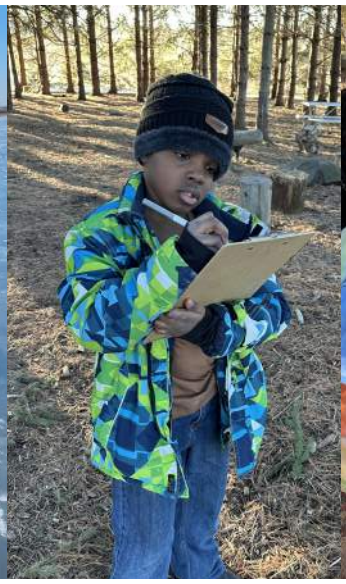
Dane County Parks

Always in Season



PARKS AND OPEN SPACE PLAN

2025 - 2030 DRAFT

Dedication to Past and Future Generations

The 2025-2030 Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan is dedicated to the wisdom and enduring spirit of those who have walked before us and to those who will follow. With deep reverence for the Native American principle of the Seventh Generation, we honor both the past and the future through managing public land, recognizing that every action we take today echoes into the lives of future generations.

The Seventh Generation philosophy reminds us to think beyond our immediate needs, to nurture and protect the land for those who will live seven generations from now. It is a call to stewardship, balance, and sustainability—values that shape the Dane County Parks mission, vision and goals.

The Dane County Park Commission, Land & Water Resources Department and Dane County Parks are honored to be stewards of public land within the 2025-2030 Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan. We acknowledge the First Nations Indigenous communities who have stewarded this land through many generations, recognize their contributions and the resilience of their people, and pay respect to their elders past and present. Their traditions of respect for the Earth and its resources guide our actions as we strive to continue this legacy of harmony with the natural world through our work connecting people to the land, water and cultural resources of Dane County.

As stewards of public lands, Dane County Parks promises to honor the principles of the Seventh Generation, ensuring that the beauty and vitality of all public lands under our management remain intact.

A thriving Dane County Park system is our gift to the future - a symbol of our commitment to balance, sustainability, and respect for the interconnectedness of all life. May it serve as a sanctuary for reflection, a playground for growth, and a lasting reminder of our responsibility to one another and to the land we call home.

In the spirit of the Seventh Generation, we dedicate the 2025-2030 Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan to all who have cared for the Earth and to all who will continue this sacred duty for generations yet to come.

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I.1 Acknowledgements

First, we acknowledge and express our deep gratitude to the Ho-Chunk, Sauk, and Kickapoo nations - the original stewards of the lands and waters of Dane County for thousands of years. We honor their deep knowledge, care, and commitment to preserving these natural resources for future generations.

On behalf of the Dane County Parks Commission, I wish to extend our sincere gratitude to our "team of many partners" and all those who contributed to this 2025-2030 Parks and Open Space Plan.

This dedicated team includes Dane County Parks staff, the County Executive and staff, Dane County Board of Supervisors, Parks Commission members, local government units, numerous parks "Friends" groups and partner organizations, the Foundation for Dane County Parks, and more than 3,000 volunteers who are deeply committed to protecting and enhancing our parks, trails, and open spaces. Your efforts make a lasting difference.

Our parks, trails, and open spaces are invaluable for protecting natural resources and promoting physical and mental well-being. Their importance became even more evident in recent years, as they provided a vital refuge for people during the pandemic while also playing a key role in addressing the challenges of climate change.

We extend special recognition and gratitude to former Dane County Parks Director Darren Marsh, who retired in 2021 after nearly 30 years of service. Darren was instrumental in developing the volunteer program and one of the first off-leash dog park programs in the nation. His contributions were honored with the renaming of the Department of Land and Water Resources' Robertson Road Operations Facility, home to the Parks and Lake Management divisions.

We also recognize and thank Chris James, former Park Planning Manager, who retired in 2025. Chris played a pivotal role in shaping Dane County's Parks and Open Space Plans from 2006 to 2018 and was integral to the public input process for this plan. His 23-year tenure left a lasting impact, including projects such as the Lower Yahara River Trail, which will serve future generations for years to come.

Additionally, the Parks Commission acknowledges the importance of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. With the program set to expire in 2026, the Parks Commission and the Dane County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution in support of its continuation. This program has provided essential funding for acquiring parkland, developing trails and lake access sites, and expanding public outdoor recreation opportunities in Dane County for decades. It remains a vital tool for preserving natural areas, wildlife habitats, and water quality while also fostering economic development and enhancing our quality of life.

As we move forward with this plan over the next five years, we remain committed to a continuous cycle of planning, action, and improvement to ensure the responsible stewardship of our parks and natural spaces for generations to come.

To everyone who contributes to our parks and open spaces - you are the heart of this effort. Thank you for helping make them the treasured community assets they are today and for the future.

Thomas Thoresen

Chair, Dane County Park Commission

I.2 Authorizing Resolution

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I.3 Dane County Park Commission

The Dane County Park Commission provides oversight and guidance to staff within the Department of Land & Water Resources on matters of public interest. Established under Wisconsin Statute Section 27.02(2), the Park Commission operates in counties with a County Executive and comprises of seven members appointed by the County Executive, with approval by the County Board. The Park Commission is an advisory committee to the Environment, Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee (EANR), which is a standing committee of the County Board responsible for overseeing the Land & Water Resources Department.

The Park Commission and the Land & Water Resources Department may exercise certain powers delineated in state statutes, subject to approval of the Environment, Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee and the County Board. The County Board, made up of 37 elected supervisors, directs the Land & Water Resources Department to carry out adopted Park Commission policies and authorizes some Park Commission actions, such as the acquisition of land, adoption of planning documents, and approval of major park development contracts.

Fish Camp/Lower Yahara River Trail Phase 2 Ribbon Cutting - 2024

I.4 Land and Water Resources Department

The 2005 Dane County budget created the Land and Water Resources Department, by merging Dane County Parks, the Land Conservation Department, and the Office of Lakes and Watersheds. The Dane County Land & Water Resources Department ensures the protection and enhancement of Dane County's natural, cultural, and historic resources; provides the County's citizens with a broad array of accessible, high-quality resource-based recreational services and facilities; and supports citizens, communities, local governments, and other agencies and organizations in their resource management and protection activities. In 2025, the Land and Water Resources Department consists of six divisions: Administration, Lake Management, Land Conservation, Parks, Watersheds & Ecosystem Services, and Water Resource Engineering.

ADMINISTRATION DIVISION

The Administration Division provides administrative support, including budget management and GIS services to the entire department. The Division serves as the first point of contact for many customers, oversees permit sales and park reservations, helps support the department's social media and web-based outreach, and manages real estate/land acquisitions.

LAKE MANAGEMENT

The Lake Management Division is responsible for many lake-related activities including management of the three County-owned lock and dams (Tenney, Babcock and LaFollette) that help maintain water levels for the four major lakes in Dane County (Mendota, Monona, Waubesa, Kegonsa). In addition, the division addresses sediment removal for water quality and to improve flood resilience, aquatic plant management, aquatic invasive species, navigational aids, flooding, clean beaches, water quality and more.

LAND CONSERVATION DIVISION

The Land Conservation Division helps landowners plan, design, and implement conservation practices with the goal of protecting water quality and conserving soil in Dane County. The division goal is to provide conservation planning assistance and technical service in the area of soil and water conservation to landowners, land users, and decision-makers of Dane County, Wisconsin.

PARKS DIVISION

The Parks Division is responsible for stewardship of over 15,000 acres of recreation parks, natural resource areas, trail corridors, historical/cultural sites, wildlife areas, and forests for Dane County's citizens. The Division provides daily visitor services, enforcement of park rules, operations and maintenance, land management, park planning and development, volunteer opportunities and youth and education programming at the Lussier Family Heritage Center. The Division also helps support the department's social media and web-based outreach, in addition to outreach and engagement events and activities.

WATERSHEDS AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Formerly the Office of Lakes and Watersheds, this division strives to protect and improve surface water quality by reducing phosphorus runoff, improving runoff infiltration, and restoring streams and wetlands. The division coordinates with other department and agency staff, water-related citizen groups, the Dane County Lakes and Watershed Commission, and a variety of other partner organizations.

WATER RESOURCE ENGINEERING DIVISION

The Water Resource Engineering Division implements and enforces the County's Erosion Control and Stormwater Management Programs and provides technical assistance to county departments regarding water resources. Goals include reducing soil erosion and reducing/minimizing the negative impacts of stormwater runoff quantity and quality after land disturbing, development, or agricultural activities.

I.5 Definitions

The following terms are found throughout this plan and are generally defined as follows:

Accessibility- The quality of being easy to approach, reach, enter, speak with or use.

Accessible Design- Accessible design is a design process in which the needs of people with disabilities are specifically considered. Any new construction or alterations must comply with the American Disabilities Act of 1999 (ADA) Standards for Accessible Design.

Active Recreation- For the purposes of this planning report, active recreation is defined as recreation that requires some type of developed facility or manipulated landscape to participate and requires ongoing maintenance. Examples include soccer, mountain biking and disc golf.

Equity- The state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair. The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept.

Inclusion- The action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure. More than simply diversity and numeral representation, inclusion involves authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging.

Nature-Based Outdoor Recreation- Activities where the primary focus is the appreciation or enjoyment of nature.

Pandemic- A widespread occurrence of an infectious disease over a whole country or the world at a particular time.

Passive Recreation- For the purposes of this planning report, passive recreation is defined as outdoor activities that do not require a developed setting or facilities to participate. Examples include bird watching, foraging, and hunting.

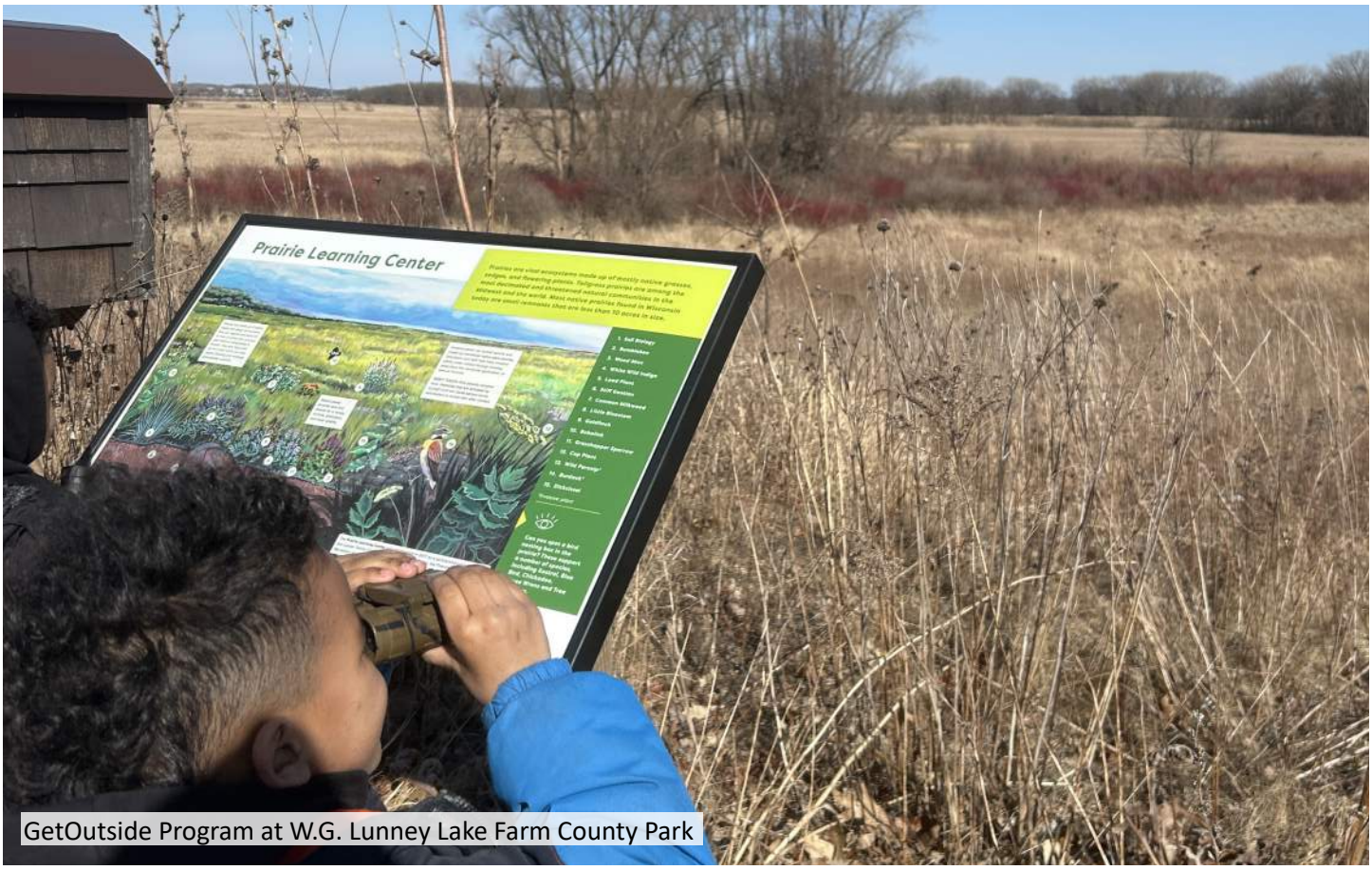
Capital Springs Dog Park, *Photo Credit: John Kalson*

Policy- Policies are more specific statements that provide guidance for future park planning, development, management, and land acquisition decision making processes. The policies of the 2025-2030 Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan were updated by staff to reflect current park operation, planning, and land acquisition procedure and practices.

Priority- Priorities generally identify acquisition, planning, or preservation efforts that should always be a part of ongoing work programs throughout the course of a year. However, it should be noted that park acquisition, development and management decisions are often based on funding opportunities, partnerships, and willing sellers rather than priority.

Silent Sports- For the purposes of this planning report, silent sports are generally defined as human-powered recreation activities that have little to no impact on the surrounding environment. Examples include snowshoeing, hiking, kayaking.

Universal Design- Universal design is a broader concept that is defined as the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Sidewalks with curb cuts and doors that automatically open when a person moves near them are examples of universally designed products. They benefit people with disabilities, parents with baby strollers, delivery workers, and others. Human characteristics considered in universal designs may include age, gender, stature, race/ethnicity, culture, native language, and learning preference.



GetOutside Program at W.G. Lunney Lake Farm County Park

I.6 Accomplishments

The 2018-2023 Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan outlined the following recreation needs; trails, wildlife viewing opportunities, water access facilities, camping, picnicking and shelters, disc golf, dog exercise areas, hunting, and archery. While some new facilities and lands have been added to meet these projected needs, many of the existing Parks and Open Space Plan recommendations will carry forward into the 2025-2030 Parks and Open Space Plan. The following is a summary of major projects that have been achieved since the last update to this plan:

Trails & Bridges

- Anderson Farm Park Trail – Completed 0.9-mile of paved trail with wayfinding signage
- Capital City Trail – Resurfaced 10-miles of paved trail and improved drainage issues
- Capital City Trail – Installed wayfinding signage, emergency location markers, and updated kiosk maps
- Lower Yahara River Trail - Completed Phase 2: 1.6-miles of paved trail and 0.75-mile of boardwalk from Fish Camp County Park into Lake Kegonsa State Park
- Lower Yahara River Trail - Installed wayfinding signage and emergency location markers
- North Mendota Trail – Completed 1.20-mile segment through Governor Nelson State Park to North Mendota Prairie Unit Wildlife Area
- North Mendota Trail – Completed 1.50-mile segment from North Shore Bay Drive to Yahara Heights/Cherokee Marsh NRA with CTH M reconstruction
- West Waubesa Trail – Completed 0.9-mile of paved trail through Capital Springs State Park/WGL Lake Farm County Park
- Token Creek County Park – Replaced 0.25-mile of boardwalk
- Brigham Trail – Resurfaced a section of paved trail and improved drainage issues
- Walking Iron County Park - Hiking bridge installed
- State Corridor Trail #21 – 7 snowmobile bridges replaced
- State Corridor Trail #36 – 1 snowmobile bridge replaced
- State Corridor Trail #38 – 2 snowmobile bridges replaced
- County Funded Trail #53 – 1 snowmobile bridge replaced
- Club Trail #33 – 1 snowmobile bridge installed at McCarthy Youth and Conservation County Park

Parks & Recreation

- Anderson County Park – Constructed a dog park
- Goodland County Park – Resurfaced the basketball court
- CamRock County Park – Installed a natural playground at Shelter 2 and built a parking lot and trailhead for the CamRock Trail
- Fish Camp County Park – Redeveloped the park
- Salmo Pond – Parking lot redevelopment
- Token Creek – Roadway pavement resurfacing and replacement of disc golf baskets
- General Improvement - Replaced all permit collection tubes with solar credit card paystations

Shelters & Restrooms

- Anderson County Park – Vault toilet
- Badger Prairie County Park – Vault toilet
- Goodland County Park – 2 shelter roof replacements
- McCarthy County Park - Timber frame shelter
- Prairie Moraine County Park – Vault toilet
- Salmo Pond County Park – Vault toilet
- Token Creek County Park – 4 shelter roof replacements
- William G. Lunney Lake Farm County Park – Campground showerhouse improvements, 2 solar shelters, 3 shelter roof replacements

Scenic Overlooks

- Festge County Park - Overlook restoration

Land Acquisition

- Acquired approximately 2,500 acres of recreation park, natural resource area, and wildlife area lands
- Provided 20 Dane County Conservation Fund Grants, protecting over 1,120 acres

Community Gardens

- Anderson Farm County Park - Added community gardens, including a well and irrigation
- Silverwood County Park - Expanded community gardens, including a well and irrigation
- Door Creek Wildlife Area – Expanded Hmong community gardens

Water Access/Fishing

- Cherokee Marsh Wildlife Area – Installed a canoe/kayak landing on the Yahara River
- Sugar River Wildlife Area (Basco Unit) – Installed a canoe/kayak landing
- Black Earth Creek – Canoe/kayak access improvement
- Fish Camp County Park – Accessible canoe/kayak improvements and fishing pier
- Salmo Pond County Park – Accessible fishing pier
- Lussier County Park – New boat launch
- Mendota County Park – Improved the lagoon walkway

Wildlife Areas/Hunting

- Added over 1,400 acres of Wildlife Areas open to public hunting
- Added over 1,100 acres and 30 permits to the Limited Archery Program for a total of 6,322 acres and 213 permits
- Cherokee Marsh Wildlife Area - Wetland restoration and constructed parking lots
- Door Creek Wildlife Area – Added a parking lot and completed stream restoration
- Walking Iron Wildlife Area – Completed stream and wetland restoration projects

Volunteer Program

- Volunteers contributed over 65,000 hours per year of park work and planted over 5,000 trees

Park Planning

- Indian Lake County Park – Completed the Master Plan

Restorations

- Walking Iron County Park - Black Earth Creek restoration
- Walking Iron Wildlife Area – Wetland restoration
- Halfway Prairie Wildlife Area – Prairie restoration
- Indian Lake County Park – Forest restoration
- Morton Forest – Forest restoration
- Anderson Farm County Park – Forest restoration
- Black Earth Creek Headwaters – Wetland restoration
- Falk Wells Sugar River Wildlife Area – Wetland restoration
- Fish Camp County Park – Wet meadow restoration

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2025-2030 Dane County Parks & Open Space Plan identifies significant cultural, historical, and natural resources that should be considered for possible protection, preservation, or restoration over the next five years. The plan also identifies Dane County's role in providing facilities to meet anticipated demands for county-wide recreation needs. This plan is not a land use plan or created for the purpose of guiding future zoning decisions. The Parks & Open Space Plan must be updated and adopted by the County Board every five years in order to maintain Dane County's eligibility for a variety of state and federal grant funding programs for park and trail land acquisition, development and restoration.

The following vision statement and six primary goals are identified within the plan.

VISION STATEMENT: Connect people to the land, water, and cultural resources of Dane County.

GOALS:

1. Provide sufficient park land and recreation facilities to meet the demand of Dane County residents without adversely affecting existing natural and cultural resources.
2. Preserve for posterity the characteristics and diversity of the natural, cultural, and historical resources of Dane County.
3. Preserve large tracts of natural and agricultural rural landscapes at urban fringe areas that will provide regional resource protection and recreation benefits.
4. Provide volunteer opportunities and stewardship education to all county residents.
5. Protect lakes, rivers and streams, including shorelines, wetlands, high infiltration areas and associated vegetative buffers to maintain high water quality, manage water quantity, and sustain water-related recreation throughout Dane County.
6. Provide an inclusive parks system for all Dane County residents, regardless of age, race, gender or gender identity, national origin, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, place of residence, veteran status, physical ability, cognitive capacity, or family, marital, or economic status.

PLANNING PROCESS

The update to the Parks & Open Space Plan began in January of 2024 and included a comprehensive public input process consisting of three public informational meetings that provided the public, stakeholders, and local units of government opportunities to provide input on recommendations found within this plan. An interactive web page with feedback form posted on the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department website was made available. Invitations to participate in the planning process for the update to the plan were e-mailed to all local units of government in April of 2024, and again in April 2025 to provide feedback on the draft plan. As an added outreach effort, Dane County Parks prepared a survey to further explore the overall public awareness of the park system and any improvements that could be made to promote a larger and more diverse group of users.

In an effort to reach a more diverse population, staff attended community events in the summer such as Drag Me to the Zoo, Disability Pride, Juneteenth, the Madison Gospel 5K and Health Fair, and Sessions at McPike Park. At each event, information about the plan was shared through staff conversations and QR codes providing information about the plan.

Dane County developed a bi-lingual survey that was partially or completely filled out and submitted by 1,958 respondents, with the majority being residents of Dane County. Overall survey results indicated the goals and vision of the previous plan are still valid.

ECONOMIC AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF PARKS

Dane County parklands provide recreation, conservation, and scenic value to local residents, while also contributing to the region's tourism economy. Dane County Parks has over 5 million estimated annual visitors. The Dane County Parks system draws visitors and supports events that directly benefit the local economy. For example, Reddan Soccer Park at Badger Prairie County Park draws over 225,000 visitors to the park annually.

Parks and outdoor recreation have significant physical and mental health benefits, which is increasingly being recognized by the health care industry, especially as obesity and its associated health care costs are on the rise. In 2020, during the Covid-19 Pandemic parks and trails saw increased use as people found new places and things to do outside to maintain social distance guidelines. There is strong evidence that people are more physically active if there are parks or trails nearby that can be easily accessed for exercising. Studies also show that the number and size of parks in a community are positively related to physical activity levels. In 2018, severe flooding occurred in parts of Dane County. Parks and greenspaces provide opportunities for flood attenuation, wetland mitigation and restoration opportunities to reduce impacts from increased development and runoff.

EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY

Dane County Parks is dedicated to providing an inclusive parks system for all Dane County residents, regardless of age, race, gender or gender identity, national origin, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, place of residence, veteran status, physical ability, cognitive capacity, or family, marital, or economic status. This plan references the Land and Water Resources Equity and Inclusion Plan for meeting this goal.

PARK HISTORY AND CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

The park system was established in 1935 when the county acquired what was once Lake Park in Mt. Horeb; the park was renamed Stewart Lake County Park. Eleven additional parks were added over the next 30 years, Babcock, LaFollette, Goodland, Mendota, Brigham, Fish Lake, Festge, Half-Way Prairie, Token Creek, and Lake View Woods. In 2000, the Park Commission adopted a park classification system that divided county park lands into four categories: Recreation Parks, Natural Resource Areas, Forests and Historical/Cultural Sites. In 2007, a new land classification category called "Wildlife Areas" was adopted by the County Board for areas open to public hunting. In 2017, a trails classification was added.

EXISTING LAND AND FACILITY INVENTORY

The Dane County Parks currently provides 15,255 acres of land in the following categories:

Recreation Parks (25)	6,333
Wildlife Areas (21)	4,796
Natural Resource Areas (27)	3,346
Trails	210
Forests (2)	253
Historical/Cultural Sites (5)	317
Total	**15,255 Acres**

In addition, Dane County Parks currently provides 3,549 acres of Conservation Easements, 175 acres (24 miles) of Streambank Easements, and 133 acres of Trail Easements. Through acquisitions and grants from the Dane County Conservation Fund the Land and Water Resources Department has protected more than 22,000 acres of land.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Eleven planning considerations were considered for the update to the plan, including the Dane County Parks Survey, Demographics, Related Planning Efforts, Recreation Needs Analysis, Future Land Needs Analysis, Public Input, Parks Staff Input, Land and Water Management Considerations, and Partnership Opportunities. Primary considerations included population information, such as the population of 65 years and older residents in Dane County is increasing the most of any age group and by 2040 will account for approximately 20% of the population in Dane County. The continued projected growth of the 65 years and older County population supports the ongoing priority to develop more trail and passive recreation activities. Dane County has one of the highest and most diverse ethnic populations in south central Wisconsin. The Asian (non-Hispanic) population is the fastest growing ethnic group in Dane County, followed by the Hispanic population, bilingual signage and website information should be considered. Another primary consideration was data from the 2024 Outdoor Recreation Participation Report and the Wisconsin DNR State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation

Plan (SCORP). A summary of these two planning reports compared with Dane County Parks use data suggest the following five-year recreation needs:

- Walking/hiking/biking have the highest participation rates locally and nationally reinforcing trail development needs.
- Demand for mountain biking and disc golf continues to increase.
- Biking, dog parks, paddling, picnicking, fishing, and hunting continue to rank high for participation in Dane County.
- Camping continues to increase and regional sporting and community events place additional demands facilities.
- High visitation of nature centers demonstrates demand for outdoor education and natural/cultural interpretation.

PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

Priorities, policies, acquisition, and development recommendations were updated for each park land classification category. In addition, a shared-use trail priority list is included that outlines roles and responsibilities for major trail projects anticipated to occur over the next five years.

Recommendations are also included for the following Parks Division program and staff responsibility areas: Engagement and Visitor Services (NEW), Operations and Maintenance, Natural Resource Management (NEW), and Planning and Development, Real Estate and Grants, Agriculture, Property Stabilization, Sustainable Forestry and Woodland Restoration, Wetland Restoration and Protection (NEW), Invasive Species Control, Mound Management (NEW), Lake Management (NEW), Aquatic Plant Management (NEW), Lake Levels (NEW), Yahara River Sediment Removal (NEW), Stream Restoration and Protection (NEW), Streambank Easements.

Two new recommendations are included in Partner Projects and Programs including the Rodefeld Landfill and the Madison Lakeway Project. The Rodefeld landfill is nearing capacity and planning for closure and future public access will be initiated by Dane County Waste & Renewables. The Madison LakeWay is a regionally significant park along the shore of Lake Monona with connections to Downtown, Capital Springs Recreation Area and the Capital City Trail. Dane County has contributed funding to see this project implemented.

Recommendations within Adapting for the Future address changing population needs, public expectations and changing environmental conditions and their impacts on park lands. Planning and adapting for change will ensure that Dane County can sustain and maintain the park system into the future. Many examples of strategies to address these challenges are found throughout this plan; the Foundation for Dane County Parks is a new addition included in this plan. Climate change is a major consideration included in this plan update. The lands and recreation opportunities offered by Dane County Parks will certainly be impacted by climate change, such as extreme weather events and decreasing snow cover. With varying habitat, access to major universities, and dedicated volunteers, the Dane County Parks system can encourage and expand research and partnerships for regular scientific monitoring of wildlife and plant life, and water quality around the issue of climate change. The restoration and management of parklands will play a vital role in achieving the Dane County Climate Action Plan objectives.

CONCLUSION

The Dane County Parks system has continued to expand with the addition of new properties and classifications to meet the demands of public use. Increased public visitation throughout the system remains high in the wake of the pandemic. Public input continues to support land acquisition. The WDNR stewardship grant program is under threat and it's unclear if the program will be available in the future. Dane County will seek grant funds and work with the Foundation for Dane County Parks on acquisition development recommendations.

Planning and development of the regional off road shared-use trail system will continue to be a priority over the next five years. Trails connect neighborhoods and communities and provide transportation, health, and recreation benefits. Active transportation, such as walking and biking, is an important part of reducing emissions and efforts of the Dane County Climate Action Plan. The strong demand for shared-use trail development must be guided by the planning and development roles and responsibilities outlined within this plan.

The Land and Water Resource Department and Parks Division have developed specialized program areas to implement the initiatives and goals that will sustain Dane County Parks into the future. Strategic coordination and planning will protect the land, water, and cultural resources of Dane County for future generations.

III. INTRODUCTION AND PLAN PURPOSE

The Dane County Parks system continues to increase in acreage and use. In March of 2020, Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic and a national emergency that resulted in travel bans, shutdowns, and social distancing guidelines for more than a year. During these isolated and uncertain times, parks became places of respite, relaxation, and relief for people and communities facing mental and physical health concerns. Dane County Parks saw an influx of visitors filling parking lots, trails and properties as people were publicly encouraged to explore the outdoors. Since then, park visitation remains high throughout the county park system.

Public Health Madison & Dane County's Post

Public Health Madison & Dane County
April 22, 2020 ·

We encourage you to get outside solo or with your household members every day, for your physical and mental health. Please remember that sports courts and playgrounds at our area parks are closed due to COVID-19.

We recommend walking, hiking, or biking, while being safe and maintaining physical distance of at least 6 feet from anyone you may encounter while you're out. Bring along your cloth face covering and put it on in any areas where you're unable to maintain 6 feet of distance. If you get to an area that's crowded, consider finding somewhere else to go. Madison Parks Dane County Parks

The Dane County Park Commission continually strives to balance public use with proper stewardship and land management practices. This plan provides a county wide vision for park, trail, recreation, policy, program, and resource protection initiatives based on current recreational trends, demographics, public input, and current planning considerations. As the population of Dane County continues to grow more diverse, the ability to provide a park system that is easily comprehensible, managed, and inclusive to all people is paramount to reduce user conflicts and ensure resource protection is balanced with public access.

This plan update included a staff-led survey with the goal of gauging park user level of satisfaction, preferred types and frequency of recreation use, barriers to use, and areas where improvement is needed. Overall, the survey results and public input continue to demonstrate support and appreciation from Dane County residents. They value the variety and diversity of recreational opportunities and protected land for public use over the last 50 years of park and open space planning.

The 2025-2030 Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan seeks to identify significant cultural, historical, and natural resources that should be considered for possible protection, preservation, or restoration over the next five years. The plan also seeks to identify countywide recreation needs and Dane County's role in providing accessible, equitable, and inclusive facilities to meet anticipated demands. Both resource and recreation needs were identified through a comprehensive public input process. This Park and Open Space Plan must be updated and adopted by the County Board every five years in order to be eligible to participate in a variety of state and federal funding programs for park land acquisition and development, including trails.

IV. VISION STATEMENT AND GOALS

VISION STATEMENT:

CONNECT PEOPLE TO THE LAND, WATER, AND CULTURAL RESOURCES OF DANE COUNTY.

GOALS:

Goals in this plan are intended to be broad, visionary statements that are not time specific which serve to guide the policies and direction of Dane County Parks. This update to the County Parks and Open Space Plan has six primary goals:

1. Provide sufficient park land and recreation facilities to meet the demand of Dane County residents without adversely affecting existing natural and cultural resources.
2. Preserve for posterity the characteristics and diversity of the natural, cultural, and historical resources of Dane County.
3. Preserve large tracts of natural and agricultural rural landscapes at urban fringe areas that will provide regional resource protection and recreation benefits.
4. Provide volunteer opportunities and stewardship education to all county residents.
5. Protect lakes, rivers and streams, including shorelines, wetlands, high infiltration areas and associated vegetative buffers to maintain high water quality, manage water quantity, and sustain water-related recreation throughout Dane County.
6. Provide an inclusive parks system for all Dane County residents, regardless of age, race, gender or gender identity, national origin, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, place of residence, veteran status, physical ability, cognitive capacity, or family, marital, or economic status.

Adaptive recreation in parks.

V. ECONOMIC AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF PARKS

Dane County Parks have an estimated annual visitation of over 5 million visitors. The park system is "Always in Season" serving the local community and region as a destination for daily exercise, seasonal activities, annual events and national conferences and competitions like the International Trail Summit, Iron Man Competition, CrossFit Games, or World Cyclocross Championship. Park and recreation facilities are primary drivers of Dane County's billion dollar tourism industry. In Spring, campgrounds start to fill when the Midwest Horse Fair comes to town. In the summer, boat launches and trails are full as biking, boating, fishing, and paddling pick up. In the fall, hunting and hiking peak with the changing leaf colors. Winter typically brings opportunities for cross country skiing, ice fishing, and snowmobiling.

During the pandemic, outdoor activity and park usage spiked as people were motivated to participate in outdoor recreation to improve physical and mental health, spend time with family and friends, and bring home fresh, healthy food. Park visitation has remained as Dane County parkland has inherent recreation, conservation, and scenic values that attract users to a diversity of facilities and landscapes. The health benefits of parks and recreation facilities are becoming increasing more important to our community as more and more research indicates a positive relationship between parks, the economy, and healthy people.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Dane County Parks provide a significant economic benefit to Dane County through recreation service industry sales for activities like biking, fishing and disc golf. Dane County has been host to a number of local sporting events like Reddan Soccer Park, mountain bike events, and national scale events including the Horse Fair, CrossFit Games, Ironman Competition, and the World Cyclocross Championship. All of these events certainly have an overall positive impact on the local economy, and nearly always are supported heavily by Dane County Parks.

Information provided by the Wisconsin Bicycle Federation indicates bicycling contributes $1.4 billion annually and 13,000 jobs to the Wisconsin economy. Bicycling contributed $152 million to the state's GDP in 2022. Wisconsin and Dane County are consistently ranked as some of the best bicycling destinations in the country. Dane County is also home to some of the largest bicycling industries in the nation.

Parks have shown to increase property values and improve economies by attracting businesses and local residents. According to the Wisconsin Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, outdoor recreation contributed over $11.2 billion to the Wisconsin economy in 2023. Employment in recreation and tourism industries has increased over the years. In 2023 tourism supported 18,811 jobs in Dane County.

The Dane County Parks system draws visitors and supports events that directly benefit the local economy. For example, Reddan Soccer Park at Badger Prairie County Park draws over 225,000 visitors to the park annually. The Greater Madison Convention and Visitors Bureau estimates that the seven soccer tournaments held at Reddan alone generate more than $3 million annually in direct spending in the local economy. Trout anglers visiting Dane County parklands and streambank easements also contribute to the local economy. A study published by Trout Unlimited indicated that the total economic impact of fishing in the Driftless Area in 2017 was estimated to be over $1.6 billion, supporting 6,500 jobs in the region. Special events held at Dane County's park facilities, such as the Sugar Maple Music Festival, cyclocross and mountain bike races, various runs/walks, disc golf and fishing tournaments, also draw thousands of visitors each year that result in direct spending in the local economy. Additionally, Dane County issues over 3,000 lake access permits annually, with a third of them being non-resident, suggesting a significant economic impact from boaters recreating on our lakes. Dane County Parks amenities and services are a central reason why people visit, live, and work in Dane County, providing substantial benefits to the local economy.

HEALTH BENEFITS

Time spent in nature has a multitude of mental and physical health benefits. In Wisconsin, a lack of time is identified as the most common barrier to participation in outdoor recreation. However, research shows that 20 minutes spent walking in nature improves concentration, 30 minutes spent walking in a park can improve heart health, circulation and lower blood pressure, and just five minutes walking in nature improves mood, self-esteem and relaxation. Frequent exposure to nature reduces anxiety and depression, while promoting a sense of wellbeing and fulfillment.

There is strong evidence that people are more physically active if there are parks or trails nearby that can be easily accessed for exercising. Studies also show that the number and size of parks in a community are positively related to physical activity levels. It's important to consider opportunities for maximizing health benefits as Dane County Parks properties are planned and developed. For example, providing park facilities that are close to populated areas which are accessible and designed for a diverse population and year-round use. In 2021, Dane County Parks partnered with the Foundation for Dane County Parks, SSM Health, and Dean on a Healthy Parks, Healthy You project to connect people with the parks to promote better health. Through engagement, events, resources, and programming visitors go opportunities to use the parks and learn about the health benefits of spending time in nature. In 2022, Women's Wellness Walks were hosted focused on making connections with ourselves, each other, and with nature. Events like this and other activities should continue to be encouraged to promote the health benefits of parks.

The Dane County Parks system natural areas offer many opportunities to escape urban environments, which is increasingly being recognized in the field of medicine as providing measurable health benefits. Some of Dane County's most important natural, cultural, and historic resources are preserved in parks. Visiting a park, cultural site, or heritage center can expand your sense of place, challenge your perspective, and teach a new skill or activity. Curiosity leads to life-long learning which is known to promote self-confidence and brain function. Learning about past histories can expand your knowledge of different people and cultures and promote empathy toward others which has mental health benefits that improve well-being including decreased stress, emotional regulation, and a sense of connection to others. Park Prescriptions (ParkRx) is a growing movement among healthcare providers and parks where doctors refer their patients to parks for their physical and mental health. Park prescriptions are recognized by the NPS Healthy Parks Healthy People program as a promising practice for expansion nationally.

Native Seed Collection at Yahara Heights County Park

VI. EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY

Dane County Parks is dedicated to providing an inclusive parks system for all Dane County residents, regardless of age, race, gender or gender identity, national origin, ethnicity, culture, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, place of residence, veteran status, physical ability, cognitive capacity, or family, marital, or economic status.

The department has a representative serving on the county's Racial Equity and Social Justice team and also has an internal team that works to implement the Equity and Inclusion Plan and share learning resources with staff.

Since 2019, Dane County Parks has partnered with Access Ability Wisconsin and other partners including the Foundation for Dane County Parks, Madison Fishing Expo, and Wisconsin Fishing Expo to fund raise and implement accessible fishing and boating improvements throughout the park system.

Access Ability Wisconsin, Inc. is a non-profit organization dedicated to facilitating and providing the means for individuals with mobility challenges to access and enjoy Wisconsin's natural resources. Dane County Parks in cooperation with Access Ability Wisconsin offers a free to use outdoor, all-terrain wheelchairs for anyone with a temporary or permanent disability in the Capital Springs Recreation Area. The chair is designed to help people of all ability levels access the outdoors.

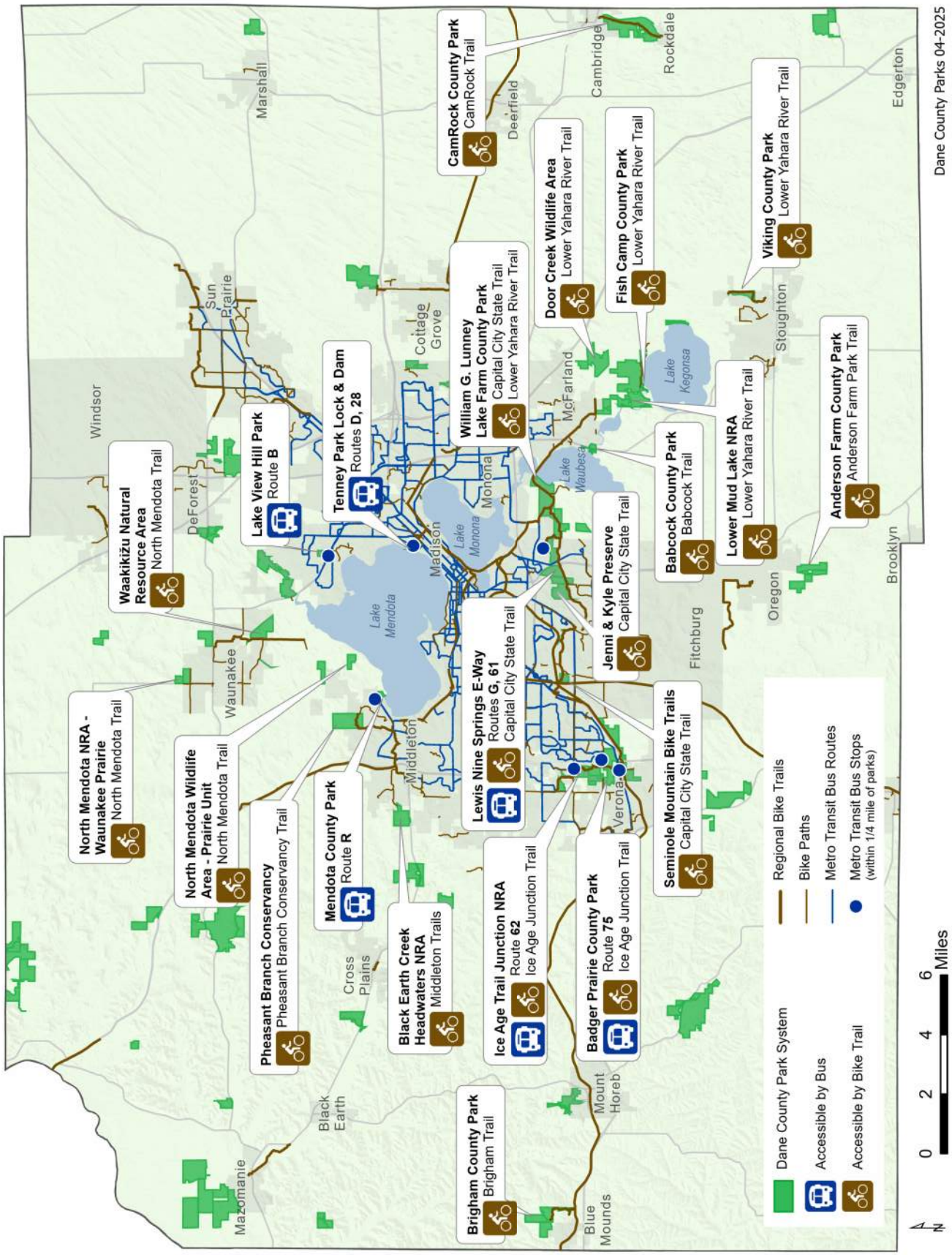
In 2021, the Dane County Board of Supervisors contracted with Keen Independent Research to conduct an independent evaluation of equity and access at Dane County Parks and the Henry Vilas Zoo. The final report included recommendations and resources for Dane County.

In 2022, the Land and Water Resources Department updated its Equity and Inclusion Plan based on recommendations of the Keen evaluation and submitted it to the Dane County Office of Equity and Inclusion. The plan increases the understanding of equity issues and how staff can be a constructive part of a more equitable and inclusive department and county. The plan includes actions and ideas to increase the diversity of the workforce, and identify and remove barriers so that all county residents have equal access to programs and services offered by the Land and Water Resources Department and Dane County Parks. The plan builds on equity initiatives already underway in our department.

Priorities for maintaining and achieving an equitable, inclusive, and accessible parks system include:

1. Continue to implement recommendations of the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department Equity and Inclusion Plan to address identified challenges and barriers.
2. Continue to develop park facilities for all ages and abilities by striving to provide universal and inclusive experiences.
    - Maintain Dane County Parks website highlighting accessible park facilities such as accessible fishing piers: https://www.danecountyparks.com/parks/accessibility
    - Identify a park for developing a universally accessible and inclusive playground for people with cognitive or physical disabilities.
    - Continue to comply with and exceed ADA and Universal Accessibility Standards for all new develoment projects.
3. Coordinate with Madison Parks and other municipal departments as appropriate to further evaluate this topic and consider their respective jurisdictions, the facilities and programs they offer, and the populations served.

Dane County Park Properties Accessible by Bus or Bike Trail



VII. PARK HISTORY AND CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Dane County Parks was created in 1935 when the county acquired what was at the time Lake Park in Mt. Horeb. The site was renamed Stewart Park and had a rich recreational history and also served as regional community gathering location. Early use of the park included a lake that provided for fishing, swimming, ski-jump, and skating and supplied the area residents with their annual storage of ice. Upon the county's purchase, the park became one of two Civilian Conservation Corps. (CCC) camps that were located in Dane County in 1934 and 1935. The CCC rebuilt the dam and created a 7-acre lake with an access road and a new beach.

Eleven additional parks would be added over the next 30 years, Babcock, LaFollette, Goodland, Mendota, Brigham, Fish Lake, Riley-Deppe, Festge, Half-Way Prairie, Token Creek, and Lake View Woods. Many early parks received their current names later through a school naming campaign that selected prominent figures from the area and state. The first County Parks and Open Space Plan was adopted in 1970, enabling the department to apply for a number of State and Federal park acquisition and development grant funds. In the late 1980's, the Park Commission initiated the Indian Mounds Identification Project to inventory and locate the remaining Native American burial mound in unincorporated Dane County. At the time, several mounds were under threat of encroachment by proposed development. The report resulted more awareness and greater protections for mounds.

Beginning around 1990, the county began to focus on acquiring larger tracts of land for the purpose of protecting key natural and cultural resources, water, and wetlands. The Dane County Parks system would grow from around 700 acres to more than 3,600 acres over these 20 years. The Parks Department also began exploring diverse recreation opportunities including off-leash dog exercise areas, the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, and disc golf.

Dane County was one of the first park systems, if not the first park system, in the United States to develop designated off-leash dog exercise areas. In 1991 dog issues rose to a priority issue. Calls of concern for not only park visitor safety, but also for safe areas to take dogs became a common theme. The first Dane County Dog Park established in late 1994 was at Viking County Park.

The acquisition and recreation diversity from the 1990s continued to evolve, and by 2000 the system had nearly doubled in size to over 6,600 acres. Park system properties became much larger and contained a diverse mixture of land cover types including wetlands, agriculture, prairies, forests, historical buildings, and developed park lands. It became apparent with the expanding diversity of lands and recreation uses occurring that a system was needed to provide the public with a uniform understanding of how lands were being managed.

In 2000, the Park Commission adopted a park classification system that divided county park lands into four categories: Recreation Parks, Natural Resource Areas, Forests and Historical/Cultural Sites. The classification system identified management practices for each category and also provided the public a clear expectation of what types of recreation uses would occur on these properties. Between 2000 and 2010, the lands managed under the Park Commission nearly doubled again to almost 12,000 acres. Increasingly large tracts of land within the Natural Resource Area classification were being purchased that had little or no development of recreation facilities on them. Several properties were added to the system that were adjacent to very large tracts of WDNR wildlife areas. In 2007, a new land classification category called "Wildlife Areas" was adopted by the County Board with the intent of maintaining hunting on lands purchased that historically had this use, allowing seamless management practices on lands adjacent to WDNR wildlife areas and mitigating crop losses on lands historically prone to wildlife damage. This classification has grown the most since the last plan update.

In 2017, a "Trails" category was added to the park classification system which now includes over 130 acres of trail easements and properties supporting the county-wide trail network. Trail mileages are anticipated to continue to grow over the next five years, increasing the importance of a transparent understanding by local units of government, non-profit conservation organizations and the public of Dane County's role in planning, developing, operating, and maintaining a multi-jurisdictional regional trail network. In 2021, Waunakee Community Middle School students worked with the Dane County Park Commission to name a property in the North Mendota Natural Resource Area Waakikižu (pronounced WÄ – ke – ke – zhü) Natural Resource Area. Waakikižu is a Ho-Chunk language word that means community or togetherness.

In 2025, Dane County Parks celebrates its 90th Anniversary as the largest county park system in Wisconsin and welcomes more than 5 million visitors annually. Cultural heritage within the park system has grown with mound protections, a new Center for Rural History at Schumacher Farm Park and the the Heritage Center providing outdoor and environmental education experiences for persons of all ages and ability levels. Gaylord Nelson had envisioned the center would celebrate our interconnection with the land, our forebears, and the community, saying "our heritage and way of life is directly linked to our ancestors and a rich, diverse, cultural history."

VIII. EXISTING LAND AND FACILITY INVENTORY

VIII.1 Recreation Parks

VIII.2 Natural Resource Areas

VIII.3 Forests

VIII.4 Historical/Cultural Sites

VIII.5 Wildlife Areas

VIII.6 Trails

VIII.7 Preserves

VIII.1 Recreation Parks

DEFINITION

A Recreation Park consists of land that is specifically set aside for active and passive recreation uses. Active recreation generally refers to activities that can only occur on developed park lands or facilities such as soccer, disc golf, dog parks, and RV camping. Passive recreation refers to activities that occur in natural areas with little or no development of facilities required, i.e. kayaking, hiking, foraging, wildlife observation, and snowshoeing. Recreation park use is often extensive and intensive. A Recreation Park primarily serves users who are attracted to outdoor recreation with an expectation of using some type of developed access or facilities. It may provide facilities that offer a wide range of outdoor recreation opportunities, cater to only one predominant activity (special use), or include lands under a trail corridor classification that offer connections to other park and trail systems. Recreation Parks may also be found within the boundaries of lands which fall under a different category.

OVERVIEW

Dane County Parks has 26 Recreation Parks, which account for about 5,570 acres of all the lands in the system. The county's role is to provide large, regional-scale parks that attract users from numerous communities. Recreation Parks are usually several hundred acres in size and provide a mix of natural and developed park land areas. Recreational use of Dane County park land is extremely diverse and includes, but is not limited to, hiking, biking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, horseback riding, camping, picnicking, mountain biking, soccer, aeromodelling, lake access, dog walking, disc golf, bow-hunting, foraging, and fishing.

INVENTORY

The table on page 26 and map on page 27 present an inventory of all Dane County Recreation Parks.

McCarthy Park, sledding hill

	Park: Date Represents Year Established in County POSP	Total Acres	Car Parking and Public Access	Number of Camp Sites	Electric Campsites	Camping with Showers	Group Camping	Restrooms	Reservable Shelters	Non-Reservable Shelters	Picnic Area	Historical/Cultural Feature	Playground Equipment	Improved Boat Launch (Trailer Parking Spaces)	Small Watercraft Launch	Canoe/Kayak Launch	Swimming	Accessible Fishing Pier	Shared-use Trail (Miles)	Hiking - Hard Surface Trail (Miles)	Hiking - Natural Surface Trail (Miles)	Boardwalk Trail (Miles)	Mountain Biking (Miles)	Equestrian Trail (Miles)	Cross-Country Skiing (Miles)	Snowshoeing Trail (Miles)	Snowmobile Trail (Miles)	Basketball Courts	Volleyball Courts	Tennis Courts/Pickleball	Dog Park (Acres)	Dog Park Trails (Miles)	Disc Golf Course (Holes)	Permitted Archery Hunting	Other Amenities
1	Anderson Farm (2014)	309.6	●					●			●								0.9	0.2	3.5						0.7				36	2		●	Electronic Pay Station, Community Agriculture
2	Babcock (1936)	37.2	●	25	●	●		●		1	●	●	●	78		●		1		0.5														Electronic Pay Station
3	Badger Prairie (1976)	316.9	●					●	1		●	●	●						0.8		4.2		3.4			4.2	0.1				10	0.8			Aeromodelling Field, Electronic Pay Station
4	Brigham (1952)	232.4	●	23			●	●	2		●	●	●						1.4		3.1					3.1			●					●	
5	CamRock (1970)	574.5	●					●	3		●	●	●			●			2.4		3.7		9.7		6									●	Natural Playground, Electronic Pay Station
6	Donald (1993)	774.7	●					●	1		●	●									14.5			10		14.5	1.2							●	
7	Festge (1963)	155.5	●					●	2		●	●	●								4.5					4.5								●	
8	Fish Camp (1976)	15.6	●					●			●	●		21		●		2	0.3*	0.3														Electronic Pay Station
9	Fish Lake (2000)	199.7	●																	0.6							0.9								
10	Goodland (1937)	14.1	●					●	2		●	●	●	19			●			0.1								●	●	●					Electronic Pay Station
11	Indian Lake (1975)	790.8	●				●	●	1		●	●			●					0.3	7.4				4.5	1.4	1.1				38	1.9		●	Warming House, Ice Age Trail, Electronic Pay Station
12	Jenni & Kyle (1989)	160.4	●					●	1		●							3		0.3	0.8													●	
13	La Follette (1936)	30.1	●					●	1		●	●	●			●																			
14	Lussier (2000)	221.3	●					●			●			13							1.1						0.9							●	
15	McCarthy (1974)	347.9	●				●	●	1		●									0.1	4.9			4.3	4.7	5.1	1.6							●	Electric Vehicle Charging Station, Electronic Pay Station
16	Mendota (1951)	19.0	●	27	●	●		●	1		●	●	●		●		●	1		0.1	0.4							●	●						5 Unit Boat Campground, Electronic Pay Station
17	Prairie Moraine (1993)	166.4	●					●													2.4**					2.4					76	4.2			Electronic Pay Station
18	Salmo Pond (1980)	7.8	●					●			●					●		5		0.2	0.3														
19	Silverwood (2000)	308.3	●					●							●	●					6.3			5.7											Community Agriculture
20	Stewart (1935)	177.1	●					●	1		●	●	●			●	●	1			4.0													●	
21	Token Creek (1966)	417.9	●	37	●	●	●	●	5		●		●			●		1			6.1	0.3		2.6	4.9	2.5			●		38	1.5	27	●	Electronic Pay Station, Electric Vehicle Charging Station
22	Viking (1972)	77.1	●					●							●	●			1.2	0.1	1						0.5				15	1.2			Electronic Pay Station
23	Walking Iron (1972)	495.3	●					●			●					●					6.9			6.0			1.7							●	
24	William G. Lunney Lake Farm (1973)	345.8	●	47	●	●	●	●	3	2	●	●	●	51		●		2	3.4		6.2	1.2*			3.8				●				●	Electronic Pay Station, Capital Springs Recreation Area
25	Yahara Heights (2000)	138.1	●													●					1.8										21	1.2		●	Electronic Pay Station
	Totals	**6,333.3**		**159**					**25**	**3**				**182**				**16**	**10**	**2.8**	**80.7**		**13**	**29**	**24**		**8.7**				**234**	**13**			

* Includes boardwalk for Lower Yahara River Trail

** Prairie Moraine Hiking Natural Surface Trails are designated segments of Ice Age National Scenic Trail.

Data as of March 2025

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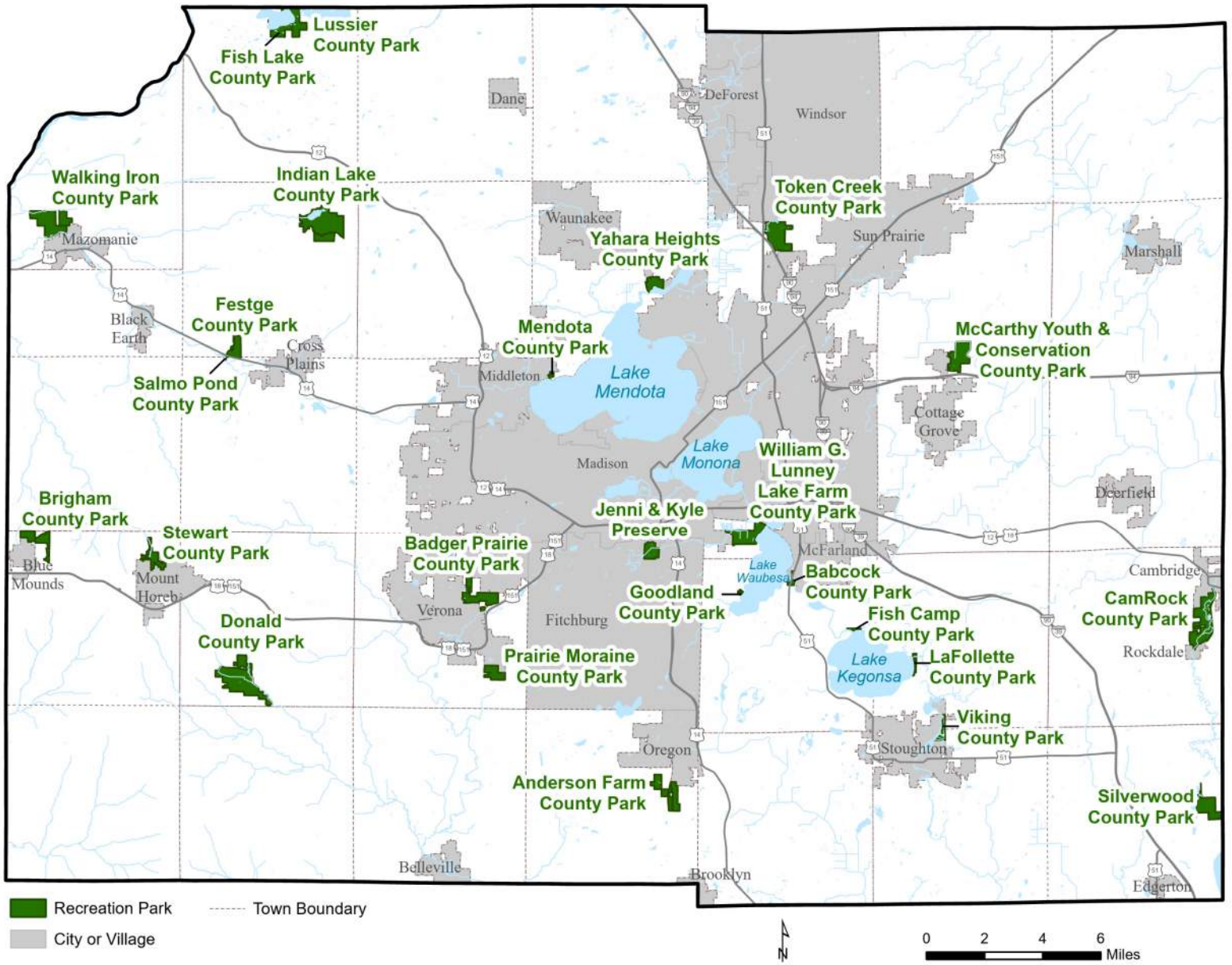
Dane County Recreation Parks



VIII.2 Natural Resource Areas

DEFINITION

A Natural Resource Area consists of land that is specifically set aside for the protection of valuable natural environments and/or greenbelt corridors that were identified through a public process. This can include habitat protection and open space preservation. Recreation at Natural Resource Areas is a secondary objective, and users are encouraged to enjoy the resource as is. Passive recreation activities dominate the site use and active recreation, if any, only takes place on the fringes or in small pockets (areas) of a natural resource area. Natural Resource Areas may include lands belonging to another category, such as trails, recreation parks or wildlife areas.

OVERVIEW

Dane County Parks has 27 Natural Resource Areas, which account for about 3,346 acres of all the lands in the system. Typically lands protected within these project areas should be large, contiguous blocks that may include a mixture of agricultural working lands, water, wetlands, steep topography, prairie, and forests. Some of these lands may be protected through fee title purchase, however, much of the protection of larger landscapes and buffer zones can be achieved through purchase of agriculture/conservation easements and continue to remain under private ownership. Land or easements are only purchased from willing sellers. Natural Resource Area boundaries have no bearing on any zoning or land use decisions and participation by private landowners or local units of government to carry out any outlined resource protection initiatives is on a voluntary basis.

Creation of larger areas will provide enough space to incorporate some limited recreation use without impacting the resource and also allow native vegetation management practices, such as prescribed burns, to take place. Lands protected within Natural Resource Areas are often owned by multiple public agencies, therefore, it is critical that the county work jointly with these other agencies to ensure cohesive resource and recreation management.

INVENTORY

The table on page 29 and map on page 30 present an inventory of all Dane County Natural Resource Areas.

Waakikizu Natural Resource Area, Six Mile Creek

	Natural Resource Areas: Date Represents Year Established in County POSP	Project Area Boundary (acres)***	Total Natural Resource Area Acres under County Ownership****	Off-street Parking	Restrooms	Canoe Launch	Shared-use Trail	Hiking - Natural Surface Trail (Miles)	Groomed Cross-Country Skiing (Miles)	Snowshoeing Trail (Miles)	Snowmobile Trail (Miles)	Dog Park Area (Acres)	Historical/Cultural Feature	Permitted Archery Hunting	Other Amenities/Properties
1	Badfish Creek (2012)	15975.9	0.0												
2	Badger Mill Creek (1995)	623.1	0.0												
3	Black Earth Creek (2001)	11718.5	179.0							0.2				●	NRA includes Black Earth Creek Headwaters (2020)
4	Blooming Grove Drumlins (2000)	1645.7	174.7											●	
5	Blue Mounds (2012)	2976.3	0.0												
6	Capital Springs Recreation Area	2755.3	0.0*	●	●		●	1.4		2.6		25	●	●	Upper Mud Lake Parking Lot, Capital Springs Disc Golf Course (18-hole), and Dog Park
7	Cherokee Marsh (1970)	4608.2	207.7	●				3.8		3.8			●	●	
8	Door Creek Wetlands (2000)	3961.5	0.0												
9	Fish Lake (1996)	683.3	0.0												
10	Ice Age Trail Junction (1993)	1949.6	553.7	●			●	5.8		5.8	0.3			●	
11	Koshkonong Creek	3519.4	0.0												
12	Leopold-Riley Game Cooperative (2001)	1820.0	0.0												
13	Lewis Nine Springs E-Way (1976)	3889.0	632.5	●	●	●	●	2.5	1.1				●	●	
14	Lower Mud Lake (1995)	2226.0	350.9	●							0.3			●	
15	Maunesha River (2012)	6035.1	139.7					1.3							NRA includes the Joyce M Baer & George J. Socha Conservancy (2021)
16	North Mendota (2006)**	4602.1	321.4				●	0.8					●	●	NRA includes Waakikižu (2007), Waunakee Prairie (2007), and Wilke Prairie (2016)
17	Patrick Marsh (2001)	990.0	0.0	●				●					●		
18	Pheasant Branch Conservancy (1995)	501.7	318.2	●			●	3.7					●		
19	Phil's Woods (1974)	36.0	36.1	●				0.8						●	
20	South Waubesa Marsh (1990)	2133.2	64.1												NRA includes Holtzman (1973)
21	Springfield Hill (2001)	701.0	198.1	●				1.6		1.6				●	
22	Starkweather Creek (2006)	2372.8	0.0												
23	Sugar River (1983)	7644.4	0.0												
24	Token Creek (1970)	890.3	169.6											●	
25	Upper Yahara River (2001)	496.0	0.0												
26	Walking Iron (2012)	2688.1	0.0												
27	Yahara Headwaters (2012)	1141.6	0.0												
	Totals	**88584.1**	**3345.7**					**21.7**	**1.1**	**14**	**0.6**	**25**			

* Acres for the Capital Springs Recreation Area are accounted for in Lewis Nine Springs E-way.

** Boundary established per North Mendota Parkway Study.

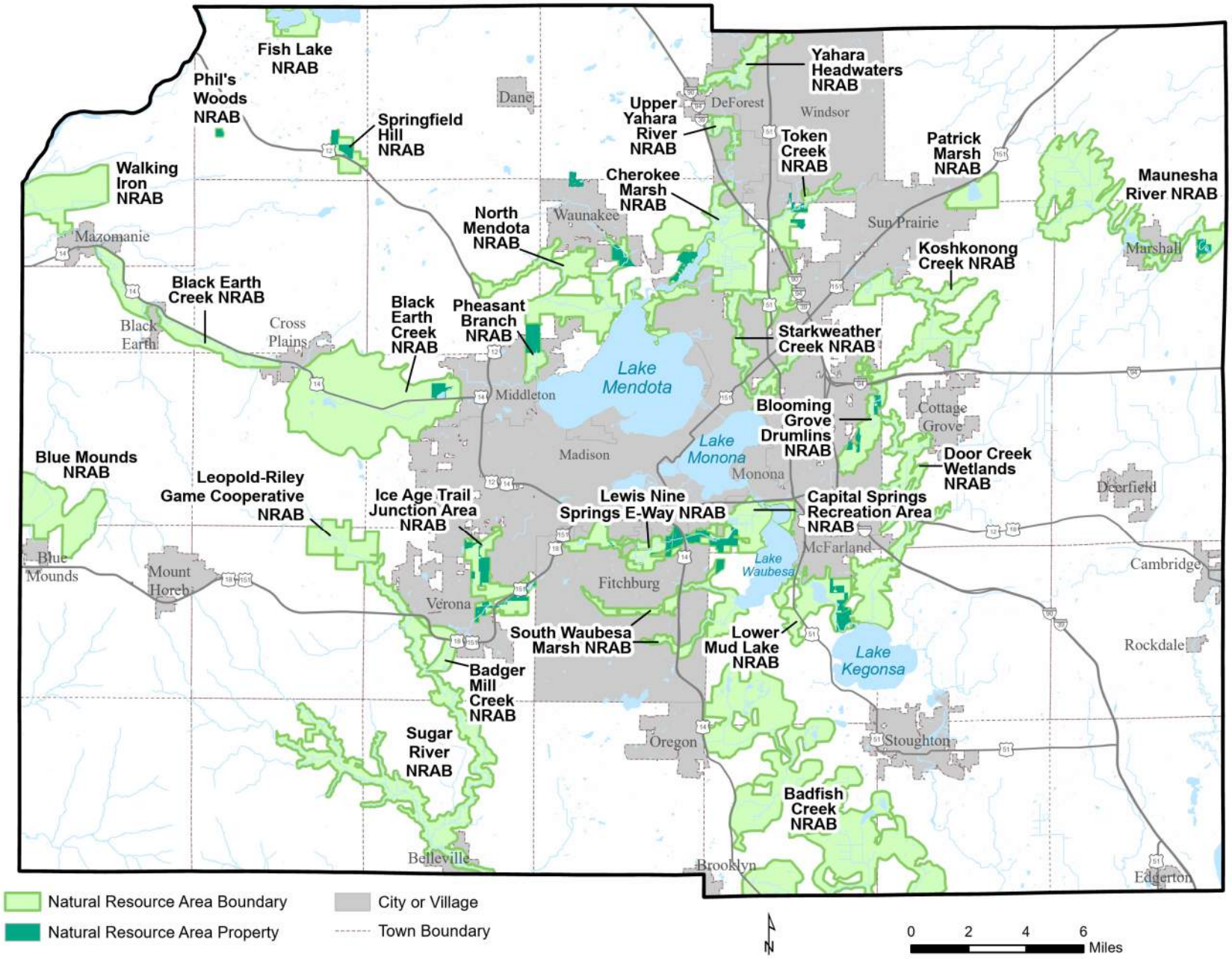
*** Not all lands within Natural Resource Area Project boundaries are in public ownership. Please respect private landowner rights.

**** Acreages only inlcude Natural Resource Areas and does not account for other Dane County Park classifications.

Note: This facility inventory includes only those found on County-owned property. Natural Resource Area lands are generally open to the public year-round for hiking, fishing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, wildlife observation, and foraging. However, there are not typically any designated trails or developed facilities for these activities.

Data as of March 2025

Dane County Natural Resource Areas



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VIII.3 Forests

DEFINITION

A Forest in the Dane County Parks system consists of lands where timber is managed using sustainable methods and where some passive recreation such as hiking, cross-country skiing, foraging, wildlife observation, hunting, and snowshoeing may occur. Dane County Forests are different from northern county forests in Wisconsin, where more active and motorized uses may occur. Dane County Forests have the potential to become excellent outdoor classrooms for people of all ages to learn about forest ecology, vegetation management practices, and the wildlife that use these areas. These lands also offer great demonstration areas for land management practices, such as prescribed burns, invasive species removal, and selective cutting of trees that contribute to the overall health and sustainability of forest ecosystems. Oftentimes harvested trees can be re-purposed for building materials throughout the park system. Dane County Forests may include lands under a trail corridor classification that offer connections to other park and trail systems, and may be found within the boundaries of lands of another category.

OVERVIEW

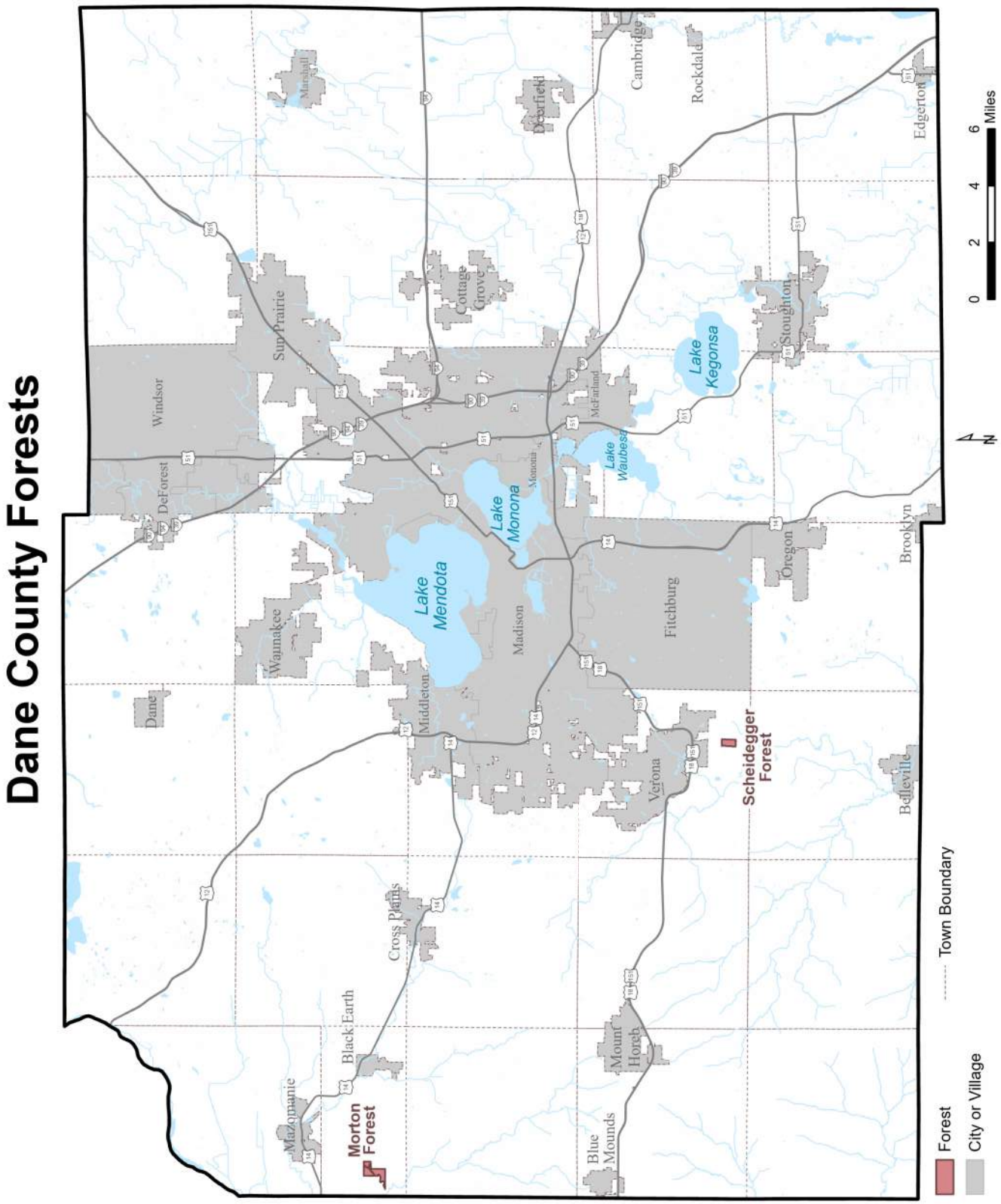
Dane County has 2 Forests. Lands managed under this category will allow the county to receive income from timber management as well as from a variety of grant programs. Lands may be enrolled in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources "School and Community Forest" program that allows the County to receive income from timber management as well as provide an excellent opportunity to demonstrate sustainable forestry practices and teach about land stewardship. As acreage increases in the future, hunting will continue to be utilized for both recreation and wildlife management purposes compatible with forest use and ecology. The county may also consider enrolling some lands in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources "County Forest" program that would make them eligible for a greater variety of funding programs as this program area increases in the future.

INVENTORY

The table below and map on page 32 present an inventory of all Dane County Forests.

	Forests: Date Represents Year Established in County POSP	Total Acres	Car Parking and Public Access	Group Camping	Restrooms	Reservable Shelters	Non-Reservable Shelters	Picnic Area	Hiking Natural Surface Trail (Miles)	Permitted Archery Hunting	Other Amenities
1	Morton Forest (1999)	178.9	●		●				2.47	●	Scenic Overlooks & Nature Center
2	Scheidegger Forest (2002)	73.9	●	●	●	●		●	1	●	
	Total	**252.8**							**3.47**		

**Data as of March 2025*


Dane County Forests
Lake Mendota
Lake Monona
Lake Waubesa
Lake Kegonsa
Madison
Middleton
Fitchburg
Verona
Oregon
Brooklyn
Stoughton
Edgerton
Rockdale
Cambridge
Deerfield
Cottage Grove
Sun Prairie
Windsor
DeForest
Waunakee
Dane
Marshall
McFarland
Monona
Belleville
Scheidegger Forest
Morton Forest
Cross Plains
Black Earth
Mazomanie
Blue Mounds
Mount Horeb
0 2 4 6 Miles
N
Forest
City or Village
Town Boundary

VIII.4 Historical/Cultural Sites

DEFINITION

A Historical/Cultural Site consists of land that is specifically set aside for the preservation, restoration, or reconstruction of features significant to the history or cultural heritage of an area. This can include historic buildings, reconstructions of historic buildings, and archaeological sites. Activities at a Historical/Cultural Site may be limited to sightseeing and the study of the historic or cultural features. Recreation use at these properties is primarily passive, such as hiking, interpretive study, and picnicking. Historical/Cultural Sites may be surrounded by lands belonging to another category, such as recreation parks or natural resource areas (e.g. Lake Farm Archaeological District).

OVERVIEW

The Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan includes six Historical/Cultural sites that range in size, ownership, and scope of programming. Each site is unique to the system and highlights different aspects of the region's history and culture. Management of each property is also unique to the specific characteristics of the site and all have dedicated volunteers that are instrumental in providing access, management, restoration, and programming.

Note: Individual historical/cultural features on county-owned property such as Native American mound sites, cabin remnants, historical markers etc. are not listed due to very limited size and remote locations.

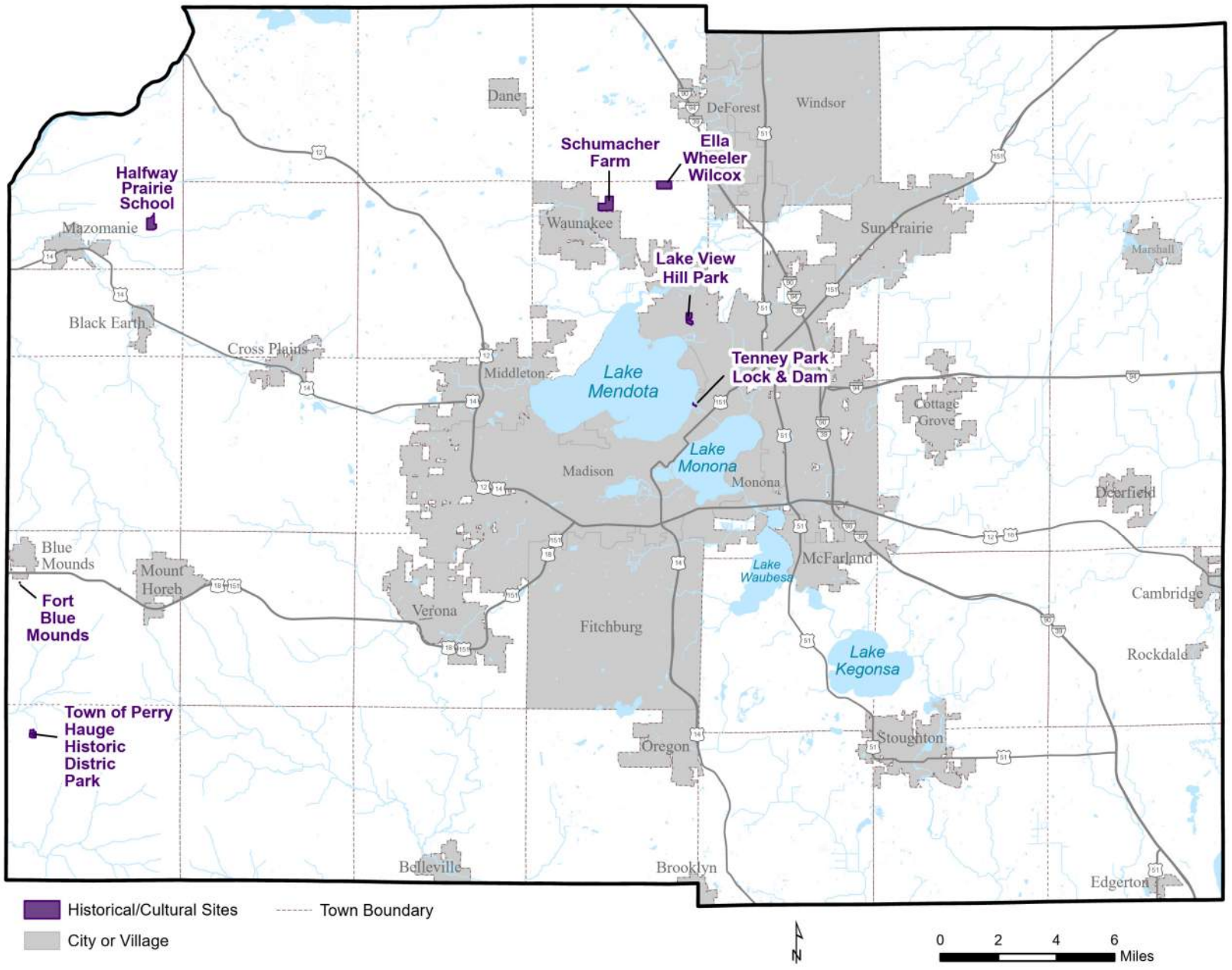
INVENTORY

The table below and map on page 34 present an inventory of all Dane County Historical/Cultural Sites.

	Historical/Cultural Sites: Date Represents Year Established in County POSP	Total Acres	Car Parking and Public Access	Restrooms	Reservable Shelters	Non-Reservable Shelters	Picnic Area	Playground Equipment	Fishing	Shared-use Trail (Miles)	Hiking Natural Surface Trail (Miles)	Hiking Hard Surface Trail (Miles)	Historical/Cultural Feature	Other Amenities
1	Fort Blue Mounds (1910)	0.2											●	
2	Ella Wheeler Wilcox Homestead	82.5	●								●		●	
3	Halfway Prairie School (1964)	75.1	●	●			●	●					●	Archery Hunting (permit required) & Foraging
4	Town of Perry - Hauge Historic District Park (2001)	27.0	●	●			●				3.0		●	Log Church NRHP
5	Lake View Hill Park (1967)	41.5	●								1.4		●	Sledding Hill
6	Schumacher Farm (1978)	116.0	●	●			●				3.8		●	Center for Rural History & Antique Machinery
7	Tenney Park Lock & Dam (2018)	1.5	●	●			●		●			0.28	●	Breakwall/Pier
	Total	**343.8**									**8.2**	**0.3**		

Note: Historical Cultural Sites designated as a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) may be within other park classifications, such as a Recreation Park.

Dane County Historical/Cultural Sites



VIII.5 Wildlife Areas

DEFINITION

A Wildlife Area consists of land that is primarily undeveloped with the exception of limited parking opportunities along the outer fringes. The lands function similar to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource Wildlife Areas and are open to nature-based outdoor activities that play an important role in meeting landscape scale conservation and recreation needs of the county. County and state wildlife area project area boundaries often are adjacent or overlap one another, providing some of the largest public natural areas in the county. Non-profit conservation organizations and other conservation partners play a critical role in expanding acquisition and restoration efforts within these project areas. Management practices focus on providing wildlife habitat and undeveloped recreation uses such as hunting, trapping, hiking, foraging, snowshoeing, fishing, and cross country skiing. Land covers usually consist of forest, wetlands, grasslands, and working farmlands. All Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources fishing, hunting and trapping regulations apply to Dane County Wildlife Areas unless otherwise posted. Each property may have specific restrictions for use based on proximity to residential or developed areas, endangered resources, and other issues that have been identified in a public planning process. Similar to a Natural Resource Area, users are encouraged to enjoy the area as-is and trail access of any type is extremely limited. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource Conservation Wardens assist with the enforcement of hunting and fishing laws on County Wildlife Areas.

OVERVIEW

In 1994, the County Board amended the park ordinance to permit hunting within the county parks. The county recognized that as park land acres increased, there would be additional opportunities to provide for hunting, especially on lands adjacent to state and federal wildlife and fishery areas and/or lands that historically provided for passive recreational uses such as hunting. In response to strong support heard for provision of more hunting opportunities on county-owned lands during the 2006-2011 Parks and Open Space Plan update and changing Stewardship requirements, the Dane County Park Commission worked through a public process to create Wildlife Areas. In 2007, the County Board approved updates to park ordinances allowing the Park Commission to designate Wildlife Areas. The first Dane County Wildlife Area was established in October 2007, and there are now almost 4,800 acres offered at 21 different Wildlife Area properties. Often, but not always, a Dane County Wildlife Area will be located adjacent to state wildlife areas, creating larger tracts of public recreational land with similar uses and rules regardless of ownership. There are designated public parking areas at each property along with an information board that includes a map and any special rules. Trail development within Wildlife Areas is limited to access and property connector trails, regional bicycle connections and non-motorized uses, except designated Snowmobile Trails.

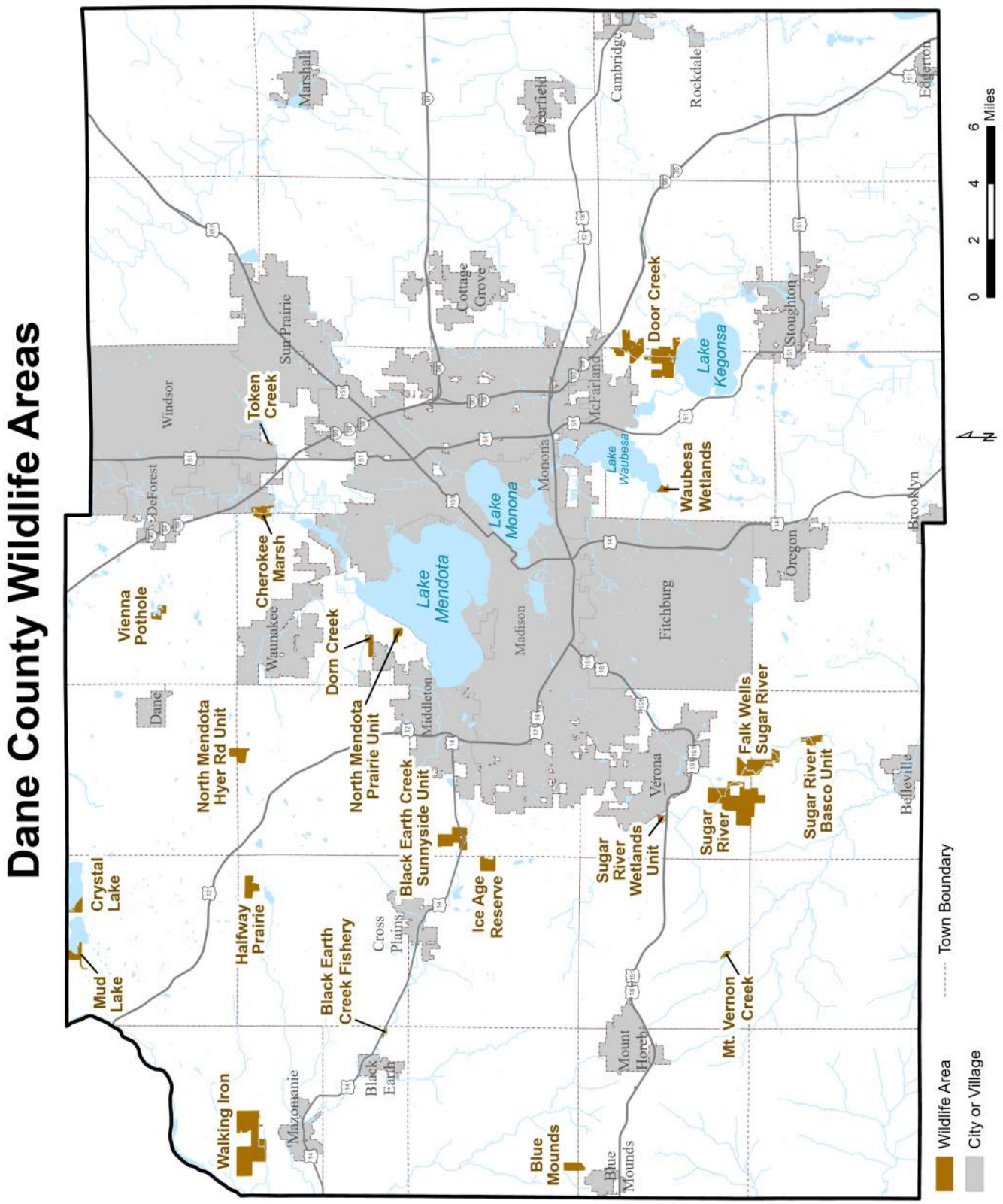
INVENTORY

The table on page 36 and map on page 37 present an inventory of all Dane County Wildlife Areas.

	Wildlife Areas: Date Represents Year Established in County POSP	Total Acres under County Ownership	Off-street Parking	Fishing	Canoe/Kayak Launch	Hiking	Snowshoeing	Cross Country Skiing	Hunting	Trapping	Foraging	Streams/Ditches	Upland Forest	Wetlands	Grasslands	Snwomobile Trail (Miles)	Historical/Cultural
1	Black Earth Creek Fishery (2023)	14.4		●		●			●	●	●	●					
2	Black Earth Creek Sunnyside Unit (2012)	291.8	●	●		●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●		0.9	
3	Blue Mounds (2015)	107.0	●			●	●	●	●	●	●		●				
4	Cherokee Marsh (2016)	126.4	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●		
5	Crystal Lake (2015)	205.3	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●		●		●		
6	Door Creek (2012)	833.7	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	0.2	
7	Dorn Creek (2012)	79.6	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●		
8	Falk Wells Sugar River (2014)	378.6	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●		
9	Halfway Prairie (2014)	148.1	●			●	●	●	●	●	●		●		●		●
10	Ice Age Reserve (2019)	131.2	●			●	●	●	●	●	●		●		●		
11	Mount Vernon Creek (2012)	29.6	●	●		●	●	●	●		●	●		●	●	0.3	
12	Mud Lake (2017)	117.4	●	●		●	●	●	●		●		●		●		
13	North Mendota Hyer Rd Unit (2015)	137.2	●			●	●	●	●		●	●		●	●		
14	North Mendota Prairie Unit (2015)	62.7	●			●	●	●	●	●	●				●		
15	Sugar River (2018)	922.7	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3.3	
16	Sugar River Basco Unit (2016)	97.7	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		
17	Sugar River Wetlands Unit (2013)	34.0		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●		
18	Token Creek (2018)	9.9	●	●		●			●	●		●		●			
19	Vienna Pothole (2019)	81.1	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●			●			
20	Walking Iron (2012)	948.5	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1.8	
21	Waubesa Wetlands (2014)	38.9	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●		
	Total	**4795.8**															

Note: Developed and maintained facilities are not typically available for recreation uses such as hiking, snowshoeing, and cross country skiing at Wildlife Areas.

**Data as of March 2025*


Dane County Wildlife Areas
Crystal Lake
Mud Lake
Halfway Prairie
Black Earth Creek Fishery
Walking Iron
North Mendota Hyer Rd Unit
Vienna Pothole
Cherokee Marsh
Token Creek
Dorn Creek
North Mendota Prairie Unit
Black Earth Creek Sunnyside Unit
Ice Age Reserve
Blue Mounds
Sugar River Wetlands Unit
Mt. Vernon Creek
Sugar River
Falk Wells Sugar River
Sugar River Basco Unit
Door Creek
Waubesa Wetlands
Lake Mendota
Lake Monona
Lake Waubesa
Lake Kegonsa
Windsor
DeForest
Marshall
Sun Prairie
Cottage Grove
Deerfield
Cambridge
Rockdale
Edgerton
Stoughton
McFarland
Monona
Madison
Fitchburg
Oregon
Brooklyn
Verona
Middleton
Cross Plains
Mount Horeb
Belleville
Mazomanie
Black Earth
Blue Mounds
Dane
Waunakee
0 2 4 6 Miles
N
Wildlife Area
City or Village
Town Boundary

VIII.6 Trails

DEFINITION

Trails are managed for the primary purpose of providing interconnectivity between parks and other trails that are considered regionally significant due to their inclusion within an adopted County plan or Madison Area Transportation Planning Board Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP). Shared-use trails are typically paved, compacted crushed limestone, and/or boardwalk that are a minimum of 10 feet in width. Dane County shared-use trails provide for hiking, biking, roller blading, and roller skiing. Dogs on leash are allowed on trails, but may certain long bridges or boardwalk may have restrictions. Trail use on the Ice Age National Scenic Trail (NST) is limited to hiking, backpacking and snowshoeing. The Ice Age NST is typically a native surfaced (dirt) footpath that is about 3 feet wide. Motorized recreation use is not allowed on the Ice Age NST or Dane County shared-use trails with the exception of designated seasonal snowmobile trails which may overlap select trail corridors.

Trails are usually surrounded by lands belonging to another category, such as Recreation Parks or Natural Resource Areas. Other recreation uses that may occur within the Ice Age National Scenic Trail corridor lands include hunting, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, foraging, and some limited primitive camping opportunities. Hunting may not take place within 100' of a designated trail corridor on Dane County Park Lands. Management practices primarily focus on operation, repair, maintenance, and buffer lands necessary to provide uninterrupted public use. Management of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail and surrounding corridor lands also includes extensive vegetation management with the goal of providing users with a pre-settlement landscape experience dating back to the glacial era some 15,000 years ago.

OVERVIEW

The Trails category was adding to the Dane County Parks classification system during the last Parks and Open Space Plan update. Since the opening of the Capital City Trail in 2000, shared-use trails managed by Dane County have increased to over 30 miles and over 150 acres of trail easements. These trails often provide connections to other state and local unit of government trail systems offering more than 100 miles of shared use trails throughout the county. In an effort to improve trail user navigation throughout the overall trail network, Dane County funded a Bicycle Wayfinding Plan that was completed in 2017 with a goal to provide a seamless template for trail signage development throughout the county that would improve user awareness of location, destinations and trail management responsibilities. Since 2018, wayfinding signage has been implemented on the Capital City Trail, Lower Yahara River Trail, and segments of the North Mendota Trail. Dane County has also initiated the implementation of Emergency Location Markers along regional bike trails and in parks with extensive trail systems (Indian Lake County Park). The goal is that the markers will help streamline emergency response using alphanumeric coordinates based on the US National Grid (USNG). When provided in 9-1-1 calls, the coordinates quickly direct emergency responders to your location on a trail.

Operation, maintenance, and management of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail is carried out by the National Park Service and Ice Age Trail Alliance. The nearly 1,200-mile-long corridor follows the edge of the last continental glacier in Wisconsin and was designated in 1980. It is one of eleven designated national scenic trails in the United States.

INVENTORY

The table on page 39 and map on page 40 present an inventory of Dane County Shared-use Trails and the Ice Age National Scenic Trail.

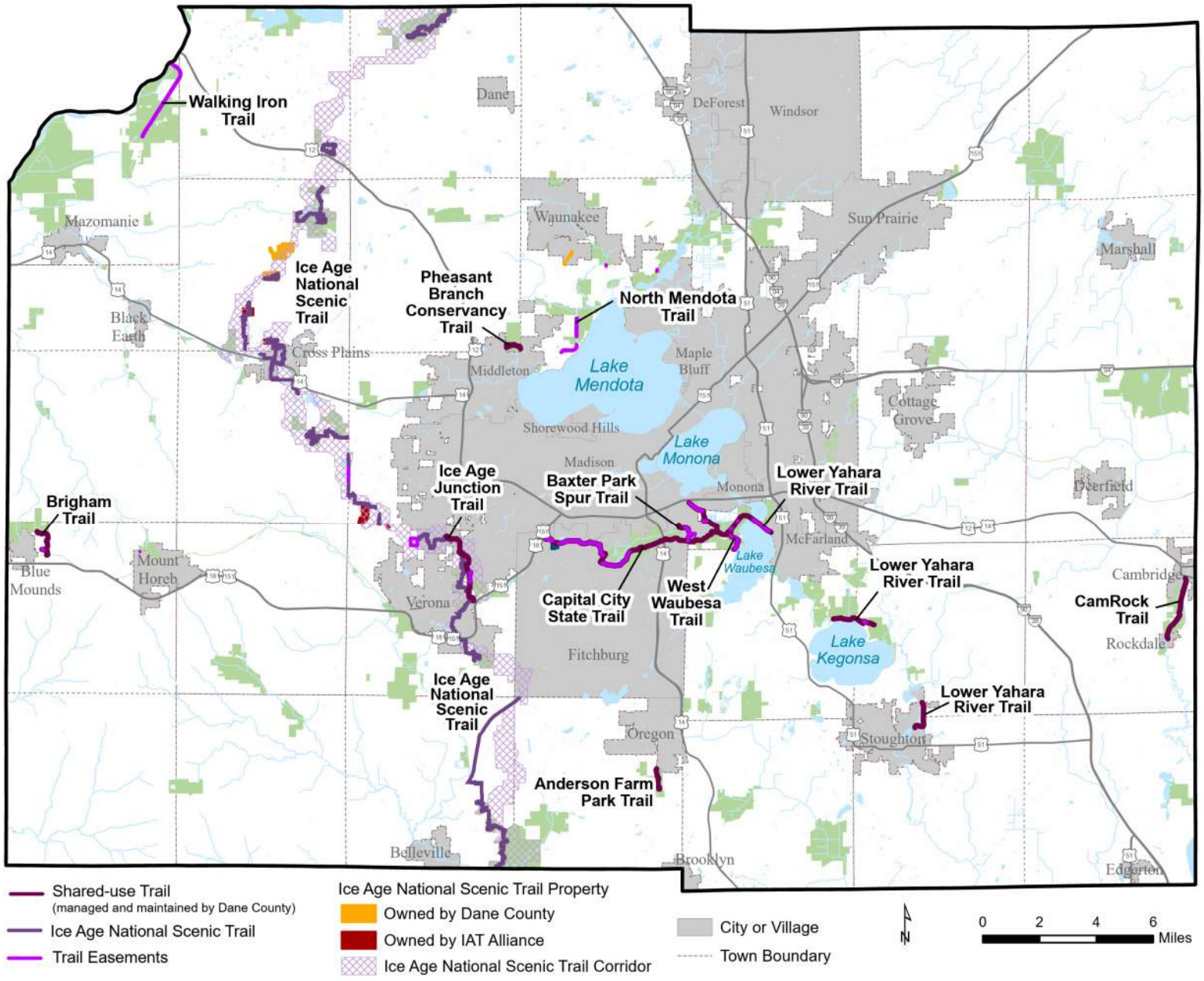
	Trails: Date Represents Year Established in County POSP	Trail Project Area Boundary (Acres)	Total Acres under County Ownership	Trail Miles	Trail Surface	Car Parking and Public Access	Hiking	Biking	Mountain Biking	Rollerblading/Roller Skiing	Snowshoeing	Backpacking Campsites	Restrooms	Reservable Shelters	Non-Reservable Shelters	Picnic Area	Other Amenities
1	Ice Age National Scenic Trail (1980)	18090.3	210.4	45.2*	Mowed Grass or Dirt Footpath**	●	●				●	●					
2	Anderson Farm Park Trail (2021)	NA	NA	0.9	Paved	●	●	●		●			●			●	Anderson Farm County Park Amenities
3	Baxter Park Spur Trail (2011)	NA	NA	1	Paved		●	●		●							
4	Brigham County Park Spur Trail (2015)	NA	NA	1.5	Paved	●	●	●		●			●	●		●	Brigham County Park Amenities
5	CamRock Trail (2010)	NA	NA	2.5	Crushed Limestone	●	●	●					●	●		●	CamRock County Park Amenities
6	Capital City Trail (2000)	NA	46.32	9.6	Paved	●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	Lake Farm County Park Amenities, Seminole Mountain Bike Trails
7	Ice Age Junction Trail (2010)	NA	NA	3.3	Paved	●	●	●		●			●	●		●	Badger Prairie Park Amenities
8	Lower Yahara River Trail (2017)	NA	NA	5.4	Paved/Crushed Limestone	●	●	●		●			●	●		●	Accessible Fishing Pier and Boardwalk, Viking County Park Amenities
9	Pheasant Branch Conservancy Trail (2003)	NA	NA	1.8***	Crushed Limestone	●	●	●									Scenic Overlook
10	West Waubesa Trail (2024)	NA	NA	0.9	Paved/Crushed Limestone	●	●	●		●							Boardwalk
11	Trail Easements	NA	133.5														Walking Iron Trail, North Mendota Trail, Capital City Trail, Lower Yahara River Trail, Ice Age Junction Trail

* Includes all IAT segments maintained by Ice Age Trail Alliance on all public lands
** Some sections of IAT are temporarily routed on hard surface shared-use trails
*** Includes shared-use trail segments on all public lands

Data as of March 2025

West Waubesa Trail

Dane County Trails



DRAFT

IX. PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

The Dane County Park Commission is responsible for combining a variety of planning criteria when considering recommended updates to this plan, with an end goal of balancing use of the parks by the public with proper land stewardship. Planning considerations that were used to formulate recommendations for the update the 2025-2030 Park and Open Space Plan included:

IX.1 Dane County Survey

IX.2 Demographics

IX.3 Related Planning Efforts

IX.4 Recreation Needs Analysis

IX.5 Public & Non-Profit Conservation Organization Input

IX.6 Future Land Needs Analysis

IX.7 Dane County Parks Staff Input

IX.8 Land Management Considerations

IX.9 Lake Management Considerations

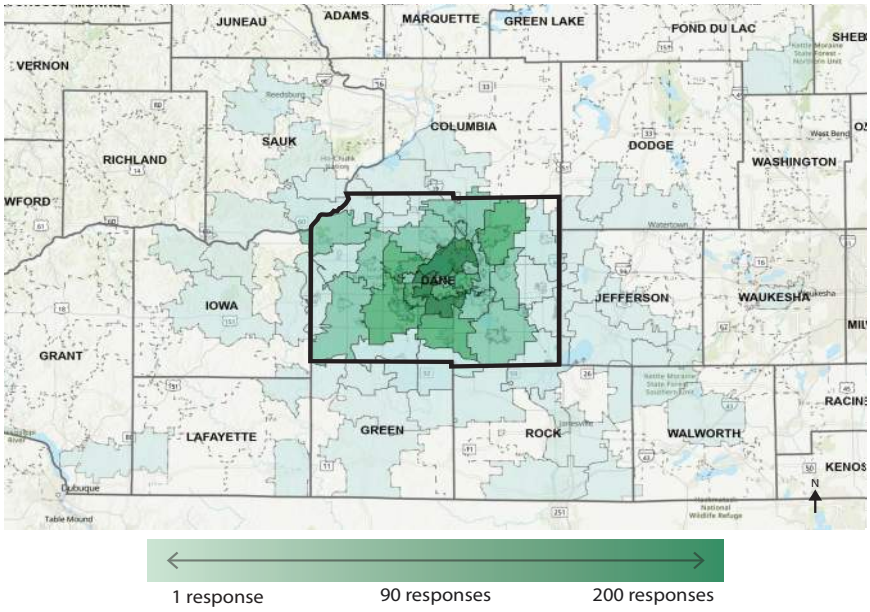
IX.10 Partnership Opportunities

IX.1 Dane County Survey

SURVEY BACKGROUND AND DISTRIBUTION

A 17-question online survey was developed to gather public input on the Dane County Parks system. The survey aimed to assess recreation trends, user satisfaction, barriers to park access, visitation frequency, areas for improvement, and the relevance of the goals outlined in the previous Parks and Open Space Plan. The results were used alongside other data sources to identify key planning themes for the park system's future development.

To reach a broader and more diverse audience, the survey was available in both English and Spanish and was widely distributed and promoted. The survey was open from January 29 to May 1, 2024. It was featured in the March 2024 Parks Newsletter, which reached 2,400 subscribers, and included in press releases for the March and April Parks and Open Space Plan public meetings. Additionally, it was emailed to 22,736 permit holders, public officials, and shared on social media platforms, including Facebook (9,800 followers) and Instagram (4,000 followers). A QR code linked to the survey was provided at events hosted by Centro Hispano and the Wisconsin Fishing Expo. Dane County Parks staff also engaged with Operation Fresh Start (OFS) to gather further input and feedback.



SURVEY RESULTS

A total of 1,958 individuals participated in the survey, with the majority being Dane County residents.

Overall, respondents expressed satisfaction with the Dane County Parks system and the recreation opportunities it offers. Regional, state, and county parks were the most popular outdoor destinations, and most respondents reported visiting the parks a few times per month. In general, the parks were perceived as safe, welcoming, and accessible, though respondents identified room for improvement in accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

The survey also assessed the continued relevance of the primary goals from the 2018-2023 Parks and Open Space Plan. The majority of respondents rated protecting lakes, rivers, and streams as extremely important, while providing volunteer opportunities was considered somewhat important. Overall, the survey indicated that the core values and objectives of the previous plan remain relevant.

While respondents were generally satisfied with the park system and shared that walking, running, hiking and biking are some of the more popular outdoor activities, they also identified areas for expansion or enhancement, including:

- Infrastructure improvements
- Disc golf facilities and amenities
- Cross-country ski trails
- Dog parks and amenities
- Accessibility upgrades, including accessible trails and adaptive recreation options
- Enviromental conservation efforts
- Additional hiking, biking, mountain biking, and equestrian trails
- Improved restroom facilities
- Increased access to water recreation areas

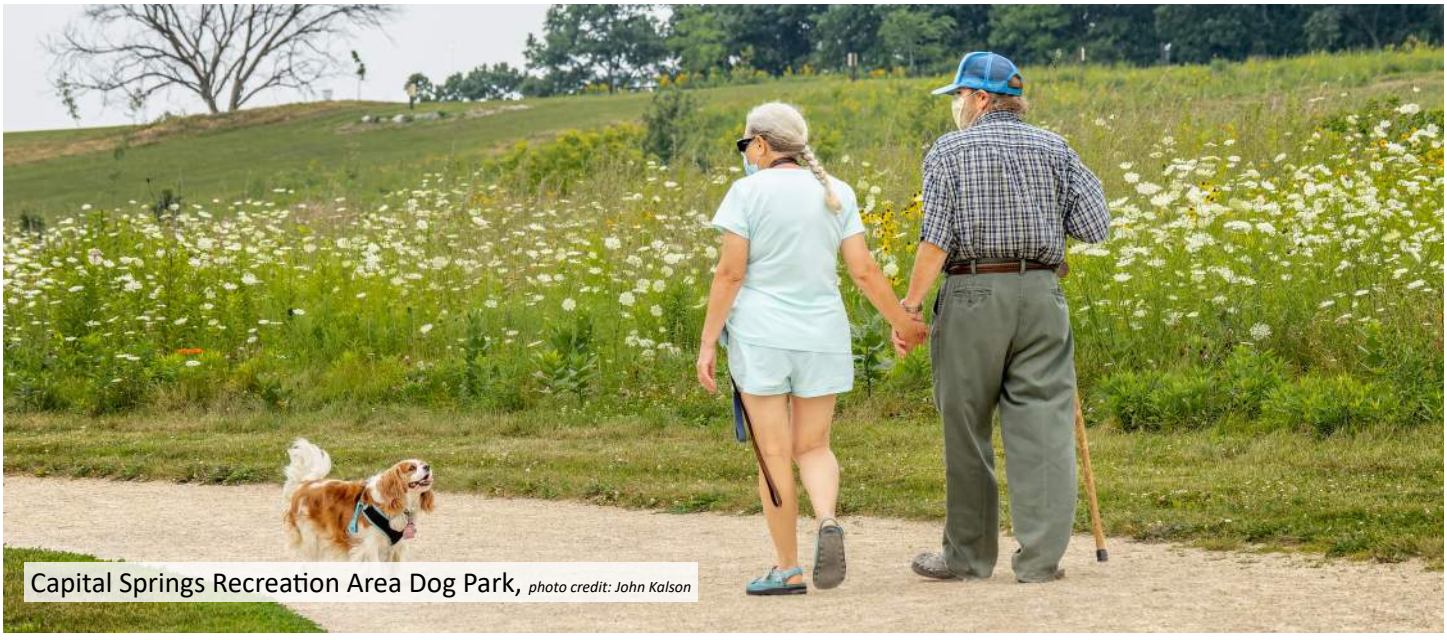
Despite efforts to promote the Spanish version of the survey, only three responses were received. Additionally, the survey respondents lacked significant diversity, particularly among those who completed the English version.

Following the survey, Dane County Parks staff expanded outreach efforts to engage a wider audience. Community events included the Kennedy Heights Block Party, Sessions at McPike Park, Drag Me to the Zoo, Juneteenth celebrations, the Madison Gospel 5K and Health Fair, and the Disability Pride Festival. Dane County Parks remains committed to connecting with underserved and disadvantaged communities to gain insights into park usage and address potential barriers. This ongoing initiative aims to foster stronger relationships and ensure more inclusive representation in future planning efforts

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain and Enhance Popular Features: Prioritize trail maintenance, restroom facilities, and seating.
- Improve Accessibility and Inclusivity: Address barriers for individuals with disabilities and transportation challenges.
- Promote Alternative Transportation: Enhance biking infrastructure and public transit connectivity to parks.
- Expand Outreach and Communication: Increase engagement through newsletters, social media, and community events.
- Support Environmental Conservation: Align future planning efforts with water conservation and natural resource protection.

For additional details on the survey and results, visit: https://www.danecountyparks.com/openspaceplan



Capital Springs Recreation Area Dog Park, *photo credit: John Kalson*

IX.2 Demographics

Demographics refers to the statistical data that describe populations and their unique characteristics. This plan examines population trends, growth areas within the county, as well as factors such as age, race, and ethnicity. The demographic information was gathered from sources including the University of Wisconsin-Madison Applied Population Laboratory (APL), Wisconsin Department of Administration, USA Facts, and U.S. Census Data from 2010 and 2020.

POPULATION GROWTH

Understanding population changes is essential for identifying suitable locations for future recreation parks, prioritizing land acquisitions for resource protection, and planning potential trail development projects.

Dane County is a desirable place to live and work, as reflected in its population growth. Dane County remains the second most populous county in Wisconsin and one of the fastest-growing in the state. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population reached 561,504 in 2020, accounting for 10% of Wisconsin's total population of 5,893,718. According to a report by the Wisconsin Department of Administration projects Dane County to experience the largest numeric population gain in the state, increasing from 561,504 in 2020 to an estimated 779,265 residents by 2050 – a 38% increase.

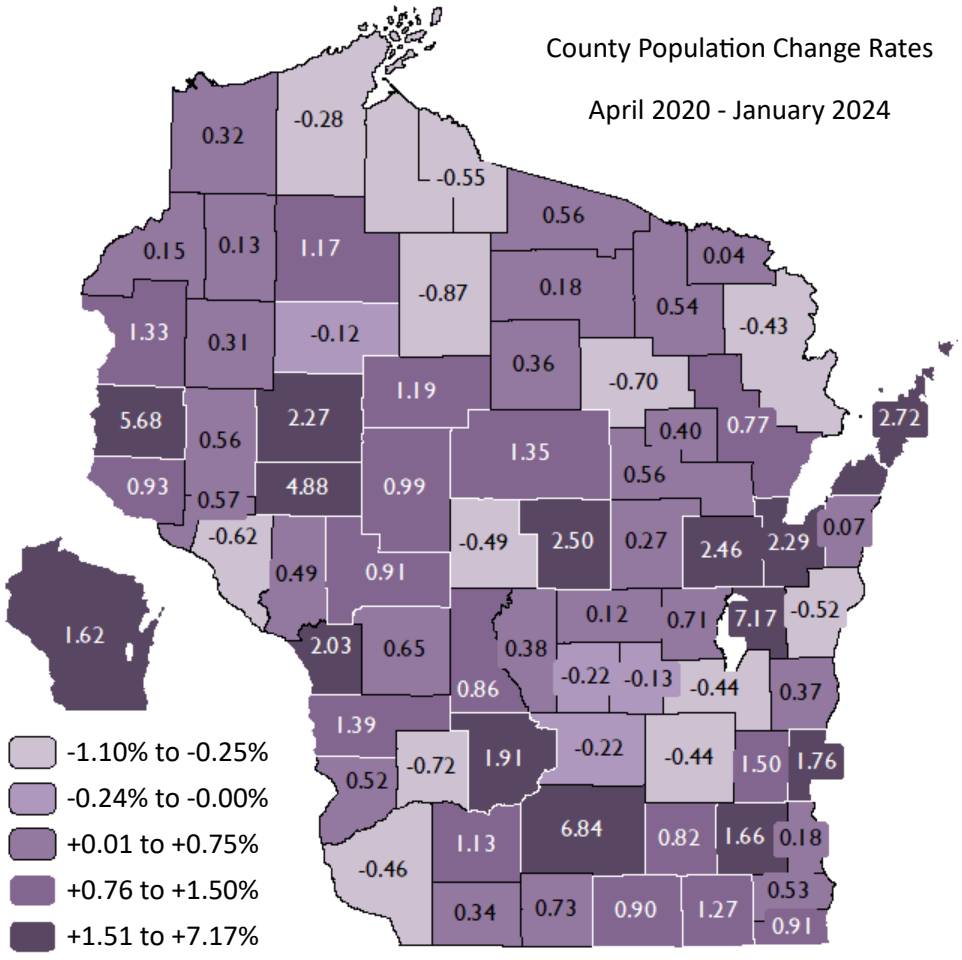


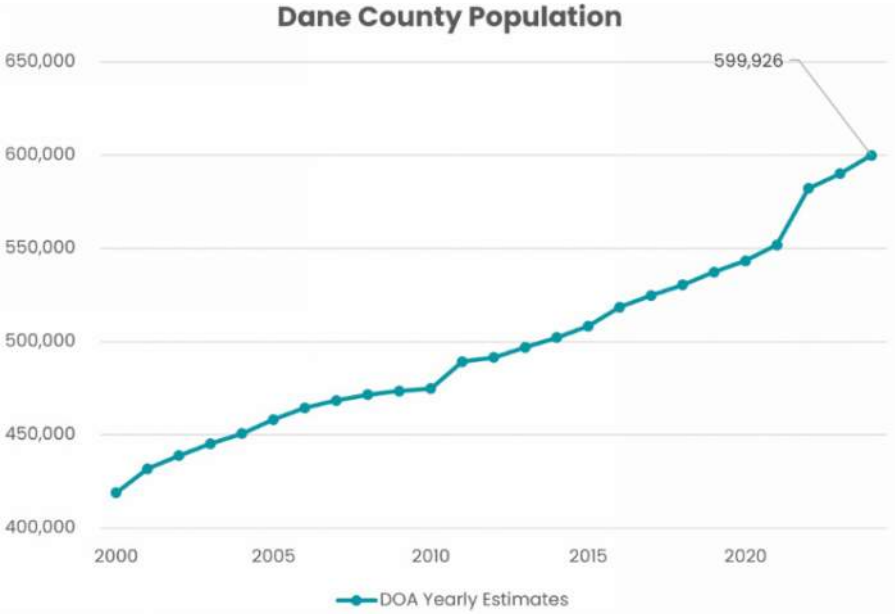
Image from Wisconsin Demographic Services Center 2024 Population Estimates

Population estimates are projected annually, and as of 2024, the Wisconsin Demographic Services Center estimates that Dane County's population has grown by 38,426 people since 2020, reflecting a 6.84% increase. Among counties with populations exceeding 150,000, Dane County continues to experience the highest growth in the state. The City of Madison leads in both proportional change (+5.95%) and numeric growth (+16,351 people) from 2020 to 2024 among large Wisconsin cities.

Most Populous Counties (more than 150,000 residents)				
County Name	**Final Estimate 2024**	**Census 2020**	**Numeric Change**	**Percent Change**
Milwaukee	941,139	939,489	1,650	0.18%
Dane	599,930	561,504	38,426	6.84%
Waukesha	413,728	406,978	6,750	1.66%
Brown	274,899	268,740	6,159	2.29%
Racine	198,781	197,727	1,054	0.53%
Outagamie	195,388	190,705	4,683	2.46%
Winnebago	172,943	171,730	1,213	0.71%
Kenosha	170,693	169,151	1,542	0.91%
Rock	165,156	163,687	1,469	0.90%

Wisconsin Demographic Services Center 2024 Population Estimates

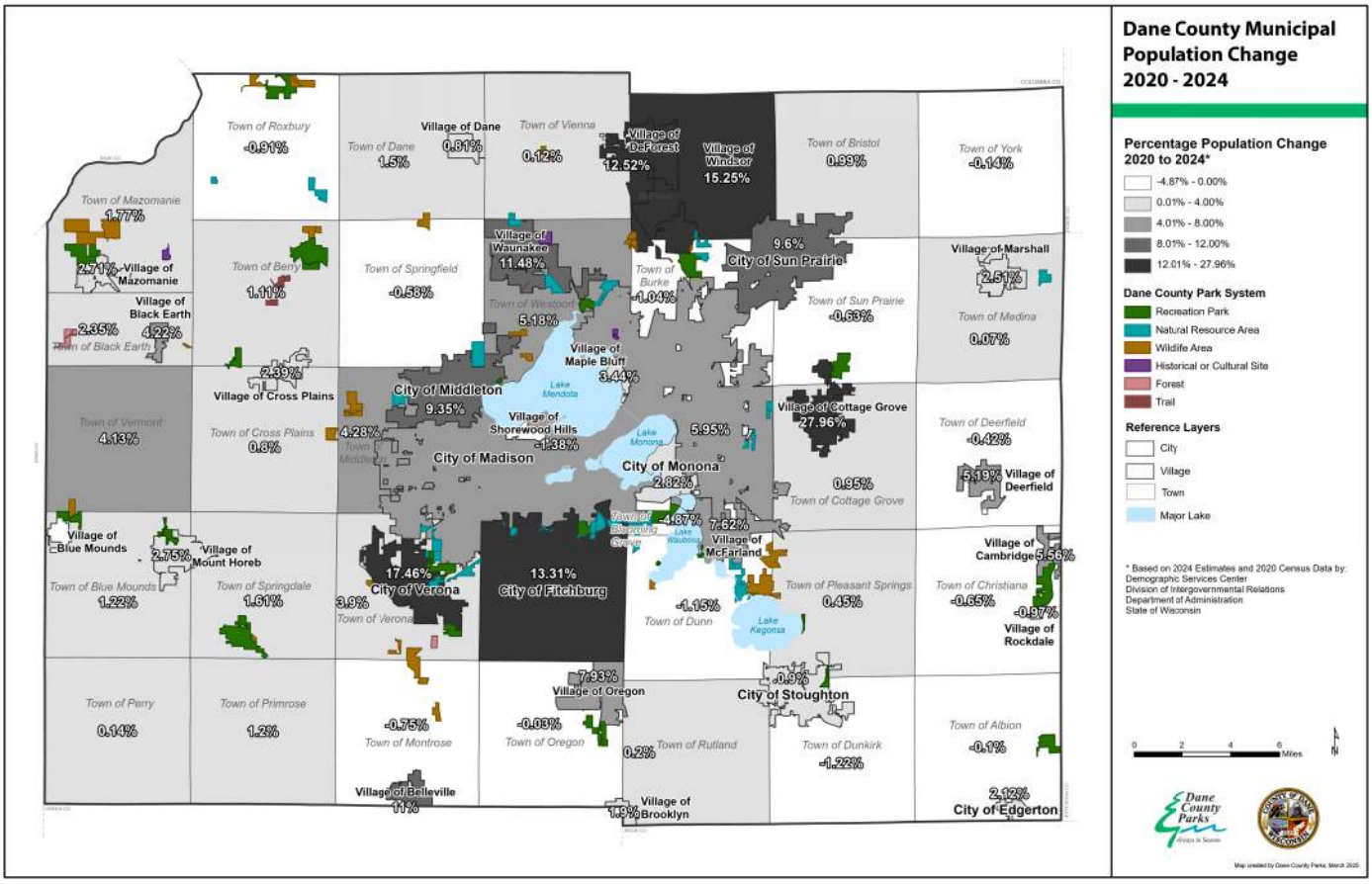
"Our continued population growth is no accident. It's the result of intentional investments in the things that matter to people looking for a place to call home. From safeguarding our environment and building a strong, resilient local economy to developing world-class recreational amenities like bike paths and parks, Dane County has become a destination for those seeking both opportunity and quality of life." (County Executive Melissa Agard)



Wisconsin Demographic Services Center 2024 Population Estimates/Capital Area Regional Planning Commission (CARPC)

From 2020 (census) to 2024 (estimate), the top ten largest population percentage gains in Dane County were:

1. The Village of Cottage Grove 27.96%
2. The City of Verona 17.46%
3. The Village of Windsor 15.25%
4. The City of Fitchburg 13.31%
5. The Village of DeForest 12.52%
6. The Village of Waunakee 11.48%
7. The City of Sun Prairie 9.60%
8. The City of Middleton 9.35%
9. The Village of Oregon 7.93%
10. The Village of McFarland 7.62%

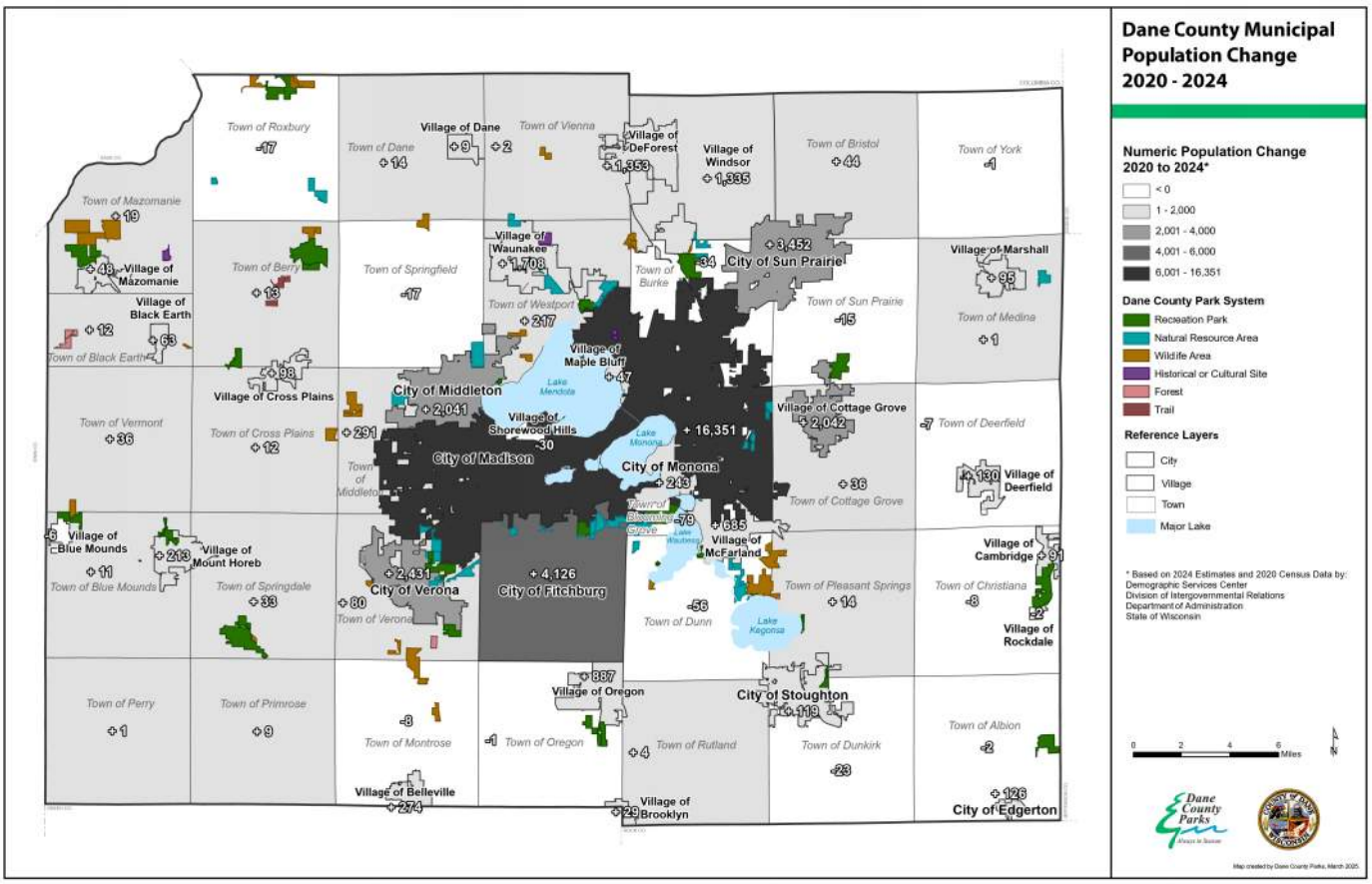


Map of Percentage Population Growth in Dane County 2020 to 2024

Developed by Dane County Parks Staff from the Wisconsin Demographic Services Center's Official Estimates, 1/1/2024, Wisconsin Municipalities, with Comparison to Census 2020.

From 2020 (census) to 2024 (estimate), the top ten largest numeric population gains in Dane County were:

1. The City of Madison 16,351
2. The City of Fitchburg 4,126
3. The City of Sun Prairie 3,452
4. The City of Verona 2,431
5. The Village of Cottage Grove 2,042
6. The City of Middleton 2,041
7. The Village of Waunakee 1,708
8. The Village of Deforest 1,353
9. The Village of Windsor 1,335
10. The Village of Oregon 887

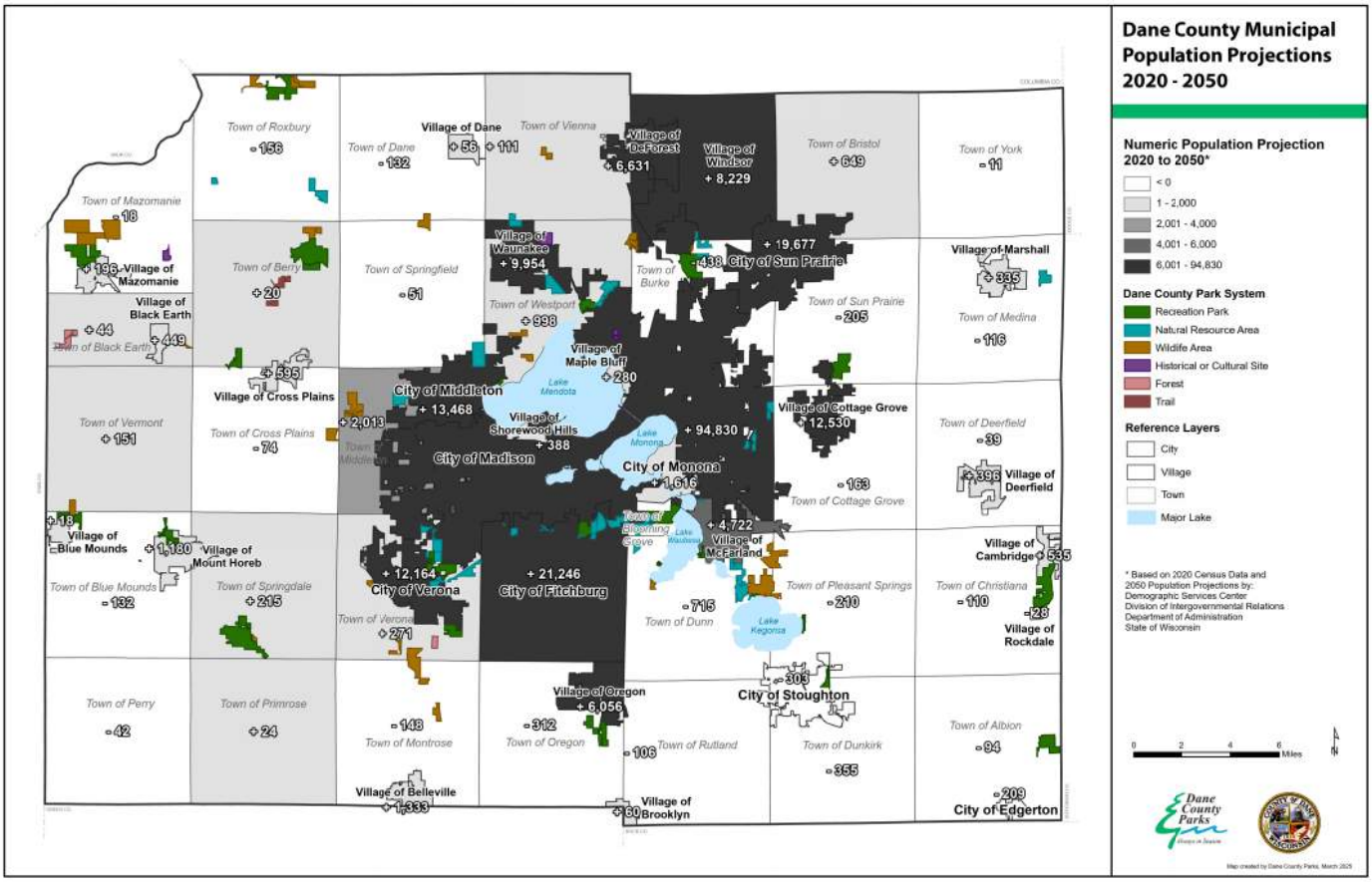


Map of Numeric Population Growth in Dane County 2020-2024

Developed by Dane County Parks Staff from the Wisconsin Demographic Services Center's Official Estimates, 1/1/2024, Wisconsin Municipalities, with Comparison to Census 2020.

Most of the population growth in Dane County is expected in the central portion and north east quadrant by 2050 with the top ten largest numeric population gains anticipated in:

1. The City of Madison +94,830
2. The City of Fitchburg +21,246
3. The City of Sun Prairie +19,677
4. The City of Middleton +13,468
5. The Village of Cottage Grove +12,530
6. The City of Verona +12,164
7. The Village of Waunakee +9,954
8. The Village of Windsor +8,229
9. The Village of DeForest +6,631
10. The Village of Oregon +6,056



Map of Numeric Population Projections in Dane Co. 2050

Developed by Dane County Parks Staff from the Wisconsin Demographic Services Center's Official Estimates, 1/1/2024, Wisconsin Municipalities, with Comparison to Census 2020.

AGE

Understanding the age structure within Dane County helps to determine if the types of outdoor recreation facilities being provided are appropriate for local residents now and into the future.

In 2020, census data identified the median age of Dane County residents as 35.7 years for both males and females, a relatively young county compared to surrounding counties.

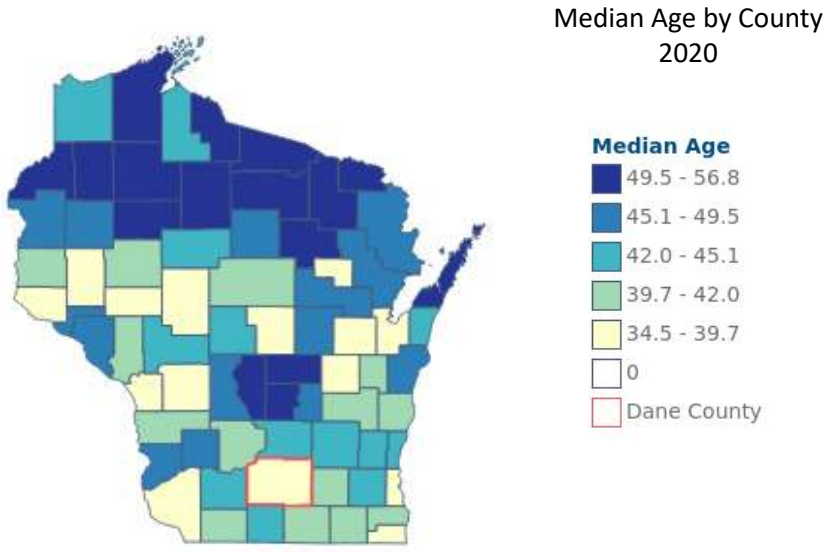
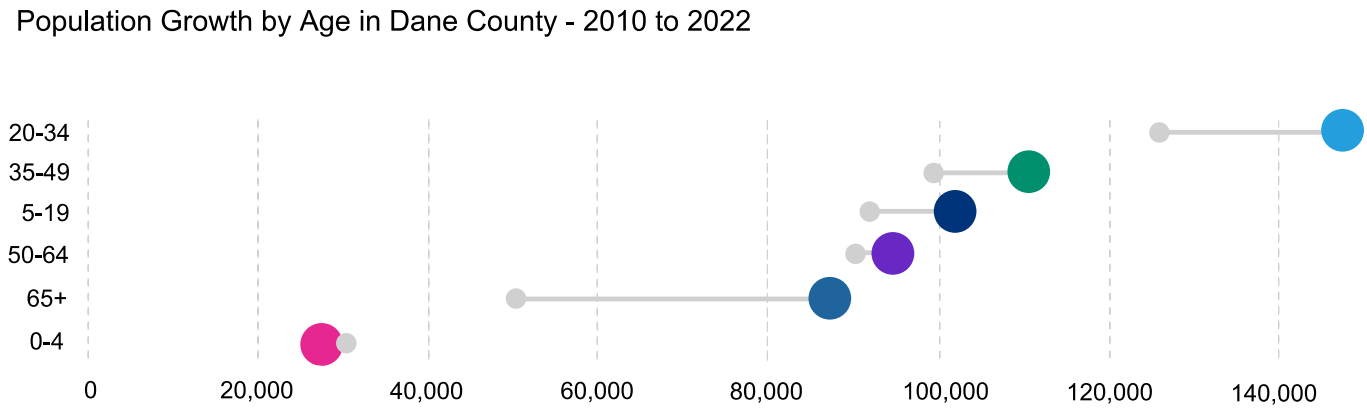


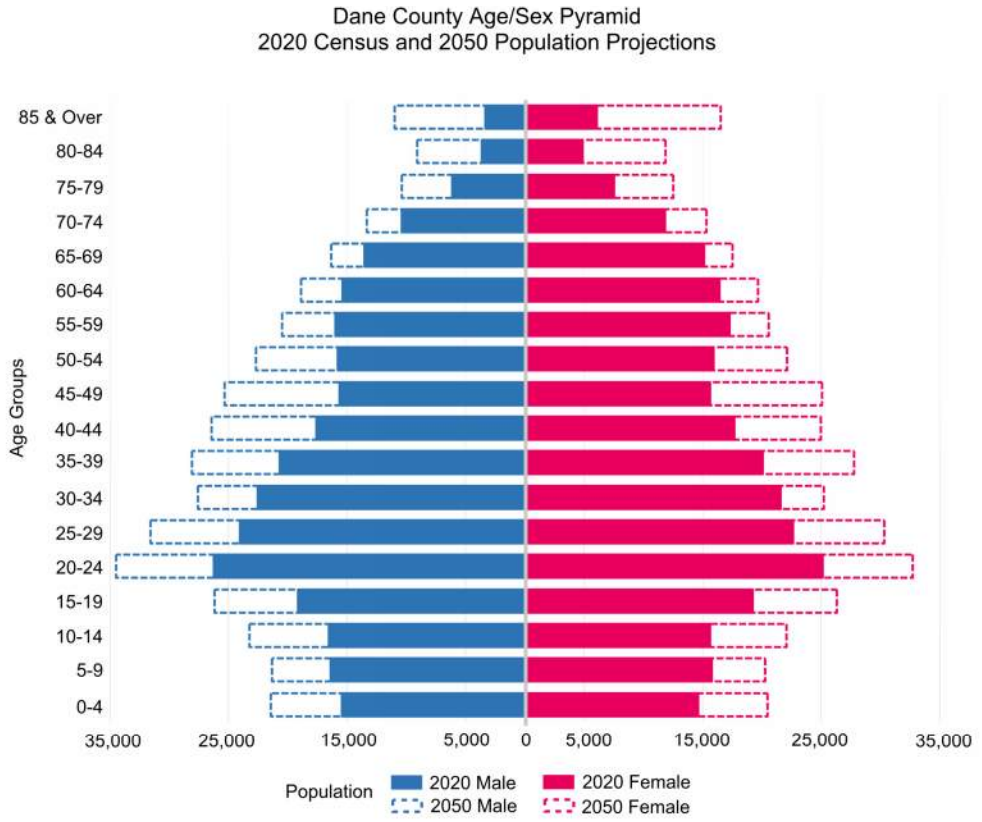
Image from Applied Population Lab based on 2020 Census Data

The graph below compares population age groups between 2010 and 2022. The most common age range for residents in Dane county is 20 to 34, however, among the six age groups represented, the 65 and older population has grown the fastest between 2010 to 2022, increasing by 72.2% among the age range. This age group makes up about 18% of the population in Dane County. In contrast, the 0-4 age range has declined about 6.5% during the same period.



Source: USA Facts

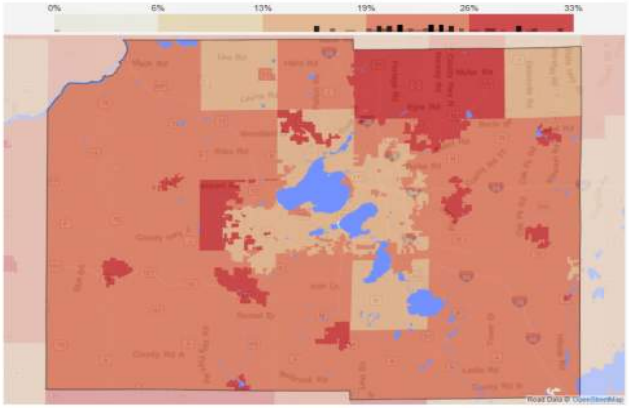
Continuing the trend from the previous 2018-2023 Parks and Open Space Plan, the largest population growth projection gains for 2050 are in the 65 and older age category with growth projected in the 19 and under group, but at a slower rate among the age range.



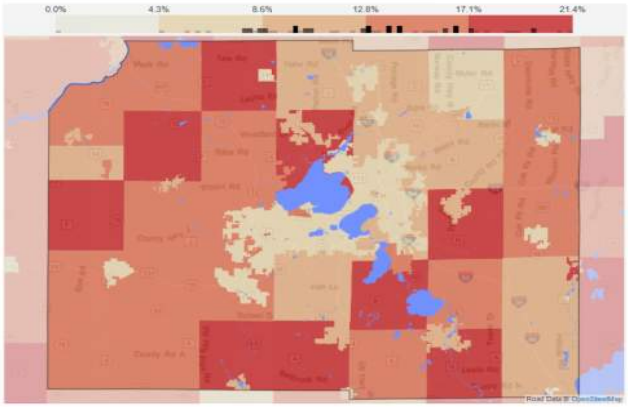
State of Wisconsin Department of Administration, Department of Intergovernmental Relations County Age-Sex Population Projections, 2020-2050

The map on the left below shows the percentage of the population aged 0-17 by county municipality. Higher populations of children are located in the darker red areas. In general, more densely populated suburbs like Sun Prairie, Cottage Grove, and Waunakee have a higher concentration of children. In contrast, the map on the right shows the percentage of population aged 60-69 and a higher concentration of older adults in rural regions suggesting movement from more central cities and villages to more quiet locations, such as the Town of Berry or Town of Dunn.

Percentage of Population Aged 0 to 17



Percentage of Population Aged 60 to 69



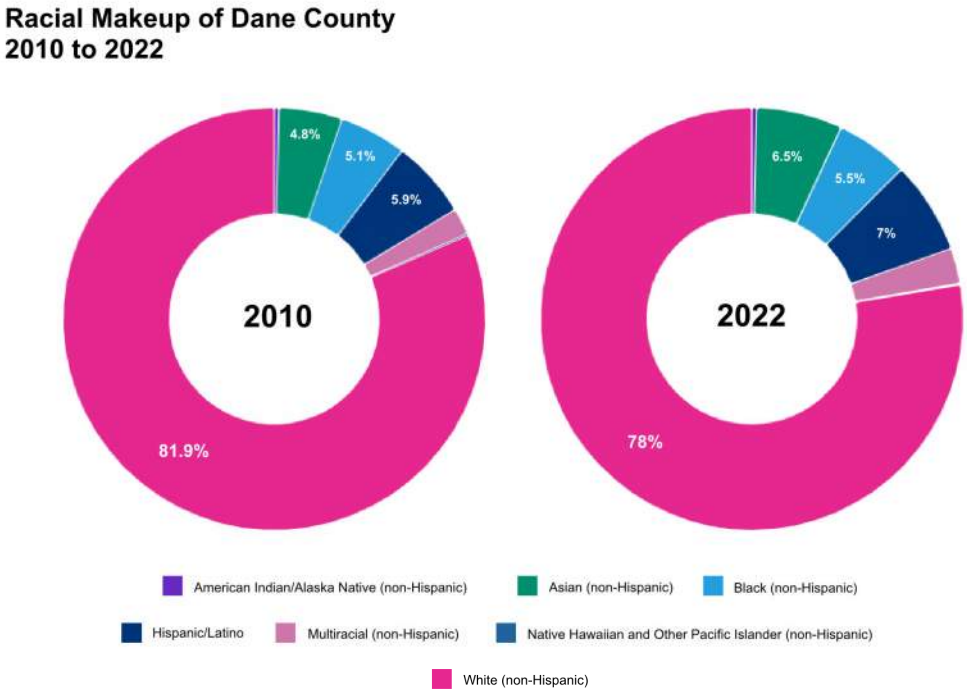
Source: Statistical Atlas

RACE AND ETHNICITY

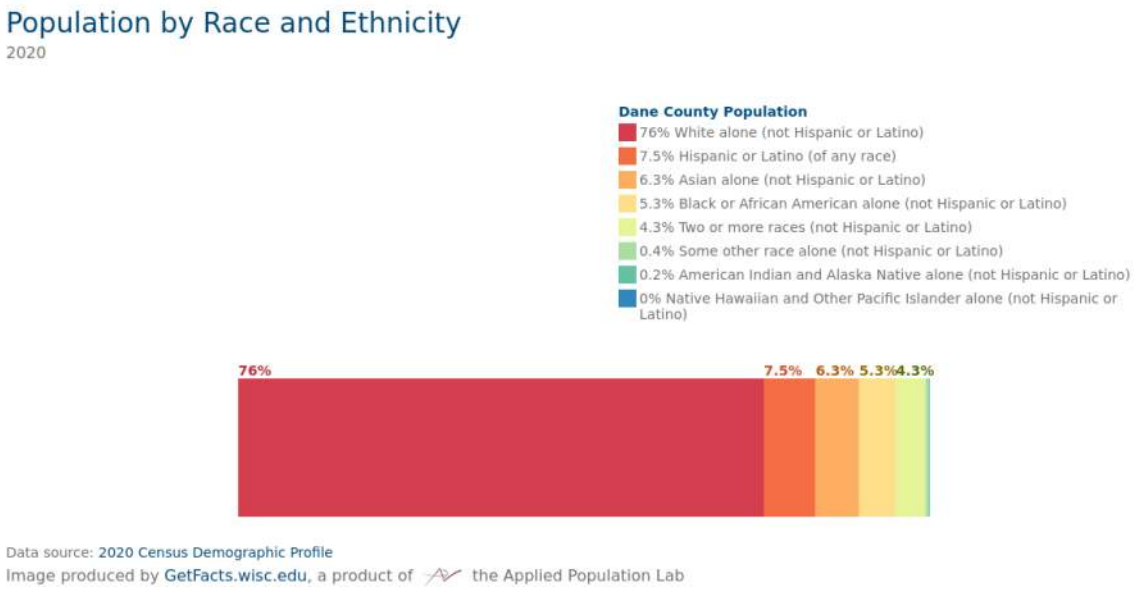
To effectively plan and develop parks and open spaces that are equitable and inclusive for all residents, it is essential to understand the racial and ethnic demographics of Dane County.

In 2022, the largest racial or ethnic group in Dane County was white (non-Hispanic), comprising 78% of the population. However, this represents a decline from 81.9% in 2010, reflecting a growing diversity in the county. The Asian (non-Hispanic) population saw the most significant increase, rising by 1.7%, followed by the Hispanic population, which grew by 1.1%.

Overall, Dane County became more diverse between 2010 and 2022, with the white (non-Hispanic) population decreasing by 3.9 percentage points, while Asian and Hispanic populations experienced the most notable growth.



Source: USA Facts



DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Dane County is projected to continue growing over time. Population growth trends indicate a sustained need for system-wide park expansion, particularly in the central part of the county and the northeast quadrant, where population increases are most pronounced. This study helps guide future park locations, regional trail connections, and land acquisition priorities. Thoughtful planning will help prevent overuse on existing open spaces as the County's population increases.

As seen in the 2017-2023 Parks and Open Space Plan, the population is trending older, with individuals aged 65 and over increasing among the age range. The aging population reinforces previous Parks and Open Space Plan recommendations to provide non-age-specific recreational opportunities such as trails, picnic areas, hiking, and wildlife viewing. The continued shift in age structure also highlights the importance of developing and maintaining inclusive and accessible facilities, with an emphasis on multi-generational recreation spaces. As the youth population declines, fostering early engagement and interest in parks and conservation is essential to the long-term success of the Dane County Parks System.

Additionally, the County is becoming more diverse, with the Asian (non-Hispanic) population experiencing the most significant growth, followed by the Hispanic population. Inclusion of all people in parks, understanding recreation needs, and eliminating barriers will help sustain future support for public lands.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Dane County is projected to see a significant population increase with estimates suggesting a 38% surge from 2020 to 2050 making it one of the fastest growing counties.
- The majority of growth is expected to occur in the central and northeast quadrant of the county.
- The population of 65 and older residents is increasing the most of any age group and by 2050 it is estimated it will account for approximately 17% of the population in Dane County. In 2020 this age group accounted for only 14.6% of the population. This age group has increased 4.6% from 2010.
- The 0-19 age group is projected to stay consistent at around 23% in relation to population growth through 2050.
- Dane County continues to have one of the highest and most diverse populations in south central Wisconsin. The Asian population had the most significant growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to prioritize land acquisitions to preserve open space relative to growth patterns.
- The projected growth of the 65 and older county population supports the ongoing priority to develop more trail and passive recreation activities and maintain current rural landowner relationships on priority acquisition projects.
- Maintain relationships with the retirement age population as they provide the majority of volunteer assistance and often lead school and youth activities.
- Involve youth populations to sustain and strengthen support for parks and open spaces over time. Engaging youth to take an interest in parks and conservation is vital to the long-term success of the park system.
- Provide a range of activities and programs that interest diverse groups, including individuals of different abilities, cultural backgrounds, and age groups.
- Continue to promote bilingual signs and website information.

IX.3 Related Planning Efforts

The following is a list of other planning efforts that were considered in the preparation of the 2025-2030 County Park and Open Space Plan. Several of the recommendations that are found within this plan are supported and/or included within these related planning projects.

DANE COUNTY PARK AND OPEN SPACE PLANS 1970-2024

Dane County has completed Parks and Open Space Plans for over 50 years. The first plan was done in 1970 and was completed by the Dane County Regional Planning Commission. All subsequent planning efforts have continued to build upon this original plan with additional recommendations for park planning and facility development, land management, acquisition of new lands, as well as ongoing recreation and trail needs analysis.

2019-2023 & 2025-2030 WISCONSIN STATEWIDE COMPREHENSIVE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN (SCORP)

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources provides a plan to identify essential issues that affect the future of outdoor recreation and includes appropriate recommendations. All supply, demand, and recreational data is compiled on a regional level and include eight SCORP planning regions throughout the state. The plan includes a recreational participation survey, demand and needs assessment of recreational resource requirements, and demographic data for the Dane County region that was considered in preparing this plan.

BICYCLE TRANSPORTATION PLAN-MADISON AREA TRANSPORTATION PLANNING BOARD

The Bicycle Transportation Plan for the Madison Metropolitan Area (MPO) and Dane County is a comprehensive bicycle plan to serve as a blueprint for continuing to improve bicycling conditions and increase bicycling levels throughout Dane County. The planning horizon is 2050. It provides a framework for cooperation between state agencies, Dane County, and local governments in planning for and developing bicycle facilities and programs. It is intended to educate citizens and policy makers on bicycle transportation issues and the needs of bicyclists as well as present resources for planning, designing, and maintaining bicycle facilities. The plan is a component of the MPO's regional transportation plan.

Dane County Parks Volunteer Summit

IX.4 Recreation Needs Analysis

It is important to thoroughly understand the types of recreation facilities and opportunities that should be provided within an expanding park system. Staying current with recreation trends and demand is critical to meeting the recreational needs of Dane County residents as new properties are acquired and existing facilities are assessed for replacement or redevelopment.

Recreation needs analysis is unique to Dane County due to its diverse population structure and correlated demand for diverse recreational uses. A high number of college students and faculty from around the world reside in Dane County, which highlights the importance of analyzing national outdoor recreation participation rates. Additionally, the majority of the population is urban and concentrated throughout the Madison metropolitan area, likely accounting for the significant demand for dog exercise areas, which is less common in other regions of the state. The following recreation demand and trend information was considered in determining the recreation needs for Dane County over the next five years.

NATIONAL AND STATE OUTDOOR RECREATION PARTICIPATION SURVEYS

Outdoor Industry Association / Outdoor Foundation

Since 2007, the Outdoor Industry Association has published an annual outdoor recreation trends report. This report summarizes and provides insights on participation statistics from a nationwide study conducted during a calendar year by Sports Marketing Surveys USA (SMS). Under the guidance of the Outdoor Foundation, the Sports and Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), and six other sports industry associations forming the Physical Activity Council (PAC), the participation study was designed and launched by Digital Research (DRI). All other data is attributed to the SFIA/SMS research partnership.

In 2023, the nationwide outdoor recreation participant base grew by 4.1% to a record 175.8 million participants, representing 57.3% of all Americans aged six and older. The number of participants increased across demographics and activities, as new, more casual participants began hiking, biking, camping, running, and fishing. In 2023, 7.7 million Americans tried one or more outdoor recreation activities for the first time. New and young outdoor recreation participants are driving growth and increased diversity within the outdoor recreation participant base, including a rising number of women, people of color, and seniors. The growth that began in 2016 and accelerated during the COVID pandemic continues, although at a slower pace than in previous years.

Seniors, aged 55 and older, are participating in outdoor recreation in increasing numbers and are largely responsible for driving participation growth nationally in 2023, according to the Outdoor Foundation's Annual Participation Trends Report.

2025 Wisconsin Statewide Outdoor Comprehensive Recreation Plan (SCORP)

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources prepares a statewide 5-year outdoor recreation plan that includes significant planning information that is pertinent to the county plan. This plan also includes valuable survey data pertaining to the amount and trends of outdoor recreation activities occurring across the state.

Participation in outdoor activities substantially increased during the pandemic. Some activities have maintained high levels of participation while others have seen a drop back to pre-pandemic levels.

Federal, state, county, city, and village park and recreation areas experienced large increases in visitation over the last 5 years.

2025 Top 20 outdoor recreation activities in Wisconsin *(participation rates of survey respondents ager 18+)*

1. Walking/Hiking/Running (on paved or unpaved trails) - 68%
2. Swimming in lakes, ponds or rivers - 46%
3. Wildlife watching/Nature photography - 45%
4. Picnicking - 44%
5. Fishing - 40%
6. Motorboating (including pontoons) - 40%
7. Visiting a nature center - 40%
8. Canoeing, kayaking, row boating, SUP - 36%
9. Bicycling - all types 34%
10. Gardening - 31%
11. Using splash pads or outdoor pools - 30%
12. Camping (tent & RV/pop-up/van) - 28%
13. Riding a motorized vehicle (ATV, UTV, 4WD, OHM) - 24%
14. Visiting a dog park - 22%
15. Playing court sports (e.g., basketball, pickleball, tennis) - 21%
16. Hunting - 19%
17. Recreational firearm range shooting (target, clays, trap) - 17%
18. Playing field sports (e.g., soccer, football, baseball) - 17%
19. Foraging or gathering (e.g., wild edibles, medicinal plants) - 15%
20. Managing land (e.g., restoring habitats, building trails) - 12%

DANE COUNTY OUTDOOR RECREATION PARTICIPATION SURVEYS

MRI-Simmons Survey of the American Consumer

MRI's "Survey of the American Consumer" is an annual, in-person and online survey of 25,000 Americans that generates a comprehensive consumer database, encompassing media choices, demographics, lifestyles, attitudes, and consumption patterns for over 6,500 products and services. The survey aims to provide a thorough understanding of the American consumer, detailing their demographics, media habits, lifestyles, attitudes, and purchasing behaviors. This survey employs probabilistic sampling, a technique where researchers select samples from a larger population based on the theory of probability. To be considered part of a probabilistic sample, a participant must be randomly selected. There are multiple views of the combined MRI-Simmons data, which includes analyses at the DMA, County, and zip code levels. The table below presents a three-year view of outdoor recreation participation in Dane County.

2019-2022 Dane County Outdoor Recreation Participation

Age 18+ Participated once in the last 12 months

Recreation Use	Number	% of County Population
Walking	211,170	48.1%
Dog Ownership*	183,739	43.1%
Swimming	175,275	40.0%
Running	120,552	27.5%
Go to the Beach	108,949	25.6%
Backpacking	99,281	22.6%
Hiking	93,180	21.9%
Biking	76,818	18.0%
Visit a Zoo	74,307	17.4%
Basketball	72,815	16.6%
Fishing	71,039	16.7%
Camping	68,337	15.6%
Canoe/Kayak	61,225	14.0%
Golf	50,956	12.0%
Baseball	46,872	10.7%
Picnic	46,641	10.9%
Attend a State/County Fair	44,872	10.5%
Soccer	44,464	10.1%

*Household Ownership

STATEWIDE AND DANE COUNTY PARKS OUTDOOR RECREATION TRENDS

A number of considerations can be taken into account with demand trends that can be used to consider such issues as accessibility for upgrades to ADA-compliant facilities or climate resilience for incorporating green energy and restoration projects.

Statewide SCORP County Results

As part of the 2025 Wisconsin SCORP, a survey was done on perceived recreational trends obtained from local government officials through the two questionnaires (county and municipal). Overall, 89% of the counties indicated that there was a moderate or large increase in activity on county lands over the last five years. Counties with larger populations (including Dane County) appear to have experienced a slightly greater increase in recreational participation compared to those counties with populations of less than 100,000 people.

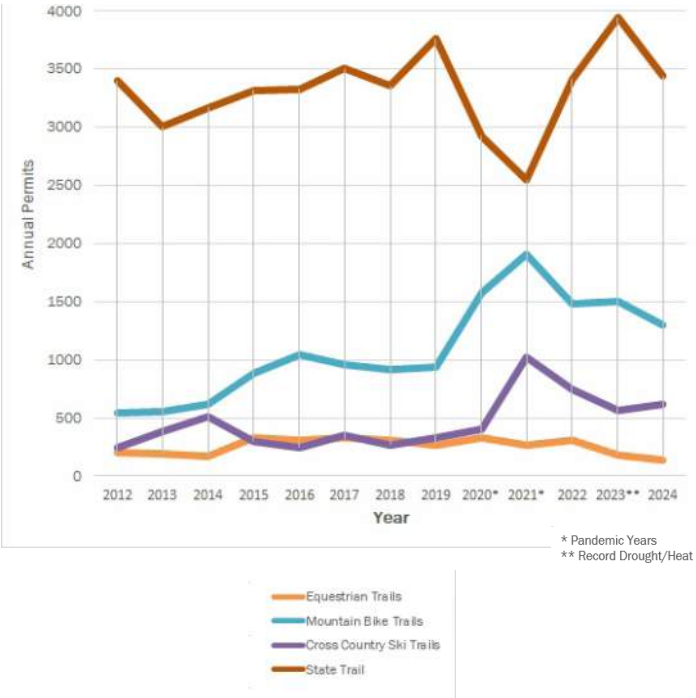
Counties reported increases in recreational activity associated with all activity types. Wildlife watching and nature photography saw the greatest increase in participation, with 85% of counties indicating a large increase over the last five years. Other activities with significant increases in participation include winter biking (fat tire), canoeing, kayaking, hiking/ running, and bicycling. The counties reported a slightly larger increase in the use of universal-access fishing piers and universal-access canoe, kayak, and boat launches compared to other accessible facilities.

DANE COUNTY

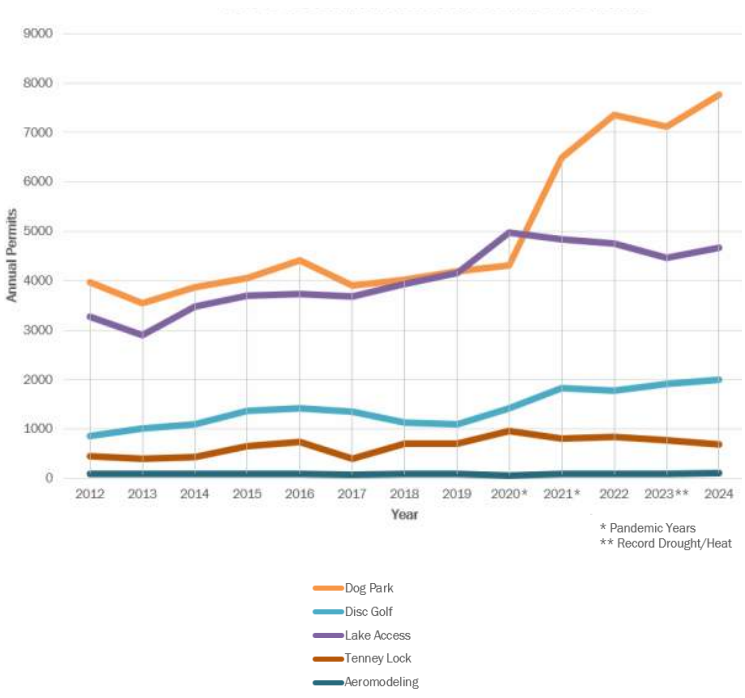
Permit Sales

While access to Dane Conty Parks is free, certain activities or facilities do require a user permit to access certain recreation sites. These permit numbers have been tracked for many years as shown in the figures below. Since 2011, all permit sales have seen an increase expect aeromodelling and equestrian use.

2011-2024 Annual Trail Permit Sales



2011-2024 Annual Permit Sales



Camping

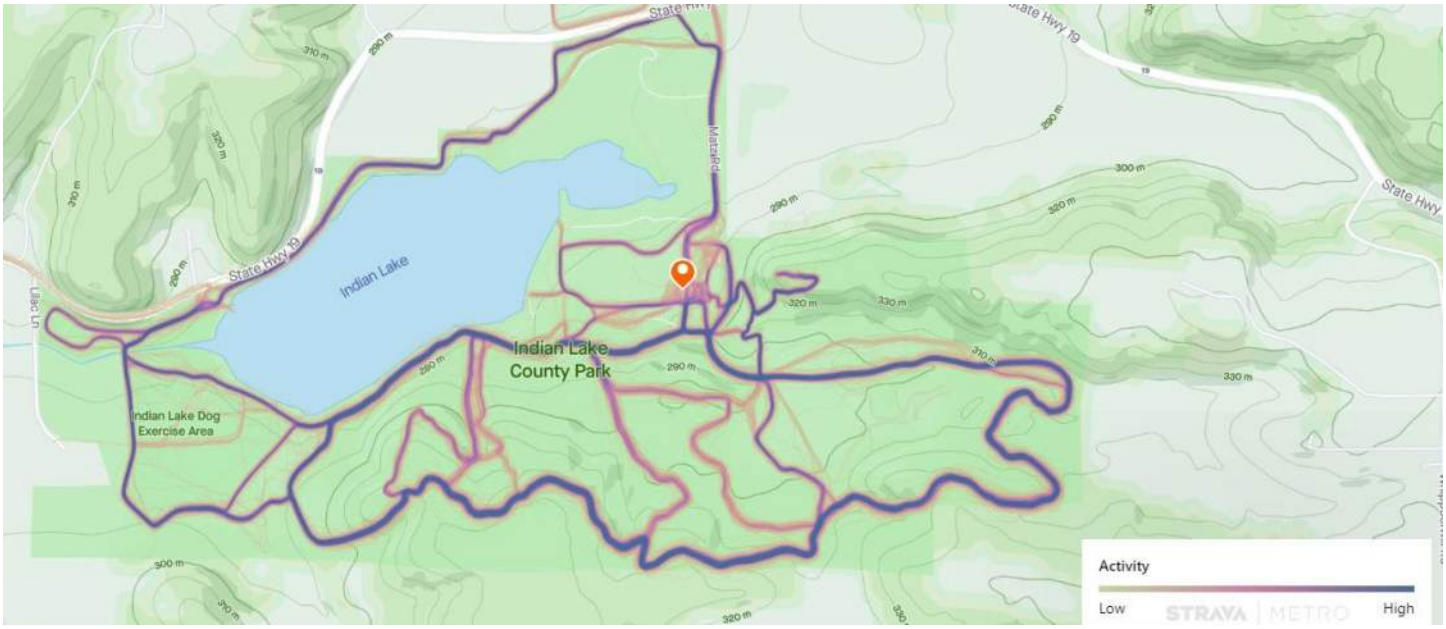
Dane County Parks offers a number of camping sites that are popular for both local residents and non-local visitors and select dispersed campsites along the Ice Age trail. On average, a camper will stay for three nights primarily in an RV or pop-up camper. Camping continues to be popular recreational activity with strong demand.

Dane County Parks Total Camper Nights 2011-2023. Note: camping reservation numbers increased starting in 2021 from previous years as it accounts for all reservations, past years did not include walk in self-registrations.

Social Networks

Dane County Parks staff monitor recreation user numbers by tracking annual sales of permits sold and using electronic counting devices in the park. In addition, mobile phone applications allow users to track activity usage. There are a number of companies that will aggregate and homogenize this data to provide site and trail level views of participation. This information can be helpful in determining public demand for the recreation opportunities offered. The following graphics represent examples of a one year use patterns at Indian Lake County Park and CamRock County Park.

CamRock County Park Bike Activity Feb. 2024 – Feb. 2025



Indian Lake County Park Hike, Walk and Run Activity Nov. 2022 – Nov. 2023

RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES AND NEEDS

Outdoor recreation opportunities and needs encompass a wide range of factors, including physical, cultural, and spiritual benefits, as well as economic impacts. Key considerations in determining these needs are what the public desires and how the landscape can accommodate these activities. Looking at national, state and local data, recreation tiers can be formed for higher demand facilities and opportunities.

Tier 1 Recreation Opportunities

- Bicycling Trails – Mountain Biking
- Bicycling Trails – Recreation/Rail-Trail
- Boat Launches
- Campsites
- Dog Parks
- Hiking/Walking/Running Trails
- Picnic Areas/Day Use Areas
- Playgrounds

Tier 2 Recreation Opportunities

- Disc Golf Courses
- Fishing Opportunities
- Interpretive Trails
- Natural Areas
- Sports Courts (e.g., Tennis, Basketball, Pickleball, etc.)

Tier 3 Recreation Opportunities

- Horseback Riding Opportunities
- Hunting Opportunities
- Trapping Opportunities
- Sports Fields (e.g., Soccer, Softball, Baseball, etc.)

CamRock County Park

OTHER RECREATION PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Participation in outdoor activities spiked during the pandemic and people were motivated to participate in outdoor recreation to improve physical and mental health, spend time with family and friends, and bring home fresh, healthy food.

Gardening, foraging, fishing, and hunting continue to be popular outdoor activities in Dane County and Wisconsin. The demand for community garden space often exceeds available space and the Parks Division continues to seek opportunities to expand the program. Access to parking, water and storage are critical components for successful gardens. Livestock like chickens at community gardens are generally not allowed. Dane County encourages responsible foraging throughout the park system. Fishing continues to be popular throughout Dane County with the Madison chain of lakes offering popular shore fishing opportunities and ice fishing access in the winter. The Dane County Limited Access Archery Program continues to expand in acreage and participation indicating a steady interest in deer and turkey hunting opportunities on Dane County parkland. Applications for the access permit lottery far exceed those avilable. In this plan update hunting made the top 20 list of outdoor recreation activities in Wisconsin indicating steady hunting numbers. Minority populations continue to participate in these activities on county parkland. Minority participation rates for these activities and additional analysis would be helpful to determine any factors limiting use or access by these populations. Several barriers noted in the SCORP by residents were, the need for mentoring, providing information in multiple languages, and improving access to places.

SUMMARY

- Walking/hiking/biking have the highest participation rates locally and nationally reinforcing trail development needs.
- Demand for mountain biking and disc golf continues to increase.
- Biking, dog parks, paddling, picnicking, fishing, and hunting continue to rank high for participation in Dane County.
- Camping continues to increase and regional sporting and community events place additional demands facilities.
- High visitation of nature centers demonstrates demand for outdoor education and natural/cultural interpretation.

IX.5 Public & Non-Profit Conservation Organization Input

The five-year update of the County Parks and Open Space Plan serves as an opportunity for local governments, non-profit conservation groups, and the public to share ideas and offer input on proposed changes to the plan.

In early 2024, notification of the upcoming Parks and Open Space Plan update and process was shared with all local units of government in Dane County. Plan update kick-off meetings were held throughout the county; west, central, and east, on January 17th, April 3rd, and April 15th, 2024, respectively. The public information meetings introduced the planning process for the 2025-2030 Parks and Open Space Plan and explained how stakeholders could contribute their feedback. Each meeting was hosted both in-person and virtually and was attended by a mix of staff from local units of government, non-profit conservation organizations, recreation user groups, and members of the public.

A dedicated webpage for the 2025-2030 Parks and Open Space Plan was launched on the Dane County website in January 2024, featuring an online feedback form. The public information meetings were promoted widely on the Dane County Parks website and shared via email to 22,736 individuals, including permit holders and public officials. In February of 2024, social media outreach included posts on Facebook to 9,800 followers and Instagram to 4,000 followers about the plan update. The Dane County Parks newsletter was shared with 2,400 subscribers in March of 2024 highlighting the plan and online survey. Additionally, a county press release was issued on March 20, 2024 promoting the April public information meetings and online survey. Over two dozen meetings were held with local units or governments and stakeholder groups to discuss updates to the plan.

Throughout summer of 2024, staff participated in community events such as Drag Me to the Zoo, Disability Pride, Juneteenth, the Madison Gospel 5K and Health Fair, and Sessions at McPike Park. At each event, information about the plan was shared through staff conversations and QR codes providing information about the plan.

Feedback collected continues to emphasize the importance of expanding public lands to enhance connectivity, create buffers to surrounding development, and support additional trail expansion and recreation opportunities. Community input has also highlighted priorities such as engaging youth, planning for aging population, and addressing climate change in future park planning efforts.

IX.6 Future Land Needs Analysis

Future land needs recommended in the Parks and Open Space Plan are identified primarily through stakeholder and local unit of government input during the planning process. Some of the considerations to recommend new project areas include restoration potential, strong public support, existing public ownership, partnership potentials, high probability of an active friends group forming, and opportunity to provide a variety of public use. This method has been successful in generating a greater sense of ownership by plan stakeholders and broadening partnership opportunities with other government agencies and non-profit conservation groups.

IX.7 Dane County Parks Staff Input

Dane County Parks operations, natural resources management, and engagement and visitor services staff provide critical in the field observations and public feedback on how the park system is being used by the public and priority facility needs. Park management staff were also consulted throughout the planning process to gain insights on program area needs. Staff input was used for identifying some of the Dane County Parks system and program area recommendations found in the update to this plan.

IX.8 Land Management Considerations

The Dane County Parks system now consists of over 15,000 acres of land with land management practices varying according to property classification. Land management practices strive to balance proper stewardship of resources with an appropriate amount of compatible public uses. Recommendations pertaining to land management within this plan must be consistent with a variety of conservation guidelines including Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Best Management Practices, Dane County Chapter 14 storm water management requirements, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service restoration standards, Park Commission Integrated Pest Management Plan, and Agriculture Conservation Plans that are reviewed and approved by the Dane County Land Conservation Department.

IX.9 Water Management Considerations

The Land and Water Resources Department Lake Management division is responsible for various programs and projects related to water levels, water quality, and water recreation. Department programs and projects utilize parkland for aquatic plant management, sediment removal for phosporous and flood reduction, and stream restoration projects. Consideration for overlapping operational and public use at lake access sites should continue to be considered during facility improvements and management planning. Projects should consider impacts to parkland and the natural, cultural, and historic resources in the early stage of planning.

IX.10 Partnership Opportunities

The potential to partner with Friends, private donors, and other non-profit conservation organizations is a strong consideration for deciding if a new initiative is included in this plan. Many new programs and projects would not be possible without outside assistance in areas such as land acquisition, property restoration, facility renovation or park development.

X. DANE COUNTY PARKS SYSTEM PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

X.1 Recreation Parks

X.2 Natural Resource Areas

X.3 Forests

X.4 Historical/Cultural Sites

X.5 Wildlife Areas

X.6 Trails

- i. Shared-Use Trails
- ii. Ice Age National Scenic Trail
- iii. E-Trails
- iv. Snowmobile Trails
- v. Equestrian Trails
- vi. Water Trails

X.1 Recreation Parks

PRIORITIES

1. Maintain and expand existing park boundaries where needed to provide future park facilities and adequate buffers from adjacent urban and transportation land uses.
2. Consider potential expansion of disc golf, dog exercise, mountain biking, trails, and camping facilities throughout existing and new park lands where need is demonstrated.
3. Consider including revenue generating program areas where appropriate to offset maintenance costs in all future recreation park projects.
4. Mitigate loss of park land for any purpose to the greatest extent possible.

POLICIES

1. Provide park and recreation resources that have regional significance and provide multiple uses for all county residents.
2. Locate new recreation parks close to, but isolated from, large population centers on lands that provide for year-round multiple recreation uses with diverse natural resources. Ideally, natural features such as rugged topography, water or wetlands will help provide separation from urban areas.
3. Partner with schools and recreation groups, including private, non-profit organizations, that have a regional user base.
4. Charge fees in balance with other available resources for use of park facilities in order to offset costs for operations, maintenance and development of the park system.
5. Consider development of new regional recreation uses on existing or future park land if the demand is quantifiable, designated lands are suitable for the intended use, and there are sufficient resources available to plan, develop and manage the proposed use.
6. Incorporate a minimum of twenty-five acres of level, utility open space available for parking and special events into recreation parks where possible.
7. Develop higher intensity park program areas such as camping, disc golf, dog exercise, mountain bike areas, and other uses that require daily management at staff occupied park work unit locations unless alternative volunteer/ partnership management options exist.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The infrastructure at many of Dane County's recreation parks is more than 30 years old and in need of ongoing repair and replacement. Facility renovations or replacements should incorporate accessibility improvements and universal design practices to serve all ages and abilities. Future park improvements should be designed to have the least amount of visual impact on the natural landscape as possible and have a uniform, natural appearance. Maintaining a consistent design style of all park infrastructure throughout the park system will continue to brand the Dane County Parks system and improve public recognition. Signage throughout the entire park system should continue to be replaced based on the department sign standards for a consistent appearance and user-friendly experience. Emergency Location Markers (or ELM) and wayfinding signage should continue to be implemented on regional bike trails and extensive park trail systems to aid in user navigation and emergency response.

Dane County Parks should continue working with local units of government to connect bicycle-pedestrian trails from urban areas to County recreation parks and trails. This will enhance access to a variety of recreation facilities for County residents of all age and income levels. As the bicycle/pedestrian network continues to expand, additional consideration should be given to development of park and recreation facilities that are primarily accessed by bike or foot.

There was considerable interest throughout the public input process for additional development of mountain bike trails (particularly single track) in western Dane County and at CamRock County Park. Dane County staff will continue to investigate suitable locations.

Interest in the disc golf program continues to be strong. This plan recommends continuing to investigate development potential of a new course on the western side of the county as all facilities are located in the Madison metro area or in the eastern half of the county.

Dane County campgrounds often cannot meet demand expectations during the many regional special events that occur each year. Several parks have existing master plans in place that recommend campground expansions and improvements. Dane County Parks should continue pursuing these camping program enhancements as staff and budgets allow, in order to better serve this need in the future.

Dane County Parks often receives requests for assistance to develop new dog parks from local units of government throughout the county. Dane County's role will continue to be providing dog parks that serve regional populations. An inventory of existing and proposed dog parks is presented on the following page. The recommendation to provide a new dog park on the western side of the county remains, particularly in the Town of Middleton and Mt. Horeb regions. This update to the plan continues to recommend consideration of new dog parks in the Cottage Grove and Deerfield/Cambridge regions. The northeast Dane County region should continue to be considered for a new recreation park.

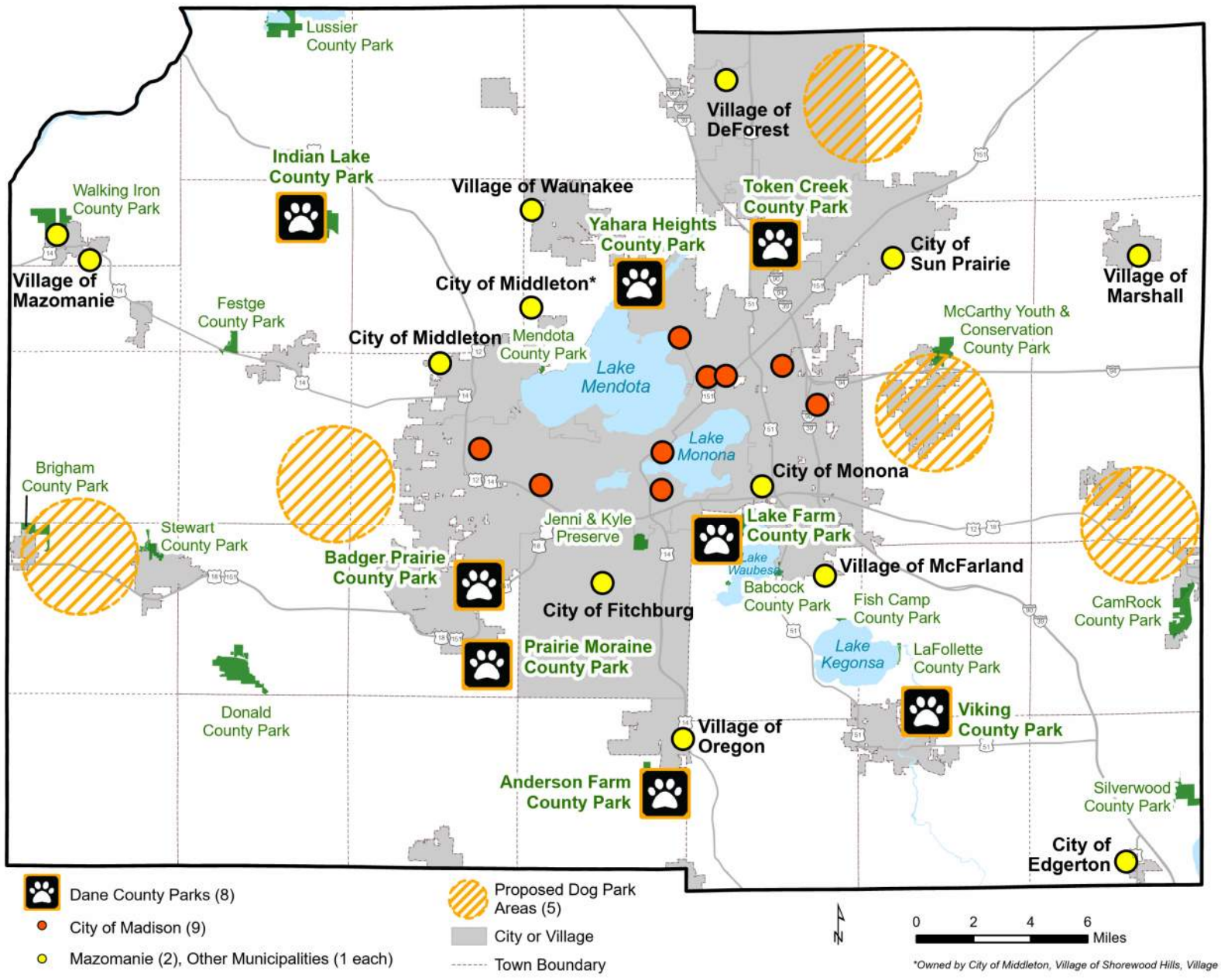
PROPERTY NAMING

The culture and values around property naming are shifting, particularly as there is growing public awareness and understanding that these lands were originally the ancestral homelands of the Ho-Chunk Nation, from which they were forcibly removed. In recognition of this history and in alignment with current values of respect, equity, and stewardship, naming practices for parks and open spaces must evolve accordingly. Moving forward, we believe park and property names should reflect the natural features of the landscape—like the woods, waterways, or wildlife that make each place special—rather than the names of former property owners. An exception may be made if the land was fully donated, without payment. This plan recommends review of and updates to the current donation policy to clearly reflect and support these naming guidelines moving forward. Consider coordination with the Ho-Chunk Nation on potential renaming of mound sites and use of traditional names for certain properites or areas.

FUTURE COUNTY PARK LOCATIONS

One new recreation park is proposed in this plan that was included as a recommendation in the 2018-2023 Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan. The park should be generally located in the northeast quadrant of the County. This region of the County continues to be forecasted to experience a large amount of residential growth according to local land use plans and other demographic analysis and currently is lacking a Dane County regional recreation park.

Existing & Proposed Off-leash Dog Parks



DRAFT

EXISTING RECREATION PARKS

ANDERSON FARM County Park (Town of Oregon, 309.6)

Anderson Farm County Park, established in 2014, is located just south of the Village of Oregon. The park features a network of woodland hiking trails through the Arthur Sholts Memorial Woods, an off-leash dog park with limestone trails winding through restored prairie, and community and market gardens. A central paved bike trail connects the Dog Park with the Memorial Woods and the Village of Oregon. The master plan was adopted in 2013. The park is named after Lyman F. Anderson, a former County Board Supervisor and also served in the Wisconsin State Legislature. The administration of the community and market garden program is managed by a non-profit partner through an annual contract. The Anderson Park Friends support ecological restoration activities, maintain a garden plot in which all produce is donated to local food pantries, and host community events in the park.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Continue to work with a partner organization to manage the community and market grower agriculture program.
- Redevelop farmstead area to provide support facilities for the community and market gardens and accommodate agricultural demonstrations and programming.

Anderson Farm County Park, dog park

BABCOCK County Park (Village of McFarland/Town of Dunn, 37.2 acres)

Babcock County Park is located on the eastern shore of Lake Waubesa, where the Yahara River flows beneath USH 51. In 2019, the acquisition of two lakefront properties expanded the park, adding 650 feet of additional public shoreline access. The park features a popular boat launch, a shore fishing area, and a campground - amenities that are heavily used during the summer months. The park is named after Stephen Babcock, an internationally renowned Wisconsin dairy scientist. It also serves as a base for Lake Management operations and the Dane County Sheriff's Marine Enforcement Bureau.

Recommendations:

- Construct shore fishing pier at shoreline on north side of lock.
- Maintain shore fishing access at lock and dam structure.
- Construct accessible canoe/kayak launch at lock and dam.
- Implement accessible improvements at existing boat landing and newly acquired waterfront property.
- Resurface pavement areas at lock, shower building and campground and incorporate stormwater infiltration areas.
- Reconfigure bicycle/pedestrian path between shower building and lock.
- Continue discussions with WDOT on mitigation activities required for the proposed USH 51 roadway expansion project.
- Develop east overflow lot and public access improvements with Yahara River sediment removal dewatering basin restoration.
- Investigate opportunities for work unit facility improvements or expansion.

BADGER PRAIRIE County Park (Town of Verona/City of Verona, 316.9 acres)

Badger Prairie County Park is located at the eastern edge of the City of Verona at the intersection of CTH PB and USH 18/151. The City of Verona constructed a library off Enterprise Drive which provides a western entrance for the park. The park serves as the center of the Ice Age Trail Junction Area and provides access to Military Ridge State Trail and a segment of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. A variety of recreation uses take place at the park including aeromodeling, an off-leash dog park, soccer, community gardens, hiking, and mountain biking. The master plan was adopted in 2009. Dane County Waste and Renewables Department oversees the closed landfill and retains decision-making authority over land use, while Dane County Parks manages only the recreational amenities on the landfill site. The Reddan Soccer Park is managed by the Madison Area Youth Soccer Association through a formal lease with Dane County Parks. Capital Off Road Pathfinders volunteers maintain the mountain bike trails. Badger Prairie Community Garden, Inc manages the community garden.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Investigate outdoor education and archery program partnerships.
- Explore feasibility of a second entrance road into Reddan Soccer Complex in collaboration with MAYSA, the City of Verona, and the Town of Verona; commitment of private funding from MAYSA may expedite the project.
- Improve signage throughout the park.

BRIGHAM County Park (Town of Blue Mounds, 232.4 acres)

Brigham County Park is located on CTH F just northeast of the Village of Blue Mounds. The park offers camping, two shelters, playground equipment, hiking trails, and outstanding panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. A natural surface hiking trail connects to Blue Mounds State Park. The Brigham Trail, a 1.3-mile paved shared-use trail, goes through the park and connects to the Military Ridge State Trail and Cave of the Mounds National Natural Landmark. The park is named after Ebenezer Brigham, one of the first homesteaders in the area.

Recommendations:

- Prepare a master plan to further investigate how recreation and stewardship activities at this park can be improved and enhanced.
- Improve signage throughout the park.
- Work with Capitol Off Road Pathfinders (CORP) and Wisconsin DNR on planning and development of mountain bike trail system with connections to Blue Mound State Park.
- Investigate restroom facility improvements at park and campground.
- Consider expanding park boundaries, including a continuous corridor south and east to Military Ridge State Trail and west to Blue Mound State Park.
- Work with the Village of Blue Mounds/DNR to plan and develop a shared-use trail connector from the park to Blue Mound State Park.

CamRock County Park, Koshkonong Creek

CAMROCK County Park (Town of Christiana, 574.5 acres)

CamRock County Park is located along the Koshkonong Creek between the Villages of Cambridge and Rockdale. The original park property acquisition was made possible through efforts of the Cambridge Foundation and Dane County Park Commission. The park features the former Rockdale Mill historic marker and contains an "old beer cave" that is being restored. Mountain biking, snowshoeing, kayaking, and cross-country skiing are popular recreation uses. The park has three shelters and playground equipment. The master plan was adopted in 2006. Capital Off Road Pathfinders volunteers maintain the mountain bike trails. The Friends of CamRock Park conduct water monitoring on Koshkonong Creek.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Update the 2006 master plan to include expansion of trail network and future dog park.

DONALD County Park (Town of Springdale, 774.7 acres)

Located along USH 92 south of Mount Horeb, Donald County Park was made possible by a donation of 105 acres from the Donald/Woodburn family in 1993. The park has become a premier equestrian destination with an extensive trail system and also offers outstanding hiking, snowshoeing, foraging, trout fishing, and picnicking opportunities. The master plan was first adopted in 1999 and updated in 2004. The Friends of Donald Park support ecological restoration activities, maintain the equestrian trail network on private lands outside of the park boundaries, and host community events in the park.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Continue planning for future park access site at the former Hitchcock residence.

FESTGE County Park (Town of Berry, 155.5 acres)

Festge County Park is located along USH 14 between the Villages of Cross Plains and Black Earth. Festge County Park has an overlook area that provides panoramic views of the Black Earth Creek valleys. Hiking trails wind through a mature stand of hickory and oak trees. Other features include two shelters and playground equipment. Festge County Park is named after Otto and Evelyn Festge who donated the original acreage for this park. The Friends of Festge Park support ecological restoration activities.

Recommendations:

- Continue to acquire lands/easements to protect views from the overlook area.
- Replace vault restroom facilities.
- Expand boundary to connect to the Ice Age Trail Alliance's Swamplovers Preserve.

Autumn at Donald County Park

FISH CAMP County Park (Town of Dunn, 15.6 acres)

Located at the end of Fish Camp Road off CTH B, this park offers a boat landing and accessible canoe/kayak launch for water access to the Yahara River and Lake Kegonsa as well as a trailhead for bike/ped access to the Lower Yahara River Trail. In 1934, the Wisconsin Conservation Department hired netting crews and established rough-fish removal camps. Fish Camp was one of several rough-fish removal facilities. Carp were captured in nets and then held in pens until they were shipped live by truck to stock ponds in other states, or packed in ice and sent by rail to fresh fish markets in Chicago and New York. An interpretive display, installed in 2009, tells the story of the carp harvesting operation. The park also supports Lake Management aquatic plant management operations and Dane County Sheriff's Marine Enforcement Bureau. The Friends of Lake Kegonsa Society maintain gardens along the shoreline and host community events in the park.

Recommendations:

- Consider replacement of boat landing and floating piers with elevated permanent piers.
- Continue to implement wet meadow restoration and ash tree replacements.

Fish Camp County Park, Accessible Fishing Pier, 2024

FISH LAKE County Park (Town of Roxbury, 199.7 acres)

Located on the west and south shores of Fish Lake in the far northwestern corner of Dane County, Fish Lake County Park was expanded in 2023 when Dane County acquired approximately 192 acres on the lake's south shore. Much of the park's original acreage remains underwater, as Fish Lake - a seepage lake without a natural outlet - has experienced rising water levels in recent decades. This park features a gently rising landscape from the lakeshore to a hilltop with scenic views, along with three small ponds. The master plan for Lussier County Park and Fish Lake Natural Resource Area was adopted in 2014.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Combine with Lussier County Park.
- Restore croplands to prairie and expand hiking trails.

GOODLAND County Park (Town of Dunn, 14.1 acres)

Located on the west shore of Lake Waubesa, Goodland County Park is one of the oldest county parks in Dane County, established in 1943. This park has 600 feet of shoreline. Facilities include two shelters, pickleball/tennis/basketball court, playground equipment, boat launch, and an unsupervised swimming area. The park is named after Walter Samuel Goodland, who served as the 31st Governor of Wisconsin. The park also supports Lake Management aquatic plant management operations.

Recommendations:

- Replace playground equipment.
- Install interpretive signage related to Native American mounds.
- Investigate parking lot and restroom facility improvements.

INDIAN LAKE County Park (Town of Berry, 790.8 acres)

Indian Lake County Park is located along STH 19 approximately 2 miles west of USH 12. In 2021, the park was expanded by 300 acres. The park includes a historic chapel building atop a wooded hill. The nearby overlook provides outstanding views of the park, surrounding hillsides, and lake. The park is one of the systems most popular and is used extensively for cross country skiing during the winter. Other amenities include a shelter, playground equipment, a sledding hill with warming cabin, a youth group camp, and an off-leash unfenced dog park. Only electric boat motors are allowed on Indian Lake. In 2015, Dane County Parks partnered with the Wisconsin DNR on a lake restoration project that involved removal of carp and efforts to reestablish native vegetation. The master plan was adopted in 2024. The Friends of Indian Lake host the annual Indian Lake Trail Run.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Increase park acreage. Acquisition areas include buffers on the northerly lakeshore, as well as the lake headwaters north and east of the park and associated wetlands and springs.

JENNI AND KYLE Preserve (City of Fitchburg, 160.4 acres)

This park is located on the south side of Madison near the border with Fitchburg. The park is part of the Capital Springs Recreation Area and is included in the Lewis Nine Springs Eway. The Jenni and Kyle Preserve was developed to provide children and persons with disabilities a place to enjoy outdoor activities and learn about natural environments. The park offers accessible fishing piers on two spring-fed ponds, trails, wheelchair swings and a shelter. The parkland was acquired using a donation from Patricia and Harvey Wilmeth as a memorial to their two grandchildren, Jenni and Kyle, who both died at the age of 4 of a degenerative neurological disease.

Recommendations:

- Complete an accessible path and waterfowl observation area surrounding the wetland complex south of the ponds.
- Repair/restore paved paths surrounding ponds.
- Replace/upgrade accessible playground equipment.

Reflections at Indian Lake County Park

LAFOLLETTE County Park (Town of Pleasant Springs, 30.1 acres)

This park is located on the eastern shore of Lake Kegonsa on Williams Drive. The park is very linear in nature and includes a shelter, restroom, and playground equipment. The park is popular for shore fishing at both the lock and along the Lake Kegonsa shoreline. The park is named after Robert M. La Follette Sr., a former governor and US senator.

Recommendations:

- Provide for shore fishing and canoe/kayak landing opportunities at the lock on the Yahara River.
- Begin working on establishing Lower Yahara River Trail corridor through the park.

LUSSIER County Park (Town of Roxbury, 221.3 acres)

This park is located on the eastern shore of Fish Lake. The property includes approximately 3,000 feet of shoreline, a parking area, hiking trails, and boat landing. Only electric boat motors are allowed on the lake per Town of Roxbury ordinance. Some prairie restoration and vegetative management have taken place, and an active eagle nest is present on the shoreline. The park is named after John H. Lussier, who made a donation for the acquisition. The master plan was adopted in 2014.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Consider conversion of agricultural fields to prairie.
- Combine park with and rename to Fish Lake County Park.

MCCARTHY Youth and Conservation County Park (Town of Sun Prairie, 347.9 acres)

This park is located east of Madison on CTH TT. The park has a shelter, playground equipment, group campsite, a sledding hill, and popular trails for hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing and equestrian use. The master plan was adopted in 2015. The park is named after Russell and Ella McCarthy who donated the original acerage for the park with the objective of involve young people in conservation and outdoor activities. The Friends of McCarthy Park groom the cross county ski trails, host an annual Youth Service Day, and partner with the Ho-Chunk Nation on developing a system of educational nodes pertaining to pre-settlement Native American culture and lifestyles.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Continue to work on vegetation management and restoration projects.

McCarthy Youth and Conservation County Park, Timber Shelter 2023

MENDOTA County Park (Town of Westport, 19.0 acres)

This park is located along CTH M at the eastern edge of the City of Middleton along the north shore of Lake Mendota. The park is used primarily as a neighborhood park; however, it does still provide regional benefit as it provides the only campground available on Lake Mendota. The park also includes a shelter, playground equipment, an unsupervised swimming area with an accessible swimming ramp, a basketball court, and a shallow launch for small boats, kayaks and canoes. It is a popular place to access Lake Mendota in the winter for ice fishing. The master plan was completed in 2016. The park also supports Lake Management aquatic plant management operations.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the master plan.

PRAIRIE MORAINE County Park (Town of Verona, 166.4 acres)

This park is located on CTH PB approximately 1 mile south of Badger Prairie County Park. The primary uses of the park are the Ice Age Trail corridor, which is along one of the best examples of a terminal moraine in southern Wisconsin, and an extremely popular off-leash dog park. The park contains the remnants of a former leper colony, once part of the Dane County Asylum's grounds in the early 1900s. The master plan was adopted in 2002. The Prairie Moraine Friends support ecological restoration activities and host community events in the park. The park also supports a Dane County Public Safety Communications (911) tower.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Expand park boundaries north, east, and south to protect the terminal moraine and other glacial features, upland oak woodlands, and scenic views as well as to provide an adequate buffer for these features.
- Construct off-leash dog park expansion.

SALMO Pond (Town of Berry, 7.8 acres)

This park is located on USH 14 immediately south of Festge County Park. The property is owned by the Wisconsin DNR, however, Dane County has a 99-year management lease to operate and maintain the property as a county park. In 2018, flooding on Black Earth Creek damaged the trails, piers and the restroom. A new accessible fishing pier was constructed in 2019 and the parking lot was reconstructed with a new restroom in 2022. The Friends of Festge Park support ecological restoration activities at Salmo Pond.

Recommendations:

- Replace/improve accessible fishing bumpouts and canoe/kayak access on Black Earth Creek.

Salmo Pond Fishing Pier 2022

SILVERWOOD County Park (Town of Albion, 308.3 acres)

This park is located in the Town of Albion on the far southeastern edge of Dane County. The park educates the public on the broad and diverse aspects of Wisconsin agriculture – past, present and future by demonstrating innovative agricultural practices and land stewardship that will sustain the land for future generations. The park offers access to Sweet and Rice Lakes, hiking, and equestrian trails. The property, named after the Silverwood Family, was donated to Dane County in 2001 by Irene Silverwood. The master plan was adopted in 2016. The Friends of Silverwood Park administer the grower-partner program, host community education events and managing private rentals of the stone house visitor's center through a formal lease with Dane County Parks.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.

Sunflowers at Silverwood County Park

STEWART County Park (Town of Blue Mounds, 177.1 acres)

This park is located on CTH JG immediately north of the Village of Mount Horeb. This park was created in 1935 and was Dane County's first park. Between 2009-2010, the county completed an extensive water quality improvement project to reduce the amount of sediment being washed into the lake. County staff and partners completed lake dredging, aquatic habitat improvements, beach construction and fish stocking. The park is named after Frank Stewart, who served as the Dane County Board Chair during the 1930s. He was instrumental in advocating for the county's acquisition of the land that became the park. The Friends of Stewart Park work on a variety of restoration and bluebird housing efforts.

Recommendations:

- Prepare a master plan to further investigate how recreation and stewardship activities at this park can be improved and enhanced.
- Construct accessible beach access and a beach changing room area.
- Investigate restroom facility improvements.
- Acquire buffer lands east of the park and lands to the west to provide connection to STH 78. Consider acquisition of conservation easements on adjacent lands to maintain rural viewsheds of surrounding hillsides from within the park.

TOKEN CREEK County Park (Town of Burke, 417.9 acres)

This park is located near the intersection of Interstate 90-94 and USH 51. The park is perhaps best known for its very popular disc golf course. It also has a camgrpound, five shelters, an off-leash dog park, and popular trails for hiking, cross country skiing, and equestrian use. Token Creek is the only stream in northeastern Dane County with the potential to support a cold-water fishery. Dane County Parks and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources completed stream restoration project within the park to stabilize banks and improve habitat. The park has undergone multiple phases of asphalt pavement restoration, boardwalk renovations and shelter improvements since 2018. The master plan was adopted in 2011.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Continue to work on vegetation management and restoration projects.

VIKING County Park (Towns of Dunkirk and Pleasant Springs, 77.1 acres)

This park is located on the Yahara River north of Stoughton on CTH N. A bicycle-pedestrian path and bridge connects the park to the City of Stoughton. The park offers accessible shore fishing and an off-leash dog park.

Recommendations:

- Work on shoreline restoration and habitat improvement projects throughout the park.
- Investigate potential expansion of park north for boat launch improvements and continuous public ownership to existing City of Stoughton and Wisconsin DNR lands. Continue to work on vegetation management and restoration projects.
- Investigate paving of the Lower Yahara River Trail and connections to other completed segments.
- Continue discussions with Dane County Highway on future roadway expansion projects.

WALKING IRON County Park (Town of Mazomanie, 495.3 acres)

This park is located in northwestern Dane County adjacent to the Village of Mazomanie. The park contains native sand prairies and a segment of Black Earth Creek. Access to the park is primarily through the Lions Park in the Village of Mazomanie. Extensive prairie, woodland, and streambank restoration efforts are being undertaken throughout the park. The park offers hiking and equestrian trails and canoe/kayak access to Black Earth Creek.

Recommendations:

- Prepare a master plan to further investigate how recreation and stewardship activities at this park can be improved and enhanced.
- Continue to work with Wisconsin DNR on concept of trail connections to the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway.
- Continue to work with stakeholders and the Ho-Chunk Nation on mound site identification and preservation.

Walking Iron County Park

WILLIAM G. LUNNEY - LAKE FARM County Park (City of Madison/Town of Blooming Grove, 345.8 acres)

This park is located at the intersection of Lake Farm Road and Libby Road, just west of Lake Waubesa, and forms the eastern end of the Lewis Nine Springs E-Way. It offers a wide range of amenities, including a campground, five shelters (two of which are constructed with solar panels), two accessible fishing piers, playground equipment, a boat launch, an observation tower, and trails for hiking and cross-country skiing. The park is located along the Capital City Trail, Lower Yahara River Trail, and West Waubesa Trail. The Lussier Family Heritage Center, the hub of Dane County Parks' environmental education programs, is located within the park. A solar energy system supplies approximately 90% of the park's electricity. A master plan for the broader Capital Springs Recreation Area, which includes this park, was adopted in 2010. In June 2019, the park's original name, Lake Farm County Park, was officially changed by County Board resolution to William G. Lunney Lake Farm County Park in honor of William (Bill) G. Lunney, who served in Dane County government for 50 years, including 30 years as Chair of the Dane County Park Commission.

Recommendations:

- Continue to implement recommendations of the Capital Springs Recreation Area Master Plan.
- Add accessibility improvements to fishing piers.
- Renovate existing boat launch parking lot and improve stormwater.

Sandhill Cranes at WGL Lake Farm County Park

YAHARA HEIGHTS County Park (Town of Westport, 138.1 acres)

This park is located at the intersections of CTH M and STH 113 along the Yahara River. The primary use is as an off-leash dog park; there are also hiking trails and a canoe landing area along the river. Yahara Heights County Park has over 3,000 feet of water frontage within the upper Yahara basin. The Friends of Cherokee Marsh support ecological restoration activities and host educational events in the park.

Recommendations:

- Prepare a site development plan to relocate the entrance from Catfish Court to River Road that includes considerations for water access, trail access into the Cherokee Marsh Natural Resource Area, and dog park access.
- Continue to coordinate with Wisconsin DNR on existing Cherokee Marsh Canoe/Kayak Access.

X.2 Natural Resource Areas

PRIORITIES

1. Preserve lands adjacent to urban areas that improve water and wetland quality and quantity.
2. Through partners acquire or fund natural resource area acreage that increases overall size and connectivity of existing natural resource areas.
3. Focus on projects that involve and foster multiple partnerships.
4. Continue to expand existing and create new natural resource areas that provide a variety of regional functions, including nature-based recreation uses, water quality improvement and other environmental services, trail connectivity, and habitat improvement.
5. Continue and increase restoration efforts to the extent possible on woodlands, wetlands, prairie and savanna ecosystems.
6. Utilize volunteers and non-profit conservation organizations to oversee ecological asset assessments and species inventories in partnership with educational and research institutions.

POLICIES

1. Communicate project area resource protection priorities to partnering agencies and non-profit groups to provide a common vision and work plan.
2. Work with partnering agencies and groups toward creation of larger landscape-scale natural resource areas.
3. Plan and implement greenway connections that enhance non-motorized public access from population centers to existing public lands and regional trails.
4. Plan, implement, and partner on projects that provide environmentally sensitive access to Dane County lakes, streams and rivers, including water-based trails and shore fishing.
5. Acquire lands to buffer Dane County water and wetland areas to reduce flooding and enhance water quality.
6. Allow low-impact, nature-bas ed recreation development and use of natural resource areas, such as that overlook areas for natural and scenic views.
7. Where advantageous, undertake alternative land lease, rental, or sustainable resource management practices that could generate revenues for future operation, maintenance, and development of natural resource areas.
8. Stabilize streambanks, shorelines, and other areas of erosion through coordinated planning efforts on county-owned parklands and work jointly with adjacent property owners as necessary to ensure permanent stabilization.
9. Consider both working and non-working farm lands as a complementary component of natural resource areas.

EXISTING NATURAL RESOURCE AREAS

BADFISH CREEK Natural Resource Area (Towns of Rutland, Dunkirk, Dunn)

The project area spans from the Badfish Creek headwaters in the Town of Dunn and follows the creek and associated wetlands south to the county line in the Towns of Rutland and Dunkirk. The US Fish and Wildlife, Wisconsin DNR, Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), Friends of Badfish Creek, Groundswell Conservancy, and Rock River Coalition are all potential future conservation partners in this region. The project area lies between two large population centers, Stoughton and Oregon, and is anticipated to provide quasi-wilderness experiences for the region. Existing recreation uses that may be enhanced include canoeing and kayaking, hunting, fishing, and wildlife observation. There is also high potential for a variety of wetland restoration projects in lowland and hydric soil areas that could expand and connect existing publicly-owned lands.

Recommendations:

- Continue to investigate acquisition and stewardship opportunities with conservation partners.

BADGER MILL CREEK Natural Resource Area (City and Town of Verona)

This project area includes wetlands and adjacent upland buffer lands along the lower stretch of Badger Mill Creek. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources reclassified Badger Mill Creek as a "cool water fishery," indicating it does have the potential to sustain some trout populations.

Recommendations:

- Continue discussions with the City and Town of Verona on future land use plans for this corridor.
- Stay engaged with MMSD, stakeholders and regulatory authorities on management and restoration updates if and when MMSD discontinues effluent flow to Badger Mill Creek.

BLACK EARTH CREEK Natural Resource Area (Towns of Black Earth, Berry, Mazomanie, Cross Plains, Middleton, 179 acres)

Black Earth Creek is nationally known for its excellent trout fishing. Some of the lands along the creek are owned by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as public fishing and wildlife habitat areas. Future land acquisitions would seek to fill in the gaps between existing publicly-owned lands and to protect the scenic quality of the stream corridor. The Dane County Regional Planning Commission completed a project plan for Black Earth Creek in 2003 that was adopted by the Dane County Board. A master plan for the Sunnyside property was completed in 2010. In 2018, Black Earth Creek and western Dane County experienced an unprecedented storm event that caused widespread flooding and extensive damage. In 2022, the Capital Area Regional Planning Commission (CARPC) led the Black Earth Creek Green Infrastructure Plan to identify projects and practices to improve flood protection and water quality.

Recommendations:

- Acquire additional headwater lands at "Old Mud Lake" north of USH 14 and immediately south of USH 14 with the help of multiple partners for future wetland restoration projects.
- Expand Sunnyside Seed Farms property west and south along the creek, and north to expand future park, access and recreation potential.
- Continue working with Groundswell Conservancy on its identified priority areas within the project boundary, including acquisition of conservation easements from ridge top to ridge top between Cross Plains and Mazomanie.
- Investigate allowing hunting on county lands adjacent to Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources public hunting grounds where compatible and grant funding requires.
- Continue implementation of the Sunnyside master plan.
- Continue discussions with the Town of Middleton, American Transmission Company (ATC) and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation on future road and transmission line improvements that impact parklands.
- Continue to foster planning of the future Black Earth Creek Trail.
- Coordinate with DNR and other stakeholders on restoration projects along BEC and contributing tributaries.
- Consider a future joint planning effort by local units of government to identify unified resource and recreation management strategies for the entire project area.
- Continue discussion with WisDOT to provide public access to Black Earth Creek Headwaters Property.

BLOOMING GROVE DRUMLINS Natural Resource Area (Towns of Blooming Grove and Cottage Grove, 174.7 acres)

This project area seeks to protect the glacial drumlin features found throughout this region, as well as the associated wetlands that surround them. Drumlins are low, smoothly rounded, elongated hills of compact glacial till (sand, gravel, and rock) deposited under the sheet of ice and shaped by its flow; with the longer axis parallel to the direction of ice movement. They have a blunt nose that points in the direction from which the ice approached, and a gentler slope tapering in the opposite direction.

Recommendations:

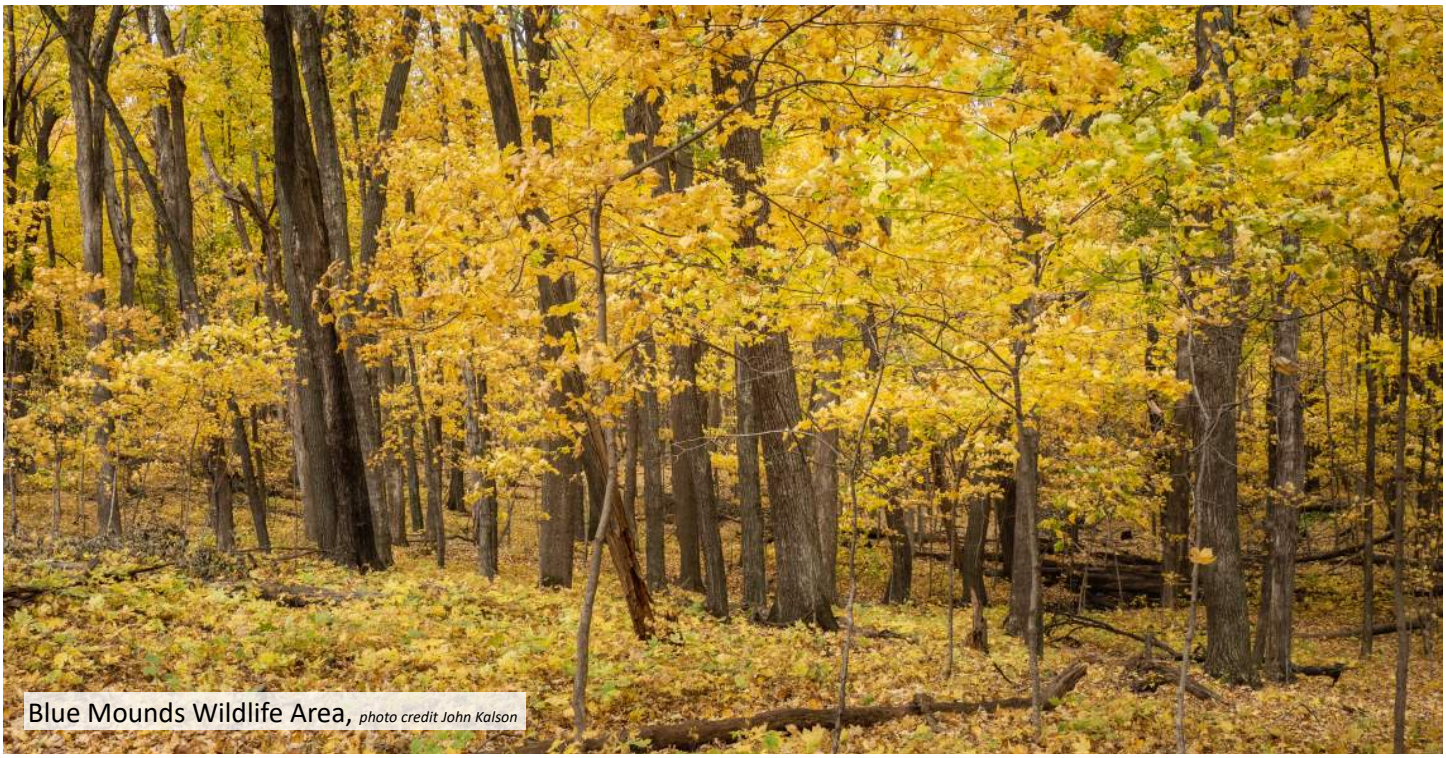
- Partner with City of Madison, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Cottage Grove on the implementation of a connector trail between the Capital City Trail and the Glacial Drumlin State Trail.
- Partner with City of Madison to expand hiking/cross country ski trails into Door Creek Park.
- Consider a future joint planning effort by local units of government to identify unified resource and recreation management strategies for the entire project area.

BLUE MOUNDS Natural Resource Area (Towns of Vermont and Blue Mounds)

This project area landscape consists of steep wooded hills and valleys, which afford spectacular views, streams, oak savanna, and prairie remnants. Dane County has made several significant land purchases to provide connections from Brigham Park to Blue Mound State Park and the Military Ridge State Trail. The Prairie Enthusiasts have also been actively working to preserve lands in this project area. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Groundswell Conservancy, and Capital Off Road Pathfinders are all potential future conservation and recreation partners in this region. Portions of this project area could be managed as Forest lands.

Recommendations:

- Continue to investigate mountain bike and shared-use trail connections to Blue Mound State Park.
- Expand boundary north of Blue Mound State Park along Dane/Iowa county line to northern extent of existing project area boundary.



Blue Mounds Wildlife Area, *photo credit John Kalson*

CAPITAL SPRINGS RECREATION AREA (Cities of Madison, Monona, Fitchburg, Town of Blooming Grove and Town of Dunn)

The Capital Springs Recreation Area spans approximately 2,700 acres within the Lewis Nine Springs E-way. A master plan was developed jointly by Dane County Parks and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and was adopted in 2011. Several local units of government and stakeholders manage property and public parks, trails, historic and cultural features, and natural resource areas within the recreation area. Recreational activities include biking, hiking, snowshoeing, canoeing, kayaking, hunting, fishing, camping, disc golf, wildlife observation, and cross-country skiing.

Recommendations:

- Implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Refer to recommendations outlined below in Lewis Nine Springs E-way.

CHEROKEE MARSH Natural Resource Area (City of Madison, Towns of Burke, Windsor, and Westport, 207.7 acres)

The Cherokee Marsh project area is generally bound by Interstate 90-94 on the east and STH 113 to the west. Public ownership is a mixture of City of Madison, Dane County, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources owned lands. The City of Madison has been conducting extensive vegetation and wetland management efforts on the south side of the river. Dane County and volunteers have been working on removal of invasive species and prairie restoration on the north side of the river.

Recommendations:

- Explore creation of a land-based trail that provides connections to Token Creek Park and the Upper Yahara River Natural Resource Area.
- Continue vegetation management practices and prairie restoration.
- Continue working with the Friends of Cherokee Marsh, the City of Madison, Groundswell Conservancy, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on acquiring lands within the project area boundary.
- Continue to work with volunteers on identifying and providing educational information for Native American mound sites.
- Expand project area boundary to include Westport Drumlin Area and consider future trail connections.

Cherokee Marsh Natural Resource Area, *photo credit John Kalson*

DOOR CREEK WETLANDS Natural Resource Area (Village of McFarland, Towns of Dunn and Pleasant Springs)

This project area includes the wetlands and surrounding upland buffer areas of Door Creek on the north shore of Lake Kegonsa. A project plan completed by the Dane County Regional Planning Commission, adopted by the County Board in 2000, provides management recommendations that include the protection of wetlands and associated buffers, provision of northern pike spawning areas, and enhancement of Door Creek water quality.

Recommendations:

- Work with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on creating unified resource and recreation management strategies for the entire project area.
- Continue planning for the Lower Yahara River Trail.
- Continue vegetation management practices and prairie restoration.
- This boundary should be revised in the future as local units of government complete more detailed neighborhood plans for developing areas.

FISH LAKE Natural Resource Area (Town of Roxbury)

This project area is located on lands surrounding Fish Lake and along the western shore of Crystal Lake in the far northwestern corner of the county. Dane County has acquired parklands, and server properties that have flooded with perennially high lake levels on both lakes for several years. A lake district was formed, and under a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources permit, pumping of the lake began in an effort to decrease water levels.

Recommendations:

- Continue to expand county-owned lands, with priority given to acquiring shoreline and shoreline buffer areas.
- Continue to implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Work with the Wisconsin DNR to explore the possibility of creating a boat landing on the west shore of Crystal Lake.
- Investigate archeological site preservation and conversion of cropland to permanent cover.

ICE AGE TRAIL JUNCTION Natural Resource Area (Town of Verona, 553.7 acres)

This project area includes Ice Age Trail corridor lands north and south of Badger Prairie County Park and the park itself. It also includes the habitat and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation wetland mitigation area known as Goose Lake. The Ice Age Trail Junction Area was the result of a 1991 proposal that called for a wider Ice Age Trail corridor in the Verona-Madison area to encompass key resource and scenic features associated with the trail. In 1992, the Dane County Park Commission established an intergovernmental advisory committee composed of the Town of Verona, City of Verona, Dane County Board, Dane County Executive, and the Park Commission to create a project plan for the area that was adopted by the County Board in 1993.

Recommendations:

- Solicit outside funds to provide bicycle trail connections from the Ice Age Junction Trail to the Reddan Soccer Park.
- Investigate acquisition partnerships with the City of Verona and MAYSA on lands surrounding the Reddan Soccer Park.
- Consider development of snowshoe trails.

KOSHKONONG CREEK Natural Resource Area (Town of Sun Prairie)

This project area spans from the City of Sun Prairie south to Interstate 94 and the northern tip of the Blooming Grove Drumlin Natural Resource Area. It also includes environmental corridor lands northeast of McCarthy County Park that drain into the Koshkonong Creek. The vision for this project area is that it would become a greenbelt corridor between the Cities of Sun Prairie, Madison and the Village of Cottage Grove while also providing a rural transition into the Town of Sun Prairie. This corridor could provide a diversity of benefits including flood mitigation, wetland restoration potential, and future recreation opportunities such as shore fishing and trails. Protection of these lands is also expected to include working farms that exist throughout the drainage district areas.

Recommendations:

- Investigate acquisition opportunities along the CTH N corridor west and north of McCarthy County Park.
- Consider a future joint planning effort by local units of government to identify unified resource and recreation management strategies for the entire project area.

LEOPOLD-RILEY Game Cooperative (Towns of Springdale, Verona, and Cross Plains)

In 1931, Aldo Leopold formed a cooperative for the purpose of providing its members a place to hunt. Historically, it was the site of the Riley Game Cooperative. Aldo Leopold created, participated in, and analyzed this cooperative effort between the area's farmers and sportsmen/conservationists from Madison. They worked together to create better wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities, especially for pheasants and bobwhite quail. The area encompassed all or part of 11 farms, or about 1800 acres, mostly in the Town of Springdale, but also extending into the Towns of Verona and Cross Plains. Within the reserve boundary were croplands, pastures, an oak savanna, woods, a cattail marsh, a sedge meadow, springs and spring ponds, and the Sugar River. Historically, the Chicago and Northwestern railroad track ran through Riley on the way between Madison and Mount Horeb. The railroad right-of-way is now the Military Ridge State bike trail. This area contains important wildlife habitat and is the headwaters of the Sugar River system.

Recommendations:

- Accelerate landowner contact efforts for purposes of acquiring land or easements.
- Work with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Dane County Conservation League on exploring the possibility of providing public hunting opportunities in the future as additional lands are acquired or leased.
- Work with U.W. Madison and volunteer groups to prepare a management plan for the project area.

LEWIS NINE SPRINGS E-WAY (Cities of Madison & Fitchburg, Town of Dunn, 632.5 acres)

In 1969, the National Endowment for the Arts provided funds for the development of an environmental study model to illustrate how a community can identify and capitalize on existing natural and human made resources in an effort to elevate environmental, ecological, and esthetic planning decisions to a higher priority within the community development decision making process. This resulted in an "E-Way" concept developed through the efforts of Professor Emeritus Philip Lewis of the University of Wisconsin Environmental Awareness Center, with the "E" representing educational, environmental, esthetic, and ecological. The Lewis Nine Springs E-Way project area extends from Dunn's Marsh at Seminole Highway east to Lake Waubesa and includes more than 1,300 acres of land under county ownership.

Recommendations:

- Implement recommendations of the Capital Springs Recreation Area master plan within the E-Way boundary.
- Develop a series of educational kiosks along the Capital City Trail.
- Work with City of Fitchburg/WDNR on feasibility of adding bike lanes to Syene Road.

Lewis Nine Springs E-Way

LOWER MUD LAKE Natural Resource Area (Town of Dunn, Village of McFarland, 350.9 acres)

This extensive natural resource area stretches between Lake Waubesa and Lake Kegonsa along the Yahara River. The land is a mix of county, town, village and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources ownership and supports a variety of recreation uses including public hunting, canoeing, cross country track and field races, and fishing. The Village of McFarland has a master plan for a proposed community park along the northern boundary off of Elvehjem Road, and developed a new dog exercise area in 2010. The County Board adopted a project plan for this area in 1994.

Recommendations:

- Begin planning for the Lower Yahara River Trail.
- Work with the WDNR on creating unified resource and recreation management strategies for the entire project area.
- Plan and implement Native American educational trails and nodes.
- Restore dewatering sites used for Yahara River sediment removal

Prescribed Burn at Lower Mud Lake NRA, *photo credit Steve Dahlgren (Dog Grin Photography)*

MAUNESHA RIVER Natural Resource Area (Towns of York, Sun Prairie, Medina, Bristol, Village of Marshall, 139.7 acres)

This project area extends from the WDNR Deansville Marsh Wildlife Area southeast along the Maunesha River through the Village of Marshall to the county line. The 131-acre Socha Baer Conservancy that was donated to the County in 2008 is included in this project area boundary. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Village of Marshall, Capitol Water Trails Ltd., Groundswell Conservancy, and Capital Off Road Pathfinders mountain bike advocates are all potential future conservation and recreation partners in this region. This region is part of the southeastern Wisconsin glacial plains landscape that provides extensive wetland and grassland habitats. Existing recreation uses that may be enhanced include canoeing and kayaking, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and mountain biking.

Recommendations:

- Further discussions with former landowner of Socha Baer Conservancy regarding future plans for this property.

NORTH MENDOTA Natural Resource Area (Town of Westport, 321.4 acres)

In 2008, Dane County Parks worked through a public consensus building process with the Towns of Westport and Springfield, Village of Waunakee, City of Middleton, Wisconsin Department of Transportation and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and stakeholders to identify a North Mendota Natural Resource Area project boundary. The planning effort was a component of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation North Mendota Parkway study led by the consulting firm Strand Associates. The boundary included in this plan represents the results of this planning process. The project area begins at STH 113 and the Yahara River to the east and follows the north shore of Lake Mendota, including Six Mile and Dorn Creeks and their associated wetlands. Dorn and Six Mile Creeks contain some state fishery lands and public hunting areas. Properties within this project area are anticipated to enhance water quality of the Yahara chain of lakes and provide fish and wildlife habitat.

Recommendations:

- Continue to work with partners on implementation of the North Mendota Trail.
- Investigate connecting this Natural Resource Area with the Pheasant Branch Conservancy.
- Work with WDNR to create unified resource and recreation management strategies for entire project area.

PATRICK MARSH Natural Resource Area (Towns of Sun Prairie, Bristol, City of Sun Prairie)

Patrick Marsh is located on the eastern edge of the City of Sun Prairie just south of USH 151. The property was the first Wisconsin Department of Transportation wetland mitigation bank site in the state. The public land around the marsh is a combination of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Dane County, and Groundswell Conservancy and includes prairie restoration efforts. The shallow marsh area is home to many varieties of waterfowl and grassland nesting birds. Rising water levels have resulted in the marsh becoming more of a lake, and therefore long-term goals should involve lowering water levels to restore vegetative diversity of a shallow marsh. Dane County Parks worked with local units of government, the Patrick Marsh Middle School, and several area stakeholders to prepare a project plan that was adopted by the County Board in 2003.

Recommendations:

- Continue to provide peripheral planning support to stakeholder groups to identify future recreation and management objectives for Patrick Marsh.
- Continue to assist with acquisition of lands designated within the Patrick Marsh project plan.

PHEASANT BRANCH Conservancy (City of Middleton, Town of Springfield, 318.2 acres)

This project area is located on the northern boundary of the City of Middleton and is jointly owned by Dane County, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the City of Middleton. An active Friends group has been assisting the county Naturalist with ongoing wetland, savanna, and prairie restoration efforts throughout the Conservancy. The Friends mission is "to restore, protect, and promote the Pheasant Branch Conservancy and its watershed for today and tomorrow." In 2005, the City and the County worked jointly on the installation of a crushed limestone bicycle-hiking trail with interpretive kiosks. The trail extends from Orchid Heights Park in Middleton west to an existing trailhead along Pheasant Branch Road. The property also contains an overlook for a large spring that contributes 2.6 million gallons of fresh water to Lake Mendota each day.

Recommendations:

- Acquire lands adjacent to the Conservancy within the Fredrick Springs Recharge Area for water protection purposes and for future establishment of regional bicycle trail connector to Governor Nelson State Park.
- Prepare an updated master plan to establish a common vision for future facility development, stewardship and management of Pheasant Branch Conservancy.
- Continue to work with the Friends of Pheasant Branch Conservancy and the City of Middleton on improving access opportunities to expanded user groups, particularly people with dementia or Alzheimer's disease, and restoration projects.
- Plan and implement Springs overlook improvements.

PHIL'S WOODS Natural Resource Area (Town of Roxbury, 36.1 acres)

Phil's Woods is located in the Town of Roxbury west of USH 12 along North Dunlap Hollow Road, and is named for Philip LaFollette, three-time governor of Wisconsin. The site consists of woods and open meadows with hilltop views of the Wisconsin River valley and Baraboo Range.

Recommendations:

- Construct small gravel parking lot and trailhead off North Dunlap Hollow Road.
- Consider reclassifying as a "Forest" to enable the property to come under a forest management plan.

Phil's Woods NRA, *photo credit John Kalson*

SOUTH WAUBESA MARSH Natural Resource Area (Town of Dunn, 64.1 acres)

South Waubesa Marsh is located on the southwest end of Lake Waubesa and includes segments of Swan and Murphys Creek. The marsh includes deep peat deposits and major springs and seepages that provide water to Lake Waubesa. Some wetland restoration and enhancement projects within the project area have been ongoing. The former Holtzman NRA property was donated to Dane County with the intent that it be considered a nature preserve, access can only be obtained by permission from one of the surrounding landowners. The Nature Conservancy and WDNR are the primary public landowners within the boundary.

Recommendations:

- Consider acquiring property that would provide public access to the former Holtzman NRA property.
- Upon completion of the hydrologic study of this region and review of the study by Dane County (or appropriate agency), local units of government or eligible non-profit conservation organizations would be able to apply for matching funds through the Conservation Fund grant program for protection of additional lands critical to maintaining the existing hydrologic function outside of the project area boundary.

SPRINGFIELD HILL Natural Resource Area (Town of Roxbury, 198.1 acres)

This project area is located along the USH 12 corridor and provides outstanding views from atop Springfield Hill, one of the highest points in the area. The landscape includes steep wooded valleys, glacial kettle ponds, and open meadow areas. Inclusion of this project area is closely linked to future development of the Ice Age Trail.

Recommendations:

- Continue to work with the Ice Age Alliance on acquisition of lands necessary for trail development and to maintain the scenic, rural quality.

Trail Overlook at Springfield Hill NRA

STARKWEATHER CREEK Natural Resource Area (City of Madison, Town of Burke)

This project area extends north and east from the confluence of Starkweather Creek at Lake Monona, including both branches of Starkweather Creek. The boundary includes an environmental corridor identified in the 1983 Water Quality Plan for Starkweather Creek plus additional area as recommended by the City of Madison Parks Department that extends to adjacent watersheds of Cherokee Marsh, Token Creek, Door Creek, and Koshkonong Creek. The Dane County Airport is the largest property owner in the watershed. Lands protected within this natural resource area are primarily envisioned to provide lake and water quality protection, water and land based trails, upland vegetation buffers, and wildlife habitat. The project boundary included in this plan is based on information in the City of Madison's Comprehensive Plan. This boundary should be revised in the future as local units of government complete more detailed neighborhood plans for developing areas.

Recommendations:

- Continue working with the City of Madison Planning Department on concept of trail connection to Token Creek County Park.

SUGAR RIVER Natural Resource Area (Town of Verona)

The Sugar River Natural Resource Area lies just west of the City of Verona and includes a segment of the Military Ridge State Trail. It is one of the largest continuous wetland complexes along the boundary of the driftless area in western Dane County. Dane County is the primary public land owner in this project area.

Recommendations:

- Continue working with the Village of Belleville on regional park, trail, and restoration initiatives being undertaken as part of the Lake Belle View project.
- Work with volunteers to provide increased canoe/kayak access.
- Prepare a master plan to identify unified resource and recreation management strategies for the entire project area.
- Plan and implement public access improvements of newly acquired Sugar River Wildlife Area properties.
- Continue working with WDNR and other non-profit conservation organizations on streambank restoration and fish habitat improvement projects.
- Consider historical preservation potential of the former Davidson and Minch houses.

TOKEN CREEK Natural Resource Area (Towns of Windsor, Burke, 169.6 acres)

The boundary is generally defined as Interstate 90-94 on the western edge and extending along the creek to CTH C. The dam was removed from the mill pond in 2004, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has been actively working on restoration efforts to enhance habitat and water quality of the stream. Token Creek is the only cold-water fishery in the northeast quadrant of Dane County. A master plan was completed for this project area in 2011.

Recommendations:

- Continue working with WDNR and other non-profit conservation organizations on streambank restoration and fish habitat improvement projects.
- Dane County would work toward acquiring lands north and east of Token Creek County Park to STH 19. Local units of government and/or non-profit conservation organizations would work on protection of lands from STH 19 east to the mill pond either through dedication or acquisition. These agencies would be eligible to apply for partial funding through the Dane County Conservation Fund grant program.
- Continue implementation of the adopted master plan.

UPPER YAHARA RIVER Natural Resource Area (Village of Deforest, Town of Vienna)

This project area lies along the Upper Yahara River and on the western boundary of the Village of DeForest. It contains large areas of wetlands, floodplain forest, a heron rookery, and calcareous fens. As discussed within the demographic needs analysis, this region continues to be one of the fastest growing areas in Dane County.

Recommendations:

- Work with the Village on development of a regional off-road shared-use bicycle trail along the river that would provide connections to Token Creek County Park and Cherokee Marsh.
- Continue acquisition efforts through the Dane County Land and Water Legacy program and increase land acquisition efforts through the Dane County Conservation fund as opportunities become available.

WALKING IRON Natural Resource Area (Town of Mazomanie)

In 2008 Dane County acquired over 1,000 acres of property known previously as 7A Farms in the Town of Mazomanie. This project area is a combination of Walking Iron County Park and the Walking Iron Wildlife Area. The property hosts Wisconsin River backwater and shoreland communities as well as large tracts of working farm lands. Flocks of sandhill cranes use the property as a staging site for fall migration, and each fall several thousand cranes gather here. An area north of Walking Iron County Park hosts a scrub oak forest which could be considered an oak-barren ecological type, and has the potential to support ornate box turtles, an endangered species. An old glacial lake of some 200 acres, now drained, may easily be restored to a productive wetland. In addition, a half-mile of Marsh Creek meanders through a wide riparian corridor. Interior ditches throughout the project area and seasonally flooded crop fields provide outstanding waterfowl habitat. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Groundswell Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Pheasants Forever are all potential future conservation partners in this river region.

Recommendations:

- Continue to work with volunteers and partners on trail-connectivity between Walking Iron Park and the Lower Wisconsin Riverway.
- Continue ongoing vegetation restoration and habitat improvement projects throughout the project area.

YAHARA HEADWATERS Natural Resource Area (Village of DeForest, Town of Windsor)

The project area aims to provide water quality and wildlife habitat buffers for the upper reaches of the Yahara River. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Village of DeForest, Groundswell Conservancy, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are potential future conservation partners in this pothole region. There is high potential for grassland habitat restoration work along the river corridor and associated floodplain areas that extend just north of the Village of DeForest to the county line. This project area is ecologically connected to the WDNR Land Legacy Arlington Prairie property, which features deep soil prairie and prairie pothole remnants that once covered most of north central Dane County and south-central Columbia County.

Recommendations:

- Consider a future joint planning effort by local units of government to identify unified resource and recreation management strategies for the entire project area.

Sunset Paddle on the Yahara River

X.3 Forests

PRIORITIES

1. Consider using WDNR staff expertise and resources to create Forest Management Plans (including sustainable timber harvests) for county forests and woodlots that are compatible with other forest use objectives.
2. Educate county park users about sustainable forest management practices, including sustainable timber harvest, when compatible with other forest use objectives.
3. Increase county-owned acreage of forests and woodlots and consider future transition into an expanded "Dane County Forest" program as forest lands increase.
4. Utilize proceeds of sustainable and environmentally compatible timber harvests for future forest management and facility development.

POLICIES

1. Consider multiple low-impact recreation uses of county forests and woodlots, which are compatible with forest objectives including hiking, cross country skiing, picnicking, foraging, and hunting.
2. Investigate revenue-generating sustainable timber management practices and collection of firewood.
3. Maximize volunteer efforts to control invasive vegetative species.
4. Work toward establishing partnerships with schools, Friends and non-profit conservation organizations to assist with management, maintenance, and monitoring of forest lands.

Invasive Vegetation Removal at Morton Forest

EXISTING FORESTS

MORTON Forest (Town of Mazomanie, 178.9 acres)

Morton Forest, named after its benefactor Steve Morton offers passive recreational use in a quiet and tranquil setting. Steve Morton donated the property to the county in 1999. The Forest is located about 2.5 miles south of the Village of Mazomanie within the driftless area of southwest Wisconsin, known for its steep hills and lush valleys. The park offers year-round hiking trails and two outstanding vistas looking over the countryside. A portable toilet is located at the parking lot.

Recommendations:

- Expand trail system to connect newly acquired property.
- Continue vegetation management improvements.

SCHEIDEGGER Forest (Town of Verona, 73.9 acres)

This forest property was made possible through a generous donation from Walter R. Scheidegger in 2001. The land was formerly the Abraham's Shooting Range for the Dane County Sheriff's Department. In 2005, Dane County Parks requested assistance from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to complete a Forest Stewardship Management Plan for Scheidegger Forest and enrolled the property in the State Community Forest program. The plan was completed in December 2005 and takes into consideration the property objectives outlined in the Dane County Park and Open Space Plan. A master plan was completed for this property in 2006, and a shelter, kiosk, trails, and parking area completed in 2010.

Recommendations:

- Continue to solicit interest in an organized Friends group.

Scheidegger Forest

X.4 Historical/Cultural Sites

PRIORITIES

1. Implement historical and cultural educational exhibits and outreach programs at the Lussier Family Heritage Center.
2. Design and install additional Native American interpretive signage throughout the county where appropriate.
3. Increase emphasis and awareness of unique historical/cultural resources on all county park lands.
4. Investigate systems of connected landscapes and trails that highlight significant historical and cultural resources of Dane County, and integrate with future cultural planning processes.
5. As staff time and resources allow, continue to develop interpretive and educational signage to increase public interest and appreciation of historical and cultural sites.
6. Preserve existing cultural/archaeological resources in place permanently through prairie restoration to the extent possible.

POLICIES

1. Friends, non-profit, and special interest groups partner to varying levels on all costs and fundraising efforts related to construction of new structures or restoration of existing historic buildings and structures.
2. Dane County Parks is responsible for approving location and design of all new or restored historic buildings, structures or site improvements.
3. Dane County Public Works is responsible for review and approval of construction and bid documents for all new buildings or building restoration projects.
4. Dane County Parks is responsible for review and approval of any agreements with Friends groups necessary to construct new or remodel existing facilities.
5. Explore historical/cultural project implementation partnerships with other agencies, such as the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission.

NEW HISTORICAL/CULTURAL SITES

ELLA WHEELER-WILCOX HOMESTEAD Historical/Cultural Site (Town of Westport, 82.5 Acres)

This site was the former childhood home of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, famous poet and author of "Poems of Passion" and "Solitude" in which she wrote "laugh, and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone." A parking lot and a historical marker are located at the site where the house once stood. The surrounding property was previously a clay borrow site for Dane County Waste & Renewables and has been restored to prairie with mowed hiking trails.

Recommendations

- Coordinate with Dane County Waste & Renewables on transfer of ownership.

Heritage Center Barn and Solar "Flowers"

EXISTING HISTORICAL/CULTURAL SITES

FORT BLUE MOUNDS Historical/Cultural Site (Town of Blue Mounds, 0.2 acres)

The Fort Blue Mounds historical site and surrounding lands are located on county highway F just south of the 18-151 expressway near the village of Blue Mounds. Fort Blue Mounds was constructed in the spring of 1832 to provide protection to area mining families from anticipated Native American attacks. An incredibly rich and colorful history of this site was prepared by retired State Archeologist Bob Birmingham and is available on line at: https://video.wosu.org/video/university-place-life-death-and-archaeology-fort-blue-mounds/

The original plaque dedicated on the site in 1910 was the first historic marker erected by the State Historical Society. The Mount Horeb Historical Society has restored the historical marker and are trying to develop a vision for what the fort site could become. There are several other potential partners for this project area including The Blue Mounds Area Historical Society, The Nature Conservancy, Prairie Enthusiasts, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Southwest Grasslands program. The Blue Mounds Area Historical Society is interested in working together to possibly restore the prairie grasslands around the fort site, establish public access, and develop interpretive displays.

Recommendations:

- Partner with non-profit organizations on acquisition of additional lands surrounding the site that would enhance access and connectivity to adjacent existing grassland restoration projects.

HALFWAY PRAIRIE SCHOOL Historical/Cultural Site (Town of Mazomanie, 75.1 acres)

This site is located at the junction of CTH F and STH 19 two and a half miles north of the Village of Black Earth and contains the oldest elementary school in Dane County. The one-room school was operated from 1844 until it closed as a result of consolidation in 1961. Visitors may view the inside of the school in its original restored condition on holidays and Sunday afternoons, from 1-5 p.m., Memorial Day through Labor Day. The park was expanded in 2020 with the acquisition of the surrounding hills and fields.

Recommendations:

- Consider future agricultural field conversion to prairie.

TOWN OF PERRY HAUGE HISTORIC DISTRICT PARK Historical/Cultural Site (Town of Perry, 27.0 acres)

The property is currently owned by the Town of Perry. This park is Wisconsin's first Town Historic District Park and Dane County's first Historic Overlay District. It surrounds the Hauge Log Church National Historic Site. The park was created in 2001 to preserve its unobstructed scenic views and preserve the peace and serenity of the area surrounding the historic site. Dane County provided Dane County Conservation Fund Grants towards its preservation. The unique park boasts a spectacular scenic view of the Blue Mounds, stunning vistas of the Wisconsin Driftless Area glacial landscape, and 3.0 miles of trails for walking, hiking, kite flying, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, and picnicking.

Recommendations:

- Ownership of the property by Dane County Parks may be considered if needs and resources merit.

LAKE FARM ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISTRICT (Town of Dunn)

Native Americans have lived in Wisconsin for about 12,000 years. Evidence of Native American inhabitance in Dane County dates back to the Paleo-Indian Tradition, or 10,000-5,000 B.C. It is still unclear as to the name of the people who first inhabited the park area or if they were related to the historic tribes met by the first European settlers. By far the greatest concentration of archaeological resources found within the Capital Springs Recreation Area are located within the Lake Farm County Park region. Between September and November of 1976, Philip H. Salkin and Thomas E. Emerson conducted an environmental impact survey of the proposed E-Way that identified 10 prehistoric sites at Lake Farm Park and artifacts dating back to the Early Archaic and Late Woodland periods. Salkin and a team of University of Wisconsin students conducted a more intensive study in 1977 and identified 32 prehistoric sites at Lake Farm Park. A Lake Farm Archaeological District was designated and placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Archaeological survey work completed for the Lower Yahara River Trail in 2015 consolidated all of the individual sites on the east half of the park into one continuous site, and added another site in McDaniel Park on the north shore of Lake Waubesa. The geography of this area may have been what made it so attractive as a settlement area. The park is on a peninsula that had a vast wetland marsh complex to the north and west, Lake Waubesa to the east, and oak woodlands on the upland areas to the south. These areas were rich in a variety of fish, shellfish, wild game, nuts and berries. Additional information about the archaeological resources of the Lake Farm Archaeological District can be found in Phil Salkin's report, "An Intensive Archeological Survey in the Lake Farms Archaeological District of Madison, Wisconsin," June, 1979. The Dane County Park Commission publishes a pamphlet entitled "Prehistoric Native Americans in Lake Farm Park" that provides an overview of early settlement of the park by these people.

Recommendations:

- Plan and develop a comprehensive exhibit area at the Lussier Family Heritage Center to educate park users about the extensive Native American history of this area and other people that first settled in the region.

Lake View Hill

LAKE VIEW HILL PARK Historical/Cultural Site (City of Madison, 41.5 acres)

Located on Northport Drive on the north side of the City of Madison, the property aims to conserve both historical and natural resources, while also offering recreation uses such as walking trails, nature observation, historical/cultural education, and an area to picnic and watch fireworks. The site was reclassified from a Recreation Park to a Historical/ Cultural Site per the master plan that was adopted by the County Board in 2009. The buildings on the site, currently used as office space for Dane County Health and Human Services, are on the National Register of Historic Places and originally functioned as a County tuberculosis sanatorium from 1930 to 1966. There are also remnant landscape features visible on the site that help illustrate the history of the site. For example, a series of cement-lined waterfall pools and stream channel leading to a pond are still visible on the property that were historically enjoyed by the patients, their visitors, and medical staff. An evaluation was completed in 2011 by Quinn Evans Architects that assessed the sites historical landscape and provided treatment recommendations for key features. The Friends of Lake View Hill Park have been working actively on overall stewardship of the property and more recently have begun to focus on increasing awareness of its historical significance.

Recommendations:

- Implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Continue to consult the historical evaluation as appropriate for future management or development of the site.
- Continue vegetation restoration efforts per Applied Ecological Services management plan.

SCHUMACHER FARM Historical/Cultural Site (Town of Westport, 116.0 acres)

Schumacher Farm was donated by Marcella Pendall Schumacher to Dane County Parks in 1978. It is located just east of the Village of Waunakee on the north side of STH 19-113. The purpose of Schumacher Farm Park is to provide a period appropriate restoration and re-creation of an early 20th century farmstead, as well as a nature conservancy that offers a representation of Dane County's rural heritage through preservation, restoration, and education. The farmstead is leased by the Friends of Schumacher Farm Park and consists of a restored house complete with period furnishings, a barn, granary, chicken coop, outhouse, and corn crib all restored and maintained to their 1920-30's state. A prairie remnant has been expanded to encompass 45 acres of restored prairies with hiking trails. There is also a young maple sugarbush that will provide an additional period experience. Educational programs are in place for school groups exploring Wisconsin history. Special events such as the popular Harvest Fest in September feature rural lifestyles of the period. A master plan was adopted in 2005 and is being executed by the active Friends of Schumacher Farm Park group. In 2019, the center for Rural History (Red Barn) was completed and serves as an educational programming space. In 2024, the Friends of Schumacher Farm Park constructed the Machinery Shed to display and store antique farming equipment.

Recommendations:

- Implement recommendations of the adopted master plan.
- Schumacher Farm should be considered as a place where historic buildings could be relocated that are consistent with the historic integrity of the property. Relocation of additional buildings to the site beyond those shown on the adopted master plan would be reviewed by the Dane County Park Commission on a case-by-case basis.
- Implement permanent interpretative signage to assist the public in learning about historic features, both for the grounds and buildings, as well as building contents.
- Increase passive recreation of the prairie including snowshoeing, cross country skiing, walking, and nature observation.
- Increase educational use by families and school groups.
- Explore expanded educational and passive recreational uses with the Village of Waunakee Parks and Recreation Department and area schools.

TENNEY PARK LOCK AND DAM Historical/Cultural Site (City of Madison, 1.5 acres)

The Tenney Park Lock and Dam is located on the eastern shore of Lake Mendota along Sherman Avenue between the City of Madison's Filene Park and Tenney Beach. The site consists of a breakwall, boathouse and dam/spillway structure. The first dam was built of earth just south of the current location in 1847 as an early mill and brewery, but was destroyed in a thunderstorm in 1866. The City of Madison purchased the current site in 1896 and constructed the first lock and reconstructed the dam to allow for shallow drafting boats to move between lakes Mendota and Monona through a dredged channel of the river. Prior to this time, the river was a shallow meandering river flowing through wetlands leading to Lake Monona. In 1958, the lock and dam were reconstructed to provide improved navigational access and water control through the river. The Tenney Lock and Dam/Spillway has been maintained and operated by Dane County since 1981, with approximately 10,000 boats passing through annually. The facility was updated in 2006 and 2017. During normal flows the water level in Lake Mendota is maintained at an average height of five feet above the water level of Lake Monona. A Dane County Historical Society Marker has been on site since 1967.

Recommendations:

- Investigate improvements to breakwall to enhance public use.

Junior Naturalist Summer Camp at Schumacher Farm

X.5 Wildlife Areas

PRIORITIES

1. Maintain and restore large, contiguous natural areas to improve water quality, natural environments and critical habitats.
2. Provide seamless management to the extent possible in situations where the county owns lands adjacent to existing WDNR Wildlife Areas.
3. Seek cooperative management opportunity partnerships for access, restoration, vegetation management, enforcement and maintenance activities.

POLICIES

1. Designate Wildlife Area lands through a public planning process.
2. Provide property boundary signage, information board and property maps.
3. Provide park website information on properties throughout the county.
4. Provide limited off-road parking facilities.
5. Allow for seasonal snowmobile trails authorized and approved by the county.

Sugar River Wildlife Area

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Wildlife areas have minimal facility development and public access is often limited to on-road or small off-road gravel parking lots. Wildlife areas are open to hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, cross country skiing, foraging and snowshoeing. Recommendations for all wildlife areas include completion of boundary signing, improving off road parking as needed and vegetation management practices including invasive species removal and habitat restorations.

EXISTING WILDLIFE AREAS

BLACK EARTH CREEK Fishery & Wildlife Area (Town of Black Earth, 14.4)

This property is located along USH 14 just east of Black Earth and is accessed from the adjacent WDNR Fishery Area on County Road KP. Deer and turkey are the primary hunting opportunity while Black Earth Creek offers trout fishing opportunities. Wetland restoration is anticipated to improve the riparian habitat.

BLACK EARTH CREEK SUNNYSIDE UNIT Wildlife Area (Town of Middleton, 291.8 acres)

The property is located just west of the Twin Valley Road and USH 14 intersection. A small gravel parking area was constructed on the north side of USH 14 in 2011 that provides walk-in access. Wetlands along Black Earth Creek and crop fields are the primary land cover south of the highway, steep wooded hills and crop lands lie to the north. This area offers the potential for excellent deer and turkey hunting.

BLUE MOUNDS Wildlife Area (Town of Vermont, 107.0 acres)

The property is located immediately north of Brigham County Park. A small parking lot and information board is located on the north side of CTH F for access. The southern third of the property is prairie restoration and the northern portion is hardwood forest that features steep terrain. Turkey and deer are the primary hunting opportunities.

CHEROKEE MARSH Wildlife Area (Village of Windsor, Town of Burke, 126.4 acres)

Dane County acquired this land from the Bollig family in 2015. Upper reaches of the Yahara River wind through and adjacent to the northwest property boundary; Wisconsin Department of Transportation is working on a potential canoe/kayak access on the south side of STH 19. Several grassland and stream bank restoration projects are planned and underway. Deer, turkey, and waterfowl are the primary hunting opportunities.

CRYSTAL LAKE Wildlife Area (Town of Roxbury, 205.3 acres)

The property is bordered by Mussen Road and Crystal Lake on the eastern boundary, and Lussier County Park on the west. The majority of the land cover is steep, wooded hillsides that offer primarily deer and turkey hunting opportunities. Existing small abandoned quarry ponds offer limited waterfowl hunting opportunities. Excellent shore fishing and berry picking are other available recreation activities. A new boat launch is being planned in the open field near the Crystal Lake pumphouse.

DOOR CREEK Wildlife Area (Town of Dunn, Town of Pleasant Springs, 833.7 acres)

Primarily a large wetland complex extending north of Lake Kegonsa with some crop and uplands surrounding the north/ northeast perimeters. Parking access points are available off CTH MN, Elvehjem Road, Fish Camp County Park and Longview Drive. There are also Wisconsin DNR public hunting grounds within the southern half of the boundary. Deer, turkey, pheasant and waterfowl are the primary hunting opportunities. Firearms are restricted to shotgun and muzzleloaders on county property. Newly acquired property on CTH AB includes a Community Garden and buildings that may serve a Lake Management Operations Facility. The property includes an existing section of the Lower Yahara River Trail and may include another future segment north to McFarland.

Door Creek Wildlife Area

DORN CREEK Wildlife Area (Town of Westport, 79.6 acres)

This property is located north of Oncken Road between CTH M and Q and contains a mix of upland grasslands and the creek and associated wetlands. A small gravel parking lot on the north side of Oncken Road provides seasonal walk-in access. Deer, pheasant and waterfowl are the primary hunting opportunities. Adjacent Wisconsin DNR wildlife area lands are found to the north and east of the county wildlife area.

Dorn Creek Wildlife Area *Photo Credit: John Kalson*

FALK WELLS SUGAR RIVER Wildlife Area (Town of Verona, Town of Montrose, 378.6 acres)

The property is named after two long-time conservation champions, former Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk and Dane County Chief of Staff Topf Wells. More than 3 miles of continuous public Sugar River frontage meanders through the property, with excellent trout fishing opportunities. Parking lots and carry in canoe/kayak access landings are located on STH 69 and Paoli Road. Other recreation opportunities include hunting, foraging, snowshoeing and wildlife observation. Trout Unlimited and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continue to work on stream and habitat restoration projects. Restoration and habitat Improvements are ongoing.

HALFWAY PRAIRIE Wildlife Area (Town of Berry, 148.1 acres)

Located immediately north of Indian Lake County Park on STH 19. Land cover is a mix of restored prairie, agricultural fields, and steep wooded hillsides. Deer and turkey hunting, foraging, hiking, snowshoeing and photography are the primary recreation opportunities. The property includes a segment of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. A prominent historical/ cultural feature of the property is the former Matz Farmstead stone ruins that were built in 1907 and burned down in 1949.

ICE AGE RESERVE Wildlife Area (Town of Cross Plains, 131.2 acres)

This property is located within the Glacial Passage Area of Cross Plains. The property consists primarily of crop fields and some small woodlots and contains glacial landforms, including a gorge carved by meltwater. A 1.5-mile long segment of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail goes through the property and offers exceptional views of the glacial features and surrounding landscape. Deer and turkey are the primary hunting opportunities.

MOUNT VERNON CREEK Wildlife Area (Town of Springdale, 29.6 acres)

Located on STH 92 just to the west of Mt. Vernon on the northern edge of Donald County Park, this property is a combination of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and county-owned lands. Wetlands and crop field are the two primary land covers. Parking access is available at a WDNR gravel lot on the south side of STH 92. Firearms and bows must be in a case for hunters accessing the wildlife area from Donald County Park south of the creek.

MUD LAKE Wildlife Area (Town of Roxbury, 117.4 acres)

This property surrounds the western half of Mud Lake and is primarily grassland and crop fields, with a small isolated woodlot in the north central portion. Deer and turkey are the primary hunting opportunities. Parking is available off of Haas Road.

NORTH MENDOTA HYER ROAD Wildlife Area (Town of Westport, 137.2 acres)

A small natural surface parking lot is located off of Hyer Road. Property is primarily ditched crop fields that offer limited waterfowl and deer hunting opportunities.

NORTH MENDOTA PRAIRIE UNIT Wildlife Area (Town of Westport, 62.7 acres)

Expansive prairie restoration offers excellent hiking, snowshoeing or cross-country skiing opportunities. Limited pheasant hunting may occur. A future segment of the North Mendota shared-use trail is planned to be developed adjacent to the CTH M corridor. A small natural surface parking lot is available on CTH M on the east side of the property. The property connects to the Holy Wisdom Monastery trail system.

SUGAR RIVER Wildlife Area (Town of Verona, Town of Montrose, 922.7)

At the confluence of the Sugar River and Badger Mill Creek is the Sugar River Wildlife Area. This property consists of over 900 acres owned by Dane County and another 108 acres of Conservation Hunting Easement open to public hunting. The property connects to the Madison School Forest and features grasslands, wetlands, wooded areas and agricultural fields. Deer, turkey, waterfowl, and trout are the primary species. The property south of Riverside will remain in agricultural as a Dane Demo Farm for several years. Some future prairie, savanna, and wetland restorations will restore wildlife habitat and water quality. The property also includes the historic Davidson House and Minch house ruins. Canoe and kayak access is available off HWY 69 and Riverside Road.

SUGAR RIVER BASCO UNIT Wildlife Area (Town of Montrose, 97.7 acres)

Extensive streambank restoration, habitat improvement and oak savanna restoration projects have been undertaken along the Sugar River by Dane County, WDNR and Trout Unlimited. Excellent trout fishing and foraging opportunities are the primary recreation opportunities. Two small parking lots are available off STH 69 and provide property access and canoe kayak access to the Sugar River.

Fly Fishing at the Sugar River Wildlife Area - Basco Unit

SUGAR RIVER WETLANDS UNIT Wildlife Area (Town of Verona, 34.0 acres)

The Sugar River winds though the southern third of this property located between USH 151 and the Military Ridge State Trail. Parking access is along Bobcat Lane on the south or off a small WDNR gravel parking on the north side of the property off Country View Road. Nearly all of this property is lowland/wetland and offers primarily waterfowl hunting opportunities. Carry in canoe/kayak access is possible off Bobcat Lane, and the Sugar River offers limited trout fishing opportunities.

TOKEN CREEK Wildlife Area (Town of Burke, 9.9 acres)

Located just north of Token Creek County Park off of STH 19 this property provides walk-in to former DNR fish rearing ponds. Surrounding wetlands offer excellent waterfowl hunting opportunities. Token Creek, a designated trout stream, also runs through the property and offers outstanding trout fishing.

VIENNA POTHOLE Wildlife Area (Town of Vienna, 81.1 acres)

The property is just north of Waunakee near the intersection of State Highway 19 and Schumacher Road. A small parking lot on the southern end of the property provides access to the large pothole wetlands that offer excellent waterfowl hunting opportunities. The area also offers the potential for quality deer and turkey hunting and is adjacent to the 39-acre Vienna Waterfowl Production Area owned and managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

WALKING IRON Wildlife Area (Town of Mazomanie, 948.5 acres)

Located north of Walking Iron County Park and the Village of Mazomanie, this property can be accessed off a gravel parking lot at the intersection of CTH Y and Amenda Road, and from two additional gravel parking lots on Amenda Road. The Dane County Conservation League provided a substantial donation that allowed parking lots and boundary signage to be installed. Lands east of CTH Y are primarily grassland restoration and crop fields. Lands north of Amenda Road contain a small woodlot, crop fields and drainage ditches that can offer fantastic waterfowl hunting and observation. Lands south of Amenda Road are being restored to oak savanna and offer excellent deer and turkey hunting.

Wetland Restoration at Walking Iron Wildlife Area

WAUBESA WETLANDS Wildlife Area (Town of Dunn, 38.9 acres)

Walk in access is available from a small parking lot off Stace Road. The property borders the northeast corner of the Waubesa Wetlands State Natural Area and includes approximately 1500' of Lake Waubesa shoreline. Wetlands are the primary land cover on the northern half of the property transitioning to a wooded hillside oak savanna to the south. Limited waterfowl, deer and turkey hunting are the primary recreation opportunities.

X.6 Trails

PRIORITIES

1. Plan and develop shared-use trails that offer the highest potential to reduce automobile trips and serve commuting purposes.
2. Provide connectivity between existing park facilities and other regional trails.
3. Plan and develop shared-use trails that enhance youth and low-income resident access to park facilities.
4. Implement the Ice Age Trail, the only National Scenic Trail in Dane County.
5. Plan and develop shared-use trails closest to major population centers or through areas targeted for development adjacent to urban areas.

POLICIES

1. Dane County is responsible for planning and developing shared-use trails on county-owned lands within project areas identified in the Parks and Open Space Plan.
2. For proposed shared-use trails that are not on county-owned property or extend beyond project areas identified in the Parks and Open Space Plan, the county's primary role is to provide eligibility for local units of government to apply for trail acquisition and/or development grants.
3. The county may consider partnerships with local units of government on planning and development of shared-use trails that provide direct connections to existing or proposed county shared-use trails.
4. All shared-use trails the county plans, develops or provides funding assistance for must be identified within the Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan, the Madison Area Transportation Planning Board Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP), or State Trail Plan.
5. All shared-use trails the county develops or provides funding assistance for require planning, design and engineering be completed by licensed professionals with bicycle pedestrian facility planning experience.

i. SHARED USE TRAILS

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Strong support continues to be demonstrated for development of additional shared-use trails throughout the county. These trails provide significant economic, recreation, transportation, and health benefits to Dane County residents and are used by an extremely diverse population, particularly people with disabilities, youth, and the elderly. With rising costs of motorized transportation, an aging population, and increasing interest in healthy lifestyles, continued development of shared-use trails should continue to be a priority of the Dane County Parks Division.

- Continue to work with the Dane County Highway Department on coordinating on-road bicycle facilities with the shared-use trail network.
- Continue to implement recommendations of the Dane County Bicycle Wayfinding Signage Plan.
- Investigate the creation of Dane County bicycle Friends groups to assist with operation, maintenance and advocacy of the shared-use trail network.
- Continue to host annual BikeDane meetings.
- Bicycle Commuter Lots. Continued interest is demonstrated for provision of more parking facilities that would better allow residents the ability to park automobiles and ride bicycles for the purposes of commuting to work. Continue to investigate development of a series of bicycle commuter lots on county-owned lands.
- Work with the Town of Dunn toward establishment of bicycle lanes on Lake Farm Road that will provide connections to the Capital City Trail and Lower Yahara River Trail.

5-YEAR SHARED USE TRAIL INITIATIVES

BLACK EARTH CREEK TRAIL - Middleton to Mazomanie - 13.4 miles

(City/Town of Middleton, Village/Town of Cross Plains, Village/Town of Black Earth, Village of Mazomanie)

Preliminary planning work was completed by a Good Neighbor Trail work group in 2012 that involved local units of government and recreation user groups. The Wolf Run Association completed the first phase of trail development in 2014 from Crescent Street in Mazomanie to Wisconsin Heights School. Dane County's role will be to assist with grant funding as budgets allow for acquisition of land and development of the trail.

Recommendations:

- Work with ad hoc planning group to review existing plan.
- Update trail vision and standards based on input from stakeholders and local units of government.
- Prepare a phased implementation plan that includes land acquisition recommendations.

CAPITAL CITY STATE TRAIL - 10.0 miles

(Town of Blooming Grove, Cities of Madison and Fitchburg)

The Capital City State Trail segment between Verona Road and Nob Hill Road was completed by Dane County Parks in 2000. It continues to be one of the most used and popular shared-use trails in Dane County. From 2017 to 2020, pavement restoration was completed between Nob Hill and the bicycle roundabout near Dawley Park.

Recommendations:

- Implement signage recommendations found within the Dane County Bicycle Wayfinding Plan.
- Partner with Cities of Madison, Fitchburg and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on stormwater improvements at the bicycle roundabout near Dawley Park.

GLACIAL DRUMLIN STATE TRAIL TO CAMROCK TRAIL - 3.1 miles
(Village of Cambridge, Towns of Christiana and Deerfield)

Dane County has completed the CamRock Trail from Rockdale to the Water Street bridge in the Village of Cambridge. The Village is leading a planning effort to extend the trail to the Glacial Drumlin State Trail. In 2021, the trail was dedicated to Phil Van Valkenberg during a groundbreaking event. Dane County's role will be to assist with grant funding as budgets allow for acquisition of land and development of the trail.

Recommendations:

- Continue to provide technical planning assistance to the Village if needed.

GLACIAL DRUMLIN STATE TRAIL TO CAPITAL CITY CONNECTOR TRAIL - 3.5 miles
(Village/Town of Cottage Grove, Town of Blooming Grove, City of Madison)

This segment of shared-use trail is the last remaining gap in a continuous off-road trail that extends between Milwaukee and Dodgeville. It is anticipated to be used extensively by commuting cyclists from the east side of Dane County into the Madison metro area. The trail will generally parallel the railroad grade from the Glacial Drumlin State Trail trailhead on CTH N in the Village of Cottage Grove to the Interstate.

Recommendations:

- Dane County will continue efforts to advance planning and development of the trail between the Interstate and Vilas Road as time and resources allow.
- Consider creating a new Trail Memorandum of Understanding with involved stakeholders to outline future management responsibilities.

LOWER YAHARA RIVER TRAIL - McFarland to Stoughton - 8.0 miles
(Village of McFarland, Town of Pleasant Springs, Town of Dunn)

Phase 1 of the Lower Yahara River Trail was completed in 2017 from the Capital City Trail to McDaniel Park in the Village of McFarland. This section of trail includes a nearly 1-mile-long bridge and boardwalk along the north shore of Lake Waubesa, the longest in Wisconsin. Phase 2 was completed in 2024 between Fish Camp County Park and Lake Kegonsa State Park with four more sections of boardwalk and a bridge over Door Creek. The Village of McFarland has nearly completed the trail from McDaniel Park to County HWY AB. Stoughton has nearly completed the trail from CTH B to Viking Park.

Recommendations:

- Dane County will continue efforts to advance planning and development of the trail from Urso Park in the Village of McFarland to Fish Camp County Park as time and resources allow.
- Continue to coordinate with Dane County Highway on future road and trail improvements.

Capital City State Trail

NORTH MENDOTA TRAIL - 3.8 miles
(Town of Westport, City of Middleton, Village of Waunakee)

The Town of Westport, Village of Waunakee, City of Middleton, and Dane County are partnering on a shared-use trail parallel to CTH M that will connect Pheasant Branch Conservancy, Mendota County Park, and Yahara Heights County Park at Cherokee Marsh. Since the last plan update, major trail improvements have completed most of the trail from Pheasant Branch Conservancy to Mendota County Park and from the North Mendota Prairie Unit Wildlife Area to Yahara Heights County Park. Dane County has secured easements for the trail through the Holy Wisdom Monastery property.

Recommendations:

- Dane County will continue efforts to advance planning and development of the trail from the North Mendota Prairie Unit Wildlife Area to Fox Bluff Road as time and resources allow.
- Town of Westport is responsible for trail planning and development from Fox Bluff Road to Signature Drive.
- City of Middleton is responsible for trail planning and development at Highland Way.
- Coordinate with Dane County Highway on future road improvements and involved stakeholders on future management responsibilities.

WALKING IRON TRAIL - GREAT SAUK CONNECTOR TRAIL - Sauk City to STH 78 Trailhead - 3.3 miles
(Town of Mazomanie, Sauk City)

Dane County and Sauk County established and agreement in 2021 for planning and design of a rails to trails conversion to connect the counties at Sauk City on the former railroad trestle across the Wisconsin River and extend the Walking Iron Trail to the existing DNR parking lot on STH 78. The Wisconsin River crossing segment started in 2025 and will connect into the Great Sauk Trail. The Great Sauk Trail is primarily a Sauk County initiative that extends between Sauk City and Devil's Lake State Park. Snowmobiles will utilize the trail to cross the Wisconsin River.

Recommendations:

- Dane County will continue trail planning and design from the Bridge to STH 78 parking lot.
- Coordinate with DNR and the snowmobile club on trail connections, easements, and land use agreements.
- Coordinate with Sauk County on future management responsibilities.

WALKING IRON TRAIL STH 78 TRAILHEAD TO MAZOMANIE - 6.0 miles
(Town of Mazomanie)

This trail will connect from an existing Trailhead on STH 78 to Walking Iron County Park.

Recommendations:

- Dane County will continue efforts to advance planning and development of the trail as time and resources allow.
- Continue discussions with DNR related to Lower Wisconsin State Riverway connections.
- Consider trail planning as part of a future Walking Iron County Park Master Plan.

Walking Iron Trail Bridge, rendering

ii. ICE AGE NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

The Ice Age Trail corridor traverses north - south through western Dane County and follows the end moraines that mark the furthest extent of the glacial advancement. The Ice Age Trail is a footpath through diverse landscapes that provides a superlative outdoor recreation experience and commemorates world renowned geological features. The trail provides a natural corridor, serves as an educational resource, promotes the health and vigor of users of all ages, and links the history of diverse human cultures. The trail was designated a National Scenic Trail by Congress in 1980 and the State's only scenic trail in 1987. More information about the Ice Age Trail can be found at www.iceagetrail.org. The Trail passes through several Dane County Parkland properties of various classification type. Select properties offer dispersed camping opportunities for through hikers.

Recommendations:

- Continue working with the Ice Age Trail Alliance, DNR and National Park Service on land protection throughout the corridor and development of the trail and infrastructure.
- Continue prioritizing County acquisition of lands for the Ice Age Trail, particularly where they overlap with other project boundaries, historic/cultural interpretative sites, and where partnership support is available.

iii. E-TRAILS

Electronic web-based trails or "E-Trails" were introduced in the 2012-2017 Park and Open Space Plan as a recommendation from Earth/Art® Resources to explore the feasibility of a Earth Day Heritage public lands and land/water trail to celebrate and highlight the unique cultural legacy of Dane County and beyond. Dane County's initial role with the trails portion of this proposal would include investigation of educational/interpretative information for significant historical/cultural places located on trails identified in this plan. Initial development would begin with a web-based "E Trail".

The Dane County Parks system encompasses a varied landscape of rivers, lakes, marshes, oak savanna, prairies and forests in both glaciated and driftless (unglaciated) areas. Many of these places have unique cultural connections to Native Americans and/or European American settlers which are of public interest for understanding the natural environment and providing context to the overall heritage of the area. Dane County aims to interpret and present this information where appropriate.

Dane County would model its first E-Trails after the E-Way concept of linking the Educational, Environmental, Esthetic, and Ecological resources within a shared corridor, first developed and championed by Phil Lewis, UW Professor Emeritus of Landscape Architecture.

Dane County has identified several E-Trails that will provide visitors with a virtual opportunity to tour the natural, cultural, and historical sites using interactive maps via the internet. The proposed E-Trails correspond to existing shared-use trails for bicyclists and pedestrians, water trails for paddlers, or long- term proposed regional corridors where a constructed recreational trail does not yet exist. The development of E-Trails complements priorities identified for Historical/Cultural Sites.

Recommendations:

- Develop the following E-trails:
  - Lewis Nine Springs E-way Trail
  - Yahara Waterways Heritage Trail (Yahara Waterways)
  - Lake Farm Lower Yahara River Trail
  - Ho-Chunk Cultural Trail
  - Georgia O'Keeffe Trail
  - Earth Day Heritage Trail

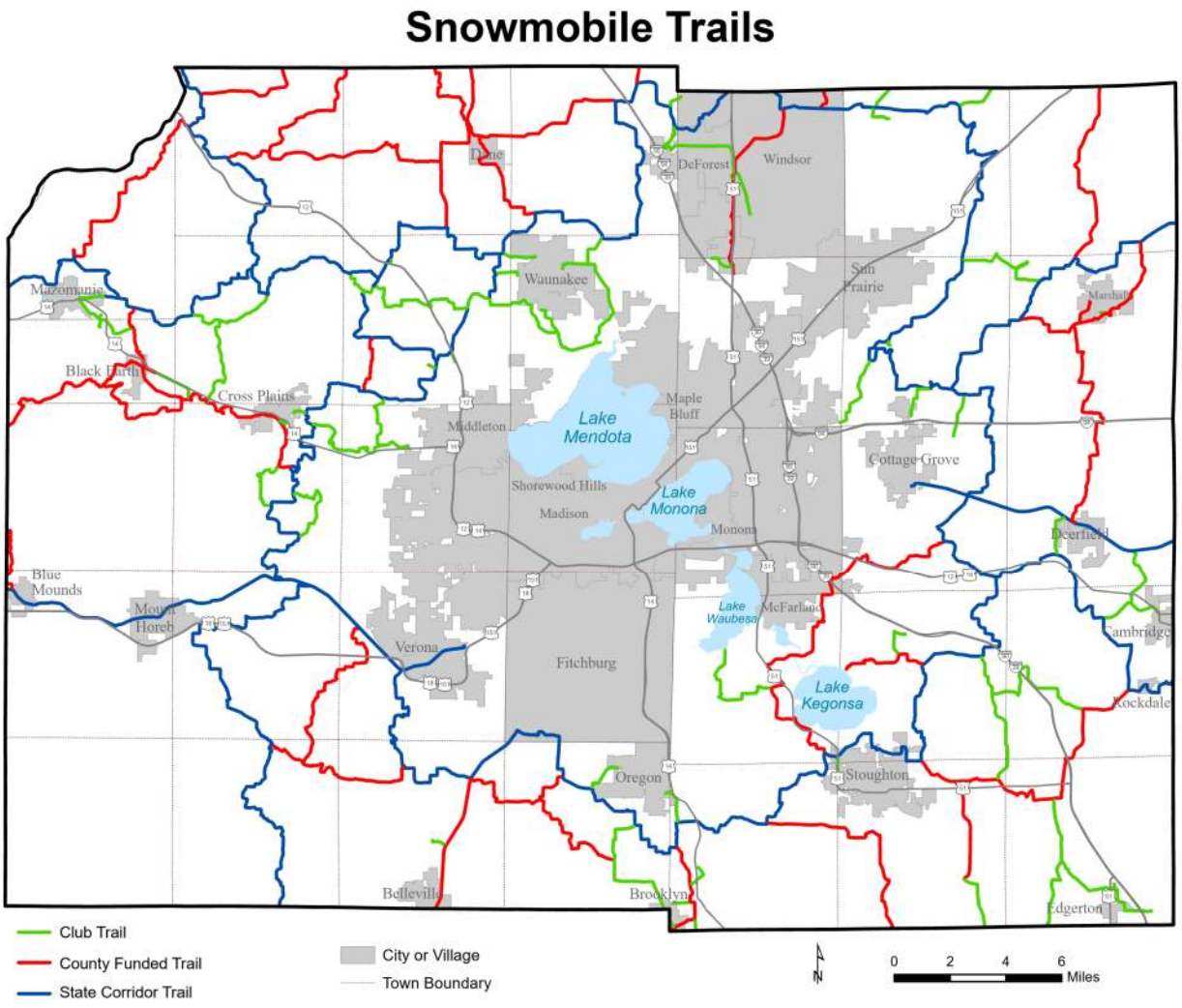
iv. SNOWMOBILE TRAILS

Dane County has over 400 miles of county-sponsored trails, which are part of the state's funded trail system. To maintain and operate these trails, the county partners with local snowmobile clubs, which handle the on-the-ground maintenance and grooming to ensure safe and accessible routes for riders.

In Wisconsin, counties are the only eligible applicants for Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) motorized snowmobile trail aid grants. By designating counties as the sole applicants, the WDNR ensures a consistent, organized, and accountable approach to managing the state's extensive network of public snowmobile trails. Dane County Parks staff manage the grant administration process, including the annual maintenance grant, applications for new or replacement snowmobile bridges and oversight of bridge development projects. Dane County Park Rangers conduct annual inspections of the funded trails to ensure proper signage, layout, and safety compliance.

Dane County parkland is often used for snowmobile trail corridors, as public lands provide important connections for recreational trail networks. Dane County Parks prioritizes maintaining these connections on parkland when possible. When land restoration efforts overlap with existing snowmobile trails, trails may need to be rerouted to another part of the property to maintain connectivity while ensuring the success of conservation initiatives.

Additionally, as Dane County Parks acquires new land, it frequently includes existing snowmobile trails. When this occurs, the county will evaluate whether these trails align with the long-term vision for the property. Trails will be kept open when feasible, but if they conflict with other higher-priority land management objectives, modifications or closures may be necessary.



v. EQUESTRIAN TRAILS

Dane County has five equestrian parks and offers 29 miles of trails, each with unique terrain and characteristics to accommodate riders of all skill levels.

External regional trails are made possible through volunteers who secure formal access agreements with landowners, allowing trails to be built on adjacent, private lands. Donald Park has already set a precedent for this approach, and the equestrian community hopes to expand this idea to other public riding areas, making the trails more connected and accessible. The long-term vision is to create a continuous loop around the metropolitan area, stretching through rural parts of Dane County.

Recommendations:

- Consider equestrian use where appropriate as new land is acquired with a Recreation Park classification.
- Dane County equestrian clubs should form a committee to negotiate landowner agreements, development, construction, and maintenance of a regional trail system located outside county parks.

Equestrian Trails at Silverwood County Park, *Photo Credit: Samantha Haas*

vi. WATER TRAILS

Dane County has a number of lakes, streams and rivers that provide outstanding water trail opportunities. Capitol Water Trails Ltd. has been spearheading most of the water trail development efforts in Dane County. Several access improvements have recently been completed for the Dane County water trail network on Black Earth Creek at Mazomanie and Black Earth, along the Sugar River at the Falk Wells Wildlife Area and at CamRock Park in Cambridge and Rockdale. Some of the waters that provide water trail opportunities include Token Creek, the Yahara chain of lakes, Badfish Creek, Maunesha River, Black Earth Creek, Dunlap Creek, Halfway Prairie Creek, Sugar River, and Koshkonong Creek. A bicycle pedestrian ferry from Middleton and Governor Nelson State Park to downtown Madison that was first proposed in 2001 remains a component of this plan.

Extent of trail development, public access points, and more detailed trail maps can be found on the Capitol Water Trails website at: www.capitolwatertrails.org or by calling 608-223-0995. Another outstanding resource is the Yahara Waterways Water Trail Guide. A project led by the Dane County Environmental Council and many partners, the trail highlights historical, cultural and environmental features. The trail guide is available online at https://olw-lwrd.countyofdane.com/yahara-waterways-trail-guide

Recommendations:

- The county's role will be to continue acquiring future lands that provide public access for parking and canoe/kayak launching to navigable waterways. Dane County Parks may also construct small gravel parking lots and trailhead facilities as staff and budgets allow. Development, signing and maintenance of these water trails will be carried out by volunteer organizations.
- Establish a water trail on Sugar River from the Sugar River Wildlife Area north of STH 18-151 south to Paoli.
- The Friends of Capital Springs Recreation Area have cleared a water trail on Nine Springs Creek from CTH MM to the Yahara River. Improve parking and signage at Anderberg Drive in partnership with the City of Fitchburg.
- Investigate development of canoe campsites with the Village of Belleville along the Sugar River.
- Investigate measures necessary to improve water trail access under railroad trestles on Lewis Nine Springs Creek.

Rock River Trail Initiative

The mission of the Rock River Trail Initiative is to establish and interpret a Rock River Water Trail along the 300-mile river course from the headwaters in Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, to the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Illinois, and a separate Rock River route on roads within the river corridor to provide access for all to the natural resources, recreational opportunities, scenic beauty, and historic and cultural assets of the Rock River Valley. The Yahara River could provide Dane County residents with future water trail access to the Rock River Trail Initiative. Inclusion in this plan is intended to further awareness and grant eligibility for local units of government, volunteers and non-profit groups who are working to implement this initiative.

Learn to Paddle at Lake Farm County Park

XI. DANE COUNTY PARKS PROGRAM AREA RECOMMENDATIONS

XI.1 Park Division Program Areas

i. Engagement & Visitor Services
   - Lussier Family Heritage Center
   - Park Enforcement & Visitor Services
   - Volunteer Program

ii. Natural Resource Management

iii. Operations and Maintenance

iv. Park Planning and Development

v. Real Estate and Grants

XI.2 Land and Water Management

i. Land Management

ii. Water Management

XI.3 Other Initiatives

i. Foraging

ii. Conventional Agriculture,

iii. Community Gardening

iv. Art in Parks

v. Scenic Transportation Corridors

XI.1 Park Division Programs

i. ENGAGEMENT & VISITOR SERVICES

The Engagement and Visitor Services program area was created to bring together the education, outreach, engagement, marketing, volunteer program, park enforcement, general visitor services, and the Lussier Family Heritage Center. Engagement and Visitor Services focuses on providing safe, welcoming parks and programs.

PROGRAM AREA INITIATIVES

Lussier Family Heritage Center

- The Lussier Family Heritage Center provides outdoor and environmental education experiences for persons of all ages and ability levels. We strive to connect all people with the outdoors as parks and open-spaces are vital to mental and physical well-being.
- The Lussier Family Heritage Center is the hub for education and outreach programming for Dane County Parks. The Center hosts numerous environmental and outdoor education programs including: Summer Camp, Get Outside!, field trips, public events, native plant workshops, volunteer trainings, and more.
- The grounds of the facility feature two pollinator gardens, a sensory garden, a natural play area, prairie seed beds, a monarch way-station, and a self-guided interpretive trail.

Park Enforcement & Visitor Services

- Park Rangers oversee high use areas such as shelters, campgrounds, lake access sites, disc golf, dog exercise areas, parks and trails. Rangers are often the first contact the public gets with Dane County Parks.
- Park Rangers regularly assist with special events, outreach at expos and events, permit sales, enforcement and public education.

Volunteer Program

- The Volunteer Program was created in 1992. Roughly 3,000 volunteers dedicate approximately 65,000 hours of time annually.
- The volunteer program includes opportunities to participate in staff-led workdays, be a campground host, work independently as land stewards, monitor wildlife, or volunteer with a Friends Group.

PRIORITIES

1. Provide outstanding customer service.
2. Ensure the safe and enjoyable use of all county park lands and trails by promoting visitor education through public engagement, enforcement, clear signage, and recreational programs.
3. Provide high quality environmental and outdoor education programs.
4. Provide meaningful opportunities for volunteers to engage with and give back to Dane County Parks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement the Strategic Engagement Plan Focusing on the following long-term goals:
    - Provide environmental education programming such as summer camp, school field trips, Get Outside! community center partnership programming, public education programs, and large community events.
    - Continue engaging the public through volunteer opportunities, offering a diverse range of training sessions and partnership opportunities.
    - Expand staff-led youth volunteer opportunities offered throughout the park system.
- Continue to develop an action plan for creation of education and interpretive exhibits within the main and lower levels of the Lussier Family Heritage Center.
- Investigate fundraising options for the proposed expansion area at the Lussier Family Heritage Center.
- Investigate grants, donations, endowment funds and other alternative sources of income to fund expanded programming that provides outreach and education.
- Create strong relationships with Dane County Parks Friends Groups that provide benefits to individual parks and Dane County Park system as a whole.
- Implement the Friends Grant program in partnership with the Foundation for Dane County Parks.
- Create new volunteer opportunities in different program areas such as forestry and the Lussier Family Heritage Center.
- Implement the Land and Water Resources Department Equity & Inclusion Plan.
- Update Dane County Park Ordinances and Park Rules to reflect today's industry standards.

Youth Programming at the Heritage Center

ii. NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Dane County Parks play a vital role in preserving and restoring natural landscapes, enhancing biodiversity, and strengthening ecosystem resilience. Through strategic land restoration and forestry efforts, the county works to maintain healthy and diverse natural areas that support wildlife, improve water quality, and provide recreational opportunities for residents.

The Natural Resource Management program area focuses on two primary initiatives: natural area restoration and forestry management. Restoration efforts target prairies, oak savannas/openings, oak woodlands, and wetlands. With expanded staff and equipment resources, Dane County Parks has increased its capacity to manage natural areas and transition more agricultural fields to permanent conservation cover. Volunteers play a key role in restoration projects, contributing significantly to habitat improvement.

Forestry management focuses on sustaining and enhancing the tree canopy throughout parklands to support both ecological and recreational benefits. This work includes planting and nurturing young trees, conducting regular pruning and maintenance to promote healthy growth, and implementing proactive disease and pest management strategies to address threats such as emerald ash borer and oak wilt. Storm damage response and hazardous tree removal also help maintain safe and resilient park landscapes.

These conservation efforts provide critical ecosystem services. Prairies, savannas and forests contribute to flood mitigation by enhancing soil absorption and reducing runoff, while also playing a key role in carbon sequestration to combat climate change. Additionally, these landscapes provide essential habitat for a diverse range of plant and animal species, supporting Dane County Parks' broader commitment to ecological stewardship.

PRIORITIES

1. Maintain and enhance Dane County Parks natural areas through invasive species control, native seeding/ planting, and prescribed fire.
2. Maintain and enhance Dane County Parks tree canopy through regular tree pruning, planting and caring for young trees, storm damage and hazard tree response, and tree disease and pest control.
3. Work with the Real Estate Coordinator and other LWRD Divisions to convert agricultural fields on parkland to permanent cover.
4. Apply for grants to support forestry and land restoration projects.
5. Incorporate volunteers in land restoration and forestry efforts as safe and appropriate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to implement Dane County Parks Forestry Operations Plan.
- Create vegetation management plans for each property outlining broad goals and objectives.
- Develop specific and clearly defined annual work plans with Friends Groups and lead volunteers to guide their volunteer efforts.
- Further develop and lead land steward volunteer program to implement natural areas management recommendations.

Workday at North Mendota Wildlife Area

iii. OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE

Maintaining high-quality infrastructure is essential for ensuring positive visitor experiences. This includes the upkeep of roads, trails, bridges, parking areas, shelters, restrooms, playgrounds, boat launches, and other park structures.

Regular inspections and preventive maintenance extend the lifespan of facilities while reducing long-term costs. Repairs and upgrades are prioritized based on safety, accessibility, and public use patterns.

Dane County Parks oversees an extensive network of paved and unpaved trails, requiring ongoing maintenance to address erosion, vegetation overgrowth, and surface degradation. Seasonal trail maintenance includes clearing debris, repairing trail surfaces, and ensuring proper drainage to prevent washouts.

Maintaining water access points is a key operational responsibility, given the numerous lakes, rivers, and streams throughout Dane County Parks. Boat launch piers are installed and removed seasonally, and support facilities like fish cleaning stations require regular upkeep.

The operations and maintenance team adapts to the changing demands of each season. In winter, staff manage snow removal for park roads, parking areas, and key trails, as well as grooming cross-country ski trails when conditions allow. In spring, turning on water in bathrooms and campgrounds is a major undertaking. Summer operations focus on increased park use, requiring heightened maintenance of shelters, restrooms, trails, and lake access sites. Emergency response efforts include addressing storm damage, flooding, and other weather-related impacts to ensure safe park access. In the fall, staff shut off water systems in preparation for winter.

Operations staff also handle trail and parking lot construction, sign installation, fabrication of kiosks and park amenities, and property stabilization of newly acquired lands.

PRIORITIES

1. Provide park users with safe, clean, and well-maintained facilities and park areas.
2. Make facilities available for public use in a timely, safe and cost-efficient manner, as resources allow.
3. Provide facilities and use areas to accommodate a variety of recreation uses and special events.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a long-term maintenance and replacement plan for park infrastructure to ensure sustainability.
- Improve efficiency in seasonal operations, such as snow removal and water system management, through updated equipment and best practices.
- Implement new technologies and materials to enhance the durability and accessibility of park facilities.

Pouring Slabs for Park Kiosks

iv. PARK PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The Parks Division is responsible for preparing the following park planning and development documents:

- County Parks and Open Space Plan
- Master Plans
- Concept Site Development Plans
- Concept Grading Plans
- Construction Documents for Non-Structural Park Improvement Projects
- Regulatory Permits

Dane County Parks undertakes a comprehensive public input process for preparation of the Parks and Open Space Plan and Park Master Plans. Staff led public input meetings foster grass-roots-level relationships with local units of government, non-profit conservation organizations and private landowners that are critical to long term success of Dane County Parks.

Planning staff often work closely and partner with Dane County Public Works staff on a variety of building projects and major development projects that require public bidding and are completed by general contractors. The Land and Water Resources Department Water Resource Engineering Division provides technical assistance to park planning staff on projects that require complex storm water management plans.

PRIORITIES

1. Prepare master plans for project areas that currently have none or are in need of updating due to additional land acquisition, restoration efforts and changing recreation demands.
2. Plan for non-motorized and mass transit access to existing and future park lands and facilities to the greatest extent possible.
3. Implement projects that improve public access to lands and water that currently have none.
4. Implement projects that improve safety and environmental stewardship of a property.
5. Meet with the Madison Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, local units of government and the Bicycle Federation on an annual basis to coordinate implementation of regional shared-use trail objectives identified in this plan.
6. Strive for preservation in place of cultural resources on all development projects on parkland.

POLICIES

1. Utilize salvaged construction materials and employ sustainable building practices to the maximum extent possible when developing park infrastructure.
2. Provide review and peripheral input to local units of government on park, open space and resource protection plans, as staff and resources allow.
3. Develop park lands in a manner that restores and preserves to the greatest extent possible the original character and integrity of existing natural, biotic, cultural and geographic features.
4. Conduct thorough archeological inventories prior to starting any park or trail development projects.
5. Develop new and retrofit existing park facilities to meet or exceed guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
6. Park plans completed by Dane County Parks are not land use plans or created for the purpose of guiding future zoning decisions.
7. All development projects that require plantings should strive toward an emphasis of utilizing native plant materials to the extent possible.
8. Plan and develop park program areas in close proximity to one another as appropriate to maximize future operation and maintenance efficiencies.

v. REAL ESTATE AND GRANTS

Lands identified in this plan are generally purchased through the Dane County Conservation Fund, although other county funds or grant dollars may also be utilized. The Conservation Fund was established in 1990 and expanded in 2000 after 75% of voters county-wide approved an advisory referendum. Funding for the Conservation Fund has remained as of 2025, although appropriations are subject to annual budget deliberations.

Rapid growth in Dane County and changes to the Wisconsin Stewardship grant program continue to underscore the importance of this funding program for Dane County Parks land acquisition. These monies are spent primarily on the acquisition of land or property interests (e.g. conservation easements) identified in the Parks and Open Space Plan, including miscellaneous costs such as appraisals, title insurance, surveys, and site preparation.

CONSERVATION FUND GRANT PROGRAM

A key component of the Conservation Fund is a matching grant program that supports nonprofit organizations and local government units in acquiring land or property interests for outdoor recreation and conservation. While properties acquired through these grants provide significant recreational and ecological benefits, they do not meet the criteria for inclusion in the Dane County Parks system.

To qualify for funding, applicants must demonstrate the capacity to independently manage the acquired property or land interests. Eligible lands must be identified in the Parks and Open Space Plan, provide regional resource protection with public access, and be recognized in an approved regional planning document or be adjacent to existing public lands, including:

- Waterfowl Production Areas
- State Natural Areas
- State Wildlife Areas
- State Parks
- Prairie Remnants, Wildlife Habitat, Waterways & Wetlands identified for preservation by the Wisconsin DNR, US Fish and Wildlife Service or a Non-Profit Conservation Organization

PARC AND PARC AND RIDE BICYCLE GRANT PROGRAM

Established in 2011, the Partners for Recreation & Conservation (PARC) Grant Program provided funding assistance to local governments and nonprofit conservation organizations for outdoor recreation and conservation projects with significant regional benefits. Over time, the program evolved into the PARC & Ride Bicycle Grant Program, which focused on expanding bike trail connectivity across Dane County through matching grants for municipalities. This initiative facilitated numerous regional trail connections. Funded by the county's annual budget process, the program may continue if funding and staff resoueces are available to administer the program.

KNOWLES-NELSON STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM'S ROLE IN DANE COUNTY PARKS

Established in 1989, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program helps preserve Wisconsin's natural resources and enhance outdoor recreation. Administered by the Wisconsin DNR, the program provides grants to local governments for land acquisition and park development.

Dane County has used Stewardship grants to acquire land and fund park projects that might not have been possible otherwise. However, these grants come with restrictions, including a requirement that funded lands must allow hunting, fishing (if applicable), trapping, hiking, and cross-country skiing, unless an exception is granted by the DNR for public safety or ecological protection.

Dane County evaluates each grant opportunity individually to determine if all required uses align with site-specific policies and master plans. When necessary, the county may request exceptions or explore alternative compliance options, though there is no formal variance process currently in place.

PRIORITIES

1. Targeted Land Acquisitions for Conservation and Recreation:
   a. Prioritize acquisitions that expand or connect existing parks, trails, and protected natural areas.
   b. Focus on lands with high ecological value, including wetlands, prairies, and woodlands that support biodiversity and climate resilience.
   c. Secure key parcels to complete regional trail networks and greenway corridors.
   d. Prioritize land that improves public access to lakes, rivers, and streams while protecting shorelines and water quality.
2. Strengthen partnerships with land trusts, municipalities, and state/federal agencies to leverage funding and resources.
3. Maintain a balanced approach between land acquisition and the long-term costs of development, maintenance, and ecological restoration.

POLICIES

1. Cooperate with federal and state agencies, local units of government and community organizations in acquiring land.
2. Identify properties of high interest and proactively contact the owners.
3. Work with willing sellers and treat all landowners fairly when pursuing lands identified in the Parks and Open Space Plan.
4. In relinquishing county-owned parkland for purposes other than preservation or recreation, take into account the following factors:
   - The long-term impacts on parks and recreational use throughout Dane County.
   - Dedication of revenue for additional park lands, improvements, or an equitable exchange of land.
   - Action being consistent with local and regional plans.
   - Total costs and benefits of land ownership.
   - Possible deed restrictions placed on property being relinquished.
   - Existing deed restrictions that carry mitigation requirements for any parkland that is relinquished.
5. Evaluate donations of land to the Park Commission on the following:
   - Consistency with needs identified in the Parks and Open Space Plan.
   - Maintenance and development costs, including proximity to existing parkland.
   - Special environmental or cultural qualities.
   - Consideration of benefit to county and public

XI.2 Land and Water Management

The addition of natural area acreage throughout the Dane County Parks system and restoration of these lands will continue to challenge available resources to effectively manage these properties. A new Natural Resource Management program area within Dane County Parks has been created since the last plan update with increased staff and equipment necessary for invasive species removal, prescribed burning, forestry, and restoration critical to protect these long-term investments. Lake Management and the new Watersheds and Ecosystem Services are planning stream and wetland restoration and improvement projects to improve water quality, flood resiliency, and increase carbon sequestration. Coordination with Dane County Parks staff will be needed to maintain public access and ensure the protection and enhancement of the natural, cultural, and historic resources for projects on Dane County Parklands. Expanding partnerships with organizations such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Trout Unlimited, Watershed Associations, Dane County Conservation League, Groundswell Conservancy, Ice Age Trail Alliance and Friends groups will continue to be a necessity. Completing updated management plans that prioritize restoration needs throughout the park system should continue to be a priority to provide common land and water stewardship visions for all partners on all properties.

i. LAND MANAGEMENT

COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT

Dane County Parks owns many properties that are within project areas of nonprofit, state, or federal agencies. As staff and financial resources become increasingly limited, it is critical to form and expand partnerships. The county has and will continue to enter management agreements with, for example, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Ice Age Trail Alliance. Management agreements currently exist on several properties, including Capital Springs Recreation Area, the Capital City Trail, Lower Yahara River Trail, Pheasant Branch Conservancy, and segments of the Ice Age Trail.

AGRICULTURE

County parkland is often leased for agriculture as an interim management tool. Row cropping helps prepare the site for restoration and prevents invasive species from spreading into the area. Agricultural leases also provide a revenue stream that offsets operational costs of parkland. Use of parkland for agriculture will continue where appropriate (and in some cases will expand as outlined in Agriculture, Gardening and Foraging) as an effective management strategy and revenue source.

The Real Estate Coordinator for the Land and Water Resources Department coordinates with Dane County Parks and the Land Conservation Division to develop conservation plans and leases for agricultural areas. Agricultural on parklands is an opportunity to implement conservation practices and field edge monitoring to demonstrate the effectiveness and adaptability of conservation practice systems to reduce erosion, sedimentation and nonpoint source pollution and provide education for the public, farmers, land managers, agribusiness, environmental organizations, natural resource agencies and research entities.

PROPERTY STABILIZATION

Property stabilization includes the management and basic development of newly acquired County Park properties that provide for safe public access and a clear understanding of property boundaries and allowable uses. There are several items that need to be evaluated and implemented after properties are acquired for transitioning them into the park system in a manner that is consistent with their long-term goals. Examples of property stabilization activities include demolishing or securing buildings, disconnecting utilities, surveying and posting boundaries, developing basic public access (i.e. parking lots and signage), and working with partners, including farmers, on habitat and land management activities.

SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY AND WOODLAND RESTORATION

Dane County Parks has completed sustainable forestry and woodland restorations on some properties involving timber harvests, such as Indian Lake, Anderson Farm, Morton Forest, and Walking Iron County Park. This initiative will continue and may be done in partnership with foresters from the WDNR. The timber harvests will be conducted to maximize the health of the forest and restore specific habitats and land covers like Oak Savanna. Trees removed may serve as a source of material for park shelters, firewood not for commercial resale, or streambank restorations. Restoration and forestry projects will be developed based property specific vegetation management plans.

INVASIVE SPECIES CONTROL

Invasive plants and insects are a direct threat to the health and enjoyment of parkland. The Botanists/Naturalists oversees control of invasive plants throughout the Park system. Additionally, Dane County Land and Water Resources Department is the lead agency working to control invasive species on county lands and waters. They also provide coordination and access to state and federal cost-share grant programs to local units of government for invasive species control. Current programs include:

- Monitoring and treatment of invasive species on county lands and waters.
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Gypsy Moth Suppression Program – Aerial Treatment Program on Gypsy Moth Concentrations
- Countywide Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) Preparation Plan and Monitoring
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Clean Boats, Clean Water Program at Lake Access Sites

Invasive Management at Lake View Hill, *Photo Credit: Wendy Murkve*

One component of the EAB plan is the recommendation to develop wood utilization yards. Wood utilization yards would be strategically located to handle unanticipated large volumes of down or damaged woody vegetation. Wood formerly considered waste, such as that damaged by infestation or storm damage, could be proactively managed with the additional benefit of potential revenue from sale of material for logs and chips. Criteria for both acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term) site development will be evaluated, but the county would only become involved in the development of a facility if it was a large scale initiative involving multiple municipalities. Dane County Parks consider temporary wood utilizations sites on parkland for free public firewood that is not for commercial resale.

Currently, there are limited protocols for establishing wood utilization yards. Dane County, working in concert with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and local municipalities proposes to help formulate guidelines. A report summarizing criteria, existing sites, timelines, and other pertinent information was prepared through an Urban Forestry Grant provided by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Recommendations:

- Continue partnering with nonprofit, state and federal agencies to cooperatively manage land.
- Implement recommendations of the 2009 Dane County Emerald Ash Borer and Wood Utilization Strategic Management
- Plan, including planning for wood utilization yards.
- Expand educational opportunities for volunteers that focus specifically on land management and will directly assist the Natural Resource Program.
- Expand the Natural Resource program to provide both land management and environmental education.

MOUND MANAGEMENT

Dane County Parkland is home to numerous archeological sites and Indian Mounds. Some are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Mounds are considered to be human burial sites and are protected on all non-federal lands in the state by Wisconsin's Burial Sites Preservation law (Wis. Stats 157.70) and Wisconsin's Field Archaeology Act (Wis. Stats 44.47). Mounds survive in various conditions, Extant which may have intact above ground features or Subsurface which have no remaining above ground features, but some features may still remain underground.

Extant Mounds may be cataloged as a human burial site believed to still contain human remains and are listed in the Wisconsin Burial Sites Catalog. An uncatalogued burial site is a human burial site that has been destroyed or has not yet been listed in the Wisconsin Burial Sites Catalog. Neither Catalogued nor uncatalogued sites may be disturbed without authorization from the director of the Wisconsin Historical Society. Disturbance means any ground-disturbing activity within the boundaries of the burial site.

Recommendations:

- Develop a Mounds Policy or a Preservation Plan to ensure mound sites are protected and managed appropriately.
- Continue to investigate sites of uncertain status and catalog eligible mounds.
- Plan interpretative and wayfinding signage to educate and allow visitors to engage with these sites appropriately.
- Coordinate with the State Historic Preservation Office and the Ho-Chunk Nation in advance of work adjacent to mounds or known archeological sites.

ii. WATER MANAGEMENT

LAKE MANAGEMENT

AQUATIC PLANT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The Lake Management Division operates a fleet of floating aquatic plant harvesters on the Madison Lakes and Yahara River. This mechanical harvesting program is permitted by DNR under NR 109 (Wis Admin code) and follows approved plans for each lake that are renewed every 5 years. The harvesters cut and remove invasive and over abundant aquatic plants that cause nuisance conditions and impair recreation and reduce the flow of the Yahara River. Management of aquatic plants helps provide reasonable recreational use of the lakes for boating, fishing, and swimming as well as lake level management, while balancing the needs of the lake ecosystem and aquatic habitats. Dane County parkland at Mendota, Babcock, Fish Camp, Goodland, LaFollette, Lake Farm, and Lower Mud Lake support lake management operations.

Recommendations:

- Coordinate with Dane County Parks on Aquatic Plant Management operations on County parkland.
- Consider storage needs for equipment on County parkland.
- Consider development of a facility, or facilities, where appropriate with outdoor space for handling harvested plant material for drying and composting.

LAKE LEVELS

The Lake Management Division is responsible for maintaining lake levels for the four major lakes in Dane County: Lake Mendota, Lake Monona, Lake Waubesa and Lake Kegonsa. Lake levels are managed by a series of locks and dams at Tenney, Babcock, and LaFollette County Parks in accordance with the Dane County Lake Level Management Guide for the Yahara Chain of Lakes, approved by the Lakes & Watershed Commission in 2010 and updated in 2019.

Dane County's goal is to maintain the following target ranges:

- Summer goals (first runoff event after March 1st) - maintain water levels at the mid-range of summer minimum/ maximum target levels
- Winter goals (starting November 1st) - maintain water levels between winter minimum and summer minimum target levels

Minimum and maximum lake levels were set by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in 1979. Pursuant to Res-419 2020, adopted by the Dane County Board of Supervisors on April 8, 2021, the Land & Water Resources Department has the flexibility to manage lake levels within the prescribed ranges proactively guided by weather forecasts.

The Yahara Lakes Advisory Group was convened in 2001 (YLAG) and 2012 (YLAG2) to develop recommendations on how to best manage the Yahara chain of lakes as a system. The group examined the operation, physical constraints, and changing hydrology of the Yahara chain of lakes to make water level recommendations that balance public and private interests.

YAHARA RIVER SEDIMENT REMOVAL PROJECT

Following severe flooding in 2018, the Dane County Board adopted resolution 2018 Res-227 which called for the creation of 1) a technical report to identify ways to address flooding on the Yahara chain of lakes and 2) a task force to make policy recommendations.

A technical work group met from October 18, 2018 to January 25, 2019 to evaluate lake level conditions, model various scenarios that include predicted climate changes, and identify short- and long-term approaches to improve resiliency for future events. The work group compiled their findings into a technical report. A task force began meeting on February 4, 2019 to review the technical report findings and make policy recommendations. Task Force meetings and public input led to the Final Task Force Recommendations on March 18, 2019. On April 9, 2020, former Dane County Executive Joe Parisi announced the beginning of the first phase of the Yahara Chain of Lakes Sediment Removal Project.

The Yahara River Sediment Removal project is designed to increase the discharge or flow capacity of the Yahara River from Tenney Lock and Dam downstream to the Stoughton Dam. Development of impervious surfaces in the watershed and the climactic trend of increasing precipitation results in water entering the Madison Lakes faster than the Yahara River can convey the water out. This has led to increasing risk of flooding and high water. While efforts to increase water infiltration to groundwater and storage in internally drained areas and wetlands are ongoing, the need to move water out of the system faster has led to implementing an environmental dredging project. The Land and Water Resources Department has completed the initial two phases of the project and is currently conducting the third phase.

Recommendations:

- Coordinate with Dane County Parks on remaining sediment removal phases to reduce or avoid impacts to natural, cultural, and historic resources.
- Develop reclamation plans for sediment basins on Dane County Parkland, considering the possibility of future operational and public use needs.

STREAM RESTORATION & PROTECTION

Stream restoration is broadly defined by the county as any work conducted to improve the environmental health of a river or stream, in support of water quality, biodiversity, recreation, flood management, and/or landscape development.

Dane County is home to more than 435 miles of streams and rivers which play a vital role in the quality of life for residents and visitors and are important habitat for fish and aquatic organisms. Whether it's fishing, paddling, or just talking a stroll along the banks, the opportunity to interact with water is cherished by many. The Watersheds and Ecosystem Services division uses a number of tools and resources to restore and protect streams and rivers so that they can be enjoyed now and for generations to come.

Implementation priorities will vary considerably based on a number factors, including whether streams have protection plans in place, financial commitments from the local municipality or qualified non-profit organization and the recommendation of the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department and respective Divisions. In cases where opportunities arise and there is no approved protection plan, an evaluation to determine the resource being protected, ability to adequately manage surrounding uplands to support the water resource, fiscal resources available for both purchase and implementation, and the potential for future protection efforts will be conducted.

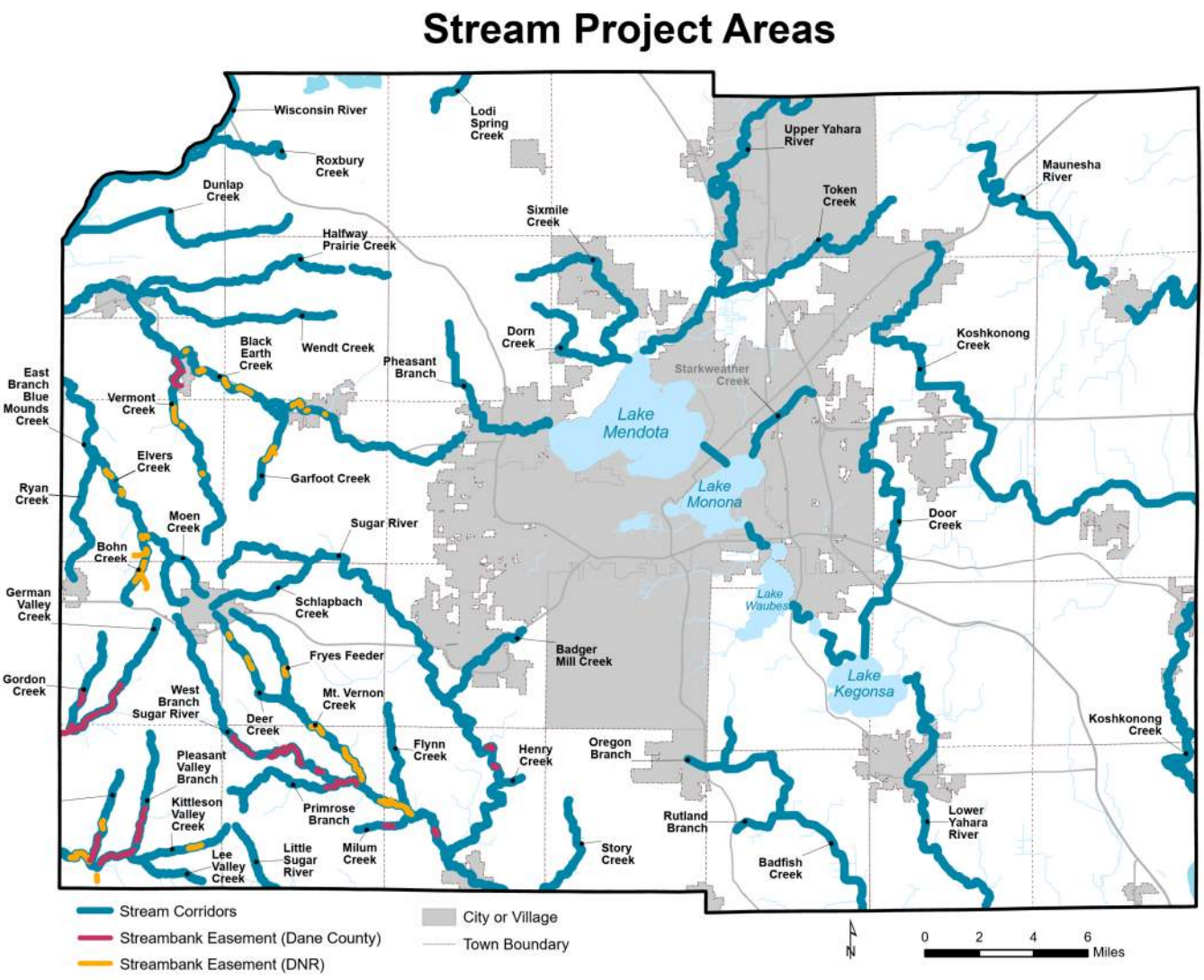
Recommendations:

- Coordinate with Dane County Parks on restoration projects on County parklands.
- Restore stream corridors based on the designated biological use, current level of protection or enhancement, and the likelihood of establishing conservation within the stream corridor
- Restore streams with protection or resource plans in place in conjunction with local municipality or qualified non-profit organizations.
- Continue to coordinate with Dane County Parks on legacy sediment removal projects.
- Continue to increase public fishing access through acquisition of permanent easements on prioritized streams.

STREAMBANK EASEMENTS

Dane County continues to work with private landowners to purchase streambank easements Priority is given to streams that have been restored or enhanced through an existing conservation program and to those that offer the highest fishing potential and would benefit from increased permanent public access. The majority of these streams are located within the unglaciated Driftless Area of Dane County that is known for its excellent trout fishing opportunities and beautiful scenery. Streambank easements typically extend 33 feet from the streambank and are open to public fishing, hiking, and wildlife observation. Trout Unlimited, Badger Fly Fishers, Dane County Conservation League, Groundswell, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources have contributed greatly to the program's success and ability to leverage County dollars.

Dane County continues to monitor easements with 42 individual landowners covering roughly 26 miles of streams. These easements are monitored biannually to ensure agreement conditions are being met and to identify and address any potential resource concerns. They are also monitored to determine any maintenance needs related to; adequate signage, recreational access, and fish and wildlife habitat.



WETLAND RESTORATION AND PROTECTION

Wetlands are unique and productive ecosystems that provide many important ecological services to the environment. They reduce the rate and volume of stormwater runoff, provide protection from flooding, remove pollutants, provide important wildlife habitat, and can improve the overall health of a watershed.

Over half of the wetlands in Dane County have been lost over the last century. Many of those that remain have been degraded. Wetland restoration is the process by which the physical, chemical, and/or biological properties of a former or degraded wetland are improved to restore its natural function. Dane County Parks has completed several wetland restorations on Dane County Parkland in conjunction with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited and other partners. This initiative will continue in cooperation with Watersheds and Ecosystem Services with the following priorities:

Recommendations:

- Preserve lands adjacent to urban areas that improve water and wetland quality and quantity.
- Continue to increase restoration efforts on wetland ecosystems.
- Acquire lands to buffer water and wetland areas to reduce flooding and enhance water quality.
- Protect internally drained areas that store and infiltrate surface water.

Walking Iron Wildlife Area Wetland Restoration

XI.3 Other Initiatives

i. FORAGING

Foraging for edible fruits, nuts, and mushrooms is allowed on Dane County parklands and can be a fun way for parents to introduce their children to the outdoors. Commonly foraged items found throughout the park system include blackberries, black raspberries, blueberries, morel mushrooms, black walnuts, hickory nuts, and wild apples.

Foraging is permitted only for personal use, and foragers must follow best practices to ensure plant populations remain sustainable. This means harvesting responsibly, avoiding damage to plants, and being mindful of sensitive habitats. Visitors are encouraged to learn proper identification techniques, as some wild plants and mushrooms may be toxic. Seasonal foraging opportunities are posted on the Dane County Parks webpage to help educate and inform park users about what is available and when.

Dane County Parks is actively planting small fruit orchards in appropriate parkland locations to provide seasonal foraging opportunities for visitors. Some properties contain existing, unmanaged orchards that can be used for the same purpose. The fruit trees are maintained without chemical sprays, so the fruit may have natural imperfections. Park users are encouraged to pick and enjoy the fruit while spending time in the parks, but large-scale harvesting for commercial sale or use is not permitted. This initiative supports local food access and enhances park experiences.

ii. CONVENTIONAL AGRICULTURE

Conventional agriculture is used as an interim management tool on park properties. Row cropping has helped prepare sites for ecological restoration while preventing invasive species from spreading. Many properties in the Dane County Parks system remain in leased farmland until Dane County Parks has the capacity and resources to restore them to natural areas.

Dane County Parks works closely with the Land Conservation Division of the Land & Water Resources Department to ensure that tenant farmers implement conservation practices whenever possible. All tenant farmers are required to have a nutrient management plan to promote soil health and water quality. In alignment with county sustainability goals, recommendations for alternative and advanced agriculture practices will continue to evolve over time while coexisting with conventional agricultural practices when appropriate.

iii. COMMUNITY GARDENING

Dane County Parks supports community and market grower gardens by providing land when it aligns with a park's master plan or overall property goals. Dane County Parks has established community agriculture sites at several parks. Anderson Farm County Park features community gardens, including several larger plots for market growers. Badger Prairie County Park offers a community garden where individuals and families can reserve plots. Schumacher Farm Park highlights historical agriculture with an heirloom garden and orchard. Silverwood County Park supports regenerative farming and agricultural education in partnership with local schools and organizations. At Door Creek Wildlife Area, market growers were already tenants when the county acquired the property, and they continue operations under lease agreements. McCarthy Youth and Conservation County Park includes a Native American demonstration garden as part of the Ho-Chunk Interpretive Trail.

Dane County Parks does not have the capacity to directly manage these gardens. Instead, the county relies on non-profit partners to take on the management and oversight of gardening operations. These partner organizations must be financially self-sufficient, covering all costs related to maintenance, infrastructure, and programming. Each partner must enter into a formal agreement, lease, or permit that outlines their responsibilities, including garden management, maintenance, and compliance with county policies. The agreements also require partners to carry liability insurance, naming Dane County as an additional insured party. Lease terms specify permitted uses, infrastructure requirements, and conditions for renewal. The county provides the land and, when appropriate, limited resources such as water and parking, while ensuring that partner organizations uphold their commitments to maintaining the garden spaces in accordance with environmental and land-use regulations.

The framework for agriculture and gardening on county parkland is outlined in Sub. 1 to Res. 280, 2009-2010, Establishing a Sustainable Agriculture Agenda for Dane County. This resolution includes recommendations relevant to the Parks & Open Space Plan, such as setting aside county-owned land for longer-term uses that support community agriculture and food security. Additionally, the Dane County Food Council and Dane County Food Coalition actively promote food policy recommendations that encourage food production on public lands.

Organizations that may collaborate on these initiatives include, but are not limited to:

- Research, Education, Action, and Policy on Food Group (REAP)
- Rooted, Inc.
- Farley Center
- FairShare CSA Coalition
- Community Action Coalition for South Central Wisconsin, Inc.
- Fitchburg Fields
- Groundswell Conservancy
- Neighborhood Food Solutions

Gardening activities may take various forms, including:

- Community gardens
- Incubator gardens and fields
- Certified organic fields
- Demonstration gardens
- Market grower gardens
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms
- School farms
- Access for non-traditional or minority groups

Potential sites for future gardening include, but are not limited to:

- Blooming Grove Drumlins Natural Resource Area – North Unit
- Donald County Park
- Fish Lake County Park
- Lewis Nine Springs E-Way
- Token Creek Natural Resource Area
- Waakikižu Natural Resource Area
- Walking Iron County Park
- Yahara Heights County Park

Identifying potential sites is only one step in determining suitability, and it does not guarantee that agriculture or gardening activities will occur there or determine what type of activities are best suited for the property. Properties that are very close to population centers will be more suitable to community gardens. Properties that are located in more rural parts of the county will not be suitable for community gardens but may be suitable for incubator space or organic practices.

The inclusion of community gardening in this plan allows non-profit organizations and local units of government to apply for Conservation Fund grants to protect lands for these uses.

iv. ART IN PARKS

The incorporation of public art and cultural activities into the park system remains a recommendation in the Parks and Open Space Plan for 2025-2030. This initiative aims to enhance the outdoor experience by fostering a deeper appreciation for nature and the historic character of each site. By integrating art into the parks, visitors can engage with their surroundings in new and inspiring ways, enhancing both visual appeal and community connection.

Projects range from temporary and permanent installations to cultural programming, all designed to improve aesthetics, architecture, and ecology, while creatively enhancing park infrastructure. The Park Commission, with assistance from park staff, oversees art in parks, ensuring that selected projects and locations align with broader park development plans. Careful consideration is given to current and future park improvements, how the art will be included within the framework of the master plan, and how recognition for contributions will be handled.

Several installations are present in the parks system, with two projects highlighted in this plan. In November 2020, a permanent art installation titled "Art Rock" was introduced at the Ice Age Reserve Wildlife Area. Created by Tim Malzhan and Dean Bloedorn, this piece features three stones—Dolomite, Iron Concretion from Sandstone, and Gneiss, all sourced from the property. The installation serves as a visual representation of the geological history of the area, encouraging visitors to engage with the art and science of trail design. The project, which took three years from concept to installation, was made possible through support from David Mickelson, Professor Emeritus at UW-Madison's Department of Geoscience, and early input from Madison artist Gene Kain. Funding was provided by a Capital Grant from Dane County to the Ice Age Trail Alliance. Visitors can view this installation by accessing the Old Sauk Pass Trailhead.

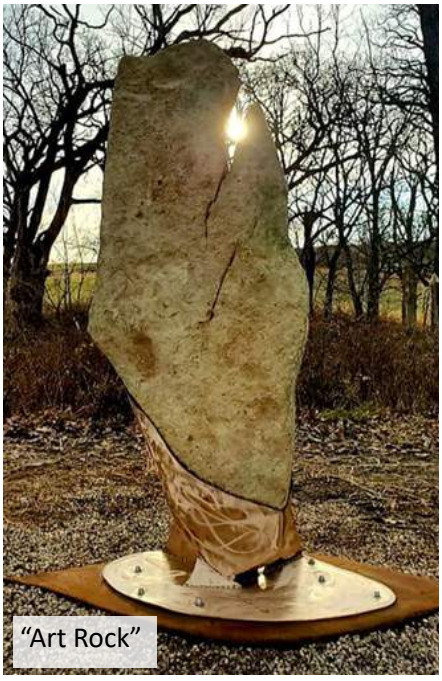
Another example of meaningful art within the parks system is the metal installation at Anderson Farm County Park, added in April 2021 to honor Gary Kalscheur, a dedicated volunteer and neighbor to the park. Designed by Jacky Graves and fabricated by Rich Fizzell of Prairie Art Metal, the piece reflects Kalscheur's love of nature, biking, and sports while also offering aesthetic and emotional value to the park. Located along the Anderson Farm Park Trail near the Memorial Woods entrance, the installation stands as a source of inspiration for park guests.

Metal Art *Photo Credit: Mike Kuhr*

While the Park Commission plays a central role in reviewing and approving art projects, partnerships and collaborations with local organizations, Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission, and Foundation for Dane County Parks offer additional opportunities to bring art and cultural activities into parks. When evaluating proposals, the Park Commission and staff consider several key factors:

- Current site usage and potential limitations on existing activities
- Compatibility with future park improvements
- Impact on the landscape, including its potential to enhance natural sights and sounds
- Ability to attract new visitors to the park system
- Long-term maintenance feasibility
- Potential vulnerability to vandalism
- Contribution to a greater appreciation or connection to nature
- Capacity to adapt as the landscape or park use evolves

Through thoughtful planning and community partnerships, the integration of public art into Dane County Parks continues to enrich these spaces, making them more dynamic and engaging for all visitors.



"Art Rock"

v. SCENIC TRANSPORTATION CORRIDORS

Driving for pleasure was listed as the 3rd highest participation rate of recreation activities in the 2016 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. The 2001-2005 Park and Open Space Plan recommended designation of a county scenic roads program, and could potentially link local, county and state park facilities. Safety determinations would have to be made prior to the designation of any road. These roads could be designated on a map and provide pull off areas that offer scenic views of the countryside and interpretive signage. Development of this recreation program is consistent with providing opportunities for the projected aging population and also benefits other transportation means, such as bicycling.

The county's role in any scenic road program would be to work with willing landowners that wanted to permanently protect their lands through conservation easements and to possibly provide signage and interpretive information regarding the landscape. Any scenic transportation corridors identified by the county through this Plan should not be used for any zoning decisions or in any way influence or limit private property rights. The county would seek support from the local towns before designating any scenic transportation corridors.

Recommendations:

- Utilize student interns or university student help to begin investigating designation of this program with Park Commission oversight.
- Investigate possible opportunities with U.W. Extension to create a transportation route that would link Prairie Heritage sites.
- Investigate potential of a transportation route that would highlight cultural sites.

Brigham County Park

XII. REGIONAL RESOURCE PROTECTION INITIATIVES

XII.1 Wetland Mitigation Banking

XII.2 Southwest Grassland

XII.3 Glacial Heritage Area

XII.4 Recharge Area for Frederick Springs

XII.5 Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area

REGIONAL RESOURCE PROTECTION INITIATIVES

Strong support was again evident throughout the public input process for the county to preserve larger tracts of lands dedicated toward resource protection as well as to strengthen and expand partnerships with other conservation organizations. Larger resource protection and recreation initiatives may be a component of conservation projects that extend far beyond Dane County borders.

XII.1 Wetland Mitigation Banking

Dane County Land & Water Resources Department, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have established one of the first agricultural wetland mitigation banks in the state at Cherokee Marsh Wildlife Area. Agricultural wetland mitigation banking is a tool for farmers and natural resource managers to maintain no net loss of wetlands resulting from impacts from agricultural activities. It involves restoring wetlands in one location to mitigate farming impacts to wetlands in another location. Mitigation credits will be available to local producers starting in. The project is largely funded through the NRCS Wetland Mitigation Banking Program (USDA NRCS) and will develop an agricultural wetland mitigation bank administered collectively by Dane County, WDNR and NRCS.

Dane County Parks owns properties that may be suitable for other wetland mitigation banks, and additional lands may be able to be restored through this program in the future that would make regional scale wetland restoration projects possible. Additionally, staff within the Land & Water Resources Department would approach a wetland mitigation banking program from an environmental perspective rather than profit being the priority.

XII.2 Southwest Grasslands

The goal of the proposed project is to work with a broad group of partners to conserve and enhance functioning grassland, savanna and stream ecosystems in southwest Wisconsin, set within a rural farmland landscape, focusing on the area's biological, cultural, historical, economic, and recreational values. The project includes parts of Dane, Iowa, Green, and Lafayette counties and encompasses approximately 320,000 acres. The project area is composed of agriculture lands, prairies, savannas, grasslands, streams, rare plant and animal species, recreational opportunities, historical and cultural resources. The project will work to conserve the open rural landscape of southwest Wisconsin by utilizing a wide range of conservation tools.

XII.3 Glacial Heritage Area

In October of 2009, the State Natural Resources Board approved the Glacial Heritage Area (GHA) Plan. The Glacial Heritage Area includes lands in Dane, Dodge, Rock and Jefferson counties and proposes to establish a coordinated network of conservation lands and recreation opportunities. CamRock County Park, Riley-Deppe County Park, the Maunesha River Natural Resource Area and Silverwood County Park are all within the boundary of this regional resource initiative. It is not the goal of the GHA plan to change individual management plans for existing properties, but rather incorporate them into a broader network. The project seeks to protect and restore native grasslands, forest and wetland habitats, improve water quality, identify and protect cultural and historical resources, and collaborate with working farms to maintain open, agricultural landscapes. Another goal of the plan that overlaps with several Dane County initiatives is to provide connectivity of park and recreation resources through trails. This project area is expected to provide easily accessible opportunities to connect with the outdoors for one of the state's largest population centers.

Dane County's role would primarily be limited to a potential funding partner through the Conservation Fund grant application program only on lands that are within Dane County. The DNR and other non-profit conservation groups would be responsible for all planning, management, and implementation of conservation tools for these project areas.

Other WDNR Land Legacy projects in Dane County such as the Arlington Prairie and Dunn-Rutland Savanna and Potholes that become adopted project areas by the same process could also be considered in the future.

XII.4 Recharge Area for Frederick Springs

In 2000, R.J. Hunt and J.J. Steuer with the U.S. Geological Survey prepared Water-Resources Investigations Report 00-4172 in cooperation with the City of Middleton and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The report identifies critical groundwater recharge areas for the spring and wetland areas of the Pheasant Branch Conservancy. It is envisioned partners such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service, WDNR, Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, and local conservation organizations would work toward protecting working farm lands and open space within the recharge zone identified in the plan by utilizing a variety of acquisition tools.

Prairie Seeding at Pheasant Brancy Conservancy, Acker Property

XII.5 Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area

The MRPHA lies in southwestern Dane and southeastern Iowa counties at the headwaters of the Sugar and Pecatonica Rivers. The historic prairie that covered these lands and additional areas to the west was called the Military Ridge Prairie, after Military Ridge Road that was built in 1835. The road served as a highway for immigration of settlers into this region of the county. The Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area organization is made up of eight partnering agencies who signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2003 pledging resources toward protecting and promoting the grasslands and water quality of this project area. The Nature Conservancy has been helping coordinate efforts of this organization with other agencies, private land owners and local units of government. In 2003 the Dane County Board of Supervisors adopted Res. 68 03-04, Adopting Elements Of the Town of Perry Open Space and Recreation Plan as an Amendment to the 2001-05 Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan. The resolution authorizes inclusion of the Hauge Historic District Park within this project area boundary.

Dane County's role in all of these project areas would be limited to potentially providing matching funds to government and non-profit conservation organizations through the Conservation Fund grant application program only on lands that are within Dane County.

Thomas Memorial Prairie *Photo Credit: The Nature Conservancy*

XIII. PARTNER PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

XIII.1 Capital Springs Recreation Area

XIII.2 McPike Park

XIII.3 Madison School Forest

XIII.4 Prairie and Oak Savanna Sites

XIII.5 Active Sports Fields

XIII.6 Target Archery Ranges

XIII.7 Conservation Club Buffer Zones

XIII.8 Phosphorus Reduction Zones

XIII.9 Bike Park

XIII.10 Madison Lakeway

XIII. 11 Rodefeld Landfill

PARTNER PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

Dane County works with a several conservation and recreation partners on a variety of initiatives. These projects have some connection to county-owned park lands, facilities or trails and are expected to provide some regional recreational, cultural, or natural resource protection value. Partnership benefits may include non-profit grant eligibility for a variety of funding programs, staff, park or planning assistance, shared stewardship responsibilities and shared acquisition responsibilities. Projects in this section were brought forward to the Park Commission through the public input process by local units of government or non-profit agencies. Inclusion of projects in this section does not guarantee grant funding, and the Park Commission retains the right to determine cost-share amounts, reversionary rights and any other relevant restrictions or conditions as appropriate, based on the details of the project, including other project partners.

XIII.1 Capital Springs Recreation Area (2,755.4 acres)

The vision for the Capital Springs Recreation Area (CSRA) started in January of 2000, with a successful proposal to the State of Wisconsin from Dane County to establish a centennial park that would serve as a "crown jewel" of the Lewis Nine Springs E-Way project. Dane County has been working on implementing the vision of the Lewis Nine Springs E-Way by acquiring parkland and managing natural areas that facilitate environmental education and awareness for more than 40 years.

In 2002, the State of Wisconsin and Dane County began a joint master planning process for the approximately 2,700 acres of land included within the CSRA boundary. The process included many public informational meetings and planning workshops that were well attended by representatives of local governments, private citizens, other government agencies, and special interest groups. The Master Plan was completed and adopted in 2010 and provides the vision for future acquisition, development, management and operation of the recreation area and opportunities to apply to a variety of grant funding programs.

The Capital Springs Recreation Area area offers tremendous potential to educate and promote the important archeological and cultural features within the William G. Lunney Lake Farm Park and Capital Springs State Park. Another recommendation is to develop interpretive nodes/signage and "rest areas" along the Capital City Trail, showcasing the important culture, flora and fauna of the area. In 2015 an interpretive kiosk was installed at the Capital Springs disc golf course to provide educational information about the Gilman mound landscape. In July of 2011, the Friends assisted with a mural dedication at the Jenni and Kyle Preserve that was designed in part with the assistance of youth and disabled Dane County residents.

These efforts to provide cultural elements including visual and performing arts should continue to be expanded throughout the recreation area.

XIII.2 McPike Park (City of Madison, 5.8 acres)

A master plan for this park in the City of Madison was completed in 2011. The park was renamed from Central Park to McPike Park in 2017 in honor of long time Madison East High School principal Milton McPike. This nearly 6-acre park located along the Capital City Trail is host to numerous festivals and events including a weekly farmers' market April through October. The park features a restroom building (open seasonally) and Madison's first skatepark, which opened in September 2015, and was partially funded by a Dane County grant.

Fundraising, planning and development efforts for the park are the responsibility of the City of Madison, its inclusion in this plan is intended for the sole purpose of eligibility for the Conservation Fund Grant Program.

XIII.3 Madison School Forest (Towns of Verona, Montrose, 356.2 acres)

The Madison School Forest is located on Spring Rose Road just west of STH 69. Public land owners of the Madison School Forest are the Madison Metropolitan School District, Friends of the Madison School Forest and WDNR. Dane County recently acquired property along the Sugar River that connects to the School Forest. The purpose of including it in the county Park and Open Space Plan is solely to provide eligibility for State Stewardship and County Conservation Fund grant dollars for future acquisition of contiguous parcels from willing sellers as they become available.

XIII.4 Prairie and Oak Savanna Sites

The amended Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan 1990-1995 recommended that the county support and assist in completing an inventory of prairie and oak savanna sites, notify landowners and local governments of site locations and promote better awareness of these important natural environments. The Prairie Enthusiasts has developed a database of known prairie and savanna remnants to inform the owners of the existence of these remnants and work with them on restoration, management and protection if the owners so choose. Dane County's role in this initiative is to work with non-profit conservation organizations and land trusts, such as the Prairie Enthusiasts and Groundswell Conservancy, as well as with local units of governments and the WDNR, in funding the acquisition of identified sites through the Dane County Conservation Fund. The county should also investigate opportunities to expand these sites through proposed phosphorus reduction projects in the north Mendota watershed.

XIII.5 Active Sports Fields

There continues to be a number of regional scale active sports field projects being considered by several local units of government and other non-profit sports groups expressed similar to Reddan Park. This initiative is intended to allow local units of government to be able to apply for Conservation Grant funds for acquisition of land needed to develop this type of facility. Proposed sports field complexes would need to serve multiple jurisdictions and provide regional recreation benefits. Ideally, they would be planned to allow for non-motorized and mass transit access and be a component of an existing adjacent park or resource protection initiative.

XIII.6 Target Archery Ranges

The popularity of target archery and bow hunting continues to be demonstrated in Dane County. The Wisconsin DNR has a National Archery in the Schools Program initiative that aims to provide increased target archery opportunities for youth across the state. The county will work with the WDNR and interested parties to further explore this proposed program within the park system. Dane County's role would be to provide suitable range sites; schools and/or non-profits groups would need to provide equipment and oversight.

XIII.7 Conservation Club Buffer Zones

Dane County has a number of active conservation clubs that offer a variety of target shooting opportunities. As urban areas continue to expand, the distances between residential areas and these clubs diminishes. Very limited public shooting range opportunities exist in Dane County, so it is important that these clubs are able to continue to exist and provide this recreation use. Dane County's role would be limited to providing eligibility to non-profit conservation organizations to apply for Conservation Fund grants for acquisition of buffering lands around these facilities.

XIII.8 Phosphorus Reduction Areas

Dane County has been implementing phosphorus reduction projects in multiple watersheds including the Yahara River and Door Creek Watersheds. The Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) is also investigating strategies to reduce phosphorus loads in the Yahara Watershed and has been working cooperatively with Dane County in this regard. Possible examples of future joint effort projects that could complement Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan initiatives include wetland restorations, expansion of prairie and oak savanna sites and streambank buffers throughout the Yahara Watershed and the proposed Badfish Creek Natural Resource Area. Dane County and MMSD, along with other partners, should continue to work cooperatively and evaluate opportunities to implement management options that could provide for multiple benefits in other watersheds as well, such as the Sugar River.

XIII.9 Bike Park

Staff from the Madison Area Sports Product Development Committee have worked with several Dane County local units of government to explore the feasibility of developing a bike park. A bike park is regional scale park that offers numerous off-road bike activity areas such as mountain biking, pump tracks and bicycle motocross. Dane County's role would be to potentially provide partial grant funding to a local unit of government or non-profit group for acquisition or development of a regionally significant bike park.

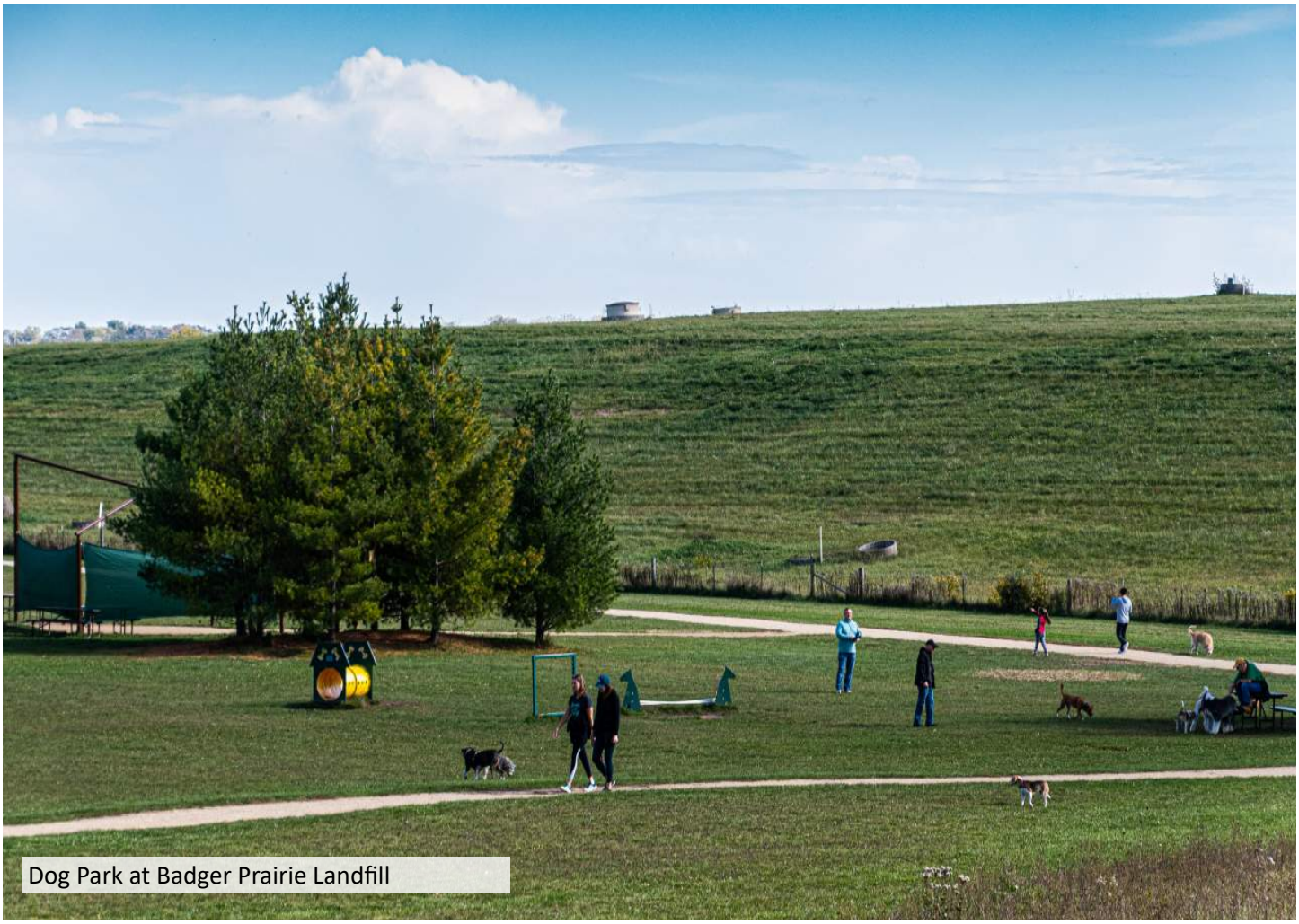
XIII.10 Madison Lakeway

Formerly Law Park on Lake Monona, the Madison Lakeway is a regionally significant park owned and maintained by the City of Madison located along the Lake Monona shoreline in Downtown Madison. John Nolen originally proposed a Great Esplanade along Lake Monona as a part of his 1909 "Madison: A Model City" plan. Since Nolen, many others have offered ideas for expanding Law Park and this lakeshore region including Phil Lewis who assisted planning professionals from 2008 to 2010 with design visions for the Nolen concept, a privately developed vision for Law Park. The City of Madison has begun planning for this regionally significant park that is connected to the Capital Springs Recreation Area via the Capital City Trail. The vision is for the Lakeway is to be the connection point between downtown Madison and Lake Monona and become a space that promotes social equity, building civic engagement, various forms of recreation, environmental interpretation, and an opportunity for the connection to one of our natural treasures just steps from the Capitol. Future partnership opportunities may exist as the project is nearing the final stages of planning, design and public input.

XIII.11 Rodefeld Landfill

With less than 5 years of landfill space remaining at Dane County's Rodefeld Landfill, the Dane County Department of Waste & Renewables is preparing for closure of the landfill on the east side of Madison.

The site could be a potential future park. Coordination between Dane County Parks, Dane County Waste and Renewables, City of Madison Parks and recreational organizations to identify suitable future public use areas and recreational opportunities will be needed as the site is being closed and restored. Dane County Waste and Renewables will lead the planning effort.



Dog Park at Badger Prairie Landfill

XIV. ADAPTING FOR THE FUTURE

A major theme of the 2025-2030 Parks & Open Space Plan continues to be adapting to changing needs, expectations and environmental changes. Proactive planning and flexibility will be essential to sustaining and enhancing Dane County Parks. Throughout this plan, numerous strategies address these challenges; this section highlights some of the most significant initiatives and overarching themes.

ENGAGED COMMUNITY

People are at the heart of a successful park system. While preserving land for wildlife habitat and ecological functions is inherently valuable, long-term success depends on an engaged and invested community. Dedicated park users - whether it's a family visiting a dog park daily or a disc golfer playing weekly - often develop a deep passion for the activities that become part of their routine. These park users are frequently the same individuals who volunteer their time and contribute resources to support various park projects. Maintaining open and active relationships between park staff, user groups, and volunteers is essential, ensuring collaboration and sustained community involvement. Equally important is fostering a social and enjoyable atmosphere for volunteer activities, as many volunteers cite the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals and spend time outdoors as their primary motivation.

Additionally, gaining a deeper understanding of park usage patterns, demographics, and visitor preferences is crucial to meeting future public needs. Collecting data through professional surveys, trail and vehicle counting devices, sales records, and field observations can provide valuable insights. A comprehensive review of current data collection methods should be conducted to identify strategies for more accurately tracking park usage, helping to inform future planning and improvements.

PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY

Private philanthropy has played a vital role in the growth and development of Dane County Parks. More than 1,000 acres of land have been donated or acquired through bargain sales, contributing to the creation of numerous parks, including Donald County Park, McCarthy Youth and Conservation County Park, Festge County Park, Anderson Farm County Park, CamRock County Park, Schumacher Farm County Park, Lussier County Park, Silverwood County Park, Morton Forest, and Baer Socha Conservancy.

Beyond land acquisitions, generous donors have contributed both time and financial resources to enhance and steward our parks. Major development projects such as the Jenni and Kyle Preserve, Scheidegger Forest, the Ice Age Junction Shared-Use Trail Underpass, Morton Forest, and Mendota County Park were made possible through private donations. Additionally, smaller yet impactful contributions, such as accessible fishing piers, kayak launches, informational kiosks, and bicycle repair stations, have enriched the visitor experience. Looking ahead, private support will be essential for future initiatives, including the future expansion of the Lussier Family Heritage Center. Through our philanthropic partner, the Foundation for Dane County Parks, private donations will continue to drive opportunities for growth, innovation, and the enhancement of parks and programs. Review and updates to the current donation policies that clearly reflect and support property naming guidelines and updates recommended in this plan will be needed moving forward.

FOUNDATION FOR DANE COUNTY PARKS

The Foundation for Dane County Parks is the philanthropic non-profit partner of Dane County Parks. Since formation in 2017, the Foundation's capacity has grown significantly, notably with the hiring of a full-time Executive Director. This leadership expansion has allowed the Foundation to enhance its fundraising efforts and provide additional funding for Dane County Parks programs and initiatives. Fundraising priorities are determined by Dane County Parks and the Foundation secures funding through private and corporate donations and grants to support these priorities.

The Foundation also plays a central role in raising funds for the Friends of Dane County Parks Endowment Fund, held at the Madison Community Foundation, which leaders from the Dane County Parks Commission established in 2012. The endowment ensures long-term financial support for Dane County Parks conservation efforts, and volunteer and community programming that will benefit generations to come.

The Foundation will continue to support Dane County Parks so that all Dane County residents and visitors can experience the beauty and benefits of nature, reinforcing the importance of parks as spaces for recreation, conservation, connection and well-being.

The Foundation's Mission:

The Foundation supports and enhances Dane County Parks through philanthropic community engagement, helping to preserve and improve the park system for future generations.

The Foundation's Vision:

The Foundation envisions a thriving, financially sustainable Dane County Parks system that is cherished and enjoyed by the entire community, fostering a deep connection between people and the natural spaces around them.

The Foundation's Values:

- Commitment to philanthropy and investment in public natural spaces
- Conservation and stewardship of land and natural resources
- A connected and engaged community
- Equitable access, inclusion, and representation for all
- Health, wellbeing, and quality of life for residents and visitors
- Encouraging youth engagement in outdoor activities and nature explorati

Foundation for Dane County Parks - Healthy Parks, Healthy You

NEW TECHNOLOGY

Dane County Parks has embraced new technology to enhance visitor experiences and streamline operations, especially in recent years. Since the pandemic, we have upgraded to credit card payment kiosks for permit sales in the field, making transactions easier and more convenient for park visitors. For years, Dane County Parks have been popular for geocaching, a GPS-based treasure hunt activity, to engage outdoor enthusiasts in a fun and interactive way. Social networking platforms play a crucial role in promoting our events, helping us reach a wider audience and encourage community participation. As technology continues to evolve, we are ready to embrace new innovations that inspire people to get outside and explore.

Looking ahead, the possibilities are endless. Parks across the country are incorporating mobile apps, augmented reality, and virtual tours to provide interactive maps and guided experiences. Conservation efforts are benefiting from drones, AI, and bioacoustic sensors that monitor wildlife and environmental changes, while smart infrastructure like solar-powered facilities, automated waste management, and AI-driven crowd control is making parks more sustainable. Safety measures, such as GPS tracking, geofencing, and real-time weather alerts, are improving visitor security, and cloud-based management tools are helping park staff operate more efficiently. While these advancements represent exciting possibilities, we are ready to evaluate new innovations as they emerge and consider implementation if that technology enhances outdoor recreation and encourages people to connect with nature.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Dane County Parks is committed to addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by climate change. Since 2015, we have collaborated with the University of Wisconsin - Madison to study its potential effects on parks and public lands. Recognizing the urgency of this issue, former Dane County Executive Joe Parisi established the Dane County Office of Energy and Climate Change in 2017 and the office developed the Dane County Climate Action Plan, which outlines ambitious targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing climate resilience.

Dane County has made major investments in flood resilience in recent years, including restoring wetlands and removing sediment from the Yahara River. In April 2025, County Executive Melissa Agard announced Dane County was awarded a state grant to restore a degraded stretch of Black Earth Creek and its surrounding wetlands and another for Capital Area Regional Planning Commission (CARPC) to conduct a county wide stream crossing inventory to identify vulnerabilities in culverts, bridges, and other infrastructure that affect water flow and flood resilience. “These projects will strengthen our infrastructure, protect public and private property, and restore critical natural areas that act as buffers during extreme weather events,” Agard added. “This is climate resilience in action.”

The restoration and management of parklands will play a vital role in achieving the Dane County Climate Action Plan objectives. One of the most effective natural climate solutions is carbon sequestration, and Dane County Parks is uniquely positioned to contribute through large-scale prairie, wetland, and forest restoration efforts. Healthy ecosystems absorb and store carbon while also improving biodiversity, enhancing water quality, and providing resilient landscapes that can better withstand extreme weather events. These restoration efforts will be monitored and evaluated by the Watershed and Ecosystem Services Division to quantify their carbon sequestration impact over time. Expanding these efforts through strategic reforestation, controlled burns, and invasive species management will be critical in meeting the county’s climate commitments.

Climate change is already altering how people use Dane County Parks. Rising temperatures and shifting weather patterns mean shorter snow seasons, affecting traditional winter activities like cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. While these remain valued recreational opportunities, milder winters and less consistent snowfall means that skiing and snowmobiling may no longer be as central to the county’s recreational offerings as it once was. In contrast, longer boating, hiking, disc golf, and camping seasons due to extended warm weather will likely increase demand for expanding seasons earlier in the spring and later in the fall. These shifting patterns require adaptive planning to ensure parks remain accessible and enjoyable year-round.

More frequent extreme weather events, such as heavy rainfall and flooding, also pose challenges. Stormwater management and erosion control will be increasingly critical for maintaining trails, preventing habitat loss, and protecting park infrastructure. The county will need to expand the use of green infrastructure solutions such as rain gardens, permeable

surfaces, and restored wetlands to absorb excess runoff and reduce flood risks. Additionally, rising summer temperatures may lead to investing in shade structures in high use areas such as dog parks and expanded tree canopy coverage.

Climate change will also bring new invasive species and tree diseases/pests that are spreading due to shifting environmental conditions. Warmer temperatures and altered precipitation patterns create favorable conditions for the expansion of invasive plants, insects, and pathogens that were once limited by colder climates. Species such as the Emerald Ash Borer, which has devastated ash trees across the region, and other pests like the spongy moth and oak wilt, are expected to continue their spread, further stressing park trees. Parks staff will need to remain vigilant, monitor these emerging threats, and adapt management strategies accordingly.

With its diverse landscapes, strong academic partnerships, and dedicated volunteers, Dane County Parks is well-positioned to serve as a living laboratory for climate research. Ongoing collaborations with universities and conservation organizations can facilitate regular monitoring of wildlife populations, plant communities, and water quality to track the impacts of climate change and inform future land management strategies. With access to major research institutions and a community of engaged citizens, the county has an opportunity to lead in data-driven conservation and climate adaptation efforts.

Carbon Sampling at Anderson County Park

XV. CONCLUSION

The Dane County Parks system has continued to expand and evolve with the addition of new properties and classifications. Increased public visitation throughout the system remains high in the wake of the pandemic. Public input continues to support land acquisition efforts to keep up with population and development trends around the urban fringe. Funding from the WDNR stewardship acquisition program is under threat and it's unclear if the program will be available in the future. Dane County will continue to seek grant fund opportunities and work with the Foundation for Dane County Parks to continue land acquisition efforts and park development recommendations.

The Land and Water Resource Department and Parks Division has expanded and evolved since the last plan update. New specialized program areas have been developed to implement the initiatives and goals that will sustain Dane County Parks into the future. New divisions like Ecosystem Services (LWRD) and Natural Resource Management (Parks) will plan, implement, and manage restoration projects on Dane County Parkland. The New Engagement and Visitor Services program area in Parks will focus on providing safe, welcoming parks and programs. Strategic coordination between all LWRD divisions and Park Planning Development will be necessary to ensure the protection of the land, water, and cultural resources through Dane County Parks for future generations.

Planning and development of the regional off road shared-use trail system will continue to be a priority over the next five years. These trails connect neighborhoods and communities and provide transportation, health, and recreation benefits to the most diverse population of Dane County residents than any other facilities the park system offers. The growing network of trails throughout Dane County offers alternative modes of transportation. Active transportation, such as walking and biking, is an important part of reducing emissions and efforts of the Dane County Climate Action Plan. The strong demand for shared-use trail development must be guided by the planning and development roles and responsibilities outlined within this plan.

Improving existing facilities and developing newly acquired properties will be critical for Dane County Parks over the next five years. Aging infrastructure, increased park usage, and justifiable demand for new facilities for dog parks, mountain biking, and disc golf will compete for available resources and staff time. Development of Park Master Plans for specific recreation park and properties will help guide planning and budgeting for necessary improvements.

Several considerations present planning and management challenges. More intense and frequent rainfall, lack of snow, and warmer temperatures will impact project and property management decisions. Cultural resource preservation need to considered for all development projects on county parkland. Balancing equity, inclusion, and accessibility with resource protection will be paramount to connecting a diverse population to the land, water and cultural resources within Dane County Parks over the next five years.