

## Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan Change

### **PROPOSED** Newport State Park Dark Sky Amphitheater Variance

Variance ☒ Amendment ☐ Minor Plan Amendment ☐ Other Plan Change ☐

**Property Name:** Newport State Park

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

#### **Proposed Change to the Master Plan**

This variance would authorize new development in the day use area near Parking Lot 3, on the eastern side of Newport State Park along Newport Bay. The proposed development would be funded by local partners and include construction of a new 100-seat amphitheater, a storage shed, a low wall to block light pollution from the parking lot, an observation deck, and boardwalk and/or gravel/paved paths to connect new and existing facilities.

The proposed development also includes adding electricity to the site, preferably via installation of a solar array and battery. Primary use of the electricity would be for use in interpretive programming, temporary lighting of foot paths at the end of evening events, and charging of equipment (e.g., tracked wheelchair). Provision of electricity to the existing picnic shelter was previously authorized in the current master plan but not implemented. This work would be completed with this project as well.

The Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan would be updated to authorize the new development. Specifically, the recreation prescriptions for Type 4 Recreational Use Settings on pg. 18 would be updated as indicated below (proposed new text is shown in *red italics*):

#### Recreation Prescriptions (Type 4 Recreational Use Setting Only)

- Add electrical service to the existing picnic shelter near Lot 3.
- *Working with partners, undertake the following:*
  - *Develop an amphitheater with seating for up to 100 attendees that is suitable for programming and use related to night-sky viewing, as well as other interpretive programming and special events.*
  - *Construct a storage shed suitable for the storage of park equipment, such as tracked wheelchair(s) and telescopes.*
  - *Develop universally accessible paths connecting new and existing facilities within the day use area, using paved, gravel or boardwalk surfacing. At a suitable location along the path include an observation platform overlooking the lake.*
  - *Install measures to block light intrusion from the parking lot into the day use area, such as a low wall made of stone.*
  - *Add electrical service (preferably solar) to the storage shed for use in park programming and operations.*

Map 1 shows the general concept and approximate location of the proposed improvements.

## Decision

After reviewing public input (summarized below), the department has decided to approve the proposed variance to the Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan to work with partners to develop an outdoor, educational amphitheater and other support facilities at Newport State Park.

Authorization of this proposed variance provides clarity and detail in how the department will meet recreation management objectives currently in the master plan for the modern day use area associated with Lot 3. Additionally, the variance addresses other goals and objectives in the plan pertaining to public safety and accessibility. Many comments received during the public comment period were supportive of the variance for these reasons. People supporting the comments also emphasized how the improvements would positively impact existing use of the site for staff, volunteers, and park goers, especially for educational events highlighting the unique night sky viewing opportunity at the park.

The department heard concerns from the public about potential negative impacts related to the proposed development, on plants, wildlife, and other features understood to be associated with the site. Consistent with all projects undertaken on DNR managed lands, the department will follow existing procedures designed to address and appropriately manage the risk of such impacts.

It was also clear from public input that maintaining Newport State Park's "wild" character is very important, as well as maintaining the International Dark Sky Park designation of the park. The department shares these views. By limiting potential new development to the park's established day use area and working with partners to consider the site's character in the design, construction and use of the proposed new facilities, implementation of the proposed variance will not impact these features of the park.

Many thoughtful comments were shared during the public input process that will be taken into consideration if, and when, the proposed development progresses. The department recognizes the popularity of existing dark sky viewing opportunities and programming, as well as the need to provide a designated area that can be safely accessed by all.

## Background

The Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan, approved in 2018, includes management for Newport State Park. As the only certified [Dark Sky Park](#) in the state, Newport State Park offers unique recreation and education opportunities for the public. With unobstructed views of the horizon and basic amenities, the day use area near Parking Lot 3 is the most popular site for night-sky viewing in the park. An active community of night-sky viewing enthusiasts frequent the site and it is a destination that attracts casual stargazers and professional astronomers. Park users bring and set up their own telescopes and the department also has several of its own telescopes that are used in educational programming and events at the site.

While most of the park has minimal development in accordance with its niche as a wilderness park, the day use area provides for more intensive use, with a picnic shelter, swimming beach, toilets and other amenities. The area serves as a trailhead to several of the park's trails – including the universally accessible Fern/Europe Bay Loop. The park has a reservable tracked wheelchair, currently stored at the park shop, that is frequently used here.

Working with local partners, the department has identified the improvements detailed above that, if developed, would support these unique opportunities, as well as enhance recreational use of the site and surroundings. The proposed new development is aligned with the objectives established in the 2018 NLMC Regional Master Plan, including at the property and management area level.

**Approvals**

Signed by:

  
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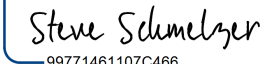
3/24/2025 | 2:38 PM CDT

*Tim Cooke, Administrator, Division of Internal Services*

*Date*

**Supporting Approvals**

Signed by:

  
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3/16/2025 | 6:14 PM CDT

*Steven Schmelzer, Director, Bureau of Parks and Recreation*

*Date*

Signed by:

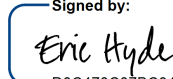
  
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3/3/2025 | 11:56 AM CST

*Erin Rieser, Manager, Property Planning Section*

*Date*

Signed by:

  
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3/7/2025 | 8:25 AM CST

*Eric Hyde, Peninsula Unit Superintendent*

*Date*

**Variance Initiator:** Eric Hyde, Peninsula Unit Superintendent

**Planner:** René Buys

## **Supporting Information**

### **Purpose and need for the plan change:**

The purpose of this variance is to authorize improvements that will enhance visitor experiences, highlight unique park features, expand universal access and support improved operational efficiency at this site within the park. With master plan authorization, funding will be available from local partners for the department to complete the site planning and construction of the new facilities.

Newport State Park is included in the Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan and the proposed developments are within Management Area 1: Recreation Management Area – Type 4 Setting. To appropriately authorize development of the proposed facilities a new management prescription is required within the plan.

### **How the proposed plan change is supported by or is inconsistent with the property vision, goals and objectives or other plan provisions:**

The existing master plan has **three region-wide goals** that apply to the variance:

- Provide opportunities for high-quality nature-based recreational activities; such as wildlife viewing, scenic viewing, nature study, trail-based activities and paddling as compatible with the properties' capabilities, and regional habitat and recreation goals.
- Accommodate research and provide educational activities that are consistent with the primary management purposes of the properties and with user safety.
- Improve accessibility for mobility-impaired individuals where feasible.

*The proposed development is consistent with/supportive of these region-wide goals.*

The existing master plan has **one property-wide recreation management objective** for Newport State Park that applies to the variance:

- 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.

*The proposed development is located in a modern day use area that is authorized for and currently accommodates a range of recreational uses that fit within the park's niche. The proposed developments are consistent with/supportive of this property-wide recreation management objective.*

The existing master plan has **one recreation objective for Type 4 Recreational Use Settings** that applies to the variance:

- Provide a modern day use area for activities such as picnicking, boating, swimming as well as passive recreation activities.

*The proposed development is consistent with/supportive of this recreation objective. Per ch. NR 44.07 (7)(e)5.c Wis. Adm. Code, modern day use facilities are not limited and may include hard-surfaced trails, amphitheater, and a wide range of facility types.*

The existing master plan has **one management objective for Management Area 1: Recreation Management Area – Type 4 Setting** that applies to the variance:

- Provide and maintain attractive and safe grounds for intensive outdoor recreation activities.

*The proposed development is consistent with/supportive of this management objective.*

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

The proposed plan change would:

- Improve and expand universal access to park facilities and recreational opportunities.
- Improve and expand unique night-sky viewing experiences and opportunities, including educational programming and events.
- Support efficient park operations by providing on-site storage and charging infrastructure for equipment used in park programming.

#### **Potential adverse impacts:**

##### *Related to construction and site disturbance*

Construction of new facilities and expansion/modification of existing facilities, such as walking paths, typically entails vegetation clearing, grading and additional substrate. Some soil compaction and other disturbance may occur during these operations. New impervious surfaces may increase runoff, which has the potential to create erosion elsewhere. Construction activities may negatively affect the aesthetics of the park for visitors and disturb wildlife in the area, though these impacts are limited to the duration of construction.

The proposed development is within an existing day use area that includes a variety of modern amenities in a cleared area that is maintained for intensive use. The proposed developments are not expected to result in substantive new disturbance and construction is expected to comply with all department standards, protocols, and applicable laws, including stormwater control and erosion statutes and requirements (NR 216.46, Wis. Admin. Code). During construction, the department strives to minimize soils exposed to erosion and follows best management practices for doing so. In sloped or otherwise vulnerable areas, the department installs armoring measures to reduce erosion potential and limit effects to soils from construction activities. Construction activities would be scheduled to avoid or minimize disruption to park use.

##### *Related to increased/changed use*

Improvement and expansion of facilities associated with popular activities at the park may increase use of the site overall and at certain times, relative to current levels of use. This may lead to instances where

there is insufficient parking available, increased site disturbance, increased litter and/or other issues typical of larger numbers of park users within a specific area.

The site is currently popular and well-trafficked, with daytime uses such as picnicking and swimming, as well as the night-sky viewing that makes Newport State Park a unique destination. The park currently hosts well-attended events at the site. Parking limitations in Lot 3 are not anticipated, and Lot 2 is close enough to offer additional parking, as needed. The proposed new paths are expected to concentrate traffic to developed paths, reducing dispersed walking throughout the site, resulting in less disturbance overall.

*Related to increased/changed sources of light and noise*

Provision of electricity to the site may increase the presence and use of electrified equipment and infrastructure. This may lead to more and/or louder sources of noise, if the change results in more visitors using the site, as well as more and/or brighter sources of light, relative to what is currently experienced at the site. For some users, these changes may be regarded as having a negative impact on their use of the site.

The purpose of developing electrical service in the area and providing electricity to the proposed storage shed is primarily to charge equipment stored on site, such as tracked/all-terrain wheelchairs, and for use in park sponsored events and programming. Any use of electricity must be in accordance with applicable property and management area objectives that uphold Newport State Park's niche as a wilderness park providing low-impact recreational opportunities.

If planned and implemented in accordance with applicable department policies and procedures, the proposed variance is not anticipated to result in any substantive adverse impacts.

**Summary of any alternatives considered:**

*No Action*

The no action alternative was also considered. Under this alternative, there would be no new facilities developed beyond what is currently authorized for this property in the Northern Lake Michigan Coastal Regional Master Plan.

*Location of New Paths*

An additional segment of path that would connect the parking lot directly with the proposed amphitheater was considered. The route was not selected to avoid impacting the sand dune complex that would need to be traversed. The preferred routing for new paths minimizes disruption to the sand dune and follows existing routes of travel.

*Headlight Screening*

Various options were considered for the type and height of installation to block light intrusion from Parking Lot 3. Taller options such as a live hedge or wooden fence were not preferred due to the potential obstruction of views of the lake.

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

This variance has been written in compliance with all applicable statutes, codes, and department policies. The variance process has followed Ch. NR 44, Wis. Adm. Code requirements.

**Federal aid limitations:**

Newport State Park is Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) program encumbered. The proposed development is consistent with the grant program terms and conditions.

**Public review process:**

The draft variance was initially posted on the department's Property Planning webpage for public comment from November 11 to November 25. Due to public interest, the department extended the comment period through December 4, 2024. The public was informed of the public comment period through a press release and GovDelivery notification to the Newport State Park and Statewide Master Planning GovDelivery lists. Several local media outlets picked up the story and shared the public comment opportunity.

*Results*

The formal public comment period ran from November 11 to December 4, 2024. Members of the public were encouraged to mail, email, or call the department with their comments, resulting in:

- 141 emailed comments
- Seven mailed letters
- One phone call (transcribed)
- One text message
- One voicemail

The department was also contacted by members of the public about the draft variance after the advertised public comment period had closed. To the extent possible, this input was considered in the master plan variance process.

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

Although the department sought and received comments on the content of the variance, 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. The goal of this summary is to identify the range of reactions to the proposed variance and the reasoning behind those stances.

Drawing on the various ideas and perspectives shared by the public during the comment period, the following summary focuses on the issues that were commonly raised and the factors that informed commentors' positions. It is important to note that many of the comments addressed only specific aspects of the draft variance (e.g. the amphitheater).

**Description of the support and/or opposition to the proposal:**

*Appropriateness of development in a wilderness park and International Dark Sky Park*

Many comments stated that the addition of the proposed developments would not be consistent with the wilderness designation of Newport State Park and would conflict with the park's niche within the state park system as a relatively undeveloped property relative to other department-owned lands in Door County (e.g. Peninsula State Park). Comments noted that visitors come to this park specifically to experience its wild character, remoteness, quiet and darkness in contrast with levels of development seen elsewhere on the peninsula. It was often stated within comments that the park should "remain as is." Concerns were raised that this proposal would lead to additional future development, further threatening Newport's status as a wilderness park.

Other comments stated that the proposed developments in the draft variance, if designed and constructed appropriately, would not interfere with visitors' wilderness experience, would be in keeping with the wilderness quality of the park, would be consistent with current uses of the day use area, and would have limited visual impact to other park users.

A central focus of many comments was the proposed 100-seat amphitheater. Comments on the proposed amphitheater included questions and concerns about how such a facility could fit with the park's wilderness designation. Concerns were also raised regarding the amphitheater's potential for other uses, outside of educational programming, being in direct conflict with the park's wilderness designation (e.g. wedding receptions, commercial uses, concerts), as well as its frequency of use.

Other comments focused on the amphitheater expressed excitement and appreciation for its potential to feature and enhance unique Dark Sky related experiences and opportunities at the park. It was noted that using the term "amphitheater" to describe the proposed seating improvements may have led to a misunderstanding of the scale and intent of the proposal.

Concerns were shared that the proposal to add electrical service and any lighting to the area may negatively impact night sky viewing conditions and the International Dark Sky Park designation. Speculation of increased vehicular traffic to Parking Lot 3 raised additional concerns of light pollution. Other comments noted that the dark sky designation is unique to Wisconsin and the park must remain dark, preserving it for present and future generations.

It was also stated that the headlight blocking wall would support the dark sky designation by protecting the dark sky viewing area from light pollution stemming from Parking Lot 3 already occurring, and in the future.



*Impacts to visitors and the environment*

Many comments expressed concern that the changes to the day use area proposed in the draft variance would result in negative impacts to visitors, and to the environment.

Comments that identified negative impacts to visitors generally focused on the following:

- Development would intrude on experience of visitors whose primary goal is enjoying solitude and experiencing remoteness.
- Development would lead to overcrowding (vehicular and pedestrian), and an increase in light and noise pollution impacting visitor experience.
- Safety concerns due to an increase in visitation at night.
- Current staffing levels not sufficient to handle potential increases in visitation.

Comments that identified negative impacts to the environment generally focused on the following:

- Increased human activity leading to impacts on the local ecosystem, biodiversity, and threatened or endangered species.
- Impacts to nocturnal wildlife from increased visitation and addition of lighting.
- Impacts to wildlife during construction of the proposed developments.

Some comments questioned or expressed concern that the department had not adequately analyzed the potential impacts of the proposed developments on the natural resources and existing public uses of the park. It was suggested that the department should evaluate potential impacts of construction on cultural resources (e.g., previous Native American use), rare plants, wildlife and whether Parking Lot 3 can support a potential increase in visitation due to the proposal. Specifically, it was communicated that the location of the proposed amphitheater is a known Native American stopover site, and further consideration of the potential impact to cultural resources is needed.

Conversely, many comments identified educational and recreational benefits to visitors through the proposed changes to the dark sky viewing area, specifically through enhancements of a dedicated, organized, and safe location to see the night sky. It was noted that the proposed development would improve usability of the park for dark sky/astrological programming, including types of events that are already heavily attended. Further, it was noted that having a dedicated space for audiences attending educational programming would support continued efforts to bring greater awareness and interest in the wonders of the night sky and the park's natural communities. Additionally, it was stated that the addition of seating via the proposed amphitheater would improve park visitor experience compared to current conditions where visitors must carry in their own chairs or seating, which some said was an impediment to their ability to attend and enjoy night sky viewing.

Respondents expressed a need for accessibility improvements and that the proposal would make accessing and viewing the dark sky easier for everyone who visits. They also noted beneficial safety improvements through the addition of pathways guiding visitors to and from the dark sky viewing area during programming, as well as safe access to the beach. Respondents noted current walking conditions pose safety hazards due to lack of lighting and not being able to see potential trip hazards.

It was noted that establishing dedicated walking paths to the beach and for programming would protect sensitive dune habitat from foot traffic/trampling limiting dispersed travel through the area. It was also noted that, relative to other sources of electricity, the use of solar electricity will help keep a low carbon footprint and may have cost-effective benefits. Additionally, many comments observed that the location of the proposed amphitheater, and other improvements, are within an already heavily used area of the park and that the proposed changes to the area can be designed to minimally impact the environment and blend in with surroundings in line with the park's wilderness designation.

#### *Benefits to park staff and volunteers*

Comments were submitted that identified benefits of the proposed improvements to staff and volunteers leading dark sky programming. Current challenges noted included a lack of a power supply for formal events and telescopes. Additionally, improvements to onsite storage would make equipment availability easier for programming.

#### *Compliance with Newport State Park master plans*

Some comments indicated that the new developments proposed in the draft variance were inconsistent with stated goals or principles for the property within the master plan – including the original plan from 1973 and the current master plan from 2018.

#### *Local and regional socioeconomic impacts*

Some comments expressed concern about this project's contribution to the cumulative effect of increased development and visitation to the Door County area, including negative impacts to local traffic patterns and volume. Other comments expressed the belief that the proposed developments positively impact and improve a regionally important, unique experience for night sky viewing.

#### *Suggested alternatives*

Some comments identified variations and/or alternatives to the proposed developments in the draft variance. Some comments expressed support for improvements to the accessibility of the day use area (i.e., well-developed paths) but did not support the development of an amphitheater or addition of electricity/lighting. Other comments supported the general idea of improvements to the site related to night sky viewing opportunities but suggested that it could be accomplished with less permanent development.

Specific alternative proposals that were provided in comments included:

- Alternative location(s) to develop additional dark sky viewing amenities, particularly in other more intensively used department properties in the area.
- Additional wayfinding signage (e.g. directing visitors exiting the park)
- Making safety and accessibility improvements to the existing path to the beach as an alternative to construction of an amphitheater.

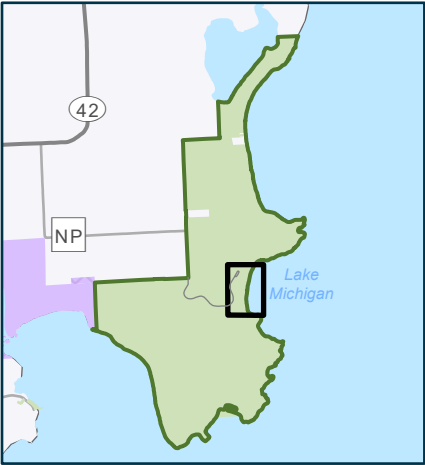
- Reconfiguration of parking spaces in Parking Lot 3 to orient headlights of parking vehicles away from the day use area.
- Partnerships to expand transportation opportunities to the park decreasing automobile traffic and light pollution (e.g. designated shuttle pick-up/drop-off sites).



# Newport State Park Dark Sky Amphitheater Variance

## CONCEPT MAP: APPROXIMATE SIZE AND LOCATION OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

DRAFT



### Proposed Development

- Amphitheater
- Gravel/Paved Path
- Boardwalk
- Observation Deck
- Screening Wall
- Storage Shed and Solar Array (location and size approximate)

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