North Beach Park Master Plan – Creating a More Sustainable, Inclusive, and Engaging Park Environment

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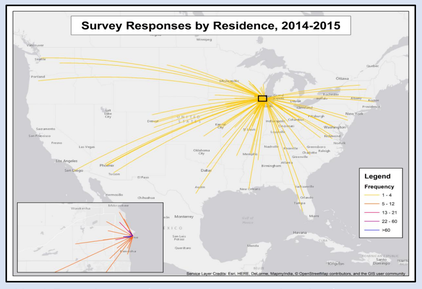
Background

Since November 2000 the City of Racine has utilized engineering and best management practices to improve water quality at North Beach. Employing data driven solutions has resulted in the number of swim advisories decreasing from 62 days (2000) to 8 or fewer days over a typical beach season (June – August). In 2004, North Beach became the first beach in Wisconsin and second on the Great Lakes to receive Blue Wave Certification. Ultimately, the designation and water quality improvements were leveraged to host Iron Man© 70.3 events, international motocross championships, and pro-amateur volleyball tournaments. The ensuing activities generate a regional economic impact estimated at $32 million annually with $5 million directly influencing the local economy (Brunner and Kinzelman, 2014). Consequently, annual visitor totals have steadily climbed, from 47,933 in 2006 to 144,051 in 2016 – a 300% increase (Figure 1). The change in user volume has, and continues to, challenge limited park resources, programming, and design. In response, the City of Racine conducted a visitor survey to collect data and inform future planning efforts.

A survey was designed in 2014 and adjusted in 2015 with the goals of collecting information on (1) Visitor demographics and beach usage; (2)Assessing effectiveness of park safety and health communications; and (3) Opinions of park programming and site conditions . Surveys were conducted in-person and were restricted to individuals 18 or older. Respondents were allowed to complete the survey on their own unless clarification was necessary. Surveying events were planned and prioritized based upon historical daily visitor counts. Over the 2014 and 2015 seasons, a total of 751 surveys were completed over 32 survey dates. The response rate for the survey averaged 94.5 % over the two seasons. While responses came from across the US, nearly 52% of respondents resided within the City of Racine and 80% resided in the State of Wisconsin (Map 1). Health and safety signage was not well identified even though respondents identified similar matching information that would like to be known before attending. Areas of improvement were identified, specifically those targeting existing bathhouse, concessions, and park equipment/recreational areas (Figure 2). Areas that were identified as important for decision-making (Figure 3), in addition to receiving higher ratings, were considered options for enabling growth in addition to retaining existing park patrons .

Driven by survey results, the City of Racine engaged the UWM School of Architecture and Urban Planning to develop a visioning document for the park. The project was taken as a capstone course for the Master's of Urban Planning program. A project team of four graduate students , supervised by program faculty, led the planning process to develop the visioning document additional direction from a committee of City staff. The process was also further enriched by public input from various community stakeholders . This process of developing the visioning document lasted over 4 months and formed the cornerstone for a final master plan for the park.

Figure 1. Annual seasonal (June – August) visitor counts from 2006-2016.



Map 1. Travel distances of survey respondents depicted in a flow map.

Left: Several thousand visitors waiting for the 4th of July fireworks to start at North Beach.
Right: Visitors utilizing the ADA compliant path to walk from the North Beach Oasis to the lifeguarded swim area.

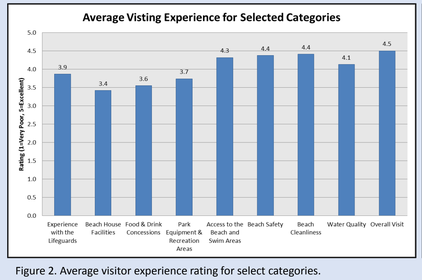


Figure 2. Average visitor experience rating for select categories.

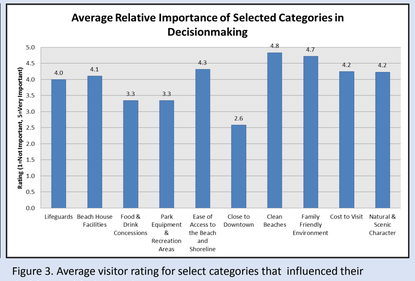


Figure 3. Average visitor rating for select categories that influenced their decision to visit the beach.

Cited Literature

1. Brunner, Joel and Kinzelman, Julie . "*Assessing the Economic Impact of Beach Restoration: A Case Study of North Beach Racine, WI.*" Research Paper, City of Racine, 2004.

Planning Process

Through collaboration the project team and committee identified four focus areas to address in the planning process. The focus areas included Access & Connectivity, Design & Amenities, Environmental Stewardship, and Operations & Programming. Each area was provided an overarching goal in addition to identifying objectives which would be used to evaluate the plan (Figure 4). These goals and objectives , along with questions and potential examples, were presented for public input on March 18th to further inform the process. Over 60 members of the community were present at the meeting to provide input and ask questions on the plan. A graph showing the breakdown of public input comments shows the many challenges facing the park (Figure 5). Utilizing the feedback from public input session, the project team developed a series of recommendations for each focus area that aimed at achieving at least one objective. A matrix identifying the 18 recommendations and their relative impact with respect to each focus areas is shown below (Figure 6).

Access & Connectivity

Goal

Improve connectivity and access between the beach and other local destinations

Objective

- *Create logical connections to additional/overflow parking for days with very high usage*
- *Improve connectivity between adjacent parking and beach amenities*
- *Improve connectivity between existing and proposed beach amenities including improved handicapped access to the water*

Design & Amenities

Goal

Maximize the beach's community utility through innovative design

Objectives

- *Craft an inspiring and environmentally friendly park design that brings the public to the waterfront*
- *Provide adequate built facilities for high visitation days*
- *Ensure the scale and design of North Beach amenities reflect the community's character*

Environmental Stewardship

Goal

Protect and enhance the surrounding restored coastal habitat

Objective

- *Educate the public on coastal habitat, stormwater management infrastructure, and water quality issues*
- *Improve local coastal habitat and continue to preserve pristine water quality*

Operations & Programming

Goal

Develop the beach as a community education and wellness resources

Objectives

- *Design effective all-season outdoor recreation opportunities to provide healthy exercise opportunities*
- *Provide programming alternatives to summer beach activities to activate the beach during the non-peak season*
- *Establish educational opportunities for children*

Figure 4. The goals and objectives above were used to guide planning and evaluate the plan's overall success.

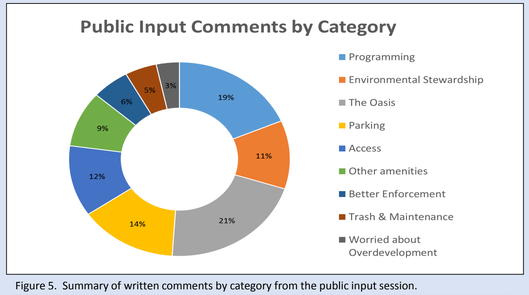


Figure 5. Summary of written comments by category from the public input session.

	Plan Recommendation	Access & Connectivity	Design & Amenities	Environmental Stewardship	Operations & Programming
Access & Connectivity	*Parking Shuttle*				
	Hoeffert Drive				
	Bike Share				
	Boardwalk System				
	Wayfinding Signage				
	Pedestrian Improvements				
Design & Amenities	*Picnic Amenities*				
	Outdoor Rinse Showers				
	Fitness Park				
	Oasis Beach House				
Environmental Stewardship	*Rain Gardens*				
	Native Landscaping				
	Nature Center				
	Biofiltration Devices				
	Permeable Pavement				
Operations & Programming	*Online Presences*				
	Friends of North Beach Park				
	Contracted Recreation				

Indicates positive impact on focus area
Indicates neutral impact on focus area
Indicates negative impact on focus area

Figure 6. A matrix showing the anticipated impact for the proposed recommendations for each focus area.

Implementation

Developed over a four month period, including input from community stakeholders and City staff, the visioning document established an outline for improvements. The "Vision for North Beach Park" presented the City with 18 recommendations that address concerns regarding access, environmental stewardship, programming, and park design. The recommendations were proposed to be implemented using a multi-phased approach such that the project could maintain momentum over the long-term, such as for redesigning the Oasis Beach House (Figure 7).One of the 18 recommendations is already underway with nature trails being planned behind Kid's Cove - 20,000 square foot playground. When finished the nature trails are expected provide approximately 800 feet of environmentally neutral trail space with educational signage and improve access to the water front by adding two clearly marked entrances. The trail will also provide protection to the surrounding dune environment by limited access of visitors to the designated trails . An example of other site improvements recommended in the visioning document can be seen below (Figure 8).

In addition, a master plan is expected to be completed by October 2017 and will build upon the existing recommendations through schematic designs and detailed site plans. Specifically, the plan will conceptually detail and place the proposed recommendations for a renovated bathhouse and boardwalk system. Both of these elements are crucial to the park and adjacent beach. The existing bath house is limited in its capacity to provide services to large crowds while also acting as a resource for off-season months. Similarly, the boardwalk system currently in place is in need of significant repairs . A new boardwalk system will be necessary to provide visitors an easy and effective means of transition to and from points of interest within the park. Similar to the nature trails, a delineating path will also minimize damage and disturbances to the park's highly desirable environmental features. Realizing these critical elements in addition to the implementing the proposed recommendations within the vision document will drive greater inclusivity, strengthen environmental awareness, and spur citizens into a healthy, active lifestyle through a more engaging park environment.

Figure 7. The timeline above shows the phasing of the 18 recommendations along with an approximate timeframe for completion .

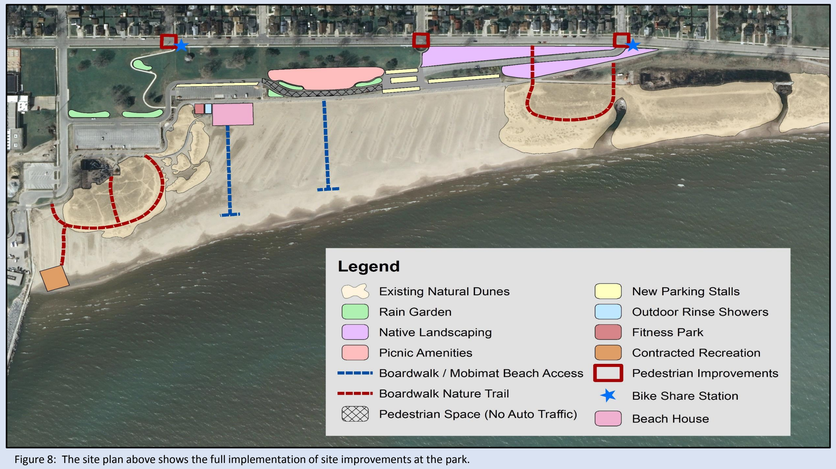


Figure 8: The site plan above shows the full implementation of site improvements at the park.

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