



## ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

### Introduction & Background

The Rockford Region has an array of diverse rivers, lakes, and waterways – offering an abundance of recreational opportunities as well as natural resources that add value to our city. The region's four main rivers, the Rock River, Pecatonica River, Kishwaukee River and Sugar River, provide a wealth of resources that helped to foster rapid development throughout the 20th century. The region's largest river, the Rock River, flows for 163 miles in Illinois with a total length of about 318 miles and has a total area of 10,915 square miles. The Rock River originates in the Horicon Marsh in Dodge County, Wisconsin and flows in a generally southerly direction until it joins the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Illinois. The region's second largest river, the Pecatonica River, is 194 miles long. It originates in the hills of southwest Wisconsin and flows south and southeast until it receives the East Branch of the Pecatonica River, approximately eight miles north of the stateline. It then flows past Freeport, turns easterly, and receives the Sugar River near Shirland before joining the Rock River at Rockton, Illinois. Many of the region's municipalities have developed along these rivers, including Rockford. While there are many benefits provided by these rivers, whether as water resources or fertile agricultural land, they can also create a number of issues. Water quality is a public health concern and integral to human life, as it affects nutrition, overall health, and sanitation. Seasonal flooding has also caused issues along the Rock River over the years.

Flooding and pollution from agriculture, industrial, and stormwater runoff, have the greatest impact on the region's water resources. The Rockford region has been

experiencing more severe weather events in recent years with the most notable examples including periods of extreme flooding, prolonged periods of drought, intense thunderstorms, tornados, and higher heat indices. The impacts of these events have resulted in costly damage to personal property and public infrastructure, lost lives, and intensified strain on resources. Continued development in natural areas can lead to further and longer-term impacts from these events. Smart planning and management of water resources is key to the city's, and regions, overall resilience.



## Water Resources & Their Importance

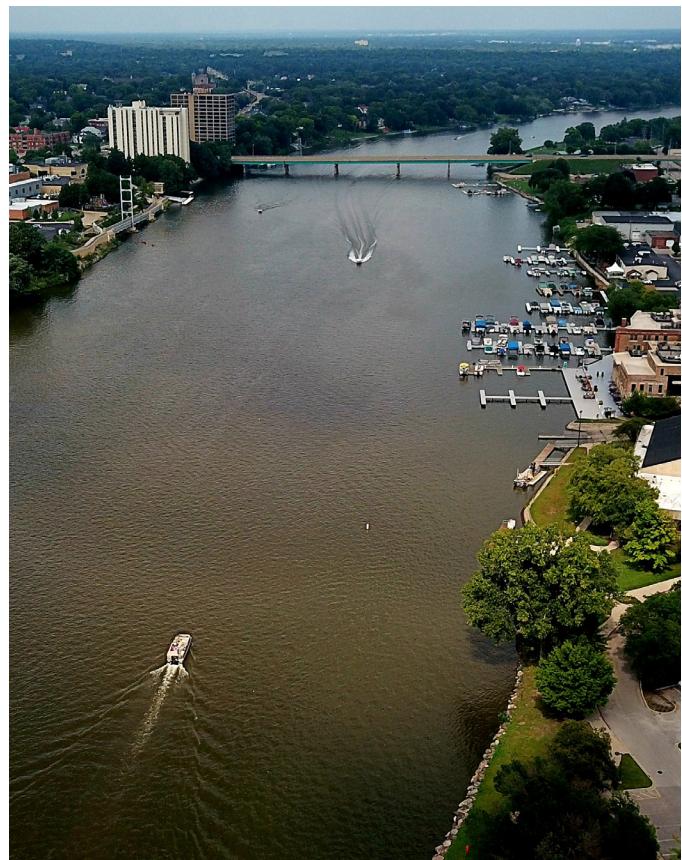
Water is one of the most essential resources on earth since it supports life, and the needs of both humans and the natural environment. Water shortages are continuing to increase in many regions, leaving people without access to adequate drinking water. According to the Illinois State Water Survey, demand for water in Illinois is likely to increase by up to 50 percent in the coming decades, with many water shortages resulting from drought, increased agriculture irrigation, and a lack of water supply planning.<sup>i</sup> While Illinois and the Rockford region is currently abundant in water resources with miles of streams, rivers, freshwater lakes, ponds and underground aquifers, the continued availability and quality of the water is pertinent to the success of the region. Because water does not care about political boundaries, planning for the protection of current and future water resources must begin locally, but requires regional planning efforts to be successful.

### Lakes

The City of Rockford predominantly contains rivers, ponds, and wetlands as far as water features go. There is only one publicly accessible lake within the city. Levings Lake is located on the west side of the city within Levings Park, which is operated by the Rockford Park District. Levings Park hosts the Sounds of Summer's Live at Levings Lake Talent Show, and concerts in June, July, and August each year.<sup>ii</sup> It is also home to the West Rock Wake Park, a premiere water sports experience where new or experience wake boarders of all ages can try the cable park facility located on Levings Lake. Water skiing is also available. Plans are currently underway to add additional amenities, as the wake boarding park has grown over the years and attracts visitors from all over.<sup>iii</sup>

### Rivers and Creeks

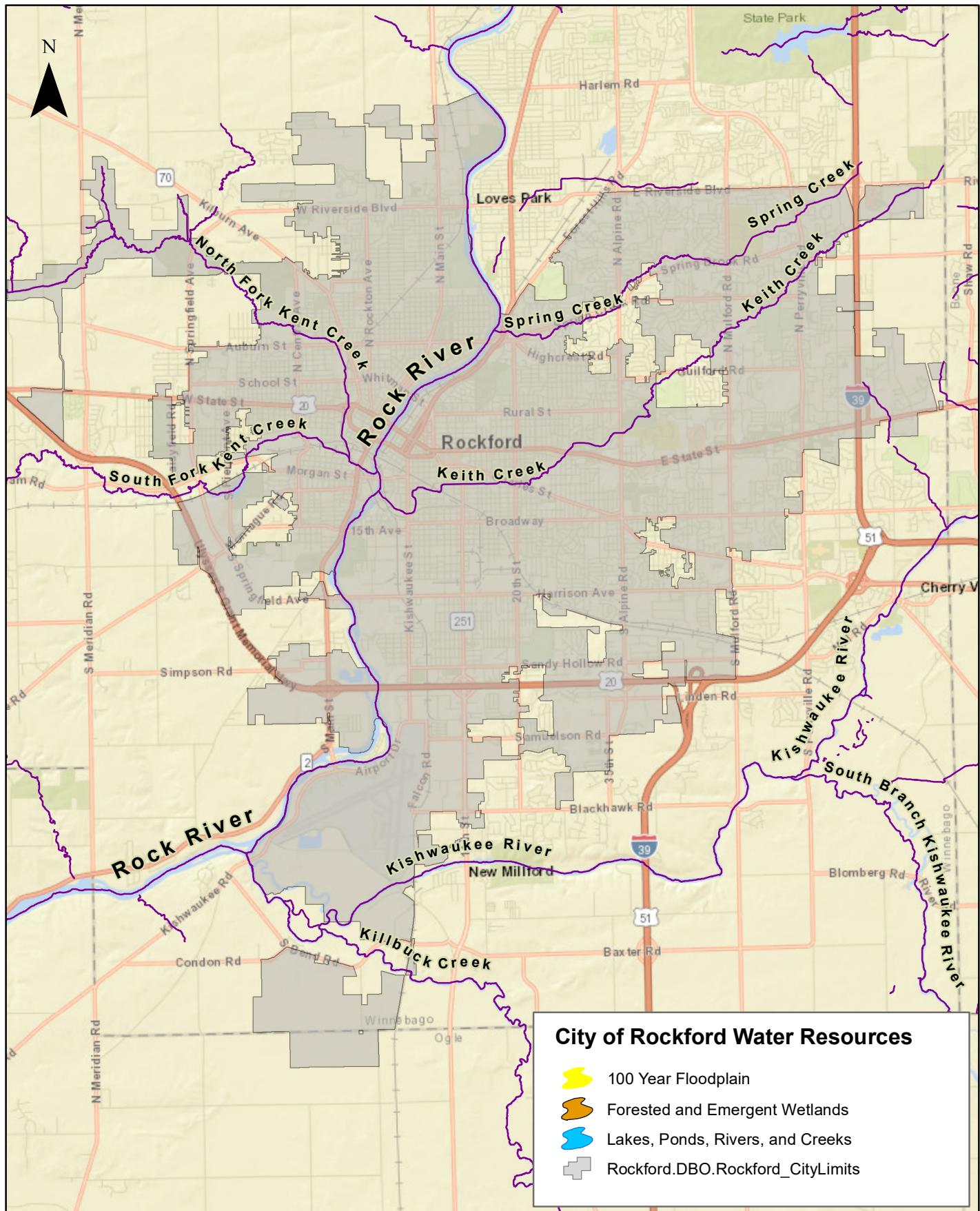
The Rockford region contains many high quality rivers and streams that are important to the overall health of the area. These major rivers, along with their tributaries, offer freshwater environments that are highly valued as natural and recreational assets. The Rock River is the largest of the rivers and flows near historic buildings, residential homes and parks, as well as separating the east and west sides of the City of Rockford. The Sugar and Kishwaukee Rivers are biologically significant streams with rich fish and mussel populations. Kinnikinnick, Beaver, Coon, Raccoon, Mosquito, Piscasaw, and Kilbuck Creeks are tributaries of the four main rivers and provide habitat for a diversity of species of plant and animal life, including healthy populations of mussels and cold-water species, like the Mottled Sculpin.<sup>iv</sup> Additionally, Keith Creek and Kent Creek flow



Rock River - Whiteman Street Bridge



Rock River - Chestnut Street Bridge



into areas of downtown Rockford and provide both habitat for wildlife, as well as recreational opportunities and even stormwater management in the way of water conveyance from runoff.

### Wetlands

The 100-year floodplains of the rivers and tributaries in the area are important to regional biodiversity. The wetlands formed on these floodplains, as well as the land adjacent to these riparian zones, contain some of the most ecologically rich habitats. The protection of these areas is crucial to sustaining a thriving and diverse community of species and plants. Riparian zones can help reduce erosion, protect against environmental stressors and disturbances, such as flooding, and are key nesting and feeding grounds for endangered or threatened species. Within the City of Rockford, the 100-year floodplain encompasses 4,352 acres of land, while wetlands make up 1,647 acres.

City of Rockford Water Resources	
	Acres
Wetlands	1,647
Riverine	502
Freshwater Pond	51
Lake	367
Freshwater Emergent Wetland	302
Freshwater Forested/Shrub Wetland	424
100 Yr Floodplain	4,352

*Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*

### Stormwater Management

Stormwater runoff occurs when precipitation from rain or snowmelt flows over land and is not able to infiltrate the surface material quick enough, and ends up as runoff. The addition of roads, driveways, parking lots, rooftops, and other surfaces that prevent water from infiltrating into the ground greatly increases the runoff volume created during storms. This runoff is swiftly carried to local streams, lakes, wetlands, and rivers; it can cause flooding, erosion, and wash away important habitat for flora and fauna that live in and around waterways. Stormwater runoff also picks up and carries with it many different pollutants that are found on paved surfaces, such as sediment, nitrogen, phosphorus, bacteria, oil and grease, trash, pesticides, and metals. It comes as no surprise then that stormwater runoff is the number one cause of stream impairment in urban areas, and Rockford is no different.<sup>v</sup>

To reduce the impacts of runoff on urban streams, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) expanded the Clean Water Act in 1987 to require municipalities to obtain permits for discharges of stormwater runoff. As a



Keith Creek Drainageway

result, many communities have adopted regulations requiring developers to install stormwater management practices that reduce the rate and/or volume and remove pollutants from runoff generated on their development sites.

Even with local regulations in place, flooding represents a substantial issue in the region. Many areas upstream are urbanized, resulting in fewer places for water to infiltrate the surface. With large weather events or downpours, significant flooding may occur which puts a strain on the region's transportation infrastructure; local, state, and federal budgets; and the region's economy. Rockford is impacted by three kinds of flooding: flash flooding, river flooding, and stormwater flooding. Flooding can be intensified by land use development and transportation infrastructure, especially when development occurs in identified floodplains. Early development in floodplains was common due to inexpensive, plentiful land, and a need at that time for municipalities to be located near major waterways. Urban developments are resource intensive, and repetitive damage from flooding events and subsequent reconstruction cycles that accompany these events is costly.<sup>vi</sup>

Stormwater flooding is more likely to occur in heavily urbanized areas because of the distance water has to travel to

infiltrate a porous surface. For context, the City of Rockford has budgeted over \$3 million per year for stormwater maintenance, repair, and mitigation efforts. Flooding will continue to be an issue for the city over the next 30 years. Stormwater mitigation should continue to be incorporated into the city's future planning and programming efforts. Some efforts the city has made are: the incorporation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) best management practices, pro-active property acquisition and demolition, conversion of land located in floodplains into open space, and investment in capital projects that mitigate flooding in certain areas (such as daylighting, improved drains to major waterways, or detention ponds).

Although Rockford has enacted and enforces a flood detention ordinance, it is largely inadequate when dealing with macro stormwater management and water quality. Requiring each new development to provide for detention on a piecemeal basis does not adequately address the larger stormwater management needs for various basins. The Department of Public Works has specifically identified the northeast and southeast as areas where further stormwater management plans need to be developed to identify better stormwater management facility locations.

### **Additional Water Quality Concerns**

Due to Rockford's industrial past, both surface and groundwater in the region has a higher chance of contamination. While lead is not present in Rockford's groundwater or treated drinking water, buildings with water service lines made of lead may corrode, resulting in drinking water contamination. In order to minimize exposure to lead in water, the city of Rockford has an interactive lead service line identification map to help assist residents in identifying where these contaminated lines are located. In addition, the newly commenced Lead Service Line Replacement Program includes the replacement of identified lead service lines throughout the city.

In 2019, in order to support clean water, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) conducted a statewide investigation into the prevalence and occurrence of Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) in finished water. While the IEPA PFAS testing study did not find Rockford water to be above the established health-based screening levels, Illinois EPA testing determined that two PFAS were detected in the water system at very low levels. In response to these findings, the Rockford Water Division is working to monitor PFAS levels through quarterly well site sampling beginning in January 2021.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Greenways Planning**

Greenways planning in the Rockford region focuses on the interconnected, region-wide network of linear open spaces that provide many benefits to the residents of Northern Illinois. The vision for regional greenway plans throughout Illinois was first conceived during the Governor's Workshop on Greenways and Trails held in Springfield in May 1995, launched by then Governor Edgar and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR).<sup>viii</sup> The workshop lead to the creation of a program designed to encourage and facilitate comprehensive, cooperative, and coordinated planning to protect high priority greenways and, where appropriate, provide public access by developing trails, by coordinating with local jurisdictions.<sup>ix</sup> This grant program would provide financial assistance for the creation of regional greenways plans. Funded plans were required to explicitly consider bike trail projects; identify priority greenway and trail projects; include an action plan identifying sequential activities and responsible parties; and consider potential linkages to state sites and trails, greenway and trail initiatives of statewide significance, and priority greenways and trails in neighboring communities, counties, and metro areas.

### **Past Greenway Planning Efforts in the Region**

Sparked by the new grant opportunity, a group of local agency staff and community citizens convened to discuss the development of a greenways plan for the Rockford region. Participants considered: "Does the region need a greenways plan? Who would facilitate the plan? How would this plan be created? Once it was created, how would it be shared with the region?" The answer was a resounding yes; the region should have a greenways plan. The group successfully received funding from the IDNR to develop a greenways map and plan document and began a collaborative effort to identify existing trails, paths, and future linkages within the system.<sup>x</sup>

The purpose of the plan was to:

- Create a vision of a regional greenway network and provide a framework for coordinated greenway and trail preservation and development;
- Assist implementing and funding agencies in allocating resources in support of the plan;
- Initiate a continuing forum for discussion and resolution of greenway issues among governmental jurisdictions and the private sector;

- Provide a basis for coordinating transportation, water quality, storm and flood water, and other programs with existing and proposed greenways to advance greenway preservation and reduce conflicts with other development activities; and

- Increase the level of understanding regarding the importance and value of greenways and encourage stewardship of natural and cultural resources.

After an extensive public engagement process, the finalized map was published in December of 1997.

A second edition of the map was produced in 2004 with funding assistance from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, the Rockford Area Transportation Study, and participating agencies. The second edition incorporated updated additions to the network and new inclusions in mapping criteria.

The third iteration of the Greenways Plan was completed in 2011. Primary development of the plan was brought under the responsibility of the Rockford Metropolitan Agency for Planning (RMAP), now Region 1 Planning Council, with assistance from the region's resource agencies, in order to better integrate transportation and environmental planning initiatives. The 2011 edition was the first time the map was developed in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), making the data shown on the map

available to partner agencies for analyses and visualization purposes. The initial GIS work and data from Winnebago County Geographic Information Systems (WINGIS) was provided by a consultant in Chicago.

In 2015, the Greenways Map was updated again and accompanied by a planning document that outlined a regional strategy to guide future greenways efforts. At this time the Greenways Map and Planning Document was developed completely in-house.

### Current Greenways Map and Plan

To continue the preservation of the region's rich natural heritage, a group of partner agencies and community organizations met to discuss an update to the greenway plan.

2021: A Greenways Plan for Boone, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties. The Greenways Working Group was comprised of representatives from each of the major environmental planning and advocacy groups in the region, as well as citizens with environmental and planning backgrounds.

Now in its fifth iteration, the 2021 Greenways Plan and Map works to promote a regional greenway network that protects natural and cultural resources, supports equal access to green space; provides alternative forms of transportation and recreational benefits; enhances environmental and scenic qualities; and stimulates sustainable, equitable economic development. This plan and map serve as a comprehensive regional planning tool that helps leverage and secure additional funds for government agencies, nonprofits, and others involved in transportation and land use planning, sustainability initiatives, natural areas preservation, and recreation. The goals of the current iteration of the Greenways Plan include:

- Protect the natural and cultural resources in the region for all;
- Provide recreational benefits for safe, convenient, and comfortable alternative transportation options;
- Enhance the environmental and scenic qualities of the greenways in a manner relevant to the community;
- Stimulate equitable economic development; and
- Increase education and awareness regarding the importance and value of greenways and encourage the stewardship of natural resources.

# 2021 Greenways:

A Greenways Plan for  
Boone, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties



Final Report  
April 2021

**R1** REGION 1 PLANNING COUNCIL

## Air Quality

Air quality in the region is an important environmental factor that can have both positive and negative effects on the quality of life. Air quality is measured nationally by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) through the Air Quality Index (AQI) Data Report and is supplemented by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA). The AQI is an annual summary of all pollutant data for a core-based statistical area (CBSA), such as the Rockford region. This is considered the best measure of air quality as it shows all criteria air pollutants in a given geographical area. These criteria pollutants include particulates such as carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide. According to the EPA, the transportation sector generated roughly 29 percent of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions nationally in 2020, followed closely by the electricity production sector at 25 percent, and industrial sector at 23 percent of GHG emissions.<sup>xi</sup> The burning of fossil fuels, such as petroleum, commonly used in transportation, accounts for the largest percentage of emissions the region faces. While electricity production also increases emissions, most of the Rockford region's energy comes from nuclear, which tends to be a cleaner option than its counterparts.

The Clean Air Act set national standards for air quality for pollutants that are identified as harmful to public health. The NAAQS provides primary standards (e.g. protection of public health), and secondary standards (e.g. protection of property and the environment) for different groups. Based on these standards, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) assigns two designations, attainment or non-attainment, to counties. Currently, Winnebago County, which includes Rockford, meets the EPA's standards and is classified as in attainment status. Attainment versus non-attainment statuses can greatly impact the permitting, construction, and operations of infrastructure projects, but does open the door for additional funding sources.<sup>xii</sup>

Data indicates that the Rockford Region continues to maintain a "good" air quality status across all of the pollutants tracked. Of the 365 days tracked in 2020, the region had 284 days with good air quality (77.6 percent), 81 days of moderate air quality (22.1 percent), and one day of unhealthy air quality for sensitive groups (0.3 percent). The figure below lists the air quality statistics for the past ten years.

Air Quality Index Report (2011-2021)											
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Days with AQI	363	366	363	342	362	354	354	362	341	366	55
Days Good	327	313	340	306	311	316	317	316	240	284	31
Days Moderate	35	47	23	34	50	35	37	43	100	81	24
Days Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups	1	6	-	2	1	3	-	2	1	1	-
Days Unhealthy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Days Very Unhealthy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
AQI Max	115	115	84	105	108	105	87	151	102	101	95
AQI 90th Percentile	50	61	48	51	54	51	51	54	61	61	75
AQI Median	32	33	31	34	35	34	35	35	42	39	47

Source: Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) - Air Quality Report 2011-2021

## Brownfields

A brownfield is a property or site complicated by the presence, or potential presence, of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.<sup>xiii</sup> Many of these properties are found within older areas of a city, such as downtown, and especially at former industrial sites. Brownfields exist in a number of forms: as abandoned industrial factories, gas stations, dry cleaners, landfills, and any other industrial or commercial sites where prior uses introduced contaminants into the environment. Alternatively, a greenfield is an undeveloped site free of hazardous waste, inexpensive, and unconstrained by urban infrastructure that can be developed more quickly, at lower upfront cost, and without the legal constraints of a brownfield or previously developed site.<sup>xiv</sup> Most greenfield development occurs on the outer edges of the city limits because this is generally where undeveloped sites are located. Financial costs, time constraints, and the legal burden of preparing a brownfield for development can deter investment. Meanwhile, developers are often more attracted to greenfields outside the urban core.<sup>xv</sup>

It is important for the city to address brownfields for a number of reasons including improving public health, the economy, and public safety. While brownfields lie idle, the sites have the potential to negatively impact public health by polluting local air and groundwater supplies which burdens local neighborhoods with health challenges. Living in proximity to abandoned and disinvested sites may also affect mental health and a sense of safety for community residents, and especially for children who may use these areas to play.

From an economic perspective, brownfields may deplete local tax bases, decrease surrounding property values, cause personal illness, sickness or disease and can attract illegal activities. A 2017 study concluded that cleaning up brownfield properties led to residential property value increases of 5-15.2 percent within 1.3 miles of the sites. Analyzing data near 48 of those brownfields, another study found an estimated \$29 to \$97 million in additional tax revenue for local governments for a single year after cleanup—two to seven times more than the \$12.4 million the EPA contributed to the cleanup of those brownfields. Initial anecdotal surveys also indicate a reduction in crime in recently revitalized brownfields areas. With brownfields disproportionately burdening marginalized, low-income, and high minority neighborhoods, it is important to redevelop them in a timely manner, to focus on beneficial and equitable reuse of sites, and to recognize the potential they hold for transforming communities and increasing community health.<sup>xvi</sup>

Revitalizing brownfield sites can also provide numerous environmental benefits to the community. In 2020, a study completed by the United States EPA looked at the environmental benefits that occur as a result of a brownfield site being redeveloped. The study also found that when housing and job growth is the focus of brownfield redevelopment projects, the expansion of paved/impervious surfaces, average vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita, and per job are reduced as compared to accommodating the same amount of growth on previously undeveloped sites.<sup>xvii</sup> This is partially due to the fact that brownfield sites are often located in the downtown corridors where infill development puts less strain on existing facilities and services due to their existence prior to construction.

Like most other former industrial cities, Rockford has a number of brownfield sites. For almost 20 years, the City of Rockford, its community stakeholders, and engaged constituents have worked closely together to assess and cleanup perceived and confirmed environmental hazards present at many valuable redevelopment sites in our com-

munity, especially in old industrial areas.<sup>xviii</sup>

A 2012 inventory identified approximately 970 brownfield properties within the City of Rockford. As of 2021, that number decreased to 854, covering around 780 acres of the city's land. The city recognizes that clean-up and redevelopment of these underutilized and potentially contaminated properties is a key component in fostering economic growth and improving blight. The city has been successful in applying for and using Federal and State Brownfields Grant Funds dating back to 2000, when the city was selected as one of the original EPA Brownfield Pilot Programs.

One step the city is taking is actively seeking interested parties to partner with on redeveloping city acquired brownfield properties. With a variety of local development incentives available and our ability to secure and leverage several state and federal funding sources, the city has established itself nationally as a model community in the brownfield redevelopment market.<sup>xix</sup>

A few successful brownfield redevelopment projects completed include:

- UW Health Sports Factory Campus (305 S Madison Street),
- Embassy Suites by Hilton Rockford Riverfront & Rockford Conference Center (416 S Main Street),
- Stanley J. Rozkowski United States Courthouse (327 S Church St),
- Save-A-Lot Grocery Store (1701 W State Street), and
- Former TAPCO Warehouse (222 Cedar Street).

Due to the city's extensive industrial heritage and proactive approach at brownfields revitalization, it is common for the City of Rockford to have several concurrent brownfields projects occurring at various stages.

Current active projects, include:

- Rockford Watch Factory Asbestos Abatement (325 S Madison Street),
- Lloyd's Hearing Building Contaminated Soil Removal (128 Kishwaukee Street),
- Southwest Rockford Revitalization Planning, and
- Community-Wide US EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant.

Some potential future brownfield redevelopment projects include:

- Former Rockford Watch Company Factory (325 S. Madison Street)
- Chick House Hotel (119 S Main Street)
- Historic Rockford Armory (605 Main Street)
- Historic Walgreen's/Trek Media Building
- South Main Rail Yards Parcels
- and Church School (1411 Blaisdell Street)

In July of 2023 Rockford City Council approved the Barber Colman redevelopment project with Milwaukee based developer J. Jeffers. This 26-acre former industrial site, located off South Main Street will be named Colmanards and is soon to be home to a mixed-use space of commercial and residential property at a scale and level of development that the region hasn't seen in a long time. A project of this scope and design could very well act as a catalyst that spurs additional economic growth resulting in an overall revitalization of this area of the city.



# Goals Objectives and Implementation Strategies

## ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

### Protect the groundwater supply and enhance drinking water quality

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Implement Source Water Protection Program (SWPP) that was recently updated in 2022	\$\$	Medium	High
Optimize existing, and add new, water treatment facilities as needed to meet future population demands, and meet required drinking water regulations, while continuing to treat water at the wellhead locations	\$\$\$	Medium	Medium
Continue to support and conduct annual water main flushing program	\$	Short	High
Continue to inspect industrial and commercial properties to reduce illicit discharges into the ground and streams	\$	Short	High
Continue residential backflow inspections yearly requirement for residential irrigation systems	\$	Short	Medium
Continue lead service replacement program	\$\$\$	Short	High

### Protect the aesthetic quality of waterways for recreational use

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Complete next phase of the Rock River waterfront pathway system filling in the existing gaps to create logical termini	\$\$\$\$	Medium	High
Evaluate water transportation services to connect Riverfront activity centers	\$	Long	Low
More docks at local businesses, city market dock, and more public docks downtown to attract visitors	\$\$	Short	High
Partner with private and non-profit organizations to implement pedestrian-friendly streetscapes connecting neighborhoods to local waterways	\$\$	Short	Medium
Improve access to waterways with ADA access	\$\$\$	Medium	High

### Maintain and enhance local watershed protection efforts

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Identify impaired or damaged wetland sites for restoration projects	\$\$\$	Medium	Low
Complete waterway planning for Kent and Keith Creeks. Keith Creek Greenways Study underway for recreation and water quality, 319 study	\$\$\$	Medium	Medium
Secure funding to follow through with implementation of Keith Creek Greenways Study	\$\$\$\$	Medium	Low

### Protect floodways and floodplains from unnecessary development

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Develop an inventory of best practices to support neighborhoods impacted by flood map changes	\$	Long	Low

Complete watershed studies and plans as needed	\$\$	Medium	Low
Continue to promote greenways map and planning document	\$	Short	Low
Continue locating city parcels for stormwater retention where flooding occurs after heavy rain events to reduce residential flooding issues	\$\$\$	Short	Medium
Zoning- Continue to enforce suitable building/development outside floodplain according to existing ordinances	\$	Medium	Medium

### Protect mature trees and maintain required landscaping

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Continue to evaluate street tree policy and responsibilities to encourage more tree-planting	\$\$	Short	Medium
Continue to record and track city trees in right-of-way (ROW) in GIS database that's regularly maintained	\$\$	Medium	Low
Continue to include tree planting as part of stormwater management	\$	Short	Medium
Evaluate tree protection ordinance	\$	Medium	Low
Continue to require, based on ordinance, landscape plans that meet existing minimum requirements as part of the review process, especially for parking lot design and roadway frontage design	\$	Short	High
Evaluation of landscaping and enforcement of requirement/ordinance as part of Strategic Review Team (SRT)	\$	Short	High
Continue partnering with public agencies, non-profit, and private sector entities to maintain and enhance the tree planting program with a variety of native species and locations	\$\$	Short	Medium

### Improve the convenience and ease of recycling

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Continue installing recycling receptacles in areas with high pedestrian use	\$	Short	Medium
Partner with the Rockford Public Schools to develop programming to maintain and expand awareness of recycling for grades K-12	\$	Long	Short

### Reduce the City's solid waste footprint

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Increase recycling within households, public, private, and non-profit sectors	\$	Long	Short
Incentivize city vendors to recycle, recover, and reuse materials	\$	Long	Short
Collaborate with regional partners to develop shared E-waste recycling program-Keep Northern Illinois Beautiful	\$\$	Medium	Medium
Continue collecting curbside yard waste and providing free local mulch at the city yard	\$\$	Short	High

**Continue to remediate brownfields that have a high potential for redevelopment if there were no environmental issues creating restrictions**

issues creating restrictions	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Continue to identify brownfields in locations that could see the benefit of the property being utilized again	\$	Short	Medium
Continue maintaining the brownfields inventory in GIS	\$\$	Medium	High
The reuse of a priority redevelopment site(s) will research the feasibility of including renewable energy from wind, solar, or geothermal energy in the remediation plans	\$\$	Medium	Medium
The reuse of a priority redevelopment site(s) will incorporate energy efficiency measures into the construction	\$\$\$	Medium	Medium
The project reuse strategy for a priority redevelopment site(s) will consider climate adaptation and/or mitigation measure	\$\$	Long	Medium
The city should continue to have a full time Brownfields Redevelopment Specialist on staff	\$\$	Short	High
Incorporate public access, paths, and docks along riverfront. Especially the Rock River Path to South Park and Morgan St. Bridge. Continue to fill in gaps along riverfront as brownfields are redeveloped.	\$\$\$	Short	High

## Chapter Endnotes

- i. <https://investigatemidwest.org/2017/06/20/uncharted-waters-illinois-water-use-issues-exacerbated-by-irrigation-lack-of-water-supply-planning/>
- ii. <https://rockfordparkdistrict.org/levings-park>
- iii. <https://westrockwakepark.com/about/>
- iv. Greenways: A green Infrastructure Plan for Boone and Winnebago Counties, 2015. [http://www.rmapil.org/assets/documents/greenways\\_document\\_2015.pdf](http://www.rmapil.org/assets/documents/greenways_document_2015.pdf)
- v. 2050 Metropolitan Transportation plan for the Rockford Region
- vi. 2050 Metropolitan Transportation plan for the Rockford Region
- vii. <https://www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/water-quality/pfas/Pages/default.aspx>
- viii. 2021 Greenways: A Green Infrastructure Plan for Boone, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties
- ix. 2021 Greenways: A Green Infrastructure Plan for Boone, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties
- x. 2021 Greenways: A Green Infrastructure Plan for Boone, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties
- xi. <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/sources-greenhouse-gas-emissions>
- xii. 2050 Metropolitan Transportation plan for the Rockford Region
- xiii. <https://rockfordil.gov/city-departments/community-and-economic-development/long-range-planning/brown-fields/>
- xiv. <https://mnbrownfields.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Benefits-of-Brownfield-Redevelopment-2019.pdf>
- xv. <https://mnbrownfields.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Benefits-of-Brownfield-Redevelopment-2019.pdf>
- xvi. <https://www.cclr.org/brownfields-healthfields-opportunities#:~:text=While%20brownfields%20lie%20idle%2C%20they,values%2C%20and%20attract%20illegal%20activity>
- xvii. <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfields-program-environmental-and-economic-benefits>
- xviii. <https://rockfordil.gov/city-departments/community-and-economic-development/long-range-planning/brown-fields/>
- xix. <https://rockfordil.gov/city-departments/community-and-economic-development/long-range-planning/brown-fields/>



## ARTS, CULTURE, & HISTORIC LANDMARKS

### Introduction & Background

Rockford has always been a culturally diverse city with a unique assortment of neighborhoods and historically significant properties, parks, art, and landmarks. Today Rockford continues to be home to a rich, robust and distinctive cultural environment, with a variety of art mediums, artists, nonprofit cultural organizations, farmers markets, street fairs and festivals, sports venues and arenas, theaters, amphitheaters, and more. The region's artistic, cultural, and historic assets continue to attract and entertain millions of people each year. Rockford's art and cultural resources are not only something to be proud about and to enjoy, but they also contribute significantly to the region's economy. While entertainment, art, cultural activities, and history are sometimes sidelined and seen as a nice "extra" they are necessary elements for making communities attractive and a vibrant places to spend time whether as a resident or visitor.

### Arts & Cultural Attractions

Arts and culture are key components for building community pride, supporting new development, nurturing health and well-being, and contributing to the diversity within a city. Arts and culture provide a better understanding of the city's past and how it will be remembered in the future. According to Americans for the Arts, public art can be a distinguishing part of a city's public history and showcase its evolving culture over time. Cities should be places where people want to live and visit, especially as a strong community identity is becoming increasingly more important in those decisions. The City of Rockford,

local businesses and non-profits, and the public strongly support public art and cultural attractions as a way to bring people together, create unity, and to beautify otherwise bland facades.

### Painted Murals

There is a strong recognition of the importance of public art in Rockford that can be seen in the growth of the city's collection of painted murals. As of 2022, there were 32 murals throughout the city as a result of several successful mural programs, including the CRE8IVE Art Festival, ArtsPlace, and the Audubon Mural Project.

The city gained a majority of its murals through the CRE8IV Transformational Arts Festival. The festival was created as part of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau's (RACVB) placemaking and beautification initiative. CRE8IV is a community-building, art infused event that was first held in 2019 and included nine large scale murals in downtown Rockford by eight artists. Each day of the festival was celebrated with a free block party at one of the mural locations. The festival was funded largely by a grant received from the Illinois Department of Commerce's Office of Tourism and a local match that was raised through personal investments, sponsorships, and donations. Since 2019, CRE8IV has added 20 more murals throughout the Rockford region and there is a goal to add five to seven additional murals each year.<sup>1</sup>



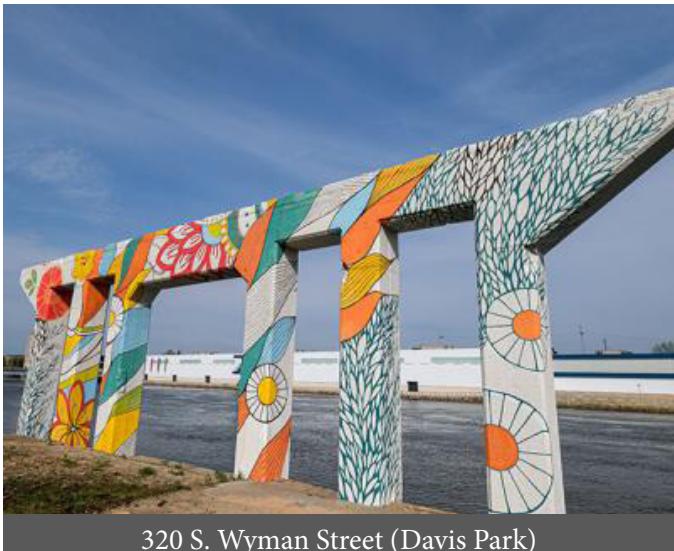
316 W. State Street (near Stewart Square)



401 E. State Street (in Wired Cafe Alley)

Another mural program within Rockford is the ArtsPlace Program, which was established by the Rockford Area Arts Council (RAAC) in 1969 with a mission to support, promote, and develop access to arts for everyone, particularly school age children.<sup>ii</sup> The ArtsPlace Program is an apprenticeship program for students ages 14 through 18.

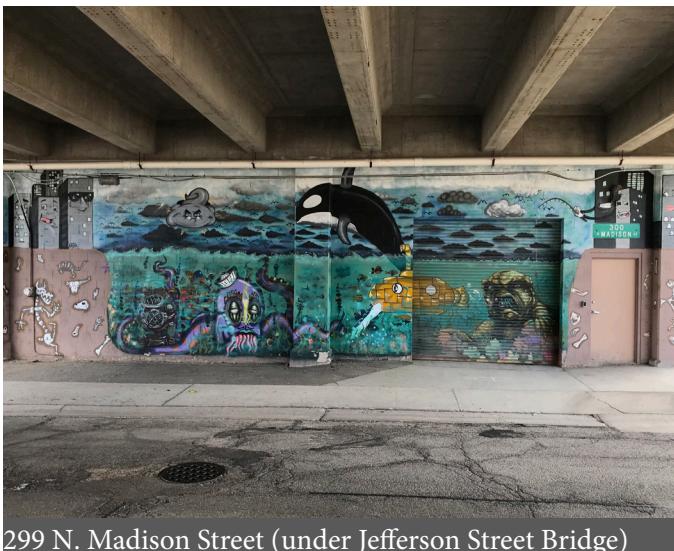
This program is responsible for two of the murals found under the Jefferson Street Bridge.



320 S. Wyman Street (Davis Park)



Jefferson Street Bridge Underpass & Market Street



299 N. Madison Street (under Jefferson Street Bridge)

Additionally, the Audubon Mural Project helped support the creation of three murals within Rockford, one of which was created as a part of the CRE8IV Transformational Arts Festival. The Audubon Mural Project was brought to Rockford by the Sinnissippi Audubon Society as a way to bring awareness to birds that were featured in the National Audubon's birds and climate change report.



Baltimore Oriole, Brett Whitcare (203 N. Church Street)



Yellow-headed Blackbird, by Therese Rowinski  
(317 Market Street)



Golden Crowned Kinglet, by Lincoln Middle School students (corner of 9th and State Streets)

## Sculptures

Rockford is also home to a variety of permanent and visiting sculptures of varying artistic styles and materials. Some of the city's most notable permanent sculptures are located along the Rock River Recreational Path. These sculptures are maintained by the Rockford Park District, in cooperation with the Rockford Art Museum and the Arts Council. Working together these agencies have created a Public Art Walking Tour along the Rock River Recreational Path that connects residents and visitors to the arts and the outdoors. The two-mile walking tour features 16 sculptures donated to the Rockford Park District and placed either along the path or within the Nicholas Conservatory & Garden grounds. Walking tours can be self-guided or as a part of a 1 ½ hour tour that leaves from the Nicholas Conservatory.<sup>iii</sup>



Symbol - designed by Alexander Liberman



Suspended Motion – designed by Gene Horvath



Rock Men Guardians – designed by Terese Agnew

Several temporary sculptures are also located throughout Rockford as a part of the CRE8IV festival. As of June 2021, 16 sculptures have been added or have replaced the initial CRE8IV sculptures. As a temporary display, these sculptures will be changed every few years as a part of future CRE8TIV Art Festivals as a way to introduce residents and visitors to new and interesting sculptures.



320 South Wyman Street in downtown Rockford

In an effort to bring people together during the COVID-19 Pandemic, RACVB created a permanent sculpture of four-foot-tall "ROCKFORD" letters in Davis Park. The installation was intended to be a backdrop for photos and other outdoor activities and a way to encourage city pride during uncertainty.

#### Museums and Learning Centers

The residents and visitors of Rockford also have access to numerous cultural attractions, such as museums and other learning centers. Museums are institutions created in the public interest to provide their visitors with an opportunity to expand their cultural or historic knowledge and promote diversity within society. Museums play a crucial role in preserving local culture, preserving artifacts, and remembering the past. Museums and public event centers also help to cultivate a respect and interest for different cultures and time periods, often bridging social gaps within a community.

Some of these institutions in Rockford are detailed below:

- **Discovery Center Museum:** Established in 1981, the Discovery Center is a beloved children's museum with more than 25 hands-on art and science exhibits, including a planetarium and TV studio. Additionally, the Discovery Center hosts special events, traveling exhibits and classes, as well as being home to the nation's first community built outdoor science park, which features a two-story maze, water play area, dinosaur fossil dig pit, and a secret garden.

- **Burpee Museum of Natural History:** This natural history

museum has a long history in the city's center and now has four floors with eight permanent exhibits, a space for temporary exhibits, and meeting rooms that can be used for private rentals. Permanent exhibits at the museum include the Windows to Wilderness, which focuses on the nature of the Rock River Valley, Woolly Mammoth skeletal cast, Pennsylvanian coal forest with simulated thunderstorms, Native American exhibit with full-sized dwellings, geoscience, and a viewing lab where visitors can watch Burpee Museum staff work on specimens from the museum's collections and recent dinosaur discoveries to contribute to their two dinosaur exhibits. The Burpee Museum is also the location of the first rooftop garden in Rockford.

- Rockford Art Museum: The Rockford Art Museum is housed adjacent to the Rockford Discovery Center and consists of three galleries over two floors. The art museum has more than 1,900 works that range from modern and contemporary art, photography, outsider art, contemporary glass, and regional art from Illinois artists.

- Veterans Memorial Hall and Museum: As the first of its kind, and dedicated by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903, Veterans Memorial Hall is a dedication to local veterans of all wars. The museum preserves, displays, and shares the artifacts of Rockford and Winnebago County veterans who served in all branches of the military.

- Midway Village Museum: is an award-winning living history museum which provides visitors an immersive experience of a Victorian village situated on 13-acres and consists of 26 historical buildings that are filled with artifacts from the 19th century. In addition to the open-air museum, in their main museum center visitors can engage and explore Rockford's history through interactive exhibits in the more than 20,000 square feet of gallery spaces.

- Erlander Home Museum: The Erlander Home Museum is a cultural museum for Rockford's Swedish ancestry community in the historic Haight Village of Rockford. The museum is located within the home of John Erlander, built for his family in 1871. Collections at the museum include Rockford-made furniture and many artifacts recalling Swedish immigration to Northern Illinois and Rockford's Swedish heritage.

- Ethic Heritage Museum: The Rockford region was shaped by six nationalities, which are represented in this museum. The house, built in 1850, features a room for each ethnic group it represents: African American, Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Hispanic.



Erlander Home Museum, Built in 1871

- Beyer Stadium: This stadium was home to the Rockford Peaches, the All-American Professional Girls Baseball League team, from 1943 to 1954. The stadium has since been restored to include re-created original scoreboards, vintage backstop, and a new baseball diamond. Following the renovation, the stadium lives out its legacy as home of Rockford's woman's baseball team, The Starfires.



Rockford Peaches Women's Baseball Team

- Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum and Gardens: This historic house museum is located near downtown Rockford, overlooking Kent Creek. The museum complex contains the historic house museum, barn, and carriage house built for the Tinker family in 1865. The property is the home of the founding site of Rockford and contains a Pre-Columbian Native American conical mound.

## Historic Preservation

Rockford has a rich history that is preserved in historic sites and buildings throughout the city. Rockford wishes to showcase, preserve, and utilize assets for years to come. The city has established the Rockford Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) which provides proactive and practical guidance in order to preserve structures and neighborhoods that have historic significance. The HPC is a Certified Local Government (CLG) by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) which authorizes the

HPC to maintain and enforce guidelines regarding changes made to properties that are either locally designated landmarks or are a part of a locally designated historic district.

The city recognizes that historic preservation, like anything else, does not exist in a vacuum. Just as historic sites must be evaluated within the context of their surroundings and their history, they must also be viewed within the wider context of preservation of the community as a whole. However, this wider context needs to be evaluated very carefully and should not be used as a means of getting rid of something simply because it's old, beat up, and nobody seems to want it at the moment. When deciding whether or not to preserve something, we need to bear in mind that once a building or site has been destroyed, it's gone forever; there is no going back.

Historic preservation is important not only in retaining the physical evidence of the history and individual character of Rockford, but also as a tool in maintaining the viability of older neighborhoods. When looking at the historic districts around Rockford in comparison to similar nearby neighborhoods (both neighborhoods having homes similar in size and similar zoning), the value of these districts is clear. According to Winnebago County Assessor data, in 2019 the average assessed value of homes outside of a historic district was \$28,021.61, while the average assessed value of homes within a historic district was \$30,000.72, a difference of 4.5 percent. Similarly, fair market values show that homes outside of historic districts have a lower average fair market value of \$84,190 compared to homes within a historic district, which have an average fair market value of \$90,020.

As of January 2018, Rockford had designated the following six areas as local historic districts:

- Haight Village: Area bounded by South Madison, Walnut and Kishwaukee Streets and the Union Pacific Railroad to the south.
- Garfield Avenue: 600 through 900 blocks of Garfield Avenue.
- Indian Terrace: Indian Terrace south of the Armory, and including Beattie Park.
- Brown's Hills/Knightsville: This is most of the area lying between North Second Street on the west, Sinnissippi Park/Golf Course on the north, the Scandinavian Cemetery (Prospect Street) on the east and Rural Street on the

south, plus the four houses just north of the YMCA on the west side of North Second Street.

- Northeast State & Main: 201, 203 and 211 West State Street, plus 107 and 109 North Main Street.

- Peacock Brewery: 200 Prairie Street plus Brewmaster's House (stone house) at Northwest corner of Prairie and Madison Streets.

In addition, six districts have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These are:

- East Rockford: East State Street from the Rock River up to and including the Faust Landmark, north to Market Street and south to Walnut Street.

- Haight Village: Generally, the same area as the local district described plus the Watch Factory on the west side of Madison Street.

- 7th Street Commercial: Generally, properties fronting on 7th Street from Charles Street to Keith Creek.

- Barber-Colman Company: All 11 structures remaining on the Barber Colman site on Rock Street.

- West Downtown Rockford: Generally, follows an irregular boundary from Park Avenue north as far south as Elm Street, and from the alley west of Church Street east to Wyman Street.

- Garrison-Coronado-Haskell: Roughly bounded by Salem and Summer Streets on the north, Main and Court Streets on the east, Whitman and Fisher on the south and Ridge and North Avenue on the west.

## Important Historical Structures

Additionally, Rockford has 25 properties listed on the U.S. National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places, including; Valencia Court Apartments, Veterans Memorial Hall, the Brown Building, Lake-Peterson House, and Rockford Woman's Club; and 28 locally designated landmarks.<sup>iv</sup>

Locally designated landmarks include:

- Freeman School: Built in 1893, it is an example of the Romanesque revival style and was the second school building to be constructed on this site.

- Erlander Home: Built in 1871, the home served as the residence of John Erlander, one of Rockford's earliest settlers and business/civic leader. Since 1952, the home served as a museum for Swedish artifacts and early Rockford made furniture and historical records. It is located within the Haight Village.
- 7th Street Passenger Depot: The passenger depot was built in 1911. The depot is one of two older remaining train depots in Rockford and the only passenger depot. It is the last restorable Chicago and Northwestern Depot in the Kenosha District (northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin).
- Beyer Stadium Gatehouse: Located one mile from downtown, the Beyer Stadium was the home of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League team, the Rockford Peaches, from 1943 to 1954.
- Herrick-Logli Cobblestone House: Built in 1847 in a Greek revival style, it is one of the oldest surviving buildings in Rockford and one of the few surviving cobblestone houses left in Illinois.
- Lincoln Middle School: Opened in 1926.
- East High School: Built at the same time as West High School and is a WPA (Works Project Administration) Project. The school is considered an excellent example of Art Modern architecture and focal point for the community from its beginning.
- Anderson Building: Built in 1867, the building is mid-19th century Italianate style. In 1970, the building was restored as close to its original design and character which served for a time, the nationally famous Rockford enterprise, Connie's Flowers & Dress Shop. The building also served as offices of Anderson Consolidated Industries Inc. for almost 20 years.
- Garrison School: Built in 1887, the school is a prime example of a late Victorian elementary school through its Romanesque facade and Queen Anne details. It is the oldest standing elementary school in Rockford and has since been transformed into loft-style apartments.
- Winnebago County Courthouse Annex/Jail: Built in 1916-1917 as an annex to the 1876 Winnebago County Courthouse. The building originally was home to the county offices on the first three floors and the jail on the fourth floor.
- Elks Club Building: A contemporary of Frank Lloyd Wright, were the architects of the prairie-style building. Overall boxy shape, and horizontal lines, use of natural materials for decorative purposes and large overhanging eaves. It had an integral part in the evolution of commercial architecture in downtown Rockford. However, this structure is in serious danger of requiring demolition due to its neglect over recent years.
- Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum: Built in 1869 and is an exceptional example of picturesque cottage style. It is a 26-room frame cottage situated on a high bluff overlooking Kent Creek
- Times Theatre: Built in 1938, the building was one of two remaining example of Art Modern-style movie theater in Rockford. It opened in 1938 with visitors boasting about the theater's acoustics and fireproof and moth proof seating.
- Coronado Theatre: Built in 1927, Coronado serves as one of the best preserved atmospheric "movie palaces" of the 1920s. The theater contains a mix of Motifs-Spanish, Italian and French architecture, Italian sculpture and Chinese, Egyptian, and Persian art. The theater was virtually untouched until a major renovation in 1999.
- Liebling (Jackson Piano) Building: Known locally as the home of Jackson Piano Building, it is an excellent example of the Art Deco style from the 1930s. The interior of the structure was incorporated into the Coronado Theatre during the 1999-2000 renovation.
- Illinois National Guard Armory: Constructed in 1936, the building has been used both as the National Guard Headquarters until 1993 and as the primary civic auditorium until 1983. It was a venue for various social, recreational, and political events. It was built during the Depression era as part of the Work Progress Administration and Public Works Administration federal relief effort.
- Burpee Museum of Natural History: Designated as landmarks in 1983. The building was entirely turned over for museum space in 1971.
- Chick House: Former hotel building constructed in 1857 and was operated as a hotel until 1951. In 2004, the City of Rockford purchased two-thirds of the building and made modifications to the structure, which is a mix between Greek revival and Italianate styles.
- Graham-Ginestra House: Built in 1857, it is a transition

between Greek Revival and Italianate architectural styles and is now a museum.

- West Middle School: Originally built as part of the WPA project in 1939.

- Rockford City Hall: Original building was constructed in 1926 as the manufacturer's national bank. The city of Rockford purchased the building in 1937, and built a 20,000 square foot addition in 1990.

- Shumway Market Building: Built in the 1920s, and was donated to the City of Rockford in 1904. The building was restored by the Rockford Areas Convention and Visitors Bureau in 1987 and currently houses the Rockford Area Arts Council.

- Midway Theatre: Opened for business in 1918, it was one of the largest "movie houses" of its kind. The original building was constructed in ornate Spanish renaissance style and originally contained a movie theatre, storefronts, apartment, and a basement that contained a bowling alley and recreation areas for Camp Grant soldier during WWI. It was a movie theatre until August of 1980 when a fire badly damaged the structure.

- Lake-Peterson House: Built in 1873, the house was considered one of the finest intact structures in Illinois built in the Victorian Gothic style.

- Four Squires Building: In the 1920s the original two building structure was combined and transformed from the original Italianate design into its current Art Deco. It serves as a focal point for the remaining block of downtown West State Street that is still intact.

- Booker Washington Center: Rockford's third school. It later became a central established for troops/soldiers and served as the only social enterprise for Rockford's African American populations. It was founded as the Colored Soldiers Club in 1916.

- Witwer (Bell) House: Built in 1876 by a local business owner/alderman. The inside has been restored but exterior of the house remains original.

# Goals Objectives and Implementation Strategies

## ARTS, CULTURE, & HISTORIC LANDMARKS

**Improve the quality and quantity of all forms of urban art, cultural landmarks, and historic preservation efforts**

Implementation Strategy	Cost	Timeframe	Priority
Establish matching grants or revolving loan funds for historic preservation	\$\$	Medium	Medium
Continue to develop and implement the adopted wayfinding guidelines	\$\$	Short	Medium
Continue to promote cultural assets through public art and event nights	\$\$	Medium	High
Work to make retail centers more attractive destinations and any new development to be held to higher design standards	\$	Short	Medium
Create active and secure open spaces, define neighborhoods with visual cues, increased signage, entryways, and street lighting design	\$\$	Medium	Medium
Continue to preserve scenic vistas through the appropriate location of telecommunications towers and removal of billboards from the city; and enact clear design guidelines so that streets, buildings, and public spaces work together to create a sense of place	\$	Short	Medium
Add properties that qualify for designation as landmarks or historic designation	\$	Long	Medium
Continue to support citywide art and beautification projects	\$\$	Short	High
Continue with the Creative Program- Art Installations -Sculptors, local and traveling art exhibits	\$\$	Short	High
Setup a tour for the murals/art installations- to keep them relevant and to highlight the locations better	\$	Short	Low
Develop an interactive public art map that describes artists and shows their information	\$	Short	Medium
Bring new public art displays into the neighborhoods	\$	Short	High
Design art around neighborhood history that depicts important events, people, and contributors to our region	\$	Short	High
Promote Wavepark and other recreational facilities that are unique sports attractions or venues	\$	Medium	Medium
Establish a list that can be updated and added to highlight local amenities by category or type	\$	Medium	Medium

## Chapter Endnotes

- i CRE8IV: Transformational Art In Rockford | May 15-19, 2019 (gorockford.com)
- ii About Us | The Rockford Area Arts Council (artsforeveryone.com)
- iii PubArtBrochure\_68eccf98-fcf6-4b86-a24a-568e46d4db7b.pdf (simpleviewinc.com)
- iv <https://rockfordil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ROCKFORD-LANDMARKS-HISTORIC-DISTRICTS-2020.pdf>