

Parks, Trails and Protective Open Space Plan

This chapter summarizes previously-adopted plans for future multi-use off-road paths (trails) and proposes five new parks. Recommendations are also included for using parks to improve the appearance of the city, protect the environment, maintain the system and acquire additional park land.

Please refer to the Parks and Trails System Assessment, chapter 6 of this plan, for a description of the current facilities and needs.

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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. Neighborhood Parks:** Should there be more mid-sized, neighborhood parks in the 5- to 10-acre range?
- 2. 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?
- 3. Trails:** How aggressive should the City be in extending the many disconnected off-road paths?
- 4. 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?
- 5. School Facilities:** Should the City forge a closer working relationship with the School District for shared facility use?

Goals for the Park and Trail System

These are the overall goals for the park and trail system. They are based on the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan* and ideas generated during the process of preparing the Comprehensive Plan.

- **Increase recreation opportunities in Big Lake**
 - Plan and acquire land for new parks in future neighborhoods; please refer to Figure 14-1, Park System Plan for those locations
 - Plan and acquire land for a community park in the southeastern quadrant of the city, southeast of the Northstar rail neighborhood; see Figure 14-1 for the location
 - Create a park dedicated to athletic fields
 - Partner with the School District for more shared use of school facilities and City parks.
- **Improve existing parks and park land**
 - Continue to budget for and improve existing parks
 - Improve River Oaks Park according to its master plan
 - Continue to maintain the City's flagship park, Lakeside, as a local and regional attraction
 - Follow the detailed recommendations of the 2016 master plan.
- **Extend the system of off-road trails and sidewalks to improve walking and bicycling within neighborhoods, across the city and to parks, schools and to other destinations**
 - Link trails to provide local connections
 - Create new trails where necessary to link neighborhoods that lack access to the system
 - Coordinate with the sidewalk system
 - Make it safer to cross major roads
 - Improve wayfinding signs



Completing the planned improvements to River Oaks Park has high priority in this plan.

Parks and Protective Open Space System Plan

Plan, acquire and develop parks to help meet the outdoor recreation needs of the Big Lake population, protect environmentally sensitive areas, provide environmental education and improve urban design

Several new park sites are proposed in conjunction with the plan for future land use and the forecast growth of households and population.

1. Neighborhood Parks

The approximate locations of five future Neighborhood Parks are illustrated on Figure 14-1, Park System Plan, and on Figure 11-1, Land Use Plan Map. Exact locations will be determined by in-field examinations of land characteristics and negotiations with developers during neighborhood design. These approximate locations are recommended:

- **North:** Three sites in future neighborhoods north of Glenwood Avenue, near the Elk River. Each is approximately 20 to 25 acres and includes upland for active recreation and floodplain protective open space.
- **South:** One site in a future neighborhood along the proposed southern parkway. Approximately 5 acres.
- **West:** Two sites in a future neighborhoods in the western sector of the city. Approximately 8 to 10 acres each.
- **East:** An addition to Hudson Woods Park in a beautiful, mature oak forest. A playfield and open space in the Prairie Meadows neighborhood, which has been platted but not improved yet. .

2. Community Parks

A future Community Park is proposed in the southeastern quadrant of the city. At 125 to 150 acres, this site would encompass a major wetland and include dry upland for active recreation. This land should be added to the list of candidate sites for a set of athletic fields. This idea was first raised in the City's 2005 park system plan and continued in the Northstar neighborhood plan.

Because of its size and location, the City would likely have to purchase this land as opposed to receiving for free it as part of a plat dedication.

3. The Elk River Corridor

The Elk River is a beautiful natural resource that is largely undamaged by nearby development. Consequently, it represents a major opportunity to allow residents to experience nature, launch a canoe or relax in a tranquil setting.

The three future Community Parks along the Elk River north of Glenwood Avenue would add to the established pattern of riverfront parks. The City's existing river parks are Sweetwater Bend, Riverside Landing, River Oaks and Hidden Rivers. Big Lake Township Lion's Park also sits on the Elk River. Longer term, there is potential for another riverfront park east of 166th Street.

Acquiring new park sites along the river is an opportunity that should not be missed, as it will add immeasurably to the quality of life in Big Lake and sustain the value of the nearby neighborhoods.

Locations next to the river instead of the middle of the neighborhood would maximize their value, provide public access to the river and protect the natural qualities of the riverfront.

These parks should include upland for active recreation, playgrounds and picnic sites as well as riverfront wetlands and floodplains. The protected open space will provide opportunities for appreciating nature, strolling, relaxing and water access.

Connections among all of the riverfront parks may be made in several ways:

- Via local streets, sidewalks, on-street bicycling lanes or off-street bicycling paths
- Via linear public open space along the riverfront.

4. River Oaks Park

The City will continue to improve River Oaks Park as recommended in its 2014 master plan, which is shown by Figure 6-3 in the Parks and Trails Assessment chapter. The master plan calls for a major disc golf course, picnic facilities, paths, recreational vehicle and tent camping, a wetland boardwalk and a playground. The City hopes that River Oaks becomes a "destination" park. This park is located between County Road 5 and the Elk River.

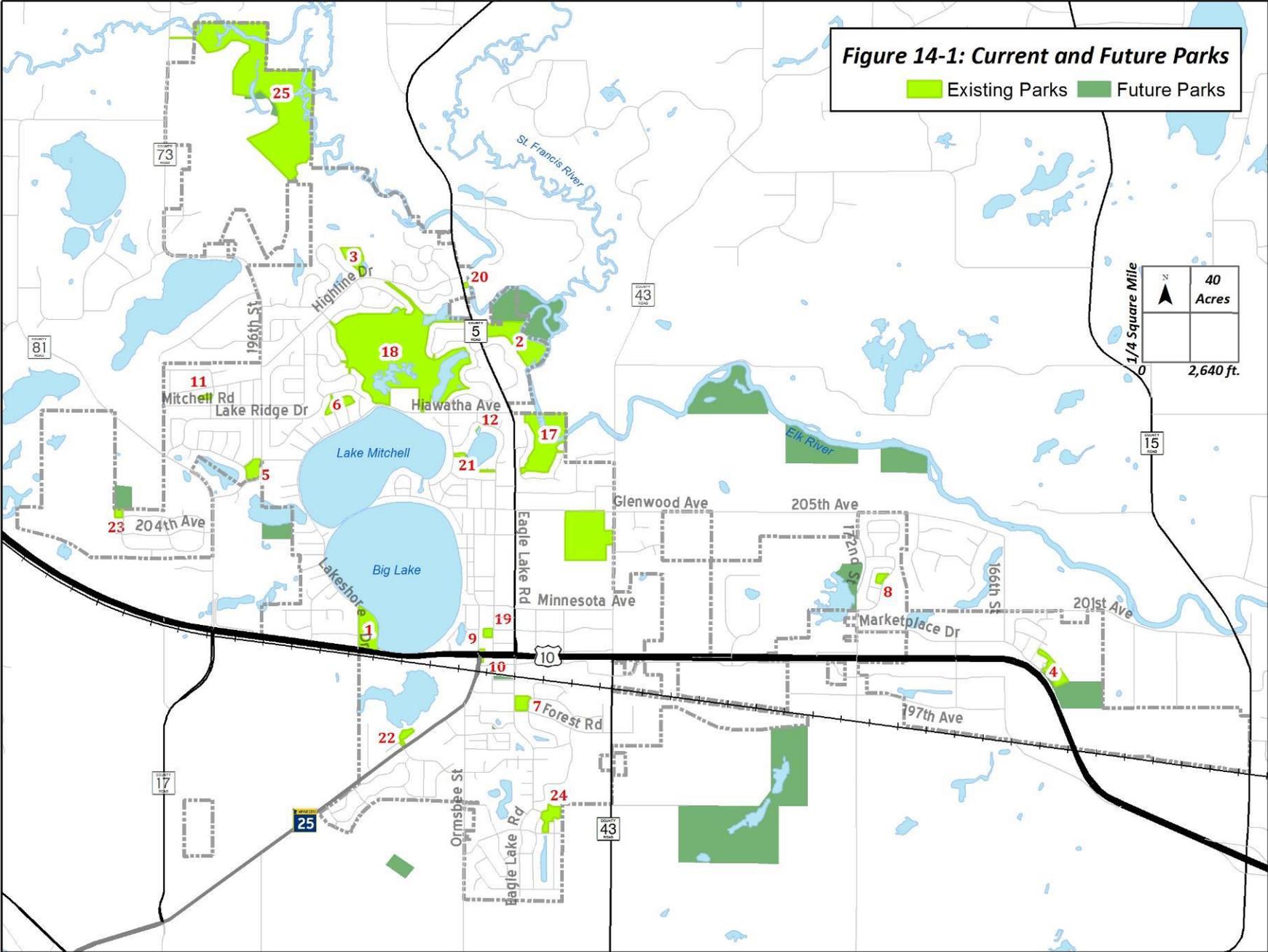


Table 14-1: Park System, 2017

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

5. Lakeside Park

The City will prepare a master plan for the continued improvement and maintenance of Lakeside Park, as recommended in the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan*.

6. Athletic Field Complex

The City will continue to consider the possibility of acquiring a large site to host several athletic fields. A 2015 location study recommended four locations, and they are illustrated by Figure 6-6 in the Parks and Trails Assessment chapter of this comprehensive plan. The proposed Community Park in the southeastern quadrant of the city may be considered also.

7. Park Land Acquisition

It is essential that the City acquires land for future parks or trails before it is developed for other uses. These and other methods will be used to acquire land.

Land Dedication during the Subdivision Process

The City will continue its practice of ensuring that each new residential land subdivision and all future commercial or industrial buildings help provide for future park or trail needs in proportion to the demand they generate. This is the primary method that the City will use to acquire land for future parks or trails. State law allows Cities to follow this practice.

Park land dedication should continue to be based on the park land need defined by this Comprehensive Plan or other adopted park system plan. Active park areas shall be exclusive of wetlands, slopes exceeding 12 percent, ponding areas, or other features unsuitable for active park development.

However, the City may choose to accept land not suited for active recreation but ideal for hiking, water access, nature study or solitude. The City Council will decide the location and characteristics of land desired for park in each plat based upon the policies and recommendations of the Park Committee and the appropriate park system plan.

Some plats may be in locations not suited or desired for future parks. In those instances, the Council can choose to accept money instead of land based on a formula previously adopted by resolution or ordinance. The City fund seeded with cash instead of land will be used when needed to purchase land in desired locations when land dedication is not sufficient there. It is essential that the City keep this cash formula sufficiently high that desired land can be purchased, and that developers are not compelled to always argue to give cash instead of land.

Other Means of Acquiring Land

Some of the future park lands proposed in this chapter may be too large to be acquired by requiring a land developer to dedicate to the City a percentage of this plat. (The 2018 figure was 10 percent.) In those cases, the Council will consider other means that will ensure that the proposed acreage and location are secured. One such means is direct purchase, as described above.

8. Sharing Facilities with the School District

The City will discuss and possibly negotiate more sharing of facilities with the Big Lake School District.

Trails System Plan

Link paths in City park land with on- and off-street facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians

Big Lake has a good start on a system of off-road, paved paths for bicycling and walking, commonly called trails. These paths are typically asphalt and are different from the concrete sidewalks located along certain streets in Big Lake. The trails and sidewalks work together to help walking and bicycling. Sidewalk policy is described in the Transportation Plan chapter of this plan.

This section outlines how the trails system should be extended and improved.

1. Previous System Planning

Use the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan* as the primary guidance for extending the trail system. This comprehensive plan summarizes the major recommendations of the 2016 master plan, but the master plan should be consulted for more specifics.

2. First Priority Trail Improvements

- Build a trail along **County Highway 73** (196th Street) connecting Delta Street and 204th Avenue Northwest
- Build an additional connection from **County Highway 73** along Manitou Street (Lake Ridge Park to Lake Mitchell)
- Continue the trail from Highline Park along **Highland Drive**; connect it to County Road 73 Trail
- Create a regional connection along **County Highway 5** (Eagle Lake Road) at Lions Park North to Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge
- Build a connection along **205th Ave NW** (Bluff Park neighborhood to Liberty Elementary)
- More clearly delineated pedestrian/cycle route along **198th Avenue**
- Build an additional connection from **County Highway 73** along Highland Trail to connect to Highland Drive/to McDowell Park
- Create a **direct east-west connection** from 204th Avenue NW to Big Lake (a trail easement will potentially be required).

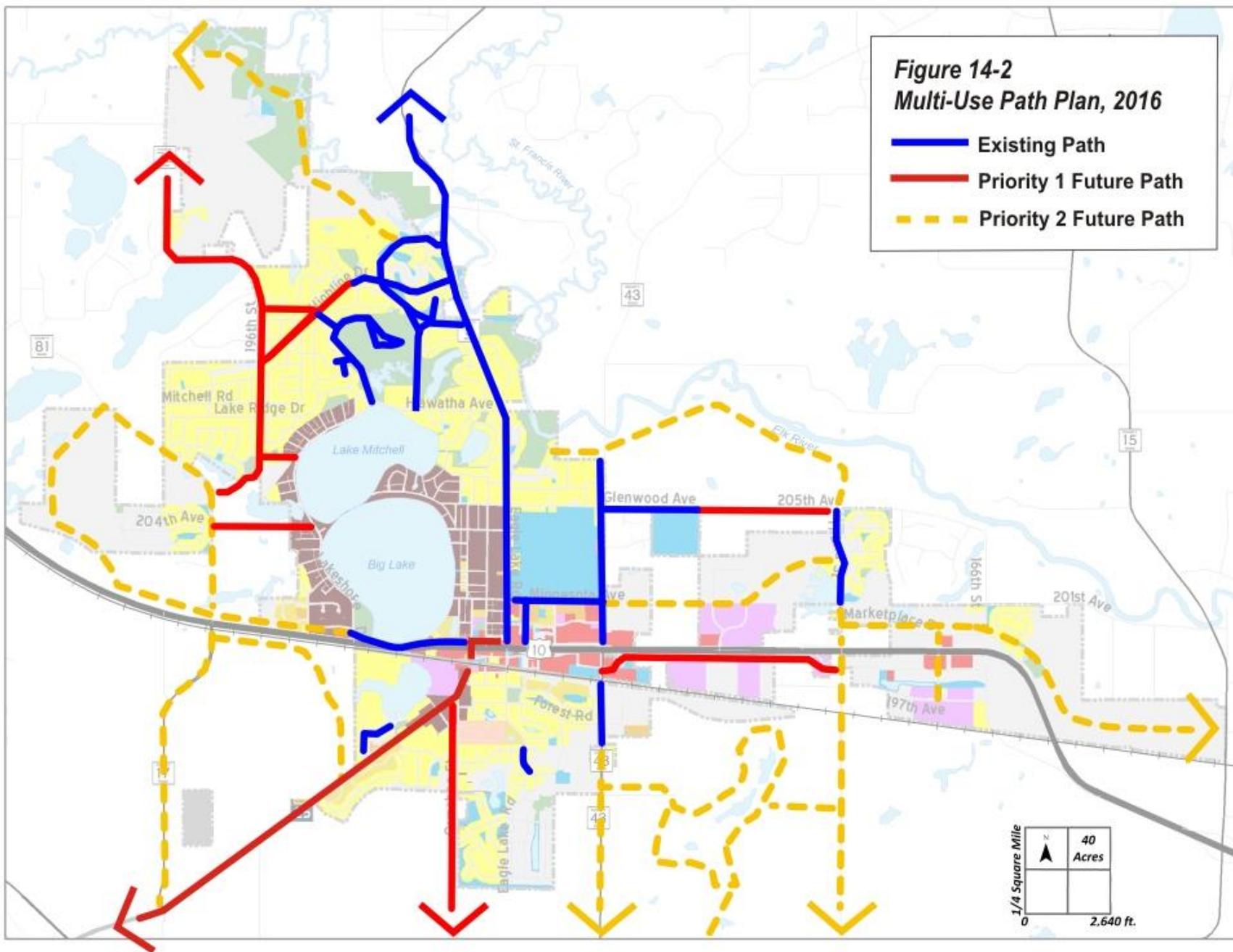
3. Long-Range Trail Improvements

- **Elk River Trail** (south side of Elk River from CSAH 43 to 172nd Street)
- **Elk River Trail** (south side of Elk River between CSAH 5 and CSAH 43)
- **Elk River** (Sweetwater Bend to CSAH 5)
- **Industrial Park East Trail** (Minnesota Avenue to Highway 10)
- **172nd Street** Parkway to Highway 10
- **Hudson Woods Trail** (172nd Street to 196th Ave and US 10)
- Trail Connecting **Big Lake Marketplace to Hudson Woods** (along Railroad)
- CSAH 81 Trail from **Norland Park to Wood Lake**
- CR 81 Trail from **Norland Park to Highway 10**
- Highway 10 Trail (from **Lakeshore Drive to Landis Lake**)
- South Side **Highway 10 to Highway 25** Trail
- CSAH 81 to Highway 10 to Highway 25 to Keller Loop Trail
- **Loop Trail** CSAH 43 to 172nd Street South
- **Minnesota Avenue Trail** (CSAH 43 to Prairie Meadows PUD)

These planned trail segments are illustrated and numbered by Figure 14-2 on the next page and in Appendix B of the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan*.



Off-road paths are part of a system that includes sidewalks and quiet local streets.



The Role of Parks and Trails in Urban Design

Locate and design parks and trails to enhance the quality of residential neighborhoods and commercial districts, reflect the cultural heritage of Big Lake and honor civic life.

Parks are a major and highly visible public investment that can have a significant positive effect on the appearance of a community and its quality of life. Big Lake has several fine examples of how parks and greenways can be used to improve or sustain nearby private investment. This objective recommends ways that existing or future parks should be used to help create better neighborhoods, promote revitalization and build an attractive community

1. A Network of Green Spaces

Big Lake will continue to build a system of green open spaces for recreation, urban beauty and natural protection that are linked by trails, sidewalks and on-street bicycle lanes.

2. A System of Civic Spaces

The City will regard the park and trail system as one element of a larger system of civic spaces. Through a high quality of design and stewardship, these civic features will sustain the quality of life, private investment and economic competitiveness of Big Lake. The elements should be designed to complement one another visually and functionally, and should be interconnected for motorists, bicyclists and pedestrians. Elements include:

- Plazas
- Public schools
- Civic buildings such as City Hall and the library
- Local or collector residential streets, sidewalks and street trees
- The designated “parkway” streets
- Off-street trails and on-street bicycle lanes
- Wetlands and ponds
- The several lakes

- Wooded areas
- The Elk River and its wooded edges.

3. Neighborhood Quality

In addition to providing amenities for residents, parks should be used to improve the level of private investment in nearby housing and create lasting value in neighborhoods. These public spaces should be regarded as visual assets and designed as such. Each park should:

- Be open to the neighborhood on at least half of its perimeter
- Include generous amounts of landscaping to soften and direct views
- Provide both active spaces and quiet, natural areas
- Use civic buildings such as a gazebo or picnic shelter as a focal point
- In a school-park situation, be designed in coordination with the facilities provided by the school.

4. Quiet Spaces

Parks should include quiet spaces for strolling or sitting wherever the landscape allows. Some locations in the park system should be managed to retain their wooded or otherwise natural characteristics to invite exploration and discovery. Such places offer a small refuge from the bustle of the urban environment and offer opportunities to connect with nature on a daily basis.

5. Civic Pride and Local Heritage

The City will design and maintain parks and other public spaces as the highest expression of civic pride and local heritage. Parks should be beautiful as well as functional so that current generations will enjoy their use and future generations will appreciate what they represent. Parks and greenways should be inspiring and represent the best of Big Lake.

Ecology and Environment

Plan and design parks and trails to protect environmentally sensitive features, reduce negative environmental effects and serve as models of land stewardship

Parks can and should provide benefits in addition to outdoor recreation such as protecting environmentally sensitive areas and connecting people to nature on a daily basis. This section describes several ways that the City will manage its parks and trails in an ecologically responsible manner while meeting other objectives.

1. Natural Preservation and Stewardship

Identify, preserve and enhance existing valuable natural areas such as wetlands, major wooded areas and native prairies (if any) and provide for appropriate use. Identify such lands prior to the process of neighborhood platting and development.

As a primary land owner of open space and environmentally-sensitive areas, the City should set a good example of land stewardship and urban design with its parks and other public facilities.

2. Manage Drainageways Naturally

Drainage swales and creeks are important for their ability to provide wildlife habitat and movement paths, cost-effectively manage stormwater, reduce flooding and serve as visual amenities. Drainageways in parks should be identified and maintained in a natural state. Mowing should be discouraged, and environmentally sensitive methods of bank protection should be used rather than engineering approaches.

Incorporate neighborhood detention ponds into parks for the sake of park aesthetics, water quality and land efficiency. This should be done without losing the amount of land needed for active park uses, however.

3. Use Sustainable Plantings

Work to judiciously reduce the amount of park area devoted to mowed turf and introduce in its place plant species that require less maintenance, provide habitat for birds, small animals and insects, and that improve the quality of water runoff. Control invasive, non-native species.

4. Link Open Spaces

Link major intact natural areas by corridors of native woods and grasses for the sake of wildlife habitat and movement, and urban aesthetics. Landscape elements that can be used for such links include streams and stream edges, fencerows and hedgerows, drainage swales, roadside ditches with natural vegetation, floodplains and wetlands.

5. Retain Unmanaged Spaces

Keep a few wooded or other natural areas in the park system at a very low level of management in order to provide places for people to explore on their own and experience a rudimentary bit of wilderness.

6. Set a Good Example

As the major public landowner within the community, the City should set a good example of land stewardship for the private sector to emulate by following these and other principles of sustainable design.

7. Provide Educational Opportunities

Educate the general public and teach park users about the physical and natural environments existing within the City's parks through the use of interpretive displays, plaques, educational programs, etc. Such efforts should address topics such as vegetation, wildlife, aquatics and geology as well as highlight significant historical events associated with a particular park.

8. Work with other Organizations

The City will work with allied organizations (e.g., Sherburne County Parks) that are dedicated to protecting the local natural environment in order to leverage spending and volunteer help, marshal political support and evaluate resources.

Park Improvements and Maintenance

Continue to improve existing parks and trails so they meet current recreation needs, are visually appealing and sustain the natural environment

Many recent improvements have been made to the Big Lake parks. However, some deficiencies still exist. The challenge will be to sustain an adequate renewal effort during periods of budgetary retrenchment.

1. Five-Year Improvement Plans

The City will continue to prepare five-year programs directing the maintenance and operation of its parks and trails. The most recent example was the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan*, which included lists of short-term and longer-term improvements by location along with detailed cost estimates.

2. Other System-Wide Improvements

Other plans specific to sites or topics also be prepared as needed. Recent examples include the River Oaks Park Master Plan and the study of alternative locations for a possible athletic fields complex (found in Appendix A of the 2016 *Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan*).

Plan Action Steps

**Table 12-2
Parks and Trails Plan Actions**

Action	Timing
Acquire Park Land: Acquire land for new parks during the process of land subdivision. Require dedication of cash when the plat does not include a location planned for park. Use the money to acquire land in the proper location later.	Ongoing
Acquire Land for a Community Park: Acquire land for a new community park in the southeastern quadrant of the city. It is anticipated that most of this acquisition will have to be done through direct purchase because of the planned size of this park.	2018 - 2030
River Oaks Park: Continue to improve River Oaks Park according to the adopted master plan.	2018 - 2020
Lakeside Park: Prepare a master plan for continued improvement of Lakeside Park.	2020
Athletic Field Complex: Continue to consider acquiring a location for and building a site for several athletic fields.	2018 - 2025
Sharing with the School District: Discuss how the City and the School District could collaborate for mutual benefit.	Ongoing
Trail Extensions: Follow the 2016 Trails master Plan and build or extend off-road paved paths.	Ongoing
Neighborhood Design: Use parks as the centerpieces of future neighborhoods.	Ongoing
Ecological Stewardship: Manage parks and other City open spaces in a manner that protects their natural and educational qualities.	Ongoing
Maintenance: Follow the recommendations of the 2016 <i>Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan</i> . Update the program by 2021.	2018 – 2021