

# LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL



*The Adventure in Our Own Backyard*





# The Future of Public Facilities Along the Lower Eau Claire River

By Daniel Guild, Weston Village Administrator



In early 2015, the Village of Weston passed a revised edition of its official Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. Within the Plan, the elected Board of Trustees established Section 9.5.4 for the Development and Maintenance of an All-Season Multi-Use Trail Network.

The Plan states that where possible, new trails should use existing environmental and utility corridors. Furthermore, the Plan specifically addresses the Village's desires to **expand use of the Eau Claire River for canoeing, kayaking, tubing, fishing, and swimming.**

"We have long-believed that the Eau Claire River is an under-appreciated asset here in the metro area," said Weston Parks and Recreation Director Shawn Osterbrink.

The Village has identified multiple potential locations for water trail launches, some of which are used informally today. Last year, the Village finished constructing a new canoe/kayak access location along the Eau Claire River, immediately adjacent to the Ross Avenue bridge, on the corner of Ross Avenue and Babl Lane.

**The Babl Lane launch — which is envisioned to be the first in a series of improved access points along the Eau Claire River — was completed last year.** The Village intends to design and build future access points and launch sites with financial resources acquired through grants, local philanthropy, parkland dedication fees, and hotel room taxes, in the same way the Babl Lane launch was developed. Grants totaled approximately \$123,000 of the \$175,000 project. (No property taxes were used.)

Four entities came together to fund this first launch site project at Babl Lane: Marathon County, the B.A. & Esther Greenheck Foundation, the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin, and the Village of Weston. **This project is a true community partnership, and I am very gratified and humbled by the philanthropic funding and financial support that we have received.**

- Marathon County's Environmental Impact Fund provides funding assistance for non-reoccurring projects in Marathon County for environmental remediation and/or natural resources protection. The source of Environmental Impact Funds is the 2006 agreement between Marathon County and the American Transmission Company concerning construction of the Arrowhead-Weston Transmission Line in Marathon County.
- The B.A. & Esther Greenheck Foundation was established in 1998 by Bernie and Esther Greenheck. Their purpose is to provide financial support for meaningful projects in central Wisconsin that enhance the area's arts, education, health, and economic and social development resources.
- Additional support for this project was provided through the Marvin & Ruth (Rudie) Schuette Fund of the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin (CFONCW). CFONCW is one of 700 nonprofit community foundations nationwide. Created in 1987 by and for the people of north central Wisconsin, the foundation is a nonprofit community corporation created to provide for the long-term needs of our local communities.

To maintain a successful water trail, navigability during most times of the year is key. This entails maintaining sufficient water flow and cleaning woody and other debris. Other potential barriers along the river, such as bridges and underpasses, need to be considered, as well. With these considerations in mind, the Village is focusing on river access improvements at Yellow Banks Park and at County Hwy J.

Future launches will be designed with a firm surface for launching (despite changes in sedimentation levels), a launch area of 15 to 25 feet long and 6 to 12 feet wide, slopes of not more than 15 percent (or 8.33 percent to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility standards), and water level of at least 2 feet. Also, handrails or other support structures (including step-down designs or ropes) will help paddlers balance their weight during put-in and take-out. Launches will also feature convenient parking areas. Trailhead signs and bridge underpass signs installed along the water trail will provide users with an easy way to identify progress and various destination points along the trail.

To support the Village's efforts to increase access, use, and enjoyment of the Eau Claire River, **the Village is looking to organize service-oriented citizens into a local Friends of the (Lower) Eau Claire River group.** If you are interested in assisting or joining the group, please contact the Village at [clerks@westonwi.gov](mailto:clerks@westonwi.gov).

Outside our borders, there are additional opportunities to create and improve access points in Schofield, Wausau, and Ringle along the Eau Claire River. Village officials are sharing their plan and speaking with municipal officials in these communities to encourage them to build from our efforts and expand the Eau Claire Water Trail Vision Plan into a regional recreational concept and amenity.

We hope that this is the start of a concerted effort by our local communities — not just Weston — to make the Eau Claire River more accessible and enjoyable for families (and our many guests) throughout Marathon County.

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## Our Vision is for an enhancement of a Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail that...

- Expands opportunities for safe and fun paddling and floating.
- Grows recreational-based tourism development in the Wausau-Weston-Ringle area.
- Builds on related initiatives, like Wausau's master plan for the Eau Claire River Conservancy.
- Includes safe and well-marked put-in and take-out spots along the river, and advises people on how to get to these spots and navigate once there.
- Connects to and enhances destinations along the river, including parks and conservancies, campgrounds, school forests, and neighborhoods.
- Advances opportunities for land-based trails, picnic spots, and other activities along the river.
- Provides a consistent and appealing image through signage and informational materials.



### What is a water trail?

A designated route for paddling or floating along a waterway with strategically located access points; similar to hiking trails and bikeways but with one difference: the “trail” already exists.

### Benefits:

Recreation      Economic  
Quality of Life/Health  
Education/Information  
Resource Stewardship  
Community Identity

**Canoeists on the Kickapoo spent over \$1.2 million in rural southwest Wisconsin.\* (1999)**

\*Johnson, Lindsay “Case Studies of Water Trail Impacts on Rural Communities.” Masters Thesis, University of Oregon, 2002. p.102.

### Finding A Put-in Spot

Paddling and floating down the lower Eau Claire River is a rite of summer for many residents in the Weston-Wausau-Ringle area. The river offers a natural escape, a range of experiences, a path to healthy living, and most of all, fun! To date, most paddling occurs on an informal basis, sometimes offering a mixed quality of experience and safety. Many area residents are not aware of what the lower Eau Claire River has to offer, and others may be reluctant to canoe or kayak the river. Further, paddling down the river is not on the navigation chart of most visitors to the area.

Much of the proposed water trail goes through the Village of Weston. The trail also goes through parts of Wausau, Schofield, and Ringle, and passes by lands in the hands of scouting organizations, the D.C. Everest School District, and other organizations. This calls for an intergovernmental, collaborative approach to trail conception, development, and implementation.

### Going with the Flow

The idea of a water trail is not a new one, and paddling or floating down the river already provides a special experience for many people each summer.

The river, itself, is of course the most valuable asset. It is navigable from spring until late summer, and has few obstructions. During spring and early summer, when water levels are higher, the river provides an exhilarating experience for beginners and a test for more experienced paddlers. Later in the summer, the river takes on a lazier character, bringing out more first-

timers and tubers. Starting in Ringle, then Weston, then Wausau, and finally Schofield, the character of the river shifts. In most places, the views from the water are similar to what they might have been 200 years ago.

There are already several launch sites that many people use each warm summer day. Some, like the County's launch site along Ringle Avenue in Ringle, are well-marked, include at least basic parking, a picnic spot, and a reasonable launch site. Others, like a spot at the County Highway J bridge in Weston, are very informal and not always safe in their present condition. Safety deficiencies at this and other spots often result from little to no parking, heavier car and truck traffic, and very informal or hidden put-in/take-out locations.

The communities along the river, Marathon County, local outfitters, and others also recognize the value and potential of the river in their efforts and plans. For example, the City of Wausau has recently established a master plan for its Eau Claire River Conservancy—City-owned land on the northern shore of the river. The land has a series of oxbow lakes, making it an ideal place to kayak and canoe.

The Village of Weston has, through its 2015 Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, identified the water trail as a priority initiative. To advance that initiative, the Village has constructed a modern launch and parking lot at the Ross Avenue Bridge (see Fig. 1). This project was supported through grants from Marathon County, the B.A. and Esther Greenheck Foundation, and the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin. The Village is exploring similar improvements at Yellow Banks Park and the County Highway J bridge area, which are in need of funding support.

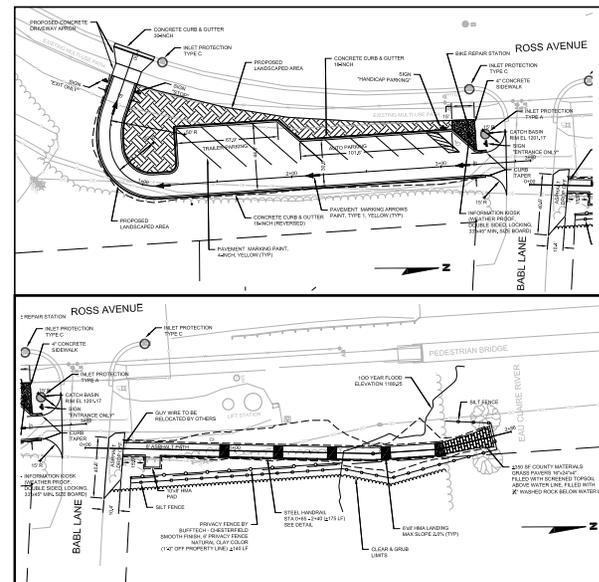


Figure 1: Engineering drawings for Ross Avenue Bridge river access point, including parking area, ramp and river launch, guided recent improvements at this site and may be a model for parking and access improvements at other spots.

### Economic Benefit

The economic impact of recreation water trails has been documented by a number of studies since the early 2000s. For example, in 2012 the Outdoor Industry Foundation estimated that the

annual national active outdoor recreation economy, including resources such as hiking trails and water trails, contributed \$646 billion to the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup> In a 2009 study of the economic

impact of the Rogue River in Oregon, ECONorthwest found that river-based recreation contributed at least \$30 million annually to the surrounding local economies.<sup>2</sup> In 2008, the North Carolina

Paddle Tourism Study estimated that paddlers spent more than \$1 million dollars annually on paddle trips in North Carolina.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Outdoor Recreation Economy, 2012. Outdoor Industry Association. [http://outdoorindustry.org/pdf/010\\_OutdoorRecEconomyReport2012.pdf](http://outdoorindustry.org/pdf/010_OutdoorRecEconomyReport2012.pdf), May 2012.  
<sup>2</sup> Helvoigt, Ted L. ECONorthwest, 2009 Regional Economic Impacts on the Wild and Scenic Rogue River. [http://www.econorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/040\\_Rogue\\_Economic\\_Impact\\_Report.pdf](http://www.econorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/040_Rogue_Economic_Impact_Report.pdf)  
<sup>3</sup> Beedle, Jennifer. 2008 Paddle Tourism Study. North Carolina State Trails Program, 2008. [www.ncparks.gov/about/docs/paddle\\_report.pdf](http://www.ncparks.gov/about/docs/paddle_report.pdf), June 2012.



### The Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail

- Existing or Proposed Access Point
- Existing Land Trail
- - - Proposed Land Trail
- Public Park
- Private Recreational Land
- School District Land

This page shows the 15-mile extent of the Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail, existing and proposed access points, distances between points, other key spots along the river, and improvement opportunities. These opportunities focus on parking, ramp, picnic, restroom, and signage/wayfinding improvements for each of the access (put-in/take-out) spots--see details on next page. Some access points require minimal improvements; others require more significant investments to ensure safe and visible access. The map also shows key road and land trail connections, both existing and proposed. Because lands, trails, roads, and other facilities associated with the water trail are under different ownerships, collaborative action is required to realize the full potential of the water trail.

# on map	Access Point Name	Current Condition of River Access				
		Parking	Ramp	Picnic	Restrooms	Signs / Wayfinding
1	Club House	on shoulder	unimproved	no	no	no
2	Riverside School Area	on street	unimproved	no	no	no
3	Mountain Bay Trail	on shoulder of Ringle Ave	unimproved	yes	no	no
4	Highway J	on shoulder of County HWY J	unimproved	no	no	no
5	Planned Park	no current public access	---	---	---	---
6	Ryan Street	no current public access	---	at Kellyland Park	---	---
7	Ross Ave	yes	recently improved	no	porto-let	yes
8	Yellow Banks Park	yes	recently improved	yes	yes	no
9	Eau Claire Conservancy	yes	no	yes	no	no
10	Brooks & Ross Dam	yes	yes	yes	porto-let	no



7 - Ross Ave.

Access Distance (miles)	Downriver →									
	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩
Club House	①	1.6	3.9	7.1	10.1	14.9				
Mountain Bay	③	1.6	2.3	5.8	8.5	13.3				
Highway J	④	3.9	2.3	3.5	6.2	11				
Ross Avenue	⑦	7.1	5.8	3.5	2.7	7.5				
Yellow Banks Park	⑧	10.1	8.5	6.2	2.7	4.8				
Brooks & Ross Dam	⑩	14.9	13.3	11	7.5	4.8				

## The Value of Signage

Informational, directional, and wayfinding signage is an important amenity for trail users and provides a visible benefit to the surrounding community. A good signage system increases user comfort, assists in navigation, warns of approaching obstacles, and guides users through unfamiliar terrain. Signage can direct people from road or parking to water, advise on current location and destinations, and provide directions and distances.

The signage system must be visible but not obtrusive, and distinctive but not distracting. It should provide information in an understandable and logical way.

*(continued)*

## Sharing Our Float Plan

### Each access location should ideally be developed with:

- A parking lot or safe pull-off area, ideally for at least 10 motor vehicles including a few with trailers (See Fig. 1, on earlier page).
- Wayfinding signage to get to each parking area, and from there to the launch (Fig. 2-A).
- A permanent display near the put-in spot that would include a “you are here” map showing other put-in/take-out spots, distances, other riverfront destinations, and navigation tips (Fig. 2-B).
- A launch, designed with a firm surface (despite changes in sedimentation levels), a launch area of 15 to 25 feet long and 6 to 12 feet wide, slopes of not more than 15 percent (or 8.33 percent where possible to meet ADA accessibility standards), and water level of at least two feet. Handrails, step-down designs, or ropes can help paddlers balance their weight during put-in and take-out (See Fig. 1 on earlier page).
- An area with a picnic table or two and a bench overlooking the river.
- Along the river, minimal signage is advised to provide a navigational aid while maintaining the natural experience. Each bridge should be signed, and a sign indicating the location and distance to each upcoming take-out spot should be included (Fig. 2-C). Some other modest navigational signage may be beneficial, particularly for beginners and emergency service personnel. These may include  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile markers (Fig. 2-D), and arrows to help users avoid non-navigable forks (Fig. 2-E). Alongside the river, land trails should be developed and possibly co-branded with the water trail (See map on earlier page).
- Signage should be developed and installed in accordance with a unified theme. The accompanying conceptual graphics provide a starting point for more detailed design work (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

## Scouting the Route

### Specific efforts to develop the water trail include:

- Adaptation of this document to serve as a project brochure, including an accompanying route map.
- Final signage plan, including final types, logo, design, placements, and “you are here” route map, and then build and install the signage.
- Engineering design and development of put-in/take-out points—some require minimal improvement while others require more significant time and investment.
- An annual community “riverfest” event, including introductions to the river for first-time users and fun activities like a rubber ducky race.
- Educational and promotional programming, such as a YouTube video, on river use and paddling skills.
- Collaboration with and among riverfront organizations and businesses, and encouragement of more.

### The Village of Weston cannot complete these efforts or develop the Lower Eau Claire River Water Trail alone.

Intergovernmental partnership with Marathon County, City of Wausau, City of Schofield, Town of Ringle, Town of Weston, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is essential, and partnerships with other riverfront recreational land owners and outfitters are desired. Potential funding sources include local health care and wellness organizations, paddlers, Marathon County’s Environmental Impact Fund, State Stewardship and Federal LAWCON (River Protection and Enhancement) grants, the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin, and the B.A. and Esther Greenheck Foundation.

## The Value of Signage

*(continued)*

The user should understand at a glance what information is being conveyed. The system must also harmonize with the environment it inhabits or it will detract from its surroundings.

Providing clear, concise and consistent wayfinding has many benefits. Good signage, by increasing user comfort level, can lead to increased usage. By providing a better experience, users are more likely to return. Good signage also makes for better and easier management of trails. By providing appropriate information at access points and on the water, the incidence of user conflict and negative resource impact can be reduced. Accurate location information, at predictable intervals, also provides improved EMS response and maintenance access.

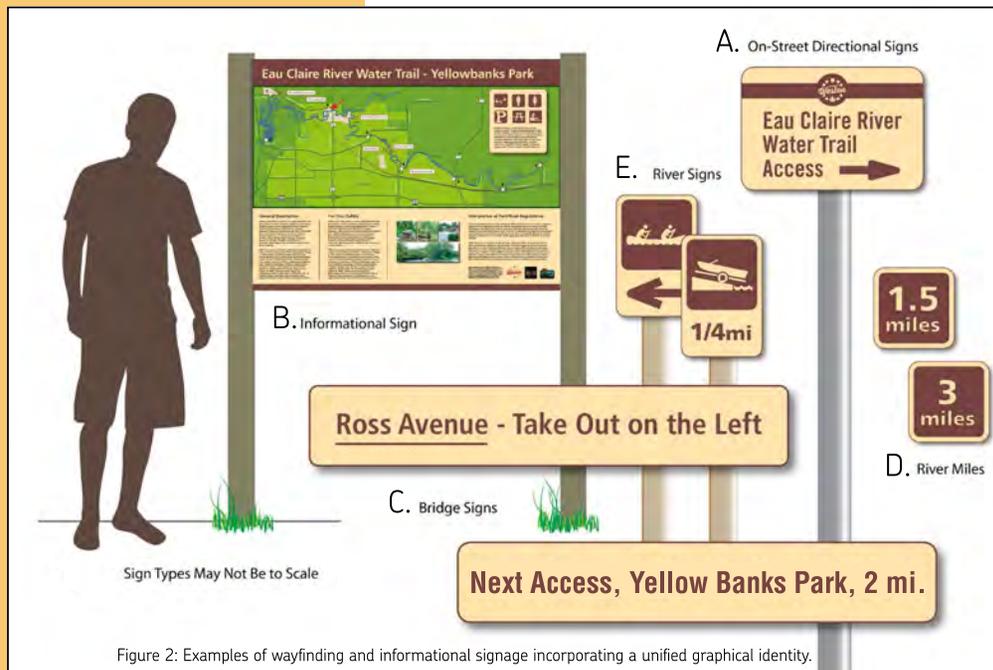


Figure 2: Examples of wayfinding and informational signage incorporating a unified graphical identity.

Figure 3: Visualizations of water trail signage in context.



# Our Float Plan

- Our Water Trail Vision
- Current Conditions and Amenities
- Future Improvements
- Your Participation

# OUR WATER TRAIL VISION

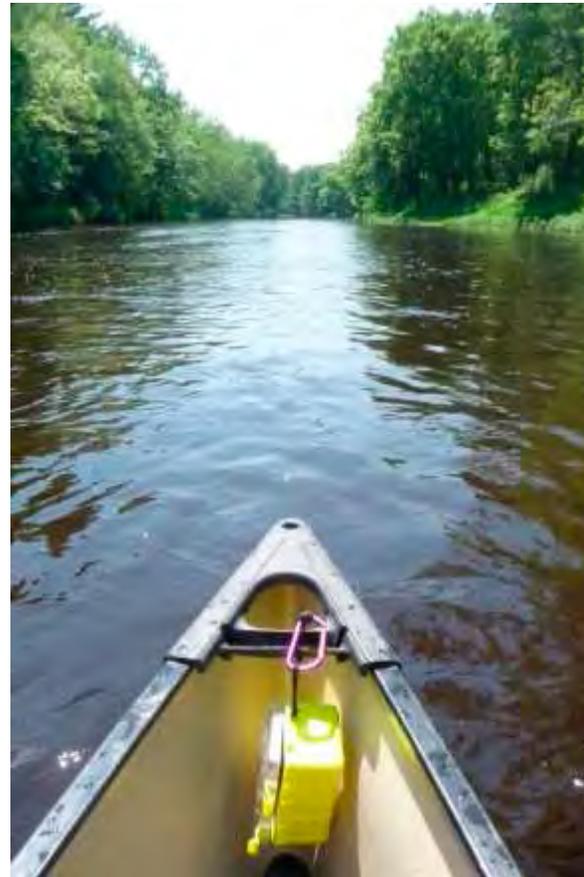


**LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL**



# What is a water trail?

A designated route for paddling or floating along a waterway with strategically located access points; similar to hiking trails and bikeways but with one difference:  
**the “trail” already exists.**



## The Lower Eau Claire Water Trail should...

- Expand opportunities for safe, fun paddling and floating
- Include safe, well-marked put-in and take-out spots
- Connect to and enhance destinations along the river
- Grow recreational-based tourism development in the eastern Wausau Metro area
- Advance opportunities for land-based trails, picnic spots, and other activities along the river
- Be identified through consistent and appealing signage and marketing materials



**LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL**



# The benefits of an enhanced Water Trail include...

- Greater water use and healthy recreational opportunities for area visitors and residents
- Fosters a sense of community and environmental stewardship and pride; pair with water quality initiatives
- Significant positive economic impact (e.g., 1999 study found that canoeists on the Kickapoo spent over \$1.2 million/year)
- Coherent sign and education program can lead to greater water trail use, increased safety, and efficient EMS response

# 15-mile, day trip stretch between...



...Club House Road in Ringle...



...and the Brooks & Ross Dam in Wausau.



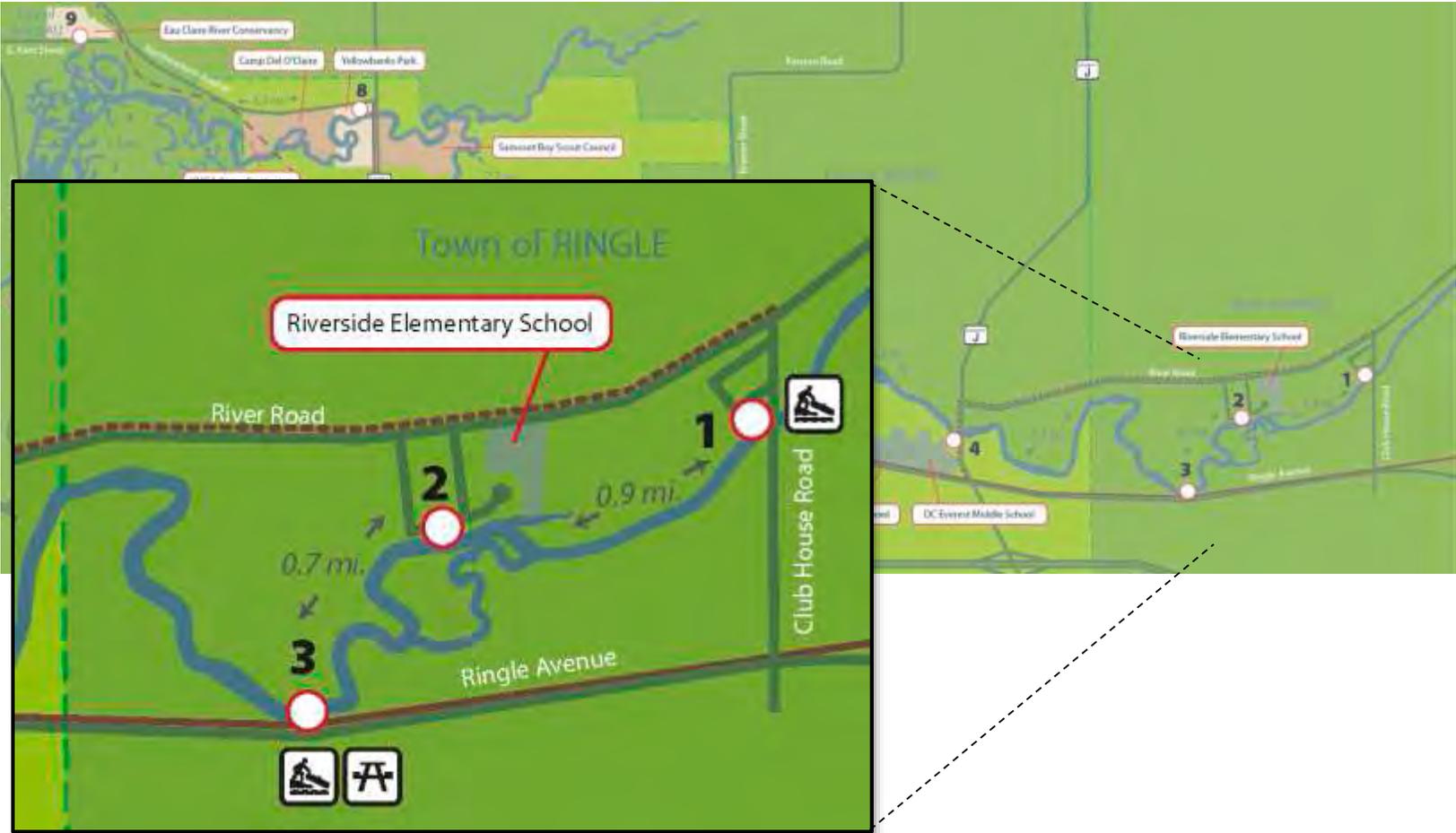
## LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL



# A route blessed with varied experiences and amenities



# From a cozy, winding segment in Ringle



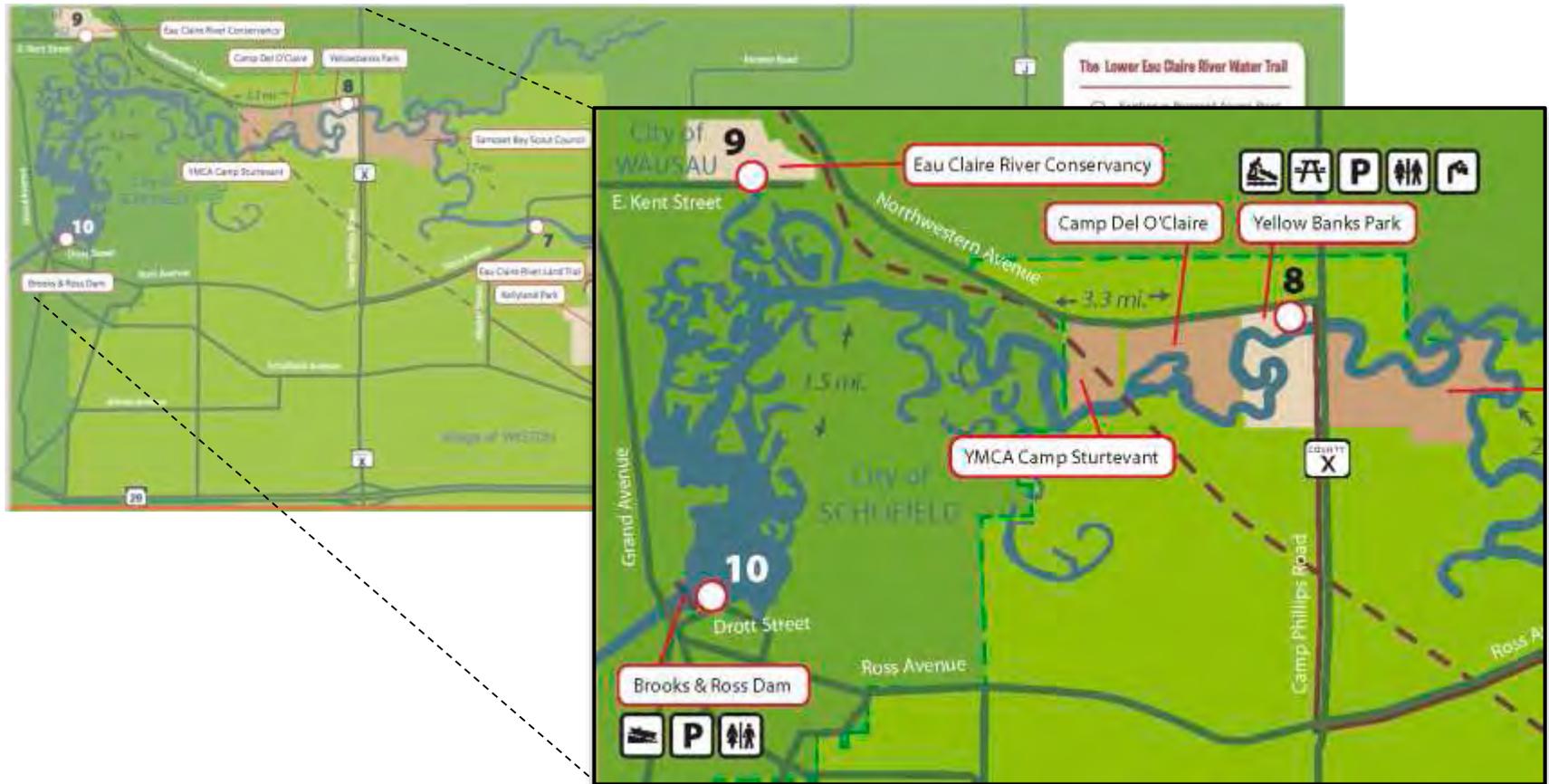
## LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL



# To the wider, scenic Weston segment



# And finally the serpentine and expansive Wausau/Schofield segment



## LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL



# CURRENT CONDITIONS & AMENITIES

# 7 existing accesses of varying quality

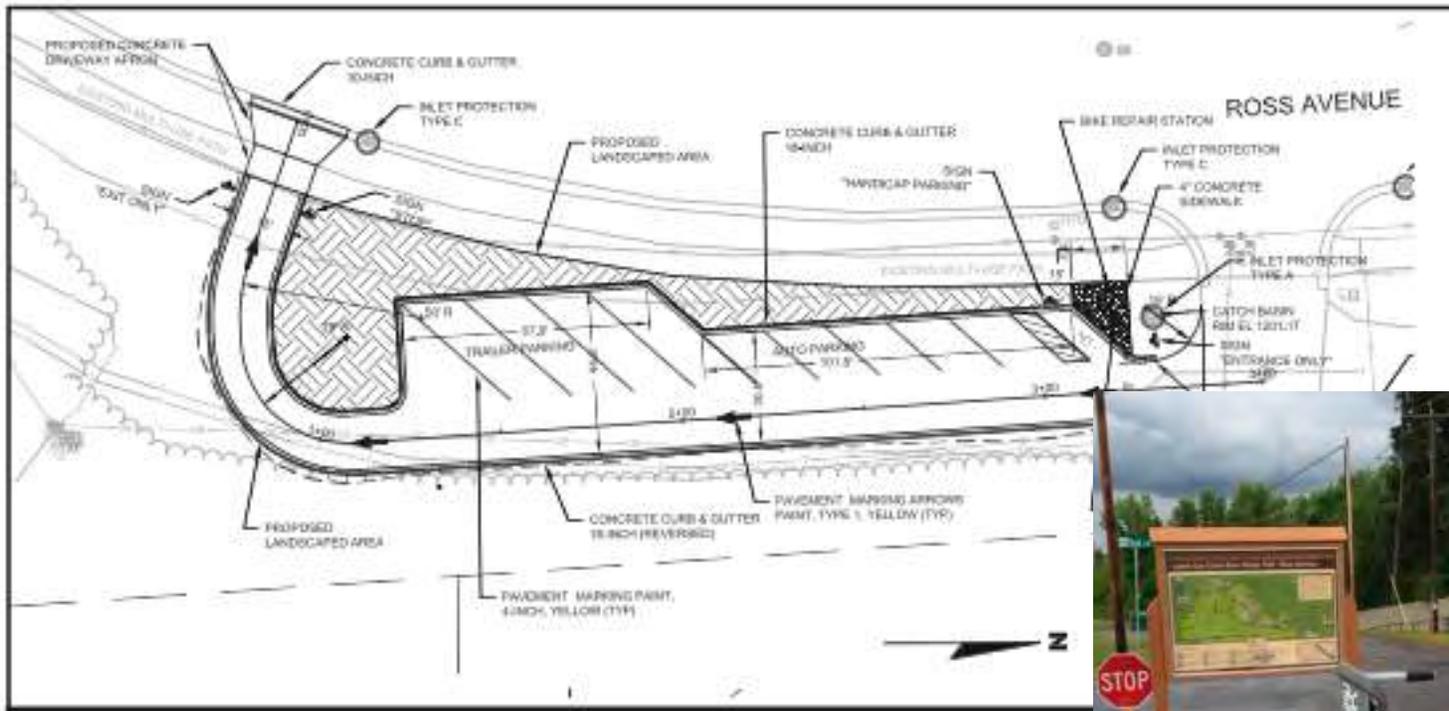
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9	Eau Claire Conservancy	yes	no	yes	no	no
⑩	Brooks & Ross Dam	yes	yes	yes	porto-let	no



## LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL



# Ross Avenue access finished in 2016



## Other current conditions...

- Improving launches/parking at County J and Yellow Banks Park is a priority
- Several schools, parks, and camps along river provide education and respite
- Different times of year provide different experiences, including some mild whitewater
- River navigation generally good, but some wayfinding and regular maintenance required



# FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

# Bring all existing and new launch sites up to standard

- 10+ vehicle parking lot or safe pull-off area (inc. trailers)
- Adequate paddler launch with a firm, accessible surface
- An area with a picnic table and bench
- A restroom, where practical
- Wayfinding signage and a “you are here” map



**LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL**



# Consistently sign and brand the trail

- Wayfinding signage to get to each parking area, and then from there to the launch
- Display near the put-in spot with “you are here” map, distances, other destinations, and navigation tips
- Minimal on-river signage to provide a navigational aid, while maintaining the natural experience
- Each bridge signed, including location and distance to the next take-out spot



# Consistently sign and brand the trail

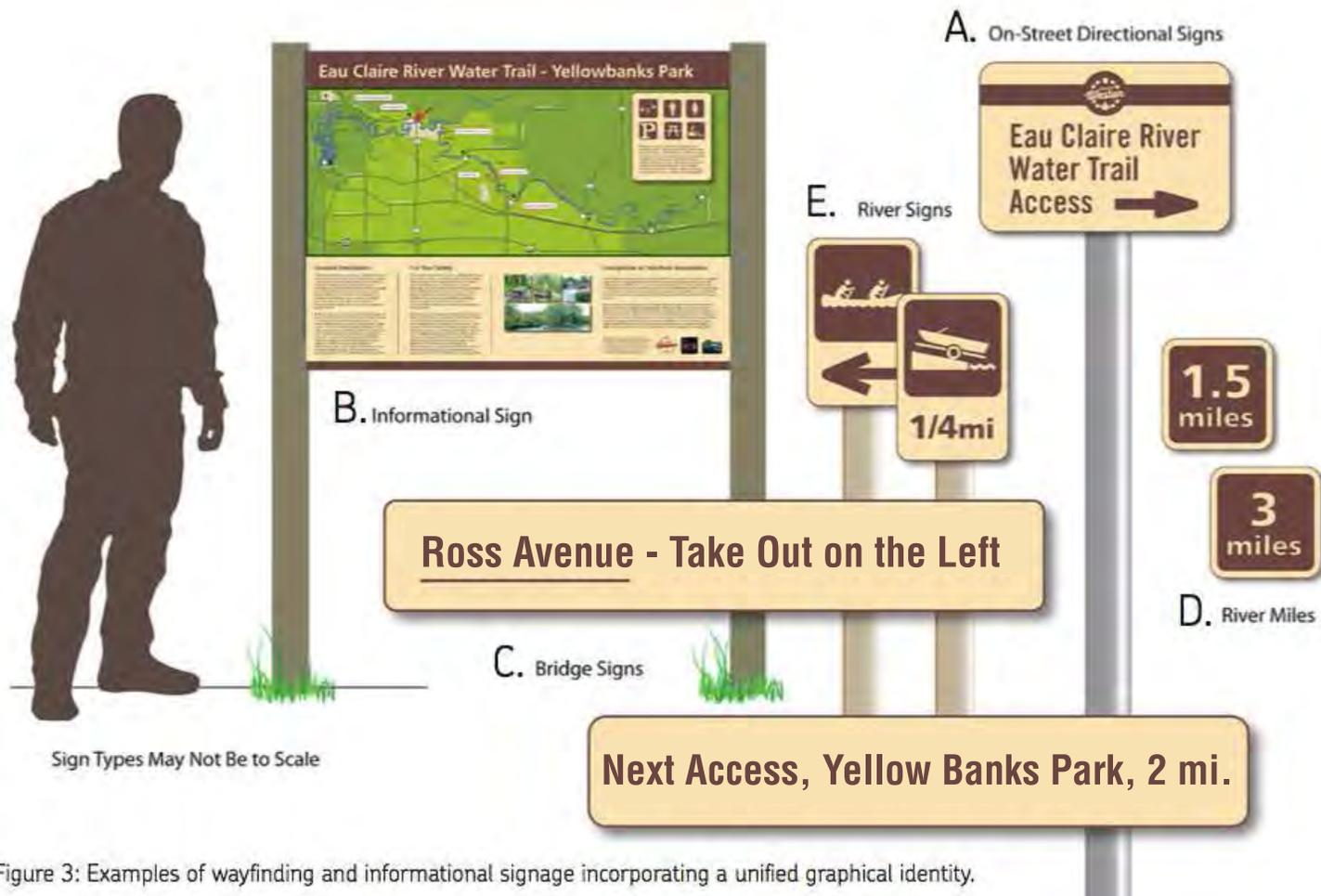


Figure 3: Examples of wayfinding and informational signage incorporating a unified graphical identity.

# Expand related opportunities

- Grow outfitters, transporters, and other complementary business opportunities
- Get on the tourist “map” through chambers, hoteliers, etc.
- Improve linkages with adjacent land-based recreational offerings
- “Riverfest” event, including introductions to the river and fun activities like a rubber ducky race
- Educational and promotional programming, such as YouTube video, on river use and skills

# YOUR PARTICIPATION



**LOWER EAU CLAIRE RIVER WATER TRAIL**



# Steps to enhance the Water Trail



- Build partnerships; “friends” group?
- Enhance brochure and other marketing
- Refine signage plan
- Further design and develop put-in, take-out points
- Fundraising
- Your ideas!!!

# Your Thoughts

- Recommendations for the Water Trail?
- How can we ensure that this is a successful endeavor and increase safe use of the Water Trail?
- Any additional comments or questions?



# VILLAGE OF WESTON MUNICIPAL CENTER

**Address:** 5500 Schofield Avenue, P.O. Box 446, Weston, WI 54476

**Office Hours:** 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (Monday – Friday)

**General Information:** 715-359-6114

**Website:** [www.westonwi.gov](http://www.westonwi.gov)



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**General Information:** 715-261-1550

**Website:** [www.co.marathon.wi.us](http://www.co.marathon.wi.us)

