How did this project get started?
Garms: This all began with the devastating flood of 2008, when 32 homes and a bank had to be torn down. What do you do with all this land and open space when you tear all those houses down? The obvious thing for us was a park with some playground equipment for the kids.

Why was the obvious thing a park?
Garms: Because it was Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) buy-out land we couldn't do much with it. We didn't want to let it just go to grass, because when you come into town on Highway 56 this area is the first thing you see.
How did you decide what went into the park?
Cowsert: We had a lot of vision sessions with interested residents, the Main Street Elkader group and other residents. It was actually a pretty big group, especially in the beginning. We also worked with Trees Forever on the visioning process. For the final product we had MSA Professional Services give us a master plan, and that plan isn’t too far off from the final product.

How did you raise the funds for the project?
Garms: Anything and everything! Whatever you can do for fundraising—we did it.

Cowsert: We had a lot of grants too. This project was several small projects put together, so that lent itself well to grant applications. We received grants for the playground, the recreation trail, the butterfly garden, the picnic tables, the river access, and the white water feature—even the trash receptacles.

We also had a council member who went door-to-door to just raise money for the playground, and he raised about $20,000. We also had a committee of parents working on playground fundraising.

Garms: So much of the work was done by volunteers, especially with a major contribution from the contractor on the job.

In addition to what you mentioned earlier, what else is included in the final project?
Cowsert: Passive recreation and the creation of several soccer fields that are used in the fall for our six-week soccer program. One of the big attractions in the park is the playground equipment that is three-stories tall, which is the only one in our area that is that big. There is also a toddler playground, a picnic shelter and recreation trails and flower gardens throughout the park. There’s also a performance shelter, which is bring-your-own chairs. There’s a labyrinth in recognition of our sister-city Mascara in Algeria. The whole area contains about six acres of land.

One neat thing—we were able to use pieces of the homes in the project, which is neat. Any leftover plantings were saved and used in the landscaping. We’ve used foundation blocks in our parking areas or along paths.

What are the more popular features?
Cowsert: I think the whole area is very popular, but one of my favorites is the handicap-accessible river access. You used to have to go down this steep staircase to take your canoe down to put it in the river. Now it’s just gorgeous; it’s very inviting; it’s very nice to be able to be right there on the river.

Garms: We see people with motorized wheel chairs who go down there almost every day to fish and enjoy nature.

Tell me more about the flood buy-out process?
Cowsert: The houses that were flooded and bought out—this wasn’t their first time being flooded. Some of them had cleaned up from floods a couple times, so they were ready. And the city was lucky that we didn’t have more houses that stayed, or it would have affected how we would have developed the area.

Garms: One of the things we were able to do, that I think helped a lot, is that we went out and borrowed the money to get buyout money in the hands of the people faster than FEMA would have done it. And then we just waited for FEMA to reimburse us, but the homeowners got their money and could go on with their lives. I think that was a good move by the city council.

What tips or advice do you have for other communities?
Garms: The visioning thing. You need to sit down and ask, “What are we going to do with this property?” And let’s get not just the city council, the mayor and the city administrator involved, but let’s get people in the community involved. Let’s get their input on what they want to do in the area. This is their town as well as it is ours. “What do you guys want to see down here; what are you willing to help fund. What are you willing to help raise money for?” I think that’s a biggie.

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