Appendix E: Ongoing Initiatives

The 2018-2023 Park and Open Space Plan was developed through the guiding lenses of equity, sustainability, adaptability and public health. As shared in the Accomplishments Section, the Parks Division and policymakers have directed resources to implement a variety of projects and initiatives. To help supplement the work of the previous and current plan, staff have identified six Ongoing Initiatives, which align with the previous plan's guiding lenses and have received significant focus and investment since 2018. The Ongoing Initiatives highlighted within this section are as follows:

Table of Contents

Activating Parks 1

Climate Resilience: Sustainable Land Management Practices & Reduction of Carbon Footprint 6

Madison Parks Golf Program 8

The Madison LakeWay (formerly Lake Monona Waterfront) 11

Recreational Biking 14

Volunteers in Madison Parks 17

The Ongoing Initiatives narratives were written by Parks Division staff with significant subject matter expertise in these areas, and are intended to serve as a resource for both internal and external stakeholders. These resources provide new staff, policy makers, project partners and other interested stakeholders additional insight into how the POSP strategies are implemented and the important role that the parks system plays in the community. Each of the narratives document progress made on key issues over the last several years and outlines general opportunities for continued growth and improvement for the next 5-10 years.

Each of the Ongoing Initiatives were presented as "Issue Papers" and became a major area of focus during the open house sessions that were held during 2024 related to the development of the Park and Open Space Plan. Members of the public had an opportunity to provide their input regarding each of these areas. In addition, staff were able to answer participants' questions related to individual topics. This input is highlighted in Chapter 4.1 and further summarized in Appendix G.

Activating Parks

The Madison parks system provides a wide variety of recreational opportunities. Recreation is critical for promoting human development. Children learn important social skills through early play experiences. As children grow, they develop physical skills through play, and the physical activity enhances the learning process and the development of cognitive skills. As adults, parks and

open spaces enhance the quality of life and contribute positively to the mental health of its users, a fact that was proven during the COVID pandemic. Parks were sought as a respite and the park system saw an incredible increase in the number of users during this time period. As a municipal park system, Madison Parks can play a catalytic role in increasing the number of people that use and recreate in parks through park design as well as through programming recreational activities, or park activation. Parks are an important piece of public infrastructure, and activating parks is a key role of the Parks Division.

While the parks in Madison are created as places for people to connect with nature and the outdoors, not everyone naturally feels comfortable using a park. Therefore, it is important for the Parks Division to "invite" people to use parks and encourage them to be there by providing a wide variety of activities and events. As a result, parks more accessible to a wider, more diverse population. When parks have more activity in them, they are safer and more desirable places to be for everyone. By playing an active role in programming activities in parks, or facilitating "park activation," the Parks Division is ensuring that the investments made by the City are put to their intended use, and that the public sees the value of the resources and investments in the park system by the City.

Madison Parks is heavily dependent on community partners to provide recreational activities to the community, with the Parks Division administering various use agreements and the formal reservation system. The primary public recreation programming agency is the Madison School and Community Recreation (MSCR), a division of the Madison Metropolitan School District. This long-term partnership has benefitted the community by having MSCR provide low, to no cost activities at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center ("the Center"), swimming lessons at the Goodman Pool, and sports leagues and outdoor activities throughout the park system. Where MSCR is unable to meet the rapidly evolving recreational demands of the community, other organizations such as Madison Ultimate Frisbee Association, Madison Sport and Social Club, and Madison Area Youth Soccer, among many others work with the Parks Division to provide a variety of athletic recreation activities.

Even with MSCR and other community partners providing a large amount of recreational programming, the Parks Division identified populations that need additional opportunities and created programming to address these gaps. The City of Madison values equity, and the Parks Division has used an equity lens in creating its programs and by working closely with Neighborhood Resource Teams (NRTs). NRTs have been developed to promote racial equity and improve the quality of life for Madison residents by understanding and elevating the needs, issues, and priorities of people living in areas with NRTs.

In recent years, Madison Parks has increased the amount of programming it provides directly to the community. Areas in which the Parks Division has expanded programming include the Kids Need Opportunities at Warner (KNOW) program, the Learning Series, Movies in the Park, Parks Alive, and Carts in Parks. The KNOW program was established in partnership with the Madison Parks Foundation to provide no-cost programs in a welcoming space for northside youth and young adults. The program addressed an identified gap as there were no other teen-focused afterschool programs offered in the neighborhood. The free Learning Series allows the Parks Division to offer enjoyable activities such as birdwatching, stargazing, disc golf, and more. The series features educational events, hands-on workshops, and informational stories about projects, people, activities, and initiatives. The Sina Davis Movies in the Park program was established in partnership with the NRTs to bring more activity to parks in areas of the City that are served by NRTs.

The Parks Alive program that was launched in 2021 was born from a violence prevention framework that identifies parks as a critical piece of the violence prevention continuum. Parks Alive utilizes the park space to host events that connect neighbors to each other and encourage community engagement through positive social activities. In 2021, Parks partnered with the Economic Development Division Vending Program to create the Carts in Parks program as a way to streamline and ease the vending permitting process for food carts and food trucks to use parks within the City's broader permitting framework. A high percentage of food cart and food truck operators are women, immigrants, and people of color, and when combined, Parks and the City's vending fees were often a barrier to doing business in the parks. The Carts in Parks program is beneficial to supporting local small businesses, as well through activation of the spaces by creating a more inviting atmosphere for park visitors.

The programs that the Parks Division has implemented would not be possible without strong community partners. The KNOW program and the Learning Series are primarily funded through the Madison Parks Foundation. The Parks Alive program is spearheaded by the Parks Division but is a cross-agency program that relies on community organizations to bring activities and resources to its events. Furthermore, through a partnership with the Madison Public Library, the City broke ground in May 2025 for the Imagination Center at Reindahl Park, which is a combined library and year-round reservable event shelter. One of the Parks Division's longest-standing partnerships is with Olbrich Botanical Society to operate Olbrich Botanical Gardens, which has led to the success of the Garden, rapidly increasing attendance through high quality programs and events, and private support of capital projects.

In addition to non-profit and public agency partnerships, public-private partnerships have been critical to activating some of the Parks Division's key assets. Since 2009, the Parks Division has contracted with the Madison Mallards to provide summer collegiate baseball to Warner Park Ballpark. Additionally, the Madison Night Mares, a summer collegiate women's softball league, had a very successful first season in 2024 at Warner Park. In 2013, after years of very little use, Parks contracted with Big Top Entertainment to lease the Breese Stevens Field. Now, Breese Stevens is home to the Forward Madison men's soccer team, the Madison Radicals professional ultimate frisbee team, as well as numerous concerts and community events. A similar story is true at Brittingham Park, where before the Parks Division's partnership with Brittingham Boats, the park was rarely used and considered unsafe by many residents. With the partnership presence of Brittingham Boats, the park now has boat rentals available during the summer, with thousands of people visiting the park and creating a fun, family friendly atmosphere for all to enjoy. Similar partnership agreements are in place at Brittingham and Marshall Parks for boat rentals and at Olbrich for both an outdoor Biergarten and boat rentals, each operation converting underutilized City assets into destinations that are now visited by thousands of residents and visitors every year.

Looking forward, the Parks Division aims to build on the park activations that have been successful to-date. For example, partnering with Public Health Madison and Dane County to advocate for parks as a health promotion and violence prevention strategy will continue to leverage both partners' strengths. Already a proven partner in the Parks Alive and Nature Everywhere Communities initiative (formerly Cities Connecting Children to Nature), this partnership can grow in addressing more neighborhoods' needs for pro-social activities in their parks and connections to supportive resources. The Parks Division is also focusing on expanding opportunities for a growing population. The Warner Park Community Recreation Center expansion is under construction and will provide more opportunities for youth on the north side to participate in recreational activities year-round.

As the population grows, field sports such as soccer, ultimate frisbee, and others are competing for limited athletic field space. The Parks Division needs to be thoughtful about acquiring parkland that can accommodate these types of uses. The Madison Area Sports Commission recently identified a need for youth athletic sports tournament space in Madison, confirming the long understood need that the Parks Division must seek out opportunities for creative partnerships that will provide these spaces for additional athletic activities to serve the growing population. The Parks Division has identified Northeast Park, an undeveloped park with over 230 acres of space, as one potential area for multiple athletic spaces. Future development here will require partnership with Sun Prairie, private partners, and significant investment from the community.

Park activation is not only large events and sporting activities. It also includes “passive” recreational uses, such as birdwatching, hiking, dog-walking, and picnicking. Partners such as the Friends of Urban Nature partner with the Parks Division to offer bird and nature walks. These everyday uses are all activities that connect people to parks and the natural resources they have to offer. Land acquisition and development will need to continue to balance the diverse uses that our population seeks out in our parks.

Strategic partnerships are key to the success of the Parks Division. Staff recognize an area for improvement is to streamline and add transparency to the process of becoming a partner with the Parks Division. Partnerships should be easy to understand by the public and our potential partners from entry to close-out. Making it easy to understand the various ways to support and be supported by the Parks Division will increase the number of organizations that help to further the mission of the Parks Division. To advance this transparency, the Parks Division has piloted a Qualified Discounts Program that will standardize discounts given to partners and clarify the needed qualifications for given discounts. Further analysis is needed to understand the impact this will have on revenues and to ensure it is implemented in a financially sustainable manner.

Attendance at events and activities, the number of events, number of reservations, and the public perception of parks are all markers of success. It is important to think of park activation on a system-wide level. Park events that are sponsored by external organizations are frequently centered in the downtown area or at larger parks, as the event sponsors are often marketing to a regional audience. The Parks Division should continue to work with community organizers through park event and reservation processes to activate parks throughout the system so that everyone can access “active” parks and enjoy the increased sense of civic pride that comes with them. Measuring our success is also being done by surveying participants about their experience. The Parks Alive program is surveying attendees to find out if they feel that the program helps strengthen their neighborhood. Utilizing this data will inform the Parks Division about what is successful and what changes are needed to be more effective.

The Parks Division will continue to evaluate the best way to access automated data that tracks attendance at parks and events through cell phone locations, app data, or other mechanisms. Measuring the number and demographics of attendees at events and parks will help the Parks Division ensure that the targeted populations are reached. Furthermore, by utilizing this and other data, the Parks Division should work to develop measures that demonstrate the physical, social, and mental health benefits of living near and going to parks.

The Parks Division also needs to continue to explore funding strategies that expands the currently available resources. In comparison to other park systems throughout the country, the City of Madison falls short of investing financial resources in its park system. Therefore, working with the Madison Parks Foundation will be paramount to maintaining park excellence. Philanthropic support will be one factor, but park activation lends itself to other forms of revenue generation that should be explored. In the future, Parks should be providing opportunities for partnerships that enhance the user experience and increase the revenue of the agency. The more people are connected with parks, the more willing they will be to support parks, be it through the Madison Parks Foundation, political support, or volunteerism to name a few. Maintaining a system of parks that people feel connected to and proud of will be essential to maintaining the support needed from the public to be a properly resourced system.

Climate Resilience: Sustainable Land Management Practices & Reduction of Carbon Footprint

The Madison Parks system is integral to alleviating some of the adverse impacts of climate change, such as heat island effects, extreme flooding, and air quality concerns. A sustainable park system adapts to environmental, economic, and social changes. Madison Parks is adapting to existing and anticipated effects of climate change by restoring and maintaining natural areas with native species throughout the park system, while at the same time reducing its reliance on fossil fuels. The Parks Division has worked diligently over the last decade to improve its capacity to properly manage and improve the quality of natural areas within the park system beyond the work that was historically done primarily in conservation parks.

The Parks Division's Land Management Plan, which was updated in 2023 with an intentional focus on climate change and sustainability, directs the care and maintenance of parkland to provide a more adaptable landscape in a more socially and fiscally sustainable manner. The Land Management Plan identifies site-specific habitat management plans for certain parks, broadly outlines Parks' various vegetation management practices, and defines vegetation-cover types throughout the system. The Land Management Plan guides the daily and annual work of Parks Division staff, who cooperate across work groups to implement the management of each park. For example, General Parks staff maintain active recreation spaces, remove invasive species from woodlands and borders, and transition specific turf areas to natural areas supporting oak regeneration and native plant establishment; Conservation staff provide leadership and expertise in conducting prescribed burns; and the Ecology Team staff provide expertise in establishing and expanding native plantings.

In order to balance the active recreation needs of the community with the Parks Division's important role in environmental stewardship, strategic management of turf and pavement surfaces is complemented by increasing native plantings within the system where feasible and resources allow. In traditional landscape settings, ranging from individual tree plantings to park signature signs, the Parks Division is shifting towards using species of trees, shrubs, and perennials that are native to North America in order to ensure the success and sustainability of these plantings. Improved management of prairie and savanna habitats through prescribed burns and selective removals of non-native plants is also critical to improving biodiversity and creating a sustainable landscape. These natural areas and native plantings sequester carbon, improve stormwater infiltration, provide food and shelter for wildlife, and contribute to the physical and mental well-being of the community. Such plantings require less maintenance which also supports financial sustainability.

A key strategy to achieve climate resilience is to improve and expand the urban forest. Whenever possible, Madison Parks works to increase the urban forest's tree canopy within the park system by planting and preserving native tree species and encouraging natural oak growth and regeneration. As identified in the Land Management Plan, the Parks Division prioritizes reducing stressors to mature native trees, especially oak trees, which are considered a keystone species. Oak trees support more diverse species than any other type of tree in North America. Ensuring the survival and reproduction of oaks is crucial to sustaining biodiversity. Throughout the next decade, Parks will continue to work toward promoting root and canopy health in individual trees, allowing reproduction and expansion of groves, and increasing the total tree canopy cover where appropriate within the park system. Diversifying the tree canopy will continue to be important to ensuring the urban forest can withstand pest and disease pressures, which will include planting some tree species that were not hardy to the Madison region a decade ago, but are known to thrive in the expected future climate conditions.

Beyond improved and increased habitat, the benefits of using native plants creates an opportunity for people to become reacquainted with the land and the species as part of the natural surroundings in Madison. Volunteer engagement and educational opportunities actively connect people to nature which fosters a culture of environmental stewardship. Introducing volunteers and the public to these land management practices also provide examples of native landscaping that people can adopt for their own spaces, whether on their own property or in a community garden.

Volunteer seed collection at pollinator demonstration garden at Odana Hills Golf Course

Per the City's Sustainability Plan, the City has established the ambitious goal of reaching 100% renewable energy and net zero carbon emissions for City operations by 2030 and community-wide by 2050. Beyond land management, the Parks Division is also dedicated to reducing its carbon footprint by transitioning to electric vehicles and tools as technology advances and the equipment becomes both fiscally attainable and operationally sufficient. A portion of the Parks Division's fleet has already been replaced by electric vehicles, including a number of pick-up trucks and several mowers. Much of the smaller, handheld, gas-powered equipment used in operations has also been replaced with electric versions, including leaf blowers, chainsaws, and string trimmers. Larger equipment such as heavy-duty trucks and larger riding mowers have been evaluated and found to not yet fulfill the requirements needed to replace their gas-powered alternatives. This technology continues to advance, and it is anticipated that electric equipment will eventually be able to meet the demands of Parks' workload and the City's goals pertaining to carbon emissions in the future.

The combination of improved land management practices and carbon footprint reduction will help to mitigate some of the extreme effects of climate change such as heat and drought, as well as intense rain events by providing more opportunities for stormwater infiltration in parks. The continued improvement and increased health and sustainability of park spaces overall will provide increased opportunity for the community to reconnect and engage with nature. Success will be measured by benchmarks of incremental reduction of invasive plant dominance and increases in biodiversity, particularly native plant species diversity. Success will also be measured by reduced reliance on fossil fuels, as conversion to electric vehicles and equipment will reduce Parks' carbon footprint.

Madison Parks Golf Program

The Madison Parks Golf Program (Golf Program) includes four public golf courses: Odana Hills, Yahara Hills, and Monona Golf Courses, as well as The Glen Golf Park. These courses offer a total of 72 holes, with the long-term plan to offer 54 holes, system-wide, starting in 2026. The Golf Program operates as an enterprise system that is expected to cover all expenses with revenues received from its business operations. With approximately 550 acres, the Golf Program comprises one of the largest outdoor open spaces managed by Madison Parks for a primary use. The Golf Program is deeply embedded in Madison's outdoor recreation culture and plays a critical role in offering an accessible gateway to the game of golf for a diverse population.

For decades, the Golf Program struggled financially, necessitating the formation of the Task Force on Municipal Golf in Madison Parks in 2019 to evaluate the current state and make recommendations regarding the future of the golf program. The Task Force report recognizes the important role that the Golf Program plays in providing quality, affordable municipal golf and serves as a guiding lens for the Golf Program into the future. Golf around the world and locally grew substantially in popularity during and since the COVID pandemic, resulting in record-breaking revenue throughout the 2020-2024 seasons. To continue to thrive and secure a sustainable future, the Golf Program must adapt and innovate. Over the next 5-10 years, the Golf Program will continue to implement the task force recommendations to provide the right quantity of golf, redefine its mission statement, invest in the courses in financially and environmentally sustainable ways, and approach programming with a focus on equity and inclusion.

Family Fun & Movie Night at The Glen

The starting point of the Golf Program's transformation began in 2022, when the newly renovated Glenway Golf Course was reopened and rebranded as The Glen Golf Park in an approach that showcases a commitment to sustainability, inclusivity, and innovative programming. The project was made possible through the generosity of private support from Michael and Jocelyn Keiser, grassroots efforts led by Supreme Structures and ZEBRADOG, and overall collaboration with the Madison Parks Foundation. This effort showcases the power of philanthropic and community partnership. The Glen model of introducing native trees and planting areas along with turf species requiring fewer inputs, such as water and fertilizer, will be replicated throughout the Golf Program as improvements are made to other courses. This approach to golf course design will significantly improve the biodiversity and minimize the impact of the golf courses on the environment. The redesign also incorporates features that allow for more enjoyable play for both experienced and novice players. The golf park programming approach unveiled with the reimagination of The Glen overlays mixed use recreational programming with the primary golf uses, inviting more members of the community to experience the golf park as a year-round community gathering space and natural asset. Golf park programming at The Glen is planned for times when golf play is typically slower, allowing space for live music, fitness activities and a variety of cultural experiences, along with family fun nights where movies, kites, and a variety of other activities are offered in partnership with community organizations to foster a deeper connection with the natural environment and community. As more people experience

The Glen in ways that speak to them, they will have a deeper appreciation for the role a golf park plays in the community and may even be inspired to take up the game of golf as barriers to the sport are broken down.

As the Golf Program navigates challenges and embraces opportunities, the ongoing construction and hole reductions at Yahara Hills symbolizes the tangible manifestation of this commitment to change. In 2022, the City of Madison Department of Public Works and Dane County Waste and Renewables negotiated the sale of approximately 200 acres of the eastern portion of the course to be used for a landfill expansion. This collaboration addresses the waste management needs of Madison and the broader Dane County community for decades to come. Revenue from the sale allowed the program to repay the balance of the $500,000 loan borrowed from the general fund in 2019 and provides approximately $5,000,000 for reinvestment within the Golf Program. Along with addressing the Task Force's recommendation to reduce holes at Yahara Hills from 36 to 18, the proceeds from the land sale will allow the program to address capital needs and support revitalization of the program with a thoughtful approach to address both financial and sustainability concerns. The course redesign features incorporation of natural areas and rightsizing of golf course and specialized turf areas. This will allow for implementation of an improved integrated pest management plan, with a key goal of exemplifying the commitment to responsible land stewardship and environmental sustainability. Additional facility improvements will happen by 2028 including replacing the maintenance shop which is now on county-owned property.

Parks anticipates ongoing planning efforts for and implementation of capital improvements at Odana Hills and Monona Golf Courses that incorporate the design and sustainability practices in place at The Glen and underway at Yahara. A philanthropic partnership similar to The Glen is under consideration for the Odana Hills course. Odana Hills' renovation will also include the installation of an irrigation well as a move to address water and resource conservation measures from a system that is currently utilizing city drinking water. The Odana Hills clubhouse infrastructure and mechanicals are in desperate need of replacement. Future clubhouse facilities will at minimum meet the seasonal golf park needs of the program. Additional funding sources will be required if the clubhouse is to be constructed as a multi-purpose year-round gathering space that meets the broader community's needs and reflects the current multi-season use of the course for cross country skiing, bird watching, and walking and running activities in the winter.

Renovation of Yahara Hills Golf Course 2024

Strategic planning efforts underway encompass not only the physical transformation of golf courses, but also a shift in mission and goals. The vision for the Golf Program's future involves growing the sport and increasing accessibility to those who are not golfers or may not currently feel welcome on the courses. In addition to growing and

expanding The Glen programming, there is an absolute need for focus on diversity and inclusion within the overall program. The program continues to strengthen partnerships with organizations such as First Tee of Wisconsin and Change Golf Instruction and develop intentional collaboration with Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Dane County, and LGBTQ 50+ Alliance among many others, to encourage youth and adults from BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized communities to engage with the golf program through a variety of opportunities.

Success for Madison Parks Golf will be measured through continuous evaluation and adjustment. Data points including financial measures, annual rounds played, profitability, programming attendance, qualitative survey results, and outreach success will guide the assessment process. Staff's commitment to continuous improvement, informed by data from tee sheets, event attendance, visitor feedback, and revenue statistics will ensure the program remains adaptable and responsive to community needs. The ultimate goal is to build on the successes achieved at The Glen Golf Park and replicate them across the system, enhancing the overall experience for all residents and visitors.

Youth Golfers at The Glen Golf Park

Madison Parks Golf is poised to evolve into a more diverse, innovative, and thriving program for the broader community and golfing enthusiasts alike. The strategic initiatives underway, from reconfiguring courses to fostering community partnerships, highlight a forward-looking approach that will shape the future landscape of golf in Madison and municipal golf around the country. The collaborative efforts of the program, community, and stakeholders reflect a shared vision for a golfing experience that is not only rooted in tradition, but also attuned to the changing dynamics and expectations of a vibrant and diverse community. Utilizing lessons learned from transformations underway to date, the Golf Program will continue to evolve to address recommendations from the Task Force on Municipal Golf to create a welcoming, sustainable and financially stable program that provides diverse year-round recreation to the community.

The Madison LakeWay (formerly Lake Monona Waterfront)

The City of Madison's position on the isthmus between Lake Mendota and Lake Monona offers miles of lakeshore for residents and visitors to enjoy. The beauty of the surrounding landscape has shaped the city's development and values, and continues to influence how we connect with the natural world. Current-day Lake Monona has thirteen miles of shoreline, approximately five miles of which are available for public access. A 1.7-mile section of shore near downtown remains notably separated from the city fabric due to rail lines and a major highway thoroughfare. In addition to the transportation barriers, this section of shoreline has seen little investment in public amenities and habitat preservation over recent decades. Given its proximity to the high residential density of downtown Madison and its role as a connection to the greater city, the Lake Monona waterfront remains one of the city's greatest unrealized opportunities. The Parks Division intends to change this and has embarked on the Division's largest park project to date. Tackling the shoreline from Law Park to Olin Park, Madison Parks intends to transform the area from an underutilized space to one of the crown jewels of the park system and of the city: the Madison LakeWay.

In 2019, after decades of private advocacy and support, Madison Parks began an ambitious planning initiative to develop a master plan for the Madison LakeWay, known at the time as the Lake Monona Waterfront. The planning area extends from Law Park to the northern portion of Olin Park and includes the John Nolen Drive causeway, which is a primary link between downtown and the south side of Madison. With community interest already strong, and the project of a scale that was unprecedented, approaching the project as a public private partnership was not just opportune, but essential. The Friends of Nolen Waterfront, now the Madison LakeWay Partners, have supported the project from its inception through both advocacy and funding.

To ensure an open, transparent, and community-led process to select a design team for the Master Plan development, the City of Madison's Common Council appointed a thirteen-member Lake Monona Waterfront Ad-hoc Committee. To solicit the highest quality designers, the Ad-Hoc Committee hosted a Design Competition, with the prize funding split between the City and the Madison LakeWay Partners. The master plan envisioning process involved extensive community outreach and engagement at each phase of plan development through a variety of methods, including large-scale event presentations, stakeholder workshops, tabling at neighborhood gatherings, on-site interviews, and online surveys. The public response to the planning initiative greatly exceeded previous planning efforts by the City, due in large part to the advocacy and outreach of the Madison LakeWay Partners. The high level of engagement confirmed the importance of the project to Madisonians across the community.

The Ad-Hoc Committee worked closely with the winning design firm, Sasaki, to develop the Lake Monona Waterfront Master Plan, with the primary goal of capturing and conveying the expressed community values and desired improvements for the lakeshore. On December 18, 2023, the Lake Monona Waterfront Ad-hoc Committee unanimously approved the draft master plan. The Master Plan was introduced to the Common Council in January 2024, and after going through a committee referral process with unanimous support from the committees, the Master Plan was unanimously adopted by the Common Council on April 16, 2024.

The Master Plan recommendations center on six guiding principles: creating a living shore, offering a place for connection, sharing the cultural history of the land, ensuring equitable access, inspiring stewardship, and creating a balanced approach between the built and

natural environments. The plan seeks to foster and enhance a greater connection with the lake for residents and park visitors while enhancing shoreline and aquatic habitat. The master plan builds on the improved community connections constructed with the John Nolen Drive roadway project. Through a combination of access improvements, shoreline strategies, wildlife habitat restoration, new site amenities, and welcoming gathering spaces, the waterfront will serve as a destination for the broader Madison community to enjoy. Specific proposals include using native plant communities to address urban runoff while providing greater ecological connectivity along the lake edge and promoting art in the landscape to communicate the site's cultural history and encourage environmental stewardship. The Madison LakeWay has the potential to serve as a vital green corridor along the isthmus, connecting all of Madison to the lake and beyond and creating a more welcoming and usable park space.

The scale and size of the Lake Monona Waterfront Master Plan vision is greater than any project that Madison Parks has taken on in its history. Initial cost estimates for the entire plan range between $250 - $320 million (though significant variances will occur based on the final design and timeframe for implementation). Due to the scale and size of the project, revenues will be needed for both the capital investment and operations of the park and will need to be funded through a blended stream of public and private funds.

The City of Madison will be contributing to the funding and will dedicate resources to identify and secure State and Federal funds. In addition, a strong fundraising plan with a funding strategy that is blended, scaled, and outside of the traditional pathways that have previously funded parks is critical to the Madison LakeWay's success. This fund-raising strategy requires a strong partnership with the Madison LakeWay Partners to lead on private and philanthropic fundraising under a cooperative agreement for capital funding and other project support.

Even with concerted effort to identify public funds, financial support for the project must come through non-traditional means. For example, the project will require developing public-private partnerships that can sustain ongoing revenue and financial support for the project. The City has done this to a certain degree, such as with its partnership with Madison Boats, which is a private business that provides a strategically important service of connecting people to the lakes in a way that is beneficial to the residents of the City and also incentivizes the private business to provide high quality experiences and invest in the park. Other public-private partnerships will be needed to increase the support for the park, and this may be through programming, services, concessions, or other creative endeavors. Additionally, park revenue models in other areas of the country include revenue from private developments on parkland such as hotels and restaurants that create an ongoing, steady stream of revenue to support the park.

The Parks Division will need to explore its gift, donations, and recognition policies to create new and larger-scale opportunities for corporate and philanthropic sponsorships. The City will be looking to the Madison LakeWay Partners to lead on developing and managing these creative partnerships and to establish a self-sustaining model over the long term. The goal of the project is fundamentally to bring people to the Lake Monona shore, and that will be the primary measure of success.

As the Madison LakeWay develops, and the Madison LakeWay Partners organization matures, success will be measured by how well the project is used by residents and visitors once it is constructed, and how well the project's progression is able to be maintained. It

will be important for future Park leaders to utilize data about park users to determine the demographics of the attendees, how many visitors are from outside of Madison, and how long visitors stay at the park.

The Madison LakeWay has the potential to redefine the city's relationship with the lake by making this connection to the lake reflect the cultural values of the people of Madison and the Dejope area. Through intentional work to create sustainable, fruitful public-private partnerships, the City will be able to realize the vision of the Madison LakeWay Master Plan.

Recreational Biking

While Madison is known for its extensive hard surface bicycle infrastructure, natural surface connections and singletrack networks close to neighborhoods are hard to come by. There are over 50 miles of bike optimized singletrack trail in Dane County, but until 2020 only 1 mile was within the City of Madison. Natural surface trails, singletrack, and bike-optimized park facilities encourage access for a range of trail users and riders from neighborhood children to the seasoned commuter, the occasional enthusiast to the serious athlete. Natural surface trail network development results in improved public health, equitable access, increased youth engagement, community building, and positive economic impacts.

Recreational biking has increased in popularity dramatically over the past several decades. The National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) has over 800 family memberships within Madison alone. In addition to youth participation, the NICA program supports and encourages lifelong participation in the sport. More facilities within Madison are needed to meet the demand.

Over time, bike riders have become more sophisticated, seeking purpose-built or “bike optimized” trails that offer a wide range of difficulty levels, terrain diversity, and genres. Bike-optimized trails are designed and constructed to enhance trail experiences specifically for trail, bike motocross (BMX), and mountain bikes. These trails differ from traditional trails in several ways: enhanced tread shaping, one-way travel, and the addition of man-made technical trail features (TTFs), also known as skills development features. Well-designed, mountain bike-optimized trails are exciting for mountain bikers but are also designed to help manage risk and minimize user conflict. Though off-street recreational bike facilities are something the community has been interested in, Madison Parks didn’t have a plan to provide them.

The Parks Division engaged the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) - Trail Solutions Program to complete a citywide feasibility study and planning exercise with the goal of developing a connected network of natural surface trails and identify locations for bike skills development features such as bike parks and bicycle playgrounds. The IMBA feasibility study was conducted from 2020-21 and analyzed the following:

- existing City of Madison public lands and bike/pedestrian infrastructure,
- planned improvements to those lands and infrastructure,
- connectivity to adjacent county and municipal properties,
- how these physical components interact with the wide range of demographics throughout Madison, and
- the trail-based experiences riders (and non-riders alike) are interested in.

The outcome of this planning process was the Madison Bicycle Adventure Trail (MadBAT). Appropriate trail types, technical trail features, and bike-optimized facilities are detailed in the MadBAT feasibility report. Depending on locations, these may include traditional singletrack, bike-optimized singletrack, gravity singletrack, bicycle playgrounds, pumptracks, pump parks, skills development features, dirt jumps, and technical challenge loops. It is anticipated that every 5-10 years the MadBAT plan will need to be revisited and revised with IMBA Trail Solutions to incorporate sections of trail completed and identify new opportunities.

The strategy and concept of building the MadBAT system city-wide starts with building trail hubs or trailheads. Ideally, these will be spread throughout the city where trail connectivity potential is the highest. These trail hubs should contain a small trail loop of 1-2 miles that is built to the highest construction standard. This may include features like chip seal trail or a paved pump track that can be ridden year-round in any type of weather. Trail hubs that have already been identified are:

- Aldo Leopold Park (South side)
- Sycamore Park (East side)
- Country Grove Park (Southwest side)

Once the trail hubs have been established, additional trail mileage will be built out from the hub. The additional trail may be dirt or a more hardened, durable surface such as chip seal. These trail arms may be built in areas such as parks, greenways, or unused right-of-way as identified by the MadBAT plan. Connectivity is a critical component of MadBAT. Natural surface trail segments should be developed with connectivity to other trail segments or trail hubs in accordance with the plan. On-street bike lanes or paved bike paths may be used to link trail segments and hubs together where building natural surface trail isn't feasible. Gaining 3-5 miles of trail at each hub is a critical goal. This will create a critical mass of trail that will be rewarding to the public and increase the value of the local trail system. Priority sites for trail construction should be centered around these trail hubs with the goal of increasing the mileage and connectivity of each.

As of 2025, Madison Parks has constructed a pump track at Aldo Leopold Park, approximately 1.5 miles of singletrack along the Cannonball Bike path, a skills track at Sandburg Park, approximately 1 mile of trail at Quarry Park, and 2 miles of singletrack at Sycamore Park. Furthermore, the Parks Division has secured a grant from Dane County's PARC and Ride program to build an additional 1-2 miles of trail at Country Grove Park.

Maintenance and community engagement are also critical factors. Natural surface trail requires ongoing maintenance on different intervals to both maintain the surrounding landscape and the specialty features of the singletrack facilities. Volunteers from Capital Off-Road Pathfinders (CORP) have expressed an interest in helping maintain the trails under a mutual agreement. In addition to supporting the upkeep of these facilities, regular communication with members of the community and through CORP communication channels help monitor the status of trails when weather conditions are poor. In 2025, the Parks Division hired a consultant to help develop an Operations and Maintenance Manual.

It's critical that Madison budget resources and staff time to address maintenance needs. Healthy relationships with volunteers such as CORP will be critically important to the health of the trail system. Parks has committed funding each year to build at least one component of the MadBAT system. Based on experience from recently built projects, it is evident that private partners and alternate funding sources will be needed to develop the entire system to its full potential. Developing MadBAT will likely take decades. In addition to building components each year, funds will need to be secured and partnerships will need to be formed for trail maintenance. CORP has a long history of building and maintaining over 50 miles of trail in Dane County and will be critical partners in this goal. Having an in-place

MadBAT plan will keep Madison at the forefront of the cycling infrastructure community. It will also serve a critical role in developing new ridership and connecting people with nature.

Other mid-size midwestern cities including Duluth, Minnesota and Marquette, Michigan, as well as the biking mecca of Bentonville, Arkansas have already built substantial urban singletrack networks. These have been widely used and successfully implemented. Madison is now uniquely positioned to join them. This will provide an important amenity to our community members and deliver a powerful economic engine for our future.

Volunteers in Madison Parks

The Madison Parks system of today would not be possible without private support. Volunteers have been and continue to be essential to the upkeep of, development of, and community engagement within the park system. Beyond maintaining green spaces, volunteers foster community, promote environmental stewardship, and enhance the well-being of Madison area residents. Recognizing the significance of these contributions is crucial for the sustained growth of the volunteer program, and vitality of our public spaces. The deep history of volunteering in Madison's Parks has greatly benefitted and positioned the Madison Parks Division to provide a well-structured and supported volunteer program.

As with all resources, there must be coordination behind volunteer time and talent to optimize the benefits of these efforts for both the individual volunteers and the park system. Nearly 30 years ago, decision-makers recognized a need for a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator at Olbrich Botanical Gardens. Under this well-established model, volunteers are recruited, onboarded, and their skills aligned with tasks at hand. Staff at the gardens support and recognize the vital role the volunteers play in growing and sustaining the Gardens. From the smiling faces that greet guests, to the muddy boots that maintain the gardens, these volunteers are ingrained in every aspect of the Gardens. Today, Olbrich continues to benefit from over 19,000 hours of volunteer service each year. Meanwhile, prior to 2023, volunteer coordination for the rest of Madison Parks was a small part of assigned duties for multiple staff members, with the Parks Division reporting just under 5,000 hours of volunteer service in 2019.

Olbrich Botanical Gardens Volunteer

After years of advocating for a dedicated staff position to support volunteers, a Parks Volunteer Coordinator position was authorized in the 2023 Operating Budget. This was a pivotal moment, as policymakers recognized the opportunity for substantial improvements in volunteer coordination and the value of volunteer time and talent as a supplemental resource for the park system. While Olbrich's volunteer program continues to grow and sustain, the dedicated Parks Volunteer Coordinator now champions system-wide efforts across Madison Parks, including the golf program, through community programming, land management activities, and the advancement of sustainability practices. With the ongoing development of the system-wide volunteer coordination program under the new Parks Volunteer Coordinator position, this marks a significant step towards enhancing support for volunteer initiatives and strengthening community connections across diverse park landscapes. In 2024, volunteers donated over 29,000 hours of their time and talent to parks and golf courses within the system, a substantial increase over the 2019 reported numbers.

Today, Madison Parks volunteers contribute to the system in various capacities such as youth engagement, special events, group initiatives, long-term commitments and short-term projects. Long-term volunteers typically offer sustained support to specific parks or programs, such as by leading Bird & Nature walks or by participating in ongoing restoration efforts in their neighborhood park. Short-term volunteers, including those fulfilling specific requirements or mandates, contribute to targeted assignments that are usually short in duration, such as: park plantings; wildlife monitoring; parks self-directed improvement teams; seasonal work such as ice

maintenance, trail maintenance, and seed collection; and student science projects, to name a few. Special event volunteers lend their efforts to one-day events, such as the Earth Day Challenge or Ride the Drive, enhancing community spirit without the commitment to ongoing assignments. Youth volunteers (ages 14 to 17) also partake in volunteer programs with caretaker release, and younger volunteers may participate alongside a guardian, ensuring a safe and inclusive environment for all ages. Lastly, group volunteers, such as families, clubs, and organizations which may be part of long-standing Friends groups, participate in one-day events or schedule individual work party days. Each type of contribution is crucial to the Parks Division's success as opportunities are refined and expanded, fostering a deeper connection between the community and the parks, while ensuring a rewarding experience for all.

The Madison Parks Volunteer Program is working towards a vision for a thriving park system with a robust volunteer program deeply integrated into its core functions. Major areas of focus for the Madison Parks Volunteer Program over the next five years are:

1. Develop and Implement Volunteer Management Software: The Parks Division has implemented a software that will be used to increase volunteer engagement capacity by enhancing recruitment, onboarding, training, and retention as well as increase staff's reporting ability. This comprehensive, user-friendly platform for volunteer registrations, ongoing training opportunities, and communication will increase collaboration with local schools, businesses, and community groups to ensure a diverse volunteer pool that represents the entire Madison community.

2. Develop and Foster a Culture of Volunteerism Among Staff: Maintain a safe and inclusive environment among all staff that acknowledges and values volunteers as essential contributors to all aspects of park operations, events, and initiatives. A critical first step is engaging with staff in formalizing policies for project approval and volunteer group formation. Parks Division staff will work cohesively with volunteers and understand the benefits of volunteerism and its potential to transform Madison's parks into community hubs. Staff will be adept at managing volunteers efficiently, ensuring they feel welcomed and valued from the start and that their work aligns with the mission of Madison Parks. A critical aspect of enhancing volunteer involvement is refining the onboarding process for volunteer recruitment. This process must be designed to be seamless and informative, ensuring potential volunteers fully understand their roles, responsibilities, and the impact of their work. Staff must be equipped to guide volunteers through the initial steps, from expressing interest to becoming actively engaged, making the transition as smooth as possible. This aids in recruitment and builds a stronger relationship between staff and volunteers from the beginning.

3. Enhance Volunteer Recognition: Establish a robust volunteer recognition program, including annual awards, regular appreciation events, and public acknowledgments to show volunteers how much their contributions are valued. Policymakers will see volunteer engagement as an investment in community well-being, by facilitating a supportive environment for volunteers and establishing clear metrics to measure the success of volunteer programs. Additionally, it's important to recognize volunteer contributions allow Parks to do more than what would be possible within the constraints of budgeted resources.

4. Expand Volunteer Base: Increase the total volunteer hours by accurately reporting hours worked, actively recruiting new volunteers and engaging existing volunteers more effectively. Staff will leverage technology for outreach and communication to build stronger connections with volunteers.

5. Strengthen Community Partnerships: Build and nurture partnerships with local businesses, schools, and organizations to support volunteer recruitment and collaborative projects, fostering a strong sense of community involvement and support. One key goal is working with the Madison Parks Foundation to build private funding support for volunteerism, including seeking corporate support to further enhance volunteer initiatives and expand their impact within the community. Existing partnerships with organizations such as the Sierra Club, Clean Lakes Alliance, and various school groups help to broaden and enhance the quality and impact of volunteer efforts. These partnerships offer unique opportunities for volunteers to engage in specialized projects, such as environmental conservation, educational programs, community cleanup projects and park programs that align with Madison Parks' mission, while fostering a sense of community, solidarity and shared responsibility for our natural spaces. Strengthening these relationships and exploring new partnerships will ensure that the volunteer program continues to grow and adapt to the needs of Madison's parks and the community. Madison Parks goal is to create a more inclusive, effective and interconnected network of volunteers and community partners, further embedding the park system into the fabric of our city and ensuring its sustainability and vibrancy for future generations.

A successful volunteer program can be gauged through increased participation, improved park conditions, positive community feedback, and higher volunteer retention rates. All of these indicators reflect a shared commitment to fostering vibrant and engaging park experiences through dedicated volunteer efforts. The Parks Division is committed to maintaining an inclusive volunteer culture which recognizes the connection between a thriving volunteer program and overall park success.