

## NEWPORT STATE PARK MASTER PLAN VARIANCE

Variance  Amendment

**Property Name:** Newport State Park

**Plan Name:** [Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan](#)

**Date the Current Master Plan Approved:** July 2018

### Proposed Change to the Master Plan:

The department proposed a variance that would have made four changes to the equestrian use authorized for Newport State Park in the 2018 Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Master Plan:

1. Increase the mileage of authorized equestrian trails from “4 to 6” miles to “up to 10 miles.”
2. Allow equestrian trails to be sited throughout Management Area 2, not just the northern portion of this area.
3. Allow equestrian use to be co-located on hiking and hiking/biking trails in Management Areas 1 and 2 where it will improve the efficiency of the trail network and will not substantially detract from existing uses.
4. Allow the construction of a new parking lot to accommodate up to six vehicle-horse trailers, added toilet facilities, 4 to 6 hitching posts, and a mowed grassy area in a former gravel pit on Newport Lane.

NOTE: Management Area 1 consists of two units – (1) an area encircled by Management Area 2 and adjacent to the main entrance road and (2) a smaller section that includes the day-use area on Lake Michigan. Both units have a land management classification of Recreation Management Area – Type 4. In this document, references to “Management Area 1” just pertain to the section by the main entrance road. No changes to the day-use area on Lake Michigan were proposed.

### Decision

After reviewing [public input on the proposed variance](#), the department has decided not to approve the first three elements of the variance. The department has decided to approve the fourth component, which will allow the construction of a new parking lot to accommodate up to six vehicle-horse trailers, added toilet facilities, 4 to 6 hitching posts, and a mowed grassy area in a former gravel pit on Newport Lane. Authorizing this change to the location of the equestrian parking area in the variance is expected to improve potential implementation of the equestrian trails as approved in the existing 2018 master plan.

The area that was proposed for the equestrian trails by the variance (the southern portion of Management Area 2, one of the few upland portions of the park that is not designated as a State Natural Area) already has many popular hiking trails. When the department presented the draft variance to the public for review and comment, it believed that the change in location for equestrian use and the increase in authorized miles of trails would not substantively impact existing users of the park and thus were consistent with the property-level and management area objectives.

Upon reviewing the public comments, the department has concluded that if the variance was approved and implemented, existing users seeking remote experiences in the portion of Management Area 2 south

of the park office would be negatively impacted to a substantive degree. That is, the change in location of equestrian trails and increase in authorized miles would be inconsistent with the objective for Management Area 2 (“Maintain and enhance the natural appearing character of the management area to provide opportunities for solitude and remoteness.”) The department does not believe that equestrian trails can be sited in a configuration in the southern part of Management Area 2 that would not unacceptably degrade the existing user experience.

The department recognizes the desire of horse owners to access safe and enjoyable places to ride. However, in balancing the various recreation and conservation needs and opportunities at the park, the department has concluded that the proposed location for expansion of this use in the park is not a change the department wishes to pursue. Department staff will work with local equestrians to determine if there is interest in developing trails at the park as authorized in the 2018 master plan along with a potential change in the location of the parking area.

### **Background**

The 2018 Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan (2018 Plan) identified recreation opportunities that different property types are well suited to provide. State Parks and Forests were noted for their ability to support “Equestrian trails that either connect a network and/or are loop trails contained wholly in the property.” (page 116)

The 2018 Plan included a management objective to expand recreational opportunities by adding equestrian trails and authorized 4 to 6 miles of new equestrian trails in Management Area 1 (Recreation Management Area – Type 4; 37 acres) and the northern portion of Management Area 2 (Recreation Management Area – Type 3; in total this management area encompasses 690 acres). These trails would be loop trails contained wholly in the property. After additional analysis at the request of local equestrians, the department concluded that the area initially envisioned for equestrian trails would not provide high quality experiences, in either location or distance.

The proposed variance would have allowed the equestrian trails to be constructed throughout Management Areas 1 and 2 and increased the authorized miles of equestrian trails to up to 10 miles. The park currently has 26 miles of hiking and hiking/biking trails; this variance would have allowed placing equestrian use on these trails in Management Areas 1 and 2 where it would have improved the efficiency of the trail network and would not have substantively detracted from existing uses. The department expected this would occur in short stretches where options to construct equestrian trails were not feasible or practical. In total, the department expected co-locating equestrians with hikers and bikers would occur on less than 0.5 miles, out of the total of seven miles of hiking and hiking/biking trails in Areas 1 and 2. Places where equestrian use would have been co-located with existing hiking or hiking/biking trails would only have been approved if they met department guidelines and policies.

The existing master plan calls for the expansion of an existing parking area (Lot 4) to accommodate up to six vehicle/horse trailers, added toilet facilities, 4 to 6 hitching posts and a mowed grass area. To better align with the location of the equestrian trails proposed in the variance, the variance proposed to construct a new parking area and the added toilet facilities, 4 to 6 hitching posts and a mowed grass area in a former gravel pit about 0.7 miles to the south of the initially proposed parking area.

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**Approved:** Tim Cooke D792C5F7A747460... **Date:** 1/5/2024 | 2:42 PM CST

*Tim Cooke, Administrator - Division of Internal Services*

**Supporting Approvals**

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*Terry Bay, Director – Bureau of Facilities and Lands*

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*Eric Hyde, Property Supervisor*

**Variance Initiator:** Eric Hyde, Northern Door County Unit Natural Resource Property Supervisor

**Planner:** John Pohlman, Property Planner

## **Supporting Information**

### **Purpose for the proposed master plan change:**

Newport State Park is included in the [Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan](#). The master plan contains language that confines where equestrian trails are authorized and which parking lot is to be used by equestrian riders in the following prescription:

*Work with partners to develop 4 to 6 miles of primitive to lightly developed equestrian trails east of Newport Lane, south of the Europe Bay State Natural Area and north of the Park Office. Improve Lot 4 to accommodate up to 6 vehicle/horse trailers. Add toilet facilities and 4 to 6 hitching posts and a mowed grass area near Lot 4. (page 18)*

This description limits equestrian trails to Area 1 (Day Use Area – Recreation Management Area, Type 4) and the northern portion of Area 2 (Hiking and Primitive Camping Area – Recreation Management Area, Type 3). Local equestrians have informed the department that they believe a small portion of this part of the park would provide good quality trail riding, but most would not. A private inholding a ¼ mile to the south of Parking Lot 4 limits options to site a trail between the inholding and Europe Bay Woods State Natural Area. In addition, after more field visits, department staff determined that much of the area south of the inholding and north of the park office would be unsuitable for equestrian trails due to shallow bedrock and karst features.

The length of trails authorized in the master plan (4 to 6 miles) is likely to provide a long enough experience to draw horseback riders for a half-day or less of riding. The Department Design Standards Handbook (8605.1) indicates that at least seven miles (for a half-day experience) or at least 10 miles (for a full day of riding) of equestrian trails are needed to provide a satisfactory experience.

The proposed variance allowed the construction of equestrian trails throughout Area 2, not just in the northern portion. In addition, the variance proposed to increase the miles of trails that may be constructed to up to 10 miles and to construct a new parking area in a former gravel pit about 0.7 miles to the south of Parking Lot #4. This new lot would have accommodated up to six vehicle-horse trailers and provide toilet facilities, 4 to 6 hitching posts and a mowed grass area.

The variance proposed authorizing equestrian use on portions of existing hiking and hiking/biking trails in Areas 1 and 2 if they would not have substantively impacted existing uses. Places where equestrian use is co-located with existing hiking or hiking/biking trails would have needed to meet department guidelines and policies.

The proposed changes would not have affected the boundaries of any management area or any land management classifications as described in the master plan.

### **How the proposed master plan change related to the property's goals and objectives or other master plan provisions:**

The existing master plan has two management objectives for the entire property related to the variance:

1. Maintain and enhance the wild character of the property to provide recreational experiences of solitude and remoteness while accommodating a range of low-impact, non-motorized

recreational uses; particularly hiking, canoeing/kayaking, biking, snowshoeing, skiing and camping.

2. Expand recreational opportunities by adding equestrian trails.

The existing master plan has one management objective each for Management Areas 1 and 2:

1. Area 1: Provide and maintain attractive and safe grounds for intensive outdoor recreation activities.
2. Area 2: Maintain and enhance the natural appearing character of the management area to provide opportunities for solitude and remoteness.

The changes to the master plan that were proposed in the variance were consistent with the property-level objectives as follows:

1. The expansion of equestrian uses is consistent with property objective #2.

The existing master plan does not have recreation-related prescriptions for Management Areas 1 and 2; it does have two management prescriptions for the entire property related to recreation:

1. Maintain existing facilities at current development levels to continue to provide existing recreation opportunities.
2. Work with partners to develop 4 to 6 miles of primitive to lightly developed equestrian trails east of Newport Lane, south of the Europe Bay State Natural Area and north of the Park Office. Improve Lot 4 to accommodate up to 6 vehicle/horse trailers. Add toilet facilities and 4 to 6 hitching posts and a mowed grass area near Lot 4.

The proposed changes would have modified the prescriptions that implement the objectives in the following ways:

1. Increase the length of equestrian trails from 4 to 6 miles to up to 10 miles (Prescription #2).
2. Increase the area where equestrian trails may be located (Prescription #2).
3. Change the location of the parking area for vehicles with horse trailers (Prescription #2).

**Anticipated primary benefits of the proposed plan change:**

The proposed variance would have increased the miles of authorized equestrian trails and allow the department to avoid the area where karst and shallow bedrock features are present. These changes would have provided better experiences for horseback riders. Approval of this variance would have allowed the department to help satisfy the desire to create additional equestrian opportunities described in the Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan.

**Additional anticipated benefits:**

Creating a higher-quality equestrian use may have resulted in more visitors to the park and increased park revenue.

**Potential adverse impacts:**

The department seeks to minimize conflicts between hikers/bicyclists and equestrians through several approaches. The department ensures appropriate signage and adequate sight lines on trails. The department also seeks to ensure that trails are properly maintained. Where feasible, the department seeks to limit co-locating bicyclists and horseback riders, especially on trails where bikers travel at higher speeds (e.g., rail-trails). The trails in Newport State Park open to bicyclists are mostly surfaced with native materials and designed for slower speeds than rail-trails.

If the proposed variance were pursued, some park visitors that hike or bicycle the trails in Area 2 expressed concern that they would have been negatively impacted by sharing portions of the trail network with equestrian riders. Despite the efforts to minimize negative interactions, some hikers and bikers may have felt their experiences were diminished by sharing the trails with equestrians.

Construction of the equestrian trails would have required tree cutting to create an approximately 8-foot-wide corridor. This would have resulted in some fragmentation of the forest and was expected to lead to an increase in the spread of invasive plant species along these trails due to ground disturbance and increases in sunlight.

Additional brushing, tree cutting and mowing to widen existing hiking and hiking/biking trails where equestrian use would have been co-located would have been necessary. From the department's experience, additional soil displacement might have occurred from equestrian traffic if use levels were high. An increase in use of these trails may have also led to an increased spread of invasive species.

Given the disturbed conditions at the former gravel pit, use of this area as a parking lot was expected to have minimal impact to the resources of the park or its current users.

**Summary of any alternatives considered:**

Park staff considered alternatives that would have placed equestrian trails elsewhere in the park including in the state natural area and other areas of the park with a Native Community Management Area land management classification. These alternatives would have high levels of impacts to the most ecologically sensitive areas of the park and would impact the solitude and remoteness of these areas.

Staff also considered not incorporating equestrian trails at the park at this time. This would not meet the desires of the local equestrian community and would not be consistent with the property objective related to equestrian use.

**Compatibility with statutes, codes, and department policies:**

The proposed variance was prepared in compliance with Chapter NR 44 of the Wisconsin Administrative Code. The proposed change was compatible with all statutes, codes, and policies.

**Federal aid limitations:**

No federal aid limitations were identified as impacting the proposed change.

**Public review process:**

The proposed variance was posted on the department’s [Property Planning webpage](#) for a 30-day public comment period from August 16 to September 16, 2023. The public was informed of the public comment period through a press release and GovD notification to the Newport State Park and Statewide Master Planning GovD lists.

*Methods of gathering public input*

The public comment period ran from August 16 to September 16, 2023. The public was encouraged to mail, email, or call the department with their comments. The following input was received:

- Emails – 93 emails received
- Letters – 3 letters received
- Phone call – 1 phone call was received, which was transcribed

*The department’s approach to analyzing the comments received*

Although the department sought and received comments on the issue of potentially expanding the miles of authorized equestrian trails, comments supporting a particular point of view were not counted as votes with the most votes “winning.” Rather, the department’s approach to analyzing the input received was to carefully read through all the comments and material presented to find common themes and issues. Our goal was to identify the range of reactions to the proposed variance and the reasoning behind those stances.

Rather than attempt to describe all the ideas and perspectives heard, the following summary of messages heard during the comment period focuses on those issues and perspectives that were most commonly raised.

**APPROPRIATENESS OF EQUESTRIAN TRAILS AT A WILDERNESS PARK**

It was noted that equestrian use in the park (and increasing the miles of allowable equestrian trails) is incongruent with the park’s designation as a wilderness park. It was stated that NSP is the only designated wilderness park in Wisconsin with the intent to be a quiet, uncrowded alternative to other areas of Door County; it was noted that adding equestrian use was not aligned with that purpose. It was stated that the park is the only Dark Sky property in Wisconsin, although there was no indication that respondents believed horseback riding in the park would detract from the night sky.

**IMPACTS FROM EQUESTRIAN USES TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND VISITORS**

Comments related to impacts from horses included:

- Safety of interactions between horseback riders and hikers/bicyclists on shared trails. It was mentioned that some people do not feel safe near horses and that fast-moving bikes and horses were not compatible.
- Spread of invasive species by horses. Concern was raised that considerable effort is invested by the Newport Wilderness Society (the park’s Friends Group) in addressing invasive plant species now and that horseback riding will exacerbate the problem. Others stated that horses

have minimal effects on vegetation along trails, including that they are not a major source of invasive plants compared to other vectors.

- Erosion and compaction impacts to trails by 1000+ pound animals. Concerns were raised that horses on existing hiking and biking trails would substantially impact the trails through widening, compaction, and erosion. Others stated that horses are not a major contributor of trail degradation.
- Horse manure and its clean-up and disposal. It was mentioned that, if equestrian trails were constructed, riders would need to clean up after their horses. To some people, this seemed unlikely to happen and that the manure would negatively affect hikers' and bicyclists' experiences.
- Browsing of native vegetation and the need to cut trees and brush to construct equestrian trails. Concern was expressed that many trees would need to be removed to construct the trails and that horses would eat vegetation along the trails. Horseback riders stated that horses typically don't eat while they are on trail rides.
- The increasingly crowded conditions at the park. It was noted that since the pandemic, visitation levels at NSP have risen substantially and that adding horseback riding would exacerbate this problem.

#### ADEQUACY OF THE IMPACT ANALYSIS

Concern was expressed that the department had not adequately identified where the equestrian trails would be located and had not adequately analyzed the potential impacts of equestrian trails on the natural resources and existing public uses of the park. It was suggested that the department should evaluate potential impacts of equestrian trails and their use on:

- Rare plants, wildlife and high-quality native communities.
- Existing recreation uses and the quiet setting of the park.
- Existing hiking and biking trails.
- The type and amount of vegetation that would be cut for trails, parking area, and grassy area.
- Groundwater contamination from horse manure.

#### FUNDING AND MAINTENANCE OF TRAILS

It was stated that current staffing levels at the park staff are not adequate to manage the existing trail system and that the Newport Wilderness Society takes on much of the work to maintain trails, address invasive species and other management tasks. It was questioned who would be responsible for constructing and maintaining the trails and parking area, toilet facilities and grassy area.

It was noted by equestrians that they were willing and able to volunteer to help construct and maintain a trail system at NSP. Commentors stated that equestrian clubs have a positive history of volunteering for trail management in other parts of the state.

#### NEED FOR EQUESTRIAN TRAILS IN THE REGION AND DOOR COUNTY

Horseback riders noted that there are very limited opportunities to ride horses on public lands in Door County and that it is dangerous for equestrians to ride on roads and road shoulders (which happens



now due to a lack of better options). Also, it was stated that people like to ride their horses in scenic areas and that everyone should have access to Newport State Park to enjoy the setting.

The historic horseback riding in the county and the Newport area was mentioned along with a desire to bring the use back.

Conversely, it was noted that there didn't appear to be many horses in the county and it was suggested that equestrian trails at the far northern end of the county would likely not be used much. A horse owner noted that, in their opinion, the park would be used by only a modest number of local residents. To some, it appeared that the construction of equestrian trails would result in substantial environmental impacts but only benefit a few riders.

Concern was raised that if trails were constructed it was possible that a commercial stable would be established near or adjacent to the park and encourage patrons to ride in the park. It was noted that this would result in high numbers of riders and substantial impacts.

Some comments seem to reference existing equestrian trails on private lands in the county, similar to the network of snowmobile trails ("Every year, we lose properties that we were once allowed to ride on. Farms get broken up, lots get sold, people move in and decide they don't want horses (or snowmobile trails) crossing their land.") It is unclear the nature of this opportunity or to what degree these trails meet horseback riders' current needs.

#### BENEFITS TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

It was noted that trails at NSP would provide a valuable and safe experience for equestrians and would generate benefits (including economic benefits) to the local community and the state. It was stated that equestrians would be drawn to NSP for a riding experience in the park and thus increase use of the property. Conversely, it was stated that establishing equestrian trails in the park would lead many existing users to discontinue visiting.

# Newport State Park

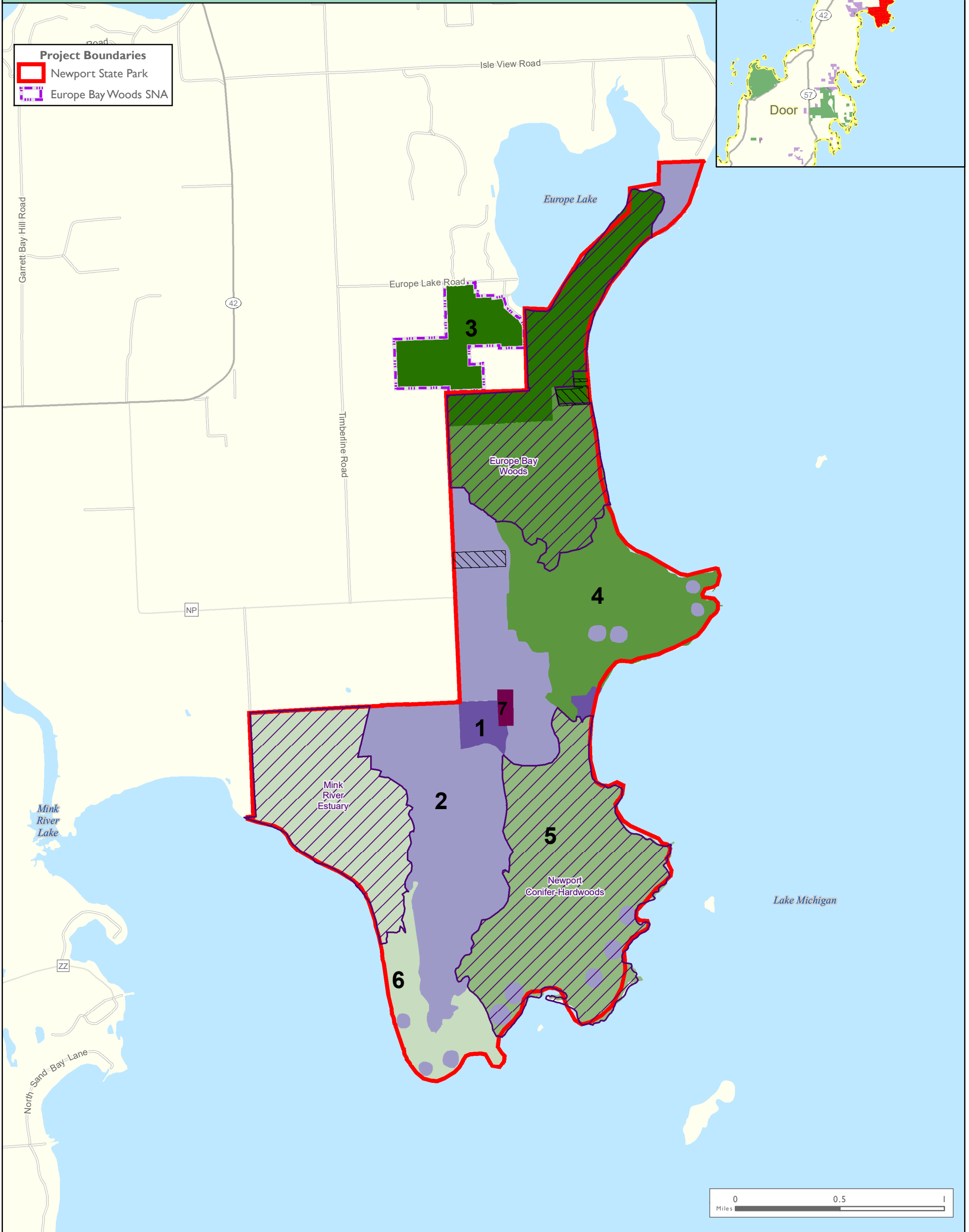
## LAND MANAGEMENT CLASSIFICATIONS

NORTHERN LAKE MICHIGAN COASTAL ECOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE



**Project Boundaries**

- Newport State Park
- Europe Bay Woods SNA



**Native Community Management Area**

- Area 3: Europe Bay Woods
- Area 4: Newport Woods and Cliffs
- Area 5: Newport Conifer and Hardwoods
- Area 6: Mink River Estuary

**Recreation Management Area**

- Area 1: Recreation Management Area-Type 4
- Area 2: Recreation Management Area-Type 3

**Special Management Area**

- Area 7: Special Management Area
- State Natural Area
- Not DNR Managed Land

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES



Bureau of Facilities and Lands  
September 14, 2018

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### MAP K-4

The data shown on this map have been obtained from various sources, and are of varying age, reliability and resolution. This map is not intended to be used for navigation, nor is this map an authoritative source of information about legal land ownership or public access. Users of this map should confirm the ownership of land through other means in order to avoid trespassing. No warranty, expressed or implied, is made regarding accuracy, applicability for a particular use, completeness, or legality of the information depicted on this map.

# NEWPORT STATE PARK

