

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: August 14, 2026

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Guy Smith, Executive Director of Milwaukee County Parks

Subject: Milwaukee County Parks Trails Network Plan Update

File Type: Action

REQUEST

Authorization to adopt the 2026 Trails Network Plan Update as an addendum to the Parks 2050 Long-Range Plan.

POLICY

State grant eligibility is dependent on application(s) consistency with local planning.

Wisconsin State Statutes:	NR 51.904(4)
Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	
Specific Adopted Budget:	
Specific Adopted Budget Amendment:	
Specific Adopted Capital Project:	

BACKGROUND

Milwaukee County's last Trails Network Plan was adopted in 2007 and has been widely implemented. Since the plan's last adoption, 9 out of the 19 recommended multi-use trails have been built, are under construction, or are currently funded by various agencies. With many of the recommendations implemented, a new effort was planned to reevaluate trail priorities to ensure future planning aligns with Milwaukee County Parks' strategic goals.

To better connect the existing multi-use trail system in the County and southeast Wisconsin region and address underserved areas of the county, project WP0813 Milwaukee County Parks Trails Network Plan was initiated through file #21-1044. The project scope included evaluating existing and planned paved and soft surface trails, identifying available corridors for separated trail facilities and gaps in the trail network, and developing recommendations for trail improvements for Milwaukee County Parks system over a projected 20-year timeframe.

Milwaukee County Parks owns and maintains the Oak Leaf Trail, which is the largest trail system in Wisconsin with over 135 miles and 1.5 million annual trips. Parks also maintains soft surface hiking trails throughout the system.

The update to the Trails Network Plan began with an inventory of existing trails in the system including the Oak Leaf Trail, Forked Aster hiking trails, and mountain bike trails. Building on past planning efforts, the plan update evaluates how the trail network functions today, identifies critical gaps, and reflects how residents would like the system to evolve.

The plan identified the following design objectives for the trail system:

- Provide a connected trail system
- Be accessible for all users, including ADA accessibility
- Be comfortable and safe for all trail users
- Provide a clear, distinct trail route and accommodation

Public input was gathered through three rounds of engagement from August through December 2025. Outreach included online surveys, in-person public meetings, coordination with municipal partners, and ongoing collaboration with the Community Advisory Group. The project team also participated in community events throughout the county to engage residents in their neighborhoods and gather additional feedback on trail use. Overall, the engagement process resulted in 1,292 online survey submissions, participation from 163 attendees at public meetings, and more than 300 comments on an interactive mapping tool.

Engagement feedback indicated that the most important priorities for the plan are increasing connectivity and access, maintaining the existing trails and facilities, and expanding soft trails and support facilities. To better understand barriers to access and use, the project team developed a non-user trail survey. Lack of information was identified as the biggest barrier that prevented the non-users from using the trail system.

One of the major objectives of the plan is to reduce disparities in trail access. During the data analysis phase, the project team identified significant gaps in the existing network. Addressing these gaps would substantially increase the number of residents living within walking or biking distance of a trail. Many of the identified gaps occur in areas with limited parkland or public property available for separated, paved multi-use trail development. While the plan identifies opportunities on County property where feasible, completing the network will require continued collaboration with local municipalities to provide a connected and accessible trail system throughout Milwaukee County.

Plan Recommendations

The Trails Network Plan includes recommendations to improve connectivity, expand access, enhance user safety, and guide future investment in the county's trail system. The recommendations are organized into three primary categories:

Oak Leaf Trail Facility Recommendations:

- Add separated multi-use trails for existing gaps in the network
- Widen trails in areas of high use or where existing trails do not meet the 10-foot width minimum
- Narrow roadway and add a separated path or convert from parkway to trail for segments of the trail that is routed on parkways
- Add shared-use side paths where feasible for existing connections routed on-street

Soft Surface Trail Recommendations:

- Complete a comprehensive trail inventory
- Prioritize new soft surface hiking trail opportunities in high equity parks and those connected with the existing trail system including the Milwaukee River Area, Kinnickinnic River Area and South Shore Area
- Explore funding for additional staff for trails maintenance
- Increase trail access and use with additional signage and public outreach
- Prioritize new mountain bike trails in the Milwaukee River Area, Menomonee River Area and Kinnickinnic River Area
- Establish a team and vision to define a long-term sustainable vision for water trails

Crossings & Other Design Standards:

- Improve safety at high priority trail crossings
- Continue implementation of the Oak Leaf Trail Signage Strategy
- Consider a design-based approach to improve safety and manage speed for bikes, e-bikes, and e-scooters through speed calming elements, wider trail cross-sections, centerline striping, separation of users
- Implement policy and management tools such as educational resources, geo-coded speed limiting technology, regulatory measures, and partnerships to create a safe and welcoming trail system

Implementation Priorities

The plan categorizes implementation projects into high, medium, and lower priority tiers based on their ability to improve connectivity, enhance the user experience, and advance the overall trail network.

High priority projects provide essential connections within the regional Oak Leaf Trail system. Completing these critical gaps will result in the greatest improvements to overall connectivity and benefit the largest number of users.

Medium priority projects enhance the trail network by improving the user experience and expanding separated trail facilities.

Lower priority projects improve connections to the regional network but may require coordination with local municipalities. These opportunities should be pursued as funding and partnerships become available.

Milwaukee County Parks intends to use the recommendations in this plan as guidance for future planning decisions, including capital requests, capital outlay documents, operating budgets, and pursuit of grants and other funding opportunities. Each related budget request or resulting project will include additional approvals, public input opportunities, and phased timelines based on the needs and obligations of Milwaukee County Parks.

Related File No's:	Milwaukee County - File #: 21-1044 ; Milwaukee County - File #: 22-386
Associated File No's (Including Transfer Packets):	
Previous Action Date(s):	

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the [strategic plan](#):

2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity

2C: Apply a racial equity lens to all decisions

3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities

FISCAL EFFECT

This request was previously budgeted for. The recommendations in this planning document will be executed through future capital budget initiatives.

TERMS

N/A

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

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PREPARED BY:

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Pa Phouala Vang, Long-range Planner, Milwaukee County Parks

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APPROVED BY:

Guy Smith, Executive Director Milwaukee County Parks



ATTACHMENTS:

Resolution

Fiscal Note

CC: David Crowley, County Executive
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive's Office
Sheldon Wasserman, Committee on Parks & Culture Chairperson
Anne O'Connor, Committee on Parks & Culture Vice Chairperson
Priscilla Coggs-Jones, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Jack Eckblad, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Felesia Martin, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Juan Miguel Martinez, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Steve Taylor, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Mgr, Office of the County Clerk
Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services
Nick Sinram, Fiscal & Budget Director, DAS
Vince Masterson, Fiscal & Strategic Asset Coordinator, DAS
Pamela Bryant, Capital Finance Manager, Comptroller's Office
Justin Rodriguez, Capital Finance Analyst, Comptroller's Office
Allyson R. Smith, Committee Coordinator, Office of the County Clerk
Anthony Rux, Budget & Management Analyst, DAS-PSB
Sandy Saltzstein, Research and Policy Analyst