

Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area Design Plan Existing Conditions Report



Trail in the Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area (Photo: May 2021)

October 4, 2021

Charter Township of Garfield
Planning Department

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www.garfield-twp.com

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Introduction

Purpose

The Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area Design Plan is intended to guide the future of the Commons Natural Area including recreational activity, site improvements, and environmental restoration. The Natural Area is treasured by residents of Garfield Township and people from around the Grand Traverse region. It is a significant recreational asset near the core urbanized area of the region and provides recreational opportunities such as hiking, dog walking, biking, skiing, bird watching, and more. This Design Plan is a community-based planning effort to gather the feedback from key stakeholders and the public on current conditions of the Commons Natural Area, potential design scenarios, and proposed next steps.

This Existing Conditions Report provides relevant information for the Commons Natural Area including a community profile, history of the site, an inventory of natural and built features on the site, summary of activities affecting the useability of the site, and findings around the major issues to be addressed in the Design Plan.



Footbridge in the Commons Natural Area (Photo: May 2021)

Previous Plans and Studies

Although many previous plans and studies have been completed for the entire Grand Traverse Commons property, this Design Plan is intended to focus specifically on the Commons Natural Area and to create a design plan that will account for recreation and environmental restoration. These previous plans and studies are summarized at the end of the report as Appendix B.

Community Profile

Demographics and Social Characteristics

The table below shows population changes in Garfield Township, the City of Traverse City, and Grand Traverse County since 1980. Garfield Township had a population of 16,256 as of the 2010 Census and 19,499 as of the 2020 Census. The Township and Grand Traverse County have both grown in population over the past several decades, creating additional demands for recreational resources.

Year	Garfield Township	Traverse City	Grand Traverse County
1980	8,747	15,516	54,899
1990	10,587	15,155	64,273
2000	13,840	14,532	77,654
2010	16,256	14,674	86,986
2020	19,499	15,341	95,238

The table below shows a comparison of social characteristics from the 2010 Census and the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates with the 2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates.

Attribute	2010	2019
Total population	16,256	17,319
Median household income	\$39,589	\$50,372
Unemployment rate	10.3%	5.9%
Income below poverty level – families	7.0%	11.0%
Income below poverty level – individuals	12.4%	14.5%
Average (median) age	43.0	40.4
Sex (male / female)	45.8% / 54.2%	45.6% / 54.4%
Housing units with no vehicle available	7.1%	10.2%
Commuting to work – drove alone	81.9%	82.1%
Commuting to work – carpooled	9.9%	10.1%
Commuting to work – walked / took public transit / other	2.9%	3.9%
Commuting to work – worked at home	5.3%	3.9%
Race – White	93.9%	95.5%
Race – Black or African American	0.8%	0.7%
Race – American Indian and Alaska Native	1.2%	1.3%
Race – Asian	1.1%	0.1%
Race – Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.1%
Race – Some other race	0.7%	0.4%
Race – Two or more races	2.4%	1.9%
Ethnicity – Hispanic or Latino	2.4%	2.7%
Ethnicity – Not Hispanic or Latino	97.6%	97.3%
Households	7,150	7,666
Households in multifamily structures (2 or more units)	27.1%	34.6%

Differences between 2010 and 2019 data reveal increases in median household income, poverty rates, housing units with no vehicle available, and households in multifamily structures.

Geographic Distribution

Most of the population of the Township lives west of the Boardman River and Boardman Lake, and the recent pattern of development in the Township indicates this trend will likely continue. The Commons Natural Area is on the west side of the Township near several neighborhoods of Garfield Township and City of Traverse City.

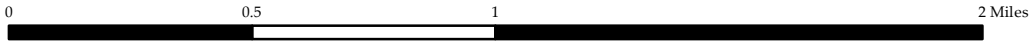
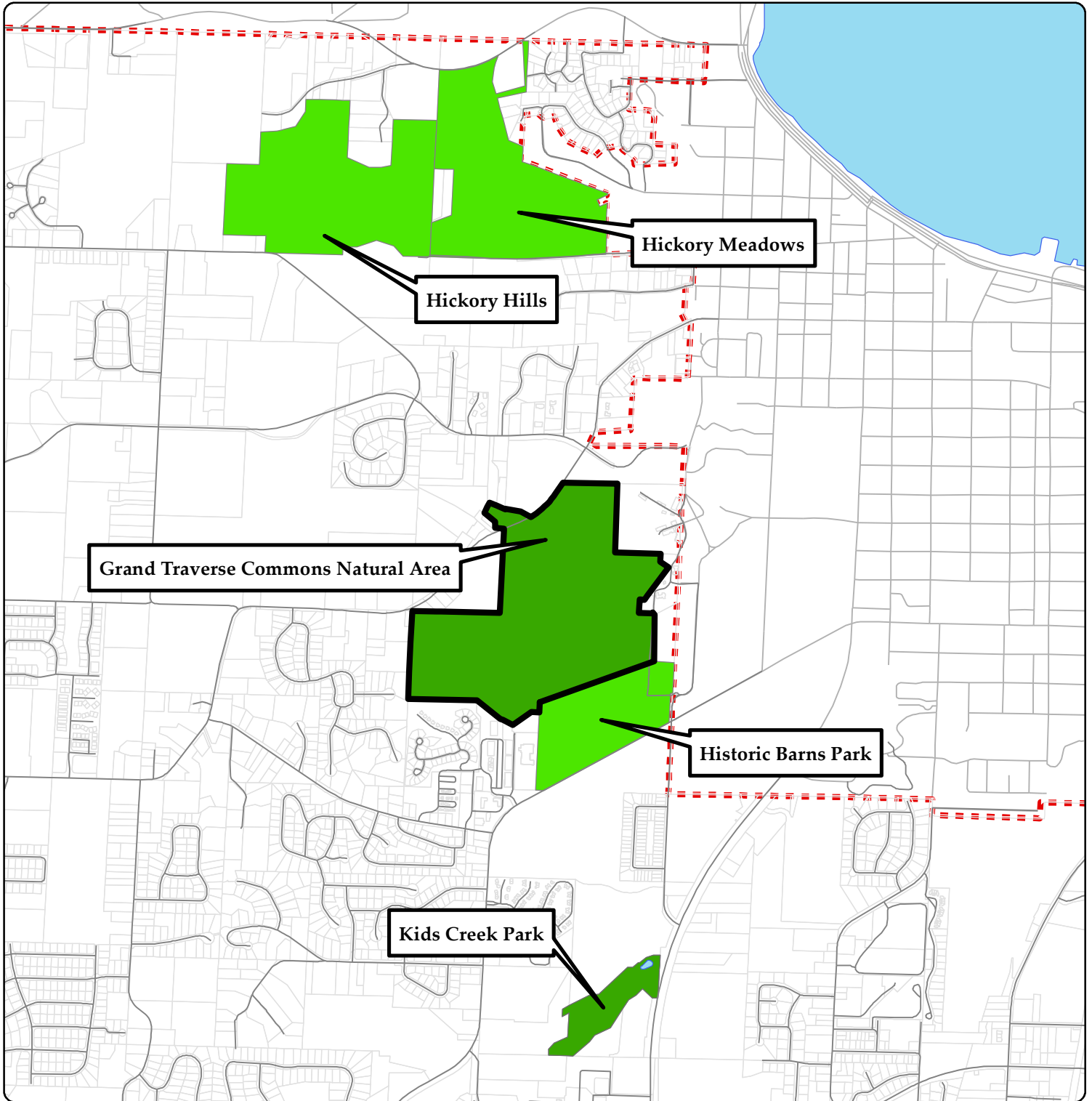
Nearby Parks and Trails



The Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area is one many parks and recreation areas that serve residents of the Township and nearby areas. The Historic Barns Park, run by the City of Traverse City and Charter Township of Garfield Recreational Authority (aka the Joint Recreational Authority), is located immediately to the south of the Commons Natural Area and includes hiking trails, Botanic Gardens, and event space for social gatherings. About a mile south is Kids Creek Park, run by Garfield Township, which has hiking trails and a fishing pond.

About a mile north are the “Hickory” parks. Hickory Hills, run by the City of Traverse City, is known for skiing, but also has other activities available including disc golf. Hickory Meadows, run by the Joint Recreational Authority, offers hiking, cross-country skiing, and other activities. The Joint Recreational Authority has tentative plans to purchase another piece of property next to Hickory Hills to add to this chain of parks, with a working name of “Hickory Forest.” Long-term plans include new trail connections between the “Hickory” parks and the Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area.

The Commons Natural Area includes a network of hiking trails which connects the park to the Village at Grand Traverse Commons, Historic Barns Park, Copper Ridge, and Munson Medical Center. This plan will determine how to improve the trail system to allow some mountain bike activity while ensuring that all users may enjoy the park. The Buffalo Ridge Trail is just east of the Commons Natural Area and connects to points south including Traverse City West Middle School, the YMCA, and Kids Creek Park. This trail also connects to the Mall Trail, which gives non-motorized access to businesses on US 31. From the Commons Natural Area, bicyclists can use the on-road network in the City of Traverse City to navigate to other trails including TART Trail and Leelanau Trail.

Overview of Area Parks



-  Commons Natural Area
-  Township Parkland
-  Other Parks in Garfield Township

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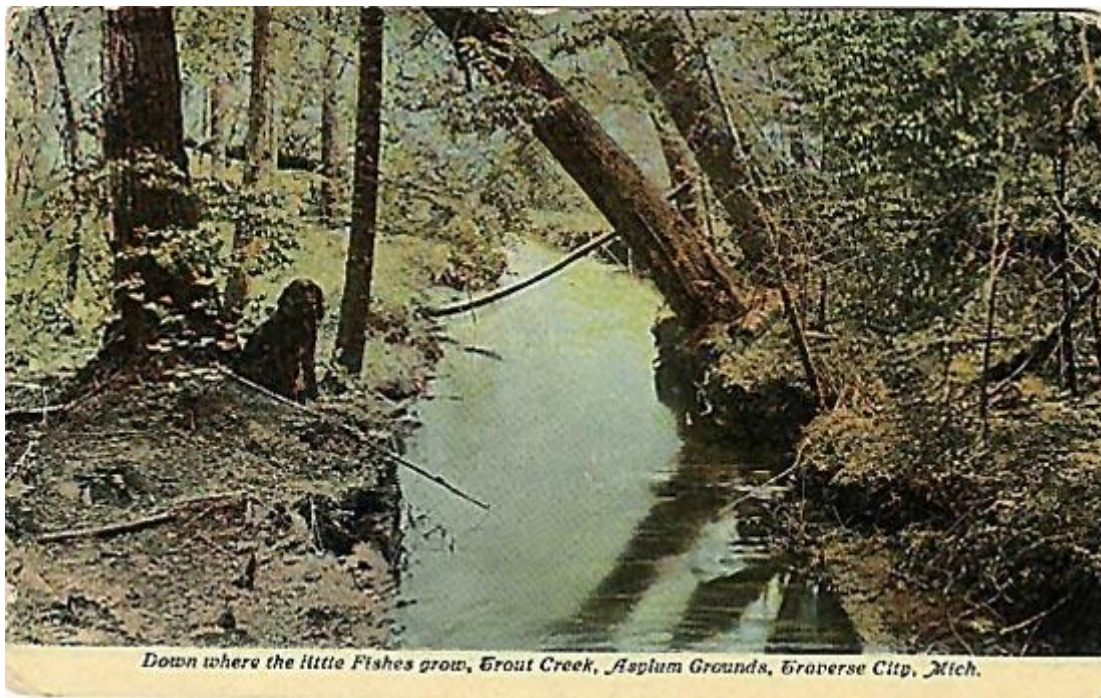
Site History

State Hospital

What is today the site of the Grand Traverse Commons was previously the Northern Michigan Asylum, established in 1881 and later known as the Traverse City State Hospital. The hospital provided services to people experiencing mental health issues. This included offering patients an environment with light, sunshine, fresh air, and access to nature as part of the philosophy of “beauty is therapy” espoused by the hospital. The Commons Natural Area was a main part of the access to nature for the patients, as described in the 1994 Grand Traverse Commons District Redevelopment Plan (page 128):

“...The grounds in the rear ascend in a series of heavily wooded hills, separated by ravines, affording complete protection from the southwest winds. These timbered ridges overlooking the bay and the city, and the intervals, shaded with a primitive growth of beech and maple, each with a little rivulet, will prove an attractive feature in the outdoor exercise of patients...”

The number of patients served by the hospital dwindled over several decades, and the hospital was ultimately closed by the State of Michigan in 1989. It was proposed for demolition, but the community rallied support to preserve the site. In 1992, the State of Michigan started selling or deeding the former state hospital properties to different local governments and other entities.



Historic postcard from State Hospital (Source: <https://www.thevillagetc.com/history/>)

Acquisition by Township

In 1993, the State of Michigan deeded a 100.87-acre parcel to Garfield Township, which became known as the “Commons 100” and which forms the bulk of the Commons Natural Area today. The Township has acquired other parcels since then to expand the parkland and provide more recreational opportunities for the community. Today, the Township parkland at the Commons Natural Area consists of four parcels totaling approximately 185 acres.

Easements and Deed Restrictions

The deed from the State of Michigan in 1993 came with a restriction which stated the land could be used “solely and exclusively for the public purposes of hiking and cross country skiing trails only...” Mountain biking has been a historically prolific activity on the “Commons 100” parcel as well, but the deed restriction did not allow for biking on the site.

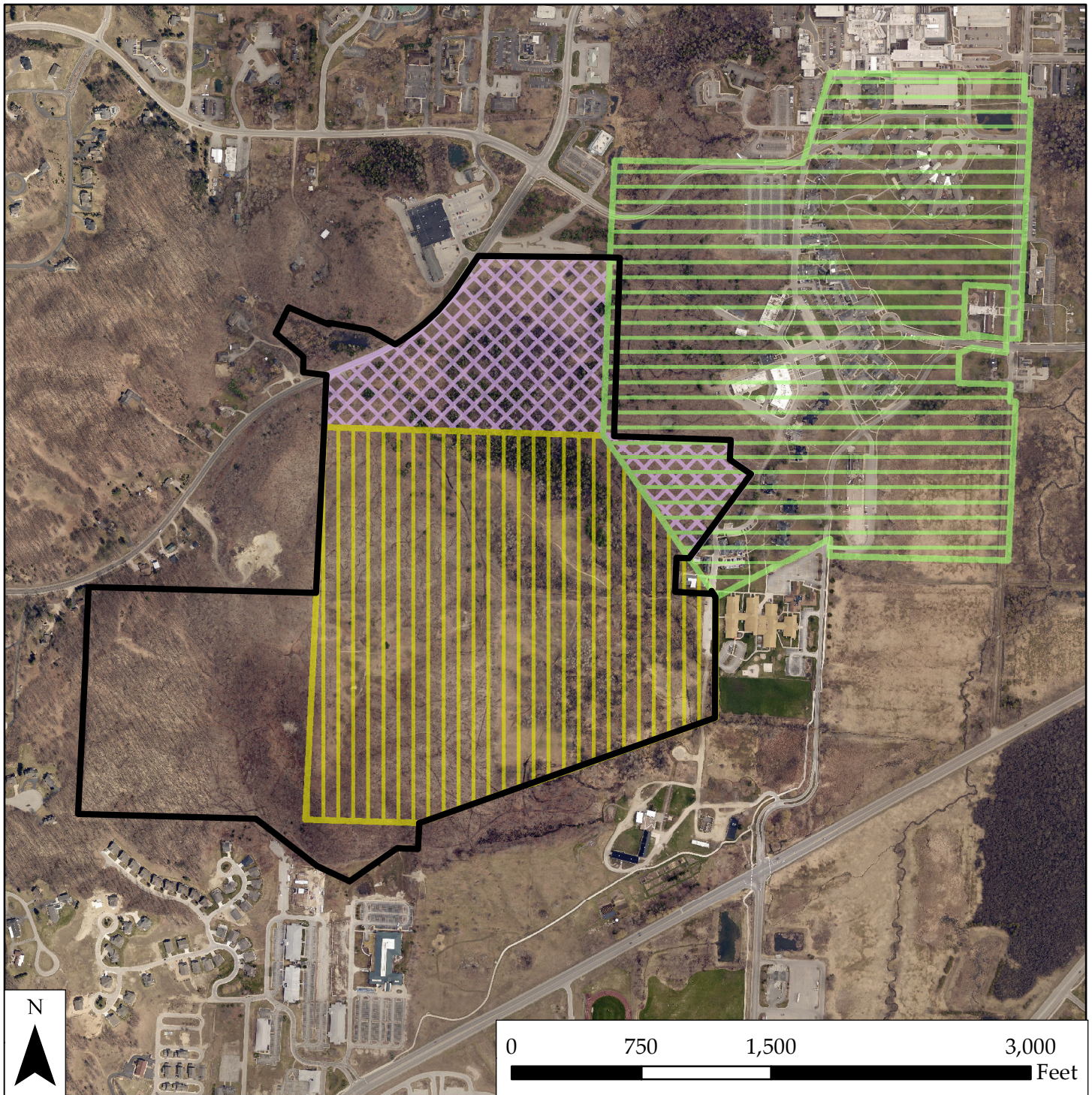
Two parcels later acquired by the Township and merged into the Commons Natural Area have conservation easements that restrict uses allowed on those parts of the site. These conservation easements are the “Grand Traverse Commons VV” established in 2000, along with the “Grand Traverse Commons Addition” established in 2004. These conservation easements are managed by the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy on behalf of Garfield Township.

A portion of the Commons Natural Area is also included within the area of a historic easement. The historic easement primarily covers the former State Hospital buildings and grounds and is meant to protect the historic character and appearance of these areas.

Alteration of Deed Restriction


The Township has engaged stakeholders at the state level over the past several years to work to remove the deed restriction preventing bicycling activity on the Commons 100 site. In October 2019, State Senator Wayne Schmidt introduced Senate Bill 595 to allow for this process to occur. Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed Public Act 159 into law on September 17, 2020 to allow the Commons 100 property to be deeded back to the State on the condition that it is deeded back to the Township with the deed restriction on bicycling removed.

Following approval by the State Administrative Board and signature by the Governor, the actual deed transfer occurred in August, 2021. The new deed restriction allows for “nonmotorized public purposes.”





Commons Natural Area - Easements and Deed Restrictions


Legend

 Township Parkland Boundary

Easements and Deed Restrictions

 Conservation Easement

 Historic Easement

 Original Commons 100 Area

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Site Inventory

Boundaries and Ownership

The Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area is owned mostly by Garfield Township. There are other nearby properties owned by others which extend the park or have park amenities such as trails or trailheads. A map of boundaries and property ownership is included on the following page and a description of property ownership is included below.

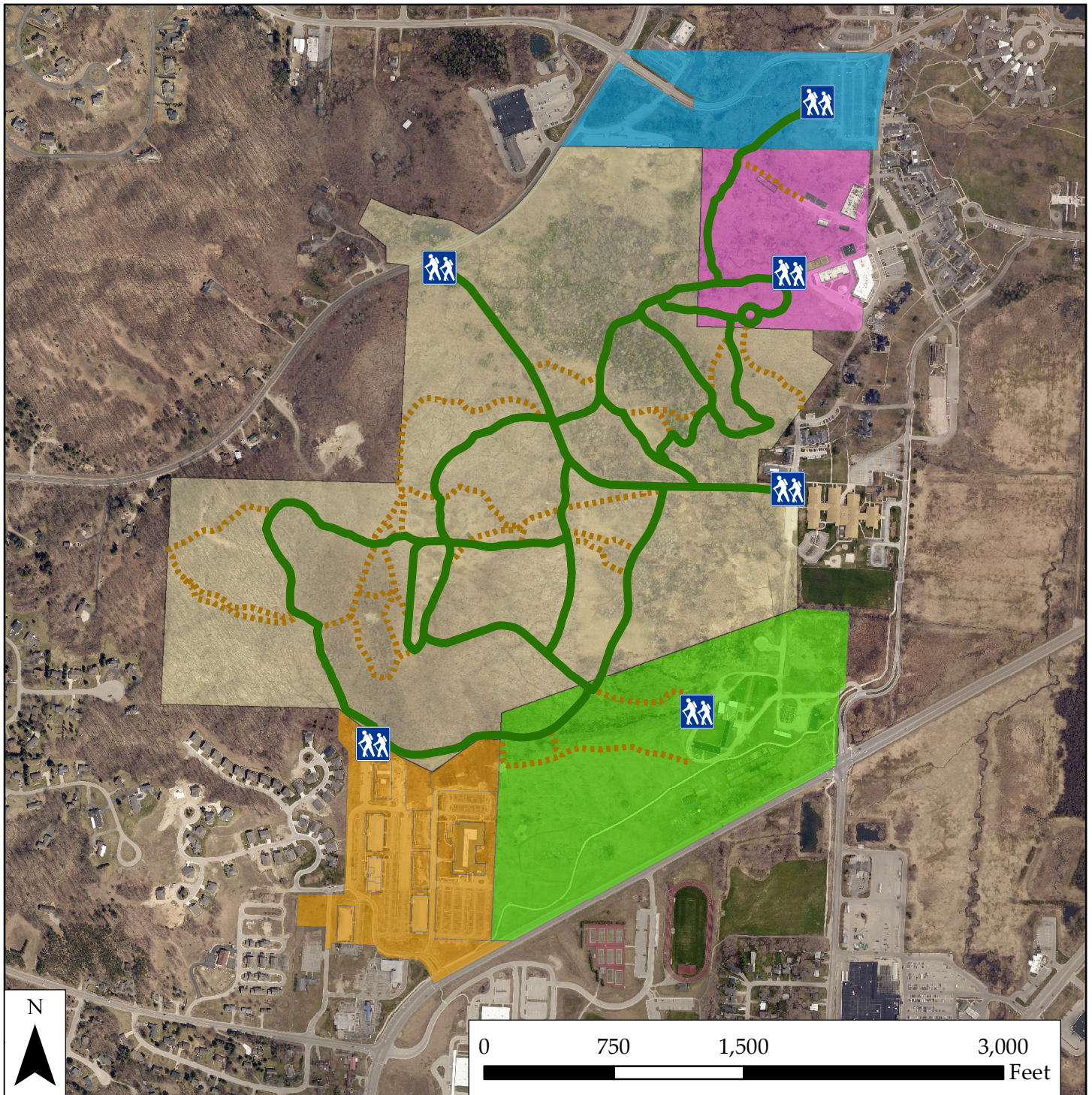
Garfield Township owns 185 acres of the Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area as part of its parkland system. This parkland includes most of the trails, a variety of tree species, and other key natural features. The “Commons 100” site, which was deeded to the Township by the State with restrictions, is part of the parkland. The Township also has two conservation easements in the site managed by the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy. Another piece of land to the west of the Commons 100 was purchased from the State without any restrictions.

Munson Medical Center owns 21 acres north and northeast of the Garfield Township parkland. This property includes Medical Campus Drive and three parking lots south of the drive serving Munson Medical Center: Lot K and Lot Q serving the employees and one lot serving the Family Practice Center. There is some wooded area on this lot included a trail that connects to the trail system and a trailhead at Lot K.

The **Minervini Group** owns about 22.5 acres northeast and east of the Township parkland area. Most of this land is the West Commons common area but also includes about 8 buildings. This area also has two other buildings: one owned by Building 58 LLC and the other owned by Blue Fish Properties LLC. The Minervini property includes one of the main trailheads for the entire park, several trails, and an old cistern.

The **Historic Barns Park** is a 53-acre park to the southeast and south of the Township parkland, owned by the Joint Recreational Authority. There are some trails connecting Historic Barns Park to the Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area and one trailhead. Recent construction at Historic Barns Park has improved circulation in the internal drive areas but also limited available parking on this site to serve only the Historic Barns Park users.

Copper Ridge is a Planned Unit Development (PUD) southwest and south of the Natural Area. The PUD is about 71 total acres and includes housing, medical centers, offices, restaurants, and other uses. There is one trailhead here allowing for access between the PUD and the Township parkland area.



Commons Natural Area - Ownership

Legend

	Garfield Township		Trailheads
	Copper Ridge		Trails
	Historic Barns Park		Social Trails
	Minervini Group		
	Munson		

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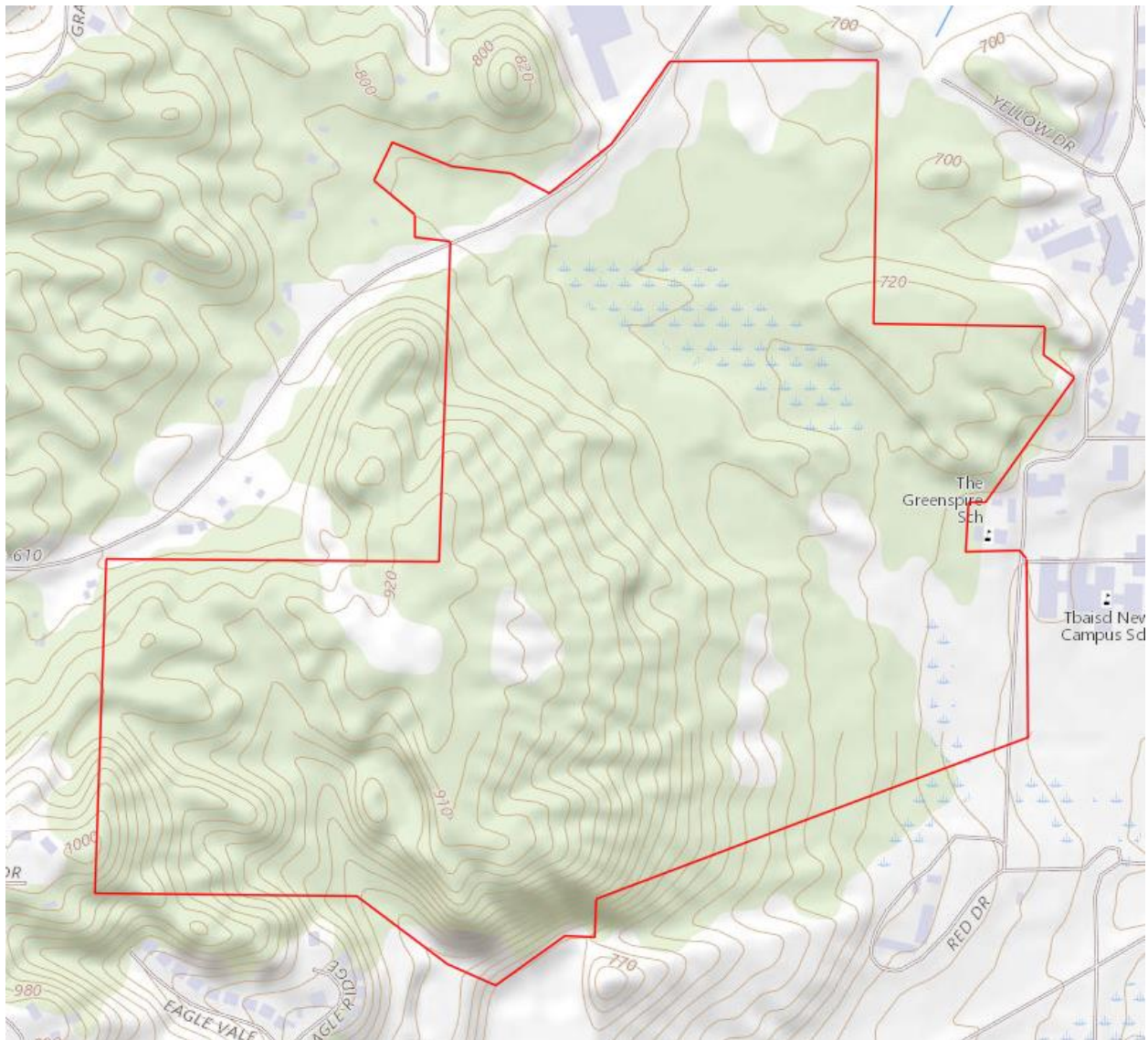
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Topography

The Commons Natural Area generally has a steep slope from west to east, including an almost 300-foot drop from its highest to lowest point. The site is generally flatter in the north and east portions. The topography influences several other aspects of the site such as wetland locations, stormwater runoff patterns, and more.

The map below shows topographical contour lines in brown at 10-foot intervals. The parkland boundary of the Commons Natural Area is shown in red.

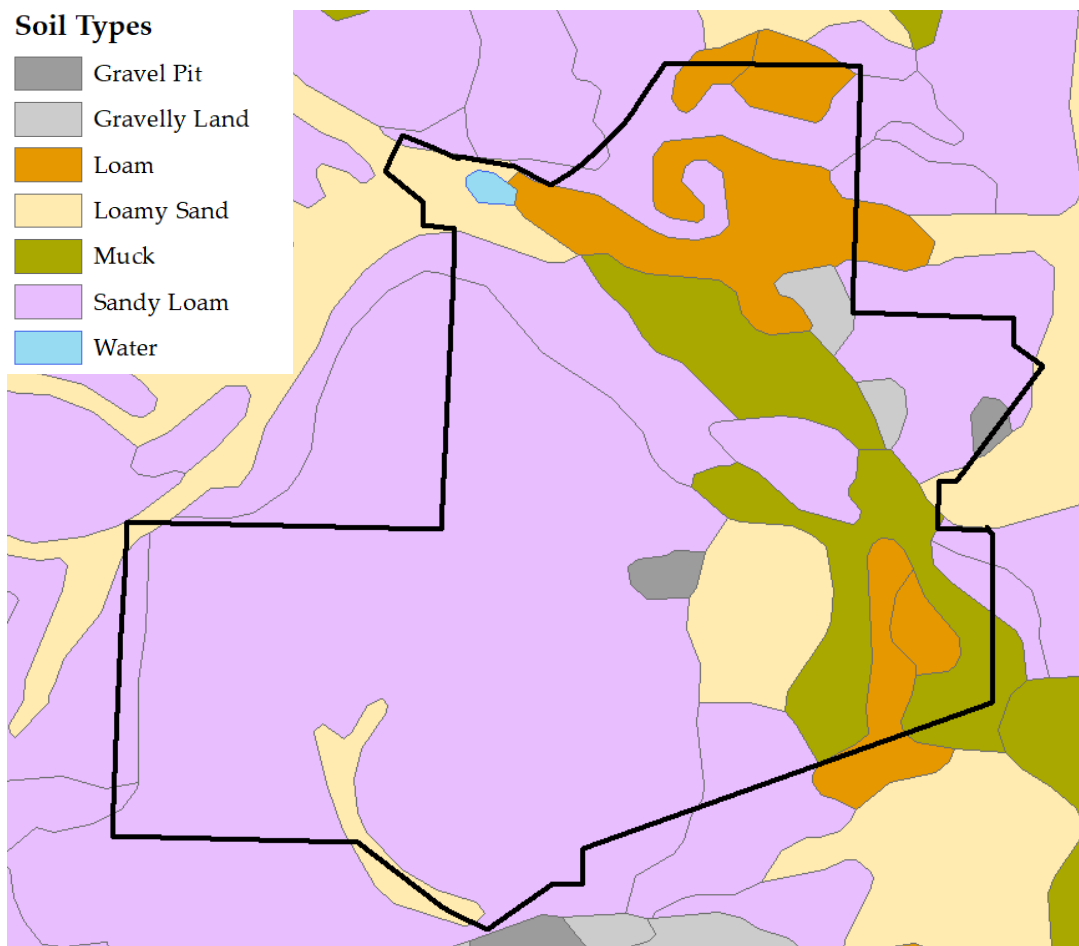


Map of topographical contour lines (Source: United States Geological Survey)

Soils

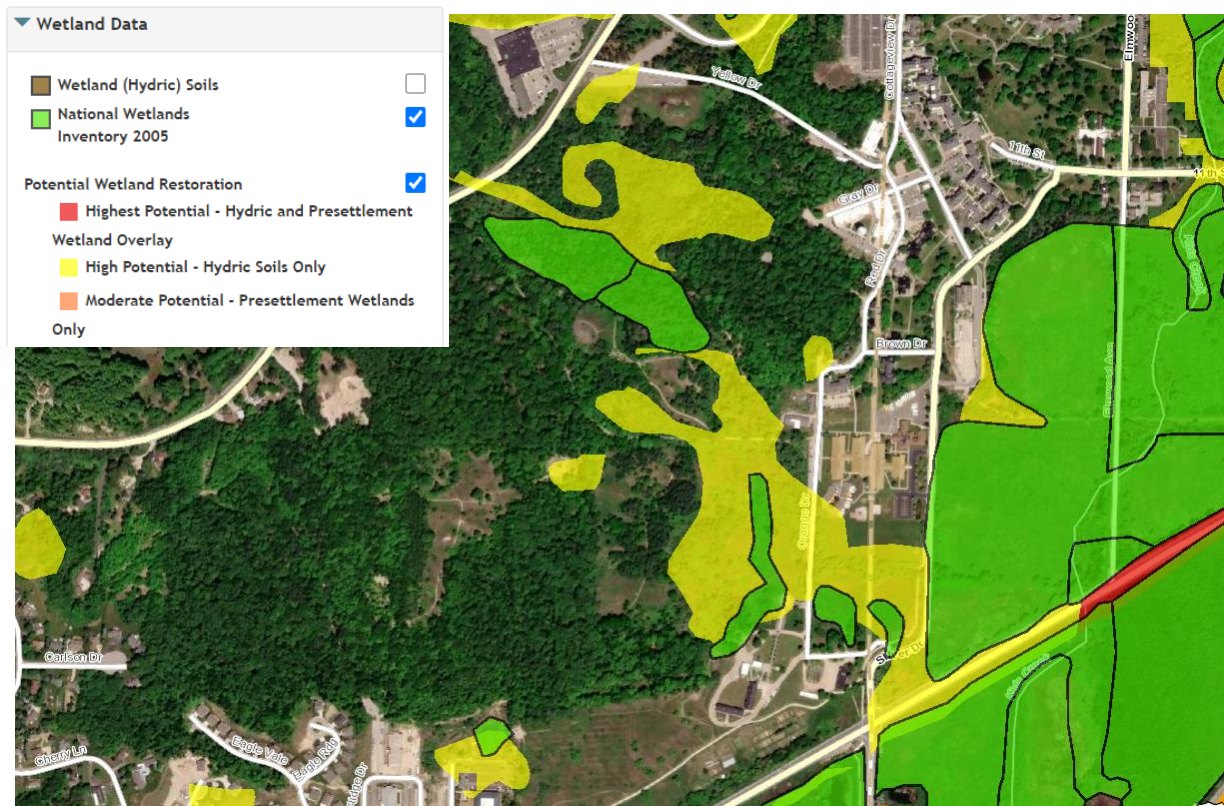
Soil survey information comes from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) which is part of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Most of the Commons Natural Area site including most of the western portion is sandy loam, shown in lavender. This type of soil is described by sand particles mixed with silt and clay and generally permits good drainage with more room for water to move freely through it. The soils on the western portion of the site also have very steep slopes which impacts potential trail construction and stormwater runoff in this area.

The northern and eastern portions of the site have a wider variety of soil types including loamy sands (shown in beige), loams (orange), mucks (green), water (blue), gravelly land (light gray), and gravel pits (dark gray). Given the flat land in these parts of the site, the soil slopes are also generally flat.



Wetlands

The map below shows wetlands as identified on the National Wetlands Inventory in green and shows potential wetland restoration areas identified by the State in yellow. Most of these areas are on the eastern side of the site given the steep slope from west to east. The potential wetland restoration areas are those areas identified as potentially suitable for wetland restoration efforts and may encompass areas that were historically wetlands.



Map of wetlands and potential wetland restoration areas (Source: EGLE)

Stormwater

The topography dictates how stormwater runoff moves through the site, running from the high ground in the western portion to the low ground to the north and east. There is a creek roughly flowing from northwest to southeast through the low ground. This creek eventually flows into Kids Creek, the Boardman River, and Grand Traverse Bay.

Erosion issues have been prevalent here in recent years. A large rainstorm in the region in May 2020, which caused flooding in the Village at Grand Traverse Commons, also exacerbated these erosion challenges in the Commons Natural Area including some washouts on parts of the trail system. Illegal rogue trails and land disturbance on the site also exacerbate these erosion issues by disrupting the delicate ecosystem's natural defenses against erosion.

Environmental Site Assessment

A Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA), funded by the Grand Traverse County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority on behalf of Garfield Township, was performed for this property. The ESA is a report which identifies potential or existing environmental hazards. Historic activity on the site includes dumping from the State Hospital operations. Dumping was limited to a 3-acre site located in the middle of the Commons Natural near the intersection of several trails. There is also evidence of historic gravel mining. The ESA provides information on the environmental issues that may need to be addressed as part of this planning process.

Other Natural Resources and Natural Features

The Commons Natural Area has many different natural resource and natural features. Artesian wells can be seen at different points throughout the site. Some of these have concrete structures built around them which likely date back to the days of the State Hospital operations.



The creek is the other most prominent water feature on the Commons Natural Area. The creek is heavily wooded with dense trees hugging the creek bank, which offers a different landscape than the forest or meadows seen on other parts of the site.

There are many varieties of trees on the site. These unique species include sycamore, hawthorn, box elder, and many types of oaks. There are both forest trees and agricultural trees on the site, with the agricultural trees dating back to the self-sufficiency farming activities that were part of the State Hospital operations.

Garfield Township worked with Schillinger Forestry on a Forest Management Plan for the trees in the Commons Natural Area in 2012 and completed a hazardous tree inventory for the site in 2014. These activities are summarized in the appendix.

Trails

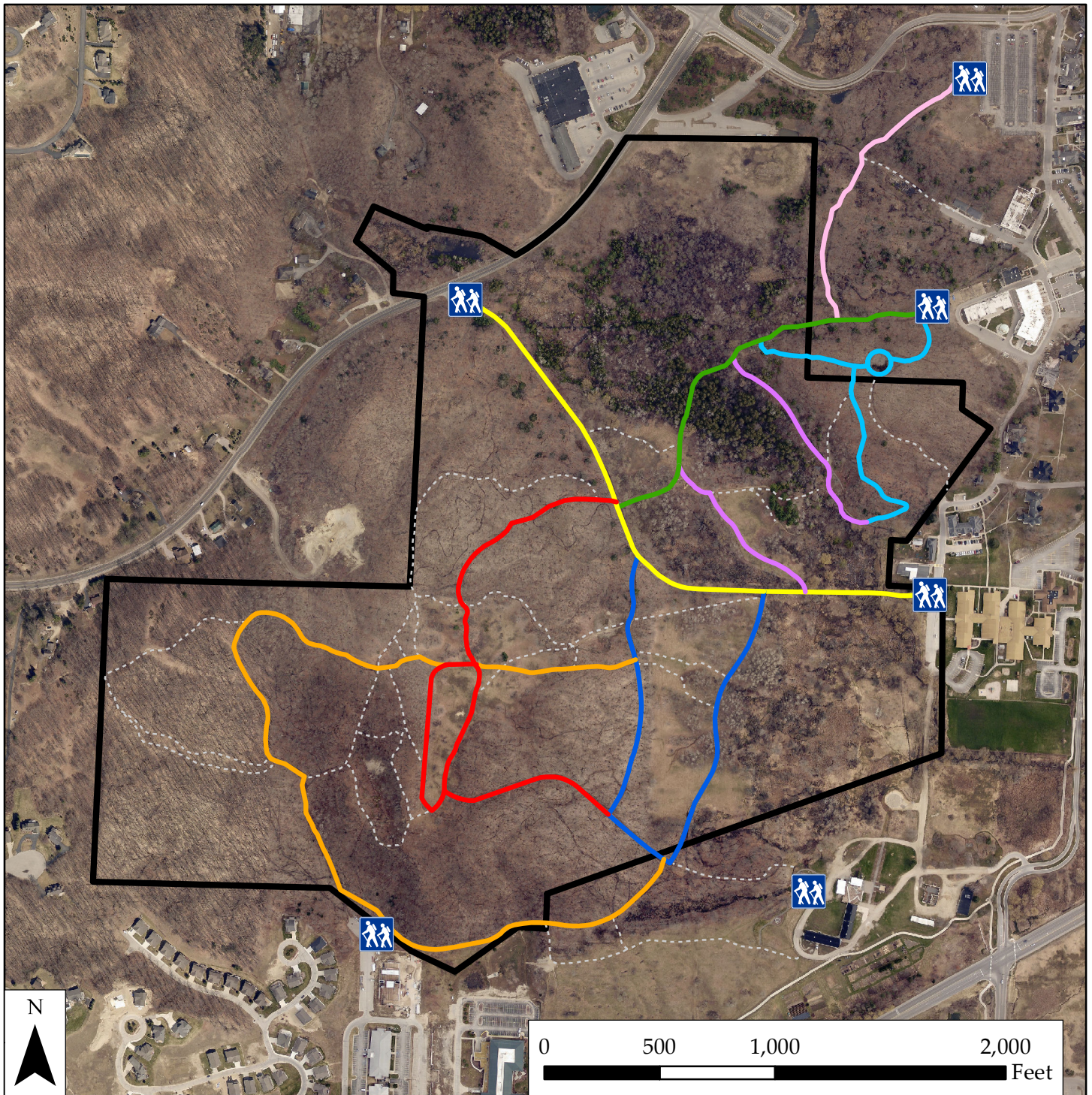
The Commons Natural Area includes over four miles of trails throughout the entire site. These trails are named and are described by the following:

Trail	Location
Cedar Cathedral Trail	From the trailhead on Gray Drive to the center of the Natural Area, intersecting with the Garfield Trail and Old Orchard Trail
Cistern Spur	From two points on the Cedar Cathedral Trail and one point on the Streamside Loop up to the cistern
Copper Ridge Trail	From the trailhead at Historic Barns Park onto the old "State 40" site, intersecting with the Old Orchard Trail
Garfield Trail	From the trailhead on Red Drive to the trailhead on North Long Lake Road, formed from old two-track road
Meadows Loop	Beginning and ending at the trailhead at Historic Barns Park, and intersecting with the Garfield Trail and Old Orchard Trail
Old Orchard Trail	From the trailhead at Historic Barns Park to the center of the Natural Area, intersecting with Garfield Trail and Cedar Cathedral Trail
Streamside Loop	Beginning and ending at a point along the Garfield Trail near Red Drive, intersecting with Cedar Cathedral Trail
Tanglewood Trail	From the trailhead at Munson Medical Center to a point along the Cedar Cathedral Trail, not on Township property

Trailheads and Access











There are currently six recognized trailheads for the Commons Natural Area as follows:

- **Garfield Township** – This trailhead is on Long Lake Road, approximately one-quarter mile south of the intersection with Cedar Run Road and Medical Campus Drive. There are about four parking spaces, a kiosk, and a trash can at this location.
- **Munson Medical Center** – This trailhead is only accessible via Munson’s Lot K parking lot and provides an access point to the Commons Natural Area for Munson employees.
- **Minervini Group** – There is a trailhead on Gray Drive with about 16-20 parking spaces. A kiosk, trash can, and dog waste bags are also available here.
- **Garfield Township** – The eastern trailhead is located on Red Drive next to Greenspire School and across from the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (TBA ISD) headquarters building. It is unclear if the parking spaces here are all reserved for TBA ISD or if any are available for the public.
- **Historic Barns Park** – Construction was recently completed on parking lot and interior circulation improvements for Historic Barns Park. There is a trailhead which allows for access between Historic Barns Park and the Commons Natural Area but the parking on this site is intended for Historic Barns Park.
- **Copper Ridge** – The trailhead between the Copper Ridge PUD and Commons Natural Area is located at the end of a parking lot off Copper Ridge Drive. The Copper Ridge PUD is being built out and parking here is intended to serve these buildings.



Commons Natural Area - Trails and Trailheads

Legend

- | | |
|---|---|
|  Trailheads |  Meadows Loop |
|  Cedar Cathedral Trail |  Old Orchard Trail |
|  Cistern Spur |  Streamside Loop |
|  Copper Ridge Trail |  Tanglewood Trail |
|  Garfield Trail |  Social Trails |

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Current Issues

The Commons Natural Area provides an opportunity for many recreational activities including hiking and biking, bird watching, dog walking, snowshoeing, educational activities, and many more. However, there are some ongoing issues which will impact future efforts to improve the site for both recreation and conservation, as summarized in this section.

Rogue Trails

The trail system at the Commons Natural Area has faced challenges from an increase of “rogue trails” or social trails. These trails are created by users without any authority or input from the Township and can be constructed by illegal earth moving or from people walking a well-worn path off the official trails. Rogue trails cause many problems including destruction of sensitive habitat, erosion, and safety issues.

The Traverse City Ticker published an article about rogue trails at the Commons Natural Area in May 2020. Over the past year, the Township has increased enforcement and oversight of the Commons Natural Area to help curb the proliferation of these rogue trails.



Left: rogue trail; Right: sign stating, “Stay on Designated Trails” (Photos: May 2021)

Bike Jumps

In addition to the rogue trails, parts of the Commons Natural Area known for mountain biking have also seen bike jumps constructed, especially within the “State 40” portion of the site. Bike jumps involve significant earth moving and destruction of the nearby habitat. Bike jumps have the same problems as rogue trails, especially safety issues arising from the unofficial mountain biking trails crossing official hiking trails.



Bike jumps included as part of illegal mountain bike construction (Photos: May 2021)

Mining

Parts of the Commons Natural Area indicate evidence of historic mining operations, most likely from the time of the State Hospital operations. No documentation for mining operations on the Commons Natural Area has been found, although soil data shows a gravel pit at this location.



Evidence of historic mining operation (Photos: May 2021)

Graffiti

Two landmarks in the Commons Natural Area are known for graffiti usage: the “Hippie Tree” and the cistern. The Hippie Tree is near the center of the Natural Area and the cistern is on the Minervini-owned portion of the site. While graffiti has been historically tolerated at these two sites since they are well-loved community landmarks, the graffiti has recently spread out from these sites onto nearby areas. Additional graffiti threatens the sensitive environmental areas in the Commons Natural Area, especially when it is sprayed on still-living vegetation.



Graffiti on Hippie Tree, spreading to other trees (Photos: May 2021)



Graffiti on cistern, spreading to other nearby trees (Photos: May 2021)

Encampments

The Grand Traverse region has seen many people experiencing homelessness in the past several years which has exacerbated an ongoing issue in the region. Some people in this situation have taken to camping in various open spaces and parks around the area, including Township parks and the Commons Natural Area. This camping is not allowed on Township parkland for many reasons including that the parks are not open after sunset, camping poses a threat to the natural environment, and the increased presence of encampments poses safety issues.

The Township has spent time and resources on enforcement to clean up encampments and help protect Township parkland, including partnering with other organizations on cleanup efforts.



Cleaning up encampments at the Commons Natural Area

Findings

Access

The Commons Natural Area has very limited access points which present issues with increased use of the park. The existing access points have limited parking available or share parking with other nearby uses. Sensitive natural features and restrictions including conservation easements would make it difficult to create new access areas on existing Commons Natural Area property. Access issues present challenges to allowing everyday users to access the site, to hosting events at the Commons Natural Area, and to offering amenities to the park users including restrooms. The design plan will evaluate the access points for the Commons Natural Area and explore any potential improvements.

Environmental Issues

The Commons Natural Area has several sensitive natural features and activities on the site have increased challenges to preserving these features. Increased mountain biking activity has led to the proliferation of illegal rogue trails and bike jumps, which have exacerbated issues including erosion and habitat disruption. The design plan will envision a sustainable trail network for the site to allow for different activities to coexist while protecting the sensitive natural environment. This plan will include recommendations for the closure of some of these trails as needed.

Stormwater and Wetlands Management

Large rainstorm events have contributed to trail washouts and erosion issues on the Commons Natural Area site. Ongoing erosion issues pose a threat to the natural environment. This plan will include design elements to help prevent future erosion including stormwater management techniques.

Design elements will account for protection of the wetlands on the site. Wetlands are sensitive environmental features but are also natural tools to manage stormwater and slow erosion. The design plan will ensure that recreational areas of the site will not interfere with the function of the wetlands.

Appendix A: Governance Structure

Garfield Township Board of Trustees

The Township Board is the legislative body for Garfield Township. There are seven (7) elected officials each serving four-year terms. Officials include the four Trustees and the three officials who work in the Township offices every day: Supervisor, Clerk, and Treasurer. The Township Board is the ultimate approving body for items such as general ordinances, zoning ordinances, resolutions, zoning map amendments, special assessment districts, and other matters that come before the Board.

The Grand Traverse Commons Design Plan is written as an amendment to the 2018-2023 Parks and Recreation Master Plan with the Township Board having final approval authority over the Design Plan. The Parks and Recreation Commission will provide their recommendation on the Design Plan to the Township Board.

Garfield Township Parks and Recreation Commission

The Parks and Recreation Commission is a recommending body to the Board of Trustees which provides guidance to the Board on policy affecting the Township's parks and recreation system. Specific duties of the Parks and Recreation Commission include developing and implementing the 5-Year Parks and Recreation Master Plan, developing park-specific management plans, and fostering partnerships with other stakeholders. The Parks and Recreation Commission consists of seven (7) members appointed by the Board of Trustees.

Joint Planning Commission

The City of Traverse City and Garfield Township Joint Planning Commission (JPC) was created in 2007 to develop and administer a Master Plan and Development Regulations for the Grand Traverse Commons Redevelopment District. The first step was to develop the Grand Traverse Commons Master Plan, described in Appendix B, which was adopted by the JPC in December 2009 and by the City of Traverse City and Charter Township of Garfield in January 2010. The next step was to create the Development Regulations to implement the goals of the Master Plan; this project was done in May 2017.

The Joint Planning Commission consists of five members as follows:

- Two members of the Traverse City Planning Commission.
- Two members of the Charter Township of Garfield Planning Commission.
- One member appointed jointly by the Traverse City Commission and Charter Township of Garfield Board of Trustees.

The City of Traverse City and Garfield Township Recreational Authority (aka Joint Recreational Authority)

The Joint Recreational Authority is a partnership of the Charter Township of Garfield and City of Traverse City, and their citizens, formed in 2003. The Authority operates three public parks which serve the two jurisdictions: Historic Barns Park, Hickory Meadows, and part of the Open Space on West Grand Traverse Bay. The Authority operates under a voter-approved millage to manage and improve the parks. In November 2020, voters approved a new 20-year millage for the Authority for it to continue operations and pursue the public purchase and preservation of the former Kroupa property (tentatively known as Hickory Forest).

The Joint Recreational Authority consists of seven members appointed as follows:

- Three appointed by the Traverse City Commission, including one City Commissioner.
- Three appointed by the Garfield Township Board, including one Board member.
- One appointed by the Board of Directors of the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (must be a resident of the City of Traverse City or Garfield Township).

Appendix B: Previous Plans and Studies

1994 Grand Traverse Commons District Redevelopment Plan

The District Plan for the Grand Traverse Commons site contains planning concepts and design guidelines for redevelopment of the site. This plan was developed shortly after the Commons site was deeded from the State of Michigan to the local entities. Content of the plan includes a description of the redevelopment process, property conditions, and eight proposed subareas to conceptualize different areas within the property.

The 1994 District Plan is a thorough and comprehensive document describing the history of the site, property conditions, redevelopment plans and design guidelines. However, the document is complex and cumbersome. Thus, the Grand Traverse Commons Master Plan was developed to create a simplified and user-friendly plan that builds on the tenets of the 1994 District Plan.

2010 Grand Traverse Commons Master Plan (Joint Planning Commission)

The Grand Traverse Commons Master Plan provides a profile of the Grand Traverse Commons site and a vision, objectives, and strategies to guide future development. The plan was adopted first by the Joint Planning Commission in December 2009, and then by the City of Traverse City (City Commission) and Garfield Township (Township Board) in January 2010.

The vision for the Grand Traverse Commons includes an open natural environment, connection to history, and vibrant close-knit village atmosphere. The entire vision elaborates on the site as a key community resource which will continue to evolve based on community input. From the vision section, the following describes the vision for the natural environment:

“The Grand Traverse Commons will continue to be a place where people explore and interact with the natural environment. The Grand Traverse Commons will continue to be characterized by clean creeks, rolling wooded hillsides, wetlands, tall mature trees, and the connectivity of natural and large-open landscapes. Large expansive lawns will continue to function as the Central Park of Traverse City - supporting passive recreation opportunities and community events. Portions of the Grand Traverse Commons will continue to support sustainable agricultural activities.”

Objectives for landscape and the natural environment cover areas with existing original historic landscape elements, protected natural areas, and the large historic lawns. Strategies to support these key objectives include using native plants, eradicating invasive species, using low-impact design elements, and preserving existing natural elements.

2012 Forest Management Plan for Garfield Township Commons Property

Schillinger Forestry completed the Forest Management Plan for the Commons Natural Area site in 2012. This management plan covers different flora present on the site and the diseases which present a threat to the forest health including oak wilt disease, the emerald ash borer, and beech bark disease. This plan also discusses the threat of invasive species, especially given how much user traffic is on the site and how close the site is to nearby heavily populated neighborhoods.

This plan describes four management units covering the site and describes the major objectives, existing conditions, and planned management activities for each unit. A timeline and an action plan are also included.

In 2014, Garfield Township hired Schillinger Forestry to complete a hazardous tree inventory in the Commons Natural Area. This inventory identified 383 trees to be removed and 50 trees for pruning to mitigate hazards. In 2015, the Township hired Deering Tree Services to perform the tree cutting necessary to remove the hazardous trees from the site.

2016 Trails Focus Group

On May 19, 2016, several stakeholders and interest groups met for a focus group on trails in the Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area and possible connections to other parks including the Hickory Meadows area. The focus group included representatives from the Garfield Township Parks and Recreation Commission, Joint Recreation Authority, Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, Grand Traverse Conservation District, TART Trails, and others including groups interested in activities such as running, mountain biking, and cross-country skiing.

The group performed a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis of trails at the Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area to identify issues relevant to trail planning and development. The results of the SWOT analysis were as follows:

- **Strengths.** Participants identified the location of the Commons Natural Area as a major strength including its proximity to people, its diverse neighbors, and its possibility as a hub for connections to other parks and trails. They also praised the site for its beautiful natural landscape, terrain, habitat, and wildlife, among other strengths.
- **Weaknesses.** Two major weaknesses identified by the focus group include the conflicts between user groups and the unsustainable design of the trail system. Mountain bikers and hikers have often had conflicts with one another while using these trails. The trails lack a cohesive design and include a mix of some formal trails, two-tracks, and “bandit trails.” The lack of design and the bandit trails have been exacerbated by erosion issues within the Commons Natural Area.

- **Opportunities.** Focus group members cited the opportunity for the Commons Natural Area to become a world-class mountain biking destination. People were also excited to have the opportunity to restore and showcase the site, and for the opportunity to foster new partnerships among several different stakeholders with shared interests.
- **Threats.** One of the biggest threats was continuing the status quo with people citing the overuse, unsustainable trail design, erosion, and maintenance as major issues facing the Commons Natural Area. Bandit trails especially exacerbate erosion and invasive species issues, as well as increase the likelihood of conflicts between different user groups.

The focus group anticipated that a full redesign of the site would be beneficial and allow for the community to conduct an input and design process resulting in a mixed-use system.

2018-2023 Garfield Township Parks and Recreation Master Plan

The Garfield Township Parks and Recreation Master Plan provides guidance on investments in Township parks and priorities over five years. Adoption of a parks and recreation master plan is required to apply for grants including the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) administered by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Within the parks and recreation plan, there are several park-specific recommendations. For the Commons Natural Area, recommended actions included the following:

- Develop and implement long-term woodland and forest management plans.
- Improve navigation and wayfinding on the trail system throughout the site.
- Develop a vision for the “State 40” parcel including management of the trail system.

This plan also includes a development concept for the “North Parcel” of the Commons Natural Area near the parking lot for Munson Medical Center. The concept envisions a pump track for use with bicycles, scooters, skateboards, rollerblades, and wheelchairs. This would be a paved area for active use and is viewed as a potential regional asset.

Appendix C: Community Recreation Needs and Preferences

Parks and Recreation Master Plan Survey

In 2017, the Township conducted an online survey as part of updating the Five-Year Parks and Recreation Master Plan and consisted of seven multiple choice and open-ended questions. The survey ran for two and a half months from July 2017 to September 2017 and was posted on the Township website, Facebook page, and promoted in a Traverse City Ticker article. There were 206 people who completed the survey.

The Grand Traverse Commons Natural Area was cited by respondents as the most well-known of the Township parks as well as one of the most visited parks. There were some comments on the Commons Natural Area for the open-ended questions. Most of these said the Commons is well-liked as a recreational asset for the Township, but some cited areas to improve including a better wayfinding and signage system and improved trail construction.

One of the survey questions asked about the need for specific types of recreational facilities for parks in the Township. The most popular responses were as follows:

1. Walk / Hike / Jog Trail
2. Paved Bike Paths
3. Cross-Country Skiing Trails
4. Pickleball Courts
5. Outdoor Ice Rink
6. Beach Access
7. Sledding Hill
8. Picnic Shelter
9. Mountain Bike Trails
10. Nature Center / Gardens

Master Plan Survey

In 2015, the Township conducted a mail survey of residents in advance of updating the Master Plan. The Township decided to create a random sample of survey recipients evenly distributed among the six voting precincts in the Township. The Township developed a method to select a random sample of recipients with the Qualified Voter file and Microsoft Excel. A total of 3,600 people were randomly selected. The total Township population based on the 2010 Census was 16,256. This number generated a confidence interval (margin of error) of 1.4 based on receiving 20% of the surveys back.

The survey asked questions about the demographics of respondents, why people choose to live where they do, the pace of development in the Township, potential issues the Township should address, potential priorities for the Township to focus, what people like best about living in the Township, and more. One of the questions asked about the relative importance of the potential Township priorities. The highest percentage of responses for at least “somewhat important” or higher included the following:

- Protecting surface / ground water 87.7%
- Protecting natural areas 87.7%
- Protecting open space / views 82.0%
- Increasing availability of fresh, local foods 77.1%
- Increasing housing opportunities for young families 75.8%
- Creating local job opportunities 75.3%
- Increasing housing opportunities for seniors 72.7%
- Establishing or expanding parks near neighborhoods 69.3%
- Encouraging agriculture 67.0%
- Better public transportation 63.9%
- Establishing or expanding bike trails and bike lanes 63.2%
- Increasing public access to lakes 60.4%