflects MDNR guidance encouraging communities to reach residents who may not attend traditional meetings and to include those who may be affected by future projects.

Survey Participation and Findings • 70 total respondents • 82% of respondents are Township residents • 76% are between 25 and 64 years of age • 55% of households include children ages 0 to 18 • 9% of respondents report a household member with a disability (compared to 23% of all Township residents) • Top priorities for the next five years: playground for children (74%), picnic tables and benches (44%), park restroom (46%) • perimeter walking path (34%) • 61% of respondents stated that lack of amenities at the Township park keeps them from visiting. **Note: See the Appendix for Early Input Survey compilation of public comments, questions, and raw data summary.**

These results were incorporated into the draft Plan and used to refine priorities and design considerations, consistent with MDNR expectations that early input empowers residents and strengthens community ownership of the plan.

7. DESCRIPTION OF THE PUBLIC PROCESS / BOARD APPROVAL

A. 30-Day Public Comment On Draft Plan (Aug 1-August 30).

The Township initiated its formal public input process with a community open house held at Township Hall on Saturday, August 1st, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Free hot dogs were provided to encourage attendance and to create a welcoming environment for residents to review and comment on the draft Plan. This event served as the kickoff for the required public comment period and offered an accessible, informal opportunity for residents to engage in the planning process, consistent with MDNR guidance encouraging broad and inclusive participation.

Following the open house, public notice of the 30-day review period was posted on the Township Hall noticeboard and on the Township website. The draft Plan was made available for review both online and in person at Township Hall from August 1st through August 30th, 2026. Public feedback was invited through a survey available in both paper and digital formats, ensuring accessibility for residents with varying levels of internet access. The Planning Commission used its Facebook page to drive people to the Township website to review the Plan and take the survey. All Early Survey Respondents who provided an email were notified by email of the updated Plan, survey and 30-day public comment period. Also, in accordance with MDNR expectations that neighboring jurisdictions and affected agencies be notified, adjacent townships (Breedsville, Bloomingdale, Bangor), Friends of the Kal-Haven Trail, the Van Buren County Conservation District, and major township employers (blueberry growers) received the Plan via email on August 1st and were invited to submit comments.

B. Public Hearing (Sept. 9, 2026). A public hearing on the Plan is scheduled for September 9th at 6 p.m. at Township Hall. This hearing fulfills the MDNR requirement that residents be provided with a well-publicized opportunity to comment on the Plan before adoption. After the hearing, all public comments will be compiled and incorporated into the final version of the Plan. The updated Plan will then be submitted to the Planning Commission for review and recommendation that the Township Board adopt the Plan.

Finally, the Plan will be presented to the Township Board for formal approval, completing the MDNR-required adoption process.

8. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Columbia Township's goals and objectives directly support Michigan's *Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2023–2027*. Each goal is paired with clear Township actions that appear in the phased implementation schedule in the Action Plan. Together, they reflect community priorities, MDNR guidance, and the Township's commitment to equitable, accessible, and health-promoting recreation.

A. SCORP Goal 1: Improve Collaboration. Strengthen coordination among outdoor recreation stakeholders so Michigan's recreation system meets the needs of residents and visitors.

Township Alignment:

Phases II, III, and IV formalize collaboration with the Van Buren County Conservation District, Southwest Michigan Disability Network, and Friends of the Kal-Haven Trail. These partnerships ensure that park improvements reflect resident values, public health priorities, and best-practice accessibility standards.

- B. SCORP Goal 2: Improve and Expand Recreational Access.** Ensure recreation opportunities are connected, inclusive, and accessible to people of all backgrounds, abilities, means, and locations.

Township Alignment:

Phases III and IV depend on MDNR funding to expand connectivity between the Township Park and the Kal-Haven Trail, improving regional access and usability. Planned upgrades - including an ADA-accessible restroom, drinking fountain, seating, and clear signage - directly respond to public input identifying basic amenities and accessibility as top priorities.

- C. SCORP Goal 3: Enhance Health Benefits.** Increase physical activity and improve the health of Michigan residents and visitors through outdoor recreation.

Township Alignment:

Phases II, III, IV, and V expand opportunities for safe, low-impact physical activity through universal-design play equipment, an ADA-accessible restroom/drinking fountain, and a perimeter walking loop connected to the Kal-Haven Trail. Establishing an indigenous flower and grass meadow enhances environmental quality and creates a restorative natural setting. Activating a standing Parks Committee to host community events encourages residents of all ages and abilities to engage in regular outdoor activity.

- D. SCORP Goal 4: Enhance Prosperity.** Strengthen local economies, support quality of life, and improve talent retention through outdoor recreation.

Township Alignment:

Phases I–V demonstrate the Township’s recognition of outdoor recreation as a driver of livability and long-term economic vitality. By developing the Township Park as a community anchor that reflects local character and natural assets, the Township supports resident retention and community identity. In Year 5, the Parks Committee will evaluate the economic and social impacts of expanded amenities and prepare a long-term maintenance and stewardship plan.

Commitment to Accessibility and Equity. The Township Park will remain free to the public and designed to support safe, inclusive outdoor recreation for residents and visitors of all ages and abilities.

9. FIVE-YEAR ACTION PROGRAM (FY 2026-2031)**A. Action and Funding Plan**

Fiscal Year	Phase	Description	Estimated Capital Cost	Estimated Operational Costs	Estimated Maintenance Costs
Phase 1 4/2026 to 4/2027	Create and finalize 5 year park plan (Plan) * Seek Township approval of Plan * Begin funding initiatives for 1st park priority(playground equipment funding by private donations,crowd funding, MEDC grant).	Finalize the Township 5-year plan after the 30-day public comment period and hearing * Submit the plan to the Planning Commission for final recommendation, then to the Township Board for approval * After adoption, submit the 5-year plan to MDNR for review and approval * Begin fundraising for the first park priority through crowdfunding, private donations, MEDC grants, and AARP grants, focusing on universal play equipment, picnic tables, and benches.	\$0	\$0	\$1,500 (mowing)
Phase 2 4/2027 to 4/2028	Complete funding for 1st park priority and install (playground) * Install indigenous pollinator meadow * Apply for MDNR grant for 2nd park priority (secured seasonal restroom) * Grant funding requires 25%	Site Survey for entire project * Septic inspection/test * Prep site for playground equipment * Select vendor through competitive bid process and install * Submit MDNR grant proposal for 2nd park priority(ADA compliant seasonal park restroom with security camera).	\$ 150,000 (\$75,000 private donations & crowd funding/\$75,000 MEDC grant match)	\$0	\$1,500 (seasonal mowing)
Phase 3 4/2028 to 4/2029	Complete funding for 2nd park priority (public restroom) and install. Implement Township park maintenance schedule for playground equipment.	If grant awarded for seasonal restroom with security cameras, move to selecting vendors * Site survey for 2nd priority and complete install.	\$150,000 (MDNR grant with + Township 25% cost share requirement).	\$ 2,500 (seasonal, routine safety inspections and repair).	\$1,500 (seasonal mowing)
Phase 4 4/2029 to 4/2030	Complete 2nd priority install (secured restroom) * Reivse and implement Township park maintenance schedule to include seasonal restroom cleaning * Begin funding for 3rd priority - ADA compliant permieter walkway to connect Kal-Haven Trail via park.	Activate Parks & Recreation Committee to draw communityto the Park * Complete install of 2nd priority project - ADA secured seasonal restroom * Activate 3rd priority, to fund with MDNR or grant or donations the ADA perimeter paved walkway in Park that connects to Kal-Have Trail.	\$200,0000 (MDNR grant with 25% Township march requirement. Possible 2nd crowdfunding if necessary).	\$2,500 (seasonal safety inspection, routine repairs, septic pumped)	\$2,500 (seasonal park mowing, trimming, litter removal, restroom cleaned)
Phase 5 4/2030 to 4/2031	Complete Priority 3 to install ADA permiter walway and connect to Kal-Haven Trail. Parks & Recreation Committee to start process of updating the 5-year Parks & Recreation plan.	Utilize the Parks & Recreation committee for outreach for community events at Park, and work to update 5 Year Park plan. Finalize remaining installation issues if any.	\$25,000	\$2,500 (seasonal safety inspection, routine repairs, septic pumped)	\$2,500 (seasonal park mowing, trimming, litter removal, restroom cleaned)
Total Estimated Cost			\$525,000	\$7,500	\$8,000

- The Township Board manages annual budgeting from the general fund to support the development of the proposed Plan.
- For the 2026-27 Fiscal Year, the General Fund features its first dedicated budget line for Parks & Recreation.
- Seasonal Park maintenance is funded through the General Fund. Currently, maintenance costs for the Park are combined with those for Cemetery upkeep.
- Here is the proposed General Fund annual budget to develop the Park under the 5-Year Plan.

Fiscal Year April 1 to March 31	Proposed Annual Budget
2026-27	\$5,000
2027-28	\$25,000
2028-29	\$50,000
2029-30	\$50,000
2030-2031	\$25,000

B. Role Of Volunteers And Stewardship

Volunteers and stewardship are essential components of successfully implementing and sustaining the Township's Five-Year Recreation Plan. The MDNR emphasizes that communities must demonstrate the capacity to operate and maintain new recreation facilities, and Columbia Township will rely on a combination of resident involvement, service organizations, and coordinated partnerships to meet these expectations.

The Township intends to involve volunteers in each Action Program improvement and maintenance activity at Township-owned park properties. Resident volunteers, local service groups, and civic organizations will be invited to assist with tasks such as landscaping, seasonal cleanup, trail edging, pollinator meadow care, and general park stewardship. This Plan also aims to strengthen and expand the Township's volunteer base by encouraging ongoing participation in park projects and by establishing a consistent communication channel between the Parks Committee and community volunteers.

Although Columbia Township does not have a school within its boundaries, student-age residents attend nearby districts under Michigan's school-of-choice policy. To broaden youth involvement, the Parks Committee contacted athletic directors in adjacent townships, and the Township Board invited comments from school administrators during the 30-day public review period. These outreach efforts support the MDNR's guidance to engage diverse user groups and ensure that recreation planning reflects the needs of all ages and abilities.

Township Action: Approve the Five-Year Recreation Plan, which reflects residents' priorities and establishes a clear framework for volunteer participation and stewardship. Funding for the Plan will come from a mix of private donations, crowdfunding, grants, and required Township cost-share contributions. The most substantial funding opportunities are available through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), which provides development grants of up to \$400,000 per project. MDNR grants require a 25 percent local match; for example, a \$200,000 grant award would require a Township contribution of \$50,000. Annual operation and maintenance costs are estimated at \$2,500 for maintenance and \$2,500 for operations, and volunteer support will help ensure these responsibilities are met sustainably.

C. Draft Park Schematic for Public Comment



10. APPENDIX

- A. Early Input Survey Questions, Raw Data Summary, Compilation Of Public Comments
- B. Letter of Support Disabilities Network of Southwest Michigan
- C. Notice of 30-day Public Comment (to be provided).
- D. Public Hearing Agenda & Minutes (to be provided after 9/9/26 hearing)
- E. Township Board of Trustees Adoption Resolution (to be provided)
- F. Township Board of Trustees Adoption Resolution Meeting Minutes (to be provided)

APPENDIX

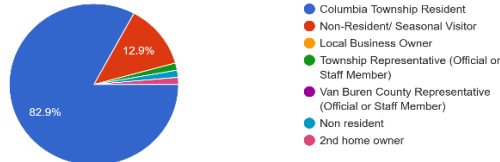
A. EARLY INPUT

1. Compilation Of Public Comments

2. Questions & Raw Data Summary

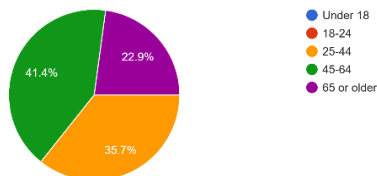
Question 1

Which best describes you?
70 responses



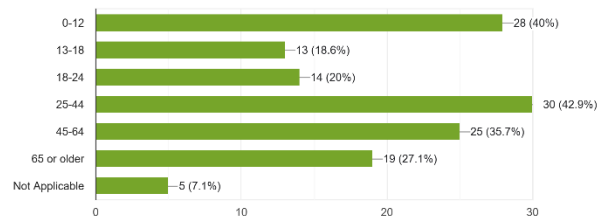
Question 2

What age group are you in?
70 responses



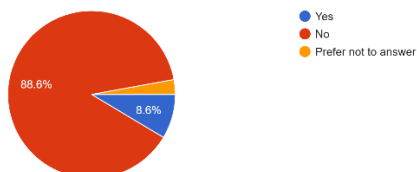
Question 3

What are the age ranges in your household other than yourself? Check all that apply.
70 responses



Question 4

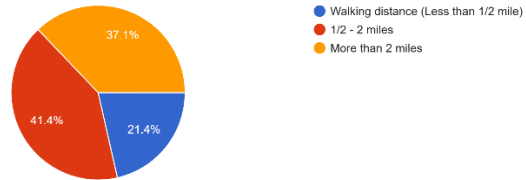
Do you or someone in your household have a disability that affects how you use parks or trails?
70 responses



Question 5

How close do you live to a park or trail?

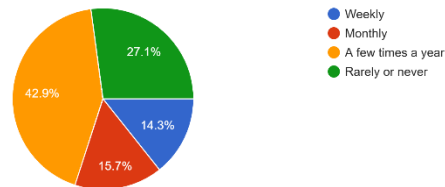
70 responses



Question 6

In the last 12 months, how often have you visited a nearby park or trail?

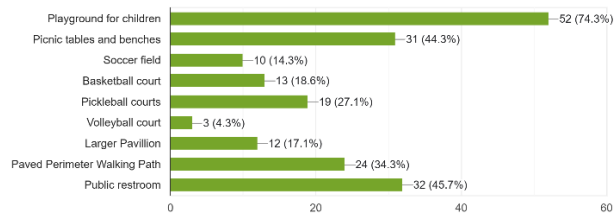
70 responses



Question 7

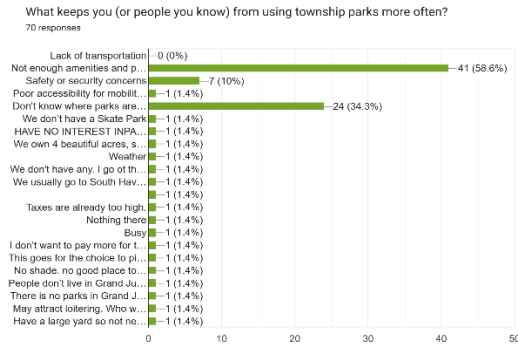
If the township could only fund three new park improvements the next five years, which would you choose? (Only Choose Three)

70 responses



DRAFT 5 YEAR PARK PLAN FOR PUBLIC COMMENT 8/1/26 TO 8/30/26

Question 8



Question 9

What would make township parks more welcoming or useful for your household or neighbors?

Theme	Count
Facility Upgrades and Amenities	38
Maintenance and Safety	11
Communication and Accessibility	9
Fiscal Responsibility	5
Other	7
Total Responses	70

Theme	Count
Facility Upgrades and Amenities	38
Maintenance and Safety	11
Communication and Accessibility	9
Fiscal Responsibility	5
Other	7

• **Facility Upgrades and**

Amenities: Residents frequently requested playgrounds, walking paths, and pavilions with picnic tables. There is also a strong demand for sports facilities, including basketball and soccer fields, alongside basic infrastructure like restrooms, water access, improved lighting, and seating.

- **Maintenance and Safety:** Improving the quality of existing spaces through regular maintenance, cleanliness, and enhanced security measures—such as lighting and surveillance—is a top priority.
- **Communication and Accessibility:** Many residents expressed confusion regarding the location and existence of current parks, suggesting a need for better signage, a dedicated page on the township website with GPS-ready addresses, and improved general awareness.
- **Fiscal Responsibility:** A portion of respondents voiced significant opposition to the use of tax dollars for park development, emphasizing the need for alternative funding sources like grants or expressing a preference against any tax increases for these projects.

MICHIGAN DISABILITY NETWORK - Letter of Support

May 30, 2023



Re: Columbia Township Park

Proposal Dear Grant

Coordinator:

I am writing on behalf of Disability Network Southwest Michigan; a Center for Independent Living serving eight counties in Southwest Michigan. Recently, our staff reviewed the Columbia Township Park Project plans to upgrade and improve the accessibility of the park. Disability Network Southwest Michigan is pleased to express our support of the Columbia Township Park proposal.

The accessible features that would be added will go beyond the ADA Standards and embrace Universal Design guidance. These accessible features would be:

- Accessible parking spaces with a sidewalk connecting to the park features.
- Accessible 6-foot-wide pathways with benches having companion seating.
- Accessible playground.
- Accessible drinking fountain.
- Accessible restrooms.

More than 13,605 residents (18%) of Van Buren County have a disability. Too often, barriers in the physical environment create segregated communities and feelings of isolation. Having access to recreational activities and the means of being able to share that experience with others aids in creating a healthy and inclusive community.

Disability Network Southwest Michigan would encourage Michigan SPARK Grantor's support for the Columbia Township Park development grant.

If there are questions, please feel free to contact our ADA Specialist & Systems Advocate, Paul Ecklund, at (269)3451516 ext. 117. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Paul Ecklund".

KALAMAZOO OFFICE
517 E. Crosstown Parkway
Kalamazoo, MI 49001
(269) 345-1516

BATTLE CREEK OFFICE
200 W. Van Buren Street
Battle Creek, MI 49017
(269) 345-1516

ST. JOSEPH OFFICE
2900 Lakeview Avenue
St. Joseph, MI 49085
(269) 985-0111

Yvonne Fleener,
MPA President &
CEO