

Why are parks costing more these days?

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(Photo: The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy)

Yes, voters will all see the names "Clinton" and "Trump" on their ballots Nov. 8.

But thousands of voters across Hamilton and Clermont counties will also see a parks tax.

Some will even see two.

All four parks levies would require taxpayers to pay more for their parks.

Often, people rank parks and recreation as a top priority in their community and say they want to preserve and grow their green spaces.

But are they willing to pay more for it?

Enquirer voting guide: [Build your ballot before you vote \(http://c3.thevoterguide.org/v/enquirer16/build.do\)](http://c3.thevoterguide.org/v/enquirer16/build.do)

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Dave Liedhegner, harbor manager for Great Parks of Hamilton County's Winton Woods Park, shows a fish to Angel Oki, a 10th grader at Taft High School, during the Special Olympics Hamilton County's Fishing Days on September 27. (Photo: The Enquirer/Cara Owsley)

Hamilton County: We complement local park districts

When he's out sharing levy information, Executive Director Jack Sutton likes to explain the difference between county and local park systems.

Sure, each agency runs parks where visitors like to hike and take the kids, but Great Parks of Hamilton County also leads the county in protecting natural spaces in a more passive way.

"We are preserving land across the county," Sutton said. "It's important for our children and grandchildren."

Great Parks is responsible for roughly 17,000 acres of land, more than 6 percent of Hamilton County.

This includes 20-some parks, including Sharon Woods, Woodland Mound and Miami Whitewater Forest, but also areas purchased mainly for conservation. Their properties include 710 acres of lakes and other water resources, 50 miles of streams, and nearly 10,000 acres of forests.

"You may not live next to the Little Miami River, but boy is it important to protect it," Sutton said.

The district also operates [Shaker Trace](/story/news/2015/08/18/shaker-trace-seed-nursery-great-parks-hamilton-county/31906489/) (/story/news/2015/08/18/shaker-trace-seed-nursery-great-parks-hamilton-county/31906489/), a nursery that cultivates roughly 450 pounds of seeds of native plants a year. Thousands of acres of wetland and prairie habitat have been planted as a result.

Operating on roughly a \$35 million budget, Great Parks collects roughly 55 percent through its levy.

The remainder is raised through park fees, grants and partnerships.

Great Parks works hand-in-hand with local parks agencies, including Anderson and Delhi townships, too, Sutton said.

The county district helped Delhi and [Western Wildlife Corridor](/story/news/2015/11/25/western-wildlife-corridor-comes-into-its-own/75540266/) (/story/news/2015/11/25/western-wildlife-corridor-comes-into-its-own/75540266/) (a nonprofit land trust protecting a tract of land on the West Side) acquire Bender Mountain, a hillside nature preserve off of Bender Road. It also helped Anderson acquire Johnson Hills Park on Bridle Road.

Taxpayers have supported the county district with a 1 mill levy since 1988, re-approving it last in 2002. The 15-year levy expires at the end at 2017.

The [new tax would replace it and cost \\$35 per year](/story/news/politics/elections/2016/07/26/park-leaders-opt-conservative-levy/87147256/) (/story/news/politics/elections/2016/07/26/park-leaders-opt-conservative-levy/87147256/) per \$100,000 of home value, compared to today's \$25.55. (Read more about why, below.) With three weeks before Election Day, there is no organized opposition to the county levy.

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One of the projects Clermont County Park District wants to complete with levy funds is the Williamsburg to Batavia Bike Trail, which has been a collaborative effort with many other groups in the county. (Photo: The Enquirer/Carrie Blackmore Smith)

Clermont levy pitched as game changer

Clermont County Park District is asking residents to increase their parks tax six-fold.

And with that money, the park district could grow and add amenities that residents have said they want and expect, said Parks Director Chris Clingman.

No organized opposition has formed around the idea, in fact, the proposal has been well received, Clingman said.

The Clermont County Chamber of Commerce has endorsed it and the levy has bipartisan support, there's even [a photo on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/clermontparkslevy/photos/a.1154273787963851.1073741828.1148594758531754/1188582267866336/?type=3&theater) (https://www.facebook.com/clermontparkslevy/photos/a.1154273787963851.1073741828.1148594758531754/1188582267866336/?type=3&theater) of Republican Chairman David Uible and Democratic Chairman Ray Lemke shaking hands and grinning next to a "Vote for Clermont Parks" sign.



<https://www.facebook.com/clermontparkslevy/photos/a.1154273787963851.1073741828.1148594758531754/1188582267866336/?type=3&theater>

Facebook | [@Clermont County Park District Levy 2016](https://www.facebook.com/@ClermontCountyParkDistrictLevy2016)
(<http://facebook.com/1148594758531754>)

David Uible, left, and Ray Lemke agree the ...

Taxpayers have been paying \$3.50 per \$100,000 home value for parks in inside millage since the park district formed in 1970. Inside millage is a tax that counties and townships in Ohio are allowed to collect without approval by voters. This would continue to be collected.

Now, for the first time in park district history, [the district is asking for its own levy \(/story/news/2016/08/26/new-parks-tax-proposed-clermont/89257596/\)](http://www.enquirer.com/2016/08/26/new-parks-tax-proposed-clermont/89257596/). At 0.5 mills, it is estimated to cost \$17.50 per \$100,000 of home value and would last for 10 years.

"People have said they want what their neighbors have," Clingman told the Enquirer earlier this year, referring to other park districts.

The 620-acre district is sitting on 530 acres of pending land donations and would like to add playgrounds, restrooms or both at parks that have seen increased visits, Clingman said.

Without more funding, the parks district would have to make some difficult decisions as some infrastructure, like bathrooms, are outdated and badly needing maintenance. Nature programs, like summer camps and scout activities, would likely be first on the chopping block, Clingman said.

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Diane Bass of Price Hill walks for exercise at Floral Paradise Gardens in Delhi Township. (Photo: The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy)

Delhi Township still finding financial footing

When the amount of tax dollars trickling down from the state got cut earlier this decade almost every small government in Southwest Ohio struggled to adjust.

Delhi Township found itself in a particularly challenging position, said Township Administrator Pete Landrum.

The state cuts of the estate tax, local government fund and other taxes eliminated roughly \$1.5 a year for the township. Once phased out, it took about about a 60 percent swipe from the township's annual general fund, a fund that nearly every department relied on, at some level, from police to public works, Landrum said.

In the years that followed, departments weaned themselves off the fund, cutting costs and passing levies so that each department could meet its budget.

Two departments, parks and recreation and zoning are the last two reliant on the general fund, a fund needed to cover unexpected expenses at times, Landrum said. This year, for example, parks needed roughly \$177,000 from the general fund, the bulk of which is spent to operate the Senior Center.

So, the township has proposed a 0.54 mill continuous levy, estimated to cost \$18.90 in taxes per \$100,000 value of a property a year, raising \$240,736 annually. That would cover the Senior Center gap and more.

The remaining money would create a park resource officer position, allow more activities to be held across the 54-acre park system and end an annual \$6,000 fee for the Delhi Seniors organization to rent the Senior Center, according to Landrum and Parks and Recreation Director Josh Torbeck.

If passed, it will become a second continuous parks tax collected for park operations. Delhi voters approved a 1 mill park levy in 2005 election that currently costs an estimated \$29.95 a year per \$100,000 home value.

What happens if this levy fails? No added security, no help for the seniors, Landrum said. Eventually, it could require more extreme measures, such as "selling off pieces of property."

That would be a shame, folks at flagship Delhi Park said one fall weekday morning.

Paula Gray, who was walking around Clearview Lake on a crisp fall morning, just moved to Delhi a year ago.

"Green space is so important – mentally, physically, for our overall health," Gray said.

She said she values all of the park options in the area and will vote for both Delhi and Hamilton County park levies.

Anderson wants a little more to keep with status quo

Anderson Township Park District is not part of township government. It is independent, its own special taxing district, and has been that way since the 1970s.

"That means we're not last on the list for funds, but always first," said Executive Director Ken Kushner.

Residents have supported the park district at the same rate, 1.9 mill level, since 1992, Kushner said.

If this 10-year tax is approved, it will cost \$66.50 per year per \$100,000 of home value, up from the current rate of \$54.73.

The new tax would replace the current one, due to expire in 2018.

This tax proposal should not be confused with a proposal last fall to purchase 40 acres of land from Beech Acres Parenting Center. That levy was pulled off the ballot (</story/news/local/anderson-township/2015/10/14/beechnacres/73918404/>) after parks leaders decided against moving forward with the plan.

This year's proposal is strictly for operations at a similar level as today, Kushner said, and maintenance.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, everyone at the popular farm-themed playground at [Juilfs Park](http://andersonparks.com/juilfs-park/) came from outside of Anderson Township. That included Northern Kentucky resident Stephanie Laake, there with her 4-year-old son Russ and the family dachshund, Rambo.

Russ rushed up to the pretend haystacks in a large sandy area.

"I wish I could vote for the levy," Laake said. "Anderson has really wonderful parks."



Water streams from a bucket over a well at Floral Paradise Gardens in Delhi Township. (Photo: *The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy*)

Why does my levy cost more?

Hamilton County and Anderson Township are asking for the same amount of millage for their new levies as the ones currently on the books – so why do they cost more?

A few reasons.

When voters approve a new tax the amount the homeowner will be charged is calculated and set for the life of the levy so that homeowners know what to expect to pay and the taxing authority knows what to expect to receive.

During the lifetime of the last parks levies property values rose. So, for example, the 1 mill levy for Great Parks is currently being collected at 0.85 mill to reflect the greater property value.

The new levy is a reset and again goes back to the 1 mill, collecting more.

Also, homeowners are no longer eligible for three tax credits that used to roll back the amount they paid. Now, they are responsible for the whole 1 mill.

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