



Live Ona!

2040

ONALASKA

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

EXISTING CONDITIONS



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PROJECT OVERVIEW



The City of Onalaska completed its last comprehensive plan in 2015. Consistent with Wisconsin state guidelines recommending an update every ten years, the new Onalaska 2040 Comprehensive Plan project is currently underway.

The purpose of the Comprehensive Plan is to provide a **long-range policy framework** to guide the City's land use and development decisions over the next ten to fifteen years. The Plan will focus on a range of **core community issues** related to land use, transportation, economic development, housing, community character, and sustainability to guide Onalaska, capitalize on unique local assets, and grow in a meaningful way that reflects its small town character. The comprehensive plan will be **informed by analysis** of Onalaska's existing conditions, as well as **extensive community feedback** from stakeholders, community members, staff, and the Long Range Planning Committee.

PLANNING PROCESS



Phase 1: State of the City

The goal of the first phase is to better understand the existing community character, demographics, land use mix, physical conditions and built environment, and transportation systems.



Phase 2: Community Visioning

This will explore and test a range of ideas, strategies and policies for future physical improvements to key opportunity areas of the City.

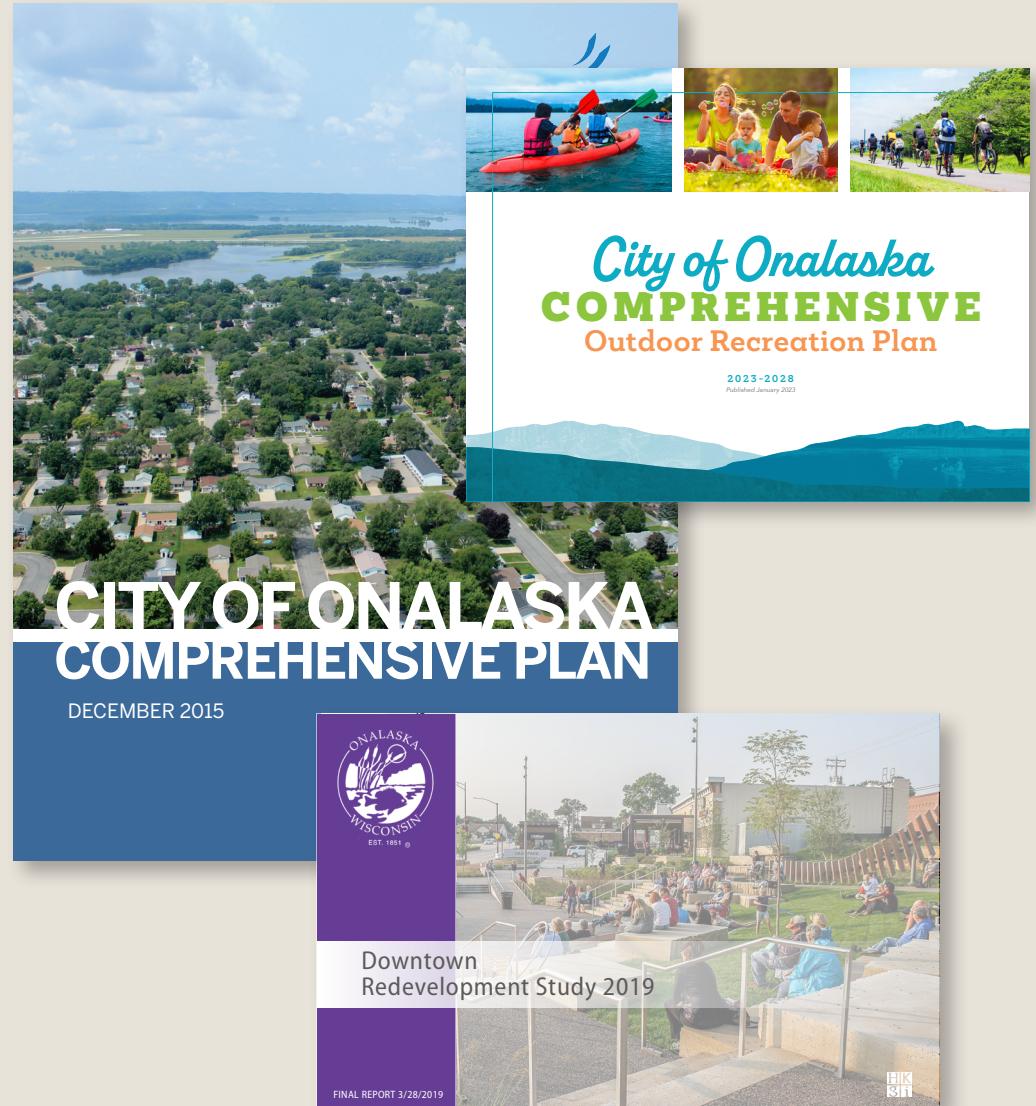


Phase 3: Plan & Implement

The final phase will include the compilation of all the community dialogue, studies, and plans into a draft Comprehensive Plan.

EXISTING PLANS

- City of Onalaska Comprehensive Plan (2015)
- Downtown Redevelopment Study (2019)
- State Road 16 Corridor Study (2019)
- Housing Study (2022)
- Community Survey (2022)
- City of Onalaska Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (CORP) (2023)





COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

Community engagement is essential to the success of this comprehensive planning process. Crafting a public participation plan ensures from the start that **all voices within the community are heard** and promotes equity and inclusion in shaping the future of a city.

The Public Participation Plan provides **multiple opportunities** for the community at large to **share their thoughts** in both traditional and non-traditional formats. Digital engagement opportunities include a project website, online surveys, virtual workshops, and other innovative solutions to make the information accessible and inclusive. More traditional opportunities include stakeholder interviews, open houses, and pop-up events. The following summarizes engagement done to date and the **key community themes and values** that will serve as a jumping off point for the planning process.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES



KEY COMMUNITY THEMES

- » **Holistic Growth:** *Preserving Onalaska's close-knit community feel as the City grows will be as crucial as many structural improvements like safer mobility and targeted residential development.*
- » **Defining Downtown Onalaska:** *The momentum generated by the Great River Landing and Dash-Park needs to be sustained and expanded.*
- » **Onalaska's Identity:** *Embracing its past, celebrating its present, and looking forward to its future can help the City break out and shine in its own right.*
- » **Enhanced Mobility:** *Onalaska's streets need to serve as more than just routes for vehicular traffic; they should mirror the community's vibrancy, energy, and aspirations.*
- » **Harmonizing with Nature:** *There is interest in expanding and better integrating recreational and environmental offerings.*
- » **Expanding Onalaska's Housing Paradigm:** *There's growing interest among residents for more housing opportunities and attainable living spaces.*
- » **Arts, Culture, and Community in Onalaska:** *Residents want to celebrate community spirit and shared experiences in the community, whether its local celebrations or more arts and cultural programming.*
- » **Unlocking Onalaska's Development Potential:** *With limited space available for expansion, the emphasis for Onalaska should be on optimizing redevelopment opportunities.*



COMMUNITY PROFILE

Onalaska, Wisconsin lies within the geologically distinct Driftless Area, situated in the picturesque western part of the state. This region's **unique natural features** influence the City's character and way of life. With its riverfront location on the Black River, the steep bluffs, and meandering valleys, Onalaska's setting is a valuable asset.

This exceptional regional setting offers residents and visitors great views and amazing opportunities. The natural beauty invites exploration and **outdoor recreation**, a **cultural heritage** that tells the story of the area's past, **economic vibrancy** that fosters growth and opportunity, and access to a wide array of regional amenities. These factors combine to make Onalaska an appealing place to call home, a workplace, and a leisure destination.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

- Located within La Crosse County, Onalaska is positioned just north of La Crosse, the region's largest city, and east of Minnesota.
- Major thoroughfares like Interstate 90, State Highway 53, and Highway 35 provide accessibility to neighboring states and cities, as well as the broader Midwest.
- This access benefits residents and is also an economic driver that supports local businesses and



COMMUNITY HISTORY

With its setting along the river and wealth of natural resources, Onalaska has a history of settlement going back centuries. Native Americans inhabited the area as early as 8,000 B.C. The Oneota arrived in the area around 1300 A.D. and were noted for their farming methods, fishing, and hunting. Ancestors of the HoChunk Nation settled into the area in 1634 and some descendants still live in the area. Archeological resources from this history abound and have been carefully mapped throughout the City.

The City's formation can be credited to Thomas G. Rowe, a New York native who arrived in 1851. With his entrepreneurship, the town transformed into a bustling lumber hub. Lumbering peaked in 1892 and Onalaska economy evolved. This shift marked the City's resilience and adaptability as it transitioned from a lumber town into a more diverse economy with a rich historical tapestry.

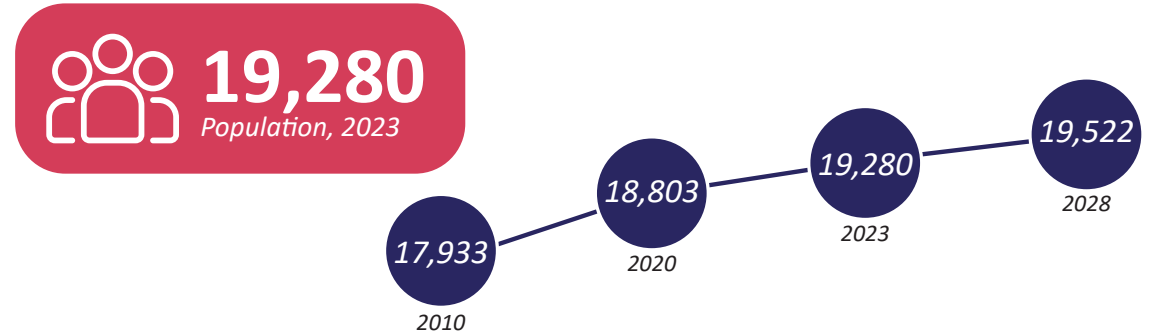
As Onalaska grew through the 20th century, urban development became a prominent feature of the City's landscape. New residential neighborhoods, commercial districts, and public improvement projects shaped the City's modern structure. Today the City continues to experience growth and development, representing a modern suburban community with a strong economy, excellent schools, and a high quality of life.



DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

- Over the 23 years since the 2000 Census, the City’s population has grown by 23%. Onalaska’s growth far outpaced La Crosse which grew only 2% during the same 23-year period.
- Onalaska households have a relatively high number of children, with 22% of the population under 18 years old.
- About a third of the City’s population is over 55. A fifth of the population is aged 65 and older, many of whom may be empty nesters.
- Diversity has increased slightly since the 2010 Census. The largest non-white population is Asian, which today is an estimated 8%.

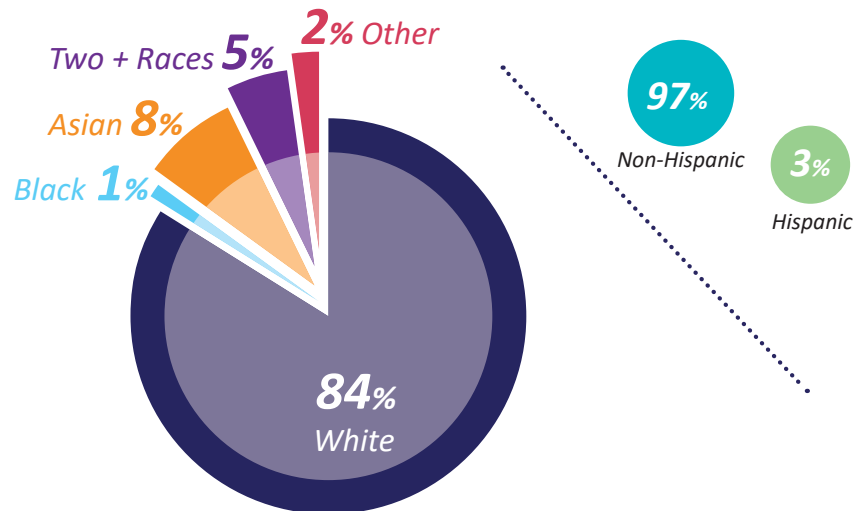
Population Trends



Population by Age, 2023



Race + Ethnicity Distribution, 2023





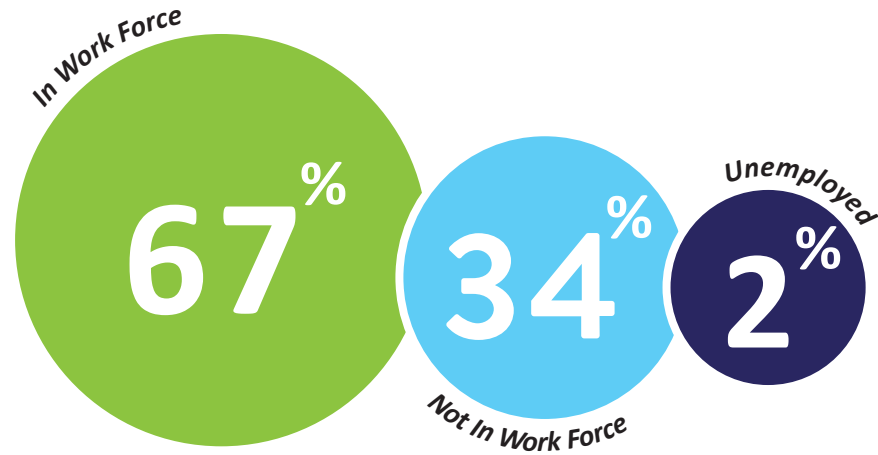
LOCAL ECONOMY

Onalaska has low unemployment and many residents' jobs are in the City of La Crosse. This underscores the importance of **economic connections** between the two cities.

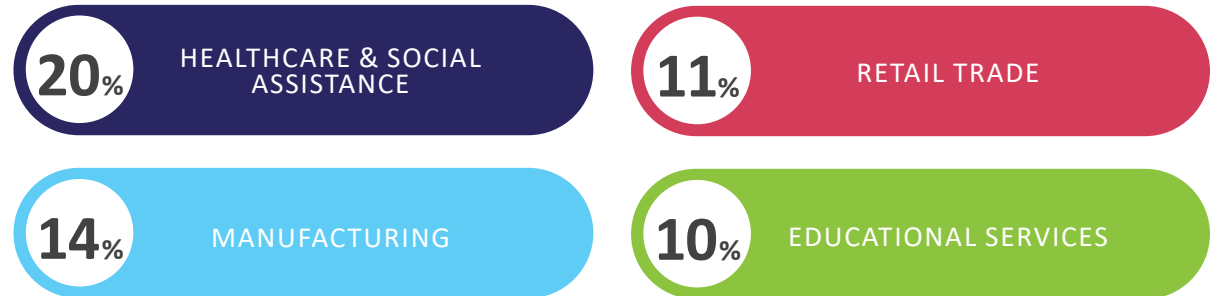
There are about **795 businesses operating in Onalaska**. Over 200 of them are in four commercial centers: Downtown Core, 2nd Avenue South / Highway 35 Corridor, Highway 16 Corridor, and Crossing Meadows Shopping Center. While most local enterprises are small and distributed throughout the City, most of the large-format retail is on Highway 16. Several other big box stores are in Crossing Meadows.

EMPLOYMENT & SPENDING

- The healthcare and social assistance sectors account for most of the primary jobs among Onalaska residents, followed by manufacturing, retail trade, and educational services.
- 45% of the primary jobs are located in the City of La Crosse, followed by 18% of jobs in Onalaska proper.
- The total amount of supportable commercial activity in the area is limited by the regional population of Onalaska, La Crosse, and nearby small cities.

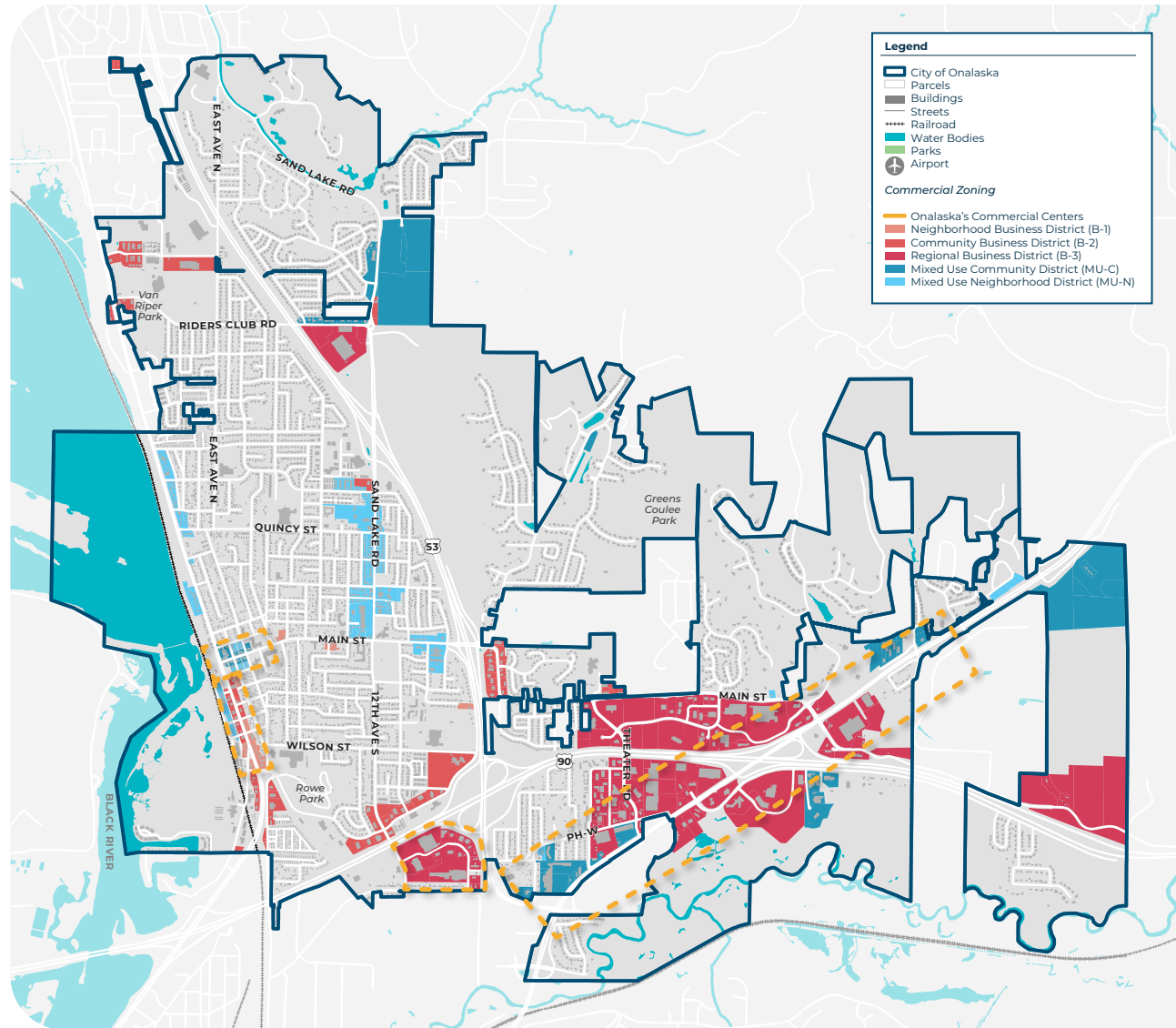


Top Job Counts by NAICS Industry Sector: Residents' Primary Jobs



ONALASKA'S ECONOMY

- Downtown Core
 - » Contains about 29 businesses or institutional entities with City Hall as the largest anchor.
 - » Retail businesses account for 17%
- 2nd Ave South / Highway 35 Corridor
 - » Extension to the south of the downtown core, though the wider, faster roadway makes it less walkable.
 - » 32 businesses or institutional entities on this corridor, with a relatively low density of retail or service uses.
- Highway 16 Corridor
 - » Auto-oriented retail and strip shopping centers hosting the majority of Onalaska's big box retailers, as well as other commercial uses.
- Crossing Meadows Mall
 - » Anchored by Sam's Club and Festival Foods.



HOUSING

- Onalaska has 8,680 housing units as of 2023, with an occupancy rate of 94%. Owner occupancy in Onalaska is 65%, almost the same as the 66% homeownership rate for the US.
- The median home value in Onalaska is \$266,565, which is 37% more than the median home value in the City of La Crosse (\$194,514).
- Onalaska's residential development market remains very active. Multi-family development varies more widely from year to year than single-family development.





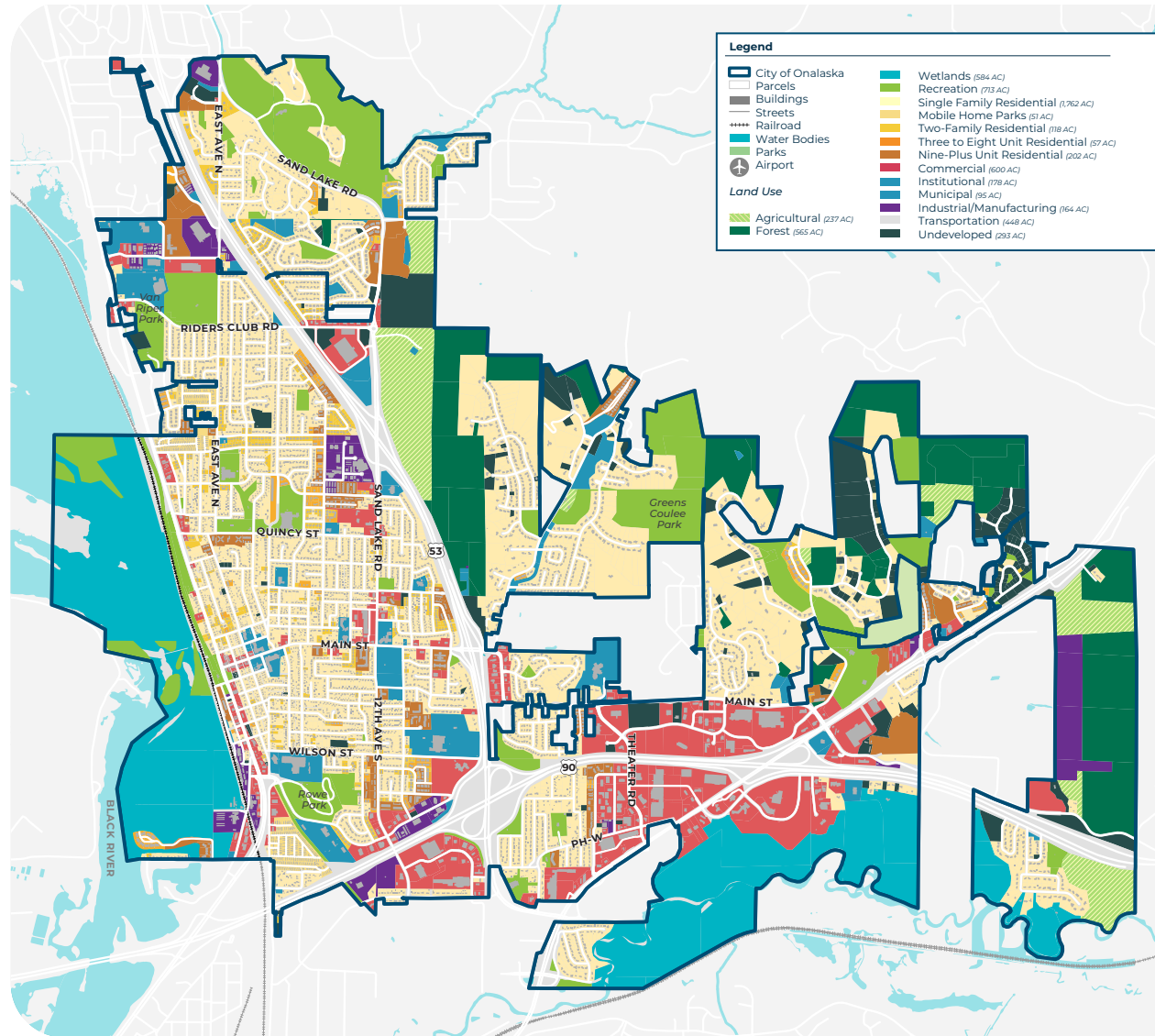
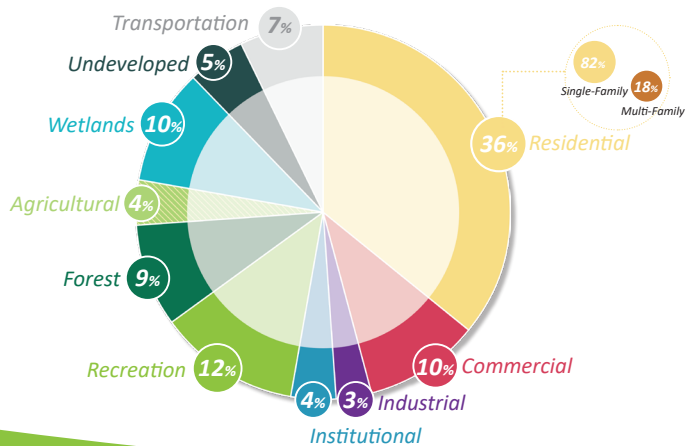
LAND USE & DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Land use is a **pattern of physical development** and arrangement of residential, commercial, industrial, and open space uses within a community. Onalaska's history as a **lumber town along the river** created an intensity of land uses on the west side of the City that progressed eastward with **growth and expansion**. Arterial roadways in and around Onalaska have a significant impact on land use patterns, as do natural resources like bluffs and floodplain areas.

An analysis can help identify how residential, commercial, industrial, and other land uses developed throughout the community and where transitions and changes in land use may be appropriate.

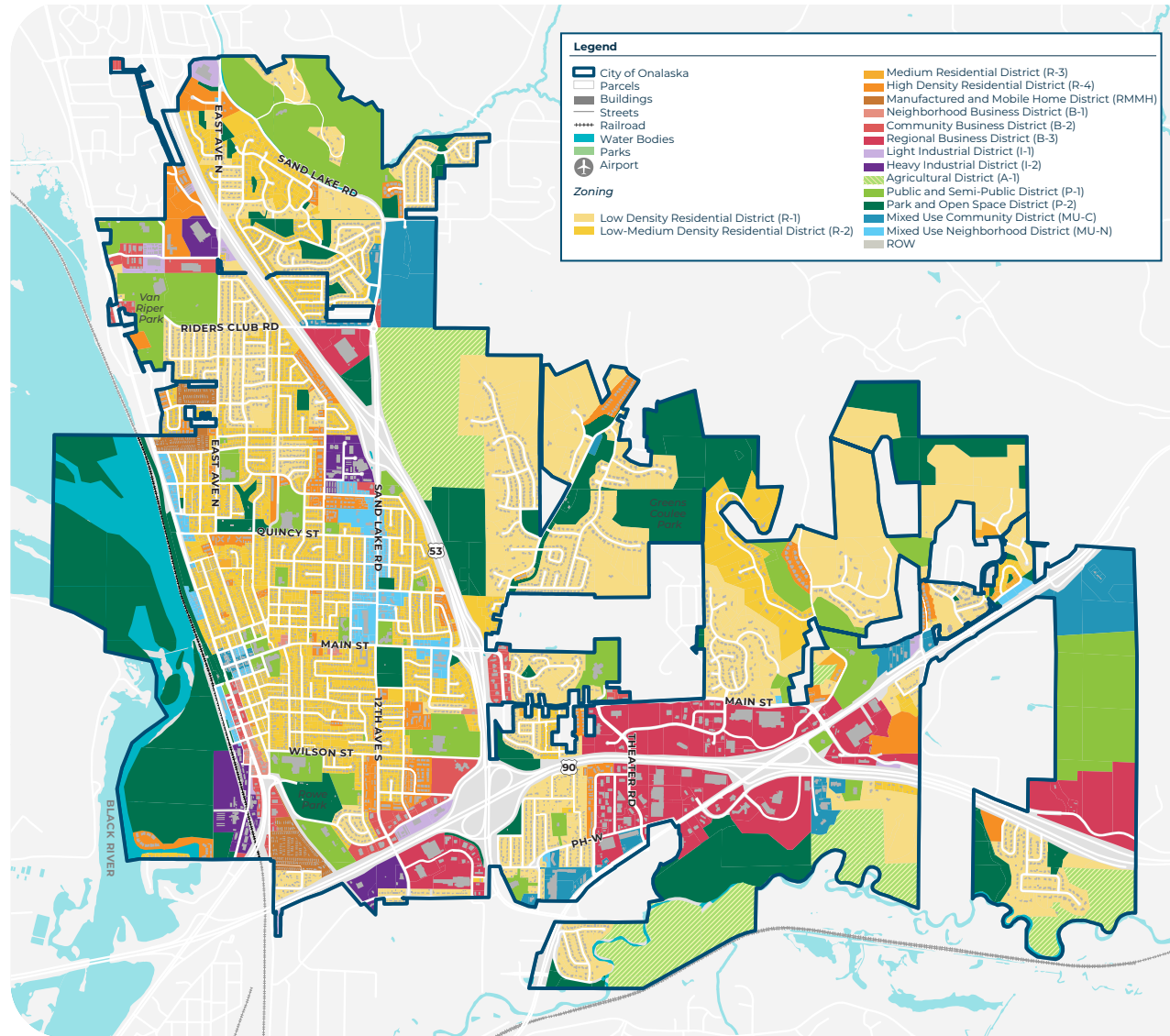
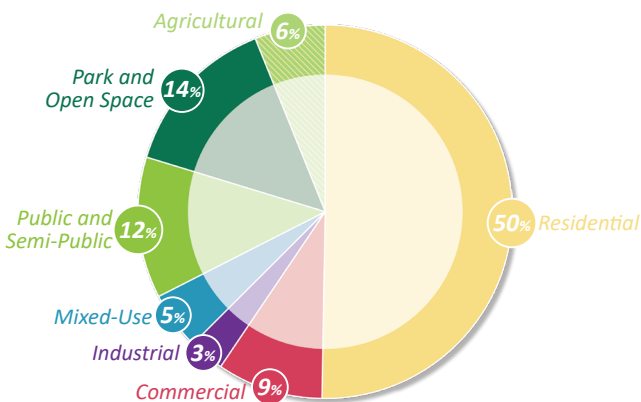
EXISTING LAND USE

- More than a third of the land (36%) in Onalaska is in residential use. Of that, 82% is single family.
- Several different commercial environments: intense automobile-oriented commercial corridors, less-intense neighborhood commercial areas, and a pedestrian-scale downtown.
- Over 1,260 acres, or 21% of land in Onalaska is open space and forest.



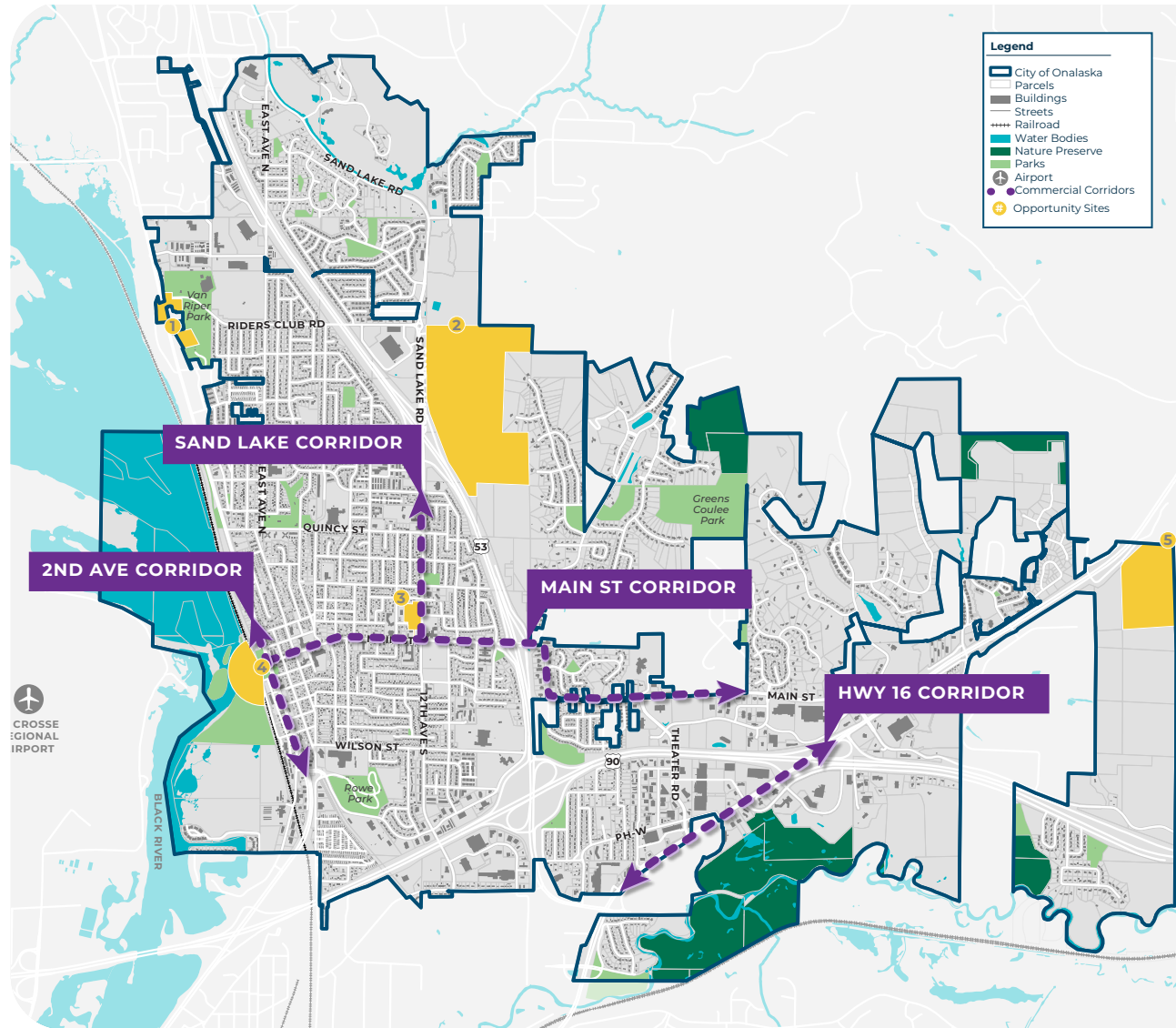
ZONING

- Onalaska recently adopted a Unified Development Code (UDC), a comprehensive regulatory approach.
- Onalaska has five zoning districts for residential-only development. The R-3 is a new addition that fills an important gap.
 - The R-3 allows townhouse and rowhouse development, up to eight per lot.
- Two MU-Mixed Use zoning districts accommodate increased residential density in key areas



COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS & OPPORTUNITY SITES

1. Omni Center Hospitality
2. Mayo Clinic Property
3. Center 90 Shopping Mall
4. Waterfront
5. Nicolai Properties





COMMUNITY HERITAGE & PLACEMAKING

Onalaska is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Nearly a quarter of the community's land area is in single-family residential use, but there are **parks** and preserved **open spaces**, intense automobile-oriented **commercial areas**, neighborhood-scale commercial corridors, light industry, and **multifamily housing** that all contribute to Onalaska's character.

Part of the community's character is a deep investment in the tight-knit **small town feel** and the importance of maintaining it, while recognizing the need for change and adaptation to **keep Onalaska vibrant**. Finding that balance will be an essential part of this comprehensive planning process.

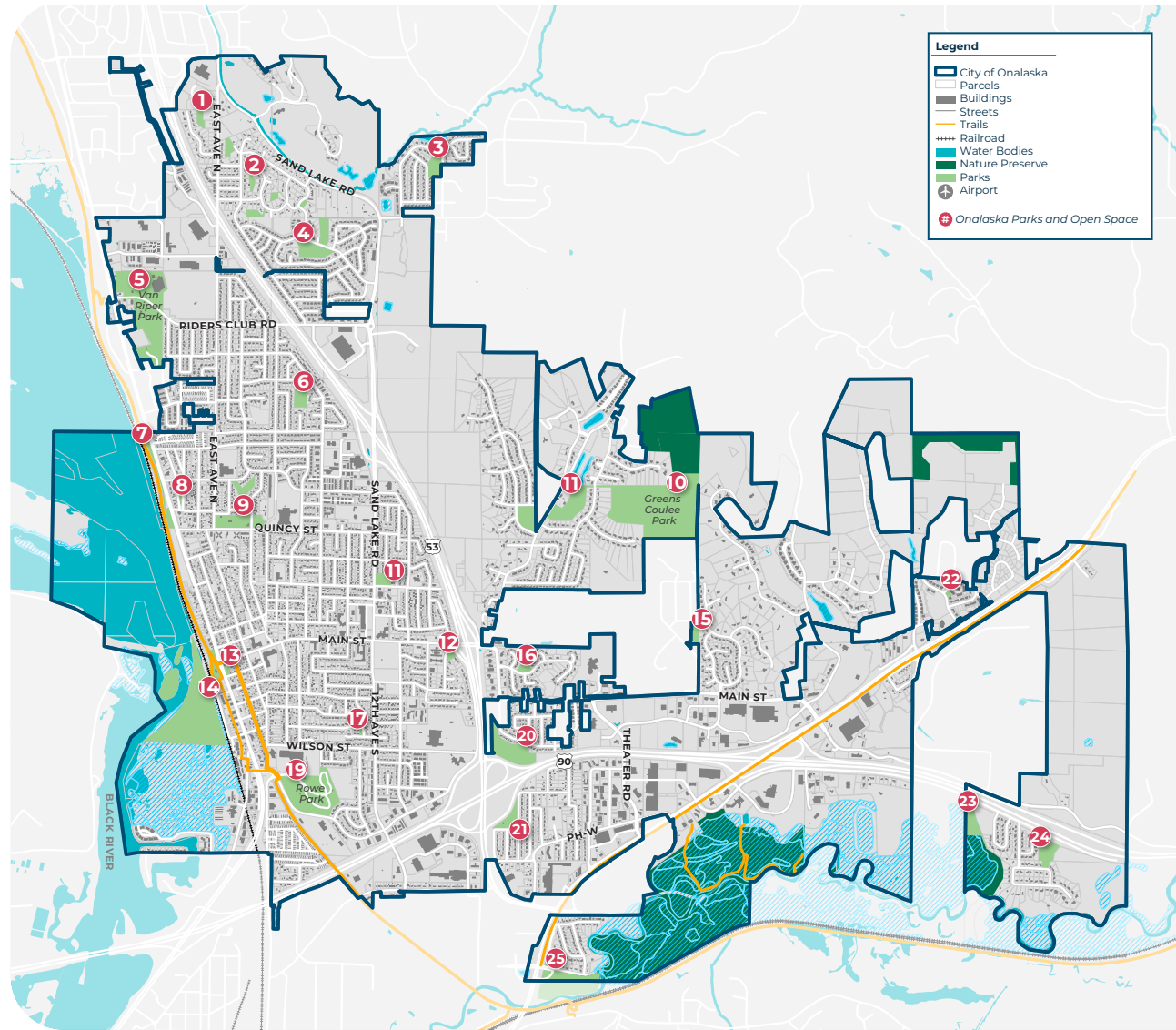
COMMUNITY CHARACTER & DESIGN

- **Neighborhoods:** The network of neighborhoods and subdivisions is a community asset that supports quality of life and creates connections.
- **Natural Beauty & Local Identity:** Onalaska's distinguished location within the Driftless Region, marked by the bluffs and the Mississippi River, contributes to its identity.
- **Downtown Onalaska:** Onalaska's downtown and the waterfront represent the greatest opportunity to create a special place in the community.



PARKS, RECREATION, & OPEN SPACE

1. Thomas Farm Park
2. Oak Park
3. Wellington Greens Park
4. Meier Farms Park
5. Van Piper Park
6. Parkridge Park
7. HWY 35 Wayside - "Sunfish"
8. Park Avenue Park
9. Community Park
10. Green Coulee Park
11. Pierce Park
12. Oakwoods Park
13. Hilltopper Heights Park
14. Dash-Park
15. Green River Landing
16. Elmwood Hills Park
17. Coachlite Greens Park
18. Oak Knoll Park
19. Rowe Park
20. Sandalwood Park
21. Glenn Fox Park
22. Nathan Hills Park
23. Valleyview Park
24. Robinson Park
25. Holiday Heights Park



HISTORIC & AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

- The town's identity has grown away from the industrial history, focusing more on recreation and fishing in recent decades. But the legacy of a lumber baron and some high-style architecture live on in some of the buildings in town.
- Historic Structures:
 - » 1 on the National Register of Historic Places
 - » 3 Local Landmarks
- The City maintains a zoning district for Agriculture, but in practice it serves as a base district for open, undeveloped land more than a guiding policy for land use and development.





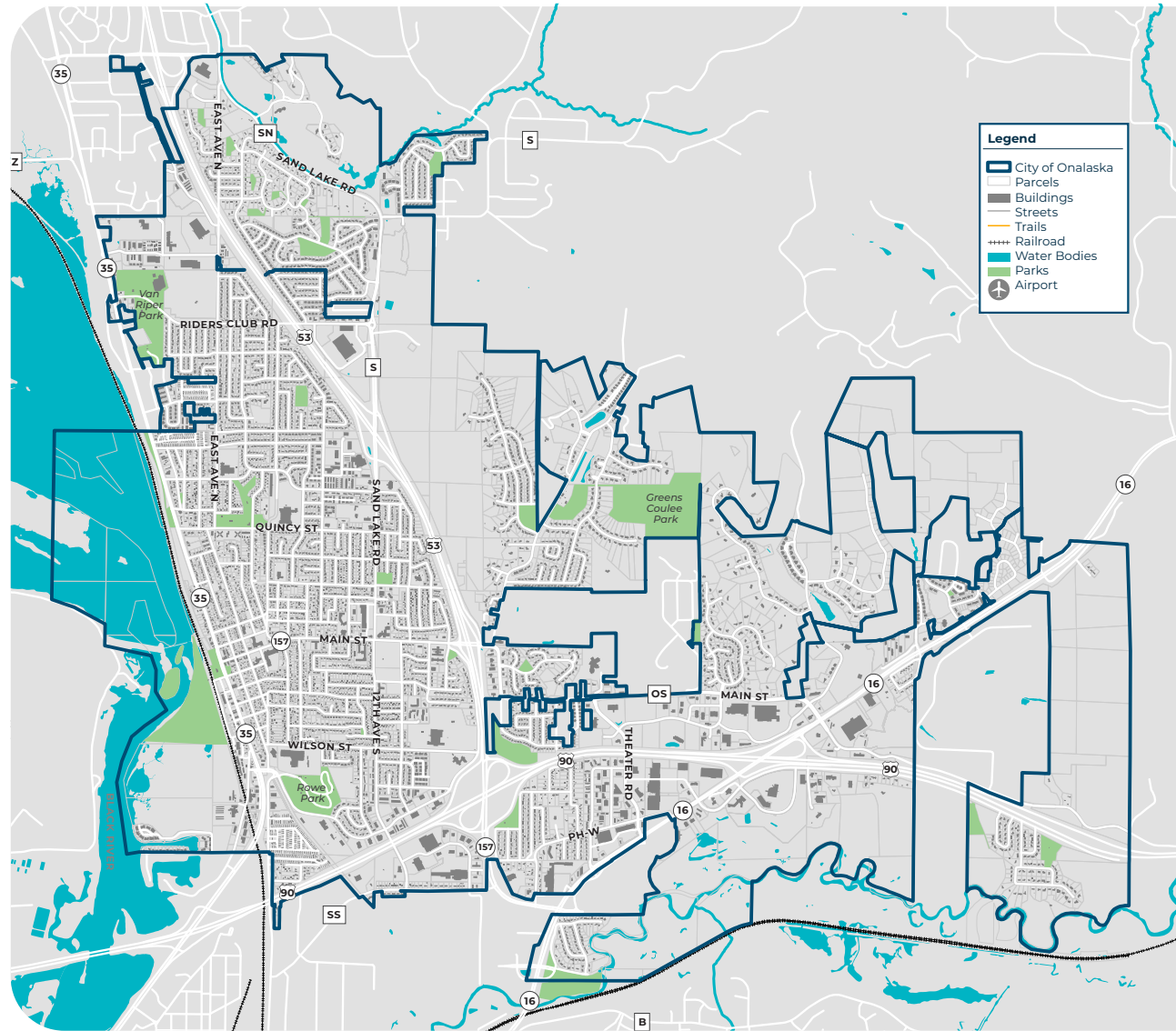
MOBILITY & CONNECTIVITY

As part of a review of existing conditions, it is helpful to analyze the facilities, resources, and infrastructure that **help residents, visitors, and freight move around.**

Onalaska is a **well-connected community**. Residents continually comment how you can “get anywhere from Onalaska”. Mobility within City limits is strong, with a largely-intact sidewalk system and a network of **bike-accessible routes** that allow children to walk to school and non-motorized options for getting around town. The **La Crosse Municipal Airport** provides passenger airline options nearby, though its size and capacity are smaller than airports in Minneapolis and Milwaukee. The **BNSF and Canadian Pacific Railroad lines** don’t contribute to Onalaska’s connectivity directly because they’re dedicated to freight services, but are a constant presence with heavy traffic on the lines.

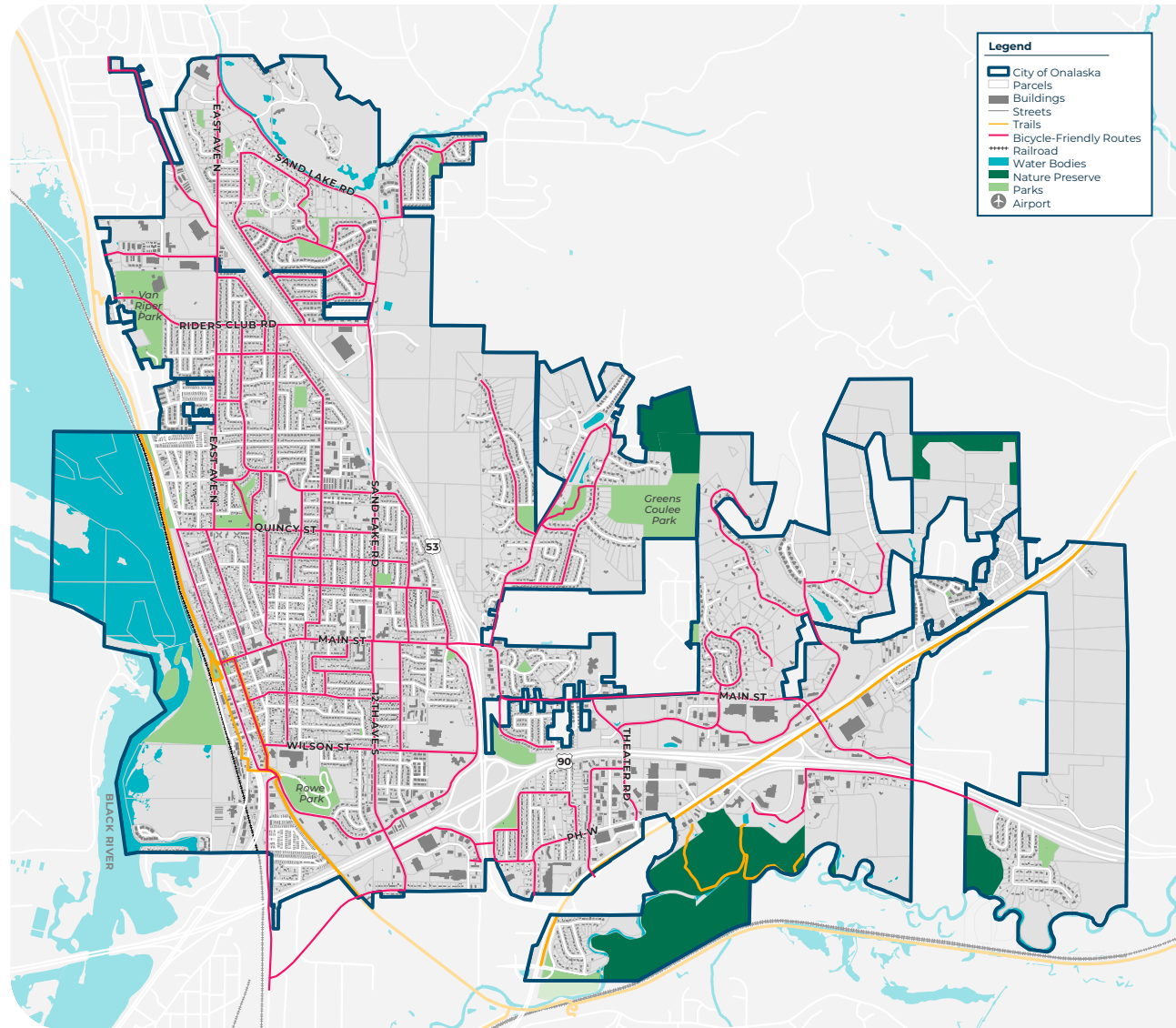
ROADWAY NETWORK

- Well-developed network
- Historic grid network (west) versus suburban style curvilinear (east)
- I-90 and Hwy 53 provide regional mobility and access, but can create barriers to active transportation connectivity within the community
- Grid network west of Hwy 53 provides good multi-modal connectivity - more comfortably scaled for pedestrians/bicycles
- Roadway network can be viewed as one of Onalaska's biggest assets



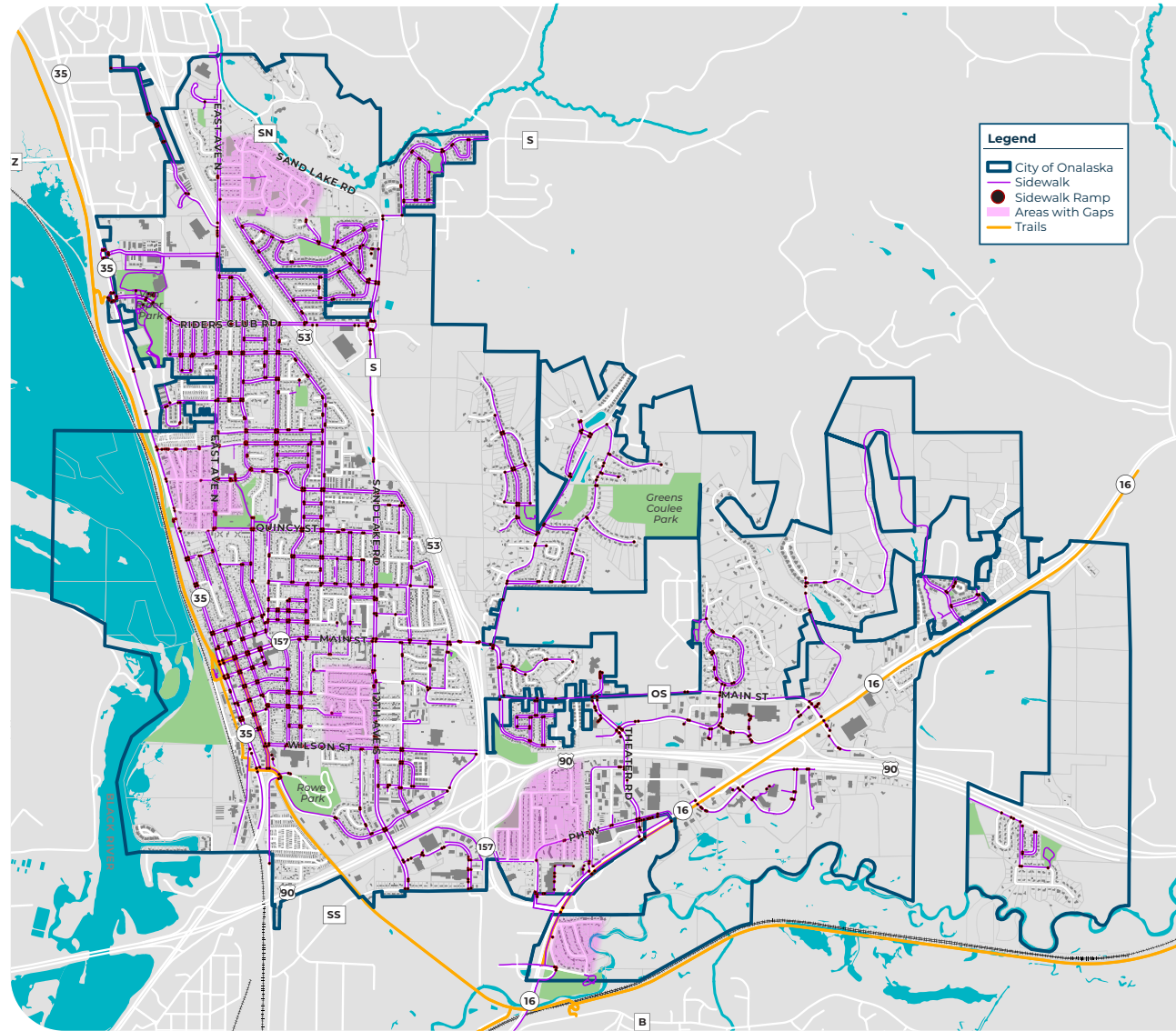
BICYCLE ACCOMMODATIONS

- Many bicycle-friendly routes throughout the entire City that connect most major destinations, institutions, residential areas, and commercial hubs
- Some routes experience high levels of traffic stress and don't have strong bicycle accommodations:
 - » Braund Street
 - » Theater Road
 - » Main Street



PEDESTRIAN ACCOMMODATIONS

- A strong sidewalk network, most streets provide sidewalk on both sides
- Notable gaps (pink shade) at:
 - » North of Wilson St, south of Well St, West of 12th Ave S, east of 9th Ave S
 - » North of Quincy St, south of Troy St, east of WIS 35, west of East Ave N
 - » Neighborhood East of East Ave N, south of Sand Lake Rd
- Most intersections with collector and arterial streets provide pedestrian accommodations
- Sidewalk replacement program: \$125k annually



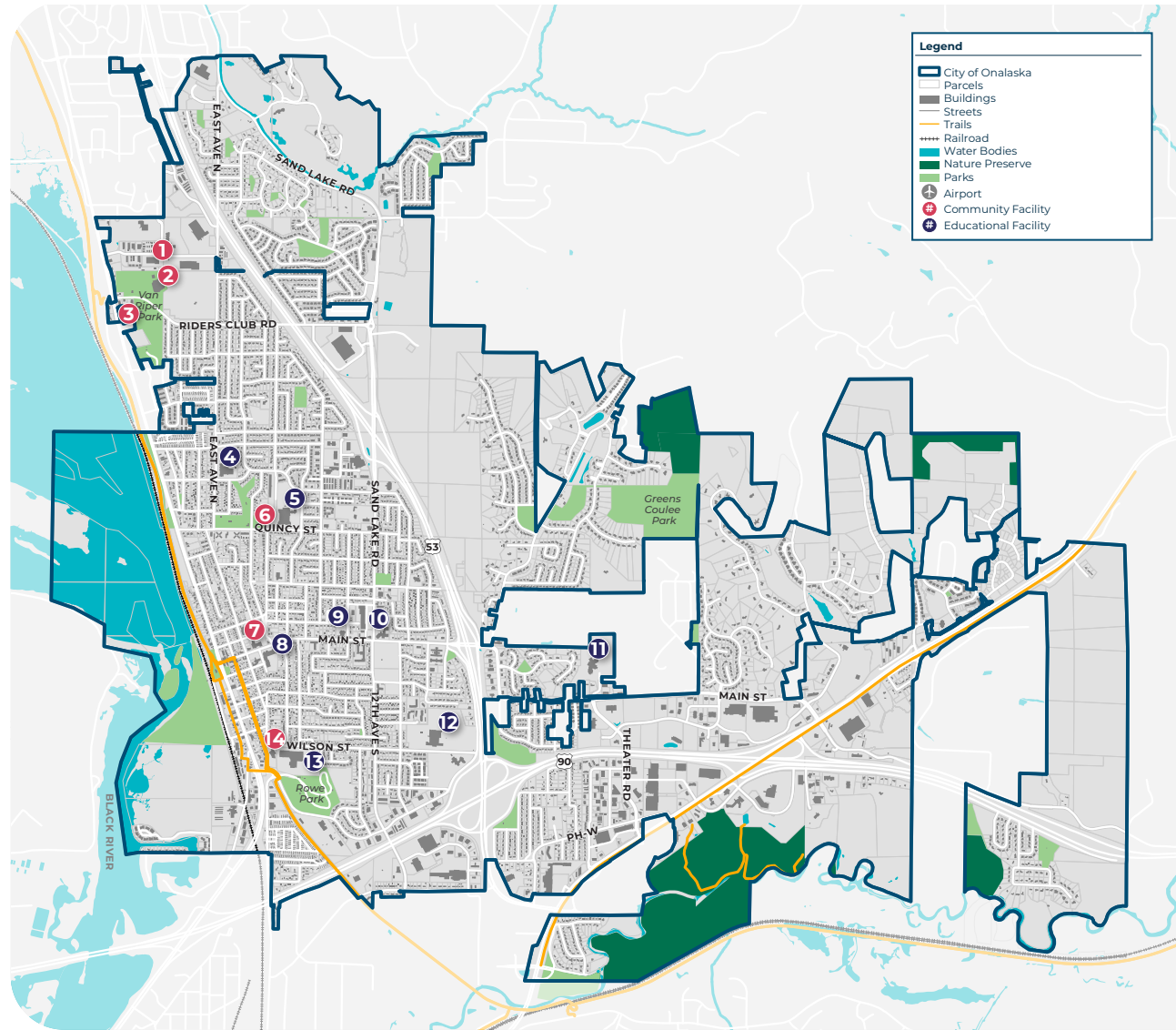


COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE & SERVICES

The City of Onalaska operates under a **council/mayor form of government**, with an elected mayor and six alderpersons who govern three districts. Most City services **operate out of City Hall** at 415 Main Street in the downtown, including City Clerk, City Attorney, Engineering, Finance, Fire, Human Resources, Municipal Court, Inspection, Planning/Zoning, Police, Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and City Assessor.

FACILITIES & SERVICES

1. Public Works Facility
2. Omni Center
3. Aquatic Center
4. Northern Hills Elementary School
5. Onalaska Middle School
6. Onalaska Community Center
7. City Hall
8. Irving Pertzsch Elementary School
9. Saint Patrick's Grade School
10. Saint Paul's Lutheran School
11. Eagle Bluff Elementary
12. Luther High School
13. Onalaska High School
14. Public Library



UTILITY SYSTEMS & INFRASTRUCTURE

- Water Service within Onalaska is provided using numerous types of infrastructure including 4 wells, treatment plants, water mains, and water service lines.
- Sanitary sewer service maintained by Sanitary Sewer Division of Public Works provides ~87 miles of sanitary main and ~1,900 manholes.
- Onalaska, however, is well-equipped to provide residents with consistent broadband internet availability.
- No major shortcomings identified during Phase 1 of the Comprehensive Planning process.





OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lakota Group team has assembled a list of preliminary observations and recommendations based on research, field work, and input from the public engagement process. These are categorized broadly by topic and will inform elements of the visioning and strategizing in Phase 2 of the comprehensive planning process.

OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

- **2nd Avenue:** Facilitate growth, development, and activation along this extension of downtown. Review the land use mix, built form, and effectiveness of the B-Zoning Districts to achieve the community vision. Strategies in 2019 Study still relevant.
- **Expand R3 Zoning District:** This new zoning district represents a key opportunity to provide “missing middle”-scale housing that fills a gap between single family/duplexes and large multifamily development.
- **Outdoor Activation:** Coordinate and facilitate outdoor community events, including in the winter, that celebrate the beauty of Onalaska’s setting along the river and among the bluffs.
- **Gateway Signs:** Enhance gateway signs at key entrance points to the community. These contribute to a sense of place, announcing to visitors that Onalaska is a special community.
- **Design Review:** Incorporate a formal design review process for new development, create established design standards and guidelines. Development standards for MU Zoning Districts in the UDC are a great starting point.



OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

MOBILITY & RECREATION

- **Connectivity:** Improve multi-modal access and connectivity to and through the downtown. Design and infrastructure can improve the pedestrian experience and remove barriers to waterfront access.
- **Park Maintenance and Improvements:** Staffing and resources are key issues identified in the 2023 CORP. While long-term strategies like grants and partnering are valuable, seeking “low hanging fruit” solutions will be important.
- **Great River State Trail:** The on-street portion of this trail in Onalaska is a great opportunity to show off the City’s commitment to cycling. Through small investments, it can be made safer and more attractive for cyclists.
- **Complete Streets Policy:** Several street reconstruction projects are on the horizon in Onalaska. Now is the perfect time to revisit & refine the City’s Complete Streets Policy to make the streets safer for non-motorized users.





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