Discover Dutchess County Parks & Trails

By: Emily Dozier, AICP, Senior Planner

People love their local parks and trails, and the importance of these community resources has been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic as people search out outdoor options for exercise, fresh air, and stress relief. In Dutchess County alone, we have nearly 200 parks and almost 400 miles of trails, ranging from National Historic Sites to municipal recreation areas.

In 2019, the County launched Dutchess County Parks & Trails, an interactive website for residents, tourists and others to find information about all of our parks and trails. It was developed by the County's departments of Planning, Health, and the Office of Central & Information Systems (OCIS), with assistance from many partners. The website built on and replaced the Healthy Communities Trail Map Series, which had included PDF maps of major parks and trails.

Key Features
The site has several key features:

- Search by a park/trail name or key word (e.g., garden, rail trail).

- Filter to find parks/trails with certain facilities (e.g. swimming, accessible playground). You can also filter by trail length, difficulty, surface, and park owner (national, state, county).

- Map: View a map of all the parks/trails in the county or in your area. When you zoom to a park, an individual park/trail map shows entrances, parking, kiosks, trailheads, trails (and their length, surface, and difficulty), as well as contour lines (so you can see where the hills are), structures, and water bodies. Maps can be downloaded and printed or used on your mobile device while at the park/trail. The map page also includes a "Contact" feature so you can submit updates or corrections to the information if needed.

What We're ~~Reading~~ Watching

Ever wonder what your friendly county planners are reading (or watching!) these days? We've launched this segment to share interesting books, blogs and more to further spark your interest in the how's and why's of placemaking. We hope you find it inspiring!

Staff WEBINAR SERIES REVIEW:

SMART GROWTH ONLINE

The Smart Growth Network (coordinated by the Maryland Department of Planning) has an ongoing webinar series that focuses on a variety of planning issues (parking reform, housing policy, farmland preservation, walkability, etc). Our staff have been taking advantage of these free offerings featuring nationally-recognized experts to learn about topics such as Missing Middle Housing, Just Suburbs: Creating Equitable Opportunities in Suburban Development, and Lessons Learned from Walkable City and Human Transit. All of the webinars are available here.

If you'd like to receive announcements for upcoming webinars, join their email subscription list.

The Smart Growth Information Clearinghouse is a project of the Smart Growth Network and is partially funded by the U.S. EPA, Office of Community Revitalization, and managed by the Maryland Department of Planning.

- List: The full list of park/trails can be sorted by municipality or by name. Each listing includes icons for the park/trail features. Clicking on the name takes you to the map of that trail/park, with photos, a list of amenities, a link to directions, and more information.

- The site also has links to health and safety tips and a list of park events (when applicable).
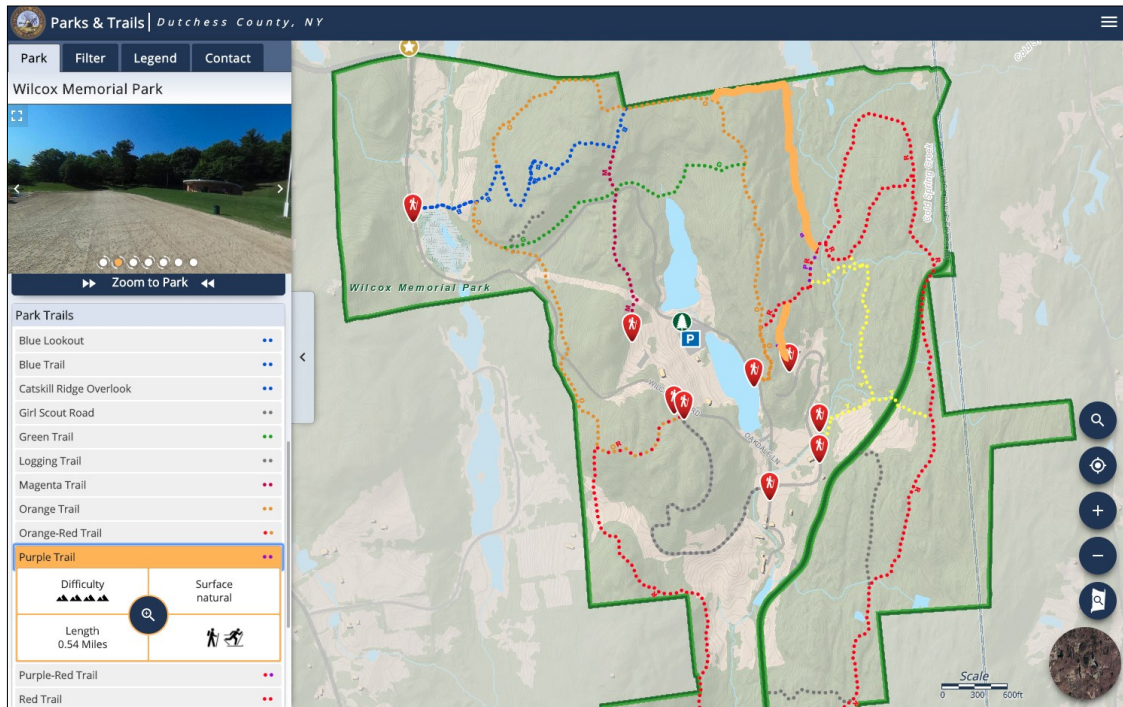
This screenshot shows the boundaries of Wilcox Memorial Park in the Town of Milan, along with a color -coded trail map and trail access points noted along the way. The website has a mobile-friendly version, so be sure to check it out from the trail for access to maps and other information.

New Tools

Developing the website allowed OCIS and Planning staff to try some new tools:

- One of these was a camera that takes 360-degree images. The 360-degree images are available for many of the parks (along with static images of key features).

- Another useful tool was an ArcGIS survey app called Collector, which was used to inventory the amenities at each park/trail.

- Planning staff used a GPS device to locate all of the trails and amenities within each park so they could be accurately mapped.

Collaboration

While OCIS developed the site and Planning staff did the field inventory work, the project also involved collaboration with many others: the County's Department of Public Works and ThinkDIFFERENTLY initiative helped plan the project, and State and municipal park managers and trail groups helped gather park information, descriptions, and photos, determined if anything was missing, and reviewed the information collected.

According to Joe Rutkowski, GIS Project Leader at OCIS, "The most challenging part was the collection and organization of all the data, as it involved several departments and numerous outside agencies over several years."

An Early Success

The Parks & Trails website has been very successful. From its launch in April 2019 through July 2020, the site saw over 44,000 visitors and 3.4 million "requests" (searches and actions within the site, which are used to measure engagement).
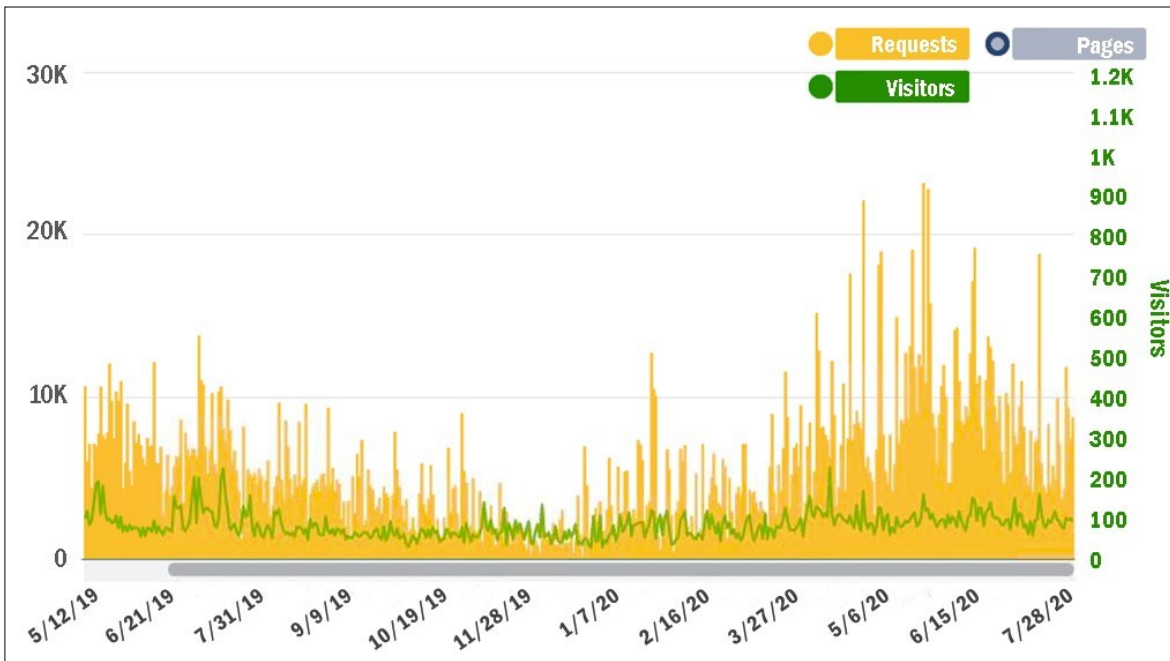
This graph shows the daily total website traffic for the Dutchess County Parks & Trails site. Comparing May-July 2019 to May-July 2020 shows a marked increase in site usage. (Source: Dutchess County OCIS)

The benefits of the site have been highlighted during the COVID pandemic. Traffic on the Parks & Trails website increased from an average of about 80 visitors a day in March 2020 to 110 in April 2020, a 35% jump, and remained around 100 visitors/day through July. Requests, which averaged about 5,200 a day in March 2020, jumped to 8,300 a day in April, a 60% increase, and continued to climb in May and June. Clearly this in-depth resource on our parks and trails is serving a public need.

What's Next?

OCIS is planning several updates to the site: adding new parks (including Lake Walton once it is developed); adding or updating trails; highlighting the soon-to-be-complete Empire State Trail; adding new photos; and improving communication between the County and local trail stewards to assure that the trail data is accurate and current.

To that end, please share your feedback! In particular, we'd like to know:

- How did you find out about the website (internet search, other County webpage, another way)?

Many people are taking advantage of the variety of parks and trails in Dutchess County to get fresh air and exercise while social distancing during the pandemic. (Photo credit: Heather LaVarnway, DC Planning)

- How do you use the website: do you search by park/trail name, by amenity, or by using the map and looking near where you are planning to be? Do you use a cell phone and your physical location to look for parks?

- Are you able to find what you are looking for on the site? Is there enough information for what you need? Is the information accurate?

- Is any information missing (parks, trails, features), or need to be updated?

Finally, please share the Dutchess County Parks & Trails site with your friends and neighbors, and use it to explore a new park or trail!

View from Cat Rocks, part of the Appalachian Trail in the Town of Pawling. (Photo credit: David LaVarnway)

More Information

Dutchess County Parks & Trails:
Dutchess County Parks & Trails Interactive Website
Background Info
Press Release Announcing Launch of Website (April 2019)