

*Summary and
Introduction*

Eau Claire Waterways Plan



Summary of *Eau Claire Waterways Plan*

The Eau Claire Waterways Plan is a statement of the community's goals and policies with respect to its waterways. It is a guide to City investments along the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers, the five creeks – Sherman, Lowes, Taylor, Little Niagara and Otter -- and Half Moon Lake. It is also a reference for private property owners and investors near those waterways. The plan is adopted as an element of the City's *Comprehensive Plan*, although specific decisions about City spending and ordinances will be made by the Council as the need arises.

Chapters of the Plan

The chapters of the *Eau Claire Waterways Plan* are:

- 1. Parks and Trails:** Establishes guidelines for the acquisition of additional park land (known as the Greenway) along the waterways, the extension of multi-use paths and on-street bicycle routes, and the design of park facilities along the waterways.
- 2. Land Use and Urban Design:** Provides direction for land development in the waterway corridors and offers guidelines for site planning and architecture adjacent to the Greenway.
- 3. Natural and Cultural Resources:** Addresses ecological stewardship along with the protection and interpretation of cultural resources near the waterways.
- 4. Economic Development:** A plan to leverage the amenity of the waterways for the benefit of economic growth across the community.
- 5. Plan Implementation:** A program to advance the plan that includes a list and map of the major initiatives along waterways plus ideas for funding, partnerships, regulation and education.
- 6. Discovery:** Background information and a description of the major planning issues.

Central Goals for the Waterways

- 1. The Greenway:** Continue to improve waterfront access and enjoyment through growth of linear parks and connections from the neighborhoods in coordination with land development.
- 2. Land Use and Urban Design:** Guide land use and design in the waterway corridors in ways that enhance both the development and the Greenway.
- 3. Ecology:** Protect and improve the natural functions of the waterways and their riparian environment.
- 4. Economic Development:** Boost jobs and economic investment in Eau Claire through the amenity of the Greenway in conjunction with other public facilities, services and infrastructure.
- 5. Achievement:** Implement this plan through sustained and continuous municipal investments aided by other public and private resources.

Principles of the Waterways Plan

Honor the natural qualities of the water ecosystems

Protect or restore the natural environment along the waterways in harmony with nearby urban development. Give first priority to nature at the water's edge. Treat the waterways with the respect they deserve.

Think at the scale of the watershed

Plan and act throughout the watershed for the benefit of the streams and lakes. Coordinate trails, parks, drainage and land use with Chippewa Falls, Altoona, the Village of Lake Hallie, the Towns and the Counties. Topography is the only boundary known by the waterways.

Connect the city to the waterways

Improve views, build connective streets and paths, and orient buildings to the waterways.

Complete the greenway

Continue to create linear parks and trails along the waterways for recreation, ecology, economic development and lasting neighborhood value.

Touch the water

Make it easier for people to get onto and into the water. Create strong personal bonds with the waterways through touch and use.

Leverage development

Use the intrinsic beauty of the waterways to attract development to the corridors. Lift neighborhood housing values with connections to riverfront parks and trails.

Promote the image

Use metaphorical and actual images of "clear water" as a long-term public relations tool in marketing and branding. Promote the idea that this is a community built around and benefiting from abundant, world-class water resources and a magnificent river confluence.

Integrate surface water

Combine the management of surface water with recreation, water quality and habitat improvement.

Design thoughtfully

Guide designers to simultaneously benefit from and contribute to the greenway.

Raise awareness and build support

Partner with other organizations to improve the public's knowledge of and support for the waterways.

Communicate with art

Use public art for path-finding, interpretation, communication, beauty and enjoyment.

Partner for success

Build partnerships supporting the implementation of the plan with industries, businesses, neighborhoods, schools, business districts, institutions and other units of government.



The ability of people to closely experience the water will help build support for proper stewardship of the Waterways.

Key Actions and Measures of Success

1. **The Greenway**

Continue to improve waterfront access and enjoyment through growth of linear parks and connections from the neighborhoods in coordination with land development.

Key Actions:

- Complete the Greenway around Half Moon Lake
- Complete the Greenway loop on both sides of the Chippewa River north of Madison Street including the High Bridge river crossing
- Acquire steep, wooded slopes along the Eau Claire River and extend the Greenway.

Measures of Success:

- The High Bridge decking will have been connected to the existing City trail system
- A corridor of land from City-owned property along the Eau Claire River will have been dedicated as park
- A loop trail will be completed around Half Moon Lake.

2. **Land Use and Urban Design**

Guide land use and design in the waterway corridors in ways that enhance both the development and the Greenway.

Key Actions:

- Complete the redevelopment of the North Barstow District
- Redevelop Haymarket Square into multiple uses and Greenway
- Continue redevelopment of the Oxford Avenue corridor following the *West Riverside District Plan*
- Develop the 21-acre City-owned site near River Prairie Drive and Galloway Street
- Adaptively re-use the industrial building at Dewey and Galloway Streets

Measures of Success:

- Obsolete buildings will have been replaced
- Land uses will have taken advantage of and complement the Greenway
- The City's Waterways Development Guidelines will have been completed.

3. **Ecology**

Protect and improve the natural functions of the waterways and their riparian environment.

Key Actions:

- Prepare an ecological assessment and management plan for the existing and planned Greenway
- Protect and enhance the steep river banks according to the guidance of this plan.

Measures of Success:

- Invasive plant species will have been reduced in number and extent
- Steep riverbanks will have been protected in a visually pleasing manner
- Views to and from the water will have been improved

4. Economic Development

Boost jobs and economic investment in Eau Claire through the amenity of the Greenway in conjunction with other public facilities, services and infrastructure.

Key Actions:

- Use the Greenway in local and regional marketing campaigns
- Achieve or complete redevelopment with new jobs, businesses and housing at key riverfront locations including the North Barstow district, Haymarket Square and the Oxford Avenue corridor.

Measures of Success:

- The number of jobs across the city will have risen
- The number of jobs near the Waterways will have increased, especially in the sectors of professional services, finance, technology, hospitality, entertainment and the arts
- Private investment near the Greenway will have grown

5. Achievement

Implement this plan through sustained and continuous municipal investments aided by other public and private resources.

Key Action:

The Parks and Recreation Department through the Waterways and Parks Commission will facilitate and support coordinated enhancements to the Eau Claire Waterways, including:

- Advocating for funding requests
- Forging support from the business and not-for-profit sectors to further the aims of this plan, which may include financial or in-kind assistance or compatible land development
- Convening technical advisory groups for specific subjects or needs; sources may include city, state or federal agencies, academic faculty, independent experts or others
- Accelerating implementation of the *Waterways Plan*
- Monitoring the Measures of Success for waterways enhancements
- Generally becoming “champions” of the Waterways and this plan.

Measures of Success:

- Many of the public improvements recommended by this plan will have been accomplished
- Strong and sustained private and public support will exist for Greenway improvements and resource stewardship.

Major Planning Issues

These and other planning issues were identified during the Discovery process. The issues were used to guide the preparation of the plan.

Bank Treatments: How should the river banks be treated in terms of artificial versus natural conditions? Should all be the same? To what extent should waterfront buildings be visible either from the water or the opposite shore?

Redevelopment: To what degree should the City promote redevelopment of deteriorated, under-utilized or incompatible properties near the waterways?

Views of the Water: Should some river bank vegetation be cleared to improve views to the water? Can this be done selectively? Which locations are most important to open?

Water Access: What should be done to improve access to the water for recreationalists including anglers, boaters, and tubers? Should additional boat launches and fishing piers be built? If so, where? How important is it to be able to touch the water?

Waterfront Access: Should there be public access to the waterfront whenever feasible, including adjacent to private land redevelopment?

Additional Park Land: Should additional land be acquired for parks and trails along the upper Eau Claire or along the lower Chippewa River?

Multi-Use Paths to the Waterfronts: When and how should a multi-use path be extended all the way around Half Moon Lake? Should additional former railroad corridors be re-purposed as multi-use paths?

Creek Water Quality: What should be done to reduce harmful flows to the creeks including thermal pollution?

Water Safety: What should the City do to improve the safety of tubers and other river users?

Waterfront Zoning: How should the zoning ordinance be amended to accomplish the objectives of this plan? Should building setbacks be increased?

Invasive Species: Should the City work to rid the corridor of invasive plant species?

Industrial Development: Should industries along the river that are not dependent on the water be phased out?

Gravel Mine Areas: What should be the long-term use of the land now devoted to aggregate mining and processing?

Structures in the Flood Plain: Under what circumstances, if any, should the City attempt to buy and clear structures that are in the flood plain (e.g., for linear park and trail; for general flood impact reduction)?

Introduction and Purpose

Eau Claire, the major city and an economic leader in Western Wisconsin, is located at the junction of I-94, US 29 and US 53. But just as importantly, it is situated at the confluence of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers, a world-class water resource. Thus, the Eau Claire region has potential to support additional growth and economic development by leveraging and protecting its natural heritage.

The 1988 *Waterways Plan* by the City of Eau Claire has served the community well but many of its ideas have been implemented, attitudes about the rivers have evolved, and fresh political energy is needed in support of the rivers and creeks.

The Contemporary Role and Importance of the Waterways

The Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers were the economic foundation and reason for urban settlement in this magnificent valley, and they remain so today – perhaps more than ever.

In the contemporary era, and moving forward, the rivers and creeks of the Lower Chippewa River Valley will play an increasingly important role in economic development. Nowadays, they can and should be the focus of efforts to enhance quality of life, recreation and a sense of place. Those are important factors in attracting the creative class entrepreneurs, visionaries and business leaders that will nurture innovation that creates jobs in the 21st Century.

Water quality has improved in the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers to the point that tubing and fishing have become highly popular summertime escapes; the beautiful Phoenix Park has risen from the ashes of a steel manufacturing plant at the rivers' confluence; downtown redevelopment proposals are now orienting housing, offices and hospitality toward the water; a recent neighbor-

hood revitalization plan hinges on transforming a mile of disused riverfront to park and trail; and local medical and educational institutions now are making concerted efforts to leverage the natural qualities of the rivers for healing, enrichment and growth. In short, competition for connection to the rivers has become intense from all quarters of the economic spectrum.

The waterways of the Eau Claire urban region have re-emerged as a primary driver of regional economic development, and that role is expected to grow throughout the foreseeable future. A rising percentage of future jobs requiring a college education or creative skills can be expected to be attracted to locations within a quarter mile of the Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers in this urban area – but only if river corridor land use and transportation are properly managed. These resources – in combination with good-quality parks, schools, infrastructure, services and neighborhoods -- can grant the Eau Claire region a decided advantage in its national competition for the best and the brightest during the coming decades.



The Chippewa and Eau Claire Rivers are leading an economic rebirth of the City of Eau Claire and the region.

In addition, our awareness of the ecological wealth and importance of the river valleys has grown immensely. The City of Eau Claire is near the midpoint of the Chippewa River watershed, which is of continental ecological significance because it is home to such a number and diversity of fish, plant, bird and prairie species. To achieve the community's goals of economic development and quality of life, it will be essential to reverse past harms, restore lost habitat and protect river-related ecosystems through the urban area and throughout the watershed.

A New Approach to Land Use and Public Investments

A major element in the process of rediscovering the value of the rivers will be to rethink the use of nearby land. Beyond the protected floodplains and backwater estuaries, many long-term decisions will have to be made that balance natural protection, recreation, visual access and economic development. Every reach of the rivers must be carefully evaluated for its use as housing, business or public space. The economic value of the waterways is now derived from not just historic activities such as power generation, manufacturing and extraction but – perhaps more importantly -- contemporary benefits such as viewing, playing and appreciating. As our transportation and energy systems have evolved, so should our use of the rivers.



This local financial institution invested in a Downtown location to take advantage of views near the rivers' confluence .

Benefits of moving toward this more enlightened use of the waterways include:

- Improved neighborhood conditions; lasting value
- Economic development attracted by improved quality of life and desirable building sites
- Opportunities for active and passive recreation
- Increased spending by visitors
- Improved pedestrian and bicyclist circulation; enhancement of the Chippewa River State Trail and its branches
- Preservation and enhancement of natural and historic sites.

Careful river corridor planning will promote economic development, recreation and ecological stewardship. Shown here is a proposal for redevelopment and a new park in Downtown.



The Waterways Public and Agency Engagement Process

To build the political support for investments in a time of constrained budgets, the local population should be encouraged to use, enjoy, understand and appreciate the rivers. A connected system of parks, trails, access points and wild areas is building a critical mass of citizens that love and work for the waterways. Political support and sustained funding has grown as beneficial results have been shown in economic development and quality of life. This planning process has begun to rekindle political awareness and support for the river corridors.

The waterways planning process was crafted to result in ideas that can be put to work in the short term and over the decades; the proposals were broadly endorsed and engendered political support; and the process helped create “champions for the plan” who will stand up for it through thick and thin.

The process of public and agency engagement and communication was woven through each phase of the planning process. Key actions in that regard were:



A vigorous process of public and agency participation helped improve the plan and build political support.

Project Advisory Committee: A committee of citizens and officials that guided the project, offered ideas and reviewed proposals.

Meetings with Agency Staff: Met with representatives of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the US Army Corps of Engineers to understand their plans, regulations and resources and to review plan ideas.

Meetings with Commissions: Met with the Plan Commission, the Waterways & Parks Commission and City staff members and used a group process to identify opportunities, challenges and issues regarding public and private development.

Meetings with Major Landowners and Businesses: Met with major waterfront landowners and businesses to hear their thoughts on the use of the waterways and to review plan ideas.

Meetings with Economic Development Organizations: Met with representatives of the Eau Claire Redevelopment Authority and the Eau Claire Area Economic Development Corporation to hear their concerns and review plan ideas.

Draft Plan Reviews: Distributed and reviewed drafts of the plan chapters with all concerned groups.

Project Website: Distributed draft chapters, meeting information and contact names through a page on the City’s Website.