



American Academy
for Park and Recreation Administration

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**Park and Conservation Leaders Receive the
Honorable Cornelius Amory Pugsley Medal**

Prestigious award recognizes lifetime contributions in parks and conservation

Three prominent park and conservation leaders from Virginia, Missouri, and Michigan received the Honorable Cornelius Amory Pugsley Medal for Parks and Conservation, September 17, 2025, at the annual awards dinner hosted by the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration in Orlando, Florida.

The Honorable Cornelius Amory Pugsley Medals are the most prestigious awards that recognize outstanding contributions to the promotion and development of public parks and conservation in the United States. The inaugural Pugsley Medals were awarded in 1928.

Paul A. Gilbert, Executive Director, of NOVA Parks (Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority), Fairfax Station, Virginia, has developed relationships with landowners for the past 20 years, collectively leading efforts to create 15 new parks and expand three existing parks. History has been saved through Gilbert's efforts, in that 10 properties became park land, that can now tell significant historical stories. Prior to NOVA Gilbert managed and grew a local land trust, the Northern Conservation Land Trust, which increased its funding fivefold under his leadership. Additionally, he helped lead a successful State of Virginia Park Bond.

Mark L. McHenry, Kansas City, Missouri, has spent a lifetime dedicated to the provision of parks, recreation and conservation of public lands. McHenry spent 44 years as an administrator in Kansas City Parks and Recreation the last 16 serving as director. Under McHenry's leadership Kansas City's renowned fountains and boulevards became listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. He developed a creative solution to secure long-term funding for the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department when two existing regressive property taxes were retired and were replaced with a 1/2 cent sales tax with no sunset provision. The ballot item passed by over 68% and garnered a net gain of approximately \$25 million. McHenry recently ended six years as a Missouri Department of Conservation Commissioner, overseeing the department and creating new park land and conservation land for Missourians.

Ronald A. Olson, Lansing, Michigan, spent the bulk of his career leading park systems in Maryland and Michigan. He retired after serving 20 years as chief of Parks and Recreation for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Olson helped reimagine Michigan's 140 state forest campgrounds and the state trail

system and added capacity to address a spike in visitation, which increased from 28 million visits to 36 million over a brief time. He helped secure \$270 million in Federal American Recovery Funds to modernize the state park and recreation system -- the single greatest investment in the system in its 106-year history. During his tenure the Michigan system grew from 97 to 104 state parks and it added unique facilities as the Outdoor Adventure Center in Detroit and new state parks in Detroit and Flint.

In presenting the 2025 Pugsley Medals to Gilbert, McHenry, and Olson, Elizabeth S. Kessler, Pugsley Committee Chair remarked, "We are proud to honor visionary leaders and steadfast advocates for parks, open spaces, and conservation. Their lifelong dedication and achievements have left a lasting impact on their states by expanding access to nature and recreation. The Academy is proud to join with the National Park Foundation and Davey Tree to recognize their remarkable leadership and contributions with this distinguished honor."

The 2025 recipients join a distinguished list of Pugsley Medal recipients, including Stephen Mather, the founder and first director of the National Park Service; landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.; two former Secretaries of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt and Stuart Udall; and US Senator and former State of Tennessee Governor, Lamar Alexander.

The Pugsley Medal is provided in association with the National Park Foundation, the official philanthropic partner of the National Park Service. The Foundation's mission is to enrich America's over 400 national parks and programs through private support. To learn more visit www.NationalParks.org.

The American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration gratefully acknowledge the supporting sponsorship of The Davey Tree Expert Company. For further information regarding The Davey Tree Expert Company visit www.davey.com.

To learn more about the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration's Pugsley Award, click [here](#).

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About the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration

The American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration is a group of 125 distinguished practitioners and educators who are leaders in the field of parks and recreation. Established in 1980 the Academy was formed to advance knowledge related to the administration of parks and recreation; to support and encourage scholarly efforts to enhance the practice of parks and recreation administration and to promote broader public understanding of the importance of parks and recreation to the public good. Additionally, the Academy sponsors a scholarly journal; organizes seminars; and recognizes excellence in park and recreation management in an agency accreditation program and the National Gold Medal Award Program. For more information, visit www.aapra.org.