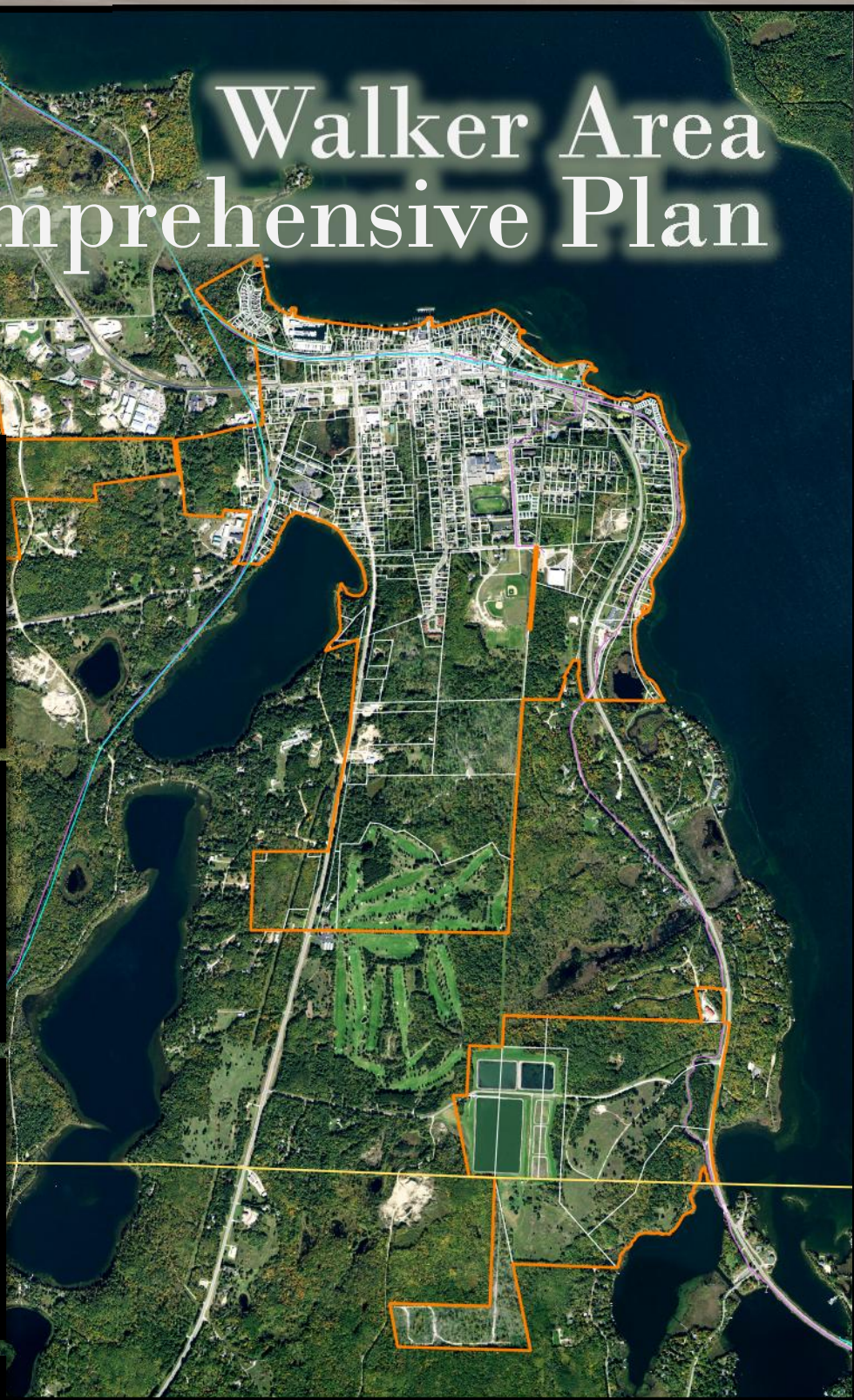
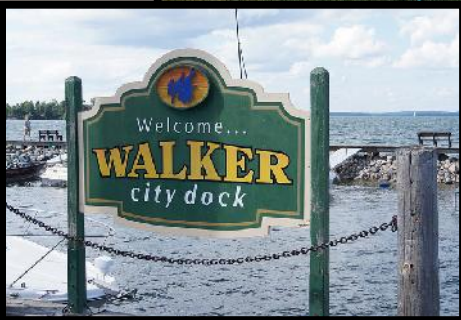


Walker Area Comprehensive Plan



Originally Written: 2010
With assistance from
Community Growth Institute



Updated: 2016
With assistance from
Hometown Planning



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The City of Walker wishes to thank the National Joint Powers Alliance (NJPA) for funding assistance in the preparation of this 2016 update of the Comprehensive Plan.

Introduction

The Walker Comprehensive Plan was last updated in 1997 and again in 2010. Over that almost 20-year timeframe between 1997 and this 2016 update of the Plan, there has been dramatic change in Walker, as well as in the regional, state and national economies. Positioning Walker to respond proactively to a modern, quickly-changing world is the great challenge of this – and future - planning efforts.

The 2010 plan update represented a major shift for the city in a number of areas, which is most dramatically captured in the title of that plan. It is now not simply the Walker Comprehensive Plan, but the Walker Area Comprehensive Plan. This document strongly affirms the basic understanding that building a healthy community requires cooperation and participation that doesn't start or stop at an artificial boundary line.

Participants in the planning process have come to understand, and are seeking to express in this plan, that while the Walker area is a remarkable place to live, its charm will not be maintained without positive action. This plan outlines goals and policies, but also extensively details specific action steps that need to be taken.

The national economy shifted dramatically after the “Great Recession” of 2008 and 2009. As a result of that recession, but also in analyzing trends that existed prior to that time and continue even today, the City now understands that the approach to growth and development detailed in the city's old plan has left it vulnerable in ways that were not foreseen in 1997. A reinvigorated prosperity will only be attained, and maintained over time, with a new approach that builds on existing strengths and maximizes the return on existing investments.

For the Walker area to be strong—physically, financially and socially—public officials, and the people they represent, will need to be thoughtful and deliberate about the choices they make in the coming years. This plan is designed to help them do so.



Brief History

Walker's distinctive landscape of three separate ridges and Leech Lake, along with the many other lakes in the area, were carved out by glaciers millions of years ago. It was the valleys and breaks in these and other hills across the country that provided important transportation routes for Native Americans and for the area's first European visitors.

The Walker area was explored first by French explorers who realized the area's great natural resources and potential for commercial trade. This wealth of natural resources was later recorded by the British explorer Joseph Nicollet. Nicollet wrote journal entries describing the presence of more than 1,000 Native Americans around Leech Lake and of the good soil for farming, plentiful small trees, wild plum, pear, cherry trees, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries and hawthorn bushes. Additionally, Nicollet mentioned the abundant white fish, tulibee, mushkonosha, jack fish, pike, sucker, pickeral or golden carp and turtles.

For the Native Americans—first the Sioux (Dakotas) and eventually the Ojibwa (Chippewa)—the bays of Leech Lake and the shores of rivers provided abundant wild rice to supplement the fish, berries and other wild game. It is clear to see why the Ojibwa fought so hard for possession of this land from the Dakota.



Ojibway Indian landing at Walker Minnesota, 1896, Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society

The original French explorers set up trading posts on Ottertail and Mound (Squaw) Points in the late 1700s. Vibrant trade occurred between the local Ojibwa people and the Europeans, with the Europeans seeking mostly furs and the Ojibwa benefiting from clothing, blankets, and tools.

In 1837, a treaty was signed between the Ojibwa and the European settlers, setting the boundaries of the reservation and establishing fishing and hunting rights. Discussions about the meaning of this treaty continue today. The casino south of Walker (as in other parts of Minnesota) is a partial result of the negotiations and interpretations regarding Native American treaties.

As the nineteenth century proceeded, more and more European settlers arrived, including an influx of lumberjacks. Walker was eventually founded as a City in March of 1896 shortly after a rail line was laid between Brainerd and Walker. The logging industry benefited from this rail line, which ended on Shingobee Island, as well as the construction of the Leech Lake Dam at the outlet of Leech Lake, which was built in 1882. The dam not only connected five to seven smaller lakes to create Leech Lake as it exists today, it also helped to facilitate the ability to float logs through the lake and into the Mississippi River where they could reach lumber mills.

As would be expected, the new railroad line, the abundance of timber and the ability to float timber down the Mississippi River fueled Walker's early growth. Continued trade with Native Americans and a new influx of tourism also served to bring people and resources to the fledgling city. The first tourists arrived by train in 1896 and made use of the various steam ships that had been built for use on Leech Lake. The City contained three hotels at the time—the Spaulding, the Spencer and the Lake Shore—which were quickly filled. The area's first resort was established by P.H. McGarry in 1896—the “White Tent City” which consisted of 12 white sleeping tents on First Point. Additional hotels and resorts followed in the subsequent years as a steady flow of tourists entered the area.

Walker received its name, not after an early settler or important resident, but rather in an effort to attract T. B. Walker to build a mill in the City. Walker offered to build the mill if the City's saloons were closed down—an appeal based on his wife's staunch Methodist faith. The City rejected that offer and the mill was instead built in Akeley.

The City's true forefather was P.H. McGarry. He successfully fought to have the City established as the County seat and brought electric lights to the City in 1898, in addition to his construction of resorts and hotels. A water system was also constructed in 1897. The city's first library was built in the early 1900s after Emma Spencer obtained a \$6,500 grant from the Carnegie Institute. Walker then became the smallest city in the nation with a Carnegie-funded library.

The City's first major growth period was seen during the years of the Great Depression.

Much of the growth was fueled by the availability of federally funded Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects which essentially built much of the town's major public facilities. Specific projects during these years included the construction of a fire hall, council chambers, an addition to the school, the Conservation building, city streets, the cemetery, the sewer system and improvements to the water main. The Walker Park was also improved during this period.

The modern road system had its roots in the stage and coach line in the early 1900s. These coach routes eventually became portions of Highway 371, County Road 50 and Highway 34. Pressure for improved local roads also occurred during this time as residents of the surrounding townships sought better access to Walker for farm products and supplies. The driving distance between Remer and Walker was shortened by about 20 miles in 1925 when the state highway department built up Highway 200 between the two cities. Other improvements to

Highway 34, Highway 371 (including its eventual designation as a US Highway) and other area roads continued to improve access to the area.

P.H. McGarry was known for his belief that logging, trade with the Ojibwa and tourism would sustain the area forever. While this was certainly true for a significant time, it is clear that this is less the case today with only tourism still constituting a significant portion of the local economy. Logging does continue, although at a reduced pace as reforested areas take decades to mature enough to be logged again. Walker's residents no longer engage in significant trade of locally produced goods, but rather depend on the connections to the broader regional, national and world markets for most of their retail purchases.

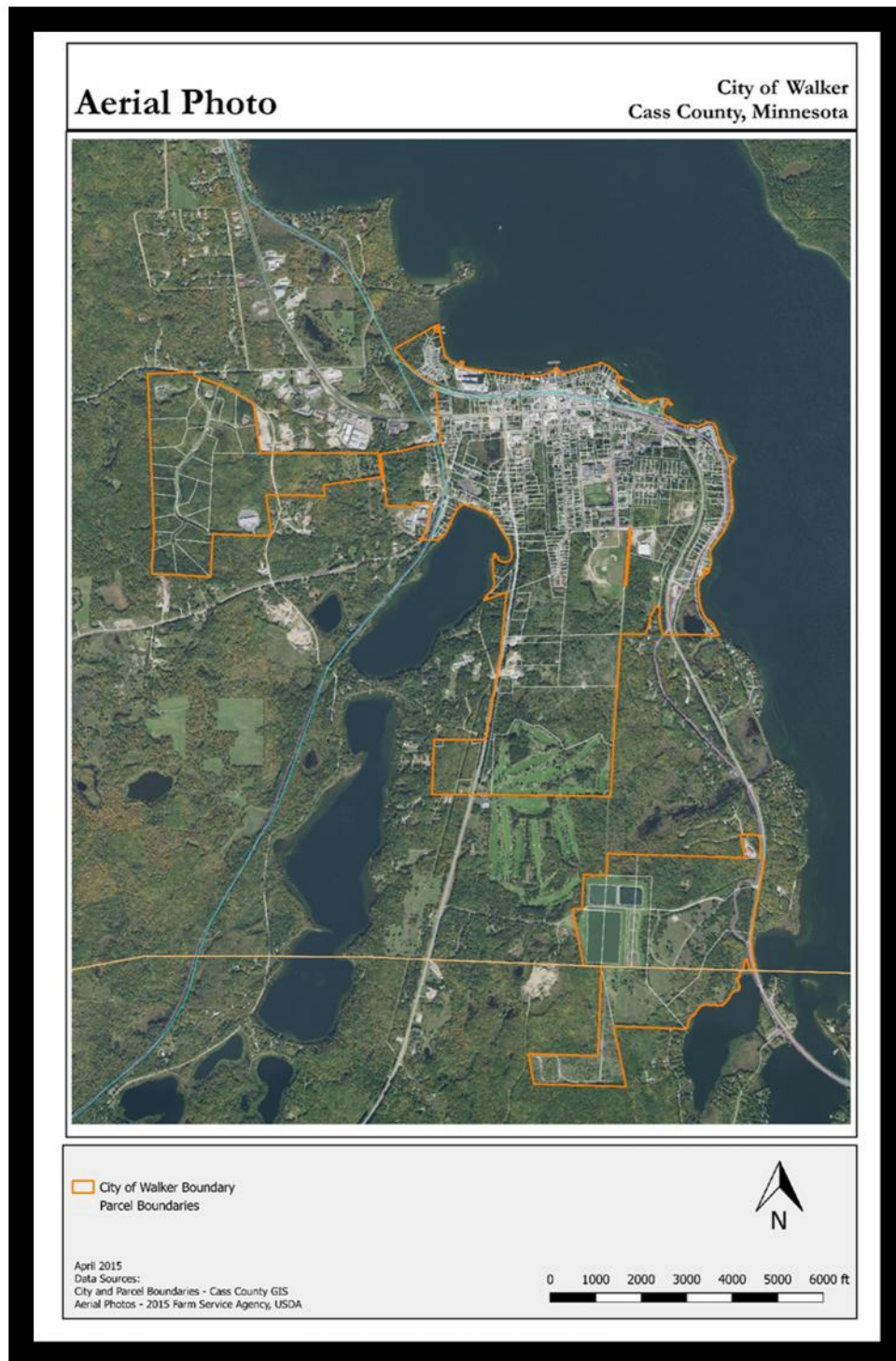


Walker Minnesota in 1880, Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society



Postcard of the Walker Boat Service, 1940s. Tourism has long been a major part of the Walker economy.

Today, tourism remains a major economic engine. Manufacturing related to various wood products has been a growing industry over recent decades, as well as the general construction industry, given the building boom that has been seen in the region as well as throughout the country. It remains to be seen how much long-term impact the recent economic recession and the related decline in housing values will have on sources of employment and income for residents of Walker and the surrounding townships.¹



¹ Much of this information came from “Walker on Leech Lake: The First 100 Years (1896-1996)” by The Walker and Area Centennial Committee and “History of Walker” compiled by the Cass County Historical Society and the Cass County Museum.

Background Information

As part of the planning process, it is critical that there be an understanding of the general demographic trends impacting the area. This section is not meant to be an exhaustive dissertation on all the data collected and analyzed as part of assembling the plan, but instead a highlight of the most significant factors that are shaping Walker's future.

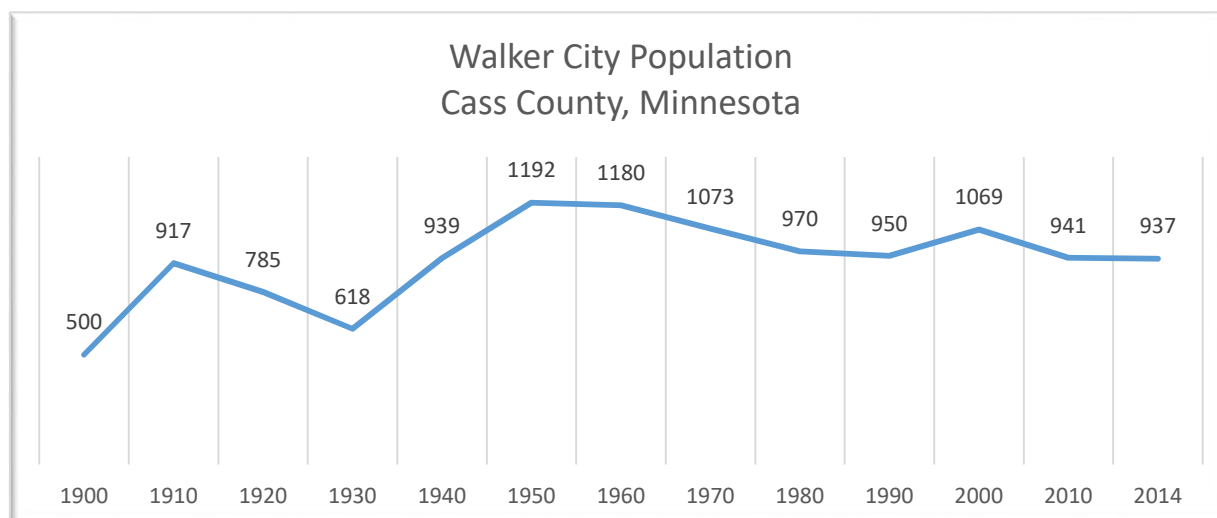
Along with the rest of the country, Walker is aging rapidly. While the population is projected to continue to grow, household sizes are shrinking (more single households and couples without children) and, consequently, school enrollment is declining. This has a significant impact on the nature of the local economy, providing both opportunities and challenges.

Walker's compact development pattern has provided it with tax base that is sounder in relationship to its long-term liabilities than other cities in the county. Despite this stability, the tax rate in Walker is twice the state average for cities and higher than most other cities in the county. In a period of slower growth, being ready for the future requires an understanding of how these three factors—the tax base, the tax rate and future maintenance liabilities—all interact.

The following will elaborate on this summary in more detail.

POPULATION AND HOUSEHOLD GROWTH²

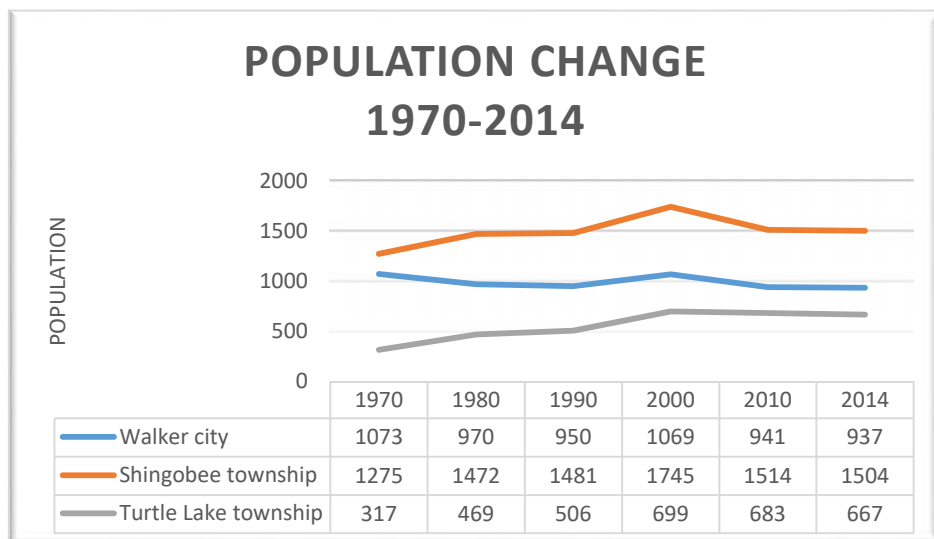
The City of Walker was founded in 1896 as the railroad was constructed through the area. In the initial years, the City grew rapidly from 500 persons in 1900 to over 900 in 1910. Since that time, the City has experienced both growth and decline, fluctuating between a low of about 600 persons in 1930 to a high of about 1,200 persons in 1950. The population rose from 1,069 in the 2000 Census to an estimated 1,186 in 2008, but declined again to 941 in the 2010 Census. The 2014 estimated population stands at 937 persons.



Periods of declining population were seen between 1910 and 1930 and again between 1960 and 1990. The early period of decline marked the shift away from the logging industry as fewer workers were needed to process fewer trees. The latter shift coincided with migration patterns following World War II, where remote, small-towns such as Walker struggled while employment opportunities shifted to the suburbs of metropolitan regions. The more recent decline in population since 2000 – and particularly from 2008 – can likely be attributed to a variety of

² Data in this section has been obtained from the US Census Bureau (decennial censuses) and the Minnesota State Demographer's office (intercensal population estimates).

impacts including the closing of the Ah-Gwah-Ching facility, smaller family sizes, the movement of families to surrounding townships and the effects of the Great Recession.



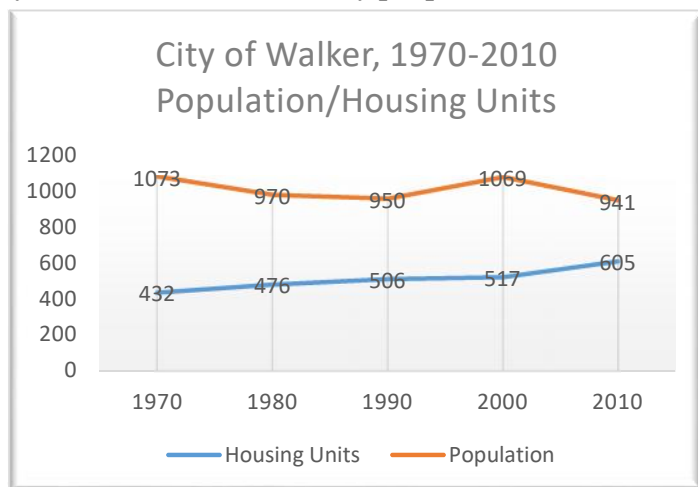
Periods of population increase were between 1930 and 1960 and again between 1990 and 2008. The Depression Era increase was directly related to jobs programs and outside government investment in Walker. As the tourism industry matured during this period, more opportunity became available relative to other areas in the region and Walker attracted more workers. Post 1990, population growth has been driven largely by the great migration of the Baby Boom generation to areas, such as Walker, with high scenic value.

This migration was enabled not only by the age and relative affluence of this generation, but by improvements in transportation systems and technology.

The Townships surrounding Walker have experienced a more sustained growth pattern since 1970 than Walker itself. The largest population growth in numbers has been in Shingobee Township, which has grown steadily from 1,275 in 1970 to an estimated 1,659 in 2008 before declining to 1,514 in 2010 and an estimated 1,504 in 2014. Turtle Lake Township increased from just 317 persons in 1970 to an estimated 731 in 2008 before falling to 683 in 2010 and an estimated 667 in 2014. Overall, while Walker actually declined by an estimated 13 persons between 1990 and 2014, the two surrounding Townships grew by a combined 184 persons. Between 1970 and 1990 the pattern was even more obvious – with Walker declining in population by 123 persons and Shingobee and Turtle Lake Townships growing by a combined 395 persons.

The shift in growth to the surrounding townships is directly related to the reasons why people have moved to the region; mainly, to access the scenic beauty of the area. Lakes lots and “estate” tracts in the forested areas off the lakes are scenically attractive and desirable places to live. The surrounding townships have more of this land to offer than the City of Walker, and thus have experienced a more rapid growth in population.

Population growth is only part of the story in the Walker area. While it has increased, the number of housing units has increased even more dramatically. The number of households within Walker has grown steadily over the past 40 years, from 432 in 1970 to 605 in 2010 – an increase of 173 housing units over that time period. Shingobee and Turtle Lake townships however, grew by over 800 and 430 units respectively during the same 40 years.

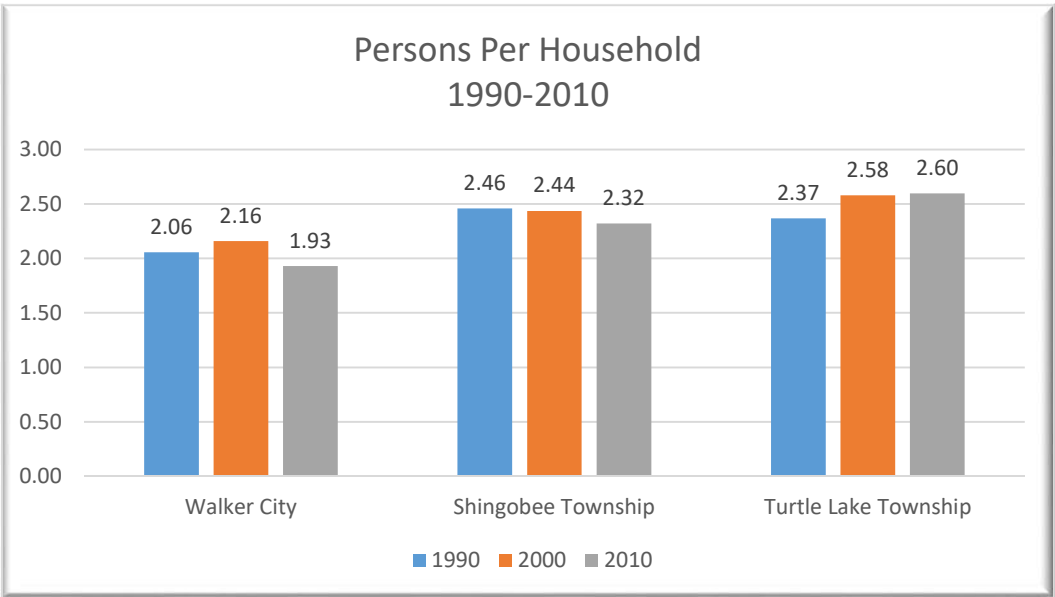
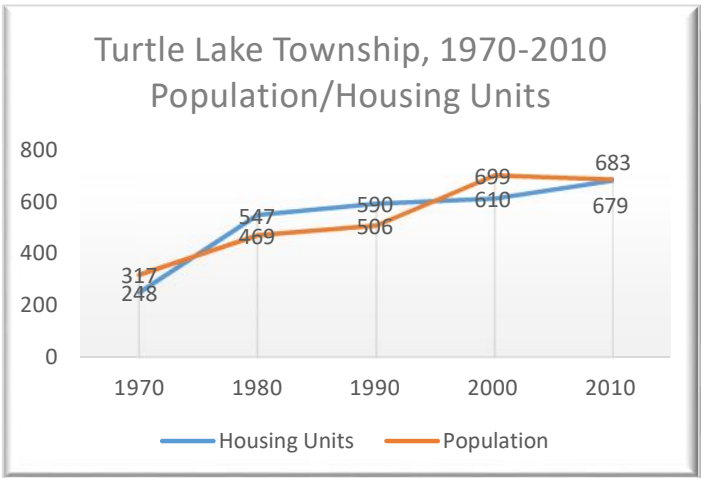
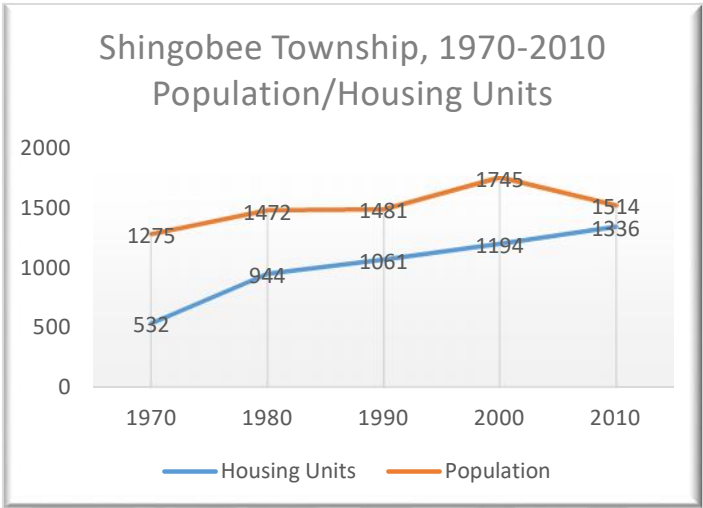


In each instance, the growth in housing units has outpaced the growth in population. This indicates that the new growth in the area came largely from one and two-person households. Age statistics verify that this growth has been largely in retirees or families nearing retirement and not a large percentage of young, families with children.

In Walker, household size has fluctuated, dropping from 2.19 in 1980 to 2.06 in 1990, rising again to 2.16 in 2000 and then falling back to 1.93 in 2010. This fluctuation is somewhat unique to the area and reflects the fact that the City of Walker has housing that primarily appeals to either the very young (single-person household) or those with less mobility, like senior citizens. Walker’s average household size is the lowest in the area.

Shingobee (2.32) and Turtle Lake (2.60) townships both had higher average persons per household in 2010 than Walker. This is an indication that more families live in surrounding townships, rather than in the City itself.

Housing tends to be more expensive in the surrounding townships than it is in the City of Walker. Taken in combination with the demographic statistics, it is evident that, in general, young families earning middle-class wages along with retirees and near-retirees with relative affluence are choosing to live in the townships. Correspondingly, in general, young, single men and women, families with low to moderate incomes and seniors are choosing to live within the city limits. While there are certainly exceptions, these are the overall trends.

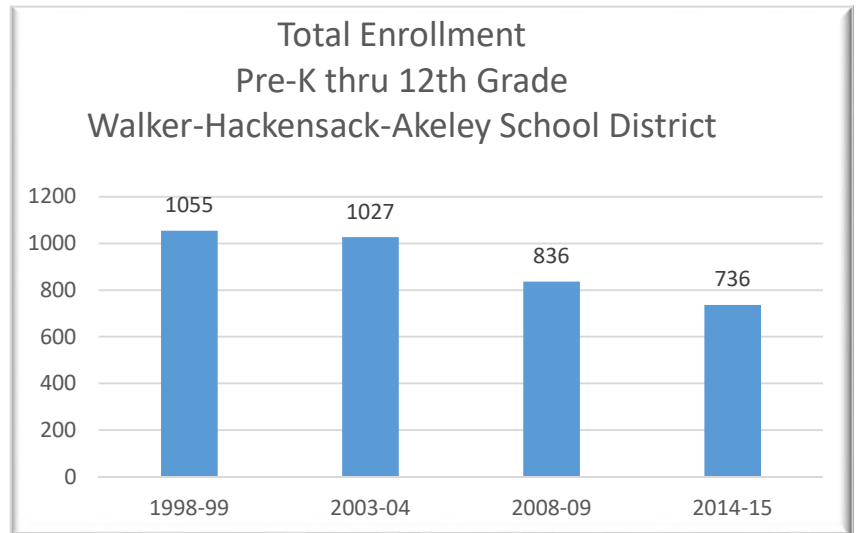


SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Many small towns identify strongly with their local schools. For many residents, it is the presence of a small, high quality school in the community that makes it an attractive place to live. The ability of a school district to maintain this quality is an essential component to the overall health of the community.

Walker is part of the Walker-Hackensack-Akeley School District (#113). Enrollment has been steadily declining over the past 10 years—shifting consistently downward from 1,055 in 1998-99 to 1,027 in 2003-04 to 836 in 2008-09 to 736 in 2014-2015.

With state funding tied to the number of students in the district, it is difficult for any school system to maintain quality along with declining enrollment. While the fixed costs of buildings, maintenance and other systems remain, revenue declines as the population of students drop. As budgets tighten and a school district is required to make cuts, the district becomes less attractive to new families that may consider relocating to the area (or choose to remain in the area). This creates a negative feedback loop that further reduces enrollment. Such a cycle is difficult to recover from.

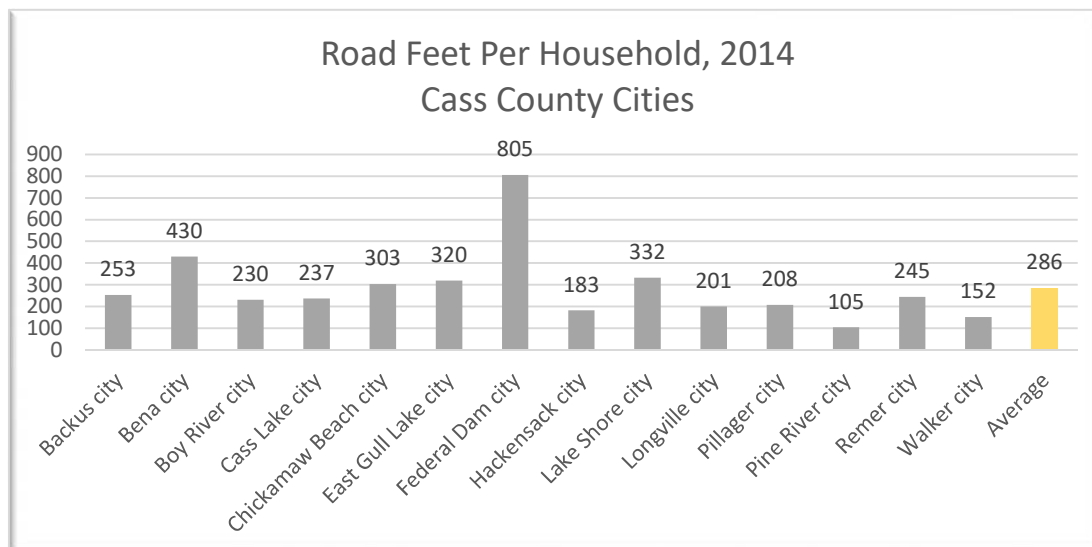


The population shifts in the Walker area have brought solid investments, new growth and good people to the region. The lack of population diversity, however, is a long-term challenge for a community that needs working age families to sustain the local economy. Declines in school enrollment are a warning, signaling potential economic difficulties if population diversity issues are not addressed.

INFRASTRUCTURE

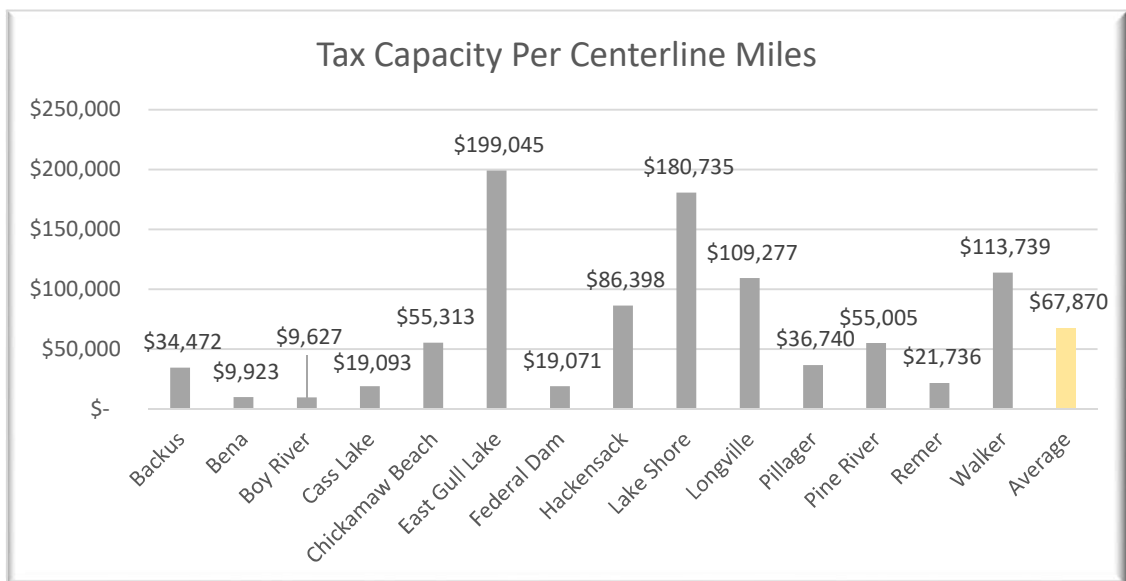
For small towns such as Walker, roads, sewers and water systems are typically the largest investment the city makes. Such infrastructure represents both an asset in that it provides the necessary infrastructure for growth to occur, and a liability in that the infrastructure needs to be maintained.

In 2014, the City contained nearly 13 miles of city streets and about another 4.2 miles of county and state roads



according to the Minnesota Department of Transportation. With an estimated 451 households in 2014, this amounts to roughly 151 feet of city-maintained street for every household. Compared to similarly sized cities in Cass County, this figure is relatively low. East Gull Lake (407 households) has approximately 320 feet of roadway per household, Lake Shore

(464 households) has about 332 feet. Pine River (417 households) has only about 104 feet per household. On average, all cities in Cass County average about 286 feet per household.

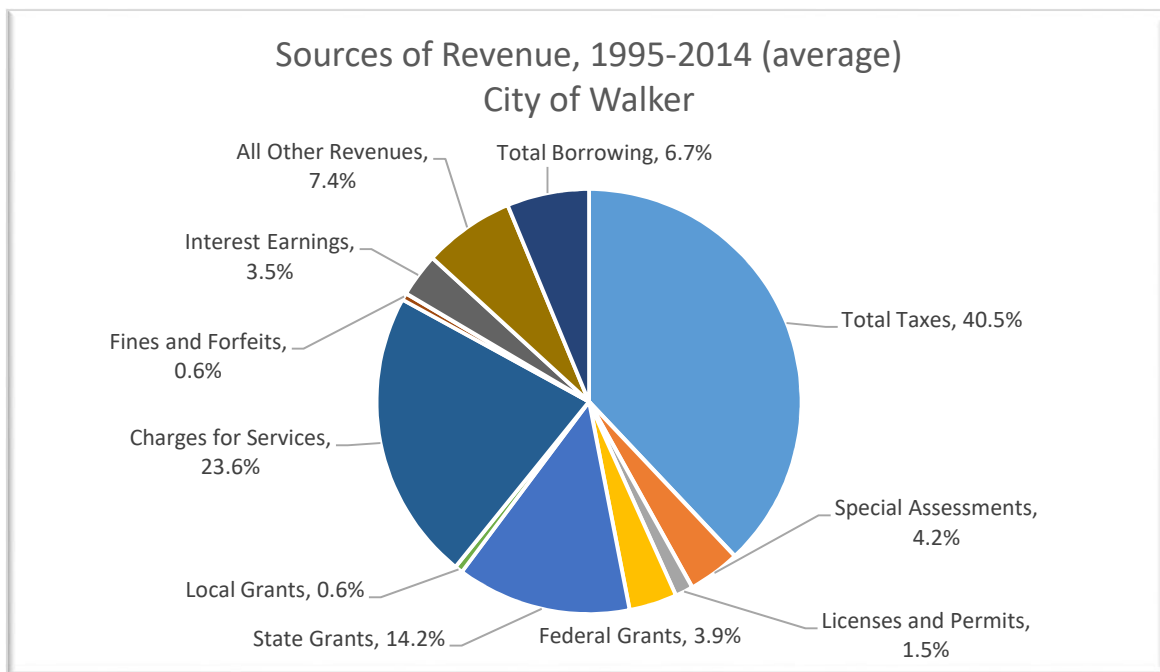


The ability of the City to maintain these streets, and the sewer and water lines that run underneath them, is dependent on three primary sources of revenue: 1) local property taxes, 2) local government aid payments from the state, and 3) federal and state grants for specific infrastructure projects.³ Of these three sources, the City only has control over local property taxes.

The availability of state and federal sources of revenue have been growing more uncertain in recent years—even before the recent national recession and current fiscal crisis.

A useful measure of the ability of the City to cover the long-term maintenance costs is how much local tax capacity the City has in comparison with the amount of streets, sewer lines and water lines in need of maintenance. According to 2015 an analysis of 2015 tax capacity data from the League of Minnesota Cities and the 2014 data on road miles from the Minnesota Department of Transportation, Walker's tax capacity (about \$1.47 million) per mile of road (12.95 of city streets) stands at about \$113,739. This is significantly above the average Cass

County city, which had about \$67,870 per mile of road.



Like other cities in Minnesota, the revenue side of Walker's budget is comprised primarily of property tax revenues and state aid. Between 2010 and 2014, property taxes accounted for an average of about 45 percent of all revenues collected by the city – up from 30 percent between

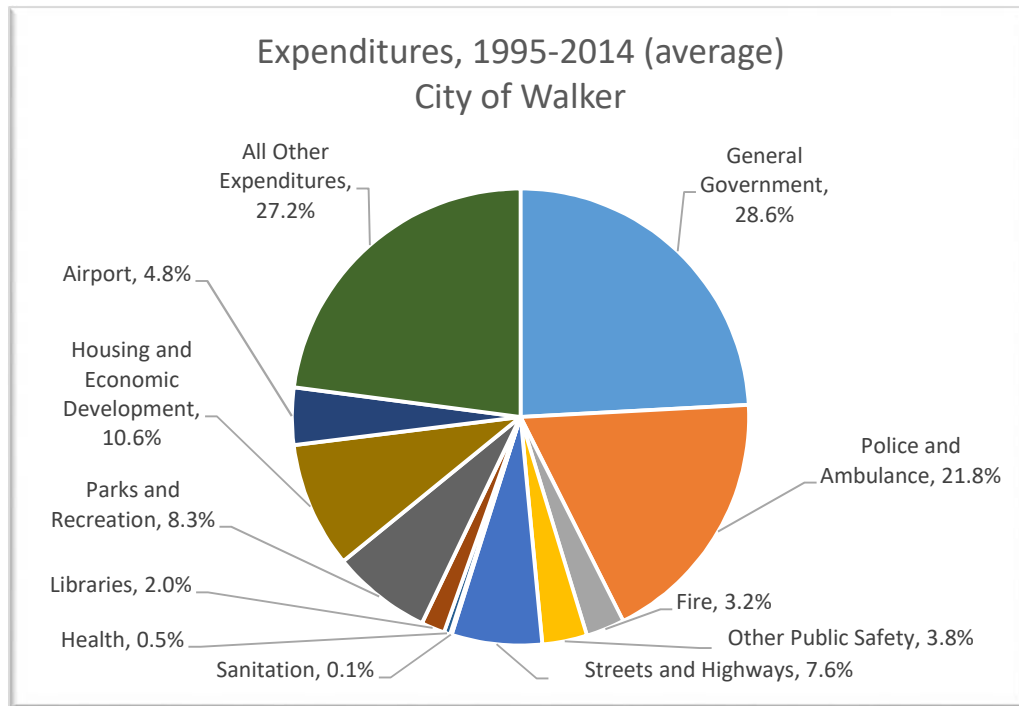
³ Some cities also use assessments as a mechanism to raise revenue for maintenance projects. Minnesota Statutes require improvements that are assessed to increase the value of the property being assessed at least as much as the amount of the assessment. For projects that are purely maintenance, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate an increase of value from the project.

2005 and 2009, 25 percent between 2000 and 2004 and 22 percent between 1995 and 1999.

Over this same period, state aid has fluctuated relatively significantly, accounting for as low as 6.4% of the revenues in 2004 and as high as 24.6 percent in 1996. Within that timeframe however, there were wide fluctuations from year to year – with steep drops from 2002 to 2004, rapid increases from 2006-2008 and significant drops again from 2008 to 2010. Since 2010, the levels of state aid as a percent of total revenues has remained relatively constant. Still, the wide fluctuations over the years are indicative of the likelihood that the City cannot rely on state aid as a stable source of revenue.

FINANCIAL HEALTH—EXPENDITURES

On the spending side of the ledger, Walker has had four primary expenditures as a percentage of current expenditures (not including capital outlays and debt service): general government, police, housing/economic development and streets and highways. Over the last 20 years (1995-2014) general government accounted for an average of 31.8 percent of total expenditures. Public safety (fire, police, ambulance⁴) costs accounted for another 23.4 percent. housing and economic development accounted for 14.4 percent and streets and highway another 11.3 percent. Fire⁵ (4.9 percent), parks and recreation (4.3 percent) and airport (3 percent) accounted for the bulk of the remaining spending.



Tax capacity is a measure of the ability of a community to generate taxes based on the value of taxable property and the type of tax classification that property falls under.

The City of Walker had a 2014 taxable tax capacity⁶ of \$1,198,339 – as compared to \$1,329,209 in 2010 and \$973,237 in 2005. . The city's average tax rate⁷ over these same years was 68.34% in 2005, 76.16% in 2010 and 84.22% in 2015. Adjusted for inflation, the net tax levy each year has fluctuated – rising from \$806,236 in 2005 to \$1,099,098 in 2010 and then declining slightly to \$1,012,372 in 2014.

Walker has a relatively high tax rate when compared to the state average and to other cities in the area. For 2015, the average tax rate for Minnesota Cities was slightly less than 47 percent – up from 39 percent in 2010. Of the cities in Cass County, the average tax rate was 61.5 percent – up from 55 percent in 2010.

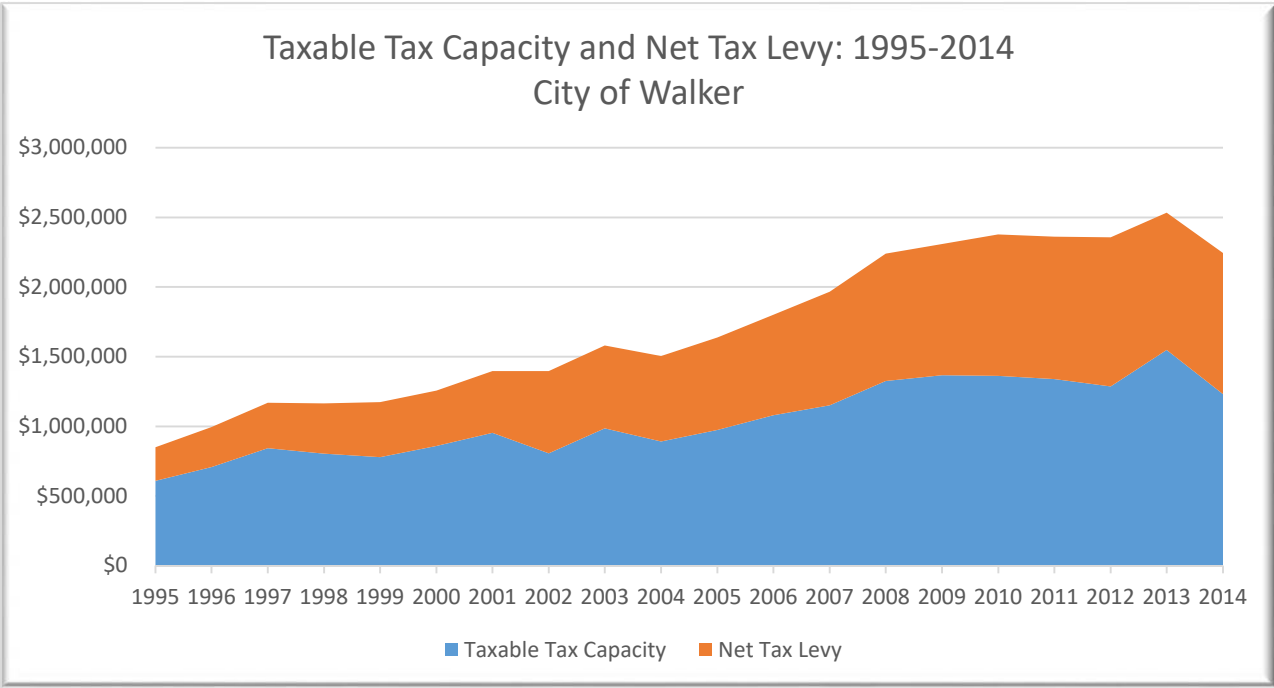
⁴ The City of Walker's ambulance service was sold to North Memorial Ambulance in 2008.

⁵ The City of Walker's fire department became the Walker Area Joint Fire Department in 2013 as part of a joint powers agreement with Shingobee, Leech Lake, Turtle Lake and Pine Lake townships.

⁶ Data from the Minnesota State Auditor's office. Taxable tax capacity reflects total tax capacity minus any captured TIF tax capacity and fiscal disparities contributions.

⁷ Data from the League of Minnesota Cities.

A relatively high tax rate combined with an aging population (families on fixed incomes tend to be more sensitive to fluctuations in rates of taxation), aging municipal infrastructure and in the likelihood of instability in the level of state assistance are challenges Walker must face in the coming years.



Community Character

BACKGROUND

For a city like Walker, the character of the community is critical. Not only is the well-being of residents tied to this character, but the foundation of the Walker economy is based on being a memorable destination. The more Walker transforms into “Anytown USA”—a place indistinguishable from other small towns that dot the landscape—the less competitive it becomes.

Enhancing the character of the community is how Walker will grow from a place that is simply above-average in many respects to one that is amazing.

THE CHARACTER OF WALKER

Walker is an old logging town on the western edge of Leech Lake. How this legacy strongly impacts the character of the community is sometimes not apparent to those living here today, but the influence is strong.

The original town planners of Walker built it on the traditional grid pattern. It was laid out as sort of an amphitheater, with the lake being the “stage” and the “seats” being all of the development that was envisioned to happen sloping up the hill away from the lake. The streets terminated at the shoreline so that the “audience”—the people who live in Walker—would be treated to lake views as part of their daily experience in the public realm.

The typical buildings were erected within this grid lined up at the edge of the property line. This provided for a pleasant public space in front of the building with room for things like outhouses and garbage bins to the rear. The same pattern was seen in commercial and residential neighborhoods, the main difference being the sidespacing between buildings.

In contrast to typical buildings, public buildings were given places of prominence. Despite the lack of overall wealth of the country and the community at the time they were constructed, buildings like the courthouse and the original library were built to be public landmarks. The courthouse in particular was set back from the street to create a public plaza in front of the steps. It was located at the end of the street so that the view terminated in this spectacular public building.

While it may seem quaint today, all of this was done to add value to the community. Because of the concentration of wealth and lack of general affluence at the time, investments that were made were designed to – in real terms – increase the dollar value of properties in the community. The planners of this era had a simple approach that was predicated on getting the highest return for each investment, and that meant each improvement must enhance the public realm.



Sketch from the 1968 Walker Comprehensive Plan. The plan shows the traditional neighborhood design and the planned enhancement of the community's pedestrian orientation.

PUBLIC BUILDINGS ADD VALUE



Cass County Courthouse, 1950

One of the opportunities for adding value that has been lost over the years in Walker, and other similar communities, is the leveraging of large, public investments to improve the character of the community.

The Cass County Courthouse is one Such investment. When first designed and constructed, it was given a prominent location where its magnificent architecture and green space enhanced the public realm and provided value to the entire community.

Functional additions to the structure over time have diminished its grandeur, and the significant value of this public investment is now mostly unrealized.

The same can be said about the public library. The original Carnegie Library was a community landmark. Any development in its vicinity was enhanced simply by proximity to this magnificent structure. Its replacement is more functional, to be generous. Its architecture and style actually detracts from the public realm, quite the opposite of the building it replaced.

The grand public improvements of the past were done at a time when America was struggling economically. In our present age of relative affluence, we have shifted our public investments to horizontal infrastructure (roads/water/sewer) and, subsequently, our public buildings tend to be more functional and less distinctive. This is a lost opportunity that can be recaptured by reorienting our investment priorities and our approach to public improvements.

This approach changed following World War II. The 1950s started the highway era and automobile access became the predominant design feature for new development. Buildings started to be set back further to provide space for cars. They were also designed so as to appeal to passing motorists, with pedestrians frequently becoming an afterthought. Ever wider streets with fast-moving traffic and the proliferation of parking lots effectively transformed many of Walker's pedestrian areas into auto-only zones. New residential and commercial development started to appear on the periphery of town, often outside of the city limits.

While the automobile is a fantastic device that we should not be without, the change to an auto-oriented development pattern has damaged the character of the community. It has detracted from the public realm envisioned by those that set out the town's original pattern. By orienting new development exclusively towards the automobile, Walker is losing its competitive advantage and is slowly transforming into a town that is indistinguishable from most small towns in the United States.

The parts of Walker that are memorable have a fantastic public realm. The parts of Walker that are ordinary and the parts that are undesirable are those where the public space is harsh, isolated or uninviting. Building on those memorable places simply means paying attention to the elements that enhance the public space.

SENSE-OF-PLACE

The components that give parts of Walker a strong sense-of-place are simple to understand. Where they are absent, it is quite easy to see how the public realm is diminished. The two key elements are:

1. *Line up the buildings.* Where the buildings are lined up, they have the

effect of creating a wall. This boundary condition makes the space feel comfortable to people within it. Where the wall effect is absent, the sense-of-place is lost and the experience of walking past will be unsettling to a pedestrian.

2. *Maintain the correct width to height ratio.* Once the buildings are lined up to form walls, they need to be correctly spaced from one side of the street to the other or the sense-of-place effect is lost. Maintaining a width to height ratio between building on either side of a street of between 3:1 and 6:1 is necessary, with 3:1 being optimal. If the buildings are too close, the space will feel cramped. If they are too far away, the public realm feels barren and the sense-of-place is lost.

This applies to areas that are commercial as well as residential. Wherever attention is paid to these two elements, the public realm is enhanced, a sense-of-place can be achieved and the properties become memorable in a way that translates directly into higher valuations.



A - Postcard of Main Street, 1937 B - Postcard of Main Street from the 1950s C - Photo of Minnesota Ave/Highway 371/200 (formerly Main Street), 1967 D: Photo of Minnesota Ave/Highway 371/200 (formerly Main Street), 2009

OTHER PHYSICAL ELEMENTS OF CHARACTER

While sense-of-place is the critical component of character for the community, once it is established it can be enhanced by paying attention to the public realm. Creating a complex, human environment is not an expensive proposition, but one that requires many small, intentional decisions over time.

Some simple things that can be done to enhance the public realm include:

- ☐ *Terminating vistas.* Ensuring that, where possible, views from the public realm terminate in either a memorable landscape or significant structure.
- ☐ *Correctly scaling buildings.* Putting a large building, such as an apartment, in a neighborhood with small buildings throws the neighborhood out of balance. It is not that the apartment is bad, just that it

does not fit with the neighborhood. Scaling neighborhoods, commercial and residential, to ensure that buildings are compatible in size provides continuity and improves the character of the neighborhood.

LAKE VIEWS

The layout of Walker includes a feature that has become peculiar in recent decades: direct public lake access. It is common across Minnesota for cities to obtain value from shoreline property by subdividing it and developing it for private ownership. While Walker has this approach as well, it also has a number of road rights-of-way that terminate at the shoreline.

This presents an amazing opportunity to reflect the value of the lake throughout the entire community.

Improving the views of the lake by removing vegetation and obstacles on these rights-of-way will enhance the public realm.

Adding public features to these sites, such as a fishing pier or public boat docking facility, will create value for all property owners in the community.

Leech Lake is a defining feature of the community's identity. Finding ways to physically connect the community to the lake will enhance the community's character and improve the overall quality of life.

□ *Eliminating walls without void spaces.* Even when buildings are lined up and the correct width to height ratio is maintained, if walls are long and barren they are uninviting to pedestrians. Maintaining pedestrian-oriented windows (void spaces) breaks up the wall-effect and provides more comfortable space. Large gaps between buildings, especially when they are gaps dedicated to cars (such as a drive-through), have an even more detrimental effect on the pedestrian environment than a long wall.

□ *Correctly articulating buildings.* In areas with no side-yard setback, buildings that line up and all articulate towards the street can be designed with a tremendous amount of individuality without degrading the overall character of the neighborhood. When the articulation changes and the roof or projections on the building orient instead towards the neighboring properties, the continuity of the public realm is broken. There are no design standards that can compensate for a building that is articulated to contrast with surrounding properties.

□ *Building complex streets.* When streets are designed solely to move automobiles, they become harsh human environments that shun pedestrian life. When complexity is built into streets in the form of sidewalks, landscaping, on-street parking, narrower lanes and slower traffic, the public realm is enhanced and can be shared by many modes of transportation.

□ *Provide safe pedestrian/auto interfaces.* A city needs cars and people, but the two do not mix well in a small-town environment. Designing the areas where pedestrians and automobiles interface in a way that limits the amount of interaction and creates a reasonably safe pedestrian environment will enhance the experience for the pedestrian and the automobile.

From a small-town perspective, none of these approaches requires the heavy hand of government that is often apparent in zoning codes. To capture the sense-of-place and create a memorable human environment, the city is not called on to regulate such things as siding type or building color. Instead, some simple physical guidelines are all that is necessary, giving the property owner the freedom to develop their own property once the essential elements are satisfied.

GOALS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

The City of Walker adopts the following goals relating to community character:

1. Provide a high quality of life for the residents of Walker by improving the public realm and enhancing the character of the community.
2. Improve property values throughout the city by ensuring that all development enhances the public realm and preserves and builds on the character of the community.

3. Develop pedestrian-scale connections throughout and between neighborhoods to make Walker a more livable and vibrant community for people of all ages and incomes.
4. Build on the sense-of-place found in downtown Walker, expanding the basic design principles seen there to all areas of the community.
5. Enhance the public realm in a way that provides a memorable experience for visitors.

To accomplish the stated goals, the City of Walker adopts the following policies:

1. The pattern of new growth and development must be complimentary to the community's traditional development pattern – a grid network of streets, a vibrant public realm and a physical orientation towards Leech Lake.
2. Streets within the public realm must be complex - designed to balance the needs and desires of pedestrian, bike and other universal methods of travel with the needs and desires of automobile traffic and motorists.
3. Public parks, buildings and facilities must be located and designed to reflect the value of the public investment throughout the community.
4. The expansion of business growth should be publicly promoted where new businesses can fill needed gaps and/or directly complement and enhance existing business ventures.
5. Leech Lake and the publicly-owned forests that surround Walker are public resources whose use must benefit the entire community.

To implement the goals and policies of this section, the City of Walker will seek to enact the following strategies:

1. Continue to emphasize the maintenance of sidewalks and curbs so as to ensure an attractive appearance.
2. Continue to maintain and enforce ordinances for handling garbage and outside storage so as to keep properties neat.
3. Review and amend existing zoning ordinances so as to ensure that the City balances necessary regulations with the flexibility for property owners to maintain and build structures that contribute to the City's unique character.
4. Adopt new street standards that narrow lane widths to appropriate neighborhood scale and provide safe pedestrian mobility throughout the city.
5. Use existing mechanisms to provide business loans, loan guarantees and tax incentives to businesses seeking to renovate in the downtown, in conjunction with Small Cities funding, so long as the renovation is complimentary to the existing, pedestrian-oriented development pattern.
6. Investigate options for creating a "Heritage Trail" walking tour that would educate visitors on the history of Walker.
7. Identify features that could be added to public parks, trails or in public right-of-way, such as "head-in-the-hole" cutouts or other photo opportunities, to help create memories for visitors and promote the area as a tourist destination.
8. Ensure that views of Leech Lake are maintained from public rights of way as much as possible throughout the community.
9. Coordinate with local arts organizations to promote public art. Budget a modest amount each year for this community effort.
10. Maintain the city dock areas as pedestrian space for regular use and events.
11. Create a plan for establishing wayfinding (signs and other devices) throughout the city that are modestly scaled, pedestrian-oriented and provide direction to key locations throughout the community.

12. Review and amend, where necessary, the City's sign ordinances so as to ensure that businesses have adequate opportunities to advertise their products and services while also ensuring that the City's unique character is maintained.

Economic Development

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Walker has experienced three distinct phases of economic development. Those were:

1. *The Logging Era* (mid to late 1800s through the Depression), where the local economy was based primarily on the logging industry. In this era, Walker was a railroad town that served as a local camp for logging operations.
2. *The Tourism Era* (post WWII through the mid 1980s), where the city transitioned from a logging economy to a tourism-based economy. The logging camp turned into a fishing camp as the city transformed to serve tourists that were staying at area resorts and enjoying quality of the fishing Leech Lake had to offer.
3. *The Rapid Development Era* (mid 1980s to the early 21st Century), where rising affluence, transportation improvements, technology advancements and increased borrowing power amongst the middle classes created a nationwide population shift towards areas with high scenic value. During this era, the tourism economy shifted into a growth economy, with more people working in housing and growth-related industries such as realty, mortgaging, construction and surveying.

Today it appears that, for Walker as well as other similar communities across the country, the Rapid Development Era is coming to an end. Although it is not clear what will follow, there are some realities that are starting to emerge as critical.

□ *Decreased access to capital.* As this plan was originally being compiled in 2010, the United States was in a severe economic recession brought about, at least partially, by poor lending practices. While the country has perhaps technically come out of that recession by 2016, its effects are still being felt. Job and wage growth is still slow or non-existent and even with historically low interest rates, banks are having a difficult time lending, especially to businesses that may present a degree of risk. Greater levels of caution amongst lenders may be the norm for the foreseeable future.

□ *Decreased population migration.* The post 2008-economic downtown has manifested itself most clearly in the mortgage market, where home prices have fallen and, due to stricter lending requirements, and fewer people are in the market to purchase homes. While the recession may have ended, home prices, job creation and the economy generally continue to recover slowly. These factors all stifle migration and, unfortunately, look as if they may persist for some time. For an area like Walker that has been reliant on growth from in-migration, this presents some particular challenges.⁸

□ *Aging infrastructure.* A tremendous amount of infrastructure has been put into or on the ground to accommodate and, to some extent, induce growth. Whether or not the resulting tax base justifies the investment, the infrastructure deteriorates and will someday require substantial, expensive maintenance. In a post-Rapid Development Era economy, it will be necessary to make the highest use of each infrastructure investment the city chooses to maintain.

□ *Aging population.* Elderly households typically have incomes that are more stable and fluctuate less with market conditions, good or bad. A Walker population that is slightly older than the state average

⁸ It has been offered by some in the public that the underlying fundamentals of Walker as a scenic-destination make it attractive to the retirement baby-boom generation. Of that there is no question. The only question for the future Walker economy is how much mobility boomers will have in the new economy. If they have the flexibility to move to Walker, there are no major obstacles to locally prevent it and an entire industry established to facilitate the move. However, the fundamentals of the economy are limiting everyone's mobility. For the City of Walker, there are prudent reasons to anticipate and prepare for a local economy that is less dependent on a continual infusion of new residents undertaking new development projects.

(which itself is considered disproportionately aging) indicates some built-in resistance to policies that involve risk or the potential for tax rate fluctuations. It also implies the potential for preferring short-term approaches where larger expenses can be deferred.

□ *Less government support.* State and federal governments are realizing the same kind of fiscal limitations as local governments and are questioning priorities for future spending. Local government aid to cities in Minnesota had been cut dramatically in the mid-2000s and continued instability in these transfers are almost assured. With populations nationwide shifting from rural to urban/suburban areas, policymakers are questioning the wisdom of future infrastructure investments in less populated areas. While there will likely be some money available from state and federal sources, the City of Walker should prepare for the day when their support is negligible – or at least for it to be difficult to rely on such support in a consistent and stable manner.

□ *More connected world.* From the Internet to cellular phones to the advent of social media, our ability to communicate with each other has vastly expanded. Where Walker was once remote and isolated it is now connected to international commerce in ways previously unimaginable. This leveling of the competitive landscape does not give Walker any particular advantage, but does present a new opportunity that can be capitalized on.

□ *Increased technology advancements.* Along with improvements in communication technology, other technological advancements continue to benefit Walker businesses. The ability to attract and retain an educated workforce, the ability to collaborate with partners across the globe and the options for researching new, innovative approaches are all enhanced by continued improvements in technology. It is clear that the next era, however it manifests itself, will be led by those able to best utilize new advancements in technology.

It is likely that the future of Walker will be oriented towards tourism, tourism support industries, the provision of government services (federal, state, county, school district and municipal) and businesses that utilize technology to create and/or distribute goods and services. Notably absent from this list are the industries of growth (land development, real estate, title closing, surveying and engineering, etc..) which, while important to a functioning local economy, are unlikely to be the dominant industries they were over the past two decades.

EXPORT AND IMPORT-REPLACEMENT

For the Walker economy to prosper in the coming years, it is important that community leaders understand the relationship between export industries (businesses that “export” goods and services outside of the community and, in exchange, “import” capital to the community) and import-replacement industries (those that serve the local market).

It is easy to understand exports and import-replacement on a national scale. We export computers made in the United States to Europe. In this instance the computer is an export that brings outside capital into the county. We import televisions from Japan. When we provide televisions locally instead of importing them from Japan, that is an import-replacement. American money now goes to American manufacturers instead of being sent to Japan.

The same thing happens at the local level. When someone from Walker drives to Bemidji to buy shoes, Bemidji is exporting the shoes to us. Our money goes to Bemidji’s market and the shoes come to Walker (imported). When that resident opts instead to purchase the shoes in Walker, then the shoes are an import-replacement. Instead of buying it from someplace in Bemidji, the shoes were bought locally and more of the money stays in the community.

The following table shows how this relationship has worked throughout the history of Walker.

	Export Industries	Import-Replacement Industries
Logging Era	Raw wood and lightly processed wood materials	Services and goods for lumberjacks and those in support of the forestry industry (eg. shoe repair, clothing sales, bars and restaurants, brothel)
Tourism Era	Tourism service, fishing experience and—to a lesser degree—fish	Services and goods for tourists and support services for the tourism industry (eg. fishing guides, bait stores, tourist retail shops)
Rapid Development Era	Land as well as land development and construction-related services	Services and goods for new residents and support services for land development activities (eg. title companies, real estate offices, government services)
Next Era	Unknown	Unknown

The first way a regional center like Walker can create a prosperous local economy is to increase the number of exporting businesses to bring new capital into the city. The second way is to create an environment where competitive, import-replacement businesses can flourish.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Walker has many more things that are working for it than are not working. A very strong destination effect in the downtown has created an agglomeration of businesses that mutually benefit and support each other, even when they directly compete. A trip to the bank can passively create the side trip to the coffee shop or the drug store. Multiple quality restaurants make Walker a dining destination. The practical is also available within Walker, from accountants to attorneys to surveyors. This is a diversity that allows Walker to function year-round.

There are also a handful of key destinations in place supporting the entire Walker economy. On the private-sector side, Reeds and The Chase are destinations unique to Walker that draw people from hundreds of miles away. In the public sector, the Cass County Government Center, located in the middle of town, serves the same function. It is critical that the Cass County Government Center, along with the many well-paying jobs that accompany it, stays in its current location where it has such a tremendous positive impact on the local economy. The same can be said about the school and the post office.

The opportunities to expand the destination effect are many and they begin and end with enhancing the character of the community. The main challenge Walker faces in that regard is that the style of many new developments contrast with the character of the community and actually detract from the destination effect. Businesses that are auto-oriented—designed primarily to service people arriving by automobile—may independently be successful but, due to their lack of interconnectivity, fail to add proportionate value to neighboring businesses.

The auto-oriented pattern of development is also damaging to existing businesses. The greatest unrealized assets that the Walker economy has are the residents themselves. Currently those residents are forced, due to the auto-centric configuration of their neighborhoods, to drive to every routine destination. Once forced into an auto-trip, the competitive advantage of close proximity the downtown has is negated by the large parking lots available in businesses outside of town. Reconfiguring the neighborhoods of Walker to provide residents with more choices for how they get around is necessary to the continued economic health of the community.

IS THERE ENOUGH PARKING IN WALKER?



Walker, July 2009

The answer to that question depends largely on the expectation of whoever answers it.

Many local residents expect to travel to their destination and be able to park within a few parking spaces of the entrance. There are three principle factors that have created this expectation. First, parking is generally abundant. For at least nine months of the year, a convenient spot can always be found. Second, Walker has largely been reconfigured to prioritize travel by automobile over any other method of travel. If you can't walk, you expect driving and parking to be ultra-convenient. Finally, destinations have been dispersed over the past two decades and so most trips require an automobile and a parking spot.

Visitors often have different expectations. Many come from areas where walking between three and ten blocks to a destination is routine. Even where the public realm is not great for pedestrians, a person can walk from one side of Walker's commercial area to another in just a few minutes. The adjacent residential areas, where on-street parking is abundant, are also very close to the downtown. Even though visitors to Walker are often here during times of peak parking demand, they are the most likely to think Walker has enough parking.

The City of Walker pays an enormous amount of money to meet the parking expectations that exist. The costs are not just the monetary cost of acquiring the land and building the spaces. It also includes the massive amount of lost opportunity (tax base, jobs, enhanced destination) that devoting so much of Walker's valuable commercial area to parking involves. Since cars and pedestrians don't mix well, a diminished public realm is another significant cost for a parking-centric economic development strategy.

The better question is: How much does the City of Walker want to give up for the convenience of meeting local parking expectations?

This is in contrast to an approach that favors the conversion of valuable downtown property to auto-related infrastructure like parking and additional lane capacity. Not only is building and maintaining this horizontal infrastructure very expensive, it detracts from the destination character of the downtown. In attempting to compete with businesses on the periphery for auto-convenience, the approach negates the town's greatest strengths, its overall character and the collection of diverse businesses that are conveniently located within it.

This is not to suggest that competition from auto-oriented businesses on the periphery of town is not real. County zoning policies have induced a random mix of commercial and industrial investments just outside of the city limits that directly compete with businesses located in the city. While there is short-term gain and loss with this approach, there is a more significant long-term missed opportunity for everyone.

As opposed to filling a needed gap in the market, these improperly-zoned areas outside of town simply displace jobs and investments from areas where existing infrastructure is in place and additional growth and development would grow the local economy beyond just the single investment, to areas that are isolated and provide no benefit to neighboring businesses, require more auto trips and thus create more traffic, and are outside of any established support structure for area business growth. This missed opportunity ultimately weakens the entire area. The city's industrial park is both a challenge and an opportunity. While providing municipal utilities to this area is not financially feasible, existing business in the park proves that the infrastructure is not necessary to attract quality investments and grow a large number of jobs there. The city is already committed to maintaining a massive amount of infrastructure to serve the Ah-Gwah-Ching site, which has the characteristics of a typical industrial or business park location. Focusing on this existing investment as a priority for additional growth presents a tremendous opportunity for the City to obtain a better return on its current system.

To be successful, the City of Walker must not limit itself to what currently exists or "how things have always been done" but must instead boldly embrace innovation and new visions for the development of the local economy.

GOALS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

The City of Walker adopts the following goals relating to economic development:

1. Identify and implement strategies to promote the City and region to potential residents and new businesses.
2. Maintain and enhance the original community character that makes Walker an economic destination in the region.
3. Seek ways for local businesses to complement and support each other within a competitive, regional market.
4. Work to connect Walker's neighborhoods to the downtown business community.
5. Prioritize approaches to economic development that maximize the use of existing buildings and infrastructure.
6. Identify and strengthen leadership capacity within the area and leverage it for building a strong local business community.
7. Build on Walker's position as a government center to support economic opportunities within the downtown.
8. Look for innovative and cost-effective ways to grow jobs and tax base through business development.
9. Continue to promote the Walker area as a tourist destination by coordinating with area businesses, resorts, state and federal agencies and other communities to ensure well-coordinated and collaborative marketing.

To accomplish the stated goals, the City of Walker adopts the following policies:

1. For the benefit of the area, the Cass County offices must remain within the downtown of Walker.
2. Commercial development, major subdivisions and zoning changes that happen within two miles of the Walker city limits should be coordinated with the City of Walker.
3. The pattern of new growth and development must be complimentary to the historical development pattern – including a general grid pattern to streets, a vibrant public realm, and a physical orientation toward Leech Lake.
4. The expansion of business growth should be publicly promoted where new businesses can fill needed gaps and/or directly complement and enhance existing business ventures.
5. Streets within the public realm must be complex - designed to balance pedestrian, bike and other universal methods of travel with automobile traffic and motorists.
6. Neighborhoods must be physically interconnected and accessible to and from the community's commercial areas.
7. The increased use, reuse and redevelopment of properties already served by municipal sewer and water systems should be supported over development of properties that require extension of utilities.
8. Avoid an over-supply of city-owned parking areas and, whenever possible, convert platted lots to commercial ventures or other uses that help grow the tax base and add jobs to the community.

LEVERAGING GOVERNMENT

Walker is the Cass County seat as well as the home of School District #113. Both the county and the school district employ a large number of people at competitive wages. These people are a significant part of the Walker marketplace. The more mechanisms that are established and enhanced that allow these people to live in town, shop in town and take part in the local community, the more the local market is enhanced.

Further, both of these government operations draw people to Walker from a larger region. The advantage of this to the local market is also tremendous. It is critical to the future economy of Walker that both Cass County and the school complex remain within the city limits and within convenient walking distance of downtown businesses.

To implement the goals and policies of this section, the City of Walker will seek to enact the following strategies:

1. Work with Shingobee Township to standardize industrial development standards between the city and the town.
2. Continue to work with other cities in Cass County to request that the county modify its approach to zoning around cities to coordinate commercial development efforts with the investments of its municipalities.
3. Continue to support expansion of the Cass County offices on its current site.
4. Monitor and amend local regulations and policies that may impair Cass County from maximizing use of their existing site. Modify the regulations and policies, where possible, to provide the county with greater flexibility.
5. Review and amend existing zoning ordinances so as to ensure that the City balances necessary regulations with the flexibility for property owners to maintain and build structures that contribute to the City's unique character.
6. Ensure that newly built street sections are designed appropriately for neighborhood scale, reduce long-term costs and provide safe pedestrian mobility throughout the city. As opportunities arise, retrofit existing streets to narrow driving lanes, slow traffic or otherwise improve safety for pedestrians.
7. Provide business loans, loan guarantees and tax incentives to businesses seeking to renovate in the downtown, so long as the renovation is complimentary to the existing, pedestrian-oriented development pattern.

8. Maintain and retrofit existing municipal parking lots to reduce long-term maintenance costs and emphasize the aesthetic qualities of the downtown.
9. Identify city-owned, platted lots currently unused. Develop a strategy for converting each to commercial or other uses when it would help achieve the goals of the Comprehensive Plan.
10. Conduct and maintain a business inventory so as to promote local businesses and identify gaps in the local economy.
11. Annually update a business inventory to measure the success of the City's policies and strategies in promoting a wide variety of businesses and employers in the area.
12. Establish a joint working group with Cass County to re-evaluate options for use of the Ah-Gwah-Ching site. Seek possible opportunities for the site including mixed use redevelopment, higher education institutions and/or scientific research that leverages the natural assets of Leech Lake and the area's natural environment.
13. Review and amend, where necessary, the City's sign ordinances so as to ensure that businesses have adequate opportunities to advertise their products and services while also ensuring that the City's unique character is maintained.
14. Establish a task force to identify and implement strategies for ensuring adequate provision of affordable and adequate housing options for wages typical of the area. Consider zoning amendments, as necessary, to assist in these efforts – including consideration of reduced minimum lot and/or dwelling sizes, encouragement of multi-family housing where appropriate and allowances for home construction on otherwise nonconforming lots.
15. Meet regularly with the Walker Chamber of Commerce, the Tourism Board, local businesses and other interested parties to identify ways in which the City can support efforts to promote year-round tourism and awareness of the area's many environmental, cultural and recreational assets in a well-coordinated and effective manner. Seek to ensure that social media is leveraged as effectively as possible in promoting the area.

Parks and Recreation

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Traditionally, parks in urban areas have been designed for one of four types of functions. Those are:

1. *Squares*, a small gathering place designed at a neighborhood level.
2. *Greens*, a larger gathering place designed at the community level.
3. *Parks*, a place designed to simulate nature for those that live in an urban area.
4. *Greenbelts*, which are natural areas that surround an urban environment making the latter into a distinct town.

These spaces are planned to add value to the properties within the community. They do this by providing convenient places for recreation, public events and spontaneous gatherings. They add to the sense-of-community and, when well designed, will terminate sightline vistas so that the public realm is enhanced through a landscape that is designed to be memorable.

For a small town's park program to be successful, it should create real improvements in property value throughout the community.

The City of Walker has three squares (the plaza fronting the Cass County Courthouse, the small park next to the First National Bank and the city dock), two greens (the school grounds and the main city park) as well as part of a greenbelt (Leech Lake).

AN “ACCIDENTAL PARK”

The area that is currently the main park in the City of Walker was never designed by the city’s founders to be a park. This “accidental park” is actually the former location of the logging camp that was the principle economic driver of early Walker. As the logging operation declined and was dismantled, the grounds were partially turned into a public green. While this was a great opportunity for the community that former leaders rightly capitalized on, the fact that the land was never planned to be a public area manifests a number of challenges - and opportunities - for the City today.



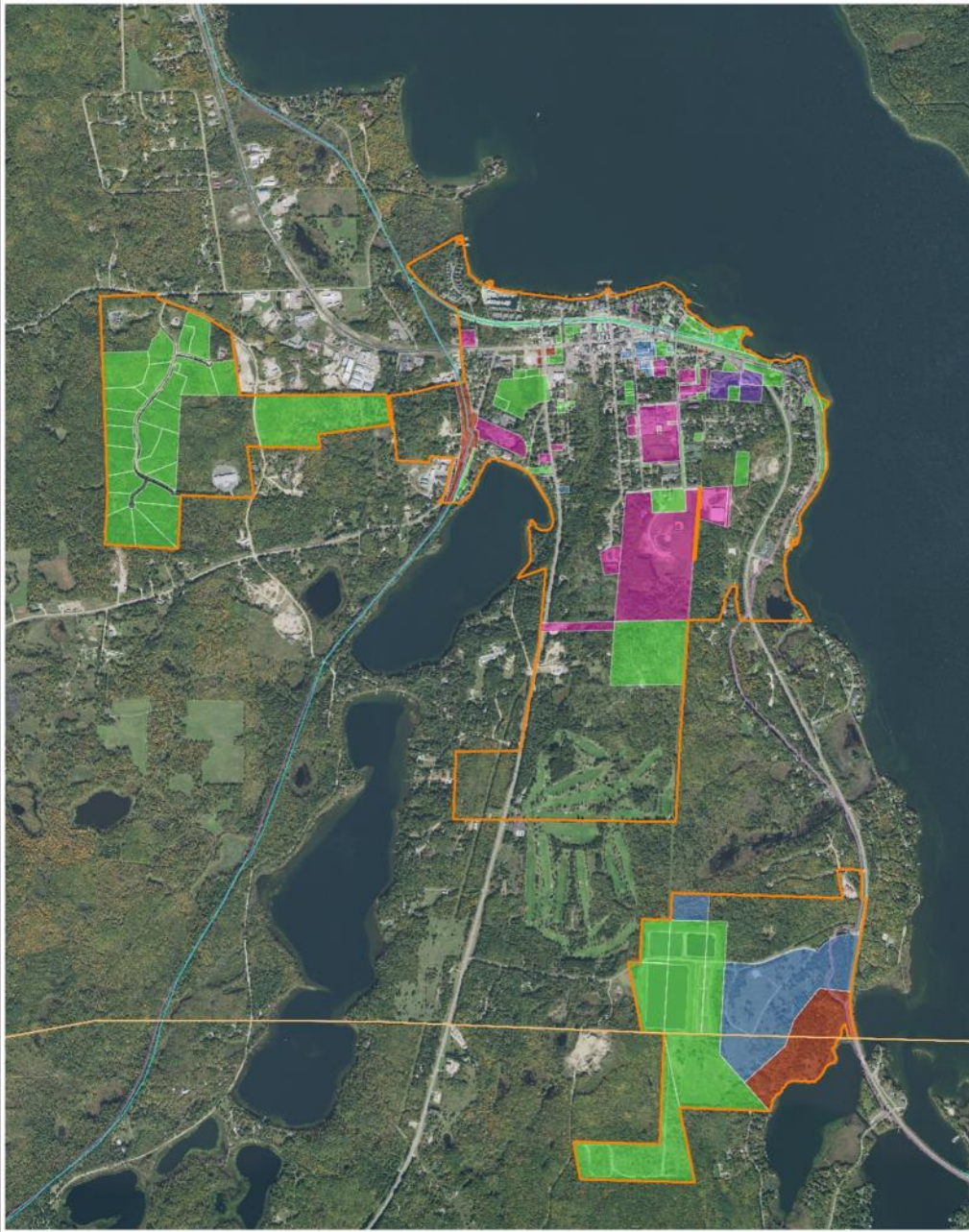
Walker City Park, Photos from the 1968 Comprehensive Plan

OPPORTUNITIES

1. The city’s main lakeside park contains a large amount of shoreline, a high-value commodity that is rarely in public ownership.
2. The lakeside park is in close proximity to the residential and commercial areas of the community.
3. Community groups and active individuals feel a sense of ownership in the grounds and have invested in improving it.
4. There are historic and cultural landmarks within the park that are not being utilized.

Publicly Owned Lands

City of Walker
Cass County, Minnesota



Publicly Owned Land

- CITY
- COUNTY
- EXEMPT
- FEDERAL
- STATE

■ City of Walker Boundary



0 1000 2000 3000 4000 5000 6000 ft



April 2015

Data Sources:

City and Parcel Boundaries, Land Ownership - Cass County GIS
Aerial Photos - 2015 Farm Service Agency, USDA

CHALLENGES

1. The lakeside park is not as easily accessible as it should be. This limits the spontaneous value of the park as a public gathering space and requires much of the limited area to be dedicated to parking.
2. The value of many of the properties in the immediate vicinity of the lakeside park would be increased by improved pedestrian accessibility⁹. Those properties that would benefit from increased access have not been designed to fully benefit from the amenities the park could provide and, in reality, actually detract from the value of the park itself.

WHAT SMELLS?

Water treatment and wastewater collection facilities are a part of every city, but when they are located in the park, special consideration must be taken.

Sewage lift stations are typically located in the “low spot” of a collection system, gathering sewage in a holding tank until it can be pumped to a different area. The smells from such a facility can be unpleasant to anyone passing nearby.

Water treatment systems can also sometimes have foul odors that are released to the air. While non-toxic, these smells can be disturbing to people seeking to recreate, picnic or enjoy some solitude in the park.

Over time, the City of Walker should seek to relocate infrastructure facilities with offensive odors away from places where contact with people is anticipated. Where this can't happen, consideration should be given to retrofitting these facilities to reduce the odor. Design of future facilities must include an evaluation of potential odor problems.

3. The investments that have been made in the park, while welcome by residents, are not coordinated or designed to maximize the value of those investments to the community. In some instances, they give the area a random and unsettling feel.

The community envisions the lakeside park as a lively public green that would serve four active functions:

1. *Providing pedestrian access to the lake.* Few residents of Walker own direct lake access, but all residents can have access to the lake in this area. Whether it is a fishing pier, an active beach or a place to watch the sun go down, this public space provides an excellent opportunity for the residents of Walker.
2. *A place for small gatherings.* Family picnics and other spontaneous get-togethers fit into the vision for this area. There is ample room for people that want to grill out, play catch, throw a Frisbee or lay on a blanket under the sun.
3. *Active community recreation opportunities.* In the summer, the tennis courts, playground equipment and basketball court provide areas for active recreation. In the winter, an ice skating rink would provide opportunities for hockey, curling or a leisurely skate in the moonlight.
4. *A place for events and periodic, large gatherings.* When done in a way that complements the other uses in the public space, large gatherings are an important function for this green. Music festivals, fireworks displays and other cultural events fit well into this setting.

LESSER KNOWN PUBLIC SPACES

Nearly six out of ten participants who responded at the Open House kicking off the 2010 Comprehensive Plan Update process indicated that Walker could use more recreational opportunities. These same sentiments were often repeated in the 2015-2016 update process. Some of the under-utilized spaces that exist may, if transformed, provide the opportunity they seek.

Cass County Courthouse Plaza. The area in front of the courthouse was designed to be a traditional public square. Unfortunately, it is not well connected to the community and, over time, its value as a public space has

⁹ Since the writing of the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, access to the park from the Hardee's restaurant has been improved.

been degraded by changes in its design. To reconnect and revitalize this area would provide a benefit to the retail section of town and provide a true, natural gathering place.

Bank Square. The area next to the First National Bank is an awkward square. Even though it contains picnic tables, it is not widely used because it is not well located, not accessible and not a comfortable space to be in. Unfortunately, this land is a fragment of what used to be a broader public space that has now been turned into parking area. Redesigning this space and ultimately reclaiming some of the area lost to parking is necessary to recapturing the value of this area.

City Docks. The city provides a set of docks for boaters to use to access the city. The facility consists of a dozen day docks where one can tie



Bank Square, July 2009

SHORELINE RESTORATION

Over the last 15 years, there has been a popular movement to “restore” shoreline to natural conditions.

Although well-intentioned, the effect has largely been to restore public sites, which limits the public’s access to lake and use of shoreline. While this takes place, private shorelines—the overwhelming majority of all lakes—see their lake buffer go largely unregulated.

Walker lost a significant part of its shoreline to such a project. Unfortunately, the restoration also covered up a part of the community that had historical significance dating back to the logging era. Recapturing this area for public use would be a benefit to all of Walker’s property owners.

Walker should support restoration efforts on the 99+ percent of shoreline not in public ownership, where minimal standards and a small amount of effort could have much more significant impact on lake water quality and projects on the small fragments still available for public use.

up a boat and then walk into town.

Overnight mooring is not allowed, so patrons of the docks tend to be lake property owners or vacationers from other parts of Leech Lake. There is parking at the site, but its use is believed to be mostly independent of the dock usage. While the boat traffic is valuable, the city docks are an under-utilized community resource.

Schools Grounds. The community, through the school, has invested in some impressive facilities on the school grounds. These are centrally located and positioned in an area where they provide great value to the surrounding areas. Unfortunately, they are also difficult to access due to poor street design and aggressive fencing by the school district. An enhanced relationship between the school and the City could help residents appreciate the value of this important community gathering space.

Leech Lake. While Walker would not exist were it not for the lake, this large public space is frequently overlooked in planning the community. While a traditional greenbelt provides a hard break between the developed, urban areas of a community and the undeveloped “green” areas that surrounds it, the “blue”-belt of the lake serves the same function. It not only increases the property values of those that directly abut the lake, it can provide recreational opportunities for those within the city and, if done properly, can enhance values throughout the entire community.

Forest Service Land and the Paul Bunyan State Forest. Walker has the good fortune of being adjacent to some significant tracts of federally-owned and state-owned lands. Strengthening the connection between these lands and the City of Walker will help capture the value of this proximity and provide even greater recreational opportunity for residents and visitors to the area. This is a huge unrealized opportunity.

Miscellaneous Water Access Points. It is evident that Walker’s original town planners considered Leech Lake an important community amenity and sought to capitalize on the close proximity by providing a number of public, water-access points. Some of these apparently were to enhance the view by terminating vistas on the water, while others seem to be created to provide water access to off-lake properties. As time has passed, cultural attitudes towards shoreline ownership have favored exclusivity over community access and many of these access points have been given to neighboring property owners or left unused. Reclaiming these lost accesses, where possible, and restoring their connection to the community is another way to improve the quality of life within the city and provide value to Walker property owners.

OTHER RECREATIONAL AMENITIES



Paul Bunyan/Heartland Trail, July 2009

Trails. The Paul Bunyan and Heartland trails pass through Walker¹⁰. They are two of the most significant trails in Minnesota. The Paul Bunyan trail runs from south of Brainerd/Baxter north to Bemidji while the Heartland Trail runs west to Park Rapids and north to Cass Lake.

Community Center. A privately-owned community center, with a full gym and hockey arena, has been constructed on the edge of town. It serves a number of local organizations. The owners of the facility have approached city officials requesting assistance with financial short falls. The future of the community center is not certain.

Walker-Hackensack-Akeley (WHA) School District Ball Fields. New softball and baseball fields are being constructed for public use. The facilities have been built using donations and are scheduled to be available in 2010.

GOALS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

The City of Walker adopts the following goals relating to parks and recreation:

1. Use the city’s squares, greens and parks to enhance the quality of life for Walker area residents and business owners.
2. Construct a new public library.
3. Help promote the park as a gathering space and improve pedestrian-oriented connections between public spaces and the commercial areas on the eastern edge of downtown.
4. Retain the city’s squares, greens and parks and enhance them in a way that provides a long-term financial return to property owners throughout the city.
5. Develop human-scale connections to the city’s squares, greens and parks to better define those spaces making them more accessible and meaningful to people in Walker.

¹⁰ It actually terminates on the south end of Walker and starts again on the north. A project is underway to connect these trails by defining the trail corridor through the City.

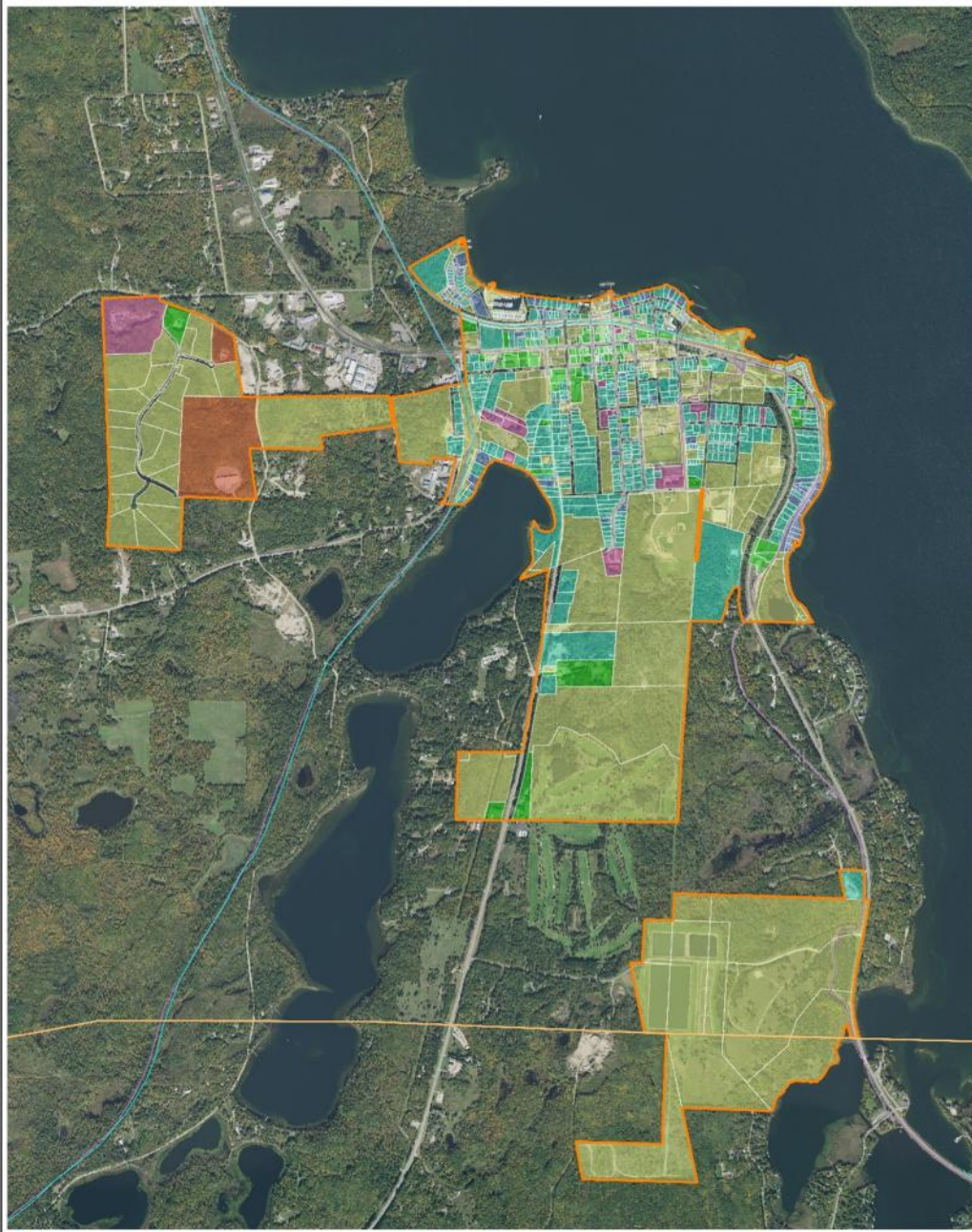
6. Utilize the layout and design of the city's public spaces to draw the people of Walker to Leech Lake.
7. Share the history of Walker in a way that is subtle, authentic and memorable.
8. Through implementation of these goals, provide a memorable experience for visitors to Walker.

To implement the goals and policies of this section, the City of Walker will seek to enact the following strategies:

1. Develop and implement a master plan for Walker's entire current and future park system consistent with the goals of this plan and which provides a wide variety of amenities and activities for the public.
2. Make enhanced pedestrian connections to the lakeside park area a priority of the City.
3. Construct a fishing pier at one of the public park facilities.
4. Monitor and address, when necessary, factors which affect the attractiveness of the lakeside park visitors and residents – including vegetative plantings, maintenance of the grounds and facilities, and nuisance characteristics from nearby properties.
5. Maintain and establish, where necessary, signage along the recreational trail through town.
6. Maintain an accurate trails map that includes cross-country ski trails and other trails in the surrounding townships.
7. Continue to work with representatives from the Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Forestry Department, Leech Lake Riders and any other organizations that are interested in trails and trail maintenance to discuss ways to share resources.
8. Continue to work cooperatively with Cass County officials to implement strategies for recapturing and enhancing the Cass County Courthouse Plaza for public use.
9. Look for ways to establish a public boat-mooring facility for the residents of Walker. If demand is greater than supply, provide seasonal access by a lottery system.
10. Maintain the city dock areas as pedestrian space, rather than for parking, so that the site can be dedicated to those arriving to Walker by boat and those seeking to access the docks from the City.
11. Meet regularly with School District #113 officials to discuss ways in which the City and the school can cooperate to increase the amount of park land and recreational facilities available for public use.
12. Provide space for a joint outdoor ice skating/skate park facility.
13. Identify each public water access point within the City of Walker. Develop a long-term plan for the use of each site consistent with the values of this plan.
14. Continue to generate new ideas for improvements to the City's amenities and facilities within its parks. Prioritize and implement those ideas with the greatest positive impact as funds and circumstances allows.
15. Seek out opportunities to establish programs and amenities that will provide opportunities for the area's youth and young adults to participate in positive recreational opportunities.
16. Consider the installation of permanent public restrooms in the downtown area and in other public areas, including the intersection of Fifth Street with the parking lot serving "The Chase". Ensure that such facilities, if built, are well maintained.

Land Use Tax Classifications

City of Walker
Cass County, Minnesota



Land Use Tax Classification

- Residential
- Apartment (4 or more unit)
- Recreational/Seasonal - Re
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Other

 Municipal_Boundary



0 1000 2000 3000 4000 5000 6000 ft



April 2015
Data Sources:
City and Parcel Boundaries, Land Ownership - Cass County GIS
Aerial Photos - 2015 Farm Service Agency, USDA

Housing and Land Use

The City of Walker is built primarily on a traditional grid pattern. The original housing was located near the lake and in the blocks adjacent to the downtown. The original development pattern was mixed-use, and so residential and commercial ventures were interspersed throughout the grid.

Over time, residential development coalesced into neighborhoods across with housing that was compatibly scaled. Single family and multi-family homes were built throughout these areas using a traditional pattern that spaced houses the right-of-way at distances that enhanced the public realm. Dwellings were built near the street while accessory structures were placed in the rear of the lot. The neighborhoods were connected by narrow streets (narrow by current standards), often with sidewalks. While modest in size and scale, these neighborhoods had a sense-of-place characteristic of this era of development. Fragments of these neighborhoods can still be found in Walker.

Following World War II and into the 1980s, the style of housing began to shift. As streets and rights-of-ways were reconfigured to increase automobile accessibility, the orientation of homes changed as well. The typical home was a little larger and positioned differently on the lot. Desire for a more independent feel prompted home builders to move houses back and move accessory structures forward. Some multi-family dwellings were constructed along this same pattern, with emphasis on large parking areas and green space along the public street. Most of the current housing stock in Walker was built in this style.

As area development began to pick up in the 1990s, the significant housing investments were transitioning out of the city to where property owners could have lake access or larger acreage. A number of marginal properties in the city limits fell into disrepair and, while most homes were still properly maintained, new housing investments within the City limits were suburban-renditions of the homes being constructed in rural Shingobee Township. They were larger, used more land and were set back in an independent style.

This form of housing combined with further street widening to reduce the connectivity of neighborhoods. Most homes were now independent of their neighboring dwellings, a pattern that creates patches of both value and



*The traditional neighborhood pattern is still visible in parts of Walker.
Photo taken in July 2009*



Architecture in Walker began a shift to auto-orientation in the 1960s that accelerated through the rapid growth of the 1990s and early 21st Century. Photo taken in July 2009.

blight. Multi-family apartment buildings out-of-scale with the surrounding housing was also built during this period. Redevelopment, except in extreme cases, is non-existent or the purview of government.

What has happened in Walker is similar to what has happened in small-town neighborhoods across the country. What our original homes lacked in size and scale, the original builders made up for in design. Building neighborhoods on a human scale enhanced the public realm and ensured that the houses provided value, and retained value, more than the sum of their parts.

As the City changed orientation from neighborhood design to a more auto-centric, independent style of living, the City attracted some short-term investment but ultimately lost out to properties outside the City that provided even more independence and greater auto accessibility. The more the City “invested” to increase auto-accessibility in its neighborhoods, the more it devalued those neighborhoods and the housing that was there. Today investments in housing improvements are random and almost always out of scale or incompatible with adjacent development, which the new developments try to buffer themselves from.



Building scale and neighborhood compatibility are important issues in the long-term viability of housing built in Walker. Buildings must orient towards the street, be scaled to the neighborhood and be designed so that they contribute to a public realm that is inviting space for people to use. Unfortunately, this relatively new building does not accomplish these features. Photo taken in July 2009.

Participants in the planning process were asked where they felt a new family consisting of two parents, both working well-paying, professional jobs, and kids attending the local school would live if they moved to the Walker area. All agreed that, since they likely had the means, the family would seek housing outside of the City. This realization should be startling to all residents of Walker.

A city with Walker’s parks, ball fields, access to an incredible lake, downtown full of vitality, well-located school, low crime rates, local churches and opportunities for an engaging civic life should not be experiencing stagnation and decline of its housing stock. The City is built on a framework of neighborhood design. Trying to adopt a suburban development pattern on a traditional framework has made Walker’s housing stock less competitive.

For the City of Walker to improve its housing—which is essential if there is to

be any sustained, long-term growth for the area—it needs to restore its neighborhoods. This means returning to a pattern of development that emphasizes sound site design, proper building placement, structure compatibility and the interconnectivity of neighborhoods.

GOALS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

The City of Walker adopts the following goals relating to housing and land use:

1. Develop neighborhoods that are interconnected and create a sense of community.
2. Ensure that new housing is properly scaled at the neighborhood level and is designed in a way that enhances the public realm.

3. Allow regulatory flexibility within the city to expand housing options.
4. Manage the rural/urban transition area surrounding the city to ensure new growth is coordinated to build on the strengths of the area.
5. Support efforts to provide an adequate supply of housing which is of quality and safe construction and affordable to individuals and families with incomes provided by local and regional employers.

To accomplish the stated goals, the City of Walker adopts the following policies:

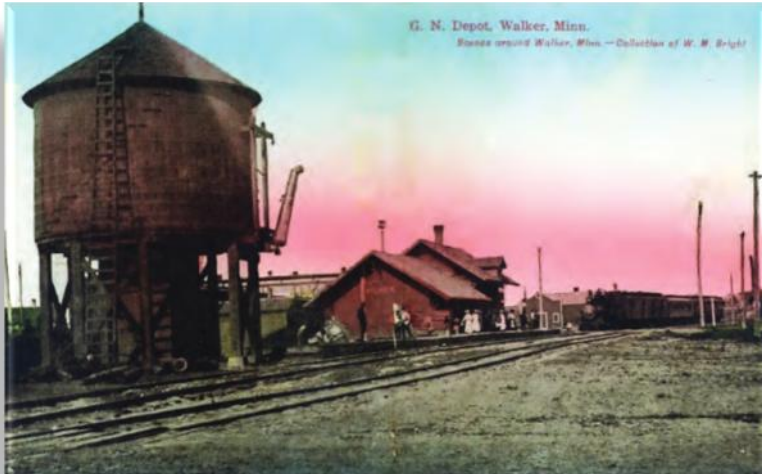
1. The pattern of new growth and development must be complimentary to the historical development pattern – including a general grid pattern to streets, a vibrant public realm, and a physical orientation toward Leech Lake.
2. Streets within the public realm must be complex - designed to balance pedestrian, bike and other universal methods of travel with automobile traffic and motorists.
3. Neighborhoods must be physically interconnected and accessible to and from the community's commercial areas.
4. Support the construction of “starter homes” in appropriate areas to increase the supply of homes affordable to those individuals and families with incomes typical of the region.
5. The increased use, reuse and redevelopment of properties already served by municipal sewer and water systems should be supported over development of properties that require extension of utilities.
6. The City of Walker supports local state and federal efforts to protect drinking water supplies.
7. The City of Walker will recognize and support state-endorsed wellhead protection plans through land use and facilities plans, zoning and other appropriate methods.
8. The City of Walker will support communication and coordination efforts to protect and preserve groundwater resources and facilities.
9. It is a paramount policy of the City to protect the purity of present and future drinking water supply areas by recognizing the goals of the wellhead protection program.

To implement the goals and policies of this section, the City of Walker will seek to enact the following strategies:

1. Review and amend existing zoning ordinances so as to ensure that the City balances necessary regulations with the flexibility for property owners to maintain and build structures that contribute to the City's unique character.
2. Review and amend existing zoning ordinances to allow for reasonable increases in housing density, where appropriate, so as to help increase the affordability of lots and housing.
3. Ensure that newly built street sections are designed appropriately for neighborhood scale, reduce long-term costs and provide safe pedestrian mobility throughout the city. As opportunities arise, retrofit existing streets to narrow driving lanes, slow traffic or otherwise improve safety for pedestrians.
4. Ensure that views of Leech Lake are maintained from public rights of way as much as possible throughout the community.
5. Establish a task force to identify and implement strategies for ensuring adequate provision of affordable and adequate housing options for low- and middle-income workers and seniors. Consider zoning amendments, as necessary, to assist in these efforts – including consideration of reduced minimum lot and/or dwelling sizes, encouragement of multi-family housing where appropriate and allowances for home construction on otherwise nonconforming lots.

Transportation and Infrastructure

Some of the greatest challenges for the City of Walker relate to infrastructure. This is because the City's infrastructure systems must be maintained and, in general, the tax base adjacent to the existing improvements is not sufficient to support that maintenance. This reality has become more acute in recent years as new development has "spread out," further decreasing the efficiencies of the system.



Postcard of the Great Northern Depot, 1910.

To start to correct the financial imbalances in the current system, the City needs to constantly seek ways to make better use of current infrastructure investments. Consistent with the other aspects of this plan, making better use of current systems means reevaluating the City's development pattern. The larger-lot style of development seen in the neighboring townships, which is mandated by the zoning code, is simply not financially viable with urban infrastructure.

While the 1997 Comprehensive Plan calls on the City to invest in new infrastructure as a way to promote growth and economic development, this plan update recommends a different course of action. Much like our ancestors in leaner times stretched each

available resource as far as they could, so the mentality of the City in regards to infrastructure needs to shift.

The primary mechanisms for funding infrastructure in recent years—federal and state grants and developer investments—are not stable or predictable sources of revenue. Increasing debt to pay for inefficient infrastructure limits future options where leverage may be necessary. If the City is to grow strong, it must have an approach to infrastructure that maximizes the return on each public investment.

NEAR-TERM & LONG-TERM TRADEOFFS

Major infrastructure improvements in the City of Walker have been paid for mostly by aid from the Federal and State governments or by landowners who install the infrastructure as part of a development project. In both instances, the underlying assumption is that the City will then maintain the infrastructure.

In the near-term, there are a lot of advantages to this approach. With relatively little or no investment, the City gains immediate tax revenue. This allows either a greater level of service or a lower rate of taxation (or both) for taxpayers.

In the long-term, however, the infrastructure needs to be maintained and, ultimately, replaced. This is where financial imbalances become problematic. If the development that is served by the infrastructure does not generate enough revenue to pay for that maintenance, the money needs to come from somewhere else.

Typically, cities will try to grow more to make up the imbalance. The idea is that a new development would generate new revenue that could be used to maintain the older development. The Ponzi scheme aspect of this is obvious: if growth slows down or even fails to accelerate quickly enough to keep up, the system can't be sustained.

Even if this system could be made to work, the underlying mechanisms of growth—government aid and investments by developers—are not reliable. The City cannot count on the Federal Government or the State of Minnesota to continue to provide grants in the coming decades. Unless there is a dramatic change in the

economy, for the near-term at least, it does not look like there will be robust investments from private developers. The City can no longer safely rely on these mechanisms to maintain their infrastructure systems.

Major portions of Walker's infrastructure are at or nearing the end of their life cycle. That means the City will need to start addressing the long-term tradeoffs inherent in the development pattern adopted by the past generation.

ROADS AND STREETS

The first goal listed in the 1997 Comprehensive Plan deals with transportation. It states *"The City of Walker should provide for the efficient movement of traffic throughout the community and for adequate parking facilities within the downtown area."*

The implementation of this goal fundamentally undermines the City's ability to maintain its infrastructure systems.

The "efficient movement of traffic" is a concept applied by engineers to highways. Highways are simple roads where the complexities of intersections, curves, encroachments, potential pedestrian conflicts, etc... are removed so that automobiles can move "efficiently." In a highway environment, any complexity reduces safety and efficiency and should rightly be avoided. Roads of this type have wide lanes, generous shoulders, large sight distances and ample recovery area.

However, the concepts that make a highway function well are misapplied with city streets. Urban areas are complex environments. Not only are there moving cars, there are parked cars, pedestrians, bicyclists and other things within the right-of-way such as trees, commercial signs and benches. Thoughtful design responds to this complexity by narrowing streets and adding design elements, such as sidewalks and parallel parking. In such a complex environment, it is imperative that cars are operated at slower speeds. Ironically, where complex streets are transformed into simple roads it not only damages the value of the immediate area, but it makes these places dramatically unsafe.

The irony of the approach Walker took in its 1997 plan is that it costs more money to build wider, less complex streets. Further, it is less safe and it stagnates property values. As one participant in the planning process remarked, "Who wants to live on a highway?"

PENDING IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

In 2009, the City began a discussion on capital improvements by looking at five projects, three of which would be considered maintenance. These projects are just a small fraction of the overall maintenance liability that the City has coming due, yet the cost for doing them is estimated to be more than \$5 million¹¹.

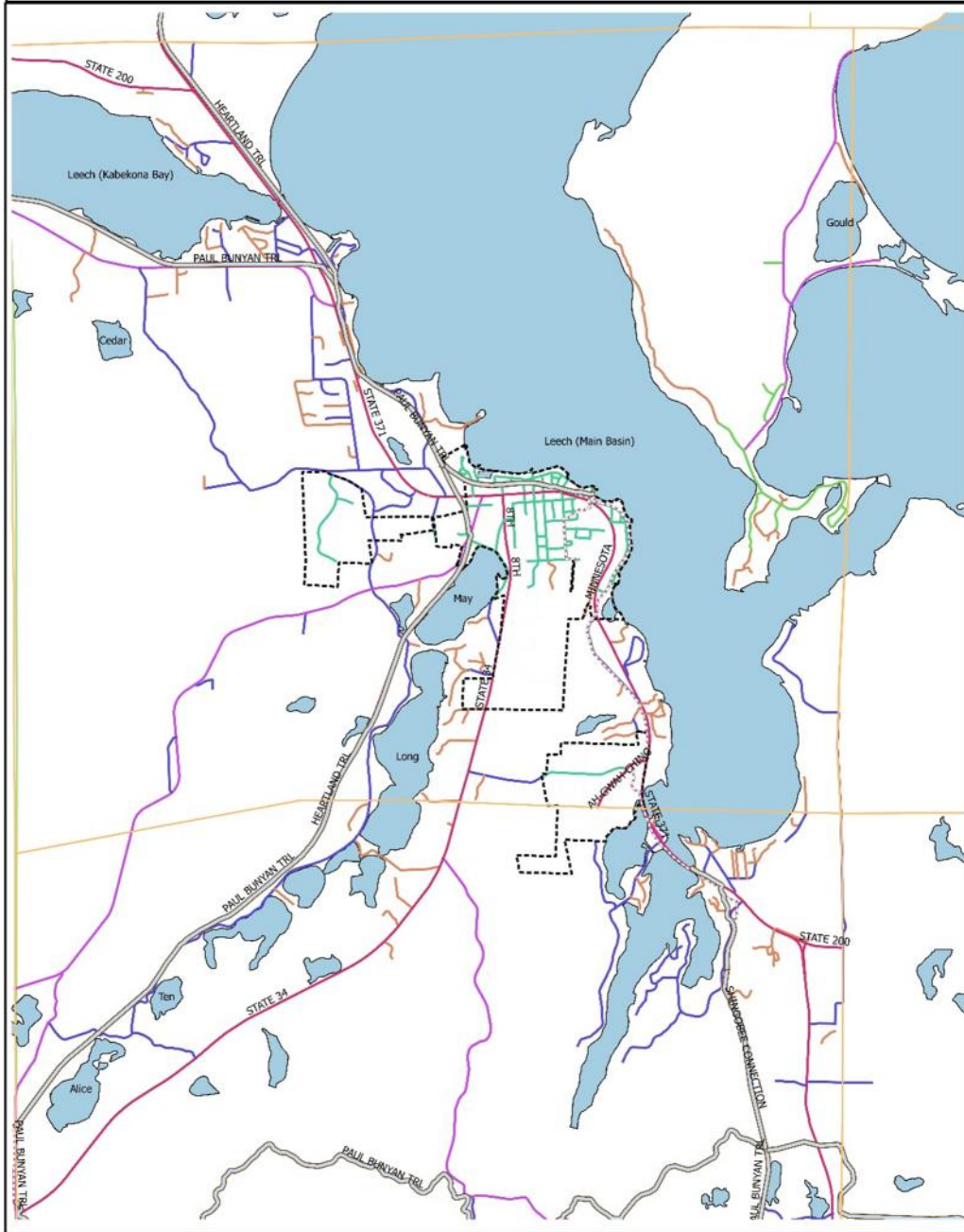
For comparison, in 2008 the City of Walker spent just over \$200,000 on streets and budgeted another \$110,000 capital improvements. That same year, the total levy (the amount collected in property taxes) was just under \$765,000¹².

¹¹ Taken from the 2009 Capital Improvements Plan, September 2009

¹² City of Walker, Financial Statements and Independent Auditor's Report, December 31, 2008

Transportation

City of Walker
Cass County, Minnesota



- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| — Snowmobile/Bike Trails | — Forest |
| — Bike Trails | — Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe |
| — Road Jurisdiction | — Other |
| — City | — State |
| — County | — Township |
| | — City of Walker Boundary |

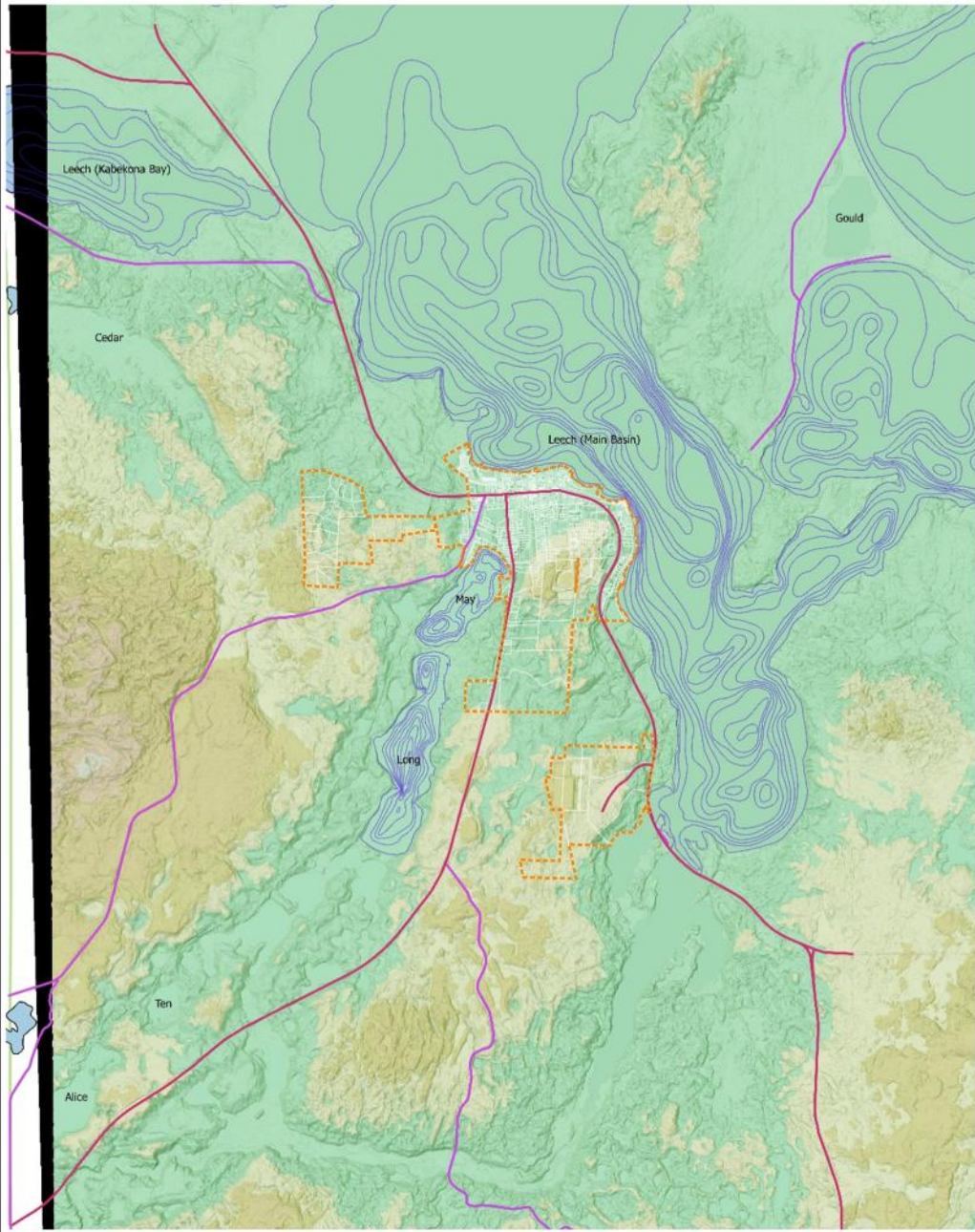


2500 0 2500 5000 7500 10000 ft

April 2015
Data Sources: Cass County GIS

Topography

City of Walker
Cass County, Minnesota



City of Walker Boundary
Lake Depth Contours (feet)
Elevation (feet)

2500 0 2500 5000 7500 10000 ft



April 2015
Data Sources: MN DNR

THE INDUSTRIAL PARK

The City of Walker has set aside land on the outskirts of town for a potential industrial park. The area is platted and a sewer and water system has been installed. Unfortunately, the sewer and water system have not functioned as intended and their failed performance threatens future development within the park.

A proposal to extend municipal sewer and water systems to the industrial park to remedy the situation has become a major discussion point over the past 5-6 years. The project demonstrates the tradeoff between near-term gain and long-term liability that faces the city with every infrastructure expansion project. In this instance, even with the lost opportunity inherent in an underperforming industrial park, running centralized sewer and water utilities to the park is a bad investment.

According to the City Engineer, the expansion project has the following general parameters:

- ☐ Estimated Cost (2010): \$1,916,000
- ☐ Lots Served: 25
- ☐ Cost per Lot: \$76,640

For the sake of analysis, it was assumed that the project could be financed at a rate of 4% over a period of 30 years. If so, the annual cost of the city would be:

- ☐ Annual Bond Payment = \$110,750

If it is further assumed that all development in the park is taxed at a Commercial/Industrial rate (in other words, there is no residential development in the park), the valuation needed from each property can be determined as follows:

- ☐ Each lot's annual share is $\$110,750 / 25 \text{ lots} = \$4,430/\text{lot}$
- ☐ To generate \$4,430 per lot, the following post-development value would be needed:
$$\begin{aligned} \text{Value} &= \$4,430/\text{lot} / 0.02 \text{ (industrial tax rate)} / 0.70 \text{ (city tax rate)} \\ &= \$316,400 \end{aligned}$$

This analysis also assumes:

1. All of the tax generated from the industrial park will go to paying debt. None of the tax base from the new growth will go to lower the overall tax burden for other residents.
2. All of the lots will develop to an average value of \$316,400 within one year of the improvement being completed. A phase in over a number of years—which is obviously what would have to happen—will increase the value needed. In the interim, the general fund will need to cash flow the project, which will mean higher taxes or reduced services.
3. There will be no Tax Increment Financing or other incentives that will reduce the amount of tax paid to the city as part of development of the lots.

It can be argued that, even if the taxpayer winds up subsidizing development in the industrial park, it is worth it to have the jobs and the other investments in the community those jobs would create. The proper way to phrase that question, however, would be this:

If the City were to invest \$110,750 per year for the next thirty years on economic development, how should it invest that money for the highest return?

When phrased in this way, the central argument for installing infrastructure becomes less appealing. The relative expense and risk of such an undertaking is great compared to other alternatives. If it costs \$110,750 to (hopefully) attract one business a year that can create 20 jobs, how much would it cost the City to induce twenty existing businesses a year to each create one job? The latter undertaking will not include ribbon cuttings or other outwardly visible signs of “progress” that come along with large projects, but it is financially much sounder over the long run.

The lesson of the Industrial Park analysis is that infrastructure expansion should not automatically be synonymous with economic development. Infrastructure systems must serve the community, not the other way around.

FUNDING THROUGH GRANTS

Much of the City’s current infrastructure system has been paid for by grants and low-interest loans from the Federal and State governments. Even if grants were a stable long-term source of revenue, if they are used to fund projects that are inefficient or wasteful, they ultimately damage the community.

If the City gets a grant for part or all of a project, the underlying financial fundamentals of the project still apply. If the project does not pay for itself, a grant simply means that reality will ultimately manifest itself in the future when the system needs to be maintained. In other words, a future generation will need to find a way to maintain a system that is too inefficient to support itself.

In the long-term, the cost burden to maintain inefficient infrastructure will ultimately detract from the long-term prosperity of the community, regardless of the short-term gain brought about through a grant program.

An example of this is the new infrastructure to serve the Ah-Gwah-Ching site. While paid for by the State of Minnesota, it will soon be the City of Walker’s to maintain. There is an urgent need to make good use of this investment. In a generation, when significant maintenance starts to be required, the City needs to have the tax base in place so that this investment does not become a financial drag on the entire community.

Grant programs are a long-term benefit to the City of Walker when they allow it to maintain an existing piece of infrastructure (replace the water tower, for example) or when it provides a mechanism to complete an efficient project that will ultimately be self-sustaining.

NECESSARY INDUSTRIAL PARK IMPROVEMENTS

There are businesses that are critical to the future of Walker that have invested in the existing industrial park. The City has an obligation to keep the commitments made to these property owners when they chose to locate to Walker. This includes providing services to these properties in a manner that is safe, healthy and cost-effective.

The current system of sewage treatment and water supply in the park is at capacity and not functioning as envisioned. There have been large investments made in these systems, but the technology has not worked as intended.

The City of Walker supports efforts to obtain grant monies to address this unique situation. It is imperative that these businesses get the support necessary to operate and expand. It is also important for attracting future investments that the City of Walker be seen as a reliable partner for providing quality public services.



Postcard of Walker, MN showing the historic water tower, 1915

GOALS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

The City of Walker adopts the following goals relating to transportation and infrastructure:

1. The City of Walker should provide for safe and efficient transportation systems that add value to the neighborhoods they serve.
2. The City of Walker should seek to establish pedestrian connections throughout and between all neighborhoods.
3. Work to have all new infrastructure that is to be publicly maintained serve development that generates city revenue sufficient to cover the full cost of its maintenance.

4. Seek ways to reduce the long-term cost of maintaining municipal infrastructure systems.
5. Look for ways to make better, more efficient use of existing infrastructure investments.

To accomplish the stated goals, the City of Walker adopts the following policies:

1. New investments in infrastructure must have a positive rate of return that prioritizes growth in the local tax base over more suspect concepts such as the value of time saved from reduced travel times.
2. Walker will not assume new infrastructure maintenance liability where the corresponding tax base does not cover the long-term cost.
3. The increased use, reuse and redevelopment of properties already served by municipal sewer and water systems should be supported over development of properties that require extension of utilities.
4. Streets within the public realm must be complex - designed to balance pedestrian, bike and other universal methods of travel with automobile traffic and motorists.

To implement the goals and policies of this section, the City of Walker will seek to enact the following strategies:

1. Perform and maintain a full inventory of all publicly-maintained infrastructure.
2. Utilize the infrastructure inventory to establish a capital improvements plan that accounts for the full life-cycle of all of the City's infrastructure. Ensure that sidewalks and other pedestrian facilities are considered on equal footing with those related to automobiles.
3. Ensure that newly built street sections are designed appropriately for neighborhood scale, reduce long-term costs and provide safe pedestrian mobility throughout the city. As opportunities arise, retrofit existing streets to narrow driving lanes, slow traffic or otherwise improve safety for pedestrians.
4. Find a solution to the infrastructure problems in the industrial park that meets the needs of existing tenants and limits the City's long-term financial obligations.

5. Create a long-term plan to identify and prioritize areas where existing sidewalks could be expanded or connected with other pedestrian facilities, as finances and need allows, to create a more complete pedestrian-friendly environment throughout the City.
6. Work with the Minnesota Department of Transportation to ensure that crosswalks across State Highways are appropriately striped and maintained over time so as to create a safe pedestrian environment.
7. Pass a resolution opposing the creation of a highway bypass around the City or the expansion of State Highway 371 to four lanes in all areas in and immediately outside of the City of Walker (roughly until the Highway 371/200 split on both the north and south ends of the City). Provide copies of this resolution to the MN Department of Transportation and area legislators and work with affected landowners and other government agencies to communicate this to the public as appropriate.
8. Consider the installation of permanent public restrooms in the downtown area and in other public areas. Ensure that such facilities, if built, are well maintained.

Public Facilities and Government Coordination

BACKGROUND

To remain competitive in a global market, the City of Walker needs to be part of a group of area governments that operate efficiently, are well-run and increasingly cooperative. Regional prosperity depends on an economically strong and vibrant City of Walker positioned to host both the county seat and the regional school facilities as well as provide for the day-to-day goods and services of those living in the surrounding areas. In turn, the economic strength of Walker is heavily influenced by the governments of Cass County, School District 113, Shingobee Township and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

Governments that can find a way, through cooperation, to increase the return on each public dollar spent will be the ones positioning their communities for the greatest future prosperity.

CURRENT RELATIONSHIPS

The City of Walker has relationships with each of the area governments. With Shingobee Township, the City is working cooperatively on:

- ☐ Fire Department services,
- ☐ Police service through mutual aid,
- ☐ The area cemetery,
- ☐ The City Park Board, where the township has representation,
- ☐ A cooperative maintenance agreement for roads, and
- ☐ An orderly annexation agreement that runs until 2017.

PEQUOT LAKES AND SIBLEY TOWNSHIP

A local example of cooperation between a city and the surrounding township that is worth examination is the relationship between Pequot Lakes and the former Sibley Township. Sibley is a “former” township because, in 2002, they entirely—and voluntarily—merged with the City.

Land use issues had been important to Sibley Township. So much so that they undertook a lengthy planning process to develop their own future vision and corresponding land use regulations, which they administered at the township level. Through this process they discovered that the overall health of the township was directly related to the health of the city.

By working cooperatively, they could not only be more efficient, they could coordinate an approach to growth and development in a way that benefitted everyone.

The City of Walker is also working cooperatively with Cass County and School District 113 to bring natural gas to the area and lower costs for all local governments. The county also handles sewage treatment system inspections for the City, maintains GIS data¹³ beneficial to the City, provides maintenance of utilities to Ah-Gwah-Ching and assists in police coverage through mutual aid agreements.

The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe is an important neighbor. They are a critical partner in the natural gas project. They are also seeking to operate a fire substation that supports local public safety efforts. The Band has a number of projects in the works that have regional significance. City Officials and Walker residents would benefit from understanding the priorities of the Leech Lake Band and being in a position to work cooperatively to help them accomplish regional objectives.

The U.S. Forest Service is also a key partner in the community. They are planning on housing a visitor’s center with the Chamber of Commerce and are an asset that needs to remain in the City limits.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASED COOPERATION

The City of Walker needs to be a leader in facilitating regional cooperation on difficult issues. As this plan is being written, there are four key areas that need regional cooperation and attention in the near-term:

1. *Zoning around the City of Walker.* Both Cass County and Shingobee Township need to be engaged, potentially along with other cities and townships throughout Cass County, to assess the long-term costs and benefits for the region of the County’s approach of zoning land for commercial development within two miles of their municipalities to ensure that commercial uses are directed to where they are most beneficial to the region as a whole.

2. *Cass County’s relocation and expansion plans.* Other parts of this plan have discussed the significance of keeping the county offices within the Walker downtown. In the past, City Officials may not have

been as cooperative or open to ideas for meeting the space needs of the county at its current site as they could have been. Renewed focus on the importance of the County Seat to the health of the community should prompt the City to reengage Cass County on this issue.

3. *The future of the Community Center.* The Community Center started and remains a private venture, but one that certainly has some broad public implications. While the financial situation of the owners is not entirely clear, regional governments are being asked to engage in a process of developing a solution to the budget shortfalls of the project. While the facility resides in Walker, it is a regional asset that requires the engagement of all local governments.

¹³ Geographic Information Systems (mapping data)

4. *The provision and funding of services which provide a regional benefit.* Certain services that have traditionally been funded by the cities in which they reside but which have a regional benefit – such as fire protection, libraries, parks and airports – are increasingly difficult to adequately fund as local budgets are constricted. Questions about how best to address these challenges – including a fresh look at possible regional funding mechanisms – **are an increasingly necessary consideration.**

GOALS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

The City of Walker adopts the following goals relating to public facilities and government coordination:

1. Coordinate the efforts of area governments with the interests of all Walker Area property owners and residents in mind.
2. Work cooperatively to increase the quality and effectiveness of area governments.
3. Look for ways to involve residents from the broader area in decisions that directly impact them.
4. Capitalize on Walker's position as the county seat.
5. Always look to strengthen the relationship between the residents of Walker and the members of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.
6. Assist School District 113 in making its location in the City of Walker as advantageous as possible.

To implement the goals and policies of this section, the City of Walker will seek to enact the following strategies:

1. Continue looking into cooperative strategies with surrounding communities – both financial and otherwise - to ensure that the library, the airport, the park system and other services with a regional benefit regionally funded entities are financially viable into the future.
2. Reach out to Cass County to support expansion of their facilities within the downtown area in whatever ways possible.
3. Jointly work with Cass County to change their policy that identifies areas just outside of cities as appropriate for commercial and industrial businesses so that such development is more actively encouraged within the City itself. Coordinate with other cities within Cass County that are faced with those same issues.

SCHOOL DISTRICT 113



Walker school grounds as depicted in the 1968 Comprehensive Plan

A healthy school district is critical to the overall potential of the Walker area. If families grow to believe the local school district does not meet their needs, the City will have a difficult time attracting and retaining the workforce necessary to sustain growth in the community.

There are some significant challenges currently facing the district. Consolidation—encouraged by state funding formulas—has combined Walker schools with those of Akeley and Hackensack. While there are administrative efficiencies involved in such a consolidation, it is naturally more difficult for the school located in Walker to be fully connected to the large region it now serves.

A recent levy was voted down, with large margins against in both the Akeley and Hackensack areas. Changing demographics are causing declining enrollment, a curse when revenue is tied to enrollment yet base costs remain fixed.

The District needs a growing City that is energized around a strong community-centric school.

4. Establish a task force to work with Shingobee and Turtle Lake townships on sharing funding of important services that will benefit the area.
5. Establish a joint working group with Cass County to re-evaluate options for use of the Ah-Gwah-Ching site. Seek possible opportunities for the site including mixed use redevelopment, higher education institutions and/or scientific research that leverages the natural assets of Leech Lake and the area's natural environment.
6. Consider the adoption of a resolution of support for operating levies that are recommended by the School Board.
7. Establish a task force to work with School District 113 on ways the City and the District can work cooperatively to increase enrollment and reduce costs.
8. Regularly meet with the Leech Lake Band to discuss ways in which members of the City Council can listen to and learn more about the tribal government so as to improve relations and understanding between the City and the tribal government.
9. Support all efforts to add Native American perspectives to discussions taking place in the City of Walker.
10. Continue to evaluate the needs of the Community Center and determine whether public involvement in the project is warranted.
11. Develop policies regarding use of the electronic message board on the City Hall property so as to support local events and businesses in a fair and consistent manner.
12. Improve ongoing access to notices about meetings of the City Council and other city committees and ways in which the public can be involved in city decisions via the City's website and local media.
13. Create informational/educational materials regarding the requirements of the zoning ordinance and procedures for reviewing variance requests and make these available to the public via the City's website and in print.
14. Reach out to the Forest Ranger Station and request that they improve the visual appearance of their facility.

Implementation

The planning process has value in that it generates a greater understanding of the community and a common vision the direction it should take in the future. The core sections of this plan details the goals and policies of the community as well as strategies for implementation.

To provide a more detailed roadmap for implementation, the following pages present a year-by-year checklist for plan implementation. It lists each task, what section(s) of the plan it comes from and who is expected to lead the effort to complete the task.

This checklist should be used by public officials to focus efforts and resources and to monitor progress on plan implementation.

PRIORITIES FOR 2017-2018

Completed (x)	Specific Implementation Task	Plan Section	Who will get this done?
	Continue to support expansion of the Cass County offices on its current site.	Economic Development	City Administrator
	Continue to evaluate the needs of the Community Center and determine whether public involvement in the project is warranted.	Government	City Council/Special Committee
	Consider the adoption of a resolution of support for operating levies that are recommended by the School Board.	Government	City Administrator
	Monitor and amend local regulations and policies that may impair Cass County from maximizing use of their existing site. Modify the regulations and policies, where possible, to provide the county with greater flexibility.	Economic Development	Planning Commission
	Reach out to Cass County to support expansion of their facilities within the downtown area in whatever ways possible.	Government	City Council
	Create a plan for establishing wayfinding (signs and other devices) throughout the city that are modestly scaled, target pedestrians and direct people to key locations throughout the community.	Community Character	Parks Committee
	Continue to emphasize the maintenance of sidewalks and curbs so as to ensure an attractive appearance.	Community Character	Public Works
	Conduct and maintain a business inventory so as to promote local businesses and identify gaps in the local economy.	Economic Development	City Planner

	Regularly meet with the Leech Lake Band to discuss ways in which members of the City Council can listen to and learn more about the tribal government so as to improve relations and understanding between the City and the tribal government.	Government	City Council
	Find a solution to the infrastructure problems in the industrial park that meets the needs to existing tenants and limits the City's long-term financial obligations.	Transportation and Infrastructure	City Engineer

PRIORITIES FOR 2019

Completed (x)	Specific Implementation Task	Plan Section	Who will get this done?
	Ensure that views of Leech Lake are maintained from public rights of way as much as possible throughout the community.	Community Character, Housing	Public Works
	Continue to work with other cities in Cass County to request that the county modify its approach to zoning around cities to coordinate commercial development efforts with the investments of its municipalities.	Economic Development	City Planner
	Perform and maintain a full inventory of all publicly-maintained infrastructure.	Transportation and Infrastructure	Public Works
	Annually update a business inventory to measure the success of the City's policies and strategies in promoting a wide variety of businesses and employers in the area.	Economic Development	City Planner
	Establish a task force to work with School District 113 on ways the City and the District can work cooperatively to increase enrollment and reduce costs.	Government	City Council/Special Committee
	Establish a task force to work with Shingobee and Turtle Lake townships on sharing funding of important services that will benefit the area.	Government	City Council/Special Committee
	Continue to maintain and enforce ordinances for handling garbage and outside storage so as to keep properties neat.	Community Character	Planning Commission
	Provide business loans, loan guarantees and tax incentives to businesses seeking to renovate in the downtown, so long as the renovation is complimentary to the existing, pedestrian-oriented development pattern.	Economic Development	City Administrator

	Review and amend existing zoning ordinances so as to ensure that the City balances necessary regulations with the flexibility for property owners to maintain and build structures that contribute to the City's unique character.	Community Character, Economic Development, Housing	Planning Commission
	Work with Shingobee Township to standardize industrial development standards between the city and the town.	Economic Development	City Council/Special Committee
	Provide space for a joint outdoor ice skating/skate park facility.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee
	Establish a joint working group with Cass County to re-evaluate options for use of the Ah-Gwah-Ching site. Seek possible opportunities for the site including mixed use redevelopment, higher education institutions and/or scientific research that leverages the natural assets of Leech Lake and the area's natural environment.	Government	City Council/Special Committee

PRIORITIES FOR 2020

Completed (x)	Specific Implementation Task	Plan Section	Who will get this done?
	Use existing mechanisms to provide business loans, loan guarantees and tax incentives to businesses seeking to renovate in the downtown, in conjunction with Small Cities funding, so long as the renovation is complimentary to the existing, pedestrian-oriented development pattern.	Community Character	City Administrator
	Jointly work with Cass County to change their policy that identifies areas just outside of cities as appropriate for commercial and industrial businesses so that such development is more actively encouraged within the City itself. Coordinate with other cities within Cass County that are faced with those same issues.	Government	City Planner
	Support all efforts to add Native American perspectives to discussions taking place in the City of Walker.	Government	City Council
	Continue to work cooperatively with Cass County officials to implement strategies for recapturing and enhancing the Cass County Courthouse Plaza for public use.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee

	Make enhanced pedestrian connections to the lakeside park area a priority of the City.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee
	Continue to work with representatives from the Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Forestry Department, Leech Lake Riders and any other organizations that are interested in trails and trail maintenance to discuss ways to share resources.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee
	Develop and implement a master plan for Walker's entire current and future park system consistent with the goals of this plan and which provides a wide variety of amenities and activities for the public.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee
	Maintain and establish, where necessary, signage along the recreational trail through town.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee

PRIORITIES FOR 2021

Completed (x)	Specific Implementation Task	Plan Section	Who will get this done?
	Utilize the infrastructure inventory to establish a capital improvements plan that accounts for the full life-cycle of all of the City's infrastructure. Ensure that sidewalks and other pedestrian facilities are considered on equal footing with those related to automobiles.	Transportation and Infrastructure	City Engineer
	Maintain an accurate trails map that includes cross-country ski trails and other trails in the surrounding townships.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee
	Meet regularly with School District #113 officials to discuss ways in which the City and the school can cooperate to increase the amount of park land and recreational facilities available for public use.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee
	Maintain the city dock areas as pedestrian space, rather than for parking, so that the site can be dedicated to those arriving to Walker by boat and those seeking to access the docks from the City.	Community Character, Parks and Recreation	Planning Commission/City Engineer
	Identify city-owned, platted lots currently used for public parking or other uses. Develop a strategy for converting each to commercial or other uses when it would help achieve the goals of the Comprehensive Plan.	Economic Development	City Planner

	Maintain and retrofit existing municipal parking lots to reduce long-term maintenance costs and emphasize the aesthetic qualities of the downtown.	Economic Development	Public Works/ City Engineer
	Investigate options for creating a “Heritage Trail” walking tour that would educate visitors on the history of Walker.	Community Character	Parks Committee
	Ensure that newly built street sections are designed appropriately for neighborhood scale, reduce long-term costs and provide safe pedestrian mobility throughout the city. As opportunities arise, retrofit existing streets to narrow driving lanes, slow traffic or otherwise improve safety for pedestrians.	Community Character, Economic Development, Housing, Transportation and Infrastructure	City Engineer
	Coordinate with local arts organizations to promote public art. Budget a modest amount each year for this community effort.	Community Character	Parks Committee
	Identify each public water access point within the City of Walker. Develop a long-term plan for the use of each site consistent with the values of this plan.	Parks and Recreation	Parks Committee
	Construct a fishing pier at one of the public park facilities.	Parks and Recreation	City Council/Special Committee

PRIORITIES FOR 2022

Completed (x)	Specific Implementation Task	Plan Section	Who will get this done?
	Look for ways to establish a public boat-mooring facility for the residents of Walker. If demand is greater than supply, provide seasonal access by a lottery system.	Parks and Recreation	City Council/Special Committee