

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

To the Residents, Community Partners, and Leadership of the City of Whitewater:

On behalf of the Parks and Recreation Department, I am pleased to present the City of Whitewater Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan 2026–2031. This plan establishes a clear framework for guiding the City's investments, operations, and priorities over the next five years. It reflects the collective input of residents, the Parks and Recreation Board, City staff, public agencies, and community partners who contributed to its development.

The recommendations and initiatives described in this plan support the City's efforts to provide safe, well-maintained, and accessible parks and recreation opportunities. These facilities, programs, and natural resources play an important role in advancing community health, strengthening social connection, and contributing to the overall quality of life in Whitewater. This Strategic Plan outlines a coordinated path forward to maintain and enhance these essential public assets.

I extend my appreciation to all who participated in the planning process. Their insights and engagement helped ensure that the Strategic Plan reflects community needs and aligns with the City's long-term goals. The implementation of this plan will require continued collaboration across departments, partnerships with local organizations, and ongoing support from the community.

We look forward to working together to advance the goals set forth in this plan and to ensure that Whitewater's parks, lakes, trails, and recreation programs continue to serve residents effectively. Thank you for your continued support of the City's parks and recreation system.

Sincerely,
Kevin Boehm
Director of Parks, Recreation, and Facilities
City of Whitewater

1. INTRODUCTION

The City of Whitewater Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan 2026–2031 provides a structured and coordinated approach for guiding decisions related to parks, recreation facilities, natural resources, and community programs. The plan establishes priorities for the next five years and serves as a tool for aligning resources, improving operations, and advancing key investments.

Whitewater's parks, lakes, and public spaces play a central role in community life. The system includes neighborhood parks, community parks, natural areas, trails, and lakefront spaces that support recreation, social interaction, and environmental stewardship. As Whitewater continues to evolve, maintaining and improving these assets is essential to meeting community expectations and ensuring equitable access to high-quality recreational opportunities.

The Strategic Plan builds upon the City of Whitewater Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan 2026–2031, which provides the foundational vision and system inventory required for Wisconsin

Department of Natural Resources eligibility. While the Open Space Plan identifies long-range community priorities, this Strategic Plan focuses on implementing those priorities through specific initiatives, recommendations, and measurable actions.

Community-Driven Planning Process

The development of this plan incorporated input from a broad range of community members, stakeholders, and partners. The planning process included:

- Community surveys that documented preferences, priorities, and satisfaction levels
- Engagement with the Parks and Recreation Board and City staff
- Coordination with UW-Whitewater and the Whitewater Unified School District
- Review of lake management assessments and ADA accessibility evaluations
- Park and facility condition assessments conducted on-site
- Review of municipal trends, statewide standards, and recreation best practices

Feedback consistently emphasized the need for improved accessibility, upgraded park infrastructure, enhanced lake stewardship, expanded programming, and strengthened communication. These themes guided the development of the Strategic Initiatives found in Section 3.

Purpose of the Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan provides a framework to:

- Prioritize capital investment in parks, lakes, facilities, and open spaces
- Guide operational decisions and program development
- Support annual budgeting and the City's Capital Improvement Program
- Improve communication and transparency with the community
- Promote equitable access to parks and recreation services
- Ensure long-term financial and operational sustainability

By aligning community expectations with available resources and staff capacity, the Strategic Plan establishes a practical foundation for decision-making and progress.

Plan Structure

The Strategic Plan is organized into the following sections:

1. Introduction
2. Strategic Framework (Mission, Vision, and Values)
3. Strategic Initiatives (1–5)
4. Appendices
5. Conclusion and Call to Action

This structure mirrors best practices in municipal planning while addressing the specific needs of Whitewater.

A Plan Rooted in Whitewater's Identity

Whitewater's natural character, cultural diversity, and strong sense of community inform the priorities of this plan. Parks and recreation serve as essential public services that:

- Support community well-being
- Enhance environmental health
- Strengthen economic vitality
- Provide opportunities for recreation, education, and connection

The Strategic Plan outlines actions that are realistic within the five-year timeframe while supporting long-term improvements aligned with the community's vision.

2. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The Strategic Framework defines the Mission, Vision, and Values that guide the work of the Parks and Recreation Department. These elements provide consistency and direction for decision-making, resource allocation, and service delivery.

Mission

To enhance the quality of life in Whitewater by providing safe, inclusive, and well-maintained parks, open spaces, facilities, and recreation programs that support health, connection, and community well-being.

Vision

Whitewater will be a community where parks and recreation strengthen social connection, support lifelong learning and wellness, and celebrate the city's natural character. The parks system will provide environments that are welcoming, accessible, and reflective of the community's cultural and ecological diversity.

Values

Community

Creating spaces and opportunities that strengthen relationships and foster a sense of belonging.

Inclusion and Accessibility

Providing equitable access for all residents by removing barriers and promoting welcoming environments.

Stewardship

Protecting and preserving the community's natural, cultural, and financial resources for current and future generations.

Health and Wellness

Supporting physical, mental, and social well-being through environments and programs that encourage active, healthy lifestyles.

Excellence

Maintaining high standards in facility care, customer service, programming, and operations.

Collaboration

Working with partners including UW-Whitewater, WUSD, service clubs, and community organizations to expand capacity and achieve shared goals.

3. STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

The Strategic Initiatives translate community priorities and system needs into five focus areas. Each initiative includes a background summary, recommendations, and measures of success.

Strategic Initiative 1: Parks, Facilities, and Natural Resources

Goal

Maintain, modernize, and enhance Whitewater's parks, facilities, and natural resources to provide safe, accessible, and high-quality experiences for all users.

Background

Whitewater's parks, lakefronts, trails, and natural areas are essential public assets that support recreation, social interaction, and environmental health. Much of the system's infrastructure has reached or exceeded its intended lifespan and requires reinvestment. Community input emphasizes the need for improved accessibility, modernization of facilities, and environmental restoration, particularly within lakes and natural areas.

Recommendations

- Replace aging playgrounds with inclusive and accessible designs
- Modernize restrooms, shelters, courts, lighting, and other amenities
- Improve ADA accessibility through updated pathways, surfacing, and parking
- Expand natural shade, tree canopy, and landscaped areas
- Strengthen lake and natural area restoration efforts
- Implement asset management tools for maintenance planning
- Improve safety through lighting, signage, and wayfinding
- Use resilient, sustainable design practices in capital projects

Measures of Success

- Improved accessibility across high-use parks
- Reduced maintenance backlog

- Completion of identified capital projects within the plan timeframe
- Increased user satisfaction
- Improved Lake and natural area health metrics

Strategic Initiative 2: Community Engagement, Communications, and Partnerships

Goal

Strengthen engagement, improve communication, and expand partnerships to increase awareness, inclusivity, and participation.

Background

Whitewater's diverse population requires intentional communication strategies to ensure all residents are aware of available opportunities. Survey results revealed gaps in awareness among certain groups. Partnerships with community organizations, UW-Whitewater, and WUSD offer opportunities to expand programming and extend outreach.

Recommendations

- Develop a consistent communication strategy
- Provide multilingual materials, including Spanish
- Expand digital and print outreach methods
- Participate in community events to strengthen direct engagement
- Establish a community ambassador network
- Collaborate with local institutions, nonprofits, and service clubs
- Promote parks and recreation as essential public services

Measures of Success

- Increased awareness of programs and facilities
- Expanded partnerships and volunteer engagement
- Improved participation among underserved groups
- Stronger communication metrics and survey feedback

Strategic Initiative 3: Programs, Services, and Inclusivity

Goal

Offer diverse, inclusive, and high-quality programs that reflect the needs and interests of residents.

Background

Residents expressed interest in expanded programming, including arts and culture, fitness, nature-based recreation, senior activities, teen engagement, and multicultural events. Programs should be responsive to demographic trends and support accessibility, affordability, and cultural representation.

Recommendations

- Expand arts, culture, and creative programs

- Increase fitness and wellness offerings
- Strengthen senior programs and services
- Provide bilingual and multicultural programming
- Expand intergenerational and family programs
- Develop nature-based recreation and environmental education
- Explore new opportunities for teens and young adults
- Evaluate program accessibility and affordability
- Use participation and evaluation data for planning

Measures of Success

- Increased participation and satisfaction across age groups
- Growth in multicultural and bilingual program attendance
- Improved program diversity
- Greater engagement across demographics

Strategic Initiative 4: Organizational Excellence and Staff Development

Goal

Strengthen internal operations, staffing, and communication to enhance service delivery and long-term departmental effectiveness.

Background

The success of the parks and recreation system depends on skilled and supported staff. Operational demands, seasonal labor shortages, and aging facilities increase pressure on existing staff. Strengthening internal systems, communication, and training will improve efficiency and service quality.

Recommendations

- Standardize onboarding for all staff
- Provide ongoing training and certification opportunities
- Improve internal communication processes
- Implement cross-training to improve flexibility
- Evaluate staffing levels to meet operational and program demands
- Strengthen coordination with Public Works and Forestry
- Support leadership development and recognition programs
- Use technology to improve workflows and maintenance tracking
- Encourage all full-time exempt Parks and Recreation staff to obtain and maintain the Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP) credential, or an equivalent nationally recognized parks and recreation certification
- The City should support certification attainment through professional development resources, exam preparation assistance, and reasonable timelines for completion. Establishing CPRP certification as a professional standard will promote consistency, risk management, ethical practice, and leadership development across the department

Measures of Success

- Improved staff retention and satisfaction

- Increased training participation
- Better coordination between divisions
- Improved operational consistency
- Higher customer service satisfaction rates

Strategic Initiative 5: Financial Sustainability and Long-Range Planning

Goal

Strengthen the financial stability of the parks and recreation system through diversified funding, responsible asset management, and coordinated capital planning.

Background

Maintaining high-quality parks and recreation facilities requires sustained investment. Many identified capital needs require external funding. Strategic use of grants, sponsorships, partnerships, and long-range planning will support effective resource management.

Recommendations

- Align capital planning with Strategic Plan priorities
- Pursue grant funding from Stewardship, LWCF, TAP, and related sources
- Develop multi-year capital investment schedules
- Expand partnerships to share resources and funding
- Increase sponsorships and donations
- Strengthen financial reporting and communication
- Use asset management tools for life-cycle planning
- Review cost recovery strategies for sustainability and equity

Measures of Success

- Increased external funding through grants and partnerships
- Timely completion of capital projects
- Improved asset condition ratings
- Greater financial transparency
- Sustainable program and facility support

Priority Framework

Projects, programs, and recommendations identified in this Strategic Plan are assigned priority levels of High, Medium, or Low within the Implementation Matrix. Priority designations are intended to guide decision-making, budgeting, capital planning, and grant applications over the five-year planning period.

Priority levels were determined based on a combination of factors, including community input, safety and accessibility considerations, facility condition, regulatory requirements, operational capacity, cost implications, and alignment with City goals and adopted plans. Priority assignments reflect current conditions and available information at the time of plan adoption.

The Implementation Matrix is designed as a living document and will be reviewed and updated periodically to reflect completed projects, changing conditions, funding opportunities, and

emerging community needs. Adjustments to priority levels may occur through the City's annual budget and Capital Improvement Program processes without requiring amendments to this Strategic Plan.

Priority Level and Phasing Definitions

High Priority / Immediate (Years 1–2)

Projects or actions that address immediate needs related to safety, accessibility, regulatory compliance, critical infrastructure condition, or significant community demand. High-priority projects are intended to be actively pursued within the first two years of the planning period, subject to available funding and resources.

Medium Priority / Mid-Term (Years 3–4)

Projects or actions that support system improvement, program expansion, or long-term goals but do not address urgent or critical conditions. Medium-priority projects are anticipated to be pursued in the middle portion of the planning period as funding, partnerships, and operational capacity allow.

Low Priority / Long-Term (Year 5 and Beyond)

Projects or actions that represent future opportunities, enhancements, or aspirational improvements. Low-priority projects are not expected to be implemented in the immediate planning period but are identified to guide future planning, preserve long-term vision, and inform subsequent strategic updates.

4. APPENDICES

The Appendices provide contextual information supporting the Strategic Plan. They summarize system conditions, community input, planning considerations, and tools used to guide implementation.

Appendix A — Strategic Issues and Opportunities (SWOT Summary)

This appendix summarizes key strategic issues and opportunities identified through the planning process. The information reflects community survey results, Parks and Recreation Board input, staff analysis, park and facility condition assessments, lake management studies, accessibility evaluations, and review of existing adopted plans. Together, these inputs informed the development of the Strategic Initiatives and priorities outlined in this Strategic Plan.

Strengths

- A diverse system of parks, trails, lakefronts, natural areas, and recreation facilities that serve residents of all ages.
- Unique natural resources, including Cravath Lake and Trippe Lake, which provide both recreational and environmental value.
- A strong sense of community identity and high resident participation in parks, programs, and events.
- Dedicated Parks and Recreation staff and an engaged Parks and Recreation Board.

- Established partnerships with UW–Whitewater, the Whitewater Unified School District, service clubs, and community organizations.
- An adopted Open Space Plan that provides long-term vision and supports eligibility for state and federal funding programs.

Challenges

- Aging infrastructure requiring reinvestment, including restrooms, shelters, playgrounds, courts, roofs, and paved surfaces.
- Accessibility gaps that limit equitable use of some parks, playgrounds, and facilities.
- Ongoing maintenance demands that strain staff capacity and operational resources.
- Limited indoor recreation space for year-round programming and community use.
- Communication gaps that result in some residents being unaware of available programs and amenities.
- Environmental pressures affecting lakes and natural areas, including invasive species and stormwater impacts.

Opportunities

- Availability of grant funding programs to support park improvements, trails, accessibility upgrades, and environmental restoration.
- Growing interest in nature-based recreation, wellness activities, cultural programming, and intergenerational opportunities.
- Expanded collaboration with UW–Whitewater and local schools to serve students, families, and residents more effectively.
- Increased emphasis on equity, inclusion, and universal design in park planning and programming.
- Use of technology to improve communication, registration, asset management, and maintenance tracking.
- Community support for lake restoration, environmental stewardship, and sustainability initiatives.

Threats

- Rising costs for construction, materials, equipment, and staffing that impact project feasibility.
- Long-term funding constraints that limit the pace of capital reinvestment.
- Climate-related impacts affecting lakes, trees, and natural areas.
- Competition for limited grant funding and increased regulatory requirements.
- Workforce recruitment and retention challenges, particularly for seasonal and skilled positions.

Appendix B — Why Parks and Recreation Matter

Parks and recreation services are essential public services that contribute to the overall health, vitality, and sustainability of the City of Whitewater. The park system supports physical activity,

social connection, environmental stewardship, and economic vitality, while providing inclusive spaces and programs for residents of all ages and abilities.

Community Health and Well-Being

Parks and recreation facilities provide opportunities for physical activity, mental health benefits, and social interaction. Access to safe, well-maintained parks and programs supports active lifestyles, reduces barriers to participation, and contributes to improved public health outcomes.

Environmental Stewardship

Whitewater's parks, lakes, and natural areas play a critical role in protecting water quality, supporting wildlife habitat, and enhancing environmental resilience. Ongoing stewardship, restoration, and sustainable management practices help preserve these resources for current residents and future generations.

Economic and Neighborhood Value

Quality parks and recreation amenities enhance neighborhood desirability, support local businesses, and contribute to tourism and special events. Investments in parks and recreation can strengthen property values, attract residents and visitors, and support community economic development.

Community Identity and Lifelong Learning

Parks and recreation programs foster creativity, learning, cultural expression, and civic pride. Community events, recreational programs, and shared public spaces help strengthen social bonds and reinforce Whitewater's identity as an active and welcoming community.

Appendix C — Community Survey Summary

Community input was a critical component of the Strategic Plan development process. Feedback was gathered through surveys conducted as part of the Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan process and reinforced through Parks and Recreation Board discussions and staff review. The survey results provided insight into resident priorities, perceptions, and barriers related to parks, facilities, programs, and natural resources.

Survey responses reflected participation from residents across age groups, neighborhoods, and household types, including families, seniors, and students. While individual preferences varied, several consistent themes emerged that directly informed the Strategic Initiatives and Implementation Matrix.

Key Priorities Identified

Residents consistently identified the following priorities for parks and recreation investment:

- Improved accessibility, including pathways, surfacing, inclusive playground equipment, and ADA-compliant amenities
- Modernization of aging infrastructure such as restrooms, shelters, playgrounds, courts, and lighting
- Expanded trail connectivity and safer walking and biking routes between neighborhoods and parks
- Restoration and protection of lakes and natural areas, including shoreline stabilization and invasive species management
- Increased shade, seating, and comfort amenities in high-use parks
- Expanded recreation programming for seniors, families, teens, and culturally diverse populations
- Improved communication regarding available programs, events, and facilities

These priorities align directly with Strategic Initiatives related to facilities and natural resources, programming and inclusivity, community engagement, and financial sustainability.

Barriers to Participation

Survey respondents identified several barriers that limit use of parks and participation in programs:

- Limited awareness of programs and events
- Physical accessibility challenges in some parks and facilities
- Aging or outdated amenities that affect comfort and usability
- Limited indoor recreation opportunities during winter months
- Scheduling, transportation, or cost concerns for certain households

Addressing these barriers informed recommendations related to accessibility improvements, communication strategies, and program planning.

Program Interests

Residents expressed interest in a broad range of recreation and community activities, including:

- Arts, music, and cultural programming
- Fitness, wellness, and outdoor exercise opportunities
- Nature-based recreation and environmental education
- Intergenerational and family-focused activities
- Youth and teen enrichment programs
- Cultural celebrations and community events

These interests reinforce the need for flexible programming, strong partnerships, and inclusive program design.

Use of Survey Results

Survey findings were used to:

- Identify high-priority capital reinvestment needs
- Shape programming and service recommendations
- Support grant applications and funding strategies
- Inform accessibility and equity considerations
- Validate the prioritization framework used in the Implementation Matrix

The survey results provide ongoing value as a reference point for evaluating progress, adjusting priorities, and responding to changing community needs over time.

Appendix D — Implementation Matrix Overview

This Strategic Plan is supported by an Implementation Matrix, provided as a separate working document. The matrix translates the Strategic Initiatives and recommendations into specific actions and projects that can be tracked, prioritized, and updated over time.

The Implementation Matrix is intended to serve as the primary operational tool for guiding annual budgeting, capital planning, grant applications, and project coordination. It provides a clear connection between the Strategic Plan and the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP).

Matrix Components

The Implementation Matrix includes the following elements:

- Project or action descriptions organized by park, facility, or program area
- Alignment with the applicable Strategic Initiative
- Priority level and corresponding implementation phasing
- Estimated cost ranges based on current benchmarks
- Potential funding sources, including grants, partnerships, and capital funding
- Responsible departments and partners
- Notes regarding dependencies, permitting, regulatory requirements, and sequencing

Priority Levels and Phasing

Each project or action in the Implementation Matrix is assigned a priority level and corresponding implementation phase. Priority and phasing designations are aligned as follows:

- **High Priority / Immediate (Years 1–2)**
- **Medium Priority / Mid-Term (Years 3–4)**
- **Low Priority / Long-Term (Year 5 and Beyond)**

Priority levels reflect conditions at the time of plan adoption and are based on a combination of community input, safety and accessibility needs, facility condition, regulatory requirements, operational capacity, cost considerations, and alignment with City goals and adopted plans.

Use, Review, and Maintenance of the Matrix

The Implementation Matrix is intended to be a living document. It will be reviewed and updated regularly to reflect completed projects, changing conditions, funding opportunities, and evolving community needs.

The matrix may be reviewed annually by the Parks and Recreation Board as part of budget development, Capital Improvement Program updates, and ongoing planning discussions.

Updates to the Implementation Matrix, including adjustments to priority levels or implementation phasing, may occur through the City's annual budget process, Capital Improvement Program (CIP), and grant funding decisions. Inclusion of a project or action in the Implementation Matrix does not guarantee funding or implementation and does not require formal amendments to this Strategic Plan.

Appendix E — Maps and System Overview (Maps to be inserted in final document)

Maps and system data provide geographic context for the Strategic Plan and support informed decision-making related to park access, equity, land use, and long-term investment. The maps referenced in this appendix are included in the City of Whitewater Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan 2026–2031 and are incorporated by reference into this Strategic Plan.

System Overview

The City of Whitewater Park system includes neighborhood parks, community parks, lakefront areas, trails, natural areas, and recreational facilities distributed throughout the community. These assets serve a wide range of recreational, environmental, and community functions and vary in size, function, and level of development.

Maps Referenced

The following maps provide system-wide context and support implementation of this Strategic Plan:

- Citywide Park and open space system map
- Trail and bicycle network map
- Lake management and watershed boundaries
- Neighborhood service areas and walkability analysis
- Natural resource features and ecological classifications

Use of Maps

The maps referenced in this appendix support:

- Evaluation of equitable access to parks and recreation facilities
- Identification of service gaps and connectivity opportunities
- Prioritization of capital improvements and land acquisition

- Planning for trail expansion and multimodal transportation
- Coordination of environmental stewardship and lake management efforts

Together, these maps provide a spatial framework for implementing the Strategic Initiatives and maintaining alignment with the City's adopted Open Space Plan.

5. CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

The City of Whitewater Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan 2026–2031 establishes a clear direction for the next five years of investment in parks, recreation facilities, natural resources, and community programs. The plan reflects community priorities and provides a framework for decision-making, implementation, and accountability.

Whitewater's parks and recreation system plays a vital role in community identity, public health, and environmental sustainability. Continued investment, stewardship, and collaboration are essential to maintaining these benefits. Successful implementation will depend on coordinated efforts across City departments, partnerships with community organizations, and ongoing engagement with residents.

This Strategic Plan demonstrates the City's commitment to providing accessible, inclusive, and well-maintained parks and recreation services. By working together, Whitewater can continue to strengthen its parks, lakes, trails, and programs in ways that support a vibrant and connected community.