TRANSPORTATION

INTRODUCTION

The transportation network is the backbone upon which a community bases its economy, access to resources, and connection to other communities, forming a critical link to continued development and growth. Maintenance and repair, in addition to periodic additions and enhancements to this system, are essential for preserving connectivity for county residents, visitors, and businesses. Keeping pace with changes in transportation trends and network use is also essential to anticipate needed improvements and potential additions to the transportation network.

State Trunk Highway 51 is the primary highway that links Mercer to points south-southeast. During the 1990s, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation made significant highway upgrades to Highway 51 in central Wisconsin improving the highway from a two-lane highway to a four-lane freeway, increasing highway speed up to 65 mph. This improvement had a direct impact on Mercer by allowing tourists and second homeowners and buyers the ability to travel from their point of origin in south-southeast Wisconsin to Mercer in a considerably shorter timeframe.

The Town of Mercer's transportation system consists of principle and minor arterials, major and minor collectors, and local roads. Certain areas of the town can also accommodate bicycle and pedestrian travel. However, private vehicles are the primary means of transportation in, through, and around the Town of Mercer.

INVENTORY OF EXISTING TRANSPORTATION FACILITIES

Transportation facilities in the Town of Mercer are basic facilities ranging from rural town roads to major highways. Residents enjoy easy access to highways and town roads. Opportunities for safe pedestrian travel are limited given a lack of sidewalks and few trail facilities to connect developed areas. Residents rely on their personal vehicles to meet most of their transportation needs. Other modes of transportation, including mass transit and air transportation, are not available in the town nor are they likely to be developed in the next 20 years since the population and local businesses do not demand nor can they support these types of transportation services.

FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

The Town of Mercer's roadway network is comprised of approximately 195 miles of highways and town roads. Roads within the community are classified according to their primary function and by the amount of traffic they sustain. In the Town of Mercer, USH 51 serves as the central road corridor providing residents and visitors access to the community. CTH J, H, and FF provide additional traffic routes to moderate-sized communities, while local roads provide routes to homes and recreational destinations both within and beyond the town. See Table 3.1 and Map 3.X, Functional Road Classification.

Principal Arterials serve corridor movements having trip length and travel density characteristics indicative of substantial statewide or interstate travel. These routes generally connect urban areas with populations greater than 25,000. USH 51 is the Town of Mercer's principal arterial.

Minor Arterials link cities and larger towns (and other major destinations capable of attracting travel over long distances) and form and provide intrastate and inter-county service. The combined state highways 182 & 47 are the minor arterial roads in the Town of Mercer.

Major Collectors provide service to any county seat, not on an arterial route, to the larger communities not directly served by an arterial, and to other traffic generators of equivalent intra-county importance. CTHs FF, H, and J, Fisher Lake Road, and Popko Circle are the major collectors in the Town of Mercer.

Minor Collectors are spaced at intervals consistent with population density, to collect traffic from local roads and bring all developed areas within reasonable distance of a collector. Beaver Lodge Road is an example of a minor collector.

Local Roads provide access to homes and businesses. They have low speed limits and offer limited mobility for through traffic. The remaining 116.74 miles of roads in the town are local.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.**.1: Functional Road Classification**

Classification	Miles
Principal Arterials	15.24
Minor Arterials	1.35
Major Collectors	47.04
Minor Collectors	14.95
Local Roads	116.74
Total	**195.32**

Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation

TRAFFIC VOLUME

Table 3.2 depicts the change in Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) at recording sites on roads passing through the Town of Mercer between 2005 and 2019. AADT is the number of vehicles expected to pass a given location on an average day per year. It is based on a short duration traffic count, usually 48 hours, taken at the location. This count is then adjusted for the variation in traffic volume throughout the year and the average number of axles per vehicle. Short duration counts are collected over three, six, or 10-year cycles.

The decrease in AADT in and around the Town of Mercer is most likely due to longer-term demographic and generational shifts in travel choice.

THE FOLLOWING TABLE CANNOT BE UPDATED AT HIS TIME (per C. Schroepfer)

(I talked to Kasey Krall this morning. This data is 5 years old and does not reflect ATV/UTV traffic as the county roads were not open for them at that time. The county uses the same system for their data as we do (WISLR).
He was meeting with their IT person today to see if they could get their traffic counter coordinated with their computer system.
Chuck)

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.**.2: Annual Average Daily Traffic**

Site	2005	2007	2010	2013	2016	2019
Site 1	3,500	4,100	4,400	4,000	4,100	3,400
Site 2	-	5,000	5,300	4,900	4,500	3,900
Site 3	4,400	-	-	-	3,500	3,000
Site 4	-	-	3,000	2,300	2,200	2,000
Site 5	-	-	-	-	3,500	2,500
Site 6	-	-	2,000	-	-	1,300
Site 7	-	-	1,000	-	-	550
Site 8	-	-	1,100	-	-	810
Site 9	-	-	800	-	-	480
Site 10	-	-	530	-	-	-
Site 11	-	-	210	-	-	140

Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation Traffic Count Map - No Data for this year

Site 1: USH 51 west of CTH H
Site 2: USH 51 between Clinic St and CTH J
Site 3: USH 51 1.0 miles south of CTH J
Site 4: USH 51 between Arrowhead and Poplar Dr
Site 5: USH 51 between CTH FF S and Pierpoint Dr
Site 6: CTH J between USH 51 & CTH H
Site 7: CTH J east of CTH H
Site 8: CTH H north of CTH J
Site 9: CTH FF 3 miles south of USH 51
Site 10: Martha Lake Rd E of USH 51
Site 11: Fisher Lake Rd between CTH H & Shays Mill Rd

PAVEMENT & SURFACE EVALUATION RATING SYSTEM

A requirement of all units of government is the evaluation, rating, and reporting of the local road conditions to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation by December of every odd-numbered calendar year. This roadway evaluation is a visual inspection to develop a condition rating. PASER is an important tool as it provides a picture of road conditions and can identify candidate road projects for maintenance and rehabilitation. Surface defects, cracking, potholes, and drainage are all examined during a typical PASER evaluation.

TOWN ROADWAY IMPROVEMENTS

Improvements to local roads are critical for maintaining an adequate and safe roadway system. Future road improvements are generally based on current road conditions, with the intent to keep all roadways intact and usable on a daily basis. Future roadway improvements need to be flexible because of the possibility of unforeseen emergencies or disasters that may arise year-to-year or even day-to-day. The Town of Mercer maintains a five-year capital improvement plan for the maintenance of local roads. Table 3.3 identifies town roadway improvement projects planned for 202X-202X.

Funding for local roadway improvements is generally done through the town's general fund by either local tax funds or state programs. One state program providing funds to the town is the General Transportation Aids (GTA) program. GTA helps defray a portion of the costs of construction, maintaining, and operating local town roads and bridges. Funding is based on several factors, including the amount of road mileage in the Town of Mercer and the amount of money the town has spent on that mileage over the past six years. **In 2024, the Town of Mercer will receive approximately $436,456 in GTA.**

The Town Road Improvement Program (TRI) program is another state program providing funds to units of government for improving seriously deteriorating town roads. It is a reimbursement program which pays up to 50% of total eligible costs, with local governments providing the balance. The Town Road Improvement Discretionary (TRID) program and the Town Road Improvement Supplemental (TRIS) program target high-cost town road improvement projects with a total project cost of $100,000.

Iron County Road Improvement Plan

The Iron County Highway Department has a road construction schedule in place for scheduled county road improvements for 2024-2028. There are three scheduled county improvements for the Town of Mercer, which are listed in Table 3.3. No conflicts between the Iron County and the Town of Mercer Comprehensive Plans have been identified.

State of Wisconsin Six Year Highway Improvement Program

State Highway 51 resurfacing and replacement projects are part of the schedule in the Town of Mercer in the Six Year Highway Improvement Program: 2023-2028.

THE FOLLOWING TABLE TO BE UPDATED BY CHAIRMAN SNOW.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.**.3: Selected Roadway Improvements**

Year	Sponsor	Road/Street	Location	Length	Improvement
Town of Mercer Road Improvements					
2005	Mercer	East Fisher Lake		1.0	Reconstruct and Pave
2005	Mercer	E. Fisher		1.0	Reconstruct, Grave, chip Seal
2005	Mercer	Murray's Landing	Town Line towards Hwy 51	1.0	Reconstruct
2006	Mercer	Fisher Lake		0.6	Reconstruct and Pave
2006	Mercer	Beaver Lodge		1.0	Reconstruct and Pave
2006	Mercer	Pierpont		To cutoff road	Reconstruct and Pave
2006	Mercer	Paul		0.3	Gravel and Pave
2006	Mercer	West Wilson Lake		1.0	Reconstruct and Pave

Year	Sponsor	Road/Street	Location	Length	Improvement
2007	Mercer	Feely Lake		0.4	Reconstruct and Pave
2007	Mercer	Crystal Lake		0.2	Reconstruct and Pave
2007	Mercer	Dam	From CTH FF	1.0	Reconstruct and Pave
2008	Mercer	Lameka's		0.2	Gravel and Chip Seal
2008	Mercer	No Name		0.4	Reconstruct and Chip Seal
2008	Mercer	Russell Bros.		1.2	Reconstruct and Pave
2008	Mercer	Dul		0.5	Reconstruct and Chip Seal
2008	Mercer	Turtle		0.1	Reconstruct and Pave
2008	Mercer	Pine		.15	Gravel and Pave
2008	Mercer	Trude		.4	Reconstruct and Pave
2008	Mercer	Bambiland			Reconstruct and Pave
Iron County Road Improvements					
2024	Iron County	CTH H	CTH J - Pine Forest Rd	1.8 mi	Recondition
2024	Iron County	CTH J	USH 51 - Horners Dr	6,231 ft	Mill and Repave
2027	Iron County	CTH J	Horners Dr - Belding Rd	3.3 mi	Mill and Repave
State of Wisconsin Road Improvements					
2024	WisDOT	USH 51	Vilas Co Line - Beachway Dr	7.0 mi	Resurface
2024	WisDOT	USH 51	CTH J - Weber Creek Bridge	3.5 mi	Resurface
2026	WisDOT	USH 51	Beachway Dr - Lakeview Rd	1.1 mi	Resurface

Source: Town of Mercer, Iron County Highway Department, Wisconsin Department of Transportation

PEDESTRIAN FACILITIES

Designated pedestrian facilities are limited in the Town of Mercer. Mercer's central business district provides the only developed sidewalk system providing access to local commercial businesses. In the remaining portions of the town, most roadways have limited shoulder areas, speed limits greater than 45 miles per hour unless posted otherwise and are gravel roads that at times can have dusty conditions. These conditions hamper safe pedestrian travel opportunities. Moreover, given the low-density development pattern of the town, and the fact that nearly all goods and services are located several miles away in nearby cities, walking to places of work, shopping, or entertainment is not realistic for most residents.

Since the publication of the first "Town of Mercer Comprehensive Plan" in 2005, the town has added some walkways. Sidewalks have been constructed from the Mercer School and Mercer Public Library to the downtown area. The town has also added sidewalks on Railroad Street and in the central downtown area.

A nonmotorized, asphalt pedestrian/multi-purpose trail begins along US Highway 51 in downtown Mercer and continues seven miles to the Vilas County line. There it connects to the neighboring Manitowish Waters trail system and eventually the Boulder Junction trails. The trail system provides the Town of Mercer with a safe route to areas of the town, as well as other communities, that were previously only accessible by motorized vehicles.

BICYCLING FACILITIES

Bicycling offers an alternative to an automobile, which is critical to young and old who do not possess a motor vehicle. The WisDOT, along with the Bike Fed, created a 2020 Wisconsin State Bicycle Map that highlights bicycling conditions on select roadways in the state. Based on this map, WisDOT also developed county bicycle maps. Figure 3.1 provides a visual of bicycling conditions in the Town of Mercer based on the Iron County bicycle map. The full 2020 Iron County bicycle map is available on the WisDOT website: wisconsindot.gov.

the Town of Mercer has partnered with Iron County Outdoor Recreation Enthusiasts (ICORE) (a local nonprofit a group of silent sports enthusiasts) on a number of trail expansion projects. ICORE's mission is to obtain grant funds, construct additional non-motorized multi-use trails, and to promote the responsible use of land and water open to the public for the enjoyment of all. For example, joint efforts in 2011 created 7.8 miles of asphalt trail heading south from Snow's Family Market to connect with the paved "Heart of Vilas Trail" in Manitowish Waters. In 2021, the Town expanded its trail to the north by connecting a "Safe Route to School" to Carow Park on County Highway J via Margaret Street, Library Street, and Lakeshore Drive. These trails allow walkers and bikers to safely enjoy outdoor recreation and travel to downtown businesses, the school, and the library.

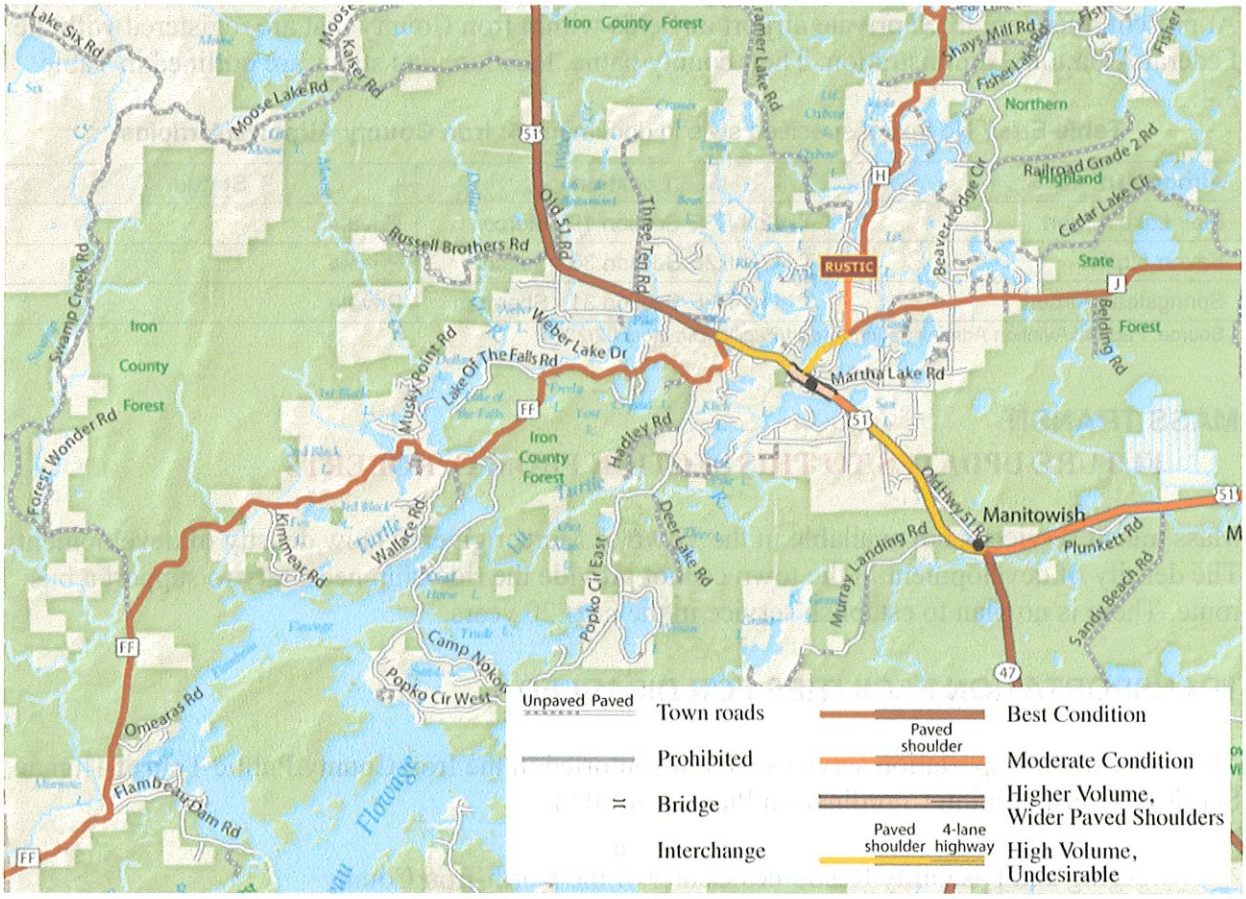
The proposed bike trail expansion is the next highest priority recreational opportunity identified in the Iron County Strategic Outdoor Recreation Plan 2021-2025. To guide this plan, an online survey was conducted in February of 2021. Survey respondents were asked to identify recreational opportunities which the county should explore for future development. The most cited opportunity identified was for the development of new bike and walking trails.

The partnership continued in 2022 and 2023, and ICORE successfully applied for a Department of Transportation (DOT) TAP (Transportation Alternatives Program) grant to expand the current trail. The 2021-2025 Iron County Strategic Outdoor Recreation Plan data was used as support for the TAP grant narrative. The expansion will create a 23-mile loop connecting with the Heart of Vilas trail by adding 9 miles of trail between Carow Park along County Road J to the intersection at County Road W, near Winman Trail Park. The first phase of the trail expansion project is a year-long engineering and feasibility study, unanimously approved by the Town of Mercer in February 2024. The DOT TAP grant will pay for 80% of the total project costs of just over $115,500 in a not-to-exceed contract. The Mercer Chamber of Commerce demonstrated their support for the project by pledging to contribute $10,000 towards the Planning Feasibility Study and the Town of Mercer is responsible for the remainder of approximately $13,100. The scope of services includes

real estate analysis, Safe Routes to School, jurisdictional reports, public involvement, environmental reporting, utility reporting, funding analysis, surveys, trail plans, and structure plans, with expected completion by December 31, 2024.

ICORE, the Town of Mercer, and the Mercer Chamber of Commerce anticipate partnering on additional phases of the trail project over the next several years. ICORE will also seek private funding for other costs, such as signage, fix stations, and maintenance of the trail. Current fix stations are located at Mercer Public Library and Rivers Edge Adventure Company, which is located on US Hwy 51, with another fix station to be installed at Carow Park in 2024. This partnership will create an ideal and desirable biking loop through Mercer thereby expanding the current Heart of Vilas County Paved Bike Trail system which has recently been granted the official designation as a National Recreation Trail.

Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.**.1: Bicycling Conditions**



Source: 2020 Iron County Bicycle Map

RAILROAD CORRIDORS

There is no rail service available within the Town of Mercer. Canadian National (CN) provides the closest rail service available to the Mercer area along a route crossing the far northern portion

of Iron County and along a north-south CN route through Price County. Within the town, several abandoned rail corridors may provide future transportation alternatives. ~~Planning has been underway to develop a non-motorized trail on portions of an abandoned rail corridor.~~

AIR TRANSPORTATION

No public airfields are located in the Town of Mercer. One private airfield, Blair Lake Airfield, is located in the south-central portion of the town. There are no plans to establish other facilities. The nearest major airport facility with scheduled passenger service is the Gogebic-Iron County Airport located near Ironwood, Michigan. Gogebic-Iron County Airport offers daily flights, Sunday through Friday to Chicago O' Hare and Minneapolis-St. Paul. ~~The airline carrier is Denver Air Connection.~~ The next closest airports with commercial air passenger service are Duluth International, Rhinelander-Oneida County, and Central Wisconsin Airport – Mosinee, Marathon County. Manitowish Waters and Minocqua-Woodruff also have airports available to Iron County residents.

At present, there are three private airport/airfields within Iron County that are registered with the Federal Aviation Administration. Their county name, location, and status are outlined in Table 3.4.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.**.4: Iron County Airports/Airfields**

Airport/Airfield	Location	Status
Blair Lake Airport	T. 42N-R3E Section 19 - Mercer	Private
Saxon Airport	T. 47N-R2E Section 35 - Saxon	Private
Springstead Airport	T. 41N-R3E Section 31 - Sherman	Private

Source: Federal Aviation Administration Airport/Facility Directory 02/2024

MASS TRANSIT

FUTURE UPDATES TO THIS SECTION FROM O. ROBERTS

Mass transit service is not available in the Town of Mercer given its low density of development. The density of development in the town cannot provide the ridership necessary to support a bus route. There is no plan to establish service in the next 20 years.

TRANSPORTATION FACILITIES FOR DISABLED

The following transportation services were inventoried in the Iron County Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Coordination Plan 2024-2028:

- Aging and Disability Resources Center of the North-Iron County
  - Service area: Iron County
- Handi-Lift
  - Service area: Cumberland area, but services a total of 16 counties
- Highline Corporation
  - Service area: Iron County
- New Freedom Transportation/Center for Independent Living for Western Wisconsin

- Service area: Adams, Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Chippewa, Clark, Douglas, Dunn, Eau Claire, Florence, Forest, Iron, Langlade, Lincoln, Marathon, Oneida, Pepin, Pierce, Polk, Portage, Price, Rusk, Sawyer, St. Croix, Taylor, Vilas, Washburn, and Wood Counties
- IndiGO Transportation Voucher Program
  - Service area: Ashland, Bayfield, Burnett, Iron, Douglas, Price, Sawyer, and Washburn Counties

TRUCKING AND WATER TRANSPORTATION

The local roadway system and its connection to the county and state highway system provide adequate trucking access for sending and delivering products. In the spring, the Town of Mercer imposes weight restrictions on town roads to lower the allowable weight because of the instability caused by frost and to prevent road damage.

No waterborne commerce or routes are located in the town. The nearest access to waterborne commerce is located in the City of Ashland.

MULTI-USE TRAILS

Throughout the Town of Mercer and Iron County, there are several hundred miles of multi-use trails. This network is used most intensely during the winter months for snowmobiling and in the summer months for ATV/UTV use. In addition to its recreational use, the trails provide an alternate means of commuting for some Iron County residents. Some town roads are open to ATV/UTVs and snowmobiles. Motorized and non-motorized trail systems are further described in the Utilities and Community Facilities element of the Town of Mercer Comprehensive Plan.

SUMMARY OF EXISTING TRANSPORTATION PLANS

State and county agencies have developed guidance and improvement schedules for roadways and infrastructure under their responsibility. It is important that the Town of Mercer and these agencies communicate on proposed implementation schedules and coordinate local and regional activities. State transportation plans applicable to this element have been reviewed and are summarized to reflect their overlapping jurisdictional control or recommendation. Neither the Wisconsin Department of Transportation nor the Northwest Regional Planning Commission has developed a regional transportation plan.

Connect 2050

Connect 2050 is the statewide long-range multimodal transportation plan developed by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. The plan facilitates decision-making or improvements to and investments in all types of transportation throughout Wisconsin through the year 2050.

Active Transportation Plan 2050

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation is updating the Wisconsin Bicycle Transportation Plan and Wisconsin Pedestrian Policy Plan and combining them into the Wisconsin Active Transportation Plan 2050. The Active Transportation Plan will be a statewide long-range plan focused on human-powered modes of transportation, such as bicycling and walking. This plan

will evaluate active transportation opportunities and needs, resulting in policies and actions that will align with and further Connect 2050, Wisconsin's statewide long-range transportation plan.

State Airport System Plan 2030
Wisconsin State Airport System Plan and its accompanying System-Plan Environmental Evaluation is the statewide long-range airport transportation plan.

State Freight Plan
The State Freight Plan is a long-range multimodal plan that addresses the state's freight transportation needs and provides a vision for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's freight program for the next eight years.

TRANSPORTATION GOALS, OBJECTIVES, & ACTIONS

A set of recommended transportation goals, objectives, and action steps has been developed to assist the Town of Mercer. Implementation of the actions will allow the town to achieve the identified objectives and overall goal of continuing to develop and maintain a well-planned, cost-effective transportation system in the Mercer area that is ecologically sound and aesthetically pleasing.

GOAL: Continue to develop and maintain a well-planned, cost-effective transportation system in the Mercer area that is ecologically sound and aesthetically pleasing.

Objectives:

1. Support the initiation and further development of pedestrian and multi-use non-motorized **and motorized** trail systems.

   Action 1: Seek funding for trails with the assistance of the DNR, UW-Ext., and Iron County Development Council.
   Action 2: Meet with Iron County representatives, neighboring municipalities, and local organization to develop, maintain, and regulate safe motorized and non-motorized trail systems.
   Action 3: Expand 'Share the Road' signage on Cty Highways FF, H, G, and J to encourage safe bike routes in and around Mercer.

2. Develop, maintain, and improve area roads to meet Town of Mercer specifications.

   *Action 1: Continue to utilize the PASER Rating **(Pavement Surface Evaluation and Rating)** System to help meet Town of Mercer road improvement needs.*
   ~~*Action 2: Follow through on use of EPA grant monies for improvement of Hwy 51 corridor through downtown Mercer.*~~

3. Coordinate transportation and land use planning with adjacent municipalities and Iron County for sound traffic planning and maintenance.

   Action 1: Remain informed regarding all Iron County road and surface projects.

4. **Expand and promote public shuttle service for all Iron County Communities.**

   Action 1: Support and promote public shuttle service through media, postings, etc.
   Action 2: Survey Iron County Community members to determine shuttle needs.

5. **Research and investigate the possibility of bringing light rail services into the area.**

   Action 1: Coordinate with Iron County and its other communities, as well as adjacent counties, regarding the feasibility of initiating light rail service within the next 20 years.

Due to the rural character of the community and its low-density development pattern, the ability of persons to travel by alternative methods other than the automobile is very limited. The result of this creates difficulties in implementing significant design standards for low-density developments. The exception may apply however in the unincorporated area of Mercer in and around the downtown area. Planned bicycle and pedestrian trails connecting the downtown with residential neighborhoods **and adjacent municipalities and trail systems will** ~~could~~ provide persons with alternatives to the automobile**, while simultaneously supporting tourism.**. In all higher-density development proposals, a compact roadway network will assist in reducing road development costs and in turn will result in lower maintenance and future reconstruction costs to the town.