



CITY OF MANITOWOC

WISCONSIN, USA

www.manitowoc.org

TO: Personnel Committee
FROM: Justin M. Nickels, Mayor
DATE: December 30th, 2025
SUBJECT: Proposal to Create a Separate Parks and Recreation Department

Personnel Committee Members,

As noted in the 2026 Executive Budget, I am officially requesting the Personnel Committee's consideration and approval to create a standalone Parks and Recreation Department. This would remove Parks and Recreation's duties from the current Department of Public Infrastructure and rename the department to the Department of Public Works. I am also requesting the creation of a new Standing Committee of the Common Council: Parks and Recreation Committee. This would bring the total number of Standing Committees to five.

Over the past few weeks, I have worked with staff to outline potential options for an organizational chart to address this request. We have also reviewed the responsibilities and duties of current staff to ensure alignment with the two departments. I look forward to discussing these ideas and hearing what the committee envisions as well.

My request to the Personnel Committee at your January 5th, 2026, meeting is to approve staff to proceed with the development and implementation of a new organizational structure. We will prepare the required job descriptions, compensation plan updates, and any other items requiring full Common Council approval for submission at your next Personnel Committee meeting (February 2nd, 2026).

MAYOR JUSTIN M. NICKELS

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Proposed Organizational Structure

Parks and Recreation Department

Main Office located at the Senior Center

3330 Custer Street

Parks

Recreation

Senior Center

Aquatic Center

Zoo

Department of Public Works

Main Office located at City Hall

900 Quay Street

Engineering

Office Manager (*new position*)

Streets

Buildings and Grounds

Fleet

Transit

Cemetery

Forestry

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Responsibilities of the new Parks and Recreation Standing Committee

Parks

Recreation

Grants for Parks and Recreation

Playgrounds

Trails

Senior Center

Lincoln Park Zoo

Manitowoc Family Aquatic Center

Schuetz Park Community Built Playground

Silver Creek Park Disc Golf Course

Red Arrow Beach

Fieldhouses (and rentals)

Special Events

Committee on Aging

Zoo Board

Manitowoc Zoological Society

Adopt-A-Park Program

Parkland Dedication Fund

Manitowoc Marine Band

Manitowoc Symphony Orchestra

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Background

Prior to 2011, the City of Manitowoc operated with a separate Parks and Recreation Department. Due to budget constraints that year, we consolidated Parks and Recreation into the newly formed Department of Public Infrastructure to reduce costs. While this structure has served us well, it has also created challenges in maintaining a distinct parks and recreation identity and in prioritizing the growth and enhancement of our parks system.

Rationale for Change

Parks are one of my top priorities as Mayor. Our parks system plays a vital role in quality of life, community engagement, and economic development. By creating a dedicated department, we send a clear message that parks and recreation are a cornerstone of local government and deserve focused leadership and resources.

Statewide Impact and Economic Value

Outdoor recreation is not just a local amenity; it is a cornerstone of Wisconsin's economy and community life. In 2023 alone, outdoor recreation contributed more than \$11.2 billion to Wisconsin's economy, demonstrating that parks and recreation are significant engines for prosperity, health, and civic engagement. By investing in a dedicated Parks and Recreation Department, Manitowoc will be joining communities across the state that recognize the vital role parks play in attracting residents, supporting local businesses, and enhancing quality of life.

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Alignment with Professional Standards and Funding Opportunities

Our proposal is guided by the core values championed by the Wisconsin Park and Recreation Association: Advocacy, Collaboration, Community Impact, Lifelong Learning, and Professionalism. These values reflect our commitment to building spaces that foster belonging and wellness for all residents. A standalone department will also position Manitowoc to better leverage state programs such as the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, which has helped nearly 90% of Wisconsin communities access high-quality parks and recreation spaces. This will open doors to new funding opportunities and innovative projects that benefit our community for generations.

Identity and Focus

Currently, parks and recreation is part of a very large department with diverse responsibilities, from engineering, transit, fleet management, and buildings and grounds. This breadth dilutes focus. A standalone department will allow parks and recreation to concentrate solely on its mission: maintaining and improving parks, recreation programs, and facilities for all residents.

Customer Service Improvements

Relocating all parks and recreation administration to the Senior Center will enhance accessibility and customer service. Residents seeking recreation programs, facility rentals, or park information will have a centralized, welcoming location that aligns with community use.

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Operational Efficiency

The Department of Public Works will benefit from this change as well. With a narrower scope: engineering, streets, fleet, transit, and related functions, it can focus on infrastructure and public works priorities without being stretched across unrelated areas.

Building on Success

Our current parks staff has done an excellent job under challenging circumstances, and we have made significant strides in recent years. This proposal is not a reflection of shortcomings but an opportunity to do even more and be even better. A dedicated department will empower staff to plan for the future and deliver exceptional services.

Conclusion

This restructuring is about vision and commitment. Parks and recreation deserve their own identity and leadership to ensure continued progress and innovation. At the same time, public works will gain clarity and focus on its core responsibilities.

Parks and recreation are not amenities; they are the foundation of thriving, resilient, and welcoming communities that generations will continue to enjoy.

I respectfully request the Personnel Committee's approval of this organizational change. Please let me know if you would like additional details.

Sincerely,

MAYOR JUSTIN M. NICKELS