

## Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

The Village of Empire offers many recreation opportunities for residents and visitors. Public beaches, natural areas, trails, and sports fields are among the facilities available and include a mix of village-owned facilities and other publicly owned facilities and properties.

As a recreation service provider, the Village recognizes the importance of maintaining its parks and recreation facilities and planning for future recreation services and facilities. A major factor in providing any service is how projects will be funded. One possible source of recreation project funding is grants from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR).

Since 2012, recreation has been a key component of the Village's master plans. In 2018, the decision was made to update recreation information and create a stand-alone Village of Empire Recreation Plan. This 2025 update reflects the village's commitment to maintaining a review and updating process every five-years.

## Community Development

The Village of Empire is a community of 378 year-round residents (2023 American Community Survey) occupying 1.1 square miles of land abutting Lake Michigan. The Village is located within the boundaries of Empire Township on the southwestern edge of Leelanau County (see Figure 1-1). **Empire is home to the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore headquarters, establishing the community as a popular tourist destination.** The year-round population has been relatively constant over the last five (5) years. Recreational use occupies the second highest amount of land in the Village with over 212 acres or 35.6% of the Village land area dedicated to recreation and/or preservation (Village of Empire Master Plan 2019). This recreational land includes publicly owned properties as well as privately owned (such as the Lions Club) or quasi-public property such as that held by the Leelanau Conservancy as a preserve or nature area or Township Hall and public library.

## Population Characteristics

When planning for recreation facilities, the community's age and income levels are important factors to consider. **The Village of Empire is home to a population aging faster than the State of Michigan, with a median age of 63.1 years, compared to Michigan's median age of 40.5 years.** As the population ages, needs move from active recreation facilities like ball fields and playgrounds to more passive recreation types like walking and boating. **However, playgrounds and ballfields serve to connect generations.** Barrier-free access to recreation is particularly important for an aging population. At the same time, it's important to consider activities and amenities for the populations the Village hopes to attract and serve as residents and visitors, including younger people and families with children. **The financial means of the majority of the residents must be a top consideration as activities and amenities options are considered.** Finally, the Village must remain keenly aware of the influx of seasonal residents and visitors that use the Village's recreation facilities. The population of Leelanau County rises and falls by 78 percent in the summer, with visitors **making up 40 percent of the region's total population in the**

peak month of July (from a 2022 report from Networks Northwest and Beckett & Raeder). The study shows the impact of that influx has across the region – including on infrastructure and emergency services. The National Park Service (headquarters in Empire) estimates that over 1.5 million people visit the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore annually. Many of those visitors start and/or end their visits in the Village of Empire, with stops at the National Park Service Headquarters, located in the Village, at downtown retailers and restaurants, and at Village-owned parks or beaches.

### Administrative Structure

The Planning Commission is responsible for the Recreation Plan. The Village Council has a Parks Committee that works with the DPW Superintendent on future planning and provides recommendations regarding park policies and projects to the Village Council. A more formal committee/group focusing on recreational issues may be needed. The Village Council or the Planning Commission might consider an ad hoc recreation committee (that would include a Planning Commissioner and Village staff) to serve as a community sounding board on recreation matters, working with other community partners to investigate and propose fully conceived plans (including cost analysis) and to provide a forum for residents' concerns that would ultimately be sent to the Village Council for consideration.

Routine park maintenance is handled by Village staff, contractors, and volunteers, who operate under the direct authority of the Village Council. The Village Council has the ultimate decision-making authority and responsibility for all park-related projects.

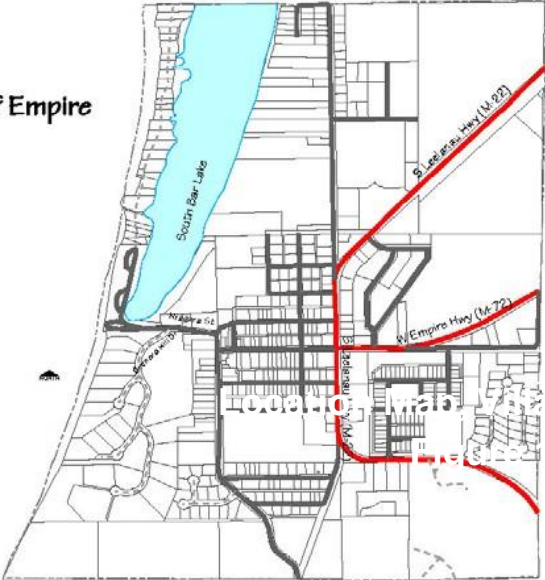
Volunteers remain an integral part of the recreation projects in the Village of Empire. While no designated volunteer group exists, volunteers are solicited on a project-by-project basis to provide some of the labor for the Village “in-kind” match on projects as appropriate, including from local organizations such as the Empire Lion’s Club, Empire Area Community Center (EACC), the Heritage Museum, Glen Lake Library, Chamber of Commerce and the Beautification Committee.

### Relationships

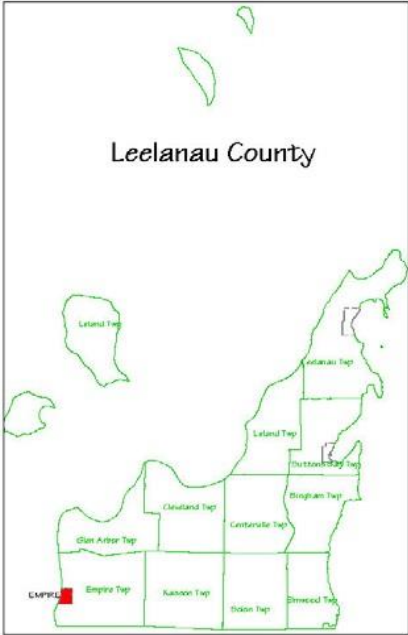
This recreation plan covers the Village of Empire, which is located within the geographic boundaries of Empire Township and is part of the Glen Lake Community School District. The visitor’s center and park headquarters for the Sleeping Bear National Lakeshore are also located within the Village. The Village of Empire intends to continue to partner with the National Park Service, surrounding jurisdictions, and quasi-public entities in the Village on recreational projects as appropriate. The Village supports the expansion of the Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail toward the south. This Recreation Plan includes provisions to continue and enhance the working relationship with Leelanau County, the Leelanau Conservancy, the National Park Service, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and all other recreation providers located within the Village of Empire.

# Location Map, Village of Empire Figure 1-1

Village of Empire



Leelanau County



State of Michigan



## Funding

The Village of Empire's recreational activities and facilities are primarily funded through the Village's general fund. Table 1-1 illustrates recreation spending for the past six years in comparison to the Village's total budget. While two large projects were included in the budgets from 2020 and 2024, for specific projects, the general recreation expenditure (non-project years) averages \$75,513. This demonstrates that the Village Council routinely allots funding for recreational purposes.

From 2012 through 2023, the majority of recreation funding has been for park maintenance. The recreation planning process indicates strong support for maintaining current funding levels for maintenance activities. It also suggests an increased desire by residents for additional recreational activity programming. This can be achieved with significant collaboration with community partners and strong community volunteer leaders and will be where an ad-hoc committee will be needed.

Table 1-1 Village Budget and Recreational Expenditures 2019-2023

### Budget

FY	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Village Totals	\$528,338	\$531,027	\$564,566	\$587,133	\$646,003	\$875,189

### Expenditures

FY	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Recreation	\$82,255	\$235,334*	\$68,135	\$86,149	\$102,452	\$390,403**

\*Steel Wall and Rip Rap (Beach Park)

\*\*Shalda Park DNR Grant \$150,000

Source: Village Audits



# Recreation Inventory

Below is an inventory of existing recreation facilities in the Village of Empire, with properties identified in Figures 1-2.

In 2018, Networks Northwest conducted Accessibility evaluations for Village parks and recreational facilities with input from the Master Plan Committee, using the criteria provided in the MDNR Guidelines for the Development of Community Park, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plans (MDNR, 2016). These criteria are based on the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design. To assist with the assessment, the following references were used:

ADA Rating 1: None of the facilities/park areas meet accessibility guidelines

ADA Rating 2: Some of the facilities/park areas meet accessibility guidelines

ADA Rating 3: Most of the facilities/park areas meet accessibility guidelines

ADA Rating 4: The entire park meets accessibility guidelines

ADA Rating 5: The entire park was developed/ renovated using the principals of universal design.

In 2022, the Shalda Park walking path was designed and installed using the same criteria.

## Lake Michigan Beach Park

Size: 6.7 acres

Service Area: Village, County, Region

ADA Rating 3

Lake Michigan Beach Park is a heavily used park with frontage and access along Lake Michigan and South Bar Lake. It is a major attraction for Village residents and seasonal visitors, offering recreational opportunities for swimming, boating, sandcastle building, picnics, and more.

Discussion in the recreation planning process identified concerns regarding the lack of access to Lake Michigan Beach because of the rip-rap and old concrete slabs used as high-water solutions and the need for a beach cleanup process. A remaining issue from 2018 is stormwater runoff that flows into South Bar Lake at the boat launch and where runoff forms a pool adjacent to the anchor.

Other issues or potential concerns at the park include the need for increased parking fees to pay for updated playground equipment and trash removal. Sand removal from sidewalks and roadways was also mentioned. A changing room is scheduled for construction in 2025.

All of the park boat launches, swim and fishing docks are inspected and maintained as part of the Department of Public Works budget and are eligible for inclusion into the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) as needed.

#### South Bar Lake Recreational Amenities:

Boat Launch—a boat launch ramp with a concrete pad located on the South end of the Lake. A wooden walkway to the north of the concrete pad leads to an ADA-accessible floating fish dock with a bench area.

Swimming Dock— seasonal and ADA accessible, consisting of three (3) 60'x20' hinged floating platforms with no ramp and supported by six (6) poles/ pipes for anchoring. Includes a swim ladder.

Additional amenities include a picnic shelter, ADA-compliant playground equipment, picnic grills, a drinking fountain, a bathhouse with restroom facilities (accessible), a fishing dock, a picnic table, and benches.

South Bar Lake offers a wake-free zone and is intended for small boats, kayaks, canoes, rowboats, and paddle boards.

#### Lake Michigan Beach Park Recreational Amenities include:

A seasonal boat launch ramp at the public beach's north end consists of five (5) ramp units measuring 150' x 146'. Each ramp is composed of steel grates designed for the annual set up in the Spring and removal in the Fall by the Village's Department of Public Works with assistance from outside contractors.

Additional amenities include a Beacon Lighthouse for boaters and fishermen, a basketball court (non-regulation size), historic structures with interpretive panels and ADA-compliant playground equipment, **a volleyball sand court, foot washing stations, drinking fountains, fire rings, and grills.**

#### Shalda Park

Size: 12.2 acres

Service Area: Village/Township

General Park Area ADA Rating: 3

Walking Path ADA Rating: 5

Shalda Park includes facilities for organized sports, including baseball and tennis, **a new ADA-compliant paved walking trail, and fitness equipment. An unpaved walking path connects Shalda Park with Leelanau Conservancy Land off the southeastern end of the paved walking path.**

**Recreation planning input suggested more useable fitness equipment. Input also indicated that the park may need additional promotion and/or improvements to encourage its use among residents and others by offering facilities such as pickleball courts, a gazebo, new and accessible playground facilities, and shade trees. Another suggestion was using the artesian well for drinking water by the brush pile.**

#### Recreational Amenities Shalda Park

Two (2) ball field with backstops, small bleachers, fenced outfields, and dugouts; tennis courts (2, unlit); an ADA-accessible paved walking path; fitness stations; a storage building; restroom facilities (2, one ADA-compliant); a landscape buffer; and drinking fountains.

#### Downtown Green Space

Size: .14 acres

Service Area: Village/Township ADA Rating: 4

The Village maintains a small open-space park in its downtown. **Recreation planning input suggested refreshing the kiosk, adding more picnic tables, a buffer of trees/bushes/plants, and a gazebo as a possible small entertainment venue.** This may also be the location of a public restroom, which may depend on sewer/water infrastructure options.

#### Recreational Amenities Downtown Park

Informational kiosk, picnic tables, **bike racks, benches**

#### Other Leelanau County Recreational Facilities

In addition to parks within the Village, residents and visitors also use recreational facilities outside the Village owned by other local governments, nonprofits, and state or federal agencies. Township, County, and State parks and campgrounds offer various recreational activities, from picnicking and baseball to hiking and swimming. The local public school district, Glen Lake Schools, has recreational facilities, including sports fields, tracks, and a fantastic **playground**. Designated public access sites on Lake Michigan and inland lakes and rivers feature boat launches, parking areas, and toilets. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources or Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore maintains such facilities. In addition, privately owned recreational facilities open to the public provide amenities ranging from golf courses to canoe/kayak rental liveries, catering to residents and visitors.

#### Trails

Numerous recreational facilities are classified as trails in or run through Leelanau County, including walking, hiking, biking, equestrian, and cross-country skiing trails. Notable trail systems within and connecting to the Village of Empire include the Michigan Shore-to-Shore Trail, a cross-state equestrian trail, and the Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail, which was developed collaboratively by the National Park Service, the Friends of Sleeping Bear, Traverse Area Recreational Trails, the M-22 Leelanau Scenic Heritage Route, the Michigan Department of Transportation, and other state and regional partners.

## Key Public/Quasi Publicly Used Recreation Facilities/Providers

NAME	OWNER	SIZE (ACRES)	FACILITIES
Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore	National Park Service	107.7	Visitor's facility with interpretive center and auditorium (leased), natural area, trails, picnic facilities
Chippewa Run Natural Area	Leelanau Conservancy (non-profit)	110	Natural area, 1.5 miles of trails
Johnson's Park	Empire Lions Club	5.3	Picnic shelter with kitchen area, storage building with restrooms, playground equipment, pickle board/shuffleboard courts, bocce ball court
Township Hall	Empire Township	0.28	Meeting facilities, indoor recreation facilities
Village Nature Preserve (formerly Nature Conservancy)	Village of Empire	13	Natural area with wetlands
Glen Lake Library	Serving residents of Empire, Glen Arbor, and Kasson townships.	0.28	The library has diverse collections and services and functions as a vital information hub for our community. These include children's story hours, book discussion groups, lecture series, room rentals, and art displays.
Empire Area Community Center (EACC)	Serving the "greater Empire area"	No physical space	EACC provides recreational programming for events that bring members of the public together in fellowship: Holiday Dinner, Artisan Market, Trunk-n-Treat, Anchor Day activities and a concert series that serves to raise money for their emergency fund.
Chamber of Commerce	Host two large recreational events in the Village	No physical space	The Chamber is host to the Asparagus Festival and Hillclimb that are both well attended events – residents and visitors alike. Both events offer significant opportunities for volunteers.
Total		236.56	

### Empire is also host to a number of community recreational events

January	Empire snowmobile drag race – Roy Taghon Memorial
April	Lion's Club Pancake Breakfast
May	Asparagus Festival (Chamber of Commerce)
June – Sept.	Farmer's Market
July	Anchor Day Celebration (EACC) Lion's Club Chicken Dinner
August	Lion's Club Auction
September	Hill Climb Car Rally (Chamber of Commerce) Sleeping Bear Marathon
October	Trunk – Treat (EACC)
November	Artisan Market (EACC)
December	Holiday Potluck (EACC)

Village of Empire Recreation Sites  
Figure 1-2



# Planning and Public Input Process

## Recreation Planning Process

The Village of Empire recognizes the need to plan for future improvements at locally-owned recreation sites and consider how these projects could be funded. In addition to investigating sources of grant and matching funding, the Village proactively seeks funding from public donations of labor and materials to assist with recreation maintenance and improvements.

To ensure that recreation planning considers the full spectrum of community issues and input, the 2024 Recreation Plan was developed in conjunction with the 2024 Village of Empire Master Plan update process. The process included reviewing and analyzing socio-economic data, natural resources, existing land use, and recreation inventory information required by MDNR as part of the recreation plan. The Master Plan informed the data and questionnaire process in developing the draft plan and ways to engage the public.

### Public Input Process

As part of the 2024 Village of Empire Master Plan Update, the Empire Village Planning Commission created a survey to obtain public input on priority recreation issues. The questionnaire was made available online in November of 2024. Print copies were available at the Glen Lake Library and Village Office. One hundred 121 responses were received. A sampling of the survey results related to recreation are shown on page 11. The full report is available from the Empire Village Office. A public forum was held in December of 2024 to discuss the survey results and invite community feedback. Approximately {} participants attended the event. In addition, all meetings with the Village of Empire Planning Commission open to the public and posted in local public places.

### Public Input Results

The November 2024 community questionnaire results showed a near-unanimous agreement regarding maintaining our Village beach and parks. Results suggested that while maintaining Lake Michigan Beach Park was important, focusing on utilizing the other parks (Shalda and Downtown) and recreation activities (versus spaces) is gaining priority status. A never-ending consideration is balancing maintenance/operational issues with how to fund and organize growth in recreational activity opportunities in the Village.

## Goals and Objectives

Because of its environmental attributes, expanses of public (state and federal) land, and low population density, the Village of Empire currently enjoys a favorable reputation as an outdoor recreation area.

**Goal:** MAINTAIN AND EXPAND CONNECTIONS TO RECREATIONAL SPACES FOR ALL AGE GROUPS WHILE ADHERING TO SOUND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND PLANNING PRACTICES.

Objectives:

1. Encourage the preservation and continued vitality of Critical Dune Area and federally protected wetlands.
2. Work with community and institutional partners to ensure the continued maintenance and accessibility of the Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail.
3. Encourage using Planned Unit Development, clustering, and conservation easements to maintain open spaces and scenic vistas.
4. Coordinate Shore-to-Shore Trail signage with the Michigan Trail Riders Association.
5. Research and implement a shared roads campaign.

The Village of Empire has a system of parks, ball fields, and recreational facilities. It is important to improve and expand these recreational facilities to meet the needs of residents and seasonal visitors. Recreational facilities should be developed to meet the needs of the whole community, all age groups, and income levels.

**Goal:** IMPROVEMENTS TO PARK FACILITIES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF VILLAGE RESIDENTS AND SEASONAL VISITORS OF ALL AGES AND INCOME LEVELS

Objectives:

1. Consider recreational facilities and activities integral to community development planning.
2. Ensure ADA compliance is considered when planning park improvements and recreation activities.
3. Enhance public beach and water access at Lake Michigan Beach Park.
4. Enhance Shalda Park facilities to incorporate greater intergenerational activities.
5. Plan and implement improvements to the downtown park.

**Community-wide programs** that provide opportunities for year-round recreation, personal enrichment, art, and music contribute to the village's quality of life and attractiveness. Adequate public recreation facilities and cultural activities must be



accessible to area residents and visitors. Coordinated programs and facilities that reflect the community's character and desires can be key in attracting new commercial activities.

**Goal: INCREASE ACCESSIBLE RECREATIONAL ACTIVITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR AREA RESIDENTS AND VISITORS.**

1. Work with community partners to secure appropriate spaces to support community activities.
2. Encourage community arts and crafts, musical, and personal enrichment programs for all age groups and full-time and seasonal residents.
3. Encourage and promote cultural facilities and events that meet the needs of the entire community.

### Action Program

The action program describes improvements to existing facilities and the development of new facilities. Anticipated funding sources will be in the form of cash from the Village general fund, in-kind labor, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, Leelanau Conservancy and Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) grants. Sources of the grants may also include: Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF), Coastal Management Program (CMP), Inland Fisheries Grant Program (IFGP), Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), Natural Heritage Small Grants, other appropriate grant programs.

### Proposed Actions

#### Lake Michigan Beach Park

1. Develop and implement a plan to improve access to Lake Michigan Beach (rip rap/concrete removal).
2. Refresh and update the Lake Michigan Beach Park Pavilion.
3. Research and demo beach groomer options.
4. Add a changing room area by the restrooms.
5. Add additional trash receptacles during peak months

#### Shalda Park

1. Add a playground and improved fitness facilities at Shalda Park.
2. Enhance the ballpark facilities with a new scoreboard and removal of posts and lights.
3. Research and recommend skate park options on site.
4. Research the feasibility of ice rink or other winter-focused recreation activity
4. Add a pavilion structure in ADA picnic area.
5. Research and survey residents on support of a community garden
6. Designate an area and provide infrastructure to support a pickleball court



### **Downtown Park**

1. Refresh the information kiosk
2. Design a plan for park enhancements to include screening planting in the back of the property, adding a gazebo, additional benches, and smaller picnic tables.
3. Incorporate possible public restroom facility placement installation depending on future wastewater system implementation.

### **Trail System**

1. Research and implement a shared roads campaign for Front Street, Lake, and Lacore streets.

### **Recreation Activity Support**

1. Form ad hoc recreation committee (including a Planning Commissioner and Village staff) to serve as a community sounding board on recreation matters, working with other community partners to investigate and propose fully conceived plans (including cost analysis) and provide a forum for residents' concerns. The committee suggestions, plans, and findings would be forwarded to the Village Council for consideration.
2. Working with community partners, develop a communications plan for recreational activities and events.

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# Non-Motorized and Trail Map

(Source: Village of Empire Transportation Plan 2015)

