

Parks and Trails System Assessment

This chapter describes the existing system of parks and trails, presents a system for classifying the parks, lists existing facilities for each park, and summarizes prior plans for the parks and trails.

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Major Parks and Trails Issues

The following are the major issues in the topic of parks and trails identified through the analysis of conditions.

- 1. Athletics Complex:** Should the City acquire land for and build an outdoor athletics complex for organized team sports? If so, where should it be and what should it include?
- 2. School Facilities:** Should the City forge a closer working relationship with the School District for shared facility use?
- 3. Neighborhood Parks:** Should there be more mid-sized, neighborhood parks in the 5 to 10-acre range?
- 4. Sidewalks:** Should there be more sidewalks in all parts of the city as an integral element of the walking and bicycling network, which would be supplemented by off-road, multiple-use paths? Should the City work to retrofit established neighborhoods with sidewalks?
- 5. Trails:** How aggressive should the City be in extending the many disconnected off-road paths?



The playground at McDowell Park

Parks and Trails Inventory

The existing system of parks and off-road paths is illustrated by Figure 6-1 on the next page. Table 6-1 lists all of the parks and indicates their classification, acreage and facilities.

The city has 18 parks, totaling 246 acres. McDowell Park is the largest at 146 acres. Supplementing this land are two public school sites that have athletic fields and playgrounds, totaling 167 acres. It was decided during the process of writing the Master Plan that the public school facilities should be included in the analysis.

Among the 18 parks, there are six designated as Open Space, totaling 194 acres: Beaudry, Kellerwood, Norland, Sanford Select Acres, Sweetwater Bend, Lions Township Park.

Please refer to the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open System Master Plan* for photos and location maps of each park.

It is notable that of the six Neighborhood Parks, only one, Highline, is larger than 5 acres, which is considered the lower threshold for that type of park. Highline is 6 acres. See Table 6-1.

There are 12 segments or loops of off-road, multiple-use paved paths, also known as trails, totaling 16 miles. Approximately half are located in street rights-of-way and the others are in parks. The system is scattered and disjointed. Please refer to Figure 6-1 for their locations.

It is very helpful to have a network of sidewalks across the city to lead to and from the off-road path system. However, there is a relative shortage of sidewalks in Big Lake. Sidewalks were not addressed in the 2016 Master Plan.

The 2016 value of the park and trail system has been estimated at \$11,000,000. It was estimated in the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open System Master Plan* that another \$8,000,000 will be needed to expand and improve the system by year 2030.

Park Classification

The City has categorized its public recreation areas to provide for active use in community and neighborhood parks, and passive use in nature areas. The National Recreation and Park Association suggests that parks may be classified as follows:

Neighborhood Parks – Active area designed for intensive use by children and family groups close to home and affording opportunities for informal recreation and possibly some scheduled activities for all ages.

Community Parks – Larger, active play area providing for a greater variety of play experiences and activities.

Special Use Facilities – Include play lots, squares and plazas, public beaches, swimming pools, parkway systems, golf course facilities, greenbelts, drainage ways, trails and any other facilities for which standards are difficult to formulate. The number, location, and distribution of Special Use Facilities depend on several factors, including: physical conditions, natural amenities, opportunities for acquisition, and public demand. Their location and size is variable and dependent on specific use.

Open Space / Nature Areas – Public land set aside for preservation of natural resources and visual aesthetics or buffering, which may include areas for trails and other passive recreation uses.

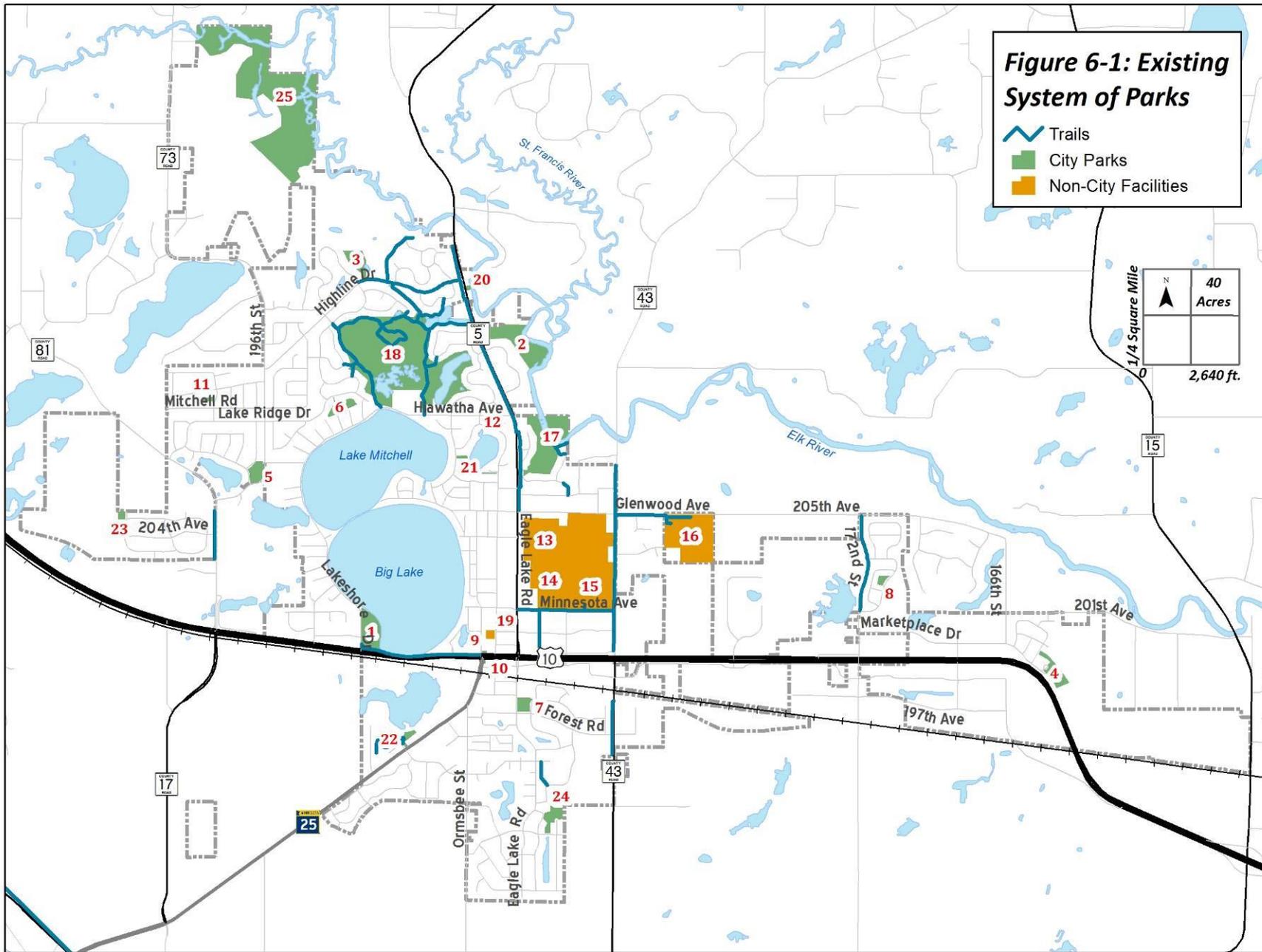


Table 6-1: Existing Park System

Park Name	Map Refer.	Usable Acreage	Class	Baseball / softball	Basketball	Bathrooms	Boat dock	Fishing	Frisbee golf	Ice skating	Lighting	Memorial	Open space	Parking	Picnicking	Play equipment	Shelter	Skate park	Soccer / multi-use	Swimming	Tennis	Trails	Volleyball
Highline	3	6	N	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓						✓	
Hudson Woods	4	6.4	N	✓					✓					✓		✓							
Lake Ridge	5	4.4	N	✓										✓	✓	✓							
Shores of L. Mitchell	6	4.5	N	✓	✓									✓	✓				✓				
Wright’s Crossing	7	3.1	N											✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓
Bluff Park	8	1.25	N										✓			✓							
Lakeside	1	11	C		✓	✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
River Oaks	2	12	C						✓						✓								
Brown’s	9	0.3	M												✓		✓						
Jefferson Square	10	0.3	M									✓											
Mitchell Farms	11	0.8	M												✓	✓							
Powell	12	0.5	M													✓							
High-Middle-Elementary	13-16	87	S	✓	✓						✓			✓					✓		✓		
Liberty Elementary	16	12	S	✓	✓											✓			✓				
Hidden Rivers	17	2	S																			✓	
McDowell	18	62	S										✓									✓	
Lady of Lake Church	19	4.4	S						✓					✓		✓							
Riverside Landing	20	0.25	S				✓																
Beaudry	21	2	O																				
Kellerwood	22	2	O											✓									
Norland	23	1	O																				
Sanford Select Acres	24	2.5	O											✓									
Sweetwater Bend	25	22	O																				

Classifications: N: Neighborhood C: Community M: Mini S: Special Use O: Open Space

Park System Evaluation

The 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open System Master Plan* analyzed the park system using guidelines provided by the National Recreation and Parks Association. Those guidelines were national, generic and numeric and did not account for local preferences, natural resources, nearby regional parks, private facilities, or residential density. Nevertheless, they are a useful and quick measure of a system and a guide for planning. The NRPA guidelines were

supplemented by local public opinions gained through meetings and a survey during the planning process.

The Big Lake system measured up as shown by Table 6-2. It should be noted that the analysis used gross park acreage and counted wetlands.

**Table 6-2
Comparison of Big Lake Parks and Trails to NRPA Guidelines**

Type	NRPA Guideline	Big Lake		Comparison
		Number	Recommended	
Neighborhood Park	2 acres per 1,000 people	19 acres	21 acres	- 1.2 acres
Community Park	5 acres per 1,000 people	23 acres	51 acres	- 28 acres
Total Parks	10 acres per 1,000 people	42 acres	103 acres	- 61 acres
Trails (miles)	1 mile per 1,000 people	16 miles	10 miles	+ 5.7 miles
Other Open Space (acres)	1.5 acres per 1,000 people	144 acres	15 acres	+ 129 acres

During the *Master Plan* process, many ideas were generated by members of the public regarding the quality of the system and how it could be improved. Here is a summary.

- **Barriers:** Highway 10 and the railroad tracks are a major physical and psychological barrier dividing the city and hindering movement to parks
- **Mid-Sized Parks:** There seems to be a need for more mid-sized parks (5 to 10 acres) serving neighborhoods or districts to supplement the many small and the few very large sites
- **Trails:** The off-road paved paths are disconnected; extend and link them, including to County trails
- **Water Access:** More access is desired to water, particularly the rivers
- **School Facilities:** The school fields are not under City control and cannot be programmed independently of the schools' needs. There is no agreement for mutual use of facilities
- **Athletics:** A large, multi-sport site is needed for organized athletics.

Strengths

- Nice local parks
- Lakeside Park
- Lakes, in general
- Nice tot lot parks and playgrounds
- Much potential
- Natural parks (e.g., McDowell)
- Young population

Opportunities

- Potential access to extended parks areas such as Hidden Rivers
- River access; water access
- Bring people to Big Lake
- Regional connections, especially to wildlife areas
- Strengthen partnerships with County
- Connections with "specialty trails"

Weaknesses

- Trails do not connect
- Need more parks on the south side
- No money
- Need more space for large events
- Limited Community involvement

Threats

- Hazardous pedestrian or bicyclist crossings of major roads
- People leaving Big Lake because of a lack of parks or recreation
- No money
- Strength of development is down, which translates to less money
- Limited Community involvement

Park Location Analysis

The 2016 *Master Plan* included an analysis of the location of Community, Neighborhood and Mini parks relative to residential development. Thus, Special Use and Open Space parks were not included. The Special Use Parks included the public school athletic sites.

On a map of the park system, radii of one-quarter, one-half and 2 miles were drawn around each of those parks. The results are shown by Figure 6-2. That map illustrates that all but one of those parks are located north of the barrier created by Highway 10 and the BNSF Railroad tracks. The south side park is Wright's Crossing, at only 3 acres.

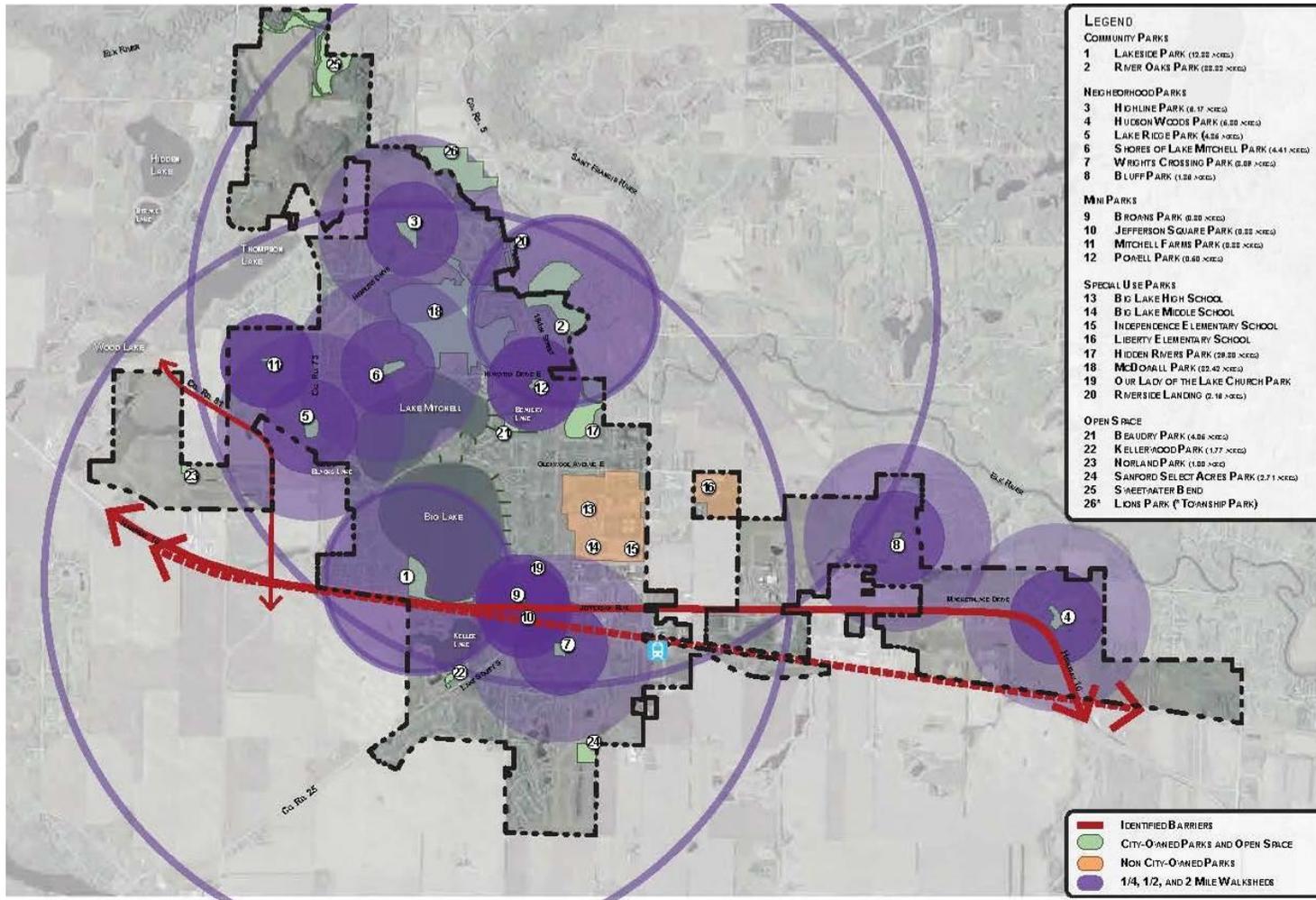


Figure 6-2:
Park Location Analysis

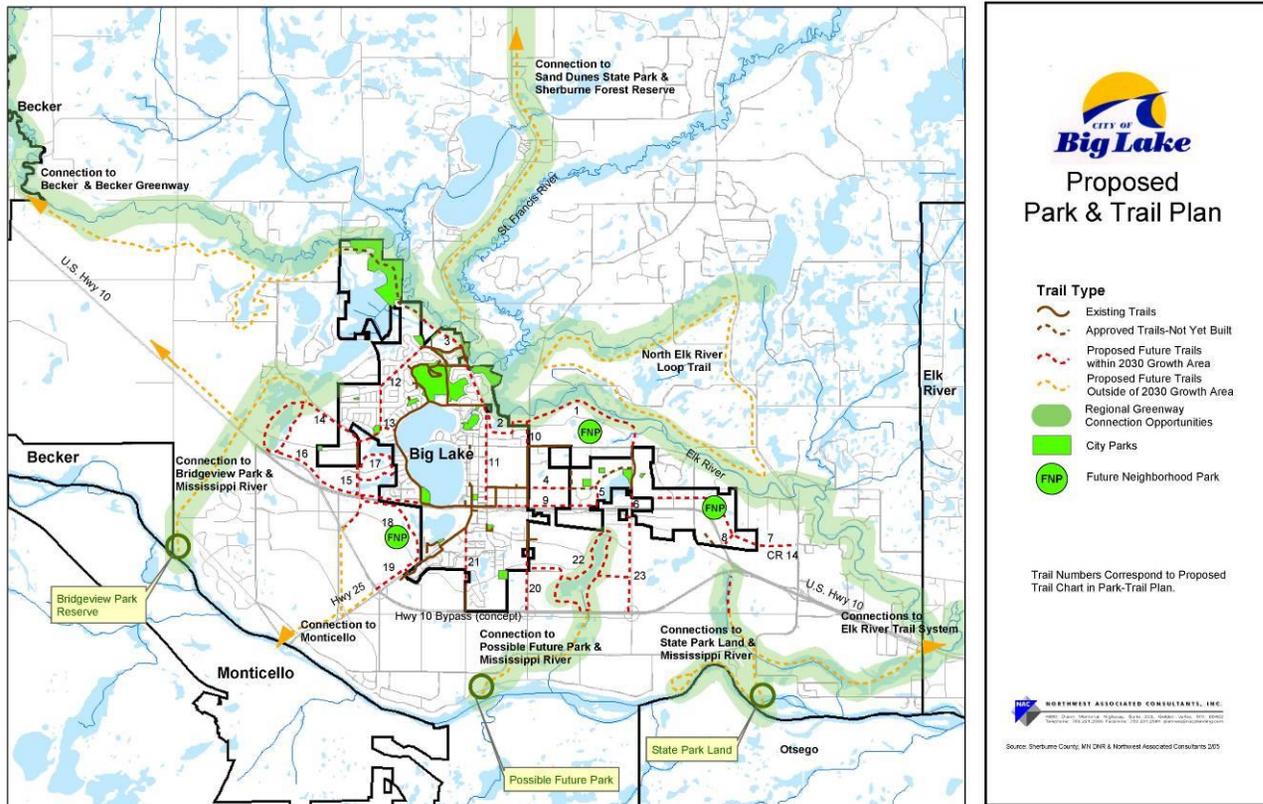
2005 Parks and Trails Plan

The system plan adopted in 2005 emphasized the location of future parks and trails as compared to the 2016 plan, which focused on specific improvements for each park. The plan map, shown below, called for:

- Three new **Neighborhood Parks** – two in the northeast and one in the southwest. No park is shown in the southeast quadrant but the text noted the need for a community athletic field and the possibility of coordinating that with a potential future school site there. Also, in 2005, the land use plan for that area was unresolved, and the thought was that it could guide the area for industrial development; the 2009 land use plan showed Northstar transit-oriented development and light industry.

- Off-road paved paths**, either in linear parks along streams (“greenways”) or in the right-of-way of major roads, leading to regional destinations such as County parks or state conservation lands. The linear parks would be acquired in fee title and used for natural protection, trails and public access to the streams. This would be ambitious and difficult but highly beneficial to the public. The County would have to lead and coordinate as the alignments would be outside the City.
- Multi-use paved paths** within the city or its future growth areas.

Note that the 2005 plan included the now-defunct idea of building a Highway 10 bypass route, which influenced thinking about future land use and parks.



**Figure 6-3:
2005 Parks and Trails Plan**

System Master Plan, 2016

The **2016 Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan** included a detailed, illustrated description of each park followed by a plan for improvements in specific parks over the next ten years.

The plan presented a guide for the spacing, size and function of parks according to the classifications shown above.

Specific ideas and alignments were presented for future off-road paved paths, also called trails (refined from the 2005 plan), and also included detailed maps of existing park, trail and sidewalk locations.

Other recommendations addressed partnerships, funding, and priority.

The plan noted the location and type of park or trail deficiency or surplus but did not address where future parks should be located.

That plan will be the basis of the Parks and Trails chapter of this comprehensive plan, but recommendations will be added for the location and type of future parks.

Sports Complex: Five alternative locations were presented and evaluated for a potential “sports complex,” which would include several athletic fields. Detailed layouts were included for each alternative site.

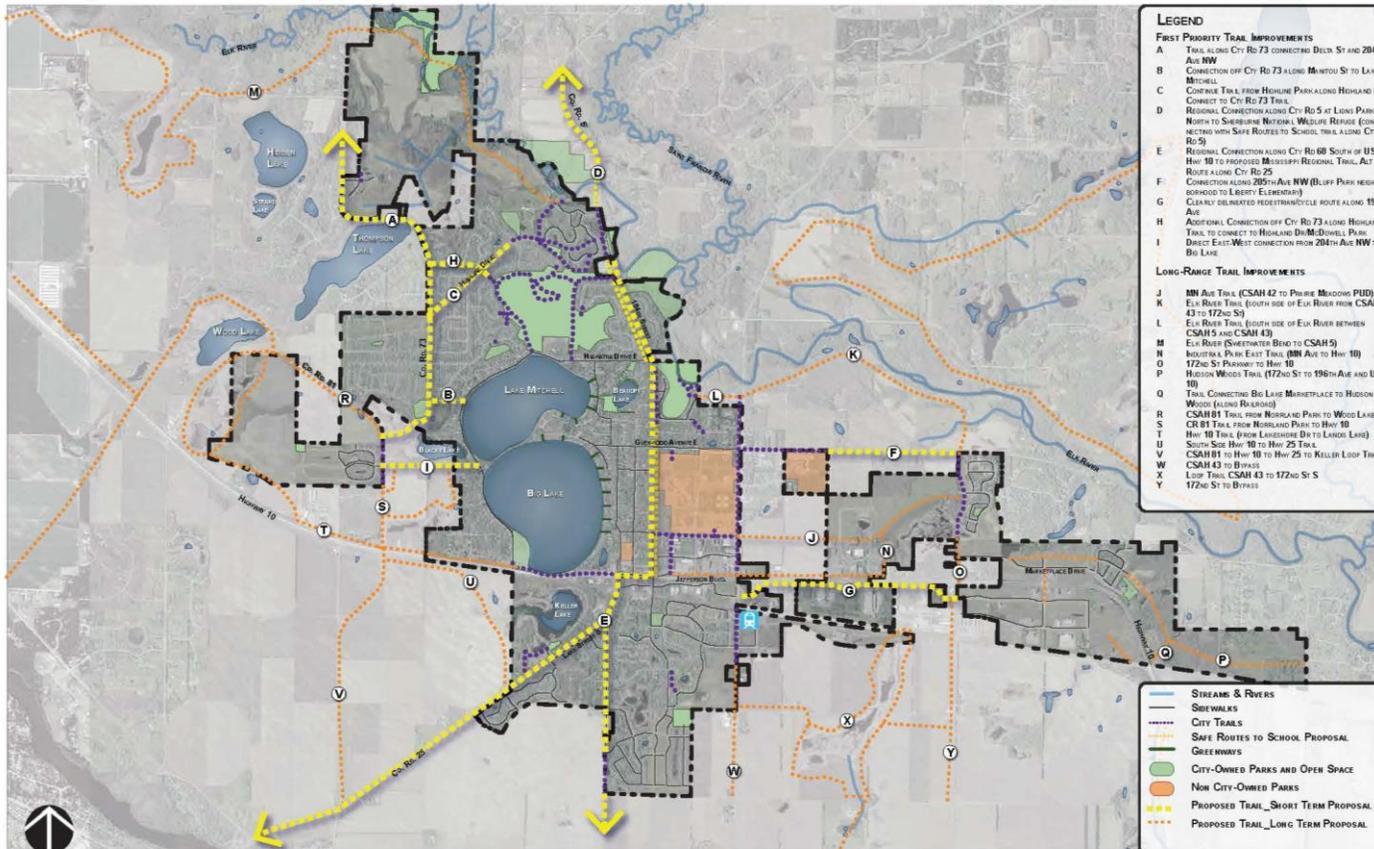


Figure 6-4:
2015 Trails Plan

Parks and Trails System Assessment

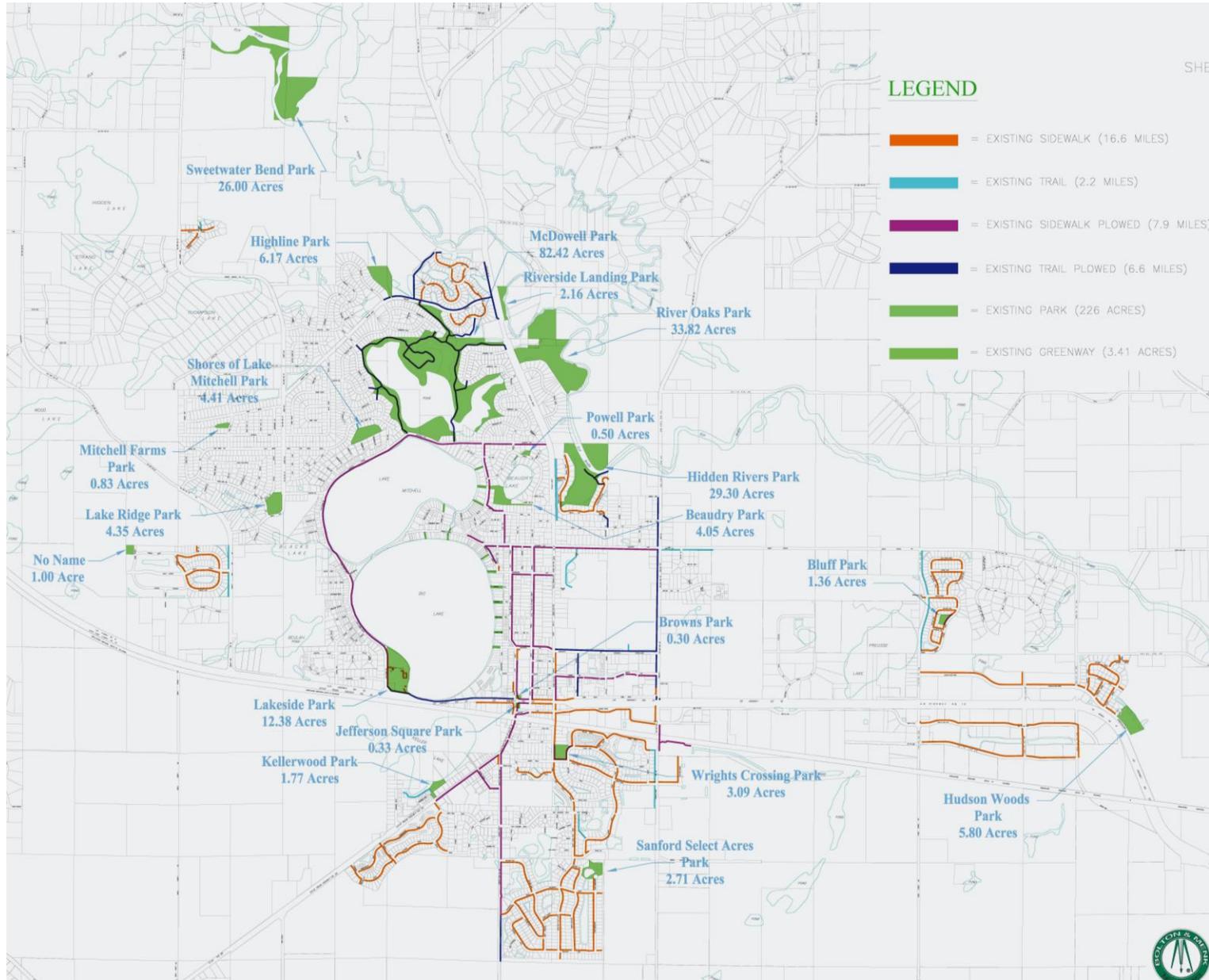


Figure 6-5: Existing Parks, Trails and Sidewalks, 2015

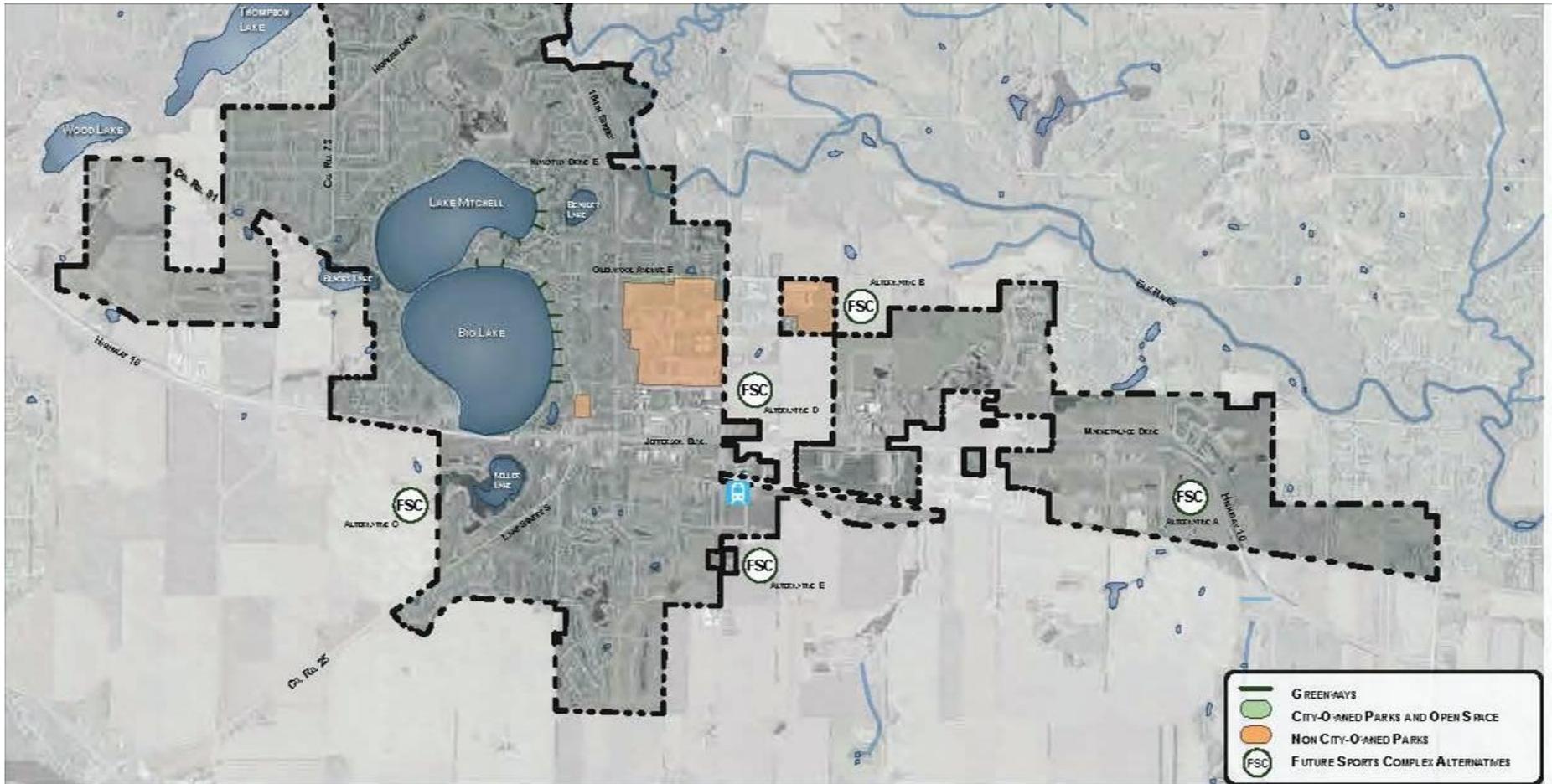


Figure 6-6: Alternative Locations for a Sports Complex, 2015

River Oaks Park Master Plan

In 2014, the City prepared a plan for the undeveloped River Oaks Park, which is located between County Road 5 and the Elk River. The plan, shown by Figure 6-3, calls for a major disc golf course, picnic facilities, paths, RV and tent camping, a wetland boardwalk and a playground. The City hopes River Oaks becomes a “destination” park.

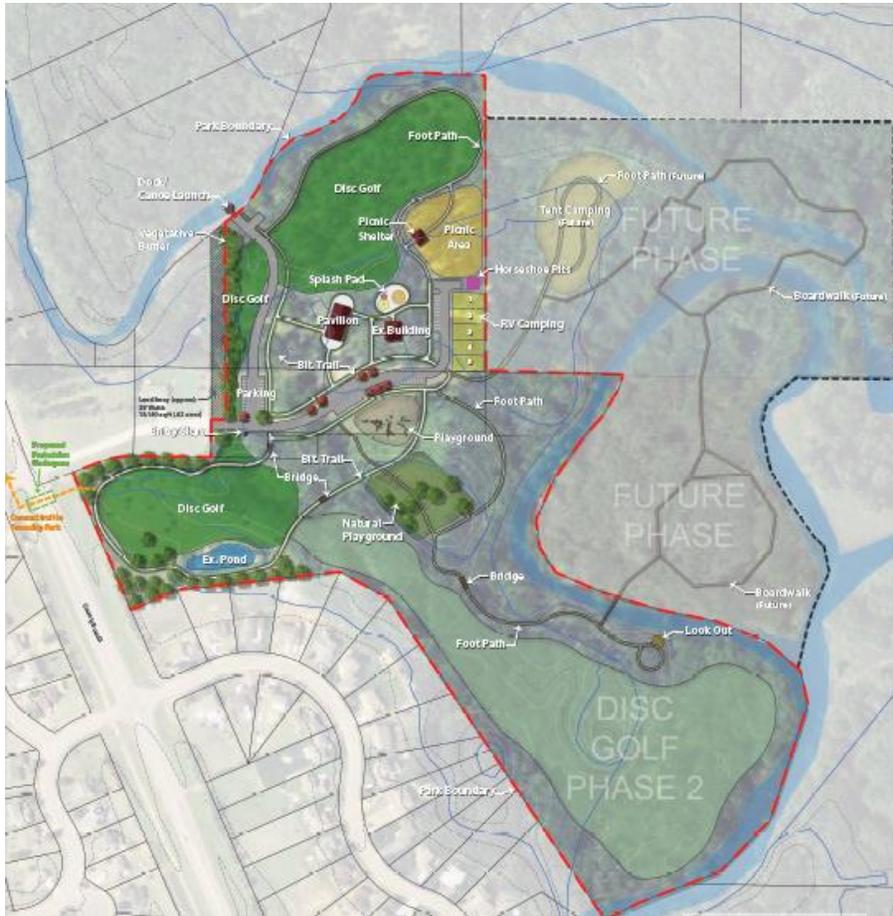


Figure 6-7: River Oaks Park Master Plan

Greenways

There are 13 short segments of publicly-owned land that lead to the lakes Mitchell and Big from neighborhood streets, as shown by Figure 6-3.



Figure 6-8: Existing Greenways

Park Dedication Requirements

The City of Big Lake requires that those who subdivide land for residential development give to the City either 10 percent of the land for use as a park or trail or a cash contribution based on a formula. Subdivisions for commercial or industrial development require a park dedication of either 4% of the land or a cash contribution. This requirement is tied to the act of dividing parcels, according to state law. The amount of dedication is expected to be roughly proportionate to the demand created for parks or trails. This is the most common means of acquiring land for future parks and is employed by most cities.

The amount of land required to be given for parks or trails, 10 percent, is typical of most cities and has been judged roughly proportionate to the need. The 4 percent park dedication requirement for industrial and commercial subdivisions was adopted in 2017 after a survey of the region showed that most of Big Lake’s peer communities have similar requirements. Prior to 2017, industrial and commercial subdivisions were exempt.

The City has the option of taking either land or cash. The decision is based on whether the park system plan shows a park in the subject location, whether the

natural conditions are suitable for a park, and whether a site can be combined with adjacent land acquired previously or in the future.

It is important to have an adopted plan showing desired, future park or trail locations and that those locations be naturally suitable. This is because very large parks usually cannot be assembled piecemeal through the subdivision process. In that case, the City would have to purchase land through negotiated sale. The power of eminent domain may be used to compel sales at a fair market price for public facilities such as parks or roads.

Some Cities’ plans show a general location for a future park and negotiate the exact location with the land developer based on the design of the neighborhood. Section 1108.1 of the Subdivision portion of the City Code establishes these requirements.

Courts have determined that there are two basic tests that a local park (or other public facility) dedication ordinance must pass:

1. The City must establish that the proposed development will create a need for additional park facilities; and
2. The dedication amount requested by the City must be roughly proportionate to the impact from the development.



The Elk River – an underutilized natural recreational asset