

2025 Awards of Excellence

The OPRA Annual Awards of Excellence recognize organizations throughout Ohio that embody the vision, dedication, and demonstration of excellence in parks and recreation. These awards highlight the efforts of those organizations that transcend everyday standards to make a difference and improve the quality of life in Ohio communities.



Celebrate Parks & Recreation!

The 2025 OPRA Annual Awards of Excellence will be presented during the 2026 OPRA Conference & Trade Show at the Kalahari Convention Center in Sandusky, Ohio on February 3, 2026 at 6:30pm.

Recognizing the Best: The OPRA Governor's Award

The OPRA Governor's Award recognizes the one award from all the first place winners that has made the most significant impact in the lives of Ohioans. The award winner will be announced during the Awards Presentation. A \$500 donation is awarded to the winning agency's foundation. State leaders will serve as the judging panel for the award with the following criteria.

The project, program, or event:

- is impactful on community quality of life.
- is unique/innovative or presents a new way of doing something.
- addresses a need recognized in the community.
- is utilized by the community.

**End of Day
October 15, 2025**

Awards Submissions Deadline (Narrative & Supporting Documents)

For more information:

OPRA | 614-895-2222

opra@opraonline.org | opraonline.org

Darcy Baxter, Awards Co-Chair
Upper Arlington Parks and Recreation
614-583-5300 | dbaxter@uaoh.net

Kevin Swanson, Awards Co-Chair
Miami County Park District
937-335-6273 | kswanson@miamicountyparks.com

Submit an Application for the OPRA Awards of Excellence to:

- display how your agency is improving the quality of life in your community.
- earn your agency acknowledgement.
- demonstrate the caliber of your agency's work.
- showcase your agency's talents and dedication to the parks and recreation profession.
- increase marketability and media access.
- receive recognition in the parks and recreation profession.

Outstanding Leadership Awards

Recognizing outstanding leaders who have advanced the benefits of parks and recreation in Ohio. No entry fee. Awards in the Outstanding Leadership categories are voted on by the OPRA Board of Directors. Award notifications will be sent the week of November 17, 2025.

Describe the primary reason this person is being nominated for a Leadership Award and explain how the nominee has enhanced parks, recreation, and quality of life in your community and/or Ohio.



Outstanding Youth Leadership

Presented to an outstanding leader 12-18 years of age who has enhanced parks and recreation in their community and/or Ohio.

Outstanding Citizen

Recognizing an outstanding citizen, volunteer, or community board member who has enhanced parks and recreation in their community and/or Ohio.

Youth Sports Coach of the Year

Recognizing an outstanding youth sports coach who has positively affected youth sports and has served as a role model for athletes in their community and/or Ohio.

Jack Hanna Resource Conservation*

Presented to an OPRA member who has dedicated their career to the conservation of natural resources as exhibited by leadership in conservation both in their career in parks and recreation and in other efforts.

Ranger of the Year*

Presented to an OPRA member serving as a ranger, park police officer, or public safety officer who has demonstrated a willingness to go “above and beyond the call of duty” to provide life-changing service to park users.

Public Official of the Year

Presented to an outstanding elected official who has advanced the cause of parks and recreation in Ohio.

Harvey Woods Lifetime Achievement

Harvey Woods served as a parks and recreation professional not only in his day-to-day tasks, but also by mentoring young professionals and serving OPRA and NRPA. This award is presented to an outstanding individual who has emulated this work within parks and recreation in Ohio.

Professional of the Year*

Presented to an OPRA member who has served in the field of parks and recreation and has provided outstanding service to their community and OPRA. Please also describe their contributions to OPRA.

OPRA Hall of Fame

Induction into the Hall of Fame is the highest award given by OPRA. Hall of Fame inductees will have made a significant statewide contribution to parks, recreation, and natural resources which is demonstrated through specific and tangible accomplishments over the course of the individual’s career. Nominations should detail statewide contributions and accomplishments and the candidate’s career contributions to OPRA. Up to 2 recipients may be selected.

In addition, please provide a detailed explanation of why the individual deserves this award as well as a summary of the contributions impacting parks, recreation, and natural resources in Ohio at the local, state, and/or national level.

*This category requires the nominee to be a member. Please confirm eligibility before submitting nomination.

Awards of Excellence Categories

Recognizing excellence in projects, programs, and events that enrich the quality of life and strengthen Ohio communities.

PROJECTS

Capital Improvement

Development or redevelopment of parks, facilities, or historical buildings/properties that advance the goals of parks and recreation agencies.

Category 1: Up to \$500,000

Category 2: \$500,000 to \$3 Million

Category 3: \$3 Million to \$10 Million

Category 4: \$10 Million and Up

Category 5: Management Innovation

Noteworthy contributions to parks and recreation through inspiration, incentive, and leadership initiatives; excellence in management, education, and staff development.

Category 6: Marketing Innovation

New or unique ways to communicate programs, stories, and/or the benefits of parks and recreation that keep communities up-to-date and informed. Entrant must manage projects with outside assistance limited to support functions such as printing, technical, and production services.

Category 7: Natural Resources & Conservation

Sustainable, significant contributions of an agency toward long-range planning and quality of services within the area of park facilities and natural resource acquisitions/development which positively impact Ohio's environment.

PROGRAMS & EVENTS

Category 8: Adaptive

Programs or events that enhance the lives of those with special needs such as emotional, cognitive, or physical disabilities.

Category 9: Environmental & Interpretive

Programs or events focused on nature; including environmental awareness, natural interpretation, or conservation.

Category 10: Health & Wellness

Programs or events focused on healthy lifestyles for community health or employee wellness.

Category 11: Historical & Cultural Arts

Historical reenactments, celebrations, fine arts, or similar programs or events of a cultural nature.

Category 12: Community Events

Events with the intent of showcasing a creative, innovative, or distinctive interpretation to the awareness of a general theme.

Category 13: Recreation Programs

Creative programs with the intent of spotlighting an innovative approach to a general theme for educational or developmental purposes.

Rules

Submission Deadline (Narrative and Supporting Documents): October 15, 2025

Cost is \$60 per submission. Group members will receive one free submission. Discount will be applied to first submission received.

Projects, programs, or events must be completed between October 1, 2024 - September 30, 2025. For capital improvement projects, please use the date of your grand opening. For ongoing programs, please use the date of the last completed program or session within the above time period. For events, use the event date.

Applications must be submitted by a current OPRA member.

Projects, programs, or events can only be submitted in one category.

Submissions are not permitted to be entered two years in a row.

The Awards Committee reserves the right to reassign applications to the most appropriate category.

All submissions are submitted online at opraonline.org.

There are templates found on the Awards homepage to help you prepare your submission before submitting it online.

Awards Submission Information

When applying online, please be prepared with the following information:

1. Award Category
2. Project/Program/Event Name
3. Date Completed
4. Cost of Project (Categories 1-4 only)
5. 1,500-character summary of your project, program, or event and how it changed lives. (Letters, numbers, punctuation, and spaces count as characters.)
6. Narrative description of the project, program, or event not to exceed 7,000 characters which address the following:

1. Community Impact

Addresses a community need, provides broad community benefit, is attentive to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and generally serves to improve the quality of life for the community.

2. Achievement

Achieves stated goals in a measureable way.

3. Innovation

Is innovative and creative, as well as, presents a new way of doing things, is new to the field of parks and recreation, and provides a model which can be replicated.

4. Execution

Strategically utilizes tools, resources, engagement, and outreach in order to accomplish goals.

5. Sustainability

Is sustainable and/or provides sustainable benefits to the community.

6. Resourcefulness

Uses available resources including community partnerships, sponsorships, grants, and volunteers.

7. Storytelling

Utilizes available resources to clearly articulate the benefits to the community. The application materials should clearly describe the project, program, or event and its benefits.

Supporting Documents

Supporting documents should be uploaded at the same time as the narrative. You may submit a maximum of 10 image files, 5 PDF files, and 5 hyperlinks. One image file is required with each submission.

- All supporting documents must have been made for the project, program, or event and not created specifically for the Awards submission.
- Image files may be photographs, maps, artwork, screen captures, etc.
- Photographs may not contain borders, captions, or collages, and they must be high resolution.
- One document per PDF. Please save all PDFs to the lowest resolution possible. Examples of PDFs include flyers, posters, brochures, plans, calendars, or news articles.
- Hyperlinks include website pages and links to videos (YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, etc.). Videos will not be accepted as an original file (ex: .mov) or from SharePoint.
- All images and PDFs need to be less than 10 MB each.

By submitting an application, you are granting OPRA permission to use any and all portions of the application, including photos, on our website and in marketing materials.

September 10, 2025

10:00am - 11:00am

Virtual Awards Workshop

The Awards Committee will:

- Review changes made to the Awards Program for 2025.
- Share tips and tricks on how to get the most out of your submission.

Register at opraonline.org.

November 6, 2025

10:00am

Virtual Awards Judging

OPRA members from around the state will gather virtually first and then score their assigned category (1-13) at that time.

Bonus: Participating helps you prepare for your future submissions!

Register at opraonline.org.

**Week of
November 17, 2025**

- Winners will receive notification with media release.
- The top 3 scores in each category receive awards. Ties are broken by the Awards Committee.
- All entries will receive their score summary with comments. All submissions will be available to members on the OPRA website.