

Community Development Department

City of Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin

2020 Annual Report



Kyle Kearns, Director of Community Development
KKearns@wirapids.org



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Introduction

The Community Development Department's mission is to promote a safe, diverse, and dynamic vibrant community by enhancing the living, working and recreation choices for community residents and visitors. To fulfill this mission, the Department is organized into four different divisions: 1 – Economic Development; 2 – Planning and Zoning; 3 - Permits and Inspections; 4 - Neighborhood Improvement / Code Enforcement. Department staff work together to ensure compliance with local and state ordinances and codes and fulfill the objectives of the City's Comprehensive Plan and other planning documents.

Several major projects and activities occurred in 2020, including, but not limited to:

- ❖ Several construction projects were completed or began, including the completion of Matalco's aluminum billet manufacturing building.
- ❖ The creation of the Wisconsin Rapids Small Business Grant, in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- ❖ The submission of a U.S. Economic Development Administration Cares Act grant to analyze, strategize and plan for the Verso paper mill and downtown area in response to the idling of the mill.
- ❖ Participation on the Rapids Together Task Force, created to address the Verso Mill idling, as well as the Wood County Economic Development Recovery group, in response to the mill and pandemic.
- ❖ The promotion of the Rapids Rediscovered program, an infill housing assistance program.
- ❖ 665 permits were issued with a total construction value of \$14.8 million and a corresponding permit fee revenue of just over \$100,000.
- ❖ The department filled the Director position after 6 months of vacancy with the hiring of Kyle Kearns.
- ❖ The department created the position of a full time Administrative Technician, and hired Erica Esser, to assistance both the Community Development Department and Assessor's Office.
- ❖ Continued development of the City's sign code rewrite, anticipated for adoption in 2021.

This report will outline the major projects and activities that occurred in 2020 with respect to each individual division.

Lastly, I want to thank all the staff within the department for their hard work and dedication throughout this unique year, with a special thanks to Madelin Petz for assisting with this report. Much of the work outlined here would not be possible without the combined efforts of the Community Development Department staff!

If you should have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Kyle Kearns
Director of Community Development
City of Wisconsin Rapids

Economic Development

Developments

There were several significant projects that were completed or began within the City during 2020. Summaries of those projects are provided below.

1. Matalco

Matalco, a manufacturer of high-quality aluminum billet finished completion of a 110,000 square foot facility in November. The facility meets a need for aluminum in the growing Midwest extrusion industry. It is one of five plants Matalco operates. They anticipate to employee approximately 80 workers at full operation.



2. Arbor Terrace Apartment

The completion of a 4-story, 40-unit senior apartment building occurred in the summer and is fully occupied. The development started in 2019 and was part of a planned development, which met the need in our housing study for dense infill senior housing units. It is anticipated that this can serve as a catalyst to other housing within the vicinity.



Economic Development

3. YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, & VA Clinic

The long-anticipated nearly 100,000 square foot development project, giving a home to the YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, and Veterans Affairs Clinic was completed in 2020. The project is a great example of the strong partnerships throughout the community and charitable spirit. Hundreds of visits to the site daily brings users to the downtown area, where they patronize other local businesses.



4. Revision Eye Care

This project was a local business expansion, which included 4,000 square feet for the eye clinic and a second leasable suite at 2,000 square feet. Furthermore, the development occurred on a vacant property and is a good transitional use between the busy 8th Street South thoroughfare and adjacent residences.



Economic Development

5. Out of the Box Coffee

Another 8th Street vacant lot development, this coffee shop business is the dream of a local entrepreneur. The building is approximately 1,200 square feet, offers a drive-through, and is uniquely designed with a horizontal shipping container, which brings new aesthetic characteristics to the 8th Street corridor.



6. Aquatics Center – Wisconsin Rapids Recreation Complex

The City's Wisconsin Rapids Recreation Complex was significantly expanded in 2020 to include new playground-equipment, a tennis court, pickleball courts, an outdoor picnic shelter, and the aquatics center. Aquatics center amenities include a toddler pool/activity, two water slides, lazy river with "rapids" action channel, leisure pool, and recreation pool.



Economic Development

7. Riverfront Parks

Several riverfront parks renovation projects were completed in 2020, including Veterans Memorial Park, and Demitz Park. Notable improvements at Veterans Memorial Park include a 76-foot long balcony over the Wisconsin River, event terrace, and platform seating, where events such as Lunch by the River are easily accommodated. Demitz Park improvements include a fishing pier, kayak launch, picnic tables, grills, connection with the multi-use trails along the river, and fitness stations.



Other Community & Economic Development Initiatives

Below are summaries of other economic development initiatives that were completed or are underway within the department.

❖ COVID-19 Business Grant Program

The City, in partnership with the Chamber, administered a small business grant in May to assist local businesses during the shutdown and Covid-19 Pandemic. Qualified applicants could receive up to \$1,500 to cover the cost for monthly commercial mortgage or rent/lease payments. A total of nearly \$80,000 dollars was provided to 62 qualified local businesses.

❖ Regional Task Force

In response to the announcement of the Verso Mill idling, local representatives created a task force to assist the community in accessing resources and exploring options for the mill. More recently, the focus has been towards mill opportunities, but initially crucial partnerships were created through the task force to address unemployment, organize job fairs, and provide other resources. Community Development staff have played an active role on the task force and have also assisted with an effort led by regional loggers to create and operate the mill as a Cooperative. The task force and other regional groups that have formed due to strain on the economy will continue to meet through 2021.

Permits & Inspections

Permit Data

Below is a table that outlines building permits issued in 2018, 2019, and 2020, which compares figures for each year.

Residential and Commercial Permits

Permit Type	2018			2019			2020		
	#	Total Value	Total Fees	#	Total Value	Total Fees	#	Total Value	Total Fees
Commercial New or Addition	18	\$25,114,291	\$30,199	14	\$19,572,076	\$15,489	5	\$1,618,501	\$4,333
Commercial HVAC, Electrical, Plumbing	134	\$13,567,423	\$98,316	142	\$12,137,045	\$82,598	84	\$5,461,206	\$30,076
Commercial Remodel	42	\$9,405,433	\$72,558	42	\$7,685,400	\$59,794	40	\$3,333,182	\$21,633
Commercial Signs	19	\$96,019	\$1,491	31	\$190,276	\$2,785	20	\$222,029	\$3,173
New Single-Family Residential	4	\$818,300	\$3,133	8	\$1,499,588	\$5,418	2	\$361,670	\$926
New Two-Family Residential	2	\$622,143	\$2,373	1	\$120,000	\$835	6	\$682,500	\$5,543
New Multi-Family Residential				6	\$7,534,081	\$33,196			
Residential Accessory Buildings & Additions	36	\$255,066	\$2,038	55	\$490,933	\$3,867	42	\$304,530	\$2,406
Residential Deck & Fence	89	\$193,000	\$3,586	83	\$191,340	\$3,268	83	\$324,215	\$3,329
Residential Electrical, HVAC & Plumbing	213	\$812,019	\$13,763	226	\$951,248	\$17,664	204	\$908,365	\$13,736
Residential Alternative Energy	5	\$93,748	\$708	2	\$32,640	\$272	2	\$20,005	\$150
Residential Misc.	13	\$138,134	\$578	14	\$172,843	\$858	2	\$19,260	\$131
Residential Remodel	130	\$1,262,754	\$11,265	175	\$1,435,785	\$12,444	166	\$1,516,212	\$12,990
Raze/Demo	10	\$221,500	\$2,286	6	\$35,600	\$635	9	\$112,802	\$2,391
TOTAL	715	\$52,599,830	\$242,294	805	\$52,048,855	\$239,125	665	\$14,884,476	\$100,817
% Inc. / Dec.				13.00%	-1.00%	-1.30%	-17.40%	-71.00%	-58.00%

While 2018 & 2019 were similar when comparing total value and permit fee revenue, 2020 differed significantly. In 2020, permit totals were down 17% from 2019 and valuation dropped 71% respectively. With these declines, permit fee totals also dropped 58%. Given the above, it is important to note that 2018 and 2019 had several large projects, including the YMCA and Boys & Girls Club, Aspirus Riverview Hospital remodels, Matalco, and several multi-family developments, which led to higher values. Across all commercial permit types declines occurred in 2020, however residential permit types remained strong and even increased in cases. The commercial decline among new buildings and additions can likely be attributed to the pandemic as well as to the Verso news. Interestingly, the quantity of commercial remodel numbers remained consistent with previous years. The residential values, however, align with the strong housing market in the region, and coincide with the premise that during the pandemic homeowners were more inclined to reinvest in property. Lastly, 8 total residential dwelling units (2 single-family, 6 duplexes) were also constructed, which is consistent over the last few years. It is hard to forecast the outlook for 2021, but it is likely, given the trend, that residential will remain consistent but commercial will likely be a slower recovery.

Other Permit and Inspections Initiatives

- ❖ **MyGov Permit Software** – The department has been using the same version of permit software for nearly a decade. The software is user friendly but lacks adequate search functions, and other integration functions, and will be unsupported in a few years. Therefore, the department entered a contract to upgrade after approval of the item in the 2021 budget. The much-improved version will allow for significantly improved staff efficiency and a fully functional web portal for applicants, amongst other improvements. Software rollout and go-live is anticipated for spring 2021.

Planning & Zoning

Planning and Zoning Data

The City adopted a new zoning ordinance in 2018 which provided clarity for zoning requirements and procedures. Below is a table comparing planning requests since the adoption of the new code, including 2020 figures:

PLANNING REQUEST SUMMARY

Request	2018	2019	2020
Annexations / Detachments	0	2	1
Conditional Use Permits / Amendments	3	0	3
Ordinance Amendments	0	1	5
Rezoning	4	1	1
Special Requests (Signs, Etc.)	1	3	1
Site Plan / Landscaping / Parking Review	4	9	7
Subdivision / Land Division / Survey	13	9	7
Variances /Administrative Appeals	9	5	0
Other/Misc.	3	2	2
TOTAL	37	32	28

Planning and zoning requests have decreased in 2020, likely as a result from the COVID pandemic which significantly affected the economy. Many projects, referenced in previous sections, continued throughout the pandemic maintaining a slightly reduced number from 2019. Site Plan reviews and surveys continue to be the majority of Plan Commission requests. In 2020 an ordinance to remove Plan Commission review for certain site plan uses was denied. Uniquely, the Zoning Board of Appeals did not receive a request, which could partially be due to the slow economy stifling homeowners' capacity to invest in Zoning Board of Appeals procedures when making unique improvements to their property. Staff would not anticipate this trend to continue and would estimate increases in all requests for 2021.

Other Planning Projects

Below are summaries of other planning projects that were completed or are underway within the department.

- ❖ **Parks and Recreation Plan** – The City's Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan is somewhat obsolete (2016), and the need for a new Plan was apparent. A new Plan can assist the City in efficiently maintaining existing Parks (many of which were updated in 2019), outline future park improvements, and qualify the City to apply for funding. Therefore, the department assisted in presenting options to the Parks Commission, of which they elected to pursue hiring a consultant to create the Plan. A request for proposals was created and released, to which 11 response proposals were received. In December, the Park Commission, with Council approval, selected Ayres Associates to produce the Plan. Parks staff will work directly with the consultant, while Community Development staff will continue to offer planning oversight. Plan Adoption is anticipated for fall of 2021.

Planning & Zoning

- ❖ **Wayfinding Sign Design Project** – In 2019, the City released an RFP for a Wayfinding Sign Design, with which Corbin Design was selected. A final design package, including a phased approach, was provided in the fall of 2020. A variety of sign types (pedestrian kiosks, trailhead signs, parking sign, etc.) and their location were recommended. Sign fabrication and installation are anticipated for 2021.
- ❖ **Sign Code Rewrite** – Civitek, consultant for the Zoning Code rewrite project, assisted the City to produce a draft of an updated Sign Code. Upon further review, however, staff identified that the proposed code failed to adequately address several key components, such as trends in signage, temporary signs, and types of signs. Given the nature of signage and its connection to the first amendment, staff spent time reviewing and researching appropriate solutions to the above and anticipate adoption in 2021.
- ❖ **UniverCity Alliance (UW-Madison)** – The City was pleased to engage with UW-Madison students through the UniverCity program on a variety of projects, including marketing and promotion, flooding mitigation, arts and culture and more. UniverCity Alliance connects education, service, and research activities across UW-Madison with cities, furthering the practice of sustainability. Initially, a total of nine (9) projects were identified, four of which were matched and completed in 2020. The reports and data from the projects can be used by City staff to further the initiatives within the community, improve efficiencies and build collaborations locally.
- ❖ **U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) Cares Act Grant** – The City partnered with the North Central Regional Plan Commission to apply for approximately \$180,000 in grant funding through the EDA to assist with developing a strategy for recovery and redevelopment in response to the mill closing. If awarded funding in 2021, an RFP will be released to hire a consultant to develop and initiate implementation of a detailed recovery and redevelopment plan. The planning effort would incorporate the following tasks: 1 – Market Assessment, 2 – Visioning, 3 – Site Area Redevelopment Planning, 4 – Strategy, and 5 – Implementation.
- ❖ **Sustainability** – The City has been part of the Green Tier Legacy Program through the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources since 2017. The Green Tier Legacy Communities network is a statewide group focused on advancing sustainability practices in counties and municipalities through collaboration and information sharing among its members. The City participates in engagement and technical assistance / resource sharing meetings and webinars, and reports on yearly statistics and sustainability related accomplishments as part of an annual report submission. The City and Utility continue to excel in the sustainable management of water and wastewater infrastructure. Looking ahead to 2021, the City is also researching the possibility of recreating a sustainability committee to help guide and nurture sustainability goals and benchmarks.



Neighborhood Imp. / Code Enforcement

Code Enforcement Data

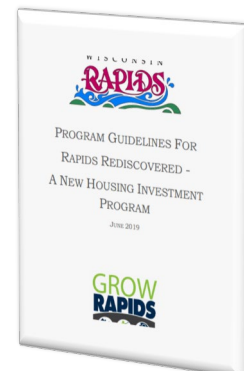
Below is a table that outlines code enforcement cases in 2020, with comparisons to the previous year.

	2019	2020	# Change	% Change
Exterior Property Area Complaints				
Accumulation of Rubbish or Garbage	60	58	-2	-3.00%
Grass or Weeds	200	204	4	2.00%
Improper Parking of Vehicles	50	54	4	8.00%
Improper Storage of Refuse or Refuse Carts	320	3	-317	
Refuse or Refuse Carts on Curb	144	160	6	4.00%
Snow and Ice	124	59	-65	-52.00%
Recycling violation	169	183	14	8.00%
Impassable Sidewalk	7	13	6	86.00%
Leaves/yard waste	6	3	-3	-100.00%
Abandoned/Junk Vehicles	27	20	-7	-26.00%
Exterior Structure Complaints				
Substandard Building	25	19	-6	-24.00%
Missing or Defective Handrails/Guards	1	0	-1	-100.00%
Building Violations				
Electrical Code violations	1	0	-1	-100.00%
Plumbing Code Violations	2	1	-1	-100.00%
Signs	4	1	-3	-75.00%
Multiple Violations / General Case				
Work without Permit	1	2	1	100.00%
Chronic nuisance	21	15	-6	-29.00%
Citations*	183	276	93	50.81%
TOTALS	1345	1071		

Code enforcement data has decreased in many areas from 2019, but not by substantial numbers when reviewing the data further. The largest decrease was in 'Improper Storage of Refuse Carts', which were elevated due to the research study performed after the garbage and recycling container rollout in 2019. Numbers were expected to significantly reduce for 2020 for refuse cart numbers. Additionally, 'Snow and Ice' violations were much lower, due to the average spring and very mild fall/winter in 2020. Also of note, slight decreases to 'Chronic Nuisance' violations occurred, yet significant increases to the number of citations issued. Significant citation increases could be due to the Police Department's assistance with code enforcement. Moving forward, 'Building Structure' violations will be of higher priority for building inspectors and therefore should result in higher numbers in 2021.

Other Neighborhood Improvement Initiatives

- ❖ **Rapids Rediscovered** – The Rapids Rediscovered housing investment program, created in 2019, was created to strengthen existing neighborhoods through reinvestment. Funding is available for constructing homes on vacant lots (\$5,000) and for demolition and construction (\$10,000), but unfortunately was not utilized in 2020. In 2021 the program may be slightly tweaked and will be heavily promoted, as funds have been carried over.



Summary

Summary

While the COVID Pandemic forced our office to adjust policy and procedures in 2020, we have been able to successfully offer continued service to businesses and residents, through embracing many virtual and electronic means. It has also forced us to disseminate information to the public via our website, factsheets, press releases and other means, which have improved our office efficiency. The announcement of the idling of the Verso Mill was disheartening, but federal, state, and local programs, as well as gracious support from community members has helped to lessen the economic impact. It has certainly been devastating for many, but other businesses, such as Matalco, have been able to assist in creating new jobs within the community. We have also been blessed with continued development as indicated above, albeit lessened due to the Pandemic. Unfortunately, the full impact of COVID and Verso idling within our community may not be fully recognized until 2021 or beyond. However, the Community Development department will continue to play an active role in Economic Development, which now more than ever is of extreme importance. Great opportunity for greenfield development and redevelopment exists in the community, which will be a high priority moving forward. All four divisions of Community Development are crucial for continued success and growth in our community's vibrancy and vitality.