

# Chapter 6

## Transportation

The City of Rhinelander's transportation system includes various modes of travel. The local transportation network is an important factor for the safe movement of people and goods, as well as to the physical development of the City. Understanding where and who is responsible for maintaining each part of the transportation system provides the basis for determining future needs. This chapter identifies who maintains each transportation facility, what condition it is in, and the different ways that people are using each facility, primarily roads, in Rhinelander.

### Previous Plans and Studies

#### Regional Comprehensive Plan, 2025

The 2025 Regional Comprehensive Plan (RCP), written by the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, addresses issues of livability in the areas of housing, transportation, economic development, and land use. The RCP identifies the following issues facing transportation within the Region:

- A need for bicycle and pedestrian improvements
- Dispersed population in rural areas
- Weight limits on roads
- Rail and roadway conflicts
- Funding transportation maintenance and improvements
- An aging population's ability to continue depending on driving
- Transporting students as school enrollment declines and school facilities consolidate

#### Rhinelander Safe Routes to School, 2026

The Rhinelander Safe Routes To School (SRTS) Plan coordinates the opportunity to make walking and bicycling to school safer for children in grades K-8, and to increase the number of children who choose to walk and bike. On a broader level, SRTS programs can enhance children's health and wellbeing, ease traffic congestion near schools, and improve community members' overall quality of life. Participating schools include James Williams Middle School, Central Elementary, Crescent Elementary, Northwoods Community Elementary, and Pelican Elementary.

#### City of Rhinelander Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, 2019

The focus of this plan is to enhance the viability of bicycling and walking as forms of transportation throughout the City of Rhinelander. This plan focuses on guidelines for planning bicycle and pedestrian facilities, with general design and funding information included. This plan also examines existing conditions for biking and walking and suggests routes and segments on which to prioritize bicycling and walking improvements.

### Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan 2018

This 2018 plan is a region-wide effort to improve bicycling and walking across the communities. The plan assesses existing conditions related to bicycling and walking, identifying other potential trail and route user groups, identifying routes and describing policies and programs to assist local governments in improving bicycling and walking to promote connectivity between communities and destinations throughout north central Wisconsin.

### Connect 2050: Let's Connect Wisconsin 2022

Connect 2050 is the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's (WisDOT) long-range transportation plan for the state. Adopted in 2022, the plan addresses all forms of transportation over a 20-year planning horizon: highways, local roads, air, water, rail, bicycle, pedestrian, and transit. It states that other existing state-level plans created prior to Connect 2050 remain in effect until another plan supersedes them. These plans include:

- Bicycle Transportation plan 2020
- Corridors 2030
- Pedestrian Policy Plan 2020
- Rail Plan 2050
- State Airport System Plan 2030
- State Freight Plan
- Transportation Asset Management Plan 2023-2032

### State Trails Network Plan

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) created this plan in 2001, to identify a statewide network of trails and to provide guidance to the DNR for land acquisition and development. Many existing trails are developed and operated in partnership with counties. By agreement the DNR acquires the corridor and the county government(s) develop, operate, and maintain the trail.

### Locally Developed, Coordinated Public Transit – Human Service Transportation Plan, 2024-2028

Oneida and Vilas Counties developed this five-year plan that was facilitated by the North Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission. The plan analyzes service gaps and needs in public transit and human services transportation and proposes strategies to address the gaps and needs.

### Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act)

This current federal transportation program authorizes up to \$108 billion to support federal public transportation programs, including \$91 billion in guaranteed funding. It also reauthorizes surface transportation programs for FY 2022-2026 and provides advance appropriations for certain programs. Major goals include improving safety, modernizing aging transit infrastructure and fleets, investing in cleaner transportation, and improving equity in communities with limited transportation access. These funds will be distributed via formulas and grants to the states.

## Road Network

Local roads create the primary transportation system. These roads allow people and goods to move within the City and provide connections to the County, State and Federal road networks. US Highway 8 and State Highways 17 & 47 are the primary highways serving the City. Major City streets include Stevens St, Davenport St, Kemp St, Lincoln St, River St, Phillip St, Pelham St, Timber Dr, Courtney St, and Oneida Ave. The jurisdictional and functional breakdown of the City’s road network is shown in **Table 16**.

Table 16: Road Mileage by Jurisdictional and Functional Class				
Jurisdiction	Functional Classification			Totals
	Arterial	Collector	Local	
State*	3.53	0.00	0.00	3.53
County	0.90	0.00	0.00	0.90
City	12.33	7.31	36.90	56.54
Totals	16.76	7.31	36.90	60.97

Source: WisDOT & NCWRPC.

\* WisDOT has jurisdiction over interstate and federal highways.

### Functional Classification

A functionally classified road system is one in which streets and highways are grouped into classes according to the character of the services they provide, ranging from a high degree of travel mobility to land access functions. At the upper limit of the system (principal arterials, for example), are those facilities that emphasize traffic mobility (long, uninterrupted travel), whereas at the lower limits are those local roads and streets that emphasize access. The functional classifications are generally defined as:

- **Principal Arterials** serve corridor movements having trip length and travel density characteristics of an interstate or interregional nature. These routes generally serve all urban areas with populations greater than 5,000 or connect major centers of activity. They carry the highest traffic volumes and are designed to accommodate longer trips.
- **Minor Arterials**, like principal arterials, minor arterials also serve cities, large communities, and other major traffic generators, providing intra-community continuity and service for trips of moderate length, with more emphasis on land access than principal arterials.
- **Collectors** take traffic from local roads and provide links to all remaining portions of smaller communities and connect to other higher function roads listed above.
- **Local streets** provide direct access to residential, commercial, and industrial developments.

Functional classification of roads within the City of Rhinelander is shown in **Map 6 – Transportation**.

## Jurisdiction

Roads are commonly classified in one of two ways: by ownership or by purpose. Jurisdictional responsibility refers to ownership of a particular road, while functional classification, as described above, identified the road by the level of service it provides.

Jurisdiction refers to governmental ownership, not necessarily responsibility. For example, some State-owned roads are maintained by local jurisdictions. Additionally, the designation of a public road as a “Federal-aid highway” does not alter its ownership or jurisdiction as a State or local road, only that its service value and importance have made that road eligible for Federal-aid construction and rehabilitation funds.

As previously noted, these functional classifications are generally equated with the jurisdictional divisions. In the more developed larger urban communities, this relationship may not be as rigid, whereas the local community constructs and maintains all classes of the roadway system. However, in the typical rural transportation system the jurisdictional and the functional classifications maintain a closer relationship. The greatest emphasis of traffic in rural areas is generally on non-local efficient movement, whereas local access is secondary due to relatively low population densities.

## Road Maintenance

The City of Rhinelander uses the Pavement Surface Evaluation Rating (PASER) system, which was designed by the Transportation Information Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The PASER system is the rating system used by most Wisconsin communities. The PASER system rates road surfaces on a scale of 1 to 10. This scale is broken down as follows:

- “1” and “2” = very poor condition
- “3” = poor condition
- “4” and “5” = fair condition
- “6” and “7” = good condition
- “8” = very good condition
- “9” and “10” = excellent condition

**Table 17** shows a summary of pavement conditions in the City of Rhinelander. Roads exhibiting a surface condition rating at or below “fair” must be examined to determine what type of reconstruction or strengthening is necessary. The roads that display a surface rating of “good” or better will only require minimal preventative maintenance to promote safe travel conditions. Over 68 percent of local roadways within the City are currently in need of improvement. Asphalt roads account for the vast majority of roadways within the City, as less than a mile of roadways in the City are gravel roads.

**Table 17: Summary of Pavement Conditions, 2025**

	<b>Miles</b>	<b>Percent of Total Mileage</b>
Very Poor	11.03	19.6%
Poor	6.42	11.4%
Fair	21.08	37.4%
Good	8.63	15.3%
Very Good	5.44	9.7%
Excellent	3.74	6.6%
Total	56.35	100.0%

Source: WisDOT 2025

## Other Modes of Transportation

### Airport

The Rhinelander/Oneida County Airport (RHI) is jointly owned by the City of Rhinelander and Oneida County. RHI serves a vast area encompassing northern Wisconsin and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. RHI is located on the west side of the City and has one concrete runway that is 6,799 feet long, and one asphalt runway that is 5,201 feet long.

According to the FAA, there were about 24,958 total aviation operations (take-offs and landings) in 2025, down from 42,340 in 2000. RHI is classified by WisDOT as a commercial airport.

RHI is served year-round by Delta Connection, operated by SkyWest Airlines, with passenger service to and from the Minneapolis – St. Paul International Airport (MSP). United Express, operated by SkyWest Airlines, offers summer seasonal service to Chicago O’Hare International Airport (ORD). Air freight is flown by carriers on contract with FedEx and UPS. The airport also supports military and medical flights, general aviation, on-demand charter, flight instruction, aircraft rental, and maintenance.

### Bicycle and Pedestrian

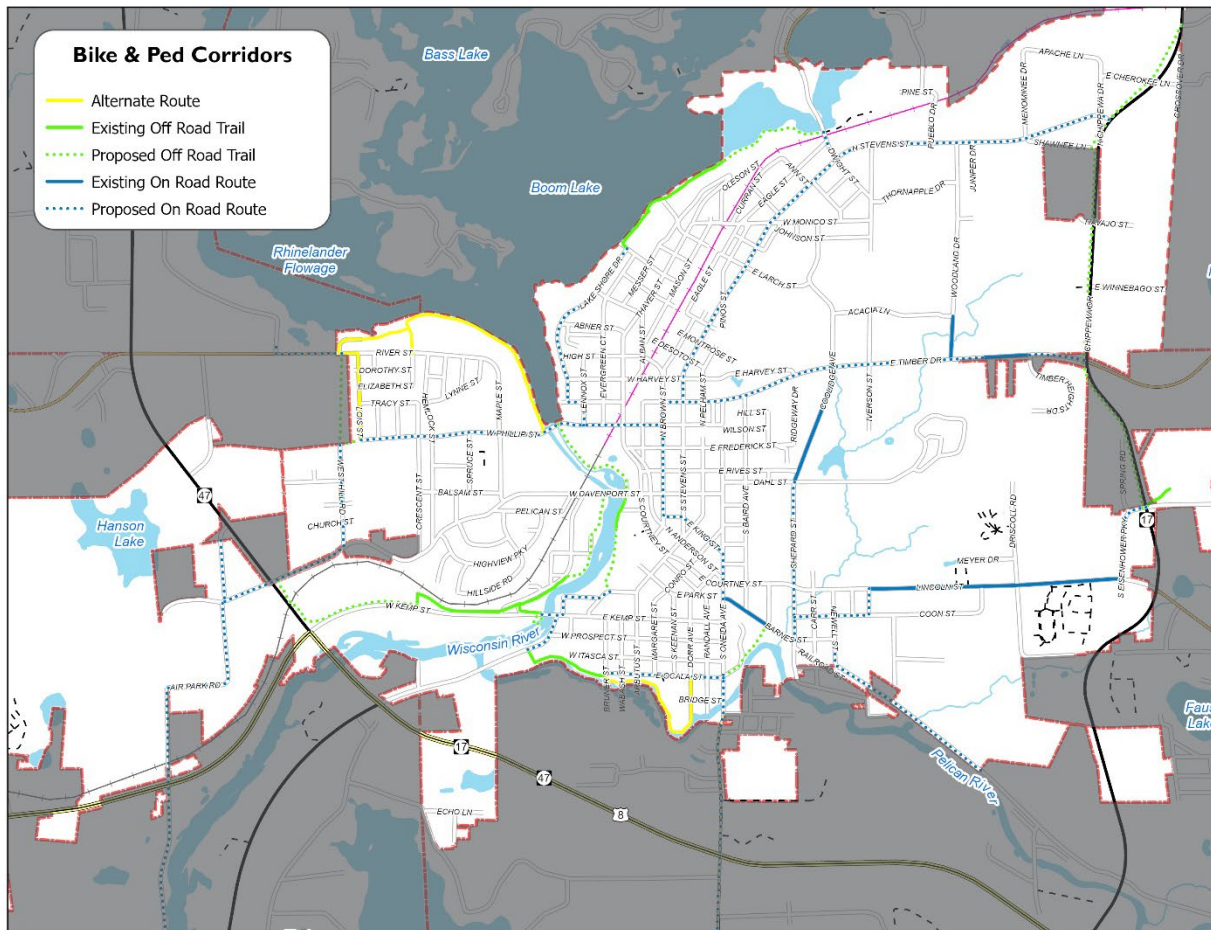
Biking and walking are essential to maintaining and promoting the quality of life for residents and visitors. Walking is ubiquitous; nearly everyone depends on walking for at least part of every trip, if only from the parking lot to the nearest building. Although some lament that “people just can’t seem to walk anywhere anymore,” the reality is that, given the opportunity, many people choose to walk from one place to another, particularly if they can do so safely and conveniently.

Sidewalks are the primary piece of infrastructure that everyone thinks of when asked where walking is allowed, but the road itself is a walking surface. In both Rhinelander and Oneida County all roads are legal to walk and bike on. It is not safe to walk in a travel lane of a 4-lane highway, and it would slow down traffic flow, so sidewalks or a 5-foot paved shoulder are usually provided for people to walk on. Walking is only acceptable on low volume streets and streets that are wide enough to allow for parked vehicles.

Paved roads are the main bicycling infrastructure within the City. However, even though all roads throughout both Rhinelander and the County allow bicycle travel, not all of them are considered safe for bicycling due to factors such as high traffic, narrow pavement width, road geometry, and high-speed limits. US Highway 8, State Highways 17 & 47, and County Highways C, G, and P are classified as “not recommended” for bicycle travel due to high traffic volume and narrow pavement widths.

The 2019 City of Rhinelander Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan identifies both existing and proposed bicycle and pedestrian corridors within the City, as shown in **Figure 7**. The Plan also identifies and describes 15 corridor segments within the City, with discussion on factors such as route justification, existing or proposed segments, whether the segments are on-road or off-road, surface type and what uses for year-round use, key connections, suitability for bicycles and pedestrians, potential accommodations and improvements, and the time frame needed for creating the corridor segments.

**Figure 7: Proposed Bicycle and Pedestrian Corridors**



*Proposed Bicycle & Pedestrian corridor network within Rhinelander.*

## Public Transportation

Northwoods Transit Connections provides public transportation in Oneida and Vilas Counties with on-demand service 5 days per week from 8:00am - 5:00pm. The Oneida County Department on Aging coordinates volunteer driver-escort service to residents of Oneida County, which includes Rhinelander. Rhinelander has connections for two Northwoods Transit bus routes, the White Tail Bus Route and the Silver Maple Bus Route. Escort drivers provide transportation to elderly and disabled residents of Oneida County that qualify as a priority trip purpose such as medical appointments and grocery shopping. For rides or other info call the Oneida County Department on Aging.

The City of Rhinelander used to have a shared ride taxi program, but the program was recently discontinued at the beginning of 2025. **There is interest in reestablishing a public transit program within the City.**

## Trucking

US Highway 8 and State Highways 17 & 47 are long truck routes designated by WisDOT that serve the City. This corresponds with their role as Corridors 2030 connecting routes, linking to the Backbone highway system, and facilitating the movement of goods between Oneida County and the rest of the state/nation.

Local truck routes often branch out from these major corridors to link local industry with the main truck routes as well as for the distribution of commodities with the local area. Mapping these local routes is beyond the scope of this study, and local issues such as safety, weight restrictions, and noise impacts play significant roles in the designation of local truck routes.

## Transportation Programs

Below is a listing of programs that may be of assistance to the City with regard to the development of the local transportation system. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation is the primary provider of programs to assist local transportation systems. A wide variety of programs are available to serve the gamut of jurisdictions from county down to the smallest town. The programs most likely to be utilized by communities such as Rhinelander include:

- Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)
- Local Roads Improvement Program (LRIP)
- General Transportation Aids
- Surface Transportation Program – Local (STP-L)
- Surface Transportation Program – Rural (STP-R)
- Surface Transportation Program – Urban (STP-U)
- Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP)
- Connecting Highway Aids
- Disaster Damage Aids
- Transportation Economic Assistance Program (TEA)
- Airport Improvement Program (AIP)
- Local Bridge Improvement Assistance
- Local Small Structure Improvement Program (LSSIP)
- Signals and ITS Standalone Program (SISP)

More information on these programs can be obtained by contacting the WisDOT region office in Rhinelander or at <https://wisconsindot.gov/Pages/doing-bus/local-gov/astnce-pgms/default.aspx>.

## Goals, Objectives, and Policies

**Goal:** Develop and maintain a well-integrated and cost-effective transportation system that is capable of moving people and goods to, from, and within the community in a safe and efficient manner.

**Objective 1:** Maintain the efficiency, safety, and functionality of the City's existing transportation system, which links the urban center with outlying towns, adjacent communities and the region.

- a. Pursue grant funding for the maintenance, improvement, and expansion of the City's transportation network. [proposed new objective]
- a. Implement road and infrastructure safety improvements recommended in the 2026 Rhinelander Safe Routes to School Plan. [new]
- b. Develop Airport Land Use Ordinance under Wisconsin Statutes to protect the public investment in the Rhinelander/Oneida County Airport. [Remove? City already adopted this]
- c. Work with rail service providers and users to address facility or service issues in order to maintain safe and efficient rail operations in the City.

**Objective 2:** Achieve close coordination between transportation facilities and land use development.

- a. Work with WisDOT to control access onto Highways 8, 17, and 47 to preserve capacity and movement of traffic. Encourage WisDOT to commission/fund highway corridor plans for these highways to address corridor development, intersection deficiencies, sight distances and turning movements.
- b. Plan for extension of major arterials and other roads as necessary to complete connections, provide for appropriate routes for trucks and emergency vehicles and serve planned development areas.
- c. Consider future road locations, extensions, or connections when reviewing development plans and proposals.
- d. Work with Oneida County and towns to plan for a network of interconnected new roads in planned development areas to control highway access and improve access to these areas.
- e. Avoid land uses that generate heavy traffic on roads that have not been constructed or upgraded for such use.
- f. Plan for new developments to minimize excessive road construction and avoid burdening the City for maintenance.

**Objective 3:** Support additional transportation options for those who choose not to own a car; and for those without access to an automobile, including the disabled, seniors, youth or low-income individuals.

- b. Revise the City's Sidewalk Ordinance:
  - a. Require sidewalk installation at time of road installation.
  - b. Add an option for bikeway development, and their use instead of sidewalks.
  - c. Consider removing the cost of sidewalk installation from landowner to City – just like road installation.
- c. Continue to support public transportation options such as Northwoods Transit Connections. [this policy previously referred to City's former shared-ride taxi service]
- d. Encourage the development of a walking and biking trail & pathway system throughout the City.
- e. Promote the development of multi-use trails, trail linkages, and sidewalks or wide shoulders on roads as part of new developments or road projects. [new]