

## **DRAFT PLAN PUBLIC INPUT SUMMARY**

The Fort Custer Recreation Area Draft Phase 2 General Management Plan was available for public review and comment from August 16 through September 11, 2022. The draft was available on the project website and the public was invited to learn about the plan and share their thoughts at a virtual public meeting on August 30, 2022, from 6:00 – 7:00 p.m. The general public and stakeholders were notified about the meeting and other opportunities to comment on the plan through a press release and internet postings.

### **Virtual Public Meeting**

A total of 14 attendees were recorded, although over 60 people registered for the event and to receive additional information. The meeting began with a brief introduction of planning team members, followed by an overview of the general management plan process, Fort Custer Recreation Area, and the draft general management plan contents. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period. Topics discussed covered many different aspects of the park, including camping opportunities, stewardship efforts and various suggestions for improvements. A summary of the questions and answers follows.

### **Virtual Public Meeting Questions and Answers Summary**

- Q. how often do they restock the lakes with fish? My last few outings were...disappointing, might be the fisherman?
- A. every other year Eagle Lake is stocked with muskie fingerlings that are 12 inches long.
- Q. Can they lift the alcohol prohibition at the campground, many state campgrounds allow alcohol, why is it prohibited?
- A. The ban was put in place over 20 years ago in response to people drinking to excess resulting in law enforcement issues and several serious accidents, including fatalities. There is no intent to lift the alcohol ban at this time.
- Q. are you gonna be adding more trails to ride bikes on?
- A. The only additions proposed are a beginners' or skills loop near the mountain bike trailhead (approximately a half mile) and the Kalamazoo River Valley Trail that will go through the northern part of the park. The park has over 40 miles of trail currently and with balancing other uses and natural resource protection there are no plans for further expansion.
- Q. Is there a timeline for the addition of electricity and water at the equestrian campground?
- A. Currently, no. The project is still in the planning stages.
- Q. Use of antenna field should consider locations of uncommon plants so development does not adversely impact them.
- A. Currently we do not have plans to develop that area.

- Q. Is there any plan to add additional dump and water station? Any thought to any future full services (water/sewer) at camp sites? If you added another entrance to the park would it be considered to also have an additional sanitation station?
- A. No plans at this time. It is our hope that once the hook up to the municipal sewer system is complete it will speed things up at the sanitation station.
- Q. ebikes and snowmobiles, any thoughts of adding these to the plan?
- A. Ebikes are covered under an overall DNR policy which generally prohibits riding on natural surface trails. The proposed Kalamazoo River Valley Trail (KVRT) through the park will be open to certain types of ebike. There are no plans to change the snowmobile use right now. The recreation area does not connect to any snowmobile trail and there is a lot of other trail use in the park currently, including dog mushing, which could result in conflicts.
- Q. how many group campsites do you guys have? do you plan to add more?
- A. There are two group campsites, each accommodating 60 people. These are considered adequate and there are no plans to add more.
- Q. Would the Antenna field provide room for new trails?
- A. There are no plans to add more trails in this area currently. If it becomes part of the park, it will need to be evaluated to consider the natural resources.
- Q. Does the development plan recognize that the North Country National Scenic Trail passes thru the north edge of FCRA? Should consider expanded parking at the NCT trailhead along the county road just north of Dickman Rd.
- A. The plan does recognize the NCT through the park. Expanded parking is not currently in the plan but is something we could consider, in coordination with MDOT, the county, or the NCT Association.
- Q. do you guys need volunteers for these projects? if someone were to want to help how would they sign up?
- A. Volunteers are always welcome. There are opportunities to assist with the trails through the mountain bike or equestrian group or through stewardship days. Look for opportunities to sign up for stewardship days on the DNR's website or contact Tony for specific opportunities. Volunteer activities also include seed collecting from native species.
- Q. Is there a source for the pre-history of the park like where homesteads were located? I run across foundations while on the trails and just wonder who lived there and how big the farms were. just curious
- A. Below ground cultural resources are sensitive and we do not typically share location for protection purposes (except for approved research). We are planning to develop interpretation materials for the previous land uses of the recreation area, such as farmsteads, for enhanced public understanding. A meeting attendee indicated that information on the history of Fort Custer can also be found at the McKay Library in Augusta.

- Q. did the state get any oil spill money from Enbridge that could be used to fund more Custer state park projects?
- A. There was a natural resources damage assessment levied against Enbridge Energy. A small portion of that was administered by fisheries division to fund a three-year aquatic invasive species study and control project on all three of our lakes. The majority of that went to the state park stewardship section for some of their prairie habitat restoration.
- Q. Some campsites have concrete pads, is that for seasonal and or handicap access?
- A. Currently, there are two campsites with concrete pads. Those sites are in the east loop and were improved as part of the electrical system replacement in that half of the campground. They are designated as barrier-free, however by our camping policy if those are the last sites remaining unoccupied, we can register any camper onto them.
- Q. Any feasibility of improved parking at Dickman Rd canoe launch? This is outside of FCRA boundaries, I think, but any insights on parking there would be appreciated.
- A. It is not currently in the plan, but something to consider.
- Q. what kind of efforts are being made to remove invasive species?
- A. There are several stewardship volunteer days where they work on primarily black locust, autumn olive, honeysuckle, multiflora rose removal primarily in the prairies, but also in some of the woodland sections. Periodically, stewardship enters into contracts to perform larger scale invasive tree removals.
- Q. is fort Custer seasonal if so what sites are?
- A. The campground is open year-round and is one of the few state park campgrounds in the region to be open through the winter. The west loop is closed from December 1 until about the end of March.
- Q. Any plans to add additional docks or pier's possibly for fishing at the lakes?
- A. Not at this time. Funding to construct and maintain fishing docks is difficult to come by.
- Q. Any plans for changes to the cabins?
- A. Aside from maintenance, not at this time.
- Q. could you consider kayak, canoe, rowboat rentals in the summer?
- A. Canoes, kayaks and stand-up paddleboards are currently available through the summer months through a concessionaire at Eagle Lake.
- Q. Any chance for a backcountry campsite for NCTA hikers?
- A. Room is limited in the area of the park that the NCT passes through.

At the end of the meeting, attendees were asked to participate in a public input survey to review, comment on, and help prioritize the ten-year actions goals.

### **Post Meeting Online Survey**

Two hundred and thirty-nine individuals completed the post meeting online survey that was designed to help prioritize and provide feedback on the proposed action goals and public input opportunity. In the survey, participants were asked to prioritize their top five action goals from the ten-year action goals list (see table on following page). The top priorities, in order of preference were:

- Implement equestrian campground improvements considering electricity, shade for horses and running water
- Construct Kalamazoo River Valley Trail through the park
- Consider appropriate location for mountain bike beginner/ skills loop at trailhead
- Replace two campground toilet shower buildings
- Investigate a feasible off-road equestrian trail connection from the equestrian trailhead north along Augusta Climax Road
- Repave and reconstruct roads as needed
- Implement mountain bike staging area improvements including picnic tables/benches, improved signage, accessible surfacing, and reroofing vault toilet and change courts.

When asked if any actions should be added to the list, a variety of responses were submitted. Common themes included:

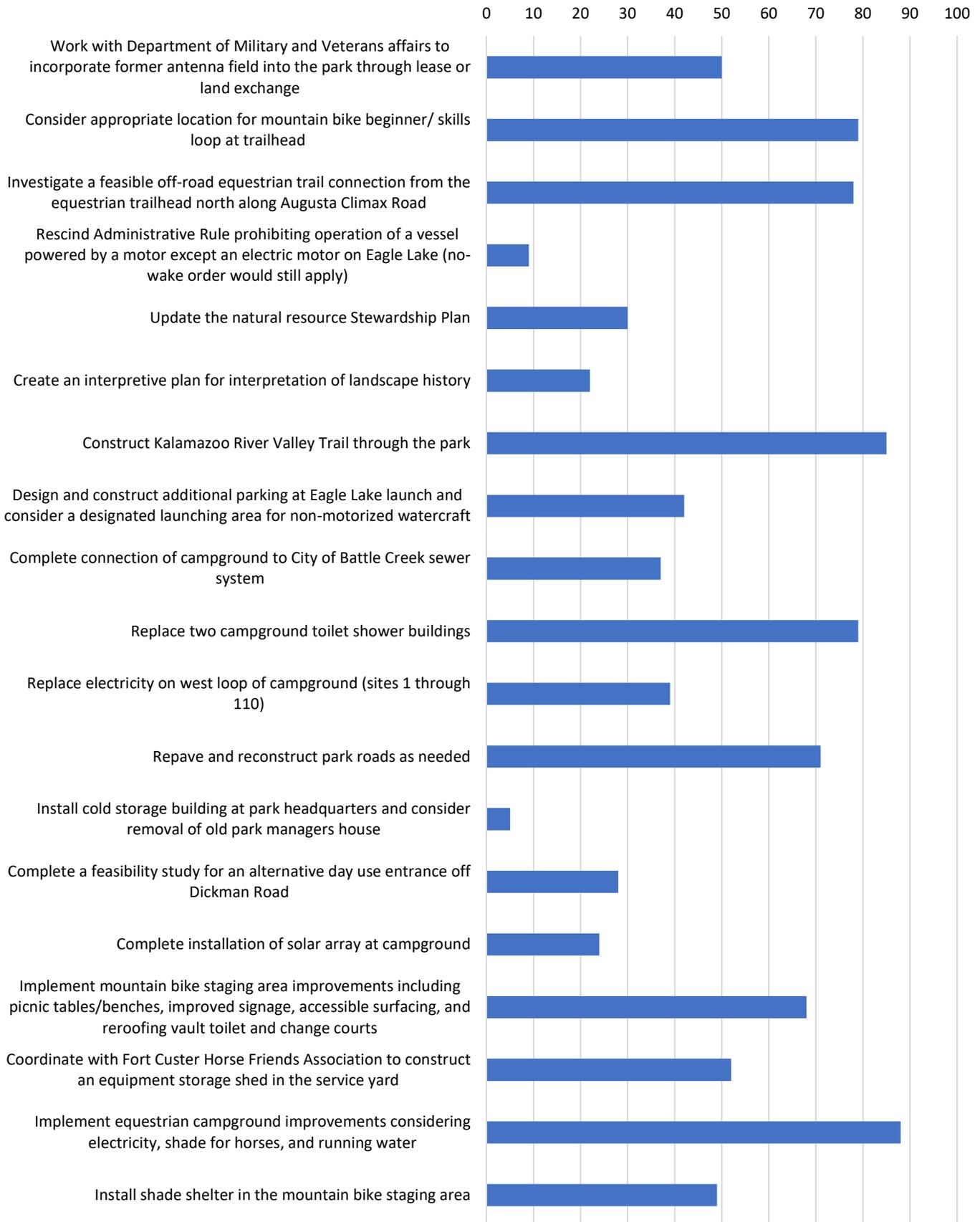
- Additional improvements to the equestrian campground, such as adding corals, and larger sites.
- Improvements at Eagle Lake, such as shade on the beach, concession building updates, a playground (natural playground) and more amenities such as an outhouse for out-of-season use, picnic tables and general improvements to the area.
- Additional fishing docks
- Additional mileage for mountain bike and equestrian trails and other trail improvements, including maintenance.

When asked if any actions should be removed from the list, the majority of the 48 comments, were in relation to the boating restrictions. Many would like to see Eagle Lake restricted to electric motors only, although it was not clear if people understood that the no-wake order would remain, and it what is currently being enforced as many said to leave it as it is.

Additional comments regarding Fort Custer Recreation Area or the draft plan included many positive comments regarding the park and repetition of comments made in other areas of the survey. Several respondents expressed concern that there were few actions related to hunting and fishing and that an emphasis on trails and other amenities was moving away from the DNR's mission.

Very few of the survey respondents attended the online public meeting. The overwhelming reason for not attending was that they were not aware of it. Those that did attend the meeting mostly rated it favorably and appreciated the virtual format.

## Action Goal Priorities



## Email Comments

The following letter was received via email.



September 13, 2022

Debbie Jensen  
DNR Park Management Plan Administrator  
Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Dear Ms. Jensen,

Discover Kalamazoo would like to suggest specific improvements to Fort Custer in response to your recent webinar on the Phase 2 General Management Plan.

Please know that we are delighted that you are continuing to make improvements to the Fort Custer Recreation Area. Parks, trails and waterways are very important assets to Discover Kalamazoo and our community, and as such we regularly feature them in our marketing activities targeted to potential out-of-town visitors. Our ads and website pages featuring outdoor recreation, especially trails and waterfront/waterways have proven to be some of our most engaging content, demonstrating to us their ability to help us attract valuable leisure travelers.

There are three things we recommend you prioritize in your plans:

1. Facilities for the launch of canoes, kayaks and tubing. This would include parking areas downstream, transportation upstream for launch, rental facilities and restrooms/changing areas. These types of facilities are hugely popular in other parts of Michigan, and inquiries to Discover Kalamazoo indicate demand in our area. If you created facilities like this, we would market them from Spring to early Fall to the surrounding areas.
2. Free, unimpeded access on trails including through the State Park area. We are so fortunate to have the Kal-Haven Trail and KRVT connecting into Kalamazoo County, and are very much looking forward to improvements which will make the entire lake-to-lake trail system safe and easy for bikers to traverse our great state. This is already a significant tourism draw for us, and we think the planned improvements will make it even better. It is critical, however, that access be easy for bikers and not require passes or fees as they go from one portion of the trail to another. It can't be like a toll road or bikers will choose other trails. This could even discourage people from using the Kal-Haven Trail or the other portions of the KRVT if they learn that "there are fees to use trails in SW Michigan" without understanding the nuances.
3. Enhanced access for travelers with disabilities. We are beginning a concerted effort to attract visitor with disabilities to Kalamazoo County. As one in four Americans currently has a disability of some kind, this is an important and valuable market. And of course, improvements for visitors with disabilities will benefit residents as well. It would be great to be able to market Fort Custer Recreation Area as a fantastic, accessible outdoor recreation area for all travelers.

Thank you very much for soliciting community input, and for your commitment to making Fort Custer an even better asset. Please contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jane S. Ghosh".

Jane S. Ghosh  
President & CEO  
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