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For Immediate Release

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Lifetime Achievement Award Presented to Wheaton Park District Leader

La Grange IL– On January 24, 2025, the Illinois Park & Recreation Association (IPRA) honored Mike Benard, Executive Director of the Wheaton Park District with the IPRA Robert Artz Lifetime Achievement Award, for his commitment and lifetime of service to parks, recreation, and conservation in Illinois. Mr. Bernard was recognized during the IPRA Awards Program at the IAPD/IPRA Soaring to New Heights Conference held at the Hyatt Regency Chicago.

The IPRA Robert Artz Lifetime Achievement Award was established to honor Robert Artz's legacy of service to the park and recreation profession. The recipient's efforts will have had a lasting impact and created awareness of the importance of parks and recreation among peers and in the community they serve.

Mike Benard is a visionary leader whose dedication and innovation have transformed the field of parks and recreation. During his distinguished career, he has driven transformative results for the Wheaton Park District, earning prestigious accolades such as the IAPD/IPRA Distinguished Agency Award, Association of Zoos and Aquariums accreditation, and Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Designation for Arrowhead Golf Club.

A strategic planner, Mike developed the district's 2010-2014 and 2016-2019 strategic plans and founded the Agency Leadership Academy to foster staff development. His leadership has also secured over \$16 million in philanthropic funding and \$9.6 million in grants, advancing community projects like Memorial Park's redevelopment and the adaptive reuse of Wheaton Central High School.

Beyond Wheaton, Mike has shaped the industry statewide through leadership roles with organizations such as the Western DuPage Special Recreation Association and advisory committees at SIU.

We are proud to honor Mike Benard with the Robert Artz Award, recognizing his outstanding contributions to parks and recreation.

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‘Congratulations to Mike for being recognized by his peers with this meaningful, prestigious award. The number of ways in which Mike has advanced the field, and the Wheaton community, is incredibly impressive. IPRA is proud to honor Mike for all he has humbly done – as evidenced not only by this award but his lengthy list of accolades,’ Suzi Wirtz, IOM, Executive Director of IPRA. “Thank you, Mike, for serving as a leader and example to others within your profession!’

A complete list of IPRA award winners is available on the IPRA website, ILipra.org.

Established in 1944, the Illinois Park & Recreation Association (IPRA) serves over 3,000 park, recreation, and conservation professionals throughout the state, and is a national leader in providing premier education, networking, and resources. For more information about IPRA, its board and mission, please visit the IPRA website: www.Ilipra.org.

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