CITY OF HOUGHTON
RECREATION PLAN
2008–2013
INTRODUCTION

The City of Houghton is fortunate to have an outstanding variety of indoor, outdoor, and water-based recreation opportunities available for its citizens and the surrounding area. The location of Michigan Technological University within the community provides recreation facilities that typically would only be found in larger cities. The city’s geographic location on the Keweenaw Peninsula offers tremendous outdoor recreation resources as well.

Citizens of Houghton generally have a positive attitude about the long cold and snowy winters experienced on the Keweenaw Peninsula, due in part to recreational opportunities such as hockey/ice skating, cross country and downhill skiing, ice fishing and snowmobiling. Winter has become an important part of Houghton’s niche and strategy as a “winter city” to attract new residents and business to the community. Supporting winter recreation is an important role for the City of Houghton.

The City of Houghton Recreation Plan describes the community, inventories existing recreation facilities, and presents a five year action program for future recreational development. The Recreation Plan is scheduled to be adopted by the Houghton City Council in May 2008. A copy of the City Council’s resolution is included in the Plan.
COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

The City of Houghton is located in Houghton County. Bordering the city on the east, west and south is Portage Township. The northern border of the city is formed by Portage Lake. The total land area for the city exceeds 1,380 acres. The combination of steep hillsides and water gives Houghton a dramatic urban setting with scenic views throughout the City.

Total population in the City of Houghton has been stable for the past few decades. The U.S. Census Bureau reports the population is 7,025; during the 1990 U.S. Census, it was 7,010.

A unique feature of Houghton’s population is the predominance of persons in the age groups 15 to 19 and 20 to 24, particularly when compared to Houghton County. This is due primarily to the presence of Michigan Technological University (MTU) in the city and resulting student population.

For recreation planning, this is especially important, as younger citizens have different recreation needs than older citizens. While MTU provides excellent recreation facilities, students use many city recreation facilities, such as the beach and waterfront walkway/trail. Many students who live in the city tend to walk, bike or roller blade to the campus, downtown and other city destinations, creating new needs and demand for pedestrian and biking improvements.

The climate of the area is greatly influenced by Lake Superior. Temperature extremes are moderated; however the area receives annual snowfall in excess of 200 inches, resulting from the northwest prevailing winds traveling across the Lake. The growing season is 120+ days with freezing temperatures occurring from early-October to mid-May.

With a five to six month winter as the dominant climatic characteristic, it is very important that Houghton consider recreation needs for the winter season. Facilities are designed to accommodate all-season use. Winter creates different opportunities for Houghton as a “Winter City”, such as ice skating, sledding, and cross-country skiing. (See Wikipedia.org for a definition of “Winter City.”)

A great improvement in water quality has occurred in Portage Lake over the last 20 years as a result of improved wastewater treatment and the decline of mining and industrial impacts. With Houghton’s waterfront development, more residents have “discovered” the recreational value of Portage Lake.
ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

Recreation facilities are developed and maintained by the City of Houghton under the direction of the City Council and City Manager. The City Manager serves as Recreation Director. The City Planning Commission provides recommendations to the City Council on recreation issues. An organization chart is included in the Plan.

The City of Houghton annually budgets $281,000 for the operation and maintenance of parks and recreation facilities. Additional funds are budgeted for development of new recreation projects and facilities for a total of approximately $35,000.

Competitive athletic programs for school-age children are administered by the Houghton-Portage Township Schools. Michigan Technological University also sponsors programs, such as swimming and gymnastics for persons of all ages.

Many improvement projects and daily maintenance at the City parks are carried out by City Public Works crews. One employee supervises all park maintenance, ice rink operations, and summer youth program and Michigan Youth Corps workers.

Security is provided by the Houghton Police Department. Very little vandalism has been experienced within the City.
RECREATION INVENTORY

An outstanding variety of recreation facilities are available to residents of the City of Houghton. City-owned facilities are inventoried on a map included as an attachment to the Recreation Plan and are listed below:

Kestner Waterfront Park

The new beach and park facilities were opened in 1989 at the west end of Houghton’s waterfront. The redeveloped site was formerly used as a coal and copper port facility. Included at the park is a beach, creative play area, bandshell, pavilion, picnic area, parking, and an R/V camping area. In the last couple of years there have been improvements made to the pavilion and new sod and sidewalks added.
Lake Avenue Waterfront Corridor

Over the last several years the city has developed recreation facilities along the Lake Avenue waterfront corridor. Fishing piers, a paved pedestrian/bike/jogging trail, picnic facilities, and a boat launch are located along the one mile roadway.

Lake Avenue Boardwalk/Marina

As part of the waterfront described above, a large boardwalk, deck and 15 boat slips were developed by building upon old wooden pilings that remained from the former industrial use of the site.

Huron Street Waterfront Park

A small waterfront park in downtown was completed in 1989. The park includes fishing piers, shoreline improvements, picnic tables and parking.
Bridgeview Downtown Park

A broadside mooring facility for transient boaters and park was developed in 1982 adjacent to downtown. Recent improvements include new lighting, improved walkways, a small pavilion with firepit and a viewing deck with interpretive information.

Dee Stadium

“The Dee” is located downtown on the waterfront. This building was acquired from Michigan Technological University in 1977. Over the years, the City has reinvested in this facility. This facility houses the city’s indoor ice rink, history museum, skateboard and bike “park” and headquarters of the Keweenaw Star, a local cruise boat.

The Dee Stadium celebrates Houghton’s contributions to the sport of hockey with space devoted to historical display. The Dee Stadium site was originally the site of the Amphidrome Arena and has been officially documented as the birthplace of professional hockey in the United States.
Shoreline Trail System

The city has developed a 4½ mile paved trail along the Portage Lake waterfront. This non-motorized trail is extremely popular with residents and visitors. In winter, the trail is used by snowmobiles.

Bugni Park

This 12.5 acre complex includes little league and softball fields, a playground, three tennis courts and restrooms. Bugni Park is located adjacent to the Houghton High School on Gundlach Road.
Bridge Street Basketball Court

One basketball court is included at this park.

Garnet Street Park

This park includes one tennis court, a playground and horseshoe pits.
West Houghton Neighborhood Park

This small park contains an outdoor hockey and skating rink, basketball nets, warming house and tot lot playground. The West Houghton Neighborhood Association built the rink and warming facility with volunteer labor.

Verna Mize Park

A small roadside park offers scenic views of the Keweenaw Waterway.
Veterans Memorial Park

This two acre hillside park is situated overlooking the Portage Lake Lift Bridge and is used for picnicking and viewing.

East Houghton Waterfront

The City of Houghton has developed a new waterfront park in recent years. Approximately 3 acres of land was acquired with assistance from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund. A subsequent Recreation Grant provided funding for the park development including a pavilion/restrooms and docks.

Boat slips, fishing piers and picnic tables are located along the Waterfront Trail, adjacent to the Super 8 Motel. This strip of waterfront was retained by the city for public access as part of the redevelopment of this site.
Nara Nature Park

Houghton residents Robert and Ruth Nara have donated to the City of Houghton a large tract of land encompassing 96 acres encompassing the mouth and upstream area of the Pilgrim River on the east side of the city for the development of a recreation area. The city has constructed boardwalks that wind along both sides of the mouth of the Pilgrim River and through the adjoining wetlands. This area is noted for wildlife and bird watching, and fishing. Platforms for viewing and fishing are situated along the walkway.

The city has started implementation of a master plan for the upland area of the park including ski/hiking trails and a sledding hill. A park building is now under construction.

College Avenue Park

This pocket park is located on College Avenue near MTU, and once was the home of a veterans memorial. The memorial and statue has been relocated to the Veterans Park near the Lift Bridge. The pocket park now includes seating and a viewing area overlooking the waterway. Its new role is to provide a place for MTU students to relax and study.

Other Recreational Facilities

City of Houghton residents have access to recreation activities and facilities owned by the Houghton-Portage Township School Districts and Michigan Technological University. These are listed below:

- Houghton High School (pool, gym, Bugni athletic fields)
- Houghton Elementary School (playground)
- MTU Student Development Center (pool, gym, ice arena, tennis center, racquetball courts, weight-lifting, athletic fields)
- MTU Ski and Mountain Bike Trails (25 kilometer of groomed cross-country ski trails with approximately 5 km of lighted trails for night skiing)
- MTU Portage Lake Golf Course (18 hole golf course)
- MTU Mont Ripley (downhill ski facility with snowmaking)
In addition to the facilities described above, the Keweenaw Peninsula offers an outstanding variety of recreation facilities for residents and visitors. The City has been noted by National Geographic “Explorer” magazine and the “Men’s Journal” as being one of the best communities in America for outdoor recreation opportunities. A number of regionally-oriented parks are easily accessible for residents, including Isle Royale National Park, Keweenaw National Historic Park, and the following state parks: McLain, Fort Wilkins, Twin Lakes and Baraga.

The Keweenaw Peninsula has numerous water-oriented recreation opportunities including Lake Superior, Portage Lake and other inland lakes and streams. State-owned lands and private lands under the Commercial Forest Act are available for public recreational use.

The Keweenaw Water Trail is a network of camping and parks along the Portage Lake Waterway, promoted for kayaking and canoeing. Golfing is a popular summer recreation activity. Golfers may enjoy the Portage Lake Course near Houghton (MTU).

Cross-country skiing has long been a traditional winter activity in the Keweenaw and its growing popularity in the Midwest has benefited area tourism. Trail systems are located at Michigan Tech in Houghton, the Maasto Hiihto Trail in Hancock, Swedetown Trial near Calumet, and the Chassell Classic Trail in Chassell. The trails are groomed and maintained by local ski clubs in cooperation with local governments.

Downhill skiing is available at Mont Ripley, directly across Portage Lake from downtown Houghton. This ski area is owned and operated by Michigan Technological University. Through community and individual donations, snowmaking was added to the hill in 2000 and a new chairlift began operation this season.

In 2000, a new downhill ski resort opened in the area. Mount Bohemia is located 40 miles north of Houghton in Keweenaw County. This ski area further diversifies the winter recreation opportunities for residents.

The Porcupine Mountain State Park, approximately 70 miles southwest of Houghton, also offers downhill skiing.

An extensive snowmobile trail system exists in the Keweenaw Peninsula that connects to trails throughout the U.P. and northern Wisconsin. This trail system and the area’s abundant snowfall attracts thousands of snowmobile enthusiasts. Houghton is the gateway to this system.

**Accessibility Assessment**

As part of the recreational planning process, City of Houghton recreation facilities were evaluated for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Fortunately, accessibility of many of the city’s facilities has
been addressed by improvement projects over the last 15 years.

Houghton’s topography creates severe limitations for persons with disabilities. Steep slopes often cannot be mitigated. Many of the north-south hillside sidewalks throughout the city are too steep to meet ADA guidelines. The city has a program to improve walkability that includes efforts to install handrails at key locations. These are particularly helpful during winter.

The newer playground equipment within the city has been designed for accessibility. This includes the large “Chutes and Ladders” play area at the Houghton beach/Kestner Park, the play area at the West Houghton Neighborhood Park, and at Garnet Street Park.

The Dee Stadium Ice Arena is accessible to persons with disabilities on the ground level, including a seating area. The second level does not meet requirements, however, it can be modified through the installation of an elevator, or by the extension of a skywalk from an existing walkway to an adjoining building.

Unless otherwise noted below, all facilities are accessible.

**West Houghton Neighborhood Park**
Problem: the park is developed on a hillside site, on two separate levels.
Transition Plan: The City will construct an accessible ramp by 2010.

**Garnet Street Park**
Problem: This is a small hillside park with a play area on one level and tennis courts on a higher level.
Transition Plan: The City will construct a ramp access to the play structure from the parking area by 2009.

**Dee Stadium**
Problem: The second level of the building consists of a large open ballroom space, now used primarily as an indoor skateboard and bicycle park. There is not an elevator in the building. The extension of a nearby skywalk will not provide handicapped access to the second floor of the Dee, as its elevation is above the ballroom. Restrooms are not ADA compliant. Transition Plan: Install a chair-lift/assist in the existing stair well and renovate the restrooms.
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DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING AND PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS

Planning Method

Comparison to Recreation Standards: The City of Houghton retained the services of a community planner employed by U.P. Engineers & Architects, Inc., who holds the designation “AICP” (American Institute of Certified Planners). UPEA’s planner updated the city’s Recreation Inventory, gathered public input, spoke with city officials, and based upon his professional knowledge developed this draft of the city’s Recreation Plan. The planner and city officials developed the Action Plan based upon the planner’s extensive experience in the field of recreational planning (32 years of experience) as well as the recreational desires of citizens based on input and which recreational projects best meet citizen needs within the context of a fixed recreational budget.

Public Input

Developing the Recreation Plan is truly an on-going event for the City of Houghton. The city council, the mayor, the city manager, and the planning commission members listen to citizen ideas for recreation projects (and there are always plenty of ideas) and discuss options to arrive at a consensus of which projects best represent the desires of the city’s diverse population. The best ideas and options have been implemented into this plan. To meet the specific requirements as requested by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the City of Houghton undertook several additional activities. The plan was discussed at a number of City Planning Commission meetings starting at the end of 2007. These meetings were open to the public. The commission advises the City Council on all planning issues, including recreation.

City officials also spoke with students at Michigan Tech and conducted an interview with the Michigan Tech Lode, the student newspaper to further open lines of communication. The city manager’s phone number and email address were published, and the city manager reports he did receive email input from citizens.

To obtain additional input from the community, a public meeting/open house was conducted on January 29, 2008. Through advertisements and public service announcements, the public was notified of this opportunity to discuss issues and opportunities with members of the City Planning Commission, City Council, city staff and the city’s planning consultant. This meeting format was successful and citizens provided comments and ideas direct to city officials in an informal setting. Comments were also received via emails and through the city web page.

A draft of this plan can be downloaded at www.UPEA.com. Listed below are comments and ideas developed at the forum:
**Kestner Park:** Landscaping, improve the Huron Creek with shade trees and natural landscaping

**West Houghton Park:** Provide a seasonal roof over the ice rink to reduce snow shoveling and maintenance done by volunteers

**Community Gardens:** Expand the area available and make improvements

**Waterfront trail:** landscaping, signage, new bollards/barriers

**Skateboarding:** create an outdoor skateboard park/site somewhere in the central part of the city, preferably along the waterfront

**Coordinate** the Recreation Plan with the new community bike plan and with the Walkability Plan

**Acquire a vacant wooded site** in East Houghton for an undeveloped Greenspace, perhaps with limited walking trails and a picnic site

**Nara Park:** keep some ski trails for classic skiing. A lighted loop would be nice

Following the public forum, contributed comments and ideas were summarized and presented to the Planning Commission for consideration for inclusion in this plan.
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

This section of the Recreation Plan provides the basis for the projects included in the Action Program. These projects are further described below:

Portage Cove Dock Repairs and Park Master Plan

The city’s water treatment plant is located in the area known as the Isle Royale Sands. The City of Houghton redeveloped this site for waterfront homes with a system of canals. The city water treatment plant is situated in this area and the site has recreation potential for water-based recreation and a neighborhood park. Renovations to the existing dock are needed. A Master Plan for the site is also needed to guide future recreation development.

Nara Park Improvements

Dr. Robert Nara, longtime Houghton dentist, businessman and civic contributor, has donated 96 acres of wooded and riverfront land (site includes over 10,000 feet of Pilgrim River frontage) to the City of Houghton for a Nature and Recreation Area.

A Master Plan was developed for the site and includes the following:
- An access road and parking
- Lighted sledding hill
- Back Country Ski/hike/bike/nature trails with boardwalks over wetland areas
- Fishing access trails to the river
- Primitive/rustic camping sites
- Warming chalet/service building with showers and restrooms

The City began to improve the property for limited access and use in 2004, and applied for funding in 2005 for the major construction projects at the site. These are being completed at this time.

Additional improvements are proposed to include lighting the ski trails and the sledding hill, and parking area paving.

Dee Stadium Improvements

The City proposes to continue renovations at the Dee Stadium ice arena. The needed improvements include:
- Remodel men’s and women’s restrooms to meet ADA requirements
- Install new ceiling and insulation over rink area
- Insulate walls and install new fire doors
- Install heaters for rink area
- Paint walls and bleachers
- Renovate front foyer
- New concrete floor in the Zamboni room
- Install new electrical panel for main lobby

Garnet Street Park improvements
Several small projects are proposed for the Garnet St. Park, including ramp systems to meet ADA requirements. Picnic area development, benches and BBQ grills are proposed for the Garnet St. Park.

**Waterfront Trail Improvements**

The city’s 4+ miles of waterfront pathway is the most popular city recreation facility. As part of a continuous enhancement program, a number of improvements are proposed signage and way-finding, interpretive signage, benches, motorized vehicle bollards/barriers, etc. A new Master Plan will be developed to guide this improvement program.

**West Houghton (Park Street) Bike Trail**

An opportunity to connect Park Street with Kestner Park with a bike trail using an easement for the City of Hancock water line has been presented to the City of Houghton. This connection will make it possible for West Houghton residents to access the waterfront and waterfront trail system without having to cross the 5 lane Highway M-26.

**Citywide Pedestrian and Bike Route Improvements**

Houghton has been planning to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety and “walkability” in the city and has completed two planning efforts: a bike plan and a walkability plan. These efforts are due to the large number of bikers and pedestrians already in the city and interest by citizens in walking and biking for health benefits.

A number of improvements are proposed, including major crosswalk identification and safety enhancements, identifying major bike and pedestrian routes, new sidewalks, signage and education.

**Kestner Park Renovations**

Landscaping and security enhancements are needed in this popular waterfront park. Proposed improvements include:

- Make improvements to Huron Creek according to the Watershed Plan - new landscaping, tree planting, and bank erosion protection.
- Install security cameras around the pavilion and the chutes and ladders play area
- Improve the park’s lawn/grassy area

**Historic Walking Tours**

Throughout Houghton are areas of historical and geological significance, worthy of interpretation. The City is
developing a series of walking tours with signage. Some of these sites are recreation areas.

**East Houghton Green Space/Open Space**

A vacant, wooded several acre parcel of land at the end of Fifth Street is proposed for acquisition. The steep hillside topography of the site limits its development potential so an open space, mostly undeveloped park is proposed. If acquired, trails and a small picnic area could be developed.

**Community Garden**

In recent years, a group of community members have developed a community garden area on a vacant site in the City of Houghton. The City has assisted this group and is proposing to expand the area and make small improvements to the site to enhance its utilization.

**Skate Boarding Park**

Currently an indoor skate board and bike park is located at the Dee Stadium in downtown Houghton. The skateboarders would like to expand skateboarding opportunities in the City in partnership with the City. An outdoor skate park located in a central part of town and close to the waterfront is desired.

**West Houghton Park Improvements**

The West Houghton Park has become very popular for its outdoor skating and hockey rink. The ice is mostly maintained by volunteers. Improvements are needed to make this task easier. Proposed improvements include a new concrete slab surface and a roof structure to keep snow off the ice.
ACTION PROGRAM

1. Capital Improvement Schedule
A Five Year Action Program has been developed for the City of Houghton recreation facilities. Action Program projects are listed below:

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<tr>
<th>Year Completed</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Funding</th>
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</table>
| 2008           | Nara Chalet and Interpretive Center               | $130,000 | $65,000 MLWCF  
<p>|                |                                                   |        | $65,000 General Fund                 |
| 2008           | Nara Ski Trail                                    | $25,000 | $25,000 MTU                          |
| 2008           | Dee Stadium Restroom Renovations                  | $20,000 | $20,000 General Fund                 |
| 2008           | Garnet Street Park ADA Walkway                    | $1,000  | $1,000 General Fund                  |
| 2008           | West Houghton Rink Concrete                       | $15,000 | 15,000 General Fund                  |
| 2008           | Waterfront Trail Improvement                      | $6,000  | $6,000 General Fund                  |
| 2008           | Skate Park                                        | $20,000 | $20,000 Donations                    |
| 2009           | Land Acquisition E. Houghton Open Space           | $30,000 | $25,000 DNR Trust Fund               |
|                |                                                   |        | $5,000 Donation                      |
| 2009           | Kestner Park Huron Creek                          | $80,000 | $25,000 DEQ                          |
|                |                                                   |        | $55,000 DDA                          |</p>
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<td>2011</td>
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*City of Houghton Recreation Plan*
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RECREATION DEVELOPMENT FUNDING PROGRAMS

City officials are aware of a number of funding programs that could be used to finance recreation projects. In recent years, as budgets across the region and across the state have tightened, the city continues to encourage civic groups to partner with Houghton to successfully complete projects listed in this plan.

Generally speaking all grant programs require a local match. Any local civic or other community group that is interested in a particular project is encouraged to speak with any elected city council member or with City Manager Scott MacInnes about how the city and its citizens can work together to create a great place to live.

The following is a partial listing of potential grant programs the city can use to fund recreation projects:

- Land and Water Conservation Fund (LAWCON) 50/50 Grant – DNR
- Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) 75/25 Grant – DNR
- Coastal Zone Management (CZM) 50/50 Grant – DNR
- Michigan Waterways 50/50 Grant – DNR