

# **Metro-East Park District Celebrates Milestone Anniversary With 20 Years Of Supporting And Promoting Local Parks, Trails**

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The Metro East Park and Recreation District (MEPRD) celebrates its twentieth anniversary, marking an important milestone for the agency and its mission to develop a first-class, regional system of parks and interconnected trails.

In 1998, Gateway Parks and Trail 2004, a group of local leaders and engaged citizens from across the greater St. Louis area, organized around an ambitious vision for a true

regional system of public parks, trails, and outdoor spaces entitled the “Clean Water, Safe Parks & Community Trails Initiative.” The group later released a final report summarizing their findings, after soliciting input from communities throughout the bi-state area. It called for the creation of two regional park and recreation districts, one in Missouri and the other in Illinois, with the aim of bringing communities together, improving the environment, and celebrating the region’s rivers. It was envisioned that both districts would operate under a shared framework and incorporate the objectives formed out of the Initiative, namely: (1) Improving water quality; (2) Increasing park safety; (3) Proving community trails; (4) Improving, restoring, and expanding local parks; (5) Increasing public and disabled access; and (6) Preserving wildlife habitat.

It was not long after its final report was published that Gateway Parks and Trails 2004’s ambitious vision started to come into fruition. By July of 1999, the State of Illinois passed HB 702, the Metro East Park and Recreation Act; that is, legislation which allows the Illinois Counties of Madison, St. Clair, Jersey, Clinton, Monroe, and Macoupin to opt-in and participate in the Metro East Park and Recreation District if approved by the voters in any such county.

In November 2000, the voters of Madison and St. Clair Counties, IL signaled their support for the regional park district with the approval of “Proposition C: Clean Water, Safe Parks & Community Trail Initiative,” culminating in the formation of the Metro East Park and Creation District. Across the Mississippi River, the Voters in Missouri would also approve a ballot measure that resulted in MEPRD’s sister organization, the Great Rivers Greenway, or “GRG.”

The Metro East Park and Recreation District is funded by a one-tenth of one percent (0.1%) sales tax imposed in each participating county, as authorized under the Metro East Park and Recreation Act. Fifty percent (50%) of the tax revenue collected by MEPRD is returned to the respective county and the remaining fifty (50%) is utilized by MEPRD, allowing the District to offer grant programs, sponsor outdoor events, and more.

For two decades now, MEPRD has proudly served the residents of Madison and St. Clair Counties by increasing awareness of and promoting the use of existing parks, trails, and recreational facilities, providing useful tools for public use like maps, statistics, and related data, and partnering with other public entities and 501(c)3 non-profit organizations to improve parks, develop interconnecting trails, and enrich recreational opportunities for public enjoyment. Each endeavor has helped to further the District’s mission – “the development, operation, and maintenance of a public system of interconnecting parks and trails throughout the counties comprising the district” – as

well as by expanding access, increasing awareness, and encouraging the public's use of these exceptional recreational facilities and amenities that exist within Metro-East communities.

According to the District's latest calculations, which are current as of February 2021, show that for every dollar invested by MEPRD to date, \$4.70 has been generated by other funding sources for the planning, development, and/or improvement of public parks and trails in Madison and St. Clair Counties. MEPRD has invested approximately \$32.8M into the region's parks and trails to date, for a total of 199 park and trail projects (40 of which remain ongoing) with a combined valuation that exceeds \$153.2M. The District also estimates that 105 miles, approximately, of the 215+ miles of existing shared-use paths (bike trails) in Madison and St. Clair Counties were developed and/or improved in part by MEPRD dollars.

This remarkable progress attained over the District's twenty-year history has, in large part, been made possible by its 63 unique project partners, to include Madison County Transit District (MCT), St. Clair County Transit District (SCCTD), both counties, municipalities, park districts, and nonprofits comprised within the two-county area. It is a testament to the positive outcomes and success that can be achieved when agencies engage one another to collectively tackle a shared goal, for the benefit of each community and the region as a whole.

The Metro East Park and Recreation District remains steadfast in its commitment to serving the residents of Madison and St. Clair Counties, IL and to the fulfillment of its mission as it embarks on its next decade of supporting and promoting the region's great outdoors. If the past twenty years can serve as a measure for what lies ahead, parks and trails in the Metro-East are positioned for a promising and bright future.