



PARKS, RECREATION, & PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

Introduction & Background

The quality, quantity, and distribution of parks, recreational areas, and open space directly correlates to the livability of a region. A vibrant park system, and public recreational opportunities for all abilities, helps to increase our property values, stimulates economic development, decreases juvenile crime, and also improves our community's overall health standings. It's hard to put a number on the value of the ecosystem services that parks, open-spaces and forests provide, such as filtering our drinking water, cleaning our air, and helping to reduce high temperatures in the summer. Research shows that property values can be up to 20% higher if a home is located within 500 feet of a well maintained park. Parks and recreational facilities add to the region's economy by providing jobs, collecting user fees, and hosting sports events. Parks and public facilities can spur additional development, revitalization, and attract other investment. A vibrant and attractive parks system offers a higher quality of life for prospective new home buys and businesses looking to invest in a community. By keeping youth engaged through lessons, camps, sports programs and employment, the Rockford Park District helps decrease juvenile crime. Finally, parks and recreational facilities provide the opportunity to improve physical and mental well-being through exercise or recreation, which leads to a better quality of life all.

Inventory of Parks & Public Open Space

One of Rockford's greatest assets is the abundance of greenspace located within the region for the enjoyment of

both residents and visitors alike. One of the distinguishing features of the City of Rockford is the vast amount and beauty of the region's public open space, recreational trails and parks and playgrounds for families to enjoy.

Open Space

Open space provides a number of benefits to the public including its value as an asset to communities. In addition to acting as a recreational amenity for residents and visitors, accessibility to open space has been shown to improve public health, improve rates of physical activity, and reduce social and financial impacts of major natural disasters. Designated open space also serves as a home for the region's diverse ecosystems of trees, plants, and animals. The Rockford region boasts an ample amount of open space, with Winnebago, Boone, and Ogle Counties collectively having over 21,000 acres. Many of these acres are public and private lands (with public access) owned by various state and local governments, park districts, conservation districts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and not-for-profits. While a significant portion of Rockford is urbanized, neighboring municipalities and county lands offer plentiful access to open space in the form of wetlands, nature and forest preserves, conservation easements, trails, public parks, and the largest state park in Northern Illinois, Rock Cut State Park. It only takes a short drive to be in very rural areas of the county.

Over 5,780 acres of open space are located within the Rockford city limits, making up approximately 62.2 percent of the open space in Winnebago County. In total,

Winnebago County has over 9,300 acres of open space with several notable preserves and greenways, such as Harlem Hills Nature Preserve (Loves Park), Kishwaukee River Forest Preserve (unincorporated Winnebago County), Nygren Hills Wetland Trail and Overlook (Rockton), and Stone Bridge Trail Land and Water Reserve (Roscoe). Within a short distance, Rockford residents can also access approximately 1,800 acres of open space in Boone County, which is predominantly owned and managed by the Boone County Soil & Water Conservation District, and over 10,300 acres in Ogle County. In the three counties, the dominant owners of open space are private entities, such as the Natural Land Institute (NLI), followed by the State of Illinois, local governments, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

Parks

In addition to an abundance of forest preserves, natural areas and a state park, Rockford is served by an extensive local park system, which continues to be a strong foundation for the region's quality of life. Currently, 70 percent of Rockford residents live within a half-mile of a neighborhood park.

The majority of parks in Rockford are owned and maintained by the Rockford Park District (RPD). The RPD is the third largest parks and recreation system in Illinois and a three-time winner of the National Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Parks and Recreation. The RPD is responsible for 4,612 acres of regional natural lands and parks, of which 2,243 acres are within Rockford. The figure below outlines these natural areas in more detail by size.

	Acreage and Number of Facilities by Facility Type				
	All Properties		Within City Limits		
	#	Acres	#	Acres	% Acres In Rockford
Large Urban Parks	10	2,069	8	1,684	81%
Community Park	13	274	9	131	48%
Major River Park	8	41	8	41	100%
School Park	22	152	17	120	79%
Neighborhood Park	57	340	50	269	79%
Special Use Area	24	1,326	18	791	60%
Parkway	5	5	5	5	100%
Natural Resource Area	4	66	3	25	38%
Museum	4	164	4	164	100%
Connector Trail	3	43	2	1	3%
Not Specified	3	114	1	67	58%
Other	21	20	21	20	100%
Total	174	4,612	146	3,316	72%

Source: Rockford Park District

The Rockford region is considered the amateur sports capital of the Midwest, with RPD owning and operating many of the athletic facilities in the Rockford region, such as Mercyhealth Sportscore One and Two, UW Health Sports Factory indoor sports facility, Riverview Ice House, Carlson Ice Arena, and a multitude of golf courses scattered across Rockford. These facilities provide a wide array of recreational benefits to residents and visitors. In 2018, MercyHealth Sportscore Complexes and Indoor Sports Center were the top visited sites in Rockford and the surrounding area, bringing in 2,900,000 visitors. The Carlson and Riverview ice facilities together bring in approximately 532,200 annual visitors, while RPD's golf courses are also ranked at the top most frequented recreational facilities, with a collective visitation of nearly 195,000 people annually.

Mercyhealth Sportscore Two is the largest athletic field in the region. While this facility is located in Loves Park, it undoubtedly has an economic impact on Rockford as well. This complex features Wedgbury Stadium, which seats 2,500 spectators and hosts high attendance sporting events, such as IHSA State High School Soccer Finals, professional football games, national rugby finals, college rugby championships, and professional soccer games. Within the sports complex, there are concession and picnic areas, indoor and outdoor dining options, a tournament staging area for pictures, and a playground. Adjacent to the stadium is the Indoor Sports Center, a 60,000 square foot multi-sport indoor facility, which is complete with an indoor golf center, multi-sport soccer fields, volleyball/basketball courts, locker rooms, a sports equipment store, and restaurant. The venue can also accommodate a variety of events including conventions, expos, birthday parties, and festivals. Due to the amount of sporting events and programming available through this facility, this sporting destination is well known in communities outside of Rockford and spurs a large portion of the tourism revenue Rockford receives.

Additionally, Rockford is home to one of Illinois' limited number of equestrian centers, Lockwood Park. Lockwood Park Trailside Equestrian Centre and Children's Farm is home to a variety of animals and includes over 146 acres of natural area. It also offers a comprehensive trail system, playground, and picnic area. Lockwood Park is home to several summer camp options for those interested in horseback riding and/or agriculture, as well as week-long horseback riding lessons for kids ages three and up. Other events, such as Fall on the Farm, are programmed seasonally and draw a large number of Rockford's residents.

Rockford also has the third-largest indoor conservatory in the state, Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens, which opened in the fall of 2011. Located along the Rock River, Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens offers an 11,000-square foot indoor plant exhibition area where visitors can experience the intersection of art and nature. The area is complete with tropical plants, sculptures, and seating areas. The adjacent gardens include an outdoor eclipse lagoon, with two fountains and a waterfall, a pedestrian bridge, patio areas, and walkways connecting the conservatory to the Sinnissippi Rose Gardens. Floral displays change on a seasonal basis and different art exhibitions are debuted throughout the year. Complimentary to the nature walkthroughs, Nicholas Conservatory offers educational programming where children can learn about plant and animal species, workshops and lecture series for adults, and event space for receptions or weddings. It is also located right on the Rock River and adjacent to the Rock River Recreational Path.

The Rockford Park District has long been viewed as a major asset to this community for the quality, inclusiveness, and variety of facilities they provide for all ages and abilities. However, limited financial resources have left gaps in services and infrastructure provided by RPD. In order to address these gaps and other challenges facing the Rockford region, RPD engaged an estimated 37,000 individuals over a six-month process to inform the development of a five-year strategic plan in 2018. The action plan provides a series of recommendations that will help guide investment in the district's assets, along with decisions regarding underutilized park facilities and amenities. In addition, participant feedback regarding recreational needs is being used to determine areas to reinvest in, eliminate, or strategically add.

Key recommendations included:

- Expanding youth programming, leadership development and employment opportunities, refurbishing playgrounds and shelters, and providing new trending amenities and programs for youth, teens, and families;
- Repurposing Sportscore One to natural flood plain, and introducing other recreational opportunities that reduce overhead costs and sports field maintenance (fishing, conservation clubs, etc.);
- Enhancing investment in Clarence Hicks Memorial Sports Park; and
- Continuing to improve fields and facilities at Mercy-

health Sportscore Two.ⁱ

Trail & Bikeway Facility Types

Trails and paths within Rockford offer unique opportunities for active transportation and provide connections to high-quality environmental corridors and parks. While trails and paths are often seen as a place for recreational opportunities and exercise, they can also be tools for non-motorized mobility and commuting throughout all seasons. In other words, some people use them for transportation. In the winter months, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing are popular activities among those who utilize the trail systems. Ultimately, local trails, paths, and bikeways are connectors that bridge the gap between larger interregional trails and neighborhoods or communities divided by major roads. Within Rockford, there are 98 miles of shared-use paths, as well as 57 miles of bikeways, providing a total of 155 miles in active transportation opportunities on designated facilities.

Some of the most prominent multi-use trails in the Rockford region are listed below.

- Anna Page Park Trails: This park is home to a number of trails for mountain bicyclist and equestrian users. In combination with Lockwood Park, these trails wind through five miles of natural wooded land.
- Atwood Trails: Atwood Park has approximately five miles of multi-use trails for beginner and intermediate users, a parking area, trail signage, and a bike wash/repair station.
- Rock River Recreation Path: Coming to fruition through a bicentennial community project in 1976, the Rock River Recreation Path is one of the oldest and most scenic paths in the system. This path travels by the YMCA, Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens, Shorewood Park, and Martin Park. Along the trail, visitors can view several notable sculptures and works of art, such as the Rockford Symbol and Rockmen Guardians.

Several neighborhood parks within Rockford also provide residents opportunities to enjoy walking or biking closer to home, including Dahlquist Park (0.43-mile walking path); Landstrom Park (0.75-mile paved path); Brown Park (0.5-mile paved path); Wantz Park (0.5-mile path); Mulford Crest Park (0.46-mile paved path); Levings Lake Park (1.3-mile paved roadway); Haight Park (0.32-mile path); and Midway Village Museum Loop (1.4-mile paved path).

More information on the City of Rockford's trail and bicycle facilities can be found on the R1PC interactive greenways map and the Rockford regional bicycle interactive mapping programs. Both platforms show the shared-use paths and existing bicycle facilities within the Rockford region, including information on facility type, length, signage, markings, and agency ownership.

Greenways

Greenways connect existing areas of open space to other lands within our region. While a greenway can be considered a part of a larger ecological system, it can also be any open spaces or landscaped paths that facilitate pedestrian and bicycle movement and recreation. Although many greenway plans focus on trail networks, the Rockford region's plan considers both trail and natural area networks that also connect wildlife from one area to another.

Greenways are similar to arteries connecting vital organs together into one cohesive unit. They are part of a network of green infrastructure, linking together parks, preserves, wetlands, unique habitats, and other environmentally sensitive areas, spanning across urban and rural lands. They provide an opportunity for the natural circulation of plants and animals from one habitat to another, and even through or across features that act as barriers. Greenways are not only planned and managed for their natural resource value, but also for the associated benefits and services they provide to people and communities, including the promotion of active transportation and the resulting health benefits.ⁱⁱ

Greenway network maps typically display a region's robust greenways system, which facilitates a better understanding and awareness among local jurisdictions and the general public. One of the major functions of the Rockford region's greenways map is to serve as a navigational resource for individuals looking to take advantage of the region's open spaces. The 2021 greenways map provides an overview and illustrates the basic functionality of the greenway network by highlighting the spatial relationship between trails, transportation infrastructure, water resources, environmentally sensitive areas, and publicly and privately protected lands. The greenways plan also aids in the acquisition of new property by the park districts and forest preserves, especially areas that are listed as environmentally sensitive or as priority acquisition areas.

Currently, a corridor study for the main branch of Keith Creek, which runs right through the southern portion of downtown Rockford, is underway. R1PC has partnered with the consultant team of The Lakota Group, Studio GWA, Strand Associates, and Hey and Associates. The purpose of this plan is to create a vision for Keith Creek and development of a comprehensive creek corridor analysis of the main branch of Keith Creek, including socio-demographic metrics, access to transportation, and environmental conditions. The main purpose of this project is to find funding to develop a new greenway to connect to existing parks, recreational areas, and community assets to extend the network of paths and trails within our region. Ultimately, this project needs to address stormwater mitigation and urban flooding along this corridor as a whole in order to be successful.



City Markets & Other Open-Air Market Events

An open-air market, also known as a farmers market or city market, is a public marketplace where food, produce, and merchandise is bought and sold. Many farmers markets are seasonal and usually held during the summer and early fall, correlating with peak harvest seasons and good weather.

Farmers markets have become increasingly popular for consumers and communities, and have proven to be important economic outlets for many farmers and small businesses. When food is produced, distributed and sold within the same region, the money stays in the local economy. Additionally, farmers markets provide opportunities for small farmers and businesses to sell their products directly to consumers, and meet a growing demand for locally produced food and goods. Being able to directly supply their goods provides farmers income opportunities without additional costs associated with shipping. This ability makes farmers markets cost-effective for vendors and consumers alike. Additionally, these markets have the potential to increase access to healthy food in disadvantaged areas depending on their location and price.

Rockford City Market

One of the most popular markets in the Rockford region is the Rockford City Market, which opened on June 11, 2010, with nearly 1,000 visitors. Since opening, the market has expanded its footprint, secured over 70 vendors, and attracts an estimated 100,000 visitors per season. Rockford City Market is open every Friday starting mid-May and runs through the end of September, with hours typically between 3:30 pm and 8:30 pm. It is located in downtown Rockford at the intersection of Water Street and East State Street.

Rockford City Market is known for bringing together local farmers, crafters, artisans, and musicians to celebrate what Rockford has to offer. Rockford City Market focuses on local products and small business development by giving priority to vendors within a 150-mile radius of the city. By promoting the sale of local products, it offers the opportunity for local entrepreneurs and businesses to test and refine their products, encouraging business incubation and success. Because it showcases local food, goods and services, the market is able to act as a driving force behind community enhancement, increasing access to fresh produce, facilitating social connection, and highlighting the local culture of the community.



Rockford City Market

While Rockford City Market started as an open-air market, in 2018 the Indoor City Market building was opened as an indoor market that is open year-round with varying tenants. It is located across from the Rockford City Market on 116 North Madison Street and has two rental spaces, the Bowtruss Room and Market Hall, available for weddings, corporate events, or other special events year-round.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the years, the Rockford City Market has expanded allowing for supplementary initiatives to take shape. Current programs and initiatives associated with the Rockford City Market are:

- **Incubator Kitchen:** The Incubator Kitchen offers a commercial grade kitchen on the top floor of the Indoor City Market building to be rented by someone who wants to start up a catering or other food-related business. The kitchen comes with a manager, as well as a double-deck gas convection oven, a ten-burner gas range, 60-quart planetary mixer, char-broiler, reach-in freezer and coolers, stainless steel prep tables, storage shelves, and baking sheets and small wares. Bookings for the kitchen are available seven days a week/24 hours a day and can be used through a contract agreement or for occasional users.
- **Vintage Market:** Started by Rock River Development Partnership in 2015, this one-day-only market focuses on vintage, and vintage-like, vendors with quality vintage, antique and re-purposed items, such as home and garden goods, furniture, clothing, jewelry, art, and children's items. Admission is free and features food, beverages, and entertainment for shoppers.
- **Creative Studio:** On the second floor of the Rockford City Market building is a Creative Studio, encompassing 748 square feet. The studio is available to rent and offers space for individuals to host their next production project.

Amenities that are provided with the rental space include private restrooms, a mini fridge, microwave, three vanities with seating, a velvet sofa, full length mirror, clothing racks, and vintage-inspired chandelier. Prices vary depending on length of time rented.

Other Farmers Market

In addition to the City Market, Rockford has a number of other farmer and open-air markets, of which are listed below.

- Edgebrook Farmers Market: The Edgebrook Farmers Market is open every Wednesday from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm during the summer and fall months.



Edgebrook Farmers Market

- Forest City Church Farmers Market: Previously the Heartland Community Church (HCC) Market, holds a weekly farmer's market in their parking lot, every Friday from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm Mid-May through Mid-October.



Forest City Church Farmers Market

- North End City Market: The North End City Market is located at the southeast corner of North Main and Auburn Streets, and runs on Saturday mornings from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm.



North End City Market

- Pasqua Mercato: Pasqua Mercato is a seasonal open-air Italian market located along East State Street. The market is open on Sundays from 11:00 am to 3:00 pm during the months of June, July, and August.



Pasqua Mercato Open Air Italian Market

- Rockford Midtown Farmers Market: Located at 502 Seventh Street, the Midtown Farmers Market is open 9:00 am to 1:00 pm on Thursday mornings from June to September. Rockford Midtown Market encourages a community gathering for ethnic food, farm produce, coffee drinks, kid activities, music, and crafts.



Rockford Midtown Farmers Market

Goals Objectives and Implementation Strategies

PARKS, RECREATION, & PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

Maintain and expand open space along the Rock River corridor for recreational use and other silent sports

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Support further implementation of the Riverfront Walkway Plan by filling in remaining gaps	\$\$\$\$	Medium	High
Prioritize linking the Morgan Street Bridge path to Sports Factory path utilizing the parcel that ComEd currently owns but won't allow access to	\$\$\$	Short	High
Fill in gaps using logical termini planning methods, starting with easiest sections and working the way up to harder to finish gaps that may have private ownership or other constraints to development	\$	Medium	Medium
Construct two-way, multi-modal, recreational paths over major bridges on the Rock River. Similar to the seasonal designated bike lane on State Street but with year round access	\$\$\$	Medium	High
Maintain and continue to install small resting areas along river corridor pathways, and other major recreational paths	\$\$	Medium	Medium

Enhance and expand off street pathways, trails, and linear parks for both recreational and commuter uses

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Continue reducing all existing gaps along major bike trails and paths	\$\$	Medium	Medium
Connect city-wide parks to the existing protected natural areas of the regional greenway network	\$\$	Medium	Low
Find funding or grants to install bicycle and pedestrian counters on key trails and intersections for time of day counts. This will help to align funding opportunities with current and future needs, and work to improve safety as well as ensure that funding is utilized best	\$\$	Short	High

Preserve and enhance walkability within city

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Extend the current network by targeting neighborhoods through infill development with high pedestrian use but currently with no infrastructure, or failed infrastructure to the point where it does not function, and people walk in the streets	\$\$	Medium	High
Analyze pedestrian infrastructure needs at or near bus stops and shelters to create more complete networks, especially between modes of travel that are generally connected (such as walking and public transit)	\$\$	Medium	Medium

Ensure all Rockford residents live within a 10-minute walk of a neighborhood park or a recreation center			
Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Identify opportunity sites available for parks, open space, and related public facilities on vacant land parcels	\$	Long	Low
Work with the Rockford Park District to prioritize and develop neighborhood parks in areas identified with service gaps	\$	Long	Low
Ensure proper maintenance and vibrancy of parks, public green space, and public facilities			
Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Assist the Rockford Park District with near and long-term planning for facilities in all planning areas	\$	Medium	Low
Assist the Rockford Park District with near and long-term land acquisition for the development of indoor and outdoor public facilities. The city should have more involvement in capital planning initiatives because of the direct and very great impact these decisions can have on the City of Rockford	\$	Long	Low
Coordinate with Rockford Park District to increase programming and events at the Indoor Sports Factory to pre-Covid levels, and more	\$\$	Short	Medium
Continue assessment, remediation and redevelopment of brownfield sites			
Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Establish training and other community engagement programs to build capacity within community-based organizations in brownfield redevelopment planning and implementation	\$\$	Medium	Low
Create a green remediation guide for site remediation and improvement information regarding past, current, and possible future project locations	\$	Medium	Medium
Establish green remediation approaches for redevelopment of city land	\$\$	Medium	Medium
Study the economic value of brownfield redevelopment within the city boundary, rank properties with the highest return to market potential, and increased property value possibilities	\$\$	Short	Medium
Coordinate with the Rockford Area Economic Development Council (RAEDC) to market current vacant facilities and connect prospective businesses with unique properties prime for adaptive reuse with the possible need for remediation, or where cleanup has already occurred	\$\$	Short	Medium
Incentivize development in regions of the city where investment is stagnant or declining over the years			
Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Leverage public sector infrastructure development for private investment in stable and declining planning areas	\$	Long	Low
Evaluate and advance strategies with existing TIF District redevelopment plans	S	Short	Medium

Chapter Endnotes

- i <https://rockfordparkdistrict.org/priorities>
- ii 2021 Greenways: A Greenways Plan for Boone, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1U-eT1RqGWa9yjN-jw0Ydgoi165qa1j3V/view>
- iii <http://www.rockfordcitymarket.com/about-4>