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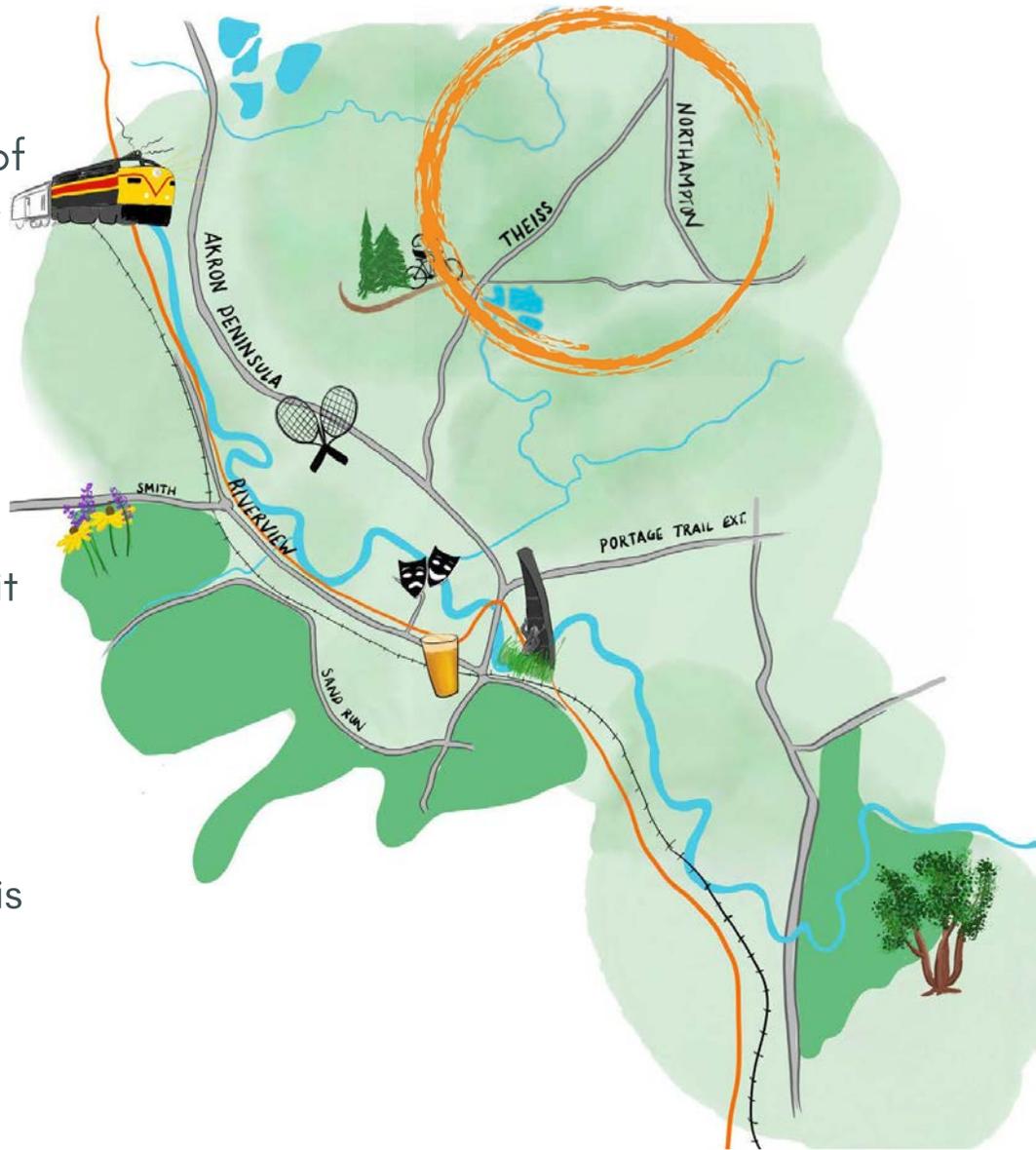
**CITIZEN ACTION GROUP**

# THEISS WOODS

THE LAST MAJOR GREENFIELD IN THE CITY OF AKRON

# WHAT IS THEISS WOODS?

The Theiss Woods property is public land owned by the citizens of Akron. It covers roughly 45 acres southeast of Theiss Rd. and north of Hardy Rd. in Akron's Ward 8. It was used as farmland until around 1970, then allowed to sit idle. Healthy trees and shrubs have reclaimed the former fields. Recent drone footage shows most of the site is now covered by a tree canopy.



“ AS THE LAST MAJOR GREENFIELD IN THE CITY OF AKRON, WE BELIEVE THIS PROPERTY OFFERS TOO MUCH NATURAL RESOURCE VALUE TO BE DEVELOPED. ”

ALEX CZAYKA, WESTERN RESERVE LAND CONSERVANCY TO AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

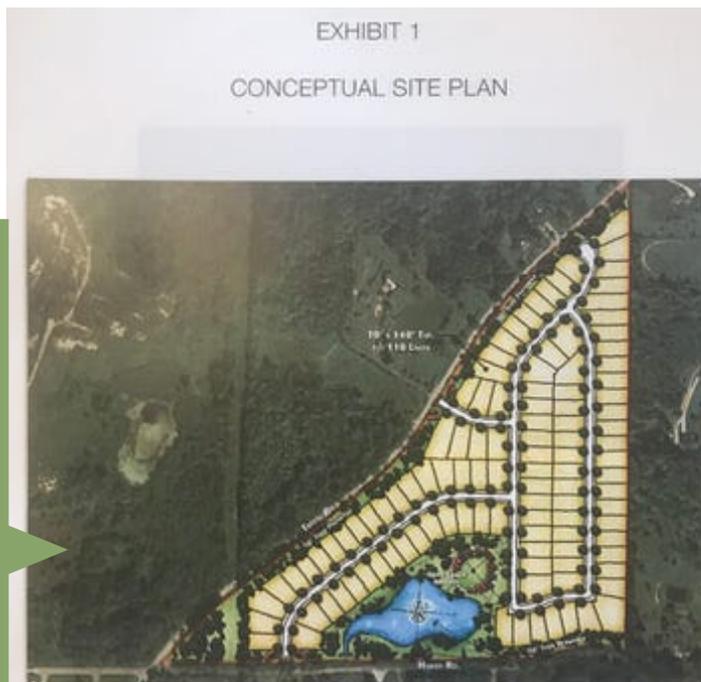
# DEVELOPMENT VS. CONSERVATION

In August 2020, Akron placed the Theiss property on the market for residential development with an asking price of \$361,520 -- a price well below market value, with a 15 year CRA tax abatement for future homeowners. Five proposals from developers called for the clearing of up to 70% of the site to build 65 -110 upscale single-family homes offered at prices up to \$420K. A sixth proposal was submitted by the Western Reserve Land Conservancy to purchase the land for conservation at the city's asking price.

In response to intense public pressure and calls for conservation, the city issued a new request for proposals (RFP) in December 2020 to allow conservation groups to submit proposals. The asking price was increased to \$550,000 for conservation groups. Proposals are due on March 31, 2021.

In April 2021, Akron's Office of Integrated Development is expected to select either conservation or development for the property, and choose one proposal to present to the Mayor, Akron City Planning Commission, and Akron City Council.

One conceptual site plan for Theiss Woods shows tightly packed houses using the entirety of the remaining greenspace



**AUGUST**

2020

Akron requests development proposals

**DECEMBER**

2020

Conservation groups allowed to submit proposals

**MARCH**

2021

Proposals are due

**APRIL**

2021

Conservation or development?

# WHY CONSERVE?

We believe the Theiss property has the potential to be an environmental, ecological, and recreational success story for Akron and the entire Cuyahoga Valley National Park region. Here are **TEN** key reasons why it should be conserved.



**VALUABLE NATURAL RESOURCE:** Theiss is the last major greenspace in the city limits.

**CONNECTIVITY:** Theiss is a key piece of an existing greenbelt of parkland and conservation lands above the Valley.



**WILDLIFE DIVERSITY:** Theiss supports a wide range of wildlife important to the ecosystem of Summit Metro Parks and Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

**TREE CANOPY:** The 45 acres of ground cover and tree canopy on Theiss is vital for carbon lock-up and protecting the Valley from stormwater run-off.



**ECONOMIC COST:** The cost of more development on the already stressed infrastructure of the Valley is too high for taxpayers.

**EQUITY & OUTWARD MIGRATION:** Developing Theiss accelerates outward migration and ignores environmental equity issues faced by Akron's poorest wards.



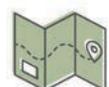
**RECREATION POTENTIAL:** Theiss offers the opportunity for expanded recreation amenities for Akron citizens next to Summit Metro Parks' mountain bike area.

**EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY:** The Theiss property offers a prime location for a future outdoor learning lab to enhance Akron Public Schools' environmental career academies and connect with other National Park educational resources.



**THEISS PAST AND FUTURE:** Theiss has rebounded ecologically from its past history as a degraded property next to a landfill and is a now thriving ecosystem that should be valued and maintained for the future.

**MASTER PLAN CONNECTION:** Theiss is adjacent to the Master Plan area and should be included in this decision-making process for the Valley's future.



# A VALUABLE NATURAL RESOURCE

Currently, the 45-acre “pie-shaped” Theiss property is a vital link in an existing greenbelt of parkland and conservation lands above the Valley. The surrounding properties include:

- 375 acres of Summit Metro Parks’ Hampton Hills Mountain Bike park, leased from Akron
- 85 acres adjacent to the Mountain Bike park (West Creek Conservancy)
- 40 acres south of the Theiss property (West Creek Conservancy) along with conservation easements from private landowners.

The framework now exists for establishing a **continuous protected greenspace** from Mud Brook north to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. To remove the 45 acres of Theiss from this chain of greenspaces means that any vision of a substantial “greenbelt” joining Akron park goes and wildlife to the National Park will not happen in this area. The capacity to grow if Valley tourism increases will be significantly hampered

We also believe the increased traffic, human impact, and infrastructure needs of a large housing development in this location will have an enormous effect on visitor experiences at the current park properties.



# WILDLIFE DIVERSITY

Observational data collected by homeowners bordering the Theiss property show that it is home to a wide variety of wildlife and bird life, indicating its importance as a healthy ecosystem in a greenway corridor. Connectivity is essential for maintaining wildlife populations throughout the park systems that surround Theiss. These "green highways" are responsible for the return of birds like the bald eagle in the Cuyahoga Valley.

ACCORDING TO SUMMIT METRO PARKS' BIOLOGIST MARLO PERDICAS, "PARKS HAVE SPENT THE PAST FEW DECADES TRYING TO RECONNECT THESE GREENSPACES, ALLOWING THE LARGER WILDLIFE TO COME BACK TO PLACES LIKE SUMMIT COUNTY."

*AKRON BEACON JOURNAL*

Residents who border the Theiss property have recorded the following list of wildlife and birds spotted in the last six months:

- Great horned owl
- All Ohio woodpeckers
- Opossum
- White tail deer
- Barn owl
- Turkey
- Rabbit
- Coyote
- Red tail hawk
- Red fox
- Fox squirrel
- Painted turtle
- Cooper's Hawk
- Mink
- Red squirrel
- Snapping turtle
- Skunk



# ECONOMIC COST OF DEVELOPMENT: STORMWATER RUN-OFF

A current list of projects shows the **HIGH COST** of erosion control, water quality management, and infrastructure repair issues in the Valley right now:

- \$1.1 billion Combined Sewer Project, Akron
- \$2.6 million Sand Run Parkway ecological improvements, FEMA
- \$2 million Sand Run Parkway, erosion control, Clean Ohio grant
- \$15 million Cuyahoga River Restoration in CVNP, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- \$1 million grant for Akron to remove Gorge Dam & improve water quality, Great Lakes Restoration Initiative
- \$390,000 Floodplain study for Summit County, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- \$810,000 to Repair Akron-Peninsula Road. Closed indefinitely due to erosion
- \$1,123,934 West Bath Road Landslide Repair
- \$3,969,200 Valley View Road Landslide Repair
- \$45 - 60,000,000 Boston Mills Road repair estimated

Building above the Cuyahoga River watershed while we are spending BILLIONS on water restoration and repairing infrastructure degradation caused (in part) by over-building doesn't make economic sense.

Right now, ALL citizens of Akron are financing the \$1.1 BILLION Combined Sewer Project to improve the water quality of the Cuyahoga River. Developments above the watershed, like Theiss Woods, will create more runoff and cause more erosion and additional infrastructure degradation -- costing taxpayers even more.

Why is our area facing so many costly environmental expenses? Geology, water, and time. **The geology of the Valley makes it a prime candidate for erosion and instability.** The county is monitoring multiple landslide areas affecting roads and infrastructure in the Valley right now.

Increasing rainfall due to climate change and run-off from over-development will only add to this serious problem. Our region gets 7 more inches of yearly rainfall now than in the 1960s.

# SAVING AKRON'S TREE CANOPY

According to the 2020 Akron Tree Canopy Report released in February, the Theiss Road land cover classification is "green" indicating that the 45 acres are primarily "tree canopy" (p. 11) as drone photos have shown. In addition to the site's extensive tree canopy, a natural spring and wetland area exist on the property.

In the past decade, the City of Akron has lost enough trees to cover 577 football fields. The loss of the Theiss tree canopy would mean the loss of **up to 33 football fields of trees at one time.**

According to the same study, Akron's trees save the city about \$23 M a year by capturing millions of gallons of stormwater, and provide a total of \$27.3 M in ecosystem benefits annually to Akron residents. They also provide numerous economic, psychological, and social benefits.

The findings of report clearly indicate that removing large numbers of trees in a "green" region like the Theiss property would have detrimental effects, and are not congruent with the city's values to preserve its tree canopy.

“FOR AKRON TO REMAIN A THRIVING, WELCOMING AND ‘GREEN’ CITY, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT ALL PROPERTY OWNERS, BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE, ADOPT THE MINDSET OF NOT REMOVING URBAN TREES UNLESS THEY ARE DANGEROUS, UNHEALTHY, OR WILL BE REPLACED ELSEWHERE IN OUR COMMUNITY.”

JON MALISH, AKRON CITY ARBORIST TO AKRON BEACON JOURNAL



# EQUITY AND OUTWARD MIGRATION

The Theiss property is located on the outermost edge of Akron. It has no connection to existing sewer and water systems, so any development would require new infrastructure -- and an expansion of city services. This is an example of **outward growth** which degrades the environment and diffuses city resources. It represents a disinvestment in the city's current infrastructure and its existing neighborhoods. **It will lead to further abandonment and isolation of the city's core.**

In Akron wards 3 and 5 which are majority Black and have the lowest median household income by neighborhood in the city, an *Akron Beacon Journal* analysis of 2020 Tree Canopy data found that there are 1.7 acres of rooftops, roads, sidewalks, and other impervious surface for every 1 acre under tree cover.

This means that Akron residents who live in majority Black wards, have significantly less access to the health benefits of greenspaces -- and are vulnerable to higher rates of asthma and other health risks from that lack of access. The sale of Akron's last and largest public greenspace to benefit wealthy suburban homeowners and developers, while ignoring the plight of Akron's poorest neighborhoods who need more greenspace access, is inequitable and unjust.

Selling Akron's natural resources to establish new outer-ring neighborhoods that are financially out-of-reach of the average citizen in Akron (average income \$34,122 per capita, 2019) is also unjust. These actions do not align with the City of Akron's Office of Integrated Development's 5-year plan which states "to improve equity, there must be increased fairness within its own systems, processes, and procedures, as well as **justice in the distribution of resources.**"

2018 ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA) REPORT  
FOUND THAT BLACK PEOPLE ARE EXPOSED TO 1.5 TIMES MORE  
PARTICULATE MATTER THAN WHITE PEOPLE AND THAT BLACK  
CHILDREN'S RATES OF HEART DISEASE AND ASTHMA ARE DOUBLE  
THOSE OF WHITE CHILDREN.

# RECREATION POTENTIAL

The Theiss property is adjacent to Summit Metro Parks' popular Hampton Hills Mountain bike area which draws both locals and tourists alike. REI Co-op listed it as **one of the best mountain bike rides in Ohio**: "A seemingly rare thing, Hampton Hills offers up the mountain biker's dream: bike-specific trails that are closed to foot traffic."

Recreation tourism is a well-documented way to provide an economic boon to an area. It boosts property values, brings in unique jobs, and supports existing businesses. An article in *Outside Online* in 2017 detailed how the mountain biking industry is saving small towns like Crosby, MN, where it has added approximately \$2 M to the local economy and 15 new businesses.

With its close proximity to existing trails, the Theiss property could provide the ideal space to expand Akron's eco-tourism reach -- with expanded mountain bike trails, hiking trails, climbing, zipline, or other activities that would keep visitors in the Merriman Valley, supporting the local economy. **Currently, National Park spending adds more than \$36M annually to the economy, while supporting 541 jobs.**

An innovative option that invests in Akron youth would be an outdoor recreation site, focused on biking and active outdoor lifestyles. In Seattle and Philadelphia, urban bike programs engage youth from city neighborhoods in technical bike repair and riding opportunities in a way that "opens doors to healthy development, active lifestyles, civic engagement, and environmental stewardship."

New programs promoting diversity in outdoor recreation include:  
<https://www.browngirlsclimb.com/>,  
<https://www.diversifyoutdoors.com/> and  
<https://outdoorafro.com/>



# OPPORTUNITY FOR EDUCATION

## GREENWAY EDUCATIONAL CORRIDOR

A state-of-the-art outdoor learning lab on the Theiss property could enhance Akron Public Schools' existing career academies for Hospitality & Tourism, Environmental Engineering, and Energy & Environmental Protection to increase minority representation in environmental fields, currently among the least diverse fields of scientific study according to a 2016 DATAUSA report.

A learning lab at Theiss could immerse APS students of all ages in its myriad of natural resources which include: native wildlife, wetland/pond, a natural spring, fields, and forest uplands. Past archeological digs at sites in close proximity to Theiss (300 meters) have yielded rare prehistoric pottery finds and stone projectile points, offering another area of future research and study.

The learning lab could also connect with current programming available at the Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center, the flagship program of the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park, that serves over 10,000 students a year.

Nearby, Old Trail School in the Cuyahoga Valley recently added a 2,000-square-foot, glass-walled outdoor classroom to their private school campus, offering environmental education and outdoor learning for their students, as well as organic gardening and beekeeping.

Joining these outstanding educational sites and resources together in the Cuyahoga Valley could create a ground-breaking "Greenway Educational Corridor" bringing together Akron students and others from region to approach environmental learning in a truly new and collaborative way. **We believe a Greenway Educational Corridor in the Valley has the potential to be a national model for environmental learning.**



# THEISS: *PAST AND FUTURE*

The City of Akron has been active in shaping the area around Theiss for over 50 years. The former Hardy Road Landfill sits across the street from the Theiss property. It was operated by the City of Akron from 1970 to 2002 and accepted municipal and industrial waste. Unanticipated methane migration from the landfill through a geologic fissure along Hardy Road caused a nearby home to explode in 1984, and 11 other homes on a 1-mile stretch of Hardy Road were ultimately condemned by the city of Akron due to the explosion risk.

In 2001, Akron planned to expand the landfill east and increase its size by 106 acres, but a grassroots group of citizens known as CORE rallied in opposition. The Ohio EPA rejected the landfill expansion plans as the risks of environmental damage became clear. The Superfund site was closed and remediated, and now the landfill methane is used to generate power for the nearby Akron wastewater treatment plant.

The Theiss property was purchased by Akron in 1999 with the intention of using it for a gun range for police training. These plans were later abandoned. In 2010, Akron agreed to lease 375 acres surrounding the landfill site to Summit Metro Parks for what would become the Hampton Hills Mountain Bike Area in 2016.

West Creek Conservancy acquired 85 acres adjacent to the former landfill property in 2020 to be protected in perpetuity. West Creek purchased an additional 40 acres south of the Theiss property and has acquired conservation easements from private landowners.

The final chapter of Theiss has yet to be written, but we believe it has the potential to be a national environmental success story of a once degraded area being reclaimed for conservation and recreation use.

## Trials set for Akron landowners

**AKRON (AP)** — The first of 11 lawsuits filed by Northampton Township families who lost their homes because of methane gas leaks from the Hardy Road landfill is scheduled to go on trial this week in Summit County Common Pleas Court.

David and June Henry, whose home exploded March 21, are asking for \$373,000 in damages. The Henrys' suit is scheduled to go to trial tomorrow morning.

**THE COUPLE** and their two children escaped from the explosion. The family's insurance paid more than \$80,000, but they are asking for additional compensation and repayment for the insurance company.

The \$373,000 is the largest amount sought by any of the property owners.

The lawsuits of nine other families who were evacuated by March 29 are scheduled to be heard in December, January and February, along with that of an 11th family which had not yet moved into the neighborhood.

The families filed \$13 million in claims after the city refused their informal proposal to settle for \$1.6 million and certain additional expenses.

**COMMON PLEAS** Judge James Winter then reduced the possible settlement to about \$2 million by ruling out punitive

An Associated Press article published in the Daily Kent Stater in 1984 about the fallout from the Hardy Road landfill



# MASTER PLAN CONNECTION

Preserve the Valley welcomes the recent news that Cuyahoga Falls and Akron have finalized the selection of Chicago-based Farr Associates, an architecture and planning firm that specializes in planning, urban design, sustainable architecture, and environmentally-sensitive design to guide the pending master planning process.

While we are encouraged by this pending master planning process, we are also concerned that the process may stop short of what is needed. We believe that the decision to limit the planning area and set the boundaries so as to exclude the 45 acres of the Theiss property is short-sighted and not in keeping with the stated goals of the planning process.

**If this is truly to be an inclusive, citizen-involved process, focusing on the environmental future of the region -- then a large public green space like Theiss Woods should be part of the discussion.** Taxpayers' dollars are funding this \$200K effort, and taxpayers' voices should be heard.

Excluding Akron's Theiss property -- and the associated 15-year City of Akron tax abatement -- from the process will have further adverse effects on the citizens of Cuyahoga Falls and cause unnecessary and irreparable environmental impact on the other regions included in the Master Plan study. Including the Theiss property in the discussion will ensure that all development and land use decisions benefit from a cohesive strategy.

# ABOUT PRESERVE THE VALLEY

Preserve the Valley was established in October 2020 to bring attention to the Theiss property and Master Plan process, along with the need to protect and preserve the natural resources of the Cuyahoga Valley where we live, work, and play.

**15,750** people have signed our Change.org petition to SAVE THEISS WOODS

**750+** have signed on with our group as supporters

**312** Preserve the Valley signs & banners have been requested and posted

**500** site visits per week on our **www.preservethevalley.com** website

**Hundreds** of voicemails, emails, and letters have been sent by citizens advocating for saving Theiss Woods, Riverwood, and calling for a Master Plan process for the Valley

**500** flyers distributed at two local rallies for RIVERWOOD and THEISS

CLOSING STATEMENT by PRESERVE THE VALLEY:

We ask the Office of Integrated Development, Mayor Horrigan, and Akron City Council to listen to the voices of the citizens. We agree with the Mayor's words below:

**“ IN AKRON, WE BELIEVE THAT BEAUTY IN NATURE IS A BASIC RIGHT OF ALL WHO LIVE, WORK, AND PLAY IN OUR CITY. A FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENT OF THAT VALUE IS THE HEALTH OF OUR URBAN FOREST. WE HAVE A SACRED RESPONSIBILITY TO TAKE CARE OF THE LAND AND ENSURE IT REMAINS HEALTHY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS**

DANIEL HORRIGAN, MAYOR, 2020 AKRON URBAN TREE CANOPY REPORT

**We believe it is Akron's sacred responsibility to save Theiss Woods for future generations to enjoy.**

# LINKS AND RESOURCES

Below are the links and resources from the entirety of the document. If you have questions about anything presented in this document, please reach out to [info@preservethevalley.com](mailto:info@preservethevalley.com)

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/2021/02/09/summit-and-valley-girl-akrons-newest-bald-eagles-nest-former-golf-course/4433918001/>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0169204696003416>

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/2021/02/03/akron-2020-tree-canopy-study-tracks-lost-trees-replanting-programs/4344987001/>

<https://www.summitengineer.net/news/Akron-Peninsula-Road-Closure-in-Peninsula.html>

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/2021/02/03/akron-2020-tree-canopy-study-tracks-lost-trees-replanting-programs/4344987001/>

<https://diverseeducation.com/article/166456/#:~:text=Though%20African%20Americans%20compose%2013,diverse%20fields%20of%20scientific%20study>

<https://www.rei.com/blog/cycle/best-mountain-bike-rides-ohio>

<https://www.outsideonline.com/2184491/how-mountain-biking-saving-small-town-usa>

<https://bikeworks.org/youth-programs/>

<https://neighborhoodbikeworks.org/youth-programs>

<https://www.browngirlsclimb.com/>, <https://www.diversifyoutdoors.com/>

<https://outdoorafro.com/>

<https://diverseeducation.com/article/166456/#:~:text=Though%20African%20Americans%20compose%2013,diverse%20fields%20of%20scientific%20study>.

<https://www.careeraddict.com/environmental-job>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/11/us/methane-condemns-11-suburban-akron-homes.htm>