OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING PARKS & RECREATION SERVICES IN GREATER RACINE

cgr Promising Solutions

Wisconsin Policy Forum
ABOUT THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their lengthy histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. WPF is committed to those same activities and that spirit of nonpartisanship.

ABOUT CENTER FOR GOVERNMENTAL RESEARCH

Since its establishment by Kodak’s George Eastman in 1915, the nonprofit Center for Governmental Research (CGR) has supported the municipal and voluntary sectors through objective analysis, mission-critical data and strategic counsel, empowering innovative solutions in the public interest. Headquartered in Rochester, New York, CGR has served communities throughout the Northeast and Great Lakes regions.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was undertaken to provide citizens and policymakers in the Greater Racine region with information on possible service sharing and consolidation options that might improve the quality and cost effectiveness of parks and recreation services in their communities. The intent was to lay out a series of options for their consideration, but not to make recommendations on the future of those services in the respective communities.

Report authors would like to thank parks, recreation, and public works officials – as well as administrators – from Racine, Caledonia, Mount Pleasant, Sturtevant, and Racine County for their assistance in providing information on parks and recreation services, maintenance, and finances and for patiently answering our questions.

In addition, we wish to acknowledge and thank the Johnson Foundation at Wingspread, which provided partial underwriting for this research as part of its “Resilient Communities Initiative,” which is focused on building resiliency in the Greater Racine region to improve the social and economic health of all area citizens.
OPTIONS FOR IMPROVING PARKS & RECREATION SERVICES IN GREATER RACINE

November 2019

Prepared by:
Kent Gardner & Paul Bishop
Center for Governmental Research

Prepared in collaboration with:
Wisconsin Policy Forum
# Table of Contents

Summary .................................................................................................................................................. 1  
Park Development and Recreational Service Delivery ................................................................. 1  
Improving Coordination of Development & Service Delivery ....................................................... 2  
  Park maintenance should remain the responsibility of individual municipalities ......................... 2  
  Expand regional financial responsibility for regional park assets .................................................. 2  
  Create a regional process for regional park planning ................................................................. 3  
  Establish Greater Racine Park and Recreation Council ............................................................... 3  
Parks and Recreation Services: Overview ........................................................................................... 4  
  Current Conditions ....................................................................................................................... 4  
    Recreational Assets by Community .......................................................................................... 4  
    Spending on Parks & Recreation ............................................................................................ 6  
    Recreation ........................................................................................................................... 8  
Options for Changes to Parks & Recreation Service Delivery in Greater Racine ................................. 9  
  Ownership, Management, and Planning for Regional Parks ......................................................... 9  
    Park Maintenance ..................................................................................................................... 9  
      Would Centralized Maintenance Reduce Cost? ................................................................. 10  
      Recommendation: Park maintenance should remain the responsibility of individual municipalities ................................................................. 11  
      Recommendation: Expand Regional Financial Responsibility for Regional Park Assets .... 11  
  Planning & Funding New Park Development ............................................................................. 12  
    Neighborhood parks ............................................................................................................... 12  
    Regional parks ..................................................................................................................... 12  
    Recommendation: Create a regional process for regional park planning ................................ 13  
Recreational Program Consolidation and/or Coordination ................................................................ 14  
  Recommendation: Establish a central information (and possibly registration) site for county recreation services ................................................................. 15  
Role of Regional Coordination ....................................................................................................... 16  
  Recommendation: Establish Greater Racine Park and Recreation Council ................................ 17  
    What would the Council do? ............................................................................................... 17  
    Do models exist outside Wisconsin? .................................................................................... 18  
    Focus on meeting needs; grow organically ........................................................................... 19  
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 20
Summary

Nearly every sphere of American life has undergone a fundamental transformation during the previous half century. The “big box” retail revolution typified by Walmart has been transformed by Amazon and has fundamentally changed how goods and services are sourced and sold; reliable birth control, shifting social mores, and technology have transformed the workplace and family life; the Internet has made communication instant and spawned amazing new products and services.

Yet the structure of local government remains largely unchanged from its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many metropolitan areas are balkanized by local zoning and planning powers, with socioeconomic differences literally cast in concrete and communities divided by asphalt.

Change is possible, however. Under the premise that Greater Racine’s local governments would be better off working together than individually to address Foxconn-related and other growing service delivery challenges, members of the Resilient Communities Roundtable, comprised of the region’s top elected leaders and administrators, commissioned the Wisconsin Policy Forum to conduct a high-level scan of municipal services in the region that would identify which were most conducive to enhanced sharing or consolidation. That 2018 report – Building Bridges: A scan of service sharing opportunities in Greater Racine – identified three such service areas: fire and emergency medical services (EMS), parks and recreation, and public health.

This report represents a next step in the inquiry into the potential benefits associated with intergovernmental cooperation in Greater Racine by providing a detailed analysis of the potential for enhanced sharing or consolidation of parks and recreation services in the region. Commissioned again by the Resilient Communities Roundtable, this report explores the current state of the existing municipal parks and recreation functions in the region’s four largest municipalities (as well as in Racine County government) and opportunities for improvement through greater collaboration. The Johnson Foundation, which convenes and facilitates Resilient Communities Roundtable discussions, provided partial underwriting for this study.

Park Development and Recreational Service Delivery

Parks and open space provide important opportunities for active and passive recreation for children and adults. The Greater Racine municipalities east of Interstate 94 currently include 3,213 acres of public parkland for a population of 138,000. These assets are spread across the Greater Racine area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mount Pleasant</th>
<th>Caledonia</th>
<th>Sturtevant</th>
<th>Racine</th>
<th>Racine County</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Acres</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1,175</td>
<td>1,098</td>
<td>3,213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acres/1000 residents</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not only is ownership dispersed, but maintenance and upkeep plus recreational service delivery also is dispersed across the region, with spending to match.

### Spending on Parks & Recreation Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sturtevant '19</th>
<th>Mount Pleasant '19</th>
<th>Caledonia '19</th>
<th>Racine '19**</th>
<th>County '19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parks</td>
<td>$84,617</td>
<td>$334,197</td>
<td>$413,585</td>
<td>$2,943,150</td>
<td>$1,297,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>$12,500</td>
<td>$84,495</td>
<td></td>
<td>$389,239</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoological Gardens*</td>
<td>$36,678</td>
<td>$192,512</td>
<td>$142,649</td>
<td>$664,001</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wustum Museum*</td>
<td>$20,175</td>
<td>$105,890</td>
<td>$78,463</td>
<td>$401,341</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$153,970</strong></td>
<td><strong>$717,094</strong></td>
<td><strong>$634,697</strong></td>
<td><strong>$4,397,731</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,322,239</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ per capita</td>
<td>$32.1</td>
<td>$27.3</td>
<td>$25.4</td>
<td>$56.5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Village support via 2002 wastewater agreement (current year estimate for 2020 pmt)
**Excludes community centers; admin allocated by share of expenditure
* Sturtevant population used for per capita calculation does not include prison population

## Improving Coordination of Development & Service Delivery

The current fragmentation of investment and service delivery is a direct result of the independent governance established as individual communities were founded. Urban planners would create a more centralized structure if presented with a bare canvas. Yet the built reality, as reflected in housing characteristics and demographics, makes radical realignment impractical.

This study explores options for changing patterns of ownership and control of parks and recreational assets and services. While we detect little support for a radical realignment, gradual changes are appropriate and achievable. Recommendations, discussed in detail in the body of the report, include:

### Park maintenance should remain the responsibility of individual municipalities

Consolidating or centralizing park maintenance offers little prospect for cost saving. Sharing of specialized equipment and unique expertise across the municipalities (which occurs now to some degree) should be encouraged, however.

### Expand regional financial responsibility for regional park assets

Although neither political reality nor operational efficiency demands the creation of a centralized maintenance function, equity suggests that a shift in financial responsibility for the maintenance of park assets deemed to be “regional” in nature by virtue of their usage should be actively considered.
Create a regional process for regional park planning

Racine County is best positioned to lead the planning of additional regional parks and public open space in the Greater Racine communities, in consultation with the municipalities. Racine County and the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) could start the process by scheduling and funding an update of the countywide Park and Open Space Plan to reflect anticipated population growth and increased demand for recreational opportunities. This concept could be expanded to initiate the creation of a formal coordinating council consisting of appointees from each of the municipalities to augment county leadership.

Establish Greater Racine Park and Recreation Council

With growing populations and growing demand for park and recreational services, each of the municipalities is considering development of new assets, amenities, and programming. The threat of redundancy and inefficiency as these improvements are planned suggests the need for a regional council that could play an oversight and coordinating role in both park development and the provision of enhanced recreational services throughout the Greater Racine community.

Such a council could provide:

- a sounding board for potential changes in ownership and maintenance of the region’s recreational assets, particularly with regard to those assets that are deemed “regional” in nature;
- a forum for exploring ways to jointly fund new and existing assets (again with an emphasis on those deemed “regional”);
- a clearinghouse for practical information on developing and managing recreational programs;
- a place to develop, maintain, and house a joint information and registration website as well as joint efforts to recruit, train, and retain volunteer coaches, umpires/referees, and staff; and
- periodic events/workshops that bring service providers together with program managers.

Overall, there is much to be gained and little to lose from collaborative planning and coordination of parks and recreation enhancements in the Greater Racine region. Local officials might opt to start slowly with a joint recreational website and joint planning, or they could pursue a more comprehensive approach under the leadership of Racine County.
PARKS AND RECREATION SERVICES: OVERVIEW

Park development, maintenance, and recreation service delivery in Greater Racine is largely decentralized, provided by a combination of municipalities and voluntary organizations.

The purpose of this study is to explore existing conditions governing park development and maintenance plus the structure of recreational service delivery. Impending population and employment growth anticipated from Foxconn and other new development offers an impetus for considering a change in structure and delivery of these services.

Parks and recreation services were identified by the Wisconsin Policy Forum as worthy of further exploration in its 2018 report, *Building Bridges: A scan of service sharing opportunities in Greater Racine*. That report was prepared as part of the Johnson Foundation at Wingspread’s Resilient Communities Initiative, which is focused on building resiliency in the Greater Racine region to improve the social and economic health of all area citizens. Recognized for its world-class convening expertise, the Foundation is providing area leaders the opportunity to explore and discuss if and how municipalities can work together to benefit both individual communities and the region as a whole.

Current Conditions

Recreational Assets by Community

Greater Racine (Racine County east of Interstate 94) currently includes 3,213 acres of public parkland for a population of 138,000, or 23 acres per 1,000 residents. According to the Trust for Public Land, the median parkland available in the nation’s largest cities is 13 acres per 1,000 residents. By way of comparison, the Trust reports that Milwaukee’s total is 10 and Chicago’s is 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mount Pleasant</th>
<th>Caledonia</th>
<th>Sturtevant</th>
<th>Racine</th>
<th>Racine County</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Acres</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1,175</td>
<td>1,098</td>
<td>3,213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acres/1000 residents</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Racine County plays an important role, with its parks and open space assets (and development of recreational opportunities within those assets) principally designed to serve regional populations. This role is clearly in evidence at the county-owned 79-acre Pritchard Park, located in the City of Racine. The county took the lead in developing the SC Johnson Community Aquatic Center at the park and is similarly spearheading the planned SC Johnson Community Sports Complex. Both of these park amenities are intended to serve as regional assets.
A listing of City of Racine-owned parks of five acres or more, public parks owned by the villages of Caledonia, Mount Pleasant and Sturtevant, plus parks east of I-94 owned by Racine County is shown below.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Park Name</th>
<th>Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Nicholson Wildlife Refuge</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Caledonia-Mount Pleasant Memorial</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Gorney</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Crawford</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>5 1/2 Mile</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>County Line</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Crawford</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Linwood</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Chapla</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>Maple</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Pike River Corridor</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Biex-Ramcke Homestead (undeveloped)</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Smolenski</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Campus</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Cozy Acres</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Stewart-McBride</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>James Turek</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Pheasant Creek</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Lathrop Manor Subdivision</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Lake</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Sheridan Woods</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Disrke</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt Pleasant</td>
<td>Polzin</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturtevant</td>
<td>Fireman's</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturtevant</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturtevant</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturtevant</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>Horlick &amp; Root River</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>Cliffside</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>Sanders</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>Pritchard</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>Quarry Lake</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>Racine Harbor</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>Racine Harbor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racine County</td>
<td>neighborhood parks &lt;5 acres</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Johnson Park and Johnson Park Dog Run are owned and maintained by Racine but are located in Caledonia.
Spending on Parks & Recreation

Given the far greater number of parks and the full range of park-related services offered by the City of Racine, it is unsurprising that its total spending and per capita spending on parks and recreation services well exceeds that of its suburban neighbors. Moreover, Racine owns and maintains a number of recreational assets (e.g. the zoo, museum, three public golf courses, lake beaches, and boat launches) that are used by many nonresidents.

For some of these assets, nonresidents pay higher admissions/user fees; also, the municipalities in Greater Racine support selected regional assets through a water and sewer agreement signed in 2002. Nevertheless, city officials have argued that their level of financial support for these assets represents an inequitable burden in light of the degree of regional usage.

### Spending on Parks & Recreation Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sturtevant ‘19</th>
<th>Mount Pleasant ‘19</th>
<th>Caledonia ‘19</th>
<th>Racine ‘19**</th>
<th>County ‘19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parks</td>
<td>$84,617</td>
<td>$334,197</td>
<td>$413,585</td>
<td>$2,943,150</td>
<td>$1,297,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>$12,500</td>
<td>$84,495</td>
<td></td>
<td>$389,239</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoological Gardens*</td>
<td>$36,678</td>
<td>$192,512</td>
<td>$142,649</td>
<td>$664,001</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wustum Museum*</td>
<td>$20,175</td>
<td>$105,890</td>
<td>$78,463</td>
<td>$401,341</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$153,970</strong></td>
<td><strong>$717,094</strong></td>
<td><strong>$634,697</strong></td>
<td><strong>$4,397,731</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,322,239</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>$ per capita</strong></td>
<td><strong>$32.1</strong></td>
<td><strong>$27.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>$25.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>$56.5</strong></td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Village support via 2002 wastewater agreement (current year estimate for 2020 pmt)

**Excludes community centers; admin allocated by share of expenditure

* Sturtevant population used for per capita calculation does not include prison population

This perceived difference in financial burden between the City of Racine and its suburbs reflects a common urban-suburban pattern as a city like Racine develops community assets that need not be replicated as the population grows and expands into surrounding municipalities. It would be impractical for Caledonia, Mount Pleasant, and Sturtevant to each establish a zoo, for example. The public golf courses (at Johnson, Shoop, and Washington parks) and Racine Art Museum (Wustum campus) are other assets that benefit the entire community. Nor do all of the villages have access to the unique Lake Michigan shoreline: North Beach is another Racine-owned-and-operated asset that is used by all the residents of the region.
As discussed in greater detail below, the provision of recreational services also varies considerably between the City of Racine and the surrounding suburbs. Racine offers and funds a wide array of recreational programs while suburban families rely heavily on voluntary organizations like the Caledonia Baseball/Softball League, Racine Youth Sports, and the Racine Area Soccer Association (although Mount Pleasant and Caledonia both allocate some tax revenue to recreation). The voluntary organizations depend on participant fees and a considerable investment of volunteer labor (often contributed by parents), reflecting the significant difference in both income and social capital in city and suburb. These private sports clubs also rely on sponsorships to defray some of the cost of providing these services.

Whether equitable or not, the burden of maintaining its large network of parks and recreational programs (a quarter of which serve non-Racine residents) presents a significant challenge for the City of Racine. Larger fiscal constraints have forced a reduction in staffing for park maintenance and recreational service delivery.*

---

* For further information on Racine’s financial challenges, see the Forum’s April 2018 analysis, *Living Within its Means*. 
Recreation

While not centrally managed or coordinated on the “supply” side, the “consumers” of recreational services come from all of the communities, regardless of the provider.

The largest provider is the City of Racine. City staff report that just over a quarter of the users of recreational services are nonresidents. This is more pronounced among the users of recreational services in Mount Pleasant, where nearly half of the users of the community’s programs are nonresidents.

Racine Youth Sports, the voluntary organization providing the widest variety of youth sports opportunities, was also willing to share its user profile with CGR. Although a majority of Racine Youth Sports activities take place at Haban Park in Sturtevant, over half of the more than 1,000 participants come from the City of Racine. The program also attracts some youth from west of I-94 (34) and 28 from other counties, presumably Kenosha.

As shown earlier, taxpayer spending on recreation services is significantly higher in Racine than in the suburban villages. Many of the same recreational opportunities are available in the suburbs, yet the dominant providers of these services are private, voluntary organizations like Racine Youth Sports or the Racine Area Soccer Association. This may be partly an artifact of history but may also be attributed to a difference in social capital between Racine and the villages. The private sports organizations rely heavily on volunteer hours and private fundraising and sponsorships, which may be more difficult to mobilize in Racine.
OPTIONS FOR CHANGES TO PARKS & RECREATION SERVICE DELIVERY IN GREATER RACINE

The existing distribution of parks and recreational asset ownership, recreation service delivery, and the financial burdens this imposes particularly on the City of Racine poses a challenge to the community. As the region’s population and workforce grows, that challenge will become more formidable.

In the pages that follow, we consider how potential alternatives to the structure of asset ownership and the allocation of management might be used to ensure the provision of desired park and recreational opportunities for Greater Racine’s citizens. We also discuss how a change in structure might realign financial responsibility for the maintenance and development of the region’s park and recreation assets.

Both efficiency and equity considerations are explored below for existing park ownership, park management, and maintenance funding plus the provision of recreation services.

Ownership, Management, and Planning for Regional Parks

Determining an equitable allocation of cost for managing regional parks is beyond the scope of this study (and is, indeed, properly a decision made through the political process). Racine County can play a much more significant role, particularly for park assets with clear regional appeal. This role could be limited to coordinating a regional oversight entity (discussed in more detail below) or could extend to assuming full ownership and management responsibility for those assets deemed to be regional in their appeal and use.

Park Maintenance

The maintenance of parks and open space is managed differently by the City of Racine, the suburbs, and the county. With nearly 1,200 acres of park land, Racine employs a dedicated parks maintenance staff at a cost of $2.9 million in the 2019 budget.

The other communities in the region rely on municipal public works staff to maintain parks. Some maintenance services, particularly mowing, are provided through contracts with private landscaping firms.

County parks are maintained by the Parks Division of the Department of Public Works and Development Services. The net cost (after fees) of park maintenance was budgeted at $1.3 million in
the 2019 Executive Budget. Most positions within the division are shared with other divisions in the
department, however, which enables staffing to ebb and flow with overall departmental needs.

Would Centralized Maintenance Reduce Cost?

Is the current structure of park maintenance services rendered inefficient by its decentralized
provision or by the lack of specialized staffing outside the City of Racine?

With the exception of some aspects of ball field construction and maintenance, the skills and
equipment required for park maintenance are shared by other public works functions, thus justifying
the staff sharing with highway departments seen outside the City of Racine. By sharing staff
resources between highway and parks maintenance, these departments take advantage of the
seasonality of both functions, reducing cost. Only the City of Racine has the extensive parks
maintenance responsibilities that warrant a dedicated labor force.

A question that arises is whether the city’s parks maintenance staff could be expanded and
compensated to handle maintenance responsibilities for all parks (both municipal and county) in the
Greater Racine region. Alternatively, those functions could be consolidated at the county level.

Under the first option, suburban and county parks maintenance responsibilities would be eliminated,
with all or a portion of the resulting savings paid to Racine instead. While the city undoubtedly would
need to expand its staffing levels to maintain parks regionally, it would be hoped that the revenue
received from the other jurisdictions would equal or exceed the cost of doing so, while the other
jurisdictions would pay less to Racine than they are currently spending to maintain parks
themselves.

The same paradigm would occur if the county assumed parks maintenance responsibilities for all of
the region’s municipalities. However, given that the county has lower staffing levels than the city and
lacks a dedicated parks maintenance staff, significant added capacity would be required. That, in
turn, likely would make consolidation at the county level a less efficient option.

Unfortunately, we find that in either case, there is little evidence to support the proposition that a
regional park maintenance function would offer cost-saving efficiencies. To the contrary, while the
elimination of park maintenance responsibilities in the suburbs could free up public works staff time,
it would be difficult for the suburban municipalities to eliminate positions (and achieve cost savings)
given that their maintenance workers would still have other public works maintenance
responsibilities. Indeed, the use of public works staff for parks, highway, building, and other
maintenance produces efficiencies for the suburban communities, as does the use of seasonal
workers on an “as needed” basis for summer maintenance.

Furthermore, centralized provision of maintenance services by a public sector workforce could limit
the ability of municipalities to employ private landscape contractors through a process of competitive
bidding, which they have similarly found to be a cost effective endeavor.

Joint contracting for maintenance services has also been proposed. The market structure of the
landscaping business sector should be a consideration, however. Given very low barriers to entry,
many vendors would be able to compete for services like mowing and grounds maintenance for a
single village or a selected group of parks. Only well-established firms of scale would be capable of bidding on the work of multiple municipalities, however. It is likely that a consolidated bid would either save little or, by limiting the number of potential bidders, actually cost more.

Recommendation: Park maintenance should remain the responsibility of individual municipalities

Consolidating or centralizing park maintenance offers little prospect for cost saving. Sharing of specialized equipment and unique expertise across the municipalities (which occurs now to some degree) should be encouraged, however.

It was also clear from CGR’s interviews with municipal officials in Racine County that there is little interest in ceding ownership or administrative control of locally-developed parks to the county or a countywide park district. Cost savings from a single maintenance organization would be small or nonexistent.

Recommendation: Expand Regional Financial Responsibility for Regional Park Assets

Although neither political reality nor operational efficiency demands the creation of a centralized maintenance function, equity suggests that a shift in financial responsibility for the maintenance of park assets deemed to be “regional” in nature by virtue of their usage should be actively considered.

This can be accomplished in two ways: First, a regional park authority or park district could be established to finance the development and maintenance of all parks with a regional draw.

Alternatively, Racine County could establish a schedule for assuming maintenance responsibility for the large regional assets not currently owned by the county. These might include the three public golf courses currently owned by Racine, North Beach Park (also Racine), Pike River Corridor (Mount Pleasant), and Nicholson Wildlife Refuge (Caledonia).

Which parks would be considered for such regional maintenance and cost sharing would ideally be decided by a regional body such as the Greater Racine Park and Recreation Council discussed below.
Planning & Funding New Park Development

Neighborhood parks
As a community grows, the demand for active and passive recreational assets also grows. At the neighborhood scale, the comprehensive planning processes and public land dedication ordinances of individual communities can be used to ensure provision of additional parks, including funds to facilitate related development by the municipalities.

Regional parks
Park and open space assets in Racine County have been documented by the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) in relatively recent Park & Open Space plans prepared for the City of Racine (2018), the Village of Caledonia (2018), the Village of Mount Pleasant (2015), and the County of Racine (2013). The Village of Sturtevant has engaged the Lakota Group and Ehlers to prepare the Sturtevant Southwest Area Plan* to address land use planning issues near the Foxconn development. This same consultant is preparing a county-wide “targeted development study” that may address the need for additional recreational assets.

Our interviews with municipal and county leaders and review of ongoing park and recreation planning efforts indicate there would be promise in joint planning (and possibly development) of major new park and recreation assets in the Greater Racine region. Such an effort could ensure that redundant amenities are not developed in neighboring communities and that the overall demand for park and recreational opportunities among citizens of the larger region – as opposed to smaller municipal populations – dictate the nature, scope, and location of any new development.

Recommendation: Create a regional process for regional park planning

Racine County is best positioned to lead the planning of additional regional parks and public open space, in consultation with the municipalities. Racine County and SEWRPC could start the process by scheduling and funding an update of the countywide Park and Open Space Plan to reflect anticipated population growth and increased demand for recreational opportunities.

As a subsequent step, this concept could be expanded to initiate the creation of a formal coordinating council consisting of appointees from each of the municipalities to augment county leadership. The council would be designed to provide a forum for a discussion of regional needs and the engagement of a broad cross-section of community voices. As will be discussed below, the council also could serve a coordinating function for regional recreation activities.

In its most basic form, the council would be charged with coordinating the planning of new park and recreation assets throughout the region. Whether it would be purely advisory or have more formal oversight authority is a decision that would need to be considered by local elected officials and perhaps even state lawmakers, as statutory changes likely would be required to create a regional council with more direct decision-making capabilities.

In addition, the new council could initiate procedures for sharing the cost of developing and maintaining new assets. Our conversations with municipal leaders indicate that they are willing to play a supportive role in the development of regional assets, including possible involvement in financing, but will need the coordination and leadership that only the county can provide.

From SWRPC 2018 Park & Open Space Plan for City of Racine
Recreational Program Consolidation and/or Coordination

While we did not attempt to develop a census of youth sports programs in the study region, our incomplete list is lengthy:

- City of Racine Youth Sports: https://www.cityofracine.org/ParksRec/YouthSports/
- Mount Pleasant Recreation: https://www.mtpleasantwi.gov/253/Parks-Rec
- Sturtevant Youth Baseball Association: https://tshq.bluesombrero.com/sybaall
- Caledonia Little League: http://caledonialittleleague.com/
- Racine Youth Sports: https://www.racineyouthsports.com/
- Racine Area Soccer: https://www.racinesoccer.com/
- Rebel Youth Football: https://www.rebelyouthfootball.com/
- Racine Family YMCA: https://ymcaracine.org/

Given the varied nature of existing programs, is there scope for consolidation? As the financial table shown earlier in this report demonstrates, the comprehensive City of Racine programs are costly. These programs are staffed largely by full-time, permanent employees.

By contrast, the voluntary groups rely heavily on parents and adult volunteers for team management, coaching, and scheduling. That this volunteer model is dominant in the more affluent suburbs is unsurprising—the time required for this kind of volunteer activity relies on a deep well of “social capital.” Less endowed with social capital, the City of Racine has to fill the gap.

This fragmented delivery system is far from ideal, however. Consider the challenge confronted by a young family moving to the county for a job at Foxconn: What recreational opportunities are available both for youth and adults? How would a new resident identify these opportunities and take advantage of them?

A second problem of fragmentation confronts these disparate organizations, both public and private. All have similar challenges, including difficulties recruiting and retaining umpires and referees, providing appropriate background checks and guidance for coaches, implementing efficient registration systems, and finding appropriate administrative capacity. These problems are exacerbated by the regular turnover of engaged parents.

A regional recreation council or authority could benefit both public and private recreational entities by coordinating problem-solving with regard to the following:

- What options exist for improved registration systems? Our online world demands access to information, including registration, through the participant or parent’s laptop or smartphone. These can be complex to set up and manage.
How can a service provider, particularly a new one:

- Gain access to sufficient trained coaches and referees?
- Secure equipment at good prices?
- Find sponsors for uniforms and equipment?

How are service gaps, either by geography, season, or sport, identified and filled?

Recommendation: Establish a central information (and possibly registration) site for county recreation services

Although a higher level of coordination is desirable and may be achievable (as discussed below), the first step can be the creation of a common “landing page” for county recreational services. For example, Racine County could place a link on its home page that connects to a county-themed landing page with links to all youth sports opportunities. The landing page also could solicit citizen input on the need for new recreational opportunities and the quality of existing programs, and it could include a sign-up function for coaches, referees, and volunteers.
Program registration could be another feature of the recreation landing page or website. With the cooperation of the various organizations, this common information site would provide a service to the public by consolidating the various registration systems into one. This would take time, however, as the individual coordinators would have to be confident that the system would be reliable and would treat their organization fairly. It would also require resources for registration site development and maintenance, which might be assumed by the county in light of its growing role in regional recreation, funded by donations from philanthropic or corporate entities, or both.

Role of Regional Coordination

Regional coordination and funding of recreational assets and recreational services already exists.

- Racine County owns and maintains a number of regional assets and has assumed a larger role in the development of Pritchard Park.
- Youth recreation programs welcome participation across the region.
- Through the wastewater agreement the Greater Racine villages already share in funding of the zoo, museum, and library.
- SEWRPC serves the region broadly and is actively involved in park and open space planning.
Nevertheless, while some increase in regional planning and coordination can occur without the creation of a new entity or in a phased fashion, (e.g. the creation of a recreation-services-focused landing page on the Racine County website), the issues and challenges described throughout this report require consideration of a more robust approach.

**Recommendation: Establish Greater Racine Park and Recreation Council**

The need for a regional vehicle for planning asset management and development is apparent and was described in the previous section. Moreover, the fragmentation of recreational services provision is quite significant, thus suggesting the need for a regional council that would play an oversight and coordinating role in both park development and the prevision of recreational services throughout the Greater Racine community.

The wastewater agreement among the villages and the City of Racine encompasses the library, zoo, and museum, acknowledging some communal obligation to maintain them. The proposed Council would also provide a forum for the discussion of these important assets and should be included in its mandate.

**What would the Council do?**

Such a council—potentially with representation including both public and private stakeholders in parks and recreational planning and programming—could provide:

- a sounding board for potential changes in ownership and maintenance of the region’s recreational assets, particularly with regard to those assets deemed “regional” in nature;
- a forum for exploring ways to jointly fund new and existing assets (again with an emphasis on those deemed “regional”);
- a clearinghouse for practical information on developing and managing recreational programs;
- a place to develop, maintain, and house the joint information and registration website described above as well as joint efforts to recruit, train, and retain volunteer coaches, umpires/referees, and staff; and
- periodic events/workshops that bring service providers together with program managers.
Do models exist outside Wisconsin?

There is tremendous variety nationally for park and recreation oversight. Park “districts” vary in their scope and authority, although districts that span county boundaries are rare. We surmise that the preference for local control is quite powerful as these facilities and programs touch a large proportion of a community’s residents.

Two examples bear mentioning, however.

**Centre Region Parks & Recreation Authority (Pennsylvania)**

Many states have authorized a “movable feast” of intergovernmental cooperation under the “council of governments” rubric. The Centre Region Council of Governments in Pennsylvania (CRCOG) is a voluntary association of State College Borough and the townships of College, Ferguson, Halfmoon, Harris, and Patton.*

Centre Region Parks and Recreation (CRPR) actually pre-dates CRCOG, however, having been established in 1928 under the control of the region’s school district. In 1968 CRCOG relieved the school district of any financial and management responsibility and designated CRPR as the official municipal recreation and park agency for all five municipalities.

As described by the Authority:†

*Each municipality acquires and develops their park sites; maintenance and programs are then provided by CRPR. CRPR currently maintains park sites totaling 930 acres at 56 sites, and provides the region’s 90,000 residents with special events and programs in parks, school district facilities, and other sites. Seven facilities, however, are capitalized and operated by the Centre Region Parks and Recreation Board / Centre Region Parks and Recreation Authority (CRPRA) on a regional basis with prorated contributions from the five participating municipalities.*

**Baltimore County Recreation and Parks Board (Maryland)**

In a more traditional model, Baltimore County created a Recreation and Parks Board to support “39 volunteer recreation and parks councils and five agriculture, nature and special facilities councils to sponsor a wide range of leisure programs, activities and special events throughout the County.”‡

Some of these councils are multipurpose entities with a narrow geographic focus like the Cockeysville Recreation Council, which organizes and promotes recreation activities for groups of individuals in the Cockeysville, Maryland area. As noted by the Council: “We are a part of the Baltimore County Division of Recreation and Parks in the State of Maryland. The activities that we coordinate range from dance for 5 year olds to Seniors tennis, from gardening to youth football.”§

---

* See [https://www.crcog.net/](https://www.crcog.net/)
† See [https://www.crpr.org/about-crpr/pages/crpr-facts](https://www.crpr.org/about-crpr/pages/crpr-facts)
‡ See [https://www.baltimorecountymd.gov/Agencies/recreation/programdivision/index.html](https://www.baltimorecountymd.gov/Agencies/recreation/programdivision/index.html)
§ See [https://leagueathletics.com/?org=COCKEYSVILLERECCOUNCIL.ORG](https://leagueathletics.com/?org=COCKEYSVILLERECCOUNCIL.ORG)
Other councils are countywide and meet very specific interests. Examples include the Baltimore County Skateboard Council, the Baltimore County Sailing Council and the Lake Roland Nature Council.

Focus on meeting needs; grow organically.

As noted above, more coordination can begin without creating a new entity. Racine County could begin the process by creating the regional recreation website on its larger website with input and participation from the municipalities. Out of that effort could grow the formation of a more formal council. Similarly, an initial effort geared toward coordinated recreational planning and administration could grow into a larger effort to coordinate regional park and recreation asset development, maintenance, and financing.

Ambitious plans can either derail or delay practical improvements. By starting small and focusing on immediate needs, the effort to improve regional collaboration and oversight of park and recreation services may be more likely to succeed.
CONCLUSION

The provision of public services evolves as communities change and as the willingness and ability of residents to jointly fund public services responds to social norms and cultural expectations. The overlay of separate municipal jurisdictions and the preferences and financial capacity of each community creates a structure that works for some and not for others.

Finding the right balance of finance and control is challenging. This study explores the provision of park and recreation services in Greater Racine. Although this analysis became more relevant due to expected population and workforce growth related to Foxconn and other hoped-for development, the issue is not new.

It is tempting to ask, “How would we design park and recreation service delivery if we were to start over?” and attempt to create what answer emerges. Yet political realities and established municipal jurisdictions often make that impossible and, some might argue, undesirable. Local control over park and recreation services has strong support.

Nor is centralization necessarily more cost-effective. As noted above, recreation services often benefit from major investments of volunteer labor and management. Replacing volunteers with paid staff can be enormously expensive. Moreover, maintenance of parks does not always benefit from economies of scale. The diversity of approach observed in Greater Racine reflects different municipal capacities and needs.

Yet better coordination is clearly desirable. Without forcing a controversial change in ownership and control, a voluntary association spurred by Racine County leadership could improve the coordination of service delivery and identify new services and approaches to serving the residents. The Greater Racine Parks and Recreation Council, once established, could evolve to better serve the needs of current and future residents.