

Whitewater Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan 2025

1. Introduction

Parks, open spaces, and recreation facilities are vital elements of a thriving, livable community. They support physical and mental well-being, provide opportunities for social connection, protect environmental resources, and contribute to community identity and character. Parks also help shape development patterns and serve as public assets that enhance the quality of life for all residents and visitors.

As the City of Whitewater continues to grow and evolve, thoughtful, proactive planning is essential to ensure that future generations have access to safe, inclusive, and high-quality recreational spaces. New development and shifting demographics present both opportunities and challenges that require strategic planning aligned with community values.

The **Whitewater Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan 2025** serves as a comprehensive and forward-looking guide for the preservation, enhancement, and expansion of parks, trails, natural areas, and recreational amenities. It outlines both immediate priorities and long-term goals to meet the current and future needs of Whitewater's diverse population. While the plan identifies strategies through 2035, it is designed to guide investment and development over the next five years (2025–2030).

This plan includes conceptual recommendations for various types of parks, natural areas, and recreational facilities, with a focus on equitable access, operational sustainability, and environmental stewardship. It also supports broader community goals related to public health, inclusion, climate resilience, and the creation of a connected and walkable public realm. In many cases, further detailed design, public engagement, engineering, and budgeting will be required prior to implementation.

The plan has been prepared in accordance with guidelines from the **Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR)** to maintain eligibility for grant programs such as the **Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)** and the **Wisconsin Stewardship Program**. Maintaining DNR certification requires updating this plan at least every five years to reflect changing community needs.

In addition, this Parks and Open Space Plan functions as an adopted element of the City's overall Master Plan, as authorized under **Wisconsin Statutes §62.23**. It builds on the findings of previous Parks and Open Space Plans and integrates with related documents, including the City's Comprehensive Bikeway Plan and various Neighborhood Development Plans. **This plan establishes the citywide vision, guiding principles, and framework for parks and recreation. A separate Strategic Plan will complement this document by identifying specific needs, priorities, and improvement recommendations for each individual park and facility.** Where inconsistencies occur, the recommendations of the **2025 Parks and Open Space Plan** shall take precedence.

2. The Vital Role of Parks and Recreation in the Community

As financial and land resources become increasingly limited, it is important to recognize the critical value that parks, open spaces, and recreation services bring to the community. In Whitewater, these assets are essential components of our public infrastructure—equally vital to our long-term well-being as roads, utilities, and housing.

Parks and recreation play a foundational role in addressing major public health challenges. With rising rates of obesity, diabetes, and sedentary lifestyles across the country, the availability of safe, accessible spaces for physical activity is more important than ever. By offering places to play, walk, bike, gather, and participate in positive recreation experiences, Whitewater’s park system helps instill habits of health and wellness that can last a lifetime—especially for children and families.

In addition to their health benefits, parks and recreation facilities are among the most visible and valued services a community provides. A well-maintained and vibrant park system reflects a strong sense of civic pride and quality of life. Parks are places where neighbors connect, celebrations are held, and community bonds are strengthened.

Parks also serve as an important economic driver. High-quality public spaces help attract and retain new families, students, and businesses. They enhance property values, support tourism and events, and contribute to the city's appeal as a place to live, learn, work, and play.

Equally important is the environmental role of parks. An interconnected system of active and passive recreation areas, greenways, and open spaces helps preserve biodiversity, protect sensitive ecosystems, and support stormwater and flood management. As climate-related pressures increase, these “green infrastructure” elements will play a vital role in enhancing Whitewater’s resilience and environmental sustainability.

Ultimately, the park system is a reflection of the community’s values—supporting health, equity, sustainability, and quality of life for all. As we invest in and improve these spaces, we ensure that current and future generations can continue to benefit from the vital role parks and recreation play in the heart of Whitewater.

3. Background Information

The City of Whitewater is located in southeastern Wisconsin, straddling the border of Jefferson and Walworth Counties. As of [insert latest available year], the estimated population of the City is approximately [insert updated population]. Whitewater covers roughly nine square miles and is bordered by the Town of Cold Spring to the north (Jefferson County) and by the Town of Whitewater to the south, east, and west (Walworth County).

The Whitewater Unified School District (WUSD) encompasses the entire city and extends into surrounding lands within Jefferson, Rock, and Walworth Counties. This regional connection reinforces the City's role as a central hub for education and community life in the area.

Since 1980, Whitewater has experienced modest but steady population growth, averaging approximately 0.8% per year. While growth rates have varied—typically lower than the state average and Walworth County but comparable to Jefferson County—Whitewater remains a dynamic community shaped by both permanent residents and a large student population.

The presence of the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater significantly influences the character of the community. Although many of the recreational needs of university students are served by on-campus facilities, the City recognizes the importance of ensuring off-campus parks and programs are welcoming, accessible, and inclusive of students. Continued collaboration between the City and the University is essential to meeting the recreational needs of all residents—long-term and temporary alike.

Effective park and open space planning requires thoughtful consideration of population trends. Estimating future population growth is challenging due to numerous variables, including regional economic development, housing trends, and broader urban expansion from nearby metropolitan areas such as Milwaukee, Madison, and Chicago. However, based on existing projections, the City of Whitewater is expected to reach a population of approximately [insert projected population] by the year 2025.

Given these projections—and the possibility of accelerated growth tied to regional development pressures—it is recommended that the City plan according to the higher end of park and open space standards. This proactive approach will help ensure that Whitewater remains well-equipped to serve a growing, changing, and increasingly diverse population.

4. Planning Process

To be developed

Note: A separate Strategic Plan will be developed in conjunction with or immediately following the adoption of this Parks and Open Space Plan. The Strategic Plan will provide detailed, park-by-park assessments and identify specific needs, design concepts, priority improvements, and potential funding opportunities tailored to each facility in the system.

5. Mission, Vision, and Values

To be developed

6. Park and Recreation System Overview

Park Classification and Standards

To ensure that the City of Whitewater's parks and recreational system continues to meet the diverse and evolving needs of the community, a clear and consistent classification of park types is essential. This plan uses the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) classification system, adapted to local context and planning goals.

Two key planning standards are used:

1. Gross Acreage Standard

This standard identifies the recommended number of usable acres of park and recreation land per 1,000 residents. The NRPA generally recommends 6.25 to 10.5 acres of developed recreational land per 1,000 people. This figure excludes environmentally sensitive lands acquired for conservation purposes, which are measured separately.

2. Service Area Standard

Each park classification is assigned a recommended service radius, ensuring that residents have access to appropriate facilities within walking or biking distance. This helps identify geographic gaps and ensures equitable park distribution across the city.

Park Classifications

Whitewater's park system includes 15 distinct parks, classified into the following categories. Each classification includes a description, typical size, population served, and intended recreational intensity.

Mini Park

Small parks designed for concentrated or specific populations such as preschoolers, seniors, or apartment-dwelling families.

- Size: 2 acres or less
- Service Radius: < ¼ mile
- Acreage Standard: 0.25–0.5 acres per 1,000 residents
- Typical Features: Tot lots, seating, garden plots, shade structures

Neighborhood Park

The foundational unit of the park system, designed for a mix of active and passive uses and accessible by foot or bike.

- Size: 3–7 acres
- Service Radius: ¼ to ½ mile
- Acreage Standard: 1–2 acres per 1,000 residents

- Typical Features: Playgrounds, sports courts, picnic shelters, open lawns, trails

Community Park

Larger parks that serve multiple neighborhoods and accommodate a wide variety of uses, both active and passive.

- Size: 15–40 acres
 - Service Radius: 1.5 miles
 - Acreage Standard: 5–8 acres per 1,000 residents
 - Typical Features: Ball fields, aquatic centers, event space, natural areas, trails, ample parking
-

Recreation Area Classifications

To better understand the functional use of spaces within parks, this plan also categorizes areas by recreational intensity:

Active Recreation Areas

Designed for structured and high-use activities, including: athletic fields, playgrounds, sport courts, skateparks, splash pads, dog parks, and community gardens.

Passive Recreation Areas

Characterized by open space or light improvements for informal use: natural areas, walking trails, picnic areas, scenic overlooks, native plantings.

Special Use Areas

Uniquely programmed or historic spaces with specialized facilities: memorial parks, amphitheaters, historical sites, cultural plazas.

Conservancy Areas

Permanently protected lands of environmental or ecological significance: floodplains, wetlands, shorelines, stormwater basins, environmental corridors, and wildlife habitat areas. These areas may offer trail access or environmental education, but are not counted toward developed park acreage.

Note: The Whitewater Effigy Mounds Preserve is classified as a Special Use Area due to its sacred cultural significance, interpretive and educational value, and its preservation function. The site may also be considered a Conservancy Area due to its sensitive landscape and emphasis on

protection over programmed recreational use. It is managed with care and respect in collaboration with Native American communities, and is not included in the developed park acreage total to preserve its integrity and honor its historical context.

7. Needs Assessment

To be developed

8. Goals and Objectives

To be developed

9. Recommendations and Strategies

To be developed

10. Implementation Plan

To be developed

Note: This section will include system-wide strategies and capital improvement priorities. Park-specific implementation actions, cost estimates, and phasing details will be outlined in the forthcoming Strategic Plan, which is intended to guide detailed park-level improvements aligned with the vision established in this Open Space Plan.

11. Plan Adoption and Certification

To be developed

Appendices

To be added as needed