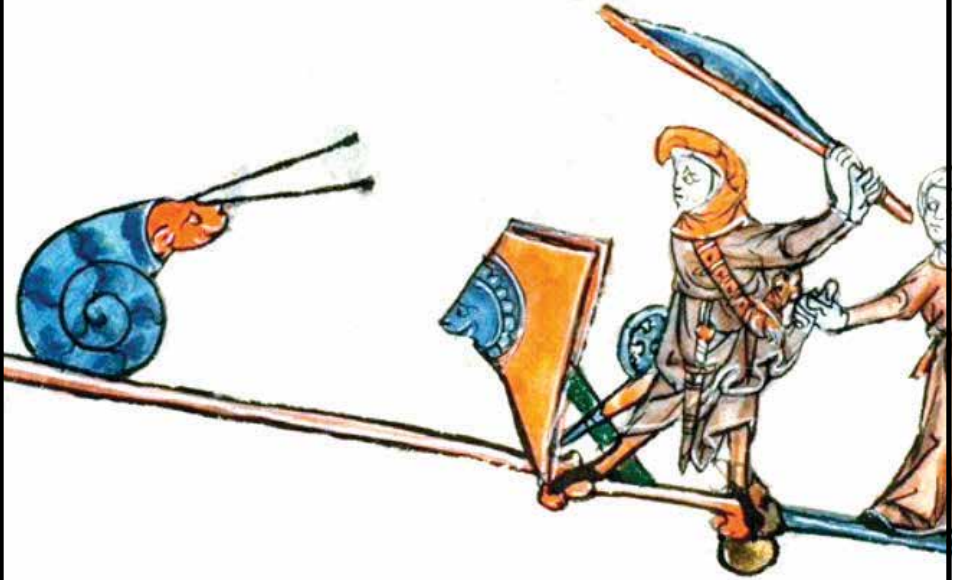


DEMYSTIFYING CITY GOVERNMENT



Getting a Proposal in Front of Council

CASE STUDY: "Skateboard Park" by Brock Coyle
CITY INPUT: Chris Kahlow, La Crosse City Council

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FROM THE PUBLISHER

If you're wondering why we chose images of medieval knights slaying giant snails to illustrate this series of zines, here are the reasons: First, logistics; 500-year-old art is copyright free. Second, they're whimsical as hell. And third, even though we don't really know why an entire illustrated genre of medieval knights fighting giant snails exists, we're glad that it does. Maybe the citizens of that long-ago time and place had heard of snails but had no idea of their actual size, so they imagined them into a much bigger problem. Which, if you think about it, is kind of like city government: a giant, slow-moving slug that is imagined to be a much larger problem than it really is.

And because we imagine it as such, we citizens tend to hand our power over to others when it comes to how our city works and what needs to be done to improve it. That approach rarely works to our advantage. The only way to ensure that La Crosse accurately reflects "we the people" is to actively participate and co-create the city as we see fit. We can't leave the work to the sole discretion of a chosen, privileged few.

The ultimate goal of the *Demystifying City Government* series is to provide some of the tools needed to empower the citizens of La Crosse to alter the physical and/or political spaces around them. It's a tall order, we know, but we truly believe that our communities have the wherewithal (and the responsibility) to do what's best for them. Navigating the multiple blocks—in language, transparency, communication, and overall understanding—that exist between citizens and city government has not been easy during this project, and we *like* this shit. La Crosse became a city in 1856, so that's 167 years the city has had to snail-crawl its government processes into their current form. And there are a LOT of processes. Which means there is a definite learning curve, and that curve can get wicked slick, because, well, this is Wisconsin. The good news is that zines have a history as disruptive technology (we're playing fast and loose with the definition of technology in an era of smart fridges, but all the same: disruptive technology). Our hope for this zine series is to inspire one/some/all of us to work together to dig into improving our communities, making La Crosse an enlivened, engaged, better place to live.

So in this first volume, you'll find information about what it means to bring an idea to your community and to City Hall. Maybe your idea isn't as grand or ambitious as a new skateboard park, but if it matters to you and to your community, then it's important enough to be discussed in council chambers. If you and a few of your neighbors have ever talked about something you all would like to see happen, something you'd like to change in your neighborhood, then we hope the information you find here will inspire you. So yeah, let's get to fighting giant snails.

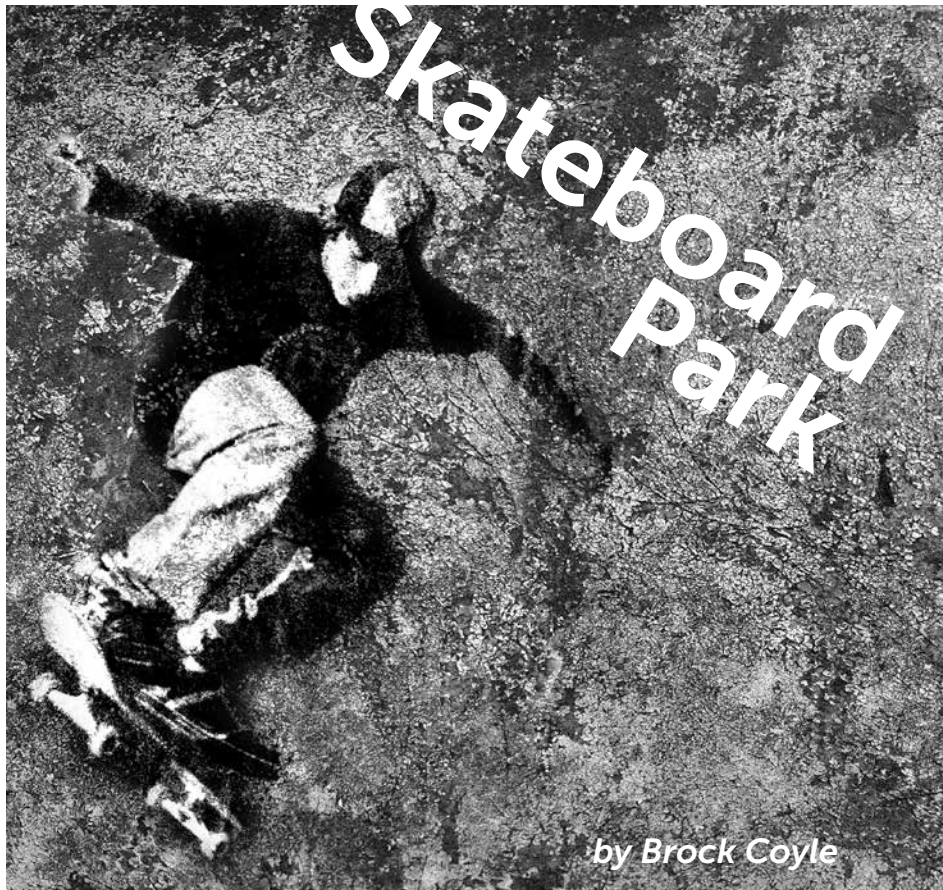
Cheers, Roxanne and Rachel

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I was about seven years old when I got my first skateboard. I remember waking up Christmas morning, and there it was under the tree. That Walmart Variflex, with plastic trucks and wheels, bearings full of molasses. It was glorious. As a little kid in the late nineties, you watched the X Games, played Tony Hawk's Pro Skater on PlayStation, and watched Rocket Power on Nickelodeon. There was a big focus on being "extreme" in those days, at least it seemed so to me, and I wanted to do it all: I had the rollerblades, the skateboard, and the bike, but it didn't take long to realize that skateboarding was the coolest.

My biggest obstacle early on was where I lived. My parents' house sits on a gravel drive, a quarter mile back in the woods on the outskirts of Holmen. It's a beautiful place,

and growing up in the woods was amazing, but for skating it left a lot to be desired; the only concrete I had was the basement and the garage. I had to get creative.

My best buddy, Dylan, lived in the boonies too, and he and I would hang out in the summer and build little ramps in the yard. We would lay down plywood on the dirt so we could roll and make little jump ramps out of cinder blocks and old tires. Once in a while our moms would take us down to Lueth Park in La Crosse. I remember being so excited but so intimidated by the big ramps, not to mention that this was 1999: people had blue hair, Limp Bizkit was in full swing—these were terrifying times. But we loved our trips to the skatepark, nonetheless.

Around fifth grade, I started hanging with Sam McElrone. Sam was a tall, lanky dude in the same class as me. He played basketball and was pretty new to skateboarding, but he liked it and was a fast learner and had a real drive to get good at things. Sam lived in the country too, about two miles down the road from me. His parents had a big house on a hill, with a barn at the bottom, cut into the hill. The top of the barn was a hayloft they used for storage, but it was mostly empty other than a few dozen hay bales. In the lower level they had a stable and a space for grazing, complete with a menagerie of animals—a "funny farm" as they called it: horses, donkeys, fainting goats, even zebras. Sam's mom loved zebras. The home décor was zebra print from floor to ceiling: the rugs, the pillows, everything zebra. The actual zebras got quite a bit of attention from neighbors and people driving by. Turns out you can't ride a zebra. It's not like a horse...but that's a story for another day.

With his parents' permission, Sam and I started skating in the hayloft of the barn. We soon started amassing skate ramps. Some were homemade, little launch ramps and embankments, others were ordered from catalogs, little grind rails and Factor X kickers. Remember those black plastic Factor X jump ramps? In the early 2000s, it seemed like anyone with kids had one in their driveway. Over time, those plastic ramps would warp at the ends and become deadly to ride on. Eventually you either had to bolt them

down to something or put a sheet of metal at the bottom; otherwise it'd stop your wheels and send you flying.

Eventually, Sam's dad ordered some real, prefabricated quarter pipes and welded us some rails. It wasn't long before we had a pretty legitimate skatepark in the barn. Having the barn allowed us to skate year-round; we even had toy snowboards we would ride from the house down the big hill to the barn. This is when skating really took off for us, in our teen years. We got into the culture, watching skate videos like *Girl Skateboards*, *Yeah Right*, or *The DC Video*. We had our favorite skaters and started ordering apparel from CCS catalogs. Our skating aspirations felt a little bleak living in Holmen, Wisconsin, but hey, we had our own little skatepark. There we were, dreaming about California schoolyards while kick-flipping over hay bales in a barn, a foot of snow on the ground outside. When the weather was nice, our parents would drive us down to the skatepark in Onalaska. Back then, the park was new, and it felt like the place to be; there were so many characters who hung out there on a daily basis. It became my favorite place to go. When I wasn't there, I would daydream about it, because that's where my head was: skating.

In middle school, we started to form a crew of skaters. We would have sleepovers at Sam's house and skate the barn all night. We skated the streets in Holmen, too, and started making little videos. These were semi-early digital days, so we had those little Sony camcorders that recorded onto mini DV tapes. Sam had a VCR tape adapter and a huge TV where we could watch our antics play out. For instance, the barn had this death hole: a three-foot-by-three-foot hole used for chucking hay bales from the loft down into the stable. Once in a while, somebody just had to pop a trick over the hole for a video. It wasn't that far across, but if you came up short, the fall was a good 20 feet. Luckily, nobody met such a cruel fate.

I spent a lot of time in the summers just skating around Holmen looking for spots. I'd get dropped off at my grandparents' house in the morning, then skate over to my buddy Taylor Hesselburg's place; his parents would be at work and

I'd knock on his door almost every day at 10 am, waking him up to go skate. I annoyed the shit out of that dude, but we grew up together and we were tight. We'd listen to punk rock and skate this little homemade rail his dad built, along with a few places in town—schools and churches that had stair sets and nice curbs to grind on. Unfortunately, we were always getting the boot. Plenty of people were polite. A simple "Sorry guys, you can't skate here" does just fine, but it was always funny to have a custodian, a preacher, or a principal flex some authority and scream and yell at us for defiling their sacred private property. None of us ever got more than a talking-to from the police, no tickets or hard time, but it did make us feel like vandals. We were sort of outlaws in a sense, and why the heck not. Skating was punk rock, but even so, we wished we had a skatepark in Holmen, a neighborhood spot where we could skate every day and get really good—free from authority giving us the third degree.

The summer before high school Sam's mom and stepdad split, and Sam, his mom, and his two sisters moved into an apartment in Holmen. We bid farewell to our beloved barn skatepark, but now we had an apartment complex with a wealth of concrete. We had a few boxes and rails we would set up in the driveway and shred. We were getting pretty good at this point: flipping our boards, grinding on things. We were doing it. This is also where our mischief really took off. I have very fond memories of the sleepovers we had then. We'd skate around town all day, then run around all night toilet-papering friends' houses and ding-dong ditching. Oh, to be 14.

When I was 15, I got my first job, a dishwashing gig at Jacqlon's in Holmen. Shortly after that, I started working the counter at McDonald's—a precursor to my dreadful life of customer service to come (kidding). High school changed a lot of things. Girls and social events became an interest. A lot of the dudes I grew up skating with shifted their focus. A bunch of them started playing music: Sam played guitar and bass, Taylor played drums, and everyone started jamming together. I was there for it. They

were really good, and I'd come hang at all the jams and band practices. They did their thing and I kept skating. I remember one day there was a photographer from the *La Crosse Tribune* hanging around the Onalaska skatepark. He asked if he could snap a photo of me and I obliged. A few days later there I was on the front page of the *Tribune*, doing an ollie to fakie in the halfpipe at the Ona park. Shortly after, I got a message on Myspace from a girl; she saw my picture in the paper and thought I was cute. She ended up being my first girlfriend, affirming my belief that good things come to those who skate.

By this time, I had a lot of friends from the skatepark, guys who skated every day and planned to keep skating after high school. I started spending more time in La Crosse. Pro Skate & Snowboard was the local shop, located at 2nd and State, right downtown. They had just opened an indoor skatepark in the back of their shop called

Coalition. It was small, but really fun. A couple of the guys who worked there were rippers, guys I really looked up to and still do. One was Duke Brooks. Duke was about five years older than me, and kind of took me under his wing when it came to skate culture. We would kick it in the shop and just talk about life. He showed me new music and skate videos to get hyped on. I'll never forget one day he pulled me aside and asked if I wanted to be on a skate team. I remember being so psyched I called my mom right away. I was on the team. I may not have been a pro skater, but I skated for a shop called Pro Skate.

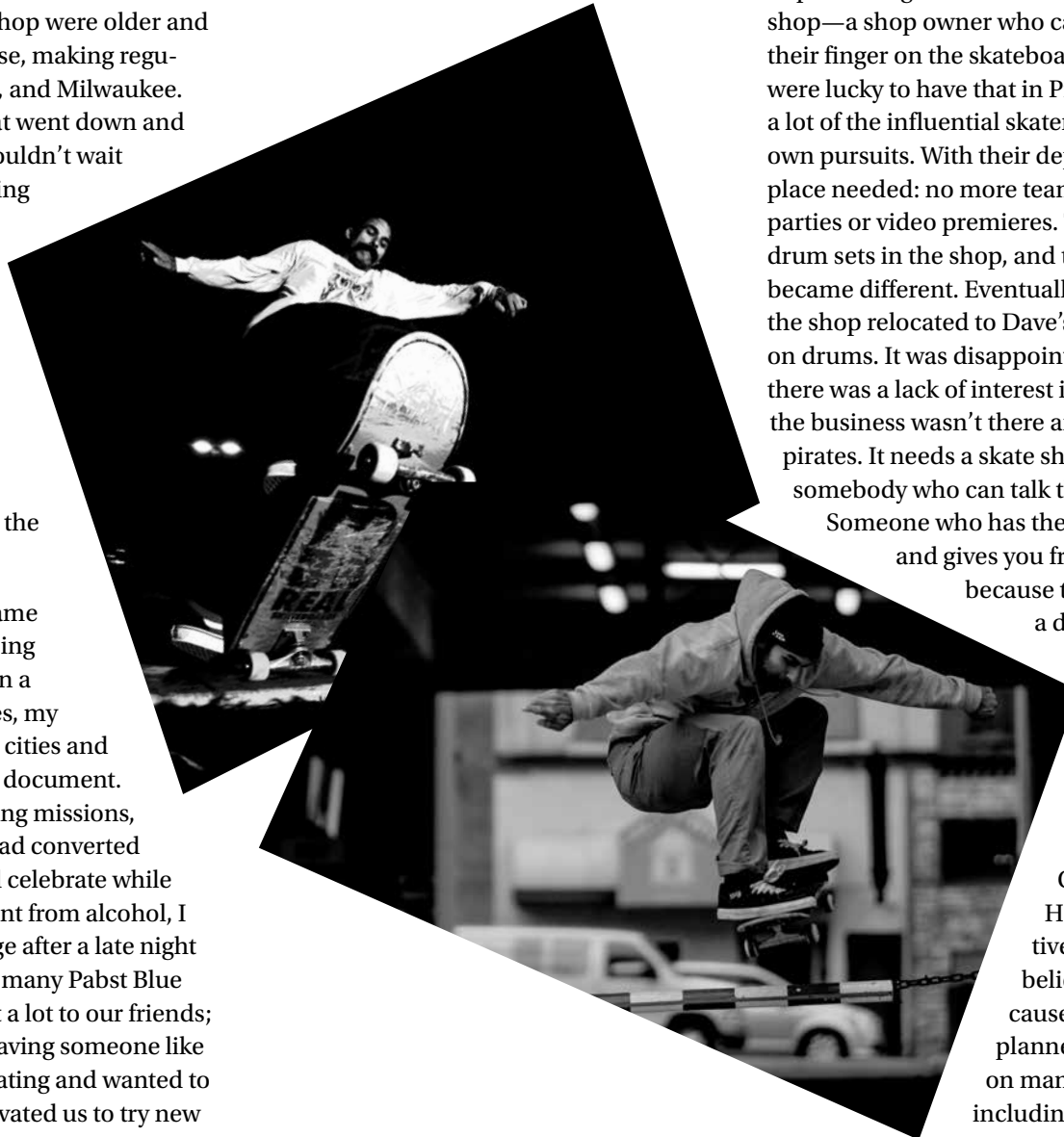
I felt a sense of community and belonging then. We had contests and put on demonstrations at the shop and at local festivals and events. Every Friday, the shop stayed open



until 10pm. They'd order pizzas from Jeff and Jim's and premiere the latest skate video on a projector in the park, along with little contests and product tosses. It was a really fun time, especially for the kids, and it motivated me to be an advocate for skateboarding. I realized that with a little effort, we could make everyone feel part of something big.

Some of the guys who hung out at the shop were older and had aspirations outside of little La Crosse, making regular skate trips to Madison, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee. I'd listen to their stories about tricks that went down and wild parties. It all intrigued me, and I couldn't wait to start off on my own adventures. Getting to know those dudes, I learned a bit about La Crosse skate history too. I got to know guys like Cole Herold and Jim Hartig, two guys about ten years older than me who have been instrumental in the La Crosse skate scene since the early nineties. Through community advocacy, charity work, and being overall positive examples of skateboarders, Cole and Jim helped get the Lueth skatepark built in 1999.

As the years went on, Cole and Jim became two of my closest friends. Along with being a true fan of skateboarding, Jim has been a filmmaker for years. In my early twenties, my friends and I started traveling to nearby cities and skateparks, and Jim was always there to document. Upon returning from our trips and filming missions, we hung out in Jim's garage, which he had converted into a video studio and party zone; we'd celebrate while Jim edited footage. Prior to my retirement from alcohol, I crashed on the couch in Jim's edit lounge after a late night watching skate videos and drinking too many Pabst Blue Ribbons. Having a place like that meant a lot to our friends; it became our hangout. Furthermore, having someone like Jim, who had genuine interest in our skating and wanted to bring it to a larger audience, really motivated us to try new



tricks and explore new places. The filmmaker is an integral part of any skate scene.

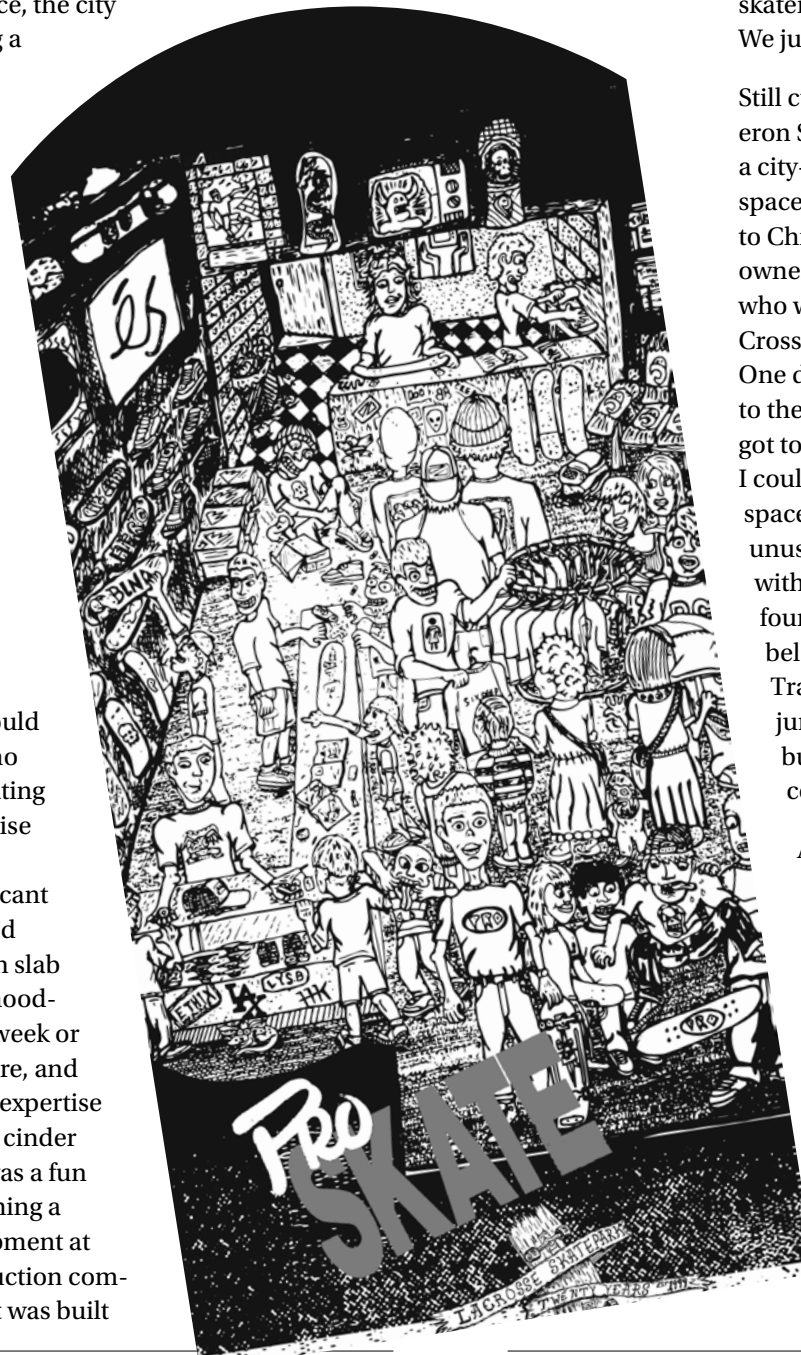
As we explored new places, we saw how other scenes operated, and I began to form a clearer picture of what makes skateboarding thrive in a city and in turn, how that impacts the greater community. One big piece is the skate shop—a shop owner who cares and employees who have their finger on the skateboarding pulse are essential. We were lucky to have that in Pro Skate, but as time went on, a lot of the influential skaters moved on, following their own pursuits. With their departures went the nurturing place needed: no more team events, no more Friday pizza parties or video premieres. The owner started selling drum sets in the shop, and the whole vibe of the place became different. Eventually the indoor park closed, and the shop relocated to Dave's Guitar Shop, with more focus on drums. It was disappointing to me, because it's not like there was a lack of interest in skating, but the skate side of the business wasn't there anymore. The skate scene needs pirates. It needs a skate shop dude, or gal, or whomever: somebody who can talk the talk and order the cool gear.

Someone who has the cool skate video queued up and gives you free grip tape now and again because they know you spend \$60 on a deck every three weeks: a skater's skater.

Cole Herold has always been one of the biggest skateboarding advocates in La Crosse and an active community member in general. Cole runs the Onalaska Jaycees Haunted House every year, is active in his labor union, and is a big believer in uniting over a common cause. To this day, Cole and I have planned several events and worked on many skate projects together, including the 15-year anniversary party

for Lueth Park in 2014 and the 20-year in 2020. In 2018, thanks to the advocacy of a few college students, along with Jed Olson of Outdoor Recreation Alliance, the city approved a remodel of Lueth Park, including a blacktop pump track addition. The original park was built by a construction company, Fowler & Hammer, not an actual skatepark builder, so while we loved our park, it was common knowledge that many of the obstacles were hard to skate and not very beginner friendly. A facelift was long overdue, and we were happy with the results. The remodel brought a resurgence of use, and lots of new skaters hit the scene.

With this resurgence, and the success of our anniversary parties, Cole, our friends, and I wondered what else was possible in La Crosse. We often discussed building a small DIY park somewhere. Skate obstacles would appear under the Cameron Street bridge on and off over the years, but they were always getting confiscated or destroyed, or rocks would get scattered everywhere. We never knew who was dismantling or discouraging us from skating there, but it was frustrating: it was an otherwise unused space, with only car dealerships and factories nearby. In 2020, we discovered a vacant slab near the Mississippi River, an abandoned foundation for a factory. It was a nice smooth slab in a scenic location, perfect for filming and hoodlum skateboard antics. Over the course of a week or so, our friends started bringing obstacles there, and our buddy Joe McCoy used his construction expertise to erect a parking block ledge out of cement, cinder blocks, and a red-painted parking block. It was a fun one. As our dream DIY skate spot was becoming a thing, construction started on a new development at the same location, and overnight the construction company took down all our obstacles. How fast it was built



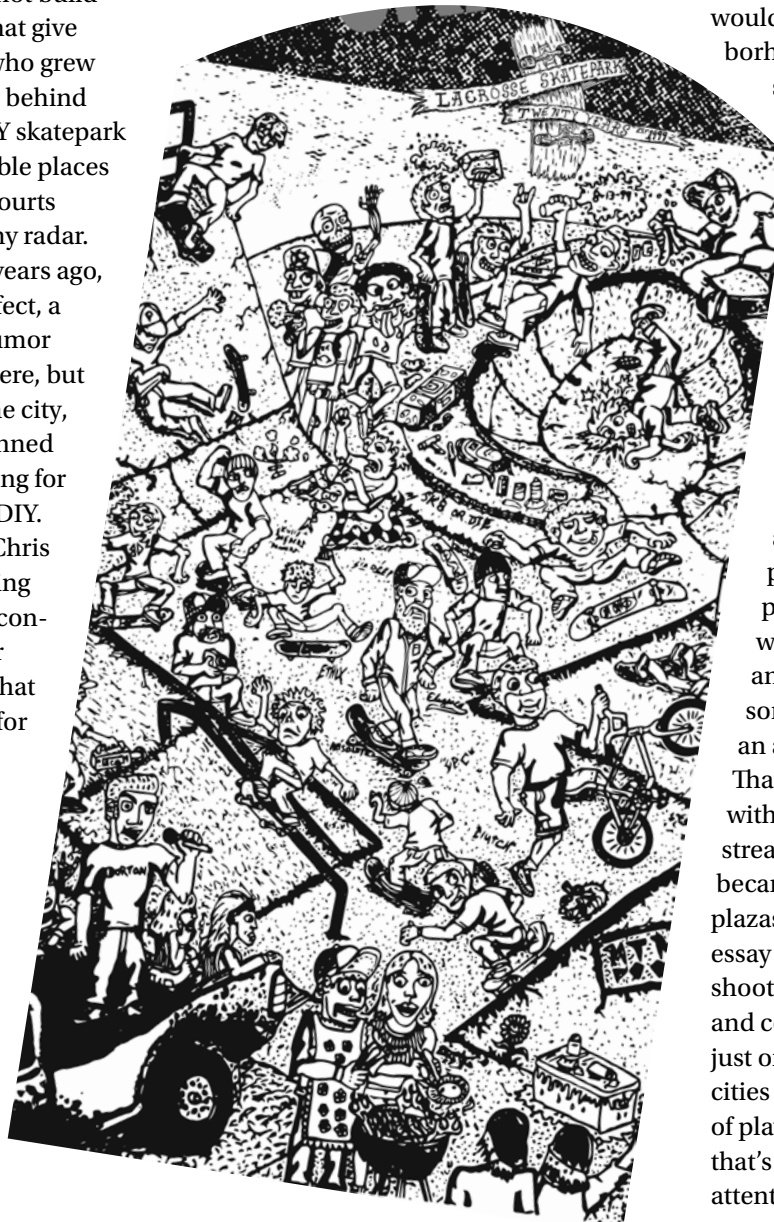
and then demolished was both comical and tragic. We didn't let it discourage us, because that's the thing about skaters—we fall down a hundred times and keep trying. We just needed to find a new location.

Still curious as to who owned the space below Cameron Street bridge, I wondered if it was possible to get a city-sanctioned DIY there, or in some other unused space around town. As I asked around, I was told to talk to Chris Kahlow. I've known Chris for years, both as the owner of Jules' Coffee and as mother to my friend Evan, who worked in the coffee shop. Chris is a member of La Crosse's city council and president of the city park board. One day, Chris stopped into my place of employment, and to the dismay of the other customers waiting in line, we got to chatting about different possibilities and locations. I could tell she was intrigued about who owned the bridge space and liked the idea of turning something vacant and unused into a place of recreation. She assured me that with her active role in city government, I had indeed found the right person to ask. As it turned out, the space below the bridge is owned by the state Department of Transportation (DOT), which makes it outside the city's jurisdiction, and thus a lot harder to get any kind of building permit there. She was still optimistic that we could find a space to make this idea a reality.

Along with Chris, I reached out to Jed Olson of Outdoor Recreation Alliance; Jed was responsible for building the pump track at Lueth Park and for getting it resurfaced. He's been the driving force behind many of the cycling and hiking trails in the La Crosse area. Jed and I had previously attended a meeting regarding the La Crosse Center remodel, advocating for the possibility of including skate obstacles into their design plan. Jed introduced me to the concepts of "skateable art" and "wheel-friendly plazas"—ideas that are gaining traction in more urban areas. Skateable art functions as an art piece with a lens on skateboarding: sculpture with a purpose, while

wheel-friendly plazas are interactive spaces such as public parks and playgrounds that include skateable features. Both concepts aim to create better relationships between skaters and community. Instead of putting up “No Skateboarding” signs, hiring extra security guards, and putting knobs and hooks on ledges and rails, why not build aesthetically appealing parks and courtyards that give skaters somewhere to do their thing? As a kid who grew up getting kicked out of spots, I could really get behind these concepts, and Jed fully supported our DIY skatepark idea. One day Cole and I were discussing possible places we could build, and he brought up the tennis courts behind Erickson Pool, a place that wasn’t on my radar. He said the nets and lights had been removed years ago, so it was just a vacant slab, which sounded perfect, a place begging to be skated. Cole had heard a rumor that the city planned to put pickleball courts there, but it was still up in the air. Maybe if we talked to the city, we could change their mind. I figured if we planned on advocating for this, we had to aim high, asking for a professionally built skate plaza rather than a DIY. The worst the city could say was “No.” I texted Chris about it, and she thought pickleball was the going plan as well, but wasn’t certain, and put me in contact with Jared Flick, the recreation coordinator for the City Parks and Rec. Jared informed me that the plan was to turn the area into a parking lot for the pool, and the city had \$150,000 allocated to do so, but nothing was finalized.

I relayed this to Chris, and she was adamantly opposed to the idea of turning a recreation area—a public green space—into another parking lot. She thought a skate plaza was a far better idea. I knew I had a real ally in Chris; she wanted to see this happen. Jed Olson suggested that if I wanted to see this idea come to fruition, I should write up a 1- to 2-page essay detailing why a skate plaza would be beneficial to La Crosse and present it to the city. On June 20, 2022, I texted



Chris and told her I’d be preparing a 1- to 2-page paper for the city, and she thought that was a great idea. I got to work writing my essay.

I was passionate about this essay. I got to write about what skating really meant to me and my friends, and what it would mean to some kid to get a skatepark in their neighborhood. I detailed how skateparks bring connection, serve as community centers, and get kids outside doing something creative. Having skateparks in neighborhoods allows kids to go skating at any time. A lot of parents might think twice about dropping their kids at Lueth, but what if it was right next door, like a neighborhood playground? Robbie Young of the Parks board had a brilliant analogy at one of the meetings: there’s a reason we don’t have one giant swing set for everyone to use at the same time at Riverside Park. It wouldn’t make sense to have everyone drive to one park to use the giant swing set; we have a swing set in every neighborhood park so that after school, kids can all go and easily use the swings. I loved that, and it perfectly illustrated my point. Skating isn’t a cost-prohibitive activity like golf or snowboarding. Anyone with a board can go to a skatepark and push around, and it allows lower-income families to participate in something. Skating nurtures a sense of self-worth and an ability to fall down and get back up and try again. That applies to life. Skaters, at least the ones who stick with it, are driven people. They’re creative types. Mainstream culture has embraced skateboarding. In 2021 it became an Olympic event. Skateparks and wheel-friendly plazas are popping up in cities all over the world. In my essay I included photo examples of the kind of thing we’re shooting for. For example, Eau Claire recently approved and constructed a single skate ramp in a public park, just one bank ramp as an offshoot of a sidewalk. Many cities now have concrete pump tracks at the perimeters of playgrounds, and small skate plazas dot urban areas; that’s what I want for La Crosse, to give skateboarding the attention it deserves.

In early July my essay was completed. Chris provided me with email addresses of city council members to forward it to, as well as meetings where I could present my idea. The first was a city council meeting set up to discuss the Capital Improvements Plan, or “CIP” budget for the coming year. The second was a meeting of the city park board three days later. The former Erickson tennis court location was on the docket as a topic of discussion for both meetings. Chris informed me that every discussion topic has an item number. Item 545 was mine, and I was to email the council members to inform them that I intended to speak on that topic. The next step was to prepare for my presentation. I went to the La Crosse Public Library to print copies of my essay. I asked one of the librarians what the fees were for color copies, and in taking one glance at my paper, she said she would waive the fees and let me print as many copies as I needed. She said Erickson Park meant a lot to her and the library staff, and she liked my idea. I printed off 25 copies of my essay, ensuring that each member of the council and the park board would have one to take with them after the meetings.

The city council meeting was July 18, a Monday, at 6:30pm. Cole Herold accompanied me to the meeting, for moral support and to help me field any questions the council might have. There was a little clipboard at the entrance to City Hall where we both wrote our names down, along with Item 545. We listened to the council discuss other topics: road hazards in floodplain areas, building codes, and construction projects. It was interesting to have an inside look at how these things are decided. Each topic was followed with a vote: “All in favor, raise a hand or say ‘Aye.’” Finally my name was called. I was a bit nervous walking



to the podium to present, but having Cole there helped. Each member got a copy of my paper, and I began my speech. I was proud of what I wrote and enjoyed speaking about it in a public forum. I felt like my speech was well received but wasn't sure what they would have to say about it. I sat back down next to Cole, fingers crossed. To my great relief, we received no criticism; in fact, the council members one by one spoke in praise of my idea. They felt like a skate plaza would be a much better use of space than another parking lot. They had questions, but all were positive and constructive. There was no official vote, but we unanimously had their support. I was instructed to present my idea to the park board that Thursday and to start discussing plans. Cole and I knew this was only our first hurdle, but we felt like celebrating. We went down to Del's and had a nonalcoholic brew called Jed and told him the good news. We did it. The pieces were in motion.

That Thursday at 6:00pm we attended the park board meeting. Once again, I handed out copies and presented my essay. It was just as well received there. One board member even spoke about how in her youth, she ran with the skater crowd, and how they were always getting kicked out of spots and what a good thing this would be for the city. With everyone in full support, we were instructed to start brainstorming design ideas and to follow up with the park board director.

As of now, this idea is still in the making, with 2024 as our projected goal. Cole and I are drafting potential layouts for a plaza and a remodel of the surrounding area of Erickson Park. I've been looking into extra fundraising and possibly getting local business owners involved. I even had a phone call with Don Zietlow, the CEO of Kwik Trip, prior to his retirement. Mr. Zietlow instructed me to write a letter and mail it to his post office box, explaining what we were shooting for and what funds we would be requesting. He said he would personally present it to their donations board. My letter detailed our project and the benefit it could have on the community. I included pictures of our layout ideas, mentioned the potential of

future event sponsorships and opportunities, and congratulated Don on his upcoming retirement. Apart from the Zietlow correspondence, we also plan to participate in charitable causes, spread awareness, and find more community support. Hopefully, by the time you're reading this, we're a little further along.

This whole process taught me a lot and really bolstered my self-confidence. I learned that it's not difficult to make my voice heard, and that anyone can do what I did. These days, people have a lot to say on social media about the decisions their local government is making, and there's a lot of complaining after the fact. I learned how to use my energy in a proactive way and to advocate for the changes I want to see in my city. The mystique around city government is thinking all the decisions are being made behind closed doors, when in reality, the doors are wide open. In a lot of cases, individuals have more influence than they think, and all it takes is initiative. Always push for what you believe in, and more important, keep pushing.



SIDEBAR by Roxanne Aubrey

In La Crosse, there are two small repair shops on Fifth Avenue near the Cavalier Theater: Dan's Shoe Repair and Clocks Off Main. Since repair work is generally a drop-off/pick-up situation, customers are often there in short stints: pop in, pop out. Additionally, the clock shop has a lot of elderly customers who bring in big old clocks to be worked on. Downtown parking can be a challenge, and the two spots in front of the shops were always occupied, making it difficult for many of the customers to find a nearby spot for the few minutes it took to pick up or drop off their items. Customers sometimes had to carry an old clock a block or two because there weren't any closer spots.

I spoke with the downtown district's city council representative, Chris Kahlow, to find out what could be done. She told me I had to file a zoning change with the engineering department and if I did it quickly enough, I could get it on the upcoming Board of Public Works agenda. She told me who to contact at City Hall, and that person pointed me to a form on the website I needed to fill out and submit. It was actually a pretty simple form, and I got the owner of the building to sign off on it. (It had to be signed by the building's owner and not the two businesses requesting the zoning change.) I emailed the completed form—which requested that the parking time limit in front of the repair shops be changed from 2 hours to 15 minutes—on the 11th of March and on the 17th, I was informed it was on the agenda for the Board of Public Works for the following Monday. Thankfully, my attendance was requested, but not required, since I had somewhere else to be. I was able to phone in to listen to the hearing. The engineering department presented the request and had no issues with it. The committee voted yes. That was it. Two days later, the parking signs were changed from two-hour to 15-minute parking.

It was a pretty painless process, as it should be for something so simple. The council member did what she was supposed to do: point me in the right direction, and the engineering department did what it was supposed to do: tell me what steps to take and keep me informed of the process. The result has only been a benefit to the two businesses. That's not to say that a few people haven't groused about losing more downtown parking spaces. Someone even scrawled "pointless" in green spray paint along the curb to express their displeasure. Worth a few creative points, maybe, but it goes to show: no matter what you do in city government, someone is going to have an issue with it. But hey, I'm flattered; someone noticed my work!

AND NOW A WORD FROM THE CITY...



by
**La Crosse City Councilwoman
for District 6, Chris Kahlow**

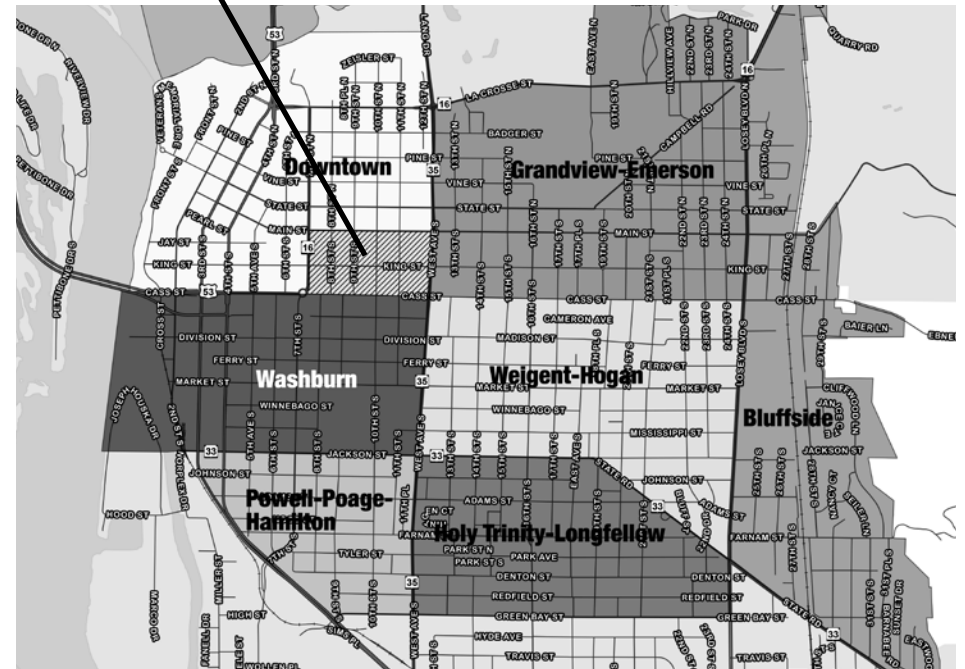
What follows is an explanation of the process for city residents to utilize the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) in the City of La Crosse, from the perspective of a first-term council rep.

To move a capital project from vision to implementation, the simplest advice is to find an advocate. While the entire process can seem daunting, having an advocate who knows how to work with others and get results is imperative. My suggestion is to seriously consider asking the council representative for the district of the desired project. When it comes to potential capital improvement projects, it makes sense for council members to take the lead and act as liaison between city staff and city residents and/or neighborhood associations.

There are other advocate options: a city department head, mayor, or neighborhood association representative. The City of La Crosse seeks and welcomes all input and suggestions from its citizenry, as our folks have their boots on the ground in their districts. City Council members have their contact information on the City of La Crosse website, so I would suggest sending an initial email that details the potential request, then following up with a phone call. Council members are part-time representatives who do not have offices or office hours. While I cannot speak for all council members, my opinion is that the current council is quite responsive and will return an email or phone call in a timely manner. Realize that these are not full- or part-time jobs, so a response may take a day or two. Follow up with another call if you do not hear back within a reasonable time to be sure the email correspondence didn't go into spam or quarantine.

Before I go on, I'll clarify some of the language from the City of La Crosse 2023 Capital Improvement Budget, adopted by the city council.

**Downtown/
Washburn
overlap**



The Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) includes both Capital Equipment and Capital Projects. A Capital Project, as defined in the municipal code, is a project that is expected to have a useful life of over one year and provide a minimum asset value over \$20,000. Capital Equipment is an outlay for equipment that is expected to have a useful life of over one year and provide a minimum asset value over \$10,000.

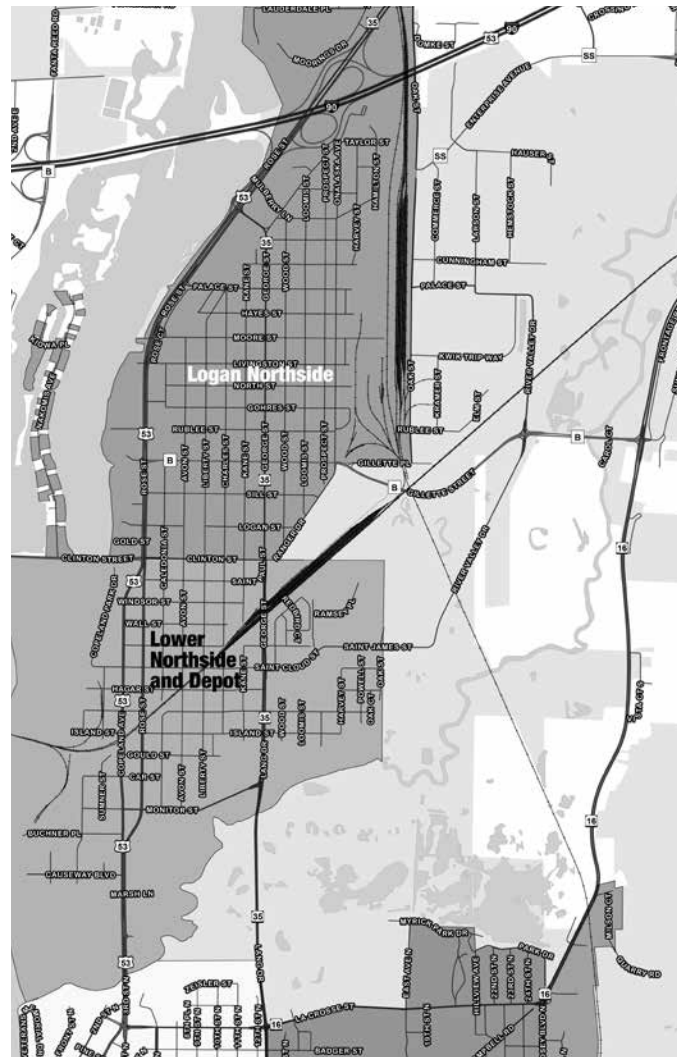
Now, I will describe in lay terms what I think are the simplest approaches to moving a project forward. Please note there are several ways to achieve a result, and often projects are shifted year to year.

Your first point of contact should be your neighborhood association. La Crosse has several neighborhood associations: Bluffside, Downtown, Grandview-Emerson (GENA), Hintgen, Holy Trinity-Longfellow (HTLNA), Logan Northside, Lower Northside-Depot, Powell-Poage-Hamilton (PPH), Springbrook-Clayton-Johnson, Washburn, and Weigent-Hogan (WHNA). You can find information about the associations and other neighborhood-related topics on the La Crosse Neighborhood association website at lacrosseneighborhoods.org.

Your second point of contact is your council member. A full list of council members and their contact information can be found on the city's website: cityoflacrosse.org/your-government/city-council. If you're not sure who your council member is, you can find that information on the website. You'll notice that a link to the committees each member sits on is included with their contact information.

One example of a project a neighborhood association might tackle is a playground surface upgrade at a neighborhood park.

NORTHSIDE



In that case, the neighborhood association representative or other designated member of the neighborhood can approach the relevant council member with the request and justification for the upgrade. The next step would be to meet with the appropriate department. In the case of a playground surface upgrade, the appropriate department is the Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department. This is where your council representative could be the liaison for the project. Going directly to the parks department may accomplish what you want, but the proposal will carry more weight if a council member takes it to the department.

As far as timing your proposal, city staff are required to submit requests to the Finance Department by mid-February to get any and all project money set aside and included in next five-year Capital Improvement Plan. So ideally, for both neighborhood associations and individuals, discussions with your council member about any proposed projects should occur in the fall. That way, you'll be on track to finalize the request in early January, which will give departments plenty of time for their own submission of the proposal to the Finance Department.

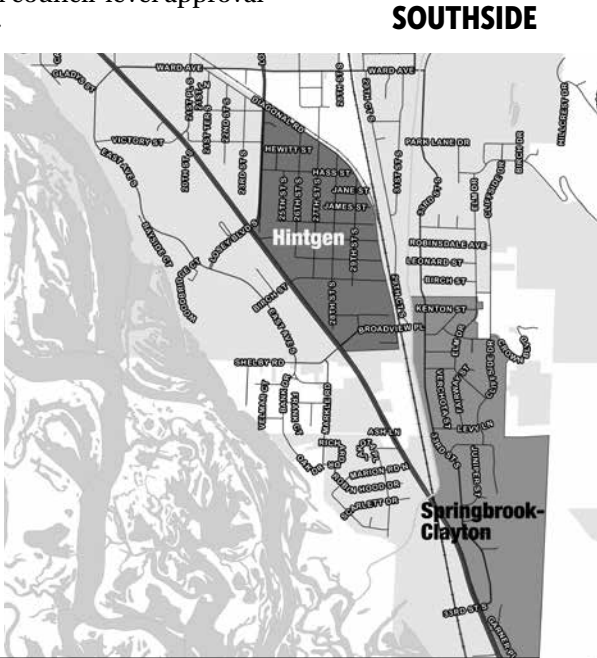
Once a department submits a request to the Finance Department (prior to February 15), the process moves along internally until it reaches the City Planning Commission (CPC), which holds public hearings on the submitted five-year CIP. Those requests are submitted to the CPC no later than May 1. Your council member or contact within the department should keep you updated on the progress of your request. In some cases, a meeting with the mayor might be warranted and could help press the need for the project. If you can sway the mayor, she/he would then end up being your advocate, since they are the chair of the City Plan Commission and can make cuts and additions to the CIP internally.

The public hearing of the City Planning Commission is the most important date to keep in mind. In the time leading up to that date, you should be organizing

residents/citizens in support of the project. Encourage residents to show up in person and at minimum, register their support. To register support, a person can write an email addressed to the city clerk, specifically identifying the CIP item number and ask that it be added to the CIP agenda item going before the CPC. Additionally, at the CPC public hearing, there will be a sign-in sheet for folks wishing to register in favor of a particular item, or to additionally speak directly to the commission members during the meeting. Plan on having several people ready to speak specifically about the needs and benefits of the project at the hearing. Public hearing dates are published on the city website and are available by calling the City of La Crosse clerk's office directly. The more people who show up to support a project, the more likely it is to be included in the budget. It's not a guarantee, but it helps.

Following any public comments, the City Planning Commission will submit a five-year capital projects recommendation on or before July 1 to the common council, through the Finance and Personnel Committee. Another public hearing will be held if residents wish to speak in favor of a certain item. The final council-level approval happens during the September cycle. As stated earlier, this process can seem arduous, but your advocate should be able to keep you and those interested up to date and informed.

In November, the council makes their final vote on the upcoming year's budget (capital and operating) and ensures that the project and funds have been identified and approved. It then becomes the responsibility of the designated department to take the necessary steps to move the project into bidding, and then



Both Capital
Equipment &
Project Budgets

Capital
Equipment
Budget ONLY

Capital Project
Budget ONLY

2023–2027 Capital Budget Process Timeline

Mid December	Application Requests Open
January 4	Finance Director meets with F&P to set limits on Equipment & Projects
January 17	Capital Equipment Applications due to Finance Department
January 25–February 10	Mayor and Department Head Capital Equipment Plan Meetings
February 15	Capital Project Applications due to Finance Department
February 15	Capital Equipment Reviewed by Board of Public Works
March 1–March 15	Department Capital Project Presentations to Scoring Team
March 15–April 15	Mayor and Department Head Capital Project Plan Meetings
April 1	Board of Public Works Files Capital Equipment with Common Council
May 1	Capital Projects submitted to City Planning Commission
May–June	City Planning Commission Reviews Projects with Departments and Public Hearings
July 1	City Planning Commission files Capital Projects with Common Council
September 8	Common Council Adopts Capital Projects and Equipment

all the way through to completion. In the case of Brock's skatepark proposal, his input on design has been helpful since he has a unique understanding of skateparks. In most cases, city staff are open and interested in citizen input support. It is bottom-up, citizen-driven government at its best.

While the process itself is fairly simple, city staff, time, and resources are often limited, and patience, as well as unwavering determination, is necessary.

To sum up, a worthwhile project can be suggested by citizens, but having an advocate to help guide them through the process is very important. Three C's—communication, cooperation, and coordination—that are most important in effectively moving a project from vision to reality. Dream big and enlist an advocate.

Ope! has navigated the byzantine city website so you don't have to.*

Go to ope.pub/demystify/skatepark to find links to the following:

A PDF of the final 2023–2027 Capital Budget

Coyle - Item 545 CIP Proposal: Neighborhood Skateparks for a Better La Crosse Erickson Park Proposal

EXAMPLES OF CITIZEN-DRIVEN PROJECTS INCLUDE:

Cass King lighting project

Burns Park renovation and upgrades

Weigent Park shelter upgrade

Cameron Park poured playground surface

Memorial Pool

Trane Park pickleball courts

Cass Street beautification project (upcoming in 2023)

PHOTO & ART CREDITS

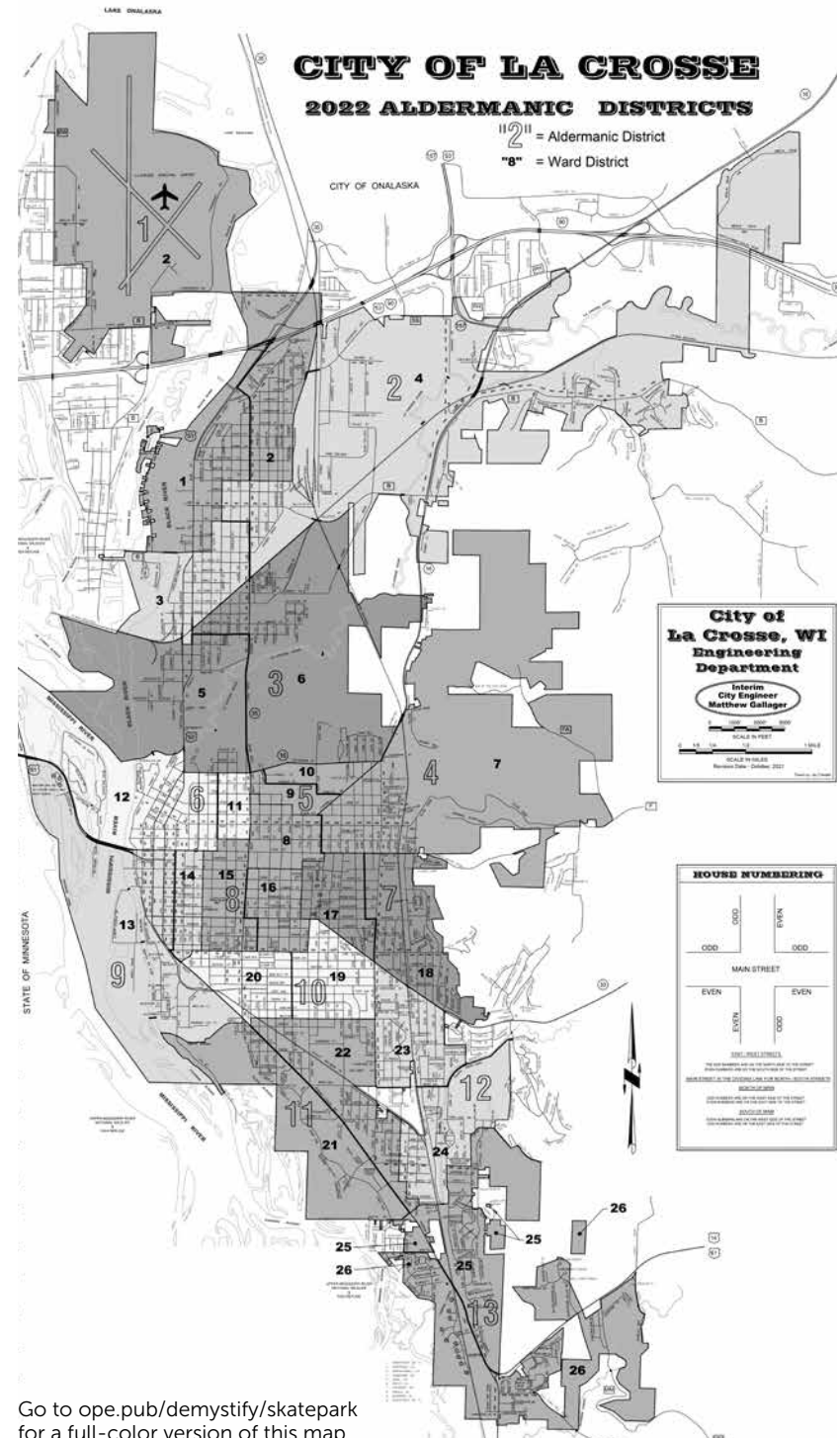
Medieval Marginal Art: Anonymous medieval scribes having fun

Photos: p4: Erik Daily, *La Crosse Tribune*; pp 6, 8, 10: Jim Hartig; p 18: Rachel MacFarland

Artwork: pp 12, 14: Cole Herold

Maps: Provided by Tim Acklin in the La Crosse Planning Department

**[publisher's note] I have never encountered such a poorly designed website. All public documents should be easily accessible. They should not be—as is the case here—so difficult to find you spend the better part of your Saturday morning trying to perform just the right set of mental gymnastics to figure out where it's all kept. If anybody from the City is reading this: Hey! I know a guy who can fix your user-interface problem.*



Go to ope.pub/demystify/skatepark for a full-color version of this map.

THANK YOU!

Ope! thanks the following for donating to this project.
It's because of them—along with all the people who are contributing their
time and effort to write about their experiences with city government—
that we're able to bring these zines to you, free of charge.

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