

## **“Assessment” of green infrastructure in Wisconsin – how current efforts do not address all of the Principles.**

Note: the examples are not illustrated here, as we want to make sure we have the “right” examples for each. Case studies have been drafted separately which can be included here to fill in the examples.

Wisconsin’s urban parks and open spaces are an important starting point for developing comprehensive green infrastructure to serve our citizens. But they fall short of achieving the vision that the Community Open Space Partnership has created for Wisconsin’s green infrastructure through its Principles. Not every space (real or imagined) will satisfy every Principle. Rather, the Principles are intended to serve as our source of inspiration and as a yardstick of our success as we create high quality green infrastructure in communities across Wisconsin. In this chapter we assess Wisconsin’s current green infrastructure insofar as it addresses (or fails to address) COSP’s Principles, while providing hope in the form of some places that are striving to get it right.

***Equitable/Accessible.** Every neighborhood has quality open spaces that are inviting and accommodating. Open spaces are located throughout a community so all residents and visitors have access to quality spaces in their neighborhoods. Some open spaces meet local needs. Others meet regional needs. Both types of spaces need to be accessible. Open spaces accommodate use by multiple generations and differing cultures. Individuals of various physical and cognitive abilities can safely access open spaces.*

The current collection of parks in Wisconsin communities is often based on providing a prescribed set of spaces and services (e.g. baseball diamonds, soccer fields) to all communities rather than providing a diversity of services and types of spaces to meet the particular needs of neighborhoods within the community. Often this “cookie cutter” approach means that regional needs may be addressed by the parks, but that local needs go unmet for certain neighborhoods. In addition, this approach can mean that segments of the community’s population (including ethnic, age, and user groups) do not have spaces that they can use and enjoy.

Civic spaces including parks and open spaces are disproportionately located in more affluent communities, meaning that under served neighborhoods have reduced access to their community facilities. While state and federal legislation has improved the physical accessibility of recently build facilities, many of our community parks and open spaces remain difficult to reach and use for some. A study conducted by the University of Chicago that assessed the recreational activities available in two neighborhoods found that the public parks in suburban neighborhoods inhabited by mostly white, middle-income people provide eight times more activities for young people than did the parks in a low-income, minority, inner-city neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

Positive example: Cravath lakefront park?

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<sup>1</sup> Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours, Carnegie Corporation of New York, December 1992, p. 66.

**Safe.** *Open spaces are safe places. Open spaces are not only structured physically for safety, but are perceived as havens for everyone. Open spaces are not centers of criminal activity. People of all backgrounds and abilities feel comfortable getting to and enjoying these areas. Conflicts between uses are minimized.*

Too often, parks and open spaces in Wisconsin's urban communities are seen as places for crime and unsavory activity. They can also be underutilized because they are unwelcoming. In Milwaukee, an open space situated across the street from a retirement facility would seem like the ideal place for the facility's residents to enjoy some peaceful respite and conversation. But the space remains unutilized by most of these residents because they don't feel they can safely cross the street to access the park. In other instances, some users don't feel welcomed in an open space because of user "turf" issues and use incompatibility.

Positive example: *Riverside Park* by Urban Ecology Center in Milwaukee?

**Diverse.** *All community residents and visitors can access a variety of open spaces that support diverse uses. Communities have open spaces of various sizes. Open spaces support a variety of uses and purposes and accommodate diverse user groups. Open space designs are adaptable over time to meet changing local and regional needs, without diminishing the experience of a coherent and unified space.*

Because of a "cookie cutter" approach to park and open space development that is used by many communities in Wisconsin, diversity (in size, uses, purposes, and user groups) is often lacking in park and open space systems. More fundamentally, most parks and open spaces are designed with particular user groups and purposes in mind, with no plan for adaptability over time as the needs of the community (and therefore likely the uses and user groups) change. In one Wisconsin community, a park was designed more than four decades ago to meet the needs of the residents from primarily German backgrounds who then comprised the community. In recent years, the demographics of the community have shifted dramatically: most residents today are African-American and Asian-American. The design of the park no longer meets the needs of the residents, and as a result the space is under-utilized and the needs of the residents are unmet.

Positive example: plan for the Menomonee valley open spaces? Addressing needs of Marquette University, Latino neighborhoods, industrial workers. Bike paths, soccer fields, informal picnic facilities.

**Connected.** *A network of spaces enhances other public places and civic amenities. Communities and regions have networks of open spaces. Interconnected spaces provide greater opportunities and more diverse experiences. Connected spaces enhance ecological diversity and functions. Open spaces are connected to public transportation and pedestrian facilities. Libraries, schools, courthouses, and other public facilities include open space.*

When people think about connection, trails are the first things that come to mind. Many communities in Wisconsin are doing an admirable job at trying to develop trail systems, and some are even working to connect their trails with those of neighboring communities. But the

Community Open Space Partnership envisions more than trails when it thinks about open space connectivity, and most Wisconsin communities come up short in these other areas. Often civic amenities like public transportation, libraries, museums, and other cultural venues are not effectively connected with open spaces. These civic amenities also frequently do not encompass open space in their design. This disconnection not only makes non-automotive transportation to such amenities difficult, but makes them less inviting, and therefore underutilized, as well. Unconnected open spaces are also less able to provide ecological services like absorbing or detaining stormwater or providing habitat corridors for plants and wildlife.

Positive example: Madison's capitol square (connected to trail system, public transportation; other civic amenities (museums, shops, convention center, courthouse) nearby)

***Ecological.*** *Open spaces provide environmental benefits at multiple scales. Open spaces address large-scale concerns. Open spaces provide habitat, minimize storm water runoff, infiltrate groundwater, and offer other environmental benefits. Open spaces provide opportunities for people to connect with nature.*

Wisconsin's urban communities face a plethora of environmental concerns, chief among them stormwater management, flood prevention, water quality, and air quality. Our collection of parks and open spaces cannot, in their current state, address these large-scale ecological concerns. Communities have been forced to turn to engineered solutions that are not only very expensive, but are often ineffective over the long term as well, when the opportunity to create solutions through green infrastructure exists but is not yet widely practiced.

In addition, the modern age has witnessed a severing of the spiritual, emotional, and even physical connections between humans and the natural world. Living in the "built environment" of cities, we have become oblivious to our ultimate dependency on and responsibility for the "unbuilt" world – the life-sustaining systems that make cities possible. Urban dwellers in many communities do not currently have adequate access to open spaces that can help reconnect them with nature.

Positive example: Baird Creek Greenway in Green Bay

***Engaging.*** *Open spaces promote cultural understanding, interpret environmental and cultural identities, and foster community pride. Open spaces provide opportunities for multiple experiences. The design, materials, and uses reflect elements rooted in community values, history, and cultural linkages. Open spaces help define a community. Open spaces positively impact the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual growth of citizens.*

The too-often used "cookie cutter" approach to park and open space development in Wisconsin poorly reflects the cultures and unique qualities of the communities in which they are found. Few places are designed to reflect community values, history, and cultural linkages, although this approach can be seen in more recent projects such as the Menomonee Valley redevelopment plan in Milwaukee and the Fox River Corridor in Appleton. Parks and open spaces are also often designed to provide for only a limited type and number of experiences (e.g., soccer fields, ball fields, picnic grounds) rather than providing for the possibility of user-defined multiple

experiences. As a result, the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual growth of citizens is not encouraged through the use of these spaces to the extent that they could and should be.

Positive example: East Rail Corridor plan (Central Park) in Madison?

***Cared for.*** *Citizens engage in caring for open spaces and foster an appreciation of nature in their families and neighborhoods. Communities demonstrate their caring in many ways. Citizens of varied talents and interests devote their time and resources to open space planning and management.*

Citizen involvement in the management and stewardship of parks and open spaces is limited, despite the fact that parks departments are notoriously under-funded and therefore often unable to carryout stewardship of existing parks beyond simple upkeep despite their best intentions. Communities are also inadequately involved in planning for urban parks and open spaces, which is often is a “top down” experience in Wisconsin. Parks and planning departments typically create plans and citizens provide review of these proposals well into the planning process. Many parks departments often wish for more feedback than they receive, and are puzzled by the lack of community interest and engagement. Citizens must be substantively involved in the visioning, planning, and design processes for their communities as a whole and for parks and open space initiatives in particular in order to develop a sense of ownership and power over community decision-making and a sense of responsibility for stewardship.

Positive Example: Token Creek? Yahara River Parkway?

***Funded.*** *Communities sufficiently fund open space planning and management to meet citizen needs and community goals. Open spaces, like highways and sewers, require investments to reap community benefits. The long-term success of open space also requires long-term commitment and maintenance to protect the quality of the environment and visitor enjoyment.*

Funding is a challenge for all entities working to establish and maintain urban open spaces in Wisconsin. While communities maintain large budgets for highway and road maintenance and construction, budgets for green infrastructure languish. Even when funds for acquisition are made available (as in the case of the Dane County Conservation Fund), often these funds are not followed up with long-term funding for maintenance and stewardship, or they are limited to land acquisition and do not cover development of facilities within the spaces. Our community open space networks suffer greatly as a result.

Positive example: Dane County Park and Open Space Plan?

## PROCESSES

***Community Driven.*** *Open space planning and decision-making reflects community values, responds to citizens’ needs, and addresses broader community goals. Citizens create a vision for open space preservation and enhancement. Communities address open space needs in relation to other goals, including local and regional economic priorities, social development objectives, and a local vision of community character. Citizens identify community assets, such as civic*

*buildings, community organizations, and natural features that can be enhanced through strategic investments in open space.*

Planning is too-often a “top down” process. Rarely are citizens involved in a sufficiently rich discussion of the community’s vision for itself: defining important goals and priorities for the community; identifying community assets and character; and developing economic, environmental, and social objectives. Citizens frequently get involved with planning-related issues in a “crisis management” mode, late in the process and often because of opposition to draft plans. Citizens should drive planning efforts, not merely respond to draft plans.

Positive Example: Baird Creek Greenway

***Inclusive.*** *Everyone is welcome in the open space planning and decision-making process. Participation by community residents of all backgrounds and diverse interests drives the planning and design process. Traditional and non-traditional partners are sought out and included.*

Community residents are not often enough or deeply enough involved with community planning efforts. Those who are involved are small in number and often narrow in representation of a community’s diversity. The same holds true for other partners. Those leading the planning process don’t often enough effectively reach out to non-traditional participants in the process, when these new people could provide fresh ideas and improve the end result.

Positive example: East Rail Corridor

***Science-based.*** *Decision-makers use sound environmental science in open space planning and management. The siting and design of open space consistently incorporates sound science regarding ecosystems and the connection between land and water resources. Planning for public open space recognizes that open space can function as a system if it is designed with nature, instead of "in spite of" nature. While management and funding of open space may continue to respect established political boundaries, planning for open space should address the regional ecosystem and watershed contexts.*

Planning often occurs without the benefit of sound environmental science as the foundation for decision-making. As a result, not only are our natural resources put at risk, development that occurs in inappropriate areas like floodplains and wetlands can be too – at a high cost for our communities in the form of flooding, poor water quality, and expensive engineered “fixes” for these problems.

The political boundaries of human communities do not reflect ecological boundaries, and as such planning done for these communities does not recognize regional ecosystem contexts, which in turn can result in an exacerbation of ecological problems. For example, the efforts of a community with good watershed planning that has protected open spaces critical to providing flood storage will be washed out if communities upstream do not do similar planning.

Positive example: MMSD Conservation Plan.

***Innovative.*** *Communities engage in innovative partnerships that achieve creative solutions. Park professionals, community organizers, and public officials seek out creative partnerships and use collaborative processes to carry out innovative strategies for acquiring, funding, and managing open space.*

Government alone cannot accomplish the enormous task of planning for, protecting, and managing open spaces necessary for our communities' health and prosperity. Financial resources are limited, as is the capacity of municipal and agency staff, already burdened with numerous responsibilities. In addition, the "tool kit" available to governments is limited. Developing creative partnerships is essential to achieving the resources, ideas, and political will to acquire, fund, and manage open space. In order for such creative partnerships to work, a collaborative process is essential to bringing partners together.

Positive example: Dane Co Park & Open Space referendum coalition?

Wisconsin's green infrastructure currently falls short when compared with the Community Open Space Partnership's vision for green infrastructure. Through developing and promoting a vibrant vision for green infrastructure in Wisconsin, the Partnership strives to lay the groundwork for improving and expanding Wisconsin's green infrastructure so that it can ultimately achieve this ambitious vision. The Partnership also intends to lead the way by proposing important policy and institutional reforms that will help make implementing green infrastructure easier.