



Natural Systems, Open Spaces and Recreation

2-16

La Crescent is surrounded by exceptional natural features and maintains excellent park and recreation resources. This chapter describes the City’s commitments to protect and enhance those features.

Vision Statement



Our community in 2035...

The City of La Crescent is known not only for its exceptional driftless landscape, but also its conservation of natural features and resources. The City is recognized as a leader in environmental stewardship across the region. By expanding public access to bluffs and waterways, and attracting businesses that serve recreation needs, the City has cultivated a reputation for outdoor recreation opportunities. Recreational users have become active participants in the sustainable management of the region’s bluffs and waterways.

Issues & Opportunities



The planning process revealed the following issues and opportunities related to natural systems, open spaces and recreation that inform this plan for the future of La Crescent. (These statements are drawn from public comments, the Community Indicator Report, committee discussions and survey results and do not represent policy decisions.)

- The City is surrounded on three sides by prominent bluffs. The bluffs to the north and west feature some urban development, and also parks that provide some access to these lands. The bluff to the south remains largely undisturbed.
- The City borders the Mississippi River, however the river itself is not visible from most parts of the City. Residents identified the river as their most frequent outdoor recreation destination - nearly 60% of survey respondents reported using it for recreation at least four times in the past year.
- Eighty percent of residents rate the City’s parks as “Good” or “Excellent”. The City has several parks that are very lightly utilized and little known, based on survey results, including North End Park, Harris Park, and Vollenweilder Park.
- Recreational walking is the most common recreational activity practiced in the City, according to the survey, and walking trails are the recreational amenity that the most people would like to expand or improve. The second most popular amenity for which improvements are desired is bike trails.
- Residents indicated strong support in the survey for bluffland protection and access; more than 60% favor more trails, private and public land acquisition, and increased regulation on development and tree cutting.
- Blue Lake is considered a high quality wetland by the US Fish and Wildlife Service because of the diverse species it hosts (see box on next page)

Goals & Objectives



Goal:

Natural features and ecosystems in the La Crescent area will be conserved and restored

Objectives:

1. Local waterway health will improve through enhanced management of both urban and rural stormwater runoff
2. Bluff faces overlooking La Crescent will be permanently protected from further development
3. Existing residential development on bluff faces in and around the City will be obscured by mature trees

Goal:

Public access to and recreational use of parks, blufflands and waterways will be expanded and improved in the La Crescent area

Objectives:

1. There will be more hiking and biking trails and users in the bluffs around La Crescent
2. There will be more access points to the wetlands north and south of the pike, and more non-motorized users enjoying those areas
3. Public access improvements to natural areas will be designed to prevent or repair ecosystem damage and will be long-lasting with minimal maintenance requirements
4. Downtown La Crescent will serve as a trailhead for a system of regional hiking, biking and boating trails
5. Businesses tied to recreation uses will locate and thrive in La Crescent
6. La Crescent parks will be accessible to all residents and highly utilized
7. Parks and trails in the region will be clearly identified and easy to find and navigate.
8. As access to natural areas increases, there will continue to be wild and secluded places with limited human visitation
9. Scenic views of the bluffs and wetlands will be enhanced through the removal of billboards

Goal:

La Crescent will be recognized as a leader in environmental stewardship and natural resource conservation

Objectives:

1. *Continue to be recognized as a leader in urban forestry*



2.8 Goals, Objectives, Policies

Strategies



2-18

1. Encourage and support efforts by federal and state agencies, and local authorities, to protect and enhance fish and wildlife habitat in the backwaters of the Mississippi River located in proximity to the City of La Crescent. These backwaters extend in a “crescent” around the city, from the upper end of Shore Acres to below Barron Island, and include Blue and Target Lakes. Management actions to protect and enhance backwater habitat may include managing flows and hydraulic connectivity, increasing depth diversity in channels and backwaters, managing floodplain forests, invasive plant and animal management, and watershed management programs.
2. Support local and watershed-level water quality management activities that reduce nutrient, sediment, and other pollutant loads through point and nonpoint source pollutant control programs within the Pine Creek watershed. The City will also encourage and participate in watershed-level planning efforts.
3. *Use and enforce the City's sign ordinance to manage the size and brightness of signs, with particular emphasis on the protecting and improving scenic viewsheds.*
4. Encourage the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to install interpretive sign(s) at the canoe/kayak accesses planned near Chestnut Street and Twilite Street. Interpretive topics could include an introduction to the National Wildlife Refuge, the importance of Blue Lake as wildlife habitat and its function as part of the Mississippi River, and/or local history.
5. Explore construction of a birdwatching overlook along the shore of Blue Lake, including parking and interpretive signs. A key partner is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which identified this as a possible project in its 2006 Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Other partners may include FOR 78 (local Refuge Friends organization), corporations, and area service clubs.
6. Encourage the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to install interpretive signage along the Wagon Wheel Trail. Interpretive topics may include the history of the Stagecoach trail, the trail's recent and ongoing improvements, and the hydrology of the adjacent impounded backwaters.
7. Collaborate with La Crescent Township and private landowners to establish a contiguous trail network in the bluffs immediately surrounding the City. Identify former logging roads and current snowmobile trails as possible linkages between existing sites and trail segments.
8. Work with LaCrosse area partner governments to enhance the use of bluffland trails in the La Crescent area, including identification of public access sites on regional bluffland maps and use of common trail signage standards
9. Continue to collaborate with the Minnesota Land Trust to identify and pursue acquisition of bluffland sites for protection from development and public access improvements
10. Establish the downtown area as a trailhead for hiking, biking and canoe/kayak adventures in and around La Crescent. Add features such as a prominent information kiosk about trails and access points, public-access bathrooms that remain open during daylight hours, bike racks and an outdoor bike repair station, and safe and well-marked bike routes between downtown and key parks and trails. Consider creation of an interpretive center with robust information about the region's natural setting and recreational opportunities, possibly as part of a new City Hall.
11. *Establish a well-maintained, web-based source of information about outdoor recreation sites, trails, and amenities in the La Crescent area.*
12. *Highlight the City's scenic and recreation resources as part of a comprehensive promotion strategy to tell La Crescent's story and attract visitors, residents and investment.*
13. *Highlight in recreation promotion efforts, both externally and within the City, the location of Mississippi River access points, including Sportsman's Landing and the Upper and Lower I-90 landings.*
14. Prevent tree cutting around homes on the

bluffs by working with La Crescent Township, Houston County, and private landowners to establish and enforce strict regulatory limitations on tree cutting.

15. Plant more street trees in all parts of the City, and especially in newer neighborhoods.
16. Pursue and maintain Tree City USA designation.
17. Continue to use and implement the 2012 Park and Recreation Plan. Update that plan every 5 to 7 years, with an emphasis on improvements to the City's parks, trails systems, and water access points.
18. Maintain and implement a capital improvement schedule for all City parks that emphasizes trail development, signage improvements, and accessibility improvements.
19. Maintain participation in and Implement best practices encouraged by the Minnesota GreenStep program, which La Crescent joined in 2015.

About Blue Lake...

Community survey results revealed that many residents are not aware that the shallow water body south of the pike is called Blue Lake. While a portion of Blue Lake is within the city limits, much of the lake, and Target Lake to the south, is owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and managed as part of the 261-mile long Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Blue and Target Lakes and sections of other backwaters located in proximity to the city have been classified as having high value fish and wildlife habitat which is unique and irreplaceable on a national basis or in the ecoregion. Most notable and visible are the migratory bird species, including Wood Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, Hooded Mergansers, Least and American Bitterns, Common Morrhends, Night Herons, Sandhill Cranes, Tundra Swans and others.

To protect nesting birds, fish nurseries and furbearers, Blue Lake and the upper end of Target Lake were designated a seasonal Slow, No Wake Area by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2006. Each year from March 16 through October 31, watercraft must travel at slow, no-wake speed and no airboats or hovercraft are allowed in this area. Year round public access continues, with an emphasis on non-motorized boats that cause less disturbance to this valuable habitat.

Ownership of the rest of the Mississippi River backwaters in proximity to the city is a mixture of private and public ownerships, including the City of La Crescent and Minnesota Department of Transportation.

State agencies who typically work with the two federal agencies on river habitat enhancement/restoration projects in the area include the Minnesota and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Depending on the jurisdiction, permits for wetland work are issued by the Corps, Minnesota DNR, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and/or Houston County through the Environmental Services Department.

About the Billboards

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will remove billboards from Refuge-acquired land along Highway 14/61 after an existing use agreement with the sign company expires in 2022. The tract was acquired from willing sellers in 2004 with the use agreement in place.



Future Trail Map, 2012 Park and Recreation Plan

2-20

