



*A Framework For*

# Recreation

*In Northwest Michigan*



**FRAMEWORK  
FOR OUR FUTURE**  
A REGIONAL PROSPERITY PLAN  
FOR NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

**2014 REPORT**

A *Framework for Recreation in Northwest Michigan* was prepared as part of the *Framework for Our Future: A Regional Prosperity Plan for Northwest Michigan*, a regional resource for local governments, community organizations working to meet local goals. The *Framework* was developed as part of Michigan's Regional Prosperity Initiative, as initiated by Governor Rick Snyder and signed into law as a part of the FY 2014 budget. The Regional Prosperity Initiative encourages local private, public, and non-profit partners to identify regionally aligned growth and investment strategies for the State of Michigan to support, not the other way around. It also provides the framework for streamlining state services and highlighting the regionally defined goals and strategies that will further Northwest Michigan's success.

The *Framework for Our Future* includes information and tools that can help stakeholders address issues such as housing, transportation, land use, energy, arts and culture, workforce and economic development, community health, food and farming systems, and natural resources. Data and information will help communities supplement their local deliberation,

planning, and decision-making processes, and will help to identify the steps a community can take to address a local issue, if desired.

The *Framework for Our Future* was developed by the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments (NWMCOG) with input and partnerships from a variety of community stakeholders and members of the public. An intensive community outreach process featured a wide variety of opportunities for participation from the public: events, surveys, focus groups, online forums, and public discussions were held region-wide throughout the process. Outreach activities and engagement opportunities included a series of community dialogues, interviews, and other events designed to obtain input from individuals with disabilities, minorities, youth, those in poverty, and others that have historically been underrepresented in planning processes. Public input was used to identify priority community issues and concerns, and to help develop goals, strategies, and actions.

The goals, strategies, and actions included in the *Framework* were built upon public input heard throughout the process, as well as on existing

and adopted goals from local plans and planning initiatives. Strategies are not intended as recommendations, nor do they supersede any local government decision-making. Moreover, the *Framework* is not intended for, nor shall it be used for, infringing upon or the taking of personal property rights enjoyed by the residents of Northwest Michigan. Rather, the information included in the *Framework* is instead intended to serve as a compilation of best practices to help guide local decision-makers who would like to address the issues identified in the *Framework*.



## FRAMEWORK FOR OUR FUTURE

A REGIONAL PROSPERITY PLAN  
FOR NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

Let Our Resources Work For You.



### In This Report

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>	Opportunities	14
Enhancing Economic Prosperity	4	What is a Recreation Plan?	15
<b>COMMUNITY NEEDS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>RECREATION &amp; THE ECONOMY</b>	<b>16</b>
Opportunities	6	Trail Towns	17
Accessibility & Universal Design	7	Opportunities	18
<b>RECREATION ASSETS</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST</b>	<b>19</b>
Water Trails	9	<b>FRAMEWORK STRATEGIES</b>	<b>21</b>
UpNorthTrails.org	10	Data, Education & Outreach	22
Opportunities	11	Planning & Policy	23
<b>RECREATION MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>11</b>	Financing & Incentives	24
Michigan Recreation	12	Development & Implementation	25
Grant Programs		<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>27</b>

## ➔ A Framework for Recreation: Introduction

Recreation and parks are a significant and integral player in Northwest Michigan's health, economy, and quality of life. Our parks, natural areas, trails, sports fields, and water access points provide opportunities for people to be social and active, greatly enhancing their health and quality of life. From small township parks to the nationally-renowned Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, Northwest Michigan's parks and recreation facilities set the stage for events and activities, provide access to the areas water, forests, and other natural resources, and attract visitors from throughout the state and country. These events and visitors have an enormous economic impact, bringing tourism dollars to our region and supporting thousands of recreation-related jobs.

Because of its impact on residents' quality of life, as well as the economy, the provision of safe, adequate recreation opportunities is an important community role. Many communities and stakeholders throughout the region are actively engaged in efforts to create open space, provide recreational opportunities, maintain a wide variety of parks and recreational facilities, and protect the region's land and water resources. Yet, local efforts to improve and enhance recreational facilities encounter a number of challenges and barriers:

- Developing and maintaining recreational facilities requires significant financial and operational commitments. Some communities struggle to maintain or update existing facilities, while others are unable to provide new recreation opportunities needed by their residents. While a number of state and other grant opportunities are available to communities, some communities lack the expertise or staff capacity to pursue or administer grant funding.



**Recreation in Northwest Michigan is an important part of the quality of life and economy of the region.**

- While recreation is an important asset that can draw visitors to a community and enhance quality of life, information on local parks and recreation facilities is often not available in easy-to-access formats, and many communities report that residents and visitors are unaware of what recreation opportunities exist locally.
- Many of the region's communities experience a major population increase in the summer months, and with it, increased pressure on local parks and recreation facilities. For communities with limited staff capacities and a small year-round population, it can be challenging to accommodate the recreation needs and demands of a large seasonal population.
- Recreation plans and related zoning policies are seldom developed in conjunction with neighboring communities, which hinders the ability of communities to work collaboratively on cross-jurisdictional issues like trails or water access.
- Recreational opportunities that are accessible to people with disabilities are limited. As the population ages, recreation needs will shift towards more passive forms of recreation, with an increased need for barrier-free and universally accessible recreation facilities.
- Recreation options for youth are important amenities that can help draw young families and individuals to a community; but small and rural communities often lack diverse recreation options for youth.

State and local agencies, local and county governments, local and regional nonprofits, friends groups, land conservancies, and others all work in creative and innovative ways to improve our recreation network.

Nonprofit groups provide significant support in advocacy, maintenance, operation, and fundraising in addition to actual construction of new trails. Area conservancies also play an important role in establishing nature preserves and helping local governments acquire property for parks and preserves. The State of Michigan, meanwhile, provides critical financial and technical support for the region's recreation network, by funding, operating, and maintaining parks, trails, forests, boat launches, campsites, and other facilities. And local governments

have tremendous responsibility in ensuring that recreational facilities are well-maintained, have adequate and accessible amenities, and that there are enough types of places for residents to visit.

*A Framework for Recreation in Northwest Michigan* identifies some of the various roles and potential activities for all these stakeholders as they work to ensure that our region remains a recognized leader in providing easily accessible opportunities for outdoor recreation while protecting our natural resources.

For instance, locally-developed recreation plans act as blueprints for the community's recreation goals, while also providing opportunities for funding from state programs. Partnerships between communities and other recreation stakeholders can help in developing interconnected land and water trail networks, while increasing access to parks and recreation information through websites, wayfinding, events, and promotional activities can raise awareness of existing facilities while bringing visitors to a community.

## Recreation: Enhancing Economic Prosperity

- Recreation opportunities help create the high quality of life that attracts both businesses and talent to a community.
- Much of the region's tourism, which forms an important part of the region's economy, is driven by recreation and recreational access to the region's natural resources.
- Recreation opportunities encourage physical activity, which helps residents improve their personal health.

## ➔ Recreation: Community Needs

A community's recreation needs depend on the age, income, and other needs of its residents. Northwest Michigan is undergoing important population shifts, which will impact its recreation needs and opportunities: seniors represent an important and growing segment of our region's population, necessitating new recreation facilities and features such as universal accessibility. At the same time, communities are increasingly looking to attract young families and individuals to stem the decline of younger populations region-wide, requiring a variety of recreation amenities that appeal to all ages.

### Age

The age of a community's residents is an important factor in determining recreation needs: facilities should accommodate the varying abilities and interests of residents at different stages of life.

Like the nation as a whole, Northwest Michigan is aging. However, because of its desirability as a retirement destination, the region is aging at a faster rate than the state or the nation. Northwest Michigan is home to nearly 53,000 adults aged 65 and over, comprising about 18% of the region's population. That number represents

an increase of about 26% between 2000-2010, compared to a 12% increase in that age group statewide.<sup>1</sup> Some of this growth reflects natural age increases, as the Baby Boomers begin to reach retirement age; while some growth can be accounted for by new residents that moved to the area following retirement.

These increases among the senior population constituted the majority of Northwest Michigan's population growth between 2000-2010. With fewer jobs available during the recession, many residents and their families left the area to find employment opportunities elsewhere, reflected

by a 23% decline in individuals aged 35-44. Because this age group is most likely to be part of a household with children at home, the region also experienced an 8% decline in the number of all individuals under the age of 18—despite overall regional growth of about 6%.<sup>2</sup>

These trends have significant impacts on recreation needs. As individuals age, needs increase for facilities that accommodate passive recreation such as walking. Barrier-free access to recreation is particularly important for an aging population, and the provision of barrier-free recreation will become an increasingly high priority as the population ages.

However, it's important to recognize that despite declining numbers of children and family households, households with children make up more than two-thirds (68%) of households in the region, and more than 20% of Northwest Michigan's population is below the age of 18. A focus on recreation facilities for the aging population in many communities thus leaves many residents' recreation needs unmet. Questionnaires and input from youth throughout the region identify a number of priorities for recreation that are often not addressed by the community. Skate parks, basketball courts, organized sports or other recreation programs, and even social opportunities or "third places" to simply meet friends are often not available, particularly in smaller communities and rural areas. Ensuring that the recreation needs of youth are addressed can make the community more attractive to families, helping to reverse the decline in younger populations, while improving opportunities for physical activity and social development among the region's children and adolescents.

## Community Health

Providing access for all residents to safe and enjoyable recreational facilities is important in ensuring a high quality of life and personal health, particularly as the nation, state, and region contend with rising

rates of obesity and associated chronic diseases such as diabetes. Obesity was identified as a top health concern among stakeholders throughout the region as part of community needs assessments, and was also identified as a priority issue in community dialogues conducted as part of the *Framework* process.<sup>3</sup> On average, about 30% of residents region-wide are obese; and a number of counties experience obesity rates that are higher than the statewide rate.<sup>4</sup> Obesity among those in poverty is of particular concern, as national studies show that those in poverty are more likely to experience obesity and related disease.<sup>5</sup>

## Accessibility

A disability is a medically definable condition that causes a limitation in one or more of a person's major life activities, such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, and thinking. Data on disability rates are not available region-wide, but information from the American Community Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau indicates that nearly 15%—nearly 42,000 people—of individuals in the Traverse City and Cadillac micropolitan areas have some form of disability.<sup>6</sup> Disability rates are higher among the American Indian and senior populations. And, because 50% of those aged 75 and older have a disability, disability needs will increase as the region's senior population continues to grow.

While Northwest Michigan offers a tremendous wealth of recreation opportunities, many of these opportunities—particularly outdoor recreation activities and natural areas—are not accessible to people with disabilities, meaning that a significant proportion of our region's most beloved assets can't be experienced by thousands of residents. The term "accessible" or "accessibility" refers to the ability of a wide range of people to easily access a facility. Accessibility needs in parks may include wheelchair ramps or paved trails, handrails, and assistive technology

such as swimming pool lifts.

Communities are required to comply with requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which provides minimum standards for accessibility, and many recreation plans region-wide identify compliance with ADA standards as a community goal. However, ADA standards are considered the "bare minimum" of what's required to provide access, and compliance with these standards does not ensure access for a wide range of people with disabilities. Some communities are instead striving for universal accessibility, which encourages spaces and facilities to be designed to be used by the widest range of people possible.

## Income

When planning for recreation, it is also important to ensure that activities and amenities in the community are within the financial means of the majority of residents.

In Northwest Michigan, 14,000 households (12%) are considered extremely low-income, which means they earn below \$20,000 annually; and another 45,000 households (37%) earn between \$20,000-\$35,000 annually.<sup>7</sup> Lower-income residents have greater challenges in accessing recreation: parks may be less prevalent or offer fewer amenities in low-income communities, which often have fewer public revenues that can be used to develop and maintain recreation facilities. In addition, the costs associated with a wide variety of recreation activities, such as biking, golfing, skiing, paddling, and even organized sports, can prevent many households or individuals from participating.

Because obesity is closely connected with lifestyle issues such as physical activity, higher rates of obesity and diabetes among those in poverty may, in part, reflect issues associated with recreation access and costs. While public recreation facilities are often available at low- or no-cost, many individuals are priced out of

recreation opportunities like fitness programs or facilities, or by the cost of equipment for participation in activities like biking or skiing.

## Seasonal Population

Northwest Michigan's recreation opportunities contribute to a significant seasonal population. Tourists and seasonal residents alike travel to the region for day trips, hotel stays, camping, or vacation homes to take advantage of the boating, biking, golfing, hiking, swimming, fishing, and hunting available in the region's forests, lakes, and open spaces.

A 2014 Northwest Michigan Seasonal Population Analysis, conducted by the Michigan State University Land

Policy Institute, found that the region's population grows by about 50,000 people during the summer months. The large influx of seasonal residents has a tremendous impact on the area's economy, and also on its recreation needs and opportunities. Activity at and demand for recreation facilities region-wide climbs dramatically, with boat launches, beaches, open spaces, and other outdoor facilities often experiencing large crowds. This increased activity brings added visitor spending at the region's businesses, but also comes with community costs in the form of added maintenance for trash removal, landscaping, and other activities. Transportation, too, is impacted, as traffic volumes increase and some parking lots overflow. With limited recreation budgets

and staff in many communities, some communities struggle to plan for, budget, and address seasonal usage patterns at local parks.

## Opportunities: Community Needs

Communities are some of the principal players in providing recreational access to the region's residents. When considering how best to provide this access, it's important to ensure that a range of facilities is offered both locally and regionally, in order to meet existing and future needs.

in park amenities and design. Communities and recreation providers should consider universal accessibility in the beginning of any park design or improvement process, while assessing existing facilities to determine where accessibility improvements are needed (see sidebar, next page).

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### **A first step is assessing and understanding what populations are being served, and how best to meet their recreation needs.**

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Because the characteristics of a community's residents form the foundation of local recreation needs, a first step in meeting recreation needs is assessing and understanding what populations are being served, and how best to meet their needs. Communities can use questionnaires or surveys to collect user data for parks, trails, beaches and other recreation areas to determine how, when, and by whom recreational facilities are being used, in order to plan for appropriate improvements, changes, or expansions. Public input obtained in recreation planning processes, online, or at regular meetings can also help to inform communities about local recreation needs.

Once recreation needs are established, there are a variety of opportunities and amenities that can be incorporated into local parks and recreation assets. As the population ages and the numbers of people with disabilities increase, universal design and other accessibility features will be increasingly important

In addition to recreation opportunities for seniors and the disabled, communities can work to provide diverse recreation opportunities that meet the needs of young people and families. Some communities work with nonprofit organizations and schools to provide and support recreational opportunities; and some work directly with student groups to identify priorities and implement improvements.

Additionally, because recreation opportunities encourage physical activity, which is a fundamental element of healthy lifestyles, communities should ensure that recreation opportunities are accessible and convenient to residents. The presence of parks in and near existing neighborhoods is important in providing convenient recreation access that can encourage physical activity; and linking parks to other uses, neighborhoods, or other parks, through trails or wayfinding, can also improve their accessibility and encourage use of parks.

# Accessibility & Universal Design

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in 1990, was designed to recognize and protect civil rights for people with disabilities by ensuring that they are not unfairly denied access to jobs, goods, or services due to their disability. ADA includes the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, which outlines accessibility requirements for buildings and facilities. Many communities view the ADA Accessibility Guidelines as standards to aim for when they are developing public spaces, buildings, or recreational facilities. However, the ADA standards actually describe the dimensions for what would be the least accessible facilities allowed by Federal law. Communities that build to the exact dimensions listed in the ADA specifications are only providing the absolute minimum in terms of accessibility. Communities can go beyond the minimum requirements by incorporating the principles of Universal Design during the initial planning phases.

Universal Design is a practice that designs products and spaces to be used by the widest range of people possible. Universal design recognizes that there is a wide spectrum of human abilities, accounting for childhood, temporary illnesses, disabilities, injuries, and old age. It considers the full range of human diversity, including physical, perceptual, and cognitive abilities, as well as different body sizes and shapes. It makes places more user-friendly for everyone: for instance, curb cuts at sidewalks help those in wheelchairs, those pushing strollers, and those with temporary injuries alike. As our population ages and more residents experience temporary or permanent disabilities, universal design features will become increasingly important.

Universal Design principles are priorities for both state and federal recreation agencies. The National Forest Service supports and includes Universal Design principles in designing their

programs and facilities. The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, meanwhile awards points on grant applications for development projects if they can demonstrate that some of the proposed facilities go beyond ADA requirements. More points are awarded if all proposed facilities go beyond ADA requirements.

Communities can support recreation accessibility and Universal Design in a number of ways:

- **Develop a recreation plan with goals and actions to enhance accessibility.**  
Ensure ADA guidelines are seen as minimums, rather than a goal to aspire to in park retrofits, new developments and design considerations. Include goals to incorporate Universal Design principles in park development and when upgrading existing amenities, as appropriate. In the recreation plan, rate the accessibility for each park or recreation site, and note where and how potential improvements can be made.
- **Plan for accessibility and Universal Design early in the planning and design process.**  
When submitting a request for proposals, communities can include a statement that the facility needs to be universally accessible. Also require that the design indicate how certain features go above and beyond the requirements of ADA accessibility standards. Include standards and conduct accessibility reviews before planning new developments or upgrades
- **Incorporate Universal Design into park upgrades, amenities, and signage.**  
Aim for 100% accessible furniture and fixtures rather than merely meeting the minimum. When replacing signage, provide audio media, high contrast lettering and appropriate sized fonts.

## NUMBER OF PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES



*Data from field analysis by the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments, 2013. Data include public parks, boat launches, and marinas, but do not include undeveloped/road end water access sites*

Northwest Michigan has a tremendous variety of recreation for all seasons. Hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, downhill and cross-country skiing, swimming, boating, and many more activities are available in the region's forests, open spaces, rivers, lakes, and neighborhoods. In addition to these outdoor activities, residents can use the region's many parks and recreation facilities for swimming, ice skating, physical fitness, and organized sports.

### Active Parks

Active parks generally include areas developed to accommodate certain specific activities, areas developed for a relatively narrow range of uses, or areas with higher traffic and visitor counts. They often have artificial lighting and/or sound equipment, paved pathways for walking and jogging, water and flush toilets, and/ or have a prepared surface such as a golf course, baseball field, or tennis court.

Active parks provide opportunities for residents and visitors to be physically active through constructed facilities

as well as by providing programs. Programs can be structured around the facilities offered on site, such as a walking group or a youth softball league. Active parks might include facilities to support higher traffic or events like an outdoor theater, neighborhood park with playground equipment, or athletic fields. Active parks also include civic centers that provide for indoor activities or facilities including pools, ice rinks, basketball courts, and fitness centers.

### Passive Parks

Passive parks, including natural areas and open space, are public areas with little to no improvements for specific uses. These areas remain in more of a natural state and allow for multiple, less restricted uses. Examples include bird watching, picnicking, hiking, cross-country skiing, hunting and fishing.

Despite their simplicity, passive parks are important placemaking elements. They provide space for residents and visitors to congregate in an unstructured way, offering opportunities for social interaction and community

engagement. In cities and villages, these passive parks are increasingly used for community events, concerts, fairs, and festivals that often attract crowds of thousands, increasing the visibility of the community's amenities and drawing customers to support local businesses. Northwest Michigan is home to dozens of community festivals that take place in these passive parks.

### Natural Areas & Nature Preserves

Natural areas and open space are similar to passive parks in that they provide unstructured recreational opportunities; however, they are specifically intended to protect certain unique areas, land formations or habitat. Natural areas achieve these natural resource preservation goals while also providing for public access and recreation. Nature preserves, on the other hand, are protected areas that are primarily intended to provide spaces for wildlife and plant species and/or protect unique areas. Public access is generally restricted or not permitted.

Recreation access is available at natural areas managed by nonprofits, local and county governments, the State of Michigan, and federal agencies throughout the region, highlighting Northwest Michigan's majestic natural resources and tremendous scenic beauty of its rivers, lakes, forests, and dunes:

- **Natural Rivers** » The Jordan, Boardman, Manistee, Pine, and Betsie Rivers are designated Natural Rivers through the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' Natural Rivers Program. The program is intended to protect, preserve and enhance the natural qualities of the river. Public access for recreational activities such as paddling, boating and fishing is a primary focus area of the program.
- **Lakes** » In addition to 440 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, Northwest Michigan features approximately 1,280 lakes that are one acre or more in size. Beaches, parks, boat launches, harbors and marinas are available both along the Lake Michigan shoreline and on inland lakes, providing public access for swimming, boating, sailing, canoeing and kayaking, and fishing, as well as educational activities. Water access points are managed and provided by a variety of partners, including local and county governments, the State of Michigan, the National Park Service, and regional land conservancies.
- **Forested land** » The majority of our region's land cover remains forested land. According to the 2000 Census, total forest area in the region covered 2,063,300 acres. The largest contiguous sections of forest are under State and Federal ownership in the Pere Marquette State Forest and the Manistee portion of the Manistee-Huron National Forest. The Huron-Manistee National Forest's northern reaches extend into Manistee and Wexford



## Water Trails

Several water trails are being developed across the region to link existing water access sites in a way similar to land trails. Water trails provide opportunities for canoes and kayaks to navigate inland lakes and rivers as well as the Lake Michigan shoreline. The Lake Michigan Water Trail, developed with funding from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's Coastal Zone Management Program, has cataloged nearly 200 public access sites along the entire Lake Michigan. Several inland water trails are also being developed to highlight public access from the Boardman River in Grand Traverse County, to the Chain of Lakes trail in Antrim County, to the Inland Waterway which starts in Emmet County near Petoskey and ends in Lake Huron near Cheboygan.

Counties and cover about 317,000 acres in the region.

### Trails

Trails are pathways that are used recreationally or for transportation by a variety of users, including bicyclists, horseback riders, snowmobilers, or hikers.

The region boasts over 2,500 miles of motorized and non-motorized trails. Motorized trails include those that were designed to accommodate motorcycles, ORVs, or snowmobiles, while hiking, biking, horseback riding and snowshoeing are among uses permitted on non-motorized trails. Multi-use trails are those designed to accommodate multiple user types simultaneously, such as pedestrians and cyclists. Other trails might be designed and designated for certain uses, such as hiking trails, a bike path, or snowmobile or ORV route.

Trail facilities provide a unique opportunity to combine physical activity with transportation, linking destinations while providing alternatives to motorized transportation. Close, convenient and connected trail networks encourage physical activity, with benefits in

community health. In addition, trails have been found to have significant economic impacts, generating tourism and visitor spending in retail sales, hotel stays, and restaurant visits. Snowmobilers, ORV riders, and mountain bikers—many of whom travel to the region specifically for access to trails—contribute substantially to local and regional economic activity. Additionally, trails are a top community amenity sought by prospective homeowners: a National Association of Homebuilders study found that trails are the second most important community amenity that potential homeowners cite when choosing a new community; and “trail availability” outranked 16 other options for desired amenities including security, ball fields, golf courses, parks, and access to shopping or business centers.<sup>8</sup>

Because trails are an important and desired quality of life amenity that can enhance the recreation opportunities and sense of place that draw new residents—particularly the skilled workforce that drives new economic activity—to a community, trail development and connections between existing trails are increasingly recognized as important economic strategies. Yet, because trail development, by

its nature, often crosses government boundaries, the process of planning and implementing trail routes and connections can encounter procedural barriers and political difficulties. Additionally, trail ownership is often divided among various agencies: portions may be managed by the State of Michigan, others might be maintained by nonprofit organizations, while still others are owned and maintained by local units of government. Increasing the complexity of trail management is the variety of user groups engaged in their use and maintenance: while many trail uses are compatible, some activities may preclude the use of the trails for other activities. For instance, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling have starkly different trail needs; and motorized trails that accommodate ORVs may not be safe for hikers.

### Water Access

Water access forms an integral part of the identity and economy of northwest Michigan. In 2010, 812,066 boats were registered in the State of Michigan; the third highest number of boats registered in the nation behind Minnesota and Florida.<sup>9</sup> In addition to beaches and other public access sites at many of the region's nearly 1300 inland lakes, Northwest Michigan also features 17 harbors and marinas, 161 public boat launches, and over 180 public access sites to Lake Michigan.

Access to the region's inland lakes is often provided by a local unit of government, which may support or maintain a small beach, boat launch, or road end. In some cases, as in the case of private marinas, access may be managed or provided by a for-profit entity. However, many smaller lakes, along with some of the region's largest inland lakes, including Torch Lake, Glen Lake, Lake Leelanau, and Crystal Lake, are largely surrounded by private year-round and vacation homes which limit public access.

# UpNorthTrails.org

The Up North Trails Collaborative is a coalition of 53 organizations in Northern Michigan that are working toward the goal of promoting all trail systems together for all trail users. The coalition is led by the Top of Michigan Trails Council, Northeast Michigan Council of Governments, Northwest Michigan Council of Governments, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Land Information Access Association, Traverse Area Recreational Trails (TART), the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, and Cheboygan County, with funding from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), Rotary Charities, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Up North Trails Collaborative has developed a comprehensive, interactive website that provides information, photos, and routes for over 5,300 miles of trails in northern lower Michigan. The website is available online at [www.upnorthtrails.org](http://www.upnorthtrails.org).



### State & Federal Recreation Facilities

Northwest Michigan includes significant acreage managed for recreation by state and federal government agencies, including the National Park Service, US Forest Service, and Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The Huron-Manistee National Forest covers about 317,000 acres in Manistee and Wexford counties. These areas provide for rustic and improved camping, hunting, fishing, hiking trails, public access to rivers and lakes for kayaking and canoeing, and opportunities for wildlife and bird watching.

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, managed by the National Park Service, extends 35 miles along Lake Michigan's shoreline and covers over 50,000 acres—including two Lake Michigan islands—in Leelanau and Benzie Counties. Its amenities include historic resources—such as lighthouses, three former Coast Guard stations, and the Port Oneida

and Glen Haven Historic Districts—along with outstanding unique natural resources, including forests, beaches, dune formations, and ancient glacial phenomena. Its spectacular views and natural beauty are among the nation's finest: in 2011, the park won the title of "the Most Beautiful Place in America" from the television program *Good Morning America*. Activities at the park include hiking, swimming, camping, fishing, boating, bird and wildlife viewing, and stargazing. The park receives, on average, about 1.2 million visitors per year, which create an enormous economic impact for businesses in and around the park boundaries. A 2012 National Park Service study indicates that national parks account for \$31 billion in spending annually and over 250,000 jobs nationwide.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to federal recreation and natural resource lands, the State of Michigan operates dozens of boat launches, campgrounds, and other recreational facilities throughout the region.

# Opportunities: Recreation Assets

Recreation facilities are owned and managed by nearly every type of community stakeholder: private business, public agencies, nonprofits, and even volunteer groups made of dedicated individuals. Understanding the breadth of existing recreation opportunities and needs, therefore, requires a comprehensive recreation inventory with

For instance, communities with few opportunities for public water access may consider purchasing waterfront real estate that offers opportunities for swimming or boat access; while others may identify linkages between existing trail systems to encourage tourism or physical activity. Because property acquisition for recreation purposes is

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## Communities may wish to partner with other organizations that offer expertise and support in acquiring property for recreation purposes.

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information and participation from all players. To ensure that recreation assets meet existing and future needs, communities can play an important role by participating in or conducting inventories of both regional and local recreation assets that identify their amenities, condition, activities, management, and other characteristics.

Once community recreation needs are identified, communities work with partners and the public to identify activities, properties, or programs that meet local needs.

often a complex process requiring significant fundraising efforts, communities may wish to partner with other organizations that can provide expertise and support. Nonprofit groups such as regional land conservancies and trail organizations often provide technical assistance in developing fundraising strategies, submitting grant applications, and managing the acquisition of the property.

## ➔ Recreation Management: Park Planning, Budgeting, & Improvements

Administration, maintenance, funding, and other management activities associated with recreation require commitment and expertise from a variety of stakeholders—including the public, local officials, funders, and nonprofits.

### Maintenance & Management

Park and recreation maintenance involves a variety of activities that ensure the functionality, safety, and sustainability of a community's recreation facilities. It might include regular landscaping activities, repairs or replacement to equipment or facilities, structural improvements, or the addition of new park amenities.

In addition, the region's parks and recreation opportunities are often

located in areas that include unique and valuable natural resources. Ensuring the long-term, sustainable quality of these natural resources is an important park management activity. Invasive species and other biological issues, such as beech bark disease and Emerald Ash Borer impacts on forests, present real and serious threats to regional ecosystems; and maintenance and management activities in natural areas typically include efforts to address invasive species.

Park maintenance and upkeep is often the most significant activity involved in local park administration, requiring a long-term community commitment. While the acquisition and development of new parks is a lengthy, complex process, involving significant

fundraising efforts, once it's acquired, it must be managed and maintained in perpetuity. These are costs that may or may not be adequately planned for in the acquisition process; and major improvements on top of regular maintenance may be difficult for communities to fund.

### Park Administration, Staffing & Governance

Most communities are served by recreation committees, often made up of elected board members, planning commissioners, and the general public, that oversee the management and improvement of local parks. They make recommendations on recreation budgets, develop and adopt recreation plans, and oversee park

maintenance and improvements. They are critical in ensuring that recreation is a community priority, and that recreation needs are being met.

Many communities employ at least one full-time staff person that performs or oversees the majority of park maintenance activities. These full-time staff are often assisted by seasonal part-time employees or volunteers during the summer months, when maintenance needs increase. However, apart from maintenance staff, there are rarely dedicated staff that manage recreation assets or address longer-term recreation needs. Recreation-related management activities are often rolled into other

positions, such as the community's manager or planner positions, where recreation is one of many administrative activities. This means that, despite the importance of recreation to a community's quality of life and economy, activities such as planning for, promoting, and coordinating recreation activities are rarely a focus of activity.

### Local Funding

Recreation costs may include the acquisition of land for new parks; improvements to existing parks; and the maintenance and upkeep of existing parks. Growth and investment areas within Northwest Michigan spent a

total of over \$10 million on recreation-related expenses in 2013, an average of about \$650,000 annually, accounting for about 10% of an average growth and investment community budget.

Because financial resources in many of the region's communities—which are often small and rural in nature—are limited, recreation expenses may be financed by a number of sources or techniques, and often require outside support from community partners such as nonprofits, volunteers, or community foundations. Some communities also work to develop local funding sources through taxes or bonds that can specifically support recreation activities:

## Michigan Recreation Grant Programs

### **Land and Water Conservation Fund**

The Land and Water Conservation Fund is a federal program with pass through funds available from the MDNR. Applicants must have a DNR-approved recreation plan on file with the MDNR to be eligible for recreation grants. Projects must also be consistent with the content of the Michigan Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) to be eligible for funding. A 50% local match is required.

### **Recreation Passport**

The Recreation Passport program is a reimbursable grant program with funds derived from the sale of Recreation Passports for entrance into state parks, recreation areas and boating access sites. The primary focus of the program is to support public recreation opportunities or facilities and infrastructure to support public recreation activity. Grants are available for local development projects only with a focus on renovating and improving existing parks. Eligible projects must be included in a current annual Capital Improvement Plan or

current DNR-approved recreation plan. Facilities must be ADA compliant. A 25% match is required.

### **Coastal Zone Management**

Through the Coastal Zone Management program, grants are passed each year to local communities and non-profit organizations located on the Great Lakes shoreline for a variety of projects. Communities along the Lake Michigan shoreline in Emmet, Charlevoix, Antrim, Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Benzie and Manistee Counties may be eligible for grant funding.

### **Waterways Program Fund**

The Waterways Program grants are funded from marine fuel tax and water craft registrations. The program provides funding assistance for land acquisition, the design and construction of public harbors, marinas and boating access sites or launch facilities. Starting in 2015 the program will require a recreation plan to be submitted with the grant application. A match greater than 50% may receive priority.

- **Recreation Millage** » Some communities in the region have approved increases in property taxes to support recreation. Recreation millages have been posed as ballot questions in communities throughout the region, including in Antrim, Grand Traverse, Leelanau, and Wexford counties. Wexford County historically used a recreation millage to fund a local grant program, in which local units of government within the County could apply for funds for specific recreation projects. Several townships, including Acme, Long Lake, and Peninsula Townships, have approved recreation millages to purchase specific properties for use as parks or natural areas.

- **Bonds** » Bonds are a form of debt issued by a local government; and recreation bonds are occasionally used to support specific recreation projects. For instance, a joint venture between the City of Traverse City and Garfield Township created the Recreation Authority of Traverse City and Garfield Township. In 2004 a bond was approved to acquire wildlife habitat and open space.

- **Grants & Endowments** » Because local recreation budgets primarily cover maintenance and regular upkeep expenses at parks, major improvements or new park additions often require outside support from grants or donations from individuals, community foundations, and regional, state, and federal agencies. An endowment is a restricted fund that is made up of gifts and bequests that create a source of income for a specific organization, use, or purpose. An endowment requires that the endowment principal remains intact in perpetuity, for a defined period of time, or until sufficient assets have been accumulated to achieve a designated purpose: only the interest from the fund can be spent, not the principal that anchors the endowment. Usually,



Northwest Michigan's many beaches are enjoyed by local residents, seasonal residents, and visitors.

only a portion of the interest or earnings from the endowment are spent on an annual basis in order to assure that the original funds will grow over time. Professional money managers often oversee endowment funds, investing the money in stocks, bonds, and other instruments. Many community foundations use endowment funds to support recreational activities and facilities across the region, including the Grand Traverse Regional Community Foundation, the Charlevoix County Community Foundation, the Petoskey-Harbor Springs Community Foundation, and the Manistee County Community Foundation.

Grants from philanthropies and public agencies are an important source of funding, particularly for park acquisitions and major improvements. A variety of grants are available for recreation (see sidebar, page 12), but one significant source of grant funding for communities in Michigan is the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF), which was

established as the Michigan Land Trust Fund in 1976. Funds accrued from oil, gas and mineral leases and royalties from their extraction on State lands are placed into the Trust Fund. Each year grant awards are made to state agencies and local governments from interest on the more than \$500 million in the fund. Grants funds are awarded in two categories: development projects and acquisition projects. Since the fund was established, over \$135 million has been awarded to projects in Northwest Michigan. To be eligible for MNRTF grants, a local government must have an approved recreation plan on file with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

## Volunteers

Volunteer groups can help make the most of limited budgets, particularly for regular maintenance needs; and Northwest Michigan is served by countless dedicated individuals that donate their time and resources to improving the region's

natural environment and recreation opportunities. The Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore alone sees 29,595 volunteer hours from 850 individuals that together invest over \$650,000 worth of time and talent in the park.<sup>11</sup> In addition, scouting and other service groups often partner with many communities to address specific maintenance or park improvement needs. Other communities work with their sheriff's departments to obtain assistance from jail crews to perform some maintenance and improvement activities. The Northwest Michigan Invasive Species Network, a group made up of natural resources organizations and driven largely by volunteer labor, works with communities throughout the

region to mitigate the impacts of invasive species in natural areas.

### Recreation Planning

Recreation plans help a community plan for and prioritize recreation needs and improvements. They identify community vision and goals for recreation improvements, and outline specific actions to take to meet needs. Public input opportunities in the recreation planning process provide for two-way communication between the public and officials about community recreation needs; and data and public input help communities to assess population trends and specific park needs. Prioritizing these needs helps a community budget for improvements

and identify opportunities for partnerships, volunteer assistance, and grant funding.

Recreation plans can also aid communities in accessing state recreation grants: a 5-year recreation plan that is approved by the DNR renders the community eligible to apply for Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grants (see sidebar, page 12). Recreation plans also help in other grant applications, by demonstrating community need and consensus. As of February 2014, 42 communities in the region have current, approved 5-year recreation plans enabling them to access these grant sources.

## Opportunities: Recreation Management

Communities can best position themselves to manage and fund through recreation planning. Recreation plans create eligibility for grants from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, and also help communities determine specific recreation needs and priorities, which in turn helps them to budget effectively. In addition to community-wide

and in trail maintenance; and many "friends of" groups exist across the region to support maintaining, promoting, and advocating for recreation systems. Other potential partners could be found in the public school system, library, scout troop or civic groups in the community. An "Adopt-a-Park" program with these groups can focus their

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### **Partnerships with nonprofits are critical in developing a volunteer base that can aid in maintenance and other management activities.**

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recreation plans, some communities develop management plans for specific parks, to guide future activities and improvements. A management plan relies on public input to identify desired activities and amenities for the park, and provides a detailed action plan for implementation. Management plans can help communities prepare for long-term maintenance needs, expenses, and activities.

Partnerships are important in maintaining and managing recreational facilities. Local and regional conservancies have acted as tremendous partners in preserving natural areas and providing for public recreation access, by assisting with complex fundraising and property acquisition processes. Partnerships with nonprofits are also critical in developing a volunteer base that can aid in maintenance and other management activities. For instance, regional trail groups help both in fundraising

activities throughout the year in certain areas if needed, or agreements can be drawn up for groups to perform certain activities across many properties to ensure that maintenance issues are prevented and facilities remain in a safe and usable condition. Scouting organizations, as well, provide structured volunteer participation that can address specific needs, such as removing invasive plants, park clean-ups, planting trees, clearing shrubs along trails, refurbishing park benches, or trash maintenance.

Volunteer participation is also critical in addressing invasive species and other biological threats to the natural environments that make up many of the region's recreation facilities. Forestry management plans can also aid in ensuring that these threats are addressed in a cohesive manner, while allowing for the profitable and sustainable harvest of timber in some areas.

# What is a Recreation Plan?

Through its recreation grants program, currently funded through the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) provides financial assistance to communities that would like to purchase land for parks or are planning to improve or develop recreation facilities. To be eligible to apply for these grant programs, a community must adopt a five-year recreation plan, which must subsequently be approved by the DNR. To be approved by the DNR, a recreation plan must include certain components and follow certain procedures:

## **Community Description and Planning Considerations**

Describe the community, as well as the context of the recreation plan, and the extent of the plan focus.

## **Administrative Structure**

Describes how park and recreation functions are carried out, and includes descriptions of relevant boards, committees, and staff, as well as budget information, relationships with other agencies engaged in recreation, and volunteers.

## **Recreation and Resource Inventory**

Identify parks and recreation areas owned or operated by the community. The section should include maps, descriptions, accessibility assessments, and information on any grants received for recreation purposes from the DNR.

## **Description of the planning and public input process**

As with any planning process, public input is a vital piece of the recreation plan. The DNR requires that public input must be solicited by at least two means. The first public input opportunity should take place before or during the preparation of the plan. It could occur at public meetings, community workshops, open houses, focus groups, or questionnaires. The second method is an advertised public meeting held as part of the meeting at which the plan is presented for adoption.

The recreation plan should include a description of how obtained public input, and how that input was incorporated into the planning process and the plan itself.

## **Goals and objectives**

Recreation plan goals and objectives are based on consideration of community needs and demographics, public input, and other community factors.

## **Action program**

The action program identifies how the community intends to meet goals and objectives over the next five years. Specific projects should be described.

Detailed guidance, submittal forms and checklists, and other information is available from the MDNR's Guidelines for the Development of Community Park, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plans, which is available online at [www.michigan.gov/dnr-grants](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr-grants).

## ➔ Recreation & the Economy

Recreation and parks contribute millions of dollars to the region's economy annually, employing thousands of residents, generating tourism, capturing visitor spending, and supporting related economic activity. In addition to direct dollars in the economy, recreation acts as one of the region's most important and recognized quality of life assets, which draws millions of visitors annually and attracts both new residents and visitors.

### Tourism & Economic Impact

The Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation sector supports more than 200 establishments in the region with an annual payroll of more than \$61.5 million, and employs over 2100 residents in the ten counties of northwest Michigan.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to direct dollars and jobs, recreation has an enormous indirect economic impact, forming the foundation of the region's renowned and thriving tourist economy. Visitors who come to Northwest Michigan for recreation spend dollars on hotels, restaurants, and related expenses, supporting related jobs and additional economic activity. While data isn't available to identify the indirect economic impacts of recreation in Northwest Michigan, state and national studies highlight the impact of specific recreation activities and parks. For instance, Michigan state

parks saw more than 1 million camp nights in 2012, which equates to nearly \$687.7 million dollars in trip related expenses. Most (72%) of this spending is captured within 20 miles of the park, so local businesses directly benefit from visitors to these parks.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore alone contributed more than \$130 million in total visitor spending to the region's economy. Further, in addition to the 46 year-round and 87 seasonal jobs provided by the National Lakeshore, visitor spending at the park supported an additional 2,288 jobs locally.<sup>14</sup>

### Environmental Economic Impact

Recreation facilities are often part of larger, interconnected areas of green infrastructure. These undeveloped green spaces – including forestland, wetlands, and open space, some or all of which may provide public recreation access – come with a number of environmental and economic benefits. Natural areas provide ecosystem services like storm water management, waste treatment, water supply, and wildlife habitat and refuge, as well as production value in terms of food and resources. By maintaining natural areas, communities are saved the expense of providing these ecosystem services through expensive construction projects or equipment. In areas that are more developed,

green infrastructure helps to save money by mimicking these natural processes. A number of national studies show a significant financial benefit provided by undeveloped areas. When expressed in value per acre, grassland provides \$61 worth of services, shrub land provides \$660 worth of services, forests provide \$1,014 per acre and wetlands provide \$10,608.43 in services per acre.<sup>15</sup> Studies have also shown that proximity to green infrastructure increases the value of nearby real estate. Greenway spaces like biking and hiking trails are often seen as more valued amenities by residents than even golf courses or swimming pools. Additionally, the larger the park, the greater the positive impact on neighboring property values.<sup>16</sup>

### Talent Attraction

In addition to direct economic impacts, a variety of recreation facilities for all ages is needed to attract younger families and individuals to the region, which in turn enhances the region's economic competitiveness. In today's knowledge-based economy, the presence of a skilled, knowledgeable, and educated workforce is critical in attracting new business, entrepreneurial activity, and subsequent economic growth. Studies have consistently shown that the educated and skilled workforce that's needed in today's economy choose to relocate in communities with a high

213

ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, AND RECREATION **ESTABLISHMENTS** IN NORTHWEST MICHIGAN

2,148

RESIDENTS **EMPLOYED** IN NORTHWEST MICHIGAN'S ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, AND RECREATION SECTOR

\$111,337,519

**ANNUAL EARNINGS** FROM NORTHWEST MICHIGAN'S ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, AND RECREATION SECTOR

Source: EMSI, 2014

quality of life and plentiful recreation opportunities. Providing recreation access that meets the needs of a wide variety of ages and abilities is critical in attracting these skilled workers.

Northwest Michigan's outdoor recreation assets are unsurpassed in the State of Michigan. A high-quality natural environment provides for a wealth of hiking, biking, swimming, boating, and other activities that contribute to a high quality of life; and the region is recognized statewide for these recreation activities. Indeed,

Northwest Michigan is emblematic of the outdoor experiences promoted by the highly-successful Pure Michigan advertising campaign.

Yet, the sheer volume of recreation opportunities available at the local level creates difficulties in effective marketing and promotion. While visitors bureaus promote recreation opportunities in specific communities region wide, the region lacks a cohesive regional branding or marketing approach. Marketing regional or even local

assets is complicated by the variety of recreation providers—including units of government, nonprofits, public agencies, and others—that provide recreation opportunities. Many communities and agencies operate with limited staff and budgets, and can struggle even to maintain their assets, let alone market or promote them.

## Trail Towns

Trails provide a myriad of public benefits: they help to encourage healthy lifestyles and active living; they preserve the natural environment by protecting human and wildlife corridors and reducing air pollution; and they can foster a strong sense of community and place, providing opportunities for social interaction and linking community amenities like parks and schools. Communities can use their local and regional trail systems to maximize trail-based tourism and future economic development opportunities by branding themselves as “Trail Towns.”

A Trail Town, as defined by the Allegheny Trail Alliance, is a destination along a long-distance trail. In Trail Towns, which are located along or near long-distance trails, trail users can leave the trail to visit the businesses, scenery, services, and other amenities of the nearby community either by foot or vehicle. Trails are integral and important parts of Trail Towns, which are often linked together by the trail itself. These networks of trail-focused communities create regional destinations that are active, attractive, and interesting places with accessible and comfortable spaces, hosting a variety of activities and services that meet the needs of both trail users and the residents of the community. A Trail Town has the physical amenities



that support trail users, such as drinking fountains, along with business amenities to support both day-trip and overnight trail users, such as bike shops, outfitters, hotels, restaurants, and laundry services.

The Land Information Access Association has developed a manual for communities that would like to market their communities as a Trail Town concept. *Trail Towns: Capturing Trail-Based Tourism – A Manual for Communities in Northern Michigan* is available online at [www.liaa.org](http://www.liaa.org).

# Opportunities: Recreation & the Economy

Improving and enhancing recreation opportunities can grow tourism, attract new residents, and increase investment in the region. Communities have important roles to play in recreation improvements that meet residents' needs while generating additional economic activity.

engage in a wide variety of marketing efforts, either focused specifically on recreation or as part of an overall community branding and marketing initiative. Informational resources are one basic activity that communities can engage in: free maps, partnerships with newspapers or other media to highlight recreation

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## **Comprehensive websites featuring information on recreation opportunities and locations are increasingly important information sources.**

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Understanding both the direct and indirect impacts of recreation on regional and local economies helps communities as they seek to improve recreation assets and the impact of those assets on economic development. Conducting economic impact studies that identify recreational impacts can help communities prioritize recreation improvements that contribute to greater economic impacts, while improving the community understanding of recreation's economic impacts – which is critical in building support for public recreation initiatives.

Marketing and promoting local and regional recreation opportunities is an important economic development strategy that can result in new visitors, residents, and investment in a community. Communities can

resources, and community websites or mobile apps can help raise awareness of local assets and opportunities. As more and more residents rely on online data for information, comprehensive websites featuring information on recreation opportunities and locations are increasingly important information sources.

In addition to informational resources, communities can consider events, such as festivals at local parks or competitive events that use local trails or bike paths, in order to highlight areas that many visitors or even residents might not be aware of. Communities can also consider marketing and promotion strategies that focus on a particular asset, such as participation in the Trail Towns program (see sidebar, page 17).

## ↻ Local Implementation Checklist: Recreation

Planning and zoning are important implementation tools for communities that are working to meet recreation needs. The Local Implementation Checklist identifies some examples of how communities in Northwest Michigan and other parts of Michigan have addressed recreation needs in their local policies. Communities may consider this language, and/or *Framework for Our Future Strategies*, when updating their own local policies.

### Master Plan Goals and Objectives

A master plan is a guide that's intended to shape local decisions about managing resources, directing growth, and how development should be designed. Master plans help the community understand current conditions, build a vision for the future, make recommendations about actions to take on various community issues, and act as the foundation for zoning ordinances.

Communities have an important role to play in supporting and encouraging recreation, and there are significant opportunities to enhance economic development efforts by integrating recreation into local plans, development, and initiatives. Incorporating recreation into the local master plan can be an important first step in enhancing the community's recreational assets and economic opportunities. Some sample master plan language follows:

#### **Enhance recreational facilities and amenities to meet the needs of residents and non-visitors**

- Create a meaningful network of trails and pathways and inviting, non-intrusive connections to local and regional natural areas and recreation facilities
- Establish a detailed trails and greenways plan which coordinates nonmotorized pedestrian and bike trails, and snowmobile or other motorized recreational uses
- Seek grant dollars to develop trailhead staging areas as trailways are constructed
- Explore the "trail town" concept to connect businesses, neighborhoods and key community features through a trail system
- Support cooperative recreational planning and development with the surrounding townships and the schools
- Construct modern restrooms within park facilities
- Add a dog park to the community

#### **Develop a recreation, facilities and open space network which is interconnected by open land corridors, conservation easements, public roadways, and utility corridors**

- Develop an informational brochure and distribution plan which describes the recreational and open space offerings and opportunities available to residents and visitors
- Renovate, repair, replace and upgrade existing parks and park facilities to expand each park's usefulness for all age groups
- Expand and improve the hiking, biking, nature and walking trails
- Recreation areas should be conveniently located, accessible, and well designed in each neighborhood area

#### **Ensure that a wide range of recreational opportunities exists for all types of users**

- Identify the type of parks, park facilities and hike/bike trails lacking in the community
- Enhance the visual attractiveness of the community and park system
- Maintain all park areas in a manner that fosters community pride in the park system
- Create and promote opportunities for private contributions and volunteerism in the acquisition, construction, operation, and maintenance of parks, trails, and recreation facilities
- Ensure that development adjacent to parks and recreation facilities is designed to minimize impacts on these parks and recreation areas and vice versa
- Maximize where possible the retention of existing native vegetation in new parks while meeting the purpose of the park
- Design parks and recreation improvements to maximize sustainability through the preservation of a site's natural systems and the use of recycled materials when possible
- Appropriately sign all parks; signage may include interpretive and historical information
- Consider establishing an "Adopt-a-Park" or "Adopt-a-Trail" program to assist in the operation and maintenance of facilities

# Local Implementation Checklist: Recreation

## Zoning Ordinance Elements

Zoning ordinances are local laws that regulate land and buildings in order to protect the health, safety, and welfare of all citizens. It helps define how properties are used, what new buildings look like, and how much development can occur in a community.

Zoning and other ordinances can accommodate and encourage new recreation opportunities and access. Zoning elements that might support recreational activities include:

- Zone for an interconnected series of greenways, natural areas or open spaces that provide uninterrupted habitat and movement for wildlife
- Encourage or require trail or pathway connections as part of new residential developments
- Incentivize the preservation of open space for recreational access
- Encourage or require that larger residential developments include an active recreation component

## ➔ Framework Strategies

As a resource for communities in Northwest Michigan, the *Framework for Our Future* identifies a number of strategies and actions that communities can take locally to address their specific needs. Because each community identifies their own goals, through public input, local discussions, and need analyses, the strategies and actions identified in the *Framework* are not intended as recommendations for any communities to implement or adopt. Rather, they are provided as a resource list of potential actions that, if desired, can be taken locally and/or used as model language for local master plans, organizational strategic plans, and other policy documents, to address various community needs.

The strategies and actions in the *Framework* were developed from public input and local, regional, statewide, and national sources. Many are based on public input obtained during the *Framework for Our Future* process in events, focus groups, interviews, online discussions, and community dialogues, and were also drawn from or based on master plan language from existing adopted master plans within and outside the region. Others reflect state or national best practices designed to address specific issues.

Strategies are grouped around four major themes that reflect needs and potential actions for each community issue.

**Education, Data & Outreach.** Often, taking action on a community need requires a solid understanding of the need, as well as public consensus on the appropriate course of action. *Education, Data, & Outreach* strategies address data gaps, outreach needs, and educational opportunities that can help to improve community understanding and awareness around a particular issue.

**Planning & Policy.** Many community issues can be addressed in part by local policy, such as master plans and zoning ordinances. *Planning & Policy* strategies identify broad policy goals and specific changes to master plans or zoning ordinances that can impact a particular issue.

**Funding & Incentives.** Communities can use funding and incentive tools to encourage private, public, and nonprofit initiatives and activities that meet local goals. *Funding & Incentives* strategies identify opportunities that can enhance organizational capacities, as well as incentives that may help communities work with the private sector and others to meet local goals.

**Development & Implementation.** Goals for each community issue center around programs, development

or initiatives that directly and tangibly impact community needs. *Development & Implementation* goals include specific strategies designed for on-the-ground activities and bricks-and-mortar implementation.

Each strategy includes additional information intended to aid in implementation, including:

### Why?

Each strategy is designed to address a certain issue. Information is provided to detail specific community needs that might be met through implementation of the strategy.

### Actions

To implement each strategy, communities can consider taking action in a number of ways. This section identifies some specific actions that communities might consider to reach local goals

### Tools & Resources

A number of existing tools or resources are available to partners that are interested in taking action on a particular strategy. This section identifies, and provides links to, tools and resources such as:

- Research or background studies that can help communities identify specific community needs in order to develop appropriate policy or initiatives
- The *Framework for Our Future Action Guide*, which provides details and implementation guidance for planning and zoning actions identified in the *Framework*
- Guidebooks and workbooks that provide step-by-step information on actions and the implementation process
- Examples of where the action has been implemented regionally
- Local, regional, state, or national reference documents that can provide additional guidance

Links to all resources are available online at [www.nwm.org/rpi](http://www.nwm.org/rpi).

### Measures

Communities can track progress toward these goals and actions by benchmarking data identified in this section. While some measurement data will be locally generated and tracked, many indicators can be accessed on the regional data portal [www.benchmarksnorthwest.org](http://www.benchmarksnorthwest.org).

# Recreation: Data, Education & Outreach

*Improve knowledge and understanding of existing recreational facilities and opportunities among both residents and visitors*

<b>Strategy 1</b>	<b>Raise community awareness of and appreciation for recreational opportunities</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Communities report that many parks and recreation facilities are underused due to lack of awareness on the part of the community. Raising awareness of local facilities through events and other promotional activities can enhance placemaking initiatives while improving recreation access for residents.	
<b>Actions</b>	Partner with volunteers and stakeholders to organize events that showcase parks and recreation facilities	Partner with local schools, visitor bureaus, etc. to promote existing facilities
	Prepare a marketing campaign utilizing advertisements, public service announcements, and websites	
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	UpNorthTrails.org	Experience231
	Land Information Access Association <i>Trail Towns: Capturing Trail-Based Tourism—A Manual for Communities in Northern Michigan</i>	<i>Northern Michigan Community Placemaking Guidebook</i>
<b>Strategy 2</b>	<b>Provide access to information identifying available recreational opportunities</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Parks and recreation are important economic assets that draw visitors to a community while improving quality of life for residents. Improving awareness of community recreation opportunities can help in marketing a community and in attracting new visitors, residents, and businesses.	
<b>Actions</b>	Create or expand on a central website identifying all parks and recreational facilities	Create, print and distribute maps identifying parks and recreational facilities
	Create a Parks and Land Classification System	Develop a comprehensive regional database of recreational assets
	Provide educational and informational materials to the public regarding what is and what is not permitted at various recreational sites	
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	UpNorthTrails.org	MyNorth.com

# Recreation Development: Planning & Policy

*Coordinate policies, plans, & ordinances that improve and enhance recreational opportunities*

<b>Strategy 1</b>	<b>Enact policies that protect, maintain, and enhance green infrastructure and other recreation assets</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Green infrastructure provides a myriad of community and economic benefits, while enhancing recreation opportunities. Local planning and zoning policies can incentivize or require the preservation of green space to enhance local recreation access and opportunities	
<b>Actions</b>	Consider zoning changes that encourage or incentivize the preservation of open space	Consider zoning changes that require or encourage trail connections as part of new residential developments
	Consider developing trail /pathway plans and/or integrating trail plans into master plans	
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	<i>Planning for Pathways: An Implementation Resource of the New Designs for Growth Guidebook</i>	<i>Planning with Green Infrastructure: An Implementation Resource of the New Designs for Growth Guidebook</i>
<b>Strategy 2</b>	<b>Establish and support community structures for recreation maintenance, planning, and improvement oversight</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	While local governments play a pivotal role in providing access to recreation, recreation staff in many communities is limited to maintenance personnel. Recreation committees and dedicated administrative staff can oversee park improvements and engage in strategic and long-term recreation initiatives can help communities prioritize recreation activities while coordinating with other important community initiatives.	
<b>Actions</b>	Establish and/or support parks and recreation planning committees	Provide dedicated staff support to maintain, improve, and/or promote recreation facilities
	Consider working with surrounding communities to establish a recreation director	Work with volunteer groups to coordinate park maintenance and improvements
<b>Strategy 3</b>	<b>Establish and maintain DNR-approved 5-year recreation plans</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Long-term planning for recreation helps communities budget and plan for initiatives that meet public needs and priorities. In addition, recreation plans that are approved by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources can provide eligibility for important recreation funding opportunities.	
<b>Actions</b>	Develop recreation plans consistent with DNR requirements	Regularly seek and obtain public input on recreation needs and priorities
	Develop annual work plans to ensure recreation plan goals are accomplished	
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	<i>Michigan Department of Natural Resources Guidelines for the Development of Community Park, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plans</i>	

# Recreation Development: Financing & Incentives

*Ensure the long-term financial sustainability of recreation assets and opportunities*

<b>Strategy 1</b>	<b>Pursue grant funding for recreation improvements</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Recreation makes up a small percentage of local budgets, creating difficulties in achieving local goals and objectives. Grants are an important source of funding that can supplement local budgets for recreation programs and projects.	
<b>Actions</b>	Ensure recreation plans are current and DNR-approved	Conduct regular research to identify local, regional, state, and national grant opportunities
	Work in partnership with other organizations to increase grant funding opportunities	
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	Michigan Department of Natural Resources <i>Guidelines for the Development of Community Park, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plans</i>	
<b>Strategy 2</b>	<b>Consider a recreation millage to support the maintenance and improvement of community recreation assets</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	The acquisition, development, and long-term maintenance of recreation facilities require a significant local funding commitment. Millages allow communities to plan for regular operations as well as needed improvements and enhancements to parks and recreation facilities.	
<b>Actions</b>	Identify recreation funding needs	Seek public input on recreation millage potential
<b>Strategy 3</b>	<b>Explore opportunities to establish a recreation endowment</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Local financial support for recreation can help communities achieve recreation goals. Recreation endowments offer funding opportunities focused on specific community needs over the long term	
<b>Actions</b>	Develop fundraising strategy to guide fundraising efforts and identify fundraising opportunities for recreation activities and improvements	Work with regional community foundations, philanthropies, and others to establish a recreation endowment fund

# Recreation: Development & Implementation

*Maintain, improve, enhance, and expand recreational facilities*

<b>Strategy 1</b>	<b>Maintain and improve existing parks and recreation facilities</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	The provision of appropriate recreation access requires recreation facilities to be safe, functional, and appealing to users. Regular maintenance and improvements help to ensure safe recreation access while maintaining the long-term functionality of important community assets.	
<b>Actions</b>	Ensure a high-level of maintenance and management at all parks and recreation facilities	Regularly seek input from citizens and park users relative to park and recreation facility needs
	Provide improvements to existing parks and recreation facilities as needed	Provide sufficient parking and other related facilities at access sites
	Manage parks and recreation areas to protect and enhance natural resources and environmentally-sensitive features	
<b>Strategy 2</b>	<b>Explore the acquisition and/or development of new recreational lands or facilities to meet existing and future needs</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	A high quality of life requires access to a variety of recreation opportunities. New properties or park improvements that are designed around community needs can improve and enhance recreation access to all parts of the community.	
<b>Actions</b>	Identify properties for potential purchase based on identified community priorities	Pursue funding opportunities as appropriate to support property acquisition and/or development
	Develop management plans and guidelines for park improvements or amenities in order to facilitate access at any properties acquired for recreation	
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	<i>Northern Michigan Community Placemaking Guidebook</i>	
<b>Strategy 3</b>	<b>Ensure a diverse range of recreation opportunities for persons of all ages, abilities, and economic means</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Many communities lack the recreation opportunities needed by a changing population. Facilities that provide universal access to seniors, youth, people with disabilities, families, and low-income households can help to create a high quality of life for new and future residents.	
<b>Actions</b>	Regularly identify recreation needs and gaps	Work with partners and volunteers to facilitate and further recreational programs for all population groups
	Provide or improve barrier-free access at all parks and recreational facilities	Ensure that park and recreational facilities are affordable to all residents
	Consider and incorporate universal access at all parks and recreational facilities	
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	<i>US Forest Service Accessibility Guidebook for Outdoor Recreation and Trails</i>	

<b>Strategy 4</b>	<b>Develop an interconnected system of both motorized and non-motorized trails and pathways</b>	
<b>Why?</b>	Interconnected trails are among a community’s most highly-valued recreation assets. Building and connecting trails are important economic strategies that build a sense of place and attract both new residents and visitors.	
<b>Actions</b>	Continue to maintain, improve, and expand existing trails	Coordinate trail usage groups, goals, and activities
	Identify potential trail routes to link existing trail networks	
	Identify potential trail connectors to parks, schools, and other community resources	Work within ongoing coordinated trail planning efforts and with neighboring communities and stakeholders to develop and link trail systems
<b>Tools &amp; Resources</b>	<i>Planning for Pathways: An Implementation Resource of the New Designs for Growth Guidebook</i>	UpNorthTrails.org
	<i>Land Information Access Association Trail Towns: Capturing Trail-Based Tourism—A Manual for Communities in Northern Michigan</i>	

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