

VERGENNES TOWNSHIP RECREATION PLAN

Prepared by the Vergennes Township Recreation Committee

Approved by the Board October 2002

(Submitted, but not approved by the MDNR)

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INTRODUCTION

The word recreation comes from the Latin word *recreatio*, meaning “restoration to health”. A modern definition of recreation is “refreshment of strength and spirits after work”. Governmental bodies, at all levels have recognized the importance of recreation to the quality of life and the physical and mental health of their citizens. This recognition has been manifested in the development of National, State and local park systems, public trails, preservation of wild areas and opening of Government-owned lands to public recreation.

According to the National Recreation and Park Association¹, parks and recreation:

- Enhance the human potential through the provision of facilities, services and programs that meet human emotional, social and physical needs.
- Articulate environmental values through ecologically responsible management and environmental education programs.
- Promotes individual and community wellness to enhance the quality of life for all citizens.

¹ <http://www.nrpa.org>

Recreation planning is an exercise engaged in by local and state governments to anticipate change, promote needed change, and to control or direct recreational development in such a way as to benefit the entire community. It has the aim of harmonizing the available recreational resources and activities with the social, environmental, aesthetic, cultural, political, and economic requirements of the jurisdiction.

The purpose of the Vergennes Township Recreation Plan is to provide a policy and decision making guide regarding future recreational development within the Township. Key planning issues are identified, a clear set of goals and policies are outlined, and specific implementation projects are identified.

The contents of this plan were developed based on guidance from the Vergennes Township Recreation Committee, and an inventory of the existing resources in the area. In addition, information was utilized from the Kent County Recreation Plan, and the Vergennes Township Comprehensive Plan.

The plan which results from these various inputs is presented below, and is intended to be used as a living instrument of guidance for the future of Vergennes Township.

ADMINISTRATION

The township board is the primary decision making body. This board consists of five members elected by citizens of the township, and includes the supervisor, clerk, treasurer and two trustees.

The Vergennes Township Planning and Zoning Commission has overall responsibility for these two areas, whereas the Vergennes Township Historic Commission is responsible for the preservation of historic resources in the township. The Open Space Committee leads the Township in seeking ways to preserve farmlands and other undeveloped land.

PHYSICAL RESOURCES

Since Vergennes Township is a rural township, its residents consider the physical resources of the area to be of paramount value. These resources include such diverse elements as large tracts of farmland, unspoiled wilderness, rich wetlands and waterways, and scenic hills.

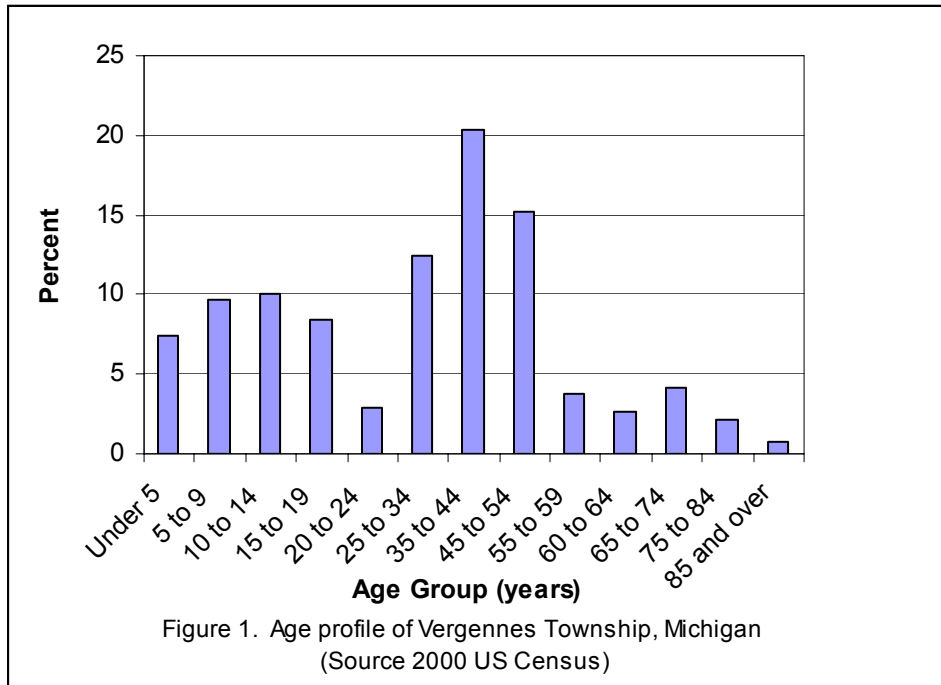
In terms of overall topography, the Flat River Valley dominates the area. This wooded valley contains such diverse elements as high bluffs, steep ravines, and large areas of floodplain and wetlands.

In addition to the Flat River, two other significant water resources exist within the township. These are Murray Lake and Bailey Lake. The former is surrounded by moderately dense residential development, and is heavily used for motorized boating. Murray Lake has experienced water quality problems, which, if unchecked, may limit its future usefulness as a recreational resource. The latter, Bailey Lake is largely unused for recreation, due to its lack of easy access.

Of the 22,996 acres of land constituting Vergennes Township, a large percentage is either agricultural, grassland, or forested land. A significant portion of the land area of the Township is considered not suitable for development in the typical sense due to poor soils for septic fields and/or extreme slopes.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Vergennes Township has experienced steady growth in population from 1960 to 1990. Over this 30-year period, the township has realized an average 18% increase in residents each decade. Vergennes Township's population increased from 945 persons in 1960 to 2492 persons in 1990. Population growth since 1990 has been much more dramatic. According to the 2000 US Census the population of Vergennes Township was 3,611, an increase of 45% since 1990. The 1992 Recreation Plan noted that the population appeared to be getting older on average. Recent growth appears to reverse this trend. The largest proportion is now in the parenting ages from 55 to 25 and a large proportion of the population is under 19 years old (Figure 1). As noted in the 2001 amendment to the Comprehensive Plan¹, one-half of all households in Vergennes Township have children under eighteen years old as compared to Kent County overall where 38.2% of the households have children. This new trend is consistent with the movement of new families with children into the township. Based on the increasing housing projects and development in the Township this trend may be expected to continue.



The income of these households is fairly high when compared to other communities in Kent County. The 1989 Master Plan indicates that less than one percent of the

¹ Vergennes Township. 1999. A Comprehensive Plan.

households in the township had incomes under the poverty level, and further estimates that the average household income is over \$25,000. The 1998 Comprehensive Plan indicates that the per capita income in the Township is \$14,653 and the median household income is \$43,653. By comparison, the City of Lowell was noted to have a per capita income of \$12,110 and its median income was \$28,542.

HISTORIC RESOURCES

The recreational aspects of historic preservation, especially as they relate to tourism and economic development, have been well documented. Historic parks and preserves are as important in some ways to the recreation of the community as any other recreational resource that may be available, particularly when other resources are scarce.

The bulk of these resources are located in the settlement of Fallasburg, located in the eastern half of the township. The Michigan Bureau of History has designated Fallasburg Pioneer Village as a historic site, along with other individual sites within and around the village.

RECREATION RESOURCES

A. Recreation Inventory

General Recreation. Vergennes Township, because of its large geographic area (36 square miles) and its relatively small population (about 100 persons per square mile), historically has not lent itself to the detailed urban park classification system. The foundation of an urban park system is a geographically balanced neighborhood park system supplemented by community and municipality-wide parks.

Historically, the township has relied upon Kent County, the nearby City of Lowell and the Lowell Public School System to provide formal recreation programming. Given the township's small population base in the past, and its close proximity to the city, this arrangement has worked fairly well.

The most important outdoor recreation facilities that are located in the township consist of 1) Kent County's Fallasburg Park and 2) the Lowell State Game Area. Both of these recreation facilities are very important to the area, and are used by thousands of persons each year.

Fallasburg Park is a regional facility that has been identified in the Kent County Recreation Plan¹ as the most frequently visited County Park. Generally this park is available for use by local residents of Vergennes Township. However, during summer weekends many of its facilities are rented for large private functions.

Recently the Wittenbach Agriscience & Environmental Center, the Wege Natural Area and the Cooper Natural Area have been added to the Lowell School District's holdings in the Township. These areas are available for walking and enjoyment of nature. The

¹ Kent County. 1998. Parks, Recreation and Natural Areas Master Plan.

North Country Trail passes through the Township and Lowell State Game Area and offers additional opportunity for hiking on rustic trails.

The Ionia Recreation Area is the nearest State Park. This Park offers fishing, camping, swimming, equestrian, and other recreational opportunities. It is approximately 20 miles from Vergennes Township.

“Active recreation” refers to activities such as athletics and team sports. To a large degree the active recreation needs of the township are being met by the neighborhood parks and other facilities associated with the City of Lowell. These facilities are in close proximity to the southern part of the township, where the majority of the population resides. Additional playground and athletic facilities are available at the various public school complexes in the city. Despite the large increase in population since 1990, no active recreation facilities have been added to the Township other than some sports fields associated with the new Lowell Senior High School. No public playground facilities are available in the Township other than those at Fallasburg County Park.

“Passive recreation” refers to activities other than organized team sports. Passive recreation may range from sitting on a bench in the forest, to vigorous exercise such as hiking, running or bicycling. For passive recreation activities, the Fallasburg County Park, Lowell State Game Area, and Fallasburg Historic Village provide opportunities for the township's residents, most of Kent County, and western Ionia County. Fallasburg County Park offers a variety of opportunities that include picnics, hiking, playground equipment, ball fields, and a pavilion. In addition to these facilities, this Kent County owned and operated park also offers public access to the Flat River for canoeing and fishing. The State Game Area is used primarily for hunting and fishing. Other more regional park facilities available to the residents of the township include Seidman Park in Ada Township, and Townsend Park in Cannon Township. The North Country Trail provides hiking opportunities through the Lowell State Game Area.

Other Recreational Factors. In addition to the above-mentioned facilities, several other factors affect the recreational attractiveness of the Vergennes Township area. These include:

- 1) The designation of the Flat River as a Natural Beauty River by the State of Michigan,
- 2) Montcalm Avenue, a designated Natural Beauty Road, winds through state land.
- 3) A golf course, horse farms, and a polo field are nearby,

B. Recreation Needs.

The following subsections indicate various elements that are important considerations when determining recreation needs.

Public Participation. In November 1998, the Vergennes Township Planning Commission issued opinion surveys to all real and personal property owners and residents for the purpose of gathering public opinions relative to growth and development. Part of this survey addressed recreation.

1. In Item 18, respondents were asked for their impressions of the importance of various issues facing the Township and the priority those issues should be given by Township officials. The top three responses, respectively, were maintaining rural character, conserving open/natural area, and encouraging open space in new residential developments. It could be argued that preservation of open space in a rural setting is integral to maintaining recreation opportunities, especially “passive” activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, bird-watching, etc. Parklands serve the community in many ways, including preservation of open space, wildlife habitat, clean watershed areas, etc.
2. Item 18 asked the respondents how important to them were items in a list of potential Township priorities. “Establishing pedestrian and bike trails” was ranked as “Somewhat important” or higher by 70% of the respondents. “Improving parks and recreation facilities” was similarly ranked by 67% of the respondents. Priorities relating to preservation of rural character and open space also ranked very well with generally greater than 90% of the respondents ranking these priorities as “somewhat important” or greater.
3. Item 19 asked the respondents what types of recreation facilities, if any, would they like to see developed in the Township. Following is a full list of responses

Facility	Respondents in favor (%)
Bike and Walking Paths	34.6
Nature areas	22.2
Swimming Pool	9.3
Neighborhood Parks	8.0
Public Hunting Lands	6.0
None	5.0
Community Center	4.8
Golf Courses	4.0
Other	2.8
Soccer Fields	1.5
Baseball/Softball Fields	1.1
Basketball Courts	0.2

Clearly bike/walking paths was the most desired facility. Nature areas, the number 2 facility, and bike paths normally complement each other, since paths typically traverse natural areas and often provide natural corridors to connect nature areas.

4. In item 21, the respondents were split on their willingness to pay additional taxes for recreational facilities. Fifty percent of the respondents were not willing to pay additional taxes for parks or open space, while 41% were willing to pay and 9% had no opinion. However, the majority of respondents were generally against higher taxes for any reason. Only emergency services such as police and fire departments ranked ahead of parks/open space in terms of people being willing to pay more taxes.

Based on the results of the 1998 Community Opinion survey, it appears that landowners would like to see more open space, trails, and parks, particularly if no additional tax burden is required.

Recreation Issues and Trends.

Types of Recreation Facilities. Historically, Vergennes Township has been a rural community with a small population base. Thus there has not been a great need for many types of active recreation, such as baseball fields and tennis courts. As the township has grown it has still been able to use facilities located in and around Lowell to satisfy these needs. For passive needs, the County Park, State Game Area, and other facilities provide for these as well as a portion of those for the county as a whole.

In view of its rapidly increasing population, the Township should now consider becoming more involved in the provision of additional facilities. According to the latest census data, the Township now rivals the City of Lowell in terms of total population and exceeds, by a large margin, the City in household income and land area. It may now be time for the Township to become less dependent upon the City of Lowell recreation facilities or at least become more active in assisting the City with facilities that its residents share.

Age and Recreation. New population growth appears to be largely in the age groups that benefit from active recreation facilities. In the absence of recreational facilities, people will “make do” with whatever facilities are available. This will inevitably lead to more bicycles and joggers on the roads, dog walking in streets, homemade playgrounds and backyard pools. Wading and swimming in the Flat River may become more common. These activities may lead to safety, environmental and public health concerns. Existing facilities such as Fallasburg Park will become increasingly in demand and crowded during peak times. As the populations of the surrounding communities grow, facilities in the City of Lowell may become overcrowded since they are actually serving a larger population than is being planned for.

It is well known that exposure to nature; exercise and recreation improve health and quality of life for older individuals. Additional facilities for safe walking, biking and swimming would benefit this segment of the Vergennes population as it also grows.

Analysis of Needs.

Analysis of the existing recreational opportunities within the township shows that residents must at present rely on, and at times compete with, others for the use of recreational facilities. Although these facilities have been adequate for their use in the past, it must be noted that as the population of the township and the area has increased greatly in the last 20 years, Vergennes Township must become increasingly responsible for providing its residents with recreational opportunities. This conclusion is supported by the results of public opinion surveys, which indicates desire for additional facilities. In addition, it would be appropriate to clarify understandings with surrounding authorities such as City of Lowell, Kent County and Lowell School District that Vergennes Township intends to depend on their facilities for the recreation of its residents. This improved

understanding will help these other groups in their planning and may give Vergennes Township a voice in their planning process.

LOCALLY IDENTIFIED RECREATION DEFICIENCIES

The following is an unranked list of those deficiencies that have been locally identified, according to local input, and other established criteria:

1. Safe areas for walking and biking, particularly for children and senior citizens.
2. Minimal access somewhere along the Flat River, for low or no-wake craft, such as canoes, etc
3. A local park which serves the western 1/2 of the township.
4. The pursuit of joint use and support of athletic and other public facilities now supported by Lowell Public Schools.
5. Development of swimming pool facility in the community.
6. Preservation of those lands and resources which are fundamental to the scenic character of the township.
7. Development of recreation and leisure opportunities for senior citizens of Vergennes Township.

KENT COUNTY RECREATION NEEDS ANALYSIS

Kent County has performed a detailed survey for its 1998 recreation plan. The top ten existing facilities ranked as most important to expand are listed in Table 1. Although some improvements to Fallasburg Park have been listed as potential projects in this plan, the County currently has no plans to significantly expand this park or to create new facilities near Vergennes Township.

Table 1. Percentage of Kent County residents ranking selected existing facilities as most important to expand.¹

Existing Facility	% of all households surveyed
Foot/bicycle trails	25.9
Nature study areas	15.8
Picnic areas	9.3
Campgrounds	8.5
Playgrounds	8.5
Beaches	7.3
Winter sports facilities	7.3
Boat launches	6.1
Fishing opportunities	4.0

¹ Kent County. 1998. Parks, Recreation and Natural Areas Master Plan.

The Kent County data is consistent with the Vergennes Township survey, which indicated that biking/walking paths are clearly the most desired facility, followed by nature areas.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

In consideration of the recreation considerations presented above, the Recreation Committee has developed specific goals and objectives. These goals and objectives are intended to be the official policy of Vergennes Township on recreation matters. Goals and objectives help to provide direction in order to identify appropriate projects and programs.

Goal 1.

To develop a recreation system that will be responsive to, and effective in, meeting the present and future needs of residents.

Objectives:

1. Develop an on-going planning process with a built-in procedure for receiving public input and evaluation of recreation opportunities.
2. Update the recreation plan as needed and entirely review the plan every five years.
3. Enhance recreation opportunities for persons of all ages.

Goal 2.

To coordinate facilities and programs with those of other agencies and groups.

Objectives:

1. Provide facilities that complement those of Kent County, Lowell City, Lowell Township, Lowell Area YMCA and other groups.
2. Cooperate and contribute to community wide recreation projects.
3. Seek active participation in the planning of recreation facilities and/or opportunities that affect Township residents.

Goal 3.

To protect and enhance those natural resources that have outstanding recreational value to the public.

Objectives:

1. Promote recreational activities that complement historic sites and natural areas within the township.

2. Develop recreational resources in a manner that will not result in an adverse impact on the natural and cultural resources of the site or of the area.
3. Assist other Township Committees in acquiring environmentally sensitive lands and culturally valuable resources to ensure their preservation and proper development.

Short and Long Range Improvement Program Schedule

The following projects are suggested as the short and long range recreational improvements needed in Vergennes Township. They are unranked.

Short Range, 0-5 years

1. Actively participate in establishment of Lowell Community Trails.
2. Development of a local type park, with facilities for outdoor children's recreation. Explore possibilities for using donated land or sharing with existing facilities in the Township.
3. Development of minimal canoe accesses on the Flat River.
4. Joint use and development of Lowell Public Schools athletic facilities, through negotiations and written understanding.
5. Improve communication between Vergennes Township and the City of Lowell Parks and Recreation Department.
6. Ensure that recreational considerations are included in any new large-scale residential development plans.

Long Range, 1-10 years

1. Development of public swimming facilities.
2. Preservation of natural lands in Vergennes Township.
3. Expansion of Lowell Community Trail System and North Country Trail.