Originally designated as a National Recreation Area in 1974, Cuyahoga Valley National Park protects a restored landscape with deep cultural roots. Adjacent to cities like Cleveland and Akron, the park provides educational, natural, and recreational opportunities for neighboring communities and visitors. The park includes hundreds of cultural assets including part of the Ohio & Erie Canal, railways, historic communities and districts, and old farmhouses. Recognizing the importance of preserving these historic sites but limited by staffing and funding, the park turned to historic leasing and developed two programs: one which focuses on leasing historic farms, and the other which repurposes historic buildings for events, accommodations, and other uses. Today, the park holds 15 leases—11 for farms and 4 others—and is exploring opportunities to encourage more leasing. In 2017, more than 2.2 million visitors spent more than $78.1 million in local gateway communities.
EXTRAORDINARY SPACES PROGRAM

In 2011, the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park—the primary friends group for the park—entered into a 10-year lease to bring several underutilized buildings back into use. The Conservancy participated in a seminar focused on making nonprofits more entrepreneurial and developed business plans to put these sites to better use. Now, both the Hines Hill Campus, built in 1904, and the Happy Days Lodge, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, serve as unique event spaces especially popular for weddings. The Conservancy supports sustainability efforts and zero waste initiatives, and utilizes caterers whose produce comes from local farms, including some that are part of the farm leases. Since making investments in hospitality staff and completing necessary upgrades, the Conservancy turned a gross profit of $430,000 in fiscal year 2018. As part of the lease, the Conservancy pays a flat fee of 2% gross profit to the park, pays for most utilities, and manages custodial and minor maintenance. This agreement allows the park to better prioritize funding for major rehabilitation projects. This partnership draws new visitors to the park, offering them memorable experiences and providing the park with an additional revenue stream.

"COUNTRYSIDE INITIATIVE"

The 13 farms at Cuyahoga Valley sat fallow for many years until the park began pursuing options to better steward the historic landscape. The leasing program began in the early 2000s and today boasts 11 productive farms. The park invested in the restoration of the farmhouses and key farm buildings, allowing farmers to begin farming immediately. As part of the 60-year leases, the farmers pay a monthly rent on the farmhouses based on market prices and a second rent payment on the land based on a formula that considers startup costs. The Cuyahoga Valley Countryside Conservancy, a nonprofit partner of the park, provides technical assistance to farmers. The farm lease program allows for the preservation of important rural resources, places farmland back into diverse, productive use, creates opportunities for entrepreneurial farmers, and teaches visitors about farming methods and food production.

"Everybody wins with this program. Important historic buildings are preserved, the NPS mission is served in a financially sustainable way, and most important, communities and visitors benefit from vital resources."

Deb Yandala, CEO, Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park
A PROBLEM

The National Park Service (NPS) maintains a network of 417 parks and sites that protect some of our nation’s most spectacular historic, cultural, and natural resources. However, after 100 years of operation and inconsistent public funding, the NPS faces a deferred maintenance backlog estimated at $11.6 billion—of which approximately 47% is attributed to historic assets. Deferred maintenance in our national parks puts historic and cultural sites at risk of permanent damage or loss, and in the absence of funding, the condition of these assets will continue to deteriorate and become more expensive to repair and preserve in the future.

A SOLUTION

Leasing of historic buildings in the National Park System is an effective and proven public-private partnership that can be used as part of the suite of options necessary to abate the NPS deferred maintenance backlog. The NPS has the legal authority to enter into lease agreements whereby the park maintains ownership of the building, but the lessee is responsible for the preservation and maintenance needs of the structure. For long-term commercial leases of 55 years or more, the lessee is able to utilize the federal historic tax credit and receive a 20 percent credit for qualified rehabilitation expenses. Historic leasing partnerships alleviate the burden on the NPS to maintain historic buildings by reducing maintenance costs and the repair backlog for the park, allow reallocation of scarce resources to other priority projects, create opportunities for private investors, provide services for visitors and residents of gateway communities, and bring iconic historic buildings back to life. The National Trust for Historic Preservation plays a leading role in advocating for the use of leasing by the National Park Service by providing research and guidance about best practices and highlighting opportunities to leverage this innovative preservation tool.

The House Appropriations Committee has also noted, in part, that “leasing of historic park buildings has proven to be an effective public-private partnership that has brought private investment to the repair and maintenance of historic park resources.”


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The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a privately funded nonprofit organization, works to save America’s historic places. Visit us at SavingPlaces.org.