2015 Parks Master Plan

Town of Merrillville

THE ARSH GROUP INC.

Planners·Landscape Architects·Development Consultants

Merrillville, Indiana

2015-2019 Parks And Recreation Master Plan

Town of Merrillville, Indiana

Department of Parks and Recreation

Parks & Recreation Committee

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Chapter 1

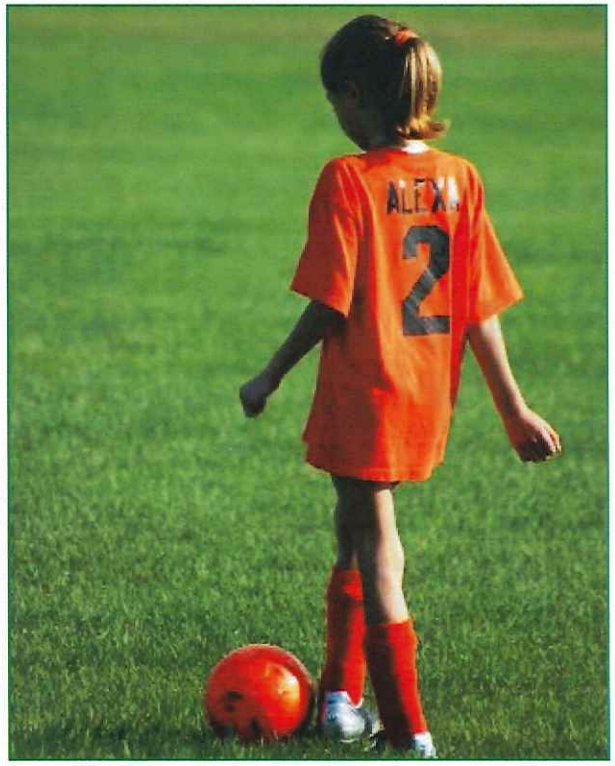
Introduction

Background

Over the past several decades, the traditional functions of parks and recreation have undergone a transformation. Family and community social activities have moved inside, while outdoor sports activity has declined. Parks as gathering places for family and neighbors to play sports, exercise, and for extended family activities have also shifted. Where weddings, family reunions, and other ceremonies were once a major park use, many of these functions are now taking place in expanded church facilities and banquet halls.

The most common neighborhood park function is tied to play activity for children. But at the same time, parks of today must also be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of a much wider range of constituents. Today, larger community parks provide a wider variety of facilities to accommodate daily walks or runs, picnic areas for family cookouts, and sports fields. Children playing on the playgrounds, adults enjoying a book on a bench, and the family dog running free are common activities. Community centers that feature spaces for daily activities and programs that organize these activities are seen as essential in the community as a safe gathering place for children and adults of all ages. Senior citizens require amenities for year-round activities to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle. The disabled and special needs population, who were more home bound in the past, have greater mobility now due to modern technology. Parks departments today are required to provide them with a full range of facilities and programs for a quality experience and meaningful lifestyle.

Today's parks do not only focus on active recreational uses. The rise of passive uses and enhanced beautification is becoming more prevalent. Creative aesthetic features of flowers, benches, and water elements like fountains and ponds make parks more attractive for use. The protection of environmentally sensitive areas is becoming more prevalent in modern parks, not only to protect the native ecology, but also to provide enhanced educational opportunities about the environment around the community and region. Sustainable parks have also become more of a necessity as the demand for resources increases.



Quality of life has become a major consideration for relocation and real estate decisions by families. This condition is more evident among suburban communities where people are less rooted to their hometown and more interested in amenities offered by the community. Working adults have also learned that daily exercise is essential for good health now and into their later years. They look to the parks to help them get that daily workout and provide them with opportunities to meet their lifestyle needs. For this group, the parks will need to provide facilities and programs that operate beyond the weekend hours. Their needs often require parks department to stay open later in the evening and start earlier in the morning.

The changing society and the market conditions are also imposing challenges for the parks departments. These challenges are forcing the departments to become more responsive and entrepreneurial while becoming more sustainable as funds are often not adequate to meet a variety of needs that are demanded. The societal changes require parks departments to adapt and respond accordingly to meet the needs of an evolving community.

Balancing all of these needs and adapting to ever-changing trends, while still providing a quality recreation experience, is the overarching goal of the modern parks department. This makes a comprehensive master plan document a vital resource and guide for achieving these goals.

The Town of Merrillville prepared its first Parks Master Plan in 2005. That Plan established a new course for the Town as a growing community to meet its residents' recreational needs. The parks and recreational conditions in the Town have varied significantly since the adoption of that 2005 Plan. The economic downturn over much of the past decade has resulted in the loss of tax revenue. Additionally, property tax revenue caps for commercial and residential properties that the State of Indiana had were enacted at that time dramatically limited the Department's income. Both of these measures contributed to the pressures in providing quality parks and recreation opportunities, resulting in a reduction of programs, services, or totally delaying implementation of facility development and expansion. On the positive side, the recent adoption of the Lake County income tax means that the parks department has the potential to see increased revenues, helping with the day-to-day operation of the department, as well as potentially providing more investment opportunities for program and facility expansions. In addition, the previous tax caps have since been lifted. Thus, the 2015-2019 Parks and Recreation Master Plan sees Merrillville at a crossroads, where the Town can begin to move from simply maintaining its existing inventory to expanding its offerings to better serve the needs of the Town.

Planning Process

The 2015-2019 Parks and Recreation Master Plan is Merrillville's official policy guide for parks and recreation acquisition and development. It considers not only the immediate needs and concerns of the community, but also the projected needs of the community on an annual basis.

The Town of Merrillville retained The Arsh Group, Inc. as the consultant for the Master Plan. The Arsh Group's involvement was to review and prepare specific elements of the Master Plan. The plan development process was very much open and participatory. It included community meetings for citizen input, discussions with the users of the facilities, and input from town officials. The Merrillville Parks and Recreation Department also played a major role in advising during the Plan development process.

Planning Area

The planning area for the master plan is the corporate boundaries of the Town of Merrillville. Because of the Town's development pattern, additional focus was made on the western half of the Town (generally, using Mississippi Street as the eastern boundary), as most of the current population of the Town resides in this area. The Parks Department is governed by a Parks Authority according to an ordinance approved by the Town Council. This ordinance sets the jurisdictional authority of the Authority as the corporate boundary of the town. Adjacent communities' plans were also reviewed and considered in development of this master plan. Exhibit 1 shows the planning area.

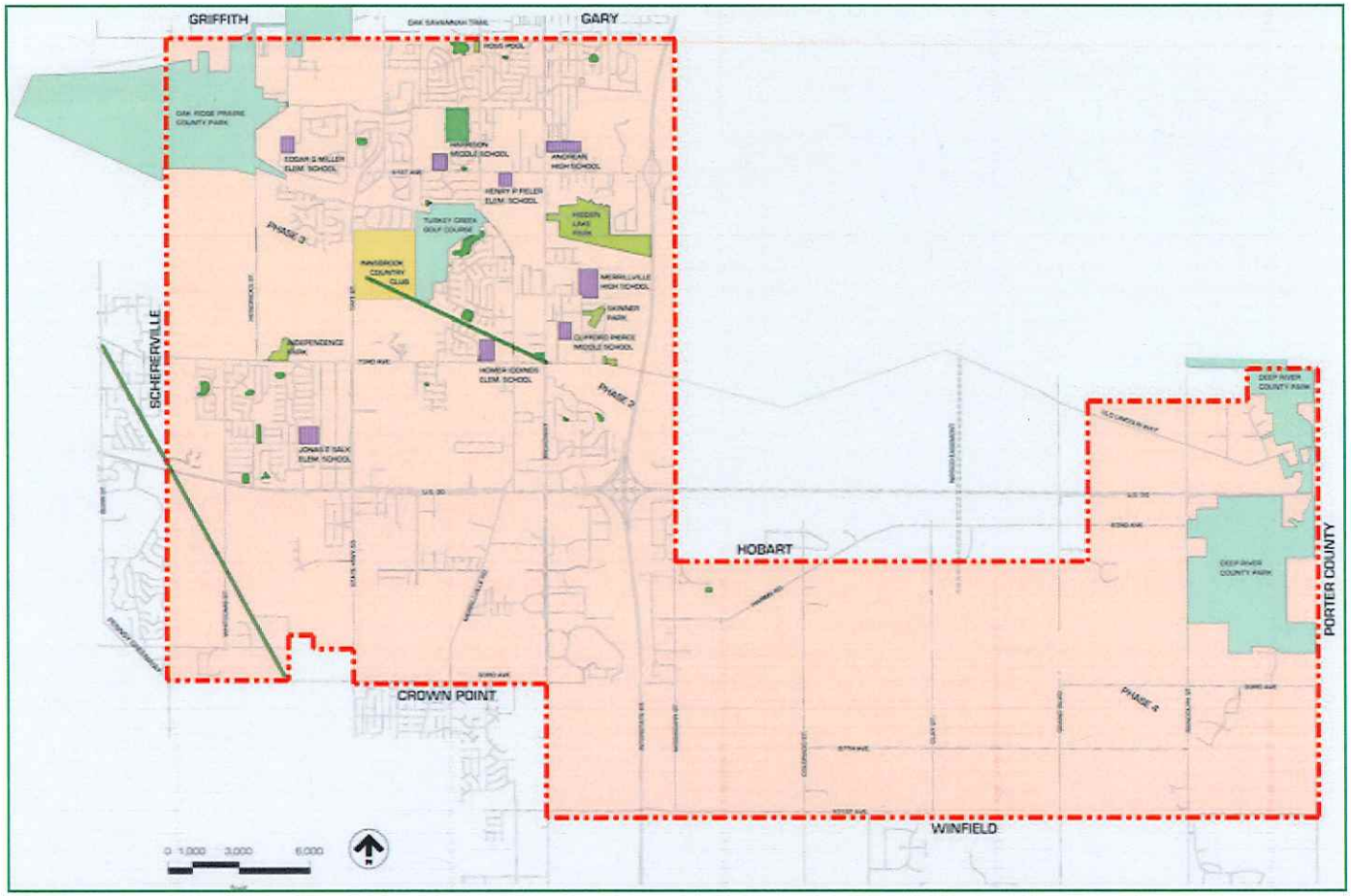


EXHIBIT 1 - PLANNING AREA

Chapter 2

Community Profile

Location

The Town of Merrillville is located in the northwest corner of Indiana in Lake County (Exhibit 2). The Town shares borders with several municipalities, including Schererville, Gary, Griffith, Crown Point, Winfield, and Hobart. Merrillville lies 30 miles to the southeast of Chicago and 140 miles northwest of Indianapolis. Interstate 65 traverses the Town in a north-south direction and connects Merrillville with Indianapolis to the south and the I-80/94 corridor to the north. U.S. 30, Lincoln Highway, crosses the Town in an east-west direction and connects the town to adjoining communities.

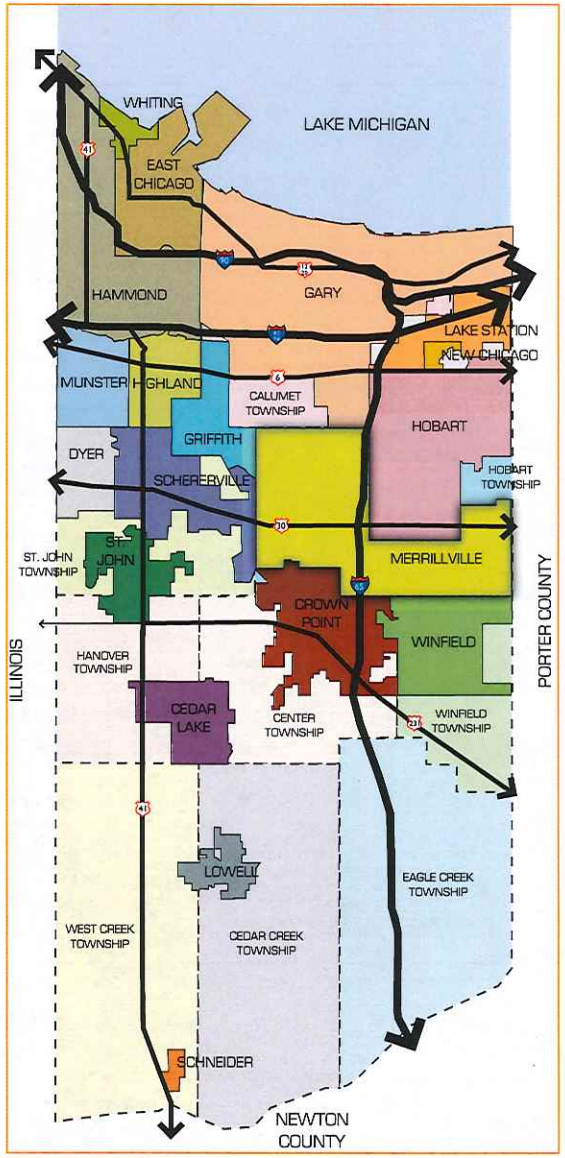


EXHIBIT 2 - REGIONAL MAP

History

The Town of Merrillville was once a populated and heavily forested area inhabited by the Potawatomie Indians. The Potawatomie were native to the land and were hunters and fishermen. Before 1837, the area known as Lake County belonged to 19 Potawatomie chiefs and ten white men. Early settlers found the northern part of Lake County to be dunes, marshland, and brush. They found the southern part of the county to be river marshes and prairie suitable for farming.

Other settlers came into the region by way of 16 trails to an area called Wiggins' Point. The major trail was the Sauk Trail, where development started on the edges of that area. Portions of this trail still exist as today's 73rd Avenue. In 1835, a white trader named Jeremiah Wiggins arrived at McGwinn's Village. Wiggin's familiarity with the language of the Potawatomie made it easy for him to begin trade with the natives. Settlement expanded after the federal government revoked the Potawatomie claim to the land in 1833. The Indians from this area became part of the larger forced resettlement in the West.

Merrillville is located in Ross Township, named after one of the early settlers, William Ross. Ross was one of the first white settlers in the area who made a home in the Deep River area in 1833. Since this area was near the center of the 16 trails, residents suggested the name of Centerville for the town developing there. It wasn't officially Centerville until the first post office opened in 1844. Two of the settlers who came to the area shortly after Wiggins' death were the Merrill brothers, Dudley and William. They farmed the area next to the Wiggins' property, which was then owned by the Saxton family. The first commercial building was a hotel for travelers. Dudley Merrill became the proprietor of the hotel years later. Other buildings including a general store and a blacksmith's shop were soon built near the hotel.

Dudley Merrill opened a cheese factory, ran the hotel for a time, and continued farming in the town. Both Merrill brothers had a significant influence on the development of the town. This influence was recognized when in 1948, the residents changed the name once again to Merrillville. By the early 1900's, expanded development throughout Lake County transformed the Indian trails of 1835 into major transportation thoroughfares that run through Merrillville: 73rd Avenue (Old Lincoln Highway), Highway 30, and Interstate 65 linking northern Lake County to the south.

ORIGINAL MERRILLVILLE POST OFFICE

OLD MILL (c. 1930)

Merrillville officially became a town in 1971 by incorporating most of Ross Township. (Parts of Ross Township remain as parts of Hobart and Crown Point.) The Town's boundaries generally reach from 53rd Avenue in the North to 101st Avenue in the South, and from Whitcomb Street in the West to County Line Road to the East. Merrillville covers 31 square miles of land. The area is characterized by gentle rolling topography of well drained fertile soil that is well suited for farming. Merrillville also has a series of tributaries that drain into Turkey Creek and Deep River.

The Town has continued to grow rapidly since its first settlement over 165 years ago to become the town we see today. By 2008, the population grew to over 31,500. The 2010 Census reported the population at 35,246, which has remained stable in recent years. The Town has evolved into a diverse and cultural community with rich business districts that support both residents and regional shoppers. Daytime trips, due to shoppers, restaurants, and business engagements increase the population of Merrillville to over 100,000 according to recent estimates. Merrillville's primary transportation routes include U.S. 30 and I-65, which runs through most of the Town, and effectively divides the Town into four distinct quadrants. State Road 53 (Broadway) is another major north-south thoroughfare connecting the Town to Gary and Crown Point.

BROADWAY & OLD LINCOLN HIGHWAY (c. 1925)

Natural Features

Several natural features contributed to the area's popularity during the settlement period. Area climate, soil composition, vegetation, and the quality and expanse of both surface and groundwater were all primary factors influencing growth and development of the Town. The following sections describe different natural elements in the Town of Merrillville.

Vegetation

The Town of Merrillville is located where upland and lowland areas of Lake County meet. These areas are typified by prairie and forest in the uplands and extensive wetlands in the lowlands. Various species of hardwoods such as several types of oak, butternut, and maple exist throughout the area.

In recent years, much of Northwest Indiana's ash tree population has been devastated by the invasion of the Emerald Ash Borer (EAB.) This insect eats away at the tissue between the bark and sapwood of ash trees, disrupting the transport of water and nutrients, eventually killing the entire tree. The most obvious visual symptom of an EAB-infected ash tree is canopy dieback, with several epicormic shoots forming around the roots, major crotches, and trunk of the tree. Infected ash trees may also feature two types of holes: small holes from woodpeckers that feed on EAB, and D-shaped holes from beetles that emerge from the tree.

Like many local communities, Merrillville has seen the negative effects of this insect. While healthy ash trees can be treated to protect them from EAB with regular systemic insecticide treatments, most ash trees are now unsalvageable and must be removed to prevent future damages and keep EAB from spreading. As the transport of wood is the primary way for EAB to spread, this removal process includes burning the removed tree to kill any EAB larvae still living within the wood to prevent future contamination. The Town received an IDNR grant in 2011 to help protect healthy ash trees while removing and replacing dead ash trees on Merrillville's streets. Because no known inventory of ash trees in Merrillville's parks has been undertaken, the effect of EAB in the park system is currently unknown.

EXAMPLE OF VEGETATION WHERE UPLAND AND LOWLAND MEET

TREE INFESTED WITH EMERALD ASH BORER (EAB)

Soils

Soil classifications (made up of a mixture of basic soil types) have been identified and mapped by the Soil Conservation Service in the Soil Survey of Lake County, Indiana. There are five different soil associations within the Town. Each of these associations has its own unique characteristics, including limitations for development, recreation, and agriculture. Three of these are:

- In the North, there is the Alida-Del Ray-Whitaker Association
- In the East and again in the West, there is the Morley-Blount-Pewamo association:
- In the Center, there is the Elliott-Markham-Pewamo association

These soils are best used for crops of corn and soybeans, pasture land, and trees. The seasonally high water table and ponding in the level soils makes drainage a problem and limits engineering development for roads and business districts.

Wetlands/Water Resources

Merrillville is in the Little Calumet River Watershed. Two major waterways are found within the Town: Turkey Creek and Deep River. Turkey Creek is approximately 11 miles long and flows generally eastward , emptying into Deep River. Deep River is a tributary of the Little Calumet River. It begins west of Crown Point and travels northeastward through Merrillville and Hobart, forming Lake George in Hobart, and eventually emptying into Lake Michigan.

Wetlands are found throughout the Town, but are particularly concentrated around the area's rivers and streams. The largest wetland complex occurs in the lowland areas in the northwest corner of the Town. The eastern "panhandle" area also has significant wetland presence. The wetland areas support a variety of flora and fauna and contribute significantly to the preservation of water quality and the reduction of floods.

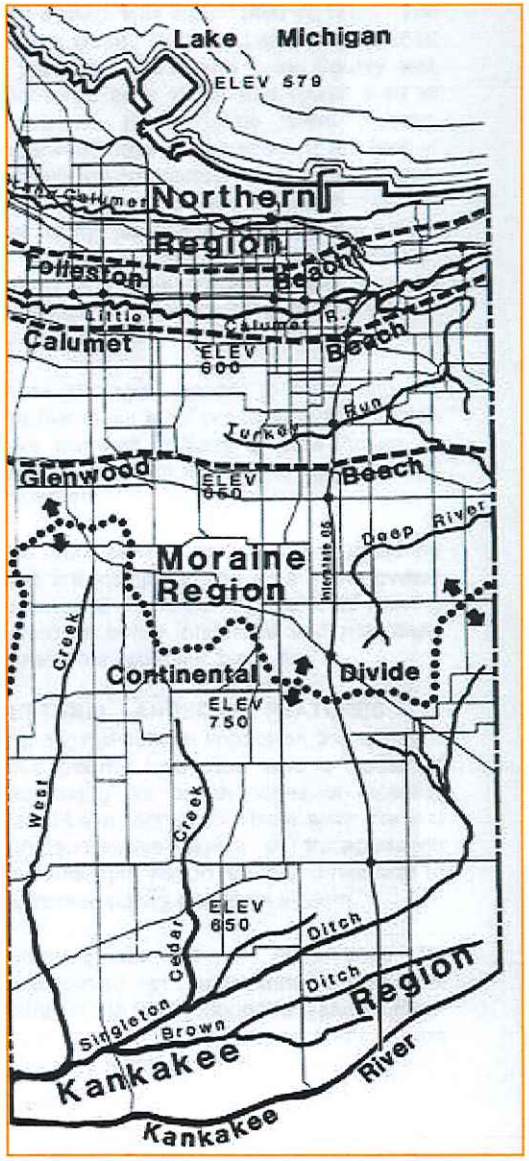


EXHIBIT 3 - SOILS MAP

Man-Made Features

The Town of Merrillville has an area of approximately 20,980 acres. The land use pattern in the Town ranges from agricultural, single-family residential homes, and open space areas, to commercial and office uses. Agriculture remains one of the dominant land uses in Merrillville, which are concentrated primarily in the "panhandle" area east of I-65, with other agricultural areas located in the far northwest and southwest parts of Town.

The majority of the Merrillville's current development lies west of I-65. Much of this land is residential in nature. With continued Town growth, new residential developments are beginning to appear south of US 30. Newer residential developments in the Town often include duplex homes or other multi-unit buildings. Commercial uses are primarily located along the major arterials of US 30 and Broadway, with some more modern office and research parks abutting these corridors. One of the most recent such facilities is Purdue Research Park, located at the corner of Broadway and 101st Avenue.

Much of the land east of I-65 in Merrillville remains predominantly undeveloped, generally consisting of various scattered uses surrounded by vacant land, open space, or forested areas. The areas between I-65 and Grand Street are currently zoned for a mix of agriculture and limited industrial uses. East of Grand Street, most of the land outside of the US 30 corridor is zoned for single-family residential.

Sensitive Sites

The State's 2000 Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan has inventoried the sensitive sites in the Town. Accordingly, the following areas have been identified:

- Deep River Marsh
- Deep River Woods
- Oak Ridge Prairie West

CENTIER BANK HEADQUARTERS - MERRILLVILLE

PURDUE RESEARCH PARK

Community Facilities

The Town of Merrillville is governed by a Town Council form of government. The Town has seven council districts with one representative from each district. The Town relies primarily on property taxes, state taxes, user fees, and federal grants as revenues for its operation. The total certified assessed valuation for the Town for the 2015 Budget Year was reported to be $1,733,148,542.

Past changes in tax structure, including former property tax caps, have created major difficulties for many communities including Merrillville. The most recent economic downturn has exacerbated this condition to the levels that Merrillville has had to resort to severe budget cuts despite its relatively healthy tax base. In turn, the Parks Department has had to rethink its programs and reduce its overall operation.

Fire Protection

The Merrillville Fire Department is responsible for fire protection in Merrillville and unincorporated areas of Ross Township. The Fire Department Headquarters is located at 26 W. 73rd Avenue. In 2014, the Department had 14 full-time officers working from the main station (Station 71), including one Fire Chief and one Deputy Fire Chief. The other 12 full-time officers work in one of three different shifts, with 4 officers per shift. In addition, there are 60 volunteer firefighters in the Department working among the four Fire Stations in the Department:

FIRE STATION 71

- Station 71: 18 W. 73rd Avenue
- Station 72: 7905 Taft Street
- Station 73: 9264 Old Lincoln Highway
- Station 74: 850 W. 57th Avenue

Parks and Recreation

The Merrillville Parks and Recreation Department administers all parks and recreation activities and programs within the Town. Currently, the Town has over 146 acres of park land ranging in size from 1/4 acre to 30 acres. Recreation programs have been stressed in the past, but the lack of funding and facilities has limited the development of robust recreation programs.

There are also several other recreation facilities in the Town that offer a variety of programs to residents. These facilities are described in more detail in Chapter 3. These additional facilities can be categorized into three different providers:

- Ross Township - Ross Township provides a variety of services to all of Merrillville, as well as parts of Crown Point and Hobart. Township services include emergency financial assistance and subsidized bus service for elderly and disabled residents through South Lake County Community Services. Ross Township has four park and recreation facilities: Hidden Lake Park, Ross Swimming Pool, Skinner Park, and Independence Park. The Township also owns several other smaller parcels in town, but they are all undeveloped.
- Lake County - Lake County Parks Department owns and operates several regional park facilities in the County. Most of these parks are focused on passive recreation uses and programs. There are three County park facilities in Merrillville: Turkey Creek Golf Course, Oak Ridge Prairie, and Deep River Park/Deep River Water Park.

DEEP RIVER WATERPARK

INNSBROOK COUNTRY CLUB

- Private - A variety of private facilities are also available in Merrillville. Most of them generally require membership to use their facilities, but may allow limited public or guest access. The regionally well-known Innsbrook Country Club is among the largest private recreation facilities in the Town.

Utilities

Sanitary sewer collection and conveyance is provided by two separate agencies, Independent Hill and Merrillville Conservancy Districts. The districts are independent agencies and are regulated by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management. These agencies have a contract with the Gary Sanitary District for waste-water treatment. The districts are not subject to operations or oversight by the Town of Merrillville. Nonetheless, these utility agencies have played a major role in the growth of the Town. The waste water collected within town is delivered to the Gary Sanitary District, where it is treated.

The Indiana-America Water Company provides drinking water to most of Merrillville proper, although in less developed areas, drinking water is primarily obtained from residential wells. Several subdivisions are also provided water by the Conservancy District.

The storm water drainage consists of several systems. These include separated storm sewers, open ditches, detention/retention ponds, and combined sewer systems. In most neighborhoods, the storm water is drained into a storm water sewer system or ditch that drains into a lateral tributary like Turkey Creek or Deep River. Most platted subdivisions, streets, retail centers, churches, and other developed lands have created a combination of storm water systems which often are not adequate.

The Federal government implemented mandatory regulations for the reduction of water pollution from stormwater runoff. To help address this, the Town has approved new ordinances to establish a Stormwater Management District. Under this Authority, the Town has adopted the new regulation entitled Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4). Under MS4, each municipality is responsible for their community and has assessed a fee tied to the property tax bill. The Town of Merrillville most recently established its stormwater utility fee schedule in 2008, which defines the assessment rate based on property type. In 2014, the Town commissioned a Stormwater Management Master Plan to help deal with the many flooding and stormwater issues the Town currently faces. The recommendations may have two important effects on the Parks Department. First, some of the plan's proposals may utilize existing parkland, which may in turn affect existing park facilities and the potential for future activities. Secondly, the use of non-parkland for stormwater management activities could create opportunities for new passive recreation areas.

Town Demographics

Population

From 2000-2010, Merrillville experienced rapid population growth, growing over 15% during the decade. Since 2010, the population has been stable, increasing by less than 1%. Between 2010 and 2013, the Town of Merrillville issued 113 building permits for 509 new housing units. The economic downturn in the latter part of the last decade is a major reason for this decreased level of population growth. As a whole, the following characteristics exist in the Town at the time of this report:

- Added 4,686 population between 2000-2010
- Added 236 population between 2010-2012
- Merrillville population projected to increase to over 38,000 by 2020

With most of Merrillville's current development being found in the northwestern quadrant of the Town, there is ample room for future growth in the southern and eastern areas that are currently greenfields or very sparsely developed. Changes in population can place demands on the Town's resources and impact quality of life and land preservation. The increase in population and estimated projections is also expected to impact the Town's future land use decisions since the needs for park land will require better management of the future developments. Especially in newly developed areas, ensuring that adequate parkland is preserved will be critical in being able to provide sufficient recreation facilities.

As a whole, Lake County has experienced a population increase of 2.1% since 2000. This includes a slight drop of 0.2% since 2010. According to the Census, Lake County's 2012 population was 494,961 in comparison with the 2010 total of 496,005. Population estimates predict Lake County will grow by approximately 2.7% over the next decade. Table 2 shows the projected population change, as well as changes for Merrillville. While Merrillville is expected to see a larger increase than the County as a whole, it is anticipated that the growth will be less than other surrounding communities.

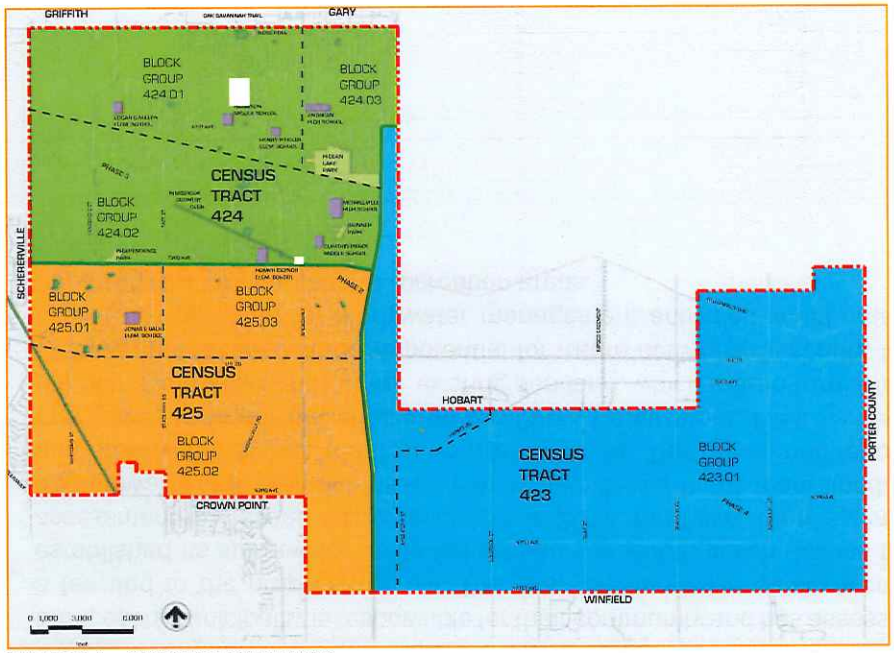


EXHIBIT 4 - CENSUS TRACT MAP

Year	Merrillville		Lake County	
	Total	% Change	Total	% Change
1980	27,677	-	522,965	-4.30%
1990	27,257	-1.52%	475,594	-9.06%
2000	30,560	12.12%	484,564	1.89%
2010	35,246	15.33%	496,005	2.36%
2012	35,482	0.67%	494,961	-0.21%

TABLE 1 - POPULATION COMPARISON (SOURCE: US CENSUS)

Location	1990	2000	2010	2020	% Difference		
					1990-2000	2000-2010	2010-2020
Merrillville	27,257	30,560	35,246	38,177	12.1%	15.3%	8.3%
Lake County	475,594	484,564	496,005	509,229	1.9%	2.4%	2.7%

TABLE 2 - POPULATION CHANGE

Year	Population	White	%	African American	%	Hispanic	%
1990	27,257	24,998	91.7%	1,367	5.0%	1,880	6.9%
2000	30,560	21,286	69.7%	6,987	22.9%	1,035	3.4%
2010	35,246	16,338	46.4%	15,673	44.5%	4,533	12.9%

TABLE 3 – POPULATION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

Population Characteristics

The Town of Merrillville has experienced a shift in population as the area has become more diverse in character. Table 3 shows different racial categories for the population in the Town. Minority groups have increased over the last decade, now accounting for over 56% of the Town's population. In particular, African-American populations have drastically increased, now accounting for over 44% of the Town's population according to Census reports.

	Category	423		424		425		Total
1990	White	4,082	98.3%	15,205	89.0%	12,766	95.0%	24,998
	African-American	0	0.0%	1,311	7.7%	305	2.3%	1,367
	Hispanic	211	5.1%	1,237	7.2%	771	5.7%	1,880
	Total	4,154		17,091		13,438		27,257
	% Minority	5.1%		14.9%		8.0%		11.9%
2000	White	4,081	93.8%	10,613	60.9%	14,140	83.7%	21,286
	African-American	88	2.0%	5,441	31.2%	2,382	14.1%	6,987
	Hispanic	271	6.2%	1,753	10.1%	1,432	8.5%	1,035
	Total	4,350		17,433		16,902		30,560
	% Minority	8.3%		41.3%		22.6%		26.3%
2012	White	4,651	66.2%	5,332	30.5%	4,867	49.9%	15,592
	African-American	1,310	18.6%	8,989	51.5%	3,436	35.2%	16,141
	Hispanic	745	10.6%	2,724	15.6%	1,251	12.8%	5,048
	Total	7,026		17,460		9,763		35,482
	% Minority	29.2%		67.1%		48.0%		59.7%

TABLE 4 – POPULATION DISTRIBUTION BY TRACT (SOURCE: US CENSUS)

A review of the racial characteristics for different Census Tracts since 1990 shows a general increase in the number of the minorities. The highest concentration of minority population is observed in northern Census Tract 424 where minorities constituted more than 67% of the population in 2012. Overall minority population has nearly tripled since 2000, with the overall percentage more than doubling in the same period.

Households

The 2010 Census for Merrillville indicates a substantial increase in the number of households in the Town, with over 2,000 new households moving to Merrillville in that decade. According to the Census data from the 2012 estimate, there were a total of 12,789 households in Merrillville, down 6.6% from the 2010 Census. Family households represent 7,987 of the total households and non-family households are 4,886. An increase of 31.5% occurred in non-family households between 2000 and 2010. Female-headed households increased dramatically from 2000-2010, with almost 1,000 additional such households in that time. The 2012 Census estimate, however, shows a decrease of over 17% in those households since 2010.

Despite a nation trend of decreasing household and family sizes, data for Merrillville show the average size of families and household to be increasing. Estimates for 2012 show the average household size of 2.73, on par with the average size from 1990, and higher than both the 2000 and 2010 Census figures. The average family size is well higher than 1990, with the current estimate at 3.56. This helps explain the slight population increase since 2010, despite the reduction in the number of households.

Table 7 shows the household composition by Census Tract. Within the 8,262 family households, female householders accounted for 1,803 households. In non-family households, over 88% of the population lived alone. Non-family households where the head of household lives alone were almost evenly distributed in the community with between 82%-90% residing in all Tracts.

Households	Families	Non-Family	Female Head	Elderly	Total
2000	8,125	3,558	1,469	3,192	11,678
2010	9,016	4,680	2,454	3,529	13,696
% Change 2000 to 2010	11.0%	31.5%	67.1%	10.6%	17.3%
2012	7,987	4,802	2,030	2,882	12,789
% Change 2010 to 2012	-11.4%	2.6%	-17.3%	-18.3%	-6.6%

TABLE 5 – HOUSEHOLDS

Tenure	1990	2000	2010	2012
Average household size	2.72	2.57	2.54	2.73
Average family size	3.14	3.12	3.16	3.56

TABLE 6 – HOUSEHOLD CHANGE (SOURCE: US CENSUS)

Census Tracts	Total Households	FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS				NON-FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS			
		Family Households	Female Householder	%	Female Household w/ children under age 18	%	Non-family Households	Non-family Households where the H.H. Lives Alone	%
423*	2,816	1,689	118	7%	30	25%	1,127	979	87%
424.01	2,293	1,558	523	34%	220	42%	735	605	82%
424.02	2,543	1,731	406	23%	238	59%	812	711	88%
424.03	1,647	969	239	25%	117	49%	678	612	90%
425.01	2,068	1,558	386	25%	321	83%	510	457	90%
425.03	1,387	757	131	17%	37	28%	630	568	90%
Total	**12,754**	**8,262**	**1,803**	**22%**	**963**	**53%**	**4,492**	**3,932**	**88%**

TABLE 7 – HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION
* - INCLUDES PART OF HOBART

Area	Family			Household		
	2000	2011-12	% Change	2000	2011-12	% Change
Merrillville	$56,355	$61,493	9.12%	$49,545	$53,470	7.92%
Lake County	$50,131	$59,166	18.02%	$41,829	$47,991	14.73%

TABLE 8 – MEDIAN INCOME (SOURCE: ACS 2008-2012)

Census Tract	Low-Mod Households	Low-Mod Population	% Low-Mod	2014 MFI
423 (Block 1) Merr.	150	1,102	13.6%	$71,204
424.01 (Block 1)	459	1,722	26.7%	
424.01 (Block 2)	1,201	2,670	45.0%	$62,566
424.01 (Block 3)	1,010	2,249	44.9%	
424.02 (Block 1)	248	1,124	22.1%	
424.02 (Block 2)	1,744	4,358	40.0%	$58,031
424.02 (Block 3)	348	888	39.2%	
424.03 (Block 1)	600	1,520	39.5%	$47,527
424.03 (Block 2)	1,210	2,605	46.4%	
425.01 (Block 1)	543	1,513	35.9%	
425.01 (Block 2)	766	2,915	26.3%	$55,680
425.01 (Block 3)	512	1,758	29.1%	
425.03 (Block 1)	680	2,537	26.8%	$59,012

TABLE 9 – INCOME BY TRACT/BLOCK (SOURCE: US CENSUS/FFIC 2009 & 2011

Income

According to available data from the Census Bureau, family and household incomes have risen since 2000. The Median Family Income increased by over 9% from $56,355 in 2000 to $61,493 in 2012. Median Household Income saw a similar overall trend, with a nearly 8% increase from 2000-2012. Nonetheless, both rates are nearly half the median increase seen in Lake County as a whole. Table 8 compares income changes for Merrillville and Lake County during the reported period. Four of Merrillville's block groups have at least 40% of their households with low or moderate incomes. These block groups are in the northern part of the Town, generally between Cleveland Street and Harrison/Madison Street. Census Tract 424.03 has the lowest reported MFI. Concurrently, Block 2 of this tract, lying east of Broadway, has the highest percentage of low-mod income in the Town. While blocks 2 & 3 of CT 424.01 (located east of Cleveland Street) have the next highest levels of low-mod income households, the higher income households to the west in Block 1 help offset this to give CT 424.01 the second-highest MFI in Merrillville.

Age

Since 2000, there have been multiple shifts in the age distribution in the Town. According to the Census, all age groups experience some population increase. The most notable change is observed among the population group age 55-64. This subgroup has seen an increase of nearly 1,500 individuals, or about 56.8%. The population of children age 19 and below also saw double digit percentage gains. Since 2010, the children population has seen the highest population increase for children age 9 and below. Conversely, the adult age groups grow much more modestly, with senior population actually seeing the largest percentage decrease (-8.5%.) These characteristics, combined with the larger household sizes mentioned above, suggests that Merrillville may be starting to become a younger, more family-oriented community.

Table 11 presents the age distribution by Census Tract. According to this table, Census Tract 425.03 has the smallest number of all age groups due to its predominantly commercial character.

Year	Pre-School	School Age		College-Adults		Older Adults	Seniors	Number
	0-4	5-9	10-19	20 - 34	35 - 54	55 - 64	65 >	
2000	2,021	2,006	4,347	6,006	8,979	2,597	4,604	30,560
2010	2,241	2,394	5,332	6,865	9,527	4,073	4,814	35,246
% Change 2000-2010	10.9%	19.3%	22.7%	14.3%	6.1%	56.8%	4.6%	15.3%
2012	2,589	2,659	5,372	6,933	9,374	4,152	4,403	35,482
% Change 2010-2012	15.5%	11.1%	0.8%	1.0%	-1.6%	1.9%	-8.5%	0.7%

TABLE 10 – AGE DISTRIBUTION CHANGE

CENSUS TRACT	AGE							
	< 5	5 - 9	10 - 19	20 - 34	35 - 54	55 - 64	65 & over	Total
423.00*	408	513	717	1,335	2,066	892	1,096	7,027
424.01	378	504	834	1,278	1,566	780	654	5,994
424.02	400	435	1,276	960	2,068	848	1,016	7,003
424.03	365	347	561	881	1,108	556	641	4,459
425.01	587	497	1,328	1,154	1,793	619	484	6,462
425.03	202	205	225	663	792	351	872	3,310

TABLE 11 – AGE BY CENSUS TRACT
* - INCLUDES PART OF HOBART

Year	Elementary	Intermediate	Middle	High	Enrollment
2010	2,154	1,046	1,125	2,288	6,983
2011	2,452	1,076	1,128	2,396	7,052
2012	2,354	1,051	1,072	2,423	6,900
2013	2,391	1,042	1,090	2,339	6,862

TABLE 12 – SCHOOL ENROLLMENT CHARACTERISTICS

School Enrollment

Table 12 shows student characteristics at Merrillville schools since 2010. In 2011, there was an enrollment spike with over 7,000 registered students. Most of this increase came in elementary school enrollment, with nearly 300 new students that year. Since then, there have been small declines in enrollment each school year, with an overall enrollment decrease of 2.7% since 2011.

Merrillville Schools	2013		2012		2011		2010		2009	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Special Ed. Students	804	11.7%	746	10.8%	738	10.5%	740	10.6%	770	11.0%
Free Meal Students	3,430	50.0%	3,329	48.2%	3,216	45.6%	3,209	46.0%	2,705	38.5%
Reduced Price Meal Students	678	9.9%	722	10.5%	754	10.7%	795	11.4%	715	10.2%
Limited English Students	199	2.9%	202	2.9%	203	2.9%	185	2.6%	203	2.9%
Total Student Enrollment	6,862		6,900		7,052		6,983		7,021	

TABLE 13 – SCHOOL DATA (SOURCE: INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION)

Table 13 shows special student characteristics at Merrillville schools since the 2009-2010 school year. Most percentages of special education students, limited English students, and Reduced Price Meal Students have remained fairly steady in the past five years. One area that did see a substantial increase is the level of Free Meal Students. In the last school year, approximately 50% of Merrillville students were a part of the Free Meal program.

Employment

Like many communities, Merrillville saw increased unemployment as a result of the economic downturn. After seeing an unemployment rate of only 2% in 2000, unemployment increased to 5.7% in 2008; during the same time period, the national unemployment rate was 6.1%. The unemployment rate peaked at 9.6% in 2011, and has been steadily declining since then. Still, from 2008-2013, Merrillville experienced higher unemployment rates than that of Lake County. The most recent estimates in July 2014 put the unemployment rate at 7.1%, below Lake County, but still higher than the Indiana and national averages.

Table 15 shows Merrillville's employment conditions in more detail. Although Merrillville's unemployment rate has increased since 2000, the overall labor force and number of employed persons has also risen in that time period.

Location and proximity to major highways provide opportunities for both employers and those seeking employment. From 2007-2012, the education and retail services provided the most jobs in the Town. The fastest growing job sector in Merrillville by percentage is in the information industry, while the manufacturing sector saw the most total jobs added. Construction jobs saw the largest workforce decline, which is likely due to the slowing of new development as a result of the Great Recession.

Area Rate	Year				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014 (July)
Merrillville	9.4	9.6	8.9	8.5	7.1
Lake County	9.8	9.3	8.1	8.4	7.7
Indiana	9.0	8.4	8.1	7.5	5.8
U.S.	9.1	8.3	8.1	7.4	6.5

TABLE 14 – EMPLOYMENT CHANGE (SOURCE: INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT)

Year	Town of Merrillville			
	Labor Force	Employed	Unemployed	Rate
2000	15,975	15,652	323	2.0
2008	16,662	15,707	955	5.7
2013	17,647	16,146	1,501	8.5
Change 2000-2013	1,672	494	1,178	6.5

TABLE 15 – EMPLOYMENT COMPARISON

Occupation	2007	2012	% Change
Construction	1,071	401	-62.6%
Manufacturing	2,265	2,743	21.1%
Wholesale Trade	284	247	-13.2%
Retail Trade	2,044	2,034	-0.5%
Transport. and Warehousing	1,149	1,556	35.5%
Information	93	216	132.0%
Finance and Insurance	828	647	-21.8%
Professional, scientific, management, administrative and waste mgmt. services	953	955	0.3%
Educational services, and health care and social assistance	3,962	3,729	-5.9%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation, and food services	1,504	1,818	20.9%
Other services, except public administration	915	431	-52.8%
Public administration	536	647	20.8%

TABLE 16 – MERRILLVILLE OCCUPATIONS (SOURCE: US CENSUS)

Disability & Accessibility Status

The Town of Merrillville operates 20 parks, 2 trails, and one recreational center, each having a variety of facilities, amenities, and equipment. Listings of these facilities are provided in Chapter 3 – Existing Conditions. Many of the parks are old and have equipment that cannot be modified to meet current safety standards. The U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, Recreation Access Advisory Committee's report, Recreational Facilities and Outdoor Developed Areas, provides detailed guidelines for parks and recreation facilities. The guidelines are used to modify existing park facilities or to build new facilities.

Disabled Population

The 2010 U.S. Census collected information about people with a variety of disabilities, including:

- Sensory disabilities involving sight or hearing
- Conditions that limit basic physical activities
- Disabilities that cause difficulty in learning, remembering or concentrating
- Conditions that cause difficulty in dressing, bathing, or getting around inside the home
- Disabilities that make it difficult to go outside the home
- Disabilities that inhibit a person's ability to work

Census 2010 counted 5,018 people with some type of long-lasting condition or disability, representing approximately 15.4% of the total population who were aged 5 and older in the civilian non-institutionalized population or slightly over one person in six. Within this population, Census 2010 found:

Subject	Number	%
Population 5 to 17 years	7,099	100.0%
With a disability	442	6.2%
Population 18 to 64 years	21,269	100.0%
With a disability	2,897	13.6%
With an ambulatory difficulty	1,557	7.3%
Population 65 years and over	4,306	100.0%
With a disability	1,679	39.0%

TABLE 17 – POPULATION WITH DISABILITIES

- About 6.2 % of the young population, or about 442 individuals, had some type of disability
- Among the population 18-64 years old, about 13.6% had some type of disability.
- The largest group with disability is the population group 65 years and over with approximately 39% having some type of disability.

Accessibility Conditions

The populations with special needs are required to be accommodated when planning for parks and leisure facilities. According to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), all facilities designed and constructed after 1992 must be accessible and physical barriers in existing public facilities must be removed if "reasonably" achievable. ADA policy also addresses the following:

- Policies – compliant with ADA except for Braille copies of documents
- Employment – ADA/Rehabilitation Act compliant
- Programs – ADA compliant
- Facilities – ADA compliant except for ingress/egress to several playgrounds
- Economics – Not covered under ADA, but sliding scales for fees are in place and operating for population with special needs

Federal Statutes

The Federal statutes require compliance with several provisions of three different legislations which impact operation of the parks and recreational facilities. According to these provisions, communities are required to address the needs of the "disabled", as defined by federal rules, and assure equal opportunity for access to all citizens. The three legislations are:

1. Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (ABA) - first federal law created to ensure access by persons with disabilities to all facilities that were designed, built, altered, or leased using federal funds;
2. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Pub. L, 93-112, as amended - extends access beyond architecture to include programs and employment. The Department of the Interior Regulations 43 CFR 17, Subpart B requires that all recipients of federal funds must be in compliance with Section 504 including those programs and activities not receiving direct Federal aid. Federal financial assistance subject to Section 504 includes, but not limited to, the following:
    - Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1964, (Pub. L. 88-578, 78 Stat. 897);
    - Title X of the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978, (Pub. L. 95-625), Urban Park and Recreation Recovery program;
    - Reservation of Land for Park, Playground, or Community Center (38 Stat. 727, 43 U.S.C. 569);
    - Recreation and Public Purposes Act (44 Stat. 741, as amended, 43 U.S.C. 869-869- 4);
    - Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act (64 Stat. 430) as amended, 16 U.S.C.
3. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) - mandates state and local governments to remove barriers to access in facilities, programs, activities, and services. This includes providing modifications to policies, practices and procedures. The Act requires that the parks facilities and programs are "reasonably" accessible and useable by the entire population. The regulations for Title II set forth standards for what constitutes discrimination on the basis of mental or physical disability, as well as provides a definition of disability and qualified individual with a disability. It further establishes a complaint mechanism for resolving allegations of discrimination. In July 2010, the Department of Justice issued new regulations revising the Department's ADA regulations, including its ADA Standards for Accessible Design. These revised regulations became effective on March 15, 2012. The revised rules establish specific requirements for a variety of recreational facilities and programs, among which includes playgrounds, sport facilities, and routes to access such facilities. The governing standards further require a public entity to furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services when necessary to afford an individual with a disability an equal opportunity to participate in, and enjoy the benefits of, the public entity's service, program, or activity. This expressed choice must be given primary consideration by the public entity (Sec.35.160 (b)(2)). The public entity must honor the choice unless it can demonstrate that another effective means of communication exists or that use of the means chosen would not be required under Sec.35.164.

The Town of Merrillville has prepared its own Americans with Disabilities Act Compliance Report, which was last updated in August 2012. All Town-owned buildings were analyzed as part of the study, including the Pruzin Center. Most of the noted ADA deficiencies and recommendations in the report have been corrected, with only the modification of doors with an emergency "panic" handle potentially needing attention. The ADA Compliance Report also surveyed the Town's streets for curb cuts; however, because few of Merrillville's parks are located on street corners, this work is deemed to have minimal impact on overall park function. Due to time & staff concerns, a sidewalk analysis was not a part of the Compliance Report.

Because the Town's ADA Compliance Report did not focus on park lands or park equipment, The Arsh Group conducted a preliminary survey of ADA compliance as part of their general park surveys. This survey focused on three general categories:

- Accessibility – Can park facilities be easily accessed by disabled persons?
- Equipment – Is the equipment in the park able to be safely used by disabled persons?
- Visitabliltiy – Is the park "visitable", or have adequate access from sidewalks or off-street pathways, for disabled persons from outside its boundaries?

Table 18 lists the relative level of ADA non-compliance in the Town's parks. The survey found deficiencies in the majority of Merrillville's parks. Most parks generally had similar issues:

- No sidewalks on park perimeters
- No/inadequate internal pathways connecting to park facilities
- Outdated playsets
- Inadequate safety surfacing for playgrounds

Facility	ADA Non-Compliant		
	Accessibility	Equipment	Visitability
Barclay Village	✔	✔	✘
Crescent Lake	✘	✔	✔
Devonshire	✔	✔	✔
Forest Hills	✘	✔	✘
Hendricks	✘	✘	✘
Jennings	✘	✘	✘
Kurtis	✘	✘	✘
Lincoln Terrace	✔	✔	✔
Meadowdale	✔	✔	✔
Meadowland	✘	✔	✘
Meadowland Estate	✔	✔	✘
Petruch	✘	✘	✘
Preserves	✔	✔	✔
Pruzin	✘	✔	✘
Rosenbalm	✘	✔	✘
Savannah Ridge	✘	✘	✔
Southbrook	✘	✘	✘
Stefak	✔	✔	✔
Union	✔	✔	✔
Wirtes	✘	✘	✘

TABLE 18 – FACILITIES WITH ACCESSIBILITY DEFICIENCIES

The Department views physical accessibility to all parks, playgrounds, rest rooms, and water fountains as a high priority; however, a lack of funds has impacted the Department's ability to modify all facilities in its inventory. Future improvements or modifications will meet all necessary ADA accessibility requirements, and will be undertaken at the soonest available opportunity.

Chapter 3

Existing Conditions

Management

The management of Merrillville parks and recreation activities and facilities is the responsibility of the Town of Merrillville Park Authority. The Park Authority was originally organized on April 8, 1986 by The Ordinance 86-04. The Ordinance creating the Park Authority is permitted by Indiana Code (IC 36-10-5-2b), where all Town Council members serve as the Park Authority. The Town Council/Park Authority is responsible for budgeting, hiring, and security of all the park facilities.

The Parks Authority is the managing entity for the Department of Parks and Recreation. The Authority, although a separate entity under Indiana Code, also serves a dual purpose, both as the Town Council and the Park Authority.

Membership

Although the Town Council as a whole serves as the Park Authority, the Council has established a Parks and Recreation Committee. The Committee oversees the Parks activities on a regular basis. The members of the Park Committee are appointed on an annual basis. The 2014 members of the Committee are:

- Mr. Donald Spann, Chairman
- Mr. Tom Goralczyk, Member
- Mr. Ron Widing, Member

Powers & Duties

The State enabling legislation sets out the Authority's duties and responsibilities for cities and towns. Section 10 of the State statute (IC 36-10-5-2), as amended, sets the powers and duties of the Park Authority in the following manner:

1. The Park Authority shall manage all public parks, including approaches that belong to the municipality.
2. If a municipality decides, by ordinance, to establish, lay out, or improve a public park or grounds, or to make an extension of a park or grounds, it may locate the park or grounds, including appurtenances, and it may lay out and open the public ways necessary for the improvement. If it is necessary to acquire land, water rights, or easements, or a pool, lake, or natural stream of water, the Park Authority may condemn that property and take possession of it, if it is located within five (5) miles of the municipality. Before the Park Authority condemns the property, it shall assess the damages to the owners of the property at a meeting of the authority. Additional condemnation proceedings are the same as those provided for the taking of property to open streets.
3. The Park Authority may adopt rules concerning the laying out, improvement, preservation, ornamentation, and management of parks. The Park Authority shall allow monuments or buildings for libraries, works of art, or historical collections to be erected in a park, as long as they are under the control of the persons in charge of the park, and no enclosure separates them from the rest of the park.
4. The legislative body of the municipality may also levy a tax on all taxable property in the municipality to pay for park property and for its improvement. The legislative body may also borrow money and issue the bonds of the municipality at any rate of interest payable annually or semiannually and may sell them for at least par value. The money derived from the sale of bonds may be used only for the purchase or improvement of parks. The legislative body shall annually levy a tax sufficient to pay the interest on the debt on all taxable property

in the municipality to create a sinking fund for the liquidation of the principal of the debt.

5. If the Park Authority of a city decides to lease any buildings or grounds belonging to the city and located in a public park when they are not required for public use, the proceeds shall be deposited with the city fiscal officer to the credit of park funds and devoted to the improvement of public parks.
6. Any non-reverting fund that was created under IC 19-7-6 (before its repeal on September 1, 1981) continues until abolished by ordinance of the municipal legislative body. The legislative body may include, in the Park Authority's annual budget, an item and an appropriation for the specific purposes of a non-reverting capital fund. Money put in the fund may not be withdrawn except for the purposes for which the fund was created, unless the legislative body repeals the ordinance creating the fund. The repeal may not be made under suspension of the rules. Money procured from fees shall be deposited at least once each month with the municipal fiscal officer. The fiscal officer shall deposit the money either in a special non-reverting operating fund or in the non-reverting capital fund as directed by the park authority. The legislative body may provide, by ordinance, that expenditures may be made from the special non-reverting operating fund without appropriation. Money from fees procured from golf courses, swimming pools, skating rinks, or other similar facilities requiring major expenditures for management and maintenance, may not be deposited in this fund. Money from either fund shall be disbursed only on approved claims that are allowed and signed in the same manner as other claims of the municipality are allowed and signed. (As added by Acts 1981, P.L.309, SEC.112. Amended by Acts 1981, P.L.320, SEC.19; P.L.3-1990, SEC.142.)

It should be noted the Park Authority, as the Town Council, will continue to have functions and duties as it has been provided by the State Code for the Town Council. As such, the Parks Department reports directly to the Merrillville Town Council through the Parks Committee and the Parks Authority.

Parks Operation

The Merrillville Parks and Recreation Department is responsible for the development and upkeep of the Merrillville parks, trails, and approaches. The Department currently is responsible for 20 parks, 2 trails, and one recreation center. The Department also offers a select number of recreational programs for the residents.

Mission Statement

Expand opportunities for recreation and promote a clean and healthy environment.

Accomplishments

Table 19 shows the Park Department's accomplishments since the adoption of the 2010 Parks Master Plan. Severe cuts in the parks budget, along with employee turnover over the life of the previous plan, appears to have hampered the ability of the Parks Department to initiate most of the previous plan's recommendations. What funds have been available have gone to only the most necessary improvements.

Facility	Accomplishment	Year	Estimated Cost
Meadowland	New play equipment & mulch	2010	$57,000
Preserves	New play equipment & surfacing	2013	$60,000
Pruzin	New play equipment & surfacing	2012	$60,000
Rosenbalm	New play equipment & surfacing	2012	$60,000
Stefek	New play equipment & surfacing	2013	$60,000
Wirtes	New play equipment & surfacing (to be completed)	2014	$60,000
TOTAL ESTIMATED IMPROVEMENT COST			**$357,000**

TABLE 19 – PARK IMPROVEMENTS 2010-2014

Recreation Programs

Similar to park improvements, the offerings of recreation programs has decreased since 2010. In addition, most of the programs that remain are predominantly focused for senior citizens, with the annual KidsZone Summer Camp being the only true program for youth being offered. The current Park Department recreational offerings are as follows:

- Park Programs
  - Aerobics
  - Ballroom Dancing
  - Chicago Style Steppin'
  - Enhanced Fitness
  - Flu & Pneumonia Shots
  - Kidz Zone Summer Day Camp
  - Sponsored Trips
  - Yoga
- Park Events
  - Annual Arts Festival
  - Independence Day Parade
  - Parade of Lights & Holiday Tree Lighting
  - Town Hall Trick-Or-Treat

Park Staffing

To guide the efforts of local authorities overseeing parks and recreation activities, the State enacted several legislative processes and procedures. Included is the composition and duties of the Park Authority previously described in excerpts from "IC 36-10-5-2". The State also outlines the duties and responsibilities of the Superintendent as described in "IC 36-10-3-14". Under this section, the superintendent reports to the Park Board and is responsible for operations which include, but are not limited to:

1. Propose annually a plan for the operation of the department;
2. Administer the plan as approved by the board;
3. Supervise the general administration of the department;
4. Keep the records of the department and preserve all papers and documents of the department;
5. Recommend persons for appointment as assistants if the board determines there is a need;
6. Appoint the employees of the department, subject to the approval of the board, according to the standards and qualifications fixed by the board and without regard to political affiliation;
7. Prepare and present to the board an annual report; and
8. Perform other duties that the board directs.

The administrative composition of a Town's parks and recreation department is linked to park asset conservation and expansion. The State has provided standard guidelines to ensure that all communities maintain certain standards of operations. All cities and towns have not adopted a staffing structure which includes a parks superintendent as described by the State.

The Town of Merrillville's operational structure is comprised of a Parks and Recreation Committee that reports to the Town Council. The Director of parks and recreation is responsible for a number of recreation activities and facility maintenance. In recent years, economic and other conditions led to the reorganization of the department. Administrative and maintenance

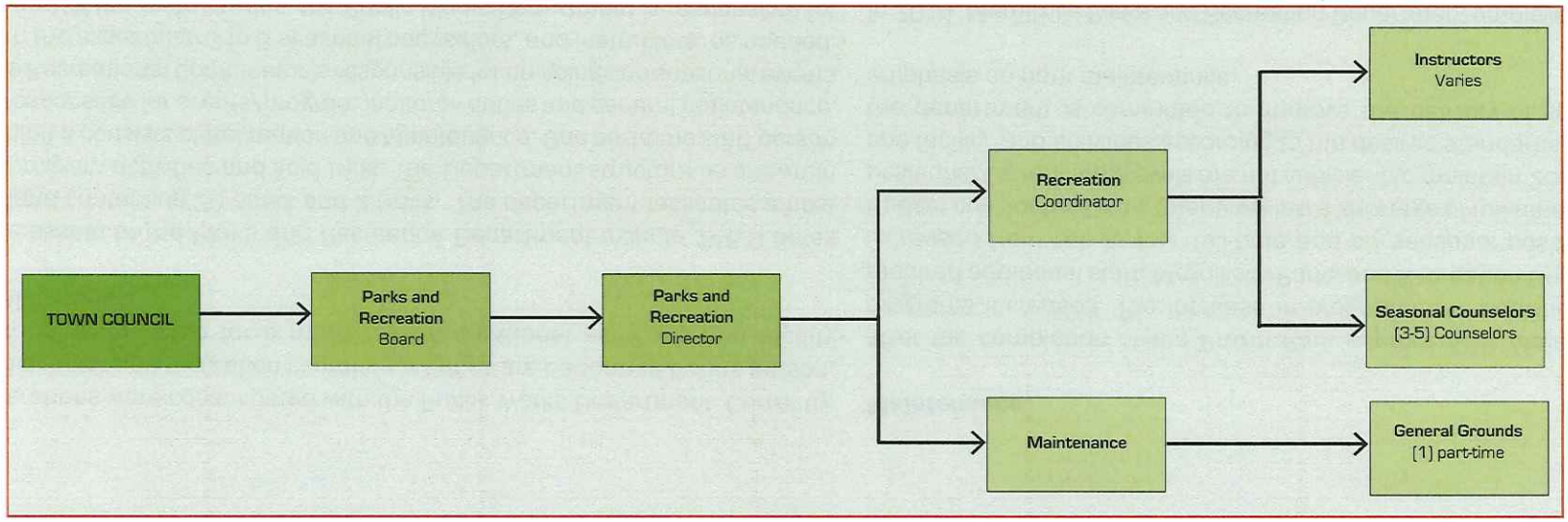


EXHIBIT 5 – TOWN OF MERRILLVILLE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

operations were consolidated with the Public Works Department. Currently, the director and recreation coordinator duties are performed by one person, who is responsible for a number of recreational activities and facility maintenance.

The assets of the Parks and Recreation Department include 146.9 acres of land containing 20 parks and 2 trails. The department facilitates a host of program activities and field trips. The Department structure as shown in Exhibit 4 consists of Recreation and Maintenance. One part-time staff person is responsible for events/program janitorial duties and general maintenance. The Recreational Coordinator is responsible for on-going and seasonal events with the assistance 3 to 5 seasonal counselors, and instructors, as needed. As part of the restructuring, the Public Works Department is responsible for the maintenance of parks.

Staff in 2005 included four full-time positions. Workforce levels increased at the time of the 2010 Plan Update. Four full-time positions included the director, secretary, recreation coordinator, and custodian. In addition to these full-time positions, there were 3 to 4 seasonal lawn maintenance and recreational positions. Current staff includes the Recreation Coordinator and one part-time General Grounds employee. The Director's position is open.

The current park staff for a community of 35,482 (Census-2012) population is very low. Population projections for Merrillville in 2019 is 37,045, representing an increase of 4.4%. The staff to park acreage ratio for the department is 97.9 acres per full-time staff member. This ratio is very high for an urbanized park department. Opportunity exists for the town to expand recreational capacity and staff to accommodate a growing community.

Maintenance

After the completion of the Pruzin Park improvement project, recreation programs increased. The increase in programs and activities in the park required additional staff. Merrillville Parks and Recreation Department staff increased from two to four full-time and six seasonal positions in 2009. Budget cuts for the Department has left a shortage of full-time and part-time positions. Current staff levels are not sufficient to maintain 20 parks, 2 trails, one facility, and activities according to the desired standards. Nonetheless, the department is committed to improve the delivery of service with an emphasis on park maintenance.

In 2014, Merrillville Parks and Recreation Department employed one full-time staff person and one part-time. During peak season, the department will typically hire seasonal workers to assist with the upkeep and maintenance of the parks. Department budget cuts have left the secretarial position unfilled. Two positions in the maintenance department have been combined into a full-time/part-time maintenance/custodial position. The maintenance/custodial staff member is responsible for the maintenance of all the parks and Pruzin Park building. Seasonal staff positions were not filled during 2014 summer season.

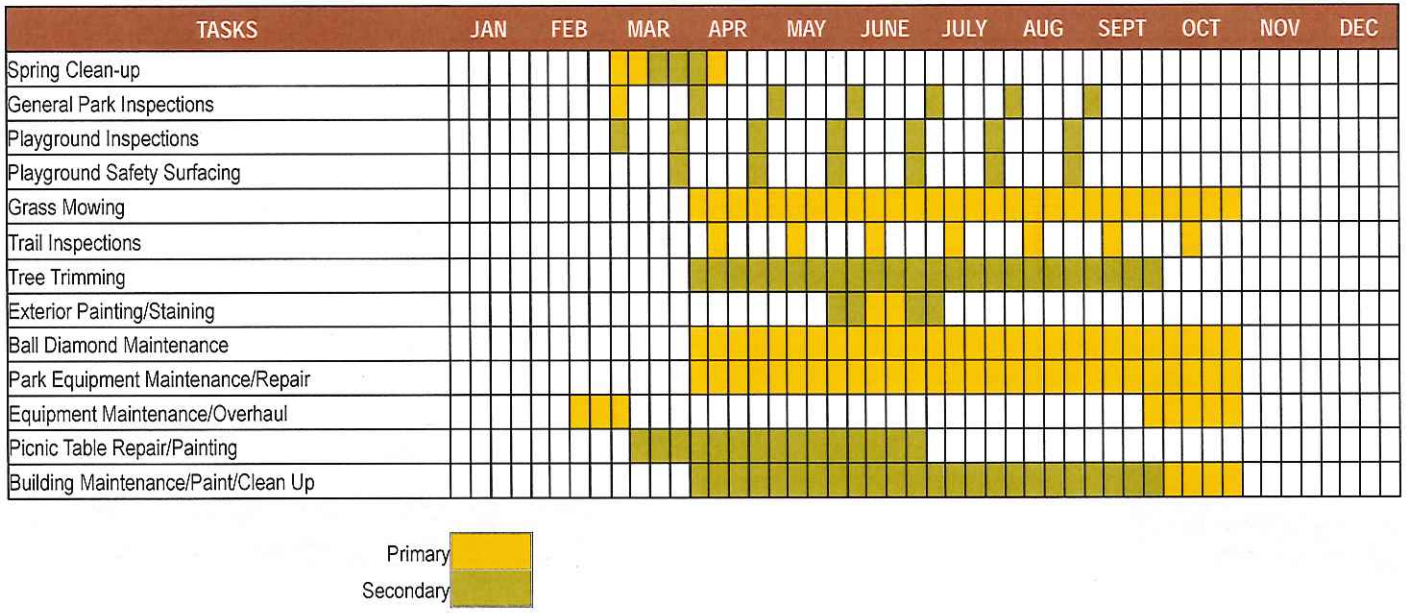


TABLE 20 – PARK MAINTENANCE SCHEDULE

Budget

The recent economic conditions, the tax policies and revenue collection have negatively impacted the Town of Merrillville budget as a whole. As a result, the Department has seen a drastic reduction in its budget, a trend that has only recently begun to reverse. Nonetheless, historically, the Department has had a much lower than average expenditure in the parks and recreation programming. The majority of the annual department expenditures go towards operations. There are very limited amount of funds available for capital improvements. This lack of funding make the Department severely undercapitalized to carry out park improvements, programming, overall upkeep and maintenance.

A review of past expenditures provides a snapshot of trends for future resources. The Department's budget in 2010 was $257,266 or about $7.30 park expenditures per resident. Since then, the overall budget has decreased, due in large part to the economic downturn and the state freezing tax levies in Lake County. At its lowest point in 2012, the Department's budget was only $158,142, translating to about $4.46 park expenditures per resident. Much of the budget reduction came with the laying off of park staff, although most every line item in the budget saw some funding decrease. The projected budget of the Department for 2015 is expected to be about the $236,845. Table 21 presents the budget history for the Department since 2010.

A budget comparison with other communities shows Merrillville to continues to be the lowest in expenditures for parks and recreation activities. The following tables compare Merrillville's park expenditures and park lands with similar neighboring communities.

Fund	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Salary and Benefits	$153,031.00	$153,031.00	$78,076.21	$79,653.22	$79,653.22
Office Supplies and Maintenance	$11,200.00	$11,200.00	$9,261.45	$11,357.08	$11,357.08
Services and Charges	$14,050.00	$14,050.00	$5,226.24	$9,329.52	$9,329.52
Sub-Total	$178,281.00	$178,281.00	$92,563.90	$100,339.82	$100,339.82
Impact Fees	$48,984.66	$33,715.30	$35,578.00	$49,225.00	$49,225.00
Non Reverting	$30,000.00	$20,000.00	$30,000.00	$30,000.00	$33,000.00
Sub-Total	$78,984.66	$53,715.30	$65,578.00	$79,225.00	$82,225.00
Total	**$257,265.66**	**$231,996.30**	**$158,141.90**	**$179,564.82**	**$182,564.82**

TABLE 21 – MERRILLVILLE PARK BUDGET HISTORY (SOURCE: INDIANA GATEWAY FOR GOVERNMENT UNITS)

Town	Population	Park Acreage	Park Acreage/ 1000 Pop.
Griffith	16,619	46	2.8
Merrillville	**35,622**	**146.9**	**4.1**
Crown Point*	28,412	202.6	7.1
Schererville	29,010	259.7	9.0
Hobart	28,519	264	9.3
Highland	23,285	230.1	9.9
Dyer	16,277	208.4	12.8
Portage	36,812	489	13.3
Munster	23,270	340.2	14.6
Valparaiso	32,267	743	23.0

** - does not include Lake County Fairgrounds*

TABLE 22 – PARK REGIONAL PARK ACREAGE COMPARISONS

Town	Population	2013 Park Budget	Expenditure/ 1000 Pop.
Merrillville	**35,622**	**$179,565**	**$5,041**
Griffith	16,619	$258,475	$15,553
Dyer	16,277	$350,384	$21,526
Hobart	28,519	$615,228	$21,573
Schererville	29,010	$655,930	$22,610
Portage	36,812	$1,170,926	$31,808
Crown Point	28,412	$1,263,709	$44,478
Valparaiso	32,261	$2,625,617	$81,387
Highland	23,285	$2,018,000	$86,665
Munster	23,270	$3,350,000	$143,962

TABLE 23 – PARK EXPENDITURE PER RESIDENT (SOURCE: INDIANA GATEWAY FOR GOVERNMENT UNITS)

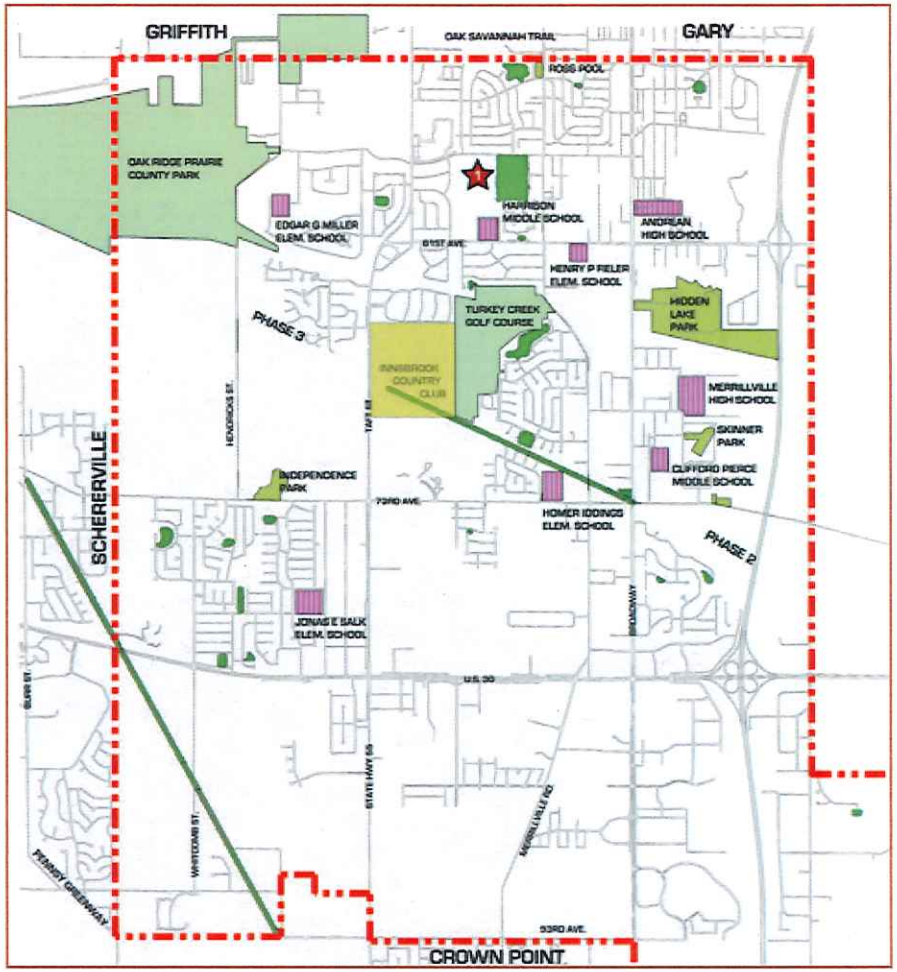
Park Facilities

The Town of Merrillville has 20 parks, 2 trails, and one recreational center. The Pruzin Center acts as a community center, accommodating a variety of activities for residents of all ages. Merrillville Parks and Recreation facilities have been updated to define each park type to reflect recreation trends. Additional opportunities for fitness-related activities are available throughout the Town, offered by private and public facilities.

The NRPA Classification System for parks and recreation facilities classifies parks according to their size, purpose, and population that they serve. Different types of parks are identified in the following sections.

Community Parks

Community parks offer opportunities for a wide variety of active and passive recreational uses, such as athletic complexes, walking trails, picnic areas, and nature viewing areas. They are typically larger than 20 acres in size, but can be smaller based on their overall usage and function within the Town. Merrillville currently has one park that serves as a community park.



List of Community Parks

1. ***Pruzin Park***

Pruzin Park (5750 Tyler Pl.)

CHARACTER

- A 30-acre community park, with several acres of wetland & lowlands in the center. The park also utilizes land owned by Merrillville Intermediate School, which is not reflected here. Most of the existing facilities are devoted to passive recreational uses.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Community Center building/Park Offices
- Parking Lot
- Playground
- Picnic shelter
- Gazebo
- Walking path & Boardwalk

GAZEBO

PLAYGROUND

BOARDWALK

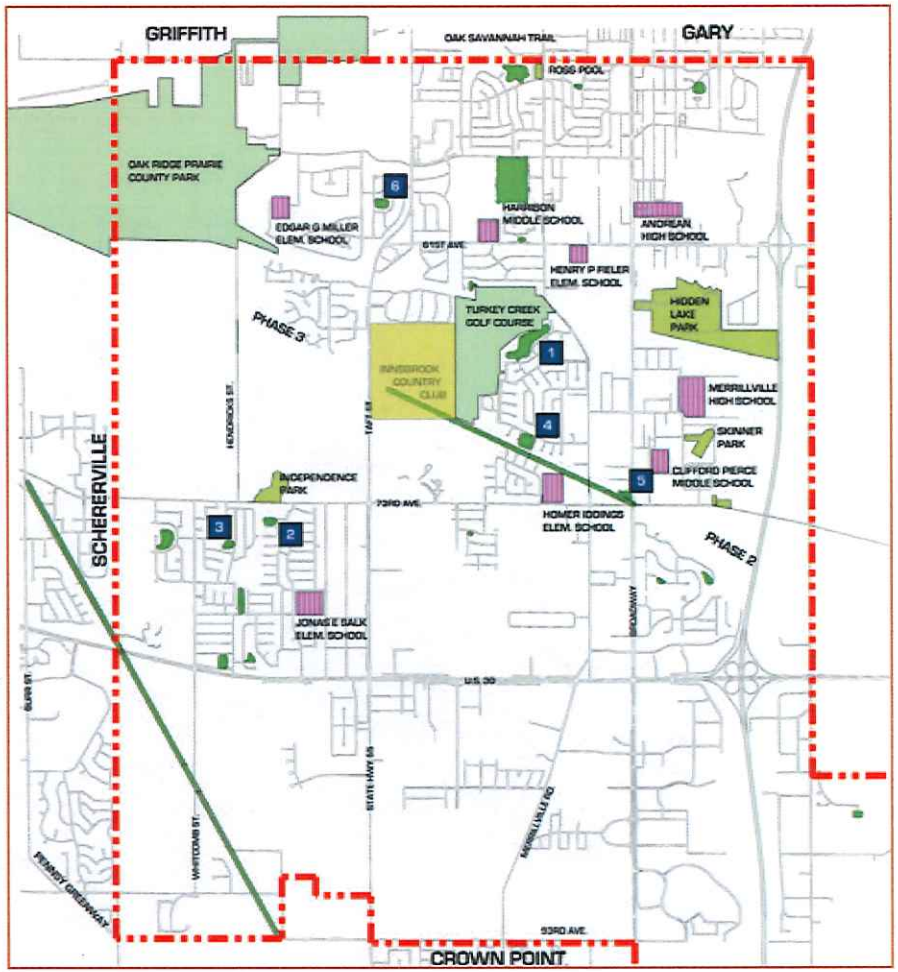
OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

Neighborhood Parks

Neighborhood parks offer active and passive recreational facilities for all age groups. They are generally located within walking distance to neighborhood residents. Neighborhood parks are typically more than five acres in size, but can be smaller based on their overall usage. Neighborhood parks typically include field games, court games, shelters, and playgrounds. The Town of Merrillville currently has six parks that are classified as neighborhood parks, two of which are currently undeveloped.

List of Neighborhood Parks

1. ***Devonshire***
2. ***Rosenbalm***
3. ***Southbrook***
4. ***Stefek***
5. ***Union***
6. ***Wirtes***



Devonshire (6500 Harrison Dr.)

CHARACTER

- A 9.3-acre neighborhood park located along Turkey Creek. The park lies within the Turkey Creek floodplain and is predominantly undeveloped. A small wooded island is located on the park's west side.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Walking path & bridge

GENERAL PARK VIEW

EXISTING PATH TO STREET

Rosenbalm (7402 Chase St.)

CHARACTER

- A 4.0-acre neighborhood park. Kaiser Ditch runs along the west edge of the park. The remainder of the park is generally open grassland in character. The play area was recently replaced, though older uses in the park, including the abandoned basketball court, still remain.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Ballfield
- Playground
- Picnic shelter
- Parking lot

GENERAL PARK VIEW

BALLFIELD LOOKING EAST

Southbrook (7448 Hendricks St. / 7460 Wilson Pl.)

CHARACTER

- A 6.6-acre neighborhood park. The park has been subdivided into several different parcels by the residential streets. Only the far eastern parcel and the area immediately adjacent to the west side of Hendricks St. is currently developed. The remainder of the parkland is a mixture of open space and shade trees. Much of the acreage is surrounded by residential homes.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Ballfield
- Playground
- Picnic shelter

PLAYGROUND

BALLFIELD

Stefek (815 70th Pl.)

CHARACTER

- A 3.0-acre neighborhood park. In 2013, Stefek became the most recently renovated park with new play equipment and benches being installed in the park's southeast corner. This renovation, however, has negatively impacted the ballfield by infringing on the outfield playing area. The original picnic shelter has been removed, but remnants of the original playground & abandoned play courts still remain. The C&O Greenway borders the park to the south.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Ballfield
- Playground
- Picnic shelter
- Parking lot

PLAYGROUND

GAZEBO (C&O GREENWAY IN BACKGROUND)

Union (7200 Broadway)

CHARACTER

- A 3.5-acre undeveloped neighborhood park. This is the most recently acquired park in the Town. The eastern half of the park is predominantly open, whereas the west half of the park is heavily wooded. The C&O Greenway borders the park to the south

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Parking lot

PARK VIEW WEST

PARK VIEW EAST TO BROADWAY

Wirtes (5860 Roosevelt Pl.)

CHARACTER

- A 2.0-acre neighborhood park. Wirtes is the only park in Merrillville's system with multiple picnic shelters. There are several areas in the park that are low-lying and hold water after significant rainfall. Most of the east side of the park is unused, with only the remnants of a basketball court still remaining. New play equipment has been purchased for the park, and is scheduled to be installed in 2015.

EXISTING FACILITIES

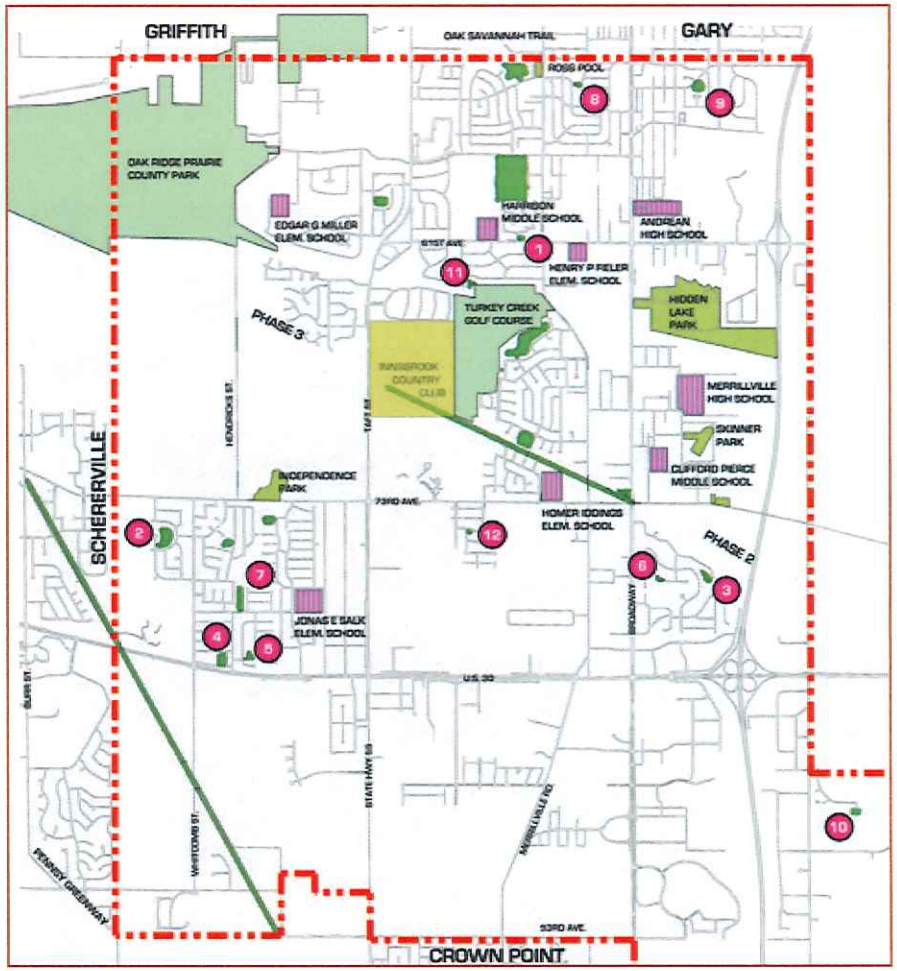
- Playground
- 2 Picnic shelters
- Parking lot

GENERAL PARK VIEW

NORTH PICNIC SHELTER

Mini-Parks

Mini-parks are small, protected areas and spaces in residential areas for young children, families, and the elderly. These parks can be variable in size – anywhere from a single lot to over two acres – and are equipped with playgrounds, picnic areas, and shelters, with other facilities as space and need dictates. The Town of Merrillville has twelve mini parks, three of which are currently undeveloped.



List of Mini-Parks

1. ***Barclay Village***
2. ***Crescent Lake***
3. ***Forest Hills***
4. ***Hendricks***
5. ***Jennings***
6. ***Kurtis***
7. ***Lincoln Terrace***
8. ***Meadowland***
9. ***Meadowland Estate***
10. ***Preserves***
11. ***Petruch***
12. ***Savannah Ridge***

Barclay Village (1016 61st Ave.)

CHARACTER

- A 0.2-acre vacant mini-park. The park sits at the entrance of the Barclay Village subdivision, with a frontage road acting as a buffer from 61st Avenue traffic. A narrow sidewalk sits along part of the west side of the park.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- none

GENERAL PARK VIEW

Crescent Lake (7501 Morton St. / 4179 W 74th Ave.)

CHARACTER

- A 5.0-acre park near the Merrillville/Schererville border. Most of the eastern half of the part is low-lying and covered with brush. Only the area adjacent to Morton St. is currently developed. There is an access easement to the northern park area from 74th Ave. Most of the play equipment in the park is among the oldest in the park system.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Playground
- Picnic shelter

PLAYGROUND

PICNIC SHELTER

Forest Hills (78 Indian Trail)

CHARACTER

- A 4.3-acre park located between two creeks. Bridges are provided at the northwest and northeast sections of access the park. The older play equipment has been removed, and is scheduled for replacement in 2015. Most of the park perimeter is wooded, but ample open area exists in the south portion of the park. The southeast portion of the park is adjacent to an easement that is planned to connect to Phase 2 of the C&O Greenway in the future.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Picnic shelter
- Parking area

SOUTHERN PARK VIEW

PICNIC SHELTER

Hendricks (3694 W 80th Ln.)

CHARACTER

- A 1.2-acre park, separated from US 30 by a frontage road. The park is generally open, with some trees around the playground. The park is bordered by single-family homes to the north and east, and a strip mall to the west. Foundations for the former basketball court and gazebo still remain. The playground at Hendricks is the only one in the system to be fenced in.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Playground
- Picnic shelter
- Ballfield

PLAYGROUND

BALLFIELD

Jennings (7825 Jennings Pl.)

CHARACTER

- A 5.3-acre park, mostly along Kaiser Ditch. An access easement off of 80th Pl. provides access to the existing playground. A second access easement is found off of 79th Pl. to the east; however, there is currently no way to cross to the west side of the creek from the east side. The area around the playground is uneven and often attracts water after significant rainfall.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Playground

PLAYGROUND

PARK ENTRANCE

Kurtis (9 ½ Meadow Ln.)

CHARACTER

- A 0.8-acre island park in the middle of a residential neighborhood. Several large street trees are found along the park's perimeter, providing ample shade.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Playground

GENERAL PARK VIEW

Lincoln Terrace (3528 78th Ave.)

CHARACTER

- A 2.3-acre park along Kaiser Ditch. The park used to house older tot-lot equipment. With its recent removal, no park facilities remain. Much of the park has large shade trees along the creek bed.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- none

GENERAL PARK VIEW

Meadowland (54th Ave. & Madison St.)

CHARACTER

- A 2.0-acre corner park in the middle of a residential neighborhood. The park was developed in 2010, but much of the installed equipment is in varying states of disrepair, and the park itself appears unkempt. In particular, a natural walking path along the park perimeter has now grown over with weeds. The modern-style picnic/shade structure is unique to the park system.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- 2 playgrounds
- Picnic/shade shelter
- Walking path (overgrown)

PLAYGROUND

PLAYGROUND AND SHELTER

Meadowland Estate (601 E 54th Ave.)

CHARACTER

- A 2.0-acre park fronting 54th Ave. While a ballfield backstop is located at the southeast corner of the park, an overgrown & low-lying section of the park makes it essentially unusable. A pedestrian easement exists on the east side of the park from Carolina St. The park is essentially wide-open and slopes away from 54th Ave.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- none

GENERAL PARK VIEW

Preserves (2081 E 87th Ave.)

CHARACTER

- A 0.4-acre park in the middle of a residential neighborhood. Essentially taking up 2 residential lots, Preserves is the most recently developed park in the system. The park overlooks a wetland area across 87th Ave. A NIPSCO high-line is located immediately south of the park. There is no landscaping in the park.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Playground

GENERAL PARK VIEW

Petruch (1403 W 63rd Ave.)

CHARACTER

- A 1.5-acre park, bordered on the south by the Grand Trunk Railroad and the east by Turkey Creek Golf Course. A pedestrian easement on 63rd Ave. is provided for park access. Except for the entry and area around the playground, the park is heavily wooded. This gives the park a very secluded feel, separating it from the area around it.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Playground

GENERAL PARK VIEW

Savannah Ridge (1457 W 74th Pl.)

CHARACTER

- A 0.3-acre corner park in the middle of a residential neighborhood. Though only the size of 1 residential lot, Savannah Ridge manages to pack multiple facilities in its small space. Many of these facilities, however, are becoming outdated and are in need of replacement. There is little landscaping or buffering from the neighboring homes.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Playground
- Picnic shelter

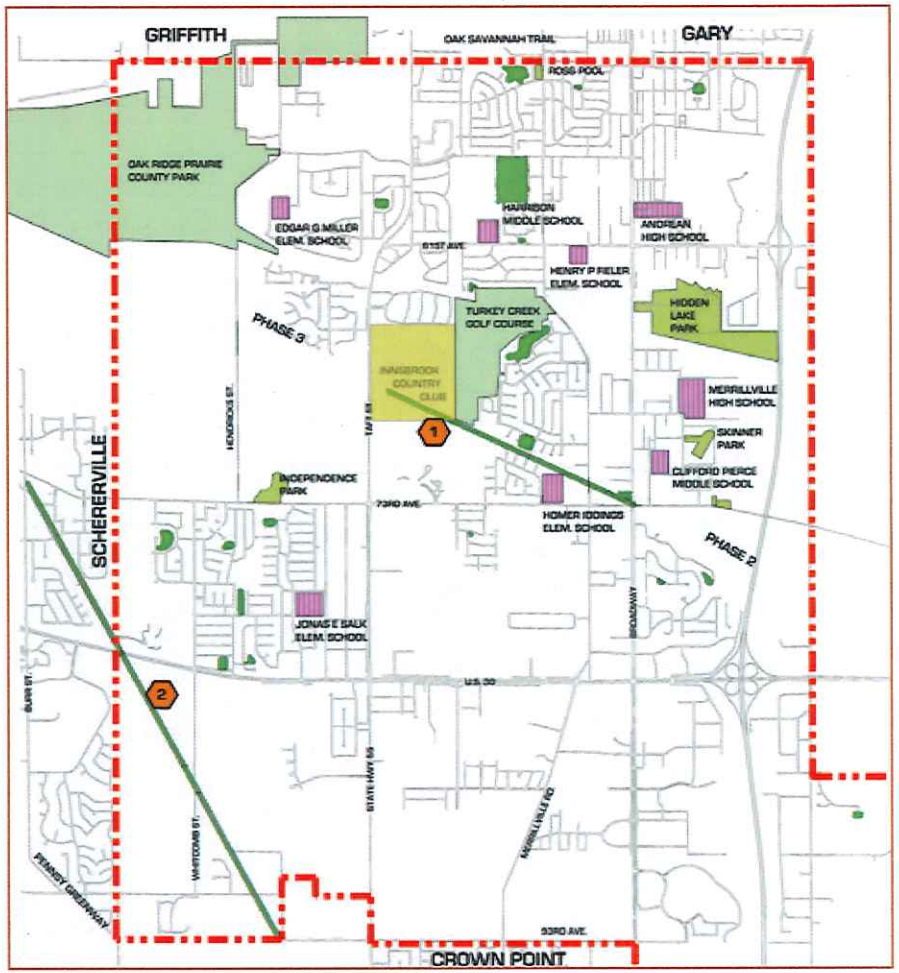
GENERAL PARK VIEW

Linear Parks/Trails

Linear Parks and trails serve the entire community by providing walking, biking, and other non-motorized recreational opportunities. Trails often provide access to sensitive environmental areas. They also facilitate linkages between parks and neighborhoods across town. Linear Parks may have paved or unpaved trails and include support facilities such as trailheads parking lots, restrooms, bridges, visitor orientation, interpretive signage, and resting areas. A recent trend is for linear parks to also provide additional recreational opportunities throughout the trail corridor. Merrillville is home to two trails.

List of Linear Parks/Trails

1. ***C&O Greenway***
2. ***Erie-Lackawanna Trail***



C&O Greenway

CHARACTER

- The most recently developed trail in Merrillville is the C&O Greenway. Work on the C&O Greenway through Merrillville from Broadway west nearly to Taft Street (just east of Innsbrook County Club's golf course and driving range) was completed in 2009. The C&O Greenway is directly accessible via a trailhead at Stefek Park, with an additional street crossing at Madison Street. Future plans call for the trail to be expanded east from Broadway to Mississippi Street, connecting with a trail loop in Hobart.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- Paved trail

GENERAL TRAIL VIEW

EASTERN VIEW CROSSING MADISON

BROADWAY TERMINUS

STEFEK PARK TRAILHEAD

Erie-Lackawanna Trail

CHARACTER

- This trail occupies the former Erie-Lackawanna rail corridor. Merrillville's section of the trail covers 1.89-miles, beginning at US 30 to the north and proceeding southeast to 93rd Avenue to the south. The trail provides access to Crown Point to the south, and Schererville, Griffith, Highland, and Hammond to the north. The trail is not directly accessible from any parks. Trailheads are available at Whitcomb Street, 91st Avenue, and 93rd Avenue. Parking is available at all three trailheads; a shelter is located at the 91st Avenue trailhead.

EXISTING FACILITIES

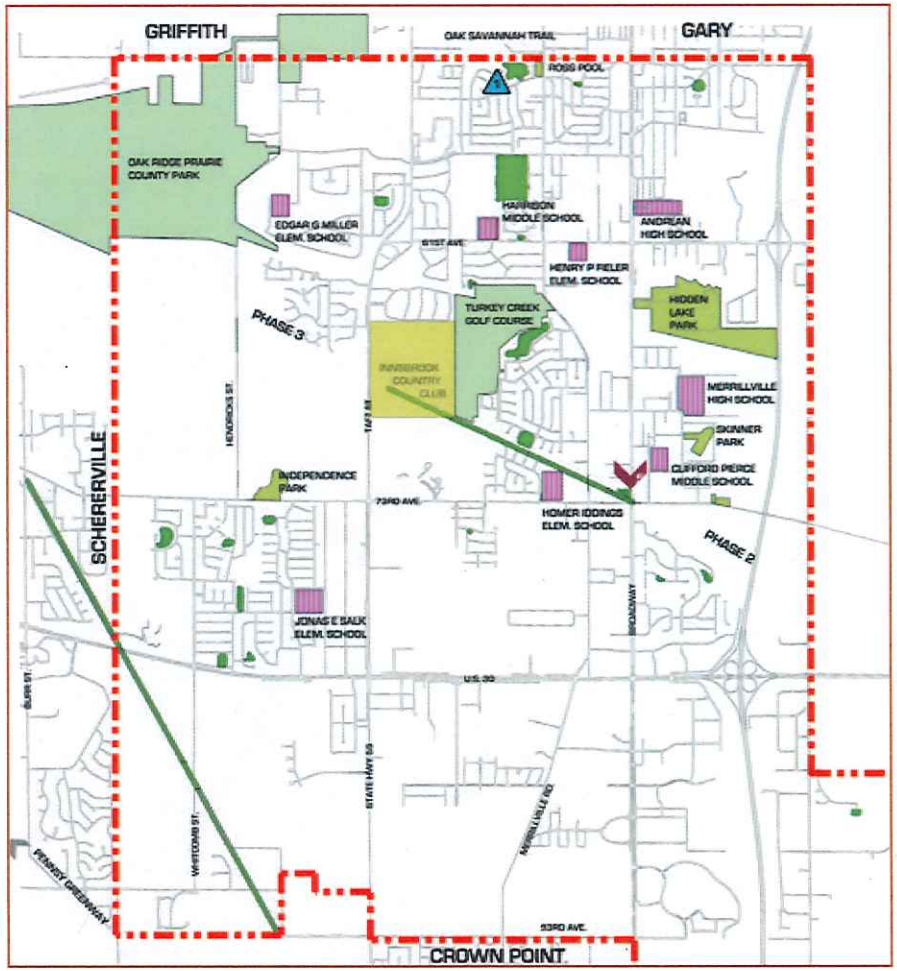
- Paved trail
- 3 Trailheads with off-street parking
- Picnic shelter

GENERAL TRAIL VIEW

WHITCOMB ST. TRAILHEAD

Open Space

Open space is typically designated for the environmental protection of sensitive lands. These areas are primarily undeveloped, but may include passive recreational uses such as walking paths, observation areas, and minor infrastructure (parking, restrooms, etc.) Merrillville has one park that is designated as open space.



List of Open Space

1. ***Meadowdale***

Meadowdale (1030 W 54th Ave.)

CHARACTER

- A 9.7-acre park at the northern boundary of the Town. The park has two distinct characters. The eastern half is low-lying, and is covered with brush and prairie plants. The western half has a more distinct parkland character with mature trees, but is smaller, narrower, and more fragmented. The main access point is off of 54th Ave. However, a secondary pedestrian easement is available to the west off of Pierce St.

EXISTING FACILITIES

- none

EASTERN PARK VIEW

WESTERN PARK VIEW

Schools

Open space is also available in the Town to Merrillville through the Merrillville Community School Corporation and three private schools. The Merrillville Community School Corporation provides indoor and outdoor recreational facilities primarily for use by the enrolled students. Additionally, Merrillville High School is home to the Merrillville Senior Center, which provides a place for senior programs and activities, as well as a Meals On Wheels lunch site. Some high school facilities are also available for Senior Center activities during non-school hours. Many other school facilities are available for use by other organized groups or the general public on an arranged basis.

There are also three parochial schools in town that have indoor & outdoor recreational facilities. These schools are:

- Aquinas Catholic Community School,
- St. Peter & Paul School,
- Andrean High School.

Other Open Spaces

The Town of Merrillville enjoys several other open spaces in the Town, including several Ross Township parks and Lake County parks. These parks vary greatly in size and amenities, with many of them serving as regional facilities. While many of these parks are open to the public, several of them charge parking or access fees for using these facilities.

Private Facilities

Innsbrook Country Club (184 acres) - The country club is a private facility open to its members only. The facilities include:

- An 18-hole golf course and Driving Range
- A water slide and pool

Lake County Facilities

Deep River County Park (1,080 acres) - This large county park occupies parts of Merrillville and Hobart and is a regional destination point. Deep River Waterpark, a popular summertime attraction, is probably the most visible part of the park. The park is also a very popular site for wedding ceremonies & receptions. The Deep River Grinders, a vintage baseball club, play games at fields in the park. Many other clubs and seasonal events are also hosted here. Other attractions include:

- A working sawmill & gristmill
- Picnic shelters
- Walking & equestrian trails
- Fishing area
- Canoe launch
- Numerous play fields

Turkey Creek Golf Course (151 acres) - Turkey Creek Golf Course is a popular 18-hole facility, with several greens on both sides of Turkey Creek. There is also:

- A pro shop
- Snack bar
- Dining/banquet facilities

Oak Ridge Prairie (939 acres) - This county park occupies parts of Merrillville and Griffith, and there are plans to expand to 1,800 acres in the future. The park is mostly open and natural. Oak Ridge Prairie is the western starting point for the Oak Savannah Trail that traverses through Griffith, Gary, and Hobart. The park offers:

- A playground
- Picnic facilities
- Fishing pond
- Walking trails which are used for cross-country skiing in the winter
- Extensive prairie areas
- A sledding hill in the center of the park

Ross Township Facilities

Country Club Heights (1.4 acres) - This small neighborhood park is primarily unused without any facilities.

Ross Township Cemetery Park (2.7 acres) - Merrillville Cemetery is home to several deceased residents from the nineteenth century, including several Civil War veterans. Immediately to the west of the cemetery proper is Ross Township Cemetery Park, home to the Merrillville Veterans Memorial.

Hidden Lake Park (106 acres) - This Township-owned regional park offers a wide range of recreational facilities. Among them are a variety of seasonal activities, giving the park year-round interest. The existing facilities include:

- A lake (with beach, fishing, paddle boat rentals, and a skating pond in winter)
- Sport facilities (soccer, baseball, sand volleyball)
- Playground
- Fitness trail
- Disc-golf course
- Sledding hill
- Gazebo
- Social Center
- Numerous picnic facilities
- Parking

Skinner Park (9.1 acres) - Acquired in 1978, this park was named for pioneer land developer Olind Skinner. This park offers:

- Picnic shelter
- Playground
- Parking

Ross Pool (1.1 acres) - Ross Pool was originally built as part of the Meadowdale subdivision in 1956. Ross Township took ownership in 1975. The facility is primarily used by the residents on the north side of town. The facility features:

- An L-shaped pool with water slide (ranging in depth from 3 to 12 feet) and a small wading pool
- Men's and women's shower rooms and bathrooms
- Concession area

Independence Park (8.7 acres) - Originally known as Independence Park Sportsmen's Club, this park was acquired by the Township in 1976. It offers:

- A 5-acre fishing lake
- Picnicking & seasonal concession stand
- Playground
- Parking

Chapter 4

Analysis

Recreation Trends

The following analysis presents an assessment of the needs for park and recreation facilities in the Town of Merrillville. The assessment is based on a set of standards used for this plan to evaluate recreational facilities and programs in the Town. These standards are generally expressed in terms of facility or program unit of measure, relative to a given service population. In development of this analysis, the Town of Merrillville has used the following sources to evaluate the residents' needs and desires for park and recreation services:

- Demographics analysis
- Household needs survey
- Conversations with stakeholders
- Focus group discussion
- Public meetings
- Review of national standards
- Review of local and national trends

The key findings of these efforts are described in this chapter. These findings have played a great role in formulation of the approach and strategies to address the needs of Merrillville residents. Above notwithstanding, recreational needs are also influenced by the location, distribution, and access to facilities by residents. For these reasons, trends, standards and community sentiments have been considered in assessment of the needs and setting planning goals for the Town.

National Trends

According to 2014 National Recreation and Parks Association National Data Base Report, there are several new trends impacting provision and management of recreational services for the parks departments. The National Recreation and Parks Association's (NRPA) Report, a collection of data provided by different communities, suggests that today's park and recreation agencies provide more than just park maintenance and recreational programming. Park agencies have diverse responsibilities that range from overseeing special events (85 percent) — such as themed 5K runs and summer concerts — to managing open space (80 percent), maintaining jurisdiction public spaces (55 percent), overseeing outdoor sports event complexes (59 percent), operating aquatic centers (50 percent), supervising historic properties (50 percent) and running community gardens (46 percent). To manage such a divergent set of activities requires not only funding, but also staffing that can understand and manage a diverse set of activities.

Parks agencies are providing these services due to changes in residents' desires and national attitudes for parks and recreational activities. These trends are influenced by the following perceptions:

- Growing awareness of long-term physical and mental health value from an active lifestyle
- Individualized sports, e.g., walking, running, swimming and biking, represent the top 10 activities participated in by active Americans
- Safety issues (concussions) may impact activities such as youth tackle football, resulting in options such as flag football leagues
- Emerging community roles; where public health, social transition for youth, conservation of resources and other social and lifestyle tasks are added activities to current roles.

The modern trends are also changing the traditional roles, job classifications and employment types that have been prevalent in the parks and recreation industry for many decades. Today most parks departments are developing better understanding of the emerging market trends and responding by better defining what makes a park and recreation professional; and what skills, knowledge and abilities are needed to pursue a career in the field; and what programs should be offered to address those needs.

State Trends

According to the 2011-2015 Indiana Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreational Plan (SCORP), top ranked recreational activities based on statewide survey is as follows:

1. Hiking/Walking /Jogging
2. Camping
3. Picnicking
4. Fishing
5. Swimming
6. Boating/Water Skiing, Personal watercraft
7. Golf
8. Bicycling
9. Hunting
10. Horseback Riding

With respect to participation of residents in recreational activities, SCORP reports the top three reasons for participation as:

- To be with family and friends;
- Physical health;
- Mental health (i.e., relaxation, stress reduction, meditation, spiritual renewal).

The State also reports that Hoosiers participated in trail activities in the following order: walking, biking and hiking. The SCORP reports the top three reasons for trail use are:

- Pleasure, relaxation, recreation
- Health/physical training
- Family or social outing.

The State Plan further reports several general reasons or barriers for lack of participation in recreational activities. These include structural barriers such as poor setting/physical environment, lack of facilities or programs, time, money, transportation, safety, etc." or social barriers such as lack of participation by other family members, family conflict, and responsibilities to others. Personal reasons given for non-participation range from no motivation and lack of skills to physical, mental or emotional health, and ability level.

Local Trends

With the exception of one park and several playgrounds, parks and recreational facilities and services in the Town have not significantly changed in recent years. At the same time, the population of the Town has increased significantly. The Town remains deficient in both acreage and facilities in most categories. The programs offered by the Town also have remained minimal due to limited space and lack of staff.

Key Findings

The following represents some of the local findings based on the household survey, analysis of data and assessment of regional trends.

- Merrillville's population continues to grow despite recent economic downturns. Population of the Town increased by about 15% for the last decade while number of households has increased by more than 17%.
- Over the last decade, population groups age 20-34 increased by 14.3%, and age 55-64 increased by about 56%. Senior population 65 and older also increased by 4.6%. All other age groups similarly saw an increase.
- Demographic data indicate continued increase for the next 10-20 years, but minor changes, i.e. seniors, in population characteristics is expected, requiring realignment of some services for the senior population and single head of households.

- The median family income of residents in the Town has increased by more than 9% during the last decade despite economic downturn, but this rate is less than the County as a whole.
- Merrillville continues to have an unemployment rate of less than the County but higher than the state or national rates.
- School enrollment continues to remain stable, but is expected to decline as the household sizes shrink.
- Residential growth is expected to continue particularly in the southern section of the Town. This growth will add additional burden on the Town for parks and recreational space and services.
- Continued Town growth will also limit parks development as available properties are consumed for other uses.
- Commercial and retail growth is expected to continue along the major arterial roads, particularly along Broadway, US 30 and Taft street.
- Modern commercial developments require access to alternative transportation. Connection of employment centers to parks, schools and neighborhoods is a required element of smart growth principals. It also add to the quality of life of the community.
- Merrillville's per resident park expenditure remains to be one of the lowest in the region and has relatively stayed flat for the last five years.
- 29% of residents responding to the household survey rate conditions of the parks as poor.
- Soccer fields and sport courts received the lowest maintenance rating (8%) from survey respondents.
- Sport and athletic clubs have very little relationship with the Town. This has lead to loss of potential resources, including revenues, for the Town.
- A strong desire for additional indoor facilities for a variety of activities was expressed in the household survey.
- The southern part of the Town is generally underserved by park facilities.
- Over 77% of household survey respondents indicated they use Merrillville 's trails, while 49% are active in bicycling and walking.
- Trails, biking and picnicking are the top activities residents would like see more in the Town.
- Residents would like to see additional amenities developed in the parks, particularly activities that can be done at the neighborhood level.
- More outdoor activities, especially for children are desired by residents.

According to the household survey, the top ranked recreational activities that residents participate in, or would like to see offered, include:

Top 5 Activities Residents Would Like In Merrillville's Parks

1. Walking/Trails (55%)
2. Bicycling/Trails (38%)
3. Picnic (36%)
4. Outdoor Gym, Outdoor Fitness (32%)
5. Playground (30%)

Top 5 Most important Activities (based on total responses)

1. Walking/Trails (77%)
2. Bicycle/Trails (49%)
3. Playgrounds (46%)
4. Picnic in the parks (42%)
5. Football (19%)

Program Needs

- Better advertising for programs
- Evening/afterhours programs
- Recreational trips
- Senior programs
- Youth programs

All communities have unique facility and program needs based on their population, demographics, economy, needs and interests of the residents. National standards and trends are important considerations in recreational facility planning for Merrillville. But community needs and interests are typically measured and quantified by local input and level of service desired by the residents. For this the Town has used the Household Survey and other outreach efforts to gather information and assess residents' needs.

Other factors which influence the planning for parks and recreation facilities are the location, distribution, and access for community uses. For example, Merrillville may have met the level of service for neighborhood parks per capita, yet the facilities are not distributed appropriately, creating service gaps in some neighborhoods. That is in fact one of issues in Merrillville, as most of the facilities are located on the northern part of the Town.

Table 24 shows the overall park acreage available in the Town. Included in this table is a comparison of the national standards with current and future level of service, using population estimates for 2020. According to these standards, the Town is deficient in almost every category. The deficiency is increased if the population increase continues. As such the estimated total deficit is projected to be about 233 acres.

The level of service analysis is perhaps most critical when distribution of facilities is assessed. As shown on Exhibit 6, there are significant deficits in most of the southern and western part of the Town for different types of parks. Although some of these areas remain undeveloped, planning principals and best management practices dictate that the Town must plan for facility acquisition without delay as available land for parks will be lost to development and future cost of facility expansion could become prohibitive.

Activity	Existing Acres	Recommended Standard		Deficit/Excess (current)	Deficit/Excess (2020 proj.)
		Per/1000 Population	Service Radius		
Mini Park	25.3	1.5 acre	5 minutes	-27.9	-31.7
Neighborhood Park	28.3	2 acre	20 minutes - walking	-42.7	-47.8
Community Park	30.0	1.5 acre	15 minutes - Driving	-23.2	-27.0
Trail/Linear Park (acres)	53.6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Open Space	9.7	4-5 acres	n/a	-167.7	-180.5
Total	**146.9**	**10 acres**		**-208.0**	**-233.4**
Trail/Linear Park (miles)	3.3	0.1 miles	n/a	-0.2	-0.5

TABLE 24 - PARK NEEDS BY PARK TYPE

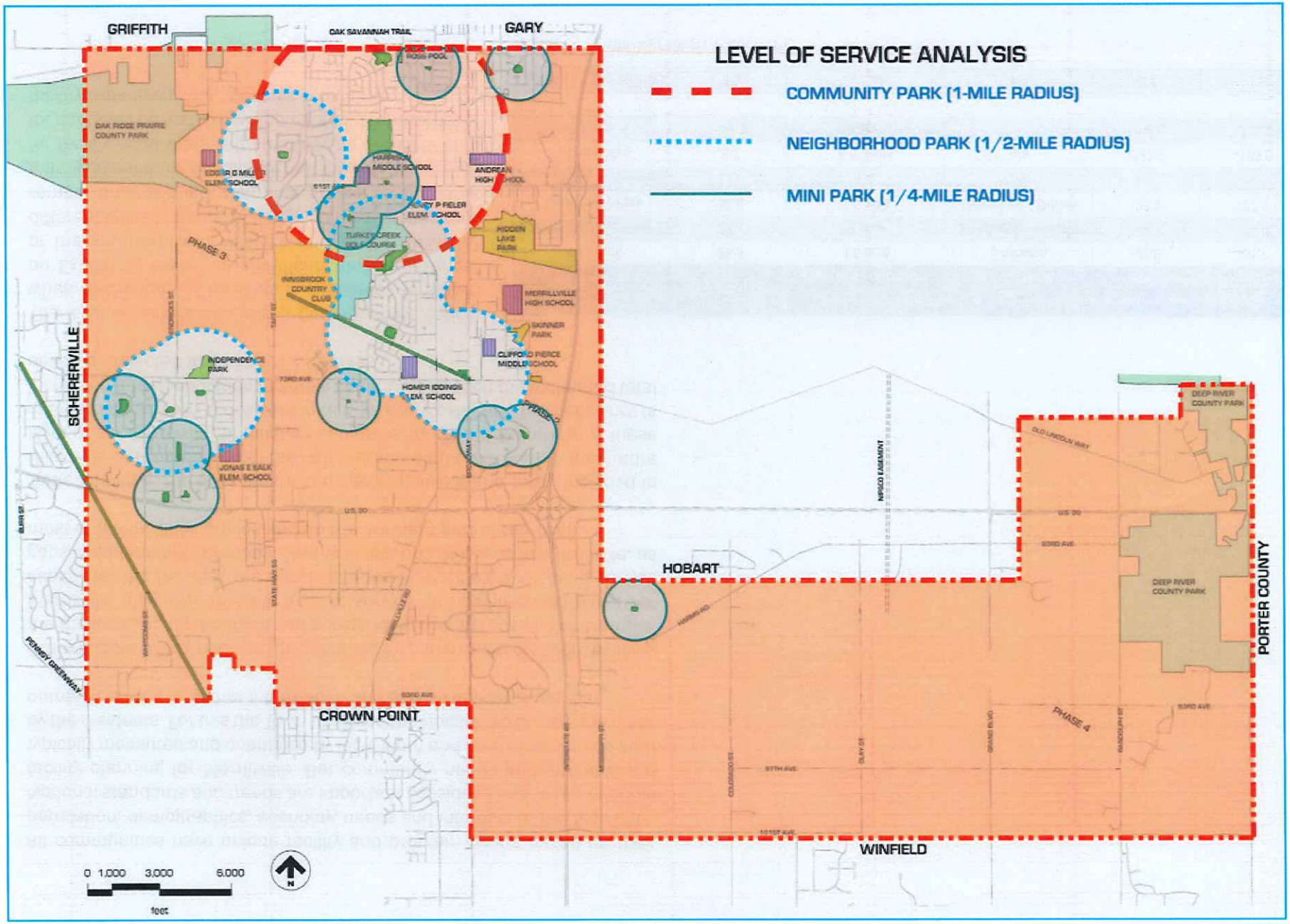


EXHIBIT 6 · MERRILLVILLE PARKS LEVEL OF SERVICE BY LOCATION

Facility Demand

The parks and recreation facility need in the Town of Merrillville is determined through comparing the existing facilities by type to the level of service standards. For this comparison the long standing national standards are used. Accordingly, the total park system demand is approximately 355 acres, and is projected to increase to approximately 382 acres by 2020 based on a very moderate population growth projection.

Table 25 lists the overall deficit for different outdoor facilities. Similar to parks distribution, the outdoor amenities must be distributed based on population needs to insure equitable access for all residents.

Community Parks

The immediate need (5-10 years) for community parks is approximately 23.2 acres. The immediate demand can be satisfied through the development of a community parks in the northeastern and northwestern section of Merrillville where much of the Town has developed but vacant land still remains available. These new facilities must provide a variety of recreational services to the adjoining neighborhoods.

The long term demand requires additional planning as Merrillville continues to grow. Future needs for community parks should be addressed by acquisition of large parcels of quality land in southeastern and southwestern parts of the Town. This acquisition of new parkland should be focused in a way that will insure equitable distribution of facilities. Property acquired through dedication by developers and others could supplement such acquisition for park development.

Neighborhood Parks

The Town currently has 6 parks that are classified as Neighborhood Parks. These parks are mostly located in the northern part of the Town and most require facilities and amenities as a neighborhood park. The overall needs for neighborhood parks is estimated to be about 44.7 acres.

Activity	Existing	Recommended Standard		Deficit/Excess 2014
		Per/1000 Population	Service Radius	
Baseball (Official)	0	0.2	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(7)
Softball	4	0.2	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(3)
Baseball Fields (lighted)*	0	0.033	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(1)
Softball Fields (lighted)*	0	0.033	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(1)
Basketball Court	0	0.2	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(7)
Outdoor Ice Rink	0	0.01	15-30 minutes	(0)
Volleyball Court	0	0.2	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(7)
Soccer Field	0	0.1	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(4)
Tennis Court	0	0.5	1/4 - 1/2 mile	(18)
Multiple Courts	0	0.1	1-2 miles	(4)
Field Hockey	0	0.05	15-30 minutes	(2)
Football*	0	0.05	15-30 minutes	(2)
Running Track	0	0.05	15-30 minutes	(2)
Indoor Pool	0	0.05	15-30 minutes	(2)
Outdoor Pool	0	0.05	30 minutes	(2)
Golf	1	0.04	30 minutes	(0)
Recreation Center	1	0.05	15-30 minutes	(1)
Paved Trail	4	0.1	20 minutes	0
Playground	14	0.5	1/4 -1/2 mile	(4)
Dog Park	0	0.033	15-30 minutes	(1)
Skateboard Park	0	0.033	15-30 minutes	(1)

TABLE 25 - PARK FACILITY NEEDS

The neighborhood parks require to be established in existing neighborhoods as well as in future subdivisions. In development of these parks, property acquired through dedication by developers and others present a supplemental option for meeting the service level demand for such parks.

Mini (Block) Park

Mini parks are the closest open space facilities accessible to resident and should be within walking distance. Immediate needs for these facilities should be focused on improvements to existing amenities, i.e. playgrounds. Long term needs should be addressed by property acquired through dedication by developers and others in new subdivisions.

Open Space

As the society has changed, so has the value of open and green space. Large green space and natural preserves fill the regional need for such facility type. Merrillville, being the commercial hub of the region, requires even more open space due to its daily demand by shoppers and visitors to the region. As such the demand level for open space as a regional hub is higher than a typical demand for a community with 35,000 population. For this need, however, the Lake County parks and the State parks, namely Hoosier Prairie, Deep River, and Oak Ridge Prairie contribute significantly to satisfy the regional level of service for open space. A vigorous effort to preserve and develop the corridor along the Turkey Creek corridor and other potential green corridors could potentially add to the open space inventory of the Town. These efforts should be pursued on a long term basis to expand green space in the Town and with continued partnership with other agencies and organization.

Civic Park

Creation of a gathering place for special events and to build a sense of place has become a norm in most suburban communities. As such communities mature and residents long for attachment, more and more suburban communities engage in development of a central place which they can hold special events, resident can stroll and children can freely play.

The Civic facilities are typically large green public spaces in the heart of a community which offer enriching and captivating experiences that draw people together and strengthen the bond to the community. They often serve as front porch of the community. They invite people to gather, connect, recharge and enjoy art, culture, and entertainment.

The Town of Merrillville has reached the threshold level that the creation of such a park should be strongly considered. These facilities, however, require substantial planning and consideration. For these reasons, development of a civic park should be a long term objectives. Nonetheless the Town must consider starting conversation around the concept, identifying the scope and possible sites for such facility in the near future.

Trails

The Town currently has two trail systems: the C & O Greenway and Erie-Lackawanna Trail. These systems provide adequate levels of service for the community. Trail development and usage ranked high among the public comment for desired recreation activities in Merrillville. Short term effort should focus on developing existing trails where right-of-way is readily available. Long term opportunities exist for existing trail facilities to be improved to expand the level of services townwide and regionally. Opportunities that exists include connection to other Merrillville facilities as well as regionally. One of the most important opportunities locally is the development of park facilities along the existing trails as well as creation of direct linkage to other neighborhoods, schools and potential pedestrian corridors. One of such corridors is the Turkey Creek Blue Way. Regionally, the C&O Greenway should be extended both east and west to link to other regional trail systems and neighboring communities.

Recreation Programs

Until recently, the Department operated a recreation program with one full-time coordinator that managed all community recreation, fields scheduling, special populations and special events. As a result of budget cuts, this position was eliminated. The community survey as well conversation with many stakeholders show that there is a strong gap in provision of recreational services.

The Town will need to appropriate funds to address program needs of the community. These services are needed in the areas of youth programming, senior services, and general leisure services.

Senior Programs

The needs for senior services has been expressed in multiple outreach efforts. The current limited senior programs that the Town offers are expected to continue to grow in popularity as the Baby Boomer generation matures. New trends for senior programs are much more active and promote health, fitness and wellness. Merrillville will need to develop space and partnership to provide such services on a regular basis.

Youth and Family Services

With the exception of a Summer Camp program, the Town does not provide any youth and teen programs on a regular basis. Youth and Family services were highly requested in the community survey and in conversation with stakeholders. Programs that could be consider must include early children programs, teen programs, and after school programs. In addition, the Town must develop extensive partnerships with other agencies and Athletic organizations to build a robust recreation programs for the youth in the Town.

For the above programs, the Town needs to have adequate indoor facilities. The Town has a great need for a facility which it can carry out a variety of indoor activities and to address the needs of various groups of population. The current Pruzin Center can only accommodate a limited number of people and as such is inadequate, both in terms of size and location. This facility can be expanded, but will not be able to become a townwide facility due its location. A new facility, at an estimated of 30,000-35,000 s.f. and centrally located, will be required to meet the current needs.

Finance

The wishes of the residents cannot be fully realized without adequate resources and staff. Additional resources are needed for park development, maintenance and facility expansion. The Town must consider establishing a capital improvement line item in its Parks budget to address the regular parks maintenance needs in an orderly fashion. The Town must consider a parks maintenance bonds just to address many years of deferred maintenance and facility rehabilitation. Additionally the Town must consider other sources for development and purchase of land for future development. These should be considered on a case by case basis and based on planned development.

Given the current economic conditions and funding limitations, the Town must also expand its efforts for alternative financing, including public private partnership to plan and develop new facilities. The Town further needs qualified staff. The current staffing capacity is totally inadequate. The Department must evaluate its human resources needs with an eye toward a full service parks department with different divisions within the organization.

The 2015 Plan proposes measured efforts for acquiring parkland and expanding facilities. These proposals aim to address some of the most urgent needs. Other needs remain unfulfilled dues to a variety of reasons including budget reason. But the Town has shown in the past that it has the capacity to achieve significant accomplishments. This trend will need to be restarted and continued for the next five years. The Town must set its goals and allocate resources for parkland acquisition and development with the idea of meeting fully its goals based on the Park Authority's priorities outlined in this Master Plan. The Master Plan estimates that development and expansion of the planned activities required to meet the residents' need will cost nearly $8 million. This will require for the Town to find resources of about $1.6 million each year for development of park and recreation facilities.

Barrier-Free Evaluation: Facilities & Parks

This section provides an overview of the Town's barrier-free evaluation of parks and facilities. The Town has prepared a transitional plan to identify and eliminate its identified ADA deficiencies. The specifics of this Transition Plan are summarized in Chapter 2. As a part of this plan, the Arsh Group also assessed other needs including those concerned with visitability of the parks, playgrounds, other facilities and policies for compliance with ADA.

Currently, Merrillville's ADA Coordinator is Bruce Spires, who also serves as the Town Manager. The ADA Coordinator handles all ADA claims and grievances in the Town, including those related to parks and recreation issues. Procedures for filing grievances, as well as the grievance form, are available in the Town's ADA Transition Plan at the Town Hall and on the Town's website. Individual ADA grievance forms are also available at the Town Hall.

As a matter of policy and in order to maintain full compliance with new federal rules, it is recommended that the Town address all barriers as a high priority and at the earliest possible. Such efforts should assure that no otherwise qualified handicapped Merrillville resident solely by reason of his or her handicap, is excluded from the participation in, is denied the benefits of, or is subjected to discrimination under any program or activity sponsored or implemented by the Department.

With respect to non physical barrier needs, the Town will make attempts to expand its policies to fully employ other assistive tools available such as captioning, audio description, assistive listening systems, and tactile access in all of its activities, facilities and programs that are accessible to the public regardless of location.

The Plan has identified and discussed deficiencies and needs in Chapter 2. These range from accessible routes to parks, access to park facilities, issues related to signage or availability of Braille or audible copies of the documents or non-compliant playgrounds. There appears to be adequate desire by the Department to obtain full compliance. To this end it is recommended all ADA compliance efforts to be given high priority and implemented at the earliest possible. The Department must also coordinate its efforts with the Town Pubic Works for public improvements to fully assure barrier free access to all of its parks in different parts of the Town.

Chapter 5

Master Plan

Vision

The needs of the community based on data review and assessment and the results of the input from the community played a major role in formulating the overall objectives for the Plan. However, these objectives cannot be fulfilled if they are not part of the broader vision for the Town's future. Thus, the vision for the future as a growing community with strong interest in expansion of its quality of life is a determining factor influencing the Plan. This vision was developed by the Town and sets the overall goals for the 2015 Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Vision (2010)

To meet the needs of a diverse community where families and children are encouraged to engage in play activities while connecting their lives with the community and enjoying a healthy lifestyle in all seasons.

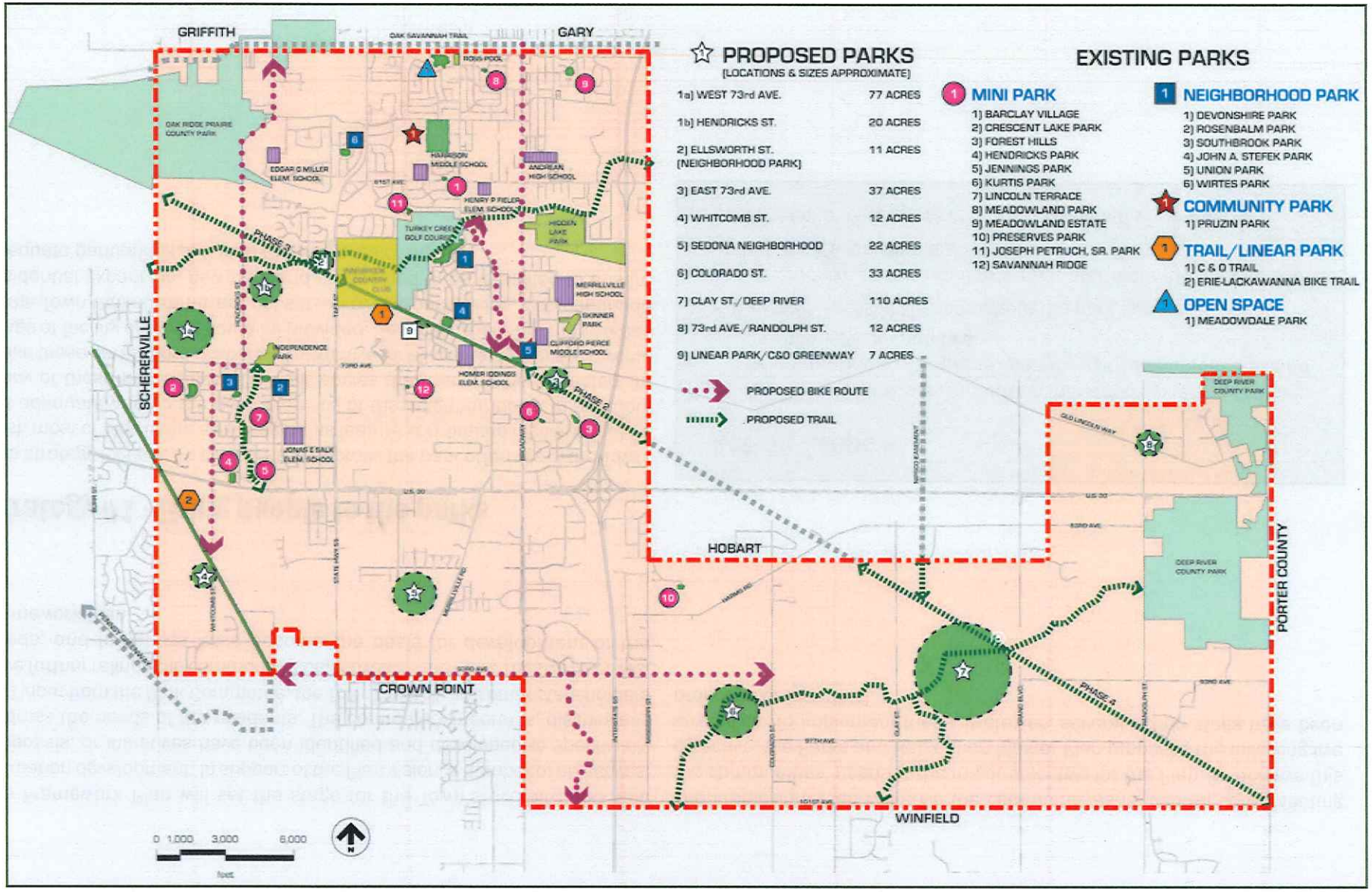


EXHIBIT 7 - PROPOSED MASTER PLAN

Framework Plan

The Framework Plan will set the stage for the Town's overall parks and recreation development. In support of the Plan vision, a number of objectives, proposals, or initiatives have been identified and developed to specifically address the needs of the residents. The community meetings, discussions and input from the Park Committee, the Town Council, and other stakeholders have further refined the community's objectives for the Plan. These objectives, needs, and initiatives have become the basis for development of the Framework Plan.

The Framework Plan will have the community as its central core. Meeting the communities' needs is the major objective for the Plan. To achieve this objective, the Parks and Recreation Master Plan proposes the following five strategies. To implement these strategies, several action steps have been proposed or identified.

Strategy #1 - Bring people to the parks

This strategy focuses on two areas to improve the park offerings in the Town. First, most of Merrillville's existing parks feature very limited facilities that do not adequately serve the demographics of the neighborhoods. In addition, many of these parks have ADA deficiencies that need to be corrected. To make these parks more usable and attractive for all residents, a more diverse range of facility options should be provided. Secondly, there are many areas of the Town that currently are not served by any parks. Also, with continued residential expansion, new parkland areas need to be identified to ensure adequate parkland is provided for future residents.

Action Steps

- Develop a trail & pedestrian transportation system to connect neighborhoods with parks, commercial uses, schools, and neighboring communities.
- Improve accessibility throughout the park system.
- Synchronize the community's park and recreation needs with the Town's growth plan.
- Expand park facilities and park land south of US 30.

Strategy #2 - Enhance the maintenance and operations management

This strategy focuses on developing appropriate operation and maintenance standards that are consistent with industry best practices, as well as allocating the appropriate level of resources to meet these standards. Such efforts will ensure a high-quality management system that will improve the attractiveness of the parks, as well as make the Department more efficient in its operations.

Action Steps

- Maintain a clean, orderly appearance at all parks particularly at the entrances.
- Employ a full-time quality maintenance staff.

Strategy #3 - Create recreational programs to support the needs of the entire population

For many years, the Parks Department has been challenged in its ability to bring quality recreation programs to its residents. Not only are the total number of offerings extremely limited, most of them only serve a narrow segment of the population, leaving several population groups underserved. This strategy, then, will seek to expand not only the quantity of overall programs that the Department offers, but also the diversity in its offerings The Park Department should also identify resources and partners to help augment their own offerings to provide additional recreational resources for the residents. In the long-term, the Park Department should consider the development of a new recreation center to better provide these services.

Action Steps

- Expand programs and services to meet current recreational needs.
    - Maintain senior recreation programs.
    - Establish a variety of youth programs.
- Establish after-hour recreational programs.
    - Development after school program for the youths
    - Develop evening adult recreation programs
- Build relationships and partnerships with local recreation and sport organizations to expand services.
    - Boys and Girls Club
    - Youth Sports Leagues
    - Merrillville School District

Strategy #4 - Foster environmental and financial sustainability in parks development and management

This strategy will focus on two core areas of sustainability: environmental and financial. Environmental sustainability will promote the protection and preservation of natural areas in the Town. Sustainable green space initiatives, such as the inclusion of natural landscaping and green maintenance practices, should be incorporated as part of the Park Department's operations as a matter of course. In addition, environmental sustainability will also promote the use of non-motorized transportation to access the parks and their facilities. Financial sustainability will ensure the Parks Department will always remain fluid with steady, predictable sources of revenue.

Action Steps

- Enhance pedestrian travel through new and upgraded sidewalks and off-street paths.
- Employ green practices to reduce costs of park maintenance.
- Seek alternative funding sources and partnerships to stabilize park revenues.

Strategy #5 - Improve and modernize the administrative operations of the Department

The quality of parks in a community is often seen as an indicator for the overall health of the community. Providing quality, consistent upkeep is vital to protect the quality of parkland in the Town. Recognizing that the current staffing climate provides significant challenges to fulfilling this objective, this strategy aim to improve the size, diversity, and level of service to help make Merrillville's Parks Department competitive with other regional departments.

Action Steps

- Develop a Marketing Plan to promote usage, image and awareness of the parks program
    - Improve marketing to the community through all forms of media.
- Establish a capital projects plan.
- Hire a full-time, qualified Parks Director.

Priority Plan

The 2015 Plan identifies several issues as critical issues that require closer attention. These issues range from the need for a fully developed community parks system to additional facilities in certain neighborhoods. Development of amenities and programs for the families and/or older population has also been identified as a major need. Although these issues have played a major role in development of the Framework Plan, some of them will need to be considered on a shorter term. Other issues, for a variety of reasons, will need to be considered as long term objectives. Some issues have also become priorities, as they represent opportunities which the Town will need to take advantage of on a short term basis. The issues and opportunities have been assigned priority levels based on the interest of the citizens, review by the Park Department, and the level of deficiencies.

Priority Levels

Essential projects are those critically and urgently required, meeting one or more of the following criteria:

- Addresses safety, security or accessibility issues.
- Improves maintenance efficiency, advances Merrillville's commitment to resource conservation & stewardship, and reduces operating cost (including eliminating service duplications).
- Provides preventive maintenance for Town assets.
- Provides fundamental park and recreation services available to all residents at neighborhood and community parks.

Needed projects occur within an existing site or facility, mainly needed to address service deficiencies. Examples include:

- New trail and pathway development in existing parks.
- Renovations/new projects in existing parks that increase access and promote new activities for youth and adult recreation
- Athletic field improvements
- Additional improvements at existing parks and facilities.
- Land acquisition in areas slated for development.
- Acquisition or protection of high resource value green space.

Desirable projects are long-term developments of parks, facilities or equipment, at new sites or existing sites, such as:

- Acquisition of land for new parks and facilities.
- Acquisition or protection of high resource value green space.
- New facility development

Park	Activities	Priority		
		Essential	Needed	Desired
Barclay Village	Install Park Sign			
	Add trellis and benches			
	Install trees and shrubs on north and east side			
	Install/renovate sidewalks			
C&O Greenway	Extend trail east to Mississippi Street (Phase 2) w/ Trailhead			
	Extend trail west to Town boundary (Phase 3)			
	Install benches / Dog Waste Stations			
Crescent Lake	Construct walking trail around lake & to north side of park			
	Install paths to amenities			
	Replace playground equipment & surfacing			
	Replace shelter			
Devonshire	Install park sign			
	Install playground			
	Construct little league field			
	Construct tennis court			
	Construct shelter			
	Construct restroom facilities			
	Construct walking & jogging trail			
	Construct parking			
	Install shade trees			
	Repair path & bridge to island			
	Restore island			
Erie-Lackawanna Trail	Remove shelter at end of useful life			
	Pave parking areas at Whitcomb St.			
Forest Hills	Acquire land to the east			
	Replace shelter & create picnic area			
	Replace playground equipment			
	Construct restroom facilities			
	Resurface existing parking lot			
	Construct entry road & parking			
	Construct walking trail			
	Construct softball field			
	Construct leash-free dog park			
	Install shade trees			
	Improve landscaping along entry paths			
Hendricks	Construct Farmers Market - shelter/bandstand			
	Install turf & hardscape			
	Install landscaping (add trees on north and east sides of park)			
	Construct parallel parking along western edge			

TABLE 26.1 - PRIORITY PLAN

Park	Activities	Priority		
		Essential	Needed	Desired
Jennings	Install paths to entrance & facilities			
	Remove playground equipment at end of useful life			
Kurtis	Install picnic shelter			
	Install sidewalks & paths to park amenties			
	Remove playground equipment at end of useful life			
Lincoln Terrace	Complete masterplan for expanded park			
	Connect 76th Ln. to Jennings to create additional park entrance			
	Construct walking paths			
	Install play equipment			
	Construct picnic facilities			
	Install park signs			
Meadowdale	Develop nature trail			
Meadowland	Pave walking path			
	Install sidewalks			
	Install landscaping			
	Install fence along 54th Street			
Meadowland Estate	Construct picnic shelter			
	Construct entry plaza & arbor			
	Construct sidewalks			
Petruch	Install sign			
	Resurface playground			
	Landscaped entry			
	Clear trees			
	Construct shelter			
	Construct walking paths			
	Construct sidewalks			
Preserves	Install landscaping			
Pruzin	Install paths & sidewalks to park facilities			
	Replace shelter			
	Construct ballfields			
	Construct soccer field			
	Construct restroom & concession facilities for practice fields			
	Install drinking fountain			
Rosenbalm	Renovate baseball field			
	Install paths & sidewalks to park facilities			
	Install paths to park facilities			
	Install sidewalks			
	Replace shelter			

TABLE 26.2 · PRIORITY PLAN

Park	Activities	Priority		
		Essential	Needed	Desired
Savannah Ridge	Install shade trees			
	Resurface playground			
	Install swing set			
	Replace shelter			
	Install paths to park facilities			
Southbrook	Install paths to park facilities			
	Install sidewalks			
	Resurface playground			
	Replace shelter			
	Construct fitness trail among the various parcels			
	Construct tennis court on East parcel			
	Install landscaping			
Stefek	Complete master plan for park			
	Create community gardens			
	Create entry plaza			
	Construct ballfield			
	Install swing set			
	Seed former playground area			
Union	Complete master plan for park			
	Install picnic shelter			
	Install walking paths			
	Install restrooms			
	Install new landscaping			
	Install park signage			
	Expand park south of C&O Greenway (2.7 acres)			
Wirtes	Replace playground equipment & surfacing			
	Replece south picnic shelter			
	Remove north picnic shelter at end of useful life			
	Install paths to park facilities			
Trail Development	Construct trail along Kaiser Ditch			
New Facilities	Park Site #1A: Community park along 73rd Ave. (appx. 77 acres)			
	Park Site #1B: Community park along Hendricks St. (appx. 20 acres)			
	Park Site #1C: Neighborhood park at Ellsworth St.(appx. 11 acres)			
	Park Site #2: Community park south of 73rd Avenue (appx. 37 acres)			
	Park Site #3: Neighborhood park at Whitcomb St. (appx. 12 acres)			
	Park Site #4: Community park at Merrillville Rd. (appx. 22 acres)			
	Park Site #5: Community park at 93rd Ave. extension (appx. 33 acres)			
	Park Site #6: Community Park at Clay St./Deep River (appx. 78-110 acres)			
	Park Site #7: Community park at 73rd Ave./Randolph St. (appx. 12 acres)			
	Park Site #8: Neighborhood park along C&O Greenway (appx. 7 acres)			

TABLE 26.3 - PRIORITY PLAN

Action Plan

The Action Plan is an instrument which will guide and direct the activities of the Parks Department for the next five years. The activities included in the Action Plan are priority items which were determined to be highly desirable or needed items to meet the overall objectives of the Master Plan. The Action Plan is organized according to year, facility, planned improvement, estimated budget, and potential funding sources. The funding source is expected to be fluent, as budgetary policies of the Town may change over time. The costs identified on the Plan are only estimates and should be used for budgeting purposes only. Actual costs may vary as projects are further developed and defined. Due to the Department's current financial limitations, as well as the uncertain nature of future budget levels and funding sources, some priority plan items are currently not budgeted in this plan cycle, but are still included in the action plan for future planning purposes.

FUNDING BY SOURCE	
General Park Funds	$367,500
2015 Park Improvement Bond	$499,000
Impact Fee	$260,000
TIF Funds	$110,000
TAP Grant	$1,842,840
Grant	$174,250
Local (Grant Matches)	$634,960
Donations	$100,000
Private	$282,500
Public Works	$117,000
Stormwater Management	$110,000
SUBTOTAL	**$4,498,050**
Land Acquisition Fund	$3,450,000
TOTAL	**$7,948,050**

TABLE 27 - SUMMARY OF FUNDING BREAKDOWN

Park	Action Item	Proposed Budget					Funding Source
		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Barclay Village	Install park sign		$ 2,000				General Park Funds
	Add trellis and benches						
	Install trees and shrubs on north and east side						
	Install/renovate sidewalks			$ 2,500			Public Works
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 4,500	
C&O Greenway	Extend trail east to Mississippi Street (Phase 2) w/ Trailhead	$ 823,550					TAP Grant
	Extend trail west to Town boundary (Phase 3)					$ 1,480,000	TAP Grant
	Install benches			$ 10,000			Impact Fee
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 2,313,550	
Crescent Lake	Construct walking trail around lake & to north side of park		$ 28,000				2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Install paths to amenities		$ 1,500				General Park Funds
	Replace playground equipment & surfacing		$ 60,000				General Park Funds
	Replace shelter					$ 40,000	2015 Park Improvement Bond
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 129,500	
Devonshire	Install park sign		$ 2,000				General Park Funds
	Construct playground			$ 60,000			2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Construct little league field				$ 50,000		Impact Fee
	Construct tennis court						
	Construct shelter			$ 40,000			2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Construct restroom facilities						
	Construct walking & jogging trail		$ 35,000				2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Install parking						
	Install shade trees			$ 10,000			General Park Funds
	Repair path & bridge to island		$ 35,000				Grant
	Restore island		$ 25,000				Grant
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 257,000	
Erie Lackawanna Trail	Remove shelter at end of useful life					$ 3,000	General Park Funds
	Pave parking areas at Whitcomb St.			$ 10,000			General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 13,000	
Forest Hills	Acquire land to the east						
	Replace shelter & create picnic area	$ 40,000					2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Replace playground equipment	$ 60,000					General Park Funds
	Construct restroom facilities						
	Resurface existing parking lot	$ 5,000					General Park Funds
	Construct entry road & parking						
	Construct walking trail	$ 15,000					2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Construct softball field						
	Construct leash-free dog park						
	Install shade trees						
	Improve landscaping along entry paths						
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 120,000	
Hendricks	Construct Farmers Market - shelter/bandstand		$ 60,000				Private
	Install turf & hardscape			$ 40,000			Private
	Install landscaping (add trees on north and east sides of park)			$ 10,000			Private
	Construct parallel parking along western edge			$ 25,000			Public Works
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 135,000	
Jennings	Install paths to entrance & facilities			$ 5,000			Impact Fee
	Remove playground equipment at end of useful life					$ 3,000	General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 8,000	

TABLE 28.1 - ACTION PLAN

Park	Action Item	Proposed Budget					Funding Source
		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Kurtis	Install picnic shelter					$ 40,000	2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Install sidewalks & paths to park amenties			$ 12,500			Public Works
	Remove playground equipment at end of useful life					$ 3,000	General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 55,500	
Lincoln Terrace	Complete master plan for expanded park			$ 10,000			Stormwater Management
	Connect 76th Ln. to Jennings to create additional park entrance			$ 17,500			Public Works
	Construct walking paths				$ 21,000		Grant
	Install play equipment				$ 60,000		Stormwater Management
	Construct picnic facilities				$ 40,000		Stormwater Management
	Install park signs			$ 2,000			General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 150,500	
Meadowdale	Develop nature trail		$ 55,000				Grant
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 55,000	
Meadowland	Pave walking path			$ 10,000			Impact Fee
	Install sidewalks			$ 17,500			Public Works
	Install landscaping			$ 10,000			General Park Funds
	Install fence along 54th Street			$ 19,000			2015 Park Improvement Bond
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 56,500	
Meadowland Estate	Construct picnic shelter						
	Construct entry plaza & arbor						
	Construct sidewalks					$ 7,500	Public Works
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 7,500	
Petruch	Install sign			$ 2,000			General Park Funds
	Resurface playground					$ 25,000	General Park Funds
	Landscaped entry			$ 5,000			General Park Funds
	Clear trees						
	Construct shelter						
	Construct walking paths				$ 3,500		Impact Fee
	Construct sidewalk				$ 500		Public Works
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 36,000	
Preserves	Install landscaping					$ 5,000	General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 5,000	
Pruzin	Install paths to park facilities		$ 1,000				General Park Funds
	Replace shelter	$ 40,000					Impact Fee
	Construct ballfields			$ 75,000			Private
	Construct soccer field			$ 25,000			Private
	Construct restroom & concession facilities for practice fields						
	Install drinking fountain						
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 141,000	
Rosenbalm	Renovate baseball field					$ 25,000	Impact Fee
	Install paths to park facilities					$ 22,000	Impact Fee
	Install sidewalks					$ 9,000	Public Works
	Install landscaping					$ 15,000	General Park Funds
	Replace shelter					$ 40,000	2015 Park Improvement Bond
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 111,000	
Savannah Ridge	Install shade trees		$ 2,000				General Park Funds
	Resurface playground				$ 25,000		General Park Funds
	Install swing set				$ 25,000		General Park Funds
	Replace shelter		$ 40,000				Impact Fee
	Install paths to park facilities		$ 500				General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 92,500	

TABLE 28.2 · ACTION PLAN

Park	Action Item	Proposed Budget					Funding Source
		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Southbrook	Install paths to park facilities				$ 2,500		Grant
	Install sidewalks				$ 25,000		Public Works
	Resurface playground				$ 25,000		General Park Funds
	Replace shelter			$ 40,000			Impact Fee
	Construct fitness trail among the various parcels				$ 60,000		Grant
	Construct tennis court on East parcel						
	Install landscaping			$ 30,000			General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 182,500	
Stefek	Create master plan for park	$ 7,000					General Park Funds
	Create entry plaza		$ 20,000				2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Create community gardens		$ 7,000				2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Construct ballfield		$ 50,000				2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Install swing set		$ 25,000				2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Seed former playground area		$ 1,000				General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 109,000	
Union	Complete master plan for park	$ 10,000					Impact Fee
	Install picnic shelter				$ 60,000		TIF Funds
	Install walking paths			$ 45,000			Private
	Install restrooms				$ 50,000		TIF Funds
	Install new landscaping			$ 25,000			Private
	Install park signage			$ 2,500			Private
	Expand park south of C&O Greenway (2.7 acres)				$ 100,000		Donations
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 292,500	
Wirtes	Replace playground equipment & surfacing	Funding allocated in FY 2014, to be installed in 2015					
	Replace south picnic shelter				$ 40,000		2015 Park Improvement Bond
	Remove north picnic shelter at end of useful life					$ 2,500	General Park Funds
	Install paths to park facilities	$ 4,500					Impact Fee
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 47,000	
Trail Development	Construct trail along Kaiser Ditch				$ 150,000		Grant
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 150,000	
New Facilities	Park Site #1A: Community park along 73rd Ave. (appx. 77 acres)					$ 825,000	Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #1B: Community park along Hendricks St. (appx. 20 acres)						Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #1C: Neighborhood park at Ellsworth St.(appx. 11 acres)					$ 150,000	Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #2: Community park south of 73rd Avenue (appx. 37 acres)			$ 925,000			Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #3: Neighborhood park at Whitcomb St. (appx. 12 acres)						Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #4: Community park at Merrillville Rd. (appx. 22 acres)		$ 750,000				Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #5: Community park at 93rd Ave. extension (appx. 33 acres)						Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #6: Community Park at Clay St./Deep River (appx. 78-110 acres)				$ 800,000		Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #7: Community park at 73rd Ave./Randolph St. (appx. 12 acres)						Land Acquisition Fund
	Park Site #8: Neighborhood park along C&O Greenway (appx. 7 acres)						Land Acquisition Fund
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 3,450,000	
Misc. Items	Remove ash trees throughout park system (appx. 8/year)	$ 5,000	$ 5,000	$ 5,000	$ 5,000	$ 5,000	General Park Funds
					PARK SUBTOTAL	$ 25,000	
YEARLY SUBTOTAL		$ 1,010,050	$ 1,205,000	$ 1,490,500	$ 1,542,500	$ 2,700,000	
TOTAL - FIVE YEAR					$	7,948,050	

TABLE 28.3 - ACTION PLAN

Vehicle & Equipment Maintenance

Equipment List	Value
Vehicles/Trucks	
GMC 4500HD 1-ton dump truck (2007)	$30,000.00
4x4 half-ton Chevrolet Pick-up (1988) (location - street dept.)	$-
~~Chevrolet Impala (2002)~~ 2013 Chevy Equinox	$2,071.00
Equipment	
Equipment Trailer -18 ' (2014) (estimate)	$3,500.00
Equipment Trailer -20' (estimate)	$4,000.00
Equipment Maintenance	
Scag Mag 72" Mower (2011)	$13,000.00
Scag Mag 72" Mower (2011)	$13,000.00
Sabretooth Tiger 72" mower (estimate)	$1,500.00
TOTAL	**$67,071.00**

TABLE 29 - LIST OF PARK EQUIPMENT

ITEM DESCRIPTION	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Scag Mag 72" Mower			$13,000.00		
Scag Mag 72" Mower				$13,000.00	
Pick-up Truck- 4x4 Half-Ton				$30,000.00	
2002 Chevrolet Impala	18,169	~~$28,000.00~~			
Annual Total	**$-**	~~**$28,000.00**~~	**$13,000.00**	**$43,000.00**	**$-**
GRAND TOTAL	**$84,000.00**				

TABLE 30 - EQUIPMENT REPLACEMENT SCHEDULE

The Department of Parks and Recreation has limited number of the equipment and facility for maintenance. The Department often relies on other Departments or volunteer agencies to maintain its facilities.

Equipment replacement and maintenance is proposed as a capital item in the Plan. The set aside program will allow for an orderly replacement and to ensure that existing vehicles and equipments can be regularly maintained. A Vehicle and Equipment maintenance and replacement program is strongly recommended. The life cycle of vehicles and equipment purchased by the Department should be considered in budgeting on an annual basis. Table 30 presents the projected replacement needs for equipment and vehicles for the Parks Department.

Funding Sources

Funding for Action Plan projects and programs will be primarily dependent upon local revenue, grants, bonds, special appropriations, and cost sharing through strategic partnerships. Included in the plan is the establishment of a Community Park Foundation. This entity, once set up, could also seek funding and raise funds for many projects. The Park Department or the town can also seek contributions or donations from residents, businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, or philanthropists. Furthermore, the town has been fairly successful in partnering with other organizations. The town can cultivate these relationships on a broader scale and raise more in-kind dollars to develop park facilities. Potential sources of funding for the Action Plan items include:

1. General Revenue

The Town of Merrillville can utilize a variety of funding sources from within the Town's budget. These resources are appropriated by the Town Council on an annual basis. The Departments should pursue funds as necessary to meet the needs.

2. Bonds

The Park Department capital needs are often ignored as they are typically small on an individual basis, but system-wide they could be significant. The result has generally been lack of maintenance or removal of the facility from the inventory. A small bond, targeted specifically for maintenance of park facilities and larger equipments, is proposed. This plan proposes a modest bond amount of $500,000, but larger amounts (up to $2 million) may be considered if it does not negatively impact the Town's ability to pay it off. The maturity of bond should be set for five years, the end of the plan effective period. The bond should be reissued after its final payment.

3. Special Bond Issue

The Town has, in the past, issued special bonds to cover major facility construction and acquisition. The current plan identifies several larger capital projects, such as new community parks throughout the Town, that should qualify as special projects and funded by specially designated bond.

4. Other Local Funds

There are several local funds that can be tapped for parks programs to reduce the burden on parks capital funds. These include TIF funds, storm water management funds, and public works funds.

5. Private Donors/Organizations

The Department of Parks and Recreation must continue to seek out private donations of land, funds, and amenities to aid in the maintenance and improvement of the park system. In addition, local organizations can become an integral part of the park system by organizing fundraisers, park maintenance outings, or by helping sponsor new park features. Corporate and philanthropic contributions and sponsorships may also be available to assist with funding park improvements and providing park & recreation facilities.

6. Grants

Several grants are available from the State of Indiana and the Federal Government. The Town of Merrillville should seek these grants on a regular basis. Some private organizations also provide grants for parks and recreation purposes. Most parks and recreation grants are highly competitive and require the receiving agency to provide matching funds to prove that they are capable of undertaking the project.

7. Park Board

Currently, Merrillville's Park Department is overseen by a Park Authority. Indiana Code 36-10-3 allows for the creation of a Park Board as a vehicle to oversee park operations. One advantage in transitioning to a Park Board structure is additional ability to raise funds to help pay for park improvements. Some of the powers that a Park Board can utilize include:

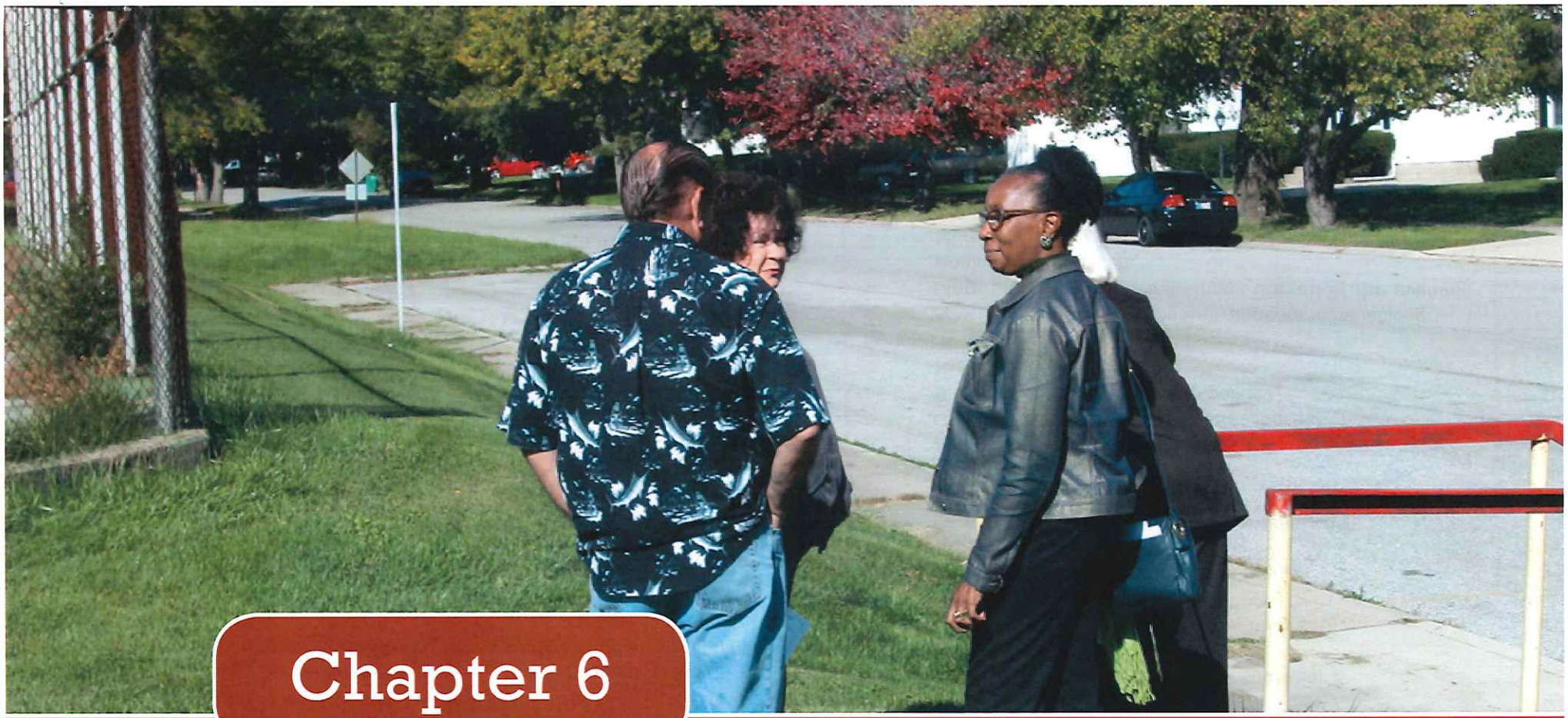
- Ability to buy/sell park facilities & equipment
- Ability to raise funds for park operations
- Lease park facilities for supplemental uses, such as:
  - Education
  - Food service
  - Secondary recreational activities

Available Grants (Matching Requirements in parenthesis)

- *Land and Water Conservation Fund (50/50)* - The Land and Water Conservation Fund is a federal grant program that is administered at both federal and state levels. The program provides assistance for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation/conservation areas and facilities. The National Park Service administers the federal portion, while the Indiana Department of Natural Resources administers the state portion of the grants.
- *Transportation Alternatives Program (80/20)* - The Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funds projects that increase multi-modal transportation alternatives and enhance communities and the environment. Federal funds administered through this program provide up to 80 percent of costs for a wide variety of projects including "provision of facilities for bicycles or pedestrians" and "provision of safety and educational activities for pedestrians and bicyclists." Projects must meet federal and state requirements. Local governments with taxing authority, state agencies and Indian tribes are eligible for funding. A project sponsor must pay for a project and then seek reimbursement for the project from the state. Federal funds will provide up to 80 percent of project costs, while the sponsor must provide at least the other 20 percent. These grants must be coordinated through the transportation improvement program process of the metropolitan planning organization (NIRPC).
- *Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)* - The agency provides a variety of funding for a range of preservation and conservation in urban areas. These range from Challenge Grants for smart growth, to restoration grants for wetland and conservation efforts in storm water management.
- *Recreational Trails Program (50/50)* - The Recreational Trails Program (RTP) is a federally-funded, state administered (Indiana DNR) grant program which is aimed at developing or maintaining motorized or non-motorized recreational trails. Funding for the RTP is provided through federal gas excise taxes paid on fuel used by off-highway vehicles. Cities, towns, counties, tribal governing bodies, school districts, state agencies, federal agencies and incorporated organizations are eligible to receive reimbursement for development and maintenance of recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both motorized and non-motorized recreational trail uses. A minimum of 30% of the overall grant program must be for motorized use, 30% is for non-motorized use, and the remainder is discretionary funds. Eligible sponsors may be reimbursed for up to 50 percent of the total project costs. The minimum grant amount is $10,000 with a maximum award of $150,000.

Available Grants (continued)

- *Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG)* - The program funded through Department of HUD but locally administered by the State or the County based on a formula basis. The program funds can be used for a variety of recreational projects and activities for eligible activities.
- *National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities* - There are several funding categories available for public arts funding and arts programming. The agency also provides funding for art along trails and greenways.
- Indiana Waters Program (75/25) - Indiana Water grants can be used by local park boards to acquire, develop, or renovate fishing and boating access facilities.
- *Indiana Coastal Grants Program (50/50)* - The Indiana Coastal Grants Program awards monies to projects that protect and restore natural, cultural, and historic resources in Indiana's Lake Michigan coastal region. Natural area restoration, preservation, and management projects are deemed high priority issues and, therefore, receive the highest consideration in awarding grants. However, cultural & historical restoration, preservation, and management projects are also eligible under this grant, as well as improvements to trails, public access connections, and habitat corridors.
- *Indiana Lake and River Enhancement Program (75/25)* - The Indiana Lake and River Enhancement Program (LARE) was created to help ensure the viability of Indiana's publicly accessible lakes, streams, and reservoirs. The program provides funding for such projects as wetland construction, shoreline/stream bank stabilization, watershed treatment projects, dredging, and various diagnostic & feasibility studies. The program does not provide monies for lake construction, private lake enhancement, or shoreline improvements for recreational purposes.
- *Shooting Range Program (75/25)* - The DNR's Shooting Range Grant Program offers assistance to all units of government, and not-for-profit agencies, for the development of rifle, handgun, shotgun, and archery facilities available to the public. The intent of this program is to train the public, hunter education, and to provide additional safe places for target practice.
- *Bicentennial Nature Trust Fund (50/50)* - The Bicentennial Nature Trust Fund (BNT) was created to preserve and protect important conservation and recreation areas throughout Indiana by matching donations of land or dollars. Properties acquired with this fund will become part of the public trust to ensure that the land is protected for future generations of Hoosiers to use and enjoy. BNT funds may only be used for the acquisition of land and cannot be used for capital improvements, stewardship, or programming. The program has a $300,000 cap for each project.



Chapter 6

Citizen Participation

Resident Survey

The purpose of this survey was to receive community input about a wide variety of parks and recreational issues in Merrillville. To gather this input, an on-line survey was created using Constant Contact. This on-line survey was made available to all residents, with responses being allowed until October 19. The survey was promoted by the following:

- A link to the survey was posted to the Parks Department and Town websites.
- The survey was advertised at the September 3 public meeting.

In addition, a short-form survey was also developed for those who did not wish to fill out the on-line survey. This was made available at the Parks Department and the Merrillville Senior Center. In all, 67 on-line surveys and 3 short form surveys were completed. The following is a summary of the survey findings.

Park & Trail Facilities

- Top 5 Parks/Trails Used:
  1. Pruzin (81%)
  2. Erie-Lackawanna Trail (46%)
  3. Rosenbalm/C&O Greenway (34%)
  4. Stefek (31%)
  5. Hendricks (30%)
- Top 5 Most Important Activities:
  1. Walking/Trails (77%)
  2. Bicycle/Trails (49%)
  3. Playground (46%)
  4. Picnic (42%)
  5. Football (19%)
- Top 5 Activities Residents Would Like In Merrillville's Parks:
  1. Walking/Trails (55%)
  2. Bicycle/Trails (38%)
  3. Picnic (36%)
  4. Outdoor Gym/Outdoor Fitness (32%)
  5. Playground (30%)
- General Facilities Comments
  - Several parks appear to be poorly maintained, including Kurtis, Jennings, and Hendricks.
  - More trails may be needed, including paths within park boundaries.
  - Parks need more variety in amenities, including soccer fields, basketball, restrooms, and water fountains.
  - There appear to be staffing issues at Pruzin Center, including the building not always being opened on time.
  - A dog park should be considered in Merrillville.

Programs/Events

- Top 3 Programs/Events (based on total responses)
  1. Independence Day Parade (31)
  2. Parade of Lights & Holiday Tree Lighting (30)
  3. Trips (24)
- Top 3 Programs/Events (based on overall rating)
  1. Trips (3.71)
  2. Parade of Lights & Holiday Tree Lighting (3.50)
  3. Independence Day Parade (3.45)
- Programs/Events with rating below 3
  - Aerobics (2.93, 14 responses)
  - Chicago Style Steppin' (2.89, 9 responses)
  - Ballroom Dancing (2.50, 8 responses)
  - Yoga (2.29, 7 responses)
- General Programs/Events Comments
  - Advertising of existing programs appears to be lacking.
  - More programs, especially those offered in the evening, would be appreciated.
  - More bus trips for seniors should be offered, especially more sightseeing trips and fewer casino/gambling trips.

Operations/Management

- Overall maintenance ratings were mixed.
  - 29% rated maintenance as "good"
  - 34% rated maintenance as "more needed" or "adequate"
  - 24% did not provide an answer
- Top 3 maintained facilities/areas
  1. Trash Pickup (70%)
  2. Turf/Landscaped Areas (53%)
  3. Parking (50%)
- Soccer Fields & Sports Courts received lowest maintenance rating (8%)

Short-form Survey Summary

- More indoor facilities and activities may be needed.
- More daytime activities for seniors would be appreciated.
- There should be more interaction between the parks department and other organizations.
- Pruzin Center should be better advertised, particularly for its rental space.
- More free programs would be appreciated.
- More trips, including a larger variety of trips, are requested.
- Landscaping around Pruzin Park needs more attention to remove weeds.

One-On-One Interviews

One on One interviews were conducted with a diverse group of stakeholders and agencies in Merrillville. Among those interviewed were major department heads within the town government, various town officials, and representatives from county and regional entities. The following is a summary of their input.

Interview Subjects

- Edmund Griffin, Merrillville Pop Warner
- Eugene Guernsey, Town Clerk
- Matt Lake, Merrillville Stormwater Management
- Joe Shudick, Ross Township
- Dr. Mark Sperling, School Town of Merrillville Superintendent
- Bruce Spires, Town Manager
- Tom Trakas, Boys & Girls Club
- Dr. Ed Williams, Boys & Girls Club
- Craig Zandstra, Lake County Parks

Parks

- C&O Greenway
  - Phase 2 extension to Mississippi Street planned for 2015.
  - Phase 3 extension westward hampered by need for bridge over Taft Street.
- More natural/passive parks needed. Look to Cook County & forest preserves for inspiration.
- The County is continuously looking for opportunities to expand their park areas and provide improved linkages with existing trails.
- Investigate opportunities for "pocket parks", especially along 73rd Avenue.
- Short-term work should focus on improving existing parks.
- Parks have no "presence". Town is so spread out, with few connections between different uses.
- A centralized park should be developed in the Town.

Programs

- More programs overall are needed in Merrillville.
  - Year-round activities
  - Kid activities
  - Passive activities (crafts, e.g.)
- Programs should utilize all of the park facilities, not just Pruzin Park/ Center.
- Existing environmental programs, such as Arbor Day & Go Green Day, work well.
- There is very little town support for youth sports.

Facilities

- Pruzin Center, despite being originally developed as a senior center, appears reluctant to host senior programs.
- Boys & Girls Club needs additional space for their activities.
- Most Ross Township park facilities have been upgraded.
- Ross Pool still active, but has low usership.
- MIS provides space for Pop Warner practice, but drainage issues often force most games to be played at Merrillville High School.
- Parking is inadequate at most larger parks.

Operations

- Current staff is too small. At least one full-time and one part-time employee needs to be hired.
- A town-wide grants official would be highly beneficial.
- Instead of selling park lands, focus on land swapping to get more appropriate recreation areas.
- Several groups/organizations have expressed interest in partnering/collaborating with the Parks Department and allowing use of their facilities.
    - Sports groups reluctant to have their own facilities because it would drive up user participation fees.
- TIF funds can be, and should be, used for park improvements.
- Sponsorships and fundraising efforts, especially for sports leagues, may be an underutilized resource.
- Investigate if casino funds can be used to pay for park improvements.
- Consider a small resident fee (50¢/resident/year) to help with park funding.
- The Town is open to using bonds to pay for park improvements, but unsure of how to repay them.
    - Merrillville has lowest tax rate in Lake County.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held to get specialized input from residents and facility users. The first was a September 22 focus group with staff members from the Merrillville Senior Center. The questions asked included a range of topics about the operations of the center, frequency of use, and the needs of the users. A second focus group was held on September 25 with various neighborhood residents. This focus group was held to learn more about the resident's needs for recreation and park amenities, with special focus on Stefek Park and Union Park. This focus group led to a site walk at Stefek Park to get more detailed input about desired activities and amenities sought there. At all of these meetings, participants provided a wealth of information that was used to further develop the priorities for the Master Plan. The following is a summary of their input.

Senior Focus Group Summary

Current Programs & Events

- Meals For Wheels lunch site (serves 45 lunches per week)
  - Center would likely not exist without the lunch program
- Bingo Mondays & Fridays
- Health/Wellness programs
- Occasional recreational & entertainment activities
- Most programs/activities offered on a donation basis (Bingo is the most notable exception)
- Ongoing rummage sale provides funds for special social events
- Have worked with Lake County Parks for programs in the past; still visits Hidden lake once a month

Facilities

- Part-time facility at Merrillville High School: 9:30-12:30, all weekdays except for holidays
- High school provides some janitorial services (vacuuming, windows, & restroom cleaning); daily cleaning & sanitation done by Senior Center workers. Senior staff at center uses an hour of the three hours of operation sanitizing and completing other required administrative duties. No computerized system is used in operations or marketing of programs.
- Funding limitations have an effect on programs offered & operating hours
  - Grant funding only limits operating hours to 3 hours/day
  - Must be open at 11:30 for lunch service
  - If funding were available, they would like to expand back to 4 hours/day
  - May be possible to "shift" operation hours (ex. 10:00-1:00), but would need to adjust service from bus company
- Has access to High School's indoor track and pool when school is not in session; due to the Center's operation hours, it is currently not a popular draw. Additional insurance would be required to use these facilities and supervision.
- South County Community Services provides bus services from the resident's homes to the Senior Center at no charge; can provide service to other locations (for trips & events), but at a cost
- Average monthly attendance estimated at 150 people. These individuals consists primarily of the lunch program participants (40) and 5 others.
- Advertising of facility & programs mainly accomplished via flyers & sending mailings
  - Senior Life newspaper is a potential advertising venue

Recreation Needs

- Desire to "diversify" program offerings beyond wellness programs
  - Gaming trips
  - Theater trips
  - Shopping trips (Gurnee Mills, Lighthouse Place, etc.)
- Lake County Library has indicated willingness to travel to a facility to presents some of its educational programs

Relationship With Parks Department

- Currently, there is no real relationship with Merrillville Parks
  - Haven't been able to coordinate meetings/activities with current Park Superintendent
  - The previous Parks Director would often invite senior center attendees to Park programs at Pruzin Center. When that person left, the Senior Center hosted some of those programs, but were forced to end them due to lack of funding.
- Senior Center is interested to host future Park Programs. The Center's insurance would cover any activities in the Senior Center, as well as any areas in the school that are available for the Seniors Center to utilize. (Use of other school spaces would need to be cleared by the School.)
- Would like to have flyers for the Senior Center available for distribution at Pruzin Center & Town Hall. Senior Center willing to host & distribute park program flyers.

Community Focus Group Summary

Stefek Park

- Amenities desired
  - Community gardens
  - Trees/landscaping
  - Sitting area
  - Grills
  - Chess/Checkers/Card tables
  - Maybe reconsider a half-court basketball court
- New swing is set to be installed near current playground
- Needs to be more focus on activities for teens
  - Reiterated concern over new playground making softball field unusable
  - Activities/areas for older & younger kids should be kept separate
- No more plans to sell the park
- Increased police presence by off-duty police, plus the formation of a Crime Watch program, has significantly reduced crime in the park
- Could playset equipment be moved, and repurpose the safety surfacing for another use?
- Site walk with residents to discuss the park, held on October 9

Union Park

- Section with vacant house is auctioned off
  - Intent is to use as used car lot & repair center
  - Town requested vinyl fence & arborvitae as visual buffer from park
- Keep natural park setting
- Don't need more memorials
- Picnic shelter & table on far south side, near back, without disturbing wildlife
- Natural paths
- Signage, reflective of natural setting (wood, "old corral")
- Butterfly garden
- No parking
- $75,000 initial budget
- More lighting
- "Gateway to nowhere"
  - Garden gate/trellis into wooden area
  - Archway entry

General Comments

- Utilize existing resources for programming (but don't compete with Pruzin Center)
  - Purdue Extension Service
  - IUN/Internships
- Potential for cooperation with schools, etc. for shared recreation? (esp. basketball)
- "Create reasons for neighborhoods to come together"
- Need to communication among neighbors & exploit existing local resources
- "Connect The Parks With The Neighborhoods"
- Parks need more lights & more garbage cans
- Department operations
  - Improve organizations structure & operation
  - Increase parks revenue (events, programs, etc.)
  - Increase park investment
  - More kids programs

Public Meetings

Two public meetings were held for the 2015 Parks and Recreation Master Plan. The first meeting was held on September 3. This meeting provided information that covered the process and steps involved with submitting the official plan. Background information that included demographic and parkland information was also presented. The second public meeting was held on December 8. At this meeting, all of the public input collected was presented, as well as an introduction to the proposed elements and improvements in the draft master plan. Both meetings provided opportunities for residents to provide input and ask questions about the plan. Summaries of these meetings are provided below.

Public Meeting #1 – September 3, 2014

The first public meeting for the Merrillville Parks Plan was held on September 3 at Pruzin Center. Approximately 12 people were in attendance, though not all attendees signed in. Taghi Arshami, Principal of The Arsh Group, began by talking about some of the pertinent demographic data for Merrillville. Jay Gianotti, Project Planner for The Arsh Group, discussed the different parks in Merrillville and provided a summary of their facilities and overall condition. Taghi Arshami then concluded with some brief analysis of the preceding information. He noted that Merrillville ranks near the in terms of park investment and provision of amenities in comparison with similar neighboring communities. The formal presentation concluded with a brief look at emerging trends in outdoor recreation.

After the formal presentation, the attendees were invited to provide comments or concerns about the Parks Department. The comments included the following:

- One resident asked about the parks budget, and what types of improvements could be done with the current resources. Caryn Wilson, Parks Superintendent, noted that the parks budget has been continually reduced over the past several years. Currently, it sits at just over $100,000, with most of it going to pay salaries & maintenance. With the recent passage of the Lake County Income Tax, some of that income for Merrillville will be earmarked for the Parks Department; however, the exact amount or percentage is not known at this time.
- One resident noted that most parks have limited amenities, and many appear to go unused. The resident was concerned that the amenities provided do not match the current demographics of the Town.
- One resident stated that they had a better appreciation for the Parks Department, in light of the limited resources they currently have. The resident suggested that that plan should include and promote public "grassroots" efforts to assist the Parks Department. As an example, the resident noted a movement to prevent Stefek Park from being sold in recent years. Taghi Arshami noted that there are many avenues for increasing public involvement, with the establish of a Parks Foundation possibly being the most effective.
- One resident mentioned being active in youth sports leagues for 26 years, and stated that overall youth sports participation has been steadily declining in recent years. The resident stated that the Parks Department and the plan need to find ways to promote youth activity.
- One resident was critical of the recent improvements at Stefek Park. In particular, the resident noted that, with the relocation of the playground and shelter, the existing ballfield & soccer field became unusable due to inadequate space.

A short survey form was also provided to the attendees to fill out. In addition, the on-line survey for the master plan was also promoted.

Public Meeting #2 – December 8, 2014

The second public meeting for the Merrillville Parks Plan was held on December 8 at Pruzin Center. Approximately 10 people were in attendance, though not all attendees signed in. Taghi Arshami, Principal of The Arsh Group, began by summarizing the town's demographic data and overall trends in the town and in recreation. Jay Gianotti, Project Planner for The Arsh Group, provided a summary of the public input received from Town stakeholders, Focus Groups, resident surveys, and the Park Committee. Both then talked about the proposed elements of the plan, including the goals and objectives, and proposed park improvements for the Town's parks and trails. A brief summary of the preliminary budget and potential funding sources to complete these improvements was also discussed.

After the formal presentation, the attendees were invited to provide their comments on the proposed plan. The comments included the following:

- One resident asked about the new Park Board, specifically about who would be part of that. Taghi Arshami noted it would comprise at least four persons, two Democratic and two Republican, as well as one liaison, typically chosen from the Town Council. Tom Goralczyk, Town Councilman, stated that the process to establish the Park Board was underway, but likely wouldn't be finalized until early 2015.
- There were some questions about hiring new Parks Department staff. There was a recently advertised position for a full-time Parks Director, applications for which were due on December 5. There was no specific timetable to hire a person for this position, and that the Park Board could be established before this hire was made. One resident asked if there would be other full-time jobs to be advertised for the Department. While there were no other planned hires at this time, it was noted that the Master Plan calls for the hiring of Recreation Director, as well as two six-month maintenance staff positions.
- There was a short discussion about various partnerships for helping to fund park improvements. In particular, one resident asked about the possibility of corporate partnerships. It was noted that corporate partnerships was certainly a viable option; ultimately, it would be the responsibility of the Park Director to find appropriate partnership opportunities. Another resident expressed some skepticism about corporate partnerships. This resident stated that they tried approaching larger business for donations/sponsorships for the sports leagues, but never had any success. The notion of a Park Foundation was also mentioned as a partnership option, with examples in Schererville and Highland being highlighted.
- One resident asked if there was a specific person that pursues grants for the Parks Department. Tom Goralczyk stated that the Town typically uses their engineering firm to locate and apply for grant funding. He also noted that several grants that they pursue are very competitive, and they are not always successful in obtaining the grant funding they apply for.