

# GREEN ISLANDS

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Summit Metro Parks Bi-Monthly Magazine

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Our parks are like green islands in an urban landscape.

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The park district's governing body is appointed by the Summit County Probate Judge. Commissioners serve overlapping three-year terms and are assisted by the executive director, who oversees the work of full-time and part-time employees, seasonal workers and volunteers.

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Your Metro Parks are funded by a small Summit County real-estate tax. This magazine is an example of your public dollars at work.

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## MAPLE LEAF GIFTS

### A Gift for Everyone on Your List

'Tis the season to shop Maple Leaf Gifts! With Summit Metro Parks branded apparel and gear, along with nature-themed items for all ages, you can find something for everyone on your list. Shop local and enjoy a unique gift from Maple Leaf Gifts — conveniently located inside the visitors center at F.A. Seiberling Nature Realm in Akron and online at [bit.ly/MapleLeafGifts](https://bit.ly/MapleLeafGifts).

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## DISCOVER YOUR BACK YARD Section

### YOU'LL POLLUTE YOUR EYE OUT, KID!

By Brendan Tisch, Interpretive Naturalist

Want to celebrate the holidays with your friends and family, but worried about your carbon footprint?

No one is saying you should stay home alone for the holidays, but planning your travel (when able) is one of the best ways to shrink your carbon footprint. When choosing between planes, trains and automobiles, you might be surprised to find a car trip can be more efficient than taking a plane. Planes use more fuel per minute taking off and climbing than at any other stage of the flight. By cutting out short-haul flights and layovers, you can save your air miles for longer, more eco-friendly trips. For trips closer to 200 miles where the option is available, nothing is more efficient than taking the “polar express.” On average, trains produce roughly 6.5 times less carbon dioxide than planes for the same trip. However you choose to travel, you can check your carbon footprint with an online calculator to learn more about the impact of different transportation options.

Want to learn more ways to navigate the holiday season with the environment in mind? Read the extended article on [summitmetroparks.org](https://summitmetroparks.org) or attend one of our programs on sustainability.

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## THE JOY OF MUSIC

### Celebrating 25 Years of the Metro Parks Ensemble

By Kara Herman, Marketing Assistant

All the world's a stage, and these musicians are not merely players. The Metro Parks Ensemble is thought to be the only volunteer band affiliated with a park district in the country. In 2026, the group is celebrating its 25th anniversary of bringing music to Summit Metro Parks.

In December 2000, SMP naturalists hosted a traditional Holiday Sing-Along program at Firestone Metro Park. As with many Ohio winters, the weather did not cooperate, and a blizzard drove away the attendees. The only people who showed up were the volunteers — Bill Wilkerson and his sons, John and Paul.

Though they did not have an audience that night, the conversation that followed would mark the beginning of entertaining thousands in the Metro Parks for years to come. They had an idea — instead of playing cassette tapes, what if they could get a live band together?

The Wilkersons were worried it would be difficult to find musicians, but by the following year's Holiday Sing-Along, they had assembled a 10-piece band with all kinds of instruments: brass, strings, woodwinds — even a banjo! With only one rehearsal before the show, the band was a hit, and the Metro Parks Ensemble was born in 2001.

As the Ensemble has grown over the years, so has its repertoire. From classic rock to patriotic marches, Broadway hits to kids tunes, there's something for

everyone. Concerts are performed outdoors in your Metro Parks on select Tuesdays at 7 p.m. from the last week in May through mid-September.

Throughout the years, they've featured many fun additions, such as naturalist displays, Friends of Metro Parks serving dessert, a barbershop quartet, audience participation, mascot appearances and pop-up gift shops. In 2022, Cycling Without Age — a program that features accessible trishaw bike rides — was added to concerts at Munroe Falls Metro Park. Recently, the Ensemble has seen increased popularity, drawing around 2,000 attendees each season.

Paul Wilkerson, who now directs the band, likens the experience on a Tuesday evening to one of their favorite songs to play, Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." He says, "There's so much to enjoy and appreciate out in the parks, not just the natural world, but families you come across ... joy in the moment."

Today, the Ensemble is made up of 40 musicians — some of whom have been around since the very beginning. Each has a unique story about why they play. Many are retirees who are picking up their instruments for the first time since high school. Others have had a lifelong love of music and are in many community bands.

Trombonist Kathy Jesser plays in memory of her son, Timmy J., who was a music performance major at Otterbein University. She shares, "When I joined the band ... I picked up this trombone, I just sat there crying. I'm blowing hot air into this instrument my son played for years. It brought such immense joy to my soul ... I can honor him."

It's true that music brings people together. Kathy feels her fellow musicians are some of the nicest people she's met; they support and care for each other.

Reflecting on the 25 years of the Ensemble, Paul shares his favorite part: "It's the joy that you see in people's faces, the smiles, the foot taps, getting people engaged

in the music ... both the audience and the group. When we're having fun and it shows, the audience will too."

## ENJOY A HOLIDAY CONCERT BY THE METRO PARKS ENSEMBLE.

Saturday, November 14

7 p.m.

Akron Children's Hospital Holiday Tree Festival,  
John S. Knight Center

Sunday, December 13

2-3 p.m.

CV / Himelright Lodge

1212 Cuyahoga St., Akron

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## CONNECT, AND MAKE A LASTING IMPACT

By Jen M. Harvey, Chief of Philanthropy

Summit County has extensive multipurpose greenways that serve as recreational travel ways in natural settings. Connections to the greenways are vital because they transform individual trails into cohesive, continuous networks and become another way to enjoy nature. Connecting people and nature is part of the Summit Metro Parks mission, and it's also one of the long-term goals of our current strategic plan.

Trails link neighborhoods, schools, workplaces and recreational spaces. By providing safe, off-road alternatives to driving, these networks reduce emissions, boost public health and stimulate local economies through increased tourism and recreation.

The Munroe Falls-Freedom Trail Connector, to be built in 2027, will connect the Freedom Trail greenway with the many recreational amenities at Munroe Falls Metro Park — the picnic shelters, playground, scenic lake and park

trails. It will be built to a high standard of accessibility for all trail users.

Although short in length, the long-awaited connector will provide a parking and access point at the longest stretch of the Freedom Trail without a trailhead. This connector brings many benefits — the most important of which is improved access — and that is why the Summit Metro Parks Foundation is backing the project and seeking your support as well through the Support Your Parks! fundraising campaign.

This season, consider a gift to the Summit Metro Parks Foundation to Support Your Parks!

Find out more at: [foundation.summitmetroparks.org](http://foundation.summitmetroparks.org).

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The Summit Metro Parks Foundation connects, conserves and inspires as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization established in 1991 where donors can create a lasting legacy by supporting the park district. We are grateful to the many people, organizations, businesses and agencies who made gifts, grants and sponsorships January 1, 2026, through June 30, 2026. These donations and other forms of support create thriving parks that are a cornerstone of Summit County's quality of life.

## DONOR LISTING

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Kathryn Kilpatrick

We're grateful to those who have made a planned gift to Summit Metro Parks or the Summit Metro Parks Foundation. Those who have done so are recognized here as part of the Green Islands Legacy Society. Planned gifts (such as bequests) are a wonderful way to make a lasting difference for your parks.

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