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February 2013

This plan was prepared under the direction of the City of Merrill Parks and Recreation Department by the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE
The primary purpose of this outdoor recreation plan is to provide continued direction toward meeting the current and future recreation needs of the City of Merrill.

Adoption of this plan by the City of Merrill Council and subsequent acceptance by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) will continue the City’s eligibility for Land and Water Conservation Fund (LAWCON), and Stewardship Fund money.

Non-profit groups, foundations, and the general public may also use this document to coordinate their own private efforts for developing outdoor recreation facilities.

This plan is organized by:
1. Reviewing other plans and laws that affect outdoor recreation (Chapter 1);
2. Describing the City demographics (Chapter 2);
3. Inventorying what park facilities exist within the City (Chapter 3);
4. Asking the public about their needs for outdoor recreation (Chapters 4 & 5); &
5. Recommendations are made to satisfy identified needs (Chapter 6).

B. PROVISIONS FOR UPDATING PLAN
Plan amendments are common and should be considered part of the planning process. They frequently represent good implementation or plan usage and should be acceptable for consideration by local decision makers. Amendments must follow the same process as the original plan and generally prolong the effectiveness of the plan.

Establishing a plan amendment at least every five years will assure that the plan reflects changes in the recreational needs of the City, and will maintain the City’s eligibility for grant programs.
C. REFERENCE PLANS & LAWS

Merrill is “The City of Parks,” and has been involved with recreation planning since 1974 when a park plan was compiled and written by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. In 1977 the City of Merrill Outdoor Recreation Plan was prepared by Vandewalle and Associates. The North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (NCWRPC) has prepared the Merrill Outdoor Recreation Plan since 2002.

Each plan and law listed below affects outdoor recreation in the City of Merrill:

**Complete Streets Law**

Wisconsin’s Pedestrian and Bicycle Accommodations law addressing Complete Streets was codified in 2009. It was incorporated as State statute §84.01(35) and later into administrative rule as Transportation 75.

Complete Streets are roadways designed and operated to enable safe, convenient, and comfortable access and travel for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and public transport users of all ages and abilities are able to safely and comfortably move along and across a complete street.

All roads receiving state or federal funding through the Wisconsin Department of Transportation must also accommodate bicycles and pedestrians per this law. Local governments may pass their own Complete Streets ordinances to cover their own road networks. Specific guidelines related to traffic counts, and if the road is urban or rural, are used in these ordinances to determine whether a sidewalk, path, or lane is needed to accommodate bicycles and pedestrians.

**State Trails Network Plan**

This 2001 document clarifies the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) role and strategy in the provision of all types of trails. The plan identifies a series of potential trail corridors that would link existing trails, public lands, natural features, and communities. This statewide network of interconnected trails would be owned and maintained by municipalities, private entities, and partnerships of the two. Preserving transportation corridors, such as old rail lines, is specifically discussed as a very important strategy in the creation of recreational and alternative transportation corridors.

One Segment affects Merrill:

**Segment 18 – Tomahawk to Wisconsin Dells**

From the end of the Bearskin/Hiawatha Trail in Tomahawk, this corridor would go south to Merrill, and then into the West Central Region terminating in Wisconsin Dells. Part of State Highway 107 has wide shoulders to accommodate bicycles and was identified in the *Wisconsin Bicycle Transportation Plan 2020*. When the remaining section of highway is reconstructed, wide shoulders will be included. Going south, this corridor links to Wausau, where it could link up to Mountain Bay Trail from there by road corridors.
**Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2005-2010**

Completed in August 2006, and reauthorized to remain in effect through 2016, this plan attempts to classify, measure, and ultimately provide for the preferences and needs of a statewide recreating public. Many factors, from changing demographic and land use trends, to recreational supply, and conflict with other recreation uses, affect the quality, supply, and demand for outdoor recreation.

This plan is summarized in Attachment B, and is what the State will use to determine where to approve grants.

**Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2011-2016**

Every five years, the Wisconsin DNR publishes a SCORP as required by the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965. At its core, this SCORP is used to help allocate federal funds equitably among local communities, but the document also transcends many levels of outdoor recreation discussion and policy. At the national level, this SCORP recognizes the America’s Great Outdoors (AGO) initiative, which is based on the idea that the protection of the country’s natural heritage is a non-partisan objective shared by all Americans. The AGO encourages state and local communities to develop local conservation and recreation initiatives.

This document shows a clear vision of how preserving and improving recreation opportunities in Wisconsin fits within a broader national initiative of conservation and recreation.

A summary of this SCORP is in Attachment B.

**North Central Wisconsin Regional Bicycle Facilities Network Plan, 2004**

North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission created this document to guide the development of an interconnected bikeway system for the North Central Wisconsin Region at the county level. Potential trails are identified and an improvement description was created for each county that trails exist in to facilitate implementation.

The routes for Merrill are part of a countywide loop that passes through Merrill from the west on STH 107, then continues east through the city on STH 64, and leaves Merrill on the east by traveling north on CTH G.

**Lincoln County Comprehensive Plan, 2012-2032**

This county plan updates the previous plan’s demographics. Any recommendations that relate to outdoor recreation are inserted into the public participation part of Chapter 4.
**City of Merrill Comprehensive Plan, 2010-2030**

This plan was created according to Wisconsin planning law (s.66.1001 Wis. Stats.), and therefore allows Merrill to continue zoning their community to protect all land owners. The City contracted with NCWRPC to assist with creating this plan. All maps show a sample of the land surrounding Merrill (exterritorial zoning area). A summary of this plan’s issues relating to outdoor recreation were inserted into the public participation documentation in Chapter 4.

**Wisconsin Land Legacy Report 2006-2056**

This report is a comprehensive inventory of the special places that will be critical to meet future conservation and outdoor recreation needs for the next fifty years. Some of the questions asked to guide creation of this report were: Which lands and waters remain unprotected that will be critical for conserving our plants and animals and their habitats? What gaps exist now (and will likely emerge in the future) in providing abundant and satisfying outdoor recreation? How can we most effectively build upon the state’s existing investment in protected lands to fill conservation and recreation gaps? What special places will our children and grandchildren wish we had protected? The study focused on identifying what of our state or regionally significant green infrastructure remains to be protected. These Land Legacy Areas are shown on MAP 1.

The report recommends protection of these lands by using federal, state, and local funding opportunities; along with possibly creating new kinds of incentives for landowners, working to draft comprehensive plans, or offering different types of technical assistance.

Recreation prioritization of Land Legacy Areas is described in SCORP’s Chapter 3. Each Legacy Area near Merrill is summarized below with 5 stars representing the highest level for that category:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legacy Area</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Protection Initiated</th>
<th>Protection Remaining</th>
<th>Conservation Significance</th>
<th>Recreation Potential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PR Prairie River</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UW Upper Wisconsin River</strong></td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MW Middle Wisconsin River</strong></td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Insert MAP 1 – Recreation Facilities in Merrill
Insert MAP 2 – Merrill Memorial Wildlife Area
Chapter 2
BACKGROUND OF MERRILL

A. INTRODUCTION
This section provides a basic feel for what the City of Merrill looks like physically, demographically, and economically. Potential opportunities and limitations start with understanding an area.

The history of Merrill as a Euro-American community began in 1847 when a dam was constructed on the Wisconsin River where a mill was established. By 2010, Merrill’s Census recorded population was 9,661.

On April 10, 2011, the west side of Merrill was hit with an F3 tornado. Council Grounds State Park, the MARC, and the Smith Center are recreational facilities that were directly hit by the tornado and substantially damaged.

B. LAND USE
Merrill is located at the confluence of the Wisconsin and Prairie Rivers. The Wisconsin River dominates the surface water hydrology of the area with numerous streams flowing into it. Wetlands lie to the north of the city and a variety of terrains are found throughout the area, from steep slopes to flat plains.

The two rivers divide the city into three distinct areas, one is south of the Wisconsin River, while the other two areas are north of the Wisconsin River, and are east and west of the Prairie River.

The city is about 7.5 square miles running roughly three miles east to west and about one mile north to south. Commercial development is stretched along State Highway 64 from the U.S. Highway 51 interchange to the west side of the city. There are numerous publicly owned parcels scattered throughout the city for schools, parks, county offices, city hall, library, and other community facilities. Industrial uses are concentrated along the railroad tracks that parallel the Wisconsin River, and the industrial park by the airport on the west side of Merrill. Scattered industrial properties exist among houses throughout the city.

There are about 5,020 acres of land within the city. As of 2005, about 28.2% of land was residential; 19.4% was woodlands, which includes some parks; 12% was governmental, which includes schools; 5.1% outdoor recreation, which also includes some parks; 7.6% was listed as open lands, most of which is in an area on the east side of Merrill that may become industrial and housing.

C. DEMOGRAPHICS
From 2005 to 2010, Merrill and two of three surrounding towns all shrank in population, with the Town of Scott gaining people over that time, as shown in Table 1.
### Table 1: Area Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Merrill</td>
<td>10,148</td>
<td>9,661</td>
<td>-487</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town of Merrill</td>
<td>3,099</td>
<td>2,980</td>
<td>-119</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town of Pine River</td>
<td>1,965</td>
<td>1,869</td>
<td>-96</td>
<td>-4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town of Scott</td>
<td>1,372</td>
<td>1,432</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: WI DOA, 2010 U.S. Census, & NCWRPC*

In 2000, Merrill’s Census population was 10,146. By 2010, the Census reported that Merrill’s population decreased by 4.8% to 9,661 residents. The Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) has not released their projections that use the 2010 Census, so NCWRPC created 5-year projections that decreased the city’s population 2.4% every 5 years, as shown in Table 2.

### Table 2: Merrill Population Projections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10,146</td>
<td>9,661</td>
<td>9,429</td>
<td>9,202</td>
<td>8,982</td>
<td>8,766</td>
<td>8,556</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census, & NCWRPC*

The City of Merrill’s population shows a young and middle aged profile. Figure 1 is Merrill’s population pyramid that was created with 2010 U.S. Census data. Sixty percent of households in Merrill are families, of which 27.7 percent have children under 18 years old.

**FIGURE 1**  
2010 Age Cohorts for City of Merrill

![Population Pyramid](source: 2010 U.S. Census SF1)
Demographic Trends
Table 3 shows a comparison between Merrill’s last two U.S. Census counts. Fewer children under 5 years old, and fewer people over 65 years old live in Merrill. The amount of high school graduates has increased, but the amount of college graduates has declined as a percentage of the total population.

**Table 3: Merrill’s Quick Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000 Census</th>
<th>2010 Census</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>10,146</td>
<td>9,661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons under 5 years</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons under 18 years</td>
<td>2,309</td>
<td>2,418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons 65 years and over</td>
<td>1,999</td>
<td>1,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female persons</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White persons (not Hispanic)</td>
<td>97.8%</td>
<td>97.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black persons</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian persons</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian persons</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino persons</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduates or higher</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>86.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing units</td>
<td>4,397</td>
<td>4,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average household size</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income [ACS]</td>
<td>$33,098</td>
<td>$39,783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons below poverty level</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: U.S. Census, 2000, 2010, & American Community Survey (ACS) 2006-2010*

D. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
The following strengths and weaknesses relate to attracting and retaining business and industry to Merrill from their 2007 Comprehensive Plan.

**Strengths**

Economic Resources
- Reasonable Cost of Living; Excellent Health Care Services; Tourism Potential; Lower Wage Rates; Adequate Utilities; Wide range of Prices on Land and Buildings.

Infrastructure
- Available Business and Industrial Space; Capacity of Infrastructure for Growth; Necessary utilities, services, and telecommunications; Proximity to Highway 51.

Human Resources
- Available Labor; Quality Schools / Commitment to Education; Strong Work Ethic of Labor Force; High Level of Interest in Economic Development; Safe
Community; Good Business & Education Partnerships.

Natural Resources
- Abundant area Natural Resources; Four Season Climate; Excellent Recreation Opportunities (e.g. State Park, and MARC); Good Water and Air Quality.

Other
- Overall good Quality of Life; Proximity to Wausau.

Weaknesses

Economic Resources
- Lack of Financing (e.g. venture capital, or angel investors); Need for Better Coordination and Cooperation; Economic Assistance from State is Low (compared to other areas); High Property Taxes; Location to Major Markets; Lack of Promotion for the “North;” Lack of Broad-Based Economic Development; Marketing Programs for the Region; Lack of Community Preparedness; Decline of Manufacturing Sector; Slow Decision making by State and Local Governments.

Infrastructure
- Transportation Limitations Imposed by Interstate System Access; Adequate, but lagging in local telecommunications; City Regulations (e.g. zoning, wellhead & sewer service area).

Human resources
- Lack of Public Education Towards Economic Development; Difficulty retaining young workers; Lack of local training programs; Concerns of skill level of entry-level labor; Limited partnerships between business and education.

Other
- Proximity to Wausau
Chapter 3
EXISTING RECREATION FACILITIES

A. PARKS and CONSERVANCY CLASSIFICATIONS

The following descriptions of each park type are from SCORP 2005-2010. Linear Parks are trails that may have various lengths.

Mini Parks: Generally less than 5 acres, these parks are special areas that serve a concentrated or limited population or specific group such as tots or senior citizens. One prominent feature or recreation facility like a playground may be present as the purpose of this park. The service area for this park generally is a ½ mile radius, and a population of 2,000-3,000 people.

Neighborhood Parks: Centrally located spaces of 5 to 25 acres that serve as the recreational and social focus of the neighborhood are good neighborhood parks. Active and passive recreational activities in this park classification include field, court, and ball games; skating; crafts; and picnicking. Facilities may also include a playground, wading pool, ball field, multi-activity field, ball diamond, tennis courts, skatepark, and shelter. Trees, open fields, and undeveloped natural areas are also desirable components of neighborhood parks. The service area for this park generally is a 1 mile radius, and a population of 2,000-5,000 people.

Community Parks: Usually more than 25 acres in size, these parks serve entire communities, and are located adjacent to a collector street to provide community-wide vehicular access. The purposes of this park are to meet the recreational needs of several neighborhoods, as well as to preserve unique landscapes and open spaces. These parks allow for group activities not feasible at the neighborhood level. All of the facilities of a neighborhood park may exist, along with nature trails and scenic areas.

Special Use Areas: These areas are for single purpose recreational activities that often are designed as revenue generating enterprises such as for baseball, golf, nature centers, arboreta, formal gardens, gun ranges, festivals, ski areas, or areas that preserve and maintain cultural or archeological sites.

County Parks: County parks consist of 100 acres or more that are specifically set aside for active and passive recreation uses to accommodate large gatherings, special events, and individual users. These parks have scenic natural features that preserve the character of the region and provide a wide variety of compatible outdoor recreation activities; and may also provide areas for camping, historic preservation, protection of natural areas, and special use areas.

Conservancy Areas: Conservancy areas are managed for the flora & fauna resources that exist at a site. Activities like hiking, wildlife watching, hunting, and fishing may be allowed on these lands that may have labels like state natural areas, forests, or wildlife refuges. Each conservancy area has specific rules of use for public enjoyment.
B. PARK FACILITIES IN MERRILL

The Merrill area park and recreation system consists of approximately 822 total acres within the city and exterritorial boundary (1.5 mile buffer) around the city. This does not include snowmobile trails. The City of Merrill owns and maintains about 281 acres of parkland plus an additional 920 acres of wildlife area about 6 miles outside of Merrill, for a total of 1,201 acres. Public and private school playgrounds consist of 23.5 acres. Merrill High School has 12 acres. County owned outdoor recreation consist of the county fairgrounds. State owned outdoor recreation in the Merrill area consists of the 503 acres of Council Grounds State Park. All parks are shown on Maps 1 & 2.

Outdoor recreation in the City of Merrill includes trails (linear parks); 13 city parks of different classifications; the county fairgrounds; 8 public and private school facilities that serve local recreation needs; and one state park.

Linear Parks

Water Trails – A water trail is a network of access points, resting places, and attractions for users of water craft on lakes and rivers. This website can help with creating a trail: (http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes/publications/watertrails/). Parts of the Wisconsin River and all of the Prairie River are available to canoe on. Portages have been established on the Wisconsin River to get around the Alexander and Merrill dams. All navigable water is available to canoe on. There are 3 public water access points within the Merrill area, and shown on MAP 1.

Snowmobile Trails – Lincoln County has approximately 305 miles of designated snowmobile trails that are part of the State snowmobile aid program, along with approximately 100 miles of club trails. About 196 miles of these snowmobile trails are also winter ATV trails. These trails pass through Merrill on non-permanent easements.

Mini Parks

Each listing with a **bold title** represents a park available to the public. Listings with *italic titles* represent park like facilities at schools that may be available after school hours. See "Mini Parks" definition on page 10.

Polk Street Tennis Court & Skate Park: This one acre park is located along the Prairie River just east of Stange Kitchenette Park. The park contains a lighted tennis court and lighted skate park. This park has seen a heavy increase in usage since the completion of the skate park. Skaters of all ages come to the park at many hours of the day. Some recommendations would include better crosswalks to/from the park, permanent vandal proof tables and garbage receptacles. The skate park has impacted usage of the tennis court that shares it’s space, but I would not recommend at this time to expand the skate park or eliminate the tennis court.

The following **public schools** have outdoor recreation facilities that are available to the public outside of school hours:
Prairie River Middle School – A 0.5-acre swimming pool exists at this public school, located in the southwest part of Merrill.

Jefferson Elementary School – A 5-acre open space with playground exists at this public school, which is located in the southwest part of Merrill.

Washington Elementary School – A 3-acre open space with playground exists at this public school, which is located on the city's east side.

Kate Goodrich Elementary School – A 5-acre open space with playground exists at this public school, which is located on the city's north side.

The following private schools have outdoor recreation facilities that may be available to the public outside of school hours:

St. John’s Lutheran Elementary School (K-8) – A 0.5-acre play area exists at this private school, which is located in the central city.

St. Francis Xavier Catholic Elementary School (K-8) – A 4-acre playground exists at this private school, which is located in the northeast area of Merrill.

Trinity Lutheran Elementary School (K-8) – A 5-acre open space with playground exists at this private school, which is located on the city's west side.

NTC Christian Academy (K-12) – A 0.5-acre play area exists at this private school, which is located about 2 miles north of downtown at the intersection of Business Hwy 51 and Hillside Drive.

**Neighborhood Parks**

See “Neighborhood Parks” definition on page 10.

**Normal Park:** This two acre park is located north of downtown. It contains an outdoor ice skating rink with warming shelter, picnic areas, and a youth baseball/softball field. In 2011 the Bauman Family Memorial Gazebo and walkway were added. In 2010 this park was transferred from county to city ownership.

**Ott’s Park:** This nine acre park is located on the west side of the City along the Wisconsin River. This park has a children’s playground, a softball field, boat landing, picnic areas, volleyball courts, tennis courts, horseshoe pits, picnic shelter with electric and water service. This park is used mainly by local softball associations and organizations for league play, along with shelter reservations, the park is also used consistently for its boat landing and water frontage for fishing, and swimming. The ball field is in need of some improvements, including new concession stand and announcers booth. In 2012 new ADA accessible restrooms and new concession stand were constructed.

**Riverside Park:** This 22 acre park is located in the southeast portion of the City along the Wisconsin River. This park features a boat landing and boarding dock
(redone in 2011-2012), picnic areas, sand volleyball court, horseshoes, a playground (ADA accessible in 2011-2012), restroom facilities (new ADA in 2011-2012), a picnic shelter with water and electric service, and a 9-hole Disc Golf Course. The park is very heavily utilized by “drop in” visitors for disc golfing, using the boat landing, walking/hiking/wildlife observation, fishing, professional photographs, weddings, and family functions at the shelter. This park is one of the most scenic in our system and does need some improvements. The trail system that leads into and out of the park behind the T.B. Scott Mansion is very historic and in great need of repair.

**Streeter Square Park:** Streeter Square is a two acre park located to the immediate north of downtown. It contains a playground, basketball court, and youth baseball field. This park is used mainly as a quiet spot to eat lunch, play on the playground, and shoot hoops. The ball field has been used more in the past few years by the young age groups for a coach pitch league. The only recommendations that I would have would be to make some improvements on the baseball field but they only need to be minimal.

**Lion’s Park, Stange Park, and Stange Kitchenette Park** all have neighborhood park amenities, but also have community park amenities. Each park is described under community parks, because of a feature in each park that is more of a community attraction. Lion’s Park’s community features are its 5 little league baseball fields. Stange Park’s community features are its 2 pools, which closed permanently after the 2012 season. Stange Kitchenette Park’s community feature is the kitchenette.

**Community Parks**

Each listing with a **bold title** represents a park available to the public. Listings with *italic titles* represent park like facilities at schools that may be available after school hours. See "Community Parks" definition on page 10.

**Lion’s Park:** Lion’s Park is a 13 acre park located in the center of town along the Prairie River. The park consists of 5 little league baseball fields that are used very heavily from the first weeks in April through August. The park is used very heavily by the Prairie River Middle School for Physical Education Classes as well as their football team for practices. In the winter months, the park has an outdoor ice rink and the existing building is used as a warming shelter and restrooms. This park is very heavily utilized year round and there is no room for expansion. This park is in need of some upgrades to the ball field playing conditions as well as the amenities. The restroom area is not universally accessible and the fields are in need of improvements.

**Stange Park:** Stange Park is an 11.6 acre park in the central portion of town along the Prairie River. The park includes an outdoor swimming pool and wading pool (both permanently closed after 2012 season), tennis courts, a basketball court, playground equipment, restrooms, picnic shelter with electric and water service, walking bridges over the lagoons. This park is also used very heavily by the general public for swimming, basketball, tennis, shelter reservations, fishing, walking, and general daytime visits. The park is very popular for “stop in” traffic at lunch or playing on the equipment for the toddlers.
**Stange Kitchenette Park:** This six acre park is located just south of Stange Park along the Prairie River. It contains a kitchen shelter with electricity and water service, universally accessible restroom facilities, a playground (new in 2011), horseshoe pits, and a sand volleyball court. Kitchenette Park is our most heavily reserved park within our system. The park reserved at least 3-4 times per week for the entire season and could use some improvements.

**Merrill Area Recreation Complex (MARC):** This complex covers 96 acres and is located on the west side of the City, north of the Wisconsin River. The MARC as it is referred to, includes four youth softball/baseball fields, an announcer’s booth/score booth, two multi-purpose baseball/softball fields, and one baseball field. Concessions and restrooms exist by the varsity soccer fields as of 2008. All of the ball fields have covered dugouts. The park also includes three soccer fields, two sand volleyball courts, 2.5 miles of multi-purpose walking/hiking/biking trails that connect to Council Grounds State Park, outdoor concession stand/restroom, outdoor hockey rink, and the Smith Multi-Purpose Center which houses an indoor ice rink, a multi-purpose community room, a concession stand, locker rooms, weight room. The MARC has evolved over the years to host many different indoor and outdoor events and activities. Some improvements that would help in the future would be, expansion of the walking trails, more tree plantings, lights to at least one youth and one adult ball fields, restroom facilities near the adult baseball fields, in ground irrigation to more of the athletic fields, improved children’s play area, basketball courts, and a picnic shelter with water and electrical service for reservation. Connecting the MARC trails with the adjacent Council Grounds State Park is a simple connection to make. Also connecting these trails with the yet to be developed river trail to downtown would open up additional recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

**Merrill High School** has 12 acres of outdoor recreational facilities located in the northeast area of the City. There are 3 soccer fields, one softball field, one baseball field, and a varsity football field and track.

**Special Use Areas**
See "Special Use Area" definition on page 10.

**Cenotaph Park:** This is a 0.3 acre memorial park dedicated to veterans.

**Athletic Park:** This five acre athletic facility contains a baseball field, announcers booth, concession stand, newly constructed universally accessible restroom facilities, lights, in ground irrigation, new dugouts, and a batting cage. This park has seen a considerable amount of improvements within the past 3 years. The park is used solely for baseball games, older youth leagues, through adult league games. The park has been improved to the point where it will begin to host large scale tournaments.

**Jack Pines County Park:** This 11 acre county owned park is located in the northeast portion of the City across from the Fairgrounds. Development of the County Annex building in 2008 used 9 acres of the original 20 acres of land. The City of Merrill
operates an outdoor ice skating rink and warming shelter on the very southeast corner of the property. Most of this site is undeveloped woodlands.

**Lincoln County Fairgrounds:** The fairgrounds are a 26 acre facility located in Merrill. Existing facilities include three restrooms (two of them are ADA compliant); a livestock barn with 5 wings for cattle, horses, pigs, and sheep; a poultry and rabbit exhibition building; 3 exhibition structures for displays; a historical school house; and an office building. This facility is maintained by Lincoln County Maintenance Department.

**State Park**

**Council Grounds State Park** consists of 503 acres and is located on the west side of Merrill. Facilities include a 55 site campground with restrooms, showers, swimming beach, picnic areas, shelter house, boat access, shelter buildings, and a physical fitness trail. **Krueger Pines State Natural Area** (21 acres) is located in the southeast corner of Council Grounds State Park.

**Conservancy Areas**

**Gebert Park:** This 15 acre conservation protection area and wildlife habitat includes nature trails and is located south of the Wisconsin River. This park is very heavily under-utilized and the trail system could use some extensive work. Brush should be cleared back from the trail and it should be resurfaced. This would encourage more walkers/runners/hikers/observers.

**Memorial Forest Wildlife Area (Refer to MAP 2):** This 920 acre park is located north of the City and includes walking trails, wildlife habitat, and the 80+ acre Don Manthei Wetland Recreation Area. This property is priceless and is used steadily by a select few individuals. Some recommendations for the property should include extensive improvements to the existing trail system, with the addition of more trails. These should be mapped out and provided at a centralized kiosk system to allow for a more interactive experience. The forest should also be more actively managed for forest and wildlife habitat. This would be a perfect site for future cross country fun runs, youth hunting experiences, outdoor education classes, cross country ski courses, and shoe-shoe trails. With its proximity to the Prairie Dells Park future considerations should include connection to this park for a contiguous trail system throughout.

**Prairie Trails:** Prairie Trails is a newly developed, 99 acre silent recreation park located on the north side of the City along the Prairie River. The park features 2.5 miles of multi-purpose hiking/walking/biking trails, picnic areas, picnic shelter, bridge, 2 – canoe landings, overlook, fishing pier, boardwalk, and interpretive signage. The park has been primarily used for the trail system by walkers and their dogs as well as the Merrill High School for science classes. Future recommendations should include restroom facilities near the shelter and parking lot area to promote longer usage of the park. Areas along the river should be cleared out to allow easier access to fishing. The park is used heavily enough to warrant more extensive trail developments throughout.
Chapter 4
OUTDOOR RECREATION NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A. INTRODUCTION
Recreational needs within the city were identified by collecting public input, reviewing past plans, and creating a park Level Of Service assessment.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROJECTS COMPLETED
First we will start with a list of projects from the previous outdoor recreation plan (2008-2013), and note if they were completed or not.

Note: On April 10, 2011, an EF-3 magnitude tornado hit the western part of Merrill. Council Grounds State Park and the MARC were substantially damaged. Reconstruction of existing facilities in the MARC took priority over other facility improvements.

2008 Riverside Restrooms demolition – rebuild to ADA Standards; Complete
Basketball Courts at MARC; Incomplete
Resurface tennis courts at Ott’s Park; Complete
Refurbish Stange Park “2-arch” Bridge; Complete
Restroom facility by adult baseball fields at MARC; Incomplete
Sandblast and repaint Riverside Shelter. Incomplete

2009 Ott’s Park Restrooms demolition – rebuild to ADA Standards; will be complete
Construct restroom facilities at Prairie Trails; Incomplete
Begin work on “River Walk” Trail System to follow the Prairie River; Incomplete
Lights on 1 adult field and 1 youth field at the MARC; Incomplete
Designated bike route through town; Incomplete
Riverside Park bridge refurbishment. Incomplete

2010 Continue work on “River Walk” Trail System to follow Prairie River; Incomplete
Locate and develop site for Dog Park; will be working on in 2013
Refurbish Riverside trail system; Incomplete
Improvements to Lion’s Park Restroom facility – ADA Compliance; Incomplete
but will be working on in 2013
New Playground equipment at Kitchenette. Complete

2011 Construct new swimming pool/aquatic center – in location to be determined Incomplete
Continue work on “River Walk” Trail System to follow Prairie River; Incomplete
Refurbish Gebert Park Trail System; Incomplete
Re-seal/stain Kitchenette Shelter building. Incomplete

2012 Improvements/addition to Riverside Park Disc Golf Course (Eric Schalow Disk Golf Course); Incomplete
Remove Shingles – steel roof on Kitchenette Shelter Building. Incomplete will work on in 2013

2013 Re-stain/seal Kitchenette Restroom building; Incomplete
Construct new park maintenance building at location to be determined. Incomplete
Upgrade playgrounds citywide for ADA accessibility. Incomplete
Investigate creating a new park to relieve use congestion of little league fields at Lion’s Park. **Incomplete**

C. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

**Informal Public Input**

In the regular course of business, Merrill’s Park and Recreation Department staff, members have received public input about the parks. That input and their professional experience with also shape what changes are implemented.

**Visioning Sessions**

Two visioning sessions were held in the Merrill City Hall to engage the public. More detailed summaries of both sessions are in ATTACHMENT D.

**Session #1 – September 5, 2012**

Twenty people, including local residents, City of Merrill Parks & Recreation members, the director of the city’s Parks & Recreation Department, and a planner from North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning discussed the future of the city’s parks and recreation facilities. The conversation was facilitated by Art Lersch, Community Resource Development Educator, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Lincoln County.

Those items that were discussed the most and by a relatively broad cross section of attendees are in **bold** directly below.

- **Build new or upgrade existing bathroom facilities throughout the park system.**
- Improve athletic fields and their amenities such as scoreboards, fencing, etc.
- **Make parks more American Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant.**
- Establish a city Public Works Department responsible for handling all park maintenance (e.g. City of Plover).
- **Connect parks with pedestrian and bike trails. Connect these trails to other regional trails (e.g. Bearskin, Hiawatha, Mountain Bay, etc.)**
- **Develop and implement a park marketing plan.**
- Volunteer groups will have adopted sections of parks to maintain/improve, and market. (Volunteers who have ownership, who take pride in the section they are maintaining).
- Create a broader definition of what a park is; includes more varied uses; location in other more non-traditional places such as industrial parks, roughage areas, expanded current playground areas, along rivers, etc.
- All parks should be centers of outdoor educational workshops/events. Facilities should be developed to make this a reality.
- **Improve communication between the city and current/potential volunteer and user groups.** (Note: Many in the audience agree that positive, visionary improvements must begin with this.)
- Parks and Recreation Department will have to be changed; will need more resources, to achieve any of the suggestions.
Session #2 – October 9, 2012
Thirteen people, including local residents, City of Merrill Parks & Recreation members, the director of the city’s Parks & Recreation Department, and a planner from North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning attended the second of two visioning sessions. The conversation was facilitated by Art Lersch, Community Resource Development Educator, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Lincoln County.

Participants prioritized the list of visionary concepts discussed during the first session. They identified the following priorities for the entire park system. The items are in no particular order.

- **Connectivity** (link pedestrian and bike trails.) Trails should become linear parks that will attract people of all ages throughout the year.

- **Build bathroom facilities** that can be used throughout the year. These facilities should be placed near trails/linear parks. Other new facilities should be built at existing parks.

- **Continue to upgrade athletic facilities.** This should always be done with keeping in mind the potential economic impact additional tournaments could have on the city.

- **Improve communication between parks user groups and the city.** Much of the work to develop connections between trails, build bathrooms, etc. cannot take place unless communication amongst stakeholders is improved. Without better communication, the collaborations necessary to make improvements to the entire system will not happen.

- **Increase park and recreation department resources.** Besides taking the lead on creating improvements in the system, additional resources are needed to help the department provide ongoing maintenance to parks that have undergone those improvements.

The group also emphasized that an effective **marketing plan** needs to be developed to attract people to the parks. They also indicated that the **Parks and Recreation Department focus on growing its existing endowment fund.** The department director reminded meeting participants that the fund can and should be used to help finance parks improvements but cannot be utilized for staff salaries/benefits.

The group recognized that these initial discussions form merely a foundation upon which further conversations will take place with the aim of developing a comprehensive parks and recreation plan.
**Public Hearing Results**

January 2, 2013
The first of two public hearings was held on January 2, 2013. Over 45 people, including local residents, City of Merrill Parks & Recreation Commission members, the director of the City’s Parks & Recreation Department, a planner from NCWRPC, the Mayor, the City Administrator, and several City Council Members were present, and a few people provided comments.

The general theme from those public comments was definitely to implement the plan, but to also carefully consider long term and short term costs to the tax payers. Other themes related to specific projects that should become high priorities:

1. Make Merrill bicycle friendly;
2. Implement the River Bend Trail;
3. Continue working on projects from the last 5-year plan;
4. Cooperate with County Forestry to develop 1) trails, and 2) a timber management plan in Merrill Memorial Forest;
5. Assess and upgrade all facilities at the MARC; and
6. Please provide a second public hearing on this plan.

February 6, 2013
Since City leadership was not confident enough in the promotion of the first public hearing, then the Parks Commission established this second public hearing.

As you can see in the picture to the right, over 30 people, including City of Merrill Parks & Recreation Commission members, the director of the City’s Parks & Recreation Department, a planner from NCWRPC, the City Administrator, and many local residents were present, and a few people provided comments.

The general theme from those public comments was definitely to implement the plan. Other themes related to specific projects that should become high priorities:

1. **Fully support creation of the River Bend Trail (4 people);**
2. **City of Merrill survey results (from City Administrator):**
   a. people want trails and there is a lack of access to the Wisconsin River and the Prairie River; and
   b. best parts of Merrill are its parks and the Wisconsin & Prairie Rivers.
3. Make Merrill bicycle friendly;
4. Other comments included: a. working with Lincoln County Fairgrounds; b. do more research on creating a dog park; and c. allow gazebo in Normal Park to be reserved.
City of Merrill Comprehensive Plan Issues
The City of Merrill created a comprehensive plan in 2006. Below are some of the transportation issues that residents identified. Only issues that relate to outdoor recreation were listed.

- Abandoned rail corridors and spurs are not available to adjacent landowners to own. Abandoned rail bridges over the Wisconsin River.
- Snowmobile trails need better access to local businesses. A comprehensive review of the snowmobile network is needed, because it keeps changing every other year, and some corridors may need permanent protection.
- There are some discussions of a riverwalk system in the downtown.
- A recreation trail could connect Prairie River Park to Stange Park.
- Additional issues relate to aging infrastructure and the cost to improve, high-speed areas, congestion areas, overall flow of traffic or network, funding transit system, lack of intra-city bus service, and the need for an integrated pedestrian/bike plan.

Lincoln County Comprehensive Plan Issues
Lincoln County created a comprehensive plan in 1999. A survey was administered and part G (Parks, Recreation, and Natural Resources) relates to outdoor recreation. When asked which of nine different types of parks and recreational facilities were needed (more than one could be selected), the most common responses were "multi-use trails for bicyclists, pedestrians, skiers, and snowmobilers..." (43%) and "natural areas such as nature trails, wildlife viewing areas, [and] interpretive centers..." (40%). These were followed by waterfront parks (31%) and campgrounds (23%). Just under 31% of respondents believed that no additional parks or recreational facilities were needed. Responses from town and city residents were not significantly different.

Lincoln County Comprehensive Plan Goals & Policies
Transportation Element

Goal #2: Trails of various types (e.g. ATV, snowmobile, walking, biking, horse, etc.) will be joined together and linked with other transportation modes such as roads both inside and outside the county to support greater regional economic activity.

Goal #3: County departments will coordinate the development of a plan that effectively promotes Lincoln County trail systems.

Policy:
Install bike and pedestrian lanes wherever feasible to encourage a more sustainable approach to community and economic development. These amenities will also be developed in such a way as to promote quality of life and healthy lifestyle practices. Work with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to create economical, safe, and efficient designs of bike and pedestrian lanes that also improve the flow of traffic.

Enhance signage to bring people into the cities off of Route 39/51. The route's corridors near both Tomahawk and Merrill are well traveled. Attracting people off of the route to visit both cities is consistent with the City of Merrill 51 Corridor Feasibility Study and Tomahawk Main Street initiatives.
D. NEEDS DRIVEN PARK PLANNING

Since the 1960’s, an accepted practice has been to adopt a uniform national land standard, such as 10 acres per 1000 population, for park planning. A standard amount of land for parks and recreation nationwide is no longer recognized as universal for a park. A standard land measure is still used to determine how much land is needed for a specific use like a baseball diamond. Facility standards are used for this purpose. The number of baseball diamonds and other facilities are not the same among similar sized communities nationally; therefore a Level of Service needs to be created locally.

Besides creating a Level of Service for each park classification, other measures such as geographic distribution and universal accessibility, are also used to determine the adequacy of a community’s parks.

Universal accessibility is making facilities (e.g.: tables, drinking fountains, and restrooms) accessible to people with limited mobility. Americans with Disabilities (ADA) standards are followed when purchasing or modifying facilities for universal accessibility. Each park description starting on page 11 lists specific park facilities. If changes to park facilities are necessary to make them ADA compliant, then they will be listed as recommended improvements in Chapter 6 under "Capital Improvements."

1. Level of Service

A Level Of Service (LOS) approach is used to identifying if enough park land exists for a community’s needs. This revised approach is defined by the community’s needs rather than an arbitrary acreage-per-1000-people standard. The LOS is generated locally for each park classification (i.e. mini, neighborhood, or community). Public input is collected, and the needs for a particular park, or whole park classification, are determined. If the public is content with the existing parks within a park classification, then the LOS is applied to the whole population. If the public determines that individual parks need more facilities in them, then a particular park needing additional land may become reclassified into the next larger classification. When the community grows in population the LOS is used to calculate how many additional parks are needed.

Park Acreage
The size of a park is determined by three criteria:
1. **Physical geography.** Does the site have steep hills, woodlands, or wetlands? Such natural features are useful for exploration, conservation, aesthetic buffers, and unprogrammed lands.
2. **Park facilities.** What activities are allowed or will be allowed? How much land is needed for each use? This is determined by applying the park Level of Service (LOS)
to lands where the village is growing. If a community is not growing in population, then the LOS does not change, but different uses may become desired over time, so facilities will need replacement.

3. **Unprogrammed buffers.** How much land within the park is needed to separate different uses or future expansion? Designating future parks on the *Official Map* [developed under Sec 62.23(6)(b) Wis. Stats.] and on the *Future Land Use Map* in the *Merrill Comprehensive Plan* will guide future parkland purchases.

Park acreage in TABLE 4 shows how Merrill’s park system compares with state standards for the size of each park as grouped by classification. The average park sizes for Merrill follow in the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) recommendations for each classification.

Some parks in each classification are smaller than SCORP recommendations. Taken together; Lion’s, Stange, Stange Kitchenette, and Polk St Tennis & Skate parks form one 36.6 acre community park in the heart of Merrill.

### Table 4  Park Sizes, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>SCORP Recommendation</th>
<th>Merrill average park size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mini</td>
<td>0.5 – 5* acres</td>
<td>2.7 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>5 – 25 acres</td>
<td>8.8 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>25+ acres</td>
<td>31.7 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Use</td>
<td>Various based upon facility</td>
<td>Various based upon facility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SCORP states that a mini park is 0.5-1.5 acres, but a gap from 1.5-5 acres exists, so that gap was added to the mini park size.*

Parks are listed by classification starting on page 10 of this plan. No schools were used to create the Level Of Service. Merrill’s 2005 WDOA estimated population was 10,148, and decreased to 9,661 in 2010 per Census 2010. Jack Pine Park was partially developed in 2008 for the County Office Annex building, therefore 9 acres was removed from the Special Use classification acreage. There are fewer people living in Merrill from 2005 to 2010, therefore the Level Of Service appears higher in the *neighborhood* and *community* classifications.

\[
\text{LOS by classification} = \frac{\text{Park acres per classification}}{(\text{City Population} \div 1,000 \text{ population served})}
\]

### Table 5  Level Of Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park Classification</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Acres</td>
<td>Acres per 1,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>126.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Use</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>213.9</td>
<td><strong>21.2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: NCWRPC*
Merrill had a citywide 19.9 Level Of Service in 2005, is almost identical to the 2010 LOS of 20. Even though the City’s population declined, it also lost a small amount of county owned parkland that was developed into the County Annex, therefore the LOS virtually remained the same.

The LOS calculated in TABLE 5 is only adequate if public comment proves that more park land is not needed. Public comment may state that different uses are desired, but that may not affect LOS if the land area for those new uses replaces the old uses, or if unused land within existing parks is used. Chapter 6 will show what projects are planned to improve the parks.

2. Park Service Areas

Parks must be close to where residents live for people to consider a park useful. Map 3 illustrates how well the City of Merrill’s parks serve the various areas of the city. The State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) provides the following guidelines for park placement:

- Mini park service area: ½-mile radius, or a population of 2,000-3,000;
- Neighborhood park service area: 1 mile radius, or a population of 2,000-5,000;
- Community park service area: 2-5 mile radius, in a city or outside of city limits (shown with a neighborhood service area on Map 3, but they also serve the whole community);
- Special Use park service area is a whole community, and is determined by the type of recreation program, special event, or general activities desired at the park (not on Map 3, because none exist in the community);
- School parks are not classified in this plan.

Map 3 shows the service areas for all neighborhood and community parks. All community classified parks are also neighborhood parks. Map 3 shows a 1-mile radius service area for each neighborhood or community park. Special use parks, community parks, and conservancies serve all of Merrill; therefore no specific service areas are shown for these parks on Map 3.

Results

Several residential areas are not within ½ mile walking distance of a park. See Map 3.

Areas not served by Mini Parks (by themselves or within Neighborhood parks):
- East of Sales Street;
- South of the Wisconsin River by CTH K;
- South of Mathews Street on the west side of Merrill.
Insert Map 3 – Park Service Areas
Chapter 5
OUTDOOR RECREATION VISION, GOALS, & OBJECTIVES

The development of an efficient outdoor recreation plan depends upon establishing specific recreation and open-space goals and objectives from public participation. These goals and objectives will provide general direction to the Forestry, Recreation, and Parks Department for outdoor recreation purposes over the next 5 years.

People who attended two visioning sessions, described on page 17 & 18, came up with the following vision and goals. The Parks Committee created goal 6.

Vision:
“Merrill, City of Parks, is committed to celebrating its heritage through diversified outdoor opportunities along the Wisconsin and Prairie Rivers which enhances quality of life for all generations.”

Goals are not listed in priority order:

1. Trail Connectivity
Link neighborhoods throughout the city with multi use trails. Make sure there are opportunities for unorganized recreation along the trails themselves, so the trails become linear parks that will attract people of all ages throughout the year.

2. Build bathroom facilities that can be used throughout the year. These facilities should be placed near trails/linear parks. Other new facilities should be built at existing parks.

3. Continue to upgrade athletic facilities. This should always be done with keeping in mind the potential economic impact additional tournaments could have on the city.

4. Improve communication between park user groups and the city. Much of the work to develop connections between trails, build bathrooms, etc. cannot take place unless communication among stakeholders is improved. Without better communication, the collaborations necessary to make improvements to the entire system will not happen.

5. Increase park and recreation department resources. Besides taking the lead on creating improvements in the system, additional resources are needed to help the department provide ongoing maintenance to parks that have undergone those improvements.

All new facilities already must be ADA compliant (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 [ADA]), but existing facilities have had a long grace period to come into compliance. Short term and permanent fixes will be part of each park’s capital improvements list in this plan.

7. Create new outdoor pool. The outdoor pool is an aging facility (about 40 years old) in great need of repair, as well as needing to comply with the new ADA pool regulations of 2010.
Chapter 6
RECOMMENDATIONS & CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Recommendations and Capital Improvements are strategies for satisfying issues identified. Although it is unlikely that all recommendations presented in this plan will be undertaken in the next five years, they should be recognized as causes for action if the opportunity or need arises.

A. RECOMMENDATIONS

River Bend Trail
Merrill’s outdoor recreation vision statement recognizes the livability that the Wisconsin River adds to the city. The River District Development Foundation of Merrill is pursuing plans for a trail from downtown to Council Grounds State Park along the Wisconsin River – River Bend Trail.
- Complete parts of the trail as the opportunities arise, and attempt to finish segments when they are mostly complete (e.g. a segment is defined as the corridor between two roads). See the map in Attachment F.

Connect Parks with Bike and Pedestrian Trails
Merrill has parks interspersed along the Wisconsin River and Prairie River within densely developed housing. Connections between parks will focus on using the existing street network.
- Analyze how to make sure the roads and sidewalks are friendly to wheelchairs and bicyclists, and make sure connections exist from each park to each neighborhood.

Develop Volunteerism Mechanism
Merrill residents would like to help build the improvements they want, because they have time, and understand that most people don’t want their taxes going up. A combination of grants, city taxes, club fundraisers, and club & public volunteer efforts could be used to improve some types of park facilities (see Fig. 2).
Some possible projects include:
- Painting murals on buildings.
- Upgrade athletic facilities.

Grow the Park Endowment Fund
The Merrill Park Endowment Fund is a joint effort between the Merrill Parks & Recreation Department and the Merrill Area Community Foundation. The Endowment Fund will allow the Department to invest in park improvements, recreation programs, playgrounds, and special events that have not been possible due to budget shortfalls.
- Actively promote the fund’s existence among the general public and specialty groups of all age groups.
- Possibly create a memorial program where people can provide a specific donation and receive a brick paver engraved with their name and placed next to an existing tree, bench, or other object, and with new objects costing more.
**Concessions in Park**

A possible way to raise money for park maintenance and increase isolated park area usage could be coordinating a local restaurant to operate a unique concession stand.

**Keys to possible success:**

- Provide a unique experience. Selling concessions in a park is just a convenience. If it is to make revenue to support the park, then it must be unique. High end foods that are not commonly available within Merrill would be part of the unique experience. Another part of a unique experience would be a convenient location or a destination use that residents would consider a hidden gem. Maybe this spot would become a hangout for musicians to jam at, which would provide free entertainment to patrons who would linger and buy concessions.

- Request a local food and beverage establishment to operate such a facility. Additional park staff would be needed if a restaurant does not choose to participate. Part of the contract would state that the City would receive 20% of beverage sales and 10% of food sales.

**ADA Improvements**

Cooperate with Streets Department to reline parking lots to add accessible marked parking spots in each park, and also to fix any paths in disrepair. Each park has a variety of ADA improvements listed in the Capital Improvements section on page 32.

**Develop Trails in Memorial Wildlife Area**

Merrill Memorial Wildlife Area, described on page 15 & Map 2, is a vast area that was never developed since its donation to the City. No management of the land exists now. Actively managing the forest for wildlife and developing trails on the property would open up this resource for more people to use. Increased usage of this property from trail development would bring a need for restrooms, map kiosks, and trailhead parking. With its proximity to the Prairie Dells Park and Lincoln County Forest, future considerations should include connecting this wildlife area with the county lands for developing a contiguous trail system throughout.

The Lincoln County Forestry, Land, and Parks Department is considering upgrading the restroom at Haymeadow County Park. Haymeadow County Park is a former DOT wayside with a small picnic area and restrooms. This park may see increased usage due to planned development at Prairie Dells Scenic Viewing Area.

- Cooperate with County Forestry to determine how any improvements within the Merrill Memorial Wildlife Area will compliment Haymeadow County Park and Prairie Dells Scenic Area.

- Consider creating a property management plan to determine which areas would be developed for what uses.

**Snowmobile Trail**

The Lincoln County Outdoor Recreation Plan lists a need to review snowmobile trails in Merrill to determine if permanent easements are needed to maintain access to destinations within Merrill like gas stations, hotels, and restaurants.
• Review snowmobile routes connecting Merrill with surrounding areas to determine if multiple use trail right-of-ways (easement) that snowmobiles could use are needed.

**Market the Park Amenities**
A variety of residents commented on advertising what is currently available and especially after the following amenities are added:

• Refurbished ball fields;
  o Advertising could occur in conjunction with the Chamber.
• New RV amenities possibly at Riverside Park;
  o An ad could be taken out wherever RV clientele would see it;
  o Possibly contacting a reporter could get this new facility mentioned locally in Merrill, and regionally in neighboring counties;
• A tot lot within an existing park
  o A note in local mass media could promote this new use in a park.

One mass media marketing possibility for the whole city is to use existing newsletter money once a year to create a full glossy “insiders guide.” Additional money for such a project would come from selling advertising space in the guide.

**Creative Park Programming**
Anyone would be able to host events in the parks for the benefit of the community. Possibly create a formal approval process through the Parks Department to allow professionals and interested individuals to share their craft in 90-minute time blocks in a park. The Parks Department would also coordinate a common print or other mass media theme to advertise each 90-minute event, and the instructor’s sponsor (acquired by the instructor) would pay for advertising the event.

For example, a local for-profit instructor may wish to teach a Tai Chi session in a park. No cost would be charged by the Parks Department for use of the park and no charge would be levied to those who showed up, but an advertising fee would be charged for the instructor’s sponsor to pay. Instructors would also have the option of renting a space for their class to show up and use too. The 90-minute blocks of time would be enough to whet someone’s appetite for the activity, without the hassle of registering in advance.

**Create Broader Park Definition**
Residents in the visioning sessions recognized that different areas may provide unique outdoor recreational opportunities. These spaces may keep young people interested in their city’s history, and provide different experiences than traditional green spaces.

**Examples in Merrill:**
• Historical properties along the Wisconsin River, south of the railroad tracks and east of Center Avenue may be developed into for-profit businesses that may generate many bicycle and walking trips to this scenic area. The *Eastside Waterfront Initiative, Riverfront revitalization Plan, 2010*, documents a variety of ways to develop this area of Merrill. For example, the water tower could become a landmark where people meet for a bike ride, a walk, or some “creative park programing” listed earlier. A building nearby could become the second “Smith Center” that would be free of interior ice usage as requested by visioning session residents.
• An island park could become an outdoor concert facility (see Fig. 3).
• **Parkour** (does not currently exist in Merrill) – Individuals may use public spaces to become physically active.

**Parkour** is a training discipline that developed out of military obstacle course training. Practitioners (traceurs) aim to move from one place to another, negotiating the obstacles in between.

Parkour is not widely practiced in dedicated public facilities such as skate parks. Although efforts are being made to create places for it, some traceurs do not like the idea as it is contradictory to the philosophy of freedom. Traceurs practice parkour in urban areas such as gyms, parks, playgrounds, offices, and abandoned structures.

Concerns have been raised regarding trespassing, damage of property, and the practice in inappropriate places. However, most traceurs will take care of their training spots and will remove themselves quickly and quietly from a public place if asked. One of parkour’s values is to respect people and places as well as helping others. One of the first campaigns to preserve this sort of philosophy is the 'Leave No Trace' project, stressing the importance of training safe, respecting the environment and the people around you.
Here is a scenario of how to capture volunteerism in Merrill to improve some park system facilities.

1. All tasks for a park would be pre-approved through the Parks Committee.
2. Volunteers would coordinate and implement their tasks through a service group or outdoor recreation group upon approval to start from the Parks Committee.

- **Scoreboard** – Volunteers fundraise to purchase it.
- **Bathroom** – Parks Dept. applies for DNR Stewardship 50% grant, and use room tax money for other 50%.
- **Infield** – Volunteers coordinate in-kind services, and possible labor needed to redo field.
- **Fence & backstop**
  - No grant money available;
  - Parks Dept. request prices for materials & supervisors to oversee volunteer workers;
  - Local service group provides structured volunteer drive, and serves lunch on-site for all workers.
- **Parking lot** – Possibly add it to a planned Streets Dept. road resurfacing bid.
- **Fence & backstop**
- **Bathroom** – Parks Dept. applies for DNR Stewardship 50% grant, and use room tax money for other 50%.
- **Infield** – Volunteers coordinate in-kind services, and possible labor needed to redo field.
- **Fence & backstop**
  - No grant money available;
  - Parks Dept. request prices for materials & supervisors to oversee volunteer workers;
  - Local service group provides structured volunteer drive, and serves lunch on-site for all workers.
- **Parking lot** – Possibly add it to a planned Streets Dept. road resurfacing bid.
- **Concession Stand** – Possibly add it to the bathroom building project bid, but ask service clubs to fundraise for it.
Figure 3  Possible Island Park

Potential island park, Merrill

Airphoto Sources: Bing Maps

Isle of Ferns Park, Wausau
**B. CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS 2013-2018**

Capital improvements to parks are the addition of labor and materials that improve the overall value and usefulness of that park. Routine maintenance is considered the normal cycle of repair and upkeep for existing facilities and is traditionally funded through the Park and Recreation Department’s operations budget. For example, upgrading an outdoor restroom facility for universal access would qualify as a capital improvement, while repainting an outdoor restroom is considered routine maintenance.

Projects listed below are subject to receiving budgetary approval in the years they are planned. All listed projects may not be completed. Short term and permanent fixes to make each park ADA accessible are identified among other improvements listed below:

**2013**
- Construct Dog Park
- Lions Park Restroom ADA Remodel
- Begin planning for new aquatic center
- Create implementation plan for developing and maintaining River Bend Trail
- Begin citywide bicycle & pedestrian plan creation
- Riverside Park Trail improvements
- Gebert Park Trail improvements
- Develop master plan for Normal Park
- New infield at Athletic Park

**2014**
- Continue work on Aquatic Center Development
- Sandblast & Repaint Riverside Park Shelter
- Construct restroom facility at Normal Park
- Begin implementation of master plan for Normal Park
- Construct restroom facility at Prairie Trails Park
- Install lights on varsity softball field at MARC
- Continue River Bend trail development
- Irrigation to Athletic Fields at MARC
- Begin implementing bicycle & pedestrian plan
- Emergency exit route established at MARC

**2015**
- Lights on Varsity soccer field at MARC
- Explore curling capabilities at Smith Center
- Improvements/addition to Riverside Park Disc Golf Course
- Restroom facility by MARC adult ball fields
- New lights at Athletic Park
- Finish and open new Aquatic Center
- Finish River Bend Trail from Center Ave to Council Grounds
- Continue implementing bicycle & pedestrian plan
- Continue implementation of Normal Park Master Plan
- Construct Basketball Courts at MARC

**2016**
- Begin working establishment of River Bend Trail as State Trail
- Begin working on connectivity of Bearskin/Hiawatha State Trails to Mountain Bay State Trail via our newly constructed River Bend Trail
- New field lights at Ott’s Park
- Continue implementing bicycle & pedestrian plan
Continue implementation of Normal Park Master Plan

2017  Repave parking lot at Stange Park
      Lagoon Bridge replacements at Stange Park
      Construct meeting/banquet “4-season” room above community room in Smith Center
      Continue implementing bicycle & pedestrian plan
      Continue implementation of Normal Park Master Plan
      Trail expansion at Prairie Trails

2018  Install lights at Lions Park baseball complex
      City Forest road and trail improvements
      Construct trail head at City Forest
      Build new shelter with Council Grounds and WDNR along joint trail on south end of MARC
      Continue implementing bicycle & pedestrian plan
Chapter 7
IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

There are a variety of strategies available for implementing this plan. These strategies include using land use tools and government programs to realize attainment of this plan’s goals and objectives.

Shoreland Zoning
Wisconsin’s Shoreland Management Program established statewide minimum standards for shoreland development. Counties are required to adopt and administer shoreland zoning ordinances that meet or exceed these minimum requirements. The statewide minimum standards for county shoreland zoning ordinances are found in Chapter NR 115, Wis. Admin. Code. The City of Merrill administers the zoning within Merrill.

Public Access to Waterways
State regulations for subdivisions require dedication of public access when the land along waterways is platted.

LAKE AND STREAM SHORE PLATS [236.16(3) WISCONSIN STATUTES]
(a) All subdivisions abutting on a navigable lake or stream shall provide public access at least 60 feet wide providing access to the low watermark so that there will be public access, which is connected to existing public roads, at not more than one-half mile intervals as measured along the lake or stream shore except where greater intervals and wider access is agreed upon by the department of natural resources and the department, and excluding shore areas where public parks or open-space streets or roads on either side of a stream are provided.

NR 1.93 Access in platted subdivisions. Under s.236.16 (3), Wis. Stats., the DNR has authority to recommend wider access at less frequent intervals than are prescribed in the statutes. The DNR shall consider waiver of the 60-foot access requirement only where the DNR determines:
(1) It will be advantageous to public interests in navigable water;
(2) Adequate space for access users and adequate buffering for private property is assured by access wider than 60 feet where possible; and
(3) The access that would result provides an equal or greater opportunity for public access than would be provided by dedication at statutorily prescribed intervals and the 60-foot width.

Park Dedication
Subdivision regulations can be used to require residential land subdividers to dedicate a portion of subdivided land for permanent park and open space use. Neighborhood parks may be acquired in this manner in newly developing residential areas. Local landowners should also be encouraged to dedicate land to their communities for recreational uses. Numerous small town memorial parks have been acquired through the generosity of local citizens. If citizens are made aware of community needs, this
form of private action may continue to enrich the public resources of some communities.

Conservation Subdivisions
Conservation subdivisions are characterized by common open space and clustered compact lots. A variety of housing types or the same type of housing may be allowed. The purpose of a conservation subdivision is to protect farmland or natural resource open spaces while allowing for the maximum number of residences under current community zoning and subdivision regulations. In some cases a greater density (density bonus) may be offered in the local ordinance to encourage this approach. Generally, this tool is used for parcels 40 acres and larger, or where the community maps natural resource corridors or natural features that they want to preserve. A conservation subdivision maintains the same level of overall density as a conventional subdivision, but individual lot sizes are smaller, and the community receives open space.

Use of Easements
Open space and public recreation use of private land may be acquired by easement. With an easement, certain rights are granted to the public for a specific period of time and the private owner is compensated for that public use. In purchasing an easement, the public body acquires a right either to use the land in a specific manner or to restrict the use to which an owner may put their land. For example, the rights to establish public hiking or fishing access to a waterway may be purchased through an easement.

Leases
Leases may be used as measures to use or protect land until more permanent measures may be found. By leasing parcels of land, the land remains on the community’s tax rolls and can be renegotiated or non-renewed by the property owner if the monetary prospects for another use proves overpowering.

Another leasing method involves outright purchase of land by the community. The community then leases the land to a private party or organization with use restrictions placed on the land. Under this method, the community receives some monetary return on its investment and retains control over the use of the land.

Program Costs
A community should carefully watch operations and maintenance costs when setting up a parks program. A too ambitious acquisition and/or development program can easily lead to annual costs larger than the community can afford to meet. Recreation facilities like golf courses and swimming pools, for example, require large annual maintenance investments to continue.

Capital Improvements
Community officials should develop five year capital improvements programs for recreation that reflect implementation of proposals made in their plans and the priorities they place on them. To be functional, the program must be flexible and be subjected to annual review.
In developing a recreation program, care should be taken that the annual cost of maintenance does not exceed an amount the community can afford to pay. Too often, an ambitious program can lose community support as a result of prohibitive maintenance costs.

Monetary Aid Programs
State and federal financial and technical aid programs are designed to assist communities with meeting recreational needs. A list of these programs exists in Attachment D.

The Stewardship Fund is a state provided comprehensive aid program for the promotion of resource conservation and outdoor recreation opportunities. It consists of several state and federal aid programs such as Local Park Aids and LAWCON, combined with new programs, such as the Urban Rivers Program. Attachment E gives an explanation of the Stewardship Program. For additional information go online to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

A requirement for application to the Stewardship Fund is for the local community to have a DNR approved comprehensive outdoor recreation plan. The City of Merrill Outdoor Recreation Plan is designed to meet that requirement. For additional information contact:

Community Services Specialist
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
107 Sutliff Ave
Rhinelander, WI 54501

Besides state and federal aid programs, there are other sources of funding such as private foundations, trust funds, and civic and recreation organizations.

Lifetime Activities
Community and school officials responsible for recreation should place greater emphasis on land areas and facilities that can support "lifetime" recreational activities. Falling into this category are activities like golf, tennis, all target sports, horseshoes, cross country skiing, skating, running, volleyball, handball, badminton, back packing, and canoeing. Many schools have programs aimed at teaching recreational activities that people can participate in for a lifetime.

Winter Activities
All communities should provide winter outdoor recreation facilities. Skating and sliding sports (sledging, tobogganing, and skiing) can generally be provided without large investments. Skating, for example, can be as involved as providing rinks for ice hockey or as simple as flooding a small area of a school playground. Likewise, merely blocking off a lightly traveled street with a suitable slope can frequently provide a sliding area.
Specialized Facilities
Encourage development of specialized facilities by the private sector. Specialized facilities such as golf clubs, intensive use ATV areas, and ski resorts can be an important adjunct to public recreational facilities. Quality and availability for public use should be emphasized.

Municipal and School District Cooperation
Promote cooperation between municipalities and school districts in meeting recreational needs. With good planning, cooperation may take the form of joint land acquisition and/or facilities development cost sharing. Increased municipal use of existing school facilities during non-school hours should also be encouraged.

Senior Citizen Involvement
Involve senior citizens in community park development and beautification, and provide recreational facilities for their use. Although senior citizens often compose a significant proportion of the total community’s population, they are often neglected in recreational planning. Benches placed near neighborhood parks and play areas and non-intensive sports facilities such as horseshoe pits located in community parks help to provide a place for the senior citizens. Small, passive use parks and gardens located near nursing and retirement homes should also be encouraged. In addition, senior citizens can provide invaluable assistance in beautifying parks and open spaces and can thereby become more involved in community group life.

Service Group Involvement
Involve organized service groups in park and recreation development, including development of competitive sports areas and neighborhood parks. Traditionally, service groups and recreation organizations, such as Lions Club, V.F.W., softball leagues, and snowmobile clubs have played an active role in the development of such facilities. Continued volunteerism of this type should be encouraged. In addition, service groups could help to meet the need for neighborhood facilities by supplementing municipal financial resources by providing organization and volunteer labor.

Community Beautification
All communities should recognize that community appearance is an important component of a recreation program. Maintained streets and sidewalks, attractive trees and shrubs, well cared for homes and commercial buildings, and neatly landscaped home lawns, public open space, and parks are principal contributors to community beautification. Such a program is most rewarding to persons engaged in passive recreation.

Adopt-A-Park Program
A program which encourages local groups to adopt-a-park or segment of trial or stream could be organized similar to the very successful Adopt a Highway program. The groups could volunteer their time to maintain and beautify the county’s recreational system, allowing more county funds to provide major improvements.
ATTACHMENT A

Park Design and Location Criteria

From:
Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2011-2016
Facility Design Standards
From:
National Recreation and Park Association
Both Visioning Session Summaries
September 5, 2012
October 3, 2012
Federal & State Outdoor Recreation Funding Programs
Wisconsin SCORP 2011-2016 Summary

Summarized by NCWRPC
ATTACHMENT F

River Bend Trail Map