

CHAPTER 3: PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on Merrill's Strengths

Responding to the opportunities and constraints of the physical site, market, and community desires, JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause prepared a concept for riverfront redevelopment. The concept builds on Merrill's strengths:

- Wisconsin River
- Muskie fishing
- Protected natural views on river's south side
- Council Grounds State Park
- Gateway into Northwoods
- Logging history and identity
- Relatively little train traffic
- Relatively few known contamination issues
- Proximity to downtown, Lincoln County fairgrounds, Merrill Golf Club, state highway access

Concept Review

JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause met with community stakeholders and presented the concept plan for the eastside riverfront. Feedback and criticism guided changes to better address the community's wants and needs.

JJR and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause led a community meeting in City Council Chambers. Baker Tilly Virchow Krause described their market analysis and pin-pointed Merrill's market strengths. JJR described a concept for riverfront redevelopment, solicited comments, and answered questions. Approximately 50 Merrill residents participated.

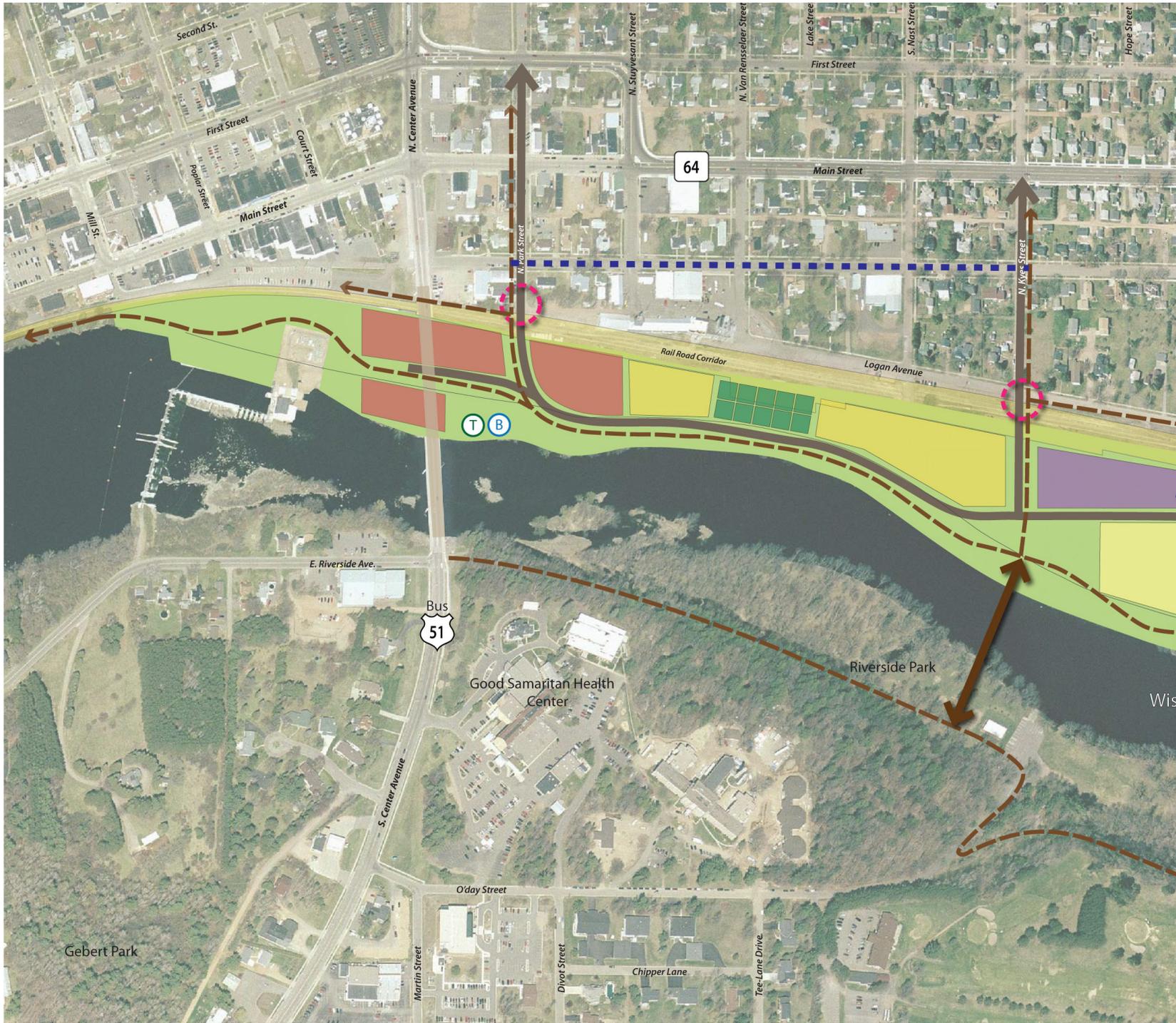
Eastside Waterfront Initiative: Increasing Access

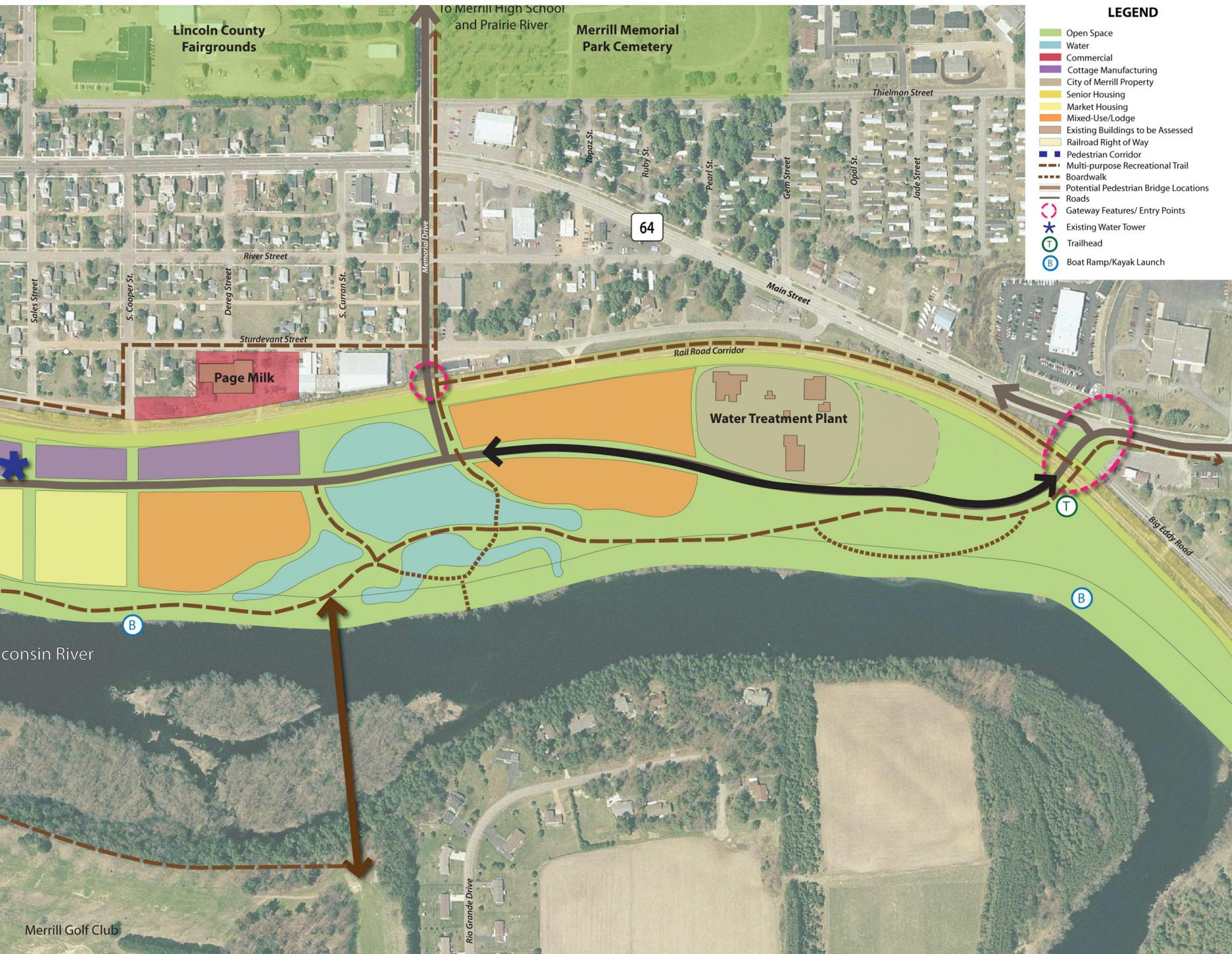
This riverfront revitalization plan is about increasing access.

- Public access to the water through an easement along the water's edge, which will include natural open spaces and a multipurpose recreational (bicycle/pedestrian) path
- Transportation access to riverfront parcels through a new road south of the rail line and strategic connections to the existing street grid to the north
- Access along the river to and from downtown, so that riverfront development strengthens and complements Downtown Merrill
- Create a special environmental corridor

Two primary ingredients of the plan link the entire study area - a new roadway connection and a riverfront path. Building on the idea of improved access these corridors allow for and promote more localized redevelopment opportunities. In addition to providing infrastructure and inviting private investment these elements also provide a strong rationale for northerly linkages to neighborhoods, the County Fair Grounds, public schools and the Prairie River with an associated trail network.

The following revitalization opportunities are generally described as one would experience them travelling from east to west.





LEGEND

- Open Space
- Water
- Commercial
- Cottage Manufacturing
- City of Merrill Property
- Senior Housing
- Market Housing
- Mixed-Use/Lodge
- Existing Buildings to be Assessed
- Railroad Right of Way
- - - Pedestrian Corridor
- · · Multi-purpose Recreational Trail
- - - Boardwalk
- - - Potential Pedestrian Bridge Locations
- Roads
- Gateway Features/Entry Points
- ★ Existing Water Tower
- T Trailhead
- B Boat Ramp/Kayak Launch

CONCEPT PLAN



Riverfront Multi-Purpose Recreational Trail

This new riverfront path provides continuous physical and visual access along more than one mile of the Wisconsin River. This trail forms the spine of a recreational and environmental corridor where public access historically did not exist. The river trail allows the community to fulfill its desire of returning to the tradition of “the City of Parks”, celebrating its most valuable natural resource, promoting a healthier lifestyle and creating a legacy public amenity for future generations.

The recreational trail should be constructed to allow walkers, bikers, and other recreational users. The trail width should be approximately twelve feet wide, except in environmentally sensitive areas.

On the eastern end, the trail has a natural feel, similar to trails in Council Grounds State Park. It should be removed from the parkway, and pass through the landscape. In the central portion, the trail runs between the river and redevelopment sites. On the western end, the trail become more urbanized and runs along and close to the parkway, passing through the riverfront retail and through the WPS parcel.

The trail is a critical connection for the city-wide trail network. It should connect to planned riverfront trails west of downtown, to on-street trails on Park Street, Kyes Street, and Memorial Drive, and to future trails to the east.

The trail should allow twelve-month access to the river. The path can either be cleared for winter walking and biking, or groomed for cross-country skiing. Trail usage should follow overall city policy, but the trail could provide an important connection for snowmobilers among the proposed lodge redevelopment, other

Main Street accommodations, and regional snowmobile trails to the east. Snowmobile access should not extend west of the proposed lodge.

Access to the river trail is greatly embellished by the creation of two new trailheads. One trailhead is located off the proposed parkway entry at Big Eddy Road, and serves as a starting point for the natural areas along Big Eddy Road and points east and north. The second trailhead is located on the western end under Business Highway 51 Bridge near the Main Street retail district. The parking lot for this trailhead can double as a location for river-oriented community celebrations.

The trail should provide access to kayak/canoe launches, allowing trail users physical access to the river. Launches for non-motorized boats should be co-located at west and east trailheads, with a potential additional kayak/canoe launch near the lodge and pond redevelopment area.

The trail should also provide opportunities to visually interact with the river. Trail overlooks should provide highlight the most picturesque viewpoints. Overlooks can include ADA-compliant fishing access. Interpretive signage can educate trail users to the Wisconsin River, its history, its wildlife, and special ecological demonstration areas.

The riverfront recreational trail is a first-phase improvement. It can be created by negotiating an access easement with riverfront property owners for the first 60-100 feet of land from the river. In the short-term, the riverfront trail can coexist with current riverfront uses. As an initial project, the riverfront project will re-introduce Merrill residents to their Wisconsin Riverfront, sparking continued community excitement for continued redevelopment.



Precedent Images of Riverfront Trail

Merrill River Parkway

The success of any district, neighborhood or community facility is good access and the ability to service an area. The proposed Merrill River Parkway provides a public conduit to the river and adjacent riverfront properties where historically access consisted of limited private roads.

The Parkway has the ability to generate a ceremonial gateway from the east to the downtown, changing perceptions for both local residents and out-of-town visitors. Its alignment and design can offer as powerful and memorable an experience as its counterpart, the Council Grounds State Park, to the northwest. Finally it offers the downtown residents of Merrill a walkable alternative to access and recreate along the river without having to travel to the state park by car.

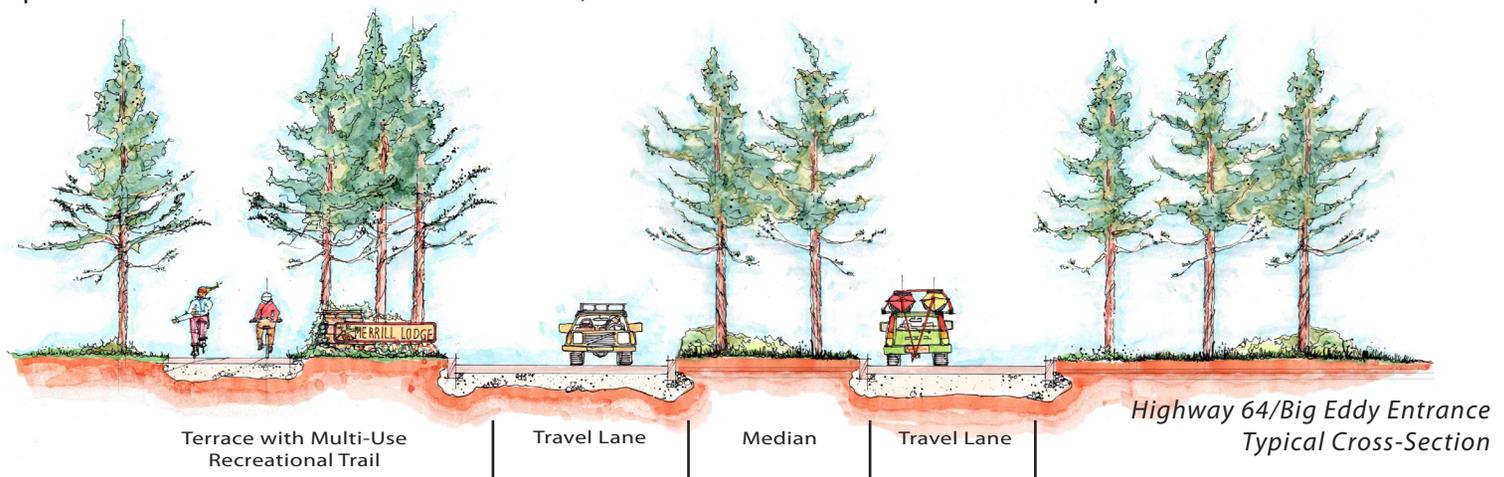
The cross-section of the road should change as its context changes. On the eastern end, the road passes through undeveloped wooded areas, so the Parkway should have a more rural cross-section, including a vegetated median and sidewalks. As it passes through redevelopment areas, the cross-section should narrow, providing on-street parking and sidewalks where appropriate. Vehicle lanes should be 10-11 feet wide,

encouraging slower speeds particularly through redeveloped areas.

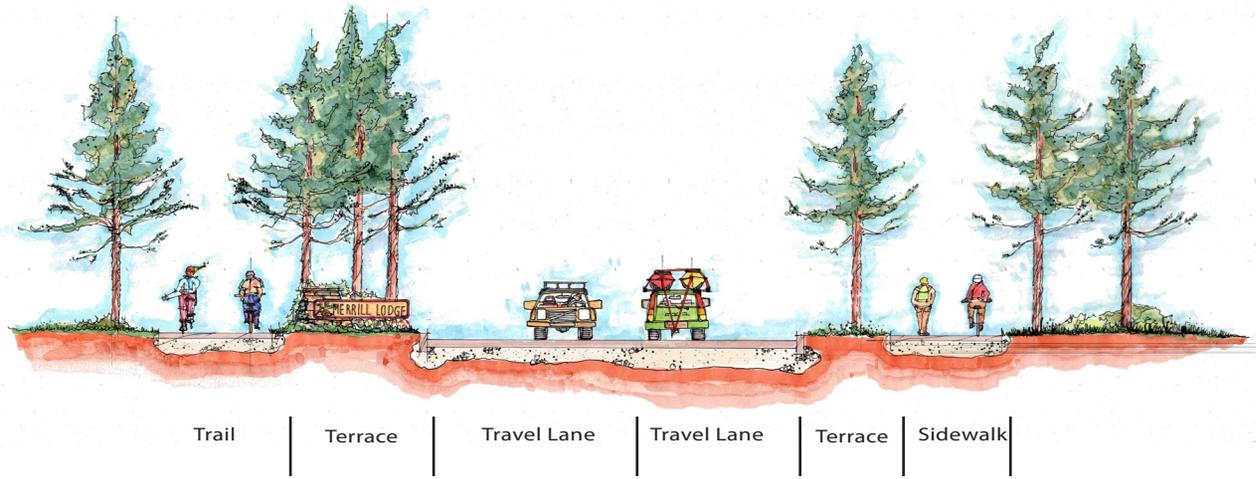
The road connects directly to Main Street on the east and Park Street on the west. Extensions of Kyes Street and Memorial Drive connect the Merrill Parkway to the neighborhoods to the north. The Parkway will be another connection between Highway 51 and downtown, sharing traffic with Main Street and lessening the impact of through vehicles on the residential areas that flank Highway 64.

The Parkway and its neighborhood connections will have four public rail crossings and no private driveway crossings. This is a reduction from the existing two public crossings and five private crossing easements. The safety of existing public crossings at Park and Kyes should be improved with more signage and cross arms. All changes to rail crossings are reviewed and approved by the Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Railroads, with Canadian National an important stakeholder in the discussion.

The Merrill River Parkway is a critical infrastructure investment that will provide the access necessary for the redevelopment of private riverfront parcels. It is also an opportunity to bring residents and visitors down to experience the Wisconsin River.

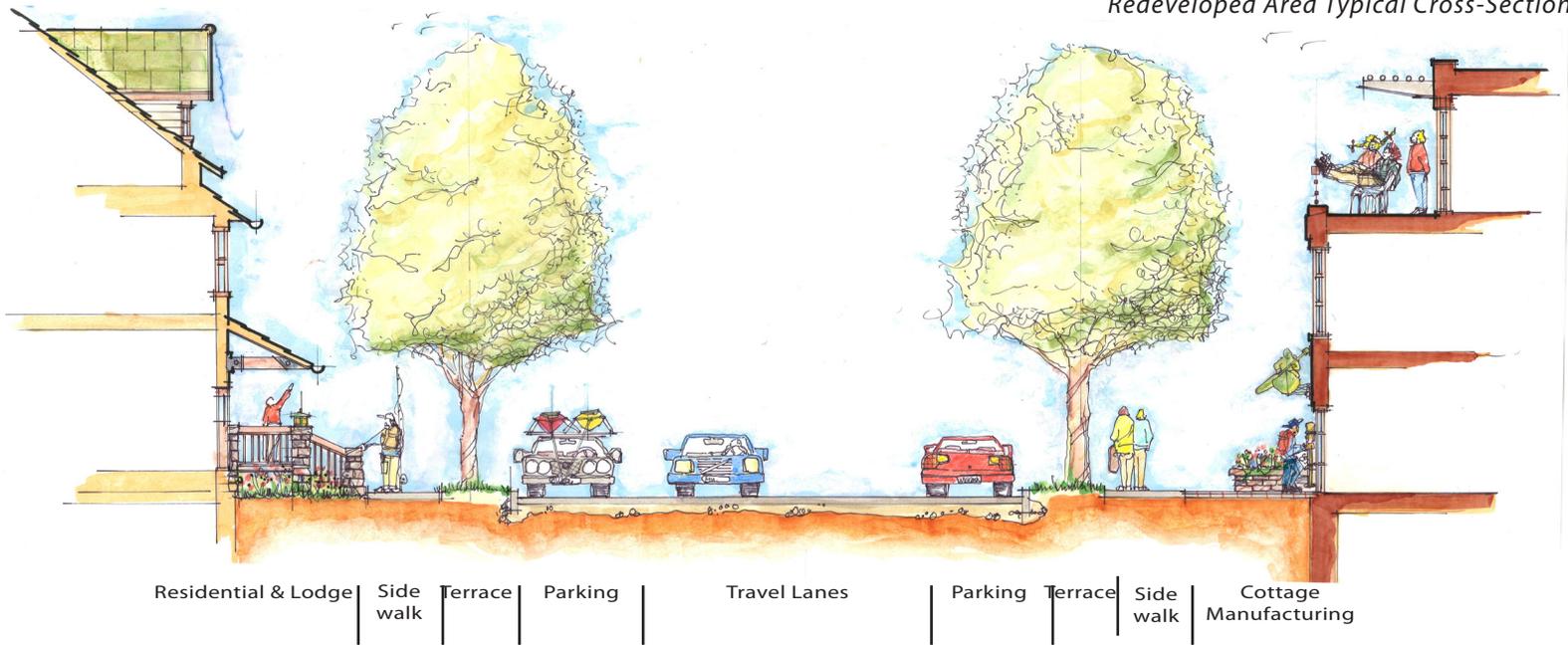


Merrill River Parkway Area Typical Cross-Section



Trail | Terrace | Travel Lane | Travel Lane | Terrace | Sidewalk

Redeveloped Area Typical Cross-Section



Residential & Lodge | Side walk | Terrace | Parking | Travel Lanes | Parking | Terrace | Side walk | Cottage Manufacturing

Merrill River Parkway at Highway 64 Entrance

The opportunity to create a gateway from the east will help redefine and brand Merrill as a city with a river running through it. The design featured landscape has the ability to reinforce the environmental quality and underscore the message of truly being the “Gateway to the North”.

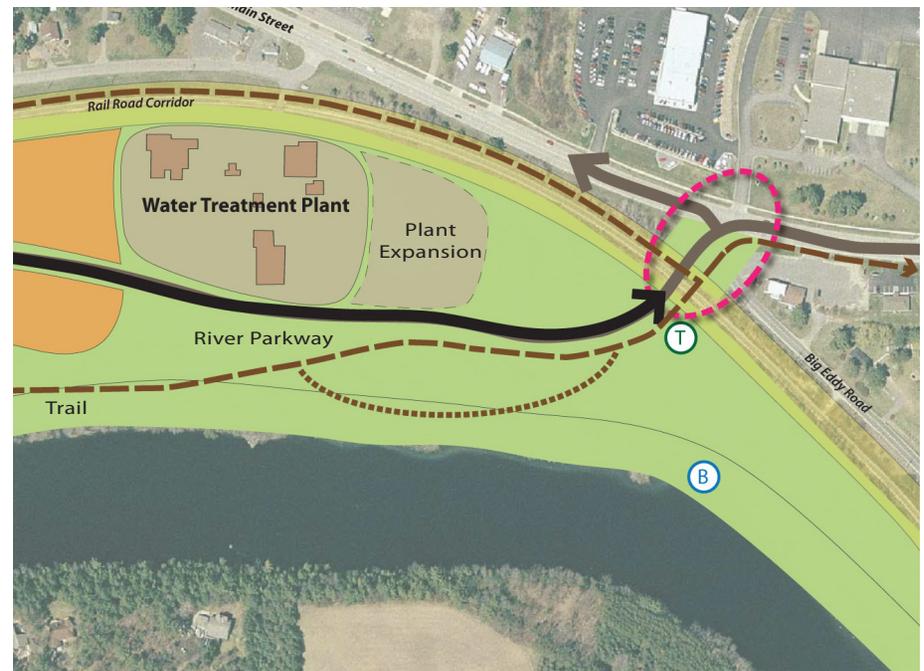
The new intersection of the Merrill River Parkway and Highway 64 should occur in the vicinity of the current Highway 64 and Big Eddy Road, reconstructing the intersection to correct the existing poor visibility. Should the City and WisDOT determine the River Parkway will be the primary entrance to downtown, the intersection can be designed so that Main Street “T’s” into the new parkway.

The new roadway will travel west, crossing the rail line at a new public rail crossing and passing south of the Water Treatment Plant. The road should be designed to allow a future expansion of the plant to the east. A landscaped berm should block views of the treatment plan from the road. The Parkway will be the new access point, with a closing of the existing private easement rail crossing on the north side and a new southside entrance gate.

The character of the Highway 64 entrance is paramount in determining the driving experience of the entire road and the image of Merrill’s riverfront. The road passes through undeveloped and publicly owned land, and the road design should feature the natural resources. The road design will need to respond to likely wetlands and the former landfill south of the treatment plant.

Landscaping in the median and outside the right-of-way should feature a native plant palette, including the removal of invasive species. The road alignment and landscaping should highlight selective views of the river. Roadway signage should emphasize a Northwoods character, similar to the existing Council Grounds State Park entry.

The Parkway will provide access to a new east trailhead and canoe/kayak boat launch area. The trailhead should provide restrooms and opportunities for fishing and signage that interprets the river, its history, and its habitat.





Boardwalks negotiate topography and provide closer access to the river's edge



The road design, plantings, and signage should evoke the Northwoods qualities of the Council Grounds State Park entrance.



Character photos of what could be



Recreational and Stormwater Pond

The existing gravel pond is an opportunity to incorporate both standing and flowing water into the eastside riverfront. The gravel pond could be redeveloped into an attractive amenity for adjacent redevelopment sites.

The pond could be a recreational attraction. A contained water body, the pond could be a training space for those learning to kayak and canoe before attempting the flowing water of the Wisconsin River. The pond may also allow swimming. Trails and boardwalks should circumscribe and perhaps cross portions of the pond.

The systems of ponds could be a stormwater amenity. Water drains from northern neighborhoods through the pond on its way to the river. The ponds could hold and clean stormwater before it passes to the river, improving the water quality of the Wisconsin River.

Further studies are necessary to understand the condition of the gravel pond, including water depth and possible contamination.



Innovative and beautiful stormwater management



Ponds attract recreation and redevelopment



Interpretive signage

Innovative and beautiful stormwater management



Bird Watching is a growing and profitable eco-tourism activity.





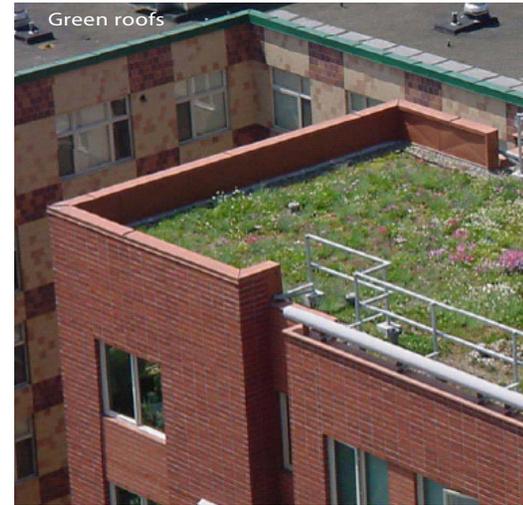
Native plant communities



Porous pavement



Bio-swales



Green roofs



Street terrace stormwater treatment

All redevelopment should incorporate strategies to reduce run off and improve water quality.



The riverfront should be programmed for year-round activities



Merrill Lodge

The redevelopment of the riverfront property with improved access allows for the recruitment of unique businesses and the creation of a unique attraction. One potential new destination is a lodge that celebrates Merrill's outdoor recreation, promotes eco-tourism, and explores the traditions and offerings of the great lodges of the past century.

The riverfront lodge will target a different set of visitors from the existing highway-oriented hotels. The lodge should capitalize on its natural surrounding and target anglers, kayakers/canoists, bird watchers, and other eco-tourists. The lodge could be the site of destination riverfront dining, and nature interpretive center, and/or limited supportive retail.

The lodging redevelopment should also provide amenities to Merrill residents. This destination is equally important in offering the local population a place to host meetings, conferences and serve large social events. The local market can support a lodge once significant riverfront improvements are completed and successful tourism marketing initiatives are undertaken.

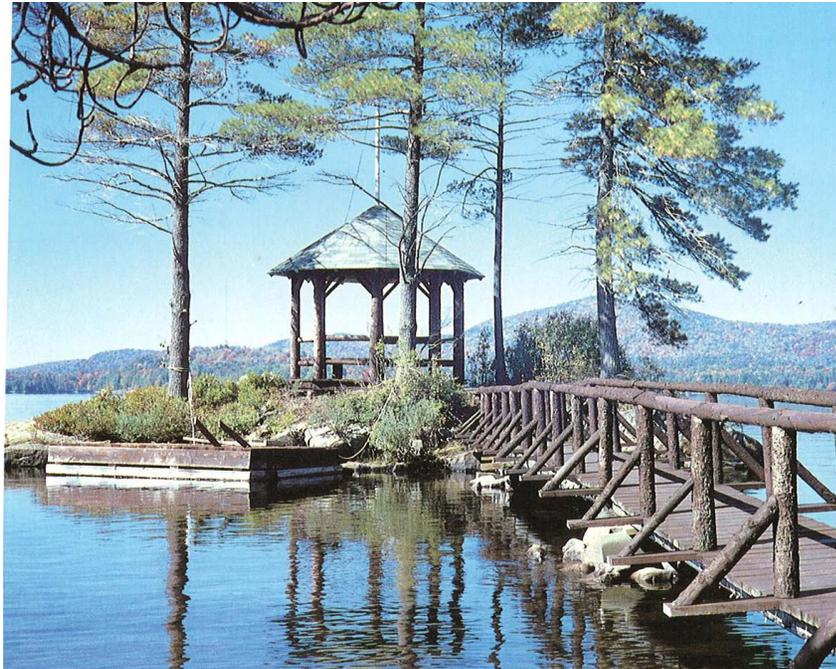
Recreation is not limited to fair weather, and the lodge should offer year-round programming and attract winter recreation enthusiasts.

One of the road connections from the Merrill River Parkway is an extension of Memorial Drive. Memorial Drive is a critical opportunity to tie together the open spaces to the north -- including the Lincoln County Fairgrounds, Merrill Memorial Park Cemetery, Merrill High School, and the Prairie River -- to the Wisconsin River. Memorial Drive should be reconstructed to include wide sidewalks and trail connections from the Parkway into the east neighborhoods.



Nature interpretive center





A long tradition of waterfront lodges

Riverfront Housing and Cottage Manufacturing

There is an opportunity to provide unique riverfront housing and maintain light manufacturing jobs as part of the redevelopment strategy.

The Merrill River Parkway creates a unique address. The area adjacent to the riverfront trail and river provides an excellent opportunity for market-rate housing. Market housing, both rental and owner-occupied, will be feasible as the riverfront improvements are completed and as the population continues to increase in the market area.

The design and architecture should contribute to the character of the riverfront district and take its cues from typical older North Country dwellings and the proposed lodge. A boat launch for canoes and kayaks could serve the lodge and riverfront housing. Maintaining public access to the river's edge and the boat launch is important, so continuous access along the river and regular access paths between the Parkway and the river are critical.

The area between the Parkway and the railroad is an appropriate location to explore light or cottage manufacturing. The concept is to create opportunities for local entrepreneurs or businesses that are looking to locate or relocate in a unique location. The light manufacturing uses will retain/create manufacturing jobs and increase the tax base.

The success of the cottage manufacturing component depends on the ability to identify uses willing to pay a premium to locate near the Wisconsin River and future regional riverfront attractions. Likely tenants are those that manufacture products that reflect an outdoor recreational culture and that want to be located in a beautiful environment where such products would

be used. Canoes, paddles, and craft furniture would combine Merrill's wood products legacy with recreation and nature-focused riverfront redevelopment.

The rehabilitation of the Anson Gilkey water tower would create a prominent and appropriate icon for the cottage manufacturing district. A study is necessary to determine the feasibility of rehabilitating the water tower.

The cottage manufacturing along the rail line would help provide a buffer between the active rail line and riverfront residential. The manufacturing structures should allow for vertical mixed use, such as a live/work structure where the artisan works and sells his products on the ground floor and lives in the second and third floors.

Successful redevelopment south of the rail line will complement the interest for adaptive reuse of the historic Page Milk Creamery building. Former manufacturing and warehouse structures have been successfully redeveloped into artist and craftsman studios in many riverfront communities. A study is necessary to determine the feasibility of rehabilitating and repurposing the Page Milk Creamery building. If redevelopment is possible, the City, working with Canadian National, should consider a physical connection/bridge over railroad tracks. To better connect the redevelopment site with the Parkway and the river.



North Country residential character



Public access to the waterfront through a private residential neighborhood





Cottage manufacturing as tourism attraction, North House Folk School

Mix of ground floor studios and upper floor housing



Water tower as icon for cottage manufacturing area





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ART CENTER

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Days a Week
10am - 5pm
Free

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3 Floors of Art

82 Artist Studios

*Adaptive reuse of
manufacturing for
artist and craftsmen
studios*

Senior Housing and Community Gardens

Between Kyes Street and Park Street, the redevelopment study area narrows, although the parcels are outside the floodplain and are fully redevelopable. In this segment, the trail is close to the river and doubles as the southside sidewalk for the Parkway. Views from the Parkway should continue to feature the Wisconsin River and the permanently preserved canopy of Riverside Park.

Redevelopment sites within walking distance to downtown allow for the development of senior housing. It is important to diversify the riverfront residential products and create affordable opportunities for local residents. The region’s aging population will support additional and multiple formats of senior housing.

If the population within the market area continues to age as projections indicate, the demand for additional senior housing may be sufficient to support the first phase of development in the near future.

The housing redevelopment will lie along the active rail line. Noise buffers will be necessary within the construction of the housing product. However, the rail line is not necessarily something that must be avoided. In many communities the land along the rail has been transformed into a linear park, while still ensuring the safety of pedestrians and freight. Coordination with Canadian National about their right-of-way is required.

Where the width of available land parcels between the railroad and the Parkway is narrow, creative and non-traditional open space uses like community gardens are an option. Community gardens are more than a hobby. They fulfill the real need of producing alternative and sustainable sources for healthy and affordable food. A secondary bonus of community gardens is

the social benefit of promoting inclusivity along the river and a creating a special place for social interaction. The gardens can serve residents of the senior housing and nearby neighborhoods while serving as a demonstration for those on the Parkway and trail.

Within this segment is the second neighborhood connection via a southern extension of Kyes Street. Narrower than Memorial Drive and Park Street, Kyes Street should provide a local street connection and sidewalk connection to the Parkway and trail. The safety of the existing public rail crossing should be improved with crossing gates and better lighting and signage. The City should methodically improve the safety of all public rail crossings within the city, allowing for an eventual declaration of a train horn “quiet zone”.





Trail and aesthetic railroad right-of-way treatments

Bringing Downtown to the River

The west end of the eastside riverfront is within easy walking distance of the downtown retail district and government complex. Riverfront redevelopment should expand and complement the downtown business district, connecting Main Street with the river.

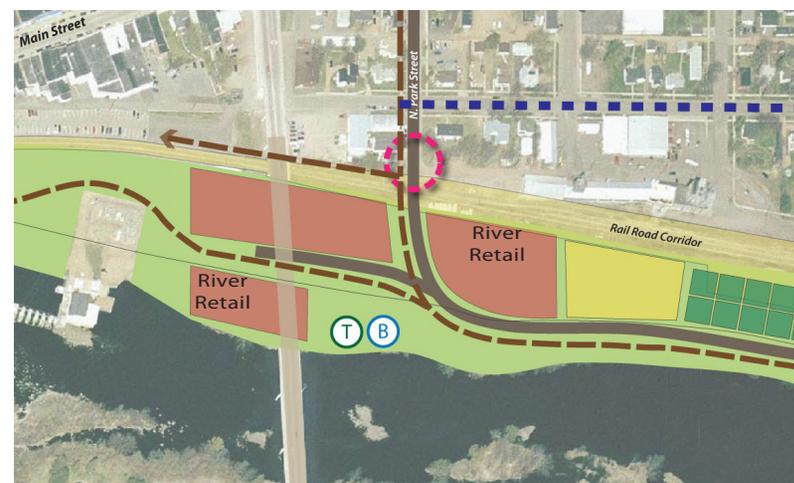
The space under the Center Avenue bridge is between the city’s business core and its river, but it is now lost space. Owned by Wisconsin Public Service, the area contains offices and equipment storage that does not need to be near the dam or on the river. WPS has indicated that they are willing to move these functions to another location within the city and freeing this important area.

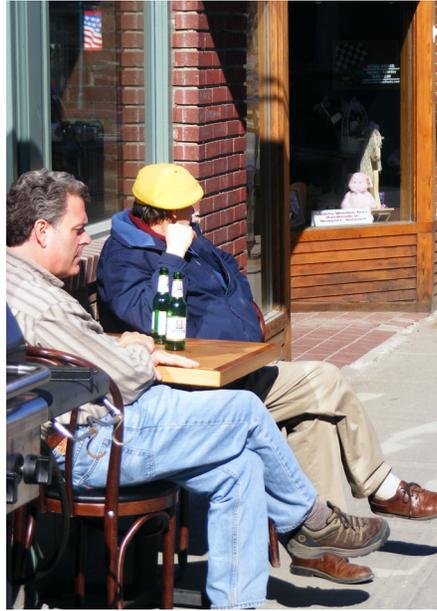
Riverfront retail will complement, support and expand Downtown Merrill. Select and limited riverfront retail sites will demand a rent premium. River and recreational retail uses such as boat, bike, fishing, camping, outdoor gear, and similar retail establishments will pay a premium to be on the Parkway, the riverfront trail, and the river.

The area under the bridge should also feature a trailhead and boat launch. Already the location of the dam portage put-in, the boat launch would increase the prominence of boating opportunities. The launch should be paired with a trailhead, including a covered pavilion and restrooms. The trailhead and the supportive parking lot will become the preferred location for riverfront community events and seasonal traditions capitalizing on the riverfront, resulting in a more vibrant and successful retail district. Community performing groups such as the City Band could find a permanent home on the riverfront.

West of the retail redevelopment area is the dam and power generation facilities. This space, now used for equipment storage, should be redeveloped as a passive open space, with open lawn and benches focused on the river. Working with WPS, the aesthetics of the power generation facilities should be improved through fencing and landscaping. WPS should take this opportunity to sponsor interpretive signage describing how water power is a critical component of our nation’s sustainable energy needs. The City should work with the Main Street retailers to encourage attractive facades and functional entrances on the south side facing the public parking and open space.

In this west segment, the Merrill River Parkway turns north, connects with Park Street, uses an existing public rail crossing, and connects to Main Street and First Street. More pedestrian-oriented than Center Avenue and Highway 64, Park Street should be reconstructed to include wide sidewalks, street trees, and on-street parking. With increased pedestrian and vehicle traffic, retail uses on Park Street should redevelop as an eastward expansion of downtown-type retail and office uses.





Riverfront/recreation retail

Riverfront community celebrations

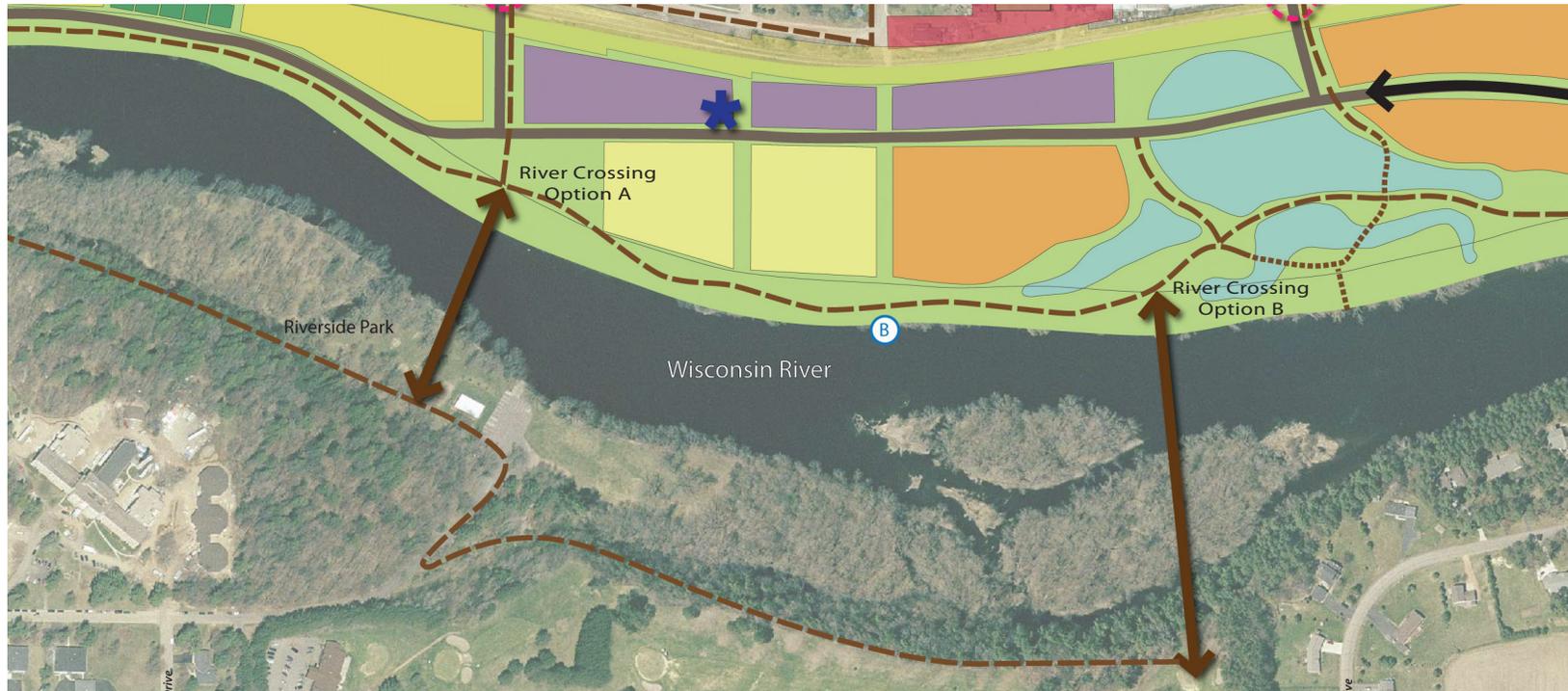


Crossing the Wisconsin River

A longer term vision is to establish another pedestrian river crossing. Additional crossings maximize the interaction of the river and the community. They also provide riverfront trail looping opportunities and connect the riverfront trail to Riverside Park, the golf course, and south bluff trail system. Another river crossing would better connect south neighborhoods to the eastside riverfront and downtown.

A few strategic locations are possible pedestrian river crossings. A connection between the Kyes Street extension would create a direct connection between the north neighborhoods and Riverside Park and the south bluff trail. Another possibility is connecting Memorial Drive to the golf course on the south bluff. The Memorial Drive bridge is twice the distance of the Kyes Street bridge but could connect to the Wisconsin River islands.

Each of these locations require further feasibility studies. Additional pedestrian river crossing opportunities are a longer term phasing priority, but reserving space for the connection now is important.





Pedestrian bridges can be simple and functional, or attractions in themselves



