



WAUSAU

COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN

2017-2021

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1 INTRODUCTION

This plan has been prepared to guide the City of Wausau in developing public outdoor park and recreation facilities. It also serves as a tool to encourage participation in outdoor recreation grant programs through the Department of Natural Resources and other organizations.

1.1 Executive Summary

Parks are gateways to healthy, prosperous and connected communities. The National Recreation and Park Association names “Three Pillars” by which a healthy park system can benefit a community:

- *Conservation* – Parks play an important role in the conservation of natural resources. These protected open spaces not only benefit the environment but also serve as an important indicator to potential outside investment in the community.
- *Health and Wellness* – Parks are essential in combating important health issues such as obesity and physical inactivity.
- *Social Equity* – Universal access to public parks and recreation should be considered a right, not a privilege. A healthy park system will provide equal access throughout the community.

This Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan sets forth Wausau’s vision for future growth and development of its outdoor recreation parks and facilities. The plan is intended to guide the community’s outdoor recreation facility development through the year 2021.

The existing park system in Wausau includes 36 City managed parks. Many of these parks are neighborhood scale parks with traditional recreational facilities such as playgrounds and open air shelters. The City is also the location of four Marathon County parks. These community parks are not owned by the City but provide additional access to recreation for City residents. There are also numerous school parks within the city limits that can be utilized by local residents for active outdoor recreation (tennis, basketball, etc.).

1.1.1 Wausau Mission Statement

In response to our citizens, we will provide services in the most effective and efficient manner in order to promote and enhance our living environment. Plan and encourage positive growth. Promote a positive community image by encouraging citizen involvement and civic pride.

1.1.2 Statement of Need

The purpose of this project is to develop a Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan for the City of Wausau, assess the vitality and needs of the current City park system and provide direction for maintenance, growth and programming for the next five to ten years.

As a working tool, the plan will provide officials with a clear understanding of park land inventory and future recreational facility and open space needs. The plan also creates an orderly and prioritized strategy for making incremental improvements. The plan will allow the City to request DNR and other public funding for implementing proposed park improvements.

1.2 Goals and Objectives

The following section identifies goals and objectives to guide the future development or expansion of parks and recreational facilities in Wausau.

Goal 1.2.1: Establish and maintain high quality parks and recreational services.

Objectives:

- a. Ensure the amount of parks and recreational facilities is reflective of community population needs.
- b. Upgrade and improve existing parks and facilities.
 - i. Develop bi-annual inspections and inventory of existing parks facilities to maintain an active log of facilities improvements.
 - ii. Continue funding the replacement of old and deteriorating equipment in all city parks to ensure health, safety and welfare of visitors including playground equipment and safety surfacing.
- c. Pursue funding for park and recreation development and land acquisition.
- d. Pursue the development of revenue generating recreational facilities and activities, which can aid in the development of new facilities and/or the maintenance of existing facilities.

Goal 1.2.2: Offer recreational services in an efficient, effective and economical manner.

Objectives:

- a. Cooperatively work with surrounding municipalities, the school district and other partners.
- b. Conduct periodic reviews of programs and services and their benefit to the community.

Goal 1.2.3: Evaluate and analyze park, open space and recreational services based on the needs of the community.

Objectives:

- a. Encourage citizen involvement with the development of the plan.
- b. Survey community to determine changing needs.

Goal 1.2.4: Promote bicycle and pedestrian facilities throughout Wausau.

Objectives:

- a. Improve local trail connectivity throughout the Wausau area to parks, conservancy areas, schools, local businesses and all regional trails.

- b. Improve/establish wayfinding signage to allow new residents or visitors to effectively travel throughout Wausau on foot or bicycle or other means (skateboard, rollerblades, etc.)
- c. Increase the availability and accessibility of bicycle parking.

Goal 1.2.5: Promote water recreation throughout the community.

Objectives:

- a. Improve visibility and awareness of the natural amenity and asset the river provides to the community.
- b. Promote and maintain boat launches.
- c. Continue to support community events that support river activity.

Goal 1.2.6: Ensure that the community's existing open space, recreational facilities and programs are designed to meet the special needs of all residents regardless of age, gender, or ability.

Objectives:

- a. Prepare a site Master Plan prior to improvement and/or development of any public park to assure the highest and best use of existing resources.
- b. Provide for barrier-free access in all new park facility construction and play areas.
- c. Achieve compliance with accessibility requirements in existing facilities by 2025.
- d. Encourage participation and accommodation of all interested participants at park and recreational meetings and in recreational programs.
- e. Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act as it applies to communication with the public. This is in reference to the standard language that government agencies should use on their agendas and other public meeting documents stating accommodation of those with disabilities who wish to attend the meeting.

Goal 1.2.7: Coordinate subdivision review with all departments responsible for providing or maintaining adequate park facilities.

Objectives:

- a. Consult and incorporate the needs identified in the Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan before subdivision plats are approved.
- b. Evaluate land dedicated for parks to differentiate between land appropriate for active park use, land appropriate for open space only, and land requiring protection from development. Land requiring protection from development should be protected via development codes.
- c. Continually evaluate and update local zoning and subdivision ordinances so that they adequately address the recreational needs of residents.
- d. Preserve any proposed trail corridors in any review of new development.

Goal 1.2.8: Provide residents with safe and reliable recreation equipment throughout the community park system.

Objectives:

- a. Accurately inventory existing parks facilities and maintain an active log of facilities improvement.

- b. Continue funding the replacement of old and deteriorating recreation equipment in all area parks.
- c. Continually monitor and maintain existing park equipment to ensure its longevity and safety.

Goal 1.2.9: Stress the benefits of larger neighborhood and community parks that provide a wide range of facilities over small playground and tot-lot facilities.

Objectives:

- a. Analyze the location, size and function of existing and proposed parks as annexations, residential development, or land use changes occur.
- b. Communicate the importance of dynamic, multi-purpose parks and recreational facilities as a component of Wausau's regional draw and economic development potential.
- c. Use Park Service Area Criteria to help determine the location of future park sites (see Chapter 2).

Goal 1.2.10: Recognize the importance of an adequate park budget, which can financially address existing park hazards and allow for future parkland acquisition and facility development.

Objectives:

- a. Use the Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan as a guide to establish yearly park budgets and funding for the Wausau park system.
- b. Invest funds for the development of facilities that will maximize existing park and recreation areas and provide exciting recreational programs, with the intention of increasing park prominence, community visibility, and use.

Goal 1.2.11: Use all available resources to further enhance the quality of the City's park system.

Objectives:

- a. Continually pursue state and federal funding programs, which can aid in the purchase and/or development of desired park system improvements.
- b. Nurture the existing positive relationships with public and private organizations for donations and volunteer help to aid in park system development.
- c. Update the Wausau Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan every five years to maintain grant eligibility.
- d. Pursue the development of revenue generating recreational facilities and activities, which can aid in the development of new facilities and/or the maintenance of existing facilities.

1.3 Review of Past Planning Documents (Local, Regional, State)

1.3.1 City of Wausau Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (2010 - 2014)

The 2010 – 2014 City of Wausau CORP was intended to provide guidance to City staff and officials in the acquisition, development and programming of parks, playgrounds and special recreation areas. The focus is on the adequacy of existing facilities and the opportunities for future recreational facilities. The plan was developed under guidance from the City Park and Recreation Committee as well as input from the general public through user groups and a random survey.

Recommendations of this plan were divided into two broad categories; those that were citywide in scope and those with a primary impact on the neighborhood level.

Citywide recommendations included:

- Developing master plans for key properties
- Development of an open space/land conservation plan
- The identification and development of bicycle and pedestrian access ways
- Development of facility and programming cooperation with the school district, user groups and neighboring communities

Neighborhood level recommendations included:

- Development of River Edge Trail
- Improvements to facilities based on site assessments
- Acquisition of land adjacent to parks
- Installation of new facilities based on public input
- Improvements to park accessibility

1.3.2 City of Wausau Comprehensive Plan (2006)

The 2006 Comprehensive Plan was written as a guide for the City Plan Commission, Common Council and other City officials as they make decisions about the long term growth and development of the community. The plan focuses on the development of Wausau in terms of elements such as land use, transportation, housing, natural resources and parks.

Goals of the plan as they relate to park and recreation improvements include; the maintenance of a diversified park and recreation system for current and future residents, the development of facilities that provide a quality recreational experience, the preservation of important cultural features in the park system and the maximization of the efficiency in which park and recreation services are provided.

Some recommendations of the plan include:

- Exploring opportunities to convert vacant, blighted or underutilized properties into parks, open space or community gardens
- Identification of new trail corridors or trail extensions
- Improving access to the Wisconsin River
- Identification of environmentally sensitive areas within City parks for the purpose of restricting access and providing greater protection

- Exploring the feasibility of increasing user fees, particularly for non-residents
- The completion of detailed master plans for all parks

1.3.3 Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan for the Wausau Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (2015)

This 2015 plan is intended as a multi-jurisdictional strategy for enhancing conditions and providing inter-city links for biking and walking in support of the Wausau area's transportation, quality of life and tourism goals. The plan stresses the "Five-E's" of bicycle and pedestrian planning when developing goals and improvement strategies. The "Five-E's" include Evaluation, Engineering, Encouragement, Education and Enforcement.

Proposed recommendations of the plan include:

- The modification of existing roadway configurations to utilize existing pavement. Some examples of this type of modification include striping bike lanes on existing pavement, reconfiguring on-street parking and the implementation of "road diets"
- The enhancement of exiting bicycle routes with wayfinding and regulatory signage and markings
- Coordination of bike/ped improvements with future roadway projects
- The prioritization of stand-alone projects that provide high value connections

1.3.4 Wisconsin's State Outdoor Recreation Plan

Since 1965, the State has developed and maintained the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) in an attempt to classify, measure, and ultimately provide for the preferences and needs of a statewide recreating public. Goals include the following:

1. Improve integration of outdoor recreation interests and needs in land use and other relevant planning efforts.
2. Continue to provide and enhance access to Wisconsin recreational land and waters.
3. Promote outdoor recreation as a means of improving public health among Wisconsinites.
4. Establish great urban parks and community green spaces.

1.4 Neighboring Community Planning Documents

A number of neighboring communities in the Wausau area have recently completed Outdoor Recreation Plans. Many of these plans recommend improvements that could impact the City of Wausau in terms of recreational opportunities, tourism and general quality of life. Some communities with recently completed plans reviewed for this document include: the Village of Kronenwetter, the City of Mosinee, the Town of Rib Mountain, the Village of Rothschild and the Village of Weston.

There were four categories of improvements that were common in these plans in terms of potential impact on the City of Wausau. They are listed below.

1. Improvements to bicycle infrastructure and connectivity throughout the Wausau area.

The Weston Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan recommends improvements to bicycle facilities that would impact the City of Wausau. The plan calls for the support of the completion of the Mountain Bay Trail into Wausau, connecting the City to communities to the east as far as Green Bay. The Weston plan also mentions a desire to establish a trail connection to Wausau along the Northwestern Avenue rail corridor as well as a general desire to collaborate with neighboring communities in the delivery of recreational opportunities and trail connections.

The Kronenwetter Outdoor Recreation Plan also recommends improvements to bicycle system connectivity. The Kronenwetter plan recommends continuing to implement the Wausau MPO Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan with improvements such as establishing new trails and routes connecting to Wausau.

2. Improvements to river based recreational opportunities.

Communities in the area are naturally connected by the Wisconsin, Eau Claire and Big Rib Rivers. Improvements such as a new canoe and kayak launch in a neighboring community can serve as a destination point for an afternoon paddle. Several of the plans recommend new canoe, kayak and boat launches. The Kronenwetter plan recommends a public river access point on the Wisconsin River between the Rothschild Dam and the Mosinee Dam. The Rib Mountain and Weston plans also recommend new boat launches at parks with river access.

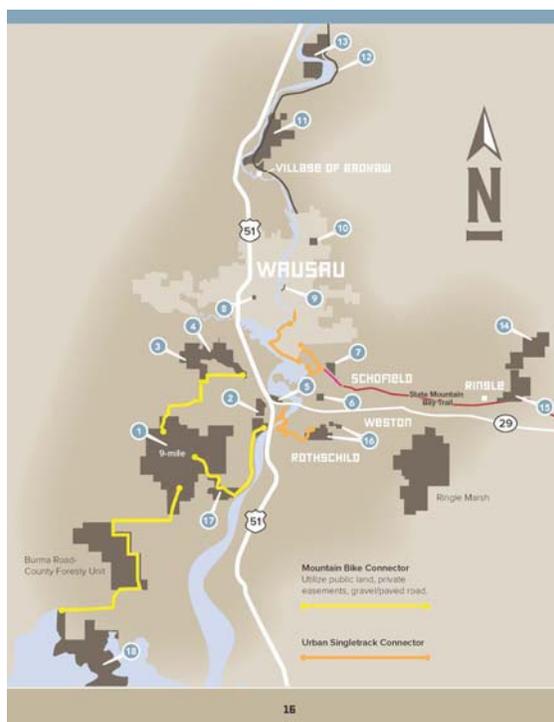
The Weston and Mosinee plans also call for the establishment of marked canoe and kayak water trails. A route from Miller's Bottom to the Canoe Portage Park is recommended in Mosinee while a trail along the Eau Claire River is recommended in Weston.

3. Establishment of facilities to qualify the Wausau area as an IMBA (International Mountain Biking Association) Ride Center.

In 2013 the CWOCC (Central Wisconsin Offroad Cycling Coalition) proposed the Wausau area as a potential IMBA (International Mountain Biking Association) Ride Center. At the time, there were only two other ride centers in the Midwest. Both of these sites experienced over 25,000 bike visitors a year with future projections of over 30,000. The plan recommended improvements to parks in surrounding communities focused on mountain biking that would qualify the Wausau area as one of these recognized Ride Centers.

Outdoor Recreation Plans in Rib Mountain, Rothschild and Weston support the establishment of Wausau as a Ride Center and offer recommendations for mountain biking facilities. The Rib Mountain plan gives pros and cons for the location of mountain biking facilities in different parks in town. The Weston plan recommends the establishment of facilities in Yellowbanks Park, D.C Everest School Forest or Prohaska Tree Farm. The Rothschild plan expressed a desire of the community to work with the CWOCC to find a suitable site for improvements.

The CWOCC plan envisions the City of Wausau as a “hub” of this system and a potential benefactor of new tourism to the area.



Map of proposed locations for IMBA Ride Center facilities from the CWOCC 2013 plan

4. Development of a regional sports complex in Weston.

The Weston plan recommends the establishment of a sports complex with a regional draw. The Village would like to create a facility designed to host baseball and softball tournaments and provide for a potentially underserved portion of the community. The plan states that there is an unmet demand for tournament space in the area and that girls’ softball teams in particular have to travel to Stevens Point, Rhinelander, Wisconsin Dells and other communities for tournaments. This potential facility could serve residents of Wausau as well as bringing tourism dollars to the area.

1.5 Summary of the Planning Process

1.5.1 Work Plan and Timeline

This plan was developed between March 2016 and October 2016. The process included several meetings with staff and other officials and a public information meeting. All parks were audited by Ayres staff with findings identified on inventory sheets. An online survey was also performed to elicit public information from individuals and groups unable to attend the public meetings.

1.5.2 Meetings

Meeting #1 March 22, 2016: The kick off meeting held at the Parks Administration Building with representatives from the parks department and the consulting planner. Topics discussed included goals and objectives of the plan, recent park projects, park policies and the overall scope of the project.

Field Work – April 2016: All sites were audited by Ayres staff and issues photo documented.

Meeting #2 July 14, 2016: Presentation of site analysis and preliminary recommendations to park administration staff.

Meeting #3 September 22, 2016: A public informational meeting was held to gather stakeholder input and review recommendations.

Meeting #4 October 3, 2016: A parks commission meeting to present the draft report, review recommendations and finalize the report.

1.5.3 Online Survey

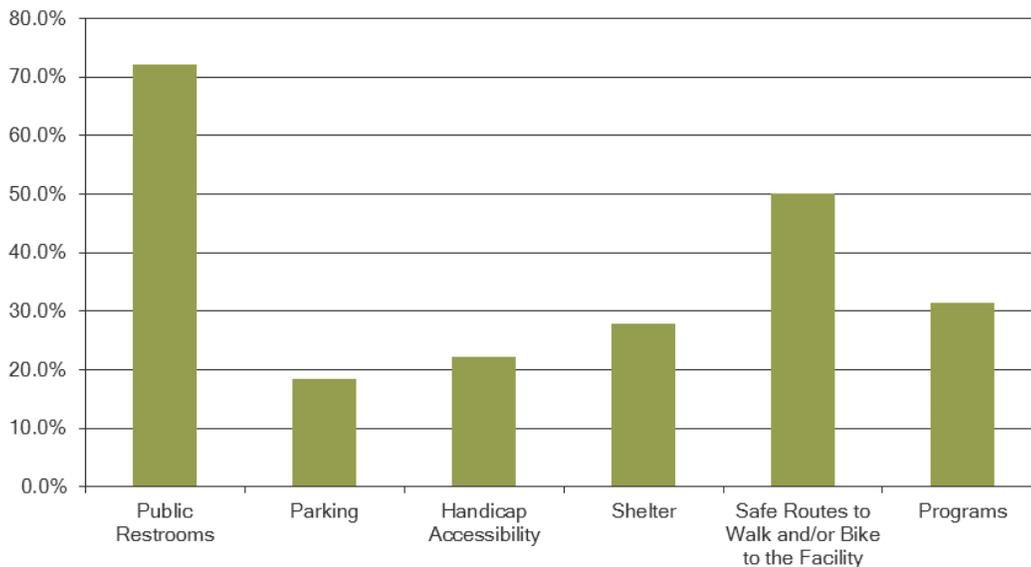
During the development of this plan, an online survey was created to record public opinion concerning key issues and opportunities for enhanced use and enjoyment of parks in Wausau. The survey was also used to formulate recommendations in Chapter 3. The survey was open to residents from August 1, 2016 to September 6, 2016. A total of 137 individuals responded to the survey, 76.6% of whom were Wausau residents.

General findings are summarized below:

- When asked about the overall condition of each type of city park facility, the most frequently rated condition was “good”. Items like picnic areas, park shelters and splash pads were the most common facilities rated “good” by respondents. Facilities that most people believe “need improvement” include park restroom facilities, dog parks, tennis courts and basketball courts.
- Survey participants were asked if the quantity of any facilities/amenities in Wausau did not meet the demands of the community. The most frequently chosen facility was park restroom facilities followed by dog parks, disc golf courses and community gardens.

- When asked what specific facilities were desired but not provided in Wausau, the most common response was BMX/mountain biking facilities. Other facilities commonly mentioned included disc golf courses, dog parks and restrooms.
- Survey participants were asked which outdoor recreation activities they expected to gain popularity over the next five years. Common responses included BMX/mountain biking, disk golf and pickleball.
- Support components are accessory structures and facilities necessary for park use. These include public restrooms, parking lots, handicap accessibility, shelters, safe routes to facilities and programming. When asked if any of these facilities needed improvement in Wausau, “public restrooms” and “safe routes to walk/bike to facility” received the highest percentage of affirmative responses with 72.2% and 50.0% respectively. See **Chart 1** for survey results.

Chart 1 – Please indicate which, if any, of the following support components at existing park facilities need improvement. Select all that apply.



- Survey participants were asked to rank different types of general park improvements in order from most to least important. The results were as follows: 26.8% thought that the “Development of New Facilities” was the most important improvement, 23.9% felt that “Maintenance of Existing Facilities” was the most important improvement, while 21.1% felt that “Offering Additional Programs” was the most important. **See Chart 2.**

Chart 2 – Highest Priority Improvements

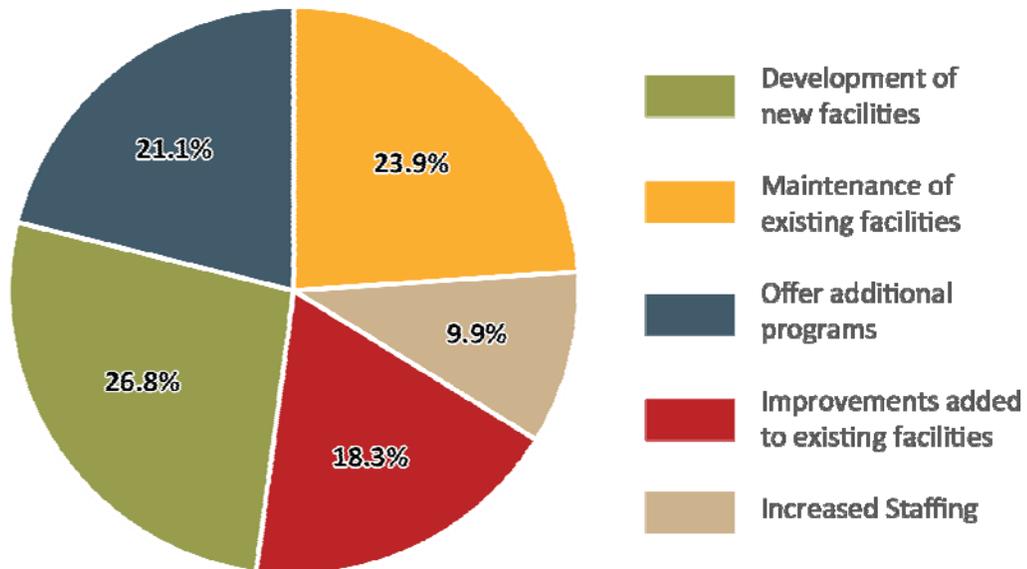


Chart 3 – Survey results of the overall condition of each type of recreational facility.

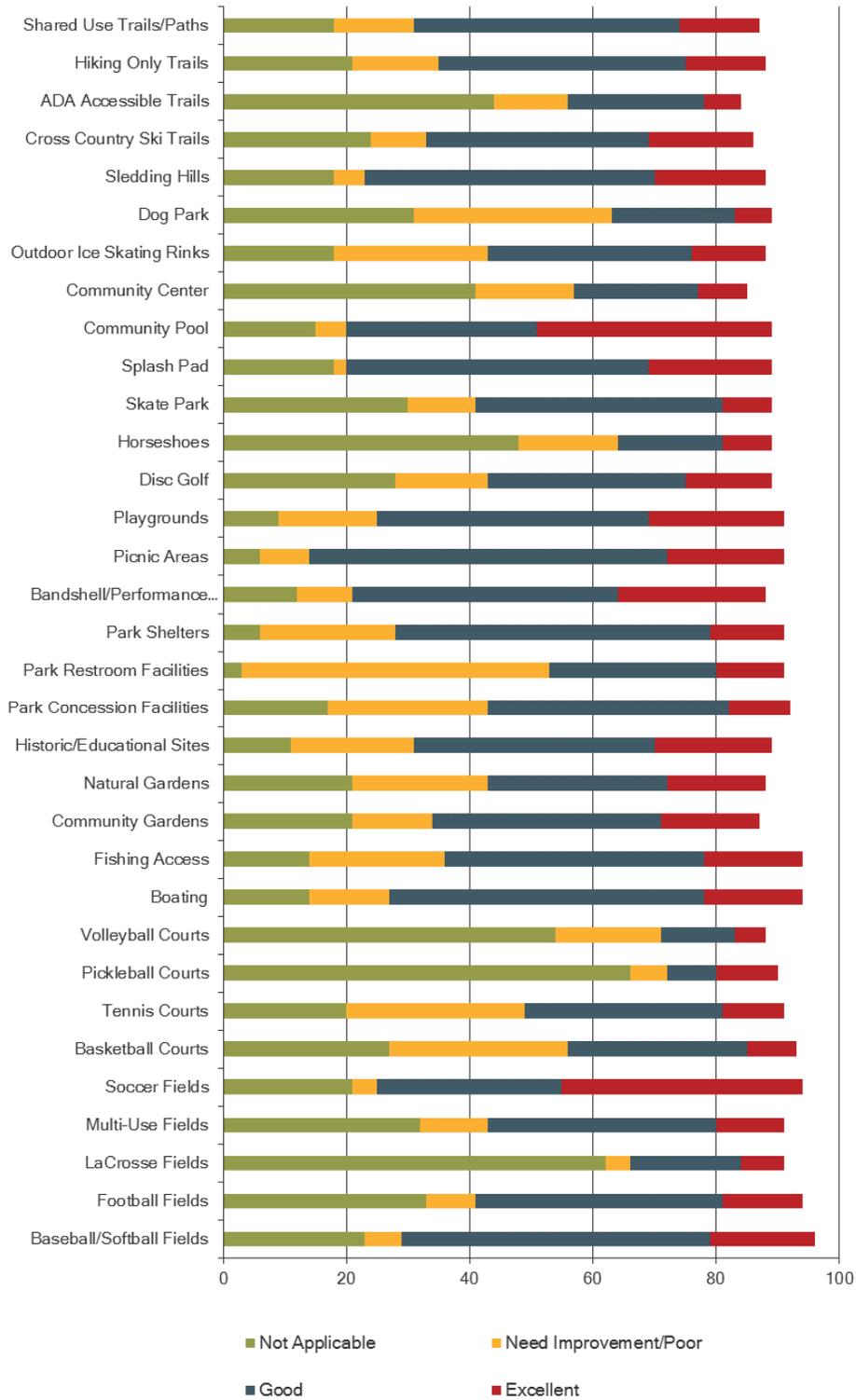
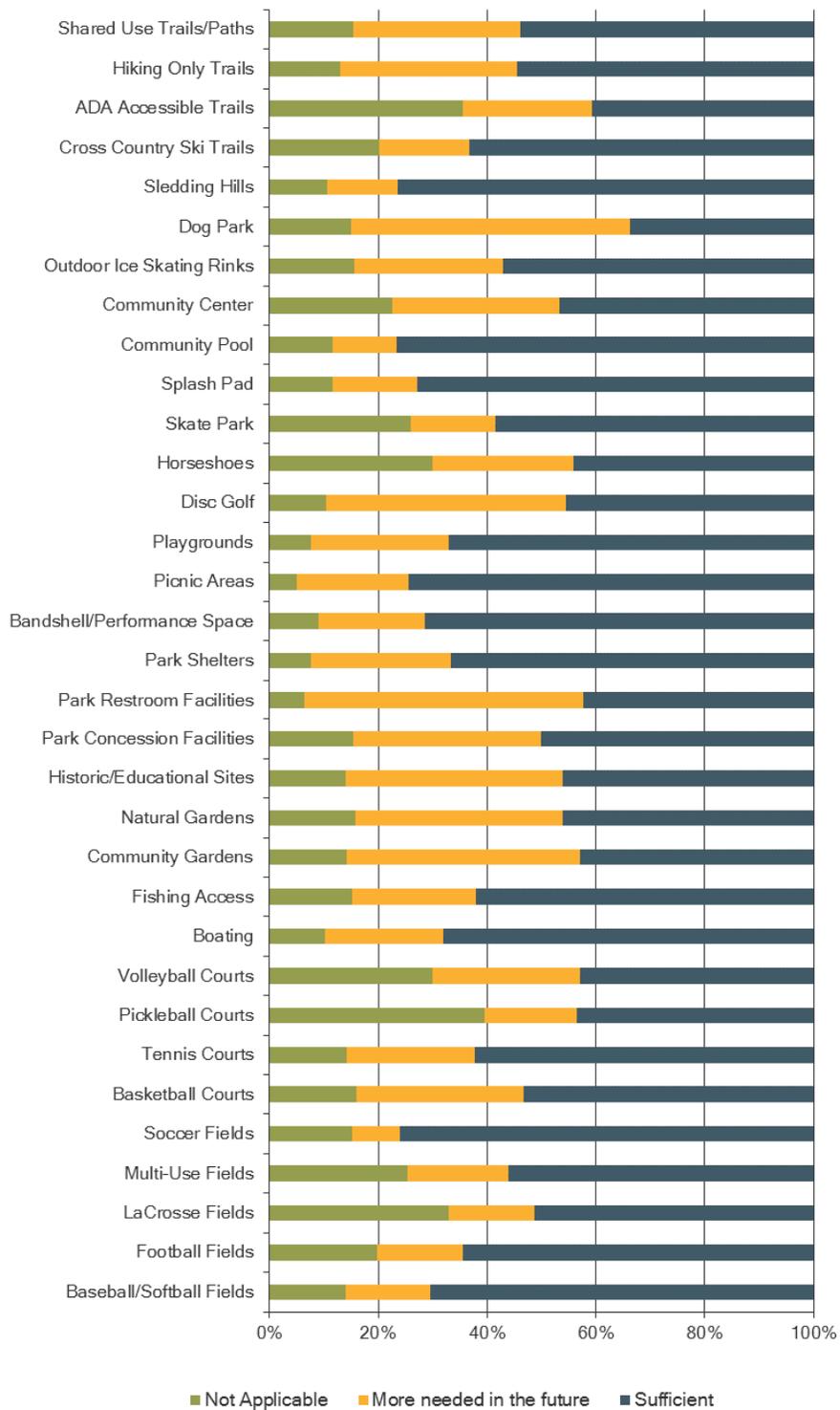


Chart 4 – Survey results as to whether or not the community has sufficient quantities for each type of facility to meet demand.



1.6 Wausau Demographics

1.6.1 Social Characteristics

This section presents social factors that are important to understanding the community and its recreation needs and potential. Particularly important to planning for the adequate provision of parks and open spaces are population trends and projections over the planning period (5-10 years) and age characteristics of potential park users.

Population Trends and Projections

There is a direct relationship between population and the need for parks and recreational space. Predicting how the population might grow in the future provides important information about the amount of new parkland and recreational facilities that will be needed to serve the new populations.

According to data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, Wausau has experienced stable population growth over the last 45 years. The population decreased 1.2% between 1970 and 1980 while it increased 14.3% between 1980 and 1990, increased 3.6% between 1990 and 2000, and increased 1.8% between 2000 and 2010. There was an overall population increase of 19.0% from 1970 to 2015.

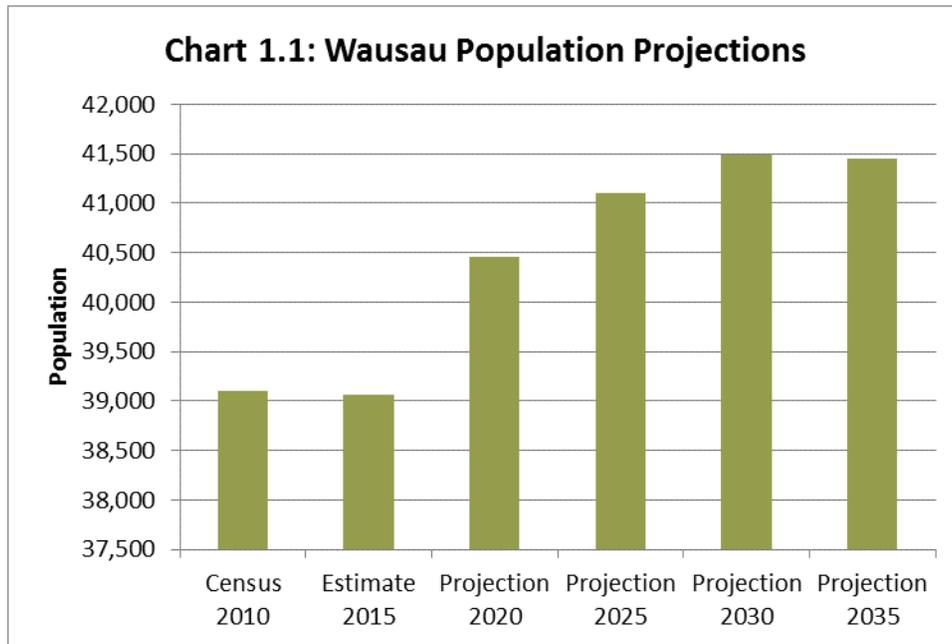
The Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA) projects population to increase at a rate of 6% over the next 20 years. That amounts to an additional 2,387 residents by the year 2035. Population projections for Wausau and comparable communities are shown in Table 1.1.

This increase in population is significant because current NRPA standards recommend a minimum of 10.5 acres of dedicated parkland per 1,000 residents. Utilizing this methodology, a minimum of 25.1 acres of new parkland will be needed to accommodate the additional 2,387 residents in 2035.

Table 1.1: Population Projections for the City of Wausau and Comparables (2035)

Name of Municipality	Census 2010	Estimate 2015	Projection 2020	Projection 2025	Projection 2030	Projection 2035	Percentage Change 2010-2035
C Wausau	39,106	39,063	40,460	41,100	41,490	41,450	6%
C Fond du Lac	43,021	43,461	44,510	45,540	46,300	46,370	8%
C La Crosse	51,320	51,992	52,550	52,750	52,700	52,300	1%
C Manitowoc	33,736	33,703	33,760	34,060	34,180	33,890	1%
C Neenah	25,501	25,871	26,990	27,810	28,520	28,870	13%
C Stevens Point	26,717	27,037	28,420	29,110	29,640	29,980	12%

Source: Wisconsin Department of Administration Estimates and Projections (2013, 2015)



Ethnic Background

In 2010, the Census indicated the largest percentage of Wausau residents (80.3%) were “White”. The second highest percentage was “Asian” with (13.4%) followed by “Two or more races” (3.8%) and “Black or African American” (1.8%). Other races make up 0.7% of the remaining population.

Employment/Unemployment

The U.S. Census 2014 5-year estimate of the unemployment rate for Wausau was 9.3%. That rate is higher than the statewide unemployment rate during this same time period of 5.3%.

Age

Age distribution in Wausau is shown in Table 1.2. Age cohorts are an important consideration when determining park facilities because different age groups utilize different recreation facilities. For example, in 2014 there were an estimated 2,901 children under the age of 5 (7.4% of the population). These children would be best served by low platforms with ramps and ladders, sand areas or short slides no taller than 4 feet. These same facilities would be uninteresting to a 10 year old. A well-rounded park system will provide a variety of facilities (soccer fields, etc.) and equipment (swings, etc.) for all potential users regardless of ability or age.

Changes in age distribution between 2000 and 2010 seem to suggest there is a growing need for adult-oriented (55 and older) activity centers. Following national trends, the community is likely to experience an increase in senior residents seeking recreation opportunities. These

populations are generally seeking walking paths (with benches) and formalized senior programming as well as fishing and other outdoor options.

**Table 1.2: Age Distribution, 2000-2014
Wausau, Wisconsin**

	2000		2014		Percent Change 2000-2014
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Under 5 years	2,394	6.2	2,901	7.4	21%
5 to 9 years	2,737	7.1	2,196	5.6	-20%
10 to 14 years	2,873	7.5	2,588	6.6	-10%
15 to 19 years	2,896	7.5	2,509	6.4	-13%
20 to 24 years	2,526	6.6	2,666	6.8	6%
25 to 34 years	4,977	13.0	5,607	14.3	13%
35 to 44 years	5,586	14.5	4,117	10.5	-26%
45 to 54 years	4,821	12.5	5,293	13.5	10%
55 to 64 years	3,034	7.9	4,783	12.2	58%
65 to 74 years	2,813	7.3	2,862	7.3	2%
75 to 84 years	2,624	6.8	2,156	5.5	-18%
85 years and over	1,145	3.0	1,529	3.9	34%
Total Population	38,426		39,209		2%

Source: 2000 Census (SF-1), 2014 ACS
5 Year Estimate