

Wisconsin Rapids Recovery & Redevelopment Plan

Public Online Survey Summary

Introduction

The Wisconsin Rapids Recovery and Redevelopment Plan project team has implemented a number of public engagement opportunities over the course of the planning process. A public meeting was held on June 1, 2022 to gain input on community priorities and desires for future development, which will help inform the Site Vision and Redevelopment and Reuse Program for the former Verso Paper Mill Site. There were eleven registered attendees at the meeting, that worked in three small groups to provide input on the Community Priorities.

To engage more citizens in the planning process and obtain additional public feedback, the public engagement materials were converted into an online survey available to the public. As of the closing of the survey on September 9, 2022, 618 total participants completed the survey and provided their input along with an additional 20 written responses collected. The following contains a summary of the survey results.

Demographic Composition of Survey Respondents

Of the 638 respondents, 428 (67%) live in Wisconsin Rapids. A total of 108, or 17% of total respondents indicated that they live within 0.5 miles of the former Verso Paper Mill site. Of the 23% of respondents who indicated that they do not live within the community, many indicated that they live in nearby municipalities, most predominantly the Town of Grand Rapids, City of Nekoosa, and City of Port Edwards.

Survey results indicate that the majority of respondents that engaged with the survey are longtime Wisconsin Rapids residents and generally represent an older segment of the population. Nearly 50% of all respondents (49.61%) indicated that they have lived in Wisconsin Rapids for more than 21 years. Correspondingly, nearly half of all survey participants (48.11%) fell within the age range between 30 and 49 years old, and collectively only 9% of those engaged were under 30 years of age. This indicates that young people were likely underrepresented in the survey.

The survey also indicated that 87% of respondents owned their homes and that another 12% are renters. This is important to note, as current homeowners may not perceive the need for additional housing within the community that renters within Wisconsin Rapids may see and experience.

Survey Responses: Top Priorities Selected by Participants

Ultimately, the goal of the survey was to gain an understanding of what community members view to be the top priorities in advancing the Wisconsin Rapids Recovery and Redevelopment Program. The primary survey question asked participants to rank five to seven priorities from a large list of possible goals for the redevelopment and reuse of the former Verso Paper Mill Site. Participants were asked to rank priorities based on the ability of each option to meet the needs of the community. It should be noted that of the 638 total survey participants, 417 answered this question and the remaining participants skipped it entirely.

The seven top priorities selected by survey respondents include:

- Creating new jobs (at 36.2% of respondents or 85 picks as a top priority)
- Creating opportunities to retain/expand/recruit businesses (at 35.6% of respondents or 78 picks as a top priority)
- Reusing existing facilities to the maximum extent possible (at 22.2% of respondents and 36 picks as a top priority)
- Redeveloping the properties quickly (at 23.53% of respondents and 20 picks as a top priority)

- Mitigating environmental pollution (at 21.93% of respondents and 25 picks as a top priority)
- Improving safety, reducing crime & vandalism (at 20.30% of respondents and 27 picks as a top priority)
- Enhancing long-term economic sustainability (at 19.2% of respondents and 32 picks as a top priority)

Ultimately, the survey indicates that respondents would like to see the site used to expand, retain, and attract companies to provide new jobs within Wisconsin Rapids. There is an emphasis amongst respondent priorities on environmentally responsive redevelopment, including the mitigation of environmental pollution and the reuse of existing facilities as much as possible, which would decrease construction costs and mitigate the amount of construction material being consumed in redevelopment and being discarded in landfills. Respondents emphasized the desire for the expansion and attraction of quality jobs based on the strong indicated desire to enhance long-term economic sustainability. Capitalizing on the redevelopment opportunity to diversify the community's economic base is advisable. At the same time, respondents called for the properties to be redeveloped quickly, potentially indicating the need for additional quality jobs or the fear that the site could sit underutilized and vacant if action isn't taken to redevelop in the near term.

Open-Ended Prompts: General Themes & Consensus

The final survey question provided respondents with an opportunity to provide further details about any potential priority options that were not included in the options for the previous question. Responses were quite varied, but a number of trends amongst responses exist. In total, 111 respondents chose to provide an open-ended comment response to this question. General themes from this question can be found below:

- There is a desire to focus on redevelopment that will attract quality, long-term jobs that are from diverse economic sectors to strengthen the local economic base.
- While some respondents indicated the desire for more restaurants, entertainment, and shopping within the site, many indicated that they do not feel the community needs more low-wage service industry jobs. Redevelopment should focus on attracting modern manufacturing and technology sector businesses that can provide significant long-term job security to Wisconsin Rapids residents and attract or provide opportunities for a younger workforce.
- Several responses indicated the desire to see innovative environmental technology uses at the site, from waste-to-energy production facilities, cardboard and paper recycling, and other innovative green initiatives.
- Respondents indicated that the redevelopment site should be well-planned to create a neighborhood or part of the City designed for the future by addressing the need for a more varied and diverse housing stock that can provide different types of rental and ownership options for area residents.
- There was a common theme in the desire to clean up the river and incorporate it into the community's identity and list of amenities, and the general desire to see the site become a cohesive, enticing, and active place that will draw people to it to work, play, and live.
- Amongst respondents, the need for quality jobs and the desire to see unique entertainment and recreational opportunities besides bars and drinking establishments integrated into the area appear to be two of the strongest desires of commenters. Recreational centers or opportunities for physical activities and games, shooting and archery, bicycling, indoor golf driving ranges, and other such recreational entertainment businesses were mentioned as desires on several occasions. Community gathering spaces, concert halls, and events venues and programming to attract young people to the community were also mentioned regularly throughout these responses.
- Additional responses included the desire for a reliable public transit system that would add to quality of life for residents.
- Several respondents indicated a need to focus on supporting business development and opportunities to draw small business to the area. Including adding affordable, attractive commercial properties downtown.