

# 07

## PARKS, RECREATION & NATURAL RESOURCES

### Chapter highlights

- Overview
- Unite a Network of Parks, Open Spaces, and Natural Features
- Identify & Protect Natural Resources
- Foster Community Engagement
- Promote Community Reinvestment
- Bring Climate Resiliency to the Table
- Goals & Objectives





# OVERVIEW

The City of Albert Lea Parks and Recreation Department offers a wide range of parks and programming. Park spaces range from humble, passive options like Dress Island which provides opportunities for impromptu picnics, to destinations like Bancroft Bay Park which draw users from surrounding rural areas. The benefits of healthy living and opportunities for outdoor activity are numerous, though not all are aware of the amenities which surround them. Recreational facilities offer opportunities for socialization, activity, and mentorship. Continuing to meet existing and future community needs requires planning for recreational facilities, outdoor spaces, and programs. In addition, continuing to expand and further connect these resources is also an important aspect of this process.

This comprehensive plan will serve as a framework for future development, notably a more in-depth park master plan. Through examination of existing amenities and spaces, overarching goals were developed for future development with actionable items set in place to achieve them. The goal of this document is to provide benchmarks to ensure that resources are wisely managed and that development efforts benefit both residents, their community, and the broader environment.



# Unite a Network of Parks, Open Spaces, and Natural Features

Albert Lea, as a community, is framed by a series of lakes, low ridges, and waterways located on the edge of prairie and hardwood forests. Together, they form a ring around what could be conceived as the Albert Lea community and form the base upon which we can build our future. We commit to providing a unified network of green space articulating these essential natural features that frame the community. The parks, open spaces, and natural features found throughout Albert Lea provide its residents with several options to interact with the outdoor environment and by extension, each other. Keeping in line with this goal, the features comprising this network must reflect the communities that they serve. Providing opportunities for access by all ages and physical abilities is a key indicator of this goal's success and will require community outreach and engagement.

Formalizing the open space network within Albert Lea will encourage its use and in turn provide positive opportunities for community members. Improved health, sense of place, and community building are but a few positives which arise from the formalization of this network. Another benefit is a more resilient, interconnected series of spaces with greater capacity for carbon sequestration, addressing the heat island effect and providing more flexibility for anticipated wet and dry weather patterns. Continued efforts between both community leaders, their associated city administration, and local partners will yield further benefits as the spaces are developed and used. Through the planning process, we have come to recognize an opportunity to stitch together these features in a way that brings the community together and demonstrates sincere respect for our natural systems.





## Identify & Protect Natural Resources

The city is committed to the protection of natural resources such that they may continue to function, grow, and provide for future generations. The existing parks and natural areas serve as the framework for recreation, public space, and their associated ecological systems. The stewardship of these areas is placed on all generations; meaning we all have a part to play in their continued success.

Albert Lea is committed to sustainable maintenance and management practices to uphold the high standards of its public land. Maintaining a sustainable ecosystem requires a concerted effort by both the city through management and by individuals through active participation in community outreach. With all partners actively engaged, environmental stewardship will allow Albert Lea's parks and open spaces to flourish and expand for the benefit of future generations.



## Promote Community Reinvestment

Albert Lea supports community reinvestment through our parks, recreation activities, and facilities. Given our central location in southern Minnesota, the city is positioned for continued growth and renewal. Growth will come in the form of the continued expansion of our parks and trails network while renewal will occur through the consistent revitalization of our existing amenities by both public and private benefactors. Consistent engagement and efforts will help our community to rally behind the spaces we call home. These efforts are mandatory to establish a grounded sense of place within Albert Lea.

The effects of growing our parks and recreation spaces extend beyond the neighborhoods which they serve. Outside funding and development will be catalyzed through the creation of a strong neighborhood identity via investment within the parks and trails systems. The shared success of the community depends on the active engagement of both the public and private entities which comprise it. Through continued efforts to improve parks and recreation, the community will prosper through existing and future development and investment.





## Foster Community Engagement

Albert Lea commits to providing opportunities for public engagement on the process behind the creation and maintenance of the public spaces they interact with. This effort is meant to be an inclusive approach seeking input from representatives from all members of the community; allowing each voice to be heard. Through the promotion of community leaders and the growth of partnerships, Albert Lea will be better equipped to respond to the wants and needs of its constituents.

Parks and recreation provide important benefits to the younger populations they serve. From providing safe spaces to congregate and socialize to the documented health benefits of outdoor play, an investment in parks is an investment in the health of the community's youth. To this end, concerted efforts at establishing healthy recreational activities across all skill levels are mandatory. Active engagement and quality of services will improve by expanding partnerships, mentorship, and leadership for all ages.



## Bring Climate Resiliency to the Table

In 2021, Albert Lea completed a Climate Action Plan. The plan commits to making challenging transitions in social and economic environments while making targeted investments toward a lower carbon footprint. Reducing carbon footprints and lowering the amount of greenhouse gases produced will help protect Albert Lea's natural environment, vulnerable populations, and economic sector vitality well into the future. The goals established in the Climate Action Plan align with the State of Minnesota's.

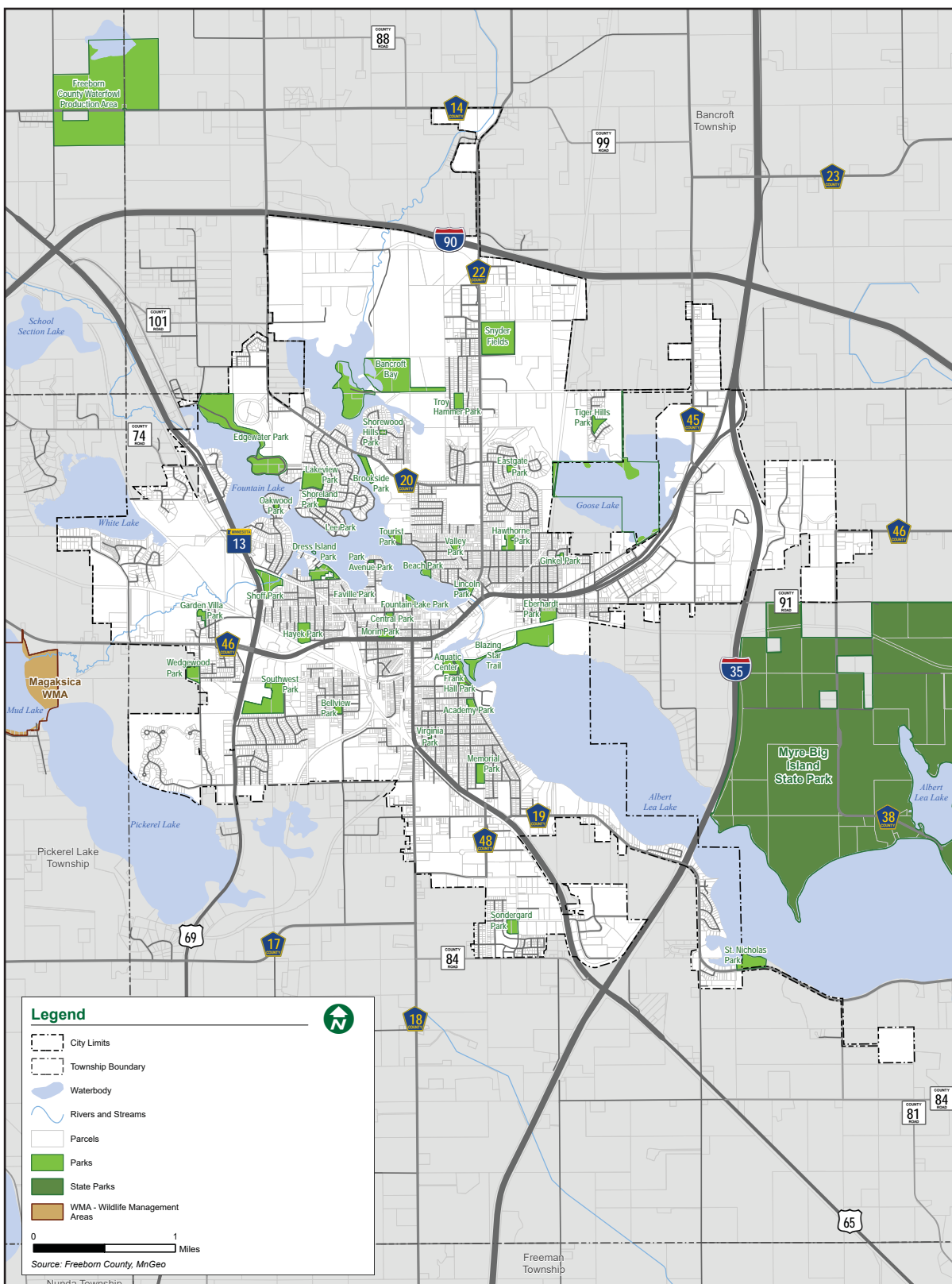
This comprehensive plan does not seek to override the Climate Action Plan. Instead, the Climate Action Plan should help guide and inform direction regarding all other topics in the Comprehensive Plan. Between switching city vehicles to electric or hybrid options to resilient infrastructure design, every major topic in the Comprehensive Plan shall be, in one way or another, linked to climate resiliency and sustainable design.



## Park Service Areas, Classifications, and Amenities

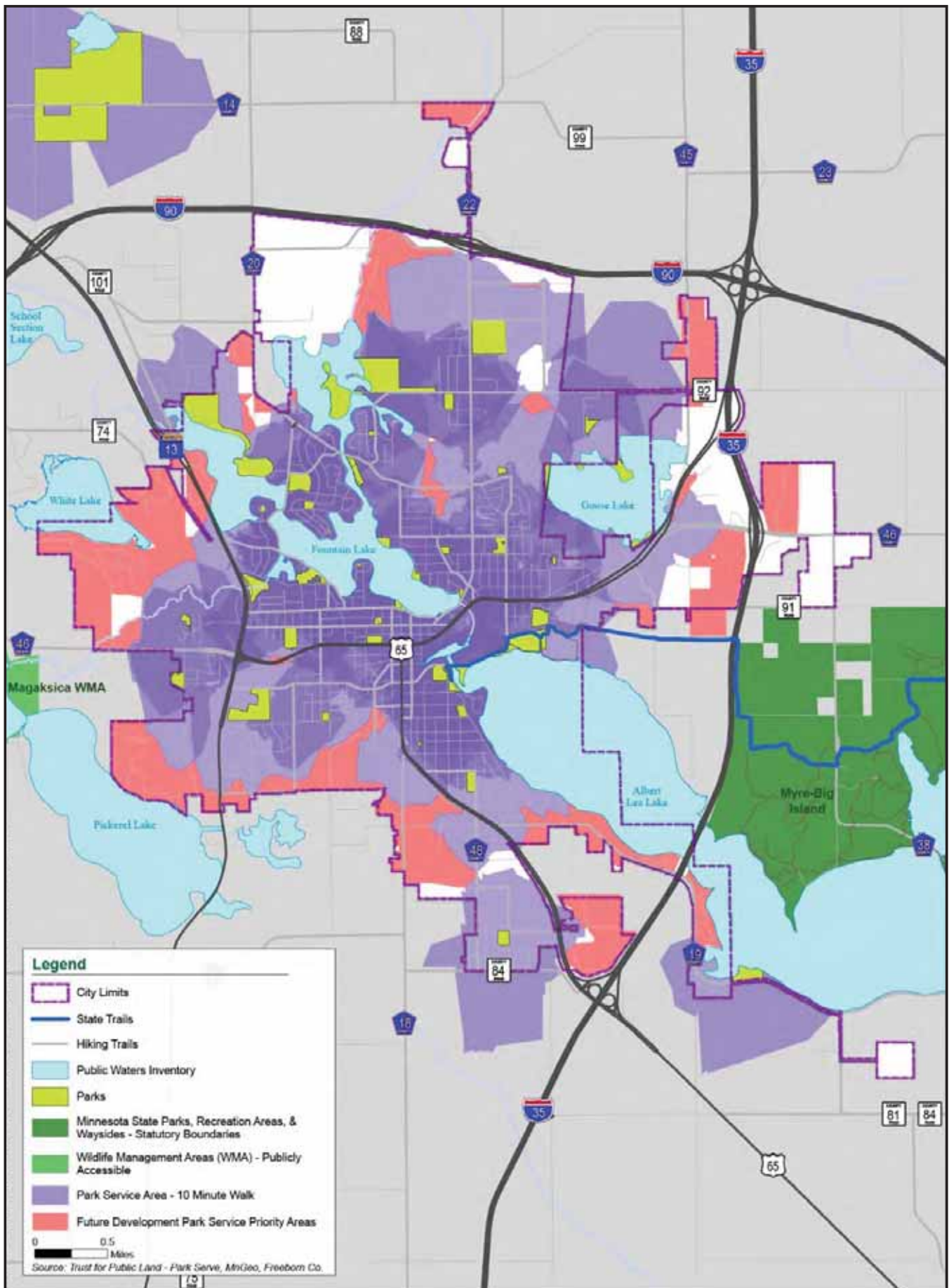
The figure below provides a review of existing city park locations and how accessible they are for nearby residents and businesses, which are understood through park service areas. Service areas for parks are typically identified as a 10-minute walk, or a half-mile, from point of origin to the park, trail, or other recreation facility.

## FIGURE 7-1 PARK LOCATION MAP





**FIGURE 7-2 PARK SERVICE AREA**





## TABLE 7-1 PARK CLASSIFICATIONS

Park Classification	Use	Service Area	Size	Site
<b>Mini Park</b>	Provides opportunities for recreation close to home, such as open lawns, tot lots, tennis courts, basketball courts, or open spaces.	1/4 mile	Less than 1 acre	Easily accessible to neighborhood residents. Safe walking and/or biking access.
<b>Neighborhood Park</b>	Provides opportunities for recreation close to home, such as field games, court games, play equipment, and skating.	1/2 mile radius, free of major barriers such as highways	1-15 acres (5-10 is optimal)	Easily accessible to Neighborhood residents. Safe walking and biking access.
<b>Playfield</b>	Consolidates athletic fields and associated facilities to larger and fewer sites throughout the community, often on school property.	Strategically located City Wide – usually 1-3 miles	Minimum of 25 acres with 40-80 optimal. Existing playfields are smaller (7-20 acres)	Easily accessible to the population it is intended to serve. Safe walking/biking distance with convenient auto access.
<b>Community Park</b>	Focus is on community-based recreational needs as well as preserving unique landscapes and open spaces.	Strategically located City Wide – usually 1-3 miles	As needed to accommodate desired uses. Usually between 30 and 50 acres	Site should be suited for community use, easily accessible to all populations, and located near high-traffic areas such as schools and major thoroughfares.
<b>Special Use Park</b>	Parks and recreational facilities oriented toward a single use, such as gardens, boat launches, pools, overlooks, etc.	Community-wide	Varies	Site-specific
<b>Community/ Recreation Facility</b>	Public buildings which provide recreational, cultural, social, and/or educational opportunities to the community.	Community-wide	Varies	Site should be suited for community use, easily accessible to all populations, and located near high-traffic areas such as schools and major thoroughfares.



## TABLE 7-2 ALBERT LEA PARKS & AMENITIES

Park/Facility Name	Park/Facility Type	Size	Amenities/Features
<b>Academy Park</b>	Community Park	3.1 acres	Playground, restrooms, baseball/ softball diamond, warming house, ice skating/ hockey rink
<b>Albert Lea City Beach</b>	Special Use Park	1.6 acres	No lifeguard beach and roped-off swim area, picnic tables, bathhouse with restrooms, skate park, sand volleyball court, small public dock, parking lot
<b>City Aquatic Center</b>	Community/ Recreation Facility		Bathhouse, pool, zero-depth splash pool, 226 ft waterslide
<b>Bancroft Bay Park</b>	Community Park	74.1 acres	2 picnic shelters, picnic tables, fire rings, restrooms, hiking trails, 18-hole disc golf course
<b>Bellview Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	1.8 acres	Baseball diamond, playground equipment, and picnic tables
<b>Blazing Star Trail</b>	Trail	6 miles	10 ft wide, connects to Myre Big Island State Park, small parking lot, small prairie, planned future connection to Austin, MN
<b>Brookside</b>	Community Park	4.2 acres	Community garden, tennis courts, public boat landing, Brookside Education Center, dog park
<b>Dress Island</b>	Mini Park	0.2 acres	Green space, benches, wooden bridge
<b>East Gate Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	2.2 acres	Playground, full-court basketball, green space
<b>Eberhardt Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	5.1 acres	Playground, small shelter, green space
<b>Edgewater Park</b>	Community Park	62.6 acres	Green space, three picnic shelters with fireplaces, boat landing, band shell, horseshoe courts, playground, baseball/ softball diamond, volleyball net, restrooms, picnic tables, horseshoe pits, shoreline, public dock
<b>Food Truck Plaza</b>	Mini Park	0.9 acres	Phase 1 to be constructed in 2023. Currently provides parking and green space. Once Phase 1 is constructed will introduce more formal green space, plaza space, and sidewalk.
<b>Frank Hall Park</b>	Community Park	11.8 acres	Green space, Full-court basketball, 3 tennis courts, accessible DNR fishing pier, public boat ramp lighted trails, restroom, 2 picnic shelters with tables, 3 horseshoe pits, playground
<b>Fountain Lake Park</b>	Community Park	3.9 acres	Green space, gazebo, children's garden, benches, limestone overlooking lake, children's garden, small public dock  270 dock spaces along Fountain Lake are available for lease. Adjacent homeowners prioritized.
<b>Garden Villa Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	4.1 acres	Open space, some play features
<b>Ginkle Park</b>	Mini Park	0.8 acres	Open space, playground, fenced



**TABLE 7-2 ALBERT LEA PARKS & AMENITIES**

<b>Park/Facility Name</b>	<b>Park/Facility Type</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Amenities/Features</b>
<b>Hawthorn Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	4.3 acres	Open space, playground, baseball/ softball diamond, warming house, ice skating, and hockey
<b>Hayek Park</b>	Playfield	19.1 acres	One lighted baseball diamond, one lighted softball diamond, batting cage, playground, half-court basketball court, restrooms, concession stand, broadcast booth, warming house, ice skating, and hockey
<b>Albert Lea Ice Arena</b>	Community/ Recreation Facility		2 ice sheets, bleachers, concession stand, lounge, skate rental
<b>Katherine Island</b>	Mini Park	0.2 acres	Island on Fountain Lake, benches
<b>Lakeview Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	13.1 acres	Playground, full-court basketball, two soccer fields, rain garden, restrooms, warming house, ice skating
<b>Marion Ross Performing Arts Center</b>	Community/ Recreation Facility		Fully equipped stage, meeting rooms, set rooms, costume rooms, storage
<b>Memorial Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	4.9 acres	Playground, open space, soccer field, shelter
<b>Morin Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	3.2 acres	2 baseball/ softball diamonds with backstops and bleachers, playground, lighted full-court basketball
<b>New Denmark</b>	Neighborhood Park	1.1 acres	Green space, park benches, mermaid statue, flower gardens, lake views
<b>Park Avenue Park</b>	Mini Park	0.3 acres	Mature trees, half-court basketball, and some play features
<b>Pioneer Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	3.5 acres	Playground, picnic shelter with restrooms and kitchenette, small gazebo, picnic tables, mature trees, lighted path, gravel parking
<b>Senior Citizens Center</b>	Community/ Recreation Facility	8,000 SQ FT	Game room, commercial kitchen, small conference room, craft room, restrooms, computers, dining room
<b>Shoff Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	12.1 acres	Higbie Gardens, green space, small picnic shelter with picnic tables, gravel parking, path
<b>Shoreland Heights Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	2.3 acres	Green space, playground, chain link backstop
<b>Shorewood Hills Park</b>	Neighborhood Park	0.8 acres	Open space, playground



**TABLE 7-2 ALBERT LEA PARKS & AMENITIES**

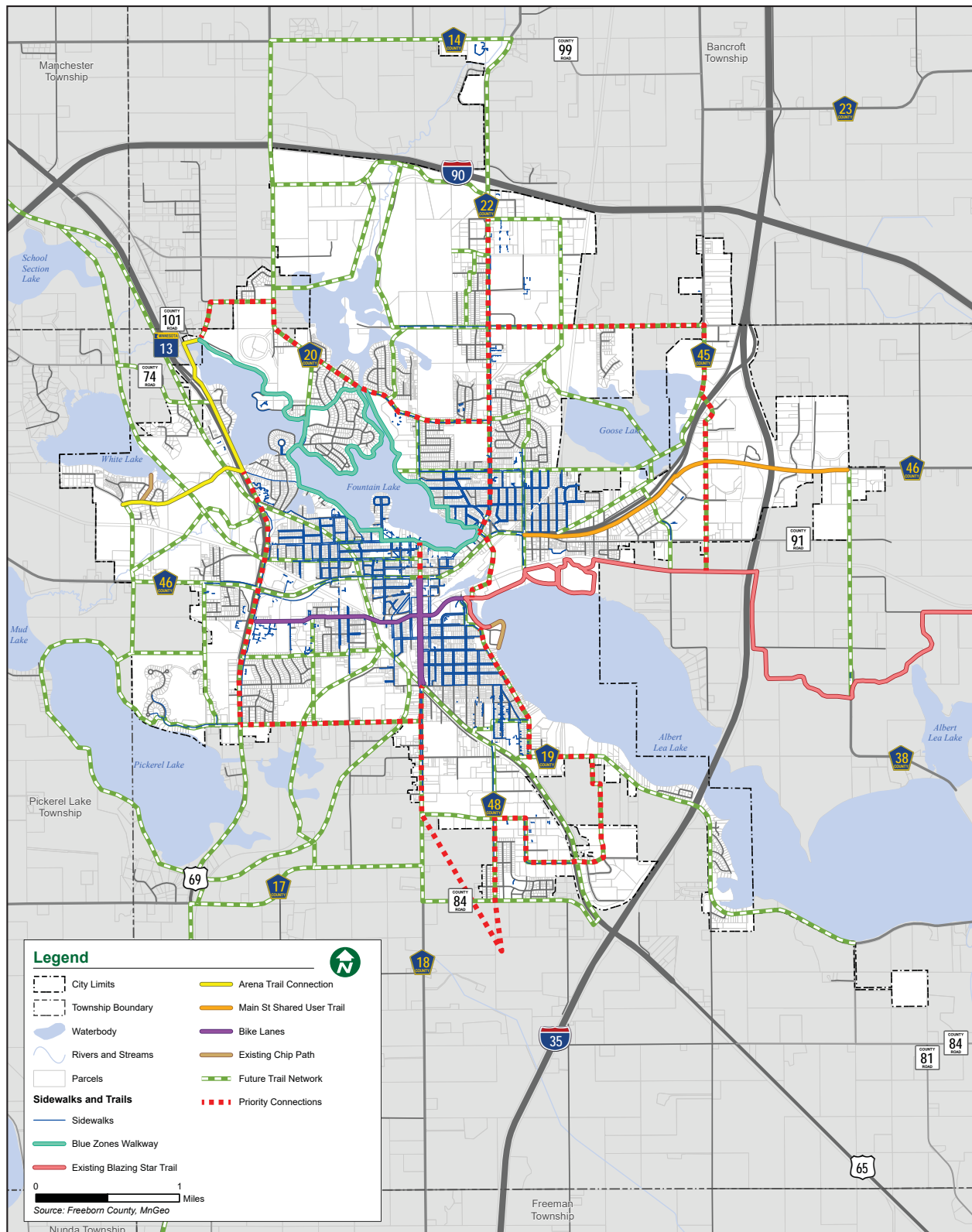
Park/Facility Name	Park/Facility Type	Size	Amenities/Features
<b><i>Snyder Fields</i></b>	Community Park	13.1 acres	Lighted athletic complex, 5 baseball diamonds, batting cage, concession stand with restrooms, picnic tables, four sand volleyball courts
<b><i>Sondergaard Park</i></b>	Neighborhood Park	5.1 acres	Four baseball/ softball diamonds with backstop, full-court basketball, playground, green space, park building
<b><i>Southwest Park</i></b>	Neighborhood Park	24.5 acres	Green space, playground, full-court basketball, six tennis courts, baseball/ softball diamond
<b><i>Troy Hammer Park</i></b>	Neighborhood Park	4.5 acres	Playground, open space, full-court basketball, baseball/ softball diamond with backstop, park/ maintenance building
<b><i>Valley Park</i></b>	Neighborhood Park	1.7 acres	Playground, restrooms, baseball/ softball diamond with backstop, full-court basketball, park building
<b><i>Virginia Place Park</i></b>	Mini Park	0.8 acres	Playground, half-court basketball
<b><i>Wedgewood Park</i></b>	Neighborhood Park	7.1 acres	Open space, playground, sledding hill, chain link backstop



# Trails Across Albert Lea

The previous comprehensive plan included a non-motorized trail map. This map served as a guide for identifying and constructing new trail corridors to connect various neighborhoods and places of interest across the city. The below map shows the full system of trails, depicting which segments are constructed, and prioritizing segments for the next five to 10 years.

**FIGURE 7-3 SIDEWALK AND TRAIL NETWORK**







## Natural Resources

Like parks, natural areas serve as the foundation for recreation and ecological systems. The City of Albert Lea, including generations of citizens, are responsible for the stewardship of natural areas for the benefit of all. The continued success of the city is linked to the health of lakes, rivers, streams, wetlands, forests, and numerous other spaces for ecological communities.

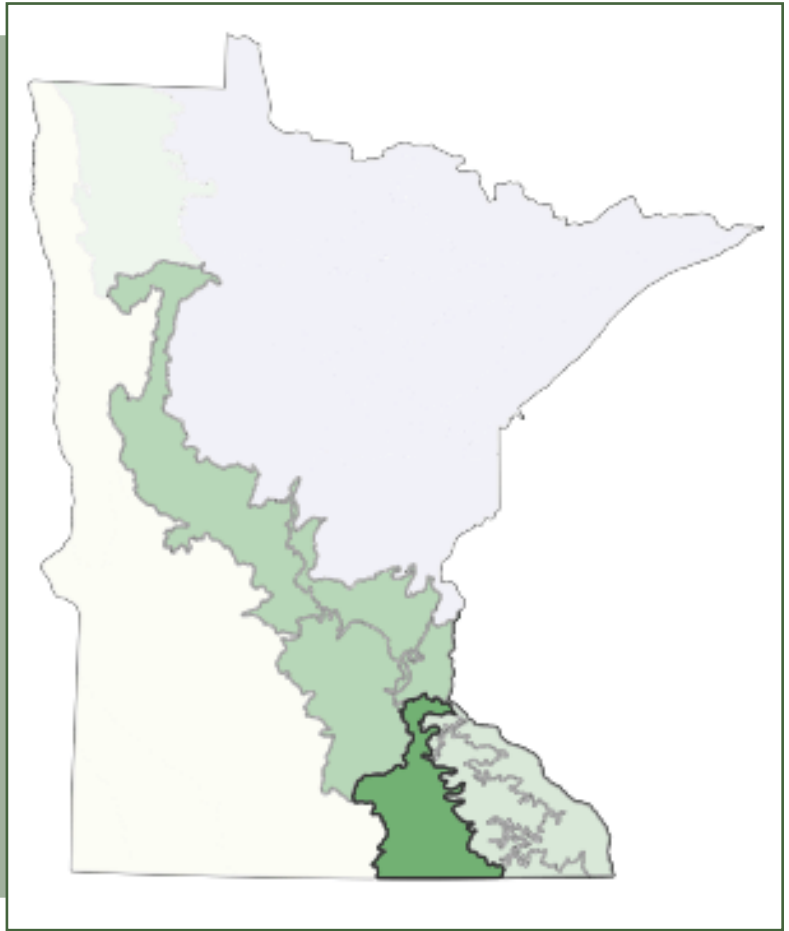
The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the U.S. Forest Service developed an Ecological Classification System for Minnesota. These classifications are used to describe areas of land with uniform ecological features. The City of Albert Lea lies within the Eastern Broadleaf Forest (EBF) ecoregion but is close to another ecoregion called Prairie Parkland (PPA) Province. The following descriptions are from the Minnesota DNR.

The EBF ecoregion can be found throughout the Midwest, parts of the South, and New York. This region acts as a transition zone between historically prairie parts of the U.S. and areas defined by semi humid mixed conifer and deciduous forests. Typically, areas within the EBF ecoregion consist of a plateau dissected by the erosion of streams that feed the Mississippi River valley, forming uplands. The process of erosion exposed bedrock formed during the Paleozoic Era and glacial drift from the pre-Wisconsin Age glaciation. Because glaciers did not smooth this area, the landscape is characterized by steep bluffs, river valleys, and karst geology. The decline of glacial lakes combined with strong winds deposited large amounts of sediment in river valleys and other eroded areas.

Albert Lea falls within a further-defined section of EBF called the Minnesota and Northeast Iowa Morainal Section (MIM) and the subsection Oak Savanna. MIM refers to a long band of forest, woodland, and prairie from Polk County in northern Minnesota to Iowa. Half of this section is characterized by moraines, sometimes with small sand plains, and a quarter by rolling till deposited as drumlins. Prairies, savanna, and oak and aspen woodlands can be found in sandy, flat areas and on glacial till in southern Minnesota. Streams, lakes, and topographical breaks in the landscape, including fine-textured drift deposited in hummocky moraines, supported forests, and woodlands by protecting vegetation from natural wildfires that seasonally engulfed prairie and savanna areas.

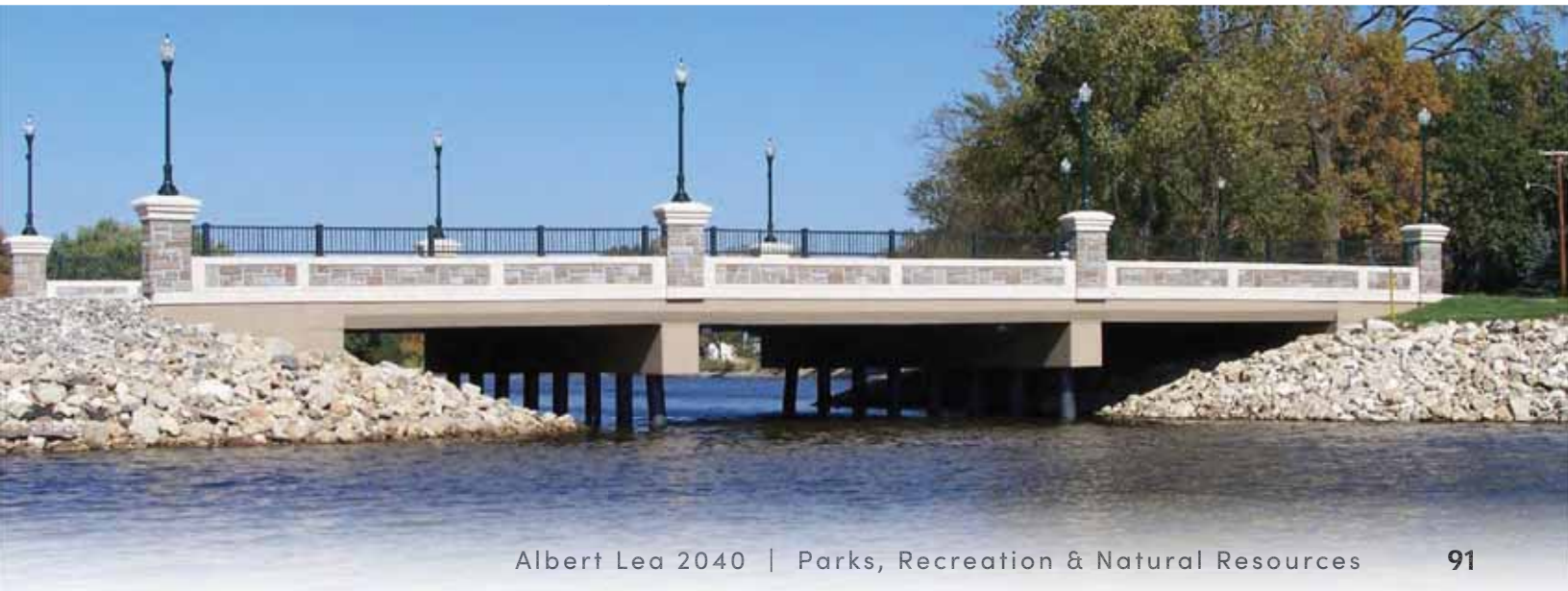
## FIGURE 7-4 SAVANNA OAK SUBSECTION

In this part of MIM, the Savanna Oak Subsection, these moraines were sufficient to stop the spread of prairie fires, but not enough to allow for hardwood forests to be established. Fires from the south, west, and east maintained an oak opening instead of a forest. What makes this subsection different is rolling plains of loess-mantled ridges over a sandstone and carbonate bedrock and till. The area around Albert Lea includes moraine ridges, a continuation of larger moraine ridges found southwest of the Twin Cities. Land for agricultural uses takes up around 92% of the Oak Savanna subsection. Oak savanna habitats are found nowhere else in Minnesota and with more land developed for cities and agriculture, finding these habitats is exceedingly rare. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources published an action plan in 2006 with goals and action steps to guide conservation efforts across Minnesota and gave specific guidelines for actions in this subsection.



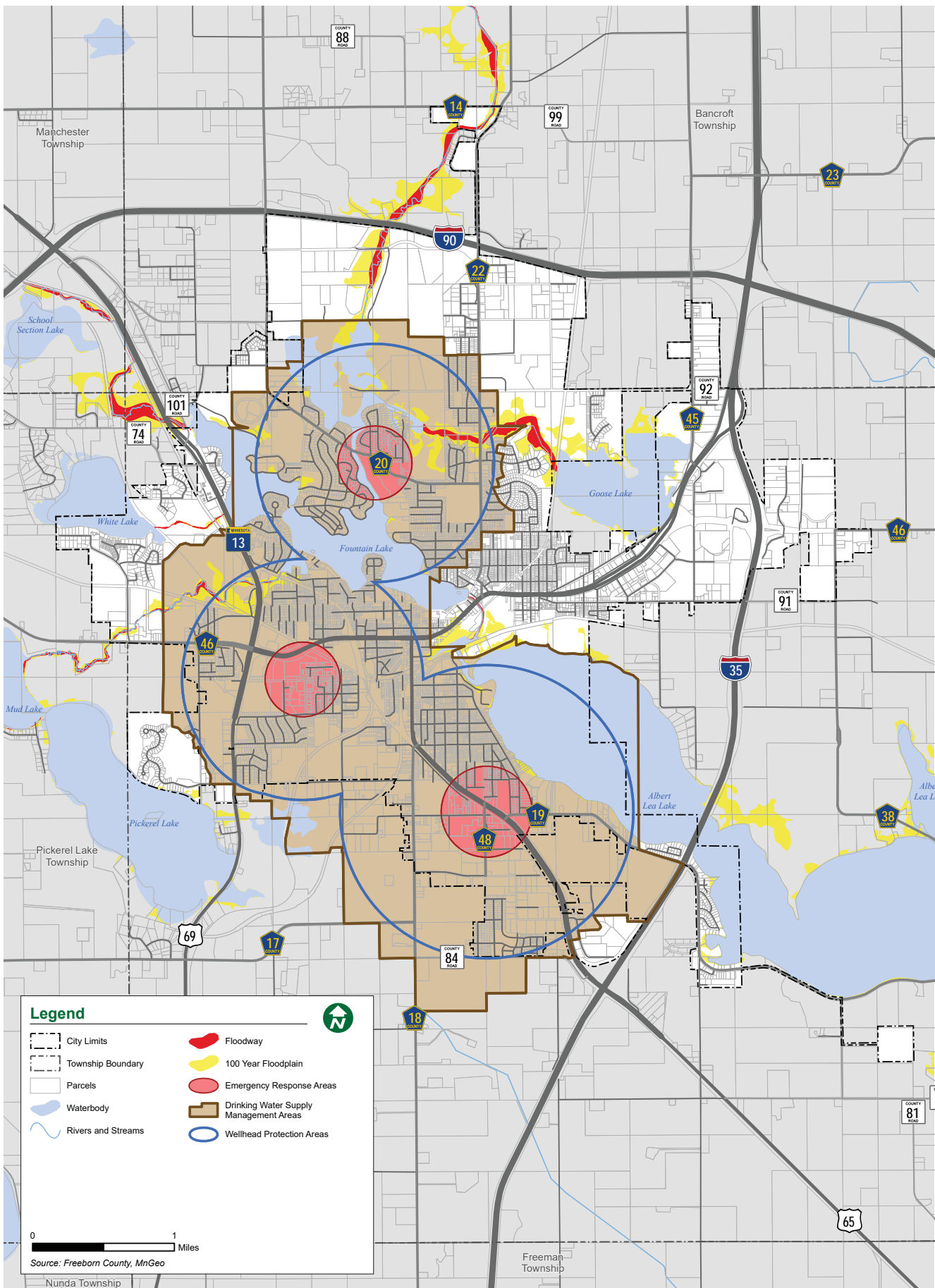
Albert Lea is within the Shell Rock River Watershed and Freeborn County Soil and Water Conservation districts. In February 2022, Shell Rock River and Winnebago River watersheds adopted a joint Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan. The plan outlines specific goals and action items on topics ranging from dredging Fountain Lake to development standards near water bodies.

The following figures help depict areas within city limits that should be protected, like wellheads and wetlands. Most of the identified ecological communities shown in Figure 7-4 can be found nearby in Myre Big Island State Park, which the city should continue to help protect by limiting new development in that area.

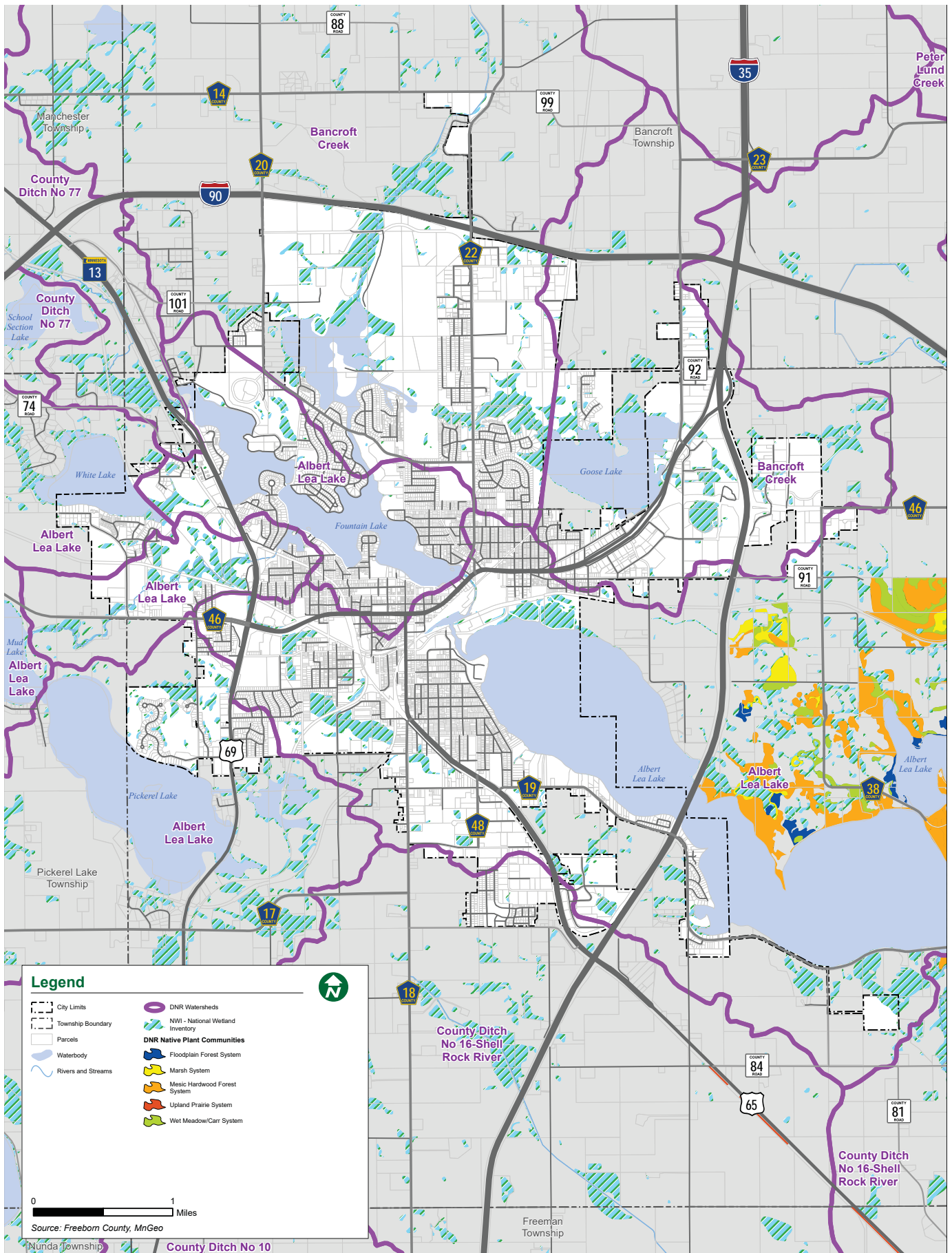




# FIGURE 7-5 NATURAL RESOURCES: LAND AND WATER



# FIGURE 7-6 NATURAL RESOURCES: PLANTS AND WETLANDS







# GOALS & OBJECTIVES

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## Goal 1: Unite a Network of Parks, Open Spaces, and Natural Features

Objective 1.1 Develop a more thorough network of accessible green space across the city.

Objective 1.2 Provide amenities tailored to the needs and wants of the community they serve.

Objective 1.3 Improve the health of the community by providing spaces and activities to suit a variety of needs.

Objective 1.4 Connect existing and future parks and greens paces with trails and sidewalks.

## Goal 2: Identify & Protect Natural Resources

Objective 2.1 Maintain existing forests and parks at healthy, sustainable levels.

Objective 2.2 Prioritize open space through consistent efforts to expand the park system with new dedications and planning techniques that weigh the positive benefits of open space with the changes in density.

Objective 2.3 Encourage the public to foster environmental stewardship.

## Goal 3: Foster Community Engagement

Objective 3.1 Encourage leadership across generations.

Objective 3.2 Create and expand partnerships.

Objective 3.3 Hold inclusivity at the forefront.

Objective 3.4 Promote healthy activity.

## Goal 4: Foster Community Engagement

Objective 4.1 Build community identity.

Objective 4.2 Maintain long-term projects.

Objective 4.3 Emphasize the benefits.

Objective 4.4 Establish sustainable revenue streams.

## Goal 5: Bring Climate Resiliency to the Table

Objective 5.1 Address climate resiliency in public and private investments.

